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Spectral Subversions: Rival Tactics of Time and Agency in Southwest China

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In much of rural China, memories of past violence are crucial to people's sense of their own relation to distant centers of state power. In particular, memories of death from hunger during the Great Leap famine (1958–61)¹ and suicide during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) continue to haunt people's imagination of state and nation in ways that those of us who did not live through these devastations are only beginning to discover (cf. Watson 1994). Many of the diverse, non-Han, Tibeto-Burman speaking communities scattered through the mountains of Southwest China share traditions of poetic speech, explicitly intended to deal with bodily afflictions attributed to spectral memories of the violently dead. In a Lolop'o (officially Yi) minority community, where I did fieldwork from 1991–1993,² poetic speech is used to drive the ghosts of those who died of hunger, suicide, or other violence out of the bodies of their descendants and into the surrounding landscape. The ghosts are driven along a specific route through surrounding mountain villages. Their path eventually takes them down the nearby Jinsha river to the Changjiang (Yangtze). They make these rivers their steeds, riding them across the empire's breadth to the richly-imagined cities of Chongqing, Wuhan, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Beijing. En route, they are to feast on piles of meat and barrels of drink, buy beautiful clothing in the markets, and hobnob with officials. The following fragment of one chanted exorcism, which finds the ghosts in Beijing—their penultimate destination before they disperse into sea and sky—encapsulates the themes of this article. (With the exception of proper names and terms for political meetings and airplane

¹ In the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward, twenty to thirty million people died of hunger-related causes. The famine is usually attributed to overprocurement, bad harvests, disastrous agricultural policies, chaotic transportation, and natural calamities (Kane 1988). In Yunnan the famine was not as severe as in many regions, but the poor, remote counties in the north still suffered badly. In 1960, according to official figures, the crude death rate rose to forty-two per thousand in the northern counties of Yongren, Dayao and Yaoan, while the rate for the province as a whole was twenty-six per thousand (Yunnan Sheng tongji ju renkou ban 1990). Within these counties, high-mountain, cash crop areas such as Zhizuo, where every household relied on sales of hempen cloth to buy food (see Mueggler 1998b), suffered worst.

² Thirteen months of field research were conducted in Zhizuo between October 1991 and June 1993. Sponsoring units were the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences in Kunming and the Yi Culture Research Institute in Chuxiong.

crashes, spoken in Mandarin and transcribed here in boldface, this chant is in a sub-dialect of the Central dialect of Yi.)³

go over there to Beijing	ni Beijing ko ka yi
your ghost kings live there	ni chè tsǐ ko ka jǒ
every day they hold meetings in Beijing	Beijing ni pi ni hui kai lè jǒ rò
Lin Biao died in a plane crash	Lin Biao wang ruo fei
Jiang Qing hanged herself	Jiang Qing chà chà lè lí shǐ
the ghost king Lin Biao, go follow	chè tsǐ Lin Biao ni Lin Biao j'ǒ
Lin Biao	yi go
your king is over there	ni tsǐ ko ka ŋǒ
I shall lead you to Beijing	ŋǒ ni t'è chè hà Beijing he gǎ do
go to where your chè friends live	ni chè chǒ ro ka yi
go to where your chè companions live . . .	ni chè pè o ka yi . . .
if the road returns don't you return	ni jǒ kǒ ni t'à kǒ
if the road strays don't you stray	ni jǒ tǛ ni t'à tǛ

A prominent leader of the Cultural Revolution, Lin Biao died in a 1971 airplane crash while fleeing Beijing in the wake of a failed attempt to assassinate Chairman Mao. Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and one of the Cultural Revolution's notorious Gang of Four, was publicly tried in 1980 and sentenced to death, commuted later to life in prison. To people in this mountain community, Jiang Qing and Lin Biao were the king and queen of the violently dead. And, as the seat of their spectral government, Beijing was the ultimate geographical source of all bodily afflictions attributed to memories of past violence.

Efforts to send the ghosts of the violently dead back to this source were animated by a difficult moral question. While responsibility for the wounds and deaths of the Great Leap famine and Cultural Revolution may clearly be tracked across the nation's breadth to a distant source, the immediate agents of violence in most rural communities were just as clearly kin and friends. The question of how to distribute the responsibility for past violence over the troubled gulf between the "distant shore" of the imagined state and the "near shore" of one's intimate, lived community is what, very often, gives memories of such desolation their enduring power to afflict (Das 1997:68).

³ Indigenous terms in this article are drawn from two languages, in which nearly all Zhizuo residents were bilingual: Mandarin Chinese and Lòlòŋǒ, which may be considered a subdialect of the central dialect of Yi, a Loloish Tibeto-Burman language (Bradley 1979; Chen et. al. 1984). Lòlòŋǒ terms and chants are left unmarked, while romanized Mandarin terms, transcribed in *pinyin*[M], are followed in their first use by /[M]/. The orthography of Lòlòŋǒ used here emends in the following ways a version of the International Phonetic Alphabet employed by Ma Xueliang (1992) to record Yi languages: (1) Five alveopalatal consonants are represented as /ch/ (voiceless aspirated), /j/ (voiced), /c/ and /sh/ (voiceless fricative) and /r/ (voiced fricative). (2) Only three tones are distinguished: high level and mid-high rising tones are marked with an acute accent; low falling tones with a grave accent, and mid level and mid-high level tones are unmarked. (3) Underlining of vowels indicates laryngealization or a final glottal stop.

This article explores some of the ways one community confronted this question. It retells a tale of how Yang Guowen,⁴ Branch Party Secretary of Zhizuo Brigade⁵ during the Great Leap Forward and subsequent famine, became the local boss of wild ghosts in Lin Biao's and Jiang Qing's spectral government. Zhizuo is a community of just over 3000 people, living in two large and about twenty small villages, scattered over several mountain valleys in Yongren County in the north of Yunnan Province. About ninety-five percent of Zhizuo residents refer to themselves as Lolop'o, while the remainder claim to be Han. In a nationwide ethnic identification campaign in the early 1950s, Lolop'o in Zhizuo were designated Yi, along with a diversity of mostly highland peoples in Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi Provinces.⁶ With the exception of a few households of recent immigrants, Lolop'o and Han alike speak as their first language a variety of what is currently considered the Central dialect of Yi (Chen et al. 1984). For most Zhizuo residents, however, membership in the large Yi nationality (*minzu* [M]) is relatively meaningless. Most insist on the designation Lolop'o, restricting this term to those who claimed descent from an apical ancestor said to have settled this set of mountain valleys about 300 years ago. Throughout the twentieth century, Lolop'o in Zhizuo maintained a strong, if troubled sense of corporate identity, founded on a rotating headmanship system (*ts'ici*) said to have been bequeathed them by this ancestor (Muegler 1998a). Before 1965, the harvest of an ancestral trust of about ten *mu* [M]⁷ of the area's richest paddy land supported this headmanship and its ritual and political duties, which rotated yearly among the area's wealthiest households. In early 1965, Brigade Party Secretary Yang Guowen was a central player in the violent, ritualized destruction of this rotating headmanship system. His purported elevation to the office of local chief of wild ghosts thirty years later was one of many uncanny returns of this violent act, which continued to haunt Zhizuo residents through the early 1990s.

