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## **Entrapment by consent : the co-ethnic brokerage system of ethnic Yi labour migrants in China**

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## Chapter 3

# The Formation of Co-ethnic Brokerage in Liangshan

As mass migration has been sweeping across the whole of China since the 1980s, people in the ethnic Yi autonomous region have inevitably become involved. This migration has not only been a physical geographical transition from one place to another, it has also brought significant social and economic changes to the Yi society. After pointing out the divergent meanings of “ethnic Yi” constructed by the Chinese state and perceived by Nuosu people themselves in the previous chapter, this chapter discusses the Yi co-ethnic brokerage system in the context of mass migration. Why is the co-ethnic brokerage system particularly predominant among Yi migrants over the courses of mass migration? What role does the local government of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture play in regulating the mass migration of Yi migrants? To what extent does the co-ethnic brokerage system matter with the ethnic reciprocity and clan identity that I have discussed previously?

This chapter is organized in the following way: it starts with an introduction to the migration policies (*hukou*) policy in China in general and the labour output (*laowu shuchu* 劳务输出) in Liangshan in particular. Against this background, I elaborate the failure of government-orientated migration policy and the emergence of the co-ethnic brokerage system. In particular, I show how the Yi co-ethnic brokerage system emerges as a viable entity as it imbricates with complex relations of trust, reciprocity, status hierarchy and

dependence and how brokers utilize the asymmetric information between the Liangshan Yi society and the world outside to facilitate the mass migration.

### 3.1 Labour Migration in China

China has a special migration control policy called *hukou*. *Hukou* is based on birth and officially defined as an administrative mechanism for collecting and managing information about citizens' personal identification and legal residence. For a long time, the *hukou* system has been implemented for administration and the official registration of citizens, but it has also played a role in controlling the movement of the rural population to cities.

The *hukou* system was first introduced in 1966, in the period of Planned Economy. In this era, people were required to reside in a designated unit and workplace, and products were distributed to each unit according to a plan formulated by the state. In order to promote national industrialization and modernization, peasants were required to remain on their land and to produce for cities. As food production was vitally important, the movements of its producers—rural peasants—were strictly controlled. For example, if they wanted to buy train tickets so that they could leave to work in cities, they had to apply for an official permit from the local administrative office. As one can imagine, the chances of obtaining such a permit were often scarce.

This situation only began to change after a series of reforms launched on the path towards a market economy in the 1980s. This market-oriented economic reform needed a workforce to boost industrial production. If this goal were to be achieved, it was necessary to make the *hukou* system more flexible.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, the *hukou* system no longer works as a mobilization

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<sup>1</sup> In 1992, the grain ration of non-agricultural *hukou*-holders was changed. In 2003, the “Custody and Repatriation” (*Shourong Qiansong* 收容遣送) system was abolished. More recently, there have been some small changes in the *hukou* system. For example, some cities have set up a “points system” so as to attract skilled migrants. This has favoured the well-educated, higher-income, and more highly skilled migrants. The latest change was announced by the State Council in July 2014 and includes the removal of the *hukou* transfer limits for smaller cities, the relaxation of the restrictions on medium-sized cities, and new qualifications set for big cities. This reform is expected to eliminate the distinction between an agricultural and a non-agricultural *hukou* designation and to be of major benefit to migrants in obtaining the same treatment as local *hukou*-holders.

control mechanism; people now have the freedom to move from one region to another. So far, more than 200 million people in China have migrated internally. Most of them come from western rural areas and have moved *en masse* to eastern urban areas. Although no longer as omnipotent as it once was, the *hukou* system still functions as an institutional boundary that differentiates between rural and urban cities and establishes an unequal status between migrant workers and local *hukou*-holders in cities (Solinger, 1993). The upshot is an inequality of citizenship in the nation-state between *hukou*-holders and non-*hukou* migrants in terms of their access to insurance and educational opportunities. Consequently, *hukou* is an issue only when migrants want to settle down permanently in cities and need access to formal education for their children or to ownership of houses in major big cities. Most peasant workers who come to cities for temporary work and then return to their native villages seldom complain about the hindrances caused by *hukou*, nor are they concerned about the change in their unequal status that has been brought about by *hukou* restrictions. The main concern of Chinese migrant workers is simply to earn a livelihood and improve their income and welfare situation.







