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## A Precarious Rite of Passage in Postreform China:

Heroin Use among Nuosu Youths on the Move

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*This article employs the rite of passage concept to analyze why and how heroin use and a subsequent HIV/AIDS epidemic have taken hold among minority Nuosu (Yi) young men in Southwest China. It juxtaposes structural inequalities and socio-cultural particularities in social suffering among Nuosu youths as they attempt to create meaningful lives in China's market reform era. Since the 1980s, young Nuosu have ventured out to Han-dominant cities in search of fun and opportunities. This movement has become a new foray into manhood and inadvertently set up their encounter with heroin and the subsequent introduction of HIV into their hometowns. The article is based on my 20-month ethnographic fieldwork in Limu, a mountainous Nuosu community in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, between 2002 and 2009. [rite of passage, substance use, AIDS, youth, China]*

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I began using drugs at the age of 16 when I went out for fun. At the time, everybody did that, and I thought that was what men should do. So I also wanted to be a man like them. I began stealing the next year and was caught at once. Ha! I came of age in prison. Many young men like me all came of age in jail.

—Mahxi Bburddur, 2005, 28 years old

This article examines a new rite of passage in post-1978 China, one that unfortunately presents significant health risks to the Nuosu young men navigating through it. *Rites of passage*, a key concept in sociocultural anthropology on life-course transition, provides an analytical framework with which we can understand the life journey of Nuosu youths in recent decades in a nearly uniform manner. This journey, which introduces them to heroin use and other illicit activities, has brought many social problems to their mountainous hometown, including AIDS.

In 2001, the China-UK HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project (hereafter the China-UK Project), a collaboration between the Chinese government and the British government's Department for International Development (DFID), began to investigate the state of HIV infection in Liangshan Prefecture, home of the minority Nuosu in Sichuan Province. Its initial report revealed that the Nuosu, who constituted less than 3 percent of the provincial population, nevertheless comprised a stunning

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59.56 percent of the province's HIV infection cases. The vast majority of these cases were found among young men in their twenties to forties who had a history of heroin use (China-UK Project 2001:6-8).

By analyzing how the spread of HIV has been an unforeseeable outcome of a life-course transition among the Nuosu youth, this article makes explicit that health is both a "social indicator" and part of the "social process" of inequality (Kleinman et al. 1997:ix). The tragic turn of these young men's shared behaviors reveals how people's perceptions and responses to a changing society may sometimes clash with the macro sociopolitical environment. The spread of disease along certain social fault lines around the globe has prompted anthropologists to take up theoretical orientations like "political economy" and "structural violence" to point to the many guises of inequality that dog socioeconomically disadvantaged people and cause adverse effects to their health (e.g., Farmer 1992; Farmer et al. 1996; Parker 2001; Schoepf 2001; Singer 1998). On the basis of long-term ethnographic fieldwork, including in-depth interviews with current and former drug users in a Nuosu township in Liangshan for an accumulated 20 months between 2002 and 2009, this article responds to the aforementioned theoretic orientations and further zooms in on the individuals' yearning and explorations of life. The intricate relationships among individual desires, sociocultural factors, and a changing political economy are critical to understanding Nuosu youth's self-formulated rite of passage in China's market-reform era.

### An Ethnographic Approach to Drug-Related Rites of Passage

The term *rites of passage* has a long history in anthropology, and yet it may still provide fresh insights into our understanding of contemporary social change. Arnold van Gennep (1960) first developed this concept to analyze the interlocking relationships between society and individuals' changing life stages. He showed that all rites of passage are marked by three distinct phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. When people are removed from their normal structural positions, they are separated from the conventional values, norms, sentiments, and practices associated with those positions. This is followed by the acquisition of new societal knowledge and then being reincorporated with newly gained status and rights and duties. The concept was further elaborated by Victor Turner (1967), who analyzed the processual changes in the individual's status, a condition that he called "liminality." During their liminal phase people are both forced and encouraged to reflexively examine themselves and their own society and culture. In other words, liminality is at heart "a stage of reflection" (Turner 1967:105). Anthropologists have mainly used these concepts to describe institutionalized transitional rituals in preindustrial societies, although Turner argued that such processes and changing relations are found in all types of societies.

The utility of using the rites of passage approach for considering the Nuosu situation is twofold. First, this approach suggests useful comparison between the Nuosu and Jeffrey Arnett's theorization of emerging adulthood, which sheds light on a new life stage for young people from the late 20th century onward (Arnett 2004). Arnett suggests that, owing mainly to extended schooling and postponed marriages, American young people today have a longer transitional period than their parents

did a generation ago. He further points out that this “emerging adulthood” consists of five characteristics shared by young Americans between the age of 18 and 29: identity exploration, instability, being self-focused, feeling in-between, and seeing this stage as the age of possibilities (Arnett 2004:8). Arnett, a psychologist, claims this new phase has been ignored or neglected in the discipline’s conceptualization of human development in the United States. This phenomenon, however, is not entirely new in the Nuosu context, and it has metamorphosed as the social environment changed. Seeing this transition in a cross-cultural framework, we may grasp that it—whatever we call it in a specific context—is inevitably enmeshed in a changing world and must draw our attention to those changes and their social implications.

