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# **Work and relatedness in rural southwest China**

Submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy  
London School of Economics and Political Science  
University of London  
2003

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a study of a village in rural southwest China. It explores the meaning and interrelations of three major concepts: work, relatedness and modernity, in order to understand everyday life in the village. Broadly, it ponders the questions what is work, what does it produce and to what extent does what you do and where you do it determine who you are? The study pays close attention to context and ‘resonance’. The analysis is firmly rooted in the material environment and ‘praxis’ as well as consideration of verbal discourse. In short, it is argued that work, defined as all significant daily activities of villagers, creates relatedness in the village and outside it, and also defines villagers’ place in the context of the wider modern world.

In the village, rippling circles of action stretch from individual houses and outwards to fields and mountains. This flow of people through these circles is punctuated with greetings to friends and neighbours, exchange of news and gossip, favours and gifts. Relationships are produced through activity in these circles – working in them and moving through them. The complementarities of the work of men and women are emphasised but there is nevertheless a distinguishable division of labour by gender and generation.

In the larger Chinese context, what it is like to be an ‘uncivilised’ and ‘backward’ peasant is discussed with its inherent distinction between ‘a salaried job’ and ‘manual labour’; a salaried job being part of a modernity which young people and their parents on their behalf often aspire to and manual labour being what villagers do to earn their livelihoods.



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**This thesis is dedicated to my extraordinary parents  
Hólmfríður Friðbjörnsdóttir & Hörður Vilhjálmsson**

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## **Acknowledgements**

I want to first and foremost thank the people of Lu village, who will remain anonymous, for their boundless generosity and patience.

In Lufeng I would like to thank all the officials I dealt with at one time or another. I would particularly like to recognise Xia Liang who showed precious understanding of my endeavour.

In Kunming I was on the receiving end of invaluable assistance and hospitality by Yang Hui and the late Wang Zhusheng at Yunnan University. It was they who introduced me to Wu Yinghui of the now Yunnan Normal University (then Kunming Education College) who helped me with the gruelling process of applying for a research permit in Lufeng and consistently showed me goodwill.

During my three years in Kunming, Beijing and Lufeng I have accumulated many friends all of whom have touched this project in various ways. Jaana Korvela, Ulf Carro, Magnus Fiskesjö, Malin Oud, Zhao Hong (Jane), Zhao Hong (Emily), Jiang Ya Bing, Hans Bragi Bernharðsson, Li Hua, Ye Jing Jing, Tricia McFarlin, Jón Egill Eypórsson, Song Qian, Li Yongxiang. Eileen Walsh shared experiences of fieldwork with me in Yunnan and has done various sanity work with me since. Eileen Otis parted with knowledge, cheerfulness and drinks in Kunming and Beijing. Laurel Bossen visited me in Lu village and instead of resenting me for invading her space has encouraged and assisted me in every conceivable way.

At the LSE I gratefully acknowledge the influence of my supervisors Charles Stafford and Chris Fuller. I have also benefited enormously from conversations with Peter Loizos, Stephan Feuchtwang and Rita Astuti. I would also like to acknowledge the debt I owe to all my fellow students at the LSE and in particular Jacquie Spector, Mila Rosenthal, Sarah Knowles, Gonzalo Santos, Yang Shu-Yuan, Asgeir Dybvig, Yang Der-Ruey and Anja Timm.

There are also friends I want to mention which do not neatly fit into the above categories. Steinvör Þöll Árnadóttir and Sigrún Birgisdóttir have been

there for the ‘before and after’ and have unselfishly given good advice and concrete help. Jónína Sigrún Lárusdóttir reminded me who I am and where I come from. Þórður Orri Pétursson deserves a medal for his eternal enthusiasm and willingness to help . Andrew Clarke has shown himself to be an admirable human being since he has known ‘me and Thesis’. I have no idea how to express my gratitude for the patience, constant goodwill and common sense he has shown me. Above all I would like to thank my sister, Hildur Harðardóttir. This write-up would probably never have seen the light of day without her. My biggest debt, however, remains that to my parents, Hólmfríður Friðbjörnsdóttir and Hörður Vilhjálmsson, to whom this humble piece of work is dedicated.

I have enjoyed financial support from the Icelandic Student Loan Scheme (Lánasjóður íslenskra námsmanna), The China Education Commission and an LSE Graduate Research Grants. The contribution of these funding bodies has made this project possible.

## **Introduction**

In September 1996, I packed my backpack and set out to explore life in China's countryside. In my head circled questions formulated from the reading of books and gleaned from various people I had talked to in order to come up with a research proposal. How do global and national policies play out in a small village? How do changes in a far-away urban administrative centre affect everyday life in a rural village? How do people feel, talk and think about the changes these policies bring? Or do they perhaps conceive of things as being much the same?

The questions were big and in the course of two years' language training in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, and Beijing, the national capital, I had time to ponder them some more. By the time I had in September 1998 secured a research permit in Lu village - with patience, persistence and a great deal of luck and assistance from various people - my themes were fundamentally the same but my angle had tilted slightly in the direction of questions which were smaller but essentially following the same direction of inquiry.

Whilst not letting go of my original set of questions, I grounded my focus - especially once I started fieldwork. Looking around me, talking to people and working with them, I started asking how the chores performed every day affect a person and how that person thinks, feels and talks? Is a person who attends to the rhythms of an agricultural cycle different from a person attending to the rhythm of office work in a work unit? What is the difference between working in the countryside and working in a town or a city? What effect does the place in which



you work have on the work done and the meaning of it? What does it mean to be a Chinese peasant today? How does one become a peasant? How does one get away from it? What purpose do the various activities I observe in Lu village serve – if any? What larger picture do they contribute to – or do they? Why do people give each other anything from pig manure to large sums of money? Why is so much work ‘not work’? What is ‘work’? Why does entrepreneur Chang run a factory but spend most of his time fishing, singing karaoke, eating and drinking? These are questions I try to grapple with in the course of what follows.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Place and History**

#### **Why study Lu village?**

In 1938 a young Chinese man, Fei Xiaotong, completed a doctorate in social anthropology from the London School of Economics and returned to China. At the time, China was at war with Japan and Japanese forces had occupied most of the northern part of the country. Fei, therefore, did not return to his native east coast but made his way from London to Hanoi by ship and from Hanoi along the Burma Road to Kunming in Yunnan province. He joined other refugee scholars at the Yenching-Yunnan Research Station - a research cell connected with the then so-called Consolidated University (Lian Da) in Kunming<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See more on the historically important Consolidated University in Israel (1998).



Map 1. China and Yunnan.

In 1938 and 1939, Fei did research in a village he called Lucun [Luts'un]. Exactly 60 years later, I gained permission for fieldwork in the very same village, referred to here as Lu village.



Map 2. Yunnan and Lu village.

Fei's study in 1938 and 1939 was part of a three-village study he conducted in partnership with his colleague Zhang Ziyi. Fei's doctorate had been a study of a village in Jiangsu province where absent landlords rented land out to tenants (Fei 1949 (1939), Fei 1992b). The three villages Fei and Zhang chose in Yunnan were representative of three other types of rural economies with reference to land ownership, industry and commerce. The Jiangsu case described an

economy of tenant farmers. The three Yunnan cases were Lu village [Luts'un], a community of petty landowners; Yi village [Yits'un], an economy of farming and rural industry; and Yu village [Yuts'un], an economy of farming and commerce. They published their study in 'Earthbound China: a study of rural economy in Yunnan', which came out in 1949 in Britain. Fei did most of the fieldwork in Lu village while the Yi village and Yu village studies, were undertaken by Zhang.

For Fei and Zhang, Lu village provided a model of a "self-sufficient village with little sideline production and practically no handicraft industry, characterized by a large population confined to small plots of flatland, earning a living from agriculture and the application of only simple technology" (Fei 1992b: 51).

Fei rose to prominence as a scholar and activist for social change in China but was labelled a counterrevolutionary rightist in the late 1950s - a curse he did not shake off until 1978. Fei has since then steadily regained stature, and to this day writes and gives lectures. He revisited Lu village briefly in 1990 (Guo & He 1995; Qian, Du & Shi 1995) and I was fortunate enough to meet him in spring 1999 in Jiangsu to compare notes.

When I came to Lu village, I was asked whether I knew the Canadian 'Bao Sen Bo Shi' – Dr 'Bao Sen'. Slightly sheepish for having planted myself 'in somebody else's field site', I managed to get Dr 'Bao Sen's' address in Canada. This was my first contact with Laurel Bossen, associate professor at McGill University. Bossen has conducted research in the area since 1989, during which time she has made several visits and completed detailed household surveys based



on a random sample of people from Lu village and its satellite villages. Her overarching goal has been to understand “how gender systems related to agricultural systems, both of which have always varied within China, and to see how the revolutionary changes of the late twentieth century affected women in their relation to men and farms” (Bossen 2002: 5).

To have Fei’s account from the late thirties provides invaluable historical depth and context to Lu village. Bossen has painstakingly tracked down official statistics as well as providing precious insight into the lives of women, old and young, in Lu village. I am hugely indebted to both of these scholars. As a way of perhaps carving out a niche for myself, however, I concentrate here predominantly on my own observations and data so as to complement the work already done and not replicate it.

### **Fieldwork and methodology**

The official social sciences in China are generally geared towards the goals of the Chinese Communist Party and foreign scholars are often viewed – perhaps especially by local cadres – with some suspicion.<sup>2</sup> There are hence obstacles to research in China to be overcome. I spent a great deal of time and energy explaining my being in the village, and gaining people’s trust was a great deal of hard work. Needless to say, this thesis would never have been written if it hadn’t been for the many people who opened their homes and hearts to me and treated me with untold kindness.

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<sup>2</sup> See Gene Cooper (2000) for an interesting account of doing research in mainland China.

During fieldwork, I lived with the Chang<sup>3</sup> family. The Changs are probably the wealthiest family in the village. They were not left with much choice in the matter of housing me, however. Having conscientiously worked my way through the bureaucracy to obtain necessary permits and liase with appropriate officials I was unceremoniously left in their care upon my arrival in a motorcade of Mitsubishi jeeps. Much as this arrangement pleased me, as I was able to live and sleep in Lu village in the family house of one of the descendants of those with whom Fei Xiaotong had stayed sixty years earlier, I often felt profound discomfort having ‘forced’ my way into these good people’s home in this manner. The Changs’ stoic acceptance of my presence has earnt them my eternal respect and gratitude.

The period of fieldwork itself lasted twelve months, from September 1998 to October 1999. During this period I came and went between Lu village and the province capital, Kunming. I armed myself with two years’ training in Chinese, a bunch of pristine notebooks and the mindset of learning and sharing. The people I followed around day in and day out, picking beans, eating and washing, learnt at least as much about me as I learnt about them. My methodology, in short, consisted of speaking to anyone I could and not pushing those who wouldn’t too much. I went around learning how to cook, how to sow seedlings, weeding, looking at pigs, watching television, talking and eating. I tried to fit as much into everyday life as I possibly could to minimise the nuisance and disruption I inevitably caused. I do not pretend to have captured the complexity of Lu village

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout for the names of villagers so as to protect the privacy of individuals.

here. I have concentrated on the whole and the everyday, and organised my narrative in a way that I feel is true to my experience of the place that is Lu village.

### **The lay of land and people**

Lu village grows around a fork in a main road leading from the county seat of Lufeng to a large village in the bottom of a long green valley. The constant traffic of minivans, bicycles, mopeds, motorcycles and horse carts comes through and loops around the village outskirts. The main village street is paved but narrow. Vehicles pass through it slowly, picking up speed as they join the main road. Here stands the elementary school. Children aged 6-12 from Lu village and surrounding hamlets go to school here. Outside its gates, horse-cart drivers wait for business and usually someone is here, selling something; Mrs Liu with her bitter olives (gan lan), pens, pencils and sweets in a basket; a peddler with ice-lollies; a man with huge steamers on his wagon, selling sweet and savoury stuffed buns (bao zi); one day a truck filled with potatoes, another day a truck filled with watermelons.

The man who comes through occasionally mending shoes, umbrellas and watches pitches up further along the village main street, in front of the village administrative office (ban shi chu or da dui). There is a narrow concrete platform along the street against the wall of the administrative office where people from Lu village and surrounding hamlets sometimes sell pork, water buffalo meat, fish and homemade bean curd. People gather here in clusters and spread to the steps



leading up to the kiosk next to the office. Old men in blue Mao suits smoke and talk. Sometimes a Chinese chessboard is pulled out. This always draws a crowd offering comments and advice to players. Grandchildren shoot in and out between adults. Grandmothers sit and sew shoes or shell beans. Younger women pause for a chat, usually with knitting needles in hand or young children in arms or on backs.

In the early morning, pine-scented smoke rises out of chimneys filling the streets. The running of water and the sound of sweeping brooms can be heard and glimpsed behind and through courtyard gates. Men smoke bamboo pipes (yan tong) on doorsteps and cough the chesty coughs of heavy smokers. The odd person can be seen mounting a bicycle and heading to the market town where they work. On a market day, bean curd peddlers roll their hand-pushed carts out and also head in the direction of the market town. The kiosk next to the administrative office rolls up its metal door and opens for business.

As the day wears on, movement through the main street increases but is never as loud and fast as the traffic encircling the village coming and going between county town and the villages in the valley. People walk up and down the main road and cut across it to use the many unpaved side paths, which lead to other houses, pig sties, vegetable gardens and fields.

Lu village is the largest of seven villages under the administration of a single office based here. The Lu village office is in turn the lowest government unit in an administrative chain that answers to Jinshan Township, then Lufeng

County, Chuxiong Prefecture, Yunnan Province and ultimately the People's Government in Beijing.

According to the 1998 land registry I dutifully copied by hand from the administrative office, the total population of Lu village and its satellite villages was 3,158 people in 788 households, each household consisting of around four people on average. Lu village itself had 1,296 inhabitants in 319 households. My fieldwork focused on Lu village itself and unless otherwise stated, my observations refer to that unit of analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Lu village is divided into seven production teams (sheng chan dui) that vary in size from 28 to 68 households, or between 114 and 258 people. Land per person ranges from 0.68 mu<sup>5</sup> per person to 0.97 mu per person, depending on which team they're in. This has remained constant since the village was divided up into teams during the communal era (early 1950s till late 1970s).

Great many villages in China – at least those subject to anthropological study – are single surname villages. Lu village, however, boasts forty-seven surnames. The villagers who have been here the longest, claim to trace their ancestry back to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). One informant from the family that I am most frequently told are the first settlers in Lu village, tells me that her family can indeed trace its ancestry back to the Ming. She claims her ancestors (zu xian) came from Shandong province to the north. “And they were not farmers (mei dang nong min); they were educated (you wen hua de ren),” she exclaims

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<sup>4</sup> Fei used the same unit of analysis but Bossen (2002) in some cases takes what she calls Greater Lu village – i.e. Lu village and its seven satellite villages - as her unit of analysis.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Mu’ is the common measure of land in China. One mu is 0.067 hectares or 0.17 acres. One mu is further divided into ‘gong’. One mu equals 2.6 gong.

proudly. Her grandmother, who is walking beside us as this information is conveyed, points to a bridge down the road and tells me their ancestors built the bridge.

In the Lufeng County Annals [Lufeng Xianzhi] (1997), there is mention of a Wang Xi Gun from Lu village. He lived during the last days of the Ming, having been born in 1598 and died in 1647. His ancestry is traced to Huayin county in Shanxi province. An ancestor of his came to Yunnan province on a military campaign and for his contribution had been given higher rank. His army was stationed in Lufeng and he settled in Lu village. Wang Xi Gun was a scholar and an official. He passed exam after exam in the official Chinese examination system. He went to Beijing to do the final imperial examination, succeeded and was appointed to the Imperial Academy. When his father died he returned to Lu village to bury him. While in mourning he proposed to build a bridge, the very bridge pointed out to me, crossing the river between Lu village and the market town, Lufeng.

There are many gaps in my reconstruction of the history of settlement in Lu village. Yunnan's integration into the Chinese Empire from the 13th century onwards brought not only trade routes into the Empire's embrace but also rich natural mineral resources; gold, silver and copper. Mining and trading remained important in Yunnan throughout the ages. The province's relationship to central government, however, remained problematic with Yunnan's identity of being a far-away and 'wild' place inhabited by minority ethnic groups.

At the turn of the 19th century, cracks began to open in the Manchus' Qing Dynasty. As a geographically and politically peripheral province, Yunnan felt the reverberations acutely. The economy nosedived and the Qing Empire, desperate to claw back at its financial losses, increased taxes, further worsening the situation in Yunnan – and indeed elsewhere. Mines started closing down, serious unemployment and rioting followed. Ethnic minorities such as the Yi and the Miao rebelled. The Taiping movement began in neighbouring Guanxi in 1850 and spread to Yunnan and across the country. But the most serious and devastating confrontations in this period were those between the Han and the Muslim Hui (Wang 1995, Gladney 1989). The aggression now referred to as the Muslim Rebellion took place by the Yunnan mines in their decline most ferociously between 1855 and 1873. Wang (1995) estimates that the Han Hui conflict affected the lives of five out of the then eight million people living in Yunnan at the time<sup>6</sup>. The bubonic plague also hit Lufeng in 1871 and 1872

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<sup>6</sup> One of the larger mines in Yunnan was the Shiyang silver mine relatively close to Lu village with 30,000 workers. Incidents are reported from Shiyang in 1821, 1854 and 1855 (Wang 1995) where scuffles among Hui Muslim and Han Chinese about money-lending, women and honour caused armed fights that left thousands dead as these spilled into neighbouring villages. As the mine's ore began to diminish in the 1840s, a new mine adjacent to the old one started to flourish where a Hui technician introduced a more effective way to smelt ores. Han miners who had lost their jobs at Shiyang's previous excavation applied to join the new quarry's 1,800 employees but were turned down, creating bitterness and increased tension. The incidents were further inflamed by partisan interference from biased officials. A full on violent conflict ensued with the Han pursuing Hui forces through Linan, Chuxiong, Guantong and Anning killing, looting and setting fire to Hui houses and villages in these areas. Lu village would have been right in the path of the devastation. Han Chinese who did not turn against the Hui also fell foul of the anti-Hui sentiment and suffered the same fate. Yaozhou, also not far from Lu village, saw an incident in 1848 where several Hui were arrested for planning a robbery at the salt well. A Han investigator, alerted to reports of a secret Hui arms build-up, was murdered. The killing triggered a wave of violence leaving 327 Han casualties and 2,680 homes burnt to the ground. The Hui side suffered 65 deaths or injuries and 260 torched

bringing “massive depopulation” (Bossen 2002: 181). People born in this period and interviewed in 1938 and 1939 (Fei & Zhang 1949) spoke of the Lu village of their childhood as consisting of merely a few households.

In 1938, the Temple of the Earth, belonging to all villagers, was the largest property holder in Lu village. The Temple had acquired a great deal of its property “by reversion of land of many villagers who perished during the Moslem rebellion of 1855-73” (Fei & Zhang 1949: 54). In the late 19th century, many local affairs were conducted through societies and associations such as the Temple of the God of the Earth in Lu village, who owned land and used the rental income of that land for public services (Bossen 2002: 313). One of my informants, a young mother, told me of the existence of the Temple in the village but that it had been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. One of Bossen’s older informants told her about the Temple, which had a big Buddha statue. After Liberation in 1949, villagers struck the Buddha down “with one blow on the back.” (Bossen 2002: 339). The Temple has never been resurrected but during my time in the village, some villagers go to the Temple in Lufeng on special occasions.

Due to these disasters, land was up for grabs in Lu village around 1900 and many landless outsiders came and settled. Their provenance seems to have been mainly from other areas of Yunnan and Sichuan province. By 1938, when Fei arrives, however, all land has been claimed.

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houses (Wang 1995: 11). In 1855 a multi-ethnic rebellion encompassing the Yi, Hui and Miao peoples took place in Yaozhou.

The Burma Road, passing Lu village, opened in December 1938 and was an important lifeline for the Guomindang enclave during the Sino-Japanese War. With most rivers and streams in Yunnan being non-navigable due to the mountainous terrain of the province, transport is very reliant on roads. Fei describes the state of the roads connecting villages in Yunnan in 1939 as “often badly paved or not paved at all and unsuitable for vehicles, although occasionally some buffalo carts may be seen dragging along the muddy trails. Loads are carried either on human backs or on horseback. The former seems more common” (Fei & Zhang 1949: 12).

Fei was struck by this most common mode of transport as it also reflected clearly the glaring gap between the wealthy and the poor. Having just arrived in Lu village, been warmly welcomed and invited to lunch by the headmaster of the village primary school, he describes his shift of mood “when we saw, stumbling along the roughly paved paths of the village, lines of heavily laden coolies with lean hungry faces and in worn, ragged clothing. On their backs they carried huge blocks of salt, burdens beneath which their bodies were bent almost double. Inquiries directed to our new friends elicited the information that these people were salt-carriers, whose job it was to transport salt on their backs from the well to the district town – more than a full day’s walk” (Fei 1949: 41). The chasm between the haves and the have-nots in Lu village is a constant theme in Fei and Bossen’s discussion of the Republican period. It is a theme relevant to present day Lu village as well, although the desperate poverty of the past has abated.

Lu village has both prospered and suffered from its closeness to the Burma High Road. On the one hand, it brought bandits and bubonic plague, but on the other, opportunities for non-farm work, such as transport, inn-keeping and trading. Lu village lies some one hundred kilometres west of Kunming, the province capital of Yunnan. It is a couple of kilometres south of the county capital of Lufeng, which today is a vibrant market town of roughly 20,000 people. When Fei Xiaotong visited in 1939 he describes Lu village as sitting in an oval plain, the south end of which is passed by the important Burma Road. In 1939, the walk from the Road to the village took 30 minutes (Fei & Zhang 1949).

The Sino-Japanese War and the Communist struggle also took people away from Lu village. China was declared a Republic in 1912 but instead of hailing in a new era of strong central government working with local officials, the period was instead one of great insecurity. The Nationalists and the Communists struck an alliance in the face of a fragmented China, both in terms of local warlord militias and foreign concessions. The alliance proved a complex and fraught one with internal fighting which boiled over in 1927 resulting in the Communist Long March. A full on war with Japan in 1937 dashed all hopes of any semblance of stability in Yunnan. Japan took northern China and the strategic east coast with its essential harbours, effectively sealing the country off from the outside world. The Communists regrouped in Yan'an in Shaanxi province and the Nationalists retreated to the wartime capital of Chongqing in Sichuan province, bordering Yunnan.

Mass migration across China followed as people showed their allegiance with their feet. Yunnan was firmly in the Nationalist fold. The province was governed from 1927 and throughout the war by Long Yun, a local warlord of the Lolo tribe. Long Yun resisted censorship laws imposed by the Nationalist government, which made wartime Kunming the most important intellectual centre in China. Entire classes of university students from the Japanese occupied north and east literally trudged across China to reach the newly established Consolidated University in Kunming. In 1937 and 1938, 60,000 refugees added themselves to a Kunming population of 147,000 (Spence 1999).

With the end of the Sino-Japanese War, the Communists and the Nationalists had it out with the ultimate conquest of the Communists and the escape of the Guomindang to Taiwan. Mao Zedong stood atop the Heavenly Gate on Tiananmen Square in Beijing and declared the foundation of the People's Republic of China on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1949.

Lu village was liberated by the People's Army in 1951 and underwent agrarian reform the following year. Almost a quarter (24 percent) of the population were classified as landlords or rich peasants, half as average and the remainder (27 percent) as poor peasants, labourers or workers (Qian, Shi & Du 1995). Collectivisation followed in 1954 and the people's communes were set up in 1958. I have little information about the actual impact of collectivisation in Lu village. My informants were reluctant to discuss this period except for in the most general terms and I did not push the issue<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> See Bossen (2002) for some personal narratives of villagers' from this period.



### **A new era?**

There were movements in the Lu village economic climate throughout the seventies away from the strictly collective way of earning a living and something a bit more individualistic. In the 1970s a team of villagers was sent out for the collective to look for work outside the village. They built kilns for brick and tile production and also engaged in construction work. They reaped greater benefits for their initiative than those who remained at home.

When the first format of the Household Contract Responsibility System (bao chan dao hu) was introduced in the spring of 1978, however, hot debates erupted amongst villagers (Qian, Shi & Du 1995). Some saw the new system as sensible while others prevaricated anxiously debating whether the system was in tune with the Communist doctrine. Early in 1980, the Prefecture Government affirmed that linking food production to production team, household and individuals was a proper practice of the Communist principle of 'distribution according to work' (an lao fen pei) and that this was indeed different from 'working on one's own' (fen tian dan gan). That spring, the seven production teams in Lu village were split into three teams that kept going as before and four that tried a form of the new system with a view to maximising output. The latter four teams outperformed the former three and for the autumn harvest that year, all seven production teams adopted the Household Contract Responsibility System. A year later, autumn 1981, a statement was finally issued from Yunnan Province Party Secretary, declaring that the new policies were now to be popularised and were fully supported and endorsed by the Party.

Various modes of farm management have come out of the adoption of the Household Contract Responsibility System in Lu village. The majority is that of the self-employed where farm work is done solely by household members with additional labour being sought on an exchange basis during ploughing and harvest periods. Subcontracting of land occurs on a very limited scale where a household has been allocated land but does not have the labour force to farm it. This happens in the case of elderly people with children living elsewhere or when sidelines or other occupations are too profitable to warrant engaging in farming. Hiring outside labour for ploughing and harvesting is becoming increasingly common for the same reasons. Most people hold on to their land, as there is a sense of security in it, but a tiny minority choose to abandon farming altogether and return their land to the co-operative. There was only one such household in Lu village in the late nineties and in that case the family was busy running a successful manufacturing business.

By 1982, as the communes had been dismantled, village income from sources other than agriculture stood at 48.5 percent. According to Fei (1992a) and Qian, Shi & Du (1995) of 477 able-bodied labourers, only 270 were needed for agricultural production. 130 of the surplus labourers were exported to work in the building trade which was booming by then. Those who remained behind also looked for jobs and expanded household sidelines in pig rearing, bean curd making, transport with horses and later mini-vans and tractors, the production of rice noodles and so on.

The great majority of people in Lu village are registered as farmers. This reflects the Chinese government's system of household registration (hu kou), which distinguishes between a rural and an urban household registration. Urban registration is hard to come by for rural residents but highly desirable. The migration out of Lu village is to bigger places with urban registrations. People in Lu village have the less desirable rural registration and are further categorised into farmers (nong min) or non-farmers (fei nong ye). In 1998, out of a total population of 3,158 in the Lu village administrative area, only 60 were registered as non-farmers (fractionally more than 2 percent).

Laurel Bossen, during numerous visits to Lu village since 1989 (Bossen 2002) conducted random sample household surveys, which revealed a lower proportion of farmers than the official statistics. While all but one family in Lu village retain their farmland, some of them do not farm the land themselves, passing it to family members or, mostly unofficially, to tenant farmers.

Bossen's statistics are collected by a personally conducted, household survey, therefore reflecting what a household actually does, whereas the state census merely recognises the registered status of the household members. Today, practically every household in Lu village farms, but household members also engage in various cottage industries such as larger scale pig-rearing, bean curd making and basket weaving in addition to occasional day labour in the nearby market town. In 1997, just under a third of the population of Lu village were primarily farmers (Bossen 2002).

The discrepancy between these two sets of figures does beg the question; what do the non-farmers do? The answer of course is a range of things; transport, construction, commerce, factory work. More and more people are engaged in these market activities or commute to work in the market town. Lufeng is only roughly 2 km from the village and has a middle school, banks and other service units. There is also a steel factory, an electric battery factory, a scissor factory and a fertiliser factory. Other people work in the afore-mentioned cottage industries such as basket weaving and bean curd making, which are closely linked to farming. They make use of farm products and work is frequently carried out by members of farming households.

Indeed, the reality is more complex still. Households seek a diversity of income sources. A household might include a farm, which various members of the family work on to different degrees, and a related-cottage industry (e.g. making ice lollies). Other members of the family might work in the local factory or drive a minivan, though they too may help out on the farm, especially during the harvests.

This can clearly be seen in statistics from Qian, Shi & Du (1995) on the proportion of manufacturing and services in the village's total income. In 1982, this amounted to 28%, rising steadily throughout the eighties and reaching 58% in 1990. The last figure is a turning point as it decidedly shifts villagers' main income from agriculture to secondary and tertiary industry.

Despite this, however, life in Lu village in the late 1990s has a certain agricultural focus. Most households keep their land and farm it alongside

engaging in other perhaps more lucrative activities. In 1984, one household in Lu village handed their land back to the co-operative and by 1990, there was still only a total of three such cases in Lu village and its satellite villages (Qian, Shi & Du 1995). In 1998, there was still only one household in Lu village that had returned its land and relied entirely on other sources of income<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> This household did, however, retain their vegetable gardens.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Theoretical Perspective**

I was guided, during fieldwork, by the questions set out in my Introduction. Knowing history had been pieced together to an extent by Fei and Bossen, I concentrated on the here and now. The dynamic of everyday life was what intrigued me. In the end I isolated two key concepts – kinship and economy - which I felt were all-pervasive in daily life and were useful organising my observations of what I had seen, experienced and participated in during my stay in Lu village. These concepts, of kinship and economy, are rooted in the traditional concerns of social anthropology.

For a fresh start, influenced by recent writings of Carsten (1991, 1997, 2000), Stafford (2000b), Astuti (2000) and others, I use the word ‘relatedness’, which holds at its core social relationships engaged in on an everyday basis, be they with kin or non-kin. Similarly, in order to break out of the straitjacket of discussing only activities that are clearly definable as economic, I have chosen the term ‘work’ to denote all activities engaged in through the course of a normal day. While pulling these two key concepts out, I would at the same time emphasise their inextricability from their environment (Ingold 2000). I also attempt to analyse not only people’s words but also the contexts in which they are uttered (Wikan 1990, 1992).

In this section, I review the concepts of work and relatedness to elaborate upon what I mean by these concepts while seeking to place them in their historical and theoretical context within anthropology as an academic discipline.

## **Kinship and economy**

Economy and kinship and the relationship between the two is one of the oldest issues of anthropology as an academic discipline – and subject of much debate. The key terms used in the title of this thesis – work and relatedness – anchor this thesis firmly within what has been written about economy and kinship ever since Fortes. It is an intimidating prospect – but also a very exciting one. I have outlined the main characteristics of the formal economy of Lu village in Chapter One. I will now turn to the anthropological writings that have informed my analysis of everyday life in Lu village.

One would be justified in believing that the study of kinship started with Fortes. This is where most of those who write about kinship start. Whether theories have been formulated in refuting or amending Fortes' statements or in emulation of them, his influence on the study of kinship is beyond question.

Fortes (1949) sums up his analysis of the Tallensi thus: "Kinship taken as a system of values ... is unique in that it is the master principle both for particular activities and for the social structure as a whole" (p. 340). This places kinship in the pivotal position of being the foundation, so to speak, upon which the entire social structure rests.

Logically following on from this, Fortes sees the social universe of 'ego' as divided into two distinct moral spheres, one of kinship and the familial domain where the 'axiom of amity' ties individuals together, and the other of non-kinship, where these moral rules do not apply.

Fortes admits that the morality of kinship enters the territory of the neighbourhood of non-kin but he still adheres to the rigorously bounded kinship units and writes neighbourliness off as superficial to the basic structure of the morality of kinship. It must be noted, however, that Fortes notes the 'overlap of neighbourly relations with kinship relations' but does not see it as a 'structural convergence' but a 'spilling over' of the axiom of amity into the area of neighbourliness. Fortes' detailed ethnography did not allow him to ignore this 'spillage' but in organising his data along structuralist / functionalist lines, he may have exaggerated the rigidity of the two spheres of kin and non-kin. This is particularly evident when Fortes refers to the growing cities in Taliland and how "lineage, local, totemic, and cult divisions are swept away" and the "generalized sentiment of amity" reaches beyond kinship boundaries (Fortes 1969: 248).

In 1956, Worsley wrote a prize winning essay re-evaluating Fortes' analysis of his Tallensi data. Instead of seeing the system of kinship as the foundation for the rest of the social structure, he uses Fortes' own data to show how kinship adapts to the underlying system of economic organisation and co-operation. It is not kinship, which comes first and the economic secondary but vice versa.

Among the Tallensi, a network of interlocking ties bind people together and this multiplicity of ties is primarily expressed through the idiom of kinship. But this does not, according to Worsley, make kinship the primary system in Tallensi society. The importance of kinship among the Tallensi stems from the



way “the unifying moral function of kinship ... subsumes the different systems of ties.” (Worsley 1956: 63).

Worsley also raises a critique, which has since become one of the main arguments against the structuralist / functionalist position of a lack of historical context and an overemphasis on equilibrium which excludes all historical change (see also e.g. Leach 1961, Carsten 1997). “Movement”, Worsley says, “as seen by Fortes is a cyclical process: mechanical fission and reintegration are depicted as cycles which persist through time.” (Worsley 1956: 66). Change remains unexplained and unaccounted for.

