The Clever Orphan Outwits the Dragon King:
Storytelling, Ethnicity, and Cultural Resistance in
Nujiang Valley, China

by

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Three successive insets, from top, clockwise: the People's Republic of China; Yunnan Province, Nujiang Prefecture. From wikimedia.org.

The prefectures of Yunnan province. From pratyeka.org.
An incomplete map of Nujiang prefecture and environs (Liuku should sit about 15 miles south of Bijiang.) Better maps are quite hard to come by.
From www.river.com
Introduction

“A story, when recognized as such, is not an endpoint but a point of departure from which readers can explore the lived significance of strange affairs and can consider how their own lives might be situated within the web of actions and reactions that make up those affairs.”—Shari Stone-Mediatori, Reading Across Cultures

In the slanting light of a Chinese dusk, four women walked down a dirt road curving through rice paddies and Tibetan wheat fields to the main village thoroughfare about a mile away. The sun was at such an angle that only their silhouettes could be seen: they were all about the same height, wearing Western-style clothes, and their hair was gathered in ponytails or hung loose around their shoulders. One was more heavyset than the rest, but their dark shapes were otherwise indistinguishable against the evening sky. As they walked, three of them conversed in the local Mandarin dialect. Sometimes there would be a pause and one woman would translate an idiom for the benefit of the fourth. One of the women, who had long bangs and wore faded blue jeans, was telling a story:

Once there was an orphan who made money by helping another family tend sheep. Every day he would sit on a rock and eat baba. After this routine had gone on for a while the rock grew a mouth. The orphan would give it some baba every day, but the rock was never full. Finally, the orphan brought a whole bag full of baba and threw it in the rock’s mouth. In response, the rock vomited up the same bag, but filled with money.

The orphan was very honest, so he told the townspeople all about what had happened. Another man who was not as successful or hardworking decided he wanted to try, so he went and threw a bag of baba into the rock’s mouth. Quick as a flash, the rock bit down on the bad man’s arm and would not let go. None of the townspeople knew what to do: finally they decided that, as it was evening, they would

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1A fried pancake often spiced with chives or sweetened with honey—a local delicacy.
crack the rock in half the next morning, and went home. When they came back the next morning, however, the rock had grown to such an enormous size that nothing could be done. As a last effort, the bad man’s wife came and danced around the rock with some other women in a circle. The rock shrank and let the man’s arm go. Now we Lisu always dance in a circle.

As she concluded, the storyteller noted that her tale was the source of a common aphorism, which she recited: “If you have good things in your heart you will have good things in your bag.” She added that she had learned the story from her grandmother (Mandarin: 奶奶 nai nai), who was Christian but “didn’t mind” telling stories. When she had finished, the other women smiled and made appreciative comments. They continued down the road to the village trading stories to pass the time until they could hail a taxi to take them back to the city of Liuku.

I was that heavyset woman, and the other three were friends I had made during my time in Nujiang Valley, a remote river gorge set in the farthest northwest corner of Yunnan Province, China, next to the borders with Burma and Tibet. I was two weeks into my first fieldwork trip and had spent the evening having dinner with my translator, Selena, two sisters, and a third friend, at the sisters’ house. I was working on a project I conceived of as collecting stories told by the several indigenous peoples who coexisted in the valley, called 少数民族 shaoshu minzu in Mandarin, usually translated as “ethnic minorities” or “minority nationalities.” Sara, the woman who told the story about the rock and the baba, was a member of the Lisu people, an indigenous group native to Nujiang, other parts of Yunnan including Tengchong and Weixi, as well as Burma, India, Thailand, Laos, and Malaysia.

As we walked toward the village, I found myself lost in thought. Sara had explained that her family, like the majority of Lisu in Nujiang Valley, had converted
to Christianity—in this case four generations ago. Her attitude toward traditional Lisu stories differed dramatically from the attitudes of many of the Christians I had encountered in Lanping, a city six hours away by bus: these Christian Lisu had distanced themselves from Lisu traditions, and many refused to tell stories at all. I found myself intrigued by this disparity and by the world spun in the story. There was a honk and a flash of light, and I realized that we had reached the main thoroughfare. I was starting on a new road as well, one that would lead me to a place where generational and identity politics, education, modernization, morality, religion, and stories were intricately woven through the horizon of daily life.

* * * * *

The verdant walls of Nujiang Valley rise impressively from the banks of the muddy Nu River. In some places they disappear into a halo of low-lying clouds, while in others they soar into pearly sky, only to be dwarfed by even higher and more foreboding snow-capped peaks in the distance. The cities, towns, and hamlets that dot this dramatic scenery are occupied by the Pumi, Lisu, Bai, Dulong, ethnic Tibetan, Yi, and Nu peoples, who coexist here among cliffs, and streams. The geographical area of Nujiang Prefecture encompasses the gorge valley, as well as areas directly to the northeast. The Prefecture is made up of four counties: Lanping, Lushui, Fugong, and Gongshan, The city of Lanping, seat of its eponymous county, is located about eleven hours by bus from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, on cobbled roads that blend into the slowly humping farmland which comprise the foothills of the Himalayas. In actuality, Lanping is closer to the Lancang River valley: the city was,
until a few years ago, considered part of nearby tourist Mecca Lijiang’s jurisdiction, but recent re-zoning assigned it to Nujiang Prefecture.

Lanping is known the world over for its successful zinc mining industry, but it is lacking in tourism, a more common source of income in China. One Yunnanese friend estimated that only 4,000 foreigners visited Lanping between 2001-2007. Instead, Lanping’s approximately 200,000 people—mainly Bai, with some Pumi and a small amount of Lisu and highland Yi (Nuosu) sprinkled throughout—are involved in mineral extraction, farming, and light manufacturing. According to a teacher at the local high school, 98% of students in Lanping schools are of minority descent. Multiculturalism is an important cultural component in the city, with efforts taken to teach the basic customs of each minority to the whole of the population, through school curricula and public festival celebrations staged by the local government. I spent my time in Lanping making friends of a variety of ages, ethnicities, and religions and hearing their stories.

Yingpan, a small town about two hours south of Lanping on the road to the mouth of the Nu valley, was the other locality I visited in Lanping County, near the border with Lushui. Yingpan’s small population, made up largely of Lisu, Pumi, and a few Yi, make their livings as farmers, construction workers on the banks of the nearby Lancang River, or in the salt mines that provide for a swath of land that stretches through much of Yunnan Province and sometimes beyond. Mr. Xiu, a government official I spoke to about Lisu and Pumi lifestyle outside major urban centers estimated that Lanping County is home to 9,000 Lisu, most of whom live in or around Yingpan.
After Yingpan, my research took me to Lushui County. I spent the majority of my time there in Liuku, the county seat, and it was in Lushui that I heard the story about the *baba* and the rock. Liuku, known to some as “the smallest city in China,” lies at the very mouth of Nujiang Valley proper and is the home to a significant concentration of native Lisu, as well as smaller populations of Pumi and Nu, who have migrated from either the Lanping area or upper portions of the Valley to find work. Like most of the cities in the Valley, Liuku is bisected by the river, with the most urban portions on one bank and more agrarian sections on the other. Because of its proximity to Myanmar (the border crossing at Pianma is about two hours away by bus), there is a large military presence in Liuku.

I also spent time in the rural areas of the Valley, an important undertaking in gaining a balanced understanding of life in Nujiang. My first destination was a small village called Luzhang. Perched on a series of mountain ridges about an hour up the valley from Liuku, Luzhang’s poor-to-middle-class population, comprised of a mix of Pumi and Lisu people, are largely employed as alpine farmers, eking out a living on the fertile but extremely steep mountains that flank the Nu River. My second rural stop was Chengan, which is located about an hour past Luzhang but lower down in the valley, nearer to the river itself. The small hamlet functions mostly as a hub for a satellite of very small and very poor Lisu villages between ten minutes and an hour away by foot. As almost the entirety of the population subsists through farming, the town is deserted during the day. However, through some enterprising social networking, I was invited to visit one of the satellite villages, about a fifteen-minute hike away. During my afternoon in the village, a tight knot of traditional Lisu houses
on one portion of a mountain flank, I was able to talk to a small family about their experience as rural Lisu farmers.

After a month-long break during which I traveled elsewhere in China, I returned to Nujiang for an additional five-week stay. I spent the bulk of my time in Fugong County, almost exactly half way up the valley. Fugong city has the highest concentration of Lisu in the valley, with estimations ranging from 60 to 90% of the total Lisu population. One official claimed that the Fugong urban area has a population of 9,000, with 80,000 more in the countryside. I was unable to find a way to verify this statistic, but my experience of the compact concrete patch spreading out into a rural sprawl of villages that stretched into the hills was consistent with this estimate. I had initially planned to divide my time between Fugong and Gongshan, the northernmost city in the valley, but due to a series of health problems I was unable to do so. Instead, I undertook one excursion to Laomudeng, a city high in the mountains halfway between Liuku and Fugong home mostly to Nu farmers, and otherwise spent my time in Fugong, where I began to appreciate the daily annoyances and joys of Lisu life as it went around me.

* * * * *

As I got comfortable navigating the world of the valley, I thought about what it was I wanted to learn from my time in Nujiang. I was particularly interested in stories like the one Sara had told me. The tale itself interestingly articulated ideals of Lisu morality and cultural identity in a narrative structure. But because the teller was a Christian woman growing up in the 21st century People’s Republic of China, the act itself—telling the story to a visiting American student—marked a point of cultural
convergence. In this moment of narrative performance, definitions of Lisu and Christian morality and identity interacted with powerful ideas of Chinese modernity and intercultural hierarchies of economic and racial power. As I traveled throughout Nujiang talking to people and hearing their stories, I began to see that storytelling was not the cordoned off activity that I had first defined for myself. I could not “collect” tales without also learning about the other powerful social influences with which storytelling is inextricably intertwines. Stories could no longer be “things” to me: instead, I began to see them as dynamic narrative practices embedded in a variety of social and cultural relations which they reflect and help to constitute.

I deliberately obscured my identity in the anecdote at the beginning of this introduction specifically in order to reflect this mindset. A great deal of literature on the subject of storytelling sees stories the way I did at the start of my research. Such texts treat the tales that comprise them as things, objects to be accumulated, dissected, flattened, and pinned down, without regard for cultural or chronological context. This thesis, however, will seek to fully contextualize the storytelling process, to relate fully and richly the circumstances that surround a tale—the people who tell and who listen; the surrounding sights, sounds, and tastes; and the pertinent ideas that comprise the full storytelling event. I feel strongly that only through this kind of approach can we begin to comprehend and appreciate the many layers of meaning and significance that comprise an oral tradition such as the one the Lisu of Nujiang have cultivated.

* * * * *
Methodology

In dealing with Chinese transliteration within this text, I have chosen to use the dominant system within the People’s Republic of China, pinyin. I have tried to include the Chinese characters along with their corresponding pinyin the first time a Chinese word appears. Subsequently, the pinyin appears without the character. The exception to this system is Chinese words that are better known in the U.S. using systems other than pinyin. The game mahjong is one such word—in pinyin the word would appear as *majiang*.

Because the concept of an academic set of social sciences is largely unfamiliar in the Nujiang area, although I tried my best to explain my intentions, I have still struggled with issues of informed consent. Furthermore, I feel ethically bound to protect the identities of the people who helped me, regardless of the nature of their assistance. Therefore, all of the names in this text have been changed to preserve privacy. I have used the following system to outfit my informants with aliases:

Many of my younger informants, especially those who had studied English previously, already possessed English names. Using these names in my field notes (and in this text) has helped me to remember my informant’s identities while not revealing their true names. I found it useful to give the remaining younger informants (here classified as under the age of 30) false English names as well: I feel this is ethically acceptable because most of these informants expressed interest in English and American culture—some even requested that I “name” them—and the grouping of these people in my notes through nomenclature did a great deal to simplify keeping track of more than 100 interviewees, helpers, and friends.
However, I felt it would be problematic to name my older informants (30 years old or more) in this fashion, as they generally belonged to a generation uninterested or even disdainful of Western culture. Furthermore, within the borders of Chinese culture, I was bound to call these informants with an honorific (“Mr.” “Mrs.” “Teacher,” etc.) Therefore, I have created my older informants’ aliases through the combination of an honorific and a false Chinese surname.

My research methodology largely took the shape of formal or informal interviewing, sometimes with the help of a translator. During the informal interviews, I used the method of guided conversation to urge the interviewee to tell me stories of different types, depending on his or her interpretation of my request for a story (using the Mandarin words 故事 gushi or 明鉴故事 mingjian gushi —“story” and “folktale” respectively.) During these conversations, I sometimes told a story of my own, and the conversation often also focused on my and the interviewee’s attitudes toward the tales. The formal interviews I conducted were similar in structure, but sometimes the informant had prepared some stories to tell me, and other times I used the opportunity to gain more general background information about the informant’s ethnic background and lifestyle.

Although these techniques fall mostly under the umbrella of “interview method,” I would argue that in a way they were also a form of participant observation. As the person on the receiving end of the told story, the listener, I was automatically implicated in the storytelling process. I brought my own cultural biases, experiences, expectations, and private goals to the interview site and these were, consciously or
unconsciously, part of the way I interpreted each story I heard. I was careful to ask as many people as possible what their perception of the “meaning” or “interest” (Mandarin: you shenme yisi 有什么意思) of each story was. Nevertheless, I will have unavoidably brought partialities to my analysis of these people, their stories, and the life that weaves them together.

Translation was an especially tricky part of the research process. On the whole, English speakers in Nujiang Prefecture are few and far between. Interviews were generally conducted in a mix of standard Mandarin, Mandarin dialect, and Lisu language. In Lanping, I worked with a translator named Jackson, a Bai native of Nujiang who is majoring in translation at Yunnan Normal University in Kunming and speaks Thai, Mandarin, German, English, Lanping dialect, and Bai language. Usually, Jackson’s translations were a mix of English and Mandarin, with final English translation coming from my own Mandarin understanding. In Lushui, I worked with Selena, a Pumi student studying at a vocational college in Liuku who spoke standard Mandarin and Liuku local dialect, as well as Pumi, Bai, and some Lisu. In Fugong, I worked with Cheryl, a Lisu dance instructor at the local Cultural Bureau, who spoke standard Mandarin, Fugong dialect, and several dialects of Lisu language. Both Selena’s and Cheryl’s translations were always into standard Mandarin (even the Mandarin of locals was difficult for me to understand because of the thick Nujiang accent), and I provided the final translation into English.

Regardless of the translator, the resulting texts are filled with small ethical issues. I found that in most of my interviews it was best to leave the tape recorder at home, as Nujiang residents were surprised and discomfited enough by the presence of
a Westerner without the additional pressure of a recording device. I did my best to take careful, detailed notes whenever possible; however, given the length of the interviews and the complexity of the sometimes two-step translation process (for example, Lisu dialect → Mandarin → English), the question of “What is a direct quote?” arises. The quotes and stories I cite in this paper have all been translated, sometimes more than once, and in some places, undoubtedly a change in meaning took place. In other situations, words were surely left out or changed, or the tone or implication of some phrase was altered. I fear that, in this case, such effects were unavoidable. I did my best throughout the research period to thoroughly record my own translations, and I also requested the help of friends and translators in remembering and working through connotations and word choice. The outcome is imperfect, but it is my hope that the rich vibrancy and complexity of Nujiang life comes through, nonetheless.

* * * * *

In Chapter 1 of this text, I draw largely on preexisting theories of exchange to discuss reciprocity in Nujiang. Marcel Mauss’ *The Gift* is an essential text within this analysis. Mauss’ argument that a mix of instrumental and emotional motivations is present in all exchange transactions (1990: 73) is important in my interpretation of my own reciprocal transactions with Lisu friends. I also make use of the idea that more than material objects are exchanged in acts of reciprocal gift giving:

What they exchange is not solely property and wealth, movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the
passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract (Mauss 1990: 5).

Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics* (1972), which builds on Mauss’ ideas, forms the rest of my general exchange theory foundation in Chapter 1. I draw in particular upon Sahlin’s argument, “If friends make gifts, gifts make friends… the material flow underwrites or initiates social relations” (1972: 186) in my portrayal of Nujiang gift giving. And in exploring the various complex nuances of that reciprocal system, I make use of Sahlins’ conception of reciprocity as a “between” relation which does not merge two exchange parties into one, but rather establishes a connection across difference.

Yuxiang Yan’s book *The Flow of Gifts* (1996) is equally essential in exploring the nuances of Nujiang’s social network. Yan did fieldwork in a village in northwest China, and so her book’s focus on 关系 guanxi, China’s widespread system of reciprocity, heavily informs my own take on gift giving and exchange in Nujiang Valley. Yan echoes Sahlins in her claim that gift exchange helps constitute social dynamics in China, an idea I find important to viewing my own integration into valley life:

“Gift exchange in China is embedded in a process anthropologists have called the ‘cultural construction of personhood’: individuals are required to learn how to deal with different categories of people though the practice of gift exchange. Gift exchange…defines the boundaries of the socially recognized person” (Yan 1996: 14).

Before I could comprehend the ways that Lisu storytelling connected diverse aspects of Nujiang life, I first had to find an acceptable place within the complex social hierarchies of the Valley. The deeply rooted guanxi network in Nujiang was
both the main obstacle to and chief instrument for my establishing myself in a social role in Lisu society. I found that my new Lisu friends and connections were very sensitive to the ethnic, national and economic differences in our position, and so they constructed me as an outsider, a category with local resonance that made me feel “othered” and isolated. Guanxi gift exchanges, when executed correctly, placed me in a pre-existing mold that allowed my new friends to locate me in a familiar, albeit still socially distant, position—but when I erred, breaking the unspoken rules of propriety, my status as an outsider was reinforced.

I find Yan’s discussion of Chinese reciprocity systems especially applicable to my work in Nujiang because of her differentiation between the more strict, instrumental portions of guanxi networking and an emotionally- and morally-driven portion of that system that she calls renqing. Yan defines renqing as a combination of compassion, affection, and “an understanding of others’ emotional responses” with the set of obligations inherent to the guanxi system (Yan 1996: 122). The concept of renqing helps me to analyze the ways my new friendships grew and changed throughout my stay in Nujiang, providing a lens through which to understand my struggles with physical illness, the surprising extent to which my friends cared for me, and the ways this new kind of interaction further shaped our relationship.

In Chapter 2, I turn to an exploration of the act of storytelling, making use of preexisting theories of oral tradition and ethnicity. Barbara Meyerhoff’s book Remembered Lives provides a rich resource here, especially her model of cultural performance, which can be applied to storytelling with interesting results. As she says,
“Cultural performances are reflective in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves... Performance is not merely a vehicle for being seen. Self-definition is attained through it, and this is tantamount to being what one claims to be. ‘We become what we display’” (Meyerhoff 1992: 235-236, emphasis in the original). I make use of Meyerhoff’s idea (which is related in several ways to a similar concept of Victor Turner’s) in tandem with a term coined by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1972). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the process of identity definition in her work on a community of Jewish immigrants in Toronto, giving the example of a body of folktales that portray the new Jewish immigrant as accident prone but deeply resourceful and resilient, an identity that is transmitted through these stories into the psyche of the listener.

As my relationships with my Lisu family developed, I began to see how storytelling and the ways I was going about seeking out stories fit closely with the rules of guanxi, how the morality of guanxi was caught up in the act of storytelling, and how the stories themselves drew deeply from and contributed to this morality. Therefore, working off Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s idea, I argue that Lisu identity definition involves the younger generation’s inculcation with moral standards and ethnic self-image through the medium of stories. And, using Meyerhoff’s work as a lens, I discuss how those moral standards further affect the stories which are told—thus, the storyteller participates in a dialectic of creating and being created, shaping and being shaped.
Finally, in Chapter 3 I turn to issues of cultural resistance, drawing upon the work of Lila Abu-Lughod, James Scott, and a trio of ethnographers who have done work on other Chinese indigenous peoples. In *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), Abu-Lughod describes a Bedouin society in which oral culture acts as a forum for the expression of certain sentiments that are unacceptable in other contexts. In everyday life, she says, these individuals express themselves in ways that represent the dominant system of morality, “but the coexistence in people’s poetic expressions of a set of contrary sentiments raises questions about the extent to which the dominant ideology determines… individual experience” (Abu-Lughod 1986: 255). Abu-Lughod’s exploration of Bedouin oral culture raises important questions regarding Lisu stories’ capacity for expressing content contrary to the dominant Chinese nationalist ideology.

During my time in Nujiang, I puzzled over the widespread use among Lisu of a seemingly hegemonic cultural narrative of progress that defined indigeneity in terms of an innate “backwardness” (Mandarin: 落后luohou) and associated correlation of laziness and immorality in the form of petty crime, gambling, poverty, and dirt. In response to the questions raised by Abu-Lughod’s text, I introduce the work of James Scott (1990), specifically looking at his important theories on the public versus the hidden transcript. Scott defines the *public transcript* as “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (1990: 2), in particular involving the tendency of subordinates in a public situation to “bow and scrape… appear to know their place and to stay in it, thereby indicating that they also know and recognize the place of their superiors” (Scott 1990: 33). In contrast, the *hidden transcript* presents a counter-ideology to the public
transcript, one that empowers subordinate peoples through one of the quiet methods of protest he calls infrapolitics. Specifically, Scott claims that subordinate groups must create insulated social spaces for themselves where the hidden transcript will be secure and the groups can go about their infrapolitical cultural production undisturbed (Scott: 1990: 183).

By this logic, Lisu storytelling has an important role as a form of cultural resistance: although my Lisu friends dutifully played along with the progress narrative, the stories of Lisu people in Lushui and Fugong counties challenged these negative assumptions. In telling their traditional stories, which were devoid of any mentions of backwardness and which reconfigured the past as a source of moral and cultural value, I found that Lisu narrators were implicitly contesting the prevailing negative construction of indigeneity as morally inferior. Instead, they infused their tales with cultural wisdom based in collective history, constructing their own alternative definition of what it means to be “modern” in contemporary China through a valorization of the past as a source of knowledge and power.

Throughout Chapter 3, I use recent ethnography by Louisa Schein (2000), Sarah Davis (2005), and Eric Mueggler (2002), who worked with other indigenous peoples in the PRC, to support this claim. For example, Schein discusses her impressions of the Miao (also known as Hmong) with whom she worked in Gansu province:

There were moments in which an indigenously and variously defined modernity was repeatedly constituted through acts that could be called performances. From off-handed comments at ceremonial vents to scripted acts on stage, Miao were negotiating their location in relation to the social categories that typed them. But, I will argue, they also were rearticulating those social categories through these acts.
Performing modernity works in tandem with the displacing of subalternity (2000: 258).

Schein’s text is powerful in its portrayal of a subordinate people attempting to negotiate and redefine dominant definitions of legitimacy in the PRC. The parallels present between the Lisu I met, Schein’s Miao, Davis’ Tai Lue, and Mueggler’s Yi suggest that this sort of infrapolitical protest is going on throughout China. It is my hope that by sharing my experiences and observations of Nujiang Valley in this text, readers can come to a deeper understanding of social dynamics and the power of storytelling in China, as part of a subordinate people’s struggle against oppression.

* * * * *

A Story of Stories

As you read through the following text, you may notice that it shares many traits with stories and other literary media. When I first approached telling the tale of Lisu stories and the Lisu world, it simply seemed “right” to me that a text about stories would take in some way the form of a story: I have always appreciated most those texts whose forms fit with their functions, and as a writer by training, I have a passion for wordcraft. During my research, however, I came upon the following passage in Shari Stone-Mediatori’s book Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance (2003: 165):

When a reader approaches a text as a story, that is, a creative reconstruction of subjective, not easily representable phenomena, then what comes to her attention are the text’s tentative, provocative, and poetic elements. Likewise, viewed as a story, the text reveals gaps, contradictions, and abrupt transitions, incoherences that reflect the writer’s never-complete attempt to come to terms with multiple, often contending memories. Read as a story, the text also appears
open-ended, as one attempt to render coherent a complex of boundless, continually evolving phenomena. Insofar as a reader attends to such tentative, poetic, and open-ended elements of a text, she cannot find certain truths to repeat robot-like. She can, however, find poetic insight into aspects of the world that are historically meaningful but not easy to see or theorize.

