I just wanted to move on from my life in Burma. I believed if I studied hard, I would get a chance to go abroad. Education was the only way to change my life.

—Ae Maew, January 30, 2005

Cat Girl

Ae Maew, meaning cat girl, is the Shan nickname of a Yunnanese graduate student I met in Taiwan in 2004 when I was invited to lecture at her university on the diasporic Yunnanese consciousness of time and space. After the lecture, Ae Maew came to see me and shared briefly her own migration experience, which sparked my interest in her Yunnanese origins and her effort to come to Taiwan for higher education. She was a second-generation migrant in Burma who had grown up in Laikha in Shan State. I hired her during two winter breaks (2005 and 2006) to assist me in fieldwork. Through her connections, I extended my ethnography to a few places that I had not visited before in Shan State.

In January 2005, after completing part of my fieldwork in northern Thailand, I flew from Chiang Mai to Yangon to meet with Ae Maew, who flew in from Taiwan. We did a few interviews in Yangon and then flew to Mandalay, the last royal capital, to which the Yunnanese immigration,
mostly from Tengchong, has a history of several centuries. Because of my limited research budget, we had to stay in a cheap hotel in the downtown, not far from the Yunnanese Association. We took a room with twin beds. Its old green carpet emitted a slight damp smell, and the showerhead in the bathroom continually dripped. I apologized to Ae Maew for the rough living conditions. We borrowed two bicycles to navigate the city during the day. It is organized in a grid, with numbered streets that makes it easy to locate addresses, but getting around is a challenge, with trishaws, coaches, motorcycles, cars, and bicycles moving through intersections with very few traffic lights. Even in early January the city was very hot and dusty.

Ae Maew had some friends whose relatives were in the jade business in Mandalay. With her help, I visited a few jade companies and interviewed several jade traders to trace their transnational networks as well as learn about their diverse lives outside of work. The Yunnanese husband of Ae Maew’s best high school friend, a Shan lady, took us to explore the jade marketplace frequented every day by numerous small traders. When we were not conducting interviews, Ae Maew often told me about the joys and sorrows of her life. Despite her young age, she has experienced much adversity, complex tensions and conflicts involving family, ethnicity, society, and state. She expressed contrasting and contradictory feelings and seemed unreconciled to the divergent facets of her subjectivity in relation to her multiple positions—a daughter, a sister, a second-generation Yunnanese migrant in Burma, and a Chinese trans-migrant from Burma to Taiwan. Lila Abu-Lughod stresses exploration of this question of positionality in ethnographies of the particular by looking into how individuals live their “‘cultural’ complex” in order to “subvert the most problematic connotations of ‘culture’: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness” (1993, 13-4). Her viewpoint is in accord with the philosophical school of

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1. Some surviving stone tablets of a Yunnanese Han temple, Jinduoyan tudici, located near a port on the Irrawaddy River in Mandalay, record its founding more than three hundred years ago. Another temple in Amarapura, Dongmiu guanyinsi, eight miles south of Mandalay, was completed in 1773 (Wu and Cun 2007b). About a hundred years later (in 1881), the Yunnanese Association was established there on a piece of royally granted land (Wu and Cun 2007a). Most of the early Yunnanese immigrants in the city were merchants and clerks.

2. This orientation is in line with that of a number of anthropologists since the 1980s who have discussed the significance of polyphony and of individuality and challenged traditional interests in using collective structures for the presentation of a coherent society (Clifford and Marcus 1986).
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phenomenology that endeavors to recover the meaning of subjective consciousness and explore how the subjective consciousness opens toward the world from different angles (Natanson 1973; Watson and Watson-Franke 1985, 13). Corresponding with Abu-Lughod’s phenomenological insight, my focus on Ae Maew’s life and her changing relationships did draw me to see and also experience the whirl of “frictions” that drive her to transgress a range of structural forces relating to gender, class, community, and nation, simultaneously causing her intense pain and frustration. Moreover, it challenged my academic positioning’s thin veneer of “neutrality.” The story that follows not only illuminates Ae Maew’s life but also my personal limitations during an ethnographical process.

On our last night in Mandalay before we set off for Taunggyi, we were, as usual, battling the heat and mosquitoes before falling asleep. The wall fans did little to help. Ae Maew assured me that after we reached Taunggyi, which is located on a plateau, it would be much cooler and there would be no more buzzing mosquitoes. Maybe it was the anticipation of going home that triggered Ae Maew’s childhood memories that night. She spoke of Laikha, the place where she grew up before moving to Taunggyi:

“I love animals and have raised cats since I was a little girl. I often carried a cat in a cloth bag while taking our buffalo to graze. Sometimes I carried a cat wrapped in a longyi on my back. That is why our Baiyi [Shan] neighbors called me Ae Maew, meaning cat girl. . . .

“From childhood I saw mules silently carrying heavy loads. My family began breeding mules when I was in junior high school, seventy to eighty in the beginning. The number grew to over a hundred later on. They were born from the mating between horses and donkeys. Mules can’t give birth themselves.³ You have to keep on mating horses and donkeys in order to get mules. When I heard that purchasers had arrived in the village, I knew which of our mules would be sold. My heart saddened. Despite the fact that the mothers were horses and their young were mules, they were very attached to each other.

“The selling took place every year during the advent of Chinese New Year. Young mules were taken away one by one as the merchants set off on

³ I found a source that mentions that male mule foals are castrated after birth so that they can be tamed and take on the work of transportation (Li 2008, 111). In any case, the offspring of cross reproduction cannot reproduce.
their trade journeys. My heart was with these mules that wailed for their mothers while being taken away. I recognized their individual cries even after they had gone some distance, and each one was branded in my mind. But this was how we made a living. I wanted to break free of such a life. I was aware that the only way this could happen was to study hard in order to leave the village for further education in the city.

“During the summer, the livestock were taken to the mountain to graze. At that time, all farms grew rice; animals had to be kept away. Every household knew approximately where their animals were grazing, and about every two weeks, they had to check on them. Sometimes the animals couldn’t find water and could die of thirst. Therefore, it was important to monitor them and drive them to a place with water. Villagers helped each other in this task. If I chase my animals today, you come to help me. Tomorrow, I help you in return. Every household’s livestock was kept at a different site, so there was no risk of mixing with the neighbors’ stock. Each herd had a lead female horse.

“After the rice harvest, it was time to lead the animals back to the village from the mountain. Villagers called this kaibazi [opening the valley]. They tore down the wooden rails around the farms and let their animals stay there for the winter.

“I was attached to the animals I looked after. I touched them and talked to them. After the mares gave birth to baby mules, the mothers and babies were cared for in the stable. I could tell the mothers were feeling uncomfortable with swelling breasts. Sometimes, I milked the mother horses and saved the milk in bottles. Out of curiosity, I would stare at the bottles for a long time, and then bottle-feed the baby mules. They were lovely, but when they grew older they were sold off. I cried for them. I cried. My father and mother didn’t know about this. Oh, I didn’t want to have this kind of life. It was very sad. Although these animals didn’t speak, you could read their emotions by looking at them.

“I named every horse and mule. We had one horse that was wild and often had stomachaches, so I named her Chenshui.\(^4\) Early one morning when Mother had gone to the market and my brothers were away I saw her in the distance walking home. Her steps were unstable, and with each one she stumbled, raising clouds of dust. She was bringing her two baby

\(^4\) Chenshui in the Tengchong dialect means stomachache.
mules with her. I knew it was her. I opened the gate of our pen to let her and her children in, and then I ran to my auntie’s house to borrow medicine. My cousin came with me to give Chenshui a shot.

“The livestock had their own instincts. When they were sick, they found their way home and we gave them some salt or medicine. After eating, they would wander around for a few hours or an afternoon and then go back to their own place again. Sometimes they cried too, and when they did, I would wonder if they also felt sad.”

