

Experiencing Development on China's Frontier: The Nuosu's  
Bridewealth

Candidate Name: Aga ZUOSHI

DPhil in Development Studies

St Antony's College

University of Oxford

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## **Abstract**

The thesis investigates the “problematic” inflation in bridewealth among the Nuosu people in contemporary Liangshan, Southwest China, to elucidate how ethnic minorities engaged with various state-steered development projects. The study treats “development” as a historical process, in which the practice of bridewealth has been associated with the ethnicity of the Nuosu, and the inflation in bridewealth has been attributed to the “backwardness” of the Nuosu culture both in political discourses and policy-making of the state. The thesis discusses, through ethnographic materials, how the Nuosu of various statuses indigenise the “humiliation” inflicted on them by state development. The historical perspective and ethnographic method serve to show empowerment of the Nuosu as reflectors of their society. Nuosu on-going and dynamic negotiation and engagement with state definitions of ethnicity and legitimacy has thus led to the reification of the state as an interlocutor at the most local level and in core events of Nuosu's daily life, importantly the practice of bridewealth.

The thesis reveals “the variants of development” rooted in the understanding/misunderstanding of planned templates for development. The variants are manifested by the multiplicity of voices and the creativities found in the narrations and implementation of development. By engaging with anthropological debates on the themes of “value” and “the anthropology of the good”, the thesis demonstrates how the shift in the value attached to the Nuosu brides transvalues the external environment such as manifested in state investigations, regulations, and legislation. More importantly, the humiliation inflicted on Nuosu culture in the process of promoting development has not resulted in the depreciation of the value that

define being a “real” Nuosu. Instead, the practice of bridewealth is informed by Nuosu collective values which simultaneously are creating values. The inflation in bridewealth highlights and transvalues the yearnings and desires of the Nuosu in their most exalted form, leading to a core insight of the thesis that values associated with a “real” Nuosu identity acquired their most forceful impact in the Nuosu encounter with state developmentalism.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2010, many street vendors in Xichang<sup>1</sup> made a fortune selling stools. Stools suddenly became a popular commodity because of “the Healthy and Civilised New Life Movement of Liangshan Yi<sup>2</sup> (彝族)Region”, a state development project initiated by the Sichuan Provincial Government. By the end of 2010, 1,280,000 stools worth 16,145,000 CNY had been donated to Nuosu communities across Liangshan by different government branches.<sup>3</sup> The massive national campaign was launched against the Nuosu’s lifestyle, particularly against their “unhygienic” habit of sitting on the ground and their “exorbitant” expenditure on funerals and bridewealth.

In the course of extensive propaganda for the campaign, bridewealth was labelled as “a backward ethnic tradition” (*luohou de minzu xiguan* 落后的民族习惯) and “the obstacle to social and economic development”. The campaign swept through Liangshan in a didactic manner. Representatives of various institutions were organised by the government to “learn”<sup>4</sup> (*xuexi* 学习) the core ideas of the campaign. Following that, to show the effectiveness of learning, different institutions handed in various forms of assignments. For example, speech contests were held cross-institutionally; TV news reports were broadcast regularly; series of articles were published in the

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<sup>1</sup> The capital city of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province, China.

<sup>2</sup> The Yi is one of the 55 ethnic minority groups officially identified by the PRC, mostly living in Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi. It has a population of 8 million. The term “Yi” is the official designation and Nuosu is the self-designation of the Yi living in Liangshan. About 2,310,700 Nuosu are living in Liangshan (official statistical data, <http://www.lsz.gov.cn/rsls>, accessed on 17 March 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Long Dehua and Luo Zong 2011 (10 March). Toward Modernity: Preview on the Healthy and Civilised New Life Movement of Liangshan Yi Region. <http://www.lsz.gov.cn/Detail/2010zt-gbb/00fb77f0-88c1-493c-96f9-af9625a7c247> (accessed on 17 March 2011). NOTE: As a part of the media propaganda for the movement, the article was written by the chief editor of *Liangshan Daily News* (凉山日报), the most widely circulated local newspaper which is sponsored and supervised by the government.

<sup>4</sup> Learn (*xuexi* 学习) is the dominant way of how the state policies are propagandized and executed at different administrative levels in the forms of various conferences and meetings.

most popular newspapers; writing competitions were organized by schools. Many other similar activities were held to actively promote the ideas the campaign advocated. Consequently, the campaign reached a broad audience.

In 2014, owing to the severity of bridewealth inflation, the local government initiated a series of investigations across 14 counties under its administration. According to the official statistic data released in the official report that resulted from the investigation, between 1985 and 2014 bridewealth increased at the upper end by 600-fold in Mianning County, and at the lower end by 100-fold in Mabian county, an inflation rate that is extremely disproportionate to the growth of household income in the region. Even though bridewealth is practised widely in different geographical areas and cultures, including in Han Chinese dominated regions, in the campaign's discourse prevailing in Liangshan this factor is ignored either intentionally or unintentionally, and instead the "irrationality" of inflation in bridewealth is deliberately tied up with the Nuosu's ethnicity. The inflation in bridewealth became such an urgent social problem that the local government was determined to tackle it in order to, in their words, "achieve a higher level of social and economic development".

The thesis is triggered by the apparent loopholes in the state development project as much as by the realities I encountered during fieldwork. Apart from being a "problem" targeted by the development projects of the government, the inflation in bridewealth is one of the most popular topics for conversations in the Nuosu's everyday life. The stories of bridewealth circulate as gossips about families' reputation among the Nuosu and stir the Nuosu's reflections on their society. Doubtlessly, it is because marriage matters significantly in people's life course and bridewealth is

essential for establishing a marriage from Nuosu's perspective. As noted by an often-quoted Nuosu's proverb: ***a credible marriage is established by bridewealth***. For the poor and the rich, either willingly or unwillingly, the Nuosu are required to exhaust their resources to establish a good marriage with bridewealth. Moreover, the conversations about the excessive bridewealth of today provide a space for people to discuss or realise their values of life. In such a space, their values of being Nuosu are tested by the state's regulation, while they keep challenging the state's definitions of ethnicity and legitimacy.

In the thesis, through the lens of bridewealth, I draw on my years of research among the Nuosu and my experience of being raised as a native Nuosu to offer a new way of conceptualising the identity of ethnic minorities in a contemporary Chinese state. The ethnic identity of Nuosu in contemporary Liangshan keeps challenging Nuosu people on a daily basis. On the one hand, their identity is constructed and realised in the relationship between Nuosu versus other ethnic groups (mostly Han Chinese), and between the Nuosu society and the Chinese state. These aspects of ethnic minority positioning have led many scholars to conceptualise minority people's identities in terms of the "other", the culture/savage slot, the de-essentialisation of ethnic identity, or as suffering subjects.

The biggest risk of dichotomised approaches is that groups are imagined as internally homogenous vis-à-vis other groups, thereby overlooking within-group heterogeneity and various ways of interacting between different people across time and space (Pan 2010: 47). Additionally, the academic deconstruction of the political process of classifying ethnic minorities may lead researchers to ignore an important fact: for many people of different ethnic groups, the ethnic identities indicated on

their national ID cards has become the label tagged on them in their everyday life. The identity has been fostered into something fundamental in shaping how they see themselves and how they are perceived by others under different settings, ranging from daily conversations to the enactment of state policies. Moreover, being a Nuosu entails constantly self-reflecting, which requires people to interpret new experiences with their knowledge of the world and adjust themselves to social and economic change. The strategy of self-reflecting is shown in subtle ways in their everyday life.

The thesis aims to reveal the Nuosu's multi-faceted ways, or strategies, of negotiating their identities and self-reflections when coping with a Han-dominated state that wants to change and improve them. However, presenting the multi-faceted ways in which they strategize and cope does not mean to reduce them to calculative, manipulative, "rational", "economic" agents, but to stress their creativity in finding a balance between being a Nuosu and being a Chinese citizen. For the Nuosu, the strongest constraint entailed in being a Chinese citizen is to abide by laws or in their words, be "legal" (*hefa* 合法). But state laws are not only a way for the state to regulate its people; it is also a resource that the Nuosu can use to seek legitimacy for their behaviours.

In fieldwork, I found that the use of the idea of *hefa* is not limited to people engaging in legal disputes, it is also widely adopted by people in their daily conversations whenever they need to establish a kind of legitimacy or justify their behaviour. In addition to their interpretations, and sometimes misinterpretations of state laws, the "traditional" rules/laws of the Nuosu, referred to as "customary laws", provide an alternative for the Nuosu to establish the legitimacy of their identity and their practices. Therefore, the juxtaposition of two systems of laws yields a flexible

space within which Nuosu people can be creative in justifying and legitimising their customs as “legal”. The Nuosu’s engagement with state-engineered development projects opens up a space to investigate - instead of arguing whether they are subjects or objects of the development - the social realities of development, or as I prefer it, “the variants of development”. The term does not suggest an essentialised version of “development”. Nor does it involve the judgment of right and wrong. It is meant to encompass the diverse voices which have evolved concerning the meaning and impact of development, the creativities which are found in the implementation of development projects, and the outcomes which have their origins in understanding/misunderstanding.

To serve these purposes, the thesis, firstly, studies the process through which the humiliation associated with the Nuosu practice of bridewealth has been brought about by the state, in particular, through the process of forging the concept and identity of ethnic minorities and promoting the state development projects. Secondly, based on materials collected from fieldwork, it investigates the counterpart to humiliation: what bridewealth means to Nuosu or, in other words, what values are embodied by bridewealth in their own narrations. It investigates how the Nuosu justify their practice of bridewealth by synthesising the dual legal system. Moreover, it reflects upon the internal complexity of Nuosu society revealed in the practice of bridewealth which is rooted in their social history and has come under the influence of various development projects. By studying how the Nuosu rationalise the “irrational” bridewealth, the thesis also explores the state’s “rational” criticism of excessive bridewealth and how this is instrumentalised to serve other and even “irrational” purposes.

The thesis at the core is an ethnography of development from a bottom-up perspective. It studies how people's values are changed, or indeed not changed, by development policies, and it studies on the other hand creativities unleashed at the most local level in negotiating with macro-developmental forces. It aims to reveal the complexity of the social realities of development, or the outcomes of the various development plans, which cannot be reduced to a binary interpretation of the enforcer and the enforced.

## **Rationale**

After WWII, development had achieved the status of certainty in the social imaginary and "reality" had been colonised by the development discourse (Escobar 1995: 5). Global society came to be classified into the three categories of developed, developing and underdeveloped, mainly according to the level of economic development. In the hierarchical ordering of societies in terms of their "progress", the developed or the "advanced" societies experienced high levels of industrialisation and urbanisation, technological advances in agriculture, the rapid growth of material production and living standards, and the widespread adoption of modern education and cultural values. It is believed that development, driven by the power of modernity, incontrovertibly yields cultural change, a topic explored by a long list of scholars of different disciplines.

In anthropology, Marshal Sahlins is most influential and "the only one who has made the theorisation of cultural change central to his/her work" (Robbins and Wardlow 2005: 1). Most of his major works are devoted to finding cultural continuity and to demonstrating how indigenous categories and values have been able to shape even the most dramatic transformations in ways that allow for their own survival,

even if in varied forms. He argues that the cultural integrity of indigenous people endures because indigenous people actively struggle “to encompass what is happening to them in terms of their own world system” (Sahlins 2000: 10). However, he points out that people tend to give up on continued cultural reproduction and extension when they are humiliated. He explained the argument as such:

... [people] learn to hate what they already have, what they have been pleased to consider their well-being. Beyond that, they have to despise what they are, to hold their own existence in contempt---and want to be someone else (Sahlins 1990:92).

He considers “humiliation” to be part of a global-historical process of modernisation and a necessary stage of economic development. He argues that the role of disgrace is critical to the modernisation process, for in order to desire the benefits of “progress”, all indigenous senses of worth, both the people's self-worth and the values of their own objects, have to be depreciated. For him, the self-contempt of people is the prerequisite of their modernisation.

Sahlins’ significant but neglected observation about the role of humiliation in cultural change is further developed and questioned by Joel Robbins and others (Robbins 2004; Robbins and Wardlow eds. 2005). Joel Robbins argues that “if humiliation is to be the starting mechanism of the move to adopt a new culture, it must be experienced in traditional cultural terms. This means that any account of why a group engages in rapid cultural change needs to begin as a cultural one” (Robbins 2004: 10). Furthermore, in the collection of writings specifically devoted to the discussion of Sahlins’ arguments of humiliation, Robbins and Wardlow point out “humiliation might seem a rather slender thread upon which to hang a major theory

of cultural change, ...it is in fact only a place holder that points to the need to develop a broader theory of the role of cultural debasement in fostering discontinuity” (Robbins and Wardlow 2005: 4). The authors of the collection demonstrate that it is possible to indigenise humiliation itself and how it becomes a spur to indigenous agency. They argue that “in their efforts to come to grips with their colonial and postcolonial situations, people in the past worked with, and even now continue to work with, indigenous understandings of humiliation and traditional ways of dealing with it”. Such an interpretation re-integrates Sahlins’ argument that humiliation must be given a critical interrogative role into his more well-known writing; that is, how indigenous categories shape people’s understanding of novel experiences. Their discussion of how indigenous people steer processes of humiliation and how the humiliation becomes a spur in embracing or rejecting modernisation serve to contribute to a deepening of my analysis.

The Nuosu’s encounter with the state-steered socialist version of development derives many benefits from the explanatory powers of the concept of humiliation. Though James Smith (2007) claims that high modernist staples such as rationalised scientific planning from “above” and the attendant ideology of unilinear progress are now widely understood to be philosophically and morally moribund instruments of imperial control (Mitchell 1999, Scott 1998, Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1994), however, the Nuosu and other groups of people in a similar situation still labour under the force of central planning. Moreover, poverty issues among these people are often tied to their ethnicity. In other words, poverty is framed as something determined by their culture and their identities. Poverty becomes the sign of poverty with the added significance of a cultural deficiency (Sahlins 1990:89). This goes counter to the

fundamental purpose of development which is to improve the living standard and quality of life of people and foster their capabilities to order their lives in dignity, without shame (Sen 1983).

Stevan Harrell's (1995: 3-36) discussion of the civilising mission of state development projects is relevant to explain the role which humiliation can play in the process of modernisation. He holds that a civilising project denotes an interaction between peoples, in which the civilising centre interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) as an expression of a particular kind of inequality. The first requirement for those who would civilise is to define and to objectify the objects of their civilising project. The definitions produced must consist of two parts: a demonstration that the peoples in question are indeed inferior, and thus in need of civilisation, and a certification that they can, in fact, be improved, or civilised, if they are subjected to the project. The "object" of the project, while struggling with the attempts to be civilised, nevertheless accept the general premise that they are less civilised and thus develop a "stigmatised identity", a sense of being backward, uncivilised, dirty, stupid, and so forth. Therefore, as he points out, the effect of a civilising project seems to engender, develop, sharpen, or heighten the consciousness of the peripheral people as an ethnic group.

The thesis explores how the Nuosu deal with "humiliation" brought on by the Chinese Communist Party/state's civilising project, making use of Harrell's terminology. Focusing on bridewealth, I will study how the Nuosu people objectify, express and create social relations of their own and their own perceptions and understanding of the manifestations of the state and of concepts of prestige, wealth and power. My research of the Nuosu's experience is to show how humiliation can be

indigenised and how they legitimise their behaviours using the dual legal systems, state laws and the “customary laws”. It focuses on how people have lived locally, and how they have worked to make sense of and control their lives in this arduous process of transformation.

As my attention was drawn by the Nuosu’s fascinating narratives on bridewealth, state, development, and humiliation during the fieldwork, my theoretical inquiry was also drawn towards the issue of “value”, what humiliation aims to depreciate. In Graeber’s work, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (2001), he summarises that there are three large streams of thought that converge in the term of value. The first one is “value” in the sociological sense: conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life. The second one is “value” in the economic sense: the degree to which objects are desired, particularly, as measured by how much others are willing to give up in order to get them. The third “value” is to be understood in the linguistic sense, which goes back to the structural linguistics of Saussure, and might be most simply defined as “meaningful difference”. Nuosu’s bridewealth enables a comprehensive study of value: the increase in the amount of bridewealth, the economic sense of value, is tied up with ethnic difference, the linguistic sense of value, rooted at the same time in the Nuosu’s ultimate desire of a decent life, the sociological sense of value.

This is where my ethnographic materials contribute to an important stream current in anthropology which elucidates “value” as the anthropology of good (Robbins 2013; Ortner 2016). It is to study how people “strive to create ‘the good’ in their lives; explore the different ways people organise their personal and collective

lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project.” (Robbins 2013:457) Marriage, or tying the knot, is considered to be one of the ultimate good things in life, cross-culturally, and despite differences in rules, laws and rituals.

The thesis examines how ‘good’ marriage is culturally constructed in Nuosu’s setting. It explores how they imagine the things they consider to be good; what and how much they invest in or in what ways they realise the good and achieve fulfilment in their lives. For the Nuosu, “to strive” means to struggle with social conditions which are defined by a greater political framework. In such conditions, people need to live with their ethnic identity, which is not only biologically defined but is also politically imposed on them. This entails them struggling with the humiliating stereotypes attached to ethnic minorities which recur in mainstream Han Chinese official and popular media discourse presenting them as either socially backward (as in the social evolutionism key to the communist regime) or “dancing fools” (Mueggler 2002) wearing colourful and exotic clothing in the ethnoscape of the state. As said by Sahlins (1990), in order to desire the benefits of “progress”, the traditional values of a people have to be depreciated. However, the Nuosu’s case reveals much complexity in how people reinterpret the humiliation and negotiate and reinstate it through their own values. At the same time, though, the desires for what is valued as good always exist as an ideal. These desires are attached as much as detached from everyday life because of the constraints on realising them. The gap or the grey area between the reality and the ideal, or how people show flexibility in negotiating these spaces, is one of the main fields the thesis aims to explore.

## The Context

The official designation of the Nuosu is the Yi nationality (*Yizu* 彝族), one of China's 55 ethnic minorities. Most of the Yi live in Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces. "Nuosu" is the self-designation of the Yi people who inhabit Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, which covers an area of 60,423 square kilometres in southwest Sichuan Province between the northern Hengduan Mountains on the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau and the Chengdu Basin. It borders Leshan, Yibin, Ya'an and the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the north and Yunnan Province on the east, west and south.<sup>1</sup> It is high in elevation, with mountains and highlands making up over 90% of its land.

According to the Sixth National Population Census data released in May 2011, Liangshan has a population of 4,798,037. Of these, 49.13% are Nuosu, 47.55% are Han Chinese and 3.32% are people of other ethnic groups<sup>2</sup>. In its capital city, Xichang, the Nuosu constitute 22.5% of the population, while in some of the other 16 counties administered by the prefectural government, more than 97% of their residents are Nuosu.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the Nuosu live in the remote mountainous area in the northeast part of the prefecture. Most of the mountain peaks are more than 4,000 meters above sea level. The distance between the lofty peaks and deep valleys can reach 5,633 meters, constituting a unique topographic landscape of plateaus and savannahs. Even today, "climbing up and down the hills" (see Scott 2009) still perfectly describes the Nuosu's route to visit cities or urban areas for various purposes in their

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix II for the map.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lsz.gov.cn/Detail/jrls-next/2617/b2f4e5ab-0118-4013-82de-1a6b9cac35de> (accessed on 1 November 2011)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.lsz.gov.cn/channel/city/2011-06/20110613\\_city\\_yc\\_72271.html](http://www.lsz.gov.cn/channel/city/2011-06/20110613_city_yc_72271.html) (accessed on 1 November 2011)

daily life. Moreover, even those who moved to cities like Xichang or Chengdu decades ago are still considered outsiders by their Chinese neighbours, or more offensively, *manzi* (蛮子 barbarian) coming down from mountains.

### **Social Hierarchy and *Cytvi*<sup>1</sup>**

The Nuosu have been under the administration of different Chinese dynasties for more than 2,000 years, going right back as far as the Xihan dynasty (202 BC to 9 AD) (Zeng 1945). However, like many other groups in the region, or *Zomia* (Schendel 2002; Scott 2009), due to its exclusive ecological environment and loosely coordinated central administrative institutions, the Nuosu have never been fully incorporated into the Chinese nation. Numerous descriptions of the exclusiveness of the Nuosu can be found in the historical archives, in academic research, in news reports, in travelogues and missionary diaries from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, even in news reports, travelogues and books written in the Republican Era (1911–1949), Nuosu people were either accused of being barbarians from the remote mountains, robbing and kidnapping Chinese people living in the savannah, or be portrayed – whether in the works of Chinese scholars or foreign travellers (e.g. Broomhall 1948; Lin 1961; Zeng 1945) – as “independent Lolo” who captured outsiders to exploit as slaves. However, the situation seems to have changed significantly after the CCP took over their region in the 1950s.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cytvi* ㄣㄣ, a Nuosu term, can be roughly translated as Nuosu lineage. See Appendix I for the full list of Nuosu glossary used in the thesis.

Their “hierarchical society with slaves” (Hill 2001) was classified officially as a “slave society” (*Nuli Shehui* 奴隶社会)<sup>1</sup>. In social evolutionist theory, a slavery society ranks far behind a socialist society and is considered only one stage higher than a primitive society. It is regarded as backward, and its social system is characterized by the brutal, exploitative relationship between slave and slave-owner. Slave-owning was officially abolished after the establishment of the local government in the 1950s and the successful penetration and implementation of central state powers in the area. However, the societal hierarchy that existed for so long in Nuosu society did not dissolve completely.

Historically, within the Nuosu social and kinship hierarchy, people were classified by *vupddu*— that is, as five ranks, *nzy*, *nuo*, *quxnuo*, *mgapjie* and *gaxy*, determining the order from the highest to the lowest rank (Hu 2007:78). The literal meaning of *vupddu* is bone. The indigenous term describes one’s blood ties with both deceased and living members of the society. *Nzy* and *Nuo* are nobles, and *mgapjie* and *gaxy* are slaves. *Quxnuo* form the majority; they are commoners obliged to pay tax, rental fees for using land and other secular and ritual contributions to nobles. That said, *Quxnuo* were also able to own slaves so long as they were wealthy enough to purchase slaves and meet their basic subsistence needs.

Since the social ranks are demarcated by blood ties, namely kinship, *cytvi* occupies the first place when it comes to understanding Nuosu society. *Cytvi* can be roughly translated as “lineage”, in which people are identified and classified by their paternal surname. Male Nuosu start to learn and recite their genealogy at a very

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<sup>1</sup> For the most in-depth discussion of the Liangshan Slave Society, see Hu Qingjun (1985) *Slavery: The Form of the Yi’s Society in Liangshan (Liangshan Yizu Nulizhudu Shehui Xingtai)*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.

young age, meaning that even on the occasion of the first meeting between two strangers, one can conveniently tell how they are related to each other and infer from that to which rank their *cytvi* belong. Besides the hierarchical feature of a Nuosu lineage, compared to Chinese lineages (Lin 1961[1948]; Freedman 2004 [1965]), the concept of *cytvi* has a broader scope. As long as people share the same family name, regardless of their actual biological ties and geographical origins, they are related, and correspondingly their behaviours are expected to abide strictly by the acknowledged rules of the society.

