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Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China

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CHAPTER 4

Preferential Bilateral-Cross-Cousin
Marriage among the Nuosu in Liangshan

Lu Hui

Until 1956, the Nuosu (Yi) society that we know of in Liangshan was almost completely free from control by the central government (especially in the hinterland). Yet it did not form a separate state but was a slave society divided and ruled by various *nuoho* clans.

At the same time, it was also a castelike social system. The hierarchical order of castes and even of clans was demarcated by the degree of "hardness of bones." Such a social system had divided the Nuosu society into two sides: the aristocratic "hard bones," including *nzyimo* and *nuoho* ("Black Yi" or "Black Bones") categories on one side, and on the other their subordinate castes, the three categories *quho* or *qunuo* ("White Yi" or "White Bones," commoners), according to the region; *mgajie* (serfs); and *gaxy galo* (slaves). Marriage between castes was, and still is, considered a grave violation of social rules and punished severely, by death before 1956 and by exclusion from the clan or even caste today. The whole society, then, followed the principle of strict endogamy of caste and exogamy of clan. On the basis of this principle, bilateral-cross-cousin marriage was, and is, practiced and parallel-cousin marriage was, and is, forbidden.

The principle of clan relationship applies not only among *nuoho* clans but also among *quho* clans, just as the concept of "bones" is generally acknowledged by every Nuosu caste. This fact further illustrates the hierarchical distinction in the caste system, especially the distinction between the *nzyimo*, the *nuoho*, and the *quho*.

Nuosu society is a patrilineal society; consanguineal relatives are reckoned patrilineally. The clan consists of a group of people descended from the same male ancestors; females are excluded from oral genealogies. Sons have the privilege of inheritance in a family; men practice levirate and polygamy; mar-

ried women do not move into their husbands' households before becoming pregnant.

In patrilineal societies such as that of the Nuosu, the most common rule is to forbid parallel-cousin marriage. In preferential bilateral-cross-cousin marriage, whether preference is shown for the mother's brother's daughter or the father's sister's daughter varies according to the social conditions. In this essay, I will discuss in detail the practice of the preferential bilateral-cross-cousin marriage among the Liangshan Nuosu and the factors that affect their decision making.

THE LOGIC OF CLAN COMPETITION IN MARRIAGE

From ethnographic literature recorded in Chinese, we know of two sayings in Liangshan: "The father's sister's daughter is naturally the daughter-in-law of the mother's brother" and "It takes no effort for the father's sister's family to obtain the mother's brother's daughter." Although these sayings are recorded in Chinese, using Chinese terms, they still illustrate the marriage principle of the Nuosu. The truth of the sayings has been verified by scholarly investigations. In other words, according to this marriage custom, both in theory and in logic, the MBD is very often in fact the FZD: MBD = FZD (see Figure 4.1).

According to the kinship terminology in Figure 4.2, however, we can see that for the Nuosu *assa* (MBD) is not always *ahmi* (FZD).¹ The reason is that, unless father's sister actually married mother's brother (a common but not universal occurrence), father's sister's daughter and mother's brother's daughter belong to different clans. Clans are the core of the Nuosu social structure. They function like pillars in the structure, and their interrelationship crucially influences other aspects of social lives, including the marriage system.

Let us examine the Nuosu clan organization by using *nuoho* clans as an example. I have mentioned that the hierarchical order of each caste in Nuosu society is differentiated by "softness" or "hardness" of their bones. Among them all, *nzyimo*, or *tusi* (the Chinese term), have the hardest bones and have the purest aristocratic blood. *Nuoho* are second in the hierarchy and are in turn followed by *quho* or *qunuo*. The Han laborers, who are seized and kept as slaves, are usually considered to "have no bones." Although the ruling *nuoho* clans originated from two brothers, Gguhxo and Qoni, their descendants eventually divided into hundreds of clans. The populations of these clans range from less than one thousand to ten thousand or more. The name of each clan serves as the surname of its members. These clans form themselves

1. Ego = male or female; F = father; M = mother; Sp = spouse; H = husband; W = wife; S = son; D = daughter; B = brother; Z = sister; C = child.

