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Chapter Seven
As Mothers and Wives:
Women in Patrilineal Nuosu Society
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This chapter brings to the fore women's structural positions and practical power in the patrilineal and patriarchal Nuosu society of Southwest China. A gender perspective expands our understanding of the women of this society where they are usually seen as homogeneous affiliates of men as described in classic kinship studies that center on male descent groups.¹ By analyzing their status changes along the life course, I argue that Nuosu women may not be as objectified or marginalized as commonly imagined.

My argument echoes the recent explorations of kinship insofar as gender, agency, or process in daily life have emerged as new questions in the field, especially since the 1990s (Stone 2004). In the Chinese context, the Maoist and post-Maoist social transformation has been recognized as the key historic-cultural framework or background to social analysis that tries to understand people's changing kinship life in the country (Cohen 2005:7; Santos 2006). It is from this perspective that I examine the Nuosu case, using the lenses of gender and social change. In what follows, I first discuss the norms of Nuosu patriliney and patriarchy. Then, I focus on women's structural significance and their practical resourcefulness in the patrilineal kinship system and social life. Finally, I refer to two scenarios that illustrate the power of maternal relatedness in rapidly changing Nuosu society, especially in its recent battles over heroin. The data presented here are based on my year-long ethnographic fieldwork (2005) in Limu, a highland basin Nuosu township at an elevation of 1,900 meters (6,200 feet) in Liangshan Prefecture, Sichuan Province.²

Nuosu Patriliney and Patriarchy

Historically the Nuosu have been classified as a "primordial" minority group. Chinese ethnologists discovered a caste-like Nuosu society dominated by a few large *cyvi*, patrilineal clans or lineages. These two distinctive characteristics, namely, the caste-like strata with large descent groups, have been the core of

Chinese scholars' description of Nuosu culture and social structure. Literally, *cy* means kindred within seven generations, and those who are related beyond seven generations are called *vi* (Ma 2001:88). To translate *cyvi*, some scholars use the term "clan" (e.g., Harrell 2001; Ma 2001) and others use "lineage" (e.g., Hill and Diehl 2001). I distinguish these two terms circumstantially. Usually, the term "lineage" applies to kin within close genealogical and geographic distance; it represents kin in frequent interaction. A clan implies distant kin who are far removed from the local kin group. In other words, I suggest a contextualized use of clan or lineage that hinges on the relatedness and the nature of kin gatherings.³

The significance of *cyvi* is most vividly captured in discussions about Nuosu society in its non-state era. Before the 1950s, the Nuosu had no consistent political organization or power structure above *cyvi* (Lin 1961). The formidable power of the Nuosu *cyvi* during this era was a major theme in outsiders' research and travel notes (Goullart 1959; Lin 1961; Ma 2006; Winnington 1959). Han state officials and outsiders could not gain access to Nuosu-dominant areas without the protection of strong Nuosu aristocrats; Han Chinese were awed by Nuosu's practice of capturing and enslaving outsiders (Harrell 2001; Lin 1961).⁴ Those slaves were mostly captured Han Chinese and their offspring, and they were taken mainly to increase manual labor resources (Lin 1961; Ma 2006). Slaves were incorporated into Nuosu society through their owners' *cyvi* organizations, and they became a means to enlarge the *cyvi*. Around the 1930s, for instance, captured Han incorporated into Nuosu society numbered annually from thousands to tens of thousands across Nuosuland (Ma 2006:336). These slaves might gain social mobility after two to three generations through marriage with Nuosu commoners (Lin 1961; Ma 2006).

The Nuosu recognize only a few dozen large clans, despite their population of about 1.8 million in Liangshan, which covers 63,000 square kilometers (Ma 2006; Ma 1999). Since *cyvi* was the bedrock of Nuosu society, kinship principles dictated people's social stratum, their marital options, and residential distribution. Social morality and individual rights and obligations were also embedded in this kinship universe (Liu 2007). Powerful and well-armed Nuosu *cyvi* kept Liangshan an independent "Lolo" (Ch. barbarian) region beyond the reach of Chinese empires or states before the early 1950s.

In the 1930s, under escort by a Nuosu nobleman's daughter, who had received a Han education, and frontier officials, Chinese ethnologist Ma Changshou (2006) engaged in pioneering research on the Nuosu. He used the concept of moiety to analyze the formal ties of descent and marriage alliance in Nuosu kinship life. He suggested that all *cyvi* originated from two clans, Gguhxo and Qoni, and later subdivided into several segmented lineages over a long historical period. Although the Nuosu no longer relied on this dualistic moiety concept to define alliance or enemy, the concept of descent as manifested in *cyvi* has remained critical in shaping a Nuosu individual's self-identity (Ma 2006:261). To the Nuosu, the most dreadful punishment was to be expelled from his/her *cyvi* (Bamo 1994).

