The Jade Emperor’s Last Taste of Water

An ethnography on the making of a village in China

Suvi Rautio
Cover photo: Meili villager standing beside a bayberry tree along the mountains that border the village. Photo taken by Suvi Rautio.

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Suvi Rautio

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Abstract

What constitutes and defines a village in China today? This study seeks to answer this question within the space of an ethnic minority Dong village in southwest China acknowledged for its natural and architectural beauty in national and international official heritage programmes.

*The Jade Emperor’s Last Taste of Water* takes an ethnographic approach to deconstruct how an ethnic minority village is constituted, adjusted and redefined from the vantage point of where one stands. Distancing itself from a more comprehensive village ethnography, this thesis structures around scales, both spatial and perspectival. The thesis comprises of four parts whereby each part reverses the vantage point of the onlooker to consider a different scale. In shifting vantage points, this study argues that the conception of a village space, from whatever angle, is not a fixed phenomenon. Instead, it is a continuously reconstructed effort adopted by people according to the social hierarchical constructions that get attached to a village space. Often leading to tensions and conflicts that arise in response to these inclusive social orderings, my thesis argues that places, in this case a village space, are continuously made and remade through these responses. Drawing on broader discussions such as the dynamics of cultural heritage politics; ethnic representation; landscape and belonging; and rural ethnic subjectivities and male status, this thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of the workings behind China’s top-down policies of rural heritage reconstruction efforts to reveal the incongruences and layers of social difference that characterise rural China today.
To the people of Meili,
who reminded me to laugh even when I fall
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carpet’ and delve further in the world of anthropological thought. Just over four years by my side and Sarah continues to inspire both intellectually and personally. Alongside Sarah, Stephan Feuchtwang has been an invaluable guide. Stephan’s expertise and commitment towards the anthropology of China has been a huge source of inspiration since I started my university studies. To have my work commented on by him in the amount of depth and commitment he has provided as an advisor has been a huge privilege I could never have imagined when I started my thesis.

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Notes on Transliteration, Units of Measurement and Pseudonyms

Translation
The quotations included in this thesis are from conversations carried out in Meili and the region over the course of my research, which I have translated from Mandarin and Kam into English. All translations in this thesis are mine. When making translations, I refer to Mandarin words with the Chinese character and the standard pinyin in italicized form.

Only if consent was given to me did I record interviews and discussions at meetings and refer to them as direct quotations in my thesis. Discussions held in meeting aside, everyday conversations were not recorded but memorized and as soon as I could I would recall them from my memory to note them down. I also got into the habit of noting down events and quotes on my mobile phone, which was particularly helpful when conversations were carried out with the consumption of alcohol or whilst traveling to an event where finding time aside for fieldnotes would have been both challenging and impolite. Even though conversations were recalled from my memory, I have tried my best to capture the tone, meaning and context in which they were being carried out throughout my thesis.

Units and Measurements
Chinese Renminbi are given in the unit of RMB in my thesis. When referencing monetary sums, I include the exchange rate into Euro, which at the time of writing (2016-2018) was approximately one RMB to 0.13 Euros. Weights are given in Chinese jin, which is equivalent to 0.5kg.

Pseudonyms
To maintain the anonymity of my field-site, I have used pseudonyms for all the people and villages referred to in my thesis.
Introduction

The Jade Emperor’s Last Taste of Water

According to local myth, the Jade Emperor, also referred to as the Supreme God in Daoist theology had one final request before he attained immortality: to savour his last taste of water. In his efforts to find water that was both sweet and refreshing, he travelled long distances to the margins of his kingdom where he found a small well beside a village. Far removed from the Imperial centre, the village sits huddled along a chain of mountains close to the heavens. This village, which in this study I refer to as Meili, produced sweet water that flowed into the well from mountain streams worthy of quenching the Jade Emperor’s thirst, finally allowing him to seek immortality.

This myth was told to me on more than one occasion over dinner conversations with Uncle Long, a resident of Meili village. The intoxicating effects of homebrewed wine animated and elated Uncle Long to the point that he often lost track of which stories he had already shared with me in the past. He was particularly fond of reciting the narrative of the Jade Emperor’s last taste of water, which filled him with a strong sense of pride he wished to share. Uncle Long also felt the story had been overlooked by visitors and researchers in Meili in the past and, given that I had travelled all the way from abroad to document the everyday lives of the villagers, I was considered the perfect candidate to captivate with the tale and to circulate it further.

I start with the Jade Emperor’s last taste of water because it frames the numerous narratives and events that unfold in my thesis. The myth is revealing

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1 I refer to the village under the pseudonym ‘Meili Village’ (梅李村) translated as ‘Plum Village’ (not to be mistaken for Meili town in Jiangsu Province). The reasons behind this chosen name is not because the village grew plums, which are more commonly found in Central China (although the villagers grew bayberries which carries the same Chinese character for plum (杨梅 pron: yangmei)). Rather, I have chosen this name due the association with Lao Tzu, the founder of Daoism, who is said to be born under a plum tree. This draws connections with the Jade Emperor, the official deity of Daoism, and the title of my thesis. Also, another association with plums and the title of my thesis is the legend of an artist who painted the perfect plum tree whilst crossing a dessert that whenever he looked at his painting it quenched his thirst (Williams 1976). Thus the association with plums, the Jade Emperor and quenching thirst are all relevant here.
on a number of levels but what I want to draw to the reader's attention here is its relevance to understandings that supreme rule emanated from the Imperial centre. The Jade Emperor's pilgrimage to Meili represents one of many historical encounters between the village and sovereign power coming from outside it, thereby introducing a theme that is central to my examination in this study of the relational interplay between a centre and its peripheries. The story is also a revealing reminder of the pride Uncle Long felt in the water of the mountain springs that encircle the village, which was shared by many other villagers. This pride relates to a second theme on which my thesis dwells: how the inhabitants of Meili village redefine and adjust encounters with sovereign rule to claim a bounded sense of belonging and shared feeling of embeddedness in place. Lastly, the conversation with Uncle Long and the stories he shared with me cast light on the role I played as researcher in the village, thereby positioning me within the ethnography.

The distinction and interplay between hegemonic sovereign rule and how it is incorporated into local histories, addressed by the Jade Emperor story, shapes the principal proposition of my thesis. Studying the relational interplay between a centre and its peripheries, I explore how a village is constituted, adjusted and redefined depending on one's vantage point. In exploring the various viewing perspectives, I excavate the pivotal role that human agency plays in materialising places, noting that this accords with who is holds the decision making authority at a given moment and to whom the inhabitants feel most obliged to respond.

The study draws on altogether thirteen months of fieldwork (between 2014 and 2017) when I lived in Meili village in Guizhou province, Southwest China. Topographically the village sits in a narrow space huddled along the banks of a river that carves through steep mountain ridges and drops into a deep valley. Demographically Meili contains an ethnic minority population officially referred to as ‘Dong’ (侗) in Mandarin but, as my interlocutors refer to themselves as Kam in their own language, I follow their practice in this thesis. There are estimated to be around three million Kam, most of whom reside in southeast Guizhou and the neighbouring provinces of Hunan and Guangxi (see Map 1). The Kam language, of the Tai-Kadai family of languages and completely
separate from the widely spoken Mandarin, is divided into two major subdivisions: Southern and Northern Kam.

Map 1: Guizhou, Hunan and Guangxi Province

Regardless of the vast differences between the northern and southern populations, as well as variations from village to village, all Kam are assigned to the affixed ethnic minority category. The historical and political background that led to China’s ethnic minority categorisation contributes to understanding how political campaigns deepen cultural nationalism, market heritage tourism and regulate policy in China to this day. I outline this background below, starting with a brief overview of efforts to assimilate China’s minority populations, perceived as barbarians during Imperial rule, as citizens of the modern nation. I then consider how political and historical conceptions of China’s ethnic minority populations have guided trends in the anthropology of China. In the remainder of the Introduction, I position my thesis alongside larger theoretical discussions on place making and maintaining boundaries. The Introduction concludes with an outline of the thesis layout.

Making ethnicity

*Peripheral Populations in Imperial and Contemporary China*

Throughout history, China’s rulers have paid considerable attention to the maintenance of its vast peripheral lands, viewed as vital to the strength of
Imperial rule. Although records from the earliest Chinese civilisations reference people other than the Han (who currently constitute approximately ninety-two percent of the entire Chinese population), interest in non-Han populations increased dramatically over the course of history. The most prominent wave of interest towards the non-Han populations of Southwest China took place during the late Ming and especially the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), as Manchu rulers gained control over expansive territories in response to the discovery of natural resources and rising fears of internal and external threats. To authorise rule in the region, policies with coercive and persuasive tactics in mind were instigated. Coercive methods included direct military force and the expansion of military agricultural colonies (屯田 pron: tuntian), while persuasive methods were initiated to weaken the official native tusi system (土司), through which Chinese Imperial rule maintained indirect power across the Empire by allowing native chieftaincies their own armies and hereditary titles in exchange for tax (Dreyer 1976). The outcome of these tactics and the escalation of Qing political control was particularly felt in Guizhou province where an influx of Han Chinese migrants, widespread land alienation and increases in tax and administrative constraints led to frequent rebellions and social dissatisfaction. The repercussions of these events continue to be felt in Guizhou today (Wu 2013).

Treatment of the Empire’s peripheral lands and people took a radical turn after the fall of Imperial China in 1911. Whilst Imperial rule was constituted by loyalty towards the emperor, after the formation of the Republic of China rulers and intellectuals replaced existing epistemologies with one that had nationalism, modernisation and scientific progress at its core. With growing interest in evolutionary theory amongst key intellectuals and reformers, the racial superiority of an imagined homogenous Han nationality was considered central to initiating a shared nationalism in the formation of the new modern state. This was firmly adopted by Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the Republican movement that toppled the Qing dynasty and founding father of the Republic of China, who had been influenced by nationalist ideology during his long-term stay in Japan. Incorporating this ideology into governance measures, Sun Yat-Sen promoted Han solidarity as a countermeasure against the non-Han, Qing-dynasty Manchu rulers and Western imperialists. Recognising the impossibility of confining the
country’s non-Han nationalities, or *minzu* (民族) into a single group, he projected an urgency to integrate the non-Han population through assimilation, or Hanification (汉化 pron: *hanhua*). 3

Whilst Sun Yat-Sen and his successor, Chiang Kai-Shek, envisioned the Sinification of minority populations in the building of a glorified Han nation, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao Zedong proposed to lead a multinational China. Taking a less inclusionary stance than the Nationalist Party, in the early years the CCP borrowed Soviet policies such as self-determination and autonomy, claiming a right to political independence for all of China’s minority nationalities (Dreyer 1976: 63). 4 After the formation of the People’s Republic of China and expansion of Maoist rule in 1949, new attempts were enforced to win the trust of minority populations through cooperation in order to position the CCP as separate from the ‘imperialist-bourgeoisie’ Nationalist Party. The latter’s initiatives to ‘assimilate’ (同化 pron: *tonghua*) the population were replaced with the need to ‘integrate’ (or ‘melt together’: 融合 pron: *ronghe*) and to strive for similarities (共同性 pron: *gongtong xing*). In response, propaganda and national discourse presented Chinese nationals as ‘growing together’ during the first years of CCP rule. Basing campaigns on Marxist theories of culture that allude to the idea that as customs and traditions disappear, society will advance through universal stages of development, Mao asserted that ethnic tensions would diminish with the removal of class differences, and a homogenous proletarian culture would arise.

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2 *Minzu* is often translated ‘ethnos’, ‘nation’ or ‘nationality’. *Min* (民) refers to ‘people’ and *zu* (族) to ‘descent’ or ‘lineal descent’. In its early usage minzu was understood as a “lineage that shared a territory for an ancestor...both an organic and corporate unit” (Dikotter 1992: 97). Before the 1930s, minzu referred to ‘nation’ and zu to ‘nationality group’; after the 1950s minzu became more generalised to refer to all Chinese nationalities (Wang M. 2012b). The linguistic origin of minzu remains contested, leading some researchers to suggest it was adopted from Japanese (*minzoku*) in the 1900s. Other research suggests it had been applied by reformers in the 1890s, whilst some evidence even suggests it was used as early as 1870s as a direct translation from English (Dikotter 1992). For a more detailed discussion of the term, see Han and Li (1984), Crossley (1990) and Harrell (1996).

3 Sun Yat-Sen was himself Cantonese and brought up in Hawaii. Consequently he spoke Mandarin with a heavy southern accent and was well aware of the distrust and suspicion he would face from the northern Han population. By employing the notion of a Han ‘race’, Sun was able to distance these threats by mobilising the Han into “Sino-linguistic speech communities” (Gladney 2004: 15).

4 In 1933, during the Long March, which lasted from 1931-1938, ‘right of secession’ was modified to ‘rights to internal affairs’, which has crucial implications in minority policy to this day.
In efforts to integrate minority populations, the CCP launched the appointment of political minority representatives. However, prior to delegating representatives it still remained unclear who China’s non-Han minority population actually were. To find answers, a nationwide Ethnic Classification Project (民族识别 pron: minzu shibie) was initiated in 1954 with the goal of systematically categorising the population. The project applied Stalinist criteria whereby populations were grouped based on four qualities: territory, language, economy and psychological nature. A Soviet model by Marx and Engels scholars that reinterpreted Lewis Henry Morgan’s stages of social development was then applied to ‘scientifically identify’ the levels of socialist progress of each nationality. These stages were divided into five modes of production: primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist or socialist. Reaffirming existing prejudices, minority nationalities were located at the lower end of socialist modes of production while the Han were placed in the ‘late feudalism’ category to lead the country’s socialist movement; non-Han were expected to catch up with them over time (Dreyer 1976: 63).

The Ethnic Classification Project came to a halt after the Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957 and later dismantled during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) for claiming ‘local nationalism’. Researchers and political authorities involved in the project were placed under intense time constraints to complete their work and were thereafter publicly ridiculed for taking part in ‘bourgeois scientific objectivism’. Nonetheless, prior to being brought to a standstill, the Ethnic Classification Project had been completed in three phases. In the first phase four hundred ethnonyms were compressed into thirty-eight minority groups, which rose to fifty-four in the second stage. The final phase of categorisation took place between 1978 and 1987, after which the State Commission for Nationality Affairs declared that no new nationality would be recognised outside the single major nationality, the Han, and a further fifty-five ethnic minority nationalities (少数民族 pron: shaoshu minzu). Due to the sudden halt in research, what was intended to be a detailed compendium of China’s (at the time) 660 million inhabitants was instead transformed into a “simplified history and simplified gazetteer” (Dreyer 1976: 163).
Whilst multi-nationalism was celebrated and minority nationalities were given more freedom at the outset of communist rule, as Maoist emphasis on class struggle heightened from the end of the 1950s through to his death in 1976, it was made apparent that ‘integration’ of the minority population implied repression of culture and customs, and forced authoritative rule (Dreyer 1976). Regardless of its limitations and ambiguities, the Ethnic Classification Project is one of the most detailed and widespread registration schemes in the history of the modern state (Mullaney 2011). Widely taken for granted as an accurate and objective criterion for identifying people into collective groups, minzu status is an affixed imprint on the legal documentation of every Chinese citizen. Initially part of a greater effort to categorise the population for regulation and to apportion political minority representatives, the relevance that minority status continues to have for state administrations in deepening cultural nationalism, marketing heritage tourism and regulating policy cannot be underestimated.

An Anthropological Approach to China’s Ethnic Minority Population
Quoting Feuchtwang (1998), an article by Harrell summarising anthropological studies of China points out that central to the narratives that anthropologists gather is the attempt to answer the question: “with what strength and shared sense of definition do rural residents treat where they live as a place of shared or common identity?” (2001b: 48). Anthropologists have followed several routes to find answers to this, as Harrell expands on in great detail. Yet, in seeking to understand what is meant by a shared sense of common identity, there exist clear biases, largely determined by where in China anthropological research is conducted. This geographical division, as Wang Mingming (2012b) points out, has historical roots in the early 1930s with the initiation of anthropology by Chinese scholars, which was founded on two schools of thought. Heavily influenced by German and American scholars studying the cultural history and linguistics of ethnic groups, the ‘southern school’ focused predominantly on minority nationalities. This movement diverged from the ‘northern school’ who sought to piece together anthropological theory on social organisations and methodological reform (Wang M. 2012b). Both schools thrived as two lines of thought within the disciplinary category of anthropology until they were replaced with the nation-wide Ethnic Classification Project, as outlined above,
later to be removed altogether from academic thought at the height of socialist rule.

Meanwhile, as Sinological anthropologists were unable to enter the country during Maoist rule, they studied China from the outside. Disregarding Chinese ethnologists for their adherence to evolutionary theory, Sinological anthropologists outside of China studied the society with a keen focus on religion, cosmology and kinship structures in Han communities, depicted as the ‘real’ Chinese people (Wang M. 2012b). It was only with the reopening of Chinese university disciplines in the post-Mao era that anthropology attracted renewed interest amongst Chinese academics. Led by many of the disciples of the ‘southern school’, today ‘ethnic studies’ (minzu xue) is its own industry with universities and research institutes devoted to studying Chinese minorities from an ethnological historical point of view.

Alongside these frames of thought, a separate anthropological school on China’s minorities was born. Uncoupled from China’s ‘ethnic studies’ and Sinological anthropologists, the movement was initiated by American ethnographers, such as Stevan Harrell, who focused on the relationship between the Han and the Yi people, and Nicholas Tapp, who researched the ethnic migration of the Miao; these scholars were pivotal in opening up new questions and redirecting trends in Sinological anthropology that reinstated the salience of ethnic difference in response to historically driven, Han-centric civilisation schemes. Research on Chinese ethnicity from a predominantly Western educated point of view is helpful in moving analysis beyond the notion of ethnic minorities as culturally distinct entities towards examining the role of ethnicity in dialogue with the homogenous Han population and the Chinese state. At the same time, limitations are imposed by reliance on the same criteria that are used to construct categorical groupings in a context entirely removed from Chinese society. Although anthropologists studying Chinese ethnicity have made considerable contributions to positioning ethnic minorities in relation to the politics of representation, critics claim these approaches are too often interlaced with pre-existing Western theoretical conceptions of ethnic nationalism and victimisation.

Drawing on the pioneering work of anthropologist Fei Xiaotong, Wang Mingming (2012b) argues that, despite considerable advances in the
anthropology of China, studies of both the Han and ethnic minorities continue to overlook their similarities. In isolating China’s southeast ‘Han’ regions and the ‘ethnic’ southwest regions, both geographically and theoretically, historical narratives that situate their ‘relational structure’ as frontiers or ‘intermediaries’ extending from a shared Imperial centre get overlooked. Using historical examples, Wang expands on this:

The two intermediaries, southeast and southwest, share a common culture; that is, they both were located in the geographical ‘middle’ that became a terrain for frequently cultural encounters between ‘the barbarian’ (夷 pron: yi) and ‘the Chinese’ (夏 pron: xia). On this terrain, Chinese, foreign, and local (or the so-called minority nationality cultures after the 1950s) cultures encountered, distinguished between, and integrated with each other. (2012b: 173).

Too often, critics argue, these intermediaries get overlooked in efforts to isolate discussions on ethnicity.

On a similar note, Vasantkumar asks, “What would studies of China as a ‘unified multi-ethnic country’ look like if minzu [ethnicity] is not the first tool off the belt or if the belt of fixed tools is itself discarded in favour of a performative crafting of tools themselves in the processes of inquiry and analysis?” (2014: 243). Vasantkumar suggests anthropologists need to scrutinize beyond the minority problem to locate where it fits rather than replacing issues related to “class, ‘quality’, place of origin, degree of developedness, and a host of other linked factors” (2014: 265) with ‘ethnicity’. From the narratives I collected in my fieldwork I also grew to understand that the subjectivities attached to my interlocutors were not only linked to ethnicity per se but were often the result of much deeper divides between China’s urban and rural populations.

Following these discussions, my thesis seeks to move past the question of ethnicity as an analytical tool. Instead, studying a village population which is classified as an ethnic minority yet who see themselves as no less ‘Chinese’, I look at ethnicity and rural subjectivities as ethnographic descriptors. In this sense, ethnicity is one of the numerous elements with which the subjects of my inquiry identified themselves. Using anthropological works studying the construction of agency, depicted through ethnic and rural identities, to ground my thesis, I seek
to move beyond identities to study the relational interplay between subjectivities taken on by individuals and the collectives with which they associate themselves. I argue that these subjectivities are defined by scales that are both spatial and perspectival, as discussed in the following section.

Making Place
To frame the theoretical contributions my thesis attempts to take on, I want to start by drawing the reader’s attention to the notion of scale. Drawing on Xiang’s article (2013) that emphasises the importance of taking into consideration perspectival scale both for the ethnographer and interlocutors, he asks “On what scale is a particular observation and abstraction made? What steps are we taking, and skipping, when we move from ethnographic observations to general commentary? What appears to be a clear pattern at one scale may fragment into something else when looked at closer, and what seem randomly scattered may start falling into well-integrated wholes once we take a step back” (Xiang 2013: 285).

On the understanding that scales are institutionalised and socially constructed to the point that there “are no ideologically neutral scales” (Carr & Lempert 2016: 3-4), taking them apart becomes an important task for anthropologists that illuminates how others orient themselves, both spatially and temporally. It is a task that has been on the anthropological agenda since the 1980s that can be regarded as a response to the increase in studies of the movement of people, ideas and things in multi-sited research. Central to the latter was the goal of challenging fixed scales, such as the dichotomy of the ‘global’ and ‘local’, to pose new questions on perspective and connectivity.

Discussions on scale were promoted by Strathern’s (1999, 2004) contribution to conceptualising scales, which she discusses in two dimensions (see Jimenez 2009). The first posits scales as magnitude to measure the effect of actions: for example, the magnitude of social policy can be studied according to the scalar composition of the institutional hierarchy, such as the role of policies and policy-making at the regional, national or local level. The second dimension considers scales as orders of knowledge “where particular orders of relations (of economy, or religion, kinship, etc.) are mobilised and measured up against other scales” (Jimenez 2009: 158). These orders of knowledge (including the knowledge
derived through ethnography) draw on a perspectival scale based on the observations and abstractions that construct a particular knowledge with its own effects and hierarchical distributions. Hence scales become heuristic devices with which to communicate one’s vantage point.

Scales are important to the construction of my thesis layout, in that in each chapter of my thesis I unravel a different scalar perspective from which to depict how a village – specifically the village of Meili – is made. The purpose is not to fix the reader in these categories but to illustrate the relational interplay between the realms that unfold according to the physical and metaphysical loci of observation. In the theoretical outline to which I now turn, I first consider a vantage point that draws on the Chinese notion of a spatial ordering based on relations between a centre and its peripheries. After exploring the spatial relevance of the centre/periphery discussion in the context of rural China, I then discuss how boundedness is maintained from inside through family and kin relations.

Centre and peripheries

Existing unmapped, the peripheries are associated with wildness in both its imaginative and spatial form (Tsing 1993; Rutherford 2003). In contrast to a centre made up of power, order and control, the peripheries are considered unplanned, treacherous places, havens for unruly people who have escaped state incorporation (Scott 2009). Historically in China the relational interplay between a centre and peripheries echoes cosmological notions of inclusive ordering that radiated from the Imperial centre, forming the world-scape notion that sustained the Imperial imagination of ‘all under heaven’ or *tianxia* (天下) that enveloped “the larger cosmology that covered earth, heaven and everything in-between” (Wang M. 2012a: 338). Strengthening the notion of a Sino-centric world order that projected from the civilized centre to the peripheral zones of wild, uncivilised ‘savages’, *tianxia* introduced hierarchical distinctions of the world according to their spatial orientation.5

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5 Also relevant here, as Bruckermann and Feuchtwang (2016) point out, is Sahlins’ (2008; 2012) work on the Stranger-King theme that builds on the relationship between the Stranger King who exists outside and above the community to carry supreme sources to avert dangers to appear as the life-giver and life-taker of the community.
Wang Mingming (2012a) convincingly argues that throughout Chinese rule, centring was the focus that linked heaven, humanity and earth; the centre existed in relation to its peripheries. Yet the centre cannot be understood without taking into consideration what penetrates it from outside, and the results of its enquiring beyond the centre to the outer regions. An article by Robert Weller (2014) studying historical variations in views of nature in China also highlights the permeability of the centre-peripheral zones. Supported by historical examples, Weller directs the reader to consider “that there are no simple evolutions of power. The centre does not sap the power of the edge, for example, in an inexorable process of state formation or of the triumph of civilisation over savagery. The powers of centre and edge instead continuously shape each other” (2014: 160). Drawing on accounts of Imperial rule, Weller traces how China’s peripheries existed as a “general experience of otherness” (2014: 151). Feared and viewed disparagingly, the untamed landscapes, people and resources, including minerals and foods coming from the “empowered edge” (Weller 2014: 151), were considered rich in strangeness and unfamiliarity that added value to the efficacious power they were imagined to contain. Associated with both a majestic sexuality, reinforced through minority tourism to this day (Gladney 2004), and a sense of magical power connected more closely with the supernatural world, there was a rarity to the strange and unfamiliar shaped ideologies and orders of knowledge associated with peripheral lands and the people who inhabited them. This potent desire and curiosity resulted in the constant movement of valued items from the peripheries into the centre. From empowering foods to high quality timber (as discussed in Chapter Eight), in a sense the edge came to “exist everywhere, not just at the geographical margin” (Weller 2014: 154).

Existing everywhere in the power imagined as reaching from the cognitive margins, at the same time the peripheries were spatially centres of their own. Observed from the peripheries, the centre-periphery dichotomy becomes blurry, and peripheral places also become territories, or centres, comprising their own in-group worlds. The work of anthropologists studying the histories of families and the geomantic orientation (fengshui) of rural China, such as Steinmüller in his rich ethnography, Communities of Complicity, addresses the moral frameworks that allow inhabitants along the peripheries to consider themselves
“in one way or another at the centre of the world” (2013: 62). Thus centres are not distant references but places made here. In the Chinese context, ‘here’ exists in “the modern city and the backward countryside, the brick house on the market street and the wooden house on the hill, or the house of a family and the world outside the house” (Steinmüller 2013: 20). Places are continuously shaped by readjustments and redefinitions in response to interplay between centre and peripheries, something stressed by Steinmüller’s quoting Ardener’s (1989: 221) framing of remoteness, as a “specification, and a perception from elsewhere, from an outside standpoint; but from inside the people have their own perceptions – if you like, a counter-specification of the dominant, or defining space, working in the opposite direction” (cited in Steinmüller 2013: 62).

People engage in place-making practices and create their own centres in the process of what Feuchtwang (2001; 2004a) refers to as ‘territorial place-making’ that consists of centring, linking and gathering. These three gestures are carried out through the Chinese ‘art of location’, or *fengshui*, to locate a site – that of a grave or any form of dwelling from a house to a village or a city – by marking a reference point according to its coordinates. By linking and gathering the reference points, the order on which territorial place-making builds is defined in relation to a centre that radiates outwards. Locating a suitable site that follows the rules of *fengshui* thereby establishes a new territory with a centre and boundaries of its own, defined by its spatial orientations. To enhance the presence of the centre, the boundaries that encircle the territory are strengthened through fixed focal markers but also in the partaking of pilgrimages, rotations and tours of borders carried out by individuals and collectives to strengthen the spatial orientations of place. These events reinforce a shared sense of place conceived through the making of internal and external boundaries defined by the subject position located within the centre (Feuchtwang 1998).

**Bounded place**

In his famous collection of essays, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Frederik Barth and his collaborators (1969) outlined a new approach to studying ethnicity that concentrated on boundary creation and maintenance rather than the ‘cultural stuff’ within the boundaries. Referring to the collective dimensions that people
initiate through interfaces and interactions between groups, their research stressed the limitations of placing ethnic groups into fixed categories of belonging as discontinuous cultural isolates. In light of these claims, the inhabitants of Meili village are not an isolated group of people, nor have they ever been so. In China, as elsewhere, the boundaries drawn around ethnic people and places are conceptualised socially, politically and historically, and those that define Meili are entwined in relations with the village’s previous inhabitants and other ethnic groups. Constructed through national ethnic categorisation schemes, boundaries are strengthened and maintained in everyday encounters, historical conflicts and shared myths that reveal the spatial relations between Meili and its vicinity – such as the claws of the dragon that mark the end of the village and the body that snakes through it (discussed in more detail in the following chapter). At the same time, boundaries are defined spatially. Green’s (2012) contribution to studies on borders and senses of borders (borderness) is helpful here. Studying the logic of borders historically, Green discusses the shifts in state-border controls as a way of understanding the world and as a form of knowledge practice. Presenting borders as the subject of larger epistemological and ontological projects, Green helps us to consider them an outcome of particular ways of seeing that are, following Gell’s work (1985) on indexicality, “dependent upon both their relations with other places and things, and their particular location” (Green 2012: 586).

Although the substance that constructed the world-scape notion of ‘all under heaven’ (tianxia) that defined territorial divides in China from the imperial centre outwards to the peripheries has largely been overthrown, the logic of borders and its hierarchical divisions remains. This can be seen in the ongoing understanding of rites and rituals as attributes of civilisation that define the moral foundation of the nation (Wang M. 2012b). As connected spaces and intermediaries, chosen sites within spaces, such as territorial temples, ancestral halls (Siu & Faure 1995) and graves, act as microcosms of power and stability, or as Feuchtwang defines them, “minor imperial sovereignties” (2004: 9). To maintain that sovereignty, rituals are carried out within these spaces, such as a standardised framework of Chinese funeral customs through the unified use of “yin-yang and five-phase cosmology, continuation of an elder into ancestor hood,
and the idea of a body and many souls that separate at death” (Bruckermann & Feuchtwang 2016: 200).

Drawing on anthropology studying boundaries that I have outlined thus far, I have sought to describe how the inclusive ordering from the Chinese Imperial centre is reinforced and the classifications inherent in these orderings are strengthened when people take part in standardised rituals. At the same time, as Barth conveys, the boundaries that are maintained strengthen categories of identification amongst ethnic groups themselves. Looking at it from this angle, ethnic groups who, according to the *tianxia* ideology, exist along the peripheries in relation to the centre do not merely respond to evolutions of power from above, but introduce a bounded ordering of their own. This is addressed through Mueggler’s research, drawing on more than twenty years of fieldwork studying the mortuary rites of the Lolop’o in Yunnan province. Drawing on the poetic and semiotic practices of the Lolop’o, Mueggler’s research illustrates the historical underpinnings of state intervention that framed an ethnically distinct moral universe as an embodiment of the larger, national culture. Concerned in the cosmological framework of the Lolop’o, Mueggler goes beyond notions of ethnicity to understand how people assess social relations that make up a community through the historical procedures of work on the dead. Studying diviners’ dialogues on the subject of speech that verbalises the desires of the dead, Mueggler (2017) elaborately traces how the dead remain subjects of the bureaucratically structured Chinese empire as subjects of the Chinese-speaking underworld king, *Yan Luo Wang*. Rather than conveying that these practices have removed all sense of continuity and meaning, instead Mueggler borrows from Strathern’s (2004) writing on the relations that make up a person to illustrate how social relations are maintained. Writing counter to the Western notion of personhood where the individual is associated with a unique core that contains individual agency, Strathern’s research in Mount Hagen illustrates how people see the world through the outcome of relationships which, she argues, always consist of prior relations constituting the socialities and analogical links that matter to people. Expanding on her work, Mueggler depicts a social ordering amongst the Lolop’o that is strengthened around the shared local world of family and kin in the process of disentangling the dead from the shared world of memory. In partaking in these practices the community conceives of its centre
that expands to frame a local world of its own in-group moralities. To reorient the direction of power by considering the social relations across kin (both the living and the dead), a different orientation of centring and boundedness is established from the ordering of power radiated from the central Imperial court outwards to the peripheries.

Drawing on the research outlined thus far, the chapters in my thesis trace how a village is “conceived through the making and maintaining of boundaries with an outside and how that outside is conceived from the inside” (Bruckermann & Feuchtwang 2016: 230). In outlining the making of a Chinese village space, my thesis returns to themes central to anthropology of China to contribute to understanding how rural residents associate where they live as a bounded place embedded with a shared common identity with other villagers. In studying these themes, I attempt to contribute to answering the question that Feuchtwang also posed, and mentioned above: “with what strength and shared sense of definition do rural residents treat where they live as a place of shared or common identity?” (1998: 48).

At the same time, my thesis goes beyond the village to study how place is constituted, adjusted and redefined in the relational interplay between a centre and its peripheries framed by multiple perspectival scales. Drawing on the perspectival of scale taken on by numerous key actors, such as myself as the ethnographer, the preservationist, the government official and the villagers, I argue that the each scale defines the village based on its own hegemonic totality to which people feel obliged to respond. Reversing the vantage point of the onlooker, I conclude that centring, from whatever angle, is not a fixed phenomenon but a continuously reconstructed effort adopted by people who nurture their own conception of place through the agency and responsibility that they maintain via their relations with others. Now let us turn to how this will be accomplished by turning to the layout of my thesis.

**Thesis Layout**

In February 2017, six months after I had completed my fieldwork and returned to Helsinki, I planned a one-month visit to Meili over Chinese New Year. Arriving in the village, I was approached by Grandpa Yang Huangsheng who was curious to hear how my thesis was progressing. Grandpa Yang was a pivotal figure in my
fieldwork, whom I befriended and spent many afternoons with from the first few months of my fieldwork. I told him about the difficulties I was facing drawing together connections in my material, and he empathised, telling me that finding the connections between everything should not be central to my work. What is more important, he told me, is that I write pragmatically about the villagers’ lives and my experiences but with a taste of exaggerated ‘romance’ (浪漫 pron: langman). In efforts to return Grandpa Yang Huangsheng’s request, each chapter in this thesis goes beyond pragmatic description to touch upon romance both through the intellectual and emotional experiences that I encountered conducting my fieldwork. Some readers might think a style of writing that incorporates romance and intimacy does not belong in an academic text; rather, the researcher should seek to conceal her own emotions and romantic encounters for ethical purposes, both to protect the vulnerability of her interlocutors but also to avoid the judgment of the reader. The latter is not a path I have chosen to follow as I consider that excising these facets of research, glossing over the romance and hardship of the experience, would be unfaithful to my ethnography and to myself because they became such an integral part and motivation of persevering to reach the beginnings of an academic career in anthropology.

My thesis comprises four parts, each taking a different vantage point from which to examine how the village is conceived. In each part I illustrate how the conceptualisation of the village is a continuously reconstructed effort which I have divided into the following scales that form the title to each separate part of the thesis: fragments; completion; permutations; and bounded. Framed through optics, as the thesis progresses, each chapter shifts across these scales to eventually locate the village defined by its own inclusive social ordering that frames a bounded village made up of its own centre. Moving across scales towards the village social ordering, my chapters draw on what I refer to as ethnographic vignettes: scenes, conversations, meetings and events that piece together to demonstrate conditions of perspectives and conflicts.

After the second chapter following the introduction outlining the research setting and conditions, I move to the first part of my thesis, ‘Fragments: The making of an ethnographer’. The first part of my thesis outlines my role and vantage point as an ethnographer. In tracing the layers of emotions and
difficulties that I encountered during my fieldwork, the chapter discusses the
difficulties that I encountered through an intimate relationship that forced me to
treat myself as one of my own interlocutors by interrogating my own
assumptions and perspectives. The chapter discusses the ethnographic
knowledge that I gathered through emotional and social exchanges in line with
my own biographical narrative that framed my fragmented positionality as an
integral and unfolding dimension of my ethnography.

The second part of my thesis, 'Completion: A village whole', takes a
perspective on the village from above, looking down through preservation efforts
that take on an authoritarian role in their positing Meili as a 'traditional Chinese
village'. Gazing down at the village, like a painting, photo or written poetry that
can be replicated to lure a memory of a place with no definite attachment to a
fixed location, I take apart the ideology of preservation efforts upheld by
architects who consider it their moral responsibility to preserve the vernacular
setting of the village, which mirrors the Chinese appreciation of completion. In
doing so, I depict how power and order gets defined by the centre that radiates
power from above to maintain the image of a village.

Studying Meili villagers' engagements in preservation efforts that
upholds the image of a 'village whole' reveals the incommensurate stakes in
decision-making and commonly held dissatisfaction. These are discussed in more
detail in the third part of my thesis, 'Permutations: A village from inside', which
moves closer to the village context. In gaining this proximity the village context,
the chapters address the changes in perspective where the complete 'village
whole' envisioned by cultural elites appears fragmented, with no centre, "no map,
only endless kaleidoscopic permutations" (Strathern 2004: xvii). Engagement
with its parts reveals dissonance, not coherence. As the two chapters in Part
Three unfold, I move closer to the permutations of the village setting to depict
how coherence is sustained as a site of power and struggle to strengthen male
status and kinship affiliations. In studying these sites of power and struggle, the
analysis in Part Three focuses mainly on male agency leaving an imbalanced focus
on female gender. The emphasis on male interlocutors is to highlight their
prominent role in transforming the village space into sites of power and struggle
that disturbs the social cohesiveness of the village but simultaneously
strengthens people’s affiliation with kin.
The concluding part of my thesis, ‘Bounded: A Village of Relations’, shifts from studying the conceptualisation of social relations through human interaction to look at the spiritual, material and somatic relations people form with the landscape that encompasses the village. Building up to the final chapter of my thesis, I conclude with a different scalar perspective than my thesis started with, to depict an inclusive ordering of a bounded place made up of a totality of its own. The village becomes a place worked on through the living and their relations with the dead.

By concluding with a totality that is conceived of in the process of centring from a different perspective of scale than that with which my thesis started, I am at the same time attempting to convey the argument that my entire thesis builds upon. That is, places – in this case a village space – are made up of multiple scales that are formed around an inclusive ordering that gets materialised by human agency and the relational interplay of centre and peripheries. Depending on the vantage point of the viewer, the perspectival scale of a centre and peripheries are presented. From one perspective, the village space might appear an archetype of a traditional village: whole and complete. From another, the village presents itself as a place of permutations: shattered by village conflict. Shifting perspectives again will present the viewer with a spatial ordering that is maintained through the role of, and relations with, kin: bounded. To situate the ordering of the village space in the context of Meili, let us now turn to discuss the research setting in more detail.
Having positioned my thesis in broader anthropological discussions, I now consider the research setting and research conditions in more detail. Because studying a locality requires that the multiple ways in which it is historically constituted are understood, the outline I provide is composed of two historical threads that shape Meili. The first pieces together locally shared myths and narratives of the past that are the products of relations in the local area. The second version, more familiar to those conversant with China’s contemporary history, conveys a more hegemonic outlook told through the historical discontinuities recollected by villagers. These two threads are not discrete but overlap with one another to produce a notion of place that is always linked to other places beyond the fixed locality of Meili.

Research Setting

Locally shared histories: Maintaining boundaries

The first historical framework focuses on the myths and narratives of the past produced by interactions in the village and its vicinity. Meili’s oral history is dotted with tales of revenge, deception and violent engagement involving the populations of neighbouring villages. Many of the stories end with the victory of a Meili man with the physical strength to fight off intruders while remaining loyal towards his own kind. Even the village’s founding myth echoes this element. It recounts that Meili was originally colonised by the Miao people, a much larger ethnic group that generally lives high in the mountains, while it is said that Kam people have always lived beside water. The story tells of a group of nine Kam brothers arriving at the Miao village. Seeing the river that meanders through the valley, the brothers decided it was an ideal place for them to set up home. Considering themselves smarter than the mountain-living Miao, they sought to outwit them by leaving tiger footprints on the mountain slopes and village outskirts. The Miao saw the footprints and, fearing the tigers, quickly picked up
their possessions and fled. With this, the first inhabitants of the Meili Kam population colonised the valley floor.

It is still said that the Miao have a strong dislike for people from Meili, who are consequently very cautious about contact with them. I too was warned to be careful of the Miao and not to accept the food they offered me in case it was poisonous. If that were not an option, I was advised to add excessive amounts of chili to override the harm they might be trying to cause me.6 Sometimes, when travelling through Miao villages with Yangxu – a Meili resident who often took me with him to film singing competitions in neighbouring villages – I noticed that he hid his background when we ate in the homes of local people whom he did not know; he would tell our Miao hosts that he was not from Meili but from the county town. The colonisation of Miao land also continues to haunt Meili residents through the material remains of Miao bones that still occupy the earth on which Meili’s homes are built. Uncared for and unsupervised, the traces of the dead act as reminders of the Miao predecessors that still hold their ground.

This was not the only tale about the success of Meili residents in fooling the Miao. Another story is more symbolic. The spirit animal of the Miao is the centipede and, on one occasion, the strongest man in Meili was able to trick the Miao king by transforming himself into a chicken, one of the totem animals of the Kam, and pecking the centipede to death. The mutilated centipede turned into the head of the Miao king which to this day is represented by a large stone that sits in the village territory as a monument to Meili’s strength. Another version of the story claims the stone was carried to the mountain ridge by Meili’s strongest man as a warning to neighbouring villages.

Both these stories tell of male strength (a theme to which I return in more detail in Part Three of my thesis) but also highlight the significance of markers along the mountain ridges that are part of Meili’s territorial boundary making. Village boundaries are also marked by the river that cuts through the mountains to the valley of Meili. Crucial elements of the topography that sustain the village boundaries are the wind and water bridges at both ends of the village.

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6 Food from Guizhou is generally a lot spicier than other forms of Chinese cuisine thus chili was a frequent conversation tool with people from the region. Here the advice to kill poison in my food with chili is noteworthy considering I was also told by a villager his interpretation of China’s historical encounters with Europeans who brought chili with them thinking it was poison that they could kill the Chinese population with.
that ‘lock in’ the water spirit (水神 pron: shui shen) that brings prosperity to the village (also see Wu 2014; Jones & Li 2008). Further down the river, the water flows past two long, narrow stones. One version of the story depicts the stones as paint brushes that were used to paint the beautiful landscape by immortals, including the Jade Emperor, who then mutated into a mountain behind the river. Another story refers to the stones as dragon’s claws. The lower body of the dragon sits at the other end of Meili, inhabiting a deep pond and waterfall. With the claws of the dragon at one end and the tail at the other, the dragon body carves through the village in shape of the meandering River Lidong to mark the territorial divisions of the village. The same markers are said to be located in another Kam village located on a parallel mountain ridge that shares kinship ties with Meili residents. The rivers that flow through the two villages meet down the mountain but the physical alignment of the dragon delineates the frontiers of the village-scape.

Image 1: Making the plunge into the ‘Dragon’s Pond’
Following the flow of the Lidong River, the village is divided into the upper village (к�pron: shangzhai) and lower village (лᆵpron: xiazhai). Historically, settlement patterns were organised by lineage group but this is not always the case anymore. Organically scattered along the river are rows of wooden stilt houses with grey-tiled, overhanging gable roofs; five roofed bridges link the riverbanks. With a population of 1,306 and 305 registered households, Meili consists of a total land surface of 9.8 square kilometres and sits in a deep valley surrounded by 117 acres of terraced fields and lush forests, including emerald green sheets of bamboo trees and rare ancient Chinese tree species, which comprise 60.4% of the overall land. The mountains that ring the village are not karstic, as commonly found in the region, but folded clastic mountains that crowd together and are sliced through by deep valleys and village settlements. They are not particularly tall but, as villagers described them, they are ‘thick’ (厚pron: hou) and the boundaries between them difficult to ascertain. A complex irrigation system supports the cultivation of rice from spring until harvest season in the autumn in the layered plates of paddy fields that are carved into the mountains. Fish are left in the paddy fields throughout the year, even after the harvest season, and some of the land is converted into gardens to plant winter vegetables.

The architectural traditions often associated with the Kam people remain largely intact in Meili. Studying the materiality of the village assists in piecing together fragments of its history, revealing the long-term wealth of select, well-to-do families. Inscribed with Chinese characters and interlaced with Han symbolism, the remaining architectural sites should not and cannot be understood in isolation from the Middle Kingdom’s Imperial rule. Although oral histories claim that the first inhabitants of Meili arrived as early as the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), most of the recorded artefactual remnants in Meili refer back to late Qing dynasty. According to a local gazetteer, records of Meili Qing Imperial presence in the village date back to Emperor Yongzheng’s rule in the 1730s. However, only under the rule of Yongzheng’s son, Emperor Qianlong, did the domination and management of Imperial rule intensify in the village, as depicted in engravings on the stone plaques that mark the entrance points to the village and on the village wells. The plaques originally flanked the three village
gates that were locked and guarded by a gatekeeper. To ward off outlaws or bandits, carved bamboo stumps were thrust into the earth along paths leading up to the gate. A stone wall and massive, ancient trees with 200 cm diameters enclosed the village and outlined the territorial boundaries. In addition to the inscribed stone plaques of the Qing dynasty, Meili’s bridges, its intricately carved stone pathways leading to neighbouring villages, and its wells and residences, including a unique courtyard building, can also be traced back to the late eighteenth century and Emperor Qianlong’s rule. While the stone carvings materially link Meili to Imperial rule, tales and myths reveal historical encounters between the village and sovereign power, including that of divine beings such as the Jade Emperor, whose last taste of water featured at the beginning of this thesis.