These arguments are reiterated and taken even further by Leach whose critique of Fortes, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard took on legendary proportions even at the time (Hugh-Jones & Laidlaw 2000). Leach (1954) criticised the concept of society as a ‘bounded social structure’ gravitating constantly towards equilibrium as this failed to take into account the change occurring in societies over time, a historical dimension, and also, importantly for this thesis in particular, that it did not tally with the social reality he observed on the ground in Southeast Asia – and he suspected it did not in fact make sense in many parts of Africa either.

Leach, like Worsley, came to the conclusion that the economic system was indeed a priori and he explained this through analysing external material constraints and ecology, most evidently in ‘Pul Eliya’ (1961a) which is unapologetically written as an assault on descent theory and the ‘supremacy’ of kinship advocated by Fortes in particular. As Leach says in his Introduction:

“The interpretation of ideal legal rules is at all times limited by such crude nursery facts as that water evaporates and flows downhill. It is in this sense that I want to insist that the student of social structure must never forget that the constraints of economics are prior to the constraints of morality and law.” (Leach 1961a: 9).

And Leach went further in his insistence of the study of the material. To him, it was far more than merely natural and / or man-made context. It was “not simply a passive backcloth to social life; the context itself is a social product and is itself ‘structured’; the people who live in it must conform to a wide range of rules and limitations simply to live there at all.” (Leach 1961a: 306). This is something I aim to take into account in the following analysis of Lu village.

A somewhat different strand emerges in Bloch (1973). Recognising the critique offered by Worsley, Leach and others, Bloch focuses on Fortes’ notion of morality as a force of its own. Bloch distinguishes various time scales of social action. According to him, it is in the variety of time scales, that the basis of social and economic life lies. Kinship is a prime example of a ‘moral social relationship’ and its essence, according to Fortes, is ‘sharing’ without ‘reckoning’ (Fortes 1969: 238). Fortes contrasts this relationship with debt repayment within a specified time. Sahlins (1972) calls the relationship Fortes refers to as, ‘sharing without reckoning’, ‘generalised reciprocity’. Bloch takes this notion on to deduct that balance is not sought in the short term in such relationships as they are assumed to endure. It is assumed they are long term and on average and over time the exchange will balance out. The actor is then forced into an imbalanced relationship by morality. Bloch therefore concludes that the crucial effect of

morality is long term reciprocity and that the long term effect is achieved because it is not reciprocity which is the motive but morality.

So Fortes' division of 'ego's' world into moral kin and non-kin, where different rules apply, is replaced by Bloch 'ego's' world along a continuum of short term and long term relationships. Morality resides towards the long term end of the continuum and kinship is there as well. But the framework is somewhat less rigid than that of Fortes' as the morality lies in the long term rather than kinship so there is leeway for relationships other than kinship to inhabit that end of the continuum. As Bloch puts it clearly: "If the effect of morality is the existence of long term commitments then there is no sharp break between kinship and other commitments but rather we should regard kinship as the end of a continuum consisting of commitments of different terms"<sup>9</sup> (Bloch 1973: 77).

It is Firth, however, who most clearly brings home the interconnectedness of economy and kinship by deducting that "... while the material dimension of the economy is regarded as a basic feature, the significance of the economy is seen to lie in the transactions of which it is composed and therefore in the quality of relationships which these transactions create, express, sustain and modify" (Firth 1967: 4). Drawing on Mauss' (1967) influential book, 'The Gift', Malinowski's discussion of reciprocity and 'the role of things' (1984 [1922], 1962 [1926]) and his own data from the Tikopia (1959) Firth brings out the complexity of transactions and relationships. He argues that there are 'significant areas of choice and uncertainty' in giving and receiving and that "in the existence of this

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<sup>9</sup> See further discussion in Chapter Six.

uncertainty lie some of the most delicate problems of procedure for those engaged in the transactions.” (Firth 1967: 10).

### **Kinship and economy in China**

As the study of kinship in anthropology must start with Fortes so the study of Chinese kinship must start with Freedman. In 1958, Maurice Freedman published his influential book, ‘Lineage Organization in Southeastern China’. With the appearance of this book, the Chinese lineage (zu) was welcomed as another piece, which fit perfectly into the descent theorists’ (Fortes and others’) giant jigsaw.

China was more complex, diverse and hierarchical than the African societies which study had given birth to descent theories. The fact that descent theory could make sense of Chinese society further enhanced its value and frankly, Freedman’s work is of undisputed importance in shedding light on the lineage and its central role in Chinese kinship. However, as elsewhere, further accounts of what Chinese kinship is all about started coming out of the woodwork.

Margery Wolf (1972) elaborated eloquently on the importance of women’s role in the lineage as the perpetual outsider and offered the concept of “the uterine family”, consisting of a mother and her sons. Watson (1985) has also criticised the anthropological focus on lineage in China as masking the daily realities of economic and political inequality. Drawing on her fieldwork in the New Territories, she describes the complex relationship between descent and

class, which encompasses control over resources such as land as well as local decision-making, marketing arrangements as well as important social and cultural differences.

Along with different theoretical perspectives and units of analysis there is also to consider in China, the immense changes, which have taken place in the last sixty years or so, with unprecedented state intervention into Chinese people's family patterns. In pre-communist times, the Chinese family was "based on Confucian prescription for a large, complex and extended or joint family" (Croll 1985: 3). Young men were encouraged to have sons to fulfil their obligation to their father and their father's lineage. Motherhood increased the status of women as well – especially if they had sons. The ideal was that of five generations living together – hardly ever attained in real life (Croll 1985, Baker 1979) as households ultimately fragment and people simply do not live long enough.

These Confucian values were vigorously attacked in communist China, where comradeship was promoted above all else (Vogel 1965). Modern Chinese families in urban settings are increasingly moving towards neolocal residence although they often lean towards the patrilineal model when families are more complicated and more individuals need to be accommodated (Davis & Harrell 1993).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This is also the case with the distribution of land in the countryside. See also Bossen (2002).

## **Kinship and relatedness**

There has been a great deal of reflection about the categories we use to describe the societies we study. Clifford and Marcus (1986) pointed out how text-based anthropological research is and that the form or tradition of writing directs our findings more than we might imagine. The sixties saw the formalist-substantivist debate where arguments raged about terminology and whether we could transpose concepts across cultures or needed to be more sensitive. The debate about nature and culture, the biological and the social in a similar vein rethinks the meaning we attach to these concepts and shows how as anthropologists we are always at risk of being culturally insensitive in categorising concepts.

With what has been referred to as the end of grand theories in anthropology (Kuper 1983), the category of kinship has been seriously challenged – as have other major categories that make up anthropological theory: economics, politics and religion. Some scholars have even gone so far as to advocate the abandonment of the study of kinship altogether (Schneider 1984). A more sensible approach – and one advocated by most – would be to recognise that the boundaries of established categories are not as clear cut as we often assume they are but we should refrain from discarding them altogether, as they provide a useful framework for discussion.

Having said that, I have, following Carsten (1991, 1997, 2000) and others, chosen to use the term relatedness as opposed to kinship in this thesis. I would, however, want to emphasise that the term was coined, not in opposition to the

more structured study of kinship but rather as a complementary and a more inclusive way of looking at kinship in a particular place. Relatedness focuses on the words people use about being related and emphasises the daily practice of kinship. It encompasses a lot of diverse activities such as sharing food and working for each other, which are seen as activities that build up relatedness in a particular place.

An important element of thinking about kinship in the terms of relatedness is that its boundaries are more malleable. The way people think about kinship on an everyday basis may change over time, or over a life cycle (Astuti 2000); it may include non-kin and it may also exclude kin (as in biological kinship). In short, relatedness emphasises the day-to-day making of kinship where individuals are active participants in producing kinship and encapsulates a degree of fluidity. Relatedness, as Stafford (2000b) points out, brings the family – especially women and the role they play within and outside the family – to the fore, and is additionally considerable hard work. It is from this last point especially that I take my cue in the following pages.

Carsten's concept of relatedness grows out of her fieldwork on the Malay island of Langkawi. There are similarities between Lu village and Langkawi as described by Carsten. Langkawi is effectively a community of migrants. Men go out fishing and also migrate between the island and the mainland in search of work. The pattern is one of men at sea or on the mainland, and women on the island and in the home. Kinship is hence a process where a great deal of diversity is assimilated through feeding, living together, fostering and marriage. Lu village

likewise accommodates families of many surnames who have moved there at various historical moments in time. The present trend is that of men commuting out of the village for work while women stay behind and farm the land. I argue that similarly to Langkawi, kinship is formed between Lu villagers primarily through exchanges of food and labour.

Women are at the working core of the process of kinship as described by Carsten, and their activities have a political dimension as well as a domestic one as they establish a village and reproduce it. There is a continuum between the domestic and the external world and the kinship described in terms of relatedness “in fact involves every aspect of social life” (Carsten 1997: 283).

The use of the term relatedness in part comes as a response to Schneider’s ‘Critique of the Study of Kinship’ (1984) questioning the traditional anthropological definition of kinship. Schneider sees the distinction between the biological and the social as fundamental to definitions of kinship.

Schneider argues that in anthropological writings, kinship is defined as “the shared substance that results from the act of procreation” (Schneider 1984). Anthropology, created predominantly in the West, assumes that social aspects of a relationship can be separated from, or added to, a biological substratum. For Schneider, the analytical significance of defining kinship in these terms lies in the universality it presupposes – which he rejects. Kinship – as defined to the date of his writing (1984) is hence not a valid cross-cultural category as it encompasses bias by definition and ignores other relationships which may be important in some



cultures. He hence ends by arguing for abandoning the study of kinship altogether.

But Carsten perseveres with a more flexible approach to the study of kinship using the more inclusive term of relatedness. In Langkawi, feeding creates and transforms kinship, and it does this by creating and transforming the blood bodies are made of. In Lu village, women are important in the creation of kinship as they are so often outsiders to lineages but the exchanges of food, chat and work that takes place between women is central to the social fabric of the place.

### **The meaning of work in China**

China's best-known philosopher, Confucius, saw work (lao) as consisting of moral and ritual activities as well as manual or physical labour. In addition, he never saw it as an isolated activity, but rather as something done for someone else. "He used the term 'work' (lao) to talk about labors performed by a filial son for his parents, for example ..." (Mann 2000: 18).

Work in its broad terms has also always been highly gender specific. Womanly work (nu gong) was the virtue of a respectable woman and early texts dictate that womanly work was spinning and weaving. Sericulture (sang) was the counterpart of agriculture (nong) – the first, women's work 'inside', the latter, men's work, 'outside' (Mann 2000, Jacka 1997).

Work organisation has also changed spectacularly in China over the past sixty years. A feudal system of landed gentry and landless peasants was

transformed with the Communist Revolution. Urban China was divided into work units (dan wei). Those with a work unit, working for a state or a collective enterprise, were issued with a work permit (gong zuo zheng), which served as an identity card until such cards were introduced in the late eighties. The identity card was a passport of sorts (Harrell 2000) to social services as well as ration coupons. In rural China, clusters of village households formed production teams, where people were issued with work points that entitled them to payment – predominantly in kind from the collective.

Turning to the concept of work in present day China, the economic reforms of the eighties fundamentally changed this. Work has become more confusing (Henderson et al, 2000) as employment is not secured or guaranteed, contract and temporary work is common and everywhere, the household is now the focus of economic activity. Agriculture has shifted from the collective to the private household. Sideline production and cottage industry has gone the same way. The boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ work has been redefined (Jacka 1997). Different kinds of economic activity has been re-valued. This is discussed in some detail in Chapter Seven.

Throughout this thesis I shall use the concept of work in a very broad sense, although I do distinguish between different terms for work where appropriate. By doing this, I do not wish to reduce all everyday activity merely to different kinds of work, which then can produce either business, food or social relationships. But in people’s daily rounds, the activities I label as work tend to merge into one another and in that sense, they are part of one and the same flow.

This flow is that of the constant production of life itself, as is reflected in the expression gan huo, which literally means ‘the doing or making of life’. Gan means ‘to do’ and huo is life. I want to call it ‘the production of life’ in this sense. It is this flow of these various types of activity, which I stress throughout and refer to as work.

### **Working towards relatedness**

In the writing of this thesis, I do not wish to ignore traditional and established categories formulated over decades of anthropological research. By organising my observations under the broad headings of work and relatedness in Lu village I am, however, able to go beyond the boundaries of and inject new life into some of these established categories. By speaking of relatedness, I expand the kinship category to include not just biological relatives but all those with whom one interacts in everyday life, and broadened the category of economy to refer not only to labour, but also a wide range of actions, including duties undertaken to establish and maintain relations with kin, neighbours or business partners which sometimes even take the form of leisure pursuits (see Chapter Six). By widening out kinship to relatedness and economy to work, I feel I have a more real model or a way of speaking about the complex relationship between kinship and economy; between thinking individuals of flesh and blood, their activities and how these form and relate to a larger social system.

Anthropologists have always pointed out that Chinese kinship has heavy economic implications – lineages and domestic units are economic institutions of

a kind – but this is rarely related to the everyday experience of doing work and doing the work of relatedness. In pre-communist China, and again, since 1978, with the introduction of the household responsibility system, the household is regarded as the basic economic unit in rural China. But what struck me during fieldwork, was the extent to which social relationships are spoken of, acted out and created through activities, which, if we take a broad view of what is economic, can be regarded as economic transactions. This is something I felt was important to bring to the fore in this thesis. On another level, relatedness is hard work.

In this thesis, I argue that people in Lu village work hard on producing food and relatedness, day in, day out. Work here, unless otherwise specified, refers to a wide range of activities such as weeding, watering, ploughing, sowing, transplanting a field; picking vegetables and cooking food; cleaning a house; mending clothes; feeding pigs; raising children; looking for business opportunities and so forth.

These activities are plainly part of the everyday making of a living – of putting food on tables, clothes on backs and roofs over heads. But these activities in Lu village, I argue, do not only produce the material basis of life but also its social component. The material and the social cannot be thought of as separate domains because everyday production of material living is woven into a production of social relationships. They are indistinguishable; parts of one and the same flow produced through the very same means. This production is a

never-ending process, constantly evolving and changing, and relatedness is constantly 'under construction' through the labour of men and women.

Going to a field to pick greens to feed your pig includes other parts of work and relatedness. Whilst walking from a house to a field you meet people who you greet and talk to. Once in the field you talk to people working in a neighbouring field. More often than not you will offer them some greens to take from your field so that they can feed their own pigs. Whilst picking side by side you talk about the new pesticide being peddled this year and whether it is any good. Later back at home and chopping leaves for the pig, a neighbour drops by with a small bowl of smoked bean curd, which that household is particularly good at making.

The production of food is in this way woven together with small exchanges of chat, favours and small gifts. This is how social relationships with friends, family and neighbours are created and maintained.

I should emphasise that when I speak of production of relationship I am not implying any sort of mechanical process bereft of affection and emotions. Whether there is a close or distant biological relation, or perhaps none at all, emotions (gan qing) and nurture in the form of feeding and working for each other are an integral and inseparable part of social relationships. In this sense, relatedness is never a given thing, which is just there for the taking. Rather, it has an active component and needs to be nurtured through various activities. Its production is an ongoing process and it is exactly because of this element that I have chosen to speak of the production of relatedness.

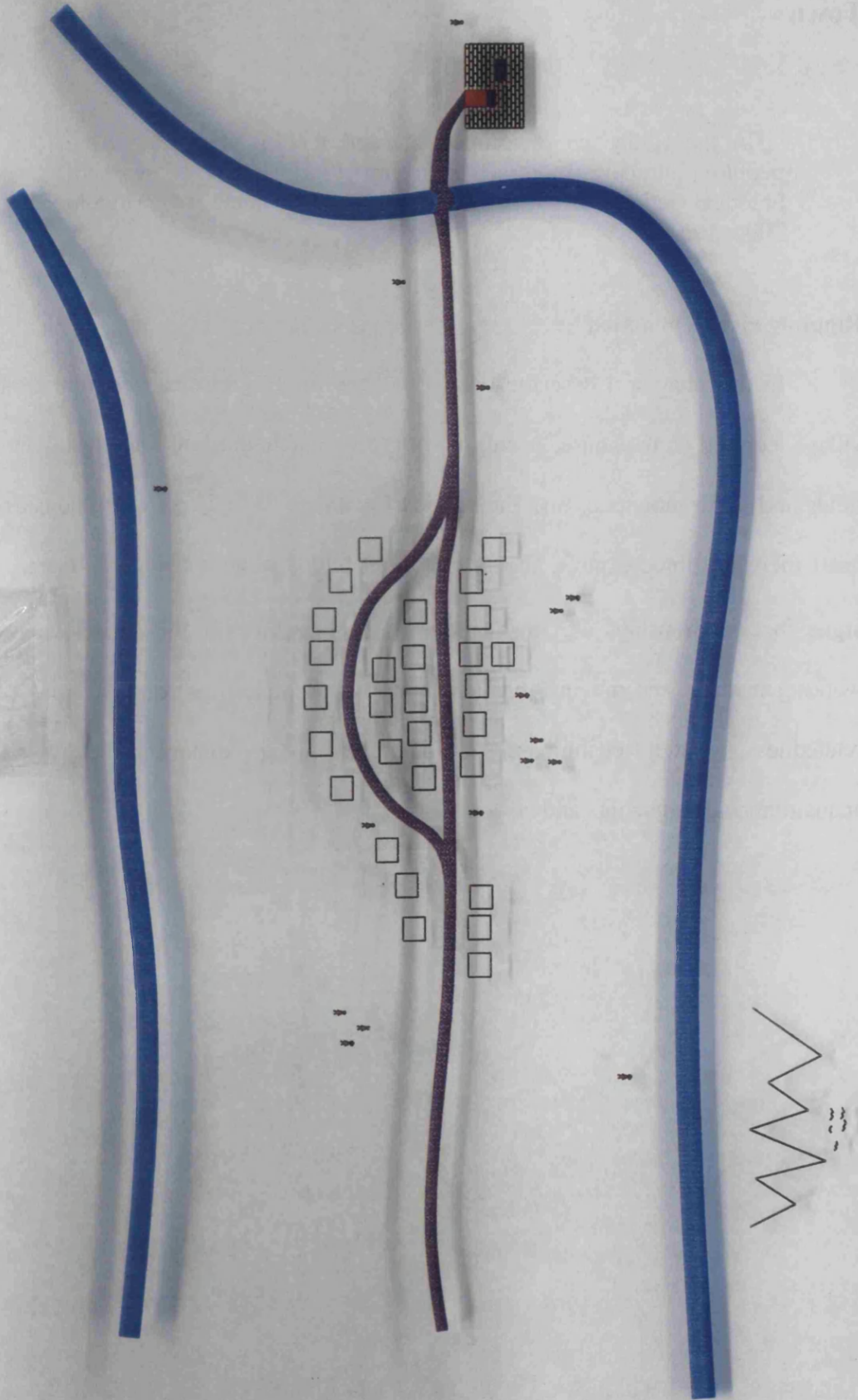
## **Chapter 3**

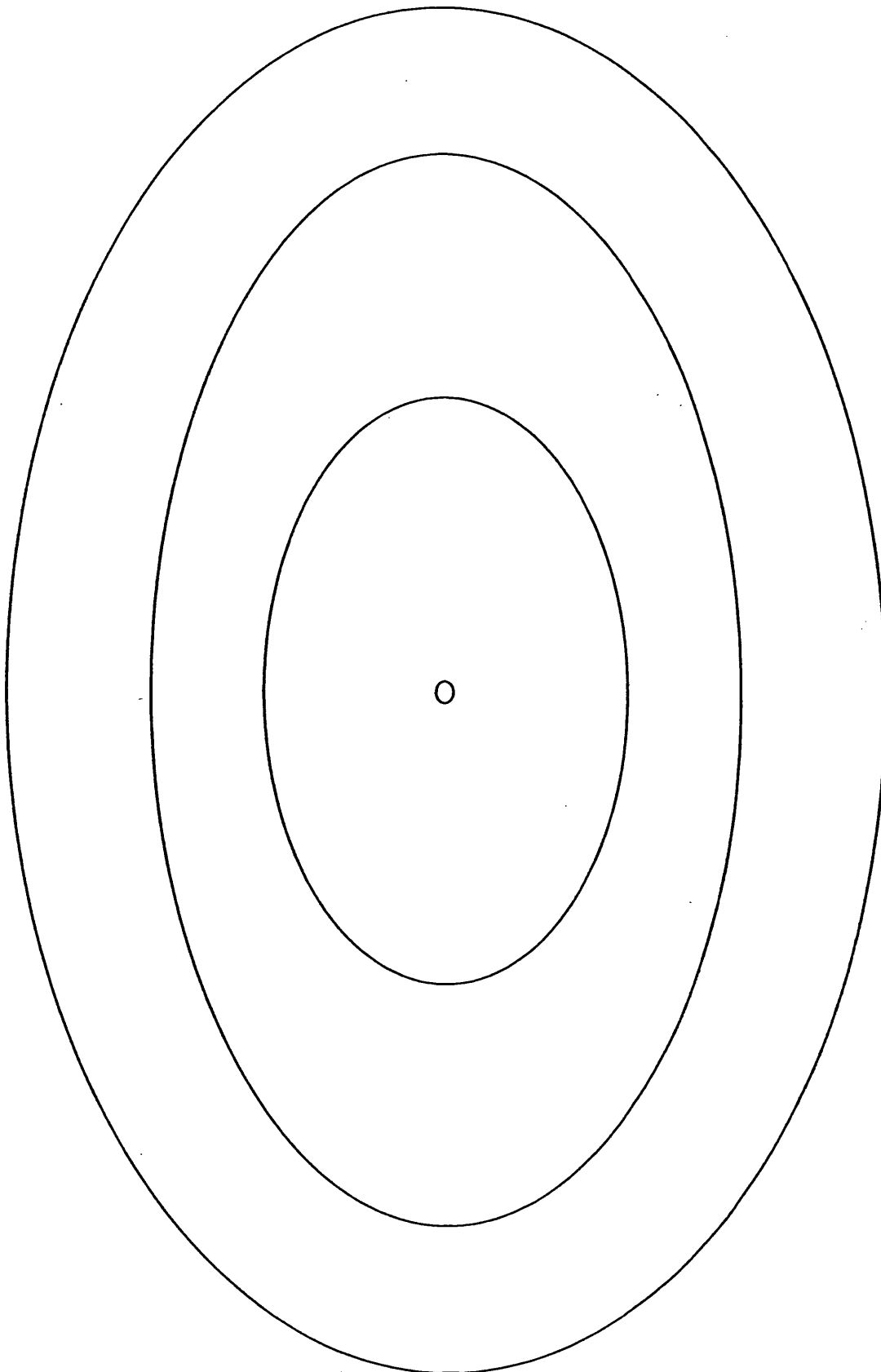
### **The Widening Circle of Work: Houses, Fields, Mountains and Town**

“[I]n the resonance of movement and feeling stemming from people's mutually attentive engagement, in shared contexts of practical activity, lies the very foundation of sociality.” (Ingold 2000: 196).

#### **Rippling circles of action**

In this chapter, I describe what I call the rippling circles of action in Lu village, centred on the house, stretching out to vegetable gardens and pigsties into fields and up to mountains and the market town (see Map 3). Within the house itself there are three centres: the kitchen, the family altar and the courtyard. I argue that relationships are produced through activities in these circles – by working in them and moving through them. These activities form the mesh of relatedness, which encompasses close and more distant kin, friends, acquaintances, neighbours and colleagues.





**Map 3: Rippling circles of action.** This map shows the boundaries people cross in their everyday work. The innermost circle is that of the house. People move within their own houses and to those of neighbours, friends and relatives with ease throughout the day. The next circle is that of the pigsties and vegetable gardens. Some of the pigsties are actually situated within house courtyards but most of them line the edge of the village. The vegetable gardens circle the village boundaries. Pigsties are visited at least twice a day to feed the pigs. These trips are combined or interspersed with tending to the vegetable gardens. The third circle is that of the fields which are visited intensively around and especially during harvest periods but more sporadically during the slack season, very much depending on individual farmers. Pig rearing farmers go to the fields to pick greens (niu pi cai) for the pigs every two or three days. The fourth cycle encircles the mountains and the market town. The mountains and the market town are markedly categorised as 'outside the village' and often a change of clothing and so on precede trips to this outer circle.



This chapter emphasises the flow and movement of people and how their histories are woven into the landscape in which they live and work. Everyday life in Lu village is ceaseless movement from one place to another. Where you go and where you punctuate your trail is significant. This is no silent movement. (Gell 1995). As one goes about one's business, one meets friends and relatives, neighbours and acquaintances. Greetings, information, news, chat and gossip are exchanged throughout the day as one goes through the motions of gan huo. Gan normally means doing hard physical labour. Gan normally means doing something and huo means life. Gan huo is thus very much an active term. Gan huo is an action or movement.

People in Lu village speak incessantly about the bitterness of being a farmer in China and the hard work involved. It is the physical nature of the labour that sparks these comments. People who are lazy are frowned upon and their laziness gets commented on, as the root of all their misfortunes, as is the case with the poorest families in the village. Proper people are always moving from one task to the next, they are always busy (mang).

Moving through the day means moving within the house - one's own and those of others, moving from the house through village streets to other houses and into vegetable gardens and fields, and sometimes moving further afield - to the mountains to collect wild flowers or firewood, or to the market town for selling, shopping or visiting.

Life in Lu village is built up of many, various but simultaneous pursuits or tasks. Sometimes, in anthropology we have partitioned the world into distinct

domains or spheres, which in a sense is only an attempt to make sense of a complex world. This invites the danger of “boxing people in, of forgetting that they move, imperceptibly or with great effort, in pursuit of compelling concerns” (Wikan 1990: 76). It is important to grasp these patterns, “how [people] connect and associate as well as distinguish and separate”, Wikan says. What Wikan calls ‘daily crisscrossings’ are many. In Lu village, fields, vegetable gardens and village streets pose different constraints to living rooms and kitchens and again different ones from mountains and then the market town. But these are in a sense brought together constantly in the daily course of life. Crisscrossings also take place without moving, to take an example from Wikan – one that I also commonly observed in Lu village – “when a sheltered gathering in a secluded sitting room ceases to be intimate in an experiential sense once a person enters who is in some sense feared.” (1990: 75)

Because of the importance of recognising flow and continuity I had some misgivings about drawing spheres of activity. However, in doing so I am following the arguments of Sandra Wallman (1979), who maintains that “[d]istinctions between spheres (or domains) of activity, exchange or meaning, and ‘conversions’ between resource systems are ultimately what work is ‘about’ from the perspective of social anthropology” (pp 20-21).

The spheres of action described here can be envisioned as concentric circles. It is important to note, as emphasised by Ingold (2000), that “no feature of the landscape is, of itself, a boundary. It can only become a boundary, or the indicator of boundary, in relation to the activities of the people (or animals) for

whom it is recognised or experienced as such ... In short, the landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them” (pp. 192-193).

The tasks of everyday life cut across spatial, temporal or socio-economic frameworks. The spatial framework refers to movement through the house, the village, the vegetable gardens, pigsties and fields and the surrounding area. The temporal is the day and the seasons. Work creates an annual cyclical pattern in villagers’ lives. Another cyclical pattern can be found in the agricultural year. The rhythm of life in Lu village is dictated by the agricultural season. Crops are harvested twice a year. Harvest time is marked by excitement and exhaustion. The periods in between are less extreme in their rhythms - people move at a more even and slower pace. This is where the ‘work of custom’ (Murray 1979) comes in, and the ‘work of visiting’. The work of looking after the fields is also important during these periods, as it ensures that the next harvest will be successful.

The socio-economic context includes family, friends, neighbours, and places the task within a political and economic reality. These are the people with whom the Lu village resident must co-exist, co-operate and compete, those he employs or works for, buys from or sells to and socialises with.

This chapter describes the context or landscape of work, the nature of everyday work and explores how relationships are produced and maintained by working in and moving through the concentric circles of everyday action.

## **Landscape**

Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' proves helpful in understanding the importance of landscape or environment when interpreting people's everyday actions. According to Ingold, "the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of - and testimony to - the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves." (Ingold 2000: 189). He calls for the anthropologist to use 'knowledge born of immediate experience' and 'everyday involvement in the world'. "A place", he says, "owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there - to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage. It is from this relational context of people's engagement with the world, in the *business of dwelling*, that each place draws its unique significance" (Ingold 2000: 192, italics mine).

Most importantly Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' is grounded in material reality, which is appropriate when conveying the business of everyday life in Lu village. Ingold defines the task as "any practical operation, carried out by a skilled agent in an environment, as part of his or her normal business of life" (Ingold 2000: 195). Tasks are 'the constitutive acts of dwelling'. "Every task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel, and usually by many people working together. One of the great mistakes of recent anthropology ... has been to insist upon a separation between the domains of technical and social activity, a separation that has blinded us to the

fact that one of the outstanding features of human technical practices lies in their embeddedness in the current of sociality. It is to the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer by the concept of *taskscape*. Just as the landscape is an array of related features, so - by analogy - the taskscape is an array of related activities.” (p.195).

Francesca Bray (1997, 1998) has taken up similar concerns to Ingold’s with reference to China. Bray speaks of technologies as part of a wider web of political and cultural practice. For Bray, technology is ‘a form of communication’. She sees the architecture of the Chinese house in imperial times “as a kind of loom, weaving individual lives into a typically Chinese social pattern” (1997: 57).

In Lu village the houses and the fields one moves through belong to people one knows; acquaintances, friends or relatives. The fields are full of memories and history that as a local person one recognises. As I walk with Mrs Li along one of her fields on a summer afternoon, she points to an adjoining field, “this field (tian) used to belong to my older son (da er zi). Now it belongs to Wang Si Na’s grandson.” Mrs Li’s son went to university and now works for the local government in a neighbouring county. His residence permit (hu kou) has thus been moved from his place of birth to his place of work. When the fields were last redivided (as they are every five years in Lu village) he lost the entitlement to land and his field went to a new baby born into the production team since the previous redistribution. But the field still held history in the form of her memories of her son working that field for his mother.

As I move through, and work in, the fields throughout my fieldwork people frequently make such comments: “there is the tree my son planted”, “there is the grave of Chen Jian Ho's father”, and so on.

The people of Lu village in a sense produce themselves through producing food and circulating food and favours. Just as kinship or relatedness is produced in this way, so the houses and fields in and on which this production takes place, are seen as ‘loci of kinship’ (Gow 1995). Kinship and the land are mutually implicated.

Gow describes how landscape is kinship in its widest possible sense. “Kinship cannot be limited to the social implications of being born, procreating and dying, for it must also include the wider conditions of those social implications” (Gow 1995: 47). One grows through ‘acts of feeding’. “There are no pristine acts in the creation of kinship, for every kinship relation is predicated on the former acts, which created the people it binds together. Kinship is implicated in the whole social universe.” (Gow 1995: 48). Food produced locally, through human interaction with the land, is labelled as ‘real food’. The circulation of ‘real food’ is continuous. It is a process through which “kinship made in the past is remembered and kinship created for the future. ... [K]in ties, for native people, are generated by acts of being fed as children by adults: acts which are subsequently extended by productive adults in memory of care given as children” (Gow 1995: 49).

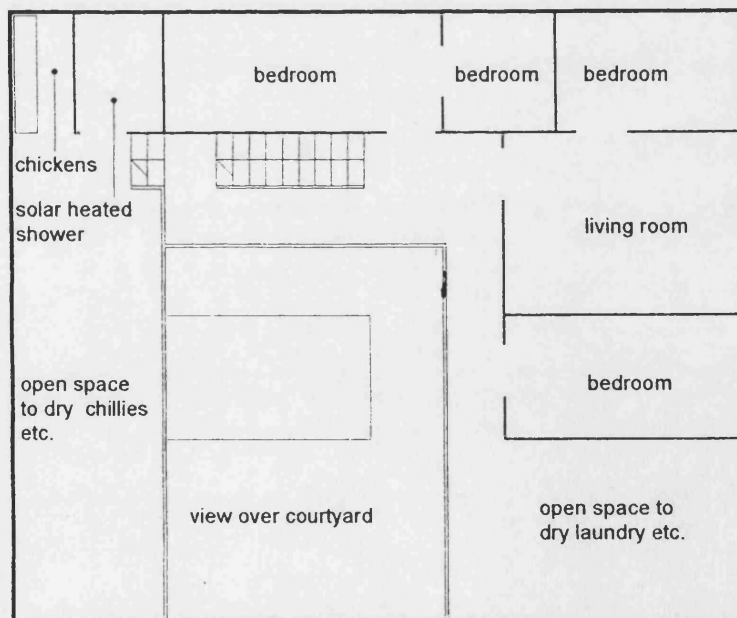
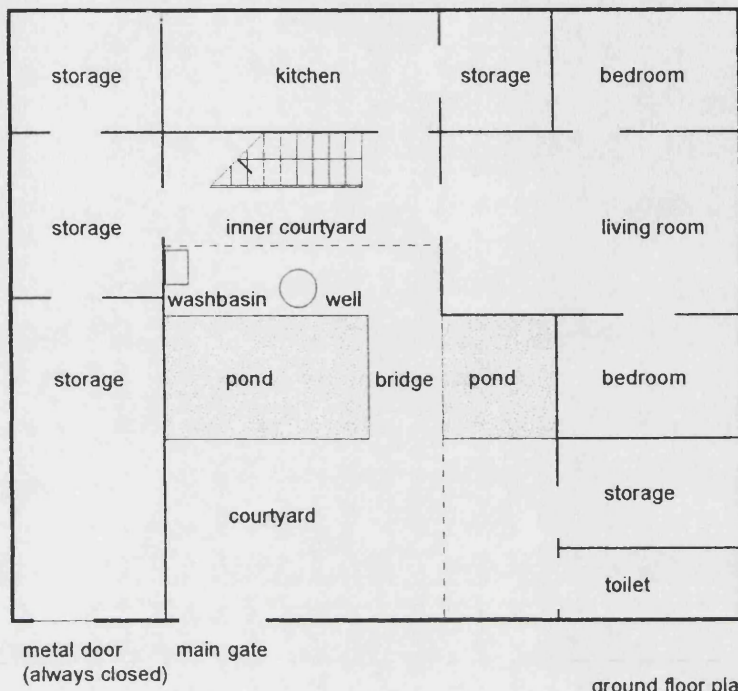
This does not imply an idyllic image of oneness with nature and perfect harmony. There are good and bad histories attached to places and people and

behind casual greetings on a day-to-day basis often lie histories of animosity and inequality. There are households, which have been divided by divorce, or nuclear families, which have split from larger, multi-generational households to set up their own homes.