Second, the rites of passage approach encourages examination of the research subjects’ activities and the significance of gender in this transitional process. Initiation to substance use, for instance, has often been linked to the construction or reinforcement of young people’s gender identity, and this association is particularly common between alcohol or tobacco use and masculinity (Harnett et al. 2000). For example, Robb (1986) describes smoking among many Western adolescent males as an attempt to acquire adult status in advance, an “anticipatory rite of passage.” Likewise, as Share notes (Tilki 2006), for Irish youths the first alcoholic drink taken in a pub signals “coming of age” and acceptance into male company. Harnett and colleagues (2000) also use the youth transition framework to identify eight types of drinking, because once people are initiated to alcohol, their consumption patterns change as they age.

The role changes entailed in life transition may also present a collective image of local users who respond haphazardly to external historical and sociocultural forces. For instance, Marshall (1979) argues that young Trukese men’s alcohol consumption is imbued with changing local meanings that are coincidental to life-stage transformations and intertwined with the local history of colonialism. Trukese had no alcohol until Western traders began to peddle firearms and firewater there in the early 1890s. After a long colonial period, “The nineteenth-century stereotype of the fearless Trukese warrior has been replaced by the twentieth-century stereotype of the fearsome Trukese drunk” (Marshall 1979:vii). Likewise, Gutmann (1996) analyzes Mexican working-class men and shows that drinking has been associated with different life roles—as friends, husbands, and fathers—that display a variety of masculinities. Those local masculine behaviors may further mix with globalized, and later relocalized, cultural symbols of masculinity such as Rambo (Gutmann 1996:6). In a different arena, Kohrman (2007) looks into the “mass death” caused by nicotine-related lung cancer among Chinese men. Behind this troubling phenomenon is the Chinese government’s long-term reliance on tobacco as a tax revenue generator. Chinese men often begin their daily consumption of cigarettes during young adulthood, and cigarette exchange and smoking together have become part and parcel of daily male sociality. In a nutshell, alcohol and tobacco as licit substances have a long history of political sanction and commercial marketing worldwide, and their availability has made them an often-integral part of youth’s pursuit of manhood (Ellickson et al. 2005; Stebbins 2001).

In contrast, research on the use of illicit, highly addictive drugs such as heroin and cocaine often directs our attention to the users’ marginality or social exclusion, rather than seeing them as also moving through a life-course transition

(e.g., Bourgois 2003; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; MacDonald and Marsh 2002). Perhaps the illegality and detrimental effects of such substances have dominated our perceptions of them. Besides, although all substance users go through similar life stages—youth (or emerging adulthood), adulthood, marriage, and so forth, drug users may not share clearly visible markers of changing status because of the clandestine nature and disruptions such practices entail. Users' poignant narratives and reflections on their initiation, entanglement, and withdrawal from illicit drugs have been the common focus of drug-related research, as has the way political economic forces inevitably turn already marginalized people into an invisible underclass. The illicitness of drugs and the powerful dependency they produce greatly prolong their users' transitional process and make their miseries a "privatized suffering" (Singer 2006).

Compared with the above lines of research on licit and illicit substances, the Nuosu case stands apart because young Nuosu's new rite of passage developed in tandem with a salient transformation of value judgments around opiates in local society. In China today heroin is perhaps the most serious illicit drug. According to criminal law, conviction for trafficking or trading heroin of 50 grams or more carries a death sentence. Given this, we may wonder at the sudden explosion in its use among the Nuosu and how they grapple with it during this period of life transition. To use heroin requires no strong will, but the impetus to stop using must come largely from within the self (Brown et al. 1971). Users' reflections on their intoxicated life reveal how they are induced—both by forces in the macro environment and by their own will—to fight their addiction and move on to a new life situation.

Chinese researchers have produced an array of epidemiological and public health studies on heroin-related HIV/AIDS. Most of their subjects are sequestered in governmental facilities such as drug rehabilitation centers, prisons, or harm-reduction programs (Choi et al. 2006; Han and Gong 2002). Because of heroin's illegality, most users remain invisible or hard to reach, which presents significant obstacles to researchers or outreach workers who can spend only short periods of time trying to access this clandestine population. Although government-sponsored research may describe general behavioral or demographic patterns among users, it often fails to provide an understanding of their behaviors and subjective experiences that yields sociocultural and political-economic meanings. Ironically, this type of contextualized data is crucial to intervention planning and implementation among the targeted population and community.

