CHAPTER 1

First Things First: Research Orientation and Background Information on Two Yi Communities in Southwest China

As the first chapter of the first psychological investigation of the two religious communities of the Yi, secluded deep in the mountains of Southwest China, this propaedeutic has the important task of orienting the reader. We begin with an introduction to the purpose and scope of this psychological investigation, and the theoretical framework of our study. Next, we give an overview of the historical background of the Yi, their native Bimo tradition, and the spread of Christianity in Southwest China near the end of the nineteenth century. Then we take the reader on a tour to the two research sites—Meigu and Luquan. Lastly, we outline our research protocol of the mixed method approach, which consists of both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Scope of Our Study: An Unusual Blend of Approaches

This study is a multilayered endeavor, which consists of the warp of theoretical prediction on the one hand, and the weft of phenomenological analysis on the other. These two approaches differ in their levels of analysis. The theoretical approach is abstract and removed from the phenomenal world, whereas the phenomenological approach is deeply immersed in fieldwork, capitalizing on an empathic understanding of

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the participants in the study. This difference in levels of abstraction may be understood in terms of two types of observations—the bird's eye view and the worm's eye view. Corresponding to the theoretical approach, the bird's-eye perspective gains an overview of things, but does not dwell on details. Corresponding to the phenomenological approach, the worm's eye view capitalizes on experiential learning, counting each tree on its way to knowledge. These two approaches rarely collaborate in the field; and it is this unusual and synergistic combination of the two that sets this study apart from run-of-the-mill psychological studies.

Theoretical Framework

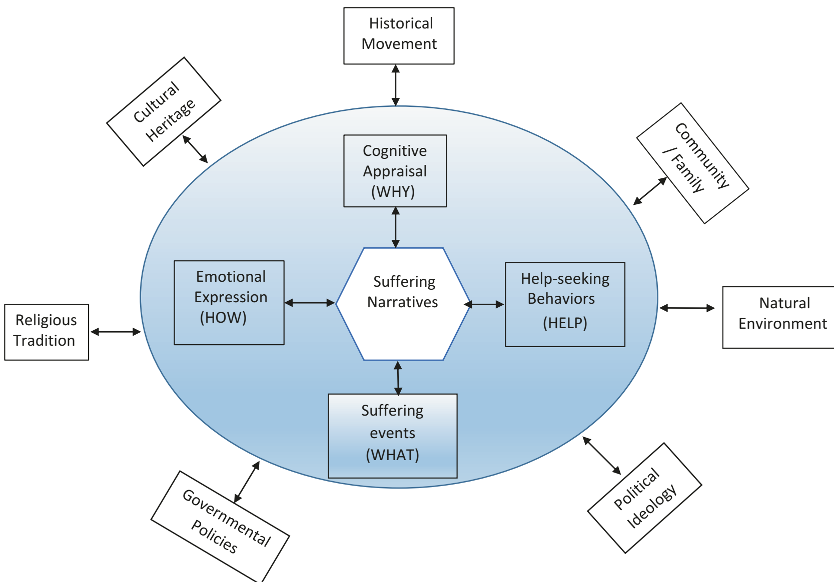
The theoretical framework that guides this study is ecological rationality (Todd et al. 2012), which posits that cognitive styles shape different types of adaptation in response to varying environmental demands, as well as being shaped by them. This theory is extended by Sundararajan (2015) to explain the difference in cognitive styles across cultures, using strong versus weak ties as ecological niches to replace collectivistic versus individualistic societies/cultures. We here adopt and adapt it further to explain the difference in suffering experiences between two religious communities among the Yi in Southwest China. More specifically, the theory predicts that the differences between the two Yi communities fall along the divide between cognitive styles privileged by strong ties versus weak ties, respectively (see Table 1.1).

The various cognitive components of suffering, as shown in Table 1.1, will be further examined in Chaps. 3–5 according to the scales we constructed (What, Why, How, Help). In addition, there are other contributing factors to suffering that we will not analyze. It suffices here to adumbrate them all with a chart (see Diagram 1.1).

