

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Edwin Anton Schmitt for the degree of Master of Arts in Applied Anthropology
presented on May 4, 2011.

Title: Commodification in an Ersu Tibetan Village of Sichuan, China

Abstract approved:

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This ethnographic research aims to discover the implications of the commodification of production processes amongst the Ersu Tibetans of Sichuan, China. This thesis examines the commodification of Ersu agriculture and ethnic identity in the historical context of both China and the world-system. Ethnohistorical and ethnoecological methodologies are utilized to answer how through history the Ersu arrived at a commodified mode of production, what has been commodified and why, and how are villagers adapting to commodification. After providing a detailed analysis of historical changes in Ersu agroecology and identity, two forms of production that are becoming commodified are closely examined: agriculture and tourism. The socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-ecological adaptations that take place due to the commodification of agriculture and tourism are then highlighted in the thesis. Finally the commodified forms of Ersu agricultural and tourism production are analyzed from the perspective of local resiliency and the thesis is concluded by cautiously recommending applications for improving the resiliency of local production.

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Commodification in an Ersu Tibetan Village of Sichuan, China

by

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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Arts

Presented May 4, 2011

Commencement June 2011

Master of Arts thesis of Edwin Anton Schmitt presented on May 4, 2011.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Edwin Anton Schmitt, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I'd like to thank the Anthropology Department of OSU for their support throughout my time in Corvallis. In particular, I'd like to thank Prof. David McMurray, Karen Mills, Loretta Wardrip and Bryce; you've all made these last two years turbulent free. I'd like to thank my colleagues in the Department, most especially Dr. Peter Little, Adele Kubein, Sarah Cunningham, Bayla Ostrach (working hard in Connecticut) and all my wonderful cohort that struggled with me through Dr. Sunil Khanna's challenging and yet extremely helpful Research Design course. This thesis would not be possible but for the hard work and dedication of the Interlibrary Loan office in Valley Library. You are all miracle workers.

I'm so appreciative of my committee for all their support in helping make this thesis a cohesive and hopefully useful piece of writing. Of course most importantly thanks to Prof. Bryan Tilt for your support, patience and friendship. There are many excellent memories, challenges and adventures that I've experienced under your guidance and I look forward to many more in China and beyond as we pursue our own *Xiaokang Shenghuo*. Regardless of what the future may hold, I am your humble *xuesheng*.

This thesis would not be possible without the support of Prof. Li Xingxing of the Institute for Ethnic Studies of Sichuan Province. Perhaps the greatest shift in my academic focus will be your advice to historicize my research. Although I haven't had a cigarette in nearly 8 months, I look forward to the many future smoke sessions we will undoubtedly share at your home in Chengdu and in the fields of Yangjuan. Thank you also to Prof. Li Yongxian, who has always looked out for me in both an academic sense and in my personal life. I still owe you and Prof. Huo Wei a report on Ge Weihang; thank you both for your patience these past two years. As always I thank Prof. Stevan Harrell, who has been a guiding influence in my academic career and also has been a patient friend that after nearly a decade still replies to just about all of my ridiculously long e-mails.

Due gratitude is deserved to anyone, American and Chinese, that has ever participated in the University of Washington Worldwide Program. While not all of you had input in this particular work, my experience amongst you over the years has only made me a better researcher and China Scholar. In particular though I'd like to thank Daniel Stemp, for mostly sober late night discussions; Benjamin Gertsen for being my twin (according to Christine) and putting up with my chaos of the last few years; Geoffrey Morgan, for couches, friendship and insight; and Christine Trac for sharing our mutual academic pain.

Here at OSU there are two friends in particular I'd like to single out. Mark Ingman, for teaching me how to self-sustain my love affair with NW *pjiu* and for delving into the world of Western Chinese agriculture with me. I'm so very glad you came to Corvallis. And many thanks to Eric Foster-Moore for being an excellent friend, listening to me talk even after I should stop and keeping me in touch with my economic past. I do hope you find that this thesis has thoroughly studied "feelings".

I have a group of friends in Chengdu who probably don't realize it but are responsible for me being able to keep my sanity over the last few years. This especially goes out to Fu Zhenqing, Wu Hao, Qi Yu, Kui Li (on her way to SUNY), He Lei, Xiao Liu, Xiao Ren, Xiao Qian, Paddy, Andrew (now in Afghanistan...stay safe friend), Tony, Patrick and Matt.

I want to thank my father, Peter Schmitt, Uncle Matt, Aunt Deb and Aunt Beth for taking time to read Version 2.0. My family for some reason continues to be supportive of my eclectic travels and work ethic. I thank you all and appreciate your understanding when I am absent from important events. Thanks are particularly due to mom, Mary Neshek and dad; couldn't have made it to this point without you both.

A special thanks is due to Prof. Theo Eicher. Your narrowly defined parameters for why "Some countries are more developed than others" has been a driving force in my movement away from economics. Culture is important!

The warmest thanks of all go to the people of Bamboo Village, who welcomed a complete stranger into their midst over the summer. I have found time and again that the most wonderful people in the world reside in the Chinese countryside; the Ersu are no exception. Many thanks also to the Asbestos County Cultural Bureau; by far the best collaboration I have yet entered into in China. To Xiao Yi and Wang Zhanzhang, this thesis has been most influenced by you both because of your intimate knowledge of Ersu culture and your belief that what we do is important to improving the lives of villagers in Songlin.

Thanks to NSF and IDAM for financial support over the summer. Many thanks to everyone on the IDAM team; it has been a great pleasure to work with you all. I hope there is more to work to be done.

Finally, to Jia Yuling, my loving wife, for sighing each time another book from Amazon arrived; for making dinner when it was my turn to cook; for watching *Xiangcun Gushi* and *Wulin Waizhuan* with me to help me relax; and for a hug when I needed it.

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Note on Non-English Romanization

Fieldwork for this study involved the use of two languages: Chinese and Ersu. The notation used in this thesis is based on the standard notation for Romanized Chinese, or *pinyin*. The dialects spoken in the field were either standard Mandarin Chinese or a variant of the Sichuan dialect which is fairly close to standard Mandarin. All Chinese words are represented using the *pinyin* system. Since most of the Ersu speak Chinese as their mother tongue, I only indicate Ersu words where there is no Chinese equivalent. In the text I have indicated the language of Ersu words using brackets and abbreviations or [E:] for Ersu. Non-English words are italicized in the text. Some Non-English words are proper nouns and therefore are not italicized. All names of the villages and villagers that appear in the text are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of those I interviewed or worked with in Asbestos County.

To Herbert Henry Schmitt

Although our clan does not have a *juo* per se, I know you have been watching, and I present this work in honor of your memory. May you live on eternally in the halls of knowledge.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Visiting a village in Southwest China in August of 2010, a conversation with my surrogate “grandfather”, Mgebbu Ashi (but we all call him Apu or grandfather), provided an brief glance into some of the more complex problems that we see in the modernizing Chinese countryside. The production brigade neighboring Apu’s home was in the process of leasing their very recently semi-privatized forests to a lumber company from outside the county. According to the brigade leader¹, the lease would bring in much needed revenue which would be split amongst all the households. The lease was temporary² and all the land would be returned to the villagers after an allotted time. Moreover, a clause in the lease ensured that the households would not be prevented from collecting branches used for firewood. Apu, with a group of other elders, had rallied his own production brigade to prevent the transfer of their lands to the same company. In Apu’s mind the purpose of a lumber company is to exploit resources to make money. It seemed there was little in the lease that would prevent the company from clear cutting the plots just before they would be returned to the village. Apu explicitly told me, “the trees are not just ours, and because of that we cannot just sell them. We can use them for our own purposes but we have to ensure that they are there for future generations.” Apu was seventy-nine that year and had spent the bulk of his life herding sheep. He continues to do so everyday. I highly doubt he found time to pick up a copy of the Bruntland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) during the slow winter season³.

In China, these are two crucial understandings of the world. The first, Apu’s perspective, reaches back to the past and recognizes lessons there that could be beneficial for the long-term development of the community. The second, the brigade

¹ 队长 *duizhang*

² Around 20 years although that was supposedly still under negotiation.

³ In fact Apu cannot read Chinese. His father made sure he learned how to speak Chinese at a very young age, albeit with a very heavy accent, but he never learned how to read or write Chinese. He does know some of the Nuosu written language though. As far as I know there is not, as of yet, a translation of the Bruntland Report in Nuosu.

leader's perspective, focuses on the more recent engagement with market system and its potential for improving livelihoods in the community. By no means constrained to the realm of forest management, in general both of these perspectives have validity at some level throughout rural China. What we can learn from this though is that each village in China approaches this scenario differently creating a uniqueness in the future plans for their village and even individual households.

Conflicting discourses of “tradition” and “modernity” occur with great regularity in Chinese villages. Modernization is approaching all of the farthest reaches of the country and its impact is felt in many different aspects of daily village life. The fact that modernity has penetrated these supposedly “isolated” regions is losing its novelty. More interesting questions need to look at the progression to modernity as well as coping with the aftershocks of an ideological shift. Yet the regularity and context of these conflicts arising from a changing rural landscape should not be taken for granted. Each Chinese village is unique, possessing an almost “agent-like” nature. Individual households interpret village history, their identity, villager hierarchical structures, and regional geography in different ways but as is often found in ethnographic research, patterns emerge.

With this in mind, I was lucky to have entered Bamboo Village, the focus of this thesis, with a very clean slate. I knew next to nothing about the village on my first trip there, except that it was near some newly constructed hydroelectric dams. Originally I had been interested in agricultural change due to dam resettlement in Southwest China, so I came prepared with the methodology needed to understand the ethnoecology of a Chinese agrarian system. When one research site turned out to be inaccessible, a colleague in Sichuan recommended I visit Bamboo Village. Moreover, a local official in the cultural bureau warmly hosted me and happily introduced me to the villagers. Driving to the village it quickly became apparent that hydropower was not a central part of village life; the nearest dam was more than 30 km away⁴.

⁴ Although there is a large number of resettled farmers located in Anshun Chang which is just around seven km away.

Thus my first few weeks at Bamboo Village were spent at the Ersu Bed and Breakfast at the behest of the cultural bureau. I discovered that the new Bed and Breakfast⁵ had become a central meeting place for the village. Here I heard many stories from villagers, cadres and bureaucrats. I learned that the Ersu had just been featured on a national television program where locals were brought to Beijing to film traditional song and dance routines. The local cultural bureau official, Mr. Wang, told me about his work having the Ersu holiday, Guzazi, officially recognized as a cultural event in 1990 which became an impetus for the revitalization of Ersu traditions. Moreover, this revitalization was part of a plan to promote tourism in the local area. Of course, I also observed farming practices in multiple villages, since farming is such an integral part of the local culture. One key social observation made quite quickly was that very few of the remaining farmers are under the age of 30; young male villagers were particularly hard to find. On the rare opportunity that I could talk to someone of that age group, stories about school and work outside the village were quite common.

As I discovered, the Ersu had participated in minimal amounts of market activity in their history; their community could not be thought of as completely isolated even before the Han farmers moved into the Songlin Valley. Yet now some of them were participating at an all new level of agricultural commodification and it was happening at a time when the Ersu culture itself was commodifying into a tourist attraction. With both of these processes happening in their midst there was bound to be impacts to the local ecology, social structure and cultural perspective. Thus by critically examining commodification processes I ask the following questions of Bamboo Village:

1. Structurally speaking, how through history did the villagers arrive at a commodified mode of production?
2. What is being commodified and why do villagers want to participate in the market economy?
3. How are villagers adapting to the changes in their community which are the result of commodification?

⁵ Opened in Feb of 2010

This thesis will explore a historical ecology framework which allows not only for greater contextual depth of Ersu ethnoecology, but more importantly it allows for the placement of the process of commodification in the village in the greater context of historical resiliency. Villager agency in this process of commodification provides the perspective of internal local interest in the market and adaptive strategies to accommodate for shifts in the ethnoecological agrarian system as villagers increase their participation in the world market system. Thus it is equally important to analyze these adaptive strategies in light of world-system and regional discourses that are external to the village. In doing so it is possible to see the issues within Bamboo Village may be as unique as any in rural China, yet they speak to a greater structural ideology of a modernizing nation and a countryside that has never truly been allowed to be ‘isolated’.

Thus in the midst of a cultural renaissance, the Ersu’s newly formed cultural production of tourism as a marketed good I found to be a fascinating development within the village. Yet, it was changes in agriculture which provided me an entry point for an emic perception of local adaptations to shifts in production which was the village’s initial attempt to participate in “China’s march toward modernity”. Before going too far down that path though I need to describe who the Ersu in modern China are.

The Ersu

Bamboo Village is located in Asbestos County, Ya’an Prefecture of Central Sichuan Province. It is part of Songlin⁶ Township which governs over the highlands above the Dadu River that flows through Asbestos County. The Dadu is famous for the steep canyons and valleys it has carved through the Daxue Mountains before leveling out into the Sichuan Basin and feeding into the Min River. See Figure 1 for a map of the region.

⁶ Both Songlin Township and Bamboo Village are monikers used to further ensure the anonymity of villagers. Anyone who understands Chinese and a little bit of Sichuanese History will know where Asbestos County is located.



Figure 1. Map of Ya'an Prefecture and Asbestos County

Traveling from the Dadu to Bamboo Village one must climb along the Songlin River⁷ about 1000 m in less than 15 km. At various points up the Songlin River along the mountain ridges, Ersu *diaofang*⁸, or what I describe as “mansions”, are still standing as the core of the Ersu Village. Most of the mansions were built 300 years ago, thus they are starting to show some unsafe structural integrity. The cultural bureau is

⁷ A small tributary of the Dadu that becomes a stream up in Bamboo Village

⁸ 碉房, the *diaofang* of the Ersu are commonly associated with the *diaolou* of the Qiang and Gyalrong in Northern Sichuan, which are called “watchtowers” since they definitely look the part. The *diaofang* are also called *puzi* 堡子 in the local dialect which could be translated as “fort” “castle” or “keep”. The *diaofang* are not large enough to be either of those three and are most certainly not watchtowers, although they did somewhat have that purpose at one point in time. I prefer to call them “mansions” as they are enlarged versions of the local household structure and moreover they represented the power of the resident in the village hierarchy.

currently trying to register the buildings as historical sites and have looked for funds to encourage residents to construct new homes so that the mansions can be restored and preserved. In Bamboo Village, the Wang family has long since moved out of the top two floors but they continue to use the lower floor as a pig sty as is tradition.

Surrounding the Mansion in Bamboo Village along the base of the mountains or at the top of small rises are the village households. The valley floor itself is left completely to be used as crop land. The positioning of the homes in this way not only maximized fertile land but also provided protection from landslides and was easier to defend from Nuosu raiders coming out of the highlands. Near the mansion is a broad courtyard (E:*luo zuo mo*) which is a general meeting area for the village as well as a place for communal labor. All of the households are positioned so that a sacred stone usually protruding from a crossbeam in the structure has an unobstructed “view” of the sacred mountain above the village. The positioning of new households in the village along with much of the spiritual, social and political direction of the village is guided by the Shaba⁹, who would have traditionally resided in the Mansion.

The Shaba is the spiritual leader of the village and as such is central to performing rituals and organizing ceremonies, such as funerals and weddings, in the village. The basic function of the Shaba is his ability to connect households with their ancestral clan through ritual and ceremony. Within each village a Shaba will be the keeper of the Shaba sacred text, many of which have disappeared over the centuries¹⁰. The Shaba text itself is a very unique pictographic text with only about 200 characters in total. There are no longer Shabas that know for sure how to pronounce all of the characters (Wu, 2004), but the purpose of the texts is still understood, which is primarily for divination purposes. Many villages also have

⁹ This is transliterated into Chinese as 沙巴 Shaba by Prof. Wu who worked in Yuexi and Ganluo (2004), and also as 萨巴 Saba by Prof. Li who has worked in Songlin (2007). While Prof. Li’s work is quite relevant to this thesis, I personally prefer the Shaba transliteration into English as to my ear it more correctly represents the pronunciation used in Bamboo Village.

¹⁰ In fact those that remain in the village are facsimiles as linguistic researchers in the 80s collected them for study and preserved the originals in museums in Beijing. They provided facsimiles to the Shaba to continue their ceremonial rites.

Su'er¹¹, who could be considered “monks” and traditionally trained in Nyingma Buddhist monasteries somewhere in Greater Tibet. A more grassroots understanding is that the Su'er draws from a Buddhist sacred text to perform their rituals rather than a Shaba sacred text. These Buddhist texts were created only by a handful of devout households in Western Sichuan¹² and are written entirely in a form of Tibetan script. None of the currently living Su'er in Bamboo Village were trained in a Buddhist monastery thus they are also unable to read their sacred texts so their knowledge base has also been received entirely through oral transmission.

The knowledge of the Shaba is traditionally passed down both orally and textually along a patrilineal line of descent from the Shaba to his oldest son who starts to learn at a very young age. During the Cultural Revolution a generation of Shabas was skipped as the sons decided not to follow in their fathers' footsteps. As one villager, Teacher Tang informed me, “I decided to go to school and learn about science to help me understand the world. I did not think that my father's knowledge at that time was useful.” Now many of the Shabas have adopted their grandsons as heirs to their knowledge.

The Shaba is instrumental in the Ersu New Year celebration of Guzazi. This festival is held every year on a day in the eighth month of the lunar calendar as determined by the cycles in the sacred texts of the Shaba of the village. For all intents and purposes the festival represents New Year for the villagers of Bamboo Village; traditionally any person who passes a Guzazi Festival ages by one year. In previous years this day would also mark the end of the growing season for farmers. Thus one of the primary functions of Guzazi is to provide households the opportunity to provide sacrifices and thanks to their ancestors for providing an abundant harvest and health within the family. A New Year celebration at this time of year is quite rare for

¹¹ This is transliterated into Chinese as 苏武尔 Suwu'er by Prof. Wu (2004), and also as 苏尔 Su'er by Prof. Li (2007). In this case I use Su'er as again I believe it more accurately represents the pronunciation of the term used in Bamboo Village.

¹² The tradition of writing both the Shaba and Su'er texts was patrilineally transmitted but unfortunately the transmission of that knowledge base did not survive the Cultural Revolution. New texts are no longer made.

this part of the world and the fact that it coincides with the harvest time of traditional crops leads one to conclude that agriculture has been a part of Ersu culture for a very long time (Li 2007). The actual content of the celebration is quite similar to ritual practices of other tribes in the Tibetan-Yi Corridor.

The Tibetan-Yi Corridor could be thought of geographically as the steep mountain valleys that run from Gansu in the North to essentially Southeast Asia. The western edge of the Corridor is buttressed by the Tibetan Plateau and on the East by the Sichuan Basin and Southern China (Fei 1980). A portion of this corridor is directly linked both geologically and culturally to the “anarchist” world of Zomia¹³ (Scott 2010). In many ways the Tibetan-Yi Corridor shares Scott’s analysis of Zomia, that it’s geography has helped diverse ethnic groups avoid the controlling and sedentary practices of the large states on their borders. Culturally the region is as diverse as any in the world; multiple waves of residents have moved through the corridor as historical changes in India, China, Tibet and Mongolia placed pressure on the local people inciting migratory reaction away from those cultural cores (Li 1994). Most of these ethnic groups adapted to the harsh environment and migratory heritage by becoming swidden farmers and pastoralists. Even this was not permanent as their cultural foundations allowed them to shift their production from intensive horticulturalists to pastoralists depending on the environment into which they could migrate. Examining this region through the lens of shifting production and malleable culture, it is possible to understand how such diversity might have formed.

And yet through that diversity there are patterns of interconnected cultural praxis (Li 2004). The earliest formation of this cultural web likely began with the advent of the Bon religion in the region. Bon is an animist religion likely with origins somewhere in Central Tibet (Baumer and Kohn 2002) with a pre-Buddhist tradition throughout the Tibetan-Yi Corridor. Many of the cultures in the Tibetan-Yi Corridor believe that their ancestral realm lies on a mountain somewhere to the north (Wellens

¹³ Although personally I believe that the concept of Zomia should be reanalyzed in the context a series of states (especially it should include Tibet, India and Mongolia) rather than just the three Scott uses (Burma, Thailand and China; to some extent also Vietnam).

2010). The Ersu believe that when a family member dies their life force must be provided a road through a “white stone” (E: *juo*) that is connected with the local sacred mountain. This local mountain then transfers the family member to the ancestral sacred mountain in the North which represents the afterlife for the Ersu. As an example, during Guzazi, sacrifices are made to the “white stone” which then connects the sacrifices to ancestors in the far away sacred mountain.

While some regions of Tibet saw the Bon tradition greatly diminish with the introduction of Buddhism, most of Western Sichuan in contrast saw a syncretization of the two religions (Li 2004; Li 2007). The bulk of the Shaba rituals likely come from pre-Buddhist belief structures. Moreover, in Bamboo Village and the surrounding area, the Nyingma Buddhist sect arrived first around the early seventeenth century and lent itself quite easily to syncretization. Through the rise of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa the Gelpugs became much more powerful in the region than the Nyingma sect ever was. Yet while Buddhism became the dominant faith in Western Sichuan, the Shaba and Su’er in the Ersu culture almost strictly adopted ritual, dogma, artistry and scripture from the Nyingma sect. This is true even to the present, even though all of the Su’er in Bamboo village are now unable to read the Nyingma texts. Regardless, the Ersu’s historical relationship with Tibetan Buddhism is one of the reasons their ethnic classification in modern Chinese society would be considered “Tibetan”.

The current “core” of the Ersu ethnicity is actually about 100 km south of Bamboo village in Ganluo and Yuexi Counties. While the Ersu do populate a good portion of the Western highlands of both of these counties, generally speaking this region is geographically considered part of the *Daliang Shan* or the Greater Cool Mountain Region, which is presently dominated by the Yi ethnic minority (Harrell 2001). From a linguistic perspective, many of the residents in villages from this region have already lost the ability to communicate effectively in Ersu. Some even speak Yi rather than Chinese or Ersu (Wu 2004). Again in this region the Shaba characters and the Su’er Buddhist texts are incomprehensible to the locals. Yet there

are some that associate themselves as Ersu, an independent ethnic group, because of the unique Shaba text, while other villagers recognize themselves as Tibetan because of the Su'er's Buddhist sacred texts (Wu 2004: 54-55). Bamboo Village does not seem to be as conflicted. For one thing, very few of the Ersu residents speak Yi but everyone speaks Chinese. There does not seem to be as much recognition of the Shaba text as anything more than divination symbols¹⁴. Yet the Su'er sacred texts are definitely recognized as being specifically Tibetan in origin and have a stronger connection with the more devout Nyingma believers of the Muya¹⁵ clans in Songlin. It is this connection of faith to Nyingma and the proximity to the Caoke Temple which makes most Ersu in Bamboo Village identify with a Tibetan identity. Conversely, the ceremonial practices of Guzazi and rituals performed by the Shaba are very distinct from even the Muya, not to mention the rest of the ethnic groups in Kham or Greater Tibet. The perpetuation of these religious practices intensifies villagers' identification with their Ersu identity. Thus while the structural reasons are different, the same identity crisis found in the Ersu core cultural region is found in Songlin Township. Seeing that the internal discourse of identity seems to be dependent more on religion, the external discourse on identity is structured almost entirely on the Chinese classifications of "othering".

The ethnic classification of China's hinterlands was a massive undertaking during the 1950s and has been properly examined and critiqued both outside and inside China (Harrell 1995, 2001; Mullaney 2006; Leibold 2007; Tong 1988; Li 2004; Xie 2010). While most scholars agree that the Stalinist soviet system certainly had a great impact on how certain groups were classified, the fact is that for the ethnographers making the classifications, the final decision was not nearly that simple (Mullaney 2006). For many groups their ethnic classification determined political

¹⁴ Although to be fair I did not conduct a socio-linguistic study as thorough as Professor Wu Da (2004), most of my understanding comes from observations and conversations related to the Shaba, their texts and their relationship with commodification processes.

¹⁵ The Muya are another Tibeto-Burman ethnic group which resides in Asbestos County and has been officially classified as Tibetan. While linguistically distinct from the Ersu, they do share some cultural traits. Traditionally the Muya have resided on the North side of the Songlin River but intermarriage has been common between the two groups for many generations.

positioning and the ability of elites to secure their place in power with the ascension of the communist regime (Wellens 2010). This kind of political positioning by local elites was in reaction to the ethnically inclusive nationalist discourse started in the Republican Era and carried through by the CCP (Leibold 2007). Many of the elite in the Southwestern ethnic groups also took advantage of the historical understanding of local ethnicity¹⁶ so that they could be classified and thereof included within a politically recognized ethnic group. For the Ersu, it does seem that historical classification became central to their being subsumed under the Tibetan classification.

Current research seems quite unclear about how the classification process during the CCP might have played out amongst the Ersu (Li 2007; Wu 2004). The regional gazetteers show that the Ersu were considered part of the *fan*¹⁷ tribes during the Qing Dynasty (Ma & Sun 1968)¹⁸. The *fan* classification is very much a generalized Chinese term for the tribes that were brought under the influence of the Tufan Empire centered in Tibet during the 14th century. Since the Chinese only had nominal control over these regions until the forming of the CCP, a more precise ethnic classification of the resident tribes was never undertaken so the term *fan* persisted (Wu 2004). Perhaps more importantly for modern times, it seems that the CCP also did not do a proper ethnographic study of the Ersu in the 1950s. This was not an uncommon occurrence in the Southwest as the deadlines and requirements given to the ethnographers were really beyond their abilities (Mullaney 2006). Instead the classification in these regions was left to census work. In Yuexi and Ganluo it was discovered that many of the census forms were actually filled in with the self-described term of *fan* for ethnicity rather than the Party recognized *zang*¹⁹ (Wu 2004). Many villagers in the 1950s would most certainly tell a census representative that they were of *fan* origin since every other “Han Chinese” they were connected to had always described them as *fan*. That’s also undoubtedly how they

¹⁶ Even though from a local perspective or an ethnologist’s point of view it would have been an incorrect and perhaps even demeaning classification

¹⁷ 番

¹⁸ This is the *Yuexi Tingzhi* 越西厅志, from here on I will reference this as (YXTZ, 1968)

¹⁹ 藏 or Tibetan

reported their ethnicity to the Nationalists and Qing before the CCP. Most villagers would not have yet been fully exposed to the “nationalities” discourse that began during the early years of the PRC. Although I didn’t have access to decades old census registers, it could be extrapolated that a similar process happened in Bamboo Village. In the 1982 Songlin became a formally recognized Tibetan Autonomous Township, thus it must have been at this time that the census registers switched from *fan* to *zang*.

The external historical ties to the *fan* classification and the internal cultural ties to Nyingma helped to entrench villager self-identification toward the outside world as *zang* or Tibetan. Yet looking inward it is clear that the villagers of Bamboo Village have always recognized themselves as Ersu. For the previous 50 years, this identity crisis was a non-issue for local interaction between Bamboo Village and modern China. As the thesis will explain, recent socio-economic ideological shifts have changed that perspective just as it has changed the way locals perceive their own interaction with nature through agricultural processes.

The Ersu Agricultural System

Modern Ersu agriculture for the most part has common characteristics with all the mountainous regions of Sichuan. While average rainfall would be considered fairly high for this region (1,000 mm/year), the elevation and lower temperatures is not well suited for rice paddy agriculture. Thus the Ersu depend mainly on corn crops that are grown in the valley floor. For the most part corn is mono-cropped and typically there is only one harvest a year. Soy beans are often grown as a nitrogen fixer on the edges of corn fields. Potatoes being the second most important crop in the village are usually planted quite early so that it might be possible to replant in mid-summer for a late 2nd harvest.

Since most of the fields are designed to support corn growth the land is prepared in a way that is suitable to that crop. Every winter around the end of November the stalks of the corn are cut and some are fed to their cattle or pigs. Other

vegetable matter will then be burned in the fields and the ashes are raked into the soil. Animal excrement, human excrement and other biological fertilizers are then spread on the fields and the soil is “flipped” or as the locals say *fandi*²⁰. For the bulk of the winter the air becomes cold and arid at the same time that the intense sun solidifies the soil into a very hard consistency. Towards February it becomes necessary to *dadi*²¹, or break up the soil. This is commonly done with large wooden hammers, pick axes and hoes; rocks are also picked out of the soil if they are found. A few weeks later the land will have to be flipped again in preparation for plowing and planting.

In March the land is plowed using a very simple wooden framed plow with a steel plowshare that is still pulled by oxen. Households in general do not have access to a large amount of land; on average villagers have about 6 *mu*²². Normally this could be plowed within a few days, but each household’s plots are not necessarily contiguously organized. Land redistribution in the 1980s rearranged traditional holdings. Once the fields are plowed, furrows are formed running perpendicular to the mountain slope to capture rain water. This process is done in tandem with seed planting and due to the complexity and number of processes, especially for corn, this is often completed through labor sharing between multiple households. Corn is spaced about three hand-lengths apart for each set of seeds. Usually two seeds will be placed in each spot and during weeding the farmer will recognize which is the healthiest and pull the other seedlings. Two different species of corn are grown in Bamboo Village, one is a local variety that has pale white kernels and is quite sweet; it has been grown in the village for generations. The other is a hybrid species that produces a dense yellow kernel. Hybrid species are exchanged every year since they generally do not produce fertile seeds. The hybrids are often promoted through the county Department of Agriculture and there are subsidies that keep the price of seeds

²⁰ 翻地 a pretty common Chinese term which means to turn over the soil

²¹ 打地

²² 亩 *mu* will be used throughout the study as a unit of measure. It is equivalent to 1/6 of an acre, thus average land-use is around 1 acre/household in Bamboo Village.

quite low. These hybrids have increasingly high outputs but also require quite a bit of fertilization; mainly biological fertilizers but purchased chemical fertilizer can be used as a substitute if supply runs low.

Potatoes and soy beans will occasionally be intercropped in corn fields. Potatoes are planted within the trenches of the furrowed corn rows. One issue remains with potatoes ripening before the corn so only those that are accessible within the trenches can be harvested. The others must wait until after the corn is harvested in September, some of which might be rotting in the ground from the heavy summer monsoon season. Most households choose to plant potatoes separately so that they can be harvested efficiently without damaging corn rows. It also allows for the fields to have a second crop, which presently in Bamboo Village is likely to be a second crop of potatoes. Potato fields are prepared in the same way as corn fields before planting. Once plowed, the fields do not need to be furrowed; instead small mounds are formed with a hole in the middle where potato seedlings are dropped in and covered with manure and soil. Soy beans are never seen planted in whole fields, but usually are intercropped late with corn. Sometimes they are seen crawling up the corn stalks but most commonly they are grown on the edges of corn fields. This allows for easier access during harvest since the beans ripen before the corn.

During the growing season labor inputs tend to slow down to a certain extent. Fertilizer needs to be spread on the fields between April to July, three times for corn but only twice for beans and potatoes. During early April sprouts should be protected and kept from being eaten by pests. While mice, birds and insects are occasionally an issue for farmers I did not hear of them as a severe barrier to agricultural growth. Interestingly, there are very few cats in the village, but every household has a dog which is always brought on the hunt for the wild pigs and hedgehogs²³ that scavenge farmers' fields. What is more of a nuisance is roaming livestock; chickens, pigs,

²³ I was able to eat my first hedgehog in Bamboo Village, the skin was incredibly tough and the meat quite gamey but the stew had a remarkable flavor. As hunting is illegal they of course couldn't sell the meat in the market so instead it was provided locally at the Bed and Breakfast for a few days. I'm not sure what kind of hedgehog it was since it was already cooked by the time I found out about the kill, but judging by it's bones it was easily the size of a small adult pig.

cattle, sheep and goats. Multiple farmers complained of this problem in recent years and there is little that an individual farmer can do to protect their crop from these animals as they abound in all directions. Weeding also must be done at least three times during this period. As new species of high output corn have been introduced, fertilization has also increased the need for more laborious weeding processes. Weeding is still mainly done by hand with a small scythe. The pulled weeds are collected and used as fodder for horses, pig feed or left to dry in piles and then used to line pig sties. When pig sties are cleaned, this material can then be used again as fertilizer. As I'll show further on in the thesis, pressure on household labor has led to alternative choices for dealing with weeding.

Harvesting of these crops is also quite labor-intensive and almost all of the following are done in labor sharing groups throughout the village. Potatoes, harvested in late July to early August, require an incredible amount of digging and sorting through soil clods. The potatoes then have to be left in the sun for bit of time before the dirt can be knocked off. Potatoes are washed just before cooking and are generally just tossed into the ashes of a fire for baking. Potatoes that begin to show signs of rot are also chopped and boiled with cut weeds to form pig slop. Beans are harvested after potatoes towards the end of August. They are generally processed into tofu or boiled in stew. Beans do not generally keep as well as other crops and thus are primarily eaten directly after harvest. After corn is harvested, the shucking process begins which can be very labor intensive. One villager told me that it takes 2-3 hours to husk 40 kg of corn with help from 2-3 people.



Figure 2. Corn hung on the side of an Ersu home for drying

The corn is then bound in bunches and it is hung from rafters or on walls that receive a great amount of sunlight. Throughout the year the corn is mainly used for pig feed. In some rare cases the hybrid corn might be ground into a powder and used to make *momo*²⁴, baked bread, but generally the villagers would rather use the local variety for this purpose. The local variety is also eaten after being roasted in an open fire pit. The corn is harvested around mid-September although the newer species are tending to ripen earlier which conflicts with some of the cultural traditions in the village.

As with many agro-pastoral cultures, harvest season is an extremely important and joyous period. As stated above, Guzazi's representation as both a New Year celebration and a chance to express reverence to ancestral control over a good harvest

²⁴ In Bamboo Village these are much more akin to the Nuosu *mgebo* which are traditionally made from buckwheat. Some of the older women told me that the *momos* also used to be made from buckwheat long ago. *Momo* is in fact a loanword from either Khamban or Lhasan Tibetan which describes baked bread made from 青稞 or barley.

shows how important agriculture is in the socio-cultural strategies of the Ersu. Signifying this to a greater degree is the tradition that grains were not to be harvested, animals were not to be slaughtered and wood was not to be collected from the forest until Guzazi had passed. The onset of potato crops and the concept of a multi-harvest season has started to drastically wear on this part of Guzazi's importance in the community. Some younger farmers did not realize that this was even apart of the holiday's tradition.