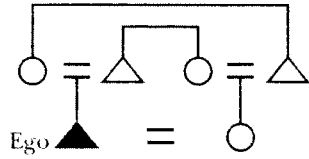


Figure 4.1. The equivalency of MBD and FZD in the ideal Nuosu marriage system.

into exogamous groups. Among *nuoho* clans, the hardness of bones of one clan is measured by the number of generations in their oral genealogy and the number of male members. The so-called Big Black Yi clans are those that have about thirty generations or more in their genealogy. Although all the clans descend from Gguhxo or Qoni, a long history of a lineage clearly ensures a clan's aristocratic position and signifies the hardness of bones. Very often, daughters of these Big Black Yi are married into the *nyymo* families. A clan can be subdivided into several segmented lineages. Each segmented lineage inhabits one or several neighboring villages, according to its population and power (see Ann Maxwell Hill and Eric Diehl, chapter 3 in this volume).

There are eight *nuoho* clans in Butuo County, where people speak "narrow trouser legs" dialect (Suondi). Every clan also contains segmented lineages of varying sizes extended into neighboring counties, such as Puge, Jinyang, and Zhaojue. Two clans are relatively concentrated and have resided for a relatively long time (at least fifteen generations) in Butuo: the Jjidi and the Bibbu clans. Each of the clans consists of about two thousand members. Until 1956, the two clans almost divided Butuo into two parts, using the Temuli River as the boundary. Because the two clans were evenly matched in power, they became conventional allies, although there was no prescribed rule of alliance between their lineage segments. If we further observe the alliance between their lineage segments, we will find that not every Jjidi lineage segment has a Bibbu lineage segment as its main ally; the main ally could be Mgevu, Jire, Mokui, or Moshe, or even Hma or Awo residing in other counties. On the other hand, almost every lineage segment (five were investigated) has some families that marry with the Bibbu clan. Actually, the eight *nuoho* clans describe the relationship among themselves this way: "All are allies and all are enemies." When they collaborated in attacking the Adu *tusi* who ruled Butuo, their military alliance was formed on the basis of affinal kinship relations. When the Jjidi Acho clan in Siqie Village fought with one segment of the Mokui clan over cattle in the 1940s, the scale of the conflict and the interests involved were small enough that none of the lineage segments or allied clans on either side took part in the fight.

As to the power distribution among the *nuoho* clans, clan members often say, "Nuoho clans are of the same size, as chicken eggs are." This saying

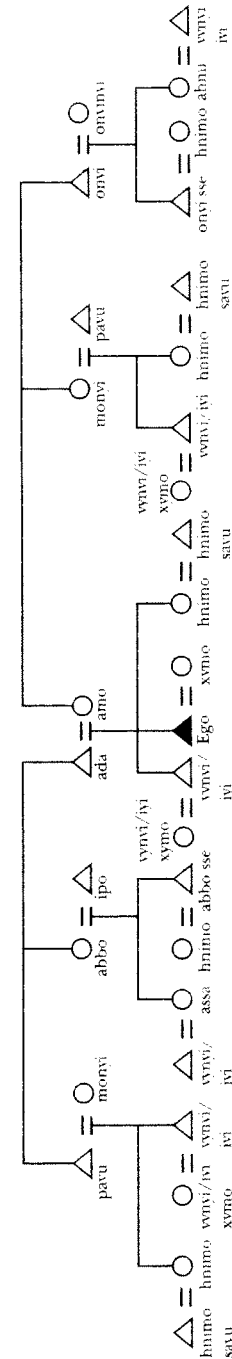


Figure 4.2. Nuosu (Suondi dialect) kin terms.

projects an egalitarian ideal of a tribal society, in which every clan enjoys equal status and there is no domination and subordination of one another. In reality, however, clans are most concerned about how to maintain and increase the hardness of their bones. A clan's hardness of bones is exhibited in the betrothal gifts that its daughters receive. In other words, the more powerful the bride's clan is, the more valuable the betrothal gifts. Thus, clans have no absolute equality in power or status. The variation and change in the preferred bilateral-cross-cousin marriage around the notion of bones best manifest the political, military, and economic interrelationship among the clans. One of the major considerations in making a choice between the MBD or the FZD for marriage is their hardness of bones. We have mentioned that often the MBD and the FZD belong to different clans, that is, the hardness of their bones might be of different degrees. Thus, the betrothal gifts needed would be different.