Picture 3.1-4: Villagers and left-behind children

Living in the isolated Liangshan region for generations, the Liangshan Yi people joined the national migrant trend quite late. Since the 1980s, there have been three main waves of Yi migration to urban areas. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, the Yi autonomous region was troubled by a reputation for social problems, such as AIDS, high crime rates, and drug addiction (mainly opiates). At that time, a small number of Yi began to trickle into the nearby cities in Sichuan and Yunan provinces in order to make something of their lives, but this frequently led to disappointment as they were often seen as drug addicts, thieves, or traffickers and left a bad impression in the non-Yi regions (see Heberer, 2007; Liu, 2012). In the middle of the 1990s, the first group of Yi workers began their “pilgrimage” towards the developed cities in southeastern areas, such as Guangdong, Shenzhen and Dongguan. Since then, the “successful” experiences of these pioneer migrants have encouraged many other Yi people to pursue the same goal.

Despite the ethnic preferential policies and the poverty alleviation programme in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in recent decades,

dramatic changes in peasant workers' economic conditions have been few and far between. The Liangshan Autonomous prefecture is still one of the poorest regions in China. Although the capital city, Xichan, in which most of the government and public service employers are located, is no poorer than other middle-level cities, the rest of the mountainous Liangshan remains comparatively impoverished. So far, 1188 counties in the region are designated as national poverty alleviation prefecture. In the Luobu village in Puge prefecture where I conducted my fieldwork, electricity was provided only in 2003. Some other Yi villages isolated in the higher mountains joined the national grid only five years ago. With no substantial industrial infrastructure in the region, Yi villagers have few job opportunities in nearby towns or cities; therefore many residents perceive labour migration as their only way out. Since the 1990s, roughly 40 percent of the inhabitants in Liangshan have emigrated.<sup>2</sup>

The economic impoverishment in Liangshan has brought a host of social problems in its wake, chief among them low-levels of educational achievement. The nation-wide policy of nine-year compulsory education in China was implemented in Liangshan since 1990s. However, though those who live in Liangshan or nearby cities now usually receive secondary school education, those in the nuclear areas of Liangshan, like Meigu, Zhaojue and Butuo prefectures, are either illiterate or only have primary school education. As a primary school teacher in Puge said, one of the most important tasks in primary school is not really to educate pupils but to persuade them not to give up their education. However, this goal has had little success in the last decade, as about 70 percent of students in these areas quit after primary school and followed their peers or relatives into work in urban factories.

Exacerbating the low educational level in Liangshan is the high fertility rate of Yi families. Continuing to foster their traditional ideal of raising a large number of children to provide cheap farm labour, the ethnic Yi actively resisted the birth control policy by hiding themselves in mountains to give birth. As a result, many families in the countryside have four to seven children whom they bring up beyond the control of the local authorities and the older children in the family have to commence working

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<sup>2</sup> Resource comes from an internal document provided by the Peasant and Labour Bureau of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture.



at a young age to reduce the economic burden on the family. At the moment, according to national statistics, only 1.01 percent of Yi students have a college degree.<sup>3</sup> The destiny of those who do not have the opportunity to go to university, even if they do finish middle school, is again to work as low-wage labourers.



Picture 3.5: A poor family in a village in Liangshan

### 3.2 Brokers as “Labour Managers”

The latest economic policy of “labour outmigration” or “labour output” (*laowu shuchu* 劳务输出),<sup>4</sup> has begun to introduce some significant changes to the Liangshan Yi area since the 1980s. “Labour output” is one policy through which Chinese state promotes internal migration—transferring surplus labour from rural to urban areas—in the hope of raising peasant

<sup>3</sup> Resource comes from the National Statistics Year Book, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> The term of “labour output” was originally borrowed from the context of international labour export. However, in the case of ethnic Yi, labour output is used to refer to the internal labour migration across regions of China.

incomes and supplying the labour required for urban economic development.

“Labour output” is perceived by the local government as an effective way to alleviate poverty and minimize the gap between ethnic Yi and Han Chinese. The official document *Chinese Rural Poverty Alleviation Outline* proclaims that, “local governments should implement additional policies to promote ethnic Yi labour migration and enhance their stable employment (in cities)... Ethnic Yi labour should be organized so that it can take advantage of employment positions in the labour market offered by the job vacancies during the Chinese New Year”. According to the Sichuan Labour Report published by the provincial government, the number of labour migrants in 2015 from the Liangshan Autonomous Region had increased to 1185,000, and the income from labour export is 2.17 times bigger than that of 2010.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, the Liangshan government was assigned to recruit and transport one million Yi labourers to cities, thereby increasing the local GDP by up to 10 billion RMB.<sup>6</sup>