As with many smallholder households in the world, farm work begins at a very young age for an Ersu child. Many of the older villagers stated that they (and in turn their children) began to work in the fields at the age of four. Work at this age of course entails very little at first but parents do bring their children to work in the fields with them at a very young age so that they can learn about the agricultural processes. When they are very young both boys and girls will accompany their mother into the fields but as they get older boys would much rather go herding with their fathers if they aren't needed in the fields. Females in the household are generally responsible for all of the agricultural activities mentioned above. The two exceptions are plowing the fields and spreading manure as fertilizer²⁵. While males are strictly responsible for these activities they also can help with any of the other agricultural activities, assuming they are not up in the pastures herding cattle, yak, sheep, or goats²⁶. Regarding animal husbandry, women tend to focus more on the raising of chickens and pigs since those animals are more dependent on a diet of weeds, cornmeal and potatoes which is processed into pig slop or chicken feed at the household. Women are also primarily responsible for all of the chores around the household including cleaning, childrearing and cooking²⁷.

²⁵ While most women explained the gender difference for plowing fields as an issue of bodily strength, the issue of dealing with manure (especially human feces) was less clear. One woman once told me that it was an issue of cleanliness. Others just simply said that women didn't do that job unless there was no one else to help them.

²⁶ Presently women also can go herding, but historically that was not the case.

²⁷ Although males in the household are responsible for slaughtering animals and will often help out with cooking as well. Both of the main cooks at the Bed and Breakfast were male family members of the Huang Clan.

It should be noted that while this thesis does not plan to extensively examine pastoral practices of the Ersu, herds of sheep, goats, cattle and yaks are kept by villagers. These herds were traditionally watched over by the men of the community. Generally, a male household member leaves home early in the morning and heads for the highland pastures, which is about a ninety minute hike from the village. These herds were considered a form of savings for the household and if the meat wasn't eaten at home it is likely animal byproducts from these herds would be exchanged for goods outside of the village. This level of exchange was limited to local markets and even today that has not changed.

While I have primarily focused this discussion of agriculture on three basic crops, it should be noted that many families do have small vegetable gardens during the summer time. Most gardens though are limited to cabbages and other leafy vegetables. What seems to be a more important source of food is *ye cai*²⁸, or wild vegetables. When women are not spending time in the fields they often climb into the mountains in search of edible vegetables, roots and herbs as well as wild mushrooms. Some of these wild foods also are used for medicinal purposes. In the last few years they have been collected to be sold in local markets in the county. But none of these wild vegetables or those from gardens are depended on to the extent that corn, beans and potatoes are in the village.

It is interesting to note that none of the three staple crops are particularly well suited to grow at this elevation, in rocky soil that must be plowed and furrowed. Although the processes are labor intensive, all three crops have become apart of the socio-ecological system in the village because of their high output levels. The high output is important because villagers are not the only first consumers but in fact a good portion of the food is grown to feed pigs and chickens. This process creates a kind of long-term storage of nutritional value in meat²⁹. The importance of this kind

²⁸ 野菜

²⁹ Wilk (1997:145) has also showed how this increases the market value of the corn since it is not only storable but also “weighs more per unit of value”. Pork is generally consumed in the home in Ersu villages but there are “pig farms” in the area which supply parts of Asbestos County. From what I was told these activities were the result of government support, not unlike the “vegetable sites”. (see below)

of nutritional storage has also found its way into cultural praxis since byproducts of both pigs and chickens are featured in Shaba rituals and especially during the Guzazi Festival. Another benefit of growing these crops is that under normal circumstances, they produce a high output on a small amount of land without an incredible amount of inputs. What inputs are needed are available or can be created locally.

While these three crops have become integrated into Ersu ethnoecology, they are in fact part of a second wave of domesticated horticulture. As I will discuss further in Chapter 3, highland grains such as buckwheat, barely and *tianxu*³⁰ were traditional staples in Ersu society. These grains as well as chickens and pigs play a central role in Shaba rituals as sacrificial items. Conversely, corn, potatoes and beans³¹ are not part of the sacrificial palate, likely because they have not held a historical importance within Ersu ethnoecology for as long as the others mentioned above.

Changes are taking place as the village modernizes, and these changes are progressively making an impact at the socio-cultural level. The highland grains are no longer grown due to policies implemented from the Chinese core over the last 60 years. An example resulting from these policies being that one of the sacrificial goods normally made from buckwheat is now made from sticky rice which cannot even be grown anywhere in Songlin. Yet one of the largest changes in the Ersu ethnoecology of agriculture is currently underway and it is happening in tandem with an ideological shift associated with the local understanding of quality of life which has consequences not just for agriculture but for Ersu culture itself.

The Vegetable Sites

During my second visit to the village I was lucky to have a few days on my own of wandering, reading and being inquisitive in my new research site. One

³⁰ 天须 more discussion of this grain is found in Chapter 4

³¹ Tofu is an exception but I can't help but wonder if this is not a substitute for an earlier food product. Tofu, and soy beans in general, has probably only become a part of Ersu cuisine within the last hundred years or so since they began to have more contact with the Han Chinese in the Dadu River Valley.

afternoon I was reading Prof. Ma Rong's "New Perspective to Understand Ethnic Relations: De-politicalization of Ethnicity" (in Xie 2010) which caught the eye of an official from the Asbestos County Department of Agriculture, Miss Li Sha. While the book itself struck a philosophical conversation about ethnicity and identity in China between a group of us in the tea house at the Bed and Breakfast it was really my interest in Ersu agriculture that moved the conversation towards the discovery of a very important piece of information. Miss Li began to inform me of all the special agricultural projects that were being implemented throughout the county to help farmers become more integrated with the market economy. As it happened one of those projects, which I call Vegetable Sites³², had been started two years ago in the 1st Production Brigade, a village about two km downstream from Bamboo Village. On her recommendation the local village leader, Wang Cunzhang³³, drove me to tour the Vegetable Sites the next morning.

The farmers of the 1st Production Brigade are all Han Chinese and have little or no understanding of Ersu culture. Yet they also grow corn, beans and potatoes as well as raise chickens and pigs³⁴. But in the summer of 2008 a group of 5 or 6 families were encouraged and provided seeds to grow various vegetables after harvesting the first crop of potatoes from some of their fields. These vegetables included, green chili peppers, carrots, cabbages, green beans, onions, pumpkins, peanuts and *moyu*³⁵. All of these crops were intended to be sold on the markets in Asbestos County. The crops ripened quite late and thus were able to enter the market at a time when fresh vegetables were being imported from counties or even provinces much further south. The families were fairly successful so in 2009 the project expanded to include around 30 households. It was also during this year that extra

³² The Chinese is 蔬菜基地, so the translation is direct but I believe it works well in this case.

³³ Wang is the leader for the administrative village which oversees both Bamboo Village and the 1st Production Brigade, which are considered natural villages. Wang Cunzhang is actually Ersu and resides in Bamboo Village with his family. His wife in fact works part-time at the Bed and Breakfast.

³⁴ As far as I could tell, few cattle were raised except to be used for plowing fields. The Han farmers most certainly did not herd yak, nor did I see them taking care of sheep or goats.

³⁵ 魔芋 *moyu* is a type of large black tuber that is dried and then turned into a powder that is used in nutritional supplements (i.e. weight loss packages) or medicinal herb remedies.

money from the central government that was allocated through the Sichuan Earthquake Reconstruction/Recovery Plan was used to construct a very solid concrete road from the villages all the way to the county seat. Furthermore, the brigade was given money to build a series of cement irrigation ditches which helped properly channel water from mountain streams thereby preventing erosion and diverting irrigation water to fields which would have previously been dependent on hauling water from the creek. Again in 2009 the families were able to sell their crop for a relatively high price.

When I arrived to the Vegetable Sites in early August 2010, many of the farmers had just finished their potato harvest. It was apparent, however, that some of the farmers had decided not to grow potatoes at all but rather just stick to the more lucrative vegetable crops. The bulk of the fields were planted with chili peppers, onions and green beans; perhaps only a third of the fields were still growing corn. During this season, all of the households in the 1st and 2nd production brigade had started planting market vegetables. This was much too large a production to supply a small county seat such as Asbestos County. The County Agricultural Bureau and local village leaders had assured the farmers that a market would be available in Chengdu the capital of Sichuan Province which on a good day was 7 hours away in a private SUV. Because they had to cope with intense flooding that summer, villagers would be lucky if they could make the journey in two days in a large transport vehicle. Transportation issues became apparent throughout the harvest season.

At first I had assumed that these Vegetable Sites were limited to the Han areas of the production brigades, but I quickly learned that a few of the Ersu households were also participating. In fact, once I had visited the site I began to realize that farmers were talking about growing market vegetables without me even asking them specifically about the Vegetable Sites. It was by far the most pressing conversation that dealt with agriculture in the village. According to Wang Cunzhang, not all of the farmers in Bamboo Village were ready to switch to these crops just yet. They were not willing to run the risk of investing time and resources to a new crop. So these

farmers would rather wait to see how those in the production brigades fared after harvest season. Yet I began to wonder what was making the Ersu so interested in the market economy in the first place.

The thesis will proceed as follows. In Chapter 2, I offer a theoretical framework that positions the commodification of Ersu agriculture and ethnic identity in the historical context of both China and the world-system. In Chapter 3, I provide an explanation of the ethnohistorical and ethnoecological methodologies I utilized to answer my three research questions. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of how Ersu agroecology and identity eventually became influenced by commodification through history. In Chapter 5, I specifically examine two forms of production that are becoming commodified; agriculture and tourism. Chapter 6 discusses the socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-ecological adaptations that take place due to the commodification of agriculture and tourism. In Chapter 7, I re-examine Ersu agricultural and tourism production in light of historical trends of resiliency and consider what commodification means in the context of Chinese society and to individuals in the community. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by reflecting on the three research questions and positing possible applied lessons for improving the resiliency of Bamboo Village.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundation

Scholars have viewed rural modes of production as developing through dynamic processes which are governed by various social and environmental conditions. Because agriculture is so essential to rural livelihoods, it is most efficient to consider how it interacts with villager's livelihoods. This thesis will particularly examine how the mode of production has changed within an Ersu Tibetan village in the context of cultural discourses linked to the "development" of rural society in China as espoused historically by the state. To accomplish this goal, I will first draw from a regional and global analytical framework of core/periphery relationships in the historical context of Chinese agriculture and Ersu culture. Then I will consider how agents within these structural frameworks have the ability to define their own ethnoecological interpretations of the socio-cultural, ecological and economic purposes of local products. Finally, this research will examine how the entrance of a new politically influenced structural element, commodification, interacts with the ethnoecological understanding of local production and cultural identity within a socio-ecological system.

World-Systems and Historical Ecology

Historically speaking, industrialization throughout the globe has been recognized as a dialectal relationship of global capitalism through core-periphery structural relations between nation states, where "economic factors operate within an arena larger than that which any political society can totally control" (Wallerstein 1974:348). World-system theory is important for understanding the external structural nature of core/periphery relationships where "major features of the economic organization are kept 'insulated' from the operations of the polity, and vice versa" (Giddens 1979:225). But it is important not to "overplay the influence of the external organizations of the world-economy³⁶ at the expense of 'internal'

³⁶ Read: capitalist world-system

components of the capitalist accumulation process” (Giddens 1979:226).

Wallerstein’s world-systems theory has its benefits, but only if it can move beyond its overly macro-orientation and begin accounting for micro-level differences in ethnicity (Hall 2000; Abu-Lughod 1989), gender (Ward 1984; Misra 2000) or ideology (Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2000).

Within China, a system of macroregions of social organization has fluctuated for many centuries (Skinner 1977); this system is quite similar to the interactions of uneven development examined within world-systems theory. One good overview of this system is Skinner’s Central Place Theory, which suggests that market systems in China were historically centered on the core of a Macroregion and radiate outward through patterned connections to intermediate markets and peripheral villages that were established according to a series of geographical, social, cultural and economic conditions (1964). This rendering of Central Place Theory does allow for more interactiveness on the part of the individuals within the structural bounds of the market than many of the classical understandings of world-systems theory. Unfortunately those structural bounds were based on a system that included little interaction with the Chinese borderlands or relationships that were extra-ethnic to the Han Chinese (Feuchtwang et al. 2010)³⁷. The critique of a world-system or central place theory’s inherent determinism and structuralism is dealt with by showing light on the agency of farmers and their modes of production throughout history. (Wolf 1982) As Marx said, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances found, given and transmitted from the past” (1898). Commodification

³⁷ I definitely agree with Wang Mingming’s critique of Skinner’s macroregional models being too focused on social structures of the Han as defining China’s boundaries of social interaction. Yet at the same time I believe that Wang’s critique of Skinner’s model as not allowing for the flexibility from an open-community to a closed-community (Wang 2009) to be incorrect. In fact Skinner’s interpretation of this oscillation, starting as opened at the beginning of a dynasty and closing as chaos descends at the end of the dynasty (1971:278-279), seems to have more validity and be more agency driven, than Wang’s interpretation of some dynasty’s being more open or closed than others (Wang 2009:58-59). Skinner’s model allows for interaction within and beyond the macroregions during any dynasty. The reason I believe his model lacks the detail of extra-macroregion interaction is more from lack of sufficient data than from a Western social scientist “imposing another kind of social science presentism onto Chinese studies”. (Feuchtwang 2010:908)

is a historical process causing the ecological, cultural and economic functions of production to change through time. Thus it is necessary to integrate the ethnographic understanding of changes in local modes of production with changes in the world-system (Rappaport 1995) or, more appropriately, for this thesis the Upper Yangtze Macroregion.

Utilizing a framework of Skinner's Macroregions in the context of world-systems theory is helpful for understanding the level of uneven development apparent between the core and the periphery in China's modern history (Wang and Hu 1999). This developmental contrast is starkly obvious when rural regions of Sichuan province are examined. Moving up to the present this research provides a micro understanding of local farmer reactions to policy created by urban intellectuals not just in Beijing but within their home county. The dynamic interactions between peasant and policy maker are critical to understanding agrarian processes (Leonard and Kaneff 2002) and those interactions become even more salient when examined within a historical context.

The concept of historical ecology provides a framework for understanding how those shifts also impact ecological processes within a given geography over time. In China, Shapiro's political history shows through archival documents and some site specific examples the environmental impact of the Great Leap Forward and Mao's belief in Man's ability to conquer nature (2001). Because the resiliency of ecological processes should not be entirely based on macro-political influences within history, it is important to have both a multi-scalar analysis of core/periphery relations with regard to shifting interpretations of production and a multi-temporal analysis across a longer time span. (Crumley 1994) For instance, an ethnohistory³⁸ of agriculture can show changes in the core/periphery structure, the process of industrialization beyond

³⁸ In all fairness, to truly gain a better understanding of resiliency of an agricultural system in a given ecology, an ethnohistory should be supported by archeological, geological, hydrological, atmospheric, economic and biological evidence. This research though shows how important ethnohistorical and ethnoecological understanding is to resiliency research. Future research on Ersu agricultural resiliency should definitely attempt to include integration with the above mentioned social and natural science researches.

a short time span and the overall impact on the environment. More importantly, through this lens it is possible to understand how a local culture adapts to policies originating from the core, such as promoting greater dependence on market forces to improve livelihoods in the countryside (Yan 2009), and how those policies might change villager's cultural interpretations of nature. This reaction to a shift in an economic or a sociopolitical system may produce different results when compared to other cultures impacted by the same changing systems (Balee 1998). Cultures enter into a dialog with nature (Ingerson 1994), and it is more important to understand what adaptation means to the relationship between a culture and an ecosystem rather than to assume definite causal relationships between the two. Examining these changes over time within an agrarian society can shed light on important aspects of their culture in relation to ecological functions of the ecosystem. As an agrarian discourse from the core becomes prevalent or salient in the periphery over time, gradual cultural changes begin to happen as well, since "this transmittal of information constitutes culture" (Crumley 1994:7). Just as it is necessary to examine how agency in the local community has historically reacted to and provided feedback to power-based structural changes in the greater understanding of "China", it is also essential to examine how the local agricultural system and ethnic identity has adapted to and interacts with changing political and economic discourses that have arrived from the state over time. In other words without understanding the historical progression of the agro-ecological system, it becomes very difficult to integrate the structural components of that system (i.e. world-system components) into an analysis which wants to understand how local farmers are impacted since they are also essential decision makers within that agro-ecological system.

Ethnoecology

From an emic perspective, decisions made by a villager which influences the local ecology through the production system should be considered in light of larger political and economic changes. But to do so it is important to consider the cultural understanding of production and the social hierarchies that influence the labor used

for that production. Ethnoecology provides the theoretical and methodological tools to understand a culture's perception of production's place within an ecosystem.

Much of this is achieved by utilizing what Netting et al. describe as:

...the priority we [anthropologists] give to learning the native model, assuming the existence of an ethnoecology of work and a system of cognitive categories reflecting a shared folk culture of utilitarian agrarian behavior (1995:56)

Defining this system from an emic perspective provides for a more accurate examination of the local ecosystem as it changes to exterior and interior forces. For instance, as the cultural system reacts to different political or economic changes so too will the agricultural system and the way in which it interacts with the local ecology. Moreover cultural interpretations of the agricultural system as a producer of ecological, cultural or economic goods will adapt to these political and economic changes. (Hume 2005) This is not to say that the processes associated with the production of these goods or their interpretations are frozen in time; there is in fact quite a bit of overlap between them (Wilk 1997:139). Yet defining the mode of production locally leads to a more accurate investigation when they are related back to the larger structural functions in society. Through the flexibility and reflexivity of ethnohistory and ethnoecology it is possible to negotiate the unnecessary determinism and structuralism that is inherent in world-systems and central place theory.

Harrell's rendition of the core "Han" Chinese areas implementing civilizing projects in the periphery of minority ethnic groups, provides a historical spectrum of both pre- and post-revolutionary politics which influenced frontier concepts of cultural identity (1995). Indigenous understandings of nature in China's periphery are central to cultural identity and contrasts strongly with the cultural identity of the core "Han" regions (Scott 2010). One of the key components of China's civilizing projects was to promote the idea that ethnoecological agricultural practices and understandings were "backwards" (Yin and Fiskesjo 2001). While there is no doubt these ethnic classifications received influence from Soviet ethnology (Mullaney 2006), in the context of production it was important for the state to replace local

knowledge in peripheral areas within the legibility and standards of the core's production processes (Scott 1998). This attempt at incorporation of the periphery into the core's ideology of production has persisted into the Reform Era and now is becoming reified through state policies and discourses that interact with the market economy (Tapp 2010). Now various products which were once produced primarily for subsistence or cultural purposes are commodities to be sold on the open market.

Commodification

The goods associated with this marketization process also undergo a more existential change in relation to the producer of the good itself. Once a good enters into the market as a commodity, its symbolic nature shifts toward a purpose directed by market forces (Appadurai 1986). According to Marx this is because of the fetishism that is associated with commodities, their transformation from an object with use value to exchange value and their relationship in the generation of capital which then further fuels the perpetuation of the capitalist system (1925). Still, it is crucial to examine these goods depending on their level of demand and purpose; i.e. should we consider them luxury goods, consumed only by the wealthy as notation of social status, or are they necessities to be consumed by all (Appadurai 1986:38)? Moreover, "things" are not destined for commodification from the outset of their production and instead can move in and out of a commoditized state depending on their mode of exchange and their demand in society based on a culturally defined sense of value (Kopytoff 1986). This thesis will follow Rothman's definition to help inform the understanding of commodities:

Any good or service that members of a society can conceive culturally as a separate class of goods having primarily intrinsic or exchange-value, as opposed to use-value, and which must be exchanged in an institutionalized marketplace or system of trade, often through individuals other than the primary producers of those goods or services. (2000)

Thus the good itself becomes disassociated from the producer as it enters the market place and "replaces" its use-value, which could be either a culturally defined symbolic value or an ecologically determined necessity, for an exchange-value.

This “replacement” also influences the gradual commodification of the mode of production. Here I define this process of commodification as:

when the process of producing a good becomes specialized specifically to support the economic value of the good thereby attempting to maximize the exchange value of a good, begins to outstrip the importance of the processes for producing a good for its symbolic value or to satisfy an ecologically determined necessity.

Thus when the intrinsic value of the good changes through the process of commoditization, the meaning and ritual associated with the production process changes for the producer. Valeri shows how the production of cloves or rice for the purpose of personal consumption is much more taboo than production that is sold to consumers exterior to the Huaulu identity. But in general producing rice or cloves at all places the Huaulu closer to the identity of those outside their culture whom they try to keep at a distance. (1999:359). Of course, it is also important to note that taboos are flexible systems which do react to shifting exterior conditions (Valeri 1999) just as it is important to recognize the shifting nature and interpretation for the production of any good. Farmers as agents negotiate different structural components of society to either preserve their organizational structure for producing goods (Geertz 1963) or to redefine those processes within a new discourse (Oakes 1998). This thesis will focus on a more specific examination of how and why Ersu farmers have allowed commodification to redefine their mode of production so that their goods move further away from use-values and more into the realm of exchange-value. This initial step of examining the commodification of a product, while an older focus of political economy, is still extremely important for understanding changes in rural Chinese communities where regional markets and the world-system are just beginning to heavily influence local lifestyles.

Thus an examination of the commodification of agricultural goods placed in such a critical light not only provides us with the analytical tools necessary to understand social change but ecological as well. The commodification of an agricultural product brings with it a new cultural discourse and worldview with regard to nature

(Haugerud et al. 2000) . The current world-system of neo-liberal economics has brought commodification to the far reaches of China's periphery. The neo-liberal ideology renders nature simply as physical limits to production which should guide one's decision making process when considering their comparative advantage. Yet as Sitko has shown, neoliberal policies interact with localized historical interpretations of production in a culture, the outcomes of which may not be precisely what some policy makers would expect of a "rational" actor within a neo-liberal market system (2008). The key to understanding how smallholders in China are interpreting these changes through their own historical processes should appropriately be perceived through agricultural production since it has always been the way the Ersu interact with nature, both at the physical and metaphysical level (Wilk 1997; Netting 1993).

Within a world-systems framework that is informed by Skinner's understanding of market developments in China and Ersu historical ecology, a clearer picture of how villagers have arrived through history to commodify local production can be provided. These structures of production processes are informed through the emic understandings of local ethnoecology and associated cultural identity. As villagers integrate into the market economy, the commodification of their products will be shown to be a process of them navigating structural forces to claim their own sense of modernity. In light of these processes of commodification, an analysis of changes to local ethnoecology and cultural identity will provide an explanation for villager adaptation to market influences. Analysis of the commodification process throughout time in the context of the Upper Yangtze Macroregion will focus on agriculture, but in the modern context of development the Ersu will redefine both their production and their cultural identity to form an entirely new commodity: tourism.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research analyzes the ethnoecological understanding of an agrarian society and utilizes a historical framework to contextualize the structures that have moved the community under study to accept the commodification of their modes of production. While agriculture is not the only source of production seen in Bamboo Village, it is the most central to village life. For this reason, the methodology used in this study focuses on agricultural activities and through that lens to examine shifting modes of production in the village over time. These methods are essential for answering the questions central to this study:

1. Structurally speaking, how through history did the villagers arrive at a commodified mode of production?
2. What is being commodified and why do villagers want to participate in the market economy?
3. How are villagers adapting to the changes in their community which are the result of commodification?

The following methodology integrates an ethnoecological study of a local agricultural system within a historical ecology framework. Such methods allow us to answer our questions across time and still obtain emic perspectives of commodification and adaptation within the village.

Sampling

The Bamboo Village, which is the focus of this research, along with two other surrounding communities, was selected to support this study using opportunistic and participatory sampling (Miles and Hubermann 1994; Creswell 1998). Bamboo Village agreed to host me and participate in my inquiries about agricultural processes after being introduced to the village through a fellow researcher and local government official. Two other villages, White Road Village and the First Production Brigade, were introduced to me by local villagers who had family connections. Information obtained from those two villages plays a supporting role in describing the surrounding region of Bamboo Village. All three villages are primarily dependent on agriculture as their source of income and subsistence. This was determined through examination

of township documents (Shi mian xian xieluo zangzu xiang renmin zhengfu 2007)³⁹ and conversations with local village leaders.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bamboo village and sampling selection criterion were established following Arcury and Quandt's site specific methodology (1999).

Step 1:

Certain social characteristics were established as being salient for collecting information that would be salient both to the local history and the ethnoecology of the agricultural system. Age as a form of criteria was separated into the categories of 18-39, 40-59, and 60+. These categories have been selected to help inform certain historical periods in the village; namely, the Reform and Opening Period, the Collectivization Period and Pre-Collectivization. The bulk of study participants were drawn from the middle category because they were the most available. In interviews with the older generation follow up questions purposely focused on Pre-Collectivization to gain a deeper understanding of that time period. As for gender, women were slightly oversampled because agricultural work in the community has traditionally been the responsibility of the female head of the household. Men play a supporting role but for the most part spend their time herding and, since the days of collectivization, working odd jobs outside the village. Education was selected as an important socio-cultural criterion. Level of education was divided into categories of none, elementary, junior high, and high school/college. Unfortunately, only one participant could be located that fit the final category. The rest of the categories were filled in progressively larger numbers as level of education decreased. This selection process is a reasonable representation of the education levels of people in the village. A primary locally determined socio-cultural criterion is related to bloodline, as nearly everyone in the village is descended or related to two families, the Wang Clan or the Huang Clan. Additionally there are some ethnically Han Chinese that have married into an Ersu family. Each of these categories were sampled evenly so as not to bias

³⁹ This is for the Xieluo Xiangzhi (XLXZ) from here on out I'll reference it as (XLXZ 2007).

one against the other. Due to recording error, one informant's family background is missing.

Step 2:

To confirm site selection, I did visit three villages during the course of my fieldwork. The other two villages were introduced to me primarily through family connections⁴⁰ of residents in Bamboo Village.

Step 3:

Two different "gatekeepers" (Creswell 1998) were instrumental in determining which of the sites from Step 2 would be able to fulfill my sampling criteria. A local village leader was my guide in the First Brigade and Mr. Wang from the township cultural bureau was my guide and translator (for two of the older generation Ersu residents in Bamboo Village) in White Road Village and Bamboo Village. A quick investigation of White Road revealed that the village did not have a large enough number of residents to conduct semi-structured interviews. Subsequently, I discovered that the 1st Brigade was populated primarily by Han Chinese making it too ethnically homogenous. Both villages still greatly informed the research through unstructured interviews, participant observation and additional historical context.

Step 4:

Once it was established that Bamboo Village would be the focus of the research, Mr. Wang initially helped introduce me to participants who would be willing to respond to semi-structured interview questions. As time went on my respondents introduced me to others in the village and in some cases I approached households on my own after I became more familiar with the local villagers.

⁴⁰ Although the importance of one village, 1st Brigade, was discovered by having a conversation with a county official in the department of agriculture.

Step 5:

As interviews were finished the final sample was distributed across the sampling criteria as indicated in the following chart:

Table 1. Composition of informants in study

VARIABLE	CATEGORIES	SAMPLE SIZE (N)	% OF SAMPLE
Education	None	9	39.1%
	Elementary	7	30.4%
	Middle School	6	26.1%
	High School	1	4.3%
VARIABLE	CATEGORIES	SAMPLE SIZE (N)	% OF SAMPLE
Age	18-39	5	21.7%
	40-59	12	52.2%
	60+	6	26.1%
Sex	Male	10	43.5%
	Female	12	52.2%
	Unknown	1	4.3%
Family/ Ethnicity	Wang	7	30.4%
	Huang	7	30.4%
	Han	7	30.4%
	Muya	1	4.3%
	Unknown	1	4.3%
Total Sample		23	100%

Note: N=23

For the purposes of researching agricultural processes, the household is considered the standard unit of survey (Netting et al. 1995; Wilk 1997). In total I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of 23 households. This final number was determined to be sufficient after content saturation was determined from a preliminary analysis done in the field. Each household in the village was assigned a number to protect the anonymity of respondents.

Political Dimensions of the Research

Because of the sensitivity of anything related to Tibet, foreigners in general are rarely allowed to conduct ethnographic research in villages that are classified as Tibetan. I found that the local government of Asbestos County has established a closer relationship with the Tibetans in the county than most places in China. These relations have been established for some time, likely stemming from the early support of the Communist Party by both the Ersu and the Muya. As this thesis will show, in the minds of local officials there is also some hope that the resident Ersu and Muya populations can provide an additional source of income for the county through tourism. Some in the county government believe that an ethnographic approach would be extremely helpful for gaining a greater understanding of the culture to help preserve it yet at the same time to commodify it.

While I was extremely lucky that this research was allowed to move forward, the truth is that I was not entirely free to do interviews on my own, which is quite common in China. The county government “delayed” me at three different stages of the research process for both political and safety reasons. Towards the end of the research this issue became less restricted and the county government realized I simply was asking what they considered strange questions about agriculture. They also found a work around by “providing” me with two research assistants to help me conduct semi-formal interviews. One assistant has become a true friend and colleague and is a “closet” anthropologist in his own right. The other was simply a minder and while a friendly person, quickly lost interest in the project. But as a disclaimer I think it is important to note that about half of the semi-structured

interviews were not conducted solely by me. However, I do believe that the material obtained in all of the interviews is important for including in the final analysis of the research.

Ethnographic Research on Agricultural Systems

One of the central goals of this research is based on producing a deeper understanding of the agricultural processes in Bamboo Village and their relation to other cultural and ecological processes to form a system. This research adapted a methodology for constructing an ethnoecology of a farming system (Netting et al. 1995). The data collected in this process is based on unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

To gain a greater emic understanding of village life it was necessary for me to participate in various agricultural activities. Ersu tradition regulates though that guests should never have to help around the farm while visiting. Thus the rapport building process (Bernard 2006) was crucial to establishing myself as more than just a guest. My connection with the local cultural bureau provided me the perfect connection to begin building rapport. The newly opened “Ersu Bed and Breakfast” not only provided me meals and a place to stay in the village, but it also had recently become a central meeting place for members of the community. I spent many days helping cook, clean and prepare food that was fed to visitors of the village other than myself. I also discovered that officials from the county and township would stop here for a meal, tea or alcohol if they had business nearby. Thus many of my unstructured interviews took place in the “tea house”.

Following the methods designed by Netting et al (1995), the major questions that needed to be answered through this ethnographic inquiry include:

1. What is produced⁴¹?
2. When do major activities take place according to the seasonal schedule?
3. What is the purpose of the agricultural products produced⁴²?
4. How are agricultural tasks done⁴³?
5. Who works⁴⁴?
6. What are the constraints⁴⁵?
7. How are things connected systematically?⁴⁶

An interview protocol⁴⁷ was established as a guide during semi-formal interviews which helped to answer some of these questions. Unstructured interviews with the “gatekeeper” informants, government officials and various household members helped to deepen the social, political, economic and cultural context surrounding the questions posted above. These interviews also allowed locals to help clarify some of the information uncovered in the semi-formal interviews. A deeper understanding of cultural processes related to the seven points outlined in the ethnoecology framework was obtained through participant observation of certain activities, with a focus as an observer (Creswell 1998). This was vital to identifying rituals or cultural patterns which are associated with these agricultural processes. Once the processes and rituals were identified some of those aspects were included in the semi-structured interview protocol to determine their prevalence and saliency in the community. The semi-structured interviews include questions that inquired about the transmission of agricultural knowledge, local perception of social and cultural structures related to agricultural production as well as local definitions of well-being and how agriculture

⁴¹ crops, livestock, foraged goods, fish, wild game

⁴² Subsistence, exchange, sale and this should include an estimated breakdown of these proportions

⁴³ Need to have typological differences for various tasks involved in production of goods, tools and equipment used

⁴⁴ Division of labor by gender, age, status, examine social networking structure of labor at the household/work unit level

⁴⁵ Local understanding of limiting factors of production, could include social, economic, and environmental factors

⁴⁶ The linkages between crop, time, task, tool and laborer, this can be visually represented and should be examined by a local farmer for consistency.

⁴⁷ Included in the appendix in both English and Chinese

as a mode of production related to that drive for a better life. Topics of this nature also allowed me to build more rapport within the entire village as they were, naturally, quite common topics of conversation.

Historical Framework

The above methodology helped me to obtain emic data that explains the local agricultural system in Bamboo Village and its relationship to culture and ecology. The second important methodological tool integrated into this thesis is to provide a historical framework to help contextualize change within the agricultural system over time. This portion of the data is informed through unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews and a review of textual documents, which gave me both an oral history and a textual history of Bamboo Village.

The textual form of this historical framework builds on a long-standing tradition of compiling the various interconnections in economic history (Polanyi 1957; Curtin 1984) while simultaneously contextualizing those economic relationships within historically important cultural, social and political content (Wolf 1982; Scott 2010). This research draws from a large amount of textual Chinese resources to construct such a framework that covers a broad time frame and spatial region which includes Bamboo Village, such as:

1. Imperial Histories
2. Local Histories
3. Regional and Local Gazetteers
4. Traveler's Accounts
5. Chinese Ethnographic Investigations of nearby regions
6. Census Schedules
7. Local Government Documentation (Edmonds 2005)

A thorough review of this material, coupled with secondary sources which have similarly analyzed regional agrarian change near Bamboo Village, has provided a basic temporal and spatial structure for the history of the place. Comparing a number of sources allows us to identify a few inconsistencies that creep up in textual histories. These inconsistencies include the manner in which geographic locations are named differently depending on cultural context; the fluctuations in how the borders of a

location are defined and the way certain phenomenon are interpreted by differing worldviews from the writers of the history. Identifying these holes in the framework is important as it fills up with ethnographic content from oral history.

