THE REVIVAL OF “VISITING MARRIAGE”—
FAMILY CHANGE AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS
AMONG MATRILINEAL TIBETANS IN SOUTHWESTERN CHINA

by

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To My Parents
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List of Abbreviations

HH      Household
VM      Visiting Marriage
c.      Chinese
z.      Zhaba term
CCP     Chinese Communist Party
TAR     Tibet Autonomous Region
The Revival of “Visiting Marriage”—
Family Change and Intergenerational Relations
among Matrilineal Tibetans In Southwestern China

Abstract

by

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This dissertation examines how a matrilineal Tibetan society has reacted
to the political, economic, and socio-cultural changes in China. The Zhaba region
of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province was chosen as the
overall field site because of its matrilineal kinship system and “visiting marriage”
tradition, in which partners live in their natal matrilineal households while children
belong to the mothers’ family. Based on eleven months of anthropological
fieldwork, this dissertation is the first ethnography on marriage, family, and
intergenerational relations among matrilineal Tibetans in Southwestern China.

This dissertation discusses how the changing ideals of marriage and
family formations influence people of different generations. A major argument of
this dissertation is that the interplay of state policies including birth planning
policy, household registration policy, marriage certification rules, and socio-economic developments over the past few decades, have contributed to changes in the “visiting marriage” tradition and family ideals among the matrilineal Zhaba Tibetans. This has led to the sense of exclusiveness between the visiting partners, an increase of the father’s contribution in childrearing, and the emergence of neolocal nuclear families. However, this dissertation shows that there has been a revival of the traditional “visiting marriage” among the majority of young people in their twenties (63.64%) who still chose to practice “visiting marriage” and live with their natal matrilineal households.

Using ethnographic data, this dissertation brings to the forefront how a matrilineal society in the cultural context of China, structures the life course of different generations and affects the well-being of the elderly. Moreover, this in-depth, on-the-ground ethnography of Tibetans residing in Sichuan province, demonstrates the diverse manner that ethnic Tibetans are adapting to change and development in China. By comparing family changes between the Zhaba Tibetans and both rural Han Chinese families and Tibetan families in the literature, it reveals how the locals reacted differently to the same set of political, economic, and social cultural forces in China, and it emphasizes the complexities and shaping forces of the social cultural traditions and the importance of ethnographic research in understanding family transformations in today’s rapidly changing China.
Chapter 1 Introduction: The Changing Family and Aging China

One of the greatest challenges for human societies in the 21st century is how to take care of the elderly in the face of unprecedented global aging (McDaniel and Zimmer 2013). According to the United Nations, there were an estimated 962 million people aged 60 or over in the world in 2017, comprising 13 per cent of the global population (United Nations 2017). The sheer number and the global share of older people have not only increased over the past decades but also are expected to grow rapidly in the near future. It is projected that by 2050, about a quarter or more of the world population, or nearly 2.1 billion people, will be aged 60 years or over (United Nations 2017). Spurred in part by rapid global aging and increased concerns about the vast demands for care for and support of the elderly, interest in aging has accelerated over the past three decades (e.g., Fry and Keith 1986; Sokolovsky 2009; Bengtson and Lowenstein 2003; Kinsella and Phillips 2005; McDaniel and Zimmer 2013). One pervasive theme within the literature on global aging concerns the changing socio-cultural contexts due to modernization, and subsequently, globalization. Still not well understood, however, is how and why such changes negatively or positively affect the rural elderly in the developing world.
While there was an early endeavor to compare the status of the aged cross-culturally (Simmons 1945), it was not until the publication of Aging and Modernization (Cowgill and Holmes 1972) that ethnographic studies emerged cross-culturally to test the controversial gerontological theory of modernization and aging. This theory argues that modernization, specifically health technology, economic technology, urbanization and mass education, brings about the decline of elderly status through changes such as a shift in living arrangements from traditional extended families to nuclear families (Cowgill 1974). This theoretical framework has been criticized as being unilinear and overly simplistic by numerous anthropologists, who argue that status of the elderly in countries like Japan and Samoa does not decline (Sokolovsky 1983; Rhoads 1984; Palmore 1975; Palmore and Maeda 1985, Holmes and Holmes 1995). However, a plethora of empirical evidence from developing countries, to a certain extent, demonstrates that elderly status indeed declines with modernization (Goldstein and Beall 1982; Albert and Cattell 1994; Apt 1996; Aboderin 2004; Van der Geest 2004). Modernization experiences from different regions do not parallel each other, consequently, it is important to examine specific cultural, political and historical factors affecting the status of the elderly over time in particular societies.
The Changing Chinese and Tibetan Family

The Traditional Era

Before the advent of dramatic socio-cultural changes in the twentieth century, the traditional Chinese family system is believed to have persisted through two thousand years without substantial change under the dominant Confucian doctrines (Lee 1953). In the traditional era, families, instead of the individuals, were considered as the basic units of society in the economic, political and jural spheres. The essential features of the traditional family system can be summarized as patrilineal structure, patriarchal power relations, patrilocal residence patterns, maintenance of a large multigenerational households, and common ownership of family property. Patrilineal structure means that descent was traced only through the male line. Only sons were the legitimate successors of the family line and legacy, while daughters were considered as being outsiders of the lineage upon their marriages. The power relationship in traditional Chinese families was highly patriarchal and hierarchical, with the eldest male acting as the head of the household. He held authority over all aspects of family lives, including management of the communal household property. After the death of the parents, the sons might break up the family and live separately, or they might still live together in the same household. In the latter case, the authority would be
vested in the eldest brother (Lee 1953; Baker 1979; Cohen 1976; Freedman 1966; Harrell 1982).

For the traditional Chinese family, filial piety is one of the fundamental virtues and moral standards. Originated from Confucianism, filial piety refers to the priority of the elders' needs or desires over the children’s, which requires the children's unconditional compromise, obedience, care, and support in order to continue the patrilineal family line. The way that children treated their elders was a central measure for their moral worth. Failure to live up to the standards of filial piety could result in damage to one’s own self-image, to loss of reputation in the community and to loss of one’s inheritance (Doolittle 1865).

The traditional Tibetan family was in many ways similar to the Chinese family. The ideal Tibetan family was also a patrilocal and patriarchal corporate family with parents holding authority and control over their children (Goldstein 1971). The Tibetan father was in charge of decision-making regarding children’s marriages and managing household property, and he remained head of the household until death or incapacity (Goldstein and Beall 1997). Just like the traditional Chinese families, children were obligated to be obedient and perform filial piety to their parents, otherwise they might be denied inheritance from their natal family (Goldstein and Beall 1997). However, in contrast with the Chinese families, fraternal polyandrous marriages in which two or more brothers shared a
wife were commonly arranged for the sons by their Tibetan parents. This practice was predominantly done for socio-economic reasons. Firstly, with only one wife in the household per generation, only one set of heirs (children) was produced, so that land could be passed on to the next generation without the risk of division that Tibetan felt was inherent when the multiple sons married monogamously and stayed in the household. Secondly, fraternal polyandry concentrated male labor within the family to fulfill corvée labor obligations to one’s lord in traditional Tibet (Goldstein 1971, 1987).


The communist era witnessed dramatic changes in both the traditional Chinese and Tibetan family systems. The collectivization of the economy during the communist era weakened patriarchy and parental power. In rural areas, the most valuable resource—land—was turned over to the state, and residents were organized into the three-tiered pattern of work teams-brigades-communes. The communes replaced the traditional corporate family system as the basic unit of production, and commune members were now awarded work points based on their individual jobs and from this secured their food and so forth. With the state in control of all communes in rural areas, the male head of the household was deprived of his ownership of property—the basis for his status and power. What’s more, young people were educated to be loyal to the nation, the communist
party, and to Mao, all of which were prioritized before one's own family. Individuals, instead of the lineage, family, or father, were legally entitled to civil rights and bounded by civil obligations. As a result, authority was shifted from the parents to the communist state, and young Chinese were relieved of the duty of absolute obedience to parental wishes and were granted rights as individuals such as the freedom to choose their own marital partners (Wang 2004; Ikels 2006). While rural families were influenced by agricultural collectivization, urban families were split apart during the years of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in the Communist era. During this time, not only intellectuals and bureaucrats but also their adolescent children were sent to the countryside to engage in agricultural labor far away from their urban homes and families for extended periods of time. What was worse was that when one died in the turmoil, there was little opportunity for the family members to arrange for a funeral or even to collect the remains.

What suffered and changed the most was the traditional patriarchal family and marriage customs, such as bride-wealth, dowry, polygamy, concubinage, arranged marriage, as well as death rituals. These were considered as backward, superstitious, and feudalistic, so needed to be replaced by modern socialist family norms modeled after those in the Soviet Union (Whyte 2003; Davis and Harrell 1993). For instance, wedding ceremonies which were traditionally featured by a family feast and filial rituals to acknowledge the
parents, were replaced by civil registration followed by simple tea parties. The intensity of regulating marriage was so omnipresent that even ethnic minority groups which did not traditionally practice monogamy such as the Mosuo group, were required to do so (Shih 2010). Similarly, the funeral and mourning rites practiced for centuries was targeted for elimination in favor of a modern set including a memorial meeting and cremation (Watson and Rawski 1988). For the Tibetans, the communist era, especially the Cultural Revolution was destructive because it prohibited all Buddhist practices. Tibetans, especially the elderly people, were frustrated because they were unable to practice Buddhism and influence their coming rebirth (Goldstein and Beall 1997).

However, researchers who have done research among those who lived in mainland China during this time believed that the socio-economic status of the elderly did not decline in this era (Davis-Friedmann 1983; Ikels 2006; Whyte 2003). Although the aforementioned changes may seem disruptive to family ties, researchers argue that the Communist era offered a paradoxical environment for Chinese and Tibetan families. On the one hand, it “undercut the power and authority of patriarchs and destroyed the economic logic of family farms and businesses”; on the other hand, it “created demographic and material conditions conducive to multi-generational households with extensive economic and social ties to nearby kin” (Davis and Harrell 1993: 1). With respect to the latter, during this time in the urban areas, work units, for example, were encouraged to provide
employment opportunities to the children of their employees. Ikels (2006) agrees with this argument of “paradoxical environment” by demonstrating that the communist era polices in urban China actually facilitated the delivery of parental support by keeping the generations in proximity—in the same dwelling, community or workplace. Coresidence as a prevalent phenomenon is also supported by Davis-Friedmann’s (1983) study undertaken in the 1970s, as 90% of urban elderly reported that they lived with at least one child. In terms of the tradition of filial piety, both Ikels (2004) and Whyte (2003) believe that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) never systematically attempted to get young people to reject filial obligations. Although the direct attack on traditional customs such as arranged marriage certainly posed a threat to parental control, the CCP reinforced the obligation of children to support their aging parents and they did not attempt to discourage coresidence of the adult children with their parents. In addition, seniority was appreciated since there was a lack of technical development and a continued demand for manual labor which allowed older workers with manual-labor experiences to benefit more than younger laborers (Davis-Friedmann 1983).

The Economic Reform Era (1978-Present)

The following post-Mao economic reform era witnessed fundamental changes in both the arena of “production” as the result of economic reforms, and
in the arena of “reproduction” as the result of family planning policy (Harrell 1993; Jiang 1995). These changes have transformed the social landscape of China, leading to the disappearance of collective work teams, the rise of family enterprises, unprecedented material prosperity, shrinking household size, as well as new forms of living arrangements. And the institutional and social changes in the post-Mao era have created even more profound urban-rural distinctions with respect to family lives.

In the urban areas, what exerted dramatic influences on family lives were the enterprise reforms and the housing reforms that began in the late 1980s and accelerated in the mid-90s. Enterprise reforms left the state enterprises responsible for their own profit making, which further led to bankruptcies and a large number of laid-off employees. This threatened the financial security of the elderly directly by reducing or delaying social welfare, and indirectly by laying off their children (Ikels 2006). In the meantime, state funding was withdrawn from subsidizing work units to allocate housing to their employees. This housing reform was launched in order to encourage the construction and selling of houses by private developers. As a consequence, physical separation of young adult children from their elder parents was becoming increasingly common in urban areas. However, researchers such as Davis, Unger, and Ikels (in Davis and Harrell 1993) argued, based on their own field research, that even though these households were separated geographically, they remained “networked”
families. Through conducting surveys in Shanghai and Tianjin in 1993, Bian and colleagues found that “although most parents still live with one of their adult offspring, non-coresident children…live close to parents, maintain high levels of face-to-face contact with parents, and provide help on a regular basis to parents. Furthermore, these children’s ties with parents are not greatly altered by whether parents live with another child” (Bian et al. 1988: 122).

In comparison to the urban environment, Deng Xiaoping's reforms have exerted tremendous impacts on rural households through the decollectivization of agriculture and the establishment of the “responsibility system.” The communes, once the political and economic core of rural life, were dissolved, and each rural family gained a certain amount of land based on the number of people per household. Households became responsible for their own agricultural production and economic affairs, and they had to generate their own subsistence by their own work and skills. As a result, families have become heavily dependent on cash income and when their economic needs and desires could not be met solely by agricultural production, people turned to migration to secure non-farm wage labor for cash income.

The expanding job opportunities in urban areas especially since 2001 when China entered the World Trade Organization, have drawn an enormous number of laborers from the rural areas, where agricultural work was barely
profitable. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China (NBSPRC), there were 169.34 million rural migrant workers who had lived in urban areas outside their registered home township for six months or more in 2016. Among these, 159.6 million (94.25%) were on the east coast of the country, where most of China’s export-oriented manufacturing industries are located. The majority of rural migrant workers were males (65.5%) and 31.9% of them were aged between 16 and 30 (NBSPRC 2017). Earning income on the basis of individual labor instead of relying on the communal household production favored the young in obtaining cash income via out-migration and enabled the younger generation to be economic independent. However, it has led to the decline of coresidence of the elderly with their children and the weakening of the economic standing of the senior generation (Ikels 2006; Goldstein and Ku 1993; Goldstein et al. 1990).

The rural-urban migration of mostly young people, coupled with the privatization of land, have negatively influenced the rural elderly tremendously. Based on a study conducted by the World Bank, the percentage of rural elderly living with adult children had fallen from 70% to 40% during 1991 to 2006 (Cai et al. 2012). However, even when the young adults reside in the villages, they are less likely to embrace the traditional ideal of multigenerational coresidence in an extended household, which added to the growing problems of rural elderly support. After the decollectivization, land as familial property free from
commune/state control enabled the possibility of dividing it up among the family members, since each individual had legal rights to family property. Subsequently, a new phenomenon of household division emerged among the Chinese families since the 1980s, wherein brothers divided up the assets of the joint household and established their own dwellings, even when the elderly parents were still alive (Cohen 1992; Wang 2004; Yan 1997, 2003). Anthropologists, focusing on private lives have fruitfully captured and depicted the tensions and conflicts in the households where adult children and their elderly parents coreside (e.g. Yan 2003, 2010). This is in sharp contrast with the traditional belief that high levels of intergenerational coresidence benefit the elderly with strong familial support, which has been promoted as an alternative to the government in industrial countries (Hashimoto et al. 1992; Hermalin 1997; Knodel and Debavalya 1992). Nonetheless, anthropological studies have demonstrated the tensions and frictions within the intergenerational families, especially in rural China, and that coresidence does not necessarily guarantee elderly support when needed (Goldstein et al. 1983).

Reasons for the intra-familial tensions can be categorized as follows. Firstly, there has been the rising autonomy and sense of individuality among both young males and females in rural China, which have been widely acknowledged in the literature (Yan 1997, 2003, 2010, 2011). In Yan’s ethnography of Xiajia village in Northern China, privacy is actively sought after, which could be vividly
reflected by the separation of young couple’s individual bedroom from the communal living room in the interior floor plan. Moreover, whenever conflicts occur between the in-laws over household issues, the husband will second his wife instead of his own parents (Yan 1997, 2003).

In addition, as already discussed, post-Mao agricultural reform has granted each individual in households with his or her own share of land and emphasized productivity and profits. No longer can the household head control the family land and income. This free market economy, coupled with the aforementioned preference for conjugal ties, has increased tensions and competitions between the sons/ brothers, as they are now more interested in earning and accumulating wealth for their individual conjugal families, rather than prioritizing spending money for their elderly parents. Thus, brothers may try to evade their own filial obligations, wishing the others will shoulder them (Yan 2003; Zhang 2004).

Furthermore, in the post-Mao reform era, parental authority continues to be weakened not only because of the rising conjugal power, but also due to their declining economic gains. In the market economy since the reform era, an individual’s social standing is closely associated with one’s ability to make money, which put the elderly in an unfavorable social position (Ikels 2006). A study conducted in six provinces and sixty-six villages in 2000 found that the
majority of the elderly had to continue working in the fields to produce basic subsistence (Pang et al. 2004). Ironically, the declining economic status of the elderly is likely to be a result of their contribution to the household over the course of their lives. For example, the custom for the parent to provide a generous bride-wealth and dowry has flourished since the 1980s. For the cohort of elderly whose sons reached marriage age at the beginning of the post-Mao reform era (late 1970s and 1980s), the skyrocketing increase in the cost of weddings drained the elder parents’ limited saving and posted great economic burdens on them (Yan 2003). In a village studied by Zhang in Hubei province, the cost of a wedding during the communist era was around 100 to 200 yuan, but in the late 1980s and 1990s, it ran up to at least 2,000 to 4,000 yuan (Zhang 2005). In Xiajia village in Heilongjiang province, parents reported that they had to spend 70,000 yuan or more for a son and 40,000 yuan for a daughter over a period of twenty years (Yan 2003). The reasons for this is considered to be a new logic of “intergenerational reciprocity,” wherein if parents do not treat their children well, then the children have reason to reduce the scope and amount of generosity to their parents (Guo 1997; Yan 2003). As a result, the elderly parents did not enjoy the benefits that the sons could bring when they got old as traditionally believed; instead, in order to be able to contribute to their sons’ lives such as weddings, the elderly parents had to work in the farmlands to earn more money. The more sons they had, the harder they would have to work. In the end, the elderly
parents ended up without much cash savings and had to depend on their sons when they cannot work anymore (Yan 2003; Zhang 2004). Another important factor that interacts with old age economic status is health care expenses (Yan 2003; Zhang and Goza 2006). With the privatization of the health care system across the country in the post-Mao reform era, rural elderly have to pay for their medical costs almost completely out of their own pockets (Ho 1995). Even though the Rural Co-operative Medical Services (RCMS) scheme covers the basic medical treatment in rural China, elderly villagers will have to travel to the township or county hospitals for serious conditions. Thus, health problems, which are prevalent among the elderly group, further deteriorate the declining economic status of the elderly within the household.

Consequently, with rising youth autonomy, increasing economic gains, and declining parental authority, young couples not only desire their own households, but they are also able to establish new dwellings and move away from the parental households (Greenhalgh 1994a; Yan 2003). The establishment of nuclear families is noted as the “triumph of conjugality” because household division granted the daughters-in-law independence in family life (Yan 1997). This once unimaginable practice of “early household division” when one’s elder parents are still alive, is now commonly found in villages across northern, central, and southern China (e.g. Cohen 1992; Wang 2004; Harrell 1993). Both ethnographic data and national surveys suggest that a range of 30 to over 50
percent of Chinese elderly are now living apart from their grown-up children, in a separate household alone or with a spouse (Goldstein et al. 1990; Gui 1988; Shi 1994; Unger 1993). National data consistently shows that post-marital coresidence since the 1980s has greatly shortened (Lavely and Ren 1992).

While the patrilineal extended Chinese families gradually broke down to nuclear families by household division in the economic reform era, the Tibetan families actually resumed their traditional extended family structures and revived the practice of fraternal polyandry. After decollectivization, families got their own share of land, and there has been a revival of the traditional practice of fraternal polyandry to maintain the household landholdings intact and increase the number of male laborers in order to earn more cash income from the various opportunities for off-farm wage labor in the economic reform era (Jiao 2001; Goldstein et al. 2002, 2006). Ethnographic research in a rural Tibetan village found that polyandrous marrying households earned 43.2% higher income than monogamous marriages (Jiao 2001).

Another event which has exerted far-reaching impact on Chinese families in the reform era is the birth control campaign launched in 1979. Although researchers believe that China’s total fertility rate had already dropped from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.7 in 1978 even before the implementation of family planning campaign, the one-child policy still remarkably decreased the size of Chinese
families, both in urban and rural areas (Davis and Harrell 1993). The young parents in the 90s who grew up in the socialist environment in which birth control was emphasized as a fundamental strategy for national development, have gradually disregarded the traditional notions of “more sons, more happiness (c. duozi duo fu 多子多福)” and “raising sons for old age (c. yang er fang lao 养儿防老),” which contrasted sharply with their parents’ generation (Yan 2003).

Interestingly, in the economic reform era, Tibetan families have also started embracing the ideal of fewer children voluntarily, even though the birth control campaign was not strictly enforced in rural Tibet (Goldstein et al. 2002). Fertility declined steadily in the late 1980s even before the implementation of birth control policy and contraceptives were widely available (Childs et al. 2013). In the Tibet Autonomous Region, the birth control policy was first introduced in the mid-1970s, targeting mainly Han Chinese. Later in 1983 it was applied to urban Tibetans with the birth limit of two children and in 1984 it was expanded to rural Tibetans with the limit of three children. Ethnographic research in rural Tibet suggests that the younger generation decided to limit the number of children in their households, in large part because of the increasing cost of raising children. (Goldstein et al. 2002).
In conclusion, during the economic reform era, the large-scale rural to urban migration, coupled with the fertility decline at the national level induced by the one-child policy, and the scarce care resources in rural China, has left the elderly, especially those who reside in the rural areas, in a vulnerable position.

**Coping Strategies of Aging in China**

The changing dynamics of family structures and intergenerational relations elaborated above is happening in the context of an unprecedented change in the age structure, not only in China, but also across the globe. The phenomenon is commonly referred to as population aging, wherein the older population is growing both in the absolute numbers as well as in its proportion relative to the younger population (Kaneda 2006; McDaniel and Zimmer 2013; Kinsella and Phillips 2005). By international standards, a society is considered to be aging when more than ten percent of the population is over 60 years of age, and more than seven percent is over 65 (Cai et al. 2012). China entered the ranks of aging societies in 2000 (Cai et al. 2012). In 2017, sixteen percent of China’s 1.4 billion population was over 60 years old (United Nations 2017). While it typically took more than 100 years for developed countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Nordic countries to experience the demographic transition to an aging society, it only took China around 40 years (Uhlenberg 2009). However, while most of these developed countries had well-established pension
systems long before their populations started to age, China is rapidly growing old before it gets rich. The accelerated aging rate and the growing elderly population have put enormous pressure on its economic development and social security system. In addition, due to the implementation of the one-child policy since 1979, China has declining numbers of births in both urban and rural areas, which not only makes the population age faster than many other developing countries, but also leads to the decreasing number of young caregivers and their increasing responsibilities to take care of aging parents and grandparents (Davis and Harrell 1993; Ikels 2006). Thus, understanding how the government, families and individual elderly respond and adapt to the unprecedented trend of population aging in the demographic and sociocultural context in China, is critically important for social scientists seeking to conceptualize cross-cultural aging experiences and coping strategies.