Stone-Mediatori goes on to claim: “When we read a text as a ‘story,’ we cannot analyze it from a detached viewpoint, nor can we authoritatively impose on it our presupposed categories, but we must respond with emotional sensitivity and intellectual openness to its unique and subjective content” (2003: 169).

These sentiments elegantly sum up my hopes for this text: instead of brushing aside the more inventive points of the following chapters as the quirks or whims of an English major; rather than merely appreciating these textual devices as decorative elements to a basically “factual” social science piece, I hope that the presence of storylike elements will encourage you to approach this text as a constructed narrative, a story. I hope that you will feel pushed to question the things you read, to reinterpret folktales and social interactions for yourself, to search out the gaps that subjectivity and positionality inevitably leave in a text, and to take away your own conclusions and lessons about the rich, verdant world of Nujiang Valley and its Lisu people.
Looking down Nujiang Valley from high in the mountains near Laomudeng

Women sell home-sewn Lisu skirts at the Fugong market
Chapter 1:

The Tiger Will Surely Eat You: *Guanxi, Renqing, and My Journey from the Outside In*

It was mid-July in Nujiang valley, and the skies were filled with drifting mists, heat slanting through the humidity-laden air. I had traveled to Gongshan, the county both northernmost and highest in altitude in the valley, near the border with Tibet. Here, rice terraces gave way to corn and barley, and stupas hung with prayer flags dotted the countryside. Gongshan’s Lisu population speak a dialect that my friends further south estimated was 80% unintelligible with Liuku Lisu, but I still hoped to learn about the people who made Gongshan their home and the stories which both reflected and shaped their lives. I was also eager to meet and learn about the Nu, an indigenous group that live only in the valley between Fugong and Bingzhongluo, the northernmost town in Nujiang.

My hosts in Gongshan were friends of friends I had made in Fugong—one was of Tibetan descent, one Nu, one Lisu. They all spoke Mandarin, albeit heavily accented, as well as the local Lisu dialect and their own mother tongues. After dinner my first night in Gongshan, they agreed to accompany me into the countryside outside of Bingzhongluo, a small town about an hour north and the last outpost before the Tibetan border. One cloudy afternoon a few days later, we hiked through the thick pine and oak forests blanketing the bottom of the valley to a scattering of traditional Nu homes hewn out of wood, bark, and stone. We drank tea outside the first house as 奶奶 nainai, or grandmother figure, wove white and blue fabric on a handloom in
the corner and her young grandson played with the chickens pecking in the yard. Suddenly, the young boy produced a crumpled Y10 note (about $1.50) from his pocket. The grownups around him—his mother and grandmother, as well as my two guides—all began cooing. “Where did you get that?” they asked him, smiling and ruffling his hair. We left not long after that, as the family had recommended that we visit an old man who lived about fifteen minutes walk away and was known for being able to tell many stories. The way through overgrown fields and undergrowth was hard going, so I did not speak up, but something about the Y10 note struck me as odd. It was a lot of money for a five-year-old boy to have on his person. Where had he gotten it?

We were received at the second Nu household in much the same way as at the first—an old nainai with a long braid coiled around her head served us tea, while her husband told several stories in Mandarin so heavily accented that I could not decipher it. As he spoke, my mind drifted away from the barking dogs and crowing roosters strutting around the yard. From the time I had spent thus far in China, I knew that I would be expected to recompense the family for their time and hospitality—for an obviously foreign white woman to simply appear and demand to hear stories without offering anything in return would be terribly rude. However, because the trip had been impromptu, I had not come prepared that day with the fruit, cigarettes, or rice wine that were my standard offerings. While I knew that money was sometimes an acceptable substitute, I had no idea how much would be appropriate. If I gave too little, I would offend my hosts—it would almost be worst than giving none at all. But if I gave too much, they would think me condescending, stupid, or both.
As the old man concluded his third story, I leaned over to one of my guides and asked, in as hushed a tone as I could manage, how much money I should give the family. He didn’t seem to understand my intention for discretion and, after a brief pause, replied at full volume that ¥100 (about $15) would be suitable. I was shocked—¥100 was a great deal of money, enough to buy dinner in a city for a large party, two nights at a decently clean hotel, or a round trip bus ticket virtually anywhere in the province. In any case, it would be an almost unheard of sum of money to receive in one lump sum for a farming family living in the Nujiang countryside. Nevertheless, I handed a ¥100 bill to the old man, thanking him as politely and sincerely as I could. He accepted it with a grunt, and we made our way slowly through the hazy fields back to the road.

Once we had reached the safety of the van, my guides made it clear to me that I had committed a faux pas of fairly large proportions. They told me that, as I suspected, ¥100 was an inappropriate sum and that ¥25 or ¥50 would have been sufficient. However, my attempts to discuss what I would give in front of the family—even though I had attempted to be discrete—were considered quite rude. In the best circumstances, they explained, the transaction of gifts is broken up in some way. Sometimes money is given in a card to be opened after the guest leaves, or else it is tucked in the pocket of a child to be discovered at some later date and given to the adults in the house. According to anthropological theory of reciprocity, an interval between gift and counter-gift is one way to distinguish gift exchange from commodity sale and purchase and may enable gifts to appear less instrumental and more “from the heart.” From this perspective, part of the reason behind giving goods instead of
cash, or enclosing the cash in a card, is that both alternatives (to cash handed over immediately, face to face) ritualize the exchange, bringing it to another level of significance, away from the mundane, everyday market transaction.

Although my friends’ admonitions had solved the mystery of the little Nu boy’s Y10, I still felt terrible. I had shamed my guides and myself and had reminded everyone involved that I came from an intensely foreign place and had only rudimentary abilities to function within their social rules. Worst of all, I had inadvertently insulted the very people who were trying to help me.

Gift giving and reciprocity have concerned anthropologists ever since Marcel Mauss published *The Gift* in 1924. In *The Gift*, Mauss delves deeply into the nuances of exchange systems, arguing that systems of reciprocity involve more than the give and take of material objects. Gift exchange, he says, also constitutes social systems:

> What they exchange is not solely property and wealth, movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract (1990: 5).

Mauss’ point about the “general and enduring contract” is most apropos here: the success of my work in Nujiang relied heavily on the social connections I made, connections which were in turn heavily reliant on acts of gift exchange. Indeed, the Chinese system of gift giving, reciprocity, and social networking known as 关系 *guanxi* was at work everywhere in Nujiang Valley. As someone coming from far away, I often struggled with learning the myriad rules of how to give, receive, and
ultimately behave “correctly” in the numerous instances of ritualized gift giving and more instrumental market transactions I navigated each day.

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In Western academic works, *guanxi* is often defined in terms of system of reciprocal giving. As Yuxiang Yan notes in her book “The Flow of Gifts”:

While Jacobs regards *guanxi* as the personal basis of Chinese politics, Andrew Walder views *guanxi* as an informal aspect of the institutional culture in socialist factories, “an exchange relationship that mingles instrumental intentions with personal feeling” (1986: 179). Translating *guanxi* as ‘instrumental-personal ties,’ Walder distinguishes these ties across the continuum, with particularism at one end and “ceremonialized bribery” at the other… The granting and receiving of favors of various kinds is the motivating force behind these personal ties (1996: 17).

Yan also notes that a number of scholars in recent years, such as Hwang (1987), King (1988) and Qiao (1988) have made efforts to elucidate Chinese reciprocity through “indigenous categories such as *renqing* (moral norms and human feelings), *mianzi* (face), and *bao* (reciprocity)” (1996: 14). I, too, will use these indigenous terms, focusing on *renqing* and *guanxi*.

For a solid definition of *guanxi*, it is useful to look to Yan, whose study of gift giving in a northeastern Chinese village called Xiajia includes elegant and thorough descriptions of the system. To begin her discussion, Yan presents an analysis of the etymological root of the Mandarin word for gift, 礼物 *liwu*. The first character, *li*, denotes ritual, propriety, and ceremonial expression of important and central ideas, while the second, *wu*, refers to material things. “The Chinese term indicates that a gift is more than a material present—it carries cultural rules (proprieties) and also
involves ritual” (1996: 44). Yan also argues that, “the structure of social relations in China rests largely on fluid person-centered social networks, rather than on fixed social institutions. Gift giving and other reciprocal exchanges therefore play a leading role in social life, especially in maintaining, reproducing, and modifying interpersonal relations” (1996: 14), a point that neatly defines the socially constitutive properties of Chinese reciprocity.

In comparison with some other Asian and South Asian gift exchange systems, *guanxi* puts less emphasis on spiritually charged symbolism, and the mystical. In her book about Japanese gift giving, for example, Katherine Rupp says of Japanese gifts, “The monetary amounts of these gifts were technically supposed to be odd numbers of 10,000 yen …. The bills were crisp and new, placed face up in the envelopes. The *mizuhiki* (dyed paper cords used to tie the envelopes) came in three strands, five strands, seven strands, and eleven strands” (2003: 5). Rupp’s description emphasizes the weight of cosmological values within presentational form in Japanese gift giving. In contrast, the *guanxi* I experienced in Nujiang and throughout China prizes the appropriateness of gifts in terms of giver and receiver but does not stress the magical or formal aspects of numbers or presentation. Gifts are not perceived as containing any innate mystical power, as in some other gift giving systems. Nevertheless, as I realized when I made the mistake of appearing to pay my Nu hosts for their storytelling services, gift giving in China still has a ritual character. Gift transactions may be ritualized through concern for the symbolic appropriateness of the object, which should in some way express the social relationship of the involved parties, or else by manipulating the temporal distance between gift and counter-gift. In this way,
a given exchange both exemplifies and constitutes the social distance between the two parties.

In *Stone Age Economics*, Marshall Sahlins states:

The connection between material flow and social relations is reciprocal. A specific social relation may constrain a given movement of goods, but a specific transaction... suggests a particular relation. If friends make gifts, gifts make friends... the material flow underwrites or initiates social relations (1972: 186).

According to Mauss, Sahlins, and the many authors who have taken up his legacy in studying reciprocity, gift exchange is about the myriad ways in which things become entangled with people and people with things, how objects both given and received can come to express interpersonal ties and to participate in and constitute what they express. The term *guanxi* can be used to denote both the system of gift giving and the web of social ties that these gifts create and maintain. It is important to make the delicate differentiation between these meanings—the two are very much interconnected but are not one and the same. As Yan explains, “the obligatory giving and receiving provides villagers with a fundamental means of cultivating, maintaining, and expanding their *guanxi* networks” (1996: 88, my emphasis), rather than comprising the *guanxi* itself. Instead, the skill with which the complexities and subtleties of interacting with one’s *guanxi* network, “building *guanxi*” as it is sometimes described, determine one’s social status and thus the ease with which one moves through the social realm of China in general and Nuijiang specifically. As I found in Gongshan and on countless other occasions, these rules of conduct were always shifting and changing. Yan had similar difficulties in Xiajia:

[Xiajia villagers] warned me not to be trapped by the rules. With their help I gradually gained the insight that most rules of social
exchange in Xiajia…could be, and frequently were, modified to some extent by specific contexts and under the influence of numerous factors (1996: 127).

I began to realize the Maussian implications of Chinese guanxi very early on in my time in China. Before beginning my fieldwork in Nujiang I spent three months studying Mandarin language and doing textual research on Chinese economics, literature, and minority culture in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. Besides helping us learn grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills, my teachers also acted partly as cultural guides. They often taught us about common cultural tropes (for example, the phrase 慢走 man zou, literally “walk slow” is analogous to the American expression “take it easy” or “take care” and is said when people are bidding each other goodbye). During one lesson, my teacher complimented me on my improving Chinese. When I answered “谢谢 xiexie,” which means thank you, she quickly corrected me. In polite Chinese society, she told me, even compliments are given and received in a specific way. Instead of thanking her, I should reply “哪里，哪里， nali, nali,” a difficult phrase to translate that literally means “Where? Where?” as in “Where would you get that idea?” or “I can’t accept this.” Thanking a person directly for a given compliment, she said, implies that the complimented individual is accepting the accolade and acknowledging its truth. Such a person would be considered immodest or arrogant.

In considering this interaction, I began to think of guanxi not only as a system of social ties but as a set of performances that display to the people in one’s social proximity how adept (or maladroit) one is at navigating the nuances of Chinese
society. Through these performances a person can identify him or herself as modest or arrogant; generous or stingy; morally upstanding or dishonorable, and so on. Furthermore, through successful maneuvering of the *guanxi* process a person achieves a specific social position that prescribes the behavior one’s *guanxi* partners are expected to exhibit toward him or her. And conversely, if one disrupts the order created by a working *guanxi* system, even unknowingly as I did, this behavior places one on the margins of the system and has far-reaching social consequences. When I arrived in Nujiang I was already considered an outsider by virtue of my skin color, ethnicity, body type, and nationality, and my insecurities and corresponding errors regarding *guanxi* interactions only reinforced this feeling.

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Toward the end of my stay in Nujiang valley, I went to visit Mr. and Mrs. Tui, a well-off Lisu couple who lived in the heart of Fugong city. Mr. Tui was a scholar of Lisu culture and traditional stories, and his living room was decorated lavishly with cultural artifacts: the traditional Lisu bow and arrow, several woven bags, carved wooden cups for *pijiù* (beer), rare furs, and more. Over steaming cups of green tea and a platter of watermelon seeds, I asked Mr. Tui to tell me a Lisu story. He adjusted himself on the low stool on which he sat and began:

A long, long time ago an old grandfather lived with his son and daughter. He was too old to take care of himself, so they labored for him and took care of him. One day, however, when the son went out to work he was eaten by Tiger.

When he found out, the old grandfather went to the Lord who ruled over his village and said: “Please help me, Tiger ate my son and I have no one to take care of me.” The Lord of the village’s assistant
was very tough, he was strong, and he could eat a lot of food. So the Lord sent his assistant to go get Tiger and bring him back. When they came in front of the Lord, he asked Tiger: “Did you eat this man’s son?”

Tiger honestly answered: “Yes, it was me.”

The Lord replied: “You will live in this old grandfather’s house and take care of him. You will labor for him and make him things to eat. When he dies, you will sit next to his grave for three years, to make sure no other animals eat his remains. After that, you are free to go.”

And so Tiger lived with the old grandfather and his daughter, laboring in the fields and taking care of him. A long time afterwards, the old grandfather finally died, and Tiger sat next to his grave making sure no animals ate his remains.

After two and a half years, the old grandfather’s daughter came and said: “You have been here for a long time. You don’t have to stay for the last half a year. You can go, be free.”

But Tiger replied: “No. I ate this old grandfather’s son, and the Lord of the Village said that I needed to wait by his grave for three years after he died. So that is what I will do.”

After another half year, he finally left and was free. He became the daughter’s husband, and they lived together and had many children, raised many crops and brought home lots of food. And Tiger, who liked to eat people, went around telling everyone: “When you go into the forest, if you hear a little sound and you don’t know where it is coming from you must say ‘Tiger, is that you?’ and I will know that it is a Lisu person and I will not eat you.”

So now we Lisu always know to say ‘Tiger, is that you?’ in Lama² when we go into the forest, and Tiger never eats us anymore.

Even now, in Burma, if there is a group of people sleeping in the forest, with Lisu people sleeping all around the edges and some Burmese in the middle, in the morning Tiger will have only eaten the Burmese. So, young daughter, you shouldn’t go into the forest, either, or Tiger will eat you, too!

I looked at Mr. Tui, who had addressed the last comment to me. “But what if I say, ‘Tiger, is that you?’ Then Tiger won’t eat me either,” I said.

My interpreter, Cheryl chimed in. “Oh, but he will say, ‘Look, her hair is so bright! Her skin is so white! She is certainly delicious,’” she replied, giggling.

² “Lama” is the word for Lisu indigenous language in that language. The Mandarin version is 傈僳话“Lisu hua,” literally “Lisu words.”
I found Mr. Tui’s story incredibly rich in cultural meaning. It gave insight into Lisu family structures and kinship ties; hinted at the aristocratic structure that once characterized some Lisu territories; provided a definition of masculine power and strength, associated with the ability to both consume and provide food (as Tiger learns to rein in his dangerous masculine consumption in favor of productivity); offered a definition of ‘justice’ and the possibility of expiation; and presented, through the last portion, a Lisu system of transnational relationships, despite the well-policied Sino-Burmese border. I will return later to the artistry and wisdom of Lisu stories, but in the immediate aftermath of Mr. Tui’s performance I was preoccupied with the story’s power to make me feel alienated and isolated.

Although I realize retrospectively that Mr. Tui was using a common tale-telling tactic in addressing me, drawing me (and my associated physicality) into the world of the story with his warning, in doing so he categorized me as deeply separate and heightened my awareness of being different. The story is an example of the tendency many of my Lisu friends showed to bring up the ways in which I differed from them at every opportunity, continually marking and reinforcing my position as an outsider. In examining at these interactions between my Lisu friends and me, I’m compelled to explore further what was happening. When my Lisu translator exclaimed over my white skin or my brown hair, when the man who came to be my Lisu father figure remarked on my weight, when a new friend identified me only as an “American comrade” to her family and everyone who came by, how and why were they locating me in their world?
These speech acts functioned to locate me firmly beyond the bounds of
Nujiang, an “outsider” coming into new territory. This classification was made more
powerful in that I was not just from “outside” Nujiang—I was a foreigner pictured as
coming from an almost mythical place of power. Few people in Nujiang have ever
been even as far as Kunming, and the idea of going all the way to America is almost
inconceivable to most. Indeed, not everyone has an accurate idea of where America
is—one young woman asked me if it were next to Japan. For many Lisu people, the
defining characteristic of this imagined America was its wealth, and this construction
mediated their interactions with me: in first encounters with Lisu, the conversation
often started with questions about finances in an American context. “How much does
an American make per month? How much does a plane ticket to America cost?” I was
repeatedly asked. This last question in particular demonstrated one basis for their
curiosity. They knew that I could afford a ticket from America to China, so in asking
after the price of a ticket they were in some ways asking if the reverse journey would
be in the realm of possibility for them. Their question was a subtle way of sizing me
up, implicitly comparing my life with theirs.

Although I always answered these questions as honestly as I could, my
mediocre Mandarin limited my ability to explain about the nuances of the American
class system. Regardless, any figures I provided were astronomical in comparison to
the cost of living in Nujiang, figures that only supported a widespread belief that all
Americans are wealthy, not just in money but in opportunities, as well. I was
repeatedly questioned as to how much money I personally had, and when my cell
phone was stolen, my companions explained that the thief probably assumed I had
enough money to buy a new phone without any financial strain. By combining these assumptions and my answers regarding the American class sphere with my everyday behavior, my Lisu friends were able to place me within their prior notions of what makes an American, locating me as coming from a higher position of education, wealth, power and influence.

My appearance further encouraged my classification as a high-status outsider. White skin has been coded as elite in China since dynastic days when a pale complexion signified that one possessed sufficient status and economic capital to not have to work in the fields: today this aesthetic ideal persists in a beauty industry that promotes a slew of skin bleaching creams and in an abundance of parasols on the street whenever the sun comes out. As working in the fields was an everyday reality for many of my largely brown-skinned Lisu friends, my own fair skin tone said volumes to them about my high social status. The fact that I am of heavy build only reinforced this assumption, especially among the older Lisu people I encountered. The Cultural Revolution, which included times of great famine, was only fifty years ago. For many Chinese, Lisu included, weight is not just an aesthetic value, it is an index of food availability, nutrition, and therefore wealth and status. When they called me fat (Mandarin: 胖pang), my Lisu parents, friends, and the people I met in the street were not impugning my self-control the way they might have been if the remark was within American context. Instead, this observation was another way of differentiating me from themselves and marking me as a status superior.

That is not to say that, given my own cultural background, these comments did not sting, for they certainly did. But, thanks to my training and preparation for my
time in Nujiang, which included warnings from teachers and friends that I might be subject to such commentary, I was able to distinguish between the given speaker’s intentions and the personal meaning to me, bound up in cultural processes of meaning making. With effort, I managed to recognize (intellectually, if not emotionally) that what felt like an insult was really a compliment, a comment, or observation, depending on the situation. Regardless of their intent, these constant allusions to my physical and cultural difference reminded me of my foreignness and of the inequalities between me and the Lisu people I me. They often made me feel like a token representative of Western culture, as if my difference was an insurmountable barrier keeping me from connecting with Lisu people the way I did with friends at home, and so in many ways this experience was very lonely.

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In her discussion of the guanxi system’s effects on social dynamics, Yan argues that gift exchange helps giver and receiver to comprehend their social roles in relation to one another, and quotes Schwartz (1971) in claiming that gifts are one way in which the images that others hold of us in their minds are created and passed on. Therefore, while my errors in guanxi negotiation helped to transmit to my new friends a picture of an outsider, my many attempts and (admittedly slow) progress in understanding the ways to properly function within the Nujiang social world conversely transmitted an image of someone who “fit”, who could slip into the pre-existing role in the march of giving and receiving. As Yan notes, Chinese gift exchange is deeply caught up in what anthropologists call the “cultural construction of personhood.” “Individuals are required to learn how to deal with different
categories of people though the practice of gift exchange. Gift exchange...defines the boundaries of the socially recognized person” (Yan 1996: 14). That is, in learning to build guanxi I was also learning how to perform myself as an acceptable figure in Chinese society and where the boundaries of this social being were located. While my lack of social virtuosity demonstrated that I was an outsider in Nujiang, in eventually learning to participate in the complex Nujiang social world I created a space for myself on the “inside.”

One illustrative example of my participation in guanxi exchanges took place on my very first night in Fugong. That night I was not feeling so well. I had been trying to get to Nujiang from Kunming for almost a full week, but the trip entailed ten hours on a sleeper bus, and my stomach had been refusing to behave. Finally, after changing my ticket again and again, I had managed to settle my stomach enough to ride through the Yunnan countryside to Liuku. It was the beginning of the summer and the weather was suffocatingly humid. I had already spent two weeks in Liuku during May, so when I could stand the heat no longer I hopped on a bus up the valley through towering peaks covered with incredible greenery.

Four hours later, I stumbled off the bus in Fugong. As I fetched my suitcase from the back of the dirty white van, I realized with a start that I had forgotten my trusty Lonely Planet travel guide in Kunming. I had a few phone numbers but no real idea of where I might stay. The bus station was typical for Yunnan’s rural outposts, featuring a small parking lot with a few of the minivans that provide public transportation to villages throughout the countryside, a filthy bathroom without running water, and a mostly toothless woman in the neon plaid headscarf of the
countryside farmer who tried to sell me bottled water. I drew stares from loiterers around the parking lot as I gathered my bags together and headed inside the station to ask where I might find lodgings. As it happened, there was a small government-sponsored hotel run out of the upstairs. The Bus Stop Hotel, as it was called, was shabby but inexpensive and clean, and it would be my home for the next four weeks. I unpacked my bags and sat on the low bed with the fan on high, unsure what to do next. Finally, I decided to use the connections I had made in Liuku. My teacher in Kunming, Mrs. Su, had given me the names of some Lisu who worked in the Liuku Cultural Bureau with whom she had professional ties (and thus guanxi connections). Although I was beginning my time in Fugong completely outside the social system, when I told these people that I was Mrs. Su’s student, their ties to her obligated them to help in any way they could (with the assumption that Mrs. Su would do the same if the situation were reversed), so they referred me to a colleague in Fugong I’ll call Mr. Bi. The great majority of my friends and helpers in Nujiang were initially contacted in this way, and eventually I was able to insert myself into situations in which obligation mixed with friendship and affection.

My phone call went very much as anticipated: as soon as I had identified myself as an American student researching Lisu traditional storytelling and dropped the name of his associate, Mr. Bi invited me out to dinner. The playing out of guanxi, especially in an international context, involves the helper performing the Chinese definition of magnanimous host—Mr. Bi was obligated to treat me to a large meal, complete with 白酒 baijiu (strong Chinese rice wine). This expectation was especially strong because Mr. Bi was an official at the local Cultural Bureau. As a
representative of the PRC government, he was to act as a kind of cultural diplomat on the small scale while also, presumably, keeping an eye on the potentially intrusive foreigner. I, too, was implicated in this play of behaviors, slipping into a prescribed social role—I was to act as the educated, wealthy “foreign friend” who initially resists the display of culinary generosity but who eventually eats her fill, or at least what looks to her hosts like her fill, regardless of her actual appetite.