When CCP China tried to systematically incorporate the Nuosu into the newly founded state in the 1950s, owing to the incredibly wide scope of *cytvi* and its entwined relationship with hierarchy, it continued to play a significant role for both the state and the Nuosu. The top priority of government policies at that time was to take over the area, avoiding any unnecessary bloodshed but pacifying dissidents and exercising central control. Many nobles were given honorary official titles within the newly established local government and other forms of compensation. Moreover, influential commoners (albeit not many) and representatives of slaves (very few indeed) were invited to work for the government or joined it voluntarily. The chosen ones of lower ranks were individuals who came from *cytvi* with greater numbers of members. Their leadership and the scope of their influence was most valued by the state. Compared to the loosely coordinated administration of the ancient dynasties, the centralised political power reinforced with invincible military force also became an invaluable resource for the Nuosu of different ranks to change their status within the local power structure. *Cytvi* was considered indispensable for both sides to carry out their strategies. Therefore, unsurprisingly it was not dissolved by the socialist

revolution; on the contrary, it helped the implementation of the socialist transformation in Liangshan. However, because of the entwined relationship between *cytvi* and hierarchy, the ideology of hierarchy, though shaken, remained intact in various social activities where individuals' engagement must be understood in terms of *cytvi*, e.g. marriage, funerals, dispute settlements, rituals and ceremonies related to festivals, disease, misfortunes, and the like.

The features of *cytvi* and its related customs are best exemplified in bridewealth. Although the practice of bridewealth is widely found in other parts of China, just as *cytvi* is different from the Chinese idea of lineage, Nuosu's bridewealth embodies different social meanings. However, the purpose of the thesis is not to elaborate on how unique Nuosu's bridewealth is, but rather to consider it as an instrument that crystallises and gives expression to the local reality. The social relations woven by *cytvi* can be revealed in detail by investigating the selection of marriage partners, the negotiation of the amount of bridewealth, the forms of bridewealth (cash, livestock, house, jewellery, clothing, etc.), the ceremonies of giving and receiving bridewealth and other life matters influencing bridewealth (divorce, offspring, death).

The centrality of bridewealth to understanding Nuosu society and its changing fate in development discourse, from "ethnic custom" to "obstacle to social and economic development", makes bridewealth a perfect entry point to study the Nuosu's engagement with development.

### **Nuosu's Bridewealth**

Nuosu's bridewealth basically consists of five parts: *vusat rre*, given to the bride's parents; *onyi rre*, given to the bride's maternal uncle; *hmapzyt rre*, given to the bride's

paternal brother(s); *patvu rre*, given to the bride's paternal uncle; and *vit rre*, given to one person from the same *cytvi* as the bride. There are other payments made under different titles in different areas, but they are rather minor parts compared to *vusat rre* which forms the majority of bridewealth. In the choice of certain receivers of bridewealth, the bride's parents are the decision makers. These five basic parts are listed in the order of their priorities in the event that it is impossible for the groom's family to settle up all the parts of bridewealth. On some occasions, although not many, the parents of the bride return a very small part of the bridewealth to the couple as a token contribution to build up their new family, which is not a dowry in either its name or meaning.

*Vusat rre* takes various forms – money, cattle, jewellery, clothing and so on, while the other *rre* are normally paid with money. There is a tendency to be noted in that money has gradually taken the place of other forms. The transformation is accompanied by the penetration of state administration in the area and Nuosu's increasing involvement with the economic development agenda of the country. Until the 1950s, not everyone had access to money, especially those in the lower ranks of the social ladder. Since the socialist reform and the market reform though, people have been exposed to more opportunities to make money by working for the government, hospitals, factories, schools and other state-owned enterprises. Then, after the late 1980s when privatised business and migrant labourers emerged, it became easier for people to earn cash. Therefore, money has become a more convenient, significant and indispensable means for people to pay bridewealth and to measure things that used to be valued by other measures.

Yan's research on bridewealth practice in a village in Northern China (Yan 2005) explores how bridewealth has been transformed into a new form of property division within the groom's family and how the bride has replaced her parents as the recipient of bridewealth. He emphasizes the strategies by which individuals exercise their agency to take advantage of the custom that affords them greater autonomy. Yan points out that individual agency has been overlooked by previous studies on bridewealth. However, the practice of bridewealth among the Nuosu tells the other side of the story, which is how the practice becomes the instrument for the Nuosu to realise the ethnic identity which is forged both by the state and their history. The role of the collective in Nuosu's social practice of bridewealth requires a revisit to the classic anthropological theme.

Bridewealth, as a type of marriage payment, has long been an important topic explored by a long list of anthropologists. The two most widely adopted approaches are structural functionalist and feminist. The former contributes to an understanding of wealth distribution within society through comparative studies on marriage exchange systems (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1931, 1934, 1946, 1953, 1970; Radcliff-Brown 1929; Leach 1953, 1954, 1957; Schneider 1953; Goody and Tambiah 1973; Tambiah 1989; Grosz-Ngate 1988 etc.). The feminist approach focuses on gender relations and women's roles as manifested in bridewealth (Ogbu 1978; Fleischer 2004; Cunningham 2009; Grabska 2010; Jolly 2011 etc.).

The structural-functionalist approach seeks to comprehend the full range of marriage payments in a single explanatory scheme. The following two key examples provide a classification of marriage payments into either two types (Goody and Tambiah 1975[1973]) or four types (Spiro 1975). Goody and Tambiah distinguish two

types of marriage payments, bridewealth and dowry. The implications of both pertain to “the structure of social groups, marriage systems, kin relationships, property arrangements and stratification” (1975[1973]: 46). They argue that the forms and meaning of marriage payments stem from the nature of enduring social and economic structures. They suggest that because bridewealth involves the redistribution of property at marriage it must be analysed in the wider context of property relations. Revising arguments of Goody and Tambiah, Spiro offers a cost-benefit scheme to explain the existence of certain types of marriage payment and their meanings. He distinguishes four types of presentations: dowry and dower, which are property brought to a union by the bride's or the groom's family respectively, and bridewealth and groomwealth, tendered by the husband's group to the kin of his wife or vice versa. Spiro's explanation for the existence of various marriage payments suggests that the cost-benefit rationale of marriage to its principals is unbalanced and the type of payment is determined by which of these principals – bride, groom, bride's family, and groom's family – is the most disadvantaged. Spiro's scheme appears to account for the associations made between bridewealth and the suppression of the rights of women. However, as Comaroff (1980: 6) puts it, even if it could be shown that different types of prestation in marriage coexist with the appropriate cost-benefit ratios, this would merely represent a second order datum—a correlation concerning the directionalities of exchange, not an explanation of their forms, value or meaning.

For the purpose of interpreting bridewealth in the context of Nuosu culture, it is worth going over the classic anthropological discussion on bridewealth that prevailed in the 1930s. The debate begins with the dissatisfaction with the idea of bride purchase implied by a then widely used term - bride price. Evans-Pritchard

(1931:36) points out “bride price” emphasises only one of the functions of this wealth, an economic one, to the exclusion of other important social functions; it encourages the layman to think that wives are sold and bought like commodities in European markets. Torday (1929:7) on the other hand considers the payment as the sealing of the contract which is of paramount importance. He sees it is a ceremonial act by which the two groups, families or clans, pledge themselves that their children shall fulfil their duties as husband and wife. Radcliffe-Brown (1929:131) proposes to use the term “indemnity” because it is a payment of compensation to the group that loses a member. He argues marriage involves an infringement of the right that a group of relatives or clansmen have over the members of the group, and the primary function of payments of cattle or other forms of wealth is to compensate the group for this infringement of its rights, this invasion, this disruption of its solidarity. He stresses that though the payment has a definite economic aspect, it also has a juridical, ritual or religious aspect.

Though the discussion centred on the terminology of bridewealth, it indeed is a debate to facilitate explanation of its meanings and functions which can be extended to our understanding of Nuosu bridewealth. The amount and ways of fulfilling the payment are determined by several formal meetings with elaborate ceremony and feasts. The payment is a compensation for the alienation of women from their *cytvi*. When the payment is settled, the contract of marriage is sealed. However, the stability of marriage is not ensured by bridewealth. In fact, in the words of Evans-Pritchard (1946), it is an accumulated recognition of the stability of marriage and the stability of the family is not really a function of economic motives, but of moral and legal norms.

Bridewealth is also a means of establishing, defining and expressing social relations, which has two distinct purposes in the case of the Nuosu. On the one hand, the accumulation of bridewealth within the groom's family and the distribution of it within the bride's family is the recognition of their cognatic kinship. Moreover, it is an acknowledgement of obligation between siblings and affines (Evans-Pritchard 1946:250; Wilson 2018). For example, the payment to the bride's paternal uncles is less an expression of the relationship between a father's brother and his brother's daughter than of that between brother and brother. Likewise, the transfers made to the bride's maternal uncles are less an expression of the relationship between a mother's brother and his sister's daughter than of that between a man and his wife's brother.

On the other hand, the hierarchical social relations are preserved and expressed in bridewealth. In principle, the Nuosu only marry people from the same social rank and from certain *cytvi*. For example, *nzy* and *Nuo* only marry people from their own rank. Similarly, *Quxnuo* only marry people from their own rank and from *cytvi* with a sustained good relationship with them that has lasted for generations. *mgapjie* and *gaxy* are considered as socially inferior and mainly marry people from their ranks, although they do make an effort by paying a larger amount of bridewealth to marry people from a higher class as a way to climb up the social ladder. It is impossible for inferiors to marry nobles; even an occasional sexual encounter would be considered a strict taboo. As told by my informant, in the past (before Liangshan became a part of PRC), couple involved in a tabooed relationship would be either requested to end their lives witnessed by the members of their *cytvi* or, in the best-case scenario, be excluded from their *cytvi* to become social outcasts, no matter how

much bridewealth they were willing to pay. In sum, “reasonable” bridewealth is settled in the marriage between two *cytvi* of same rank and it is an acknowledgement of a fair transaction.

Though social hierarchy was supposed to have been abolished by the socialist reform in the 1950s, however, the ideas pertaining to social hierarchy were indeed preserved under the disguise of kinship. In the past 60 years, the ideas associated with ranks of nobles, such as prestige, fame, honour, have been expanded to accommodate government officials, rich businessmen and other people who are capable of utilising power to establish and maintain patron-client relations. My fieldwork among the Nuosu shows that a higher level of bridewealth is associated with a higher rank or better conditions of families involved. In indigenous terms, *surxsha* (poverty) means at the same time two types of social relations: people without inferiors, and people without *suxyy* (superiors). People without inferiors are those who are unable to collect loyal support among peers, for occasions that involve symbolic competitions. The ability of exaction and the payment of high levels of bridewealth enhance the prestige of the two parties and increase their social influence. Paradoxically, people with inferiors but without superiors are also “poor” and incapable of affording a higher level of bridewealth because they lack the potential to utilise powers at a higher level of social ranking. In other words, it is very likely that poverty is a social condition within the hierarchy of the social structure where cash, cattle, food and shelter constitute a means of defining relations rather than wealth in themselves. Therefore, “poverty” is not an absolute condition that relates people to material property, but a dynamic and multi-dimensional material expression of the relations between people and

individuals, between and within groups and institutions. In other words, poverty is defined and embedded profoundly in their social values.

Just as poverty is culturally defined, it is arguable that “humiliation” arising from state development policies has to be understood in the same way. As noted by Robbins, humiliation is part of the necessary process of economic development, but it has to be understood in an indigenous sense (Robbins 2005). Since the 1950s, in the massive promotion of a “civilised”, “advanced” and “beautiful” life, the Nuosu were taught to yearn for an externally projected ideal life and despise the lives led by their ancestors. However, it seems that humiliation is understood by them in their own way. On the one hand, words like “slavery”, “backward”, “poor” are frequently borrowed by them from mainstream development discourse to describe their own situation. On the other hand, resources and techniques brought by the state and its economic and social development plans are utilised by people to stage extravagant and elaborate ceremonies which they are supposed to despise and abandon. It is a form of development from their point of view and taking place within the framework of their own culture – on a bigger and better scale than ever before (Sahlins 1990:84).

The best testimony of the argument is the inflation in bridewealth. From 1988 to 1989, the total bridewealth paid in 90,200 marriages in Liangshan was 12,720,000 CNY (Feng 1996: 157). Even though the data on the annual per capita net income of rural households in these two years are unavailable, from the official data released in 2004, we can see that the amount of bridewealth is disproportionate to the average annual per capita net income of rural households, which is 2866 CNY. In the last decade, the increase in bridewealth has been so substantial that it often outstrips the savings of households and puts them into debt.

In the analysis of the inflation in marriage payment, the demographic explanation is one of the accounts which cannot be neglected. In Rao's study on the inflation in dowry in India, he argued that a population with declining mortality (or increasing fertility) would result in a surplus of women in the marriage market, which was called the marriage squeeze. He stated that it was the marriage squeeze, in combination with the strong preference for early, universal and monogamous marriage that heightened competition for eligible grooms (Rao 1993: 286) and finally resulted in the widely rising expenses of dowries. He also indicated that the size of the dowry transfer seemed to be affected by hypergamy (ibid: 293). However, Edlund did not agree with Rao's main argument that the sex ratio had a positive impact on dowries (Edlund 2000: 1327). Instead, she argued that if parental bequests increased over the period under question, dowry thus computed would also increase without necessarily indicating a 'rising price of husbands'. (ibid: 1333)

In his response to Edlund, Rao (2000) admitted first of all that the differences in their construction of a consistent series had resulted in significantly different versions of the sex ratio variable (Rao 2000: 1334). Secondly, he argued that the estimates of regressions using aggregate census data with very small household-level samples may not be robust and should be treated with caution. (ibid: 1335). Furthermore, his feedback on the parental bequests mentioned in Edlund's comment suggests that the wealth of the households had not increased significantly. Moreover, contemporary dowries were not necessarily bequests but involuntary payments often coercively extracted by the groom's family (ibid: 1335).

However, neither explanation is satisfying in doing justice to inflated bridewealth among the Nuosu. Though sex ratio imbalance could be an important

factor that affects the level of marriage payment(Jiang 2016; Eklund 2017; Li 2018), it is essentially an insufficient explanation because of its methodological limitations as stated by Rao. Furthermore, Edlund’s argument is not applicable because the increase in bridewealth is not consistent with the increase in household income. One of the most important social force that influences the amount is the desire to emphasise the prestige of the bride’s family (Brown 1932) and, in Nuosu’s case the prestige of the groom’s as well. Marrying in or marrying out a bride with a high level of bridewealth is considered an indicator of the social influence of both parties. As argued by Swancutt (2012: 57)., the Nuosu confer a “priceless” quality on their obligations to attract fame and the fullness of life to their households and lineages.

The thesis borrows from Comaroff’s “dialectical process in a double sense” (Comaroff 1985) and Yan’s stress on individual agency in bridewealth to analyse the inflation in the Nuosu’s bridewealth. It argues that the persistence of the practice of bridewealth and the inflation in bridewealth is the product of the interplay between social structure and human agency, on the one hand, and of the dominant state power and the Nuosu’s subordinated status as “ethnic minority” on the other hand. The inflation in bridewealth corresponds with the inflation of the market economy at a certain level, but to a greater extent it reflects the struggle of the ethnic minority and reveals the internal complexity of the Nuosu which has been largely overlooked.

## **Methodology**

This thesis aims to produce a thick-descriptive ethnography of the Nuosu’s encounter with development through the lens of their practice of bridewealth. This not only entails questioning state-engineered development ideologies and projects and the

problematics of developmentalism, but, more importantly, stresses the Nuosu's local and personal experiences and manifestations of development.

In the past three decades, the anthropological critique of development has been structured around an analysis of development discourse and its relationship to the discipline. Escobar's (1991) approach arose from his findings of how anthropological work on "development" came to be more and more adjusted to the bureaucratic demands of development agencies at the expense of intellectual rigour and self-consciousness. The so-called "applied anthropology" which emerged after the Second World War came to be questioned. Hence, Escobar introduced Michel Foucault's ideas into the study of international development. Escobar called for the dismantling of development discourse as the only way to transcend development's domination and exploitation. Beginning in the 1990s, the critique gained ground rapidly through the work of anthropologists and others. The "development apparatus" itself was taken as an ethnographic object embodying the very ideas and institutions on which "applied or development anthropology" often uncritically relies. However, as Friedman (2006:203) points out, "the currently dominant anthropological critique has some irreconcilable problems that have, twenty years on, led to stagnation in the anthropology of development". He furthers his critique by stating that use of discourse analysis or a top-heavy approach not only presumes there is only one kind of development discourse but also neglects the agency or the experiences and perceptions of those who are meant to benefit from development interventions, i.e. the people who are anthropology's more conventional subjects of study. To further his argument, he proposes to direct the anthropology of development to what anthropology as a discipline is good at fieldwork.

In the light of these two approaches I outlined here, I investigate “development” both as a top-down and bottom-up approach. I emphasise how development is experienced and reinterpreted by the Nuosu and, at the same time, question developmentalism and state-society relations with empirical data gathered from fieldwork. The intention is not to provide a “grassroots” view with populist empathy but rather to explore how development, a key concept playing an important role in nation-building and in steering social change under the name of economic growth, is experienced and interpreted by the subjects of the study. Moreover, the multiple voices hidden within the “Nuosu people”, that is, people of different social ranks, professions, ages, genders, etc., present us with a dynamic and also nuanced picture of local society. The complexity and diversity embedded in the group itself cannot be reduced to a homogenous or collective image located at either end of the state–society binary. With a focus on empirical data, rather than simply relying on discourse analysis, I offer a more grounded critique of developmentalism and modernisation.

### **Research Methods**

In order to do justice to this complex subject matter, I utilised mixed methods to collect data. Four major research methods were adopted in order to meet the stringent demands of sensitive and yet thorough data gathering.

#### **1) Participant Observation**

During the one-year fieldwork in 2013, I spent most of my time in Liangshan, interrupted by occasional travels to Chengdu and Beijing for interviews and archival studies. Follow-up field trips to Liangshan were made in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of being a native Nuosu, I saw myself

and introduced myself as a researcher and as a participant observer. I was required in the fieldwork, by my informants and myself, to constantly reflect upon my own identity. Methodologically speaking, “be as much a native as possible” is considered an indispensable ritual passage to become an anthropologist. As a native Nuosu speaking the language and growing up within the culture, it appears I have advantages in conducting research among them. However, I had to face the predicament of being “too native”.

The biggest problem that I encountered during fieldwork and the process of writing is the extent to which I could detach myself from the Nuosu intellectually. Given that the interpretative paradigm radically departs from the scientific attitude of the positivistic paradigm and the ethnographer is no longer hiding behind the scenes, when in familiar surroundings he or she must remain faithful to the scientific canons to give validity to his or her presence (Schrock 2013). Therefore, it is essential for me to constantly remind myself to establish a difficult but familiar balance: this entails the need to de-familiarise what is a relationship of close instinctive familiarity with the Nuosu, by observing in the role of a researcher rather than being overwhelmed by my identity as a member of the Nuosu group.

The second problem is the extent to which the Nuosu will accept my identity as a researcher. Compared to researchers who are “purely outsiders”, it was more difficult for me to arrange a formal occasion to conduct interviews. Furthermore, sometimes interviews were side-tracked or disrupted because interviewees held that I ought to know what they know, meaning they were reluctant to proffer information. Therefore, it is vital to disclose and emphasise my identity as a researcher rather than

understanding it in order to get closer to the subject of study, a position which is adopted by researchers from “outside”.

The third problem is the gender issue. Gender is a very important variable in collecting data which may be an advantage or disadvantage in terms of the access to data. There were times that I, as “a female researcher”, was regarded by the Nuosu as being as “capable” as a man and I was therefore given the opportunity to attend certain occasions which are ordinarily only open to males. Besides that, it enabled me to explore the practices of gender differences through the principles of inclusion and exclusion of females in certain social events thanks to the exemption I am granted.

## 2) Archival Studies

The study requires a historical perspective and therefore I spent approximately one month to collect materials administered by governmental archival bureaus at different levels, including national, provincial and prefectural. I also defined information I collected on the practice of bridewealth in history as archival sources to situate the practice in a historical process of development. The study of the official archives is now possible thanks to the recent release of the Democratic Reform period (the 1950s) archives pertaining to the Nuosu, especially those kept in the Sichuan Provincial Archive in Chengdu. The purpose of adopting archival studies method corresponds with the call for “dismantling development discourses as it is the only way to transcend development’s domination and exploitation” (Escobar 1991). These primary archival materials – not yet examined by researchers working in English language - provide an unprecedented opportunity to shed fresh light on the development discourse of the PRC at the beginning of its foundation and how the

Nuosu were made to accept their position as at the lowest level in economic development, from which cultural superiority/inferiority simultaneously emerged.

Crucial to my research, the archives firstly provide a detailed view about state development discourse and policies pertaining to the subject of study and, secondly, and more importantly, the archives include first-hand materials relating to the responses of the locals when state development plans were introduced into the region in the 1950s. They are not only authored by officials but also some of them are reports written by Nuosu, some of whom were themselves working for the government and some were requested by officials to file reports on behalf of their communities. Hence, these original historical materials are crucial to enhance the quality of my research.

Besides the historical archives, I was able to get access to all the official reports resulting from the government-initiated investigations into the inflation in bridewealth and the official documents on the regulations of bridewealth, which were released in 2014 and 2015.

### 3) Interviews

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews were used according to different objectives and situations. Unstructured interviews based on a clear plan that is kept in mind all the time are useful for building initial contact with people. In the process of collecting and processing data from interviews, I am aware of how the personal life course experiences may have affected the informants' reconstruction of the past (Elder 1999).

I approached my interviewees in the fieldwork through acquaintance. Based on the data provided and their willingness, key informants were recruited for further

research. During my time in the field sites, I used interviews to interact with people of different generations and social status. They helped me to embed my research topic in the local world rather than take a fragment from it. The materials gathered from conversations, formal and informal, were one of the major resources for an interpretation of Nuosu people's own understanding of their situation. For certain groups such as scholars, key informants, local elites, and bureaucrats, semi-structured interviews were chosen in order to gather information directly related to my research questions. The information yielded by in-depth, open-ended semi-structured interviews were also used to guide and structure further inquiries at the field sites.

I used multi-media to record interviews where permissions were obtained. The voice recorder was used most often at the formal interviews. Ninety percent of the interviews were done in Nuosu *hxop* (the Nuosu's native language) or the mixed usage of Nuosu *hxop* and the Sichuan dialect. For flexibility, I also used note-taking as the other main approach to record my data, especially where time or space was not perfect to conduct a formal and recorded interview. Though I am fluent in Nuosu *hxop*, due to the diversity of the Nuosu's accents, I had consulted my local informants with any ambiguity raised during the process of transcription. Photo or video was taken with permission to present a full picture of the settings of interviews.

#### 4) Questionnaire

I used a questionnaire to generalise some of the key variables in understanding bridewealth in the economic sense. I designed the questionnaire including open questions addressing the income of households, amounts of bridewealth, forms of bridewealth, sources of raising bridewealth, payment instalments and other related

variables. The questionnaire was designed in Chinese and handed out to my informants and interviewees on a random basis. In the case the participants were incompetent in reading Chinese, I gave them structured interviews based on the questionnaire.

It needs to be stressed that the questionnaire is not designed to collect data for a quantitative study. The choice of open questions, instead of close questions, is for getting the most general information about the payment of bridewealth. Therefore, it has certain similarities with structured interviews. However, compared with structured interviews, the questionnaire has helped me to reach a wider group of people more effectively. The information collected was used to support my arguments on the popularity of the practice and the severity of the inflation in bridewealth (See Appendix III for the questionnaire).

### **Ethics**

Because my research involves human participants as informants and interviewees, it has been approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee, University of Oxford. Throughout the duration of the fieldwork and the writing-up stage, ethical issues that might arise have been given my full attention. The acceptance of people at different positions was vital in facilitating the research process and informed consent had been obtained prior to involving participants in the research. I kept my informants, interviewees and other participants informed of my purpose of research. I obtained official permission to access to the archival materials and only used the materials for academic purposes.