Regardless of the material links between Meili and Imperial rule, the altar to the Sasui deity reveals a particularly unique attachment to place unique in the region. Translated as ‘grandmother’, Sasui is the originator of every Kam village population, and wherever Kam populations settle they first build an altar to Sasui altar to mark their arrival. Worshipping Sasui involves similar forms as those offered to the Chinese Earth God, a local hero, ancestor or spirit (Wu 2014). Her imprint marks the territorial place, which she protects by resolving community disputes and assuring the fertility of women so as to regenerate life in the village. The current Sasui altar (see Image 2) was built by the first lineage in the village, which goes by the name of Yang. It is said that in the past there were two altars in Meili, proof that alongside the Yang lived another line of descent, the Shi family. The Yangs and Shi lineage groups lived cohesively in the village until most of the Shi family migrated across the mountain, taking their Sasui altar with them. To this day it is said that there is kinship affiliation between the Yang and Shi families and because of this their oxen will not compete in ox fighting when placed in the same arena. Currently Meili only contains one Sasui altar. Built on a small hill overlooking the village, stones have been piled into a monumental heap with long grass growing from the cracks that symbolises

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7 Whether this is unique to the Kam people as Wu (2014) claims, or practiced regionally, remains unclear to me. Miao villages and villages of mixed ethnicity that I visited also have Sasui altars where residents commemorate Sasui annually. Further research is necessary to confirm these distinctions.
Sasui’s long hair, which brings fertility to the village. Originally twelve pieces of silver were placed in the altar, along with a black umbrella (material objects that symbolise Sasui amongst the Kam) but during the Cultural Revolution movement to ‘sweep away all the monsters and demons’ (牛鬼蛇神, literally ‘cow ghosts snake spirits’), the altar and the silver pieces were removed.

As Meili has no written genealogical records or family histories, the migration of families cannot be confirmed, and the lineage group with right of access to Sasui’s altar as the originators of the village is disputed. Unlike Han Chinese communities where the surname of a family is synonymous with its clan, Kam populations only adopted Chinese surnames after the end of the seventeenth century. Most of the villagers in Meili go by the surname Yang, which is divided into six societal units, or clans, referred to as dou. The most important elements in orienting and organising Kam societal life, members of the same dou share the same ancestors, burial grounds and, before collectivisation, the forests and land (Geary et al 2003). Each dou has its own sequence of generational names (辈份 pron: beifen) for the male members of the family as a continuation of
the patrilineal line. The *dou* also determines who can intermarry and future marriage partners.

The ‘Laben’ *dou* is the biggest in the village, with its members claiming to be the original inhabitants of Meili who set up the Sasui altar and village boundaries, yet this remains contested. Establishing the first inhabitants of a village is crucial to carrying out rituals to honour Sasui because of their strict sequential order, which only the first inhabitants of a village are entitled to lead. The lineage conflicts have led to disagreement over this, meaning that rituals to commemorate Sasui are no longer practiced. Despite these difficulties, however, people of different age groups told me that they still believe in her potential to protect the village and the altar is kept tidy and occasionally commemorated in secret with rice wine and incense on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month.

In addition to the Yang and Shi surname groups, over the years lineage groups with surnames including Long, Liu, Zhang, Shi (unrelated to the previous Shi inhabitants mentioned above) and Wu have also migrated to the village. Shi and Li both comprise two *dou* units. I was informed that the majority of the later arrivals originated from a different ethnic group and thus did not speak Kam when they first arrived in Meili but over time they have conformed to Kam ways of living.

Alongside the kinship orientation of the village, Meili’s population is also divided and structured according to the Baojia system from the Republican era, the Agricultural Mutual Aid Group and the Communist era production teams, which are divided into six groups. To understand how these divisions came about requires a brief overview of a more nationally shared, hegemonic version of history.

*Hegemonic histories: Making a ‘Traditional Village’*

The biggest historically shared turning point recollected by Meili villagers was the Communist Liberation in 1949. Any modifications made in everyday social life, such as courtship patterns, kinship relations, style of clothing and agricultural practices, are marked in people’s memories by this transformation. It is undeniable that, on the larger scale, the changes in the everyday lives of
Chinese people under Mao Zedong rule created a whole new ordering of life and social relations that cannot be underestimated. Prior to Communist rule, Meili villagers had maintained a cohesive social organisation based on a representative system of traditional law and order known as the *kuan*, whereby all decisions were made by selected village elders. After 1949, old systems of law and *kuan* were replaced with a nationwide organisational structure reallocating hierarchical decision-making roles and divisions to administrative units, agricultural production co-operatives and Communist Youth Leagues.

In addition to the organisational changes initiated in Meili, I was informed that the centralisation of political rule brought an end to social instability in the region instigated by unruly bandits. Bandits were particularly widespread between 1911 and 1912 after the fall of Imperial rule, a period that was the precursor to the Warlord Era (1916-1928), when social instability spread and lootings across Southwest China were increasingly common. According to the county annals, social instability was initiated by armies arriving from neighbouring Yunnan province who had split from the Beiyang government during the Warlord Era (Sun et al. 2015).

Oral histories amongst Meili’s older population describe the army’s arriving in the village, looting food supplies, committing arson, and causing havoc. In the years that followed, Meili experienced famine and drought and the population halved. The havoc caused by bandits, on the other hand, is questionable, as I was also informed by villagers that bandits were considered good people who came to protect the region. Yet such favourable stories are largely submerged by genres of storytelling known as ‘talking bitterness’ or ‘pouring one’s woes’ (訴苦 pron: *suku*), encouraged among peasants during the Maoist era to “devalue the past, characterised by oppression and exploitation, and the contrast of that past with the present and future” (Steinmüller 2013: 17). As recited to me in a biographical poem written by one of the older residents who was eager to share his composition with me, the looting and disorder initiated by bandits finally came to an end once the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) brought peace and stability to the region. The reality was much starker.

Under communist rule, wealthy landlords who had been profiting from Meili’s fertile lands were publicly attacked, denounced and interned in labour
camps. Casting them into severe poverty, their material possessions were confiscated and distributed across the village or destroyed altogether. Although village landlords were the most likely targets of public denouncement, as the years of Maoist rule progressed, everyone in the village experienced the fear and hunger that was spreading across the country. Clutching their stomachs as if the hunger still pained them, they shared with me their memories of deprivation, of living in famine and starvation that led to the death of loved ones. Excessive, intrusive inspections started during the Great Leap Forward (1958-'61), and surveillance seeped into every corner of people’s lives, causing constant fear and ensuring that all their energy was directed towards farming and fulfilling nationwide grain production figures.

The second historical turning point in the memory of many Meili residents was the death of Mao Zedong and the introduction of market reforms under Deng Xiaoping. The most noticeable change this had on the lives of Meili residents was the mass migration from the village as the economic reforms of the 1980s started to gain pace and cheap labour was needed in cities. Waves of rural men and women poured into factories and construction sites in the country's coastal urban centres, to the point that in many cities, such as Dongguan and Shenzhen, the migrant population overtook the local urban population (China Labour Bulletin, 2017).

Migrant labour is still the main source of income for Meili’s population as farming is not sufficient for survival in everyday life. At the same time, demand for migrant labour has dropped in recent years and China is undergoing a significant change in the mobility of rural to urban populations that is also reflected in the stories of Meili residents. In 2017, large-scale construction projects that depended on cheap labour dropped by 18.9%, or about 54 million workers. These changes are driven by Xi Jinping’s what is officially referred to as nationwide anti-graft regulations and the end of the building boom in 2015 (China Labour Bulletin, 2017). Furthermore, many young people are no longer interested in taking the low paid factory positions sought in their youth and by the previous generation. Based on the narratives of Meili residents whom I got to know, this study presents the impact of China’s more recent economic setbacks on the lives of those most affected by economic reform: the nation’s rural populations.
Since China’s economic boom and Deng Xiaoping’s Four Modernisations scheme initiated in the late 1970s, the nation has also experienced significant changes in the advancement of infrastructural and technological development, which have modified the topography of Guizhou by carving out highways and railway lines through the region’s mountainous terrain. The folded clastic mountains that dominate the landscape are at huge risk of soil erosion, posing a major challenge to road construction. Viewed as a burden and handicap to development and everyday life, getting away from the sea of mountains was deemed an impossibility, as I was told: “First thing, you open your door in the morning and you are blocked by a mountain.” Despite these challenges, paving and widening expressways and village roads has meant that negotiating the rugged slopes and steep valley descents on foot has largely been superseded. Cars, motorbikes and, more recently, a bullet railway line make it substantially easier to get past the mountains of Guizhou’s rugged terrain to China’s eastern coastline. These factors allow populations to be much more mobile than the previous generation could have ever imagined and, as rural populations drift across country to city centres in search of work, urban residents likewise find it easier to visit parts of the country that until recently would have been too difficult to get to.

Tourism development under market reforms has initiated a wider trend in the revival and restoration of cultural practices and cultural sites, a trend at the core of strategic development policies to shift poverty relief in a top-down initiative since the 1980s and 1990s. As part of the readjustment of rural China from the collective economy to the contract responsibility system, culture and subjectivity were “placed at the very centre as the object of improvement, as they are held directly responsible for holding economic forces” (Yan H. 2003: 500). Efforts to alleviate poverty through tourism have been accompanied by attempts to activate rural populations dependent on government aid to ‘leave poverty’ (要我脱贫 pron: yaowo tuopin). The notion of a passive rural citizen dependent on aid has been replaced at the core of development policies by consumer conscious, active subjects who can act on their own initiative to escape poverty (我要脱贫 pron: woyao tuopin) (ibid.). In order to activate rural populations, the focus has been geared in more recent years towards activating them to uphold the national
cause of preserving their material history and cultural heritage. These efforts are particularly widespread in Guizhou, listed as an economically impoverished region and the province with one of the lowest per capita GDP in the country amongst the country’s thirty-four provincial regions.

The drive to tackle poverty has gained new attention and urgency since General Secretary Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. Considering the economic impoverishment of Guizhou, poverty alleviation is a key concern in China’s efforts to build a moderately prosperous, or xiaokang society, by 2020. The performance of poverty alleviation was visible across the province from road plaques celebrating the ‘Poverty Alleviation model village’ to a clock in the county town showing a countdown to when residents will no longer live in poverty and instead be able to enjoy new well-off and affluent, or xiaokang comforts. I had been informed about the clock by Grandpa Yang Huangsheng, mentioned in the previous chapter, when discussing government initiatives in the region with him. He told me that posters promoting the xiaokang lifestyles is to “reflect the ‘dream’ (夢想 pron: mengxiang) of the government” and told me to visit the county town where I will find a clock counting down to 2020 when everyone will reach this level of life. Expressing the usual sense of cynicism, he laughed and added, “It will definitely take more than four years to reach that. Go look at it for yourself if you don’t believe me!”

The following week I followed Yang Huangsheng’s orders, and as he promised, I found the clock in the courtyard of the state administration offices. But unlike I had expected, it was hidden above the main entrance to the police station, which again reminded me how perceptive Yang Huangsheng is. The clock was indeed a countdown. Beside the current time in red characters the billboard read ‘Time count to ‘attack’ (攻堅 pron: gongjian) poverty 1054 days,

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8. Xiaokang is a term that was already being used between 475-221 BC in the Record of Rites describing a society of ‘great equality’ (大同) where everyone lived in harmony. This egalitarian society eventually crumbled and became a xiaokang society where individuals only loved their own conjugal family and children and accumulated wealth for their own benefit. The term was revived in 1979 by Deng Xiaooping, and has since been widely applied in discourse promoting market socialism (Lu 2000: 126). The 2020 benchmark is no coincidence. Expected to take place one year before the one hundred year anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, achieving in the xiaokang deadline carries political meaning alongside Xi Jinping’s cultural heritage campaigns to ‘rejuvenate’ the Chinese nation.
10:34 minutes and 33 seconds to distance oneself from poverty’ (see Image 3). I watched in amazement as the colon between 10 and 34 blinked as the minutes and seconds got smaller. The relevance of future-oriented slogans cannot be overlooked in the context of China. Privileging the future is the essence of slogans to shift attention away from the current state and make the present more tolerable. Referring to the notion of time as extensions of the past and endless future rather than the present as integral to the notion of time in China even before the Maoist era, Croll (1994) claims this was reinforced by Marxist theory towards a socialist future. Hereby “[t]o make the present more tolerable, slogans such as ‘Three years of hardship for a thousand years of happiness’, common in the first revolutionary years, reiterated the message that tomorrow would always be better than today” (p. 6-7). With the reinforcement of such messages in everyday propaganda, over time the present began to be experienced as if it were the future. Notions of the future were imagined and plans were made goal-oriented. By the end of Maoist rule, plans were no longer expected to be translated to fit the local environment of where policy is being implemented, but were merely filtered downwards from one administrative level to the next (Croll 1993).

One of the numerous development projects that carried the face of the government that I refer to in my thesis, poverty alleviation was central to Guizhou’s political efforts. During my fieldwork the provincial CCP party chief was Chen Min’er, a ‘black horse’ and trusted confidant of Xi Jinping (who from Guizhou got promoted to serve the role of Communist Party Secretary of Chongqing), who was publicized in Chinese media as a success story for initiating more stringent plans to mold a xiaokang population in the province. Alongside generating appeal for private investments in Guizhou province, from
supporting technological advancements in the provincial capital’s drive to become a technology hub (nicknamed ‘China’s Big Data Valley’) to attracting the nation’s wealthiest individuals to invest in ethnic villages to alleviate poverty, during the 12th Five-Year Plan period, the cumulative poverty reduction population in Guizhou was said to drop from 11.49 million at the end of 2011 to 4.93 million at the end of 2015 (Xinhua Wang 2016). Alongside tackling poverty, these state-led efforts seek to identify alternatives for rural residents to make a living without leaving the countryside. These efforts are not new. With the drive of industrialisation during the reform period, agriculture can no longer sustain the state and rural reconstruction schemes have driven shifts in government policy providing new opportunities for rural societies. Rural revitalization campaigns such as ‘leave the fields without leaving the countryside’ (离土不离乡 pron: litu bu lixiang), seeks to “conceive of modernity without mobility – in other words, an immobile modernity” (Chio 2014: 107), thus slowing down the internal migration of rural residents to urban cities and towns but simultaneously encouraging peasants to move ‘away’ from the unmodern.⁹

Cultural heritage preservation has become an important category leading rural revitalization and reconstruction campaigns driven by efforts to alleviate poverty. Alongside poverty alleviation they strengthen national unity, as seen in President Xi’s campaigns, such as the ‘China Dream’ (中国梦 pron: zhongguo meng), that not only repackages national narratives with culture at the core, but invokes the need to reconcile historical values in order to locate a usable past that both legitimates the party and unifies the nation. In response to the hype around discovering and preserving China’s last ‘traditional’ villages, Guizhou has become somewhat of a hotspot for government officials, tourists, preservationists, designers, entrepreneurs and artists alike. Owing to its well-preserved architectural exterior, Meili is currently recognized for its cultural and historical setting on multiple national and transnational cultural heritage protected listings. The visible artefacts that are part of the architectural layout of the

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⁹ Refer to Chio’s (2011; 2014) detailed ethnography on the anthropologies of tourism in rural ethnic China in response to the New Socialist Countryside movement as part of the 11th Five Year Plan (2006-2010). For a detailed overview of prominent debates covering wider public and academic discussions on China’s central government policies directed towards the countryside and rural reconstruction, including the ‘three problems of the countryside’ debate credited to scholar-official Wen Tiejun, refer to Day (2008)
vernacular setting of Meili, for example, such as the Sasui altar, drum tower, wooden barn-like pile houses and covered wind and rain bridges, are commonly taken as evidence of the Kam people's socio-cultural organisation of village and family life. Widely circulated and regurgitated through mass media and tourism industries seeking to capitalise on the standardisation of Kam craftsmanship as a cultural commodity, the ‘distinctive architecture’ of the Kam people is regarded as representing the people themselves (Oakes 1997, 1998, 2013; Ruan 2006).

The national and transnational cultural heritage protected listings that Meili has acclaimed, as I was frequently reminded by Meili residents (discussed in more detail in Part Two of my thesis). Posted at the entry point and dotted across the village are plaques and billboards listing the numerous prestigious awards Meili has earned – these are also included in tourist pamphlets and mentioned in speeches by tour guides (a role I filled myself) – thus informing others of its merits. The listings range from provincial nominations, such as the ‘One Hundred Village Program’, which pilots a rural development model based on the utilisation of village cultural heritage and local ecological resources, awarded in June 2012, to national nominations such as the first listing of China’s National Traditional Village in December of the same year. Following the national fad reflected in China’s ‘Traditional Village’ listing, in April 2014 Meili was chosen, along with fifty villages across the nation, for a model Traditional Village pilot study funded by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH). Other national accolades include the seventh listing of the National Cultural Heritage Protection awarded in April 2013, and the sixth listing of the Chinese Historical and Cultural Famous Village awarded in March 2014. In addition to nationally acclaimed merits, in January 2013 Meili was added to UNESCO’s World Heritage Convention ‘Dong Village’ tentative list, in addition to 22 other Dong villages in Guizhou and neighbouring Guangxi and Hunan provinces, that are considered “representative of the cultural landscape of Chinese ethnic minority villages” (UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity 2009). The reputation that Meili village gained as a result of these listings also explains my own association and first encounters with the village setting, to which I now turn.

Research Conditions
My affiliations with the local government

My first visit to Meili was in July 2014. At the time I was being supervised by Professor Anne Haila of the Helsinki University Social Policy Department and was preparing to conduct my fieldwork in rural Fujian, southeast China, in a *tulou*, or enclosed, fortification-type building shaped like a Bundt cake held together with thick rammed earth walls. My visit to Meili was initiated over a dinner conversation in Beijing with a friend, who was leading the Meili cultural heritage preservation scheme in collaboration with the local government, when she asked if I could come with her to Meili. With my background in social research methods, fluency in Mandarin and the research in rural Fujian that validated my competence to perform in the living conditions of any Chinese village, as my friend put it, I was considered a good candidate to help conduct a social demographic survey in the village. The research trip was organised in July of that year and, after returning to Helsinki in the autumn, I was accepted as an anthropology student under the supervision of Professor Sarah Green and decided to change my field site from the rural setting of Fujian to Meili. With this decision, my name was included as a member of the Peking University research team in the government paperwork listing Meili’s heritage scheme, which accredited me with the opportunity to live and conduct long-term research in the village.

My second visit to Meili was also in affiliation with the preservation scheme and took place during my academic exchange period at Peking University in spring, 2015. Working as a team with three Guizhou Ethnic Minority University students, during the two week visit we compiled material into a brief report on Meili residents’ feelings about taking part in the development project. I also engaged with local women to document the cycle of traditional Dong textile and clothing making, in addition to collecting folktales related to the natural landscape of Meili. Although both my pre-fieldwork visits to the village were short, they stamped a memory in the minds of Meili residents who often recalled that I had stayed in the village for two years or more, forgetting that I had left in between visits. This was helpful in leaving an impression on people leading up to my official ethnographic fieldwork that started in October 2015 and ended in September 2016, with two brief visits to Finland due to family matters and visa complications in the period. I made another brief visit to Meili in February 2017, a
one-month follow-up trip over Chinese New Year. In total my fieldwork was completed over a period of thirteen months between 2014 and 2017.

As I mentioned above, although I was officially included in the government paperwork as collaborating with it on the Meili village development project, I had few obligations in that direction. Given the difficulties of obtaining formal permits to conduct long-term research in a Chinese rural setting, and rather than facing the ambiguities that proceeded throughout my fieldwork, both in relation to my affiliation with the Peking University research team and the local government via the research project, I took advantage of the situation and the freedom that government collaboration supplied me to undertake my research.

For the most part, I was left to my own devices apart from the occasional Mandarin to English translations I was asked to complete, the brief visits by government officials when I was asked to dress up and act as a tour guide, and social dinners with county-level Cultural Bureau staff during visits to the county seat. Although I held few obligations towards the project, my research output and analysis reveals the challenges of maintaining the anonymity of those who have helped me to avoid harming their professional reputations. Regardless of (what I consider to be) the positive connections we have maintained, as my

*Image 4: An escape from slow-paced village life. Picture taken by Sonya Chee*
research developed I grew increasingly dissatisfied with the objectives and intentions of the government-led heritage scheme and desperately tried to dissociate myself from it. To overcome these challenges I took on other roles in the village, such as teaching English at the local primary school, tutoring English to small groups during national school holidays and organising painting and reading classes for children. This was beneficial on a number of levels: it gave me an opportunity to get to know the children but also provided me with tasks to fill the long, sometimes boring days of slow-paced village life. I cannot claim that these roles overcame the ambiguity of my presence in the village; instead they probably added to it. Regardless of my ambiguous position in the village, however, the tasks I took on provided me with activities and helped in the formation of new relationships, particularly with children that led me to their families. I never escaped from the title ‘Teacher Su’ (苏老师 pron: su laoshi), which even villagers of my own age group whom I considered had become close friends continued to call me. Referring to someone as ‘teacher’ in Mandarin is a sign of respect and the title was also given to me due to my being a researcher working for a university. If I was not ‘Teacher Su’, I was referred to by my Mandarin name, Suwei, which was sometimes shortened to ‘Little Su’ (小苏 pron: xiāosū) as a sign of affection.

**Homelife**

During my preliminary visits to Meili I lived in a guesthouse run by the Shi family and ate meals at the village leader’s household, also a member of the Shi family. Both families welcomed me into their lives and I grew close to the wife of the guesthouse owner soon after my arrival. Eager to be of assistance, I woke at four in the mornings to help her prepare the rice noodle broth she sold to villagers for breakfast. We quickly formed a close bond and I spent many afternoons with her in the kitchen or following her around the village. Soon, however, I began to realise that other villagers were suspicious of our relationship. On one occasion, for example, whilst enjoying dinner with a separate family, the niece of Teacher Shi, who was helping me with translation at the time, joined us; everyone at the table left the room because they did not want to be involved with the Shi family. This is dealt with in more detail in Chapter Three but here I want to focus on the
relevance of village kinship relations to the connections I formed. This occurrence, in addition to others, revealed to me that to continue living with the Shi family would restrict opportunities to befriend members of other lineage groups. To neutralise the situation, I moved to a bedroom in the three-storey village administration building.

![Image 5: Homelife in the summer when dinner meals can be enjoyed outdoors. Picture taken by Sun Peipei](image)

This had been converted from a Maoist-era primary school and was a big building consisting of meeting rooms, office space and bedrooms for visiting researchers. I lived on the third floor of the building with the permanent architect assistant for the heritage project who slept in the room beside mine. With its cold concrete flooring and the three-storey layout lined with rows of empty rooms, I never accustomed to living in the administration building. When I spoke of these concerns to villagers I was surprised with the assertive responses given to me claiming with outright confidence that there couldn’t possibly be anything wrong the building. Their assertiveness made me suspicious and the more I
complained about the unease of spending time in the building I eventually started to gather stories of bad fengshui and ghosts lurking in the building. Once these stories were finally revealed to me to confirm my fears, I was given a net to hang on the wall and a thin red string to wrap around my ankle with a Qing dynasty coin to protect me in my sleep.

My other concern with the village administration building was that it was not only different from the villagers' own homes, built as they were for the permanent use of numerous generations of a family line rather than to accommodate temporary visitors – but that it had a completely different design layout. High up on the third floor, looming over the village-scape, in the administration building I felt disconnected and alienated from Meili residents. Furthermore, being at a higher level than the neighbouring houses meant that there was no protection from the winter wind and rain that seeped through the cracks of the tile roofing and wooden walls. It should be noted that I am complaining about my comparatively privileged living conditions in order to point out that, never comfortable within its walls, I spent as little time in the building as possible; it became merely a place to sleep, shower and write up my field-notes. This was of course beneficial for me as a researcher because it meant I had more reason to immerse myself in the lives of villagers, ‘deeply hanging out’, as Geertz (1998) would claim.

This was not as easy as I imagined. Before becoming accustomed to the slow rhythm of the cold winter months spending long afternoons indoors with families, my restlessness and boredom led me outdoors on long walks on my own along the mountain ridges. At first I kept my walks short, visiting the paddy fields surrounding Meili, but as the months progressed I made longer treks along the older mountain trails to neighbouring villages. I walked because I enjoy walking and my body craved exercise, but I was also fascinated by the layout of the landscape and I felt more sheltered in the mountains. Away from the inescapable gaze and judgment of villagers, in the mountains I felt comfortable following villagers into their farmhouses if they invited me in for a seat and chat. Friendships that grew during these encounters in the mountains, such as that formed with Grandpa Yang Huangsheng (see Image 6), felt less invasive than the
relationships I was attempting to form in the village, which at the beginning of my fieldwork felt more like I was interfering.

It was only as my fieldwork progressed that I slowly set aside this feeling and gained confidence about my presence in the village by becoming part of the lives of families who appear in my ethnography. I made daily rounds to visit their warm homes in the winter months, sitting hunched over the charcoal fire watching television and indulging in long lunches and dinners with delicious home-cooked food and rice wine. Quite soon into my research I found I could approach these families as myself, rather than as a researcher, and I made the conscious decision to leave my notepad, camera and voice recorder at home.

Gaining trust and accepting criticism

Although I spent a considerable amount of time with villagers both in their homes and in the paddy fields in the mountains, most took a lot of convincing that I could learn to help in their agricultural work and household chores. I was
eager to be more intimately involved in the everyday lives of the villagers but because I was a guest it would have been considered embarrassing if other villagers saw me being given chores. Further, teaching me farming skills was not only an embarrassment, it was also a nuisance, costing more time and trouble than it was worth. When I first arrived, the harvest season was nearing its peak and one family allowed me to join them in bringing in the year's harvest. I was unaccustomed to using a scythe, however, and, rather than helping with the workload, quite soon after arriving at the paddy fields and starting to reap the crop I almost cut my finger off and fainted. Considering the long trek to the paddy fields, I rested under a tree in the paddy fields and as we walked back to the village in the evening it was made clear to me that in the risk of me slipping and falling, my help was no longer necessary. To overcome the resulting lack of trust in my work capabilities, I had to find families who were sufficiently open-minded to let me try again and teach me their ways of life even when I slipped and fell. Gaining the trust of the villagers more broadly was my main motive, a goal to which I refer throughout my thesis. By the time spring approached and the rice planting season had arrived, I had proved to these families that I had learned from my clumsy mistakes and was physically capable of working in the fields even when I continued to slip along the mountain ridges. Due to the huge workload that comes with transplanting rice seedlings, the manpower I represented was eagerly accepted.

Whilst at the beginning of my fieldwork I was told that it would be an embarrassment if villagers saw that I was being put to work, in my final months I could hardly walk through the village without being called over if there was a collective task that required a large number of helpers, such as preparing for village feasts, foraging in the forests for fiddlehead ferns or cutting down a tree to rebuild a home. As I gained the trust of the villagers, I was not only included in physical labour but was also able to take up new hobbies and skills, such as embroidery. Like the other chores I took on during fieldwork, realising that tasks are learned rather than inherited traits and finding someone willing to put time aside to guide me in needle skills seemed too much of a challenge at first, but over time I was able to convince a few women that I genuinely wanted to learn. Beiyun was my main teacher, or master (pron: shifu), whom I visited every morning as she worked on tailoring clothing for the women in the village. Her approach to
teaching often took on the form of scolding when pointing out what I was doing wrong: “Idiot! Watch more carefully! Keep your hands steady! And follow the tracing of the outline!” What was worse was when her older sister, who lives next door, was visiting Beiyun and together they would watch over me ready to scold me at my every move. Always ready to comment on flaws, such as my bad eyesight, and once even claiming that I would never learn because I have a deformed thumb. Beiyun advised, “Better you stick to something you actually know how to do, like writing”. One afternoon I had enough and asked Beiyun to stop scolding me and she looked at me with a wide grin spreading across her face and responded, “If you don’t want me to scold you, how else do you expect to learn?”

The more I practiced embroidery, the thicker my skin grew (both metaphorically and literally); my hands became more steady, allowing me to stitch the outlines of the thin paper silhouette designs with care, and with greater ease. I was advised to stop cutting my thumb nails, and as they grew longer I could hold my paper outline in place and my thumb no longer felt deformed. The scolding died down and as I worked on my embroidery and Beiyun on her tailoring, our conversations shifted to other matters beyond my inability to master the needle. When I had gained sufficient confidence, I took my needlework to other patios where aunties gathered in the afternoons to share gossip and work on their embroidery.

It was in these moments that women would open up to me and share personal stories of abortions, miscarriages and married life or the pressures of motherhood and financial struggles. Sometimes they would even ask me about my own past relationships and together we would analyse my failed romances. Other times women would recall stories of living in the city working in factories. I expected to hear recounts of the tedious routine production of factory life, but instead the stories expressed humour and recalled moments of happiness shared with past colleagues. In the course of reminiscing about urban life, they would shift the conversation to contemplate whether they should return to the city where the work is not considered as tedious as agricultural labour – leaving the village and escaping the social pressures that come with village life where someone always has an eye on you. Yet most of the time I worked on my embroidery, taking little part in conversation. Inarticulate in the Kam language, I
could not actively engage in group conversations and the villagers did not always have the energy to translate. Although I was present at social events throughout the course of my fieldwork, language barriers remained a major obstacle to socialising. Despite having studied Mandarin in Beijing, where I spent most of my youth, it took a long time for my ears to become accustomed to the spoken Mandarin of my interlocutors, which conforms to a completely different dialect of the language intertwined with local accents unique to the region.

Yet the local form of Mandarin was not the biggest barrier, as this was something my ears merely needed to adjust to. What was more challenging was acquiring the Kam language spoken by Meili residents. Although at the beginning of my research my objective was to learn to speak Kam, this was not easy to achieve largely due to the difficulties of finding a language teacher. Villagers were too busy or disinterested to take on the task of teaching me, and offering them money for the service was considered an insult. Even when villagers were willing to commit to teaching, soon enough unexpected chores got in the way and it became impossible to find a suitable time to put aside for me. Although the Kam I picked up from daily conversations was broken, in the months leading up to the end of my fieldwork, I learned to sing Kam songs in preparation for my leaving dinner when I anticipated singing farewell songs in exchange with the villagers. Teaching me songs also became a way of teaching me the Kam language. This helped tremendously, yet, throughout fieldwork, it was always easier to carry out conversations in Mandarin and this became a habit. Due to this, my research was limited to villagers who felt comfortable speaking standard Mandarin.

Because my fieldwork relied so heavily on understanding the everyday dynamics of Meili, the kind of targeted, factual material that might have been collected through more thorough systematic interviews paired with archival research is limited. In addition, although I frequented other villages and became close friends with a family in the neighbouring village whose ancestors are from Meili, my ethnography might have been more comprehensive if I had conducted systematic research studying the larger themes and narratives across the area. This, however, I deemed too difficult because, the longer I stayed in Meili, the more obsessed I became about the possibility of ‘missing out’ on an event or happening. Introducing tape recorders or interviews felt out of place and most of
the conversations carried out with my interlocutors were spontaneous and, for the most part, uneventful.

Lastly, the reason I did not travel from village to village in an attempt to piece together a more systematic regional ethnography exploring the historical context in intensive detail is because of the difficulties of the challenges of overcoming the differences that were imposed on me. Unless I was invited to join a family on inter-village exchanges, or following a villager who had been married into Meili back to her home of birth, I didn’t travel much across villages because I disliked the attention I received when entering villages as a foreigner and instead enjoyed the tight knit relationships I was forming in the village. As these relationships strengthened, I felt I had duties to fulfil in Meili and my research objectives were replaced by my desire to fulfil my duties to reciprocate with the network of relations I was forming, which I considered required my physical presence in their lives. The relationships I formed with certain families made me feel safe and I didn’t want to miss out on anything if I left for more than two days.

Moving from village to village what I considered, would have required starting all over again each time to overcome my foreign-ness. At first I sought to disregard the emotions it triggered in me, but as the months progressed I tried my best to avoid contact with strangers. This is not to claim that my foreign attributes did not pose problems in Meili, which they did; my foreign-ness was very much a source of fascination for many villagers I got to know, something that was overcome as relationships deepened, but not with everyone. At the end of my stay I was even cautioned by one of the older residents with whom I had spent considerable time at the start of my fieldwork that many older villagers, himself included, thought that I was a spy. Unable to remove myself from these limitations, Part One of my thesis considers how these experiences of difference were turned into opportunities of interpretation. It is these differences to which I now turn.
PART ONE

Fragments:

The making of an ethnographer
Chapter Three

The Emotional Anthropologist

When the anthropologist embarks on and commits to her ethnographic research, either she places herself in a field of unfamiliarity or she works towards making the familiar strange. Unfamiliarity and ‘strangeness’ lie in both expected and unexpected differences in ways of understanding, responding to and interpreting the world (Jackson 2010). These differences might diminish or continuously multiply, while what eventually begins to feel familiar can still produce novelties. My first encounter with the village of Meili in China was overwhelmingly unfamiliar. With little advance knowledge of Meili or even of the region in which it was situated, my first visit was intentionally brief. I had been invited by an old friend from my youth in Beijing – who was leading Meili’s government-sponsored heritage scheme – to join her team in designing and carrying out research on the social demographics and cultural fabric of the village context. Formed around interpretations of difference, my first engagements with the villagers revealed our pre-existing notions and stereotypes of each other. I had been warned by friends and colleagues of Han descent that Kam men are wild and sexually ruthless, while claims about the remoteness of Kam communities and living habits that placed them closer to nature were broadcast through the media and travel guides that promote generic representations of China’s ethnic minorities. I incorporated these representations, along with my own readings of ethnography from the region, into a construction of the ‘other’ at the beginning of my fieldwork.

Meanwhile, representations of unfamiliarity were also imposed on me, based on my physical features. With long blonde hair, pale features and not a trace of evidence on my body connecting me to the physical hardship of farming, I was envisioned as the archetypical white, urban female. The characteristics associated with these features, in addition to my being a guest in the village, prevented me from taking part in many activities that were considered to be too laborious for me. On the numerous occasions when I tried to explain that I did not consider myself to fit the stereotypes of a Caucasian urban woman, trying to resist the pre-conceptions restricting my participation in social activities, I found myself being talked down. My physical features repeatedly got in the way and, as
I failed in being heard, closing the differences between us at first seemed to be an impossible endeavour, as exemplified by the following incident. One early afternoon on the third day of wedding celebrations, I was lunching with a group of male villagers, consuming the last of three days of wedding meals prepared for guests. In light of the occasion, the dishes offered were meat-heavy and paired with homebrewed rice wine, which, after three days of the same fare, my body faced without enthusiasm. Complaining about the overwhelming quantity of meat and oil in the dishes, or the host’s poor choice of meals, was not unusual in the village, but as I had had few occasions to converse and become familiar with the members of my table, I was eager to get to know them and give a good impression of myself. To accomplish this, I knew I would have to make the effort to eat and drink the same sized portions as other people at the table. Regardless of my attempts to keep pace, however, as I was (unwillingly) about to down my third bowl of rice wine, my efforts were entirely overlooked and someone at the table still wanted to point out that it seemed I had not yet acquired a taste for the local cuisine or drink, thus suggesting that I was too fussy to become accustomed to their way of living.

Drawing a boundary between us, this chapter pieces together the distinct differences, of which I was frequently reminded, between myself and my interlocutors. In exploring these differences, my objective is to communicate to the reader a sense of the fragmented position I held, one which framed my perspective during my thirteen months of fieldwork. The chapter also revolves around an intimate, romantic relationship that eventually overtook my research experiences. As an anthropologist and thus an instrument in the field, I explore the positional challenges I faced, given my belief that the ‘ethnographic love’ I felt could contribute to broader discussions in anthropology that address the interdependence that develops between ethnographers and others. I draw on Simpson’s article on the micro-politics and cycles of power that researchers enter through ethnographic fieldwork in which he writes, “the truth is that once we step into the complex flow of other people’s social experiences we are novices and bumbling incompetents, largely oblivious to the complex and multiple layering of our informants’ lives, identities and histories” (2006: 125). As novices, Simpson’s article argues, you do not do fieldwork, fieldwork does you. To support his argument, Simpson unpacks a story of the ‘gate-blocker’ that his
gatekeeper turned into to highlight that his agency was never directed merely by
his own research objectives but, rather, in the direction his interlocutors wanted
his gaze to focus. To understand where my gaze was being directed, following
the lead of Carsten, Day and Stafford (2018), who argue that ethnography cannot
be removed from the researcher's own biography, I first turn to a brief outline of
my own autobiographical stance to provide a background for the preconceptions
I carried with me to the field.

The gaze
Berger (1972) writes that, in learning to see, we become aware of the gazes
imposed on us and mould ourselves according to how we imagine ourselves
through the eyes of the watcher or spectator. The representations that I imagined
were being attached to me were my own preconceptions of living in China that
formed how I imagined myself through the eyes of the watcher and the lens of
unfamiliarity. The preconceptions I carried can be traced to my upbringing.
Moving to Beijing in 1987 at the age of two, less than a decade after China had
initiated the 'reform and opening-up' program that encouraged gradual foreign
investment in the country, I grew up in an environment where my white-ness
was conspicuously a mark of difference. Moreover, the preconceived marks of
'other-ness' that I affixed to myself were not only my own interpretations
gathered from my upbringing but were also inherited from my father's side of the
family and their experiences in Maoist China. Pregnant with my father but
deserted by her Chilean partner, my Finnish grandmother met and fell in love
with the man always regarded as my father's real father, a Chinese psychologist
completing a scholarly exchange in Paris. With the changing political climate of
China at the time, my grandfather soon returned to China to a university position
in Beijing and my grandmother decided to pack her bags and follow in his
footsteps to start a new life together as a family. Loyally committed to the future
of Maoist China, even in the last years of his life, my grandfather continued to
chant Maoist songs to remind us of his faithful support for the Chinese
Communist Party. Yet, regardless of his faith, with the crackdown of the rightists
that led to the social terror that Mao initiated across the nation, he was deemed a
traitor to the party in the mid-1960s with consequences also felt by my family.
At first committed to the youth movement, over the years my father became increasingly aware of the reality of Mao’s project and the social trauma unfolding around him. His first real taste of Mao’s brutality, however, came when he was thirteen years old and his father was arrested in his home and imprisoned, later to be placed in a forced labour camp as part of the Down to the Countryside Movement; he would not return home until the early 1970s. Faced with the uncertainties that lay ahead, it was important to stay out of trouble but with light skin and blonde hair, both my father and grandmother were easily distinguished as ‘foreign devils’ and frequently publicly cornered and humiliated, while people refrained from ordinary social contact. To avoid standing out in the crowd, it was important they kept their heads down to hide their non-Chinese physical attributes. Although to this day considered a somewhat taboo topic of family conversation, the experiences of mistrust, social displacement and alienation that my father lived through in Mao’s China, directly interlaced with both the stigma and the privilege attached to whiteness as a figure of alterity in China, were passed down to me.

A large portion of my youth was spent in Beijing, where I constructed a world which sought to avoid confronting the complexities that white-ness carries in the everyday power relations of broader Chinese society, in association with sexual liberation, capitalism, modernity, wealth and civility (cf. Schein 1994; Chow 1991). In ethnographic research, however, which explores these power relations, the hierarchies could no longer be neglected (Clifford 1986). Drawn into the intimacy that doing ethnography requires, I thought my interlocutors could answer the deeper questions impelling me to study anthropology in order to decipher my sense of displacement. Instead, ethnography demands the exact opposite: rather than removing myself from that displacement, I had first to confront it. The representations I imposed on my interlocutors and they imposed on me, and the boundaries that were drawn between us based on these perceived differences, were continuously revised through our interactions as my fieldwork progressed. As Fabian suggests, the “Other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but made” (1990: 755, emphasis in original). Yet, although the boundaries never vanished, they stretched to allow dialogue that made space for me to fit into the village context. Drawing on Simpson’s (2006) descriptions of the movement back and forth between subjectivation and objectivation that the
researcher undergoes in fieldwork is helpful here. He highlights that the researcher needs to take into consideration the way that interlocutors make sense of and construct the researcher “as a living, social presence [that] has to be fitted in and made sense of as coming from somewhere, for some purpose and with a good deal of baggage that is of interest to the host community” (2006: 126).

Some of the dialogues that best pointed out how I could or could not be fitted in came in the form of heated arguments or confrontations where I was forced to revise my positionality and research objectives. These differences were most frequently brought to my attention through Xiaoxu, a central character in this chapter, whom I grew to depend on heavily in my fieldwork, both intellectually and emotionally. Conveying the discrepancies in Chinese rural societies and at the same time crushing my exoticised pre-conceptions of ethnicity and rural life, the positive and negative emotions conjured through the intimacy of my relationship with Xiaoxu guided me in facing the experience of difference in the field. In facing the experience of difference, my ethnography taught me to tilt my gaze and at the same time accept the inescapable public scrutiny of others that restrained me from concealing myself. Before delving into these interpretations, however, I now turn to outline the framework of my relationship with Xiaoxu.

Desire
I first met Xiaoxu through his mother with whom I was spending mornings, watching her dyeing fabric with indigo. As her Mandarin was limited and my Kam was still non-existent we had to find other means to converse, but we managed to communicate without much difficulty. One morning after she had hung her hand-woven cloth to dry in the sun she came to sit next to me, asking that key question that opened numerous conversations over the course of my fieldwork: “So, are you married?” When I told her I was not and was still single she burst out laughing and exclaimed, “How can you not be married yet!” She sought to console me by introducing me to a potential partner in the village; due to the preference for sons over daughters everyone knew there were many from whom to choose. “I have the perfect candidate,” she promised me. Playing along, I told her that I could never marry into the village because I could never compare
with how fierce (厉害 pron: lihai) the local women are; to this she laughed even more and assured me that women no longer need to be fierce. Nowadays most women my age do not remain to help on the farms; rather, they move to live in China’s cities where life is better and livelier (热闹 pron: renao), she informed me. She adds that it used to be livelier in the village back when there was singing. “The men used to play with the girls,” she told me. “It was so much fun. Come over tonight when my son is home and you’ll see.”

To avoid getting too side-tracked from the scene in Grandma Yang’s house, the social custom of ‘playing with girls’ is discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven. For now, let’s return to my first encounter with Xiaoxu. Curious about Grandma Yang’s attempt to take on the role of a matchmaker, when I visited her home in the evening I found her son, Xiaoxu, sitting cross-legged on the patio in the warm light of the sunset that was flooding in across the veranda. Taking a drawn out, unrushed drag of his cigarette, he tilted his head and slowly ran his eyes over me. He asked what a girl like me was doing in his village and I sat down beside him to tell him about my research, its affiliation with the government-led heritage scheme and the purpose of my stay. “The preservation of our homes?” he asked knocking on the wooden framework of the patio chair he was sitting on. “Why should we have to listen to someone else telling us to protect our wooden homes? We don’t want to live in this anymore. You think you’re preserving culture? The buildings don’t contain ‘culture’, so what’s the point of protecting something that doesn’t move?” As we shared our opinions that evening before dinner, Xiaoxu spoke with a degree of bluntness that in the early phases of my research most villagers had not yet attained. His honesty diverged from most of the other villagers who disguised their distrust or ambivalence towards me with the role of accommodating hosts, and I felt I could let my guard down and finally stop hiding my concurrence with criticism that targeted the preservation scheme. At the same time I was also attracted to his straightforwardness and as my fieldwork unfolded and our relationship took new turns I took his blunt demeanour to reflect his broader fearlessness to life. His body mapped this attitude and the realities of growing up in poverty; when I saw the deep scars on his thighs and legs from gang fights in his youth, I asked him if
he was scared of death and he told me, “People aren’t scared of dying; what they are scared of is hunger.”