These expectations paved the way for what prove to be an exceedingly awkward dinner. I met Mr. Bi and his colleague, a 26-year-old Lisu woman whom I’ll call Jean, at a local restaurant. There, they had procured a large private table for us able to accommodate (and usually reserved for) parties of ten or more. Mr. Bi had ordered an array of dishes that followed the standard of what Chinese people tend to assume foreigners will like—egg scrambled in oil with tomato, fried vegetables, a sweet cornmeal dessert. Mr. Bi and Jane had already eaten at a previous engagement, but they had felt obliged to meet me for dinner as well, which meant that the onus was on me to eat all of the provided dishes.

The problem of my upset stomach presented itself here, especially: I had little to no appetite and could barely bring myself to taste the food. Feeling constricted by the social expectations and implications of consuming the symbols of my host’s generosity, I pushed the food around on my plate and forced myself to eat a few kernels of corn and a bowl of rice. I had to leave most of the plates untouched, an embarrassment to both my host and me, but as in many Chinese social interactions, this failure was not something we could directly address. Instead, after a time I assured Mr. Bi that I was really full and that the food had been delicious, but that I
wasn’t feeling so well, so he excused himself to go about some official business.

Having toasted our new friendship with a shot of *baijiu*, he departed, promising to find me a translator. Although I would only see Mr. Bi a few more times during my three-week stay in Fugong, our *guanxi* relationship was cemented. When Jean departed for summer classes in Kunming, Mr. Bi was able to help me find another translator, and his *guanxi* ties with other powerful players in Nujiang opened many doors for me throughout my stay there.

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Many of the *guanxi* exchanges in which I participated during my time in Nujiang would be categorized by Yan’s Xiajia villagers as “lubricating gifts”:

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The most salient feature of a lubricating gift is that it is given before a favor is asked. No previous basis of personal interaction is needed… lubricating gift giving is usually a businesslike, rational, and calculated act, which can lead only to a temporary and purely instrumental relationship between the giver and the recipient (1996: 70).
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Here we see how within the *guanxi* universe the establishment of social relationships is a process in which gifts play a variety of roles; the outcome of a given exchange transaction is not predetermined, but will depend on a variety of circumstances (the social positions of those involved, their skill in navigating the regulations regarding propriety of material flow, and so on.) Therefore, *guanxi* reciprocity is not a mechanistic structure, but a set of strategies for negotiating a web of rules and their corresponding relationships. This process licenses the “calculating” expectation of a return inherent in a lubricating gift, but only in the initial stages of what will to be a more lengthy relationship: Sahlins might call this the “gift make friends” stage.
However, in a temporary relationship of hospitality, such calculation may be perceived as taboo—another step in understanding my error during the visit to the Nu family

I generally gave lubricating gifts to the local academics, writers, cultural experts, and villagers of all kinds who told me stories about Lisu life. Because stories in Lisu culture are generally limited to the private sphere of family life, I had to travel to offices, teahouses, and private homes to ask to be told stories, instead of attending a public storytelling event. As noted in the beginning of this chapter, it would have been unacceptable for a foreign white woman to show up at the house or workplace of a stranger asking for help without some form of gift. Yan says similarly when she explains that, “one may be in the situation of asking a favor from someone who is outside the preexisting network... One way to return the favor is to present a gift of thanks, and this is considered an indirect payment by both sides” (1996: 68).

Following similar directions from my Lisu friends, when I went on these visits I often gave out cigarettes, tea, or gifts that I had brought with me from the U.S.: the difference between explicit compensation such as cash and gift items like these, which at least nominally add to the sociability of the visit, allowed both me and the people I was visiting to present ourselves as uncalculating. I became connected with a wide circle of people in the local government, the Chinese and Lisu academies, and the villages surrounding urban Fugong through these visits. My methods of study and my avenues for research were completely dependent on my negotiation of guanxi.

In studying Japanese gift giving Rupp examines the gift not just as a symbol of a particular person or self, but also as a way of representing the social relationship
between giver and receiver—the place that that relationship occupies in a “social and cosmic order.” A given gift, she argues, “situates people, it changes statuses” (2003: 197). In this way, in constructing my relationships with my new friends and helpers through gift exchange, I was unwittingly negotiating the Nujiang social hierarchy as well. I was not just finding a space in Nujiang society; I was building my own niche in the social order—a niche that came with pre-existing (and, thus, more familiar and comfortable) guidelines for my new friends to follow in their behavior toward me. And yet, as I continued to explore the city, trying to learn as much and meet as many people as I could, I still felt distant, set apart, as if an insurmountable barrier separated me from really connecting with my new friends. This feeling would never be entirely dispelled, but an unexpected obstacle would ultimately help me on the way to social intimacy.

In exploring situations of guanxi reciprocal giving, Yan follows Mauss in pointing out the complicated relationship between expressiveness and instrumentality in gift giving. In Xiajia daily life, she says, “the pure types of expressive and instrumental gifts do not exist; rather, elements of expressivity and instrumentality coexist in almost all activities of gift giving, but in different ratios” (1996: 45). Indeed, in Nujiang and Xiajia alike, “the cultivation of personal networks in village society is both a power game and a life-style; guanxi involves not only instrumentality and rational calculation, but also sociability, morality, intentionality, and personal affection” (Yan 1996: 88). Here is the first time in Yan’s book that we hear about the role of personal affection and social closeness within guanxi relations, and it is an
important role that greatly affected my own relationships with my Lisu friends in Nujiang.

Although I never heard it used in Nujiang (or at least cannot recall so), renqing is still a useful term to explain the missing link I felt at the beginning of my time in Nujiang, the extra component that kept me from what I, a Western white woman, perceived as closeness with the people I was meeting. Yan and the Xiajia villagers define it as follows:

First, it means human feelings—the basic emotional responses of an individual in connotation with various daily life situations. In this first meaning, renqing is social in nature and requires that one have an understanding of others’ emotional responses with his or her own. Second, renqing indicates a set of social norms and moral obligations (1996: 122).

Sahlins makes the important point that: “reciprocity is a ‘between’ relation. It does not dissolve the separate parties within a higher unity, but on the contrary, in correlating their opposition, perpetuates it” (1972: 170). In my day-to-day participation in guanxi exchanges, I was defining myself as an actor in the Nujiang social sphere, but I was still perpetuating the idea of being “apart.” Per Sahlins’ point, reciprocal alliances between groups maintain social distance, while alliances within groups build unity. Thus, as long as I was perceived as coming from a separate group, participating in guanxi would continually reconstruct my position as an outsider. It was not until I was accepted into a group that this social distance was reduced.

My own experience with gaining renqing during my stay in Nujiang came through a protracted period of ill health. Food-borne illness is an everyday reality for the international visitor to Yunnan. Like their peers addressing travel in other “non-Western” countries, guidebooks about Yunnan advise against drinking un-boiled
water, eating uncooked vegetables or unpeeled fruits, and consuming food made on
the street. In my own experience, however, one could only be so careful. Eventually
everyone slipped, whether the incident resulted from feeling obliged to consume
some potentially unsafe food out of politeness or from forgetting oneself in an
automatic act like brushing one’s teeth. And even if no such mistake was made,
sometimes one got sick, anyway. I got one of the worst cases of food poisoning
anyone in my study abroad program had ever seen from an expensive Western
restaurant in Lijiang; later, during my research period in the summer I contracted
what was probably amoebic dysentery from an unidentifiable source.

I was suffering from the beginnings of this dysentery when I first arrived in
Fugong in July. Luckily, I had a few days in Fugong before chronic discomfort really
began to get in the way of my ability to function. I was able use my slowly improving
skills in building guanxi to make social connections with a Lisu scholar I’ll call
Teacher Fu, a traditional Lisu dance teacher I’ll call Cheryl, who would eventually
become my translator, and her younger half-sister Diana, all of whom had peripheral
positions at the local Cultural Bureau. Originally it was my intention to formally
interview Teacher Fu and learn about the way Lisu academics talk about themselves,
an exchange in character with the instrumental relationships I had grown used to
building during my research period. But as my illness got worse and I was able to
leave my hotel room less and less, Teacher Fu took on a new role in my life.

For the span of my gastric illness, which lasted almost three weeks, Teacher
Fu would show up at my door almost every morning. “Good morning, Guo,” he
would say using my Chinese family name (a transliteration of ‘Greenberg’), “Put on
your shoes, we’re going out.” Then he and his wife would take me to some roadside restaurant in the heart of the city and make sure I ate something—a plate of mantou (plain, fried dumplings), hot chicken broth, or a bowl of salty pickled rice porridge. While Teacher Fu went to exchange business tips and local gossip with the restaurant’s owner, Mrs. Fu would sit opposite me and encourage me repeatedly to eat slowly until I was full. “It’s still early,” she would say, smiling at me with crooked teeth, “We can sit here until evening if you want. But you should finish your food.” And I, nauseous and without appetite, would try—for her.

Teacher Fu was also in the habit of lecturing me on a variety of topics in an authoritative, paternal manner that led me refer to him as “Foster Dad” in my field notes. Popular topics included “Why your health is the number one priority” and “You really brought too many things to Nujiang, next time you should bring fewer things.” When two rounds of Cipro did little to improve my digestive issues, Teacher Fu brought me to the only Western/Eastern combination pharmacy in Fugong. There, lying on a ratty bedstead behind the counter, I received IV fluids while he played Go with the pharmacist in the open doorway of the storefront, calling out to friends as they passed by, smoking endless cigarettes, and strewing the floor with sunflower seed shells.

The dysentery, which eventually cleared up with the use of a first-generation version of sulfa antibiotics, was unfortunately not the only my only incidence of medical problems during my time in Nujiang. Only a few days after I had begun to truly feel better, I went on a grueling three-hour van ride with Cheryl and Diana to Laomudeng, a Lisu and Nu village in the upper mountains of Nujiang between Liuku
and Fugong. While exploring Laomudeng, I accidentally tumbled headlong off a path running along a retaining wall and severely sprained my foot.

During the next week my mobility was extremely limited. I’d gotten a pair of crutches from a Canadian aid worker/missionary who lived on the outskirts of Fugong, but it was still very difficult for me to get around to the villages I had been previously visiting to meet Lisu people and hear their stories. Cheryl, Diana, and Teacher Fu were enormously generous during this time. They brought me food, helped me go to the makeshift county hospital to get a Y40 ($6) X-ray, and told me Lisu stories while I lay with my foot up on my bed. During this time both the Fus and Cheryl and Diana made mention of our strengthening bond. As I was preparing to leave for the Gongshan trip mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, and not long after that to go back to the U.S., they separately commented that, “Now you can say you have family in Nujiang.” In fact, by the end of my stay Cheryl (age 30) and Diana, who was one year younger than me, were encouraging me to call them 菊姐 and 妹妹 meimei (elder and younger sister) respectively, and were addressing me with reciprocal terms as well. Similarly, Teacher Fu often addressed me as 小郭 xiao guo, meaning "small Guo," a nickname referring to my Mandarin-translated family name that follows a common method for parents to refer to their offspring. I referred to Teacher Fu as “Foster Dad” in my notes in the spirit of entertainment and humor, but there is something important in this familial metaphor for our relationship. The role Teacher Fu took in my life beginning at the time of my illness was definitely paternal.
I interpret the use of fictive kin terms as a sign of the beginning of a transfer from structural *guanxi* obligation to *renqing* compassion; from symmetric exchange *between* two groups to my incorporation *into* a family group. By treating me as if I were a daughter or sister, my Lisu family was mobilizing conventional norms of conduct to ease the navigation of social terrain with a Western stranger and was, in a way, making me space on the “inside.” At this point, little acts of nurturing within the group become a matter of morality—caring for a sick loved one is simply “what one does” in a family group if one is a “good person.” In this sort of exchange, the prospect of returns becomes less important, in favor of a united feeling that “we share what we have,” from material resources to emotional support. In fact, I believe that it was because I was in a situation in which I truly *could not* return the gifts I was being given (in the form of caring behavior) that the way my Lisu friends viewed me changed so profoundly. As someone who couldn’t walk to the Internet café or go out to dinner on her own, I was temporarily removed from the classed, raced outsider identity that was otherwise ever-present in interactions with my Lisu friends. Instead, I became simply a vulnerable person who could benefit from help. This vulnerability, compounded by the perceived helplessness of my youth, facilitated the creation of a symbolic familial bond through the recognition of need, helping a new dynamic of compassion and affection develop between my Lisu family and I—*renqing*.

Before my illness I had found ways of inserting myself into the pre-established social system, but the “between” act of giving and receiving kept me separate, reinforcing my outsider status. Getting sick, however, gave my Lisu friends
an opportunity to show affection outside this relationship, to make me into what Xiajia residents call *tunqin* or “relatives of coresidence”:

The word *tun* is the local term for ‘village’ and *qin* means “kin” as well as “close” or “intimate… *tunqin* is still a kind of personal relationship created through individual cultivation rather than a preexisting membership for anyone born into the community… In anthropological literature, friendship in a village community has often been considered secondary in comparison to kinship. However in contemporary Xiajia community friendship is secondary only in the sense that it is created by personal efforts” (1996: 108).

Thus, by beginning to treat me as family and engaging in exchanges of emotional affection and caring (Yan’s *renqing*) I would argue that my Lisu friends were making me into *tunqin*, dissolving most of my outsider markers. Specifically, I was now allowed to participate in what Yan calls 走动 *zoudong* (literally “walking and moving”), in which “In addition to routinized gift exchange, people with good feelings visit each other quite often, spend time together, and emotionally depend on each other” (1996: 109).

Toward the end of my stay in Nujiang, my participation in *guanxi*, *renqing*, and *zoudong* on a daily basis meant that these interactions and the social systems they made up seemed less like “things” to be collected and more like processes in constant motion and states of change. This recognition heavily informs the way I view Lisu presentations of cultural identity, storytelling, and the stories themselves. To return to the Maussian theory of the gift, *guanxi* and reciprocal giving in Nujiang are not just about the exchange of material things. In building and maintaining *guanxi*, I not only exchanged concrete things as gifts, but also gave and received words, symbols, courtesies and—most significantly for the following chapter—stories.
A Christian church outside of Liuku, labeled in English, Chinese, and Lisu.

The city of Liuku, from a bridge overlooking the Nu River.
On that first night in Fugong, after Mr. Bi slipped away, I was left with his assistant, Jean. As we sipped cups of hot water for the customary sitting period following a meal, Jean told me a little about herself. She had been raised and had attended college in Lijiang, a major center of ethnic tourism about eight hours away by bus and had come to Fugong within the last few years to find work at the Cultural Bureau. Jean was scheduled to depart for Kunming to attend summer classes the next day, and throughout the evening she periodically expressed her regret at leaving Nujiang because we were sure to have become “great friends.” We did seem to be getting along well, so despite my upset stomach I decided to accept her invitation for a walk around the city, to be followed by a visit to her friend’s teahouse.

I quickly discovered that late-evening strolls are very popular among the Fugong population. Jean and I walked a loop through rapidly darkening streets lined with open-air noodle shops, convenience stores, and street food stalls, rickety motorcycle taxis pulling up alongside us every few feet to ask if we wanted a ride. All around, Lisu people walked alongside us to whatever business waited for them in the early evening. There were no other foreigners on the streets, or anywhere to be seen. Sometimes the passersby called out greetings to the 老外 laowai (a Mandarin slang word for foreigner), or else stared curiously at me, nudging their companions. A man
walked past, leading a young donkey by a rough length of rope; stray dogs played around the feet of those still eating dinner at low tables set out in the warm air. We ended our stroll on a small metal-and-springs bridge that spanned the roaring Nu River. From the middle of the bridge I could see the entirety of Fugong’s small urban center, with the green valley walls rising up dramatically on either side. Lights from the buildings twinkled as the evening darkness descended.

I lingered on the bridge for a while to admire the view and then followed Jean back through the throng of food vendors hawking potatoes slow cooked in charcoal and spicy chuanr (an originally Mongolian, heavily-spiced meat kebab). After a few minutes’ walk we arrived at a teahouse owned by Jean’s friend, whom I’ll call Susan. Teahouses in Nujiang, and throughout Yunnan, are centers of intensive social activity, especially at night. They offer both open-air and private rooms for groups of friends or co-workers who come to drink juice, beer, and baijiu; eat watermelon and sunflower seeds by the pound; and generally gossip, flirt, and hang out. Jean got us a semi-private booth and two bottles of the local beer. Once we had settled into our chairs and the fan was oscillating slowly above us, I asked her if she knew any Lisu stories to tell me.

Jean started by telling me a tale in the context of explaining Nujiang geography. She drew a map for me on some scrap paper, explaining that she wanted to make sure I hit all of the “important and interesting” Nujiang sites, since she wouldn’t be around to guide me. Her map included the Nu outpost Laomudeng, the abandoned city near Bijiang, a few villages outside of Fugong, and the famous Shiyue liang or “bright stone moon,” a well-known geological formation in the
region. While discussing sites in Laomudeng, Jean suddenly thought of a story about one of its outlying villages, which she decided to tell me; she accompanied her rendition with sketched pictures depicting the house and stone that figure in the tale:

Not far from here there is a place called Feilai [literally “came by flying”]. There was a house there, a traditional one with four walls and a courtyard, that was built on top of an enormous stone underground. One day the people who lived in the house woke up to find another enormous stone resting in the middle of their courtyard. It had come very quietly at night, hadn’t hurt anybody or damaged the house, hadn’t even woken anyone up.

There are two stories about this stone. One is that the stone underground was the lover of the stone that flew in, that the stone came looking for its lover. The other is that the stone underground was the mother of the stone that flew in. They thought that if the stone had wanted to make war or something bad, it wouldn’t have been so quiet as to not wake anyone up.

I found the power of names particularly significant here—the tale purports to explain the origin of a feature of the Nujiang landscape by a process of folk etymology. Specifically, by associating the phrase “came by flying” with a fallen rock, the story cements a bond between event and landscape, explaining how the rock appeared. The tale further imbues a random geological event with cultural significance, emphasizing the interaction of human and natural forces and portraying the latter as very powerful (a fact to which any traveler who has ridden on the twisting Nujiang roads, dodging rock falls after a rainstorm can attest) but capable of mercy.

Once she began telling stories, Jean warmed to her performance. She told me other thematically linked stories in rapid succession, including a Lisu creation tale involving a wily orphan (Mandarin: 孤儿 guer), who is often the symbol of Lisu people in folk stories:

A long time ago the Dragon King’s daughter fell in love with an orphan, a shepherd who didn’t have anything—not his own
belongings or his own house. He relied on other people and slept in their houses. The Dragon King was very angry because his daughter had already agreed to marry someone else. The two ran away to a mountain, but the Dragon King made a great flood, and the valley filled up with water. Finally the orphan took up a sword and made a hole in the mountain so that they could escape to the next valley, where there was no flood. That couple were the first Lisu, and so we think of the Shiyueliang as our homeland. Lisu from everywhere—Tengchong, Burma, Nujiang—will come to see the hole in the mountain.

On one level, the tale of how a poor orphan outsmarted the powerful Dragon King offers an aetiological account of certain physical features of the Nujiang landscape. On another, it associates the Lisu with a humble ancestor who succeeds through resourcefulness and resilience, rather than brute strength or status, to win out over a more powerful and dangerous adversary. I am especially interested in Jean’s personal addition to the tale: her commentary on Shiyueliang as a site of pilgrimage and ethnic unity for Lisu people. The way it brings a storied past into the present makes its telling within the Lisu area of Nujiang, Tengchong, and Burma a constitutive act. Specifically, if Lisu recite the story across regional and national borders, passing around the idea of an ancient geological formation as a site of Lisu genesis, then the corresponding physical location becomes a space of cultural oneness created by that fictive past. Thus, in coming to Shiyueliang, visiting pilgrims project unity onto present dispersal and are able to in some sense return to this past sense of unity.

The last story Jean told me involved a detailed description of one piece of traditional Lisu dress, a skirt worn by young, unmarried girls. The narrative seemed

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I would later hear other versions of this story in which the orphan uses the traditional Lisu bow and arrow instead of a sword.
like a simple explanation of custom at first, but I soon realized that Jean was actually
reiterating and condensing the other tales’ portrayals of Lisu as a strong, resourceful,
widely-scattered people who remain closely bonded despite the distance that divides
them from one another:

Before, a long time ago, Lisu traditional skirts were very wide, pleated so that you could lift them over your head and make a circle. Now, we don’t need them to be so wide, but we still have the wide white stripe down the center. This stripe has two meanings: one is so we can remember that, except for places where God says we cannot live, like the ocean, Lisu people have brothers and sisters everywhere. The second is to remind the woman who wears it to raise a good child, a white-colored child, who will do good things and not steal or take advantage of or hurt other people.

In hearing this story, I could not help but be struck by the concentric images it evokes, concretely in the description of the skirt and more abstractly in the cosmological system of dispersal outward from a central point (for example, \textit{Shiyueliang}, as constructed in Jean’s second story.) The contrast between center and periphery corresponds elegantly to the temporal difference between the distant past and the present, then and now—the discursive interaction of these categories will become a central focus in Chapter 3. I also find the presence of a motif of “whiteness” (in the pigmented and, perhaps by extension, racial sense) and its valorized position within Nujiang important here. There are connotations of purity present, and, as previously mentioned, fair skin color is signifier of high class status in Lisu society and Yunnan as a whole. The idea of a “white-colored child” refers to a child who will do no harm to others, who is morally sound and in general a “good person”—therefore, I interpret the story as exhorting mothers to teach their children to be morally upright, while also commenting on the class dynamic in Lisu society.
As I sipped my beer, trying not to think about how nauseous I felt and attempting to focus instead on the stories Jean was telling me, several of her friends dropped by our table. Teahouse social interactions in Nujiang take place within a sort of mini-community, with each table functioning as a loosely defined social unit. The members of each table come and go, visiting other tables where other friends and family are occupied with mahjong, gossip, or Chinese poker. They bring with them beer, baijiu, or sunflower seeds as gifts in the same way they would upon visiting a friend’s house. As her friends stopped to talk with us, Jean introduced me as “our foreign friend who is interested in stories,” and in turn her friends greeted me cordially, sometimes switching into Lama (Lisu language) to talk excitedly. They asked me questions about life in America and toasted me repeatedly with beer, becoming more inebriated the longer they stayed.

One of Jean’s friends, who was about my age and whom I’ll call Lily, acquiesced to my request for a story. She was fairly drunk, but still shy enough to be reticent about performing, so I volunteered to tell her one first. I opted to recite the American Thanksgiving narrative, which would become one of the several stories I often translated in such situations using my mediocre Mandarin. I chose this story because it was familiar and comfortable; because it involved a holiday that was educational in its portrayal of American traditions; and because it involved American Indians, a subject about which Lisu people often asked me, as American Indians are the closest analog to Chinese indigenous peoples.

I should note that the Mandarin word I used here, 少数民族 shaoshu minzu, does not translate directly to “indigenous peoples” but rather to the more politically charged term “minority nationalities.”
deficiencies, I told a significantly simplified version of the Thanksgiving story, similar to the narrative I was taught in grade school, which leaves out most of the historical complications. (In future renditions, I would sometimes append to the story a commentary on the ways in which Americans and the American government have mistreated American Indians.) I ate a couple of watermelon seeds and cleared my throat:

Do you know the story about the American traditional holiday called Thanksgiving? About three hundred years ago there were some people in England who had a special religion. The emperor of England said, “You can’t believe in that religion,” and so the people decided that they would leave. They rode a boat to a place in America’s northeast part where the weather was very cold and it often snowed. They weren’t used to this kind of weather and they didn’t know how to find food, so they felt very hungry. Many of the people got sick, and many died.