Narratives of this rotating headmanship's destruction, of its *revenge* as a cabal of wandering ghosts bent on revenge, and of the killings and psychic degradations these ghosts visited on local cadres and peasants were omnipresent in Zhizuo in the early 1990s. I argue that these narratives added up to a

⁴ All names of living or dead residents of rural Yunnan used in this article are pseudonyms.

⁵ In 1980, as collective land was contracted to households, brigades (*dadui* [M]) across Yunnan were renamed administrative villages (*cungongsuo* [M]). For the sake of clarity, however, I refer to Zhizuo as a brigade even when discussing events after 1980, as indeed many of its residents continued to do.

⁶ Yi are among the most complex and diverse of all the "nationalities" (*minzu* [M]) produced in this project: six major subgroups were identified, speaking six mutually mostly unintelligible dialects, and using at least four different varieties of written script (Chen et al. 1984). The 1990 census put the number Yi at 6,572,173. Of these, about six hundred thousand are members of the Central dialect group, which includes Zhizuo residents. In Western writings, Yi groups are most often referred to as Lolo, from the derogatory Chinese term *Luoluo* [M], applied to many of these peoples by their neighbors and administrators for centuries (cf. Dessaint 1980).

⁷ A *mu* is about one fifteenth of a hectare (or one sixth of an acre)

coherent “strategy of time” (Certeau 1992:11). The socialist state in China relied heavily for its power and legitimacy on a specific vision of time, in which socialist transformation was seen as a series of leaps or bridges along the linear path of national and world history. In Zhizuo, narratives of the rotating headmanship system’s violent destruction and spectral return worked to place the violent campaigns by which the state meant to achieve these leaps and bridges within an embracive moral cosmology. In this cosmology, time was neither a linear path nor a cycle: it was a spiral in which the effects of past violence returned repeatedly to engage and transform present social relations.

These rival temporal strategies framed different modes of organizing human agency. Marilyn Strathern has deftly defined agency as “the manner in which people allocate causality or responsibility to each other, and thus the sources of influence and directions of power” (1987:23). In a related definition, prolifically detailed by Anthony Giddens, agency stands for the ways human action is constrained or enabled by enduring social institutions, relationships and practices (1984). While Strathern creates sophisticated analyses of the allocation of responsibility or capacity in Mount Hagen and Europe, she does not inquire how conflicting modes of assigning agency might be wielded as strategies for gathering or undermining power within a single set of social circumstances. And while Giddens’ theory of structure may be a sensitive framework for conceptualizing the relationship between human action and enduring institutions, it does not explore how different ways of envisioning such a relationship become fodder for social and political struggles. Both these questions—how responsibility or capacity for action should be allocated, and how human action is constrained and enabled by enduring institutions—have been subjects of immense contention in twentieth-century China. Conflicting visions of the relationship between human action and time or history have fueled many of China’s recent historical transformations, from the May Fourth movement to the Cultural Revolution. And multiple, competing modes of allocating responsibility for actions have helped determine how power is accumulated and punishment assigned in each of these transformations.

Agency in both these senses pivots on understandings and experiences of time. How people allocate the capacity to affect events, outcomes, or behaviors depends on temporal chains of causality. How they imagine lasting institutions, relationships, or practices to constrain or enable action depends on how they believe that the past endures, returns, disappears, or reproduces itself. Rival tactics of both time and agency were employed by officials, activists, and peasants in Zhizuo as they sought to cope with the effects of past violence. In a cluster of stories about the Four Cleanups campaign, the Cultural Revolution, and the period of market reforms, Zhizuo residents explain how Brigade Party Secretary Yang Guowen was made into the local king of wild ghosts, through the violent destruction and spectral return of Zhizuo’s rotating headmanship system. Multiple modes of producing the “past” and competing strategies for deciding

on the sources of speech and action are interwoven through each of these narratives. Nevertheless, in their repeated retellings, these stories produced a specific mode of historical understanding, in which particular violent acts continuously returned to infect the present, and—as though by chance—to efficiently undermine the efforts of local officials to lead Zhizuo Brigade forward along a linear developmental road. Reproducing this subversive strategy of time by telling ghost stories was one means by which Zhizuo residents continued to search for ways “to inhabit a world made strange through the desolating experience of violence and loss” (Das 1997:67).

BLOOD AND A BOX

As China recovered from the catastrophic famine of 1959–1962 that followed the failed Great Leap Forward, tens of thousands of officials were organized into work teams and sent to the countryside. Their mission was to clean up the corruption, mismanagement, and low morale among rural cadres and peasants sparked by the famine. During the famine years, local cadres had learned to protect themselves by misreporting production figures, appropriating public funds and property, and engaging in illegal trading. In 1962, the Party leadership was alarmed by reports that this widespread graft and incipient capitalism were continuing, and that rural cadres and peasants had revived “feudal” practices such as gambling, arranging “marriages for sale, spiritualism and witchcraft,” and “holding religious festivals.” The “Four Cleanups” or “Socialist Education Campaign” was announced in 1962 to counter these tendencies. The campaign received wide publicity by late 1963, and by the end of 1964 work teams had been dispatched to thousands of rural locations to investigate the activities of cadres at the county, commune, and brigade levels and to re-educate peasants in the fundamentals of socialist morality (Baum and Teiwes 1968; Baum 1975).

In the small, remote county of Yongren, Yunnan, the Four Cleanups did not get underway until early 1965, when a work team from the prefectural capital began to track down corrupt county cadres. One of the officials investigated was Qi Lin, the chief administrator of the People’s Court. This young man hailed from the mountain brigade of Zhizuo, a long day’s journey from the county town. The Party Central Committee’s policy formulation on the Four Cleanups had just been revised to include a warning that some officials had “degenerated into the agents and protectors of class enemies” (Baum and Teiwes 1968:112), and Qi Lin appeared to be one of these. Under interrogation, he admitted to protecting his parents in Zhizuo, who were “religious frauds” and the ringleaders of a “superstitious sect” (*huidaomen* [M]). The previous year a group of discredited former “rich peasants” in Zhizuo had chosen Qi Lin’s parents’ household to undertake for a year the few remaining responsibilities of Zhizuo’s rotating headmanship system.

Rotating headmanship systems (*huotou* [M]) were a means by which some minority communities in proximity to administrative centers or trading routes

in northern Yunnan mediated their relations to the local state during the late Qing and Republic. They were common in Yunnan's northern mountains among people who referred to themselves as Lipo or Lolop'o. In regions with such institutions, a group of the community's most influential men would each year choose a household to feed and entertain the officials, soldiers, and other influential outsiders who traveled through the community. The designated hosts were supplied with an income from an ancestral trust—usually a few *mu* of productive rice paddy land, held and farmed communally, to offset their expenses. In Zhizuo, the host household softened the local state's impact on the community in other ways as well. With the help of a staff of five men chosen from among its kin and neighbors, the host household negotiated corvée labor to carry the sedans and luggage of officials, repaired the roads they traveled on, fed and clothed prisoners, carried letters, and buried soldiers, bandits, or impoverished travelers who died within the region (Mueggler 1998a). In addition, the host household sponsored a cycle of festivals and rituals to propitiate a collective apical ancestor, from whom all Lolop'o in Zhizuo claimed descent. Before 1958, these were very popular events in Zhizuo: a new year's festival celebrating the rotation of the headmanship and the festive spring planting of the ancestral-trust land (*yilomi*) drew together the majority of the community's population (Su 1989:3).