With the carrot of such economic incentives dangled in front of it, the local government is eager to encourage the remittances from labour migration in order to promote GDP development, which is a crucial criterion in measuring the performance of local government leaders. According to the local labour bureau in Liangshan, during the 1980s and again in the 1990s, the local government made great efforts to organize the export of labour. In that period, tens of thousands of Yi workers were sent to work in designated manufacturing enterprises in eastern cities such as the Pearl River Delta area. This was a government-directed policy that organized those young Yi people who had finished primary school to work in cities in a short period of time. However, this small-scale migration organized by the local government did not last long. Since the 1990s, the number of the co-ethnic Yi brokers has grown steadily across the whole Liangshan area. Co-ethnic brokers have gradually taken over the local state to organize labour migration.

As mentioned earlier, some Yi brokers attract condemnation on social media as they are often connected to some social problems, including human trafficking, gangsters ready to get into street fights and even drug

<sup>5</sup> <http://ls.newssc.org/system/20160316/001871230.html> (download on 12th, Sep 2017)

<sup>6</sup> This data comes from my interview with officials from Peasant and Labour Bureau in Liangshan Yi autonomous area.

dealing in cities. These problems are fully understood by the Liangshan government. However, an official in the Labour Bureau of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture “corrected” me in an interview, when I described the Yi brokers as *baogongtou* (包工头, meaning brokers or sub-contractors), which implies that this position has an unauthorized, potentially exploitative nature. Since 2010 these personnel have been recognized by the local government as “labour managers” (*laowu jingjiren* 劳务经纪人), instead of the word brokers that springs more readily to the lips. Another local government official took a positive view of the Yi brokers as well: “Because these people are literate and have an understanding of the law, it is only reasonable that they should earn some income by bringing other peasants out. We, as a government bureau, encourage them to do so, since they are playing a role for the government.” The term “labour manager” certainly presents a more positive image than brokers or sub-contractors. The official recognition of brokers also indicates that labour brokerage is promoted, even encouraged, by the Liangshan government, regardless of the social problems the brokers’ practices have created.

The official recognition of the co-ethnic brokerage system is very much entwined with the economic liberalization policy first implemented in the 1980s, a policy that has given an official seal of approval to a shift from the state-directed economy to a market-directed economy. A labour official in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture explained this transformation from his point of view:

We are only facilitating officials, we cannot arrange (*baoban* 包办) everything. Although we think that a factory is good, this does not mean that they [workers] share the same point of view. We are now living in the world controlled by the market. It is no longer run by a planned economy. Our government cannot oversee everything in society. As government [staff], we encourage people to go out themselves to seek jobs and earn an income.

Based on this account, the market-oriented economy provides opportunities for free mobility, and it justifies the local government’s relaxation of the regulation of labour migration.

It stands to reason that the self-organized Yi brokers are more knowledgeable about, and therefore better equipped to deal with, Yi culture

than the local government when it comes to managing labour migration. Approximately half the civil servants appointed to formal institutions to handle labour migration are non-Yi and they tend to be based in the central cities, a situation that makes it difficult for them to gain the trust of local Yi, the majority of whom live in rural areas. A labour bureau staff member in Liangshan Autonomous Region explained the “troubles” with which they are usually confronted when they organize migration officially.

For example, in the years 2002 and 2003, we arranged for tens of thousands of workers to go to the city of Shenzhen. However, almost all of them returned home after only a few months. They could not get used to the life, language and diet in the cities. They were even unable to manage their everyday lives or their wages. Their wage was 2000 RMB per month, but once they get their wages, they can spend 300 on food in a single evening... Eventually, hundreds of workers ended up embroiled in conflicts with the factory guards.

Reading between the lines of this staff member's response, it is obvious that the local government would prefer Yi ethnic brokers to play an active role in the migration process because the majority of the officials are Han who are unfamiliar with the ethnic culture and characteristics of Yi workers. By the same token, the Yi people also prefer to rely on their ethnic kin network, instead of state agencies, to arrange their migration. Regardless of who is handling logistics, however, promoting labour migration remains a key theme of the local government.

### **3.3 The Emergence of Yi Brokers**

Under these conditions, Yi brokers who have emerged as important players in the ethnic Yi migrant trajectories are stimulated by the nonfeasance of the local government. There are no specific statistics about the number of brokers as they are themselves usually unregistered migrants and do not have any official or registered agencies. In my observations in the Liangshan area, almost all the Yi villages and sub-village groups had at least one broker, while in the cities in the Pearl River Delta area, some powerful brokers ‘owned’ thousands of workers. Even those brokers who manage small-scale brokerage businesses have dozens of workers under their control. According to an official report from the Liangshan Labour

Bureau, one million migrant workers from Liangshan go to cities to work every year.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that there are at least 50,000 brokers in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture.