After our first encounter I wanted to get to know him better; his bold, mysterious demeanour drew me to him. The house where I was staying overlooked his house by the river, and I carefully watched his comings and goings, familiarising myself with his daily routine. The village was a compact size and I chose my paths according to the time of day when chances of bumping into him were high and we could talk some more. Willingly, one afternoon he took me to his family’s paddy fields, about an hour’s walk along the steep mountain ridges. Although I had asked on several occasions, his mother had been reluctant to take me there due to the long trek, but Xiaoxu seemed indifferent to the possibility that I could not walk across the mountainous terrain circling the village. When we got to his family’s paddy fields we spent the afternoon together, he ploughed while I tended the weeds. I crouched beside his barefoot mother and tried to imitate her with the weeds. “Eeeeee!” she yelped when she caught me making a mistake and patiently corrected my attempts to farm her fields.

As we walked back to the village at dusk Xiaoxu saw my back was aching and suggested he come over later to give me a massage. That night I became his lover. When his hands slipped under my shirt my whispered, “Don’t”, was muffled by his exhilarated state as he lustfully moved his hands from my stomach over my breasts. I was blind not to realise that he was married, but at the same time his wife, who is not from Meili and also works outside the village, seemed absent from his and his family’s life. In the last months of my fieldwork when I was saw her occasionally, she kept to herself, avoiding the housework and farming that I considered her parents-in-law carried out so diligently. He told me he had been wanting to divorce his wife for a long time, which I believed at the time. The first night we spent in his bedroom the room was dark and it was only in the morning when I awoke that I saw her clothes neatly lined along the walls and a framed picture of the two of them on the dressing table. They looked happy and I felt a sharp pain inside me.

I learned to conceal that pain just like I learned to conceal our intimacy from village life and dissociate it from my academic role as an ethnographer. This act of complicity became a habit of mine that stretched across my ethnographic encounters. When I heard rumours that the police had come looking for him
because he had been fighting with his wife and then saw her hunched amongst a busy crowd of players attentively participating in the Chinese tile-based game, *mah-jong*, with a bruised, swollen face, I again ignored what was going on. To numb unwanted emotions, I learned to adjust my gaze and disregard numerous events, and this expanded beyond my relationship with Xiaoxu. My objective became the role of the silent researcher – described by Joseph (2002: x) in relation to what she considered were uncomfortable choices made by her interlocutors in the arts and politics of a gap community in San Francisco – expected “to be silent at times of conflict and remain present even when she is uncomfortable”.

When we were not together we would message one another to express our desire. “I can make you fly whenever you need to”, he teased. He made it sound like our sex was a drug, and in a way it was. It was an escape from the continuous fog of uncertainty that hovered over my mind; I was unsure of where my research began and where it was heading and I felt guilty about my invasive role as an anthropologist. In the public setting of Meili, where physical intimacy between the sexes was restricted, I was conscious that we could not be seen together and we limited our affair to hidden touches and glances. Riding with him on his motorcycle through the narrow paths covered with its hovering forest I would wrap my arms tightly around him or he would carefully slip his hand into mine. What we had was clearly an affair, but it also evolved into a friendship; online we did not have to hide our intimacy and a level of mutual trust developed between us. He could read from my behaviour when I was feeling lonely and homesick or when I was faced with everyday circumstances or disagreements with locals that I found difficult to face, and knew to console me. In exchange he shared with me his own pressures, stigmatised in his society and in a continuous state of economic vulnerability. As a worried father, he spoke extensively about his son and the mishaps that befell him. Empathy and sympathy were central to our relationship, acting as conversational tools to extend our experiencing of the feelings and thoughts between us. He opened up to me, revealing that he too struggles to find his place in society where he is stamped as an outsider.

Around Chinese New Year he started gambling excessively and taking part in money laundering; I assumed he had returned to his previous drug addiction and gang culture lifestyle. To hide his whereabouts, he cut contact
with his family and did not return home for prolonged periods of time and on very rare occasions we arranged to meet at night in hotels in rural towns. At first I saw these meet-ups as opportunities to enter his world but, regardless of my attempts, it soon became obvious he was not willing to take the risk of bringing me into these spaces due to my conspicuous appearance and the dangerous risks of being seen with me in gambling saloons and taking me along on late-night drug trafficking excursions. Instead, these getaways in township hotels became brief moments to withdraw from my fieldwork in Meili, offering a sense of respite from the endless expectations I placed on myself to be actively and constantly involved in the daily lives of the villagers. In comparison to where I lived in the village – a creaky wooden house framed with cold, uneven wooden planks succumbing to the years – visiting him in neighbouring towns and sleeping in a hotel room, no matter how rundown, was a luxury. In the cold, damp winter months, I could finally take my shoes and socks off, take a warm shower, and I had him and his warm body beside me.

Guilt

It was only once I returned to Helsinki after the completion of my ethnographic research that I fully saw and could finally admit the impact the romantic affair had on my fieldwork experience and me as a person. I felt ashamed for having side-lined the role of researcher, which had created obstacles to gathering ‘real’ ethnographic material. I considered the physical intimacies and dependency I developed towards Xiaoxu to be disconnected from the substance of the material I should have gathered, and not what research should have been. Due to the secrecy of our relationship and my inability to even consider that it was not as well hidden as I hoped, my ethnographic recollections do not reveal further inquiry into how it inflected relationships with others in the village. Too ambiguous and constrained to depict a local perspective on romance and erotic desire that might be deemed interesting and relevant to academic research, and too drained by events to reveal a sense of personhood and social relations, my field experiences seemed meaningless to the task of producing relevant and compelling anthropological writing.

The researcher to whom I compared myself was someone who put together objective reports describing her ethnographic encounters accurately.
This was the type of writing I also produced when I first arrived in Meili to work with the researchers on the heritage project. I watched, in something close to awe, as anthropologists on the team collected interviews in just two weeks and turned them into concise descriptions detailing the people of Meili in minutiae form. As we worked together, I was reminded by the Chinese anthropologists that they were there to help me understand who the people of Meili were, even to the point of suggesting they could guide me in how the population of Meili thinks. They played the authoritarian role of the ‘indigenous anthropologist’, based on Chinese exclusivity and their claimed ability to read the minds of the locals and write holistic reports framed around a particular type of knowledge (discussed in more detail in part two of my thesis). Incorporating a privileged representation of a certain kind of knowledge, these reports purported, through so-called ethnography, to document a holistic structure of the village setting informed by systematic observation, yet their efforts to convey the ‘truth’ (Fabian 1990) resulted in uniformities emotionally detached from the objects of enquiry. I considered this detachment to stand counter to my ethnographic research, which was entangled with emotion.

Rather than repressing these emotions, as I adjusted to my academic office life back in Helsinki, separating myself from the ‘field’ in the anti-social setting of my ‘desk’ (Mosse 2006), the recollection of my fieldwork experiences were directly aided by emotional recall. As I gathered my notes and started piecing together my experiences, it became apparent that my emotions were bonded to my memories, guiding me towards events and experiences to fill the gaps of my analysis and blur the boundaries between the intimate and the formal objective gaze. In the same way that my ‘past life’ was always intermingling with my ethnographic gaze, after leaving the field, my recollections of physical intimacies in Meili merged with my analysis and reappeared through the pages of my thesis. They revealed the fluidity and partiality of my fieldwork experience and the impossibility of holding my material together to draw connections.

The memories that lingered on from my relationship with Xiaoxu were not the idealised notions of friendship and romance that I describe above; rather,
the memories that I was left with were wrapped in pain and anger that took over leading up to the last months of my research. Near the end of my research, as Xiaoxu’s gambling and money laundering led to mishaps with the police, his worries escalated and his messages became cruel and angry. My mind returned to the bruised face of his wife and the rumours going around the village of their fights. I recalled the whispered warnings from Meili villagers to keep my distance when they spotted us spending evenings together. I felt anguish and self-pity for being so naïve and foolish, and ashamed of neglecting issues of sexual ethics and the warnings I had received before starting my research against falling in love in the field.

While many anthropologists still feel discomfort over being reflexive about the personal romance they encounter and experience in the field (Härkönen 2016), it is because of the emotions that grew from these experiences that I feel it is necessary to include the details of our affair in the pages of my ethnography. Incorporating these details I also hope to draw attention to the limitations of advice referring to sexual ethics framed as ‘just don’t do it’ that was shared with me prior to fieldwork. This advice does not sufficiently acknowledge the realities of fieldwork to deal effectively with sexuality in anthropology (Willson 1995). The emotions I associate with the personal romance I experienced in the field consist of dark, negative feelings seldom spoken about in ethnography, such as “guilt, anger and disgust” (Gable 2014). In choosing not to neglect these emotions I remain honest to myself and Xiaoxu, but also to my own research and to the commitment that research carries, addressed by Newton (1993) and Kulick (1995) in their writing. By concealing these conditions, questions of racism, authority, power and the boundaries on which anthropological work depends are also silenced and the anthropologist can ignore “confronting issues of positionality, hierarchy, exploitation, and racism” (Kulick 1995: 19). The physical and emotional proximity that developed with Xiaoxu brought these conditions to the surface of my research, making me question the role of objectivity in ethnography and offering understanding of how emotions that emerge from and shape dialogue in the field are intrinsic to the knowledge production of anthropology. These emotions encouraged me to be reflexive of my own positionality in the field, to which I now turn.
Facing and closing differences

The intimate relationship I formed with Xiaoxu helped me reflect on my research positionality early in my fieldwork, as it started during my preliminary research visit to Meili village with the heritage scheme. Although we were careful to disguise our intimacy, one evening he invited me to eat snake meat with his male friends. Eating snake captured from the wild was a rare treat and that evening it was specifically brought to my attention that only a small group of close friends and family had been invited to enjoy it. Regardless of this special invitation, I felt unwelcome; throughout dinner the mood was tense and I was not included in conversations, making me feel out of place. The atmosphere was very different from most households I had visited during that first week who warmly welcomed me into their homes for meals. The contrast might have been associated with the predominantly male gathering that evening, but the stark mood continued later in the evening after we had finished eating and moved to stand in the dark alleyways outside. I had been excluded from the conversation for most of the evening but when we moved outside Xiaoxu shifted his attention to me for the first time, quizzing me on my knowledge of Chinese history in front of others. He asked me about the origin of the Chinese game, mahjong, and when I expressed ignorance he mocked me and told me I clearly did not love his country very much. Unable to defend myself, I was humiliated as he seemingly tried to remind me that I was an outsider, unrehearsed in the shared version of nationally taught Chinese history. This also allowed him to limit the risk to his self-worth that I presented by reasserting his position in the wider society.

The host from dinner, Yang Shiwei, took this opportunity to ask about my motives for staying in the village, querying whether I sought to conform to a Chinese or Finnish version of history. Although this was an entirely valid question, the combination of the dark alleyways and the lingering awkwardness of the dinner atmosphere made the conversation feel intrusive. I wanted to convey to Yang Shiwei and everyone present that due to my upbringing in Beijing and Singapore, attending international schools, my education did not conform to either versions of history; rather, it was pieced together from multiple ideological frameworks. I should have explained to him that I anticipated learning the interpretations and world-views that he and his neighbours share, but it was not the moment to justify my position through my biographical stance, as I felt myself
getting increasingly uncomfortable. My uncertainty in how to respond seemed to trigger his desire to interrogate me further, which I interpreted as an attack against me. Fraught with emotions – disappointment in my inability to elucidate my research objectives including where they originated; guilt about forcing myself into the lives of my interlocutors – I left the scene apologetically.

It was not surprising that villagers such as Yang Shiwei viewed my presence as an ambiguity and even a threat. These were opinions which never changed for some villagers, something made very clear by an eighty-five-year old villager with whom I had spent considerable time at the beginning of my fieldwork. Regardless of the months we had spent together, he wanted to convey to me before I departed from the village at the end of my research that many older villagers, himself included, had always considered me a foreign spy. Further, due to my close association with the government-led heritage scheme, my presence in the village had also been regarded as a threat because of the preconceptions associated with government projects and those concerning researchers in general. I was made conscious of the latter by Xiaoxu’s describing social implications for past researchers who were not sensitive to the lives of Meili residents and were unwilling to conform to the customs of their host community; the assumption also circulated that a researcher is someone who supervises, inspects and reports up the ladder, and I put considerable effort into detaching myself from these preconceptions. Avoiding verbal judgments that might suggest I intended to engineer the village socially, I committed to a small group of households that welcomed me in, some of whose narratives appear in the succeeding chapters. When Xiaoxu noticed the amount of time I was spending with other families, he warned me against disrupting and getting entangled in the social fabric of village dynamics; at the same time I was often reminded of my lack of care for, and genuine interest in the villagers. Xiaoxu’s accusations that ultimately I did not really care what the people of Meili thought was hurtful, although I never understood whether he was referring to me as a researcher or to my lack of care for him personally. Given my constant efforts to demonstrate my commitment to my interlocutors, these claims initiated a sense of emotional manipulation that led to a diminution of feelings of personal agency and care for myself.
Despite his accusations, as the months of my fieldwork dragged on, Xiaoxu made efforts to re-socialise me, guiding me to conform to the villagers’ social customs, which I sincerely appreciated. Mostly he corrected me for being selfish and not taking the ‘face’ of others into consideration, which I would take into account in shaping my demeanour; on other occasions, conforming to Xiaoxu’s guidance was more challenging, especially at social events that revolved around drinking copious amounts of locally brewed rice wine, which occupied a significant portion of my time in Meili. By inviting the foreign ethnographer to partake in a drinking feast, which Fiskešjö refers to as “participant intoxication” (2010b: 11), the locals are at the same time inviting the researcher into local forms of sociability and generous hospitality; abstaining is considered offensive and regarded as a refusal to reciprocate with local residents; consequently, for the most part, I accepted the hospitality and drank the copious cups of wine offered to me. Considering the purpose of drinking alcohol is to perform the effects of alcohol by behaving in an intoxicated manner yet I did not exhibit the same physical changes as many East Asians show with alcohol consumption, such as flushed cheeks, and tend to mellow down rather than get animated with alcohol consumption. I was not partaking in the act of being drunk as expected of me to perform the role of a guest. I gained the reputation of having a high alcohol tolerance, which was frequently tested in social gatherings. Slowly as the months progressed and I felt the rice wine taking a toll on my body, at times I was unwilling to participate in evenings of heavy drinking; if Xiaoxu were present, heated arguments would erupt between us in private, with his claiming I was behaving offensively to hosts by rejecting their efforts to include me in an evening of intoxication. Trying to justify myself and my behaviour, the argument would always end with his confronting me and what he regarded as my stubborn arrogance, and proclaiming, “It’s not the villagers that need to change, it’s you!” These accusations lingered in my mind throughout my fieldwork as I tried to understand why I was a threat to certain villagers.

An instrument in the field

After the emotions that had overwhelmed me in conversation with Yang Shiwei had subsided, I took up the role of ‘an instrument in the field’ (Ingold 2008) to understand why Yang Shiwei felt such strong opposition to my presence. In the
hope of closing the differences between us, as the months progressed I befriended his wider kin network. These relationships were not detrimental to my research as by that point I had befriended a number of families in the village who had become accustomed to my presence and had overcome their reluctance to let me partake in farming and household chores. Yet I still wanted assurance from Yang Shiwai that our differences could be resolved. As my connections with him and his family’s lives grew closer, one evening he confessed that his blunt demeanour did not target me alone but was his manner with everyone, claiming this shows he has a good heart. Finally, in the last weeks before the completion of my research, Yang Shiwai’s oldest son informed me that his family regarded me as they would another villager, not as an outsider or foreigner.

Alongside the closeness that developed with Yang Shiwai and his family, many males of my age cohort in Meili (appearing in greater detail in Chapter Seven) indicated that our margins of difference could also be closed. When I repeated comments by older Meili villagers in which they made our differences strikingly clear by observing that my role as guest would never equal theirs as hosts, I was reminded by Meili’s youth that they do not share the same views; rather, they pointed out our resemblances. In sharing stories of our pasts, I became aware that, much as I was trying to escape the gaze that identified me as a Caucasian woman, they were trying to evade being stigmatised as peasant migrant workers. This was brought to my attention one evening nearing the end of my fieldwork when I joined a group of mainly male Meili villagers on one of the many spontaneous getaways to the township to sing karaoke and enjoy some beers together. I had been living in a setting where, unlike in an urban context in which it is impossible to escape seeing one’s own reflection either in full body mirrors or window reflections, I had become less aware of my self-presentation in front of others. Yet that evening, as a break from everyday life, I decided to change from my usual shabby sweats into a Kam-style top and gathered my hair into a top-bun held together with a comb, like the local women. Complimenting me for wearing their clothing publicly, I was asked why I did not dress like that more often in Meili. I explained to them that I did not like the attention I received when I wore Kam attire and they sympathised with me whilst observing that that they were very much aware that I shied away from public attention; they added that they identified with this feeling, which resembled their response to
the unwanted stares they received in the cities where urban citizens looked at them unfavourably.

These encounters should have been confirmation that some of the differences between us had disappeared but when I discussed these exchanges with Xiaoxu, he was quick to tell me not to take their words at face value. In his attempts to re-socialise me in the context of village relations. Xiaoxu tried to guide me to accept that distrust is part of human relations, reminding me to take responsibility for my actions. Leaning on Dubisch’s chapter on romance in ethnographic fieldwork, I could claim that Xiaoxu revealed to me my ‘authentic’ self, thereby enabling me also to see a more authentic ‘other’; these become confused and differences between the two merge with the addition of sexuality (Dubisch 1995: 47-48); however, this would seem both contradictory to my experiences and too ambitious an explanation. Rather than revealing my authenticity, the efforts he made to get me to ‘fit in’ merely ensured that I did not fall into the trap of the anthropologist who “occasionally forget[s] that they still know we are only wearing a costume” (Gable 2014: 250). Instead, he taught me to raise my head to see the inescapability of the villagers’ gaze that drew the boundaries between us.

Expanding on Xiaoxu’s affiliation with me and the research I conducted, I have sought to convey how he guided me to acknowledge the multiple masks and layers with which people cover themselves when facing one another. Xiaoxu’s cautions resonated with the narratives of my father’s upbringing in which distrust and suspicion beyond the nuclear family lies at the core of social relations. Inheriting the atmosphere of mistrust, social displacement and alienation that my father lived through in Mao’s China, I too was taught to dismiss people’s immediate intentions with suspicion. In revealing to me just how shattered Meili’s social relations are, to the extent that trust in, and dependency on neighbours were replaced with caution and apprehension, he was trying to coach me in the local social custom that the ‘self’ a person portrays to me is only one of numerous selves. The spontaneous compliment from Yang Shiwei’s son to the effect that I was another villager like them, the brief moments of exchanging stories about stigmatising difference, and Xiaoxu’s efforts to teach me about the multiple layers that people present to others were all attempts to draw me closer to how they make sense of their world. Introducing distance by
eliciting guilt and anger, but also reminding me of our shared differences, taught me of the social dissonance and distrust that makes up the social fabric of Meili village. In cautioning me of these differences, Xiaoxu was at the same time positioning me within Meili’s larger sociality.

Conclusion
As I have sought to articulate, throughout my time in the field I was faced with the experience of difference that should have been entirely familiar and known to me considering the number of years I had lived in China. This chapter has sought to translate the experience of difference as an anthropologist into opportunities of interpretation through the pages of my thesis. These are themes I pick up in each chapter in my attempts to address a positionality that was constructed both bodily and intellectually through the interpretations I made during this study with people, not of people (Ingold 2008). Studying with people, the vantage point I assumed – one of the many that I have attempted to present in this chapter – was interlaced with emotional ties that grounded my fieldwork observations and experiences in the familiarity I attained with selected individuals and their families. What I want to highlight in this chapter is that these families were not arbitrarily selected, as I have described; specific circumstances helped build this familiarity and, hence, the knowledge they conveyed to me. Thus my perspective ultimately does not align with the entire village network. Given these circumstances, the knowledge I derived and have compiled into this ethnography pieces together my own past to form “an extension of a position” that is partial and merely defines a particular vantage point (Strathern 2004: 39). The second part of my thesis moves from the fragments that pieced together my own perspective as an ethnographer, to discuss another perspective of scale that seeks to compile holistic representations of a place, such as Meili village, so that it appears complete and ‘whole’.
PART TWO

Completion:
Making a Village Whole
Chapter Four

Saving a Traditional Village

Take a picture from a distance

Resting on the sheltered ‘wind–rain bridge’ (通风廊 *pron: fengyuqiao*) to escape the summer heat, I am joined by Xiao Lin, one of my students from the village primary school. Xiao Lin is not as shy as most of my students and frequently approaches me after class seeking answers to satisfy his curiosity about the world outside Meili. His questions reflect his own perceptions of relatedness, framed by where he situates himself amongst China’s population and ranging from the more common, “How many ethnic minorities are there where you are from?” to assumptions about race and ethnicity, such as “Since you can speak Mandarin but have white skin, does that make you part of the ‘white race’ (*白族* *pron: baizu*) or the ‘yellow race’ (*黄族* *pron: huangzu*)?”\(^{11}\) This time Xiao Lin asks to look

\(^{11}\) *Baizu* refers to the Bai ethnic minority group, who are predominantly located in Yunnan and Guizhou province. However, here Xiao Lin’s allusion to ‘race’ is probably not linked to ethnic
at the photos on my iPhone, which he has seen other villagers thumb through. I hand it over and he inquisitively looks at the collection of family photos and life in Helsinki that I have saved to share with villagers; he particularly likes to look at the panoramic images taken at my summer cabin in rural Finland by the lake with forests in the background. As he glides his finger across the screen skimming through the images, he comments on how beautiful the forests, water and mountains are, referring to the Chinese notion of landscape, ‘mountains and water’ (有山有水 pron: youshan youshui). I have noticed that many villagers mention the beautiful mountains in the images of my Finnish summer cabin. Curiously, as Finland consists of relatively flat terrain, these mountains are not actually present in the images themselves. Instead, they are imposed through the Chinese notion of what beautiful landscape scenery should comprise, in order to “see a new landscape in terms of familiar ones” (Rodman 1992: 647). Shifting the conversation from the landscape pictures on my mobile phone to Xiao Lin’s perceptions of beauty, I ask him if he thinks Meili is beautiful too, to which he answers that he does not. Yet when he comes across a recently taken bird’s-eye photo of Meili on my phone, he returns to my question to clarify: “Of course the scenery (风景 pron: fengjing) of Meili looks beautiful. But only from afar, from a distance.”

The scenery to which Xiao Lin was referring can be enjoyed coming down the narrow mountain paths before entering the village (see Image 7). Arriving at the first entry point, the vista is the first impression that greets visitors to Meili. One can pause and marvel at the compact structure of Meili’s enclave layout, which sits in a deep valley surrounded by mountains carved into terraced fields and lush evergreen forests. Peering into the valley are rows of wooden houses with tiled gable roofs, neatly assembled along a river that gently meanders through the village. Strategically located and poised over the settlement on a podium in the middle of the village sits Meili’s impressive drum tower. Marvelling at the symmetrical intactness of tiled roofing that aligns the riverbanks and the looming backdrop of mountains, the panoramic image conforms to the architectural and cultural criteria expected of a Kam village and group, but to the colour of my pale skin, reflecting his understanding of the world divided into populations of ‘races’ determined by skin colour, which was commonly shared amongst Meili villagers.
Meili’s beauty is confirmed. This image lingers in visitors’ thoughts, as voiced by a tourist during his first evening spent in Meili: “I’ve arrived in China’s most beautiful village!” The charm of Meili’s panoramic scenery, or *fengjing*, was also well known amongst residents, conveyed by my conversation with Xiao Lin as well as being brought to my attention when I had guests visit me from Beijing or abroad. Villagers insisted that I first had to make sure that newly arrived guests stop at the entry point to allow them to take photos of the panoramic view. If other villagers were present, they would argue amongst themselves about whether the photo should be taken from an angle to include the leaves of trees in the foreground or should only incorporate the architectural layout of the village to capture the most panoramic view of the scenery.

In terms of the abundant landscape, or scenery, of the village as a whole, Meili appears complete. The appreciation of completeness (完整, pron: wángzhèng), writes scholar of Asian architecture, Li Shiqiao (2014), is unique to the Chinese perception of space. The Chinese appreciation of all-round completion of appearance over what Li claims is the Western appreciation of perspective, is portrayed across all forms of Chinese aesthetics, from the conception of the body to the presentation of food and the spatial planning of cities. The value found in aesthetic completion is fixed in the notion that the object is not permanent but is made up of the ever-changing flow of quantities and essential vitalities formed by the interdependence of *yin*, associated with darkness and femininity, and *yang*, with brightness and masculinity. The parts that comprise the complete presence of essential vitality in space, Wang Robin (2012) reminds us, are never made up of individual parts themselves, but the conjunction and interaction of ever-changing properties that allow for all myriad things on earth – referred to as the ‘ten thousand things’ (万物, pron: wànwù) – to exist, grow and function. The interactive flowing motion generates an “unfolding and enfolding of the perceived world from and to a much vaster and more subtly integrated whole order” (Wang R. 2012: 67). In its continuous transformation, the functioning order towards which it moves is made up of patterns that are never absolute laws imposed externally but constantly subject to change and manipulation.
This flowing motion frames the Chinese appreciation of aesthetics. Through skilled brush strokes varying in thickness and tone, value in Chinese art can be found in the interplay of yinyang, that constitutes “a wholeness of its constituents” (Wang R. 2012: 117). Because the Chinese ideal notion of completion is never fixed but made up of ever-changing flows of quantities, these multiple points are linked and gathered from the relative point of view of the spectator to collapse all temporal dimension and evoke present and future in a single moment (Feuchtwang 2004). This is described in more detail in Vinograd’s (1991) work on the collective viewing of Chinese literati scroll paintings from the mid-thirteenth to the nineteenth century. Even the mere act of unrolling scroll paintings for viewing creates that sensation of collapsed temporality; entailing multiple perspectives, by first unrolling and then viewing a painting provides the opportunity to “re-experience or commemorate events. Chinese literati painting of this kind is relatively participatory and consensual; not so much concerned with asserting a veridical or authoritative version of a scene, but rather with permitting recognition and re-creation” (Vinograd 1991: 184). Quite contrary to this is the appreciation of ‘Western’ art as a desire for truth in the object itself, based on “display, knowledge and representation …[of] framing and lineal alignment from one focal point” (Feuchtwang 2004: 166). Framed around a broader distrust of mimesis, the metaphorical and figurative elements in what is seen from a certain angled position are neglected in efforts to represent and visualise what is ‘true’ of the object itself (Hirsch 1995).

The Chinese literati scroll that is experienced from multiple points of the same composition is the source of knowledge itself. Figural representations and textualisation heighten knowledge, to generate an experience of recognition in the viewer. Li associates the Chinese appreciation of figuration with the Chinese writing system, which works as “an empire of figures” (Li 2014: 142). Each character exists in its own right and its meaning is embedded in the components of the character itself. Meaning is embedded in its figure, which can be applied beyond its textual form. Li refers to the architectural design of beams to

12 I am aware of the limitations that I am imposing by referring to ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ artistic movements as categorical entities rather than delving into their great variation and diversity; I want to clarify that my intention is not to reinforce ideology in culturally self-centred ideals and oppositions.
demonstrate his point. Both for practical and symbolic reasons, wooden beams used in Chinese architecture are always formed on a 90-degree angle. The beam imitates the Chinese character for straight or upright, 直 (pron: zheng), composed of five horizontal and vertical strokes that, as a character, form eight 90-degree angles. Representing the figuration of the completed character in a beam means that the building will also be straight and avoid toppling over. Hence, “the measuring standard of figuration, therefore, is grounded in how completely one can represent a situation or conception from a number of views” (Li 2014: 148). In doing so, regardless of one’s observation point, the beam resembles the figure and the building appears straight and complete.

The importance of Chinese textualisation can be appreciated in both the pictorial image displayed in a scroll and scenery landscape that is made up of projections of figures depicting elements from the supernatural world, such as dragons and phoehixes (Li 2014). To enhance the elements of the supernatural world, landscapes also become canvases of art that are physically transformed to appear like miniature magical realms that pair elements in the landscape, such as rocks and trees, with narratives and poetry carved on the object itself. By inscribing the narrative through metaphorical texts, the symbolism that the object carries enriches “a poetic state of being infused with specific conditions of knowledge and emotion” (Li 2014: 188) in the viewer. This poetic state, as Han affirms in her article tracing the history of the scholarly and philosophical appreciation of Chinese landscape, is vital for “the inscription in a garden could be the heart of the garden” (2012: 98).

As sites rich in textual forms, rural landscapes have been regarded as the pinnacle of aesthetic achievement admiration reproduced through art and both religious and philosophical inspiration throughout China’s history. Separated from urban turmoil, rural life has been idealised as a means to engage in harmonious living that can be depicted in its representational form. Removed from the polluting spatial and temporal attachment of urban spaces, depictions of the countryside and its proximity to nature reflect an orientation towards life that is ethically, politically, morally and aesthetically desired (Han 2012). Like manmade gardens that mimic nature in miniature form, images reflecting the Chinese appreciation of the countryside can be modified and rebuilt to become more beautiful than the original. Thus value lies in rebuilding the rural aesthetics
of material forms and holistic scenery, such as Meili’s panorama gazed at from the scenic spot above, which can be reproduced through a painting, photo or written poetry to give rise to a memory of place with no definite attachment to a fixed location. The subject matter and content of narratives become portable and the metaphorical and symbolic meanings carried by material forms can be infinitely imitated. Like a rural landscape painting, it is less important that the panoramic view from above represents a particular time and place than that the scene evokes a subjective experience for the viewer. Addressing how the rural countryside continues to generate awe as an intact ‘whole’, the following section delves further into ways in which these ideologies are inscribed in the preservation project initiated in Meili. To begin, I provide a brief ethnographic vignette illustrating an encounter with urban elites visiting Meili and the impressions it generates.

**Saving tradition from the horror**

Arriving at the village entry point with the panoramic view of the village as backdrop, teams of academics, local government officials and media personnel step off minibuses for some fresh air. Still feeling lightheaded and fatigued from the steep and winding mountain road that brought them here, their attention soon shifts to the bird’s-eye view of the village and the awe-inspiring new sights around them. As members of the group adjust to their bearings, one of the passengers, who has a large camera hanging around his neck, takes the opportunity for a group photo against the scenic background. He calls out, “Quick, line up! You, go to the middle! Now, smile for the camera! One-two-three-qiezi!”

Amidst the excitement and photo taking, the visitors are swiftly led down the main road to the village gate where they are officially greeted by the village choir dressed in standardised attire: glimmering indigo-dyed blouses paired with chain necklaces and silver bird and flower ornaments woven through their hair and rising from their buns. Perfectly lined across the gate, the gleaming faces of the choir animate when the guests arrive. Their eyes widen and the corners of

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13 Due to the similarities in sound with the English pronunciation of ‘cheese’, *qiezi*, which literally means eggplant, is the Chinese equivalent to saying ‘cheese’ in front of the camera.
their mouths expand into gleaming smiles as they sing 'blocking the road' songs (拦路歌 pron: lanluge). As the choir sings, guests are encouraged to come forward and many use their cameras to document and film the event, while some jump in front of the group with their backs to the choir for a selfie pose.

When the choir concludes the performance, embroidered bands are wrapped around the guests' necks and the singers excitedly pour rice wine into their gaping mouths followed by a small portion of pickled fish or meat to balance the bitter taste of alcohol. Passing through the village entrance, the tour begins with the lower village before circling up to the upper village, guiding guests past the drum tower, age-old barns, wells and water systems. Particular attention is paid to key vernacular residences, such as the timber courtyard building (四合楼 pron: sihelou), which is celebrated as a site worth seeing due to its rarity in Kam villages; meanwhile, guests are reminded to enjoy the clean air and take in the ancient forests that circle the village. Entertainment is organised throughout the tour: Kam 'big song' and the bamboo pipes of the lusheng echo across the riverbanks and narrow alleyways, and villagers in their best clothing are strategically located at stop-off points performing 'characteristic' (特色 pron: tese) features of Kam culture. Activities include women sitting on stools weaving bright threads into eloquent depictions of embroidered flowers, old men carving elaborate wooden statues and braiding dried rice stems into hay slippers and villagers beating rice in stone pounders with each determined stamp of the foot. Meili inhabitants who are not part of the spectacle linger nearby to watch and take photos of the visitors being paraded through the village.

The scene above describes a typical scenario in Meili whereby the village is transformed into an inspection tour (考察 pron: kaocha). Organized across 14 Geary et al. describe “spinning wheels, weaving looms, bamboo baskets, chicken cages and other miscellaneous objects” (2003: 205) being brought to the gates of Kam Blocking Ceremonies that precede inter-village festivals. During the course of my fieldwork I did not encounter villagers bringing any items with them to block the road, only their own bodies and a bamboo beam placed horizontally across the gate.

15 Influenced by Han architecture and style, courtyard buildings, such as the more famous ones found in Beijing, are referred to as siheyuan. The modification in language, referring to Meili’s courtyard building as ‘lou’ (building) rather than the more common ‘yuan’ (yard, or courtyard) is not accidental. This was a conscious decision made by the county-level Cultural Bureau staff to explicitly differentiate between the more well-known courtyard style found in Beijing and shed light on the uniqueness of Meili’s architectural style.
southeast Guizhou’s nationally protected, ethnic minority ‘Traditional Villages’, such inspection tours were held relatively frequently during my fieldwork. Visitors, referred to as ‘leaders’ (领导 pron: lingdao), ranged from high ranking provincial political figures, such as the CCP provincial secretary, Chen Min’er, to wealthy investors, UNESCO personnel and academics from prestigious universities. Depending on the importance of the ‘leader’, varying levels of the spectacle were prepared. For influential visitors, such as a provincial government official or representative of an international organisation, the spectacle became a highly surveilled event with detection dogs sniffing through households for drugs, security guards stationed at every corner and well-equipped emergency booths staffed by nurses and doctors. Through this creation of a spectacle of place, visitors could casually admire the intactness of rural aesthetics, piecing together the cultural and material layout of the village in the form of a sanitised living museum.

I volunteered to take on the role as guide for visiting groups early in my fieldwork, an offer which the Cultural Bureau government officials eagerly accepted. To get into character, I was told to wear my Kam clothing and given a script written by members of the county-level Cultural Bureau to introduce Meili and its main architectural landmarks. Notified approximately an hour or two
before the arrival of ‘leaders’ by phone, I usually had just enough time to return to
the village administration building where I lived, change into my Kam clothing,
wrap my hair into a top-bun and receive the guests with the help of a amplifier or
loudspeaker (see Image 8). Taking on the role of tour guide was nerve-wracking,
particularly at the beginning of my fieldwork when I lacked the confidence to
claim expertise on the vernacular history of Meili in front of an audience that I
considered much more informed on architecture and Chinese history than I was.
Furthermore, because the script did not reflect what I knew about Meili, I felt
awkward and dishonest having to follow the description of the village inscribed
therein. At that point, my experience of the village had been formed through my
access to, and use of space by, a handful of villagers I had befriended and visited
on a daily basis. I felt the script I read on these tours masked the multiple and
often conflicting histories that had been recited to me, replacing experiences and
narratives with fixed dates and objectified historical accounts that referred to
people’s homes and their ways of life as ‘ancient’ (古老的 pron: gulaode) and ‘most
famous’ (最有名的), rich in ‘characteristic’ (特色) ethnic charm that reflected
the ‘simple’ and ‘unsophisticated’ (淳朴 pron: chumpu) mindset of the people.

Interlinked with China’s rural development projects, my script reflected
broader efforts to rebrand China’s ethnic rural localities into packaged,
standardised forms driven by both political and economic efforts to heighten
their appeal and value (Ruan 2006; Oakes 1998; 2013); nor did Meili’s charm go
unnoticed by key actors of the transnational heritage movement. Praising the
intactness of the village as a whole, ‘leaders’, applauded the traditional
framework of the village; the former Director of UNESCO’s World Heritage
Centre, for example, compared it favourably with the ‘horrors’ of modern
concrete mansions that he had seen overtaking China’s rural countryside
(personal conversation, March 2016). The intactness that he celebrated resonates
with government efforts to protect the ‘holistic/integrated’ (整体 pron: zhengti)
traditional aesthetic of Meili, which builds on the ideals of Chinese appreciation
of holistic landscape described above, incorporating the desire to create a
countryside setting that is traditional, harmonious and deeply embedded in
untouched nature. However, celebrating the intactness of a ‘traditional village’ at
the expense of the horrors of a ‘modernising village’ is also the product of
nostalgic pressure from the relative position of the urban citizen that seeks to ensure that the countryside never changes, a perspective which I discuss in the following section.

Protectors of the countryside
Although what I have described thus far is an exceptional example of making a spectacle of the village, I argue that the efforts to place the cultural and social elements of the village to the forefront work towards bolstering an imagined notion of ‘rural-ness’. I now turn to a brief ethnographic encounter with Professor Zhang, a visitor during an inspection tour in Meili, to help trace how the wider national heritage discourse drives the way people think about change whilst at the same time enhancing collective nationalism and Chinese exceptionalism.

Professor Zhang, a well-known figure actively involved in national academic debates on China’s rural preservation, joined an inspection tour organised for Chinese academics travelling through the region to seek opportunities to implement a research-led preservation initiative. That afternoon I was leading the group of visitors and as I introduced the courtyard dwelling, Professor Zhang interrupted my tour, confidently taking over my script and reciting her own version of the dwelling’s history, which, she claimed, she had gathered during her previous research in Meili. To justify her viewpoint, she made it clear that she knew everyone in the village, had collected all the local songs in the region and was very familiar with the folk history. Baffled by her interruption and at the same time intrigued by her overtly authoritative tone and confidence, I asked her what she had done with the wealth of knowledge she had accumulated on Meili and whether it was being shared with the other research groups conducting surveys in the area. To this she informed me that it was being kept safe in her files.

This was not the first time I had heard architects indirectly referring to their research as a form of record keeping. To archive an intact way of life that might not last much longer seemed to be a shared goal amongst those studying Meili yet, apparently, the benefits of documenting did not merely inhere in the potential for archival research or even in the compilation of gathered data into planning reports, as was later conveyed to me by Professor Zhang in an interview
carried out in her office in the city of Guiyang. The benefits of gathering material, she explained, were the opportunities thus provided to publish articles supported by documented evidence in order to enhance one’s academic position. This insight, however, was only conveyed to me at a later date; back in Meili’s courtyard I responded to Professor Zhang’s comment about keeping surveys in files by expressing my concern that perhaps her knowledge could somehow be applied to benefit Meili villagers too. With this statement I had clearly crossed the line and Professor Zhang abruptly ended our discussion with the words, “You wouldn’t understand. China’s villages are changing so fast. So fast!” – thereby asserting my obliviousness to China’s drastic rural and urban demographic transformations and reiterating the familiar discourse of Chinese exceptionalism.

In claiming exceptionalism, the relational divide between people and how histories are imagined is strengthened and ‘places’ become sites of nostalgia and authenticity (Massey 1994); as a blonde, blue-eyed ‘Western other’, I am thought incapable of empathising as the nation mourns the threat of losing its past.

Drawing on the imagined differences between China and the rest of the world strengthens patriotic sentiment that is then integrated into cultural heritage discourses that narrate a version of Chinese history going back five thousand years (Fiskesjö 2010a). Embedded in this rehearsed narration lies the threat to ‘Chinese-ness’ that has been posed by foreigners since the disgrace and losses imposed on the Chinese population by Western imperialist looting and theft, which led to the collapse of Chinese Imperial rule. The “phantasm” (Ivy 1995) exuded by cultural heritage creates props of cultural artefacts, monuments and sites to exemplify patriotic sentiment and political loyalty. Cultural heritage plays an important role in cultural politics in China, particularly in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre under the leadership of former General Secretary, Jiang Zemin. To counteract cultural nihilism, Jiang sought to initiate a general sense of ‘national essence fever’ across the country. Notions of national identity based on class struggle were thereby sharpened and revised by the drive to celebrate, protect and value cultural heritage manifest in an “imagined body of the cultural past” (Fiskesjö 2010a: 229). Since the late 1980s, the political role cultural heritage plays in China has extended to the moral realms of being a good Chinese citizen. As inheritors of their cultural past, Chinese people are expected to act as responsible, dutiful citizens, promoting, enhancing and ‘upholding’ (宏
The heritage of their nation (Fiskesjö 2010a). Increasingly prominent under Xi Jinping's rule, the dogma on which this movement builds is interlaced with the ‘China Dream’ (中国梦 pron: zhongguo meng) campaign to ‘rejuvenate’ (复兴 pron: fuxing) the nation. Xi's speeches on the preservation of his nation's cultural heritage make direct reference to the importance of China's relics and monuments in educating not only the Chinese population but also the “French and European visitors” (Sina News, 2016). Staged on a platform for the global audience to admire, the notion of an exclusively Chinese past cut off from the rest of the world is continuously strengthened, drawing a clear relational divide between China and ‘the rest’. At the same time, faced with the pace of China’s urban growth, there is an increasing urgency to protecting the nation’s history and culture, both of which are associated with rural China. In a movement with historical roots in the philosophical and religious ideals attached to the Chinese countryside and its abundant scenery, discussed above, the Chinese countryside is being glorified by urbanites as the bastion of authentic Chinese culture.

Professor Zhang's comments about the changes in Chinese villages builds on a discourse that projects the moral panic that the Chinese nation is facing at the loss of its countryside to urbanisation. In a country with 54 percent of its population living in six hundred urban centres that were just small towns a decade ago, the speed of change Professor Zhang mentions is indeed fast. Accompanying these changes is an ideology projected by urban citizens that suggests that the Chinese countryside will be swallowed by the moral (and environmental) pollution of cities existing in a state of globalisation-induced disrepair. The threat of urban influences can already be observed across rural China, as described above in the ‘horror’ of modern concrete mansions popping up and replacing previous styles of architecture.

The binaries that are reinforced between the traditional rural setting and the rapidly changing urban context is not unique to China. The constructed notion that the countryside represents tradition and convention and retains an unchanging, timeless identity is a familiar trend globally, revealing how people

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16 It is interesting to note the differentiation Xi Jinping introduces between the French and Europeans.
produce change and continuity. Strathern’s (1992) work studying English kinship in the late twentieth century appears helpful here. In describing the cultural epochs that frame Western hierarchical divisions of people and places, she stresses that the dichotomy between the imagined rural identity – which appears ‘communal’, ‘traditional’ and ‘fixed’ – and ‘complex’, ‘heterogeneous’ and ‘diverse’ urban society has become normative. Change is commonly assumed to be a phenomenon “that ‘happens’ to something that otherwise retains its identity, such as the English themselves, or the countryside: the continuity makes change evident” (Strathern 1992: 1). Thus, whilst it is imagined that the English are the same as they have always been, merely undergoing changes in response to new reproductive technologies. Yet it is not the reproductive technologies that are causing the change; rather, ongoing events are triggering people to think differently about what they have always imagined to be true. The assumptions that sustain these divisions are based on a sense of relativity that constitutes how people understand sameness and change.

Similarly, I argue that it is not so much China’s rural ethnic populations, such as the inhabitants of Meili, that are facing recent changes; rather, the way people are being thought about as rural ethnic minorities and their relative position in the wider context of China is undergoing transformation. The assignment of continuity to China’s rural ethnic populations resonates with Fabian’s (1983) work on the ‘denial of coevalness’. Fabian frames his argument by criticising anthropological research that reinforces the binary relationship between the ‘West’ and ‘the rest’, and builds on relations constructed “with its Other by means of temporal devices” (1983: 16). He portrays how, in taking an authoritative role, the anthropologist (and architect in this case) denies the coevalness of her subjects to “place the referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (ibid.: 31). Yet this divide is not limited to the ‘West’ versus ‘the rest’ model, as Schein has extensively addressed in her research on ethnic minorities in China. Schein uses the term ‘internal Orientalism’ to “describe a relation between imaging and cultural/political domination that takes place inter-ethnically within China” (1997: 73), which maintains a divide between the urban elite and the rural ethnic object of interest, who is denied coevalness to live in a fragile, timeless, separate
world. In creating this divide, the ‘other’ exists as an icon for something that draws out a sense of nostalgia in the urban citizen.

The following section begins by tracing my own preconceptions of Meili residents as an ethnic minority population in another time and space, one separate from my own. I then portray how my perspective was modified by my being brought to reconsider the home not as an aesthetic object but as a marker of social and economic status.