To make a historical framework amenable to an ethnographic study that uses the household as the unit of analysis it is imperative to include the perspective of the household in that framework. In order to do this, a simple oral history was organized providing a more accurate record of changes to the modes of production that have occurred in the village memory. Oral history has become a powerful tool of cultural preservation (McCarl 1992) but more recently even for supporting ecological restoration (Fogerty 2005). The bulk of the oral history for this project comes from a series of period based questions that were included in the semi-structured interview protocol. Thus this data was a guided conversation of the respondent's memory of agricultural change in Bamboo Village (Fogerty 2005). This content then helps to fill in the gaps of textual history as well as provide a story that becomes important at the household level of the village.

Qualitative Analysis

All interviews were conducted in Chinese and the transcripts of interviews were translated into English after returning to the United States. Transcripts and fieldnotes from participant observation were coded and then placed within appropriate themes for analysis (Bernard 2006). As stated above, preliminary analysis was completed in the field to ensure that data gained from the semi-structured interviews reached content saturation. Initially themes associated with the ethnoecological system were analyzed to examine how changes in the system were impacting cultural and sociological variables. Systems analysis helped to position themes against each other and find linkages (Daniels and Walker 2001: 99-128). These analyses will provide a greater understanding of the cultural connections of agricultural practices from the perspective of the local farmer.

The final process of analysis was to examine our temporally adjusted mode of production in the village system within the historical framework. Thus is it possible

to see how processes outside of the village are related to changes within. The purpose of this exercise is not to determine causality but rather to show that the modes of production within the village are not isolated. More importantly, through this framework an examination of the impacts of present day changes on the local economy, ecology, culture, society and politics can be related back through history. Thus we can see whether similar events have occurred in the past, understand their outcomes, and project what that might mean for the future of Bamboo Village.

Chapter 4: Ersu Historical Ecology

History is not just a form of background reading to help inform us about significant events that happen through time. Utilized in its analytical sense, the history of the Ersu is important for understanding how the local agricultural system has gradually entered into the world market economy. Moreover, the historical progression of the Ersu people shows a shifting ethnicity which is now also becoming greatly influenced by market forces. In this chapter I'll begin by discussing the oral legends and ancestry of the Ersu to set the stage for understanding the deep connections to nature and ecology found in this agrarian ethnic group. I'll follow that with a discussion of the Chinese state's first attempt at integrating the Ersu into Chinese society through the Native Chieftaincy System and a look at the agricultural system during that time period. Then I'll examine agricultural and ethnic understanding within the historical memory of current villagers focusing on the Republican, Collectivization and Reform and Opening Eras as the region becomes more integrated into the world economy. Finally, through this progression it becomes evident that Ersu identity is intimately connected to agricultural production throughout history. As commodification begins to shift the local mode of production towards a market focus, ecological and cultural understandings of nature lose their historical place in the society.

Legends and Ancestors

Ersu history is as entwined in memory, archeology and historical record as it is in local mythology and legend. The myth regarding the creation of the Upper Songlin Valley is most striking for understanding the historical relationship between the Ersu and their agricultural practices. The first family to arrive in the area of Bamboo Village was a group of hunters, today called the *Paowu* Clan or Huang Jia in Chinese⁴⁸. They had migrated north from lands to the south near Ganluo following

⁴⁸ Because today all of the villagers now go by their Chinese names for the bulk of this thesis I will simply use the Chinese last name when addressing villagers or their lineages.

their prey. Tradition says that the elder Huang ancestor regularly would hunt for game with a bow and arrow. It was an arrow from his quiver which was shot into the mountains, carving out the Songlin Valley with its force. This ancestor then decided to settle his family in the newly formed valley. He discovered that on a set of terraces perhaps 10-12 miles upstream from the present day village, game would often come to feed. There he was always able to find good hunting; often after one or two days of patient hunting he would return home with meat for the whole family.

During one trip, the game did not come and after three days he began to run out of food, forcing him to eat wild grasses. On the fourth day he decided it would be better to die than to return home empty handed. His hunting hound, realizing his master's decision, began to howl. On the fifth day the hunter's wife became quite worried about her husband and with her two older daughters went to search for him near the terraces. They left a son in the village with a group of farmers. The women eventually could hear the howl of the hound and followed the cry to where the hunter lay. Finding him too weak from hunger to walk, the entire family decided to stay and die together. Instead they became one with the mountain, making them the local holy mountain. The tears that the daughters cried for their father became the stream of Songlin River.

The young boy was raised by the farmers in the village, who taught him how to grow *chaozi* or buckwheat. The swidden style of agriculture at that time made the farmers fairly mobile; thus after a few years they decided they would move on to another area. But the boy decided to remain. He could not leave his family as they were now a part of the holy mountain and so he raised his family in the valley. Eventually more of their hunting clan from Ganluo began to move into the valley and he also taught them how to grow crops. According to some accounts these original ancestors arrived in Songlin Valley 18 generations ago.

The Songlin Valley is also populated by a clan of Ersu named the *Basa* Clan or today called the Wang Jia. This family migrated from the Hanyuan region nearly 13 generations ago, according to their genealogy. Yet the unique aspect of their

migration into the valley is the myth associated with their claim on local lands. Traditionally the Chinese name of Bamboo Village was “Crab and Clam” Village; according to the Chinese, the Ersu used to harvest Crabs and Clams in a “lake”⁴⁹ that was in the valley. When the Wang clan first arrived in Bamboo Village the Huang Shaba explained to the clan that if they could drain the “lake” they were welcome to a portion of the lands created from the draining. The Wang Shaba performed a series of rituals which drained the “lake” thereby providing extra land for the whole community.

In a recent dissertation, Wu uses linguistic evidence reconstructed from Chinese historical records and connects them to Ersu legend (2004). According to the mythology, at one time the Ersu actually established a kingdom somewhere near modern day Ganluo, Hanyuan and Yuexi counties, much to the chagrin of their four closest neighbors. These neighbors are for the most part recognized by modern day Ersu historians as the Yi, Han, Qiang and one unknown tribe. According to Wu this legend of an ancient kingdom in this region corresponds quite closely with the historical records of the White Wolf People⁵⁰.

Li Xingxing correlates this kingdom with the “Eastern Barbarian”⁵¹ tribe that likely also migrated into the Anning River watershed near present day Xichang during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.). He portrays this tribe as being a peripheral political buffer zone between the Nanzhao Kingdom in Yunnan to the south, the expanding Tang and Song Dynasty of the Chinese from the East and the strengthening of the Tibetan Kingdom on their Western borders (2007). Textual reference to the White Wolf people dates back to the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 A.D.), although they most likely migrated from further north, perhaps even from Qinghai at the headwaters of the Yalong River. This in fact corresponds well with

⁴⁹ There is little evidence to suggest that there was a lake in this valley at all or that the villagers ever harvested anything remotely like crabs or clams. I have heard of some interesting freshwater invertebrates high up in the mountains that have legs, yet they are not amphibious and have to breathe under water. The Ersu though consider them to have spirits and refuse to eat them.

⁵⁰ 白狼人 *bai lang ren*

⁵¹ 东蛮 *dong man*

traditional beliefs of the origin of ethnic groups in Western Sichuan such as the *Prmi* of Muli (Wellens 2010). This supposes though that the ancestors of the Ersu could possibly have lived in the region for over a thousand years.

According to Li, the White Wolf people “drew their governance and administrative practices from the Tang Chinese; their ethnic traditions from the Nanzhao Kingdom through the ‘*Moxie*,’⁵² and their spiritual traditions from the Tibetan Kingdom” (2007). These people are also the ancestors of ethnic groups seen in the Tibetan-Yi Corridor⁵³. During the Tang and Northern Song dynasties (618-1127) the invasion of the Turfan⁵⁴ Empire into the region caused the disappearance of the White Wolf people from the Chinese records as they were thereafter classified as *fanren*, *xifan* or *fanzu*⁵⁵. (Wu 2004) This distinction changed again during the Republican Era when Sun Yat-sen classified all *fanzu* under the new title of *zangzu*, or Tibetan, from the new Chinese name for Tibet, *Xizang*.

The Tufan Empire brought with it an expansion of the Bonpö⁵⁶ or Bon religion, the ancient animist religion of the Tibetan Plateau. The influence of Bon practices were seen throughout the Tibetan-Yi Corridor at this time. These practices may in fact not have been much different than those already found amongst the White Wolf and Moxie of that time period. One of the key aspects of these religious practices

⁵² 磨些 who Harrell (2001) identifies as the Mosu of Lugu Lake, also called the Na (Wellens 2010; McKhann 1992).

⁵³ 藏彝走廊, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the idea of an ethnic corridor stretching from Gansu to Burma was first put forward by Fei Xiaotong although he never wrote up a concrete conceptualization of his ideas. Thus the original historical framework that utilized the Tibetan-Yi Corridor is probably Li Shaoming (1994).

⁵⁴ 吐蕃 which is an early Chinese transliteration of Tibet

⁵⁵ 番人, 西番 or 番族 respectively all of these words though were used to describe a person that resides in the highlands of Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, Qinghai, and Tibet.

⁵⁶ Joseph Rock (1948) used the transliteration of Bonp’o while the Chinese simply call it *ben jiao* 苯教. This is the animist religion that was a precursor to Buddhism throughout much of Tibet and Western China. Many of the traditional practices of the Ersu not normally associated with the local Nyingma Buddhism practiced in this area are assumed to originate in the Bon Religion.

revolves around the status of a religious leader which in Ersu culture is called the Shaba⁵⁷.

From about the 9th to the 15th century, the connection with both Bon and the Turfan Empire prepared this region for a more unifying religion in both a spiritual and political context: Nyingma Buddhism, which is the oldest form of Tibetan Buddhism. The Asbestos County Gazetteer (Shi mian xian di fang zhi bian zuan wei yuan hui 1999:120)⁵⁸ states that as the Nyingma sect established itself in the region, the Bon Religion quickly faded away. From discussions with scholars of the region I believe this is highly unlikely, but rather that a syncretization of the two belief systems was created. The closest monastery was established in Caoke⁵⁹, during the end of the Ming Dynasty, around the time when Buddhism was quickly transforming the religious landscape of Western Sichuan.⁶⁰ While some Bon practices are still present in Ersu cosmology, mainly due to the heritage of the Shaba and their importance for clan structure as well as spiritual guidance, political leaders in the region used the adoption of Nyingma Buddhist practices as a way to distance themselves from the political conflicts that arose between China, Mongolia and Tibet.

From historical and cultural evidence dating at least to the Tang the various tribes associated with ancestors of the Ersu (i.e. *Moxie*, White Wolf, *fanren*) most definitely employed farming practices. It is even possible that these ancient tribes may have at one time been rice farmers in the Anning River Valley but as they were pushed into the mountains began to adopt swidden agriculture⁶¹ (Li 2007). The swidden practices would have contrasted politically and socially with the rice-

⁵⁷ This is the Shaba and Su'er that were described in Chapter 1. Amongst the Naxi this would likely be the equivalent of the *dongba* (Mckhann, 1992; Rock, 1948), for the Premi this would be the *anji* (Wellens, 2010)

⁵⁸ This is the Shimian Xianzhi (SMXZ) so from here on out I'll reference this as (SMXZ 1999)

⁵⁹ Perhaps 30 miles distant as the crow flies but requires either passing through three drainages or following the Dadu River north and then returning up the Caoke River valley.

⁶⁰ Wellens's (2010, Chapter 1) description of Muli in the 16th and 17th century is an excellent example of this.

⁶¹ It would be exceptional if this were true as it would prove once again that socio-ecological systems do not have any kind of progressional development and that agricultural practices adapt to geographical changes in the environment, even alternating between one socio-ecological system to another as cultures migrate in and out of differing environs.

centered cultivation of the Nanzhao and the Chinese. In many ways the geographic terrain and the lack of existing central governance in this region would have made it undesirable as a territory for either the Nanzhao or the Chinese. With the invasion of the Turfan, who likely had similar social structures, these ancestors also inherited the practice of yak herding. In the end it was the Mongol Empire's invasion into Yunnan that began to upset the buffer zone that had been established in this region for centuries.

Imperial Influence and Establishment of *Songlindi Tusi*

The Native Chieftaincy System, or *Tusi*⁶², actually is a successor of a series of Chinese dynastic policies which governed their relationship with the periphery. The beginning of the governance strategies started with the “bridle and halter” or *jimi* concepts that can be dated back to the Qin Dynasty (Gong 1992) yet it is the establishment of actual *jimizhou* or “bridle and halter prefectures” during the Tang Dynasty that truly set these governance theories to work in the periphery (Took 2005). The basic understanding of *jimi* within the *Han guan yi* (Rights for the Officials of the Han) reference the barbarians as horses and cattle that should be bridled and haltered (*yan zhi siyi ru niu ma zhi shou jimi*)⁶³, but that there should be a kind of hands off diplomacy approach to allowing these regions to self-govern while still showing some sense of subjugation to the Chinese Emperor. Yet, as Took shows, the importance of *jimi* policy:

...was motivated by considerations of expediency, primarily the geopolitical, military and economic benefits which flowed to China from settling and promoting peaceful relations with the frontier 'barbarians'. These benefits flowed both ways: there were significant advantages for the barbarian chiefs to form subordinate relationships with the Chinese government, such as trade, official titles, credentials and imperial gifts (2005:26).

The chaotic nature of the *jimizhou* system established by the Tang was absorbed, reorganized, refined and renamed by the invading Mongols of the Yuan

⁶² Tusi 土司, essentially a local lineage that was recognized by the Emperor as being the local extension of imperial rule.

⁶³ As described by Took (2005:25-26)

dynasty (1206-1368). It is generally assumed by Chinese scholars that the Mongols were responsible for the establishment of the *tusi* system (or native chieftaincy) which would be used in some cases until 1951 (Gong 1992)⁶⁴. The Mongols stationed large garrisons in the Southwest region particularly in Northwestern Yunnan where they could act as a defense against any Turfan resistance. But they also realized that these military conscripts (many of whom were actually from other parts of Western Sichuan) were not the best administrators and governors. Thus the Mongol Empire began to implement the Tusi System of governance which essentially designated a ruling family of local origin to implement the imperial will.

As the Mongol Empire began to erode, it took some time for the Ming (1368-1644) to consolidate these “native chieftaincies” into their system of government, but ultimately they recognized the benefit of such a political body. In fact in the region in which Bamboo Village is located, it seems as though minimal attention was paid to the Tusi of the region by the imperial government. As typical for Tusi-governed regions, the leaders would provide tribute to the emperor every 2-3 years and in exchange the emperor through various edicts would make sure that trade between the Han regions nearby could be completed with a fair price for the Tusi and their subjects. At this time the Ming court recognized the rule of six *fan* tribes from the Tianquan region nearby Bamboo Village under a local chieftain.⁶⁵ I believe it is safe to say that the Ersu and Muya could each be considered one of these six, but it is unclear if it was the Ersu that were in control of the chieftaincy position at that time.

With regard to Western Sichuan, however, it is really during the Kangxi reign of the Qing Dynasty (1662-1723) that the importance of this region gains economic, political and military attention from the imperial powers in Beijing. During the Ming-Qing transition, the population of Sichuan Province had been all but decimated; some estimate that upwards to three fourths of the population perished due to multiple

⁶⁴ The Tusi of Xishuangbana effectively surrendered control of their lands to Communist China in 1951, marking the end of the Tusi system at least at the local level, although in truth the Tusi system was effectively ended by the Republican Government in the 1920s.

⁶⁵ Found in the Ming Histories (*Ming Shi*) *juan* 311 “*Sichuan Tusi Zhuan-Tianquan liufan zhaotansi zhuan*” as cited in Pan Guangdan (2007).

wars and rebellions which resulted in further disease and famine (Entemann 1982). The chaos of repopulating the Sichuan Basin was not a primary concern for Kangxi in the beginning of his reign. Yet one of the key policies adopted by the Qing from the very beginning was to leave Sichuan relatively tax free to encourage migration back into the province.

The transition into the eighteenth century found the Qing Empire pushing out to its frontiers in reaction to developments in both Tibet and various Mongol Khanates.⁶⁶ The death of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1681 created a stir of political issues as various figures raced to support the newly “discovered” Sixth Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama’s death in fact was kept a secret from Kangxi until 1697 when the Emperor also discovered that the governor of Tibet, Sangye Gyatso, had been collaborating with the leader of the Zunghar Mongols, Galdan, in their attacks on China’s northern frontier. In the end, around 1697, Kangxi pushed the Zunghar Mongols out of Northern China and the Tibetan Plateau to setup the Qing Empire as the new protectorate of Tibet and Gelugpa Buddhism. Yet it was in 1700 when Kangxi’s hand was forced by military events in the Kham region of Eastern Tibet and Sichuan that he was forced to invade and set up a permanent military presence there. In 1701 the Qing Empire took the city of Dartsedo, present day Kangding, and in 1706 placed an iron chain bridge across the Dadu River at Luding⁶⁷ which lies about 30 km north of Asbestos County. Nearly a decade later, Yue Zhongqi, a general based in Sichuan, helped lead Qing forces into Tibet where they over took Lhasa and enforced a Chinese system of governance on the whole of Tibet.

The Qing further utilized Sichuan for strategic purposes during the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns (1723-1796) (Herman 1993; Dai 2009). The low taxes that were initially meant to help repopulate the region were now used to ensure that material and a financial base which was to be used by the Empire in their military expeditions

⁶⁶ The following paragraph is a very dense summary from Dai, 2009, Chapter 1-3. A more Tibet-centric history about the same time and scenarios can be found in Ahmad (1970)

⁶⁷ In fact both Luding and Kangding are Chinese names for these areas that were established after the construction of the bridge, the first Luding 泸定 translates literally as “the pacification of Lu” and Kangding 康定 “the pacification of Kang” or Xikang (see note 67).

against the Mongols and Tibetans could be found locally. It was also at this time that Kham⁶⁸ was annexed into China proper in 1729. The Chinese then began to parcel out portions of Kham to various native chieftains that they felt would be amenable to the imperial power. Since the Tusi positions were hereditary, this of course caused a great amount of unrest in the region between competing clans, especially in Northern Kham. (Herman 1993) To the Imperial Court, this unrest only further underscored Sichuan's strategic importance in China's peripheral relations within its empire. As military campaigns were conducted in the region, a great number of merchants would flow into the region to help support the needs of the military. (Dai 2009) More important for this research though is the fact that, as Qing pacification began to take hold in Northern Kham, these trade relations did not completely die out. The Tea-Horse trade that had been prevalent on this route from Lhasa to Dartsedo even in the Ming Dynasty saw a rapid growth under 18th and 19th century Qing Dynasty rule.

It was also during this period that Kangxi began to directly propagandize Neo-Confucian culture throughout the periphery. As Herman has shown, Neo-Confucian schools were established throughout the Southwest specifically to help educate the children of the native chieftains in the ways of Chinese governance and culture. (1993). While it is impossible to say if this is the first direct attempt by a Chinese Dynasty to acculturate the Southwestern tribes, just by examining the number of schools established in the region it is apparent that there was a significant amount of belief in the ability of such a plan to succeed in long-term pacification (Herman 1993). While these schools were not prevalent in Kham, one of these schools was established by Kangxi in Yuexi County which at that time was politically in control of the Songlin Region and thus Bamboo Village.

More precise information about Songlin and its political position at that time can be found in the Yuexi Prefectural Gazetteer (YXTZ 1968) and the Qingxi County

⁶⁸ It should be noted that once Kham was annexed into China Proper, it was considered a separate province called Xikang 西康. For simplicity I will continue to call it Kham in the thesis.

Gazetteer (Chen and Liu 1970)⁶⁹. Starting in the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368) the central Tusi Leader for the region was located in modern day Yuexi County⁷⁰. This governing seat oversaw a fairly large region, from present day Ya'an Prefecture nearly to the Yunnan border and from Leibo County to Jiulong County, thus covering nearly all of present day Southern Sichuan. The Yuexi Chieftains were central to protecting the roads leading through Greater Liangshan south into Yunnan and Southeast Asia and west into Tibet and Central Asia. The Yuexi Prefectural Gazetteer specifically states that

...the various branches of tribes within the Tusi's realm of governance all have customs that differ from those of the Han. In the event of conflict with Han residents, the Tusi is to use tribal legal customs to administer the law and punishment; they are not to rectify the situation using Han laws. (YXTZ 1968: 651)

Beyond the governance of the Yuexi Tusi there were also the *tuqianhu*⁷¹, or the “thousand household” officials, who were local governors of a smaller group of perhaps 5-12 villages. Differing tribal customs within Yuexi encouraged the Tusi to require the “thousand household” officials to be the arbiters of justice within the local area. Yet the Songlindi “thousand household” officials were in somewhat of a bind, because on one hand they were responsible for both the customs of the Ersu, the Muya⁷² and the Yi within their region. In fact the regulations from that time even state that for the *Fan* people (i.e. Ersu or Muya) who are partially conversant in Chinese, “in the event of conflict with Han residents, the ‘thousand household’

⁶⁹ This the Qingxi Tingzhi (QXXZ), from here on out I will reference it as (YXTZ, 1968) and (QXXZ, 1970)

⁷⁰ 越西县, in ancient times and especially during the establishment of the Tusi System during the Yuan Dynasty, this region was called 邛部.

⁷¹ 土千户, or Chieftain of a Thousand Households

⁷² It is interesting to note how the YXTZ (1968) differentiates the Ersu and the Muya. Essentially they describe the Ersu as related to “below” Liangshan and the Muya to be “above” Liangshan. I think this can be understood as “the Ersu are related to *Fan* tribes that reside within Liangshan”, while “the Muya are related to *Fan* tribes that are beyond the borders of Liangshan”. Historically this also makes sense as the Muya traditionally have always lived beyond the historical borders of Liangshan, whereas the Ersu migrated to the Songlin Region from within the Yuexi, Ganluo region of Liangshan.

official is to use Han legal customs to administer the law and punishment.” (YXTZ 1968: 667)

Other than arbiters of the legal system, the “thousand” household officials were also responsible for collecting grain. For the most part these grains were stored for emergencies or were used to feed troops stationed in the region for protection. According to both Gong (1992) and Cheng (2008) the creation of the Tusi by the Yuan Dynasty was not simply for military control, it was also to ensure a kind of system for dealing with shocks, such as famine, floods, earthquakes and fires. The Tusi were responsible for providing food to those in need to prevent starvation and/or migration from the region. The decentralized nature of the Tusi’s authority, their ability to govern according to local custom and their own familial relationship with those that they governed provided for a fairly resilient system of governance for more than two hundred years.

The Songlin Region became annexed into a Tusi system fairly late into history. During the 49th year of Kangxi’s reign (1711) the Wang clan was established as the Songlindi Tusi which included Bamboo Village. Gong has organized a brief description of the various “thousand” household Tusi that were operating in the Songlin Tusi region and their responsibilities. For instance each Tusi was responsible for collecting a specific amount of grain each year for taxes (Gong 1992). According to records from the time, the Songlin Tusi in total was responsible for collecting 162 *dan*⁷³ of grain or around 9720 kg (YXTZ 1968).

Historic Situation of Bamboo Village’s Agriculture

In Bamboo Village I did not hear any local myths regarding the history of the Tusi. Perhaps this is because the history is still relatively recent. Yet there are some remnants of ethnohistory in the village that relate back to the Tusi Era. For instance, many of the Tibetan silk paintings, called “thankas,” used in Ersu ceremonies or hung in homes for a blessing on the family, were created during the reign of the Songlindi Tusi. I was told by colleagues both in the Ya’an Cultural Bureau and Sichuan

⁷³ A *dan* being about 60 kg of grain, at that point in time this likely would have been collected from corn, but could also have been some highland grains.

Nationalities Research Institute that the thanka were quite unique in that they reflected the influence of the Tusi. One of the paintings actually included a seated Tusi who was served by naked women. Not only was the Tusi quite distinguishable but the presence of nudity in thanka is not very common for this region.

I was also told a story by my research colleagues, Xiao Yi and Mr. Wang, regarding the regular infiltrations of Yi raiders from beyond the mountain passes into Mianning and Jiulong Counties. Apparently the raiders would come quite often to destroy the fields, take slaves and steal livestock. Yet most of the damage would happen downstream of the local Ersu mansions to the Han farmers along the Dadu River. The Tusi of Songlindi would often require the support of Royal troops to drive the Yi back into Jiulong and Mianning. I was told that these raiding parties might be the result of disagreements between an Yi Chieftain and the local Tusi. The Ersu and the Muya have not been known to be confrontational with the Chinese. In fact Entemann notes that when Kangxi moved against Dartsedo in 1701 it was a Muya Tribe that surrendered first which encouraged other surrounding villages in the region to do the same (1982).

During the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911) the Songlindi Tusi was responsible for 1,012 households of Ersu or Muya background. From my understanding, however, land tenure had been secure through heritage for much longer than the establishment of the Songlindi Tusi. As Huang Shaba admitted to a group of us towards the close of Guzazi, the Ersu New Year celebration, there certainly were land claim issues between the Huang and Wang clans. Yet these issues were resolved locally. Thus the establishment of the Tusi required that some of the crops grown in the region had to be paid in taxes but the actual land itself was still that of the Ersu family. This is not necessarily so for the Han Chinese who lived further down in the Songlin River and Dadu River Valleys. In these areas, landlord ownership and tenant cultivation was quite common while taxes were generally paid by the landlords to the local Qing magistrates. Several informants mentioned that some of the Han families in the lower Songlin Valley have been farming those lands for well over one hundred years, even

during the times of the Tusi. Baber, a British military explorer intent on mapping trade routes from India to China, visiting the region in the 1870s was told that the migration of Han farmers in the region was fairly recent. (1882:46) It is somewhat unclear though if the Tusi actually collected taxes from the Han in their region of governance or if farmers simply paid their local Han landlord. Most likely most of these farmers were purposely evading taxes and so little was collected from them at all.

Regardless, there were certain ecologically beneficial characteristics that were prevalent in the Tusi-governed Ersu areas versus those under the auspices of the Han Chinese landlord in the Dadu River Valley. First, the Ersu's traditional practices of swidden farming were only allowed to happen along very specific ridgelines well above the main valley floor. In these swidden patches the peasants grew buckwheat and tianxu⁷⁴ and were rotated from one section of the ridgelines to another on four- to five-year intervals. The holy mountain, the site of ancestor worship sites and the Guzazi ceremony, is protected from any kind of harvesting. Even today there are multiple trees that survived centuries of pressure from the state to provide Songlin Valley timber as tribute. This is because the Tusi never forced the cutting of timber on that mountainside.

Additionally, the Ersu still farmed corn, a few soy beans and potatoes on the Valley floor. Certain cash crops were also found in the valley floor and on the lower ridgelines. The main cash crop was a special type of tree which attracts an insect which produces the base for wax⁷⁵. Traditionally the base material was collected in large amounts and so most of this material was sold to Han traders and processed either in Hanyuan or later on closer to the Upper Yangtze Macroregion's economic core. Finally, the mountains of the Dadu River basin hold an array of wild berries

⁷⁴天须 although Li Xingxing also glosses this as 须谷 *xugu* (2007:332). according to local description this is a type of grain, I believe it is a species that is perhaps localized to Sichuan, as I cannot find a Chinese description of it in any dictionary. Unfortunately it hasn't been planted in the Songlin Region for at least 30 years.

⁷⁵ Thus it's name *lachong* 蜡虫 or "wax producing insect", unfortunately I was unable to find reference to this insect in the YXTZ (1968), and the bulk of the technology for harvesting this material is passed on through oral knowledge.

and fruits which were collected for subsistence and for trade with Han merchants. Thus their harvests were diversified protecting them from possible crop shortfalls due to pests, disease or climatic events. Ersu males also spent a large amount of time herding hundreds of sheep and cattle in the grasslands high up in the mountains, another diversification for investing in caloric growth. In many cases Ersu, not unlike other Tibeto-Burman tribes, view their herds very much as a kind of investment. It is unclear, however, whether pre-Liberation this herd was made up of yaks or oxen. As noted in their mythology, the Ersu have also always been hunters and gatherers. The mountains traditionally held a vast array of wild herbs and vegetables which women would gather at various times throughout the year. Men would gather honey from beehives, hunt wild pigs, bears, many different species of birds as well as catch aquatic species. These products were gathered or raised for household consumption; the main source of taxes was paid in either buckwheat or corn grains since rice couldn't grow in the Songlin Valley.

By comparison, the Han farmers that lived in the Dadu River Valley were primarily rice farmers. Rice was the main form of tax paid to landlords. Many grew a variety of vegetables for self-consumption and perhaps raised some corn on hillsides as feedstock for their chickens and pigs. Potatoes and soy beans were also common subsistence crops for Han farmers that lived within tributary valleys of the Dadu. The Han have never participated in swidden farming in these valleys and really didn't have a set forest management process. Most of the trees on either side of the Dadu River had been harvested in multiple cuttings according to imperial decree at one time or another.⁷⁶ While Han farmers were very much dependent on their grain harvests, there are records of a very diverse number of products from the region (YXTZ 1968; QXXZ 1970). While present day interviews with Han farmers show less of a historical understanding of the diversity of the crops from this region that does not necessarily mean that in the past Han agricultural products were less diverse. It is more likely that during the Republican Era the Han farmers were more

⁷⁶ See Nicholas Menzies (1994)

preoccupied with monocropping than the Ersu who held on to their traditional farming practices for a bit longer than did the Han.

Before moving too far ahead, I think it is particularly important to review Bamboo Village and Songlin in a larger perspective of political and market forces before the 20th century. The Kham regions to the North were influenced heavily by Qing Imperial military movements which in turn emboldened and then facilitated market penetration into the region. The roads leading West from Kangding helped connect the region to Tibet and Central Asia. The Yuexi Chieftain government set up to the South required certain tributes be made to the emperor and perhaps allowed sons of the Wang Clan, who dominated the Songlindi Chieftain position, to be educated at the Neo-Confucian schools. Roads leading from Yuexi south also connected Southwest China to Burma and India on the Southern track of the Silk Road. Yet a map (See Figure 3.) placing the Songlin region within these areas of trade and political influence will show that the region is caught in a kind of dead zone. The region had minimal strategic military importance to the Qing Empire. Large market roads wound out of their range of relevance by perhaps 60 km at the most, but again resulting in the region having little to no importance for markets in either the direction of the Sichuan Basin, Tibet or the Southern Silk Road. Finally, the late adoption of Nyingma Buddhism prevented the area from establishing deep political or cultural ties to Lhasa at any point in time. In fact, I believe that during the Qing Dynasty period of aggression the Ersu established their identity as being separate from Lhasa, perhaps because of their proximity to the Chinese core once the Luding Bridge was constructed in 1706. This could be one of the reasons the Ersu and the Muya surrendered early on during the Qing aggression in the 18th century.

From a historical resource perspective this also results in a very interesting situation. Other than Baber (1882)⁷⁷, not a single Chinese or foreign explorer, missionary or ethnographer actually traveled this length of the Dadu River⁷⁸. Other

⁷⁷ Baber seems just decided to head that way out of curiosity.

⁷⁸ This includes Rockhill (1891), Legendre (1905), Ren Naiqiang (1933, 1934 and (2010[1940])), Guibaut (1947) or Duan (2004 [1941]).

than some very superficial observations made by Baber and some very bureaucratic administrative records in the Yuexi Prefectural Gazetteer (YXTZ 1968), there is very little information that can be used to recreate a historic picture of market integration in the region. The roads that took these people north across the Luding Bridge or south to Fulin, where there was another crossing, had always been part of a great web of mercantile exchange. Thus while it is known that the Songlin region was connected to these roads through secondary markets, it is very easy to see how the bulk of Ersu interaction with these market forces would have been extremely localized. Few if any of their products would have made it much beyond the borders of Sichuan and the same could be said for the goods they purchased in those secondary markets. No wonder then that the most important of these extra-regional artifacts, such as seashell horns, antelope antlers, or Buddhist texts would be considered sacred and form a portion of their material culture.

Agriculture in Memory

When speaking to villagers about agricultural periods in historical memory, they naturally divided their conversation into three time periods: the Republican Era (1930-1950), the Collectivization Era (1950-1982), and the Reform and Opening Era (1982-Present). The following sections will begin to discuss, political, social, religious and agricultural changes in these three time periods.

Republican Era

During the period of time between the fall of the Qing and the communist liberation a power vacuum enveloped the frontier regions of Southern and Western Sichuan. The Dadu River Valley and Songlin River valley were no exception, as there was minimal communication between the Chieftain and the Republican Government. The Asbestos County Gazetteer records that in 1927 the Republic established military governance in Yuexi effectively diminishing the power of the Tusi in the region including the Songlindi Tusi (1999). In Anshunchang, where the

Songlin River flows into the Dadu and very near the residence of the previous Songlindi Tusi, the Republican Army set up an outpost that governed over the region. During this period some residents complained that the Warlord Liu Wenhui, who ruled Kham from Dartsedo, often brutalized the community (Zhong gong Sichuan sheng wei 1986)⁷⁹. Although there were many times in his career that Liu Wenhui was very much at odds with the Nationalist Party (KMT), his association with the Republican Government was already set in the minds of many in Sichuan (Kapp 1973). It is interesting to note that during the Long March the Red Army crossed the Dadu River at Anshunchang near the home of the Tusi. The Red Arm succeeded where Shi Dakai and the Taiping Rebels failed as that army disintegrated directly at this spot. Local Communist Party history in the region claims that the relatives of the last Tusi in fact came to the aid of the Red Army and were responsive to their cause.⁸⁰ There is now a museum and statue dedicated to the crossing which is just on the edge of a set of newly constructed housing projects for hydroelectric dam resettlements.

From a religious perspective, Buddhism certainly continued to have a large influence. As Tibet gained more discretion and autonomy over its region with the collapse of Qing power, Lhasa became very interested in reinstating political control over the Tibetan periphery in Amdo, Kham, Muli and other parts of the Sino-Tibetan buffer zone. While the Republican government seemed willing to consider certain aspects of Tibetan autonomy in the region, Liu Wenhui's unwillingness to give up his power base in Kham and the KMT's dependence on his forces as the Red Army marched through Western Sichuan, prevented negotiations from attaining any realizable changes in the status quo (Leibold 2007).