The significance of patrilineal descent is similarly exemplified in Nuosu ancestor worship and ritual practices (Bamo 1994). Given this emphasis on descent, some scholars compare the Nuosu with Han Chinese in terms of their prevailing lineage organization and function, and it is through such comparison that we can glimpse the particularity of Nuosu *cyvi*. Hill and Diehl (2001) have pointed out that Nuosu generally memorize complete lineage genealogies by rote, unlike the Han Chinese who record their ancestry in written genealogies and usually commemorate only recently deceased immediate ancestors (Cohen 1990). In today's rural Liangshan, it is still common to see two Nuosu strangers on meeting exchange information about their lineage ancestries to determine their relatedness. Nuosu men who fail to remember their genealogy are suspected to be descendants of "slaves," individuals with low social status even today.

Some practices concerning names also manifest the Nuosu concept of descent. For example, the so-called father-son linked name (*fuzi lianming*) is an everyday approach by which a Nuosu man can memorize his genealogy and position himself in his patriliney (Ma 2001). Personal names also point to Nuosu patriliney and patriarchy. A Nuosu's full name includes, in sequence, lineage name, birth-order name, and personal name. In other words, one's name reveals his or her lineage, rank in the patriarchal family, and self. "If a Nuosu person did not have a birth-order name, then there would be no way to express these kin relations" (Ma 2001:91).

Corresponding to the Nuosu patrilineal and patriarchal system, male dominance clearly rules in the public domain. Prominent traditional Nuosu authorities entail clearly defined positions such as *bimo* (priest), *ndeggu* (judicial mediator), and *suyy* (headman), and each assumes specific functions in social life. *Suyy* is an acquired status attained through selection by kinsmen and its major role is to mediate disputes among close kin. Men who are *ndeggu* are often lineage headmen, but they can mediate disputes between individuals who belong to different lineages. *Bimo* is a ritual specialist who mediates between living humans and the dead, and as a rule, this is an inherited profession handed down from father to son. Only certain Nuosu lineages take on this ritual profession (Bamo 2003). These key authority positions are all generally occupied by men, although rarely women may assume the role of the *ndeggu*. Nuosu patriarchal bias is also manifested in male privilege in the sphere of labor allocation. In Limu, as in any other village, women generally perform the heavy labor work that includes farming, collecting firewood, carrying water, feeding animals, cooking non-meat foods, and caring for families. In contrast, young men often abstain from farm work (except for plowing and harvesting) and they considered those kinds of labor work too insignificant to be a man's concern.

Since the 1950s when the Communist government established itself firmly in Liangshan, the roles and functions of traditional *cyvi* have been undermined

by the socialist state. Resembling the patrilineal kinship organizations among the rural Han Chinese (Ruf 1998), the Nuosu kinship institutions were also labeled "feudalistic." Owing to *cyvi's* erstwhile paramount power over individual Nuosu, the Communists saw it as a tremendous threat to the new social order dictated by the socialist state (Wu 1985). Many lineage or clan activities were banned, especially in the political, legal, and ritual arenas. It was only with China's subsequent shift toward market reform in the 1980s that the state has assumed an increasingly liberal approach and allowed the resuscitation of indigenous institutions such as lineages and associated ritual practices. In Limu, for instance, local Nuosu peasants revived their kinship organizations for the sake of social cohesion in the early 1980s. By the early 1990s, as heroin use was spreading among local young men, those revived lineage organizations mobilized to undertake drug control. Still, owing to the fear of heavy-handed state authority and poignant memories of suppression in the past, revived Nuosu kinship activities have concentrated on practical and nonpolitical affairs. As one local lineage headman comments, "We Nuosu *cyvi* used to be very powerful. But now we can only follow the Communist Party and are no longer as united as before" (Liu 2011:101). The past power of the *cyvi* in Nuosu society has given way to the state and to other external forces as Liangshan, like the rest of China, has experienced drastic social change.

Obviously the onetime dominant "lineage paradigm" (Carsten 2000; Schweitzer 2000) provides a basic yet incomplete perspective for understanding Nuosu kinship life over the decades and in particular its changes in recent years. Conceptually, lineages among the Nuosu have been transformed from being a "single legal entity" (Fortes 1953), to a malleable institution in the sense that various kinds of relatedness now jointly constitute Nuosu kinship reasoning and practice. In today's Limu, for instance, we can see "informal kinship," "practical kinship," and "fictive kinship" at work every day in conjunction with traditional lineage organizations.⁵ In the local anti-heroin campaigns, small lineages have grouped together to form a quasi-lineage and serve as a watch-dog organization. At funerals, neighbors who belong to different lineages may cooperate to do *hlyx pu* (the practice of sharing expenses) to help each other serve kith and kin who travel from afar to mourn the dead. Even in the arena of "official kin," the effects of social change may also present to us a new angle of envisaging Nuosu *cyvi*; that is, women's previously invisible role there. In a nutshell, in certain situations, relatedness beyond the male descent may be as important a recourse as the *cyvi's* influence against social change.