I have taken responsibility for protecting the privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of my participants. I asked the interviewees, informants and participants

whether or not they were willing to disclose their information and I have made the subjects anonymous as they requested. I have also made any politically or personally sensitive data anonymous. Moreover, sensitive data will not be disclosed to the public and all other information will similarly be handled in ethically considered ways in future.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Following the introductory chapter, the first chapter centres on the archival studies of the Nuosu's practice of bridewealth and the official discourses on the inflation in bridewealth. The archival sources are defined broadly. They include the publications of findings from the state-sponsored social and historical investigation carried out between 1950s and 1960s; the official propaganda in the campaign against the inflation in bridewealth in the first decade of 2000s; the governmental investigations into the inflation in bridewealth in 2014 and 2015; and the official documents issued on the regulation of the practice of bridewealth, policies yielded from the investigations. Analysis of archival sources also includes the official historical archives of the Nuosu administered by governmental archival bureaus at different levels, including national, provincial and prefectural.

This chapter delineates the trajectory of the Nuosu practice of bridewealth and situates it within the state's discourse of development. The collected materials reveal how the practice of bridewealth survived the social reforms in the 1950s as an ethnic custom but was later recast as an obstacle to social development. This chapter further demonstrates, firstly, that development itself is historically-constituted just as bridewealth is. Secondly, it shows how the tactics of "humiliation" play a role in the process of promoting development. These primary archival materials shed light on the

development discourse of the PRC at the beginning of its foundation and how the Nuosu, in the making of “humiliation”, were located at the lowest level in the economic and social developmental order, from which cultural superiority/inferiority simultaneously emerged, reinterpreted and indigenised.

The second chapter, with a particular focus on ethnographic research, explores if or how humiliation conflicts with the Nuosu values of life. It addresses the most fundamental issue for understanding the inflation in bridewealth in contemporary Liangshan: what bridewealth means to the Nuosu. It offers a thick description of a special gathering for negotiating the amount of bridewealth. I depict a scene from my ethnography to capture a particular way in which a mode of conversation or a course of action is dramatized so that various voices can be expressed. The scene also encapsulates the meanings of life as they unfold across time and space, as it says as much about the present as about the past.

Nevertheless, the representation of the scene should not be read simply as the description of a specific meeting. In fact, to unfold the meanings of the scene, it is necessary to have a comprehensive perspective on other aspects of the Nuosu’s lives which was constructed with the materials I collected through fieldwork. The original dialogues are quoted frequently in the chapter in order to retain the tension which exists within the ethnographical materials themselves. The tension reveals a space to investigate the social realities of development, that is “the variants of development”. The ethnographic description offers the opportunity to hear the various voices that evolve in the interpretation and implementation of development. The materials on the negotiation of bridewealth show the Nuosu’s self-justifications of their values

through the practice of bridewealth, their responses to the state development projects, their self-critiques and also their critiques of social realities.

The third chapter discusses the arguments arising from the second chapter in further depth with enriched ethnographic data on the reflections on the practice of bridewealth. The materials of the chapter are drawn from my interviews with twenty *ndepggup* in different counties and other data I gathered from the participant observations and interviews with people of different status during the fieldwork. As the “law professionals” and the enforcers of the Nuosu’s value and morality, *ndepggup* maintain a “semi-detached” perspective on the Nuosu. Based on *ndepggup*’s reflections upon the practice of bridewealth and their culture and society, the chapter argues that the impetus for the inflation in bridewealth arises from the complex overlay of new and evolving bureaucratic channels of class formation and existing kinship and traditional hierarchies. These evolving dynamics of class formation have generated new pressures on people to demonstrate their respectability through the payment of bridewealth. Meanwhile, the practice of bridewealth among the Nuosu is not easily constrained or capped because the practice is integral to be an authentic and respectable Nuosu.

The chapter reveals how the Nuosu cope with the “humiliation” which was constructed by the process of institutionalising ethnic identities and attacks against the practice of bridewealth in the state-engineered development projects. The Nuosu’s coping system for countering this humiliation was to legitimise their practices by synthesising the dual legal systems, state laws and “customary laws”. The primordial and institutionalised ethnic identity of the Nuosu is the justification of the practice of bridewealth. It is the realisation of the value of being a “real” Nuosu, whose

marriage has to be a “good match” validated by bridewealth. The slave-owned hierarchical *cytvi* society has transformed into the superimposition of bureaucracy on traditional hierarchies in which the internal complexity is further deepened by the Nuosu’s incorporation into the state. The value of bridewealth for them is, firstly, a way of differentiating them from others. The Nuosu’s ethnic identity is recorded by their generational history, reinforced by the state’s institutionalisation of *minzu* and realised in their ideal and practical ways of living a decent life as a Nuosu. The Nuosu’s bridewealth is an arena where the values of being a Nuosu and being a citizen of the state are contested, reflected in two sets of ideas regarding “legitimacy”. From the internal complexity revealed by the inflation in bridewealth, we see the overstated tradition, wider in the scope and higher in the numbers. However, we have seen a new kind of authority arises in the *ndepggup*’s reflections on the reasons for the inflation in bridewealth. The revealed internal complexity, the new system whereby bureaucracy is superimposed on traditional hierarchies and kinship, presents us a comprehensive picture of how people of different status manipulate the sources of being a “traditional” Nuosu and a Nuosu has access to engage with the state, economically or politically.

A final chapter concludes the thesis, highlighting and developing in more depth the statements drawn from the ethnographic materials. It discusses firstly, the trajectory of bridewealth in the state discourse of development, from “ethnic custom” to “obstacle to social development”, shows the relationship between “humiliation” and development and the fluidity or the history of the ideas of development. Secondly, inflation in the economic value of brides demonstrates how the value of being Nuosu keeps reconstructing and refashioning itself. Thirdly, the archival studies

on the discourses of bridewealth and the internal complexity revealed in the explanation of the inflation provide a multi-angled perspective on development, particularly on the execution of the ideas and policies of development. The chapter also includes the significance of the research and the limits and the potentials of future research.

## **Chapter One     Archival Studies on the Nuosu's bridewealth**

This chapter delineates the historical trajectory of the Nuosu" practice of bridewealth and situates it within the state's discourse of development and official critique of on-going inflation in bridewealth. In the archival sources I collected, the practice of bridewealth had become the focal point of governance of the Chinese state during three distinct periods, the 1950s and 1960s, the early 2000s, and around 2014. The chapter discusses bridewealth in each of these three periods in detail by chronological order, highlighting the essentialisation of the practice of bridewealth as the Nuosu's custom and the evidence of the recirculation of the policies and discourses. The chapter serves to unpack the power relations evolving around bridewealth from a historical perspective by comparing the political imperatives for regulating the practice of bridewealth in different periods while looking at the continuities and changes in the practice.

The sources used in the chapter include reports of findings from the state-sponsored social and historical investigations carried out between the 1950s and 1960s; the official propaganda used in the campaign against the inflation in bridewealth during the first decade of 2000s; reports of government investigations into the inflation in bridewealth in 2014 and 2015; and official documents issued on the regulation of the practice of bridewealth, as well as policies arising from various other official investigations. The sources also include the official historical archives of the Nuosu administered by governmental archival bureaus at different levels,

including national, provincial and prefectural. The information from the archival sources is complemented with the memories that my interviewees recalled during fieldwork.

### **Bridewealth in the Early years of the Socialist Reform**

The most comprehensive records of Nuosu societies during the first half of the twentieth century can be found in the reports arising from social investigations conducted during the 1950s and the 1960s. “The Social and Historical Investigations” was an ambitious project co-organised by the National People’s Congress, Institute of Ethnology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Minzu University of China and many other institutions. Numerous research reports, articles and monographs based on the results of the investigations, amounting to one billion Chinese characters, has been made available to the public since the 1980s (Di and Zhang 1999: 45).

The investigations, backed by state funding and supported by governmental offices at different levels, underpinned the foundation of the state’s project of ethnic classification. The motivation of the project was to get to know more about the “exotic” peoples as part of imposing and consolidating state power over these populations and positioning them within “a unified multi-ethnic country”. Even though the project was later criticised for the ideological influence of socialist evolutionism and class struggle and the problems entailed in constructivism (Harrel 1995; Schein 2000), the academic value of the reports produced from the investigations is worthy of rediscovery.

I use the reports as data for analysis because they have undeniable value for recording the lives of people in that historical period. The initiation was inspired by personal communications with the late Professor Li Shaoming (1933-2009) in the 2000s. Li was a professor of ethnology who participated in the investigations in the

Sichuan area as a research assistant at a very young age. He told me the authors of the report were mostly qualified scholars in linguistics, history, ethnology, anthropology and other related disciplines. This generation of scholars formed the foundation of social sciences in China today (Wang 1997). Li added that besides of the leaders of the research teams who were entitled to authorise the reports, the investigations also had motivated many other people to gather ethnographic data, including research assistants with relevant educational backgrounds, and local people acting as informants and interpreters. In his words, the investigation made every effort in order to gather “most comprehensive” and “real” materials on the cultures and societies of the people of different ethnic origins. Since the investigations formed a part of the state’s project of ethnic classification, the research activities were facilitated in every possible aspect with the support from the central and local governments. Though the way of “knowing” people has been shaped by the people who want to “know” (Said 1978) and the writing of culture has been shaped in a very similar way (Clifford and Marcus 1986), the value of reports can be rediscovered if they are interpreted from an ethnographic perspective.

The reports written on the Nuosu people in Liangshan almost covered every aspect of the Nuosu’s lives: genealogical history, ecological conditions, a hierarchical social system, the institution of *cytvi*, marriage and family. They also included investigations into the modes of production and the ownership of the land. In these reports, marriage either appeared as a separate theme for discussion, or it was referred to under other themes such as the institution of the social system, *cytvi*, and family. The main principles of marriage were summarised in these reports with great consistency covering different areas across Liangshan. For example, the reports

recorded that the basic rules of marriage include endogamy (*yizu neihun* 彝族内婚), *cytvi* exogamy (*jiazhi waihun* 家支外婚), and rank endogamy (*dengji neihun* 等级内婚) (1985: 169; 1987b). At the same time, though, the reports also revealed significant differences both in the amount paid for bridewealth and in freedom of marriage within Nuosu society.

As most of the aspects of the Nuosu's lives were constructed hierarchically, marriage was considered by the reports' authors to be one of the most significant social practices through which people of different ranks were differentiated. As recorded in the report about the Nuosu living in Bapu of Meigu county by a researcher team on the Nuosu society (1987a: 120), despite similarities in the wedding ceremonies for nobles and commoners, a significant difference was manifest in the amount of bridewealth. At the time of the investigation, which was during the 1950s and the early 1960s, bridewealth for commoners varied from seven to sixty silver ingots, while in the case of nobles, bridewealth could range from nine to one thousand silver ingots. However, bridewealth was not paid in the marriage of slaves. *Gaxy*, the slave living with their owners, were even deprived of the right of choosing or arranging their marriages and they were forced to marry at their owners' will.

The reports showed that bridewealth was essentially a practice associated with people of higher ranks; it provides us with another critical perspective on the Nuosu's marriage, the freedom of marriage. The freedom to which I refer here does not mean the freedom at the individual level, but the freedom that people of different ranks as a group have in arranging their own marriages. Specifically, it relates to two questions: who has the authority over the establishment of marriage and what change

can be made in the rank status of an individual by the establishment of the marital relationship.

As illustrated in the reports, nobles had the right to choose their marriage partners, and they strictly observed the rule of marrying people from the same rank. Commoners had relative freedom in arranging their marriages, but specific gift and tribute had to be paid to their nobles. However, slaves did not have any freedom. For example, one of the reports recorded that in Lanba of Zhaojue county (1987a: 319), the noble would slaughter a pig, the simplest ritual for a wedding, to arrange a marriage for their slaves irrespective of whether or not they were willing. Unlike commoners, slaves were not required to return any gift. Moreover, bridewealth was not involved in the marriage. After the wedding, *gaxy* who used to live with their nobles became *mgapjie*, referring to slaves who enjoy more freedom and live in their own house offered to them by their owners. The price for this privilege was that at least one of their children would either become *gaxy* of the noble or be sold to other nobles<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the couple were required to serve their owners until they had enough money to redeem themselves. This was a usual route for slaves to become commoners. However it was difficult to fulfil the economic requirements for the redemption, it was much more challenging to obtain permission for redemption from the owners.

Even though people of different ranks had opportunities to earn money because of the opium growing in the region, the mobility of ranks nevertheless remained stable because of the tight control that nobles exercised over their people

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<sup>1</sup> See 1963 *Social Investigation of the Nuosu Area in Xichang Special District*, report from the Social and Historical Research Team of Institute of Ethnic Studies, China Academy of Science.

in the first half of the twentieth century (1985: 73). Economic conditions played a significant role in the ascending or descending of one's rank, but it was not sufficient. The permission from one's noble was a prerequisite. The mobility of social ranks was much less fluid than the ranks facilitated by changes in economic condition (1985: 74).

The official reports paid foremost attention to class divisions partially because it carried the revolutionary state's imperative of needing to diagnose the society as "backward" and class-ridden in order to prescribe the remedy of socialism. It is also because the categorisation of classes during the early years of "democratic reform" (the socialist reform carried out in Liangshan and many other ethnic areas) at a certain level corresponded with the Nuosu's categorisation of people. Firstly, the reports observed that bridewealth was practised by the Nuosu of higher ranks who were the targets of class struggle, whose money, land, property and labour were redistributed by the reform. Secondly, criticisms of bridewealth as the medium for "selling and buying marriage" (*maimai hunyin* 买卖婚姻) informed the making and implementation of the state's policies. Even though the statement of "selling and buying marriage" was rarely raised in the reports of the investigations, it was common in documents articulating and promoting the ideas and policies of the reform to the people. In this way, bridewealth was transvalued as a tool that deprived people of individual freedom. However, as shown in the reports, bridewealth was not involved in the marriages of the lower ranks. Therefore, the critique of "selling and buying marriage" was often borrowed in the official discourse to justify state criticism of slavery in other circumstances for example where the marriage was arranged against individuals' will.

As the official investigations and reports reified bridewealth as the practice associated with higher ranks (or exploiting classes in the socialist rhetoric) and as associated with the deprivation of individual freedom, bridewealth was banned by the government in its first attempt at marriage reform in the 1960s. This ban aimed at “cleansing the remnant of slavery in a revolutionary way” but the actions took the form of “policies” rather than laws (Zhang and Hu 2001: 24), an approach suggesting a less aggressive way of enforcement. Unlike the later years when the state had successfully penetrated Nuosu society, the Nuosu were skeptical about both the efficiency and durability of the new state and the security of their future. However, the reform against bridewealth indeed gave some members of the Nuosu, though not many, a new option for freeing themselves from social constraints and realising their individuality. It facilitated people to escape the control of *Cytvi* over marriage to some extent. For example, some young Nuosu chose to work for the government to escape from forced marriages (Ma 2001: 38). Their new identities, as agents of the government, required them to abide by the government policies and offered them a sufficient excuse to refuse marriages that were consolidated by bridewealth or marriages arranged by their *cytvi*.

One of the main goals of socialist reform was to eliminate class differentiation between people. As discussed above, bridewealth was a significant way to differentiate people in terms of if bridewealth was involved in the marriage and how much bridewealth was exacted. Thus, it was regulated immediately after the establishment of the local communist government because it was a concrete and tangible practice that could be controlled compared to the other practices that the Nuosu people used to define and differentiate themselves. For example, genealogical

histories that embody the names of *cytvi* persisted because they are embedded in all the aspects of the Nuosu's everyday life.

Precisely, it is because of the persistence of *cytvi* and because everyone belongs to a *cytvi* that the Nuosu continued to value the hierarchical differences enshrined in the *cytvi* as part of valuing the practices associated with living a dignified life. This endurance of genealogical histories both prompted people to imitate the imagined lifestyle of nobles that commoners used to envy and also led to a redefinition of a "noble" life in the circumstances where the imposed social structure (the rankings within the governmental administration; the classes categorised according to the standards of socialist reform; economic differences created by new money) overlapped with the original social structure of the Nuosu. The overlapping of structures will be discussed in further depth in chapter three which analyses the inflation in bridewealth in contemporary Liangshan.

The prohibition of bridewealth worked to a certain extent from the beginning of the socialist reform period to the 1980s, the early years of the economic reform. As argued by Jiang (2008: 239-240), it was the collectivisation movement during the period and the tight control of the state administration in different areas that resulted in evenly low income and restrictions on possibilities disposing of individual possessions, including resources that one could distribute as bridewealth. However, my informants who are now in their seventies told me that during that high socialist period some Nuosu, not very few, managed to practice bridewealth in secret, even as the amount was significantly reduced.

The unexpected result of the reduction in the amount of bridewealth during this time was the highlighted symbolic meaning of the practice. The limited economic

conditions did not become the obstacle of practising bridewealth. Instead, because of the reduction in the amount, bridewealth became a much less expensive and more inclusive practice that more people were able to choose and thereby participate in their desired version of a dignified life. As shown in the report of the local government written in 1976, taking Zhaojue county as an example, marriage with bridewealth accounted for 93.6% of the marriages in the area since the democratic reform.<sup>1</sup> The practice was inverted as a practice of the majority of the Nuosu; it is no longer a practice only associated with nobles.

To sum up, on the one hand, during the democratic reform in the 1950s and 1960s, in the social reform initiated by the state to domesticate the “exotic people” came to reify bridewealth as an ethnic custom and associated it with the exploiting classes and the deprivation of individual freedom. On the other hand, bridewealth survived from the reform with a reduced economic value but heightened symbolic meaning. The hierarchical differentiation of people is internal to the Nuosu society, but it had to be abolished in the name of socialist reform. Hence, bridewealth became a ready symbolic site that could accommodate the besieged values of being a Nuosu; more importantly, it offered the opportunity of being a “dignified” Nuosu, something which has been seized and built upon by the Nuosu of the 2000s.

The authority exercised by the class of nobles over marriage was also undermined during the democratic reform period. Nobles no longer had the right to

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<sup>1</sup> The data came from the local governmental report issued in 1976 and titled *the Suggestive Report on the Implementation of 'the Marital Laws of PRC and the reform of the Old Yi Marriage Institution*. It was quoted in Zhang Haiyang and Hu Yingzi, 2001, On Liangshan Ethnic Yi's Marriage Reform, *Journal of the Central University of Nationalities*, Vol.28: No. 4, p26.

choose marriage partners for people of lower ranks and commoners were exempted from paying tribute to nobles who were considered their patrons. During the past three decades, a new mode of authority over marriage gradually evolved which combined the control of the state and the essentialisation of constraints within the Nuosu culture itself. I shall explore this development in the following discussion on the official discourse of the inflation in bridewealth.

### **Bridewealth and its inflation since the 2000s**

As mentioned in the introduction, bridewealth became the target of social reform once again in the early 2000s. By the 2000s every corner of China had been influenced by the economic reforms which started in 1979 and the positive side of the economic development was repeatedly emphasised in the state's administrative discourses and practices. The most widely promoted state-initiated development project in Liangshan in the 2000s was the Healthy and Civilised New Life Movement. The Movement aimed at enforcing a better way to live by changing the Nuosu fundamentally. If the targets of the democratic reform in the 1950s and the 1960s overlapped with the Nuosu's internal struggles with class differentiation, the Movement took a further step in criticising the Nuosu's culture and society as a whole. The Nuosu thus became homogenised as a group of "unhygienic and uncivilised" people in desperate need of changing in order to achieve a higher level of social and economic development.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Movement was first advocated by Liu Qibao, the then Secretary of Sichuan Province, following a number of his official visits to Liangshan. Using the standard official rhetoric, he claimed that in order to achieve a higher level of social development, the Nuosu have to "change [their] customs and be guided to build up the awareness of hygiene, eradicate bad living habits, abandon

backwardness, pursue advancement, and strive for a modern and civilised lifestyle” (Long and Luo 2011). The project was endorsed in the course of subsequent official visits from the central government, including Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and Vice Prime Minister Hui Liangyu. Starting with donating stools to the Nuosu living in rural areas, the designers of the movement believed that these small stools would change the Nuosu’s “unhygienic” and “uncivilised” habit of sitting on the ground and serve as leverage for the grand project of changing the Nuosu's traditional ideas and customs, seen as the roots of their poverty and the obstacles that have hindered their social and economic development.

The movement’s critique of the “uncivilised” targeted many of the Nuosu’s practices, including the excessive expenses on bridewealth. The expenses were considered as “irrational” considering that the amount of bridewealth was disproportionate to the income of the families and the level of local economic development. The accusation of “irrationality” was rooted in the neoclassical idea of the “rational economic individual” which was developed from the 1960s worldwide and was imported to China in the late 1970s. The “economic rationality” theme assumes a reasonable allocation of income to expenses on different aspects of life, e.g., education, medical care, living cost, and housing. In the campaign against the inflation in bridewealth, the irrationality was associated with the backwardness of the Nuosu’s culture and society and was tied up with the ethnicity of the Nuosu.

The amount that Nuosu people spend on bridewealth is so substantial that it is described by official commentators as “backward” and “irrational”, thus “unnecessary”. Various official propaganda materials of the campaign existed to change Nuosu ideas and practices; their common message said that in order to

achieve a higher level of economic and social development, the people had to abandon these practices. According to *Liangshan Daily News* (Long and Luo 2011), the significant instrument of the propaganda of the project, 95% of the Nuosu living in Liangshan had at least “heard” of the movement - the astonishing breadth of the propaganda for this movement had covered more than 2,000 public gatherings, 3,271 meetings for mobilising participants, about 6,000 slogans posted in public places, the distribution of 900,000 copies of propaganda materials, and the publication of 2,730 relevant articles in newspapers. The massive propaganda campaign espoused the argument that the Nuosu, when compared with the “civilised” or “modern” standards promoted by the state, are a group of people who are unhygienic and, furthermore, not only do they not know how to make money, they also have no idea about how to spend money “appropriately”.

The campaign against excessive bridewealth in this period of time formed a part of the government’s mission of poverty alleviation. The poverty issue in ethnic areas is often tied with the ethnicity of the people in the official discourse in which “cultural” reasons are attributed to the origin of poverty. Development projects designed in that sense start with finding fault in the “culture” of the targets and follow with the motivation of changing the culture as the solution. Given the effort that the government put into the campaign against the excessive bridewealth, the level of inflation was not reduced substantially in the years following the movement. It has become a severe “social problem”, as phrased in the official discourse, which hinders the government plans for local social and economic development as well as raises more and more complaints from the Nuosu themselves.

In the 2010s, the local government was propelled to organise a thorough investigation of the issue across different counties of Liangshan. The purpose of the investigation was to have a more unobstructed view of inflation and provide suggestions for policymaking on the local social and economic development. It was led by the Institute of Ethnic Studies, the research centre subordinate to the local Committee of Ethnic Affairs. The Committee of Ethnic Affairs is the state institution to settle affairs related to ethnic minorities. It is replicated at different levels of the state administration, e.g. state, provincial, prefectural. Some of the staff working at the Research Centre have academic training in linguistics, ethnology, culture/social studies, and other related disciplines, but more of them are the self-trained scholars who have an enduring and active research record on the Nuosu's culture and society. As the Centre is subordinate to the administration of the government, one of its principal missions is to provide a thorough investigation and research base for policymaking when needed.

Owing to its political affiliations, the investigation had support from the governments of different counties, which greatly facilitated the research team's access when collecting materials on a large scale. In the fourteen counties the research team visited, they organised workshops with the delegates of the local governments and gathered data on bridewealth in various forms, such as interviews and questionnaires. The reports arising from the investigation covered three main aspects: quantitative data demonstrating inflation in bridewealth, popular views on the increase in bridewealth, and policy suggestions.