CLAN INTERMARRIAGE AND KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY

In Village A there are six households that belong to lineage segment A of Butuo Jiddi. Three households among them have been allied with the Awo clan for four generations; two among them marry daughters of the Bibbu clan; the last one marries the Hma clan. In lineage segment B in Village B, most of the males marry daughters of the Hma clan; most of the females are married into the Bibbu clan. In lineage segment C in Village C, most of the males marry daughters of the Bibbu clan. Thus, we have Lévi-Strauss's "generalized exchange" among at least three lineage segments.

The exchange pattern is also similar to that practiced by Kachin. That is, one clan or one caste provides women for another higher social stratum, which is the clan with harder bones in the Nuosu case, and obtains women from a third clan, and so on. And matrilineal-cross-cousin preferential marriage is the best way to guarantee the smoothness of this exchange cycle. Because of the vast territory and the dispersion of the Nuosu clans, however, matrilineal-cross-cousin marriage is usually performed on the basis of lineage segments or even villages, instead of among clans. For example, each lineage segment of the Jjidi clan chooses its affines according to its own interests. For the whole clan, the total range of its alliance is thus enlarged, as shown in Figure 4.3.

It should be noted that before 1956, the rugged topography and dialect differences rendered communication between widely dispersed clan branches in Liangshan very difficult. For military and political reasons, alliances were easier to form among neighboring clans through marriage exchange. Therefore, there exist complex terms in each dialect area, such as Vazha-Baqie, Sugga-Aho, Luoho-Lomu, Jjidi-Bibbu, and so on. These clans, which have formed fixed alliances with each other, practice preferential bilateral-cross-cousin mar-

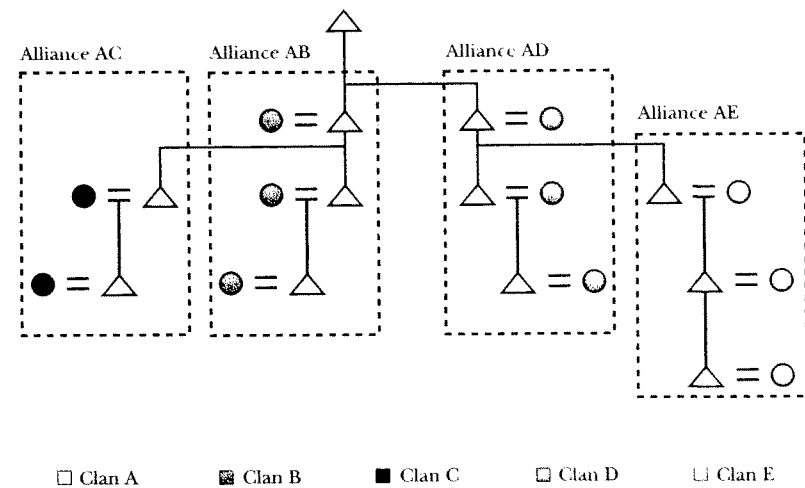


Figure 4.3. A hypothetical alliance network.

riage; that is, restricted exchange, like the above-mentioned marriage between lineage segment A in Village A of the Jjidi clan and the Awo clan.

The two clans involved in this kind of exchange usually have the same degree of hardness of bones and share common political, economic, and military interests. This kind of exchange, however, does not hinder a clan's lineage segments from forming a short-range alliance with lineage segments of other clans with which the clan is not customarily allied.

The notion of bones applies not only to the *nuoho* and the *nzymo* but also to the *quho*. Since all are "White Bones," however, *qunuo* cannot marry other white-boned castes, such as *mgajie*, not to mention the *gaxy*, who are slaves. Furthermore, the hardness of bones is also differentiated even within the same *qunuo* clan. At the level of the *gaxy* caste, those with Nuosu roots do not marry those with Han roots.

In the social hierarchy, it seems that wealth is not as important as the hardness of bones, just as an individual is less important than his or her clan. The choices that individuals make in marriage must accord with the interests of the entire clan. In choosing a partner for marriage, the hardness of a candidate's bones is first determined, and then political and economic interests involved are considered.