Ae Maew’s captivating account of the horses and mules reminded me of a faraway world that is intimately connected to my research on the long-distance caravan trade that relied on mules (chapter 5). Yet it was an aspect of that world and way of life that I had much neglected before. For years, I had listened to numerous accounts narrated by retired caravan traders and muleteers. To me, this traveling trade was an adventurous male undertaking, but Ae Maew’s narrative reveals an intimate female role behind the trade. Her sentiments toward the animals contrasted sharply with the ventures of the male traders and complemented their “history” of the trade. I anticipated exploring a new world, the rich lives of Yunnanese women, during our upcoming trip to Taunggyi. I would stay at Ae Maew’s home, which would guarantee an anthropological methodology of participant observation.

**Multiple Star Residence**

The next morning, Ae Maew and I joined two other passengers in a small shared van bound for Taunggyi. We left at eight-thirty in the morning. The road was bumpy from time to time, and when another car approached from the opposite direction, we had to roll up the windows to keep out the dust. After one and a half hours we entered a highland region on a winding mountain road. The landscape was barren, composed of limestone mountains. There were no villages on the way. I tried to picture trains of mule caravans in the past passing through this desolate track. Around noon, the car stopped in front of a small restaurant for lunch. The driver poured buckets of water on the engine to cool it down, producing clouds of hissing white vapors. After lunch, the car continued its journey, eventually leaving the barren mountains for colorful slopes and valleys. We
passed through several villages, their entrances marked with large bamboo groves. The road became wider and smoother, flanked on either side by an endless succession of rolling farms that cultivated barley, rape, beans, wheat, and other crops I could not name. Ae Maew pointed out the chinchona (jinjina) that grew along the road and said she liked their slim, tall shape very much. Intermixed with cinchona were many Bombax ceiba trees with crimson blossoms. Ae Maew said that during the rainy season, the scenery was even more beautiful.

Around five in the afternoon, we finally arrived at Ae Maew’s home in Taunggyi. It was an old two-story teak house that Ae Maew had purchased for 2.46 million kyat in 1994, one year before she went to Taiwan, using her savings of twenty years, plus some loans from friends. She said she bought the house for her father, who had been teaching at a Taunggyi Chinese school since 1989 and had been staying in the school dormitory. Her aunt and her eldest brother from Pinlong soon moved to the house, and then her sister. Her two other brothers came often as well. However, Ae Maew’s mother was left behind in Laikha to take care of their farms and livestock. In 1998, her father was diagnosed with late-stage throat cancer. After the end of a school term in January 1999, Ae Maew hurried home from Taiwan. She first went to Bangkok, where she met up with her sister who had gone to Thailand a few years earlier. Together they went back to Burma via northern Thailand by secretly crossing the border. It was only upon arriving home that Ae Maew learned that her mother had not been informed of her father’s illness. At her insistence, her mother finally moved to Taunggyi from Laikha. Ae Maew then returned to Taiwan to continue her studies. About a month later, Ae Maew’s father passed away.

Ae Maew had told me something of her family’s conflicts when we were in Yangon and Mandalay. Once she said: “My mother was always treated as an outsider by my aunt, a domineering figure who meddled in my family’s affairs. She took my brothers, one by one, from Laikha to Pinlong when they were school age. My father had also lived with my aunt. He had been teaching at the Chinese school in Pinlong before going to Taunggyi. He went home only two or three times a year for short visits. All my brothers were alienated from my mother. My aunt tore apart my family.”

Ae Maew’s aunt and father were from a family of the landlord class back in Yunnan. Her grandfather had been a high-ranking official in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan. The aunt had been engaged once, but the
flight after the Communist takeover had resulted in separation between her and her fiancé, and she has remained unmarried. Ae Maew’s father respected this unmarried elder sister very much and asked his children to address her as “Beibei”—the Chinese address for a senior brother of one’s father—instead of “Gugu” (a sister of one’s father). The preference for a male form of address points to the tradition of gender inequality but also to the aunt’s high power and status in the extended family. She raised Ae Maew’s brothers and several of Ae Maew’s male cousins. Consequently, a deep hatred exists between Ae Maew’s mother and aunt. Nevertheless, they have been living together in the house in Taunggyi since 1999. When Ae Maew took me home, there was only her mother, her aunt, and a cat living in the house. Ae Maew’s eldest brother has been in a Mandalay jail since 2003 for the crime of gambling. Her second elder brother died of AIDS in connection with drug addiction two years after their father’s death. The third brother is married and living with his wife’s family in Taunggyi. Ae Maew’s sister was working in Bangkok at a Chinese newspaper publisher.

When we entered the house, Ae Maew was upset with its dusty condition. We only saw her aunt, who was nearly eighty years old. She was very thin and small and greeted us warmly. I called her Gugu (auntie) instead of Beibei (uncle). Ae Maew briefly introduced me to her and started to complain about the house. She said that she had transferred one hundred thousand kyat to her third elder brother a few months earlier (through a friend’s connection) to hire a domestic worker for one year to look after the house and her mother and aunt. But there was no sign of the worker. Ae Maew apologized to me for the disorder. I tried to calm Ae Maew and said it was not bad at all; it only needed some cleaning.

Ae Maew took up a gray tiger cat that was squatting on the cooking stove in the kitchen. She held it lovingly and said she had brought the cat home from a friend’s house about a year earlier. Ae Maew showed me around the house. Actually, it was a lovely wooden house. Downstairs were the living room, the kitchen, and two bedrooms. Upstairs were another living room with the family altar, two other bedrooms, and a small balcony facing the road. There were only a few pieces of wooden furniture in the two living rooms—a cupboard, some chairs, and two tables—emphasizing the empty spaces. In my eyes, they resembled two small ballrooms. I loved the simplicity. In the backyard there was a toilet and a bathroom, but the latter was only used for water storage. Ae Maew’s mother also kept a small
garden in the backyard where she planted some vegetables and herbs. At a corner of the backyard was a hut made of pieces of wood from torn-down rails. Ae Maew said that this was her aunt’s kitchen. A chain lock was placed on the door. On seeing this extra kitchen, I wondered if Ae Maew’s mother had gained a superior position in the household (having the main kitchen for her own use). I thought of a Chinese saying—a kitchen does not accommodate two women (yige chufang rongbuxia liangge nyuren)—describing the tension between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. I saw that it applied to Ae Maew’s mother and auntie as well.

Having placed our luggage in the room next to her mother’s on the second floor, we started to clean the house. A few minutes later, Ae Maew’s mother came back. I greeted her and called her “Dama” (senior aunt). She was in her mid-seventies, and, in contrast to Ae Maew’s aunt, was tall and stout. Ae Maew looked very much like her. They had beautiful eyes. Yet, Dama had a sorrowful face; the lines revealed the adversity she had undergone. On seeing her mother, Ae Maew complained again about the condition of the house. Dama was quiet and went about her own work. I could not tell whether she was happy to see Ae Maew home or not. “This is my mother. She doesn’t know how to please people,” Ae Maew sighed.

By the time we finished cleaning, it was nearly seven o’clock in the evening. After a day’s traveling and the cleaning, we both needed a good shower. There was no hot water in the house, so Ae Maew took me to a neighborhood bathhouse. She explained that most people went to a bathhouse when they needed a shower. After the shower, I put on a Burmese longyi I had purchased in Mandalay. We walked home slowly. The night had become very dark; there was no electricity. The air was cool and the sky full of stars. I had not seen such a beautiful sky for some time. Taunggyi was a charming mountain town (Figure 2–1), very different from dusty and bustling Mandalay. I told Ae Maew her wooden house was lovely; I wanted to name it the “House of Many Stars.” She laughed.

We lit candles in the living room downstairs and discussed our work for the next day. The government provided electricity for different quarters by turn. Even when there was electricity, the power was weak and unstable. Dama had gone to her room to rest. Gugu sat with us in the living room.

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5. Dama (senior aunt) is an address for female adults whose husbands are older than one’s father.
She called me Teacher (laoshi) and praised my beauty. “Teacher’s face is plump and her cheeks are red, very good looking,” she said. A plump face symbolizes fortune in Chinese society. However, my face has never been plump. I tried to remain polite. Ae Maew told her I had come to learn about the history of the Yunnanese people, how they had come to Burma and what they did for a living. “Oh, Teacher is a Bodhisattva, Teacher is a Bodhisattva,” Gugu said. I felt the praise absurd, and joked, “Oh, yes, I make magic.” Gugu laughed heartily. I then urged her to tell me about her family background. She said:

“Our father had been an official [dangguande] in Kunming. He came home once every three years. He was a member of the Yunnan Provincial Assembly for three terms. My eldest brother had been the General Chief of five townships.”