In one of the reports (2014 a) that I obtained through personal contact, later published in the local academic journal *Liangshan Ethnic Studies*, two statistical tables

are provided to show the increase in bridewealth over the past three decades (See Appendix IV F1) and the extreme case of bridewealth (See Appendix IV F2). To compare, the data on local income level is provided in Appendix IV F3. According to the report submitted to the local government as the formal suggestions from the research team<sup>1</sup>, they used both traditional survey and internet platform to collect the Nuosu's attitude towards the inflation in bridewealth. They stated that 8,600 people participated in the traditional survey and 12,000 people voted for a need to reducing inflation in bridewealth through internet platforms. Based on their comprehensive data, the research team concluded that inflation in bridewealth should be regulated, but bridewealth should not be banned.

The research reports proved the severity of inflation using quantitative data covering more than ten counties under the administration of the prefectural government. They also showed that bridewealth had been practised widely among the Nuosu regardless of their original social origins, geographical origins, and professions. However, in defence of the Nuosu the reports pointed out that bridewealth was practised by people of other ethnic origins, and so the problematisation of bridewealth should not be associated with the ethnicity. The reports argued that **“the rule of Yi should be returned to Yi”** (2014a: 15) and emphasised that regulations should be imposed on the amount of bridewealth to ensure that the amounts stay within the “rational”, “affordable” and “ceremonial” zone.

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<sup>1</sup> See 2014b, *The Report on the Excessive Expenditures of Weddings and Funerals and Wasteful Spending in Liangshan*. [The report was obtained in its unpublished form through personal contact.]

In response to the outcomings of the investigation, the Office of Prefectural Government of Liangshan issued the “red-headed” file<sup>1</sup> (*hongtou wenjian* 红头文件) to all the institutions under its administration in June of 2015. The “red-headed” title indicates the highest formality in terms of issuing regulations in the context of Chinese state administration. The file advocated for “changing the custom of excessive spendings” and targeted the amount of bridewealth instead of the practice itself. The file required the governments of all the counties under its administration to make detailed and specific plans in the implementation of the *Regulations*. To follow up, the Prefectural Organisation Department of CCP issued another “red-headed” file two months later. It urged all the members of CCP<sup>2</sup> to abide by the *Regulations* and stipulated that any violation would lead to failures in career promotion.

Besides of bridewealth, the *Regulations* also defined some other categories of expenditure as “excessive”, including cash gifts at weddings and funerals (*linjin* 礼金), cattle slaughtered at funerals. It also prohibited government officials from inviting non-relative guests to family events and from receiving cash or gifts for celebrations such as birthday, opening ceremony, progress in study or career, and the like.

Unlike the situation before the 1960s when bridewealth was a practice exclusive to some of the Nuosu, every Nuosu now has won the right to have a marriage consummated with bridewealth. Bridewealth has now become practised by more and more Nuosu regardless of their traditional social ranks, and the amount has been increased at an incredible level, evident by not only in the materials I gathered in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Regulations on Containing on the Excessive Expenditures of Weddings and Funerals and Wasteful Spending*, by the Prefectural Committee of CCP and the People’s Prefectural Government [the file was obtained through personal contact]

<sup>2</sup> More than 90% of people working for the governments are members of CCP.

fieldwork but also reflected in the efforts that the government has made to regulate the practice. Essentially, the competition in the level of payment has become a significant tool to enhance the prestige of the families and the *cytvi* to which they belong, which fulfils the Nuosu's pursuit of living a noble life, a dignified life.

In the comparison between the official discourses and policymakings on how to regulate bridewealth in different periods, there are three noteworthy points. Firstly, we can see the accusation of "selling and buying marriage" has been questioned, if not denied. The report submitted to the government stated that there remained two "unsolved puzzles", a tactful way on the part of the authors of the report to raise disagreement with the previous policies. The first "unsolved puzzle" raised by the authors is whether bridewealth was simply a way to "sell and buy" brides. The report recorded the contradictory attitude towards the practice from the perspectives of the female interviewees. Some women opposed bridewealth because they were unwilling to be treated as commodities. They argued that a large amount of bridewealth meant that the groom's family had bought out the bride from her family which increase the bride's risk of being maltreated by the groom's family in future. Other women voted for bridewealth because they considered it to be the most straightforward way to pay tribute to their family origins and to show the appreciation of them individually. They also stressed that a large amount of bridewealth shows that the involved families are "responsible" and "serious", thus bridewealth would consolidate the marriage.

The second argument I draw from the formation of policy on regulating bridewealth is that the Nuosu's counter-measures to "humiliation" brought to them by the state's social and development projects are best exemplified in the way of how they justify their practice. The reports produced by the official investigation in the

2000s and my own interviews with informants indicate that “*Yizu xiguan*” (彝族习惯 the Nuosu’s customs) featured in official discourse has been essentialised by the Nuosu as a category demanding special adjustment instead of across-the-board prohibition. In reality, though, the identity of “Yizu” or the Nuosu was reified by the state’s project of ethnic classification in the 1950s and the various state institutions that administer the identities of its people [see Chapter Three for further discussion]. The category of “*yizu xiguan*” accommodates the practices that can be justified as “Nuosu” from the Nuosu’s perspective. Therefore, in the Nuosu’s justification, bridewealth as a Nuosu custom deserves respect and preservation, but the amount needs to be prescribed.

By problematising the amount instead of the practice and without setting a specific limit on the amount, the policy, in fact, retains a discursive space for the Nuosu and the state to negotiate between policymaking and implementation. My fieldwork suggests that a given amount to be disseminated to the public, which most of the time is higher than the actual amount paid, is determined at the bridewealth negotiation meeting. The difference in the amount is not only because bridewealth will be divided into different parts and paid at separate occasions and parts of the bridewealth will be waived as the token of gratitude by the bride’s family. It is also because, more importantly, “bragging” about the amount will benefit both families in terms of establishing their prestige, which the Nuosu value the most in every aspect of their lives. Therefore, as many of my informants told me during fieldwork, one can easily get away for any charges of having violated Party-state proscriptions against paying a large amount of bridewealth by denying the amount of bridewealth and claiming it as “simply gossip”. Moreover, the form of “policy” or “regulation” lacks the power to

enforce laws in a Chinese context. Also, as will be discussed in the next two chapters, the implementation of state laws leave much space for negotiation when it comes to Nuosu cases.

Thirdly, I found that new interconnected and overlapping authorities have been established in the process of regulating bridewealth. The abolishment of original social ranks in the 1950s has not meant the disintegration of hierarchies. The local government was established by re-positioning the “powerful” Nuosu, most of whom were noble or people playing the role of leaders in big *cytvi*. The ranks of people were preserved in the institutional structure of the government. After generations of replicating and reproducing the juxtaposed structures, the original social ranks and social life were redefined and revived by the government administrative structures. It is best exemplified by the revived “*cytvi* activities” in the past two decades. Many *cytvi*, especially those with more members, are organised by their specific *cytvi* committee that replicates the structure of the government with offices of propaganda, communication, finance and the like. Nominated leaders work in different branches of the committees. In that mode, the members of *cytvi* are mobilised and managed in a more effective way on a larger scale, and they are more motivated and more responsible for safeguarding the *cytvi*’s prestige.

## **Conclusion**

The state as discussed in the chapter does not exist as “an a priori conceptual or empirical object” (Sharma and Gupta, 2006; Mitchell, 1999). Instead, in the set of a relational set of practices, investigating, writing, producing and circulating documents, as described in this chapter, the state comes into being (Sneath 2007; Chatterji and Mehta 2007; Mathur 2015). The chapter showed how the legibility of state regulations

and laws (Das 2004) had been achieved through the production and circulation of official documents. However, the innate impossibility of implementing the regulations and laws lies in the process of policymaking which extracts a segment of society and makes an incommensurable comparison. In the Nuosu's case, it means comparing the value of being an "authentic" Nuosu to the value of modern economic "rationality", which would lead to the failure of the similar policies. The ways in which the Nuosu translate the regulations and laws will be discussed in the next two chapters using ethnographic materials.

As discussed, the practice of bridewealth survived the socialist reform in the 1950s with a reduced economic value but heightened symbolic meanings. It became a symbolic site for accommodating the besieged values of being a Nuosu. More importantly, because bridewealth became less expensive and exclusive, the Nuosu of different ranks were offered the opportunity to be a dignified Nuosu, verified by having a marriage consummated by bridewealth. The dismantling of the slave-owning social structure did not wipe out the Nuosu's internal aspiration for prestige. Instead, it provided more resources and opportunities to achieve this objective. The pursuit of social status as a dignified Nuosu was refuelled by the enriched resources available for paying bridewealth since the economic reform.

After the "traditional" authority that nobles held over marriage disintegrated in the course of the democratic reform, nobles were not the authorities anymore, or to be specific, they were no longer the unique form of authority. This was because of the penetration of the central administration into the Liangshan area and the assimilation of the local authorities into the system of state administration. The original local authority of nobles over marriage was repackaged and overlapped with

the government bureaucracy. However, it needs noting that the reconstruction of authority was based on the Nuosu's original sense of authority and the redistribution of state resources. As mentioned previously, the identity of nobles was not essentially associated with the possession of land, money or any form of property. Given the resources that the new rich possessed, it does not guarantee them a shortcut to becoming "noble" or respected. The superimposition of government bureaucracy on the local social ranks and kinship, or the redefinition and reinterpretation of the "nobleness", is the critical perspective by which to understand the status quo of Liangshan.

During the policymaking for the purpose of poverty alleviation in the 2010s, bridewealth was justified as a Nuosu custom which needed to be regulated, instead of abandoned completely, given the severe inflation in the amount. By problematising the amount instead of the practice and without setting a specific limit on the amount in the regulations issued by the local government, space for negotiation was reserved between the policymaking and the implementation of the policies. The discursive space exhibits the creativity and complexity of how the Nuosu counteracts the "humiliation" imposed on their culture by state developmental campaigns and discourse, and how they reinstate their values of being not only a Nuosu, but also a dignified Nuosu.

This chapter has demonstrated that development itself is historically-constituted just as is the custom of bridewealth. The policymaking, whether in the 1960s or in the 2000s, showed how the strategy of "humiliation" played a role in the process of promoting social development. The dominance of the author of "humiliation" – the Chinese state and its foot-soldiers, such as members of think tanks,

its policy-makers and its propagandists - was based on two factors: the state's dominant role, on the one hand, established through the administration of the state which is realised in creating a series of ideological binaries, such as advanced and backward, rational and irrational, modern and primitive, majority and minority, and the like; on the other hand, promotion of the blueprint of a bright future that forms a part of the Nuosu's desires.

The marital relationship embodied in a specific amount of bridewealth is crucial in Nuosu's redefinition of the values of a decent life. For the Nuosu, the significance of bridewealth is not only associated with the pursuit of living like a noble and countering humiliation of the biological origins. It is also related to a deliberative coping system in facing humiliation accompanied by developmentalism. The author of the "humiliation" is the intangible aggregate that not only wraps up the institution of the state, the agent of the government, the promoter and the implementer of development projects, among others. The Nuosu may be considered complicit in the authorship in the sense of how they reinterpret and counter an overriding collective burden of humiliation. How the Nuosu justify their practice of bridewealth in contemporary Liangshan will be discussed with ethnographic materials in the next chapter. It reveals much complexity in how people of different status reinterpret "humiliation" and, negotiate and reinstate Nuosu identity, that is, through their values of living as "authentic" and "dignified" Nuosu.

## Chapter 2 The Negotiation on Bridewealth

This chapter, with a focus on ethnographic research, shows how the Nuosu justify their practice of the “bad” and “backward” custom of bridewealth. It examines the tension between the humiliation of the stereotyped ethnic image and the persistent Nuosu values. It offers a thick description of a special gathering for negotiating the amount of bridewealth and addresses the most fundamental issue for understanding the inflation in bridewealth in contemporary Liangshan: what bridewealth means to the Nuosu. I depict a scene from my ethnography to capture a particular way in which a mode of conversation or a course of action is dramatised so that various voices can be expressed (Das, 2010). The scene also encapsulates the meanings of life as they unfold across time and space, as it says as much about the present as about the past.

This chapter examines how “good marriage” is culturally constructed in the Nuosu setting. It explores how they imagine the things they consider to be good; what and how much they invest in or in what ways they realise the good and achieve fulfilment in their lives. As I mentioned in the introduction, for the Nuosu, “to strive” for a good life means struggling with social conditions which are defined by a greater political framework. In such conditions, people need to live with their ethnic identity, which is not only biologically defined but is also politically imposed on them. This entails them struggling with the humiliating stereotype of ethnic minorities which recur in mainstream Han Chinese official and popular media discourse. Instead of depreciating their values as an outcome of humiliation inflicted on them in the process

of development, the Nuosu's case reveals much complexity in how people reinterpret the humiliation and, negotiate and reinstate it through their own values. At the same time, though, the desires for values expressive of the good life always exist as an ideal. These desires are attached as much as detached from everyday life because of the constraints on realising them. The gap or the grey area between the reality and the ideal, or how people show flexibility in negotiating these spaces, is what the chapter aims to explore.

### **The Setting**

After spending two months wandering around several counties in Liangshan conducting interviews and observations about bridewealth, I finally had the opportunity to attend a meeting where participants carried out negotiations over the amount of bridewealth. The chance was rare not only because of the problem of timing but also because guests are generally not invited to the event. Compared to the engagement ceremony and the wedding, the bridewealth negotiation gathering is much more private. This is because the negotiation may lead to failure, a result that both families are unwilling to reveal to a larger group of people. Moreover, the gathering is limited to male participants. Even female relatives are not welcomed on occasion. Fortunately, though, one of my informants, Zziti, offered me generous help and permitted me to attend the meeting for negotiating his daughter's bridewealth. To make this happen, he had to ask his wife and daughter to come as my companions.

In the beginning, I worried to what extent our appearance would affect the process and result of negotiation. However, my worry was eased somewhat after I found that we were seated in the very corner of the room. We did not have any chance at all to talk with those who were engaged in the negotiation, and they never had a

chance to say a word to us either. However, even though bridewealth is a matter for men to negotiate, it would be misleading to think the mother and the daughter did not have a right to speak on the matter. In fact, their silence at the meeting should be considered more as a ritual rather than a deprivation of the right to speak. After the negotiation, the bride told me how her mother and herself had been involved in determining the amount they asked for (see page 78).

To attend the meeting, the groom-to-be's family had to travel seven hours by car from Meigu County to Xichang, the capital city of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. The steep mountain roads make the distance of 167 kilometres between Meigu and Xichang take longer than one would imagine. Meigu lies in the northeast of Liangshan and remains one of its remotest counties. The remoteness suggests not only the difficulty of geographical accessibility but also the distance from the "modern" and "sinicised" or "modern" lifestyles, even when compared to Xichang, which itself is categorised as a "remote" and "ethnic" area on the map of the national social and economic development landscape. Meigu has a population of 180,000, nearly 97.6% of which is Nuosu. For Nuosu, an ideal marriage is a marriage between "real" Nuosu. Therefore, Meigu people are considered to be more reliable than the inhabitants of other counties with respect to the sense of their family origin or their "authenticity". The authenticity is reflected not only by the family's place of residence but also in the details recorded by family's generational history, or in Nuosu's own word, *cytvi*. As explained in the introduction to this thesis, *cytvi* can be roughly translated as "lineage", in which people are identified and classified by their paternal surname.

The bride-to-be's family was originally from Mianning county, and they moved to Xichang five years ago. Unlike Meigu, Mianning is very close to Xichang: it is a two-hour drive on the highway, and it is regarded to be more "open" and "developed" than Meigu. Mianning made its most conspicuous appearance in modern Chinese history as a cradle for the friendship between the Nuosu and the Chinese. It was in 1935 when the Red Army was driven to the hinterland and passed through the then "inaccessible" and "hostile" Liangshan. The journey was made possible by the patronage of a young man from one of the noble *cytvi*. The affiliation to the noble was the guarantee for non-Nuosu to survive during endless fights with different *cytvi* or to avoid being captured as slaves. In 1986, the historical alliance between the Han and Nuosu was taken out of its context and framed into a giant monument situating in the Xichang's city Centre ever since then. The monument features one of the generals of the Red Army, Liu Bocheng, and the Nuosu noble, Xiaoyedan, standing side by side with goblets in their hands. Living in one of the main entrances into Liangshan, Mianning's inhabitants more involved with Chinese on a daily basis than are Nuosu living in counties which have less convenient transport routes. There are two results of this. On the one hand, the Mianing residents need to make more effort than Nuosu in other counties to prove and maintain their "authenticity" in their interaction with other Nuosu or in their struggle to uphold their identities as Nuosu in their interaction with Han Chinese. On the other hand, they have advantages in gaining access to resources which are relocated or assigned to Liangshan by the state, or more specifically by the agents of the state, officials at different administrative levels.

The advantage, having the endorsement from the agents of the state, is best exemplified by the Zziti's choice of participants. Besides the close male relatives of the

bride-to-be, Zziti invited Jiji and Muji, both of them working in state institutions, as the *furxga* of the marriage and the main negotiators for bridewealth. *Furxga* is the Nuosu term for the matchmaker or the go-between. Usually, there is only one *furxga* if the couple-to-be are not very familiar with each other. *Furxga* matches families and proposes marriage to one family on behalf of the other family. The motivation can result from the *furxga's* personal observation or by invitation from members of the families. It is a tough job not only because he is required to know both the families' histories well and to make a good judgment about the possibility of marriage, but also because an unsuitable proposal may cause tedious problems in the future between the families and between the families and the *furxga* himself. As the arrangement for marriage starts to become formalised, there are two *furxga*, one for each side. They can be someone who comes from the same *cytvi* or else they are selected from a *cytvi* that the families of the couple-to-be consider to have a decent background and have a good relationship with them. When sitting at the table for the negotiation of bridewealth, these two *furxga* act as the spokesman for each of the families. More importantly, when the negotiation reaches an impasse, they will both step up and convince their own side to compromise. The obligatory courtesy frequently moves forward the negotiation. At the same time, the flexibility or space opened up for negotiation about the amount of bridewealth usually can be reached by the *furxga's* personal mastery of the art of talking. Knowing the perfect time for choosing a step forward or backward is a key requirement for *furxga*. The right judgment comes from *furxga's* personal traits and experiences and it also depends on the extent to which the family trusts their choice of *furxga*.

Muji acts as the chief negotiator for the amount of bridewealth on behalf of Zziti. The other *furxga*, Jiji, is the younger brother of Muji. They are from the same *cytvi*. Even though Zziti is older than both of them, he has to address them as uncle according to their position in *cytvi*. As we were standing in the street waiting for the mother and the daughter, Muji confirmed the amount of bridewealth with Zziti. Zziti regarded 300,000CNY (£28,000 roughly) as an ideal number. He added that if the negotiation did not go as smoothly as they expected, he would settle for 260,0000 CNY. Before they went to the venue to meet the groom's family, he emphasised that in fact his wife had said the marriage would be off the table if the groom's family offers less than 260,0000 CNY. He mentioned the important message from his wife to Muji because he expected that this bottom-line would be the last thing the negotiators would bring into the venue and it would be the most important information they would remember.

After the five of us, including the negotiators, the *furxga*, Zziti and his wife, and the bride-to-be had gathered in the street, we walked into a teahouse. The teahouse is situated in the old downtown area of Xichang. It is old in the sense that is a compound consisting of three or four streets filled with old-fashioned shoppers, like family-run restaurants, pharmacies, convenient stores, teahouses, a wet market, and other facilities for daily routines. However, the new downtown, which is only two kilometres away, is occupied by newly developed residential apartments, shopping malls, restaurants specialising in Chinese, Japanese, Korean and "western" cuisine, like KFC, McDonald's, Walmart. The landscape of the new downtown area is found everywhere in contemporary China but for Chinese residents outside of Liangshan, it

is shocking to find these things in Liangshan, a place stereotyped by the ideas such as “remote”, “ethnic”, “poor”, “underdeveloped”, and the like.

The sharp contrast between the old downtown and the new downtown not only lies in the landscape of the city planning, but also in the people who use the facilities. The new downtown serves as a hub for the whole region and offers various conveniences for its visitors. We find people of different origins, for instance, tourists making a stop in Xichang, people from neighbouring counties visiting their holiday houses or doing shopping, migrants settling and making a living here, and the local inhabitants moving to the new centre for better housing and living conditions. However, the old downtown also serves a more nostalgic function for the city, where the past stays and waits for its reminiscing visitors. Given that many local people still live in their old houses or need to visit and maintain their old houses from time to time, the old downtown now seems to be re-functioning as a gathering place for the Nuosu travelling from the neighbouring villages and cities. Travellers to the neighbourhood at night would get warnings from local Han Chinese, like taxi drivers or older women walking their dogs, of the danger and risk brought by too many Nuosu. However, compared to the restaurants or coffee shops with fancy interior decor or the internationally known fast-food seller in the new downtown, the places like the teahouse chosen for the negotiation were considered a more suitable venue.

The teahouse is located on the second floor of a building built about thirty-five years ago. Without making any prior reservation, it was possible for the members of the negotiation team to use the space almost exclusively, except for one table with two or three people playing cards and drinking tea in the hall. Without any formal greetings from the waiters, we were led directly to a big and separated room. The

attendants did not seem to mind the lack of service. Since the guests are only charged per head and the teahouse only provides very basic drinks, cheap tea and beer, and some snacks, both sides are satisfied with not getting into each other's way. It seemed that both sides were complicit in their mutual understanding of what purpose had brought the consumers here. Even so, it was difficult not to notice the condescending attitude of the teahouse owner towards his customers. For anyone who has lived long enough in Liangshan, it is easy to tell Han Chinese from Nuosu by their appearance. The Han shop owner hired Nuosu young men and women to meet the demand of his customers, who know better about how to serve Nuosu, which is to stay out of the customers' business rather than showering them with warm service.

The room assigned to us was quite spacious, about 80m<sup>2</sup> in size. Whereas the service was minimal, the room was elaborate. The room had a marble floor, light-coloured wallpaper, multi-seats sofa on one side of the room and three tables on the other side of the room. The tables were automatic Mahjong tables, which used to be very popular among people in Liangshan, like other places of Sichuan. Even though the Mahjong tables were used more often just as tea tables because of the tightened rules about gambling in public, people's love for gambling does not disappear but were relocated to more private space. Moreover, for those in power, gambling in a public space always needs some privacy because of their ability to appropriate the public power for private ends. These former Mahjong tables had now been turned into tea tables where the relatives of the two sides sat together. The bride-to-be, her mother and I sat in the corner furthest from the multi-seat sofa, where the key participants of the negotiation were sitting.

The seating of the participants reflects their roles in the negotiation. There are three sets of multi-seat sofas. Zziti, the father of the bride-to-be, sits in the middle set, with Muji sitting on his left side and Jiji on his right side. To the left of the middle set, sits the father of the groom-to-be and the uncles from both the mother's and father's sides. To the right of the middle set, sits the groom's *furxga* and his two older brothers. The father of the bride sits in the very centre of the space and although he talks little, he plays the dominant role in the negotiation. Muji sits closest to the two fathers, which denotes he is the bridge between them. Jiji sits closest to Muga, the *furxga* of the groom's side: because they know each other and they arranged the gathering together. Their seating also reflects that even though they speak for different sides, they work together to reach the goal of the negotiation. In addition to the nine people on the sofa, a further twelve people sit by the tables, most of them are brothers and cousins of the couple-to-be. They are witnesses of the negotiation but not the onlookers of the whole marriage. The members of *cytvi* play roles, collectively or individually, in the establishment, maintenance and break-up of the marriage.