Meanwhile, in the face of a rapidly aging population and underdeveloped public social service resources, the Chinese government has been also emphasizing the adult children’s responsibility to care for their elderly family members (Miller 2004; Chappell and Kusch 2007). On July 1st, 2013, the Chinese government enacted a new law stating that children should “go home often” to visit their parents and send them greetings occasionally. Meanwhile, companies and work units should give employees enough time off so that they can make these parental visits. This law, called “Protection of the Rights and
Interests of Elderly People,” (c. laonianren quanyi baozhangfa 老年人权益保障法) has nine clauses that lay out the duties of children and their obligation to tend to the “spiritual needs of the elderly.” Since then, the new law has prompted significant discussion on the issue of elderly care in China. Many people questioned the necessity of such a law, believing that visiting one’s own parents is a natural and private issue which is inappropriate for the government to intervene and compel its people to do. However, reinforcing familial elderly support through legislation is not recent. As early as 1979, the Criminal Law of People’s Republic of China claimed that refusal to support an aged parent was punishable by up to a 5-year jail sentence; the Constitution of 1982 specified reciprocal family obligations; the 1985 Inheritance Law denied a share of the family estate if one had neglected their obligations to the elderly parents or parents-in-law; in 1996, the Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly made it clear that “elderly support is mainly dependent upon family members who should show concern for and take care of their elders,” and that adult children must meet the financial, medical, housing and social needs of the elderly (Leung and Lam 2000; Palmer 1995). Despite criticism from the general public as mentioned above, these government laws illustrate the increasing intergenerational distance the elderly are facing as a result of urbanization and migration, the prevalence of parental neglect, and the urgent need for the provision of care for the aging elders in contemporary China.
In today’s rural China, not only are there problems with material needs, but the spiritual needs or mental health status of the rural Chinese elderly are also problematic (Yang and Victor 2008). Taking an extreme, yet illustrative, example, China has the third highest rate of suicide in its elderly population aged 65-74 in the world (Desjarlais et al. 1995), and the suicide rate among the rural elderly is three to five times higher than those who reside in the urban areas (Phillips et al., 2002). The fact that suicide among the East Asian elderly is twice as high as that of their counterparts in Western countries contradicts the orthodox supposition that the elderly in the East Asian societies are better cared for by the families than their more independent western counterparts because of coresidence and filial piety (Hu 1995). Instead, the elderly living in extended families have “suffered positional decline within the family and a discontinuity in social life and physical environment, making them far more vulnerable and putting them at higher risk of suicide” (Hu 1995: 201). In-depth ethnographic work has illustrated that family conflict is the primary reason for elderly suicide (Wu 2010). For instance, Zhang (2004) reported a widow in the village she studied in Hubei Province who had been troubled by disputes with her daughter-in-law, hanged herself after she got seriously sick. In Yan’s (1997) study in a Northern village, a 64-year-old man ended his life by drinking a bottle of pesticide after an intensified family conflict with his son and daughter-in-law.
The significant rural-urban difference with regard to psychological status and mental health of the elderly in China reflects, to a large degree, the contrasting social environment and health care infrastructure between urban and rural areas. With qualitative interview data of respondents from a variety of locations, economic statuses and social strata, Zhang and Goza (2006) demonstrated the heterogeneous old age experiences and elderly support in contemporary China. Urban elderly have much better access to social welfare resources such as insurance from workplaces and nursing homes, while the rural elderly are almost completely dependent on their families for support. For urban residents, the elders also enjoy the benefits and care from social support networks such as community services and City Neighborhood Committees Organizations. These facilities were utilized as important components of old age support in urban China, even though the urban residents face the moral dilemma of whether to keep the elderly at home or send them to a care-giving institution (Zhang 2006, 2007b). In contrast, such public institutions do not exist in rural China. A recent study of 3824 older adults aged 60 years or older residing in 301 rural villages across China suggested that the deficiencies of village infrastructure such as drinking water, fuel, waste management and toilet facilities, are positively correlated with late-life depressive symptoms of the rural elderly (Li et al. 2014).
The public concern over old age support and severity of rural elderly’s vulnerability have drawn the Chinese government’s attention. In 2009, a new national rural pension program was launched, based on their experiences and lessons learned from the old rural pension system, which was first set out in 1986 but suffered from stagnation due to financial deficiencies (Cai et al. 2012). The pilot program started in 10 percent of counties nationwide and was expanded to all the counties by the end of 2012. With central subsidies as the major financing source, this scheme provides pensions for all elderly aged 60 and above regardless of need, with the basic benefit being 55 yuan (approximately 9 US dollars) per month. This was aimed at increasing the economic status of the rural elderly, but the amounts are too low to enable an elder to live on only the pensions. Moreover, how effective this has been for recipients and especially whether this governmental aid for the elderly will “crowd out” or decrease the intra-familial transfer which used to be the only source of support, remains to be further investigated by anthropological field research (Cox 1987; Cox and Jakubson 1995; Chuang 2012).

The Missing Piece: Aging in Matrilineal Societies

Research literature on Chinese families has documented that since the economic reform in 1978, there has been a decline of the patrilineal father-son axis and an increase in mother-in-law/daughter-in-law conflicts in extended
family structures leading to increasing household division. Consequently, elderly care and well-being are challenged and compromised, since the elderly rely primarily on their families for care-giving and formal care is generally limited (Ikels 2004; Zhang and Goza 2006; Cai et al. 2012).

In light of such sociocultural changes, the impact of a population's kinship system comes into focus (Sokolovsky 2009: 374). As Fry (2004) argues, diverse kinship systems shape social arrangements, particularly the availability of descent members and the nature of residential patterns, which further exert profound influences on who provides support and how. Thus, kinship systems should be studied as a vital environmental context of growing old. Since the majority of the world's population organizes their families patrilineally, matrilineal kinship systems are extremely underrepresented in the aging literature. And although matrilineality has been studied and debated almost since the birth of anthropology, anthropological research on matrilineality rarely addresses aging and lives of aged individuals. Early on, attention was given to the origins of what was thought of as the "primitive" matrilineal kinship system, which, as cultures evolved and economics changed from subsistence to capitalism, were argued to be "doomed" (Douglas et al. 1969) or supplanted by the patrilineal kinship system (Engels 1902; Murdock 1949; Schneider and Gough 1961; Lévi-Strauss 1969). Recently, the literature has focused less on the origin of matrilineality than on how the matrilineal kinship system affects one's identities, social relations, and
actions (e.g., Poewe 1978a, 1978b, 1981; Phiri 1983; Holy 1986; Peters 1997; Nongbri 2000; Pritchett 2001). These studies offer extensive ethnographic data on aspects of family lives, such as marital dissolution (Takyi and Gyimah 2007) and wealth transfer behaviors (Mtika and Doctor 2002), which closely relate to elderly care and well being. Unfortunately, these studies did not focus on the lives of older adults and how sociocultural changes in the investigated areas influence elderly care.

The few studies conducted among matrilineal groups so far have provided significant contrasts with their patrilineal counterparts, especially in terms of gender differences in old age security. One example is the Gwembe Tonga people of Gambia (Cliggett 2005). As a result of dam building, the Gwembe Tonga were relocated from their farm land which was hoe-cultivated by women, to land more suitable for cattle ploughing. Due to the tradition that elderly men control the cattle, this change shifted social power in favor of men and their patrilineal groups, reducing the authority of elderly women who could only survive by collecting grains from the grass. Another example with a different outcome is the case of the Minangkabau of Indonesia (Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill 2007, 2008; Indrizal et al. 2009; Fanany et al. 2014). There, elderly support was challenged by the absence of adult children as a result of massive nation-wide youth out-migration. However, because the social organization of matrilineal descent system was passed on through women, older men were typically found
to be more vulnerable than women, especially when they were childless, or their sisters were childless.

This dissertation studies family change among the matrilineal Zhaba Tibetans in Sichuan Province in Southwestern China. It discusses how the changing ideals of marriage and family formations influence people of different generations. This dissertation aims to enhance our understanding of aging in matrilineal societies, by exploring the aging experiences of the matrilineal Zhaba Tibetans in Sichuan Province in Southwest China. Using ethnographic data, in the chapters that follow, this dissertation will bring to the forefront how a matrilineal society in the cultural context of China, structures the life course of different generations and affects the well-being of the elderly.

Chapter 1 provides the theoretical background of the overarching research question. It discusses the anthropological studies on modernization and aging in mostly patrilineal societies. It also discusses how family change and aging in the matrilineal contexts have been understudied. Focusing on the patrilineal Chinese and Tibetan societies, chapter 1 discusses how the political reforms and socio-cultural changes in China have led to the changing patterns of family formations and intergenerational relations in the past few decades. It demonstrates the importance of studies of family change and intergenerational relations in the context of population aging and change, which is the subject of this dissertation.
Chapter 2 introduces the field site and the major historical changes in the Zhaba region over the past five decades, including the traditional (pre-democratic reform) era, the communist era, and the post-Mao economic reform era. By stating the importance of households as the basic economic and cultural units, it introduces various aspects of domestic lives, including land ownership, labor division, and household property management. With household economic data, it demonstrates the sources of household income and emphasizes the significance of off-farm wage labors for the Zhaba Tibetan households. Furthermore, it focuses on the Zhaba Tibetans’ “visiting marriage” tradition in which the partners stay in their natal households and children live with their mothers. It also introduces a much less common practice of marrying an outside member into the household, in cases where there was only one sex--sons or daughters--in a household, in order to fulfill the local ideal of having both genders in one generation.

Chapter 3, 4 and 5 delve into the changing ideals of marriage and intergenerational relations after the 1980s from a diachronic and synchronic perspective. Chapter 3 focuses on how the local “visiting marriage” tradition, especially the conjugal relationship and father-child relationship have been reshaped by political changes, including the implementation of household registration, birth control policy, marriage certification policy, and the socio-cultural changes brought about in the reform era. Based on demographic data
and interviews, it reveals the decline of “visiting marriage” tradition among men aged from the thirties to the sixties since the 1980s. However, among the younger generation, the data suggests a revival of the “visiting marriage” tradition as the majority of people in their twenties chose to practice “visiting marriage.” Chapter 3 then explores the rationale behind such changes among the different generations, and demonstrates a redefined father’s role in childrearing and the emerging preference of men for co-residence as a “father” with their conjugal partners and their own children, rather than living in their natal household as an “uncle.” It concludes with a consideration of the persistence of the corporate family system, and the limited capabilities and opportunities of earning cash income among the Zhaba young people, and importantly, their agency in choosing to practice “visiting marriage.”

Chapter 4 focuses on the people who rejected the duolocal “visiting marriage” tradition, including those who joined another local household, established a new nuclear family with his or her partner locally, or permanently migrated outside of Zhaba. It starts with a recent case of household division to illustrate the reasons for household division, negotiations between the leaving individual and relatives in the natal households, and the reactions of the elderly and middle-aged members. In light of the changing ideals of marital choice and post-marital residence as described in chapter 3, chapter 4 also depicts the dilemma some middle-aged villagers faced when they had to choose between
keeping their child(ren) to help in their household and to be available as future care-giver(s) and to encourage them to leave and obtain better resources for themselves and their offspring.

Chapter 5 turns to the elderly population and examines the various statuses of the elderly villagers, including their household status, religious activities, and economic status. It discusses the elderly villagers’ satisfaction with the improving living conditions and caregiving in the household. However, by comparing lives of the elderly people who resided in the villages and those who lived by the monastery, it suggests what Goldstein and Beall (1997) argued that the institution of “elderly religion” cushions the impact of intergenerational conflicts. In addition, it demonstrates the rising cost of funerals in recent years and the elderly’s desire to spare the household budget from having to pay for their funerals in the future, which might be at odds with the young and middle-aged family members’ more immediate spending choices. Thus, it discusses the intergenerational negotiations between the elderly villagers and their family members and the elderly villagers’ coping strategies for their current needs and future funerals, for example, purchasing religious items themselves or saving pocket money without giving it to the common household money pool.

The dissertation concludes by comparing family changes between the Zhaba Tibetans and both rural Han Chinese families and Tibetan families in the
literature. It demonstrates how the locals reacted differently to the same set of political, economic, and social cultural forces in China, and it emphasizes the complexities and shaping forces of the social cultural traditions and the importance of ethnographic research in understanding family transformations in today's rapidly changing China.
Chapter 2 Village Background and the “Visiting Marriage” Tradition

Field Site: The Zhaba Valley

The Zhaba (c. Zhaba 扎巴) region of Daofu county, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture was chosen as the overall field site because of its matrilineal kinship system and “visiting marriage” practice.

Located on the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau, the Zhaba Tibetan region is an agro-pastoral community in which all families share the same ethnicity, language, and religion (Tibetan Buddhism). The total area of Zhaba region is about 1,152.70 square meters, and the average altitude is 2,700 meters. The average annual temperature is 9.3 degree Celsius and the annual precipitation is 578-699 mm. Major natural disasters include drought which happens commonly in spring and mudflows caused by heavy rainfall in summer. The major river that flows across the Zhaba region is called the Xianshui River, which joins the Ya-lung River downstream. However, the majority of the land lacks irrigation water resources, so agricultural yields suffer greatly if drought happens.

The Zhaba Tibetans reside in villages on the mountain slopes along the Xianshui River gorge. Arable land is scattered and limited in size. The locals
practice subsistence agriculture as well as animal husbandry. In the past decade, the main crops planted included barley, wheat, rapeseed, potatoes, and cabbage. Most families rear cows as sources of milk and butter for daily consumption. Some families have horses as a means of transportation to higher altitudes during the caterpillar fungus harvest season (around May) and/or for recreational horsing-racing activities during festivals. Before the agricultural decollectivization in 1980, most families in Zhaba also reared dozens of goats and sheep for wool and black pigs for pork.

The Zhaba region underwent a series of administrative changes over the last century. In the traditional era, the Zhaba region was under the administration of the Mingzheng Chief (Hereditary Headman), who lived in Kangding, the current capital city of the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan province. Back then, the Mingzheng Chief governed the 48 Headmen of 100-household units (the Head of 100-households who was the local level leader who governed an area which was equivalent to a modern township). Seven of these 48 Headmen of 100-household units resided in the Zhaba region. At the end of Qing dynasty, the hereditary chieftaincy was abolished and the ethnic minority areas were brought under unified provincial administration. During this time, the Zhaba region was placed under the administration of Daofu county, which was established in 1911. Later on, at the beginning of the Republic of China, the Zhaba region was classified as part of the newly established Qianning county
(Garthar Dzong). In 1978, after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture merged three counties established during the Republic of China, including Qianning, with the other eighteen counties. From then on, the former Qianning county’s four townships, known among the local Tibetans as “Draba” or “Zhaba,” meaning “villages in the upper land,” together with one township in the lower land area, were officially categorized as part of Daofu County, while the remaining two townships in the lower land, known as “Dramai” or “Zhamai,” were categorized as part of Yajiang County. Since the democratic reforms in 1956, the Zhaba region went through the major socio-cultural changes including the people’s commune, the Cultural Revolution, and decollectivization of farmland just as the other parts of rural China, despite its geographic isolation.

Recent studies by Chinese scholars suggests that the majority of Zhaba Tibetans living in the Zhaba region reckon kinship via matrilineality and practice a “visiting marriage” system (c. zouhun 走婚), in which individuals do not change residence from their natal extended households after the establishment of a “visiting marriage” relationship (Feng 2010a, 2010b). That is, they remain in their natal extended households even after they bear or father children. Males, therefore, are visiting “husbands,” who visit a woman for sexual relations, but are not obligated to offer instrumental support for any child she has, or for the woman and her household. Households consist of male and female members descended
from a common female ancestress. This relationship is similar to the “tisese” practice among the Mosuo in China and the Nayar in India (Gough 1959; Cai 2001; Shih 2010) in the sense that there is no “marriage” and no nuclear family. A more detailed discussion on the traditional “visiting marriage” system will be discussed later in this chapter.

Methodology

Fieldwork for the dissertation project was conducted in Yadro township of the Zhaba region for a total of eleven months between June 2014 to May 2017. Yadro township was chosen because it is the geographical and cultural center of the Zhaba region. It is located 71 kilometers south of Daofu county, at an altitude of 3,280 meters. It consists of nine villages, seven of which are agro-pastoral villages and two are pastoral villages at a higher altitude above 4,000 meters. The township government is located by the riverbank at the bottom of the valley, at the same spot where the previous Zhaba Regional Working Committee was located. All the other villages, except one, are located in the mountains away from the township government. During the first two months of preliminary research, I traveled to each of the seven agro-pastoral villages in Yadro township to evaluate them as a potential research site. I interviewed at least one village official in each village in order to obtain an overall description of the specific village regarding its demographics, economic situation, youth migration and so
on. Afterwards, Labo village and Modor village (anonymous) were chosen as the field site for the dissertation research for the following reasons.

First, all of the key informants I interviewed during the preliminary study believed that these two villages are representative of the Zhaba cultural tradition, regarding household composition and “visiting marriage” practice. Second, the lower parts of both villages will be flooded in the following decade because of dam building downstream on the Xianshui River, together with the lower parts of the entire Yadro township. Meanwhile, the township center will be relocated from the valley bottom to a newly constructed place between the two villages. As a result, a great proportion of the households in both villages will suffer from land loss, but will gain state compensation for the flooding and land occupation. This offered a rare opportunity to observe how the locals reorganize their households and envision their future life in reaction to the state-initiated developmental changes. Third, the two villages are geographically adjacent to each other, they belonged to the same commune during the communist era (1956-1980) and still engage in most cultural and political affairs jointly. Thus, the socio-cultural differences between the villages is small enough to be considered as intra-cultural variation. Last but not the least, the short distance between the two villages (about 30 minutes walking) allowed me to commute frequently between the sites to foster rapport with the locals and obtain timely in-depth data.
After finalizing these two villages as my field site, a population census and household survey of every household in the two villages were conducted to gather information on household demographics and composition and to map the distribution of the elderly. The heads of the villages were consulted about the accuracy of the collected data before it was organized and analyzed for the general demographic features.

With the guidance of the census data, I started in-depth interviews with the elderly aged 60 and above on their statuses, relationship with family members, and life stories. Informed by the multi-dimensional definition of the elderly “status” developed by Goldstein and Beall (1981), I examined: a) household status: family structure composition and the elderly’s living arrangements; b) economic status: resources earned or controlled by the elderly, especially pensions; c) psychological status: level of satisfaction with one’s present situation; d) religious status: the role of elderly in ritual life and the role of religious activities in the elderly’s daily life; and e) authority status: power and authority exercised in the family, including the ability to influence household decisions.

One of the ideal ways of living a fulfilling old age among the Zhaba elderly, who are all Tibetan Buddhists, is to withdraw from household chores and be more engaged in practicing Buddhism. To be better able to devote their later years to praying, the Zhaba elderly villagers often leave their households in the
villages and live near to the monastery in their own township where they do circumambulations every day. In reality, a remarkable number of elderly rotate between helping their families out with household chores, mostly herding cows and taking care of grandchildren during the summer time, and living by the monastery in winter. In order to better understand the Zhaba elderly’s religious status, and compare those who live by the monastery with those who reside solely in the villages, I also spent one month living by the monastery and participated in the elderly’s daily ritual activities while also conducting in-depth interviews with seven elderly individuals during the winter of 2015-2016. Although most of these were not from the sampled villages, interviews with them helped shed light upon the elderly lives of the broad Zhaba region.

Moreover, to examine intergenerational relations, I interviewed the elderly regarding their relationships with spouses/conjugal partners, siblings, sons/daughters, nephews/nieces, in-laws, and grandchildren using the combination of life-course (Bengston and Allen 1993; Hareven 1994; Atkinson 1998) and person-centered (Levy and Hollan 1998) strategies. This set of interview techniques enabled me to gain a diachronic perspective of the elderly’s relationship with household members and outsiders over the life-course, how the elderly individuals reacted to the young adults’ marital choice and residential arrangements, and how household property was divided when it came to household division. Guided by these interviews, I was drawn to the importance of
changing ideals among middle-aged and young villagers, thus, I further interviewed the adult members using the same set of interview techniques to understand how they understood the local traditions and family ideals, especially in terms of education, marital choices and migration. Interviews were audio recorded with the informants’ oral consent and notes were taken during the interviews.

Throughout the course of fieldwork, participant observation was employed and detailed field notes were maintained on a daily basis. Because no empty room was available either in the villages or the township government which was located at the bottom of the mountain far from the selected villages, I stayed with two typical matrilineal extended families while conducting research in the villages, and lived in another family’s monastery house with their elderly mother while carrying out research near the monastery. Residing with the locals and participating in their daily activities enabled me to build rapport with the villagers, examine the interpersonal interactions as they occurred naturally within and outside of households, and check on the interview data by revealing, for example, whether elderly overemphasized the importance of a support provider.

The spoken language used among the Zhaba Tibetans is a unique colloquial language, which is neither Tibetan nor Mandarin Chinese. It is only used in this area with distinct geographic boundaries, and no formal training
program is available outside of this area. However, the majority of encountered Zhaba Tibetans, even the elderly, were also fluent in the Sichuan dialect of Mandarin, which is my native tongue. During my stay in the villages, I was able to hire language teachers and became fluent in basic rudimentary Zhaba language. My endeavors in language learning, and active participation in village gatherings such as weddings, New Year celebrations and religious activities, have greatly helped me gain the villagers’ trust. Consequently, as I stayed longer, people were more and more open to me in our conversations, regarding sensitive topics such as their love stories, income sources and management, and conflicts within the household between family members.

**Historical Changes**

**The Traditional Era (pre-1956)**

The pre-democratic reform Zhaba region was a feudal estate system, but in comparison with the traditional estate system in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, there were no aristocratic families nor a religious sector of monasteries in Zhaba to share the ownership of the lands. Instead, all the lands belonged to the heads-of-100-households units, who were under the supervision of the Mingzheng Chief (Hereditary Headman) in Kangding, as introduced earlier in this chapter.
The local term for the head-of-100-households is “Benkha.” One Benkha governed the area which was equivalent to a contemporary township. There were several officials who worked under the Benkha. First, there was the “Lhunbu,” who was a consultant and was in total charge when the Benkha was absent. Under the Benkha there was also a “genba,” who was the counterpart of a modern village headman. The Genba was either assigned by the Benkha or elected by the villagers, to serve as a local leader. The Genba had an assistant called “Dandu,” whose job was to deliver messages, escort guests, and conduct other miscellaneous chores (Feng 2010b).

Figure 2-1 Administrative Structure in Zhaba During the Traditional Era
The position of Head-of-100-households was hereditary through his male heirs. However, not all heads-of-100-households were married and had with their sons living in the same household because of the “visiting marriage” tradition. In this case, his nephew would be considered as a rightful heir, or if he had no nephew, his “deli” or “illegitimate son” living in another household would be considered as a rightful candidate to participate in a democratic election held in the township and compete with other capable persons for the title.

All villagers were required to pay a land tax and fulfill corvée obligations. The land tax was calculated by the area and quality of lands being planted. Every house was assigned various plots of land. The full tax for one mu (1 mu = 0.067 hectares) of land was 10 jin (11 lbs, 1 jin=1.1 lbs) from its yield. However, because the lands were variable in quality and productivity, other fields were responsible for only half or a quarter of the “full” tax. If a household failed to manage the land well, the head-of-100-household would confiscate the land and redistribute it to someone else, while giving a small piece of land to feed the family, free from taxes. Households which suffered from food insufficiency would work for another household to earn grain, either as a year-long laborer, or for short-term labor. The payment for such labor was about one “pei” (pei is a traditional measuring unit which was equal to 850g or 1.87 lbs) of grain per day.
The heads-of-the-100-household traveled to Kangding once every three years for meetings with their supervisors, and the five heads-of-100-household in Zhaba gathered together annually to assign tasks and plots of lands to the villagers and to calculate the tax for each household. As part of the corvée obligations, the villagers had to offer either a horse for the Benka’s travels or human labor to lead the horse if they did not own one. Other obligations included offering annual gifts, building his house, cooking, preparing for firewood, fetching water and so on.

Besides the head-of-100-households, each household was also obligated to offer a bottle of barley wine, a piece of smoked pork and pieces of bread to the monastery every January 15th in the lunar calendar. In contrast to the situation in political Tibet where the monasteries were holders of estates, monasteries in Zhaba were not involved in land management in the traditional era. The head-of-100-households maintained a mutually supportive relationship with the monastery. Every year the head assigned a small plot of land with all its yield going to the monastery, and the monastery held an annual rite to pray for good yields and a good harvest for the villagers in return.

The Communist Era (1956-1978)

The Chinese Communist Party launched democratic reforms which involved land reform in the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in 1956. This
was also when the People's Liberation Army marched into the Zhaba region. The monastery was overthrown and all the monks were made lay men and participated in agricultural production. Households were also categorized into different classes—landlord, rich peasant, upper-middle peasant, middle-peasant, lower-middle peasant, and poor peasant.

In 1958, when the state launched the commune system, Labo village and Modor village were organized into the same commune. Several local villagers were elected as the commune chief (c. shezhang 社长), captain (c. daduizhang 大队长), vice-captain (c. xiaoduizhang 小队长), accountant, granary custodian and so on as the administrative team.

During the commune era, all the lands belonged to the state and people worked together according to the same schedule, with very limited personal freedom and few opportunities to seek cash income elsewhere. The elderly villagers recalled that it was required by the commune that one should first obtain permission from various levels of leaders of the commune to leave, and they had to turn in their income later on. If a leave was not permitted, one had to work together with the commune and conform to the collective schedule. At that time, different tasks were awarded work points, varying from one to ten based on the difficulty of accomplishing the work. There was no time limit to finish a certain
type of work, but whatever one accomplished was recorded on a daily basis. At the end of each year, the commune would add up all the work points that each person earned for the year. Afterwards, the work points were used towards distributing grain, and each person got about 360 jin (396 lbs) of grain per year. If the work points were not enough to cover the cost of this grain, the household had to borrow grain from the collective grain bank, using work points in the following year as credit to be paid back; if there were still work points left after paying for the grain, they would be converted to cash. One could get about 400 yuan maximum. Thus, the more labors a household had, the easier life would be in the communist era.

Productivity was not high despite the long working hours during the commune era because people were not working on their own land and because there were a series of “transfers,” called by euphemisms like “patriotic grain,” which were given to the government. The yields then were low, only about 100 jin (110 lbs) of grain per mu of land, which was not enough to feed all the commune members and the collective grain bank always ran out. The elderly persons recalled how poor everyone was during the communist era and that it was common to see people walk around in bare feet wearing clothes that were covered with patches. There were no quilts and people slept under their own coat or wool blankets made by themselves.
The Economic Reform Era (1978-Present)

Like most villages across rural China, the most significant feature of the post-Mao era was the decollectivization of land. In Zhaba, this was implemented in two phases—decollectivization of the commune’s land to the village level (c. baochandaozu 包产到组) in 1978, and the second time was the distribution to the households (c. baochandaohu 包产到户) in 1980.

At the time of decollectivization in 1980, each adult laborer was assigned 3.3 mu of land, while each child got 1.5 mu, with the average land per capita being 2.9 mu (1 mu equals to 0.067 hectares). At the household level, the amount of land obtained at decollectivization varied from seven to fifty mu based on the number of household members, with an average of 23.6 mu. After decollectivization, the locals energetically engaged in their own farm work and the yields of grain increased dramatically to about 300 jin (330 lbs) per mu of land.