In the past three decades, ethnic Yi migrants have passed through several historically significant periods. In the beginning, these workers began with a group of pioneers in the 1990s who migrated out of Liangshan at random to look for jobs. In the following, I retell a few stories about the ethnic Yi pioneer migration.

Lao Li, fifty years old, from Ninglang prefecture in Yunan province (which is called little Liangshan), was born into a prestigious *Ndeggu* family in his village. He says he would not have had any intention of migrating if he had had a fulfilling family life in Liangshan. What changed the destiny of his family was the death of his children. Not only did this cause a deep, enduring sorrow for many years, but it also brought considerable social pressure from other Yi people living nearby, since the death of children is seen as an ominous sign in Yi culture. He attempted several times to change his fortune by various means—practicing Bimo ritual and moving to new houses, for example—but nothing helped to change his circumstances or escape the social pressure. In 1996, Lao Li, with his wife and their only surviving daughter, migrated from Liangshan to Dongguan in order to change their lives and make money. Like most other pioneer Yi migrants, in the beginning they worked individually in a factory and experienced a very difficult period while adapting to the system of factory production run by Han Chinese. Three years later, he discovered that a few other Yi people had begun to bring Yi workers out from their villages and earn a commission fee by doing so. Following their example, Lao Li set up his own brokerage business.

Many pioneer migrants like Lao Li were originally, for various reasons, forced to migrate. At the beginning of the 1990s, when migration was seen by local Yi people as a risky undertaking and very few people had ventured to Han Chinese cities, most pioneer migrants were people with an unsavoury reputation in their local communities in Liangshan, among them drug addicts, criminals, failed government officials. These sorts of people are usually seen as “betrayers of traditional Yi society”.

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<sup>7</sup> This number was estimated by the Agriculture and Labour Bureau of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture.

Unexpectedly, their forced departure often completely changed their lives: they gained “the first barrel of gold” by working in factories or in the construction sector outside Liangshan. Later, as these pioneer migrants grew more resourceful and knowledgeable about migration and resettlement processes, they began to realize the need for cheap labour in industrial cities and went back to their hometown to recruit more workers. In this way, these former “losers” in the Liangshan society not only became pioneers in the history of migration, but were also transformed into supervisors of their rural fellows who desired to follow their paths.



Picture3.6: A group of “big” and “small” brokers returned to their villages during Yi New Year

Since the early 2000s, the out-migration scheme has been expanded and streamlined, and the number of migrants has increased dramatically. These pioneer migrants could easily attract other impoverished Yi villagers simply by dressing fashionably and driving back home in their own cars. One pioneer migrant told me proudly,

I did not need to go out to recruit workers at all. Whenever I came back home, there would be some people who would bring their children to me, asking me

to take them with me...Once these children earned money after following me, the next year they (the villagers) will bring more relatives and friends to me.

By 2006, the labour brokerage industry was thriving across the Liangshan area. Ahuo, a Black Yi in Meigu prefecture, twenty-two years old, told me of his initial experiences as a labour migrant and later as a broker,

I began to go out to Dagong in 2008, when the economic crisis happened. For the first two or three months, I did not have a job. The broker who brought me out did not have any money at that moment either. It was tough... Sometimes I had only one meal a day. Two months later, I finally got a job in a factory. My wages were 3 RMB per hour at that time... I have calculated that I found the job through the introduction of six brokers ... Later I figured out that I could also bring workers out myself. Now I have 180 workers, whom I send to three factories. I manage them all. To save money, I do not employ other sub-brokers. Every month I can earn 100,000 to 200,000 RMB, if no injuries or deaths occur among the workers. However, as you may know, we Yi people like to drink, eat and hang out with friends, so my money runs out very soon.

Like Ahuo, many who originally set out as workers have later become brokers or sub-brokers provided they could speak good Mandarin, tap into employment resources and possess good communication skills that pave the way for easy interaction with employers. Even though more people are seizing the opportunity to make money by broking workers out, the recruitment process is still conducted fairly strategically. Mr. Ma, who has been working as a labour broker in Dongguan since 2008, spoke of his experience of labour recruitment in 2014:

We usually make an agreement with workers' parents about the wage they will be paid per hour. It used to be 4 to 5 RMB per hour in the first few years. In recent years the minimum wage in the market has risen to 8 or 9 RMB. We usually arrange a couch or buy train tickets for these workers for their first trip from their hometown to come to work with me. I pay the workers' parents in advance in exchange for their children's labour. That amount of money will be deducted from their wages once they begin to work and earn money in a factory.