Now let us look back at kinship terminology of the Suondi dialect, using Ego, a male, as an example. From the terms, we know that the mother's brother's daughter is called *assa* and the father's sister's daughter is called

ahmi. It can be seen, then, that the MBD is not always the FZD, otherwise there would not be two different terms. However, *ahmi-assa* (MBD-FZD) is a complex term referring only to (female) cross-cousins. The term *hmazy-hnimo* (FBC-MZC) is another complex term, which includes all bilateral-parallel cousins of opposite sex, as well as brothers and sisters. Accordingly, bilateral-parallel cousins and bilateral cross-cousins form two opposite groups: consanguineal kin and affinal kin. Among consanguineal kin, no matter what the degree of collaterality, all parallel cousins are considered consanguineal and are equated with sisters or brothers. Sexual relations among people with these kin relations would be labeled as incestuous. The other group is composed of affinal relatives, including all the preferred bilateral cross-cousins. Although these two complex terms may in fact include both bilateral-parallel and cross-cousins, most of the time they designate separate groups.

There are two major kin groups in Nuosu society: *cyri*, or consanguineal kin, and *vusa*, affinal kin. There are also two terms in Suondi for the wife's parents: *onyi*=MB, *onyinyi*=MBW, *ipo*=FZH, *abbo*=FZ. Obviously, the aunt and the uncle might belong to different affinal kin, so they are assigned different terms. The fact that there are different terms also suggests that their children are not necessarily regarded as equally suitable marriage partners.

Let us now compare the status of the mother's brother with that of the father's sister. The mother's brother is not only paired with the father in terminology but also lives in the territory of the affinal kin. Until Ego gets married, the mother's brother is the closest affinal relative. In contrast, the father's sister is from the consanguineal kin of Ego. She does not become a member of the affinal kin until she is married. She is in a situation similar to that of Ego's mother. The latter comes from the affinal kin, but after she is married she becomes consanguineal kin to Ego, as his mother. The kinship term *abbo* (FZ) does not change after she gets married. Even though she becomes the cross-cousin's mother, she still remains Ego's consanguineal relative to some extent. As an affinal relative, however, her status is not as clear as that of the mother's brother.

In Nuosu society, the status of the mother's brother is very important. This is reflected in many Nuosu legends, folk tales, and sayings. When he comes to visit, his seat by the hearth is the place of honor. In the marriage, the person who accompanies the bride to the groom's home is her brother, the future maternal uncle of her children. Since Nuosu society is established on the basis of an egalitarian ideal with the clan as the basic unit, far more significant than the nuclear family, the mother's brother is most important as the representative of the mother's clan, Ego's affines. At the same time, he and his clan are important political and military allies. Especially when we understand the significance of warfare in traditional Nuosu society, we can see the importance of the affinal clan, symbolized by the mother's

brother, and the importance of the relationship between Ego's clan and his mother's clan.

My and others' investigations have shown that it is more common for Ego to marry his mother's brother's daughter than his father's sister's daughter, when they are not the same person. Although Nuosu people usually think that the FZH (*ipo*) is equal to the MB (*ipo*=MB=FZH) and emphasize that there is no difference between the two, in real life, however, the mother's brother has another name, *onyi*. That is to say, the FZH belongs to the category of mother's brother but is not absolutely the same. Some examples below may help us understand the way this expresses the flexibility in marriage alliance among the Nuosu.

SOME CASES OF CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE

Case 1

According to Ego, his parents started to think about arranging his marriage when he was twelve years old, in 1954. At that time, an elder in his clan advised his parents to form an engagement with the Jienuo clan of Jiao Jihe Village, which is twenty kilometers away. The elder said, "The Jjidi clan shouldn't always intermarry with the Bibbu clan. Bibbu also marry with the Jienuo clan in addition to Jjidi; so we should have marriage relations with other clans as well. Otherwise, if we have war with Bibbu someday, and they get help from the Jienuo clan, then who can help us? In addition, one family of our Jjidi clan in the village gave one daughter to Jienuo many years ago. Thus, we ought to get a wife from the Jienuo clan." See Figure 4.4.