The rites of passage concept I use to interpret this life journey of Nuosu youths may not be recognized by the young men themselves. They do not use such terms to describe their exploration of life, yet they do often explain their thinking and conduct collectively: "Every *nawawa* [boy or young man] went out" or "Almost none of the young men here has never had a taste of heroin." Therefore, as a researcher trying to grasp the implications of a nearly uniform behavior pattern, I can fruitfully unpack the Nuosu experience in the course of post-1978 China's whirlwind modernity drive by invoking the inherited wisdom of anthropology.

I begin by analyzing two historical moments, the early 1950s and the 1980s, to explain why heroin use became popular and of signification among Nuosu youths. The reckless acceptance of this substance has been coincidental to the footloose

adventures of Nuosu youths in Han Chinese–dominant cities. Significantly, their embarkation on this particular life-course transition has also coincided with China’s entry into the new global market economy. Meanwhile, local historical continuities, ruptures, and cultural meanings remain important in this astounding transition process.

## Methods

My exploration of this new Nuosu rite of passage took place in the Limu basin, at an elevation of 1,900 m, in Liangshan Prefecture. Liangshan is home to nearly two million Nuosu, identified as the Yi nationality by the state in the 1950s, who mainly occupy the high hills in southwestern Sichuan Province (Harrell 2001; Sichuan Sheng Renkou Pucha Bangongshi 2002). A traditionally Nuosu—and hence “backward”—area in the eyes of the Chinese state, Limu has been among the worst heroin- and HIV-hit localities in the prefecture and the province at large.

The over 20 months I spent in Limu included the entire year of 2005 and annual short visits, mostly in the summer, between 2002 and 2009. During those stays I was able to participate in local community life and conduct interviews with local Nuosu involved in sensitive activities. In addition to my daily conversations with local people, I conducted in-depth interviews with 36 former and current drug users, aged mostly between 20 and early forties, who had resettled or returned to Limu during my stay, along with other locals, including government officials, traditional leaders, and health workers. The drug users may have been HIV-positive migrant workers or drifters. My open-ended interviews with them focused on recalling their lives at home and in the cities, where they had encountered heroin. I identified these informants through the snowball sampling method, which is particularly well suited for the study of hard-to-reach people (Bernard 2002). I also constructed life histories of six among the 36 drug-using informants, although they are too long in their entirety to be used here. By expanding the age brackets of my informants, I was able to reconstruct trends in heroin use between the 1990s and 2000s. Men who started using drugs in their late teens or twenties in the early 1990s had entered their thirties or forties in 2005. A few minors also used drugs, but I did not focus on them because they were usually away from home. I did, however, manage to meet some of them when I visited Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, which is one of the big cities where itinerant Nuosu people sojourn.

Comprehensive public information about heroin use in Limu may not exist, owing to the clandestine nature of drug use. To compensate for this deficiency, based on my rapport with the local residents who were my neighbors and with the assistance of a former drug user who had good local connection, I conducted a door-to-door survey of all 68 households in the *she* (the lowest administrative unit, below the village) where I resided in June 2005. Despite its small scale, this survey has enabled me to extrapolate the unit’s general conditions—conditions that were, I believe, applicable to other communities in Limu. My structured survey questions included the residents’ migration and drug-use history, jail sentences, and the whereabouts of absent family members.

The narratives and experiences I record below were primarily collected in 2005, unless otherwise noted. To preserve confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for my

informants and localities within Liangshan. Through this ethnographic approach, as Agar (1986) puts it, I aim at mediating between the worlds of the readers and the social world of Limu to provide an empathetic understanding of its young men's behaviors that unfortunately present high risks to local public health.

### The Nuosu Historical Background

A sketch of the dramatic social changes encountered by the Nuosu in the 20th century helps explain the social environment in which young men must navigate during their life-course transition. Over the mere half-century since the 1950s, the great majority of Nuosu have experienced three distinct societal formations: nonstate autonomy (pre-1956), socialist collectivity (1956–78), and market capitalism (1978–present).

Nuosu's political autonomy before the 1950s, despite its close proximity to the ever-expanding Han-dominant state, was strengthened with the introduction of poppy planting around 1910 (Zhou 1999). The poppy farms generally belonged to a small group of powerful Nuosu noblemen who used opium to trade with the Han, most importantly to acquire guns, rifles, and bullets at the ethnic borderland (Lin 1961). Opium was considered a desirable luxury good whose ownership and consumption were associated with high social status and wealth, as indicated by a Nuosu folk saying, "Opium is the candy of *nzymo* (traditional rulers) and *nuo* (aristocrats)." This conception of opium as something desirable remains part and parcel of contemporary Nuosu reminiscences about their glorious past (Liu 2011).

