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in southwest China**

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University of Westminster  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities  
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# The Residue of a Deep Past

## Struggle over Cultural Transmission in Southwest China

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the cultural past of the *naxa* people living in Zheba, a rural mountainous area in southwest China. They perceive and live their cultural past through unreconciled fragments that are deeply embedded in their everyday lives. It is a deep past that continuously gives meanings to local people's existences, even through times when wellbeing in life is most at stake.

I trace the *naxa* people's struggles to reclaim the deep past across time through their multi-layered practices of place making, in the experience of the physical body, the domestic environment, the local landscape and beyond. These practices are crucial means to inhabit a world at the margins of the Chinese nation-state. It is a world in which decades of state sponsored violence followed by market changes in the late twentieth century have caused massive social suffering and cultural dislocation. These struggles thus take place against a decades-long background of huge shifts and ruptures in almost every aspect of everyday life. Whilst reshaping local ways of living, these radical transformations have at the same time generated nuanced ways for local people to live with unprecedented uncertainties and contingencies in their life courses. The struggle to balance the tension between change and continuity therefore involves unremitting efforts to transmit the fragmented deep past as imperative dimensions of people's present and future.

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## **Statement of Authorship**

*I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.*

## Note on Transliteration

The *naɣa* people who are of central concern in this thesis speak a Tibeto-Burman language in their daily life. Although it is categorised as a western Naxi dialect (ch. *fangyan*), there are variant phonetic features and vocabularies which are distinct from the Naxi language used in Lijiang and other Naxi areas. I choose to use a modified system of the International Phonetic Alphabet (the International Phonetic Association, 1999) as the romanization for Naxi language material in this thesis. I use a few sources for reference, including Fang (1981), Bao (2008, Appendix iv Glossary)<sup>1</sup> and Zhao and Li (2007). The resulted transcription is not perfect but sufficient to make the necessary phonemic distinctions.

The official tongue of southwest China (ch. *xinan guanhua*), also known as the Han dialect (n. *hapa*) to the *naɣa*, is often used, especially when they interact with outsiders. Most of them can also understand, to various degrees, the standard Chinese Putonghua. I used the contemporary *hanyu pinyin* (ch.) system for the romanization of both *xinan guanyua* and Putonghua.

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<sup>1</sup> I translate Baojiang's transcription according to the alphabet compiled and corrected by Füstumum and Siegel (no date).

## Introduction

About two months after I started my fieldwork in Zheba, I was chatting with a couple of local guys one day. As I was learning the *dongba* scripts, the texts used for ritual practices amongst the Naxi people, from a local ritual specialist or *dongba* every day at the time, they asked me how it was going. I confessed that I had only made a start. One of the guys in his early fifties, known as ‘Whisker’, suggested that I should go to Lijiang, the famous tourist city dominantly populated by the Naxi people, if I wanted to make fast progress. He said people in Lijiang had come up with systematic methods to teach the scripts, so it would be easier and more efficient to learn. Another guy in his late thirties, known as ‘the Smart One’, opposed this idea. He accused Lijiang people of reinventing the scripts, for they had even created characters for words like car and television, which did not exist in the original ritual scripts. He exclaimed that all these reinventions were for commercial and touristic purposes and were hence ‘fake’. The scripts volumes in Zheba were genuine and authentic. They were passed on from the past for generations. ‘We’ve got enough tradition to learn and inherit from the past. There’s no need to reinvent’, said the Smart One. Whisker laughed at him for being so naive. He agreed that Lijiang people were reinventing the scripts, ‘but they also got recognised on the world-wide level!’ Since it was nominated as a world cultural heritage site in 1997, Lijiang attracts a large number of domestic and foreign tourists every year. Whisker also did not believe that the local scripts were more authentic. He pointed out that the *dongba* ritual specialist from his village was not skilled in chanting scripts and did some ‘reinvention’ once. It was in a funerary ritual when the *dongba* was unable to go on with what was written in the scripts, he randomly improvised a couple of lines: ‘if you don’t want to eat it, I will eat it’ (referring to the legs of the ox slaughtered for the funeral, which were supposed to be the reward to the *dongba* for performing the ritual), the meaning of which was all too obvious for the assembled crowds. Just like any other discussions of this sort, no conclusion was drawn in the end.

On another occasion, the Smart One was challenged by one of his colleagues. Half-jokingly, this colleague questioned him that given his love for the local traditions, why did he let his daughters talk in Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) instead of insisting on them speaking only the local Naxi language. The Smart One has two daughters; the elder one is six and about to start primary school, and the younger is only one. In response, he said, 'I have to teach my daughters Putonghua because the lessons at school are taught in Putonghua. I don't want them to be disadvantaged compared to other kids when they go to school only speaking Naxi'.

The starting point of this thesis is the sense of disjuncture strongly expressed in both conversations above. What people in Zheba conceive as their close connection to their cultural past does not promise them the merited recognition they feel they deserve. As residents of one of the most spiritual places of the Naxi people, the locals want to be recognised and empowered by the rich traditions that lie at the heart of local ways of life. They hope to live with a sense of dignity implied by the status of being recognised as 'genuine' and 'authentic'. However, the reality does not conform to their desires. Their confidence to claim the entitlement of authenticity is greatly undermined by the obscurity of their cultural past. Their relation with the past is not at all straightforward. As revealed in the story of the *dongba* who improvised his chanting rather clumsily, the cultural past is, more often than not, experienced as fragmented and full of gaps. Failing to fill those gaps, in this *dongba*'s case, only led him to the disdain of his fellow villagers.

The situation is further complicated as the kind of recognition that people desire is absent in the local Zheba context. It can only be found in the state sponsored processes of defining 'cultural heritage' (ch. *wenhua yichan*) alongside the incursion of global capital in the form of ethnic tourism, all of which originate outside. The outcomes of such external processes often come across as indifferent to the local everyday life and neglect ordinary people's longing for and belonging to their own cultural past. Some of

them, like Whisker, incline to submit to the political and economic forces that generate official recognition, but lacking voice and participation in these forces leaves them with a sense of inadequacy and incompetence. It commonly results in conflictive feelings amongst local Zheba people towards the cultural reinvention observed in Lijiang: at once admiring and hostile. Some, like the Smart One, feel inspired to delve into their own cultural past, but at the same time they are also inevitably compelled to talk about their own lives in an unfamiliar and externally imposed rhetoric that does not belong to themselves (the rhetoric of cultural heritage), just like Putonghua that he feels obliged to teach his daughters.

The irresolvable conundrum came out of the conversations point to a problem of the past, a past that people in Zheba struggle to live with in everyday life. This past underlies the local ways of life, but often eludes people's comprehension in their immediate contexts. Most people experience it as fragments in their daily practices and find it difficult to talk about. At the same time, the past possesses enough depth to have survived material hardship, social suffering, political violence and emotional turmoil, all of which characterise the long and painful local state formation processes in the twentieth century rural China. Its depth is the source that people across generations struggle to derive meanings from, especially when their lives are most at stake. This is what I call a deep past.

Located on the Zhongdian plateau in northwest Yunnan bordering both Sichuan and Tibet, Zheba consists of over a dozen of village settlements in a u-shaped valley. Although most of the local residents are officially Naxi, they closely interact with the neighbouring *nuosu* (Yi), Tibetan, Hui and Han groups settling within a range of sixty kilometres. On the west of the valley, a group of white limestone terraces covers the cap of a hill is called Baihuaping. The terraces are formed by calcium carbonate in spring water. Baihuaping stands as the most prominent embodiment of the deep past in Zheba. It is not only regarded as sacred by the locals but also attracts worshippers from all over

the surrounding areas. In the mid-1990s, Baihuaping was developed as an AAA state scenic site. Unlike its long-standing spiritual significance, the popularity of Baihuaping amongst tourists wanes rapidly in recent years.

The deep past does not guarantee the kind of recognition and economic benefits that Whisker aspires; but it keeps informing the locals of what it means to lead a good life in their own terms. It continues to respond to their existential concerns against a background of huge shifts and ruptures in almost every aspect of everyday life in recent decades and is therefore unimaginable for them to live without. This thesis traces the deep past in Zheba people's everyday existential struggles. I seek the deep past as articulated in their various attempts to *place* themselves in a world at the margin of a nation-state in which state sponsored violence followed by market changes in late twentieth century have caused massive social suffering and ongoing cultural dislocation. By 'margin', I refer not only to the geographical remoteness of this region in southwest China, but also to emphasise how the people of Zheba inhabit their local worlds as separate from outside centres of political and economic authority. The transmission of the deep past, I argue, enables them to continually negotiate the boundary that keeps the locality *separate* despite its unceasing encounters with outside. Such negotiation constitutes the existential imperative of local people's understanding of themselves, their relations with others, and their places in the world.

### **The problem of the deep past**

Going to Lijiang was not the only suggestion I got for a potentially 'better' fieldsite. From the first day of my arrival in Zheba onwards, throughout my fieldwork, I was intermittently advised to go to Eya, in southern Muli county of Sichuan province about 150 kilometres to the northeast of Zheba, also dominantly inhabited by Naxi. It is a more isolated mountainous area with difficult transport access. The villages located on the mountainside are clearly more impoverished than the ones in Zheba, which are all on the

side of a provincial highway<sup>2</sup>. The advice to do fieldwork in Eya often came from people who have some idea of both places but come from neither. For instance, the owner of a guesthouse in Lijiang which I stayed in for a few days remarked that twenty years' back in time, Zheba had still kept the authentic Naxi culture; whereas nowadays, it could only be found in Eya<sup>3</sup>. I was always struck by how commonly such seamless equation between geographical remoteness and cultural authenticity is shared. When I was finally in Eya for the first time, I was even more shocked by the silence from those who advocate Eya's authenticity about the extremely poor living conditions there<sup>4</sup>.

These popular perceptions of places like Zheba and Eya bear resemblances to the existing academic discourses concerning the interrelated issues around culture, ethnicity and authenticity about the Naxi people. There is a common assumption, echoed in these comments about Eya, that the more distant and marginal in geographic terms, the more authentic<sup>5</sup>. My criticism of such understandings, scholarly and popular alike, is threefold. The notion of Naxi culture here is regarded as static and rejects processes of change. Such a static view is prominently reflected in the writings of Naxi ritual practices as immutable and separate from other aspects of the ongoing everyday life (for instance, see Bao, 2008)<sup>6</sup>. In practice, it often leads to some form of cultural exploitation under the name of 'cultural preservation' and creates a catalogue of decontextualised cultural relics<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, it disregards or give minimal attention to the changing political

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<sup>2</sup> This impression of Eya was based on a brief trip I conducted there in May 2017. I travelled from Shangri La which involved climbing up a mountain above 4,000 metres high. It snowed when I passed over the mountain. That section of the road was covered by ice and only allow vehicles to pass within limited hours of the day. Due to the poor road condition, my travel companions and I stayed overnight midway. It took us about ten hours in total to drive there. I was informed that the alternative road that links Eya to Lijiang, bypassing Yongning area to the southeast is in better condition, but the distance is longer.

<sup>3</sup> This view was shared by a Lijiang local in his fifties who, at the time when we met, was turning his ancestral house into a five-star hotel on the outskirts of the Lijiang old town, upon hearing about my research, he immediately suggested that I should go to Eya to study the 'best preserved' Naxi culture.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I did prepare myself with secondary ethnographic literature about Eya, the area is treated mostly as a reservoir of 'lost' Naxi culture, leaving the economic poverty barely mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> This view on 'authenticity' easily finds its echoes in the literature produced by Naxi native scholars under the school of '*Naxi xue*' (ch.) as I discuss later. The popular perception of authenticity is criticised by Chinese scholar Weng Naiqun (2010), who completely dismisses the value of such discourses. His fierce criticism is, however, not unproblematic (Kendall, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> The ahistorical understanding of cultural practices against a processual perspective has been widely criticised in anthropology since 1980s, for instance see Sahlins (1985). Although my understanding of Naxi ritual has benefited greatly from the ethnographic work on ritual practices in Eya by Bao Jiang (2008), my criticism lies in that his discussion on ritual symbolism lacks reference to contemporary social context.

<sup>7</sup> In my fieldwork, I came across cases in which local cultural elites and outside experts demanded the local *dongba*

environments that have profoundly reshaped local cultural practices, or equates them with total destructiveness. Secondly, the Naxi is seen as a homogenous category regardless of the varied localities of Naxi culture. Whilst such a presumption might find support in some indigenous ways of understanding like kinship ideology and cosmology (McKhann, 2003)<sup>8</sup>, it isolates the Naxi people from other neighbouring groups and the wider social context<sup>9</sup>. This necessarily results in an essentialised representation of the Naxi, often featured as the ‘internal other’ within the national discourses as opposed to the Han majority (Schein, 1997). This approach is commonly adopted by the Chinese scholarship on Naxi culture that has developed under ethnology as *Naxi xue* (the study of Naxi) since the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Discussions undertaken within this kind of framework are not necessarily innocent of political implications or even nationalist sentiments. For instance, the leading Naxi historians Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu (1994) trace the origin of the current Naxi nationality (ch. *minzu*) to three ancient sets of hominid remains discovered in Yunnan Province, which can be read as an attempt to establish an ‘all-encompassing nationality history’ (McKhann, 2012, p280). With his comparative attempt to link the varied cultural practices amongst the Naxi (in the broader sense of this term<sup>11</sup>) from different geographical areas to the surrounding groups on the

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to produce ritual scripts and paintings or conduct ritual performances with minimum payment (often under the name of rescuing the endangered cultural practices) and used the outcomes either for commercial purposes or to accumulate their personal cultural capital. More discussion on this form of cultural exploitation follows in the section ‘Zheba and its separateness’.

<sup>8</sup> McKhann (2003) suggests that the Naxi mythical ancestral migration roads coincide with the national discourses that emphasise a diverse but essentially united Chinese nation state. In chapter 3 and 4, I approach the ancestral roads from the light of the local temporality that consists of cycles of separation and reunion (Stafford, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Helen Rees’ (2000) ethnomusicological research on the Dongjing music in Lijiang area, which later became branded as Naxi ancient music for touristic purposes, stands as a great counterexample that traces the changes in music practices of the Naxi in Lijiang due to their long standing contact with Han culture and later marketisation; Along the same vein, Emily Chao (2012) focuses on the gendered and later ethnicised marriage practices such as bride abduction and elopement, which were also resulted from assimilation of Han practices. However, the limits of these studies lie in the opposition between the Naxi and Han without acknowledging the presence of other ethnic groups in the same area who, till today, are still in regular contact with the Naxi.

<sup>10</sup> There is a growing awareness of this problem within the Chinese scholarship that begins to approach ethnicity from an interethnic point of view, although the application is limited to the discussion around historical issues rather than the contemporary social interactions. For instance, see Zhao (2004).

<sup>11</sup> The nationality Naxi is a contested classification as a result of the ethnic identification project initially widely carried out in 1950s, suspended shortly after, and resumed in 1980s. The project adopted Stalin’s definition of ‘nationality’ based on common language, territory, economic life and culture although the actual processes on the ground were much more complicated (see Harrell, 2001; Mullaney, 2011). The major dispute concerning the Naxi is between the present day Naxi inhabiting Lijiang as well as the adjacent areas who compose the majority and the Moso of Yongning county, recognised as a branch (ch. *zhixi*) of the bigger Naxi nationality (McKhann, 1995, 1998). Although it is not within the scope of the discussion in this thesis, the Moso people with their matrilineal residence and marriage practices are often essentialised as situated on an earlier social evolutionary stage than the Naxi, along



Yunnan-Sichuan-Tibet border, the anthropologist Charles McKhann convincingly argues that the study of the Naxi ‘need[s] to be viewed against the practices of neighbouring groups and in the context of the political, economic and religious systems within which they develop’ (McKhann, 1998, p41). At the heart of the static and essentialising tendencies in existing literature on the ethnic minorities in China’s southwest, including the Naxi, is the conceptual opposition between the past—primitive but rich in authentic culture—and the present—modern and advanced but lacking authenticity. Many who share similar views to those who advised me on my choice of fieldsite, see that authentic Naxi culture is only ‘out there’, situated in another time and place, unaffected by modernization or urbanization and dominant Han influences. At the same time, they remain silent about the impoverishment and destitution that often comes as the price of living with such authenticity. The ornament of cultural authenticity makes it easier to turn a blind eye to the shocking phenomena I was exposed to during my only two-day trip in Eya, such as children before school age riding on horseback transporting animal manure, village paths covered with excessive excretion and waste as a result of poor drainage, delay in treatment to severe illness due to lack of healthcare access and the like. This echoes the anthropologist Johannes Fabian’s (1983) powerful critique of how anthropology denies the coevalness of its research subjects. Similarly, the static, essentialised, and genealogical understanding of Naxi culture is premised on the political, social and economic inequality that is omitted from critical scrutiny in the relevant literature or easily brushed under the carpet in popular views.

However, it is not my aim to further criticise the approaches to understanding Naxi culture that I have summarised above. Whilst it can be fruitful to examine the discursive reproductions of these views as aspects of local people’s self-understanding, to trace how they are transformed, reinforced or rejected<sup>12</sup>, the focus of this thesis is elsewhere. It seeks to develop an understanding of the Naxi people’s sense of self-identity in the

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the same lines but to a greater degree than the perception of the Naxi in Eya. For more discussion on the Moso cultural practices, see Shih (2010).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, in Kaili, a small city in Guizhou province, people deploy similar kind of cultural awareness in an instrumental way to proudly assert their identity as ‘fake’ (or not being) ethnic minorities (Kendall, 2017).

present not, first and foremost, with reference to debates about ethnic minorities, but through developing an alternative conceptualisation of the past, associated with the notion of the ‘deep past’. With this, I contest the dominant narratives of progress premised on the hierarchical opposition between the present and the past. I also contest the value of such narratives to explain how the Naxi of Zheba live with their cultural pasts. This is not to say that people I know in Zheba are unfamiliar with the idea of themselves being positioned on a hierarchical scale of development based on their ethnic distinctiveness and economic ‘backwardness’ (ch. *luohou*). Nor is it to deny their desire for the benefits brought along by economic development or romanticize their lament for lost local cultural practices. Their absorption of a linear historical awareness coexists with a distinctive, perhaps deeper, relation with the past that is intimate and ubiquitous rather than distant and externalised. As I argue in the chapters that follow, Zheba people may find such a deep past impenetrable and at times restrictive, but they actively engage with it in the present. In other words, the deep past is engrained in their being-in-the-world. In this sense, the deep past is a vital, if difficult and contradictory dimension of contemporary cultural life in Zheba. This dissertation, then is an ethnography of a specific perception of the past that comes into being in the lived experience of a particular locality. In this, its contribution to our understanding of Naxi people and culture significantly departs from the emphases and arguments of the available scholarship on the Naxi. It also makes an innovative contribution to more general debates about local people’s apprehension of their own cultural values, associated with place and space, in conditions of state-sponsored heritage preservation and heritage tourism.

Studies of different cultural perceptions of the past emerged in response to the problematic bias of the conventional Western concept of ‘history’ and its excessive emphasis on factuality that separates the past from the present as well as the future (Hirsch and Stewart, 2005). This neat temporal division confirmed the pervasive heritage representations of the past as relics, histories, and memoires. At the same time,

however, the past remains ‘a foreign country’, as David Lowenthal (1985) famously put it, alienated from the contemporary life. This conceptual problem also generated wide-ranging arguments across disciplines including history, philosophy, cultural studies, and museology in which scholars offered diverse interpretations of the relationship between history, narrative and memory (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995; Crane, 1997; Nora, 1989; Ricoeur, 2004, to name a few). With its comparative principles in mind, anthropology encourages reflection upon the mutually constitutive relation between historical understandings and cultural contexts (Bloch, 1998; Gell, 1992; Munn, 1992; Strathern, 1990). This endeavor has led to useful conceptual tools such as ‘historical imagination’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992), ‘historicity’ (Stewart, 2016), and ‘transmission’ (Feuchtwang, 2011). Research on China has also benefitted greatly from such reflection, resulting in a variety of ethnographies related to historical issues (for instance, Jing, 1996; Mueggler, 2001) and ethnographically based works in history (for instance, Evans, 2008; Hershatter, 2011).

In the same vein, my conceptualisation of the deep past does not refer so much to knowledge of a particular timespan (cf. ‘deep history’ in Shryock and Smail, 2011). Rather, it involves a historical practice in the present time. By ‘historical’, I follow the anthropologist Christina Toren in stressing that human beings ‘embody the history of their own making,’ including that of their relations with others (1999, p6). That is to say, each individual is simultaneously caught up in the continual process of making their own past *and* is the outcome of their historical becoming. In this light, the deep past connotes a constantly evolving relation with the past that encompasses both continuity and transformation. On the one hand, the deep past possesses the integrity to transcend the passage of time, hence often imagined as universal and permanent (Rowlands and Tilley, 2006). On the other, I argue that it is experienced as fragments in the ever-changing situations of everyday life. This conceptual stance enables me to look at the recent history of Zheba, and the Mao era in particular (loosely from 1957 to 1981), *neither* as completely alien to its preceding local historical context *nor* totally distinct

from the later period of the market economy, as is often framed in the standard official temporality<sup>13</sup>. Instead, I examine how radical political campaigns, including their catastrophic effects, were experienced as ‘critical events’ (Das, 1995) in people’s lives and continue to be revisited in diverse forms in everyday cultural practices today. In the case of Zheba, such ‘critical events’ of the past resurface in people’s struggles to make sense of them within a moral framework of retribution. Far from being dismissed as events of external destruction belonging to a long-transcended past that does not bear much meaning in local people’s lives, the political violence and social suffering of the twentieth century, as I argue in this thesis, are lived with as fragments of the deep past in everyday ritual and decision-making concerning basic questions about how to live well and where to work. Such fundamental concerns configure the ‘manifold, mutable images of the state’ as ‘a constitutive force at the heart of the social world’ (Mueggler, 2001, p5). The emphasis on the ‘perceptual, emotional, and moral experiences’ of the state here echoes the notion of ‘deep China’ in (Kleinman et al., 2011, p3).

As much as a temporal concept, the deep past also acquires a spatial dimension. It lies in the distance between the local and outside worlds, a distance that is constantly under negotiation at various levels. On one level, it refers to the idea of the ‘deep rural’ that addresses ‘aspects of cultural withdrawal among minorities in the face of dominant pressures’ originating outside (James, 2016, p33). Here, the sense of the deep past is both reinforced by and further encourages a centripetal tendency, not as a retreat from the urban or economically more developed centres but facilitating dynamic cycles of separation and reunion. The efforts of ‘going out’ and ‘coming back’ in these cycles are indispensable to the local sense of rootedness, as I discuss in chapter 3. Although it has been widely argued that such processes of cultural encounter with the ‘outside’ may, in certain historical conditions, generate what has been termed ‘cultural hybridity’ (Bhabha, 1994; Clifford, 1997), I want to stress that people in Zheba draw on the depth of the past to create a *separate* space, that is a morally and emotionally safe sphere, mediating

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<sup>13</sup> For the official periodization of the PRC history, see CCP (1981)

between the local and the outside. Across the specific experience of different generations, this liminal space is constantly redefined. Its cultural specificity does not mark an essential cultural distinctiveness. Rather, this separate space offers locals the possibility of both responding to dominant Han influences *and* maintaining their own distinctiveness and sustaining their close co-habitation with the other ethnic groups in this region of southwest China, which has long been characterised by its ethnic diversity ( cf. ‘the intermediaries’ proposed by Wang, 2008). Members of different groups remain connected but separate, both with each other and with the dominant Han ethnicity<sup>14</sup>. In this sense, the separateness deriving from the deep past acknowledges local people’s autonomy and empowers them with a crucial sense of dignity (Butler, 2006). It is for this reason that I refer to my informants in Zheba collectively as *naxa*, the most common but not the only way they refer to themselves<sup>15</sup>, instead of the homogenising category Naxi.

The deep past is morally demanding. I follow Lambek (2002) in emphasising the past not only as the source of vital forces that contribute to present and future wellbeing, but also as a weighty burden to bear. To manage one’s connection with the deep past involves an immense degree of care and the willingness to endure physical and emotional hardship. Ritual practices like persistently going up to the local sacred mountain to burn incense at the sacred spring well that I discuss in chapter 3, require spiritual piety, and at the same time, communicate the individual’s desires, aspirations and affections for closely related others. Living with the deep past, in this sense, is ‘a form of embodied ethical practice’ that far from being a passive constraint on progress, ‘provides scope for creativity, expanded agency, and responsible judgment’ (Lambek, 2002, p6-7). At times of turbulence or personal life crisis, the deep past responds to the most pressing need to survive and addresses existential concerns that may be

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<sup>14</sup> I distance the discussion of ‘separateness’ from the notion ‘diversity in unity’ or *duoyuan yiti* (ch.) proposed by the Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (1999 [1988]) mainly because of the political implications of the latter. Glossing over social inequalities in the long processes of the formation of different ethnic awareness, the word *yiti* (lit. one unit) prioritises ontological essence over historical contingency and hence cannot account for the ongoing ethnic conflict observed in west and northwest China.

<sup>15</sup> One of the eight officially classified Naxi villages in Zheba asserts their identity as ‘*zuka*’ (n.) and claims a different historic migration route from other groups. People with the surname ‘*Mo*’ in my primary fieldsite Gerdu village emphasise their Tibetan ancestry. They compose about one third of the population of the village.

submerged—sometimes brutally—by uncontrollable forces like the state, the history, the market and fate. All in all, looking at the complex ways that the living relate to the deep past is crucial to a critical understanding of what it means to be *naxa*, across time, in Zheba, and beyond the local context.

### **Zheba and its separateness**

I arrived in Shangri La (formerly Zhongdian, officially renamed in 2001), a Tibetan town in northwest Yunnan<sup>16</sup>, for the first time in August 2014. The plane landed around seven in the evening when the sky was still bright. Even though it was summer time, due to its high altitude, the air was quite chilly. Shops in the airport were selling down jackets to tourists. There was no bus from the airport to town, but as I walked out of the terminal building, just as one could expect on arriving at any plane or train station in a Chinese city, a few taxi drivers immediately came up to me competing to drag me to their vehicles. Some of them had darker skin tones and wore colourful Tibetan costumes. They used their own private cars and charged a slightly lower price than the licensed taxis. I jumped into a taxi with a customer already sitting in it. Both the driver and the customer were from Chengdu and they called each other ‘*laoxiang*’ (lit. old home country) in Sichuan dialect. We waited about twenty minutes until the hope of the driver for a third customer completely diminished. Having been told that both of us had our hotel rooms booked, the taxi driver asked which tourist sites we would like to visit, as in most tourist cities like this, by taking customers to tourist attractions, the taxi driver would be able to claim some kickbacks from the entry fees. The Chengdu *laoxiang* turned out to be an engineer working in some power station in Tibet and planned to set off the next morning. Then I told him I was going to Baihuaping, the popularly advertised tourist attraction in Zheba. Even though it was only about 100 kilometres

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<sup>16</sup> Zhongdian county is the capital of Diqing prefecture. It was initially established in the Republican era. The county was officially renamed as Shangri La in 2001 due to the resemblance of the surrounding landscape to the place with the same name described in James Hilton’s fiction *Lost Horizon*. The re-naming, however, was mainly a strategy to support tourist development (Kolås, 2004; Oakes, 2007). In 2015, Shangri La was scaled up to a county-level city. In this thesis, I refer to the place as Zhongdian when discussing events took place before 2001, and as Shangri La after.

away from Shangri La, the driver immediately commented that it was too far away. From his response, I realised that Baihuaping was not a major tourist site that people who visiting Shangri La would go and visit.

Zheba is located on the southeast edge of the Zhongdian plateau to the east of the 5,396 metres high Haba Snow Mountain. The altitude is around 2,100 metres. About sixty-five kilometres further down south is the Tiger Leaping Gorge, a famous scenic canyon on the Jinsha River (the Yangtze). The river runs along the border of the Zhongdian plateau and the Lijiang basin. Administratively, Zheba belongs to Sanba Township, an administrative level under the county—Shangri La. Initially established in the Republican period in early twentieth century, Sanba was classified as a Naxi autonomous town in 1989 with more than 62% of its population classified as Naxi (ZDXZ, 1997, p63). Zheba is classified as an administrative village that consists of fifteen natural village groups with a population of around 3,600 people. Eight of the villages are officially recognised as Naxi. Nonetheless, most people in Zheba call themselves ‘*naxa*’ with the exception of one village which identifies as *zuka*. Although they do not overtly reject the official identification, people in Zheba distance themselves from the urban residents of Lijiang, even on the most basic level such as spoken language, eating habits and traditional costumes.

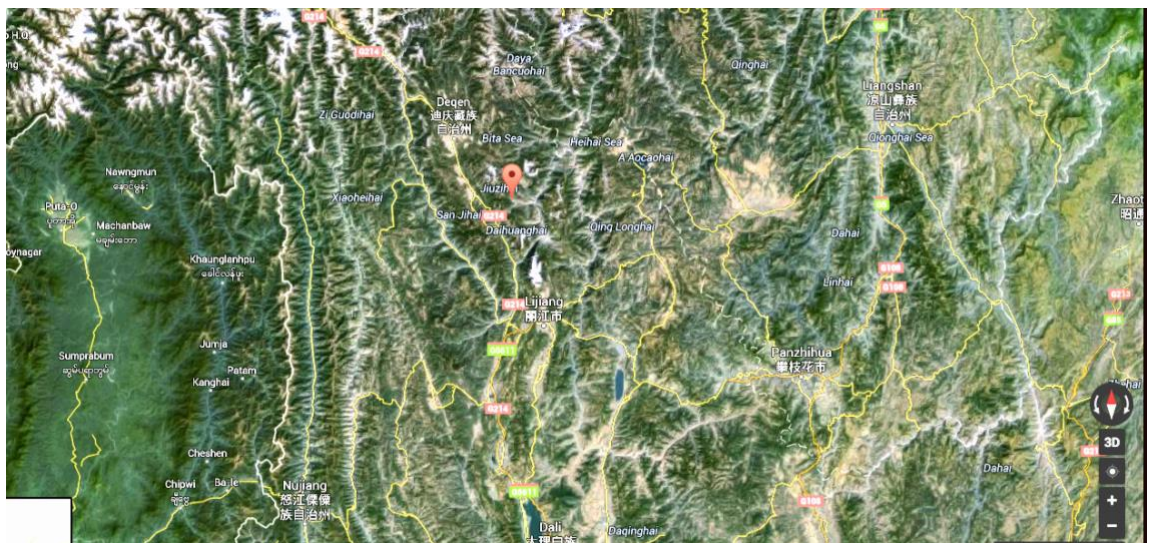


Figure i a satellite imagery of northwest Yunnan with indication of Zheba.

The Naxi language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language group. Although the local language in Zheba is loosely classified as the same western Naxi dialect as that commonly spoken in Lijiang area, there are distinct differences in pronunciation, vocabulary and intonation. The most noticeable difference is that there are considerably fewer words introduced from the Han dialect in the spoken language in Zheba. The Han dialect (n. *haba*) serves as the common tongue to communicate with other groups in the surrounding area. Elderly men can generally get by speaking the Han dialect, whereas most elderly women can only understand it to a limited degree. Most people, men and women alike, born from the 1950s onwards had the chance to at least attend the village primary school. Perhaps also under the influence of the introduction of TV in the late 1980s, they speak a fluent Han dialect or even the standard Chinese *putonghua*. Due to regular contacts with the Tibetan and *nuosu* people through pasturing and exchanging home products, elderly men can also speak the languages of both groups to various degrees. Such multilingual feature distinctively marks Zheba as a frontier area. Local *naxa* people's intimate relation with other groups in the region is also reflected in the local diet that includes products such as yak butter, cheese, barley and buckwheat, commonly consumed by the Tibetan and *nuosu* groups inhabiting the higher mountainous area.

The traditional clothes for women in Zheba are different from those in Lijiang, with a long linen crew collar gown embroidered with colourful threads at the lower hem of the back, a linen or white balayouse, a waistband woven with threads of five colours, and a cloak made from the skin of a male goat (ZDXZ, 1997, p171). Men wear white hemp made tops with a black waistband also embroidered with the colourful threads. Nowadays, the 'ethnic' dress is absent in everyday life and is mainly used at celebrations and life events such as marriages and funerals.

According to the local gazetteer, the first Naxi settlers in Zheba can be traced to the Jin and Tang dynasties (ZDXZ 1997, p163). Some of them first settled in the Lijiang



basin and then retreated to the northeast of Lijiang, while others migrated from south Kham, the present Tibetan region in west Sichuan. There was a big wave of migration from Lijiang to south Zhongdian in the early Ming dynasty, when the Mu chief pushed his power into the plateau and garrisoned troupes in order to take control of the route to Tibet (Mueggler, 2011, p83). The Mu chief's forces withdrew in the mid seventeenth century, but the descendants of these migrants remained living there (Mueggler, 2011, p84; ZDXZ, 1997, p163). The actual processes of migration and settlement in history are, in fact, more complex and less traceable. Locally, it is generally accepted that the eight Naxi villages arrived and settled in Zheba at different stages, starting with the ones further towards the north<sup>17</sup>. The area is further divided into two clusters of four villages along the north-south axis. The scope of this thesis only includes the northern four villages, Gerdu, Po, Lushu and Shugo, each with a population of roughly 300-500. Collectively they are known as *dyky* (n.) or 'the head of the place' as opposed to the southern four, known as *dymæ* (n.), the 'tail of the place'. The four *dyky* villages are within a range of two kilometres of one another. Although intermarriages are very common between the villages, they each remain independent and separate. Their spoken languages have certain distinctive phonetic nuances, with only that of Shugo village similar to the four *dymæ* villages. Village boundaries are not only drawn in physical terms but are also maintained through the subtle variations in daily routines. For instance, people from Po village get up earlier than those from the others and have lunch earlier. In this regard, it is not simply that the *naxa* in Zheba separate themselves from the outside, they also maintain an important sense of separateness amongst themselves.

To other Naxi areas, Zheba has long been known for its spiritual significance. To the north or northwest of all the villages stands a mountain called *Muuts'ydzzy* (n.) or the 'sky support'. Close to the top of the mountain, there is a cave that is believed to be the

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<sup>17</sup> The ongoing experience of place making is one of the key analytical focuses of this thesis as I discuss below. For this reason, instead of offering a full geographical account of Zheba here, the local topographical features of Zheba unfold as the narrative and analysis go on. The local landscape is discussed in detail in chapter 3 with reference to the incense burning practice and in chapter 4 where I describe the geographical features in relation to the broader cosmological understandings.

place where Master Aming, the reincarnation of the founder of the indigenous Naxi ritual practice, *dongba* Shara, attained his divinity. He also categorised the ritual scripts in hundreds of volumes in the cave. The cave is worshipped as a pilgrimage site attracting ritual specialists from all over Naxi areas, who come to enhance their spiritual power or undertake years of training in ritual skills, following the local *dongba* practitioners. One of the households in Shugo village is believed to be the one Master Aming was originally from. Local people who are not *dongba* practitioners rarely go to visit the cave, although they are familiar with the story of Master Aming, summarised as follows:

Master Aming was born in a poor household. In order to pay off the debt his father owed to a Tibetan aristocrat, Aming worked for the Tibetan as free labour in his early years. While there, he learned a number of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, because a living Buddha was teaching them to his apprentices in the same house. Later, Aming managed to run away back to Zheba. To avoid being found by the debtors, he hid in the cave up in the *Mu*ts'ydzy mountain and compiled the ritual scripts there. After he had accomplished his ritual skills, Aming became famous for his spiritual capacity and was admired by the locals as a holy man. His reputation drew the attention of the Mu chief in Lijiang, mystified as *mu tianwang* (ch.), the heavenly king. Mu king invited Aming to Lijiang and set a few tasks to test him, all of which Aming easily handled. Out of jealousy, Mu king eventually poisoned Aming to death (summarised from He and He, 1991).

Aming's legend implies the local people's struggle to remain autonomous from both the dominance of the Tibetan groups in Zhongdian and the control of the Mu chiefdom in Lijiang. It is most explicitly articulated in the episode of Aming's death. There are varied accounts regarding the technique that the Mu king deployed to poison Aming, but the two versions I came across both lead to the same point when Aming decided to give some instruction to the person by his death bed (in one account it was the Mu king). He predicted that three drops of blood would be found in his mouth after his death. Two of them should be thrown to the direction of Zheba and one should remain in Lijiang. His intention was to send his blessing back to Zheba and make sure that more people with talents would be born in his home place and none in Lijiang. However, the person at his

death bed disobeyed Aming's will and did the opposite. This led to the more disadvantaged situation for Zheba. The implication of this misarrangement is often recounted by local Zheba people to express the sense of disjuncture they feel about themselves, that I recounted at the beginning of this introduction. They long for the empowerment that they feel is theirs but is unavailable in the local context. They endeavor to remain separate but cannot be entirely free from the influences of Lijiang.

Although the death of Master Aming did not make Zheba prosper as he had envisaged at the end of his life, the ritual practices he passed on through the *dongba* scripts lay at the heart of the local way of life. The word '*dongba*' refers to the local ritual specialists, meaning wise man or teacher<sup>18</sup>. When the Austrian-American botanist Joseph Rock, who became extremely well versed in the *dongba* scripts, travelled to Zheba in the 1930s, he remarked that the local people were practising their rituals in 'purity' (1947, p250).

*Dongba* use the pictographic scripts to write their ritual texts. Both the texts and the scripts are believed to have descended from Master Aming. By the time when Rock visited Zheba, the *dongba* practices had greatly declined in Lijiang as a result of the assimilationist policy and civilising projects of the central Chinese state. He was very surprised to find a cremation ground that was still in use in Zheba (Rock, 1947, p250). In the Lijiang basin, the traditional cremation practice had long been abandoned and had been replaced by burial under the influence of the more 'civilised' Han culture.

The richness in spiritual traditions made the *naxa* in Zheba extremely susceptible and vulnerable towards the political violence initiated in the late 1950s and reaching its height in the Cultural Revolution's attack on ritual practices. Condemned as *mixin* (ch.) or 'superstition', ritual practices in Zheba faced the same fate as religious and ethnic

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<sup>18</sup> There are other spiritual practitioners amongst the Naxi (in the broader sense of the term). For instance, '*sanba*' is a type of shaman whose divinatory practices are less tolerated by the contemporary political discourse (Chao, 2013). The Moso people have their own ritual specialists called *daba*. In Zheba, *dongba* exercise the most powerful authority over people's spiritual lives. However, this does not imply that the local people are unaware of other practices or do not ask for help from other ritual specialists to solve their problems in life.

cultural activities all over China at the time and were fiercely suppressed. *Dongba* practitioners were specifically banned from performing the rituals and the scripts were denounced as ‘ghosts and monsters’ (ch. *niugui sheshen*). Hundreds of volumes were confiscated and burnt in huge piles. Local people recall that it took three whole days for the confiscated volumes to burn down into ashes. Nevertheless, rather than being eradicated as the state violence aimed to do in the first place, the ‘deepness’ of the past was intensified. As I discuss in chapter 1, the deep past survived this violence through the secret attempts made by the locals to conduct the rituals which they pressingly felt that they could not live without. It also found expression in strong emotions like the fear of retribution that people intensively experienced throughout the Mao era. Instead of seeing the political violence as totally opposed to its target, I propose that it has irreversibly *transformed* the relation between the *naxa* and their deep past, not only by rendering its everyday underpinnings fragmented, but by installing the state as a potent, constitutive force in local experiences (Mueggler, 2001, p5). I attempt to trace the process of this transformation by pinning it down not to the Cultural Revolution, as official periodization has it, but to the beginning of the local land reform in 1957, as I discuss in chapters 1 and 4.

Some of the ritual practices forbidden between the early 1960s and 1970s resurfaced in local daily life in the 1980s in an economic and political climate that was increasingly ‘tolerant’ of ethnic cultural and religious difference, including practices that were covertly carried on throughout the political turmoil of the preceding decades. In the 1990s, ‘*dongba* culture’ was invented by Naxi government officials and intellectuals in Lijiang to ‘beneficially define the distinctiveness of the Naxi ethnic group’ (Chao, 2013, p49-50) even though the spiritual practices that ‘*dongba* culture’ claimed to represent had already become rather marginalised in the lives of these urban Naxi residents and cultural elites. The defining project of ‘*dongba* culture’ was in response to the controversial effects of ethnic classification carried out in the 1950s (Harrell, 2001) and the fierce suppressions that followed. It fitted in to the political context of establishing a

post-Mao ‘nation’ featuring ‘ethnic diversity’ as a negation of the Maoist nation (Chao, 2013, p52).

This recently invented ‘*dongba* culture’ has been celebrated excessively since China joined UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004<sup>19</sup>. As argued by Emily Chao, the anthropologist who works on Naxi in Lijiang, ‘*dongba* culture’ has transformed fragments of the once fiercely condemned spiritual life into:

a scholarly encyclopedia of putatively primordial knowledge, a relic of the past appropriated and rewritten for the purposes of Chinese scholarship, a new form of antiquity to be claimed and wielded by the Chinese nation-state, [and] an exhibit for the promotion of international tourism (Chao, 2013, p58).

At the same time, the ritual practices of ordinary people like the *naxa* in Zheba were either left out of the picture or defined as the authenticised cultural relics. This stifles the existential significance of these practices to those who persistently conducted them even when at great risk of being subject to political criticism and violence. It is the aim and, more importantly, ethical implication of this thesis to address the meanings and values of the fragmented practices that tenaciously survived the historical condemnations—the residue of the deep past—to the ordinary *naxa* people’s lives without neglecting their contemporary relevance in the ongoing processes of marginalisation.

### **Accesses to the deep past**

The central type of data in this thesis emerged from my two field trips in Zheba, first of eleven months in 2014 and 2015, and then a two-month follow-up visit in 2017. Participant observation is the key research method. By living with a local host family and participating in their everyday activities, including accompanying them to work in the fields and mountains as well as to engage in everyday rituals of burning incense, I

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<sup>19</sup> In 2006, the ‘*Naxi dongba hua*’ (ch. *dongba* painting of the Naxi) and ‘*Naxi zu shougong zaozhi jiyi*’ (ch. the manual skills of paper making of Naxi people) were listed in the first group of national intangible heritage, followed by the identification of ‘*Naxi zu remeicuo wu*’ (ch. Naxi Ghost-driving dance) in the second group in 2008.

had multiple opportunities to observe their cultural practices in the spaces and relationships of intimate domestic life, and the local activities that took place in the adjacent villages and the surrounding landscape. This allowed me to develop an understanding of and investigate the fragments of the deep past that are most at stake in the local way of life. I formed sound relationships with my informants which not only allowed them to openly criticise my participation in the local practices (as I discuss in a case of an incense burning trip in chapter 4), but also enabled some of them to feel comfortable enough to share with me their individual struggles with regard to their personal desires, aspirations and concerns. Such an experience of shared intimacy strongly affected the ways I treat their experiences in this thesis and the analytical approach I have chosen to make sense of what they have gone through, as I discuss below.

One of my key informants was a knowledgeable *dongba* ritual specialist, Namu, the oldest member of the family I stayed with. He was the only *dongba* practitioner in the entire area who had acquired his skills of practice before the decades' long ban on spiritual activities in the Mao era. Not long after I started my fieldwork, Namu became my *dongba* scripts teacher. The local villagers never failed to remind me of how lucky I was to get to learn the scripts from him. This experience was certainly essential to my understanding of the local ritual practices. At the same time, it also enabled me to understand Namu as a person who bore a profound and complex relation with the deep past. I intend to convey his integrity in respect of the analysis related to his lived experience. Similarly, I also developed a close friendship with the Smart One who generously shared with me some of his most difficult life experiences. Our conversations and regular socialisation offered me insights into what it means to be an ethical *naxa* person. In my clumsy attempt to convey their longings for —and sometimes failures in—leading a good and meaningful life in their own terms, I choose to present their lived experience in as direct a way as possible in chapter 5 that includes the Smart One's life story, and through the film *The Gorge Is Deep*, in which Namu is the main

protagonist. This is not to advocate a biographical approach. Knowing these two well enough to understand their existential struggles, I feel it simply does not do them justice to break up their lived experiences to fit into abstract analytical categories. On the contrary, the key themes and concepts I explore throughout the thesis can only become alive when they are reinstated in a narrated form of their original life context.

Towards the end of my first field trip, I also conducted in-depth interviews with some villagers above sixty years old, to trace the narrative forms in which they relate to their personal pasts. Some of the interviews were conducted half in Yunnan dialect (close to my mother tongue) and half in local Naxi language, which I started learning from the beginning of my fieldwork and managed to use in daily contexts towards the end. Others were done with the help of local interpreters. While I tried to incorporate women's perspectives in the interviews, the need to respect the local gender boundaries made it difficult for me to interview younger women<sup>20</sup>. My accounts thus are qualified by a generational and gendered dimension that limits my capacity to address women's experiences of the local way of life.