Unlike other labour agencies operated by Han Chinese that deduct one-off intermediary fees from workers for providing job opportunities, Yi brokers,

including Mr. Ma, deduct from the workers' wages every hour, normally 1 RMB to 2 RMB per hour. Brokers usually offer potential workers a monthly wage before these people decide to follow them to find employment in cities. However, the sum the brokers offer to workers is lower than the price that the factories normally pay temporary workers, and the difference between the two sums provides the brokers' basic income. Before their journeys, the migrant workers do not really realize the difference between the brokers' charges and their actual hourly wage from the factories. The brokers' ability to obscure the real picture, and to feed asymmetric information to their clients, gives them a significant advantage over their Han Chinese counterparts.

In fact, prior to their arrival in cities, workers have often had any initiative curbed by the asymmetrical information available in the isolated world of Liangshan and in the world outside. This initial disadvantage is compounded because many are illiterate and speak limited Mandarin. Faced with these disadvantages, they would have no way to find jobs but have to look up to Yi pioneer migrants whom they see as informed about the industrial environment. Thus, to these urban newcomers, there is little choice, at least in the first a few years, but to work for migrants-turned-brokers, as it is the most straightforward option.

Leaving aside the information asymmetry, the ubiquitous clan and kinship relationships in Yi society contributes greatly to the growth and embeddedness of the Yi co-ethnic brokerage system. It is a tenet of clan membership that clan members have greater obligation to support fellow clansmen, and they are assumedly more reliable than people from outside the clan. They share a "moral economy": the wealthy ones are expected to share their wealth with others to a certain extent, and this characteristic makes economic activities in peasant societies more than just a rational choice (Scott, 1976). This moral economy is still widely present in Yi peasant society. As Heberer puts it in his research on Nuosu entrepreneurs in Liangshan in the 1990s, "Most Nuosu entrepreneurs could not shirk their duties about their considerable obligations to their clans, and sometimes the financial obligations toward their clans can be more or less burdensome" (Heberer, 2007, 157).

Pre-migration Yi society is a good example of a moral economy and of the workings of reciprocity within clans and within the kinship system in general. Nowadays, brokerage benefits from the moral economy of



reciprocity still honoured within clans and kinship groups. Take Luobu village for example. In it live four clans and each has a leading broker. Most workers migrate following the broker from their clan, lineage, and kinship group. Clan or kinship members are assumed to have obligations to help each other and be more reliable than other people; therefore, those in the same clan or kinship group are those generally looked to when help is needed. I asked Liying, a labour migrant, why she followed a particular broker from the same clan, rather than any other. Liying said:

He is my relative... Relatives usually do not bully relatives outside. If anything unexpected happened, we can rely on him to help... We usually do not ask how much money they earn from us and... Nobody signs a formal contract with their relatives.

The rationale behind this is the trust and reciprocity inside the clan or kinship group. Brokers are responsible for providing their relatives, whether close or remote, with protection and support. Even in the present day, they fulfill this responsibility by offering jobs and resolving disputes in cities. Whenever they recruit workers, this is what they always emphasize. Correspondingly, giving up some income to relatives is considered fair in the eyes of workers and their families. The upshot is that, as people are far more likely to trust their kinsmen and clansmen, brokers usually recruit some followers from their own clans and kinship groups, especially when these followers are in the early stages of migration. Of course, those who come from bigger clans find it easier to gather more followers than those from the smaller clans.

This form of clan reciprocity was very much at the fore at the beginning of the marketization during the 1990s. As Heberer notes in *Doing Business in China*, “Entrepreneurs from a clan mutually support each other financially, and in the search for markets. To some extent entrepreneurs take over training functions, or build roads and schools for their clan’s villages. Cadres provide advantages for entrepreneurs from their own clans” (Heberer, 2004, 11). In these cases, entrepreneurs are underlining and simultaneously benefiting from the ethic of mutual help and clan obligation. Interestingly, the same norm is observed when brokers are explaining their roles nowadays, and this highlights the fact that the moral economy within the clans has become more instrumentalized.

