

A heuristic blunder: Notes on an ethnographic situation in southwest China

Stéphane Gros

Centre for Himalayan Studies, CNRS, France.
Email: sgros@vjf.cnrs.fr

Abstract: *During long-term fieldwork the increasing involvement of the ethnographer in the lives of others raises a series of methodological and ethical issues. These can become even more pronounced when one is working with ethnic minorities in a socialist country. Yet, a seldom acknowledged reality of ethnographic fieldwork experience are the ‘little failures’ that occur along the way, alongside ethnographic blunders. I argue that these are difficult to avoid and can be part of an important learning process, oftentimes for both researcher and researched. Through the detailed description of a blunder that the author made during his research in southwest China with members of the Drung ethnic minority, this article advocates for the heuristic value of such mishaps, suggesting that one can learn a lot from accidents and unexpected events while undertaking in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. In this case, this helped to shed light on the micropolitics of Drung village life in southwest Yunnan, and the place of a ‘minority nationality’ in wider Chinese society.*

Keywords: China, Drung (Dulong), ethnic minorities, ethnography, methodology, Yunnan

Fieldwork research is embedded in a set of political, social and cultural contexts and is, therefore, subject to rules – both formal and informal – that can hinder, limit, or at least complicate the research process. This applies to any social science fieldwork experience, varying greatly with the methods employed and the contexts in which research is conducted. While some fundamental concerns related to doing fieldwork remain universal, in the case of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) numerous political rules and restrictions apply and, as an increasing number of researchers attest, coping strategies are diverse and plentiful (see Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006; Liu, 2006; Ayi *et al.*, 2007; Hansen, 2006, among others).

Many different factors and constraints contribute to setting the direction of field research. In this article I will argue that sometimes ‘putting one’s foot in it’ can be a positive move. After all, being an anthropologist often entails some degree of indiscretion and provocation. Generally speaking, the ethnographer is torn between the inaccessible and contradictory ideals of detachment on the one hand and iden-

tification on the other. In turn, being both actor and spectator leads to some unavoidable *faux pas*. Indeed, one wonders if a ‘blunder could be to ethnology what error is to so-called exact sciences, not a lack of thought, but in fact a condition of its practice’ (Jamin, 1986: 338).¹ While I do not *promote* blunders as integral to ethnographic practice, I suggest that instead of keeping quiet about those that eventually occur during fieldwork, they have a usefulness and potential heuristic value.²

When blunders do occur – often unwillingly, for diverse and unanticipated reasons – how do we deal with them, and what can we learn from them? As an unavoidable part of the field research process, ethnographic *faux pas*, blunders and even failures can provide food for thought and help improve the way we think about and practise fieldwork. In fact, a whole research project can grow out of a gaffe (McCarthy, 2009). This line of thought is akin to Pieke’s (2000: 138) view that serendipity is ‘the essence of fieldwork research’. This article will suggest that a proactive learning process via blunder heuristics ‘capitalises on accidents by

systematically harnessing them into an evolving pattern of discovery' (Pieke, 2000: 130). My account here shows how this process can reveal social rules and bring hidden levels of reality to light.

In contemporary China, state politics are but one aspect of the difficulties researchers face. As we have learnt from a variety of fieldwork-based research in different parts of the country,³ negotiations over the role of the researcher can entail many challenges concerning the interpersonal politics of culture, religion, gender, and values. Therefore, given the serendipity of fieldwork, researchers need to react creatively to different levels of constraints, and 'an intuitive approach must be taken towards data collection' (Smith, 2006: 132). Or, put another way, fieldwork 'remains partly a matter of "flying by the seat of one's pants"' (Hansen, 2006: 94). Fieldwork does not follow a pre-determined theoretical agenda, and methods and roles need to be adapted, rejected and re-negotiated in response to the changing political environment and the motivations of individuals engaged in the process.

That being said, I consider there to be three steps of ethnographic research, each entailing varying power relations, in which an anthropologist (or other social scientist) experiences constraints on his or her flexibility and agency: accessibility of research sites, integration into a social milieu while in the field, and the process of writing up. While the realities of fieldwork mean that each can vary greatly, I describe here how I experienced these constraints – as well as their sometimes surprising absence – before, during, and after research among the Drung (Dulong nationality), a minority group in Yunnan Province, southwest China.⁴ I devote the core of this article to the description of an event – a heuristic blunder – that occurred during my fieldwork. The recounting of the event, as I came to appreciate, was in itself part of the research process, and its analysis here leads me to elaborate on the heuristic value of fieldwork gaffes. In so doing, I delve into fundamental aspects of ethnographic practice, methodological issues, interpersonal relationships and problems of agency and ethics that broadly define the contours of what I call the 'ethnographic situation'.

Venturing to the field site

The Chinese government has a set of (often variable) rules regarding visas and research permits, which aim to control the entry, movement and activity of the researcher. One has virtually no control over this 'censorship' that applies both before departure to China and during one's stay. A good social network with the necessary 'connections' (Ch. *guanxi*), as well as strategies to circumvent and cope with these rules, are the researcher's best resources. It is very hard to anticipate how this process will unfold. As Smith (2006: 131) notes, 'in contemporary China, conditions for doing fieldwork are increasingly dependent on locality' and while each case is quite specific, my own experience is certainly unique.

Let me start at the very beginning. I first visited the Dulong Valley, located in the far northwest corner of Yunnan Province, in the fall of 1994 (see Fig. 1). Although the valley, which is home to the Drung people and that would later become my field site, I first arrived as a naive intrepid tourist, accompanied by another foreigner. Back then, the valley, or Dulongjiang as it is called in Chinese, was officially closed to foreign visitors, like all of Lisu Nationality Autonomous Prefecture of Nujiang to which it belongs.⁵ It was also inaccessible by road, and getting there required a three-day hike over a 4000-metre mountain pass. At the time, I had very specific, popularised images of the Drung people in mind: those of a timeless people living in seclusion far from the destructive governmental policies of the communist period. Everything I had read led me to believe that I was to discover a 'forgotten tribe'.⁶ Once in the valley, my companion and I did not last long. Soon after our arrival, we were called on by three members of the local militia,⁷ who encouraged us to continue on our way to the south of the valley. When we finally reached the seat of the Dulong Valley Township (Ch. *xiang*), the village of Bapo,⁸ the local police conducted a thorough bag check and ordered us to leave the valley in the following days. Back in Gongshan, capital of the Dulong and Nu Nationalities Autonomous County (Ch. *xian*), we were fined 100 RMB each and asked to leave the next day for the provincial capital, Kunming.