### **The Process of Negotiation**

The negotiation<sup>1</sup> develops around the keyword – *cytvi*. The proceedings commenced with the *furxga* of the groom introducing himself to Muji through his family background. He said that his mother is from Jike *cytvi*, which is the same *cytvi* as Muji's brother-in-law. Based on the link established between them, they started to talk about Muji's brother-in-law. They agreed that he is a decent man from a respectful *cytvi*. When two Nuosu strangers meet, finding ties between their families is not only a way

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<sup>1</sup> The negotiation is carried out in Nuosu's own language, Nuosu *Hxop*. The Nuosu in Xichang use both Sichuan dialect and Nuosu *hxop* in everyday settings, but they use Nuosu *Hxop* more often in their formal meetings.

to break the ice but also a guarantee of the authenticity of their origins. The most significant purpose of such behaviour is not to demonstrate how close these ties are, but to see if there is any tie between them. The *furxga* explained how he was invited to arrange the marriage. He said he was living in the same place as the groom's family but he had also known many members of the bride's *cytvi* for years. Because of his familiarity with both families, the groom's father had invited him to be the *furxga*. He emphasised that he took the job because he heard that the couple-to-be has been dating since they were teenagers and that **both of their *cytvi* are respectful**. He considered that helping marriage is one man's chance to do a good deed. He added a piece of important information at the end of his introduction. He said the groom-to-be was in his third year of the college and his family thought it was very crucial for him to find a job after graduation and got married.

The conversation hence was passed to Muji, the main negotiator on behalf of the bride's family. Muji said that the bride and the groom had both received a good education and both of them were studying in universities, which was not an easy thing to accomplish in Liangshan. He was glad to get involved with their marriage. He also emphasised that they **came from decent families** with many brothers and sisters who were caring for them. His remarks were presented in a very well-organised way because eloquence is one of the traits most valued in choosing the negotiator. He quoted Nuosu proverbs to stress the necessity for both families to sit down together and discuss the responsibilities of marriage, even though the young couple was in a love relationship that they had initiated by themselves.

He then went on to emphasise his second point which is to make sure the marriage abides by **three basic rules**. First, it is to confirm the "authentic" origins of

the families. He said it is not something one can hide because it can be traced easily through the active social grapevines. He argued that Nuo (nobles) have their origins, Quxnuo (commoners) have their origins as well. By that, he means both of Nuo and Quxnuo are real Nuosu, not like slaves who are not pure Nuosu but a mixture of the Han and Nuosu and maybe other ethnic groups. He supported his arguments by saying that the bride's family has been living in a place where they are now for many generations. It is a euphemistic way to say they are not captives or slaves with Han origin.

Muji continued to clarify the other two rules, which are related to "hereditary diseases", specifically leprosy and hircismus. He said, for the sake of healthy descendants, it was crucial to marry someone coming from a family without either of these two diseases. In his words, the rule is not only a traditional rule of the Nuosu, but also based on scientific knowledge. He added that it is easy for people to get information about the health condition of the family in various ways, and more importantly, one knows by now more about his or her personal condition better than anyone else. Therefore, if any dispute arises in future regarding the matter, the only thing one can do is to "swallow the bitterness".

After Muji had laid out the three basic rules of a marriage in a decisive way, he gave a brief introduction to the bride's family in modest terms. He said the father made a living from selling accessories made of agate in Xichang. However, due to the instability of the market for agate and the responsibility of raising three children, the financial condition of the family is not very optimistic. The next important thing facing the family is to find a job for the bride-to-be after graduating from university. Muji emphasised, fortunately, the problem had been solved since they managed to find her

a vacancy at the TV station. From here, Muji conveniently diverted the focus of conversation to the merits of the bride-to-be. He said the girl was a good girl with virtue, unlike many girls of nowadays who were too easily losing the virtues of being a good girl. He also said that even though often girls do not have the same opportunity as boys to get an education, the parents had found ways to support her from the very beginning to the end, from primary school to university. He ended his remarks by stressing the difficulty of raising such a good daughter and then opened the space for discussing the amount of bridewealth.

The uncle of the groom stepped up and showed his agreement with Muji. He said they all respected the rules and had known each other for a very long time. He added that the willingness of the couple is very important to both of the families since it is a “new society” (*xin shehui* 新社会) now and no one can force anyone to engage in a marriage if they are unwilling. He said that the tradition of bridewealth does not conflict with the “new society” because the couple is willing to marry each other. He went on to introduce the groom’s father. He said the father was doing construction related projects, earning a living for his family as modest as the bride’s father. He also had the responsibility of raising three children. The uncle concluded the situation of the two families as “people only meet their kind”.

Right before the uncle’s talk became repetitious, Jiji, another *furxga* of the bride, jumped up and asked for forgiveness if his straightforwardness sounded offensive in any way. People laughed and felt relieved that someone finally brought up the matter they were expected to discuss. Jiji said, when Zziti approached him to ask him to act as *furxga*, given his profession as a judge, the first question he asked Zziti was if these two children are in a love relationship. He told Zziti that if the

marriage was only out of the willingness of the parents, it would eventually cause complicated issues. Jiji stressed that given that the children were in love if two fathers insist on their own opinions at the negotiation table it would hurt no one but their own children.

The most articulate justification of the Nuosu's bridewealth was given by Jiji. He said,

To be honest, bridewealth is not a practice permitted by Gongchandang (the communist party of China). However, to my surprise, I learned something new from a lecture organised by my office (The People's Court of Xichang). It was given by a very famous professor. He said at the very beginning of his talk that the national marital laws do not apply to our Nuosu. I can't agree with him more.

He went on giving an example of how he had settled a marriage dispute by applying Nuosu's rules when he could not find a solution from the national marital laws. He said, as a judge, he thought it might be better if the Nuosu no longer pay bridewealth anymore, **just like Han people**. However, he rejected the idea in practice because bridewealth is something "we inherit from our ancestors, it is a rule that can help us avoid dispute in future".

Following that, he tried to convince the fathers not to haggle over the exact amount on their minds, especially the groom's father. He said that how the father behaved at the table would affect his son's and daughter-in-law's treatment of him in the future. He said both of the fathers had done a great job of raising their children and gave them a good education. He said that the next and last task of the fathers is to help them get married and build a family. When the mission is accomplished, it is

the children's turn to pay back. After Jiji finished his talk, he gave his blessings to the fathers and left for work.

The groom's *furxga* praised Jiji saying "no wonder he is a law professional". He guaranteed that the groom's family was real Nuosu and they did not have "hereditary diseases". He said the only thing that needed to be sorted out was the amount of bridewealth. He persuaded the bride's father not to request an unrealistic number. He quoted the Nuosu's proverb for the groom's father saying, "there is no daughter-in-law without bridewealth". Then he passed the ball to the fathers and asked them to be modest and practical.

Zziti, the bride's father, started to share his thinking by saying that his daughter was originally expected to marry her cousin, the son of her uncle from mother's side. The priority of a Nuosu marriage is given to the marriage between cross-cousins but as the national marriage laws formally ban marriage between relatives within three generations, preference in choosing marriage partners is given to those who are cross-cousins traced through their *cytvi*, which has a much broader scope than three generations. However, according to Zziti, the boy intended for marriage to his daughter had dropped out of school when he was only twelve so the arrangement was recalled because the two parties no longer matched. Zziti brought up the episode with the uncle from the bride's mother's side for a very important matter, which is the composition or the allocation of bridewealth.

As mentioned, Nuosu's bridewealth mainly consists of five parts: *vusat rre*, given to the bride's parents; *Onyi rre*, given to the bride's maternal uncle; *hmapzyt rre*, given to the bride's paternal brother(s); *patvu rre*, given to the bride's paternal uncle; and *vit rre*, given to one person from the same *cytvi* as the bride. When the

bride has more than one uncle or brother, the parents of the bride will decide who is to be the receiver of the particular portion of bridewealth. In cases where it is impossible for the groom's family to settle all parts of the bridewealth, the priority is given in the order listed above. On rare occasions, the parents of the bride would return a very small amount of the bridewealth to the couple as a token contribution to build up their new family, which, as mentioned earlier, is not a dowry in either its name or meaning.

Zziti reminded the groom's father not to ignore their responsibility to other family members hence his request for bridewealth to be not merely a selfish behaviour. To defend himself in asking for bridewealth, he complained about the inflation in bridewealth in recent years. He said that for many years the average amount of bridewealth had been 5000 CNY but that he did not know why it suddenly became unimaginable high in the past few years. He said that many girls' families received bridewealth of more than half a million.

Before Zziti revealed more of his embarrassment about stating the exact amount his family requested, the uncle of the groom stepped in by talking about their appreciation of the good education the bride had received at school and home. Following that, he laid out the responsibilities of becoming a wife, of which the most fundamental responsibility was that she would become a member of the groom's family. He said that the function of the bridewealth is to make clear that the girl will start her life as someone's wife at a new home. He added that the disputes between the couple or within the family in the future should be solved by themselves.

Just as the discussion seemed to be stuck circling around all the issues except for the amount of the bridewealth, the groom's *furxga* interrupted the uncle's talk by

summing up the uncle's points and asking the bride's father to give the number on his mind. The *furxga* reminded the father to be reasonable as well as not too modest which may cause him to have regrets in future, right after which, Muji added, in a humorous way:

you two are so straightforward and make the thing sound so "ugly". But let me remind you of one thing, these two families are going to be in-laws and they will get closer than all the rest of us. So, you guys need to worry about yourselves in future.

The joke, not very hilarious in itself, made everyone in the room burst into laughter possibly because everyone seemed to need to take a breath before the climax of the negotiation came. While the bride's father was acting cautiously and thoughtfully in silence, the *furxga* of the groom and one of the bride's cousin had a discussion which could be considered as the "statistics" of the bridewealth.

The *furxga* first suggested a range he himself considered to be reasonable for the bride's father. He said that nowadays a woman from rural areas without proper education and a job could generally receive bridewealth from 40,000 CNY onwards, therefore the bride they were talking about had been to university and had the offer of a great job at the TV station. At the same time, though, he also reminded the father not to bring up something ridiculous like 400,000 and scare away the groom's father.

One of the bride's cousins, whose blood ties with the bride can hardly be traced even though they were from the same *cytvi*, jumped in and showed his disagreement. He had been travelling around other counties of Liangshan, attending *cytvi* gatherings and doing small businesses. He said that even women living in the rural areas around Xichang now asked for at least 100,000 CNY for bridewealth, which

made his friends joke about heading south to marry Nuosu from Yunnan Province because the girls there were much more affordable, about 10,000 or 20,000 CNY. According to him, even in Jinyang county, the furthest county of Liangshan that bordered with Han area, the rural girls asked for about 100,000 CNY. To his knowledge, the girls of Xide county are the most expensive to marry. He recently witnessed a negotiation which was settled with 800,000 CNY in Xide.

The cousin's disagreement apparently prompted a defence from the groom's *furxga*. The *furxga* said:

Let me tell you where the bridewealth is the highest, Butuo, Meigu, Puge, these three counties. I actually have an auntie married to your *cytvi* for 300,000 CNY.

The cousin did not step back when confronted by the annoyed *furxga*. He said:

The case you brought up must have happened years ago. Let me give you an example. In the past, if any official received a bribe of 100,000 CNY, they would be sentenced to jail for ten years but now it would be for one year only. We have to admit that, the value of money is different now. They have inflated 10 times at least.

The negotiation became intense and everyone kept silent except for the groom's *furxga* and the cousin. The *furxga* questioned the cousin's "economics" of bridewealth by saying:

Do you have any doubt about the things our judge [referring Jiji, the other *furxga* of the bride] told us just now? We, as Nuosu, have our own laws, even state laws cannot resolve the Nuosu's own dispute perfectly. Today we are talking about two families becoming one through marriage, how can you calculate these things like a businessman?

He did not give the cousin a chance to fight against his accusation and urged the bride's father to be reasonable and reminded him the most two important things were, first, the two young people were in a love relationship and second, they were a good match. He asked both fathers to compromise for the sake of their children's happiness.

Muji, the bride's *furxga*, stepped in and said that their side had enough information and requested for a break. After a few minutes, they came back from outside. Muji began his talk by stating that all of them were relatives and they were here for discussion not fight. He said:

We are Nuosu, bridewealth is what we have to do. If you marry a Han, you do not have to pay anything; but if you want to marry a Nuosu, sometimes you need to pay 400,000 and even more just as they said.

To move the things forward, he said that 260,000 CNY would be an acceptable number. However, he suggested, 300,000 should be the number they share with the public for the sake of the prestige of the father. He also added details on how to settle the other parts of the bridewealth. He said that because of the episode with the uncle from the bride's mother side, the groom's family had to pay *onyi rre*; as for *hmapzyt rre*, *patvu rre* and other parts would be settled with *vusat rre* the bride's parents received. He ended his talk by urging the two fathers to move forward with the discussion. He said the recalcitrance of either of the fathers could hurt their children's feelings.

The groom's *furxga* said that he agreed with Muji. He joked about these two fathers like two bulls fighting with each other without talking. He said 260,000 CNY was a good number because the Han people also considered 6 was an auspicious

number. However, he would like to suggest giving 200,000 CNY first and 60,000 CNY later. Then he forced the groom's father to open his mouth at long last.

Finally, the groom's father said:

I agree to tell the public we pay 300,000 CNY for our bride. That is good for our family too. That means we have the capacity. But I would like to pay 100,000 CNY first, 50,000 to the relatives, and pay 70,000 later.

Because he cut the first payment in half, the bride's father disagreed strongly and added that it had to be 200,000 CNY and 20,000 CNY for the relatives initially.

The disagreement between the two fathers later was later resolved by the groom's *furxga* and Muji. The *furxga* first tried to enforce their suggestion of paying 200,000 CNY first and 60,000 CNY later. Even though he had mentioned many times that the girl had a proper job at hand and could support her new family in future and reminded the fathers many times to compromise for the children, he failed to enforce the suggestion. After making his effort, Muji pointed out that Zziti had compromised, moving from the expectation of 300,000 CNY to 260,000 CNY. He emphasised that Zziti was very persistent with the expected number when they two were out of the room and he tried to convince Zziti to compromise. To adapt to the circumstance, he suggested to pay 160,000 CNY outright, 40,000 CNY at the wedding, and 60,000 CNY later. He added that when and how to pay the part of 60,000 CNY could be decided by the relationship developed between the two fathers. The *furxga* was satisfied with the new arrangement of the payment and said in a humorous way:

It is our final decision. Don't let these two hesitating fathers keep all of us here for the whole day.

Both fathers laughed at the *furxga's* words and accepted the new proposal. After the agreement had been reached, the group moved to a small restaurant nearby run by Han and serving typical Sichuan food. The Nuosu's taste has been changed greatly by the spices that increasing numbers of Han migrants have brought into the area over the past four decades. Now the Nuosu got used to spicy Sichuan food and they have introduced spices, especially chilli, into their cooking. Unlike the engagement party or the wedding ceremony on which occasions cattle, sheep, pigs, and chickens are slaughtered and cooked in the Nuosu style, the dinner at the small Han restaurant was convenient and sufficient to close the meeting to enable the next step.

People were seated at four round tables according to their seniority, which gave people of the same table more freedom to talk. The bride, her mother and I were seated together with other younger men, most of them were teenagers. The bride told me that her mother might be disappointed because the bridewealth was less than her expectation. She told me that the requested amount of 300,000 CNY was determined by her parents and her mother was more difficult to be convinced in terms of lowering the level of bridewealth. She said that she had told her boyfriend to talk his father into paying the bridewealth of 300,000 CNY.

She seemed unaware that there was space for negotiation as her father said before we entered the teahouse that he and his wife would accept the offer of 260,000 CNY. The "miscommunication" led to a question: what makes the bride's parents compromise? Doubtlessly the groom's family wants to minimise the amount paid, but there is another question, tied up with the first one: what makes the groom's parents willing to pay Bridewealth of such a substantial amount considering the

family's income and the local economic development conditions? The issues will be discussed with more ethnographic data in the next chapter, with discussion developed from observations of the negotiation meeting.

## **Conclusion**

The account given has firstly shown us that the accusation of undue commercialising of marriage is countered by the Nuosu's value as to how to establish marriage in a Nuosu way. A good marriage is defined as the marriage between "real" Nuosu of similar background. Among the traits such as education, appearance, job, the family background matters the most in the Nuosu case. In other words, membership of a given cytvi matters the most. A Cytvi not only identifies the prohibited spouses, but also verifies the authenticity of a Nuosu. A Cytvi carries the history of genealogy indicating the family's medical history and the traditional social rank, the most sensitive and significant criteria in selecting spouse in contemporary Liangshan. One of the main goals of the negotiation for bridewealth is to convince both sides that they are authentic in origins and the practice of bridewealth is the concrete way to testify to their authenticity.

The Nuosu's identification is grounded in their collective history recorded by their cytvi, or genealogical history. However, the ethnic identity to which Nuosu commit today has been forged through various state development projects in different periods. The resources brought by the state has reshaped and redefined the definition of a "good" cytvi. The superimposition of the bureaucratic administration on kinship will be further discussed in the next Chapter. Unlike their relative ignorance when it comes to state intervention in the "making" of the authenticity of the Nuosu, including the role played by bridewealth, Nuosu people fully acknowledged the

influence of state economic reform in causing “inflation” in many aspects of life. According to the participants’ “statistical” knowledge of bridewealth in the region, the practice has strengthened, and the amounts given in bridewealth have increased tremendously over time. However, unlike prevalent assumptions that the irresistible spread of money destroys personal bonds with calculative instrumental ties or cultural meanings are corrupted by materialist concern (Zelizer 1994), the Nuosu’s negotiation of bridewealth shows how money can become the instrument to fasten social ties and reinforce cultural meanings.

To counter humiliation from charges made as to their “backward ethnic custom”, the Nuosu justify their practice by appropriating the discourses introduced by the state on state laws, customary laws, ethnic minorities, development, and the like, emphasising the judicial significance of bridewealth and the incapacity of state laws in encompassing the cultural diversity of the Nuosu. On the one hand, the legitimacy of being Chinese while being a Nuosu in contemporary Liangshan is defined by the institutionalisation of *minzu*, a concept essentialised in ethnic classification in the 1950s. In that sense, the state is an external force that keeps defining, shaping and disciplining the ways of being Nuosu. On the other hand, the state or agents of the state, such as administration, regulations and laws, are challenged in many ways by the Nuosu’s justification for the practice of bridewealth. Firstly, the Nuosu consider themselves entitled to the practice because their ethnic identity and custom were consolidated by the state. Secondly, faced with state regulation of the practice, the Nuosu seek support from the “customary laws”, which is constructed in contrast with state laws under circumstances where disputes cannot be solved with satisfaction.

The judicial significance of bridewealth in the “customary laws” is to prevent future disputes within the marriage that lie outside regulations of state laws.

Even though the Nuosu’s identity has its primordial foundation in the Nuosu’s geological history and is forged by various development projects, the Nuosu’s “self-respect” shown in the practice of bridewealth and in their ways of countering humiliation is based on the belief that the practice is essential to the realisation of their identity. The “self-respect” is also built upon the Nuosu” reflections regarding the incapacity of state laws. Paradoxically, the concepts often quoted in the Nuosu justification of their practice, such as their status as members of an ethnic minority, cultural diversity, laws, are an integral part of their encounter with the state. The next chapter will discuss in further depth how these concepts are woven into the Nuosu’s articulation of the world they live in.

## Chapter 3 *Ndepggup's* Account for the Inflation in

### Bridewealth: a foothold for reflection

Chapter One, based on archival studies, revealed the political discourses about the Nuosu's practices of bridewealth, which influenced the Nuosu's justifications for bridewealth under different historical circumstances. The differentiation in the discourses elucidated aspects of the changing relationship between the state and its minorities. Chapter Two presented an ethnographic description of a gathering, the purpose of which was to negotiate the exact amount of bridewealth, thereby exemplifying how the Nuosu justified their practice and how the Nuosu accounted for the inflation even though bridewealth was targeted for regulation in the state's development projects. The description of the negotiation provided a detailed picture of how the Nuosu realise their identities of being a Nuosu and a citizen of the state. It revealed the extent to which the Nuosu's values of being a Nuosu and living a good life have been shaped by the development projects of the state. More importantly, it highlighted the salience of internal differentiation in explaining the practice and the inflation in bridewealth in contemporary Liangshan.

This chapter deepens the arguments arising from the previous chapters, drawing on further ethnographic data, specifically my interviews with *ndepggup*, the "law professionals" and the enforcers of the Nuosu's value and morality. Complemented by other materials that I gathered from literature studies, interviews and participant observation, this chapter starts by discussing the role of the *ndepggup*

not only as mediators of disputes, interpreters of Nuosu values, but also as reflectors giving the articulation of Nuosu society on the whole.

The chapter then draws on the *ndepggup's* accounts to discuss three aspects relating to the practice of bridewealth. Firstly, it discusses the rules of marriage to explore the Nuosu's marriage values, in other words, what a good marriage means to the Nuosu. It demonstrates the significance of bridewealth to *cytvi*, the utmost value of Nuosu society and thereby proves the importance of the practice of bridewealth given the limited space left for the Nuosu to construct and realise their identities in contemporary Liangshan. Secondly, it examines further the tension between being a Nuosu and being a citizen of the Chinese state in the discussion of how the Nuosu try to legitimise the practice of bridewealth by synthesising the dual legal systems, state laws and "customary laws". Thirdly, it develops the *ndepggup's* critique of internal differentiation of the Nuosu in contemporary Liangshan into the analysis of the internal complexity, which explains in greater depth how different Nuosu's ways of pursuing a good life have been shaped by development. It argues that the impetus for the inflation in bridewealth arises from the complex overlay of new and evolving bureaucratic channels of class formation and existing kinship hierarchies. These evolving dynamics of class formation have generated new pressures on people to demonstrate their prestige through the payment of bridewealth.

### ***Ndepggup*: The Reflector**

Similar to the hierarchical social structure, "customary laws" and its expounders and practitioners-*ndepggup*- have become the cultural traits that characterised the Nuosu society in the making of the Nuosu *Minzu*. The term "customary laws" was introduced by scholars in the 1990s to study the laws and rules (*jjevi*) that governed and continue

to govern the Nuosu society. The term is now adopted widely among the Nuosu in its original Chinese form, *xiguan fa* (习惯法). The significances of “customary laws” and *ndepggup* are not only established from the external perspective of the civilising project of the PRC state whereby the knowledge of the Nuosu society is categorised and standardised. The institutionalised knowledge is also reinforced by the Nuosu’s own identification with these assigned markers. During my fieldwork, “customary laws” were quoted very often by Nuosu people to justify many Nuosu customs or practices that may oppose state laws or regulations. “Customary laws” were often referred to by my informants and interviewees in their entirety, and these have to some extent provided a unique lens through which the Nuosu view their own society. In the Nuosu’s accounts, “customary laws” provides an alternative resource to justify and legitimise their behaviours.

I interviewed twenty *ndepggup* whom I encountered on different occasions in order to resolve the ambiguity that a totalising perspective of “customary law” may generate. Specifically, I wanted to tap into the reflections of different *ndepggup* on Nuosu responses to state-imposed development projects to get a nuanced view of how experts in customary laws perceived bridewealth. The emphasis on the reflexivity of *ndepggup* not only arises from the encounters I had with *ndepggup* where I heard the most coherent and meaningful critique of the realities with which the Nuosu are living, including the urgent issue of the inflation in bridewealth. The necessity to include *ndepggup* in my research also stems from the indispensable roles that *ndepggup* plays in the Nuosu society.

Considering *ndepggup* as “law professionals” is the most simplified but efficient way to translate the judicial role of *ndepggup*. They are not only the

mediators in the disputes but also the exponents of the Nuosu's jurisprudence which combines customs and rules with value and morality. Unlike the legal professionals of state laws who are endorsed by the power executed by various institutes of the state, *ndepggup* do not have coercive power or mandatory authority. However, it is insufficient to assume the dominant state power has caused the decaying "traditional" authority. *Ndepggup* essentially is an institution for mediating relations between people, within and between *cytvi*. The enforcement of their adjudication relies on the Nuosu's shared values, and it is also built upon the people's fundamental belief in family and *cytvi*. The designated members of *cytvi* act as the executors and supervisors of the *ndepggup*'s adjudications at the practical level. Moreover, because *ndepggup* work within and between *cytvi* and men are the primary participants in these events, most *ndepggup* are male.