The emphasis of clan obligations and providence of ethnic reciprocity

are transformed into one of the strategies by which brokers attract workers. When they set about recruitment, Yi brokers prepare gifts for potential workers' parents and wider families during the Yi New Year. Well aware of the poverty of these families, some brokers will prepay a certain wage to the workers' parents. Later, once the workers have begun their factory work, this money will be deducted from their monthly wages. Of course, exceptions always prove the rule, and there are anomalies based on the relative distance between the clan or kinship members. When brokers are close relatives of the workers, the parents of these workers can borrow money from the broker whenever they need. As clan or kinship group members, Yi brokers still feel the need to prove that their behaviour tallies properly with Yi traditional community values.

Shen Cai is one of the big brokers in Shenzhen. In his best year, 2010, he brought more than 1000 people out for work. He told me proudly that his success is all because of the special methods that he adopts in his search for recruits. In the past four years, Shen Cai has organized Yi Fire Festival celebrations for his workers in cities. He then posted photos taken on these occasions on social Apps such as QQ and Wechat, so as to advertise his recruitment business and present its positive sides. He told me that this is a way to assure parents that their children can have the same celebration as they would have had in their hometowns and therefore they are not deprived of their ancient traditions. By strategically employing this eloquent discourse, he gains the trust of these families. For most of the Yi youth who are under the age of eighteen, it is often their parents' decision which brokers they should follow into the cities. Hence, Shen Cai, and many other brokers who are the same age as workers' parents, actively seek the trust of parents and by doing so recruit more workers. These parents, almost entirely ignorant of the actual situation outside Liangshan, often trust these eloquent brokers to take care of children, and it stands to reason that brokers from a reputable clan or kinship are regarded as more trustworthy than others.

Under these conditions, most Yi migrant workers rely on their co-ethnic brokers to find employment opportunities in factories and surrender part of their wages to them as what they see as a reciprocal reward for brokers' "help". Many Yi brokers are driven by the possibility of achieving upward social mobility through outmigration. As more people migrate, the income gap among peasants is amplified. As wealth becomes an

additional index by which to measure the social stratum of individuals in rural China, rich people are regarded as being of higher social status. However, being a successful broker does not mean the end of the traditional social stratification that differentiates Black Yi and White Yi—the division at the core of the Yi society is still firmly entrenched in present-day Liangshan.

### 3.3 Migration Motivation

#### 3.3.1 The Economic Spur

Ethnic Yi migrate across the nation, pursuing employment opportunities in almost every sector, but they usually end up doing the low-wage and arduous work that others do not want to do. The places where they work vary with their age. Middle-age men who have families back home prefer brickyards and coalmines in northern China, where the workload is admittedly very heavy but there is better payment. Young people prefer southeastern cities because the climate and food are similar to what they are used to in Liangshan, and such cities bristle with entertainment options. People with experience working on the cotton farms in Xinjiang told me that, “We can have plenty of fun while picking cotton. It is really just like working in the farm in our home town, but it is the hardest job and the work lasts only a few months per year.”

Undoubtedly, poverty is the immediate force driving Yi peasants to work in cities. Because of the seriously impoverished status of the Liangshan region, in comparison to the attitude of peasant workers from other regions, the ethnic Yi peasants’ desire to rid themselves of poverty is even more overriding. Many young people are keen to emigrate in search of better lives. When they speak of emigrating away from Liangshan, Yi people usually use the term “searching for money” (*zhaoqian* 找钱) instead of working (*dagong* 打工): a phrase which reveals the importance of economic factors. Many Yi workers say proudly, “Where money is, there we Yi people are.” This partly confirms the push-pull theory (Lee, 1966), which stresses the economic attraction migrant-arriving areas exert on migrants.

The push-pull theory (Lee, 1966), however, only goes so far in explaining the reasons for Yi workers’ outmigration. Besides mentioning

economic pressure, Yi migrants often relate migration to a desire for modernization. People I met always liked to show me how far they had travelled and how many different places they had been to. Frequently, these migration stories were not tinged with a wearisome or bitter ring, but sounded more like an adventure in the world outside the Liangshan Yi region. Moreover, unlike these who find permanent work in a particular place, many Yi workers I know prefer a travelling life. Talking about experiences of living in different places was often the most popular topic among workers during the Yi New Year gatherings.

To some Yi migrants, “development” and “modernization” sometimes equal “Hanization”. This was often revealed in my informants’ first conversation with me, a Han Chinese. Many people express their shame at speaking poor Mandarin, as many of them only began to learn the language after arriving in cities. From their point of view, speaking proper Mandarin and becoming more “developed” like the Han Chinese is a sign of civilization. Migrant youths are of the opinion that, as the migration continues, Yi workers will eventually become just as developed as the Han Chinese. Knowing that I study in Europe, one educated informant said to me, “we ethnic minorities learn from Han Chinese, and Han Chinese learn from foreign countries. We all need to develop.”