However, land per household kept shrinking over the past two decades due to development programs and state policies that confiscated parts of the households’ land for other purposes. For example, in response to the “Conversion of Farmland to Forest” Program, announced by the state in 2003, every household gave up various amounts of arable land to plant trees, most
commonly, walnut trees for this program. The state compensation for the program was 260 yuan per mu of land in 2015. More recently, since 2014, a number of households in Labo and Modor villages whose land happened to be on a construction site, lost land for the construction of a new township and a new provincial highway.

Consequently, nowadays, agricultural yield from the villagers’ own farmland is insufficient to support the entire household, and not a single household in the two villages is able to produce enough grain to meet their family’s food needs. Even so, no household uses fertilizers to increase the yield for the fear of harming their own health. Meanwhile, every household spends money on purchasing staple food such as rice and noodles. During the busy spring planting season and autumn harvesting time, the Zhaba Tibetans add a fourth meal around 4 o’clock in the afternoon before they go back to the farmland and work until the daylight is completely gone at around eight o’clock for dinner. Villagers consume tsamba (parched barley flour) with sugar and butter and milk tea for breakfast on a daily basis. For other meals, the most common staple food is rice, noodles, and a hand-made round bread made from wheat flour called momo (馍馍). Stir-fried dishes are made every day, usually with potatoes and cabbages from their own land. During the warm season from May to September, yogurt is made when milk from the cows is abundant. Since no households raise
poultry and they stopped raising pigs three decades ago, villagers have to buy meat, eggs, or other kinds of vegetables from the restaurants in the township or travel to the market in Daofu county for more options at a cheaper price.

There is a state-owned grain supply center near the township government, which sells staple foods including rice, wheat flour, and noodles. Villagers from the entire Yadro township make frequent purchases, especially around the end of the year, when they receive various state issued compensations. Generally, a household of five people buys 500 kilos of wheat flour, which cost 1850 yuan in 2016, and 50 kilos of rice per year.

Since the economic reform in 1980, government-led lumber projects were launched in this area, and the first paved road was constructed connecting the Zhaba region to the Daofu county seat in the north and Yajiang county in the south. Afterwards, Zhaba men were able to find off-farm odd jobs, such as wood chopping for the nearby lumber factories. A more detailed discussion of migration work and income opportunities will be made in the following section on the household property.

The Corporate Family

The family is called “yi he” in the Zhaba language, which literally means “the inside of a house,” suggesting the importance of a house for a family. The Zhaba Tibetans’ houses are built from the bottom to the top of the mountain.
slope, alongside the Xianshui River. Their houses are located in a very dispersed manner, with at most five houses being neighbors to each other. A typical Zhaba house is a multi-story (usually five) house made of locally quarried stones with wooden pillars as the supporting frame. The first floor accommodates the cows at night. The second floor is the kitchen, living room, and bedroom for mostly the elderly. Up till now, there is no natural gas in the Zhaba region and wood is used as cooking fuel. In the traditional era, the stove was a simple, round-shaped three-legged one, around which people sat on the floor while having their meals. They recalled how smoky it was and how the walls and furniture always turned black. Over the past two decades, every household replaced the traditional stove with a box-shaped steel stove with a chimney pipe going to the outdoors from the balcony on the top floor. It costs about 2,000 yuan. Preparations for firewood has always been essential for the Zhaba Tibetans. Usually, the young people would go to the woods above another village in Yadro township to cut the trees and bring them back with either their own truck or a truck borrowed from fellow villagers. Sometimes, people go down to the Xianshui River when it is flowing at its peak in July and August, and gather the floating logs washed down from upstream. No household in the villages spends money on firewood. The third floor is used for hay storage and beds for other household members. The fourth floor is a half-open space. There is a sacred shrine room there, which is usually the best-furnished and decorated room in the entire household. It also serves as
the bedroom for monk member(s) whenever they come back from the monastery. Outside the shrine room there is a rooftop platform, connected to the toilet. Beyond this level, there are two smaller platforms with usually a small stupa. The floors are connected by narrow and steep wooden ladders, which can be challenging for little children and the elderly with knee problems to go up and down.

All of the current residential houses in the villages were built within the past three decades, meaning that all of the households rebuilt or expanded their houses after the decollectivization in 1980. The majority of housing styles have not changed dramatically, except that houses in the traditional era had much smaller windows, due to the fear of robbery. House construction relies largely on the labors of fellow villagers and the work is strictly reciprocal. There is a written village contract (c. cungui 村规) which declares that whenever one family is going to build a new house, the other families are supposed to lend at least one capable laborer to help.

In Zhaba, all the households are named corporate families. Each house has a unique name which is passed on across generations as the household’s name, and is different from the names of the household members. The household name carries rich cultural meaning and is considered crucial for holding the family members together. Most of the household names are passed
down from so many generations ago that even the household members cannot explain the meaning. For those who can, a household name might be one describing the surrounding environment. For instance, one household was built on the upper ridge of the mountain and resembles an elephant trunk, so it got its household name which describes the root of an elephant trunk. A household name might also explain the origin of the family, for instance, the name “Dechen” was used when one family moved to the Zhaba village from a place called Dechen in Tibet.

The household name refers to the living environment of a specific family, not to a particular house per se. For instance, if the old building of the house “Ula” was abandoned, the newly built house will also be called “Ula.” Moreover, in cases of household division, the new house will usually continue using the natal house’s household name, adding the term “Konse” at the end, which means “new house,” as its household name. Or, based on the new house’s location in comparison with the old house, they add the term “melikay” meaning “below,” or “rokay” meaning “above,” to the old household name as its new name.

Household names are used along with the members’ personal names, when referring to someone in particular. For example, if there are more than one person named “Tashi Norbu” in the village and people need to talk about the “Tashi Norbu” from “Dechen” family, they will use “Dechen Norbu” to specify the
subject. This title change is crucial when people change residence from their natal household to their husband or wife’s household. For example, if “Dechen Norbu” married into the Ula house, he would become “Ula Norbu” thereafter.

The locals believe that the household name acts as the fundamental symbol of a household. Members under the same roof belong to the same household name, and the female members of a household are supposed to carry on the household name and family line by adding newborns to it. If the female member(s) fail to give birth, or if they choose to marry out and leave the household, one male member is supposed to remain and marry a woman from another household, such practice will be elaborated later.

The most desired family composition for the Zhaba Tibetans is an extended multi-generational household with both males and females in the young adult generation. At the time when the census was conducted in 2015, there were 242 people living in the two villages including seasonal migrant workers and children, but excluding individuals who married out. They were organized into forty households. The most common form of household composition was the ones with three generations (52.5%, see Table 2-1), and five to seven persons (60%, see Table 2-2). The mean number of household members was 6.05, and the mean number of generations was 2.75.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of generation within the household</th>
<th>Number of Households</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people in the household</td>
<td>Number of household(s)</td>
<td>Percentage %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Goldstein (1971) labels the Tibetan families as “corporate households,” which means that all members contributed their labor and income to a common pool and that individuals put the good of the family in front of their own desires. The principles of corporate households apply for the Zhaba Tibetan families as well, with all the family members putting their income together as the communal
household property, managed by the head of the household. Although the Zhaba Tibetans identify relatives and organize their family based on matrilineality, they are quite patriarchal, meaning the ones who hold power and authority within the households are predominately men. In a typical matrilineal household, the head of the household should always be the uncle, or what the locals call “awu.” If there are multiple brothers or uncles in the family, the one with the better/best capability of earning benefits or income for the household would be the head. If there is no uncle in the household because of imbalanced childbirth or outmigration or marriage, one of the female members’ visiting partners will be married in and be the head of the household, which will further be discussed in the following section on local marital traditions. In all forty households in Labo and Modor village, only one household was headed by a female member. She took the role after her husband died in an accident in 2014. As shown in table 2-3, approximately half of the households are headed by the uncle/brother, the other half headed by the father/husband (the in-marrying groom or a man who stayed in the household but married a bride in), and the heads of the household are mostly young and middle-aged men. More specifically, the young men who are heads of the households mostly are between 35-44 years of age; only two men among thirty-three younger cohort aged from 20 to 29 years old are head of the households.
Table 2-3. Detailed Household Headship of the Households

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Uncle/Brother</th>
<th>Father/Husband</th>
<th>Mother/Widow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-aged</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gendered Division of Labor

One of the most significant features of the traditional patriarchal Han Chinese families is son preference over daughters. For the matrilineal Zhaba Tibetans, this is not the case: no particular sex of children is favored and sons and daughters are considered as equals for the household. However, one fundamental rule that every household is supposed to abide by is that there must be both genders within the young adult generation. People believe that this is because traditional labor in Zhaba is highly gendered so a household cannot fulfill all the necessary labor without having both male and female members in its adult generation. In the traditional era, women were responsible for planting the land, milking the cows, making butter, and making fabrics from the wool of the goats and sheep that they raised back then. They had to comb the wool, spin the wool by hand to create yarn, and weave it into clothes or blankets. The elderly remembered that in the old days, women were busy all day long and could hardly
take a break. Often, when women were carrying construction materials on their backs when helping out with building a new house, their hands were still busy with spinning the wool. For adult men, their primary task was to plow the land twice a year, once before the spring planting season and once after the harvest in the fall. In the past, almost every household owned a pair of cattle, and it was always the men who controlled the two cattle that were pulling the plow and loosening the dirt in the land before the spring planting. Also, regardless of age, men were responsible for sewing clothes and fixing the leather soles. During the communist era, women were responsible for picking up the barley/wheat stalks from the fields after the harvest while men were supposed to pile them up together. The elderly above 70 years old did not have to work in the commune, but they still helped out with herding the cows and piling up the grain stalks. Nowadays, men are even more needed and engage in more agricultural work than they were in the traditional era due to the introduction of agricultural machinery, as men are believed to be more capable of using the machinery than women. In spring and fall, every household must have an adult man to use the hand-held tractor to plow the fields. As a result, a man cannot engage in year-long migrant work if his family has no other available male laborer, and he could only take up seasonal odd jobs from March to September.
Sources of Income and Caterpillar Fungus

The most significant income for the Zhaba households is generated from off-farm wage labor, which is consistent with findings of the rural Tibetan families in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Goldstein et al. 2008). As mentioned earlier, farming and herding in Zhaba is mostly for subsistence and rarely provides cash income. Only one household in the two villages (2.5%) mentioned that they sometimes sold their surplus butter for a few hundred yuan (120 yuan per kilo) per year.

All of the forty households (100%) in the villages had at least one income earner, and most (42.5%) of the households had two wage laborers (see table 2-4). More specifically, there were eighty villagers who earned cash income from July 2015 to July 2016. The majority of them (75%) were males, while only twenty females (25%) earned cash income. The largest category was unskilled manual labor jobs (63.75%, see table 2-5), most commonly as construction laborers doing work such as carrying loads, mixing cement, and so on. In 2015-16, such manual labor jobs could earn about 120 yuan per day. In comparison, villagers with the skills of carpentry, stonemasonry, and painting earned more about 150-180 yuan per day. In addition, seventeen villagers received salary for serving in current positions in the village committee, or previous employments in
the government, primary school, or rural credit cooperatives. Three female villagers earned money from being a waitress in the restaurants in the township.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Wage Laborers</th>
<th>Number of Household</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-5. Wage Laborers by Job Category, 2015-16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Category</th>
<th>Number of Laborers</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual labor</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>63.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled labor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail store</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waitress</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caterpillar fungus Collector</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chinese scholar Feng Min, who conducted research in the Zhaba region in 2007, argued that the most significant source of cash income for the Zhaba Tibetan households was the collection and trade of caterpillar fungus (Feng 2010b). My field research in 2015-16, however, reveals the declining contribution of caterpillar fungus in total household income. Known as Yartsa Gunbu among
Tibetans or “summer grass winter worm” (c. dongchong xiacao 冬虫夏草) among Chinese, caterpillar fungus (cordyceps sinensis) is an insect-parasitizing fungus endemic to the Tibetan Plateau. Both Tibetan Medicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine document caterpillar fungus’s medicinal values, and it is widely acknowledged by the Chinese as a precious tonic to boost immunity and has become a luxury gift (Yeh and Lama 2013). Over the past two decades, there has been a huge demand for caterpillar fungus by the Han Chinese both within and outside China, which resulted in the skyrocketing price of caterpillar fungus, making it one of the most important sources of cash income for rural Tibetan households in areas where it is present (Winkler 2008).

According to Winkler (2009) who reviewed all the available figures form the Tibetan Plateau, Sichuan province is estimated as the region with the third biggest annual production of caterpillar fungus (17.9%), following Qinghai province (39.3%) and Tibet Autonomous Region (32.1%). The Zhaba region is home to the caterpillar fungus and other lucrative fungus resources. In the Zhaba language, caterpillar fungus is called “bobbi,” which literally means “worm.” Villagers said that they had been collecting and selling caterpillar fungus for more than twenty years, and the scale of local involvement used to be very significant. Not only did the adult laborers set up camps or build simple houses on the alpine grasslands, but also young children were brought up to increase the total number
of collected worms to make money for the household. The headmaster of Yadro township primary school recalled that about a decade ago, whenever it was the caterpillar fungus harvest season, the classrooms of the fifth and sixth grade would almost be empty because the bigger kids would withdraw from school to collect caterpillar fungus with their adult family members. As a result, the teachers had to visit the students’ households before they left to talk with their adult family members out of the idea of having the young students collecting caterpillar fungus, because when the students came back to school after missing six weeks’ classes, they could not pass exams and had to repeat attending the same grade. In fact, five males out of all the thirty-three young adults aged from 20 to 29 years (15.2%) said that the direct reason why they dropped out of school was for digging caterpillar fungus. All, except two young females aged from 20 to 29 years (93.9%) reported that they had participated in the harvest for at least a year, if not every year till now. One of the two females who never participated in finding caterpillar fungus said that about eight years ago in 2007, her mother, her aunt, and two elder brothers would all leave the household for the worms, leaving no other female member to do the daily chores at home. So she had to get up early to light the fire to make breakfast tea and do other chores, even though she was only thirteen years old. She recalled how frequently her mother asked her to take a leave from school for chores at home.
The alpine grassland on which caterpillar fungus grow is located at a higher elevation than the villages and is about one-day’s walking distance away from the villages. It is considered a communal resource and is divided among villages with strict boundaries. Only residents of the village have access rights to its specific grasslands. However, even though fellow villagers collected caterpillar fungus within the same area, the number each individual could dig varied dramatically. There are people who can always find the worms with satisfactory quality and quantity, while there are villagers who just cannot spot them. The locals believe that it takes sharp eyes and luck to find caterpillar fungus, which is why after one or two years of frustration, people who did not excel at searching for the worms would switch to other types of off-farm wage labor instead of going up on the mountains for caterpillar fungus.

The transaction price of caterpillar fungus in Zhaba kept decreasing in the past three years or so. For example, in 2013, one specimen of the average quality of worm could be sold for about 40 yuan to the dealers at the township level, while in 2015, 25 yuan per piece was considered as a very good price. Because of the dropping market value, an increasing number of households rebuilding their houses which requires help from fellow villagers, and the labor opportunities created by on-going construction projects in the township, the number of villagers who participated in caterpillar fungus had been decreasing. In the 2016 harvest season, only twelve out of the forty households (30%) were
involved in collecting caterpillar fungus. This is significantly low considering that several years ago every single household in the villages participated. Among these twelve households, six households (50%) provided only one member, while the other six households had two members who participated. Specifically, there were eighteen villagers who were up in the mountains for caterpillar fungus, seven males (42.1%) and eleven females (57.9%), and most of them (66.7%) were under 34 years old (see table 2-4).

| Table 2-6. Demographic Distribution of Caterpillar Fungus Collectors in 2016 |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                 | Male        | Female      | Total       | Percentage %|
| 20-24           | 1           | 2           | 3           | 16.7        |
| 25-29           | 1           | 2           | 3           | 16.7        |
| 30-34           | 1           | 5           | 6           | 33.3        |
| 35-39           | 1           | 1           | 2           | 11.1        |
| 40-44           | 0           | 1           | 1           | 5.6         |
| 45-49           | 1           | 0           | 1           | 5.6         |
| 50-54           | 2           | 0           | 2           | 11.1        |
| Total           | 7           | 11          | 18          | 100         |

These collectors each gathered from 70 to 240 pieces of caterpillar fungus in 2016. Since there were no buyers on the slopes, they took them back home to the head of the household to decide when and how to sell. Afterwards, one of the twelve households sold them to a distant relative at 18 yuan per piece, while all
the others sold to local dealers at 18 to 25 yuan per piece based on the size and quality of caterpillar fungus, and gained instant cash. The mean income for caterpillar fungus at 2016 among all the participating household was 4137.7 yuan, ranging in amount from 1400 yuan to 8250 yuan. The villagers complained about the declining value of caterpillar fungus because three to ten years ago, each collector was able to make at least 5,000 yuan per year for the household. Most commonly, part or all of the cash income from caterpillar fungus would immediately be used by the head of the household towards purchasing snacks and beverages for the second most important festival after the Lunar New Year—"Ngapa Festival" or the "May 5th Festival"—which falls on early or mid-June, right after the harvest of caterpillar fungus. Villagers gather together and set up camps to sing and dance, in celebration of summer.

Nowadays there are some other significant sources of cash income from state-issued compensation and welfare. Some of the state-issued funding that goes to every household yearly includes: compensation for the National Non-Commercial Forest (c. jiti gongyilin shengtai xiaoyi buchang 集体公益林生态效益补偿) at 630 yuan per person, compensation for Conversion of Farmland to Forest Program (c. tuigeng huanlin 退耕还林) at 260 yuan per mu of land, and compensation for the Conversion of Farmland to Grassland Program (c. tuigeng...
huancao 退耕还草) at 209 per person. In addition to the above annual state compensations at the household level, about fifty villagers who did not have a reliable source of income received a guaranteed minimum income (c. zuidishenghuobaozhang 最低生活保障 or dibao 低保) from the state. Types of the guaranteed minimum income vary based on the recipient’s level of poverty, first-category guaranteed minimum income offers 1,200 yuan per year and second-category offers the recipient 960 yuan per year. The ones with least supporting recourses are classified as “Five Guarantee Households” (c. wubaohu 五保户) with the state guaranteeing proper food, clothing, medical care, housing, and funeral expenses at 3,000 yuan per year. Meanwhile, starting from 2012, rural elderly people above 60 years of age began receiving state pensions at 660 yuan per year, which was issued around the end of each year together with the other types of welfare.

According to the township government documents, the average income per capita was 4652.5 yuan in 2014. My data on household income from July 2015 to July 2016 suggests an increase of annual income per capita to 7,323.02 yuan, with the total annual income per household at 43,675.56 yuan, excluding the state compensation to nine households for flooding. A breakdown of household cash income sources is demonstrated below in table 2-7.
Table 2-7. Sources of Income per Household 2015-16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Income Per Household</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State compensations*</td>
<td>9440.8</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare and pension</td>
<td>2574.6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>12043.6</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caterpillar fungus</td>
<td>2068.9</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-farm wage labor</td>
<td>17525</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total income per household</strong></td>
<td><strong>43675.56</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Compensations include compensation for the National Non-Commercial Forest, for Conversion of Farmland to Forest Program, for the Conversion of Farmland to Grassland Program, and land occupation for the new township.

Research literature focusing on the caterpillar fungus economy on the Tibetan Plateau argues that cash income from caterpillar fungus accounts for 40% of rural cash income (Winkler 2008), however, household economy data from my field site suggests that this is an overestimation. As shown in table 2-7, income from caterpillar fungus comprises only 4.7% of all the household income. Even if we just examine the household income of all the twelve households which were involved in digging caterpillar fungus, the average percentage was only 9.37% which is nowhere near 40%. While state compensations and salaries are both important components of local household income, the most significant income comes from wage laboring, mostly in the construction industry.
The real income explosion for nine households in 2015 and 2016, which was not included in table 2-7 on household income, was the state compensation for flooding and relocation. As mentioned earlier, the lower parts of both villages will be flooded in the following decade because of dam building downstream on the Xianshui River, and the township center will be relocated from the valley bottom to a newly constructed place between the two villages. The state conducted a survey in 2009 and kept a record of the housing area, size of land, and the number of commercial trees such as apple trees and walnut trees for every affected household, and calculated the amount of compensation based on these items. Compensation for flooded land would be issued once the flooding actually happened and the tentative amount had increased from 1580 yuan per mu in 2014 to 2090 yuan per mu in 2015, and was still under negotiation. Since 2014, the state compensation for trees and houses was paid in two installments to the nine households, so that people could start building their new houses and preparing to relocate. Depending on the square feet, interior conditions of the old houses and the number of surrounding trees, the amount of compensation for houses varied from 100,000 to 770,000 yuan, which was a significant amount for local households. Upon receiving the compensation, five of the nine households (55.6%) immediately used the money to purchase construction materials and started building new houses. Five households (55.6%) supported one of their
household members going to driving school and tests for a license, while two households bought a car.

My fieldwork from 2015 to 2016 happened to be at the time when the households to be affected by flooding had received their state housing funding and started building their new houses at a higher altitude above the flooding zone. In the meantime, the only monastery in Yadro township was building a new main hall. Consequently, many wage laborers who used to go out for work actually stayed in the villages to help with building new houses, or the new monastery, or worked on local construction projects. Working for the monastery was without payment but the laborers were happy to do that for it was considered collecting good karma for themselves. Building new houses for the fellow villagers were mostly out of reciprocity without cash payment as well. But villagers who had expertise such as carpenters and stonemasons, still earned wages at 150 yuan per day including meals from the household building new houses. Consequently, household economy data collected during my fieldwork as shown in table 2-7 might not accurately reflect the average amount of cash income obtained from off-farm wage labors by the household over the past few years.
Matrilineal Family Ideals and Institutionalized Sexual Union

The matrilineal Zhaba Tibetans trace their kinship line and pass down their property, such as house and land, through the matrilineality, that is through a female ancestress through female links. They believe that relatives connected by blood (descent) through mothers are of one root and should stay together and support each other within the same household. For example, children of the male members are outsiders of the family, while the male and female children of different female members are considered members of the matrilineal household and are supposed to stay in the household and inherit household property. Children of different female members are not considered as different sets of heirs who would potentially divide the corporate household.

However, when the household’s young adult generation lacks Ideally, a family should have both son(s) and daughter(s) for a fully functional household. For example, whenever a female member is pregnant and about to add a new member to the household, the household members prefer whichever sex is absent in the household. If one family ended up having only sons or daughters in the young adult generation, whether as a result of imbalanced childbirth or outmigration, one of the sons or daughters is supposed to marry a spouse who would join the household. In such cases, however, the matrilineal line is not strictly enforced because otherwise a female relative from the maternal side
should be brought into the household, rather than marrying in a female member of another matrilineal household in order to achieve gender balance and add newborns to the household. In this sense, the Zhaba Tibetans are bilateral as the Tibetan families in TAR, despite having matrilineal families.

Nonetheless, there should never be two married couples within the same generation for the fear of competition and conflicts over authority within the household. Once a family member has married, no one from the same generation can marry another person into the family. However, they can practice “visiting marriage” or marry out and leave the household. Thus, the joint family structure does not exist, and the traditional Tibetan stem family ideal as described by Goldstein (1971) is practiced.

“Gayi”—“Visiting Marriage” and Duolocal Residence

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, previous research conducted by Chinese scholars suggests that the majority of Zhaba Tibetans practice “visiting marriage.” My own household survey data on marital status supports this argument. As shown in table 2-8, only forty-four persons (26.8%) of all the 164 adult villagers were married and live together with their partners, while eighty-three people (50.6%) practice “visiting marriage.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Visiting Marriage”</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>50.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Singe” means that person never had a long-term gayi in “visiting marriage” or marriage; “Divorced” and “widowed” refer to the current status of someone who was ever married.

In the local term, “visiting marriage” is called “re-dro-i-zhe.” “Re” refers to the woman, “i” means go or commute, and the phrase literally means “going to the woman’s place.” However, this is more descriptive than expressive, and no one says this phrase openly. Partners in this visiting relationship are called “gayi,” literally “the lovely person” or “lover” to each other (this is somewhat similar to Tibetan term because “ga” means “like” in Tibetan and girlfriend or sweetheart is called “garo”). A gayi could either be as short as a one-night partner or as long as a life-time partner. Although it appears that both “re-dro-i-zhe” and “gayi” describe a generic and friendly nature, they refer to sex without connoting it.
The gayi relationship is based on two people’s free will and often begins at social encounters. Decades ago, when a man set eyes on a woman, he would ask for the woman’s household name and its members’ sleeping arrangements, whether directly or indirectly, and then go to the woman at night by stepping over the exterior wall and climbing into her household through whichever window was next to her bed. Allegedly, a mutual consensus must be reached between the two partners before he is allowed to visit. Usually, it starts with a man snatching an item from the women, if she is not furious then the mutual consensus is accomplished, and the man would return the item to the woman at night. However, in my interviews with the local women, this is not always true. Many men showed up without the women’s approval, some were even strangers to the women. If this happened, one women said that she stopped the stranger’s visit by pouring leftover dishes on the man’s face when she heard that he was climbing the wall towards her window. In most cases, however, the woman approved of his stay in the same bed to talk but not have sex. They do not seem to be offended or furious when talking about these situations, and often describe these men who showed up without approval and begged to stay as “pitiful” (c. zaonie 造孽). Since the introduction of cellphones in Zhaba about two decades ago, young people have been using cellphones to text or talk before the man’s physical visit. When he visits, he can just enter his gayi’s house through the front
door secretly opened by the woman without having to climb into house. Thus, as an outdated behavior, “climb the house” (c. pa fang zi 爬房子) has become a metaphorical phrase to refer to a man’s pursuit of a woman and the visit of a woman’s male gayi.