In other words, if we see male descent as occupying the "front stage" of Nuosu kinship life, borrowing Goffman's (1959) terms, then women occupy its "back stage," since their influence is crucial yet often neglected. Exploring the back stage of a patrilineal and patriarchal society has occasionally been exemplified in research among Han Chinese. For example, Bernard Gallin (1960) pays attention to the matrilineal and affinal relationships as supplementary to the typical patrilineal relations in rural Taiwan. Likewise, Margery Wolf (1972) studies the traditional Han Chinese family with a focus on

women and reveals a hitherto invisible kinship form that she calls the "uterine family." Wolf uses this concept to describe women's emotional bonds with their children and grandchildren, particularly their sons—the future of the patriarchal household, and points to the manipulative and sentimental influence of women who were previously seen as marginal and silent within their patriarchal marital families. Ellen Judd (1989) further centers on married women and their continual ties with their natal families. Judd addresses various dimensions of women's social relationships in a patrilineal model that easily overlooks them and their available resources. This line of study among the Han illustrates that women and their kinship relatedness play an "unofficial" yet important role. To take this a further step in conceptualization, this chapter argues that, unlike Han Chinese, male dominance and female influence are simultaneously *institutionalized* in the Nuosu *cyvi* system, although the latter has been shadowy and hence oftentimes overlooked. In the next section, I examine such female power which is most prominently manifested after a woman becomes a wife and, especially, a mother.

Women's Life-Change Status in Nuosu Patriliney

Since men were considered the rightful core members in Nuosu patriliney or patriarchy in mostly earlier studies, women have been depicted largely as a homogeneous group, either invisible or simply marginal. This account neglects the importance of their life-course transitions when they move through life stages and assume different social roles. By taking this view, we can see that women's influence is constantly changing, a point that was generally overlooked in understanding Nuosu society.

Unlike Nuosu men who did not go through formal and institutionalized initiation rituals (e.g., puberty rites), Nuosu women's life transitions are clearly marked by a series of rites of passage (Liu 2011). Nuosu tradition dictates that when a girl reaches thirteen, fifteen, or seventeen,⁶ she will change her skirt from a child's style to that of an adult during an initiation ritual. She also goes through a mock marriage ritual to signal her entrance into adulthood. She may either marry a designated husband, preferably her cross-cousin, or symbolically marry a tree, a hearth, or something else that signifies her fertility or readiness for household responsibilities. Even now, in rural villages Nuosu still practice "deferred transfer marriage," that is, married women do not move into their husbands' houses until they become pregnant—the interval between "wedding" and "cohabitation" can be as long as ten years or more. During this long interim, we see clearly women's hitherto invisible agency and power in the making.

In general, pre-puberty Nuosu girls are publicly quiet, shy, passive, and hard-working, fitting the conventional image of rigid gender inequality. Married

women, however, seem to gain strength after this life-transition process. Their influence in social life becomes more recognized and visible as their social status changes. For instance, it is principally the right of a woman to decide when to stay and live with her husband. A married woman who remains in her natal home may occasionally help her husband's household with some labor tasks and ritual chores. Her husband's or in-law's request for her assistance in these matters is seen as asking her to move into the husband's house as early as possible. Still, no one can force the woman to live with her husband. In addition, Nuosu culture emphasizes certain aspects of chasteness in conjugal sexuality. A newlywed wife may not necessarily be submissive to her husband's courtship or sexual demands. Some of my female informants told me how they effectively resisted their husbands the first time they were approached for consummation after the wedding ceremony. One old woman in her sixties gestured to grab her hair pin and jab, and told me laughingly, "My mother said to do this if he approached me." Another man recollected how he was badly beaten by his robust wife the first night and how he had to wait for ten years for her to live with him. He had almost given up hope that they would ever cohabit. These stories are not exceptional but common to daily life in rural Nuosu villages like Limu. They provide a window on women's agency in husband-wife interactions.

A Nuosu woman's social status rapidly ascends when she has a child. Motherhood status is displayed in the woman's changed attire: she wears a different hat style once she becomes a mother. For Nuosu men, however, there is no such status-shifting marker, though having children is a widely recognized prerequisite of manhood. Local Nuosu believe that a person must have a child in order to reach full social maturity. Childless couples will not be seen as a genuine family or a complete social unit (Liu 2011). In this light, the role of women with children (preferably sons) in kinship life becomes more influential and significant in patrilineal and patriarchal Nuosu society.

As we examine Nuosu women's social status through both lenses of gender and life-course transition, we realize that notwithstanding the predominance of patrilineal institutions in Nuosu society, women are by no means as invisible and powerless as one may assume. Most importantly, the institutionalization of affinal alliance has endowed Nuosu women with a position of structural significance.

In the long-awaited publication of Ma Changshou's (2006) research on the Nuosu in the 1930s, he pointed out the significance of marital alliance and subsequent matrilineal relations in the then non-state Nuosu society. Nuosu exogamy recognizes marital prohibition with both *cyvi* members and mother's sisters' children. Ma argued that this marital exclusion principle was not of either patrilineal or matrilineal origin, but arose from the dual moiety system. In other words, affinal ties determine the maternal role in that the woman (the bride) represents her lineage. Based on his observation of certain wedding customs, which are commonly seen today as well, Ma concluded that the Nuosu wedding embodies a contest between two allied lineages. In this regard, the matrimonial union of a Nuosu man and a woman is not just an alliance of two

lineages, but also a potential point of conflict between them if the marriage does not work out.