I also collected textual data from the local gazetteer of Zhongdian County (*Zhongdian xian zhi*) published in 1997. This enabled me to identify some precise factual information such as dates and numbers of casualties of certain events that my informants recollected in the interviews I conducted. More importantly, I regard this data as a record of an official temporality constructed by the state. By comparing this official record with local oral accounts, I explore how different forms of temporality speak to each other. I examine the ways that people reference the official temporality when they talk about the past, in order to shed light on how the standard narratives are incorporated or rejected in the transmission of past local events. Throughout the thesis, I make use of secondary literature on the Naxi as well as other ethnic groups in southwest China and beyond, mainly for interpretive and comparative purposes. Given the varied ways that

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<sup>20</sup> I discuss the local boundaries of gender segregation in the following chapters.

people from different Naxi areas prioritise in the understanding of their pasts, as I briefly exemplified above (cf. McKhann, 1998), I do not deploy the nationality of Naxi as an analytical category. Nor do I attempt to make any generalisation about the Naxi as a whole.

Beyond the classic participant observation, I also applied film as a complementary research method, mainly to record major annual and family events and to capture local people's interactions between these events and their everyday routines. My use of film can be summarised as the collaborative approach of 'shared anthropology' by Jean Rouch (Henley, 2009)—integrating the ideas and feedback of my informants in the processes of decision-making and shooting. The stories I tell in the film are collaboratively constructed since they are based on my field experience of observing practices in local people's everyday lives and my interactions with them. As I mentioned above, I include Namu and one of his sons as the main protagonists to explore how they transmit the deep past through the gendered and generational bond between father and son. It also examines the interference of outside forces, specifically in the form of a local visit of provincial level officials, and local people's responses to it.

### **Organisation of thesis**

This thesis draws on a phenomenological and existential approach in anthropology to analyse a number of key themes that link cultural transmission with place making, embodiment, everyday experience of the state, and cosmology. I include the relevant secondary literature at appropriate points throughout the thesis to show how the deep past is lived with on multiple levels and creating the separate sense of locality. The anthropological literature commonly sees cultural transmission as 'the emergence, acquisition, storage, and communication of ideas and practices' (Cohen, 2010, pS194). This conceptualisation can serve as a valid means to effectively draw a wide range of disciplinary approaches and perspectives including biology, anthropology, psychology and archaeology to explore the exchange of ideas and practices in social and cultural



contexts, especially in the long run (Ellen and Fischer, 2013). Yet, at the same time, as the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011, 143) points out, reducing the processes of transmission to the reproduction of ‘context independent’ knowledge and skills is problematic. The processes of cultural transmission are inseparable from their changing cultural and historical contexts and hence require closer look at ‘the varied context-specific ways in which people see themselves in the real world and how their abilities are engaged in the context of their own theories, purposes and conditions’ (Bloch, 1998a, 69). With reference to Fox's (1987) ideas about kinship in Southeast Asia, the anthropologist Maurice Bloch insists that the understanding of kinship and, I would add, other forms of cultural past, should be conceptualized as:

a continual becoming, brought about through contact with the coexisting world, accords well with a view of one's place in history that results from a continual negotiation, which ultimately creates permanent cumulative transformation through the taking on of new appearances, which you become but which in the process you also make your own (1998a, 77).

Along the same lines, the anthropologist Charles Stafford focuses on the experience of learning and child development and points out that ‘[c]ultural transmission... is in fact an uncertain process in which children *create/transform* knowledge as much as they absorb it’ (Stafford, 2013, p20-23, emphasis added). I share this imperative to include the involvement and agency of individual actors in understanding their experience of *being in history*, although I see such creative capacity throughout one’s existence in relation to others rather than limiting it to childhood or conscious learning. In this thesis, I explore the multi-layered, active and dynamic existential struggles of individual persons to transmit and recreate their relations with the deep past that cannot be reduced to ideas, knowledge and skills. With this intention in mind, the chapters are organised as follows.

Based on the testimony of elderly local residents, chapter 1 investigates how they make sense of their experiences of the state violence from the late 1950s onwards in relation to the deep past. It provides the historical context for the discussion of the rest

of the thesis. At the same time, it also traces the local process of state formation through which the state became a powerful and constitutive force in shaping the ways the *naxa* inhabiting their local worlds.

Chapters 2 and 3 look at the fragments of the deep past that unfold in the experience of domestic space and movement in the local landscape. Maintaining a prosperous house entails ordering and reproducing social relations through domestic rituals. The same rituals are also attempts to tame the uncertainties and disruptions of encounters with the state through incorporating them in the experience of the house. Through these efforts, the house gains an interiority that is connected with but *separate* from the outside.

Chapter 3 traces the bodily movements of local people to the spiritual sacred place, Baihuaping, in their incense burning practice. I investigate this practice not so much as an isolated cultural phenomenon; rather by linking it to the domestic rituals discussed in chapter 2, I suggest that the cycles of familial separation and reunion can be conceptualised with the help of a tree metaphor, the root of which is the source of prosperity. This metaphor is lived and sustained through the embodied movement between the local and outside places, which has been intensified in recent years with the unprecedentedly massive scale of labour migration.

Drawing on people's scattered memories, some local archives and secondary literature of a lost ceremony—the sky worship rite—chapter 4 attempts to expand the scale further to the cosmological level. In recovering the significance of the sky worship with its current fragments, I intend to show that the *naxa* in Zheba inhabit a cosmology of displacement meaning that their struggles to make their place in the world is a still ongoing process.

Chapter 5 moves from the multi-layered dimensions of local place making practices as attempts to negotiate and assert a separate space in the transmission of the deep past, to the singular existential struggles of individual persons. With regard to the tension

between the local and the outside that is a recurring theme throughout the thesis, I examine how individuals across generational and gender differences attempt to strike the balance between the two in their attempts to exercise some sense of control over life. This chapter, then, ends my narrative exploration of a small marginal community's existential struggles to live with the deep past in a world full of contingencies, uncertainties and transformations.

Finally, my film, *The Gorge Is Deep* brings together some of the main themes discussed in the foregoing chapters. In the form of visual narrative, the film attempts to link the interlacing layers of cultural transmission in the story of a father-son relationship articulated through the embodied practices of ritual, paper making, and painting shared between them as well as other family members. With reference to the wider context of change in the political economy, the film also explores the changing generational relations with the deep past. In this it places with particular emphasis on the emotional intensity resulting from the experience of state violence, which remains difficult to directly communicate and share.

## Chapter 1 Ghostly encounters: death, loss and state violence

One evening after dinner, I went to visit Dongga, a man in his late fifties. He proudly presented me a piece of yellowing paper spotted with large dark stains. It was a land and property ownership certificate released by the prefecture government in 1957, which Dongga's son claimed no other household in Zheba still possessed. The certificate was about A1 paper size with an image of Mao Zedong right in the top middle accompanied by four five-starred red flags on both sides. The first column below consisted of names of the household members at the time followed by a list of the lands and properties that used to belong to the household. The size of each piece of land and property was meticulously recorded and defined by borders in each cardinal direction.

All the names of the household members were Naxi but recorded with Chinese characters. Dongga was trying to identify them. Although he is a married-in husband or *muu* (n.) to this household, growing up in the same village and living uxori-locally for more than thirty years should have acquainted him with sufficient knowledge about the family history to identify the names. Surprisingly, he got stuck with two names obscured by stains. The titles of them were both indicated as 'daughters'. Dongga recalled the names of the ancestors of the latest three generations, who were named daily during the household incense offering ritual. None of those matched the two. Dongga surmised that one of the names might refer to his wife who was two years old at the time when the document was produced. The other name still remained a puzzle. From the vague traces visible the name could be roughly identified as Aguji, although it was not immediately clear who this might be. Dongga's wife was the eldest among her five sisters. The second eldest was not yet born in 1957 and none of the others were called Aguji. After some contemplation, Dongga came up with a reasonable explanation. There could be another daughter in the household besides the five known who might have died in the severe famine between the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Even though Dongga was less than five years old at the time of the famine, he was well informed of the horror of 1960

being the worst year of starvation in Zheba. He was also under the impression that about one third of the population died in Yunnan. Since premature death of children was locally regarded as ominous, they would not be counted as ancestors and thus excluded from the naming at the incense offering ritual. This could explain the erasure of Aguji in all relevant memories of the household.

Aguji's absence presents a profound problem of the past in the aftermath of state violence in Zheba. At the heart of the problem is the deep silence over the collective sense of loss that lies beneath the surface of everyday life and yet can be easily evoked. The key to solving this problem could not be found in the official historical narrative which erased the massive violence, trauma and contradictions of the twentieth century in rural China. Due to lack of any sort of reconciliation, the tenuous memories of past violence are further obscured. Traces of existences like Aguji's were simply left drifting in the void between remembering and forgetting. They linger on like a ghostly being that can neither be commemorated nor completely wiped out of history.

For people like Dongga, the document perhaps stands less as evidence of the state's attempt to assert power at the household level. Rather, it materialises a gap situated in the past of the house, a gap that appears suspended, unresolved and in a sense disturbing to its current residents. In his attempts to fill the gap, Dongga took pains to bring together different temporalities such as the household ancestry, the collective memory of the Great Leap Forward famine and the local ways of handling premature death of children (as a form of forgetting). Of course, his account was by no means conclusive and the evidence he based it on was far from accurate. It was nonetheless a work of memory in which he wove various threads of temporalities together to render the fragmented remnants of the past comprehensible.

This chapter examines how local people struggle to come to terms with the long-lasting effects of state violence as articulated in local memories and events, and

somatised in chronic pain and sickness<sup>21</sup>. I argue that the state entered the local worlds through radical political campaigns with irreversible and often catastrophic consequences<sup>22</sup>. It abruptly obliterated the distance that the locals used to carefully manage to keep outside forces at bay. The entry of the state in this sense dislocated the local ways of life particularly through contesting the significance of ritual practices. This requires the *naxa* to approach the state from a different light, to absorb the narratives of progress it brought forth while living with the alternative temporalities that such dominant narratives leave out. The narratives of progress are appropriated in the local understanding of debt relationship between ancestors/parents and descendants/children. At the same time, the alternative temporalities speak for the intensity in the experience of the political violence that remains mostly stifled in the following decades. The alternative temporalities are recurrent, elusive and, in some way, disruptive. The experiences of them, as the anthropologist Janet Carsten puts it, ‘are located in personal and familial histories that connect to the wider political formations of which they are a part’ (Carsten, 2007, p2).

The lived experiences of the past violence accounted in this chapter concern what the anthropologist Veena Das calls ‘critical events’ (1995) in personal and communal histories. Such events disrupt the flow of the local everyday worlds and induce ‘a new modality of historical action’ that redefines the preexistent categories and transforms, often radically, the ways that people relate to them (Das, 1995, p5-6; p178). The experience of these events can be overwhelming and often cannot be smoothly incorporated in narratives of the past; rather, the past of this kind remains as ‘separate and unresolved existences’ (Carsten, 2007, p12), surviving, in other words, as ‘a manner

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<sup>21</sup> For more discussion on state sponsored violence in late twentieth rural China see Perry (1985) Bianco (2001), Feuchtwang (2011), Hershatter (2007), Li and O’Brien (1996), Madsen (1990), Thaxton (2008). With reference to another ethnic area in Yunnan, see Mueggler (2001).

<sup>22</sup> The presence of the central state in southwest China in the republican era (loosely 1911-1949) is extremely fragmented due to the collapse of the Qing imperial court and its control over this region, for a discussion on the nearby Kham region in present west Sichuan, see Lawson (2013). Zheba made very little presence in Chinese records at the time (1930s) when Rock travelled there. He observed that there was no trace of governance from the Chinese officials and the native governors had very limited forces to protect the locals from the violent raids of the Tibetan bandits (1947, 251).

of being' hidden behind the gaze of everyday life, as Merleau-Ponty (2012[1945], 85) famously notes. An uncanny encounter with a ghostly being and the like is thus confronting such a dislocated past whose relation to the present is by no means continuous or straightforward. Such encounters often require nuanced ways to relate the dislocated past whose intensity that does not necessarily subside but may transform. For this concern, I follow Feuchtwang and talk about the 'transmission' of critical events. For those who have lived through those events, I argue that, their relation with the dislocated past develops over time in 'a number of linked activities and resources and occur[s] in different modes' (Feuchtwang, 2011, p12-15). As Dongga's case shows, it involves as much imagining the past as remembering and forgetting.

Elaborating on Hannah Arendt's thesis that storytelling creates 'subjective-in-between' in which multiple interests are problematically in play (Arendt, 1958, p182-184), the anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013b) addresses the imperative of narrative that helps one regain some degree of agency especially when one feels overwhelmed by events that are beyond one's control. The narratives formed in the transmission of critical events, including through the bodily language, are concerned less with the search for meanings of the damage and suffering incurred, since such events were often experienced as 'accidentally visited upon the person' (Das, 1995, p19-20)<sup>23</sup>. Nor can the narratives be understood without reference to the context in which they are produced (Kirmayer, 1996). Indeed, they are struggles to open up a shared moral space in order to recover the everyday and resume the task of living (Das and Kleinman, 2001, p4). Such narratives incorporate various temporalities that are related to but depart from, or even undermine, in Erik Mueggler's case (2001), the official history. Like the conclusion Dongga came up with above, the outcome is never definite and always open to revision.

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<sup>23</sup> Das continues to emphasise the danger of searching for *meaning* of critical events. It can lead to the appropriation of the experience of the survivors for the ends of the very system, such as the state, that initiated or encouraged violence in the first place (1995, p22-23; p200-201).

## **An uncanny encounter**

Guzo, a man in his early sixties from Gerdu village, remembered vividly one encounter with a ghost more than thirty years ago. It was at the end of the Mao era or the collective time as the locals call it. He was herding cattle in the mountains with two other men from the same village. One evening while they were drinking in a shelter, one of them had a serious stomach ache, so they decided to go to bed early. At midnight, Guzo was woken by a noise that sounded like the wind blasting the door. All of a sudden, the door flew open and in came a ragged man. In the gloom, Guzo saw him in yellowed hempen sackcloth with a black waistband. The brim of his hat was rather jagged. The man walked towards them with his arms wide open. Guzo was then distracted by the anguished groan of his sick companion. The third man had been woken up as well by then. The patient got so ill that the other two had to carry him back to the village to get him treated by the local barefoot doctor. Guzo recalled that he barely survived the night. Later on, when Guzo described the man he saw that night to other people from the same village, he was convinced that he seemed like the local landlord's son who had died at the beginning of the land reform. The place they stayed was where he had hanged himself on a tree twenty four years beforehand. Nowadays some villagers of Gerdu have turned the land around the place into an apple orchard, although most people try to avoid going there as much as they can.

In Zheba, although years are generally tracked with Chinese zodiac rather than Common Era notation, elderly villagers remember certain CE years distinctively because of their association with big social changes. The year of 1957-1958 was one of them. It was in September 1957 that the land reform first took place in Zheba, in which properties of landlords and rich peasants, classified by the work team from the county government level based on the ownership of land and cattle as well as helpers hired for farm work, were confiscated and redistributed to the poor and lower middle class peasants (ch.



*pinxiazhongnong*)<sup>24</sup>. It also marked the beginning of an era of incessant political struggle. One of first struggle meetings in Gerdu village targeted the household of Bese. Bese was the title of the local governor who used to be in charge of the affairs of three villages in Zheba regarding communal events, land disputes, and other duties assigned by higher authorities. The household used to own most land and cattle in Gerdu and hire most of the villagers to help with farming in busy seasons. It was thus indisputably classified as one of the biggest landlords of Zheba. The head of the household, Bese Apu, attended the meeting with his second eldest son<sup>25</sup>, both of whom were fiercely struggled against by rest of the village. The next morning, Bese was found dead, hanging in the barn of his household. On the same day, the body of his son was found hanging from a tree in the woods near Baihuaping, the place where Guzo spent that uncanny night with his mates and claimed to have seen him.

What happened exactly during the struggle meeting remains unclear to me. I attempted to get an idea of those struggle meetings by talking to some senior villagers who had attended them. Some of them were even directly targeted and subject to the violence. Most of them admitted that the landlords and rich peasants were fiercely rebuked and beaten up without referencing any further detail in terms of the actual violence that occurred. Duzhizo, whose household was classified as rich peasant, reiterated that he was unable to talk about what he had gone through and descended into deep silence. In one of our conversations, he told me that he could still recollect the tremendous fear that he had felt whenever there was a call for the villagers to assemble and the overwhelming sense of relief when he found out he was not the main target of the meeting.

The only person who was willing to talk a bit more about the meetings was a woman in her early seventies, Nanger. Although she married into Gerdu a few years after the land reform, she had heard about what had happened to Bese during the meeting. Bese was

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<sup>24</sup> As Zheba was classified as 'ethnic frontier' (ch. *shaoshuminzu bianjiang diqu*), the land reform took place a few years later than most of rural China. The standard periodization of land reform elsewhere started in 1950.

<sup>25</sup> Bese's eldest son is always talked about as a legendary figure in Zheba who has taken part in the anti-Japanese war as a commander of the Kuomintang. Some villagers said he had even participated in the negotiation of Japan's surrender at the end of the World War II. He died of illness before the land reform.

pushed down on to the ground and loaded with a big rock. One man from the same village even stood on the rock to add more weight on him. She also recounted that most of those who were struggled against were usually violently whipped with bunches of thistles and thorns. Watching them suffer in pain was pure torture for her, but she did not dare to say anything for fear that she would be accused of showing sympathy to them and end up being treated in the same way. ‘Even if they were your close relatives, you could not say a word for them. They were treated like prisoners,’ Nanger remarked. She was not the only one who was enduring the anxiety and fear for those who were brutally treated. My teacher Namu, who had been hired to work for Besee previously, thought it was wrong to treat him in such a brutal way. He recalled that when he used to help their household with farm work, Besee had always treated him well and paid all the hired hands fairly. For similar reasons as Nanger recounted, Namu could not defend or show any sympathy for Besee at the meeting. Both suicide and death that occurs outside the main house are generally regarded as ominous (n. *duşu*), as the spirit of the diseased would not be able to ascend to the sky and would remain unsettled on the earth<sup>26</sup>, so I was surprised, when Namu commented that it was a good thing that both Besee and his son died at the beginning of the land reform: in his view, and despite local beliefs the death had at least saved them from the endless humiliation and suffering followed, which was perhaps as bad as, if not worse than, suffering an ominous death.

The suicides of Besee and his son were only the prelude to the household tragedy. The unmarried brother of the son who stayed in the same household died of starvation two years later on his way to work on road construction in Jianbian, about two days’ walk from Gerdu in the direction of Lijiang (more discussion in the following section). After being struggled against for years, the widow of the suicide son died of a heart attack, leaving a boy and a girl as orphans. Besee’s daughters who had married out were all forced to move

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<sup>26</sup> According to local custom, in order for the deceased to embark on the journey back to the ancestral lands, it is essential for them to die in their own house taken care of by family and relatives. Before the last breath, the family put a piece of silver in the deceased person’s mouth and ask him to follow their predecessors by reciting their names. This practice is called *sak’u* (n.) or to get the breath. Failing to do it, the deceased remain unsettled being on the earth. Such death is referred to as *duşu*, see also in the example of *dongba* Ajia’s death in chapter 3.

out of their marital homes with their husbands and children to some shabby shacks regardless of the class status of their married-in households. They were endlessly struggled against at meetings and were assigned the heaviest labour work throughout the collective era. Acai, the grandson of Bese, now in his sixties, was amongst the first group of students in the locality who attended the local primary school in the 1950s. He did well in class but was forced to quit because his mother was the daughter of the landlord. When the collective mess hall<sup>27</sup> collapsed in 1960, the year of the severest famine (more discussion in the next section), the limited relief grain was distributed evenly to each household except those of Bese's offspring. Benzi, a production team leader at the time, was assigned to confiscate the grain from Acai's household. He was friends with Acai and could not bear watching him and his mother starve to death so sneaked out some food for them in the middle of the night before it was all redistributed.

Even though Guzo was no more than three years old when Bese and his son committed suicide and was therefore unlikely to have any personal memory of them, what happened to the household later was part of his experience growing up in the same village. His later experience of attending struggle meetings in the 1960s also meant that it was not so difficult for him to imagine the violence leading to their death<sup>28</sup>. In many ways, Guzo's uncanny encounter with the ghost, Bese's son, resembles the resurfacing of Aguji on the land ownership certificate introduced at the beginning of this chapter. They both embodied displaced memories that remain unsettled and unsettling. They were both preserved by the materiality of place (a sheet of paper or the local landscape) whose power 'to disarm our memories and electrify our imaginations' is beyond the intentionality of human experience (Trigg 2012: 6). If 'the body is the vehicle of expression for a relation with the world', as the phenomenologist Dylan Trigg (2012, p5) suggests, the bodily figure of a ghost being articulates a broken relationship that cannot be mended due to

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<sup>27</sup> The mess halls in Zheba were first established in autumn of 1958 as part of the Great Leap Forward campaign and lasted about two years.

<sup>28</sup> One particular case Guzo remembered was that a villager was beaten up for seven evenings in a row. He was struggled against because he was suspected to have conspired with Tibetan bandits to rob the collective granary. He was also a relative of Guzo's household. Guzo remembered towards the end, the targeted person was not able to walk on his own. His family carried him on the back to the meeting place and then took him back home after the beatings.

excessive losses and the inability for those who suffer or even just witness the losses to restore their understandings of the local world as it used to be.

The sense of loss, in Bese'e's case, is not necessarily limited to the group of his close kin but is shared among the villagers, especially those who attended the struggle meetings. The violence conducted during the struggle meetings that most of my male informants seemed to be reluctant to talk about in detail, may not be a totally taboo topic, but rather evokes an unpleasant past that they would probably rather leave behind. For those who were subjected to the violence like Duzhizo, a son of a rich peasant household, the urge to forget is even stronger. Whether directly involved or not, the attendees might plead guilty to having witnessed such excessive violence against their fellow villagers, including close relatives, especially when it was impossible to interfere in any way. They 'acted and contributed to the event that other people, themselves included, suffered' (Feuchtwang, 2011, p18). The burden of guilt derived from the dilemma between the indifference they were required to show in face of violence and the 'awareness of norms of moral decency, even while being driven to flout them' (Feuchtwang, 2011, p88). It was aggravated by the anxiety they had to contend with at each meeting they attended. The loss they could not easily get over had less to do with the death or suffering of any individual person than with the despair of being unable to act as an ethical human person. The sympathy they found impossible to express at the time of past violence and the guilt they could only endure with silence find expression in the body of ghostly beings that have inhabited the wild landscape and occasionally return to trouble those with an unreconciled conscience (see also Mueggler, 2001).

### **The age of amorality**

On Chinese New Year's Eve, 2015, I shared an exquisite feast with my host family. There were twelve dishes in total, including pork from a pig that was slaughtered two days before, some fish from the local market that was rarely present on the everyday dinner table, freshly made rice cakes, and home raised chicken which is usually a dish for guests

and festive occasions. The preparation for Chinese New Year took place a while before. The previous month had witnessed flows of students and young people coming back to the village. A series of weddings attended by at least two hundred guests each had cloaked the local villages in a celebratory atmosphere. Thorough cleaning had not just been carried out within each individual household, but the small village paths normally covered by dirt and manure were also surprisingly spotless. People started making special purchases for the festival ten days ahead. During the day, a group of men always gathered to play cards in front of the small village shop. My hostess, like other women in the village, was busy running around between stoves preparing for the lavish dinner for days. While my host family and I were enjoying an amount of food that could easily serve a table of ten, I could not help thinking of the Chinese New Year fifty-five years ago that some informants kept telling me about.

For those who were assigned to Gerdy, a cluster of village settlement in the north about fifty kilometres and two days' walking distance from Zheba, to construct a road and irrigation system, the Chinese New Year's Eve of 1960 was unforgettable. Each of the men assigned to work there was given a *manjin* (ch. a sort of turnip used as animal feed) which they boiled to eat. 'What kind of New Year's Eve was it? There was nothing to eat at all', exclaimed Yuher, a man now aged seventy-seven. Yuher was only twenty-two when he was sent to Gerdy. Most able-bodied men and some women in Zheba were conscripted to construction projects<sup>29</sup> and only the disabled, the elderly and children remained at home. The recruited labourers (ch. *laodongli*), including over twenty women from Lushu village, left Zheba in the lunar ninth month 1959 after the rice harvest and worked in Gerdy for about four months. The food they consumed was supplied from their home villages, to which they referred as '*dui*' (ch.) or production team at the time. It ran out quickly. About twenty days later after Chinese New Year, one woman from Lushu village went to Yuher and suggested they run away together. After midnight, Yuher was

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<sup>29</sup> The construction projects, including building irrigation systems and reclaiming wasteland, were part of the Great Leap Forward campaign launched in Zhongdian Prefecture at the end of 1958; road construction in this area started in late 1956 as part of the plan to build the Yunnan-Tibet road system; the first project was constructing the road between Lijiang and Zhongdian which was finished in October, 1957 (ZDXZ, 1997, p306-308; p624-625).

woken up by a touch on his head. He sneaked out of the campsite with all the women from Lushu during that night.

Yuher recollected his experience in Gerdy without much affect, apart from when he talked about the *manjin* he had for dinner on that Chinese New Year's Eve, he still could not help venting his frustration and anger. In the Naxi myth, *manjin* was originally a result of a failed attempt of the first human generation to 'plant rice' cakes on the earth. Although its colour and shape are similar to rice cakes, the texture is much harder. 'The horse is eating *manjin*', was the first sentence uttered by the three sons of *Ts'ozeluuu*, the Naxi human ancestor, and *Ts'ehububə*, his celestial wife, in three languages who later became the ancestors of Tibetan, Naxi and Bai people respectively. The mythological reference to *manjin* indicates the long convention of using it as forage. Therefore, it is not too hard to understand the despair Yuher felt when he found out the only available food for the supposedly finest annual feast was animal feed. Eating *manjin* at a time of extreme starvation transformed it into a luxury. Yuher did not linger over much detail of the excitement and apprehension he felt about the decision to escape and the risk he might undertake given the rigid and tense political atmosphere at the time; nor did he describe the exhaustion he felt after four-months labouring in winter without enough food to eat. The escape was evidently the equivalent of Hobson's choice—a choice he had no option but to make—as his last struggle to survive.

Back in Zheba, the situation was not any better, if not worse. Fourteen-year-old Losi had just dropped out of teachers' training school in Zhongdian and returned home, but he regretted this decision almost immediately. 'At school, we still got something to eat at least, whereas at home there was nothing,' Losi recalled. The mess halls in each village, established in autumn 1958 at the beginning of collectivisation, were initially popularly welcomed but within less than a year were not able to feed the villagers. The food in the gruel served for each meal changed from *manjin* to corn flour, then to bran, and in the end,

there was only tree bark left in it<sup>30</sup>. Guzo, at the time a five-year-old child, remembered that there was barely any substance in the gruel, or, as he called it, ‘water.’ After each meal, he could hear the sound of the water swirling around in his stomach when he was walking.

Yuher was the only able-bodied man of his household. His grandfather was thin and bony due to poor health and his grandmother was blind. His maternal uncle and elder brother were both deaf. The rest of the family were his mother and sister-in-law. Earlier in the famine, Yuher had a close friend, a man originally from another village, who worked for the collective mill. Yuher often went to his friend and begged for wheat bran. The mill worker sympathised with the distress of his family circumstances and gave him a couple of bowls secretly each time. Yuher was repeatedly warned that he should keep silent about the bran; otherwise people would come to the mill and plunder it.

I fried the wheat bran, pounded it in the stone mortar with pestle, and carefully sieved the flour. We mixed it with water and ate it with tea... My household used to be a bit better off in the old days. There were people selling bean curd skin covertly. I went there and saw three or four acquaintances. They were my relatives. I called their names and asked them to give me some. There were many people around and it was difficult to talk. I was pretty smart. [I told them] my grandfather was lying in bed and too sick to eat anything; my grandmother had no strength to eat at all and was starving; my uncle could not bear the hunger any longer and nearly died. In the end, they sold me [the bean curd skin] at half price. I bought four bowls home and boiled it in sour water. It became bean curd again. At that time, if one could eat one bowl [of the bean curd] he or she would only eat half. We needed to save the food. Two or three days later, I went there [the secret sale] again. This time I got six buns and some sugar for the elderly. I put the sugar on top of the buns and gave them to my grandparents. I was able to drink at the time and I also got half a *jin* (250 grams) of liquor. My household used to distil liquor for sale, so my family could all drink. I started to drink a lot after fifteen. There is too much to tell about that time...

Yuher did not hide his pride when talking about the tactics to get hold of food through personal connections in the early days of the famine. This pride is also associated with being able to act filially towards the elders in the house by offering them the best food

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<sup>30</sup> The tree bark people ate at that time is called ‘*laolupi*’ in the Yunnan dialect. It is a kind of dry fungus that grows on top of tree trunks. Some recalled that at the height of the famine, even *laolupi* was difficult to hunt for in the mountains.

available (steamed buns and sugar) in a time of extreme shortage. However, his efforts did not keep death at bay after all. His grandfather passed away in 1959, at the time when there were still cattle available to slaughter for the funeral. A year later when his grandmother died, there was no food at all to send her on her way, not even a bowl of rice and an egg normally placed by the bedside of the deceased. All the funerary rituals were omitted. Those starved or sickened to death earlier on were still sent to the cremation ground of the village. Later, as more and more people died and less and less food was available, no one had the strength to remove the remains of the dead any more. They were hastily burnt with rotten firewood right in front of the houses they died in. People commented that it was just like how dead cattle were treated. Yuher's pride in finding ways to survive is therefore complicated with a sense of shame that came not long after in not being able to carry out the ritual obligations to his grandmother, to grant the dead the final dignity of being a human.

At the time when Yuher was in Gerdy, there were other construction projects going on not too far from Zheba<sup>31</sup>. Inejiu, a young man from Po village, was in a group that was assigned with the task of wasteland reclamation in Ri`en, two days' walking distance from Zheba. They faced the same situation of starvation there. People ate whatever they could find. Both Inejiu's legs became seriously swollen and he suspected it was because he had eaten some poisonous plant. He took some medicine, but it did not work. In the end, he limped back home with the help of two sticks. Many of those who went to either Gerdy or Ri`en never managed to make their way back, so Inejiu recalled. He was also not the only person in Zheba who suffered swollen legs, which was medically diagnosed as nutritional edema. According to the official record, by May 1960, 728 people in Zheba were diagnosed with nutritional edema and 124 of them died (ZDXZ, 1997, p26). By the time Inejiu returned home, the local hospital had admitted more patients than it could have

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<sup>31</sup> While the land reform did not take place until 1957 in Zheba, collective infrastructure projects that mobilised the local population to work in the adjacent areas as well as other parts of Yunnan can be traced to early 1950s. These projects were further encouraged as part of the nation-wide rural industrialization in the establishment of the People's Commune or *renmin gongshe* (ch.) in the late 1950s (Manning and Wemheuer, 2011, p5). Such projects were carried out throughout the following decades perhaps due to the poor infrastructure conditions in this region.



possibly accommodated. Each patient was allocated 3 *liang* (about 150 grams) of grain a day. Inejiu was not admitted to the hospital, and by February 1960, he was sent out, again, to construct the irrigation system in Jiangbian, sixty kilometres to the southeast of Zheba. He and his group walked for three days and only reached half way. No one had the strength to proceed with the journey anymore and gave up. People were lying around on the ground. Three or four of people died each day, including the Bese's youngest son who had survived the political struggle mentioned in previous section. Inejiu's own grandmother passed away at home when he was away this time.

Mobilising people in Zheba to provide labour for infrastructure work can be traced back to early 1950s. In 1954 when Nanger was only eight years old, her twelve-year-old sister was conscripted to road construction in Yongsheng, about seven days' walking distance from Zheba. Their mother had died the year before and their father was half blind, so the only able-bodied labourer of the household was the elder sister. The household circumstances were so difficult at the time that they did not even have proper bedding for Nanger's sister to take to Yongsheng. She recalled that there was only one piece of blue cloth in the house that she shared with her father at night and they slept in the clothes they wore in the day. In the end, the sister took a piece of sheepskin with her. It was from the sheep slaughtered for her mother's funeral the year before. The construction group stayed in Yongsheng for several months and it rained nonstop. Nanger's sister wore the sheepskin in the day and covered herself with it at night. When she eventually returned, Nanger remembered the sheepskin was completely wrinkled and hard having been soaked in the rain for too long. It was not wearable any more. Some people in the same group died during the work or became seriously ill afterwards due to sleeping in the miasma of the marshes at night.

The famine reached its climax after the autumn harvest in 1959 when there was absolutely no food in the mess halls for about four months<sup>32</sup>. While some linked this to the

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<sup>32</sup> Officially defined as 'three years of natural disasters', the Great Leap Forward Famine broke out pervasively in rural China in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The death toll is estimated to be between 15 million to 43 million

excessive waste at the beginning of collectivisation when even cattle were fed with pots of rice, most people were aware that the grain had been either confiscated by the state or pocketed by the grain keepers and cooks of the mess halls. It is recorded in 1959, the actual yield of 22,780,000 kilograms grain in the whole Zhongdian prefecture was reported by the local cadres as 47,000,000 kilograms and 3,255,000 kilograms was levied by the state; in 1960, the 27,055,000 kilograms yield was reported as 46,500,000 kilograms with 5,107,000 kilograms levied (ZDXZ, 1997, p307). When I first asked Duzhizo about the famine by using the official term ‘three years of natural disaster’, he protested strongly: ‘What natural disaster? It was utterly caused by humans!’ He carried on telling me that about twenty people died during the famine in his village, which consisted of less than twenty-five households at the time. Only one person in his village was born in the year of 1960 and it was the child of the grain keeper. Like nutritional edema, female infertility was another common consequence of the severe famine. According to the statistics of the county medical bureau, by December 1960, 3323 women in the whole Zhongdian prefecture suffered metroptosis or amenorrhoea; 2037 people died in the same year and about 1700 of them were estimated to have died of malnutrition plus overwork; the administrative township that Zheba belongs to (Sanba, see introduction) was listed as the hardest hit (ZDXZ, 1997, p26).

If the violence that occurred during the land reform years was mainly targeted at certain groups, the targets during the famine expanded so vastly that everyone could potentially fall into that category. In Po village, Nanger recalled that one of her relatives stole some collective (ch. *jiti*) grain and was tortured to near death. When he was sowing rice seeds, someone spotted him secretly hide some and reported it. After he returned from the field to the former landlord’s place, which was used as the collective meeting place at the time, a bowlful rice was found in his pocket. In the evening, Nanger went to the

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(Manning and Wemheuer, 2011). It is recorded in the gazetteer that amongst the 442 mess halls running in Zhongdian county at the time, 383 could only provide 0.4 kilograms or less food per head every day; 83 of them had no food at all (ZDXZ, 1997, p307). Local people in Zheba recall that in a neighbouring area, there was no grain for entirely six months. For more discussion on the Great Leap Forward Famine see Feuchtwang (2010), Friedman et al. (1991), Mueggler (2007), Thaxton(2008), and Yang (2008).

collective meeting and saw him tied to one of the pillars outside the house. It was in lunar February when the weather was still wintry. People kept pouring cold water over his head and body. 'Before they finished pouring one bucket, the next one came,' Nanger recalled this with a sigh. The man was tied there for a whole day and night. The next day, he was sent to a bigger struggle meeting at the people's commune in Shugo village. By the time the final decision to send him to a labour camp was made at the end of the meeting, he was already unconscious. People who accompanied him to the labour camp returned and said he died halfway there. Similar cases also happened in Gerdu. Namu recalled a man who committed suicide out of shame and fear because he was caught frying a handful beans (picked from the collective field) in his house. My friend, the Smart One's paternal grandmother, as his mother recollected, was struggled to death after being spotted hiding behind their house and eating some dried *manjin*. Violence and the fear of it were haunting those who pulled all their strength left to survive.

In Zheba, people's memories of the famine were mainly centred around food, including the sickness and death that occurred as a result of lack of food. They recounted the change of food served at the mess halls before it was all gone; they took pride in their efforts to find edible matter through social connections; they remembered in detail the meticulous methods to make unconventional things like wheat bran and tree bark digestible; they also repeatedly recounted the eating taboos, like dog, snake, frog and horse, that were broken by some of their fellow villagers (and possibly themselves, perhaps too difficult to admit). Remembering the time when the most essential need to survive could not possibly be met can easily trigger strong emotions like anguish, despair and horror, even decades after the event. Such memories also necessarily entail an ethical dimension as life was stripped to its barest form not only in the sense that people fought to eat animal feed and broke all sorts of ordinary ethics they normally observe in everyday life; but also, in that what used to grant them dignity of being human, for instance funeral offerings and rituals, were not possible to carry out. Those who lived through the famine felt that their lives were on many levels reduced to those of animals. At the same time,

they still found themselves subjected to the relentless labouring projects and excessive violence escalating to the level of terror, adding another layer of fear and suffering to their already shattered means of surviving.

In March 1960, after several investigations conducted by the work team sent from the prefecture level, relief grain was eventually distributed in Zheba. Each person was supplied with 7 *liang* (350 grams) grain a day. The famine situation started to abate a bit. However, the memories of such an age of suffering and amorality still keep visiting those who survived it, most prominently in the intimate body.

### **Chronic pain and hardship of the past**

The local market in Shugo village, where the people's commune and later the township government used to be, runs every ten days. Local people from the surrounding areas go to sell home produce like dairy foods, vegetables, chicken etc., but most of the vendors are from Sichuan or other parts of Yunnan. These vendors, or small merchants, move around between different local markets with the goods in their vans. The customers include Naxi, *lolo* (*nuosu*), Hui and Han people, who are generally from nearby villages in Sanba. The Yunnanese dialect, referred to as or *haba*, is the common language used in business transactions.

Like most local markets, there is usually a stall selling Chinese medicine in Shugo. The owner of the stall refers to himself as Doctor Yang. He displays various medical products ranging from dry herbs to animal skulls. The stall is decorated with eye-catching thank you banners that all have his name on it. Presumably they were sent by the previous patients whose diseases had been cured by Dr. Yang's medicine. At the back of the stall, his assistants work on some electronic devices to provide customers with a free blood pressure test service. When I first saw Dr. Yang, he was busy mixing up a prescription while explaining the functions of each component he added in to his audience. He talked in standard Putonghua with a loud speaker. A crowd of local people who mostly seemed

to be above fifty years old were standing around listening to his spiel. One type of herb was introduced as equally effective for both male and female bodies (ch. *jianyinzouyin*, *jianyangzouyang*). To sustain his point, Dr. Yang gave the following hypothetical scenario:

A woman suffering an abdominal pain goes to hospital, where it is most likely that she will be seen by a male doctor. Feeling too embarrassed to let a strange man check her body, she changes her mind and goes back home without taking any medical tests. She assumes that the pain will go away after a few days in bed. But without proper treatment, her illness may actually get even worse.

According to Dr. Yang, this herb he just added to the prescription could easily cure the women's illness and spare her of the embarrassing experience in hospital. While listening to this, some women in the crowd nodded and smiled their approval to each other. Dr. Yang then continued to introduce the dried starfish he was about to mix up with other medicines. He emphasised its efficacy for physical pains caused by overwork. He pointed out that many people used to carry excessive weights during farm work in their younger years, and now suffered severe chronic pain in their advanced ages. He assured the audience that the starfish was a perfect cure to relieve such pain. Once again, his point was greeted with approval by the audience. The whole process of making up the prescription took more than half an hour. In the end, each pack of Dr. Yang's medicines was sold for 60 *yuan*. Most of those who stayed about ended up buying one or two packs and left with smiles on their faces.

It is of course impossible for me to actually evaluate the medical efficacy of Dr. Yang's prescription. His advertisement, nonetheless, revealed the common health problems and medical demands shared amongst the elderly villagers. Even though he was not originally from the local area, doing medicine business at the market for many years has no doubt equipped him with a comprehensive understanding of peasants' life. He is familiar with the most likely scenes local people may encounter when they fall ill as well as the kinds of gender barriers that obstruct most women from receiving proper medical help. He did not promote the prescription with obscure professional medical terms.

Instead, by relating the effects of the drugs to people's everyday concerns, Dr. Yang convincingly won over his audience.

The link between chronic pain and excessive hard work in the past is not arbitrarily drawn; it is widely shared among the local people. Xiaoker, my teacher Namu's youngest son, now in his early fifties, often has a lower back problem. A few years ago, his cousin who worked as doctor ran a medical test for him but could not diagnose the problem. Every time when his lower back aches, Xiaoker takes some painkillers or goes to the local clinic to take injections. He traces the source of the pain to the heavy labouring work he undertook in his early twenties. Shortly after the decollectivisation in the early 1980s, Xiaoker was lucky enough to draw the job opportunity to work in a state ran tungsten minefield together with two other young men from the same village. The minefield was located on the mountainside of Haba Snow Mountain. It was 3000 metres above the sea level and the weather condition was extremely wet. Xiaoker recalled that even through their beds were raised about a metre above the floor, the bedding felt cold and damp all through the year. The daily job there was to carry loads of tungsten ore. As the youngest son of the household, Xiaoker did not do much farm work before the age of fourteen when he dropped out of secondary school. He was not used to the heavy workload in the beginning and was mocked by other mineworkers. He made efforts to catch up with the weight that everyone else could carry and even attempted to surpass them as the job went along. In the end, as he proudly claimed, he managed to carry 200 *jin* (100 kilograms) in each load. His back problem, in his analysis, is the result of this experience of extremely arduous work in poor weather conditions. One of the two other men from the same village with whom Xiaoker worked in the minefield died of heart attack shortly after they returned home.

Xiaoker's father Namu, at the age of eighty-eight, suffered bodily pain more often than his son, yet he could not pinpoint the pain to any specific part of his body. Most of the time, he complained about aching all over. He and his family associate his physical pain

with the years of the collective era. As a father of eight and a skilled hunter, Namu often went out hunting in the mountains in order to find sufficient food to feed his family. The collective farming in the Mao era required people to work in the field for nine days consecutively. Namu usually went into the mountains to set up traps for his game on the non-working days. As the traps needed to be attended to five or six days after being set and before the next non-working day, he used to walk miles in the woods overnight to check each trap with fire torches and return by dawn in time to join the farm work the next day. Unlike many other households in Zheba, none of Namu's family members died during the famine. His elder children attribute their survival to the nutrition and strength that they got from eating Namu's prey when there was no food available around.

The collective era in Zheba is generally remembered as extremely hard or 'dziæ' (n.). Those who lived through the time still remember that a week used to be ten days instead of seven, as mentioned above. Bade, a man in his fifties who dropped out of secondary school due to the lack of labourers in his household, recalled that after the end of collective work each day, he returned home, drank a pot of bitter tea, and then went to the mountains to cut firewood. The firewood villagers collected was partially for daily use, but it could also be sold to the township government sectors located in Shugo village. Bade carried on working in the woods until dark and then made his way back home for dinner. On the three non-working days of each month, the able-bodied household members usually went to the mountains to carry the piles of firewood back, while the rest spent their time cultivating their small private plots or attending to other domestic business. Bade's account of this relentless routine is shared by a couple of other people I talked to about the collective farm work, who described it in an almost identical manner.

The Naxi word for pain or 'nu' also means illness. Although experienced as symptoms in individual bodies, nu can normally be traced to other sources. It is often related to ritually polluted objects or places, unsettled beings, or defied ancestors and deities. Tracing the source of nu through the practice of divination is the key to resolving it

through healing rituals (more discussion in chapter 5). Similar to *yu* in the conventional sense, the chronic pain that Namu and Xiaoker, as well as many others who lived through the collective era, have experienced, appears to be elusive, incomprehensible or not even traceable by medical test. It is collectively linked to the hardship in the past, and to the collective farm work in particular. With such attribution, one's own pain is shared with those who are also suffering. To speak of or even to complain about the pain, as Namu often did, 'allow[s] private experiences of pain to move out into the realm of publicly articulated experiences of pain' (Das, 1995, p193)<sup>33</sup>. Such a process of sharing becomes most salient when elderly villagers gather around as I described above in the case of Dr. Yang's medical stall.

The hard collective labour work of the Mao era is often juxtaposed with the relatively more flexible work and easier lifestyle of today. Nanger recollected a comment from his eldest son, who was born in early 1970s and now works as a coach driver: 'In the old days, you worked so hard all the time but got nothing in return. Nowadays, we don't have to work as hard, somehow we have everything'. For Nanger, this comparison is her son's indirect way of acknowledging the hard work she undertook in bringing him up. Just as Namu's children attribute their survival of the famine to their father's hunting, the source of the better off lives that most people are leading nowadays is traced to the difficult times their predecessors have lived through; the echo of that past is embodied as the pain they are still living with. The pain therefore mediates the suffering in the past and the more comfortable life in the present. It becomes a medium through which the transmission of the collective era takes place.