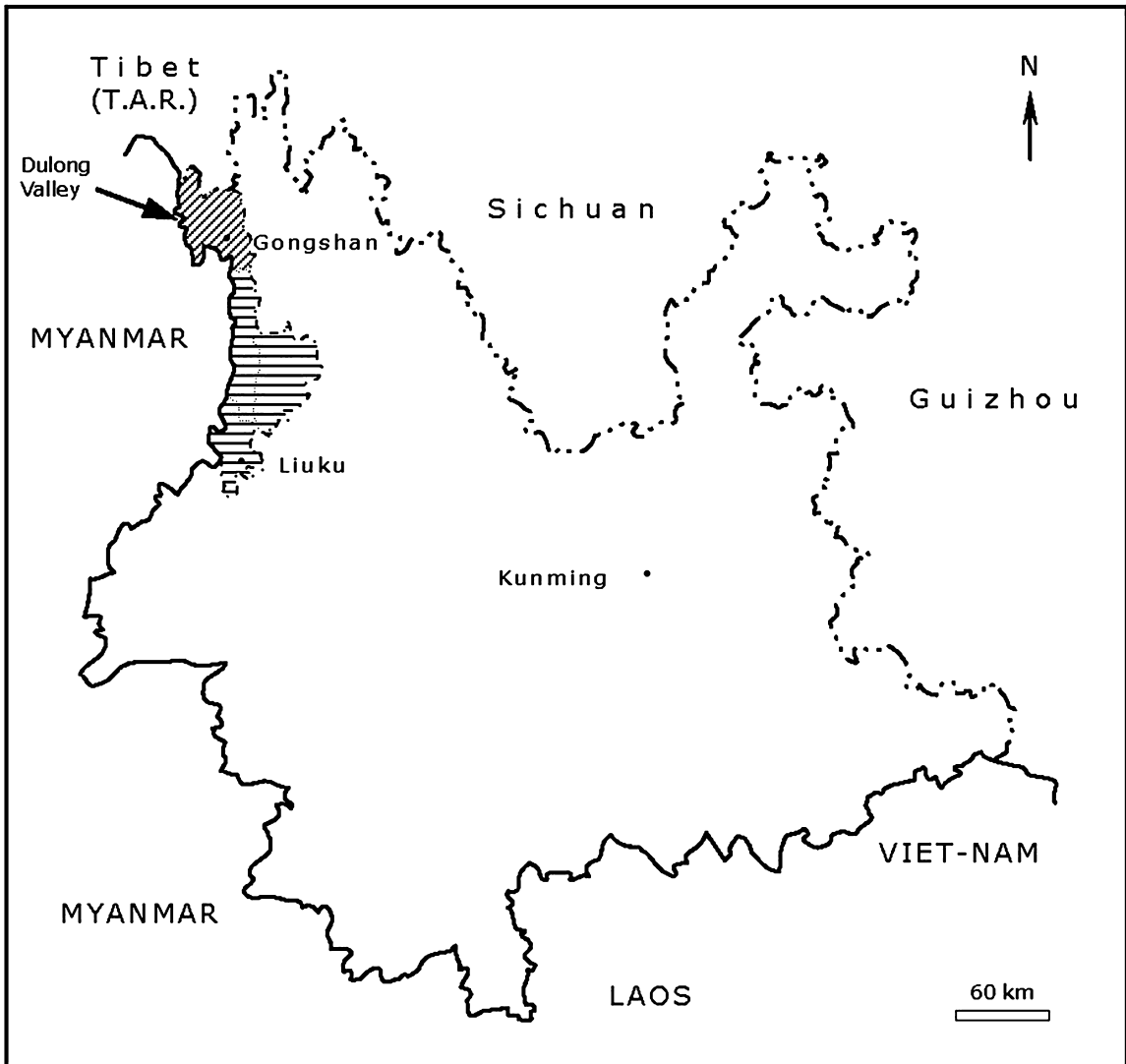


Figure 1. Lisu Nationality Autonomous Prefecture of Nujiang and Gongshan Dulong and Nu Nationalities Autonomous County (Yunnan Province, China)

In 1996, Nujiang Prefecture started to open up to foreigners. Having already completed a master's degree in Chinese studies, I enrolled in a doctorate programme in anthropology, determined to study Drung society with less bias, more methodology, and with the hopes of returning to Dulong Valley, this time as a field site. I perceived, from my previous experience, that the ambiguous status of foreigners in this remote valley might leave some room for negotiation regarding authorisations for long-term fieldwork. In the Dulong Valley, local leaders, mostly Drung, had not been clear on what kind of limits should be imposed.⁹ In fact, during my

first visit, they had been very welcoming. This kind of 'fuzziness' regarding my status prompted my return to the Dulong Valley without a permit in 1998. I determined that I had enough local contacts (both in the local government and in villages) to ensure a relatively smooth visit. I spent a month in the valley, backpacked from south to north through several villages and back, and worked freely in a number of them (usually staying in schools), interviewing Drung people of all ages. However, when I reached Bapo again on my way out of the valley, I was called on by the local police. After this experience, and another

field trip to both the Dulong Valley and the Nu (Salween) Valley the following year, I came to realise that I would not be able to continue working without the proper authorisations to conduct research and that doing so would surely cause problems for the people hosting and talking to me. Without permission, fieldwork remains a kind of 'unofficial "part-time participant observation"' (Hansen, 2006: 94) with time being too limited and a researcher's status too ambiguous to build good relationships with local interlocutors. Like many other anthropologists seeking to conduct long-term fieldwork research, I therefore had to obtain such authorisations.¹⁰

On this point, Mueggler (2001) explains that it took him repeated visits to Yunnan over four years, and months of negotiation, to gain permission to do extended fieldwork in a single location, in the Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture. For the first six months, he was accompanied by one of two 'companions' (Ch. *peitong*) who had been assigned to facilitate his research and report back to his sponsoring institutions on its progress and results. 'After six months,' he wrote, 'I was quietly allowed to continue research on my own' (Mueggler, 2001: 17).

Like Mueggler, I faced the same predicament of having an assigned 'research assistant' (see also Bonnin; Cornet, this issue), but also of being granted only a limited amount of time, since Dulong Valley, close to the Burmese border, was considered a politically sensitive area. I decided to register at Yunnan University and asked officials at the institution to apply on my behalf for a fieldwork authorisation of six months duration. I provided them with a detailed research project in Chinese, and the wait began. It took two months – retrospectively a short time, but then it seemed like an interminable wait – before I heard back from the provincial bureaus for minority affairs (Ch. *Minwei*) and foreign affairs (Ch. *Waiban*). Authorisation was granted for fieldwork research to be conducted over the winter period as I had requested, but only for a period of three months. Yunnan University was responsible for providing me with the required research assistant. Despite these limitations, there was an upside: first, there was a 'risk' that I would have to extend my stay because the

Dulong Valley is usually cut off from the outside world by snow for about six months; and second, Yunnan University was not likely to find someone who would agree to travel to the Dulong Valley, much less spend the winter there. Consequently, I wrote a formal request to extend the authorisation to a period of six months and wrote a letter to Yunnan University stating that I would take responsibility for finding a suitable and linguistically competent research assistant in the valley. To cut a long story short, I got snowed in and stayed for seven months, without an official research assistant. During my stay, I enjoyed unexpected, total freedom. I re-applied for another authorisation for the next winter, had it approved, and was snowed in again. This time, when I arrived in the valley, I did not bother showing my official authorisation, and no one asked for it. Clearly, my status as a researcher was becoming a given, and people were getting used to me.

Given the time limitations of my authorisations, I tried to reproduce the long-term quality of relationships usually developed over a continuous stay of a year or two during a series of repeated stays over a five-year period. I managed to stay in Dulong Valley for a month in 1998, for three months in 1999, during the winter of 1999–2000 for seven months, over the winter of 2000–2001 for four months and, finally, in the winter of 2002–2003 for another three months; a total of a year and a half.

With or without official authorisations, one is always confronted with the problem of how he or she is seen as a 'researcher' by people encountered on the field. As Hansen (2006: 82) suggests, in the Chinese context, the fieldworker walks 'in the footsteps of the Communist Party'; that is, the researcher's presence is embedded in a larger set of power relations. The ways in which local people 'read' this structure of power are informed by their cumulative experiences of interactions with government 'investigators', with whom ethnographers – local or from overseas – are sometimes equated. However, while government policies surely reach deep into the everyday lives of local people, I like to believe that the anthropologist still walks on some unbeaten tracks among the private, intimate or spiritual lives of the people he or she encounters.