Unlike married Han women who become "spilt water" to their natal families and whose weddings include their families performing a symbolic "cut" away from them (Wolf 1972), Nuosu women's general wellbeing remains a crucial matter to their natal families and the lineages represented by brothers, namely, their sons' maternal uncles. Ma (2006) recorded a case that illustrates this point. A famous Nuosu ruler, Leng, whose mother had been killed by an in-law when Leng was a child, was rescued and raised by his maternal uncle. Leng's maternal uncle expected him to retaliate against the killer's lineage; this was to be the key task of his life. But Leng did not meet his uncle's expectation and their relationship ruptured. Ma Changshou also showed that, during the inter-lineage wars, women were influential in cease-fire negotiations (Ma 2006:321). Other records also mention that when a Nuosu woman from either side of a conflict came out to make an appeal, both parties had to stop fighting lest the woman commit suicide as the most dramatic form of protest against the denial of her appeal (Ma 1995). This type of suicide is similar to a Nuosu practice called *nga sy ne bby*, literally meaning "I give my death to you," signifying a person's strongest protest against another (Liu 2009). The dead person's lineage will retaliate against or request considerable compensation from the party who "caused" the death.

Married women's importance is also seen in the institutionalized ties between her children and her sisters' children. In rural villages, from the perspective of a Nuosu man, both his maternal kin and his own affinal relatives are his most important practical kin. Maternal uncles may be as important as *cyvi* members. Some maternal kin of this Nuosu man may even act as consanguineous kin and closely interact as family members in daily life, and this may extend to his mother's sisters and their children, namely maternal parallel cousins. All these significant non-lineage kinship relationships revolve around the mother and her siblings. Through a close analysis of the Nuosu practice of preferential marriage and exogamous restrictions based on incest taboos, we may understand how they construct a complex and nuanced relatedness.

A Nuosu preferential marriage type is cross-cousin marriage, in which father's sister's daughter (FZD) and mother's brother's daughter (MBD) are seen as equally preferred. However, in daily life, MBD receives more careful consideration when dealing with issues of lineage alliance because the maternal uncle is more likely to be mobilized for help than the paternal aunt's husband (Lu 2001). The Nuosu term for mother's brother is equivalent to the term "father," and the importance of maternal uncles in Nuosu society has been well documented (Lu 2001; Ma 2006). Before a man is married, his mother's brother is the closest affinal relative representing his mother's *cyvi*.

Parallel-cousin marriage is considered incestuous because the Nuosu practice a strict intra-caste endogamy beyond their own *cyvi*, and marriage between real or classified brothers and sisters (i.e., patrilineal lineage members and maternal parallel cousins) is unthinkable. It is incestuous for a man to wed his mother's sister's daughter because mother's sisters are equivalent to one's mother. These maternal aunts are the most important kin next to one's parents and parents-in-law, and their children—maternal parallel cousins—are seen as true siblings (Bai 2006; Ma 2006; Su, et al. 1997).

The special relatedness surrounding the mother and her siblings in patrilineal Nuosu society can also be observed during festive or ritual occasions. During the Nuosu New Year, which falls in November or December depending on individual villages, married men must send pork to their parents, kin, and in-laws. The Nuosu New Year in rural villages like Limu is characterized by an interesting scene: If you stand at a crossroad or intersection you will see people coming and going carrying pork, pig heads, or pig legs. They are busy delivering meat to kin and relatives to fulfill prescribed kinship obligations. The best meat usually goes to one's own parents, the parents-in-law, and then one's mother's sisters. On this occasion, a man's mother's eldest sister (his "big mother") is the most important kin and his mother's other sisters (his second mother and so on and so forth) are more important than comparable paternal kin. When a man's married sister comes back to bring pork to him (the maternal uncle of her own child), her parents, and her maternal aunts, she will be reciprocated with money from the people who receive the pork. Besides, her brothers and maternal parallel cousins will also give her money to welcome her back. The complicated yet orderly exchange of pork and money is a fascinating scene that reveals the closeness of and special attention to maternal relations on such occasions.

Another important social arena, the funeral, also reveals the significance of women as mothers in Nuosu society. At funerals, maternal aunts outshine paternal uncles. If a man kills two oxen for his deceased oldest paternal uncle, he is expected to kill three oxen for the funeral of his mother's eldest sister. This is why in Limu people usually hold an old woman's funeral in a grander manner than that for an old man. All such practices point to the status of the mother and the relatedness extended from her to her sisters. To a Nuosu woman, her sisters play the role of other mothers to her children, and they become a grand family connected through motherhood, an inverse of the "uterine family" Margery Wolf described in rural Taiwan. The relationship between these mothers and their children is not just the emotional bonds illustrated by the "uterine family," but also an institution, an ideology, and a matter of daily life practice in Nuosu society.