Ae Maew added: “My aunt was the second girl in the family and was addressed as erxiaojie [the second young lady]. She had one elder sister, two elder brothers, and two younger brothers. My father was the youngest son in the family. My aunt had been powerful in the old home in Tengchong. She was in charge of stamping official papers. She had all the keys to the house.”

“How did you and your family come to Burma?” I asked.
“My brother [Ae Maew’s father] carried our mother on his back from our hometown. He carried her for many days until he was not able to walk anymore. He cried and cried. Our mother said: ‘Go, go, leave Mother alone; you go.’ But he still carried our mother. We passed a village of barbarous people [yiren zhaizi]. They grabbed our mother’s clothes and left her nearly naked. My brothers’ clothes were grabbed too. My third niece’s clothes were tattered and hence not grabbed. She took off her coat and gave it to a brother. I took off my coat and gave it to my mother.”

Ae Maew said: “My father and his two elder brothers had fled Tengchong earlier than other family members. After arriving in Burma, my father joined a KMT guerrilla unit in Shan State and later on led a troop back home to take the rest of the family members out. He carried his mother for eighteen days. The grandmother’s feet had been bound since childhood and she could not run. My father was twenty-seven years old. He took more than one hundred people out.”

Ae Maew and I went to bed late. I could see numerous stars through the window while lying in bed. While I was pondering the day’s experience, Ae Maew said: “My father used to say in his late life that he had killed many people when he took the troop back to Tengchong. He felt guilty. My brothers were disobedient. He said this may have been due to his sins; those dead people came to demand the debt. But my father was a very kind person; he treated people warmly. He was a learned man. He taught his children ancient Chinese literature, such as Xishi xianwen, Sanzijing, the works by Ouyang Xiu and Su Dongpo.”

“You mean he taught your brothers?”

“Yes, my brothers. They all lived in Pinlong. There was no Chinese school in Laikha. My father only stayed in Laikha for two or three years as a traveling trader. Using two mules he transported goods for sale to the rotating market of different villages in the mountains. Afterward he was invited to be a Chinese teacher in Pinlong. He often said he didn’t know trade. Teacher, you should meet one of my elder cousins. He lives in Pinlong. He knows my father’s history.”

**Songs of Morning**

At five in the morning I was awakened by Dama’s sutra chanting. She had begun her devotions for the day with worship at the family altar, and the
wooden structure of the house transmitted the sound of each movement. Ae Maew was awakened too. She pulled her comforter over her head and tried to sleep as the bed was warm and it was a cold morning. Later, the striking of a gong from the road announced the begging of alms, and I struggled to get up and put on my coat so I could take some pictures. The balcony on the second floor was a good spot for a clear view of the street. A few minutes later a group of monks passed by chanting sutra, and I saw neighbors, none of them Yunnanese, giving them cooked rice. Afterward, there came the sounds of hawkers selling various morning foods, including sticky rice, fresh milk, fried noodles, and fritters. Female sellers walked elegantly by with pots of food on their heads. Their hawking was a kind of singing that accentuated and prolonged one syllable of the name of the food they sold. More groups of monks passed by. The tea shop across the road was now playing popular Shan songs aired over a loudspeaker. Many guests were having their tea and breakfast in the shop. The morning had become lively.

At nearly seven o’clock, Ae Maew took me to the market, and on the way I asked her why Yunnanese neighbors did not give alms as their neighbors did. “No, Yunnanese don’t. They go to Chinese temples; there are several in Taunggyi. The Guanyin temple is the biggest one. My mother goes there the first and fifteenth days of each month following the lunar calendar.”

My studies among Yunnanese migrants in northern Thailand indicate similarities in this respect. While ethnic Chinese originating from Guangdong (Canton) and Fujian in southeastern China have largely assimilated to local Theravada Buddhism, the Yunnanese still practice their traditional religion, a conflation of different elements derived from Confucianism, Taoism, Mahayana Buddhism, and folk beliefs (see Chang 1999, 226–93) of a “highly eclectic nature” (Yang 1994, 25). Like their fellow Yunnanese in Thailand who tease ethnic Chinese coming by boat as having become Thai, the Yunnanese in Burma like to say the Cantonese and Fujianese have become Burmese and cannot speak Chinese. Differentiated by migration routes, most “overseas” Chinese were originally concentrated in lower Burma and the “overland” Yunnanese in upper Burma. However, after

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6. Ethnicity can be identified by style of clothing; the Yunnanese normally do not wear longyi.
completion of the railway extension to Myitkyina and Lashio (respectively in 1898 and 1903), many maritime Chinese moved to northern cities and towns to make a living.\(^7\) Most Cantonese worked in the fields of carpentry and construction or the restaurant business. Most Fujianese were involved in trading produce and sundry goods. As for the Yunnanese, most of them came to Burma after 1949 and have been concentrated in upper Burma. According to information provided by both Yunnanese and maritime Chinese in Taunggyi, there are more than ten thousand Yunnanese in the city, while the number of Cantonese and Fujianese is around three thousand. The Yunnanese perceive themselves as being more traditional than the Cantonese and Fujianese in terms of maintaining “Chinese” culture. While this point has been largely acknowledged by their maritime counterparts, they are also perceived as risk-takers in illegal business. In contrast, the Cantonese and Fujianese see themselves, and are also perceived by the Yunnanese, as being more conservative in business dealings.

That morning, on the way to the market in Taunggyi, we passed a few ethnic Pa-O (also known as Taungthu/Dongsu) compounds and saw workers in many houses busy packing dry tobacco leaves into bamboo baskets. Ae Maew said most Pa-O in Taunggyi cultivate tobacco and sell it to different parts of the country. They are known as hardworking people, and many of them have become big bosses in the tobacco business. The Shan, too, are considered diligent workers, mostly in farming and petty trade. The Yunnanese have lived peacefully with these two groups, but intermarriage has been uncommon, except in the early days when the number of Yunnanese women was limited. In the early 1970s, when instability in rural areas caused Yunnanese to begin moving to Taunggyi, they received much help from local Shans. Informants pointed out that Shan headmen were kind to them and covered up their illegal status. Many Yunnanese rented houses from Shans and later applied for citizenship with Shan identities.

Every morning, Ae Maew and I started our day by going to the market. Sometimes we had breakfast there and then went on to interviews in different locations; other times, we brought fresh vegetables and meat home and made our own breakfast. One morning, while frying rice in the kitchen, Ae Maew was happily singing a Burmese song.

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I asked her what song she was singing, and she said it was a song with rhymes about rain that is taught to children. It says: “When rain comes, we take a shower in the rain. When mama comes, we drink milk from her. When daddy comes, we eat the coconut he cuts for us” (Mo-ywa-yin mo-ye-cho-meh / Me-Me la-yin no-so-meh / Pe-Pe la-yin oun-thi kwehsa-meh). Ae Maew smiled and said, “Everyone learns this nursery rhyme at school when they are small.” After finishing the song, Ae Maew said, “While studying at university, the only subject that I didn’t need an extra class for was Burmese. My Burmese was even better than my Burman classmates’, and I earned a very high grade.”

I was intrigued by Ae Maew’s attachment to some aspects of things Burmese and her dislike for others, revealing her different sentiments connected to Burma and intertwined in her subjectivity in an interstitial state that embraces tensions, ambivalence, love, and hatred toward the same or related phenomena in different situations.

A good example of her contempt for Burmese society was our encounter with a collector of tolls in Mandalay, after we rode our bicycles on an overpass. The collector, a young boy around fourteen or fifteen, accused us of transgressing the law by riding bicycles on the overpass and demanded angrily that we pay a fine of a thousand kyat each. (The toll for a car was only twenty kyat.) He pointed to an obscure sign that had been painted long ago that forbade riding bicycles on the overpass, although walking with a bicycle was allowed. People from other places would have no way of knowing about this regulation. We tried to explain this to the boy, who threatened to send for the police. In the end, Ae Maew became quite provoked and shouted at him: “How old are you? How many years of education have you received? Why have you become so wicked at such a young age?” I did not know whether he was shocked or hurt by Ae Maew’s words, but they seemed to curb his anger, and he shouted back: “Go! Go! Tayoke soe [damned Chinese]!” Upset by this incident, Ae Maew cursed “silaomian” (damn old Burman) as we were compelled to walk our bikes back to the other end of the overpass where we had started. Ae Maew lamented: “Teacher, how can I stay in such a society? It’s so corrupt. He is just a boy. I hate this government and society.”