Family members generally do not intervene in the young person’s love life. Even in the traditional era, there was hardly any parentally arranged marriages in Zhaba, which differs significantly from the traditional Han Chinese and even the Tibetan families in the TAR. However, both partners deliberately kept it a secret from their family members at the early stage of a gayi relationship. The man had to sneak in to the woman’s household to her bed to avoid the woman’s older family members. Later on, if they become longer-term gayi in a stable visiting relationship or if the woman got pregnant, she will let her family know about him so that he no longer needs to sneak in every time when he comes over.

The fundamental feature of “visiting marriage” is duolocal residence, meaning that the partners still belong to their own natal households without moving in together. In order to sustain a long-term “visiting marriage,” the male gayi should frequently commute between the woman’s household and his own, consequently, the majority of the long-term gayi live within the same village or nearby villages. Nowadays, every household in the villages in this area owns at least one motorbike, some even own a car, with mainly the young adult males
being the drivers. Thus, modern means of transportation have contributed to fostering “visiting marriage” among gayi at a greater distance across villages or even townships.

Nonetheless, there is strict incest taboo in “visiting marriage.” Relatives within seven generations from both the mothers’ and fathers’ side cannot become gayi to each other, which again suggests that while the Zhaba families are mostly matrilineal, relatives are defined bilaterally like the Tibetans in TAR. Furthermore, there are various proscriptions regarding language and behavior between the siblings of the opposite sex. For example, it is forbidden to talk about one’s gayi and relationships, or even mention the word “gayi” or “re-dro-i-zhe” in the presence of one’s opposite sex sibling. On the other hand, it is possible for a man to visit two sisters at the same time, or two brothers to visit one girl simultaneously. But this was not common, only one elderly man in the villages mentioned that he visited two sisters from the same household.

Research literature on the matrilineal Mosuo people who also practice “visiting marriage” conceptualized the custom as nonexclusive, noncontractual, and nonobligatory, arguing that the visiting system is an “institutionalized sexual union” rather than a form of marriage (Shih 1993, 2000, 2010). These features also apply to the traditional visiting relationships in Zhaba. Nonexclusive means both the male and the female can have more than one gayi simultaneously.
According to the locals, it was common for the Zhaba Tibetans to have twenty or thirty gayi over the course of their lives before the 1980s. But among all the visiting partners, there is a distinction between long-term gayi and short-term gayi, based on the length of time spent together, the intensity of love, and whether there is child born out of their relationships. Most commonly, the father of a woman's first child would become her long-term gayi, and she would be expected to stop seeing other men after the establishment of a long-term gayi relationship. Feng (2010) explained it as the upper hand of men, when women were supposed to be exclusive to her long-term male gayi, while the male gayi could still see other women simultaneously. But, if the father of the first child was already a long-term gayi of another woman and they had children, the long-term gayi relationship could not be established and the woman would still be open to other visitors. With this being said, the long-term gayi relationship takes mutual commitment and is much more stable and exclusive than the short-term gayi relationship. Furthermore, the sense of “nonexclusiveness” has been declining over the past few decades. For example, one 63-year-old woman and one 59-year-old woman in the villages had children with different men, while three elderly men had children with more than one woman. But when I asked twelve of the fifteen male villagers in their 20s if they visited multiple gayi at the same time, all of them denied it. One man even got offended by the question and argued that people outside had imagined “visiting marriage” to be too promiscuous, while in
reality, they just visited one gayi at a time, and if things didn’t work out, they would then start visiting the next gayi. So, for the young people, “visiting marriage” is more like “serial monogamy” rather than seeing multiple partners simultaneously. Last but not the least, the long-term gayi would be considered as the candidate for establishing a neolocal nuclear household if they were to move in together, which will further be discussed in chapter three and four.

Additionally, no contract or commitment is necessary between the gayi. If one day the man decides not to visit the woman ever again and end this visiting relationship, he is free from moral condemnation and the woman would not try to question him nor get him back. As one 45-year-old woman, whose gayi stopped visiting her after they already had a daughter put it eloquently, “It doesn’t matter if they throw us away (c. shuaile bucunzai 甩了不存在). Have you ever seen anyone of us crying? No! To cry about what? We have brothers.”

As this quote also implies, “visiting marriage” is not obligatory. The partners are not obligated to offer any type of instrumental support for each other. Any child born from a “visiting marriage,” regardless of the continuity status of the relationship will be raised by the female side’s matrilineal family. The “brother,” or the children’s maternal “uncle” is the most important figure in the household, and he should provide care to raise the children of his natal household. Traditionally, men in visiting relationship are supposed to take care of
their sisters’ children as “uncles,” rather than providing support for their own children as “fathers.” The local term for children in a “visiting marriage” is “deli,” although the locals frequently use the Chinese word “siwazi (私娃子)”--which means “illegitimate child” in Sichuanese—to refer to someone’s relationship to his or her parent(s), the translation is not accurate. “Deli” only means that the child is the fruit of a gayi relationship and that the child’s father does not live under the same roof. It implies no discrimination nor questions one’s legitimacy.

“Tseron”—Coresidence as Married Couple

There are several situations where a “marriage” is contracted as a secondary institutionalized sexual union. As introduced above, an ideal Zhaba family consists of multi-generational matrilineal consanguineous relatives with both female and male members in its young generation. If a household falls short of the female or male laborer, they would try to marry one member’s gayi into the household to achieve the gender balance. For example, when there was no female member in the household, a male member should bring a bride into the household to ensure there are both genders and that there will be children in the next generation. In other words, continuing the matrilineal bloodline gives way to maintaining a household with both genders, when there was no female member in the family. Although it is believed that living with an in-marrying outside member is more prone to quarrels and conflicts, such concerns give way to the
importance of having both genders in its young generation. In fact, this is the most common reason for people to change residence and join another household as a “tseron,” which literally means “life-time partner.” Today’s villagers often use the Chinese term “shangmen (上门)” or “going to the door” to describe such a practice and also for the individual who became a tseron. But in contrast with the meaning in Han Chinese society which always refer to matrilocal residence for a man, “shangmen” in Zhaba is used in a gender-less way for both a man’s matrilocal residence and a woman’s patrilocal residence. The tseron relationship is contractual and monogamous with joint income and involves cohabitation, economic cooperation, and shared resources. It is like marriage in traditional Tibetan and Chinese society. As such, living together as tseron is fundamentally different from living together as gayi. For example, even though one man in Labo village has sustained a visiting relationship with a woman in the same village for almost 40 years and they stay together every night, the woman still describes him as “gayi,” because he puts his salary and earnings back into his own household bank, and that “he is not a ‘tseron’ if he’s doing that.” Meanwhile, living together as tseron is not necessarily validated by the state issued marriage certificate, in fact, most of the middle-aged and elderly couples who live together still do not have a certificate till this day. However, there is always a hand-written marriage contract called “mayi ganjia” (c. hunyue 婚约) between the two
households, which fully acknowledges the in-marrying member's rights and obligations and ties the newcomer with the household as a financial entity. Even though nowadays the couples obtained the state issued marriage certificates which will be discussed in the following chapter, “mayi ganjia” would still be contracted between the two households till this day. Thus, based on the emic understanding, I will refer to the “tseron” relationship as being “married” as husband or wife in this dissertation.

In contrast to the gayi relationship, the tseron relationship is established not just between the two individuals, rather, it takes numerous negotiations within one’s household and between the two households in deciding whether to give or receive a household member. The negotiations and procedures have little to do with gender, whether it’s bringing in a female or male member, the procedures are quite similar. In the beginning, every household member in the receiving household must agree to have this particular newcomer, as he or she would be granted rights to the property and wealth of the household, and authority to manage and control the household. As a middle-aged man said: “marriage in Zhaba is never so easy as people getting together and having a party. It is about the receiving household transferring rights and authority to the newcomer over everything in the household, from the cow pen to the rooftop balcony.” Thus, it is important for the household members to approve his/her health, capability, virtue and so on. If someone, particularly the head of the household does not approve
the incoming person, then he or she cannot move in as a new member. The rejected couple can either maintain their gayi relationship, or they would have to build their own new house elsewhere in order to live together neolocally, or they had to break up. Afterwards, another household member’s partner will be considered, to fulfill the purpose of having both genders in the young generation.

Once the receiving household reached an agreement to bring in the particular person, the head of the household would visit the newcomer’s natal household to obtain their approval. This is done by offering a bottle of liquor wrapped in a khata (traditional Tibetan ceremonial scarf) to the head of the household. If they rejected the proposal, the receiving household would keep visiting them until they agree. Once the head of the household accepted the bottle, it meant that they agreed to give one of their household members away. Afterwards, it was a tradition that the receiving household should provide the giving household gifts (such as a cow) or cash (a few hundred yuan for each household member) as a reward for raising the member and as compensation for losing him/her.

After the acceptance of liquor, the two households would work out a written contract together before the wedding ceremony, if there is going to be one. Since the Zhaba language is a colloquial language without a written form,
the contract is usually written in Tibetan or Chinese. Below is a typical contract which was written in Chinese in 2009.

**Wedding Contract (Hun Yue 婚约)**

*Party A: XX (Bride)*

*Party B: XX (Groom who was about to join the bride’s natal household)*

1. After mutual negotiation, the house, the land, and property of party A now belong to party A and party B simultaneously.

2. Party A and party B are entitled and obligated to support the parents and the elderly together;

3. Parents and the elderly have the right to instruct both party A and party B.

4. Party A and party B enjoy the same rights, they should respect, love, and support each other

*The contract takes into effective upon signature of both sides. It is made in duplicate, each copy for the parents of each Party.*

Because the newcomer would be granted right over the receiving household’s property and land, it was not necessary for the newcomer’s natal household to provide him/her a share of land. Instead, the leaving member will take a “gewa,” or his/her own share of property in the natal household, which often includes cookware, chuba (Tibetan dress), jewelry, a horse saddle, and so on.

If the newlyweds are going to establish their own family and build a new house in the same or an adjacent village, instead of joining the other’s household, one or both of the natal households will give them a piece of land. In
fact, the establishment of such a nuclear family and neolocal residence
happened frequently in recent years and was considered as household division,
bringing about much more intra-familial negotiations and conflicts, which will be
elaborated later in chapter four.
Chapter 3 “To be the Father or the Uncle”: “Visiting Marriage”

Reconsidered

When I first arrived in Yadro township in the Zhaba region in 2014 and asked the locals about “visiting marriage” (c. “zou hun”), they would laugh about it and say that it was their custom (c. fengsu xi guan 风俗习惯) in the old times, implying that nowadays people do not practice it anymore. Thus, one hypothesis I held at the early stage of the project was that development induced changes negatively affected the continuity of the “visiting marriage” tradition and matrilineal extended families among the Zhaba Tibetans. However, later on, my household survey data on the villagers’ marital status suggested a more complicated situation.

The Decline of “Visiting Marriage” among the Middle-aged Generation

It was demonstrated in chapter two that eighty-three (50.6%) villagers still practiced “visiting marriage.” However, marital status by age group and interviews with people from different generations revealed a significant generational difference: more middle-aged people are married and co-reside with their partners, while the majority of young villagers today choose “visiting marriage” and duolocal residence. As shown in Table 3-1 and Figure 3-1, among
those who were age 70-79 in 2015, 72.73% practiced “visiting marriage,” but this number dropped to 36.84% among those who were age 50-59. However, it rose up to 63.64% among those who were age 20-29 now.

| Age Group | Female | | | Male | | | Total | |
|-----------|--------|----|----|--------|----|----|--------|
|           | N      | No. VM | %   | N      | No. VM | %   | N      | No. VM | %   |
| 20-29     | 18     | 11    | 61.1| 15     | 10    | 66.7| 33     | 21     | 63.64|
| 30-39     | 20     | 12    | 60.0| 24     | 13    | 54.2| 44     | 25     | 56.82|
| 40-49     | 21     | 9     | 42.9| 17     | 6     | 35.3| 38     | 15     | 39.47|
| 50-59     | 8      | 4     | 50.0| 11     | 3     | 27.3| 19     | 7      | 36.84|
| 60-69     | 7      | 4     | 57.1| 7      | 1     | 14.3| 14     | 5      | 35.71|
| 70-79     | 4      | 3     | 75.0| 7      | 5     | 71.4| 11     | 8      | 72.73|
| 80+       | 4      | 3     | 6.5 | 1      | 0     | 0   | 5      | 3      | 60.0  |
Figure 3-1. Percentage of People Who Practice “Visiting marriage” by Age Group

Table 3-2. Marital Status by Generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth Year</th>
<th>Approximate Time of &quot;Marriage&quot;</th>
<th>Age in 2016</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>No. VM</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930-1939</td>
<td>1950-1969</td>
<td>77-86</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-1949</td>
<td>1960-1979</td>
<td>67-76</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1979</td>
<td>1990-2009</td>
<td>37-46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1989</td>
<td>2000-Present</td>
<td>27-36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1996</td>
<td>2010-Present</td>
<td>20-26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 3-2, relatively more people born from 1950 to 1969 (age group of 47 to 66 years old), moved away from the “visiting marriage” tradition. A 59-year-old male (born in 1956), known as one of the earliest and most successful businessmen in the Zhaba region, said that when people from his own generation were children, their father did not even give them a piece of candy. “It was the norm, and no one was angry about it, because it was the custom here; the economic conditions sucked back then.” But when his generation became fathers (approximately the 1980s), “There came the birth control policy and men started paying an increasing amount of attention and support to their children. The custom has been corrected into something better. Fathers pretty much all support their children now.”

During my fieldwork, whenever the locals discussed changes to the “visiting marriage” custom in recent years, they often decisively attributed the decline of the custom to the birth planning policy, just as the above quote indicated. Nonetheless, a detailed analysis of the implementation of birth planning policy in Zhaba suggests that it was the interplay of multiple factors including the birth planning policy, the household registration system, marriage certification, and economic development that contributed to the changes to the “visiting marriage” tradition.
State Interventions: Birth Planning Policy, Household Registration, and Marriage Certification

In order to end arranged marriages in China, the Marriage Law enacted by the Chinese Communist Party in 1950 requires a couple to register their marriage in person before the wedding and declare their wish to marry (Jacka et al. 2013). For the matrilineal Mosuo group, the “visiting marriage” tradition was labeled as “backward” during the commune era, thus waves of campaigns were launched to regulate it and bring “progress” to this local custom. In particular, during the “One-Wife-One-Husband Movement” (c. yifuyiqi yundong 一夫一妻运动) from 1975 to 1976, draconian measures were taken to force sexual partners to register for marriage and live under one roof (Shih 2010). In sharp contrast, the communist government in the Zhaba region did not intervene regarding the local “visiting marriage” custom at all, rather, and even the cadres working in the regional government of Zhaba were allowed to continue practicing “visiting marriage.” This is probably due to the Zhaba region’s geographic isolation (Feng 2010a, 2010b). As a result, a marriage certificate was not a must-have in Zhaba. In fact, to this day, most of the middle-aged and elderly people still do not own one.

However, the omnipresent absence of marriage certificates was no longer feasible after the implementation of the birth control policy. At the national level,
the one-child limit became official state policy in 1979 to 1980. The diverse ways in which the birth control policy was implemented in different parts of China has been discussed in the literature (Greenhalgh 1994b, 2008). For example, in the rural areas of several provinces, as a result of the long-held son-preference and the importance of sons to continue the patrilineal line, the policy was modified in 1986 to allow couples to have a second child if the first child is a daughter (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). In contrast, there was no birth limit for rural Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region until the 1990s (Goldstein et al. 2004; Childs et al. 2013). In the Zhaba region, the birth planning policy was implemented around 1980, with the rule that people can have up to three children.

The birth planning campaigns were vigorously enforced during the initial years, and birth control officials set up offices in the townships to record the number of children each household had and to distribute contraceptives. Newborns who were fourth order or higher were considered exceeding the three-child limit and were punished with a 500 yuan fine. However, while the excess child was defined by the mother’s number of children, it was the father of the excess child who was required to pay for the fine. And if the father could not be identified considering the unstable nature of “visiting marriage,” the mother’s long-term male gayi or tseron should shoulder the responsibility. For example, an elderly mother with a fourth child was eventually spared paying the fine because
her visiting relationship with her male gayi (the child’s father) had already ceased and she had no other male gayi afterwards. But a 67-year-old man who moved in as a tseron with his wife paid the fine for his third biological child, because it was his wife’s fourth child (she had one child with another male gayi before her tseron moved in). The fine of 500 yuan was considered a significant amount in the 1980s, and two elderly men in the villages who paid the fine recalled how they had to save from their salaries or borrow money from relatives for months in order to pay for it.

The birth planning policy was quite effective in Zhaba. After the implementation of the birth planning policy in 1980, aside from people who already had more than three children, only one woman gave birth to four children, while the others conformed to the rule by having at most three children. Among the majority of the villagers of reproductive age, females took responsibility for birth control by oral contraceptives, Norplant, and so on. A detailed analysis of the number of children to women by age group is shown in table 3-3. As can be seen, the mean number of surviving children declines. For women who are 60-69 years old, the mean number of surviving births was 2.71, for those who were 40-49 years old, the mean number of surviving births was 2, and for those who are 20-29 years old, the mean number of surviving births decreased to 1.33.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
<th>Mean Number of Surviving Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 and above</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to track and record the newborns per household, anyone who was born after the 1980s was required to obtain household registration (c. hukou). The household registration system was introduced by the state in the 1950s and categorizes people based on their place of residence into “agricultural” or “non-agricultural” household. A household registration booklet was issued by the police stations, which recorded demographic information and family relations for each household member. The ways in which people treat household registration reflects people’s family ideologies. For example, in the patrilineal Han Chinese areas, a daughter typically transfers her registration to her husband’s household upon marriage, whereas a son keeps his registration and adds his wife to the
booklet when he marries and his children’s when they are born (Shi 2017). In Zhaba villages, people who belong to the same household were recorded in the same household registration booklet; in other words, based on the matrilineal family ideals and structures in Zhaba, the household registration booklet only contains matrilineal relatives without any affinal relatives or marital partners. The household registration of in-marrying Tseron remains in their natal families. Consequently, since traditionally children lived with their mothers' natal households with or without the father in the same household, depending on the parents’ marital statuses, a newborn, regardless of its sex, should be registered in his or her mother’s household registration booklet. If a male registered his children together with him and his maternal family, he would be criticized as being disrespectful to his own sisters.

To get household registration for the newborn, both parents have to be present in the police office in the township government and provide their marriage certificates. Normally women registered marriage with the actual biological father of their children or their long-term gayi, but there were ways to get around the requirement. During my fieldwork, I learned of one case in which a woman gave birth after her visiting relationship with the male gayi ceased, so she found a random man who never got the marriage certificate to register marriage certificates with her, in order to get household registration for her baby. But this did not happen in my two sample villages, where all of the males who
became fathers after the 1980s had no problem going to get the certificates with their female gayi. For many Zhaba people who gave birth after the 1980s, it was not until their first child was born that the male and female gayi would get the marriage certification from the township government. In other words, the marriage certificate was not considered a prerequisite for marriage, but rather, it was obtained together with the newborn’s household registration to guarantee a legitimate childbirth and parenthood. As a 66-year-old male who paid the fine for his excessive child said regarding the impact of such policy on the visiting tradition, “Thanks to the birth control policy, men no longer dare to fool around like before and have as many illegitimate children as they want; otherwise they would have to pay a fine and could not even get household registration for the children.”

The Redefined “Father”

As mentioned in chapter 2, there was no contract between male and female gayi in a “visiting marriage” relationship. The only paperwork was the “mayi ganjia” or hand-written marriage contract when one married into the other’s household as a “tseron.” However, after the implementation of birth planning policy, male and female gayi who were in a “visiting marriage” and gave birth to children were also bonded by an official contract—the marriage certificate. Thereafter, although the couple with the marriage certificate would most likely
return to duolocal residence and continue practicing “visiting marriage,” people believed that the birth planning policy and state issued marriage certificate had changed the locals’ mentality on their visiting relationship as well as the father-child relationship. The marriage certificate legally acknowledged the man as a husband, consequently, people believe that the marriage certificate had granted the legitimacy of the visiting relationship and fostered and reinforced a sense of exclusiveness between the male and female gayi. In addition, men, who now had to pay for the fine for any excess child, believed that the birth planning policy had regulated their visiting behavior by controlling the number of children, which further increased the fathers’ contribution and investment to their own children.

After the 1980s, men with newborns constantly felt it was their obligation to take care of their biological children, even though traditionally “visiting marriage” required no such support. A 66-year-old man, who moved into the household of his female gayi when he was in his 40s in the 1990s, recalled how he constantly had to struggle in order to strike a balance between his gayi and children, and his natal family members. He said that “Every time I bought a tea brick, I would cut it in the middle, giving 5 kilos for my wife’s family and 5 kilos for my own. For children’s clothing, the minute I bought new sneakers for my own children, my nieces’ sneakers were already worn out and wanted new ones.” Working at the rural credit cooperatives then, he was one of the very few men who earned state salary in the 1980s, yet he said he still could not handle the
economic challenge of “visiting marriage”: “I just cannot take good care of both sides; it would financially crush me.” The 66-year-old man strongly criticized the traditional visiting practice: “It was the brothers who suffered because they were taking care of someone else’s children. That custom was rotten! What’s good in that?! Your own children are at someone else’s house, and you raise your sisters’ children. They call you ‘awu, awu (uncle)’, then it became the awu’s responsibility. “Visiting marriage” areas are all like that. It still sucks when the children are not your own, even though they are your nephews or nieces, things are not as convenient (as raising your own children).”

Interestingly, the men who felt the obligation and actually started providing financial support for their children were the ones who were able to earn money immediately after the 1980s. The 66-year-old man who worked in the rural credit cooperatives, the aforementioned 59-year-old businessman, and a 62-year-old primary school teacher were considered financially better-off in the 1980s and all of them stopped practicing “visiting marriage” and chose marriage and coresidence. This is highly consistent with the arguments in kinship studies that men’s acquisition of affluence will lead to the preference for cohabitation for a higher degree of control over their reproductive partners, in addition to or at the expense of their maternal relatives (Fortunato and Archetti 2009; Mattison 2010).
In the above case, the then middle-aged man found it too burdensome to support both his natal household and his gayi’s household, so he chose to marry into his gayi’s house to relinquish his obligation to his natal household without village sanction. However, for today’s young men who practice “visiting marriage,” they are also actively engaged fathers even if they belonged to and were obligated to support their natal households. Let us start from childbirth as an example. Childbirth was traditionally conducted at one’s own home on the first floor with just the pregnant woman and her mother, or mother-in-law if she married as a tseron into her husband’s household, as the mid-wife. However, nowadays, young men show up in their gayi’s house and wait up until the baby is delivered. During my fieldwork, I also witnessed two birthday parties thrown by the young fathers for their children under three years old, which the villagers believe was unprecedented. They called acquaintances who were about to come back from the county before the birthdays and asked them to bring down a birthday cake, which cost about 100 yuan. They also bought other snacks such as sunflower seeds in the township shops, brought their children, but not necessarily the mother, back to their own natal households, and invited several fellow villagers over to celebrate their children’s birthdays.

Besides providing financial support for their children, young men also feel an obligation to help out the gayi’s households, which was rare before the 1980s. For example, based on my observation, all of the young men aged 20 to 29 years
who stayed in the village in 2016 helped out their gayis’ household with spring planting after they finished working for their natal households. A 21-year-old woman once teased the young men who practice “visiting marriage” by saying, “They don’t do anything at home, they just lie down with their legs up on the couch watching TV, but when they go to their wives houses they even try to cook.”

The Notorious Scandal: Education and Tradition

While there is a stated consensus among the Zhaba people that the traditional “visiting marriage” is “nonobligatory,” a notorious incident that the locals refer to as a “scandal” took place in Labo village in 2013 that revealed a double standard regarding “visiting marriage” for students. It was about the teen pregnancy of Uma, a 19-year-old girl from a matrilineal family who was attending a secondary vocational school in an inland Chinese city. When she came back home during the Lunar New Year of 2012, she had unprotected sex with a 19-year-old fellow villager who used to be her classmate in primary school and got pregnant. Initially, she hid the fact from her family and her father, who lives in another household, and went back to school. But later, when she couldn’t hide it any more, she left school and came back home to confess to her family. Uma’s father, who was a 41-year-old cadre in Labo village, got so furious that he stormed into the young man’s household to scold him. Shortly after Uma gave
birth in the county hospital, her father negotiated with the young man and demanded that his household should pay them a fine and should further support the child at 3 yuan per day until she reached 18 years of age.

Villagers thought this incident was so inappropriate and notorious that the entire Yadro township knew about it. When I discussed it with fellow villagers and implied that “Wasn’t it always the norm for women to raise the child with her natal family without the father’s support?” They immediately objected, saying, “But it was not okay for the students (not just for Uma, but for all the students).” Because students had the priority of studying and obtaining a degree, thus they should not be bothered with having children. This incident reflected the local logic that there was a double moral standard for those who lived in the village as farmers, and for those who were students outside of Zhaba. Furthermore, it demonstrated a father’s support for his child in another household, as Uma’s 41-year-old father took charge of all the negotiations, which should have been done by Uma’s uncle in the same household according to the traditional norms.