Women's Influence in the Heroin Crisis

Social change has made visible some of the hitherto shadowy aspects of Nuosu kinship life, such as the significance of women's roles mentioned above. Limu's recent grassroots anti-drug campaign provides a salient example in this regard. Beginning in the 1980s, one by one and then cohort by cohort, the great majority of Limu's young men ventured out in search of fun and opportunities beyond their mountainous hometown. Yet their daring explorations often ended in trouble: in the first instance, widespread drug use, and then the subsequent spread of the AIDS virus through unsafe heroin injection (Liu 2011). In response to these emerging crises, in the mid-1990s Limu elders began to mobilize their various kinship networks and targeted heroin as the foremost problem in the kin-based Nuosu community.

Among the various kinds of grassroots anti-drug efforts, lineage intervention in Limu and other Nuosu localities has attracted the most attention (Liu 2011; Zhang, et al. 2002; Zhuang, Yang, and Fu 2005). Around 1994 when heroin use was on the rise among Limu's young men, lineage headmen began to mobilize their kinfolk and make use of kinship institutions to contain the emerging problem. They organized kin groups as watch-dog units to monitor drug users, established fines for members who violate drug-control agreements, and organized young men to patrol the community at night to prevent drug use or sales (Liu 2011).

In tandem with lineage intervention, however, other forms of quasi kin-based mobilization came together for the same purposes, a creative application of kinship functions. For instance, some multi-lineage villages carried out drug control based on neighborhood units. In Limu neighbors commonly have some various degree of kinship relatedness, although kinship relations are not the main concern of neighborhood organizations. Another type of kin-based organization that I discuss here is the drug-control group formed on the basis of maternal kin relationships. Twelve men out of twenty-one maternal parallel cousins (see Table 1) came together to monitor drug activity among themselves based on their sentimental bonds and residential proximity. I refer to these cousins to discuss the following two scenarios: the first demonstrates women's structural position and influence, and the second illustrates women's agency and power. Both scenarios jointly explicate women's status in Nuosu kinship life as it may be clearly observed in the local heroin crisis.

Scenario 1: Maternal Relatives in Heroin Control

Elsewhere I have discussed how four men out of a group of twenty-one cousins organized themselves to form a self-monitoring group to support their abstinence from heroin use (Liu 2011). I reiterate that discussion here for a

localities and belong to different lineages. In addition to special visits, common occasions such as funerals, weddings, and the Nuosu New Year also bring distant kin and relatives together. Originally, two of the four Hxibi sisters and their children lived in the high mountains far away from Limu. The Limu basin has a long-established reputation as the "rice barn" of Liangshan and this has prompted many immigrants from high hills to relocate there, often with the assistance of their resident kin. At the suggestion of the oldest cousin Mahxi Ggurre and his father, the Hxibi sisters and their families moved from high mountains to Limu. In socialist China, the government prohibits the sale of agricultural land. But in Limu peasants quietly sold land behind the backs of township officials. For most sales, a *ndeggu* (judicial mediator) or a *cyvi* headman would be present to witness the transaction. Ggurre's father happened to be a village cadre so he could assist in his affinal kin's purchase of houses and farmlands. Ggurre said he and his father wanted all his "brothers" (the maternal cousins) to live close by so they could care for each other.

The rank of these cousins is based on their mothers' seniority in the sibling order. For example, Jjiebba Quti (thirty years old in 2005) is the "younger brother" of Qubi Muga (twenty-six) because Quti's mother is the youngest of the four Hxibi sisters. Muga and Quti had come to Limu earlier than their families in the high hills. Muga was born to a *bimo* (Nuosu priest) family in the high mountains about one hundred kilometers away from Limu. He learned *bimo* ritual practice from his father as a child. At the age of fifteen, Muga came with his father to Limu to work with Ggurre's father in the latter's brewery. A few years later, Muga's entire family joined them. As for Quti, it was his oldest maternal aunt who took him to Limu. In 1995 she summoned him down from the mountains to help with her family's brewery business. Quti told me about his life at that time: "I did everything for my big mother, making corn moonshine, tending cattle and sheep, farming, and doing construction work. My big mother treated me nicely. She bought me clothes and gave me 200 yuan per month. But she put most of the money aside in preparation for my marriage. I lived in big mother's house."

Limu has been one of the worst heroin-inflicted localities in Liangshan since the mid-1990s. When Quti arrived in Limu, his big mother was trading drugs just as many well-off villagers did at that time. One day, she handed a bag of drugs to Quti and asked him to dig a hole in the ground and hide it. The government's anti-drug enforcement had been tightening. Quti was curious about the substance and tasted a bit of it. He then fell asleep. When his big mother found out he had used the drug, did she give him a tongue lashing! But too late, since this unfortunate first taste had quite hooked Quti to heroin—although he was careful to use behind his big mother's back.

One day, Quti's oldest maternal uncle came to Limu and scolded him, "Aren't you ashamed? You came from the high mountains to use drugs! You have nothing, no house, and no land. You've got to stop!" This maternal uncle was an important figure among this group of male cousins with respect to drug control. He made every effort to force his nephews to kick the drug habit,

although his approach did not always lead to success. One night after his big mother and maternal uncle had berated him again about drugs, he lay in bed sadly reflecting, "I have nothing and my family still live in the mountains. I feel bad about big mother and my uncle. I truly want to quit drugs."