The first interview I had with *ndepggup* happened in Zhaojue. The *ndepggup* were at a gathering for a case in which a man's tongue was bitten off by his fellow villager. Because the victim was unsatisfied with the solution given by the local court, five men, two of them were *ndepggup* and another three from the victim's *cytvi*, sat on the hillside overlooking the village discussing a better way to solve the dispute. I was told that the victim's dissatisfaction and the *ndepggup*" intervention were on account of the value that the Nuosu placed on the body. A bite, especially a bite in the tongue, is considered to be an absolute disgrace. For the victim, the disgrace could not be compensated with 2000 CNY by the verdict of the local court.

As is typical in case mediation, the *ndepggup* had spent days visiting the two families and witnesses to gather the most comprehensive information about the case. After processing all the data, they visited two sides as many as times they needed to

restate the information that they had in hand and confirmed the evidence with both sides. When they believed that they were close to grasping the facts of the case, they worked out the adjudication and convinced both sides to accept the solution. On the day I met the *ndepggup*, they were trying to convince the victim's side to accept the solution of more compensation with money and a public apology. Going "public" in Nuosu's definition usually means a ceremony that invites people of their *cytvi* and others involved and slaughtering animals, typically pigs and chickens, and closes the case by eating and drinking together.

Owing to the nature of their work, the fundamental requirement for being *ndepggup* is the trust of others in their virtues and abilities. Besides honesty, integrity, kindness and other traits defining a good man, justice and being articulate are the keys to be *ndepggup*. Without any codification of the Nuosu's "customary laws", *ndepggup* build their knowledge of the Nuosu's traditions either scattered in Nuosu canons of documented history or as passed down orally by many generations. Owing to the merits in their personal abilities, *ndepggup* status is not inheritable. Obtaining or losing the title of *ndepggup* does not involve any formal education, initiation or ritual. A man becomes a *ndepggup* gradually because of his constant and effective involvement in the mediation of disputes and the acknowledgement from the others. In that sense, *ndepggup* is a "natural leader" (Zhou 1997:250). By virtue of the "natural" process of becoming a *ndepggup* and the praise of the *ndepggup*'s virtues, some of the *ndepggup* I met were so modest about their identity of *ndepggup* that they claimed that they merely helped with solving some disputes and they were not eligible for the title.

Though *ndepggup* are highly respected especially in the context of solving disputes, the title does not suggest they enjoy any privilege in other aspects of their lives and it does not exempt them from make a living like others. The compensation given to *ndepggup* for their work in solving disputes is not significant and their subsistence needs to be fulfilled in other ways. However, the reputation of *ndepggup* is built upon their virtues and abilities regardless of their profession or wealth. Among *ndepggup*, there is no hierarchy regarding status but there is the division between the *ndepggup* of *cytvi* and the regional *ndepggup* (Ma 1992). The division is made in the working scope of *ndepggup*. Unlike the *Ndepggup* of *cytvi* who work within their *cytvi*, the regional *ndepggup* are capable of working across *cytvi* because of their abilities, experiences and reputations.

The *ndepggup's* role of mediating disputes is highlighted in the typical representation of the Nuosu society not only because of the significance of their contribution to sustaining society. More importantly, it is also because the ideas associated with *ndepggup*, such as “rules”, “laws”, “traditions”, and “history”, are crucial to establishing the “legitimacy” and “rationality” of the Nuosu, the concepts that they can apply to confront the humiliation imposed on them through the development projects of the state. Moreover, through my study on *ndepggup*, I noticed an overlooked but more fundamental role of *ndepggup*—the enforcer of the Nuosu values, which makes them the critics and reflectors of the world they live in.

As mentioned, the values which *ndepggup* speak for are these traditions or customs passed down orally or from the records scattered in the Nuosu’s canons, such as *hmatmu tepyy* (the book of education and practice). Owing to their possession of the knowledge, *ndepggup* also play an essential role in organising the formal meeting

of *cytvi* (*mop mgep*), where the fundamental rules of being the member of *Cytvi* are discussed and enforced and the critical values of being a Nuosu are reinstated.

The existence of *ndepggup* in Nuosu society is very similar to the witch of Azande or economists of the modern world (See Evans-Pritchard 1976[1937]). They have a kind of authority that exudes the power of explanation. Their authority is not established on the execution of their knowledge or judgement, but realised in how they give explanations that are convincing to their audience. Therefore, the dominant administrative power of the state does not suggest a decaying significance of *ndepggup*, because the power of *ndepggup* is embodied in how they figure out the world they live in and how they sort out disorder for the benefit of their audience. The assumption of the decaying power of *ndepggup* stems from a false comparison between two different understandings of “power”. As long as *ndepggup* continue to offer people an alternative when seeing potentially destabilising interventions in their lives, the existence of *ndepggup* is ensured.

For *ndepggup*'s comprehensive knowledge of Nuosu society, they became the most important informants of my research. The role of the *ndepggup* as a reflector was constructed through my interactions with them in fieldwork where they gave me the most articulated and critical perspective on practices and the society. My understanding of the rules of marriage and the practice of bridewealth was not only drawn from literature reviews and interviews with other informants but also based on *ndepggup*'s historical and legal perspective.

### **“The Good Match”**

As stated at the meeting for the negotiation of bridewealth in the previous chapter and as explained by the *ndepggup* whom I interviewed about the rules of

marriage, first and foremost, the young couple at the centre of the bridewealth negotiation are in a love relationship and they are a good match. Like most marriages between Nuosu in contemporary Liangshan that are consummated through the payment of bridewealth, the families of the couple gather together on the prerequisite of the couple's willingness. It is rare that bridewealth would establish a marriage between unwilling people. The "modern"/ "activist"/ "feminist" critiques on bridewealth are primarily based on the imputed commodification of women. The still prevalent misunderstanding that bridewealth involves the notional "sale" of a woman comes from an over-emphasis on the economic meaning of bridewealth and encourages commentators to think that women are traded as a commodity. This misunderstanding frequently leads to the deduction that the practice of bridewealth lies in the "backwardness" of the culture. Looking beyond the over-emphasis on the economic sense of bridewealth, we see how the Nuosu have used bridewealth to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups as well as differentiate among themselves within the group. Nuosu's definition of a "real Nuosu" and the people's desire for a good life are manifest within the practice of bridewealth.

Owing to the significance of marriage in the life course, the choice of marriage partner embodies people's ultimate desire for a good life. A "good match" is defined by many conditions, e.g. similar family background, the same level of education and personal capabilities of the intending marriage partners, of which the family background is of the greatest importance. As discussed earlier, for the Nuosu, family background means to which *cytvi* one belongs, with *cytvi* occupying first place when it comes to understanding Nuosu society. The importance of *Cytvi* not only lies in how people are grouped and organised but it is also a signifier that causes the Nuosu to

adjust their behaviours in their daily life. Therefore, it is very common and important for the Nuosu to check each other's *cytvi* at their first meeting and confirm how they are related to each other.

In the establishment of marriage, *cytvi* has the significance of exclusion. Firstly, it defines prohibited spouses. It excludes those who are not marriageable because of the existing relationships between families. For example, no one must marry within the same *cytvi* even if there is almost no trace of any biological tie. The other strict rule is that no one marries their parallel cousins, but cross-cousin marriage is preferred. As mentioned in the introduction, the kinship of *cytvi* has a much broader scope compared to the kinship systems of many other cultures, therefore, the exclusion of the parallel-cousins marriage and the favouring of the cross-cousin marriage involves a much wider group of people. The shortcomings of consanguineous marriage in terms of genetics have been taken into consideration much more than in the past, however, the preferred partnerships are still between cross-cousins in the broadest sense.

The second and third principles for *cytvi* to exclude unmarriageable people are related to history. History is signified by the surname one carries, recorded by the genealogy one recites and the gossip circles one inhabits. Owing to the hierarchical relations between *cytvi*, people prefer to marry people from the same rank and to avoid marrying those with a family history of being captured as slaves or with Han origin. Unlike in some Indian cultures where people pay a high amount of dowry to marry upward, it is impossible for the Nuosu to move upward socially through this path. On the contrary, if people of a higher rank marry someone from a lower rank, his or her rank will be demoted. Therefore, it is rare for the Nuosu to seek such a

marriage because it is, at the individual level, against the willingness of *cytvi* members; and at the social level, the married couple will become an outcast of the ceremonial events which are a paramount aspect of being Nuosu. The third group of people is excluded because of “medical” concerns. People are unwilling to marry individuals who have a family history of suffering from “hereditary diseases”, to be exact, leprosy and hircismus. The diseases are considered as an irremovable stigma of the *cytvi*. However, it does not suggest that those “unwanted” would have no chance to get married. As one of my informants told me:

This kind of people can find their match too. Even though they pretend that nobody knows their secret, people always know. And similar people will find them. But they will pretend nothing is there either.

Therefore, every *cytvi* has a decent history in its statement. Whoever and whenever they have a chance to talk about their own *cytvi*, they can always provide a long list of famous figures of their *cytvi* in history or find a way to connect to important figures of other *cytvi*. One often-heard episode is that a certain *quxnuo cytvi* became commoner because their noble ancestor married a commoner. It is almost a ritual to testify to the “decent” origins of both families. It is ritual not only because the narration of *cytvi* history adopts a poetic rhetorical form which is uncommon in everyday life, but also because it is an obligatory step to set up a marriage. The gathering to negotiate the bridewealth is the last chance for a “background” check: in fact, most of the verification has been done before the two sides sit down at the table. Therefore, after both sides reach the agreement on the amount of bridewealth, the marriage is established. Any doubt related to family history cannot become the reason to break the marriage. In the case of pulling back, the highest compensation can be

sought because any rumour related to family history can cause immense difficulties for a person in finding a new partner in future.

The most noteworthy aspect of the Nuosu's bridewealth is that it does not guarantee a "good" match for people. Bridewealth has little to do with hypergamy in the case of the Nuosu. As discussed above, the key element of a "good" match is the similarities between two families, which are largely defined by the original rank, history of the families and relationship between families. Certainly, personal traits, like education, appearance, age, do matter, but the most important attribute a person needs to have is a "good" *cytvi*. A *cytvi* with many heirs and without hereditary diseases would be considered a decent *cytvi*. However, the resources brought by the state has also reshaped and redefined the definition of a "good" *cytvi*.

When the Chinese Communist Party regime tried to systematically incorporate the Nuosu into the newly founded state in the 1950s, owing to the incredibly wide scope of the *cytvi* and its entwined relationship with hierarchy, *cytvi* continued to play a significant role for both the state and the Nuosu. To consolidate its administration in the area, the state had to recruit influential people and provide official ranks to establish the government in the region. Most of the influential people were from among the nobles. Some commoners (albeit not many) and representatives of slaves (very few indeed) were also invited to work for the government. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the original social structure was not dissolved by the socialist revolution; on the contrary, it was preserved or reproduced within the government institutions and it helped in the socialist transformation of Liangshan. Because of the entwined relationship between *cytvi* and hierarchy, the ideology of hierarchy, though shaken, remained intact in various social activities where individuals' participation

was understood in terms of their *cytvi*, e.g. marriage, funerals, dispute settlements, rituals and ceremonies related to festivals, disease, misfortunes, and the like.

As much as the state needed, particularly initially, the institution of *cytvi* to carry out its administration in the area, individual Nuosu can seek in turn resources from the state to redefine their position in their own *cytvi*. Moreover, their ability to deploy resources can change the relationships between *cytvi*. After the Cultural Revolution, the dominant influence of the state in Liangshan has made working for the state the most promising type of job from the Nuosu's perspective. In terms of categorising people by their professions, many people refer to four kinds of Nuosu, which in order of preference are: those who work for state institutions (*danwei shang de* 单位上的), those who do business (*zuo shengyi de* 做生意的), immigrant workers (*dagong de* 打工的) and peasants (*nongmin* 农民). The categories of people are referred so often by the Nuosu to account for their life stories that the Chinese terms of the four professions have been imported into the Nuosu language in their original Chinese forms. For *cytvi*, having more relatives who work for the state/the government means having greater influence. The endorsement from the external state is crucial in terms of legitimising and justifying one's status. It is best exemplified in the choice of *furxga*, made by the bride's father (see previous chapter). Jiji is a judge from the local People's Court and Muji is a civil servant working for one of the offices of the local government. Their professions are considered the "best" and "stable" from the Nuosu's perspective. It is easy to tell that their presence conferred status on the respective families from how many times Jiji's words were referenced or how Muji steered the progress of the negotiation.

As discussed above, bridewealth cannot secure a “good” match, but a “good match” needs to be sealed by the payment of bridewealth, which leads us to the next section in discussing the legitimacy of bridewealth. It is to answer the question: How do the Nuosu justify their practice of bridewealth?

### **The “Legitimacy” of Bridewealth**

To answer my inquiry into the reasons for the practice of bridewealth, the *ndepggup* I interviewed gave me the most succinct answer—***because this is our Nuosu’s jievi***. When I asked for more explanations on the term *jievi*, they made the analogy with state laws and told me that *jievi* is the Nuosu law and every Nuosu should observe *jievi*. The justification for the practice of bridewealth— **We are Nuosu and bridewealth is what we do**— was made many times in the teahouse where the negotiation for the bridewealth was held. It was also heard throughout the whole period of my fieldwork. It demonstrated that the practice of bridewealth has served as symbolic as much as a socio-economic carrier of identity for people to realise their standing in society. Both at conceptual and practical levels, bridewealth has been essentialised as “an ethnic custom” of Nuosu. However, the identity of “Nuosu”, or the legitimacy of being a Nuosu in contemporary Liangshan is also defined by the state. The process cannot be understood without knowledge of ethnic classification in the 1950s, whereby ethnic groups or *minzu* were institutionalised, or at least groups like Nuosu were essentialised as people sharing “common territory, common language, common economic life, common psycho-mental make-up”, the four Stalinist principles which guided the implementation of ethnic classification (Fei and Lin 1957; Fei 1980).

The ethnic classification was a crucial step for the CCP to legitimise its regime and domesticate its people (Tapp 2002). During the period of the Long March (1934-1936) and the Yan'an period (1936-1945), the CCP realised the significance and distinctiveness of the non-Han population of the Western and Northern China. Eventually, "a unified multi-ethnic state" (统一的多民族国家, *tongyi de duominzu guojia*) became a basic tenet in 1949. Unlike the policy of "five races in one union" (五族共和 *wuzu gonghe*) during the Republican era, the unified multi-ethnic state approach is to signify that the total number of Chinese *minzu* is far more than five "races" and all *minzu* deserve political equality which entitles them to preferential policies under certain circumstances.

The institutionalisation of *minzu* was a complicated process. At first, the Chinese government promoted the principle of "ethnonym by owner" (*mincong zhuren* 名从主人,) and asked for reports from all over the country. Unsurprisingly, the government received more than 400 ethnonyms, more than 260 of which were submitted from Yunnan province alone. Both officials and scholars involved in the project considered it quantitatively impossible to handle. They therefore suggested "merging" (*guibing* 归并) these ethnonyms, especially in the Yungui Plateau of Southwest China, the home of numerous languages and cultures. For the implementation of the project, the central government summoned experts from Beijing and provincial capitals to form research teams. The teams were required to do fieldwork with the support from the local governments, following the doctrines of Marxism and Leninism, especially Stalinism. Their goal was to investigate which ethnonym could constitute a single *minzu* (*danyi minzu* 单一民族) and define who could claim the ethnonym. Thirty-eight ethnic minorities were identified during the

first national census in 1953. Fifteen more were added during the second national census in 1964. With another two added in 1965 and 1979, the number of ethnic minorities was fixed at 55 in 1979. Ever since then, the state has left the number of identified minzu unchanged (See Fei 1997 for his recount of the process).

Even though the methodology, the ideology, the result and many aspects of ethnic classification are constantly questioned, it is undeniable that it has shaped the ethnoscape of today's China and it keeps defining different dimensions of people's identities. As a Chinese citizen, ethnic belonging is a must-known item in various settings. It is printed on citizens' ID card, an essential item to carry around for various daily purposes. It is also recorded in citizens' personal files, from primary school days to university, to places of work, and to burial. Furthermore, it defines "opportunities" in different stages of life, schooling, working, parenting, and the like. For example, ethnic students can gain extra points in the most crucial exam in their lives, the entry exam to university. However, the add-on points are not enough to send many students of ethnic minority backgrounds to universities because they come from areas with limited educational resources. Educational inequality has severely reduced their chance of getting the kind of secondary education qualification that would make them eligible to take the university entrance exam (Yang 2010: 11).

Besides indicating the ethnic origins of citizens and defining their life opportunities, ethnic identity also plays a significant role in the daily interactions between people of different ethnic backgrounds which may lead to "ethnic issues" (*minzu wenti* 民族问题) in some cases. The term "ethnic issue" is found widely in the CCP's policy documents and governing strategies and refers to any conflicts within or between ethnic groups that require the government's interference. For example, at

one point, the owner of a Sichuan-style restaurant in Xichang posted an advertisement online for hiring waiters in which he stated clearly that he would not consider an application from Nuosu. The news spread fast and thousands of Nuosu gathered downtown to speak out their discontent. To defend himself, the owner said he did not want to hire any Nuosu because he personally found they were aggressive and difficult to manage. It developed into an incident, or an “ethnic issue”, and needed to be addressed by the local government with support from the police force. This example highlights the tense relationship between the Han and the Nuosu in Liangshan. But it is not a rare event. In fact, similar things happen in Liangshan every day. Our understanding of ethnicity in China must therefore extend from issues involving inter-communal relationships in areas that are associated with religion, national security, or geopolitical sensitivities right down to the local level where individuals’ ethnic identities are challenged on a daily basis, often leading to simmering tensions.

Another legacy inherited from the ethnic classification project is the stereotyped image of ethnic minorities. In the process of ethnic classification, ethnic societies were categorised into different stages of development according to social evolutionism. Most ethnic societies were considered to be more backward than the Chinese (Han) feudal society. The Nuosu society was classified as a “slave society” characterised as “barbarian”, “uncivilised”, “backward”. The rhetoric remains unchanged although sixty years have passed. As discussed in the introduction of the thesis, in the summer of 2010, these expressions came onto the centre stage once again in “the Healthy and Civilised New Life Movement of Liangshan Yi Region”. The message sent from the massive propaganda of the movement to the Nuosu was

humiliating: they were represented as a group of people who are unhygienic, uncivilised and backward and their rationality was questioned because of the “irrational” ceremonial expenditures, such as bridewealth.

If ethnic classification in the 1950s was based on social division, in the past three decades, conceptually, it has also overlapped with economic division. The ethnic groups are stereotyped as being less economically developed because they are backward culturally and socially. Such representation has broadened the gap between people of different ethnic backgrounds and has become one of the fundamental reasons behind the conflicts that happen in everyday life.

As discussed previously, the double identity of being Chinese and a Nuosu in contemporary Liangshan is defined by the institutionalisation of *minzu*, a concept essentialised in ethnic classification in the 1950s. In that sense, the state is an external force that keeps defining, shaping, and disciplining the ways of being Nuosu. The practice of bridewealth can be an ethnic marker that differentiates people; it can also be blamed as the barrier to social and economic development. However, as much as the identity of Nuosu is defined by the state, it is also manifested by the Nuosu themselves. The next section discusses the “legitimacy” of the practice bridewealth from the Nuosu” perspective, that is, why they are entitled to practise bridewealth.

To reiterate, the state’s classification of Nuosu, or the making of the “otherness” of Nuosu, as mentioned previously, is based on the principal factors such as “common territory, language, economic life and psycho-mental make-up”, the definition of *minzu* derived from the Stalinist theory. Under the guidance of the four principles, the official designation of “Yi” includes people living in Sichuan, Yunnan,

Guizhou and many other provinces. However, the Yi living in Liangshan call themselves Nuosu and identify only with people affiliated to *cytvi* living in or from the region. When they use “we” or “Nuosu” the term refers only to people whereby the definition of “Nuosu” or “self” is tied up to *cytvi*. Thus, one of the ways to perform Nuosu identity is to organise *cytvi* ceremonies regularly, and these have become ever more significant in Liangshan in the past decade.

Nuosu’s perceptions of their ethnic identity are grounded in the institution of *cytvi*. The primordial ties recorded by the genealogy of the *cytvi* are reinforced by the state’s ethnic classification. As the state governance over the Nuosu has fluctuated over time between tightness and relaxation, it has left space for the Nuosu to challenge and reshape the definition of *minzu* given by the state and to redefine and represent themselves in various ways.

To highlight my argument here, I would like to quote once again the noteworthy words of Jiji, one of the bride’s *furxga*, during the negotiation for the bridewealth described in Chapter Two:

To be honest, bridewealth is not a practice permitted by Gongchandang (the Communist Party of China). But to my surprise, I learned something new from a lecture organised by my office (The People’s Court of Xichang). It was given by a very famous professor. He said at the very beginning of his talk that the national marital laws do not apply to our Nuosu. I can’t agree with him more.

With this quote and with a further explanation, he stated two points most explicitly. Firstly, bridewealth was not accepted by the government. Secondly, with his experience of working at the local People’s Court, state laws were unable to solve all the Nuosu’s disputes. He added there were many occasions when he needed to apply

Nuosu's "customary laws" to solve the disputes that state laws could not solve satisfactorily for the parties involved.

In my in-depth interview with Jiji, he gave me an astonishing example of a suicide case in our subsequent conversation. About five years ago, a woman committed suicide leaving a letter saying that she could not stand her alcoholic husband any longer. After she wrote the letter, she drank pesticide right before the arrival of the guests she had invited from her husband's *cytvi*. The guests rushed her into the emergency room, but it was too late. Jiji told me that it was obviously a suicide case judging from state laws, however, it is much more complicated in the Nuosu's context. The incident is categorised as *syggit*, which is the ultimate way to seek the intervention of *cytvi* into personal matters. The woman's death involved hundreds of men of different *cytvi* gathering together for days to negotiate compensation. But before the meeting of the two sides was arranged by the *ndepggup* and other influential figures of the families, the husband was hidden by his *cytvi* because they knew of the consequences if he were declared guilty of causing the suicide. After days of negotiations, the case ended with compensation of 200,000 CNY paid to the woman's family.

Jiji was intensively involved with the case because of his membership of the husband's *cytvi* and because he is a judge at the local court. But he also admitted to me that he could not become a *ndepggup* because of his drinking problem. He told me that a *ndepggup's* intervention was to "set things right" and restore the damaged relations involved in the incident, that is to "do things according to Nuosu's customs."

The conversation I had with Jiji on the practice of bridewealth and the Nuosu custom corresponded with that of many informants I met in fieldwork. The people I

met believed that although the inflation in bridewealth was unacceptable, the practice should be preserved as it says who the Nuosu are. This is because, as discussed, bridewealth first and foremost is the way of being Nuosu which embodies the significance of the *cytvi*. However, instead of being undermined by external forces, the state, globalisation, etc, the bridewealth practice has strengthened and the amounts given in bridewealth have increased over time. The interview with Jiji and many other cases I encountered during fieldwork made me realise that bridewealth is at odds with state laws.

There is a common assumption that the practice of bridewealth is more associated with people living in rural areas or people with a lower level of “education”. The level of “education” is defined by the quality and length of schooling in the national education system. A higher education may be associated with the dilemmas of negotiating material versus emotional interest (Obendiek 2016). However, my experience is that most of my informants share similar opinions on the practice, despite their living conditions and education levels. Even though they criticised the astonishing amount of bridewealth and adopted similar rhetoric that the state inflicted on the practice, most of them also insisted that bridewealth was something “we inherit from our ancestors, it is a rule that can help us avoid dispute in the future”. They emphasised the judicial significance of bridewealth and the incapacity of state laws to encompass the diversity of the Nuosu. People believed bridewealth could act as insurance whenever there was a problem in the marriage that could not be solved in a “satisfactory” way within state laws.