Many people have commented on the conspicuousness of history in China and how heavily it bears on the present. History is ingrained in the landscape through which people move on an everyday basis, with ancestral graves, fields which belong to fellow villagers and relatives and memories of past events, and thus shapes their actions in that landscape and their adaptations to it.

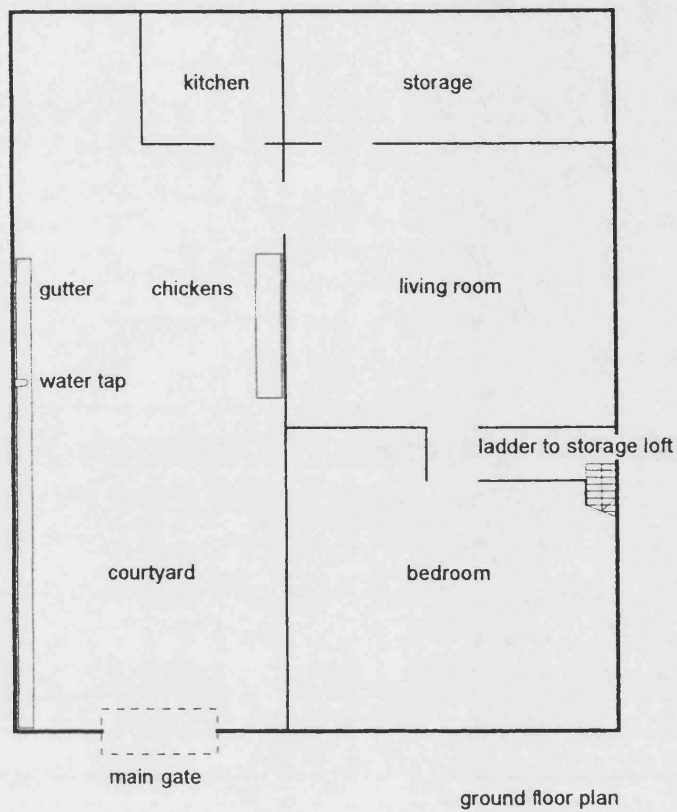
#### **The innermost circles of action: house, vegetable gardens and pig sties**

In the introduction to this chapter, the image is invoked of a pebble dropped in a pond, causing expanding ripples, the rippling circles of action extending outwards from the house. The house itself, however, requires a slightly different metaphor. Here three pebbles are dropped in the pond, one in the courtyard, one in the kitchen and the third on the family altar. The resulting ripples collide with each other, in phase or out of phase, depending on the household in question.

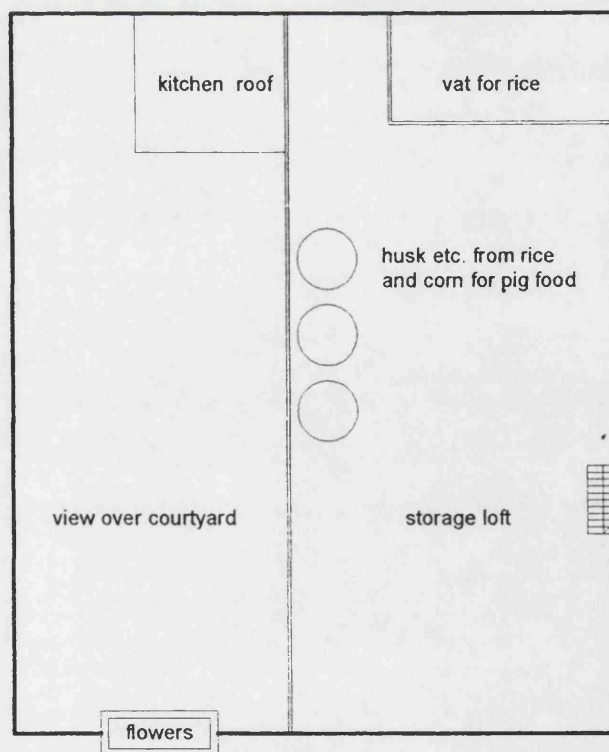


Map 4. House of a wealthy family.





ground floor plan



first floor plan

Map 5. House of a poorer family.

Bray (1998:100, fn. 11) speaks of houses as being organised around the altar or the ancestral shrine, but adds in a footnote that the “siting of the kitchen stove was also extremely important and there are good grounds for thinking of the Chinese house as a bipolar construction in which the stove was as important as the altar in constituting group identity and reproduction” (see Bray 1997: 106-114). To this, I have added the third organisational centre; the courtyard, which Bray herself referred to as “a window open to the natural world, to the sky” (Bray 1997: 198).

An echo of Wikan’s comments on artificially partitioning the world, comes through in Erik Mueggler’s discussion of the house and its place in the larger cosmology; the relationships between body, house and universe. “The house is not a microcosm of the universe; the body does not represent at one level a logic embodied in a house or universe at a different level. Instead, body, house, and universe all double, enfold, and invade one another.” (2001: 41).

Houses in Lu village vary greatly but certain elements are found in all of them (see Map 4 and Map 5). A house is always entered through a gate to a courtyard. The courtyard may be cramped and contain just a cage or two of chickens, a wood pile and the water faucet or it may be more ‘elegant’, with a little pond with a bridge over it and trees for shade. The pond and bridge invoke the view from the scholar’s window and here represent the aspirational use of the courtyard, supplanting the purely functional. In any event, in most households, the courtyard is where people wash their face and feet each evening.

In most houses, one walks straight into the kitchen from the courtyard. The kitchen may be rather dark and cramped, or it may be brighter and more spacious. The heart of the kitchen is the stove which nowadays is fuelled either by wood and coal or occasionally, by gas canisters. It is here that meals are prepared and, space and occasion permitting, eaten.

The living room is usually to one side of the courtyard. The heart of a Lu village living room is invariably the television, which faces the entrance to it and is woven into what many people refer to as their 'family altars' (jia tang). On either side of the television there will often be vases filled with plastic flowers. Above it there is often a large poster with auspicious characters written on it, a colourful drawing of Guanyin, the goddess of mercy, flanked by two podgy children representing wealth and fortune, or a picture of Chairman Mao with premier Zhou Enlai by his side – typically with the two of them striking a heroic pose on a mountain top, the wind rustling through their hair. Family altars will also have photographs of deceased parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. To the side of the family altar will be a frame with a collage of photographs of family members – often standing in front of ancestral graves, or on an outing with friends or school photographs of children.

Various tasks and duties are carried out within these innermost circles of everyday action. For the woman farmer, cooking takes up a considerable amount of time and is woven into the rest of the daily routine. The day begins by boiling water. Then the rice is put in the wok and boiled slightly before it is scooped up, drained and steamed. While the rice is steaming, one usually goes out to feed the

pigs. Other daily routines within the house and its courtyard are sweeping, cleaning and cutting vegetables. The vegetables are collected from the vegetable gardens on the outskirts of the village. The vegetable gardens<sup>11</sup> then need to be watered. Cooking vegetables and meat (though most families would not eat meat every day), washing clothes, cleaning bowls and chopsticks after meals are further daily tasks. These are all tasks performed in the house or its immediate vicinity (pig sties and vegetable gardens).

Relationships are carefully nurtured within this most intimate sphere of living. I am sitting in Mrs Li's living room. Mrs Li and two other women whom I also know sit around a glowing coal bucket enjoying the warmth it emits on a cold December day. We rub our hands and pop peanuts and potatoes into the coals occasionally as we talk. One of the women around the fire is Mrs Li's cousin (biao jie), Mrs Liu. She works as a lab technician in the hospital in the market town. This is her day off and she has come to the village to see her cousin. The other woman is a fellow villager. We sit wallowing in the warmth from the stove and talk. The cousin is rather plump. She tells me that I am three years older than her daughter who became ill with pneumonia and died. She has gained the extra weight since her daughter's death. She doesn't like being fat. The other woman speaks of a household in the village, which has just been split up by divorce<sup>12</sup>. The wife has moved back in with her mother, together with her son and daughter. She doesn't eat with her husband anymore. These are the

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<sup>11</sup> The vegetable gardens are privately owned and, unlike the fields, are not subject to ownership review. Indeed, they formed an anomalous island of capitalism during the collective era.

<sup>12</sup> While still not socially acceptable, particularly in rural areas, divorce is nevertheless becoming more common.

conversations I hear in living rooms. Some are more dramatic, some less so. Children came and left during that particular afternoon with a handful of roasted peanuts or a baked sweet potato in a pocket. After lunch the three women and I walked through the fields. It was raining and we held an old umbrella over our heads. Mrs Li wanted to give her guests some vegetables to take back. Mrs Liu had to go back into town and the other woman had business to attend to.

The exchange of food is significant. It is reflected in the words of the women by the fire; speaking of the estranged husband and wife not eating together anymore and the food the women are being sent away with. Eating food somebody has given you deepens your relationship with that person. Eating somebody else's food at that person's house is even more significant (cf. Carsten 1997).

Within the realm of the household, serving food is a key vehicle for producing relatedness. And food is loaded with meaning (Thompson, 1990). In Lu village there is no meal without rice but if you want to show your guests respect the rice is always the last thing to be offered. The rationale is that the guest should be able to enjoy and eat him-or herself full from the plentiful side dishes (cai) and not from common staple food like rice. This is reflected in the frequent egging on of guests by their hosts: “Have some more of the side dishes (dian cai, dian cai)” and “Take more from the side dishes, less from the rice bowl (duo yi dian cai, shao yi dian fan)”. And then there is the offering of prestigious rice - the more expensive and sweetened nong mi in the period around Lunar New Year or rice grown in faraway places - even imported from places such as

Southeast Asia. My host household was more affluent than most in the village. This was clearly reflected in the food we ate: meat almost every day, sometimes rare foods such as fried bee larvae or beef and sometimes non-local rice from places I was told had better rice than our local area.

Rice ultimately remains of importance. “If you don't eat rice then you won't feel full (bu chi mi fan chi bu bao),” as a middle-aged woman friend said to me once. Potatoes, bread or noodles don't fill the stomach. My grandmother talks about the hard times when they didn't even have enough rice to eat. A visitor with some friends in the village who works for the county television station tells me of very poor Yi people in the mountains, who live in particularly harsh conditions. They eat a lot of potatoes and they have no side dishes (cai) - and only a bit of rice (mei zen me cai - zhi you tu dou, yi dian mi fan - tai ke lian<sup>13</sup> le). The poverty of the most needy families in the village is expressed by saying they don't have enough rice or grain to eat (liang zi bu gou chi). The rice symbolism is intensified when people die and when children are born. Rice and paper money are the most common gifts to the dead for funerals. Rice and eggs and / or hens are an obligatory gift at the birth of a child.

### **The intermediate circle: fields**

Lu village stands on a low ridge between two rivers in a valley. The soil is dark brown and fertile - not red and dry as in so many other parts of China - and the valley is very green all year round. Where fields reach the river there are bags filled with sand to stop the river eroding its banks and reducing the size of the

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Ke lian’ - pitiful - someone or something worth pitying, worth your compassion.

already quite small fields. The fields around Lu village are beautiful by any standards. People have planted trees in some places to enjoy the benefit of shade when the sun becomes too strong to bear in the course of a working day. Flowers sometimes manage to grow in the shelter provided by these trees. These look like small oases of colour and slight wilderness in the sea of green and yellow and neat looking fields filled with crops.

When I began my fieldwork in Lu village, the rice harvest was just over. Arriving at a significant landmark in the agricultural calendar gives a good starting point from which to follow the seasons. Earless rice stalks were lying in the fields and the more frenzied activity of the harvest had given way to the more measured but backbreaking business of processing the crop.

In these rather lonely first days, I watched people that I did not yet know hoist loads upon their backs with yokes over their necks. The loads are so big that they make their carriers invisible when you watch from behind. Moving mounds of straw rise up from the fields, along the narrow paths running along on top of the low mud walls, which separate the individual fields, beaten down by so many feet. Bodies are used selflessly to tackle the hard work at hand. Feet are bare or shod in plastic sandals or muddy canvas shoes. Carts wait for some, where the road is wide enough to hold them. The rice stalks are thrown onto the carts and another trip made along the narrow paths to the field to collect another load. When the straw mountain on the cart has reached giddy heights people position themselves where one would expect a water buffalo to be, bend over and start pulling. Normally someone will also push from the back. The farmers' backs are

bent as they carry and pull and push. As they age their backs become permanently locked in that position.

Participating in work, I soon came to understand how terribly unromantic the fields can be. Crouching for an hour-and-a-half picking weeds from a fallow field for a friend's pig left me with sore knees and an aching back. The sun is numbing when it shines brightly and even with a hat on your head and the occasional escape into the shade, it still beats you down and leaves you exhausted. Fingers get sore from grappling with coarse straw and cutting stalks, fingertips aching from plucking beans out of their pods.

During the sowing of 'the small harvest' (xiao chun), the hoe is by far the most common tool used. It can be used as a shovel, as a pickaxe, as a rake - somehow it serves every purpose. All clods of earth are mercilessly annihilated with a blow of the hoe. The hoe and the yoke with the two buckets hanging on either side - a ladle dipped into one of the buckets full of water - are the most common sight. The ladles are either short-handled and kept in the buckets as people move back and forth to and from their fields or long-handled and thrown over the shoulder like the hoes. The long-handled ones allow the user to crouch over less to scoop water up. The water can also be thrown over greater distances with it. On an everyday basis it is the watering that is the most consistent need in this sort of farming. This is particularly so just after planting. Seeds need water to thrive. Without water there will be no crop.

The rice is sown from late March, during a period of roughly two weeks. Farmers will start their small harvest to clear a suitable field, which then needs to



year is spread on top. The seedbeds are finally insulated with long sheets of clear plastic – the sides of which are tucked into the mud.



Figure 1. Women protecting rice seed with plastic sheeting.

The small harvest can then continue. Three to four weeks old, the rice seed has sprouted and grown robust enough to be transplanted into fertilised and watered fields, which had previously contained beans, barley, wheat and rapeseed. Men haul rice seedlings to where they are supposed to be transplanted. There, women take over. Backs bent into arches they move backwards in a line - six to eight of them together - feet deep in mud, trousers rolled up above their knees, poking a finger into the brown water and in the same movement leaving a seedling firmly planted.

poking a finger into the brown water and in the same movement leaving a seedling firmly planted.

Another constant feature, especially during the rice growing period, is the spraying of pesticides.<sup>14</sup> People with large plastic containers on their backs with a hose leading from it into a little spraying gun are a common sight. People discuss pesticide quite a lot. During the sowing of the rice in spring there was a big campaign for a particular brand of pesticide that apparently (according to the leaflets distributed) had been tested and found superior to other brands by the Kunming Agricultural University. Some people kept on using what they already knew but others tried the new brand. Everyone was very well aware of the benefits pesticides had brought. It makes the crops more reliable - decreases the risk of crop failure and make the crop better in the sense that they do not have to put up with it being black from some pest or another and partly eaten up.

People are also aware of the dangers pesticides hold and of the fact that one cannot eat any of the crops for a certain number of days after spraying it on. The containers used for the medicines (yao), as the pesticide is referred to in common parlance, are sometimes leaky and rickety but people usually have a protective cloth on their backs as they don it, and a face mask and shout to children and visiting anthropologists to stay out of the line of wind as they are spraying.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> There is some anecdotal evidence of the increased resistance of bugs to pesticides, though little awareness of their tendency to so develop. For example, one woman explicitly told me that she was having to spray her crops more often, though her main concern was the negative effects of the pesticides on people.

<sup>15</sup> There are other and more horrible uses of pesticide. Bossen (2002) reports stories of women committing suicide by drinking pesticide. Phillips, Li & Zhang (2002) have



Figure 2. Woman spraying pesticide.

When the wheat, barley and beans are harvested, the stalks are cut down with a sickle in the field about 15 cm or so from the ground. They are then left to dry for a while, right there in the field. When the ears have dried in the field, they are piled onto a cart or into baskets and wheeled, carried on backs or levelled on shoulders, to the drying grounds (dao chang). There are several drying grounds scattered around the village, which formerly served as communal kitchens. There the grains are dried thoroughly - spread out, swept and turned. Everybody is using the drying grounds during these days. There is not enough room for the entire



the grains are dried thoroughly - spread out, swept and turned. Everybody is using the drying grounds during these days. There is not enough room for the entire harvest so roads, roofs and courtyards are used as well. The roads are increasingly popular. Bicycles, cars and motorcycles pass with some frequency. These thrust the grains and beans out of their husks and pods as they drive over them. The beans, barley and wheat grains are slowly separated from the actual stalks and husks and the people who stand by the roadside sweep it off and sieve and sieve and sieve by the roadside. The husks are used as a food supplement for the pigs since they are filled with nutrients. The stalks are used as flooring material for pigsties, which is occasionally swept away and replaced with some new of the same kind. All vehicles passing from the market town and through the villages in the valley and back have tails of barley, wheat and bean stalks hanging from between their wheels and down from their axles. The roads are carpeted with harvest and full of people busy scrabbling in it with rakes and brooms, separating the husks from the grain. The sieving is done by hand – usually with two people helping each other before it is finally put through the winnowing machine for the last and most delicate cleaning. Every production team (shen chan dui) has a few winnowing machines. They are used jointly by approximately ten households each.

Farming remains a hard and time-consuming labour. Fields are small and machinery inconvenient. Pesticides, however, have increased the reliability of crops and lessened time spent on weeding. Lu village no doubt benefited from being on the Burma Road. It meant that casual wage labour was always readily

available.<sup>16</sup> But men from Lu village, as a group and/or on their own, have been migrating out of the village temporarily for casual labour ever since the collective era.

The women are the farmers who work the fields, whereas their husbands are farmers who do occasional labour in the market town. Judd (1994) and Jacka (1997) have both written at length about the ever-increasing role of women in farming while men migrate temporarily or seasonally in search of wage labour. In Lu village, women have always played a greater part in farming than men. This is obvious from Fei's 'Calendar of work' drawn up in 1938. My own observations, and those of Bossen (2002), reveal few changes in the gender division of farming labour or time efficiency.

In the field, relatedness is produced through labour, relationships are strengthened mainly through working together during harvest, worrying together about the progress of crops, disputing over water and so forth.

Lu village has an impressive irrigation system. One of my more favoured occupations during fieldwork was to stroll with people in the fields, alongside the irrigation channels, at dusk. One is usually comfortably tired after a day's work and the lovely light lends a softer image to everything the eye sees. This time of day is calmer than the rest of the day and often couples or friends walk together

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<sup>16</sup> The old Burma road rose to prominence during the Second World War, as the supply route to Free China. The 1,000 kilometre road was built by 160,000 Chinese between 1937 and 1938 as a way of getting supplies to Nationalist troops in Sichuan and Yunnan. Changes in Burma's political situation and the construction of the Yunnan to Burma railway and the East – West, Kunming – Dali superhighway saw its use fade and the villages en route increasingly by-passed. However, Burmese traders do still appear for the Dinosaur Festival in Lufeng each September.

and talk amongst themselves and occasionally as someone passes them by, exchange greetings and comment upon how the crops are looking and so forth.

Irrigation is the responsibility of the big team (da dui) and the cadres dictate when to flood the channels. The two rivers are of course the source of all the irrigation channels and they feed a number of concrete main ducts. Numerous mud channels spur off the main ducts and these are maintained by the farmers themselves. The channels are dotted with dams to further control the flow of water and they too are built out of mud and rocks from the side of the field.

Building dams to keep the water from trickling through and so have it accumulate in one's own field was a common occupation on these evenings. Sometimes people break down their dams, to switch the water flow to another field or part of a field. On other occasions, they break down other people's dams to divert water to their own fields. However, the farmers always try to ensure that their neighbours' fields have an adequate water supply too.

One evening, I watch Mrs Liu water her rapeseed (you cai) field. She had made a small dam in the waterway to redirect water into her field. Now she breaks it so that the water rushes past her field. To make sure no more water comes into it she builds a dam to block off the entry to her field. She then builds another dam to block the second, lower water entry to her field so that the water inside the field already doesn't run out through there. The idea is that there is enough water in the field already and she doesn't want anymore. But she also doesn't want it to run off anywhere. The water should simply dry slowly and give its good effect. "The rapeseed needs some water but not too much. If it gets too much water then it

won't be good to eat (bu hao chi)”, meaning that it won’t produce good quality cooking oil.

It is a tricky business politically, since conveying water to one's own field inevitably means depriving someone else's field of water. People try to stagger their requirements and so find a balance between their needs but especially during those times when water is a matter of life and death for your crops arguments may arise. Real arguments are few. Often people may not say anything out loud but will grumble about it to their friends and family afterwards. Water is important. Towards the end of my stay in Lu village, I conducted a household survey using a small sample of the population. When I asked about the most common areas of friction between villagers, water most frequently came up first.

The summer of 1999 was very warm and dry. There was practically no rain for the entire month of June. By July, people worried aloud about their rice, which stood in the fields in much need of water. “Last year it rained too much. This year it is not raining at all”, said one farmer. One evening, I watched the news on television. There is news of floods in another part of the county. The news shows footage of water coming up to the mid-gables of houses, a metre above the ground. My grandmother shook her head. “Too much water in some places and too little in others.”

When I walk through the fields one evening with Mrs Cheng, she worries aloud about her rice catching disease (de bing). It is too dry. In places the rice ears are turning a bit yellow which is not a good sign. This is because of the drought. The yellow colour means disease, Mrs Cheng tells me. Some of her red

chillies have also been scorched by the sun and withered away. Otherwise the chillies are mostly red and rather glamorous looking. The aubergines look big, fat and shiny. We walk up to the little hut that controls the water flow for the irrigation system of the fields. Water spouts out from underneath it with great force. We walk from there away from the village to check on the fields she has on a slope, a kilometre or so further away from Lu village. There she grows maize (bao gu), pumpkins (nan gua) and other gourds (mei gua, huang gua), peas (wan dou) and chilli (la zi). In some fields there is not rice but ou, 'lotus roots', which are popular, boiled and dipped in a spicy sauce of soy sauce, vinegar, garlic and chilli.

A few weeks later, in July, it finally starts to rain; and heavily. The rain pours down continuously and people are happy again. Until it is about time to start harvesting. Now too much water is a problem. Most of the rice is ripe and ready. All that is needed is a few days without rain, enough for the fields to dry out. Then they will be able to cut the rice and dry it.

By the beginning of September people can't wait any longer. A few people start and the rest slowly follow suit. Long drainage ditches are dug in the fields so that the water can run out of them, giving them some chance to dry out, so that the harvesting can begin. A day or two later, some of the fields will be dry enough and about two weeks later, the harvesting can begin. Some people start harvesting within a week. People have muddy feet. Women with sickles in hand, tired men hauling their old-fashioned combine harvesters (da gu ji) onto carts which are pulled along the wet and muddy dirt roads by water buffaloes. People



go from one field to another, dirty and exhausted. People and equipment are covered in mud. Once the rice has been harvested the drying and winnowing begins. Winnowing and drying are going on everywhere in the village.

The daughter of the previous village head (shu ji) and her husband had hired a machine from the Chuxiong agricultural authorities to harvest their rice. While this machine is expensive to hire, it is not more so than hiring human labour. A crowd had gathered on the dirt road by their field watching this rice-spewing monster perform with awe. Some were impressed by the machine and showed genuine enthusiasm. Others muttered that the machine was spilling too much. The fields are small and the machine does spill quite a lot. But the rice that comes out of the other end is pure gu zi or unhusked rice. It is clean (gan jing) as people said. A sense of community and connection is promoted through these common tasks and uniform actions played out in the Lu village fields.



Figure 3. Harvesting with heavy machinery.

#### **To the outer circle: mountains and market town**

Trips to the mountains to collect firewood are a fairly regular occurrence but rare enough to be just slightly out of the ordinary. There is an element of excitement attached to them. In my experience they were times of women going together - two or three together, though most often two. Married couples sometimes go together as well. Leaving the village in twos, spending time in the

‘wild’ mountains and then returning together with heavy loads adds an element of closeness to the pair which has taken off and done so. It involves working, and spending time, together so as to build up a relationship. Here it is the movement between the circles as much as the work in the outer circle itself that generates relatedness.

It is 6:45 on a chilly November morning and I am walking through the darkened village to Mrs Li's house. It is slowly dawning. I am going to the mountains today to collect firewood. When I arrive, Mrs Li's husband sits in his slippers in the living room and puffs on his first pipe of the day. Mrs Li is up and about and is constantly looking over to her neighbour's. The neighbour is coming with us and Mrs Li is waiting to see light in her bedroom window as an indication that she is about to come out. Before long the light comes on and by 7:20 we're off. The two women have baskets on their backs and are carrying rakes. I have nothing to carry but myself. “You are not a Chinese farmer (ni bu shi Zhong guo nong min). You do not know how to carry things on your back (ni bu hui bei)“, they joke.

We leave the morning sounds of the village behind - grunting pigs, ladles clanking against woks, roosters crowing. Sleepy-looking people with dishevelled hair stand in doorways. As we head towards the sound of birds singing, the dawn is bursting into full glory. The earth makes a thudding sound under our feet as we stride onwards. We walk across the fields, past a small, neighbouring village, less than half the size of Lu village, and on along the path to the mountain, which

towers over the village. We pass a flowering bush. Mrs Li's neighbour tells me that these flowers are edible and are called ku zi hua or 'bitter flowers'.

We pass more fields and low fruit trees. In the walled-in garden of a lone house under the mountain, stands a tree heavily laden with citrus fruits. A dog barks aggressively from within the walls as it hears us pass by. We pass a small stone quarry. The rocks are white and red and flat-shaped and look like small, thick slabs. In another place there is a piece of machinery, which obviously is used to grind rocks into smaller pieces. In yet another place there is a sand mine - good, yellow sand. Further along are extremely dry looking fields. Their brownish hue is strikingly different to the beautiful, heavy green of the fields in the valley around Lu village. In fact, the differences in colour and vegetation here, just a short distance uphill, where there is no irrigation, are striking. The soil is baked hard and cracked. I can't help wondering whether these newly broken dry fields are counted in when land is divided between villagers or whether they are someone's attempt to extend their fields a bit independently. My questions are greeted only with smiles from my companions.

A short way up the slopes of the mountain, the two women drop their baskets. We prop them up with rocks we find lying around so that they stand upright and stable. There is some forest up here, although it is somewhat sparse. The two women pull their rakes out and start gathering brown pine needles from the ground into small mounds. We break the dry branches of trees and gather them. Pine is the best. We attack the remains of a living pine tree and use our hands to break as many branches as we can muster off it. My fingers are sticky

and my forehead scratched. We use no knives or axes - only our bare hands and fingers. We work away until we have enough. I help by stabilising the baskets as they push the pine needles and branches into them. The pile towers high above the rim so we use some rope to tie it all securely down. In the end, half of the burden is actually in the basket, while a similar load is stacked above the rim. The baskets are incredibly heavy. I carry nothing but the rakes and an unshapely branch that comes off the neighbour's basket as we head back. The two women, both shorter and all round smaller than me, carry the two baskets. They are Chinese farmers! We stopped three times on the way back to rest. Twice against a steep hill and once against a wall where the baskets could rest on something to relieve the women's backs without them having to actually take them off. It is not merely the weight of the loaded baskets that makes them difficult to carry. The burden is bulky and unwieldy and it is difficult to balance. When we get back to Lu village, Mrs Li's husband has a meal ready and waiting for us.

I went on a few trips to the mountain with people to collect either firewood or edible wild flowers ('bitter flowers' or ku zi hua).



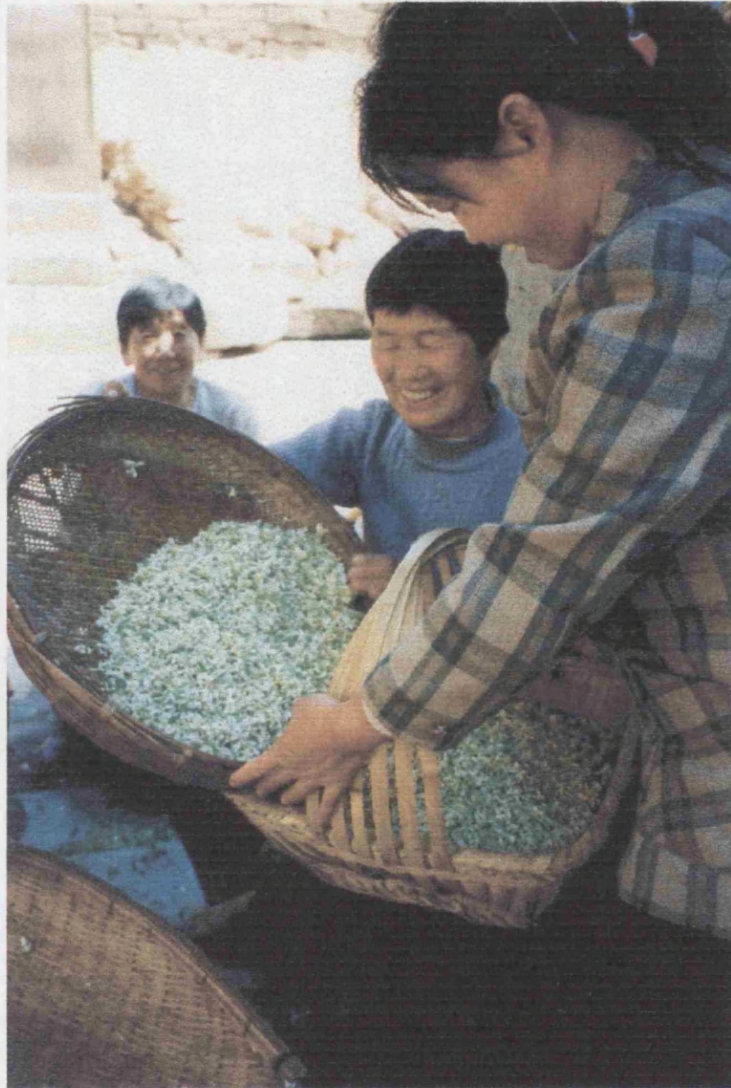


Figure 4. Women cleaning bitter flowers (ku zi hua).

I enjoyed these trips, as did my companions, despite the hard work involved. They were a welcome diversion in an otherwise sometimes somewhat monotonous cycle of everyday chores. I was therefore very disappointed when, in late January, not long before the Lunar New Year, walking back from a lunchtime food feast at a relative's house with my grandmother, she told me that I shouldn't be going to the mountains. "They are not safe (bu an quan). Next time somebody

asks you to go, tell them you can't." There had been warning signs but I had ignored them. A friend had been invited to a wedding in her native village and told me she didn't dare to ask me to go with her because my grandmother might disapprove. "She worries about you catching a cold (gan mao) and she says it is not safe (bu an quan)", she had said. Another friend had earlier invited me to go with her to visit her older sister who had married and moved to a remote village but had retracted her offer when my grandmother had uttered similar opposition.

Not long afterwards, I was invited on a mountain trip. Desperately wanting to go but remembering my grandmother's words of warning, I turned to my sister. She smiled and said: "My grandmother is old. If you want to go then you should go." The generational differences in attitude are obvious.

My grandmother and her family felt responsible for me. The reasons were not merely political. They didn't mind my spending time at people's houses or in the village fields but further away - especially at night - was more precarious and they deemed it not safe (bu an quan). However, safety (an quan) is a political word. Foreigners are kept out of parts of China for their own safety because parts of China are wild or unruly (luan), as an official had explained to me once. But there is an element of care – all be it sometimes an oppressive one - in these words of warning.

While trips to the mountains are perceived of as a little dangerous for a visiting anthropologist, they are a good example of the movements undertaken by women as they go about their everyday work. These are movements between what can be perceived of as 'wild' on the one hand and 'cultivated' on the other.