8. It is common that students have to take extra classes at their teachers’ homes, a way for the teachers to earn extra income. This happens from primary school to university. Several informants remarked that what appears in exams is only taught during extra classes.
Moving Upward

After finishing high school, Ae Maew stayed in Laikha for another two years in order to save money to go to university. Apart from working on the family farm growing garlic, rice, beans, corn, and sesame, she worked on other people’s farms. On several occasions while we were cooking, taking a walk, or chatting before falling to sleep she recounted her work experience since childhood:9

“From a very young age, I have been looking for different opportunities to earn money. I started selling fruits from our yard in the second grade. I often climbed trees to pick fruits, put them in a bucket, and took them to school to sell. I could climb trees like a monkey. Sometimes I sold fried sunflower seeds. I purchased twenty-five packages at a time and put them in my cloth bag. After class, I took them out to sell to my classmates and earned a profit equivalent to five packages. Other times, I cooked corn from our farm and carried it to school. No matter what kind of goods I found, I tried to turn them into money. I didn’t like poverty. I wanted to get out of it. . . .”

“I was a child laborer, working on other people’s farms during vacations since age eleven or twelve. In the summer, the weather was scorching hot, and I worked from seven in the morning until five in the afternoon. The first year I earned six kyat a day; the second year eight kyat, and then ten kyat. I often picked on higher-paying farms which were so wet my feet were covered in water. I was just a child, but I worked with adults to harvest rice and pick garlic. . . .”

“Our family purchased our own farm when I was in junior high school, around fourteen or fifteen years old. It was my sister and I who repeatedly asked my father to buy livestock and to farm. From the time I was small, I observed other people’s ways of living and tried to learn how they earned money. I saw that some families raised horses. The mares gave birth to foals which were sold for money, so I asked my father to raise horses. I saw other families with farms and thought of having one of our own. I then pestered my father to buy one.

“Look at my thick calves. They are because I have done heavy tasks from a very young age. Our house was located at the edge of a village, and every

9. A space separates the occasions on which we talked in the excerpts that follow.
morning my sister and I had to walk a long way, each carrying ten dan of water. We then cut plants for our pigs; we raised nearly twenty of them. We had to walk one hour each way to cut wild plants, and each full basket weighed ten kilos. I miss the experience of talking with my sister on the way. When we were tired, we would take a break or get water from a well. The taste of water was sweet. After arriving home, we boiled the plants, rice bran, and residue of soybeans into a big pot. This was the food for the pigs.”

“I sold lottery tickets when I was fifteen or sixteen years old. At the beginning I sold lottery tickets for other ticket sellers. But later on, I became an independent seller myself. I rode a bicycle to tea shops in different villages to look for customers. I earned tens of thousands of kyat in one lottery cycle. The year before coming to Taunggyi, I went to the ruby mines in Mong Hsu and panned for rough rubies in the river. I stayed there for three to four weeks. . . .

“I hid the money I earned in shoes, old clothes, and in the cracks on the back of our cooking stoves. This was how I saved money. But in 1987, there was demonetization. I lost two-thirds of my savings. Teacher, I didn’t want to do all these jobs. I wish I could have simply been a student.”

Ae Maew moved to Taunggyi in 1990 (at age seventeen) to prepare for the entrance exam to go to university. Her father had come to this city a year earlier. She entered the Department of Animal Science at Taunggyi University in 1991. Meanwhile, in the evening, she attended the Chinese school, where her father worked, at the junior high level. As there had been no Chinese school in Laikha, it was her first time attending a Chinese school. Her father had taught her some Chinese each time he went home. More often she had learned Chinese from one of her cousins and her own dictionary. She said:

“The first Chinese novel I read was written by Jin Yong when I was fifteen or sixteen. It was Yitian tulong ji [Heaven sword and dragon sabre]. A lot of words I didn’t know, but I combined them with the words I knew and tried to guess their meaning. After Jin Yong, I read Qiong Yao’s Xin you qianqianjie [The heart with a million knots]. I got these novels from

10. The act of carrying water by placing a carrying pole on the shoulders with one bucket hung on each end is called danshui, and one dan of water refers to two bucketfuls.
11. Both Jin Yong and Qiong Yao are popular novelists based in Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively.
my two cousins and learned new words by reading them. While taking Chinese class at the junior high level, I also taught at the primary level. I started with the fourth grade. Whenever there were words I didn’t know, I asked other teachers.”

Visit to Taunggyi University

On the fourth day of my stay in Taunggyi, Ae Maew proposed to take me to Taunggyi University, where she had studied for about three years. The university was on the outskirts of the city, and it took two buses to get there. On campus, Ae Maew pointed out many cinchonas, trees we had also seen on the way to Taunggyi from Mandalay. She said every university in Burma grows this kind of tree, which she likes very much. I asked her if she missed being on the university campus. To my surprise, she shook her head and said no. As we passed the first building, the administration building with offices for all departments, we heard music. Looking through the windows, we saw students rehearsing a performance. This jogged Ae Maew’s memory of the opening performance for the freshmen of her year. She said: “The welcoming performance was grand, different from those in Taiwan. It took place two months after the arrival of the first-year students. It was a very happy occasion, and all the professors and students participated. The concert was big. I remembered everyone was given a package of danpauk and a Pepsi in a glass bottle. The final and most anticipated event was selection of the most beautiful girl and the most handsome boy from the first-year students of each department. They represented their departments and needed to have good grades.” We stood outside that room for some minutes. Ae Maew was engrossed in her observations.

We came to a tree with blossoming yellow flowers. Ae Maew said: “This is British jasmine. I picked many flowers from this tree and put them inside several books that I took to Taiwan.” I picked one flower and put it in my notebook. Ae Maew continued: “After my first term at the university, the school was closed by the government until 1993. When it

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12. *Danpauk* is Indian *biriyani*. It was a dish Ae Maew and I enjoyed very much while we were in Mandalay.
reopened, we had three terms in 1993, one to make up for the second semester of the first year and the other two for the second year. When I was in the third year in 1994, I took an exam to go to Taiwan. I was selected and offered a scholarship."13

In Taiwan, Ae Maew first studied at Qiao Da, a college that offers preparatory courses to Chinese overseas students before they are assigned to universities. Two years later, based on her results, Ae Maew was sent to the department of history at a national university. She worked part time during the semester and full time during winter and summer vacations. Two years after her arrival in Taiwan, she cleared all the loans she had taken out for the purchase of the house in Taunggyi. From time to time, she sent money home. “I have worked as a librarian, shop girl, domestic nurse, and restaurant employee. One summer I washed dishes thirteen hours a day for one month in a noodle shop. I am amazed at my own past,” she said.

Ae Maew received Taiwanese citizenship when she was a junior. Her application was granted because of her father’s military service in the KMT guerrilla force in the 1950s. After graduation from university with a degree in history, Ae Maew worked for three years and then went back for graduate studies in business management.

“My brothers didn’t go to university. They were not interested in Burmese,” she said.

“Why were you interested in Burmese?” I asked.

“I was not really interested in the language. I just wanted to move on from my life in Burma. I believed if I studied hard, I would get a chance to go abroad. Education was the only way to change my life. It was strange how I, a girl from a rural village, had such a thought. My mother didn’t even know what grade I was in at school,” she replied.

We walked around the campus. Ae Maew introduced each place to me: “This is one of my classrooms. All the buildings here are named after different places in Taunggyi District. This one is named Inle; that one Loi-lin; the other one Linke. They are all beautiful names. After finishing one class, we had to rush to another one.”

“How was the teaching here?” I inquired.

13. The Taiwanese government organized the exams in upper Burma and northern Thailand each year.
“Not bad. The professors here are not bad. This is the Department of English; further on is the Department of History, and then the Department of Myanmar. It was originally called the Department of Burmese,” she said.