Bridewealth has become the ethnic marker of the Nuosu, both from the external and the internal perspectives. It defines who the Nuosu are. It helps maintain a sphere where the state has limited power to penetrate, in which the Nuosu are in control of their language and speak for themselves. The Nuosu insistence on the “Nuosu-ness” of the practice may seem curious since without the witness from the state agents, performing ethnicity would seem to be unnecessary, if, as many argue (Schein 2002, Harrel 2001a, 2001b), official ethnic identity is predominantly external and performative. However, from the observation laid out above, I am convinced that performing Nuosu-ness in the practice of bridewealth is not a performance, but a closed-end system of symbols, by which a multitude of relations— *cytvi*, affine, consanguine, descents, ranks, individual achievements, family histories – can receive legitimacy, be recognised, appreciated, and applied to social interaction. The closed-end symbolic system is indispensable for this arrangement to be played out within Nuosu society, and within Nuosu society only, or it cannot be played at all if there is lack of support from his/her *cytvi* (which means not to be qualified as a “real” Nuosu). That is to say, bridewealth is a means where immaterial values are presented in their entirety. It is a “total presentation”, to quote Mauss (1990).

### **The Internal Complexity**

The above affirmation of the importance of bridewealth to Nuosu identity notwithstanding, in the past decades the inflation in bridewealth has become not only the “backward cultural custom” the government aims to regulate but also a “social problem” (*shehui wenti* 社会问题) for the Nuosu themselves. Many Nuosu complained to me that the value of the bride has become very “problematic”. Unlike their unawareness or neglect of the state interventions in the making of Nuosu

authenticity, Nuosu people fully acknowledged the influence of state economic reforms in causing “inflation” in many aspects of life, including bridewealth. However, in contrast to the assumption that the irresistible spread of money destroys personal bonds with calculative instrumental ties or corrupts cultural meanings with materialist concerns (Zelizer 1994), the Nuosu’s continued practice of bridewealth shows how money becomes the instrument of fastening the ties and reinforcing cultural meanings. Hence, even as the Nuosu I met admitted that inflation existed they also stressed the irreplaceable social and cultural meaning of bridewealth. Yet at the same time, they also suggested that the government needed to control the level of payment by legislation.

As mentioned, the role that *ndepggup* play in the Nuosu’s society as the exponent of the rules and laws grant them the opportunity to transcend the limitations of their individual lives, help restore damaged relations in the community, and reflect upon society. Therefore, they consider themselves duty-bound to take the initiative to regulate bridewealth. The effort is based on much self-reflection. As one *Ndepggup* told me:

In the past, we Nuosu never paid such a high amount of bridewealth, not even nobles. It is all their fault, those working for the state and those doing business.

The differentiation within the Nuosu or the internal complexity pointed out by the *ndepggup*’s critique is the key to unravelling the inflated bridewealth and to understanding the contemporary context in which the Nuosu live. The *ndepggup* I interviewed blamed Nuosu businessmen, *Laoban*, for ruining the traditional way of paying bridewealth. One of the *ndepggup* told me that a *laoban* paid 1 million CNY

and set a very extreme and bad example. He told me that because the prestige of family matters most for the Nuosu the competition in the amount of bridewealth could eventually lead to a severe situation.

Laoban is a Chinese term borrowed by the Nuosu and sometimes they also use the Nuosu term, *Vuplot musu*, to refer to people who make a living by doing business. The Nuosu's historical hierarchies and the hierarchical structure of the government correspond with each other in many ways. However, the businessmen are difficult to be accommodated in either of the structures. The status of businessmen lacks the endorsement from any authority while they make substantial amounts of money by taking advantage of market economy. The categorisation of influential people is in a flux but from the perspective of *ndepggup* as well as many Nuosu, businessmen are speculators and profiteers who make money easily and spend money extravagantly, which implies a deficiency in their morality. The *ndepggup* I interviewed criticised these businessmen for "breaking the rules", in their words. In the reflection of *ndepggup*, the practice of bridewealth was once "original", authentic, a term used by *ndepggup* very often in their critique of the present and reminisces of a "better" and a more "moral" past.

In *ndepggup's* account, bridewealth practiced in the past means a token, an acknowledgement and a ritual which is morally binded. The significance of the bridewealth did not lie in the amount of bridewealth. From their perspective, some of businessmen paying unbelievably high level of bridewealth has caused "bad effects" among the Nuosu because it may have stimulated the competition among the Nuosu for building up or maintaining the prestige of their *cytvi*. However, *ndepggup* blame

the people of “danwei shangde” as the major reason for the inflation in bridewealth because these people are more influential within and between *cytvi* compared to businessmen.

Meanwhile, the focus of the *Ndepggup*'s critique of state sector employees reveals the consequence of superimposing bureaucracy on the kinship network. As discussed previously, the superimposition of state hierarchies on traditional hierarchies was rooted in the strategy that the CCP adopted when taking over Liangshan and building up its regime in the 1950s: the priority of the government at that time was to take over the area and so they gave state jobs to people in different *cytvi*. As one of my informants told me, the Nuosu once called those working for the state in the 1950s “red slaves” and made jokes about their “reform”. In their eyes, the reform simply was the change of ownership from indigenous nobles to the CCP. However, as the regime has penetrated into the area for more than half century, endorsement from the state has become the source which not only can change one's life and career, but also offers the possibility of defining oneself within a given *cytvi*, and accordingly, this provides for a chance of redefining the relationship between *cytvi*.

The superimposition of bureaucracy on traditional hierarchies enables commoners to have the opportunity to imitate the lifestyle of nobles of the past. As discussed in the chapter on the archival studies, the practice of bridewealth was associated with people of higher social ranks. As a matter of fact, before the 1950s, the exaction of larger amounts of bridewealth was the privilege of nobles. After that, the state became an external resource that the Nuosu, especially for those of lower

ranks, could resort to when trying to imitate the lifestyles of nobles. Therefore, more and more people have been willing to incur vast costs and pay “improvident” bridewealth to be “noble”, in other words, become “influential”. As I was told by my respondents, on many occasions, families paid or are paying a large amount of bridewealth, happy to leak out the information because the circulation of gossip helps to build up the families’ reputation.

As emphasised repeatedly during the negotiation for bridewealth that I attended, the two families reached an agreement that the amount “leaked out” to the public would be 300,000 CNY. The bride’s *furxga* brought up the suggestion first explaining that the father valued the prestige most, very much like all the other Nuosu men. The groom’s uncle agreed with the proposal saying they were happy to let others know that they are capable of paying such a high level of bridewealth and it also meant that they married a good girl from a decent family. The strategy of circulating “a specific number” of the bridewealth is welcomed by the families involved. For the people, the economic value of the bride is important as it contributes to perceptions of family conditions. However, what is still more important and what drives both families to play the game of numbers relates to the prestige of both families. The prestige cannot be built by oneself, but it exists only in other peoples’ accounts which rely on stories, episodes, and gossip circulating among people. The pursuit of prestige motivates the aspiration for a higher amount of bridewealth. The gap between the ideal and the practice yields the compromise between the publicly declared number and the real amount one pays.

In order to be paid as a bride from an “influential” family by the groom’s family, the most reasonable and effective strategy is for people to prove themselves to be

equally influential, which is why the *furxga* like Jiji and Muji would be the favourite choice for families preparing for advantageous marriages. First of all, they are from the same *cytvi*. It suggests they are from a prosperous *cytvi* with a larger group of people, even though it is unnecessary to have a *furxga* of the same *cytvi*. Secondly, but more crucially, both of them are “working for the state”, the most favoured category of Nuosu in terms of profession. Their professions, as a senior official and a judge, not only make them important people within their *cytvi* but also place them in a higher position during the negotiation. It needs pointing out that the groom’s family makes a living as a contractor of small construction projects and none of their invited guests have a “proper” job from the Nuosu’s perspective. The fundamental reason Muji and Jiji are respected, however, relates to their capacity to speak in a way that expresses Nuosu highest aspiration: both of them are equally capable of working in the environment dominated by Chinese as well as living their lives as members of Nuosu society. People like Jiji and Muji have the ability to address the problems and conflicts with their mastery and knowledge of two sets of rules.

Their roles as *furxga* unravel the myth of the seemingly easy process of negotiation. Muji promised Zziti that he would find a job for the groom and the news was also passed to the groom’s father. Without any reliable connection with people working for the state, it would be very difficult for the groom to find a proper job deserving of his college degree. It does not mean the money of bridewealth will buy him a job. How the groom gets a job reflects the principles of reciprocity between the Nuosu. The groom’s family pays a significant amount of bridewealth for marrying a girl from a decent family, and the bride’s family proves their social capacity and in turn

finds a job for the groom. Muji and the bride's father, as members of the same *cytvi*, have the responsibility of looking out for each other.

The story of Muji and Zziti is very common among the Nuosu, especially for people of same *cytvi* who are in a network of mutual assistance. It is important to point out that the realisation of the obligation within the *cytvi* also depends on the personal relationship. For example, Zziti played a significant role in taking care of Muji's father during his last days. Because of Zziti's help when Muji faced a most difficult time, their relationship became ever closer and Muji was obligated to reciprocate. The reciprocity can extend across time and more parties can be added to the circle of reciprocity. The preferred mode of building and maintaining reciprocal relationships is in fact the key to understanding contemporary Nuosu society.

In answering my questions about inflation, the *ndepggup* I interviewed explained that those working for the state set a wrong model for the Nuosu and the many cases of businessmen paying a large amount of bridewealth made the situation worse. They thought that these "*danweishang de*" (people working for the state) were the fundamental reason for the inflation. They told me that they had gathered with other *ndepggup* and influential people from big *cytvi* of the neighbouring counties and tried to make rules for a standard amount of bridewealth. However, unfortunately, the rules could not be applied in practice. Later in 2018, I was handed a file that shows the *Ndepggup's* continuing endeavour to "regulate" bridewealth (See Appendix V for the original file and the translation).

The document on the regulation of the inflation in bridewealth was issued by the Meigu *Ndepggup* Culture Association. Due to the efforts made by Nuosu elites,

scholars and local government officials, a trend has emerged – which can be traced back to the early 2000s – which emphasises Nuosu cultural heritage and which has spawned various associations related to Nuosu’s traditions across Liangshan, such as related to *bimox* (ritual practitioners) and *ndepggup*. These associations are formed within the bureaucratic structure of the government and affiliated to the local government. Though the activities held by the associations abide by state laws and regulations of the local government, they have certain flexibility to initiate projects which are designed by themselves. For example, in the case of regulating inflation in bridewealth payments, their efforts are welcomed equally by the local government and the Nuosu. The strategy of playing down the “legal” function of *Ndepggup* and representing it as a “culture” of the Nuosu served to reserve a legitimate space for *Ndepggup*. It is in this space that *Ndepggup* and customary laws survive as an alternative way to solve the Nuosu’s problem where state laws are not applicable or not satisfying to the Nuosu.

The document was written in the typical tone of any Chinese government document, like many other files and documents circulating among these kinds of associations. It was endorsed with a red “official” stamp which was also a form of endorsement any government file would use. To avoid breaking state laws, the file stated clearly that its objectives were guided by government policies. Even though the formality and legitimacy of the file were built upon the forms of expression and symbolism used by state institutions, the regulations on bridewealth were in fact rooted in the Nuosu’s view of themselves.

The file listed two standards of bridewealth and divided people into two groups, the employed and the unemployed. As we previously discussed, in terms of

profession, the Nuosu categorise themselves in four groups, people working for the state, businessmen, migrant workers and peasants. The classification in the file re-categorised these four groups into two, assigning the first three groups as the employed and the peasants were assigned to the unemployed. The classification reflects *Ndepggup's* critiques of the internal inequality in terms of social and economic sources available to Nuosu of different statuses. By setting two different standards of payments of bridewealth, higher for the employed and lower for the unemployed, *ndepggup* attempted to adjust the inequality caused by local historical and social conditions.

It also stated that in the process of enforcing the regulations, there would be no compensation in the case of *syggit*. As discussed, *syggit* is the suicide for which state laws are unable to provide a satisfactory solution but requires the highest level of intervention of *ndepggup* and *cytvi*. It is one of the "legal" fields where *ndepggup* have the power to respond to suicide and restore the damaged relations. The authorisation of the exemption from liability for bridewealth compensation in any suicide case reflects the *ndepggup's* firm determination in the implementation of the regulations.

The argument of some scholars as to the decaying traditional authority in Nuosu's society (Liu 2010) is not applicable to explain *ndepggup's* attempts of regulating bridewealth. The argument of seemingly decaying of local authority is rooted in the failure to understand "authority" as interpreted by the Nuosu. The *Ndepggup's* authority is based on the view that they are the people most knowledgeable of the "old lore". However, *Ndepggup* do not have a kind of authority that can be translated into Weberian power whereby one can attain one's goal over

the objections of others. The roles of *Ndepggup* are that of witnesses, meditators, and endorsers, and *Ndepggup* cannot veto, arbitrate, or enforce. This represents a performed *closed-end* system, where proper hierarchies can be assessed and appreciated, where what matters to the *cytvi* can be discussed and contextualised, and where the art of negotiation – whether argument, cunningness, eloquence, compromise, or concession—can be played out in skilful ways. The *Ndepggup* is present to make symbols symbolic, matters matter, and meanings meaningful. In a word, the *Ndepggup* is indispensable for the Nuosu to continue value long-cherished values.

I have attempted in this chapter to reveal the Nuosu's coping system to counter the humiliation of associating their ethnicity with backwardness, which is by legitimising their practices in synthesising the dual legal systems, state laws and "customary laws". The primordial and institutionalised ethnic identity of the Nuosu is the justification for the practice of bridewealth. It is the realisation of the value attached to be a "real" Nuosu. And this means to enter a marriage which is a "good match" validated by bridewealth. The value of bridewealth for Nuosu lies, firstly, in the means it provides to differentiate themselves from others. And this then strengthens the ethnic identity of Nuosu people as recorded in their generational history, reinforced in turn by the state's institutionalisation of *minzu*. This multiply-constituted identity is realised in the Nuosu's idealised and actual way of living a "decent" life that has come to represent what is most valued by Nuosu.

Through the *Ndepggup's* reflections on the inflation of bridewealth, we have seen that Nuosu society has been transformed from a slave-owned hierarchical *cytvi*

society into a society where state bureaucracy has been superimposed on kinship, generating further internal complexity through enforced Nuosu's incorporation into the state. On the one hand, we see an "over-inflation" of tradition through a widening geographic practice of bridewealth and a rise in the amount of money both expected and on offer. On the other hand, we also see a new social hierarchy whereby bureaucracy is superimposed on kinship, leading people of different statuses to manipulate the sources of being a "traditional" Nuosu while engaging with the state, economically or politically. As the guides and enforcers of Nuosu's values, *ndepggup's* reflections on their society and their efforts to regulate bridewealth have provided important insights about the significance, past and present, of bridewealth as a venue where the value of being a Nuosu and being a citizen of the state are contested and reflected in two sets of ideas: regarding Nuosu "legitimacy" and intrinsic challenges to the authority of the state.

## Conclusion

The thesis investigated contested meanings surrounding ethnopolitical discourses on inflation in the amount of bridewealth among the Nuosu people in contemporary Liangshan with a view to elucidating how ethnic minorities engaged with various development projects steered by the state. Across different historical periods and conditions, the state has treated the practice of bridewealth as a “problem” and in need of reform. Nevertheless, during the past two decades differences within Nuosu society in the amount of bridewealth that people have paid has cast light on the social divisions based on both the Nuosu’s genealogical history and the state’s local interventions. Studying bridewealth as part of the various development projects of the state as well as Nuosu’s reflections on their own society and their own solutions to “the problem” have enabled a deepened understanding of how development – as an idea, government policy and action – is intimately interwoven into people’s lives. To pursue research issues most thoroughly and efficiently, I used different methods to collect information from diverse sources, focusing on ethnographic fieldwork as well as a historical perspective.

The thesis studied “development” as a historical process and situated the practice of bridewealth within the state’s discourses of development during different periods. The practice of bridewealth was reified by the socialist reform and the state’s project of ethnic classification as a cultural trait contributing to the definition of Nuosu ethnicity in the 1950s. In the state development campaigns for poverty alleviation in the 2000s, the inflation in bridewealth was attributed to the “backwardness” of the Nuosu’s culture. Because of the high level of bridewealth, the Nuosu were accused of lacking economic “rationality”, which had hindered the social and economic

development. This thesis focused on these accusations against the Nuosu and the state's continuous attempts at regulating bridewealth, as an integral part of the state's development project, a process that entailed the "humiliation" of the ethnic other.

I have shown that the making of policies to regulate bridewealth, whether in the 1950s and 1960s or the 2000s, all entailed efforts to promote social development that involved the "humiliation" of the Nuosu. The "humiliation" refers to state-directed discourses that expressed hierarchies of cultural or social superiority and inferiority, created by the state to propel people to work for social change. The process of producing "humiliation" is tangible and manifest in a set of relational practices of the state, including investigating the Nuosu society, writing reports about them, and making policies and circulating documents. One of the far-reaching outcomes of the state-sponsored social investigations into the ethnic minorities in the 1950s is that Nuosu society is classified by the state as a slave society, which according to socialist evolution theory is ranked lower and as more backward than stages of development characterised as feudalism and socialism. The Nuosu, marked with the label of slavery, have ever since engaged in the persistent struggle to redress their popularly held "backward" and "barbarous" image.

The social classification is consolidated by various means, such as can be found in the writings of the Nuosu's culture and history, in national education, as well as in propaganda and the implementation of state policies. For example, Liangshan Yi Slave Society Museum (凉山彝族博物馆), with affiliation to the local government, which is located in Xichang and which opened its doors in 1985, shows its visitors "the historical trajectory of the Nuosu society from slavery to socialism". It has become the dominant trope representing Liangshan, not only to the tourists who flock to Xichang but also to

the Nuosu themselves. The “uneasy” and “shameful” past now has been set in a showcase, like the Museum, and the discourses of humiliation have become a set of standardised “knowledge” that has been indigenised by the Nuosu to talk about and reflect upon. It has also engendered mainstream Nuosu values and practices to counteract such humiliation.

By comparing the practice of bridewealth in different periods, linking changing practices to government regulations, this thesis sought to argue that the practice has become more prevalent in its scope and heightened in intensity during the 2000s. This development is due both to the socialist reform in the 1950s and to the persistent yearning of the Nuosu for living a dignified life.

The socialist reform initiated by the state to domesticate the “exotic people” reified bridewealth as an ethnic custom and associated it with the repugnant practices of exploiting classes and the deprivation of individual freedom. In the reports produced as an outcome of the social investigations in the 1950s, the practice of bridewealth was a practice exclusive to the Nuosu of higher ranks. This association of bridewealth with elite entitlements singled out the practice as the target of the socialist reform in the 1950s. The goal of the state-initiated socialist reform was to eliminate the class division that at certain levels overlapped with the intrinsic hierarchical social structure of the Nuosu.

However, similar to the hierarchical social structure of the Nuosu that found shelter within the government bureaucracy, the practice of bridewealth survived the socialist reform of the 1950s. It did so with a reduced economic value but with heightened symbolic meanings. It became a symbolic site of identity by accommodating the besieged values of Nuosu. More importantly, because

bridewealth became less expensive and less exclusive, the Nuosu of lower ranks were offered the opportunity to become “dignified” Nuosu, verified by having a marriage contracted by means of bridewealth. As early as the 1970s, the practice had become a practice of the majority of the Nuosu, and it was no longer a practice only associated with people of the higher ranks. The dismantling of the slave-owning social structure did not wipe out the Nuosu’s internal aspiration for upward mobility. The persistent aspiration to live a noble and dignified life is rooted in the strong ties between *cytvi* members, recorded in an expanding genealogical history and sustained by various *cytvi* activities. It can be argued that the socialist reform of Nuosu society offered Nuosu people unprecedented opportunities to elaborate historical, social hierarchies in a more fluid way.

It is thus that the realisation of the yearned-for identity of the Nuosu now has become the realisation of an identity that has its primordial foundation in the Nuosu’s genealogical history and an identity that comes into being through the impact of various state development projects. Using ethnographic materials, I examined how the practice of bridewealth evolved to become a significant means of realising the Nuosu’s value of being a “real” Nuosu, a “dignified” Nuosu, as understood in contemporary Liangshan society. Since the economic reforms started in the 1980s, the pursuit of social status as a dignified Nuosu has been refuelled by enriched resources available for the payment of bridewealth. The reification of the ethnicity of the Nuosu through the project of ethnic classification and other mechanisms employed by the state has now become irrefutable normality for living a Nuosu life. This process entails two extremes of societal attitude toward what has become the Nuosu identity. One is the above-mentioned generalised humiliation. It is very common to hear Chinese Han

referring to the Nuosu as *manzi* (蛮子, barbarian) behind the back of Nuosu people. One example comes from my conversation with a Han taxi driver in the downtown area of Xichang. He was driving me to a Nuosu beauty pageant that is held annually during *dutzie* (the festival of fire). He said, in a natural tone, these Nuosu girls were true beauties but unfortunately “barbarians are barbarians”.

Such generalised, even “naturalised” images of the Nuosu are prevalent in the eyes of Han Chinese living in contemporary Liangshan and neighbouring areas, and they have caused more and more serious conflicts between the Nuosu and the Han. During fieldwork, I met owners of restaurants who refused to hire Nuosu people, stating so in their public advertisement for employment; property owners who refused to let out or sell their places to Nuosu clients; businesspeople who refused to work with the Nuosu. Their answers to my inquiry into the degree of social distance they kept from the Nuosu reinforced the same prevalent message: because they are barbarians, and they are different.

In 2018, the owner of a restaurant in Xichang indicated in his recruitment advertisement that Nuosu applicants would not be considered, which provoked hundreds of Nuosu to smash the restaurant. Unfortunately, the attack turned out to be a case of mistaken identity; two restaurants of similar names had created confusion. The dramatic incident shows how the intensified prejudice between the communities has reached such a level of hostility that hard evidence has become unnecessary. People take recourse anyhow to direct action. Unlike the ethnic minorities who have an explicit political claim or engage in more public forms of resistance, conflicts involving people like Nuosu are largely overlooked in the policymaking of the state.

The continuous efforts by the state of promoting various development projects in ethnic areas like Liangshan have not always met the expectations of the designers of the projects, intending great cultural assimilation, acculturation, homogenisation or other similar processes of resolving differences. The imaginary “cultural melting pot”, a metaphor used by Chinese scholars (Hu and Hu 2011a; 2011b) who have committed themselves to find better solutions of solving “ethnic problems”, may not lead to the desired direction but instead cause explosive tension. In some cases, this may develop into violent conflicts between people of different ethnic origins. However, in other cases, the social practices, exemplified by the practice of bridewealth of the Nuosu, once used to differentiate people within Nuosu society, now has transvalued as an ethnic marker that differentiates the Nuosu from people of other ethnic identities. Paradoxically, the differentiation between people is facilitated by discourses and institutions of the state. Social practices as mundane as bridewealth, unlike religion, human rights and other sensitive fields that the state is determined to regulate, can be the convenient yet effective spaces for people to reclaim their dignity and status.

It is this insight that has led me to look at the other extreme, located at the opposite end of the generalised humiliating image of the Nuosu as “barbarian”, that is how Nuosu are striving to be the Nuosu they want to be, more than that, to become, in their own minds, dignified Nuosu. I have discussed what it means to be a “real” and dignified Nuosu through the ethnographic description of the negotiation of bridewealth and *ndepggup*’s reflections upon the practice and society as a whole.