Moving beyond the circle of mountains is more dangerous still. I was touched when my grandmother sat me down one evening before I was due to go back to Kunming. “Be careful in the big city. You never know where bad people (huai ren) are. Hold tight on to your money and be careful.” These were not only the words of a politically correct person. They were the words of an old woman who cared.

In this chapter, I have defined levels or spheres of action with the house in the centre, stretching out through vegetable gardens and pigsties into the fields and beyond to mountains and market town. The diverse activities within and between these circles instigate and strengthen relationships between the people of Lu village.

The nature of work varies considerably by gender and life stage, as well as the value attached to the different tasks and duties. It is those differences that I turn to in subsequent chapters.



## **Chapter Four**

### **The work of raising children and the work of being a child**

This chapter explores the work of raising children and the work of being a child in Lu village. In China the term yang is used to refer to the raising of children, plants or animals. As with growing crops, which are watered, weeded and sprayed with pesticides, children are actively raised, nurtured and disciplined. The cycle of yang produces the obligation not only for parents to care for their children, but also for children to repay their parents and respectfully care for them (feng yang) in their old age. The duties and obligations inherent in the cycle of yang are discussed in this chapter in some detail. The cycle of yang creates tension between individual desire and social obligation. This tension can be framed in Bloch and Parry's model of short-term individual gain and long-term social morality. In Lu village there are two sources of conflict worth noting; one created by education and the other dictated by the ideal of the patrilineal mode of descent. The way people negotiate this tension gives rise to alternative patterns of family relatedness.

#### **Yang: the active raising of plants, animals and children**

In China the polysemic term yang, is used to refer to raising not only children, but also crops and animals. There are many similarities between the raising of children and the raising of crops and when talking about childrearing,

many of the same words are used, as for descriptions of growing crops (Thompson 1990).

Ingold (2000) argues that the same process of growth underlies both the growing of crops, tending of livestock and raising of children. He makes a distinction between ‘growing’ and ‘making’ and challenges the Western view, e.g. advocated by Francis Bacon in 1624 (which he quotes), that people ‘act upon nature’ or ‘make by art’ something out of nature – tame it or make it produce things. Ingold is in short negating what he sees as a Western or a Cartesian assumption that there is a division between nature and culture. He says it is wrong to see children as moving from wild beings to civilised adults through socialisation.

Ingold argues that plants, animals and people are all part of one and the same world. We cannot therefore think of humans as inhabiting a social world of their own, over and above the world of nature, in which the lives of all other living things are contained. Rather, humans, animals and plants, on which they depend for a livelihood, must be regarded as fellow participants in the same world; a world that is at once social and natural. It follows that we cannot talk about people ‘making nature’, for all they do is manipulate the conditions in which nature then ‘grows’. People cannot ‘make’ plants, but they can facilitate their growth. This understanding allows Ingold to draw parallels between the raising of children and the raising of plants and animals.

“[T]he work that people do, in such activities as field clearance, fencing, planting, weeding and so on, or in tending to their livestock, does not literally make plants and animals, but rather establishes the environmental conditions for their growth and

development. They are ‘mothered’, nurtured, assisted – generally cosseted and helped along” (Ingold 2000: 85-86).

According to Ingold’s argument, then, human beings do not so much transform the world, “they are part and parcel of the world’s transforming itself” (Ingold, 2000: 200).

The raising of children is ‘active’ because like the raising of crops and pigs, there is certain hard work to be undertaken in the home, in raising children. Children need to be fed and looked after; they need to be nurtured (yang). This involves feeding them, giving them money (in a red envelope, hong bao, during Chinese New Year) and providing emotional support (Stafford 1995, 2000b). They need clothes to wear, they need to go to school, which means buying books and paying school fees and so on. These acts are tasks, much as weeding and watering in fields. The expenditure involved has a purpose analogous to that of buying seed or pesticide.

However, it is not only parents who give yang to their children. In watching children play in Lu village, one would often observe how older children looked after younger children. One day early on in my fieldwork, I am standing on the first floor of the village administrative office lazily leaning over the concrete balcony handrail watching children play in the courtyard below. The entrance to the courtyard is lined with magnificently red bougainvillea, which weaves itself around a rusty iron arch forming a beautiful gate. The clapping of the children’s plastic slip-on sandals echoes off the courtyard walls as does their laughing and screeching. The slightly older children carry the smaller ones on

their backs. Sitting on an old tricycle is a small child in the lap of a bigger boy. The others push them round in circles producing shrieks of pleasure from the small child. An infant with a wobbling stride makes its way around the courtyard with an older girl on its heels with arms stretched out behind, ready to catch it in case it loses its balance.



Figure 5. Girls playing.

Although children in Lu village spent a lot of time at school, in their own and other people's homes and in fields around adults, either playing or carrying out a few chores, they spent as much time with their peers running through the streets, playing by the river or in the fields. Children are very much their own masters on a day-to-day basis and while they are very young, they are not

expected to contribute to the household in any economic sense. They go fishing together in the river or in the waterlogged fields. As children grow older, they start to take on responsibilities, but they nurture and care for each other from a very young age.

The care the children playing in the administrative offices' courtyard showed for each other, that so impressed me, is most often shown within families or households (jia) but also reaches beyond the house to relatives, friends and neighbours. In the children's play, the older children nurture the younger ones. Naturally, as well as caring for them, they also boss them around, choosing what games they will play and so on.

But being a child in Lu village is not all about fishing and card playing. Children are often scolded by parents for being wasteful or disrespectful. The idea of discipline and resilience is pervasive in Chinese society. Hill Gates (2002), Laurel Bossen (2002) and others, report for example that the binding of the feet of little girls, practised until early last century, was thought of as the disciplining of the foot. Old women whose feet had been bound talked about foot binding being about learning about discipline for girls, while learning how to write was discipline for boys. Yen (2000) also emphasises the disciplinary element of becoming a person with wen hua or education and sophistication.

I want to use the phrase 'active raising' to indicate the conscious and involved raising of children. Children are, in a metaphoric and real sense, 'slapped into shape'. Slapping is perhaps the most extreme form of active raising



in China – and considered essential. Slapping is commonplace and is not considered abuse. Beating children however would be regarded abusive.

The body and the moral person are one and the same in China; the two will not be divided. Stafford (1995), following Elvin (1985), calls these body-persons (shen). On the one hand, the souls of children are not fixed and children are vulnerable and need to be protected. But on the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, children are left to their own devices a great deal and not stopped from playing with fire, with knives and so on. The rationale behind this is that strength is the best protection and the sooner children discover the dangers of life and learn to deal with these on their own, the better.



Figure 6. Boys in the fields.

One day, I am coming down the village main street to go to a friend's house. As I come down the street I see a woman scolding her young child. The child is standing in the open water artery that runs along the main street, sometimes covered, and sometimes open. The woman stands above the child on the road and shouts. I can't make out the words. The child is crying. She shouts more. Then she pulls its arm up towards her and starts slapping the child on the face and on its sides. I stop at my friend's door just above the scene. My friend stands in the doorway and smiles to me. She sees I am looking at the mother slapping her child. "These little children", she says. "One has to slap (da) them so that they will understand." I must have looked perplexed because she added,

"How will they know the difference between right and wrong if you don't slap them? I slapped my son and daughter as they were growing up. Not severely (bu li hai), just to teach them. Look at my neighbour. She always refused to slap her three sons. Look at them now."

The neighbour's sons had dropped out of school, were unemployed and involved in drug taking and dealing. They hung around the house living off their parents and the oldest one had stolen their savings. "Their mother never slapped them. See what happens", my friend said.

The relationship between children and parents in Lu village is very often that of the parent coaxing the child or toughening the child up. This is done with the best interests of the child at heart, and most examples are subtler than the one cited above.

I once went with Mrs Chen, two of her neighbour's children (a boy and a girl), Mrs Liu and her son to a mountain above a neighbouring village (Mrs Liu's

natal village) to pick flowers. As we are walking down the path from the mountain, the neighbour's little girl trips over and sprawls on the path, dropping all the flowers she had carefully tied together in a bundle with a string made out of straw. As she stood up her mouth formed a horseshoe and she had tears in her eyes. Her palms were badly scratched from the uneven path. The adult women with me laughed, lovingly, and made fun of this clumsiness. "How come you fall over like this being such a big girl," they giggled. "Your younger brother didn't fall."

As I see it, the lesson learnt was that the child should not let minor mishaps upset her. Next time, the girl would surely be a bit more careful. This is what I refer to as the active raising of children. Children are toughened up by being laughed at or ignored when crying from hurting themselves. This bluntness about what life is like – that it is hard – is noticeable in adults' dealings with children. The rationale is that children will inevitably come upon difficulties and hardship in the course of their lives. The sooner they develop a mechanism to cope with these the better. The parents are thus helping them along, facilitating the formation of the disposition or character necessary to survive in a sometimes callous world. This is perhaps even clearer in my next example.

It was late November - a cold day of pouring rain. We had just eaten dinner at the Chang family's factory and huddled into the factory gatekeeper, Mr Ho's, little room by the gate, around a bucket of burning coal. The bucket emitted some nice heat, which was most gratifying under the circumstances. We ate walnuts and discussed Mr Ho son's divorce. The son had two daughters and there



were questions about who would keep the children. The idea seemed to be that each parent would take one child. Mr Ho's son couldn't really keep the child and so Mr Ho had stepped in to look after the child on a temporary and uncertain basis.

Mr Ho was deeply worried about the situation. He shook his head frequently during the discussion and sighed. "She should be with her parents and older sister (ying gai gen ta ma ma ba ba jie jie zai yi qi). How will I, an old man, manage this (wo shi ge lao tou zi, wo zen me ban ne).” They also talked about whether the little girl, who was skipping around us as we spoke, realised what was going on. "She must know (ying gai ming bai). But she can't talk about it (shuo bu chu lai)”.

As the little girl stayed on at the factory, the older women there started intervening with her upbringing from time to time. On one occasion, when the girl was running in and out of the factory kitchen, Mrs Liu commented to her: "Your mother doesn't want you (ni ma bu yao ni le).” The little girl only laughed in response and continued her game of running in and out of the kitchen.

On another occasion, in the courtyard outside the kitchen, Mrs Liu took the little girl into her arms and asked her: "Do you have a mother (you ma ma)?" When the little girl answered yes, Mrs Liu went on: "Do you miss your mother (xiang ni ma ma)?" The little girl again answered yes, and nodded. Mrs Liu then said: "You don't want this crazy mother (ni bu yao zhe feng zi de ma ma)”. She repeated this a few times holding the girl tight in her arms until she managed to wriggle free and run away laughing.

As Stafford describes for Angang, “strength is the best kind of protection” (Stafford 1995: 22). Children are slapped to teach them what is right and what is wrong. The little granddaughter of the gatekeeper is strengthened through acknowledging that her mother will not be there for her later in life.

### The cycle of yang

I talk to Chang Xi Yin one warm and sunny autumn afternoon. Chang Xi Yin is a young woman who will soon graduate from her university course in art. Her parents support her through her studies. She says:

“I sometimes feel sad (you shi hou wo hen nan guo). My parents work very hard (ku ku de gan huo). My mother has lots of grey hairs now (xian zai you hao duo bai tou fa). I spend 300 to 700 yuan every month<sup>17</sup> while I’m at school (zai xue xiao mei ge yue hua san dao qi bai kuai qian). Studying art (xue yi shu) is especially expensive because materials are very expensive (cai liao hen gui). I do oil painting (you hua) and those are especially expensive (te bie gui).”

I am able to spend some time with Chang Xi Yin on this occasion because she has extended her school vacation as her grandmother is ill and has had to go to hospital for an operation. Chang Xi Yin continues:

“My grandmother is over 70 years old. When my grandfather died, my college didn’t give me leave to come back home (xue xiao bu gei wo hui jia). I felt very sad (wo hen nan guo). I want to (xiang) be here now that my grandmother is ill. My grandmother has worked very hard all her life (wo nai yi bei zi ku ku de lao dong). When our parents were working she took care of us (fu mu gan huo de shi ta ling wo men). Now we tell her to rest (xiu xi) but she won’t. She gets up early and sweeps the courtyard ..... So now that she is ill I want to be here to take care of her (zhao guan).”

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<sup>17</sup> This equates to a decent monthly salary.

What Chang Xi Yin describes to me is in short the cycle of yang previously mentioned and elegantly described by Stafford (2000b, 1995).

Stafford elaborates thus on yang:

“*Yang* is a very common Chinese expression meaning ‘to raise’ or ‘to care for’, e.g. in ‘raise flowers’ (*yang hua*), ‘raise pigs’ (*yang zhu*) or ‘raise children’ (*yang haizi*). In the case of children, the provision of *yang* – a kind of all-encompassing nurturance – is, of course, very complex. It is also productive of an almost inescapable obligation: once they have grown up, children are heavily obliged to *yang*, ‘care for’, or *fengyang*, ‘respectfully care for’, their parents in old age” (Stafford 2000b: 41).

Yang involves transfers of gifts and money, the sharing of food, mutual care and assistance – emotional as well as material needs. The cycle of yang also extends to care for ancestors, as discussed in chapter three. What Chang Xi Yin does, is to refer to the yang she has received from her parents and grandmother and how she feels a longing to give something back in return – and an obligation to repay. She overtly appreciates her parents’ and grandparents’ hard work in raising her and giving her the opportunity to educate herself by funding her. She shows her appreciation by taking care of her sick grandmother and by verbally acknowledging her grandmother and parents’ hard work in raising her.

In general, parents and grandparents often speak of the hard work they endure to better the lives of their children – to neighbours and relatives – and to the children themselves. The hard work in question is work in the fields, childcare, cooking, the giving of money and clothes. Sums of money spent on a child’s education especially are frequently mentioned. The parents have to go without so that the children can have better lives than they had. An example of

this is a middle-aged couple I frequently visited. They lived in a slightly decrepit mud-brick house, with plastic sheeting covering broken windows. On one occasion the wife remarked that they could build themselves a new house but preferred to spend the money on their two sons' education.

When children behave as they should, parents and grandparents speak assiduously of their deeds and brag about how good they are. Han Si Na, a woman in her late forties, would often tell me about her son and how well he had turned out. "He has such good character (xing ge hao), and good temper (pi qi hao). He would never lose control of his temper (bu hui fa pi qi)", she would say. Her son held a junior post with the local government in a nearby county. Han Si Na was intensely proud of him. "He earns 400 yuan a month. He sends us 100 yuan every month", she says. Han Si Na walks over to a wardrobe in one corner of her living room where we are sitting and opens it with a key she had fetched from a small cupboard in a back room. She pulls out a brown and beige polo-necked sweater with a flower embroidered onto it, that her son had given her. "He bought this one in Kunming and brought it here for Spring Festival. And these shoes too ....", she says as she pulls a pair of sturdy brown leather shoes out from the wardrobe. "It must have cost him a fortune (ying gai hen gui)," she says smiling.

Yan Yunxiang (1996) discusses

"the gift called *xiaojing*, given by the younger generation to the senior generations with no expectation of a return gift. In fact, the reverse order is considered improper in intergenerational gift giving. Such gift giving symbolises the junior person's gratitude and respect to the elder, and thereby the more gifts one receives, the more prestigious one becomes. It is common for an older

villager to make a show of a gift recently given by his son (daughter, nephew, or other junior kinsmen) and to enjoy hearing the public's appreciative comments. In this connection, the one-way flow of gifts serves to restate the kinship rank between the two generations in symbolic terms" (Yan 1996, p.151).

More often than not it is the failure of the grown child to behave according to its parents' wishes that ignites the most vehement declarations of sacrifices made – monetary or otherwise.

The debt of yang, however, is far more complex than the simple transactions of giving and receiving. It is part of an intricate system of raising children and caring for parents, and is, in a sense, the foundation on which the entire institution that is the Chinese family rests. Yang is used for things one should do (ying gai zuo de shi qing) and failing to do as one should is a failure to perform filial duty. And this happens all the time.

I used to go and visit Ma Li Da in the nearby market town with a friend of mine from Lu village, Han Si Na. Ma Li Da was in her late thirties and had married a man a dozen years her senior. She shared a room in the market town with his 23-year-old daughter of a previous marriage. The husband and father worked as a teacher in another town, where he had lodgings.

The daughter had studied in Kunming for three years. The family had paid for her studies. They are of the Hui ethnic group and Muslim. While studying in Kunming, the young girl met a young man who was Han, not Hui like herself and her family. The young girl had stayed in Kunming after finishing her studies to be with her boyfriend but had now returned and had been living in the cold and cramped room with her stepmother for three months. She constantly

spoke of returning to Kunming to be with her boyfriend. Her father and stepmother strongly disapproved of the relationship. “He is Han, we are Hui (ta shi Han zu, wo men shi Hui zu). He does not eat the same things we do”, Ma Li Da tells me anxiously. None of the family had seen the boy.

“Marriage – he hasn’t said a word about it (jie hun – ta shen me dou mei shuo). He has not been to visit her (mei lai kan ta) since she has been here. He hasn’t called or written a letter to see how she is living (ta tiao jian hao bu hao) or how she is (ta hao bu hao). If he were a good person (ta shi hao ren de hua) then he would think of these things (jiu hui xiang zhe xie). And what if she were to go (ta hui qu de hua)? What if she gets pregnant (huai yun de)? Will she be able to rely on him (ke kao ta ma)? How will she cope on her own (ta yi ge ren zen me ban ne)? And nobody else would then want to marry her (hui gen ta jie hun de bu hui you ne). We spent 30,000 yuan – 30,000 yuan - so that she could go to school, get a bit of education (wen hua). Now see .... (xian zai ... ni kan ....). What good does it do (you shen me hao chu)?”

The father and the stepmother had tried talking and tried threatening. Her father finally gave up and proclaimed that if she left then she would be on her own.

Ma Li Da’s stepdaughter is failing to repay her parents’ investment in her by not listening to their advice. It is of course not just about the money spent on her education – but the money is part of nurture which has been slighted by the daughter refusing to acknowledge her debt to her parents, by ignoring their advice. The money spent on her education was the fruit of many years of hard work on her parents’ behalf. However, the spending of money certainly is not all there is to yang. It is, though, perhaps the most easily isolated and demonstrable part.

Frequently, the definition of what is filial and what is not, is somewhat unclear and often individuals struggle to fully meet family expectations. As an example a young woman, Chen Ai Ruo, whom I met both at her parents' house in the village and on a couple of occasions in Kunming, where she lived and worked, explained to me the difficulty of complying with what her family expected of her.

“I work and I study (yi bian gong zuo, yi bian xue xi). I am very busy (wo hen mang). I have no time to look for a husband. My family wants me to get married (wo jia ren xiang wo jie hun). With each passing year the pressure increases. But there are no good men around. I think Chinese women are of far better quality (su du ti gao) than Chinese men. I can't marry someone who's not suitable (bu he shi).”

Her grandmother in the village did indeed frequently worry aloud about her granddaughter's unmarried state, but at the same time praised her for the excellent effort she put into her work and studies and admired her intelligence (cong ming). She showed me a beautiful blue traditionally cut silk jacket her granddaughter had brought her from Kunming with a huge smile on her face. But she did wish she would get married.

“That way, her life will not be so difficult (zhe yang sheng huo bu hui na me ku). But she doesn't want to (ma ta bu yao ne). She doesn't listen (ta bu ting hua).”

What Chen Ai Ruo feels is enormous pressure from her family; her grandmother feels will improve her life considerably – if only she would bend to it.

To drive home the complexity of the matter, Chang Xi Yin, to whom I referred above and who so filially took care of her grandmother, strikes a different

note when asked whether she will return to live in the village when she graduates from university. The answer is no.

“If I moved back to the village I would still be dependent on my parents (kao fu mu). I want to be more independent (kao zi ji). I would like to live close by (bu yuan de difang) so that I could come often and visit my family (chang chang hui lai kan wo jia ren). I would like to develop my skills as an artist as much as I can. If I practise (lian xi de hua) I know I can make progress (jiu hui you jin bu). But it takes time. I worry that when I start work (kai shi gong zuo) it will take up all my time (hui hen mang) and that I will be too busy to work on my painting skills (hua zi ji de hua). Here in the village many people are afraid of ‘going outside’ (qu wai mian). They don’t know anyone outside the village (cun zi wai mian shen me ren dou bu ren shi). They think people outside are bad (wai mian zhu de ren shi huai de). They cannot imagine (xiang bu chu lai) living in a place without relatives or friends (mei qin qi, mei peng you). But I’m not afraid (wo bu pa). You go somewhere (qu ge di fang) and don’t know anyone (shen me ren dou bu ren shi), but then you make friends (zhao peng you). You won’t be lonely (bu hui ji mo de).”

Chang Xi Yin is trying to juggle her own hopes and desires for her future with her care for her family. She does not make any reference to obligations. She speaks of wanting to care for her grandmother (when she is sick) and expresses worry about her mother (who now has so many grey hairs). This is in keeping with the cycle of yang, which I have discussed above, even though she is balancing conflicting desires.

### **Tension in the cycle of yang**

As evident from the narratives cited above, the duties and obligations inherent in the cycle of yang give rise to tension between individual desire and filial obligation. This tension can be framed in terms of Bloch and Parry’s (1989)



model of short-term individual gain and long-term social morality, the latter subordinate to the first. Bloch and Parry posit a “relationship between a cycle of short-term exchange which is the legitimate domain of individual – often acquisitive – activity, and a cycle of long-term exchanges concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order” (1989: 2). The long-term cycle refers to “an extremely general set of ideas about the place of the individual in a social or cosmic order which transcends the individual” (1989: 26).

Bloch and Parry argue that as long as short-term, individual, monetary gain does not violate the long-term, societal, moral cycle, this personal acquisition will be positively regarded by society as a whole. If, on the other hand, the short term individual monetary gain disregards or overtakes the long-term moral cycle, then such behaviour by an individual will be condemned or deemed immoral by society.

The long-term cycle is always collective and moral while the short-term cycle is morally undetermined and individual. When the short-term gains are converted to serve the reproduction of the long-term cycle, then the short-term cycle does indeed become morally positive.

In the interplay between the two cycles lies the potential for tension. This happens at the point when short-term actions threaten long-term morality. In everyday life in Lu village, this often manifests itself in friction between older and younger generations.

Around Chinese New Year, I went with Wang Mei Hua, a young woman, and her young son, to some relatives of her in-laws in the suburb of the market

town. Wang Mei Hua lives uxorilocally with her husband but she is obliged to visit his relatives as well as her own. These visits are especially frequent now that she has just had a son. Everybody wants to see the new baby.

We went in a horse-cart from Lu village along with relatives of Wang Yin Hong's husband: his grandmother, mother and older brother's wife. The older brother's wife had also just married and brought along her son, only ten days older than his little cousin. The relatives all live patrilocally in one of the satellite villages, which belongs to the Lu village administrative area. The relatives in town had killed a pig and put on an impressive feast. We ate and chatted and had a good time. Our group had a table to itself but we chatted to the people around us as well and there was considerable flow of people between tables as they came to look at the new children.

The older child started crying and his mother held him in her arms trying to shush him. Her grandmother in-law (her husband's paternal grandmother) immediately commented: "You don't carry him on your back so he cries (ni bu bei, ta jiu ku)". The young woman answered: "He cries so I don't carry him on my back (ta ku, wo jiu bu bei)". The old woman snapped back: "He cries because he is not used to your carrying him on your back (ni bu bei, ta bu xi guan bei, jiu ku le)". No more words were exchanged and the young woman concentrated on her son. The grandmother continued eating. The young woman looked at Wang Mei Hua and rolled her eyes and Wang Mei Hua smiled back.

This small incident illustrates the camaraderie between people in a similar position, in this case two young women recently married and with young babies.

Wang Mei Hua has not left her natal household, whereas the other young woman has, but Wang Mei Hua actually sometimes gets similar comments from her own grandmother as the other young woman received from her husband's grandmother. So they do have a lot in common. This highlights the importance of peer relations in Lu village.

Intergenerational relationships, on the other hand, often come under considerable strain. Usually because the older generation feels the young are wasteful, not hard-working enough, do not observe proper etiquette or place enough value on tradition and do not respect their elders. This is not a constant feature but rather something that surfaces from time to time with different people. I'll give an example.

One day I sit in Mrs Li's living room. It is evening and I am quietly watching television with Mrs Li and her husband. Her son is also there on holiday from university. He is leaving the following day. The son stands up abruptly and prepares to go out. His father asks him where he's going. He replies that he is going to the small shop down the road to buy some sweet soft drink (qi shui) for the next day's trip on the bus. Both his parents protest.

“Buy what soft drink (mai shen me qi shui)? We have boiled water (wo men shi bu shi you kai shui). We can add a bit of sugar to it as well (ye ke yi fang ne yi dian tang). Don't buy it, it's a waste of money (bu yao mai - shi lan fei qian).”

The son sat back down and sulked.

Younger people's waste of money is frequently commented upon by the older generation. It causes older people great upset to see hard-earned money

wasted and heads are shaken when children and young people consistently do not treat money with respect.

The children in Lu village frequently played card games, exchanged small things such as photo cards and pencils. They shared sweets and snacks such as bitter olives (gan lan), ice-lollies and puffed rice sticks, which they bought from a kiosk, with the small amounts of money sometimes passed their way by parents or other adults. As long as these purchases and exchanges adhered to the values inherent in yang - moderation and sharing - all was well. However, a breach of those values could cause uproar, particularly among the elderly.

A six-year-old girl, Xiao, was her parents' only child. She was very pretty and somewhat fond of finery. She would quite frequently be given small amounts of money, which she would use to buy sweets and colourful pencils from the small village shop. I often heard older people comment on this as she scurried past on her way to the shop. "Is she going to the shop to buy sweets?" "This child buys too many things (zhe ge hai zi mai de dong xi tai duo)."

Not only did Xiao buy too many things, she was also reluctant to share her purchases with the other children – to let them use her pencils or give them a piece of her sweets. This caused even more consternation among the older generation.

Passers-by, however, do no more than comment on things they disapprove of. The disciplining and proper raising of children is the responsibility of parents and the household in which they live.

Bloch and Parry (1989) recognise the dynamism between the short term and long term cycles and I believe these same cycles are at work in the interplay between adults on the one hand and young people and children on the other, in Lu village. What I do feel Bloch and Parry could emphasise more is the potential effect of the short-term cycle upon the long-term cycle – i.e. the possible change in the long-term cycle over time due to effects from the short-term cycle.

I have previously cited some examples of yang being repaid unconventionally or only partially repaid. Chen Ai Ruo brings presents for her family but causes them concern by refusing to get married. Today, she is the exception to the rule but an exception that is becoming more and more common. Younger people become adults and what is morally acceptable, as opposed to previous generations, is subject to change.

On a different level, the Chinese government determines and reinforces the social cycle of morality and conformity by imposing rules of birth control, creating tension between desire and duty. People in Lu village are far removed from the central government in Beijing. Government is represented at village level by the administrative office - referred to as the office (ban shi chu) or the big team (da dui). It is through the cadres of the big team that the State shows itself. These come through in the form of taxation, information about new seeds, pesticides or farming methods, provision of electricity and paying of electricity bills, and the controlling of births. These are all concrete actions, which people comply with.

Government is a male-dominated area, be it local, regional or national. However, the presence of a women's representative ensures a female presence in each locality. It is early October and I have been invited to take a walk with the women's representative, Mrs Wang. We leave the administrative office and walk across the fields to a neighbouring village also under the Lu village administration. The village hangs in a low mountainside above the flow of fields at the bottom of the valley. We knocked on a faded red gate and were invited in without fanfare. Mrs Wang asked to see the couple's marriage licence. They had been married the previous August. Stools were pulled out for us and the couple and we all sat down in a circle. The wife was pregnant and Mrs Wang was there representing the State. Mrs Wang referred to the marriage as 'cai hun' – late marriage<sup>18</sup>. The baby could not be born. The husband was 34 years old and the wife 31. She already had two children from a previous marriage. She would not be allowed to have a third child. "Zheng fu bu hui huan ying" was the expression Mrs Wang used – "the government will not welcome this child". This was discussed quietly back and forth. The couple was a bit crestfallen. The conversation went on in hushed tones but despite all Mrs Wang sounded almost cheerful. She did not waver in her carrying out of the State policy. We left the household with Mrs Wang advising them to think the matter over (xiang yi xiang). Of course they had no say in the matter.

I was very shaken from our visit. Mrs Wang kept up her cheerful attitude and insisted that we would take a bit of a walk around the village so that I could

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<sup>18</sup> 'Cai' – used before a verb indicates that something has just happened or is rather late by general standards.

see it since I hadn't been there before. We ran into a couple of people, who obviously knew the nature of our business and asked what was going on. Mrs Wang told them that of course the child would not be allowed to be born. The couple would only need to think it over a bit. They nodded their heads.

Thus, I would take Bloch and Parry's model a step further and argue that when individual actions reach 'critical mass', they can collectively alter the long-term cycle of moral values. In other words, the individual's goals sit within the context of the wider society's cycle and collectively ensure its constant renewal.

In Lu village there are two prominent areas of 'cyclical' conflict worth exploring in more detail; one is created by education and the other dictated by the ideal of the patrilineal mode of descent.

### **Conflict of individual goals and social morality: education**

Bloch and Parry's cycles are useful in understanding the tension between education and 'tradition', which resonates in everyday life in Lu village.

This tension is at play as parents push their children away from the traditional way of life while at the same time making sure they never stray from its moral rules. This could be described as a push-pull model. The parents push their children into the lesser cycle, through education, and constantly pull them back in the greater cycle, through morality.

Late afternoon one day during the rice harvest, I am sitting with a group of people around the low table in Mrs Li's living room. The group consists of a dozen exhausted workers. They have just come in from Mrs Li's rice fields. They

are friends – a family who lives in the village – but they were being paid by Mrs Li's son, who works in another county, to do the harvesting work so that Mrs Li and her husband, who are getting on in years, don't have to. Mrs Li does not tire of telling people that it is her son who has insisted that they hire workers for the harvesting. It is the first time they have done so. In previous years, they have always done it themselves with the help of various friends or relatives with whom they have exchanged labour.

The workers have skipped lunch, preferring to work right through and finish before they eat and hence this late meal. They tuck into their food. They talk about the harvest as they eat hungrily. It had been hard work due to the rains. The rain makes the soil turn into mud, which slows every movement down considerably. The workers were exhausted and their clothes muddy from the struggle with the bundles of rice. A young girl, the daughter of a couple amongst the group of workers, sat in the doorway and watched what was going on. After a pause in the adults' conversation, she comments out of the blue: "You are all filthy (ni men dou zang le).” Her mother immediately reached over wanting to slap her, missing her only narrowly. The little girl ran into the courtyard and hovered there stubbornly for a while before settling down again in the same position. "This is what the children learn at school (xiao hai shang xue jiu zhe ge yang zi)”, the mother said eying her daughter angrily as she turned back to her rice bowl.

Parents in Lu village place great emphasis on the education of their children. Farming is regarded as a 'backward' occupation and education is



needed for emancipation into the much-preferred salaried jobs (see further discussion in Chapter Seven). This is frequently talked about amongst parents and children are also constantly reminded of this by their parents. Book knowledge is important and it is something people who are farmers do not have.

However, when farmers' children, through schooling, acquire book knowledge, tension is created, as is evident from the anecdote above. Children possess one kind of knowledge and parents another, which is socially less valuable. Parents want their children to educate themselves to succeed so that they can move away from a life in farming but they do not want it to undermine their own parental authority. Whilst moving away from traditional forms of livelihood, children must take care not to move away from the moral values inherent in the cycle of yang.

In his work on Taiwan, Stafford (1992, 1995) gives a clear example of how moral values taught to children in school can blatantly contradict those taught at home. In Taiwan, nationalist education in schools, with its emphasis on sacrificing all, even one's body, for the motherland, contradicts what children learn at home, namely to take care of themselves, and their bodies, so that they may live to filially take care of their parents in their old age. These two different types of schooling can give rise to contradictory value systems; friction between inner and outer cycle, which need to be negotiated in everyday life.

In Lu village, children's acquisition of education represents a short-term cycle and ideally contributes to their getting a salaried job. They can thus have a

better life and, importantly, will in the long term be able to respectfully care for (feng yang) their parents.

In order for things to work out this way, however, the conversion of short-term goals into the long-term moral order must follow through. This is what successfully happens in Lu village when Chen Ai Ruo uses her money to buy her grandmother a new jacket and Mrs Li's son pays for having workers harvest his parents' rice so that they themselves can avoid the hard labour. Where the two cycles jar, as when Chen Ai Ruo refuses to get married and children are wasteful with money or comment on their parents' filthy clothes, there is reprimanding, scolding and slapping.

Theories of learning are often presented in highly normative terms, describing a natural novice who gradually becomes a member of society through a process of assimilation (cf. Bloch 1998). This approach assumes that learning is a scripted transmission of culture, of sorts (Toren 1999, Bloch 1998).