Yet perpetual rebellion and resulting Chinese crackdowns in Kham throughout the beginning of the 20th century seems not to have had a large impact on the Songlin River Basin region. For the most part the Ersu stayed out of these conflicts. The Shaba religion also continued to have a large influence on the daily lives of local

⁷⁹ This is a history of the Long March through Sichuan Province. From here on out I'll simply designate it as (ZGSSW 1986)

⁸⁰ Although an official party history book states that it was simply "local" boatmen and doesn't say from which minority they were from. (ZGSSW 1986)

residents, which is probably why most Ersu still did not feel any deep political connection with Lhasa or Kham. As was tradition, the Shaba provided all the guidance that was necessary within the individual villages of the Songlin River. All of my interviewees that are old enough to remember definitely stated that harvest was only done after the completion of the Guzazi Festival, which is on an auspicious day determined by the Shaba sometime around the full moon of the 8th lunar month. The Shaba were central for farmers who were interested in opening new fields, determining an auspicious day for planting and conducting rites for the preparation of animals for slaughter. Of course the Shaba were also critical for more socio-cultural aspects, divining wedding days, performing funerary rituals and birth rituals, establishing new households and providing chants to cure diseases. While it is most likely that relations with the world outside of the Songlin River Valley were still conducted through the now “deposed” Wang Clan Chieftain, many families probably felt more autonomous during this period in their decision as far as trade was concerned. One of my older informants, Grandma Yu, was born in Bamboo Village in 1938, and she remembers quite vividly as a young girl wearing sheep skin clothing made in the village but also selling chicken eggs in the market down by the Dadu River.

It is unclear, however, how agricultural practices were managed during this period. A conversation between the elders of the Huang Clan one day revealed there were concerns that their claims to lineage and standing at Bamboo Village were not as historically accurate as that of the Wang Clan. Li shows that one branch of the Huang Clan can only remember up to six or seven generations of their family tree. (Li 2007) As stated above, the more interesting aspect of this was that there were conflicts of claim of ownership to land in the valley. As mentioned above, Yang Shaba admitted that these conflicts had existed even before collectivization. A possible analysis of this conflict is that it appears as soon as the Native Chieftaincy System disappears. At that time the Wang Clan, who are directly related to the *tusi* lineage, suddenly lost their power base and the Huang Clan who were the original

inhabitants of the land most likely made a struggle to get some of that land back. This struggle seems to still be present in the living memory of the village. Of course very little change was made according to the Huangs and this makes sense considering that the two clans had intermarried for multiple generations even by the beginning of the 20th century. When considering these land tenure flare ups, it is important to remember that with the breakdown of Qing rule came a sudden surge in taxes on the Sichuan Basin. This undoubtedly created a large influx of Han farmers into regions such as Songlin who migrated further into the periphery due to population pressure, war and most importantly tax evasion. Most of the Han farmers I interviewed claimed more than 100 years of family history in the Songlin River Valley⁸¹. Thus land pressure definitely became an issue right around the turn of the century.

One benefit of the Republican Era from a historical resource perspective is that more precise data was recorded allowing better insight into the agrarian economics happening in Sichuan at this time. It turns out that certain basic aspects of China's early capitalist economy actually created serious barriers for market penetration in Songlin's agricultural production. Much of the work by John Lossing Buck paints a picture in the Sichuan Basin of landowners and renters constantly competing for the upper hand (1980). At this time the middle reaches of the Dadu River Valley classified by the Agricultural Bank of China as a rice, wheat and corn producing region. With regard to land tenure 43.6% of the land in Hanyuan was self managed compared to 21.3% partially managed and 35.1% rented from landlords.⁸² In fact even during this period of the Republican Era the rhetoric of moving farmers out of the feudal system had begun (SSJDB 1976:765). It was also during this time that Han farmers became more integrated into new capitalist forms of agriculture. Now instead of being concerned over growing enough crops to pay the rent to landlords,

⁸¹ This again was corroborated by Baber's (1882) account of his visit in the 1870s.

⁸² Bulk of this information can be found in the 四川省经济调查报告 collected by the Agricultural Bank of China in 1941 (Zhongguo nong min yin hang, 1976). From here out I'll cite it as (SSJDB, 1976)

farmers were finding themselves in larger and larger amounts of debt. Rarely were these loans provided by landlords (1-4%), but rather from friends and family (39-83% depending on different parts of China). In Sichuan 48% of loans were actually provided from cooperatives starting in the mid-twentieth century. This is probably not all that surprising considering that cooperatives were offering the lowest rate of interest at 12.2%. (Buck 1980) Thus it is at this time that the means of production are moving away from the smallholders or even landowners and gradually into the hands of financial institutions. For renters, the ratio of debt to income level on average was much higher than for self-managed farms, 20% for renters vs. 5.4% for self-managed farms (SSJDB 1976: 314). Yet in Sichuan the debts that self-managed farmers dealt with were larger, on average 550 *yuan*⁸³ per year, causing 35.8% of self-managed farms to be unable to pay back their loans within the loan period.

While this level of financial insecurity is not unheard of for farming communities around the world, all of the data that were used to calculate these numbers come from the core regions of Sichuan Province. Thus these farmers had greater access to alternative sources of income and likely larger networks to lean on during periods of economic uncertainty. They also were able to access a greater number of intermediate markets where they could sell their goods (Skinner 1964). This is not the case for a peripheral region such as Songlin. While local data is not available, using data from the core it is possible to extrapolate how this problem would be even more intense in a peripheral region. I've included a map in Figure 3 to help spatially visualize the location of market towns and roads in the region.

⁸³ Chinese monetary measure 元



Figure 3. Map of Roadways, Markets and the Dadu River in relation to Songlin

To do this exercise, I will focus simply on corn production and markets in Leshan⁸⁴. Households with an average of 1.04 *mu*⁸⁵ also attained an output around 1.15 *dan*⁸⁶/*mu*. On average families only sold 29% of this harvest on market for a total of .35 *dan*. Total cost to raise the corn for a family would be around 67.75 *yuan*. The best market price at the time was 80 *yuan/dan* during the winter of 1940. Thus at these prices corn sold at the market would only cover 27.75 *yuan* or 41% of the costs to raise the corn. 1940 is an awful year for comparison because of the rapid inflation that happened during that period of time but it has the most detailed data. To examine this question during 1938, I'll use price indexes to account for inflation in the costs of corn production. The index ratio we'll use is 142.8/1099.4 which brings our 1938 costs to about 8.80 *yuan* in costs. If I estimate a similar level of production

⁸⁴ The nearest region to Songlin in the 1940 report and does have some what similar patterns of weather and resides near a major waterway, but topographically Leshan rests in a gently sloping, hilly valley, while Songlin resides in the clutches of the excessively steep, narrow and mountainous Dadu River valley.

⁸⁵ A measure of land equal to about .0667 hectares

⁸⁶ A unit of dry measure for grain, approximately 100 Liters.

for the 1938 corn harvest in Leshan at .35 *dan* and at the Nov. 1938 selling price of 5.80 *yuan/dan* of corn that would still only bring 2.03 *yuan* of income covering only 23% of our costs. These numbers are based off of data from farmers who own their own land. So it is significant to note that 48.1% of Leshan's farmers at this time were renters, yet renters also couldn't afford to sell any of their corn on the market and consumed most of it at home.

The above calculations point to the fact that there was no period in recent history where corn would have been profitable to sell on the market that would allow a household to remain fed, even for families in the core. Corn is here used as an example simply because in Songlin before the last few years it was the only thing grown in quantities large enough that might have been sold in a large urban market. Yet this example seems to hold true for most cropping systems in early 20th century China; namely that agricultural production was not profitable. Thus it is not that surprising to see increases in large unpaid debts amongst farmers in Sichuan during this time. Beyond just the lack of profitability there is one other key rationalist reason that would have definitely kept Songlin agricultural products from being previously commodified in the sense defined in this thesis. As noted above transportation networks around this stretch of the Dadu River were notoriously bad. The river was not navigable by ship. The roads were so narrow that the Red Army even had to leave behind its artillery while crossing through the region. The only options left were horses or human packers. In 1940 the average cost of packing corn by human carrier around Sichuan was 12.15 *yuan/load*⁸⁷. Thus it was completely uneconomical to send agricultural goods to a major market center. Most likely agricultural goods from Songlin wouldn't have made it much farther than the market down by the Dadu River where Miss Yu sold her eggs. In fact urban cores such as Leshan have always been dependent on their peri-urban regions for providing their agricultural supply (Skinner 1981) thus historically there was never a demand for transporting goods out of the peripheral regions far from any market centers.

⁸⁷ A load is not clearly defined but human packers certainly have physical limitations that prevent them from making corn transport economical.

Now obviously Leshan farmers were able to diversify their crops and the SSJDB does show landowning farmers bringing in at least 342 yuan of non-agricultural income into their household a year (1976:123). Ultimately, this analysis only reinforces the truth that economic data is always far from complete⁸⁸. A nutritionist would look at this data and be horrified as there is no possible way these families were living off of the food they were growing or even able to buy enough food from their income considering the nasty levels of inflation that took off from 1938 until Sichuan became part of the People's Republic of China in 1950. The historical trend of Imperial China gradually becoming less feudal is irrefutable and thus it is very easy to knock down the anti-landlord propaganda straw men established by the Communist Party during their Civil War with the Republican government (Elvin 1970). Yet at the same time I can easily understand how it would be convenient for farmers completely frustrated with rising costs and taxes associated with agricultural production to simply point fingers at landowners who were likely in a better position to weather the collapsing Republican Era economic system.

Thus farming in the Republican Era began to feel the economic strains that were common world wide for smallholders, regardless of their position in the societal system as feudal peasants or independent family farms. On top of a shift in political authority, now smallholders had to also consider completely new forms of economic pressure with which they were unfamiliar, such as indebtedness to financial institutions like credit cooperatives. I have not found much evidence to suggest that these market forms penetrated into Ersu territory or even amongst Han farmers in the periphery. Yet I do believe that the dissolving of the local Tusi system could have been a result of this discourse. As more Han farmers began to move into the region in the 40s I believe it was the hope of the Republic to more broadly integrate the periphery into the agrarian economy. To them it was a call to free farmers from the bonds of feudalism and poverty. They did not consider that both the socio-cultural system and the ecological system were very much in sync with this subsistence form

⁸⁸ I think it is also important to note that this data was collected during a particularly violent war.

of production. It was the barriers to market penetration, lack of financial institutions, poor modes of transportation, means of production still controlled by the households and lack of favorable political institutions which prevented the slowly growing commodified agrarian marketization that was taking over the Middle Kingdom at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1950 that process took a very different direction when the Communist Party took power.

Collectivization Era

In most parts of China the collectivization process came about quite quickly. One report shows the number of farms in the country that became unified into “superior type cooperatives” went from four hundred thousand in mid-1955 to one hundred million by the end of 1956, representing 83% of all farms in China. While these cooperatives were forming though the government explicitly stated that:

“The creation of communes does not signify the redistribution of personal property...the means of life (including housing, clothes, furniture etc) as well as savings in bank accounts and credit cooperatives after the founding of communes remain, as before and will always remain the property of the members of the commune. ...with the consent of the commune member, surpluses in the buildings, trees, etc. can be taken for temporary utilization. But the right to the property in the communes remains with the member of the commune. (Zhamin et al. 1961)

While there does seem to be evidence that individual farmers were able to control some level of their means of production during collectivization, many have focused on the Maoist call for struggle against the “rich peasant” and redistribution of property from the large landowners to the general smallholders (Thomas 1956). Yet as has been noted by some scholars, large landholding just didn’t exist in China at the turn of the revolution (Elvin 1970; Buck 1980), so this rhetoric was likely more for political purposes. At that time it was important to ensure that as the collectivization process developed that the poor peasants felt secure in their land holdings. Along with the formation of communes in the countryside, there was a 55% increase in the total urban population, 30 million people, all of whom became industrial workers as

they left their agrarian heritage behind (Perkins 1964). Yet with this significant decrease in the agricultural labor force, there was still a large increase in total output. The intensification of fertilizer usage (especially household fertilizers) and the beginning usage of some agricultural chemicals (herbicides and pesticides) helped agricultural output expand from 1952-1959, as did the introduction of high output species of crops. The bulk of this growth came from more intense labor productivity through land reclamation, construction of irrigation projects and more intensified cropping strategies (Hou 1968).

Benefits from the collectives were of course supposed to be doled out according to a fair share of the output from the cooperative. By the late 1950s with the introduction of the communal kitchens, the party also adopted the wage system which included two systems of payment:

1. A flat wage rate for all commune members
2. Coupons which allow the member to eat free provisions in the communal kitchen. Bonuses could be received depending on the quality and quantity of the work done by the commune member. (Zhamin et al. 1961)

This system of labor intensification, along with work-point incentives, helped to spur the Chinese economy into the Great Leap Forward, a Chinese industrialization scheme to increase production especially in steel. Some have shown that it was the government's sudden shift from agricultural production to industrial production supported by a heavy dose of rhetoric that encouraged the drastic reshaping of the Chinese natural landscape (Shapiro 2001). The Great Famine was the ultimate result of this policy shift which likely killed tens of millions through starvation (Yang 1996).

In 1950 Sichuan Province became part of the newly formed People's Republic of China but there is no doubt that it took quite some time for the peripheral areas of the province to integrate into the new socialist economic system. Deng Xiaoping wrote about the slow pace of bringing the western periphery into the new communist nation while he was stationed in Chongqing during the first few years of the CCP (Deng

2006). Most of the Tibetan regions in Western Sichuan Province⁸⁹ at this time were quite slow to form cooperatives. The agricultural regions of Ma'er Kang and Kangding only formed cooperatives in 1957, some of which were even comprised of lamas from the local monasteries. In Kangding, this cooperative was already seen to be purchasing and using certain types of pesticides, likely for their wheat and potatoes. Yet in another region in Kangding, Dagongzi, the lamasery owned all of the land and had yet to form any kind of cooperative as the democratic reforms had not taken place that far west of Kangding. The cooperatives were still incorporating their distribution of collective benefits in cash payouts up to 1958 (Zhao 1959). In Muli County, officials focused on working with the upper echelons of the community, particularly the lamas of the local Gelpug monastery. These elites became instrumental in establishing the region as a Tibetan Autonomous County, ensuring Buddhism became the central religion and securing their own position as CCP leaders in the region (Wellens 2010).

In fact this kind of double standard treatment for integrating minorities into the communist system had its origins in the United Front ideology used during the Long March as the Red Army traveled through the Southwest (Leibold 2007). While the CCP was promising the Han peasants that their property would be protected in the process of collectivization, they were simultaneously working with the elites in the Southwest who would be able to coax their local populations into the collectivization system by using their traditional hierarchical positions in society. There is evidence that before 1959 the Chinese used this ideology particularly with regard to their work in Tibet (Goldstein and Rimpoche 1989). In many ways the onset of the Four Olds⁹⁰ and other political movements that swept through China in the 1960's during the Cultural Revolution gradually wore down this kind of political cooperation. With the Great Leap Forward in full force by 1959 all of these regions were integrated into the

⁸⁹ The Eastern portion of Xikang Province was annexed into Sichuan Province in 1955; the West was annexed by Tibet in 1965.

⁹⁰ These were considered the Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas, which should be done away with in Socialist Development. The concept was propagandized during the Cultural Revolution (Spence 1999).

commune system and thus the hierarchical systems of power based on integrations with religion or lineage were eliminated in the superficial sense. While agriculturally these areas suffered greatly during the Great Famine, some improvements were made in the 1960s and 1970s which allowed for greater individual household decision making. The repercussions of the Cultural Revolution though impacted the socio-ecological foundations of Western Sichuan long into the 1990s. This thesis will show that was particularly true for the people of Bamboo Village as well.

The process of collectivization in the Songlin Valley was actually quite slow in the beginning. From the Songlin Gazetteer we can see that before 1958 the minority populations were hardly even incorporated into any of the experimental production units. (XLXZ 2007:38-39) By 1956 the Muya Lamas and the Ersu Shabas had organized their local villages into “mutual aid teams” which really meant that they were supposed to provide reciprocal labor without charge; in other words preserve the status quo. At the same time Asbestos County was in the process of opening up mines and industrial processing centers all over the county. The extraction of asbestos was by far the most pressing matter to the newly formed county which was first established in 1951 as a part of Kham (SMXZ 1999). That all changed in 1958 when the wave of Great Leap Forward propaganda began to reach even the remote communes of the Songlin Valley. It then became imperative for all in the villages to become a part of the production process. As one of my respondents put it:

We still farmed the same land; the only real difference was the organization. Since it was a collective we all put labor into each of the land parcels and the harvest was distributed amongst those in the production team.

At the time, he was the vice production team leader, which meant he didn't farm his own land; he organized labor to farm all of the land including his own.

The system of payouts and incentives for the production brigades that were formed at this time was gradually becoming more organized. In 1960 everyone initially ate together in the village kitchen; the *gongfen* system, or work-point system, was still not quite set but a portion of the harvests were reserved specifically for supplying the kitchens. The amount of the harvest set aside for subsistence purposes

was a rate that was determined by the local township. The rest of the harvest was then sent to the county and redistributed to the industrial workers in the mines and processing plants. All of the agricultural work was done in teams including the swiddening on the mountain ridges and the planting of corn and potatoes in the valley floor. For the first few years of the township cooperative the main focus was corn production until 1961 when the beginning of the famine began to take place.

As with other regions of the country, monocropping must have had disastrous impacts on the quality of the soil in the region. Instead what is seen in Songlin is a battle between two crops that had become ecologically resilient in the local environment (corn and buckwheat) competing with the sudden drastic increase of a crop that is typically grown in lower elevations (soy beans). This is especially true between 1959-1960 when there was a 600% decrease in the amount of land where buckwheat was grown while there was a 20% and 7.69% increase in land sown for soy beans and corn respectively⁹¹. As the cooperatives came together it was determined through “science” that traditional swidden farming practices did not produce at the intensity needed to feed the quickly industrializing population in Asbestos County. Thus people were encouraged to spend more of their time on intensifying their agricultural output. Additionally, many of the local villagers were also encouraged either to work in some of the mines or to begin to harvest exposed asbestos as they had done since the 1930s (SMXZ 1999:267-268). While yields for beans were above average in 1960, the following two years were dismal for all three crops as the ecology of the valley attempted to recover from the intensification that was needed to keep pace with national expectations and decreases in labor inputs. Indeed it was not until 1963 that crop yields and total area of the three sown crops start to stabilize. If anything, the sudden intensification of the soy bean in Songlin could be considered a marker for understanding how the sudden intensification of a crop that is not adapted to the region’s ecology conjoined with a shift in the socio-

⁹¹ See Appendix A and B for data analysis and figures. In this same time period total arable land actually contracted from 1065.33 hectares to 1010.6, all of these cuts came out of the fields that were originally sown with traditional buckwheat.

political and socio-cultural structure of the community can cause the resiliency of the system to be disrupted. Looking at the resulting demographic data the impacts could have been far worse; while there was a steady decrease in total population, 3025 in 1960 to 2927 in 1963, it would be considered “minor” in comparison to some of the results of the Great Famine in other parts of the country. (Yang 1996)

Starvation is something that should never be truly classified as a minor incident, and while the hardship of the Great Famine is still present in the minds of those who lived through it, the system was able to right itself; even in times of poor yield people were able to sustain themselves through the period. In 1961 the county actually implemented a series of welfare support projects providing food and other goods to the township. Additionally, in 1963 they decreased the local grain tax for redistribution by 49% and implemented a more rigid system of meal coupons and work incentives. Many people in Bamboo Village were able to easily describe the system; each adult in the household was awarded 10 points, which could be used to purchase food and goods supplied by the collective. Sometimes women might be awarded less if they were taking care of young children. Children who were old enough to work were awarded anywhere from 1-3 points. When asked about what age children usually start working, it is interesting that the older an informant’s age the younger they felt children could begin working. These points allowed the household a share of the collective’s harvest. The XLXZ shows the allocation of the harvest after state taxes and the pay-in to the collective; the rest was divided up to the members of the collective as 70% to individuals, 20% to cover work point incentives, and 10% for individual fertilizer usage (2007). Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution this form of labor activity began to shift towards more experimental forms of market-based incentives. In 1975 the Songlin Valley became the center of an experimental corn species project with remarkable results; doubling the output of corn towards the end of the collectivization period. It is also at this time that state taxes begin to increase and drastically fluctuate within the collective itself (XLXZ 2007).

Some very important events happened during this period of time, which likely had a direct impact on the socio-ecological structure of agriculture in the Songlin Valley. The first was the harvest of the forest lands starting in 1955, including most of the trees on the sacred mountain. Not only was this considered especially sacrilegious and an affront to the ancestors who were apart of the mountain, but outside of the sacred forest regions it also freed up certain parts of the land that were originally used in rotational swidden activities. It is no wonder then that these lands were cultivated with soy bean fields starting in 1958. By that time the forests had all been cut and the demand for intensifying agricultural production had begun. There is no doubt that the destruction of these forests had a serious impact on the ecology of the valley as villagers even today still say that the cause of flooding and subsequent damage to fields is due to the cutting of the forest⁹².

Finally, in 1968 many people in the Valley were persecuted for upholding “feudal superstitions” which included the religious practices of the Shaba. From 1968 until 1990 Guzazi, the Ersu New Year and symbolic representation of harvest time, was not celebrated in the village at all. The Shaba did continue to practice some of their rituals but their sons did not decide to carry on the heritage in most cases. Thus nearly an entire generation was initially not exposed to or cared to learn about the Shaba religion, Nyingma Buddhism or how these practices were integrated into Ersu understanding of nature. Yet during this period of time villagers continued to preserve their culture in some ways, for instance swidden farming was still being practiced all be it in much smaller amounts. This meant that certain laboring songs were still sung and taught to the younger generation; song in general was a great preserver of traditional knowledge and the local language. So while those cultural traditions which were associated with “superstitions” disappeared for a period of time, those that were simply considered “ethnic” survived and perhaps in some ways were instrumental to ensuring the revival of the culture as a whole.

⁹² Although I cannot say for sure if this is a traditionally held understanding or if this is due to the increase in a Chinese ecological discourse that was used to explain the need for the Grain for Green program, a national reforestation campaign that subsidized farmers to convert their fields to forested land.

Reform and Opening Era

Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening" policies to be sure were a slow and cautious process especially in the realm of agricultural production. Agricultural market reforms were first introduced through a kind of semi-market-based policy called the Household Responsibility System (HRS). As Robert Ash notes, the initial purpose of this institution was two-tiered: to provide state support and subsidies that would encourage the positive aspects of collective labor while providing micro-based incentives at the household level to emphasize the benefits of decentralized agricultural organization (2001:80). These policies were generally introduced in 1978 and by 1984 there were 30% increases in production output of grains while decreasing harvested land by 6%. (Lohmar 2003) Even more astounding is the drastic positive benefit this had on standards of living for rural households at this point in time (Perry and Wong 1985). These policies also corresponded with high procurement prices for grain during the same 6 year period which helped improve livelihoods in rural regions. Unfortunately these prices only lasted until 1984 and as those prices dropped rural areas felt the economic pressure of the new market prices. Farmers in the mountainous western regions were hit especially hard (Travers and Ma 1994). Gradual liberalization of the grain markets did have some positive benefits to the overall health of agricultural production in China after 1984 (Park et. al 1994), although adoption of new technological advancements also had a large roll to play (Huang and Rozelle 1996).

During this period of market liberalization two important interrelated issues were developing in the countryside. The first was the reform of the bureaucratic system from party controlled organs to more decentralized governing organs of the state, the results of which have included a dwindling local tax base as the center required a larger cut and an increase of support and control from the center over economic policy at the local level with subsequent decrease in support over social policy (Chung 2001). Thus towards the close of the 20th century a geographically uneven project of economic development progressed in the country that resulted in serious

inequity. Eastern provinces were in a better position to weather the negative impacts of decentralization as they were able to attract foreign investment and were closer to the core regions of the nation where the bulk of the country's resources were amassed due to central economic development policy bias (Wang and Hu 1999). These decentralizing shifts in social governance have increased economic dependence in rural regions on local development which has led to some very close relationships between government officials and entrepreneurs (Oi 1999). As cadres become more dependent on these rural enterprises they often shift their focus away from agricultural issues which only exacerbated unbalanced economic growth at the local level (Rozelle and Boisvert 1995). Consequently, this lack of focus on social problems corresponded directly with a similar lack of bureaucratic support for protecting the environment at the local level (Rozelle et al. 1997).

The second issue that had a lasting impact on the countryside even to today revolves around land reform policy. Following the introduction of the HRS the Chinese government in 1984 also signed into existence The Land Contracting Law. While this helped redefine some of the land tenure issues associated with the HRS it also allowed for an exceptional amount of interpretation and variation in governance strategies (Lohmar 2006). Two major land-tenure security issues arise from the vague nature of this law. First is the short time rural farmers are even contracted to farm the land; originally for only a few years these leases now have been extended to at least 30 year contracts (Cheng and Tsang 1995). The second issue is that land can be reallocated by village administrators how they see fit, although they have been encouraged by the central government not to reallocate land until these 15 or 30 year cycles are ended (Krusekopf 2002). The result of this insecurity has clearly been detrimental to the land as farmers have naturally begun to increase their output by intensifying their harvests through whatever means necessary, which often results in damage to the local environment (Li et. al 1998; Krusekopf 1999). Another major pressure on land use issues was the introduction of the Grain

for Green Policy (GGP)⁹³ which has required that above certain elevations farmers must allow the land to go fallow or plant trees for a government subsidy. While there are studies which show the ecological landscape is improving in these regions (Zhu et. al 2010), the consequent land pressure on farmers is quite great, not to mention the continued need to harvest trees as a fuel source and as additional income pushing them further into the forest in search of illegal timber (Uchida et. al 2005; Trac 2011).

With the opening up of markets in the 1980s, the Songlin Valley was once again slowly introduced to the commodification process. Yet as with other parts of the periphery, marketization of agricultural goods was quite slow and the infrastructure needed to connect these regions to the market network was gravely lacking. The local agricultural department was poorly funded and dependent on the ability to raise money locally through levies. Thus investment in local infrastructure and mechanization was quite low for Sichuan as it was for many areas in China's periphery. This lack of investment within this new model of agricultural exchange meant that the Bamboo Village farmers were relegated to continue farming in a subsistence based manner. There was no way for them to fully integrate and take advantage of the market, thus both farmer and local officials focused on further development of grain crops. When asked about the most important developments within the last 15 years nearly all farmers mention the development of high output strains of corn crops. This is not surprising as yields are now triple what they were during the early years of the collectivization period (XLXZ 2007).

In the late 1990s the Grain for Green Program, a national reforestation campaign that subsidized farmers to convert their fields to forested land, was also introduced to Asbestos County. The Dadu River that flows through the county is a tributary of the Min and Yangtze Rivers which were the focus of the Grain for Green Program as the reforestation efforts were thought to help improve flood control. Officials in Asbestos County were determined to ensure that the policy was upheld throughout the countryside to pay their due diligence for flood control. One of the many reasons

⁹³ One of the many English translations for *tuigeng huanlin* 退耕还林

villagers have completely given up swidden farming is they have lost control over farming on the ridgelines above the village. Those areas are now fallow and currently deciduous forest land has indeed begun to return. This shrinkage of arable land has further encouraged female members of the household to intensify the land that has been allocated to them on the valley floor. Conversely, male members of the household have greatly freed up labor power as they are no longer required to cut and burn swidden fields. Thus during this transition many households also began to increase their focus on traditional herding practices in the high elevation grasslands as both a food source and a kind of economic savings as yak meat gains a fairly high price on the market.

During the 1990s another trend began to take place in the Songlin Valley, which changed the structure of labor allocation in regards to agricultural production. The great disparities of uneven development had become well known throughout the periphery and locals began to enter the migratory workforce. At first this becomes solely the realm of male household members and they do not have to travel far for work. Asbestos County began to diversify its raw material industry into other metals; gold and copper mines became quite prevalent at that time (SMXZ 1999). One of the younger villagers who I became closest to told me that during summer breaks off from high school he worked for one of the local gold mines. He made just enough money to purchase a black and white T.V. which he strapped to his back then hiked up to his home for his parents to watch. In another instance in the late 90s he was hired at a mine where he worked for three months in awful conditions only to never be paid by the owners of the mine. With the close connections between the owners and local government officials villagers often would rather forgo the funds than become embroiled in a battle with these entrepreneurs.

As seen from the example of the T.V. purchase above, villagers were still at this point quite segregated from the consumptive forces of the market economy. Without proper infrastructure it was impossible for villagers to spend what disposable income they had, because there were no markets within walking distance. At this

time personal cars were non-existent; perhaps in the late 80's is when a few farmers began to purchase motorcycles, but most likely these were first seen amongst local cadres working for the township government. Most villagers told me that it was not until the first decade of the 21st century that mechanization became a key aspect of agricultural processes in the village. Even educational facilities were sparse; the elementary school that was established in Bamboo Village during the collectivization period had been shut down due to lack of funds. All students walked⁹⁴ into the township for both elementary and junior high, but the few who went on to high school could only attend in the county seat.

While the one-child policy has been a serious strain on urban and rural family structures throughout China (Greenblaugh 2008) the impact was not as severe in the agrarian system of Songlin Valley. As with other ethnic minority groups in China the Ersu are able to have at most three children per household. Some families traditionally might raise more than three children in this community but in general most families informed me that they are quite satisfied with only having three children. Of course, family planning bureaus have been quite active, even propagandizing villages high in the mountains beyond Bamboo Village (XLXZ 2007). Further on in the thesis I'll show that the number of children in a household has not had as much of an impact on agricultural change compared to how those children are raised.

The greatest social change in the late 1980s is certainly the revitalization of traditional Ersu beliefs and practices. The Shaba began to be more influential in the lives of farmers but still only really comfortable performing household rituals. Then in 1990 the local cultural bureau convinced the county government that Guzazi was not a "superstition" but was a central part of Ersu culture and they were once again able to hold the New Year ceremony in the village. The revitalization of the Shaba practice could definitely be viewed as a reaction to the retreat of the state services and interaction in household life (Wellens 2010). The Shaba's medicinal and spiritual

⁹⁴ Most say it's at least 1.5 hour walk into the township and a two hour walk back up the mountain.

knowledge along with their understanding of traditional practices for holding weddings and funerals or for the construction of a new home has reasserted its importance in the lives of villagers. Consequently, this is also revitalizing an overall interest in Ersu culture and its place within a quickly modernizing area of the world.

Market Transition as a Historical Process

In many ways it would be much easier for us to simply focus on the recent history to provide context for the agricultural changes happening in present day Bamboo Village. Yet to do so would be to disassociate the villagers from a significant history that positions the social aggregate of individual household decisions in a complex context of political, ecological, cultural and economic change. Through a historical lens the fact that the cultural set of a remote Tibetan village cannot be considered isolated or completely self-sustaining becomes self-evident. Political shifts between China and Tibet, religious syncretization, shifting economic ideologies and worldviews on well-being all enmesh villagers without any set boundary or origin of influence. The only limitations imperative in such an analysis are temporal as this research was limited both by memory, record and even mythology. Agriculture and identity are here chosen as the focus of analysis; as they have the greatest influence over the mode of production where culture and nature intersect (Wolf 1982) and always have according to Ersu myth. Yet as this branch of analysis draws to a close it will be indicative to focus the analysis to the present and by doing so will examine resiliency and adaptation at the household level (Wilk 1997).

As the following chapters will show, a very acute market transition is emerging in the Songlin Valley. This localized commodification process is certainly the result of societal and political changes in greater China in very recent years. The policy that has repositioned Western China as a focus for development would be the “Great Opening of the West”⁹⁵. Through this policy the Chinese core is using the large

⁹⁵ Or the *Xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发

reserve of savings accumulated from foreign trade and a decade of tax shares from the provinces, to literally invest in developing the western provinces of China. Obviously a large portion of this “investment” is centered on infrastructure projects which is allowing for greater ease and access to new resources previously untapped in the West (Yeung and Shen 2004). Just in Asbestos County alone this has included new investments in agricultural irrigation structures, energy development particularly in hydro power, and new means of communication including cell phones and the internet. Yet by far the most crucial investment for this region is the soon to be connected four lane high speed freeway that will provide a direct transportation route to the Sichuan Basin in just over two hours⁹⁶. Even more, because of the rapid development in hydropower and minerals over the last 20 years, Asbestos County has been able to raise its own funds to completely overhaul their village transportation systems. As of summer 2009 most of the county’s remote villages have been connected by a network of concrete roads. One official in the local government told me that Asbestos was voted as the county with the best transportation system in Ya’an Prefecture.

Some of the more local aspects of development come from an additional policy push surrounding the “Build the Socialist New Village”⁹⁷ which is determined to bring modernized agriculture and economic resources to China’s rural countryside (He and Ma 2007). The central government has allocated government funds to help ensure that programs of this nature succeed, thus these projects are not simply tied to the local government’s ability to raise funds through entrepreneurial taxation. Simultaneously, the central government has also issued a series of edicts that have not only wiped out taxation on smallholders but in many regions they have even begun to offer price adjusting subsidies so that farmers continue to sell their harvests on the market at reduced prices (Li, L.C. 2006; 2007). This undoubtedly has been an attempt

⁹⁶ Even to the provincial capital, located towards the center of the basin, in Chengdu they are estimating it will only take about 3.5 hours. Most estimates say the freeway will be completed by late 2012.

⁹⁷ 建设社会主义新农村 *jianshe shehui zhuyi xin nongcui*

to cool China's inflationary economy, but at the same time it also is an attempt to help farmers attain a state sanctioned level of development, namely Xiaokang (Tilt 2011). The following chapter will examine how households in Bamboo Village perceive Xiaokang and the intersection of agriculture and ethnicity within the discourse of economic development and commodification.

Chapter 5: Commodification

As I try to understand how historical paths have led the Ersu to a commodifying mode of production, a few things began to take shape with regard to present day perceptions of life in Bamboo Village. As I'll describe in this chapter, by examining local understandings of what is a Xiaokang Lifestyle, as a measure of quality of life, I find that villagers very much wish to engage with the market economy. Following on that perspective, I then examine two aspects of local production which are becoming commodified in this Ersu community. The introduction of market crops by the local government helped spur the commodification of agricultural production. Additionally, the indigenous revitalization of Ersu traditions coinciding with a new political discourse that recognizes cultural differences as economic resources has provided the means for the commodification of cultural production in the form of tourism. Through these two avenues Ersu villagers have determined their own way of engaging with the world economic system.