There had been some people who lived in America before these English people had arrived, American ethnic minorities, and they came and helped the English people make food and find medicine. When springtime came, some of the people were still alive, and they felt very happy and grateful, so they had a big dinner to say thank you for all of the help. So now every year in November we get together with our families—like your New Year—and eat a big dinner, with turkey and potatoes and vegetables, and think about what we are grateful for.

Lily and Jean listened with interest to my narration. When I was finished, Lily, emboldened by my telling, reciprocated with a story of her own:

Once there was an orphan who would go fishing every day, and every day he caught a fish and let it go. One day, two days, three days, four days, and he began to get upset that he kept letting the fish go. Finally, he took it home with him and put it in the well in his home. Every day he went out to go fishing again. When he came back, he would discover food—chicken, beef, fish—all laid out for him. Finally one day he pretended to prepare to go fishing but really quietly watched who was making him food. As soon as he left, the fish turned into a woman! He came into the house and said, “Who are you?” and she said, “I am your wife!”
It turned out that she was the daughter of the Dragon King, who wanted to test the orphan to see if he was worthy. He told the orphan: I am going to test you. I will give you three opportunities, and you cannot laugh or you will fall into the river. The first time, the orphan saw his grandfather, and he smiled and could not help but laugh. The second time, the orphan saw his grandfather, and he smiled again and could not help but laugh. The third time, the dragon king said, “This is your last chance, if you laugh there is nothing to be done, you will fall in the river and die.” The orphan saw his grandfather and did not laugh.

It wasn’t clear to me whether she was finished with the story, but at this point Lily was hailed by a new group of young people who had come into the teahouse, and so she trailed off, told me that it was nice to meet me, and departed to continue her table rounds. Despite the abrupt ending, I was intrigued. I recognized the orphan character from the other stories Jean had told me that evening. I noted with interest that this particular tale dealt with the theme of the orphan whose patience and compassion is rewarded, in this case with a marital union to a woman whose high economic status provides the economic privilege of plentiful food. Now, looking back at that evening, I am struck in particular by the tale’s contrast with the story Mr. Tui told me about Tiger in Chapter 1—here, the fish woman nourishes people, in contrast with the Tiger who ate them; but both stories portray alliances between the animal and human worlds. The story also contrasts with Jean’s story about the creation of Shiyueliang, specifically in terms of the open versus the closed. In this version, the boy must remain closed, exhibiting social restraint, to show proper respect for his father-in-law; in the other version, he opens a hole in the mountain to get away from his father-in-law.
My narrative transaction with Lily and my experiences in the teahouse that first night in Fugong also comprise an excellent example of the way *guanxi* reciprocity can be applied to more than material goods. By using my new bond with Jean to make new social contacts in the teahouse, I was implicitly participating in social *guanxi*. The literal exchange of one story for another that ensued was an application of reciprocity to stories, which served to connect us socially in the same way as an exchange of material gifts would. This would become one of the most common methods I used to persuade shy or reticent Lisu people to tell me stories in Nujiang: by invoking *guanxi*, I was able to tap into mutual cultural interests, as well as definitions of fairness and standards for performance of the host/hostess role and of generosity in general. I found this particular strategy quite effective in persuading Lisu to open up where they were normally bashful. The time I spent telling American stories was generally when I felt the closest to my Lisu friends: I was spending time teaching them a little bit about my own upbringing, about aspects of myself and my identity that were more familiar, intimate, and specific than the “outsider intellectual white woman” identity that was generally assigned to me.

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According to the storytellers with whom I spoke, although storytelling used to be a form of public entertainment, these days Lisu tales are told in private, usually passed from grandparent to grandchild or parent to child and most often told in the evening after dinner or as a bedtime story. Therefore, I had to specifically solicit tales from my contacts in a synthetic, created setting, rather than attending a “natural”
storytelling event that would have taken place with or without my presence. The benefit of this situation, however, was that I was more easily able to view stories as relational processes actively constructed in contexts within which I participated, rather than concrete, passively transmitted things.

From this perspective, I was also able to perceive the way familial storytelling helps to construct morality and ethnic identity in Lisu society, passing ideas of right and wrong and what it means to be a “good” Lisu individual from generation to generation. “Oral traditions are first and foremost technologies of communication: they serve their cultural constituencies not as out-of-date, archaic oddities but as current, vital, mainstream ways of transmitting knowledge and experience” (Foley: 1998: 15). Specifically, storytelling “constitutes an ideal medium in which to present noncoercive, community-situated beliefs” (Stone-Mediatori: 2003:62). In the words of Langellier and Peterson, many oral cultures order information within their stories in such a way that “it can be stored, retrieved, and transmitted over time. Thus,…[storytelling] involves not only ways of creating, defining, and sharing meanings and sensibilities but ways of maintaining and perpetuating those meanings and sensibilities as well” (1993: 64).

In that same vein, when I visited Mr. Lang, a Lisu farmer who estimates his age at around 80 but whose birth predates the marking of yearly time in Nujiang, he told me “the purpose of telling stories is to teach the next generation how to live. If no one tells them how to work in the fields or cook food or what is right, how will they know?” Other elderly Lisu echoed this sentiment, and several of the young Lisu and Pumi friends I made during my stay confided that the stories they were told as
children have deeply influenced them and the choices they make. “The stories my parents told me have helped me to know what’s right and what’s wrong,” one Lisu student explained. The following story, which was told to me in the government office of Teacher Ru, a well-renowned Lisu scholar in Liuku, is an excellent example of a story embedded with a moral lesson:

There were two brothers. The younger brother was hardworking, while the older was lazy, with bad things in his heart. Every day the older brother would sit at home while the younger went to work in the fields. One day an old man came upon the younger brother, who was working hard, and said to him: “There are diamonds in the mountains. If you get up very early in the morning, dig one up before the sun rises, and leave, everything you need will come to you. But do not take more than one.” The brother did as the old man said, getting up before the sun the next day and finding diamonds where the old man had said. He took only one and went home and was able to buy many things that he needed. He grew richer and richer.

One day when he got home from the fields, the younger brother, who was very honest as well as hard-working, told his older brother all about the diamonds. The lazy man was naturally excited and he got up early the next day to find diamonds. However, when he found them he grew too greedy and excited to stop at taking just one. He was still on the mountain collecting diamonds when the sun rose, and as the rays touched him they disappeared.

The meaning of this story is: don’t be greedy, don’t take a lot or you’ll have none.

Aside from the admonition regarding greediness and moderation, Teacher Ru’s story also valorizes the traits of honesty and industriousness, traits that play a large part for many in the Lisu definition of what it means to be a “good person.” However, in the story the sanctions on moral conduct are imposed by outside forces which result in the diamonds’ disappearance, symbolizing a social system larger than oneself, such as one’s family or community, that dictate one’s own inner sense of morality (a point that lends itself to some of Durkheim’s work.)
Mrs. Zhu, a nainai so elderly that she did not know her age, but who calculated it to be 100 based on Mr. Lang’s own age estimate, told me a similarly themed story when I visited her in her family’s house nearby:

A long time ago there was a very lazy boy who was too lazy to do anything. All day he just sat around, not wanting to do anything. His mother and father said to him, “You should come and do things, you need to help us with our labor. You don’t know how to do anything. The peaches on that tree—if you want to eat them, you have to climb up, pick them, and then you can eat them.” But the lazy boy still didn’t want to do anything.

So his mother and father said, “If you still really don’t want to do anything, try this: sleep under the tree with your mouth open and see if anything falls in.” The boy lay under the tree the way his parents had said, and the wind came and many peaches fell down, but none landed in his mouth. Afterwards he knew he had to work to reap rewards.

Mrs. Zhu’s story discourages against laziness and impresses upon the listener the cause-and-effect model of work and reward. Again, we see the forces of nature, this time the wind and a tree, acting to teach the boy the “right” way to behave and suggesting a larger, impartial morality that is not subject to one’s personal whims or desires. Lessons of morality aside, however, I was also touched by the artistry and humor employed in this and other stories told by Mrs. Zhu. The story discourages slothfulness by painting the lazy boy as foolish and laughable, making doing the “right” thing look attractive in contrast. The light-hearted and affectionate tone separates this sort of tale, heavy as it is with moral significance, from a lecture of similar content a parent might give on child on the importance of being industrious.

This sense of play, a quality inherent in many Lisu stories, is especially significant given Mrs. Zhu’s personal history as a survivor of the Great Leap Forward and its accompanying famine. The act of storytelling can serve as a method of
transforming one’s situation, peering into worlds that are different—brighter, fairer, more vivid—than the one in which the teller and listeners currently live. And traumatic experiences similar to those through which Mrs. Zhu lived provide motivation for the older generation to preserve the traditions that were threatened during those periods and to teach their children and grandchildren about how to live life as a “good” person. “I have been through a great deal,” these tellers say through their stories. “I want to help you to learn as much as you can about how to live in this world so you won’t have to suffer as I have.”

Another common theme of Lisu morality stories involves the construction of hierarchical relationships within the family. Specifically, children are taught what the expectations are for a “good” person in terms of behavior toward one’s parents and, later on, one’s mother and father-in-law. Two similar stories, told to me by 80-year-old Mr. Cun in Bajigu, a village up the valley from Fugong, best exemplify this message:

An old yeye lived with his son, his son’s wife, and their little son. The wife acted poorly toward her father-in-law, so the husband said to his father, “My wife acts poorly toward you, so I’ll bring you to the mountain top. Afterwards, whatever you want to eat or drink I can bring to you.” So he took his father in a bag up the mountain and left him there.

But that night his son asked, “Baba, grandpa didn’t come back today, where did he go?”

“Grandpa went to the mountain to live,” the husband told his son.

“What did you use to bring grandpa to the mountain?” the son asked, and the husband told him that it was a bag. “Did you bring back the bag you used to take grandpa to the mountain?” the son asked.

“Yes, I did,” the husband replied.

“Good, you shouldn’t lose it. When you’re old like grandpa I will also use that bag to bring you to the mountain to live,” the son said.
When his son said that the husband knew that the things he had done today were wrong. His son had no one except his father to teach him what was right and wrong. And so the husband made a torch from the fire and went that very night to get his father off the mountain.

And the second:

A long time ago a wife and husband lived together with an old nainai, the husband’s mother. The mother and wife did not get along. When her husband wasn’t around, the mother wasn’t good to her mother-in-law. We Lisu give plates of food to old grandmothers straight on so they can see, and put chopsticks into their hands so they don’t have to look for them. But when her husband wasn’t around, the wife gave her mother-in-law her food rudely, tossing it offhand roughly instead of giving it to her straight on. Nainai’s eyes were very bad, so she couldn’t find her plate or what food she was given. And she couldn’t find her chopsticks, so she couldn’t eat.

One day, the husband came back from laboring in the fields and found his mother with no vegetables on her plate, just an enormous insect. “Mama, what’s on your plate?” he asked.

“My eyes are bad, I can’t see. What is it?” his mother replied. The husband felt very angry and gave the nainai some good food, then went back to working.

After awhile a visitor, another old nainai, came to the house, “I have a present, a beautiful shirt. But I’m not giving it to you. I’m also not giving it to your son. Wait until your daughter-in-law comes back, then give it to her,” the old nainai said.

When the wife came back from the fields, she asked, “Whose shirt is this?”

Her mother-in-law said, “A visitor I’ve never met just came and left this shirt for you. She said to give it to you when you got back.”

The wife was very happy and put the shirt on. As soon as she had, she turned into a donkey. We Chinese say that when someone has a bad temper, she is like a donkey. So the donkey ran away. The old nainai—maybe it was God? Maybe it was a little gui5—wanted to reprimand her.

These stories clearly delineate the appropriate treatment of one’s parents and one’s mother-in-law by showing what one should not do, highlighting the errant behavior through disgust and exaggeration. In the second story, the idea of serving an

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5 Gui are Lisu spirits whose significance I will explain in the next chapter.
enormous insect to one’s revered mother-in-law inspires revulsion in the listener, while the guilty wife’s transformation into a donkey evokes a mix of fear and laughter; the first story’s image of abandoning one’s parent on a mountainside induces a similar combination of shame and humor. Furthermore, both stories’ emphasis on the figure of the badly behaved daughter-in-law may suggest tension within the Lisu household in terms of the role an in-married wife plays in her new family, specifically regarding the deference she is supposed to show her husband’s parents and her own desires for autonomy.

The act of enfolding standards of morality and good behavior into a story narrative has a few important effects. One section from Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s interviews demonstrates these effects well. In this interchange, the Interviewer is asking an elderly Jewish woman why she chose to use storytelling as a method of diffusing a tense social situation and teaching her son, who she believed to be in the wrong, a lesson:

Interviewer: Why did you use a story instead of just telling him straight-forwardly?
Dvora: I don’t think he was receptive to a lecture and for me to tell him. He could give me all kinds of reasons why… and it would, I think, it would just cause a lot of unpleasantness… I thought if I’m going to tell him, I’m not going to tell him what he did. I’m going to show him what somebody else did and maybe he can identify himself with that person and that way I’m not hurting him. I’m not saying to him, “You did this.” I’m showing him, “Someone else did it. Do you see any similarity?” (1972: 455-456)

I suspect that the stories Mrs. Zhu, Mr. Lang, and Teacher Ru told me could be used similarly to Dvora’s own story. Storytelling between parent and child or grandparent and grandchild reduces generational distance and, as we have seen, makes lessons of
morality into something other than lectures. Instead, grandparents may feel, as I did when I told my own stories with my Lisu friends, that they are sharing parts of themselves with their grandchildren because these are stories that their own grandparents told them and that have personal significance. And, as previously discussed, children are less likely to feel they are being scolded or preached at when a lesson remains light in tone, as when it is conveyed as a story. This comfort allows them a chance to have moments of intimacy with their parents and grandparents during a relaxed period such as after dinner or before bed.

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In *Remembered Lives* Barbara Meyerhoff discusses the power of storytelling not just in its reflexivity but also in its reflectiveness, “*in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves...As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self-aware, conscious of our consciousness*” (1992: 234, emphasis in the original). This idea of the told tale as both reflecting and constituting the cultural world of teller and listener speaks to me about that first night in the teahouse in Fugong. As the ceiling fan spun lazily above, Jean’s voice rose over the buzz of the other teahouse patrons, and she told me a Lisu creation story:

At the beginning of the world, God scattered all of God’s children throughout the world. Lisu was the youngest and didn’t understand why it had to be this way, why Lisu couldn’t stay with God. But the other children were more grown up and bigger, so they went off alone.

God gave out different things to different children to use to claim land. Big brother got stones, big sister got water. Lisu just got grass, and so Lisu sat and made knots out of grass and put them in places Lisu found to claim it as property.
But then one day a forest fire came. And so after the forest fire, what did Lisu have left? Nothing. And now wherever Lisu went, there were stones or water there first to show it was Big Brother Nu or Big Sister Bai’s land. So Lisu put a few people on Big Brother’s territory, a few people on Big Sister’s places—not too many or they would notice, just enough. And that is why now we Lisu do not have one place where we live, but are scattered everywhere.

I found this story both engaging and deeply meaningful. The word Jean used to denote “God” in the story is different than the one used to specify the Christian God, and so this story is especially intriguing in its coexistence with Christian narratives of the beginning of the world derived from the Bible. Most people I spoke to did not seem to have any opinion on whether either of these genesis narratives was “right,” nor did they feel the need to choose.

I also find this tale to be an excellent example of the ways in which Lisu stories bring a fabled past into contact with the present by loading a story with contemporary symbolic significance. It portrays the Lisu at the beginning of the world as defined by the weakness of their forms of ownership. Deprived of the economic power of land possession, they must depend on their inner virtues—the industriousness, hard work, and honesty taught in their folk stories—to survive, just as they do in Nujiang today. Furthermore, the theme of Lisu as non-owners seems to reference on one level their status as an ethnic minority within a largely Han nation-state. In this regard, I am interested in Jean characterization of the Lisu as the tough, clever, resourceful youngest children who are able to live anywhere, specifically in lands they cannot “own”—as a people able to survive in circumstances out of their control. This was a very common motif in the Lisu stories I was told, along with the portrayal of an orphan Lisu ancestor known as the guer who exhibited the same traits.
I saw this collective identity manifested often in the ways my Lisu friends spoke about themselves, and I believe that the stories that they tell and are told affect deeply their sense of who they are as people.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett specifically addresses the inculcation of collective ethnic identity through storytelling, a process she calls “identity definition” (1972: 161). She discusses the common depiction of the “greenhorn” Jewish immigrant as a resourceful and clever individual who makes do in a foreign environment, citing stories involving a postman who couldn’t read and so had his daughter arrange his letters in order, an inept watchman who made clever excuses for his mistakes (1972: 161), and a man who could not afford to buy any new clothes and so he shared a suit with his father (1972: 246). All these examples involve portrayals of the Jewish immigrant as determined to get by on an honest living, stubborn to a fault, and infinitely adaptive and inventive, an image which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues stayed essential to Jews’ self concept long after they were no longer “greenhorns.”

Identity definition in Lisu storytelling involves the portrayal of Lisu as the youngest child or orphan. For example, Jean’s tale expresses a specific collective self-image, portraying the Lisu as perpetual underdogs who have been dealt a bum rap—whether they are on the bottom of the familial totem pole or have no parents at all—but who never bow to the pressure to lie, cheat, or stand idle. When such a tale is passed from one generation to the next, this collective self-image is transmitted as well. Such stories often also include descriptions of what the dispossessed Lisu proxy must do to get by and specifically what he chooses not to do (i.e. cheat, succumb to
laziness, steal from undeserving)—thus, the stories serve to also further establish lessons of morality. This effect is evident in another story Mrs. Zhu told me:

There was an orphan who lived next door to a son with a mother and father. The mother and father would always say when their son should do things--when he should plant in fields, when he should prepare what foods, what times to plant what crops. But their son didn’t listen.

The orphan did not have a mother or father and so he had no one to teach him these things. He felt very sad. One day when the lazy son’s parents were teaching him, the orphan listened nearby. He learned by himself and went and did the things the mother and father said to do. By and by he had a better and better life, and he was richer and richer. And the lazy son? He had less and less until he had nothing and was very poor.

I especially appreciated hearing Mrs. Zhu tell this story because she presented such a contrast with Jean: besides differing in age by something like 80 years, Mrs. Zhu lived in a traditional Lisu house, wore traditional Lisu dress, did not know how to speak Mandarin, and generally came from a different social universe of existence than the t-shirt wearing, university-attending, Mandarin-speaking Jean. And yet they both told me stories presenting the Lisu as the disadvantaged underdog who makes the best of the situation and flourishes despite the odds by following a specific moral code. Mrs. Zhu’s story even went further than Jean’s to explicitly suggest the prospect of class mobility if one sticks to the morally valued behaviors of filial respect and hard work.

In a similar transmission of “Lisuness,” some of the tales I heard presented an aetiological story regarding the way the universe works, building a traditional Lisu universe that may not jibe with scientific modernity but that still holds sway because of its cultural influence. For example, Teacher Ru told me a story about why the moon has phases during our meeting in his office:
A husband and wife lived together, but one day the husband became very sick. As he lay in bed one day a snake came into the house. He was very afraid of the snake, so he killed it. Afterwards, however, a female snake came with some special leaves in her mouth. She gave some to the other dead snake, and it immediately came back to life, after which they slithered off together, leaving the leaves behind. The husband took the leaves and ate them and immediately became healthy. Then he hid them very carefully.

His wife was very curious, as she did not know how he had become better so fast. Finally one day the husband agreed to take the leaves out to show her, but as he was taking them out of their hiding place the moon reached down and took them from him. The husband, who was very clever, planted a *ma* plant. Every day the husband gave the plant one bottle of clean water, and it grew very fast toward the moon.

After awhile, the husband set off climbing the *ma* plant with his friend the dog, instructing his wife to continue giving the plant one bottle of clean water every day. Higher and higher they climbed, and every day the wife complied, but one day she felt very lazy: she had to walk very far to get the clean water, and so instead she gave the plant a bottle of dirty water. At that moment, the husband and dog had just reached the moon, and the man had hoisted the dog onto the moon, intending to climb up after him.

However, when the wife gave the *ma* plant dirty water, it died instantly, and the man fell to earth. The dog, however, was stuck on the moon with nothing to eat, so in desperation it began to eat the moon. Now every month it eats the moon until there is no moon left, and then the moon regenerates. This is why every New Year Lisu people give the first plate of food to their dogs, to thank the dog for his sacrifice.

As he finished the story, Teacher Ru noted, “People in the countryside still believe this story, but people who go to school don’t.” However, he said, these educated Lisu still tell the story, “because it is culturally important.” I believe that this “cultural importance” is derived from the fact that stories such as this one help to construct a united cultural worldview similar to the history described above—even if that worldview is located in a non-scientific past.

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6 A tall vine native to Nujiang with seeds used for flavoring and spicing.
I think Teacher Ru is leaving something important out here: certainly the story helps to construct concepts of cleanliness versus pollution and hard work versus laziness in terms of a standard of moral conduct. But in emphasizing the “cultural importance”, Teacher Ru downplays the artistry of the story—the graceful portrayal of a world where men and dogs are friends and equals; the elegant explanation of a natural phenomenon; the rhythm with which tension builds and is dispersed; the clear pleasure Teacher Ru and others take in sharing such a story. Yes, storytelling plays an essential part in constructing moral standards and a collective ethnic identity. But the aesthetic delight of sharing a well-made tale, or building a new world out of words, transcends the utilitarianism of the “functional” view in far-reaching ways.

Victor Turner and Barbara Meyerhoff have also noted processes of identity definition in their discussions of storytelling. Turner talks about the power of story performance, which “involve[s] poiesis—the art of making, as opposed to simple mimesis, imitation. Performance, then, as poiesis, makes or constitutes cultural identity as well as imitates it” (as quoted in Fine and Haskell Speers 1992: 9). Specifically, he suggests that, “a community’s key texts are special reflexive mechanisms for mirroring and mentoring behavior in a culture. These reflexive mechanisms… impress beliefs and interpretations of the world on participants” in a storytelling event (as quoted in Haskell Speers 1992: 121). As Meyerhoff argues regarding oral tradition, the act of storytelling in Lisu culture becomes part of a dialectic in which stories both shape and are shaped by, create and reflect, the cultural world of their tellers and listeners.
Indeed, Meyerhoff’s book, which centers on the storytelling practices of an elderly community, addresses the cultural motivations for one generation to tell stories to the next:

The old people’s sense of being memory bearers, carriers of a precious, unique cargo, heightens generational memory and intensifies cohort consciousness, giving a mission to the group... Their machinations to accomplish their task, delivering themselves of their memories, establishing, then making visible their own identities, illuminates several matters: the nature of performed individual and collective definitions, the uses and kinds of witnesses needed for these performances, and the nature and uses of memory (1992: 232).

I sensed a similar urgency in many of the elderly Lisu I had the chance to meet—they, like Mr. Lang, felt that telling stories was an important way to pass on “culture” (文化 wen hua) from generation to generation, given that their language has been solely oral for most of their history. They often expressed frustration that their children and grandchildren were increasingly less interested in listening to stories and participating in the passing on of oral tradition.

As we sat on the woven floor of his home sipping green tea, Mr. Lang told me a long story about the Dragon King and noted that many of his age mates have forgotten equally long tales. He still remembers such stories, he said, because he continues to tell them to his grandson—in continuing the cycle of storytelling he also reinforces it. The stories Mr. Lang told me were long and filled with details and embellishments that contrast with the still rich but more bare-bones recitations of most of the younger Lisu with whom I spoke. I suspect that Mr. Lang’s more elaborate style is the result of much practice over many years of listening to stories.

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7 A written form of Lisu was created by missionaries around the turn of the 20th century, and the resulting interaction of oral and written material will be addressed in the conclusion of this text.
and telling them to his grandson and others—Mr. Lang’s childhood belongs to a different era of Lisu cultural history, in which storytelling was a form of public entertainment that had not yet been threatened by the political upheaval of the Maoist regime or the rise of technology.