There are problems in this approach. It reduces the novice to a mere imitator of technique, and does not answer the question of how a body of cultural knowledge is constructed or progressed. It leaves no room for human creativity (Pálsson 1994). This viewpoint or image of cultural transmission is, according to Pálsson and others, also highly ethnocentric as it is "[t]he product of western history and textual discourse, reinforced by the tradition of literacy and the institutions of formal schooling and disembedded training – caught up in dualisms of mind v. body and learning v. context" (Pálsson 1994: 903). In short, the normative view does not describe or engage with a lived-in-world or give any feel

for a place or its people. It does not account for what happens when the inner cycle surpasses the outer. It does not give weight to individual creativity or change. Personal enskilment, or learning, for Pálsson “means not mechanistically to internalise a stock of knowledge but to be actively engaged with an environment” (Pálsson 1994: 901).

I suggest that in the case of education in Lu village, the short-term cycle has an inevitable and continuous effect on the long-term cycle. The mission of parents to secure a good education for their children has a specific goal. There is no reason to believe that parents will stop wanting to help their children get a good education but once their children have made the leap from farming to an office-based job, those children’s objectives for their children will be different. Their children will not be trying to escape the hard life of the farmer but to climb to a higher rung in government or private industry.

### **The conflict of duty and desire: the patrilineal mode of descent**

Another tension at play in Lu village, which can be framed in terms of Bloch and Parry’s cycles, is that of family duty and individual desire which can be traced to the patrilineal mode of descent.

The tension between family duties and desire for autonomy and freedom is a subject discussed by Steven Sangren (in press). He argues that the patrilineal mode of descent, so dominant in China, produces internal conflict in sons and daughters by dictating certain gender roles. Young men remain with their natal families and are obliged to marry and have children, preferably sons, to maintain

the patriline, and care for their parents in their old age. Young women, on the other hand, will marry out of their natal families and give birth to children, again preferably sons, to maintain the patriline of their husband's family.

The obligations of sons and the obligations of daughters within the 'patrilineal mode of production' are thus in a sense opposites. Sangren maintains that daughters are in formal terms obliged to leave their natal families and thus may desire to stay; while sons are obliged to stay and thus may desire to leave. Thus, the patrilineal model gives rise to tension between duty and desire.

In supporting his argument, Sangren draws on two well-known Chinese myths. The first myth is that of the divinely conceived Nezha. Nezha's mother gives birth to a ball of flesh, which his father, a general in the service of the evil emperor, Zhou Wang, cuts open with his sword to reveal a perfectly formed boy, Nezha. The boy has supernatural powers and conquers a series of supernatural beings. His father has no way of controlling him and finally Nezha and his father are cursed by the defeated demons. To prevent harm coming to his parents, Nezha sacrifices himself by taking his own life. He returns his flesh and bones to his father, thus ending the already troubled filial bond with him. His spirit, however, lives on and his fairy godfather, Taiyi Zhenren, devises a scheme to restore his body. Nezha's mother builds a temple to worship Nezha, which his father destroys. Nezha, now even more powerful than before, flies back to exact revenge on his father. But he is forced by his fairy godfather to restrain himself and recognise his duty to his earthly father. Reunited, the two join the virtuous cause of Jiang Ziya against the wicked emperor.

This myth cannot be read at face value; but Sangren suggests it may reveal something about the strains put on the relationship between fathers and sons. In my opinion, Nezha's supernatural powers in the story could also be seen as a metaphor for education. Nezha is stronger and more powerful than his father, just as an educated son has the knowledge necessary to secure a prestigious job, and thus potentially obtain higher status than his father. Nezha's father has nurtured him to manhood (albeit with limited success and, clearly with some assistance from the spirit world) and ultimately this is recognised and rewarded by his son, who joins his father to fight the evil emperor, surely the ultimate reward to a mythical warrior.

The other myth Sangren draws on, is that of the princess Miaoshan who defies her father's wishes by refusing to marry and becoming a Buddhist nun. Her father, enraged, has her killed. In purgatory her true identity as the goddess Guanyin is revealed. She returns to earth in the guise of a mountain recluse in order to save her father who is now dying from a terrible disease. Her father recognises her and reunited father and daughter ascend to heaven.

In the Miaoshan legend, the father is forced to recognise his daughter and she secures her father's immortality like a filial son. In the Nezha story, the son is forced to recognise his father. By refusing to recognise his father in the first place, Nezha is asserting his autonomy.

From these myths, of the desire for autonomy on the one hand (Nezha) and recognition on the other (Miaoshan), Sangren deduces that individuals within the Chinese patrilineal family are sometimes caught in conflict between duty and

desire. They desire what they cannot have. They want to shun the obligations so firmly pressed upon them from birth. In reality, for young men this means escaping the authority of their fathers – escaping the natal family and asserting their autonomy, like Nezha - and for young women it means the opposite – to remain at home with their natal families not leaving to get married.

Sangren's ideas of tension between duty and desire can therefore be looked at through Bloch and Parry's model of short-term gain and long-term morality. Here the long-term cycle is the moral values inherent in the patrilineal mode of production, e.g. for sons to stay, and the short term cycle is the individual's desire for autonomy and freedom, e.g. for sons to leave. In the contrary pulls of these two cycles lies the dynamic of social life.

### **Patterns of family relations**

In Lu village many women are of the opinion that daughters are more skilled in negotiating this tension, i.e. that they are more likely than sons to repay the debt of yang, thus adhering to the social moral values.

This can be explained by delving further into the impact that the patrilineal model has on the repaying of yang. Under the patrilineal model, daughters are not part of their natal families but of the families they marry into. From the natal family's perspective the daughter is thus regarded as non-kin. Bloch (1973) argues that non-kin relationships need to be constantly enacted and worked upon to maintain them, whereas kin relationships require much less effort as they are already in place and can be taken for granted. Since Chinese daughters are not

seen as part of the patriline and therefore not seen as kin to the same degree as sons would be, they will work exceedingly hard – be ‘super-filial’ as Sangren would have it – in order to maintain their relationships with their natal families. Sons do not have to work to the same extent, as they are automatically part of the patriline.

In Lu village this work of filial daughters certainly does not go unnoticed. On a visit to a relative in the market town with a friend from the village, we discuss the difference between having sons and having daughters. My companions are both women in their late forties. My friend from the village has two sons. The town relative has a son and a daughter. They both agree that one of each sort is probably ideal.

This resonates with a lot of women in the village. “Husbands want sons, wives want daughters (zhang fu yao nan hai, qi zi yao nu hai)”, one middle-aged woman said smiling. “Sons grow up and then don’t care about you (nan hai zhang da jiu bu guan ni le), daughters grow up and come back to take care of you (nu hai zhang da hui lai zhao guan ni).”

This goes against the patrilineal model. The patrilineal link to the son doesn’t work, according to this woman, and yang is not satisfactorily repaid. The daughter, on the other hand, despite marrying into and producing children for a new patriline, does repay the yang, implying that the cycle of yang is stronger than the patriline.

One woman told me that she had aborted her third child since it was against the government birth control policies to have it. She had two sons

already. The third child had also been a son. “Had it been a girl, I would have had her and paid the fine”, she told me. “I really wanted a daughter as well.”

Margery Wolf (1972) put women on the map of Chinese kinship studies in the seventies, with her ethnography from Taiwan. Within the strictly patrilineal lineage, she carved out a niche for women in the uterine family – a unit consisting of a mother and her children, particularly sons. With more feminist ethnography from China (e.g. Bray 1997, Croll 1995, Jacka 1997, Judd 1994) women have slowly been emerging from the shade of the lineage. Judd (1989) has written about women’s attachment to their natal families (niang jia) and Bray (1997), Gates (1996) and others have brought to our attention the economic importance of women’s weaving. Stafford has also noted that

“provision for parents is often discussed as if it were only a son’s business, [but] most daughters effectively transfer *their* ‘debt of *yang*’ to their parents-in-law upon marriage while in many cases still providing some care to their own mother and fathers. Indeed, contrary to popular perceptions, the cycle may have as many implications for daughters as for sons, and it arguably has *more* practical implications for women than for men. This is because it is women who normally shoulder (often ‘on behalf of’ their husbands) the actual process of providing *yang*: in many cases for their parents-in-law, their parents, their children, and their grandchildren” (Stafford 2000: 42).

The importance of women to the cycle of ‘yang’ is amply illustrated by several of my informants in Lu village. Women who had married out and into Lu village would frequently visit their natal home (niang jia) if it was close by. If it was further away they would try to go at least once a year. One woman who was from quite far away travelled by bus and once by plane to her native village in southern Yunnan. She would go alone with her son and daughter. Her husband



didn't go. Their marriage was not a happy one and she discussed this with friends in the village and showed the bruises she bore after his beatings. Her unhappy marriage undoubtedly contributed to her rather frequent trips so far away – as did undoubtedly the fact that she seemed forever an outsider in the village, being non-Han and having married someone who was not originally from the village but from a nearby market town.

There were happier causes for returns to niang jia. On a few occasions I accompanied a young woman friend on her home visits to a nearby village. These visits merely lasted a day or part of a day and consisted of her doing some housework for her parents: cleaning the house, cooking food and eating with her elderly parents. Another woman in her early fifties, whose niang jia was a couple of hours' bus ride away, would sometimes go to family events and stay away for 2 or 3 days. She would also on occasion receive visits from a brother or a sister-in-law, sometimes accompanied by a nephew or a niece. She would sometimes talk about her niang jia. Four other women who had married into Lu village came from that same area. They had a special relationship with each other and would frequently stop and chat, even though they had not known each other before they moved to Lu village. This regional identity is important for the women. It helps them cope with life in a new place, with its own distinctive identity, to the extent that their different accents occasionally attracted mockery.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Work of Relatedness: Maintaining Ties with the Living and the Dead**

The emphasis in this chapter is on the work of creating and maintaining relationships. Relationships within the family and with relatives (jia ren), friends and neighbours are produced through visiting, gift-giving and through sharing work. The production of these relationships also extends to ancestors and ghosts who, like living people, need to be fed and clothed to ensure the well being of the family. It is mostly women who are responsible for these relationships with the living and the dead within the family and beyond. It is an integral part of their everyday work and every bit as important as their other daily duties. Economic anthropology has dealt with definitions of the concept of work at length, focusing on questions such as what makes an activity work and what makes it leisure. A great deal of the literature has also dealt with the division of labour – what is men's work and what is women's work. Here, the discussion predominantly revolves around the value placed on men's work in the official sphere of society and women's, often more spatially restricted, work.

#### **The work of maintaining ties with the living**

In addition to the hard labour of earning a living, there is considerable hard work involved in creating and maintaining relationships, both within and outside the immediate family setting. Kinship and friendship are not taken for

granted but are rather “seen to be hard work, the product of everyday human interactions” (Stafford 2000b: 52). In Lu village, this work is interwoven with other everyday chores and duties, such as working in the fields and the vegetable gardens, raising the pigs, bean curd making, childrearing, cooking and cleaning. Bossen (2002) is right when she describes good housekeeping as ‘managing household production, reproduction and human relations’, as maintaining relationships is every bit as important as any of the other daily tasks.

The work of producing and maintaining relatedness is an integral part of everyday tasks and duties. Daily productive activities equally encompass growing cabbages and growing relationships with fellow villagers. The same rules apply – watering everyday, fertilising the ground, reaping a harvest, daily chat, handing out of small gifts or favours, reaping harmonious relationships with friends, neighbours and relatives. There is no detectable distinction in these activities. All is contained within the same flow of daily life, interwoven and indistinguishable.

Let me give a real example. On an unspectacular day in June, Mrs Cheng starts her day by boiling water and pottering around in her kitchen and courtyard. A neighbour pops round with a small bowl of spicy pickled cabbage. The neighbour is offered pumpkin seeds to munch on during her short stay. Mrs Cheng and the neighbour discuss the latest electricity bill, which has just been posted in front of the village administrative offices. The neighbour thinks it unfairly high whereas Mrs Cheng says it is probably fair. The morning moves on and Mrs Cheng levels two plastic buckets full of pigswill on her shoulder. She

bends her knees slightly and slides or half-shuffles down the village street toward her pig sties at a bit more than walking speed. She takes the back route via the fields back to her house and stops to check how her rice is doing. She discusses pesticides with a passing fellow villager. Then, she goes back to the house and cooks lunch for the two of us. We eat and then watch some television. Later she grabs a basket and we go back to the fields where we gather the cabbage-like niu pi cai (literally ‘cow hide cabbage’) for the pigs for the following day. She calls out to a passing friend and neighbour to come and pick some niu pi cai from her field. The other woman accepts the offer and the three of us work together on filling the two baskets. They chat about the other woman son’s prospective wedding.

Through the simple material acts of everyday life, a complex system of relationships is slowly and painstakingly woven. It is this materiality of everyday life I want to convey in this thesis.

Relationships are also strengthened or acknowledged by inviting people to feasts or banquets. Going to visit someone is an important activity in the production of social relationships. The expression for this is being a guest or zuo ke, literally ‘to do (zuo) guest (ke)’. This use of the verb zuo is interesting here. Zuo is frequently used about doing chores such as doing business (zuo shang ye) and also in the sense of making as in zuo yi fu or making clothes or zuo fan or to cook a meal. Similarly, visiting somebody is an active and productive activity and the product of that activity – a social relationship – be it blood kinship or friendship – is very tangible in a small village.



Figure 7. Women working together in the fields.

Being frequently invited somewhere as a guest is seen to reflect favourably on one's social standing, and people would discuss their visits with a great sense of pride. For the more major occasions, such as weddings and funerals, inviting is done quite formally by sending a red card, stating the occasion and name of the invitee, often decorated with auspicious golden characters and drawings.

Villagers often bragged about how many invitations they had received that year. They knew exactly how many invitations they had received. Many people in Lu village kept these invitations on display. Some had a card or two on the side table where they kept their television and family altars. Others clipped them together and hung them on the wall in a great big red bundle for all to see.

There were complaints as well about these invites. There were too many, they demanded too much time and were too expensive to attend. Attending a celebration means a contribution in food and / or money and / or work. It means helping with the cooking, carrying trays of dishes and distributing them on to the tables, walking around adding food, rice and liquor to emptying bowls. There is also the lending of tables and stools for the event, going to the mountain to gather pine needles which are always used as flooring underneath the tables before the event and the washing of bowls, chopsticks, pots and woks after the meal is over. Thus, receiving too many invitations - however respectable it might be - can prove to be too time consuming and too costly, and last but not least it is very hard work.

Labouring together also implies or produces relatedness as the following illustrates. Mrs Liu is married and has two sons aged 18 and 22. All four members of the family have rights to land, which they retain and farm. They are also wage earners, holding jobs in the village metal smelting factory, owned by Mrs Liu's husband's older brother. During the rice harvest, Mrs Liu's household worked with two other households on an exchange basis (huan gong) to get the harvest in on time. This is common practice in Lu village, although there is a

growing trend to buy labour (mai gong), often from outside (wai di), during this period. One of the households with which the Liu household exchanged labour was that of close relatives (biao jie jia) and they had worked together before. They had not exchanged labour with the other household before, but the fact that they did that year was quite significant. The household was that of a prospective daughter-in-law. Mrs Liu's older son was 'talking about love' (tan lian ai) with a young woman of the household, with whom he had gone to school. As he had told me while blushing during the Chinese Lunar New Year, his mother had 'helped him to get to know the girl' ('wo ma bang wo renshi'). However, the relationship had been problematic throughout the year. The girl worked in the province capital and only came back to Lu village for short periods of time. She seemed a bit unsure about the match. Her parents and especially her mother, however, seemed to approve. Mrs Liu had gone over to the prospective daughter-in-law's house and given her gifts; a watch and some clothes. She later told a friend that she felt that the girl had lacked enthusiasm when she had received the presents. The girl's mother visited her shortly afterwards to assure Mrs Liu of her daughter's gratitude. Everyone in the village regarded the two families' exchanging work in the autumn rice harvest as a sign of a deal having been struck. The work exchange signified that a new bond had been formed between the two families.

### **Relatedness: the work of women**

The preceding example also illustrates how pertinent a role women play in the production of relatedness. It is Mrs Liu who introduces a prospective bride to her son and it is the two mothers who do, and are seen by the village as a whole to do, all the wheeling and dealing around it. This is not to say that they do not consult their husbands and their children, because they did, but the fact that they took such a public role in organising the marriage is noticeable.

The image of an exceptionally strong patrilineal kinship organisation has been resilient in Chinese anthropology. In this model the son replaces the father as head of his natal family household, whereas the daughters move away to support their husbands' natal families. Margery Wolf (1972) has challenged the patrilineal model by introducing and emphasising the importance of the 'uterine family' model, which consists of a woman and her sons. Others have followed suit. Yan Yunxiang (1997) suggests that the patrilineal model, however popular in the past, has been seriously challenged in the 1990s. His data from northeast China indicates that villagers are increasingly opting for neolocal residence, i.e. establishing their own family households away from their natal families. This allows them to avoid difficult family politics that can arise with the co-residence of several generations, and gives them the chance to enjoy the luxury of privacy as well. Stafford (2000b) feels the patrilineal model obscures 'the lived experience of Chinese kinship' and misconstrues "the relationship of 'affairs of the hearth' both to formal kinship and to other kinds of relatedness in China" (p.37). He argues for two more incorporative systems of Chinese relatedness



existing alongside the patrilineal one, ‘the cycle of yang’ (which centres mostly on parent-child relationships) and ‘the cycle of laiwang’ (which centres mostly on relationships between friends, neighbours, and acquaintances). In both these cycles, the production of relatedness through everyday transactions within and between households, is brought to the fore. As emphasised in Chapter Four, it is normally women who shoulder the actual providing of yang, often on behalf of their husbands, for parents-in-law, parents, children and grandchildren. By looking at the cycle of yang, the role of women in Chinese kinship and society is brought to the fore. Women are revealed to be at the centre of the processes described and it is through their daily engagement with the cycle that they play a valuable part in Chinese kinship and, importantly, are actually seen to do so. Further, the cycle of laiwang is sometimes conceived of as being constituted by men only but “the actual burden of producing everyday *laiwang* - and even that of special occasions is often undertaken by women” (Stafford 2000b: 47).

Sangren (2000) further treats Chinese families as arenas of value production and notes that women are largely responsible for producing the forms and ethos of family life. A fact he claims, “at once both extravagantly applauded and more subtly repressed in terms of both the religious ‘system’ itself and, more broadly, patrilineal ideology” (Sangren 2000: 172). Patriliney here is a mode of production and it is women who produce it through worship but are then exploited by that self same system, by having that surplus production taken from them and thereby alienating them from their own production.

In 1990, Bossen (2002) found 22% of marriages in Lu village and its satellite villages to be uxorilocal. Bossen does not break the non-uxorilocal households down into further categories but in my estimation most of them are patrilocal whilst some are neolocal.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the majority of households follow the model of patrilocal residence, this rule is certainly not without exception, as almost a quarter of villagers opt for matrilocal residence. Furthermore, it should be noted that people discuss these issues in a matter-of-fact manner and there is no stigma attached to matrilocal residence, as has sometimes been indicated in the anthropological literature on China. The Lu village administrative land records of 1996 count 1104 residents in Lu village in 313 households. Every household is registered under the name of the head of the household (*hu zhu*) and members of the household are then numbered but not named. Out of the 313 household 'heads', 81 are women - or almost 26% of the total.<sup>20</sup> Although patriline and patrilocal residence is dominant in the Chinese countryside, the practicalities of each case give scope to great variation in kinship organisation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> With increased wealth this is for many the preferred arrangement.

<sup>20</sup> A member of a household with a salaried government job loses rights to land. Should a male head of a household be a salaried individual then the household would be registered under his wife's name if she is classified as a farmer. This is the case in a few instances in Lu village.

<sup>21</sup> Bossen (2002) describes an interesting 'tiff' between parents-in-law of newlyweds where the parents of the groom used the expression *tao xifu* emphasising the entry of a daughter-in-law into the patriline and the parents of the bride preferred *jie hun* which is more egalitarian, emphasising the fact that the newlyweds would live neolocally.

In Lu village, the production of relationships with kin and neighbours is largely left to women.<sup>22</sup> Women take on these relationship duties when they marry.

Wang Mei Hua was a young woman in Lu village. She was recently married and had a young son. Her parents and husband went out in the morning to work in the family metal smelting factory. She stayed at home with her son and her grandmother. Her work was to manage their home and relationships with extended family, friends and neighbours. She did most of the cooking at home but this she did before marriage as well. The main change was the added obligation to go and visit people (zuo ke) - more so after she had her son than right after she got married.

There was a stark contrast between her and her sisters, who were unmarried and worked and studied elsewhere in the province. The sisters returned home for the Lunar New Year. They slept till midday and watched television and DVDs, whilst Wang Mei Hua was obliged to go visiting with her grandmother and son not only to her own relatives but also her husband's.

One evening her husband's older brother came for a visit. He lives with her husband's family in one of the outlying hamlets and has himself just married and had a son ten days before his younger brother. He says he is just passing by – he is in the transport business as he owns a tractor (tuo la ji). He mentions that his family feel they haven't seen Wang Mei Hua and her son for a while. The next day she straps the son on to her back and goes for a visit. She also goes to family

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<sup>22</sup> This is not to deny the importance of men's relationship-building. My aim here is to highlight the often neglected role of women in this respect, and not to minimise men's. I speak of the work of male cadres and entrepreneurs in particular in Chapter Six.

events at her husband's family in addition to her own family's events – often without her husband. It is not her husband's responsibility to keep in touch – it is Mei Hua's responsibility.

For Wang Mei Hua, the obligation to do things comes after marriage and especially after the birth of her son. Mei Hua is born and raised in the village. She spent two years after graduating from high school in Kunming as a truck driver but apart from that she has always lived in the village. She is told what is expected of her, not only by her own family but also by her husband's family. During Lunar New Year, when her grandmother goes and visits, she tells Mei Hua to come as well and fusses when on a couple of occasions she doesn't want to. She never does this to her unmarried sisters.

Mei Hua of course has seen how wives and mothers behave in public, but seeing is not the same as doing. Mei Hua is still adapting to her new role as wife and mother. Sometimes, when her husband was indisposed, she would ask me to accompany her to banquets held by her husband's family. She didn't want to go on her own. During these banquets she was not her usual self. She was quieter and restricted herself to certain topics such as childrearing and food whereas at home she would frequently talk about something she had read in the paper, about how she disapproved of this or that, or she would joke and laugh out loud.

Maintaining relationships is hard work, and because it largely falls on women to do so, it puts them under a great deal of pressure. Women's duties are extensive – in the field, in the home, raising the children, producing relationships.

Sometimes the burden of work is too heavy. Each of the seven production teams (sheng chan dui), which make up the big team (da dui), which is Lu village, has a big concrete courtyard. These courtyards, which all have big kitchens on one side and walls around the rest, serve as meeting halls when there are matters to be discussed, as drying grounds for rice (da mi), barley (da mai), wheat (xiao mai) and beans (can dou), and as halls of feasting when a team member marries or passes away. During the Revolutionary period (roughly 1949-1978) this is where meals were cooked and consumed by the team communally – referred to as ‘big pot rice’ (da guo mi fan). I was helping a friend drying her rice in her team courtyard. Every household had a slice of the concrete where they spread their unhusked rice (gu zi), brushed the straw and husk off with coarse brooms and moved it occasionally so that it would dry evenly. This is a period of intense work and pressure. Everyone works very hard and is very tired. That year endless rain made the work harder than it needed be.

A couple in their thirties were drying their rice next to us. Suddenly they flare up in anger. The woman accused her husband of not pulling his weight with the work. He jumped on her and grabbed her arm and they tugged for a while before other villagers, including my friend, stepped in and separated them. The woman kept on screaming at her husband – that he was lazy and no good. He remained silent. Her screams toned down into violent sobs. The husband finished what he was doing and then left the concrete ground. The woman remained behind sobbing and muttering to herself. She finished covering up the

crop with plastic since it looked like rain. Everyone else kept working on their own heaps of rice.

I was not sure what to make of this episode. Women's work is hard; it can earn them great respect and good relationships, but it can also get the better of them and leave them powerless and exploited.

### **The work of maintaining ties with the dead**

The women's relatedness work extends beyond establishing and maintaining relationships with living neighbours, friends and relatives, to include those who have passed away; the ancestors (zu xian).

Lu villagers go to the temple in the nearby market town as there is no temple in the village. On one occasion I go with my friend Mrs Li. It is the third day of a new lunar month. "It's all right to go today", she tells me. "Yesterday and the day before yesterday were very crowded I hear. Today there will still be a lot of people but not so many. Today is a good day to go." We take a horse cart from the village to the temple. The temple is painted dark red and stands on the edge of town - far from the town centre and next to a huge graveyard where young men who died whilst constructing the railway line from Kunming are buried.

At the entrance there is an old woman selling incense, 'gold ingots' and paper money. The gold ingots she has meticulously made herself. They are bright yellow with a beautiful pattern of red paper glued on to them. We buy incense, candles and paper ingots. We light candles by the big fat smiling Buddha

at the entrance. First Mrs Li and then me. We light incense, hold it between two palms pressed together and bow our heads three times before sticking it in the sand-filled urns standing next to the Buddha. Then we get down on our knees on beautifully embroidered pillows, dark from knees which have rested there before us, and bow (ke tou) three times. We repeat the same procedure in the Daoist section of the temple. There is a band of middle aged and older men playing music. There is no room for us in the Buddhist section. It is full of women in black robes chanting. There is a smell of incense in the air that mixes well with the music coming from the Daoist hall and the Buddhist chanting seeping out of the other hall.<sup>23</sup>

The atmosphere is more festive than solemn. People sit and chat in the courtyard exchanging news about acquaintances, friends and families. A middle-aged woman is selling yellow forms with a red stamp from the temple and an older man is helping people fill them in. We buy two - one for my friend and one for me. We write down the names of the people we want to wish well and tick off which prayers from the long list of possibilities printed on the form we would like on their behalf - 'success in the workplace', 'children doing well in school', 'peace in the home' and so on. The work performed in temples is very much concerned with maintaining the moral welfare of the family.

The sound of running water, the clinking of bowls, the clicking of chopsticks, and shouting comes from the temple kitchen. A meal is being

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<sup>23</sup> Temples in China frequently combine Buddhism and Daoism with some even throwing Confucianism into the pool. Chinese folk religion famously is a bit of a melting pot of various traditions. For more on Chinese folk religion see e.g. Feuchtwang (1991), Weller (1987).

prepared for the worshippers. It is auspicious to eat food cooked by the monks and their helpers in the temple and the meal is quite an important part of the trip.

We have brought a plastic bag filled with rice. “If we bring rice then we only have to pay a few more jiao for a meal”, Mrs Li had told me excitedly before we left that morning. We take our rice to the kitchen, roll up our sleeves and start helping out. The same rule applies here as applies at the house of a friend. Helping out with the work is almost a matter of manners. Mrs Li cuts up some vegetables. I wash some cabbages and a few bowls. Then we sweep the floor where several tables and straw seats are spread round. We wash our hands and an older man helps us fill in the aforementioned yellow forms. Mrs Li tells him all about her family and about me. We help an older woman folding silver paper into ‘silver ingots’. She has a bag full - and still lots of paper left.

Maintaining relationships with the dead to ensure their support of the living is an integral part of women’s work in Lu village. What intrigued me about this particular trip to the temple with Mrs Li was how seamless and natural the switch from helping to prepare food in the kitchen to praying for family members was. In fact, there really was no switch as such between praying and cooking. Sangren (2000) observes that “[w]hen women pray for domestic peace and harmony (and productivity), they are not only expressing desires, they are also representing in the idiom of worship what they are producing in their daily lives” (p.172). Worship is a way of producing and maintaining relationships with the dead, and it is an integral part of ensuring the livelihood of a family and



honouring family values. As such, it is as much a part of a day's work as cooking a meal or ploughing a field.

Death does not terminate kinship. It is not only everyday relationships with living fellow villagers that need to be 'worked on' in Lu village, but also the relationships with deceased ancestors. Just as the relationships with living neighbours and relatives are nurtured through visits and gifts, so are the relationships with the dead. The ancestors are seen as guests of honour, who need to be respectfully welcomed, fed and sent away with presents. In turn, the living rely on the ancestors' blessings to provide prosperity, fertility and health. Thus, "the dead - although dead – very much move among the living, and have a powerful impact on events in this world" (Stafford 2000a: 72).

Stafford (2000a) has argued that, "families and communities are importantly constituted or 'produced' through ritualised moments of separation and reunion" (p.70). Mrs Chang, my surrogate aunt while I lived in Lu village, once explained to me her relationship to her ancestors. We were sitting in the living room watching television and talking. It was the evening of the 14th day of the seventh month of the lunar year. Ancestors (zu xian) and ghosts (gui) have been with us for two weeks now and we have just come back inside - our hair still wet from the rain - after sending them off again to their other world.

"It is like sending a guest off (song ke ren). You welcome (huan ying) a guest by giving him food and burning incense. When he leaves, you send the guest off by giving him food and drink. Then you give the guest presents to take back with him; clothes and money. It's the same with the ancestors (zu xian)."

For the preceding two weeks the grandmother of the household (Mrs Chang's mother-in-law) has been discussing with the other old women in the village where to buy paper clothes for the ancestors, how many to get and how much to pay for them. At home we have been folding yellow and silver paper to make gold and silver ingots. Money is bought in different denominations. Notes from the Bank of Hell - hundreds and hundreds of yuan – and even American dollars – are all available at the corner store for a few jiao.<sup>24</sup>

As we stand by the roadside in the dark with the rain coming down we send the ancestors off. The sending off committees consist solely of women - in my household the committee consists of the grandmother, my aunt Mrs Chang and her married daughter. We send one ancestor off, or a married couple, at a time. There are three distinct piles of offerings in my household. Three specially bought paper bags have been filled with paper-clothes, token money and gold and silver ingots made of paper. We pull each person's things out of the bags, careful not to mix the content of the different bags. One pile is for the patrilineal clan; my uncle's father (my grandmother's husband), and my uncle's grandparents (my grandmother's parents-in-law). The second heap is my grandmother's own heap. It is for her older sister and her own parents. The third heap holds my aunt's offerings for her mother and then her grandparents. Behind the three heaps there is a row of burning incense. My grandmother chants the names of the dead. She tells them who she is and wishes them well. "I am Chang Guo Rong's mother - I'm giving you clothes to wear, money to spend, tea and alcohol to drink and food

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<sup>24</sup> Yuan is the Chinese currency with smaller unit being jiao. There are ten jiao to one yuan. At the time of fieldwork, 1GBP equalled roughly 14 yuan.

to eat - go peacefully (song ni men hui qu - ni men man man qu). She talks to her deceased husband, to her husband's parents. She asks for their protection (bao hu) and then she recites the names of the people in the household. My grandmother, my aunt and my sister stand outside in the rain burning piles of paper and splashing cabbage soup around them. I hold a big black umbrella over all of us. My sister holds the flashlight. My aunt chants over the pile she burns for her mother and grandparents. Occasionally cars rush by and light up the small groups of women lined up along the roadside with flashlights and umbrellas. People's faces are serene and serious.

We do not get out of the rain until everything is burnt. My grandmother uses a stick to poke into the ash piles. If there is a piece of paper clothing or a bundle of money that has not been properly burnt we light it again. Everything has to be burnt completely to be of any use to the ancestors. The pot of cabbage soup is finished as well.

Feeding is a means through which connection is kept with the ancestors. My aunt, Mrs Chang, says that the deceased ancestors are to be treated properly as guests - they are to be fed and sent away with presents. Thompson (1988) observes that underlying the ritual of feeding the dead is the belief that the dead require nourishment from the living in order to stay well and that this gives descendants some leverage over their dead ancestors.

Emily Martin Ahern (cf. Thompson 1988: 73) argues that, "the living hope to inspire a ... reciprocal response from the ancestors, to obtain through them the good life as they perceive it: wealth, rice harvests, and offspring". Broadly

speaking, the descendants hope for fertility from their dead. The relationship between the dead and the living is thus a reciprocal one, in which one relies on the other for their well-being. Although gifts given to ancestors create certain leverage over them, effectively keeping them under control, on another level, the relationship with the dead can be seen to be much the same as that with the living. In other words, it is yet another part of the tapestry of relationships people – here mostly women – weave from day to day.

Much has been written on ancestor worship in the anthropology of China (e.g. Eastman 1988, Watson & Rawski 1988, Ahern & Wolf 1974, Ahern 1973). My observations in Lu village do not vary greatly from this existing material but there are two points, which I would like to draw out more strongly. The first is the prominent role of women - especially older women - in ritual. They are repositories of great ritual knowledge on which other participants then draw. The second point is to balance the overemphasis on the ritual importance of patrilineal kin as opposed to matrilineal kin.

Watson (1988) maintains that “for most Chinese, it was patrilineal kinship that survived beyond death; matrilineal ties (through one’s mother) and affinal links (through marriage) were generally terminated upon death. Ancestor worship was the concrete expression of this preoccupation with the patriline.” (p.8). However, my grandmother and my aunt in Lu village honoured not only the patriline they belong to (that is their husbands’ patriline) but also their own deceased siblings, parents and grandparents, thereby honouring their natal households, men and women. This held true for other families that I spoke to. It

should be noted that ritual is not only performed out of duty or necessity. It is also a tremendously personal affair.