By the time Qi Lin's parents took over these responsibilities, Zhizuo's rotating headmanship system had been severely diminished by more than a decade of steady disapproval by local officials. Shortly after Liberation in 1950, two of the community leaders who had met yearly to choose a host household were executed for counterrevolutionary activities; the others were discredited and labeled "rich peasants." The new brigade government assumed responsibility for hosting visiting officials, organizing labor for public works, delivering letters, and burying dead outsiders. As land and labor were collectivized in 1956, nearly the entire ancestral trust of ten *mu* was divided among production teams. Only two small fields totaling about one *mu* remained with the headmanship, rotating to the host household's production team to pay for its remaining ritual responsibilities. Qi Lin's parents' duties were limited to organizing a cycle of five rituals to propitiate the spirit Zhizuo Lolop'o claimed as their collective ancestor, and four of this spirit's progeny. Each of these spirits were said to reside simultaneously in a tree or rock in Zhizuo's central valley and in a small wooden reliquary box (*ts'ihō*), kept out of sight in the host household's attic. In February 1965, as Qi Lin was being questioned in Yongren county town, his parents in Zhizuo were preparing to organize the new year's festival, still widely attended, in which this reliquary box would be carried in procession to the new host household.

After Qi Lin's interrogation in the county town, a work team was organized to take the Four Cleanups to Zhizuo. In the preceding few months, Yunnan's Provincial Party Committee had placed new emphasis on bringing the cam-

paign to mountainous minority regions. It had designated the district of Tanhua, bordering on Zhizuo and like that brigade populated mainly by speakers of the central dialect of Yi, a “mountainous nationality district Four Cleanups test site.” No fewer than 184 cadres from county and prefectural Party Committees and the army descended on Tanhua’s villages to “carry out socialist education among the cadres and masses, raise class consciousness, promote the socialist road, and develop production” (Qian 1994:144). Zhizuo fared better: initially only two cadres were assigned to this brigade’s work team. The team leader was a native of Zhizuo, the county party committee secretary. He had a personal stake in the affair; his father was Yang Guowen, party secretary of Zhizuo and the brigade’s most powerful official. Another county-level cadre accompanied him to Zhizuo. There, they met with the Yang Guowen and the brigade’s assistant party secretary and militia secretary.

When brigade members recalled the famine years, they frequently made these three a focus for their fury and resentment. Hidden behind the massive walls of the brigade government building, Brigade Party Secretary Yang Guowen and his cronies were said to have eaten daily feasts of chicken, pork, ham, eggs, and sticky rice, while the rest of the brigade gathered wild herbs to eat with their starving ration of six *liang* [M] of rice a day. In the wet season of 1960, when people began to swell with edema from protein deficiency, Yang Guowen was said to have ordered a giant cistern built near the stream and fitted with a lid, like a rice steamer. Water was poured in the cistern and a fire built beneath. Swollen people were placed inside and steamed four at a time, like dumplings, on the theory that the steam would draw out the excessive water causing their edema.

These three widely hated officials were logical targets for the Four Cleanups campaign. But Yang Guowen and his son, the campaign work team leader, formed a plan that would deflect criticism from the brigade’s leadership and place it at the vanguard of the campaign. Directly after its arrival in Zhizuo, the work team joined the brigade leadership in a procession to Qi Lin’s parents house, where the five officials publicly demanded that the family turn over the wooden reliquary box, the symbol of Zhizuo’s collective ancestor and the headmanship system that served it. Thirty years later, Qi Lin’s younger brother Qi Chun still vividly recalled hiding with his family in their darkened house, behind the locked and barred door. After dusk, the family fled to their seasonal house (*tianfang* [M]) higher in the mountains. After another day of fruitlessly demanding entry, the five officials used a roof beam as a battering ram to knock down the door, seized the reliquary box, and carried it to the brigade government.

The next day was the last day of the lunar year. Had things gone otherwise, hundreds of Zhizuo residents would have shown up at Qi Lin’s parent’s house, scrubbed and dressed in new clothes, for the festive transfer of the reliquary box to the new host household. Instead, representatives of every household in the

brigade were summoned to the brigade government for a mass meeting. The meeting must have lasted hours, with party officials making long speeches explaining the Four Cleanups. Those who described it to me years later, however, would speak of only one event, which could have taken only a few minutes. In mass meetings and struggle sessions, work team members and local cadres were often joined by local activists, who displayed enthusiastic loyalty to new policies, in an effort to gain Party membership. In this meeting, two activists, both young women, were especially prominent. As hundreds of people stood in the courtyard listening to speeches, these two activists, accompanied by the work team leader, emerged from an inner room onto a balcony above the courtyard, carrying the wooden reliquary box. I shall continue the story in the words of a brigade member who was in his early twenties at the time.

They put it in the middle of the courtyard. Yang Chaosheng [the work team leader] opened it up and dumped out the things inside. There was a little bottle and some bones [representing the bones of the collective ancestor]. The reason no one can tell you whether there were two or six bones, tiger, ox, or human bones, is that no one had ever opened that box until then. And just then everything was very chaotic. Yang Lizhu [one of the young activists] said, "See this box. We are here to destroy it. There is nothing to fear from this, it's just an old box. It's just feudal superstition." Then she sat on the box with her buttocks. She was menstruating, and she left some menstrual blood on the box's lid. That was not civilized! Then Yang Hua [the other activist, Yang Guowen's wife] also sat on it.

In retrospect, Yang Lizhu's "uncivilized" act was said to have transformed the collective ancestral spirits from benign protective entities into homeless, malignant ghosts. As one Zhizuo resident succinctly put it, "If nothing else those people did drove the spirits out of that box, that blood certainly did."

After this meeting, the work team formed an Art and Literature Propaganda Troupe (*wenyi xuanchuan dui*[M]), using the public defeat of Zhizuo's "superstitious sect" as inspiration for a prefecture-wide campaign against superstition. The four-member troupe worked out a farcical skit centered on the reliquary box. The work team leader Yang Chaosheng headed the troupe. He lectured on how this dusty old box had been the center of a superstitious cult for hundreds or even thousands of years. Another troupe member dressed up in the hemp clothing, sandals, and hat that designated hosts wore during their year of service, chanted under his breath, and feigned offerings to the box. Two young women, including Yang Lizhu, the woman who had left menstrual blood on the box, made speeches denouncing this superstition and telling how it had been heroically overcome. The skit was never performed in Zhizuo, but many there imagined that every performance ended with Yang Lizhu repeating the drama of the mass meeting at Zhizuo by sitting on the box. The troupe toured the prefecture, stopping in at least four county towns. Its final stop was a mass meeting in the prefectural capital of Chuxiong, called to drum up enthusiasm for the Four Cleanups. Stories of this assembly told in Zhizuo had Yang Chaosheng

again spilling the bones and bottle from the box and Yang Lizhu again sitting on it.