'Investigation' has a long history in China. It has been a common practice in particular in Communist China, as exemplified in Mao Zedong's well-known phrase: 'He who makes no investigation has no right to speak' (Ch. *meiyou diaocha jiu meiyou fayan quan*). As several scholars have noted, such terminology can be loaded. A researcher can be perceived as merely 'observing' (Ch. *guancha*) or 'visiting' (Ch. *fangwen*), if in the field for a short period. Fieldwork is often classified as an 'investigation' (Ch. *diaocha*), 'research' (Ch. *yanjiu*) or an 'inspection' (Ch. *kaocha*); the latter term being very familiar to Chinese citizens who have become accustomed to such inspections/investigations into all aspects of their private and social life over the last half-century (see Pieke, 2000: 147; Hansen, 2006: 94). Even the term 'collection' (Ch. *caifang*), when used in the context of field research, goes back to imperial times and the tradition of collecting local songs and legends (see Baptandier, 2001: 14). A researcher can, therefore, easily be equated with investigators whose role is more political, and from whom locals might understandably want to keep secrets.

The fact that I shared villagers' lives, at times worked with them in the fields and, to put it simply, did not conform to the usual attitude of the otherwise distant Chinese (or infrequent foreign) 'investigators', noticeably made a difference. To be clear, my understanding of fieldwork in this context is specifically 'ethnographic fieldwork', that is, an in-depth investigation that implies a long-term personal immersion into a social milieu, far from the Chinese interpretations of 'investigation' noted above.

Among academic colleagues from various institutions in China and especially Yunnan, and among my Chinese friends in Kunming, the fact that I worked with the Drung and resided in their remote valley has often created a kind of wonder-compassion. The Drung swidden farmers are among the poorest minorities in China. Not everyone could cope with the experience of living in this secluded valley where everything – diet, housing, hygiene – is precarious. Acquaintances who had already been there expressed sympathy and affinity; it is undoubtedly an experience that creates bonds. It was like sharing a secret; an incommensurable

experience of an almost initiatory kind. Yet, as Naepels (1998: 187) reminds us, 'the purpose of an investigation is first of all to produce knowledge. By trying to equate ethnographic investigation with initiation, we expose ourselves to be reminded that all initiation is a fraud, and that the only secret it conveys is that there is no secret'.

Nonetheless, something quite specific happens during long-term fieldwork as one's field site becomes the locale of more open dialogue, growing intimacy and engagement. The production of knowledge under these conditions is a process of overcoming one's passivity for a pro-active questioning. This engagement of the researcher will inevitably incur some misunderstandings and mishaps, which may provide for a good laugh for locals, yet at other times, can unfortunately offend. Some blunders, however, such as the one I describe in the following section, can also be very productive.

How the ethnographer became involved

The arrival of the ethnographer – investigator, inspector, or researcher – at his or her fieldwork location usually causes some confusion. While the researcher can be either accepted or rejected, more often than not he or she can gradually negotiate his or her presence, activities and functions. Considering the freedom I enjoyed during my fieldwork research in the Dulong Valley and the very welcoming attitude of most people I encountered, the question of my integration into the community was never too problematic. I could converse freely in Chinese with most, and my Drung language skills were improving. The only censorship hanging over my work in the field was my own self-disciplining (see Yeh, 2006), motivated by an almost unconscious fear that some topics might be sensitive, and that my work could cause problems for my interlocutors. The example I detail below illuminates how the fieldwork experience is inevitably intertwined with existing power structures and how it entails the 'politics of ethnography'.¹¹ My purpose is to reflect on the ethnological experience in order to extract the maximum heuristic effect, not to make the ethnologist into a tragicomic hero.

Will there be a New Year festival?

In the early 1990s, following a decision from the central government, a 'Drung festival' (Ch. *Dulong jie*) was officially added on the list of the festivities offered by the various minorities in China. This 'festival', the Drung's New Year, was arbitrarily set to January 10 of each year, with the Chinese name '*Kaquewa*'. Before this decision, together with other religious practices, the Drung New Year's ritual had been banned by the government for almost 20 years. After being reallocated, a few villages in the Dulong Valley decided to perform it again for several years, but by the time of my fieldwork, beginning in the late 1990s, it had been totally abandoned by local people.

In April of 2000, my first winter in the hamlets of Lemdam and Zungdam (Dizhengdang administrative village) came to an end (see Fig. 2). I decided to gather some of the villagers for a small farewell party. I provided a chicken and a dozen bottles of cheap Chinese liquor bought at the small store to make the traditional local drink for this kind of occasion, the *shara*.¹² With the alcohol flowing, songs and dances began and the elders improvised touching

farewell songs. During the evening, the party cell secretary (Ch. *zhibu shuji*) and others assured me that if I returned the following winter, they would perform the *kraltshang*, the New Year's ritual, the only annual and collective ritual event of the Drung, which they had abandoned for the past six years.

During my 2000 stay, I had had the opportunity on numerous occasions to ask about the *kraltshang*, questioning the oldest villagers on its characteristics, and asking why they did not perform it anymore. The party secretary, in particular, assured me that he wished to re-establish it. I recall, for example, in March 2000, shortly before my departure, he was chatting with his brother, the shaman and head of the commune (Ch. *shezhang*) of Lemdam, in the community's public building (Ch. *cungongsuo*).¹³ I joined them, and during the informal discussion both assured me that next year they would organise the *kraltshang*, but reduced to three days. Formerly, the quantity of beer brewed for the festival was very important and the festivities lasted almost a week. There would be less beer, and this would reduce each family's expenses, one of their main concerns.

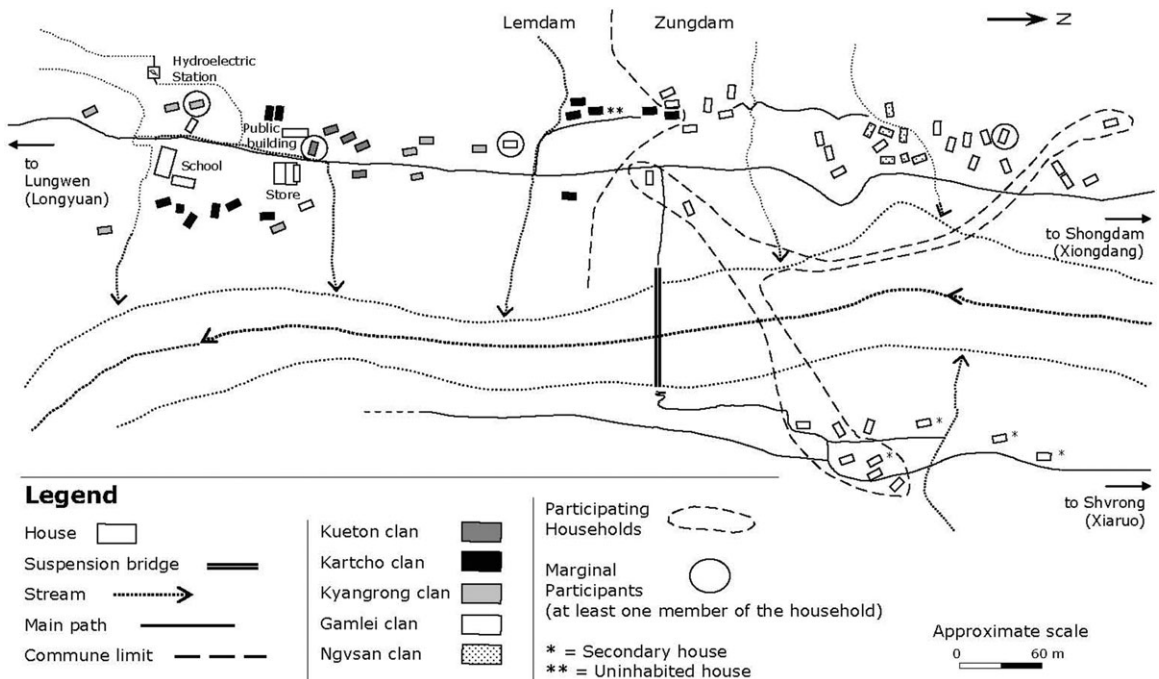


Figure 2. Lemdam and Zungdam hamlets (Dizhengdang administrative village, Dulong Valley) Details show where participants in the *kraltshang* in January 2001 resided.