The enormous power wielded by the Nuosu, thanks in part to their opium trade with the Han, vanished with the establishment of the new Chinese state after 1949. The Nuosu were forcibly incorporated en masse into the socialist state in 1956 when both opium production and their indigenous way of life were abolished, to be followed by two decades of agricultural collectivization (ca. 1956–78). The Nuosu surrendered their political autonomy under China's socialist experimentation, but they remained virtually stagnant owing to the limited opportunities for social and geographic mobility in their remote mountains. Only with the onset of market reforms in 1978, as the effects of globalization gradually penetrated into rural China, did the Nuosu's horizons begin to broaden. It was at this historical juncture that young Nuosu men embraced the new opportunities for geographic mobility to strike out beyond the confines of Nuosuland.

China's post-1978 market reforms have resulted in the growth of migration from rural areas to the cities (Zhang 2001). Since the 1980s, one by one and then cohort by cohort, Limu's young men have ventured out of Liangshan in search of fun and opportunities. Unlike typical Han peasant migration, Nuosu youths who ventured out before the late 1990s mainly engaged in a circular migration of short intervals. They generally did not spend long stretches away from Liangshan but returned home frequently according to farming and family ritual schedules or simply by their own decision. As urban sojourners, they went to cities mainly to "see the big world" and "have fun." With their newly gained freedom of mobility, Nuosu youths have reconfigured old social dramas that inspired them to undertake their own audacious adventures. Prior to 1956, the best way to demonstrate one's masculinity was to engage in feuds with rival lineages or wars with neighboring ethnic groups.

Hunting and martial skills played an important role in Nuosu boys' and men's daily lives (Ma 2006). In the postreform 1980s and 1990s, the most courageous Nuosu youths were those who dared to explore the world beyond their hometowns. They responded to the allure of cities, participating in risk-taking behaviors and developing abilities to cope with difficulties before finally, willingly, ending their transitional youthful journeys. Yet these daring explorations often ended in trouble, brought about through drug use or other criminal activities.

## A Convoluted Transition Process

### *Adventurous Youths on the Move*

Short agricultural seasons in the mountains and the limited arable land left local young men often idle, which in turn fueled their desire to explore the world outside. China's gradual relaxation of restrictions on geographical mobility in the early 1980s made it possible for them to pursue their footloose fantasies.

Many men currently in their thirties or forties went through tough times on their first city sojourns in the 1980s and early 1990s. Mostly unschooled and unfamiliar with Han Chinese languages, those who landed the cities quickly found that social and economic challenges loomed large. In those early times, they had few established social networks or ways to sustain a livelihood outside Liangshan. After quickly wiping out their meager cash reserves, some youths managed to arrange transportation back home, while others resorted to burglary and theft to survive in the city.

These routes to quick and easy money excited many young men, and theft and burglary soon became commonplace enterprises among the floating youths. Peers followed peers in learning and practicing these trades. Methods of illicitly obtaining money in anonymous Han cities soon became widely known in Limu, and youths who had yet to migrate were fully aware of them. Sometimes it was the sheer appeal of these audacious activities that drew opportunistic young men to the cities.

Theft and burglary were not merely a means for getting by in a new environment; they also manifested the contentious Nuosu-Han relationship and became the youths' preferred way of exhibiting their manliness. In rural Nuosu society, stealing is an extremely shameful act, yet Limu young men justified this behavior in the city because "It's a place of the Han people." The old Nuosu idiom, "Looting and devouring the Han is as enjoyable as eating a sweet radish," expresses a telling sentiment. The liminal status of Nuosu youths away from home actually exempted them from the moral strictures of their own society. The demonstration of provocative masculinity among the Nuosu youth is similar to Glendiot shepherds' practice of goat theft as an informal initiation to manhood, one that pits a marginal community against the bureaucratic Greek state (Herzfeld 1985). Nuosu youths' behaviors are analogous to those of Glendiot shepherds, which aim at "being good at being a man" instead of "being a good man" (Herzfeld 1985:16).

Acquiring material success in an exotic place was an accepted way to demonstrate one's masculinity among the Nuosu traditionally, and this practice has been renewed in the current market-oriented society. When Nuosu migrants brought home novelties such as cell phones for themselves and family members from distant

cities, they became role models for younger people who had yet to venture out. Migrating youths showed off city styles and affluence to hometown peasants; they typically flaunted being more modern, more sophisticated, and better informed as well. Young boys followed them about and listened to their tales of the city with adoring gazes.