GHOST STORIES

When I attempted to elicit recollections of the Cultural Revolution from Zhizuo residents, they responded with stories and biographical anecdotes about those who had participated in destroying Zhizuo's headmanship system and the collective ancestral spirits it served. These tales were related in a hurry, out of doors, as a brisk litany of deaths and misfortunes. The narratives masked the deeds and torments of the still living, and papered over the lasting schisms among them by reinterpreting the worst cruelties of the period as spectral re-visitations of the attack on the reliquary box. Each catastrophe was explicitly attributed to the collective ancestral spirits, driven out of the box and transformed into vengeful wild ghosts.

According to many in Zhizuo, the person most directly responsible for bringing the Cultural Revolution to the brigade was the young activist who left her menstrual blood on the box, Yang Lizhu. She was said to be deeply politicized by her role in the Art and Literature Propaganda Troupe's tour. In the fall of 1966, she joined a band of Red Guards that had formed among the middle school students in the county town. She led part of this band to Zhizuo, where it occupied the brigade's elementary school. From this base, the Red Guards launched attacks on the brigade government and the Four Cleanups work team. Before the end of the year, the work team dissolved and its only non-native member left Zhizuo. The Red Guards began to hold nightly struggle sessions with brigade and former work team members as their objects. The first victim of these sessions was Brigade Party Secretary Yang Guowen. Red Guards placed Yang under arrest and made him the center of the struggle sessions, where each night he was beaten and forced to admit more crimes against the people. Some of the enemies he had accumulated during the famine beat him with bamboo spikes concealed in their fists. After two weeks of this treatment, Yang escaped and hanged himself from a tree. Shortly afterwards, his wife Yang Hua, the second woman to sit on the reliquary box, grew ill and died.

Yang Guowen's son, the Four Cleanups work team leader Yang Chaosheng, fared little better. In the autumn of 1966, inspired like Yang Lizhu by his role in the Art and Literature Propaganda Troupe, he became the leader of a county-wide drive to destroy the "four olds" (old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking). As people in Zhizuo told it, he burst into a Buddhist temple with a Red Guard retinue and forced a monk to perform a farcical divination ceremony. The monk drew a bamboo lot printed with the words, "destruction to your family, death to your kin." (*jia po ren wang* [M]). "Yang Chaosheng laughed," a Zhizuo resident in his early fifties narrated:

He was full of himself. "I'm a powerful official, my father is an official, my wife is young, my children healthy. How could my family be destroyed?" But then his father [Yang Guowen] committed suicide. His stepmother [Yang Hua] died of an illness. Then his wife died, no one really knows of what.

Grieving his wife, Yang Chaosheng drank heavily. After he made drunken fun of another activist's enthusiasm at a mass meeting, he was demoted, arrested, and made the target of struggle sessions for three years.

After his father was dead, his wife dead, and he himself a counterrevolutionary, his house was hit by lightning. Terrible! Tiles flew everywhere, and there was a big hole in the roof. "Destruction to your family, death to your kin" is a terrible thing!

For others in these tales the revenge of the collective ancestral spirits was more direct. Yang Lizhu survived the beginning of the Cultural Revolution only by months. The ghosts she had spawned drove her mad:

She was possessed (nèt'æ). She ran around screaming, "Why did you sit on me? Now do you know my power? Your body was unclean, your buttocks had blood, now do you know my power?" Six months later she died.

The Militia Secretary was second in command to Yang Guowen throughout the Great Leap Forward and subsequent famine and the second local member of the Four Cleanups work team. He was also fatally afflicted by the ancestral ghosts.

His illness came and went. His mother said that when he was ill he would see an old Lolop'o man wearing a round cap, hemp shoes, and a hemp apron [the costume of the headmanship's designated host] come in his door. As soon as he saw this person, he would pass out and shit in his bed. His mother thought that old man was [the collective ancestral spirit] Agàmisimo, and when there was no alternative, she would slaughter a sheep for Agàmisimo . . . He was ill on and off for ten years; for ten years he lay in his bed covered with his own shit. Before his death they made a [duplicate] reliquary box in his house and used it to sacrifice to Agàmisimo. That didn't help either . . . Then one winter up at [the high-mountain hamlet] Heinila, he froze to death in a snowstorm. More and more snow fell in the days after his death, and they didn't find his body until two weeks later. The stink was terrible, and no one would help his wife and son carry the corpse down.

The final member of the ruling elite during the Leap and famine and third local member of the Four Cleanups work team was the assistant party secretary. Like Yang Guowen, he committed suicide after being beaten with bamboo spikes in struggle sessions. And like that of the militia secretary, his body rotted before it was buried.

He just disappeared. People thought he had run back home to hide, but his family was also looking for him. Years later, after the Cultural Revolution was over, his mother had a dream; it was very clear. In the dream he told her, "Mother, I've been struggled against very fiercely, and I have no way to keep on living. I've thrown myself off a cliff, and now my body has rotted, though my bones are still there." He named the place and asked

her to get people to pick up his bones and bring them back. He told her not to be sorry, because after his death he looked in the book of fate and found that he would have lived only a year more anyway, even if he had not committed suicide. His mother looked for his bones in that place and found them. She saw from the clothing and from a notebook he had carried that this was indeed his own body.

As they told these stories, Zhizuo residents tallied up the catastrophes on their fingers: the three who had led the brigade through the Leap and famine years died horribly. Among the five who participated in the Four Cleanups team, only one escaped—the only non-native team member, the county level official who left Zhizuo at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Of the four who participated in the Arts and Literature and Propaganda Troupe, the only one spared was Li Dong. One of Li Dong's kin explained,

All the others in the troupe cursed the reliquary box, spat on it, or sat on it. But Li Dong simply dressed up as a designated host and pretended to make offerings to it. So though he made fun of the box, he didn't insult it. Before he left on that tour, his parents told him, "Whatever you do, don't touch that box." This is the reason he is still alive. He is fine; he's not even sick.

At the root of these misfortunes, the storytellers emphasized, was the actors' moral responsibility for the transformation of the collective ancestral spirits into wild ghosts. The words of the possessed Yang Lizhu, the old Lolop'o man who appeared to the militia secretary, and the manner of death—by suicide, possessed, befouled in excrement, frozen in the snow—were listed as evidence that each catastrophe could be attributed to the vengeful collective ancestral spirits. But these tales also implied that the dead of the famine flocked behind the ancestral spirits like a band of bright parakeets—a potent metaphor for wild ghosts—eager to participate in their revenge. The moral order to which these tales appeal, an order in which past violence and injustice return repeatedly to haunt those responsible, participated in a specific strategy of time. This strategy drew on cultural resources familiar to Lolop'o, such as practices of possession and exorcism, to defy official rhetoric about time as a linear road or path, and the selective freedom from responsibility for past violence that this rhetoric implied.