Mirroring the relationship between ancestors and descendants in the Naxi cosmological understanding, as I shall illustrate further in the chapters to come, the relation between the old generation and their offspring is configured as a debt relation

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<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein argues that to say 'I am in pain' is not a declarative statement but rather to communicate it. It 'is not the end of a language, but the beginning of it' (See Das, 1995, p194-196). This is in contrast with the ways Namu talked about the Cultural Revolution, in which he *felt* himself was violated. To repeatedly articulate such destructive experience is less to do with sharing than a means to live with it (see chapter 5).



through the suffering of the former. Parents' suffering constitutes the sacrifice they made for their children in order for them to suffer less. In return, the children are supposed to take good care of the parents in their advanced years and continue to serve them as ancestors through incense offering rituals, which take place every day on the household shrine. The chronic pain endured by elder villagers like Namu and Nanger somatises the debt relation and integrates the two separate but closely related generational groups in the same moral domain. At the same time, this relation also parallels the narratives produced in the *suku* (ch. speaking bitterness) campaign widely carried out throughout rural China in 1950s including the remote ethnic minority areas in Yunnan (Mueggler, 2014). In *suku* meetings, local peasants were encouraged to articulate the hardship and difficulty before the liberation and to give credit for their lives to the party-state (Anagnost, 1997; Hershatter, 2011). The same narrative structure has been readopted in the configuration of the relationship between hardship in collective era, especially the shortage in the famine, and the material abundance in the present time.<sup>34</sup> The pain, in this sense, attests to the realisation of the material wellbeing promised by undertaking hard work in the past. In a word, the transmission of the collective past, mediated in the widely shared chronic pain, weaves various temporalities and creates morally compelling narratives. In such narratives, people think of their wellbeing in relation to the past, to the sacrifices made by their parents and ancestors, and eventually to the state that has brought about the 'progress' from the past into the present implied in the *suku* narratives.

### **Struggle against the deep past**

At 22:08, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1966, an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.4 struck Sanba. As recorded in the local gazetteer, 24 people died; 18 were seriously injured; 48 suffered minor injuries; 215 houses collapsed (ZDXZ, 1997, p30). Earlier on the same day, Nanger, together with other people from Gerdu village, went up to Baihuaping. The political activists of the village led them to tear down and smash the incense burning

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<sup>34</sup> A similar case is also observed in northwest China, for instance see Guo (2003).

shrines in front of the sacred spring well. Other small shrines in the surroundings were dug up and torn into pieces. The remains of the shattered shrines were thrown into the spring. It was, as Nanger put, an activity ‘to struggle against the deities’. ‘The smashed pieces were thrown into the spring well. I didn’t dare to do it, but I had no choice. I just followed what other people did...’ In the evening, Nanger went for a group meeting at the former landlord’s house which by then had been converted for collective use. In the middle of the meeting, the ceiling of the house suddenly started to shake. The rocks weighting the roof fell off and the ceiling of pine shingles collapsed.

We were so scared. Everyone started screaming. The paths in the village were covered by piles of rocks fallen off from the roofs. It was almost impossible to pass through. [I thought] that must be it: We offended the deities on that day. We struggled against them, so the earthquake broke out. *ame*<sup>35</sup>! So fierce! In the following half of the month there were aftershocks almost every day, probably thirty or forty times in total.

At that time, Nanger’s husband was away working on road construction in Haba, some thirty kilometres away to the southeast of Zheba. When Nanger finally managed to return home from the meeting place, her father and sister in-laws were hiding underneath the raised wooden platform in the house. She was too scared to stay and went to a relative’s place instead. They all lay down to sleep under the platform, but fear kept Nanger awake. Before long, an aftershock occurred, and they started screaming and panicking again.

The destruction done to the shrines and the sacred spring well at Baihuaping marked the high point of the Cultural Revolution campaigns that had been brewing up for a couple of months in Zheba. Earlier that year, a twenty-three-year-old university graduate returned to Shugo, his home village, from Kunming, the provincial capital. He soon organised the local Red Guard group and initiated the Cultural Revolution campaigns. Many nowadays joke about this when they recall the way this former university graduate used to dress in uniform equipped with a pistol as the head of the Red Guard. The

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<sup>35</sup> *ame* refers to ‘mother’. In Zheba, it is common to apply the Naxi term ‘mother’ or ‘father (*apa*)’ as strong exclamations.

campaign he initiated mainly targeted spiritual activities and ritual items, denounced as ‘*mixin*’ or superstition. The incense offering ritual in each house was overtly banned. The household shrines were removed. Huge numbers of ritual scripts were confiscated from the houses of *dongba*. They were either burnt into ashes or used to make strawmen in the field. It is said that it took three days and nights for confiscated scripts to burn into ashes.

At the time of the anti-superstition campaign, most men in Zheba were away working on road construction projects like Nanger’s husband. It was left to those who remained at home, mostly women, to keep all the ritual items from falling into the hands of the Red Guard. Even though women are traditionally marginalised, if not entirely excluded, in *dongba* ritual practice<sup>36</sup>, some of them played active roles in salvaging the ritual items from destruction<sup>37</sup>. Namu’s wife hid the most commonly used ritual scripts in the house, inherited from Namu’s maternal uncle who was known as the most accomplished *dongba* in Zheba in the Republican era, in a hollow under the earth behind their house. She managed to keep a hundred volumes which were later cautiously locked up in a cabinet by Namu (see *The Gorge Is Deep*). Dongga’s mother in-law also managed to hide some of the ritual scripts and a pair of big white trumpet shells used for ritual purposes in the stove hole of their house, all of which were passed down from her grandfather who used to be an accomplished *dongba*.

The apprehension Nanger felt towards destroying the shrines at Baihuaping and the initiative other women made to salvage ritual items and scripts reveal how deeply the local spiritual beliefs were rooted in the ordinary sense of moral decency. In fact, most people did covertly carry on with the incense burning ritual both at home and at Baihuaping throughout the Cultural Revolution. Nor were the local *dongba* expressly

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<sup>36</sup> The skills and knowledge of the *dongba* ritual practices are passed down only to male descendants; on some ritual occasions such as the sky worshipping ceremony (see chapter 4) strictly limits the activities of women (more on the gender distinction in local ritual practices see chapter 3).

<sup>37</sup> This stands in great contrast to the case in some neighbouring *lòlop’ò* community where local women were the most active and enthusiastic to thrust out ritual items related to a pre-existing social order, i.e. the ‘*huotou*’ (ch.) system (see Mueggler, 2001).

targeted or struggled against as the local Red Guard feared for the spiritual power they possessed. The resilience of spiritual piety seemed to derive more from the fear of retribution than the belief in the divine. The big earthquake that immediately followed the smashing of the sacred shrines attested to the efficacy of the local deities. For people like Nanger, the horror they felt during and after the event conveyed their concerns about the potentially fateful consequences of their own violation deeds. The campaign initially launched to denounce spiritual practice ironically ended up reinforcing its credibility. As a result, most people found themselves caught up in a moral dilemma. Ostensibly they still had to condemn the *mixin* activities to avoid political trouble; the anxiety and fear triggered by such condemnation, on the other hand, led to conflicted feelings and internal struggles that they had to live with for more than a decade until 1980s, when the political atmosphere became more tolerant to such practices.

A prominent aspect of retribution is that it is timeless or, as Mueggler notes, ‘it frequently returns to organi[s]e interpretations of present events (2007, p51). A few years after the spiritual activities were revived, a neighbour went to Dongga asking to borrow the scripts rescued by his mother in-law during the Cultural Revolution. This neighbour’s household used to have *dongba* practitioners<sup>38</sup>. He told Dongga that he wanted to learn to practise. Later, when Dongga asked him to give back the scripts, he denied having borrowed them and claimed that the scripts originally belonged to his own household. The neighbour then sold the scripts for 600 *yuan* to Sanba township ‘cultural station’ or *wenhuazhan* (ch.), a government sector in charge of local cultural affairs. He spent the money to buy a horse, but it died within a month after the purchase. Dongga then concluded that the death of the horse was the manifestation of the retributive power of the ritual scripts.

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<sup>38</sup> As *dongba* practice is traditionally passed on through descendancy, having practitioners in preceding generations implies that the male descendants are equipped with the capacity to acquire the spiritual power in carrying out the rituals, some of which require strong power to fight against evil spirits. Similar emphasis on lineage could be found in other shamanic practices, for instance the Darhad shamans in Pederson (2011).

## Reimagining the state

Namu often recalled the coerced conscription (ch. *zhua zhuangding*) in the Republican era in late 1930s<sup>39</sup>. The regulation was that households with three sons were supposed to send off one of them to join the military; those with five were compelled to send away two. Laoer, born in 1924, was the second eldest amongst three brothers. He was first conscripted to the army in Lijiang for a couple of years and managed to escape back to Zheba. He did not dare to show up in the village. His father helped him build a shingled house in the woods near Baihuaping to stay in and sent him food regularly. Later on, his father found him a job as a herder in a Tibetan village where Laoer worked for three years. When he returned home, there happened to be another round of conscription and the household was again demanded to hand over a male labourer. Laoer's elder brother sold the best piece of their land and used the money to buy a mule, then the most precious livestock. The mule was used to bribe Bese, the local village governor who was later classified as the landlord in the land reform. The bribery was a common transaction at the time referred to as '*luomadianyin*' (ch.), literally meaning to pay with mules and horses as silver. With this, Laoer avoided the second conscription and remained at home. Meanwhile, a close friend of Namu's, then in his teens, did leave for the conscription and never returned.

How have the critical events accounted in this chapter changed the local political and social imaginaries and the ways people relate to them? As pointed out in the introduction, the rest of the dissertation responds to this question at different levels. One prominent aspect that can be drawn out from the transmission of these events discussed thus far is the reconceptualisation of the state. The role of the village governor Bese corresponded to the *huotou* (ch.) system implemented in Yunnan in the Republican era. It was an autonomous administrative position whose responsibility was to mediate between the local affairs and the higher officials. One significant duty of *huotou*, as discussed at length

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<sup>39</sup> The coerced conscription was commonly implemented in southwest China from 1937 to 1944 during the Sino-Japanese War.

by Mueggler (2001), was to receive officials from outside, treat them with hospitality, and send them on their way as soon as possible. As shown in the *luomadianyin* transaction above, Bese as the local *huotou* managed a distance between local people and high authorities that channelled both the control of the Republican state over the local population and the local responses to it. This distance used to keep the state separate from the local worlds ‘to maintain moral and social boundaries between inside and outside and to manage the threats to community that boundary transgressions entailed’ (Mueggler, 2007).

Seen in this light, Laoer’s experience of escaping twice from the military conscription stands in contrast with Yuher’s escape that happened some twenty years later when he ran away from the construction camp then in a state of starvation, only to find himself caught up in the same, if not worse, situation back in Zheba. If it was still possible to escape from the control of the Republican state physically or through the local agent, namely Bese, in Laoer’s case, Yuher found the manageable distance between the state and the local worlds obliterated in the process of radical collectivisation. The effects of state formation reached an unprecedented scale in the famine. Perhaps this process began earlier than the suicide of Bese and his son, around the time when the land ownership certificate of Dongga’s household was produced. On the other hand, the state entered the house as a moral being. It featured in the narratives produced in the *suku* meetings as life giver that granted the transition from the suffering of the pre-liberation past to the better off life in the present time. This rhetoric has been recurrently adapted ever since. Towards the end of the famine, the state was materialised as the relief grain that brought life back into each household (apart from those of the landlord’s offspring). In the current time, the state stands behind the chronic pain endured by those who have lived through the collective era and demands those who suffered less to reciprocate. In a word, the state becomes an already there, inseparable from the body, the food, and the house.

The moral implication of state is also featured in the ways most people make sense of the political violence. When inquiring about the political activists who implemented the destructive campaigns of radical collectivisation and the campaign against the Four Olds, I was told, again and again, that all but one of them had died prematurely. The villagers in Gerdu considered this to be retributive justice. The only one who is still alive is the university graduate who led the red guards, but people pointed out that the fact he himself did not carry out the actual violence accounted for his exception. The closest I got to know about those deceased local activists was through their offspring. For instance, Ziba, a man in his early sixties, is the son of the ex-deputy head of Gerdu. He recalled that his father had banned the incense offering ritual in people's houses during the Cultural Revolution and later died in his early fifties. Ziba did not comment much on what his father had done, but the presence of an incense offering shrine in his current house, which is attended every day as I shall discuss in the following chapter, silently speaks for his deviation from his father. Those more personal agents of the state, as they were, are now generically referred to under the collective pronoun 'they' (n. *t'uguu*). As the manifestation of retributive justice, their premature death enables most people to imagine the state as separable from the past violence. The responsibility for the violence or chaos (ch. *luan*) is mostly attributed to the foolishness (ch. *han*) of those local activists whereas the state remains 'good' and 'benevolent' and brings about progress.

What happened to those left out of the progressive narratives? What about people who died of communal violence and famine in the age of amorality? What about the deities violated, the sacred shrines smashed, the ritual items broken, and the scripts burnt into ashes? They become ghostly beings hidden behind the gaze of everyday life. They fabricate alternative temporalities that are open for reinterpretation and can be drawn on to create new historical narratives (Hershatter, 2011, p3). Such uncanny existences can be helpful in the local transmission of critical events, including accounting for excessive losses especially in a context such as today's when the pursuit of material abundance encouraged both by the state and by popular practice leaves very little space for mourning

and commemoration. As Das and Kleinman (2001, p14) insightfully point out, in the wake of massive social suffering, the most difficult task could be to remember or imagine one's own place in it. Resorted to as social consent, the principle of retribution comes into play and forges narratives that allow people to make sense of what they have experienced and regain their dignity as moral persons. The responsibility for the chaos or (ch. *luan*) that took place in those critical events is commonly traced to the local political activists who were directly involved in committing the violence, generically referred to under the collective pronoun 'they' (n. *t'uguu*). People in Gerdu have come to conclude that *they* all suffered premature death. Their retributive death affirmed their guilt in the first place and rendered them the 'foolish', 'bad' or 'evil' other as opposed to the moral state, imagined as 'good' and 'benevolent'. Such narratives of retribution instrumentally incorporate different or even conflicted moral frameworks and make it viable to *live with*, without giving definite answers to, the 'most difficult moral questions that emerge in the wake of social violence' (Mueggler, 2007, p53) such as attribution of responsibility.

After hearing the story of Guzo's uncanny encounter with the ghost of Bese's son, the smart one commented that nowadays it was rarer to come across the ghosts. He reckoned that perhaps the living standards of the ghosts have been improved as well just like those of the living. They do not need to haunt the living as often as they used to. This remark reveals another layer of the intimate relation between prosperity and the problem of the past. Prosperity in the present time is not simply an outcome of past suffering. It also serves to appease the problematic past and keep it at a distance. The word 'ghost' here probably best captures the feature of the transmission of the critical events which involves unceasing 'exorcism', that is to deal with the ghosts of the past without necessarily expelling them.



## Chapter 2 The prosperous house: order, imagination and politics in everyday

### wellbeing

The land registered on the certificate that Dongga showed me (discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter) was 20 *mu* (1.3 hectares) in total, plus three shingled houses. Given the amount of land and number of properties they owned at the time, I was surprised when Dongga told me that the household was classified as *pinxiazhongnong* (poor and lower middle class peasants) in the land reform, the class background corresponding to poorest financial and material situations. Dongga's explanation was that although his household had the ownership of the land, most of it must have been left uncultivated or even deserted. His father-in-law, the household head at the time, had always been in poor health. Other people in the village talked of him as not even being able to carry a plough frame on his own. The only thing he was capable of doing was herding goat, the easiest pastoral task.

Dongga was told that a few generations back in time, the household used to be much better off and possessed plenty of land. He heard that one incident changed its fate completely. It was at the time when Lazo, an ancestor who is no longer named amongst the three most recently deceased generations of ancestors (more discussion later in this chapter), was the household head. A distant relative went to visit and stayed with them. It may have been during the festive season when most men got together and gambled all day. This relative lost quite a bit of money in gambling and in the end committed suicide, by hanging himself in the two-storey house of Lazo's household, a building only a well off family could afford at the time. Having an outsider die in one's house was considered absolutely ominous. Even though Lazo decisively burned down the house shortly after, the fate of the household started going downhill. By the time of Dongga's father in-law's

generation, the considerable amount of land they still had was mostly uncultivated hence their classification as lower-middle peasants.

This story leads us to ask how the fate of a house links to the fates of its residents. Is it possible for the residents to influence such a relationship in some way to lead the house to prosperity? This chapter examines the house in Zheba as a vehicle for imagining prosperity in the shared experience of dwelling. It argues that wellbeing of household members is intricately linked to the order of the house. Such order is maintained through the arrangement of the domestic space, through the specific ways of perceiving and moving about in the house, and through carrying out routinized rituals like incense offering. All these efforts constitute the interiority of the house that encourages smooth reproduction of social relations and harmonious coexistence between its residents, things and other beings. In the aftermath of the state violence that I discussed in the previous chapter, some people also attempt to bring the presence of the state into being in the most sacred area of their houses, in the form of Mao posters. Such an attempt is to acknowledge the imperative role that the state continues to play in shaping the local ways of life and to live better with its pervasive influences.

As a basic grouping unit in many societies, the house is commonly regarded as an assembly of differentiated social relations that are produced and reproduced in domestic lives (Bray, 1997; Mueggler, 2001). It 'embrace[s] the productive unions at the origins of life and encourage[s] stable and continuous flows of human relations' (Mueggler, 2001, p54). This ongoing (re)production of social relations is realised through the bodily movement of the people living in the house, the flow of material things and the circulation of ideas taking place in domestic space. More importantly, it involves continuous processes of bringing in and leaving out, for instance on occasions like family reunion and separation (Stafford, 2000; more discussion in the following chapter). This resonates with what Feuchtwang calls 'centring, linking and gathering' in the process of territorial place making (Feuchtwang, 2004a, p178). The house brings all

these processes into being in a way that corresponds to how the cosmic world at large is understood. It serves as a frame that, in Bachelard's words, 'thrusts aside contingencies, [and] its councils of continuity are unceasing' (1964, p6-7). Through this frame '[I]f life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house' (Bachelard, 1964, p6-7). Wellbeing in life therefore appears imaginable through maintaining the inherent order of the house.

The order maintained in the house is constantly challenged by changes, disturbances and chaos, particularly when these are brought about by outside forces. This requires the residents' constant efforts to evoke the values charged within the house through activities like domestic rituals. In this sense, the house is a highly 'valued place', in the anthropologist Allerton's words (Allerton, 2013, p71), always in the process of making or remaking (Feuchtwang, 2004b). The collectivisation that started in Zheba from 1957, including the establishment of the collective mess halls, the removal of household shrines and the ban on domestic rituals, was an attempt by the state to assert its control over the production of social relations in the house, as discussed in the previous chapter. It fundamentally challenged the existent domestic order and abruptly muted the values embodied by the house. The programme of radical collectivisation followed soon after by one of the severest famines of the last century led houses from 'dreams of unity' (Mueggler, 2001, p55) to nightmares of catastrophe<sup>40</sup>. Wellbeing within the house was curtailed and rendered extremely fragile and vulnerable. The need local people felt to reassert the house as an orderly and protective place became pressing with an unprecedented intensity, in order to reimagine their own prospects. The transmission of grief that takes place in the house, as Feuchtwang (2011) stresses, helps to repair the relations damaged in past violence, and restore wellbeing.

Crucial to the prosperity of the house in Zheba is the maintenance of a sense of 'equilibrium' that aligns the domestic order with that of the larger world (Casey, 1993,

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<sup>40</sup> The scale and severity of the Great Leap Forward famine has not merely surpassed any previous one in twentieth century China. Its mortality rate, together with famines in Soviet Union, was higher than the combination of that in Africa and India (Manning and Wemheuer, 2011, p4).

p149). The house is *both* highly structured *and* fluid. Just as the body immediately achieves its sense of orientation by being in place, referred to as ‘corporeal implacement’ by the phenomenologist Edward Casey (1993, p178), living in a house in Zheba involves embodying and perceiving the dimensions of high and low, in and out, none of which completely fall into the categories of its physical counterparts. In other words, the house offers unique dimensions of orientation in the embodied experience of dwelling. Through perceiving these dimensions and engaging with them accordingly, the inhabitants of a house are situated in a hierarchy of sacredness that coordinates the multiple layers of fluidity of the senses, bodily movements and the flow of material things. This hierarchy is embedded in the relations between different parts of the body, between men and women, between senior and junior household members, between the deceased and the living, between essential goods and waste, between the present and the absent. It also extends to the larger scales of relations in the local landscape. Each set of the hierarchical relations emerges in their own spatial and temporal scopes that eventually link the house with its surrounding world. The equilibrium of a house is therefore achieved through actively engaging with and sustaining the hierarchical sense of sacredness. In this light, the house should be conceptualised ‘less a container than a stopping-off place for myriad journeys on many temporal scales’ (Allerton, 2013, p71), in which inside and outside, the interiority of the house and the world beyond intersect.

### **The main house: a place of order**

In Zheba, a household generally consists of a courtyard enclosed by several units: a front gate, a single-storey single-room house as the main living/cooking area; one or two two-storey house(s) with rooms to sleep in; a single-story granary; a two-storey barn with the lower floor for housing animals, and the upper one serving as storage for animal feed<sup>41</sup>. The arrangement of these units follows general guidelines: the front gate is not

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<sup>41</sup> Some of the household compounds have a small single-storey house or an extension at the side of the main living house used as a kitchen.

supposed to face north, the direction of the ancestral place to which the deceased travel; the granary should not be located at a position higher than the main house (see below for further discussion of high-low dimension) in order to avoid the prosperity of the house being oppressed by the weight of the grains; and the doors in the household compound should avoid facing one another.

This main living area, nowadays often constructed of bricks and wooden frames, used to be the shingled house or *mulefang* (ch.). A *mulefang* is ‘built of pine logs trimmed to eight flat surfaces and piled to form the walls, with a roof of loose pine shingles weighted with rocks’ (Mueggler, 2001, p56). People often crisscross their fingers, a gesture referring to the intersected pine logs forming the corner between (at each connection of) two walls, when they recall lives in the days before the mid 1990s in *mulefang*. Although they are remembered as the most traditional local form of dwelling, living in one appears to be a sign of a household’s backwardness and poverty, and may even imply poor hygienic living conditions. Luzo, a young man in his mid-twenties, and his family are one of the few households in Gerdu that still uses a *mulefang* as the main living area<sup>42</sup>. When I went to visit him one evening, he seemed embarrassed and apologised for his poor household condition even before I had a chance to take a look at the dark interior. His cousin Wuba also lives in a *mulefang* but did not seem to be too bothered by it. In fact, Wuba told me that his father insisted on keeping the house as the living place because its solid structure was more resilient to natural disasters like earthquakes and debris flows than the wood-brick houses. Although both houses appeared similar from the outside, the interior of Wuba’s place was furnished with sofas and a big TV set, whereas Luzo and his family still conducted domestic activities on a raised wooden platform with a fire pit (see discussion below). Another friend of mine, Niuzo, is a skilled carpenter in Gerdu. He has reconstructed all the building units in his household in the wood-brick style. When I enquired why he did not keep *mulefang* as

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<sup>42</sup> Today, *mulefang* in Zheba are mainly used as granary or animal shelter. In the surrounding areas, *mulefang* still dominate in some *nuosu* villages. It is counted as an aspect of the *nuosu* people’s ‘backwardness’.

barn and granary like many other households did, he said that he would like to ‘keep up to date’.

Both McKhann (1989) and Hsu (1998) identify the interior of the Naxi main house as a micro ‘social and cosmic centre’. The inside of a main house is ideally divided into two parts: a wooden platform raised about one metre high above the floor as the eating, seating and sleeping area, referred to as *t̄sua* (n.), and the rest, at floor level, generally designated for women to conduct domestic tasks such as food preparation. The platform is raised against a central pillar called ‘sky’s prop’ or *mudy* (n.), supporting the central beam of the house. The pillar symbolises the Mount *Dz̄ynaz̄az̄ədz̄y* in the Naxi myths, by which the first ancestors descended from the sky to the earth (McKhann, 1989; Yang, 2009). At the centre of the platform is a fire pit with a tripod iron stand where daily cooking and tea making take place. A cabinet, served as household shrine, is placed at the corner of the platform against two walls, called *ḡakly*, literally meaning ‘above the head’. The central pillar, the fire pit and the shrine, as ‘inalienable parts of the house itself’ (McKhann, 1992, p306), jointly form a line that divides the platform into two sides: the area left of the shrine serves as the living area for men, and is regarded as ‘big’<sup>43</sup>; the right side is the living area for women and regarded as ‘smaller’<sup>44</sup>. Linked through daily rituals of incense, tea and food offering, the three key reference points—the central pillar, the fire pit, and the household shrine—form a boundary on the platform. This boundary is maintained by the gender division of living activities especially for women due to their association with contaminating menstrual blood. The only exceptional occasion is on a woman’s funeral; her body, carried from women’s area across the line, would be placed at the men’s side, and eventually sent to the cremation site.

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<sup>43</sup> Here the word for big, ‘*du*’ (n.), or the one for small, ‘*t̄ci*’ (n.), do not refer to the actual size of the living space. They indicate the hierarchical differentiation between men and women in the house.

<sup>44</sup> This arrangement coordinates with a description in Naxi myth: *du* (the archetype of male deity sits) on the left, *Se* (the archetype of female deity sits) on the right.

The seating/living areas<sup>45</sup> are ranked according to seniority of generation<sup>46</sup> and age. The two ends nearest to the shrine are regarded as higher seats, hence they are allocated to the most senior household members. The rest sit/sleep on each side in descending rank order. This seating order reveals the ‘axial’ dimension of the main house. McKhann points out that the vertical axis of high-low corresponds to other ‘homologous sets of attributed values’, i.e. gods or ancestors vs. humans; senior vs. junior; superior vs. inferior, etc. (1989, p162). The Naxi scholar Bao Jiang elaborates this axis within the house by identifying the floor as the lowest end, ascending to the fire pit platform and *gəkyly* (2008, p145). He further extends the vertical axis to that of inside-outside, with the former—high or inside—more sacred than the latter—low or outside (Bao, 2008, p255).



Figure ii the interior of a *muelefang* exhibited in the Museum of Dongba Culture in Lijiang (fieldwork photo 2014)

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<sup>45</sup> McKhann (1989) also identifies a third area (opposite to the women’s) as seating place for guests, which is not prominently present in Zheba, possibly due to the small size of the platform.

<sup>46</sup> Unless specified, ‘generation’ in this chapter refers to that within a household. The equivalent word in Naxi is *tʂʂ’ə* (n.).

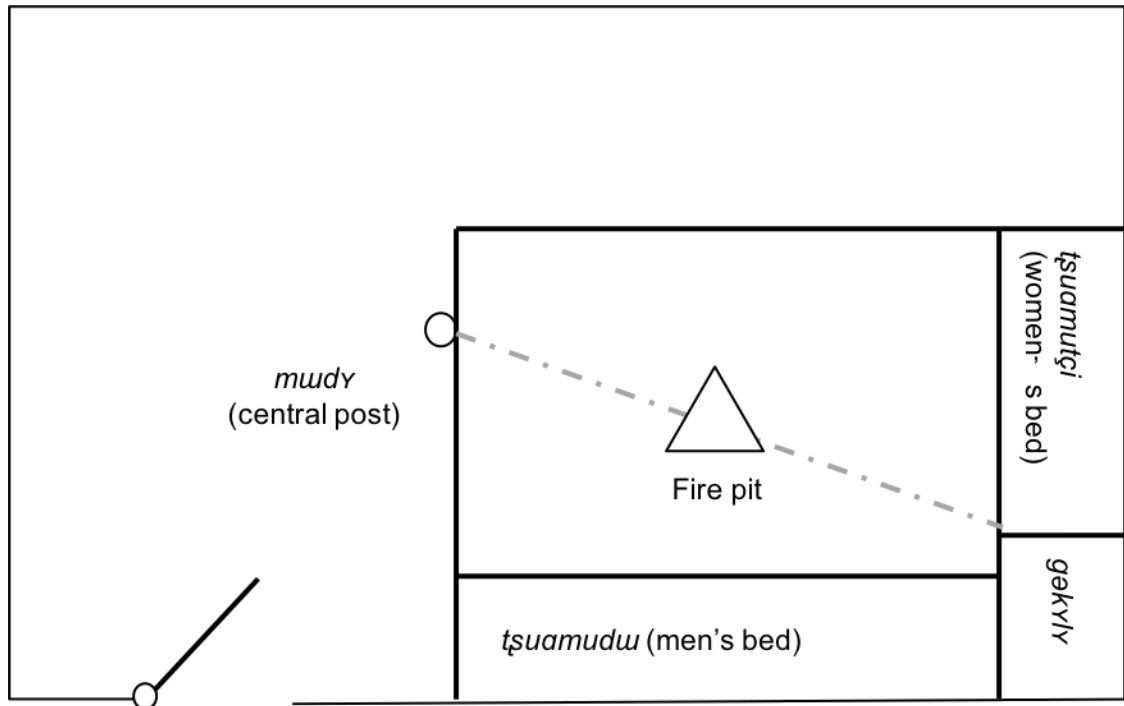


Figure iii the interior arrangement of a shingled house.

I asked several people to explain to me where *gəkyly* or the household shrine should be set up in the main house, but there was no conclusive agreement. Yet, even though the explanation remains unclear, after spending several months in Gerdu it was noticeable that there was a coherent pattern to the location of *gəkyly*. Guzo, the eldest son of my teacher who is also a *dongba* practitioner, had what seemed to be a convincing explanation. He depicted a clockwise circular movement in the house. The circle starts from the door, passes along the wall through the lower side of the room, moves from the lower to the higher end of women's seating area, reaches the corner of *gəkyly*, descends from the upper end of men's seats to the lower, and eventually ends at the door. It is difficult to confirm how widely his point of view is shared; however with regard to the perception of sacredness within a house, this description offers a useful account: following Bao's analysis (2008, p255) that the 'innerness' and 'highness' are proportional to the degree of sacredness, this circle rising from the lowest end<sup>47</sup> to the summit of *gəkyly* and falling to the 'outerest' side<sup>48</sup>, traces a parabola curve, which

<sup>47</sup> Women are considered more associated with danger and polluting power, which are the opposite of purity as the most prominent aspect of sacredness.

<sup>48</sup> McKhann (1989) suggests that men's seating area is relative more associated with the outside than the women's.



situates *gəkyly* at the peak. This way of perceiving the domestic space can be summarised as ‘corporeal implacement’ (Casey, 1993, p178) through which the physical structure corresponds to the social interactions in the house, and vice versa. This orderly place reveals itself immediately through the presence of those who inhabit the house; clarifying the logic of the order does not necessarily depend on identifying any sophisticated symbolic codes.<sup>49</sup> Simply by living there for several months, an outsider like myself comes to learn the proper place to sit and to anticipate the location of the household shrine even when visiting a house, they have never been to before.

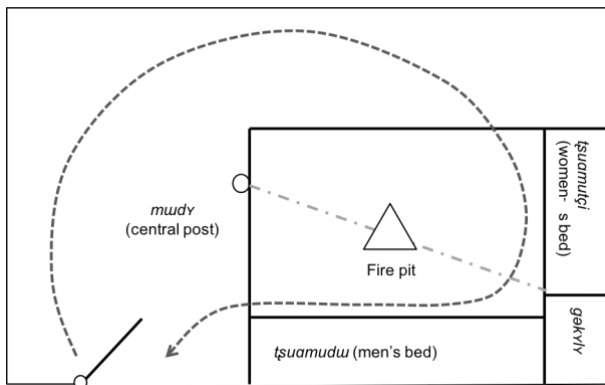


Figure iv the ideal circular movement in the house.

As suggested in the analysis above, the domestic space is not arranged strictly in accordance with the physical spatial dimensions. Instead, the main house serves as a highly ‘valued place’ (Allerton, 2013, p71), in which a hierarchical sense of sacredness is configured and sustained by its physical structure, the movement of inhabitants,

and the arrangement of things. The vertical dimension (high-low) is blended with the horizontal one (ranked seating order) with regard to the activities carried out in the house. Of course, some of the ‘rules’ are never strictly followed to the letter (McKhann, 1989), especially nowadays as most of *mulefang* have been abandoned as living places; nevertheless, they continue guiding the dwellers in terms of how they relate to one

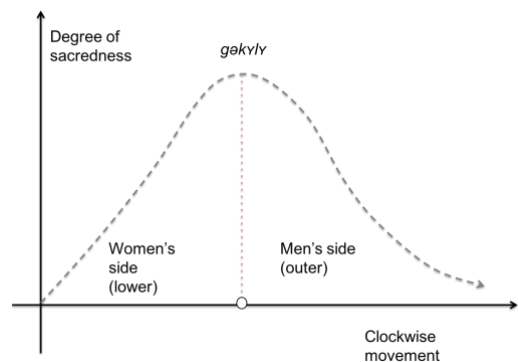


Figure v the parabola curve in perceiving domestic space.

<sup>49</sup> While Bao Jiang has produced extremely insightful analyses, which I have drawn on repeatedly in this dissertation, his insistence on the symbolic codes through which the meaning of Naxi everyday life emerges, overlooks the significance of the material and social dimensions of domestic space.

another and to other beings and things in the house. Living in a main house involves embodying and perceiving the spatial dimensions and the values instilled. Situating oneself appropriately in place within the house informs them of their emergent relations with their surroundings in the hierarchical order of the house as well as the cosmological world at large.

Since the early 2000s, most *mulefang* have been replaced by a style of living area with a concrete foundation and floor, wooden pillars and beams, brick walls, and a tile roof. Inside, this wood-brick structured house is divided roughly in half, with one side raised on a cement platform only a few inches higher than the other (much lower than the wooden platform in *mulefang*). The fire pits are commonly replaced with metal chimney stoves placed at the centre of the lower side, although the original site of the fire pit may still be visible on the cement platform. With this division, the lower side of the room generally serves as the cooking and eating area, while the higher is for seating and domestic rituals. Due to the absence of the central pillar or *mudy* (the sky support pillar introduced earlier) in this wood-brick structure, one of the two pillars in the

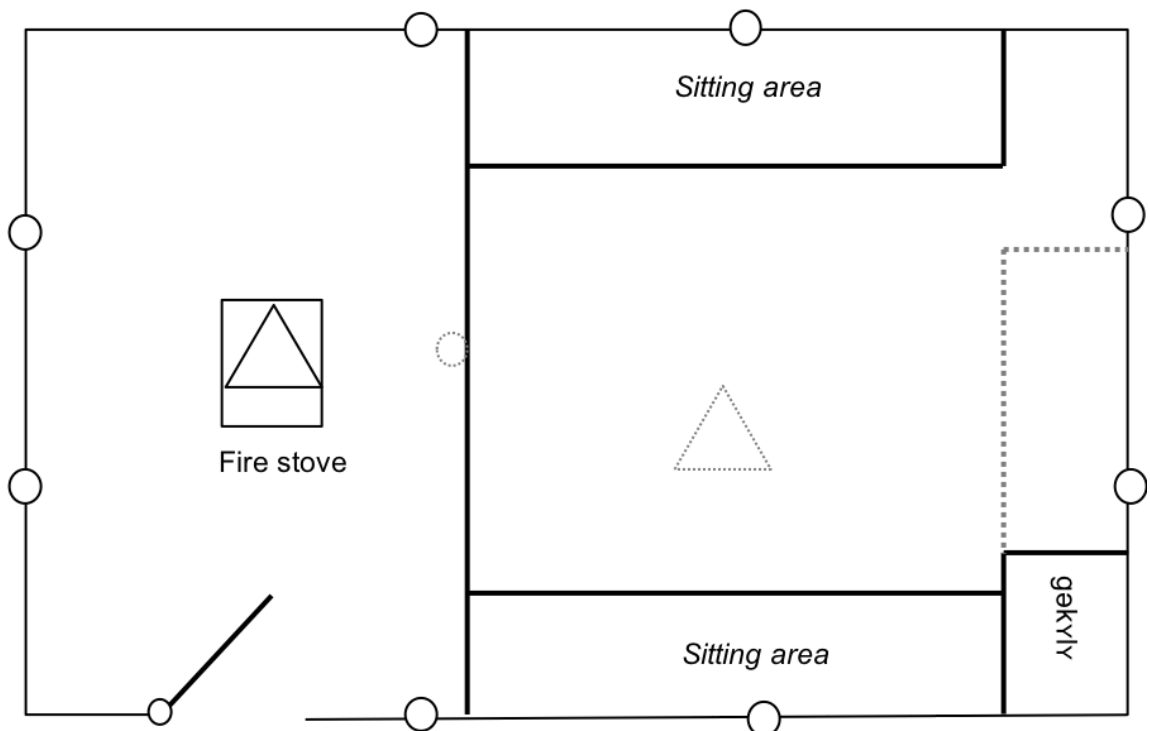


Figure vi a contemporary variation of the interior arrangement.

middle is worshipped as *mudy* with a small shrine attached to it. Some households, in most cases the better off ones, have introduced the Tibetan style<sup>50</sup> shrine, an elaborately carved wooden cabinet attached to a whole wall with niches used as shrines. Although in Tibetan houses, the niche in the middle is generally used to worship major deities, people in Zheba establish their household shrine in the niche on the right side, in the same position of the cabinet in those houses without this kind of setup. Two long wooden benches, also in Tibetan style, are placed alongside the adjacent walls, facing towards each other. The division between the male sitting area and the female is not entirely clear in this new setup, although the ranked seating order is still loosely followed. As a guest in most of the houses I visited, I was often invited to sit at the upper end of the right bench, near the shrine, although sometimes when senior household members or guests were around, I would deliberately choose to sit at the lower end. Once when I was visiting a friend, without realising it I accidentally sat at the lower end of the left bench and was teased by my friend for taking a woman's seat. Often women sit around the lower side of the house next to the stove especially when guests are around. Very rarely during my fieldwork did I see a couple sitting on the same bench in a house.

### ***Suu* and imaginary growth of the house**

One evening in late August, Keher, a retired local cadre, invited members of an association for the promotion of *dongba* culture, myself and a researcher from a university together with her student to his place for dinner. Keher had just finished refurbishing his main room and was about to hold a ritual called *suk'y* (n.), translated as 'inviting the household spirit'. He thought it would be a good chance for us all to observe the ritual and have a farewell dinner before the members of the association and the researcher left Zheba.

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<sup>50</sup> Here, I am only talking about the style that is most popular among Tibetan houses in Shangri La area. It is not necessarily uniform in all Tibetan areas, just like the variations of architecture in different Naxi areas.

The newly decorated room took over the whole ground floor of a two-storey house (the upper floor used as Keher's study). The floor, walls and ceiling in the room were all covered with pine planks varnished to a bright yellow. On the right hand side of the door at the corner of the room stood the household shrine cabinet or *gākyl*. There were two vases of artificial blossoms, an incense burner, a bamboo basket, a golden effigy of a sitting Buddha on top of the cabinet and paintings of some deities hanging above it, which I later found out were the eighteen major deities in the *dongba* tradition<sup>51</sup>. Two Tibetan benches lay next to the cabinet along the walls. A small table was set in front of



Figure vii *gākyl* in Keher's house with offerings for *Suu* (fieldwork photo 2014).

the cabinet. On the table, a plate with rice, walnuts, yak cheese and a one hundred *yuan* note, a plate of sticky rice cakes, a plate of wheat flour and a piece of butter were placed on pine needles. Duzhizo, the *dongba* ritual specialist who was invited to conduct the ritual arrived before us and was sitting on the bench on the right hand side close to the shrine.

The ritual started after the members of the association had set their filming cameras rolling. With his hat off on the small table, Duzhizo began by chanting the scripts written on a handmade booklet yellowing from age. His chanting was more fluid and melodious than ordinary

<sup>51</sup> The deities are as follows: *p'ə* who created the sky; *ga* who created the earth; *mu*, deity of the sky; *dy* of the earth; *tçi* who oversees yak herding and buckwheat planting; *fu* of agriculture; *du* who is in charge of human activities; *u* of fortune; *ka* of victory; *ha* of fertility; *dzi* of continuity and growth; *dzi* of the village; *uə* of the fortress; *hæ* of the wind; *Li* of hunting; *Wer* of grain; *Ri* who embodies the potency of *dongba*; *Nu* of herding (Bao, 2008, p305). Instead of treating them as individual deities, I propose that they represent the prominent aspects of everyday life that are closely associated with ritual efficacy.

Naxi speech. A basin of fire was placed next to him. While chanting, he put some *mukə* (n.)<sup>52</sup> twigs over the fire and the whole room was filled with the scent of the burning leaves. At some point, he circled the twigs counter clockwise a couple of times over the offerings. The ritual was divided into two parts. Towards the end of the first half, referred to as ‘raw worshipping’ (ch. *shengji*), he scattered a handful of rice grains towards the cabinet. During the ritual, Keher’s wife and other relatives were busy preparing food outside in the yard. The newly installed modern kitchen set towards the other end of room seemed untouched.

The second half of the ritual began with Keher offering some cooked rice and chicken on the table. A homemade liquor with a strong aroma was poured into a small cup and put by the side of the food. This phase is referred to as ‘ripe worshipping’ (ch. *shuji*). Having served the food and alcohol, Keher sat down on the other bench. After chanting for a while, *dongba* Duzhizo took some small pieces of incense wood from the basket on the cabinet and threw them onto the top of the food. The ritual ended with Duzhizo walking out of the room and around the courtyard, applying a mixture of flour and yak butter to the top of each window and door frame, and eventually on Keher’s forehead. The hundred *yuan* note in the offering plate was given to Duzhizo after dinner.

The literal translation of ‘*su*’ in Naxi language can be ‘life’ as a noun or ‘alive’ as an adjective (Bao, 2015, personal communication). It is also the name of a ‘household spirit’—*Su*. The pictograph for *Su* in *dongba* script is a wide-mouthed container with an upended pine branch covered with pine needles inside. Pine needles are used on various ritual and celebratory occasions as a symbol of life. *Su* is believed to live in a basket depicted as the container in the pictograph, called ‘*sudy*’, on top of the *gəkyly*. Traditionally, the basket contains small models of a wooden ladder and a bridge, threads in five colours, arrows made of bamboo or cedar wood, stones and a handful of rice. Some scholars regard *Su* as a spiritual embodiment of the house, whereas others see it

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<sup>52</sup> A kind of Rhododendron with broad leaves used in *dongba* rituals for purification, see also chapter 3 on the incense burning trip.

as a collective form of the spirits of all living household members (Bao, 2008). Instead of treating these two conceptualisations as separate and mutually exclusive, I see valid aspects in both and attempt to bring them together in the following discussion.

As a spirit living above *gəkyly*, *Suu* contributes to the sense of home in a household and distinctly configures the shrine as a sacred spiritual centre. It is summoned from all over the surrounding landscape, including the areas to the south of Lhasa, capital of Tibet, and to the north of Kunming, capital of Yunnan, as depicted in the scripts of the *suk'y* ritual. The bridge model in the basket serves as a tool for *Suu* to make this journey. It is also called on from the five major directions—the cardinal directions and the centre—and their guardian *dongba* priests represented by the threads in five colours. When *Suu* arrives at the house, it descends from the roof; the ladder is for household members to climb up and welcome it. Far from having the form of a singular entity, the coming into being of *Suu* originates from numerous locales and requires the efforts of *dongba* to actively summon, channel, and eventually preserve it, described vividly as *Suu* being tied up in the basket. As revealed in its pictographic form as a container, *Suu* identifies the Naxi main house as a place with a prominent centripetal potency. To live in such a house involves constant practice of centring, gathering and linking in the flows of materials and the movement of people (Feuchtwang, 2004a). This centripetal aspect of the main house distinguishes it from the other architectural forms in the same household, such as the barn and the two-storey house for sleeping. It constitutes a sense of home that is not available in shelters dotted around the fields used for herding.

At the same time, *Suu* concerns the wellbeing of living household members which is crucial to the prosperity of a house. By focusing on its literal meaning, the Naxi scholar Xi Yihua (2009) argues that the *Suu* spirit represents the vital force in the house which essentially relates to fertility. The bamboo arrows in the *sudv* basket symbolise male genitals contained in a symbolic womb. In this sense, *Suu* unites the reproductive power of both men and women and sustains fertility. Instead of interpreting this merely as

symbol of reproduction, I argue that it concerns a general tendency of growth as revealed in a concluding sentence in the scripts of the *suk'ɣ* ritual: ‘*Su* stays and grows; the way (of a household) is always long and food is always available (*SuxəSudzæ, zɿʂə-ha i'ho*)’<sup>53</sup>. Throughout the scripts, the Naxi word ‘*dzæ*’, meaning ‘rich’ but with a connotation of continuous growth<sup>54</sup>, is emphasised a great deal. The pictograph of ‘*dzæ*’ is a barn filled with grain. The sense of growth is further instantiated in three aspects: if *Su* arrives at the house and is properly received, the cattle will grow strong and tall and the barn will be full of grains; if *Su* is worshipped properly in a village, more and more houses will be erected. The potency of the *Su* spirit is not just limited to the increase in population, but also includes the harvest of grain and the health of domestic animals. It is portrayed as a potentiality that, once properly nurtured, leads to the wellbeing of living household members, the flourishing of domestic things and no less importantly to their harmonious coexistence in the house.