The Limu basin area has been one of the major localities of out-migration from Liangshan since the 1980s, and the local government has relied on community leaders for information about youth migration. A few lineage headmen told me that by 2005 over 70 percent of the young men from their villages had headed out at least once and that out-venturing is ongoing. By a rough estimate, over 600 young people (mostly men) from the three villages of the Limu basin, with a total population of approximately 4,000, had had migration experience by 2005. My own house-to-house survey in one neighborhood revealed that only 11 of the 53 male residents between 15 and 40 years of age had never migrated. Among those who had yet to venture out, nine were in their late teens and expressed envy at their predecessors' boldness and pursuit of adventure.

### *The Lure of Drugs*

Market reform has brought resurgence in illicit drug use in Liangshan, which sits close to the porous Chinese border with the Golden Triangle (Zhou 1999). When drifting Nuosu youths first encountered heroin in the early 1990s, they called it *yeyi*. In Nuosu language, *yeyi* originally meant opium, but now it also denotes heroin. The wealth, power, and prestige of earlier Nuosu noblemen, gained mostly through opium trade with the Han before the 1950s, obviously influenced the adventurous youths' ready acceptance of heroin. "This 'medicine' is as good as *yeyi* (i.e., opium) in making you feel good and happy," a former Nuosu user recounted. Like the opium of old times, heroin soon became a measure of style, status, contentment, and economic success among fun-seeking young men in the mid-1990s.

Once young migrants brought heroin back to Limu for their own use or for sharing with friends, it quickly gained currency in their hometowns. Some young people began using it even before they embarked on migration. In the Limu basin, only a handful of households remained uninvolved with the coveted substance. According to a village headman, heroin use grew quickly in Limu around 1995, a year when his village of roughly 1,200 residents had over 200 users, nearly all of them young men. Another village cadre estimated that in 1995 only three out of a total 78 households (or 3.8 percent) in his neighborhood had no family members involved with heroin use or trade (Zhang n.d.). My own 2005 survey further illustrated the arc of the Limu basin's heroin problems: 38 out of 53 men between the ages of 15 and 40 had once used, or were still using, drugs.

By the mid-1990s, heroin had become a popular and fashionable form of entertainment in Limu—as among drifting Nuosu migrants in the cities—and was also considered a treat for guests. The role of heroin in Nuosu male sociality and leisure at that point was comparable to pervasive cigarette sharing and smoking among contemporary Chinese men (Kohrman 2007). Peer pressure encouraged young men to share heroin, as one former user recalled:



Nearly all young men at that time used yeyi. Anyone who didn't use got no respect from his friends. When you treated friends to meat, they would not be pleased. When you treated them to liquor, they would not be pleased. But when you treated them to yeyi, they were pleased.

Unlike opium, which at one time brought awesome power and fortune to Nuosu elites in relation to Han people, heroin has only strained this already marginalized community. Initially, young Nuosu had no idea of heroin's powerful addictiveness. As growing dependency forced many of them to obtain money for drugs by whatever means they could, they began to engage in more audacious activities that place themselves at a greater risk of being captured or injured. Numerous Nuosu youths were jailed during their journeys for pilfering and drug sale or use. In Limu everyone knows who has been behind bars, because so many local young men engaged in similar delinquent activities. As years pass, many Limu men, now in their thirties and forties, often use their bouts of imprisonment as time markers for life events. Sometimes their stories carry a tinge of nostalgia for those adventurous days. The narrative of Mahaxi Bburddur, 28 years old in 2005, and partly quoted at the beginning of the article, succinctly describes the wayward youthful mentality:

The first time I was in jail, I swore I wouldn't steal again. I wanted to stay home and be a good son. But after I was set free and saw my friends venturing out, I simply forgot all those vows. The scenery away from home is better than that at home. It's more fun out there. Even if I can't find money there, I still want to go. . . . Going out and stealing, to me, is just as commonplace as farmers working the farmland. . . . I may stop going out when I turn old and no longer energetic, probably around 30 or 40.

#### *From Drug Use to Other Troubles*

Heroin has the highest dependency potential of all common drugs, licit or illicit (Ray and Ksir 2004:37). Its users are eventually forced to continue the habit out of fear of the painful withdrawal symptoms that occur after its euphoric effect subsides; this cycle commonly leads to increased dosage to satisfy the user's craving. Better-off users might smoke heroin several times a day. For many poor addicts, a common approach to managing their addiction was to adopt the delivery method of injection. Satisfying the craving through injection requires much less of the drug, as testimony from one injecting informant revealed: "You need 100 yuan to smoke yeyi, but only 20 yuan to inject it."