Villagers believed that traditional norms did not apply to those who were educated, and young students who continued education beyond middle-school also held negative attitudes on the “visiting marriage” tradition. In fact, during my fieldwork there were five young females, aged between 17 to 21 years old, who were enrolled in vocational schools in various Han Chinese cities. I interviewed
all of them and no one envisioned “visiting marriage” in their own future. Take Uma for example, she said she would never do “visiting marriage” for herself, even after her pregnancy and childbirth. Coming back to live in the village and start a “visiting marriage” relationship with her child’s father never crossed her mind. In fact, Uma’s child was raised by her mother in her natal household, while she went back to school for another year and graduated. She also said it would be impossible for her to marry into someone else’s household because “What if the mother-in-law is an annoying person?” When I followed her up in 2017, she had just got married to a Han Chinese man whom she met while working in a hotel in Daofu county, and they lived in the county in a rented apartment.

Among the five female students, the one with the highest level of education was Adron, who was a 21-year-old girl from a typical matrilineal household in Labo village. Unlike her peer students from Zhaba who went to secondary vocational schools right after middle school, Adron was the only one who went to high school in the nearby Ganzi county before she was admitted into a vocational technical college in a Han city in Sichuan province for a three-year program majoring in primary education. Adron loathed the idea of “visiting marriage” and firmly believed that this tradition strongly disfavors women. She often mentioned to me what her high school teacher in Ganzi county said in front of her entire classmates after learning her hometown’s “visiting marriage” tradition: “It is very disadvantageous for women in “visiting marriage.” (c. chikui
吃亏). Guys can just fool around while women are supposed to raise the child(ren).” She said she was embarrassed and further decided that she would never do “visiting marriage” herself. Although her mother had been in a stable “visiting marriage” relationship with her father, her aunt, whose gayi abandoned her and their only son for another woman, served as a vivid example to exemplify her teachers’ point. She said, “The custom in Zhaba makes it really hard to be a good person. Look at my uncle. If he goes to his gayi’s house, we complain about him at home, but when he comes back to our house, his gayi complains about him. The custom is so...why can’t you be decisive and just pick one side? Being caught in between two households makes everything complicated. It’s like no matter what you do, there will always be someone who is pissed at you.”

The Young’s Rationale for Choosing “Visiting Marriage”

In sharp contrast with the young educated students, the rest of the young people residing in the village and who have a much lower level of education actually choose to practice “visiting marriage.” If it is true as the middle-aged people said that it was obligatory to offer support for their own children as well as their matrilineal families and balancing support between both sides was difficult, how come the majority of young people in the village still choose “visiting marriage” more frequently than the middle-aged people? As shown in Table 3-1, twenty-one out of thirty-three (63.64%) young people aged 20-29 years old were
practicing “visiting marriage” at the time of the research. When asked whether they like the traditional way of “visiting marriage” or living together with a partner, young villagers, male and female, expressed their preference for the former. And their reasons can be summarized as follows.

Firstly, the most commonly mentioned reason (18 young villagers, 85.7%) was that their natal households needed their help, which was common for the young individual who was the eldest son or daughter. Specifically, among the twenty-one young villagers who practiced “visiting marriage,” fifteen young people (71.4%) were the eldest son (six men) or the eldest daughter (nine women). Based on the gendered division of labor, females were mainly in charge of farm work and household chores while males should plow the land and earn cash income for the household, thus, elder family members needed the eldest children of the younger generation to participate and help out as soon as possible. For example, six out of the eight eldest sons (75%) practiced “visiting marriage” and two of them had finished primary school; while among all the fourteen eldest daughters who were 20 to 29 years of age, nine of them (64.3%) practiced “visiting marriage” and stayed in their natal households. Most of the females had less than three years of education, only one female finished middle school and two other females finished only primary school. The only female who finished middle school was 27-year-old in 2015 and was a mother of three children living with her matrilineal family. She said, “When I graduated from
middle school, I was offered admission to a secondary vocational school in Zhejiang Province, but my family said no. My mother asked me to come back home because there was no one to help her do chores at home."

Secondly, nine young people (42.9%) believed that “visiting marriage” and duolocal residence enabled them to support their parent(s) and fulfill their filial obligations. For example, a 28-year-old man said to me in 2014, “For me, I think ‘visiting marriage’ is better. I want to do this myself in the future. Because I was out in the army in Beijing and then worked in Chengdu for quite some time, ‘visiting marriage’ can allow me to stay at home and take better care of my parents.” When I returned to the village in 2015, I found that he already started “visiting marriage” relationship with a girl from a nearby village and had a baby boy. A 24-year-old girl believed that abandoning the traditional duolocal practice meant being unfilial to one’s parents, which would make them suffer from fellow villagers’ judgement. She said that if she moved out of her natal household with her gayi, even if her parents approved it, she would lose “people’s heart” (c. min xin 民心) by doing so, “People would say that I abandoned my parents. Tibetans are not like Han Chinese. It is common for Han parents to live alone, but for Tibetans…it would definitely be bad.”

Thirdly, due to limited level of education, skills, and Chinese language ability, it was difficult for the young people to settle down outside of the Zhaba
region so they had no other choice but to come back to Zhaba and practice “visiting marriage.” For two young males and one female (14.3%), although “visiting marriage” is not their first choice, they ended up practicing it. They all had experience doing wage labor outside of Zhaba for some time, but failed to find stable jobs. For them, returning home and settling down sometimes conveyed a sense of bitterness, because they felt like there was no other option. A 25-year-old girl who is now the only daughter living with her parents in their household, told me that when she was young, she thought the chores in Zhaba were too burdensome and the living conditions were too poor. “I wanted to go out. I didn’t know where yet, but just not here. I thought living in the city and marrying a nice guy outside would be awesome. I also thought about joining the military. I liked that idea very much.” But when she met her current gayi, that idea ceased. However, her mother disliked the man because she wanted her daughter to be with someone more diligent, considering that the girl did not excel at farm work. As introduced in chapter two, parents rarely intervened their children’s gayi relationships, but in this case, because the girl was the only daughter who would stay in the household, anyone she chooses to be a gayi will be a potential in-marrying husband, thus, her mother judged her gayi and tried to stop them from being together. So, at age 17, she decided to run away from Zhaba with her gayi. They went to Luding and Daocheng counties, both of which are located within the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and did some odd
jobs for about a year before they returned to Zhaba. “My mother still objected us being together, and she scolded me even harder when she learned that I was pregnant. My gayi and I talked about moving out and building our own house. That would be so much better since my mother didn’t like him anyway. But I can’t. At that time, my older sister had already married out, leaving me as the only child at home. My parents would never agree.” In the end, she stayed in the household and continue practicing “visiting marriage.” A 28-year-old man told me, “After I quit the military in 2010, I started working for Fushikang (Foxconn Technology Group) in Chengdu. The work schedule was one-month night shift followed by one-month day shift, and I did that for 2 years. Back at that time, I got acnes over all my face, because it was so much work and so stressful. Now I’m back home, and I don’t have any illusions or expectations for a life outside anymore. I was once very ambitious and ready to do something when I had just quit the military, but people’s capability varies, and I finally realized that I cannot achieve much… I still like it outside better, because it’s cleaner, while here, (looking down on the wooden floor) there is dirt all over the place, you can’t even wear clean clothes.”

Last but not the least, five young people (26.3%) mentioned that they did not have the ability to run a fully functional household themselves if they were to move out with their gayi into a neolocal household. For example, a 22-year-old female informant, who was building a new house for her natal family with the help
of her gayi and fellow villagers said when she was interviewed, that her mother’s help in childrearing was essential. She said, “I think maybe ‘visiting marriage’ is better. Take myself for example, if I didn’t have my mother helping me with the two kids, I would be so miserable. I cannot imagine me trying to take care of two kids and doing chores at the same time (if I were to live in a new household with just the male gayi and children). Right now, I keep one daughter at home, and one new born here with me (the building site). My mother helps me taking care of the kid, so I can work here (building the new house).” When I asked her if she ever worried that her gayi would stop visiting her one day if they did not live together, she laughed, saying that the other day her 21-year-old cousin from another household who is also in a “visiting marriage” relationship asked her the same question. She said that she never worried about it, and “it’s okay if he stopped visiting. My family and I can raise the kids ourselves.” A 24-year-old male, who was the second son of a matrilineal family believed that the extended matrilineal family broke down responsibilities so that he could have a relaxing role. He said, “If I were to build a small family with my gayi, I would have to worry about everything. I think it’s going be too much for me because I am lazy. Right now, everything is great with my family, I am not in charge of anything.”

Since marital status and living arrangements are not static and people shift choices as they age, I asked the twenty-one young informants whether “visiting marriage” was only temporary for them and that they might eventually
move out from their natal households to live with their gayi in the future. Interestingly, only three males said that they might, while most of them (85.7%) denied such a possibility. A 24-year-old male said that although he disliked the custom in Zhaba, and that “it’s the best for a couple to be together,” he believed that he would not move into his wife’s house “because their village is more backward than ours. They can’t think, and they are too illiterate to understand what’s going on outside.”

Conclusion

State policies of birth planning, household registration, and marriage certification therefore, indirectly changed the locals’ attitude on the nature of the “visiting marriage” custom and conjugal relations, while socio-economic development and the accumulation of wealth further contributed to the men’s increasing investment on their biological children, rather than maternal nieces and nephews. However, while an increasing number of people criticized the tradition and moved away from the matrilineal norms since 1980, there has not yet been a strong enough push that persuaded today’s young people to deviate from the “visiting marriage” tradition. And while the young Zhaba Tibetans who were educated in inland China criticized the “visiting marriage” tradition, the majority of the young generation who were poorly educated and had stayed in the villages, expressed their preference for the “visiting marriage” tradition. There
was a strong sense of natal household solidarity and filial obligations toward their elder parent(s) among the young villagers, even though they had experience doing migrant work outside of Zhaba. As demonstrated in chapter two, the most significant sources of income were off-farm wage labor, and state-issued welfare and compensation for land occupied by various state development projects, and these were turned in to the heads of the household as household communal money. As I will discuss in the following chapter, building one’s new house in the villages was quite costly and was commonly objected to by the middle-aged and elderly family members. With strong pulling factors from the natal household, limited level of education and income earning skills, and the difficulty of settling down in the urban areas, both young males and females in Zhaba relied on their natal families for a secure living and fulfillment of filial obligations, while authority in the households still rested in their elder matrilineal uncles or fathers.
Chapter 4 “To Leave or To Stay”: Household Division and Intergenerational Negotiations

One clear summer day after some heavy rainfalls in 2014, numerous trees were rushing down from upstream and floating in the Xianshui river. Villagers from every household in Labor village went down to the river to gather the trees for firewood from dawn till dusk. Dorje, the 42-year-old head of the village went together with his gayi Drongtso from Modor village. Dorje’s father Dawa, who is 67 years old, complained that they acted like a different household. Meanwhile, Dawa’s eldest son went down to get firewood for Dawa’s household. The second morning, while having breakfast before they were about to go down to the river again, Dawa confronted Dorje for the first time: “Are you trying to move out? You two cannot live together! You have lived half of your lives already, just stay in your own households. The woman lives with her household and the man lives with his own. How exhausting and pricy it will be to build a new house!” But Dorje did not respond at all. Dawa had to give up eventually. Later he told me, “He didn’t say anything at all, good or bad. I ran out of things to do. If he got angry as I did, we can then quarrel about it and get things figured out, but he didn’t, so that’s it.”
Dawa was very frustrated at the idea of his son moving out, especially because he learned about it from some fellow villagers instead of Dorje himself. He said, “He never asked me directly if it was okay for him to build his own house, but we are not stupid, we can tell. People told me that he had already bought 38 logs back from Daofu and put them out there…I don’t know why! Half of his life has passed already, why does he want his own house now?! Besides, just the two of them cannot make a great household, because his wife is lazy! She gets toothaches, foot-aches, many aches here and there all the time. I am the village doctor so I know. And Dorje’s stomach is not well either. They both sleep till eight o’clock in the morning, and they are not hard-working at all…”

Besides the cost of building a new house is high. Dawa was also concerned about the future of his two grandchildren—Dorje’s younger sister’s son and daughter (his nephew and niece). He said, “Dorje didn’t say this, but I figured that he wouldn’t support those kids in the future. If he was absent, he wouldn’t care if the kids’ clothes got dirty or worn, if they were hot or cold…this would be bad for the kids.”

Before the household division, Dorje and Drongtso had been in a “visiting marriage” relationship for more than two decades. They have one 14-year-old daughter and two younger sons. The eldest son was a 10-year-old monk who lived by the monastery together with Drongtso’s 70-year-old uncle, while the other two children stayed with Drongtso’s matrilineal household. When I asked
Dorje why he decided to build a new house with his wife, he said, “For myself, I didn’t have to move out. But for my wife and children, I had to. There were more than ten people in my wife’s household and things were not convenient. She never asked for anything and she always said ‘do whatever you think is the best for you’. But I think she was too miserable at home. Initially, I thought I would just build a new house for my wife and children and I would stay in my own household. But later we had three children, and she probably could not raise them well all by herself. Even though I would help her, it was better for the two people to do things together, so we decided to build a new house and move out (of their natal households).”

When I got back in Zhaba in the summer of 2015, Dorje had already moved out and built a new house. Dawa said that he didn’t help out a lot when Dorje was building the new house and he only went up for one day symbolically and helped with cutting the firewood.

The Rise of the Nuclear Family

Dorje’s case of household division is not alone in Labo and Modor village. While the locals believe that in the traditional era cases of household division due to familial conflicts were not unknown, the past three decades had witnessed the mushrooming of new households in both Labo and Modor villages. In 1980, there were thirty-three houses and in 2015 there were forty houses. Because one
household moved out of the Zhaba region in 2014, there were actually eight new households established after the 1980s. Interestingly, a closer look at the structural composition of families reveals a significant change: all of these eight new households are nuclear families, whereas none of the households in 1980 were neolocal nuclear families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
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</tr>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Stem family refers to a family with parents or a parent, a married child, and his/her children.
*Incomplete family refers to the family in which there was only one person.

A detailed description of the new households is displayed below. Six out of the eight households were comprised of villagers from Labo and Modor villages, and the male and female were exclusive long-term gayi to each other with children living with the female gayi before they moved in to the new houses.
together. One new household consists of a Zhaba wife and a non-Zhaba husband from the nearby Danba county, which is another Tibetan county in Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. They got married when the woman migrated to Danba for wage labor several years ago.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HH No.</th>
<th>Year when established</th>
<th>Age of Male when established (Age of Female when established)</th>
<th>No. of Family Members</th>
<th>Land per capita in 2015</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>39 (38)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>41 (42)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>30 (28)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>36 (30)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>33 (30)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>32 (27)</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>47 (41)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>39 (36)</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>

When asked why they moved out of their natal households and built their own, the villagers provided various reasons, which could be summarized into three main categories. Firstly, two gayi in a “visiting marriage” desired to live together, whether on their own or being together by one marrying to the other’s
natal household, however, the gender composition in their natal households could not enable the external member to move in. For example, as introduced in chapter two, the in-marrying individual will be granted equal authority and rights to the new household’s property. Thus, if a woman had a brother, even if the brother was not the head of the household, bringing in her male gayi would be considered a lack of respect to her brother. Similarly, a male could not bring in his female gayi if he had a sister or sisters at home. Consequently, even though there was no discord or conflict in the families, the male and female gayi still had to move out of their natal households in order to live together (six cases, 75%). Secondly, there were too many young females in one’s natal household (one case, 12.5%). Since every female member might have her own child(ren) in the foreseeable future, two sisters moved out for more space and better living conditions. Thirdly, there was dissention and conflicts in the female gayi’s natal household (one case, 12.5%), so that the male gayi decided to build a house and moved her out of her natal household.

The 32-year-old Pema’s case is relatively rare and an extreme, but is an illustrative example of household division due to conflicts in the natal household. When I first met Pema in 2014, she was plastering mud on the outside wall of her new house. It was a particularly small one-story house which was different from all the other households in the village. Here’s the story of her household division:
“At first I did not want to move out. For us Zhaba people, it is the best for sisters and brothers to live together in one household. Because all of my sisters had moved out already and we had just built a new house by expanding the old building (her natal household in Modor village that she left), I actually wanted to stay as the only daughter in the household and help my mother. I used to think that if you stay in your own household, even though someone yells at you, it’s your own family so it’s fine, but if you go to someone else’s household and you get yelled at, that would be frustrating. But things didn’t work out. My mother was too old to do farm work and my brother was an alcoholic, I needed to do everything—work in the land, seek cash income, and shoulder all the chores in the house. My brother yelled at me when there was no food, when he ran out of cigarettes, and when he wanted me to pay for his debts that he ran up at the shops in the township.

My husband (who was then her gayi) is a very nice guy. After he learned about this, he wanted me to move out of my household and get away from my brother and the misery. But because his elder sister and her children were at home, I could not move into his household. Then we decided to build our own house close to his natal household. The days after I told my household that I wanted to move out, my brother started hitting me even harder than before, because he disapproved of me
leaving. He got drunk every day and hit me once in the day and once at night. At that time, I was pregnant with my third child, and had a big belly. Then, I finally moved out, because he acted like a crazy person.

I stayed with my husband’s household for the first three months after I left my own household. They were building their new house at that time so I helped out for three months before we started building our own new house. His mother was very kind to me. She was worried that I would get too exhausted from working so she boiled a big bowl of butter for me every day. I drank a lot of it at that time.

After I left my own household, I still went back to help out my mother from time to time. We had a lot of land. There were still 8 mu of land after giving 12 mu of land for the conversion of farmland to the forest program. I had to help her because she could not work in the fields anymore.”

After my first interview with Pema in 2014, she took her mother out of her natal household to live with her, because the elderly woman grew frailer and Pema’s brother still got drunk on a daily basis and was not taking care of her. A couple of months later in early 2015, her mother passed away. Now she does not return to her natal household at all, nor did she ask for land from her natal household. When I asked her about the natal household in 2016, she said, “Now
the house is all his. I don’t know if he’s doing farm work or not. I heard that the neighbors helped him with the spring planting earlier, but he hasn’t cleaned the weeds yet. I don’t even want to visit him, because he is more like an enemy than a brother to me. He acts like he’s very capable in front of outsiders, but I know that he cannot do anything at home. So, let’s see. I don’t visit him, nor does he visit me.”

In the meantime, a fundamental enabling factor for the realization of household division was sufficient resources, including money and an available plot of land in an appropriate location for building a new house. Six of the eight new houses (75%) were built with money from the communal money of the natal households, while two couples rented houses in the township for seven and eight years before they both built their new houses with their own savings in 2017. Nowadays, even with the fellow villagers’ labor support, as agreed in the village contract, building a new house costs way more money than before, mainly because of increases in the cost of materials and the fees nowadays for skilled laborer such as masons and carpenters. For example, Dorje’s natal five-story house built in 2011 with local rocks cost about 80,000 yuan, while Dorje’s three-story new house built in 2015 with wooden frames cost about 160,000 yuan, excluding the interior decorating. The neolocal households received land from either or both sides of the couple’s natal households, but not strictly on a per capita basis. Although Chinese national inheritance law stipulate that each
household member should obtain an equal share of land if they leave, it was not enforced as a norm. It is up to the natal household to decide whether to provide land to the leaving member and in what amount, sometimes less than a full share, sometimes even more than the per capita share in decollectivization in 1980. However, sometimes the leaving member rejects the offer if the new household is too far away from the natal household and its land, nor would s/he ask for grain from the natal households afterwards. For example, in the aforementioned case of Dorje and Drongtso's household division, Drongtso's household offered them five mu of land on which to build the house, while land per capita for her natal household was three mu. Meanwhile, Dorje's natal household offered them a piece of land in the size of three mu, when the per capita land for the household was only 0.625 mu. In the end, Drongtso thought the location and quality of the land from Dorje's household were bad and often times there were cows stepping onto it, so they only took the offer from her natal household. In another two cases where the previous Modor village residents moved to their neolocal households in Labo village, they did not get any land from the natal households because they thought it was too inconvenient to walk between the villages to do farm work. On average, the new household received 2.56 mu of land from either or both sides of the couples’ natal households. In 2015, the amount of land per capita for the newly established houses was 0.455 mu, which is fewer than the village average of 0.74 mu per capita.
Besides having less land per person than their natal households, animal work was not an important component for the lives of the new households, with half of the new houses having zero cows. For example, one new house got one cow from the wife’s natal house. But two years ago, the couple of the new household decided to sell the cow. They asked their then 18-year-old daughter if they could do that and she said “yes” decisively. Her daughter, who was a vocational college student studying pharmacology in a Chinese city, said, “Zhaba people work so hard every day, but for what?! Every day you take the cows out and back, prepare hay for them, and milk them…It’s like you live around the cow. But the cow can only offer you some milk and butter, which is not enough to feed the family. Grain from the land is not enough to feed everyone either. This kind of work (herding and farming) is so not worthwhile (c. huabulai).” Nowadays, the couple in this new household did not plant grain, nor did they participate in collecting caterpillar fungus, rather they worked in the nearby construction sites for wages. When they were away for seasonal jobs, they gave their key to an elderly man in the neighboring house and paid him 300 yuan per year to check on the house from time to time.

The majority of the newly built houses are different from the traditional Zhaba style houses, especially those built after 2010. The trend is for two- or three-story houses with wooden frames, or what the locals call “Daofu style”.
People said that the traditional houses had more floors because they needed space for cows and storing hays for the cows. A 41-year-old female who was preparing to build their new house in 2017 said that, “Now the land is gone and the cow is gone, a two-story house will be enough for us humans.”

**Permanent Migration**

Aside from the villagers who changed residence among households already present in Zhaba, seven females and seven males from Labo and Modor villages have moved out of the Zhaba region in the past three decades. A detailed description of those who migrated out is shown in the following table 4-3.
The main reason for people to migrate out of the village was work and/or marriage, and it was very common for people who were closely related to migrate together. For example, about 15 years ago, a young man from Labo village
moved to Daofu county and earned some money from contracting construction projects. He got married with a woman from the nearby Bamei county and they gave birth to two sons. In 2008, he took his younger sister’s daughter—his 6-year-old niece to Daofu for primary school because it had better quality of education. In 2009, he asked his younger sister to move to Daofu and take care of his sons and her daughter, which she did. Now the younger sister has lived in Daofu for six years and she commented, “Living in Daofu is so much better than Zhaba. I did the farm work and chores like everyone else before and didn’t feel too exhausted until I moved to Daofu. Now I think I would never want to move back to Zhaba, I even feel embarrassed telling people that I grew up in Zhaba. Every time I come back, I don’t even change my clothes because it’s pointless. I just put a clean outfit on my newborn son this morning but it got dirty in the afternoon.” Two years after she moved to Daofu, she convinced her gayi, a fellow Labo villager, to leave his household to join her. “You know the custom here, if we were to stay here in the village, he would have to stay with his family and I stay with mine. But I had elder sisters in my family and he had elder brothers in his household, so we agreed to move to Daofu county so that we could live together. We asked our families for permission and both sides agreed. My elder brother’s connections helped my husband get a job in the fire department and he has been working there. The customs in Zhaba are so disadvantageous for women (吃亏), but once you arrived in Daofu, it’s not like that anymore.”
A less common means of out-migration is directly through marriage. Among the female villagers who married out, there were three closely related female villagers who got married to three closely related Han Chinese men in Luding (which is another mainly Han Chinese county in the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture), whose houses are within walking distance of one another. During the New Year of 2016, all of them came back to their natal households for the festival, together with their husbands and children. I met them for the very first time and interviewed them about their marriages and families. All three females now speak very fluent Sichuanese mandarin with a heavy Luding dialect.

Their relationships and marriages started with a Labo village monk’s fresh produce business. When he purchased vegetables from a farmer/provider in Luding, he introduced his niece to him as a potential bride. After talking on the phone for a couple of months, the Zhaba girl and Han Chinese man decided to get married before they even met each other. After she left her natal household and married into the man’s place in Luding in 2007, this first Zhaba bride introduced her cousin to her Han Chinese neighbor, and later they also got married in 2008.

These two marriages inspired the then 16-year-old Pasang in Modor village, whose father was the first bride’s elder brother in Labo village. She said,
“I was very envious of the two aunts who married out because whenever they come back to Zhaba they always dressed in a very pretty and stylish way. I wanted to be like that too.” She said she was different from other Zhaba girls because she had liked Han Chinese style dresses more than Tibetan ones since she was little, and that she only started wearing the Tibetan style dress when she returned to Zhaba after she got married. With some communications with her aunt over the phone, Pasang secretly fled her natal household for her aunt’s house in Luding when she was 16 years old in 2009. Her aunt introduced a guy to her and they started a relationship. She stayed in Luding for two months before her uncle and mother showed up and took her back. “They were very mad at me because they did not want me to be with a Han Chinese guy,” she said. But when she was leaving Luding for home, her aunt said, “You’ve made me very embarrassed.” These words kept ringing in her mind and made her feel guilty day after day. A mere couple of days later, Pasang fled her house again for Luding and married that guy when she was 17 years old in 2010. Her family eventually had to accept her leaving. Five years after she had gone, considering that Pasang had left, Pasang’s younger brother was a monk, there was no other nephew or niece in the household, so her mother, who was 44-years-old at that time, gave birth to a third child as the family’s future caregiver.
New Households: Negotiations and Property Division

For natal households, what difference does it make if the leaving individual is going to join another local household, or is going to set up his or her own nuclear household with the gayi, or go to a place outside of Zhaba? In all of these circumstances, the natal household will lose a member and consequently, his or her contribution to the household. A 21-year-old female once said, “Once you step outside the household door, even if you still live in the same village, you no longer belong to this family and that you cannot help a lot with this household anymore.”