ROADS AND TIME

Official historiography in post-Liberation China has been preoccupied with metaphors of time as a path, a *daolu*[M], uniting the idea of an intellectual or moral way, doctrine, or method with that of a road leading forward. One of the attractions of Marxism for Chinese intellectuals during the May Fourth period was that it promised a linear path, directed toward a future point the West had not yet reached: the trajectory of world history it outlined did not leave China at permanent disadvantage (Levenson 1966:134ff). Mao devoted considerable scholarly effort to reconceptualizing more than three thousand years of Chinese history as a road through universal stages of development: slave society end-

ing with the fall of the Shang, feudalism rising with the Zhou and Qin, semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism commencing with the Opium War, a transition to bourgeois-democratic revolution beginning with the revolution of 1911, and a stage he called “new democracy” that spanned China’s civil war and heralded the transition to socialism (Starr 1979:258–64). Socialist transformation was to be a series of leaps (*yue*[M]) and bridges (*qiao*[M])⁸ abbreviating the path of China’s historical development to quickly overtake Europe and the United States. By 1965, when the Four Cleanups campaign reached Zhizuo, the dominant metaphor for socialist transition was a struggle between those taking the “capitalist road,” and those adhering to the “socialist road.” During this campaign, work teams dispatched to the mountain regions of northern Yunnan were explicitly enjoined to “Lift the lid on the struggle between the two roads in a big way,” and to “promote the socialist road” (Qian 1994:144). The Four Cleanups campaign opened a period when promoting the socialist road would mean an unrelenting struggle against the “four olds”: the old ideas, culture, customs and habits of the exploiting classes. The correct road would be opened only through violent obliteration of what properly lay behind. Those who could not turn away from the past were bound to get lost along deviating paths, such as the various rightist heresies summed up under the phrase “capitalist road.” In 1964–65 and throughout the ten years of Cultural Revolution, Party activists and radicals were motivated by repeated and strident demands from the center to demolish the past, in order to leap forward along a road never yet traveled.

The metaphor of time as a road or path struck deep resonances in Lolop’o culture. Rituals intended to heal, promote the fertility of crops, animals, and humans, and prepare the dead for rebirth represented time as a material path through named places in the landscape. This practice of time was prominent in the rituals sponsored by Zhizuo’s rotating headmanship system, which elaborated a homology between two temporal domains, the rice-growing year and the cycle of birth and death. Sowing was compared to insemination; uprooting and transplanting seedlings to giving birth; weeding and fertilizing to clothing and feeding children; harvesting to the labor of helping people die; and the winter months, when some rice was eaten and some saved for replanting, to the long wait for rebirth of dead souls. The rituals employed chants describing spiral paths of place names through the mountainous areas of northern Yunnan Province. The routes varied with each performance, but all turned around the central villages of Zhizuo towards the right hand, the direction in which grain is milled and dancers step. Ritual specialists enjoined the collective ancestral spirits, represented by the reliquary box, to travel this spiral path like a water bug circling its territory on a stream’s surface, gathering fertility, health, and

⁸ Widespread use of the bridge metaphor was made in a slogan attributed to Kang Sheng at the inception of the Great Leap Forward: “Communism is paradise, the people’s communes are the bridge [to it] (*Gongchang zhuyi shi tiantang, renmin gongshe shi qiaoliang* [M])” (MacFarquhar 1983:103).

good weather from other mountain villages and leading them to Zhizuo. Each chanted path recapitulated the temporal homology between a rice-growing year and a lifetime, and culminated in a new act of insemination as the ancestral spirit deposited the gathered fertility and health in spiral's center (Mueggler 1996).

Implicit in these chanted paths was an understanding of the relation between present action and enduring social practices and relationships. Zhizuo residents called poetic language of such chants *mèkòbè* (*mè*, mouth; *kò*, to return; *bè*, speech), speech that turns in (or returns to) the mouth. This poetry is composed of formally parallel units that can be compared to paragraphs, which encompass smaller parallel units at the level of verses, and yet smaller ones at the level of words and syllables. Each parallel unit, whether longer or shorter, is a "return," *kò* (see Jakobson 1960, 1966), that gathers its meaning from all those that come before it while imposing nuanced formal and tropic turns on the returning structure. Skilled practitioners of ritual poetics use the multilevel parallelisms of poetic language to elaborate witty or emotive metaphors that resonate back through each of the parallel cycles of the speech.⁹ This poetic speech diagrams¹⁰ Lolopò ideas about the place of action in the flow of time, a flow composed of longer circuits or returns, such as a lifetime, and encompassing shorter ones, such as an agricultural year. The meaning of speech and deeds takes form through the recurrent returns of past years and generations, but each return requires nuanced innovations which resonate back through the preceding cycles, adding new layers of meaning to past events.

Some of the ritual specialists I worked with in Zhizuo speculated that in addition to the turns of metaphor in the mouth, the syllable *kò* ("return") in the term *mèkòbè* may also refer to the return of the same speech to the mouths of successive generations of speakers. Though Lolop'ò ritual specialists modify and elaborate the chants they learn as apprentices to elder generations, they do not consider themselves the authors of their own speech. Their chanted speech "returns to the mouth" (*mèkò*) from the previous generational cycle. In cases of the most elaborate and complex chants, such as those used in funerals and exorcisms, the speech of ritual specialists is thought to "return to the mouth" from spirit familiars, who descend (*je*) on the speaker like a hawk on its prey. This aspect of poetic language hints at a dangerous potential associated with the spiral flow of time. Ritual specialists in Zhizuo sometimes refer to the present period, beginning with famine following the Great Leap Forward, as the age of wild ghosts, the ghosts of those who have died badly. A chanted list of those who become wild ghosts, used in exorcism rituals, includes those who die in childbirth, who are crushed by trees or stones, who die of hunger or thirst,

⁹ See Cheng 1982; Fox 1977; 1988, and Urban 1991 for related descriptions of parallelism in ritualized speech. Mueggler 1996 gives a more thorough description of Lòlòŋo poetic language.

¹⁰ The term *diagram* is used here in the sense given it by Charles Sanders Peirce, for whom a diagram is "a type of icon in which the arrangement of parts of the signifier is isomorphic with the arrangement of parts of its object" (Mannheim 1991:227; Peirce 1940 [1902]:105).

whose bodies swell and explode, who hang or poison themselves, who are stabbed or slashed, who trip and crush their heads, who die of loud shouts or big words (a reference to witchcraft), and who die in fires and floods. Wild ghosts return to afflict their own descendants with illness, madness, or death. They descend (*je*) on their victims from above, entangle (*və*) their bodies and speak (*be*) through their mouths. Those afflicted sometimes speak in the voice of the ghost, persistently demanding extra funerals, more offerings at their graves, or more animals sacrificed at exorcisms.

Lolop'o speak of every reversal of temporal and spatial flows as potentially productive of wild ghosts. The most dangerous ghosts are created by a sudden rupture in the temporal spiral of life and death caused by death in childbirth; however, such ghosts can also be spawned by intestines blocked or ruptured by poison, millstones turned backwards, posts or beams accidentally reversed while building a house, rivers backing up to overflow their banks, and storms that reverse the normal flow of wind from south to north. In exorcisms intended to cure those afflicted by these ghosts, ritual specialists chant paths through named places in the surrounding landscape. The paths are similar in form to those once chanted at rituals sponsored by the rotating headmanship system, but they are outward spirals turning toward the left hand, reversing the right-handed inward spirals of the headmanship rituals. Incorporating as many as a hundred place names, these paths begin at the center in Zhizuo, tour the mountain villages of northern Yunnan, spiral out to county towns and the provincial capital, follow the Jinsha river to the Changjiang through the cities of Chongqing, Wuhan and Shanghai, and float the sea to Beijing. In the same way that a chanted path spiraling inward toward the right hand diagrams the temporal spirals of years and generations, a path spiraling outward toward the left hand diagrams the reversals of time that spawn vicious ghosts.