Xiaokang Lifestyle: A Localized Perception of Quality of Life

As seen throughout China's history, the core has repeatedly manipulated and redefined the periphery to serve core ideology. The focus of Deng Xiaoping and particularly Jiang Zemin of first developing the urban core in the East only perpetuated this historical trend of uneven development (Wang and Hu 1999). Some may even say that the current "Great Opening of the West" project is still aimed at extracting resources from the West (i.e. the periphery) to supply the East (i.e. the core); the "Generate in the West to Send to the East" hydropower policy currently being implemented in Sichuan and Yunnan is a prime example of such exploitation (Magee 2006).

Regardless, there are initiatives that are focused primarily on improving livelihoods in the rural countryside including those of the periphery. The "Build the

Socialist New Village” program described in the previous chapter would be a good example of the government’s attempt to further integrate rural farmers into a more modern lifestyle while promoting rural livelihoods. Recent moves by the government to eliminate tuition fees through the 9th grade for rural students is another good example. The government is also connecting development policy with development propaganda, utilizing a kind of development theory discourse based on a Chinese understanding of quality of life, or a Xiaokang Lifestyle⁹⁸ (Tilt 2011). The concept behind Xiaokang, which could be directly translated as “small comfort”, actually has an ancient textual tradition dating back to the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). In a modern context it was first utilized in a economic development discourse at the beginning of the Opening and Reform Period (Tien 1991) but during that period it was more of a general indicator of economic development for the entire nation with a focus on the cities (Li 2005). After the 16th Congress of the CCP in 2002 Xiaokang began to include social and political indicators, which would help officials and local cadres better understand “development” in a more holistic sense of the term (Xu 2009). Starting in 2002, a series of Xiaokang indicators had been created and used as a simple measurement and a goal of attainment of well being for rural China.

Yet as happens with most policies in China, the recently decentralized nature of governance in the countryside has allowed local cadres to interpret the understanding of Xiaokang within the local context. For instance some of the indicators for Xiaokang recommend that at least 20% of households should own computers (Bo and Wei 2004). In a place like Bamboo Village this is of course not a practical indicator of economic progress. Thus cadres and villagers interpret Xiaokang through their own discourse of development. This in fact is why Xiaokang provides this research with the perfect indicator for a local understanding of development (Tilt 2011). More importantly through the lens of Xiaokang it is possible to interpret villager interest in the market economy, thereby explaining why the Ersu want to participate in the commodification of their modes of production.

⁹⁸ *Xiaokang Shenghuo* 小康生活

During semi-structured interviews, villagers were asked a series of questions that related Xiaokang to their lives. Since agriculture has traditionally been the main mode of production for Bamboo Village some questions also focused specifically on how agriculture was important to their quality of life, that of the village and whether or not it could help the village attain a Xiaokang Lifestyle. While some households (30% of the sample) couldn't provide a concrete definition for Xiaokang, for those that could, the results reveal a village that perceives quality of life and development exclusively through two central ideas: Food and Wealth.

In the context of Bamboo Village the first understanding of Food as a key component of Xiaokang was crucial for all the farmers. This understanding most likely does have some relationship with previous Party rhetoric relating to solving the *wenbao wenti*⁹⁹, which is the problem of being able to stay warm and eat to one's fill. During the 1980s and 1990s, local cadres were simply trying to ensure that everyone had food to eat and a stable roof over their heads while villagers readjusted to decentralization and decollectivization. In one very interesting conversation, Grandma Yu actual told me, "the collectivization period was the best of times. We always knew we were going to be able to eat." While food shortages were not a problem in the village after 1963, what made the *wenbao wenti* discourse so important was that suddenly in the late 80s villagers were to become dependent on themselves for everything after more than 30 years of being dependent on the collective and before that nearly 300 years of being dependent on the direction of the Native Chieftaincy. *Wenbao wenti* provided a veneer that made it seem that the Party and the cadres were still concerned about the basic needs of villagers. Also working in this region of Sichuan, Flower notes:

While urban planners tend to see subsistence farming as an icon of crude poverty out of place in a modern developed economy, farmers see subsistence farming as their fundamental guarantee of security from hunger in an uncertain world. (2009:43)

⁹⁹ 温饱问题

Thus while the core in Beijing may have instituted a host of modern economic, social and political indicators to define Xiaokang, local cadres of Bamboo Village recognized that what was still important to farmers in their village was ensuring access to food.

Yet as a part of this discourse, Xiaokang reveals a shift in village understanding of what are essential foods. For instance many people specified that rice should be a part of a “nutritious meal”. Tang Zhiren said: “each meal should include five dishes and one bowl of rice.” This is a fairly large increase for as villager Wang Lushan explained to me that, “...during the collective period we ate three bowls of meat and one bowl of rice, having enough meat and grains was enough to attain Xiaokang.” Tofu was also mentioned as being important for attaining Xiaokang. No one ever included barley, buckwheat or other traditional highland grains in their explanation of Xiaokang. Thus the understanding of a nutritious diet is important for attaining Xiaokang, yet within that discourse the idea of a nutritious diet has begun to assume a new meaning. People now should eat a larger amount of food including rice, which must be purchased from outside of the village, and a variety of other dishes¹⁰⁰. Such an essential aspect of everyday village life, namely “what are we going to eat”, has seen changes which have a direct impact on the local agricultural system.

Yet it is the concept of wealth that most certainly has had the most drastic impact on villager identification with Xiaokang and village development. The concept of wealth as an indicator of Xiaokang was not as homogenously defined by villagers. In some cases it was related to consumer goods such as being able to purchase a car, T.V., telephone, clothes or household electronics. In other cases it was strictly about having a comfortable and healthy place to live. A few villagers also mentioned the ability to make money and good economic conditions as being important to Xiaokang. Mr.

¹⁰⁰ Which is assumed since making five dishes with the same three staple foods doesn't make much sense and indeed was not what I experienced in Ersu homes.

Wang Huazhi stated “an improving economy is important to Xiaokang, after dealing with household expenses every person should be able to have 5,000RMB in their bank accounts.” The general sense is that money and economic development is important but this is not only for the ability to purchase goods but also as a form of savings or as security.

It is Wealth’s implication in the current ability to attain Xiaokang that is most telling. Nearly 75% of interviewees felt that their household had not attained a Xiaokang lifestyle. The main reasons for this were the local living standard was not high enough, economic conditions were too poor or they were unable to make enough money. For a village that historically had never been dependent on making money to ensure their livelihood, seeing these reactions as the inability for villagers to attain Xiaokang makes it clear that an understanding of an improved lifestyle now requires the ability to make money. The issue of being able to make enough money simply as farmers is contentious in the village. As one young respondent, Miss Yuan¹⁰¹, told me: “Even if we all raised pigs we still can’t reach Xiaokang, we have to *dagong*¹⁰²(wage-labor).”

Dagong in the countryside¹⁰³ is the term for leaving one’s home to make money. Many feel that the money needed to life a good life cannot be made in the rural periphery such as Bamboo Village. Another researcher working in Han Chinese regions of this corner of Sichuan noted that:

For many of these young people, agriculture is stigmatized—it represents the inverse of the wealth, the power of youth and the technological progress which are the beacons of the new modern economy with which they identify. While economic downturns have resulted in a decline of wage opportunities, these young people have little desire to return to agriculture. (Leonard 2002:91)

¹⁰¹ Miss Yuan is in fact Han from a village quite far away but married to an Ersu farmer.

¹⁰² 打工

¹⁰³ In my opinion this term in the city is quite different, it more directly relates to wage work but of the fairly menial kind, service jobs, construction, some sales positions. Professional jobs or management in the city would never be considered *dagong* even if the worker was paid a wage rate rather than a salary.

In the more traditional sense of attaining Xiaokang, this is true. As one older respondent, Mr. Wu Ming, 76, noted: “presently agricultural activity cannot help us attain Xiaokang because the benefits are too few.” But from the perspective of the younger Yang Xiu a new discourse seems to be appearing, as he says: “If we could grow fruit, we’d be a bit better off. Just growing potatoes and corn it’s very difficult to reach Xiaokang Levels [of development].” An even more telling perspective and one that features prominently in the drastic social and cultural changes within the village are reflected on by Zhou Ensui:

Just being dependent on agriculture is not enough to attain Xiaokang. Growing market crops and accepting work outside the village increases our income in which case we might be able to attain Xiaokang.

Thus according to this chain of discussion the concept of Wealth is dependent on the ability to make money. It is important to keep in mind though that for some leaving the village for wage-labor may not be a viable option. Yet villagers recognize that by commodifying the local modes of production they can determine their own contribution to attaining a Xiaokang Lifestyle.

Agricultural Commodification

The first of these shifts in the local modes of production I consider a blend of the Food and Wealth indicators associated with Xiaokang, namely the commodification of the agricultural system. Just as Ensui says above, shifting to market crops allows for farmers to participate in the process of economic development. Yet the Ersu traditionally have produced very little which would put them at an economic advantage in the market place; the exceptions being some wild plants and wax from the “wax-producing insect”. Neither of these goods was brought up in relation to Xiaokang but at least the idea of participating in the market as a way to make money is not something entirely foreign to the farmers. Yet the concept of strictly growing crops for the market is new to the village and the source and support for that knowledge base comes externally to the farmers.

Most of the villagers who have already decided to start growing vegetables are simply following in the steps of the 1st Production Brigade. Thus it is through the county agricultural bureau and local cadres that market vegetables have been introduced to Bamboo Village. The farmers learn about planting, upkeep and harvesting procedures directly from county officials and somewhat from occasional conversations with farmers from the 1st Production Brigade. Certainly the recent construction of the cement road to Bamboo Village has been an additional prerequisite for making some villagers feel comfortable with taking the risk to start planting market crops. Yang Guangren told me: “Now the road is finished, it’s much more convenient for us to work with people from outside the village.” This becomes especially important when the villagers have to start looking for a market to sell their goods. Examining the subsistence based low-output swidden agricultural system that was so integral to Ersu culture before collectivization, it is possible to recognize how much is beginning to change. Even during the Republican it would have been quite difficult to get crops out of the Songlin Valley to markets where they were sold. Certainly more of this took place during Collectivization, when the process of commodifying agricultural processes began, yet now it is recognizable that these processes are independent of central planning and are part of the decision making of individual farmers wanting to engage with the market economy. More importantly, with the construction of roads there is a newfound ease to that engagement.

From what I observed, most villagers are currently only growing cabbages, green peppers and carrots to be sold on the market. Regardless it is becoming well known in the village that these vegetables can help a household earn income. As Auntie Su told me: “Some households don’t have to go find wage-labor jobs, their income from market crops is already enough to support them.” Thus some people are already completely enmeshed in the market system and the village as a whole will become even more interconnected with the market in the coming years. Miss Yuan even noted that: “We haven’t attained Xiaokang yet but now that we can sell vegetables on the market, we should be able to attain it in the next two years or so.” It is important

though to note that they are not entirely dependent on the market; ultimately basic sustenance is still produced locally, but income from vegetables or wage-labor allows villagers to save income and consume goods from outside the village. The interest in consuming outside goods and services was a major driver in household decisions to enter the market system through wage-labor opportunities. Yet there seems to be a significant relationship between the ability to take a wage-labor job and the ability to take care of one's fields.

The ability to go out and find a wage-labor job is almost exclusively dominated by the male household members. Most of the mothers in the village have relatively low levels of education; of the 9 villagers in my sample who were completely illiterate, 7 were female. This definitely prevents them from participating in many different wage-labor jobs except for those that are strictly hard labor. From the local perspective this is a reason it is more likely that the male, who is culturally perceived as being able to perform hard labor and has some level of literacy, would be the household member to leave the village for gainful employment. From a more traditionalist standpoint, male household members were always more active in engaging with the outside world. This is certainly true for the Shaba and Tusi which are strictly male dominated positions in the village hierarchy. Perhaps more importantly, the female household members have always been responsible for taking care of the crops and the household chores. Men meanwhile were more mobile and would often spend days at a time in the pastures herding their livestock. Wang Guohua explained to me that: "Men do the heavy lifting and look for wage-labor jobs outside the village; women take care of work around the house and can do some light agricultural labor." Even today this concept persists. Yet my observations are that women in fact can and will perform all the labor on the farm, even plowing fields. Many of the villagers also admitted to such. As Li Huayu noted: "The sexes are equal now. Women do all of the agricultural work, while men look for wage-labor jobs outside the village. When they are home though, men will help with any of the work that needs to be done." Of course in recent years male household members are

around even less than before the collective period when they primarily focused on herding or preparing swidden fields. Thus the amount of labor potential available to the household on an average day has decreased significantly. Added on to their agricultural duties, women have also been responsible for childrearing throughout Ersu history.

In fact, childrearing is also becoming interrelated with agricultural decisions. Now that the household has begun to accumulate more wealth through wage-labor incomes from male household members, families are more inclined to provide their children with an education. While most villagers did teach their children how to farm when they were young, more than 25% decided that they didn't want their children to learn how to farm. As Wang Guohua noted: "We have one son who is currently in kindergarten...I don't plan to teach my children how to farm because there is no escape from farming." In fact all of the parents who have chosen not to teach their children farming practices are quite young, mainly under 40¹⁰⁴. All of these families send their children to school in the township and then eventually plan to use the money they save from wage-labor jobs to send their kids to high school in the county seat, which is often quite expensive. Many parents hope their children can go to school so that they can find jobs in the city or learn a trade, effectively taking them out of agricultural labor. Yet this process has an impact on the agricultural system even during the schooling process as children who are in the education system have little time to help with agricultural labor. The further students go in school the less time they have to help their mothers with household chores. Once they arrive in high school, except for summer vacation¹⁰⁵, many students are completely removed from agricultural processes. Thus the labor pool of the household is again diminished.

The loss of two sources of labor is very difficult for households that have traditionally been dependent on agriculture for their subsistence. Without men around to do the "heavy lifting" or children to help with general agricultural work,

¹⁰⁴ Wang Guohua is 41 so he actually is the one exception, but his wife is younger than he is.

¹⁰⁵ And even then many high school students attend *buxiban* 补习班 or "extended study courses" to help make sure they do well on their exams.

women and the elderly are the only community members left to manage the agrarian system. Incomes from wage-labor jobs are not necessarily stable, since the jobs the men take are typically seasonal temporary positions. Thus it makes sense that villagers would look to agricultural practices as a source of integration with the market economy. Just as it had been for her entire life Grandma Yu told me, “Of course agriculture is important to us. Everyone is dependent on agricultural activities and crop harvests.” But for the younger Tang Zhiren it “is important, as a source of income. It’s important for many different aspects of our life.” Villagers now recognize the economic importance of their agrarian system but also know that in order to fully integrate with the market their current system had to change. For instance, the villagers have been selling Yak meat as a source of income for quite some time. But Yaks do not grow to maturity on an annual basis so they represent a comparatively long-term investment. Wool from sheep is also sold but not in large quantities. Sheep also take much more effort and time to raise than Yaks. More importantly though women would rather not spend time herding; it is not a part of their tradition and from my observations they don’t enjoy spending time in the mountains herding. So as male household members search for wage-labor opportunities beyond the village they often leave their animals with an older male family member (often in a different household) to form a kind of interhousehold sharecropping agreement. These pressures redirected a focus on agriculture, a more feminine mode of production, rather than pastoral activities.

Yet even with the focus on agricultural activities there is still a shortage of hands on the farm. Corn and potato raising still requires quite a bit of labor and if male household members aren’t around during plowing season then women become dependent on networks of labor sharing. This of course slows down the agricultural process a bit as it may take some time during the season before all the fields in a labor sharing network are prepared for planting. There does seem to be a shift in this kind of planning with regard to vegetable planting. Preparing fields for vegetables is not as intensive; farmers do need to “flip” the soil but not the entire field since the root

structures for most of the vegetables are not nearly as extensive as corn or potatoes. Instead women are able to do most of the preparation on their own. As one villager noted:

Especially when planting corn and potatoes, you must have labor sharing networks; but those networks are not necessary during harvest. Raising vegetables on the other hand doesn't require any cooperation with other households at all.

Thus vegetable crops tend to allow households to be much more independent with their agrarian-based processes and decision making. Although people didn't talk about it as much in Bamboo Village, in the 1st Production Brigade, it did seem that there was an element of competition between households as well. The vehicles that could transport the goods to market have a limited amount of space. Each household wants to make sure they can get the bulk of their product to the market so as to maximize their return on investment. If one family has a better return per acre from their crops than another family, who determines what portion of the crop is allowed on the truck to be delivered to the market? This kind of competition drives families towards a more independent style of production processes. Ultimately their decision as to what crops to grow also begins to determine what they are eating in the household.

A shift in Ersu cuisine can also be seen as access to the market takes up greater importance in the agricultural system. The perpetuation of rice as a staple in the Ersu diet¹⁰⁶ is quite important since it does provide the Ersu with a foodstuff that they can purchase. While households do not eat rice for every meal it is becoming more common. More importantly an inter-household market/exchange has appeared between vegetable growers and non-vegetable growers. When vegetables ripen, many villagers wish to improve the variety in their diet. Rather than purchasing vegetables in a market 7 km away, they now can purchase them in their village. As households aim for the "five dishes and a bowl of rice" lifestyle, they have begun to

¹⁰⁶ Which really began during the collective period since that is the grain which was provided in the communal kitchens and as welfare during the 1960s when food supplies were not as stable for some households.

incorporate green peppers, carrots, onions, and cabbages into their recipes. Thus a fundamental aspect of Ersu culture, their personal relationship with nature through the consumption of food, has been altered.

Cultural Commodification

In fact, as market forces have become central to Ersu modes of production, they eventually become integrated with other aspects of local culture. The current process of turning Bamboo Village into an Ethnic Tourist destination is a prime example. It is interesting to note that the concept of tourism is not mentioned by villagers as an indicator of supporting a Xiaokang Lifestyle. An initial examination of Bamboo Village would show that the current cultural revival is related to the localized reinstatement of the Guzazi New Year Festival. While this festival was put on hiatus due to its content being branded a religious superstition during the Cultural Revolution, starting in 1990 this festival again helped redefine the Ersu relationship with their ancestors. The re-emergence of the Shaba's place in the community as a source of cultural and spiritual knowledge has also played a strong role in the local cultural revitalization discourse.

These two culturally significant changes in Ersu society are not isolated phenomenon. They are entirely intertwined with political processes and decision making. In the late 1980s, the Songlin Township Cultural Bureau began to recognize the significance of cultural cohesiveness which was beginning to drift apart as the Party became less defining in the everyday lives of villager activity. Thus in 1990, Guzazi was approved by the Asbestos County Cultural Bureau as an important cultural event that should be preserved amongst the local "Tibetan" communities. In order to make Guzazi more understandable to Chinese cadres, Songlin Township renamed the festival *Huanshan Jijie*¹⁰⁷, a rough translation of which might be "renewal of the mountain chicken festival". This describes more the process of the festival rather than the spiritual and philosophical nature of the festival. Of course just as the "Tibetan" villagers continued to call themselves Ersu amongst each other,

¹⁰⁷ 还山鸡节

they also continued to use the term Guzazi. For the first twenty years after the festival was again allowed into practice, the main participants with but a few exceptions¹⁰⁸, were exclusively local residents. It was at this time that the Ersu themselves began to recognize their cultural significance in the greater region of Western Sichuan and also the benefits of a unique cultural identity.

Around 2008, local villagers who had entered the labor force either through government positions or entrepreneurial venues, began to work more closely with Asbestos County officials on ideas for bringing ethnic tourism to Songlin Township. Construction of the Ersu Cultural Bed and Breakfast began in 2009 through local investment but under the supervision of the Township Cultural Bureau. It opened for service in February, 2010. As mentioned above it was also after the Sichuan Earthquake in 2008 that funds were appropriated to greatly improve the roads throughout the rural parts of Sichuan. As Bamboo Village was already the most accessible and culturally most well “preserved” Ersu¹⁰⁹ village, the construction of new roads effectively connected it to a greater tourism market. While visits by county officials and local cadres became quite regular occurrences in the village, in June 2010 two foreign backpackers arrived in the village simply by word of mouth. It is also important to note that in Bamboo Village resided¹¹⁰ two of the last remaining Shaba practitioners in Asbestos County. Both Shabas have taken on apprentices and are active in the propagation of traditional Ersu Culture.

In order to facilitate that propagation, however, the Shaba knowledge has undergone some forms of restructuring. While traditionally the knowledge base was strictly the realm of the local Shaba, now the information is being disseminated in other ways. Since the ability to transcribe Shaba knowledge in a Tibetan text has for all intents and purposes been lost, the Cultural Bureau is working with

¹⁰⁸ Namely a few people in the cultural bureau

¹⁰⁹ In a more preservationist lens many would likely argue that some of the Muya villages in the Upper Songlin Valley are much more traditional and less Sinified. Of course these villages are also much more difficult to access, one of which can only be reached by foot.

¹¹⁰ Although somewhat ironically, they only lived in the village part time as their children also had homes in the County Seat where they often would stay. I actually did not meet Yang Shaba until the performance of the Guzazi Festival because he was never at the village.

anthropologists to ensure that the information is preserved at least in Chinese¹¹¹. The Bed and Breakfast also utilizes the unique aspects of Shaba cultural knowledge by placing pictures of rituals and the Shaba text throughout its buildings. The grounds of the Bed and Breakfast have a “visitor center” kind of feel to it. Of course as with the past the Shaba are also central to the performance of Guzazi and other rituals in the village. But they are also important for communicating the importance of these rituals to those who are foreign to them. Many of the villagers, especially while “hanging out” in the cultural atmosphere of the Bed and Breakfast, are happy to discuss aspects of Ersu life with outsiders. Yet they might not have a complete or comprehensive understanding of Shaba rituals and almost nothing of the Shaba and Su’er texts, or the ritual connections with Nyingma Buddhism. For instance many of the younger villagers did not realize that harvests traditionally followed the thanks that are provided to ancestors during the Guzazi Festival. These villagers might not speak Ersu, certainly not fluently. Thus they may not be able to understand the significance of Shaba rituals and their connection to the Ersu past. Yet this growing connection to a more localized Ersu Culture based on Shaba traditional knowledge is becoming more appealing amongst all villagers.

One of the more important reasons villagers are attracted to a more localized culture is that it distances themselves from their “Tibetan” ethnic classification. In the past, the Ersu may not have been as concerned with their identity or association with the “Tibetan” classification. As villagers begin to desire to further interact with Chinese society, particularly in their participation in the market economy through wage-labor job opportunities, the issue of identity concurrently becomes apparent. Xiao Jiang, the eldest son of Auntie Su, explained this perfectly:

I’ve been working at a hydroelectric plant in Jiulong County¹¹² for a few months now. Before that, though, I went through a series of odd jobs and moved to many different places in Sichuan Province. In

¹¹¹ A good portion of which can already be found in (Li 2007).

¹¹² Jiulong is neighboring to Asbestos County, the Dam he mentions is in fact probably a day away from Bamboo Village. Some of the “Tibetan” clans of Jiulong identify more clearly with Khamba Tibetan culture.

2008 during the riots in Lhasa, that was the hardest period of time for me to find a job. At that time, no one wanted to hire someone whose ID card included the “Tibetan” classification. The job in Jiulong is tough, I work nights most of the time, but it is good to have a job regardless.

This need of the Ersu to distance themselves from the conflicts between Greater Tibet and the core of China is not just about generating income external to the village. Those who are interested in developing ethnic tourism in the village want to distinguish themselves from other places that already have a form of “Tibetan Tourism”¹¹³. Only in this way will the village be able to attract Han Chinese tourists who will likely be their key “marketing” demographic. The village by itself has little to do with the “marketing”, in the traditional sense, as the bulk of this is done under the guidance of local government.

In fact the government directly and indirectly has a large influence over the interpretation and expression of Ersu Culture. One of the more direct influences was related to the performance that took place in Beijing which was broadcast nationally this summer. It was very interesting to hear two very heated sides of this story, but hopefully some neutral ground can be found in the following narrative which comes from discussions with all of the people involved. It seems that a group of local residents from Songlin Township of Ersu ethnic background were invited to participate in various song and dance performances in late June, 2010. The main choreographer was on fairly good terms with one Ersu woman who had become quite famous in Asbestos County for her singing voice and knowledge of traditional songs. She even had her own recording studio and lived permanently in the county seat where she taught music. The other women were mainly middle aged farmers who had grown up singing and performing these songs. The choreographer apparently worked mainly with the music teacher in preparation of the event in which case she

¹¹³ Certainly Jiuzhaigou (Peng 1998) and Huanglong (Kang 2009) comes to mind, but the recently established Shangri-La in Zhongdian County of Yunnan is another example (Hillman 2003). Even more there is a need to contrast themselves with the tourism in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

became the focus of the performance. On the day of the show, the music teacher had her hair done up in a 1950's American Beehive style and wore an especially gaudy outfit. An official high up in the county cultural bureau was vilified and requested that she change her hair and clothing so that it wouldn't clash so much with the other women in the group. After some negotiation and soft words from the choreographer she consented and the show went off without a hitch.

From the perspective of the government official the main concern was whether or not the performance would be able to portray a traditional Ersu Culture that would interest people external to the county (read: tourists). While I'm sure he wanted to make sure the performance was distinct from "Tibetan" culture, a modernist impression of Ersu culture was not what he had in mind. On the other hand, the music teacher was greatly offended that someone from outside her culture would make the assumption that he understood Ersu tradition more than she did. From her perspective interpretation and reification of Ersu culture should be her autonomous decision as a representative of that culture. The result that the teacher consented to the advice of the choreographer only exemplifies that even the Ersu who wish to interpret their culture with a more modernist flare recognize the purpose of presenting a more traditionalist and distinct Ersu identity. Thus their culture becomes a form of production which can be reified and interpreted in a way that allows integration with the market economy as a tourist commodity.

In a less direct way, the government is also working with anthropologists and other researchers to gather a more detailed history of the Ersu and their place within the ethnic landscape of China. The macro-aspects of this history regarding the Ersu connection to migrating clans from the Greater Cool Mountain Region seem relatively straightforward. Through linguistics, archival research, ethnographic and archeological analysis Ersu connections to a non-Tibetan origin are quite apparent (Li 2007). The issue of identity, however, becomes much more complicated at the more micro-level, since historical memory in the village has its limitations. As I've noted there is some discussion as to how many generations certain clans have resided in the

Songlin Valley. Researchers are now trying to help piece together the local history of clans so that they can be integrated into the greater history which will provide them a stronger historical context for their identity with Ersu culture. As Yang Shaba said to one researcher: “We need your help to better understand our own clan history, as we have already forgotten many generations. We know from the number of graves on the sacred mountain that we have been her for much longer than our memory serves.” The Ersu know that their myths and legends must connect them to a greater history, but the lack of a historical memory through an oral tradition does seem to be a concern. I believe it is also recognized to some extent that this may not be something that can be recovered. Perhaps for that reason, many in the village tend to focus more on recovery of rituals and traditions which have not faded into their cultural past.

An example of just such a focus can be seen at the nexus of culture and production which is directly influenced by political discourse. One of the songs performed in Beijing this summer was the “Buckwheat Harvest” Song. While many Ersu songs are done with impromptu lyrics, the content of the lyrics is reserved for specific occasions. In this case, the content of a rendition of Buckwheat Harvest, can only be sung while threshing the recently cut and dried buckwheat or other highland grains. Thus the performers in Beijing actually re-enacted the event which included actual buckwheat for threshing. One of the local cultural bureau officials though feels a song of this nature could vanish quite quickly. As noted previously, since 1998 and the ban on tree felling, swidden practices associated with highland grain cultivation has for all intents and purposes stopped. More importantly the harvest of those grains is no longer a social activity to be accompanied by song and ritual¹¹⁴. Thus a possible project that the cultural bureau may sponsor is allowing for a small amount of land, where buckwheat was traditionally grown, to be set aside for the yearly re-enactment of this custom.

¹¹⁴ The ritual is not complex, but it is important. Men and women line up across from each other and alternate whacking the buckwheat to husk the shell of the grain. This is a glimpse of a more egalitarian nature to traditional Ersu gender relations particularly with regard to divisions of labor.

Yet when asked about whether they would be interested in participating in a possible subsidy program that encouraged them to grow traditional grains once more, villagers provided some very interesting answers. First, one-third of residents, mainly the younger villagers, even before 1998 had not spent much time, or none at all, raising the traditional crops and so they wouldn't be able to participate regardless of the subsidy program. Another third of the villagers replied that they wouldn't participate in such a program but the reasons vary. As Teacher Tang told me: "The law doesn't allow us to do that, so the Government wouldn't provide a subsidy of that nature." Of course the largest reasons people noted that they stopped growing the crops in the first place, are small harvests and the inability to make a profit on the harvest, which brings us right back to the Xiaokang issues of sustenance for the family and wealth accumulation. From the perspective of Auntie Su: "Not only would the government not allow something like that but the subsidy would likely not be enough." As many farmers noted, if the government doesn't allow them to practice swidden above a certain elevation then they would have to use the valley bottom land for such a project. That would require them to give up "good land" where they grow corn, potatoes and vegetables for "low output" grain crops that can't be sold for a high price. Villagers do not recognize these grains as part of the commodification process; they are traditional, require lots of labor and have low output. Villagers have a hard time seeing the possible connection that growing traditional crops might bring some kind of financial benefit to them. Thus again the ability of the government to provide some kind of connection to the market is important for villagers to be interested in participating with a project of this nature.

A project that villagers seem to understand more intuitively is that of village beautification.¹¹⁵ The main focus of this project is the completion of the road that runs through the village. The Asbestos County government had anticipated the commodification of Ersu culture even back in 2008, when Songlin Township utilized

¹¹⁵ In most political discourses in China such a project is a part of the 容村整洁 *rongcunzhengjie* or Village Beautification project. It just happens that the local government in Songlin Township has rolled this project together with their tourism development plans for Bamboo Village.

its Earthquake Disaster Relief funds to reconstruct rural roads. At that time they decided that providing the village with a more culturally defining and aesthetically pleasing thoroughfare would be beneficial, thus a section of the road was never completed. The final planning of the further beautification and restoration of village architecture was outlined during the summer of 2010 in conjunction with urban planning researchers from Chengdu. The plan for the completion of the road was finalized with village approval in late Dec. 2010. Once this project is finished the village beautification process should be nearing completion just in time for the arrival of the 2011 tourist season in Sichuan.

The Bed and Breakfast, itself a center piece in the beautification process and placing a large amount of hope in the arrival of tourists from beyond the county borders, has also had to make adjustments in their local cuisine. As I've mentioned, the local cuisine has changed simply because farmers are raising more market vegetables. But in most cases these vegetables might be cooked in a manner not that different from the preparation of wild foodstuffs for local consumption. Yet in order to appease the target demographic for tourism, the menu at the establishment now includes fairly common Sichuanese dishes. The cooks themselves did not have a great amount of experience with this kind of cuisine. When the business first opened a young Han Chinese girl was hired to help with the management of the place. She had moved on to another job before the beginning of my field work. Before that it seems she taught the cooks how to improve their basic Sichuan style foods.

These changes taking place in Ersu society are all happening in tandem with the further commodification of local modes of production. Some of these modes of production are new, such as with tourism, and some were traditionally central to Ersu existence such as with agriculture. The processes discussed above may not be a result of local integration with a broader market, yet all of these issues are interacting with the process of commodification to greatly change Ersu cultural and social structures. Here I've discussed how and why villagers from their own perspective are interested

in shifting their modes of production so that they can better maneuver in a market integrated landscape. This contrasts greatly with the traditional cultural and ecological landscape that governed their lives in the past. But before I examine the contradictions that arise from this shift, I will first consider the socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-ecological adaptations that are taking place in the village in response to the commodification of their modes of production.

Chapter 6: Adapting to Commodification

As the various aspects of Ersu production commodifies, villagers recognize and adapt to that shift. As I'll show in this chapter, these adaptations have implications for local ethnoecological understanding of the agricultural system as villagers attempt to integrate further into the market economy. Additionally, because the process of commodification is also changing the nature of Ersu identity, I'll describe how villagers are also adapting their cultural lives to better integrate into the ethnic tourism market (Wang et al. 2001). Within each of these forms of production, agriculture and tourism, local adaptations can be viewed through three different lenses of village decision making strategies; namely village economic management, the village socio-cultural structure, and village interaction with ecological services.

Adaptations of the Agricultural System for further Market Integration

Since farmers in the village now recognize the benefits associated with growing market crops, they are now beginning to adjust certain aspects of the agricultural system to make their production more profitable and more competitive beyond the village. The first set of adaptations is concerned with the economic management of the agricultural system, in particular distribution and marketing strategies. The second set of adaptations is socio-cultural in nature, such as adopting new cultural norms and reinterpreting the cultural understanding of crops. Finally the villagers have adapted their agricultural system within the local ecology to be more productive from a biological perspective by using method such as increasing the use of fertilizers and mechanization. The following sections analyze these adaptations in greater detail.

Economic Management Adaptations to the Agricultural System

As seen in both the 1st Brigade and Bamboo Village, some farmers have decided to take the risk of reserving a portion of their land specifically for growing vegetables that can be sold on the market. This means that a small percentage of the harvest will be available to feed the family throughout the year. Instead cash income

will be required to purchase new staples such as rice, while corn is fed to swine as a form of protein storage. While the output from the corn fields is quite high, it is uncertain if the amount of money that can be generated through the sale of vegetables will be enough to support the family through the dry winter months when even wild foodstuffs will be scarce. Moreover, now that the number of villagers raising market vegetables has greatly increased, the aggregate output would greatly overwhelm a small market such as that found in Asbestos County. Traditionally, villagers would engage with market forces at the household level, such as Grandma Yu selling eggs from the family chickens when she was young. Villagers have recognized quite early on that in order to get their goods to a market of sizable proportions the method of individual interaction with market forces would only increase their level of risk.