Like Meyerhoff’s “old people,” many Lisu are eager to pass on oral history to the next generation, in addition to folktales. Mr. Xiu, a low-level government official in Yingpan invited me to his office one afternoon to discuss Lisu culture. He smoked endless cigarettes in the late spring humidity, and his associates filtered in one after another until the entire room was filled. Then he told us several stories, including a long oral history about Lisu ancestors who came to Nujiang several hundred years ago from Qinghai, an area to the north of Tibet near central Asia. “It was wartime, so they migrated,” he said, “But when they got to Nujiang there were no bridges over the gorge so things were very difficult and poor. They ate bark to survive—people in Fugong still do.”

A few days later, I traveled to Chengang and met Mrs. Du, who lived in one of the villages twenty minutes up on the mountain. As she cooked hard-boiled eggs over the fire, I asked her to tell me a story. In response, she talked about her recollection of the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, a period during which farms were collectivized. At the end of an account that lasted ten minutes or more, she concluded:

In 1957 and 1958 we were very, very poor because we shared everything. If you worked in the fields you could eat, but you had to wait in line for your food. After, from 1963-1966 it wasn’t like this anymore. We had our own houses, and didn’t need to have a life together, or labor together, anymore. But we were still very poor.
Stories like those Mr. Sui and Mrs. Du told act to create a common past for Lisu who are now scattered across Yunnan and, further afield, throughout South Asia. For a people whose traditional dress, language, and religion differs dramatically depending on location and with as few as a hundred kilometers between them, such common history—whether contemporary or in a distant past (as Jean’s story)—is important in creating a sense of cultural unity. This motivation sheds light on the weight and significance of stories in Lisu culture in general and of the “Lisuness” transmitted by those stories, specifically.

But there is more to it than that: I find it especially interesting that although I consistently used the terms *gushi* and *mingjian gushi* (“story” and “folktale,” respectively) in my requests for stories, people of Mr. Sui and Mrs. Du’s generation and older often offered historical accounts like the one above in response, along with the folk stories I was expecting. Tales about the Lisu guer, the Dragon King, or the youngest child take place in a storied past of undetermined date, while these stories are based on a lived past not so long ago. The act of telling these types of stories differs: historical accounts generally involved dates but no names and lacked the stylistic flourishes and color that some tellers might add to tales centering on the creation of Shiyueliang or the beginning of the world. But explicit taxonomic distinction between the two genres appeared to be unnecessary to these elderly tellers: both versions of history are viewed as sources of knowledge and experience, ways to make sure that the next generation will not suffer as their elders and ancestors have (as touched upon before, in my discussion of Mrs. Zhu’s stories.) Here we begin to
see how this valorization of the past makes Lisu storytelling so powerful—a theme that I will pursue in detail in the next chapter.

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The end of Teacher Ru’s story presents an example of the intersection of ritual and story in Lisu life—in this case it explains the ritual of giving the family dog the first plate of food at Kuoshijie, the Lisu New Year. But the interplay between ritual and story in Nujiang is more complex than this simple didactic connection. Not only did I participate in the ritualized exchange of stories during my research; not only do stories constitute a ritual passing on of moral and ethnic Lisu identity; but also I found that sometimes when I asked the people I met to tell me a story I would find myself instead listening to them talk about traditional rituals, festivals and holidays.

Often these stories revolved around the technical methods for carrying out a ritual. For example, Mr. Ci, a practitioner of the spiritual ritual known as “上刀山，下火海 shang dao shan, xia huo hai” (“going up to the mountain of knives, going down to the ocean of fire”) in which devotees climb a ladder of sharpened knives and walk across a bed of burning charcoal, sat me down in the kitchen of his small roadside restaurant in Chengang and told me in detail about the way a practitioner is trained and then goes on teach new trainees. Similarly, between folktales, Mrs. Sui told me about Sha Ta Mei Qing Ren, a ritual practice during Kuoshijie in which a pair of lovers are buried in a hole together and their friends and family dig them out; Mrs. Du gave a long explanation in story form of the way she and her husband observe Christmas; and in a rain-soaked college classroom in Liuku, I taught a group of
curious, eager Nujiang students an English lesson about telling stories and then asked them to try telling me some of their own. Almost half of the class offered accounts of their respective ethnicity’s religious rituals. Certainly their choice of topic might have been influenced by their existing English vocabulary and by their assumptions about what a white foreigner would find interesting from their lives, but there also seems to be a strong bond between the Nujiang story as a ritual act and the Nujiang ritual act as a story, a link that holds together two forms of valued, traditional knowledge, a legacy handed down from a remote past.

Here the situation is further complicated: I mentioned previously that a significant portion of the Lisu (as well as some of the Nu and Bai) in Nujiang Prefecture have been converted to Christianity—some as recently as a few months ago, some dating their family’s conversion to the turn of the 20th century. As we walked toward the bus stop from Mr. Ci’s restaurant in Chengang, my Liuku translator, Selena, told me that in Fugong and Gongshan some of the Lisu who identify as Christians also participate in shang dao shan, xia huo hai. “These Christians don’t believe in the spirit that Lisu people pray to before they climb,” she said, “but that they still practice it—or at least watch it being practiced.”

Selena’s comment surprised me on two counts: first, my own preconceptions of what it means to be Christian precluded participation in another religion’s ritual, especially a ritual that the Christianity with which I was familiar would consider pagan and/or heathen. Secondly, prior to my time in Liuku I had spent almost a month in Lanping, a city seven hours away by bus. There, I had spoken to Christians who had disavowed and distanced themselves from much of their cultural upbringing,
refusing to tell folktales, to teach their children the language unique to their ethnic group, and to be around other people celebrating “traditional” holidays. I couldn’t imagine any of those people even considering participating in shang dao shan, xia huo hai. What was behind this difference in attitude toward ritual, religion, and expression of indigenous culture in general? I had stumbled upon a question that would lead me into the Lisu world of quiet activism through words, where I would discover the diverse ways in which the people of Nujiang prefecture claimed agency through stories— in some cases by refusing to tell them, in other cases by using them to construct a sense of themselves as simultaneously ethnically empowered and modern.
Mrs. Du in her home in a Chengang satellite village

Mrs. Zhu’s home, an example of a Lisu house owned by a wealthier family, outside Fugong.
An unmarried Lisu woman at the Fugong market, dressed in traditional skirt, vest, and beads and Western shirt and sandals.
Chapter 3:

The Flesh-Eating Spirit and the Trickster Rabbit: Storytelling As Cultural Resistance

In her exploration of an ethnic Hakka Christian community in Guangzhou province, China, Nicole Constable creates a richly drawn picture of a community navigating the line between secular culture and religious belief. Regarding the relationship of Christians in the town of Shung Him Tong to indigenous rituals, she writes:

Unlike many of their non-Christian neighbors in Lung Yeuk Tau, Shung Him Tong Christians are never seen visiting ancestral halls or Buddhist, Taoist, or other temples. They have no village shrine dedicated to the earth god, and at the Chinese New Year and other festival occasions they do not set out tables in front of their homes displaying generous offerings of food and incense. They do not decorate their doorways with lucky red paper couplets or images of door gods, and they have no household altar at which to worship the kitchen god (Constable: 1994 97).

This account closely resembles the behavior of Christians in Lanping, more than a thousand miles away from Shung Him Tong. As I mentioned in the introduction, Lanping is located about six hours by bus from Liuku, aligned more closely with the Lancang (elsewhere known as the Mekong) River but transferred to Nujiang prefecture’s jurisdiction within the last several decades. Lanping is different in many ways from the rest of the prefecture: its climate is more arid; the indigenous peoples that call it home are more varied; and, most importantly for my purposes, Christianity has a dramatically different history than in Nujiang Valley proper.
Whereas Christianity in Liuku and Lushui counties stretches back to the end of the Opium Wars and the accompanying arrival of British and American missionaries at the turn of the 20th century, Christianity in Lanping is much younger and has generally spread through illegal missionary activity among foreigners and native Chinese. Contemporary Christians in Lanping tend to be the first in their families to convert, and because there is no government-approved church in the county they must meet illegally in secret house churches throughout the city and its environs.

The Christians I spoke to in Lanping were largely Bai and Lisu. When I asked what it meant to be a Christian, they would answer that a Christian abstains from smoking, drinking, and gambling; many also asserted that Christians value their families more than non-Christians and that they are obliged to do “good works” (好事, more literally translated as “good business” or “good stuff.”) When I spoke to these Lanping Christians, I noticed that they seemed to equate conversion with the attenuation of their ethnic identity, often attributing their refusal to tell stories or celebrate traditional holidays to their newfound belief in the Christian God. In fact, every Christian I met in Lanping expressed similar assimilationist sentiments. Linda, a newly converted 24-year-old Bai woman educated in Lijiang, said that she feels that most traditional Bai culture is “useless.” Nevertheless, when I requested that she tell me a Bai story, she recited a tale about two brothers:

There were two brothers. One was always happy and the other was always sad. Their parents bought the sad brother lots of presents and then told the happy brother that he could not go out, locked him in a room, and took all of his things away. One week afterwards, they came back: the sad brother was still sad, and the happy brother was still happy.
According to Linda, while most Bai stories are useless, this one is okay “because it could be about anyone”—it lacks the cultural specificity that suggests the indigenous lifestyle she left behind for life in Lanping. When I asked her about her plans for family, she answered that if she has children she would like them to be Christian, but that they could retain other elements of Bai culture in family life, such as dress and cuisine. For her, the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in light of her new religion was drawn with stories viewed as rituals belonging to her old beliefs, rituals that therefore no longer fit with the life she chose when she became Christian. In line with this attitude, I found that the Christians I met in Lanping were much more likely to respond to my requests for stories by reciting oral history, either accounts of recent historical events or in the form of stories of their own conversion. They were also much less likely to offer folktales like those recited to me in Fugong, even when I asked using genre specific language (*mingjian gushi*, the Mandarin word for folktale.)

Constable offers a hint as to the root of this attitude in one description of the mid-afternoon milieu in Shung Him Tong:

Older men from Shung Him Tong can be seen chatting while they sit on park benches in Luen Wo market, or setting off to attend special meetings at the church, but they are rarely, if ever, seen participating in car or board games. Elsewhere in Lung Yeuk Tau, one commonly hears the clatter of mahjong tiles, or catches scenes of women playing cards through the doorways of their homes. But in Shung Him Tong, if these activities go on at all, it is behind closed doors. The only exception is the local shop in Shung Him Tong, where the sound of mahjong is often heard. This, I was told, is because “outsiders” come there to play (Constable: 1994 61).
Like in Shung Him Tong, Lanping Christians consider the performative acts of abstaining from common leisure activities like smoking, drinking, and gambling an integral part of being a “good” Christian. Mahjong, Chinese poker, and the lottery are very popular within the city, and the teahouse life I described in Chapter 1 is just as active in Lanping as it is in Fugong. In Lanping, however, these behavioral differences are associated with an “us versus them” mentality that separates “good,” abstemious Christians from “immoral,” indulgent minorities. As I traveled through Nujiang and the rest of Yunnan province, I began to see a parallel between this moral binary and another important cultural narrative, that of backwardness versus modernity.

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Following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the new government began an exhaustive project involving “collection” of ethnic culture in the form of political structure, agricultural practices, written-and spoken language, and oral tradition. “Ethnographers categorized groups as ethnic nationalities based on Stalin’s criteria of nationalities as defined by shared language, territory, and ‘psychology’ (Davis: 2005 18). This research drew heavily on Fredrich Engels’ elaboration of the Lewis Henry Morgan model of social evolution:

As this scheme is interpreted in the PRC, minority nationalities are classified as to their ‘stage’ of ‘social evolution’, which inevitably translates to the degree of their relative ‘backwardness’ (luohou) in contrast to Han ‘progress’ (fazhan). In this scheme, while Han Chinese society is not considered entirely exempt from its need to overcome its own ‘feudal’ past, Han culture is always cast as more ‘advanced’ than minority cultures (White: 1998 14).
PRC discourses of hierarchy have also historically aligned the opposition between progressive and unprogressive with possession or lack of material wealth and education, commitment to scientific forms of knowledge versus “superstition”, and hygienic practices versus “dirty” lifestyles (White: 1998 14). Within this ideology, the dominant Han have embodied and continue to embody a nationalist ideal of development, superior citizenry whose ways of thinking and being are goals for other, less developed peoples to emulate. Everyone, this evolutionist narrative says, should be like this—and everyone can, at least in principle, become full citizens once they evolve, catch up, or any number of similar active verbs. The model legitimizes existing inequalities while envisioning their ultimate transcension: when the various outlying peoples finally grow into their potential for modernity, they will have assimilated into the body of efficient citizens necessary for a powerful nation.

The catch, however, is that while the Han narrative of progress appears to support the “development” of the ethnic minority, in fact it is imperative for ideas of Han self definition that the peripheral peoples remain frozen in their so-called backward ways. Davis (2005: 176-177) eloquently articulates this ideological dynamic:

The People’s Republic of China has worked to build a whole nation out of what had been a collapsed empire. To do so it has legitimized its rule over the ethnic borderlands by creating a new national civilization, a new Chinese culture. Beijing was the high center of this new national identity, an advanced socialist civilization unified by a new vernacular language and simplified script. Peripheral peoples…were described as uncivilized and in need of Beijing’s leadership in order to become ‘advanced.’… In order to be high, the national culture needs to be surrounded by things that are lower. If its internal Others are not low enough to justify the civilizing rhetoric of
the center, then the domination of smaller kingdoms by larger ones and
the exploitation of their material resources becomes less obviously
benevolent… If the peripheral peoples are seen to have ‘caught up
with’ or are arguable cultural peers of the high civilization the whole
hierarchy risks collapsing into a congeries of feuding equal centers.”

This construction of Han modernity in opposition to a backward Other thus imagines
the features attributed to minority culture as fixed expressions of inner cultural
essences, an ideology that attempts to pin down minority culture, rendering it static
and reliable as a point of moral and political reference in the narrative of Han
progress. As Safran points out, exploring the positioning of the “traditional” and
“modern” is vital to comprehending “the PRC’s distinctive vision of socialist
modernity” (Safran: 1998 15). Specifically, exploring the way this narrative functions
in Nujiang prefecture is essential to understanding the way stories, Christianity,
secular culture, and ritual, interact in Lanping, Lushui, and Fugong counties.

To classify someone or some people as luohou, backward, is a moral
judgment as well as an economic characterization. One idea that was repeated to me
often by Lanping Christians was that Nujiang people are luohou because they are
“lazy,” like to gamble and play the lottery, and generally “like making money without
having to work for it,” as one Han man told me. In other words, poverty and
backwardness are here aligned here with a scale of moral worth: the poor are
implicitly morally defective, lacking in the economic virtues of self-discipline,
restraint, and productivity. As such, I was often advised, both by people of minority
and of Han descent, that I should be careful in Nujiang because it is a “minority area.”
Although these people claimed that crime was more prevalent in such areas, no one
could give me specific statistics, nor did they specify what locations they were using
as a basis for comparison. Instead, the idea of a lazy and more criminally inclined minority population was simply accepted

Lisu throughout Nujiang used varying method to contest this progress narrative, which constructs them as deficient in so many ways. I observed that the Christians of Lanping reacted to the presence of this narrative in everyday life by partially adopting the nationalist ideology as a way to distinguish themselves from the *luohou* masses, giving them a claim to cultural superiority. Many times in my field notes I noted the construction of an us-and-them divide, with “us” marked as a Christian community and “them” as the rest of the Lanping population. To some extent, this distinction represented a reaction to suspicion on the part of the larger community—I was told that the still fiercely animist/Buddhist Pumi people did not appreciate being “prayed for,” as I witnessed at one church service—but most of its formal logic derived from manipulating the moral contrast drawn in the dominant progress narrative. In their discussions about local politics, Lanping Christians were quite vocal about the difference between themselves and the rest of the Lanping populace, claiming moral superiority on the grounds that they refused to gamble, did not drink to excess (or drink at all), and valued their families above all else. In constructing non-Christians as their own Other, they were rejecting their assigned position as “backward” in the nationalist ideology. Rather than challenging the narrative itself, they used Christian moral principles to assert their own legitimacy within the confines of that narrative. For them, the moral decisions they made through Christianity imbued them with the legitimacy and worth that “backward” minorities
supposedly lack. Yes, some minorities are backward, they argued. But not us—just them.

It was not only among Christians and Han that I heard references to the *luohou* narrative among Christians and Han—in fact, I encountered the term on a daily basis. Mr. Bi, the low-level official who introduced me to Fugong, used the word to describe the Lisu and Nu living in the county; my guides in Gongshan and Bingzhongluo told me apologetically that the hotel I would be staying in and the places we would be going were poor, dirty and “backward”; and my translators, Cheryl and Selena, dropped the word multiple times on every excursion. On a trip to rural Chengang, Mrs. Du used the word to describe her village and others in the area. “We Lisu don’t know the best way to live,” she said. “We build very simple houses out of grass and we can’t change because our children only know one way to live… The people in the cities are better. They know how to make good money and how to make food that’s good for you.” Schein describes similar experiences with the Miao (also known as Hmong) people in Gansu province. She explains that her Miao friends drank “to the point of unconsciousness” multiple times per week but provided the defensive explanation, “This is just the way we minority nationalities drink.” Thus, “Intermittent moments of Dionysian indulgence were ethnicized… in the language of officialdom, as ‘minority nationality’ practices” (Schein 2000: 257).

As the shadow of the Maoist attitudes of the early PRC years has faded in favor of Deng Xiaoping’s legacy of less stringent economic policies, a second cultural trend has emerged that draws on the cultural essentialism implicit in the *luohou* narrative. The state has taken an active role in the packaging of minority
ethnicity for tourist purposes. Theme parks similar in some ways to Epcot Center have sprung up across China, allowing visitors to experience the exoticism of an “other” in a comfortable environment unthreatening to Communist policy. As one official said to me, “It’s as close as we can get to a foreign experience without a passport.” Davis makes a point that will become central to my argument in this chapter when she describes one such theme park in Xishuangbanna, an area in the southernmost part of Yunnan, which has become a Mecca for such cultural tourism in the past decade:

The theme park is carefully edited. There are no references, for instance, to ethnic participation in contemporary media, business, education, or their industries. Ethnic minorities are situated in the past; theme parks stress their categorization as ‘backward, primitive, flat’ (Davis 2005: 36).

The theme parks, along with government-created festivals, essentialize Yunnan’s minority cultures, paring them down to “traditional” dances, costumes, and housing and taking them out of cultural and historic context. As Schein (2000: 73) says, the vision of the Mao state involved “the establishment of certain permissible forms of difference, together with the occlusion of all other sorts of unruly heterogeneity.” In theme parks similar to that which Davis describes—as well as other forums for cultural tourism, such as theater, concerts, and dance performances—minority culture is constructed in line with the ideological needs of the Han majority. Minority backwardness is portrayed not as a mutable, dynamic condition on the way to the ultimate goal of Han modernism, but instead as a permanent, static, unchanging essence. It is in this way that the government ensures that the constitutive opposition
between supposed minority backwardness and urbanite Han modernity will remain stable.

As Eric Mueggler says in *Dancing Fools: Politics of Culture in a ‘Traditional Nationality Festival* (2002: 6), minority peoples are, “inserted into the post-Mao national landscape—but at the price of finding their cultural resources reduced to readily manufacturable ‘objects.’” Mueggler focuses on the government’s construction of the so-called Clothing Competition Festival in Zhizuo, Yunnan Province, which presents an excellent example of this kind of production of minority culture. In this situation, the provincial government resurrected a long-dormant festival that was rumored to have been held in the area before 1949. The celebration was based on an Yi nationality folkstory that was set in Zhizuo. Before resurrecting the festival, however, the government made adjustments to the story, and Mueggler compares the old and new versions in his text:

> It appears to be the same story… yet the small differences are crucial. In the official text, the brothers, delighted with the beauty and fertility around them, “Make a wish” that the grains will grow into thickets with ears as long as horses’ tails. In Li Yong’s version, it is not a wish but a ritual chant… a communication with the unseen forces that regulated the fecundity of the surrounding world… Unwilling to leave the fulfillment of their wish to chance, the brothers of Pu Hongzhi’s [a representative from the local PRC government] text make certain the seeds are all sown in one bog and they return “not long afterward” with hoes and sickles to “meticulously” care for the grain. “Sure enough,” given this diligence, the grain grows thick and long. In Li Yong’s tale, the two do not return until harvest month, finding then that the demands of their chant have been fulfilled (Mueggler 2002: 12).

Mueggler claims that the differences in the story reflect a manipulation of basic, important themes. The original Yi tale emphasizes awe at what Mueggler calls the “extrasocial” world and references the power of unseen magical forces and their love
for the Yi people. In contrast, the new version stresses the importance of hard work; working together (and its undertones of collectivization); and, later in the story, filial piety, and familial structure—all traits touted enthusiastically by the CCP. The original magical forces (which would be dubbed by current policy as superstitious) are nowhere to be found.

In the instances during which the luohou narrative was recited to me, I usually made an important (and erroneous) presupposition. I assumed that the fact that Nujiang Lisu spoke as if they agreed with the narrative tenets indicated a hegemonic force at work. It was not until I returned home and read articles such as Mueggler’s and books such as Domination and the Arts of Resistance by James Scott, that I realized that the situation was far more complex than I had understood. Such an assumption flattens the stories Lisu tell, taking them out of context and making them into safe, passive “things” displaced from time or politics, much like Davis’ description of the Xishuangbanna theme park.

In fact, Lisu storytellers throughout Nujiang Valley proper act very differently than their Lanping brethren in terms of their interaction with the narrative of progress. Instead of claiming legitimacy within the terms of the dominant narrative, Liuku and Fugong storytellers encourage positive attitudes toward usually denigrated “traditional” beliefs situation in a generally belittled past. By folding these stories and their tellers back into their three-dimensional selves and by examining the ways in which they valorize tradition, we can see how Lisu contest the construction of their backwardness and, in doing so, assert their cultural legitimacy outside of the dominant social narrative.
Once more we return to that first night in the Fugong teahouse. As she finished telling her stories, I asked Jean where she had heard them, and she replied that her grandmother had told her bedtime stories as a child. As Jean got older, however, she lost interest—until she attended university in Lijiang and realized how curious she was about her family’s heritage. “I feel stronger as a Lisu now,” she told me, taking a sip of beer. “My grandmother is Christian, so she doesn’t sing or dance the way many Lisu do—she is more virtuous than that. But I’m her granddaughter! So when I ask her to tell me stories now, she thinks hard and then tells them—but she wouldn’t tell other people.”

This was the first interaction I had had with a Fugong Christian. Given my experience with Lanping Christianity, I was surprised to hear about Jean’s grandmother’s attitudes toward storytelling. And I was soon to discover that Jean’s grandmother was actually among the more conservative Christians in Nujiang Valley proper. In Liuku, I found that the line between permissible activities and those marked as forbidden for Christian people was very thin. For example Mrs. Du, the elderly Lisu farmer who recounted the oral history about China’s collectivization in Chapter 2, is an observant Christian who goes to Church every weekend not far away from Chengang. She celebrates Christmas for three days by pooling money with her neighbors to buy good things to eat. However, Mrs. Du also celebrates Kuoshijie, the traditional New Year, by making baba, killing a pig to eat, and celebrating for five days. At Kuoshijie, Mrs. Du can watch the young people sing, dance, climb ladders of
knives, and walk across beds of hot coals (the *shang dao shan xia huo hai* ritual discussed at the end of the previous chapter) but joining in is not an option. When I called at her house, nestled in the hills above the Nu River, she offered me the traditional corn mash alcohol that Lisu make for guests—but under local Christian law she is not allowed to drink it.

The flexibility of Fugong Christianity is not limited to celebrating *Kuoshijie*. My translator, Cheryl, had been raised with Christian parents and grandparents. When she got her job at the Cultural Bureau, however, Cheryl began visiting the elderly people in her village and its environs, learning to play Lisu instruments and sing traditional songs herself. Although this behavior would be unacceptable in Lanping, Cheryl stated that even if she lived in the countryside of Fugong County and was undertaking to learn Lisu customs, “people wouldn’t be really angry. In their hearts they might feel it was a little bit wrong, but they wouldn’t outright disapprove.” Lara, a third year Christian Lisu student from Liuku told me similar stories about the permissiveness of her Christian family. She identifies as Christian, meaning that she doesn’t drink or smoke, but says she “doesn’t really believe.” She says the choice to believe or not was her own, and that when she has children it will be their choice as well.