Figure viii the items in *sudz* displayed in the Museum for Dongba Culture (fieldwork photo 2014).

All in all, *Su* unifies the intertwined relations unfolding in the experience of dwelling wherein prosperity becomes lucidly imaginable. More often than not, the

<sup>53</sup> The second half of the sentence is a literal translation. It is generally accepted as the Naxi way of saying ‘long live’ (ch. *changming baisui*).

<sup>54</sup> My teacher Namu use the word *fazhan* (ch. to develop) to explain this sense of richness.

shared experience of living in a house entails disturbance and tensions in the differentiated social relations. Such disturbance and tensions can lead to precarious situations in which the wellbeing of household members becomes vulnerable and the coexistence of people and things in the household is at stake. This requires an effort from the household members to activate the harmonious aspect of the house, embodied as *Suu*, and to reinforce its unified order.

A few days after the *suk'y* ritual at Keher's place, I asked him about the *Suu* spirit. He recalled one of his trips with my teacher Namu to Eya, the bordering area of Yunnan and Sichuan populated by Naxi people, in the late 1980s. As an official of the local cultural centre, Keher was then traveling around different Naxi areas to collect materials with 'ethnic characteristics'. One night when they stayed in a village in Muli County, Sichuan, a local young man approached them for help. The man told them his brother was seriously ill but did not react to any medical treatment. He suspected that the illness was caused by the curse from their father who did not get along with the brother. Hearing that a prestigious *dongba* priest from the famous spiritual centre, Zheba, had arrived in the village, he decided to plead with Namu to practise a divination for his brother. Having heard the story, Keher and Namu were both hesitant about what to do. As guests from afar, they both felt it was inappropriate to interfere in local affairs. Keher, a local official and a party member brought up in the Mao era, was also skeptical about the practice of divination. He was concerned that unpredictable outcomes might get them both into trouble with the local villagers. After the young man pleaded over and over again, Keher sensed that Namu was wavering. In the end, they agreed that Namu would conduct a divination, but they told the man that they could not promise the veracity of the outcome; neither would they accept any form of payback.

After interpreting the first lot that the man picked<sup>55</sup>, Namu asked if the brother fell ill when he was hunting. Surprised by the accuracy of this interpretation, the man

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<sup>55</sup> The divination practice in Zheba consists of drawing lots and casting shells. I depict the practice in both chapter 5 and *The Gorge Is Deep*.



confirmed that his brother did fall ill when he went hunting with some friends and returned to the village on his own. After several rounds of deciphering and inquiring, Namu managed to trace the possible cause of the illness. It turned out that the young man's brother used to fight a lot with his father. In one of their fierce quarrels, the brother smashed pots and some other cooking utensils. His deed had offended the *Suu* spirit of the house who inflicted the illness on him. Namu pointed out that the *sudy* basket in their house was hidden underneath a bed. The solution would be to take it out and place it properly on *gakly*. A *suk'y* ritual was required to appease *Su*. The young man became confused as he had never seen the *sudy* basket before and did not even know of its existence. He went back home and consulted with his mother. As surprised as the young man, his mother confirmed that the basket was indeed under a bed. It had been hidden to avoid trouble during the anti-superstition campaigns in the Cultural Revolution and had not been touched since. Having witnessed this whole episode, Keher was strongly impressed and decided that his previous worries had been completely unnecessary. It was from then on that he started to firmly believe in divination.

The *suk'y* ritual held in Keher's house was to reconcile the changes and disruption caused by the construction work done when refurbishing the room. During the construction work, the spirits of household members might have easily drifted away from the house. The separation of a person from their spirit could lead to bad fortune or serious illness. The ritual was thereby performed to summon the drifting spirits back. The pictograph of 'k'y' is a wind instrument being played, which reveals the key role of sound as a vehicle in summoning *Suu*. In Eya, some *dongba* priests also blow trumpet shells to call on the *Suu* spirit. Unlike the use of sound, especially noise, in some Han celebrations as the tool to scare off and disperse evil beings and unsettling forces, for example lighting firecrackers in Chinese New Year, here sound is deployed to identify the drifting spirits, and to channel and draw them back along a centering route to the house.

Apart from being performed after house construction, the *suk'y* ritual is also imperative at both weddings<sup>56</sup> and funerals. It also used to be conducted after the slaughter of pigs both in the early eleventh lunar month and before Chinese New Year. Such contexts all entail violation of the existing social order within the house: house construction disturbs the everyday routines of household members and the arrangement of things; once a new house is built (or an old one refurbished in Keher's case), the residents need to nuance different ways of living and establish new relations between themselves, things and the surroundings; at weddings a new household member is introduced to the existing relationships, whereas losing a household member, be it a person or livestock, terminates some social interactions and at the same time generates new means of sociality (for instance the offering ritual for the deceased). These are all critical moments in the experience of the house when the existing social order is challenged. Uncertainties and risks emerge in such moments. As shown in the story recounted by Keher, even in ordinary daily life the tensions and conflicts between household members could result in damage to the coexistence of people and things in a house, and even lead to severe illness. A neglected *sudy* implies the forgotten harmonious aspect of domestic life that is crucial to the wellbeing of household members and the prosperity of the house. Therefore, the *suk'y* ritual serves as a means to actively appropriate changes and disturbance in the house. In this way, the disturbed order appears repairable and the household members are once again reminded of their imaginable prospects. Even though most *sudy* baskets in Zheba were destroyed in the Mao era campaigns to attack superstition, as discussed in chapter 1, local *dongba* still firmly believe that the *Su* spirit lives above *gakyl* in the house. Despite the comings and goings of generations of household members, they assert that *Suu* always remains in the house, just like the everlasting social relations unfolding in domestic life.

### **The protective power of *gakyl***

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<sup>56</sup> In the Lijiang basin, *suk'y* has been elaborated as a major traditional wedding ceremony (See Xi, 2009).

The household shrine—*gəkyly*—where traditionally the *sudy* basket is placed is generally arranged in a standard way. A small end table is set up with two vases, an incense burner, and two small cups on it. The golden Buddha and the paintings of the eighteen deities I saw in Keher’s house, which I note at the beginning of this chapter, are rarely seen in other people’s places. In most houses, a cone-shaped stone referred to as *lyly* in Naxi is placed at the central back of the shrine. *Du* is the archetypal male deity who created the general rules in the universe. One volume of *dongba* scripts *lytu* <sup>57</sup>, literally meaning



‘*Du* stands up’, depicts how *Du* established the principles and order of the universe. My

Figure ix a *gəkyly* exhibited in the Museum of Dongba Culture (fieldwork photo 2014).

teacher Namu pointed out that the volume was mainly about rules of propriety (ch. *guiju*), a meaning the word ‘*du*’ also denotes. The *lyly* stone on the shrine is a symbol of *du* deity himself and also a weapon that *du* deploys to suppress evil spirits and forces. Shortly before Chinese New Year, the stone is replaced by a rice cake molded in the same shape.

The two vases, usually containing artificial blossoms, are called *ak’ua* or *nuak’ua* (n.). *K’ua* means a bowl or a container. The word ‘*nua*’ <sup>58</sup> a compound that combines both male (n. *nu*) and female (n. *a*) life forces. The Naxi scholar Yang Fuquan (1998, p193; p208) summarises all its connotations as ‘all kinds of good luck, such as male and

<sup>57</sup> The volume is said to be the second volume any *dongba* practitioner should learn.

<sup>58</sup> Due to the variations in among different Naxi groups, this term is referred to as ‘*nōn-ō*’ in Yang (1998).

female reproductive capacity, increase in numbers of persons, wealth, family property and other forms of prosperity and good fortune, even including individual wisdom and experience'. Most people I talked to interpreted it with the Chinese words 'jixiang', auspiciousness, and 'fuqi', prosperity or fortune. On various ritual occasions, *dongba* chant repeatedly for the host family to obtain *nuaa*. Apart from artificial blossoms, flowers and auspicious leaves (n. *nuakə*) are regularly obtained from Baihuaping, the local sacred mountain, to put in the vases after each incense burning trip<sup>59</sup>. As described in the *suk'y* ritual scripts, *Ts'ehububə*, the celestial female ancestor of human beings, joined *Ts'ozeluuu*, the male ancestor and the only survivor of the big flood on the earth, to establish a household. When she descended from the sky, she took all the living goods but *nuak'ua*, the vases placed on the shrine. As a result, the cattle she raised were only as big as rabbits and the sons she gave birth to were only the size of a thumb. Only after her father, the celestial dominant deity of the sky, granted *nuak'ua* to them later, the animals grew much stronger and their sons acquired a normal human size.

Every morning, Namu, my frail eighty-eight-year-old teacher, woke up at dawn and started his day by lighting a fire in the main living house. He waited by the stove until the flame appeared and walked slowly to the corner of the courtyard to wash his hands under the tap. When he returned to the main house, he took the incense burner down from *gəkyly* and emptied its ashes into the fire. He grabbed a handful of cedar incense wood from the table next to *gəkyly*, squatted at the open end of the stove, used an iron fire spoon to pull out some of the burning wood, and put it in the burner. He then placed the cedar incense wood in his hand in the burner and added a layer of burning wood on top of it. As he put the burner back on *gəkyly*, the smoke of the incense rose in the air and its scent started filling the house. Standing by the shrine, Namu began to recite the names of major Naxi deities: the sky, the earth, the chief *dongba* of five directions, the founder of *dongba* practice, the sacred places in Naxi areas including Baihuaping, the

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<sup>59</sup> On first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, festivals, celebrations (wedding, establishing the frame of a house), and the Chinese Zodiac day of one's birth animal, the local people go to the top of a sacred mountain *Baihuaping* and conduct an incense burning ritual at a shrine near a sacred spring well. I discuss more on the practice of incense burning in chapter 3.

local sacred mountain. The prolonged chanting ended with names of the latest deceased three generations of household members.

The incense offering that Namu conducted every morning is in service to the three most recently deceased generations of ancestors. The ancestors live above *gākylɿ*, together with the household spirit *Su* and the deity of livestock *No*. After burning the incense, Namu poured some water kept boiling in a large kettle on the stove into a small black clay pot<sup>60</sup> and placed it at the edge of the open fireplace. When the water boiled again, he broke off pieces of dried tea leaves from a compressed tea brick and put them into the pot. After brewing for a few minutes, the tea was poured into the cup on the left of *gākylɿ* and offered to the ancestors. The other cup was for offering water. Namu then added some salt and a spoonful of yak butter to the tea and blended them with a small bamboo brush. The butter tea was shared among household members in the main house. Before drinking it, Namu raised the tea bowl above his head, and chanted ‘the first brew of tea is pure as offering’ followed by naming the three generations of ancestors<sup>61</sup>. He then drank the tea and ate some spoonfuls of buckwheat or oat flour for his breakfast.

This series of offering rituals, considered as a form of attending upon the ancestors and often compared with taking care of senior household members, takes place twice a day, early in the morning and late in the afternoon. Food is also offered to the ancestors before meals. The ancestors named during the rituals are those who lived and died in the same household, men and women both<sup>62</sup>. Once a new generation of ancestors comes into being, the names of the earliest of the three will no longer be recited. They are believed to have ascended back into the sky, the ancestral place from where all Naxi people originally came.

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<sup>60</sup> The Tibetan handicraft of firing black clay pottery was catalogued as intangible cultural heritage on the national level in 2008. Available from <http://xizang.cctv.com/50/> (accessed 29/03/2016).

<sup>61</sup> Butter tea also serves as a treat to honourable guests. When I was offered the tea at other people’s places, some elderly hosts raised their bowls before drinking the first brew, although the naming was omitted.

<sup>62</sup> This is in contrast to the Han tradition of omitting given names of women on tombstones.

I was not certain about what incense offering meant to the local people until I went on a trip with Xiaoker to collect tree bark, the material used for paper making. Xiaoker decided to drive to a place near the Jinsha River called Jiangbian, about sixty kilometres from Zheba in the direction of Tiger Leaping Gorge and Lijiang, to cut some tree branches locally known as *adə* (n.), since he reckoned that most of the usable material in the vicinity had probably been collected in the previous year. It was the first time the sun came out after days of rain. The last thirty kilometres of the road to Tiger Leaping Gorge is well known as a hazardous drive, since it mostly runs along the precipitous side of Haba Snow Mountain. Although it is a two-lane road, cars generally keep to the side of the mountain because the other side overhangs the deep gorge of the Jinsha River. It is common for traffic on the road to be suspended for days or even weeks due to frequent landslides during the rainy season. In winter, vehicles passing by are particularly susceptible to fallen rocks blown off by the strong wind<sup>63</sup>. As we drove along, we spotted some big rocks in the middle of the road. They seemed to have just recently fallen from the cliff on the mountainside, and so had not yet been cleared. We both became a bit wary that we might be hit by more falling rocks. Xiaoker was driving and said, ‘We should be fine. We burn incense every day at home.’ I was unsure whether he was talking to himself or addressing me. In either case, his words revealed the significance of this ritual for him when confronted with potential danger.

Due to its geographic remoteness, life in Zheba has been provided with scarce resources and limited work opportunities besides farming. The routes leading to the nearest towns are, as it were, somehow both haunted by memories of death and potential risks. In early 2000, having just graduated from a technical school, the Smart One, a friend of mine in Gerdu who I introduced in the introduction, decided to go home for the summer before looking for jobs. The road from Zhongdian to Zheba ran zigzagged up the mountains and down into the valleys. The 100-kilometre distance usually took more

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<sup>63</sup> My friend Jianping is a driver. He used to drive trucks of sand passing by Tiger Leaping Gorge several times a week. Thinking about the precarious road condition, he exclaimed that he was surviving out of sheer luck.

than three hours' drive. Halfway there, the coach the Smart One took fell off the side of the road deep into a ravine. Every man in Gerdu who was at home at the time was called on for the rescue. Half of the sixteen people in the coach died, including the driver. The Smart One survived the accident but was badly injured. He attributed his survival to his father's pious practice of incense offering to the ancestors and local deities (more about this experience is discussed in chapter 5).

The relationship between ancestors and the living household members is often compared to that between the elderly and their offspring: taking care of the elderly, primarily by staying at home and attending to domestic duties, is regarded as the obligation of the younger generations, to compensate for the hardship that their predecessors endured in raising them, as noted in the previous chapter. This debt is extended to the afterlife above *gakyl*. To conduct offering rituals on a daily basis is to continue acknowledging the significant roles the ancestors have played in one's own life, and to remember that relationship. As Namu often remarked, he had been taking good care of the ancestors throughout his whole life and expected his son to do the same for him once he passed away. This active way of remembering is itself an ethical practice. As the philosopher Avishai Margalit (2002), it is care, or caring, that lies at the heart of remembrance. The relationship between oneself and one's close relatives is mediated through their mutual care, as Michael Jackson notes: 'your own destiny is never simply in your own hands; it is determined by your relationships with significant others and by the ways in which they reflect and care for you, even after they have passed away' (2013a, 155).

In the house in Zheba, this sense of care could be expressed through the bodily practice of incense offering. The way in which the individual body moves while conducting the ritual stresses the spatial hierarchy of sacredness discussed earlier. More importantly, it helps to envisage a smooth passage of life that extends beyond death. As indicated by Namu's comment, taking good care of the ancestors affirms his position in

the ongoing flows of human relations in the house, which ascend from the lower ends of the benches to *gākylr* and eventually to the sky. It is this ideal imaginary of life that Xiaoker was reminded of at the moment of a life-threatening crisis. Relating himself to the ancestors helped him to assert a sense of control over the precarious moment. Similarly, the Smart One referred to the care of his father, which took the form of spiritual piety to the ancestors, to account for his survival in the coach accident. Therefore, to maintain the reciprocal relation with the recently deceased generations is also to care for the wellbeing of those of the house who are on the same path of life, situated in different phases. For those ancestors who are beyond the latest three generations, the relatively less personal and less affectionate way that they relate to the living renders a collective category of memory without being specified individually in rituals. It leads to a kind of forgetting through ‘un-naming’.

*Gākylr*, in this sense, can be seen as a focal point where different generations of household members are closely linked through incense offering. The ritual is a centering process that dissolves linearity of the past, present and future. Remembering the past through recalling the ancestors is simultaneously an act of managing wellbeing and coping with uncertainties of the present and future. However, this central focus is by no means a fixed point. It refers outwards to the local spiritual centre by gathering its potency, materialised in the form of flowers and auspicious leaves. The flows of human relations are ultimately directed toward the sky, where, in the timeless myth, life originates and eventually returns. The house as a microcosmic centre is not simply a mirror or reflection of the cosmic universe, but a porous place where different temporalities and scales of space converge and are linked through ritual practices. Crucially, this involves linking the interiority of the house with its exteriority, or transcending the boundaries between inside and outside. The prosperous aspiration of a house is thus not simply an internal matter, but is realised through encompassing, or in some cases separating from, the world beyond the domestic realm.



## Everyday wellbeing and Mao

In most houses, behind the shrine on *gəkyly*, a square sheet of rice paper dyed with red and green water colours is stuck to the wall. The abstract patterns on it call to mind flowers surrounded by leaves. It is called *suşudzæ* (n. blossomy paper). At the big cleaning before Chinese New Year, a new sheet of blossomy paper purchased at the local market is placed on top of the old ones. In some *dongba* houses, portraits of deities like *dongba şazæ*, the founder of *dongba* practice, are also hung around alongside *gəkyly*. Some people also have a standard image of the god of wealth above *gəkyly*<sup>64</sup>.

Ziba is a man in his early sixties living with his wife in Gerdu. The shrine in his main house was arranged in a slightly different way. Instead of two vases on the shrine, there were three in a row: the one in the middle with artificial blossoms in it, and the two at the sides with the auspicious leaves. More noticeably, the place normally covered with blossomy papers on the back wall was occupied by a portrait of Mao Zedong. In the middle of the same wall above a TV set there was an image of the god of wealth. The presence of Mao's image in houses was not uncommon in Zheba. Usually they were standard front portraits of Mao (with one ear exposed) printed in A1 paper size in colour. On both sides of the image, there was a couplet praising Mao as the great leader or a savior (ch. *dajiuxing*). At the bottom of the poster was either the gate of Tian'anmen or a line of red flags. Occasionally, a reproduction of the oil painting, *Mao goes to Anyuan*<sup>65</sup> or with Mao wearing a cap with a red star, typically depicted as his image during the Long March, could also be seen. In most houses the posters are displayed alongside the household shrine, if not directly above. The prevalence of Mao nowadays resonates with an era when imagining household prosperity was hardly possible.

The year 1960, as discussed in the previous chapter, is remembered as the time of the severest famine in the past century. As most elderly villagers recalled, in Zheba there

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<sup>64</sup> I have come across the image of the god of wealth above *gəkyly* in a young *dongba*'s house.

<sup>65</sup> The painting depicts Mao in his early career on his way to the city of Anyuan to lead a miner's strike. During the Cultural Revolution, it was promoted as one of the most important model artworks.

was absolutely no food available for four months. Many died or were sickened by starvation. Such a time of devastation was humbly referred to as ‘*hazu*’ (n.) or hunger. The nation-wide political campaign, the Great Leap Forward that led to the famine barely existed in local people’s vocabulary. To the locals, the cause of the famine was far from clear. Some recounted the excessive waste of food about a year before when the mess halls were first set up. Others blamed the local cadres for exaggerating the grain yield. The granary keepers and cooks of the mess halls were also accused of pocketing the grain levied by the state. A couple of people I talked to were vaguely aware of the official account, which was that the grain collected by the state was to pay off the debt owed to Soviet Union. What most people did agree on was that had there been no relief grain distributed by the state, no one could have known how much longer the famine would have lasted.

The Mao posters in the house appeared against the backdrop of the famine in which hardly any household was unaffected by death. While the pervasive extent of illness and death remained officially unaddressed and possibly not dealt with at the household level either, the Red Guard and local activists lashed out to denounce the incense offering practice as *mixin* during the Cultural Revolution. They went around houses to remove the items displayed on *gəkvly*. Ziba’s father was the deputy head of Gerdu at the time. As Ziba recalled, his father used to go around the village and when he spotted anyone offering incense at home, he would designate them to be criticised at the struggle meeting the next day. The struggle meetings were locally known as extremely violent and horrific. A few people committed suicide shortly before the meetings out of fear of being humiliated and beaten up, as I already described in chapter 1. For those who experienced those days, it was remembered as utter chaos (*luan*). Perhaps one of the very few things that still sustained a sense of domestic order at the time was the Mao poster introduced into the domestic space. It was placed above the abandoned *gəkvly* where the blossomy paper used to be. Household members gathered around in front of it and recited ‘long live chairman Mao; good health to deputy chairman Lin’ before each

meal. This ritualistic activity was referred to as *sanzhongyu* (ch.)<sup>66</sup>. The same prayer was also uttered before *shengchandu* (ch. production team) started collective farm work every day.



Figure x a main house that has a Tibetan style cabinet with *gakyly* on the right, an image of the God of Wealth in the middle, and posters of Mao and current members of the Politburo Standing Committee on the adjoining wall on the left (fieldwork photo 2015).

Together with his wife, Ziba split from his natal household and they established their own, shortly before their first child was born in the year of decollectivisation (1982). This was at a time when the ancestral worshipping ritual had been reinstated in everyday life under a more tolerant political climate towards religious and ethnic customs. When *gakyly* was first set up in their new house, there were no ancestors existing in the household yet. They were inspired by the *sanzhongyu* practised about a decade before and stuck up a Mao poster above *gakyly*. Today, even though the political significance of the poster is long since diminished, the image has remained in the same place as their household tradition for over thirty-five years. Nowadays the function of

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<sup>66</sup> The political slogan of '*sanzhongyu, siwuxian*' was advocated at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The term '*sanzhongyu*' or three loyalties refers to being loyal to chairman Mao, Mao thought and Mao's proletarian revolutionary line; '*siwuxian*' or four infinities emphasises to worship, love, believe and devote oneself to the three loyalties. The slogan was criticised officially after the Cultural Revolution. People in Zheba could barely identify how many exact years the ritual of *sanzhongyu* had prevailed. Considering the mention of Lin Biao in the prayer, it is very likely that the ritual was popular locally from 1966 to 1971 and lost its political function after Lin Biao's fall in 1971.

Mao posters in the house is perhaps not so different from that of other deities, namely to protect the wellbeing of household members and to oversee the prosperity of the household. Some local people outspokenly asserted Mao to be a god. Luba, a man in his mid-thirties who became the head of his village in 2017, has the image of Mao tattooed on his right arm. When queried about this choice, he said stoutly that we could not enjoy our lives today without Mao!

As discussed mostly in this chapter, domestic life in Zheba involves establishing and maintaining the house as an orderly place. Within this frame of order, the social relations between men and women, the senior and the junior, the ancestors and the living are distinctively differentiated; life flows from the lower ends of the seats to the shrine on *gakyl*, and eventually back to the sky; wellbeing in this sense implies the smooth passage of life along the imaginary path; the prosperity of a house is embodied in the harmonious coexistence of humans, ancestors, deities and things. The installation of Mao's image in the house took place when none of the above could be realised. The protective potency of the house was deeply shattered by the excessive death rates during the famine and the following anti-superstition campaign. The connection of the living with the ancestors, the harmonious senses of the house unified in the *Suu* spirit, and the understanding of the macro cosmos through the frame of the house, all gave way to terror, desperation and chaos. In the meantime, restoring domestic order through incense offering and other spiritual practices became problematic. The passage of life could no longer be straightforwardly envisaged through the orderly frame of the house. Behind all the disturbances, some transforming force on a bigger scale could be sensed but not fully grasped by the local people. They could not pinpoint the source of the famine that undid their dignity as humans. Nor could they articulate the real problem of the superstitious practices that they used to be most familiar with and depended on so much in life. Perhaps this obscure force that uprooted their ways of life only became a bit clearer when they gazed at the image of Mao in the place which had long been registered as most sacred in their perception. Perhaps, the hope for prosperity and abundance that

diminished in the age of chaos was relit when they prayed repeatedly for the longevity of Mao. Perhaps they also came to realise that wellbeing in life was probably linked to what this image stood for. Situating Mao in the most sacred place in the house was thus more than adding another god to the shrine. It brought forth the peculiar relationship between the prosperity of the house and the transforming force of the state, whose effects were inseparable from the lived experience of the critical events in the past, but which could not be clearly articulated. It was a practice with the aim of coming to a closer view of the state amidst the endless flux of domestic relations, acknowledging the state's significance, in order to bend it to the household's purposes.

## **Conclusion**

In the existing literature, the Naxi as well as the Moso house is mainly applied as an analytical category that contributes to the understanding of cosmology, kinship practices, and gender relations. Both McKahnn (1989) and Bao (2008) reveal many significant insights of the symbolic and cosmological meanings embedded in the house structure through detailed spatial analyses. McKahnn (1989) particularly emphasises the importance of radial and axial dimensions in the house according to which the domestic order is established and reproduced, whereas Bao (2008) focuses on the role of the house as an aggregate of boundaries, especially in rituals that mark out the interior and the exterior. Although McKahnn notices that the introduction of Han style architecture in some Naxi areas rendered some of the 'encoded' meanings in the traditional house lost (1989, p158-159), in both analyses, the house is treated as prototypical in its most ideal design, while its diachronic dimension, especially the discontinuity intensified by past violence, is largely overlooked. With reference to the narratives in *dongba* scripts, the symbolic meanings attached to the physical structure of the house easily give the impression of a static and undisputed entity. Situating the house only in the context of rituals downplays the everyday aspect of domestic life. The house is reduced to pure

structure whereas those who constantly move in and around them are left out of the picture.

Inspired by Lévi-Strauss's notion of 'house-based society' (1983, p170, cited in Hsu, 1998, p67) and Carsten and Hugh-Jones' further exploration of house as 'a prime agent of sociali[s]ation' (1995, p2, cited in Hsu, 1998, p68), Hsu reveals that kinship practices in both Moso and Naxi societies flexibly coordinate with the house as 'an enduring social unit' (1998, p90). In her analysis of the house in Manggarai, Allerton argues that the 'house-based society' approach prioritises the ontological significance of social relations over place and sees the house merely as an institution that fixes social processes (2013, p72). Although Carstern and Hugh-Jones (1995) attempt to overcome the inadequacy of the house as an analytic complement to descent and alliance theories by analogously comparing the house to the body and incorporating material culture and technology in the understanding of kinship practices, the implication remains social-dominated. The analogy between the house and the body obscures the interplay between the two that emerges in the lived experience of being-in-the-house.

In his writing on houses in Zhizuo, Erik Mueggler summarises 'a house as a dense and unified condensation of social relations' (2001, p92). This social aspect of the house is also prominent in Zheba. The prosperity of a house lies in the smooth and harmonious social order sustained in domestic life. This 'condensation of social relations' is embodied as *Su*—an aggregating tendency in the movement of household members and the flow of materials; the potentiality leading to imaginable abundance; a potency to reconcile intermittent disruptions and ongoing changes in the house. In other words, social relations are coordinated in the frame of order of the houses in Zheba. At the same time, I have also shown that the potency of the house goes beyond the social domain through its permeability and fluidity. The boundaries established by the household compound are essentially there to be traversed. The summit of the hierarchy of sacredness, namely the space above *gakly* that lies at the heart of the main house, is

connected to the sky, where life originates from and returns to and the differentiated social roles ultimately blur in the form of unnamed ancestors. The space above *gəkyly* is also linked to the encompassing state envisioned in Mao posters that oversees every aspect of life. The house as a microcosmic centre with its interiority has the capacity both to connect to and ‘to resist, ignore, or even flout’ the environing world (Casey, 1993, p150). At critical moments of life, in both Xiaoker and the smart one’s cases, the house evoked as a protective force transcends geographical distance to overcome the contingent turmoil breaking out afar. As the vehicle for imagination, the house is constantly reminding its inhabitants of prosperity, particularly when the wellbeing of their lives is most at stake.

The imaginary prosperity of a house takes its material expressions in *lyly* stone, *nuakə* (auspicious leaves), and *ʒuʒudzæ* or the blossomy paper displayed on or above *gəkyly*. Whilst the stone stands for an enduring sense of stability, the latter two reveal its growing and flourishing aspects. Prosperity cannot simply be seen as fixed in the physical structure of the house or attached to objects. Just like the ancestors and *Su* spirit who live above *gəkyly*, the imaginary prosperity requires caring through washing the stone and adding a new layer of blossomy paper on festive occasions; renewing *nuakə* regularly; fulfilling filial obligations to both the senior household members and the ancestors; and maintaining the domestic order between people, things and places. Taking care of the prosperity of a household can be summarised in Casey’s term as to ‘cultivate’ all ‘the inhabitational possibilities’ of the house (1993, p174). It is an ethical practice, in which people care about how they live, who and what they live with, and how to live well in the house with the surrounding world. In sum, to inhabit a prosperous house is to find one’s core place in the world, ‘out from which so much energy and so many memories and reveries proceed’ (Casey, 1993, p179).

Removing *gəkyly* during the Cultural Revolution has radically changed the ways people used to lead their lives and the understanding of their place in the world. The

domestic order that people had been most familiar with was discarded; the connection with ancestors and *Sui* spirit, eventually to the macro cosmos, was cut out; the protective force of the house that people had held on to for most of their lives was rendered shattered; and all in all, imagining the prosperity of a household became most difficult. This has led to a dislocation of lives without physically removing people from their houses<sup>67</sup>. The radical changes in life together with the suffering endured during the famine made it almost impossible for local people to live well. Some of them struggled to live ethically by secretly offering incense wood in the fire pit even under the great risk of being struggled against. At the same time, they attempted to grasp the transcendental state that had arbitrarily reshaped their lives through the image of Mao situated at the most sacred place of the house. The Mao posters remaining in most houses in Zheba today echo a past when wellbeing of life was most at stake. Remembering the difficulties of that past has been incorporated into imagining prosperity at the present time as well as in future.

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<sup>67</sup> Those who were classified as 'landlords' and 'rich peasants' were physically driven out of their houses.



### **Chapter 3 Roots in rituals to manage separation**

Lujin, a woman in her fifties, was feeding her two-year old grandson, Guher, when I went to visit them one evening in the wheat harvest season. She was living with her son Ajun and daughter Ajiu. Both were married, and each had one son. Guher was Ajiu's son, the elder one of the two children. I became acquainted with them two years before when Ajun got married. At the time, Lujin kindly invited me to the wedding and was fine with me filming it. When I arrived that evening, Lujin and Guher were quietly eating a simple supper of vegetables boiled in pork broth. Guher's mother Ajiu worked as a teacher at the local primary school about one kilometre away from Gerdu. She had an evening class that night and would not return until about 9 pm. Ajun had gone out to help a relative harvest wheat and was probably going to stay for dinner afterwards.

Not long after supper, Ajun and Ajiu both returned. Ajiu's husband was also a primary school teacher, originally from a different town but now teaching at a school in Shangri La. Although officially classified as Naxi, Ajiu's husband did not speak much of the language. He travelled back to Gerdu each weekend to visit Ajiu and Guher. The local primary school was a boarding school, open for ten days consecutively and then with four days off. During the four days off, Ajiu and Guher took the coach to Shangri La to visit the husband.

Guher became noticeably more excited after his mother and uncle returned home. Soon after she arrived back, Ajiu received a video call from her husband. She passed the phone to Guher, but he could not quite communicate with his father on his own. He simply repeated everything his mother said in a mumbling kind of way. The husband/father asked why they did not call the day before, and they told him it was because Ajiu had left her mobile phone at school. The husband then asked whether they were going to Shangri La during the next four days off school and Guher replied no.

Ajiu commented that Guher used to become very excited when they went to visit her husband in Shangri La.

After the call, Guher started to play with his toy car. He sat on the car and drove it around in the kitchen with his feet. At a certain point, he decided that the car was broken so he turned it over and inspected the wheels. His maternal uncle, Ajun, perhaps the other most present man at this stage of his life (sometimes even more present than the father), owned a minivan and worked as a driver for small groups of tourists in Lijiang. He registered his van with a travel agency and they contacted him when they had clients. He had not yet been out working this year since the New Year's celebration but was planning to go out after the harvest. He had heard from his agency that the business was not going so well due to some new regulations in tourist management implemented by the provincial government. Ajun's own son was just one year old. The two boys spent a lot of time together. They often fought, but when they were not together, they kept asking about one another. They were also often confused about how they address Ajun differently: one as 'apa' (father), the other 'əgr' (n. maternal uncle).

From their earliest years, both Guher and Ajun's son had to learn to live with the absence of their fathers. Family separation is now increasingly common in Zheba as there are very limited job opportunities available locally, and almost none in the villages for young people. Parents, fathers in particular, often work away from home in the nearby towns like Shangri La and Lijiang for most of the year. Children are taken care of by the family members who remain behind, sometimes the mothers, but mostly the grandparents. Drawing on literature in cultural psychology and anthropology in general, Charles Stafford (2000) stresses the profound influences of such separation experiences, especially from early on in childhood, as an existential constraint on the personal experience of growing up *and* relating to others.

This chapter examines the implications of this separation constraint in people's lives in Zheba, or in another words, how patterns and processes of separation and its

counterpart, reunion, constantly shape relatedness in the local world. I argue that local rituals and idioms of separation and reunion are crucial to enabling people to live with the historical and actual lived reality of separation. Through actively engaging in ritual practices, in the embodied, affective and symbolic senses, the *naxa* people trace the source of their wellbeing, especially the wellbeing of those who are particularly susceptible to the fragmenting effects of separation, and the prosperity of their households to the protective power of the local sacred landscape. These efforts establish a crucial link between the house and the sacred site, Baihuaping. They contribute to a sense of rootedness that is ritually reinforced on idealised occasions of reunion through maintaining the connectedness between people, places and other beings like ancestors and territorial deities. At the same time, the aspiration to live with rootedness informs people of the moral judgements and decisions they make in relation to others in life. To this end, I depart from the conventional approach of understanding the Naxi ritual as *sui generis* and of little relevance to ever-changing social context<sup>68</sup>. I intend to demonstrate how rituals serve as powerful devices that help create moral narratives and images that profoundly shape the ways people situate themselves in relation to others.

I first reconstruct the experience of an incense burning trip conducted at the end of the first period of my fieldwork. I interweave the narrative with my understanding of the local places along the trip to offer an account of the local landscape in an *experiential* sense. It is also a narrative experiment to show that the interplay between memory and embodied movement in this ritual practice works to mark the time before parting as a critical moment. Moments like this, as Stafford (2000, p128-129) argues, are critical not only in the sense that they are emotionally heightened, but also because they constitute the personal and local sense of time or ‘quasi-history’.

The second section focuses on two distinct but interrelated aspects of the incense

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<sup>68</sup> The existing literature on Naxi ritual (Bao, 2008; Jackson, 1979; McKhann, 1992; Yang, 1998) overly emphasises on the symbolic meanings of the pictographic scripts and often overlook their relevance to other aspects of everyday life. Although my discussion of the ritual practices benefits greatly from such literature, I intend to develop a different approach to understand these practices with reference to the changing everyday situations in people’s lives.

burning, namely regenerating life forces and overcoming the constraint of separation<sup>69</sup>. These two aspects are brought into prominence by the bodily movement that occurs while undertaking the trip, and the use of ritual items such as *nuakə*, auspicious leaves, to create and sustain the connection between individual wellbeing, the prosperity of the house, the fertility of the land and the sacredness of the ritual site. Together, they constitute a sense of belonging that the *naχa* people struggle for in order to anchor themselves through conditions that an unprecedented scale of separation driven by market forces has been reshaping nearly every aspect of everyday life. For family members remaining at home, their commitment to this ritual practice serves as a form of support for those who are away and therefore are subject to uncertainties and risks in the outside world.

Following the discussion of the incense burning practice, I introduce the local practice of ancestor worship in which the living relatives, especially married out daughters, and ancestors are mobilised in the physical and imaginary forms of *return* to create an idealised occasion of reunion that overcomes the separation incurred by marriage and death. In both practices of incense burning and ancestor worship, the use of ritual items significantly contributes to effective ways of dealing with the physical, social and emotional effects of separation. They help to draw parallels between imaginary processes such as the growth of a house, embodied in the *Suu* spirit discussed above, and the more concrete processes observable in the local landscape, most prominently but not exclusively, the growth of a tree. The tree metaphor reiterated in both practices gives rise to what the anthropologist James Fernandez conceptualises as a model for ‘moral imagination’, through which people in Zheba find their ‘placement’ in the world (1998, p84; p93). The imagery of a tree is evoked as a form of life not only because of its resemblance to as well as difference from human experiences (Bloch, 1998b), but also because it serves as a powerful imaginative device to ‘give moral order to the nature of human relationships’ through associative processes (Fernandez, 1998,

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<sup>69</sup> I leave discussion of the historical and cosmological significance of these two aspects to the next chapter.

p103).

Writing on the corporeal and social efficacies of tree symbolism, Fernandez points out that on the one hand, ‘the product of trees... is used efficaciously to bring about changes of state and vital flow, to encourage more adequate growth or inhibit excessive [growth]’; on the other hand, the tree itself ‘is taken as sign of social identity, that is, of social character and vitality’ (1998, p92-93). In the final section of this chapter, I explore such implications of the tree metaphor outside the ritual context, in the ways that people place themselves in relation to others in social life. In recounting the various attempts of individual persons to keep themselves, as well as their offspring, ‘rooted’, I stress the moral significance of ritual symbolism in the context of everyday life that is often left out in the analysis of the Naxi ritual and kinship ideology in the existing ethnographic literature<sup>70</sup>.

### **Parting as critical moment**

A few days before I finished my first stay in Zheba, I went on an incense burning trip or *tʂ’upadzɿ* (n.) to Baihuaping with my host family. We decided to go there on the day of the rooster, as it was the closest day to my departure that went with my birth zodiac, the snake (more about Chinese zodiac animals in the following section). The day before, Xiaoker, my host, had gone to Shangri La to pay his monthly mortgage, and his two sons were off from boarding school for the weekend. They drove back together in the evening. The sons were both in high school and I had been visiting them regularly in Shangri La to help with their studies. I had already said goodbye to them on my last visit there a few weeks before, so I was not expecting to see them again in the village. Their arrival somehow accentuated the atmosphere of parting.

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<sup>70</sup> Charles McKhann’s systematic analysis on the Naxi kinship structure proves sound in terms of understanding the interrelated issues around gender, ritual and cosmology (1992). However, my attempt in this chapter aims to overcome the limits of such analysis that appears overly idealised and bears little contemporary relevance.

The local middle school in Zheba was closed down a few years ago, so after finishing primary school around the age of twelve, students in Zheba have to attend boarding schools in Shangri La. Before leaving for school at the beginning of each term, they commonly go up to Baihuaping with their family on an incense burning trip. They perform this in order to gain the protection from the local deities over the period when they are away. After the ritual the whole family usually share an outdoor meal. Barnie, my hostess, suggested that since I had been living with them for so long and was like a son of hers, we should follow the same custom as a way to send me off. My teacher Namu, the boys' grandfather, could not join us because of his old age and ailing strength. After breakfast, Xiaoker, his two sons and I set off from his house. I carried a basket with a bunch of incense leaves that are usually stacked for daily rituals, a pack of incense sticks that I bought from the local shop a few days ahead, some wheat flour and rice grain in two small separate hemp bags, and small pieces of pine fuel (ch. *songmingzi*) to light the fire. The two sons carried the cooking utensils and ingredients for the meal. As my departure was the main reason for this trip, it was supposed to be me who carried the sacrifice, a rooster, on the way to the ritual ground. When the younger son tried to catch the rooster and bind its feet, he spotted some lice and warned me about it. Sensing my fear of the lice, Xiaoker decided to take the rooster on my behalf.

Baihuaping is the name of a number of limestone terraces naturally formed by calcium carbonate in spring water as I introduced earlier. It is located on the top of a hill to the west of Gerdu village. Due to its unique landscape, it was developed as a tourist site around mid 1990s. About ten years ago, the Shangri La Tourist Company that runs the site built a wooden footpath from the bottom of the hill to the terraces. The footpath is now mostly eroded with the planks rotted away, some of which were taken and used as firewood by local villagers<sup>71</sup>. The hill is no more than 200 meters up from its base

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<sup>71</sup> This was the condition of the footpath before I left Zheba in June 2015. Since then, there was some redevelopment taking place including rebuilding the footpath.

and is not particularly steep. It normally takes me about twenty minutes to reach the top. Amongst all the villages in Zheba, Gerdu is the closest to Baihuaping. In late 1990s, when Bernie first married into Gerdu after working as a performer in an ethnic minority theme park in Kunming for three years (it was also where she and my host, Xiaoker, met), she started the business of providing horse rides to tourists from the entrance of the site to the limestone terraces. It was at the time when reportedly there used to be over 300 tourists visiting Baihuaping every day on average. Soon enough, other people from the same village began to follow her example. To better organise the business and avoid conflicts amongst the villagers, all the households in Gerdu were later divided into four groups. The groups now take turns to provide the horse riding service, referred to as *zuaʂə* (n.), literally meaning ‘to lead the horse’. The official price of the ride advertised on a notice board at the entrance states 30 *yuan* one-away and 50 *yuan* for return. However, due to the small number of tourists visiting these days and even fewer interested in horse riding, the actual charge may be as low as 5 *yuan* for a ride. The daily income total is divided up and shared evenly amongst the households in the same group. Most of those taking part are women and elderly people who remain at home and do farm work. In the slack season, women sit around doing their embroidery while they wait for people to ride their horses. They also peg out the stakes in the ground to spool the thread into skeins in preparation for weaving. Some of the elderly women like Nanger, whose experience of the Mao era was recounted in detail in chapter 1, initially could not speak Putonghua. They learned it through interacting with tourists on a daily basis. For these women, offering this kind of activity is a form of social gathering as well as a means of boosting the family income.

Just before the top of the hill, there is a rock in the shape of the belly of a pregnant woman about triple or four times the size of a normal human body. At the bottom and to the right of this rock, there are two small openings that resemble female genital organs. The place is called *qiuzidong* (ch.), literally meaning the hole(s) to pray for children.

The rock's resemblance to the shape of a pregnant woman resonates with a version of the origin story of Baihuaping I came across, summarised as follows:

Once there was a goddess who travelled around a lot. She came to Baihuaping after giving birth to a baby and was carrying it with her. When she was breast-feeding the baby, an evil spirit appeared. They started to fight each other. During the fight, the goddess accidentally spilt her milk on the ground and it became the white terraces. After beating the evil spirit, the goddess stayed to safeguard the local area in the form of this rock.

*Qiuzidong* is well known in the surrounding areas for its association with fertility. Till today, many infertile couples come to *qiuzidong* and pray for children with the help of local *dongba*, as I explain in chapter 4. When we arrived at *qiuzidong*, Xiaoker's sons and I all went ahead and bowed to the rock with our foreheads touching it. I threw handfuls of rice towards the two caves, whose exterior was embellished with layers of wheat flour, rice and sunflower seeds. Between the two caves, there is a humble shrine set up for incense burning<sup>72</sup>. I was never quite sure about whether I should burn incense there. When I started going to burn incense at Baihuaping, I was told that unless I wanted to pray for a baby, all I needed to do was to bow.

The top of the hill is a relatively flat open area dotted with a few shallow pools of spring water. On a sunny day, the colour of the water appears to be various shades of turquoise blue. A rill flows through the pools and eventually down the hill. The four of us walked upstream along the rill through a grove path between oak and pine trees and arrived at the source of the water, a spring well. The water wells out quietly from the cracks between the rocks at the bottom and normally appears a blue colour. Some eggs and rice, offered by the local people, are also lying at the bottom. There are two main shrines on either side of the spring, each shared by two villages in Zheba: the left one for

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<sup>72</sup> Namu's younger brother Ahe sat under a shelter near the rock every day for dozens of years to charge the tourists for incensing burning, because for most tourists, it is the necessary way to pass on the way to the top of the hill and get a view of the terraces. A few years ago, a Russian couple who could not have children travelled to Baihuaping. Ahe did a ritual for them. The wife got pregnant soon after they returned to Russia. As a way to thank Ahe, they invited him to visit them in Russia. The couple came back to Baihuaping again with their family and friends during my fieldwork. Ahe took all of them to Baihuaping and arranged some dance performance there. About seven villagers from Gerdu were invited to take part in the dance and each of them was paid 50 *yuan*. Ahe's youngest daughter, who works as English interpreter at the Shangri La police station, was the interpreter for the Russian visitors on that day.