“Look,” Ae Maew pointed to a construction site. “They are building the ceremonial hall for graduation. The university had no ceremonial hall before, and the commencement had to take place at Mandalay University. The ceremony here is grand, even grander than the ones in Taiwan. The female students go to the beauty parlor in the early morning to get their hair and makeup done. Each one looks like a bride.” Ae Maew joyfully described the occasion.

When we reached the campus border, there were very few trees, and the grass was dry. Ae Maew said: “One thing I have regretted is that I did not have a romance here. At that time, I didn’t like boys of other ethnic groups, and there were not so many Chinese students.” Ae Maew became deep in thought.

The temperature had risen at noon. As we walked toward the campus entrance under a serene blue sky, Ae Maew seemed to be trying to retain as many memories of the campus as possible. She stopped walking and said: “Look at the mountains.”

I directed my gaze to the nearby mountains that partly surrounded the campus and said: “Your university in Taiwan is also surrounded by mountains.” I was happy to find a similarity.

“No, it is not the same. This was my first university, and it has a different feeling. It’s winter now, very dry. In the summer, the campus will become greener, and so will the mountains.”

### Ae Maew’s Father, Mother, and Aunt

One morning Ae Maew and I were looking through two wooden boxes of books left by her father. Among them, I found a pile of letters and poems written by Ae Maew’s father, whom I should address as “Dadie” (senior uncle).\(^{14}\) I asked permission from Ae Maew to read them. Dadie had kept all the letters he had received as well as many letter drafts he had written. Ae

\(^{14}\) *Dadie* (senior uncle) is an address for male adults who are older than one’s father.
Maew loved her father dearly and wanted me to know more about him. She then contacted one of her cousins who lived in Pinlong to come to Taunggyi in order to tell me his father’s history. This cousin, whom Ae Maew calls “Tangge” (cousin from the paternal side), was born in 1934. In 1958, he followed Ae Maew’s father and other family members to Burma. He said:

“My uncle [Ae Maew’s father] finished gaoxiao in Tengchong, an equivalent to today’s middle school education. After that he went to Xiaodong High School [xiaodong zhongxue] in Longling for three years. When the local Communists [tugong] came in 1949, he joined them for the liberation of China. However, he soon discovered that they were abusing their power by bullying civilians. In 1950, he escaped to Burma and joined the KMT guerrilla forces. While serving in the Fourteenth Division of the Third Army, he received training at the headquarters in Mong Hsat for half a year. In 1958, he and a troop of more than three hundred fought their way back to Yunnan and brought out a few hundred people, around thirty of them his family members. He carried his mother, who had bound feet, on his back for eighteen days. The group fled from Tengchong, passed Longjiang, and then hid in a Kachin village. The Communists caught up with them and took part of the group back. It was during the rainy season. We arrived in the Jiangdong area and hid in a forest for more than one month while the Communists blocked our way out, living on corn that was ground into powder. When the blockade was relaxed, we found a guide to take us out. We walked during the night, passed Chefan, and then crossed the border and arrived in Hemonglong in Burma. Later on we moved to Muse. I was fourteen years old. My uncle took me to work with him in a textile factory in Kutkai, and a year later he returned to the KMT guerrilla forces and stayed there until 1961.”

I pictured Dadie as a patriotic young man ready to dedicate his life to his country. He joined the KMT after having escaped to Burma with a hope of recovering the homeland someday. Ae Maew’s mother (Dama) did not join the flight in 1958; she had arrived in Burma a year earlier. She was not from the same village as Dadie. One night while she, Ae Maew, and I were sitting in the living room, she related the story of her flight at my request:

“Ae Maew’s father and I got engaged before the Chinese Communist takeover. After he fled Tengchong [in 1950], I waited for him until my family urged me to get engaged to another man [in 1957]. Seven days prior
to my marriage with that man, I secretly received a letter from Ae Maew’s father. He asked me to flee to Burma and told me to stay with certain people in different places during the journey. With a niece and a nephew, I made my way to Burma and arrived at a place called Panghu, which was near Jiegao, adjacent to Ruili [in Yunnan]. A year later, his family also escaped to Burma, and I went to stay with them. They gave me food, but I also worked on a tea farm. Ae Maew’s father was in the army. In 1961, he sent a letter to me and told me to go to Laos to meet him. I was twenty-nine years old that year.”

Dama thus made her journey through Muse, Lashio, Mandalay, Taung-gyi, Kengtung, Tachileik, and Mae Sai to Laos. Dadie’s troop had been pushed to Laos by the Burmese army and temporarily encamped there. She said: “We got married in Laos and stayed there for two months. The troop had negotiated with the Thai authority and paid two hundred thousand baht as a bribe to enter Thailand by [crossing the Mekong River]. We took a big ship. A group of dependents went to Laoxiangtang village [Ban Huae Pai], a group went to Mantang village [Ban Tham Santhisuk], and another went to Mae Sai.” These are border villages and a town located in Chiang Rai Province. Dama and Dadie stayed in Mae Sai for one year and then went back to Burma where most of Dadie’s relatives remained. “We crossed the border from Mae Sai to Tachileik and then went to Kengtung. We took an airplane from there to Nansan and then went by vehicle to Pinlong. We stayed in Pinlong for a few days, and then moved to Xunding, where we stayed for five years. I gave birth to three boys there. Afterward, we moved to Laikha, where I gave birth to Ae Maew’s sister, Ae Maew, and another daughter, who only lived for a few days.”

Although the narration was simple and straightforward, it revealed Dama’s inner strength that enabled her to undertake these risky journeys to reunite with her fiancé. Was it out of love, obligation, social convention, or mere circumstance? Dama and Dadie seemed to be very different types of people, and their marriage had been arranged by their parents. Dadie was an educated man who loved literature and composed poems. After his military engagement, he took up trade for a couple of years and then

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15. Informants said that villagers on both sides of the border were sometimes allowed to cross over to trade in local markets (leaving in the morning and returning in the late afternoon). Letters or other objects could be smuggled back and forth through this channel.
dedicated himself to Chinese education for the rest of his life. In contrast, Dama is illiterate, although her family’s modest holdings place her in the landlord class. After fleeing to Burma, she labored at heavy tasks in the countryside until she moved to Taunggyi in 1999. How did they interact with each other? I tried to persuade Dama to tell me about her relationship with Dadie, but to no avail.

One day I was looking at a photo of Dadie taken with his students that hung on the wall in the living room downstairs. When Dama came over and stood beside me, I took a chance and asked her if she missed Dadie. “He’s already dead [rensiluo],” Dama replied. She paused and then added: “Taiwan sent eight hundred US dollars to him as a prize for his dedication to Chinese education for thirty years—a prize from Taiwan [taiwan laijiang].”

“Do you miss him?” I persisted.

“He’s already dead.” That was all Dama would say. My question was too contemporary, too modern, and perhaps too naive for her.

Between Dama and Dadie, there was Gugu—Dadie’s sister. Ae Maew said her aunt was too smart and cunning and her mother too simpleminded. They did not talk to or interact with each other while I was staying with them, and I learned that this was due to years of accumulated hatred between them. Gugu converted to Christianity in 1995, following the conversion of Tangge, who lives in Pinlong. Tangge has five sons and one daughter. His third son was once addicted to drugs and squandered most of his savings, but then his addiction was cured in a church in Mae Sai. Afterward, he not only converted to Christianity but dedicated himself to theological studies. His parents and grandaunt eventually became Christians too, and now every Sunday Gugu dressed herself neatly to go to church.

**Ae Maew and Her Brothers**

Among the pile of written materials Dadie left were many letters from his former students that had been sent from Taiwan, Thailand, and Burma. All the students expressed their gratitude for his earnest teaching, praised him as an excellent teacher, and stressed how much they missed him. I asked Ae Maew why her father, such a respected teacher, had disobedient sons. Ae Maew sighed and said: “My father was busy educating other people’s children and didn’t have much time for his own. He said that he had
spent the least time with my sister and me, but we had not become bad or caused our family to worry about us.”