Both Lara and Cheryl state that they believe in a magical entity known as *gui*, a word that can be translated as spirit, ghost, devil, or demon, although none of these terms fully conveys its meaning. Cheryl defined *gui* as a separate race of beings, but one of intelligence and skill equal to humans—“there have been *gui* for as

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8 All of the Lisu I met used separate words to refer to *gui*, to spirits of the dead, to demons, and to the Devil.
long as there have been people," she told me. One day not long after my accident in Laomudeng, Cheryl and I sat in the dingy yellow light of my room in the Bus Stop Hotel. I was lying on my bed with my foot up, and we were chatting about life in America and what it means to be Jewish (the term one uses to identify oneself as a Jew, 犹太人 youtairen is used in Yunnan to denote most of the Judeo-Christian religions, which can result in some confusion). She asked me if Jews believe in gui.

When I replied that I didn’t think so, she began a long tale about the relationship between humans and gui.

The tale Cheryl told deals with that ubiquitous Lisu proxy the orphan and his mistaken marriage to a gui woman. As it begins, the gui woman has grown sick and so the orphan must visit her father to ask advice on how to treat her. His wife’s father takes him hunting and kills three young children on the excursion to eat. The orphan is able to deduce that his new wife is actually a gui, because only gui eat human flesh, but he hides his repulsion. He delivers the meat to his wife, who gets well—and then, her appetite for flesh restored, she begins to try to hunt her husband. In the ensuing conflict, the orphan makes use of varying clever schemes to trick his wife. However, when he becomes a little bit too pleased with himself, his wife hears him laughing in his hiding place, and he is forced to kill her in self-defense. From there, Cheryl continued:

The orphan began to cry very hard. “How could I shoot my own wife? How could I kill my own wife?” he said. Because the orphan was truly sad, the gui also felt sad and also cried.

“It’s this way,” the gui said. She’s already dead. So you take half to eat, and I’ll take half of her to eat. The orphan only cried harder. “How could I eat my own wife?” he said. He didn’t want to eat human flesh.
The gui family was very happy. The wife had many younger sisters, and they each said, “I want older sister’s arm! I want older sister’s leg! I want older sister’s finger!” and when they had said this, they ate her.

After that, the orphan went back to the village and told everyone there about the gui family. They believed him. “We can’t allow them to live here, with us,” he said. “It’s very dangerous.” So they tricked the gui family into leaving their home to go to a wedding to celebrate.

“Don’t leave your pig here,” the orphan said, because the pig was surely also a gui. “There will be lots and lots of food there, they will want him to eat it.”

“Don’t leave your dog here,” the orphan said, because the dog was also surely a gui. “There will be lots of bones there, they will want him to eat them.”

“Don’t leave your chicken,” the orphan said, because the chicken was also surely a gui. “The people eating food will not be careful, and there will be plenty of rice dropped for it to eat.”

So the gui family brought their pig, dog, and chicken with them. The villagers made a very big boat and made them sit in it, then the orphan rowed them out into the river. When they were almost at the other side, he leapt out onto the bank and ran away. However, then the orphan started to feel sad and guilty because he had let the gui get away. He started running along the bank yelling, “What will you do now?”

The gui said to the trees on one side of the river, “Trees, you are mine. Bend over the water so that we can climb up to the bank.” And the trees listened to him and slowly bent over. But the people on that side of the river had long knives, and they cut down the trees in one stroke.

So the gui said to the trees on the other side of the river, “Trees, you are mine. Bend over the water so that we can climb up to the bank.” And the trees listened to him, too, and slowly bent over. But the people on that side of the river had long knives, too, and they cut down the trees in one stroke.

Now there was nothing to be done. The orphan was running along the bank with tears coming down his face. “I can’t help you, what will you do? I’m so sad.” But really he was very happy.

The gui took two stones out of his shoe and said to the orphan, “Before now man hasn’t been able to make fire. Look well! Just strike two rocks together.” Ever since then, Lisu people have been able to make fire. And the gui family floated down the river. They didn’t die—today we believe they live very far away where the river ends.
As Cheryl recited the tale, my thoughts strayed to Lisu standards of morality. The moral differentiation between those who will eat human flesh and those who will not is emphasized throughout this tale. Important, too, is the visible need for a limit to one’s pride and for the presence of a conscience. The orphan’s wife finds him as he hides from her specifically because he loses control and begins to laugh at how she must be “stupid.” Later, the orphan is disgusted by his wife’s diet, but he is still deeply bereaved when he is forced to kill her. Lastly, we see him exhibit a few moments of ambivalent guilt and grief as he banishes the gui family down the river.

Cheryl’s story also shed some light for me on matters of spiritual belief. It spotlights the use of the verb 相信 xiangxin, the Mandarin term meaning “to believe” or “to trust in.” It appears multiple times in its negative form to describe relations between humans and gui, framing a relationship of distrust. More importantly, all of the Lisu I spoke to about gui, as well as about religion in general, used this verb in their comments. Here, I am specifically interested in the conclusion of the story: Cheryl states that the gui “didn’t die” and thus have not been erased from current existence. Instead, the gui have been physically removed to a place “far away, where the river ends.” This physical distance expresses the withdrawal of “trust in” the gui, the severance of the bond that initially connected humans to them. Relations thus broken off, the gui are banished to a new outlying location that ensures that any remaining belief need not interact troublingly with Christian ideology. Instead, the repudiated gui are removed to an ambiguously secular realm, the exact location of which is different for each Lisu individual.
Regardless, discussion of (let alone “trust in”) such “pagan” spirits would be profoundly unacceptable in Lanping Christian society. As I traveled through Nujiang, I began to suspect that the disparity between attitudes toward pre-Christian beliefs and traditions was connected in some way to differing attitudes in Nujiang Valley and Lanping toward storytelling. For, like Jean, her grandmother, and Cheryl, the Christians I encountered in Liuku and Fugong were adamant about certain abstemious behaviors, but they were markedly more willing to pass on the stories told to them in their youths. Here I return to the story about the hungry rock told to me in the introduction of this text: as mentioned, the Lisu college student who told me the tale as we walked down the road toward the village came from a family who had been converted to Christianity for four generations. Her family represents well the prevailing practices in Liuku and Fugong: in the eyes of many of these Christians storytelling is not only acceptable but is actually laudable.

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According to the conversations I had with Lisu, Nu, and Bai throughout Nujiang, the definition of “what it means to be Christian” in Nujiang Valley proper is in the majority identical to what it means to be Christian in Lanping. The elderly Mr. Lang outside of Fugong defined being Christian as “not doing bad things, going to Church every weekend, not smoking or drinking.” He claimed that Christians will go to heaven and live with God forever when they die. Cheryl echoed Mr. Lang, explaining that Christians “don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t become a bad person, cheat or steal from people… being Christian means when you die your soul will go to
live with God forever.” Mr. Sui, the Lisu expert I talked with in Liuku, further posited that Christianity has been popular because it functions to keep the peace. “Lisu people are very good together because they believe,” he said. “Christian people don’t smoke, drink, or do bad things like argue with neighbors. Everyone gets along.”

All three of these Lisu also used the previously mentioned phrase “haoshi” in their descriptions, but the important difference here is the way haoshi is functionally defined. In Lanping, performing haoshi means doing “good” deeds such as helping the needy or spending time with family. In Nujiang proper, however, the term is extended to include the passing on of cultural traditions such as the celebration of Kuoshijie (and even the practice of shang dao shan, xia huo hai), making corn mash alcohol, and telling stories: it is considered honorable to pass on culture to the next generation, to teach morals, values, and ethnic identity as seen in Chapter 2.

Storytelling is therefore charged with moral meaning. It is “good” to tell stories, to participate in the combination of secular and religious ritual that might otherwise be rendered forbidden.

This ideology of ethnicity echoes Constable’s description of the Shung Him Tong Christians, who say that, “adherence to Chinese religious belief and practice is not a necessary criterion for determining Chinese identity. Instead, they argue that there are certain secular Chinese beliefs, values, and practices that make one Chinese” (Constable 1994: 101). Charging the act of storytelling with moral value leads to a more open attitude about the mix of “minority culture” and Christian doctrine. More importantly, however, it asserts a counter-narrative of to the luohou/progress narrative: this traditional, and supposedly backward, practice of storytelling is
actually one *reason* Lisu people are “good.” They gain moral worth because they tell the stories and because they heed the lessons those stories contain. Moreover, telling and listening to stories comprises a way of showing respect for ancestral traditions, the ancestors who passed them down, and the various hardships they experienced and lessons they learned. Thus, in participating in the set of traditions surrounding the exchange of stories, Lisu people also construct the past not as something to be overcome, as in the Han progress narrative, but as a *source of value and knowledge*. In this light, the oral traditions that have been handed down from generation to generation become a legacy of and link to this valorized past. The attitude one supposedly must have toward the past in order to gain legitimacy in contemporary China— that it is something to break free from and leave behind—is thus challenged, as Lisu storytelling helps to create a positive alternative view of the past and, concomitantly, an counter-definition of what it means to be modern.

We can further nuance this argument by turning back to Abu-Lughod, Schein, and Davis, and by looking at Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. In *Veiled Sentiments*, Abu-Lughod presents a society in which oral performance is used to say things that are unacceptable in other social contexts. In one example out of many, she describes a situation in which a husband uses a poem to express emotions he can’t usually say to his wife:

> As I read them aloud, he seemed embarrassed and acted almost as if he had never heard them before. He looked blank when I asked him to explain them. The next day his wife confided that these poems were about her. He had used this indirect means to communicate his sentiments to her (Abu-Lughod 1986: 188).
In another passage, an unhappy woman sings about her dissatisfaction with an
arranged marriage, expressing emotions she is not allowed to articulate in any other
way (Abu-Lughod 1986: 217). I believe that Lisu stories run parallel with the poems
Awad ’Ali residents recite—they provide a forum for expressing sentiments that
diverge from the dominant social narrative.

This forum is in opposition to what Scott calls the public transcript. It is in
the interest of the subordinate in a given situation, he says, “to produce a more or less
credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are
expected of him,” meaning that in general the public arena presents a “portrait of
dominant elites as they would have themselves seen” by defining this portrait in
opposition of the public performance of the subordinate (Scott 1990: 4; 18). The
ideological counterpart to this presentation, as represented by Awad’ Ali poetry, is the
hidden transcript, which is produced by subordinates speaking in spaces inaccessible
to the powerful or in a figurative language that masks any subversive sentiments. The
hidden transcript is a “counterideology—a negation—that will effectively provide a
general normative form to the host of resistant practices invented in self-defense by
any subordinate group” (Scott 1990: 118).

Scott refers to such symbolic practices as “infrapolitics,” defining the term in
opposition to “loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions.”
Instead, infrapolitics is, “like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum.
That it should be invisible, as we have seen, is in large part by design—a tactical
choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power” (Scott 1990: 183).
Because, in a given social situation, the “subordinate group must carve out for itself
social spaces insulated from control and surveillance from above” (Scott 1990: 188), oral culture makes an excellent setting for the hidden transcript and infrapolitics to be carried out. “Printing presses and copying machines may be seized, radio transmitters may be located, even typewriters and tape recorders may be taken, but short of killing its bearer, the human voice is irrepressible” (Scott 1990: 162). Thus, the Lisu oral storytelling tradition makes for an effective space in which to house the hidden transcript.

The infrapolitics of ethnicity is very much visible in the struggle between Chinese peripheral peoples’ collective self-definition and the Han majority’s picture of an exotic, backward Other. According to Davis (2005:177), “As the new nation emerged, ethnic border peoples learned to present themselves in ways that Chinese officials would find appealing and acceptable. But cultural production has become the sphere in which contests between the state and locals…are quietly fought.” Davis touches upon the methods Tai Lue people in Yunnan provinces’ southernmost tip are using to reclaim their ethnic identity, while Schein discusses an example of this phenomenon in detail, one in which the Miao people with whom she worked performed at a culture pageant. The passage follows Schein’s Miao friends as they carefully navigate the way they portray themselves to themselves—the event is not publicized, and the audience is largely Miao. Schein describes the mix of Han and Miao songs performed and the range of dress—from Han/Western wear to everyday rural clothing to costumes made to look like the inaccurate version of Miao dress worn by dancers in the tourist industry—and interprets these choices of performance and clothing as a method of expressing culture self-awareness. “As members of a
putatively backward minority group, commonly portrayed as unselfconscious and tradition-bound, they performed in ways that marked them as active and aware, in charge of defining themselves” (Schein 2000: 271).

Similarly, Mueggler concludes his article by discussing how the Yi of Zhizuo struggled to find ways to reappropriate the festival that had been constructed for them and define it for themselves, from below. He explains how many Yi performed passive protest by choosing sites other than the stipulated area to dance during festival time, a “subversive strategy produced in decades of struggle between a state that sought to inscribe its mutable visions of society into the material spaces of this mountain hinterland and locals who sought to reaffirm another vision of social community” (Mueggler 2002: 27). Mueggler (2002: 34) concludes that:

The relationships between the past and the present…proved crucial. The project of recovering the ts’ici dances as tradition approached the past as a legacy, a passive foundation on which Zhizuo residents could claim both a common identity and a more substantial place in the reimagined national community. Those who responded with descriptions and histories of dance engaged the past as a project, an active participant in the present.

This struggle between passive “object” and continually changing, dynamic progression harkens back to Davis’ discussion of the Xishuangbanna theme park earlier in the chapter. In their struggle to reclaim the Clothing Competition Festival, the Yi were fighting a similar conflict with dance that the Lisu fight, in part, with stories. They were struggling to incorporate a valorized past, what Mueggler calls a “legacy,” into an active, dynamic present, to acknowledge tradition as constitutive of their modern selves. Similarly, Lisu storytelling rehabilitates a stigmatized ethnic identity by putting a positive value in the ties between themselves and their collective
past—an attitude in opposition with the dominant progress narrative, which views the past as a burden to cast off. In this vein, Stone-Mediori (2003: 150) claims:

The act of telling one’s own story is empowering for the storyteller, especially for people who had been excluded from official knowledge-producing institutions. Telling their own stories enables them to claim epistemic authority as well as to counter the objectified, dehumanized representations of them circulated by others.

Although he is discussing the general separation of dominant and subordinate cultures, Scott nevertheless captures the reason Nujiang storytelling makes such an effective forum for constructing alternative cultural narratives:

The development of a thick and resilient hidden transcript is favored by the existence of social and cultural barriers between dominant elites and subordinates. It is one of the ironies of power relations that the performances required of subordinates can become, in the hands of subordinates, a nearly solid wall making the autonomous life of the powerless opaque to elites (1990: 132).

Storytelling falls under the “traditional” and thus “backward” heading within the luohou narrative, a significant fact because “one of the most effective and common ways subordinates may express resistance is by embedding it in a larger context of symbolic compliance” (Scott 1990: 166). By situating the hidden transcript within the realm of tradition, the Lisu have created a double-thick insulation. They have made certain that they appear to be “in compliance” with expectations of tradition through storytelling, and they have equally ensured that their Han counterparts must remain uninquisitive and dismissive of the narratives promoted in these stories and of the stories themselves—or else risk losing their own status as “modern.”

Privacy secured, Lisu use the morally charged practice of passing cultural traditions, rituals, and self-identity through storytelling to create their own alternative definition of moral modernity that includes an active, valorized past. In bringing their
past into the present, Lisu resist both prongs of the progress narrative: the demand for unilinear assimilation (which is what good modern subjects are supposed to do) and the contrary construction of their ethnic identities as fixed, static, and backward. Instead, they attempt to construct a present in which a plurality of identities, each with unique, distinctive, and valuable pasts, can live and grow together.

What Scott calls “trickster stories” are important to these resistance efforts. One such story in the Lisu tradition deals with a rabbit (a notably wily, clever animal lacking in brute force, and one that may be seen as a pest or “less-than” by more powerful beings) and his adventures with other animals and in people in Nujiang. This was another tale Cheryl told me as I lay with my injured ankle on a pile of dingy blankets in the Bus Stop Hotel:

There was a very clever rabbit that lived in the forest. One day, he saw many merchants carrying large containers, guanzi⁹, on their backs up a mountain. He wanted to trick them, so he said, “Hurry, hurry! When you get to the top of the mountain, look up! There are ten suns and ten moons in the sky!”

When the people got to the top of the mountain, they excitedly looked to the sky, but there was only one sun and only one moon—and the containers all fell off their backs and broke into many pieces.

The merchants felt very angry, and so they went to confront the rabbit. But he tricked them again. “Don’t worry!” he said, “In that village in the valley, they like to buy guanzi in pieces just like they like them whole. They will even pay more!” The excited merchants hurried to the village, where the people crowded around to see what they were selling.

But when they saw that the merchants were only selling shards of containers, they said, “We don’t want these. We only want whole guanzi.” The merchants realized they had been tricked again, and were even angrier.

They caught the rabbit and put him in a bag, which they hung in the top of a tree. “You can stay here for one night, then tomorrow we will throw you into the Nu River,” they told him, then left.

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⁹ A vaselike clay container used to transport crops, food, or water
After awhile, the rabbit could see through the bag that someone was coming. It was a very old bear, herding some cattle down the road. The rabbit could see that there was a problem with the bear’s eyes—they were very red and causing the bear discomfort. The rabbit could tell the bear couldn’t see very well.

When the bear got to the place where the rabbit was hanging in the tree, he stopped. “What are you doing hanging in that bag in the treetop?” he asked the rabbit.

“My eyes have been very uncomfortable, so I stopped to rest them for a night. Then I will continue on,” the rabbit lied.

“Maybe I will do that, too. My eyes are very uncomfortable,” the bear said.

“I have already been here for a night. You can get in my bag if you like,” the rabbit said, and so the bear took the rabbit down and got into the bag himself. Then the rabbit went off down the road with his cattle.

The next morning, the merchants came back for the rabbit. “Wait! I’m not the rabbit!” the bear said when they tried to take the bag down.

“You’ve already tricked us many times,” the merchants told him. “We won’t believe you this time.” And they threw the bear into the Nu River, where he died.

Two or three years later, the merchants came upon the rabbit, urging what was now a large herd of cattle down the road. They were very surprised and curious. “What happened? How did you get back from the bottom of the river?” they asked him.

“At the bottom of the river there were many things to buy for very cheap,” the rabbit replied. “What a shame, when you put me in the river I didn’t bring anything, so I was only able to bring back these few cows,” the rabbit lied. “But it was the best thing that’s happened to me—I should thank you all.”

The merchants felt jealous, and they asked the rabbit to show them how to buy things at the bottom of the river. “Things you can put water in are the most expensive there—bowls, containers, guanzi,” the rabbit replied. “You should certainly bring those.”

Each of the merchants put a container on his back. The first man to jump went into the river, and the heavy container pulled him down. He could not swim. He flailed his arms on the surface for help, but the rabbit told the other merchants, “See? He is waving to tell you all to come in.” So they all jumped into the Nu River and died, and the clever rabbit became rich and lived a long time.

According to Scott, trickster tales depict an inverted, carnivalized world in which the underdogs reign through sheer cleverness. The trickster outwits his enemies
through cunning, taking advantage of their greed, haste, or gullibility (Scott 1990: 162), just as the rabbit undoes the bear and merchants in Cheryl’s story. Scott identifies this genre of stories as subordinates lodging “implicit protest[s] against their worldly fate… they [are] likely to envision an eventual reversal of leveling of worldly fortunes and rank, to emphasize solidarity, equality, [and] mutual aid” (1990: 157).

As she finished the story, Cheryl told me that this was one of her son’s favorites. In sharing the tale with her offspring, Cheryl helped to construct the image of a clever, tough, resourceful Lisu proxy, similar to the resilient, determined youngest-son and orphan proxies in various other tales, in the mind of a member of the next generation. In telling it to me, she painted a hopeful picture of a world where the traits Lisu prize above all others—determination, cleverness, will power—will afford them social mobility and the power she, like many others, feels she deserves. In both situations she was challenging the mainstream definition of what it means to be part of a minority culture in 21st century PRC and what the world could and might look like, instead.

* * * * *

In my exploration of Nujiang Valley, I discovered that trickster stories were not the only way that the Lisu I met sought to reshape definitions of modernity and tradition. In discussing the separation of subordinate and dominant cultures, Scott (1990: 158) states:

The existing cultural hierarchy holds out a model of behavior for civilized man that the peasantry lacks the cultural and material
resources to emulate…. Whether it is a matter of knowing the sacred
texts, of speaking and dressing properly…of patterns of taste and
cultural consumption, peasants are asked, in effect, to worship a
standard that is impossible for them to achieve.

It is true that the Lisu I encountered throughout Nujiang were often lacking in the
means to dress in the cutting-edge fashions of their Han counterparts. It is also true
that the education available in the moral rural and minority-heavy areas was generally
of inferior quality. However, instead of letting their material poverty keep them in the
box marked “backward,” the Lisu I met in the streets, markets, restaurants, and fields
of Nujiang Valley proper used that which was assigned to them by nationalist
ideology—their traditional methods of housing and dress—to create their own
alternative definition of modernity.

There are many variations of housing available in Nujiang. Even in urban
areas, many of those in the highest echelon economically can afford to live in
freestanding houses, sometimes with several floors. Most of the population, however,
lives in apartments of sizes that vary with their financial means. There are few
homeless, although migrant worker families are present. Housing in Liuku, Lanping,
and Fugong cities is largely modern Han style—that is to say bleak, blocky, and made
of gray concrete. The houses in the villages surrounding these cities range from the
same Han style to more traditionally Bai, Lisu, or Yi and tend to be located on
mountain or hillsides. I saw very little overlap of these “traditional” and “modern”
housing styles in Lanping county. Fugong, however, was different. Although a
traveler in Nujiang might think about housing simply as a matter of practicality, I
found that in Fugong the choices made in terms of home construction within the
urban Lisu community could be interpreted as defining alternative modernity by
interspersing traditional elements with more contemporary house styles.

Traditional Lisu homes in rural Fugong county have many common
characteristics. They tend to be simple wooden structures with thatched or sheet metal
roofs. The houses are often on stilts, with the space between the ground and the
bottom floor of the house reserved for any animals the house’s occupants may keep,
most often chickens and pigs, with the wealthier families also owning a horse,
donkey, or water buffalo. The remainder of the structure is divided into a floor for
living and an attic-type area, made of the space between the ceiling and a peaked roof
(often partially open to the living space) for storage of grain, field supplies, and other
miscellany.

The interiors of rural Lisu houses in Fugong are made up of large mats of
tightly woven reeds or strips of soaked wood fashioned into ceiling, floor, and walls.
A house is comprised of a single large, open living space. Depending on the owner’s
financial means, there might be a bedroom as well, differentiated from the main room
by a woven wood partition similar to the floor and outer house walls. Visitors sit on
the floor or on simple wooden stools, and there is generally very little furniture. The
middle of the room features an open fireplace made out of stone or concrete to guard
against fire damage, with a hole in the roof that functions as a chimney. The open
wood fire serves both as a heat source and a location for food preparation—cooking is
done in pots resting on a three-legged iron stand called a 三脚 san jiao, literally
meaning “three feet.” There is no space for relieving oneself or for hygiene—bathing
facilities are generally communal for a given village, or else such activities take place
in the rice/potato/wheat fields and the many tributaries that feed into the Nu River.

In traveling to various villages around Fugong county I was able to visit
people of varying financial statuses. I found that, despite the luohou narrative that
was recited to me almost at every turn, high economic status did not necessarily equal
progression into more “modern” and Han-style housing. The upwardly mobile Lisu
families I visited often still embraced traditional house forms, materials, structures,
and cooking methods. Most often the increase in financial ability translated into a few
more pieces of nicer furniture—a sofa or similar place for sitting, for example—but
the construction and form of the home remained largely traditional.