Po and Shugo, the one on the right for Gerdu and Lushu. Small shrines and ritual grounds built by individual households covered the grove at the foot of old pine or oak trees. Such ritual grounds adjoin one another in the grove. The grove is known as *ηædzɪ* (n.) or sacred woods for the people of Gerdu. The trees in the woods are believed to be spiritually powerful, thus cannot be cut casually and used as firewood. Even in the most violent period of the Cultural Revolution when most of the incense burning shrines at Baihuaping were destroyed, the Red Guard did not dare to cut down the trees surrounding them for fear of the retributive consequences, as discussed in chapter 1.

We did not stop at the spring well but went straight to the ritual ground of Xiaoker's household. It was a small open space enough for ten people to sit around, levelled off on the hillside to the northeast of the spring well. The slope is mostly occupied by more or less similar size of ritual grounds that belong to households in Gerdu. People from Po village set up their ritual grounds on the adjacent hillside to the west of the spring well. Those of the households in Lushu and Shugo are located on the relatively flat area either side of the rill that we walked past. In each such space, apart from the shrine set up under the tree, a simple stove made of stones is built for cooking. On festive occasions, hundreds of people from the local area as well as outsiders gather around the ritual grounds of their own or their friends and relatives, cook together, and share meals. My friend Kerher, who once invited me to a meal at the ritual ground of his house, pointed out the fact that given the scale of cooking going on at the same time, the grove has never caught fire on such occasions is an indirect proof of the efficacy of the spiritual power of the trees.

We were about to make a fire and tea when we discovered that we had forgotten to take firewood with us. Xiaoker's elder son went off to collect dried tree branches lying on the ground and the younger son went to his paternal eldest uncle, Guzo, who was sitting in a shelter next to the spring. Guzo's daily job is to invite tourists to burn incense at the spring and provide them with incense sticks. He chants some prayers in Naxi for

the tourists once they agree to do so. In order to keep himself warm especially in winter, Guzo usually stacks a pile of firewood under his bench. His service is, in principle, donation based but he sometimes gets frustrated if the tourists ‘donate’ too little. What bothers Guzo more is his rival Inejiu, a man in his mid-seventies who sits in a shelter opposite to Guzo’s on the other side of the spring well. Inejiu is from Po village and learned *dongba* practice from Ajia, a deceased *dongba*. Although Inejiu can fluently recite the prayers for incense burning or *tʂ’upadzɿ*, he acknowledges that he is not very familiar with the pictograms. Inejiu and Guzo often compete with each other over the incense business and sometimes even get into quarrels.

This rivalry can be traced to Inejiu’s teacher Ajia and Namu, Guzo’s father. Ajia was the *dongba* who started this incense burning business when Baihuaping was first developed as a tourist site. Shortly after, Namu did the same on the other side of the well. They ‘worked’ side by side for nearly ten years, but one day Ajia hit Namu with a piece of stone. According to Namu’s account, he, Namu, chanted the prayers in a full and clear tone so more tourists went to him. Ajia was envious of him for this and assaulted him with a stone the size of an egg. After throwing the stone at Namu’s forehead, Ajia took a shortcut to escape back to his village. My friend, the Smart One, who is a staff member of the tourist company, was out on a routine patrol of Baihuaping, and came across Namu lying bleeding on his bench. He helped Namu down the hill. Namu was then sent to a hospital in Shangri La by his family and eventually survived the injury. Neither Ajia nor Namu took up their business again after the incident. Ajia did not have any children so he asked one of his *dongba* apprentices to carry on sitting on his spot, whilst Guzo took over Namu’s place. About a year later, Ajia died when he was taking a shower before bed. His body was found stiff on the floor the next morning. This was considered an ominous death, as I discuss in chapter 1, because Ajia’s family was not able to put a piece of silver in his mouth before his last breath, known as ‘*sak’u*’ literally meaning ‘to get the breath’. This practice is considered essential to enable the deceased to embark on his or her journey back to the ancestral lands in the sky. Namu

insisted that Ajia's death was a result of retribution. The deities of the sacred spring who had witnessed the assault killed him with water (the water used in Po village originates from Baihuaping).

A few minutes later, Guzo came to the ritual ground with firewood and we all sat around in a leisurely fashion and had tea. After tea, Xiaoker instructed his sons to prepare the food while the two of us went to the spring well to do the ritual. He told me to take the rooster and dip its beak and feet into the spring. The beak and feet are the parts of the rooster that are in frequent contact with the dirt on the ground. Dipping them into the spring is to purify the rooster with the sacred water so that it can serve as sacrifice. I then lit the incense sticks and placed them around the shrine and the well. I also chanted the prayer '*gulykaly ioho, k'əbilabi ioho* (n.)' usually interpreted as praying for protection (ch. *ping'an*) and health. In the meantime, Xiaoker placed the incense leaves on the shrine over the fire and put some rice and wheat flour on top of them. It did not take long before the incense smoke grew thick and rose up. I then took the offerings from Xiaoker, stood in front of the well, threw the grain to the water, kneeled down, and bowed to it. Xiaoker then cut the throat of the rooster and smeared its blood on the shrine. Barnie and some other people she had invited to come along arrived at this time.

Back at the ritual ground, Xiaoker burned some more incense leaves at the familial shrine<sup>73</sup>. While Barnie was preparing the food, the rest of us sat around chatting. The sacrificed rooster was chopped into pieces and boiled in a pot. When the food was ready, a bowl of rice with chicken pieces was offered to the shrine before we shared it amongst ourselves. After the meal, Xiaoker and I went around the terraces to pick up some pebbles for me to take away. The rounded, smooth, and white ones were preferred. In Xiaoker's car, there is a small hemp bag hanging on the front mirror—the same kind of bag used to put rice or wheat flour in as offerings for incense burning. There were

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<sup>73</sup> To differentiate the shrine on the ritual ground from the one in the house, I refer to the former as 'familial shrine'.

already a few pebbles collected from Baihuaping in that hemp bag. The pebbles embody protection for the safety of the driver. In my case, they also embody my connection with Zheba.

### **Incense burning and the regeneration of life**

A few days after my initial arrival in Zheba, I went on my first incense burning trip or *tɕ'upadzɿ* with Duzhizo, the *dongba* from Po village who did the *suk'y* ritual at Kerher's house discussed in chapter 2. It was on the morning of the 15th day of a lunar month. I followed him to the top of a hill behind Po where there was a shrine, similar to the main ones near the spring well at Baihuaping. There were Tibetan prayer flags hanging on the trees around. When we got there, two elderly women were finishing off their offering ritual. Duzhizo took out some pine twigs from his bag, lit them with some *songmingzi* fuel, and put them over the shrine. He started his chanting. Each time he bowed down, he took his hat off. Then he took out some yak butter, flour and barley wine and applied them to the stones of the shrine. I asked him if those two women knew the chanting as well. He told me that they were only repeating a simple prayer for protection/blessing. He impersonated them by folding his hands and repeating the phrase 'baoyou' in the Han dialect. On the way back, we met a man from the same village carrying a basket of incense leaves and offerings. Duzhizo told me that the man was going to Baihuaping for *tɕ'upadzɿ*. I asked him why he did not go there himself. He said that would take too long and he had business at home to attend to.

People in Zheba carry out *tɕ'upadzɿ* regularly, normally on an auspicious day such as the first and fifteenth days of every lunar month, and annual festivals. For individuals, it is also good to burn incense on the day of their Chinese zodiac animal. According to the *dongba* scripts and local idiom, the Tibetans keep track of time in terms of years, the Bai people keep track of time in terms of months, and the Naxi keep track of time in term of days. This reveals the different ways in which each ethnic group relates to the

twelve Chinese zodiac animals or *k'u*<sup>74</sup> (n.) to construct various local senses of time. For people in Zheba, as I have discussed briefly in chapter 1, *k'u* is the primary reference to count one's age<sup>75</sup>. Each day is associated with a *k'u* animal in accordance with the Chinese lunar almanac. The twelve animals are put into groups of three<sup>76</sup>. The animals in the same group are considered to be in harmony with one another. Thus, the days associated with the animals that are from the same group of one's *ku* are also appropriate for them to conduct *tɕ'upadzɿ*.

Apart from the two main shrines next to the spring well at Baihuaping, each village in Zheba also has its own communal shrines. The locations of these shrines are of particular importance. The one in Po village is on top of the hill which Duzhizo took me to. It oversees the whole village. The other three villages are all loosely in the shape of a belt along the north-south axis. The northern end is commonly referred to as the 'head' of the village (n. *uəkɿ*) and the southern one the 'tail' (n. *uəmæ*). In Gerdu, there is a well at *uəmæ* next to which the communal shrine is established. In Lushu, the two communal shrines locate at both *uəkɿ* and *uəmæ*. In Shugo, there are also two shrines: one on top of a small hill and the other at the foot of a big willow tree that stands on the path leading to *uəkɿ*. Duzhizo pointed out that the shrines on the hills worship the mountain deities whereas the ones near the water source (including the willow tree as its flourish indicates the abundance of underground water) serve the *ɕu* deities who are the guardians of the realm of nature<sup>77</sup>. The shrines are located either in the border area of a

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<sup>74</sup> *K'u* literally means year and is used to refer to the twelve zodiac animals.

<sup>75</sup> The way to speculate one's age is as follows. First of all, the age needs to be put loosely in the span between two years of the person's birth zodiac animal. For instance, the time between two years of horse could be thirteen (12+1, as it refers to the nominal age instead of the actual one), twenty-five, thirty-seven, forty-nine, etc. If someone was born in the year of horse, according to his or her appearance, one can roughly tell which duration he or she belongs to with reference to the closest year of horse (either in the past or the future). The next step is to add or reduce the relevant number of years from current one to the closest year of horse. This speculation seems complicated, but once familiarised with it, all one needs to do is to remember the numbers of multiplies twelve plus one, the order of the zodiac animals, and the addition and subtraction within six, all of which are locally taken as self-evident facts. No logical reasoning is necessary. Bao Jiang (2008) notes that when he was doing fieldwork in Eya (a different Naxi area on the border of Sichuan and Yunnan), people could immediately tell his age once they were told of his birth animal. It happened to me a lot as well in Zheba.

<sup>76</sup> The groups are: rat, dragon, monkey; ox, snake, rooster; tiger, horse, dog; and rabbit, goat, pig. The grouping is commonly recounted in verses.

<sup>77</sup> Bao Jiang (2008) argues that the *ɕu* deity is opposed to *du* worshiped on the household shrine who is in charge of the human world. The realm of nature in this sense is considered as an extension of the in-out dimension from the main house and village on the horizontal level.

village where people and things constantly move in and out or at a vantage point where the flow of everyday life can be overseen by the territorial deities. The relation between the village shrines and the shrines at Baihuaping is hierarchical. Namu once commented that the wells in the villages are like the ‘children’ or descendants of the spring well at Baihuaping. This analogy suggests that as the water in the village wells is considered to originate from the spring well, by the same token, the spiritual power of the relevant deities served by the village shrines derives from that of Baihuaping’s guardian deities, *Shuizibu* (male deity) and *Shuizimu* (female deity). When people are not able to go to Baihuaping on relevant days especially in the busy season, the alternative therefore is to conduct the ritual at the village shrines, as Duzhizo did. The protection and blessings obtained are still considered to be linked to the efficacy of Baihuaping.

Although there does not seem to be a prescribed procedure of *tʂ’upadzɿ*, people generally follow some similar patterns. At the start of my fieldwork, I initially went for *tʂ’upadzɿ* with other people and observed them practising the ritual. A few months later, I carried it out regularly on my own. Different leaves can be used for the ritual. The most common one is pine needles or *t’oʂu* (n.), but most of the time they are combined with another type of leaves referred to as *çykə* (n.), literally incense leaves, which when burnt have a fresh and fragrant aroma. Both types of leaf are commonly seen in the local area. People usually gather them to take them home when they come across them while herding or attending other business in the mountains<sup>78</sup>. Sometimes they just gather the leaves on their way to burn incense<sup>79</sup>. A third type of leaf called *mukə* (a type of rhododendron with broad leaves and big flowers) is also needed. In the Naxi myth, *muger* was the first plant that sprang up on the earth after the big flood that devoured everything except for the heroic human ancestor, *Ts’ozeluu* (for a brief summary of the story see chapter 4 and McKhann, 2012). It is considered the purest and is thus used to

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<sup>78</sup> The exception is in the lunar tenth month one is not supposed to take green leaves back home from the mountains because it is the time of year when the deceased of the year travel back to the ancestral lands (more discussion see chapter 4).

<sup>79</sup> Very rarely do people go into the mountains just to pick the leaves, which was something I often did the day before *tʂ’upadzɿ*.

purify the offerings during the ritual (Bao, 2008, p256-257)<sup>80</sup>. Alternatively, willow twigs can be used to purify the offerings by sprinkling them with the water from the spring well. The offerings generally include rice, wheat flour (sometimes mixed with yak butter), liquor (made from barley), and sometimes sunflower seeds, all of which are agricultural products.

In my own practice of *tʂ'upadzɿ*, I would first go to the main shrine, wash my hands with the spring water, and then place the leaves and offerings on top of the stone shrine. Once the incense smoke started to rise, I would light the *mukə* and circle it a few times over the fire. Once used, the *mukə* leaves were to be cast away. Often at this point, I would circle around the shrine and apply some wheat flour to the stones, go to the side of the spring and throw more offerings into the water. Chanting is not essential, as most women and people under the age of forty do not know how to do it properly. They simply speak a few verses to pray for blessings like the two elderly women I met with Duzhizo. However, the elderly villagers, mostly men like Namu, sometimes complain that young people nowadays do not even know how to pronounce '*tʂ'u* (n.)' properly, the basic word for 'worship'<sup>81</sup>. They do feel disappointed that fewer and fewer people know how to chant. The chanting is not limited to men, nor is it specifically associated as a *dongba* practice<sup>82</sup>. Although the verses are often written down with *dongba* scripts, the practice is transmitted more as an oral tradition on a familial basis. For instance, Guma and her four sisters all learned the chanting from their father who was not a *dongba* practitioner (although Guma's paternal grandfather was an accomplished *dongba*); in contrast, Guma's husband who is in his late sixties does not know much of the verses. For those who know how to chant, their knowledge of the verses varies.

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<sup>80</sup> Bao Jiang came across the same explanation in his fieldwork in a different Naxi area. Focusing on a verse in the chanting of purification ritual ('*geel-mei-lei-ggeeq, cel-mei-lei-shuq*'), he points out that the transition from '*tʂ'ə* (*cel*)', meaning 'dirty' to '*ʂy* (*shuq*)', meaning 'pure', can be linked to the processes of stripping off the clothes or fruit coming out of its skin.

<sup>81</sup> Namu commented that some people confuse '*tʂ'u*' with '*tʂ'ə*', the latter meaning 'dirty'.

<sup>82</sup> Niuzo, a man in his forties who is also the carpenter in Gerdu (see chapter 2), attended the *dongba* training classes set up in Gerdu a few years back. Namu was teaching the scripts every evening during slack season at a collectively owned *mulefang* Niuzo and a few other students felt quite frustrated that they did not learn the chanting for incense burning. It was something that they were particularly keen on learning. The school lasted for a year or so. Low attendance and no funds seemed to be the main reasons why it was closed later.

Guzo commented that most people including himself chanted the verses in a fragmented way. Most of the time they mixed up the order or shorten the verses. Only very established *dongba* like his father Namu were able to chant it fluently in full length.

After the ritual at the main shrine, I usually went on to the ritual ground of Xiaoker's household. The use of ritual ground does not entirely coordinate with household division in the village. It is very common for siblings who live in separate houses to share the same ritual ground. Xiaoker's household shares one with his eldest brother, Guzo's. His other brother married out into a different household so inherited another ritual ground. Xiaoker's three sisters and their families all share another one right next to his. This ritual ground is referred to as 'hua' (n.), the same word used for a shelter (usually a *mulefang*) in the mountain or meadow where herders and herb gatherers stay overnight. On one side of each ground stands a tree (usually an aged pine or oak) at the foot of which a simple shrine is built with rocks. At the opposite end, a stone stove is set up. This layout mirrors the arrangement of *tsua* or the higher end of the main house as discussed in chapter 2. The establishment of the shrine and the stove replicates the high-low axis in domestic space. Although I did not come across any articulated sitting order as such on the ritual ground, I noticed that sometimes when too many people were sharing a meal on the site, they split into two groups with men sitting closer to the shrine and women closer to the stove.

I would then burn the rest of the incense leaves at the familial shrine and walk about to pick some oak leaves or sometimes flowers. Namu emphasised that the leaves should preferably have smooth edges with no insect holes. These are the *nuakə* or auspicious leaves placed in the vases on the household shrine (for the origin story of *nuak'ua* see chapter 2). I also picked three or four leaves from the tips of the branches and attached them on top of my hat or to my clothes. Together with the leaves, I also took a bottle of the spring water back. When I arrived at the front gate of Xiaoker's house, I replaced the dried *nuakə* placed on the door knockers or rafters with the freshly picked ones while



announcing that I had come back from the trip. At each door and post I passed by in the household compound, including the gate to the pigpen, I did the same, until I eventually got to the household shrine in the main house. I took some well-shaped leaves off the stems and distributed them to those who were around in the house. The rest were put into *nuak'ua*, the vases on *gakly*. The water brought back from the spring well was used both to nurture the leaves and to give as offering to the ancestors every day. At the same time, the replaced dried leaves could not just be casually thrown away. Namu normally burnt them in the household stove. He recalled that in the past, the place beside the village shrine of Gerdu was where people used to go and burn them.

I once went on a *tʂ'upadzɿ* trip with Namu. When we got back, he was really upset to find there was no fire residue left in the stove. I then realised that it was important for those who returned from *tʂ'upadzɿ* to burn incense at home as a way to inform the ancestors above the household shrine of the trip. As I described in chapter 2, the fire residue of burning wood is used to burn the cedar wood indoors. The reason why Namu got upset was that he thought that Xiaoker, the youngest son he lived with, was not considerate enough to stay at home for lunch, to make sure that the fire was kept alight so that we could burn the incense wood straight away. It took Namu a while to make a fire and wait for the burning wood to be ready to use.

In Zheba, fire is essential in people's everyday lives. They use the stove to cook in the main house throughout the year even when it is hot and humid in the rainy season. A house warming celebration is called *mik'uu* (n.), literally meaning to make fire. In the sending off trip I described above, when we arrived at Baihuaping, Xiaoker did not stop at the main shrine to burn incense there as one normally does on the regular *tʂ'upadzɿ* trips. Instead, we went to his familial ritual ground and made a fire there first. The ritual ground is also where the family members share meals with the ancestors as well as amongst themselves on festive occasions. With the parallel arrangement to the main house, the ritual ground can be seen as a second home at Baihuaping. To make a fire

there after being absent for a while is to re-establish the sense of home for subsequent rituals and commensality as a form of reunion (Stafford, 2000).

The reversal of the order of making offerings at the main shrine and the familial one distinguishes the regular *tʂ'upadzɿ* trips from the ones that involve sacrifice (usually a rooster) and commensality, referred to as *henshu* (n.) or to invite the deities. The former focuses more on making the offerings, especially at the main shrine, and bringing *nuakə* and the pure water from the sacred spring well back to the house after. The offerings mostly consist of raw agricultural products that belong to the realm of human life (Bao, 2008). As noted in the previous chapter, the pictogram for growth, 'dzæ', is depicted as a barn full of grain. The rice, wheat flour, liquor and occasional sunflower seeds materialise the growing prosperity of the house. Physically taking them from the house to the sacred spring well is to trace the source of the harvest and the prosperity of the house. It is a reciprocal relationship that is established through the bodily movement in the trip. In *tʂ'upadzɿ*, the yield of fertility is first returned to its origin, the spring well, and then the regenerative forces materialised in *nuakə* and the pure water are brought back to the house. The connection between the spring well and the house is reinforced through attaching *nuakə* to each door/gate one passes through on return and eventually burning incense at the household shrine. It is also maintained by adding the water to nurture *nuakə* brought back from the mountains and offering the water to ancestors in the house.

*Tʂ'upadzɿ* should thus be seen as a life-giving practice. However, its efficacy can be undermined by forces associated with death, such as menstrual pollution. Guzo, who sits next to the spring well charging tourists for incense burning, once commented that the ritual would be useless if a woman put the offerings in the pockets of her trousers, since these could be easily contaminated by menstrual blood. Like most of rural China, in Zheba menstrual and postpartum discharge are regarded as ritually polluting and highly

contagious<sup>83</sup>. Emily Ahern links this destructive power to birth and death pointing out that ‘the menstrual blood that flows when a woman is not pregnant is, in a sense, a dead fetus’ (1978, p274). Its contamination is incompatible with the life forces materialised in the form of the offerings. Normally, the grain served as offering is kept in small bags woven with hemp.

Although the same process is also included in *tʂʰupadzɿ* carried out for special occasions, or *χeʂu* (n.), like my sending-off trip, the focus in these is more on the sacrifice and the commensality, rather than on the ritual’s life-giving dimension. This practice often serves to welcome guests and send off family and friends, both of which necessarily entail foreseeable parting. It deals with critical moments of separation. The inevitable separation is to be overcome by the reunion of the living and the ancestors in the temporary home of the ritual ground, through eating together. With the blood of the rooster sacrificed to the *ʂu* deities of Baihuaping, this commensality also takes place under these deities’ protection. It is an occasion when the relationships between the local territorial deities, the ancestors and the living are, in Stafford’s words, ‘intensified’, and a seemingly timeless ‘relational ideal’ is created that promises the future reunions to come (2000, p61-67)<sup>84</sup>. In this sense, the efficacy of *χeʂu* can be summarised as protection against the potentially fragmenting effects of separation.

However, the distinction made here between the life-giving aspect of *tʂʰupadzɿ* and the overcoming of separation in *χeʂu* is only for analytical convenience. In the actual ritual practice, although the emphasis might be placed more on one or the other, the two aspects are inseparable from each other. As I noted above, apart from the first and the fifteenth days of each lunar month, it is appropriate to conduct *tʂʰupadzɿ* on the days that correspond to one’s *k’u* or Chinese zodiac. As I went on more and more *tʂʰupadzɿ*, I gradually realised that hardly anyone I met on these trips was doing the ritual for

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<sup>83</sup> Literature on the polluting power of menstrual blood in China is extensive. See, for example, Ahern (1978), Bray (1997), Mann (1997), and Sangren (1983). Mueggler (2001) provides a similar case on the neighbouring *lòlop’ò* community in Yunnan. For more discussion on the contaminating power of postpartum discharge, see chapter 4.

<sup>84</sup> This ‘relational ideal’ is also created on annual festivals such as the Chinese New Year.

themselves. In most cases, they did it to obtain the local deities' protection for their family members who were away from home at school or on work, including the children who went to the local primary boarding school at the township centre and returned home every ten days. The protection of Baihuaping is often instantiated in the locally well-known tale that those who went to fight battles in the anti-Japanese war managed to dodge the bullets even when they were marching in front of soldiers from other places, who were shot dead. My friend Aqi, a man in his fifties who worked for a mine, some sixty kilometres away from Gerdu, recounted the following story to further demonstrate this protective power:

Many years ago, a group of people from Baihuaping went to work in a minefield. They dug really deep into the mountain. One day, a bird suddenly flew by shouting to them in Naxi: 'Run away, people from Baihuaping'. They quickly followed the advice. Right after the last person of the group got out of the mine, it collapsed. Those who did not get the warning were buried in the mountain.

Like the incense burning ritual practised in the house every day, the periodic visit to Baihuaping carried out by one's close relatives evokes the protective power of the local territorial deities over the family members who are away, as illustrated in the tales above. Such visits help to create a sense of connectedness or rootedness among those who live with the fragmenting effects of separation, either through distance and having to confront the uncertainties of separation, or at home, having to cope with the anxieties triggered by the absence of close family members. Such connectedness constitutes 'an ethics of ordinary movement', as the anthropologist James Johnston (2013, p61) puts, that integrates separation into the celebration of reunion. The physical movement between the house and Baihuaping in *tʂ'upadzɿ* trips, in this sense, implies the prospect of the return of those who have gone away.

### **The return of ancestors and married-out daughters**

As shown in both the previous and current chapters, the ancestors, especially the three most recently deceased generations, play an essential role in ritual practices in Zheba.

The living household members offer incense, tea, and food every day to the ancestors on the household shrine. They share meals with the ancestors on the ritual ground, on festive occasions and at critical moments of separation. In addition, there are other rituals especially dedicated to the ancestors known as *zuby* (n.) or colloquially *ap'yadzɪ by* (n.). The name of the ritual simply means to chant for the ancestors or grandparents. Given that the ancestors are already so present in ritual activities, what is unique about this ritual of ancestor worship? How does it relate to other practices? In the following discussion, I intend to show that mobilising both the ancestors and the living in this practice, especially the married-out daughters, creates the ideal occasion of reunion and evokes a metaphorical image of the tree that serves as a principle feature in local people's moral imagination. This tree symbolism unifies the life giving and separation-overcoming aspects discussed in the last section and sheds light on people's understanding of their place in the world in relation to each other, the house, and the local landscape.

Like most other annual events (e.g. sky worship), the dates for *zuby* vary in different Naxi areas<sup>85</sup>. Even in Gerdu, some households practise it only in the first lunar month, whilst others do it three times a year. The Naxi ethnolinguist Yang Yihua (2010), who also did her fieldwork in Zheba with a specific focus on the *dongba* scripts for ancestor worship, points out that the difference in the dates may relate to the different sky worship groups that each household is affiliated to (more on sky worship in chapter 4). The group that Namu's household belongs to, called Guher, conducts the ritual on the fourth day of both the sixth and eleventh months, and the seventh of the first month. The *zuby* that Yang documents was on the seventh of the first month. She notes that this day is regarded as when the earliest human ancestors first descended from the sky<sup>86</sup>, hence the script *ts'obə-sa*—the story of the Naxi hero *Ts'ozeluuu*—is recounted as an extra

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<sup>85</sup> Generally, *zuby* is held in spring (first or third lunar month, or Qingming Festival), summer (early sixth lunar month), and winter (early eleventh lunar month) (McKhann, 1992; Yang, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Yang does not specify the reference of the earliest ancestors in her narrative. Based on her observation that the story of *Ts'ozeluuu* (in the script of *ts'obə-sa*) is especially recounted on this day, the earliest ancestors are most likely referring to *Ts'ozeluuu* and *Ts'ehububə* (more in chapter 4).

part of the ceremony (2010: 18). The account Guzo gave me concerning the differences in terms of dates between the first and other two months was as follows. Before the ninth (the day for the sky worship for the Guher group), each day in the first lunar month is dedicated to one animal/species. To celebrate these days, people need to imitate the movements of the relevant animals. The seventh is recognised as the day of the human and hence is an appropriate time to honour ancestors<sup>87</sup>.

The *zuby* ritual that I observed took place in the eleventh month. It was after the harvest of corn and rice. It was also the day before pig butchering, an annual household event the responsibility for which is shared amongst brothers and brother in laws together.<sup>88</sup> More importantly, the month before (the tenth lunar month) is the time when all the deceased from the previous year make their way to the ancestral lands, which is seen as an ominous time for the living, as I discuss in chapter 4. The fourth of the eleventh month is the date when the deceased have more or less all passed by and arrived in the ancestral lands; it thus marks the end of this ominous month. Namu remarked that from this day on until the second lunar month, called the month of deities or *χedziə* (n.), most days are auspicious. Many of the men who work in the towns nearby returned home shortly before or on that day to prepare for the pig butchering which is carried out only by men. Some of them remained at home until the end of the New Year's celebration. Those who could not make it for these two events gradually returned afterwards. In this sense, the day also marks the beginning of the reunion of the Chinese New Year.

The day before the ceremony, Namu went for *tʂ'upadzɿ* at Baihuaping, which was unusual for him due to his frail health. Apart from the *nuakə* and pure water from the spring, he also brought back three sticks cut from the same type of oak tree that *nuakə* grow from. The sticks were distinctively different from each other: one with leaves

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<sup>87</sup> This account corresponds to the Han tradition of Chinese New Year, which also recognises the seventh day of the lunar first month as the day of human. The sequence of first eight days is as follows: rooster, dog, pig, goat, ox, horse, human, and crop.

<sup>88</sup> The day of pig butchering is cautiously selected. It should be on a day whose zodiac is not pig per se but in harmony with pig, namely the day of rabbit and goat.

attached, one with both ends sharpened, and one as thick as a thumb. They represented the three generations of ancestors. On this day, Namu got up earlier than usual and went to the field to get two turnips or *manjing*. He cut the turnips in half and one half was used as support for the sticks. When I arrived, one of Namu's grandsons was already there. He represented Guzo's (Namu's eldest son) household and had brought back a few pancakes made of sticky rice. The pancakes were placed on *gəkyly*. Barnie was frying the same type of pancakes in the side kitchen, while Namu was busy setting up a makeshift shrine in front of *gəkyly* in the main house. After purifying the spot with some burning *muger* leaves, Namu laid a layer of pine needles on the table and placed the three sticks in the front. Before establishing the sticks, Namu smeared the oil of three cubes of preserved pork belly fat on the upper end of each of them. The arrangement of the sticks was as follows: the one with leaves was in the middle, the thin one with two sharp ends on the left, and the thick one on the right<sup>89</sup>. When the pancakes were ready, with the help of his grandson, Namu put a plate of three on *gəkyly*, and a plate of four on the table. He also offered some freshly brewed tea. The incense burner was removed from *gəkyly* and put on the makeshift shrine. Other offerings present were a bowl of uncooked rice, cheese, yak butter, and a bowl of barley liquor, all washed before being placed on the table.

The ritual started off with Namu throwing a few handfuls of rice towards the sticks, referred to as ancestral trees or *zudzı* (n.). The first half was to invite the ancestors to the house, known as *zusa* (n.). Namu articulated a series of place names that mapped out the route from the ancestral lands in the sky to Gerdu village<sup>90</sup>. On finishing this announcement, Namu threw a handful of rice towards the sticks one more time, to indicate the arrival of the ancestors<sup>91</sup>. During the chanting, Namu's three daughters came and went, each with some sticky rice pancakes. His eldest daughter, who married

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<sup>89</sup> The arrangement of the shrine that Yang Yihua writes about is slightly different from that which I observed. She points out that the stick on the left represents the earliest generation of the three and the one in the middle the latest (2010, p18-19).

<sup>90</sup> For a full list of the place names, see Yang (2010, p74).

<sup>91</sup> Yang Yihua interprets the throwing of rice as to pay the debt that the ancestors owned in the other world (2010, p21).

out to Po village, also brought a bag of walnuts harvested in her own household. The second youngest brought some pieces of incense wood that she had washed at the village well. They added the offerings to the table. Before they went to sit in the side kitchen, the eldest daughter greeted her mother (Namu's wife) who had passed away about ten years beforehand by bowing to the shrine. After finishing the first part of the ritual, Namu joined his daughters in the kitchen. He said, this was a time when the ancestors were resting. During this break, incense wood pieces were continuously added to the burner.

When Barnie finished cooking, a table was set in the courtyard for lunch. Namu insisted that the others should eat without him and went on with the ritual in the main house. The second half of the ritual is referred to as *zuxadzı* (n.), literally meaning the ancestors eating the food. A pot of broth cooked with the pork belly cubes was added to the table. The pork cubes were put separately in a bowl containing some cooked rice and a few walnuts. The bowl was also offered to the ancestors. After chanting for a while, Namu stuck some cooked rice on the top of the thick stick and circled it above the offerings. He also dipped some *nuakə* in the broth and dripped it towards the ancestral trees. He then recounted the ancestral route in reverse to send off the ancestors back to the sky. The ritual ended with the removal of the ancestral trees. The stick with two sharp ends were broken off whilst the leaves attached to the twig in the middle were distributed to those who were present, including me. We each were given two or three leaves. The grandson and I fixed them on our clothes and the women wore them in their hair. All the 'guests' initially left the pancakes on the table and only took the empty bowls back, but Barnie insisted that they take the pancakes away as no one in her household would eat them up. After the ritual, Namu remarked that in the past, each household would invite *dongba* to do *zuby* rituals for them. These days, no households invite *dongba* for *zuby* any more. I was informed that most households in Gerdu, especially the old ones with more than three generations of ancestors, still do the ritual, although most people are less likely to have or be able to chant the scripts. I suspect that



they simply prepare the offerings and present them to the ancestors by reciting their names<sup>92</sup>.

The route Namu recounted in *zuby* is commonly called forth in other Naxi rituals, especially in funerals whose main purpose is to make sure the deceased return to the ancestral lands along the correct path (McKhann, 2012; Rock, 1955). This road is portrayed as *χezip'i* (n.) or 'gods' road', as some scholars translate it. The visual representation of the route is painted on a hemp cloth scroll consisting of the realms of demons, human and deities (McKhann, 2012, p281-90; Mueggler, 2011, p106-107). The one in Namu's household is 25 metres long. He painted it when he was in his sixties. The scroll is usually locked in a cabinet with other *dongba* scripts. Unlike his other paintings hanging around the main house, Namu does not display it casually. Even when he does take it out to show some special guests for instance the officials from the government sector or journalists from a TV station, he insists that only the sections about the realms of deities and humans can be unrolled in domestic space. The section depicting the realm of demons should be strictly kept closed; otherwise it would evoke their presence. However, the chanting he did in the *zuby* ritual is not merely an oral representation of the road. By vocalising the place names, the *dongba* deploys the power of his voice to compel the 'soul' to move along the route, as Mueggler (2011, p105) suggests. The chanting maps out the route, and, perhaps more importantly, directs or even imitates the movement of the ancestors.

The ancestral road, as McKhann (2012, p280) insightfully points out, spatialises time or rather the local sense of history in a linear sense, as opposed to the cyclical temporality of the Chinese zodiacs. One end of the road links to the ancestors and the past, whereas the other in the main house is associated with the living and the present. When the *dongba* invites the ancestors to the temporary shrine in the house, the

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<sup>92</sup> When it came to the seventh of the first month during my stay, Namu decided not to do the ritual at all although the relatives still returned with offerings. I did not pressure him concerning the reasons for the cancellation. Perhaps he did not feel well enough to do the ritual on that day. I also got the impression that it was the standard way nowadays for other households to celebrate such an occasion.

ancestors are required to travel from the past to the present. This journey is mirrored by the visits paid by returning relatives, including the sons and daughters who have independently established their own households, and married out daughters<sup>93</sup>, to their natal household. Returning respectively from their current households to where they were born and grew up, the living relatives carry out a journey from the present to the past in terms of their own personal history. Their role in this ritual is indispensable. The *zuby* ritual therefore overcomes the separation incurred by death, marriage, and the division of households. This idealised reunion is intensified through negating, however temporarily, the linearity of personal, ancestral, and familial history.

The reunion can be approached in the light of the sense of sacredness in domestic space. The ancestral road is simultaneously an axis with different degrees of sacredness, i.e. the places closer to the ancestral lands are more sacred and the ones more towards the household are less so. Chanting the road in different orders at the beginning and the end of *zuby* constitutes a circuit that entails first a downward and then an upward movement along the same axis.<sup>94</sup> The movement of the ancestors imagined through greeting and sending them off mirrors the ideal way of moving about in the main house that I have discussed in chapter 2. This ideal movement perceived from the viewpoint of the living is at least partially realised when the returning relatives come into the main house and place the offerings on the shrine. I have also proposed that the ideal movement in the main house can be converted to a parabola curve with *gəkyly* as the highest point in the centre. If we try to draw out the ancestors' movement at *zuby* on the same chart, what we obtain is a mirrored curve with the lowest point joined with the highest of the previous curve. The meeting point here becomes the shrine in the main house. Therefore, this reunion of the dead and the living is also realised on an idealised level.

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<sup>93</sup> Here married out sons are not included as they are more considered as people of other households.

<sup>94</sup> It is not unlike the journey embarked on by the deceased in funeral as coming to be born in the first place can be analogically seen as the first half of the circuit.

Having established *zuby* as the moment of reunion in both the temporal and the spatial sense, I now turn to explore its implications from the perspective of the returning relatives. The *zuby* I observed took place in the harvest season in terms of both crops and meat. I was also told that at the ritual in the lunar sixth month, the pancakes are made of the newly harvested wheat. Both ritual occasions correspond to the two agricultural harvests of a year. By offering the pancakes and other harvest to the ancestors, the descendants also trace the source of their present wellbeing to the natal household. This act of offering shares the life-giving aspect of *tɕ'upadzɿ* through establishing and maintaining the link between the prosperity of the descendants' current households and the place where their lives originated. The process intertwines with the centripetal movement of reunion that overcomes separation. The *zuby* ritual thus unifies both aspects. At the end of the ritual, the highlighted relation between the descendants and their place of origin is further articulated in the metaphor of a tree. The leaves that symbolise the blessings for the offspring are taken off from the stem that represents the ancestors, the predecessors who lived in the same household. The household is recognised as the 'root' where generations of members spring up. Even though some of them have moved away, they still attribute their life force to this root and continuously obtain blessings from it. In the next section, I shall point out that this tree metaphor is not only played out symbolically in rituals but also influences the ways people navigate the local world of relatedness.

### **Living with rootedness**

Shortly before the new year's celebration, I met Qimi, a woman in her thirties. She worked in a cafe run by a foreigner in the Dukezong old town, the tourist area in Shangri La, and returned to Zheba every month to visit her mother who was in her seventies. Although she did not finish her secondary school, she taught herself English and was able to have conversations with foreign tourists. We first met when she came around to use the wifi in my guesthouse. She was staying in her youngest brother's household

where her mother lived. The second time we saw each other was at her niece's wedding in Shugo. I attended the wedding on behalf of my host family and she was helping out with preparation and serving food. The day after, I went to the house she was staying in and she told me the stories of her father Ajin and her third brother Aquan, the man whose daughter's marriage was celebrated the previous day.

Ajin, Qimi's father was originally from Shugo. His mother's sister married into Gerdu and had a son. This cousin was attacked in a bandit raid in the village and went blind. As an arrangement to better take care of his aunt and cousin, Ajin went to live with them in Gerdu in his youth with the prospect of inheriting the household. A few years later, Ajin married Qimi's mother, who was originally from Gerdu. Some years into their marriage, after some of their elder children were born, a relative insisted on marrying her mute daughter to the blind cousin, so that they would inherit the household. Ajin then made a compromise. He moved out of the household with his wife and children and stayed in the thatched roof barn or *ts'o* (n.) that used to belong to the household of Bese, the village governor in the Republican period, but was then confiscated as collective property of the village or production team<sup>95</sup>. Qimi's parents had seven children. Most of them were born and grew up in the barn. Gradually, people in the village began to refer to them as the household of '*ts'ogu*' (the place of the barn).

Back in Shugo, where Ajin was originally from, his parents were living with his younger brother. The brother later eloped with an outsider girl. Ajin's parents were left on their own and pleaded with Ajin to name one of his sons as their heir who would take care of them in their advanced age. As a result, Aquan, Ajin's third son, was given away to live with his grandparents in Shugo, at an early age. When Aquan was about to come of age, his uncle—the one who had eloped with a girl from outside—returned after years away, with a new born son. This uncle claimed his inheritance of the household. In the end, Aquan married a girl from Shugo and established his own household there.

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<sup>95</sup> Ajin was the head of the production team at the time.

The adoptive practice of requesting a son from a close relative when a household faced the possibility of having no heir is referred to as *çik'ə be* (n.), literally meaning to become the human root (of that household). In colloquial terms, *çik'ə* meaning 'human root' or 'root of a person' refers to one's origin, often the natal household or village. The metaphoric aspect of this idiom finds its ritual counterpart articulated in material and embodied forms in *zuby* as discussed above. In *zuby*, the returning descendants of a household identify themselves with *nuakə* or the auspicious leaves and attribute their wellbeing to the ancestors, symbolised as tree stems, and to their natal household, the root. This aspect of *zuby* also parallels with other offering rituals such as *tš'upadzɿ* whose efficacy to regenerate life forces depends on acknowledging the origin of fertility, namely the spring well of Baihuaping or the *su* deities. The metaphorical use of the word 'root' in *çik'ə* echoes the symbolic meaning of material things realised through bodily movement in ritual practices. The poetic vocabulary in everyday language speaks to 'the language of materials' such as leaves, twigs, water and grain (Mueggler, 2001, p5). Such interplay evokes a powerful image of the tree that is both prominently present in the daily life and bears ritual significance. More importantly, it informs people of their relations and moral obligations to one another.

The term *çik'ə* has another closely associated connotation. It denotes the succession of a household, as indicated in *çik'ə be*, the adoptive practice. When there is no offspring in a household, people say that *çik'ə* of the house is broken. Such situation is regarded as highly unfortunate and problematic. For instance, an elderly couple I know in Po village was childless. When other villagers talked about them, the first thing they said was always that 'they do not have children'. Elderly care was a practical problem for them. In such cases, the prosperity of the house, ritually envisaged as the image of a growing tree, becomes impossible. My teacher Namu compared those who were barren to an empty frame without substance (ch. *kongjiazi*), implying that life became meaningless if one had no child. Adopting an heir, in most cases a son, from a close relative is commonly resorted to as a solution. This explains why Ajin, Qimi's father, went to live

with his maternal aunt and cousin in Gerdu in the first place and then Aquan, Ajin's third son, was given away to his grandparents in Shugo.

In many respects, men's uxori-local marriage (*muuu be n.*) resembles adoption. Uxori-local marriage takes place when a household has no male successor. The more literate term for it is *shangmen* (ch.), but people often talk about it half-jokingly in Yunnan dialect as to 'capture' the son-in-law (ch. *zhua guye*). Sometimes men's marrying out is directly referred to as *çik'ə be* as well. The most fundamental feature shared by adoption and uxori-local marriage comes down to the shift of *çik'ə* or human root. For the man involved, he becomes a person with a root *of* a different household. The implication is that he worships a different group of ancestors from the ones in the house he was born into. He does not participate in the ancestor worship in his natal house as the married-out daughters as well as sons who set up their own households do. Although he may remain in contact with his natal kin in life, after death he is recognised as an ancestor succeeding those of the adoptive or married-in household. While for women, the separation incurred by marriage can be temporarily overcome through the reunion of ancestor worship, i.e. their roots still lie in the natal house to which they ritually return and with which they maintain a connection, until they pass away in the households that they have married into. They then become ancestors above *gəkvly* in their marital homes<sup>96</sup>; the separation entailed by adoption and uxori-local marriage for men constitutes a more irreversible break or rupture from their origin or *çik'ə*<sup>97</sup>, one that corresponds with *death* for married-out women. Even so, some men still struggle to retrieve the connection to their natal house through the marriage of their offspring. Here I return to the story of Lujin, the woman I introduced at the beginning of this chapter who lived with both her daughter and son.

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<sup>96</sup> Unmarried or divorced daughters who remain and die in their natal household would still be recognised as ancestors there. Writing on ancestor worship in a different Naxi region, McKhann (1992, p297) also observes the 'persistence of strong bonds' between married out daughters and their natal kin. This stands in contrast with the outsider status of women in Han tradition, namely neither strongly connected with their natal family nor fully integrated into the one they marry, as reflected by the symbolic exclusion of women's agency in ancestral worship (Stafford, 2000, p120).

<sup>97</sup> This may explain why when the right of inheritance was challenged, both Qimi's father and Aquan did not return to their parents; instead, they respectively established their own households in the villages they were adopted in.

Originally from Po village, Lujin married into the household of Bese in Gerdu at the age of eighteen in early 1980s. She was the third amongst seven siblings. Her paternal grandmother was Bese's younger sister who married out into a household in the same village. Lujin's father was born and grew up in Gerdu but later married a woman in Po village where they set up their own household. Lujin's husband was Bese's orphan grandson whose father and grandfather both committed suicide on the same day in the land reform as discussed in chapter 1. At the time of the marriage, though her husband's household was less politically problematic, being constantly criticised at the struggle meetings and denied most material benefits from the collective for more than a decade left it in a financially difficult situation. Lujin confessed that the marriage was not initially her own idea. Her father felt great sympathy for the household of Bese. He told Lujin that it was where he (or rather his mother) was originally from and the household was then in need of an able woman like Lujin to manage it. Persuaded by her father, Lujin married the relative who was eight years older than her. Less than a year after their second child (Ajun) was born, her husband died of a stomach haemorrhage. Her daughter (Ajiu) was then only three years old. Lujin did not marry again. Nor did she return to Po village. She remained in Bese's household and raised the two children on her own. Thinking in retrospect about the hardship she endured over thirty years as a single mother, she sighed that had she not listened to her father in the first place, her life might have turned out differently and perhaps easier.

