A Society without Fathers or Husbands: The Na of China

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Future studies of human social organization will be obliged to take account of Cai Hua’s work on Na kinship. The Na are a cultural minority of thirty-thousand mountain farmers in northern Yunnan. Their mode of organizing sexuality and reproduction without husbands or fathers provides yet another in a long history of challenges to anthropological definitions of marriage and family. One index of this unusual system is the kinship terminology: it is “strictly classificatory” and reckons consanguineous links only through women. The system fits none of the basic types proposed by anthropologist George P. Murdock, who did the last comprehensive study on human social organization fifty years ago. In Cai’s estimation, the Na system represents a newly discovered ethnological type.

From the indigenous perspective, however, the consequence of challenging a definition has more pertinence if it is due to resisting the moral sensibilities of a ruling power. In this case the ruling power’s ideas about sex and family are defined by Han-Chinese norms of marriage, which Na custom rejects. The consequence is that mandarins of the former Qing dynasty and agents of the communist regime have tried to make the Na accept the Han institution of marriage. The attempt in the 1960s to force marriage on the Na was especially heavy-handed and regretfully used information gathered from Na informants by anthropologists. But despite these attempts and despite the effects of other cultural changes, the Na way of reckoning descent and organizing domestic life and sexual practice has shown an amazing resilience. Even those Na who stood to gain materially by the redistribution of land rejected land reform when the communists sought to bypass their localized matrilineal descent groups or *matrilignées*.

Cai grounds his ethnography in the history of Na encounters with the state. He argues that the three-tier system of consumption-based status groups was an accommodation of the matrilineal system to the imperial power of the Qing dynasty. The “aristocratic” tier was formed when the local prefect (*zhifu*) was obliged to adopt the concept of paternity, the patronymic, and marriage in order to legitimate his heirs in service to the central government. But this was mostly veneer since the prefect’s *lignée* never adopted the paternal transmission of consanguinity. Cai details the design and stratagems of the status system, the social mobility, the ritual rebellions, the consortiums between tiers, and the consequent problems of inheritance. Communist power was more successful in supplanting this local pecking order by recruiting Na leaders into the party-state apparatus than it was in changing Na domestic practices.
The core of Cai’s study is the domestic organization of sexual practices in which there are no husbands or fathers. The basic unit of social production and reproduction is the *matrilignée*, which is formed from several generations domiciled around the solidarity between mothers and daughter and between sisters and brothers. The sibling incest taboo is rigorously observed to the extent that even the slightest evocation of sex among consanguine relatives of the opposite sex is forbidden: the sister must bed a man from another *lignée* in order to perpetuate her own (and her brother’s) *lignée*. Since the sexual encounter takes place in the domicile of her *lignée*, it must be furtive to avoid her brothers. What is so unusual, however, is that “the identity of her children’s genitors is never important” (p. 296). Conversely, men express no wish to sire children.

The basic, customary, and ubiquitous mode of sexual encounter is the furtive visit. This type of visitation has a man creeping into a woman’s bed after nightfall and leaving before dawn. (Women do not visit men in their domiciles.) The visit is supposed to be an obligation-free encounter, and there is no involvement of the woman’s mother or brothers. When a man arrives at a woman’s house and she is already occupied, he goes looking for someone else. Cai asked one informant for whom looking elsewhere was a frequent experience, “Are you jealous?” The reply: “No, not jealous. These are our customs” (p. 212).

The second traditional mode of sexual encounter is the conspicuous visit in which the man begins to visit the woman openly without having to hide from her *lignée*. This is acknowledged by gift exchanges and a ceremonial feast given by the female head of the woman’s *lignée*. The men of the *lignée* do not attend because the open visitation also evokes a sister’s sexuality. The only commitment between open lovers is the expectation of privileged sexual access to each other. But the couple cannot assume exclusive rights. The partners in an open relationship may pursue furtive liaisons with others, although there is increased vigilance among the men who steal sexual access from the privileged partner.

When the woman bears a baby, the man with whom she is openly involved brings gifts from his *lignée*. Or, if all her liaisons are furtive, the men involved may bring gifts from their respective *lignées*. These gifts do not signify paternity; between *lignées* they celebrate a communal passage rite, and from each individual man’s point of view they express a desire to continue the relationship. Relationships based on furtive or open visitations end abruptly and without any formality the instant one partner decides it is over.