Between 1996 and 1998 the maternal cousins had gradually grown apart as they, along with other young men in Limu, struggled with their drug habits. It was only after several of these cousins successfully broke free of heroin that their close brotherhood was revived. Ggurre took the lead in quitting drugs, while the others were still taking them. Some of them might have participated in their lineage or village drug control campaigns, but to no avail. Ggurre decided to have one more try at getting his brothers and cousins off heroin. As he recalled, "In 2001, I proposed a collective anti-drug meeting to the other eleven brothers [i.e., maternal parallel cousins]. It was held in one brother's spacious courtyard. We bought a big pig that was over 100 kilograms. Our sisters, married and single, and neighbors brought over twelve cases of beer in support of our efforts. [Maternal] aunties and uncles all came and joined us. Over forty people gathered together in the yard.... We swore together not to use drugs any longer. We also agreed to send addicted brothers to the rehabilitation center for three months, and all brothers would share the rehabilitation expenses of 350 yuan."

Despite the fraternal pressure and solidarity based on maternal-relatedness, like many other lineage- or kin-based anti-drug programs in Limu, the maternal cousins still had only limited success. As Muga commented on the efficacy of the kin-based drug control efforts, "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." In 2003 Muga determined to end his heroin use by holding a private ritual to swear off the drug. He invited Quti to join him. Muga said, "I asked Quti because he is my brother. I didn't ask other brothers because I was not sure whether they could succeed.... You can't be sloppy about swearing in such rituals.... Quti considered my proposal seriously and decided to join me.... I called out my name and Quti's name when we mixed the liquor with chicken blood [a common procedure in making a serious vow]. 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." Indeed they succeeded in bidding farewell to heroin.

Even though some of the maternal cousins succeeded in fighting their addiction, Mahxi Ggurre surrendered to AIDS-related complications that had resulted from his past unsafe heroin injection. After Ggurre died, Muga sighed, "We used to have twelve brothers. [Qubi] Yyhox was gone, followed by [Mahxi] Ggurre. A few brothers are still using drugs, and who knows when they will get in trouble and die?" Although drug-addicted, sick, and troubled, these

maternal cousins maintain their close brotherhood and extend assistance to each other and their families in critical moments.

In Limu, people tried various kinds of kin-based approaches to drug control. Owing to the difficulties of fighting addiction behaviors, local kinship and neighborhood relationships have been imperiled by repeated failures. People united then fell out during various phases of such campaigns, and that became the vicious cycle that went from initial enthusiasm to later disappointment and distrust, which eventually tore apart Limu's social fabric (Liu 2011). In contrast, despite the deaths and failures, these maternal cousins have remained cohesive and caring for each other as family members. They reveal to us the strength of bonds based on maternal relationship that is rooted deeply in their kinship concept and identity.

Scenario 2: Women's Will and Kin-backed Divorce Settlement

In a society with a rigid patriarchy and gender inequality such as the traditional Han Chinese, it is unusual for women to take the initiative in divorce and subsequently gain support from their natal families and kin. Nuosu society is distinct in this regard. As aforementioned, the marital union between a Nuosu man and a woman is simultaneously a point of alliance formation and potential conflict between two lineages; either side has to treat this matter carefully because the conjugal partner represents her or his lineage. The formal wrestling contest between the two marital lineages held at Nuosu weddings is an illustration of this alliance-and-friction condition. The wrestler represents his lineage and not himself, so the referee's loss-or-win judgment goes to the lineage and not the individual. This practice is institutionalized in Nuosu society, yet has received little attention in the framing of women's status and influence in this patrilineal lineage society.

Nuosu have established several ground rules that legitimize a divorce demand by either party of the conjugal unit, including certain major illnesses (e.g., leprosy), sexual misconduct, or the husband's incapability of supporting the family. In any of these circumstances, one spouse may request a divorce without needing to compensate the other. On the other hand, anyone who demands divorce without legitimate reasons will have to pay hefty compensation to the dismissed partner. For a claim to gain legitimacy and kin support, the one who demands divorce because of the other's mistakes must make the issue public. The amount of compensation is usually equal to or greater than the sum the wife received from the husband over the course of the marriage, depending on the causes and the mediation and negotiation of *ndeggu* (judicial mediator) (Ma 2006; Ma 1995).

In rural Nuosu villages, *ndeggu* mediation remains critical to resolving a variety of local conflicts. Sixty to eighty percent of local disputes among lineages in a Nuosu county have been shown to be settled through traditional

mediation rather than by the state's judiciary systems (Wu 1985; Zhongguo 1999). Disputes in need of mediation often concern marital discord, divorce, physical fighting, and injuries or death. Without appropriate and timely mediation, hostility or fighting may arise and become a major flashpoint between opposing lineages (Liu 2007).⁷

In the 1930s, Ma Changshou stated that he had heard of more divorce cases requested by women than by men. One of the reasons was: "The women's lineage is as powerful as the men's, so women's rights matter" (Ma 2006:424). This is one example of how women's rights are institutionally protected by their kin. The Nuosu customs of divorce remain the same today, especially in rural villages. In Limu, as heroin became prevalent among young men, it caused some women to reconsider their marriage. Three episodes below exemplify the new social circumstances.