If Ae Maew’s father had spent the least time with Ae Maew and her sister and they had not become problematic, then responsibility for the failure of Ae Maew’s brothers cannot be placed entirely on their father. Among the letters, I found the first one that Ae Maew had written to her parents from Taiwan.

Respected Laoye\(^{16}\) and Mother,

Since I arrived in Taiwan I have not written to you yet. How have you been? I miss you very much. Ye and Mom, please do not worry about me. I have been very well here. Everything goes fine. I have returned the money that I borrowed earlier from Mr. Yang by working during last winter vacation. In addition, I have saved another 30,000 NT. I can send the money to you if you need it now; otherwise I will send it together with the money I will earn during the summer vacation. . . . I passed all the subjects last semester, but the grades were not very high. I will work harder this semester. At the end of the school year, if I can be sent to an ideal department at a national university, I will go. Otherwise, I will stay one more year at Qiao Da. Going to a private university is too expensive. Please do not worry about me; I will try my best. . . .

Laoye, you must have confidence in me. I will work hard. You and Mom, please take care of your health. . . . Wait for my success. Tell elder sister that the outside world is complicated. I will try to look for a chance to bring her here. . . .

Peace to the whole family.

Your daughter,

Ae Maew

April 3rd

I also found the draft reply from Ae Maew’s father.

My Dear Daughter Ae Maew,

I have received your letter. I am very pleased with your life and work in Taiwan. I still teach at [the same] Chinese school. My health is all right. I am already over sixty years old. You are my hope. You must work hard. . . . Your sister left for Thailand with your [eldest] brother [earlier this month]. After your departure, she lost interest in taking dressmaking classes. She

\(^{16}\) Loaye (or ye) is an old-fashioned way of addressing one’s father.
stopped teaching at the Chinese school, as well, and remained idle at home. I had to let her be; she is already twenty-nine years old.

Your [eldest] brother’s business has gone bankrupt. He asked for money from me. I dared not give him much as I have no confidence in him. This has resulted in tension between us. I cannot care so much anymore as I am already old. . . .

As you know, being a Chinese teacher in a foreign land is not easy. Having been born in this age, we have to persevere in our belief in the Three Principles of the People.\textsuperscript{17} We should not impute faults and wrongs to others, but work hard for our own duty. However, I am more than sixty years old. My mental and physical strength is declining. I feel sad about this condition. Earlier, your mother came to Taunggyi to get a set of artificial teeth. She has returned [to Laikha]. She is fine. Do not worry.

Looking back on my former military experience of more than ten years when I fought against the Communists with my life, I lament my present situation. You have the chance to go abroad for further education. You must persist with high moral principles and strive to excel. Persevere with your will and win glory for your old father. We will talk more next time. Take good care of yourself.

Your father
April 26th

The letter shows that Ae Maew’s father was upset with the family’s situation as well as his own condition. He had great expectations for Ae Maew—his only hope in his old age. Once he was a passionate and patriotic young man, but as he aged, he saw his family falling apart. Concern from his former students and Ae Maew might have been his only consolation. He served Chinese education for about thirty-five years in total. Actually, Chinese education was banned in Burma in 1965, although Chinese lessons were secretly organized and given in private homes in upper Burma. In 1978 the restriction was relaxed but not removed, and many Chinese schools were reestablished using religious names. The major Chinese school in Mandalay has been registered as Confucius School (\textit{kongjiao xuexiao}) and the one in Taunggyi as Buddha School (\textit{dacheng baodian xuexiao}).

\textsuperscript{17} The Three Principles of the People (\textit{sanmin zhuyi}), created by Sun Yat-sen, contain the ideas of nationalism, democracy, and livelihood. This political philosophy used to be the official ideology of the Chinese Nationalist Party. However, it is considered outdated, and even the party has stopped referring to it since the 1990s. The citing of the ideology by Ae Maew’s father reflects the influence of political propaganda during his times.
Statues of Confucius and Buddha are placed in these schools. Informants explained that this method of registration was strategic in order to get approval. Because Burma is a Buddhist country, the government allows the establishment of schools of Buddhism or a similar religion. Many Chinese schools in major cities provide lessons up to the high school level. After graduation, many students continue their studies in Taiwan or China.

In contrast to Ae Maew’s status as a filial daughter and her efforts to live up to her father’s expectations, her three brothers were failures. I only found letters from her third elder brother to his father. In these letters, the brother, Lin San, persistently requested money from his father. The following is an example.

Dear Father,\(^\text{18}\)

After departing from home, I have safely arrived in the [jade] mines. The situation is more or less the same as before. However, the money I took with me was not sufficient. I was very happy that my buddy, Dawen, is going to visit you. I have borrowed 50,000 kyat from him. I hope, Father, you can return the debt to him. Your son’s business will straighten out. I will face reality. Please do not worry.

Your son,
Lin San

\(\text{June 1st}\)

Lin San finished his junior high education at a Chinese school in Pinlong, and he then helped on the family farm in Laikha. He also took charge of selling their produce in Taunggyi. However, very often, Dama did not know his whereabouts when the farm required help. Under such circumstances, Dama had to ask a neighbor to write a letter on her behalf to her husband or Lin San. In these letters, Dama complained of Lin San’s disobedience and her helpless situation. The following two extracts are examples.

Dear Husband,\(^\text{19}\)

It is time to sow seeds on the farm, but Lin San is nowhere to be seen. Please find him as soon as possible; otherwise I will have to rent the farm to other people. I have no capacity to take care of it myself. . . .

Your wife

\(\text{April 10th}\)

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18. Lin San used a formal address here—fuqin daren.

19. The address to her husband in Chinese is fujun rumian after his name.
Dear Son,

You have left home for a long time without sending back any word. I wrote to you some time earlier, but why have you not replied?

I’m writing to you again. I hope you come home immediately on receiving this letter. It is time to harvest the rice and also to cultivate the garlic. You must come back with your sister [Ae Maew’s elder sister]. I’m too old to do all the work by myself.

Your mother          October 28th, 1996

These letters show that Dama had no authority over Lin San. Ae Maew said: “Before I finished high school, my brothers were seldom at home. Sometimes, my third elder brother came back to sell produce or mules, and wanted to keep the money from the sale. He often had conflicts with my mother.”

Lin San got married in 1996 and then lived with his wife’s family in Taunggyi. This is unusual among the Yunnanese, who follow a patrilocal practice. He helped his parents-in-law look after a chicken farm. After marriage, he seldom visited home except when he wanted something. Around 2000, he went to Hpakan in Kachin State to work in the jade mines. (According to the letter, he had been there once earlier.) This is a popular undertaking among Yunnanese men (chapter 7). Everyone who goes there dreams of becoming rich in this venture, although very few people have such luck. Many fortune seekers not only use up all their money there but become drug addicts. Lin San was one of them. Ae Maew and her parents had spent much time and money in different places to help him with his drug problem, but so far to no avail.

As for Ae Maew’s eldest brother, Lin Yi, he finished his high school education at a Chinese school in Lashio. He then started cross-border trade between Yunnan and Burma, purchasing clothes in Yunnan and taking them back for sale in Burma. He did this for only two years and then around 1983 shifted to northern Thailand. The major commodities he purchased were packages of monosodium glutamate, an illegal trade. Though risky, the profit was high, and he became quite rich in a couple of years. However, demonetization in 1985 suddenly brought him to bankruptcy. He then went to Thailand again and stayed for nearly ten years working in tourism and construction. In 1994, he moved to Taunggyi and
stayed at the house Ae Maew had purchased. He did not have a job but sometimes went to Mong Hsu to buy rubies. While living at home, he often went gambling, and his father was not able to control him.

Whenever Ae Maew came home from Taiwan in the 1990s, her eldest brother quarreled with her fiercely. He kept asking her for money, and this hurt Ae Maew greatly. She said: “From a very young age, he went to Pin-long for studies, and later on to Lashio. I rarely saw him, but whenever he came back to Laikha, he would talk to me a lot. His visits always made me very emotional. I was happy that my eldest brother came home, but I felt sad that he would soon leave again. During his stay, he used to tell me many stories about his life, including his romances. He even showed me his love letters. He liked to tease me because my way of speaking and dressing were very unrefined, and he would tell me how I should dress myself. While he was away, I often carved words on the trunk of the banana tree near our pig pen—‘I miss my eldest brother.’ However, the eldest brother in my mind was different from the real one. He was originally the best child in our family, but when he grew up, he became the most disobedient.”