Local village leaders also recognize this conflict. Thus they have tried to organize the farmers to do something that most would assume is part of the past in China; that is, to collectively organize the distribution of their production. In fact collective marketing of agricultural goods is not uncommon for many villages in present day China (Tilt 2008). The benefits of reduced transportation costs, more egalitarian access to markets and stronger bargaining power with regard to prices makes this kind of cooperation quite obvious to farmers. While the organization of agricultural labor is definitely becoming less collectivized for reasons already stated above, the process of actually bringing goods to market seems to be becoming more collectivized. Naturally the villagers look to the same people, village leaders, for guidance with their collective engagement with the “liberalized” market as they did during their collective engagement with the planned economy.

The village leaders are now entirely responsible for ensuring that the vegetables are marketed in bulk and make it to a larger group of consumers at a profitable price. This is a fairly unique adaptation of economic decision-making since the last collective decision was the stoppage of swidden practices. Yet even this had more of an uneven impact on individual households since by the late 90s some households were more dependent on swiddening than others. This current decision of

collective marketing provides a price and a harvest timeline that would not be differentiated by household but is the same for the entire village. Since the market cannot be local, it also means that the village leaders, and in turn all of the villagers, have become dependent on markets that are quite distant from the village.

The village leaders now look for markets in the cities of the Sichuan Basin in the core of the Upper Yangtze Macroregion; namely Chengdu. Chengdu is a modern metropolis where consumers have for quite some time now become used to eating fresh vegetables of all kinds. Towards the late Autumn months until Spring, when temperatures dip near freezing and the arid weather patterns from the North slip into the basin, the vegetable markets of the city must import vegetables from further South or become dependent on local vegetables grown in greenhouses. While importing from other regions is a recent development quite different from the beginning of the Reform Era (Skinner 1981), this only goes to show how widely integrated the market system has become in China in the last 30 years. From conversations with vegetable dealers in Chengdu¹¹⁶, it is apparent that the market is dependent on both local and imported sources. Thus the vegetables grown in Bamboo Village do have a slight advantage. Since they are only attempting to grow one late harvest of vegetables towards the end of Autumn, the extra expenses of constructing and maintaining a greenhouse are not necessary. Additionally, the cost of transportation from Asbestos County to Chengdu is likely much cheaper than the other regions from which the city markets would need to import vegetables, such as Southern Yunnan or Guangxi. This allows the village leaders to negotiate a more profitable price for their bulk supply of vegetables. Once the freeway to Asbestos County is completed in 2013, these costs and the time needed to transport the goods will drop dramatically.

¹¹⁶ Over the years I have had to rotate markets depending on where I've lived in Chengdu, but all of my vegetable dealers have always been the most amiable and talkative people I would interact with on a daily basis in the city. I proudly claim that the bulk of my ability to understand (and to some degree speak) a variety of Sichuanese comes from my dealings with Chengdu vegetable dealers, who rarely speak the somewhat standardized form of the Chengdu dialect since "home" is likely a rural town beyond the metropolitan area.

However, for the 2010 season there was a considerable concern regarding the safe delivery of the highly perishable vegetables. On my trip to see the vegetable sites at the 1st Brigade, Wang Cunzhang and the brigade leader went back and forth with many phone calls regarding reserving a truck that could take a large shipment of vegetables to market in Chengdu. As the village leader explained to me:

The real issue is not just *reserving* the transport; there are plenty of trucks that run the route from Asbestos County to Chengdu. But the truck bed has to be enclosed because we have to layer the inside with ice. That much ice is also difficult to locate.

Confused I asked: “Why does the truck have to be loaded with ice? That’s going to increase the costs dramatically, right?”

The Cunzhang replied:

With the current condition of the roads some of the trucks will be stuck in a traffic jam for hours at a time. If the sun comes out and beats down on an unenclosed truck bed at that altitude the UV rays will wilt our crops, which will be a huge problem when the purchasers receive the goods in Chengdu. But even with an enclosed bed the problem still exists because the enclosure will heat up. We need ice to make sure that the temperature in the truck bed stays relatively cool during the trip.

The interaction here with the purchasers in Chengdu is important. The village leaders are being very careful to establish credit with these purchasers, thus they are willing to spend the extra costs to make sure that the goods arrive in Chengdu in pristine condition. This summer the roads in and out of Asbestos County were exceptionally bad. Hearing the complications facing the villagers and their crops made the inability of an ethnographer from reaching his field site seem quite petty in comparison. A section of the semi-structured interview with households touched on villager perception of the floods and landslides in the area. Villagers did mention the lack of transportation as an issue, but by far Yang Jie’s response was the most telling: “There have been a few problems related to the floods. For instance it has definitely had an impact on my transportation business this year.” I believe it is interesting to note that this brief comment was actually the most animated response I received from Yang Jie

during the interview. I think he found the questions on the agricultural system quite boring and couldn't figure out why I would be interested in something so old-fashioned.¹¹⁷ Yet these responses paint a more detailed picture of the risk that is associated with villager dependence on distant markets and an unstable transportation network. For this reason, villagers have adapted their agrarian strategies so that the responsibility of navigating these risks falls on the village leaders.

While the village leaders technically are paid to deal with just these kinds of duties, the issue is whether they have the resources available to them to successfully complete them. One of the most serious barriers for the village leaders' engagement with market processes was their access to accurate market information. The villagers are wholly dependent on their networks of friends, family and acquaintances that they have built up over the years. In some cases this network might be local, as in someone from the village or township moves to Chengdu and just happens to work in the agricultural sector. But more likely these connections might be developed while the men are outside of the village earning income from wage labor (Murphy 2002). During the same visit to the 1st Brigade, over a long lunch of barbecue¹¹⁸, I observed that once the brigade leader would receive information regarding the transportation of the crops, he would then have to make a call to his connections in the Chengdu vegetable market system. He consistently had to renegotiate the price back and forth. Of course this is not that strange considering this was the first time anyone in the 1st Brigade or Bamboo Village had attempted to market their vegetables and in such a large quantity. Just to provide an example of the size of this quantity, I was told that in the 1st Brigade even in 2010, farmers were able to pick green peppers 4-5 times from one plant. This obviously could be increased if the crop was planted earlier or before growing potatoes or corn on the land. The Brigade Leader told me though that

¹¹⁷ Yang Jie is only 32 and had been driving a truck for over 10 years. He knew quite a bit about the agricultural system but didn't enjoy talking about it. He also had participated in a psychological experiment the day before which I think made him quite weary and wary of researchers. For more on this see (Schmitt n.d.)

¹¹⁸ Something I did not eat in Bamboo Village

they were averaging about 1,500 kg/*mu* in a yearly harvest¹¹⁹. It's safe to assume that each family in the 1st and 2nd Brigade was growing at least half a *mu* of green peppers, and there were 300 households between the two Brigades. That would result in about 225,000 kg of green peppers/year with even more being produced in Bamboo Village¹²⁰. While Asbestos County does have a total population of 123,261, it is important to note that these brigades certainly are not the only places which grow this amount of green peppers. Thus attempting to market locally would be difficult. Perhaps what is more important for this discussion though is that the Han brigade leader and not the Ersu Cunzhang was responsible for the bulk of the negotiation.

Socio-Cultural Adaptations to the Agricultural System

In fact, the ethnic nature of the engagement with the greater commodities market represents an adaptation in the Ersu socio-cultural structure. It does seem logical that the Ersu village leader would need to be dependent on his Han friend for advice in dealing with the market, but there is a contradiction in the political hierarchy of the village system since the brigade leader is in fact the Cunzhang's subordinate. A conflict doesn't seem present but it does intensify the Ersu's lack of autonomy with market based strategies. Some in the realm of Chinese government may interpret this less as a form of ethnic dependence and more like ethnic integration (Long 1987). If it is the desire of the Ersu to gain greater wealth through more autonomous economic strategies and further engagement with commodification processes, then this "integration" only places more pressure on the Ersu to further distance their identity away from the "Tibetan" classification. As noted already, villagers view their association with Tibetans as a detriment to their ability to enter the market economy through wage-labor jobs. Now through this newly introduced mode of production, they can interact with the market, but in order to do so autonomously, they are required to move their identity not in the direction of a

¹¹⁹ That translates as 22500 kg/ hectare.

¹²⁰ Unfortunately villagers had just started to grow green peppers in large quantities this summer so it's not clear exactly what kinds of outputs to expect for the village.

distinct Ersu ethnicity, but more towards the social and cultural capital associated with the Han ethnicity.

While external reifications of identity are changing, the internal structural relations of the village are also adapting to changes in the mode of production. The labor sharing networks based on clan relations are starting to lose their significance. In the past all of the steps in the agricultural system would be done in groups; so important was this that songs were created which are not only task specific but must be sung by a group of people¹²¹. These networks could be inter-clan based but most likely would be done with others in your family. The State shifted the organizational structure of these networks from being dependent on clan-based relationships, strictly to a collective-based understanding of labor sharing. Even Auntie Su, who loves to sing, had to admit that during the collective people began to sing less while they were working. These networks became even more conflicted in the Reform Era as land was redistributed creating some very strange arrangement of land tenure. Instead of looking to a collective or a clan member, now villagers would simply look to the field neighboring their own to create pools of labor sharing. With increasing usage of green revolution technologies and mechanization farmers require less and less help from labor sharing pools. As households begin to adapt to the shrinking amount of labor potential available at any given time mentioned in Chapter 5, farmers are becoming more accustomed to doing things on their own. Again from the perspective of local villagers vegetable crops actually don't require cooperation to be successful and now there are economic incentives for farmers to spend more of their time on their fields rather than pooling labor resources with other village members. The recent introduction of market vegetables only further ensures this disassociation with clan based labor sharing networks.

This movement away from an Ersu ethnic and clan identity coincides with a cultural re-interpretation of the agrarian system as a whole. Certainly the most prevalent is the significance of the Guzazi festival in the ethnoecological

¹²¹ Actually in my opinion the intonation of Ersu folk songs do not sound nearly as good when they are performed as solos.

understanding of local agriculture. Most farmers have been unable to await the Guzazi festival to begin harvesting their crops for many years now. Most of the crops currently grown in the village ripen long before the 8th lunar month when the festival takes place. This is mainly due to the selection of varieties which have a faster ripening period or heartier varieties which can be planted earlier during colder weather. For some households the potato crops might be far into a second planting when the festival arrives. With the introduction of market vegetables this is even more important since they are the second planting in fields where potatoes have already been harvested. Thus the purpose of thanking the ancestors for their part in ensuring that the village has a good harvest loses its spiritual sincerity. Yet by noting the objects that are provided as sacrificial goods during Guzazi, less of a contradiction becomes apparent. There seems to be a classification of the goods that are not associated with the spiritual significance of Guzazi.

In other words, there are cultural interpretations of certain crops that can be classified for their specific purposes¹²². Here I describe them in their order of appearance in the Ersu ethnoecology of agriculture. The first would be crops of a spiritual significance. These are the so called “traditional” grain crops which were apart of the swiddening system used by the Ersu as they traversed the Tibetan-Yi Corridor for many generations. Their longevity in the ethnoecological system has earned them a sacrificial place to be presented to the ancestors during Guzazi. These include buckwheat, barley, *tianxu*, soy beans¹²³, wild vegetables and all of the various forms of livestock raised by the Ersu. The second group would be crops that have subsistence-based significance. Put simply, the purpose of these crops is to feed the household and/or livestock. The most important of these crops, corn and potatoes, already have at least a 300-year history within the ethnoecological system, yet they

¹²² The following is purely based on observation alone, but I believe this section could be ripe for a cognitive ethnographic investigation about Ersu crop classifications.

¹²³ In the form of tofu, but I see this one in particular as a very significant outlier. It is quite possible that the soy bean has for some time been utilized by Tibetan-Yi Corridor cultures, especially those that have traversed the Eastern edge of the corridor near the Chinese border. It seems unlikely but perhaps it even became integrated into the agricultural system before the subsistence-based New World crops outlined below.

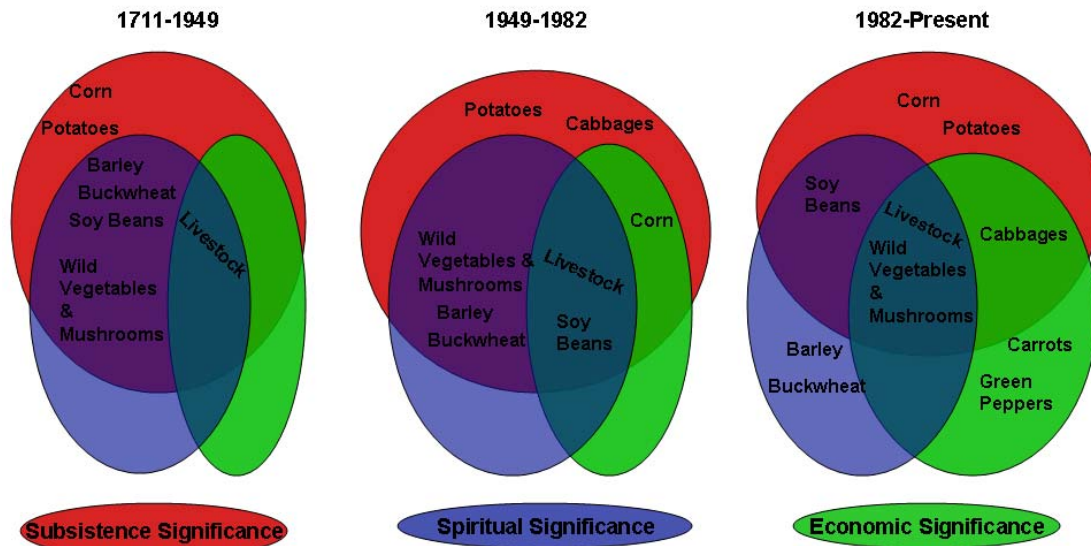


Figure 4. Historical Shift in Crop Significance for Bamboo Village

still are not offered up as sacrificial goods during Guzazi¹²⁴. Of course traditionally all of the spiritually significant crops would also fall under this category. But with the abandonment of the swidden fields, the grain crops have lost their subsistence significance. The third and final category of crop classification, the economically significant crops, contains crops that are used for subsistence and then also sold on the market for cash. Yet with the size of the harvests it just wouldn't be possible for families to eat their entire crop of spicy green peppers for instance. These crops are significant because they can be sold on the market for cash. The important thing to

¹²⁴ There might be an exception here as well, that being *momos*, which traditionally are baked or fried bread made from a wheat or buckwheat flour. Now they are also commonly made from corn flour. They are very dense and considered a staple, much more so than rice which has only in recent years become a normal dish for Ersu families to serve. The question though is whether corn has simply been included as a substitute because of the lack of buckwheat, or if it is necessary for subsistence crops to be "processed" before they can be offered as sacrifices. It is possible that tofu as a by-product of soy beans could also be placed in such a "processed" category.

note is that as the village has become more integrated with the market system, they have gradually moved to incorporate more of their agricultural system towards an economically significant cluster of crops and further away from spiritually significant crops. Through research in remote Indonesian tribes Valeri discovered that products which were not part of the original ethnoecological understanding of the Huaulu were not held under the strict set of local eating taboos. He also discovered though that taboos of this nature are not inflexible and can be altered as an adaptive strategy depending on village needs (Valeri 2000). Yet in order to make this adaptation in the crop variety of the system as is seen in Bamboo Village, ecological adaptations have been necessary as well as cultural.

Adaptations to the Agroecological System

The acceleration of village interest in market crops has been happening in tandem with the Ersu integration into the wage-labor market and an increasing importance for making sure children receive an education in Chinese schools. As this household labor potential begins to focus its attention away from the village, those that remain behind to manage the agricultural system are very interested in ways to improve their output. Almost all villagers realize these improvements through “scientific advancement and technology.” As village elder Yang Guangren told me, “I never taught my children much about traditional agriculture. I mainly introduced them to modern scientific agricultural methods.” Thus as the labor potential in the village as a whole has decreased the bulk of the village has looked to science to help them increase their agricultural outputs, both for subsistence and economic purposes.

When asked what were the most significant changes to the agricultural system in the last five years the most common answer that villagers provided was regarding transportation. In some regards these villagers are commenting about the newly constructed roads which allow for easier access to market. Yet a further examination is understood through Yang Jie’s explanation: “With roads fixed the way they are

now we can move our harvests on motorcycles¹²⁵. In the past we would have to use a *beidou*¹²⁶. We would have to walk to the markets.” Of course motorcycles are not the only form of mechanization; electric flour mills are also quite common. During my visit to 1st Brigade I noticed that Wang Cunzhang was helping the County Agricultural Bureau propagate a new subsidy for mechanization purchases. When I asked if many villagers would be able to participate in such a subsidy, he responded:

Well, currently almost 100% of households own an electric mill, and other than that, this list doesn't cover any machines that villagers would need. Tractors, harvesters, combines and plows are all impractical here because of the steep slope of the terrain and the rocky characteristics of the soil.

That aside, the increasing purchase and usage of motorized vehicles does again require access to cash in order to purchase gasoline for running those machines. But that seems like a small price to pay when it shortens the transportation time to the nearest market by days. Ecologically, however, bringing gasoline and other petroleum products into the community is likely to have somewhat of an impact on the health of streams and soil quality. With regard to the ability to distribute their harvests, it also makes it convenient to organize transportation to arrive in one location, as discussed above, and have the farmers centralize their crops there for transport to larger markets.

The second most important change to the agricultural system according to farmers was the fact that they could grow market vegetables, thus the focus of the commodification of agricultural processes as being a recent phenomenon really is an emic perspective. Yet from an ecological standpoint this in itself can be understood in a broader context. Farmers repeatedly pointed out that their access to new kinds of seeds was of paramount importance. Regarding the vegetables, these seeds have been introduced exclusively by the Asbestos County Agricultural Bureau. They were given freely to those who participated in the Vegetable Sites project and those

¹²⁵ Teacher Tang also noted that Tricycles are even more important because small truck beds can be attached to them so that even larger loads can be carried.

¹²⁶ a wicker backpack 背篋

participants have been encouraged to reserve part of their harvest for seeding future crops. At this point though it is not entirely clear how these new species are interacting with local soils or other biological species in the area. Regarding subsistence crops, older species of corn are quite rare now. While helping villager Di Guobao shuck corn one afternoon I realized that of the hundreds we'd shucked only a handful were of the old variety. Di said, "They get mixed in with the rest. I only grow a few here and there just so we have some to eat." Every year new batches of seeds are introduced for corn since the hybrid species are impotent. Farmers don't seem to see this as much of a problem, but rather seem quite satisfied with the species. Without being asked specifically over 30% of respondents mentioned that the new breeds of corn have very high outputs. This is important because as the villagers begin to move more towards market crops, what land they reserve for subsistence crops like corn will need to have very high outputs. It is apparent though that as households begin to place both labor and land pressure on their corn fields, the hybrid nature of the species is not enough to fulfill the subsistence needs of the family.

Thus families begin to look more specifically for chemical ways to improve their outputs. As Di Guobao explained: "The fertilizing methods are now different. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd weeding processes as well as the spreading of manure has been simplified." Indeed those processes have gone from the most laborious and time consuming tasks that must be done throughout the growing season, to jobs that take a day to complete. A number of villagers noted that an important change to the agricultural system is that they no longer do hand weeding anymore, but rather just spray herbicides. There is no doubt that this has taken a toll on the soil, starting with corn fields during the late 90s. As Auntie Su explained to me, however:

In the last three seasons, we've started to use a new type of herbicide. I only use it during the 3rd weeding since that has to be the most thorough because it won't be done again for the rest of the season. Just a small amount needs to be sprayed right at the base of the corn stalk. Since we've started to use it, the weeds aren't as much of a problem and we can see less of a negative impact to the soil.

Conversely, many villagers in the 1st Production Brigade claimed that they used very little herbicide on their vegetable crops. They claimed that weeds were not a problem and the high elevation prevented problems from insects. In Bamboo Village, no one mentioned using pesticides or herbicides on their vegetable crops. In fact, Auntie Su again was very specific about this:

I use many of my vegetables in our recipes for the restaurant.
Because I know that customers are going to be eating them I want
to provide them with clean vegetables that are good for their health.
Thus I use very few chemicals on our vegetables.

In fact I never saw her take the pesticide sprayer out to the vegetable garden, and my bedroom window looked out over that field. I often awoke around 7:30 to Auntie Su already busy taking care of her vegetables if the weather was good.

The weather itself is something of an issue in this region. Throughout the summer it does rain quite a bit, but right around the middle of September the rains begin to taper off. While the subsistence crops are definitely harvested not long after the change in weather patterns, the new economic crops often can grow into the early winter. This is especially true for spicy green peppers, which can have up to 5 pickings throughout the season. For this reason water of some sort must be provided if the weather does turn arid earlier than expected. It should be noted that the bulk of the market crops are much more water intensive than corn or potatoes. In 2009 the 1st Brigade was provided money to help divert the flow of a small stream that ran through the village along small concrete irrigation canals. Not all the fields are conveniently located near these canals but generally water gets where it is needed without having to be hauled long distances. Bamboo Village currently does not have such a system but it sounds as if there is talk of possibly integrating such a system. Right now a portion of the local stream is siphoned off to be used in a small hydropower station downstream of the 1st Brigade. Now that the village is connected to the national grid, the purpose of the small hydropower station seems moot. However, the canal for the hydropower station is not in an ideal location and I am unclear how shutting it down would do anything more than provide more water for

the main-stem of the stream. An irrigation project in Bamboo Village would be complicated by the fact that a portion of village fields are located on a hillside far above the stream. This is something that will have to be examined carefully as new designs for village planning are put in place.

The above adaptations are really preliminary responses to deepening market integration and commodification processes. As with any adaptation, villagers are making these shifts according to a series of historical changes that have resulted in the most recent organization of agricultural production. As the significance of economic crops begins to penetrate the everyday lives of all the villagers, these adaptations could increase in intensity and frequency or villagers could further alter their ethnoecological understanding of the agricultural system so that it is more accommodating for households to engage the market individually or via proxy. Yet as I've already noted agricultural commodification is not the only shift in the village modes of production. The current plan of promoting ethnic tourism to the village is also a part of this market integrating shift.

Adaptations of the Ethnic Tourism System for further Market Integration

Here I'll show how direct adaptive strategies more closely integrate cultural and economic management. Thus in this section I'll relate the adaptations associated with economic management strategies and shifts in the socio-cultural structure of the village together. In order to gain access to the economic benefits of tourism for instance villagers will need to spend more time and money on preserving, learning and disseminating their culture. Current tourism trends in China seem to glorify unique cultural traits associated with a localized place (Oakes 1998). Some socio-cultural structural traits will have to adapt to the influx of new outsiders, such as accepting money for services. Urban residents are also looking to find rural places with cleaner environments and throw backs to the past but that can still provide certain amenities to which city folk have already grown accustomed. Bamboo Village has the ability to provide both the uniqueness of place and the simplicity of rural life, yet certain trends in the area will need to be redirected in order to ensure

that these features retain their “authentic” nature in the eyes of the tourist. The most readily apparent of these adaptations revolve around the modern interpretation of Ersu culture.

Economic Management and Socio-cultural Adaptations to the Ethnic Tourism System

Perhaps one of the most concerning issues that could have a very drastic and lasting effect on Ersu Culture throughout Songlin Township is the diminishing number of the younger generation that can even speak the Ersu language. This trend will¹²⁷ prevent the further transmission of songs, myths, ecological knowledge, rituals and history that is associated with the Ersu culture. I talked to many villagers who were very aware and also very concerned about this issue. They recognized that the longer their children spend time in school with Chinese instruction the more likely they are to forget or lose interest in their Ersu linguistic heritage. In all of my interviews no one was as concerned about these processes as the Township Mayor. One day in his office he very frankly told me:

In my opinion one of the most dangerous aspects to the preservation of any culture is the loss of language. The more students we have that only learn Chinese and English the less they will learn about their own cultures. And I say this in regard to both the Muya¹²⁸ and Ersu cultures. Thus my hope is that in the very near future we can start to offer classes that teach children how to speak Ersu and Muya. But it has to be more than that; we have to also teach them our myths, our songs, our history and our rituals and how to interpret all of those cultural aspects.

At the time I was very struck by his sincerity, after all the new school had just been constructed and it was very much in the style of typical Han schools. That said he truly felt that if Songlin Township was going to be able to protect its distinctness and authentic nature it would have to start by spending funds to protect the Ersu cultural

¹²⁷ In some regards perhaps it already has

¹²⁸ The Mayor is of Muya heritage and speaks fluent Muya, but he also is able to speak some Ersu.

knowledge base by transmitting it to a younger generation. We both noted though that as it stands much of this kind of instruction would be dependent on the Township Cultural Bureau and collaboration with the Shaba.

While the Cultural Bureau has collected an incredible amount of cultural information about Ersu practices the Shaba themselves not only possess much more knowledge, but historically part of their purpose is to pedagogically transmit their understanding of the world down to the next generation. Part of this tradition was to pass that knowledge down to the eldest son in their lineage but presently that tradition has already been altered as a whole generation was skipped due to the Cultural Revolution. Now the Shabas are transmitting their knowledge to young apprentices of a new generation but who are a part of the clan heritage. If the Shaba were willing to participate in the cultural education of all Ersu Children though, this would greatly strengthen the cultural understanding of Ersu knowledge through the village as a whole. Currently knowledge is already shared between the clans perhaps a bit more often than was present before. The spread of this knowledge though may diminish the social position of the Shaba in the everyday lives of villagers; especially if this knowledge is used for economic gain by all in the village. Of course the Shaba's position in the village almost disappeared before 1990; the reinstatement of Guzazi ensured their importance in continuing the rituals associated with the festival and household identity. How the Shaba will integrate into a marketized understanding of Ersu culture is hard to say at this point.

As more tourists begin to visit Bamboo Village though the local culture may have to become flexible to certain circumstances in order to better accommodate the culture of the visitors. A perfect example of this flexibility was evident in the events surrounding the Guzazi Festival of 2010. With the performance of the Ersu songs and dances broadcasted across China in June many became interested in attending the Festival since that was the only time certain songs, rituals and dances would be performed during the year. As the Mayor told me on multiple occasions:

While many officials and outsiders will be present this summer, we want to make sure that the villagers can hold the ceremony in their

own way just as they always have. We won't be interfering in any of their plans.

As it turned out, the bulk of the guests who participated in Guzazi were invited not by the Township but by the County government. Most of the participants who arrived from outside of Asbestos County were either researchers there to document the event¹²⁹, government officials, or media outlets to help further market the culture. Many of these guests were not well versed in Ersu culture before arriving and quite a few were female. What many of the Han female guests did not realize is that Ersu culture forbids women over the age of 12 to participate in the portion of the festival that takes place on the local sacred mountain. As they followed the male villagers up the mountain, the Shabas decided to accommodate them, but asked that they not cross certain boundaries where the ceremonies of praise to the ancestors would take place¹³⁰. While boundaries were crossed, the sheer number of outsiders that participated in the event made it impossible to manage for the Shabas who were much more focused on performing the rituals of Guzazi. Yet this large number of outsiders also brought with them a large amount of economic benefit to the village.

In order to access that economic benefit, villagers also need to make adjustments in their traditional practices. One adjustment is that the construction of the Bed and Breakfast had in its sole purpose the function of requiring guests to pay for food, drink and in some cases lodging¹³¹. In general cash has not traditionally been exchanged for food or drink in the village; most of this would be handled with an "in-kind" form of exchange, either through goods or labor. Most tourists¹³² do not expect

¹²⁹ It is important to note that while Prof. Li (2007) with help from a few graduate students had already documented the event, their source was entirely word of mouth. Guzazi 2010 was the first time that the event had been documented through participant observation, which went far beyond the eyes and ears of a single foreign ethnographer. For more on this see Schmitt (n.d.).

¹³⁰ Again for a more complete story of this process see Schmitt (n.d.)

¹³¹ Mainly me, but after staying for only a few nights at a price that was quite high, I mentioned that I might stay in a different household to save money. Afterward they never charged me again, much to my embarrassment. The key point here though is that we were both embarrassed, it was not their custom to change for lodging and they really weren't sure what a fair price was. It seems the foreign guests that had stayed before for two nights did not argue with the high price.

¹³² Not that I considered myself a tourist but I did work every day around the farm. This may also have been a part of their embarrassment for charging a fairly high price for their room.

to provide either. But more importantly, the Bed and Breakfast has created a fairly steady flow of cash into the village. Beyond just the massive influx of outsiders during Guzazi, all summer long at least three days a week I would see people from Asbestos County come for a meal and a relaxing time in the mountains. It was interesting though to see that economic resource dispersed throughout the village.

The Bed and Breakfast couldn't possibly be run by just one family. It actually is a huge establishment that can easily rotate a hundred¹³³ customers between the tea house, the restaurant and the mahjong tables. From a practical perspective, it is really the home of just Auntie Su and her husband since none of their children currently live at home. What is even more interesting is that the investment and therefore the ownership of the business comes from Wang Shifu¹³⁴ who's mother is part of the Su family, although she married out to an Ersu from a different village in Songlin Township. Then there were at least three or four other families that helped in the upkeep, cooking and service of the restaurant. All of these villagers were paid for their time¹³⁵. The exchange of money for labor has been a common practice in the agricultural system since the Reform Era and the advent of the Household Responsibility System, but the Bed and Breakfast is the first instance of wages being paid for a service. As far as I know, the long standing tradition of Shaba ceremonies are almost always paid with an "in-kind" good; usually an animal raised by the family that commissions the ritual is provided to the Shaba. Thus the organization of the Bed and Breakfast has started to change some of the structural economic relationships between the villagers themselves.

More importantly, with the influx of outsiders, the Bed and Breakfast as well as the local convenience store had to start carrying in larger quantities of commodities

¹³³ During Guzazi they provided food, drink and entertainment for well over this number. I wasn't able to do an accurate count unfortunately.

¹³⁴ Or Driver Wang, who was a professional chauffeur for the Township Government. His position is actually quite important since it takes a very experienced and local driver to navigate the confusing and dangerous mountain roads of the Songlin Valley.

¹³⁵ I did not press the question of how much each villager was given for their work. In one conversation where I did start to ask about how the Bed and Breakfast was run, the atmosphere became awkward and so I left the details between the villagers. I suppose it is entirely possible that these people are not paid at all, but I highly doubt it.

such as pre-packaged foods, soft drinks, cigarettes and alcohol. Some of these things had been in the village for some time, but were generally the cheaper brands that were preferred by the villagers. During the summer the Bed and Breakfast began to provide beer that was kept in refrigeration and *baijiu*¹³⁶ brands that were preferred by Han Chinese visitors. During my stay there, almost every night we would have a bottle of the local honey liquor¹³⁷ which I rarely saw Han visitors drinking.¹³⁸ In general a new level and variety of consumptive products was suddenly available within the village. Yet providing these goods for customers was a necessary adaptation. Even though the overhead for purchasing these goods and bringing them to the village was expensive, it provided customers with things they wanted while they were in the village and would often times keep them there longer, which meant they would spend more money. Of course the longer visitors stay and the more they consume at the village, the larger an added ecological impact on the landscape becomes.

Socio-ecological Adaptations to the Ethnic Tourism System

As visitors consume they also produce waste at a rate and of a variety that was not common in the village's history. Just dealing with the amount of trash that accumulates from the consumption of goods not produced in the valley is a task in itself. More importantly the method for dealing with this kind of waste is less than ideal. Rather than being able to recycle the bulk of the waste produced in the village back into their agricultural fields as some kind of fertilizer, some of the plastic and paper waste now found in the village is collected and placed in a village trash collection site. This structure is made of bricks, with a small metal door on one side for placing trash, and ventilation holes between the walls and the ceiling. These are

¹³⁶ a sorghum liquor primarily distilled in ethnically Han regions of China 白酒

¹³⁷ Unfortunately, I do not remember what this was called in Ersu and it did not make it into my notes (not all that surprising considering the circumstances), but the locals all called it 蜂蜜酒 *fengmi jiu* or quite literally honey liquor.

¹³⁸ Fiskesjo (2010) shows how Han cadres in Wa regions of Southern Yunnan also refuse to drink Wa rice beer because it is "dirty".

placed along the main road, fairly far away from any of the homes. For most of my time in Songlin Township I assumed that the trash was being collected and brought down to the county for processing. A trip up the valley the day before Guzazi taught me otherwise. As we left the township center, we saw that the garbage collection site was burning from the inside. It was likely not an accident as my colleagues from the County Cultural Bureau explained; this is the way the local government manages the issue of solid wastes. The ashes are later used to be mixed in with the soil in the fields. Much of the other paper and plastic trash ends up being used either as fire starter in domestic hearths or simply tossed into the river¹³⁹.

A greater concern for the riparian system is the amount of human and livestock waste that ends up in the stream. While potable water has now been piped to every house in the village, sewage systems have yet to be considered a priority. In some cases this is due to traditional means of dealing with biological wastes. Even today the bulk of the households in the village locate their bathrooms next to pigpens. The waste then mixes with that of the swine and a trough is constructed that runs the material into either a collection area or directly into the fields. This makes the job of spreading manure at least easier for one field.

Some households have now installed modern toilets¹⁴⁰ which utilize a large amount of the potable water for flushing. The Bed and Breakfast in particular actually built two gender specific bathrooms, something that was not found anywhere else in the village. Since this reduces the ability for the material to remain in a catchment that can then be utilized for fertilizer, much of the waste has to be piped away from the household. I noticed one household in particular that runs a pipe directly from their house, under the road and into the riverbank. This portion of the riverbank is nearly devoid of plant life but instead is a dark black stretch of over-

¹³⁹ Admittedly this was not a common occurrence, from my observations trash in the river was limited to empty bags of powdered laundry detergent and perhaps some food wrappers. In other words, this was caused by carelessness and laziness rather than purposeful dumping, which does happen in many of the streams of rural China.