The third modality of sexual life is cohabitation, in which one partner moves into the other’s domicile without ceremony. The decision to cohabit is governed by the labor needs or reproductive needs of the affected *lignées*. Which residential arrangement is chosen, whether it is with the woman’s or the man’s *lignée*, the principle of matrilineal consanguinity remains constant. The strength of matrilineal consanguinity is illustrated in one case of “uxorilocal” residence: the moved-in
man was addressed with the term for a mother’s brother by his cohabitant’s daughter—she had been sired by a previous visitor. When she reached fifteen, she bedded her mother’s cohabitant and the resulting children called him by the term for grandmother’s brother. In this case there were frequent arguments between the mother and daughter, but it seems there was little room for complaint. Cai repeatedly cites the formula that a transgression of sexual privilege is reproached when it fails, permitted when it succeeds. And in all modalities, short of marriage, the dissolution of the arrangement occurs on demand and without formality.

Finally there is the institution of marriage, the words and ceremonial and institutional norms for which are borrowed from the Han. Since these exchanges almost always follow virilocal postmarital residence on a supposedly permanent basis, the matrilignées are reluctant to part with their daughters. The marriage modality appears as a supplementary measure to confront a structural crisis, most commonly when a matrilignée lacks a female descendant. Hence, marriage is not practiced in successive generations (the exception to this rule are the patricians concerned with displays of wealth and power, especially the prefect’s lignée, to which Cai devotes a separate chapter). Extramarital sexual liaisons are handled like those in the cohabitation mode. But divorce is not so simple since a marriage is entangled in exchanges of property and the possession of offspring. Still, divorce among the Na is initiated by either partner.

Although these modalities of sexual encounter proceed one from another, there is no sense, much less expectation, that one stage necessarily leads to another. Most persons never cohabit or get married. The furtive visit has always been the traditional and preferred practice. This system seems to work on an institutionalized symmetry in sexual relationships. Either partner may accept or reject any one or number of sexual partners at any time. This rule, which is repeatedly emphasized, seems to be the crux of a system that recognizes no husbands or fathers. All other matrilineal societies with which I am familiar recognize the genitor, no matter what kinship term applies, and endows him with certain rights and responsibilities. The Na occasionally relish talking about how a child physically resembles one of its mother’s partners, but such small talk has no consequence, and most children, if asked, do not recognize their genitor.

While emphasizing the symmetry of sexual relations Cai misses the opportunity to address some timely issues. First, the apparent lack of proprietary feelings and jealous emotions reported by travelers as far back as the Ming dynasty and confirmed by Cai in the present day prompts a host of questions about how emotions, feelings, and attachments are handled and experienced. Discussing this, Cai shifts from his empirically grounded reflections on Na social organization into a discourse in popular psychology. We are told, for example, that human beings naturally crave variety in their sexual partners and that feelings of passion for one person naturally ebb over a period of time (p. 444). Cai does not make clear how
Na culture shapes feelings and emotions. Other than what readers can cobble together from the data presented, there is little incisive analysis of the psychosexual makeup of Na culture.

Another missed opportunity is not addressing how the sexual symmetry, such as it is, indexes the position of women in Na society. In spite of his amazingly rich data, quantitative and anecdotal, gathered from women and men, Cai does not reflect on the question of gender relations per se. A critical reading between the lines could develop some insights here. For instance, the great majority of attributed quotes belong to “villagers” or to particular men. The cliché that “having a good time [making love] is a charity to the woman’s household” is explained by villagers: “They explained that ‘in mating, the aim of the woman is to have children, and the aim of the man is to have a good time and to do an act of charity’” (p. 119). This same locution, minus the act of charity, is used by men in several conversations. One man opined: “Today, the policies of Deng Xiaoping are not bad. We can once again have a good time with the women, like we did before” (p. 405). I wonder if this is mostly men’s talk or if women also talk in these ways. A society where men are neither fathers nor husbands but produce most of the quotable talk compels us to ask the critical question: how does the feminine voice manifest itself?

Missed opportunities aside, there is a certain delight in revisiting fundamental issues raised by Murdock half a century ago. Cai’s work is an important contribution not just to China studies but to theoretical anthropology and ethnography. The results are based on fieldwork conducted over several summers plus one full year in the period between 1985 and 1992. The monograph contains sections on every relevant aspect of Na social and cultural life. Cai describes how the adoption of Tibetan Buddhism, changes in land tenure and the structure of state hegemony, ethnic group boundaries, the architecture of dwellings, beliefs about procreation, and new educational opportunities, to mention only a few topics, figure in the domestic organization of sex and family. These descriptive analyses are based on the notion that behavior is governed by normative rules. This rule-governed style of ethnographic writing, for all its clarity, can also be tedious and epistemologically problematic (in my view). But Cai is sensitive to the vicissitudes of human behavior and gives full scope to the contingent nature of normative rules by including a huge stock of case materials. Cai’s monograph is a sober, ethnographically well-informed, and sensitive portrayal of one people’s way of organizing the intimacies of their domestic lives.

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