Injecting heroin, however, also increases the chances of spreading blood-borne diseases through the sharing of contaminated needles and syringes. The first injection of the drug may be riskier than subsequent injections, because new users often lack experience in doing proper injections or do not possess their own injection equipment (Sherman et al. 2002). Reasons other than financial considerations may also complicate the practice of injection. For example, needle sharing is sometimes seen as a way of displaying one's masculinity (Choi et al. 2006). Ethnic boundaries may also influence the practice of sharing needles. As one Nuosu drug user stressed, "I have many Han friends, but I never shared needles with them. Nuosu and Han

don't use drugs together and don't share needles." In brief, various reasons probably contributed to careless behaviors that paved the way for the spread of the AIDS virus among Nuosu injectors. According to a survey of 1,649 arrested users in six rehabilitation centers in Sichuan Province, 48.8 percent injected heroin and the majority of these were poor peasants, illiterates, and young men (China-UK Project 2001:12). HIV infection among heroin injectors in Sichuan exploded between 1991 and 2003, with an average annual growth rate of 97.23 percent (Choi et al. 2006).

The congregations of young Nuosu drifters in Chengdu City at that time, many of whom were involved in theft, burglary, and heroin use and trade, eventually came to the attention of city authorities and residents who simply wished to get rid of them. Once arrested for drug use or other crimes, the youths were sent to detention—a common chapter in their stories. Lewu Shuomo, 27 years old in 2005, recalled the miserable conditions they faced in city jails:

I went out for fun in 1996. . . . Then, I was caught by the police and was sent to the rehabilitation center in Chengdu. It was awful there! Twice a day for a few days, the wardens fed us a kind of red liquid, claiming it was medication that would reduce our craving for drugs. They also had my blood tested. Old inmates beat up new inmates. I had no clue as to why they beat us. . . . One of my ribs was broken. I was weaker than the others and deserved to be hit: no one had forced me to use drugs! And it cost my family dearly to get me out of there after three months. Had I not paid the fee, which was itemized and charged to my family as the cost of my stay at the center, I would have been sent to another detention center in Ebian, which had a notorious reputation for mistreating inmates.

Likewise in Limu in the mid-1990s, heroin injection became prevalent among local youths. Drug addicts stole from their own homes and their neighbors to buy drugs. In the past, Nuosu despised theft in their own communities; it was one of the most shameful types of misconduct. Today it has become a common social ill in Limu.

### *Community Support and Self-Help*

By the mid-1990s Limu residents had begun to form grassroots campaigns based on lineage organizations and traditional rituals to curb drug use. They mobilized various social resources for the purpose, such as asking youths to swear an oath and sacrificing animals in a ritual, organizing a few households to form a close-knit monitoring unit, holding lineage antidrug meetings, and establishing a township-level grassroots association for drug control (Liu 2011). Although these creative grassroots efforts waxed and waned between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, according to Limu elders, over 40 percent of Limu's drug users had quit heroin by the early 2000s under pressure of official penal punishments and the community's antidrug efforts, as well as by the determination of many of the young men themselves.

Those Nuosu youths who ventured out in the 1980s and 1990s experienced, in a nearly uniform manner, imprisonment on charges of drug use, drug dealing, or burglary, are no longer young adults. Today, many in this cohort, after begetting

children or reaching their thirties or early forties, have become disenchanted with drifting around and decided to settle down. Jjike Lassyr, who was 40 years old in 2005, is one such example. Between 1993 and 1995, he had spent nearly 180,000 yuan (approximately \$22,500 in 2005), earned chiefly through drug trafficking, on his heroin habit. At the end of 1995, he felt his life was held hopelessly captive by drugs and decided to go to a locality where heroin had yet to ensnare local Nuosu. His relatives there took good care of him:

My wife sold a pig for 700 yuan and bought two grams of heroin for me to use in a fashion that would enable me to gradually reduce the amount I was using. My heroin addiction was too strong and could not be stopped abruptly. Early on, I divided one gram into ten portions, and later, the second gram into twenty portions. Two months later, I had finished the two grams and bought five boxes of sleeping tablets instead . . . don't remember how I did it. I was going insane. . . . A lineage granny killed a pig for me and cried, "Your ancestors were all fine and well. How did you become like this? You are as paralyzed as a wandering dog!" I felt sorry for these relatives. . . . Six months later, I finally succeeded. I came back to Limu. My mother said joyfully upon seeing me, "You have returned from hell." All my family and kin members cried for me, happily.

The account of Qubi Muga, a 26-year-old who initiated his own ritual to bind himself to abstinence, also showcases young men's striving to bring their careening life-course transition to a conclusion:

I didn't attend our lineage antidrug meeting in 1999. I didn't want to be caught by our headman, so I left home for Beijing in 2003 to be away from drugs and sought medication. . . . You cannot force people to do or not to do something if they don't believe in it. Vows have to come from your heart. . . . When I came back from Beijing [in 2003], I was afraid that I would take drugs again. . . . So I decided to hold my own ritual to swear off the drug habit forever. I asked my cousin Quti whether he wanted to join me, and he consented to it.