¹⁴⁰ These are not the kind of toilet known in the West, but the modern version of the squatter toilets used throughout China.

nitrified soil. It is interesting to note though that the household¹⁴¹ recognized this area as being very suitable for breaking down plant material into a green fertilizer. The households have piled weed clippings and waste from the pigpen beds in this spot; after it rots throughout the summer, this material will then be used as fertilizer when the fields are prepared in the winter¹⁴². When I was first introduced to Bamboo Village, an official in the County Cultural Bureau became very interested in a project I had worked on in the Sichuan Earthquake Disaster area that provided 300 waterless toilets to villagers who resided at the headwaters of some important tributaries to the Min River in Northern Sichuan. Even at that time he already was concerned about the amount of human waste that was flowing into riverbanks and wanted to know more about the project. One aspect of that project which made it successful was the amount of research we did to understand what the current situation was for dealing with human waste before beginning collaborative planning with villagers regarding the introduction of waterless toilets. In Bamboo Village I discovered that most villagers were not really concerned about the excess flow of watery waste flowing into their fields or rivers. Auntie Su simply said: “It just flows into my fields and then I don’t have to worry about it. We don’t use them enough for it to cause a real problem.” At the time, she was unaware of the household that had been flushing their waste into the stream. It is true that when the Bed and Breakfast doesn’t have visitors the bathroom is not used often. Showers also have yet to be installed anywhere in the village; most of us always washed our hair and feet in the stream¹⁴³. But during Guzazi the bathrooms definitely saw heavy usage. Unfortunately I did not go to examine the field where the waste empties but I would imagine it was quite saturated by that evening.

¹⁴¹ or perhaps multiple households

¹⁴² The riverbank is actually used for this purpose by many of the households, even those that do not run their waste into the river. The moisture of the riverbank ensures that the piles of dead plant life will break down faster.

¹⁴³ To be honest nothing was more relaxing after a long day of interviews and hiking than washing my feet in the stream surrounded by the tall oaks and shrubs.

The interest in creating a flushable toilet system is part of a sanitation discourse that was very noticeable during my fieldwork this summer. Not only were people concerned about human sanitation but they were also very concerned about disease and cleanliness associated with animals. On the furthest point downstream of the 1st Production Brigade is a small home which has been reorganized as a “sanitation station.” Every vehicle that leaves the village area must be sprayed down with a disinfectant on its tires before it can continue¹⁴⁴. Later my contact in the Township Cultural Bureau explained:

This year many of the sheep have been infected with a disease that creates rot on their hooves. A new breed of sheep was introduced to the pastures high up on the ridgelines two years ago. These sheep are not used to the moist conditions in the pastures and were infected by this rot. So far medicine has not been very successful in combating the problem. They’ve been spraying all year to make sure that the disease doesn’t infect livestock outside of the village area.

Few of the drivers I rode with believed that the disinfectant had any impact on preventing the spreading of the disease yet the policy stayed in place all the same.

In fact this spraying was not limited to just vehicles leaving the village area. Every day Miss Yuan’s father-in-law¹⁴⁵ would wander around the village with a disinfectant sprayer spreading the mixture in various points that received heavy animal or human traffic. Auntie Su also would spray every inch of the Bed and Breakfast with the disinfectant every morning, especially the cooking and dining areas. I must admit when I first saw this taking place I was a bit alarmed¹⁴⁶, but patiently waited for three days to see if the process changed at all. It didn’t and I began to examine the bag from which the mixture was derived. I was somewhat relieved to find that it was a simple water and bleach concoction and not some kind of anti-biotic or other chemical. When I asked Auntie Su about this, again she wasn’t terribly concerned about the spread of the sheep disease but that the Bed and

¹⁴⁴ A thin bamboo draw gate was constructed to discourage drivers from blowing through the station.

¹⁴⁵ I never got much of a chance to interview him, but I believe he was part of the Yang clan.

¹⁴⁶ At this point I was unaware of the spread of the sheep disease.

Breakfast was simply taking precautions to prevent customers from getting sick.¹⁴⁷

Quite a few resources were utilized in the name of ensuring customer safety.

By far the resource that was used to the greatest extent for the sake of customers was firewood. As the traditional source of heat and for cooking purposes, firewood has always been collected and can be found at every Ersu homestead. Yet the Bed and Breakfast in particular had a massive collection located under the tea house. This was because at any given time six different woks could if necessary be brought to a roaring heat ensuring that the food was thoroughly cooked. There was also a seventh fire pit that was almost perpetually burning for brewing tea. As new visitors arrived more firewood emerge, with the most impressive display of firewood consumption during the two days of the Guzazi Festival. Most mornings I would wake and busy myself with starting the fire pit so that the tea could be heated up¹⁴⁸. There was one day in particular where everyone was quite busy and I tried to help by building a fire but we had almost no firer starter available except some boxes that had been soaked from the deluge that showered us the night before. Auntie Su's mother, Grandma Yang¹⁴⁹, saw me struggling and definitely took the fire into her own hands. Growing up in Montana I've been making fires for my entire life, but an octogenarian from Bamboo Village showed me that my knowledge base was but a paltry smattering of her own. Although she was quite pleased with herself afterwards one of the other ladies working that day had already heated up the tea and water with an electric stove.

Electricity has become a necessity for the village, but perhaps more so for the Bed and Breakfast. Most households have been partially electrified since the late 90s,

¹⁴⁷ I actually did get quite sick while I was in the village, although it is highly unlikely that it had anything to do with the sheep. Yet when a colleague from Chengdu who came to participate in Guzazi found out I was sick, he halfway joked that I probably was carrying a "foreigner supervirus", which is something villagers in another place we had collaborated together often worried about. After he mentioned that I couldn't help but wonder if Auntie Su wasn't also spraying the place down because of me!

¹⁴⁸ Anyone who has known me during the last 5 years knows I'm an avid hot water drinker, thus my first order of business every day was to make sure that Auntie Su had hot tea ready for the guests that way I could heat up a pot of water and not feel guilty. If I was in a rush they would heat up hot water on an electric burner for me.

¹⁴⁹ My oldest interviewee at 81 years! I would always get excited if we were able to have even a conversation of a few sentences. Most of her Chinese was speckled with either local dialectal words I hadn't learned yet, or a lot of Ersu.

when the small scale hydropower was constructed. Of course that supply of electricity was not very stable and perhaps for that reason villagers did not use the electricity for much other than electric lights. When the households were connected to the main grid around 2004, purchases of electronics began to see a marked increase. Now nearly every household has a T.V., a stereo, a satellite dish, an electric rice cooker and an electric burner. The Bed and Breakfast heavily utilizes DVD players and a P.A. system to broadcast ethnic music through the establishment¹⁵⁰. They also have flat screen T.V. as well as subscriptions¹⁵¹ to satellite T.V. providers with channels I hadn't seen in rural China before. As mentioned above, refrigeration was also very important to the Bed and Breakfast, which I did not see anywhere else. Both machines were used as freezers more than just keeping things cool. The kitchen needed to be able to store large pieces of meat which mainly came from the slaughter of one of Auntie Su's pigs. The meat could rarely be used all in one sitting, thus the need for refrigeration. When the kitchen only had to feed a few people, we often would just cook using the electric burner to save time and firewood. As I've noted though, these purchases of household electronics did not make firewood obsolete by any stretch of the imagination, a fact that is not uncommon to similar areas of Sichuan (Trac 2011). Every household would use their electric burner and their wood burning stove, often simultaneously. For some things it was absolutely necessary to be able to use the large wok on the wood burning stove, such as creating tofu and soy milk. The amount of space necessary to boil a batch of soy beans was quite large and really only worked in the traditional method. More modern tools such as soy milk presses etc. had yet to make their way into the village. Frankly I'm not sure how important increasing the number of electronic devices in their lives is to villagers. The issue of electrification and purchase of electric household items was not something that came up in any discussion, especially those regarding a Xiaokang Lifestyle.

¹⁵⁰ And perhaps indirectly the whole village

¹⁵¹ Many households are able to receive illegal satellite connections through their various relationships with people in the cities.

Through the lens of adaptation it is possible to see that the residents of Bamboo Village already are accepting that there are benefits to engaging with market forces. Moving beyond that acceptance, they have specifically made direct adaptations to the economic management, socio-cultural structure and ecological services present in their community. They have done so in an attempt to further integrate both agricultural production and tourism production into the world economic system. The question that remains is to examine what commodification and these adaptations mean for the community on a more holistic level. In the following chapter I will also draw on history and ethnoecology once again to guide the thesis through villager perceptions of secondary impacts and feedback loops that are occurring due to the commodification of the local modes of production.

Chapter 7: Discussion

The residents of Bamboo Village are adapting to the commodification of their modes of production. Some of these adaptations may be due to localized experience; others could be the influence of exterior cultural discourses. Regardless, these shifts do not happen over night, but are a progression of historical events. They are not developmental in nature but are flexible trajectories that can be influenced by the new arrival of other external discourses and ideologies or can be refocused by the efforts and interests of the farmers themselves. Below, I will examine some of these shifts and how they have developed in time as they reacted to different external and internal discourses of agricultural praxis. I'll then do the same with regard to the commodification of Ersu cultural praxis as a means of developing a mode of tourism production. Finally I'll examine the commodification process of both agriculture and tourism together by considering the structural and agency characteristics of Bamboo Village that may hinder or benefit the further integration of the region with the market economy. Through these three analytical perspectives I'll be able to provide a greater understanding for local perception of secondary impacts and feedback loops that are present in this commodifying system.

Synthesis of Agricultural Production

The Ersu of Bamboo Village have not only accepted the commodification of their agricultural production, but as this thesis has shown they have made adjustments to make their goods more competitive in the market system. My documentation of these adaptations has tried to examine these internal efforts to bring this about but there are other structural influences on Ersu culture which encouraged this integration. The process of agricultural commodification is historical, as I'll review below. It was also not predetermined but should be viewed as a series of discursive negotiations between the Chinese core and the Ersu on their periphery. In this section I will examine how villagers have reacted to the internal and external discourses throughout history that have impacted Ersu ethnoecological understanding of nature and agricultural commodification.

Pre-revolution, the Ersu definitely utilized a multicropping method for growing their three main staples in the valley floor; namely corn, soy beans and potatoes. These initial methods of intensive agriculture interacted and supported the more traditional modes of Ersu swiddening practices. Yet the influence of the formation of collectives brought with it “scientific” agriculture and the rationalization of monocropping as being more productive. In some cases the collective may have been rather inflexible in its decision to plant monocropped fields in the valley. It is important to keep in mind that one of the benefits of monocropping is its ability to be successfully implemented and justified based off of simple scientific models, conform to standardization and most importantly to have it’s output levels easily aggregated into government and financial accounting. This last aspect is what makes it legible (Scott 1998) and thus taxable or, especially in a centrally planned economic system, redistributable.

And yet with more than sixty years of state propaganda promoting monocropping I still found a few farmers who did utilize a multicropping system. One scene was particularly striking to me. During a visit to another Ersu village, White Road Village, I discovered a monocropped field directly across a pathway from a multicropped field as seen in Figures 4 and 5.



Figure 5. Monocropped Field



Figure 6. Multicropped Field

The texture and sight of the soil in these two fields was completely different and while I do not have soil nutrient data to prove it I believe that the multicropped field was much healthier. As it turned out, I was staying with the owner of that field and he told me:

Oh yes it's much healthier, I don't use any herbicides or fertilizer in my fields at all. Every year I plant using the same method and the results are always quite good. This is a tradition for the Ersu; we've never been monocroppers¹⁵².

What I found particularly interesting was the number of pesticide, herbicide and fertilizer bags that littered the ground surrounding the monocropped fields. The

¹⁵² In the XLXZ (2007), the only crop which the local government does not report acreage for is potatoes. I can't help but wonder if this is because the bulk of potato plants are multicropped with other crops, making it difficult (non-legible) to record the total cultivated area.

usage of Green Revolution products was higher in this village compared to those used in Bamboo Village. There could be ecological reasons for this¹⁵³, but I found that the social and cultural cohesion is not as strong in White Road Village. There are no living Shabas or Su'ers left in this village and the bulk of the residents have already moved into the county seat. The family I was staying with identified much more readily with their Ersu Heritage than the other households. Yet generally farmers in White Road Village identify more with the Han Chinese¹⁵⁴ and their state sanctioned agricultural processes.

While monocropping practices may have been more prevalent in White Road Village, it also became apparent that single plantings of fields in one growing season were not common in any of the villages. This again is influence from the collective period where the “scientific” discourse encouraged farmers to push the limits of their planting and harvesting schedules. With the push to always increase agricultural output, eventually it only made “rational” sense to begin planting more than one crop in the fields per year. This of course required more labor to be focused on individual fields for any given year and as the soil was strained, it also required more intensive inputs from chemical fertilizers. According to villagers, household organic fertilizers would not have been able to keep up with the demand for two plantings per year. I have already noted that these shifting growing seasons altered the cultural understanding of the agricultural system, effectively making the praise of thanks to the ancestors during Guzazi shift in their symbolic relationship to the actual harvest. This began to take place more than 30 years ago because some of the villagers who thought harvest had always come before Guzazi are in their 40s¹⁵⁵. Thus the classification of Guzazi as a “superstition” also helped speed along the process of

¹⁵³ This village is at a higher elevation and sits on top of a mountain ridge rather than in the midst of a high elevation mountain valley like Bamboo Village.

¹⁵⁴ There also is a large Yi Village very close by, it originally was inhabited by Ersu but apparently all but one or two families have already migrated out of that village.

¹⁵⁵ Although it is quite possible they'd forgotten or just never cared to notice. I found it noteworthy though that all of the elders felt that Guzazi traditionally happened before the harvest.

encouraging the Ersu to become more intensive monocropping, multiple planting farmers.

If so, this would also explain why the system of Ersu agricultural practices had moved further away from swiddening practices altogether. As more labor was needed to focus on the “scientific” forms of agriculture in the valley bottom, there was very little time available to allocate to swiddening practices. As many studies have shown though, the ratio of labor inputs per unit of agricultural output for swiddening is generally considered higher and ecologically more sustainable than for more sedentary practices for communities with sparse populations (Conklin 1957; Geertz 1963; Grist et al. 2007; Menzies and Tapp 2007; Xu et al. 2005; Yin and Fiskesjö 2001). This may explain why those practices lasted in the community as long as they did. Even though more sedentary crops¹⁵⁶ such as corn, potatoes and soybeans had been integrated into the Ersu agricultural system more than 300 years ago, they did not replace the highland grains grown on swidden patches. It is possible to assume that the cultural structures of the Ersu and the importance these grains held in their rituals ensured their continued place in the agricultural system.

Along those same lines, though, the other crops, such as potatoes and corn, could have entered into that cultural structure and yet were kept at a distance. Perhaps further research into Ersu history and culture will help enlighten this conundrum. What is definitely apparent is that it required a political shift of power away from subsistence farming into collective farming to begin the process of de-swiddening the Ersu of Bamboo Village. To be sure, this political influence was eager to have the Ersu (as well as all the other swiddeners in Western China) give up their traditional ways in favor of “scientific” agriculture for the same rationalizing logic put forward for monocropping: the state perceived benefits of legibility. While collectivization

¹⁵⁶ I agree with Scott (2010) that these crops have facilitated migratory swiddeners with subsistence in higher elevations preserving their interest in being kept apart from the more sedentary state structured rice growers in the valley floor. From my experience in Southwest China though, I do believe that corn in particular needs to be researched further as I hypothesize that it was most effectively utilized by Zomian tribes when they were in a more stable cycle of agricultural seasons and not when they were running or migrating away from the encroaching state. For Scott’s argument see Chapter 6 (2010).

may have begun the trend away from swiddening practices, ultimately the death knell for swiddening throughout Western China came in 1998. At that time, provincial governments, at the behest of the core scientific discourse in Beijing, outlawed the harvest of any forests above the 2000 m elevation contour, conforming to the Grain for Green Program that was introduced in Chapter 4. As all of the swidden fields in Bamboo Village are above that elevation this effectively prevented the further use of these methods and in turn the planting of highland grain crops.

It is important to recognize that farmers had already begun to move away from swiddening by the early 1990s, mainly because the male population, who were responsible for the felling of trees and burning of the fields, began to seek wage labor employment. Thus for some of the males the political discourse of de-swiddening was already a moot point. But for those who were limited in their ability to participate in wage labor because of experience or education level, they shifted their freed up labor from the swidden fields to taking care of larger herds of pastoral animals. An interview with a Han villager from another Production Team one day made me realize the unintended consequences of such a reaction to the loss of the swiddening fields. As he put it:

The animals run rampant and trash our fields. Of course, we have no way to prevent this from happening nor do we have the power to ask for recourse from those who raise the animals. The herders are all Tibetan [Ersu] and the village leaders are too!

There were even Ersu farmers who mentioned this problem to me. Teacher Tang told me that “during the collective era the management of animals would have never been this chaotic”. The chaos they are describing is likely due to just the pure number of livestock that are now being raised rather than the sudden emergence of poor herding practices. From estimates I was given by the oldest cadre in the village, herd sizes are the largest they’ve ever been, even larger than the herds owned by the Tusi and managed by villagers before 1949. According to official statistics, herd sizes of

cattle¹⁵⁸ and sheep¹⁵⁹ between 1995 and 2000 increased by 63% and 68% respectively (XLXZ 2007).¹⁶⁰ It's important to remember that men who do go to find wage labor still want their herds as a form of savings. They leave those herds in the hands of older men who cannot find work outside the village, doubling (or more) the number of animals he is responsible for watching. The unintended consequence of prohibiting swiddening in the name of protecting the environment has resulted in degradation to the local ecology from overherding and damage to agricultural crops because of overburdened pastoralists.

In my survey, I asked villagers why they stopped growing traditional crops. Many gave the answer that swiddening is too laborious or even would explain to me the modern scientific discourse that it's bad for the environment. The most common response though is that these crops cannot make money on the market, once again returning us to the observation that a Xiaokang lifestyle is attainable mainly through the accumulation of wealth. These traditional agricultural practices are a strong part of Ersu culture, yet villagers aren't interested in growing the crop because now they want to participate in a modern form of agriculture; swiddening and buckwheat are not considered "modern". Yet many people would be willing to grow the crop if there was a subsidy. Even for a crop that has never been integrated into the commodification process, villagers are still willing to re-interpret their understanding of that crop if it can be integrated into the market economy. One villager did tell me that there are health benefits from eating the highland grains, but with so many agreeing to plant the crop for a subsidy, the only explanation can be that the farmers are now solely fixated on growing crops for the purpose of making money.

¹⁵⁸ Includes Water Buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), European-Asian Cows (*Bos taurus*), and Yak (*Bos grunniens*)

¹⁵⁹ Includes goats (a breed of *Capra aegagrus*) and wool sheep (a breed of *Ovis aries*) one species of which was recently introduced to the township.

¹⁶⁰ I should note that while herd size for cattle does show a fairly normal rate of growth until the sharp increase between 1995 and 2000, since 1981 the size of sheep herds has been extremely erratic. In comparison, the number of pigs, typically the responsibility of females and children in the household, in the township has actually decreased a bit since a high in 1990.

That seems like a very harsh conclusion, yet it should not be that surprising. To briefly review again, the commodification of agricultural production has been in process for quite some time. In fact collectivization itself began that process. Corn and soy beans in the context of a collectivized, centrally planned economic system still were able to satisfy our definitions both of commodity and commodification. During collectivization both crops had intrinsic exchange-value and were exchanged through an institutionalized system of trade, thus they were commodities. But more importantly collectivization focused villagers on maximizing the exchange-value of the crops to the point that their symbolic nature (which was negligible anyway for these crops) and its nutritional value was of secondary importance to the production process. The step that differentiates this form of socialist commodification from the capitalist mode is the exchange-value becomes focused primarily on acquiring “work points” rather than profit. From my understanding, the work point system used in Bamboo Village was dependent on cadres to determine which crops in which quantities would be grown to satisfy a quota and ensure the division of work points. Thus cadres determined which crops would be “maximized” for exchange. While the HRS did provide a transition and buffer of sorts into a more liberalized market system, the current trend is the decentralization of these institutions of exchange along with the social support system. Thus farmers are completely on their own to decide which crops they’d like to grow.

Technically they could go back to strictly growing subsistence crops; this would even be a more viable option now that rural taxes have been eliminated (Li, L.C. 2006, 2007). Of course local cadres¹⁶¹ don’t want this because it would show stagnant growth happening under their watch; GDP growth is too important to advancement for them to allow that to happen. A cynic would say that in some ways the Ersu have been forced into this commodified system because of hierarchical power structures within the Chinese system. As described in Chapter 4, the core/periphery relationships in China have certainly influenced the way policy is

¹⁶¹ From my experience in Bamboo Village this is directed more at describing the township level governance than village leaders.

developed to further enfold those in the remote rural regions of the country into the system of the state. In fact the vegetable site project reflects that dynamic quite well. The agricultural bureau provides the seeds and the knowledge for growing the market vegetables; village leaders help to provide access to larger markets now that a system of more stable transport has been built by the Provincial government. But ultimately the program is voluntary; nothing in my time in the village could convince me that it was anything but voluntary. The villagers do navigate through a complex social system but they are deciding to maximize the exchange-value of their crops in the end to maximize their own profit. If commodification began structurally with collectivization it ends as an action in the hands of each individual farmer who decides to plant green peppers. And ecologically speaking this maximization certainly has unintended consequences as well. In order to maximize profits, villagers must grow crops which are completely foreign to the local ecology and therefore require further inputs and care that may not be adapted to the natural environment. Also this is still a form of intensive agriculture that preserves the insecure land tenure status quo (Krusekopf 2002). Thus farmers are likely to invest in their land for short-term gain rather than long-term sustainable benefit for their families (Li et. al 1998; Krusekopf 1999).

The largest problem I see associated with the vegetable sites project is that once again it was started without the input of the local agricultural knowledge base. Collectivization also ignored the practical knowledge of the villagers. When central planning attempted to maximize the exchange-value of crops during that social scheme the results were disastrous, causing massive famine and ecological change. That said even without their input being considered villagers are cautious of this new project, but not enough to disown it out right. There is a chance that the flexible nature of the program will allow villagers to incorporate their own knowledge base into growing these crops.

After all, this is their claim to an interpretation of modernity; their connection to modernity is through the market and through their relationship with agriculture. A goal should not be just to predict what catastrophe lurks in the distance but, given what is known, the question should be how can catastrophe be prevented and how can farmers be encouraged to harvest within the bounds of localized resiliency based on their own indigenous understanding of those boundaries. Their desire to establish their own modern lifestyle through their agricultural practices is similar in their attempt to engage with the market and modernism through ethnic tourism. They are once again utilizing a traditional form of production and repackaging it with a modernist twist so that it can be commodified for market consumption.

Synthesis of Tourism Development

In tandem with accepting the commodification of their agricultural production, the residents of Bamboo Village are also working to integrate their culture into a larger project of continued economic development. While this thesis has definitely recognized the internal efforts to bring this about there are other structural influences on Ersu culture which are encouraging this integration. Again the process of cultural commodification is historical but also flexible in that its development was not unidirectional or predetermined by either the Ersu or those exterior to their culture. In this section I'll examine how villagers have reacted to internal and external discourses regarding ethnicity and cultural commodification.

Before collectivization the Ersu identity seems to have been determined almost entirely from an internal discourse that sought to distinguish a group of subsistence based clans from the other tribes on the Chinese periphery. Yet it would be incorrect to assume that internal cultural discourse was based entirely on geographic notions of where the Ersu origin is located. Ethnogenesis is important and the Ersu of Bamboo Village do identify with that mythology as connecting them to the other clans in Ganluo and Yuexi. But as is evidenced from the myths of the hunter who's arrow carved the Songlin Valley, his wife and daughter who's tears created the river, the son who learned how to farm from local people nearby, and the

ceremonies of Guzazi that celebrate the genealogical connection to these ancestors, what is most important to the Ersu of Bamboo Village is their relationship with the local natural environment and its symbolic representation of their ancestors. This is evident in their rituals using the “white rock” to connect them to their ancestors in the spiritual realm. It is also present in their reverence for the sacred mountain where the graves of their ancestors are located and the sacred trees which watch over such holy grounds. This identification with their localized ecological surroundings is still quite strong. While the bulk of the trees on the sacred mountain were cut in the 1950s as deemed necessary by the collective, there were some that were not touched. Two of these oak trees, which are hundreds of years old, grow at the bottom of the valley and have recently collapsed from age and infestation. One collapsed in 2008 and fell across a bridge that spanned the small stream that runs through the village. Most villagers were terrified to even touch the tree, even the residents who needed to use the road. After two weeks finally one family used their axes to cut up some of the wood to use in their stoves. According to multiple villagers that I interviewed, only days later, four people in the family were killed in a car wreck. This only confirmed what many villagers had said all along; that the tree was sacred and should not be bothered.

Yet animistic beliefs were not the only aspect of Ersu culture that grounded them and differentiated them within the Tibetan-Yi Corridor. While their practice of Nyingma Buddhism was a hold over from when they were conquered by the Turfan people of Tibet, later on these practices actually helped to distance the Ersu from Tibet as Gelug Buddhism became the dominant religion. The local Nyingma temple in Caoke helped to train the Su'er and ensured their relative peaceful relations with their Muya neighbors. Their own animist beliefs syncretized easily with those of Nyingma Buddhism allowing them to perpetuate their connection with their ancestors and their local ecology. In fact this syncretization stands in stark contrast to the inability of Ersu cultural beliefs and traditions to integrate within the socialist system of a modernizing China.

With the formation of the People's Republic of China, villagers gradually acquiesced to the organization and authority of the collective. At first many villagers mainly interpreted the process of collectivization simply as a new way of organizing their labor efforts in growing crops and redistributing their harvests. With the onset of the Cultural Revolution though, collectivization began to impact much more than just the ecological and economic modes of production. Now the village was forced to concede that their rituals and faith were “superstition” and had no place in a modern scientific Chinese nation. This emphasis on being a part of the Chinese nation, most assuredly also had a drastic impact on the local interpretation of what it meant to be Ersu. For more than 20 years (an entire generation) was unable to see those unique features of their culture that had always kept them apart from Chinese society. In this light it perhaps is not that surprising that middle aged villagers are disinterested in Ersu cultural production; those would have been placed in sharp contrast to the “modernity” they had grown up with in their childhood. Yet it is also the failure of that modernity which helped to spur the Renaissance of Ersu culture.

In the 1980s, as the state began to waver in its authority over daily life in the village an interest in reflecting on what had been lost began to take place. Scientific modernity had failed the villagers. Culturally, the residents of Bamboo Village still felt as peripheral and marginal to a “Chinese nation” as they had ever been. Thus residents looked to generating (or more appropriately regenerating) an internal cultural discourse which began to reflect a worldview and relationship with nature that had been respected in the past. For this reason the return of Guzazi and Shaba rituals were so attractive to villagers.

Yet this was not quite enough. A serious disturbance had occurred within the Ersu's system of indigenous knowledge. It was not being passed down as it had been through the generations and now required that young children be chosen by the Shaba to teach their knowledge before they are gone. More importantly something was needed to engage with those who were more interested in looking towards the future of a Chinese liberalized market system than to a cultural past that was beyond the

limit of their memory. After all, this process of commodification did not begin with collectivization. Ersu culture, rather, was entirely disembedded from social life during collectivization. And, at least initially, it has not been reclaimed in the context of an external discourse; but it has identified with an external discourse in order to ensure its survival. Thus integrating this cultural revival within the market system through ethnic tourism has the potential to grab the interest of the generation which was quickly moving away from their Ersu identity. More importantly a reclaimed Ersu identity helps to distance (at least locally) themselves from the socially negative connotations of their Tibetan classification as has already been noted in Chapter 6.

In fact, the commodification of the Ersu identity is also the process of negotiating a series of distancing issues between themselves and surrounding societies. Historically, Ersu traditions were definitely state-evasive before their integration into the collective system. Even the Tusi system, which, culturally speaking, was established late in Ersu history, was a means of superficially consenting to Chinese cultural “superiority” while still protecting their own autonomy and way of life. From the perspective of Ersu history, it seems that the Tusi themselves were more instrumental at continuing to distance themselves from the core so that they could perpetuate their hierarchical position within Ersu society. Once Han Chinese society arrived in the Dadu River valley, originally under the auspices of the Nationalist government, the purpose and therein the power of the Tusi quickly eroded.

With the Tusi gone as an intermediary the Ersu culture would have only been held in place through the practices of the Su'er and Shaba. Thus to those in Bamboo Village, an idea like the United Front (Leibold 2007) likely would have sounded quite appealing, against what was then viewed as an oppressive Nationalist government. Before the collectives would have been established in 1958 and 1959, most cultural practices would have still have been followed just as they had been in the past. While the collectives would have been responsible for influencing the way the Ersu

interpreted their relationship with nature (see below), up until the Cultural Revolution it is likely that most of the leaders in the village would have still recognized a distance between themselves and the Chinese, but in the context of a multicultural nationalism. The Cultural Revolution seriously changed this perspective as the Ersu were completely subjected to accepting “cultural norms” from the Chinese core at that time. Namely, class struggle, anti-intellectualism, and especially pertinent would have been the discourse of “bring to an end the four olds¹⁶⁴” (Spence 1999).

This process of Sinifying the Ersu resulted in religious praxis classified as superstitions and agricultural praxis forced into a mode of de-swiddening. After more than a decade of this rhetoric and propaganda, the Deng Xiaoping government returned to a discourse of multiculturalism. Yet as Wilkes has shown these discourses are not necessarily products of inherent qualities within cultures such as the Ersu because the:

... production of knowledge is related to the position of the producers of knowledge in society, their relationship to other actors and the institutions and institutional procedures which structure their work.” (Wilkes 2005:48).

In the eyes of the state, Ersu identity, similar to many of the ethnic groups on China’s periphery, was influenced first by their classification in the 1950’s, but has been further validated since then in the context of academic and official research (Harrell 1995:63-91). This is not to say that some of the research does not utilize emic perspectives and ethnographic detail to reach their conclusions and there are certainly examples of ethnography that is completed outside of state paradigms (Harrell 2001)¹⁶⁵. Ultimately though because it influences the state discourse these researches also influence the local internal discourse of the village itself. In fact it is because of

¹⁶⁴ Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits and Old Ideas.

¹⁶⁵ Some of the articles within “Ersu Zangzu Yanjiu” edited by Li Shaoming and Liu Junpo (2007), are excellent examples of how academic research helps to entrench state supported ideals of ethnicity. In particular is the report by Yang Guangdian (2007) written in 1982, which is ethnographically detailed but still frames the discussion in relating the Ersu as part of the Tibetan nationality classification. Both Wu Da (2004) and Li Xingxing (2007) provide an emic perspective of Ersu ethnic identity which is framed outside the state’s multiculturalism discourse, Li in fact hardly uses the term *zangzu*, or Tibetan at all in his book.

this that the Ersu, in a rather exceptional turn of events in the Sichuan periphery, were able to recognize the uniqueness of their culture and how that might be utilized in a more modern fashion¹⁶⁶.

This became more apparent to me after a conversation with one villager who works for the cultural bureau explained to me:

I've been studying and collecting the Ersu traditions since 1979, both as an insider and as an official doing my job. I know all of the songs, rituals and ceremonies and have compiled them for preservation and documentation, even ensuring that some were changed in their official classification as superstitions¹⁶⁷. What struck me though was when [a Chinese ethnographer] arrived in 2004 and began to explain to me our relationship with the other minority groups in Sichuan. I just hadn't thought of it before. Our cultural traditions are definitely historically related to them but we are also very different.

This recognition of difference is what provides the Ersu in Bamboo Village with the ability to market themselves as a unique ethnic village. They have their own writing system which could be quite old and perhaps is independent of any other writing system in Western Sichuan (Wu 2004). Their animistic practices are still intact within their syncretic Buddhist faith. Guzazi is considered a New Year celebration yet is held during harvest season which is quite rare (Li 2007). Their songs and dances are heavily influenced by their activities, especially agriculturally related activities, and have a very impromptu nature.

¹⁶⁶ Although I wonder if Oakes (1998) and Wellens (2010) are not also examples of this phenomenon. The strong difference I see is that the Miao are still presenting the commodification of their culture within the state discourse as they are a recognized minority group. Somewhat more complexly the Premi do have their own recognized minority group but only in Yunnan; the Premi of Muli are considered *zangzu* (Tibetan) and in that sense they are similar to the discourse breaking seen in Bamboo Village. But the Ersu don't have any discourse or model to really work from like the Premi do, after all Muli is on the Yunnan border and exchange between the two areas is very prevalent in Wellens' work. Thus the Ersu's attempt to redefine their culture beyond the discursive bounds of the state ethnic classification system by utilizing the state's discourse of multiculturalism as an exploitable resource could be considered exceptional.

¹⁶⁷ This is in reference particularly to Guzazi, it was not long after this that he told me that he in fact was responsible for ensuring that Guzazi was reclassified as a cultural tradition rather than a superstition.

I admit I'm not very well versed in musical structures within the Sichuan periphery. Yet one day at lunch I happened to mention, rather ignorantly it seems, to the famous Ersu singer I described in Chapter 6 that the harmonies and rhythms of Ersu songs greatly reminded me of those I had learned in Liangshan Prefecture, which is dominated by the Nuosu. Expressing quite a bit of indignation, she then sang me a very common Nuosu drinking tune with a very lackadaisical melody and rhythm, which she then translated as "Welcome, welcome, please have some wine, if you don't like it, we don't care, you should drink it anyway." Then she sang a melodious and dynamic Ersu drinking song which she translated as "Distant traveler, welcome to our home, we hope that you will enjoy our drink even though we know it is not good enough, we thank you for coming to our home." For her, the contrast between the two was plainly evident both in the meaning of the lyrics and the structure of the song.

So Ersu culture is beginning to express itself in the context of a unique identity, even to the extent that it is broadcast live on national television just as the other 55 minority groups often do. Thus the rhetoric has shifted to the new multiculturalism, which states that Ersu culture is a natural resource which should be preserved and marketed as a commodity to help promote economic development in the region. Instead of utilizing their cultural praxis as a means of distancing themselves from the core as they did throughout much of their history, now by integrating local discourse within that of the state, Ersu cultural practices are indeed meant to attract outsiders; to teach them about Ersu traditions in exchange for tourism dollars.