The purpose of depicting the meeting to discuss bridewealth through a thick ethnographic account has been to uncover the ways that Nuosu justify their practice

of bridewealth and the inflation in bridewealth, that is, to gain a Nuosu perspective and way of seeing. The decoding of the scene or capturing of key moments of the meeting also rely on my research into other aspects of the Nuosu's life. I argued that the Nuosu's justification for the practice of bridewealth serves as their way of defending themselves against the humiliation. To counter humiliating charges made about their "backward ethnic custom", the Nuosu justify their practice by appropriating the discourses introduced by the state such as *minzu*, state laws, customary laws, ethnic minorities, and development. They emphasise their legitimised ethnic identity, the legal significance of bridewealth and the incapacity of state laws in encompassing the cultural diversity of the Nuosu. The state has become an interlocutor of sorts, its role interpreted by the Nuosu as facilitating the minutia of Nuosu's daily life.

Moreover, the marriage validated by bridewealth has been recast as the Nuosu's *jievi* (laws) which testifies to the "authenticity" of the Nuosu people collectively, not thus any longer the practice that was associated solely with people of higher ranks before the 1960s. The pursuit of representing oneself as "real" Nuosu is nurtured by the Nuosu's genealogical history and social memories. Moreover, *cytvi* activities in the past two decades have developed at an unprecedented level. The duplicate structures of governmental administration, the widely used cell phones, media, and various internet platforms, and the various ways of organising *cytvi* activities have strengthened the Nuosu's identification with their ethnicity, and their pride in what they consider to be a reinstatement of values affirming Nuosu identity. However, being a "Nuosu" is not based on a unilateral declaration of proclaiming one's choice. As discussed above, identity and belonging are forged in interaction with

external forces, the institutionalisation of *minzu* and sustained through state mechanisms. Therefore, in many cases, they are “required” to be Nuosu, for better or worse. For example, one needs to be verified as Nuosu with an identity card issued by the state to enjoy certain privileges, but one may, on the other hand, get eliminated in the selection process when searching for an ordinary job.

In the Nuosu’s justification of the practice of bridewealth, acknowledgement by the state reinforces their sense of entitlement. After all, their ethnic identity and customs were acknowledged by the state. In addition, the accusations popularly heard of the Nuosu commercialising marriage is countered by the Nuosu’s attribution of a core cultural value to the practice of bridewealth. Establishing marriage in a Nuosu way is to ensure that the marriage is a “good match” validated by bridewealth. Legitimacy for the practice comes furthermore from the synthesis of the dual legal systems, state laws and “customary laws”. Because, as held by my informants, state laws are not sufficient to validate and ensure a Nuosu marriage proper, the payment of bridewealth and its given implications provides a solution to safeguard legitimacy at the heart of the Nuosu value system. Moreover, what has come about is that under the mantle of the Nuosu’s notion of legitimacy, a combination of state laws, ethnic identity and customary laws, is forging the Nuosu ethnic identity. Nuosu and agencies of the state, in fact, combine to challenge the authority of the state at a local level.

Based on *ndepggup’s* reflections about the practice of bridewealth and their culture and society, I have argued that the impetus for the inflation in bridewealth arises from the complex overlay of new and evolving bureaucratic channels of class formation and existing kinship hierarchies. Because of the penetration of the central state administration into Liangshan and the assimilation of the local authorities into

the system of the state administration, new forms of authority emerged. The historical authority of Nuosu nobles, symbolically and materially anchored in marriage including in the practice of bridewealth, came to align itself with the authority granted by participation in government bureaucracy. A reconstruction of authority has thus taken shape specifically in the Nuosu's original sense of authority and the redistribution of state resources. The superimposition of government apparatus on traditional hierarchies, and the redefinition and reinterpretation of the "nobleness", are the critical perspectives and insights of my work, by which to understand the status quo of Liangshan society. These evolving dynamics of class formation have generated new pressures on a wider Nuosu population to demonstrate their respectability through the payment of bridewealth. It is thus that the practice of bridewealth among the Nuosu is not easily constrained or capped because the practice is integral to Nuosu authenticity and respectability.

My analysis of the inflation in bridewealth drew inspiration from my interactions with *ndepggup* I met during fieldwork. Because of their role as mediators between Nuosu people in disputes, *ndepggup* holds a "third-party" perspective on the Nuosu's society and culture. Moreover, because *ndepggup* lack a coercive power when it comes to the enforcement of laws, especially in circumstances where state laws are dominant and implemented through its various institutions, the "powerless" situation instead pushes *ndepggup* to engage more intensively with reflections on society at a more general level. Almost without exception, every *ndepggup* I interviewed reminisced about "the old times". In their words, it is the time when the Nuosu were better and more moral. The contrast between a better past and the "corrupted" present forms the foundation of *ndepggup's* reflections. The *ndepggup's*

critiques of “the present” extend to attributing the inflation in bridewealth to the “problematic” amount rather than to the practice itself. In their words, the practice itself is a tradition passed down from “the old times”, however, the inflation is caused by “the corrupted present”.

Both in relation to the government regulations on bridewealth and the Nuosu’s self-appraisal, bridewealth has been justified as a Nuosu custom that needs to be regulated given the severe inflation in the amount instead of abandoned completely. By problematising the amount instead of the practice and without setting a specific limit on the amount in the regulations issued by the local government, space for negotiation is reserved between policymaking and policy implementation. The political dictates in the forms of policy suggestions, regulations, and documents are not of an overwhelming force. Therefore, this leaves room for choice, to choose to act in the way they have acted, with much reflection and consciousness of the implications of their choice (Laidlaw 2002). The discursive space that the Nuosu have made for themselves exhibits the creativity and complexity of Nuosu’s pro-active engagement with “humiliation” - imposed on their culture by state developmental campaigns and public discourse, and it allows us to understand a creative reinstatement of core values through bridewealth.

There certainly is room for further research, particularly from the perspective of gender. Though the formal negotiations over the amount of bridewealth mostly involved with men, the absence of women’s voices does not suggest that women play a minimal role in the practice of bridewealth. On the contrary, according to materials gathered from my female informants and from written resources, Nuosu women have increasingly played a significant role in influencing family decisions. Moreover, Nuosu

women of today are given more opportunities to actively engage with *cytvi* activities which were exclusively for men few decades ago. It shows the transformation in the notions of the traditional patriarchy, a change happening across China (Santos and Harrell 2017). The changes in Nuosu's womanhood will continue make great influence on their perspectives on bridewealth, marriage, family and other aspects of their lives.

Above all, Nuosu women are equally active as men in defining, interpreting, and realising the identity of the Nuosu. Future research on their struggles of living as dignified Nuosu, more importantly, a dignified Nuosu women, could offer substantial criticism on gender, ethnicity and developmentalism. Ideas related to womanhood, such as independence, freedom, and equality that are defined in the modern sense and accompanied by various development projects, have been of great influence in the empowerment of women. However, it is critical to note that, from a historical and ethnographic perspective, the acknowledgement of the rights of women should not be undermined by an imaginary "universal" standard of women's rights. The discussions on gender issues promise further significant studies of women and development in the intersection of state control, developmentalist ideology and ethnic identity politics.

I conclude with a recent headline news which adds a further dimension to my contention that only a multi-faceted analysis can do justice to the rich spectrum of meanings attached to the practice of bridewealth. A delegate submitted a proposal about regulating bridewealth in rural China, mostly among the Chinese Han population, in the second session of the 13th National People's Congress in March 2019. The news made the headline in various popular media because the proposal

strongly echoed widespread complaints about the inflation in bridewealth in rural China. This news, in fact, has enhanced the significance of studying the inflation in Nuosu's bridewealth. If we make a comparison between the rising individualism noted in the practice of bridewealth among the Han in rural China (Yan 2005) and the strengthened collectivity that I have depicted in Nuosu's case, a number of conclusions can be drawn about how similar or different they are from each other, whether socially or culturally. However, something might be noted of still greater importance. Neither the Nuosu nor the agents of the state make reference to the fact that bridewealth is practised in so many different societies and that it is not a particular characteristic of Nuosu society.

Observation of this (intentional) omission has directed me to engage in discussion about what sustains people's endless pursuit of a good life. I believe that the fundamental values of being a good/decent human and living a good life, such as invested in the honour of family history, in prestige and fame of individuals and families, are the anthropologically universal concepts that provide us with a lens to study societies. In that sense, we can realise an important purpose of comparison. Value is a powerful concept that can generate new ethnographic questions and insights and can provide a crucial dimension to cultural critique (Otto and Willerslev 2013). I believe the notable increase in bridewealth and the trajectory of the "problematic" of bridewealth in the development discourse of the state hold theoretical significance relevant to the anthropological discussion of value.

As I stated in the introduction, humiliation may play a significant role in promoting radical social change (Sahlins 1990). However, "humiliation" may be indigenised by the people so humiliated (Robbins 2004) in the process of making

choices for themselves. This process can be explained with reference to Dumont's hierarchical notion of values. In such a hierarchical system of values, the "more valued elements tend to be more elaborately worked out, more rationalized as one might put it in Weberian terms, and to control the rationalization of less valued ideas such that they can only be worked out to the extent that they do not contradict more valued ones" (Robbins 2007: 297).

Social conditions in the early years of socialist reform reduced the economic value of the bride but highlighted the symbolic meaning of the practice of bridewealth. The practice has become a field invested with besieged values at the heart of what it means to be a Nuosu. The changes accompanied by the economic reform since the 1980s allowed people to get access to more material resources which boost the increase in the amount of bridewealth. Instead of investing in other activities or projects that can yield more economic value, a more "rational" way in the modern economic sense, the bridewealth is one of the biggest household expenses among the Nuosu. This brings insights into the Nuosu's rationalisation of things as more valued or less valued. The value placed on bridewealth in the face of economic counter arguments shows, I argue, how the personal actions of Nuosu people are informed by collective values, simultaneously creating values.

My research on the Nuosu's practice of bridewealth has highlighted how the Nuosu work with two essentially incompatible value systems: one relates to how the Nuosu speak to an identity that is in a constant flux of refashioning and reshaping, and the other relates to developmentalism that also requires a historical perspective. In the process of analysis, I have shown that money, in the form of bridewealth, becomes the instrument for fastening the ties and reinforcing cultural meanings, contradicting

the assumption that the inexorable spread of money destroys personal bonds or corrupts social values close to the heart of people. The thesis demonstrated that “humiliation” imposed by the state on the social and economic development of the Nuosu, which aimed to motivate social change, has not resulted in the depreciation of their value of being a “real” Nuosu. “The variants of development” that emerged in translating the planned template for development into practice are manifested in the diverse voices and the creativities found in the narrations and implementation of development projects. I focused on the Nuosu’s “creativity” in making their identity, a “self-made” ethnic identity by which to counteract humiliation and indigenise humiliation into a force of motivation. The inflation in bridewealth has transvalued the yearnings and desires of the Nuosu in their most pure manifestations, dramatically appreciating the value of being a Nuosu in the on-going, complex and multiply-layered encounter with state developmentalism.

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## Appendix I: Glossary

Note: I used Sichuan dialect and Nuosu *Hxop* (the language of Nuosu) in fieldwork. The important Nuosu terms are kept in the original forms in the thesis using italicised phonetic transcriptions with reference to Chinese-Yi dictionary published in 1978. Chinese terms in the thesis are also italicised but followed by Chinese characters.

ꞨꞨ	<i>bimox</i>	ritual practitioners
ꞨꞨ	<i>cytvi</i>	Nuosu lineage
ꞨꞨ	<i>dutzie</i>	the festival of fire
ꞨꞨ	<i>furxga</i>	matchmaker/go-between/
ꞨꞨ	<i>gaxy</i>	slaves living with their owners
ꞨꞨꞨ	<i>hmapzyt rre</i>	the part of bridewealth given to the bride's brothers from her father's side
ꞨꞨꞨ	<i>hmatmu tepyy</i>	the book of education and practice
ꞨꞨ	<i>jjevi</i>	laws
ꞨꞨ	<i>mgapjie</i>	slaves living within their own house
ꞨꞨ	<i>mop mgep</i>	the formal meeting of <i>cytvi</i>
ꞨꞨ	<i>ndepggup</i>	the Nuosu "customary laws" professionals
Ꞩ	<i>nuo</i>	nobles
ꞨꞨ	<i>nuosu</i>	the Yi people who live in Liangshan and the northeast part of Yunnan
Ꞩ	<i>nzy</i>	nobles with endorsements from the courts of Chinese ancient dynasties
ꞨꞨꞨ	<i>onyi rre</i>	the part of the bridewealth given to the bride's maternal uncle
ꞨꞨꞨ	<i>patvu rre</i>	the part of the bridewealth given to the bride's paternal uncle
ꞨꞨ	<i>quxnuo</i>	commoners
ꞨꞨ	<i>surxsha</i>	poor or poverty
ꞨꞨ	<i>suxyy</i>	leaders; superiors
ꞨꞨ	<i>syggit</i>	to die for
ꞨꞨ	<i>vit rre</i>	the part of the bridewealth given to one selected person from the same <i>cytvi</i> as the

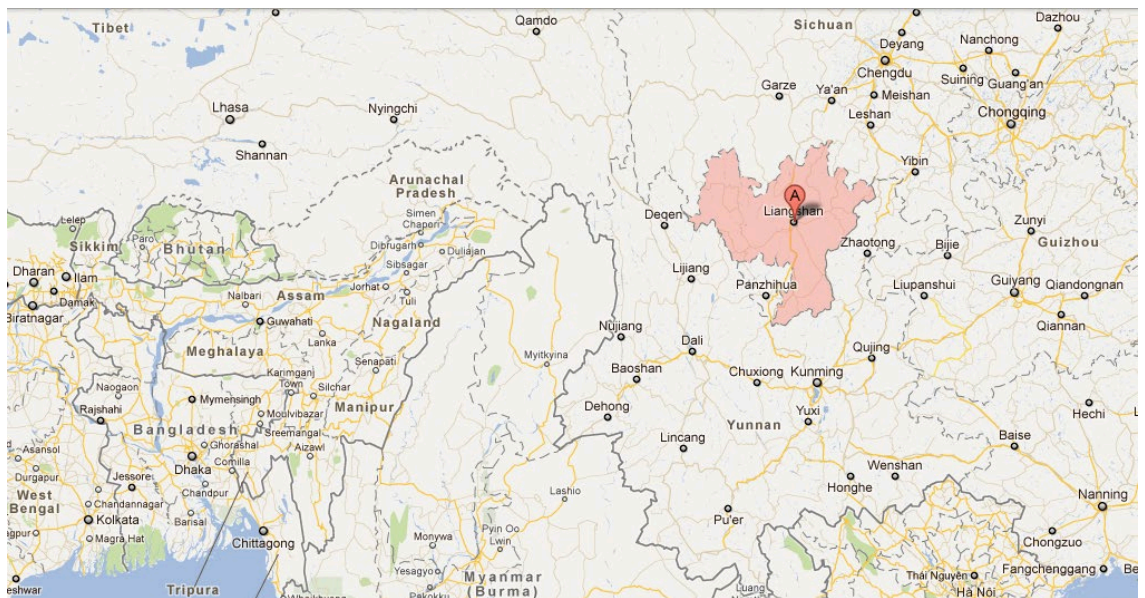
𐌆𐌿	<i>vupddu</i>	bride
𐌆𐌿 𐌆𐌿	<i>vuplot musu</i>	bone
𐌆𐌿 𐌆𐌿	<i>vussat rre</i>	businessmen
		the part of the bridewealth given to the bride's parents

## Appendix II: Map

Map 1 Liangshan Yi Autonomous Region on the map of China



Map 2 Liangshan Yi Autonomous Region and its neighbouring cities



## Appendix III: Questionnaire

To keep the consistency in the format of the thesis, I re-edited the format of the questionnaire but the contents remain unchanged.

### 凉山彝族彩礼调查

感谢您的参与！这是一项纯以学术为目的的研究，您的答案只会作为我博士论文写作的背景信息，所有信息都是匿名和保密的。您用最简单的方式填写您的答案，不愿意回答的问题请用×回答，不适用的问题请用○回答。如果您愿意以口头的方式提供更多的信息，请留下您的联系方式。感谢您的帮助！

1. 您家里有几口人？
2. 您的家庭近三年年均收入是？
3. 如果您已婚，您什么时候结婚的？
4. 您的婚姻涉及彩礼吗？
5. 如果您的婚姻涉及彩礼，金额是多少？
6. 您有子女吗？几个儿子几个女儿？
7. 如果您的子女已婚，什么时候结婚的？（请分别列出子女情况）
8. 他们的婚姻涉及彩礼吗？（请分别列出子女情况）
9. 如果他们的婚姻涉及彩礼，金额是多少？（请分别列出子女情况）
10. 如果您子女的婚姻涉及彩礼，您如何筹集支付？
11. 您所熟悉的亲戚朋友中，您觉得大概有百分之多少的人结婚涉及彩礼？
12. 您觉得彩礼是否必要？
13. 您对现在彩礼的多少有什么看法？

**[translation] Study on Bridewealth among the Nuosu in Liangshan**

Thank you for participating in the study, which is for academic purpose only. All your answers will only be used as background information for my DPhil thesis. All the information provided by you is confidential and anonymous. Please fill the answer in the simplest way as you like. Please use × under the questions you prefer not to answer. Please use ○ under the inapplicable questions.

If you would like to provide more information with an interview, please leave your contact.

Thank you for your help!

1. How many people do you have in your family?
2. How much is the annual household income of your family in the past three years?
3. If you are married, in which year did you get married?
4. Did your family pay bridewealth for your marriage?
5. If bridewealth was paid in your marriage, how much was the payment?
6. Do you have children? How many sons or daughters do you have?
7. If they are married, in which year did they get married? (please list them individually)
8. Was bridewealth paid in their marriages? (please list them individually)
9. If bridewealth was paid in their marriages, how much was the payment? (please list them individually)
10. If you paid bridewealth for your children's marriages, how did you pay bridewealth?
11. How many people of your relatives and friends do you think paid bridewealth, in terms of percentage?
12. Do you think bridewealth is necessary?
13. How do you think of the amount of today's bridewealth?

## Appendix IV

### F1 The Increase in Bridewealth

Year		1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2013	Increase (times)
County									
Xide	T	1000	2200	3000	20000	60000	120000	300000	300
	R	600	1000	1600	8000	16000	40000	160000	266.6
Yuexi	T	1000	2000	10000	30000	50000	120000	250000	250
	R	600	1000	6000	10000	20000	60000	150000	250
Ganluo	T	600	1200	2000	5000	6000	80000	200000	333.3
	R	300	600	1200	2600	3000	30000	68000	226.6
Mianning	T	600	1200	2000	5000	30000	80000	300000	600
	R	300	600	1200	2500	15000	20000	150000	500
Puge	T	2000	2500	25000	30000	70000	200000	300000	150
	R	800	1000	1200	10000	30000	80000	150000	187.5
Ningnan	T	1500	4000	6000	10000	40000	120000	300000	200
	R	One wool coat	1000	2000	5000	20000	60000	150000	500
Butuo	T	1500	2000	3000	15000	35000	200000	280000	186.6
	R	800	1000	1500	8000	20000	70000	180000	225
Zhaojue	T	1000	2000	3000	15000	50000	200000	300000	300
	R	600	1000	1500	8000	10000	600000	150000	250
Meigu	T	1000	2000	4000	50000	70000	200000	280000	280
	R	700	1000	2000	20000	30000	100000	100000	142.8
Mabian	T	600	1500	2000	7000	15000	50000	60000	100
	R	600	1000	1600	4500	12000	18000	19000	316.6

### F2 The Extreme Case of Bridewealth

COUNTY	Xichang	Xide	Yuexi	Ganluo	Mianning	Puge	Ningnan	Butuo	Zhaoju	Meigu	Mabian
(thousand)	2000	800	500	300	700	500	500	630	500	300	300

### F3 Local Income

The data on local income is from <http://tjj.lsz.gov.cn/sjfb/lsnds/tjnj2016/>, the official data released by the Liangshan Prefectural Bureau of Statics.

A\* the per capita net income of rural residents (in CNY)

B\* the per capita disposable income of urban residents (in CNY); the data in 2005 is unavailable.

	2005		2010		2013		2015	
	A*	B*	A	B	A	B	A	B
Liangshan	2438	7496	4565	14879	7359	21699	9422	24084
Xichang	3426	N.A.	6237	17539	10340	25819	13620	29040
Xide	1873	N.A.	3203	12279	4650	17459	6347	19217
Yuexi	2022	N.A.	3349	13157	5213	18816	7023	20580
Ganluo	1606	N.A.	2884	13541	4597	18872	6280	20709
Mianning	2925	N.A.	5208	13748	8498	19821	11156	22020
Puge	1944	N.A.	3724	14479	5562	19331	7454	21049
Ningnan	2853	N.A.	5516	13665	9107	19882	11914	22117
Butuo	1575	N.A.	3026	14104	4704	19630	6386	21325
Zhaojue	1648	N.A.	3143	12892	4919	18524	6675	20186
Meigu	1601	N.A.	2926	13614	4556	18683	6246	20384

## Appendix V

### 美姑县德古文化协会关于在 婚丧习俗中养成“厉行节约反对浪费”习惯的规定

为进一步贯彻落实中共美姑县委、美姑县人民政府有关政策，引导老百姓在婚丧习俗中养成“厉行节约 反对铺张浪费”的良好习惯，美姑县德古文化协会经过民主协商，作出如下规定：

一、丧葬场所禁止燃放烟花，违者处五千元罚款。

二、岳父母去世时，女婿家带牛不得超过两头，违者处一万元罚款。

三、关于婚姻身价钱，没有工作的限在十万元以内，有工作的限在二十万元以内。违者，男、女双方各处一万元罚款。

四、出现违反以上规定的情况时，由古候曲涅管理小组派监督人员处理落实，如处理过程中出现有人死给监督人员情况，监督人员不赔偿人命金，但违反本规定的当事者该处罚的照样处罚，绝不迁就。

五、以上规定由二〇一八年五月二十四日古候曲涅共同研究决定，二〇一八年六月十七日起正式生效，大家都要按规定办事。

二〇一八年六月十七日



[Translation]

**Regulations on Forming the Habit of “Enforcing Thrift and Opposing Waste” in the Funeral and Wedding Expenditures by the Meigu *Ndepggup* Culture Association**

To implement the related policies of Meigu County CCP Committee and Meigu County People’s Government and to guide the people to form the habit of “enforcing thrift and opposing waste” in the funeral and wedding expenditures, the Meigu *Ndepggup* Culture Association lays down the following regulations based on democratic consultation:

1. No firework is allowed at funerals. The fine for violation is 5000 CNY.
2. No more than two cattle are allowed as the sacrifice contributed by the son-in-law to the parent-in-law at the funeral. The fine for violation is 10,000CNY.
3. The upper limit for bridewealth is 100,000 CNY for the unemployed and 200,000 CNY for the employed. The fine for violation is 10,000 CNY for both sides.
4. Any violation of the above is under the supervision and execution of the management team of Gguho Qotniep <sup>1</sup>. The members of the team are exempted from responsibility in any case of *syggit* occurred in the execution of the regulations and the violators are bound by the fine without any exemption.
5. The regulations were made on 24 May 2018 by the agreement reached within the Gguho Qotniep with the effective date of 17 June 2018. All informed must be abided by the regulations.

Meigu *Ndepggup* Culture Association

17 June 2018

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<sup>1</sup> *Gguho* 𑄀𑄁 and *Qotniep* 𑄂𑄃 were two clans migrated to Liangshan in ancient times, according to the Nuosu’s classics 𑄄𑄅𑄆 *Hnewo Tepy* (*The Book of History*), who were the ancestors of the Nuosu living in Liangshan today. *Gguho Qotniep* is used here as an alternative term referring the Nuosu people.