**A house that’s bigger than your neighbour’s**

Regardless of Professor Zhang’s judgment claiming I was incapable of empathising with the apparent changes in the Chinese countryside, I too was guilty of attaching nostalgic sentiments to the rural condition and what I at first also considered a loss to Meili’s architectural ‘tradition’. My own biases were made apparent to me one afternoon when conversing with the local carpenter of the village, Yang Shengshi (referred to as Grandpa Yang) about his plans to rebuild his current home so that it would be bigger than his neighbours’. Up until quite recently, Meili dwellings, including Grandpa Yang’s, were one or two-storey homes. Yet, in efforts to proclaim family status, homes were now being built just a bit taller and wider than those of the neighbours. Building a new home represented a huge financial burden of around 300,000RMB (around 40,000 euros at the time of writing), one that required years of savings gathered by family members working in China’s coastal cities or abroad (a few villagers had made it to Myanmar and Democratic Republic of Congo). Construction progresses step by step and usually also takes years to reach completion. As money accumulates from family members, the next stage of construction can be completed before building comes to a halt once again. Nonetheless, it was considered vital to undergo this process. Even though the expenditure required to build a new home and host the numerous ceremonies that come with it often leaves families in large debt, in Meili, as in most of rural China, only the youngest son continues to live in the house of his parents; if there are other sons in the family, it is mandatory that a home is built for each of them in preparation for his marital life (Steinmüller 2013; Murphy 2002). With this in mind, for the Chinese villager the appearance of the home, including its care and upkeep, is the greatest
symbol of family status and an important step towards fulfilling the social obligations expected of (Zhu 2011).17

Grandpa Yang and I had been chatting most of an afternoon over generous portions of food and rice wine at a village feast when he brought up his plans to rebuild his home. Sitting at one of the rows of tables aligned along the riverbanks, Grandpa Yang told me that at the age of seventy-four he was getting tired of working from village to village, sometimes even across provinces, to save money. Pointing at the newly built three-storey house beside us, he raised his wine and, as our glasses touched, he told me that when I come to visit next time his newly built home will be even bigger than this one. Grandpa Yang is the father of Xiaoxu, whom I introduced in the previous chapter. Given my relationship with his son, I had spent many afternoons and nights in his home and had grown especially fond of its dark wooden framework and the wide veranda that caught the rays of the warm morning and evening sun. Built in the early 1990s, it resembled an average Kam home that, other than general repair and maintenance, has not recently undergone heavy renovation. The ground-floor plan is designed around the hearth room, which is the focus of family life. Central to the household, the hearth room is connected to the bedrooms and storeroom that surround it. Emitting warmth and light on the damp winter days, the hearth room is where meals are eaten and families and guests gather. The bedrooms that surround it are usually darker and more enclosed, considered private spaces not meant for communal entertainment. Due to the constrained intimacy of the floor design, sound travels easily from room to room and privacy is not easy to come by. Although during the course of my research I was living in a three-storey administrative building that did not follow the same design layout as villagers’ homes, its wooden framework also carried sound from my neighbour’s room. I was well aware of this drawback and, especially during the damp winter months, I was also aware of the nuisance of leaking rainwater and waking up to exhaling condensation in a room that never escaped the outside cold. I considered these to be the challenges of living in a Kam wooden house and struggled to see their benefits. Yet, having spent many nights in the intimate spaces and modest layout

17 For related anthropological studies on the relevance of the house in China to producing social relations refer to Bray 1997; and as sites for the continuous flow of human relations refer to Mueggler 2001.
of Grandpa Yang’s home, I had grown especially fond of its dark, timber-planked framework. Even though the house had the same problems that I associated with Kam housing in general, its modesty, lived-in qualities and compact use of space made me feel safe and warm.

It saddened me that Grandpa Yang and his family were so keen to build a new home, something that revealed my naive ignorance of the villagers’ regard for the house as a symbol of family status. Given Grandpa Yang’s occupation as a carpenter, I foolishly thought we shared the same appreciation of his humble home, assuming that he too would be disinterested in imitating the style of other villagers’ houses: residences that I considered gleaming and excessively large, which loomed over the village and felt cold and uninhabited indoors. Grandpa Yang was quick to correct my attachment to the materiality of his household, highlighting that, like the architects working on the preservation of Meili, I was romanticising the vernacular architecture of the village, associating its loss with a greater cultural and social loss of what held the fabric of the village together. Grandpa Yang adjusted my perspective by posing me a question: if they do not replace the old, creaking house that is falling apart, how do I expect his family to measure up to other villagers? He reminded me that the purpose of rebuilding the home was not for himself but part of his role to safeguard the future of Xiaoxu’s thirteen-year-old son, as Xiaoxu was in prison and not contributing to the expenses and ‘face’ of the family. In correcting me, Grandpa Yang clarified the values attached to his home of projecting the status of his family, which exists as an extension of the divisional hierarchy within a wider social network.

My conversation with Grandpa Yang that afternoon is worth mentioning on two counts. In observing that I was neglecting the villagers’ own views, Grandpa Yang corrected and clarified my misinterpretations, pointing out my complicity with the preservationists and asserting the values he himself attached to the house as an extension of the patrilineal family. These values were not mentioned in the script given to me in order to recite the ‘specialities’ of Meili’s vernacular setting during inspection guides. Nor were they part of the expectations of preservationists and UNESCO personnel who feared the ‘horrors’ of projects of urbanisation. Privileging the abundant scenery and panoramic view of the village-scape, these perspectives overlooked the values embedded in the house for the villagers, who do not see large-scale concrete housing as a ‘horror’
but as an aspiration. As an extension of kin relations, Grandpa Yang pointed out that the house is pieced together as a measure of economic and social status rather than a vernacular site that exists as a fragment of a wider legal metric that requires protection for its aesthetic appeal. Correcting my misconception about the propriety of the villagers living in ‘traditional’ housing, he points out a sense of nostalgia I too had associated with the wooden homes of Meili. Consigning Grandpa Yang and his living arrangements to another time and space, separate from my own, he made me face that I was also participating in ‘a denial of coevalness’. Indeed, the workings of internal orientalism, in terms of its denial of coevality, are demonstrated in both my naïve expectation that Grandpa Yang would share the same type of attachment to his house as I did, and the panic that people like Professor Zhang feel when they maintain that Chinese villages are ‘changing’.

At the same time, limiting the critique to time does not address the concerns of locational space that consider how things are described and understood by people. The conflict between time and space in academic discussions has been pointed out by numerous scholars including Foucault, writing in the early 1980s, quoted in Rodman’s (1992) famous article on multilocality, multivocality, social landscape and narrative. In this Rodman claimed that the devaluation of space has resulted in its being “treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time on the other hand, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic. If one started to talk in terms of space that meant one was hostile to time” (1992: 70). The call to shift questions of space from geographers to anthropologists has been initiated since the early 1990s, spurred by the recognition that places are local and multiple. From the perspective of space, for example, it becomes possible for more than one reality to be constructed and subsequently coexist, which might or might not be shared with other inhabitants and other places. Thus places carry multiple interpretations and meanings to form lived spaces shaped by regional relations that “infuse experience in one place with the evocation of other events and other places” (Rodman 1992: 644). From this standpoint, places become contested sites, both spatially and temporally shaped by human agency, where competing views of the social construction of lived space may contest each other.
Stasch’s anthropological contributions help us further discussions on approaching spatial forms as not merely abstract entities where people think and act, but points of contact and encounter where spatiotemporal ideologies and imaginations meet and are mediated. Stasch sheds light on how spaces are mediated to enforce or reconcile hierarchical divisions. Thus villages are no longer isolated, fixated spaces; rather, they are translocally connected places; villages’ global connectivity is complex, in the sense that villages sit at the intersection of multiple structural processes and forces; and village-based people are highly reflective in their engagement with the plural orders running through their home spaces, and highly active in trying to shape anew the wider worlds in which their villages sit. (Stasch 2017: 441, emphasis in original)

Stasch (2013) refers to the dense relationality of spaces as semiotic sites, which he calls the ‘poetics of village space’. The poetic denseness of these relations form the fabric of spaces embedded with “plural, contradictory, and mutually implicated values”. In their density, places are layered with multiple historical and socio-cultural processes that form relative notions of place that come to life through the livelihoods of people who “live that relation” (Stasch 2013: 565-567).

Drawing on his own research amongst the Korowai in Indonesian Papua, Stasch (2013) illustrates how the villages in which they live are poetically dense places that materialise through the multiple relations that people form with entities, such as the Indonesian state and a commodity economy, that are in marked contrast with the more dispersed forest settlements. The poetic denseness of these places embody different signs that shape them historically and politically, and enable multiple conceptualisations about places themselves, layering them with contrasts and hierarchical orders. These are experienced in their relativity so that “someone who lives in only one kind of place and is strongly identified with it, in another sense lives in different places and lives in hierarchical disparities between places” (Stasch 2017: 449). In addition to the hierarchical orders imposed on space through interactions with outside authority, as portrayed in my conversation with Grandpa Yang, villagers are at the same time living in terms of their own hierarchical orders framed around kinship relations and family status. From this point of view, tailoring the desired appearance of
one’s home to ‘improve’ on those of one’s neighbours diverged from expectations that conceptualise the village as a site of continuity and authentic rural ethnic culture. These conceptions exist together to form a sense of place made up of numerous realities.

Conclusion

Drawing on anthropological studies of space, in this chapter I have outlined how Meili village has been shaped by the numerous layers of associations and ideals attached to the Chinese countryside and its scenery. From a distance, the aesthetically pleasing scenery of Meili carries a group of signs that complies with the Chinese appreciation of rural landscape. These signs are reinforced to conceptualise a notion of place that accords with familiarity and has no definite attachment to a fixed location. Just as Xiao Lin projected his own notion of landscape onto my photographs – a notion that included the mountains that were not seen in the Finnish scenery the photographs contained – people form conceptions of places based on what is familiar to them. Familiar places are constructed around the notions of existing signs that materialise through the relations that people encounter, as I have attempted to highlight by drawing on Stasch’s work. I have discussed these relations through the associations attached to formulations of urban settlement as a separate realm from Meili village. These contrasts are reinforced through ideologies that transform village spaces into spectacles, as I have outlined above in the case of inspection tours. As spectacles, they prioritise a particular conception of space that undermines contrasting viewpoints, such as those held by the villagers. Yet the multiple views of the village, each carrying its own set of signs and relational order, continue to coexist in the same space. In Stasch’s terms, drawing together multiple temporal and spatial conceptions that exist in the space shapes the associations people form with the village, which is what makes Meili poetically dense. These conceptions are entangled with values that are continuously mediated and contested in these shared spaces.

The next chapter peers further into the discrepancies between the co-existing value systems of villagers and researchers studying Kam villages who work closely with the government on rural preservation projects. The chapter examines how the rural ethnic discourse is sustained to keep places such as Meili
bound and intact. I look at how interpretations associated with Meili, as an ethnic rural dwelling place are compiled into architectural renderings and detailed reports. Drawing on the notion that Meili as a village is considered in isolation from the more dominant Han majority, I explore the migration theory that traces the origin of ethnic minorities, based on the detailed histories, myths, architectural traditions and linguistic origins of the Kam people that get reinforced through reports and architectural renderings for planning purposes. The chapter then looks at how these viewpoints are contested and mediated by villagers to form spaces shaped by human agency.
Chapter Five

Planning a Traditional Village

I began the previous chapter by narrating a conversation I had with Xiao Lin that portrayed the aesthetic values which he, and many other villagers, attach to the Meili scenery when gazed at from afar. Taking a bird’s-eye perspective, I then depicted how the image of the village seen from above is mounted, imagined and recounted by tourists, government officials and academics travelling through the region. This chapter discusses the role of researchers in mapping the intactness of Kam people’s everyday lives in the face of claimed urban threats, examining how the village is projected by ‘experts’ as an image through architectural renderings, visual models and reports compiled for the planning of Meili’s future. Starting with a brief overview of my affiliations in the village, I move on to outlining how research is carried out by visiting teams, shedding light on what is included in guiding preservation plans and what is left out. I then highlight the disparities and contestations between the image compiled by the decision-makers and that of the villagers who continuously shape, adjust and redefine how the village is constructed according to the relational framing of China’s ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ spaces. To demonstrate how this plays out in Meili, I end the chapter with an ethnographic vignette to illustrate how the village cadre of Meili uses the language of decision-makers to negotiate the aesthetic outcome of their village by claiming autonomy in how decisions are made regardless of how they are planned.

Modelling aesthetic order

My first affiliation with Meili was through involvement in a research project initiated to guide local government officials in the planning of Meili’s preservation efforts and led by academics from Peking University and research teams from top Chinese universities. Miss Wu, the project manager of the scheme and a friend of mine, invited me to join her team of architects, planners, designers, sociologists and anthropologists in July of 2014. At the time I was conducting fieldwork in rural Fujian, and expecting to return to my own research project; my visit to Meili was intended to be brief. Yet, during my short stay, I
was intrigued by both the village dynamics and the interventions of Chinese academics in which I too had come to play a part. My interest grew and I decided to relocate the field-site of ethnographic research for my doctoral thesis from quiet Fujian village to Meili in Guizhou province.

Before my official doctoral fieldwork started, my role in the Meili research team was to design, compile and carry out surveys to gather demographic data on the inhabitants, map the village’s kinship network and conduct informal interviews with local residents, particularly among the older generation, on rituals and ceremonies. In addition to data collection, we organised focus groups to increase engagement with residents, an initiative driven by recent national trends that mirror global efforts to encourage community participation in preservation schemes, as mentioned in the previous chapter. My second pre-fieldwork visit to Meili with the research team was organised in spring of the following year. This time I felt less obligation to conform to the expectations of the project and left my notepad and surveys behind, taking the opportunity to listen rather than gather and record data. Interested in learning about the opinions of local residents and their interpretations of the preservation project, I engaged in conversations to understand how the project affects local livelihoods and how it could be improved. From my first encounters with villagers, it was made known to me that the preservation scheme being initiated in Meili, and the research to support it, were viewed as ongoing efforts to foster government-led development. This association was common across the region, as portrayed in Oakes’ research, which addresses the political role of China’s preservation projects as “exhibition tool[s] for development and modernisation, and the ‘improvement’ of the village population” (2012: 10). Whilst many Meili residents considered government-led development to offer opportunities to earn a living, the project also engendered deep fears associated with the threat of government land and resource grabbing.

The spectacle of China’s development projects to enhance state power was familiar to local residents and generated frustrations that were frequently shared with me as my fieldwork progressed. One evening, when eating dinner at Grandpa Yang’s, I overheard the news in the background broadcasting a speech by Xi Jinping on the importance of protecting the nation’s cultural relics (文物 pron: wenwu) in order to benefit the future, and the need to improve protection
measures to hinder the spread of urbanisation. Yangxu, Grandpa Yang’s eldest son, who was sitting beside me, expressed disdain for the content of Xi’s speech. This was not the first time I had heard him criticise China’s preservation policies and the impact they were having on him and the lives of his family, preventing them, in his perception, from obtaining the lifestyle to which they aspired. The restrictions that result from preservation efforts directly affect Yangxu and his family, as he had informed me the previous afternoon when he jokingly told me that even his pigs live in better conditions than anyone in his own house. When I enquired what he meant by this, he told me he had been building a brick pigpen behind his wooden house for two years now and had received reoccurring threats, both verbal and physical, from the secretary of the county Bureau of Cultural Relics on the basis that he was not conforming to village order and was fracturing its completeness (完整 pron: wanzheng). Warned to behave like a good teacher (Yangxu is a substitute teacher in the local primary school) and support the preservation project, he was ordered to tear down the pigpen.

Regardless of the threats, which, according to Yangxu, once almost led to a physical fist fight, he refused to do so and continued to build the brick pigpen according to his own wishes. Echoing the collective opinion of government-led development projects in many households in the village,¹⁸ he claimed preservation efforts were placing unwanted restrictions on his family’s living habits who were striving to assert a xiaokang (小康) lifestyle, referring to a household that appears well-off and affluent. When I asked villagers, such as Grandpa Yang Huangsheng, who I mention in the Introduction, what xiaokang means, he told me it is the opposite of a villager. He expanded to explain:

A villager eats to be full, not for flavour, and wears clothing to be warm, not to look good. Xianxian is the opposite. Xianxian is about driving your own car to the township, not someone else’s. Few villagers are xiaokang, because they

¹⁸ At the same time, it is important to note that not everyone shared Yangxu’s opinion and were content to live in wooden housing. From young adults to elderly residents, they appreciated its aesthetics and comfort.
depend on migrant labour. This makes their financial situation unpredictable. One year they might have money, the next they might not. Regardless of Grandpa Yang Huangsheng’s definition whereby the villager lives counter to someone considered xiaokang, Yangxu did drive his own car and as a teacher in the village primary school, he also earned a monthly salary. Yet Yangxu’s live like comfortable xiaokang lifestyle was stifled by preservation efforts. The irony of these limitations, whilst at the same time living in a nation indoctrinating market socialism with ‘xiaokang’ desires, cannot be understated, as Yangxu exclaimed: “If the government wants us to be like xiaokang, they need to allow all of us to live like them, too!”

The conflict Yangxu and many other villagers were facing is not unique to Meili nor to China at large; rather, driven by the cultural heritage industry, state measures that place aesthetic restrictions on a place in order to preserve its desired image, while hindering the local population’s own desires to live a practical and modern lifestyle are experienced universally. Yet the frustrations that Yangxu expressed alluded to the feeling that the preservation scheme’s initiatives disregarded the living conditions of Meili residents, which carried much bigger fears of weakening the claims that China’s rural population have to land.

The very foundation of Chinese property law attributes all land to the state and collective ownership. With this in mind, Chinese rural populations are often positioned as powerless victims, particularly in recent years in light of the nation’s drive to urbanise. Lora-Wainwright’s (2012) work depicts the moral battlefield between the state and villagers stuck on rural side of the disparaging divide between China’s urban and rural populations. Similarly, political efforts to alleviate poverty through tourism only reinforces the striking urban/rural divide by restraining rural populations living the xiaokang lives they aspire to. At the same time, with larger national efforts to shift economic capital from China’s megacities to towns, county towns are appear as increasingly attractive places to make a living for rural populations. Meili villagers were catching onto this and a handful of villagers had even bought property in the county town. Also, there was a slow trend amongst villagers (especially women who do not want to be too far away from their children who remain in the village) that they wouldn’t have to
travel to big cities for factory work, but could find temporary work in the lumber or construction industry in the nearby county towns. However, I began to realise that many of these initiatives were even flawed as villagers were returning home empty handed after a couple of months because they were not getting wages.

The national pattern of development and heritage conservation projects carries the risk of dislocating populations in order to demolish localities and build anew with revitalisation and ‘cultural protection’ (文化遗产 pron: wenhua baohu) at its core (Evans & Rowlands 2014; Chu 2014). With ‘cultural protection’ at their core, development schemes being carried out in Meili were not openly referred to in association with plans to relocate the village population. Nonetheless, during my fieldwork, media reports addressed the relocation of rural residents in the vicinity of Meili after an inspection tour of Meili by Guizhou’s highest ranking provincial political figure, the CCP Provincial Secretary, Chen Min’er (currently serving as the Communist Party Secretary of Chongqing, which makes him politically well positioned for further elevating promotions). Chen’s visit to Meili was regarded by villagers as a hopeful event that might drive infrastructural development and the construction of a new road but media reports recounted a different version. Resonating with the CCP’s ongoing modernising project, the media claimed Chen’s motivation was the goal of relocating Guizhou’s rural population under the guidance of ‘scientific distribution’ (要科学布局) and ‘overall planning’ (统筹规划) to secure jobs and reuse farmland for forestry and land reclamation purposes (Shenzhen Online News, 2016). Whether or not relocation plans will be carried out in Meili is currently uncertain but, from the perspective of the villagers, any issue pertaining to development, including recent initiatives in the guise of preservation, are seen in terms of the political motivation behind the performance of these plans. Taking into consideration the command of the state and the ongoing fear it provokes through national efforts to participate in rural land grabbing and relocation of populations, it is no surprise that Meili residents were suspicious of current preservation plans.

My experience of Chen Min’er’s visit to the village was not positive. A highly surveilled event, my conspicuous appearance as a foreigner led the police to search the files on my working computer and resulted in my eventual eviction from the village in March 2016, until I could return with the correct paperwork.
As the scheme was directly linked to ongoing efforts to foster government-led development with its attendant risk of land grabbing, the fears, opinions, desires, worries and expectations recounted to me reflected the values Meili residents attached to their households and access to land. I compiled these values into reports that outlined both support for, and disapproval of, the preservation scheme and handed them to the project managers at Peking University. Yet I soon came to understand that my recording of these opposing voices did not conform to the research material they sought. It did not fit the objective of research reports whose purpose was to delineate the social and cultural fabric of the village population, including family histories, local festivals and rituals, agricultural production, forestry and land rights and socioeconomic living conditions. Applying migration theory that traces the origin of ethnic minorities as separate from the Han, the detailed histories, myths, architectural traditions and linguistic origins of the Kam people that these reports depict reinforce the shared understanding that the Kam, as an ethnic minority, have always lived remotely as bounded communities. From this perspective, researchers studying the Kam and working alongside government-led preservation projects present architectural renderings and reports for planning purposes that highlight the allegorical role the vernacular setting of the village plays in holding together the entire social fabric of the locality. It was considered more beneficial and relevant to compile accounts of village life that maintained an intact and holistic image of the village that could be modelled and documented into plans and that elided and neglected villagers’ objections to the project. Incorporating the opposing opinions of the villagers did not fit these model designs.

Built on global and urban ideologies, the architectural renderings of Meili convey an imagined future of accessibility and order. Not unlike the images displayed in front of urban real estate property across China, architectural renderings and models reveal a different form of access to public places wherein the narrow, uneven paths that snake through the village are widened and straightened. Photo-shopped images of the village are beautified to appear more eco-friendly, with plants lined along the riverbanks and households made to look more coordinated with fences providing clear boundaries between them. The architectural renderings place cut-out images of Kam villagers dressed in Kam
attire beside blonde haired Caucasian women dressed in tight jeans and sunglasses carrying small handbags or walking a dog (which curiously looks like a guide dog), and Chinese couples walk hand in hand in loose fitting khakis.²⁰ Showing people walking side by side along the riverbanks, the architectural renderings constitute a village made up of a mixture of people that “exist proportionate to one another, instead of as integrated, simultaneous phenomenon” (Chio 2017: 425, emphasis in original). Like the model illustrations of Meili where a Caucasian woman walks side by side with a Kam villager, the aesthetic order that emerges from planning is not compiled to reflect reality but to reinforce a desired conception where the rural ethnic continues to thrive in a complete village setting proportionate to urban lives and urban places.

Incorporating designs and architectural renderings into planning is central to Chinese campaigns, particularly since the revision of the 1990 Urban Planning Law (pron: chengshi guihua fa) into the Urban and Rural Planning Law (pron: chengxiang guihua fa) in 2007. Expected to guide the construction of national campaigns, such as the ‘new socialist countryside’ formally promulgated in 2006, the careful planning and design of villages has been encouraged through the official implementation of national policies (Chio 2017). In response, Meili was transformed into a site of scrutiny by numerous research groups during the course of my fieldwork. Alongside the long-term research led by Peking University, other research teams invited by different sectors of the government have participated in the planning of Meili. With each new group comes a new survey and inventory to measure, calculate and analyse villagers’ living habits and the vernacular setting of their homes, and map the social and cultural layout of the village. In practice, each new map and report is passed on to advise government bodies and key actors in the decision-making of Meili’s planning. Carried out with scientific expertise at its core, the drive to locate data into documents and reports to be incorporated into the planning of Meili’s future sustains a distance between the research groups and the villagers.

²⁰ I am indebted to Catherine McMahon for these observations who, similar to me, was intrigued by the architectural illustrations being put together that envisioned Meili’s future. In our conversations she shared her architectural and design insights with me during her first visits to Meili setting up a design project with her studio, working on the production of Meili’s local textile crafts.
Neglecting the fact that houses are dwelled in spaces, architects prioritise a perspective from the building point of view that pre-exists how people will in fact dwell in them (Ingold 2000). Detaching spaces from the idea that they are inhabited is preceded by efforts to compile objective reports and visual models. To maintain this objectivity a distance is sustained not just from villagers but also from buildings. Based on the empirical findings of conservation research in Scotland, Yarrow (2017) describes the importance producing knowledge for preservation planning by maintaining detachment from all objects that comprise the protected building. In establishing this distance, the image of the building remains intact as a ‘whole’. In terms of Meili, from the relative location of the observer standing afar, the wholeness appears complete, consistent and connected through historical accounts, descriptions and calculations, constructing a village that is, above all, a bounded, ethnic, minority community.

This wholeness is portrayed in architectural renderings designed for planning purposes where representations of places, and the people who get photo-shopped into them, transform the village from a functional entity to an aesthetic object to be beautified and subtly rationalised. Carefully chosen elements of the village that comply with an imagined notion of the ethnic rural are pieced together to form a collage of an aesthetic order. Images of ethnic design, such as wooden architecture, handmade indigo-dyed textiles and handcrafts, are incorporated with rural practices such as rice cultivation and Kam song to be compiled, packaged and displayed to explain the social and cultural fabric of a unique and still living village. The carefully selected items of rural ethnic life that are portrayed prioritise a shared notion of aesthetic appeal that has no fixed place.

For example, one afternoon I was sitting with a group of architects and designers from Beijing who were trying to revive hand-loomed design and profit from Meili’s textiles and crafts to develop new products to be sold in the urban market. When presented with a piece of Meili’s hand-loomed fabric bearing a simple design with vertical lines running through the white cotton, one of the designers excitedly exclaimed: “It looks just like Northern European design!” The repetition of the black lines on the clean, white cotton background presented the designers with a recognised aesthetic orientation that they related to better-known, fashionable Northern European textiles. The simplicity and minimalism
that the fabric incorporated added both economic value and aesthetic appeal. Fitting with the protocol of the significance of design defined by Scandinavian well-design objects (Murphy 2013), the aesthetic appeal of the fabric is incorporated into images for preservation-planning and tourist marketing purposes to reinforce an idealised version of ethnicity and rural living. These ideals are framed around global, national and regional projections of the rural condition that can also be seen in the architectural models and visual illustrations compiled for planning purposes. Combined, they produce a single picture that is “independent of any point of observation. This picture is of the world as it could be directly apprehended only by a consciousness capable of being everywhere at once and nowhere in particular (the nearest we can get to this in practice is by taking an aerial or bird’s-eye view)” (Ingold 2000: 191). Made up of parts that are assembled and disassembled depending on the viewpoint of the observer, the ‘whole’ becomes a signifier that can only be envisioned from a distance.

Incorporated into documents and reports, the building perspective that Ingold (2000) refers to defines the position taken by architects who first plan houses from afar before building and then mobilizing people to occupy them. He argues that how people in actuality live in environments is contrary to the building perspective, referring to dwelling in spaces as an experience of sensory engagement and movement through space. Yet to reject the building perspective in favour of the perspective of the local resident seems misleading. As pointed out in the previous chapter with regard to carpenter Yang’s plans to rebuild his house, every builder, including those from the village, has an image in mind to be admired once it is complete. Whilst I was imposing a perspective of dwelling formed around interaction and movement, resonating with Ingold, I was corrected by carpenter Yang’s assertion that the building of a house is always a display. For him, it is just not the same as the holistic display of the planner. Whilst Ingold’s work assists in outlining the contradictions raised by people’s differing viewpoints, the following section presents the limitations in Ingold’s dwelling approach by taking into consideration the fact that villagers were also concerned with a display of the village that can be admired once it is complete. Of a different order to the holistic display of the planner, the village version was
linked to economic livelihoods and social conditions framed around relational differences affixed to China’s ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ spaces, to which I now turn.

Getting your hands dirty to do the work
To keep the village ‘whole’ intact, distance was maintained between research groups and the village, which created a sense of ambiguity and a heightened feeling of scepticism among the villagers towards researchers and their efforts. The scepticism had numerous roots, but here, with the story of Uncle Long, I want to focus on the value of labour that the villager embodies, which is used to contest the value attached to the labour of others. In disentangling the narratives in the story, it emerged that the value attached to village labour is tied to rural subjectivities that are projected through expectations of where rural residents stand in society in relation to others; this conveys why certain ways of life are perceived as requiring justification and others are self-evidently valuable, thereby casting light on how different forms of living are valued by locals in contrast to academics and research teams.

I got to know Uncle Long through my close ties to his wife, Siwei, with whom I spent many mornings and afternoons working on embroidery or helping with house and gardening chores, followed by evenings with her husband watching television after dinner over cups of rice wine. Uncle Long was on shaky terms with his family members, and both of his unmarried, childless offspring worked away from home, and he and Siwei often reminded me how happy they were to have me around so they did not feel so lonely. Their hospitality was generous, for which I was indebted, but what drew me to Uncle Long was his eagerness to take me to the paddy fields and let me work there when I first arrived for my long-term fieldwork at the beginning of the harvest; most villagers were ashamed to be seen putting the ‘foreign guest from the city’ to work and required more time to adjust to my presence and view me as a possible source of help with their chores. Uncle Long’s eagerness, on the other hand, portrayed his expectations concerning labour and being a productive individual, a subject he often spoke about. For me, Uncle Long represented what Steinmüller refers to as the multiple Chinese moral references associated with hard work and labour that are linked to ‘traditional ‘peasant’ values, Maoist morals of hard work and frugality, and the legitimisation of the desires and pleasures of private
consumption of today” (2013: 126). These values were portrayed in his composure and in narratives of the past.

Discussing his son’s financial concerns one afternoon, Uncle Long told me he does not want to support him anymore and instead wants to live a ‘regular peasant life’ (正常的农民生活 pron: zhengshi de nongmin). He considered his lifestyle diverges from the desires of today’s youth, such as his son, whom he thought did not understand the value of labour or money. In contrast with his son, Uncle Long remembered seeing money for the first time at the age of eleven when he received a small monetary prize from school for doing well in exams. Uncle Long wanted to continue school in the township with his friends but he had to return home after his father died from an accident when repairing roads, followed soon after by his mother’s death. Succumbing to the obligation to take over the tedious and attentive maintenance that comes with cultivating paddy fields, Uncle Long returned home to work as a farmer as a young boy. As the years past, on the side, he turned to gambling in the hopes of profit and formed a gang with other male villagers that physically threatened people to extract money and possessions to sustain their gambling habits.

A violent gambling past is a familiar narrative amongst men in Meili, and continues to be a way of life for a small group addicted to the ubiquitous habit. Uncle Long’s gambling habits diminished in the early nineties, however, as China’s urban economy escalated, and rural populations, including Uncle Long and Siwei, took their chances in the big city as temporary migrant workers. With the money they saved making fake jewellery in factories and enduring the desert winters building railway tracks from Beijing to the frontiers of the Chinese-Mongolian borders, they were eventually able to return to the village and enlarge their house into a massive three-storey wooden home. In 2015 they converted it into a guesthouse equipped with an indoor shower and modern bathroom. Proud of this achievement, Uncle Long continued to exhibit a strong work ethic and, with the exception of his leisure time in the evenings when he enjoys a couple of glasses of rice wine and light gambling with friends and family, I always saw Uncle Long busy with chores, either in the paddy field or at home.

His work ethic, which he attributed to his peasant upbringing, contrasted with the attitudes of the architects and planners from Beijing. Their inability to get things done was expressed through a scepticism that resonated
with the usual atmosphere of hopelessness associated with government-led initiatives. Soon after their arrival, Uncle Long referred to the team of designers as “thinking like they are professionals but all they do is look at their maps and charts all day. One of them sleeps all day and the other chats to girls all night and they won’t get anything done. But really, they don’t know how to get their hands dirty and do the work.” Rather than getting their hands dirty, the job of ‘experts’ was to work in front of computers, a notion based on the significant proportion of time research teams were seen doing this. Hired by the local government as intermediaries, they spent their afternoons in the village administration building in front of their computers with limited interaction with the villagers, drawing illustrations and model plans to redesign the village layout. These associations were not limited to the researchers working in Meili, but also reflected nationally circulated representations of the ‘expert’ in front of the computer designed to communicate the work being carried out in rural development projects by government bodies. Reproduced in propaganda and photo displays across the country outside government offices and public spaces, they deliver an image of planning and model-making associated with decision-makers.

The skills to use, let alone access, a computer are highlighted as a barrier between the villager and the ‘expert’, demonstrated when the role of the expert sitting in front of the computer was humorously addressed one afternoon at a funeral. The grandson of the deceased had a government position in the township and, on the second day of mourning, a group of officials travelled to Meili to show respect to the family, arriving with two large wreaths; however, the bamboo holding the decorative ornament of paper flowers together broke. After the officials had failed to piece it together again, they hurriedly burned incense, set off their fireworks and rushed off in embarrassment to return to their offices in the township. Left with trying to fix the prostrated broken wreath, a relative of the deceased announced, “People who work in offices should stick to sitting in front of their computers,” which initiated a roar of laughter.

Expressing this customary stance towards government officials and the work they are imagined to perform, and making jokes and laughing about the image of the government official in front of his computer who in actuality is incapable of fixing anything, implies a shared scepticism towards urban ‘experts’ and the products of their labour that, from Uncle Long’s point of view (described
above), yields few results. The scepticism reinforces the relational divide between the urban decision-maker who sits in front of the computer and gets away with drawing plans of an anticipated future, and the life of the villager, which depends on physically taxing labour and working with one’s hands. These contrasts strengthen the values that people defend and form how people think, live and relate to or oppose one another in establishing a sense of place and the subjectivities that inhabit it.

The relational differences between China’s ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ spaces are explored in an article by Chio (2017) which draws on her ethnographic research in an ethnic minority village in Upper Jidao village, also in Guizhou province. Chio’s work proves helpful in moving beyond Ingold’s dwelling perspective to acknowledge that, rather than merely living in their environments as sensorial spaces, peasants in rural China, such as Uncle Long, make their environments through statements of economic status gained through the production of labour. Thus environments are not only lived by virtue of sensorial interactions and the historical traces left by the dwellings of forefathers, as highlighted by Ingold, but through the points of contact where spatiotemporal ideologies and imaginations meet to construct a relational perspective of place.

Chio refers to the relational differences in rural spaces, noting that ideas about ‘rural’ spaces and the lives that are lived in them come together at these intersections to shape contradictory conceptions of ‘rural modernities’. Formed at the crossroads of development projects, contradictions are exemplified where the desire for modernity inherent in villagers’ efforts to escape from the image and economic reality of ‘rural backwardness’ meets development projects efforts and the demands of the tourist who nostalgically seeks this ‘backwardness’ in the countryside in search of an escape from urban pressures and dependency on material possessions. As Chio critically points out, however, rather than a condition formed of opposing contradictions, these crossroads give rural inhabitants opportunities to take part in modernisation projects whose access is so often restricted to them. These opportunities arise in the ethnic personas that conform to frontstage appearances of spectacles that are performed by villagers who are well-versed in them. In both framing the subjectivities and status quo of rural residents, villagers are simultaneously able to project their own desires of
modelling a modern, urban-mediated ideal of the village-scape to satisfy a general condition of being.

Stasch (2017) provides a helpful summary to support Chio’s work. Drawing on his own research amongst the Korowai in Indonesian Papua, he furthers the notion of relativity to remind the reader of the evaluative hierarchy in which people live and think about their place in history. Thus spatial forms are not merely abstract entities through which people think and act, but points of contact and encounter between spatiotemporal ideologies and imaginations that enforce or reconcile hierarchical divisions. Returning to Stasch’s work from the previous chapter, the relations across these points of contact make places ‘dense’ with contrasts and hierarchies so that “even when someone who lives in only one kind of place and is strongly identified with it, in another sense lives in different places and lives in hierarchical disparities between places” (Stasch 2017: 449). The dense relationality of spaces is made up of plural, contradictory values that are lived via the livelihoods of the inhabitants. This brings us back to Chio’s reference and use of the term ‘rural modernity’. In both framing the subjectivities and status quo of rural residents, the villagers of Upper Jidao who live in ‘rural modernity’ are well-versed in acting out the inhabitants of a rustic household carrying forwards the tradition of ethnic beauty to conform to frontstage appearances of spectacle.

Yet, at the same time, villagers are also able to project their own desires to model a modern, urban-mediated ideal of the village-scape to satisfy a general condition of being. Embedded in this condition is the intention to live in the seemingly contradictory plurality of a rural condition where they “matter-of-factly do ruralness in a managerial fashion” (Stasch 2017: 452). Chio and Stasch’s essays resonate with my encounters in Meili village. The residents of Meili also ‘do ruralness’ around the relational construct of ‘being rural’ to satisfy a general way of being and to seek betterment as social actors invested in the future of the village. As social actors, the inhabitants of rural spaces, who form their own in-group socialities, continuously shape, adjust and redefine rural subjectivities. Contrary to the “noncommittal shrugs, the willingness to ‘go along’ with plans and models, and the ability to recapture recently constructed spaces for personal purposes” (Chio 2017: 433), my ethnographic encounters revealed a more active approach to expressing and defending rural subjectivities. I have illustrated this
thus far through the story of Uncle Long, who held onto values associated with
hard work and labour as a defence of his peasant status, in contrast with
architects who do not get their hands dirty and only know how to use computers
to draw up plans. Consciousness of the incongruence of these values among
villagers meant that they were also means of mediating with architects and
decision-makers as we see in the following ethnographic vignette in which I
compare how villagers respond to preservation plans presented to them by
disregarding claims of a shared ideological framework and reinstating divisions
between the architects and villagers.

“Show us the benefits”
The residents of Meili, called a ‘community’ by visiting preservationists and
architects, were frequently referred to as if they were key agents of the
preservation scheme. In giving them voice, there was an expectation that villagers
would stand beside the key decision makers to protect the vernacular layout of
the village. This resonates with Li’s (2007) work, following Rose (1999), on
governing through the community, which analyses efforts to empower
communities and put them at the forefront of problem-solving in development
project work in the framework of neoliberal governing systems. Idealising and
deploying people into a given community – a government technique to disguise
direct state control – makes it easier to categorise ascribed, ‘inherent’ features of a
people in order to claim how they need to be improved. This paradox is
highlighted in that whilst “[c]ommunities are said to have the secret to the good
life (equitable, sustainable, authentic, democratic – however the good is being
defined), yet experts must intervene to secure that goodness and enhance it” (Li
2007: 232). As a vital tool for political formation and government projects,
‘community’ becomes an imposed idea rather than a sociality defined by people.21

Whilst I do not intend to claim that China’s government is heading
towards, or has reached, a neoliberalist order, Li’s analysis correlates with my
own observations, made while attending meetings, of how preservationists,
architects and government officials strive to empower and proclaim the voice of
Meili residents to encourage them to take part in the preservation scheme. These

21 Also see Joseph’s (2002) detailed ethnography studying how communities are produced and
consumed through the capitalist performativity of production
efforts reflect broader national trends to initiate a ‘less confrontational model’ for government projects that carry the risk of demolition work, as outlined at the beginning of the chapter. These efforts are made by both architects and academics working on heritage schemes, as portrayed in the concluding remarks of Xing Ruan’s compilation of architectural research in Kam villages:

> "My ultimate purpose is to offer hope to the built world of our time, where form and fabric are conceived and materialized without much involvement from citizens. It is a reminder of our primordial and yet romantic urge to imagine a paradisal way of life—our fantasy—when we build. This romanticism often becomes hopelessly vain ... if it fails to receive a legibly loving care and maintenance from its inhabitants. It is for this reason that making and inhabiting amongst the minority groups in southern China provides a valuable lesson not only to planners and architects but to citizens in our time. (Ruan 2006:182)"

By shifting the responsibility onto rural inhabitants and encouraging community participation, the authority of the architect appears to be downplayed, but at the same time the responsibility expected of the inhabitants is already predetermined by the values assigned to them.

As the remarks of Uncle Long and Yangxu have highlighted, regardless of the performance of community participation, the villagers I got to know in Meili did not live in the community ascribed to them and were well aware of efforts to shift responsibility onto them. Yet the villagers did not share the same moral concern to protect the vernacular layout of Meili as the architects or preservationists with whom I conversed, and were therefore not interested in taking on this responsibility. In fact, many were strongly opposed to living in a ‘nationally protected cultural relic unit’ (国家文物保护单位 pron: guojia wenwu baohu danwei), which means that all residents must abide by strict building rules, such as the prohibition on using other material than wood in efforts to maintain overall landscape of the village. Yet, rather than defining their village on the basis of aesthetic qualities that comprise the village whole, the villagers I befriended live and experience the village as a composition of its parts and are less inclined to endorse the desired outcome of the heritage movement. This section conveys how villagers disregard the moral claim to protect the nation’s heritage in order
to reinstate divisions between key experts and themselves, beginning with an ethnographic vignette that illustrates the form and application of language and dialogue that disregards claims of a shared ideological framework on preservation.

The meeting was being held in Meili village amongst architects from the Beijing Design and Architecture Company to discuss plans for a Traditional Village summit. Open to everyone, the discussion was led by a group of eight architects in front of a male-dominated audience, most of whom had political affiliations in the village. During the meeting the village leader and secretary took on the roles of mediators between the villagers and the architects. The academically oriented, formal language of the presenters, who speak in a clean Mandarin accent, marks a particular type of linguistic social differentiation, or heteroglossic form (Bakhtin 1986), which diverges from the language of the audience. This divergence was picked up by the village head at the very beginning of the meeting who apologised for their inability to speak in clear Mandarin to draw out disparities between the two parties, reminding the architects that the villagers are Kam, an ethnic minority coming from a ‘mountain area’.

The meeting started with an architect’s describing short and long-term preservation plans to initiate Meili as a model traditional village and outlining the importance of the company’s preservation actions. Expectations were that the model village would be built in three phases; in the first, three residences had been selected based on survey output to renovate and showcase for the summit. The purpose of creating and protecting a model traditional village was picked up in more detail by the second speaker who explained that by making Meili into a model traditional village it could be replicated not just across the region, but across the country. The speaker continued to justify the importance of protecting the village by referring to the national heritage criteria and the UNESCO tentative list that both confirm the value of Meili. This value, the architect announced,

reaches out to the entire world that wants to protect ‘it’ (它). Of course there will be an increase in visitors and tourists, but if you don’t protect ‘it’ now, there will be no way of protecting ‘it’ in the future. What we see in the village: the houses, the environment, ‘our blue mountains and green
water’ (青山绿水 qingshan lvshui), our ancient barns and wells that we use every day. These have cultural value and significance for the entire world’s population.

Thus she claimed the village as ‘ours’ and assumed that ‘we’ still used the barns that have been kept standing in response to preservation efforts. Hanks’ (1999) notion of utterance in language proves helpful to analysis here, suggesting that the speaker was framing her vision of the village and the elements that made up the village as a shared entity. Drawing on pronouns in interaction, these utterances contextualise the speakers’ notion of inclusivity to build on a presupposed solidarity between the speaker and the villagers. In invoking a shared collectivity through her language, the architect aligns herself and the people of Meili with the universalism that UNESCO heritage preservation evokes, and which is central to the ideology behind the entire United Nations system that shapes the rhetoric of UNESCO-led heritage preservation. Shepherd addresses “the evocation of national heritage conjures up images of the Volk in the kultur sense of ‘a People’ rooted in a particular place” (2017: 559), noting that, although rooted in place, heritage preservation stimulates a “double-edged view of globalisation” (ibid.: 560) in which the ‘globe’ threatens material cultures whilst at the same time produces world citizens who are “literally ‘at home with the world’ and thus above and beyond culture” (ibid.: 559). Embedded in UNESCO protocol are efforts to enhance democratic decision-making and empowerment via the imagined notion of an ‘organic community’ that accepts and awaits the protection of its heritage (ibid.).

Yet, as I observe in the meeting held in Meili that evening, ‘communities’ are not willing to take on the role of the ‘global citizen’ imposed on them through heritage preservation. As the meeting progresses, the lack of interest escalates as villagers voice their dissatisfaction with the planning leading up to the summit. The room becomes increasingly rowdy as villagers state their frustration that no one is incorporating their desires into the plans, such as fixing a bridge and widening the village roads to allow them to drive their three-wheeled vehicles from one end of the village to the other. As the tension in the room soars, Yang Shiwei, the previous village secretary known for his bluntness, takes charge. Directing his comment to the architects, he asks, “You say you want to protect the village, but by focusing on three households the rest of the three hundred
households in the village see no benefits. They do not get any benefits (他们没有利 pron: tamen meiyou li)! If three hundred households don’t get any enjoyment from this, what kind of protection is it?” Here, even though the speaker is himself a resident of one of the three hundred households, the use of ‘they’ redirects his subject to the third person. He challenges the architects’ use of the inclusive ‘we’ mediated by the ideology of Chinese exclusivity to frame a division that differentiates the architects’ desires from the villagers’. The argument that the meeting has turned into soon reaches its peak and the architects remind the villagers that their plans do not include the construction of the main road, nor the widening of the village roads. With this said, it becomes clear that, regardless of efforts to include the local population in their planning, the architects’ own wishes have overtaken those of the villagers.