In my explorations of Fugong, I was especially interested in the ways Lisu
people found to maintain traditional home spaces in places with non-traditional
characteristics. One example is a house I visited in Cheryl’s home village. The house
belonged to Cheryl’s cousin and was off the main road that wound through the
village, hugging the hillside. The road was wide, even, and well developed, so the
house did not need to be on stilts. Inside, however, the floor was still raised off the
ground using the traditional woven floor on a wooden skeleton, so that one still
needed to take a step up from the concrete floor to the sitting area.

Similarly, instead of submitting to the utilitarian Han standards of Nujiang
city living, several of the urban Lisu apartments I went to had been altered with
components of traditional Lisu housing. For example, when I went to dinner at the
house belonging to Cheryl’s husband’s family, I found that they had a Han-style
apartment within the confines of the building, but that the family had created an entire
separate living area on their roof. There, they had constructed a full Lisu-style woven room, complete with a fire pit and san jiao with which to cook. We ate on the roof that evening, and the family told me that they rarely ever cook in the kitchen within the apartment.

I saw a similarly interesting instance of home alteration at the Tui family’s house (the same place where I was told the story about Tiger in Chapter 1.) On the day that we were to visit the Tuis, Cheryl and I arrived at a door very similar to other serviceable Han-style apartment buildings in the city. As the family’s 帮人 bang ren, a sort of Chinese housekeeper for the upper class, led Cheryl and me up a narrow flight of stairs, however, I noticed something unusual. All of the rooms branching off the stairwell were crowded with boxes, tables, and chairs turned upside down. My curiosity was sated when we reached the top of the stairs, which led to the roof. The family simply owned a few rooms in the apartment for storage, and they did almost all of their living in a full-scale traditional Lisu house that they had constructed on their flat concrete roof. The house displayed their financial means through its materials—it was made of sturdy wood rather than woven reeds and was richly decorated with Lisu cultural artifacts—but otherwise it very much matched with the other traditional houses I saw in Nujiang.

I interpret these sorts of adaptations of rural traditionalism to the urban setting as another situation in which the Fugong Lisu revalorize what the dominant national culture defines as “backwards” traditional customs and use them to constitute a strong cultural identity and define an alternative relationship to the past and, thus, to the idea of modernity. The house acts as a structured space which orders and orients the
various performances of ethnic selves that unfold within it, blending the traditional with “modern” as a way of renegotiating ethnic identity.

The ability to combine the modern with the traditional is a class privilege: such housing decisions fall to those who can afford to create this dual lifestyle in the city. The choice of city life is a marker of cultural as well as economic capital, since most rural Lisu are subsistence farmers, but urban living calls for other job skills in order to make ends meet. To this end, the fusion of Han and Lisu architecture in middle to upper class Lisu homes implicitly challenges the luohou narrative of backwardness. Despite their movement toward money and away from roots that many people of diverse ethnic backgrounds would call “backwards,” the choice to add traditional Lisu building elements to a Han-style apartment is actually a method of holding on to a sense of Lisu self in the city arena, where pressure to assimilate is so strong. As Bourdieu (1977: 89-91) has argued, in negotiating the structured space of the house, individuals internalize key cultural distinctions as parts of their habitus. In this case, what is internalized includes the sense of legitimized tradition reclaimed from the narrative of progress and backwardness. It is another way of reconstructing (literally, this time) a sense of ethnic identity through performance within the Han-heavy—and therefore, as prevailing Chinese wisdom would have it, “de-ethnicized”—social sphere of the city. By reproducing traditional aspects of Lisu housing in such a dynamic, creative, and selective way, Lisu home owners bring the past into the present in a private context that emphasizes their own agency with regard to personal ethnic expression.
Such multiplicity of ethnic agency is also at play at Fugong’s weekly market. Fugong is the economic center of Nujiang and so, as in many parts of rural China, it plays host to an open-air market every five days, with the larger events falling on each ten-day mark. From dawn until mid afternoon, the street that runs from east to west in Fugong’s small urban center is filled with various fresh-butchered meats, a myriad of vegetables, an abundance of the tropical fruit for which Nujiang is famous, mounds of steamed buns in bamboo holders, piles of hand-woven baskets, carved bow and arrow sets, and even the occasional enormous salt crystal brought up from the mines in Yingpan. The thoroughfare fills with throngs of Lisu and Nu in motorcycle taxis, bicycles, and on foot, all coming in from the countryside to do shopping for the week.

Even when I was sick or sore, even if I spent the rest of the day holed up in the Bus Stop Hotel, I made a point of going out to the market each time it took place during my stay in Fugong. Sitting on the stoop of some open-air pharmacy or used cell phone stall, I would observe as unobtrusively as I could. I loved to be surrounded by the movement, energy, and color: the buyers and sellers squabbling over prices; the children running from stall to stall stealing unripe plums or bits of unused string; the elderly nainais enjoying the sun and sitting, catching up on gossip, sewing the traditional skirts they would sell at the next market day. Although many urban Lisu choose not to wear Han/Western styles on a daily basis, market day presented a time when the highest concentration of individuals in traditional dress interacted together.

There seemed to be few strict rules in terms of Lisu dress. One of these few was that younger girls wear the light blue pleated skirts described to me by Jean at the
teahouse in Chapter 1—the skirts are made of a cloth that resembles calico, have wide white stripes down the front, and are edged with orange or red thread. When a woman grows older and marries, she trades this skirt for a black one, with the same red-orange edging. Besides the skirt, women seemed free to choose from a variety of different articles. Some wore simply sewn shirts with hand-embroidered buttonholes for fastening down the front; others chose similar pieces that attached on the side. Some older women opted to wear embroidered pants similar to those their male counterparts sported, or to wear Han-style Mao suits. Many women wore the neon plaid headscarf so ubiquitous in rural China; others wore their long hair braided and wrapped around the crown of the head as a headband, following a similar Nu fashion in Gongshan. Some wore an ornate headdress made of bone circles and clay beads; some braided yarn into their hair; some wore one heavy jade earring. Men were similarly free to choose between button-down shirts, Mao-style jackets and caps, and linen or embroidered pants. As far as I could tell, Lisu of all ages and genders were free to mix and match among the present clothing options and to incorporate Han and Western-style components as well. I never heard any of my Lisu friends discuss, judge, or disparage clothing choices—like one’s religious beliefs, the precise way one dressed appeared to be an individual choice, a way of expressing ones sense of self.

Regardless of sex, almost every individual I encountered, both during and outside market day, carried a shoulder bag embroidered with stripes of varying colors and thicknesses and edged with long fringe. These bags were truly ubiquitous: I could not go out into the day without encountering at least one tied to a tree, its owner off on errands, or without seeing a young mother watching her child play in the park as
she crocheted a new satchel nearby. Curious, I began to ask my friends about the bag’s meaning. Why did everyone carry them? Did they have any special significance? My friends told me that the colors and widths of the stripes varied according to the place in Nujiang in which they were made and to the ethnic background of the bearer. Although my untrained eye could not discern the difference, I was told that certain color combinations announced that one was of Nu descent, while others identified the holder as Lisu. My friends explained that the patterns had once had a more elaborate meaning, but that that meaning had been lost. These days, the bags were made as a way of passing on tradition, with or without the accompanying signification.

Han and Western-style clothing is available cheaply at essentially every market in every urban area in Nujiang. Given their abundance and the dominant assumption that dressing Han makes one more “modern” and therefore morally “good,” one might think at first that Nujiang Lisu would not take the extra labor to hand-sew the various components of their dress. This assumption changes, of course, with the previous discussion of storytelling and architecture. The general Lisu attitude toward clothing choice and, specifically, toward the striped bag, indicates yet another way that everyday Nujiang life quietly contributes to an alternative cultural narrative, acting as an ethnicizing practice that symbolically refuses assimilation. By rejecting Han clothing and instead choosing to wear traditional skirts, shirts, headpieces, and bags with pride, Lisu imbue their clothing, and the identity it expresses, with dignity and respect. In embracing what many would call the luohou behavior of making and wearing traditional clothes, and in using these clothes to identify their ethnic
backgrounds to each other, Nujiang Lisu proclaim “I am Lisu, I am here, and I am not ashamed.” When they continuing to wear the clothes worn by their grandparents, and their grandparents before them, the Fugong Lisu create their market space and, on a larger scale their prefecture, as a forum for resisting assimilation. The traditional clothing joins with other performative traditional components—stories, houses, religious rituals, food preparation—to make a quiet but significant claim to ethnicized but nonetheless legitimate modernity.
Striped Nujiang satchels hung to wait while their owners are busy elsewhere

Shiyueliang, outside Fugong
As I have previously mentioned, during the last few weeks of my time in Nujiang I fell and severely sprained my left foot. The circumstances of my fall were as follows:

Cheryl, her younger sister, Diana, and I had traveled to Laomudeng to visit Diana’s natal home and to learn about Nu life. The first part of the path to Diana’s mother’s house was narrow and uneven, bordered on one side by a small planting of Tibetan corn and on the other side by a ledge that dropped off between five and eight feet into the yards of people in the village. In trying to handle the sensory overload of such a new environment, I took my attention off the path for one moment and tripped, tumbling headlong off the ledge and falling six feet onto some scrap metal.

The first minutes after my fall were frightening. I hurt all over, wasn't sure what had happened or what was wrong, and was very aware of being in the middle of nowhere. There were Lisu I'd never met clustered around me asking me in thick accents where it hurt. One of them rubbed my back; another one felt my head, although I didn't think I'd banged it. After awhile, the pain became localized in my foot—I’d somehow managed to fall with all of my weight on it, and although the rest of my body was warming with relief, my foot was throbbing intensely and I wasn't sure I could move it. I sent Diana to go get one of the iced desserts that are so popular in Nujiang from her house, which was only a few yards away—the closest thing I could think of to an ice pack.
When I was finally able to rise unsteadily through a thick cloud of dizziness, the strangers into whose yard I had fallen invited me in, arranged me in their living room, and went to get a UNICEF doctor who was working in nearby Bijiang. The living room was a sparse, concrete box in the Han utilitarian style. I struggled to arrange myself on the only piece of furniture, a bench running along the back wall, hoping that I was not too seriously injured, as the nearest decent hospital was in 15 hours away in Kunming. I groggily lay back, drinking some hot water and eating a bowl of rice that was brought to me. In a haze of pain and confusion, I heard the unmistakable sound of American jazz/pop singer Rufus Wainwright's voice—for a moment I was sure that I had more than a mild concussion, since I seemed to be hallucinating. However, when I turned my head I discovered the source of the music. The only other object in the room was an enormous TV/DVD system, in front of which a small Lisu child sat, transfixed. The child was watching the Chinese equivalent of MTV, and Rufus Wainwright was performing on a music video.

As this anecdote suggests, the rising availability of technology such as televisions and DVD players has resulted in a concomitant rise in the popularity of American, as well as Korean, Japanese, and Han, pop culture among Lisu youth in Nujiang valley. The gap between the older generations, who survived the Cultural Revolution with their traditions in most ways intact and are beginning to experience what Barbara Meyerhoff calls the “urgency” of old age, and the younger generation who grew up under Deng Xiaoping, is constantly evident. According to most adults, the encroachment of Western, Japanese, Korean, and Han culture on the younger
generation’s lifestyle has done much to lessen interest in the traditions their parents
and grandparents wish to teach them. “Before we had TV or DVDs or a disco in
Lanping, people sang, told stories all the times in the evening, and danced, but now
not nearly so much” my Lanping translator, Jackson, lamented to me at one point.
Teacher Ru echoed Jackson’s words, saying, “It used to be that Lisu people told
stories after dinner and before sleep but now with TV and music… you can only tell
stories if there are people to listen. In the countryside, where televisions are less
common, the tradition is stronger.” This sentiment was repeated to me over and over
during my time in Nujiang: it conveys a widely held apprehension concerning the
impact of cultural globalization upon youth in non-Western locations. Certainly,
television and popular music offer seductive glimpses into new and different worlds
to youth who will probably never have a chance to experience those worlds first hand.
But regardless, time after childhood in Nujiang is devoted either to all-consuming
labor in mines and on subsistence farms or to intensive studying in college or
vocational school. “We don’t have time for stories here,” one student told me.

Where lack of interest ends, deference begins: almost all of the young people I
approached to discuss stories were initially reticent and self-effacing on the topic.
Most often, they told me that they knew “only a few” stories and referred me to a
parent or grandparent. Older people, they said, knew much more—the tales they
themselves remembered weren’t too clear or accurate. Sometimes they refused at first
to say anything at all on the subject, explaining bashfully that their stories weren’t
good enough to tell me. When I asked Gina, a Lisu woman in her twenties to tell me a
story at a dinner with several of her friends, she began to tell me a story about a dog
and pig who were friends. However, she spoke quickly and quietly, stopping in apparent embarrassment to tell the people around her not to listen whenever there was a pause in the loud chatter of the restaurant. When I wanted to clarify some facts about the story, she was too shy to continue and was unwilling to repeat the story.

Although I believe this behavior may in part represent an expression of traditional attitudes toward stories in which deference to elders is encouraged, I attribute much of this privileging of old people’s stories to the widespread concept discussed above: the idea that Lisu youth are patently uninterested in their ethnic roots. As the younger generation absorbs the narrative of their own cultural disinterest, they have learned to look at the words of the older generation—-their stories, their folk wisdom— as more “purely” Lisu. Such conduct is dangerous, however, as the privileging of old peoples’ stories at the expense of young people has the potential to produce a vicious cycle. If they feel too shy and intimidated to tell stories themselves or feel that their stories are innately not as valuable as those of their grandparents, they are less likely to tell those stories at all, and the loss of traditional culture will continue.

The widespread valorization of print culture also poses a threat to Lisu oral storytelling practices. According to Teacher Ru, there are currently three different alphabets available for use in writing in Lisu language. The oldest was developed by the missionaries when they arrived after the Opium Wars, another was created especially to write down Lisu stories by a man named Wang Ren Bo in nearby Weixi prefecture, and the last was invented by the government during the period following the 1949 revolution when minority culture was being catalogued. Mr. Sui, the
government official I talked to in Yingpan, told me that the missionary script was dominant before 1957, but that now a combination of the scripts are in use.

The presence of a functional alphabet for putting down on paper what for thousands of years could only be passed from generation to generation through spoken word has been enormously exciting for the Lisu community. Bibles using the new writing system are printed in Burma, where they are not subject to censorship by the CCP, then smuggled across the border to be used in churches throughout Nujiang; signs throughout the valley are printed in both Mandarin and the Lisu alphabet; and the publishing market has exploded with books using the alphabets, translating preexisting works or using the new written media to explore the intellectual worlds of politics, social history, and, yes, traditional storytelling.

The result of this abundance of Lisu folktale collections was that most of the time when I asked someone I met to tell me a story, if I was not referred to an older relative, then I was rewarded with a shiny new edition, often inscribed to me in looping Mandarin script. When I confessed that I had not learned to read the Lisu alphabet, Mandarin-language paperbacks replaced their Lisu-language compatriots. My attempts to explain that I was specifically hoping to have someone tell me a story, rather than give me one to read, were often met with confusion. For many literate Lisu, the written word is superior to oral culture in its steadfast concreteness. In a rapidly-transforming world where changing cultural influences, conflicting political interests, and the dominant narrative of social “progress” all pose threats to a rich and thriving oral tradition, stories written down in books are insurance against what many Lisu perceive as an inevitable decline. Published stories are impervious to change, to
manipulation, to disintegration, to being forgotten. The compilations therefore act as a safeguard against the forces of change and cultural dissolution they so fear.

This deference toward written text was not universal within Nujiang, and as my relationships with my Lisu friends deepened even some of those individuals who had at first exhibited such reverence for the written word did not consistently express this view. I suspect that my status as a visiting college student from America may have contributed some of their initial behavior. Perhaps these educated Lisu initially assumed that I would want to see the “official” versions that had been legitimized through their appearance in print. Indeed, although these story compilations were often written by Lisu authors, they represented a version of Lisu stories specifically created for outsiders: although the people who gave me these books expressed great pride in their contents, I never heard of anyone reading one. Presenting me with copies of these “outsider” stories both expressed and reinforced my initial outsider position and, in presenting a singular, official version of Lisu stories, discouraged further dialogue.

“Wait,” I wanted to say. “The change you are so afraid of, the one that these books act as insurance against—that is exactly what I want to hear about. I want to listen to your version, what you remember of the story your grandmother told you at bedtime—complete with the little erasures that result from time and the colorful flourishes, quirks, and turns of phrase which you add with a great deal of thought or without really thinking at all. I want to hear your story, not a story.” As the legendary Chinese storyteller Jin Shao Bao has said, regarding committing his spoken stories to text:
How do I write it? If I write it sentence by sentence exactly as it was told, then it will be easier to write. Minimally, I needn’t think about it too much. I would need only to make a few grammatical changes. But… it will eliminate the colorfulness, the sound and human elements of the performance and gradually turn it into a written language. This is equivalent to taking something that was three-dimensional and making it one-sided… It would be hard to call this kind of book a success. It would merely be a transitional written record of the contents of the oral narrative—it becomes [archival] materials. At the very least, it is no longer a work of art (Blader 1999: 167).

Instead, I coaxed and wheedled, bought beer when necessary, recited “Little Red Riding Hood,” took pictures with curious relatives and friends. And eventually, these tellers and their stories came out from hiding. As social distance was replaced by renqing and I was accepted into the Nujiang social world, my Lisu friends began to feel comfortable enough to share oral versions of their stories with me, opening the door for new kinds of interchanges and new stories. In a significant parallel between Bedouin poetry and Lisu stories, Abu-Lughod notes:

> Poetry is the discourse of social intimacy. Sharing poems, like exposing natural weaknesses, marks the absence of hasham [strict rules of social hierarchy in Bedouin society] between individuals. Poetry indexes social distinctions by following the lines of social cleavage. It usually does not cross the boundaries created by differential power and status, including those associated with gender” (Abu-Lughod 1986: 234).

Moreover, in contrast with print versions, the oral storytelling event actively induces and involves conversation: I was implicated as a listener to interpret and find my own meaning, while the teller used the creativity and agency inherent in painting a new and unique tale iteration especially for the time we were spending together. In telling me tales, my Lisu friends were giving of themselves, and I was encouraged to give back. These stories—revealing, rich, and alive—were therefore both the result of and
the catalyst for the continuing development of my affectionate, caring relationships in Nujiang.

* * * * *

My experience with this still strong narrative tradition, hidden underneath the defensiveness required to live as an Other in the PRC, helps me believe that despite the encroachment of technology, outside cultural influences, and a purported loss of interest on the part of the younger generation, there is reason to be optimistic about the future of storytelling and Lisu cultural life in Nujiang Valley. Many of the most culturally ambivalent young Lisu I met eventually admitted to knowing some stories, and often once they were encouraged they told them with relish. Despite the stereotype of the younger generation as having little interest in their ethnic roots, a number of my Lisu friends confided in me that the stories they had been told as children still served for them as moral and cultural resources, affecting their sense of affiliation with a specific ethnic legacy and helping them to differentiate wrong from right. They often added that should they have children in the future, they would wish to pass the stories on.

Many of these Lisu were of college age and professed ambitions to become guides, dances, singers, musicians, or restaurateurs in the cultural tourism market that thrives in Yunnan. Tourism has been a lukewarm business in Nujiang until recently, when the Valley has garnered national attention for its beauty and cultural diversity. Soon, visitors will arrive in droves, as they travel from nearby Lake Lugu and Lijiang, both areas currently overrun with tourists. Now is therefore an opportune time to enter the tourism job market in Nujiang, but this ambition requires education:
the most desirable workers in the tourism industry have completed degrees at colleges or vocational schools, majoring in their chosen art.

Curricula in such programs mean that students are learning (or relearning) in some form the culture that some others are so quick to leave behind. However, because classes are geared toward jobs in the tourist industry, students are being taught the packaged, objectified version of minority culture as filtered through PRC economic and political interests and the nationalist ideology of progress and backwardness. Vocational schools such as the one I visited in Liuku are responsible for producing a large proportion of local tourist workers, whose pay depends largely on Han tourists visiting for an exotic thrill and to have their own sense of modernity as Chinese citizens affirmed. One might worry that in this sort of cultural education a more subversive inflection of tradition as a source of strength and pride, might be lost to never-ending contextless theme parks.

Schein, however, has something to say about this anxiety. Of her Miao friends in the pageant she concludes:

Throughout their attentions to costume, youthful contestants neither repudiated their traditions nor perpetuated them; rather, they packaged them in ways that demonstrated the artifice through which they were maintained. Playing the Miao part indicated to them both respect for ethnic heritage and a forward-thinking management of its expression (Schein 2000: 270).

Schein’s impressions suggest that my hopes for Nujiang’s future are within reach. She and Davis describe ethnic homelands that have been made essentially into playhouses where visitors can come to get their fill of the exotic and leave with their nationalist ideology intact. Both authors, however, also portray peoples who have found ways to quietly express their own forms of dissent. Their analyses gave me
reason to believe that, regardless of tourist development, Nujiang Lisu will continue to tell their stories, and in doing so teach their children how to become good people, claim agency through their traditions, and quietly contest the social world in which they live. In any case, I hope so: that way in the future other people will have the opportunity to visit this valley edged by incredibly green mountain walls, to hear the stories told there, and to perceive through those stories the tellers’ brave and stubborn endeavor to valorize a denigrated cultural identity in a world where matters of ethnicity are battlegrounds and orphans must struggle to survive.
Appendix A
Other Stories

I’ve included here a compendium of some of the other stories I collected during my time in Nujiang. These stories did not fit into the ethnography in terms of analysis, but I still find each of them beautiful, wise, complex, and fascinating:

Story 1—
Told by Teacher Ru, in Liuku:
An orphan went fishing one day and caught a fish that was half bad and half good. He couldn’t eat it because of the bad half, so he put it in the well in his home. Each day he went out to work and when he came back he had more and more food, more and more belongings, more and more money. Finally, he hid outside the door one day after he left to discover the source of his riches. The fish was really a beautiful woman. After awhile of living happily together, however, the orphan ran away with a beautiful woman from next door. But by then he had forgotten how to be hardworking because the fish got him everything he had. He sat and did nothing all day and slowly his belongings became less and less and he became very poor. He missed the fish.

Story 2—
Told by my translator, Louisa, in Liuku, about Shiyueliang:
A princess wanted to marry a commoner, but her father, the king, was against it. The king was also a magician, and so he poured a cup of water on the ground and made a flood, trapping the two lovers, who were attempting to escape, inside a mountain. The princess’ lover made a boy and arrow and used it to help them escape, but now there is a large hole in the mountain. You can still see it today in Fugong.

Story 3—
Told by Mrs. Su, in Chengang:
There were two young people who fell in love. One was Lisu and one was not. In those days, such a pairing was not acceptable. In desperation, they committed suicide by jumping off a mountain together. After they jumped, the mountain suddenly grew very tall and then collapsed. Some Lisu people came to find the two lovers. They buried the lovers in the ground because they did not want the mountain to grow so tall again and thought maybe this would help. They put three stones on top of the lovers’ bodies, which are still there. Until this day they call that mountain Jian Shan [“sharp mountain”] because before it was so very tall.

Story 4—
Told by Lisa, a young Lisu student, in Lanping:
Have you been to the temple outside of town? Have you climbed the stairs in the backs? Did you see they were made of stones? There is a story said about those stairs. A long time ago there was a sea there, and a dragon lived in the sea. One day a phoenix came. The dragon fell in love but the phoenix didn’t like him. She said, “If you can swallow the sea all in one gulp, I’ll marry you. The dragon did—but then he died, because he couldn’t live outside the water. The phoenix felt very sad and flew away, and the dragon’s skin fell down and covered the ground. It’s still there today as the stairs on the mountain.

Story 5—
Told by Mr. Lang, the 80-year-old Lisu ye ye, outside Fugong. Apparently a longer version of Story 1:

A long time ago there was an orphan who fished for a living. He would sell the fish and buy things he needed. Every day he went down to the riverside to fish. One morning he had no success fishing—he only caught one fish, a fish not good to eat, so he let it go. This happened four times, until finally he decided that God must want him to have the fish, so he took it home and put it in the well in his house.