SPECTRAL AGENTS

The attack on Zhizuo's rotating headmanship system by the brigade leadership and the Four Cleanups work team undermined any association Zhizuo residents may have made between the "socialist road" and the right-handed spiral of birth and death. The admonitions of activists and work team leaders to stride forward along the socialist road involved a mode of allocating the responsibility for action that Lolop'o were more likely to associate with ruptures in time's flow signaled by the attacks of wild ghosts. Young activists like Yang Lizhu were encouraged to transfer the origin of their acts outside of themselves and their networks of kin and friends, and to claim that their every word and deed sprang from the thought, or even the person, of Chairman Mao. Diaries and reminiscences of students and Red Guards referred to Mao's thought as the food one ingests, the warmth of a red sun spreading through one's body, or a fluid running through one's veins (Yang 1994:261). Bodily possession by Chairman Mao's thought was a crucial political strategy during the Cultural Revolution.

Words and acts that did not originate in the Chairman's thought were all too likely to flow from a bad class background or a tendency to walk a deviant historical road. The viciously contested origin of speech and deeds was the basis on which millions were beaten or driven to suicide, and on which opposing armies of Red Guards waged bloody factional battles.

Like the metaphor of time as a path, the practice of naming a remote agent as a source of action had long-established precedents in Lolop'o culture. People possessed by wild ghosts changed their facial expressions abruptly, developed immense strength, tore off their clothes, or ran about erratically. Sometimes, as in the case of Yang Lizhu, they used the voice of the dead to remonstrate with themselves or their families, or to demand extravagant offerings. To many in Zhizuo, the abrupt changes in manner of youngsters who became Party activists could only be explained as possession by wild ghosts or similar forces. Their continuous references to Mao and Mao's thought confirmed that their speech descended on them from outside and above, or had backed up the rivers from Beijing where Mao resided and wild ghosts were sent. Their unfamiliar slogans, chanted in Mandarin and Yunnan dialect—languages their elders understood imperfectly—seemed like the half-coherent ravings of the possessed, obsessively mouthing demands in alien voices.

Each ghost story helped consolidate this understanding with an implicit claim that the acts of violence against the collective ancestral spirits and their reliquary box had reversed the temporal spiral of life and death and loosed on the population the wild ghosts that had accumulated during the Great Leap famine. With these stories, Zhizuo residents interpreted the Cultural Revolution as an effect of the injustices of the famine returning to infect the present. The narratives served Zhizuo residents' thirst for justice against those who had gorged while others starved, but at the same time they deflected anger from still-living people who might have been held responsible for Cultural Revolutionary violence—those who, for instance, beat Yang Guowen with fists of bamboo spikes, or who refused to help the militia secretary's wife and son carry his frozen corpse home. Naming ghosts as the ultimate cause of deaths in the Cultural Revolution helped people bridge some of the schisms between kin and neighbors that these deaths had opened.

By the time I heard these stories, the mode of tracing the origin of certain events to the spectral return of past violent acts had been fine-tuned into a collective strategy for subverting local authority. During the period of decollectivization and market reform, this mode of assigning agency worked to deflect the force of new mass campaigns and undermine the authority of the local cadres who had replaced Yang Guowen and his cronies. This strategy took form in a new canon of anecdotes about another series of ghostly deaths.

MORE GHOST STORIES

After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the ghosts spawned by the destruction of the collective ancestors were said to remain quiet until 1980, the

year the collectives in Zhizuo were dismantled. The decollectivization of China's countryside took place over five years, from 1978 to 1983. In Zhizuo brigade, it was accomplished in a single spring. From 1962 forward, collective land had been controlled by production teams, units the size of a small village or a neighborhood. In 1980, each production team in Zhizuo divided its land among its members, assigning irrigated rice terraces, unirrigated terraces for corn and wheat, unterraced swidden land for buckwheat and oats, and forests for cutting firewood to every household in proportion to its size. Two tiny fields in the center of Zhizuo's precious stretch of irrigated rice terraces were included in the contracts. These triangular terraces were the upstream tip of the ten *mu* of ancestral-trust land that had once supplied the rotating headmanship system with its income. Beside them was a smooth, white rock, the residence of one of the ancestral spirits associated with the reliquary box, said to be the guardian of the ancestral-trust land (called *Lôhə*). The host household of the headmanship system had once sponsored a yearly sacrifice at this rock during a daylong festival, when hundreds of volunteers from every corner of the brigade gathered to transplant rice seedlings into the ancestral-trust land. When the bulk of the ancestral-trust land was collectivized in 1956, these two fields continued to rotate with the headmanship, supplying the host household's production team with a limited income for rituals. In 1965, the Four Cleanups work team assigned these fields permanently to one of the production teams that already farmed the majority of the ancestral-trust land.

Once they were contracted to private households in 1980, these two tiny fields became the focus for a new series of stories of deaths and possessions. As though by chance, but actually with the willing collusion of hundreds of families in Zhizuo, these stories delayed rice transplanting over a wide stretch of Zhizuo's most productive land year after year, and caused local cadres immense trouble and frustration. Zhizuo residents related them to me during the rice transplanting seasons of 1992 and 1993, making subtle but gleeful fun of the struggles of the brigade leadership, caught between deaths that everyone attributed to vengeful ghosts, and pressures from township and county governments to carry out household contracting in a rational manner, overcome local superstitions, and develop the agriculture of this economically distressed area.

It appears that in 1980, most members of the production team that farmed these two representative fields of the ancestral trust were reluctant to accept them as part of their land contract. It was said that people in the team who had helped work these fields during collectivization had frequently fallen ill or had other kinds of bad luck brought on by the ghost of the ancestral spirit that had once guarded the trust land. The leader of the production team appealed to Zhang Jianyi, whose household belonged to the five percent of households in Zhizuo registered as Han rather than Lolop'o. The whole business of the headmanship system and its ghosts was a Lolop'o superstition, the production team leader was said to have asserted. The Han of the brigade were naturally less encumbered by feudal superstitions than the minority nationalities and should

take the lead in rejecting them. Zhang Jianyi reluctantly accepted the contract. The next year, however, his mother died, and he asked the brigade leadership to cancel the contract. His neighbors speculated to me in retrospect that, having killed off all those responsible for the destruction of the reliquary box, the wild ghosts that had once been collective ancestral spirits now began to turn their attention to those who dared plant these two ancestral trust fields without first sacrificing to the spirit (*Lóhə*) that guarded over them. The production team took the matter to the brigade government, which agreed to take responsibility for contracting the land.

The brigade leadership convinced a Lolop'ο member of the same production team to accept the contract. This was an elderly ritual specialist by the name of Qi Shihong, who had once served as designated host in the rotating headmanship system. Qi was one of only two or three men in Zhizuo who claimed to remember the chant once used to sacrifice to the spirit that guarded the ancestral-trust land. Qi Shihong walked to the two fields before dawn on the designated day and secretly propitiated this spirit. Qi told me that his family planted the fields for two years without incident. But as the planting season of 1983 drew near, his wife and son, fearing that too many people knew about his secret propitiations, convinced him that his involvement in “feudal superstition” could only bring them trouble, and on their urging, he refused to plant the land a third year. That season, the brigade government pressured another Lolop'ο member of Qi's production team, Li Mingzhi, to accept the contract. He agreed, but he procrastinated transplanting until two weeks past the traditional transplanting date for the ancestral trust, creating an unforeseen and formidable new complication.