In 1963, after the Democratic Reforms were instituted, Ego married a daughter of the Jienuo clan. In 1980 Ego's son married uxorilocally into his mother's brother's house. In 1989 he got divorced and returned to his natal village. In the following year, he married another daughter of the Jienuo clan, and then died of an overdose of heroin in 1994. On the day of his funeral, his clan members decided that his widow would marry his younger brother, who was fifteen at the time, after the latter graduated from high school. The young man's widow, however, was not willing to marry her husband's brother, and she ran back to her natal home. A local member of the Jjidi said, "Well, that's OK if she is not willing to marry him, but the Jienuo family should repay us our money."

One informant told me, "Marrying fathers' sisters' daughters is certainly good, but it would cost 1,000 to 2,000 yuan more to marry daughters of fathers' sisters' families than daughters of mothers' brothers' families. Furthermore, when a clan is in need, the mother's brother's clan is more inclined to help. The mother's brother may give us money or liquor. But fathers' sisters' families are outsiders; it's not easy to ask for their help."

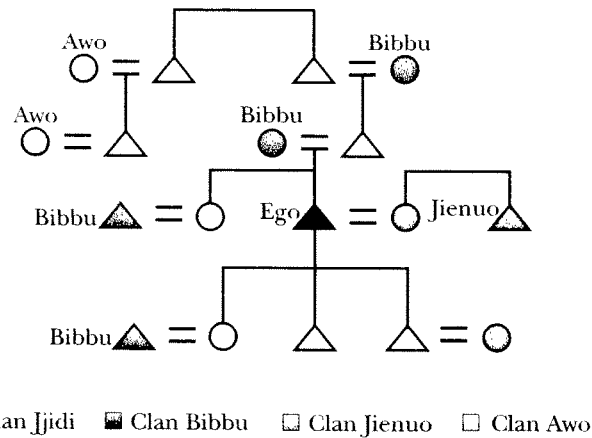


Figure 4.4. Alliances between the Bibbu and other *nuo* clans.

The fact that the betrothal gifts to the MBD and to the FZD are different in value also proves that the FZH is not necessarily the same as the MB. This is to say that if the bride does not come from the mother's clan, more betrothal gifts are needed. The bride is worth more in this case because she has harder bones, although she comes from a clan that is more distant in relationship than that of the MB's. When she for some reason does not marry the son of the MB, she has to symbolically give part of her betrothal gifts to her MB.

In a society with such a strict caste system as that of the Nuosu, an ideal marriage would be one that would increase the hardness of the bones of the family and consolidate its social position: in consequence, the FZD is the best choice. However, in reality, a family often marries a son to the MBD for political or strategic reasons, sometimes even to the daughter of other non-usual affinal clans. In the latter case, the wife's father is called *onyi* = MB, and the wife's mother *onyinyi* = MBW. That shows that the wife's father is considered or classified as the mother's brother, not as the father's sister's husband.

There is a clear boundary between the territory of one's own clan and the territory of one's mother's brother's clan, also the clan of alliance. In times of peace, both areas would be open for the best use, whether agriculture, herding, water sources, or hunting; a dispute over a stream, piece of land, or slave could turn the two sides into enemies and be cause for war.

Case 2

Figure 4.5 demonstrates the marriage alliance between the Long and Lu clans, which is traced as far back as possible based on the oral genealogy. The Jjidi clan (which adopted the Han family name Lu) moved from Butuo

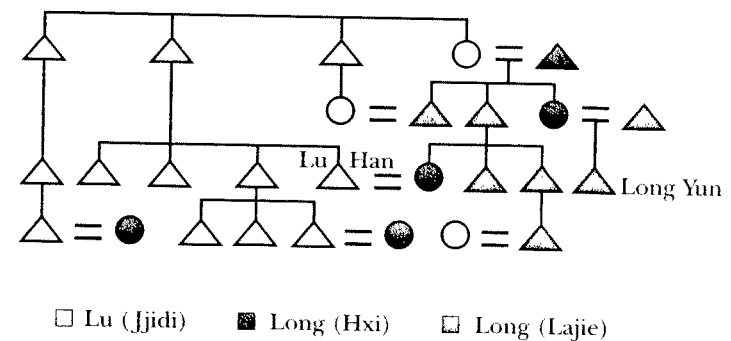


Figure 4.5. Alliances between Lu (Jjidi) and Long (Hxi and Lajie).

to Yanshan in Yunnan, and the Hxi clan (which adopted the Han family name Long) moved from Jinyang to Songle Village in Longshan. They have been allied for at least three generations. Although the Lajie clan was also once allied with the Hxi clan because of war, we can see from Figure 4.5 that marriage exchange has taken place mainly between the Lu and Long clans. The Lu and Long clans in Yanshan have adopted many Han customs in their lifestyle. For instance, they use Han family names instead of Nuosu clan names, they hire tenant-peasants to farm their land, they are educated in Han schools, and they use wood coffins and stone tablets for the burial of the dead. But they still subscribe to the Nuosu marriage system and marry only within the *nuoho* caste. And they still invite *bimo* from Zhaotong or Liangshan to take charge of important sacrificial rituals.