The next morning, he went out to fish as usual. When he got back, there were all sorts of foods prepared for him—chicken, meat, vegetables—and his house was cleaned, his floors mopped. He didn’t know who could have done these things, as he lived alone. The next day he went out to fish and the same thing happened. So the third day he pretended to go out and then stood quietly behind the door and watched. As soon as he left, the fish turned into a beautiful young girl—the Dragon King’s daughter. She cleaned, mopped the floor and made many good foods. Then, as she was about to turn back into the fish, the orphan jumped out and hugged her. “Don’t change!” he said. “Be my wife!”

The orphan and the Dragon Daughter lived happily together, and every day he went to go fish. One morning, the Dragon Daughter said, “Don’t go out today. Stay here and fix the chicken coop, the cow and pig and horse pens.” The orphan didn’t understand.

“Why would I fix these things?” he said. “We do not have any chickens, cows, pigs, or horses.”

“When you have fixed the chicken coop and cow, pig, and horse pens, then we will naturally have chickens, cows, pigs, and horses,” answered the Dragon Daughter. And it was so. The Dragon Daughter and the orphan lived together happily and were very rich.

Many people in the village were jealous of their happiness and wealth. One neighbor who was very envious came to the orphan and said, “Your wife is not really human. It is not natural for you to live with her. If you tell her that you don’t want her and she should go home to the river, then I will give you my beautiful daughter to marry instead.”

The orphan became convinced, and he went to his wife and said, “I don’t want you, go back to the river.”
The Dragon Daughter was very upset and said, “Go and think some more about this. If you really have decided, I will go.” The orphan said, “I have already thought well. I want you to go.”

And so the Dragon Daughter went and jumped into the river, but as she did all of the orphan’s riches—the chickens, cows, pigs, and horses—jumped into the river with her. The orphan tried to stop them, grabbing them as they jumped, but he could not. Soon, his house was empty. He had nothing left. He went to the jealous neighbor and said, “Now can I have your daughter to marry?”

But the man replied, “You have nothing in your house. How can I allow my daughter to live there?”

The orphan now realized his mistake. He sat on the riverbank and cried. After awhile, a crow flew by. “Orphan, why are you crying?” it said.

“I told my wife to go back to the river and now all of my riches are gone, too. I have nothing!” the orphan replied.

But the crow just jeered and made fun of the orphan. “This is your own fault!” it said, and flew off.

A little while later a magpie flew by. “Orphan, why are you crying?” it said

“I told my wife to go back to the river and now all of my riches are gone, too. I have nothing!” the orphan replied.

But the magpie was the same as the crow. “This is your own fault!” it said and flew off.

Lastly, a frog came by. “Orphan, why are you crying?” it said.

“I told my wife to go back to the river and now all of my riches are gone, too. I have nothing!” the orphan replied.

“If you go into your house and fry me some dou mi [a tofu dish], I will help you,” said the frog. And so the orphan went into the house and made some dou mi. After the frog had eaten his fill and drunk some water, the orphan could suddenly see the Dragon Daughter rowing a boat in the river. He jumped into the river and hugged her.

“I was wrong!” he told her, “Please come back.”

“I forgive you because I love you,” she said, “but my father is still angry. We shouldn’t tell him yet. Let him get used to it.” So she used her magic to make the orphan very small and put her inside her shirt, then went to see her father, the Dragon King.

When he saw his daughter, the Dragon King said, “Your smell is different today than other days. You smell human.” The Dragon daughter replied, “Don’t be angry, father, it’s just your son-in-law. He’s part of the family.”

The Dragon King decided that he wanted to test the orphan to make sure he was worthy of marrying the Dragon daughter. He took him up to the mountains to a very large rock and gave him a bow and arrow and said, “Tomorrow we will see if you can shoot an arrow into the heart of the rock.”

The orphan was very anxious. “How can I shoot an arrow into the heart of the rock? I don’t have the strength,” he told the Dragon Daughter.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “Before you shoot your arrow, just say these words: ‘Dragon Daughter and Dragon Son have come to shoot bow and arrow.’ And you will be able to shoot an arrow into the heart of the rock.”
And so the next day before he shot his bow and arrow, the orphan said, very quietly so that the Dragon King wouldn’t hear, “Dragon Daughter and Dragon Son have come to shoot bow and arrow,” and his arrow went right through the rock, making the Shiyueliang we know today.

The Dragon King was still not satisfied. “Let us go and hunt animals,” he told the orphan. Again, the orphan was anxious.

“How can I hunt animals? I don’t know how,” he told the Dragon Daughter.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “Before you go hunting, just say these words: ‘Dragon Daughter and Dragon Son have come to hunt.’ And you will be able to hunt.”

And so the next day before he went hunting the orphan said “Dragon Daughter and Dragon Son have come to hunt,” and he was able to kill many animals. This action convinced the Dragon King that his son and law was formidable, a good man, and so they lived happily together.

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**Story 6—
Also told by Mr. Lang, in Fugong:**

Have you ever looked at the moon and seen that it is not all pure-white? There are some parts of it that are darker. We Lisu say those parts look like a pear tree with a girl sitting at its base. This is a story about that pear tree.

A long time ago a mother lived with her two daughters. The younger was an idiot [Mandarin: *shazi*], but the elder, Zheng You, was very smart. One day, the mother sent Zheng You into the fields to chase birds away from the crops while she prepared malt for whiskey and made food.

Zheng You went, but after awhile she noticed that whatever sound she made to chase the birds away, another person far away from her would copy it. If she said “Huuuu,” the other person said, “Huuuu.” If she said, “Xiaaaa,” the other person said, “Xiaaaa.” She thought this was strange, and so she went back to her mother.

“There is a strange person in the fields who is copying whatever I say,” she told her mother. “I don’t want to go back there.” But her mother didn’t believe her. “You just want to eat the things I’ve made here,” she said.

“No, believe me,” Zheng You said. “I’m afraid.”

Finally, the mother agreed. “Stay here and take care of your sister. And if anyone knocks on the door, don’t just open it. Ask who it is first,” she said, then she went off to the fields.

She found that it was the same: if she said, “Huuuu,” the other person also said, “Huuuu.” If she said “Xiaaaa,” the other person said, “Xiaaaa.” So the mother yelled out, “Hey! Come here! If you are a person, come to me on my right. If you are a *gui*, come to me on my left.”

A very old woman approached the mother on her left side: the woman was a *gui*. She was very, very dirty, with leaves in hair.

“Grandmother, why are you so dirty?” the mother asked the *gui*.

“Because my home is in the forest,” the *gui* answered. “Now, if you will help me find the lice in my hair, I will help you find the lice in yours.” The mother agreed,
and as she picked each louse out she dropped it into the spirit’s hand, and the old woman ate it. The mother felt disgusted at this, but she continued.

By and by, she said, “Grandmother, I have found all of the lice.” And so the gui began to search in her hair. But it hurt the mother quite a lot, and so she spoke up.

“Don’t worry,” the gui answered. “It’s just that my fingernails are very long.”

After awhile, blood began to drip down the mother’s shoulders.

“Grandmother, what is dripping down my neck?” the mother asked. “Oh, it’s just an old woman’s drool,” the gui answered.

But then a man who was standing on a mountain high above the valley happened to look down at them in the field. He yelled down, “Hey, who is that down there? She has already eaten half of your head!” for indeed, the woman was not picking out lice, but was in fact eating the mother’s head. The two women struggled, and ultimately the gui won and ate the mother up. Then she headed back to the house, wanting to eat the sisters, too.

When the spirit knocked on the door, Zheng You said, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, your mother,” the gui said, not sounding at all like their mother.

“Our mother’s voice isn’t like that,” Zheng You responded.

“Please believe me,” the gui said, now sounding exactly like the mother. But Zheng You was still suspicious.

We Lisu have square holes in our doors, so Zheng You said, “Stick your arm in and I will see if you are really our mother.” But when the gui did, Zheng You saw that the woman’s arm was very hairy. “Our mother has no hair on her arms,” Zheng You said. And so the spirit went away and found a rock and rubbed her arms on it until all the hair fell off. Then she went back to the sisters’ house, but this time Zheng You insisted on seeing her hat and sash. The truth was that Zheng You knew it was really a gui, and nothing the gui could say would make her open the door.

But the idiot sister did not understand that the gui was not really their mother. Quietly, she said to the gui through the walls, “Grandmother, our door is not very strong. If you push very hard, you can make it give way.” And so the gui did.

“Which of you girls is the nicest?” she said. “I will choose that one to sleep with me tonight. The other must find somewhere else to sleep.” The idiot sister volunteered. Before they went to sleep, the gui told Zheng You, “I have several habits when I sleep. I often kick in my sleep. I yell nonsense words. I grind my teeth. And I often get up for a drink of water. If you hear any of these things, do not trouble yourself to get up and come help.” Of course, these were the sounds of people as they struggled with her, as she ate their bones, as she drank their blood. But Zheng You didn’t know that, and that night the gui ate her sister up.

The next morning, the gui had eaten herself very full, and she needed badly to have a bowel movement. She asked Zheng You where the nearest toilet was, but it was in a village far from Zheng You’s house. “I will give you this rope attached to our house, and then you will be able to find your way back,” Zheng You said. The gui left, and Zheng You set about preparing.

She went into the house and spoke to all the furniture. To the table she said, “That old woman will come back, and when she says, ‘Zheng You’ I want you to say, ‘Ey!’”
To the bed, she said, “That old woman will come back, and when she says, ‘Zheng You’ I want you to say, ‘Ey!’”

She said the same to the floor, the cupboard, the stool, to every piece of furniture. Then she went and hid in the pear tree outside her house.

When the gui had come back from the bathroom, she went to find Zheng You so she could eat her. “Zheng You!” she yelled!

“Ey!” said the table. Thinking Zheng You was under the table, the gui set about eating the table, but found nothing.

“Zheng You!” she yelled again.

“Ey!” said the bed. Thinking Zheng You was under the bed, the gui set about eating the bed, but found nothing. She went through every piece of furniture in the house, until she had gnawed at all of it. Finally, she went outside and saw some fallen pears from the pear tree. She looked up and found Zheng You.

“Young Daughter,” she said, “I would like some pears. Help me to climb up like you.”

“Just blow your nose and spread the mucus on the trees, then climb up,” Zheng You told her. This was clever, as mucus is very slippery, and so the gui tried but could not climb up.

“Young Daughter, I cannot climb up. Think of another way,” the gui said.

“Use your breasts to balance you on higher and higher branches,” Zheng You said. The gui tried, but the mucus was still very slippery, and she fell to the ground with her breasts covered in blood.

“Young Daughter, I want some pears!” the gui insisted.

“Go inside and get my father’s spear,” Zheng You instructed. “Sharpen it in the fire, then bring it to me. I will use it to knock some pears down for you.”

The gui did so, and gave the spear to Zheng You, who tried to throw it at the gui but missed. “You didn’t sharpen it enough,” she said. “Go inside and do it again.” The gui did so, and came back outside, gave the spear to Zheng You, and knelt on the ground with her mouth open, ready for a pear to fall into it. Zheng You aimed and the spear went right down the spirits throat and out the small of her back. She started bleeding and didn’t stop. The blood got higher and higher, filling up the field, until it was almost as high as Zheng You in the tree.

Zheng You appealed to the sun, “Sun, come down and help me or I will surely die!” she said.

“I cannot help you, because if I were to be next to you I would kill you from my heat,” the sun said. “But wait until the sky is dark, then the moon will help you.”

Sure enough, when the sky was dark the moon came down and took Zheng You and her pear tree up with it. And ever since then you can see a pear tree on the moon, with Zheng You sitting at its base.

**Story 7—**

**Told by Mrs. Zhu, a 100 year old Lisu nainai, in Fugong:**

A long, long time ago there was a pig and a dog. Every day their owner would have them go work in the fields. The pig was very hard-working and worked all day with his nose in the mud. Meanwhile, the dog slept and did nothing. At the end of the
day, the dog got up and ran around the field, leaving his footprints everywhere. Then they returned to their master.

“Master, the dog is lazy! He never helps me work!” the pig said.

“He’s lying!” the dog replied. “It’s him that is lazy. Go see the field yourself.”

Sure enough, when their master went to the field he saw the prints of the dog everywhere, showing that he had been at work all day. Nowhere did he see the pig’s footprints. And that is why we Lisu give our dogs our own food, but pigs must eat their own slop.

**Story 8—**

**Told by my translator, Cheryl, in Fugong:**

A grasshopper and a lizard went down to the river and went fishing. The grasshopper caught many fish, but the lizard could not catch any. He asked the grasshopper for help. “How can I catch many fish like you?” he asked.

“Try letting your tail dangle in the water,” the grasshopper advised. “The fish will see it and want to eat it, and then you can pull them out.”

The lizard did so, and soon enough a fish came and started nibbling at his tail. But it was a big fish, and the lizard could not pull his tail off. “Help me!” he cried, but the grasshopper laughed. The more the lizard struggled, the harder the grasshopper laughed. Finally, the lizard’s tail pulled clean off, and the grasshopper laughed so hard that his eyes popped out of his head. And that is why lizard’s tails come off and grasshoppers have eyes that are so large.

**Story 9—**

**The complete version of the story Cheryl told me about the gui family, as featured in Chapter 3:**

Long, long ago, there was an orphan, he found a wife. The wife was the daughter of a gui, but the orphan didn’t know. When they got married, the gui was sickly. The gui slowly became skinnier and skinner. The orphan gave her a lot of medicine but she still didn’t get better. So they went to go see her father. “Father, your daughter, we don’t know why but she’s sick a lot and also is skinnier and skinner.”

“She’s definitely just not eating enough, she needs to eat something. Tomorrow morning, we will go together to hunt, then you will give one of the animals to daughter to eat.”

So they went together the next morning to hunt. The gui said to wait at the roadside. He would go into the forest and drive the animals into the road, and the orphan would wait and kill them as they came out. So the orphan waited, and then he saw three children run out of the woods. He knew they were children and not animals, so he didn’t kill them, but then the gui came back and said, “How come you let them go?”

“Because they weren’t animals, they were children.” And in that way the orphan knew his father in law was a gui because he was hunting people, not animals.
The gui asked the orphan which way the children went, and the orphan told him. The gui went running very fast after them, and then speared them all three at once, so they all died. They brought the three children back to the house. The gui cut them up into little pieces and steamed them. He divided the meat into two parts, one for his own house and one for his daughter’s. They both ate, but the orphan was a person, so he could not eat human flesh. Instead, he just ate rice and very quietly dropped the pieces of meat onto the ground. As he dropped the meat, more and more dogs came to eat it.

The gui asked the orphan, “Are you dropping the person meat on the floor? Because there are so many dogs…”

But the orphan said, “No, I’m eating the human meat. I’m dropping the bones on the floor.” The gui believed him.

The next morning, the orphan went back to his own house. The gui gave the orphan lots of human meat to bring back to his daughter to eat. So the orphan walked and walked with the human flesh. But when he got to an intersection he wanted to throw it away. But the gui had magic, and he had made magic so that there was a piercing sound when the orphan tried to throw the meat away, and he felt the gui was looking at him. So he walked on—at the next intersection, he tried to throw the meat away again, but there was the same sound. So there was nothing to be done. When he got back to his house with the meat, he told his wife, “Your father gave me good food to eat.”

When she saw it, she sighed with relief. “This is the food we ate every day in my family,” she said, and then she leaned over the human flesh and ate without stopping until she was full.

The orphan already didn’t like his wife because she was a gui. She had already eaten human flesh, so she would definitely need to eat it again. After the second day, the wife wanted to go and pound rice (we Lisu have a special instrument called a dun made of wood and stone we use to pound rice husks off). But the orphan didn’t believe her, so he quietly watched from inside. He saw her take the stone part out of the dun and knew she was preparing to kill him. First he filled up a big bucket with water and hid it in his bed. We Lisu have houses with second floors for storing many things below the roof, so he went and hid in the roof and aimed his crossbow through a hole.

The gui daughter came back to the house and thought her husband was in the bed. She started to bludgeon him, and water trickled out. The wife thought it was blood, so she went outside to the basement to get a big bowl to catch the blood. When she saw it was water, she kept bludgeoning him, but only water came out.

Watching from above, the husband thought this was very funny. He thought his wife was stupid, so he let out a little bit of a laugh, and his wife heard and figured out he was in the roof. But as she was preparing to go up to kill him, he aimed his crossbow and shot her with a poison arrow in the chest. When she was dead, he covered up the wound with white powder so she wouldn’t bleed, then took her to her parent’s house.

“I don’t know what was in that meat you gave me, but your daughter ate it and then she died,” he told the gui. But the gui didn’t believe him. He took some special sticks and rubbed them together, then set them out one by one. Through this magic he
knew the truth. “My daughter did not die on her own. A person shot her with a bow and arrow,” he said.

The orphan began to cry very hard. “How could I shoot my own wife? How could I kill my own wife?” he said. Because the orphan was truly sad, the gui also felt sad and also cried.

“It’s this way,” the gui said. She’s already dead. So you take half to eat, and I’ll take half of her to eat. The orphan only cried harder. “How could I eat my own wife?” he said. He didn’t want to eat human flesh.

The gui family was very happy. The wife had many younger sisters, and they each said, “I want older sister’s arm! I want older sister’s leg! I want older sister’s finger!” and when they had said this, they ate her.

After that, the orphan went back to the village and told everyone there about the gui family. They believed him. “We can’t allow them to live here, with us,” he said. “It’s very dangerous.” So they tricked the gui family into leaving their home to go to a wedding to celebrate.

“Don’t leave your pig here,” the orphan said, because the pig was surely also a gui. “There will be lots and lots of food there, they will want him to eat it.”

“Don’t leave your dog here,” the orphan said, because the dog was also surely a gui. “There will be lots of bones there, they will want him to eat them.”

“Don’t leave your chicken,” the orphan said, because the chicken was also surely a gui. “The people eating food will not be careful, and there will be plenty of rice dropped for it to eat.”

So the gui family brought their pig, dog, and chicken with them. The villagers made a very big boat and made them sit in it, then the orphan rowed them out into the river. When they were almost at the other side, he leapt out onto the bank and ran away. However, then the orphan started to feel sad and guilty because he had let the gui get away. He started running along the bank yelling, “What will you do now?”

The gui said to the trees on one side of the river, “Trees, you are mine. Bend over the water so that we can climb up to the bank.” And the trees listened to him and slowly bent over. But the people on that side of the river had long knives, and they cut down the trees in one stroke.

Now there was nothing to be done. The orphan was running along the bank with tears coming down his face. “I can’t help you, what will you do? I’m so sad.” But really he was very happy.

The gui took two stones out of his shoe and said to the orphan, “Before now man hasn’t been able to make fire. Look well! Just strike two rocks together.” Ever since then, Lisu people have been able to make fire. And the gui family floated down the river. They didn’t die—today we believe they live very far away where the river ends.
Glossary of Terms

Although I have made an effort to define terms as they arose within this text, some readers may find a compiled glossary of Mandarin terms and place names useful (sorted alphabetically using the Mandarin pinyin transliteration system.) I have included the accompanying Chinese characters for the terms whose characters are also included in the text itself.

baba—A traditional oven-baked bread now made by Lisu largely during festival times, often seasoned with chives or flavored with honey

Bai—Indigenous people living in Lanping, Liuku, and other large swaths of Yunnan province

baijiu—A potent rice liquor popular for toasting at social gatherings and suitable for giving as a gift.

Bingzhongluo—The northernmost town in Nujiang Valley, the gateway to Tibet, located in Gongshan county an hour outside Gongshan city

Chengang—A complex of small Lisu villages located about two hours north of Liuku, on the border of Lushui and Fugong counties.

Fugong—A heavily Christian city halfway up Nujiang Valley, home to the largest concentration of Lisu in Nujiang prefecture. Also the name of the county of which Fugong is the seat

Gongshan—The northernmost city in Nujiang Valley, home mostly to Nu and Ethnic Tibetans, as well as some Lisu. Also the name of the county for which the city of Gongshan serves as the seat

guanxi—The complex system of reciprocal gift giving that comprises and constitutes social networks in Yunnan and throughout China. Also can refer to the social network itself

Guer—An orphan. Also an archetypal character that appears in many Lisu stories as a proxy who helps teach lessons regarding moral and ethnic identity

Gui—A difficult-to-translate word similar to spirit, ghost, devil, or demon, although none of these terms fully conveys its meaning. Nujiang Lisu define gui as a separate race of beings of intelligence and skill equal to humans. Gui can be recognized by their habit of eating human flesh

gushi—A story
**haoshi** 好事—An elastic term used among Nujiang Christians which can mean “good works,” “good things,” or “good deeds”

**jiejie** 姐姐—Elder sister or an affectionate term for a woman older than the speaker but younger than the speaker’s mother

**Kunming**—The capital city of Yunnan province.

**Kuoshijie**—The Lisu New Year celebration, generally observed within a week of Christmas. Celebrated through the killing and cooking of a pig, baking of baba, and the practicing of shang dao shan, xia huo hai

**Lanping**—The westernmost city in Nujiang Prefecture, located near the Lancang (Mekong) river. Supported largely by mining industry; home to a diverse population of groups, including Lisu, Bai, Pumi, Nu, and Yi

**Laomudeng**—A heavily Nu complex of villages high in the mountains between Liuku and Fugong

**Liuku**—The seat of Lushui county; the only entrance to Nujiang Valley by road

**Lushui**—The southernmost county in Nujiang Valley. Its county seat is Liuku

**luohou** 落后—Mandarin word for “backward,” usually used in opposition to “modern.” Part of the dominant social narrative of progress in the People’s Republic of China, which positions the Han majority as forward-thinking and “modern” and the ethnic minorities as traditional, superstitious, and “backward”

**Miao**—The Mandarin name for the Hmong people living within the People’s Republic of China, whose cultural struggles are discussed in Lisa Schein’s text *Minority Rules*

**mingjian gushi** 明鉴故事—A folk story or folktale

**meimei** 妹妹—Younger sister, or an affectionate term for a woman younger than the speaker

**nai nai** 奶奶—Grandmother, or a respectful term for a woman older than the speaker’s mother

**Nujiang/Nu River**—The river that runs up from Myanmar into Yunnan, through Liuku to Bingzhongluo and into Tibet. 江 jiang means “river” in Mandarin, so the names “Nujiang Valley” and “Nu River Valley” refer to the same area. Also sometimes called the Salween River in European texts
**Nu**—Indigenous people who live only in upper Nujiang, around Fugong, Gongshan, and Bingzhongluo

**Pumi**—Indigenous people living around Lanping, Liuku, and points west of Nujiang

**renqing**—The aspect of *guanxi* involving personal affection, social closeness, and compassion

**san jiao**—Literally “three legs;” a cooking implement for food preparation over an open fire, used by many Lisu as well as other indigenous peoples in Nujiang

**shang dao shan, xia huo hai**—Literally “going up to the mountain of knives, going down to the ocean of fire.” Also the name of a *Kuosihjie* ritual in which participants climb ladders of knives and walk over beds of hot coals

**shaoshu minzu**—Literally “minority peoples;” the name for indigenous groups living in the People’s Republic of China who have been officially recognized by the government as independent ethnic entities

**Shiyueliang**—Literally “bright stone moon;” the name for an important rock formation outside of Fugong that is the center of many folk stories throughout the region. Also often named as the site of Lisu genesis

**Tai Lue**—An indigenous people living in Xishuangbanna and large portions of Thailand, Burma, and Laos whose struggle for cultural legitimacy outside of the tourist industry is the subject of Sara Davis’ book *Song and Silence*

**Xiajia**—The northeastern village studied by Yuxiang Yan in her book, *The Flow of Gifts*, which explores Han systems of *guanxi* and *renqing*

**Xishuangbanna**—A Mandarin transliteration for the Tai Lue name Sip Song Panna; the geographical area at Yunnan’s southernmost tip, bordering on Burma and Laos. Home to a huge diversity of indigenous peoples and thus home to enormous cultural tourism

**yeve**—Grandfather, or a respectful term for a man older than the speaker’s father

**Yi**—An umbrella term for a group of indigenous peoples who live in the mountains of Lanping and Liuku, as well as other mountainous portions of south-central China
Works Consulted