In the swearing-off ceremony I called out my name and Quti's name when we mixed the liquor with chicken blood [a solemn ritual for the Nuosu when making pledges]. I swore, "From today on, if Jjiebba Quti and Qubi Muga relapse into drug taking, we will die the day after. In contrast, we will be well and peaceful if we no longer use drugs." We believed in the chicken [blood], and we meant what we said, from our hearts. Since then, neither of us has used drugs again.

All the former drug users I came to know tried several times before they finally succeeded in breaking their addiction. Their decision to quit heroin was often based on their being tired of the addict's lifestyle and of feeling ashamed before family and kin. As 33-year-old Mahxi Ggurre confided:

I tried three more times to cut the addiction before I finally succeeded. I did it together with six brothers of my Mahxi lineage. We killed a pig that weighed over 100 kilograms, and our lineage headman also came over to accompany us during the process. He wanted us to swear off drug use and stop drifting. He said that we were too addicted to be human. I felt ashamed to be scolded by our headman. But it was so easy to relapse into the habit whenever I saw others using it. I forgot my own oaths. After relapsing, I would again want to stop using drugs, and my family would again call our headman over. I let him down many times, but he came over every time when I tried to quit.

Substance abuse may “age out” as users’ life status changes (Glick Schiller 1992; Harnett et al. 2000; Willms 1991). Certainly, individual will was among the most critical factors in successful abstinence, in addition to the strong support of kin and over-the-counter painkillers. Many successful abstainers came through their life transition disillusioned, and they expressed great reluctance to living miserably again in the city. Healthy or not, their lives have moved on in various ways since the early 2000s: some eventually found jobs as construction workers and even led their fellow villagers to work beyond Liangshan, the more street-smart young men made money hustling in the cities, and still others simply returned home for a settled life there.

Still, a small number in this cohort could not establish a viable livelihood in the cities, nor could they return to their hometowns because of their drug dependency. Around the Chengdu City Railway Station, I witnessed Nuosu men in their twenties or thirties injecting in public, sometimes even as city street cleaners swept used syringes and needles into trash bins around them with total indifference. Most of these young men’s arms and legs bore serious wounds that were subject to frequent infections. Some who remained deeply involved with heroin expressed their ambivalence toward the drug: they fully understood its negative effects in their lives, yet they could not help but surrender to it. At this point in their lives, their continued use of the drug was mainly to avoid withdrawal pains, rather than pursuing pleasure as was initially the case. They remain in limbo.

### *The Emerging HIV/AIDS Epidemic*

No matter how many Nuosu finally succeed in kicking their drug habit, death and social affliction have emerged as major byproducts of their modern-day rite of passage. Once the local government and Nuosu headmen began to record the death toll related to heroin use (overdose or injection errors), they estimated that 275 known drug users had died young in Limu and the neighboring town by 2001. In addition to drug use and injuries from beatings by the police or other inmates, diseases like hepatitis and AIDS also contributed to the loss of young lives in Limu. In 1995, the Chinese government began to impose compulsory HIV testing on drug users and dealers in detention and in rehabilitation centers (He and Detels 2005). That same year the first HIV infection case was reported among Nuosu drug injectors in Liangshan (China-UK Project, Liangshan 2004). Limu reported its first HIV case in 1997.

In 2001, the China-UK Project launched broad-based compulsory blood tests in Limu basin's three villages. Responding to orders from above, village cadres mobilized approximately 1,000 peasants between the ages of 14 and 60 to submit blood samples for HIV tests (China-UK Project, Liangshan 2004:27). That initial screening showed an alarming rate of infection, as seen in the government's report of 68 cases of HIV. Local officials and health workers believed the actual infection rate to be much higher than reported, because many young men were away from home at the time of blood tests. Limu's infection pattern showed the same characteristics as the other worst-hit localities in Liangshan: 96.52 percent of the HIV-infected people were between the ages of 15 and 40, and most were Nuosu males who had injected heroin (China-UK Project, Liangshan 2004:27). When the results were made public, Limu quickly became known as an HIV/AIDS epicenter in Liangshan in addition to its notoriety for drug use. As mentioned above, the prevalence of drug use has declined, relatively speaking, since the early 2000s, yet the outbreak of HIV/AIDS is just beginning to ravage Limu. It subsequently became one of the earliest sites targeted for the government's AIDS intervention project (Liu 2009).

Having come through a chaotic initiation to manhood in fast-changing China where opportunities, uncertainties, and inequalities all operate, how do Nuosu young men reflect on the unexpected and often tragic consequences of that transition? Comments by 31-year-old Anyu Shiyi reveal the extent to which attitudes toward manliness and adventure have led many astray. His combination of bravado and fatalism is impressive and sad:

I was sent to the Labor and Education Camp in Ebian because I had three burglary convictions: in 1995, 1998, and 2001. (Shiyi gives a beaming smile!) In 2004, after I returned home, a doctor in the [Limu] clinic visited me, saying I was HIV positive. . . . Am I afraid of AIDS? Nothing to fear! Dying at home should satisfy my father: it's better than dying away from home!