Of course, pursuing modernization is not unique to the ethnic Yi. In terms of the urban-rural dichotomy, people from rural areas are generally seen as inferior in comparison to urban people and are portrayed as “low-quality” (*suzhi*) (Murphy, 2004). In early studies of Han Chinese peasant workers in rural villages, scholars have pointed out that Han Chinese peasant workers are keen on pursuing self-improvement and becoming more like urban citizens (Yan, 2008). When it comes to ethnic minorities, this comparison between “modern” and “pre-modern,” “high-quality” and “low-quality,” is reinforced: ethnic minorities from rural areas are deemed more “backward” than Han Chinese from rural areas.

### 3.3.2 Imagined Modernity

I joined a group of Yi workers on a long bus trip back to Liangshan for Yi New Year—more than 20 hours from Dongguan to their hometown of Liangshan. After a whole year of work in factories, relaxed smiles finally appeared on their tired faces. Before going home, the workers all dressed in

their best clothes and most of them had dyed their hair. I sat with Li on her way back home and heard how she described her experiences in the factory. Over the past months in the field, I had become familiar with the migratory stories behind these individual workers. Often times, Yi workers describe their migratory and work experiences as a severe trial, sometimes regretfully.

Sister, you know, I regret so much coming out to work this year. I was not a bad student at school... Everyone was saying how good it is to work (*dagong*) outside; I thought the world outside would definitely be full of fun... but I was also mindful that my three younger brothers and sisters are still at school. I am the eldest sister in my family and I can earn money and help my parents reducing their financial burden..... Now I regret it... but I would never be able to go back to school again.

Although young people who work in the cities usually have hard lives full of drudgery, once they come back home, they seldom tell those who have not migrated out about the hardships in the cities. These returnees are eager to embellish life outside. One girl told me how she talked about the beauty of the world outside with her peers. “They ask me what the world outside looks like, and I tell them that the world outside is very beautiful. The world outside has all the things we do not have here (Liangshan). I am honest. We have nothing here, but when we go out and are influenced by Han Chinese culture and thinking, we improve our appearance. We learn how to speak and communicate properly. That’s why I say it is beautiful.” “Yi people are as proud as peacocks (*ai mianzi* 爱面子). People do not want to talk about bad experiences,” said another.

The biggest attraction for would-be migrants comes from the descriptions of the lives outside that they hear from their peers who return for the Yi New Year. The popularization of electricity, television, and smart-phones has brought dramatic changes to people’s view of the world outside. In the eyes of Yi youth, the appearance of these returnees with their fashionable clothes and “smartly styled” hair ties in well with the image of modernity shown in TV series. As a result, a number of them prepare to go out with their peers the next year and often work with brokers previously approached by their peers or relatives.

In sum, the reason why Yi young people migrate out of their hometowns is not economic poverty pure and simple; it is also the desire of

people to internalize the “stigmatized identity” that is forced on them by the dominant society. The discourse of modernization propagated by the state regards ethnic minorities as inferior in its political and economic ranking system. Therefore, the goal of many an ethnic Yi, who are located at the bottom of the developmental pile, is to catch up with the other more developed ethnic groups. The stigma of backwardness imposed by the state is generally accepted and internalized by the ethnic Yi people themselves and they expect that it will be changed over the course of migration.



Picture 3.7: A worker in his hometown

### 3.3.3 The Wish to Break Free

The migrants are often venturing into dangerous waters. Their desire for a “modern life” that is often referred to as “Han Chinese” life is cutting the young people off from the traditional values in Yi society. In many young people’s eyes, migration is also an evasion of, or rebellion against, traditional Yi patriarchal society. This thinking is especially marked among Yi females. As aforementioned, marriage in Nuosu society is arranged by

the patriarchs of the clan, who have clan unity foremost in mind, instead of being based on individuals' free choice. Females are often married to their (cross) cousins when they are still very young. However, migration has started to generate enormous tension between gender and social structure in this transitional period. The experience of my workmate Lili, a seventeen-year-old girl, reveals the tension between gender and social structure.