In 1998, Lin Yi went to Laogai, a border town in the region of Kokang in northeastern Shan State, to start a business. He opened a shop and sold clothes that were imported from Mae Sai in northern Thailand. Apart from running the shop, he worked at a gambling house owned by a Fujianese boss. Many gamblers were from China. In 2003, a Burmese officer gambled there and lost a lot of money but refused to pay. Lin Yi was called to negotiate with the officer, who became very angry and fired a shot just above his head. That officer then called the police to raid the gambling house, and Lin Yi has been in prison ever since.

Ae Maew’s second elder brother, Lin Er, also took up the cross-border trade between Burma and Thailand in the 1990s. He too became addicted to drugs. In 1999 Ae Maew arranged for him to stay in the church where her cousin’s son worked in Mae Sai in order to help him get over his drug addiction. Before that, she had sent him twice to a private hospital in Taunggyi for abstention.

Through religion, Lin Er finally stopped using drugs, and he was baptized as a Christian. He continued to stay and work in that church. However, one and a half years later, he was diagnosed with AIDS. He then went home to stay with his mother and aunt in Taunggyi. Ae Maew said: “It was a difficult period for my mother. During his stay, he was often very
emotional. Though he was repentant, he couldn’t accept the fact that he had contracted the illness. In the last few months of his life, he was sent to a private hospital. I called him from Taiwan every day to console him and spent a lot of money. I sometimes wonder if our family has been cursed.”

I felt Ae Maew’s helplessness. The more I learned about the drug problem in her family, the deeper my frustration grew. Many Yunnanese families are haunted by the problem. Once a family member is addicted to drugs, the whole family lives in an abyss of pain. Job opportunities are rare, and drugs are available everywhere in the country. Well-off families try to send their children abroad in order to isolate them from this dangerous temptation.

The certificate of Lin Er’s baptism still hung on the wall in the living room in a glass frame. It quotes two passages from the Bible:

So if any man is in Christ, he is in a new world: the old things have come to an end; they have truly become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

I am the vine, you are the branches: he who is in me at all times as I am in him, gives much fruit, because without me you are able to do nothing. (John 15:5)

Unhappy Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year’s Eve of 2005 arrived on the fourteenth day after my arrival in Taunggyi. I was scheduled to visit a Yunnanese Muslim woman that morning, and as we were leaving the house, Dama, displeased, said to Ae Maew: “Why are you still going out today? Go and paste the New Year’s couplets [chunlian].” Ae Maew shouted back: “I told you I would do that after coming back. Why didn’t you understand?” She walked out of the house. I hurried to catch up with Ae Maew, surprised by this unexpected scene. We had to go to a nearby market to take local transportation, a kind of pickup truck, which was always jammed with passengers. We sat

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20. Mandy Sadan tells about the drug and drinking problems of her husband’s family in Kachin State (2014).
tightly next to each other in the car, but with lingering tension in the air, we did not talk to each other.

Since my arrival in Taunggyi, I had been working every day. Most of the time Ae Maew accompanied me to interviews. While I rewrote my field notes in the house, Ae Maew was always doing housework, especially cleaning and reorganizing. I noticed Ae Maew had become more and more impatient, often blaming her mother for not keeping the house tidy. One day Ae Maew had an argument with her mother while I was out conducting an interview, and that night Ae Maew asked me to take a walk with her. She said, “Teacher, I feel my life is too heavy, both mentally and physically. That’s why sometimes you see me lose my temper. I have to vent the pressure. My relationship with my mother used to be good. I am the youngest child; wherever she went, I followed her. However, after I received more education, the gap between us became larger. In the home of Laikha, I worked on our dining table next to the cooking stove. Every night I lit small bundles of pine wood to do my homework, as we could not afford to use an oil lamp. I was afraid to be alone and always asked my mother to keep me company. After studying awhile, I would raise my head to look at her.” We walked in the neighborhood, which was in deep darkness. Thousands of stars were shining in the sky. A few Pa-O boys were playing guitar and singing love songs.

After my interview with the Yunnanese Muslim woman, I decided to go to the nearby mosque to meet a Yunnanese Muslim man whom several people had recommended to me. I told Ae Maew to go home first and assured her that I knew the area quite well. When I got back to Ae Maew’s house, it was nearly three o’clock in the afternoon. A table with several dishes had been placed in the front yard as Dama, Gugu, and Ae Maew were preparing to worship Heaven and Earth (baitiandi).

Although Gugu had converted to Christianity, she participated in the worship by repeating prayers of good wishes for the offspring. After the worship of Heaven and Earth, Ae Maew and I moved the table to the second floor for the worship of ancestors. During the preparation, Ae Maew had disputes with her mother because of different opinions about worship arrangements. The custom here is to finish the worship of Heaven and Earth and ancestors before noon and have the New Year’s Eve meal at lunchtime. However, when we completed the worship and warmed up the dishes, it had passed four o’clock in the afternoon. We placed the food on
the folding table in the living room downstairs. The table was set against a wall, and Dama insisted on pulling it out and opening it to its full size. Maybe she considered this the most important family meal of the year, although her family had fallen apart many years ago. Ae Maew tried to stop her, saying that the table was not stable. Gugu kept reciting prayers and scattered uncooked rice on the floor for prosperity and good luck. The whole situation was disturbing and the atmosphere tense. Dama managed to pull out the table, but suddenly one extended side collapsed; a bowl of rice fell to the floor. Dama shouted: “Stop reciting [bie nian le].” The intensity seemed to reach its climax and then dissipate.

Gugu went to sit in the backyard next to her kitchen. Ae Maew went to her room to cry. I stayed in the living room to accompany Dama. She was eating the New Year’s Eve meal alone. I sympathized with Dama and disliked Gugu. From the very beginning, I had chosen my allegiances. There is no complete neutrality in ethnography. I felt Dama’s anger and Ae Maew’s frustration. My thoughts were in disarray as I tried to understand what had just happened. “Why does Gugu participate in the worship? She is a Christian. Is she trying to demonstrate her position in the house? Does she not know her participation generates tension?” I pondered these questions. Suddenly, Dama shouted again: “Do not create disturbances here [bielai zheli nao].” The words were aimed at Gugu, whether she heard them or not.

After dark, New Year’s Eve was as quiet as usual, with no sign of celebration in the neighborhood. Lighting firecrackers had been banned by the government. That night Ae Maew said, “I pity my mother, but I cannot agree with her stubbornness. She doesn’t understand I need my own space. I know she’s a straightforward and honest countrywoman. But she simply doesn’t know how to manage the house. My father always paid much attention to appearances. He was always neat. However, my mother doesn’t know how to dress up at all. Maybe that was why my father stayed away from home most of the time. When I choose a boyfriend, his appearance and social position must enhance my status. If not, I will not give him any consideration.”

“If you meet an ideal Yunnanese man here, would you consider marrying him?” I asked.

“No, absolutely not. I cannot stand this place or this country. I prefer to stay in my small apartment in Taiwan. I hate this environment. I hate
poverty. I want to give my family a hand, but I have never succeeded in
pulling them up. I have never been satisfied with my family.”

Ae Maew’s third elder brother, Lin San, came to the house on the sec-
ond day of the New Year. Since we came to Taunggyi, he had been around
the house often. On the third day after our arrival, he asked Ae Maew for
money. Ae Maew told him she had no money. “Not even a thousand or
two thousand kyat?” he questioned her. Ae Maew felt his demand distaste-
ful, but gave him one thousand kyat. On the seventh day, Lin San took
away a comforter that Ae Maew had brought back from Taiwan. On the
eleventh day, he took away a basket. He may have exchanged these things
for money to buy drugs. He did not talk to his mother or Ae Maew, only
Gugu. Every time he came, he stayed in Gugu’s little kitchen and did not
come inside the house. On the second day of the New Year, he came to the
house several times, creating an uneasy atmosphere.