Others, however, seemed to have little interest in this project. Yet, after my small farewell party, some people assured me that the ritual would take place the following year, and the involvement of the secretary seemed decisive. He repeated this 'invitation' in the following days. Upon reflection, perhaps my presence as an anthropologist had become the incentive that precipitated this decision.

The invitation pushed me to organise another winter visit to begin in November 2000. As agreed, I sent letters to notify the secretary and my closest friends of my planned arrival, and this time, I equipped myself with a video camera to film the New Year celebration. Indeed, electricity had just arrived in the village, thanks to the building of a small hydroelectric power station. On the evening of my arrival in Lemdam, on December 3, 2000, I found the secretary in one of the public building rooms, seated before a small black and white television recently given by the local government as a gift. He told me he had not received my letter. A few days passed, and I asked my friends about the situation. Finally, on December 10, a meeting was organised at my request with the local officials, village chief (Ch. *cunzhang*), Party secretary, and the head of the commune of Lemdam¹⁴ to discuss the organisation of the New Year celebration. The debate focused on who, within the commune of Lemdam, could participate in the *kraltshang*.¹⁵ It was then agreed to hold a small meeting with villagers the next evening, at the commune head's house.

The next day, December 11, few people showed up at the meeting spot; we waited, seated around the fire pit. Speaking in Chinese, I explained that I had returned this year because I had been told that the *kraltshang* would be organised; I did not come to ask the villagers to organise the festival, I had just been told that some wished it, and I wanted to know who would be participating, if anyone. After the officials spoke and expressed their own willingness to reinstitute the New Year celebration, nobody else spoke up. It was decided that since few people came to the meeting, another meeting should be called for the following evening. Everyone was invited to speak.

On both evenings to date, those present principally discussed the number of households in Lemdam that were likely to participate. In the

opinion of the secretary, the village chief, and the head of the commune of Lemdam, a month of preparation was sufficient to prepare the necessary alcohol and the cloth used as ritual flags. This would not adversely impact family economies, they decided. It would also suffice to make a 'reasonable' amount of beer so as not to waste grain.

The following evening, December 12, again at the house of the head of the commune of Lemdam, almost all households were represented, but few men were present, leaving the burden of attending the meeting to women. Everyone, children included, sat around the fire, the flickering flames illuminating their faces. That evening, I refrained from speaking while officials spoke, one after another.¹⁶

The secretary:

He's coming to study our *nationality*, Drung *culture, customs*, [. . .] and he comes this year to see if we want to perform the *kraltshang* or not. That is why he comes. So we, to see whether we can do it, if people want to do it, we organized this meeting. [. . .] He himself is writing on the Drung and their *customs*. What he wants to know is if there are people who want to do it; if everyone agrees and wants to do it, then he will *film* it and later the children can watch it. That is what he has come to do.¹⁷

We Drung people, what our parents used to do before, the generation of our grandchildren and us who come after, perhaps we do not know anymore. [. . .] So if you want to do it, he will collect everything, he will *film*, and later [. . .] we will be able to see the elders' way. [. . .] I do not have much to say.¹⁸

After a moment of silence, the village chief, seated to the right of the secretary, spoke in his usual low and quiet voice:

The village chief:

The Secretary has just said: Yesterday evening Duri Song¹⁹ explained why he came, and the secretary just said it. [. . .] The most important thing is the *kraltshang*. Formerly, in the *Dulong valley, festivals* of one kind or another, there were none. This is the only one. Now it has been decided that January 10 is the *kraltshang festival*.²⁰ The *Provincial Task Force* had already made the remark: Nobody knows what the Drung *festival* is. [. . .]

Each spot must have its *particularities*, this is what to do. People who travel, they go where it's fun, where there is a peculiarity. Are we going to do it or not? How do we do it? We must discuss it tonight. [. . .] One man alone cannot decide, so then [among] those [present], who wants to do it? This is why we meet.

The head of the commune:

I do not have much to say. Here, in our place [village], what were the ways in the days of old, we do not anymore. Our own *customs*, how should they be done? We do not know. [. . .] What comes from the elders, if we do not keep it for our grandchildren generations, they will not know what it is. That's what I think. We need many people to do it. [. . .] Well, I do not have much to say.

After the speeches by the local leaders, the villagers remained silent for a long time. A woman finally took the floor. She said her family would not participate. First, this year, they had very little buckwheat,²¹ and second, there was not enough time to weave the cloth necessary for the ritual. 'Nobody can do [weave] so quickly, it's wearing your hands out!' Another woman nodded, adding that they did not have enough buckwheat either. In turn, a man noted that, as he was about to repair his house, he would not have time to get prepared. Then a young man explained that since his family had become Christians, they simply would not be involved, adding that if he had not been Christian, he would have joined in. Finally, a few other comments foreshadowed that the New Year Festival would not occur.

Villagers' concerns about the expenses for mounting the festival were easily understandable, considering that most households relied solely on their farming activities (mainly on rotational swidden fields), with almost no opportunity for cash income. Living just above the national poverty line, most Drung are regular beneficiaries for government subsidies.²² Making a large quantity of fermented alcohol, providing pork meat and the roughly 10 kilos of buckwheat flour required to make ritual figurines would have been an extra stress on their limited resources. Moreover, for ritualistic reasons, re-establishing the *kraltshang*

requires performing it for three consecutive years, a far greater commitment than a one-off event.

As I had sensed, what had evolved was a situation in reverse of the intended invitation extended to me for the ritual celebration. The anthropologist had not come back just to attend the New Year's festival, he became its sponsor. Among the villagers who were present, however, most were aware of the initial situation and the discussions of the previous year, as well as the secretary's invitation in particular. But when the secretary spoke at the second evening meeting, he spoke as if on my behalf. It became obvious that the event was no longer about concretising a wish coming from some villagers, or even from the secretary alone, but to meet an external demand. I, the anthropologist, was then presented as a stakeholder in a larger process of promoting a 'festival' typical of Drung 'culture'.