In the dialogue carried out in the preservation meeting held to encourage community participation in the planning of the summit, Yang Shiwei takes on the role of drawing out the social differentiation between the architects and villagers. Challenging the architects’ inclusivity, Yang Shiwei reframes the conversation from ‘we’ to ‘they’ to confirm that the three hundred households of Meili do not conform to some imagined solidarity to protect the village for the world that was presented by the first speaker. In challenging the values of the preservationists that carry significance on the world stage, he casts light on the very different desires of the three hundred households. Yang Shiwei thus uses the opportunity to disregard claims of a shared ideology tied to the notion of an intact village, a generic representation that can be envisioned from a distance. Instead, he reinstates the irreconcilability of the notions of ‘protection’ that divide the villagers and architects. Yang Shiwei expresses no interest in engaging in the universalism that UNESCO heritage promises and instead describes a different desired outcome of the project based on different merits. Uninterested in national and transnational preservation listings, he instead recounts the tangible benefits, in either economic or social form, expected by villagers from the project. The meeting reveals the lack of shared meaning between the villagers and the architects concerning both the interpretation of the preservation project and its desired outcome. It bares the contradictions in the two “rival cognitions” that demonstrate a rejection of each side’s value systems (Greggory 1997: 12).
Dressed like a village

Rather than facing the rejection and modifying the plans to conform to the desired outcomes of all parties, the rejection lingers and plans are made regardless. In the context of Chinese government initiatives, there is a common understanding that plans are not compiled to stand as models and drivers for change but are instead aimed to safeguard autonomy and meet policy-driven targets. Conveniently pieced together according to the situation at hand to cover the gaps that appear before them, plans are placed on hold, “wait[ing] for problems to arise from policy implementation, to then report them upward to be solved by new policy, or policy amendment” (Zhang, Morais & Feuchtwang 2017: 6). This section examines an instance of how plans were implemented at the ground level, where ‘gaps’ that arise are remoulded into opportunities to monopolise how decisions are made, regardless of how they were planned. In the following example I look at how politico-economic discursive forms are recontextualised in the preparation of a Traditional Village summit meeting held in Meili to attract academics and government officials from across the country to gather in Guizhou province and tour around national listed ‘Traditional Villages’.

Silverstein and Urban (1996) refer to retextualisation to draw on the notion that people engage through discourse by decontextualizing, or removing, text from previous discourse, which is then reapplied, or recontextualised, in new contexts. Drawing on Silverstein and Urban’s work, the following ethnographic vignette seeks to depict how the language used by the village cadre allows its members to respond to the gaps in preservation planning to negotiate from a position of power. Through the language of negotiation, I look at how members of the village cadre were actively ‘doing ruralness’, as described by Stasch, at the same time projecting the villagers’ claims to ‘rural modernity’.

In 2012, Meili, in addition to 648 other villages across China, made the national list of recognised ‘Traditional Villages’ (传统村落 pron: chuántóng cūnluò). In order to maintain their ‘traditional’ appeal, all registered ‘Traditional
Villages are expected to follow the protection measures listed by ministries in protection and development plans (保护发展规划 pron: baohu fazhan guihua) ("MOHURD, MOC and MOF Notification for the First listing of Chinese Traditional Villages", 2012). The Traditional Village summit, discussed in the following example, was held in response to these investigations to showcase the outcome of protection and development plans to an audience of prestigious academics, government bodies, heritage specialists, architects and other key actors from China and abroad. Meili had two months to prepare for the summit. Regardless of the traditional village status already obtained, preparation consisted of conforming to the criteria of a Chinese traditional village. As a result, Meili ultimately revamped its exterior to become a ‘face project’ (面子工程 pron: mianzi gongcheng), a term referring to the trend of repackaging China’s rural settings into development scheme facades to showcase the progress of projects merely to please and appeal to high government officials and elites. In the rushed leadup to the summit, everything was replaced with wooden surfaces, including the brick and concrete walls of houses, which were repackaged with wooden planks;23 wooden public trash cans with the English text, ‘push’, were brought in highlighting the relevance the province plays in the nation’s drive to revitalize cultural protection across the region. By the end of 2016 the fourth listing of Traditional Villages included a total of 4,155 villages across the entire country.

23 This trend, referred to as ‘to get dressed and put on a hat’ (穿衣戴帽 pron: chuyi daimao) is not unique to Meili or Kam villages but, as Chio (2014; 2017) notes, the ‘wooden house phenomenon’ is a trend across Guizhou and the neighboring province, Guangxi, whereby villages “get dressed” in wood to follow the protocol of national and transnationally funded projects and campaigns.
and situated along the riverbanks; tasks of repaving, widening and scrubbing clean all the stone pathways were divided by household, gender and production team; and trash was collected from all corners of the village and waterways.

Most of the tasks appeared to be carried out dutifully, but underneath the cleaning and scrubbing of the ‘face’ of the village were less visible acts of subversion. Defined by Scott (1985) as ‘everyday resistance’, individual attempts to express hostility were undertaken by villagers. These included verbal threats – like that of blocking the road on the day of the summit – made towards the local government by households that were not scheduled to have their electricity circuits revamped. Resistance also appeared in more disguised forms, such as the stacking of a pile of tiles on a small plot of land so that the land itself does not get diverted to public space to plant vegetation and cover the muck of the village ponds.

Other forms of resistance materialised in absent-mindedness or feigned ignorance. One household’s pigpen was demolished in order to broaden one of the stone pathways by the river and, by the time of the summit, compensation had not yet been paid; consequently, even though announcements were made on the morning of the summit to lock up all farm animals, the villagers let the pig idle freely along the recently polished and sanitised stone pathways in view of the visitors. Later, the absurdity of these orders were expressed to me. “Aren’t animals yuanshengtai (原生态)?” I was asked by one of the Kam choir members over dinner after the summit was complete. Yuanshengtai may be roughly translated as ‘indigenous’ but with a hint of the condemnatory label of ‘premodern’. Aware of the ambiguity of popular discourse, this question was met with laughter from me and the choir with whom I was dining. To respond to the uncertainties on which these demands are framed, villagers feigned ignorance, revealing the conscious awareness of the clashes of values at play; as Scott (1992) conveys, these acts of subversion formed a secret discourse that mocked attempts of key actors to impose a notion of tradition upon the villagers.

Despite these hidden transcripts, most villagers complied with government efforts to make the village exterior fit with the ideals of ‘tradition’.

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24 Incidentally, because of the lack of foresight with the management of public trash, it did not take long that bins were overflowing with waste with no one was in charge of emptying them.
The ‘dressing up’ of their homes with wooden planks made little difference to them as long as they could continue their lives. Awareness of the impracticality of the wooden planks was only reinforced as winter progressed and the damp weather caused the wood to bend and break free from the nails, exposing the bare brick walls underneath. Yet the villagers let the wood bend, further expressing ambivalence to the ‘dressing’ of their household. It was only when the county-level government announced orders for all brick and concrete walls that divided houses to be replaced with mud that the ambivalence was replaced with widespread dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction derived from the ongoing attempts of the local government to neglect long-term infrastructural challenges and replace them with a temporary ‘face’; more importantly, however, the use of mud to create this ‘face’ was undesirable to Meili residents.

From the perspective of the local government, mud walls represent rusticity that conforms with an authentic ‘village appearance’ (pron: nongcun cunluo de yangzi), with which government officials considered the current brick walls clashed. In contrast, the brick walls represented modernity to the villagers, who strongly disagreed with the use of mud, which denotes backwardness and pollution. This conflict of interests led to an internal meeting held by the village committee to discuss the villagers’ dissatisfactions. After the meeting, the project manager of the preservationist scheme (introduced at the beginning of the chapter), Miss Wu, was sought to discuss, advise on and find a solution to the problem. Rather than merely conveying the villagers’ dissatisfaction, however, the village secretary addressed the issue of using mud by claiming it was inauthentic in terms of the architectural tradition of Kam ethnic culture, asserting that mud had never been a material resource in Kam villages. Miss Wu agreed, adding that it would also be unsustainable to use mud in such humid and rainy weather conditions. In order to compromise between the preservationist’s efforts to comply with the dictates of authenticity and the villagers’ desire for modernity, the decision was made to use lime plastering instead, and a new team of construction workers was hired to coat the brick walls.

Regardless of this resolution between the villagers and the preservationist, when county officials returned to inspect how preparation for
the investigation tours was advancing, they heavily criticised the outcome of the gleaming, lime-plastered walls that to them no longer embodied a rustic ‘village appearance’. To remove some of the gleam, the bright plastering was repainted with a grey paint to add a stale, urine-coloured tint to the walls. The aesthetic outcome of the walls did not meet the expectations of anyone involved, but at least the result, which was to cover the brick and concrete walls, had been achieved, largely through the mediation between key actors and the village cadre who borrowed verbal cues that carry political relevance, such as ‘Kam ethnicity’, to communicate an impression of what is aesthetically desirable.

The retextualisation of ‘ethnic culture’ as a unique identity, which I have portrayed above, resembles the similar application of many other terms and concepts that carry political relevance, such as *yuanshengtai*, that are mediated by key actors for a desired outcome.25 Quoting Hathaway (2010) and Li (2013), Luo conveys how the notion of *yuanshengtai* was spread by regional and urban elites in efforts to build a unique provincial identity “with access to cultural and political resources as ‘cultural brokers’ bridging local expertise and global networks” to obtain capital, power and legitimacy to strengthen the state’s own agenda (2017: 24). Whilst Luo’s article is helpful in outlining the significance of the broader politico-economic influences that legitimise the construction and dissemination of folk tradition and ethnic commodification, she concludes:

[I]t remains unclear which group(s) at which levels might act on or benefit from it. As the branding of *yuanshengtai* cannot resist being incorporated into market opportunities and state development priorities, there might be limited grounds for strategic adoption by local minority communities themselves. (2017: 24).

By employing political concepts and terms that are undeniably ambiguous, such as ‘Kam ethnicity’ and *yuanshengtai*, speakers retextualise them in order to make claims that benefit the villagers whilst at the same time affirming the agency of the village cadre. In doing so, they enter the same ‘field’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant

25 For broader related discussions on the use, translation and circulation of other politically imbued terms, such as ‘indigenous’ and how it is used to exercise identity politics and mediate environmental issues in Yunnan, see Hathaway (2010; 2013); and how these debates are practiced in Tibet, see Yeh (2007). For anthropological discussions on how ‘indigenous’ is adopted by local communities beyond China, see de la Cadena and Starn (2007); Dove (2006); Li (2000) and Tsing (1999)
1992) as ‘cultural brokers’ to reassert their own ideals of ‘rural modernity’ that reject the use of mud on village walls. In its successful outcome, the example I have provided above makes it apparent that the strategic adoption of concepts that abound with political relevance, such as ‘ethnic culture’ or *yuanshengtai*, is more common to ethnic minority communities than Luo suggests. In communication with the preservationist, the village cadres borrowed verbal cues that resonated with notions of ethnicity, tradition and authenticity to retextualise them in new discursive forms that allowed them to participate in the negotiation of aesthetics, resulting in an improved outcome. These negotiations were initiated not so much to resist change, but to sustain agency and highlight the advocacy of the villagers’ desires for modernity. At the same time, they were able to authorise themselves as ‘experts’ by demonstrating local knowledge of Kam tradition.

Conclusion

Over the years of socialist rule in which Meili has offered a prominent reference point for manipulating, informing and guiding state-led projects, the villagers have come to regard each new government project, and the plans that uphold it, as merely another attempt to reduce the everyday to a fixed past and future that yet might be overturned tomorrow (Croll 1994). Aware of the risks attendant on imposed plans that carry the long-term threat of evicting residents and demolishing homes, villagers responded to government initiatives involving the modelling of Meili with acts of subversion, which are also ways of ‘doing ruralness’, following Chio (2017) and Stasch (2017). In their enactment of rural subjectivities, the villagers expressed dissatisfaction with the preparation of the government-led summit using the tools to hand. The hidden transcripts circulating amongst the villagers and promoting a certain form of desired aesthetics, were shaped by limitations imposed on the *xiaokang* lives that villagers wanted to live, threats of land grabbing and rejection of derogatory labels attached to the ‘backward peasant’, as well as the conscious awareness that state-led rural revitalisation schemes are laced with uncertainties and gaps in the language used to define a model ‘traditional village’. Aware that government-led planning manifests gaps and ambiguities, villagers were able to take initiative
and impose their own desired aesthetics by mediating with broader hierarchical disparities that define who get to determine the ordering of space.

Rather than only being concerned with the content of plans and when they will take place, this chapter has attempted to convey how people, aware that the likelihood that the intended outcome will materialise is slim, respond to gaps in them. These gaps come to the fore at the crossroads where ‘rural modernity’ is formed and where rural subjectivities are given agentive potential (Chio 2017). This chapter has sought to peer into these gaps to illustrate how a village is not made up of an image that appears whole but, rather, is a living space that is continuously shaped, adjusted and redefined by its inhabitants according to shared socialities and subjectivities. I have explored how these subjectivities are shaped by values attached to labour, the home and the aesthetics that villagers defend, which impacts on how they think, live and relate to or oppose the forms of modernity imposed on them. These values reveal the limitations of attempting to define the aesthetic qualities of the village as a whole, rather than portraying how the village is lived and experienced as a composition of its parts. The conflicting values that people defend exist in the same space and shape the associations people form in the village, which are continuously mediated and contested.

Continuing to examine how the village is shaped by its inhabitants, the next part of my thesis shifts the focus from how values are mediated across key actors working on the government-led preservation of the Meili to how the village is conceptualised as a space of contested values by the villagers themselves. Taking an emic perspective, the next chapter explores how Meili villagers conceptualise social relations to form in-group socialities and subjectivities, looking at the incongruences in an imagined ethnicity through anecdotes of participating in performed song. Rather than dwelling solely on the contradictions themselves, however, the study is extended to address the cultural complexity of performed song as a site of power struggle and honour. Disentangling representations associated with the Kam, I look beyond the ideology that sustains the concept of the village ‘whole’ among researchers. By participating in performed song, Meili residents reassert an organisational structure wherein the village ‘whole’ appears fragmented and there is no longer a map, “only endless kaleidoscopic permutations” (Strathern 2004: xvii). Instead of
power fading from government cultural heritage projects towards the margins, which I have outlined thus far, part three of my thesis considers how the endless permutations of a village make up its own ordering of power and boundaries, separate from the envisioned totality that I have considered up till now. It is these permutations to which I now turn.
PART THREE

Permutations:
A Village from Inside
Chapter Six

Voices in the Village

My first notion of the Kam people was formed reading novelist Amy Tan’s travel article in National Geographic’s 2008 special issue on China. Mesmerised by images of hamlets existing “on the edge of time”, Tan addresses the Kam as “the singing people” claiming, “you could ask anyone for a song, and he or she would sing without hesitation” (2008: 109). Read in passing, I forgot about the content of the article altogether but this romanticised image of the Kam were absorbed by my unconscious mind and continued to be strengthened by Chinese travel programs and tourist marketing campaigns that I came across living in Beijing and later by literature on ethnic minority populations with which familiarised myself in preparation for my thirteen months of fieldwork. The idea of the Kam people immersed in song was further reinforced during my first visit to Guizhou in July 2014, when I worked with the research team mentioned in the previous chapter. Before setting off to start our work in Meili, it was important that we participated in several banquets to strengthen social relations with the local academics and government officials who were helping foster our research. I was the only Caucasian in the crowd and thus stood out at these events, and one evening a provincial-level government official sitting at my table was especially curious about my presence. Exuding strong whiffs of the kerosene-scented sorghum liquor infamous to Guizhou, Maotai, he leant close towards me and confidently suggested the two of us continue the dinner party at a karaoke booth. I did my best to refuse his invitation politely, but as he relaxed back in his chair he raised his voice so the rest of the predominantly male members of the dinner table could hear, to tell me that I should know that he is of Kam descent and therefore an undeniably outstanding singer.

As my brief visit to Guizhou became long-term ethnographic research in Meili, I grew accustomed to people’s attempts to flaunt their singing skills, which were associated with the widely taken-for-granted belief that there is an indisputable link between the Kam people and a natural gift for song. This association can be traced historically. In a population without written text, song is described as a focal part of the Kam people’s mode of passing down inherited
knowledge and moral values from one generation to the next (Ingram 2012a). The importance song plays in Kam regions is highlighted in records and interpretations of the past, described in the account by Geary et al. (2003: 237) of late Ming dynasty documentation of minority nationality customs. This cites the writings of historian Kuang Lu in his famous compilation of the Dictionary about the South (䎔䳵 pron: chiya) in which he claims that the Kam people “do not like killing and have a good command of music. They play the fiddle and the bamboo mouth organ. They sing love songs with their eyes closed, and bend up and down and kick their feet to perform a simple-minded dance.” Kam scholars cited in the text by Geary et al. expand on Kuang Lu’s records to validate his observations by noting that present day Kam people are of “gentle disposition [and] slow to compete with others, and it is interesting to speculate on whether or not their singing culture has helped mould conciliatory traits” (2003: 237).

Working counter to popular notions of the Kam people immersed in song, this chapter seeks to unravel the workings behind the cultural-political framework of participating in singing competitions in Meili to portray the incongruences between an imagined ethnicity and reality. This chapter explores how representations associated with Kam ‘big song’ get reinforced by the Kam themselves to strengthen ethical and political obligations in the village social network. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1984) work on the ‘social judgments of taste’, I trace how performed song is evaluated and produced when it becomes an object of competitive worth. Instead, this chapter is a continuation from the previous one, shedding light on how representations of Kam ethnicity are appropriated by key players in the intimate spheres of cultural politics.

Academics have studied how ethnicity in China is represented and performed through images as a feminised source of nostalgia and tradition to objectify the Han majority (Gladney 1996; Schein 2000). Whilst this approach is insightful in helping to grasp how hegemonic power relations determine the role ethnic performers are required to play, in this chapter I go beyond outlining ethnic representations imposed by the Han majority to investigate the decision-making processes integral to preparations for a singing competition. In doing so, I convey existing relations that form the male-dominated arena of local micro-politics by unravelling histories that shed light to village conflicts left unresolved.
since the Maoist era. My intention in this chapter is not to outline the political nature of song in order to suggest that this was the only motivation to take part in collective singing in Kam villages, as this would underestimate the multiple experiences that villagers claimed they gained through song, including a break from routine life that brought moments of humour and joy to the everyday. At the same time, I do not seek to criticise or discredit research into musical form and singing as part of ethnic or racial identity within a collective group of people (such as Frith 1996; Hall 1995); nor do I intend to lean on studies that focus on the commodification of ethnicity through performed song (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). Instead, through the reading of an ethnographic vignette that outlines the prototypes of performed song to which Meili choirs sought to conform, I disentangle the network of relationships that determined who had access to song, to portray how these were established through a shared understanding of male status and virility through the workings of cultural politics.

Moving lips, mute voices
Sung in single-sex choirs, ‘Kam big song’ (侗族大歌 pron: dongzu dage) is a polyphonic song genre composed of two-part choral singing. Songs are led by one to three high vocalists who synchronically coordinate the song’s tone from a low pitch that rises higher before re-accompanying the low line vocalists who carry the melody of the song and can range from five to thirty singers. Before the formation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, it was estimated that only four percent of the entire Kam population sang ‘big song’, which was normally carried out antiphonally in the village drum tower and other public spaces during major ceremonies, such as the New Year (Ingram 2011: 441). The performance of ‘big song’ changed after communist rule as it attracted attention as a convenient propaganda tool to promote Maoist ideology and at the same time celebrate China’s multi-ethnic yet unified population (Ingram 2012a). Showcased by trained members of the Central Song and Dance Troupe, the popularity of ‘big song’ carried performances from the village drum tower to elaborately stylised performances on the national stage.

Performed song continued in the village under Maoist rule until it came to a halt during the Four Olds (四旧 pron: sijiu) movement that began in 1966 and
led to the Cultural Revolution lasting until 1976. Under the new initiative, old thinking, culture, customs and habits were removed from everyday life and choral singing was replaced with hymns of hardship and pain sung in hushed voices. The social changes inflicted by Maoist-led campaigns on Chinese populations and their ways of life at the time cannot be underestimated, as illustrated by the responses I received when I asked about singing practices during this era. With dumbfounded expressions, people would reply, “Sing?! We were dying from starvation. And you ask us if we sang.” The aftermath of these years modified the cultural and social practices that come with singing and theatrical customs, to the extent that little of the repertoire was passed on (Ingram 2012a). This started to change again under the gradual loosening of state grip during the open door reform from 1978 when Kam singing took another turn on the national stage and in village life. During this era, whilst the Chinese population was seeking to refashion national identity along the divided trajectories of modernity and tradition, ethnic minorities became “an underground self that was internal, yielding an indigenous identity that allowed distinction from the West, while it simultaneously marked the modernity of Han urbanites by offering a ‘traditional’ alter ego” (Schein 2000: 129). As the desire for performances by the ethnic ‘other’ grew under the new aesthetic regime, spectacles by trained professionals that depicted “professional finesse, trained skill, slickness of packaging of streamlined ethnic culture” dwindled in demand and individuals eager to profit from cultural production initiatives returned to villages in search for what was considered a more authentic style of ethnic song and performance (ibid.: 183).

Stamped as an ethnic marker of the Kam people, ‘big song’ has received considerable attention in recent years both domestically and abroad. In 2006 the song genre was recognised under the first listing of the National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage (The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China 2006) and in 2009 ‘big song’ was added to UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under the title ‘Grand Song of the Dong Ethnic Group’ (UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity 2009). The popularity of ‘big song’ has further increased the demand for staged shows. With the evolution of Kam music over the years, ‘big song’ has travelled far from the village setting. What used to be songs of exchange sung in village drum towers have been replaced with singing
competitions and highly acclaimed shows performed in front of tourists in village settings and government-organised, county-seat annual festivals, as well as travelling longer distances across China and abroad. In response to this popularity, the song genre has become a tool to accumulate economic, political and symbolic capital in Kam populations.

Performing for non-Kam audiences is referred to as ‘going onstage to sing’ and differs from singing to Kam audiences in numerous ways (Ingram 2012a). Reinforced through criteria monitored by a handful of individuals with authority, who are either non-Kam or Kam from outside the community, performances are assessed by the song aesthetics, such as the rhythm or tempo of the song, the appearance (表情 pron: biaozing) of the choir and keeping within the five-minute timeframe. The signifiers the criteria reinforce are continually validated at staged performances by the performers and audiences that see, reflect and respond to them.

26 Refer to Ingram’s detailed chart covering the major differences between village big song and staged big song singing (2012a: 441)
To avoid getting points deducted when performing for non-Kam audiences at singing competitions, the turnout of the choir is standardised. Women have a choice of white summer blouses, which I was informed appear more youthful, or dyed, glazed indigo jackets of a black hue, paired with a glimmering red shine. Blouses are outlined with clasped Chinese knot buttons from the collar down the side of the body and thin layers of colourful embroidered bands. They are paired with a stiff, indigo-dyed pleated skirt that stands away from the body to add feminine shape to the hips and is pulled up high on the waist to reveal a seductive glimpse of bare thigh; glossy leg warmers are tightly wrapped around the calves. Faces are coated with white powder to remove what are considered dark ‘rural’ complexions and hair is thickened and lengthened with yarn threads and combed upwards into a tight topknot. The look is completed with heavy chain necklaces piled on the blouse and silver bird and flower ornaments woven through the hair to spring up from the bun, which chime and tinkle with the singer’s every movement. The entire physique of female performers heightens their feminised aesthetics whilst male choirs are dressed more modestly, wearing neat trousers paired with an indigo glazed jacket closed with knot buttons down the front.

The importance assigned to the visual display of female choirs can outweigh that placed on their ability to sing. I frequently observed strategic plans being initiated to uphold what was considered the aesthetically appealing appearance of female choirs, particularly when performing for non-Kam audiences, such as tourists and government officials. With a preference for a youthful aesthetic, government personnel from either the township and/or county government seat would arrive for rehearsals in Meili to make sure that the choirs were appropriately assembled for performances. Shoving and nudging choirs members around, government officials put together what they regarded as an ideal display in which the youngest singers stood at the front and the oldest choir members remained hidden at the back. This preference for feminised youth was also expressed by villagers and there was a shared understanding that youthful female singers should perform in order to gain greater recognition for a village, as stated by Yang Pei, a twenty-five-year-old male resident from Meili who claimed the reason Meili was not bringing in mass tourism is because all the members of the choir are old. Their age, as Yang Pei, wanted to inform me was
interfering with the aesthetics of the choir. “Just look at them”, he remarked. “You can see all the lines and wrinkles under their layers of makeup.”

Prioritising the importance of appearance over voice, however, meant that the standardised choir display could sometimes be deceptive, with the synchronised moving mouths and gleaming youthful smiles in the front rows actually muted. Falling short on the ability to master Kam song, increasingly many young women are nonetheless are drawn to perform in singing competitions and are encouraged to do so. Appearing in the front row they move their lips but, as I was told by more experienced choir members, who often got pushed to the back of the choir, “Most of the younger women don’t know how to sing the songs but at least they’ve learned how to move their mouths so it looks like they do.”

Alongside the uniform aesthetics of the choir, the content and length of performed song are modified to fit the criteria of the competitions. In the past, performances for Kam audiences contained songs of around ten to twenty verses, taking more than an hour to get through. Now audiences are more commonly non-Kam, and songs are condensed to less than one verse with accelerated tempos to fit within a five-minute timeframe. Furthermore, the content of songs has changed. Songs passed down from generation to generation have been replaced with verses selected from collected compilations of ‘big song’ published by academics or Cultural Bureau government staff. Many of the compilations are taught in music classes in primary school settings or by trained professional performers in tertiary institutes that tend to focus more on arts troupe songs. Compilations include songs written with musical notes and lyrics in pinyin (a Romanised version of Mandarin) or Kam written script, which is uninterpretable unless vigorously studied.27

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27 In response to nationwide movements to develop orthographies for minority nationality languages in 1956, twenty-eight academics from Chinese institutions set off to carry out an intensive language survey amongst Kam populations. The outcome of their research was a classification system of the Kam language including a Kam orthography, which was never made official. Written in Roman script, the orthography includes thirty-two syllable initials and sixty-four syllable rhymes. The nine tones of the Kam language are differentiated by a corresponding letter in the orthography (Geary et al. 2003)

Attempts to teach Kam orthography across rural Kam regions during the reform era have been extensive and challenging (see Geary et al. 2003: 39–41). During my fieldwork most villagers born in the 1980s had at some point taken Kam language classes, yet they did not recall learning Kam because they never managed to get past the challenge of mastering the Romanised alphabet system the orthography applies to generate readable words.
The alterations in Kam song and singing style as discussed above conform to anthropological work on events that become spectacles of standardised prototypes. Particularly relevant is Herzfeld’s (2004) research on how objects and the makers of objects – Cretan artisans and craftsmen in the case he discusses – take on new forms when removed from their social context. Relocated for tourist consumption or as objects of the state, the products they create continue to carry a familiar shared idiom in order to look like something considered authentic and original. For example, when Cretan women cease weaving hunting bags for their sons and brothers to present to patrilineal kinsmen, and instead take them out of the social scene to become ‘generic’ Greek bags for tourists, these bags become prototypes. Incorporating the aesthetic criteria that fit the protocol of ‘Greek’, the bag becomes a recognisable token of a familiar type that feeds the desires of the onlooker. Thus the Greek bag, when sold for tourists rather than passed on to male kin, does not become a new object but a prototype of what it once was. In replicating that prototype, the bag appears familiar in a ‘Greek way’ to the tourist consumer, which is vital because otherwise they would not know what was being sold to them. In the same way, the feminine aesthetics that Kam female performers display fits with the Chinese prototype of a feminised and exoticised ethnicity, considered more broadly in the ethnographic works of Harrell (2001a), Schein (2000) and Gladney (1996). To further discussions on how people adopt the prototype of objects given to them, the following section goes backstage to shed light on the intimate spheres of Meili’s cultural-political framework, depicting how the protocol of feminine youth in performed song is reinforced through already existing local power relations, shaped by historical narratives of kinship relations that reaffirm masculine subjectivities.

A new choir is formed
Meili village, like many Kam villages, has always had several choirs divided by gender and age. The choirs are all active in regional singing competitions and their popularity is manifest in the first and second-place medals from singing competitions that line the concrete walls of Meili’s administrative building. The display of the medals represents the ideological shift in government development campaigns in which, with the rise in Kam song popularity, ethnic activities, such
as singing performances, are brought to the fore to boost and showcase the development of a locality.

Using song to bolster the development of a village is not a recent initiative, as I was reminded by villagers in their mid-thirties or younger, who confirm that the performance of Kam song has always been used to exhibit and showcase government initiatives brought to Meili. Villagers are tools to bring these exhibitions to the fore, as observed by Jinlong, a thirty-six-year-old male who appears in more detail in the following chapter. He recalls one morning when he was instructed to attend primary school in Kam clothing with a Young Pioneers of China28 red scarf around his neck. Arriving at school, his class was told to stand up and sing for a group of government officials who had arrived to inspect the village. It was from that day on, he told me, that government campaigns associated the promising word *kaifa* (开发), or ‘develop’, with Meili. In recalling this memory, Jinlong adds that it was also from that day that he never wanted to wear Kam clothing again. Jinlong still felt a strong dislike for performed song even as an adult. One morning when we had arranged to meet at the village gate, he called me at the last minute to change our rendezvous, informing me that the village choir was performing at the village gate and he wanted to get as far away from them as possible. He waited for me at the other end of the village and when I arrived he again repeated how much he dislikes the sound of the choir performing. His negative feelings about Kam song were the exception amongst villagers, however, although most men in their twenties and thirties felt embarrassed about themselves performing ‘big song’ in front of large audiences, which helps explain the significant lack of young male choir members in Kam villages. Similarly, when I spoke to Yang Yi, a twenty-year-old female and the wife of Yang Pei mentioned earlier, about her opinions on the performance of ‘big song’, she also recalled attending endless rehearsals from her primary school days, before performing for government officials. Her memories were interlaced with bitterness and she added, “All those hours of rehearsals and waiting for the arrival of government officials, for what? The government never gave us compensation and the tourists never came.”

28 The Young Pioneers of China (中国少年先锋队, pron: zhongguo shaonian fengdui) are a mass organisation for youngsters aged between six and fourteen, run by the Chinese Youth League under the Chinese Communist Party.
The resentment expressed by both Jinlong and Yang Yi when describing the experiences of their youth, and the association they made between Kam song and government-led *kaifa* projects, implies that as Kam people they are less ‘developed’. At the same time, they are fully aware of government initiatives to enhance their levels of development through participation in performing song. Yet many villagers were adamant that forming and maintaining the reputation of choirs was necessary for what was considered the ‘village collective’.

Furthermore, although choir members considered singing a hobby (愛好 pron: *aihao*), the external merits that came with leading and participating in government-sponsored ‘big song’ singing competitions were well known. These merits were collective, as many villagers claimed that participating in performed song could be exchanged for political advocacy to bring in government funding for infrastructural and development projects. Acquiring merits was also individually driven, as a means to escape the constraints of rural poverty by accumulating social and economic capital from winning medals. Given their potential to supply political, social and economic capital, for the most part villagers respond positively to state-led initiatives to promote ‘big song’ and choirs are springing up in the vicinity of Meili, founded by villagers eager to participate in regional singing competitions.

In response to this hype, Meili’s choirs have revived and grown in recent years. Whilst, in the past, only unmarried women, newly married men and young women who have not given birth to their first child were granted permission to join village choirs, this has changed in recent years. In response to wider social changes across Kam villages these limitations are no longer placed on choir members and the involvement of women has enhanced their social role contributing to gender equality within Kam communities (Ingram et al. 2011). Whilst the changes to the social roles of women should not be undermined, my findings suggest that the decision-making processes underlying Meili’s choir organisation continues to be in the hands of men, thereby imposing limitations on women’s access to singing competitions.29 In the past, constraints on women

29 Also interesting to note is the gendering of spaces that limits access to big song. In the past, joint singing were held in the village drum tower, which as described in the ethnographical records of Kam villages written in the 1940s by Inez de Beauclair (1986), were largely male dominated spaces
would have been attached to their marital status; in the following example from my fieldnotes, however, they were directly linked to kinship affiliations and whether or not the singer conforms to desired protocols that portray feminised young women. But before we disentangle the kinship structure to highlight the political capital that clans carry, in this section I first outline the formation of Meili’s new choir to emphasise the dominant role of men in deciding who gets to participate in performed song to then draw out the social weight that song carries in the village.

In 2014 a second female choir was initiated by Mister Shi that led to tensions with the other female choir. Given Mister Shi’s accomplishments as a local primary school teacher who had been teaching Kam song to children for years, and had directed and filmed a well-known Kam opera re-telling the

![Image 12: Meili’s new female choir](image-url)

that women had to be admitted into. Whilst the gendering of spaces are more fluid nowadays, my observations on access to the drum tower echoes de Beauclair’s description, but further research is required to draw on how these divisions are constructed and enforced in Kam village everyday life.
region’s best known love story between Zhulang and Niangmei, starting a second choir should have accorded him respect in the village as a whole. Yet his efforts raised suspicion in Meili’s already existing women’s choir that was formed over ten years earlier, which consisted of women of a mainly older age group led by the current Director of Women (妇联主任 pron: fulian zhuren). As Meili’s female choir had already established a reputation, they questioned Mister Shi’s efforts to mobilise a second choir, claiming he had been motivated by attending the first ‘One Hundred Village’ song competition held across the county in 2014. Here he had been a bystander confronted and impressed by the hype and popularity of the competition, not to mention the opportunity to win money; consequently, members of the original women’s choir claimed Mister Shi’s motives were merely to accumulate economic and social capital across the region. Also mentioned was the increasingly dominant political hold the wider Shi family held on the village, discussed in more detail in the following section.

Whilst the allegations made by members of the original choir about Mister Shi’s reasons for forming his own choir cannot be proven, his actions had significant impact on the dynamics of Meili’s choirs. Now that Meili had two female choirs, there was a dilemma when it was announced that only one female choir could perform from each village at the annual Sa Sui festival held in the local county seat. Due to these regulations, singers from both Mister Shi’s and the original choir had to merge to form a new twenty-member female choir. A meeting was held to resolve the problem, but attempts to discuss the issue soon failed and the meeting merely led to heated arguments and name calling. Amidst the chaos, a new choir was put together consisting mainly of younger female singers from Mister Shi’s choir in addition to women from the Shi clan. Meaning that, in addition to the preferential treatment shown to the younger women, members of the Shi clan were also given priority. The discriminatory method of choosing choir members based on their youth and relationship to the Shi family

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30 It is not uncommon for Kam villages to have their own amateur theatre troupe and director who produces Kam operas. The story of Zhu Lang and Niangmei is by far the most popularly performed Kam opera and was even converted into a national film during the 1960s (Geary et al. 2003).

31 Discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight, Sa Sui (also referred to as Sa Ma) is the Kam goddess who protects and brings fertility to the village. In 2006 the Sa Sui festival was recognised as National-Level Intangible Heritage. See Liang’s (2013) research to better understand how the CCP reframes festivals into ‘intangible heritage’ when they are indeed religious festivals.
led to heated verbal and physical fights that developed into widespread conflict across the village. Ultimately, the formation of a new choir rearranged women’s access to performing Kam song in Meili and choir members from the original female choir criticised Mister Shi’s attempts to modify the rules of the game. Whilst access had once been defined by the ability and desire to sing, now the ability to sing was secondary and the selection criteria rested on affiliation to the Shi family and physical appearance.

Bourdieu’s (1984; 1990) theory of habitus and social capital proves helpful here. Bourdieu studies social groups through the affiliations individuals form with fields of practice, which are defined by the access social groups have to capital. The authoritarian social position that Mister Shi, as a member of the Shi family, held in the village allowed him to take on the role as ‘producer’ that determined the organisational structure of the new choir to perform at the Sa Sui singing competition. Carrying Teacher Shi’s own social and political obligations, capital was accessed by conforming to lines of power and affiliation directly linked to the Shi family in anticipation of their own desired outcomes. Willing to accept the consequences of neglecting older female villagers in singing performances, he as at the same time conforming to the extant prototype of ethnic performances prioritising youth and femininity in order to hold onto their own decision-making power and validate hegemonic rule in the village setting. In accumulating this capital and by conforming to the existing criteria for ‘going on stage to sing’ by selecting young female singers, Teacher Shi activated his already established roles as decision-maker to adjust the rules of the game.

Complying with the rules of the game that the male members of the Shi family had laid out required careful consideration by choir members. This was brought to my attention by Siwei, a female singer in her forties, and the wife of Uncle Long who was introduced in the previous chapter. With youthful features, a strong, high vocal pitch and well versed in Kam song, she had been chosen for the new choir to perform at the Sa Sui festival. But, as she was also a member of the original female choir, she now felt torn. I spent a large portion of my time in Meili in their household and Siwei opened up to me early in my fieldwork by including me in her daily errands and sharing her worries and thoughts with me. One afternoon as we prepared lunch, with me sitting across from her washing the vegetables as she prepared the meat, she mentioned her distress about the
tensions that arose in the heated meeting where she claimed the choirs had been divided on discriminatory grounds. As Siwei pierced the flabby piece of pork with her knife, she turned to ask my advice on whether she should take part in the Sa Sui singing competition. Naively, I suggested that if singing is something she enjoys and wants to do, she should go. Ignoring my shallow advice, Siwei clarified her hesitation by explaining to me that if she joins the new choir for the Sa Sui festival she will be betraying the eleven women of her own choir who were prohibited from joining the choir and excluded from the list. On the other hand, if she chooses not to go, villagers will call her arrogant and proud (骄傲 pron: jiao ao). It was only my second month of research at the time and I had not yet come to understand that such decisions are not made according to one’s own personal interests, but the collective’s. Whilst I misperceived singing to be a hobby in which participation was based on individual inclination, Siwei corrected me by drawing to my attention the fact that singing was not an individual choice but a means of maintaining social relations. The social implications that membership in the choir carried for Siwei resonate with Ingram’s long-term ethnomusicology research which highlights that, in performing Kam song, choir members must “ensure that their family, and, by extension, their clan or region of the village, [are] not seen as inferior to others” (2012a: 444).

Prioritising the social implications that participating in song carries, in the end Siwei decided to join the Sa Sui festival with the newly merged choir led by Mister Shi. Yet when rehearsals started, the choir was faced with another difficulty. They struggled to come to terms with the song content and a corresponding singing style to go with it. Accommodating the desires of choir members proved to be a struggle due to the discrepancies in singing style each member had acquired as a result of having been assembled from the two female choirs – Mister Shi’s recently formed choir and the more established choir led by the village Director of Women; they also exhibited great disparities in their familiarity with Kam song. Struggling to agree on a uniform content and style, choir members attempted to stake their own claims to the authenticity of performed song, which led to tense disagreements about song lyrics, pitch of voice and even breathing pauses. These disparities surfaced at choir rehearsals, which soon became arenas for disputes. Whilst the minority of choir members
strongly affirmed that songs should be performed according to what they claimed was the traditional singing style, unique to Meili, this was rejected by those who were illiterate in this tradition. The latter usually came from a younger age group who had been taught songs to 'go onstage to sing', performing for non-Kam audiences or local audiences with untrained musical ears. More familiar with the standardised version of Kam 'big song', younger choir members were usually unable to take into account the peculiarities unique to different singing techniques. Hence, following Herzfeld’s (2004) claim, although choir members were all able to conform to a shared aesthetic protocol of Kam song, because ‘big song’ had been removed from its social context, the discrepancies in singing style underlying the shared protocol now came to the surface to generate disputes and disagreements in song style and performance.

I kept a distance from the disputes that arose in rehearsals because I was still in the early stages of my research and felt uncomfortable seeing the aggressive and even physically violent side of people on whom I depended to complete my fieldwork. Avoiding the arguments that arose in evening rehearsals, I instead sought out various choir members in the mornings following evening rehearsals to gather gossip from the previous night. Siwei in particular enjoyed sharing the events of rehearsals with me. While she had chosen joining the new choir as a vehicle to maintain social relations and existing hierarchies, in the conflicts that arose during choir rehearsals, singing had become a means of bringing to the surface already fractured social relations. Although the descriptions of choir rehearsals that Siwei depicted were unpleasant, Siwei would unravel them with humour, so they almost resembled dramas from a satirical comedy; together we would laugh at the overblown chaos that the rehearsals became. In depicting the melodrama that ran through them Siwei compared the arena with one possessed by spirits. In a comic tone that revealed the tension beneath, Siwei asked me, “Who came to rouse the ghosts?! (谁来闹鬼 pron: shei lai naogui)”.

Fostering a tiger who grows up to attack you
The ghosts were roused by almost every village dispute that led to the uncovering of ongoing tensions in village power relations and unsettled social tensions
bound to the configurational structure of the village. These social tensions were often rooted to family and lineage tensions, which also arose in the formation of the new choir blaming Teacher Shi for abusing political power to interfere in and jeopardise singing competitions and the organisational structure of choirs. To understand this structure requires a brief overview of the kinship relations that make up Meili, which I address in this section.

Similar to Harrell’s (2001a) research in southern Sichuan where he argues unlike the Han attachment to place, common descent and affinity remain defining characteristics that bind ethnic groups in the region together. The Kam population of Meili is tied to a clan framework, divided by internal social units referred to as dou. Each dou is considered to share the same ancestors, burial grounds and, before collectivisation, mountain forests and land. Dou played a more dominant role in the pre-Maoist era when decisions related to crime, public welfare, family disputes and public security were made by the village elders of each dou (Geary et al. 2003:71). As outlined in Chapter Two (pages 25 and 26), in Meili the majority of villagers go by the Yang surname, which is divided into six dou. There are ongoing disputes concerning whose family were the first to arrive and settle in Meili and, according to some older Yang residents, only settlers who migrated to Meili from the six dou with the Yang surname are of real Kam origin.

As mentioned, the majority of villagers go by the Yang surname while the Shi family is a sizeable minority. Fleeing from the neighbouring county due to either deployment of war or a criminal act (the oral histories I gathered generated contrasting accounts), the Shi family arrived in Meili in the early twentieth century to work under the Laben dou, a powerful Yang clan who claim to be the first inhabitants of Meili and were the landlords of the village prior to the 1949 collective era. In more recent years, as third-generation Meili residents with an increasingly large male line and a second four-year government administrative position, the Shi family's size, power and wealth had grown with undeniable speed. Their dominating physical presence and the recent re-election of the Shi village leader for a second term displeased non-Shi households who claimed the vote was rigged. Concerns about the influence of the Shi family name on efforts to rearrange the local village dynamics have escalated and generate tensions
amongst non-Shi households. These tensions were especially felt by members of the Laben dou to uncover historical frictions between clans.

The restructuring of the choirs for the Sa Sui festival and the heated tensions that resulted was another episode of these kinship tensions. Although my research material is unable to piece together the historical events that took place that allowed the Shi family to gain political rule in the village and threaten the power dynamics previously authorised to members of the Laben dou, it can be assumed that the most significant shift of power bears traces to the Maoist era when wealthy landlords across the country, including the Laben dou, were publicly attacked, denounced and interned in labour camps. Today, in addition to the growth of the Shi male line, members of the family held powerful positions in the village as elected village leader and numerous seats as administrative cadres. The political power members of the Shi family held, in addition to Mister Shi’s position as the only teacher in the local school from Meili who has earned a permanent full-time paid teaching position, gained the Shi clan with power that went beyond political capital to also include economic and social capital.

Ongoing village tensions that had been triggered by the restructuring of the female choirs took a new turn at the yearly Chinese New Year village festivities. It was expected that these would be carried out over four evenings and include joyful singing and staged performances, but, the year that the Shi village leader was re-elected, a scene of conflict erupted that led to clashes between the Laben Yang clan and the Shi family which became so heated they resulted in the stabbing of two villagers. In response to the violence, all festivities were cancelled even before the main events could commence. The clashes broke out during a brief interval when one of the Shi family members was witnessed to appear on stage with a long spear. His appearance on stage was so fleeting that most of the audience, including myself, were too busy enjoying the cheery festive atmosphere to even notice and as we continued watching children perform as clashes broke out a couple of metres from the stage. Due to the speed that the clashes broke out, I only arrived at the scene when the violence leading to the stabblings had already erupted. I watched at the front of the crowd as it took hold among male members of the clans, as women forcefully held men back from greater involvement or hastily grabbed children away from the scene. Whilst at the beginning of my
research I had avoided village disputes in choir rehearsals, now, months into my
fieldwork, I stood and watched at the front of the audience feeling both
accustomed to, and apathetic about, the violence among the male villagers.