A few days later, Ae Maew and I went to the market to buy many things
for the house. We were leaving soon. On our way back, we passed a neigh-
bor’s small shop; that family had also moved from Laikha. The mother of
that family hurried to us and said Lin San had been demanding money
from Dama and destroying some things in the house. We rushed home.
After entering the house, we saw Lin San and Gugu sitting together in the
living room. Lin San stared at Ae Maew and me angrily with a frightful
gaze. A teakwood chair had been smashed, and a window was broken.
There were some pieces of stone on the floor. Though we had not wit-
nessed Lin San’s violent act, the scene was intimidating. I was a foreigner,
staying illegally in the house, as the Burmese government prohibits for-
eigners from staying in civilian houses. I had already been worried that Lin
San might report me to the authorities, and this new situation intensified
my fear. Quietly, Ae Maew went to the backyard to take a broom and a
basket to clean up the mess in the living room. Lin San then went to the
backyard followed by Gugu. After cleaning, Ae Maew sat in the living
room and started to cry. That was the second time I had seen her crying.

That day, Lin San did not go back to his wife’s house but moved into
Ae Maew’s house and slept in Gugu’s room. He demanded Ae Maew and
Dama give him the deed for the family’s farm in Laikha. Later, Ae Maew
told me that what her third elder brother had done that day had already
been done before by her first and second elder brothers. It was all for money.
I did not know Lin San’s potential for violence and felt very insecure.
The next day I went to say good-bye to several friends. I was leaving alone the next day for Inle Lake, a beautiful tourist area in the plains, about half an hour from the plateau of Taunggyi. I needed to give myself a break before going back to Thailand for further fieldwork. I tried to persuade Ae Maew to come with me. She said she still had to arrange several things, but she promised to return to Taiwan in time for her studies. I told her to start packing both her and her mother’s things, in case Lin San tried to do something dangerous to them and they had to leave the house immediately. Yet Ae Maew stubbornly said she had purchased this house with her savings of twenty years and would not give it up.

The next morning, before getting up, Ae Maew and I were chatting. A few days earlier, her sister had called and said she was coming back in a month’s time. There was no telephone in the house, but her sister had called a neighbor, and the neighbor had come over to call Ae Maew. Ae Maew said her sister was always jealous of her progress in Taiwan and blamed Ae Maew for not taking her there. “I told her the easiest way is to go as a student, which means she has to take an exam. I passed all the information to her, but she did nothing. What could I do? She called me to help her arrange a few things, and I said I would try. Teacher, I felt exhausted mentally and physically. I’m the only one supporting this family. My siblings think that I can find money easily in Taiwan, and my brothers keep asking me for it.”

Undercurrent

The beautiful Inle Lake is famous for its floating vegetation and stilt houses that sit high above the water. The fishermen propel their boats by rowing with one leg while standing on the other leg. The picturesque serenity alleviated my anxiety. I reflected on how the entangled “frictions across differences”—different statuses, different ethnicities, different societies—had impacted Ae Maew’s life. Tsing perceives the power of differences: “Difference can disrupt, causing everyday malfunctions as well as unexpected cataclysms” (2005, 6). Though causing much pain and frustration, the frictions Ae Maew experienced have stimulated her to seek new possibilities and directions abroad rather than keeping her in Burma suffocated with rage. Her strong will contrasts with her brother’s indulgence in vices and
failures. Her sister too leads an independent life abroad. Both her mother and aunt were also brave women, fighting against numerous vicissitudes (and also against each other) in order to survive (and protect their power). In this family, the women seem to be much stronger than the men.

Ae Mae’s anger and devotion to her family reminded me of Ruth Behar’s Translated Woman (1993), an ethnography of an uneducated, socially marginal Mexican woman, pseudonymed Esperanza, whose life is also replete with rage, suffering, and persistent efforts to improve her and her children’s lives. By “choosing” Behar, an American academic, to “hear her story and to take it back across the border to the mysterious and powerful otro lado” (p. 6), Esperanza remakes herself and figuratively traverses the borders of class, language, and nation to the American academic world. She relates her replication of her mother’s role and life, enduring endless hardships originating from male gender dominance. Conscious of gender inequality, she states: “There’s nothing like a daughter. God gave me daughters, thank God. Between a daughter and a son, a daughter is thousands of times better than a son” (p. 160). Comparatively, Ae Maew seems also thousands of times better than her brothers. She and her mother have also been suppressed by patriarchal demands (although different from Esperanza’s)—to be a filial daughter, supporting sister, good wife, and caring mother. These roles have compelled them to endure ongoing toils and distress in addition to repeated traveling. Their bravery in facing unknown environments and the future is beyond my imagination. While recognizing this similarity in Ae Maew’s, her mother’s, and Esperanza’s unrelenting perseverance in coping with structural forces, however, I did not see Ae Maew’s and her mother’s experience in what Behar writes about Esperanza’s redemption via her devotion to a spiritual cult and narrating her life stories to an ethnographer (paralleling Catholic confession). Perhaps Ae Maew chose me to tell her stories, but I doubted if her telling or my listening produced any concrete benefits. Although her move to Taiwan has provided her with higher education and better life prospects, she is still trapped by her family’s relationships and problems. I wondered if there would ever be redemption for Ae Maew.

I planned to stay in Inle for three days and then catch my flight from Heho Airport to Yangon and from Yangon to Chiang Mai. I took a long walk in nearby villages the first afternoon. The silhouette of mountains reflected in the lake and the paddy farms. A group of villagers, mostly
women and children, were working on a road carrying pieces of rock on small bronze plates placed on their heads. They placed these rocks onto the road and went back to carry more. The manual work was incredibly slow. I wondered how long it would take to finish the construction and felt sorry for these possibly unpaid workers. In the evening I made a phone call to one of Ae Maew’s friends, Ajuan, and asked her to pass on the address and phone number of my guesthouse to Ae Maew.

The next day, I took a boat trip with two tourists from the guesthouse. We visited craft shops, temples, and a rotating market. In my worry about Ae Maew and Dama, the trip seemed surreal. On the third day, the two tourists and I hired a guide to do a one-day trek through the mountains. We passed tobacco farms, a few Pa-O, Shan, and Intha villages and several temples. Part of the climbing was hard, but I was grateful for the physical workout.

When I returned to the guesthouse, it was already half past six in the afternoon. A boy working there handed me a note. He said a friend had come to visit me that afternoon, waited for an hour, and then left. My anxiety rose as I opened the note; it said:

Dear Teacher,

This is Ae Maew. I’ve come to see you. You must have been at the lake. I’m sorry that I didn’t inform you in advance. I just wanted to see you.

Since you left the house, a series of things happened as you had predicted. Well, they are all over. However, I felt hurt in my heart. My brother cut one of my palms with a knife. I have to stay a few more days with my mother. She needs company. I’m going back. I’ll call you tonight.

I wish you a peaceful journey.

Ae Maew

February 19th, 15:50

I was enraged. What a beast! I felt like I wanted to do something violent as well. I needed to vent, too. I questioned myself: “Have I become involved too much or simply not enough in Ae Maew’s family’s affairs? What is the boundary for an anthropologist?” I felt terrible that I had left Ae Maew alone at this critical time. I could not wait until she called, and I hurried to a nearby shop to make a phone call to her friend Ajuan. Ajuan told me Lin San had destroyed more windows and doors of the house. Ae Maew asked Ajuan’s brother-in-law to mediate, and the result was to let Lin San sell the family farm. He promised to give a share to his elder
brother who was in jail, although this promise had no guarantee at all. I asked Ajuan why no one had called a policeman. “Everyone said they should, but no one really did it,” she replied.

My thoughts were in disarray; I could not think of a solution. Slowly, I walked with heavy steps back to the guesthouse. The heat was unbearable, stifling. At the guesthouse, I wanted to wash my face in a shared bathroom, but some wet tissues left in the hand-basin by the previous guest were disgusting. I felt like running away from this place and this country as soon as possible. Ae Maew’s words echoed in my mind: “I hate this environment. I hate poverty.” I took off my glasses with their thick lenses, intending to place them on a corner of the basin. Accidentally, I dropped them, and they broke. A sense of deep unease swallowed me as my world suddenly blurred; things around me seemed to fade away.