Most of Limu's heroin users are young men, but their women are certainly victims of their addiction too. Among the twenty-one cousins, for instance, several of the men's addictions became intolerable to their wives, and some of them divorced their husbands. Qubi Yyhxox was a troublemaker in his family. He had been an addict and had taken to drifting far beyond Liangshan Prefecture. In May 2005, the father and kinsmen of Mahxi Ayi, Qubi Yyhxox's wife, at her suggestion, appointed two *ndeggu* to demand a divorce. The argument went that Yyhxox had been away from home for two years, leaving Ayi and her daughter without support. She could no longer tolerate it and wished to divorce.

The two hired *ndeggu* brought Ayi's demand to Yyhxox's parents. In response, Yyhxox's father, brothers, and kinsmen engaged two other *ndeggu* to join the negotiation on their behalf. Initially, his family agreed to let Ayi go with proper monetary compensation from her because she and her natal family had received betrothal money from Yyhxox. But Ayi's family and kin argued that not only should Ayi be divorced from Yyhxox without cost, but it was Yyhxox's family that should pay compensation to Ayi because it was all his fault. Ayi's natal lineage is influential in Limu and her kinsmen strongly backed her. The four *ndeggu* worked hard together, and the case took four months to resolve. The final agreement was: either Yyhxox returned home immediately and settled down, or Ayi should be granted a divorce with hefty compensation due from Yyhxox. After the judgment, Yyhxox's family and kinsmen tried hard to track his whereabouts, but in vain. They eventually surrendered before Ayi's kinsmen and paid the compensation of twelve thousand yuan to Ayi, a considerable amount of money in impoverished Limu where the average annual income per capita is far lower than one thousand yuan.

During the entire negotiation process, the power of the victimized wife came from both her own willingness to pursue divorce and her natal lineage's support. During one such negotiation session, eighty-some participants, including both Ayi's and Yyhxox's families and kinsmen, sat along two sides of

a public ground with a certain distance between them, with the four *ndeggu* running back and forth to deliver messages. The four *ndeggu* sat in the middle between the two parties to share information and ideas and discussed their recommended resolutions lest either side hear their discussion. Throughout, Ayi sat at a distance of about seventy meters from the scene watching the procedure. The strength of support Ayi received from her kinsmen was impressive and demonstrates that married Nuosu women maintain strong ties with their natal lineage, and their kin are often willing to intervene on their behalf in the name of the lineage.

Yyhxox's own sister Amy and his female maternal parallel cousin Arryr had similar experiences. They also divorced their husbands because of their drug addiction. Once they requested a divorce to their families and kin, the latter all supported them. However, in their cases they had to pay hefty compensation to their husbands in divorce settlement. Initially, they did not want to pay compensation, but their husbands' kinsmen rejected that request on the grounds that drug use was a common problem for nearly all young men, and hence not a unique personal weakness of their husbands'. Although they cannot escape paying compensation, the women's own willingness to divorce and their natal kin's support certainly deserve attention.

Another case I witnessed in Limu may further shed light on this point. One autumn night in 2005, a couple had a fight which was said to have arisen because of the heroin-addicted husband's wasting family money originally saved for their children's school fees. A few hours later, the wife was discovered taking poison to commit suicide. She was immediately rushed to the township clinic where she died. The next morning, the husband killed an ox for the clan members of the dead woman in the village and also invited neighbors to share the beef. This practice was seen as a formal apology to the wife's kinsmen for her death, as well as a request for public forgiveness and assistance in resolving the crisis. After sharing the beef, the neighbors (especially the young and middle-aged men) gathered to guard the main village entrance and prevent the deceased wife's kinsmen from entering. They had come from afar in three rented vans with the intention of beating up the husband. When they approached the village entrance, they saw the waiting neighbors from a distance. So they took a detour and entered the village from the rear, much to the villagers' surprise. They began throwing stones at the husband's house and his parents' house next door before the neighbors arrived and dragged them away. During this fracas, the parents of the husband hid in their house while the husband fled. The anger of the dead woman's kinsmen was soon appeased by the headman of her clan who resided in this village. They gathered outside her house to discuss matters with the headman and a *ndeggu* (judicial mediator), while her female kin stayed beside her body in the house. The mediators tried to appease her enraged kinsmen and suggested that an investigation be conducted in preparation for further mediation. The long and the short was that, after four to five months, the husband compensated his wife's natal family 6,500 yuan for the loss of their daughter. As a common rule, the husband's close kin and neighbors would also

contribute money to help out. According to local custom, should the husband not pay the compensation and kill an ox as he did, he and his family could anticipate revenge from the wife's kinsmen to seek justice for her loss.

In sum, the abovementioned episodes suggest the solidarity among kinsmen within male-centered agnatic groups as we usually understand them. But they also point to the delicate and significant status of women within both their natal and marital lineages. In this light, Nuosu women as wives are far from helpless in their marital family and lineage. They may actively initiate dissolution of an affinal alliance through a divorce request, even given the overarching dominance of patrilineal lineage and patriarchal networks. Moreover, rapidly changing social conditions, such as drug use, have gradually penetrated local Nuosu moral codes of kin relationship, marriage alliance, and divorce settlement. Local kinship reasoning and practices inevitably face the challenge of change.