Due to the speed of events, I was only able to gather details after the
Chinese New Year celebrations had ended. After the stabbing, the topic was very
sensitive and only a handful of residents were willing to talk to me about it.
Tensions were kept hidden from public discussion and an outsider would not
have realised that there had been a near murder scene in the village just days
before; this made it difficult for me to follow up on the violence and the few
narratives I was able to piece together were inevitably coloured by my own biases
against the Shi clan, which I recognise marks limitations in my analysis. Siwei
and her husband, who had over the course of my ethnographic fieldwork openly
criticised the village leader and the wider Shi clan on numerous occasions, now
appeared ambivalent about the fear that members of the Shi clan had provoked
across the village. Their son had recently married a member of the Shi family and
they were no longer eager to discuss what they had previously considered to be
the Shi family’s brash presence in the village. As a backlash, due to my affiliation
with Siwei’s family, other households were not eager to talk to me about the
ongoing disputes between the Yang and Shi clans either, and responded to my
questions with blank faces.

From the few individuals who were willing to share their opinions with
me, I came to understand that the violence that erupted on Chinese New Year
was a vehicle to reproduce hierarchical structures connected with relations
imprinted in the patrilineal kinship system.32 Afterwards, I spoke to Yang Yi,
who had married into the Laben Yang clan, and she described the actions of the
Shi family using the Chinese proverb “bringing up a tiger who then attacks you”
(养虎为患 pron: yanghu weihuan). Here, she tells me, the foster tiger is the Shi

32 The violence that surfaced in response to clan rivalries, and leadership behaviour resembling
village tyranny, is not unusual to Meili alone. A month before this incident occurred in Meili,
China’s Supreme People’s Procuratorate issued a list of guidelines leading to the crackdown on so-
called village tyrants (村霸 pron: cunba). Interestingly the crackdown lumped village tyrants with
‘evil religious forces’ (宗族恶势力 pron: zongzu e shili), referring to groups of people who, in the
name of religion, further their private interests. The document goes on to suggest that
procuratorates at all levels need to strengthen the supervision of village elections to ensure that
local tyrants and evil religious forces do not receive tacit government protection (Supreme People’s
family that now, as an adult, brings harm to the Laben Yang family that helped the first Shi settlers. Embedded in Yang Yi’s comment was reference to a sense of loyalty that the Laben clan, as the ruling clan of the village until the denouncement of landlords during the Maoist era, expect from others and yearn to sustain to reaffirm their status as the original inhabitants of the village. The versions of the story depicting the scene of violence that I was able to piece together all pointed towards the decision-making power that the family, and by extension the Laben clan, continues to build on to maintain authoritarian power over village relations imprinted on the patriarchal kinship system.

Performed song became an arena where ghosts of the past would return to rouse and reinstate ancestral claims. To reaffirm those claims, men sought to advance themselves in the agonistic world of status and competition to transform consciously displayed masculine agency into opportunities to manipulate singing performances and festivities. Certain members of the Yang clan interpreted events as an attempt by the Shi family to take charge of the cultural-political structure of the village in order to retain and strengthen superiority in the village setting, and performed song became an arena of power struggle to demonstrate the decision-making strength that men exercised. The restructuring of the female choir, the heated choir rehearsals and the violence that erupted at the performance of local festivities all offered opportunities to reproduce and reaffirm valued social relations that reproduce masculine charisma and virility. As performances of manhood, they became sites of power and honour where participation in performed Kam song was not determined by a singer’s technical mastery but by the access provided by local social structures and kinship affiliations.

Boretz’ (2011) detailed ethnographic study of masculine violence and martial arts at the margins of Chinese society is helpful here to deconstruct masculinity of a particularly Chinese kind. Studying the role of martial arts in relation to the formal Chinese structures of the patrilineal family based on patrilineal descent, equal inheritance among sons and virilocal marriage, Boretz explores the charisma and potency that it emits. Delving into the competitive structure of Chinese patriarchy, Boretz reminds the reader that it is unlikely that all sons will attain a level of patrilineal domination that replaces the father. Their
disappointment is projected through martial arts to allow men to be sworn into a new type of brotherhood in the form of gangs that promote honour, moral obligations and sacrifice as a way of reproducing patriarchal subjugations and charisma beyond immediate kin. In the same way that Boretz’ research portrays how martial arts reproduce hierarchical structures to thereby justify masculine violence as a form of self-producing self-sacrifice to express honour and loyalty, the occurrence of violence in Meili became an opportunity to perform the male virility that holds together the broader kinship network. The social implications of holding decision-making power and participating in the performance of Kam song brings into play the form of intention held by men. In the instances I have provided above, from the reorganisation of the female choirs and the violence that erupted on Chinese New Year, hierarchical structures reproduced by male agency that are embedded in the Chinese patriarchy were brought to the fore.

Conclusion

Whilst considerable research sheds light on hegemonic power relations beyond an ethnic locality that determine the role ethnic performers are required to take, less is written about contestation and regulation of cultural politics in the immediate communities that make up China’s ethnic populations themselves. Through the anecdotes of performed song in this chapter, I delve into these issues to disentangle how Meili residents are drawn into a network of relationships and united by a shared understanding of men’s status and virility within the everyday life of the village. Also an element of rural subjectivities, agency is shaped by power and affiliation linked to reaffirming patriarchy which, as I have illustrated, is enacted through the example of singing performances. These performances become a battlefield of cultural politics not so much determined by a singer’s technical mastery as the feminised prototype of Kam song that limits access to choirs. In a village with an unresolved history of settlement, this access was also directly linked to kinship affiliations, in order to exercise power and reinstate a male-dominated clan authority. The threats of the ‘inside other’ who comes from another line of lineage made up one of the multiple structures of hegemonic hierarchies to reveal that kinship is a means of establishing where one stands in the world. In sharing the same name, dependency and bloodline, the relationship
of people connected by kinship is intimate in that it creates an inside “of participation of being. It is one of care but also of intense rivalry and, where witchcraft exists, of harm” (Feuchtwang 2013: 283). Considering the social performance of virility was so central to my ethnographic fieldwork, the final chapter in the third part of my thesis examines more deeply how social relations are conceptualized through conventions of male status to reinstate in-group moralities and socialities.
Chapter Seven

Virility along the Margins

“He speaks spicy”

One spring afternoon during the rainy season as I was strolling through the village in the hope of finding something to do, I came across Jinlong squatting by the newly renovated stone pathway that connects the upper and lower village. I had observed Jinlong on numerous occasions from afar and was both intrigued and intimidated by his normally outspoken and brash demeanour. Slumped down under the roofs to shelter from the rain, that afternoon he looked unusually agitated and disappointed. As he did not seem to be in boastful mode that afternoon, I did not feel as intimidated as usual and took the opportunity to join him under the gables and strike up a conversation. As we started talking, Jinlong voiced his frustration with the nuisances and ongoing failures of Meili’s government-led infrastructural projects, which he was partly leading and responsible for on the village level; once again they had been halted due to the heavy rain. With the rainy season underway, there was a risk of flooding which could potentially destroy the newly integrated drainage system and neatly repaired stone pathways that coil through the houses, as had happened in a neighbouring village. As Jinlong had invested in these schemes, he was worried by the financial burden they represented and full of stories of the past and the numerous business initiatives that had faced a similar fate.

From that afternoon I felt less daunted by Jinlong. Because of the rainy season he had more time on our hands and considering my time was diverted to whatever came my way, soon we were regularly spending afternoons together. Jinlong also got into the habit of calling me early in the morning, eager to take me to the mountains to enjoy the first spring yield of mountain berries. Not shy about his intentions, he used these opportunities alone with me as we sat in the shade enjoying the sour juice of the fruit to test his chances of romance with me. When he leant in close to me, I would have to be quick to remind him to back off before his lips met mine. At first his overt advances out in the mountains made me feel vulnerable but over the weeks, as our friendship developed, I grew
accustomed to his prickly chin on my shoulder and disregarded his flirtatious intimacy and physical proximity. As spring progressed, we started spending time together on a daily basis. As he was one of the few men in Meili who refused to drink alcohol, while I was increasingly concerned about the effects on my health of the heavy drinking in which I was frequently expected to take part, I preferred spending evenings with Jinlong where being social did not require getting intoxicated. He often accompanied me on evening strolls around the village borders and we would stop to chat on a bridge or along the guardrails by the forest. During the day, the bird’s-eye view of the village landscape was visible from here and at night the site turned into a romantic retreat where teenage sweethearts get together for privacy away from family and neighbours.

Although I only befriended Jinlong in the final months of my research, it was through men like him that I gained access to most of the social gatherings and village events I attended. The majority of the younger village men welcomed my presence and showed me generous hospitality, frequently calling me over to join them for meals paired with copious amounts of rice wine. What I did not expect from these invites was the amount of romantic attention the men paid me on learning that I was a single, thirty-year-old woman. Early in my fieldwork one particularly keen villager changed from his farming sweats into a Western-style business suit to pick me up from where I was staying and parade me through the village to visit different members of his clan for dinner. Later I was to find out that he had been spreading rumours that I was his girlfriend and, although it was never clear to me whether villagers actually believed this, it became a running joke amongst certain men who, in passing, would ask me when they should set off fireworks for our engagement. Other single men tried to woo me late at night with online chats and, when I did not reciprocate their interest, I would later hear from their friends that they had told them that I was playing hard to get.

I would not have thought too much or have been bothered by their attempts to pursue me if I had not been in a romantic relationship with Xiaoxu, which was supposed to be a secret between us. The overly flirtatious behaviour of the men made me paranoid that they might be aware of our affair, and thus considered me a promiscuous target. I considered our relationship was a secret
that belonged to one of the many ‘unspoken things’ that belonged with wider social dynamics that included lying, deceiving and bickering.  

Instead of looking deeper into the motives of other male villagers, I tried to learn from their efforts to seduce me, hoping to better my understanding of the gender norms they were demonstrating and how I might be required to adapt to them. The rules of social etiquette between men and women amongst the Kam people were expounded to me early in my fieldwork. Wedded couples, I was informed, do not show affection in public and unmarried individuals should not be seen alone with members of the opposite sex. Yet, regardless of the strict gender divisions and the complete absence of the sexual overtones generated in cities by the inescapable eroticism of models posing in billboard advertisements, sexual nuances were still present; they were just more hidden, surfacing in everyday conversation interlaced with humour and flirtation. In the past, flirtatious behaviour in courtship with the opposite sex was expressed through song, which also tested the love of a sweetheart. Songs were also expressions of oneself, or of favoured personality traits, such as modesty, intelligence and wit. The singer carefully compiled his song lyrics to express these traits and a willingness to sacrifice himself for love. These were traits that were considered positive traits in a man worthy of marital quality. One afternoon, when I was attending a song festival in a neighbouring village with Yang Shengshi, our conversation led to the expression of love through song. He claimed because of the courting ritual of song, Kam people have more stable marriages than the Han population. “Unlike the Han people, our love is not about money,” he stressed. “It’s about telling your partner from the beginning, ‘I don’t have money, so the foundation of our love is not based on it.”

I heard about the relevance of songs that tested love from the older generation of Meili men who recalled memories of their youth when they would flock to women’s homes to take part in what they called ‘playing with girls’. To participate in this ‘playing’, a prospective suitor would gather his male friends of an evening and together they would visit the family home of his love interest, who would usually be attended by her female friends. If permission to enter her

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33 Refer to Green for an overview on ethnography in Greece, which has payed particular attention to lying and secrecy as “pervasive in social relations” (2005: 165).
home was granted, they would then ‘play with girls’ (玩姑娘 pron: wan guniang), that is, sing through the night until dawn. Love songs were exchanged as the male visitors paired their voices with the heartsick sounds of the two-stringed niutuiqin (牛腿琴 literally translated as ‘cows leg instrument’). To show her interest in the suitor, the girl would give him a small token before his departure in the morning, such as shoe insoles or handmade embroidered ribbons.\textsuperscript{34}

The representations of sex and courting portrayed in recollections of ‘playing with girls’ reflect Manning’s (2014) research, which draws on the Georgian fascination with sex. In his article Manning depicts the multiple meanings inhering in a particular form of sex referred to as ts’ats’ali, associated with the mountainous people of Pshavi, which is purely sociable. The vanishing customs of the numerically small group of Georgians who comprise the Pshavi – still circulated in the content of ethnographies, novels, films and everyday life –

\textsuperscript{34} Geary et al. (2003) claim that the man needs to persuade his girlfriend to give him a token as a pledge of her love, whilst she teases him and withholds her gift. If and when she does give him a token it acts as a kind of engagement ring, an act of faith between the couple (ibid.: 80); however, in the stories I collected, the token merely acted as a gesture of interest, as not all men took the commitment offered by their girlfriend seriously. Jinlong, for example, informed me that he received embroidered ribbons from a love interest when he was young and unmarried, but threw them away as soon as she was not looking.
“exhibit lost chivalric ideals that putatively once belonged to Georgia as a whole, thus representing an image of a lost totality that continues to inform the present” (Manning 2014: 270). The ts’ats’ali form of sex is differentiated from seksi, defined as heterosexual sexual intercourse potentially leading to pregnancy, which Georgians associate with the wider Georgian population. Differentiating between the two allows seksi to be the normative, preferred model of heterosexual sex whilst ts’ats’ali is projected as a fantasized, exotic sexuality that includes “fairy-tale beings, imaginary creatures who by monstrous inversion of the normal display a kind of ‘moral imagination’...[that] afford potentials for sexual fantasy and models for alternate sexualities, becoming creatures of the ‘sexual imagination’” (Manning 2014: 267). Manning echoes Herzfeld’s (2005) use of disemia to refer to the ambiguity that arises between public self-representation and self-recognition that distinguishes the different types of sex associated with a particular group of people. The disemia that arises repurposes the eroticized customs associated with the national representations of the mountain people. These national representations are rooted in the intimate nature of the practices that creates a kind of secrecy, not just in public knowledge but also amongst the very people who practice it. At the same time, framing the national representations of the mountain people in another time and place imbues them with an erotic tradition of repressed private desires that cannot be experienced directly. Evolving into a “reported sexuality, rather than a practiced one” (Manning 2014: 272), ts’ats’ali and everything related to it becomes a means of projecting one’s own desires.

Similarly, love, romance and sexuality are associated with the Kam population through imagined representations that are reinforced and popularised in widespread national and international heritage discourses. Depicted in tourist marketing and museum displays that show life-size clay figurines of Kam singing to one another, these representations are also internalised by the Kam themselves. Even though courtship practiced through song, as described above, has been replaced with casual courting in the form of idle chatting,35 the disemic

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35 Interestingly, the practice of singing face to face to the opposite sex has been replaced with the more recent appeal of singing in social media chat groups. Increasingly popular, large online chat forums are compiled by friends and former classmates to include members that spread across large
reception of the past continues through the recollections and imaginaries of ‘playing with girls’. As in Manning’s description of the fantasised ts’ats’ali, ‘playing with girls’ continues to linger in socialising and self-representations, sometimes justifying behaviour that is not always approved by both parties. Today, for example, casual courting in the form of socialising can often continue until the early morning and some single women even complain that men might lock the door and not allow them to go home until they are ready to release them. Even when there was no love interest, unmarried women would remind me of their social obligations to stay up and chat with the opposite sex because they needed to be friendly to men and give them ‘face’ (pron: mianzi), as they were often also distant family members. Whilst, in the past, a modest and compliant personality would have been expressed through song, this had been replaced with socialising and keeping men company. These obligations were entangled with previous notions of courtship to strengthen heteronormative conceptions of gender divisions.

As my research progressed and I learned more about local courtship habits, I was uncertain how far I should go as an ethnographer to conform to these gendered customs and whether I too was expected to stay up late with men to demonstrate friendliness. This uncertainty continued as the friendship with Jinlong developed. Jinlong was the archetype of what most researchers would try and avoid, or so I gathered from the teams of social science researchers with whom I worked at the start of my fieldwork (discussed in Chapter Four). Impressed by the copious amounts of material on Meili’s customs and history the research teams were able to gather in such a short space of time, I often found myself at odds with myself when comparing their material with my own. Instead of seeing the obvious incongruences in our positionality as researchers as an advantage, I responded by underestimating both my capacity as a researcher and the material I gathered. In addition to my lack of confidence as an ethnographer...
and anthropologist, I continuously questioned the validity of the stories being recounted to me, particularly those by Jinlong, who flaunted the role of a big talker.

When I first started my fieldwork I watched from afar as he walked with a flock of women around him almost rolling on the floor laughing at his stories. Walking ahead of them one day, I asked my friend to translate into Mandarin what the jokes were about. She casually told me they were talking about sex, but was unwilling or uninterested in translating the content of his stories in detail. Jinlong fancied himself a ladies’ man and, as I started to get to know him better, he also shared these stories with me. “I’ve played with Miao girls,” he proudly asserted with a wide grin that unmasked his cheeky youth. He had the ability to spice up mundane events so that even trips to the doctor transformed themselves into something that could have been from a pornographic movie. At other times he liked to show his more emotional side and recollected stories of heartbreak, such as having to leave his first true love in Yunnan province because his family prohibited him from marrying her as she was not from Meili. I never quite knew whether there was any truth to his stories, and spending time with him was like traversing a thin line between reality and fantasy.

“He speaks spicy,” women told me, reminding me not to take his vulgar stories at face value. Others bluntly warned me, “Don’t believe a single word that comes out of his mouth.” As a newcomer, I did not belong to Meili’s sociality and I was frequently warned about whom to trust and not trust. Stories told to me about other villagers were riddled with dark histories of their pasts, which sometimes seemed absurdly far removed from how they presented themselves to me. Aunties with whom I spent my days were suddenly depicted as prostitutes at night and young men I was getting to know were labelled drug addicts and ex-convicts. As if in a popularity contest, I interpreted the bickering, deceit and bad mouthing to carry an underlying message not to befriend or trust other villagers but to trust the speaker instead. Because talking and bickering behind villagers’ backs was widespread, like the stories told to me about other villagers’ pasts, Jinlong’s own history seemed questionable. Unable to escape the expectations placed on me as an unmarried Caucasian woman living with the villagers, I eventually let go of attempts to confirm the validity of my ethnographic material,
rather observing the performances of villagers such as Jinlong, better to understand the larger social transformations they were encountering.

Jinlong, and other young men I got to know, conveyed to me the discrepancies in discourses of how societies have changed, both in Meili and much of rural China. They crushed many of my exoticised assumptions about ethnicity and China’s rural life, including those I had read in detailed anthropological ethnographic writing prior to my fieldwork. For example, one thing that struck me was what appeared to be an utter lack of interest in engaging in rituals that my anthropological readings on Chinese funeral ceremonies told me followed a strict format modelled over years of historical tradition. Age-old duties and rites that express filial piety, which I had been told carried values in terms of maintaining ‘face’, no longer seemed relevant to the people around me. I had come prepared to document the complexity of funeral rituals built on the Chinese model of patrilineal continuity that reinforce the Chinese notion of filial piety, but when Jinlong was part of the male line of the deceased and thus a key figure in performing a ceremony, he would make a mockery of it to remind me that rituals are never carried out like they are in the books. Jinlong’s refusal to enact his expected role in funeral rituals can be associated with the privilege and burden that a son faces in the patriliny system. Under the authority of the father, sons spend their lives attending to their unchosen roles, carrying the weight of patriarchal continuity and expected to carry out the obligations that come with performing the role of the filial son and later that of responsible father. With the power to maintain and uphold the lineage, as portrayed in Sangren’s (2003) work exploring critical inquiry into Chinese patriliny, sons have a privileged position, but the obligations they carry are also an alienating burden and many dream of autonomy from these constraints. Sangren’s (2017) more recent writing expands on these ideas further to depict the ‘mode of production of desire’ whereby Chinese patriliny generates complex ambivalences of obedience and rebellion in filial relations. Jinlong was an archetypical example of these ambiguities. By bringing two sons to the family line and financially supporting his larger extended family, Jinlong succeeded in his role as a filial son. Yet his scorn for his ritual role revealed the ambivalence male heirs feel about maintaining filial relations, coupled with the desire to
project status and renown through displays of maleness and virility, discussed in more detail below.

**Big boss persona**

To contextualise the desire for status and renown among Meili’s young male villagers, we need to take into consideration the more recent socio-spatial mobility of China’s rural population. Rural reforms and the introduction of the ‘household responsibility system’ led to the smashing of the iron rice bowl, which had guaranteed life-time social security and employment for the Chinese population. Moreover, particularly since the early 1990s, cheap labour has been in high demand in factories and construction sites to fuel the country’s rising economy and urban construction boom. As a result, China has experienced a tremendous internal migration of people. As of 2017, an estimated 282 million people from the countryside were considered ‘rural migrants’ (農民工 pron: nongmin gong), making up more than one third of the entire working population (China Labour Bulletin, 2017). Migrant labour in the urban centres, referred to as *dagong* (打工) – which means “working for the boss’ or ‘selling labour’, connoting commodification and a capitalist exchange of labour for wages” (Pun Ngai 1999: 3) – is usually the only access to a liveable wage that much of China’s rural population has.

_Dagong_ has become so familiar that I watched as young children in Meili played shop and lent each other money for candy, promising to pay each other back when they go dagong. Yet, without access to an urban Chinese household registration system (户口 pron: hukou), migrant labourers lack the legal permission to settle in towns and cities for temporary employment and social welfare benefits, and thus spend their lives traveling back and forth between the countryside and urban centres.36 Referred to as the ‘floating population’ drifting across the country, China’s rural migrants live on the outskirts of society and are frequently faced with levels of intolerance from urban citizens. The negative stigmas placed on Meili villagers were shared with me through stories that revealed the hardship and lack of social validation facing rural citizens in China’s

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36 For information on the changes to the hukou system made in recent reforms, refer to the series of essays in *East Asia Forum* (Li 2015).
metropoles that existed in a parallel world to my own urban experience of living in Beijing.

The derogatory peasant subjectivities imposed on rural migrants can diverge radically from their reputations in the village context. Unwilling to face the hardship of city life, many villagers I spent time with in Meili had returned home after spending the majority of their late teens and early twenties performing underpaid dagong labour. The rising numbers of China’s rural returnees are also a response to the crackdown on factories and construction projects after President Xi’s political efforts to lead a national level anti-graft campaign; these are having direct consequences on Meili’s population, particularly the young, who have no option but to return home and wait for a new temporary labour stint. To go into details of the political scope of China’s corruption scandals in relation to the larger political economy goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but I want to draw on is the relevance it had on the narratives villagers told me. I was informed by numerous male villagers that the companies of infrastructure projects, such as road building and construction sites that they had previously been working for for years was now terminated because the owner of these companies had lost their position, which they speculated might have been due to a corruption scandal. The precariousness of these national changes are directly impacting rural populations who depend on dagong labour. Meanwhile, returning to Meili they could build their own notions of self-worth and value withheld from them in the urban context. Waiting at home for friends and family working in cities to arrange a better paid dagong opportunity for them, in the village context they can reject the inferior identities foisted on them in the urban context.

Jinlong, for example, loudly proclaimed his self-worth to distinguish himself from disparaging rural subjectivities. In addition to boasting about women, Jinlong liked to brag about his business initiatives as an entrepreneur. These dated back to long summers in his youth spent living like a hermit, sleeping in a cowshed in Meili’s mountains while collecting saplings from trees, until he identified the market for Chinese fu-ling medicinal mushrooms and shifted to harvesting fungi instead. That business came to an end when mushroom prices dropped and eventually his dreams of the big city came true in
1998 at the age of eighteen. He picked up his things, left his two sons with his parents and ‘took the plunge’ (下海 pron: xiánhai) with his wife in search of work, along with the masses of rural citizens attempting to ride the wave of China’s rising economy. Following the dream of the rural population, Jinlong made risky business decisions that took him across the country in search of an escape from poverty. Settling in coastal Guangzhou, he set up his own glove factory with his wife until it too failed and he too floated back to the countryside. With the opportunity to profit from short-term-use rights for communal forest landholdings, Jinlong started working in the timber industry, renting collectively owned forestland and selling timber to companies across the country. Yet, as China’s economy has grown and wealthier private investors from coastal cities have gained considerable support from local governments to improve the management of the nation’s forests, opportunities for smaller initiatives to compete in the timber market have waned. Although across China sixty percent of forestland belongs to rural collectives, over the past two decades China’s forestry schemes have intensified afforestation measures and forestry has shifted from the agricultural sector toward ecological functions (Liu 2001). Technocratic efforts to manage nature, as envisioned by the CCP, has led to significant changes to forest management in recent years particularly in Guizhou, which is considered second priority to the country’s forest protection under the Natural Forest Conservation Project established by the State Forest Administration. Under their initiatives efforts are put in place to primarily restore forests in ecologically sensitive areas and at the same time increase timber production in forest plantations. Due to these modifications the province as experienced both a significant increase of sale revenues and state efforts to protect forests with high level reforestation measures whilst rural citizens, such as Jinlong, who do not have the capital to compete with the timber trade are placed in a disadvantaged position (Chen & Deng 2013).

Perched at the margins of the wider political economy as a small entrepreneur without sufficient assets, struggling to compete with wealthy businessmen traveling from China’s coastal regions, Jinlong exemplifies the challenges of accessing the timber trade facing rural entrepreneurs; capitalising on Meili’s forests reveals the burdens placed on their owners by the forestry policies of the central government. Parry and Bloch (1989) highlight the
importance of writing about the interaction and circulation of money and resources as whole transactional systems, which are never singular but, in their temporal, moral and social frameworks, appear in their multiplicity to constantly overlap and reproduce the meaning of transactions. In what Parry and Bloch refer to as short-term transactional cycles, commodities are exchanged according to institutional and legal frameworks: for example, those of the timber trade to which I have referred thus far. Yet Meili’s forests also continue to be valued as everyday commodities through the interpersonal exchange of gifts when a new home is constructed and close kin carry the obligation of cutting down and offering a tree from their forests to the home-owner. Trees are also sites of healing, which I discuss in more detail in the following chapter, thereby resembling Parry and Bloch’s definition of long-term transactional cycles that extend beyond a person’s life-span to reproduce ideological systems and enduring social and cosmic orders. These streams of transactional exchange interact and reinforce systems of exchange as long as they are not subordinated to and do not compete with long-term restorative cycles that sustain the community.

Jinlong was unwilling to seek migrant labour work because his village business initiatives, which provided him with the title of ‘boss’ (老板 pron: laoban), left behind a burden when they started to fail. He considered that going dagong would have been both demeaning and difficult to achieve because, as he told me, he had eaten at banquets with all the factory owners in the region and if he were to ask any of them for work, they would suggest lending him money instead. According to Jinlong, the only way he can get by is to continue to carry himself as a ‘boss’, taking on uncertain projects requiring monetary loans with high interest rates from the bank in the hopes of profiting from Meili’s infrastructural development to strike it rich. Only on brief occasions, such as in the conversation with which I opened this chapter, and one evening sitting at the guard rails looking over the village, did Jinlong dismally confess to the hopelessness of turning a profit in the current market economy and the amount of money he keeps losing year after year.

Just how much debt he was in was not made known to me during the course of my research, but I did learn that, in Meili, debt incurred by borrowing money from villagers did not carry the shame that I would have expected it to,
nor were debtors rejected by the community, as described by Martin (2015). When I asked why debt did not result in loss of face, I was informed that youth nowadays do not care about face (面子 pron: mianzi), they only care about renown and showing off their status (显耀 pron: xianyao). Here I could turn to Yan Yunxiang’s (1996; 2003) research to explicate Jinlong’s actions as reflecting the tone of China’s wider rural populations, who are becoming increasingly selfish and thus facing a moral decline in response to the nation’s growing individualism. Or I could claim immorality on Jinlong’s part by turning to Scott’s (1977) research amongst peasants in South East Asia and E.P. Thompson’s (1971) work on the English working class that both laud the moral characteristics of minimising profit to ensure a fair market based on the collective good rather than those formed by the free market. In rural China, however, attempts to strike it rich are not subject to the same vision of the moral economy as the research of these scholars. Even though I was warned of Jinlong’s risky business practices and spending habits by villagers who noticed we were spending time together, claiming he’s ‘an ass of debt’ (一屁股的债 pron: yi pigu de zhai), Jinlong’s capitalist ventures of trying to profit from the timber trade or his extravagant habits were not considered immoral, because they were steps towards becoming renowned and gaining fame.

When Jinlong lost his contacts in the timber trade, he fell into a hole of heavy gambling addiction where night and day stopped meaning anything and betting filled his thoughts, although this came to an abrupt halt when the township government organised raids across the region and heavily penalised gamblers. While it lasted, however, and regardless of the widespread knowledge of his heavy gambling and financial recklessness in the village, Jinlong continued to ‘show off status’, gambling for high stakes and not shy about

37 Also see Freedman’s (1979a) historical study of handling money in the wider context of China where he refers to a general acceptance of living in a state of debt. Quoting missionaries in China in the early 1900s, Freedman concludes “[i]ndebtness [amongst the Chinese] was nothing to be ashamed of, was public knowledge, and was readily incurred” (1979a: 23).

38 I did not ask further details about the raids in the township; however, gambling in rural regions which were on the radar of government-led development and tourism was avoided amongst professional gamblers and loan sharks, such as Xiaoming. Because of the state intervention and surveillance that comes with development work, Xiaoming claimed he never wagered high amounts of money in Meili and altogether avoided places as they ‘grew in fame’. Instead, he was always moving his gambling stakes from one village to the next in efforts to dodge surveillance.
exposing where his money went by remaining audaciously well-groomed. Returning from brief visits to the county town, he often flaunted new, tight fitting, collared-up shirts, sometimes paired with heavy silver necklaces. Jinlong’s attire, along with his short, cropped hair style, always reminded me of someone from the British rudeboy culture of the 1960s. Appearing stylish and participating in ubiquitous gambling and lavish spending were practices adopted by many young male villagers, contributing to their own notions of morality in much the same way that Herzfeld (1985) writes of the performance of morality and manhood in the remote pastoral village of Glendiot in Greece. To express masculinities, the people of Glendiot resist the state, including its ideology and law, through boastful actions such as stealing sheep and opposing the authority of the police. As Herzfeld highlights, less focus is placed “on ‘being a good man’ than on ‘being good at being a man’” (1985: 16). Similarly, Jinlong succeeded in performing his manliness in the boss-like role he adopted in his business initiatives. His ‘big boss’ persona masked his failures and rural subjectivity, which carry derogatory and inferior connotations in the wider political economic context of China. Standing at the threshold between endorsing the landscape and exploiting it, the short-term gains he strove to produce were not considered disruptive to shared moral values or to the collective good of the village. Rather they were actions taken to reproduce hierarchical structures and enact self-production and self-presentation that is built on “a non-elite form of Chinese masculinity” (Boretz 2011: 18).

Quite unlike what I had expected, therefore, debt did not interfere with efforts by male villagers to attain worth in the eyes of their male peers. Rather, it demonstrated their ability to engage in business dealings with important people, which was an important part of reputation and ‘showing off’ in the village setting. Turning to Mentore’s research (2013) of the social life of Guyanese men who partake in bird-sports as an everyday social activity proves helpful here.39 In outlining the multitude of events that men undertake to make the sport possible, Mentore unpacks the reputations that men acquire, meanwhile grounding the

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39 Bird-fighting was also a widespread and popular sport among men in Meili and the region in much the same way that Mentore describes. Further research is required to examine resemblances in performing manhood amongst bird-sport enthusiasts in Mentore’s research amongst the Guyanese and enthusiasts in Southwest China.
moral order and human sociality across the region. Here she defines reputation as acquiring

a loose network of others (beyond family, neighbours and co-workers) [who] recognise you by name. It also means that others have sufficient knowledge of your disposition, tendencies and general way of doing things that they can enter into informal business dealings or other forms of engagement with a high level of confidence in their expectations of you. (Mentore 2013: 66)

In acquiring a reputation in the networks they form, bird enthusiasts must be flexible about forming connections beyond their immediate circles. Furthermore, the men must demonstrate their “affective capacities” (ibid.: 63) as a common way of taking part in human sociality. This resonates with Boretz’s (2011) research on martial arts in China, mentioned in the previous chapter. Boretz refers to the Chinese notion of an “intrinsic potency” that is inscribed in the ability to form networks beyond one’s immediate setting. This intrinsic potency is laced with masculinity that allows a man to acquire the ability to taken advantage of these networks “to summon and command the labour of others” (Boretz 2011: 13). The value obtained by demonstrating one’s potency across a wide region also mirrors Nancy Munn’s findings (1986) in Melanesia where she depicts the exchange of objects that bring value to the giver according to the distance they have travelled and the recognition or ‘fame’ that others give in return. Value lies not in the material object itself but in the ability and power one has to create and maintain social relations.

Thus, whilst I assumed Jinlong’s economic loss and reoccurring failed business attempts would lower his reputation in the village, research by Boretz, Herzfeld and Mentore that casts light on the acts of manhood that men perform as active respondents to conditions of marginalisation, suggests the reverse might be the case. From this point of view, it becomes apparent that Jinlong’s big boss persona, boastful behaviour, risk-taking business initiatives, efforts to seduce women and vast business networks beyond the village setting accorded him reputational merits that produced a high level of self-worth on the basis of his masculine virility. Performing these acts of manhood strengthens in-group moralities and sociality, which exist separately from the rural subjectivities
imposed on rural citizens in the Chinese context. At the same time, a sense of self-worth and status are affirmed to replace the alienation that attends the ascribed role of a filial son under the Chinese patriline system.

Conclusion

Focusing on how the village is shaped by its inhabitants, the third part of my thesis has drawn on the relationships that frame the village from the inside to outline how social relations in Meili are conceptualised. Counter to the previous part that looked at the village ideology as a whole, in the two chapters above I have sought to reveal the permutations and disconnections in the village collective. Rather than generating a unified collective, villagers are more keen on strengthening kinship affiliations and the village fabric become a site of power and struggle. In validating the conventions of virility that hold together networks of relationships, villagers are able to claim the autonomy and prestige that are withheld from them by the derogatory and inferior status imposed on them as rural citizens by the Chinese urban population. At the same time, performing the stereotypes of manhood allow a sense of self-worth and status to replace the alienation induced by the ascribed role of a filial son in the Chinese patriline system.

The predominant focus on male agency in this chapter leaves out the role women play in the village context. This imbalance is not to suggest that an in-depth analysis on women is unnecessary or irrelevant in understanding the complexities of local social relations but it goes beyond the scope of my work. Rather than outlining underlying the construction of gender concepts, the two chapters above sheds light on the position of men to draw on larger social hierarchies that define the relative location of Meili as a village along the margins of China.

The final two chapters of my thesis shift from studying the construction of social relations through human interaction to look at the spiritual, material and somatic relations people form with the landscape. In studying these relations, I continue to examine how people form attachments to place, but the place in focus is no longer the village setting as a site of residential dwelling that frames and maintains the social connections living human beings make to place,
which has been the focus of my thesis thus far. Instead, I shift my attention to the connections Meili residents make to form a cosmological totality through territorial place-making. I study the conjunctures of Meili's living, domesticated landscape, explicated to me in narrative form, to highlight how spatial relations and the materiality of space orient a cosmological framework of power with the village at the centre.
PART FOUR

Bounded:
A village of relations
Eight months into my fieldwork came a day when I started to read signs of an approaching death in the village in the happenings around me. It was not only the villagers returning from their day's work in the paddy fields earlier than usual, although it was at the peak of the rice transplanting season, it was also the silent thickness in the forests that formed shadows of bodily movement during my evening walk. This noiseless moment was soon followed by its shattering. The rupture, initiated by the restless barking of the dogs who only bellow at night when in fear of wandering ghosts, conjures, like sonata form, to an explosion of firecrackers after the spring storm in which the whole sky gave way to a blackened canvas of rain and thunder.

In anticipation of the storm, we had returned from the paddy field at noon and stayed indoors all afternoon. Sitting on Beiyun’s porch, I worked on my embroidery while Beiyun sewed up the last knot buttons of her Kam blouse. As it got dark and we could no longer see our needlework, we moved indoors just as the firecrackers set off. I sat by the window watching the hovering clouds leaving the scene of the storm as Beiyun prepared dinner. As she cut the firewood with deliberate thrusts of the axe, Beiyun called out to me from the kitchen to inform
me that the crash of the firecrackers after the storm marked the approach of a
death in the village, calling family members to gather together in mourning and
prepare the funeral attire for the deceased. I joined her in the kitchen and she
reminded me that I did not know the family of the deceased because they are not
close kin of hers and therefore I had no reason to visit their household. Tonight,
she declared, I was to stay at home with her.

I had often walked past the house of the deceased, which looms over the
village on a high slope beside the forest and the lines of ancient nanmu trees that
mark the territorial boundaries. These trees are a source of pride for Meili
residents and, as I grew to understand, something of an icon amongst the older
generation living in the mountainous vicinity, who refer to Meili as the ‘village of
the ancient trees’. Used in landscaping roads, they are fengshui trees appreciated
aesthetically but, more importantly, for their practical value in channelling and
improving geomantic energy flows. They “constitute a focal point that marked a
territorial place whose borders are notionial but perceivable” (Feuchtwang 2004:
171). Lurking along the fringes of the ancient trees are the thick dark forests that I
passed the previous evening with Jinlong and a designer visiting from Beijing
who had spotted the traces of bodily shadows. These are the forests where the
corpses of infants, who died soulless, were once hung.

Beiyun informed me that the movement we had seen in the forests had
been the wandering souls that had already left the body of the dying person in the
mourning household. She stopped chopping the firewood, widened her light grey
eyes and in a seemingly joking manner that covered serious intent told me, “You
see! There are ghosts up there! And you go up there every evening jogging when I
tell you not to! Tonight you're not going to the wake but you'll stay at home with
me. And you're leaving out your evening jog!” She continued to mutter in Kam as
she crouched down and resumed chopping. I had grown used to Beiyun, and
other aunties in the village, protesting against my evening jogs through the
evergreen forests at the feet of the mountains circling the village valley because of
the risk of running into ghosts. When I fell ill during summer, Siwei also claimed
I had been careless and encountered a ghost during my jogs and suggested we
visit the fengshui master to assist in my recovery. Taking Beiyun's comment lightly,
I laughed and agreed to skip my evening jog but told her I was going to the upper
village after dinner to join the family in mourning to ‘keep watch at night’ (守夜 pron: shouye). As Beiyun stood up to wash the vegetables and now her silvery eyes turned to me and she joked, “Look at yourself! Someone in the village dies and you are always the first to run after them to watch!” swinging her arms and legs to and fro to imitate a jogger. This made us both laugh and I joined her at the sink to scrub the vegetables clean.

Despite the warnings against the spirit-filled world of the encircling mountains and forests, I needed my evening jogs. The winter months went by with too many village-wide ceremonial feasts, followed by cold, damp days spent indoors with Siwei’s family, slumped by the charcoal fire. Over these months the comfort of my elastic waistband leggings accommodated my growing waistline, which was disguised under layers of loose fitted jumpers and jackets. Furthermore, with no full-body mirror in the village to assess my physique I had no reason to confront the pounds I gained during the first six months of my fieldwork. When I started to experience difficulties breathing, however, and was even experiencing memory blackouts, which I associated with excessive daily consumption of rice wine, I realised that walks to and from villagers’ paddy fields were not enough. I craved exercise as I grew increasingly concerned for my health.

Jogging also served to provide momentary escapes from the village. When my relations with Xiaoxu became confusing and difficult to make sense of, going for a jog at dusk when the villagers were just returning home from the mountains was my only opportunity to vent emotions that were otherwise kept hidden through everyday interactions. Away from people, I felt I had the space to withdraw from the tangled knots of personal relations I had established and the emotional distress it was causing.

Yet, while I sought escape from the village in the forests, they were spaces that were avoided by Meili villagers and, although the reasoning behind the fear was kept hidden from me, myths of the forests inhabited by spirits were shared. These stories were recounted by Meili villagers born after the 1980s who had never encountered tree burials but had developed their own myths based on the rumours they had heard. According to the logic of Yang Shengshi’s grandson, forests became havens of deceased baby girls during the Maoist era when
starvation and famine was widespread and parents had no choice but to neglect their daughters in favour of giving their sons a life. Older villagers did not refer to gender differences in tree burials; rather, the evergreen forests were where all dead infants were hung, thus showing parallels with Wolf’s (1974) suggestions that infants and small children occupied a neglected class of dead in Han regions of China.40 Children who die in early infancy are not entitled to the same elaborate funeral as an adult because they are not considered real people yet, and those that do not survive are born against their fate with the wrong bazi (a person’s destiny defined by the year, month, date and hour of birth). The death of a child is also an error and returning the dead infant’s spirit to the forest rids the human world of the soul which is sent to where the haunted roam.41

Whilst tales of the haunted forests were eagerly shared with me by Meili’s youth, finding an appropriate moment to ask about these stories amongst women of an older generation was difficult. When the subject did come up in conversation, some women, such as Beiyun, told me that the stories were lies. Other women spoke of tree burials cautiously; even though they claimed they had never encountered one, they were aware that babies that died in infancy were put in bamboo woven baskets and left to hang in the evergreen forests. Yet, as was repetitively explained to me, due to the advancement of scientific medicine infant mortality has dropped and therefore tree burials have not been necessary for

40 Similarly, quoting Hertz’s (1960) observations when studying Dayak and Papuan customs, Jackson (1989) writes about dead infants that are placed in trees because of their marginality and lack of personality. Because new-born children are not yet separated from the world of spirits, their return does not require attention or mourning from the public. For a more detailed list of studies on mortuary tree burials, both in early anthropological literature to more recent cases of reviving the tradition in Japan and ‘ecological cemeteries’ in the UK, refer to Boret (2014).

41 Reflecting on Mueggler’s research drawing on more than twenty years of fieldwork studying the mortuary rites of the Lolop’o in Yunnan province, Southwest China, might also inspire parallels with Kam tree burial customs. In studying the speech of ritual experts, Mueggler (2017) traces the dialogues between diviners of speech and the desires of the dead. They depict how the dead Lolop’o become subjects of the bureaucratic structured Chinese empire through the mediation of the Chinese-speaking underworld king, yamen. In these speeches and songs the bodies of the dead “were raised up into the sky to sleep amongst the trembling leaves of apple-pear trees”, which, with the influx of the Han in the mid-eighteenth century, were replaced with cremation and burial practices “in which bodies resided forever beneath the ground in stone houses, uncanny doubles of the houses of the living” (Mueggler 2017: 19). The dead, thereby, became subject to politics from the imperial centre. Mueggler’s insights are good to speculate on but I am unable to confirm similar findings in the history of tree burials amongst the Kam, which would require further research in neighbouring villages where such burials are practiced to this day.
many years. This discontinuity can be traced to broader policy interventions at the time.

Chatting with Siwei’s older brother among the planks of his half-built home one afternoon, he told me he must have been around sixteen when tree burial ceremonies stopped being carried out, claiming that this was due to the increase in Meili’s population and the drive to build new homes for sons which had pushed the already confined living space to the realms of the territorial borders. If anyone had dared to place their dead infant in the forest which looms so close to the inhabited spaces of the village, they would have been scolded by the entire community. This change began in 1978, the year which marks the beginning of the nation’s economic reforms, which resulted in the eventual collapse of the collective farming system in favour of household-based production quotas, bringing great change to the lives of China’s rural population. More importantly, this time period also marks a turning point in state-led organised intervention, as state power entered the most intimate realms of family life and the female body: the womb. With the initiation of nationwide family planning policies, couples were encouraged to marry later, wait three to five years between births and restricted to giving birth to one child, unless they were of an ethnic minority whereupon they could have two children. Under the invasive surveillance of the state, scientific medical knowledge of female reproductive systems advanced dramatically and, to support the requirements of policy, the state became obsessed with human reproduction.

With the state’s watchful eye on female bodies and the advancement of scientific medicine, the country has experienced a significant drop in child mortality as a whole. Meili’s forests are no longer havens for babies born against their fate, yet, although interactions with the trees in the forest have changed, they continue to haunt the village as empty voids that loom at the village boundaries: spaces that carry memories of suffering and misfortune. As a result of state efforts to alter female reproductive bodies, the forests have become relics of a past carried in memory and retold through rumours and myth, forming another example of what Ssorin-Chaikov (2003) calls the ‘poetics of unfinished construction’. In these projects social order is deferred to thereby carrying a temporal character of stillness to reveal the “problems [that are] not yet solved, order [that is] still unachieved” (ibid.: 136). Although remaining stagnant,
remnants of ‘poetics of unfinished construction’ also become exhibitions of a ‘work in progress’, embodying linear time meanwhile removing themselves from it and existing in a framework of multiple rhythmic cycles (Ingold 1993). This ‘multiplicity’ overlaps with numerous state-led initiatives, more recently with preservation efforts, that bear traces of the past and the future.