I was struck by the strong sense of moral obligation that Lujin's father felt for his mother's natal household. Even with the anticipation of great difficulty in material terms, he still tried to convince a daughter who he trusted as particularly 'able' to marry into the household. He was hoping his own child could change the declining fate of the house where his mother's *çik'ə* once lay. Perhaps, it was also an attempt to reconnect with his own natal village that he had moved away from. Despite the regretful tone when telling her story, Lujin encouraged her son, Ajun, to marry her elder sister's daughter from Po village, someone from her own *çik'ə*. Some people in Gerdu spoke of Ajun being filial

as he followed his mother's wishes to marry his matrilineal cousin. In a similar sense to her father, taking her niece as daughter-in-law perhaps helped Lujin restore the connection to her natal household and village that she felt gradually drifted away from over the years of separation.

## Conclusion

Addressing the prominent presence of stone and tree in Naxi rituals, McKhann suggests that they establish the 'opposition between permanence and ephemerality' (1992, p291). While agreeing on the point that the stone embodies the stable and enduring aspect of customary practices, I depart from McKhann and propose that the symbolic image of the tree substantiates the aspiration of growth. The relation between the two is complementary rather than oppositional, as indicated in the arrangement of the household shrine discussed in the previous chapter. Drawing on his works on the forest symbolism amongst the Ndembu people, Victor Turner insightfully points out that although it can be illuminating to think about 'village life-cycles' and 'domestic cycles' in biological terms such as 'origin', 'growth', and 'decay', such aspects of social processes should not be taken as '*immanent*' (1974, p31-32, emphasis in original text). He stresses these seemingly 'thoughtless images' as principal or 'root' metaphors emerging from a sense of consensus or *communitas* (Turner, 1975, p50-51).

In the foregoing analysis, I demonstrated that the image of the tree is evoked as such a principal metaphor in the ritual processes of *tɕ'upadzɿ* and *zuby*. Its metaphorical potency is not just limited to the literal sense that people talk about themselves with reference to their *çik'ə*. Moreover, it illuminates the hierarchy between origin and development that gives order to social processes and hence acquires metaphysical significance. In the tree metaphor, the root or origin is hierarchically emphasised as where the potential of growth lies. It is ritually *and* physically returned to in order to bring forth such potential. It highlights a 'struggle for succession' that unites biological



and social processes in their parallel structures rather than separating them (Durham and Fernandez, 1991, p198).

The associative processes that link the target domain, for instance the imaginary growth of a house, to the source domain, the biological growth of a tree, in metaphoric terms give rise to a ‘subtle rhetorical impact on social relations’ (Durhan and Fernandez, 1991, p192). The foregoing analysis in this chapter reveals that such a parallel is drawn and sustained through the physical and imaginary movement of people, things and other beings between places. The periodic visits to Baihuaping, the return of the married-out daughters and the deceased to the house, and the reunion with one’s natal household realised through marriage or adoption practices all contribute to establishing this metaphoric association. These cycles of movement activate a sense of interconnectedness through which life forces are reciprocally and periodically regenerated. Examining such processes sheds light on an understanding of the embodied ways that people in Zheba *live* the tree metaphor as ‘moral imagination’, through which they ‘construct their senses of themselves, of their social relations and of the world of their moral obligations’ (Fernandez, 1998, p104-105). More importantly, it accounts for the personal struggles in individual attempts to realise such moral aspirations as I discuss in greater detail in chapter 5, which can be easily obscured by talking about social relations in general kinship terms.

The key question to address in the study of ritual symbols or metaphors, as Turner famously poses, is how they ‘instigate social action’ (1975, p55). As I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, people in Zheba nowadays are experiencing an unprecedented scale of separation from an early age on. Its fragmenting effects constitute the struggles of the local people to live with the absence of their close relatives. Ritually reinforcing the connection between the absentees, the houses and the local landscape becomes essential to manage the wellbeing of those who live such consequences. The tree metaphor in this sense responds to such existential concerns and emphasising the moral

imperative to *return* to the root, the natal house, and eventually the ancestral lands. This practice of return not only creates idealised occasions of reunion that overcome problems caused by separation, but also confirms an understanding of one's place in the world without which the meaning of life becomes simply unimaginable.

#### Chapter 4 Origins, boundaries and a cosmology of displacement

Zhuoma, who was in a bright red princess dress, came into the main house and gaily greeted Bernie, referring to her as *liangliang* or aunt in Yunnan dialect, and Azhi (Bernie's younger son) as *xiao gege* (ch.) or little elder brother. She then looked around and asked Bernie where *da gege* (ch.) or big elder brother (referring to Bernie's elder son) was. Bernie pointed at me sitting on a small chair and indicated that I was the big elder brother. With her round eyes wide open, Zhuoma stared at me curiously for a second and then disappointingly turned to her mum who was sitting on the bench. Almost crying, she asserted that I was not the big elder brother. As she was calmed down by her mum, Zhuoma turned to Bernie again and repeated her question. Bernie still insisted that I was the big elder brother. It seemed even less convincing this time as Zhuoma protested fiercely by raising her voice in denial. At this point, we all broke out into laughter. Bernie exclaimed, 'How marvellous (ch. *shen*) that she can remember!'

Zhuoma was four years old. Shortly before the Chinese New Year, her parents, both in their mid-thirties, took her to Zheba to visit Namu's family. Her dad was a man of few words wearing a black leather jacket. Zhuoma's mum dressed in a distinctive Tibetan style with her hair bound in a piece of magenta coloured cloth around her head. She talked only to Zhuoma and Bernie most of the time. They lived in a Tibetan town called Xiaozhongdian and came with some homemade yak cheese and butter as gifts. Zhuoma's dad also gave Bernie's two sons 100 *yuan* each as lucky money or *yasuiqian* (ch.). Before they arrived, I was told that the couple tried to have a baby for years but did not succeed. About five years ago, they heard about a *dongba* ritualist in Zheba, i.e. Namu who had helped infertile couples to have children, so they came and asked for help. Namu took them to the openings beside the water terraces of Baihuaping, known as *qiuzidong* or the hole(s) to pray for children as introduced in the previous chapter.

They performed a sacrificial ritual there. Soon after the couple returned to Xiaozhongdian, the wife became pregnant and eventually gave birth to Zhuoma. They returned to visit when Zhuoma was just more than one year old. That was when she first met Barnie's two sons. Barnie was strongly impressed by the fact that more than two years later, Zhuoma could still remember the two elder brothers and did not mistake me as one of them even with Barnie's insistence. She remarked that Zhuoma was extremely smart and associated this with the deity of Baihuaping, a female deity of fertility whose story I recounted in the previous chapter. Zhuoma's parents also told us that when she got upset at home, she would usually say, 'I am the daughter of Baihuaping. If you don't listen to me, I will go back there!'

Although Zhuoma might have had some vague memory of her previous visit, her understanding of Baihuaping must have been informed mostly by her parents retelling the story of them praying for her there before her birth. What Barnie found particularly extraordinary or *shen* about Zhuoma was that although she was only four years old, she had already developed a strong awareness of origin that was different from the place she was born and raised. She felt very close to Barnie's family and could remember her sons even though she had only met them once when she was a baby. Barnie saw this sense of closeness as a form of reaffirmation of Zhuoma's strong connection with Baihuaping. In the previous chapter, I argued that the tree metaphor embedded in ritual practices in Zheba brings prominence to the hierarchical relation between 'origin and development' in the processes of growing (*dzæ*). Whether it concerns individual wellbeing or a collective sense of growth, for instance in the case of a house, origin seems to be the focus point to return to in order to sustain further development, especially when the fragmenting effects of separation are at work. In this chapter, I continue to explore this question of origin on a cosmological level. Particularly, I would like to stress how when the origin for a group of people, namely the *naxa* in Zheba, lies in the distant past and becomes impossible to return to, they attempt to create imaginary forms of return through myths and ritual practices.

By cosmology, I refer to the ways people understand and make their places in the world through relating to others, including people near and afar, animals, other beings like spirits, ancestors and deities, and the state. I draw on Wilhelm Dilthey's notion of *Weltanschauung* to conceptualise cosmology as a sum of cognitive knowledge and beliefs, affective values, and volitional actions and social interactions (cited in, Turner, 1987, p84-85). It is worth noting that a *Weltanschauung*, as Dilthey insists, is constantly evolving or, in Fredrik Barth's sense, always in the process of making (1987). I also draw on Victor Turner's notion of 'communitas' as 'a living and growing body of experience... which embodies the response of our whole collective mind to our entire collective experience', which he further summarises as 'the implicit law of wholeness', even though it remains 'never quite being relea[s]ed' (1987, p84). To put it simply, cosmology is manifest in the metanarratives that emerge from the shared experience of social life and in turn continuously shapes the local ways of life. My focus in this chapter centres on the metanarrative that responds to the fundamental existential concern of 'where one is from'. As this question cannot not be answered by physically returning to the origin back in time, to address it involves creating means of myths and rituals. For people in Zheba, as well as other Naxi areas, the communal response to such a question gives rise to what I call as a cosmology of displacement.

To illustrate the cosmology of displacement, I start with the birth celebration and naming process in Zheba as origin stories that respond to the irreversible point of separation between the mother and the child, an echo of the theme explored in the previous chapter. The second section explores how boundaries in the cosmological sense serve to create separate spaces. The transgression of those boundaries entails uncertainties and danger, as famously pointed out by Mary Douglas (1966), but can also give rise to the agency of transformative forces. The latter point draws on the linguistic anthropologist, Webb Keane's analysis of 'transduction' as 'the act of transforming something from one semiotic modality to another' creating boundary-transcending forces (2013, p2). The next section examines the sky worship ceremony or *muby* (n.)

that was suspended in Zheba in late 1950s. Almost every researcher who works on Naxi ritual has written about sky/heaven worship or *muby*. My focus here is that *muby* ritually reconstructs the origin story of the Naxi people, a deep past that is untraceable in the present. A key element of this worship is a juniper tree (another tree metaphor!) that stands in the centre of the altar and introduces foreign forces to the local community. Such boundary traversing overcomes the cosmological and existential problem of not being possible to return to the origin of the group in order to obtain forces of regeneration. The last section of the chapter specifies the implications of displacement in local people's current lives, which entails the struggle of living apart from their ancestors.

### **Birth, naming and origin stories**

Namu told me that his neighbour, a man in his mid-sixties, had come to visit the day before. The man's grandchild (his younger son's child) was born two months ago. The baby cried almost non-stop. The neighbour asked Namu to practise divination to find out the reason. The divination, a practice consisting of the casting of lots which I discuss in greater detail in chapter 5, revealed that a relative of the baby's mother, who married into the neighbour's household from a different local village, died long ago. The body of the deceased was not properly treated and left unattended for long. It was this dead relative who shadowed the neighbour's daughter-in-law and was causing harm to the baby.

Since we were on the subject of newborn, I told Namu that I had gone to a birth celebration or *puts'it'u* (n.) the day before. To my surprise, Namu reacted strongly by saying that I should not have gone in the first place. When he found out that it was my hostess, Barnie, who asked me to attend it on her behalf, he asserted that she had misled me to have eaten some unclean food. The celebration *puts'it'u* means to drink *puts'i*, a kind of thick porridge made of corn or sorghum flour. *Puts'i* is the main food served on such occasions. About a month before the due date, the mother or mother-in-law of the

pregnant woman starts to prepare the fermented liquor or *duzi* (n.) as a key ingredient. In the old days, as Namu recalled, the birth celebration took place ten days after the childbirth, whereas nowadays it happens about a month after. The day before the celebration, the mother or mother-in-law goes around the village and invites every household to the celebration. On the day, *duzi* or the fermented liquor and sugar are added into the porridge boiled with eggs and butter. The porridge is often simmered on an outdoor stove and thickened to a golden-brown colour. Each guest arrives shortly before lunchtime with a big bowl of rice and eight or ten eggs on top of it. Barnie recalled that when she gave birth to her two sons in late 1990s, the gifts consisted of rice and only four eggs. Tables are laid out in the courtyard like other feast occasions. The guests are served with butter tea and sweets first, which is why this celebration is sometimes also referred to as *let'uu* (n.) or drinking tea. After tea, the porridge is served in small bowls. The guests encourage one another to drink as many bowls as they can even though drinking alcohol in everyday life is seen as problematic, especially for women. Once they finish their food, the guests go to check the lying-in woman and the newborn in the main house. At the end of the celebration, the host family distributes the rest of the porridge into the big bowls that the guests used to bring their rice and eggs, to take back home and share with their families.

The reason why Namu had such strong reaction after finding out I had gone to the celebration was that traditionally only women are supposed to attend. Later on, I was also teased by other men from the village about me going to *puts'it'uu*. Although they did not mean to criticise me, they certainly found it at odds with the local customs. The household in which the birth takes place is regarded as highly polluted, so all men must avoid visiting it. Even the baby's father is supposed to eat separately from his wife and the woman who is taking care of her, usually her mother or mother-in-law. Dealing with the polluting effects of childbirth requires a series of rituals. Three days after the birth, the father burns *mukə* leaves, the same type of leaves used to purify offerings in *tʂ'upadzɿ* discussed in the last chapter, to remove the pollution from his wife with the

smoke. After a month, a *dongba* is invited to conduct a purification ritual which involves fuming the entire house with burning *mukə*. Namu remarked that birth was much ‘dirtier’ than death as the baby comes out of the vagina with blood. Some women continue to bleed three or four days after giving birth. Later when I told Bernie about Namu’s comments, she reassured me that it was fine as the baby was born in the hospital, not in the house. Besides, she added, other men from the same village who were single or whose wives were not at home also attended.

I have noted that in *tʂ’upadzɿ* or the incense burning trip to Baihuaping, women should not place offerings in their trousers pockets as the contaminating nature of menstrual blood can jeopardize the efficacy of the ritual. Postpartum discharge, as Namu pointed out above, has even more polluting effects and should be ritually dealt with. As I discuss in greater detail in chapter 5, a man’s illness may be thought to be caused by the pollution incurred when his daughter was in labour, which was not properly removed from his house. This threatening power is associated with the Naxi word ‘*tʂ’ə*’, meaning pollution. The pictogram of the word is depicted as a curved line with two knots, indicating a state of entanglement or lack of order. This depiction is in line with the conception of impurity that Mary Douglas famously puts forward as the problem of being unable to maintain distinctions between categories in a given cultural context (1966). Based on the ritual scripts *tʂ’ət’ɾby* (or *Chel Tvq Bee*, the origin of pollution), both Rock (1952, p670-674) and McKhann (1992, p153) identify the source of *tʂ’ə* as a female demonic figure.

Given this problematic association between women, birth and *tʂ’ə*, the importance of *puts’it’u* as an exclusive gathering of women after childbirth seems rather puzzling. The main activity of the celebration consists of commensality amongst women from the entire village, which is not necessarily related to the removal of the pollution. On such an occasion, drinking alcohol, a practice regarded as particularly problematic for women, is not only tolerated but also mutually encouraged amongst the guests. The food



shared during the celebration is further distributed into each household after the event. Moreover, the men whose female household members are absent are obliged to participate even under the risk of being exposed to the contaminating effects of the hostess' house. In order to unpack this paradox between the polluting power of birth and commensality at birth celebration, I now turn to the naming practice to reveal the conceptualisation of the bond between mother and child in the Naxi cosmological understanding.

One day when I was hanging out around the ticket office of Baihuaping, one of the staff members, Ahua, came to talk to me. Ahua is in her mid-thirties and a mother of two daughters, one six and the other almost two. She consulted me on her daughters' Chinese names to see if they were properly given. The daughters were both named by their father, my friend the Smart One, who went to a technical college (ch. *zhongzhuan*) in Shangri La. I told her the names were beautiful, but I was no expert of name giving in Chinese. At this time, the Smart One came over and told me that when their younger daughter was a few months old, she cried a lot and seemed somehow 'subdued' (ch. *shufu*). They went to consult Namu and it was indicated in the divination that the baby was not given a suitable name. Namu then renamed her according to the Naxi naming procedure. She stopped crying and became much livelier after, as the Smart One recollected.

The naming procedure is closely related to a micro-cosmological model referred to as *pakə* or *pakəhok'u* (n.). The model is illustrated as a compass rose with a frog or *pa* at the centre and the twelve zodiac animals around the circle in clockwise order. The cardinal and primary intercardinal directions are marked out. Each direction is occupied by a corresponding zodiac animal or two, starting from the north or *hogly* (n.) with the rat or *fu* (n.). Cardinal directions have two animals whereas the intercardinal has one. The circle is enclosed with the pig or *bu* (n.) at *hogly* again. The eight directions are regarded as eight gates or *hok'u*. It is believed that life starts by circling around these

gates at birth, men from the south and women from the north, and moves on to the next gate each year, men clockwise and women counter clockwise (Bao, 2008). The name of a newborn is determined by the gate where their mother is in the year of the childbirth. Each gate is associated with about a dozen or so names borrowing from some syllables of the names of the gate's guardian deities (Bao, 2008).

This naming practice indicates the significance of the bond between mother and child who share the same *pakə* or gate when the birth takes place. In contrast, the *pakə* of the child can be in conflict with the father's if they happen to be the same one. In such case, a close relative whose zodiac is in harmony with the new-born's, should be recognised as a foster father. If such a person cannot be found, a tree or a stone can be the alternative. The child is supposed to visit and pay respect to their foster father on the first day of the New Year. In the ritual scripts *bylyk'u*, known as the opening rite, the mother-child relationship is metaphorically applied to illustrate the relation between all beings (including deities, demons, natural phenomena, animals, things etc.) and their origins, a hierarchical relation that is also embodied in the tree symbolism, or rather the leaf-root relation, in ritual practices, as discussed in the last chapter. The scripts carry on asserting that 'if someone does not know the origin of a guest they should not receive them; if one does not recount the origin of a ghost they cannot exorcise it'. The anthropologist Anthony Jackson, who works on Naxi rituals and cosmology, points out that the emphasis on origin in Naxi rituals is to gain the power of control over the being or thing concerned: '[K]nowing and telling the origin of a thing confers power over it; contrariwise, to mention it without being able to account for its origin would be to invoke something over which one had no control' (Jackson, 1979, p152). Rituals generally start with *dongba* recounting the origin stories of the deities they want to invoke, the ritual items they deploy, or the demons they target to drive out. In exorcist practices, it is essential to pronounce the name of the ghosts. Even in the daily incense offering at home, naming the ancestors incorrectly could lead to illness or misfortune.

Seen in this light, the name of a person given according to the shared *pakə* with their mother at birth constitutes a story of their origin. It reinforces the mother-child bond that is physically separated at the moment of birth. For the child, it initiates the experience of growing outside the mother's body. Such a moment of separation is irreversible and entails difficulties to adapt to the environment outside the womb that can be hostile to the delicate health of the newborn. The shared *pakə* indicated in the name ritually establishes the connection between the mother and the child by uniting them in the same cosmological place. The origin of the child becomes symbolically accessible through the name that they carry around for their whole life. The name is thus infused with the potential for the child to grow and live well. Failing to give a baby an appropriate name, as shown in the case of Ahua's younger daughter, can lead to illness and jeopardize their wellbeing.

If the naming practice symbolically marks the origin of the baby's life as individual (as in physically separate from their mother), the birth celebration or *puts'it'u* initiates them as a social being. A sense of reunion is implicitly emphasised at the celebration. The preparation of *duzi* done by the pregnant woman's birth mother or mother in-law runs parallel with the final phase of pregnancy and delivery. Such parallel process/experience unites the pregnant woman and her biological mother or mother in-law. *Duzi* and the child are, in the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's term, 'analogically equivalent' items and 'each must make the other yield' (1988, p236). In the ritual text of *ts'obə-sa*, the migration story of the Naxi ancestral hero *Ts'ozeluuu*, alcohol brewing is directly compared to reproduction: 'From one mother comes three kinds of people [the Tibetan, the Naxi and the Bai]. From one jug of wine [liquor] comes three flavo[u]rs' (translated by McKhann, 1992, p127). Indeed, the guests who share the *puts'i* often comment on the taste of *duzi*. Its spiciness or *la* (ch.) indicates good health of the child. The ceremonial consumption of alcohol in Zheba implies social integration. For instance, I was told in the sky worship ceremony, women who married into the community or had given birth to a child in the previous year serve the representatives of

each household, all men, with freshly fermented liquor (see also McKhann, 1992, p191)<sup>98</sup>. In the case of the birth celebration, the bodily substance of the child, i.e. *puts'i* porridge, is consumed by the women who in principle share the experience of giving birth.

Not only is alcohol consumption, a seemingly problematic activity for women under normal circumstances, encouraged at the birth celebration, but these women also act as agents to further distribute *puts'i* porridge, the 'analogically equivalent' of the baby, to their own household. In this way, those, especially male household members, who could not attend the event because of the polluting effects of childbirth could recognise the newborn as a member of their community by consuming the same *puts'i* porridge. Through the act of commensality, a reunion of the whole village is created to overcome the danger involved with the separation between the mother and the child. It is perhaps the significance of granting social acceptance through gifts exchange and commensality that compels those men whose female household members are absent to take part and undertake the risk of being contaminated. As a social event exclusive to women, the birth celebration stands in contrast with the practice of cremation, exclusive to the men of the same village, which marks the cessation of the deceased person as a social actor in the community.

### **Boundaries, ordinary speech and spirit writing**

It was in the tenth lunar month. I went to the nearby mountain to collect some *çykə* or incense leaves for an incense burning trip at Baihuaping the next day. I returned with the leaves and was told in that month it was not customary to bring green leaves back home. This is known as the time when all those who died in the previous year embark on their journey to the ancestral lands. Before the land reform in 1957, there used to be a second

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<sup>98</sup> McKhann (1992, p191) points out that the liquor should be first presented as offering in the sacrificial ritual. Although Li Lincan (1984), who writes about sky worship in the adjacent area, notes that only households with newborn children offer liquor, the oral accounts of my informants who had experienced the ceremony in their childhood include both newlyweds and new parents. They particularly emphasised that the serving was done by women.

funeral that lasted three days to send the deceased off. The second funeral took place between twentieth day of the tenth month and tenth day of the eleventh month (NSLD i, 2009). The host households sacrificed some cattle as mount for their deceased kin to ride on and served the meat to the guests. My teacher Namu, who had participated in this rite in his teens and early twenties, told me that on the tenth of the eleventh month all the deceased gather at the bank of a river called *Muulusidzidu*. The river defines the border between the world of the living and the land of the dead (n. *şudy*). Boats are sent by the ancestors from the other side to carry the recently deceased across.

During the time of the second funeral, the deceased loosely follow a route from south to north back to the ancestral lands, the same *χezi* or ‘gods’ road’ chanted in ancestor worship discussed in chapter 3. Each village becomes the necessary passage for the deceased, starting from its south. The villages in Zheba are all located on the flatland side of the south White River valley. The river cuts the landscape into the dwelling and farming land on one side, and the relatively deserted valley on the other. The area I went to, to collect the leaves is the latter, north of all the villages. In the tenth month, the White River resembles the river of *Muulusidzidu* bordering the living world and the land of the dead. Although the incense leaves are generally regarded as auspicious in everyday life, the ones that I obtained from the other side of the river, the north could be laden with the threatening power of the dead and therefore should not be taken into the house. Even though the second funerary rite has been suspended for over sixty years, the tenth month is still registered as ominous in the local temporality and restricts the things people bring back to the domestic space.

Anthony Jackson (1979) and Bao Jiang (2008) both acknowledge the significance of ‘boundary’ in Naxi cosmology. Bao Jiang focuses on the exclusive and protective aspect of ‘boundary’ to keep things out. He stresses that the top of the head is the gateway of the body and wearing a cap or *kumu* (n.) keeps the person from the disturbance of other beings (2008, p232-235). Jackson points out the prominent roles of paths, bridges and

doors in Naxi ritual scripts, all of which establish connections between different spaces (1979, p160-161). As shown in the tenth month taboo above, boundary is essentially a passageway. While moving northwards stop-by-stop, village-by-village, the deceased pass through a series of boundaries and eventually reach the border that separates the realms of the living and the dead, i.e. River *Mulusidzidu*. This act of boundary crossing suspends the villages, especially those in the north, as separate spaces for everyday life, because they inevitably become the paths of the dead. The distinctions between the established realms of the living and the dead are temporarily impossible to maintain, which gives rise to danger and crisis in the Douglasian sense. Things normally regarded as benign like incense leaves become potentially threatening. In such circumstances, the dimension of the house that separates its interior from the exterior as discussed in chapter 2, is particularly emphasised in order to overcome the danger incurred when the boundaries between the spaces of the living and the dead are transgressed and blurred in the larger cosmic world.

In chapter 2, I discussed the significance of the house as an orderly place that prospers under the smooth reproduction of social relations. It has the integrity ‘to resist, ignore, or even flout’ the environing world, as Casey (1993, p150) insightfully points out. At critical times like the lunar tenth month, it is this capacity that is evoked to ward the domestic space off from outside threats. Sometimes, it is not just the deceased who are kept at bay; even the effects of mundane sociality are ritually driven out, as shown in the following case.

One evening after dinner, my hostess, Barnie came into the kitchen of the guesthouse with a bunch of oak leaves in her hands. She squatted in front of the open end of the fire stove and put the leaves into the fire. While doing this, she chanted ‘*tʂʰədʒətʂʰədʒibele, nɿdæbylefæ* (It is chanted here in this house, and the ghost of gossip/mouth goes away)’. Then she began to recite all the household names from the same village, including those of close relatives and her friends. As the chanting went on,

the leaves kept crackling in the stove. She later told me that the ritual is called *shaokouzui* (ch.) or to burn the gossips (*kouzui* literally means the talking of the mouth). She did it that evening because her business was not going very well for a while. She suspected that the talk of other villagers, especially her business rivals, had been affecting her fortune. Gossip, no matter good or bad in content, is considered threatening to personal fortune and prosperity of a house. The ritual was to get rid of these effects. Although the leaves burnt in the stove are picked from trees that are similar in type of *nuakə* or auspicious leaves, the shape of the former had thorns around the edges. During the practice, Barnie kept stuffing the leaves into the stove and twisting them until they were all burnt black. She then took them out to the fork of the road in front of her guesthouse. She put the leaves on the ground and chopped them with a kitchen knife. In the end, she spat on the chopped leaves and stamped on them with her foot. Later that night, a man from the same village who also ran a guesthouse took some tourists to Barnie's place<sup>99</sup>. They negotiated and agreed on a price for two rooms that was cheaper than she normally would charge. Although not feeling entirely happy with the amount, Barnie ascribed this income to the efficacy of the ritual she had just performed a couple of hours before. According to Barnie, this ritual cannot be carried out on the zodiac days of the household members for fear that its destructive power would turn against one's own family.

Traditionally in Naxi society, quarrels are considered problematic and should generally be avoided (Jackson, 1979; McKhann, 1992). I once came across a divinatory case which revealed that an argument the consulter had had with an elderly woman in his village led to a truck accident. The practice of *shaokouzui* described above, however, points to a different notion of danger associated with ordinary speech that has less to do with the contents per se than its social nature. Barnie's practice struck me as similar to another ritual practice called *mula* (n.) that I have heard of a couple of times but never

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<sup>99</sup> I later asked Barnie why these tourists did not stay in the man's guesthouse. She suspected that they were probably not happy with the poor conditions of hygiene there.

witnessed. It is supposed to be held for those who are strongly affected by gossip or *kouzui* in a negative way. When the effects of *kouzui* are too threatening, the ritual requires sacrificing a rooster or even a pig. One crucial procedure of *mula* involves putting a circle made of tree branches around the body of the person whose life is suffering the effects of *kouzui*. My host Xiaoker, who learned hunting skills from his father Namu, pointed out to me that it was imperative for hunters to perform *mula* before they went hunting.

Hunting practice in Zheba is generally animal trapping with offset jaws or ropes. Before choosing a good trapping spot, an experienced hunter would spend a couple of hours walking around the woods, carefully inspecting the trails left by the prey and inferring their activities at different places. Ideally traps are set at narrow passageways that the prey must pass through. Once a spot is chosen, the hunter digs a hole and places the jaw in the trap or a loosely knotted rope loop on a bamboo mat covering the trap, with the other end of the rope tied tight to a stick or a limb of a tree. After a trap is set, it is crucial for the hunter to erase the traces of the trap as much as possible and cover his own trail. The hunter then leaves and comes back to check on the traps after five days or so. An accomplished hunter not only has a sound knowledge of the habits of the prey, but also the skills to meticulously set the traps without leaving traces of himself.

Why is *mula* particularly relevant to hunting? The target of *mula* is to get rid of the effects of *kouzui* or ordinary speech. The effects of *kouzui* are perceived as attached to the physical body of the object of the talk. The effects follow the person who is being talked about around. When elderly villagers burn incense at the sacred spring well of Baihuaping, they turn around and clap fiercely several times. Guzo, the *dongba* sitting next to the spring well, told me that the clapping was to strike away the *kouzui* following the worshippers. In *mula* practice, the circle made of tree branches resembles the loop knot used as a trap in hunting. It is precisely designed to retain the effects of *kouzui*. The hunter's body that comes out of the circle is removed from *kouzui*. When men go out



hunting, they are thus less likely to leave behind the traces of the *kouzui* that can potentially be sensed by their prey.

This concern about ordinary speech and its effects on the person being talked about finds its parallel in Mongolia where it is identified as ‘*hel am*’ (Højer, 2004). Højer observes that both white *hel am* or positive statements and black *hel am* or vile statements and actions indicating bad consequences should be avoided as each type of assertion is premised on its opposite; together they constitute a binary form of representation; the transformation between two opposites is fluid, unpredictable, and thus dangerous (Højer, 2004, p55)<sup>100</sup>. Højer points out that people in Mongolia believe that *hel am* is an inevitable aspect of social life; he recounts a story of a Mongolian fisherman who deliberately takes a detour every time he goes fishing in order to avoid people and prevent them from talking about his practice (2004, p50). When I was observing Bernie burning the leaves, I was struck by the fact that she included the whole village in her recitation. This suggested to me that the source of *kouzui* may not be traceable. The talking or gossip proliferates rapidly through social interactions and communication. Similar to *hel am*, *kouzui* is not only fluid and unpredictable, but also constantly reproducing itself. The attempts to either materialise *kouzui* in the form of leaves so as to physically destroy it or retain its effects in a trap is to bring the proliferation under control. For the person who is affected by the talking, it is like stripping a layer of ‘humanity or subjectivity’ and temporarily disassociate them from the community they live in (Højer, 2004, p59).

The effort to suspend one’s affiliation with one’s immediate social context entails another form of boundary transgression. Such transgression also involves discarding the established distinctions and categorisations, which can lead to impurity and danger. However, transcending the boundaries is undertaken deliberately in order to occupy the ambiguous space of the in-between, and obtain transformative forces. For the hunters,

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<sup>100</sup> Namu told me that in some ritual practices, *dongba* ought to reverse his speech through either inverting the sequence of the text or asserting negative statements in order to achieve the opposite efficacy, but he did not specify which practices they were.

losing the effects of *kouzui* as a distinct feature of being human makes them more ‘animal like’. The state between being human and animal prevents them from being detected by their game and thus improves the chance of success in hunting. In Bernie’s case, as a local entrepreneur, her business involves interactions with tourists from outside, mostly urban areas. In order to profit, she needs to suspend her involvement in the local ways of sociality, namely to be less local<sup>101</sup>. Removing the inevitable result of local social interaction through the practice of burning *kouzui* helped her generate a status *between* insider and outsider so that she could benefit from the advantages of both. In contrast to hunter’s efforts to become less visible to his prey, the intention here is to stand out among other business rivals and to be seen by the tourists.

The ritual practices to remove the proliferative effects of ordinary speech discussed above both involve the process of ‘transduction’. As I noted above, this involves transformation across different semiotic modalities to produce efficacious effects (Keane, 2013, p2). The effects of *kouzui* originate in ordinary speech but remain in a less perceivable form as attachment to the physical body of the person who has been talked about. In the ritual practices and hunting, the effects are either materialised as leaves or encircled by the physical form of a loop. Such shifts from immaterial to material, from less perceivable to more perceivable, as Keane suggests, are movements across the boundaries of the phenomenal and non-phenomenal realms, in order to solve ‘the problem of presence’ (2013, p10). Through such processes the power to overcome the limiting effects of *kouzui* on the object of the talk is generated.

The means of transduction is also prominent in the practice of *dongba* scripts writing. Different from ordinary speech that is fluid and unpredictable, ritual chanting is fixed through ‘meter, rhythm, rhyme schemes, [and] word plays’ especially in the form of parallelism; such mnemonic features make the chanting ‘recitational’ (Mueggler,

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<sup>101</sup> This also involves efforts to be more metropolitan like: She speaks better Mandarin than most other villagers and a few words in various foreign languages just enough to interact with tourists from overseas; she advertises the local lifestyle and the products she sells as ‘authentic’ or *yuanshengtai* (ch.), a romanticizing way of relating to the rural from an urban perspective; she puts on the Naxi ethnic clothes on festivals but normally wears fashionable clothes bought from nearby towns.

2011, p98). More importantly, they are words imbued with power to communicate with beings beyond the realm of everyday life. When they are recorded in the form of pictograms or *dongba* scripts, the power needs to be transducted to the writing medium. The *dongba* scripts are normally written on hand-made paper made from a particular type of tree bark. The tree is locally known as *adə* in Zheba. The cambium of *adə* is mildly poisonous and produces swelling if the skin is in contact with it for too long. Due to this property the paper made of *adə* can resist the damage over time done by worms and disintegration. The date of the earliest *dongba* scripts available can be traced back to the eighteenth century (Mathieu, 2003). The process of making this kind of paper is not particularly complicated but is extremely labour intensive. The peeled cambium has to be boiled for hours, during which ash from the fireplace in the house is added into the liquid. The ash, nowadays often substituted by soda powder, is used to speed up the boiling, soften the cambium and bleach the colour. Lengthy and repetitive smashing of the materials with a wood pestle on a piece of rock comes after. The smashed mush is reassembled as small balls. Each ball is put into a sink and diffused in the water. A sieve the same size as the sink is used to drain the materials evenly and transfer them onto a rectangular shaped wood board. While exposed in the sun, the wet paper needs to be repeatedly pressed and flattened with a pebble or rolling pin, in order to smooth its surfaces for writing.

The transformation from materials of the *ader* tree to paper is a process of rematerialising, in which the ephemeral plant gains an enduring quality as a writing medium. It involves the interplay between tree (wood) and rock (stone and pebble), both the oldest beings in Naxi myth. This is also implied in the Naxi term for *dongba* scripts: *sidə lydə* meaning ‘marks on wood and stone’. The transformation that takes place through this process gives rise to the efficacy to transfer the spiritual power embedded in the phonetic features of the chanting to the enduring material used for ‘spirit writing’ (Keane, 2013). This durability enables the volumes of the scripts to be preserved and passed on. In addition to the divine power embedded in words as a means of

communication with spiritual beings, the transduction of papermaking also contributes to the spiritual value of the scripts volumes. As I discussed in chapter 1, a man who cheated his neighbour of his ritual scripts and sold them for 600 *yuan* spent the money on a horse, but the horse died within a month. This was ascribed by the neighbour to the retributive power of the scripts volumes. Moreover, the villagers concluded that those who took the lead to burn the ritual scripts in Gerdu during the Cultural Revolution all suffered premature death for the same reason.

### **Sky worship and the imaginary return**

In the first section of this chapter, I discussed the rituals of birth celebration and naming practice as ways of dealing with the irreversible separation between the mother and the child, and the existential constraint preventing the child from physically returning to his or her origin. I also argued that boundary crossing does not only entail danger and uncertainty but can also lead to transformative forces and ritual efficacy. My focus on *Muby* in this section expands on these two points: The sky worship ritually re-enacts the connection of Naxi people as a group to their origin, which was lost in the distant past and can never be physically returned to; at the same time, outside forces are annually incorporated into the local community through this rite to regenerate life forces that can no longer be retrieved from the lost origin. Sacrifices are essentially involved to overcome the danger incurred in transgressing the boundary between the local and the outside worlds. These two interrelated aspects foreground a distinct cosmology of displacement that the Naxi people, as well as some other ethnic groups, inhabit in southwest China (Faure, 2013) or the ‘Extended Eastern Himalayas’ (Huber and Blackburn, 2012).

The importance of the *muby* rite can be inferred from the proverb ‘*Naxi muby zo*<sup>102</sup>’ (Naxi are the people who worship the sky), in which this practice is featured as

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<sup>102</sup> The word ‘*zo*’ means man or son. It refers to the Naxi people in general here, although women’s roles in the *muby* rites are rather limited.

essential to the identity of this ethnic group. The *muby* rite in Zheba used to be held during the New Year period between the seventh and the twelfth day. The specific dates and ritual sites varied amongst different groups<sup>103</sup>. When Joseph Rock travelled to Zheba in the 1930s, he came across the ‘finest’ *muby da*—the ritual site—that was still in use at that time and remarked that the local people there practised their customs in ‘purity’ (1947, p250). It is recorded in a Zhongdian gazetteer that *muby* in Zheba was suspended in 1957 (1997, p178), the same year when the local land reform took place as I discussed in detail in chapter 1. My informants who had attended the rite before remembered that the ritual site was always meticulously arranged: the place was divided into two areas with the northern side higher than the southern part; the former was regarded as the inner side of the site; participants were led by a head *dongba* and his assistants; they entered the lower end first and moved on to the higher one; the altar was set in the front of the higher side with three groups of trees branches prepared the day before<sup>104</sup>; during the worshipping rituals, the head *dongba* stood in front of the crowd followed by his assistants; the rest of men stood in ranking order according to seniority; women and children stood behind the men and in some groups women were excluded from the ritual site (Jackson, 1979, p110); children under the age of twelve or thirteen (before the coming of age rite) were not allowed to attend *muby*<sup>105</sup>.

The key text used for *muby* is *ts’obə·sa* or the migration of *T’so*. It narrates the Naxi anthropogenic myth: the earthly born human ancestor *Ts’ozeluuu* went on a quest to the sky and eventually returned to the earth with his celestial partner *Ts’ehuububə*; they gave birth to three sons; the sons could not speak until the couple were informed that they needed to perform *muby*; after the ceremony, the eldest and youngest sons became the ancestors of the Tibetan and Bai people respectively while the second son

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<sup>103</sup> The affiliation of different sky worship groups does not correspond to the descent groups or clans. The reason behind it remains unclear (see McKhann, 1992, p61-63).

<sup>104</sup> The head *dongba* and his assistants were supposed to come to the *muby* site a day before to clean up the place thoroughly and prepare for the rite.

<sup>105</sup> For a comprehensive account of the ritual processes of *muby*, see Rock (1952) and McKhann (1992).

who spoke Naxi remained at home and continued *muby* practice<sup>106</sup>. The text was recounted as both the ancestry of all Naxi people and the origin of *muby*.

The early history of the Naxi people is widely accepted as one of migration from the ancestral lands, vaguely identified to the north or northwest of the current settlement in northwest Yunnan. The Chinese word *qianxi* or ‘migration’ implies sequential stages of settlement and often obscures the struggles the Naxi ancestors endured wandering around the vast land of west and southwest China for centuries<sup>107</sup>. Such struggles leave their traces in mythical disguise in ritual scripts. In these, frequent territorial conflicts with indigenous inhabitants or other migrants take the form of disputes and negotiations between humans and the *su* deities, humans’ half siblings<sup>108</sup>; the recurring theme of purification indicates the concern with the threat of epidemic diseases in the early settlement and wars; sacrifice and pacification are often related to the destructive power of natural disasters and wild animals, to which the early populations were extremely vulnerable.

The myth of migration therefore records a history of displacement. The origin stories commonly narrated in the Naxi ritual texts are full of references to topological features and names of various plants and animal species that have never inhabited the current Naxi areas. These references have been commemorative devices pointing to the homelands that the Naxi ancestors were forced to leave behind with massive loss of population, in their struggles of searching for inhabitable places in the world. They are attempts not only to reclaim the lost land in terms of grief and sorrow, but also to keep alive the hope to return and reunite some day. This hope compelled the Naxi ancestors to envisage a route through the vast land that their predecessors had once settled with the name of each place accurately recollected; it is the route of *χezi* that guides the deceased

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<sup>106</sup> For a full version of the narrative, see McKhann (1992) and Rock (1952).

<sup>107</sup> The sequence of settlement is often appropriated by Chinese scholars work on Naxi into the linear development of human society from hunting and gathering, to nomadic pastoralism, and eventually to agrarianism as support of a social evolutionary thesis.

<sup>108</sup> *su* (n.) are children between *Ts'ozeluuu* and his first celestial wife, who had vertical eyes and was good looking, but could not give birth to human offspring.

in Naxi funerals to return to the lost homeland and reunite with their predecessors there (McKhann, 2012).

The scripts of *ts'obə-sa* recounted in *muby* spoke to such an imagination of return in its most essential sense. It brought the participants back to the very beginning of time when the world was still encompassed in a primordial egg. Retelling the anthropogenic myth, the principal origin story, gave access to the enormous cosmological forces and potential to grow before beings and things became separated in the universe and boundaries were established, contested and negotiated between domains of divisions. It encouraged reunion on so many levels: between the sky and the earth; between 'ten thousand things'; between the male earthly hero and female celestial goddess; between parents and children; between the Naxi and neighbouring Tibetan and Bai people; between the later separated Naxi patriclans (McKhann, 2008, p279). The story served to commemorate those predecessors who died in the prolonged history of displacement and relight the compelling ambition to recover the lost lands. At the same time, as emphasised in the myth that *muby* had been performed continuously since the dawn of humankind, the rite itself transcended geographical space and historical time and linked all the generations of Naxi who had done the same practice. This is revealed in the simple but powerful statement: All Naxi people perform *muby*.

The above cosmogonic reunion between the sky, where the past and origin lie, and the earth, which the present and offspring occupy, were aligned on a vertical axis, which was articulated in the spatial arrangement of the ritual site as an orderly and hierarchical place in parallel with the house discussed in chapter 2. Such a type of reunion alone, however, seemed inadequate to generate fertility and facilitate growth. This is indicated in *ts'obə-sa* that the marriage union between *Ts'ozeluuu* and *Ts'ehububə* that conjoined male and female sexual potencies (*nu* and *a*) only led to limited reproduction: their mute sons. Only after they performed *muby*, did the sons gain the ability to speak. The implication is that some other element was introduced in *muby* practice. This leads to

my second point that *muby* involved the transformative forces achieved through transgressing boundaries, as I discuss below.

The *muby* ground was what Anthony Jackson defines as ritual foci: ‘the concentration of ritual activity upon certain central points of interest’ (1979, p90). At the highest end of the site, three trees of branches were erected as the altar for worship. The two trees on the sides were oaks and the one at the centre was combined with oak and juniper boughs (ZDXZ, 1997, p176)<sup>109</sup>. It is generally recognised that the oak on the left represented the sky and the one on the right stood for the earth (Rock, 1952; Jackson, 1979; McKhann, 1992), though there is variation that includes deities of rivers and mountains in the symbolism (ZDXZ, 1997, p176). These two trees brought about the reunion in the vertical sense I noted above. The Naxi scholar Bai Gengsheng argues that the central position of the juniper tree or *cy* (n.) indicates its superiority over the two on the sides (1997). There are generally two further distinct interpretations concerning the juniper tree. Following Rock, scholars like Anthony Jackson (1979) identify it as *k’a* (n.) or the emperor, derived from the Mongolian word *khan* (Mathieu, 2003, p163-164); whereas Chinese Naxi scholars like He Limin propose that this imperial association was a historical product of sinicisation since the Yuan and Ming dynasties and its original reference should be the maternal uncle of the Naxi people (1991)<sup>110</sup>. While the former identification must have derived from a specific historical context, it should not be easily dismissed as evidence of imperial imposition and hence invalid in the local context. At the same time, the latter interpretation cannot be read without reference to an academic discourse that bears strong association with social evolutionary theory, which positions the distinctiveness of an ethnic group like Naxi in ‘a hierarchy of differences’ with political implications<sup>111</sup>. Perhaps a closer look at the commonalities between the

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<sup>109</sup> In other Naxi areas, the tree in the middle was purely juniper.

<sup>110</sup> It is further cited as an evidence to support the argument that the Naxi people evolved from a matrilineal society to a patrilineal one (He, 1991, p50-51).

<sup>111</sup> I have pointed out the broader implications of this problem in the discussion under ‘Zheba and its separateness’ in the introduction. See also Emily Chao (2013, p49-52).



variations could lead to a better understanding of the cosmological ideas beyond mere contestation between them.