Women, especially older women, are the ritual specialists. They have moral responsibilities towards the family unit and are responsible for keeping things together. The knowledge of how to perform ritual properly is passed down through the generations of women, usually from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. Young women do not assume any moral responsibilities for families until they marry and have children who are part of the larger family. They are then expected to observe and perform the proper rituals. When rituals are being performed, however, younger women constantly refer to the older women for guidance on how to do things properly. Older women are always very serious about ritual. Women in their forties are more shy about it and do not display the expertise the older women do. Younger women in their twenties - married and with children - are beginning to learn. They find it all a bit funny sometimes and certainly not 'modern' but they do it for their children's sake and simply to keep everyone happy. This slight embarrassment derives from a combination of mimicking something they have watched their mothers and grandmothers doing since childhood and also the feeling that this superstitious (mi xin) display is perhaps a little backwards, or old fashioned (tu). Despite this, there are no signs of people abandoning these rituals.

On the second day of the Lunar New Year, I travel to a temple with members of my host household. There are eleven of us squeezed into my uncle, Mr Chang's, little van; myself, my older sister and her three younger sisters, the

second sister's husband, my aunt, my uncle's younger brother and his wife and two sons. The road is bumpy and our heads occasionally thump against the van ceiling as we bounce around on our stools. As we near our destination we overtake horse carts filled with people who are wearing their best clothes. We have to slow down when we get closer, as there are so many people on the road - groups of smiling people wearing new hats to protect themselves from the sun on this fine, crisp, winter day.

When we finally arrive, my aunt, my uncle's younger brother's wife and my married sister take care of the ritual side of things. The others run ahead - up the slope of the mountain on which the temple stands - happily enjoying the day. I stay behind with my two aunts and my sister. They buy a yellow form with a red seal from the temple and my sister squats by a low stone table in the temple courtyard and fills it in. She observes how the others fill in their forms before proceeding with hers and her mother and her aunt stand behind her looking over her shoulder, reciting everyone's name and reading the list of prayers as she ticks each and every one. She asks for protection against illnesses, good luck for children in school, smoothness on the job front and harmony in the home. The three of them take turns holding the folded form against their foreheads in front of the Buddha whilst bowing. They burn incense as well. They have done this many times before but they still watch others and the two older women talk between themselves about how to do it properly.

I stand in the temple courtyard with my sister; people and incense smoke all around us. Her mother and her aunt are burning the last of the incense we

bought. I ask my sister whether she enjoys the festivities. “I enjoyed it more when I was younger”, she responds.

“I did what I wanted to do and went wherever I wanted to go (xiang zuo shen me jiu zuo shen me, xiang qu shen me di fang jiu qu shen me di fang). After my son’s birth I have become different from my other sisters (gen wo jie mei bu yi yang). Now I have to do certain things (xian zai you wo ying gai zuo de shi qing).”

After her marriage and especially after the birth of her son she feels older - more grown up. This entails certain responsibilities – the expectation of certain behaviour. What she does and where she goes does not only reflect upon and affect herself - she is now also responsible for her son and by implication, her entire family. Not observing proper behaviour invites bad luck and - especially in such a small community - dangers of accusations of doing so from fellow villagers, including friends and family.

Relationships to gods, ghosts and ancestors are an integral part of life in Lu village. Many people will light incense on the first and the fifteenth day of each lunar month, go to the temple on festivals and when the agricultural cycle allows them to rest, they go to ancestral graves on festivals and so on. Being a ‘proper’ person is also about showing elders proper appropriate respect, adhering to the moral rules of society, being humble about success and content with less good fortune. This is not a subject that people discuss much nor is it something they draw out of their daily routine and put on a pedestal. It is simply and quietly part of the larger picture of life in Lu village.

Lunar New Year is a time of intense visiting activity. On the fifth day of the Lunar New Year we visit my host household’s ancestral graves. It was much

like a picnic! We drive a short distance until we reach the end of a small dirt road. Fruit trees are scattered around the mountainside that we climb. A middle-aged-man is working amongst the trees and exchanges greetings with my uncle. We reach the graves - a row of elongated mounds with grey headstones. We walk along the row of graves and stop at the last one.

The grave we stop by is very different from the others. It is the grave of my uncle's father who died a couple of years ago. The family has just had a new headstone carved for it. It carries the names of the entire family – the sons of the deceased, their spouses, grandsons and granddaughters and the recently born great grandson. The grave is larger and stands slightly higher than the rest of the graves and the new headstone is impressively new and elaborate. In addition to the family names carved on the main stone, there are two poles with lions to either side framing the grave nicely.

We burn incense and paper money. We offer oranges, apples, sweets and tea. There is no alcohol because my uncle's father did not drink. We also burn incense and money by the other graves of more remote ancestors. Everyone kneels and bows (ke tou) - one at a time – in front of the grave. The ceremony is most elaborate and the offerings most lavish at the grave of my uncle's father. Afterwards we eat and drink on the grass in front of the graves. My uncle has brought canes of sugar. We suck on the sweetness and then spit the dry fibres out. It is a bit chilly but the sun is shining. My uncle's mobile phone goes off. He has to meet some people to talk business. Without anyone grumbling we go home.



I hope to have illustrated in this chapter that in Lu village considerable work is devoted to maintaining relationships with both the living and the dead. Relationships are strengthened through gift giving, visiting, labouring together, rituals, temple visits and so forth. This work is carefully woven into the daily routine of tasks and duties and is largely undertaken by women. Having thus considered in some detail the work of women, we now turn to reviewing the work chiefly carried out by men; the work of forming and maintaining business relations through leisure pursuits.

## **Chapter Six**

### **The Work of Leisure and Gift Giving**

This chapter explores the production of relationships through leisure pursuits. In previous chapters, I have discussed how relationships are produced in the context of everyday tasks and duties. But relationships are also produced through more 'leisurely' activities. This nurturing of relationships through leisure is predominantly work carried out by well-to-do men, e.g. entrepreneurs and government officials, and relationships thus produced are largely non-kin relations; relationships with colleagues, associates or business partners. There are some important differences between kin-relations (discussed in Chapters Four and Five) and non-kin relationships (discussed here). The former are long-term, follow established guidelines, are morally binding and unconditional whereas the latter are short-term, fairly unscripted, morally undetermined, uncertain and conditional. Because of this unstable nature of non-kin relationships, sustaining them is even more work than maintaining kin-relations. The leisure pursuits used in the production of relationships are many and varied. The common ingredients of such a production in Lu village are food and drink, karaoke, fishing and gifts. Gift-giving is one of the more overt tools in relationship building but the giving and receiving of gifts has a series of complex rules. It does not constitute the direct exchange of a gift for a favour or influence. Because non-kin relationships lend themselves more to manipulation and accusations of corruption or

immorality, it is particularly important that proper sentiment (gan qing) be exhibited.

Numerous anthropologists have in their writings illustrated the ‘blurring’ of the boundaries between work and leisure. As early as 1939, Audrey Richards pointed out that in northern Rhodesia there was no clear break between work and leisure and Sahlins (1972) later argued much the same. Other scholars have emphasised that the end product or output of work is more than merely material. Wadel (1979) highlights the fact that work is a social construct and that most working people “produce other things than what is regarded as the product. These other things include such things as social relations, technical and social skills, attitudes and values.” (p. 367). He complains that mainstream anthropology tends to focus too much on the material end-product of work, ignoring its social by-product.

### **Kin and non-kin relationships**

The key differences between kin and non-kin relationships are that the former are long-term, moral and stable, whereas the latter are short-term, morally undetermined and unstable. Fortes’ claim for the morality of kinship was that kin would sometimes forgo economic benefit to do the moral thing. He thus takes kinship to be the prime example of a ‘moral’ social relationship (Fortes 1969). As Bloch (1973) points out, then Sahlins (1972) has described such a relationship as generalised reciprocity.

Kin relationships follow certain guidelines. Everyone knows their place and what is expected of them (though of course these rules are sometimes broken). When moving beyond kin and village-based relationships, the protagonist is on less solid ground. For example, in building and maintaining business and government relationships, there is always the possible presence of instrumentality, corruption and bribery. China is publicly very much at pains to expose and punish corruption, even executing people for such offences.

Bloch (1973), drawing on Fortes' insistence on the morality of kinship, seeks to explain what the effects of morality are on economic and political organisation – how the economy and the political system are “affected by the moral character of certain links between individuals” (p.75). Bloch argues that in a kinship relationship, balance is not sought after in the short term as the relationship is assumed to stretch over a long period of time. One may assume that in the long term the reciprocity will balance out but in the short term there is little concern with this due to the durability of the relationship. In fact, immediate repayment of a gift or favour is sometimes a grave insult and demeans the morality of the relationship.

Bloch argues that people constantly strive to make strangers or non-kin more kin-like, and then to make the relationships with them more long-term, moral and stable so as to enlarge the pool of potential future assistance to draw on. Bloch, in short, describes a continuum, which looks something like this:

short term ----- long term

strangers ----- kin

Bloch turns to the field of agricultural cooperation to explain his argument. Among the Merina of Madagascar, kinship is “binding, unconditional and without term” (Bloch 1973: 78). One has unfailingly to assist kin and can in return expect help back from them. This would make kin ideal to cooperate with but the teams which Bloch saw cooperate in agriculture were only to a degree composed of kin and to a much larger extent composed of non-kin. Real kin seemed even to have been blatantly passed over at times in favour of non-kin. In addition to this, the teams also seemed to vary continuously from one agricultural year to another.

When confronting his informants with this, the response was that they needed a lot of people whom they would be able to call upon for work. “‘Real’ kinsmen would always come, they said, ‘artificial’ kinsmen would only come if one kept up the typical kinship behaviour of repeated requests for help.” (Bloch 1973: 79). The immediate objective for the Merina farmer is to complete the task at hand, in the here and now, but agriculture is understood as being unpredictable and thus the farmer feels that he has to be able to draw on a bigger pool of people. People are also, as Bloch points out, “a very uncertain asset, they die, grow old, fall ill, quarrel and so on” (Bloch 1973: 79). Non-kin are not a guaranteed source of possible future labour to the extent that kin are but the relationship with non-kin cannot be maintained unless it is used and so it is that the cooperation teams

are made to such a large extent of non-kin. Because of their unstable nature, non-kin relationships need to be frequently worked on and nurtured.

### **Leisure work: the entrepreneur and the cadres**

While everyone indulges in leisure activities to some degree and builds relationships through them, these activities assume special importance for one particular social stratum within the village – the group of entrepreneurs and cadres. They pursue these leisure activities with more fervour, extravagance and indeed necessity than the common farmer. These are men who have more money than the average farmer – the entrepreneur through his entrepreneurial activities and the cadre through his salaried job - and thus can afford to engage in relationship production on a different scale. Perhaps more importantly, they cannot afford not to do so.

Mr Chang, the village entrepreneur par excellence, is a case in point. He travels a greater distance in his daily routine than most other people in the village. He and the village cadres, the latter by default of their direct access to government resources, frequently expand the production of relationships so ingrained in everyday life in the village, to non-kin in the market town and even across greater distances, occasionally even beyond the province. This production, taken out of its intra-village and kin environment, is morally more complex and precarious.

During my fieldwork in Lu village, I lived in the Chang household. Mr Chang, along with his brother and other men from the village, had spent time away in Sichuan province and in other parts of the county as construction

workers. His wife, Mrs Chang had made ice-lollies and sold them in the nearby market town. She would get up at three or four o'clock in the morning and make the lollies. Then she would roll into town with her wagon at seven or eight. There she would sit all day selling before wheeling herself back to the village in the late afternoon having bought various things in town for the making of next day's stock. At home she had four daughters and a house to attend to. She also made bean curd, which she sold to fellow villagers. Her mother-in-law aided her in looking after her daughters, the house and the bean curd making.

The Changs had started their factory by recycling plastics, making washboards, sandals, buckets and plastic sheeting used in farming. When they felt this market was reaching saturation, they resolved to reinvent themselves as makers of agricultural tools. They made combine harvesters (da gu ji)<sup>25</sup> and vegetable shredders and melted scrap metal into woks. Today, during peak production, the factory employs eighteen people. The combine harvesters and the vegetable shredders are made in batches, two to three times in the course of a year, all depending on contracts. The metal smelting is a more continuous production, which the Changs are looking to expand. While I was in the village they commenced production of metal balls in various sizes, which they sold to cement-making factories. These are used in conjunction with rotation and pressure to grind rocks down into fine dust. The Changs also experimented with the making of decorations, such as images of dragons or auspicious characters, which are attached to bars or doors commonly used over a second door as a security measure mostly in urban homes and offices.

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<sup>25</sup> These are either foot-or motor-powered.

Mr Chang and his wife frequently spoke of the necessity of being flexible in business. As they saw it, they had always managed to stay a step ahead of others and that was why they had been successful. They were thus constantly thinking about ways of diversifying, to spread the risk of loss, so that if one production line ceased to sell, they would at least have something else going alongside it to cushion the blow.

The Changs were commonly referred to as ‘the number one household of our village’ (wo men cun zi di yi jia ting) by fellow villagers. The year I lived with them, the county awarded them the title of ‘model household’ or ‘the five goods household’ (wu hao jia ting)<sup>26</sup>. Mr Chang himself is described by people in the village as having good temperament or disposition (pi qi hao) and being very capable (neng gan).

Mr Chang spent a great deal of time out of the village. He did not in fact have much to do with the everyday running of the family factory<sup>27</sup>. This was seen to by his wife, his younger brother and his son-in-law. Mr Chang’s time away was spent in Kunming getting materials (na cai liao) or more generally out and

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<sup>26</sup> The five goods, according to Judd (1994: 278) quoted in Bossen (2002: 323), are: 1. The love of socialism and the collective and to be law-abiding. 2. Dare to reform, be innovative and fulfil tasks. 3. Develop strengths, work hard to prosper, lead in helping others. 4. Practise family planning and teach children. 5. Respect the elderly, care for the young, be democratic and harmonious within the household and with neighbours. Not much fuss is made of these awards and younger members of the household in question found them rather an embarrassment. When I asked a middle-aged friend in the village she said she wasn’t sure but she thought the award had been given to the Chang family because they were four generations living together under one roof (si bei ren dou zai yi qi zhu).

<sup>27</sup> While I was in Lu village, a man who owned a tractor and worked in transport told me that there had been a survey on television of agricultural equipment where the Wangs’ products had not fared particularly well. Mr Chang was indeed aware of the limitations of his factory.



about in different areas of the province ‘looking for business’ (zhao shang ye). On those trips he would usually be accompanied by one of two drivers amongst the factory staff and increasingly, during my stay, by his son-in-law. I never accompanied Mr Chang on his journeys. I often, however, observed and participated in visits he himself received from other entrepreneurs with a similar mission. These involved a great deal of eating, drinking, playing cards, fishing and karaoke singing.

One evening, I sat with Mr Chang at home in the living room. He had been away for a few days and had only just returned. I commented on how busy he was. He explained to me the necessity of his time spent away.

“In China it’s like this. What we need in this country is more laws (fa lu). There is no proper law in China so you have to know people (ren shi ren). If you want to do business (zuo shang ye de hua) you need to have good relationships (guan xi hao) with people so that things run smoothly (shun li). It is very expensive to entertain people but I have to (yi ding yao zuo).”

In setting up and maintaining and expanding his business, Mr Chang has had to deal with strangers. His dealings with outsiders took many forms. Each outsider represents a relationship that must be nurtured and developed. These strangers are suppliers, customers, county officials and colleagues, and of course the bosses, from what might be described as village head office.

A part of Mr Chang’s business is an outlet or a sub-branch of a larger factory based in Kunming. The metal sheeting for the harvesters and the shredders comes from this factory. One day, during my stay, the Kunming bosses paid Mr Chang a visit. They came in a white little van - a tall grey-haired

respectable looking man, a big middle-aged jovial man - and an avid drinker - and a third younger man who drove the van. The bosses spent the day fishing with Mr Chang.

A man-made fishing pond has been dug out of the landscape by an enterprising farmer in one of the neighbouring villages. The farmer raises fish in the pond and those who can afford the luxury, and have the time to do so, go there to fish. They pay according to the volume of the catch. Coming back to the house that evening, Mr Chang and his wife cleaned and gutted the catch. Part of it was left in the house to be eaten the next day but the rest was taken to a restaurant in the market town by Mr Chang and his bosses, now accompanied by Mr Chang's very pregnant daughter, her husband and myself. It was rather late and the restaurant we found was rather dingy. The fish was handed over to be cooked and various other dishes were produced. The round table was soon overflowing with meat, fish and vegetable dishes. Mr Chang put on a veritable banquet, plentiful in food, beer and hard liquor (bai jiu). Liquor was continuously poured into the bosses' glasses, which were raised in a toast time and again. Towards the end of the evening the staff had started to pile chairs onto surrounding tables – a not so subtle hint that they wanted to get home. We took our cue and drove off in search of a suitable karaoke place to while away the rest of the evening.

The place we entered was big and dark. A huge screen covered the entire back wall. Colourful, cheery images floated past, with subtitles in complex

Chinese writing (fan ti zi)<sup>28</sup>. We sat down on a beige corner sofa with sugar-covered fruit, Lotte<sup>29</sup> coffee chewing gum and green tea in front of us. Young, good-looking, heavily made-up women sat between all the men. Mr Chang's pregnant daughter was left behind in the car and soon her husband disappeared off to drive her home before he returned again to join in the singing.

This karaoke session, the fishing, the food and the drinking, are a significant part of Mr Chang's effort to transform a short-term relationship with strangers into a long-term and more familiar relationship. The hierarchy between Mr Chang and his bosses was clear to see from the way they addressed each other. Mr Chang unfailingly referred to his bosses as 'boss' (lao ban). At one point the bosses referred to Mr Chang as 'wealthy peasant' (fu yu nong min). They did so jokingly but it set out the differences between them clearly, in words. The bosses were bosses. Mr Chang, despite his entrepreneurial acumen, was in the end just a peasant who had come into some money.

But these differences were minimised by fishing together earlier in the day and then by eating the catch together and singing karaoke together. During dinner in the restaurant, Mr Chang also took the opportunity to invite his bosses to the celebration planned for when his as yet unborn grandchild would be given a name. All of these actions aim at overcoming difference and, I shall argue, change the short-term and unreliable relationship between them into a more solid

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<sup>28</sup> Since the 1950s mainland China uses simplified characters while Taiwan, Hong Kong and the entire Chinese diaspora use the traditional and more complex form of writing. The complex characters often make their way to the mainland through popular culture (music and movies in particular) much of which comes from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

<sup>29</sup> A well-known South-Korean brand name.

and long-term one. The overcoming of status differences and the solidifying of relationships is crucial to doing business in China.

Mr Chang, the entrepreneur, I argue, is in a similar situation to Bloch's Merina farmers. Doing business is very unpredictable. And this is why Mr Chang's real work, day in and day out, is to oil the wheels. His kin – his brother, wife, brother's wife, brother's two sons, his daughter and son-in-law - all work in the factory on a daily basis and handle its daily affairs. Mr Chang is elsewhere getting materials or looking for business. His fishing, singing karaoke, playing cards, eating and drinking are, as he himself says, an integral part of his business activities. His actions are not overtly instrumental. He is not saying 'I will throw you a banquet and you will give me the business deal'. Earning new business and keeping old business necessitates constant interaction and insurance of a good relationship and good will. This may sometimes merely be insurance against negative sanctions which only those in power can yield.

Along with Mr Chang, the village cadres are key players of leisure work in Lu village. There are eight cadres working full time out of the government offices in Lu village, a two storey, plaster-covered, brick building. The general secretary (zhu ren) and vice-general secretary (fu zhu ren) have desks facing each other towards the back of the administrative office. Their desks share the television, which is often on during the day. The general secretary holds the highest position and is a party member graduated from high school. The vice-general secretary is the one people most often turn to, and for a long time I believed him to be the real head of the administrative office. The rest of the cadre

team consists of the accountant (kuai ji) who has served for several years and a young man who is a technician. The latter is very active; he takes care of calculating people's electricity bills and is concerned with the water in the irrigation system as well. The fifth person almost always there was the treasurer. Another man serving as agricultural technician rarely came in to the office. There was also a women's representative who only occasionally came into the office. The eighth cadre, who seemed to have no official title or genuine function but lived in the administrative compound, played a role in the leisure side of official relationships and, in particular, was a keen card player and drinker.

When at home, Mr Chang would frequently go eating, drinking or fishing with the village cadres. These outings would almost invariably end up at Mr Chang's house with more alcohol, sometimes food (if they were coming back from fishing) and always snacks of fruit and so on. The group would then drift towards the karaoke equipment installed in the first floor living room and howl away long into the night.

Familiarity amongst cadres and entrepreneurs in Lu village is established through singing, fishing, eating and drinking together. It manifests itself in a variety of ways but perhaps it can be seen most clearly in the playing around with titles and the using of kinship titles for former strangers.

But not all festivities to strengthen relations are as successful as those undertaken by Mr Chang. Around the time of the Mid-Autumn Festival and National Day (late September) the county government threw a banquet for all their village cadres. I tagged along to the event with the Lu village government.

First stop were the county governmental offices where the village leader made a money contribution on behalf of his delegation and received a handful of sweets in return. The cadres moped around looking for familiar faces and briefly greeted a few people standing in the courtyard before moving up to the first floor where they sat down in a small room with some other cadres, whom they were familiar with. There were sweets, sunflower seeds and cigarettes on plates on the desks in the room and a woman came with a thermos full of hot water for tea. She pours it into cups and jars that have been laid out on a low table by the window or that the cadres have brought with them.

The men sat and chatted but soon started complaining, muttering and joking embarrassedly about the lack of alcohol. “No alcohol (mei jiu). Ayaaa .....”. There was intense smoking and a couple of the men poked their heads out to see whether there were any bottles of alcohol going round and whether they were missing something.

There was a commotion and firecrackers went off in the courtyard. We walked over the pink bits of paper through the smoke to a nearby restaurant. The food served was lamb hotpot. Hotpot is a fun and common food at banquets but lamb is the cheapest meat around. The cadres were not impressed. They neither liked the meat nor the variety of the other dishes on offer. There was no liquor in sight until the very end, when a county level cadre came to the table with a bottle and toasted with them. There were a few of these who went to each and every table to toast. On our way back the cadres talked amongst themselves about the stinginess of the food and most importantly about the almost complete lack of

liquor.

The atmosphere at this banquet in the county town was completely different from that when the village cadres go and play (wan) with Mr Chang. They live in the same place, have grown up in the same place and have known each other for a long time. They jokingly refer to each other with official titles. Mr Chang calls the cadre who is probably his closest friend, the ‘general secretary’ (zhu ren), and he in return calls Mr Chang ‘boss’ (lao ban). Their children address them by a kinship term – ‘uncle’ (shu shu). Usually it is Mr Chang who pays, but occasionally one of the cadres will pay for example for the load of fish they have caught in the man-made pond. It is difficult to tell sometimes whose status is higher but the cadres’ status is more stable and officially sanctioned while Mr Chang has gained clout through other, more unconventional ways – namely, by doing business. In the short term, there is nothing specific that Mr Chang gains from entertaining the cadres. All he secures is a good time (hao wan) and an ongoing good relationship.

However, for the cadres, the difference between being entertained by Mr Chang and being entertained by the county government is that they are made to feel more important by Mr Chang. In the county banquet example, the village cadres are just one of many similar groups of cadres invited. They are not made to feel special. This is reflected in the quality of the food they are given and in the paucity of alcohol on offer and in the overall, rather offhand way they are treated. They are just small cogs in the large wheel of the county government and this is made apparent to them.

With Mr Chang on the other hand, they can feel important and valued. Although Mr Chang does not gain anything specific from his hospitality and the cadres do not give anything specific in return, they are made to feel as if Mr Chang respects them and relies on them. In short they gain in stature and face. In the example of the county government banquet, their status is unchanged and they gain nothing.

But there is something else Mr Chang secures as well. Fei Xiaotong describes his meeting with Mr Wang in 1990 thus: “[He] had developed from a peasant into an entrepreneur. Divorced from land and soil, he cut quite a figure not only among his fellow villagers, but among other peasants, as well. This made him uneasy. He wanted to expand his enterprise, yet at the same time he was apprehensive that policies might change. This ambivalence was, probably, representative of the state of mind of rural entrepreneurs at the initial stages of their careers” (Fei 1992a: 57).

During the eight-year interval between Fei’s paper and my meeting Mr Chang for the first time, he had certainly grown more confident. However, his bonding with the village cadres would have been an important safety net for him should trouble arise.

Building relationships takes considerable skill and Mr Chang time and again demonstrated his unique ability in these matters. He saw the opportunity in every situation, no matter how delicate or difficult.

NATO bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in the summer of 1999 and the Security Police showed up in Lu village to hold a meeting with Mr Chang



and the cadres about my presence in the village<sup>30</sup>. The meeting took place, without me present, in the village administrative office. As they emerged back outside they called me over to join them and we drove off to the very same fishing pond Mr Chang had taken his bosses to earlier that summer.

Mr Chang joins us at the fishing pond a moment later – his car is filled with village officials, fishing rods and bait. We fish. The bait is old sweet corn. We throw our lines as far into the muddy water as possible. We try to look professional. We are not having much luck today. I get one about the size of the palm of my hand. Mr Wang gets a medium sized one. It starts to get dark. Mr Wang is obviously taking responsibility for the gang from the white jeep. The village cadres, as usually, do not have much initiative and look sheepishly at each other. They don't have to tell me what they're thinking. "How will we feed all of us with this meagre catch?" Mr Wang's son-in-law then comes roaring up on his motorcycle loaded with plastic bags containing food bought in the market town. This is when one of our 'guests' has a fish bite the hook. And then another one. And within a few moments we have plenty for dinner.

At the farmer's house a large room has been outfitted with a big television, a DVD player and a karaoke machine in addition to the old couch, low tables and stools. It is the perfect setting for a lively evening of entertainment. The house is basic but it has all the necessary functions. Large concrete tiles cover the courtyard formed by the L-shaped house where people can pull the tables out and play cards and drink tea in the lovely shade of the trees. If tired of fishing or

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<sup>30</sup> As an Icelandic national I am from a NATO member country. The US bombing was part of the NATO operation in Yugoslavia.

playing, one can climb the mountain above the house and observe the green fields below.

Everybody is male, apart from the farmer's wife, who keeps to the kitchen, and myself. I sit between one of the visitors and Mr Chang. We chat casually until the food arrives. Then we drink. And then we eat. As we get into the drinking and eating I am asked about my stay in the village and what I think of the bombing. We talked at great length and I tried my best to assure them of my neutrality.

But it was Mr Chang who probably gained the most from the evening. He bonded with one of the guests in particular through knowing who his father was, a now retired cadre who, according to Mr Chang had served very well. Towards the end of the evening he was addressing him as 'brother' (xiong di).

When the time came to leave, it was dark and very late. The Public Security Bureau seemed to be sober enough to drive their shining white jeep themselves. The same could hardly be said about my village friends. The son-in-law (who neither drinks nor smokes) was a bit troubled since in order to drive his father-in-law and his posse home, he would have to leave his lovely motorcycle behind, risking it being stolen from the dark side road where it was not guarded by anyone. Feeling a boost of confidence, having had Mr Chang help me convince the guests that I was indeed pretty harmless, I offered to drive. It was a ride to remember. The cadres were rolling around in the back of the van marvelling at my skills<sup>31</sup> and giggling.

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<sup>31</sup> Few women in the Chinese countryside drive – although this is rapidly changing.

In relating this episode, my aim is to emphasise the talent with which a socially skilled person, such as Mr Chang, takes advantage of any opportunities that come his way to expand his pool of acquaintances. The situation was potentially a bad one as I was a suspect person in the context and this could have rubbed off on him as I was residing at his house. But he stuck with me and turned the situation to his own advantage. And he made a new friend at the Security Police Bureau – a very valuable connection indeed.

### **The elements of leisure work**

The common ingredients used in the production of relationships in the context of leisure pursuits in Lu village are gifts, food and drink, fishing and karaoke. But the production of relationships is not an exact science and there is much more to gift giving than the simple transaction of giving and receiving.

Mayfair Yang quotes one of her informants, a Beijing worker, as saying:

“Of course, if you do something for someone and nothing comes of your efforts for your own benefit, then the whole thing is a failure. But my attitude is that one can’t measure and calculate everything so precisely” (Yang 1994: 142).

Indeed, one may not know whether the gift giving has been a success for months or even years. Despite this, though, Yan (1996) writes of people keeping detailed accounts of gifts received, a seemingly scientific approach.

Yan speaks at great length about the flow of gifts and the prestige that follows. He finds that most anthropological studies have usually found that it is the giver rather than the receiver who gains prestige and power since the receiver

will thereafter be indebted to the giver. However, his data from northern China completely contradicts this. In the northern Chinese village Yan studied, receiving a gift rather than giving one is regarded as a symbol of prestige. Gifts thus go up 'the ladder of social status' and the recipient remains superior to the giver. According to Yan this is the case when there already exists a disparity in social status between the donor and the recipient.

Yan mostly discusses this asymmetrical form of gift giving between common farmers and cadres. As the state monopolises resources to a great extent in China, lower level cadres are the commoners' way to access those resources. The substrata then become dependent upon the gatekeepers of access to those resources – local and higher level officials - for the satisfaction of material needs and social mobility. It is this social reality which establishes this asymmetrical or "vertical relationship between redistributor and producer" (Yan 1996: 162).

Under such circumstances, gift giving works only as a passive strategy that the underdogs of the system adopt to protect themselves against possible discrimination by their superiors. Or in Yan's words: "The possibility that their relationship with their superiors will deteriorate already constitutes a negative sanction upon subordinates and is sufficient to keep them engaged in upward gift giving. This is why the majority of people continue to offer gifts to leaders, even though no specific return can be expected." (Yan 1996: 164).

Another important factor in relationship building (guan xi) and gift giving is the augmentation of one's social face (mian zi). "One of the ways to increase the volume of one's social face is to connect oneself with powerful and

well-known people as much as possible, because personal connections are considered part of one's resources and prestige." (Yan 1996: 167). As Hu's often quoted essay states: "One accumulates mianzi [face] by showing oneself capable, wealthy, generous, and possessed of a wide network of social relationships" (Hu 1944: 61). A common villager cannot expect a return gift from a superior recipient but importantly, the superior's acceptance of the gift can be regarded by the giver as social capital and increase the volume of the giver's social face.

Furthermore the handling of gifts differs depending on whether the relationship between the giver and receiver is a long-term relationship or a short-term relationship. Yan discusses how short-and long-term relationships call for different gift handling, and distinguishes between 'expressive' gifts and 'instrumental' gift giving relations. "[T]he former serve to cement a long term, existing relationship between the giver and the recipient, while the latter can be used to alter or manipulate a short-term relationship." (p.169). Usually the long-term relationship is morally superior and that is what people usually strive to obtain. As Yang (1994) points out then "[b]y repaying immediately and ending the relationship ... [too] soon, one not only gives up a chance to cultivate a long-term guanxi [i.e. relationship], but the relationship is also demeaned into an overt instrumentality of 'buying and selling' (mai mai)." (p.144).

Food and drink are also fundamental to leisure work in Lu village. Mr Chang and the cadres invariably drank a fair bit when out together. Most of the visiting cadres or businessmen from the market town or further away drank as well. Drinking is indeed an important form of sharing and bonding. During a

business or official social occasion, drunkenness is considered perfectly acceptable. Indeed, one may postulate that permissible drunkenness in certain circumstances may provide a safety valve for release of stresses and strains. For example, a drunk man is able to make direct criticisms or complaints that would be unthinkable were he sober, and without anyone taking serious offence. I experienced such an outburst early in my time in Lu village. My presence was clearly causing some disruption and one cadre told me so in no uncertain terms. However, this was never spoken of again and my relationship with him continued much as before.

Not drinking in a group of drinkers can spoil the mood. There are, however, people who neither drink nor smoke. A cadre from the market town who didn't smoke and drank little would always keep a packet of cigarettes in his breast pocket to be able to hand cigarettes out to others. His abstinence in a way reflected well on his character. He was sociable but kept a slight distance, which suited his position. Mr Wang's son-in-law neither drank nor smoked, which was in a sense convenient for Mr Wang as he would drive him and his friends home when they were too drunk to drive themselves. The son-in-law came from a family where the father neither drank nor smoked either and this was indeed considered an element of purity or healthiness, which was not despised but rather respected.

Not drinking or smoking out of policy, especially if this is something which your father does as well, is acceptable. As long as your abstinence does not come across as refusing to drink and smoke with the company you're in, i.e.

reflect badly on your company, or be understood as a rejection of them, not the alcohol.

Interestingly, Mr Chang's father had never tasted a drop of alcohol. Indeed, Mr Chang's elderly mother was the only one who occasionally reprimanded him on his sometimes rather excessive drinking.