*Image 15: A road leading out of the village territories. Before a village gate would be situated here alongside the thick forests to protect the village and maintain the boundedness of the village*
Chapter Eight

A Village Turned Inward

In the previous two chapters I have discussed how the permutations and disconnections that surface through tensions and conflicts in Meili disrupt the cohesive social organisation of the village collective but strengthen people’s affiliations with kin. Thus far I have concentrated on the relationships that people form through human interactions. The remaining two chapters of my thesis address how the village is conceptualised through the spiritual, material and somatic relations people form with the landscape. In conveying these relations, I seek to disentangle the cosmological framework that holds Meili together through analogical links between the human body and nature. Regarding the links as forming conjunctures with the broader landscape, I discuss how their existence tacitly acknowledges that elements existing as part of nature are not isolated, empty voids but, like all living matter, reciprocate the bestowal of care and protection. As configurations of the larger cosmological framework that the village sustains, I outline how elements of the landscape construct a sense of bounded territory from the perspective that radiates out from the village when looking upwards. This incorporates the construction of a totality that differs from the one considered at the beginning of the thesis, which was defined by the architectural layout when looking downwards from the vantage point above the village setting.

Sites of healing

As a way of differentiating from other villages in the vicinity, Meili residents of the older generation referred to themselves as being from the village of ancient trees. As mentioned in the interlude, also called fengshui trees, these circle the village and are a source pride for Meili inhabitants. This is not notion unique to the people of Meili alone; rather, it reflects the influences of Daoist Chinese philosophy which have been incorporated into broader Kam understandings of world order (Wu 2014; Geary et al. 2003), along with the associated notion that place markers, such as the trees that follow the ridges of the mountains, elevate
the inner energy flow, or qi, of a bounded territory. To maintain that energy flow, the trees – which, like all material forms including the human body⁴² are natural elements of the wider cosmos and therefore constantly transforming – require care and upkeep.

To follow the seen surface of qi is to follow the veins of a dragon. Common practice across China, the inner energies of dragon veins are carefully monitored in the art of site selection, or fengshui.⁴³ From the “double perspective: from above and from the point of view of a selected position within” (Feuchtwang 1998: 52), the inner energy flows can be visibly traced along cartographic lines and slopes to draw out patterns along the surfaces that define the internal territorial boundaries of a bounded place. Following the ridges of the mountain and the direction the site is facing, these readings are paired with divination texts that determine the timing and orientation of graves, dwellings and collective living spaces. If the movement of the energy is diagnosed correctly, the siting will enhance well-being and fortune according to where one stands in relation to the energy’s flows and forms. At the same time, the seen surface of the inner flows of a site can be improved according to one’s point of view, for example by “plant[ing] trees, dig[ging] pools or erect[ing] pagodas, or [selecting

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⁴² Relevant to this are the bodily treatments in Chinese medicine popularised through Daoist beliefs of internal alchemy during the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1280-1367) dynasties, whose goal was to “[t]urn the world inward” (Huang 2012: 85). In doing so the internal fragments of the body were visualised as replications of the outer physical world to mutually correspond with one another as a microcosmic system of the self. Human physiology was modelled on nature and the dynamic system of energies and fluids had to be cultivated through the monitoring and regulation of qi: ubiquitous life forces that form dynamic systems that circulate the body in the same pattern as they circulate the universe, including the stars and planets. Historical recordings of China’s astronomical and astrological readings generated complex and sophisticated understandings of the physical world, which were applied by internal alchemists to map the human body; thus a healthy body mirrored the divine order of heaven and the cosmos. Interpretations of this order were made by physicians, diviners, shamans and spirit mediums to master the rhythms and patterns of the universe in order to diagnose, predict and identify illnesses and auspicious times for treatment through astrological readings, fortune-telling and divination.

⁴³ The growth of organized collected writings on fengshui was essentially a late Tang and post-Tang phenomenon circa 800-900 A.D. The emergence of organized fengshui was associated with the outgrowth of the newfound importance of graves as sites of ongoing ritual. From the thirteenth century, grave sites were considered protected land. The special treatment of the valued land led to strategic attempts by lineage groups to claim the space as “a loophole in other forms of legal and contractual oversight” (Miller I. 2015: 313). As the population of the nation grew and untapped sources of lumber and fuel became increasingly difficult to find, graves sites with good soil and old trees became economically valuable land (ibid.).
the correct sites] to put up shields to ward off malign influences” (Feuchtwang 1998: 52).

Place markers define the borders of a village monitoring the qi of a bounded territory. In Meili these place markers are trees, ancient wells and large stones, which trace the cartographic lines and slopes within and along the edges of Meili’s village territory to improve the geomancy, or fengshui, of the village and its spatial orientation. This is shared as a “common condition” (Feuchtwang 1998: 53) and, if trees, stones and well water thrive and are taken care of, fortune and wellbeing is channelled back in return. Thus it benefits the shared condition of the village if the trees that encircle Meili continue to grow and the stones and well water are kept clean because the alternative can lead to harm and possible death. To reciprocate the source of life and energy flow that trees, stones and wells provide, they are cared for and revered, taking on the role of kin. Called baomu, which translates as ‘female helper’ or ‘nanny’, the fengshui trees, large stones and wells protect children who frequently fall ill or are in need of physical strength. Baomu are located by a village shaman or yin-yang master based on the child’s bazi (eight characters categorised into four pairs indicating the year, month, day and hour of a person’s birth), paired with the time and date of the child’s illness. In this pairing the child can be diagnosed according to an error or fault that has occurred in one of these timeframes to explain the interference in, or theft of, the child’s soul by a malevolent spirit. To identify the baomu, the geomancer will instruct the child to choose a time when no one in the village is present to interfere or watch. The child should then take a certain number of steps towards a cardinal point until she/he reaches the tree, well or stone located beside a road or path, and paper money and ornaments provided by the geomancer are pasted on the identified point. Paper ornaments are usually placed in a form of a cross with intricate cuttings on red and white paper (see Image 17) or cut into shapes such as a person or horse to scare away ghosts.44 The ritual

44 Objects used for commemorating the baomu vary across Kam villages between gender. Whereas girls paste paper money, in some Kam villages, if the child is a boy, he places a mirror to scare off the ghost. Eberhard’s (1970) collection of Chinese folklore in Zhejiang province from the 1930s mentions similar accounts of commemorating trees whereby people choose a tree as the mother of a child so the child might grow as strong as the tree. In his field-notes Eberhard writes that prayer notes are left at the tree and the bark of the tree is removed and placed on the child’s clothes to provide strength.
ends with burning incense, calling out for the child's soul to return and sprinkling drops of water around the child's head. In exchange, the baomu blocks the malevolent spirit from returning to the village, allowing the child to heal and prolonging his/her life. If the baomu brings strength to the child he/she is provided with a new fate (命 pron: ming), and, to acknowledge the child's rebirth, new clothing and a new name are given to the child. The birth name of son of Yang Huangsheng, whom I introduced at the beginning of my thesis and appears again below, was modified to 'thunder' after the thunder spirit protected and healed him from illness as a young boy.

The spatial orientation of the baomu order the geomancy system of the village to delineate the territorial borders of the village both physically and conceptually and make up the cosmological framework of the village. In commemorating the baomu at a site of threshold between external and internal boundaries, the path that was blocked by the disruption of malignant beings can be cleared. This ensures that the internal boundaries of the village are removed from chaos to return to peace and stability. At the same time, they strengthen the ordering of the village setting framed by “the general sense of bounding an inside from an outside” (Feuchtwang 1998: 49). The efficacy of the baomu conceptualise the territorial boundaries as points of connection between objects that make up the world that together form a totality bound to place. As place markers, they carry efficacious powers and establish a cosmological relationship with landscape. Thi resonates with Weller's (2006) ethnographic work in Taiwan and China researching rocks and trees that carry efficacious qualities. Following Sangren (1987), Weller writes that just like a Chinese deity or earth god, the efficacious qualities of which rocks and trees consist give them the ability to mediate between order and disorder. Weller reminds the reader that this does not exemplify ‘nature worship’, although it would be tempting to make such a claim; rather, each rock and tree is worshipped individually because of the extraordinary and efficacious powers they emit. Resonating with Weller and Sangren’s findings, my own ethnographic research, like that of Chen and Deng (2013) and Wu (2014) which was also carried out in Kam regions, indicates that the commemoration of objects such as trees and rocks – as part of a wider
cosmological system – reflects the belief that they possess qualities that bring order to a locality.

In addition to trees and rocks, a prominent deity figure responsible for mediating between order and disorder in Kam villages is the Kam goddess, Sasui. Translated as ‘grandmother’, Sasui is the originator of every Kam inhabited space and it is commonly said that wherever Kam populations settle, they first situate Sasui’s altar. This marks the arrival of new settlers to claim or colonise a given space. In marking her territory, Sasui protects the interior of village boundaries by solving community disputes linked to the land and forests and assuring the fertility of women to regenerate life in the village. By entering into an alliance with its inhabitants and guarding the village from dangerous forces, Sasui is commemorated for maintaining the flow from landscape to the village and for guiding souls and divine beings, such as the Jade Emperor, out of the village to embark on their safe transition to reincarnation (Wu 2014). In channelling this flow, she is directly associated with the water cycle of the village that travels down from the mountain springs to maintain peace in the village interior and protect its borders.

Maintaining the flow of landscape across the peripheries of the village, Sasui carries clean water through the streams of Meili’s mountain ridges. The sweet tasting water flows down to wells located at several points of the village interior. Supplying Meili’s population, the water that flows down the mountains protects the territorial boundaries of the village from epidemics and disease and, like the fengshui trees, is considered to carry life-giving energies: qi that carry the potential to regenerate life and return souls to reincarnate in the village (Jones & Li 2008). To benefit from the qi that flows down the river, a child is given a life-bridge at birth, usually in the form a small stone or wooden plank across a narrow gutter. This bridge is then ceremonially passed down the line of descent from one family to the next to heal children and grandchildren from sickness and harm. Bringing life and transporting the dead away, the flow of the water cycle is sustained by Sasui while at the same time marking the edges of the mountain ridges that surround the village.

As landmarks representing women that take on the role of kin to nurture and bring life to the village, features of Meili’s landscape invoke a cosmological
totality that is defined from a centre that starts below and amplifies outwards to the mountains. This scaling from below is different from the scaling imposed by administrative ordering that projects the ideology of the government as a centre looking down from the mountains at the village. The cosmological totalities that take their shape according to where one is located when looking at the territorial boundaries often conflict, thereby customising how the potency of landscape was spoken of and shared with me. I learned about the healing effects of the water cycle and protection of trees through Yang Huangsheng, who upheld the view that the global epidemics he had heard about on the news, including bird flu and AIDS, did not reach Meili because of the high quality of the mountain water and thick forests. Spending time with Yang Huangsheng, I also grew to understand that talking about the healing elements of landscape was a taboo subject and should be kept out of public conversation. Although local ideas of fengshui have always had a ‘complicated relationship’ with the state, it was more recently, during the Maoist era, that practices to enhance fengshui were methodically attacked and denounced as superstition (Steinmüller 2015: 60). The hangover of the Maoist era continues to associate fengshui with backward thought, which meant that the healing elements of Meili’s trees were excluded from conversation with me until I got to know Yang Huangsheng. Perhaps in an effort to save me from embarrassing exchanges, he warned me that villagers were not keen on telling me about the healing elements of trees. “You can ask them about the trees but they won’t tell you,” Yang Huangsheng advised me. “It’s like making a phone call and the phone keeps ringing because no one picks up.”

Yang Huangsheng whom I refer to in the introduction was the older brother of carpenter Yang, mentioned in Chapter Four, whom I got to know in the course of many afternoons spent with him in his paddy field where I was sure to find him from early in the morning until dusk. From the upkeep of his paddy field and garden to preparing three substantial daily meals for his ox, Yang Huangsheng kept himself busy with a number of chores on his large plots of land. His diligence meant that his ox was by far the biggest and best tended in the village and he criticised the majority of Meili residents who had replaced theirs with machinery to plough the fields. This was not the only criticism he levelled at the villagers. Already close to eighty, Yang Huangsheng was known for his
stubborn personality and frequent rash judgments of what he considered the backward choices made by other villagers. Sometimes I thought Yang Huangsheng’s long hours tending to his livestock and farmland reflected his somewhat reclusive behaviour. Regardless, he did not impose this reclusive personality upon me and I grew fond of mornings spent with him in his fields and our conversations over delicious home-cooked dinners which were always prepared with the freshest vegetables from his gardens enhanced with handpicked herbs from the mountains. During the time we spent together Yang Huangsheng enjoyed recollecting stories of the past and he offered me a sense of respite from the weary feeling at the beginning of my fieldwork that came from constantly asking questions that did not seem to be relevant or were not supposed to be asked. On the other hand, left to my own devices away from Yang Huangsheng, I was faced with the challenge of talking about the healing effects of baomu with families taking part in commemorating them for protection. As they were unwilling to admit that they participated in ritual practices, I was left with merely the material remains of baomu rituals. I tried to identify and pursue families that had stuck the cut-out paper ornaments to baomu trees to seek protection for their children, but when I was able to trace such parents, they would merely tell me, with embarrassed faces, that they had taken part in a superstitious practice because “We are backward”. This would often lead to telling me trails of numerous other uncanny events that they, or someone they knew, had encountered all carried under the heading of backward superstition.

In the same way that rituals of ancestral and territorial guardian festivals shape and identify a settlement amongst Han communities (Feuchtwang 1998), I have outlined how conceptions and the worship of elements in landscape function as place markers to define the borders of a Kam village. Placing the village at the centre, a much larger cosmological framework can be envisioned where the village territory exists as a totality with fixed borders. The embarrassment that villagers clearly felt about discussing this, of which Yang Huangsheng had warned me, derives from the perspective taken by administrative powers of the central government, which looks outwards and downwards, to denounce the vernacular practices and relations between Meili residents and the landscape.
Thus far I have highlighted the value of Meili’s trees and natural landscape that provide analogical links between the human body and nature to frame the spiritual and cosmological centring of a village. Tracing these links, I have outlined how they form a cosmological totality that places the village at the centre of the landscape, taking on forms of gendered kin, such as the baomu and Sasui, and personifying the relations that Meili residents have with their bounded place of belonging. Next I consider a different conceptualisation of landscape where the trees are defined as by-products valued historically for their rarity. In doing so the chapter continues to discuss the spatial and cosmological focus of Meili village, which earlier in my thesis existed along the peripheries, to now consider how the village setting re-orientates itself to form its own centring. But before studying this reorientation in more detail, let’s take a few steps to briefly reconsider how Meili exists along the peripheries under the historically constructed cosmological framing of the Chinese imperial world order.

Threats from the other centre

As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, mirroring the cosmological framework of the Chinese imperial Sinocentric world order, all human and non-human forms exist in relation to heaven and earth, carefully categorising the world into hierarchical sequences. This formed the imperial imaginary of the world-scape notion of ‘all under heaven’ or tianxia (天下), which enveloped “the larger cosmology that covered earth, heaven and everything in-between” (Wang M. 2012a: 338). Tianxia centred the universe and defined the hierarchical distinctions of the natural world according to its spatial orientation. The hierarchical sequences of the tianxia world order categorised the material world on the basis of the efficacious strength of objects, often determined by their rarity. Hence the rarer the entity, the more powerful and efficacious it was considered. As retreats, far from the centre, frontiers along the borders of the Chinese kingdom served as both physical and imagined havens made up of holy spaces and abounding rare resources. They “stood as a symbol of innate purity, as opposed to the ‘rottenness’ of the so-called civilised world” (Miller 2014: 89), that restored a sense of clarity and purity.
With their untamed landscapes, people and animals, “a general sense of otherness” was projected onto the margins of the kingdom (Weller 2014: 151). The magical power ascribed to the ‘otherness’ fascinated the imperial centre, as elaborated in historical annals and literature, such as the ‘Miao Albums’, that showed “men almost as forest creatures – hair cropped short or flowing completely loose and untamed (unlike Confucian men but like animals), sometimes with hairy bodies, almost naked on top and wearing a sort of skirt made of animal skins or leaves rather than the woven materials that indicated civilisation” (ibid.: 151). Natural resources and material goods from the empowered margins were considered superior and were brought to the Imperial centre through trade. Key among these was lumber, particularly ‘imperial lumber’ (皇木 pron: huangmu), such as ‘China fir’, or shan,\(^{[45]}\) desired for their enormous trunks to uphold and adorn palaces. As a superior softwood, shan is praised for its olive-brown to reddish hues, lightness and durability, and resistance to decay, particularly in wet conditions. Planks of shan were supported with beams made of pine and nanmu, a rare species of evergreen in the Lauraceae family endemic to southern China and Vietnam. The desire for these imperial lumber in time led to short-sighted over-harvesting. These monumental trees became increasingly rare in northern China and expeditions were sent farther south to the peripheries in search of virgin forests, eventually reaching Kam-populated mountain areas.

By the mid-1500s the high quality of wood from Kam terrain had become very popular and a widespread logging culture was already in place. Timber was transported during the rainy season in early spring and summer along Guizhou rivers, either to Hunan province and thence to Wuhan and Shanghai, or along the Duliu River to Guangxi and from there to Guangdong province on the coast (Geary et al. 2003). The river that runs through the county town closest to Meili was also an important transport hub for the exchange of timber for salt. Timber was purchased across vast areas of the Kam region for building houses, furniture and ship building, including those of explorer Zheng He, who sailed around Southeast Asia and reached Africa. To this day timber from Kam forests still

\(^{[45]}\)Shan is commonly translated as ‘fir’ in English, as pointed out by Miller (2015: 32). Similar to Coast Redwood and Sugi trees, however, it is not true ‘fir’ from the *Cunninghamia lanceolata* taxonomy group. Following Miller’s claim, I also use the Chinese word *shan* 杉 to refer to the tree type to avoid confusion.
supports buildings that carry direct symbolic relevance for the nation’s political centre. From the Ming dynasty imperial palace to prominent architectural icons in more recent history, such as the Communist Party government buildings surrounding Tian’an men Square (Geary et al. 2003), these buildings reflect the continuing importance of Kam timber in the nation’s centring of itself in a world-scape order.

In addition to their historical significance, with the current global threat of extinction facing rare tree species, the price of *nanmu* and ormosia genus species that continue to thrive in Meili has soared. National efforts to protect Meili’s rare trees have initiated conservation measures that recognise trees as surviving artefacts, resources that can be gazed at from a far. At the same time, their high value makes them especially attractive to tree thieves across Southwest China.

During my preliminary visit to Meili in the spring, five months prior to starting my fieldwork, Meili villagers were faced with the threat of tree thieves, which was a heated topic of conversation for weeks to come. The tree in question was a rare six-hundred-year-old *nanmu* tree whose bark were being stealthily lopped to be sold on the black market (see Image 16). Rooted beside a stone plaque dating from Emperor Kangxi’s rule (1661-1722) under the Qing dynasty, the ancient *nanmu*, a

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46 As surviving artefacts, trees also carry political value. Interestingly, given the secularist vision of the Chinese Communist Party, soon after President Xi began his second five-year term in 2017, media publicly documented senior Communist party officials adulating a tree planted by the president that sits beside a tree commemorating the Maoist era revolutionary martyr, Jiao Yuli, in Henan province (Dahe News Online, November 2017). Beyond the scope of this thesis, further research needs to be addressed to expand on the political relevance of the adulation and protection of trees in China today.
component of the fengshui borders, frames the village territory where the village gates used to stand to block outsiders from entering. As a prominent village place marker, the theft of the tree risked disrupting the territorial boundaries of the village-scape, but the tree also carried symbolic relevance linked to distant events. A popular myth narrates that the nanmu used to be a handsome young man named Hannam who turned into the tree when he committed suicide after his father forbade him to marry his sweetheart from a neighbouring province, forcing him to marry his maternal cousin instead. The sweetheart, who had been patiently waiting for Hannam's promised return, eventually travelled the long, treacherous mountain paths to Meili in search of her lover. Instead of finding Hannam, however, she found the woven ribbons she had given him as presents hanging from the tree, confirming Hannam’s transformation from his human form. Another variation of the stones in the river as addressed in the Introduction (page 22), her sorrow and the tears she shed turned her into a stone beside the river and it is said her breasts produce the water that flows through the village (note the resemblances to Sasui as the producer and purifier of the village water). In another version of the story she mutated into a Chinese sweet gum tree standing firmly beside the ancient nanmu. To this day the two trees can be found leaning towards one another as if they are holding hands.

By recalling, remembering and imagining myths referring to the nanmu, people form conceptions of the tree in relation to the broader landscape, and to themselves, as Basso (1996a; 1996b) so eloquently illustrates on his work on the conception of landscape amongst the Western Apache. In his rich ethnography, Basso depicts how his informants tell him to, “go to many places. You must look at them closely” (Basso 1996b: 70). In going to these places and learning stories that has given them their place-names, he is taught how to see landscape like the Western Apache, as an object of awareness. This brief moment of awareness is opened up through stories recounting relationships and moralities. Basso’s research findings resonate with my own. Told through stories incorporating moral values that communicate endogamous loyalty, the old nanmu tree establishes a sense of place, kinship continuity and belonging. This continuity was now being menaced by outside thieves.
Threatening to disrupt the protection and unity of the village, the theft of ancient trees has been considered a serious violation amongst the Kam throughout history, as recorded in the county reports from 1999 documenting the life of a Kam village called 72. Records show that the violation of a fengshui tree in 72 village leads to the punishment of the entire community with a fine of '120', which refers to 1200 RMB in money, 120 jin (equal to 60 kg) of wine, 120 jin of rice and 120 jin of meat. This is then consumed by the entire village at a picnic feast to teach all the residents that it is their moral responsibility to take care of the village trees. Because trees can be cared for and revered as shared kin, as described earlier in relation to the commemoration of baomu, their violation is a matter for the village collective.

Whilst Meili residents were less inclined to talk to me about fengshui trees in moral, cosmological and social terms, with the panic of the theft of the nanmu tree, given its high price and rarity, I was eagerly taken on to join conversations that revolved around its theft in economic terms. Yet when I returned to start my official fieldwork five months later, the county seat police force had been able to locate the thieves and the mutilation of the tree had come to an end. Meanwhile scepticism about the tree's future lingered amongst Meili residents. Similar to the scepticism that villagers expressed towards plans to conserve the vernacular architecture of Meili, attitudes towards state protection of trees reflect the uncertainty and lack of trust in the local government's plans for the future of Meili residents. Well aware of the risks of losing rights of ownership and access to their land and forests, this threat triggered reminders of how easily resources can be exploited by central ruling powers.

Yet, as Yang Huangsheng had warned me, talking about the spiritual elements of trees continued to be a taboo. Once the threat to the nanmu tree subsided, I persistently tried to generate conversations about the trees with people who, in Yang Huangsheng's words, were never going to pick up the ringing phone. The historical associations made with the practice of, and belief in, fengshui made it difficult to discuss the spiritual value of the nanmu trees. Consequently, my understandings of the ongoing threats of exploitation related to the tree and other markers in landscape were reached unexpectedly, in moments when villagers were not being harassed by my ongoing questions. For
instance, they eagerly shared mythical stories with me that recounted the relationships that Meili villagers continue to form with landscape, relationships they were unwilling to discuss directly. Instead, told through myth, the taboo subject of efficacious landscapes was often raised in drunken conversations over dinner, such as those with Old Yang. One afternoon, returning from a funeral ceremony in the upper village and emitting potent whiffs of rice wine, he announced as he passed me, “Little Su! Now that you are here don’t let me forget to tell you the story of the well water!” I already knew the story; Old Yang enjoyed recounting it to me after a few too many cups of wine. It tells of a couple that lived in the mountains by the well near one of Meili’s mountain springs that the Jade Emperor drank from before reaching Golden Immortality. Although the husband was no longer present, the woman could be seen at night washing her hair and clothes at the well. Old Yang referred to her spiritual being to carry queen-like qualities, but her spiritual value was misunderstood by outsiders for a piece of gold. Because of the high value of gold, he tells me, the village is under constant threat of outsiders going to dig up the well at night in search of the treasure. Yet, to this day, no thief has been successful because before they start to dig, they are scared away by the sight of the queen who they think is a ghost.

Old Yang’s story of the queen who protects the stream resonates with the numerous personifications of women active in Meili’s landscape as creators and protectors of life. These linkages strengthen the research of Geary et al (2003) who claim the Kam people used to live in a matriarchal system of rule and order. Furthermore, the resemblance between Old Yang’s queen and Sasui as the producer and purifier of the village water cannot be overlooked. Thus, the story incorporates gendered personifications to highlight the continuing relevance of the female deity in terms of protecting the energy flow of Meili’s mountains and providing custodial care and life to the village. Old Yang’s story also warns of the threat of outsiders who recognise the value of Meili’s rare resources and want to rob the villagers of them. Yet the warning does not only concern material loss; rather, it carries a moral message addressing the significance of who has access to Meili’s physical landscape. Echoing the panic triggered by the mutilated nanmu, such stories tell of the continuous threats of outsiders in search of rare and marvellous resources along the peripheries that disrupt the orientation of
‘territorial place-making’ in which Meili is its own centre, consisting of territorial markers that cultivate and hold the village together. Rather than telling me about the relevance of these markers in sober conversation, however, the means used to share these narratives resemble those described in High’s (2017) rich ethnography on gold mining in Mongolia, where, stories of broken taboos were aired in conversations over copious amounts of vodka. High cites Basso (1996a) and Walsh (2006) to address the importance of these social stories told as entertainment, but also as warnings of how to act morally with and within the landscape.

Much like trying to talk about baomu trees with families taking part in commemorating them for protection, so the potency of trees and Sasui were not subjects of conversation, as they were considered an embarrassment associated with the derogatory category of superstition. This is ironic in light of the response to my questions about the rituals of healing: “We are backward,” I was told. It is the type of rhetoric that can be expected when villagers are conversing with an outsider, such as a government official or anthropologist like myself. At the same time, these responses signified an in-group world of shared understanding rooted in intimate knowledge only known to ‘insiders’, which Herzfeld (2005) suggests forms the cultural intimacy of a shared group of people. Based on the assertion of stereotypes, the notion of cultural intimacy entails the opposition between official, public self-representation of local sociality and how things are really practiced. This dichotomy generates both ambiguities and a shared sense of embarrassment, which thereby gets ‘owned’ in the face of outsiders who bring social customs to bear in negative ways. Yet the shared understanding based on the tension between official self-representation and vernacular practice only understood by fellow insiders also defines and deepens the commitment to in-group solidarity. This creates the intimate spaces of what Steinmüller (2013) refers to as ‘communities of complicity’. When threats are posed by outsiders, the bond between those who inhabit the intimate spaces is strengthened, defining a separation between the two on the basis of beliefs that are construed as backward by outsiders from another centre. My pursuit of families who were taking part in rituals wherein a tree, stone or well was a site of healing merely led to the mention of superstition, which villagers knew was already incorporated into existing stereotypes of ‘backward’ by outsiders. Due to
an unwillingness to engage in that conversation, stories that reflected people’s moral conceptions of the landscape were only shared with me when they were faced with the threat of outsiders who measure Meili’s trees and wells according to a politically and economically defined value system.

Conclusion
As can be seen from the examples discussed above, Meili’s forests draw together a broader institutional collective that interacts with the people who inhabit the territorial space within it. As with religious deities, trees, rocks and streams are considered to carry efficacious qualities that can both adorn and aid in protecting people, hence the tree adulation practiced in Meili and across China and Chinese history. Yet, as illustrated in Chapter Seven with story of Jinlong – who stands at the threshold between endorsing the landscape and exploiting it – striving for profit by renting woodlands from Meili residents and selling timber to companies across the country was not considered disruptive to shared moral values. Rather, landscape and its efficacy is a constitutive component of people’s lives when seeking betterment.

Like the forestry policies initiated by the central government that hindered Jinlong’s ability to capitalise on Meili’s forests, conservation efforts carry their own hegemonic ordering that recognise trees as surviving artefacts that exist separate from human interaction gazed at from afar. As demonstrated by the mutilation of the ancient tree, regardless of efforts to conserve the trees, they were unable to prevent the exploitation of Meili’s land and resources. Instead, they projected threats of a precarious future that risk disrupting the territorial orientation of the village that upholds the long-term transactional cycles that sustains the community’s own social and cosmic orderings, as discussed in the previous chapter in reference to Parry and Bloch (1989). At the same time, carrying these threats contributed to forming ‘communities of complicity’, in Steinmüller’s terms, heightening in-group perceptions among inhabitants who define themselves according to beliefs that are construed as backward by outsiders.

The following chapter continues to examine the spatial orientation of the village and its conjunctions with Meili’s broader landscape. Studying how the
village is conceptualised as a bounded place formed by the analogical links between the human body and nature to shape knowledge of the spiritual and cosmological centring of the village, I frame the chapter around a funeral scene to address how the continuity of kin relations is shaped through the active participation of kin and their relationships in landscape that prepares family members for death and departure from the world of the living.
Chapter Nine

Relations of Loss

Expanding on discussions in the previous chapter of the interactions people maintain with landscape, this chapter studies how spatial, somatic, and spiritual conceptions of land come together in funeral rites and explores the pivotal role that living bodies and their relations with one another play in engaging with landscape. Drawing heavily on Feuchtwang’s research on territorial place-making and Muegger’s ethnography of mortuary rites, the chapter follows segments of a funeral after the death of a villager, to illustrate how death and reproduction are interrelated through the materiality embedded in landscape. One of many that I attended during my fieldwork, the funeral discussed here was the only one at which I was present from the moment of death to the final meal shared with the family three days after the burial; this is the event that closes the cycle of death to open the new one of transcendence. For the most part, the funeral and its mortuary practices were representational of other funerals carried out at the death of an elderly family member in Meili. To depict the scene of the funeral, I return to the ethnographic vignette at Beiyun’s house, described in the Interlude, when the storm and firecrackers marked a death in the village. The chapter begins with my arrival in the house of the deceased and the search for the grave that followed her death.

Departure

When I take off from Beiyun’s, it is already late in the evening and the shadowy presence of the dark forest looms over me as I walk to the home of the dying woman in the upper village. Entering the main hall I am reminded of Beiyun’s warning not to go to the night vigil because I do not know the family, and a strong feeling of apprehension hits me. Even after eight months of fieldwork, hints of uncertainty still creep up on me when entering social gatherings in new spaces, especially large banquets and family ceremonies in the homes of villagers I had not yet befriended. I am suddenly uncertain how unfamiliar faces will respond to me, whether I will be rejected and ignored or, almost worse,
welcomed into a heavy drinking bout and unpleasant conversations that are difficult to escape.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I suppressed these fears to appear open, outgoing and interested, as I assumed an anthropologist is supposed to be. I also had to be more optimistic than I am prone to being, nudging my fear aside by reminding myself that there was always someone familiar at a social gathering to welcome me, or an opportunity to befriend someone new. I grew accustomed to swallowing shyness or discomfort, boosting my self-esteem and pushing judgments away to appear self-assured and approachable. Yet accessing those new experiences also required considerable effort in building trust with the villagers who were often unwilling to include me in their activities as this required their teaching me to do things. Formerly, I was a guest and guests should not be given chores nor be too entangled in social events.

Regardless of attempts to keep me at a distance, as the months progressed my confidence grew. I learned to appreciate the relationships I had been forming. I grew to navigate my means of gaining acceptance by families that appear in this thesis through my contacts with children and women. My fieldwork would have been difficult without anchoring it in the lives of these families, not so much in terms of my research but because of the bonds we formed that helped reduce my paranoia about imposing a burden on them. Over time I no longer felt like a threat or an outsider and, as I learned to trust the villagers, they also learned to trust me, giving me tasks and allowing me to take on responsibility. I also made a point of staying closer to the families with whom I spent more time because I knew I could rely on them to watch out for me. Saying ‘no’ to alcohol in social gatherings posed a challenge when my reputation for having a high alcohol tolerance was being tested. At these events conversations were drowned with generous gulps of rice wine and I frequently found myself in vulnerable situations. As I familiarized myself with the group dynamics of the village, however, I made a point of staying closer to people who would not force me into a drinking session and, learning from bad experiences, I avoided certain heavy-drinking male groups that tried to impose their own practice on me in the name of being good hosts – but also to feed their own thirst for alcohol.

On this occasion, I am entering a household where a family member is dying, so alcohol is not a problem, yet I cannot prevent a pang of uneasiness
because, as Beiyun has reminded me, I have not befriended these people and their kinship network is not intimately linked to hers. I step into a brightly lit room filled with thick cigarette smoke, where crowds of men are squatting on low stools close to the ground huddled in tightknit groups playing card games. Luckily, I spot a familiar face, Yang Jin, who was reluctant to include me in card games when I first began fieldwork, but now calls me over to play a few rounds of 5-10-K to pass the time. I sit watching the group slap cards on the table as Yang Jin informs me of the situation with the sick woman in the neighbouring room, observing that she does not have long to live. We chat some more until I eventually leave the cloud of smoke to enter the room where the old woman whom I do not know reclines on a bed surrounded by her three sons. As I enter this new room, the thick smoke and hectic clapping of cards and money onto tables is replaced with the more moderate noise levels of family and friends interacting and chatting on phones. The television in the corner is playing mindless reality shows and local talent sitcoms presenting young university girls dancing the hula followed by a female performer flaunting her endurance and flexibility by leaping from inverts to suspensions in a choreographed pole dance. I find a seat in the corner of the room by the television to watch as the three men take turns lying beside their mother in her narrow bed, embracing her tightly in her last hours. I pass the night in this corner following as the atmosphere of the room changes fleetingly from sombre heaviness, to lighter moods, and even joyous radiance in just a matter of minutes.

Whilst the room is vibrant with life, the grandmother’s frail body lies motionless although she releases loud moans that no longer sound human but like an animal calling out to its own kind in a forest. These noises carry on throughout the night, communicating to those present that she is still here in this world, in pain. As the night passes, however, her moans soften and by early morning they are replaced with delayed, laboured intakes of breath. I watch as these quieten and eventually a single teardrop, so perfectly shaped, slides down her cheek. Leaning towards her, the youngest son gently dries the moisture with his hands and watches his mother intently; the sound of her breathing is replaced by his loud weeping, which grows stronger as the movement of her chest slows. Unexpectedly we are escorted out of the room to the brightly lit, smoke-filled main hall which is still full of chatter and noise from the large groups huddled
around tables eating. I am not hungry but someone nudges a bowl and chopsticks into my hands and I find a stool to peck at some rice and vegetables.

As I get up to put my bowl away, one of the aunts who has accompanied me throughout the night takes me aside to whisper that the grandmother has stopped breathing. When I return into the bedroom the frail body of the old woman lies motionless, and the light cream tone on her cheeks has turned to a cold hue of ashen. The waiting has come to an end and the sons’ intense expressions of grief devoted to their mother’s final hours are replaced with the work of making a body ready for the afterlife. She is dressed in glossy indigo funeral attire, handmade by her sister, and her only daughter-in-law is covering her bare toes with white cloth slippers. The actions of clothing the dead are, as Mueggler points out, “expressions of love and care, whilst it also places the dead in relation to the king of the underworld, Yan Luo Wang and his bureaucracy of ghost officials” (2017: 89). Weeping, she then disentangles the comb holding her mother-in-law’s long threads of hair and ties them into a loose knot whilst her husband wraps shiny, indigo-dyed cloth around his mother’s waist and hairline, which will be used to pay the taxes and entrance fee at the underworld gate. In his haste, as he attempts to remove the diaper from his mother’s pants it tears and cotton balls sprinkle across the bed. In the hectic rush of clothing the dead, the corpse is then carried out of the household to at the same time remove all traces of her material possessions.

In Meili, transposing the deceased outdoors has become commonplace and I was unable to decipher when it had been conducted differently. Usually in Chinese mortuary practices the corpse should be kept in the indoor life-space of the family to reflect the house as a focal centring of life. In Eberhard’s (1968) detailed classificatory studies on the Thai, Yao and Liao people of China, he claims “first, the house is the centre of life and, second, the dead are worshipped...Here death means no separation, but the deceased remains a part of the family, and so he remains in the house; his energies continue to operate, as when he was alive” (1968: 334). When neighbouring villagers criticised Meili

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47 Usually in Kam communities the funeral attire is prepared by the daughter of the deceased but because she did not have any daughters, the role was passed onto her sister.

48 Payments of cloth to the underworld were also given in the form of recycled real-estate flyers rolled into small bundles and placed on top of the coffin to appear like bundles of indigo cloth.
residents for their immoral and disrespectful treatment towards the deceased by moving their bodies outdoors in such haste, this criticism was brushed aside by Meili residents’ claims that the living take care of the elderly whilst they are still alive and give them a good funeral that expresses emotive intimacy. This, said Meili residents, should be considered filial enough.

The hectic rush of carrying the corpse out of the household sets off commotion and suddenly a young girl bursts into the room crying. Kneeling beside the bed in tears, she is quickly brushed aside and comes to sit down next to me, as I am the only one not involved in the mad rush. As she cries she takes my hand and squeezes it tightly; I squeeze hers in return and we sit watching the room before us. I try to console her, telling her that it is going to be okay, that her grandmother’s presence is still here and can be felt, but she rejects my consolations and corrects me, “No, my grandmother has gone to the mountains. She is no longer with us. She hasn’t told us which mountain she’s gone to yet, but my father knows which one is her favourite.”

By this point in my ethnographic fieldwork I had observed the rites at nine funerals carried out in Meili and Beili, a neighbouring village. I was determined to be part of these events and spent night vigils awake around the clock, diligently documenting and observing the elaborate performances of funeral ceremonies; I also accompanied the geomancer in search of the gravesite, conducted interviews with the shaman on funeral processions, and actively participated in the preparation of meals to serve guests for the numerous feasts arranged over three days throughout the funeral. At the beginning of my research these ceremonies fascinated me but I also considered my presence part of my duty as an anthropologist. As time went on and my relations with the villagers developed into something more intimate, my presence at funerals became an expression of my duty as a friend and an opportunity to reciprocate what they had given to me. Yet studying the sequential events of mortuary rites in Meili only got me so far. As portrayed in my attempt to console the young girl who had just lost her grandmother, I still did not understand the significance of death. In reaching out with empathy I was merely voicing my own perceptions of death and trying to console her in the same way that I had consoled myself just two months before when my own grandmother passed away. Empathy, in addition to the other emotions that came with fieldwork – uncertainty, fear and
embarrassment – became means of learning rather than being sufficient for understanding. To incorporate these emotions into ethnographic fieldwork, I had to work on my relationships with the villagers to allow them to teach me and for me to learn from them. Whilst I was trying to address the continuous existence of her grandmother in thought and material presence, the young girl corrected the error in my understanding. Verbalising the difference between us, at the same time she tried to guide me in terms of the whereabouts of her grandmother who, at the immediate moment of her final breath, departed from us entirely and travelled to the mountains waiting for her sons to relocate her wandering soul and renegotiate her relations with the living with the help of the careful readings of the fengshui master.

In the epilogue of his elaborate ethnography of material and immaterial views on death, Mueggler (2017) draws on the experiences of his own brother’s death, illustrating how he has learnt to see past what he thought were differences in experiencing the death of a loved one between himself and his Lolop’o interlocutors in Yunnan province, Southwest China. In efforts to protect his deceased brother from being judged by the negative conceptions attached to the Lolop’o’s perception of the right or wrong kind of death, he keeps a mental separation between the world of his interlocutors and his own when studying their mortuary rites. Yet, in due course, he comes to understand that these differences cannot be kept apart because there is nothing to keep different worlds apart. In claiming that living bodies are only virtual bodies and “living bodies are merely potential dead bodies” (2017: 8), Mueggler argues that the living and the dead are continuously moving between material and immaterial forms. In fear of death, first the dead must be separated through ritual conventions of cleansing, only then to reconnect.

This separation was also a vital element of funerals held in Meili, outlined below. Yet interpretations of death as an immediate departure of the individual, one that needs to be disentangled from the relations of the living to allow the individual to proceed on a journey to transcendence, are not unique to Mueggler’s depiction of the Lolop’o or my observations of a Kam population. As Bloch and Parry (1982) convey in their extensive edited collection of ethnographic accounts, it is common mortuary practice to remove the deceased from the collective in order to re-establish society and reallocate kin roles, in efforts to reinstate
transcendental order to a locality after death. Through ethnographic material, they depict death less as a disruption than an opportunity for creating social order by taking the dead apart from the living to put them back together. Building on this continuity, Mueggler’s research also sheds light on the active involvement of kin to make dead bodies into “the kind of strangers with which one may enter into formal contracts” (2017: 7), which begins at the immediate moment of death when the soul departs from the body and becomes a ‘virtual absence’ of immaterial form.

Framing experiences of loss as a transcendence of life opens commonalities and differences in practice and perception to discussion. The commonalities Mueggler refers to between his brother’s death and death amongst the Lolo’po is the purely experiential, or existential feeling of the presence of the dead. The presence of the deceased can be experienced through the memories of the living. This continuity was also felt at the death of my own grandmother when I sought desperately to sustain her presence through the material possessions she left behind. At my grandmother’s death the funeral rites carried out brought close family and friends together to briefly share memories of her and sustain her presence with us. But the funeral only lasted half a day and, from then on, how we chose to hold onto her presence became an individual endeavour. This differs substantially from the large social gatherings of people at the approach of death in Meili, described above, the purpose of which was not to hold onto the memory of the dying woman but to accompany the immediate family, who at the death bed express care and love through grief and sorrow as their final expressions of filial piety to prepare the dying for the underworld. Holding onto the presence of the dying is not necessary because, as the young girl I encountered at the funeral conveyed to me, at the moment of death of her grandmother had already become a stranger, leaving the family to go to her favourite place in the mountains and becoming a different kind of spirit from living beings. The immediate spatial separation is then overcome by capturing her wandering soul and returning her to the world of the living to be transcended and regenerated in the family cycle. It is this trail of events that follows the moment of death that I now examine.

Locating the dead
When I arrive at the household of the deceased in the morning, crowds of people are already present and helping with funeral preparations. On arrival I am given a long bundle of unbleached muslin cloth to wrap around my head as mourning attire. Later, villagers point out that, unlike the factory-made white cloth given to most guests at Meili funerals nowadays, the handwoven fabric given to me by the family of the deceased is considered a sign of respect in exchange for being present at the grandmother’s deathbed. I am reminded that to reciprocate this respect I need to be present with the family throughout preparation of the mortuary rites. At the household women are busy washing and peeling vegetables in preparation for the next meal, and men who are not in the temporary kitchen cooking up the next meal are taking a rest after a morning of transporting all the necessary stools, tables and cutlery for the evening’s feast. Beside the corpse are a group of men preparing the coffin using the timber cut in advance from the forests of the deceased. A table arranged with incense burning in a bowl of rice, paper money, rice wine and pickled fish is set up to commemorate Lu Ban, the revered god of carpentry and masonry believed to live in 500 BC;49 meanwhile, Yang Shengshi, who has taken on the role of master carpenter, is measuring the wooden planks. Other members of the group carry out tasks of waxing, cutting and splicing the wood, whilst older men sit in pairs twisting stalks of glutinous rice plants into long braids of hempen rope to wrap around the coffin when it is carried to the gravesite. Once the coffin is complete we have lunch together and, reminded of my tendency to slip on the muddy slopes of the paddy fields, I go and change into another pair of shoes to join the fengshui master in his siting of the grave in the mountains.

Little did I expect that my footwear would generate so much discussion during the course of my field-work. I had brought with me a pair of old Nike trainers, so I would not mind if they wore out and got dirty. I thought they would be appropriate for the rough and mountainous terrain but, as the months progressed and I kept slipping on the muddy paths of the mountain ridges, I was

49 Lu Ban’s carpentry manual, The Canon of Lu Ban, is used to this day to determine the proportions, size and relationships of various parts of a house. The manual goes into great detail to determine these based on divination systems, such as the ‘Nine House Divination’, related to the system of magic squares which were found inscribed on the backs of tortoises. A certain color and season are attributed to each square, determining the direction that energy flows. In addition to carpentry and house building, the saw-horse, block and tackle are also accredited to Lu Ban (Walters 2005).
frequently reminded by villagers that I still had not become accustomed (习惯 pron: xiguan) to life in the mountains. Explaining my mistakes with this statement was common. Usually whether or not I had ‘become accustomed’ was posed as a question to voice concern or to start a conversation, as in, “Have you become accustomed to life here yet?”; other times it was less a question and rather a statement based on the assumption that I was incapable of adapting to their way of life. From acquiring a taste for their sour-spicy dishes to navigating through their mountainous rural terrain – which local residents assumed must be inferior to the flat, modernised and urban topography of where I am from – it was commonly assumed that because of our differences, I struggled with, or was incapable of becoming accustomed to, village life.