The use of Chinese terms during the meeting – 'nationality, culture, customs, festivals' – which otherwise took place in the Drung language, is in itself significant. My work, like the importance of this 'festival', was discussed through a specific vocabulary that showed the pervasiveness of official discourse on minority cultures. It provided the framework through which these local officials conceived of both the possibility and the significance of re-establishing the New Year's festival. Several people, officials at other administrative levels in the region and elsewhere, had already pushed for the New Year's festival to be practised again. At the same time, another issue had started to appear, namely the potential association of tourism with the promotion of cultural heritage. This was slowly beginning to surface in the local government's discourse about possible development alternatives for the Dulong valley. In addition, I was to write about Drung 'culture' and, better yet, film the ritual (see Fig. 3). This was considered important by the local officials as it would serve not only to disseminate and promote this event, but also facilitate the inter-generational transfer of knowledge and practices from the ancestors to younger generations.²³

However, I could not fulfil the position attributed to me. During these meetings, I considered myself primarily an 'observer', outside



Figure 3. Setting up the video camera before an interview, winter 2001 (photo by Wang Xiaogang)

the discussions and decisions. The day after the final group meeting I went to see Denba with whom I was fairly close. He himself had been party secretary for the administrative village (including Lemdam, Zungdam, and also other hamlets) and was now retired. Residing in Zungdam, he was one of those whose voice was still heard, if sometimes also teased for his elocution. I found Denba at home drinking with a friend. He immediately came and sat beside me and spoke spontaneously about the case. He had heard of the meetings (which he did not attend because he is not a member of the commune of Lemdam). He stressed his disagreement with the attitude of the secretary and village chief. 'They are not doing their jobs,' he said, adding:

Now, you, here is what you should say: 'You told me you would do the *kraltshang* if I came back. Now I'm here.' If they want to, there is nothing they cannot do. They are the leaders, they must *mobilise* everyone. [. . .] When you

speak, you must make yourself heard. Say things clearly. Knock, like that, with your finger on the tripod [of the fireplace]. When we do that, it is so the higher spirits can hear.

He told me he himself was ready to perform the *kraltshang*, but that the ceremony would only consist of a few households, including relatives who would follow his lead.

Thus, some villagers were suggesting that the secretary was not a man of his word, not a good leader. Some exhorted me to intervene, to bang my fist on the table (or rather to finger tap on the tripod of the fireplace), which I refused to do for ethical reasons; I had never commissioned the festival and did not want to intervene as its promoter. However, I was now overtaken by events that had made me the initiator of this project. I found myself involved in this case when I wanted to remain 'outside the scope'. Despite the relative exteriority that I managed to keep up during my previous visits, the ideal of the 'atopy of the ethnographer'²⁴ was, at least temporarily, ruined. From another point of view, it was an opportunity to become aware of certain external pressures on the village communities, to which I seemed to contribute, and of different sources of internal tensions. This event certainly turned into a heuristic blunder.

It remained unlikely that the *kraltshang* would be organised in Lemdam. Given the situation, Denba and his relatives of the nearby commune of Zungdam told me that they would do it in Zungdam instead. However, on January 13,²⁵ Pung, Denba's nephew and a close friend of mine, told me that there was a problem: since the *kraltshang* was originally intended to be held in Lemdam, some people might be jealous (in Drung (Dr.) *neq ku*) if it happened in Zungdam. It had to be ensured that, on the one hand, local officials agreed and gave their permission and that, on the other hand, the head of the commune of Lemdam, a shaman, would keep a favourable attitude. Indeed, above all, people feared that if he became jealous, his spirit helpers could cause trouble. Therefore, at Pung's request, I went to find the local officials, party secretary, village head, and the heads of both Lemdam and Zungdam communes, to arrange another meeting.

This new meeting took place on the evening of January 13, in the public building where I

was still temporarily living. It was important that local officials give their explicit approval and clarify their standpoint, for the choice of Zungdam had caused tensions and revealed that there was more at stake than just the political decision to revive a cultural practice that had fallen into disuse. Many other concerns were emerging: personal rivalries, the challenge to local authority, saving face for local leaders, difficulties within the household economy, the role occupied by women, doubts about the effectiveness of the ritual, fear of offending the spirits, and the like. In fact, a complex set of determinants had arisen that were shaping the possibilities for action and the interests of each person involved.

It became clear that Denba, together with his relatives and some neighbours, had decided to perform the *kraltshang*. The purpose of this meeting was therefore to ensure that this decision would not provoke tension or face opposition. Since I was asked to call the meeting (it could have been perceived as a provocation if someone else had taken the initiative), it was also evident that I was expected to put pressure on the local officials. Considering that my involvement was already irreversible, and that this meeting could help clarify pre-existing positions and decisions, I decided to go ahead with it.

I spoke first, and this time, following Denba's advice, I addressed the party secretary, reminding him that he had said last year that the *kraltshang* would happen this year. It was up to them, the local leaders, to come to a decision. Once I had finished speaking there was silence, and nobody wanted to speak. The party secretary commented that people, whatever he said to mobilise them, were not listening. Then, after a pause, he spoke.

The secretary:

At Lemdam it does not seem possible. For some, there is not enough buckwheat, others have no cloth, others no gongs. [...] If there are four or five houses it is enough [...] we need an *open mind*, we have nothing to fear about spirits now [...] that we call the spirits or not, even if it has been a long time [...]

The head of the Lemdam commune took the floor right after that and began speaking in an

increasingly strong voice, mixing Drung and Chinese more than usual:

I've already said that I agreed to do it, so I have nothing more to say [...]

(Addressing his brother, the secretary) Spirits! What spirits? Look, Duri Song came, and *he has a hope*, it is to *film* the Drung festival. If we don't do it, it does not *make sense*! Huh? *You are a leading cadre*, if we cannot do it, it *makes no sense*! Huh? This is a *custom*, it is something from the generation of our parents, our grandparents. If everybody cannot do it, some should; if we don't do it, it *makes no sense*. [...] We spent two nights, people do not listen, what can I do? *I want to do it!* But I alone, how could I [...] The *kraltshang festival*, the *kraltshang festival* [...] *Now there is no more Drung festival!*

The head of the commune of Zungdam then spoke in a calm and steady voice that contrasted sharply with the outburst and provocative tone of the previous speech. He made clear that since there had been no discussion about organising the festival in Zungdam, one could not expect them to do it.

Then, Denba began to speak, using a lot of formulations in Chinese as well:

I am a *retired cadre*, [then] it's hard to *pronounce myself* [...] the *key issue* is, that the *central government*, the *Provincial Board*, said that *each nationality is free* [...] *one or the other cannot interfere*, we cannot interfere in the *customs of the nationalities* [...] *I believe it is like this*. Alcohol is for oneself, eating is for oneself [...] The problem is that *time is too short*.

The head of Lemdam commune: 'Yes, the two meetings have failed, so now there is no more time [...]'

Denba:

The authorities in the *sub-prefecture*, the *prefecture* said 'do it, you must do your own *nationality's customs*' [...] our own particular *nationality's specificity*, we must do it. [...] I am a *retired cadre*, I cannot talk much [...] we must *restore* our own *nationality's peculiarities* ourselves. [...] The *key problem*, it is the *leaders*, you two, you've not quite *taken action*. *The people must be mobilised*.

The head of the Lemdam commune: 'Yes, *leaders* must mobilise the people!'

The secretary: 'But we've tried! And we could not mobilise them! . . . I said what was necessary at the meetings!'

Everyone began talking at once. The secretary, since the remarks were directed at him, began to speak loudly and the tone escalated. The head of Lemdam commune joined Denba in his remarks, and said that in Lemdam he was the only one willing to do it; the secretary replied that in his case, he actually had no more fabric; he had given it away . . .

Denba:

That's what I think . . . You, the leaders, have you spoken well? Are you saying the right thing? [. . .] Let those who want to do it do it, and those who do not want to do it should not oppose it!

The head of Lemdam commune: 'That is well spoken.'

Denba: 'We cannot oppose those who would do it!'

The secretary: 'This is a *custom of our nationality*, how could we be opposed to it?'

The meeting ended shortly after without, it seemed to me, a clear decision. I was surprised to see the secretary obviously delighted, and he seemed to take credit for the success of the operation. He brought along a bottle of alcohol to celebrate with Pung and myself, the only ones left. I began to understand that, tacitly, Denba had managed to ensure that the *kraltshang* could happen in Zungdam. The issue was settled.