Until now this hot-potato land contract had been an entertaining source of scandal and speculation to many Zhizuo residents, but it had precipitated few practical consequences for anyone but brigade officials and the households which had held it. Li Mingzhi's procrastination vastly expanded the scope of the scandal, drawing in the entire membership of Zhizuo's largest and wealthiest production teams—every household that farmed rice within sight of the former ancestral-trust land. Before the demise of the rotating headmanship system, these several hundred *mu* were transplanted in rice only after the ritualized transplanting of the ancestral trust and the propitiation of its guardian spirit. Even between 1962 and 1980, Zhizuo's production teams generally transplanted the two representative former ancestral trust fields before any of the surrounding land. After 1980, as rumors spread that the ghosts of the collective ancestors were attacking those who farmed this land without secretly propitiating its guardian spirit, those who farmed in the surrounding area took care to wait until the two troubled fields were transplanted before transplanting their own rice. Now, as Li Mingzhi procrastinated, all his neighbors waited to transplant, watching their rice seedlings grow long and sickly green. Finally, two weeks past the traditional date for transplanting, fearing that his seedlings would ex-

pire in their seedbeds, Gu Yin, who farmed one of the former ancestral-trust fields downstream of the two representative fields, had his household transplant its land, and all those with land nearby, including Li Mingzhi, quickly followed suit.

It was only as expected, one of Gu Yin's neighbors told me, when a member of Gu Yin's household died within the year. Li Minzhi's brother died that year as well, and Li petitioned the brigade government to take back the contract for the two ancestral trust fields. The brigade government gave the contract to one of its own, Gu Liliang, a brigade cadre from a Han family. Some in Zhizuo claimed that Gu Liliang secretly hired Qi Shihong, the ritual specialist who had planted the troubled fields for two years, to propitiate the fields' guardian spirit. Qi Shihong told me that he did quietly perform this sacrifice for several years, not because anyone was paying him, but because his own fields were contiguous with the contested land. Gu Liliang's household planted the two fields for six years, each year delaying transplanting for weeks past the traditional date and seriously impairing production in the hundreds of *mu* of surrounding land. In 1990, Gu Liliang's mother-in-law died, and he asked the brigade government to take the contract elsewhere. His fellow brigade officials convinced him to plant for another year, but after the transplanting season of 1991, he retired from the brigade government and refused to accept the contract again. After scouring the brigade for Han families thought to have less invested in beliefs about Lolop'o collective ancestors, the brigade government turned over the contract to Zhang Jianliang, brother to Zhang Jianyi, the first to accept it. "Perhaps Zhang Jianliang has forgotten that the ghosts of the collective ancestors killed his mother," one Zhizuo resident commented to me in the spring of 1992. Perhaps Zhang hadn't forgotten—or was reminded—for a month before the traditional date for transplanting, he backed out of the contract. At the last moment, brigade officials again appealed to Qi Shihong to have his household plant the land, offering to release him from the requirement to sell part of the harvest to the state at state prices, and implicitly agreeing to look the other way as he propitiated the land's guardian.

In 1990, the central government launched a nationwide Socialist Thought Education Campaign (*shehui sixiang jiaoyu yundong* [M]), intended to rationalize aspects of the system of contracting land to households which had begun to escape the control of local cadres. Yongren County's Party Committee sent a two-member work team to Zhizuo in late 1991. The team immediately set to work investigating the brigade's finances, adjusting household contracts for the first time since 1980, hiring laborers to repair deteriorating irrigation ditches, and promoting new methods of planting and fertilization. The work team leader promised county-level officials to solve Zhizuo's absurd production problems. Every year the confusion surrounding those two tiny rice paddies delayed the farming of hundreds of *mu*, team-leader Dong complained to me shortly after his arrival, unacceptable in an area where most peasants relied on government

subsidies for over fifty percent of their grain consumption. “Socialist thought education” meant combating harmful feudal superstitions, he said, but in this era of reform and opening up, one could no longer openly punish superstitious peasants. After giving the problem much thought, he had decided that the best way to solve it without directly confronting deeply-held prejudices was to give the contract to Zhizuo’s elementary school, whose teachers were educated officials, and would not share the common people’s backward beliefs. As the transplanting season of 1992 drew near, team leader Dong proposed this solution to the schoolteachers. But after a long and vitriolic meeting, the teachers refused to accept the contract. “Social pressure,” was one teacher’s laconic explanation.

Stung but not defeated, team leader Dong vowed that the campaign work team and the five brigade officials would personally plant the fields that season. But as the traditional planting date approached, their resolve seemed to dissipate. The Brigade Party Secretary left for a meeting in the township center, and two other brigade officials found reasons to absent themselves to seasonal houses high in the mountains. Less than a week before the traditional date for transplanting, team leader Dong himself found pressing business the county town. Two nights before the transplanting date, I was awakened by a woman’s voice, coming from the path that led to the brigade government building, repeating in a high, hoarse tone two or three phrases I didn’t understand. Others had been awakened as well: the next morning, everyone I asked seemed to have heard about this incident. It was a woman who claimed to be intermittently possessed by the collective ancestral spirits, I was told, and she was screaming, “Why do you let Han plant my *yilomi* [ancestral-trust land]. If you keep letting Han plant my *yilomi* I will never stop killing you! Restore my *ts’ici* [rotating headmanship system] or I will keep killing you!”

The next day, Zhizuo residents watched from the hillsides as the brigade government’s only female member spent the morning turning the representative ancestral trust fields with a hoe, a job usually performed by men with oxen and plows. After completing about a third of the task, she abandoned her hoe and went home. That night, it was reported that the brigade chief paid a visit to Qi Shihong, the ritual specialist who had transplanted the fields the year before. He asked Qi to plant the land once again on the same generous terms. Qi later told me how he carefully explained to the young man that to plant the land safely, he must personally perform the ritual for its guardian. This was impossible, he said, because he and his wife both opposed feudal superstition—and besides he was too old to walk that far. Only after the brigade chief offered personally to carry Qi to the fields on his back and to buy the two chickens for the sacrifice with brigade funds did Qi agree to accept the contract. Qi’s two nephews plowed and harrowed the fields the next morning, and by noon they were transplanted. The following day, hundreds of Zhizuo residents filled the valley floor and completed the season’s transplanting.

Having waited through the traditional transplanting date in the county town, team leader Dong returned to Zhizuo the next day, vowing a thorough investigation. But the Socialist Thought Education Campaign ended in Zhizuo two weeks later, when Dong was accused of adultery with a married Zhizuo resident and forced to resign his position and leave the area. Not long after, the township government accused the brigade chief and two other brigade officials of encouraging feudal superstition, demoted them, and appointed replacements. But few in Zhizuo seemed to think that this new leadership would do any better than the old at resolving the yearly rice-transplanting crisis. "None of those bumbler and fools will solve the problem of the ancestral-trust fields until the Party allows the rotating headmanship to be restored," one brigade member predicted to me.