In Zheba, I was informed that the head *dongba* who led *muby* was referred to as *k'adu* (n.) or big emperor. While the households sponsoring the sacrifice of the rite rotated within the sky worship group every year, the role of *k'adu* used to be fulfilled by the *dongba* practitioner from a fixed household. It was passed on through descent. Today, this household in Gerdu is still known as '*k'adu*'. Unlike the two assistants in *muby* who were ordinary *dongba* and often held funerals in the village, *k'adu* was not supposed to practise rituals related to death because of its contaminating power. All of the three men I talked to in Gerdu who had attended *muby* in their youth emphasised that on the days of the rite, one had to be particularly cautious about what he or she said. Moreover, people temporarily discarded their own names on the ritual site. Instead, men were referred to as *k'azo* (n.) or son of the emperor, and women *k'ami* (n.) or daughter of the emperor. The *zuka* group in Lushu village also included a ritual dedicated to the deity of victory as part of *muby*:

... [D]uring the ceremony to worship the deity of victory, a man from one of the oldest households plays the role of the king [emperor], a woman from the same household plays the queen [empress]. They stand on the altar. A number of others act as servants wearing helmets and armours, equipped with sabres and standing on their sides. The rest of the group stand below the altar with hands folded. The king or a *dongba* leads the chanting of the ritual. After the ceremony, a straw archery target is established close to the village where people practise archery. After each arrow is shot, they cheer, 'kill *Litawezhisui*!' The shooting continues until an arrow gets to the centre of the target, indicating that *Litawezhisui* has been shot to death (ZDXZ, 1997, p178).

The archery practice, known as 'shooting the enemies', was commonly shared by other sky worship groups. Writing about *muby* of the Pudu group, Li Lincan recorded a speech given by the head *dongba* at the beginning of this practice, in which he named various ethnic groups in the surrounding areas respectively corresponding with the four cardinal directions: Han—east, Bai—south, Tibetan—west, Mongol—north (Li Lincan,

1960, p232-234, cited in McKhann, 1992, p196-197). Interestingly, amongst other enemies recounted in this passage, the Na people—that signify the Naxi themselves in ritual scripts—were also included (McKhann, 1992, p197).

The intentional practice of anonymity is a distinctive aspect of *muby*. The identity of each participant was temporarily suspended through erasing his or her personal name. Instead, they were addressed with reference to their relation with the juniper tree, as representative *k'adu*, child *k'azo* or *k'ami*, or servants in the case of the *zuka* group as above. In the announcement of shooting the enemies, the head *dongba* named his own group, i.e. the Na people, as one of the enemies amongst other ethnic groups. This seemingly odd contradiction could be approached through Victor Turner's notion of 'performative reflexivity': the participants are at once the actors and the audience; they act 'representatively, turn, bend or reflect back upon' the sociocultural conditions that 'make up their public "selves"' (1987, p24). As I have noted in the previous section, names are associated with the power over the objects of naming. Being talked about in everyday speech can reproduce the proliferative effects of *kouzui* that threaten one's fortune. In this sense, remaining anonymous cancels out the possibility of being influenced by the speech of others. In *muby*, not only were individual names erased, but the participants also played roles in relation to the other that lay beyond the local context, namely the emperor. On the one hand, such performance *reflected* an understanding of the subordinate status of the Naxi to the imperial court of China. On the other hand, the performers also represented the 'eye' through which they could see themselves. 'The 'self' is split up the middle—it is something that one both is and that one sees and, furthermore, acts upon as though it were another' (Turner, 1987, p25). Such reflexive performance in *muby* moreover involved transgressing the boundary between the self and the other, creating the agency for change. Thus, to list one's group as one of the enemies was to transcend the self as seen or known by others. By doing so in a ritual context, the participants of *muby* gained the power of victory that spared themselves the control or dominance of their foes.

The transformative forces that this kind of performative reflexivity alluded to are shared by the other interpretation of the juniper tree as the maternal uncle. This maternal uncle refers to *Muzok'ohilo*, *Ts'ehububə*'s mother's brother's son, her ideal marital partner according to the cross-cousin marriage principle<sup>112</sup>. In the version of *ts'obə-sa* analysed by Anthony Jackson (1979, p224-225), *Ts'ozeluuu* and *Ts'ehububə* performed seven *dyby* (n.) rituals before they eventually descended and settled down on the earth. *Dyby* was performed to prevent *Muzok'ohilo* from descending with his leopard and wolf as vengeance for the couple's violation of the ideal marriage union. This ritual was incorporated as an imperative part of *muby* that required sacrifice of a rooster or an egg (in some areas both). It was performed to ward off wild animals and diseases set free by *Murzokohilo* to harm the domestic livestock. In McKhann's reconstruction of the *muby* site, on the left of the highest end stood a stick with its top split into four, referred to as *æky ty diu* or an 'egg prop' (1999, p147-148). *Dyby* sacrifice was made to this effigy in order to 'prop up' or prevent a variety of harmful influences including hail storms, floods, and animal and grain diseases from descending from the sky (McKhann, 1992, p205-206).

Although some Naxi scholars claim *Murzokohilo* to be the maternal protector of the Naxi people (He Limin, 1991; Bai Gengsheng, 1997)<sup>113</sup>, according to the above references, his role in *muby* seemed closer to an antagonist to the community. The connection between *Muzok'ohilo* and the imperial emperor was that they both stood as the radical other that could have strong influences on people's daily livelihood but remained beyond the reach of the local context. The *muby* rite arranged with its central focus on the juniper tree therefore created a boundary or an in-between space to mediate

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<sup>112</sup> Although McKhann (1992) identifies him as *Ts'ehububə*'s mother's brother, namely her own maternal uncle instead of her sons, the significance is also related to the cross-cousin marriage.

<sup>113</sup> This kind of argument is often made to justify the features of matrilineal cross cousin marriage commonly found amongst Naxi people. Instead of seeing it as a support for such marriage practice, I read the union between *Ts'ozeluuu* and *Ts'ehububə* as a *departure* from such arrangement to social practices that are more house-based. Interestingly, in early twentieth century, a number of rural Naxi couples were inspired by the anthropogenic myth and instrumentally applied it to legitimise eccentric practices such as bride abduction and elopement when the financial situation of husband's household did not allow them to afford an 'ideal' sinicised marriage demanded by the bride's family (Chao, 2013).

such powerful outside influences whose source otherwise remained untraceable. It turned the participants from passive recipients into active agents to ‘act upon the self-made-other’ (Turner, 1987, p25). Such mediation promised the most desirable outcomes of interaction with the outside, such as victory in the battlefield and good weather for agriculture, and at the same time rejected the harmful ones. It led to integration on the horizontal level that complemented the incompleteness of the reunion along the vertical axis.

The imperative to appropriate outside forces was echoed in the neighbouring Yongning area where the Nuosu people deploy hospitality as ‘spider webs’ to lure captive guests, preferably with prestige, and prevent them from reciprocating, in order to sustain a long-lasting attachment that is regarded essential to ‘the fullness of life’ (Swancutt, 2012). Drawing on a wide range of cultural practices, from Amazonian people’s ‘passion for extremity’, to Pano and Jivaro people’s incorporation of strangers as both ‘indispensable antagonist’ and ‘self-reference’, Marshall Sahlins famously summarises this necessity as ‘the stranger-king’ paradigm that responds to the existential constraint of ‘human finitude’ (2008, p177–199). The source of political power, often embodied by the stranger king, generally lies beyond the local community and introducing such power entails violence (Sahlins, 2008). In the case of *muby*, the regenerative outside forces were only obtained through the sacrifice of the pigs to the three trees and the rooster or egg to the *Muzok’ohilo*’s egg prop, all of which could be thought of as violent acts.

The suspension of *muby* in 1957 is recorded in a Zhongdian gazetteer as a voluntary initiative from the local people (1997, p178). It happened nearly a decade before villagers of Gerdu actually went to Baihuaping and smashed the communal and familial shrines in the Cultural Revolution (more discussion in chapter 1). My teacher Namu somehow firmly believed that the Cultural Revolution started in 1957, the year of the suspension, rather than 1966, as in the official periodisation. The autumn of 1957

was the time when the land reform took place in Zheba, in which agricultural and pastoral activities and catering were radically collectivised. As I have argued towards the end of chapter 1, it was in the land reform that the distance between the state and the local community previously managed by the local governor Bese began to collapse. The socialist state established its pervasive presence on the local level through collectivisation and the unprecedented mobilisation of the population. The suspension of *muby* coincided with such radical changes. The in-between space once created through rituals to mediate the alterity personified as either Murzokohilo or the imperial emperor soon vanished; the local political activists quickly assumed the alternative roles that emerged with intervention of the state and started eliciting violence from within. The year of 1957 therefore not only marked the beginning of political and social changes, but also implied a cosmological shift in which the local people's understanding of themselves and their relation with outside others took an irrevocable turn.

### **Living apart from the ancestors**

It was the second time that Aguji went to Namu for divination. This time, she went with her elder son who found it difficult to fall asleep at night. He had also suffered from a business failure not long beforehand. Aguji runs a restaurant with her husband at the entrance to the Baihuaping scenic site. Originally, they lived in her husband's natal household in a village, some 8 kilometres away from their current place in Gerdu. Fourteen years ago, when the local primary school in the township centre first set up a canteen, the couple decided to rent a piece of vegetable field nearby and sold the yield to the school. To make it easier to take care of the vegetables, they moved out of their house and rented a place in the township centre close to the field. They carried on with this business for nine years until five years ago when they started their own restaurant in Gerdu to cater for tourists. They have lived in a house next to the restaurant ever since. The two sons both work in Shangri La. The younger one is a taxi driver. The elder used to assist a chef for five years and cooked for the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. Tired

and frustrated with working for other people, he started his own restaurant in 2014. However, his business did not go well. By the end of the year, he could not even pay the rent. The divination revealed that his insomnia was caused by the ghost of an ancestor who died long ago of an ominous death. He was advised to go back to the original house and hold a ritual to appease the ghost. After Aguji and her son left, Namu, the diviner, pointed out to me that the main problem for them was that they no longer lived with their ancestors.

Aguji's previous visit was about six months before this one. Her younger son was feeling lethargic and kept dozing off. They went to find Namu to see if anything had gone wrong. According to the divination, the younger son was suffering from these symptoms because the ancestors in their original house had been left unattended for too long. The neglected ancestors had drifted away from the house. Aguji and her son were instructed to go back to the house, burn incense on the household shrine and serve meals to the ancestors. When I went to visit them one evening, the younger son had recovered from his lethargy. They all commented that the divination was so efficacious that it was impossible not to believe in it. Aguji's husband also mentioned that they had established a household shrine in their new place and had been offering incense there. Somehow his deceased parents and other ancestors did not realise that they had moved away and did not come with them to the new place.

The problem that Aguji's family were repeatedly confronted with perhaps resonates with the early Naxi ancestors who were constantly on the move in search for a habitable place in the world. The ancestors also risked drifting away from their predecessors. To reclaim the origin, they could no longer physically move back to, they performed *muby*. The unprecedented scale of labour migration accelerated by the market reform since the 1980s suggests a fundamental imbalance in the distribution of life forces between inside and outside. Incorporating the outside forces nowadays involves gendered modes of mobility that I explore in the next chapter. It has also led to the pressing need to remain

in contact with one's ancestry in order to manage to live with the fragmenting effects of separation that I discussed in the last chapter. However, such carefully maintained connections could easily get lost in the pursuit of a livelihood beyond the local context, as is demonstrated in the divinatory case above. The perpetual cosmology of displacement thus requires people in Zheba to cautiously navigate between the local and foreign worlds. The tension between staying connected to one's origin and the pull of outside resources constitutes an ongoing existential struggle in the experience of inhabiting a world that has become increasingly fractured.

## Chapter 5 Struggle between the local and beyond

In 2017, during my second field trip in Zheba, I came across Alu again, a man in his late forties from a village some 30 kilometres to the south of Gerdu. He seemed feeble and slightly restless. He was going to Namu for divination, but Namu, who was nearly ninety years old at this point and often suffered from memory loss, could not remember where he had put the divinatory scripts. We waited together for Namu's youngest son, my host Xiaoker, to return from the field, because he might know where the scripts were. Knowing my interest in divinatory practice from our previous encounter, Alu recounted the following story, which according to him, told the origin of the volumes of the divinatory scripts:

Long ago, a contagious disease released by some ghosts spread around in a village. All the villagers died of the disease except one young man. The ghosts were determined to hunt down the last survivor and went to his house in the middle of the night. Hiding under a bamboo sieve<sup>114</sup>, the young man was too scared to make a move. There happened to be a bowl of water next to him. The ghosts could not find him anywhere. One of them took out a book they brought along and consulted it. According to the book, the man was hiding either above or below water level. The ghosts could not figure out what the implication was. They kept looking for a while but in vain. They talked amongst themselves that they ought to hurry as the sun was coming out soon. Upon hearing this, the young man imitated the rooster's crow and hit the sieve to make the sound of a rooster flapping its wings. The ghosts took it as the sign of dawn. They panicked, threw the book into the fire pit and rushed off. As soon as they had left, the young man dashed out and salvaged the book from the fire. But by the time he got the book, half of it was already burnt and gone. The remains of the book became known as the divinatory scripts. Because of the missing half, the divinatory practice based on the scripts could only be accurate half the time.

Throughout my two periods of research in Zheba, people from the adjacent villages and even further away like Alu kept visiting Namu and other *dongba* for divination.

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<sup>114</sup> Erik Mueggler records a story from the neighbouring *Lòlop'ò* people in which the dead deployed a bamboo sieve to separate themselves from the living. Hidden behind the sieve, the dead could see the living clearly, but not the other way around. See Mueggler (2001, p5-6).



Some consulted him about illnesses, their own or their family's. Others sought advice for their failed business. Why is divination so significant in local people's everyday lives? What does this significance say about the world they live in? As indicated in Alu's story, the power of the divinatory scripts lies in their efficacy to reveal the unknown. This power does not originate in the realm of the living. More importantly, it is only partially accessible to human beings. The tale Alu recounted should not only be read as an account of the fallibility of divination, because it also speaks to the limits of human existence. The world that human beings apprehend through the incomplete divinatory scripts is by definition fragmented. To live entails inhabiting this fractured and uncertain world. It is a constant struggle between what is or can be known and what is unknown.

This chapter looks at such struggles of people in Zheba to make their places in the world habitable (Mueggler, 2001, p4). As indicated in the conversation between the two men introduced at the very beginning of this thesis, the local people often find themselves caught up between what is seen as familiar, local, comprehensible, over which they may have some say or exercise some control; and situations that elude their immediate understandings, dominated variously by cosmological forces, by ancestors and ghosts, by the state or the market, by physical pain and illness, in the face of which they feel helpless, disempowered, and vulnerable (Jackson, 2013a). The former grants them a sense of autonomy or agency in determining their own fate, whereas the latter throws them into a spectrum of otherness that to various extents denies the significance of their existence and reduces their being to a passive state. The struggle is to strike a balance between the two in the context of the specific cultural, social and political circumstances of their lives and situations (Jackson, 2013a, p155). Through such efforts, the local people do not simply inhabit the world as it is given, but actively transform and remake their lifeworlds in the ways in which they *experience* them (Jackson, 2005, pxxii).

Following Husserl's later work, Michael Jackson takes up the concept 'lifeworld' to denote the world of interconnected relationships as 'a force field (*kraftfeld*), a constellation of both ideas and passions, moral norms and ethical dilemmas, the tried and true as well as the unprecedented, a field charged with vitality and animated by struggle' (Jackson, 2013a, p7). This conceptualisation enables me to look at various struggles of the local people to make their lives livable especially when they are forced to confront or are even cornered by the constraints of their existences, such as the experience of the great famine in the late 1950s and early 1960s recounted in chapter 1, and the nowadays more pressing need to live apart from one's close relatives as discussed in chapter 3. They negotiate the constraints of their lives through actively relating to those who are significant to them (including ancestors and deities) and grant meanings to their lives.

The struggles examined in this chapter take place in different contexts and are framed by different *personal* experiences such as physical illness, career choice and existential crisis. At the same time, these experiences are inevitably related to others, most prominently through the mediation of generation and gender. Whether it is the dilemma between personal desires and moral obligations, or the attempt to resolve life crisis through divinatory practices, these struggles all involves an effort to reorient one's comprehension of the world and continuously negotiate their placement between the local and beyond. Following Michael Jackson's existential thesis (2005; 2013), I argue that it is through this ongoing effort of rebalancing that people in Zheba inhabit a world that at once encourages and constrains their being.

I first draw on the experience of my friend the Smart One who barely survived a coach accident in his early twenties and then immersed himself in the local ways of life. He attributed his survival to the spiritual piety of his father and resolved to recreate the prosperity of his house that some of his predecessors, including his father, had achieved in their own terms. The coach accident that had threatened his whole being drove him

back to the familiar local world. At the same time, he experiences the latter as an increasing restraint. His attempts to relate to the outside world in his local life offer him a sense of achievement, but at the same time, the changing wider social context often challenges his understanding of the world.

The kind of recognition that the Smart One struggles to gain through identifying with his male ancestors is necessarily associated with the limitations that the obligations of being a male household head entail. His struggle is thus markedly gendered. The limitations to the kind of recognition he can obtain shape his struggle in ways that are distinct from women's experience. In examining the struggle in terms of gender the second part of the chapter explores how experiences of being 'mother' and/or 'daughter' as well as 'son' can respectively give rise to recognition or a sense of autonomy and, on the other hand, lead to certain ways of life that induce further struggles between personal desires and social obligations. Such struggles are often experienced across the generations but in relation to those of the same gender. In the mother-daughter relationship I focus on in this section, the daughters strive to be different from (live away from) their mothers but at the same time remain connected to them as well as to their natal households. Such a focus emerged from the communications I had with the mothers and daughters concerned in which they chose to reveal this specific aspect of their lives to me. I by no means intend to downplay the significance of other relations; they simply did not come to the fore when the mother-daughter relationship was accounted. The struggles of mothers and daughters, I argue, are intimately related in the emotional, and sometimes material, sense of recognition and support that they can offer each other.

The struggle in the existential sense often appears in an intensive form in the practice of divination, which I explore in the third section. In Zheba, as well as in many other places in the world, people turn to divination when they sense that their wellbeing is under threat, when they feel a lack of control over their own lives or those of closely

related others. They resort to divination in response to bewildering experiences that evade their apprehension of the familiar and local worlds—in other words, to ‘experiences that defy or elude social significance’ (Jackson, 2005, pxxviii)<sup>115</sup>. The ethical sensitivity that people mostly rely on in their daily lives is at stake in such situations. Their established understanding of their lifeworlds is challenged. This can lead to an estranged relation with the world in the sense of feeling alienated from the normal ways of being<sup>116</sup>. Coming to terms with these experiences involves a struggle to reorient, sometimes quite radically, one’s understanding of one’s place in the world. In turn, this struggle pressingly demands an ethics that speaks to ordinary concerns but at the same time departs from them. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, this is ‘a new idea of reason’ in terms of how people make their moral judgments (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p3).

Divination and healing rituals can create a space that transcends everyday ethical circumstances and facilitates the reorientation of one’s lifeworld. My concern here, however, is not to explain the logic of divination as such, but to contextualise divination with reference to the existential struggles of both the consulters and the diviner, in order to show how it enables both parties to experience the world in an unfixed way that continuously encourages a sense of agency.

### **Son, father and the struggle for household prosperity**

‘Nowadays the values [of the world] are changing too fast. Since my childhood, they have been changing every day!’ The Smart One made such a remark when I visited his house one evening, two years after my initial fieldwork. While we were chatting, his mother sat on the opposite bench to us, listening attentively to our conversation, and occasionally making some comments which sounded unintelligible to me and were mostly neglected by my friend. His four-year old daughter was quietly playing with a

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<sup>115</sup> Jackson talks about distressing and disturbing events like murder, wars, violence, etc. For the limited purpose of my analysis, I address that the events and experiences that drive people to divination defy social significance because they usually do not make much sense to them in the everyday terms.

<sup>116</sup> This is often overtly experienced in sickness when the person feels alienated from his or her own physical body.

pillow on the lower end of the same bench. She was from time to time distracted by the show on TV that featured a group of children dressed as rock stars singing pop songs. After serving me sunflower seeds, tea and fried cheese, the Smart One's wife Ahua joined us, sitting in a chair at the lower end of the room. She did not talk much apart from some enquiries about my family and home city. At one point, the Smart One took off a string of Buddhist prayer beads that he was wearing and started rotating them between his fingers. For an instant, I had a flashback to his father who used to do the same after supper sitting on the opposite bench. His father had passed away at the age of eighty-eight in the autumn of the previous year. The Smart One showed me the beads and said they were a gift from a Tibetan lama living in the Songzanlin Monastery in Shangri La, who was a longstanding friend of his family. The beads had been consecrated and wearing them helped him keep a positive outlook in life.

It was early in the morning on the last day of 2014. I went to the Smart One's place to help out with the erection of the frame for a new two-storey house. The day before when I passed by, a dozen men were already there fixing the timber frame with big wooden hammers. They tied four posts together with ceiling joists and roof rafters toward the upper ends to make a truss. Four trusses were prepared lying on the ground, one on top of another and waiting to be set upright. When I arrived the following morning, the Smart One had just returned from an incense burning trip to Baihuaping and brought back a bunch of auspicious leaves and a big bottle of water from the sacred spring well. He attached the leaves to all the joints (the connecting points of the posts and joists) on the side of the trusses that faced the centre of the courtyard. He also sprinkled water over them. He then went into the main house and poured the water into the cup on the household shrine and into a bottle placed on a small shrine next to one of the posts of the house. More and more men gradually arrived with ropes around their waists or shoulders and gathered around a big fire made on the construction site. Some of the men started fixing long poles, to which their ropes were attached, at several points on the two opposite sides of the trusses. Having done this, they positioned themselves by

the main posts and began to set them up, some pushing, and some pulling with their ropes on the poles. After two trusses were erected, a number of the men, most in their twenties or thirties, climbed up to the joints and connected the trusses with beams passed to them from below. The others were either supporting the trusses or lifting the beams up. After the third truss was erected and connected to the second one, everyone took a break and were served with butter tea and steamed buns by female helpers, including the Smart One's sisters, sister-in-laws, and women from neighbouring households. When the whole frame was established, all the men, some sixty from the same village, went to the north entrance of the village (*uəky* or village head, whose ritual significance is often marked by a communal shrine established there) where more timbers were temporarily stocked. We each carried one timber back to the courtyard, to be placed as purlins on the roof. While we went off to *uəky*, the crossbeam was established, and an offering ritual was conducted. A rhombus-shaped red paper was stuck to the middle of the crossbeam. The construction ended with an eight-dish feast on the side of the courtyard, prepared and served by women and a couple of men who were not strong enough to help with the construction. While we were eating, the Smart One's father came out from the main house, tottered around the tables, and thanked us for our help.

Speaking about that day in retrospect, the Smart One admitted that he was quite touched by all the men who turned up to help. He was particularly grateful to those who voluntarily climbed up to set up the beams. As far as he was concerned, they had not hesitated to risk their lives to help him. He attributed the support he received to his good *weiren* (ch.), literally meaning 'being human'. It spoke for his good relationship with other people in the village and their reciprocity in return for help and favours he had previously offered to them. He also pointed out that if one's *weiren* was bad, fewer people would turn up to help and no one would be willing to put themselves in danger.

The construction of the two-storey house was part of a bigger plan to renovate the Smart One's household compound, a plan that he had contemplated for a while. He had

calculated a budget of 130,000 *yuan* to build the house and restore the granary and the livestock shelter. His idea to renovate was in part inspired by his household's long history, that he was particularly proud of and recounted to me several times. The household had two names. For some people living in the *dymæ* villages further down the valley of Zheba, it was still known by its previous name, Weeta. The ancestors of Weeta were remembered as the earliest members of the local caravan. They had supplied the local residents with essential outside products like tea bricks and salt<sup>117</sup>. In one of their trading trips, one ancestor brought back a peony tree from Dali, the famous trading city of Yunnan, and transplanted it in their backyard. It was known as the first peony planted in the soil of Zheba. Although the peony tree had disappeared long before, household members still used to talk about how it used to put forth ten blossoms a year.

Perhaps it was through this trading business that the Smart One's ancestors developed close relationships with Tibetans in Xiaozhongdian, a town located on the old caravan route between Zheba and Zhongdian. The interaction and correspondence (ch. *laiwang*) between these households lasted for generations. When Zheba was severely hit by famine in the late 1950s, some offspring of these earlier Tibetan acquaintances were living as lamas in the Songzanlin Monastery (these were the predecessors of those who gave the Smart One his Buddhist beads). They had a stable food supply in the monastery and helped the Smart One's father, who as the only son of his household, had relatively little support in his village. He and his family survived due to the food sent over from the monastery. Up until today, much of the yak butter and cheese—both generally regarded as precious items—which the Smart One's household regularly consumes, continues to be sent by the Tibetan descendants of those households in Xiaozhongdian. The Smart One refers to these people as his relatives.

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<sup>117</sup> The local saying, 'Zheba Baihuaping has got anything but a salt cave; Zheba *Muuts ydzy* (name of a sacred mountain in the local area, see introduction) has got every type of tree apart from tea tree', reveals the significance of the access to products from outside such as tea bricks and salt for the locals. Until 1960s, the supply of those products still relied on the caravan organised by *jiti* (the collective).

When a man called Amazo became the household head (this was beyond the three most recently deceased generations of ancestors in his household), two two-storey houses were built in the courtyard. The Smart One asserted that these must have been amongst the earliest two-storey buildings that had ever appeared in Zheba. The household prospered under Amazo. Gradually, people started to refer to it as Apuma, after Amazo's name.

For the Smart One, the stories behind these two names make his household distinctive in the village. They are more than just stories he boasts of in front of friends and outsiders but are an indispensable part of his self-understanding that gives meaning to how he inhabits the house. The two names are implicitly recalled in his offerings of incense to *gəkyly* in the morning; in his welcome, as household head, to the returning ancestors and relatives on the day of *zuby*; when he sends local products to or receives yak butter and cheese from his longstanding Tibetan 'relatives'; or when he encounters those who still refer to the household with its old name Weeta. The newly erected timber frame embodies his aspiration to rely on his own abilities and resources to renew the prosperous household history. It embodies an attempt both to strengthen the durability of the house as a social unit and to facilitate its growth in terms of prosperity. It is through this effort that the Smart One sustains and deepens the intricate relationship between his own wellbeing and the flourishing welfare of the house, just as many of his predecessors had done in the stories he told me.

The new house was also built to acknowledge the hardship his parents and elder siblings had endured when he was a child. Born in 1978, the Smart One was the eighth child and the fifth boy of the house. Different from those who had lived through the collective era in Zheba and regarded those years as the hardest, in his understanding, the most difficult period for the household were the years following the decollectivisation of land in 1981. With ten household members, the household was allocated 22 *mu* (1.5 hectares) land in total. Only his parents and two eldest siblings were able to do farm



work. The others were either too young or had to attend school. The Smart One told me that now, when he had an argument with his father, he felt very bad and regretful afterwards, particularly when reminded about how much his father had suffered. He remembered that when he was a child, his father used to come home exhausted and hungry after working in the field the whole day, but with seven or eight little mouths in the house waiting to be fed, he would eat very little to leave enough for the children.

In the early 1980s, there was not much cloth available for sale in the local market, and it was very expensive. Almost all the clothes the Smart One and his siblings grew up wearing were made of coarse hemp cloth woven by his mother and eldest sister. His eldest sister grew particularly skilled at weaving<sup>118</sup>. In order to supply clothing for all the family, she regularly used to stay up until midnight. It was in such a difficult situation, that his parents managed to build a fairly large *mulefang* (shingled house), about six metres in length and width, spacious enough to accommodate all the children. He praised his parents by using the Chinese phrase *you zhiqi*, ‘having morale’. The *mulefang* he grew up in is now used as a barn, moved from its original site to the side of the courtyard. He was hoping his parents would be able to enjoy (ch. *xiangshou*) their remaining years in the new house once it was built. He saw this as a form of payback for the hardship they endured during all those years of suffering<sup>119</sup>.

As the second youngest of the nine, the Smart One did very little farm work for the household in his childhood and adolescence and enjoyed opportunities to continue studying that most of his elder siblings did not have. He was physically strong and fought a lot with other boys at school. He also dreamt of joining the army like one of his elder brothers. After high school, he got into a technical college or *zhongzhuan* in Zhongdian. At the time, *zhongzhuan* was regarded as particularly desirable, especially for students from a peasant family background, because they were guaranteed state

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<sup>118</sup> Women’s weaving skill is also essential to make the clothes for their family to wear on occasions of rituals, festivals and celebrations, see Evans (2017).

<sup>119</sup> This constituted the Smart One’s own version of the debt relation between parents and children that I discussed in chapter 1.

allocated jobs after graduation (ch. *fenpei*)<sup>120</sup>. Most of his classmates whose grades were not good enough to get in were envious of him. His family were proud of him—a *zhongzhuan* graduate would be the most educated in the village. By the time he graduated in early 2000, the system of state job allocation was called off as part of the higher education reform put forth by the then premier Zhu Rongji, as the Smart One pointed out with indignation. The popular slogan of the reform, which the Smart One mentioned, stated ‘one red heart, two hands[kinds] of preparation’<sup>121</sup>. His cynical interpretation was that you were completely left on your own to find a job. Although some of his classmates did easily secure a job through personal connections (ch. *guanxi*) of their families, his family did not have such connections, so he did not manage to find a job straightaway. With a deep sense of disappointment, he jumped on a coach and headed back to Zheba for the summer. Halfway through the journey, the coach fell off the road and crashed into a ravine. There were sixteen people in the coach. Half of them died, including the driver. Severely injured in the back, the Smart One was hospitalised and lay in coma for seven days after surgery before eventually regaining consciousness.

‘Although the accident disabled me, I’m grateful to the deity of Baihuaping for letting me survive.’ As one of the most educated young men in the village, up to this point of his life, he had always regarded himself as rather scientifically minded. He could not understand why people like his father kept burning incense at home every day and going up to Baihuaping to pray for his household several times each month. Such local customs seemed all too backward to him. However, the coach crash completely threw his world upside down. Amongst those who did not survive the accident were three from the same village, including one girl a few years younger than him. He could not make sense of how he managed to survive such a deadly event. Nor could he

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<sup>120</sup> *Fenpei* or state job allocation was a common form of labour distribution or recruitment in the People’s Republic of China until 1990s. It is linked to the *danwei* (ch. work unit) system in urban areas, which ‘functioned as a unit of economic production, social welfare and political control’ (Guthrie, 2013, p256). This system has been gradually disintegrated in most institutions since the market reform in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Bray, 2005).

<sup>121</sup> The slogan ‘*yike hongxin, liangshou/zhong zhunbei*’ (ch.) became popular nationwide after the National Higher Education Entrance Examination was reinstated in 1977. One heart refers to the aspiration to realise socialist modernization; the two kinds of preparations are either to attend university as a full-time student or to continue self-study.

imagine what lay ahead of him living with a disabled body. For days and nights, these confusions kept visiting him. At the same time, he was constantly reminded of an image of his father, who, more than seventy years old, used to endure the pain in his bent back, and climb up to Baihuaping with the help of a stick, to burn incense and pray for the deities' protection over his youngest son. His father kept doing this throughout the years when the Smart One was away from home, on every day of his zodiac animal (*k'u*), regardless of rain or wind. Recalling this image, the Smart One came to the realisation that it was his father's piety that brought him the 'luck' to survive.

Before the coach accident, the Smart One was actively searching for a balance between the familiar local world where he grew up and the world of a city where he would be able to realise his dream of getting a state allocated job. His ambition of making a livelihood in the city was tied up with his self-expectation to stand out amongst his peers from the same village, acknowledge the hardship his parents had endured during his childhood, and perhaps support some of his elder siblings who had dropped out of school in their early years. This prospect came to nothing overnight with the arrival of the higher education reform. He could not comprehend the implication of the political slogan of the reform; nor could he grasp its full scale and wider effects. All he could do was to link the name Zhu Rongji, the premier who was in office when the reform was launched, to the incomprehensible force that arbitrarily diminished his once promising future<sup>122</sup>. He found himself reduced to the status of a child of a peasant family, who was shut out of all the opportunities that urban social networks and personal connections could offer. He felt like a complete stranger to the place where he had been studying for years. He was left helpless on his own. Perhaps it was this feeling of isolation and powerlessness that drove him back to the familiar world of Zheba, only to find himself in an even more hopeless situation.

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<sup>122</sup> As I argued in the previous chapter, in the Naxi cosmology, naming entails gaining a certain sense of control over the named object. In this case, the name Zhu Rongji enabled the Smart One to ascribe the responsibility for diminishing his prospect. It struck me that even many years after, he could not talk about losing the chance to get a state allocated job without mentioning the name. This reference became indispensable in his understanding of that experience.

The accident did not just disable the Smart One's body; his whole being was shaken up. In Michael Jackson's words, he suddenly seemed to be 'stripped of the power to play any part in deciding the course of his life, [and] rendered passive before impersonal forces he [could not] comprehend and with which he [could not] negotiate' (2013a, p149). How could he make sense of a near-fatal experience that had reduced his being to almost nothing? His radical change of attitude towards the local practice of incense burning was a painstaking struggle to reorientate his understanding of the world. It was not simply submitting to the hand of fate but striving to survive with a sense of worth in a world that had put his whole existence in question.

By attributing his survival to the protective power of the deities, the Smart One immersed himself into the interconnectedness of local relations, both mundane and spiritual: the impersonal forces that nearly denied his existence could be influenced by the power of the local deities; the intervention of the latter, in the meantime, was a reciprocal response to the spiritual piety of his father; his father's spiritual piety took the form of care for his son. Acknowledging this interrelatedness helped him comprehend life not as merely subject to contingency and luck; rather, he opened himself up to a world in which forces that overwhelmed his sense of being coexisted with those that supported and sustained it. The relationship with his father was key to all the interconnected relations that the Smart One came to realise as vital to his being. He consciously linked his survival of the accident to the care that his father had offered him throughout his life. Such care was intensified when he was away studying in Zhongdian and expressed in his father's practice of incense burning, as a way of dealing with the effects of separation. His aspiration to reciprocate his father may be the source of the strength he relied on to pull back from the edge of death and come to terms with his traumatic experience.

I got to know the Smart One more than ten years after the accident. He has worked in the ticket office of Baihuaping ever since he recovered from his injuries. The then

township head gave him the job as part of the state's compensation for the accident. Ahua, another survivor of the accident from Shugo village, was allocated work in the same office and later married the Smart One. In recent years, the state tourist company responsible for the ticket office has organised annual trips for the staff to visit various tourist sites and cities in other parts of China, supposedly for the purpose of studying. The Smart One told me that when on these trips they visited majestic mountains, he used to silently recite an improvised prayer recollected from ritual chanting he knew: 'Although I do not know your name, please forgive my intrusion and grant me your protection'.

Apart from selling tickets and interacting with tourists, working in the ticket office involves cleaning up the area around Baihuaping and patrolling the alternative paths leading up to it to look for ticket-dodgers. This is very basic and unchallenging for a *zhongzhuan* graduate like the Smart One. He earned his nickname the 'smart one' from his colleagues and fellow villagers who often tease him as he gives the impression of being someone who generally knows more than they do. More than once, he complained to me about how fed up (ch. *ni*) he was with his job and the local ways of living. He wanted to give up farming because with the over 6000 *yuan* salary he and Ahua together earn each month, they could easily support their household by purchasing grain and other food. However, his parents strongly disapproved of this idea. They scolded him and his wife for being lazy and unfilial every time they brought the suggestion up. In a way, he could well understand that for his parents as well as many others who have lived through the upheavals in ritual China in the past century, especially the great famine in the late 1950s and early 1960s, nothing could be more substantial and precious than grain, and therefore the land that produced it. For his parents, the land has been both core and fruit (ch. *xinxue*, lit. heart and blood) of their painstaking labour. In view of this, the Smart One does not have the heart to insist on his own desires and discard what his parents have held dear throughout their whole lives. He feels that he has no choice but to

carry on with the farm work. It is possible that he may quit it eventually, he told me, but only after both his parents pass away.

The widening gap between the sense of achievement and recognition that the local familiar world can offer him and the his unrealisable dream for a different way of life beyond the local context is increasingly causing the Smart One distress. He has grown tired of the routine work in the ticket office even though it offers him the financial security that most households in the same village have no access to. He sometimes seems like a fish out of water, as the groups he works and socialises with often do not share his ideas and interests; most of the time, they just see it as him being smug. His sense of being out of place is on the one hand related to his experience of life outside the village: of his earlier years spent studying in town, his travel to big cities organised by the tourist company, and his daily interaction with tourists from outside. On the other hand, it is intensified by the frustration of not being able to escape the exhausting labour in the fields because of his moral obligations towards his parents, particularly his father. Nonetheless, the consequent constraints on his choices do not stop him from frequently referencing his ancestry, investing a fortune to renovate his household compound, and fully committing himself to the local networks of reciprocity, regarded as a crucial dimension of being human (*weiren*). He takes great pride in all these endeavors to deepen his involvement in local life, despite the rigors and constraints it means for him. He is thus caught in the struggle between the banality of the daily life and the sense of achievement it offers him.

The renovation of the Smart One's household compound was completed by the time I returned to Zheba two years later. I jokingly reminded him of my contribution on the day the house frame had been erected. He took me around the two-storey house. Its interior decoration had been finished about six months before. The entire ground floor was taken over by a spacious sitting room furnished with a big TV, a set of modern design sofas, and a wooden tea table exquisitely carved in Tibetan style. Three

bedrooms occupied the upper floor, all of which were connected by a porch. The railing of the porch was also a storage compartment for shoes. This design, as the Smart One proudly asserted, could not be found elsewhere in Zheba. The design ideas he came up with were mostly inspired by the houses he saw when he was traveling around Lijiang and Dali. He made an analogy to the visits of the Mu chiefs, the historical native Naxi rulers who established the centre of their regime in Lijiang, to the imperial court in Beijing in historical times. Folklore has it that one of them drew inspiration from the *siheyuan* (ch.) houses he saw in Beijing which he then used in promoting a similar architecture style in Lijiang. The Smart One's entire renovation project cost 270,000 *yuan*, more than double his initial budget. I gathered from talk in the village that his younger sister, who is a college teacher in Shangri La and married to a construction project contractor, contributed 100,000 *yuan* to the expenses. Since she is not around in the village very often, this was clearly her way of giving financial support to her parents. Perhaps out of his pride as male household head, the Smart One was silent about this when he told me about the cost of the renovation.

When his newly built house began to take shape before I left Zheba in 2015, the Smart One cheerfully pointed out that it would be the tallest building in the village. This was a clear sign of his household's prosperity that *he* had achieved through his efforts as household head. He anticipated that his parents would be able to lead a more comfortable life in the new house. Two years later, when he was showing me around the finished work, he seemed much less confident, and kept asking me whether I liked the house. I kept reassuring him, but he did not seem convinced. His father had passed away, at the age of eighty-eight, just a few days after the interior decoration was completed. He talked with pride about the nine heads of cattle, nine pigs, two lambs and numerous chickens slaughtered at the funeral to honour his father's life, but he clearly regretted that his father did not get to live in the newly furnished house. The death made it impossible for him to repay his father's past sacrifices by providing him with better living conditions.

In the meantime, people in other villages had started building three- or even four-storey concrete houses with flat roofs called *pingdingfang* (ch.). The wood-brick style of the Smart One's new house was now out of fashion and had been replaced by *pingdingfang*, now locally regarded as more modern and advanced. In response, the Smart One regrets the decision he initially made to build the wooden style. He feels he has been fooled and 'left behind by the time' (ch. *shidai nongren*). It was in this context that he made the remark about the rapid change of values in the world that I quoted at the beginning of this section. 'Growing up in the countryside, neither my parents at home nor the teachers at school helped me establish a proper world outlook or values (ch. *shijieguan, jiazhiguan*). I never had a proper objective (ch. *mubiao*) ... Nowadays values are changing too fast. Since my childhood, they have been changing every day!'

The Smart One's use of the term 'values' (*jiazhiguan*) is informed by the dominant political discourse of 'Core Socialist Values'<sup>123</sup>, frequently referred to in national news and appearing on the local propaganda signboards in the township centre. However, its implication in the Smart One's remark is different. He used it to denote an apprehension of the world that both encompasses the local situation and, more importantly, corresponds to the wider changing social context. It is this kind of understanding or, in his terms, 'values' that he finds impossible to grasp.

The aspirations the Smart One had in life, such as getting a state allocated job, reciprocating to his parents in their advanced years, and recreating the household prosperity, were all mediated by the tensions between the moral obligations entailed by local life and his desires shaped by his access to a world beyond the village, to maintain contact with the broader context. The former grants him a sense of stability which allows him to recover from his near-fatal accident. However, being immersed in the local world for too long imposes its own limits. Having already experienced life beyond the village, it accentuates the Smart One's desire for the outside world, articulated in the

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<sup>123</sup> The Core Socialist Values was promoted at the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012. They consist of twenty-four Chinese characters including prosperity, democracy, civilisation, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendliness.



architectural designs of his new house. He hopes to incorporate outside forces to sustain the prosperity of his household. However, the outside forces are invariably unpredictable and repeatedly elude his established understanding of the world. The decisions he made were relentlessly challenged by uncontrollable forces: some due to changing social circumstances, others as a result of existential constraints such as death. More than once, he found himself caught up in undesirable situations feeling helpless or even passive (in his own words, he was fooled by the time or '*shidai*'). His struggle is an ongoing attempt to strike a balance between the local life and the desirable outside world and the complex prospects and constraints they each entail.

Realising that his newly built house is now 'behind the times' does not make the Smart One completely lose his morale. Speaking about the future, he hopes the recent redevelopment of Baihuaping will attract more tourists to the local area. The promotion of tourism will encourage more local residents to start private business such as providing homestay services. The Smart One now thinks of applying for a loan to convert his household compound into a guesthouse. He also talks about his desires to purchase a property in Shangri La and perhaps a car, even though he does not know how to drive. When I asked about his expectations for his two daughters, he said he will listen to the sky and let fate decide (ch. *tingtian youming*).

### **Daughters, mothers and the struggle between the local and beyond**

The Smart One's struggle accounted above is embedded in his experience of growing up as the youngest son in the house, who later stayed on living with his parents and inherited the household. His aspiration to recreate his household prosperity was inspired by the achievements of his male predecessors. It was also a reciprocal response to his father's care to which he explicitly attributed his survival after his near fatal accident. The constraints he increasingly felt in living the local life also arose from the obligations entailed in his position as male household head. Such experiences and events shape his

struggle in a distinctly gendered way that stands in contrast with the experience of ‘mothers’, ‘daughters’ and ‘wives’.

Across cohorts, women as well as men in Zheba strive for the opportunities they see in the space between the historically and socially bounded avenues available to them to realise their personal pursuit of academic and/or career aspirations. However, the obligations and expectations women experience in their roles as ‘daughter’ and ‘mother’ brings a gendered dimension to the tension women experience in this process that is distinct from men’s experience, as illustrated in the Smart One’s story.

In this section, I first discuss cases of two women who are both mothers with adult children. I focus on their respective struggles related to the mother-daughter relationship to see how the specific gendering experiences shape their lives. The third case concerns a woman who grew up in Gerdu and returned to establish a household with her husband after a couple of failed attempts to leave. In all three cases, the tension between the local and the outside worlds is key to the desires, recognitions and constraints experienced by these women.

I met Ayu on an incense burning trip. She was conducting the ritual for her second eldest daughter whose Chinese zodiac corresponded with that of the day. Ayu is fifty-four years old. She lives in her natal village Shugo with her married-in husband who is originally from Haba, a cluster of villages over thirty kilometres away from Zheba. The two of them cultivate 8 *mu* (0.5 hectares) of land—5 *mu* for two seasons of wheat and maize in rotation and 3 *mu* for only one season of either. Like many households, they stopped cultivating rice because of the hard work involved. Their three daughters, all live and work elsewhere, but give them money to buy the rice they need for daily consumption. The daughters are away most of the year and only return for festival celebrations.

On our way together to the top of Baihuaping, Ayu talked mainly about the three daughters. Ayu recalled that when the daughters were all in high school, she and her

husband's only source of income was selling livestock. Each month, she used to ask the coach driver to take 20 *yuan* to Zhongdian as her daughters' living expenses. Later when the daughters went to university, the situation became even more difficult. She and her husband sent their daughters a monthly allowance when they were away at university but would often receive a phone call almost immediately after paying it, asking for more money.

The situation was particularly painful for the eldest daughter, who now runs a restaurant in Shangri La. She was accepted into a prestigious university in Beijing, but during her second year, Ayu's husband fell ill from overwork and was hospitalised in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. However, according to Ayu, this illness was at least partially intentional in order to force this daughter to quit university. She and her husband found it impossible to support the studies of all three at the same time and decided to sacrifice the eldest. When her husband was in hospital, Ayu told her daughter to return home. 'If you only have one year left [for university], I would let you continue, but there are two. We really can't afford it. Come back and forget about it!' Eventually in response to her family's financial difficulties, the eldest daughter dropped out of university and returned to the village. As over the years Ayu learnt more about the reputation of the university, she gradually came to realise how great a loss this was for her daughter. She could not stop sighing as she told me the story.