This second commodification of Ersu production is just another example of a shift from use-value of cultural praxis to exchange-value of an economic good. In this case the good is itself Ersu culture. The final aspect I want to examine here is how this can be interpreted in terms of the Ersu relationship with nature itself. As I mentioned in this chapter, traditional Ersu relations with nature were symbolically crucial to their own identity. Not only is this evident in their explanations of natural

connections to the afterworld and the origin of Bamboo Village, but it is essential to understanding the Ersu ethnoecological perception of their agricultural production. Agricultural crops are recognized as being a product of both human labor and a “gift” from their ancestors who work through the Earth to provide and guard over their harvest. Thus some of the harvest must be returned to the ancestors in thanks.

This understanding completely shifted with the advent of collectivization and multicultural explanations for the Ersu inclusion into the Chinese state.

Collectivization shifted the focus from an ancestral connection to the land and agricultural products to exploitation of the land through modern science. Moreover science also paved the road (quite literally) for the harvest of minerals and other natural resources. This ideological shift is still prevalent today and perhaps has been perpetuated by the fact that the Ersu identity has been enfolded within the multiculturalism that represents a Chinese state. An entire generation had grown up with the understanding that to be Ersu (or, to be more correct, to be Tibetan) means that you are just one part of a Chinese national identity and that identity believes in a path of scientific economic development’s exploitation of nature to bring about a modern life for The People.

Yet now this discourse is losing steam. Villagers do want a modern life but they wish to establish it on their own terms and within their own cultural definition of man’s relationship to nature. From the tourism perspective, preserving the integrity of the local ecology is very important and can be seen in their continued respect for their cultural interpretations of their natural resources. As I’ll note below, this desire to re-claim the Ersu identity starts perhaps within internal structural bounds, particularly of a generational hierarchy. Now it seems that through the commodification of Ersu culture, the entire village can negotiate their own economic development without having to be dependent on the Chinese mode of scientific exploitation of agricultural land or natural resources. Yet as this internal discourse of cultural commodification is arising at the same time as a discourse of agricultural

commodification which is still the exploitation of a natural resource the question becomes, how can the Ersu plan to resolve that contradiction.

Synthesis of Modes of Production

For the bulk of this thesis I have been examining agricultural and tourism development as being quite separate. For the remainder of this discussion though I think it is important to view the commodification of these two forms of production as happening within the same context even if they have very different even contradictory trajectories. While tourism is certainly a much more modern capitalist phenomenon (Greenwood 1989) than the marketing of agricultural goods to far off destinations (Curtain 1984), in the context of Bamboo Village both of these processes began with their incorporation into the Chinese nation-state. Agricultural production in Bamboo Village has fully accepted integration with the modern ideology of exploitation of nature to achieve its goal or the maximization of agricultural output to gain profit. Tourism on the other hand is developing off of the rejection of the modern ideology that the Ersu are a part of the Tibetan nationality ethnically integrating them into a multicultural Chinese nation. Instead they are maximizing the uniqueness of their cultural attributes in contrast to those around them in order to gain profit.

Yet how will villagers negotiate these two forms of production. In the context of labor, they are already stretched thin; with the male population often beyond the village participating in wage work and children off to school possibly preventing them from a future in agriculture, it is very unclear if there is enough labor power and interest to sustain the agrarian system in the village. In light of that fact it would seem these same parents would be more interested in having the village focus on tourism rather than agriculture. But the truth is that agriculture is a central part of their culture and that is what provides Bamboo Village with its authenticity; with its unique agrarian characteristics compared to say Jiuzhaigou or Lijiang, which are both more notable ethnic tourism destinations in the region but are quickly losing their connection to an agro-pastoral cultural history (Peng 1998; McKhann 2001). After a few ethnographic interviews that problem seemed very apparent to me only more so

after a through analysis here. Villagers are very excited to participate in the market economy and see the vegetable sites as a means of engaging with the outside world so that they can increase their wealth and improve their livelihoods. But to grow things like green peppers, carrots and onions in place of their subsistence based corn, potatoes and beans will not only change their diet it will change the purpose agriculture has within their own culture as I've noted. Conversely, if people are to focus all of their activities on tourism, making Ersu handicrafts, performing for visitors, cooking and servicing at the local Bed and Breakfast, and designing informational materials, will this not take them away from their fields?

In other words, I have answered how commodification has developed through history, why villagers want to participate in the market system, what production processes they are commodifying and how villagers are adapting to the commodification of these modes of production. Now it is time to move beyond the problems discovered within those answers and discuss if solutions might be possible. These solutions could have the potential to continue improving the livelihoods in Bamboo Village all the more so because individuals are beginning to engage with the market and modernity on their own terms. There are structural barriers and conflicting ideas within this system that could make it difficult for villagers to claim their own sense of modernity. There are also some structural benefits from the commodification of these systems which can help ensure the success of villagers in their attempt to interact with the market system. Before discussing solutions it's important to review these barriers and benefits, their historical significance and how they interact with a Bamboo Village that has commodified its agricultural system and its ethnic identity.

Barriers and Advantages in Ersu Social Structure for Market Integration

One of the main reasons why inequality is perpetuated in China today is that the bulk of the population still views the Western periphery as backward and poor and very much in need of support and instruction from the core (Wang and Hu 1999). In this sense, the historical relationship between the core and the periphery has not

changed much. The Qing in fact viewed all of Sichuan Province as a periphery thus they created tax incentives and subsidies to re-populate the province (Dai 2009). What I think Dai relates well but misses analytically, is that the Imperial powers wished to militarize the Province to control the real periphery of China: Tibet, Mongolia and the tribes of the Tibetan-Yi Corridor. This is not much different than the Central Government's current policy of eliminating taxes on farmers and building infrastructure to connect them to markets to encourage agricultural production in remote rural areas. Militarization is not the goal in this modern age; in its place is a strong desire to spread marketization as far as possible. This is not simply a project to improve livelihoods but is also a means of keeping a portion of local labor power in an area that is focused on natural resource extraction to support economic activities in the core regions (Harrell 2001). Thus the residents of Bamboo Village are integrating themselves into a system that is determined to support marketization. Yet the system is accommodating only as long as those who participate "play by the rules" that benefit core ideals of development, which is dangerous because it means locals lose a voice in how marketization can play out in their village.

Since most of the "rules" are determined in political arenas that are far from Songlin, it is necessary to think about how geographic barriers could act on their decision-making processes. As discussed in Chapter 4, geographic boundaries would have severely restricted historic market penetration, causing the Songlin Region to be dependent on Kangding, Hanyuan, Yuexi or Ya'an for markets. Songlin's economic and social relationship with those towns was well beyond Skinner's dual ring of hexagonally-shaped central place-based organization of trade (1964), and really that is confirmed here ethnohistorically as well. Thus Songlin would likely only be visited by long-distance, highly specialized traders. Selling agricultural goods would have never been efficient. Even in the present day it requires highways and enclosed, cooled transport to bring a profit making agricultural good to market in Chengdu during the off-season where it would be competitive.

Thus the villagers are going to need to become dependent on technology and exterior cultural norms to help them navigate the market system. This goes beyond just an efficient transportation system. It is already taking place with many locals using cell phones to keep in contact with their networks beyond the village; networks which can help them make money on either their agricultural or their cultural goods. Even cell phones are not enough, as now the village is being promoted on the internet by journalists and tourist bureaus using pictures and information that has zero localized input. Once their agricultural goods are harvested, only the village leaders are able to keep control over price and payment through their Han Chinese connections in Chengdu. Both of these scenarios prevent the villagers from placing their input into the way their goods are marketed. Thus while they may have commodified their modes of production to maximize profit according to their own ideals, within the Chinese structural system their own social and cultural capital prevents them from realizing those profits. The social and cultural capital that is necessary to negotiate these barriers to the market is related more closely to an ethnically Han Chinese worldview. In fact this is precisely why when village wage laborers would enter into the market system, people would often take advantage of them.

Within the Chinese open market economy, there are few if any protections for migrant laborers. This in itself is a huge risk for anyone to take. As opportunities for individuals increase through more localized means, agriculture and ethnic tourism, villagers are more inclined to move away from wage labor or migrant labor work, particularly those of an older generation. The Chinese government also recognizes this phenomenon. As Wang and Hale (2009) have shown, some components of the New Socialist Countryside program integrate quite well with elderly associations. What the New Socialist Countryside or Songlin Township's Vegetable Sites are attempting to do is reinvigorate the remote countryside's place within the larger Chinese economic structure. Some could be cynical and say these are urban ploys to

prevent further rural to urban migration and they could be right. But villagers are negotiating with these structural “ploys” to make opportunities for themselves.

Perhaps there is a perceived decrease in risk in something as familiar as agriculture or the presentation of one’s own culture. None of the villagers ever informed me that they are against cash crop agriculture or ethnic tourism or felt that these projects had anything but good potential. Even the younger generation agreed with this rendering. Yet that does not prevent them from still saying things like “I’d rather not teach my child how to farm.” There are those of a younger generation who do not want to become dependent on agriculture because of its “backward” cultural connotations. Perhaps this stigmatism is developing in response to how employers of wage labor view rural workers. This is synonymous with the issue of self-identification as identifying one’s self as Tibetan has few benefits in the world of wage labor. Conversely, asserting one’s identity as Ersu rather than Tibetan provides a uniqueness that can be capitalized in the tourism market. That said, I think it is too early yet to tell if the younger generation will still view this cultural form of production as “backward” and continue to reject it for the more ethnically Han centered notion of wage labor.

But most certainly the older generation¹⁶⁸ is embracing their cultural revival. As my friend in the township cultural bureau explained to me, his reasoning for wanting to ensure that Guzazi was reclassified from a “superstition” to a cultural practice was that he:

...felt that the village was losing its sense of cohesion. Children no longer learned to speak Ersu or sing our songs; they didn’t know the names of their ancestors or understand the importance of their heritage.

We needed something that was culturally significant for all of us. I don’t see this interest in revitalizing cultural heritage and ritual as simply an attempt to satisfy a sense of nostalgia. It is recognition that there were benefits associated with that “sense of cultural cohesion” which should still be available even as the

¹⁶⁸ For Bamboo Village when I think of older generation I’m commenting on those who were born at least before 1960. In otherwords those who would remember Guzazi, buckwheat farming and for those a bit older perhaps even pre-collectivization.

village modernizes. For instance Guzazi is a time for everyone in the village to return home, catch up with their family and friends and utilize various networks that may have been developed by those family and friends over the last year. In one family home, I was privy to a discussion between a thirty-something villager who was working in Eastern China and had invited his colleague to return home with him for the ceremony. The colleague had already started to think of ways to bring additional employment opportunities to Asbestos County noting its almost complete lack of light industrial jobs. Guzazi is also a time to return home to help with harvests. Some of the more difficult work is hauling in the loads of corn and potatoes after harvest¹⁶⁹; this job is much easier when the children and grandchildren are, in a sense, “home for the holidays”. I believe elders wish to strengthen social structures by revitalizing lost cultural traditions not only for their own respect for their cultural heritage but also because they recognize the power social cohesion provides to the community when negotiating the pitfalls of the modern market economy.

It’s important to remember that those of an older generation have a social memory of what life was like before the entrance of market forces. They remember the influence of the state in their everyday lives; the good and the bad. They have experienced the gradual withering away of state support and recognize how difficult it is for a remote village to integrate into a more liberalized market system. But to some degree they must also remember their childhood of Ersu heritage and believed that cultural capital still had validity and potential benefit for their children and grandchildren. Thus Guzazi was revitalized and Shaba rituals were once again commonly accepted by the villagers. It is very important to keep in mind that this “renaissance” happened in the early 1990s, so it is completely independent of the current commodification of those same cultural practices. The concept of tourism is extremely new but does seem to be embraced by various generations. Thus I believe it is possible to see how cultural praxis is used by actors to engage with and define the Ersu sense of modernity.

¹⁶⁹ Although, as I’ve mentioned before, harvest time is actually moving further away from the religiously determined date of Guzazi.

Costs and Benefits of Ersu Individualization for Market Integration

There are certain aspects of individualized cultural praxis which could be a cost or a benefit to the village as their modes of production continue to commodify. It is important to consider how certain alterations in the societal structure, perhaps through policy changes, could reinforce the advantages a person might have to navigate a commodified system. On the other hand, finding ways to redirect their shortcomings so that it can provide benefit to themselves and to the village at large is equally worthy of our attention. In this section I will specifically examine three different groups of actors: wage workers¹⁷⁰, children, and women. I'll show how their individual identification with these groups interacts with local social structure and Chinese social structure to act as a cost or benefit in commodified modes of production.

As I've noted wage workers do tend to be male due to local cultural norms and the way villagers interpret wage labor as being intensive or entrepreneurial work as engaging with the outside world and therefore masculine in nature. This puts the bulk of the wealth accumulation responsibility on the male household members. Actively working in the Chinese labor market puts these part-time farmers in a position of expanding their networks into a range of Chinese societal groups (Murphy 2002). For instance, their interaction with the Han Chinese exposes them to the linguistic challenge of improving their Standard Mandarin Chinese or even with learning a new dialect altogether. For instance the young migrant laborer that had returned to the village during Guzazi spoke flawless mandarin and had also learned to understand and communicate key phrases of the Jiangxi dialect from Eastern China. They also have a more up-to-date understanding of Han cultural norms that may not be reinforced through television. Clothing, hair-styles, dinner table customs and the ubiquitous karaoke singing are all cultural traits that these men learn while on the road. Adapting these cultural traits in the right situation has been key for negotiating the Chinese economy beyond the village; they are equally as beneficial for helping to

¹⁷⁰ Here I'm referencing both wage laborers and salaried entrepreneurs.

integrate local agricultural goods and tourism opportunities into that same market system.

Just being on the road also puts wage workers in contact with a broad swath of Chinese society. Constantly traveling from home to the work site, which could be thousands of kilometers away, allows them to become familiar with truck, bus and taxi drivers, travel agencies for booking quick plane tickets¹⁷¹, as well as a host of hotel and hostel owners. This provides them a network of experienced professionals who could help bring tourists to the village or bring agricultural goods to market. Entrepreneurs in particular must deal with marketing agencies, middle-men and lawyers to help ensure the smooth course of their business; experience interacting with these kinds of people is essential for the safe establishment of the new industries of tourism and market crops. Yet the most important group that entrepreneurs interact with is undoubtedly government officials. In some cases many entrepreneurs are or were officials or cadres in their local government; thus they have the social capital necessary to cut through the thick Chinese bureaucratic red tape. The owner of the Ersu Bed and Breakfast works as a driver for the township government and his father is a key figure in the cultural bureau; those connections have provided him necessary social and cultural capital to establish what seems to be a very productive and profitable business.

Yet building these connections and spending time away from home also has its pitfalls. Many of these wage workers now have purchased homes in the county seat, effectively disconnecting them from the work associated with both agriculture and tourism. Living beyond the village for long periods of time makes these men less connected to their culture and certainly less knowledgeable about agricultural production. If they don't move to the city, they often leave their wives at home making them less important to the decision making processes within the household. It does seem though that in either case, families who have an income external to

¹⁷¹ Although this is quite rare and is more likely only utilized by local entrepreneurs rather than average wage laborers.

agriculture (or now tourism), are encouraging their children to attend school beyond the nine years required by state mandate.

While education is technically free for children through the ninth grade, there are significant costs to the village from participation in the education system. For instance, in recent years children have stopped working in the fields at an earlier age or in many cases they just never started. I have already noted that this has greatly reduced the labor supply in the village creating some serious adaptations to the agrarian system. But, from the perspective of the children, this also prevents them from having an alternative means of production to fall back on if they cannot participate in the market economy as a wage worker. Because the education system is designed and implemented in a pedagogical style that originates from the core Han Chinese areas of the country, these children are also not familiar with the cultural capital they would need for helping to promote tourist practices in the village.

Yet turning that around, students who are educated in the Chinese system, are endowed with cultural traits that are similar to the benefits of their wage working fathers. Especially if they go on to a secondary or even college education, they'll begin to build networks beyond the county borders, become more familiar with a range of interests and norms outside their village and become proficient in tools that will allow them to work more efficiently in the market system. One prime example is the number of young adults from the village who are learning to use the internet, in particular the chat software program QQ. One of the young girls who worked for the Ersu Bed and Breakfast had just finished her Bachelor's degree in law and whenever she could get internet access she would keep in touch with her classmates through QQ using her laptop and certainly by text messaging with her cell phone. Proficiency with forms of communication is quickly becoming essential to be competitive in the Chinese market place; that's just as true for agricultural production as it is for tourism. But the one group who are almost completely disenfranchised from these beneficial cultural processes would be the village mothers.

As I hope has been portrayed in as emic a way as possible in this thesis, women in the village truly are the backbone to the subsistence way of life in Bamboo Village. They are the gate keepers of both traditional and modern agricultural knowledge and in some cases also possess a good deal of cultural knowledge as well. No one in the village could sing Ersu songs as proficiently as Auntie Su, not even my colleague in the cultural bureau. Yet she also was one of the few in the village that was willing to start growing market vegetables in her fields¹⁷². Women are more inclined to sow vegetables not just because it's culturally more acceptable, there's a practicality to it as well. Compared to tourism or wage labor activities, vegetable raising can be more easily integrated into other tasks that women are responsible for such as raising pigs and chickens, cooking, childcare, keeping the house clean, and most importantly raising staple crops (corn, potatoes and soy beans). Conversely, hiking into the mountains in search of wild greens and mushrooms is decreasing in activity and likely to continue to decrease because it detracts from labor that could be spent on the more integrated forms of agricultural production.

Yet these mothers have almost zero experience navigating the realm of the Chinese market. Thus while they may be the primary producers of agricultural commodities, they do not possess the cultural capital needed to ensure that their goods are marketed in a way that maximizes their exchange-value. Women want to participate in the market; in responses to my questions about Xiaokang Lifestyle, wealth accumulation was just as important to women as it was to men. I believe this is a reaction to seeing men providing a large portion of their labor to ensuring the household does advance its level of wealth. Women traditionally have always been the main providers for the household, certainly from the perspective of developing their ecological mode of production, or the proverbial "putting food on the table". Perhaps for this reason women in the village have been searching for a way to contribute to this new modern discourse of household advancement. By

¹⁷² I should note that she is also primarily responsible for the day to day business of the Bed and Breakfast, so the market vegetables are grown to supply the restaurant as well as for sale on the open market. In fact one of Auntie Su's fields has been turned into a very diverse and dynamic garden, with species beyond those grown in the Vegetable Sites.

commodifying practices they are more familiar with compared to their men, they have the opportunity through tourism and market crops to provide their own contribution to household engagement with the market system and modernity. Yet because of the nature of Chinese society they cannot do it alone, nor should they.

As I've discussed here the residents of Bamboo Village influenced by cultural discourses that are exterior to their community throughout history but have navigated those issues to construct their own interpretation of how they plan engage with a modernizing China. The process of adapting to the commodification of agricultural and tourism production has integrated the village into large market forces and created positive and negative feedback loops that directly impact production processes. This chapter though also examined the barriers and advantages inherent in the social structure of Bamboo Village as well as the costs and benefits of market engagement for residents with different backgrounds. Each of these barriers and advantages plays a key part in the Ersu's interaction with commodification. Finally, in the concluding chapter I'll look at what was learned from the research questions and how that knowledge can help inform practical application for improving the lives of villagers as they continue to engage with the world economic system.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

As I close out this thesis I'd like to do so first by examining the research questions and what has been learned from those three primary objectives. The first is to examine the path through history that brought the Ersu to a commodifying system of production. The second is to examine how and why, in the Ersu's commitment to engage with market forces, they chose to commodify their local agricultural practices and their culture. And finally, in order to ensure that local agricultural and tourism goods were competitive on the market, villagers underwent certain economic, cultural and ecological adaptations. Then I'll end on a positive practical note since what is most important is that villagers want to engage with the broader market and are establishing opportunities to do so by negotiating the Chinese political discourses and integrating their own localized discourse of how to improve their quality of life. Thus I believe there are practical solutions to helping ensure villagers succeed in their journey through the commodification of their modes of production and empower them when they try to break through state discourses.

The Questions of Commodification

Throughout my time in Bamboo Village I was always struck by how often the turn of the conversation would be brought back to the ability of individuals to earn money. While I have extensively outlined agricultural and tourism means of earning money, these are far from exhaustive. There were some in the village who worked in local mines, others who drove for a living. The Tangs had even opened a small convenience store long before the idea of tourism entered the minds of villagers. Yet I found that, in particular, agriculture and tourism were the most salient to villagers, at least during the Summer of 2010. But beyond that, I found that agricultural praxis and cultural praxis not only had certain unifying connections but they seemed to impact everyone in the village. I found that it didn't make sense to research agriculture apart from tourism because they were so integrated culturally and discursively and so I really needed to take a broader approach and examine

production of a commodity from the local perspective. Thus prepared with methodological tools of ethnohistory and ethnoecology the three research questions I posited really emerged naturally through informal conversations:

1. Structurally speaking, how through history did the villagers arrive at a commodified mode of production?
2. What is being commodified and why do villagers want to participate in the market economy?
3. How are villagers adapting to the changes in their community which are the result of commodification?

These questions have led me down a path of history that has allowed me to see changes at the economic, cultural and ecological level. Here I'll review some learned lessons from each of those questions.

Historical Ecology

Through examining Ersu oral legends and ancestry to the Chinese state's Native Chieftaincy System I was able to take a look at the agricultural system during a forgotten time period that had great implications for Ersu identity and agricultural production. It becomes apparent that the long history of agricultural production was why songs and rituals that are directly associated with crops are still performed today. The purpose of ancestor worship found in Guzazi rituals and the day itself traditionally being the marker for harvest time, comes sharply into focus when viewed in a historical perspective that extends beyond present day memory. This history not only helps to inform the historical relationships between ecology and culture in Songlin Valley but sets up a framework for understanding how an exterior discourse like commodification might impact this socio-ecological system.

Reviewing the changes in ethnoecological understanding of agricultural and ethnic identity within the historical memory of current villagers was crucial for understanding the progression of commodification in the village. Villager memory was able to formulate three distinct periods the Republican, Collectivization and Reform and Opening Eras. Each of these eras represented a continued integration into the world economy and a shift towards commodifying the local modes of

production. As I have noted, the connections between the Ersu and the Chinese were set locally during the Republican Era. Yet it was the fervor of the Great Leap Forward and collectivization which truly started the commodification of Ersu agricultural production. This period brought with it the beginnings of de-swiddening local agricultural praxis as well as classifying cultural praxis as superstition. Then in the Reform and Opening, with villagers able to make more individualized decisions, the process of commodification and market integration became more entrenched. Finally, as commodification shifted the local mode of production towards an economic focus, ecological and cultural understandings of nature began to lose their historical place in the community. What was discovered is that the villagers themselves were now more focused on engaging with the market.

Commodification

The reason villagers wanted to engage with the market is that they recognized that it could provide them with an improved quality of life. Following on Tilt's call for using indigenous measures of quality of life (2011), I analyzed local perceptions of a Xiaokang Lifestyle. Thus I discovered that villagers are interested in providing food and wealth to their households. These two understandings of attaining Xiaokang lead very easily into the commodification of agricultural production, as villagers could provide themselves with both food and money through such activities. As I discovered, male household members had already taken on wage labor jobs, while children were encouraged to attend school and find good jobs in the city. This meant that village mothers and the elderly were left behind to care for their farm. Yet they themselves wish to contribute to the accumulation of wealth and improved quality of life for the household. Thus the Vegetable Sites in the 1st Production Brigade provided Bamboo Village with a model that fit the desire to engage with the market and culturally applicable abilities of those that remained in the villages.

This interest in finding local means of further integrating the village within the market system grew at the same time that a cultural revitalization was taking place.

As villagers became more aware of their uniqueness within the region they began to look for ways to express those unique qualities which could be economically beneficial to the village. The current policy which describes the multiculturalism within the Chinese state as a natural resource (Wilkes 2005) does play into these desires of the local villagers. Yet because the Ersu are not an official recognized nationality, some breaking of the state discourse has had to take place, although often under the guidance of local officials. Now the village is beginning to integrate their cultural knowledge, rituals, dances, songs and cuisine into a commodified form that can be marketed to a Chinese and even worldwide audience of consumers. Yet to commodify their mode of production in such a way, both with their culture and agriculture, certain adaptations were necessary to make their goods competitive in the market.

Adaptation

As the agricultural and cultural production in Bamboo Village commodified, the villagers made socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-ecological adaptations to accommodate for that change. In agricultural production they made economic management changes, collectivizing their distribution and becoming more dependent on village leaders for marketing their goods. From a cultural perspective, villagers began to adopt more Chinese cultural norms when growing and marketing their crops. Additionally the cultural interpretation of the crops themselves moved away from having a subsistence and symbolic purpose for villagers towards simply having an exchange value that could be traded for money on the open market. This exchange for money is what relates the interest in cash crops back to local understandings of improving their quality of life. Yet in order to realize these profits, the villagers had to introduce species of crops to the socio-ecological system which may not be well adapted to the local ecosystem. Additionally, due to decreasing availability of labor on the farm, households increased other inputs in the production process, which likely degraded the ecological resiliency of the system.

A similar process of adaptations also occurred in the commodification of Ersu culture, although in this case socio-economic and socio-cultural adaptations were interconnected. In order to maximize profits through tourism, the villagers need to spend more time and effort on preserving, learning and disseminating their culture so that they can present it as authentic and unique compared to other groups that are already established ethnic tourism destinations. Additionally, they likely will have to adjust certain cultural taboos which may not relate well with their key consumers, namely the Han Chinese. By encouraging the increase in visitation to the area by tourists, greater strain will be placed on local ecological services. In particular, new ideas of sanitation and cleanliness may produce extra pollution from consumers of tourist activities. Finally, the tourists themselves will consume more resources during their visit, increasing local usage of firewood and electricity.

As noted in Chapter 7, these adaptations to the commodification of both agricultural praxis and cultural praxis produce some negative and positive secondary impacts and feedback loops. A major concern focused on the fact that in order to produce and market agricultural goods, villagers needed to adopt Chinese cultural norms. Yet, in order to protect the authenticity of their village, which makes it more attractive to tourists, villagers need to protect and transmit more Ersu cultural norms. To ensure a more resilient socio-ecological system in the Songlin Valley, these kinds of contradictions need to be addressed. As I've already showed there are aspects of the village social structure which could be a boon or a bane to further integration into the market system. Additionally some individuals in the community also have characteristics which could be an advantage or a barrier to them as they commodify their production. Yet being aware of these complications and contradictions is already half the battle. The final section in the thesis examines a few practical solutions which draw from what was learned in the three research questions that decoded local understanding of historical ecology, commodification and adaptations to commodification.

Practical Application

There are certain aspects of the villager's engagement with Chinese modernity that are not entirely isolated in their context of commodifying both their agriculture and tourism practices. As this thesis has shown the commodification process has been long in the making and many villages throughout China have already been through these processes so there is much to learn and apply from their successes and mistakes. With regard to agriculture (in particular pastoral activities) the "in-kind" practices of certain organizations such as the Heifer Project have been quite successful in empowering rural communities in their engagement with the Chinese market system. While that may not be the right framework for a more agricultural centered Bamboo Village, what is important to take away from projects of that nature is how they strengthened intra-village networks and integrated the various strengths of different villagers to minimize the inherent weaknesses each individual has when trying to produce a marketable good. In some ways Bamboo Village has already incorporated this process into their engagement with the agricultural commodities markets. Farmers, in particular female villagers, depend on the village leaders, who are all male, to help them negotiate the market system, which requires a certain knowledge of Chinese cultural norms. I draw out the gender disparities above because I believe one of the possible weaknesses existing in the methods the village is currently employing to engage with the market disenfranchises the female farmers who are the primary producers of the agricultural goods. This is not an uncommon problem in China, but there are signs of practical solutions.

There are signs that limited forms of democracy are sending positive feedbacks into the institutional structures of rural communities in China (Martinez-Bravo et al. 2011). Thus participatory frameworks do yield beneficial results. It is crucial to be cautious of the ways democratic tools are put into place in rural communities which do not have historical precedent of integrating decisions in such ways (Sturgeon 2009; Mosse 2005). I see open forums with interactive dialog being perhaps equally as effective as a simple democratic vote. In this sense villagers

already do this kind of information sharing but it often happens between small groups and the village leaders. A more productive exercise might be to bring all of the villagers together to hear each others concerns and voice them as a group to the village leaders. In this way, female farmers can better understand their own position in relation to their fellow villagers and perhaps realize that together they can benefit from the experience male villagers have in the greater Chinese society beyond the village. Tourism also could benefit greatly from such an exercise.

The tourism practices that are currently underway have a disorganized sense to them. There is not the communal understanding or dialog for how tourism might develop in their community because most of the current projects are started by individuals or under the jurisdiction of government agencies. Xu et al. have shown how local knowledge bases provide positive reinforcement for producing discourses of conservation (2005). Much of these knowledge bases, if integrated with public policy, have the potential to transform the state's multiculturalism into a bioculturalism (Wilkes 2005) which has the potential for drawing a tourism market. Again though this requires a method that brings together different groups within the community for it to be successful and have long-term potential.

As I've noted, the central force behind the promotion of tourism in the village originated with a cultural revival from the older generation. While the older generation has certainly been instrumental in bringing their culture into the market place through the construction of the Bed and Breakfast, the commodification of Shaba practices in pictures and performances, and the establishment of Guzazi as an event to draw outsiders, they have yet to fully integrate those of the younger generations. There certainly are some cultural barriers that prevent those of young age from fully contributing to all of the performances and investments. For instance no one under the age of 30 would have enough money to invest in a new Bed and Breakfast, nor are any of them fathers and mothers so they are forbidden from participating in some of the ritual aspects of Guzazi. But there are practical ways the younger generation could be important, not the least of which is providing the outside

world with a more accurate representation of their village through the internet or journalism. This generation is educated and accepted into the greater Chinese society, thus they have the cultural and social capital that is needed to promote the successful integration of tourism into the Chinese market.

However, one great advantage could be provided to future generations of villagers was actually suggested by the township leader himself. The Ersu language and cultural knowledge could be integrated and disseminated through instruction within the current schools system. While I do believe this could be extremely important for the students if the village continues to push forward with its tourism development plans, I also believe that some kind of practical experience learning how to farm is important. On one hand it obviously teaches children a method for providing subsistence for themselves, but it also would provide them the experience they need to fully comprehend the Ersu ethnoecological understanding of nature. Agriculture is so central to Ersu history and culture; continuing to disembed the villager knowledge base from the practical everyday experience of their agricultural experiences would be detrimental to the development of local tourism.

Overall, these ideas need to be accepted and improved upon by villagers themselves. Some of these ideas I developed through dialogues with the township government but my hope is that a broader dialogue could begin with the villagers before more implementation of uninformed policy takes place. Recently a colleague informed me that in late December 2010, the final stretch of road connecting the Ersu “mansions” with the outside world would be constructed and undoubtedly with an “ethnic” flare since the designers came from an institute in Chengdu, the core of Sichuan Province. I’m unsure how much input villagers themselves provided into this design but my guess is very little, even though it will be up to them to provide the labor while the county will provide the design and materials. My hope is that through this thesis the county will realize the benefit of using ethnographically defined analytical tools to inform their decision making processes when it comes to designing and implementing policy.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Table A.1 Songlin Township Corn, Bean and Mixed Grain Outputs from 1957-1975 (XLXZ, 2007)

	Corn				Beans				Mixed Grains (Buckwheat)			
	Hectares	Tonnage	Yield	% Change in Hectare	Hectares	Tonnage	Yield	% Change in Hectare	Hectares	Tonnage	Yield	% Change in Hectare
1957	540.73	419.55	0.78		68.8	30.1	0.44		18	7	0.39	
1958	457.6	401	0.88	-18.17%	67.73	34.1	0.50	-1.58%	77.4	35.1	0.45	76.74%
1959	478.67	353.1	0.74	4.40%	153	104	0.68	55.73%	195.27	109.75	0.56	60.36%
1960	518.53	340	0.66	7.69%	192.67	117.75	0.61	20.59%	27	17.5	0.65	-623.22%
1961	273.87	276.05	1.01	-89.33%	194.8	11.25	0.06	1.09%	105.07	55.05	0.52	74.30%
1962	348.2	234.4	0.67	21.35%	274.47	19.3	0.07	29.03%	160.2	2.2	0.01	34.41%
1963	550	537.5	0.98	36.69%	119.33	28.1	0.24	-130.01%	82	30.25	0.37	-95.37%
1964	558.27	522.55	0.94	1.48%	103.33	22.35	0.22	-15.48%	80	32.45	0.41	-2.50%
1965	546.67	463	0.85	-2.12%	106.73	31.05	0.29	3.19%	78.67	16.3	0.21	-1.69%
1966	546.67	720	1.32	0.00%	137.33	62.65	0.46	22.28%	71.47	45.4	0.64	-10.07%
1967	524.53	713.9	1.36	-4.22%	150.4	53.1	0.35	8.69%	100.27	30.4	0.30	28.72%
1968	515.87	473	0.92	-1.68%	135.4	51.1	0.38	-11.08%	65.47	48.8	0.75	-53.15%
1969	526.47	647.05	1.23	2.01%	131.27	62	0.47	-3.15%	68.67	53.45	0.78	4.66%
1970	520.07	594.6	1.14	-1.23%	134.67	108.95	0.81	2.52%	22	33.55	1.53	-212.14%
1971	501.4	747.3	1.49	-3.72%	122.07	80.1	0.66	-10.32%	70.87	17.35	0.24	68.96%
1972	497.7	760.5	1.53	-0.74%	163.73	73.75	0.45	25.44%	82.8	38.5	0.46	14.41%
1973	500.67	660	1.32	0.59%	141.67	57.5	0.41	-15.57%	80.47	26.5	0.33	-2.90%
1974	498.07	589.5	1.18	-0.52%	138	42.5	0.31	-2.66%	97.2	58.5	0.60	17.21%
1975	494	823.5	1.67	-0.82%	137.87	60.5	0.44	-0.09%	71	2.2	0.03	-36.90%
Average	522.11	570.92	1.15		148.52	58.34	0.43		86.32	36.68	0.51	

Appendix B

Figure A. Chart of Songlin Township Corn, Bean and Mixed Grain Outputs from 1957–1975
(XLXZ, 2007)