Nonetheless, the leaving member’s locality still makes a difference in its influences on the natal household. In the first circumstance, as discussed earlier, if someone is going to join another family within the villages, he or she will be granted equal rights over the property of the other household, so the natal household of the person marrying out does not need to offer the leaving member a lot of resources such as money or land; instead they might gain some monetary gifts from the other household for raising that person. Secondly, if the leaving member is going to have a new family somewhere outside of Zhaba, usually it means that he or she has already obtained a job, a relationship, and/or other resources outside, thus the demand of support from the natal household might be minimal among the three circumstances (migrating outside of Zhaba,
joining another matrilineal household, and establishing neolocal household). Consequently, leaving the natal households and building a new house locally requires the most support in the form of land, money and labor from one or both sides of the natal households.

When household division finally happens, the traditional custom is to invite the head of the village, the Party secretary, and close relatives over to the dividing household to discuss how the family property is to be divided. As introduced in the tseron relationship in chapter two, the leaving member of a household would usually take his/her “gewa”—one’s own share of household property—when s/he leaves, and this also applies to household division. Most of the household division cases conformed to this custom, but this tradition was modified recently.

For example, let’s look at Dorje’s case. In 2015, before Dorje moved out to his own new house, all of the close relatives were invited to his father Dawa’s household. People sat in a circle in the living room with all the cookware and beddings laid out in front of them. A 61-year-old male relative who had worked and lived in Daofu county as a government official in the health bureau suggested that Dawa’s household should just give Dorje 200,000 yuan. He said to Dawa, “You are a poor farmer family yourself and there are not enough pots, bowls, and blankets to be divided. If you give a share to Dorje, you would need to
buy those things again which would be troublesome and is going to cost you.

Since Dorje turned in all the money he earned before to the household and he
doesn’t have any savings himself, why don’t you just give him 200,000 yuan and
that’s it?”

Dawa thought the number was ridiculously high, even though his
household was offered a compensation of 600,000 yuan by the government for
flooding an already abandoned old house and a couple of trees at the bottom of
the valley. “I don’t know if he (Dorje) is satisfied, but we have eight people at
home, so if you divide the money by the number of people in my household,
could each person get that much? No!” But he still consented to the proposal by
being silent, “I didn’t say a single word because I was furious for the whole time,
dammit. I thought to myself, ‘if he decided to move out, it would be okay if he
rejected all the pots, bowls and clothes from home, because he must be capable
of earning all the things by himself. But if he still took things from me, he should
feel shy and ashamed of it’. When I was young and just moved into this house,
there was nothing in it. It was me who built this house up little by little since I was
21 years old. I remember the first time I got eleven bowls for the house from the
money earned by treating patients and later there were thirty bowls from a shop
in the township…The old woman (his wife) didn’t say anything either, we were
both pissed. Because all of us relied on him, we asked him about everything
concerning the house. He told us what to do today and tomorrow. Everyone felt
lost if the most capable person left."

Because of Dawa and his wife’s silence, and because the relative who
proposed this was considered by the other relatives as somewhat reliable and
prestigious as a governmental official from the county, a consensus was reached
and the proposal was accepted. After the family meeting, Dorje took his own
clothes away and transferred money from the natal household’s account to his
personal bank account when he went to Daofu county. But the financial line was
not so clear-cut afterwards. Dawa said that later in 2015, when Dorje took his
own daughter and his niece to Daofu county to enroll them in middle school,
Dawa gave his household bank card to Dorje, but expected him to withdraw
money only for his niece not his daughter. School cost 4,000 yuan per student,
but Dorje withdrew 8,000 yuan from Dawa’s household bank account, which
frustrated Dawa because he thought Dorje should not still be using the natal
household’s money after his division. Dawa also complained that when Dorje
was building his house, he borrowed Dawa’s saw but never returned to him.

In all the other seven cases of household division, none of the leaving
members was head of the household. However, if the leaving individual
happened to be a primary caregiver or cash earner, or head of the household
such as Dorje in his case, the other members might find it difficult to adjust to his
or her leaving. After Dorje left in 2015, Dawa claimed that the role of head of household was shared by his other two sons, “The two of them discussed what we needed and what to buy. The last time I told them, ‘Now that our house has been rebuilt (remodeled), the painters and carpenters’ work is done, my job is also finished. I will leave everything to you two. I’m old now, it’s up to you to decide whether to buy something or not. I’m almost dying, I will take care of the money I need when I die. I have my own money, but I won’t give it to you, because I will use it when I die.’ They didn’t say anything. Nowadays, people are…even if you say good things to them, they are still skeptical (of your intentions). Our ideas and their ideas are like this (punching his fists against each other).”

As Dorje’s case demonstrated, Dawa as an elderly father was strongly against the idea of household division. Similarly, a 72-year-old uncle was very upset about his 21-year-old grand-niece leaving. When the young girl was hospitalized in the neighboring county for a miscarriage in 2006, he forbade any family member to leave to take care of her. He said to his family that since she chose to live in another county with an outsider, it means that she chose to abandon her natal household, thus she could just count on her husband for support. The fellow villagers told me that this elderly man was grumpy about anyone leaving the household, because he built his current big house eight years ago, which is still the most spacious house in the village now, in order that his
three nieces and their daughters would have enough space to live. So if they ended up leaving, it made him feel like his efforts had been in vain. In another case, a 77-year-old elderly man living in a typical matrilineal household with his niece and her children said that the current head of the household (his grand-nephew) has to stay in the family. “If he leaves, I would never figure out why (c. xiang bu tong 想不通). He just cannot leave.” Another elderly man told me that when his eldest son tried to move out from the natal family, he beat him on the back with a wooden stick and said to the rest of his children, “if any one of you wants to move out separately, I will go out to beg.”

While most elderly were against the idea of household division, in a much less common circumstance, the elderly will approve household division on condition that such practice is the only option to benefit their grandchild in the long run. One bright spring morning, the 67-year-old man named Samten walked into the living room of my host family with a worrisome look. He told everyone that when he was going back home after hanging out in a neighboring household the previous night, he saw two familiar figures—Samten’s only son and his gayi from another village—walking towards his house, but he couldn’t believe his eyes. “What are you doing here at night?” Samten asked. His son said, “Something bad happened.” It turned out there was a dramatic fight in his gayi’s household. His gayi’s sister went to Daofu county with a man from another
township to do odd jobs years ago, but she came back two years ago and their natal family started building a new house. Samten’s son knows some stonemasonry work so he helped them building the new house. Afterwards, the sister went to Daofu again looking for odd jobs, but when she came back this time, she claimed the house to be hers and tried to evict her sister--Samten’s son’s gayi. She threatened her with a cleaver, and her uncle evicted Samten’s son with a sickle. They got so frightened, they grabbed their eight-month baby, and fled to Labo village.

Although Samten felt sorry, he told them that only the baby could stay in his house, and asked them to get the son’s blankets and pad/mattress and then go down to their old house to sleep. In fact, the old house was more like an abandoned hut with merely a roof and three walls on the ground. I thought it was pretty cruel of Samten to put them to sleep down there because it was still cold outside in the early spring on the plateau. But the fellow villagers thought it was reasonable because Samten’s two daughters live in the household so his “daughter-in-law” cannot stay in.

Later when the bullying sister left for Daofu again, they were able to move back there and stay there peacefully for a while. But in May, Samten’s son and “daughter-in-law” eventually moved in with them because she was about to deliver another baby but there was no female member in her natal household to
help her, and Samten’s wife would be the mid-wife if she was in labor. The fellow villagers often gossiped about this situation, saying that this was so inappropriate but there was nothing else to do.

Samten admitted that his only son had to build a new house, because his one-year-old grandson and the newborn baby would be too miserable if they stayed with their mother. He said he tried very hard to stop his son from seeing this woman years ago when they first initiated the “visiting marriage” relationship because the woman’s family was already notorious for having two deceased leprosy patients and conflicts between the sisters. “I told him not to go, not to go, repeatedly. Now look, they have failed.”

Caregivers and the Concerns of Middle-aged People

In comparison with the elderly persons, the middle-aged generation is more acceptable of the idea of household division, after all, some of them abandoned the duolocal “visiting marriage” tradition and moved in with their partners themselves. Generally speaking, on the one hand, they prefer having all of their children at home as an ideal multi-generational household, but on the other hand, they are more aware, compared with the elderly generation, of the better resources and options for their children elsewhere, since a great proportion of the middle-aged men were at one-point migrant workers outside of Zhaba themselves. Sometimes, they compromised their own feelings in order to
do what’s best for the children, and potentially their grandchildren, rather than keeping all their children under the same roof for the sake of household integrity. However, they did that on condition that there was still a cash earner and at least one future care-giver staying in the household, whether it was one’s child or one’s nephew/niece. Let me illustrate this with some examples.

Oma is a 45-year-old woman who was crippled from arthritis. She lived with her natal family members and had an only child, a 21-year-old daughter from an already ceased “visiting marriage.” The daughter left the household three years ago. Oma was concerned about family changes and the increase of nuclear families in Zhaba, and said, “In the old days, we Zhaba people all lived together, no matter how many people one household had. Now you see, it has become one family with two persons everywhere. Look at our neighbors, look around the entire Zhaba area. I don’t know why, now it’s all become like the Han people. They live in a separate household, leaving their parents behind at their own natal houses. I think it’s better to do what we used to do.”

However, despite having such expressed preference for the traditional matrilineal households, Oma did not tell her daughter where to live in the future, nor did she ask her to come back here to take care of her. She did tell her daughter not to live with a Han Chinese guy, but with someone from Zhaba, because that way she would be able to communicate with her son-in-law. But the
daughter did not listen. She met a non-Zhaba man while working in the nearby Bamei county, got pregnant, and then married him in 2016. Oma says that she misses her daughter because she is her only child, but at the same time, she was aware of her daughter’s obligations for the household if her daughter was to stay in Zhaba. Oma said, “My uncle, two sisters, four young nieces, and one nephew are all at home. They (uncle and sisters) need to work and think about earning cash, because once they were poor, things would be difficult again. I think I will be fine as long as I stay home. But if my daughter came back and stayed in the house, she would have a difficult life because she would have too many people to look after. If she returned and did wage labor, what little money she made would just be gone after buying clothes for the many little kids at home.”

Oma’s case vividly demonstrates the middle-aged persons’ awareness that if their child was to stay home, he or she would not only earn money to support themselves (the parents) but also the entire family. Thus, if the child was able to earn income and make a living outside of Zhaba, the parent had to admit that it might be a better life for the child.

For some other middle-aged parents, however, even though their children are living under the same roof and practicing “visiting marriage” for now, they are concerned that their children might join their gayis’ households someday in the
future. The Dechen house is a vivid example of such concern. The head of the Dechen house is 57-year-old Palden, who is the party secretary of Labo village. His younger sister Rinchen manages farm work and household chores. The younger generation consists of Rinchen’s two sons—25-year-old Tsewang and 23-year-old Tashi, and two younger daughters—21-year-old Adron and 20-year-old Drolma. Tsewang and Tashi didn’t get much education. They spent about 5 years in primary school and then dropped out to collect caterpillar fungus and later on took odd jobs to earn money. Now they practice “visiting marriage” and mainly stay in Zhaba.

Ever since the eldest son Tsewang started visiting his gayi from a household in the same village, Rinchen had been worried that Tsewang would join her household eventually. She said, “Because there was no capable young man to do heavy chores in that family, they were going to love to marry him in for sure. I told him that he would suffer in the future (have too many heavy chores to do) if he chose to be with the daughter from that household, but he didn’t listen.” Palden and Rinchen’s gayi Norbu did not approve of the girl either, for the same fear that Tsewang would become an in-marrying tseron. But instead of confronting Tsewang directly, they both asked Rinchen to argue with Tsewang. Consequently, for about three years Rinchen and Tsewang’s relationship kept deteriorating like they were enemies. Then two years ago, when Tsewang and his gayi had their first child, Rinchen stopped trying to convince him, “What’s the
point for me to complain if those two get along well? Now you see, Tsewang already had two children with the girl, it was only a matter of time for that household to take him over. If they didn't have children, it would be questionable whether he would join them, but now with the two kids, he doesn't have a choice."

Rinchen and other family members were concerned about his leaving partially because Tsewang was more capable than his younger brother Tashi. Although neither of them got much education, Tsewang as the eldest son, prioritized the familial benefits more than his personal desires. For example, before 2014, Tsewang always contributed thousands of yuan to the household from collecting caterpillar fungus, while Tashi often spent a great proportion of the money earned from construction projects on dining in the restaurants with his friends or what he called “brothers” (xiongdi 兄弟) before he turned it in to his uncle. Rinchen often complained about this with her gayi Norbu, who lived in the township and visited her frequently, “What to do if Tsewang left the house? Tashi is so lazy and fools around all day. He doesn’t have any real skills and doesn’t earn much money.”

Tashi was aware of his elder brother’s plan to leave and he complained to me that Tsewang was too straightforward and abrupt in communicating with the family members. He said, “You can’t just wake up one day and say to your family
'This year I'm not going to find caterpillar fungus because I'll help them (his gayi’s household) build a new house.' That is so cruel. You have to let them know slowly.” On one hand, Tashi admitted that he could not establish his own nuclear family because he lacked the ability to make enough money, so had to rely on his natal household. On the other hand, he made a commitment in front of his parents that he would take care of both of them and would never leave the household. He also said, “I asked them not to look down upon me. Even though I have nothing and am like a small dragon now, I will one day become a spectacular one and look after them…”

When I followed up with them in 2017, I learned that Tsewang's earnings from finding caterpillar fungus that year had been contributed to his gayi’s household. The Dechen house believed that this basically means that he was gone. Rinchen finally accepted the change because she told herself that Tsewang was earning money for his children, and her grandchildren. Rinchen also felt relieved because Tsewang’s gayi’s household bought a new car and supported Tsewang’s driving training and his test for a driver’s license, which cost about 100,000 yuan in total. She admitted that if he stayed in the natal household, they could not have afforded both of their sons to obtain the license, which would absolutely have led to conflicts between the brothers.
Besides worrying about Tsewang's leaving, the Dechen household constantly thought about the future of Rinchen's eldest daughter, the 21-year-old Adron, who by 2017 was the only one with a college degree in the two villages. While everyone in the Dechen house expected Adron to stay in the house after she graduated from college, Adron believed it was only a matter of time for her to move out because of her younger sister. Adron felt fortunate that she had a younger sister at home to share farm work and household chores with her mother and aunt, because otherwise, she couldn’t go out for school. When she graduated in 2017, she did not look for jobs in the Han areas at all because she felt isolated there without friends and family. She signed up for several recruitment exams for civil servant or school teacher jobs in various counties in Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. She said, “I cannot go back and live in my household. I enjoyed all the benefits of my family because I was the only student in school, while my younger sister shouldered the bitterness and work (c. ku he lei 苦和累). If I go back now and end up having children, my younger sister would have to take care of my children which will make her even more miserable. I can’t do such a thing to her. Even if I stayed in Zhaba, I won’t live with my sister forever.” Nonetheless, when I communicated with her after the fieldwork in 2018, she had gotten a job as a teacher in the Yadro primary school and had been living in her natal household since graduation.
The case of Dechen household vividly demonstrates the role of the individual's visions for their life and the negotiations between the generations and households. It also reveals the significance of birth order among the siblings: elder brother or sister were granted more resources and freedom to choose what they preferred, while the younger ones had to adapt to their choices and subsequent consequences.
As shown in table 4-4, the most common living arrangement for the middle-aged generation is duolocal, with fifteen out of eighteen (83.3%) women and eleven out of twenty-three (47.8%) men living with their own natal households. A significant gender difference is that while the majority of women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4-4. Living Arrangements of the Middle-Aged Persons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 45-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In her natal hh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With husband and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With nephew/niece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In her husband’s natal hh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With husband and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a neolocal nuclear hh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With husband and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In his natal hh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With nephew/niece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In his wife’s natal hh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a neolocal nuclear hh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
live together with children, most men live with their nephews and nieces instead of their own children. Specifically, sixteen out of eighteen (88.9%, fifteen in natal household plus one in nuclear household) middle-aged women live with their own children, while only nine out of twenty-three (39.1%, five in his wife's natal household plus four in nuclear household) middle-aged men live together with their children. Meanwhile, eight out of eighteen (44.4%) women live together with their husband (including the situations where the husband married into her household, or vice versa, or they moved out together), while nine out of twenty-three men (39.1%) live together with their wives.

Except for one middle-aged woman without a child, ten middle-aged men, including two monks living by the monastery, were childless and thus counted solely on their natal household for future support. According to them, they either never had a “visiting marriage” relationship or the relationship ceased before the gayi got pregnant. Villagers often joked that these single and childless men were either too handsome or too ugly so they couldn’t find a matching gayi for themselves.

Nonetheless, when interviewed, the childless middle-aged men rarely expressed concerns about their old-age support. They were all able-bodied laborers in the households and felt secure that nephews and nieces in the family would eventually take care of them in the future. The 56-year-old man Dundrup
was a special case because he was the only one in the entire Yadro township who was childless and lived by himself. His parents used to live together and he was the only child, but because he didn't have any long-term gayi, no female could be married in and he ended up living by himself after his parents passed away. The villagers claimed that living by oneself was definitely not the norm in Zhaba, but there was nothing left to do to fix this particular situation, because Dundrup's parents didn't have any distant relative who could move over to take care of him. Dundrup was in good health and every spring he rode his motorbike to nearby mountains by himself to pick up morchella mushrooms for sale, or did odd jobs in the nearby construction projects. Some of the elderly villagers tried to convince him not to go, saying that he should avoid the risk of falling off from the motorbike while trying to earn cash, instead, he should just stay home and enjoy the money from the Five Guarantees funding which gave him 3,000 yuan per year.

In comparison with the childless men who counted on their natal family members, particularly their nephews and nieces, middle-aged men who practiced “visiting marriage” and had children in another households expected their own children to be their future caregivers, especially those who participated closely in their childrearing and had invested in their education. Take the 47-year-old Norbu, who was the father of the aforementioned siblings in the Dechen house for example. Although Norbu did not live with his children, over the course of
Adron’s school years, Norbu paid the majority of her tuition and living expenses, while Adron’s uncle Palden shouldered the rest. Before Adron graduated from college, I asked Norbu how would he feel if Adron chose to stay outside and did not come back after all these years’ support, he said,

“Raising a child is all like this, you spend your money on her from a little girl to an adult, and if she ended up being with someone outside, you don’t say things behind her back and disagree. She has her own karma and will choose to marry whomever she likes. She has spent many years in school, so I believe that she has her own thoughts and ideas. It would be stupid of her to come back and marry a farmer after all these years of education, which I don’t think she would do. The key is to find a good job first, then she can worry about marriage. Nowadays so many women get married after 30 years of age, right? Girls are not like guys, it’s more difficult for a girl to support herself by doing odd jobs because they are physically less capable. Anyways, this is what I’m thinking. After all these years of schooling, she needs to find a good job. We parents would be happy whether she stays outside or comes back here. I would never tell her: ‘we supported you with our sweat, so how dare you ignore us after getting a job and a man’.”
Norbu believed that he could at least count on his daughters if both of the sons married out. “If Adron also married out, the youngest one would stay home and support us parents. One of them has to stay home, it’s our custom here, if the elder three moved out, the youngest daughter should marry her husband into the household, it’s the only way. For those who moved out, they could come back when I was sick, pay for my medicine in the hospital, and if we die, they would put some money together for our funerals. Other than that, they don’t need to take care of us, only their own (nuclear) families.”

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter focused on cases which strayed from the duolocal “visiting marriage” tradition, including those who joined another local household, or established a new nuclear family with his or her partner locally, or permanently migrated outside of Zhaba. It demonstrates the complexities of changing residential arrangements by contrasting the perspective of those who leave with the perspective of those who stay in the natal household. The intra-household negotiations suggest that people are critically reviewing what an ideal family is for themselves. In addition to the young people’s family ideals and rationale for choosing “visiting marriage” discussed in chapter three, this chapter further complicates the young generation’s changing attitudes toward marriage.
and family which is partially attributable to education. It emphasizes negotiations between the different generations, and between siblings within the young generation. This chapter illustrates that the traditional multi-generational household is not ideal for everybody. As a middle-aged man from Zhaba who married a Daofu woman and has lived in the county for decades put it: “There are always one or two lazy people in the extended households who don’t do anything and rely on the work others, which is unfair to the most capable people.” In the next chapter, how all this is affecting the care and well-being of the elderly will be examined.
Chapter 5 Growing Old in a Changing Era: Lives of the Elderly

When one is young
he wants his fur hat to be prettier, his shotgun to aim better, and his horse
to run faster

When one is middle-aged
he wants his land to be larger, his warehouse to be fuller, and his house to
be bigger

When one is old
he wants his family to get along better, his tea to be sweeter, and that he
can pray more.

----Zhaba Folk Song

“The Present is the Best”: Activities and the Domestic Lives of the Elderly

In the Zhaba language, the generic descriptive term to refer to the elderly
is “ga gi,” regardless of whether they are the young elderly or the old elderly. The
gendered terms are “lordo” for the males, and “miu wu” for the female elderly.
When one is talking directly to an elderly individual, one uses “awu” (uncle) or
“apo” (grandpa) for the male elderly, and “ame” (grandma) for the female elderly
for politeness. When asked how old is old, or at what age one becomes an
elderly person, the locals agree that when one becomes a grandparent or
physically weak, he or she is considered as an elderly individual. Taking the emic
understanding of the elderly into consideration, I classified participants who were
above 60 of age as the elderly people in this dissertation. Among all the people
who lived in the sampled villages in 2015, thirty out of the 164 adults (18.3%), including fifteen males and fifteen females, were above 60 of age.

The elderly status was examined based on the multi-dimensional definition of status developed by Goldstein and Beall (1981). The oldest female elderly in the villages was 86 years old and bedridden, and the oldest male was an 82-year-old monk. Both of them suffered from severe hearing loss and were hardly communicable. All of the other elderly villagers, except the bedridden elderly female, were able to perform activities of daily living as demonstrated in table 5-1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Ability</th>
<th>Performs Independently</th>
<th>Performs with Assistance</th>
<th>Unable to Perform</th>
<th>Don't have to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can get in and out of bed</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can feed oneself</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can wash oneself</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can walk up/down stairs</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can walk to neighbors</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can dress oneself</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can go to toilet oneself</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Education level among the elderly was predominantly low. School was not available in the Zhaba region before the democratic reforms, and twenty-two out of thirty elderly informants (73.3%) had never enrolled in school. For those who did go to school, they mostly dropped out after less than two years. Nyima, a 67-year-old monk recalled that before the revolution, he studied with the monks at the monastery on the basic Tibetan language. After the revolution, the monastery was shut down and a new school opened at the monastery site so he enrolled there, but dropped out after less than a year, because education was not important at that time and there was too much farm work to do at home. The one with the highest level of education was a 62-year-old man who graduated from Kangding Normal Training College in 1977 and returned to Zhaba where he taught in the primary school for decades.

When I asked twenty-eight elderly villagers if they were satisfied with their current standard of living, each and every one of them uttered positive answers without any hesitation. They all believed that the elderly nowadays led a much better life than did those in the traditional society. Such a high level of satisfaction is mainly attributable to the improvement of basic human needs including food, clothing, and housing. They recalled insufficient food in the traditional and communist eras, and expressed satisfaction with the variety of food choices today. They believed that there had been such a significant improvement in living conditions that they have nothing to complain about. A retired primary school
teacher once said, “Generally speaking, Tibetans think that now is the best of time for food, clothing, and most importantly, for the freedom to practice Buddhism. What else do you want? This is the best of times, and it does not come easily. Where our society is heading to is still uncertain, and unexpected things can happen, and ideal happiness can be lost at any time. However, I don’t think any dynasty is as happy as now. Before the economic reforms, China was so poor that people had no food or clothing, and especially during the Cultural Revolution, you could even get yourself into trouble by making the wrong jokes. Having been through all that, I think the present is the best period. People from your generation wouldn’t think so, because you believe that the future is going to be better, thinking that ‘I have so much suffering now, one day I will be rich and lead a better life’. Human beings are never satisfied with the present. But the elderly, no matter which ethnicity, believe that the present is the best.”

In addition, the various types of state welfare and compensation further contributed to the elderly’s level of satisfaction. For example, a 66-year-old elderly woman once commented on pensions, “How come the government is so nice to give me money for being old? It is not the government that makes me age, I grow old myself, so why is the government giving me money for that?” Meanwhile, when asked what kind of problems the Zhaba elderly are facing, none of the elderly informants provided a specific answer.
Table 5-2. List of Major Activities by the Elderly 2015-16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Herd cows</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk cows</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take care of grandchildren</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treat patients</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftsman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collect mushrooms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do circumambulation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give water bowl offerings</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5-2 demonstrates the major activities of the elderly villagers. Physically capable elderly villagers were often in charge of herding cows. Among the twenty households with at least one elderly member, eight households’ cows were being grazed solely by an elderly member, including three males and five females (see Table 5-2). The oldest of them was an 80-year-old female elderly, Lhamo, who was in a very good health condition compared with her peers. Every morning, her niece brought her breakfast—tsamba mixed with sugar and butter, and a small pot of milk tea—to her bed. After having breakfast in bed, varying from eight o’clock in summers to ten o’clock in winters, she would release the cows from the first floor and walk them to the wild grassland areas along the
mountain slope, which also belongs to their village, but is located about half an hour walk from the residential area. While most of the cows can just be left in this area and be retrieved by the same person to bring back home around 5 o’clock in the afternoon, the cows of Lhamo’s household, unfortunately, were notorious for stepping onto someone else’s farmland to eat the crops. Thus, from April to early September when the farmlands had been planted, she had to follow her cows all day long to make sure that they would not enter the others’ farmlands. She took some simple food such as steamed buns with her for lunch and stayed outside for the whole day before she brought the cows back around dusk. When asked if this was too exhausting for her, she said no, and that she actually enjoyed going with the cows to graze, because she could pray along the way without any interruption with her prayer beads (mala seeds), which she wore as a necklace all the time. If she stayed at home, she would spot things that she could do here and there, or would redo things that she thinks her daughter and niece didn’t do well.