Village micropolitics

'We have nothing to fear about spirits now . . . that we call the spirits or not, even if it has been a long time . . . ' the secretary had noted. His words clearly showed that feeding into each other's fears had to be avoided. These fears stemmed primarily from the potential danger of 'awakening' (Dr. *sat*) the spirits of the mountains, after having abandoned the ritual for several years. On the other hand, the potential harmful actions of a dissatisfied, or jealous, shaman were also feared. Then, as if he felt targeted, the head of Lemdam commune (and a

shaman) had spoken and specifically addressed his brother, the secretary, as he exclaimed: 'Spirits! What spirits?' Certainly, he knew he could be the object of suspicion.

During my previous stay, some villagers in Lemdam had told me that they thought it abnormal that the head of their commune practiced 'superstitions' (Ch. *mixin*). This was a very politically correct way to indicate their disagreement with him. His behaviour was sometimes threatening, but since he was a shaman, no one dared to openly oppose him. I was told that at times he predicted the onset of fatal diseases. Those who were frightened offered him gifts and invited him to come and perform the appropriate ritual. During discussions I had with villagers, they made references to the official negative discourse on 'superstitions' and commented that shamans were not good any more but instead were harmful. This, it seems, was a matter of dispute between the two brothers, the party secretary and the head of the commune.

Most villagers were reluctant to revive the *kraltshang*. Despite all the benefits they could obtain, appealing to the spirits of the mountains was potentially dangerous. Their fear referred to the ambivalence of the mountain spirits; providers of goods and protectors, these spirits are nevertheless capable of mischief. The importance of mastering the ritual language was crucial to the performance of the *kraltshang*. I was told repeatedly that it was better to be silent than to utter awkwardly. Even the elders feared performing the incantations improperly. Nevertheless, the minority of villagers who had decided to organise the *kraltshang* were not afraid to re-do the ritual. From their point of view, only those who failed to do so could provoke 'the anger' (Dr. *svna sai*) of the La and fall victim to diseases, even death.

It was evident that the choice between Lemdam and Zungdam as the ritual site had become a source of conflict. There was no past rivalry between the two communes as such, but certainly some tensions and competition between local lineages. It was necessary to spare the secretary, who had initiated the idea, so that he could save face and still appear publicly as a promoter of the festival. More importantly, it was critical to assess the threat posed by his brother, the shaman. For those about to prepare for the ritual, all feelings of rivalry or

jealousy had to be dispelled. Within the village, those who eventually did perform the ritual for three days in late January were of the same lineage (Gamlei clan), a solidarity that extended to some neighbours of the same clan and one matrimonial ally (Kueton clan) who, together with the party secretary (Kartcho clan), joined as marginal participants (refer to Fig. 2).

It remained that the majority of the villagers did not actually want to perform the *kraltshang*. The secretary thought he could 'mobilise' everybody the way he had done to implement top-down government policies. However, despite his official status, he was not recognised as a 'good orator', the traditional figure of village leader, and neither was Denba. Villagers were concerned that the ritual involved a significant economic investment. The household economy was foremost on their minds since the government had successively launched several development plans in the late 1990s, and state discourse on agricultural profitability, good household management, and savings had started to have an undeniable influence. In addition to these economic aspects, villagers also called into question the benefits of collective action as well as the efficacy of the ritual. This time, contrary to when they had performed the *kraltshang* again in the early 1990s, there was no collective will whatsoever to revive the ritual. Religious life because of official criticism of 'superstitions' was now based solely on the management of the hazards of personal misfortune in the private sphere. With the disappearance of the *kraltshang*, each household was still able to perform rituals according to its needs, and these specific actions were likely to provide the same benefits.

Although the above example gives only a partial glimpse of what was a complex and multi-faceted situation, it highlights the power relations that an event like the organisation of a once-forbidden and then-abandoned ritual can generate or bring to the surface. It also demonstrates how Chinese cultural policy, by promoting specific aspects considered typical of minority cultures, is echoed locally among the Drung. In addition, this episode reflects local history, specifically the increasing neglect of the *kraltshang* and the role that some villagers played in its demise; it also highlights the demarcation of relevant social units, both in

social relationships, in general, and in rituals, in particular. Far from being purely anecdotal, this experience brought together some essential aspects of the ethnographic situation.

The politics of ethnography and the continuation of fieldwork

Throughout this series of events, I came to realise my increasing involvement in the field. My relationships with some villagers began to have an impact on my research and, in fact, direct it. The route taken by the discussions about the festival, what it revealed about power relations and authority in the village, the issues it raised vis-à-vis livelihood means, attitudes towards religious practices, and of course the New Year's ritual itself, all became central to my fieldwork research and increased my involvement in village life. What do I make of these interwoven aspects of intimacy and engagement?

To me, this event constitutes a blunder; one that required me to carefully negotiate my positionality and local power relations, as I, the ethnographer, was put in a position to request the villagers to perform a ritual. Was it a total mistake to have taken the secretary seriously when he boasted that he could mobilise people for the organisation of the *kraltshang*? Did I go beyond my role as an ethnographer? Or was my presence manipulated? Obviously, things were not that simple, but clearly my 'participation' went beyond the limits imposed by my own methodology and ethical standards. The situation escaped me. At that point, even if the ritual had not taken place, the chain of events itself and its several levels of meanings became an object of research.

All the events in the led up to the *kraltshang* helped me to develop a clear map of local solidarities and tensions and, with this understanding, to reflect on my positionality. Naepels (1998: 193) suggests that, while consisting of 'relations of meaning and social relations, the ethnographic relationship can keep a scientific value if we are aware of its conditions, its limitations, but also of its horizon: the construction of a selfless presence, a strange strangeness'.²⁶ This rule of externality amounts to admitting that we 'ideally' do not interfere in the field of study. This obviously introduces a paradox: the

ideal of objectivity and of maintaining a 'view from afar' is based on a method – ethnography – that requires, or naturally leads to, intimate relationships.

As Maria Svensson (2006) points out regarding empathy and friendship during fieldwork in the Chinese context, there is always a risk that one's sympathy and interest can give rise to unrealistic expectations (see also Beer, 2001). She thus asks: 'is the detached researcher really the only and the morally best or most "scientific" role model? Can and should one be completely neutral, or is this just an illusion?' (2006: 270). As my own experience has revealed, blunders and failures are difficult to avoid in the field, even when, in my case, I wanted to remain at a certain distance from the debates going on around me. I soon found that in the research process, complete detachment – or even partial as I had strived for – is an illusion, and there is no pure objectivity to be attained. As I became part of an intricate web of social and power relationships, I had to work hard to maintain a certain distance if I wanted to comprehend the broader social dynamic of the event, and not just my role in it.

Research can be significantly transformed by context. A crisis can be incorporated into the focus of an investigation, or even become a lens through which to capture something fundamental about the social life of a community. As an 'event', the problems surrounding the 'festival' I encountered was intricately tied up with a myriad of events that constitute its context. At the village level, it almost constituted a 'total event', in that it 'creates its own context and determines the meaning and significance of all other happenings' (Pieke, 2000: 135). Furthermore, one might argue that, given the circumstances, I produced the event. During fieldwork, my presence *created* an opportunity, and after fieldwork, as I reflect on my experiences and try to present them as an anthropological 'object', I am *creating* meaning. Indeed, the meetings and the events as a whole became a 'site' in that they afford a particular view of the cultural landscape, a 'cultural synthesis' so to speak (Metcalf, 2001). As a synthesis, the chain of events I encountered gives clues to 'how people put together their worlds despite the disjunct elements that make it up'. It illustrates how such an experience 'involves multiple motivations all

working themselves out at the same time in a seamless flow of social action – just what anthropologists have always confronted in fieldwork' (Metcalf, 2001: 169). In other words, it was both a unique and exemplary event.