Conclusion

I have examined women's influential role in Nuosu patriliney and patriarchy by observing their life transition from before marriage to assuming motherhood. A careful analysis of what marriage means to women structurally points to the fact that Nuosu women are not a homogeneous group that is universally marginal and powerless. A conventional patrilineal and patriarchal model may not be applicable to their situations.

Recently, feminist anthropologists have argued that the definition of "woman" is not stable and completely knowable. In other words, women cannot be classified categorically as constituents of a group whose membership is simply self-evident (Lewin 2006). Gender as a set of meanings and relationships must be related to individual life-course transitions and macro social change. We need to not only pay attention to women as opposed to men as a social group in a given society, but also to interpret the particularities among women in the context of meaning, interaction, and power. By shedding new light on Nuosu women's subtle influence and power in marital kinship, we may begin to think through a different form of gender relationships, one that may not be articulated sufficiently by the general concepts of patriliney and patriarchy.

Certainly, the identification of this new analytical angle regarding Nuosu women is just a first step toward understanding their agency and power, rather than a sweeping statement or some wishful thinking about discovering a brave new world. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, women do not automatically become complete free agents after the critical life-course transition; Nuosu women and girls in rural areas remain usually subordinated to men.

Despite this common manifestation of gender inequality, the particularities of Nuosu married women's social position may be best understood in

comparison with Han society, often seen as the patrilineal and patriarchal model in China. As Wolf (1972) notes, continuity is typical in the lives of the Han Chinese men, but such continuity is radically severed after marriage for women. In Nuosu society, the disruption women experience in life seems not as severe and absolute as their Han counterparts. In addition, Nuosu women's agency is institutionally empowered, in contrast to Han women who must make great efforts individually to carve out a specific sphere of influence, such as the Han women Wolf (1972) observed who sought to form a "uterine family" to benefit themselves and their children.

In Nuosu society, marital alliance is part and parcel of patriline in which women play the critical role of linking two lineages. The Nuosu kinship system assures women a structural position after they become wives and, especially, mothers. In this light, women are not just objectified tokens exchanged in marriage as classic alliance theory suggests. Through a gender lens, we may direct our attention to women's roles in forging the marital alliance, and not to its meanings for men who seek to expand their political authority through acquiring proper women. Likewise, we must also recognize that to Nuosu women male descent is not just patriarchal suppression; it can also provide a protective network. These Nuosu particularities provide an intriguing and perhaps distinct form of kinship life that is also considered patrilineal and patriarchal.

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Notes

1. Before the 1970s kinship studies were dominated by descent theory and alliance theory. The former focused on the functionalist instruments of descent groups such as lineages. This theory also became the overarching framework, developed by Maurice Freedman (1958, 1966), by which the presumably unfathomable Chinese rural society was delineated between the 1960s and the early 1980s when China shunned outsiders. Alliance theory is often associated with Lévi-Strauss (1969), who focused on the connubial relationship between kin groups through the exchange of women in marriage. Both structuralist and functionalist approaches to kinship studies faced severe challenge from David Schneider's (1972) critique of applying Eurocentric notions of kinship to non-Western societies. This led to the dramatic decline of kinship studies in anthropology until it was revived by new research concerns in the 1990s (Stone 2004). Nevertheless, recent kinship debates seem not to have exerted much influence on contemporary Nuosu kinship studies. Structural-functionalist approach has remained central to scholars' depiction of Nuosu people's kinship life.

2. The names of the township, village, and individuals in this chapter are pseudonyms.

3. Nuosu lineage members who reside in close proximity usually have an annual meeting at the end of a year. Once in a while, however, these year-end meetings can be expanded—especially when distant kin members encounter major social problems—and may request assistance from several dispersed lineages that belong to the same clan. In addition, all lineages that belong to the same clan in Liangshan as a whole may also meet once every few years (Liu 2011).

4. Whether Nuosu society is a "slave society" is debatable, especially between Chinese ethnologists and Western anthropologists. Hill (2001), in particular, argues that slave labor was not essential to the structures of production in Nuosu society and therefore the Nuosu society was a society with slaves but not a slave society. In addition, Harrell (2001) stresses the difference between Nuosu caste and India caste. There are no notions of pollution or automatic deference in Nuosu caste stratification. (Harrell 2001:94)

5. Bourdieu (1977), for instance, differentiates "official kin" (defined by norms of genealogical protocol) and "practical kin" (varied boundaries and definitions) in terms of their function. He uses marriage as an example to separate these two kinds of kinship. "It is practical kin who make marriages; it is official kin who celebrate them." (Bourdieu 1977:34)

6. The Nuosu believe that odd numbers are auspicious and even numbers ominous.

7. Before 1956, feuding between lineages was a marked social phenomenon in Liangshan (Hill 2004; Lin 1961). This sort of behavior has been largely suppressed by the modern state, but small-scale fighting still exists between lineages when conflicts remain unresolved.