The second daughter, who Ayu was burning incense for, went to study in Thailand after high school. Initially, she wanted to find a job there and settle down, but Ayu did not approve and insisted that she should return to Yunnan. She now works in the civil service in a neighbouring county, where she met her husband, a Han Chinese man. The youngest daughter went to university in Kunming, and after graduating found work as an accountant at a local school in a nearby Tibetan town. She also does ad hoc jobs at a local bank at weekends. Of the three, only the second daughter is married. The youngest one does not want to marry for the time being because she is afraid that it would affect

her career development. Ayu did not specify why her eldest daughter, at the age of thirty-three, well above the average marriage age for local women, is still unmarried. However, she indicated that had the daughter managed to finish university in Beijing, her situation would be quite different. This daughter now wants to buy a property in Shangri La. But priced at 500,000 *yuan*, it is way beyond what she can afford, so, as Ayu told me, her eldest daughter expects the two sisters to help her out, perhaps as a way to repay her for having sacrificed her own education in order to help support theirs.

Parents' concerns over their children's, especially daughters', education have changed tremendously over the past half century or so. Nanger was amongst the earliest group of women in Zheba who went to primary school in the early 1950s. At the time, her sister, only seven years older than she was, was the only able-bodied labour in her household. As described in chapter 1, this elder sister attended to all the collective farm work and joined the state's construction projects. Their mother died when Nanger was seven. Their father was half blind and needed someone to take care of him. Nanger recalled that at the beginning of her fourth year in primary school she returned from school with the new textbooks but did not go back to school the next day. The teacher turned up at her house to try to persuade her to go back to school. He pointed out that it was good for children like Nanger from a poor peasant household, then an honoured class background, to continue studying. Nanger followed his advice and went back to school for another few days, but eventually stopped to stay at home and take care of her father and the domestic work.

More than seventy years later, even though Nanger has long forgotten what she learned at school, she felt regret that she had not been able to carry on: 'I don't wish that I'd studied for much longer, perhaps just finishing the primary school. Those who graduated from primary school in my day all worked in *danwei* (urban work unit)'. However, all the girls Nanger went to school with dropped out more or less around the same time. No girls from her village at the time did actually manage to graduate and get

a state allocated job, since studying was not considered as important as farming and domestic labour.

Indeed, the significance of labour was prioritised in most, if not all, households in Zheba throughout the collective era when, as elsewhere in the region and China as a whole, the income of each household was dependent on the work points earned by its members. After her marriage at the age of nineteen, and for many years, Nanger and her husband were the only two in their household of seven or eight members who were able to earn work points. Nanger's elderly mother in-law helped take care of her eldest son and daughter. But by the time her second son was born, her mother in-law had passed away. Nanger had no choice but to ask her eldest daughter Ami who was then just around school age to stay at home to look after her younger brother. She recollected vividly an image of Ami, probably in her early teens, carrying the younger brother around on her back even though he was by now quite strong and almost as tall as she was. Ami, now in her early fifties, runs a small shop near the township government. Nanger told me that even today Ami still blames her for not letting her go to school. She often complains that her mother's decision ruined her life course. 'Even though she (Ami) didn't go to school, she has learned to send text messages and use smart phones all by herself.' Nanger regretted not being able to support the realisation of her eldest daughter's talents, but on the other hand, she felt that she did not have a choice at the time, due to the need to support such a big family.

Ami's story stands in contrast with Alan's, her youngest sister. Alan went to school in the 1980s when the family's financial situation was rather better, since all her elder siblings were able to help. On a couple of occasions, Nanger took great pride talking about Alan's academic achievements. Alan was the best in her class all the way through her education. By the time she graduated from a university in Qujing, eastern Yunnan, she obtained a local teaching position. However, Nanger thought it was too far away and was worried about Alan not being able to return home much. The family all shared this

concern and in the end Alan's elder sister went to Qujing and persuaded her to go back home. Later Alan found a job teaching English in a high school in Shangri La. This time the family all approved of it. After teaching for a few years, Alan took the civil service examination and was awarded with the first place. She was employed as an English interpreter by the public security bureau. A few years ago, she completed an on-the-job postgraduate course and became the first person from the village to obtain a master's degree. Comparing Alan with her nephews (Alan's cousins) who could not find any work even after giving expensive gifts to local officials, Nanger proudly pointed out that Alan had always been able to choose between competing job offers because of her talents. However, when Alan expressed her interest in doing a PhD, Nanger objected and asserted that there was not much use in studying so much.

The mothers' struggles with their daughters in these instances were essentially linked to the care for their other children or the family as a whole. Both Ayu and Nanger struggled to support their children's education because of material scarcity. They were put in a position where they felt they had no choice but to sacrifice their eldest daughters' education. Such decisions had long-term implications that constrained the life courses of the daughters, especially in comparison with their younger siblings who grew up in better off circumstances. The daughters' struggles, expressed in the loss they later felt (in Ami's case) or the practical constraints on their aspirations they experienced as a result of unfinished education—for instance the financial difficulties Ayu's eldest daughter faced—were reflected in the sense of guilt shared by both mothers. Even though the cancelation of their daughters' schooling was not their decision alone and was initially made to better support the family as a whole, the mothers both acknowledge a sense of guilt and are living with the effects of regret. Nanger fully understood Ami's frustration since it resonated with her own experience of quitting school at an early age. Because of this shared lament for their unfulfilled potential and desire for opportunities denied to them, Nanger accepted the blame that her daughter placed on her. The relationship between the mother and the daughter is redefined by

such intimately related struggles over time in their shared gender experience and active presence or, as pointed out in the following discussion, significant absence in each other's lives (Evans, 2008).

For the younger daughters who have enjoyed the opportunities of better education than women of Nanger's generation, one of their main struggles or sources of tension is between their personal and career aspirations, and the connection they are obliged to maintain with their natal household<sup>124</sup>. This, in itself, is not too different from the contradiction that lies at the heart of the Smart One's struggle. However, it is expressed in very different ways in the mother-daughter relationship.

From the mothers' perspective, this tension appears in their anxiety about their daughters being too far away from home, for fear that they might, as Nanger put it, end up becoming a person from a distant place, even though both mothers genuinely took pride in their daughters' achievements. Rather than risking the prospect of permanent separation, which necessarily entails losing the daughters' support in their advanced years, the mothers initiate or support some kind of intervention to demand the daughters to return to a more manageable distance. Such concerns are of course shared among other natal household members, but are often articulated most forcefully by the mother, given her crucial role as domestic carer. They also function to circumscribe the geographical range within which the daughter can establish her life. They thus lead to a negotiated physical distance that is perceived as emotionally safe and morally unthreatening (Stafford, 2003, p4). Managing physical distance involves struggles—and compromises—with conflicting emotions and desires on the part both of parents and their children. However, the gendered expectations on daughters as actual and future carers, comes with the expectation or promise of their return crucial to enable them to remain connected with their mothers and their *çik'ə* (human root), as discussed in chapter 3. Finding ways to maintain this connection while pursuing different ways of life

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<sup>124</sup> The need for the daughters to maintain the connection with their natal households is ritually expressed in their participation in *zuby* as I discussed in chapter 3.

gives a distinctively gendered quality to the experience of struggle younger women encounter, as Aying's story reveals.

I was introduced to Aying by my colleague, Lao, who was also doing research in Zheba for a short period of time. Lao talked about Aying as a young woman in her early thirties who lived on her own in a newly built house. Her house, as Lao described and as I later confirmed, was beautifully decorated and impeccably maintained to a standard that was rare to find elsewhere in Zheba. Her son was eight years old and attended the boarding school in the township centre. Her husband, a married-in husband from the neighbouring village Shugo, works as a taxi driver in Shangri La. Aying's father died a few years before I met her in an accident when he went hunting with a couple of men from the adjacent village. Her mother also lives in Gerdu with her younger sister who is often away. Managing the household mostly on her own, Aying gave the impression of being rather 'isolated'. Lao said that Aying had commented that when her son finishes primary school, she will leave the village.

I went to visit Aying six months after she and Lao first met. It was late in the evening and her family were having dinner. Aying explained that the dinner was late because they were waiting for her son to finish his homework. He was due to go back to his boarding school the next day. Noticing they were having chicken soup, a dish usually served for guests, I asked Xiaopeng, the son, whether his parents cooked chicken every time he came back from school. He nodded and said he liked chicken. It was already May, but Aying's husband had not returned to Shangri La for work since the New Year's celebration earlier in the year. He told me he was preparing to take driving tests for a special type of license that would allow him to drive large vehicles. This qualification could potentially lead him to more job opportunities than just being a taxi driver.

After dinner, we moved from the side kitchen to the main room next door. This room, which they refer to as the TV room, has a sofa, a large flat screen TV and a desk



by the door. Even though her husband was present, Aying was noticeably chattier than the wives I met in other households who tended to let their husbands do the talking. She shared with me memories of her early teens, when Baihuaping was first developed as a tourist site since the mid 1990s. She recalled that this was the first time in her life that she saw foreigners. She and her friends from secondary school were curious to see them, but at the same time they were afraid that the foreign tourists would come up and take them away. At first, the girls just hid in the woods to watch the foreigners under cover and ran away quickly as soon as they were noticed. Later on, as more and more tourists came to visit Baihuaping, Aying and the other girls started singing and dancing for them and charging for the performance. Some of girls occasionally developed long standing relationships with people in the audience. On one occasion, a couple from Beijing came and asked them if there were any local children who needed help. They then told the couple the story of Aying's friend in the same village, whose parents had divorced when she was young and who had to quit primary school because of her family's poor financial situation. The couple decided to adopt her and took her back to Beijing. They supported her to continue going to school. Later when she grew up, the girl married the couple's son. She sometimes returns to the village to visit her biological father who later remarried.

Aying started taking singing lessons in high school. She applied for an art college in Kunming and was asked to go for an interview there. She managed to put together 1,000 *yuan* to cover the travel expenses, from a man from Guangdong who she got to know when he visited Baihuaping and saw her performing. She also got in touch with another tourist from Kunming and went to visit him when she was staying there during the week of her interview. She found the man at his *danwei*. He was extremely surprised to see her, a seventeen-year-old girl, traveling on her own. Aying, however, confidently asserted that she was not at all afraid. When she got lost, she just took a bus to the hub station and asked passers-by and the traffic officers for help. She passed the interview and got in the art college but dropped out after a month because the tuition fees were too

high, and she felt she was not learning much. She returned to Shangri La to study for another year and was hoping to go to business school but did not get in. ‘When I was in Kunming, I thought that someday I would go to cities like Shanghai. If I continued studying, I probably would not come back.’ Aying confessed that when she first returned to Zheba, the idea of leaving again was always on her mind. After a few years, she felt eventually settled. ‘It’s easier to be at home. There’s no pressure (ch. *yali*) here,’ she concluded.

The same word *yali* was also used by the Smart One when he was trying to explain to me the difference between men staying in their natal households and marrying out, though with a very different implication. Whilst he admitted, perhaps speaking from his own experience, that staying with one’s own parents could be restraining (ch. *yueshu*) since sometimes it was necessary to follow their advice, as for instance, when his own parents objected to him giving up farming, he also described the demand for married-in husbands to do things properly in front of their in-laws as a form of pressure or *yali*. The source of pressure identified by the Smart One was different from Aying’s. According to him, the pressure arose within the household in the form of the restraining influence of one’s own parents or as the stress endured under the watchful eyes of the in-laws. For him, its source is the patrilineal continuity that all men have to assume as their duty and from which they eventually acquire their authority as household head. For Aying, in contrast, the pressure comes from the outside: the foreign world to which she, as well as her many friends, aspired from a young age. As with the Smart One, Aying’s feeling towards the outside world is not unequivocal. While settling down in her home village did spare her the sense of pressure she experienced in her earlier pursuit of going out, she still hopes to sell her house in Zheba and move to Shangri La once her son finishes school.

Both the Smart One’s and Aying’s cases speak to but depart from what Sangren identifies as the ‘Chinese modalities of desire’:

Chafing under the constraints of patriarchal authority and their privileged but *unchosen* role in establishing patrilineal continuity, (at least some) Chinese sons come to desire autonomy and freedom—in Stafford’s terms, a separation—precisely because the family system binds sons so closely. Conversely, because the Chinese family system enjoins a daughter to marry out—another, in this case obligatory, separation—daughters come to desire that which the system denies them— in other words, inclusion (in Stafford’s terms, reunion) or recognition (2003, p55, emphasis in original text).

Sangren defines ‘desire’ as individual responses to what the ‘culturally specific productive processes’ have denied them (2003, p59). The Smart One gains the recognition of being household head through identifying himself with his predecessors, but at the same time, he grows increasingly weary of the constraints that this entails. His desires for the outside world are, in Sangren’s words, desires for ‘autonomy’. They take expression in how he designed his new house to incorporate different architectural features that he learned about when he was traveling elsewhere, as he proudly pointed out to me. He also talks about the possibility of converting his place into a guesthouse in the near future. For sons in Zheba, especially for those who stay in their natal households like the Smart One, their struggle is to balance the duty of sustaining patrilineal continuity, sometimes also experienced as pressure, with efforts to bring the outside world in. The most direct form this struggle takes is financial and material, like Aying’s husband who goes out to work and brings back the income to support the household, in the form of labour migration I discussed in chapter 3. The daughters discussed above all attempted to establish lives elsewhere from an early age. Their struggle involves maintaining the connection with their mothers and natal households within a manageable distance in the emotional and moral as well as physical sense. They do not necessarily identify with their mothers and sometimes even strive to assert their differences<sup>125</sup>, even though to be different would entail finding the material and emotional means to endure the competitive pressure from the outside world, as Aying points out. The quest for difference is complemented by negotiations over how to remain

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<sup>125</sup> For instance, Ami’s complaints about her lack of education, (i.e. a repetition of her mother’s experience), can be read as a response to having failed to be different from her mother.

in close contact with their mothers and natal households. In contrast to all the other daughters discussed in this section, Aying somehow settled down by setting up a new household in her natal village, a common residential practice for sons who choose not to, or cannot, remain in their natal households. Aying has partly realised what, in Sangren's analysis, most daughters desire. Still, she talked enthusiastically about her earlier adventures and entertained herself with the hope to leave again. Living with the gender specific desires and struggles, for both men and women, thus involves continually striking a balance between the senses of recognition and constraint that their differently gendered experiences in relation to others give rise to.

### **Divination and the struggle for a smooth passage of life**

When I first met Alu, the man who recounted the origin of the divinatory scripts, he was consulting with Namu about a proper date to start building a new kitchen in his household compound. According to one of his previous visits, the divination revealed that the construction work on his current house did not start on an auspicious day, so it led to a car crash on a snowy day. Alu first encountered divination when his parents were both seriously ill and when his brother was suffering from a broken arm. He went to Zheba to look for herbal medicine and was recommended by local people to see Namu, who surprised him by being able to speak about the things that had happened in the past to his family through his divinatory practice. In the divination, Namu revealed that his parents' illness was caused by his father cutting down an incense tree that was planted behind their house. He returned to his village and did a ritual as Namu instructed him, and his parents recovered. Later on, he had another experience with divination. Initially a carpenter, Alu then started his own business working on contracted construction projects. In 2014, he was working on some building construction, but his team was not able to proceed because groundwater kept springing out at the construction site. They used three water pumps but could not get rid of the water, and the walls they built kept collapsing. He returned to Namu. It turned out that the construction had

disturbed *gu*, the deity embodied as the water's source, at the site. To appease *gu*, Namu instructed him to conduct an offering ritual at the spot where the water came out. The ritual included an offering of fried barley, millet grain and milk. After the ritual, Alu managed to finish the project successfully.

The people who went to see Namu generally shared a sense of crisis. Like Alu, some of them resorted to divination because of an illness that did not respond to medical treatment in hospitals or local clinics. Others went with the hope of finding lost cattle, improving their business and financial situation, or identifying the causes of some peculiar, near fatal accident that they had survived. All these motivations can be summarised with the word '*bushun*' in Han dialect, or 'not smooth'. The ideal life, for them, is envisaged as smoothly moving along a path; hence, lack of smoothness could lead to all sorts of problems in one's own or close family relatives' lives. This lack, or 'unevenness' is experienced when things happen that are beyond one's control. Bodily symptoms like toothache, eye pain, lethargy, insomnia and constantly crying in the case of babies are recognised as indicators of such precarious situations. People usually take their problems to the diviner when they suspect that their lives are not going smoothly.

Consulters arrive for a divination with a piece of incense wood or a bunch of incense sticks. Most people, as soon as they arrive, give Namu material goods, like noodles and tea bricks, or simply cash, varying from thirty to two hundred *yuan*. Namu thought of this as a reward for his mediation between his visitors and the deities, and he also presented this reward to the deities as an offering. After a brief exchange about the reasons for their visit, the divination began with Namu burning the incense. He took a set of sixty divinatory cards<sup>126</sup>, each with a string attached on one end, out of a black briefcase. This was where he kept his divinatory texts and items. He held the cards close to his forehead with both hands. With eyes closed, he recounted the various divinatory

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<sup>126</sup> This number corresponds to the age considered as a complete lifespan for human, which is sixty years. However, the actual number of cards used in practice, in Namu's case, was not exactly sixty. He had been using these cards for long and a few of them got lost over the years of practice. Somehow, he did not seem to be concerned by the ones missing. He told me that when the current set got worn out, he would replace it with a new complete set. I have also seen less experienced *dongba* perform divination with only twelve cards.

practices customarily performed by different ethnicities in the surrounding areas recorded in the scripts. After circling the strings above the incense smoke a few times while pronouncing the name and zodiac animal of the consulter, Namu asked the consulter to pick one string and pull the card out. He then interpreted the text written on the card. The interpretation involved an exchange of information: Namu asked questions according to the depiction on the card and the consulter responded with concrete details. Eventually they came up with a consensus that could explain the problems concerned. This process was often conducted three times in one divinatory session. The practice of drawing lots, referred to as *ap'ibe* (n.), was often followed by another divinatory practice called *bamædo* (n.), especially if the issues still remained unresolved on the last card. At this point, Namu took out two or five cowrie shells from his briefcase. The curve of the shells was cut flat and filled with some black material of burnt plant extract. Namu threw them three times into a clean bowl or sometimes onto the flat top of his hat. He then deciphered the patterns that emerged by consulting the divinatory scripts<sup>127</sup>.

The second time I met Alu, he seemed rather exhausted and anxious. He told me he had suffered a bad cold for ten days and lost ten kilograms as a result. He had strangely lost his appetite for meat. He suspected that his illness had something to do with his forty-nine (forty-eight) years of age. The age forty-nine, locally referred to as *k'ube* (n.), for men and women alike, marks a critical point that determines whether or not one can proceed to enter the second half of their life. Charitable deeds like building a bridge or maintaining a public path at the beginning of the year is required to ensure the smooth passage between the two halves. Alu built a bridge on the second day of the Chinese New Year. However, this did not seem to have spared him his suffering. He was hoping that the divination with Namu would help him resolve it. The lot that Alu drew in the divination indicated that his house was unclean, *mə ʒY* (n.). Namu checked with Alu whether there was a newborn baby in the house as it was explicitly depicted on the first lot he drew. It turned out Alu's daughter had gone into labour about a month before and

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<sup>127</sup> I depict this process in detail in *The Gorge is Deep*.

was still resting at home. Looking at me in astonishment, Alu exclaimed how accurate this depiction had matched the situation of his household. According to Namu, the polluting power occurred during the child birth, which as I discussed in chapter 4, was not dealt with properly. A ritual was required to rid the house of the remains of the pollution.

The consultants sometimes experience an ecstasy of astonishment in divination. This can be described as a feeling of exhilaration at the realisation that one's own lifeworld, experienced as intimate, singular or domestic, is deeply subsumed into larger cosmic forces. For Alu, this took place when he realised that his daughter's giving birth had greater significance than a geographical event. It was part of the larger world, shared by everyone and which could be manifest as such, with the revelatory power of the divination. Writing on the divination practices amongst the Kuranko people in Sierra Leone, Michael Jackson captures this sense as 'the dynamic life of Being reali[s]es itself in fields of relationship (involving persons, spirits, animals, ancestors, divinities and even inanimate objects) rather than restricting itself to individual human beings in the form of fixed, intrinsic properties' (2013a, p37). For those who endure bodily pain or suffering from misfortune like Alu, the astonishment derives from a radical shift in perspective from the immediacy of the all too familiar everyday life, which offers no answers or solutions to their suffering, to an expansive holist view of the world as interrelated processes. It is through such reorientation of one's perception of the world that illness or misfortune is experienced no longer as an individual occurrence isolated from other bodies and lives; rather it enables an apprehension of individual pain or suffering as interconnected with others.

Following Mauss and Huber's discussion on the magic of contiguity, Erik Mueggler emphasises the intertwining of 'material realities' and 'the imagined pain of others' in divination and healing rituals (2001, p44). Here, I suggest along the same lines that divination opens up the suffering individual to the suffering of others (a sick relative, a

daughter in labour, a sacred tree cut down thoughtlessly, an ancestor neglected, and a deity defied) with whom he or she is in close contact in everyday life, memory and imagination; the individual's suffering becomes part of others' and vice versa. It is through bringing this fundamental interconnectedness between self and others, including non-human others, to light that the illness or misfortune previously endured as an isolated and alienating experience acquires a historical and social dimension. Through divination, the individual's suffering is situated in a world where pain inflicts pain, loss entails loss, and the alleviation of the former promises the release of the latter. To lead a smooth life therefore is to move smoothly along interrelated paths 'that can become blocked or darkened, but may be ritually cleared' (Jackson, 2013a, p39).

The efficacy of divination is of course channelled and expressed by the lifeworld of the diviner. Namu emphasised his role in spiritual practice as the communicator, or 'postman' (ch. *tongxinyuan*) between the realms of the living and the dead and the deities. Although for him the scripts lay absolutely at the heart of the divinatory interpretation, the prognosis and solution were also mediated by his lived experience and personal history.

On one occasion sometime in the past, a primary school teacher who married uxorilocally in Lushu village went with his wife to see Namu. His father had been suffering intermittent pain in one leg for some time. The leg had swollen up. The teacher was hoping to find out the cause of the pain. According to the divination, his father was afflicted by the wind deity/ghost. The symptom he had was called *hæŋu* (n.). According to Namu, the wind can be sometimes benevolent and sometimes malevolent. The teacher's father was afflicted by the malevolent wind that blew three times a day. A healing ritual was required in order to cure the pain. This involved mixing barley flour with water into a thick paste to stick to the swollen leg to literally draw the pain out. Namu recalled that when he was young, before communal ritual practices were suspended in 1957, there used to be a collective ceremony every year to appease the



wind deity/ghost, called *hæby* (n.). It was held in spring around February or March at a site specially dedicated for such a purpose. The ceremony required sacrificing a chicken and a small pig to the wind to eventually drive it away to the mountains. There also used to be a pole next to the front gate of each household, called *tçidzu* (n.) Some bamboo branches and a flag with Tibetan script were attached to the top of the pole. *Tçidzu* served to strike the wind and prevented *hæŋu* from descending into the house. In winter not long before the New Year, household members renewed the branches and the flag with a ritual called *tçidzu ts'i*, or to establish *tçidzu*. When I was living in Gerdu in 2014, there were only two or three households that still had *tçidzu*. Most of them were pulled down during the anti-superstition campaign in the 1960s. Namu lamented that due to lack of precautionary mechanisms like the *hæby* ceremony and the protection of *tçidzu*, people nowadays became more vulnerable to afflictions like *hæŋu*.

Amongst the divinations I witnessed while studying with Namu, many of them shared a common sense of loss. Sometimes this was embodied in a missing relative who was forcibly recruited into the military in the Republican era, died elsewhere but returned to haunt the living. It was also evoked in a communal shrine deserted since the Cultural Revolution or an old house abandoned due to more recent labour migration encouraged by the market economy, as I trace in *The Gorge Is Deep*, which had caused anguish to those worshippers of the deserted shrine or those former residents of the abandoned house. This sense of loss results from the fact that the cosmological meta-narrative that used to encompass people's lifeworlds, has been shattered by the specificities of history and politics and is now lived with as incoherent fragments. For diviners like Namu who have been struggling to keep their cosmological understanding of the world intact throughout decades of political violence and social suffering, divination leads to a confrontation with past violence that has never fully sedimented as memory; the 'past that remains as the true present', in Merleau-Ponty's words, and 'does not move away' (2012[1945], p85).

The destruction of ritual scripts and items that Namu revered as sacred; the overthrow of the household shrine which he associated closely with his predecessors; the prohibition of the skills that granted him the dignity of being *dongba*; all such violence in the official state-led campaigns against superstition converged in the destruction of him as a human being<sup>128</sup>. Although he was not personally criticised at struggle meetings at the time, he *felt* himself an inseparable part of the target of the attacks. Even after many decades, he still discreetly safeguarded his volumes of scripts—a few of which tenaciously survived the violence—in a locked cupboard, as is seen a couple of times in *The Gorge is Deep*. He became very distressed when he could not find a script volume he was looking for.

Namu found this sense of loss almost impossible to share. This did not stop him constantly talking about it, sometimes to himself, me, or the consultants who happened to be around. ‘We always have to lock these up. Otherwise they will be lost again.’ He would repeat phrases like this, not to communicate his loss to anyone in particular, but to live with it. The intense experience of living through past violence allowed him to approach its source, the state. Still he found it impossible to allude to the state’s oppressive power without the help of a metaphor: he once spoke of the state power like a ‘wok lid’ that smashed down and crashed the local customs into pieces. To accept and endure, in Namu’s as well as the others’ cases discussed in this chapter, is never merely passive; it is a constant struggle in which they draw on all their strength to live under the shadow of forces that have relentlessly undermined their existence (Jackson, 2013a, pxii)<sup>129</sup>.

At the same time, the practice of divination provided Namu with an alternative means to engage with past violence: an ethics, as Mueggler (2001, 50p) suggests, that

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<sup>128</sup> As *dongba* practices are exclusively transmitted to men, all these essential ways of being *dongba* are also linked to a sense of gendered struggle that is similar to the Smart One’s identification with his male predecessors.

<sup>129</sup> I am also reminded of a ninety-four-year old woman from Po village. She was stripped of all her clothes when all properties of her household, classified as landlord, were confiscated in the land reform. Her husband was sent to labour camp for over thirty years. I met her in her vegetable field when she was weeding. I was told that she still went to the field to collect pig feed most of the days. She did not talk much but kept repeating that she did not understand why she was not dead.

does not subscribe to but transcends the power of political violence. In divination, as well as other rituals, Namu suspended the victimized role as a practitioner of the denounced *mixin*; rather he inhabited, in the fullest sense he could, the imaginary cosmos that he preserved within his lifeworld and confronted with forces that elude apprehension in the terms of everyday life. The strength he derived from this cosmological integrity enabled him to piece together the fragments of his community's deep past and give rise to the power of healing, for both himself and those who consulted him. For him and them, divination acknowledges the suffering of those whose existence is turned down by the medical system, market forces, history, or fate. More importantly, it 'distributes the burden of responsibility' for that suffering to those who are in close contact with each other in their lifeworlds (Mueggler, 2001, p50). Such a process reinstates the irreducible 'historical becoming' (Toren, 1999, p12) of each individual in the wider field of interrelatedness where their cosmological position is acknowledged as indispensable.

## **Conclusion**

In the origin story of the divinatory scripts, the young man managed to dodge the ghosts because of his indefinite position in relation to the surface of the water: neither above nor below it. Occupying this intermediate space between certainty and indeterminacy gave rise to a sense of agency that not only enabled him to survive his precarious situation, but also led him to the power of divination. The struggles narrated in this chapter, in different ways all deal with the tension between, on the one hand, the familiar—whether in the intimate mother-daughter or father-son relationship, the domestic ways of life, or the reciprocal interactions in the local community—and, on the other, the foreign, loosely categorised as the outside world or, in the case of divination, the realm beyond the apprehension of everyday life. In situations when one's wellbeing is threatened by uncontrollable forces or when the structure of daily routine is not enough to accommodate one's desire, regaining some degree of agency and autonomy

depends on being able to transcend one's immediate context. For the Smart One, after facing death in the coach accident, he regained his strength by resorting to spiritual faith and reimmersing himself in his local world, by investing his energies in sustaining the prosperity of his household: a responsibility that offers both recognition and constraint to most sons.

The existential struggle involved in striking such a balance is embedded in one's relation with others. For the daughters born in Zheba who established their adult lives elsewhere, the struggle is a shared project between themselves and their closely related others, especially their mothers. The mothers conduct incense burning rituals to manage their anxiety over the daughters' absence. When their daughters threaten to go beyond an emotionally and morally safe distance, the mothers struggle to draw them back, even by using coercion. At the same time, the daughters carefully maintain the connection with their mothers by returning to their natal houses for celebratory reunions. Such reunions are also occasions when the daughters may be temporarily relieved from the pressures and stresses they live in the world outside.

The boundary between these two realms identified above (the familiar and the foreign) is extremely fluid or even unstable. This can become particularly problematic when life is not going smoothly, and when one feels alienated from one's own body and the ways that one usually experiences the world seem estranged. The order of domestic life can be disturbed by the uncertainties brought from the outside world or can be challenged by the threatening power generated from within, as indicated in Alu's case. This sense of 'unevenness' is often experienced as rupture—a powerful sense of being disconnected from their familiar surroundings or being restrained from their desires by devastating suffering. Divination, therefore, opens up a space in which the broken or disruptive relation between the familiar and the strange can be restored; the world that grants oneself a sense of control or autonomy and the one that undermines one's existence are experienced not as discrete paradigms but are intersected. It negotiates a

balance that the individual can recover a sense of wellbeing in the ongoing struggle to make their lifeworlds inhabitable.

## Conclusion

I have explored the ways in which the *naχα* people in Zheba relate to their deep past across time on multiple levels. The deep past, as I set out in the introduction, is mediated in the embodiment of grief and loss that inhabits the local landscape as ghostly beings, in the chronic pain felt in the bodies of elderly villagers, in the ways people arrange and move around domestic space, in their attempts to remain connected with close relatives especially when their lives are susceptible to uncontrollable forces, and in the scattered memories of the lost communal ceremonies whose fragmented remnants can still be traced in certain aspects of the daily life.

Multifaceted as it is, this deep past is also entangled with the experiential and existential presence of the state in the lifeworlds of the local people. The second half of twentieth century Zheba has undergone radical and irreversible transformations with the entry of the state, more or less simultaneously, into communal affairs, the house and the physical body. The *naχα* people's engagement with their deep past is thus inevitably linked with their ways of living the long-lasting effects of state violence. For them, this does not simply imply accommodating the intrusions of the state. They actively bend what the state brings to their own material well-being. Most prominently, such efforts constitute the annual cycles of separation and reunion in which the local people periodically move between their immediate local context and that of the outside. The former entails the deep involvement with ancestors, rituals and divination, whereas the latter is considered as a significant source of life resources, ever more so nowadays as the locality is further and further marginalised in the process of economic and tourist development. This movement, or rather the struggle between the local and beyond implies incorporating outside forces whilst creating/recreating their own lifeworlds in the process of envisaging prosperity and growth and, at the same time, maintaining a

sense of belonging and dignity. All in all, the transmission of the deep past is ‘a struggle for being’, in Michael Jackson’s (2005) words, in a precarious world that often evades the *naxa*’s comprehension but can be appropriated to assert some degree of control over the course of their lives.

Cultural transmission in this sense is inseparable from the acts of living, in the present time. The deep past is neither ‘preserved’ as cultural relics in museums; nor is it staged merely for tourist gaze. It is readily there in the continuous and transformative processes through which the *naxa* make their places in the world and become who they are. The sense of continuity derives from the continual reference to their ancestry, origin or ‘root’ in the embodied, metaphoric, emotional, moral and cosmological senses. Evoking this sense of rootedness constitutes the depth of the past especially in a cosmology of displacement in southwest China where migration and movement have profoundly shaped the local ways of survival both in historical terms and with contemporary relevance. At the same time, the emphasis on origin does not imply a literal return; it is rather a way of moving forward, a means to facilitate development and sustain growth. To develop or grow in this sense does not primarily concern the accumulation of material wealth. Nor is it limited to personal progress or success. Development and growth are channeled in the unremitting endeavor to approximate the ideal ways of relating to one another in a shared world and to strive for the harmonious coexistence between different lifeforms and other beings along the imaginary smooth passage of life. It involves enormous care, nourishment and renewal in order to flourish in ever-changing situations effected by unceasing encounters with outside. The transmission of the deep past thus necessarily entails incorporating change and sometimes coping with radical ruptures that occur beyond the local context but have overwhelming impact to the *naxa* people’s lives.

While cultural transmission, in this regard, remains a point of self-making in the struggle for existence and well-being, it is worth noting that the increasing imbalance

between the local and the outside worlds in terms of life resources has led to the diminution of transmission. In another word, the deep past has become more and more remote, less and less traceable. With respect to ritual and divination in particular, Namu has taught his eldest son and a few other *dongba* in the same area the ritual techniques over the past couple of decades (some of them took part also as the result of state-driven heritage projects as discussed in the introduction). However, the existential meaning behind such practices—that is, the necessity that Namu so strongly felt to stay faithful to and preserve the integrity of his cosmological understandings as indispensable to enable him to survive through the social and political turbulences that characterized most of his life—is almost impossible for him to effectively communicate and pass on.

In this thesis, I have approached the state not as a monolithic entity that bears some sort of coherent logic of functioning, but through the local people's intimate encounters with its variant facets manifested in their everyday lives. For the elderly villagers who lived through the abrupt transition of its entry, the state has been experienced as the critical events I recounted in chapter 1. These were a succession of happenings that people found themselves caught up in without being able to properly assess and comprehend their own situations. Such experiences were destructive not simply because of the violence elicited. The circumstances that led to the violence did not correspond with the local world as it used to be known. This gave rise to bewilderment and internal struggle with intense emotions like despair, shame and fear. More importantly, to *live* those events and their consequences demands local people to shift their perspective, to perceive the state not from afar, but to re-imagine and engage with it right here and right now. This encourages initiatives like bringing the state into presence in the form of Mao posters above *gəkyly*, the household shrine, along with other attempts to bend it to their own ends.

Seen in this light, the state is necessarily implied in the fragments of the deep past. The *naxa* people keep finding its pervasive presence difficult to live with but



unimaginable to live without. To survive it is not a matter of resistance. Nor is it a quest for reconciliation. The state is an indispensable part of the field of struggle in their experience of the world. As it continues to inform the local people of the changing meanings of living well and instructs some on the places to migrate to in search of better prospects, the ongoing everyday encounters with the state require sustained attention both in the context of Zheba and beyond.

Across all levels of the processes of transmission, the tension between self and others, the local and the outside, the domestic and the wild, the familiar and the uncanny is constantly negotiated. This results in a sense of separateness, a liminal or in-between space where boundaries are blurred, and various forces are brought together and worked on in the continuous attempt to balance this tension and create new possibilities for life. In the context of Zheba, where forces of dominance like the Tibetan groups in Zhongdian (Shangri La) and the Lijiang Naxi have been competing to assert their control over the local population for centuries and, where local people are at the same time increasingly subject to further marginalisation in the market economy, the local struggle for separateness is to reclaim life on the margin. It signifies a refusal to remain merely passive, and a desire to live with dignity as humans in accordance to their own terms.

With the accounts of lived experience from people like Namu and the Smart One, I hope to show that such a struggle is first and foremost experienced as *singular* on a personal level. Breaking it down into neat and abstract categories and terms like spirituality, kinship, gender, history, cosmology and etc. inevitably diminishes the agency involved in their struggle for life and crops out the uncertainty, contingency and indeterminacy that shape their existences no less significantly than the more noticeable cultural conventions. The singular experience of struggle is irreducible and therefore needs to be treated in its own right.

In the meantime, the wellbeing of oneself is related to the closely related others

from the moment of birth. It is intricately linked to the prosperity of the house, the care of close relatives such as parents and spouses, the everyday sociality and the transcendent forces of one's locality, and the broader political economic circumstances. At times of predicament when one's connection with others is cut off by illness, political persecution, separation, death and so forth, local people retrieve this sense of interrelatedness through the means of divination and healing rituals. While it would be naïve to assume that any intellectual attempts could fully grasp the totality of lived experience as it is, this thesis suggests that critical moments, situations and events when certain aspects of one's being is most at stake, in other words when one feels that they *have got no choice but* to make certain changes in life, can offer valuable insight into how, as human being, they maximize their capacity to make their world habitable. This encourages methodological innovation to capture the interplay between singularity and interrelatedness in understanding what it means to be human.

Two days after I left Zheba at the end of the second period of my fieldwork, I received a phone call informing me that Namu was approaching the end of his life. I returned to Zheba over night, not as an ethnographer this time, but more as a family friend, or perhaps a bad student who was never going to actually practise the ritual knowledge taught by his teacher. Over the following days, I had the intense experience of accompanying a dying person to complete his journey of life. I was also immersed in rounds of visits paid by people from near and far to acknowledge such a final moment. I have become extremely aware of how easily and repeatedly words can fail our being. Still, as part of my own struggle, I hope this thesis can do justice to all the stories I retold and celebrate, in its limited way, the existences I have come to relate to in the course of its production.

## Glossary of Selected Terms and Phrases

### Chinese (ch.)

fangyan	dialect
xinan guanhua	official tongue of southwest China
hanyu pinyin	Chinese romanization
Putonghua	standard Mandarin Chinese
dongba	name of Naxi ritual specialist (and their ritual practices)
wenhua yichan	cultural heritage
nuosu	an ethnic group officially classified as Yi
naxi xue	the study of Naxi culture
minzu	nationality
zhixi	lineage/subgroup
luohou	backwards
duoyuan yiti	diversity in unity
laoxiang	fellow villager
mu tianwang	mu heavenly king
mixin	superstition
niugui sheshen	mosters and ghosts
Naxi dongba hua	dongba painting of the Naxi people
Naxi zu shougong zaozhi jiyi	Naxi paper making skill
Naxizu remeicuo wu	Naxi ghost dance
pinxiazhongnong	poor and lower middle class peasant
shaoshuminzu bianjiang diqu	ethnic frontier
manjin	a kind of turnip
laodongli	labour
(shengchan)dui	production team
laolupi	a kind of tree bark
renmin gongshe	people's commune
jiti	the collective
suku	speaking bitterness
wenhuazhan	cultural station
zhuazhuangding	coerced conscription
luomadianyin	use mules and horses as payment
huotou	title of local governor
luan	chaos
mulefang	shingled house

shengji	worship with raw offerings
shuji	worship with cooked offerings
guiju	propriety
jixiang	auspicious
fuqi	prosperity
dajiuxing	savior
sanzhongyu	three loyal to
songmingzi	pine fuel
qiuzidong	children granting hole
ping`an	safety
baoyou	protection/blessing
kongjiazi	empty frame
shangmen	(men) marry uxorilocally
zhua guye	capture son in-law
liangliang	aunt
xiaogege	small elder brother
dagege	big elder brother
shen	marvelous
yasuiqian	lucky money
zhonghzuan	technology school/college
shufu	subdue
la	spicy
(shao)kouzui	burn gossip (ritual)
yuanshengtai	authenticity
qianxi	migration
weiren	social behavior
laiwang	correspondence
you zhiqi	have morale
xiangshou	enjoy
fenpei	(job) allocation
danwei	work unit
yike hongxin, liangshou/zhong zhunbei	one red heart, two kinds of preparation
guanxi	relationship/personal connection
ni	fed up
xinxue	core and fruit
siheyuan	quadrangle courtyard
pingdingfang	flat-roof house
shidai nongren	time makes one a fool
shijieguan	world view
jiazhiguan	ethnic value
mubiao	goal
tingtian youming	submit to the hand of fate

yali  
yueshu  
bushun  
tongxinyuan

pressure  
restrain  
uneven  
postman

**Naxi (n.)**

*naχa*

the name most people in Zheba use to call themselves

*hapa*

Han people/dialect

*zuka*

a group of Naxi people

*dyky*

higher valley

*dymæ*

lower valley

*Muts'ydzy*

mountain that supports the sky

*muuu*

married out husband

*duşu*

ominous death

*sak'u*

getting the last breath

*Ts'ozeluuu*

name of the first male human ancestor

*Ts'ehububə*

name of the first female celestial ancestor

*lolo*

a discriminative way to refer to *nuosu* people

*dzjə*

poor and hard

*ŋu*

illness/pain

*əme*

mother

*əpa*

father

*t'ugwu*

they

*tşua*

raised platform (used to be sleeping area)

*mudɣ*

central pillar (sky's prop)

*Dzynazazədzzy*

sacred mountain that connects the sky and the earth in Naxi myth

*gəkyly*

household shrine

*du*

big

*tçi*

small

*du*

male archetypal deity/propriety

*se*

female archetypal deity

*tş'ə*

generation

*suu*

household/life spirit

*suk'y*

ritual that invites *suu*

*k'y*

to invite

*mukə*

Rhododendron leaves used for ritual purification

<i>sudɣ</i>	basket that <i>su</i> lives in
<i>dzæ</i>	rich/continuously grow
<i>lyɣ</i>	weapon of <i>du</i> deity
<i>lytu</i>	ritual script about propriety
<i>k'ua</i>	bowl
<i>nwak'ua</i>	vases for auspicious leaves
<i>nua</i>	auspiciousness/prosperity
<i>nu</i>	male potency
<i>a</i>	female fertility
<i>nwakə</i>	auspicious leaves
<i>no</i>	deity who supervises livestocks
<i>adə</i>	tree bark for paper making
<i>ʂuʂudzæ</i>	blossomy paper
<i>dongba ʂazə</i>	founder of dongba ritual
<i>hazu</i>	hunger/famine
<i>əɣɣ</i>	maternal uncle
<i>tʂ'upadzɪ</i>	burn incense to sky
<i>zuaʂə</i>	lead the horse
<i>ŋædzɪ</i>	sacred woods
<i>gulykaly ioho</i>	good fortune
<i>k'əbilabi ioho</i>	safe and healthy
<i>k'u</i>	year/Chinese zodiac
<i>uəkɣ</i>	northern village entrance
<i>uəmæ</i>	southern village entrance
<i>t'oʂu</i>	pine leaves
<i>cykə</i>	incense leaves
<i>tʂ'u</i>	worship
<i>tʂ'ə</i>	dirty
<i>ʂu</i>	deity oversees the realm of nature
<i>hua</i>	outdoor shelter/outdoor ritual site
<i>mik'u</i>	make fire
<i>χeʂu</i>	deity worship
<i>zuby/əp'yədzɪ by</i>	ancestor worship
<i>muby</i>	sky worship
<i>ts'obə-sa</i>	the origin story of <i>Ts'ozeluuu</i>
<i>χedzɪə</i>	second lunar month
<i>zudzɪ</i>	ancestor tree
<i>zusa</i>	invite ancestor
<i>zuxadzɪ</i>	treating ancestor with offerings
<i>χezip'i</i>	the scroll of gods'/spirits' road
<i>çik'ə</i>	human root
<i>ts'o</i>	barn house

<i>çik'ə be</i>	adoption
<i>muuu be</i>	(men) marry out
<i>puts'it'u</i>	birth celebration
<i>puts'i</i>	special porridge served at birth celebration
<i>duzi</i>	fermented liquor
<i>let'u</i>	drink tea
<i>tş'ət'yby</i>	the origin story of dirt
<i>pakəhok'u</i>	birth gate
<i>hogylx</i>	north
<i>fu</i>	mouse
<i>bu</i>	pig
<i>bylyk'u</i>	(script of) opening rite
<i>şudy</i>	lands of the dead
<i>kumu</i>	hat
<i>Muluisidzidu</i>	river that marks the border between worlds of the living and the dead
<i>mula</i>	ritual ridding of negative effects of gossip, especially for hunters
<i>sidzə lydzə</i>	pictogram
<i>muuby da</i>	sky worship site
<i>k' a</i>	emperor
<i>k'adu</i>	big emperor
<i>k'azo</i>	son of emperor
<i>k'ami</i>	daughter of emperor
<i>Muzok'ohilo</i>	<i>ts'ehububə's</i> maternal cousin and ideal marriage partner
<i>dyby</i>	earth worship
<i>æky tx diu</i>	egg's prop
<i>ap'ibe</i>	lot drawing (divination)
<i>bamædo</i>	shell casting (divination)
<i>k'ube</i>	critical years in life (same as Chinese <i>benminnian</i> )
<i>mə şy</i>	not pure
<i>hæŋu</i>	illness caused by wind
<i>hæby</i>	wind exorcism
<i>tçidzu</i>	pole that drives malevolent wind away
<i>tçidzu ts'i</i>	establish <i>tçidzu</i>

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## **The Gorge Is Deep (Film)**

*Please find the DVD copy of the film attached to the back cover.*