Conclusion

Back from the field, the researcher faces constraints from at least two different sources during the writing-up phase. The ethnographer needs to remain faithful and respectful to his or her host community; as well as following the rules of writing and scientificity of his or her own academic community back home. The act of reflecting on the interactions between the researcher's will to achieve in-depth knowledge and the ways in which his or her will can be thwarted, contained, or diverted is both an epistemological necessity and a heuristic procedure. This epistemological vigilance opens the possibility of taking advantage of what accidentally happens, or what was first imposed, and turning the constraints into an instrument of knowledge production.

A seldom acknowledged reality of fieldwork are the ethnographers' 'little failures' and blunders. As I have emphasised through the detailed description of such a blunder, the field researcher can learn a lot from accidents and unexpected events, as long as the experience can be considered as part of a larger series of events and treated as a creative process, not just the expression of some 'cultural' logic.

Beyond the level of local and ethnographic politics, the chain of events triggered by my blunder illustrated many facets of the minority situation in China. In the People's Republic of China, 'minority nationalities' refers to a sociological and political reality, a way of being in the Chinese society as a whole, which should not just be considered through its economic and political aspects. There are many symbolic aspects to what it means to be a 'minority nationality', involving groups that are part of wider society and the latter's representations and cultural norms. The relationships implied by the minority situation are also exchanges of goods, power, people and words. While they sometimes lead to power struggles, they are also defined by the use of dominant references and values, which are sometimes shared or at least

constitute everyday realities. The heuristic value of an event like the one that took place around the Drung 'festival', therefore, lies in its potential to reveal how the Drung people find a place of their own, while also revealing my role as an ethnographer in the process.

Notes

- 1 Translated from the original: '*la gaffe pourrait être à l'ethnologie ce que l'erreur est aux sciences dites exactes, non point un défaut de la pensée mais, de fait, une condition de son exercice*'.
- 2 The ideas put forth in this paper first took root during a presentation I gave at the *Atelier des doctorants* (University of Nanterre, Paris 10) in April 2002, thanks to remarks by participants and by Guillaume Rozenberg, in particular. More recently, in June 2009, I presented some of these ideas at the seminar of the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie et d'Histoire de l'Institution de la Culture (LAHIC, CNRS) and am thankful to the participants for their useful comments. Earlier drafts of this paper greatly benefited from comments by Sarah Turner, Andrea Quong, Christine Bonnin, Candice Cornet, Gérard Toffin, and two anonymous reviewers. All shortcomings remain my own.
- 3 Among the impressive number of recent contributions to the field of Chinese Studies, within anthropology the following works can provide a useful overview of the last decade of scholarship: Harrell (2001), Blum (2002, 2006), Hill (2006), Liu (2006), Walsh (2009). For an interesting account of collaborative work in minority areas, see Ayi *et al.* (2007).
- 4 Little has been written about the Drung (Dulong) in Western languages. For a detailed description of their socio-cultural characteristics, see Gros (2001, 2004, 2005, 2009).
- 5 Autonomous regions (prefectures and counties) are administrative units with significant minority populations (officially recognised as 'nationalities,' Ch. *minzu*) whose members are represented at each administrative level; this, however, does not counter-balance the top-down style of policymaking in the PRC. See, for example, Heberer (1989).
- 6 These imaginings are of course not uncommon, but only uncommonly acknowledged; see Fabian (1983), Thomas (1989). On the 'search for the Drung people', see Brackenbury (1998); and for a recent, unambiguous reiteration of this kind of romanticism about the Drung people (Tarong) living in Burma, see Rabinowitz (2001). For a discussion of the representations of the Drung (Dulong) in China, see Gros (2001).
- 7 Such militia organised at the administrative village level and composed exclusively of Drung people have since disappeared.
- 8 Since then, the local government has been moved from Bapo in the south of the valley to the village of Kongdang in the centre of the valley, where the newly built road begins (since fall 1999).
- 9 Even in a place like central Tibet where one would expect clear regulations to exist, Yeh (2006: 99) mentions that when organising her fieldwork in Lhasa, 'there seemed to be no uniform regulations or understanding of what exactly could constitute proper official documentation for a systematic village study.'
- 10 Not all anthropologists have had to obtain official authorisation to conduct fieldwork research. Not surprisingly, in their writings, they rarely acknowledge the specifics of how they have been able to conduct fieldwork.
- 11 In this regard, I found Caplan's (1988) discussion stimulating, as well as Toffin's (1990) critique of the extreme relativism of some postmodern approaches. See also Olivier de Sardan (1995) for fieldwork methodology.
- 12 *Shara* (lit. meat/liquor) consists of frying a chicken previously cut into small pieces until golden brown, then pouring alcohol on it. The drink, much appreciated by everyone, is ready when it comes to a boil.
- 13 The public building, located in Lemdam near the school and the store (see Fig. 2), is usually used for meetings and to accommodate people if necessary. It is theoretically the office of the party secretary and village chief. It is a wooden building consisting of four rooms. I have stayed there at times in a room that contained two bed frames, one table and a chair, and a small pile of useless things in the back corner.
- 14 All are Drung and from this village. In terms of hierarchy, the party secretary is the highest position. The village chief has no real authority, whereas the head of the commune is usually in charge of issues related to his commune's economy. Both the party secretary and the village chiefs are appointed at the level of the administrative village, made of a cluster of hamlets, including Lemdam and Zungdam.
- 15 Lemdam and Zungdam are administratively two distinct but adjacent 'communes' (Ch. *she*) within Dizhengdang administrative village, each made up of about 25 households (see Fig. 2). The *kraltshang* would apparently take place only in one of the two. Therefore, during these meetings, the head of the second commune and its inhabitants were not invited to join.
- 16 Drung language was used during these meetings, together with an interesting choice of Chinese words mixed in. In the dialogues that follow, the significant instances of Chinese terms are indicated in italics. I have tried to keep the oral quality of the speeches in the translations.
- 17 Until then, the secretary spoke not so much on his behalf as on mine, restating (or transforming) what I said the night before. I decided not to interfere.
- 18 This last sentence (*ago bv-bv geuq-sa mv-al* in Drung) is a formulation used to start or finish a speech.
- 19 Duri Song is the Drung name I was given: Duri/2nd born, Song/personal name.
- 20 It is here referred to the official calendar of minority nationalities festivals. As mentioned earlier, the Drung New Year, under the Chinese name *Kaquewa*, has been arbitrarily fixed to January 10 of every year. According to tradition, even if the right period for the *kraltshang* corresponds to January, there is no fixed date for the ritual.

- 21 Ritual figurines made during the New Year's ritual need to be shaped with one variety of buckwheat to the exclusion of all other types of grain.
- 22 On the current economic situation of the Drung people, see Gros (2005).
- 23 I organised regular screenings of my footage.
- 24 I am here borrowing Naepels' (1998) expression to characterise the ideal of investigation (sociological or ethnographical) as trying to keep some necessary distance.
- 25 After the first series of meetings, this pause ensued because, as required by the local government, the men departed to do 'volunteer' (mandatory) work to dig the road in Kongdang (Krongdam), down in the centre of the valley, a three-days' walk. They were absent for about a month.
- 26 'Rapport de sens et rapport social, la relation ethnographique ne peut conserver une valeur scientifique que si nous avons conscience de ses conditions, de ses limites, mais aussi de son horizon: la construction d'une présence désintéressée, d'une étrange étrangeté'.