For the elderly villagers who grazed cows and did farm work, none of them said that they did it because they were required to do so. The young and middle-aged people often times complained about their elderly relatives, especially the elderly woman, for continuing to engage in chores. Before Lhamo started herding the cows two years ago, it had been done by her elder sister Lhakyi, who was 83 years old in 2015. She was the oldest person in the villages that I could still have
a conversation with. When I first met them in 2014, Lhakyi was in surprisingly good health condition for her age. However, her physical condition declined rapidly over the following three years, and now she mainly stays around the household most of the days while her sister Lhamo herds the cows. Despite her weakness, she still finds things to do here or there, even if no one expects her to do the work and all of her household members constantly ask her to leave the chores alone. When the adult members had left the household to do farm work, she would still grab her hat and go to a different piece of land to pull out the weeds slowly by herself. When I asked her why she still did that, she said, “Because I’m not producing cash for the household nor doing a lot of farm work, so I try to do as many things as possible so that my family will not fall behind others (in farm work) and that others won’t laugh at our family.”

In addition, the elderly people believed that it was their responsibility to take care of their grandchildren whenever the young parent(s) were unavailable. For example, in the spring of 2015, a 73-year-old man moved downhill to a rented room next to the primary school to look after his grandchildren when the adult members were occupied with either harvesting caterpillar fungus or remodeling their house. One afternoon, when the children were still at school and no one was around, he cut some firewood with a saw, took them back into his room, and all of a sudden, had a heart attack. With no one to turn to for help, he just lied in bed until a random visitor came over hours later and drove him to his
own household uphill for the retired village doctor. Two weeks later, when he felt better, he went downhill again for the grandchildren. After this incident, I asked the fellow villagers whether they thought the old man’s family members were inconsiderate in letting such an old man look after their children. They disagreed, saying that here, it was appropriate for the elderly to take care of the children. Because they were not capable of doing farm work or household chores, taking care of children was the easiest thing to do.

**When “Visiting Marriage” Becomes Nominal: Living Arrangements and Caregivers**

At the early stage of the fieldwork when I tried to explain to the locals about my dissertation’s focus on the elderly support, I often described the significant phenomenon of “empty nested elderly” (c. kongchao laoren 空巢老人) in Han Chinese villages because of youth migration. The local villagers, especially the young people, often had a very prompt and strong reaction, stating that Zhaba people would never leave the elderly family member behind and that no elderly person lived alone. My fieldwork attested that this assertion was true. The thirty villagers aged 60 years and above resided in twenty households, among which one household had three elderly members, eight households (40%) had two elderly members, and eleven households (55%) had just one elderly member. As shown in table 5-3, the majority (63.3%) of the elderly villagers lived
in households with three generations, 30% of the elderly lived in four-generational households, and 6.67% of the elderly lived in two-generational households.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. Generations in the Household</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>No. Elderly Person</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the thirty elderly villagers, fifteen (50%) elderly persons, including ten females and five males practiced “visiting marriage” (when they were younger) and lived with their natal matrilineal families, eleven (36.7%) were married and nine (30%) still lived together with their tseron and children (see Table 5-4).
As introduced in chapter two, “visiting marriage” is essentially a sexual relationship that requires the male partner to commute between households. Thus, when one gets older, as the sexual drive and physical ability gradually decrease, “visiting marriage” eventually becomes a mere nominal relationship without the men actually visiting. If the partners live within the same village, they might see each other at the village gatherings such as festivals, otherwise, it is rare for the two elderly persons to even see each other at all. All of the fifteen
elderly persons who used to engage in a “visiting marriage” relationship reported that they had not visited their gayi (for males) or received her gayi’s (for females) visit in their households for at least five years. One frequent response they gave when I asked them why the “visiting marriage” had stopped is a Zhaba term “ma ha i”, which literally means “physically incapable of going uphill and downhill.” In addition to these “naturally” ceased “visiting marriages” as the partners grew old, “visiting marriage” also ceased when one gayi married someone else. It was discussed in chapter two that “visiting marriage” is nonexclusive and both gayi can still see others. However, if one initiated a tseron relationship by marrying someone and started living together, previously established “visiting marriages” will cease automatically. For example, the gayi of Lhakyi, an 83-year-old woman, was a cadre from another township in Zhaba. He visited Lhakyi and they had a daughter when decades ago he worked at the Yadro township government downhill of Labo village. But when he was assigned another position back in his own township, he met another woman, whom he married as a tseron in his own village, and they had children. So the “visiting marriage” relationship between him and Lhakyi ceased without discussion. Lhakyi never had another gayi after him. Nowadays, their daughter, who lived in Lhakyi’s household, still kept in touch with him over the phone and paid him a visit every year during the Lunar New Year, but the two elderly persons never saw each other again. Whenever I asked
Lhakyi if she missed her gayi, she would laugh and say no, “I have already become old, I don’t need him anymore (z. maxue).”

Among the elderly in my sample villages, twenty out of thirty (66.7%) persons lived with their natal matrilineal households. Four elderly persons (13.3%), including three males (two from other villages) and one female (from another village) no longer lived with their own natal households and had married into his or her partner’s household where they resided (Table 5-5). “Visiting marriage” means that one lives with his or her own matrilineal family, but not vice versa—living with one’s own family does not necessarily imply one’s marital status. As described in chapter 2, a tseron relationship can either mean that one moved into the gayi’s natal matrilineal household, or the two partners moved into a neolocal household. For the couples who were in a tseron relationship, they supported each other and were supported by their children. If, in a rare circumstance, which did not happen in my field site, an elderly tseron couple was infertile and childless, one nephew and one niece from both sides’ natal households would be brought into their household, to ensure that the gender needs were met, and that the bloodlines of both sides of the couple were represented, which symbolized that the next generation were the couple’s children.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5-5. Living Arrangements of the Elderly Villagers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With natal household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With partner’s household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With a relative by the monastery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variety of the elderly’s living arrangements resulted in different primary caregivers and intra-familial relationships. An elderly man once said that “visiting marriage” means that the two gayi would eventually “die in each’s own household (c. ge si ge jia 各死各家).” This vividly demonstrates that anyone who engages in a “visiting marriage” relationship lives with and counts on his or her own natal matrilineal household for care and old-age support. However, there is a significant gender difference: since children belong to the female’s side in a “visiting marriage” relationship, a female gayi’s primary caregiver will be her own children, and if she has sister(s) and the sister has her own child(ren), her niece/nephew will support her as well; in contrast, the male gayi can only rely on his sisters' children in his natal household for future support. It is the norm for the nephews and nieces, instead of one’s own children to take care of their aging unmarried uncles in the matrilineal families.
Among the fifteen elderly males in my sample villages, nine elderly males (60%) were supported primarily by their nephews and nieces, while four of them (13.3%) had children living in their female gayi’s households. When asked whether they were well-treated by their nephews and nieces, all of them said yes and none of them worried about the absence of caregivers in the future. One 70-year-old man with two children but who was mainly supported by his nephew and niece said, “According to the custom of Zhaba, if the son doesn’t live with the father, he will support the father if he is kind-hearted.” He said he did not expect his son to give him money, because he had his own family and he was not sick, and he believed it was an obligation for his own household members to support him in the future. “For me, I have lived almost all my life, and if my son supports me, I will be grateful to him; if not, it’s fine by me. But for my nephew and two nieces, they have to take care of me.” As the quote implies, the elderly men living with his own matrilineal families did not expect care from their children, which reflects the traditional norm of the absent caregiving between the father and the children in “visiting marriages.”

However, recently, the father-child dynamics were changing. Besides the young and middle-aged fathers’ increasing investment in childrearing as discussed in chapter three, the young and middle-aged villagers who were children of “visiting marriages,” especially the daughters also increased care and support for their elderly fathers, even though the fathers did not provide any
support for them when they grew up. For example, every one of the four elderly men with children living in the gayi’s household, received visits from their children with gifts such as new clothes or money during the Lunar New Year in 2016. When a 72-year-old man got a heart attack in 2016, all of his three children (two daughters and one son) immediately went to his house and they cried for fear of losing him. Although such support from children was only occasional and not significant, it complemented caregiving from the nephews and nieces and contributed greatly to the elderly men’s level of psychological satisfaction.

In the Zhaba language, taking care of the elderly is called “yo,” and the people who are currently providing support or will do so in the future are called “yo pi.” The locals believe that the ideal way to “yo” or to support for the elderly is to spare them from household chores and farm work and provide them with food and clothing. In 2015, I asked twelve elderly men and seven elderly women whether they were satisfied with care in their households, and all of them gave positive answers. In reality, however, at what point the elderly can actually be free from agricultural work varied from household to household. The more adult laborers a household had, the earlier the elderly are able to withdraw from farm work. However, no elderly member, except for the ones who suffered from severe illness, stayed at home without doing anything, as was shown in table 5-2.
In terms of caregivers, there is not a specific person who should be the primary caregiver, instead, capable members living in the same household are supposed to take care of their elderly member(s) together. Because young adult males are often absent from home for seasonal non-farm work, or if they practice “visiting marriage,” the males stay in their gayis’ households overnight, thus, the primary caregivers for the elderly’s daily lives were mostly women, meaning their daughter(s) or niece(s). However, when the elderly got sick and needed to see a doctor, it was mostly the males who took the elderly for medical care with their motorbikes.

Medical resources in Yadro township were very limited. Although every elderly village was covered by the Rural Co-operative Medical Services scheme, they could only get reimbursement in a government sponsored clinic within the township with four or five health workers, which the villagers often complained about saying how insufficient their drug supply was. The better utilized medical resource was a clinic of a monk doctor from the Chamdo region of the Tibet Autonomous Region, which was always packed with patients sitting outside receiving intravenous therapy. However, both the township clinic and the monk doctor were far away from the villagers living up on the mountains. Unless assisted by the motor vehicles, it was difficult for an elderly person with severe ailment to walk all the way down there.
Over the course of my fieldwork, seven elderly villagers consulted the village doctor for chronic joint pain (five cases) or stomach-aches (two cases). Four elderly villagers went to the monk doctor for infusions to treat stomachache (two cases), heart attack (one case) and diabetes (one case). Only one female elderly was brought to the township clinic by her grandson for chronic stomach pain. Among the five medical trips to the township, one elderly man and one elderly couple walked there and paid the fee by themselves, while two were brought there by a son or grandson on motorbikes, who paid the fee for them. For four more severe cases, the elderly individuals were brought to hospitals in Daofu county, Kangding city or Chengdu city for better treatment. Among the four cases, the elderly patients were accompanied by both sons (or son-in-law) and daughters, because the young men could communicate better with the doctors in Chinese than the daughters, and because daughters could provide better daily care when they stayed in the hospitals.

One case of a 65-year-old man revealed the significant support from externally-resident daughters. When the elderly man was enrolled in a hospital in Kangding city for chronic pulmonary heart disease in Fall 2015, he was accompanied by his residential daughter and son-in-law. His youngest daughter, who had married in Luding in 2008, also traveled to Kangding to take care of him. She didn’t give her father money and the medical fee of 5,000 yuan was paid by the communal fund of the man’s household, but when he was discharged from
the hospital, the youngest daughter asked the elderly father to live with her in Luding for a while, because Luding was at a lower elevation and milder climate than Zhaba, which would be beneficial to her father’s health. The elderly man went with her and stayed there for months before he returned to the village in the spring of 2016.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 5-6. Health Resources Utilized by the Elderly Villagers 2015-16</th>
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<tr>
<td>Destination for illness</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monk doctor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Township clinic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospital in Daofu county</td>
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<td>Hospital in Kangding city</td>
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<td>Hospital in Chengdu city</td>
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As mentioned earlier, female adults were usually the ones who stayed home and served food for the elderly on a daily basis. However, for the one case in which two elderly sisters were supported by a daughter and a niece, even though they said that the daughter and niece both took good care of them, they were conscious of the difference between them. This can be vividly exemplified by the “shoe incident.” One afternoon, when the two adult females, who were daughters of the two elderly sisters, left to working in the fields, the 83-year-old Lhakyi stayed around the house. She told me that she washed her dress, jacket,
and shoes because they had gotten dirty when she was carrying and pouring manure onto the fields surrounding the house. I noticed that she was wearing a brand-new pair of brown shoes so I commented that I had never seen them before. She smiled and said they were her daughter’s, adding, “She wouldn’t give me her shoes! But I washed mine so I just stole hers since she’s not here. She is going to yell at me tonight when she comes back, but I’m not afraid. She won’t beat me, she’s my child so I’m not afraid of her.” The next day, Lhakyi still wore the same shoes, so I asked her if she got yelled at last night. She said no happily, “I told her (my daughter) that I wore her shoes, and she didn’t say anything. Then I asked ‘why don’t you just give them to me,’ but she remained silent. She didn’t say she would, nor did she say she wouldn’t.” When I asked her why she didn’t take her niece Rinchen’s shoes, she said that she didn’t dare to, and that besides, she couldn’t find Rinchen’s stuff. Lhakyi said that if Rinchen complained about her, she wouldn’t say a single word, “I just remain silent (as she says this, she lowers her head, shrugs her shoulders and arches her back as if she’s being scolded). But if my daughter yells at me, I yell her back, because she is my child.”

**Journey towards the End: Religious Endeavors and Funerals**

The practice of Buddhism is a fundamental component of aging for Tibetan elderly (Goldstein and Beall 1997). For Tibetan Buddhists, old age is a
critical life stage for it is a time when one is able to amass adequate good karma for a satisfactory next life by engaging in various religious activities. One elderly man in Zhaba said that filial piety for ethnic minority people means allowing the elderly to pray more and collect more good karma.

Living by the Monastery and the “Team Waiting for Death”

For the Zhaba Tibetans in Yadro township, it has been common since the 1980s to build houses around the Duga monastery (of the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism) that was the only one in the township. It was a twenty-minute motorcycle ride or a two-hour walk from my field site. Because the monastery only had teaching buildings and a dining hall without a dormitory for the monks, it was essential for the villagers to build houses around the monastery for their own monk relatives to live in. If the monk was too young and there were no other adult monk relatives to take care of him, one of the household members, mostly an elderly man would move over there to live with him. Compared with the typical five-story houses in the villages with space for hay and cows, the monastery houses are much smaller ones with rooms only for human beings. Since it is common for the monks of different households to share rooms, these monastery houses usually do not bear a particular household name, and people can rent or sell these buildings among households across villages. In 2016, an old two-floor house sold about 50,000 yuan, but to build a brand new two-floor house could
cost about 100,000 yuan, due to the skyrocketing price for human labor and wooden materials.

In Labo and Modor village, six elderly persons, including two monks, three laymen, and one elderly woman lived in their monastery houses all year round, except for the festivals, while one elderly woman rotated between her village house and the monastery house. A 76-year-old elderly man who lived with his matrilineal natal household in the village, once told me that those who live by the monastery were the ones who could not get along with their own households. In order to investigate life around the monastery and grasp the whole picture of elderly lives in Zhaba, I also lived by the Duga monastery for one month and a half from December 2015 to January 2016. During that time, the monastery was building a new main hall uphill from the old one, and at least one adult laborer from every household in Yadro township was participating in the construction voluntarily.

One sunny winter afternoon, while the young adults were busy constructing the new monastery, about twenty elderly persons who mostly lived in nearby houses, were doing circumambulation around the mani walls (short walls built with carved prayer stones) by the old monastery hall as they did every day. Each circuit takes about 800 steps to finish, and the elderly persons follow one another to turn the prayer wheels alongside the monastery while they
intoned various the prayers such as “o mani pad me hum” hundreds of times. After every two or three circuits, they would sit on the logs in the yard, which are construction materials for the new monastery for a short break and chitchat. In order to interview them without interruption, I walked with them as they went around and sat down next to them as they rested. I learned that about half of them lived by the monastery only from after the harvest was finished (around late September) to the Tibetan New Year (January/February). They said that during this fallow season, there was not much farm work to do at home and cows can just step onto the fields without human intervention. Thus, they were able to move over here to pray and do circumambulation every day. When I asked one elderly man if he would manage the household chores when he returned home, he laughed and said, “No no no, you cannot steal the power.” An elderly woman sitting next to me said in an elongated tone, “The power is gone.” “See, she agrees,” said the old man, “When you get old, you lose power. It’s like getting rid of an old cow. The eliminated ones are all here. The ones who cannot do work and have lost power are thrown here, haha…When we go back home, we say nothing and we sit in the corner. No matter what they give (feed) us, we just sit in the corner quietly. It wasn’t like that when we were young, but when one gets old, the power is transferred to the young. It was the same in traditional times.” I looked around, realizing suddenly everyone, male and female, nodded immediately. One elderly woman even stood up and pointed at herself: “No, no
power at all.” The old man continued, “See, if you didn’t believe what I said, you should believe it now that everyone says so.” The elderly woman next to me said, “We are all waiting for death”, then everyone started laughing together, “Yeah, we are the team of people waiting for death (the conversation was in Chinese and he used the Chinese term “deng si dui” 等死队).”

While most elderly persons I met at the monastery were only there during the fallow season, some others live by the monastery all the year round. Tsering, a 70-year-old man from Labo village, was one of these. He was a very tall and strong man who enlisted in the army at 22 years old and still wore military style clothes nowadays. When he got back from the army in his late 20s, he had two gayi who were sisters in the same household (which was rare as discussed in chapter two) in another village and had a son and a daughter. Now he received about 200 yuan per year as pension from the military. Six years ago, the village committee chose him as one of the recipients for the state’s “Five Guarantee” funding, so he had been receiving an extra 3,000 yuan per year from then. With adept hands, he was able to earn some extra cash by carving clay Buddha statues or making religious drums. He lived with his brother Nyima, who was a monk, in a small two-floor house built by his family decades ago. They took turns to cook simple meals for themselves and planted flowers and vegetables, such as radish, cabbage, celery, and cilantro in the yard. Tsering’s natal family
provided them with about five kilos of barley flour and noodles every year. During festivals, his nephew would come over to take him home by motorcycle.

Tsering called himself a “rebel,” in the sense of being the one who refused to live with his natal household. He did not give any money to his family, nor would his family ask for his money. When I asked him why he didn’t give his money to his family, he acted rather surprised, “You think 3,000 yuan a year is a lot? I can use it up easily by buying groceries here in the monastery shop.” He believed that the relationship between the young and the old had changed significantly in the past decades, because in the old days, whenever the young meet the old, he or she would take their hat off, put their hands together in front of their heart and bow to greet the old person. The young people also didn’t even dare to speak loudly to the elderly, and the elderly were free to yell at any young man who was not respectful. Nowadays, young people run back and forth in front of the elderly like they are going to step on them, which was definitely not allowed before. The young people also speak with their head held high and don’t listen to the elderly. He said, “After the liberation, good things and bad things all came out. The good things are convenient transportation, cars, electric lights, and all kinds of machinery. But the bad thing is that some young people lost their consciences (c. liang xin 良心). ”
Another 71-year-old man from Modor village had been living in the monastery house with his 10-year-old monk grandnephew since 2011. He was now dissatisfied with the arrangement ever since his niece Drongtso moved out of his natal household and established her own household a year ago as discussed in chapter four. He thought that since Drongtso moved out as another household with her husband, they should think about taking care of their monk son themselves, instead of having him cooking meals and giving pocket money to the child. He complained that the young monk spent too much money on snacks from the monastery shop, like 80 yuan per month, which the elderly man paid out of his pocket but was not compensated by Drongtso and her husband.

Every year for the past five years, new houses kept being built near the monastery by people from the entire Yadro township. Among them, there was the retired primary school headmaster Gyatso, whose son and daughter have both bought apartments in Daofu county. They asked Gyatso and his tseron to move to the county for a more modern and easy old age life, but the elderly couple refused. Gyatso said that they want to be in an environment where there were many familiar faces and most importantly, a place without many mundane things to distract them from praying.

Pilgrimage to Lhasa
For Tibetan Buddhists, one of the most prominent religious activities is a pilgrimage to Lhasa, the capital of TAR. It is considered as one of the most important life events for the Zhaba Tibetans. In fact, every household in the villages has at least one member who has been to Lhasa. Before they set out, the travelers’ household would throw a farewell party to which every household in the two villages sends a representative to wish them a safe journey with monetary gifts, varying from 50 yuan to hundreds of yuan. One of the travelers keeps a record of the amount each household gave, and they will purchase souvenirs, such as soap, Tibetan medicine, and rosary beads to reciprocate each household after the trip, based on the amount they received.

In 1990, a month-long trip to TAR cost about 3,000 yuan per person, while in 2016 the cost was 10,000 yuan per person, excluding shopping. When I asked the young adults whether they thought it was too expensive for their elderly relatives to go on a pilgrimage to Lhasa, they denied it, believing that it is necessary for anyone, young or old, to go to Lhasa if they are physically and financially capable. After the trips, details from the pilgrimage become chatting materials for the rest of their lives. One day after dinner, Lhakyi, Lhamo and Lhakyi’s daughter talked excitedly about the zig-zag route inside of the Potala Palace. Even though three of them made the trip more than ten years ago, they still talked about it with sparkling eyes and great excitement. Similarly, whenever Dawa recalls his trip to Lhasa with his wife and son seven years ago, he goes on
and on, covering every detail in every single day. He says, “you have to remember all this so you will have something to think about when you are on the verge of dying. Otherwise, it's like the tsamba dough you ate, your life would be in vain.”

Funerals

The funeral is a significant expenditure for any household in Zhaba due to the recent skyrocketing payments to monks. When an elderly member passed away, the household uses the communal household money for his or her funeral, and the amount was not limited to the deceased individual’s share of money on a per capita basis. One funeral of a 77-year-old woman who passed away from diabetes in 2016 cost about 100,000 yuan, which was considered by the locals as the most expensive funeral in the village’s history. The head of the household, who was the head of Modor village, said that people in his family can make money in the future but their mother could only die once, so they tried their best to give her a proper funeral to reincarnate to a better next life.

The cost of funeral consists of several parts and how a funeral is arranged depends largely on the household’s willingness and budget for it. For the first three days immediately after one passes away, monks from the Duga monastery and three other monasteries in nearby townships will be invited over to the household to chant in the shrine room. The number of monks to be invited is
determined by the household’s budget. Meanwhile, fellow villagers and relatives come over to the household and give condolence money, while the household will have someone trustworthy, usually the village cadres, present to record which household give how much money. All of the condolence money from fellow villagers will later be used up as a supplement to the household’s savings to pay for the monks for the funeral.

After the first three days, the family needs to choose among three alternatives: sky burial, cremation, and water burial. The ideal way is sky burial, which is only feasible in Serta, another county in the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The family will hire a carpenter to make a wooden box as casket in which the corpse would be placed in a fetal position. The family will also hire a seven-seat or nine-seat van from the limited number of local drivers who own one, and four to seven male household members or relatives, decided by drawing lots, will be escorts for the week-long trip to Serta. Together they will visit several monasteries along the way and invite monks to chant to the corpse before the final sky burial ritual is performed in Serta. All the expenses along the trip, including meals, hotel accommodations, payment for the monks, and driving-related fees will be covered by the particular household, and such a trip cost about 70,000 yuan in 2014. Drivers/owners of the vans are generally very happy to do that because giving someone his or her last lift is considered to create such good karma that some men even bought a van specifically to be able to drive
corpses out for the sky burial. A 23-year-old man who bought a second-hand three-row van in 2015 said that if he accomplished seven such trips, he would be relieved from sufferings himself when he died.

If the family thinks sky burial is too expensive, a divination (c. dagua 打卦) will be performed to suggest whether cremation or water burial is a good option for the deceased. A cremation funeral usually takes place on the household’s own land, and for water burial, the corpse will be put in the Xianshui River just downhill. No matter which means of burial the family chooses, there will be a 49-day chanting ritual in the shrine room of the household by monks invited from Duga monastery. Payment for the monks was thirty-six yuan per person per day in 2016, and the number of monks was decided by the household, and varied from as few as three, to as many as twenty. During this time, the household will offer meals, accommodations, and sets of new toiletries including cups, towels, toothbrushes, and toothpaste for the monks. In the meantime, if the household has connections in the TAR or India, they would call them to arrange to do chanting rituals there as well.

The arrangements and expenses for the funeral are so transparent among the fellow villagers that people often comment or judge the particular household for the ways it treated the deceased individual. For example, when 32-year-old Pema’s mother passed away in early 2015, she chose water burial after the
fortune-telling ritual said it was appropriate to do that. Because everyone in the village knew that when her eldest brother was killed in a car accident earlier, their mother received a compensation of 150,000 yuan, so the fellow villagers commented that Pema was too obsessed with the money and that she spent so little for her mother and “ate” the rest of the cash.