Until 1949, the Lu and the Long clans were the biggest landowners and the only *nuoho* clans in Yanshan. Their alliance kept their land from falling into the hands of Han people. In addition, transportation in Yanshan was very inconvenient due to the high mountains and deep valleys. It would take several days for one to get to the nearest town, Zhaotong, on foot or by horse, and it was no easy thing to come down the mountains to cross the Jinsha River, either. Geographic isolation helped promote the alliance between the Lu and Long clans as they sought to consolidate their status and counter local Han families. However, because the number of members in the two clans was very limited and the sex ratio was unbalanced, they still had to find spouses from outside. They married the An clan of *nuoho*, who originated from Guizhou, and the Hma clan from Liangshan.

Early in this century, members of the Lu and Long clans started to leave Yanshan to join the army and government in Zhaotong and Kunming. Eventually, they ruled all of Yunnan province. After they left Yanshan, they were influenced by the outside world. They were disturbed to hear such comments as "A is not as smart and healthy as B, because A's parents are cousins." There

was a difference between their marriage practices and those of the Nuosu in Liangshan: the cross-cousin preferential marriage between the Lu and Long clans involved first cousins rather than more distant classificatory cousins as in Liangshan. After they took up permanent residence in Kunming in the 1930s, there was only one case of intermarriage between Lu and Long.

Case 3

Ego A left his home village at the end of the 1950s to study in the county seat. Later he became a teacher. According to the tradition, he married a daughter of the Bibbu clan in the village; he had three daughters and two sons. After several years, his wife brought their children to the city to live with him. The children received a Han-language education in school. Later, his two sons both worked in government institutions. The oldest daughter was engaged to a son of the Bibbu clan in her childhood. A had accepted one-third of the betrothal gifts—one thousand yuan. Later, liberal-minded A decided to break off the engagement so that his daughter would not marry back to the countryside to become a farmer, but could have her own career in the city, instead. His decision enraged the Bibbu clan. They found it hard to accept A's family's withdrawal of the commitment as a *nuoho* family. In addition, it was even more unacceptable that A looked down on villagers once he had moved to the city. However, A had made up his mind, and his daughter did not want to get married and live in the countryside either. Therefore, A initiated a difficult negotiation with the Bibbu clan. Finally, the conflict was resolved by A paying back double the betrothal gifts and thus incurring great debt. He sighed at the peaceful resolution of the conflict: "If this had happened in former times, the Bibbu family and I would probably have become enemies."

After this problem was over, A began to worry about the marriage of his oldest son, B. B had a secondary school education and a nice job. Certainly there were a lot of marriage proposals. Although all the girls proposed were from *nuoho* families, they all lived in the countryside and were considered "uncultured." A did not think that they were fit for his son. B agreed that the gap between his lifestyle and that of those women was too big, and said he would like to find a *nuoho* woman who had job in the city. B did not want to marry a Han woman, let alone a *quho* woman. However, there were really very few *nuoho* women who were both educated and had jobs in the city. After many inquiries made by clan members, a year later they finally found a daughter of the Elu clan in another county, which was hundreds of *li* away. B was successfully married. A did not incur great expense on the betrothal gifts because the bones of the bride's family were not hard enough to merit that. Many Jjidi clan members brooded on this marriage, and they said in

regret, "It's certainly nice to marry a *nuoho* daughter, but her bones are not hard enough. It wouldn't have worked in former times."