References

- Ayi, B., S. Harrell and M. Lunzi (2007) *Fieldwork connections: The fabric of ethnographic collaboration in China and America*. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press.
- Baptandier, B. (2001) En guise d'introduction: Chine et anthropologie, *Ateliers* (24): 9–27.
- Beer, B. (2001) Anthropology of friendship, in N. J. Smelser and P. B. Baltes (eds.), *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*, pp. 5805–5808. Kidlington, England: Elsevier.
- Blum, S.D. (2002) Margins and centers: A decade of publishing on China's ethnic minorities, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61(4): 1287–1310.
- Blum, S.D. (2006) In and out of the ethnographer's shadow: 'Native' identity and the anthropology of China, *Reviews in Anthropology* 35(1): 79–95.
- Brackenbury, W. (1998) *Yak butter and black tea: A journey into forbidden China*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books.
- Caplan, P. (1988) Engendering knowledge: The politics of ethnography (parts 1 and 2), *Anthropology Today* 4(5): 8–12, 4(6): 14–17.
- Fabian, J. (1983) *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gros, S. (2001) Du politique au pittoresque en Chine. À propos des Dulong, nationalité minoritaire du Yunnan, *Ateliers* (24): 28–68.
- Gros, S. (2004) The politics of names: The identification of the Dulong of Northwest Yunnan (China), *China Information* 18(2): 275–302.
- Gros, S. (2005) Le nouveau partage du monde. Pauvreté et dépendance dans les marges du Yunnan (Chine), *Moussons* (8): 61–88.
- Gros, S. (2009) Le lieu du pouvoir. Mémoire et enjeu de l'histoire chez les Drung du Yunnan (Chine), in G. Krauskopff (ed.), *Les faiseurs d'histoires*, pp. 187–215. Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie.
- Hansen, M.H. (2006) In the footsteps of the communist party: Dilemmas and strategies, in M. Heimer and S. Thøgersen (eds), *Doing fieldwork in China*, pp. 81–95. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Harrell, S. (2001) The anthropology of reform and the reform of anthropology: Anthropological narratives of recovery and progress in China, *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* 30: 139–161.
- Heberer, T. (1989) *China and its national minorities: Autonomy or assimilation?* Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharp.
- Heimer, M. and S. Thøgersen (eds) (2006) *Doing fieldwork in China*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Hill, A.M. (2006) Defining difference from China's margins, *Reviews in Anthropology* 35(1): 97–104.
- Jamin, J. (1986) Du ratage comme heuristique ou l'autorité de l'ethnologue, *Études rurales* (101–102): 337–341.
- Liu, X. (ed.) (2006) *New reflections on anthropological studies of (greater) China*. Berkeley, California: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.
- McCarthy, S. (2009) *Communist multiculturalism. Ethnic revival in Southwest China*. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press.
- Metcalfe, P. (2001) Global 'disjuncture' and the 'sites' of anthropology, *Cultural Anthropology* 16(2): 165–182.
- Mueggler, E. (2001) *The age of wild ghosts: Memory, violence, and place in Southwest China*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Naepels, M. (1998) Une étrange étrangeté: Remarques sur la situation ethnographique, *L'Homme* 38(148): 185–200.
- Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. (1995) La politique du terrain: Sur la production des données en anthropologie, *Enquête* (1): 71–119.
- Pieke, F. (2000) Serendipity: Reflections on fieldwork in China, in P. Dresch, W. James and D. Parkin (eds), *Anthropologists in a wider world, essays on field research*, pp. 129–150. New York: Berghahn Book.
- Rabinowitz, A. (2001) *Beyond the last village: A journey of discovery in Asia's forbidden wilderness*. Washington, DC: Island Press (Shearwater Book).
- Smith, J.N. (2006) Maintaining margins: The politics of ethnographic fieldwork in Chinese central Asia, *The China Journal* (56): 131–147.
- Svensson, M. (2006) Ethical dilemmas: Balancing distance with involvement, in M. Heimer and S. Thøgersen (eds), *Doing fieldwork in China*, pp. 262–280. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Thomas, N. (1989) *Out of time: History and evolution in anthropological discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toffin, G. (1990) Le Degré zéro de l'ethnologie, *L'Homme* 113(30-1): 138–150.
- Walsh, E. (2009) Anthropology of China's frontier: From the periphery to the center, *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17(1): 109–114.
- Yeh, E.T. (2006) 'An open Lhasa welcomes you': Disciplining the researcher in Tibet, in M. Heimer and S. Thøgersen (eds), *Doing fieldwork in China*, pp. 96–109. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Glossary of Chinese terms:

Central government (*Zhongyang* 中央)
 Collection (*caifang* 采访)
 Companions, guide (research assistant) (*peitong* 陪同)
 Connections (*guanxi* 关系)
 County (*xian* 县)
 Culture (*wenhua* 文化)
 Customs (*fengsu* 风俗)
 Customs (*xiguan* 习惯)
 Drung festival (*Dulong jie* 独龙节)
 Each nationality is free (*ge ge minzu shi ziyou* 各个民族是自由)
 Festival (*jie* 节)
 Film (*pai* 拍)
 Foreign Affairs (*Waiban* 外办)
 He has a hope (*ta you yi ge xiwang* 他有一个希望)
 He who makes no investigation has no right to speak (*meiyou diaocha jiu meiyou fayan quan* 没有调查就没有发言权)
 Head of commune (*shezhang* 社长)
 I want to do it (*wo yuanyi zuo* 我愿意做)
 Inspection (*kaocha* 考察)
 Investigation (*diaocha* 调查)
 It's hard to pronounce myself (*fabiao shi nan de* 发表是难的)
 Key issue (*guanjian wenti* 关键问题)
Kraltshang (*Kaqueswa* 卡雀哇)
 Leading cadres (*lingdao ganbu* 领导干部)
 Make sense (*daoli* 道理)
 Minority affairs (*Minwei* 民委)
 Nationality (*minzu* 民族)

Now there is no more Drung festival (*xianzai meiyou diao le dulong jieri* 现在没有掉了独龙节日)
 Observe (*guancha* 观察)
 One or the other cannot interfere (*yi ge ren, liang ge ren shi bu neng ganshi* 一个人, 两个人是不能干涉)
 Open mind (*sixiang kaifang* 思想开放)
 Opinion (*yijian* 意见)
 Oppose (*fandui* 反对)
 Particularities (*tese* 特色)
 Party cell secretary (*zhibu shuji* 支部书记)
 People's assembly (*Renda* 人大)
 Provincial board (*Shengwei* 省委)
 Provincial task force (*gongzuo dui* 工作队)
 Public building (*cungongsuo* 村公所)
 Research (*yanjiu* 研究)
 Restore (*huifu* 恢复)
 Retired cadre (*tuixiu ganbu* 退休干部)
 Superstitions (*mixin* 迷信)
 Take action (*tuixing* 推行)
 The people must be mobilised (*renmin yao fadong qilai* 人民要发动起来)
 There is no more time now (*xianzai laibuji le* 现在来不及了)
 Time is too short (*shijian tai jin* 时间太紧)
 Township (*xiang* 乡)
 Useful (*zuoyong* 作用)
 Village head (*cunzhang* 村长)
 Visit (*fangwen* 访问)
 We cannot interfere in the customs of the nationalities (*minzu xiguan shi bu neng ganshi* 民族习惯是不能干涉)
 You are a leading cadre (*ni zuo wei yi ge lingdao ganbu* 你作为一个领导干部)