Karaoke is yet another popular building block, or facilitator of relationships in Lu village. Karaoke holds mysteries to the uninitiated. The videos are of old Chinese popular songs (liu xing ge) or traditional songs with Asian and Western women in flower-patterned bikinis or bathing suits stretching leisurely on clean white beaches by palm trees - umbrella cocktail in hand, rouge and smile on lips, big plastic rings in earlobes. Even more bizarre are traditional Chinese songs against the backdrop of fresh Alpine mornings. Jolly men in lederhosen, feathers in hats, dancing with fair, red-cheeked, braided maidens in swinging skirts and wide-sleeved white blouses. The text runs continuously along the bottom of the screen, the characters taking colour to guide the singer on the pace and rhythm at which the song should be performed to stay in tune with the computerised music.

The Changs owned a karaoke machine. Only one other household in the village possesses karaoke equipment (that of another entrepreneur, who occasionally used it to similar effect). Although owning a suite of karaoke equipment may seem like luxury, it is in fact a sound investment. "Going out for karaoke is tremendously expensive (hen gui)", Mr Chang told me once, "it is

cheaper to bring people back here and sing (chang ge) and play (wan).” Singing karaoke at Mr Chang’s house is seen as a special treat.

### **Sentiment (gan qing).**

Sentiment accompanies all genuine relationships. Sentiment or gan qing, in Lu village, is something which is quietly given and received, rather than explicitly spoken of. It is inherent in every piece of vegetable, which you give to your neighbour, in the food you share with strangers, friends and relatives, when you invite a stranger to your house to celebrate an important family occasion. It is implicit in the patting on a back, the holding of a hand. When Mr Chang gives a village cadre’s grandson sweets, sings a duet with him in karaoke, has his son-in-law drive him home, or his daughter see him home after dark with a flashlight, then he is showing care for their relationship and it is this care that I refer to as sentiment or gan qing.

The words used for sentiment vary. I have chosen to use the English word sentiment for a variety of expressions. The most common one is gan qing which usually translates as feeling, sentiment or emotion. Women would sometimes say that they were very close or intimate (qin). Qin also means related by blood as in relatives (qin qi).

Occasionally somebody may be referred to as having sentiment (you gan qing). It refers to somebody who knows the rules of moral conduct and can be relied on to act and react in a moral way – with care for fellow humans. Kipnis (1997: 31) speaks of gan qing within a household being manifested through taking



over certain chores by a family member, special care in the performance of more personal duties, eating together and so on. The way Kipnis speaks of gan qing within the household is telling, for it is exactly this active component which I want to emphasise. Having gan qing literally involves doing something – such as performing chores and eating together.

In Lu village one twelve-year-old girl who frequently helped her mother out with housework and taking care of her younger brother was referred to as understanding things (hen dong shi) by a group of older women observing her from afar. The inference from this expression is that she has the maturity to understand things that are not said, which is an essential component of gan qing. She understands what needs to be done and does it. Her mother works very hard and so she tries to help at home as well as being a good student at school. This goes to show that she has gan qing. I only ever heard this expression used to complement girls, never boys. The girls complemented in this way helped their mothers with cooking, cleaning or taking care of a younger sibling.

Banquets are great venues for producing sentiment. Passing cigarettes out and smoking together is something commonly observed between men. So is toasting and drinking together. Women usually neither smoke nor drink – apart from occasionally sweet red fruit wine (hong jiu) - so mixed banquets inevitably tend to become gender segregated. But both men and women will use the food productively. Hosts will constantly remind their guests to eat more (dian cai) and drop pieces of food into their guests' bowls to emphasise this.

Often the simple expression of fun, play or enjoyment (hao wan) was used

by both men and women about their relationships. Three middle-aged women I came to know quite well once asked me to take a photograph of the three of them since “when we are together we always have fun” (wo men san ge zai yi ci duo hao wan ne). One of the village cadres once drunkenly expressed his relationship to Mr Chang, the entrepreneur, and his fellow cadres in the following terms: “We all go out and eat and drink and it’s a lot of fun (hao wan)”.

People will also express concern or care about somebody (guan xin). On one occasion when I came back from a short trip to Kunming, a day later than I had planned, the grandmother of my host household greeted me with a sigh of relief and reminded me that they cared or worried about me (wo men hen guan xin ni), thus indicating affection and concern.

Yan (1996) speaks of ren qing which is almost synonymous to gan qing. He eloquently defines ren qing thus:

“First, it means human feelings – the basic emotional responses of an individual in confrontation with various daily life situations. In this first meaning, *renqing* is social in nature and requires that one have an understanding of others’ emotional responses in accordance with his or her own. Second, *renqing* indicates a set of social norms and moral obligations. These norms and obligations require keeping in contact with those of one’s *guanxi* network and participating in the exchange of gifts, greetings, visits, and assistance. Third, in its extended usage *renqing* can be regarded as a kind of resource, such as a favor or a gift, and can be used as a medium of social exchange. Finally, in certain contexts, *renqing* is used as a synonym for *guanxi*. People may talk about how much *renqing* they possess when in fact they are referring to the size of their *guanxi* networks” (Yan 1996: 122-123).

What is frequently spoken of in the literature of anthropology under the term of guan xi, that is the art of building up a pool of relationships on which one

can draw if done properly, consists always of material gifts and favours but is irrevocably accompanied by emotions, by sentiment (gan qing).

In 1990, Potter and Potter wrote that “Chinese emotions ... are natural phenomena without important symbolic significance for the maintenance and perpetuation of social relationships.” They went on to argue that “[t]he critical symbolic dimension for the affirmation of relationships is work, and the related and subordinate concept of suffering, which is thought of as an intrinsic aspect of work”. Here they obviously recognise the important place work occupies in the expression of emotions. But to claim, as they do in the next sentence, that “both work and suffering are understood, not in terms of inner experience, but in terms of outward results, especially measurable ones” (Potter & Potter 1990: 189) is in my opinion unfounded. I would argue that it is precisely through work and by working for household members, friends and neighbours that such emotions are expressed and indeed also how they are maintained and reproduced.

I recall one warm summer evening walking through the fields with a friend, a woman in her late forties. As we merrily strolled along she reached for my hand and held it and explained to me that the holding of hands was the most intimate (zui qin) expression of a relationship (guan xi). It appears to me that the relatively simple action of holding of hands in China has a stronger feeling attached to it. It is the nuances of expression that are important.

## Obligation

However, gifts and favours are not always the expression of proper sentiment. Obligation plays a big role too. In speaking about the production of relationships, I have argued that relationships between relatives need to be worked on as well as those with non-kin. Kinship relations, however, do bring certain obligations, which are hard to negate.

One day a man came by the house asking for Mr Chang. Mr Chang was away on business. The man was a distant relative and he was invited in and a glass of green tea placed before him. He didn't want to say what the errand was - just that he had business (you shi) - he had something he wanted to talk about with Mr Chang. He sat there for a while and chatted and drank tea. Nobody knew exactly when Mr Chang was due back so in the end his wife called him on his mobile phone. Mr Chang answered and the relative explained his business. His son had been working in the county town and had been laid off (xia gang). He needed a job. Would there be anything for him at Mr Chang's factory? Mr Chang told him to send the son to him after the Chinese New Year.

After the relative had left, Mr Chang's aged mother mumbled angrily - half to herself and half to her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. "These people (zhe xie ren), so lazy (lan) ... come here to ask for favours (lai zhe li zhao bang mang)", she said.

Prior to this, Mr Chang had told me that the factory wasn't going too well. China was still affected by the dramatic fall of the stock market in 1998, which had repercussions particularly in Southeast Asia and South Korea. He believed -

and this knowledge came from reading the Director & Manager's Daily [Chang Zhang Jing Li Ri Bao] – the slump would last three years. Last year had been fine, this year was difficult and the next would be even more difficult. The year after next things should then start to improve. For now, they just had to work hard to stay afloat and sit out the bad times.

I knew all too well that they didn't really need more people for the factory, so I later asked Mr Chang's daughter whether they really had to give this relative a job. "Yes, we have to (yi ding yao gei)", she responded, "We couldn't not give him a job (bu ke neng bu gei); he's a relative (shi qin qi)."<sup>32</sup>

So, there is obligation, but this obligation flows around the system. Gifts and favours go up the system to those whose status is higher, as in Mr Chang's generous treatment of his bosses and his and the cadres' treatment of the Security Police. Mr Chang not only has obligation to his family and bosses, he also has certain duties towards his staff, the factory workers.

Working together and working for one another is an important part of family relationships in China and food is an important part of the creation of relationships as well. Eating together in a household is essential on certain days of the ritual calendar and eating in other households is not merely symbolic of a relationship of some sort but actually productive of it. The Chinese New Year is particularly important, as it is a time of visiting friends and relatives and eating forms a large part of what is done on these occasions. On a more daily basis, food

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<sup>32</sup> This anecdote forms a partial rebuttal of Fortes' aforementioned claim for a "morality of kinship". Mr Chang's decision to find a job for his relative was based on a duty that springs from custom. The job is given grudgingly. It is given because the family has to, not because of a moral decision. It is more to do with face than with charity.

makes up the most common gift exchange between households – also productive of a relationship.

To celebrate the Chinese New Year, Mr Chang invites the factory workers, who do not go home for the festive period, to join him for dinner at his own house. Five workers arrived. Some were shy, others determined to impress their boss. They looked slightly awkward wearing clean clothes. Mr Chang played the grand host while at the same time reducing the status gap between them by eating and drinking with them, the roles now reversed from his outing with the Kunming bosses described earlier. Mr Chang and his family would keep filling the workers' bowls with alcohol and then meat. All the workers got money bonuses at that time in addition to presents of alcohol, soft drinks, fruit and cooking oil.

This generosity towards the workers is nothing extraordinary – all work units in the provincial capital do the same. But the quality or quantity of the gifts can often vary, and is overtly compared and discussed – and sometimes found wanting.

As mentioned earlier non-kin relations, business relations in particular, are by nature short term and morally undetermined and unstable. They easily lend themselves to scrutiny and it is therefore vital that they be nurtured with proper sentiment.

In Lu village leisure pursuits are an important vehicle of relationship production. The key players of leisure work are well-to-do men, entrepreneurs

and government officials. The leisure activities are diverse but most include key elements such as food and drink, fishing, karaoke and gift giving. The relationships thus produced are primarily non-kin relationships; relationships with colleagues, associates, business partners and they differ from kin relationships in that they are short term, morally undetermined and unstable. In order to retain these relationships one must frequently act upon them and nurture them with proper sentiment.

## Chapter Seven

### Work and Modernity

“We are firmly convinced that by the middle of the next century, we can catch up with and even outstrip the moderately developed countries and basically achieve modernization. By the end of the twenty-first century, it is possible for us to catch up with the developed countries and realize the long-cherished aspirations of the Chinese nation. The twenty-first century will mark the dawn of a new age for our country” (Wang & Li 1989: 237)<sup>33</sup>.

As evident from the quote above, there is a sense of a ‘deferred relationship to modernity’ (Rofel 1999) in China. The consensus seems to be that most other countries are further along the line of progress than China, and a sense of urgency to catch up with the rest of the world is pervasive. There is a time lag, which is referred to in both official government communications and in the everyday language of farmers.

Rofel notes that “coming of age at particular moments creates telling fault lines through which meaning is transformed” (1999: 22). She does acknowledge that the quest for modernity is not a new thing. “The socialist revolution and its current repudiation in the post-Mao era, however, has positioned this quest in a new way” (1999: 24).

The discussion of modernity is omnipresent in Lu village. Work is central to this dialogue; the type of work you do reflects your degree of modernity.

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<sup>33</sup> Indeed, this view is not restricted to China. Western media and business commentators see China as a sleeping economic dragon and a potential superpower. This view is for example clearly represented in titles of books such as Kristof and WuDunn’s ‘China Wakes’ (1994), the implication being that China is waking up to modernity after centuries of sleep.



Farming is seen as old-fashioned and backward, whereas salaried jobs are viewed as modern and progressive. It follows that the places where salaried jobs abound, i.e. urban places or cities, are considered modern and the arena of farming, i.e. the countryside, is regarded as backward. Hard physical labour is outdated and items which carry with them convenience, entertainment or ingenuity represent modernity. Education holds the key to modern life; it increases the chances of obtaining a salaried job.

The issue of what is modern and what is not is a complex one. Values and attitudes are not just framed through groups of peers and state propaganda. People live and eat and talk with different generations and take in their words and actions. There have been great disruptions to family patterns throughout the last century in China. While every story is of course different, the fact remains that generations cannot avoid interacting with each other and through that interaction both mutual understanding and difference is created. Therefore younger generations understand not only what is modern now but also have an inkling about what once was modern.

### **Concepts of modernisation (xian dai hua) and backwardness (luo hou)**

I stand in the village school courtyard one late afternoon. The pupils run around in the courtyard playing. Behind us, on the whitewashed mud brick wall encircling the playground, in large red characters, it says: 'Turn to face modernisation, to face the world, to face the future' (mian xiang xian dai hua, mian xiang shi jie, mian xiang wei lai). 'Modernisation' (xian dai hua) is a

concept commonly used in official Chinese state discourse. My informants, however, never really spoke of things as being ‘modern’ (xian dai). They would use the words fa zhan or fa da, which are usually translated into English as ‘development’ or ‘progress’ and ‘developed’ respectively. These concepts are also insidious in government and public discourse in China, where they connote a comparison with the wider world, a world bigger than China. Fa zhan has a strong connotation of movement or action and is frequently used in combination with words such as ‘economy’ (jing ji), as in ‘economic development’ (jing ji fa zhan). Both fa da and fa zhan are used by the government to encourage people to work towards a more ‘developed’ economy – moving towards ever-greater prosperity on a par with ‘developed’ nations.

Wen ming or ‘civilisation’ is part of the government’s modernisation project. It is an expression often used, equally by the government and the people of Lu village, to refer to a degree of modernisation, seen as increasing or bettering the ‘quality’ of the Chinese people (ren min su zhi), who in return contribute to a more ‘intelligent’ economy and to ‘progress’. ‘Improving the quality of the people’ is a provocative phrase and warrants some explanation. Anagnost (1997) suggests that the idea of wen ming has replaced the Maoist discourse on class. It is indeed part of a huge governmental project in which ‘civilisation’ is almost synonymous with ‘modernisation’. Work units are rewarded by plaques praising them as wen ming dan wei or ‘civilised work units’ and model households likewise get praise as wen ming hu or ‘civilised households’. Broadly speaking, both wen ming and wen hua are taken to connote good manners and a

level of sophistication and refinement. They are generally taken to imply one another. However, wen hua encompasses an element of education or book knowledge, which wen ming does not and the two are, thus, not interchangeable. A person with wen hua can be seen as being “comparatively well read, interested in arts and literature and [having] refined tastes” (Yen, 2000: 58). Whereas people with wen hua are generally expected to have wen ming as well, the opposite is not necessarily true. Yen (2000) observes that: “Above all, to be *wenming* is the top priority in the education of the general public. In short, to be *wenming* is not to spit in the street, not to curse and argue, not to dispose of garbage in the wrong place, not to occupy public space for personal use, and not to transgress traffic regulations” (p. 58, fn.13).

It is a common perception that being ‘of the countryside’ implies being without wen hua and wen ming, and this is much looked down upon by people who do not regard themselves as being of the countryside.

Whether we use words like ‘modernisation’, ‘development’, ‘progress’, ‘civilisation’, ‘developed’ is perhaps not the key issue, as long as we are sensitive to their social and cultural context. In what follows I will discuss modernity in Lu village in the context of work, which is very much a core element of how the villagers conceive of themselves. I feel it also gives me a firm and ‘close to the ground’ core around which to base my argument. I will look at the different concepts that the villagers and outsiders use to describe themselves and one another, and the contexts in which they are used.

The terms tu and luo hou are used to refer to the opposite of what is modern, i.e. to describe things that are backward, old fashioned or underdeveloped.

The word tu is often used in association with peasants and the countryside. Its literal meaning is 'earth' or 'soil', but figuratively it is taken to refer to things or people that are countrified or unrefined. This acquired meaning of tu might stem from attitudes such as those described by Fei, when he comments that: "City dwellers scorn country people for their closeness to the land; they treat them as if they were truly 'soiled'." (1992b: 38).

The younger people of Lu village, and in particular those who have been away from the village to study or work, are quite self-conscious about being tu. The 19-year-old son of a friend of mine, who was in his third year of medical school at a university in the prefecture capital, is a case in point. As he prepared to leave the village after a short holiday at home, he refused to wear a sweater that his mother had knitted for him because it was too tu. She had not bought enough yarn and had to go back for more in order to be able to finish. The new yarn was visibly of a slightly different colour shade and would reveal the wearer to be tu.

On another occasion, a relatively well off household in the village had a sofa made by a carpenter in a neighbouring village. It was delivered to the courtyard gate on a horse-cart and carried up to the first floor of this household's rather fine house where it was placed along one of the walls. As we stood and observed the sofa a young woman member of the household asked me in a low

voice: “Isn’t it a bit too tu (shi bu shi tai tu)?” thus expressing concern to me that the sofa might be unfashionable or in ‘countrified’ taste.

Hardly a day goes by without people commenting on their own ‘backwardness’ (luo hou) and comparing it to the ‘development’ (fa zhan) of towns and cities, not to mention ‘abroad’ (wai guo).

### **Toil (lao dong) or salaried job (gong zuo)**

There was a time when being a farmer was something to be proud of. The farmers had pride of place in the pantheon of the revolution. In fact, they were the building blocks of Mao’s New China. Being a farmer was toiling on the land was the key to being a respectable member of society. Farmers held that position for more than thirty years, but since those times, their status has slipped. Indeed, nowadays, the farmers in Lu village frequently refer to themselves as ‘without civilisation’ (mei wen ming) and ‘backwards’ (luo hou). As Anagnost mentions in a sense, “[t]he unremitting toil of peasant life represents, in some contexts, the ‘stagnation’ of the Chinese economy.” (1997: 87).

Whereas attitudes towards what constitutes an ideal life have changed markedly, the reality of life in Lu village has not changed to the same extent. The region is relatively poor compared to other parts of China and developments towards modernity are more recent and have gone a comparatively short way. The way people in Lu village define themselves and their place in the world is largely dictated by the work they do. It is evident in the way the villagers speak about themselves and being a peasant is not highly regarded.

One evening, I am at Mrs Wang's house. She is a woman in her thirties, tall, lean and hardworking. Her children, five and nine years old, are watching television and her husband has gone into town to do some construction work. I have told her that I want to do a household survey and asked whether she would mind answering some of my questions. Mrs Wang is reluctant. "I don't know how to answer questions. I'm a mere peasant (nong min).” “They are not exam questions”, I tell her, “they are just questions about everyday life. It's really quite simple (jian dan).” "I've only finished elementary school (wo zhi shi xiao xue bi ye de). I am not educated (mei you wen ming). You should ask someone learned (you wen ming de)," she tells me, embarrassed. In the end I prevail.

When we have worked our way through the formal questionnaire we lean back and watch television. Her two children crawl all over us. We have known each other for a year now and my departure is imminent. "I'll be back some day", I say, "and who knows, maybe one day you will be able to come and visit me". Her face hardens and she laughs a forced and loud laughter as she slaps my arm with her right hand.

“We are peasants. We don't know how to write (bu hui xie), we don't have any education (mei wen ming), no culture (wen hua). In China, we are the poorest people (zui qiong de). In society, our place is the lowest one (di wei zui di de)”.

This sort of self-deprecation is common and reflects the lowly place the farmer is generally taken to hold in the larger Chinese social context, both by the farmers themselves and by the people conceived of as ‘higher’ up the societal ladder.

Just a few days into my fieldwork, as I am walking along the main road of the village, a woman stops as she asks me where I'm going (the standard form of greeting). "Are you getting used to things (xi guan le ma)?" she then asks me. "Pretty much ... (bi jiao xi guan ba)," I respond hesitantly.

"This must be very different from where you come from (ni men guo jia). The life of the Chinese farmer is very hard (xin ku). We carry things on our backs (bei) and level them on our shoulders (tiao). It's not like that in your country. In your country, the fields are big and the farmers use heavy machinery to bring the crops in. They are wealthy (fu yu) not poor (qiong) like we are here."

Comments such as these are frequent and are illustrative of how people define themselves and their position in the world in terms of their manual labour.



Figure 8. Toiling in the fields during the rice harvest.

An interesting parallel to this is described by Pigg (1992), in her work on development in Nepal. Discussing the perception Nepalese villagers have of themselves and their place in the world, she reports that they define the difference between village life and life in more developed places in terms of carrying loads; whereas they have to carry loads, people in the developed world do not.

Life in the countryside is ku – hard and bitter. People speak incessantly of the bitterness and difficulty of the work they do. Cleaning the house (da sao) is the easiest work, whereas the two harvests are the hardest and the most ‘bitter’ work (zui xin ku de lao dong). A hardworking person is referred to as neng chi ku - capable of ‘eating bitterness’ - capable of gritting his or her teeth and getting on with it. A woman who is seen as good wife material, for example, is referred to as having ben zhi or as the dictionary would have it, having ‘essence’ or ‘true nature’. Perhaps ‘diligence, stamina and backbone’ would be the closest approximations. In everyday speech, the word is used to describe somebody who is hard working, able, capable and skilful. This hardship is an important marker of how the people in Lu village see themselves in the context of the wider world.





Figure 9. Preparing the fields for transplanting rice seedlings.

Marianne Lemaire (2001) describes work competitions among the Senufo of the Ivory Coast, which glorify the strength, perseverance and pain involved in hard labour. This takes the form of a race in which the competitors must harvest their lane of crops more quickly than the others. The champion of these, the ‘tegban’, is the one who can endure the pain the longest and his suffering is emphasised, intensified and celebrated by accompanying music. Having proved his perseverance, the ‘tegban’ gains a status of superiority and respect. This kind of glorification of toil and hardship is in some way reminiscent of Mao’s farmers of the revolution and can still be found to some extent amongst the older people of Lu village. I watched similar competitions among Chinese farmers in other provinces on national television while in Lu village.

One of my friends and informants, Mrs Liu, who was well into her seventies, frequently told me how she had worked for chairman Mao in the fields.

“It was hard (ku). We had to toil (lao dong) and take care of the children (ling wa wa). Sometimes we didn’t even have enough grain to eat (liang shi bu gou chi). But we all worked for Chairman Mao.”

To her, the sense of pride in being a hard working member of Mao’s team, working towards the ideals of a New China, justified the toil and hardship and made the hunger easier to bear - in retrospect at least.

Ever more prevalent, however, and in particular amongst the younger generation, is the sense that being subjected to hard labour is ‘backwards’ (luo hou) and somewhat embarrassing. In today’s China, the glorification of backbreaking farm work is becoming largely obsolete. Newspapers are filled with the rags-to-riches stories of entrepreneurs, and the general consensus is that pride is derived from success rather than hardship. The old-fashioned production methods of farming do not generate much income and government policy now dictates the formation of factories and the creation of new business opportunities. Peasants are no longer the driving force of a ‘New’ China. In their place, the entrepreneurs are the new movers and shakers of an ‘Open’ China. They are the ones that the younger generation look up to and aspire to be like.

Mrs Liu’s twenty-three-year-old granddaughter once sat with us as Mrs Liu was yet again telling me about when she worked for Chairman Mao. The granddaughter giggled as she listened to the older woman’s words and

commented: ‘too revolutionary’ (tai ge ming de), meaning that the values her grandmother was describing belonged to the time of the revolution - a bygone era.

This choice of words is interesting, as it depicts a clear gap between the older and younger generations. When Mrs Liu was young, it was modern and respectable to be revolutionary, and it was something her generation aspired to be. Her granddaughter’s generation, however, consider it old-fashioned and wholly undesirable to be revolutionary. They associate the concept of revolution with the old way of life - with the toil and hardship of old-style farming, with the lack of creature comforts and consumer goods and with an insular and backward way of life. And as the political winds have turned, they have dragged with them the social values. Being revolutionary is now seen as being naïve, backward and an indicator even of a degree of ‘dimness’.

The people of Lu village make a very clear distinction between being in employment and working the land, with a salaried job (gong zuo) being greatly preferred to the hard manual labour (lao dong) of farming. The preference stems both from the security and freedom that a regular income brings and the generally less physical effort involved. Thus, holding a job in a factory or in construction is preferable to relying on farming for a livelihood, although there is often considerable physical effort involved in these jobs too. Better still are jobs such as working in shops – be they selling tea and dried fruit or access to a photocopying machine. This is despite the fact that these jobs are often very badly paid and in the end generate even less income than farming. Even more desirable are jobs in governmental offices or as teachers and doctors, where work

security is high and salaries are stable – to be handed the iron rice bowl - as it is known. It is for example highly respectable to work in the Lu village administrative office. Towards the top of the ladder you find skilled, professional jobs, in business or industry, with professional jobs within government at the very top.

Jobs in the market town or the provincial capital for government work units such as China Telecoms and others are highly regarded. In the provincial capital, salaries paid by the joint venture companies are the highest available and in addition to this, joint ventures can also be seen as somewhat glamorous. Salaried jobs are glorified to such an extent that they are seen as something to be proud of even if the salary is so meagre it is not enough to get by.

Mrs Hui's daughter, for example, had gone to a local technical middle school and upon graduation moved to Kunming where she got a job in a computer and photocopying shop. The shop was not a work unit as such. She was not provided with any housing or benefits and her earnings were so meagre that she would return to her parents every few weeks and they would send her off with some money to live on. Despite this obvious disadvantage, her parents were extremely proud of her and supported her wholeheartedly in her venture. For them it was a valued investment. Although their daughter could not support herself at this point in time, surely things would get better for her in due course and life in the city was beyond doubt much better than labouring away in the village.

The downside of salaried jobs, as people see it, is that they are sometimes not as stable or safe as government jobs. For the rural people, job security is particularly important.

An example would be a friend of mine who had moved to Kunming from the countryside as a university student. She had stayed in Kunming to work after graduation and held a series of office jobs. She then landed a job with a joint venture tobacco company. The people hired by the Chinese partner held low salaries but had housing and some benefits, such as a bulk of toilet paper every month. My friend, who had been hired by the foreign partner due to her language skills, had a much higher salary but no housing or benefits. She complained bitterly about her situation in comparison to her Chinese hired counterparts even though her income after paying rent and other expenses would monthly far outweigh theirs. “They do not care about us”, she complained, “while the Chinese partners take good care of the people they have hired”.

**Places good to stay in (hao zai) and places not good to stay in (bu hao zai)**

Places are frequently referred to as places, which are ‘good be in’ (hao zai) or ‘not good to be in’ (bu hao zai). There is of course some variation in which places are considered good or bad to be in, but big cities and foreign countries are generally referred to as places where it’s good to be, whereas on the other hand, places where it’s not good to be are those that are smaller than Lu village – inaccessible places such as mountains and places which minority peoples inhabit.

The place you are from or the place you live in rubs off on you. People endlessly move in and out of places of more or less modernity. Villagers go from the village to the market town. They visit friends or relatives in Kunming or even other provinces. Wherever you go, you take a bit of that place in. The person who returns to Lu village is not the same person that left it.

The elderly night watchman of the metal smelting factory in the village was often referred to as 'the one who had gone to Africa'. In the seventies, he had spent three years there as part of a government project to establish tea manufacturing factories. Although Africa does not rate high on villagers' evolutionary way of looking at the world, this adventure had irreversibly changed their general perception of the old man. He had been abroad and that was part of who he was<sup>34</sup>.

I often heard Lu village referred to as a place where it's not good to be. As has already been noted, the places people reside in are thought of as quite definitive of their character. Thus, being from, or working in, a place, far from the cores of modernity confers the immediate connotation that you are not a modern person.

There is an elementary school in Lu village. There are two gates to the compound. There is a large gate with the name of the school, High Mountain Elementary School, written in gold above it in bulging, beautiful and prosperous-looking characters. This is the gate the children use when they go in and out of

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<sup>34</sup> Countries are clearly ranged along an evolutionary ladder in the spirit of Morgan and Engels. Africa and the third world is at the bottom and western Europe and particularly North America at the top. In addition to this, black skin is considered inferior to whiter skin and whiter skin to indicate increased degree of intelligence.

school. There is another smaller gate, which leads to the living quarters of the teachers. It is through this gate that I am first introduced to the inside of the school.

The teachers' quarters has a small, newish building that serves as an office and as dormitories for the teachers who don't come from the area, most of whom are young women from larger places such as the prefecture or provincial capitals. They are not very happy to be here, they tell me. They have just graduated and this was their placement - there's no getting around it. Most of them did not plan to stay for long. They were all seeking placements elsewhere. "This is a small and backward place. I can't stand it", one of them said to me. "I come from Kunming. I have only just graduated from university and I was sent here. It really is an awfully backward place (luo hou). I'm hoping to get a transfer next year." Kunming is a fast-growing city of a million people, while Lu village has just 1,300 inhabitants. Kunming is bustling where Lu village is sedate. It has shopping malls and nightclubs to Lu village's kiosks. To the young teacher, Kunming feels cosmopolitan whereas Lu village feels like the back of beyond.

In the provincial capital, Kunming, the word 'peasant' (nong min) is used to refer to someone who is 'of the countryside'. This is a derogatory term, taken to refer to someone who is badly dressed, uncultured and ill mannered. Peasants are recognised by their often torn, patched and ill-fitting clothes, their loudness, uncouthness and 'bad' accents. They are the people who sometimes do not bother to sit on the small stools at the tables of noodle stands by the roadside. Instead they crouch - resting their buttocks on their heels - while slurping their noodles

hungrily. These people meet with very little respect in the cities and the urbanites sneer at them as they pass them by.

People of the countryside are also instantly recognised by the darkness of their skin, which immediately gives away their outdoor labour. Urbanites, especially women, go to great lengths to avoid direct sunlight and in the summertime the streets of Kunming are filled with women on bicycles wearing large-brimmed hats and sometimes long gloves and veils over their faces to keep their skin soft and pale.

In her discussion of the attitude of the urbanites of Kunming (Kunming ren) towards migrant labourers (min gong), who are invariably farmers from the poorer countryside, Yen (2000) comes up with a 'ladder of acculturation and literacy' where migrant labourers are placed at the low end of a continuum of wen hua and are thus categorised as 'incomplete' persons. "In other words, *mingong*, in the eyes of *Kunming ren*, are taken to be equivalent of the uncivilized barbarians, lacking in genuine civilization. Before they are 'cooked' by knowledge in the form of writing, they are seen as deficient and blanketed in ignorance" (Yen 2000: 65).

Those most verbal about the 'backwardness' of the countryside are generally people not very far removed from it: officials in the nearby market town; village cadres who have a salaried job and occasionally go to the county town to attend meetings (kai hui); people who are born in villages but now live in the county town – who have work units there but relatives in Lu village or in surrounding villages - in a sense 'emancipated villagers'. They speak of the



countryside farmers as being far from the sophisticated ‘urbanites’ they see themselves as. This view is frequently expressed on visits with those very same ‘backward’ people, often straight to their faces, and seemingly without a trace of embarrassment attached.

A cadre friend of mine in the market town provides a stark illustration of this. He is an intelligent man and a good official of several years’ standing. He would frequently express his opinion of this element of life in the countryside.

“How are you?” he asks me as I pay him a respectful visit in his new and clean office in my cotton trousers and slightly muddy sneakers. “Are you alright out there?” he asks. “Is everyone nice to you? My biggest worry is that you won’t be able to get used to the food”. “I couldn’t live in the countryside”, he then adds. “Life is too hard (sheng huo tai ku). I was born in the countryside myself (wo zi ji zai nong cun chu sheng de) but now I go back for a day and can’t stand it (shou bu liao).”

Xiao Wu, a young woman of twenty-two born in Lu village, is another example. She has grown up in Lu village, where her parents still live. In addition to farming, her father owns and drives one of the horse carts that constantly move between Lu village and the nearby market town. Xiao Wu had not yet married but was considered a good catch because she had a job in Kunming. Her parents had found her a prospective husband, a young man in the village. Although he and his parents and brother still worked their land, they all held salaried jobs in a small factory in the market town. The ‘citified’ Xiao Wu, however, was clearly unsure of the match since he was after all somewhat ‘countrified’. She had

moved away from the countryside while he, although having a salaried job, still worked the land and was likely to reside in the village with his family.

Another important matter of modernisation is that of roads and how physically accessible places are to cars. Roads make a place more or less ‘of modernity’. More than anyone else I knew in the village, Mr Chang, the entrepreneur, who travelled the province far and wide, would frequently regale me with stories from other places. Roads and the condition of the roads and how accessible places were would always correlate perfectly with the degree of ‘modernity’ and ‘sophistication’ of that place. The most ‘backward’ places were those, which didn’t even have a road connecting them to the rest of the world.

Minority groups who tend to live in remote places, e.g. mountainous and inaccessible areas, are therefore seen as even more backward than the predominantly Han people of Lu village. This frequently crops up in conversation. I remember a woman once shouting jokingly at a young boy who was behaving badly. He hung his head unable to speak as he was being scolded: “Do you or do you not speak Han Chinese (ni hui bu hui shuo Han hua). Are you perhaps a little Lolopo child (ni shi bu shi ge xiao Lolopo ba)”<sup>35</sup>.