The political and social life in Liangshan has radically changed in the last few decades. The Nuosu castes consciously or unconsciously followed along with the process of social transformation. But this does not mean that they have gradually given up their traditions completely. On the contrary, not only do the Nuosu not depart from their own history in the face of these new changes and the pressure of Sinicization but they also reinforce their relationship with the Nuosu tradition through various means. This is manifested in their marriage practices. The *nzyimo* and the *nuoho*, who are of the aristocratic stock and who have lost their privileges, still preserve the custom of complete caste endogamy so as to maintain their aristocratic characteristic in today's world. The *quho* also stick to their own marriage rules. The *qunuo* clans, which have harder bones, are still reluctant to marry with other clans, let alone with other castes, such as *mgajie* or *gaxy*. In Liangshan, we still hear government officials, intellectuals, and farmers from *qunuo* clans say, when they comment on their marriage rules, "We don't marry with other *quho* at random."

The story in Case 3 illustrates the difficulty and dilemma in spouse selection that many *nuoho* and *quho* officials as well as urban residents commonly encounter and the compromises that they often have to make. On the one hand, the concept of bones is still the same as it was in the past and is still the decisive factor in spouse selection; on the other hand, the concepts of power, prestige, and status have changed. The degree of Sinicization and the level of education and professional success have replaced the old signs of wealth and power—land, livestock, and slaves. In addition, these factors act to contend with the notion of bones. Nonetheless, the notion of bones, as the basis of the Nuosu caste society, always reminds every Nuosu that one of the markers of his identity is his obedience to the rule of the Nuosu ancestor—one can marry only within the caste and with a family with equivalent bones.

CONCLUSION

The Nuosu society, which was a forest of clans, was never organized into a state. The egalitarian relationship among the clans, where there was no domination and subordination, was a means to coordinate the clans in order to attain political balance. Nuosu history showed that, as an aspect of ethnicity in the social system, this coordinating relationship was manifested in frequent military confrontations and conflicts among clans, on the one hand, and in the relatively stable alliance relationship among clans, on the other hand. Such a system seems paradoxical but was in fact logical: although the ideal of warfare and equality led the clans to competition, conflicts, and wars, the flexibility of choosing the MBD or FZD in marital decision making of-

ferred possibilities of stability. As allies in war, clans perceived each other as equals, but in the competition for marriage partners, clans searched for harder bones when possible. It was through conflicts and alliances that Nuosu social values were expressed, summarized in the sayings "Where there are allies, there are enemies" and "It is goats that we cannot be short of; it is the clan that we find indispensable."

Since the clan is so important, the marriage choice of a clan member is far from being a choice pertaining only to his or her individual life: it is part of the larger interest of the clan. It is clan members who collect the betrothal gifts, hold the wedding, and build the new house for the bride. On the other hand, when a clan chooses spouses for its members, its considerations include not only the desire to increase the hardness of family bones through the marriage but also the overall political alliance of the whole clan. That is to say, if a man does not marry the daughter of his MB because her bones are not sufficiently hard, he may incur dissatisfaction of the MB's clan; if it is serious, it might cause military conflict or even war.

Another characteristic of Nuosu society is its mobility. The wide area of Liangshan provided space for the expansion of victorious clans, and it also offered alternative space for clans that lost wars and had to leave their own territories. Following this geographic mobility were changes in social spaces. A clan and its customary affinal clan might not only become distant in the geographic sense, their political interests also might not correspond. Therefore, a new alliance might be necessary. But a clan's oral history and genealogy always remind its offspring of the place of the clan's origin, the route of its migration, the lands it conquered, the places it settled, and the alliances it had. Oral history and genealogy also ensure that all clan members will find their consanguineal kin, *cyvi*, or affinal kin, *vusa*, in every corner of Liangshan. Mobility, which results from wars and changes in livelihood, injects a certain degree of flexibility in spouse selection and promotes changes and expansion of the political alliances of migrating segmented clans. In wars fought between *nuoho* clans, they had cooperation from their allies in combating their enemies; in dealing with the *nzyimo* or the Han, all the Nuosu clans (including the "White" *quho* clans) would be united.

Marriage choice is not fixed, just as the interests of any clan are not always stable. The choice between the ideal marriage, the daughter of the FZ, and the actual preference, the daughter of the MB, is conditioned by the political and economic interests of the family or the clan. At the same time, as a system of exchange of gifts, marriage plays an essential role in balancing the social relationship among clans in a society constantly engaged in armed conflicts.