With the winking collusion of brigade members, the revenge of Zhizuo's collective ancestral spirits had thrown the local government into disarray, defied its efforts to rationalize the system of land contracts, and deflected its attempts to develop the brigade's "backward" agriculture. But these persistent returns also related recalcitrance towards local authority to a larger moral drama of justice and revenge, in which the unsettled souls of those who had died in the Great Leap famine and Cultural Revolution continued to shape forcefully the ways in which locals imagined their relations to the state bureaucracy. Shortly after team leader Dong's scandal-laden retreat, I attended a funeral for a widower named Luo Cheng. Long ago, Luo Cheng had married the sister of Brigade Party Secretary Yang Guowen, who had so notoriously ruled Zhizuo during the Great Leap famine, and who had died a violent and demeaning death during the Cultural Revolution. Luo Cheng's funeral was widely anticipated and well attended, for he had been a community leader: a Party member, a teacher, and the principal of Zhizuo's elementary school. In the days that followed the funeral, a rumor spread around Zhizuo about a "strange event" that had occurred before the corpse was encoffined. It appears that one of Luo Cheng's sisters, keeping vigil over the corpse inside the house, began speaking in a man's voice, soon recognized by her companions as the voice of Yang Guowen, dead for 20 years. "Sister's husband," the ghost was reported to have said through her mouth, "I am sorry for not attending my sister's funeral [Luo Cheng's wife had died several years before]. I have been very busy, running about here and there, attending this death and that. I have many duties now, as king of wild ghosts." As this story circulated, Luo Cheng's family carried his personal possessions to the river and burned them while a ritual specialist drove away the shade of this former brigade party secretary, local overlord in an empire of ghosts stretching from this corner of the Southwest to Lin Biao's and Jiang Qing's tombs in Beijing.

SPECTRAL SUBVERSIONS

In the 1980s, political culture in China underwent a series of profound transformations as people rejected the styles of discourse, forms of personal and po-

litical relationships, and modes of gathering and granting power that had prevailed during the Cultural Revolution. A bad class background or past errors were no longer assumed to define one's entire personal and social identity. Those who had been tortured and imprisoned for their pasts were rehabilitated, and those who had persecuted them were expected to be forgiven. Gradually, people were allowed to possess their pasts, rather than being possessed by them. Painted with a broad interpretive brush, these transformations amounted to another shift in the manner of allocating the capacity for effective speech or action. Power was achieved and punishment distributed on the assumption that effective action originated in individual subjects, with their own initiative and autonomy, rather than in remote sources such as Chairman Mao's thought or a landlord grandfather (cf. Lin et al., 1995).

Yet just as legal punishments were increasingly meted out on the basis of actions consciously authored by individuals, Zhizuo residents learned how to shift the authorship of certain acts back to a more remote source, the spectral resurgence of past violence. By the mid 1980s Zhizuo residents found it possible to be temporarily possessed by a ghost without running the risk of being permanently identified with it. Just as speaking as though possessed by Mao's thought was no longer politically useful, one could now speak in the voice of a ghost without being labeled a "cow ghost snake spirit" (*niu gui she shen* [M]), incorrigibly under the sway of feudal superstition. Beyond a general disparagement of Lolop'o peasants as "backward" and "superstitious," local cadres found it impossible to take effective legal revenge on those who refused a contract for the ancestral-trust fields because a household member had died, refused to plant their own land before these fields were planted, or used the voices of the collective ancestral spirits to demand the headmanship's restoration. Peasants and brigade officials alike interpreted these acts and refusals as the inevitable eruptions of past injustices into the present. And since these afflictions could not be assigned to living, conscious, individual authors, they could not easily be punished.

This is what I have called spectral subversion. Despite a nationwide effort to erase the effects of past injustices and keep the national imagination fixed on present and future economic expansion (Watson 1994), in Zhizuo the events of the Great Leap famine, the Four Cleanups campaign, and the Cultural Revolution kept returning to infect the present. As subversions, these returns were particularly effective because they disrupted agricultural production, which reform-minded state agencies had identified as the crucial issue for poor mountainous areas. By the time I left the area in 1993, the brigade government was in disarray. Peasants openly ridiculed local cadre members; the latter frequently fled to remote mountain settlements to avoid the visits of higher state officials, and township and county officials repeatedly reviled Zhizuo Lolop'o as backward, superstitious, and recalcitrant while finding themselves powerless to take effective action.

CONCLUSIONS

The practices of time on which Chinese socialism was founded made copious use of “minority nationality” people such as Lolop’o in Zhizuo. Until the late 1980s, historians and ethnographers tracked down traces of primitive communism, matriarchy, or slave society in these minority nationalities as scientific evidence in support of the doctrine of history as a universal, linear development. When market-oriented economic development began to displace socialism as history’s goal, the poor, backward, and marginal areas in which many minority nationality people had their homes served a similar temporal strategy. As control of the economy was gradually transferred to the market, these areas became a focus for a rhetoric of development in which the state again would draw the economically backward minority nationalities towards the future, this time by overcoming outmoded “traditional concepts,” such as egalitarianism and isolationism, in favor of the competitive commodity economy (Tang 1988; Pan 1992).

The narratives retold here make it evident that in Zhizuo people continuously adjusted their modes of allocating responsibility or capacity for action in response to the state’s temporal strategies. During the Four Cleanups campaign, work team leaders and budding activists gathered power through efforts to dismantle backward “feudal superstition.” In the Cultural Revolution, activists found influence through direct identification with the person and thought of Chairman Mao, under the banner of overcoming the “old ideas, culture, customs, and habits of the exploiting classes,” again with the purpose of wrenching local society forward. During the era of market reforms brigade officials sought power by creating plans and projects designed to promote the area’s economic development and pull it into the market economy, the new target of history. In each period, the ability to act and to direct the deeds of others depended on a sense of history as a road forward.

In this mountainous corner of the southwest, each of these tactics of agency was subject to inversion; each was, at times, interpreted not as a motor of history but as an obstacle or reversal in time’s flow. Ghost stories turned the Four Cleanups campaign’s defeat of “feudal superstition” into a violent inversion of the temporal movement of life and death, which killed off the entire brigade leadership. During the Cultural Revolution, activists’ unmediated connection to the person and thought of Chairman Mao was reinterpreted as ghostly possession and the half-understood slogans in their mouths as speech of the angry dead. After decollectivization in 1980, efforts to wean Zhizuo from dependence on state relief grain towards fuller participation in the market economy were frustrated, as the ghosts of past violence cycled backward through another temporal spiral, killing off those who privately planted the representative fields of Zhizuo’s former ancestral-trust land. Each of these modes of distributing “the sources of influence and directions of power” (Strathern 1987:23) was eventu-

ally deflected through another practice of time, a practice assembled of rumors, stories, and the protean voices of the possessed.

This brief evocation of two competing temporal strategies doubtless oversimplifies. Even in the narratives presented here, the difference between the “socialist road” and the temporal practices implicit in ghost stories or exorcism rituals was not always clear. At times, people were seized and set against each other by these rival strategies; at others, they shifted easily among them, purposefully merging or transforming them as they sought relief from political dilemmas. Nevertheless, these ghost stories demonstrate that the question of “agency” in Giddens’ (1984) sense of how human action is constrained or enabled by enduring social institutions and relationships is not merely the province of social scientists. Rival tactics for posing and answering this question constitute fields of struggle in which people create provisional answers to the other problem of “agency,” as formulated by Strathern (1987)—how responsibility or capacity for action should be allocated. Time and history are strategies for distributing the ability to act or speak and to influence the words, deeds and fates of others.

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