Whilst many villagers accepted my inability to live in a rural setting at face value, others took the time to teach me how to adapt. Uncle Long, mentioned in Chapter Five, saw that it was not my inability to traverse mountainous terrain that was the problem, but my Nike sneakers. One afternoon, after I had returned from his paddy field with a muddy behind from falling over, he told me that it was about time that I threw out my ‘garbage’ footwear and got a pair of peasant shoes, pointing at his green, rubber-soled sneakers, which had a rougher sole more suitable for walking on slippery and uneven terrain. Designed for the Chinese Liberation Army in the 1950s, they are referred to as ‘liberation sneakers’ (解放鞋 pron: jiefang xie) and, perhaps up until quite recently, were the most common form of footwear worn across rural China. Due to their popularity, I came to understand that liberation sneakers are an icon of the hardworking and humble Chinese villager with Maoist roots, as depicted in a social media posting posted by a Meili villager in his late twenties who kept his appearance groomed and stylish and paired his look with a pair of green ‘liberation sneakers’. The posting showed an image of him wearing new liberation sneakers paired with the text: “I’m just going to say it: Mao Zedong would approve of these shoes. You guys are wearing shoes that show money, I am wearing shoes that show faith/conviction (信仰 pron: xinyang). A person needs to be low-key/humble! (做人要低调 pron: zuoren yao didiao).”

They were practical, comfortable and easy to wash and I never expected to get the amount of attention I received for wearing them. When I visited the
county town, strangers on the street would laugh and point at the foreigner with her unusual choice in peasant footwear. On one occasion, when walking through the muddy slush along the mountain roads at the peak of the rainy season, a team of engineers called out to me to ask why I was wearing ‘their’ shoes and not wearing heels like a Caucasian woman is supposed to. Whilst for some placing me in the category of both non-peasant and non-Chinese was commonplace, as my time in Meili prolonged, villagers such as Uncle Long and others present at the funeral no longer voiced these judgments on my appearance but instead pointed out the practicalities of my acquiring their local dress style.

Once I change into the appropriate footwear, we take off into the mountains. I follow the sons of the deceased, the brother of the daughter-in-law and the fengshui master and, as the day progresses, we walk the narrow stone trails along the mountain ridges and through thick forests, stopping at numerous sites recommended by the fengshui master to measure the geomantic lines of energy. Locating the correct siting of the grave is crucial for the good fortune of the agnatic descendants, fortune which draws on the geomantic influences of landscape (Freedman 1979b). In identifying the site using the reference points of a compass, locating a grave – but also any form of dwelling such as a house, village or city – is an act of centring. The centre marks a gathering point of the landscape’s energies that are linked from several significant coordinates and points of reference “which can be points in the landscape, resources or people” (Feuchtwang 2004: 20). In the process of centring points of energy, the spatial orientation of landscape is vital in shaping analogical links to form the wider geomancy system that makes up the world. This includes, as discussed in the previous chapter, the water flow down the mountain ridges and the fengshui trees and rocks circling the village that have somatic qualities to sustain and uphold the inner energies, or qi, and to connect the materiality and human life that make up the physical world.

Calculating the cardinal points according to the relativity from the centre in the eight directions – north, east, south and west, together with their intermediate points – we seek the ideal grave siting, which should sit on the belly of a mountain enveloped by higher slopes surrounded by terrain that resembles the mythological guardians of the Chinese constellations. Importantly, the east
should resemble an azure dragon and the west, a white tiger. The validation of
the siting is measured with the Lo P'an, a geomantic compass that reads the
cosmos and calculates the directions of the influential currents of a site, which is
placed on a bag of rice to level out the surface. With a thread cursor drawn over
the compass needle, the alignment of the pointer is then compared with the
heavenly stem (天干) and earthly branch (地支) of the bazi of the deceased
determined by the eight characters indicating the year, month, day and hour of
the person’s birth that make up a pair of heavenly stems and earthly branches).

Locating a suitable burial site to anchor the corpse into the ground is
vital to defining the relations across spaces that comply with how people
envision a cosmological ordering. Finding somewhere that measures up to these
alignments is not an easy task and as evening approaches the geomancer still has
not located a suitable siting for the grave as we continue to circle the sloped
ridges of the village exterior. After one too many slips along the muddy mountain
paths, I am getting tired of the search, hoping we can return to the village soon,
but am told that this might yet take another day or two. I hopelessly trudge
behind in my soggy sneakers with, by this point, a painful and muddy backside,
as we reach the old cotton fields. Following the same procedure as at the previous
sites, the fengshui master completes the geomantic measurements. After a detailed
discussion, the gravesite is confirmed on the basis that the geomantic lines measure up and the site is facing the mountain where the dragon is visible, but also because of the high quality of the earth itself. The earth needs to be fertile and potent for the continuation of the endogamous family line, a point that I discuss further in the following section, and this is confirmed by the emergence of a spider from the soil as the geomancer measures the spatial orientation of the setting. In addition to its auspicious configurations, the gravesite is favoured for its vicinity to the main road, which makes it convenient to visit regularly from the valley setting of Meili village. The larger number of burials being carried out along the narrow trail facing the opposite mountain over recent years may be attributed to this element of convenience.

The analogical perspectives that shape landscape and generate knowledge on spatial orientation form what Feuchtwang calls “territorial place making” (1998; 2004). Rather than containing physically enclosed boundaries, the centre marks a focal point that diffuses outwards to open spaces which are the shared spaces of interaction. Contrary to Edward Casey’s (1996) phenomenological argument that prioritises a body-place matrix of spatial orientation, Feuchtwang argues that the Chinese principle of locating sites is to consider spaces as sites of interaction that are always in a state of reaching order from chaos (รก, pron: luan), “an ideal of flux” (Feuchtwang 2004: 25). Landscape, in the Chinese sense, is experienced by sensing and moving from the relative location in place but not, as phenomenologists might argue, with the human body proceeding the mind. Landscapes are shaped by their own agency when attaining order, in addition to the human agency that is driven by historical, political and economic trajectories according to the relationship inhabitants have to what is central and peripheral (discussed in the previous chapter). Moving away from a purely phenomenological perspective that studies how people interact with the world, learning to move through landscape also requires an epistemological understanding of its spatial orientation and the correct bodily technique tailored to these orientations, neither of which I had mastered in Meili.

When we return to the village, my muddy backside evokes the usual laughter from villagers, a few of whom are delighted to remind me again that I have not yet become accustomed to life in the mountains. I laugh with them but
at the same time cannot help wondering what I am doing wrong. The physical ‘being in the landscape’ is difficult for me to master because it requires skills that come with knowledge and experience (Ingold 1993). I have paid particular attention to how local villagers walk along the mountain paths and have tried to imitate their light steps by placing weight not so much on the centre of my foot but towards my toes. Yet, as has been pointed out by villagers, I do not look at the paths clearly and I choose angles and surfaces that are wet and slippery. The problem is not the placing of my weight but the perception of my vision.

Mauss’ famous paper (1973) describes how people learn to use their bodies through everyday ways of moving and acting that become ‘techniques of the body’. In outlining these techniques, Mauss wrote extensively about how they are shaped by perceptions of, and engagement with, the material world, which varies historically and culturally. Writing about the socially learned habits that people use to respond to certain conditions, Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, which was inspired by Mauss and has roots in Kantian humanist social theory, furthers the notion that society acts on people most powerfully through the body. Contrary to the phenomenological approach, briefly mentioned above through Casey’s application of the body-place matrix, for Bourdieu (1977) the body is always socially moulded according to a world shot through with power relations that deeply shape our experiences, as well as involving us in the shaping. Functioning as body memory – the performance aspects of habitus – individuals learn embodied responses from a young age to internalise environmental content, both to organise and navigate the external world. Thus the body does not merely exist as a means to interact with the world, but is rather actively involved and yet always constrained by social structures and power relations that it moves through.

My physical inability to traverse the slippery vertical trails of the mountain ridges triggered laughter amongst the villagers who did not share the same struggle as I. Instead, their bodies have learnt to inhabit the landscape over lifetimes of climbing up and down its steep paths and engineering and cultivating the land into paddy fields and gardens. My choice of the wrong footwear and lack of their bodily skills in the mountains became a widespread joke; through humour I was being reminded that I did not share the same bodily techniques or habitus in the mountainous physical environment in which they had grown up.
Through their pointing out my faults, I was being informed and guided on how to move through the landscape. Over time, the landscape did not change, but my knowledge of it did, as Basso (1996a) also elaborates in his rich ethnography. What changed, as Basso learned the myths of the mountains, was not his phenomenological experience of the mountain itself, but his knowledge of it.

Learning how to navigate through the mountain ridges that circulate Meili, I was at the same time trying to learn about the immanent forces that make up the physical landscape, which again required another form of epistemological knowledge. This taught knowledge allowed the geomancer to draw on fengshui principles and locate a gravesite that is a focal centre marking a gathering point of the landscape's energies. These skills were not taught to me through the sensorial experience of being in the landscape but in the geomantic calculations, historical texts and descriptive interpretations that define the existential, spatial and social relations that hold a location and its inhabitants together. The following section returns to the departed soul of the young girl's deceased grandmother to shift discussion from the spatial orientations of the dead to examine how social relations with the soul are maintained, broken and negotiated.

Return

Amongst the Kam, a person is said to have three parts to them when they die: the ben that remains in the grave; the material soul that wanders along paths; and the material soul which enters the sperm of a male to impregnate a woman and be reborn anew. In the souls' ability to be mobile, they are different from the materiality of the bones and flesh that is locked in the earth at the time of burial. To ensure that the souls that wander and the bones and flesh of the corpse are kept separate, the shaman's crucial role at the burial ceremony is to seal the corpse into the earth. Only men are entitled to attend the burial of the deceased in Meili. Women, who are considered emotionally unstable and carry the risk of creating disorder by startling the soul of the deceased, cannot leave the village territories until the following morning at the calling back of the soul. Regardless of this gender division, I was fortunate to follow a funeral ceremony to the burial site in the neighbouring village, Beili, where due to the internal migration of the
rural population, the remaining number of males in Beili is not sufficient to carry out the procession without the physical help of women. Women are escorted back to the village after the coffin has been led to the burial site, but due to the ambiguity of my presence, I am allowed to stay and watch.

During the ceremony the shaman calls out to the heavens, the sea below and the direct flow of energy from the mountains carried along the dragon veins by reciting the cardinal points including the mythological guardians of the east, the dragon, and the west, the white tiger. The cardinal points are recited both verbally and in writing and the shaman buries a coloured piece of paper at each of cardinal points. In this way the ben that remains with the body is welded to the undifferentiated animate substances of earth, unable to wander in the world of the living, thereby maintaining the cosmological order (Wu 2014). To mark the landscape of a burial site, layered piles of earth that are carved from the mountains to look like bricks are collected and carefully piled on the site. If the gravesite has been chosen correctly, grass will grow from the soil to symbolise the fertility and continuity of the family line. Later a stone marker of carved and mortared stone is placed by the grave. The heap of earth is left untouched and kept as a mass unless the family of the deceased is faced with misfortune or it collapses, in which case a large ceremony is held and the heap is reformed. Only the Sasui deity’s grave is upheld by stone to maintain a sturdy structure that reinforces territorial place. The graves of the Kam reflect Bloch’s research amongst the Merina of Madagascar who erect ancestral graves and tombs as mediums to incorporate ancestors within a “non-temporary order of the eternal deme, eternally merg[ing] with its land for ever and ever” (Bloch 1982: 219). These demes were ideally endogamous to avoid dispersing right to land to outsiders. Similarly, the significance of sustaining endogamy in Meili is represented in the heap of earth that marks the siting of the grave, later to emit potency.

50 In a population without its own written text, the Han influence on this ceremony cannot be underestimated. Further in-depth research studying the diviner’s speech that is read from written speech, indicating the literary abilities of the shaman, is required to understand this influence more fully. Furthermore, unlike Mueggler’s (2017) research on mortuary rites in Juzo with the Lolo’po, where he documents the recent revival of laments that are sung by male ritualists at the burial site, these practices have long since lapsed, according to the Kam funerals I attended.

51 Again, see Mueggler (2017: 62) on the Han influence that initiated inscriptions made on grave stones, creating a new form of body for the dead that was “permanent...subject of potential readings in the future”.

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Furthermore, the grass that grows on the earth signifies the importance of ancestral relations that tie people to place. As with the mortuary rites that Bloch documents among the Merina, whereby birth and death collapse in rituals asserting continuity and fertility and reaffirming an eternal order, death rituals in Meili become “a continuous transformation of taking apart and putting together” (Bloch 1989: 17).

Due to limitations of space, I do not deal with the elaborate funeral procession in more detail and instead jump directly to the ritual of calling back the soul, a focal element of mortuary rites practiced across China. Before the flesh decays, on the morning following the burial, the calling back of the soul, called furong, is carried out. Following the route to the grave taken the day before with the corpse, the family arrive at the grave to show respect and then reverse, to walk the road back home from the mountains to guide the soul to its place as an ancestral effigy located in the life-space of the family. Although by this point the soul has no character, it has a “location and a trajectory of movement, and this enmeshes it in an ecology of relations with other unseen beings and forces”
(Mueggler 2017: 83-84). The furong ritual renegotiates these relations to prevent the spirit getting lost and disentangled from the living and other immaterial forces to disrupt the natural order of the cosmos (Wu 2014).

Arriving at the scene of the furong, the burial site stands tall and firecrackers are set off to scare away any unwanted spirits. The raw pig's head and tail placed in front of the ‘spirit table’ near the coffin during the funeral rites are now put in front of the heap of earth marking the grave. Men climb trees to cut down branches and twigs so that they do not shade the burial site whilst family members prepare for the ceremony to commence. It begins when the soul materialises in the form of a spider and in a rush it is caught and placed in a bamboo basket with rice ornamented with a piece of silver grass (suo in Kam). In sequential order, each member of the family commemorates the deceased at the grave by burning incense and making offerings of pork and rice wine. Whilst kin commemorate at the grave, bundles of paper money are placed on the heap of earth and the ceremony ends by burning the stalks of glutinous rice that were braided into a hemp rope at the wake (described above) and collected before the ritual procession left the village. Throughout the ceremony the atmosphere can be quite joyous, as men joke and make a parody of the situation, yet it is also a solemn event when the wailing and laments that women sing throughout the wake are replaced with silent weeping. After the completion of the offerings a tree stem is placed on top of the grave and firecrackers are set off. Everyone gathers to eat sticky rice and pickled pork and fish before making their way back to the village still carrying the spider in its basket. Returning to the village, the basket is taken home and placed on the family altar or at the site of death, for

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52 Pigs for funerals are bought by the married daughters of the deceased. The head and tail of the raw pig are common across Chinese funerals to symbolise a “good beginning and a good end” to verify a successful transformation into a benevolent ancestor.

The gift of the pig from the daughters, as Watson highlights (1982: 177), also acknowledges paying off the last debt owed to the deceased by affines to “strike a balance between givers and takers”. Thus, it is the daughters who determine whether a person has a ‘good beginning and a good end’ and a balanced relationship with affines.

53 Silver grass is also placed on top of buckets of indigo dye and thrust in the corner of a farmed paddy field in the early spring after rice transplanting has been completed. Silver grass is also bent to resemble a cricket and placed close to infants when they leave the home. Further research is required both on the linguistic and metaphorical associations of silver grass and what it embodies.
example above the bed of the deceased, on the third day a feast is prepared with close kin and male heirs to eat the rice that the spider has also been fed on in the basket. By this stage, the chances of the spider still physically remaining in the basket are slim but the symbolic relevance of its transcendence persists.

Rice, as described in more detail in Thompson’s (1988) work on food symbolism and Han funeral ritual, is the key food offering across China that transforms a wandering soul into an ancestor: the giver of life and “food of the ancestors” (Thompson 1988: 93) that epitomizes the regenerative elements of the deceased. By incorporating food into death rituals, the biological death of the corpse is transformed into a socially continuous being; in the reciprocal exchange of food in the hopes of providing fertility to the living, social relations between the living and the dead are maintained and the family unit is kept intact. In the furong ceremonies I observed in Meili, eating rice also regenerated the cycle between the deceased and the living to retain the reproductive capacity of the lineage and renew the cosmos, but this was assisted by the active element of the spider. As described above, the role of the spider is both to assist in locating the gravesite and then to emerge from the ground as the soul of the deceased to be taken home and live on with the family. The spider appears as an active element connecting the worlds of the living, above ground, and the deceased below. The male line absorbs the essence of rice that the spider also consumes and thereby the soul can be reborn down the family line through the male sperm. Hence semen, rice, bones, offspring and ancestors are all “elements in cycles of agnation spiralling through time. At death an agnate becomes an ancestor preserved as bones and ancestral tablet; but for descendants the death of an ascendant releases life forces (fertility), of which semen is a facet, thereby closing one cycle and generating another” (Thompson 1988: 95). In the act of eating the rice that also feeds the spider, these worlds are not only connected symbolically, but bodily, to achieve transcendence.

Spiders play a central role in the Kam cosmological making of the world, as depicted in a folk tale repeated by Wu (2014: 39). The Kam myth illustrates the pivotal role of the spider in funeral practices to reflect the shared properties

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54 Although I was informed that the spider is placed at the family altar, I observed families place the bamboo basket elsewhere in the household. It remained unclear to me how families determine where to place the basket.
of substances and the effects they transmit. During Wu’s research into Kam folk belief, he collected a song commemorating the Sasui deity that recounts how the world is formed. In the story, Sasui gives birth to the heavens and the lands, which are kept separate by a jade beam. Soon the beam becomes unstable, however, and with the gusting of heavy winds, the beam collapses and the world returns to a state of chaos. To clear the disorder, Sasui opens her mouth and spits a long thread of spider’s silk through a weaving shuttle that holds the thread and weaves the sky to the heavens. Now the land is separated from the heavens and jade string creates the ground for people to walk on. Similar to the more familiar Han version of the Pangu story that tells the story of the origin of the cosmos as responsive order emerging from flux, the universe emerges of its own accord and out of its own material to be replaced with “a great togetherness (大同 pron: datong)” (Feuchtwang 2002: 21). This ‘ideal of flux’ that frames Chinese cosmological world order is also evident in the art of site selection as detailed above, reaffirming that order emerges from processes of change and chaos, rather than being a singular point (Feuchtwang 2014). The Kam version of the story also
portrays human beings, who derive from Sa, and the spider as elements that come together to form and maintain relational order, somatically connecting the world of the living above ground with the soul of the deceased.

Swancutt’s research (2012; 2016) in Sichuan province amongst the Nuosu, a Tibeto-Burman group with the Chinese ethnonym Yi, also sheds light on the spider as a human soul. Drawing out the synonymous qualities that soul-spiders and human souls share across ethnic minority groups in Southwest China, Swancutt writes about the soul-spider amongst the Nuosu that resides on the surface of the human body. In the event of the soul being captured by a ghost and hidden under a stone, a soul-calling ceremony is held. The retrieval of the lost soul takes place by positioning a white string, meant to resemble a real spider’s thread, across a threshold with a long grass stalk (in the Nuosu language the grass contains the word for soul-spider) at one end leading to a basket containing a piece of meat or fat. Then the soul-spider is called from home through song until it becomes visible and climbs up the thread and it is placed in an enclosed winnowing basket or lacquer box. On an auspicious day, the lid is removed and the soul-spider returns to its owner. Considering the Nuosu’s history with slavery, Swancutt refers to the spider as a captive guest to reflect the power relations of the captor and captive. It “relies upon its owner for maintaining its attachment to the human body (its home), while also being free to move around that home, living out the soul-spider’s condition” (2012: 105). In this “art of capture”, the spider, as a captive of the human body, strengthens the Nuosu people’s lineage attachments and fullness of life (2016: 208).

In both Swancutt’s encounter with the Nuosu and my own with the Kam in Meili, the spider carries potency that draws together the analogical relations of other elements and beings in the world. Materialising from the earth, the spider is captured as a soul to allow for the regeneration of the lifecycle of the deceased to sustain the family line. However, Swancutt associates the Nuosu art of capture with animist thought and practice. Drawing on the Chinese animistic worldview that reflects the divisions of the world into the heavens, made of celestial bodies, and the earth that consists of one thousand life beings (万物生灵 pron: wanwu shengling) from the world of the humans. This hierarchical division is spoken of as a Chinese animistic worldview, referred to as ‘nature worship’ (自然崇拜 pron:
Yet the application of these terms needs a critical reading. Rather than drawing on the animist qualities of the spider, it might be helpful to return to the efficacious quality of the trees and rocks, as pointed out in Chapter Eight in relation to the efficacious quality of trees and rocks, which, as Weller (2006) observes, are not worshipped as an entirety or as representing a greater notion of ‘nature’, but individually, like any other Chinese deity or earth god with extraordinary and efficacious powers that can be retrieved by the careful ritual enactments of the worshipper.

Mueggler’s (2017) research proves helpful in further investigating the intrinsic qualities of these individual deities and gods. In contrast to Swancutt’s interpretation of the ‘captive’ spider that carries its own animist agency, Mueggler studies the elements that together assemble the materiality, such as a deceased body that “place[s] it in relation to other elements and beings, fleshing it out with a fundamental cosmology of immanent experience…[that] draws upon the most intimate relations the dead person had while alive, with sons, daughters, and siblings…” (2017: 94). Rather than carrying agency on its own, it requires the active involvement of kin to place it in relation to other beings. Drawing on Gell’s (1998) research on images of divinities that are animated by secret internal parts and Wei-Ping Lin’s (2015) depiction of Taoist god carvings, Mueggler refers to the analogous qualities that assemble the body of the dead. The Taoist god carvings and images of deities, like the spider, do not consist of “an inner person with individual character, desires and intentions…it is merely a soul, evanescent and without content” (2017: 94). Devoid of content, the object is actualised in response to the purposefully active involvement of the human intention to gain potency.

In the argument that Mueggler develops, he takes a different perspective from Swancutt and other researchers in Southwest China and the region, who apply anthropological idioms to describe the supernatural world through an animistic lens or one related to ‘fortune’. Instead, Mueggler refers to the making of the dead as a “process of actualisation” (2007: 94) that is materialised through rituals that carry their own historical past. These processes are not fixed

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55 See Swancutt for an insightful overview of the animistic perspective in China, which, she highlights, “has become a tool for social engineering, capable of transforming formerly taboo phenomena, such as shamanic rites, into a new means of production” (2016: 75).
practices but shaped existentially, always changing and being modified according to people’s intentions and relations with one another. Borrowing Strathern’s (2004) formulations on persons as objectifications of relations, Mueggler notes that people form connections between objects that make up the world through pre-existing social relations; this creates the ground upon which living kinship emerges. Hence, dead bodies belong to living bodies and living bodies belong to the dead and they become “a sum of relations in which that person was suspended” (2017: 97). The active involvement of kin starts with preparations for death where friends and family gather at the wake to express sorrow or pass the time gambling; this then proceeds to locating the burial site in order to follow the movement of the lost soul, catch it and consume it, transforming it into a socially continuous being. The material substances with which humans engage through these stages are not part of different animist worlds; rather, in the same way that the earth in which the dead are buried is revered and treated as part of the same world, the exchanges between living and dead reaffirm relations with the dead and also partition them from the living.

Conclusion
In the funeral rites I have described above, I have referred to the numerous events carried out to locate the dead, reflecting on the land and the materiality of the soul-spider that derives from the land to conclude that the potency and agency that they emit that cannot be understood in isolation from human relations. From centring the land through the direct flow of the dragon veins, through locating and marking the grave with heaps of earth, to then consuming the spider-soul that emerges through the land, I have sought to illustrate how physical landscapes are shaped by human interactions that strive to reconnect the deceased across relations of spatial orientation and through the bodies of the living to regenerate the endogamous male line. As mentioned in the Interlude of Part four, physical landscapes that are worked on through the living stand in contrast to the temporal cycle of the haunted forests where dead babies of a neglected class were once hung. Instead, they are actively engaged spaces held together through the pivotal relations of living bodies that purge the dead from the spaces of the living to distinguish the immaterial soul from the materiality of the corpse.
This is achieved through the composition of relations that create and sustain bodies, which do not come to an end at death; rather, the relations of living bodies materialise the dead, continuously sustaining and strengthening their existential presence with the living. This presence defines the relations that people form with landscape and with each other to heighten emic perceptions of an in-group, which is bounded to space.

These emic perceptions of an in-group draw on what Mueggler considered were the differences between his own interpretation of his brother’s death and the interpretations of his interlocutors, but in doing so he is able to gradually see past them, learning from the Lolo’po that he carries an embodiment of his brother’s dead body. The existential feeling of the presence of the dead and their continuity in the living that I too drew on at the death of my grandmother, as a living memory, contrasts with the notion that they continue to exist with the living by virtue of their being called back home to regenerate life. With notable differences of interpretation, the active engagement and involvement of living humans that allow for an extension, or regeneration, of life after death are part of these existential notions that conceptualise death.

The two chapters of the final part of my thesis, ‘Bounded: A Village of Relations’, explored how social relations are maintained to form bounded connections with place through human interaction, as well as how the connections are shaped through social relations that people make with landscape. These relations continuously establish and strengthen boundaries that define the village as it is experienced from the perspective of the village as centre, scaling up to construct the framework of a totality. In Chapter Eight I discussed what happens when the place markers that define this bounded territory are threatened by the ordering of another cosmological framework, from a separate centre, which looks down from the mountains at the village. I pointed out that the cosmological framework of the village-scape is always in negotiations with other cosmologies that form their perspective from a scaling down, that is, looking down from above. Through the mutilation of the ancient tree and stories of theft, I showed how these frameworks can be in conflict, projecting the threat of disrupting the territorial orientation of the village.

At the same time, the totality that upholds the territorial borders of Meili is not framed around an epistemological construction unique to the residents of
the village, but is interlaced with Han notions of spatial orientation that define how people move through and navigate landscape. Tracing the movement of energy along cartographic lines and slopes to define the *fengshui* of a locality is not specific to Meili but prevails across the country, both historically and to the present day. The readings of these spatial orientations are actively envisioned, invoked and modified by villagers themselves who, at the same time, conform to their own models of the conjunctures of allegorical relations that make up conceptions of location and space. In this chapter I have looked more closely at these relations by studying a funeral and burial where the local centre is marked as a gathering point of the landscape’s energies. In determining the most auspicious gravesite, all the elements that make up its spatial orientation, and also the efficacy of the living beings that comprise the earth, are taken into consideration. These elements, from the spider to the trees and streams, are connected allegorically through human agency. Actively envisioned and invoked by the villagers themselves, in efforts to locate, link and shape relations that people form with the dead, in-group understandings of the bounded village as a centre are continuously heightened and confirmed.
Conclusion

Making a Village in China

By the beginning of the lunar New Year on a grey and drizzly afternoon, the last kernels of glutinous rice had dropped from their dry panicles onto the sandy path below where they hung. The rice had been left to dry in tight sheaves on the upper levels of Meili’s fir-bark granary columns after the harvest, and no one in the village had been prepared to take it down for threshing, instead leaving it shrivelled and rotten to fall and feed the chickens. For this was rice that had been placed merely to add aesthetic value to the granary; indeed, the rice that fed the chickens that afternoon had not even been farmed by the villagers of Meili. Rather, it had been bought at a county-seat market by government officials in preparation for the first national regional Traditional Village Summit inspection tour held in the autumn of 2015. The bought-in sheaves of glutinous rice hanging from the granaries were intended to provide evidence of the “native wisdom of the harmonious farming community living in tranquillity in ancient residencies in a traditional village”, as the village is described in leaflets distributed to outsiders visiting Meili. It was, like many other ‘traditional’ features that had recently been installed in Meili, just window dressing, or according to the Chinese saying ‘to get dressed and put on a hat’ (穿衣戴帽 pron: chuanyi daimao).

These sheaves of rice came to represent the many efforts that I observed during my fieldwork that were committed to creating a traditional village out of Meili. These were incorporated into government-led development projects initiated in the past, which, in the eyes of villagers merely represented forms of government interference in their lives. Government-led projects and the plans that uphold them have their roots in the Maoist era, and villagers have become accustomed to the gaps and ambiguities in their goals to transform the everyday into a fixed past and future (Croll 1994). Like the rice kernels that were left to rot to feed the chickens and the descriptions in tourist leaflets, the work required to maintain Meili as a timeless, traditional village setting merely tends to produce a parallel dimension, standing apart from the everyday lives of villagers who inhabit the space.
Yet Meili has never been timeless nor a traditional village apart from the rest of the country. Returning to the story this thesis starts with and borrows as its title, the Jade Emperor’s pilgrimage to Meili represents one of many historical encounters between the village and sovereign power coming from outside it. More recently these encounters are carried out along a long trail of development projects. The infrastructural renewal and renovation put into Meili’s preservation are among many rural development schemes carried out in China today as continuous attempts to draw the peripheries closer to central power.

Preservation initiatives wherein the Chinese population stand together as inheritors of their cultural past have been part of governance since the late 1980s and have taken on new meaning since General Secretary Xi Jinping gained power in 2012. Most evident in nation-wide propaganda such as the ‘China Dream’ (中国梦 pron: zhongguo meng) campaign and public speeches invoking citizens to ‘rejuvenate’ (复兴 pron: fuxing) the nation, these politicised accounts reinforce a trope of common Chinese origins bound to an objectified, eternal culture that is tightly intertwined in cultural heritage discourses to strengthen unity and stability across the Chinese population. Efforts to promote rural modernisation and revitalisation through heritage led government campaigns seeks solutions to counter the precarious futures that China’s rural citizens are faced with. And according to government statistics, where poverty alleviation is central to political efforts especially in poverty-stricken provinces such as Guizhou, these solutions are working.

The heritage industry is not only a government effort but a larger scheme driven by tourism that sustains an image of the idealised village validated by an urban population who stand by efforts to preserve the Chinese village. In a movement with historical roots in the philosophical and religious ideals attached to the countryside and its abundant scenery, the village is glorified by urbanites as the bastion of authentic Chinese culture. At the same time, it stands at risk of being swallowed up by the moral (and environmental) pollution of cities that are thought to exist in a state of globalisation-induced disrepair. The strategies taken to protect the countryside remains a disputed and national concern. Going beyond these disputes, my thesis considers preservation efforts in more complexity. Peering into the backstage practices, my thesis obscures binary
terms of state imposition versus local resistance to instead take an ethnographic lens beyond preservation efforts and village aesthetics, such as sheaves of glutinous rice kernels on the fir-bark village granary columns after the harvest to problematize the very notion of the village beyond the face value of official accounts.

Fulfilling much of the same role as the glutinous rice kernels purchased for the granaries of Meili, prominent roadside billboards promoting cultural heritage projects also act as extensions of the Communist party, reminding passers-by of the abiding central state presence. During the course of my fieldwork I observed the frequency with which these non-commercial roadside billboards – designed to provoke imaginaries of a goal-oriented future – were rearranged and amended. Signboards written in large red characters that once promoted gender equality and family planning campaigns had been replaced with images of well-off and affluent, or xiaokang, families, and tourist marketing proclaiming, ‘Beautiful Meili, a homeland and family deep in my heart’ (大美的梅李村，心灵家园家庭 pron: damei de melicun, xinling jiayuan jiating). In addition to these gleaming, illustrative and highly visible billboards hovering over the expressways, with messages big enough to be read by passing vehicles, long red banners without images were also pasted at eye-level along roadsides to promote heritage preservation projects. The banners remind the Chinese citizen to ‘protect cultural heritage, start from you and me, start from today’ (保护文化遗产，从你我做起，从现在做起 pron: baohu wenhua yichan, cong ni wo zuoqi, cong zianzai zuoqi). Whilst political discourse claims that the Chinese are themselves inheritors of their cultural past, these banners and the numerous other forms of propaganda that strengthen this ideology promote the notion of a dutiful Chinese citizen enhancing and upholding (弘扬 pron: hongyang) the heritage of the nation (Fiskesjö 2010).

Key arguments rephrased

Giving villagers the autonomy to ‘uphold’ Meili’s cultural heritage themselves was an ongoing subject of conversation amongst key actors working towards protecting its ‘traditional village’ layout. Contrary to identifying with the
vernacular organisation of the village and regarding it with pride, however, Meili residents expressed embarrassment, humiliation and low self-worth when pointing out what heritage discourse saw as the village's charm. The sea of mountains were viewed as a burden and handicap to development and everyday life, and getting away from them was deemed an impossibility. As I was told: “first thing, you open your door in the morning and you are blocked by a mountain”. The wooden homes of the villagers were an embarrassment and I would hear the reoccurring comment, “We are poor”, even before I passed through the main door. When I tried to discuss the healing capacities of the trees, the conversation came to a dead-end with the statement: “It’s a superstitious practice that we, as backward people, still carry out.” Their inability to escape from conditions of marginality was reiterated through apologetic narratives that were interlaced with the apprehension and embarrassment that could be expected of villagers conversing with a government official and outsider like myself. Discussed in more detail in Part One, the differences in representation and the boundaries that were drawn between my interlocutors and myself as researcher were continuously revised through our interactions as my fieldwork progressed. It took me many months to move past narratives that highlighted our differences to gain the proximity that enabled me to gather stories that expressed how locals see their place and their history, and revealed a sense of pride and honour. The chapter positions me and the perspectives I took on moving across spatial and metaphorical boundaries inside and outside the village that allowed me to build on the ethnographic knowledge. As described in detail in the chapter, this knowledge is interlaced with emotional and social exchanges in line with my own biographical narrative that framed my fragmented positionality as an integral and unfolding dimension of my ethnography. I return to this positionality throughout my thesis to shed light on the kinds of relationships that myself, as a female Caucasian researcher, was confronted with and the limitations that were imposed on me by the selection of interlocutors.

As discussed in more detail through the conversations with my interlocutors, the expressions of self-deprecation were accepted by key actors working in the cultural heritage initiatives in Meili. Directly relating the villagers’ lack of civilisation to their inhabiting a place cut off from the rest of the world, for civil servants and government officials the backwardness and poverty were
reoccurring themes that were taken for granted. Talking to them about my research, I was frequently warned about this: “There’s nothing to research here. Let me tell you why. One, the area is remote (僻僻 pron: pianpi) and two, they are ethnic minorities. This means they are ignorant and backward people.” They were considered ignorant and backward because they did not share the perspective from above that frames Meili as a panoramic image of a tradition that can be replicated to evoke a memory of rustic countryside. Discussed in Part Two of my thesis, in efforts to depict the aesthetic traits that signify a complete ‘traditional Chinese village’, I explore the tools used by the authorities to impose their power and an order defined from the viewpoint from above. In unpacking this, I examined how the village as they imagined it from above was not an image endorsed by the villagers themselves, which led to a number of challenges and disagreements when attempting to mobilise the latter to take part in the preservation projects. These challenges led to the incongruences between the preservationists and architects on the heritage scheme and the villagers themselves. The chapters that followed sought to clarify that the issues were not related to a lack of knowledge of, or care in ‘upholding’, the heritage scheme itself, but to the differences of interpretation that shaped disparate conceptions of what constitutes and defines the village.

The ‘village whole’ envisioned by cultural elites did not correspond with the ‘village whole’ to which villagers were accustomed. Drawing close to the village context, Part Three of my thesis explores the incoherent elements in the village as it was envisioned by preservationists. Sustaining this, villagers took advantage of these unconnected elements and gaps to fulfil the duties expected of them as an ethnic minority group living in a traditional village. At the same time, by exercising authority and participating in negotiations over the aesthetic outcomes of the heritage project, villagers brought forth their own socialities, strengthening emic perceptions of an in-group that build on the values of honour, status and renown. Through the performance of these socialities, rural ethnic subjectivities and male status are strengthened and the village space becomes a site of power and struggle that strengthens kinship affiliations.

The Fourth Part of my thesis, the final perspective, examines in-group worlds through territorial place making. In uncovering the myths and narratives of death described in Chapters Eight and Nine, I explore the importance of these
practices as a measure of place. Rather than describing place using comparisons based on the goal-oriented levels of perceived wealth or economic and intellectual development common in billboard signs and propaganda slogans, the concluding chapters reveal how the village has been shaped by analogical links between the human body and nature. Recounted with pride by many Meili residents, these stories delineate the village locality from an insider’s vantage point. I outline how elements of the landscape construct a sense of bounded territory from the perspective that radiates out from the village when looking upwards, one in which the derogatory condition of marginality is absent.

In concluding my thesis by illustrating the manifold analogies that maintain connections between the living and the dead, I have sought to reverse the perspective of the village with which my thesis began, which took in a panoramic view of it from above. From above, Meili appears to be a traditional village that exists in the margins, far from a centre, yet I conclude with discussing a perspectival scale that locates the village as the centre defined by its own inclusive ordering. By reframing the conception of a centre and its peripheries, I demonstrate that the village consists of its own hegemonic totality to which people feel obliged to respond. Reversing the vantage point of the onlooker, I conclude that centring, from whatever angle, is not a fixed phenomenon but a continuously reconstructed effort adopted by people who nurture their own conception of place through the agency and responsibility that they maintain via their relations with others. Often leading to tensions and conflicts that arise in response to the continuous inclusive hegemonic orderings that spaces sustain, my thesis argues that places, in this case a village, are continuously made and remade through these responses.

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Tracing the historical developments of anthropology disciplines in China in my Introduction, I highlighted the disjuncture in theoretical, political and geographical trends that has divided the interests of anthropologists and the questions that anthropologists have sought to answer. Generally speaking, anthropologists studying the nation’s Southwestern peripheries are drawn to issues related to ethnic identity that imply collective belonging, whilst sinologists studying Han populations along the Southeastern coastlines interpret
cosmologies and territorial boundaries to define community and sense of place. The absence of coalition among anthropologists studying Han populations and those focusing on China’s ethnic minorities has led to a neglect of broader methods of studying Chinese anthropology using more relational approaches (Wang M. 2012). My research, by moving beyond peasant and ethnic identity to study conceptions of place, offers one option by which this gap might be bridged.

Studying the making of village space, my thesis returns to themes central to anthropology of China to contribute to understandings of how rural residents regard where they live as a bounded place embedded in a common identity shared with other villagers. Studying the relational interplay between a centre and its peripheries, my goal has been to explore how a village is constituted, adjusted and redefined depending on the vantage point where one stands. In doing so, I have drawn on Strathern’s (1999, 2004) research on perspectival scale that forms orders of knowledge with specific effects and hierarchical distributions, to convey the relations that people hold important, given their positioning. The perspective of ‘scaling up’ shifts according to whom one feels obligated to respond. Depending on whose agency is dominant, ‘scaling up’ might be a cosmological scaling, looking up towards deceased kin or trees that heal, or it might be a politico-ideological upscaling, towards the Chinese nation and its imposed heritage schemes. Constructed from coexisting ideologies framed through a perspectival scale, each chapter of my thesis shifts across scales to convey the multiplicity of layers that make a village.

Taking into consideration the notion of scale that locates one’s vantage point, I have sought to define how a ‘traditional village’ is made by studying the relational interplay between a centre and its peripheries. These are not fixed entities but made up of coexisting ideologies that reveal themselves according to the perspectival scale taken. To unpack these ideologies, as the thesis progresses I move across vantage points to examine the village from above or from within to reverse the perception of centring. In doing so, I illustrate how autonomy is maintained and negotiated according to the hegemonic totality upheld by the ideology to which people feel most obliged to respond. Shifting across the ordering of the village in these two dimensions allows the village to be understood, not just as a singular entity that can be flattened into universalist representations, but as one built on a multiplicity of ideological totalities that are
continuously shaped according to the spatial orientation of a centre and its peripheries.

In deciphering the dynamics of a village in rural ethnic China as it emerges from multiple centring perspectives, my thesis contributes to anthropological scholarship and literature on the formation and transformation of the larger state and its integral role in the framing of ongoing hegemonic ideologies. As illustrated in relation to the Jade Emperor’s pilgrimage to Meili with which this thesis commenced, the village has always been in contact with sovereign powers coming from outside, with their own ideological frameworks. The distinction and interplay between hegemonic sovereign rule and how it is incorporated into local histories and the present day are themes I pick on through my thesis to highlight the relevance of how the village has always been shaped by external influences. Set against the backdrop of the increasingly intensive control and surveillance that upholds the sociopolitical climate of contemporary China, today the external threats of supreme authority is more prominent than ever. With the Communist Party’s moral superiority at its core, contacts with sovereign powers are repackaged into cultural heritage initiatives across the country. In efforts to strengthen unity and stability across the Chinese population, cultural heritage projects promote Chinese tradition and culture that has taken on new meaning since General Secretary Xi Jinping’s unbridled power. Understanding the ideological framework that the cultural heritage preservation industry sustains is more urgent than ever.

My thesis answers to this urgency by unpacking the ideology of preservation efforts in a state-led cultural heritage project in rural ethnic China to look at the incongruences that arise in the making and conceptualisation of a village space. Rather than succumbing to the expectations of hegemonic powers, I disentangle the many conscious efforts that I observed during my fieldwork that worked towards creating a traditional village. I study the discrepancies that, like the bought-in sheaves of rice that decorated the village granaries and the roadside billboards and long red banners that celebrate the beauty of Meili, arise between and across the many value systems at play: sometimes intersecting but often existing in a parallel dimension from the everyday lives of villagers who inhabit the space. Drawing on these incongruences I have described how even efforts to make a traditional village do not flatten places and people to create standardised
unities. By unpacking stories of honour and loss told through place and relations to place, I have highlighted how people maintain an attachment to a shared, bounded locus composed through its own processes of centring.

Drawing on the multiple scales that generate observations and abstractions, my thesis identifies how the relations that people associate with space are mediated. I offer the proposition that understanding these processes is vital in order to move beyond studying places as the products of singular ideologies to see them as connected spaces formed around the relational interplay between centres and peripheries.

Future research

While building my thesis around consideration of multiple perspectival scales, the observations and abstractions I make are limited to fieldwork within a single village. Within this village, as highlighted in Chapter Three, affiliations with the villagers were not arbitrarily selected; rather, there were specific circumstances that helped build our relationships. Consequently, the knowledge that was conveyed to me is drawn from the few kinship circles that opened up to me rather than the entire village network. Researchers following in my footsteps to Meili and forming their own affiliations would add a more versatile and thorough understanding of the village, including its dynamics in the wider heritage scheme, which would enrich this ethnography.

Themes to readdress in Meili are plentiful. One theme that would certainly benefit from further research is the gendering of spaces, which deserves more thorough understanding. Gender is an important topic in Part Three of my thesis, but my research material does not fully explicate how gender defines access to space, particularly in relation to performed song. Another social practice dominated by men that I mention in passing in Chapter Seven is the popular sport of bird-fighting. Studying the performance of manhood that bird-sport enthusiasts demonstrate, of which numerous Meili male residents partook in, could strengthen and expand the argument my thesis is trying to make in Part Three. Nor does my thesis explore the role of the local deity Sasui in any depth. Further research could provide better understanding of her role in everyday village life and her revival through festivities across the region, which are
organised both by local residents and the local government. This material could add to analysis in Part Four of my thesis to deepen understandings of the cosmological framework sustained by Meili and other Kam villages.

Finally, there are numerous uncertainties that lie ahead for the future of Meili that deserve investigation. As discussed in Part Two, locals believe that the heritage scheme has plans to relocate Meili’s population at some point in the future, and it would be crucial to follow up these rumours when documenting the longitudinal impact of the heritage scheme on the lives of the villagers and their attachment to place. Another field I have not addressed that is relevant to my research interests is the environmental change the village is facing. My title references the Jade Emperor’s last taste of water, but I have not actually related this story to ongoing transformations in the village water system. Then, although I refer to the theft of the ancient tree as a threat to the cosmological system inflicted from outside the village, I am aware that I have not discussed the threats imposed by villagers themselves, including the ongoing construction of new houses that is polluting the groundwater sources of the upper village well water causing health risks. My research is unable to answer the question: What will happen to the story of the Jade Emperor if one day the sweet taste of Meili’s water disappears and it becomes sour and undrinkable? Worth an entire research project of its own is how in-group perceptions attached to place will be altered as the spatial orientation that holds the natural environment together is modified, eliminated or destroyed.
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