**Economic Status: Sources of Income and Pocket Money**

As discussed earlier, a household in Zhaba is considered as a collective economic entity or family corporation and that the income of every household member is put together as communal household property, that is, it is managed by the head of the household. As such, no one in the household, young or old, gets to possess the household property personally. No one can simply take what s/he wants from the common fund.

There were various other sources of income for the elderly, even though none of them did migrant work to earn cash. One source was pensions. Six men out of the thirty elderly villagers (20%) get income because of positions they held when they were young. For instance, two elderly men received retirement salaries of 5,000 yuan and 3,000 yuan per month respectively, for one used to be a primary school teacher, the other used to work for the rural credit cooperatives. Two elderly men who used to be village cadres got pensions of 1,600 and 3,000 yuan per year respectively, based on the number of years they worked in that
position. Two other elderly men who enlisted in the army when they were young, received military personnel pensions of 1,000 yuan and 200 yuan per year. Besides these work-related pensions, twenty nine of the thirty elderly villagers (96.7%) also enjoyed a pension of 660 yuan per year issued by the Rural Pension Scheme. The one exception to this among the elderly was a man who used to work for the rural credit cooperatives and held an urban household registration.

These pensions had been issued directly to the elderly individual’s bank account around the end each year. However, there was no bank or ATM machine in the entire Zhaba region, so usually one of the elderly person’s own household members or relatives from another household would bring the elderly villagers’ bank cards to withdraw the money when they went to Daofu county to buy things for the celebration of the Tibetan New Year. Only one 72-year-old man told me that he sometimes withdrew his pension when he traveled to the county and he said he would use the money to buy food or clothes for himself or other family members. All the other 29 elderly persons reported that their bank cards, together with the cards of other family members, were held by the head of the household. Moreover, none of elderly persons said that s/he specifically asked for the pensions after they were withdrawn.
The elderly villagers’ welfare and pensions, therefore, generally went into the household money pool and were used for covering communal expenditures such as food. There was only one exception in 2016 in which the household spent this money specifically for the elderly. The head of the elderly sisters Lhakyi and Lhamo’s household spent all their state welfare and pension, a total of 1,900 yuan per person for the year of 2015, on bedding sets, Tibetan dresses, and shoes for the two elderly women. No other adult household member complained or objected to this decision. They did complain though that the two elderly women were too frugal to enjoy the new things, “They have many new dresses but they still wear the same dirty outfits every day. Whenever you ask them ‘where are your new clothes’, they would always say ‘I don’t know’.”

Besides state issued salaries, welfare and pensions, four elderly males (13.3%) and one elderly female (3%) were able to earn extra cash from their own skills or endeavors. For example, 67-year-old Dawa, who used to be the only village doctor, earned income through his expertise in healing. Even though he had retired for more than a decade, he still got frequent visits by patients from the entire Zhaba region, usually for acute orthopedic problems, chronic pain, or pediatric issues. He kept a small stock of biomedical OTC drugs for common illnesses and traditional materia medica such as loose moxa wool for chronic pain. He did not have fixed prices for specific issues or drugs, and normally did not ask for money from the patients. Instead, the patients gave him whatever
amount they found appropriate; he wrote down every single transaction in his notebook.

The elderly monks were also able to earn alms in cash when they got invited to funerals and other religious rituals in the households around Yadro township. The amount of alms is determined by the type of rituals, the host family’s economic condition, and its budget for religious activities. These vary from 36 yuan per day for a 49-day chanting session for funerals, to 100 yuan or more per day for other types of rituals. Nyima, a 67-year-old monk, recalled that in the traditional era, monks were given grain for rituals because there was no money circulation in Zhaba, but immediately after the Cultural Revolution when religious activities were allowed again, monks were given around 7 yuan per day. On the one hand, he admitted that alms for the monks had increased significantly over the past decades, but on the other hand, he complained that this amount was too low, compared with wage labors such as constructions.

Two elderly men made money with handicraft skills, such as making clay Buddha statues or chupas (traditional Tibetan dresses) for sale. For example, Namgyal was a 72-year-old well-known tailor in Yadro township. He started earning money making clothes when he was in his 30s and said that it took him about three days to finish making one dress, and about six days for more complicated styles such as the set with a pleated dress and a blazer/cape. In the
past decade, he was paid at 120 yuan per day. He bought all of the wool fabrics called pulu in Lhasa when he visited his distant relatives who migrated there years ago. Each set of clothing cost about 900 yuan for the pulu fabrics, and once he finished making the outfit, he sold it for 1,800 yuan. From 2015 to 2016, he sold about a dozen dress sets, earning more than 20,000 yuan, which he gave to his nephew, the head of the household. But he said that the process was so exhausting that he would not be able to continue doing this anymore.

In comparison with their male counterparts, the female elderly villagers had fewer opportunities to earn cash. This is mainly because they were more needed or preoccupied with the household chores and farm work over the course of their lives, so none of them ever went out of the township for work. Only two out of the fifteen (13.3%) elderly women were fluent in mandarin, whereas thirteen out of the fifteen (86.7%) elderly men spoke mandarin fluently. Meanwhile, aside from the three elderly monks who were supposed to wear maroon monk robes, all of the twelve elderly men wore Han Chinese style clothing every day except for the festivals, while all of the fifteen elderly women wore Tibetan dresses on a daily basis. Among the fifteen female elderly villagers, only one elderly woman earned money in old age while two women had ever managed to make money over the course of their lives. In the past two years, Dekyi, a 61-year-old elderly woman, was able to make some pocket money from morchella, a sponge mushroom that grows in the woods around the Zhaba
mountains in May. During this time, the young people had left the households either for collecting caterpillar fungus or doing odd jobs in other places, so for those who stayed home, after doing the weeding on their fields, they often took day-trips around the mountains to collect morchella. In 2016, Dekyi was the only elderly person who went to gather the mushrooms together with the middle-aged and young villagers. Whenever the other elderly villagers saw her climbing up the hill, they teased her for exerting herself so much to make money at such an old age, but Dekyi felt perfectly fine hiking around. In 2015, she found about half a kilo of mushrooms, and sold them to a local vendor for about 500 yuan. No one in the household asked for that money and they actually told her to pocket it. Her tseron in her household asked her to buy herself a pair of shoes or some new clothes, but instead, she kept the cash so that she could give pocket money to her two grandsons in primary school from time to time. The other elderly woman who earned money when she was younger was 65-year-old Palmo, whose gayi was a primary school teacher from another village. About eighteen years ago, when the primary school in the township was in need of cooks, Palmo was called upon by her gayi to take up the role. Because there were other females taking care of farm work and household chores, she was able to leave and work in the primary school. She worked in the school for sixteen years and was paid 160 yuan per month before it was raised to 300 yuan per month.
As mentioned above, it is the norm and ideal for everyone in a Zhaba household to put their cash income together as the household’s communal property. However, interviews with the elderly at a later phase of the fieldwork suggested that this was not always true in practice. After months of rapport building and communicating with them, three elderly men eventually told me that they had their own savings separate from the communal household bank. One case is the “rebel” Tsering living by the monastery which was described above, the other two were the monk Nyima and the retired bare-foot doctor Dawa. Their stories are as follows.

The elderly monk Nyima held his own savings of about 8,000 yuan. He never asked for his pension money from his natal matrilineal family, saying, “What for? It is only a little, like several hundred yuan per year.” But he pocketed whatever he earned from chanting in religious rituals in others’ households. Nyima was quite autonomous in purchasing things for the household or himself without having to discuss it with the head of the household (his nephew) or with other household members. He said, “I don’t tell them, otherwise there would be quarrels (c. chepi 扯皮).” Nyima complained that things were too expensive in Zhaba and that buying things from outside is much cheaper. Nyima mostly live with his older brother in their monastery house, but he commutes back home very frequently to check what was new in household or plant flowers in the yard. Because in Tibetan society, monks should separate themselves from secular life
and their natal family, other female villagers often teased Nyima as a “miu wu” or elderly woman, for being too attached to household issues as a monk.

In 2015, after experiencing an earthquake in spring when the rocking of the ground was quite sizable, Nyima asked a distant relative to buy him a tent which cost about 800 yuan, in case people needed to camp outside in the open air if another big earthquake happened. Although eventually, the head of the household (Nyima’s nephew) paid for it when the tent was delivered to their household, it was Nyima who made the initial decision. As a monk who goes into the fellow villagers houses to chant or perform rituals frequently, Nyima is quite familiar with other households' interior arrangements, furniture, and decorations. He joked, “We monks are like dogs, sniffing around in other people’s houses all day, knowing who bought what.” After seeing that three other households in Labo village bought new tables, he thought his household needed them as well. In May 2016, when one of Nyima’s monk friends whose household was being rebuilt, traveled to the neighboring Bamei county to buy new furniture, Nyima asked him to shop for tables for him as well. He ended up spending 3,000 yuan on a set of four carved wooden tables. When the tables arrived at his natal household’s living room, I joked that from then on, whenever his family members saw the tables they would think of Nyima. He objected saying, “That’s not going to happen! Are there any young people who think like that? Nowadays, people in
the new society have no conscience (c. liang xin 良心). In the old society they
had consciences and people were all honest (c. lao shi 老实), and they would say
things like ‘this is our uncle’s stuff.’ However, in the new society, if I died, these
things would become things that the young people bought, and they would go
bragging about it saying they earned these things themselves! As for me (if I die),
they might throw me in Serta, or throw me in the river to feed the fish, but I
wouldn’t know since I’m already dead, hahaha.” Then I asked him why he bought
the furniture if he thought like that. He glanced at his 5-year-old and 2-year-old
grandnieces playing next to him, and said, “Look at these little fellas, they can’t
do anything. I buy things to put it there for them.” He also bought a set of butter
lamps for religious rituals and said that his nephews and nieces were not smart
enough to foresee the future needs (his own death and funeral).

Besides purchasing household items, Nyima also liked to spend for
himself with his pocket money. “For food and meals, all of our family are the
same, we eat together, good or bad, it doesn’t matter. I would seem black-
hearted if I asked them for different things to do. But for my own clothes and
shoes, I like nice ones. If I’m dying, I need to wear clean and nice clothes.” In
fact, Nyima often calls his nephew, who is the only person from the two villages
that works in the capital city of Sichuan province, to buy him clothes or shoes and
send them to Zhaba. During the 2016 Lunar New Year, a fellow villager brought
Nyima three pairs of shoes, a brand-new smart phone and a power bank (portable phone charger) for Nyima from his nephew in Chengdu, who didn’t actually take Nyima’s money.

Dawa, the retired village doctor, was also a village cadre for decades, and when he retired at age 60 (in 2008), he had saved about 17,000 yuan from his double salaries. Although he was the head of his household and managed the communal money, he didn’t plan to contribute his savings to the household. He said, “I pocketed it. I need the money to buy myself medicines or other small things needed in the household. This way, whenever I go to Daofu county or the township, I don’t have to ask for money from them. Their money belongs to the household, which I don’t take with me.” He thought about depositing the money in the bank, but eventually gave the idea up, because firstly, there was no bank located in the township, so one had to travel to Daofu county, and secondly, he thought the interest was too low. So after asking around, he just forgot about it and kept the cash. However, even though he had his own money separate from that of the household, Dawa still used his own money for his household. For example, in 2014, he bought a refrigerator from Daofu county, which cost him 1,800 yuan, and earlier in 2016, he bought a pan for 240 yuan, a pressure cooker for 220, and an electric pancake-maker for 200 yuan, all with his own pocket money without discussing this with the household members. When I asked him whether his family mentioned that they would compensate him for these things,
he complained, “Not at all! They didn’t even say ‘thank you’ to me as if I should have bought them.”

Besides deciding for the household about daily life purchases, elderly men who have withdrawn from the position of head of the household can still exert great influence on the financial decisions of the family members. As described in the previous chapter, Dawa’s household received 600,000 yuan of state compensation for flooding and transferred 200,000 to his son Dorje who divided his household from Dawa’s. After giving money to Dorje, Dawa’s youngest son Yeshe, who lived in Dawa’s household, bought a new car before the Tibetan New Year of 2016. The car and the fee for the driving school and the test for a license cost about 50,000 yuan and this was covered by Dawa’s household communal money. Later in 2016, when the state sponsored construction projects of the new Yadro township and highway going on, a Han Chinese contractor built a sand plant at the valley bottom in the township to sell sand to the construction projects. With a newly-earned driver’s license, Yeshe wanted to buy a truck together with his gayi’s household and drive it for the sand plant to earn cash. He wanted 70,000 yuan from the household to buy the truck, saying he would use it as a tool to earn more cash for the family. But Dawa rejected his proposal. He said his two grandchildren, one in fifth grade the other in seventh grade, will need money for school. In addition, his wife and he need money for their funerals in the near future. Dawa’s rejection deeply hurt Yeshe’s feelings, and in the end, his gayi’s
household bought the truck themselves and hired Yeshe as the driver. Some young men in Labo village strongly disagree with Dawa’s decision, criticizing that he “doesn’t have the mind and gut to invest” (c. touzi de tounao he danliang 投资的头脑和胆量), believing that after Dawa’s rejection, it was only a matter of time when Yeshe would “fly away” to his gayi’s household and that Dawa would one day “lose both the person (his son Yeshe) and money (which his family should have earned if Dawa agreed to buy the truck)” (c. rencailiangkong 人财两空).

Despite the conflicting opinions with Yeshe, Dawa firmly believed that they would need money in the future, and in fact, shortly after the spring planting in 2016, his only daughter went out to work on a construction site in the neighboring county with her gayi. During that spring, the elderly couple were the only ones living in the house. They took care of weeding and built fences around the land to keep the wild boar away. He also herded the cows, while his wife milked the cows and cooked their meals. Dawa said that when his daughter left, she asked if the two of them could handle everything, and he said yes, “There’s no other way. They have to go because we need money.”

The rising cost of funerals not only concerns the elderly villagers but also the middle-aged adults as well, sometimes even leading to discord among the middle-aged household members. Take the Dechen house with its two elderly women Lhakyi and Lhamo both in their 80s, as an example. During the spring
and summer of 2016, Lhakyi got extremely sick and bedridden after eating some mushrooms. Her distant relatives started showing up in the Dechen house to visit her out of fear of losing her and to give her what they call “chin cha i”—money for the patient. Lhakyi’s niece Rinchen was so concerned about her health that she refused to see a doctor in Daofu county for her own severe headache in order to save money, worrying there might be a funeral soon. However, the head of the household Palden—Rinchen’s elder brother—wanted to buy a set of cabinets for the shrine room because his gayi’s house was also buying it from Daofu county at that time. Rinchen and her gayi, Norbu, got so frustrated by his decision that they complained almost every single day, believing that Palden didn’t understand the current situation. But they didn’t say anything in front of Palden for he was the head of the household and for fear it would cause a dispute. The cabinet was delivered to Dechen house later in the summer, and fortunately, Lhakyi recovered from her illness.

In conclusion, all of the interviewed elderly Zhaba people expressed satisfaction with their current living conditions, and they tried to still engage themselves in household chores as well as various religious activities to achieve a peaceful old age. No elderly person lived alone. No matter what marital choice one made when he or she was young, the elderly individual had available caregivers with their matrilineal household being a safety net. Elderly women who chose “visiting marriage” with duolocal residence over marriage with co-
residence did not suffer from the absence of husbands living under the same roof. Meanwhile, elderly men who chose “visiting marriage” and duolocal residence with their children in another household were not deprived of old age caregivers either, because their nephews or nieces, mostly middle-aged, still believed it as the norm to support their uncles. The sense of solidarity of a household was still very strong and even the childless elderly men were confident that at least one, if not all of their nephews or nieces would take care of them once they got sick or died.

However, those who lived by the monastery either for a certain period of time or all the year around, did complain about the declining status of elderly within the households, but the practice of Buddhism served as a coping strategy. Moreover, the emerging diverse ways of earning off-farm wages coupled with the rising cost of both living and dying have led to the differing expectations and plans among the family members. The elderly persons disapproved of the younger family members’ plan of entrepreneurial investment for fear of losing the money, which they believe should be used to guarantee the grandchilden’s education and the eldelry’s funerals. Meanwhile, in the face of a sick eldelry family member, middle-aged villagers within the same generation also held diverging plans on how to utlize the communal money. Consequently, in order to be more autonomous in making decisions which would benefit themselves, some elderly villagers who were able to earn their own income had started saving this
separately to fulfill their own needs, both present needs in their daily lives, and the ultimate need of a proper funeral in the future.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

This is the first ethnography on marriage, family, and intergenerational relations in the matrilineal region of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Southwestern China, and one of the few studies on aging in matrilineal societies. In this concluding chapter, I relate findings of the dissertation to the studies on the changes of Han Chinese families, Tibetan families, as well as the matrilineal Mosuo society, in order to better understand family change and elderly support among Tibetan populations in today's rapidly aging China.

The preceding chapters examined how the matrilineal Zhaba Tibetans with the “visiting marriage” tradition reacted to the political, economic, and socio-cultural changes in China. The “visiting marriage” tradition means that the “visiting marriage” partners live in their natal households and children live with their mothers. The male partners do not provide any assistance to the female partner or her children. This dissertation argued that the interplay of state policies including birth planning policy, household registration policy, and marriage certification rules have contributed to changes in the locals’ attitude on the nature of the “visiting marriage” custom and conjugal relations, fostering a sense of exclusiveness between the visiting partners. Meanwhile, socio-economic
development and the accumulation of cash income via off-farm wage labor have further contributed to the men’s increasing investment in their biological children rather than their maternal nieces and nephews. This has brought about an emerging pattern of establishing neolocal nuclear families.

Anthropological research on matrilineal societies cross-culturally argues that the accumulation of wealth is inconsistent with matriliny and that when it occurs, men lean towards their own wives and children instead of their matrilineal kin (Murdock 1949; Richards 1950; Schneider and Gough 1961; Levine 1987). Research results among the matrilineal Mosuo people in China have been consistent with this argument, and have demonstrated that marital patterns and household structures in economically better-off tourist-impacted areas differ significantly from traditional agricultural areas. Frequency of marriage and nuclear families were much higher for Mosuo living in the more affluent tourist-impacted areas, whereas the majority of villagers in the non-tourist-impacted areas still practiced the visiting system of “tisese” and lived in matrilineal households. Researchers on the Mosuo have argued that cultural assimilation and the men’s economic gains from tourism have led to the decline of “visiting marriage” practice and the extended matrilineal families, and the increase of paternal investment (Walsh 2001, 2005; Mattison 2010; Mattison et al. 2014).
In comparison with the Mosuo society, impacts from tourism in the Zhaba region are minimal. Even though the Ganzi prefecture government in the past decade has named this area the “Zhaba Visiting Marriage Grand Canyon (c. Zhaba zouhun daxiagu 扎坝走婚大峡谷)” and advertised the local tradition of “visiting marriage” as an “exotic” custom to appeal to tourists, the region is rarely visited by outsiders. The poor infrastructure especially the very poor road conditions makes it hard to be accessed by tourists, and the absence of guest houses further makes it hard to accommodate them. Nevertheless, modern ideals and family norms from outside of Zhaba have definitely reached the Zhaba people and have influenced them. Local villagers especially the young and middle-aged people, are aware of family ideals and lifestyles outside of Zhaba as a result of the introduction of television, mobile phones, migrant work, education and so on. Ever since the introduction of the birth planning campaign and the economic reforms in the 1980s, the “nonexclusive,” “noncontractual,” and “nonobligatory” nature of relationships in the traditional “visiting marriage” system have been redefined. Visiting marriage has become exclusive in nature between two partners and there has been an increase of fathers’ investment in childrearing.

However, based on the ethnographic data, this dissertation has shown that there has been a revival of the traditional “visiting marriage” among the
majority of young people in their twenties (63.64%) who still chose to practice “visiting marriage” and live with their natal matrilineal households. This study demonstrated that 85.7% of the young people who practiced “visiting marriage” shared a strong sense of solidarity with their natal matrilineal households, believing it was their responsibility to continue to live there and to engage in agricultural work and wage labor for their natal households. Moreover, 42.9% of the young villagers who chose “visiting marriage” believed that duolocal residence enabled them to better support their parent(s) and fulfill their filial obligations.

The findings of this dissertation show that the custom of “visiting marriage” in Zhaba is still widely utilized and valued among the young. The persistent ideal of living in a matrilineal corporate family, the limited level of education and income earning skills, and the difficulty of settling down in the urban areas, have led to both young males and females in Zhaba to rely on their natal families for a secure living and fulfillment of filial obligations, while authority in the households continue to rest in their elder matrilineal uncles or fathers.

Filial obligations expressed by the Zhaba youth revealed that such values were much more intact than what has been found among Chinese young people. Filial piety in today’s China involves negotiations between generations and the discrepancy of expectations. While the older generations strive to cling to the
traditional standards, the younger generations aspire to new intergenerational relationships based on reciprocity (Cheung and Kwan 2009; Chou 2011; Croll 2006; Miller 2004; Wang et al. 2009; Xie and Zhu 2009).

However, the dissertation also revealed many cases in which people rejected the duolocal “visiting marriage” tradition and the matrilineal family ideal, either joined another local household, established a new nuclear family with his or her partner locally, or permanently migrated outside of Zhaba. It showed that there was an emerging pattern of preference of neolocal nuclear households and household divisions among people in their thirties to sixties in contrast to those in their twenties who were adhering to the “visiting marriage” tradition. Such a trend of establishing neolocal households and household division is widely found in the Han Chinese areas (Xue et al., 1998; Zhang 2004). While the Zhaba elderly were generally against the idea of household division as discussed in chapter four, research in China suggested that the Han Chinese elderly are actively reacting, engaging, and adapting to this changing socio-cultural environment by cultivating new beliefs and creating new life styles. Research in various parts of China indicates that living alone has become a generally accepted alternative, and many elders actually choose to live alone to avoid chores and frictions within the household (Zhang 2004; Miller 2004). Moreover, because different food preferences and life styles are also significant reasons for household division, elderly people feel that their quality of life has improved afterwards, because they
could cook whenever and eat whatever they like, without being concerned with the preferences of other family members. When asked about the reason for household division, the most common answer given by the elderly was “freedom.” For instance, when one elderly villager was asked why he did not want to move to his son’s house, he responded that he would not feel at ease, and that “he is he and I am I” (Thogersen and Ni 2010). Zhang (2004) believes that the desire for more freedom reflects strained intergenerational relationships, based on the fact that more than 80 percent of the elderly parents living alone had fierce quarrels with their adult children before they moved out to live separately.

However, among the Zhaba Tibetans, unlike the situation in Han China, the commitment to elderly support was much more favorable than what has been reported for the Han rural areas. The dissertation found that no matter which marital practice one chose when s/he was young, s/he was not deprived of caregivers when s/he grew old or became ill. All the elderly women were supported by their children, and elderly men who never got married (60%), whether they were childless or they practiced “visiting marriage” and had children in their female gayi’s natal households, were supported by their nephews and nieces in their own natal households. These findings of a strong value to support the elderly, are similar to the findings in the rural TAR (Goldstein et al. 2013)
Within the households in Zhaba, the primary caregivers for the elderly in their daily lives were mostly women, meaning their daughter(s) or niece(s). Because of the Zhaba family ideal of having matrilineal relatives living under the same roof, it was very rare for a Zhaba Tibetan elderly to be supported by a daughter-in-law, which contrasts sharply to family composition among the patrilineal/patrilocal Han Chinese and Tibetan families. Since conflicts between the elderly and daughters-in-law are believed to be the primary reasons for elderly mistreatment and dissatisfaction (e.g. Yan 2003; Zhang 2004), the absence of daughters-in-law in the matrilineal Zhaba households contributes to a high level of satisfaction among the Zhaba elderly.

Finally, by studying and comparing the elderly villagers who resided in the villages and those who lived by the monastery, this dissertation demonstrates what Goldstein and Beall (1997) argued, namely, that the institution of “elderly religion” cushions the impact of intergenerational conflicts. Researchers on Chinese and Tibetan families have already demonstrated that coresidence with children does not necessarily led to secure and satisfying lives of the elderly (Yan 2003; Zhang 2004; Goldstein and Beall 1997). The dissertation illustrated that when the elderly’s expectations of caregiving were not fully met within their households, the practice of Tibetan Buddhism and the institution of the monastery served as an important positive option for the elderly people, Although no elderly individual said explicitly that s/he moved to reside beside the
monastery because of dissatisfaction within their household, those who lived by
the monastery or rotated living between the villages and the monastery
expressed dissatisfaction about their declining authority and power within the
households.

In conclusion, my research among the matrilineal Zhaba Tibetan
community has revealed a multi-dimensional reaction to economic development
and modernization. As Goldstein noted on the revival of polyandry in Tibet in the
economic reform era, “Rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions do not
necessarily erode traditional cultural practices. They can revive and sustain them
as well.” (Goldstein 1987: 77). Although there was an emerging pattern among
the middle-aged Zhaba villagers of switching from “visiting marriage” and
duolocal residence to couple marriage and coresidence with their spouse, the
“visiting marriage” practice was not eroded and the majority of young generation
today practice “visiting marriage.” Nonetheless, with the young people’s level of
education and the state’s construction of development projects such as the
highway through the Zhaba region increasing, how the young males and females
in this matrilineal community will react to future economic development calls for
further ethnographic investigation.