There is abundant anthropological literature on the various minority groups in Yunnan. An evolutionary model is prevalent behind ‘the civilising

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<sup>35</sup> For an excellent ethnography of people who call themselves Lolopo see Mueggler (2001). The Lolopo or Yi people number around six million throughout China with the largest concentration in the southwest. They speak a Tibeto-Burman language called Lolo or Yi, which is considered backward by many Han Chinese. Tibeto-Burman languages form a subgroup of the Sino-Tibetan group of languages to which the major Chinese dialects belong. Both Yi and Chinese scripts use ideographic characters (Katzner 1977). For the record, then “[m]odern linguists generally draw the conclusion that all languages are of equal value” (Janson 2001: 76) graciously not ranking them in any way.

project' of the Chinese state. This project shows the minorities at the bottom (notably the matrilineal Mosuo or Na, see e.g. Walsh (2001)) with the Han further towards the top.<sup>36</sup>

### **The unspoilt peasant**

Despite the veneration of life in the city there are those who approach it with more sobriety. The relationship between the city and the countryside is complex. Many villagers, especially of the older generation, feel that there are moral dangers associated with the low-paying jobs in the cities. The city is not a very safe place and there is no one there to keep an eye on these young people when they venture out there and have to fend for themselves. Parents often know little about the lives their children or relatives lead in the city. The kinship system is lacking and they fear the absence of the safety net that relatives provide. They fear the money-grabbing mentality and base morality of city people.

Furthermore, people who have moved far away from the countryside, further than Kunming, literally and figuratively, tend to romanticise the 'earthiness' and 'purity' of the countryside. It would appear that the countryside is having a revival of sorts.

The tourism industry in Yunnan province capitalises on this glorification of the countryside, with tour operators 'selling' Yunnan by representing it as a clean place where people live unpretentiously in harmony with nature. The province's high percentage of minority groups is emphasised to support this idea and tourists from home and abroad are drawn to seeing minority displays, be they

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<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Harrell (1995).

of song or dance, where this ‘naturalness’ is celebrated. One does, however, get the feeling that what attracts people on these tours is the opportunity to observe the ‘quaintness’ of country life, rather than an actual desire to go back to nature themselves.

This is also a popular notion amongst television people who film the countryside where ‘real’ and ‘honest’ people work the land. This was certainly the impression I got from the documentary filmmakers from Suzhou Television Station who one day showed up in Lu village. The anthropologist Fei Xiaotong, who had done research in Lu village sixty years earlier, was turning ninety and they were making a documentary about his life. They were thrilled to find a foreigner around and were adamant about filming my room so that my living circumstances could be broadcast to the Chinese people. Under my embarrassed gaze, the camera crew promptly bypassed the bed I used to sleep in, which had clean sheets on with images of birds, mountains and trees. Instead the camera was pointed to the further corner of my room onto a second and hardly ever used bed, which had no sheets and a somewhat worn mattress on top of a straw under mat. As the director gave his instructions to this effect, he explained the reason behind it: the unused bed was nong cun yi dian – a bit more ‘countryside’. This maintains the image of people of the countryside as ‘basic’ and ‘uncultured’.

### **Objects of modernity**

The items you own reflect your degree of modernity. These are various material goods ranging from accessories and clothing to household goods large

and small. What links them is that they in some way convey glamour, entertainment or convenience. The acquisition of these items is driven by the desire for modernity and facilitated by increased affluence.

Life has changed significantly and rapidly in Lu village over the last decade. Land was redistributed in Lu village for the first time in 1981 in accordance with the new household responsibility system introduced by the Deng Xiao Ping government after 1978. The freedom to dispose of crops for money, the opening up of rural markets and thus the opportunity for the buying and selling of products from farming and cottage industries has slowly increased the cash flow into individual households. These are mainly bean curd and basket making and pig rearing. This has given many households a new level of disposable income, where before they had lived at or below subsistence levels.

This extra money has resulted in investment on the part of households, which results in increased productivity. Carts and small tractors (tuo la ji) are bought to improve the transport of goods. Pesticide is sprayed on crops to secure a healthy and abundant harvest. Objects of convenience and luxury, such as bicycles, vegetable shredders, radios, televisions and rice cookers, are becoming more and more common. Easily washable synthetic clothes are increasingly replacing traditional cotton wear. At the same time there has been a boom in house building and renovating, which in turn has generated paid work in construction for labourers and the transportation of building materials for tractor owners. Whereas most houses in Lu village still remain the colour of the mud brick from which they are made, stylish blue glass windows and white tiled walls

have made their way into a couple of the larger houses. The more ambitious and wealthy house owners have even invested in coloured tiles, which form patterns on some house gables, or decorated tiles, which adorn the posts of courtyard gates.

Another, non-agricultural means of providing for one's family was provided by the opening of the first factory in Lu village in 1990. This was a plastics recycling factory, which eventually grew into the present metal recycling business. This new economic activity instigated by private individuals manifested itself in other ways. For example, telephone line penetration increased. While only a handful of households had phone lines during my residence there in 1998 and 1999, by the time of my departure, work had begun on providing phone lines at reasonable prices to every household in the village.

Television is an object of modernity and present in almost every household in Lu village. It provides a window onto the wider world, precious entertainment and its content frequently features as a topic of conversation.

Television has had a tremendous impact on life in rural China. Television stations, broadcasting both Chinese and foreign material, provide ready viewing access to the drastically different lifestyles of people in the wider world - people who to the hard working people of Lu village appear to have enviably easy lives. It is a peculiar feeling to sit in a house made of bricks of dried mud and watch glossy American daytime drama such as 'The Bold and the Beautiful' in vivid colour.

Watching television is the main pastime when not working. Villagers do not live in a bubble. They are very much aware of what is going on in the world. Although that awareness is of course very much determined by what is aired on television, be it the distortions of US soaps or the filtering of Chinese news bulletins.

People spend a great deal of time in front of their televisions, most evenings and sometimes days when farming duties allow. It is turned on when visitors come, often just to have as a backdrop to conversation. Soap operas and national and international news in particular, commonly feature in everyday conversation. Quite a few times, I had friends commenting on tiredness during the day while giggling about having gone to bed late because they had stayed up to watch television.

When the People's Republic of China celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation, the village sent a dance troupe to a celebration organised by the county government in the market town. Only a handful of villagers went the short distance to see them perform. The majority of villagers preferred to stay at home and watch the celebratory programme broadcast live from Beijing on national television.

A degree of modernity is also expressed through ownership of smaller manufactured items or accessories, such as colourful plastic washbasins, manufactured shoes of canvas, leather or plastic, synthetic clothes, hats or 'proper stools' as opposed to those braided from dried rice stalks. These items are seen to add colour and glamour to life. Hats provide a necessary protection from the

glare of the sun but the purchased ones are often decorated with a red flower or a coloured string woven in to form a pretty pattern. Synthetic clothes are not only easier to wash, but often colourful or patterned in interesting ways. The desire for modernity also comes through in decorative objects: elaborate wall hangings made of glass (jing zi), colourful materials for bedspreads and so on. These latter items practically only turn up as presents as they are expensive luxury goods.

‘Convenience’ (fang bian) is a key symbol or characteristic of what is perceived as modern in China. Anything that reduces labour and effort, be it machines, method or material, is seen as modern. Failing to take advantage of innovation is very tu.

Anyone who has washed clothes by hand knows how much easier it is to rub mud out of polyester trousers than from cotton ones. My friend in Lu village is chatting away about the synthetic trousers she’s wearing as we are sitting in her mud brick house living room munching on sunflower seeds.

“I bought these at last year’s Dinosaur Festival (Kong Long Jie).<sup>37</sup> I’ve had to patch them over here a bit but they have really lasted. And they’re so easy to wash. Just dip them in water and the dirt practically drips out – no need to rub.”

During my fieldwork, I would frequently wear a pair of blue cotton trousers I had bought some months previously in Beijing. One day, my adoptive aunt commented on some stains in my trousers that I had believed to be barely visible. “It’s so hard to wash these cotton clothes”, she said sympathetically.

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<sup>37</sup> Lufeng County is frequently referred to as the Dinosaur County due to the large number of dinosaur fossils unearthed in the area. Lufeng County town annually hosts an impressive market festival with merchants coming from neighbouring provinces and Burma. This is prime shopping time for villagers since the selection is big and the prices are generally favourable.



You rub and rub and the stains just won't come out. Synthetics are so much more convenient (fang bian).” Self-consciously, I stashed the trousers away and took to wearing a brown polyester pair. “Ahhhhhh ...”, a woman friend, cooed a few days later. “These trousers you're wearing are good. So easy to wash. So convenient (fang bian).”

In everyday speech, things such as a washing machine that reduces the physical labour of washing by hand, a nice and a clean house, a shower, a good bucket and an easy-to-clean washbasin - things that make life easier and more comfortable or more convenient - are highly desirable. Making the effort of creating things by hand, now when there is the money to buy them, seems ridiculous to the people of Lu village.

When Mrs Ma told me she knew how to braid stools out of dried rice stalks and saw the excited look on my face, she offered to teach me how to do it. I gratefully accepted. One afternoon soon after, we went to her pigsty and carried back two armfuls of dried rice stalks, stored in a loft there. We beat the stalks against the concrete ground in her courtyard to make them easier to twist and bend before the lesson began. The braiding was hard work. The stalks were stiff and one had to loosen one's grip sufficiently to add more stalks, while not losing grip of what had already been accomplished. This was not easy work. My hands became sore and tired fairly quickly. The dried stalks also rustled up quite a bit of dust, which then settled on our faces as we sat in the courtyard on this fairly hot afternoon. The courtyard gate had the door leaned back but not locked. A few visitors dropped by, mostly middle-aged women curious to see the foreigner make

straw stools. “Aren’t your hands sore. Mrs Ma, why are you teaching her this. This is too tu. We use stools nowadays.” But they laughed at my efforts and jokingly told me I could give the stool to my teacher so that he could be impressed by the skills I had picked up in China. “Give it to your teacher in England. Show him what you have learnt in China,” they said laughing hysterically.

There are people who do not have enough staple food to feed themselves (liang zi bu gou chi) and there are others who buy luxury rice from other counties or even other countries. Despite this, production teams are always talked of as being almost the same (cha bu duo). The differences between them are played down. However, when provoked, villagers do get worked up about inequalities and seem to agree on what they consist of. It is not the case that these inequalities are being masked by friendly greetings. In a small place it is important for people to get along. They move on from inequality. Sometimes it surfaces but on a day to day basis people simply try to get on with life and concentrate on themselves and their households.

Modernity costs money and although collectively, the Chinese as a nation are becoming more affluent, the gap between rich and poor seems to be ever widening. In Lu village, people go about their daily lives with considerable modesty and caution. This does not stem from bashfulness about one’s abilities but an understanding of one’s place in the system and the system’s place in its evolutionary arc. A good example is Mr Wang, who is an elementary school teacher. Before the Lunar New Year, people either make themselves, or

increasingly buy, poetic couplets (dui lian) and posters, to decorate their houses and entice luck and fortune into their homes. The making of these requires good calligraphy skills. Mr Wang's wife scolded him gently for not putting his formidable calligraphy skills to moneymaking use. "Mr Hui down the road writes these beautiful poetic couplets and he sells each pair in the market town for five jiao. You could easily do that." Mr Wang's response was that while it was fine to do such things at the moment, this might not always be so. "We may have another political movement (yun dong) and then things may change. I'm not going to write couplets to sell for a few jiao. We have enough."

The last 30 years, with Deng Xiao Ping's new open door economic policy, have seen a great deal of change. This has been slow in coming to Lu village but ten to fifteen years ago, people began to have more money. Change is constant in China as it is elsewhere. However, change such as this growth of money in hand, which can be pinpointed to a short span of time, give rise to clear attitudinal differences between generations.

People have now started buying material goods their parents would not have been able to purchase. But they are still cautious. Liquid assets (i.e. cash) are new enough that people do not have an easy come, easy go attitude to money. In conversations about material possessions (cai chan), people will rattle off what they have but when asked about desired possessions (xiang wang de dong xi) few will comment. The prevailing attitude is captured in the words of this man in his early fifties: "First you save up the money, only then do you start thinking about what you want (xian zheng qian cai xiang)."

### Education: vehicle of modernity

There is a strong link between education and modernity. Education is seen as a facilitator of modern life; a necessary condition for modern jobs. As described at the beginning of this chapter, the courtyard of Lu village elementary school is lined by a whitewashed mud brick wall on which large red characters display the exhortation: ‘turn to face modernity, to face the world, to face the future’ (mian xiang xian dai hua, mian xiang shi jie, mian xiang wei lai). To get a salaried job, some basic education is generally required and as is the case everywhere, the higher up in the ladder the job is, the more education is needed to get there.<sup>38</sup> As gong zuo is part of a modernity that most of the young people in the village aspire to, and their parents on their behalf, education is highly desirable. But there is hard work involved in moving along the scale from the backwardness of manual labour to the ‘modernity’ of a salaried job, and it normally takes several generations to make the transition.

Education, and the emphasis people attach to it, is very much a means to an end. Education for the sake of education is considered a luxury one should not indulge in. Education teaches practical skills, such as reading and writing, which then give rise to opportunities for jobs outside farming. The opportunities have more material rewards than the life of the farmer can offer and are also wen ming in the sense that they are ‘clean’ jobs – jobs that are light on the body and demand

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<sup>38</sup> Personal connections (guan xi) are also important here. To ‘go through the back door’ (zou hou men) is then an option.

more of the brain. These are preferably jobs in a work unit, which secure housing and some kind of a social welfare scheme such as health care and so on.

The young university students or young people who have migrated to the city for work were always treated differently when they returned to the countryside for a visit to those who stayed behind, and indeed differently to the way they were themselves treated before. Book knowledge is powerful and does not mix well with farmers' knowledge.

My questions on various topics would often garner the response to ask somebody educated (you wen hua) or that it must all be written down somewhere. People who could read and had access to written sources are greatly respected in Lu village. They have the potential to tap into a world to which an illiterate farmer has no access and which holds the key to the one and only legitimate knowledge.

Parents work hard to enable their children to lead what is regarded as a better life, to acquire education and get a salaried job. Parents would tell me proudly of their children who had graduated from high school and even gone to university or held salaried jobs. They would emphasise the hard work they had put in on behalf of their children, so that they could have a better life, and they wallowed in stories of how filially or unfilially their offspring had repaid that hard work (see more on this in Chapter Four).

Mrs Li one day elaborates on the importance of sending your children to school.

“You send your children to school so that they don’t have to work in the fields as farmers (bu dang nong min). They go to school so that they can get a job (gong zuo).”

We had just come back from her vegetable garden where we had first pulled out a few stray weeds, then got some vegetables for lunch before watering the plot carefully. “So what is it that you do then?” I asked. “Is what we did this morning not gong zuo?” “No”, Mrs Li answered, grinning sweetly to one side at my silly question. “Farming is not gong zuo (dang nong min bu shi gong zuo)” she said laughing.

On another occasion during the busy rice harvest I am walking from the market town and into the valley towards Lu village. I cross a river just outside the market town by walking along a bridge on my way and start chatting to a man, who is drying (shai) his unhusked rice (gu zi). He has the characters Jin Long – Golden Dragon - tattooed on his forearm. When I ask him he tells me this is his name. “It’s not a common name”, he tells me proudly. He wears a faded green shirt loosely tucked into dirty grey polyester trousers rolled up to mid calves. His feet are shod in once white plastic slippers. We chat on a bit. He keeps shifting his rice in the sun throughout the conversation, only stopping briefly, resting one arm on the rake when emphasising a point.

“It’s bitter being a farmer (dang nong min tai ku). You have to ‘buy labour’ to sow the rice (zai yang de shi yao mai gong). You have to exchange labour to harvest it (shou gu zi yao huan gong). And now there is not even enough space for drying the rice (shai gu zi mei di fang) as the village has started to sell its land to people wanting to build new houses.”

Here he leans on his rake and looks me straight in the eye.

“My son goes to school (wo er zi shang xue). I pay 300 yuan a term for him (mei ge xue qi fu san bai quai qian) to go to school so he can get a bit of wen hua (xue yi dian wen hua) and become a worker (gong ren). A worker’s life is a lot better than the life of the farmer (gong ren de sheng huo bi nong min sheng huo hao duo ne)”.

He starts moving the rake over his rice again.

Parents work hard to put their children through school and are disappointed if their young don’t live up to their expectations. Walking from the market town back to the village in the company of a woman friend one day, we passed a man on the edge of our village, who along with his wife was tending to their vegetable garden. They were ploughing the plot with their hoes in preparation for planting some cabbage (bai cai). The man pushed his straw hat with the red synthetic flower back and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his jacket sleeve. His wife nodded to us but kept working. My friend was familiar with the family so she spoke to the man for a bit. He had three sons and had managed to put all of them through middle school. They had migrated out for work but had now become disillusioned by what the city had to offer and were preparing to come back to the village in order to live off the land.

“We spent so much money (hua le ji qian quai qian) to give them an education (gei ta men xue yi dian). Now it has all been rendered useless (xian zai mei shen me yong).”

The sons had apparently not been able to secure permanent work units in the city and did odd jobs for little money. Now they had decided to come back to the still low income but relative security of their own plot of land. The money

spent on their education was seen as wasted (lan fei). You don't have to educate yourself at all in order to be a farmer.

Throughout China the discourse of modernisation is pervasive. To the people of Lu village the work you do reflects your degree of modernity. The work you do further determines the place you live, giving rise to the notion of modern and backward places. Increased affluence enables the purchase of modern material goods; objects of modernity, thus labelled for their convenience, entertainment value or glamour. Education facilitates acquisition of salaried jobs and is therefore seen as the great emancipator from backwardness to modernity.



## **Conclusion**

I set out to answer several questions outlined in the Introduction of this thesis. These questions can be summarised under the three major themes prominent in the thesis; work, relatedness and modernity. Broadly speaking what this thesis ponders is the question of what work means in Lu village, what it produces and the extent to which what you do and where you do it determines who and what you are.

### **What is work and what does it produce?**

I found that the most plausible framework for understanding everyday life in Lu village was that of ‘work’ and ‘relatedness’, with both concepts defined in their broadest sense.

Work, as defined in this thesis, crosses the traditional boundaries between kinship and economics, so as to emphasise that the reality of Lu village cannot be separated into such neat domains. It is not how reality is experienced and described to me in Lu village and it is thus not how it has been represented here. Work includes not only job or occupation, but also refers to everyday tasks and duties, such as housework, childrearing, attending to relatives dead or living, activities usually categorised as ‘leisure’ pursuits, including banquets, fishing and maintaining social relationships in general. Throughout this thesis, I have emphasised the interweaving of these activities to explain and justify to the reader why I put them all under a single label, that of work. I bring together these varied activities under one heading because it appears that in Lu village they serve the

same purpose (be it primary or secondary) of producing relationships. They contribute to strengthening or creating relationships of varied natures; with people and places, kin and non-kin, short and long term. Furthermore, I choose a single label to emphasise the blurring between the perceived boundaries between economic work and relatedness work; to convey the extent to which, for example, housework and rituals seamlessly blend in with one another and are performed with much the same mindset or disposition.

In Lu village, work lies at the heart of the building of relatedness. The relationship between work and relatedness so broadly defined can be seen as cyclical. Relatedness is hard work and hard work can also produce relatedness. Relatedness is the by-product of everyday work in fields primarily aimed at producing food. Relatedness is the primary focus of some work, such as performing rituals. There is also a range of work activities, such as lending a hand as a guest at a banquet or giving a neighbour pickled vegetables one has laboured over, which are integral to the production of relatedness. Understanding the nature of these concepts helps one analyse and make sense of everyday life in Lu village where relatedness creates work and work creates relatedness, how different types of work are required for the production and nurturing of different kind of relationships.

A striking feature of life in Lu village is how prominent a role women play in the everyday production of relatedness. Under the patriline, women are ‘outsiders’ in China as the most common household form is that of a woman marrying into and thus becoming part of her husband’s patriline. She is also

essential to the continuity of the patriline. Women generally come from outside but once married are more 'inside' than men tend to be. By this I mean that women become responsible not only for raising children but also for nurturing relations with other family members, neighbours and friends. Although men are not excluded from this sphere, it is women who dominate in relationship building within and closer to the home. In the case of men who are entrepreneurs or cadres, their relationship building tends to be 'riskier' in that it goes further afield and deals with people who are more or less strangers. But would men be able to engage in these activities if women did not take care of the home front? In the case of the successful Chang family in Lu village, their good fortune has come about through the joint efforts of, in particular, Mr Chang, his wife and his mother. They had a division of labour which honed in on a specific goal; the economic well-being of their household.

I have looked at everyday life in Lu village through the work that people do. I have noticed that work is called different things and certain work happens in certain places. Noting all kinds of work and what is produced by it one may come up with a model of Chinese relatedness where women are indeed the centre, the long-term, the core around which everything else revolves. In Lu village, women are the fixed part of the world, working towards the static and continuous image of it while men are impermanent. This in a sense turns the traditional patrilineal model on its head. Men are usually represented as the constant in Chinese kinship. But by looking at Chinese kinship through relatedness, place and work, a

wholly different image emerges, where women are the fixed, constant and long term.

### **Different work, different relationships**

The individual chapters in this thesis discuss different types of relationships and the type of work undertaken to maintain them. Chapter Three focuses on connecting with landscape, Chapter Four revolves around relations between parent and child, Chapter Five describes everyday relations with neighbours, friends and extended family (dead and living), Chapter Six discusses how leisure work strengthens ties with colleagues and associates and Chapter Seven deals with the work undertaken to stay in touch with developments in China and the rest of the world.

Life in Lu village is played out within rippling circles of action. The innermost circle is that of the home or the house, undulating to the vegetable gardens and pigsties at the village edge, then beyond into fields and out to mountains and market town. Relationships are formed and maintained through working within the circles and moving between them.

According to Carsten & Hugh-Jones, in their discussion of houses and relatedness, anthropology has in the past assumed that kinship is “logically prior to forms of association based on residence, territory or ‘soil’” (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 19). In Lu village connection to the soil is amplified by the fact that it is the resting place of the ancestors.

The history of modern China has indeed been turbulent and much of it has had to do with great upheaval, particularly in land ownership. Lu villagers have known times when land was concentrated in very few hands, times when everyone owned land communally and lately, a state of affairs where everyone has their own plot - which is however, subject to change every five years.

Ancestral graves are scattered around fields and surrounding mountainsides, fields that have changed hands and are still moving hands every five years, houses which used to house landlords or people who have moved away. In Lu village the link to the soil, to the landscape on which people raise crops, children and animals and where they bury the dead, is strong.

As I left Lu village, I carried with me on the rickety bus a sack of rice, a red plastic bag of peanuts, a fifty yuan note, a pair of home-knitted shoes for my mother, a bottle of spirit for my father and a small yellow plastic bag full of dried mud. These were presents from friends. The mud came from the field of a close friend. We had talked at great length about my departure. Going from one place to another is 'not easy' (bu jian dan). The soil of different places varies. My friend had smilingly told me that before I left she would give me some mud from her field. If uncomfortable in the new place then I was to boil water and pour it over a lump of the mud, have the mud settle and then drink it. It would make me feel better. "These are superstitions (mi xin)", she grinned, scooped the mud up into a plastic bag and thrusting it into my hand. "Just in case", she said grinning yet again.

This farewell trip to my friend's field was more for sentimental reasons than for serious belief in the trick. But it does convey the sense and importance of place in people's perception of the world. Places and people cannot be separated. I am not insinuating a static model, one of people being bound to the soil and their natal village, but rather the sense of people absorbing the places they move between and thus to an extent places mould the person; be they people's houses, people's fields or other countries.

The desire to maintain relations with the soil is strong, but the desire to stay in touch with the modern world is stronger still. Children are pushed towards education so that they may have a brighter future away from Lu village. The desire for modernisation and civilisation is linked to moving to other places, which are less backward (luo hou).

As discussed in Chapters Four, Five and Six, the nature of work and the work one is expected to perform varies by gender and life stage. This discussion is not finite or exclusive but aimed at giving a rough idea of some distinctions at work in Lu village based on age and gender.

The term yang is used for raising children, crops and animals. As crops are tended – watered, weeded and sprayed with pesticide – so children are raised by nurturing, slapping and scolding. Underlying is the same 'process of growth'. The relationship between child and parent is not unidirectional; where one gives and the other receives, but cyclical, where both parties at different stages of their lives give and receive yang. During childhood, children are on the receiving end but must repay their parents the debt of yang at a later stage. Children are

encouraged to educate themselves so as to ‘grow out of’ the world of manual labour (lao dong). They are frequently reminded of the hard work their parents put in, that makes this possible for them. They are also scolded for being wasteful or disrespectful of their parents. Children must learn to move away from the manual labour their parents do but must not move away from ‘moral values’ – those inherent in the cycle of yang. What they gain through their own hard work at school and their parents’ in the fields should be channelled back into the cycle of yang by caring respectably for parents when they are old.

Relationships within families and with relatives (jia ren) as well as with friends and neighbours are produced through visiting, gift giving and giving and receiving favours. It is mainly women who are responsible for these everyday relationships within and between households. Their duties include the support and nurture of their young, maintaining relations with immediate and extended family and with neighbours. They are furthermore responsible for performing rituals to sustain relations with those who have passed away, that are essential for the well-being and protection of living family members. Women perform household duties such as cleaning and cooking. In the fields they are the workhorses of the household. Through these chores the web of relatedness is spun.

Relationships with colleagues and business partners, subordinate and superior, also need to be nurtured. They need to be wined, dined and entertained – often lavishly. In Lu village, this is the work of well to do men, entrepreneurs and cadres, who have more money to play with than the common farmer;

entrepreneurs due to their entrepreneurial activities and cadres due to their salaried jobs. The work of entrepreneurs and cadres often takes the form of elaborate leisure where often, large sums of money are spent. Through these leisure pursuits, short-term and unstable non-kin relationships are transformed into long-term and more solid ones. In order to do this work properly, without attracting accusations of manipulation, immorality or downright corruption, one has to perform it with sentiment (gan qing).

Throughout my ethnography of Lu village I emphasise the equal importance of what we tend to think of as the material world to what we usually refer to as the social world, because I think it is impossible to make a distinction between the two. References to backward and modern places, to backward and modern work, to other people, have a rich material as well as a social component. A relationship without the exchange of material goods, without working for the other person or doing favours is unthinkable. However, the gift brings more than merely the material, a great deal of feeling is attached to, for example, gifts from a son to a mother.

Janet Hoskins (1998) has demonstrated quite elegantly how ordinary household possessions are given extraordinary significance “by becoming entangled in the events of a person’s life and used as a vehicle for a sense of selfhood” (Hoskins 1998: 2). Life histories and narratives of the past are told through material things such as pouches for betel nuts or houses one lived in and so on. In his article on the weaving of a basket Ingold (2000: 339-349) warns against reducing the material component of the gift to a mere metaphor. Material



things are benchmarks through which social relations are created, maintained and nurtured.

Not only do the people in Lu village work to maintain relations with neighbours, friend, family, associates, and ancestors. Considerable effort is also geared towards staying in touch with the wider world, in a sense the short term goal of work is relatedness and the long term goal is modernity.

### **To what extent does what you do determine who you are?**

In Lu village everyday activities along with the context in which they occur serve to shape villagers' perception of themselves; indicate their place in a larger context, their degree of modernity, their relatedness to the world where being a peasant and living in the countryside is regarded as backward and uncivilised and holding a salaried job and living in the city are seen as modern and civilised.

To a large extent the work you do indicates how in touch you are with the modern world. The discourse of modernisation and progress is all-pervasive. Again and again, Lu villagers would tell me that they were the people who carried things on their backs (bei) and levelled them on their shoulders (qiao). They toiled with their bodies, ate bitterness and were backward. In so doing, Lu villagers are casting themselves up against an image of modernity advocated by the Chinese state through slogans frequently seen painted on walls along roadsides, through television and through their representatives at local levels, namely the village cadres. In this scheme of things, being a toiling farmer in Lu

village compares unfavourably. The emphasis on children's education is great; the hope of a better life for one's children practically without exception.

### **Standing still or moving on?**

Classical Chinese ethnography very much describes a society of rules and tradition. In this thesis, I have delegated more space to the dynamic and ad hoc aspect of Chinese society. Tradition is not a state of consensus blindly followed. There are always discussions as to what is the 'correct procedure' and the correct procedure tends to be what works best at any given time. Rules are bent and twisted. In fact, one could argue that nobody really knows what the rules are in the first place.

As Ingold (2000) mentions in his article on weaving a basket the shape of society is not based on a preordained formula. Nobody really knows what form it is going to take. People weave their lives from day to day and try to do some long-term planning but nobody really knows what shape things will take until the work is done and the shape is there.

Peter Gow (1995) speaks of no actions being 'pure' in the sense that every action made today bears within it something of the past. It is the past which has brought people to where they now are and only from that platform do they act upon the present. The shape of society and the shape of people's lives is thus not determined merely by their actions. The shape is determined by past actions, by the actions of their neighbours and relatives and also by the actions of government far away.

But through these ‘tainted’ actions life is woven. And the goal is modernisation – ‘to turn one’s face towards the future’ as the words painted on the Lu village elementary school walls read. And this is the aim of everyday movement, to the extent that it is premeditated; namely progress and development.

Modernity is not a static concept. Its meaning is fluid and changes all the time. And it is movement rather than fixity that characterises life in China at the moment. Speaking about movement is of course meaningless without conceiving of a static state of affairs with which to compare it. And a static state of affairs is a label attached to the Chinese countryside (Anagnost 1997).

But the forces of modernity are also present in the countryside, albeit with less velocity and more caution. Life in Lu village is fraught with contradiction. Why do people push their children through education and in a sense pushing them away, whilst at the same time insisting they conform to traditional values inherent in the cycle of yang? This contradictory behaviour is a manifestation of how the people of Lu village negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity omnipresent in the village.

Caution is practiced along with daring. In Lu village people proceed with caution, negotiating risk, by mostly moving in the inner, short-term cycle without violating the outer, long term cycle. Parents push children towards book-knowledge but rein them back when they seem to be becoming disrespectful of farmers’ knowledge. History has taught them to proceed with caution. Mr Wang, the elementary school teacher, could use his calligraphy skills to sell poetic

couplets but prefers not to as he has lived through campaigns where such selfish pursuits were punished severely. Mr Chang, the entrepreneur, is described by Fei Xiaotong (1992a) as being cautious at the beginning of his career. He is now more confident but retains and creates good relations with people representing government as insurance. It is a balancing act between moving toward modernisation, as the government preaches and a desire for a more comfortable life drives on, and the caution of people who have heard of and lived through incredible historical changes. As a drunken cadre once said to me: “You will never understand. You are young. You are from a developed country (fa da guo jia). China is underdeveloped (bu fa da). Foreigners will never understand Chinese history.”<sup>39</sup>

So what is changing in Lu village and what stays the same? The concepts of work and relatedness remain a stable and useful framework for analysis, ever important and all inclusive, but the significance of these concepts - i.e. the activities and connections they refer to, the relationship between them, and the attitudes towards different types of work and relations - is shaped by what is modern at any given time. The fluidity of the concept of modernity thus spills into work and relatedness.

The past century, is one of a turbulent history of civil wars and wars with neighbouring countries for China. Revolutionary government policies have also swung from one extreme to the other. During the communist era, production teams or communes did not follow the lines of kinship, which in a sense gave

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<sup>39</sup> The heaviness with which history weighs down on present day China is the subject of many good books, notably W.J.F. Jenner’s *The tyranny of history: the roots of China’s crisis* (1992).

more weight to work than relatedness. Today, with the implementation of the household responsibility system, production is firmly rooted within the household, thereby increasing the importance of a family unit and relatedness. Furthermore, the modern household strategy of diversifying and dividing labour; i.e. with women looking after home and family, men seeking salaried jobs and children seeking education, gives rise to new forms of relatedness or new types of relationships, e.g. with fellow students and business associates, which in turn demand new forms of work.

In Lu village, the work of farmers remains much the same as it always has been, but the value laid upon it changes. In present day Lu village, the discourse of modernisation, progress or development dictates how valuable farming work is. It is mentioned in people's discourse constantly, it is written upon school walls and house gables in the nearby market town, it is talked about constantly on television. And the work of the farmers does not fit the image of what is now considered modern.

There is a steady flow of people migrating from rural areas to urban areas, escaping toil in the fields in search of the much-desired salaried jobs in the city. Patterns of constancy and change can also be seen in the surrounding landscape in Lu village. Here, where land potentially exchanges hands every five years but ancestral graves are sometimes right in the middle of fields, the changeable and the static are at their most manifest. Relationships with ancestors are constant and long-term whereas the possession of the fields in which their bones rest is short-term and even transient.

Lu village is a complex place where people and things are in constant flux. Identifying the axes around which the flux revolves, however, goes some way to understanding what it is like to live and work in Lu village. Work and relatedness are inextricably linked. Work produces relatedness and relatedness is produced by work. The production takes place within rippling circles of action and women, men and children focus their efforts within these in different ways. Despite the flow that I have emphasised, then, the fixity and influence of place is important as well. Place shapes humans as humans shape places. These are the rival, overarching pulls of what is perceived as modernity and backwardness.

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