I really want to go to Dongguan to work with my other friends but, if I do, I might not be able to come out next year. Why? I am seventeen years old now, and my parents have fixed the date for me to marry my cousin. I have known him since I was very young but I do not have any affection for him. He has been studying in high school while I worked in factories for a year. Therefore you see that we have very different types of lives. I hate the idea of this marriage... I escaped to Xichang city for three days. My parents called me and said that my behaviour was making them lose face. Were I not come back to marry, my mum would rather commit suicide... I have to obey them... I cried nights and nights before my wedding. Three days after the wedding, my husband went back to school and I decided to return to work in factory again. I know we are really different types of people. It is easier for you Han Chinese. Many people can get divorced... but I do not yet have the courage... If I do summon it up, I shall have to earn money because, if I say I want a divorce, I shall have to pay my husband's family back much more money than they gave my family bride price when we got married.

For many females, migration has become a way of subverting the asymmetrical power relations and the arranged marriages so prevalent in patriarchal Yi society. Lili's story is not exceptional among female Yi migrants. Nowadays, after the advent of school education, an unprecedented reformation in the perception of women's roles is taking place in the traditional Nuosu society. At the same time, outmigration endows women with the idea of breaking free of the traditional values of marriage. Inspired by what they see of the free marriage in Han-dominated cities, the idea of rejecting arranged marriages is spreading all over the Liangshan region. Quite a number of young Yi people are beginning to disobey the inter-clan marriage prescriptions and choose their partners according to their own wishes. However, in traditional Yi society, females are not expected to emigrate, let alone work alongside males in the same factory. Nor is following a broker to work in Han regions regarded as a decent job for a

woman. As Murray says that “sexuality is used to judge women’s morality but not men’s” (Murray, 1991, 127), some of these female migrants are regarded as promiscuous in their hometowns.

While many women view migration as a way of escaping from arranged marriages, the role of marriage in migration is also given equal emphasis by men, but for very different reasons. Yi men usually relate migration to the traditional pressures exerted by getting married and they often migrate in order to pay their bride prices. A marriage in Liangshan means that men have to pay a high bride price, which usually varies from 300,000 RMB to 800,000 RMB, depending on the education level of the bride. The amount of the bride price is far more than the income a person can earn from farming or working in factories. Under these circumstances, the clan members will usually offer to lend money to each other; later, after the marriage has taken place, the sums will be returned to their relatives.



Picture 3.8: Yi women in Liangshan – three generations



### 3.4 Conclusion

In the past three decades, China has been witnessing its largest internal rural-urban migration ever, and this mass migration has left its dramatic mark on the whole Liangshan region. The experience of Yi migrants is another facet of the complex cultural, economic, and power structures that migrant workers experience in the process of social transformation. In Li Shaohua' study research of Liangshan Yi people in *Pathway to the Manhood*, she remarkably notes that, "Globalization as a paradigm has been altering the ways in which we envision the world. As far as the Nuosu (Yi) are concerned, their encounters with different brands of modernity over the past half century, the socialist, capitalist or global, have been externally imposed and drastic, seeming to occur in blindingly rapid succession" (Liu, 2011, 192). The tendency toward marketization inevitably entangles individuals and groups in its path, regardless of whether they like it or not.

In this chapter, I have elucidated on how the migration policy dovetails with the Yi ethnic identity (whose core is composed of clan identity, trust and reciprocity) and facilitates the co-ethnic brokerage system in Liangshan Yi area. The co-ethnic brokerage system has taken root in Liangshan society and is nourished by the Yi "moral economy," in particular the principle of mutual help (Scott, 1976). Owing to the constraints of the moral economy and obligation of reciprocity, young Yi migrants prefer to follow workers from the same ethnic clan, instead of taking part in state-organized migration. Nevertheless, this study reveals a scenario different from that of the Nuosu entrepreneurs in Liangshan in the 1990s, as described by Heberer (Heberer, 2007). In *Doing Business in Rural China*, Heberer demonstrates that, because of their strong community values, Nuosu entrepreneurs show a commendable adherence to their moral obligations and their clan relationships, and this sometimes is experienced as a burden. In contrast, this study shows that migration has created a sense of upward mobility and personal improvement, at least for the pioneer migrants-turned-brokers.

The earlier migratory subjects were predominately adult males. Lately, both young males and females, often sixteen years old or younger, have joined in the mass migration trend. The mass migration prevailing in Yi society, however, has proved to be problematic. The moral economy that

was once such a conspicuous feature among the Yi people has begun to erode among the Yi migrants, undermined by personal profit maximization. The market economy allows Yi brokers to make a profit under the guise of their clan/kinship relationship. Meanwhile, the concept of ethnic reciprocity is often deliberately misinterpreted and abused by the Yi brokers in organizing out-migration. In the name of “reciprocity”, brokers take advantage of the workers’ trust based on ethnic affiliation, demanding and making extra money out of the unequal, dependent relationship.