Few Limu men I talked to expressed publicly their fear of death. Like Shiyi they looked on such an admission as unmanly. Friends, families, and kin embrace these prodigal young men whether they are HIV positive or not. Occasionally, at a young man's funeral, his kin would throw a small amount of heroin into the bonfire as the body was cremated. The deaths of young Nuosu men are definitely the saddest chapter this new rite of passage has entailed.

## Conclusion

I have traced the rapid spread of HIV to a new life-course transition young Nuosu men have succumbed to, whether voluntarily or by circumstance. Their pursuit of life has been full of uncertainties and opportunities in which substance use has unfortunately become a core theme. The transformation of the moral economy of opiates in Limu also reveals the process by which a generation of Nuosu men has participated in China's tumultuous integration into the world capitalist modernity. The Nuosu case exemplifies a kind of victimization that has resulted from a system of complexities, rather than simple causal lines. Structural inequalities and

sociocultural particularities intertwined with historical juncture and have shaped the trajectory of the epidemic in their communities.

What engagements the Nuosu have with the outside world have been largely externally imposed—beginning with their entry into the opium economy in the early 1900s, followed by the dramatic and drastic imposition of Chinese socialist sovereignty in the mid-20th century, and, after the 1980s, China's hasty embrace of capitalist modernity. The Nuosu young men under study embarked on their adventures as their ethnic group continued to be marginalized in China's market-oriented development.

Market reform has introduced both bright and dark forces into young Nuosu's lives. On the positive side, capitalist modernity has endowed young Nuosu with an expanded social horizon and greater individual freedom of choice and movement, which in turn has provided opportunities for adventure, experimentation in lifestyles, and new gratifications. Seizing on this historically unprecedented opportunity, young men willfully venture out to demonstrate their maturation into adulthood. These life experiments have proved both fulfilling and dangerous, but the young men have embraced them voluntarily—at least initially. Before going through this process, they found the lure of wealthy cities irresistible, and this triggered their desire to be modern and mobile. After experiencing the outside world, whether happily or miserably, most Nuosu men have eventually returned to assume their roles as responsible husbands, fathers, and breadwinners—to be socially mature men. With this, their turbulent rite of passage seems to come to a close.

In Limu, the traditional signposts that in the past might guide young men to adulthood have been weakened or replaced by commodities and desires fashioned primarily by the new capitalist market. The constant flows of commodities as well as increased personal opportunities and risks have contributed to the greatly broadened worldview that distinguishes today's Limu youth from their forebears, who were locked into mobility-restrictive social aggregates, be they tribal or socialist. But we also find that recent Nuosu life experiences in this transitional phase are marked by deprivation, unemployment, uncertainty, risk, and harshness. Their marginal socioeconomic status makes them easy victims in the early days of market reforms.

The lens of a life-change ritual allows us to think through how one generation could become so entangled in heroin use, with the subsequent spread of HIV and many untimely deaths in Nuosuland. To cope with the emerging HIV/AIDS problem, we need a comprehensive view of circumstance and concerns on the ground. Unfortunately, the state seems determined to simply reproduce long-standing inequality by ignoring the nuanced and important particularities expressed in the HIV/AIDS epidemic among the Nuosu. If the threat of AIDS forced the national government to launch intervention projects in Limu in the early 2000s, China's deployment of power and the preexisting social divisions among those deployed are also crucial to understanding the current AIDS policies and practices (Hyde 2007; Liu 2011). Habitual top-down state intervention in local crises has not only resulted in ineffective public policy and practices in Limu but also further stigmatized Nuosu men for their individual crimes and risky behavior, rather than discovering the facts of cultural difference and the overarching political economy of the Nuosu (Liu 2009). The young generation's dreams are frustrated and their frustrations are ignored. All the while, the Nuosu continue to deal with chronic poverty and marginalization,

and so their experience fits Philippe Bourgois' critique, "Drugs are not the root of the problems; . . . they are the epiphenomenal [*sic*] expression of deeper structural dilemmas" (Bourgois 2003:319). As I argued above, a life-course approach provides a fuller, more fine-grained view of how history is embodied in critical public health issues (Nguyen 2003).

Given Limu's ongoing marginalization, juxtaposed with opportunities presented by the new horizontal mobility, Nuosu in their late teens and early twenties are more than ever ready to venture out. Heroin may or may not remain a critical element in the Nuosu's life-course transition. Even though the perception of drug use has changed from fashionable to delinquent thanks to its devastating effects on Limu communities since the late 1990s, young people today nevertheless share the feeling of their predecessors that there is neither hope nor fun at home.

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