As Diagram 1.1 indicates, our investigation pays selective attention to certain variables, and not others. Note that all the demographic variables (on the outer ring of the diagram), such as governmental policies, historical factors, and so on, are not the focus of our investigation. What we focus on instead are the cognitive styles behind certain behaviors—help-seeking, emotional expression, and causal attributions—associated with suffering. This point can be elaborated by levels of analysis. The variables that show up on our radar screen, as indicated by the shaded circle on Diagram 1.1, are accessible at two levels of

Table 1.1 A schematic comparison between Yi-Bimo and Yi-Christians in terms of ecological rationality, defined as cognition co-evolved with the ecological niche

Ecological niche	*Strong ties*	*Weak ties*
Cognitive styles		
Representation of emotion	Implicit Somatic expressions	Explicit Verbal, linguistic, conceptual
Information processing	Perceptual (concrete)	Conceptual (abstract)
Categorizations	Experience-bound In-group versus out-group; natural versus Supernatural Causes	Higher level of abstraction Church as all-inclusive group: God having sovereignty over all things, natural and supernatural
Cognitive orientation	Physical space (external)	Mental space (internal)
Cause of suffering	External Attribution (cause is external to the self)	Internal Attribution (sin)
Responses to suffering	Concrete action (hire a religious specialist to do ritual)	Mental action (prayer, etc.)
Cognitive effort	Low cognitive effort	High cognitive effort



Note. Variables inside the shaded circle are the focus of this study.

Diagram 1.1 A schematic representation of all the contributing factors to suffering experiences

analysis—at the abstract, experience-distant level, cognitive styles are conceptualized and predicted by the bird's-eye approach; at the concrete, experience-near level, data on help-seeking, emotional expression, and causal attributions are collected through sympathetic listening to the suffering narratives of the research participants. What falls outside the scope of our investigation is the mid-range level of analysis that focuses on the societal, historical, political, religious, and environmental factors (shown on the outer ring of the diagram) found in anthropology literature.

Aim of Our Study: What Is This Study About?

Due to this difference in levels of analysis, our investigation of the two religious groups of Yi neither asks nor answers the same questions that concern anthropologists. Rather, it asks a different set of questions. Guided by the theory of ecological rationality, we propose that religion as a cultural system co-evolves with the ecological niche and cognitive styles, which have a pervasive impact on the emotional expression and help-seeking behaviors of the local community. Let us spell out more fully what we do and do not include in our research agenda:

1. This study is not about religion per se, because religion is dissolved into the higher-level analysis of culture. By the same token, this study is not about the religious experience of the individual—we focus only on religious behaviors, such as rituals and prayers, that give us information on cognitive styles and emotional expression.
2. Although we study suffering, we do not focus on coping as it is narrowly defined in the literature (Harrison 2001), because coping is dissolved in the larger context of cognition and emotion, in other words as normal functioning.
3. Corresponding to two types of explanations, remote and proximate, there are two types of ecology—one is evolutionarily ancient; the other pertains to more recent history. The latter is the focus of proximate explanations of suffering—such as the historical, political, economic, and social factors that can make life difficult. By contrast, our focus is on the "ecological niche" that co-evolved with the cognitive styles of a culture in the evolutionary past.

Cast in the context of evolution and stated in simplest terms, ecological rationality posits that the cognitive skills of an organism evolved to serve the purpose of its ecological niche as well as shaping it. For example, in the ecological niche of the beaver, it is advantageous to build dams, such that beavers have evolved such skills. In our framework of cultural analysis, we posit two evolutionarily ancient ecological niches—strong ties and weak ties (Granovetter 1973)—each privileging the development of certain cognitive styles and not others, see Table 1.1.

For illustration, consider the two different cognitive orientations—internal versus external. Cognitive orientation refers to attentional focus—external focus on the physical space versus internal focus on the mental space. Our prediction, as shown in Table 1.1 and to be explained further in Chap. 5, is that mental, internal focus is privileged by weak-ties societies, in which one frequently rubs elbows with strangers through trade, whereas external focus on the physical space is privileged by (some) strong -ties societies, characterized by sharp in-group and out-group distinction due to the centrality of bloodline-based connections in the sedentary agricultural community.

For a concrete example of the externally oriented cognitive style, consider the *Nuosu* Yi in Swancutt's (2012) ethnography. The *Nuosu* Yi are so invested in the in-group and out-group distinction that they made finer distinctions among outsiders by parsing them into two types of guests—the ordinary versus the captive. Consistent with our prediction is the observation that this ultra-strong-ties community also exhibits an ultra-external notion of the soul, which "takes the form of a 'soul-spider' residing *on the outer surface* of the human body" (p. S103, emphasis added). This example helps clarify our conceptualization of cognitive styles:

1. In the framework of ecological rationality, all cognitive styles are equally useful in the ecological niches they evolved to function adaptively and creatively. Thus, internal focus is not necessarily better than external focus. Nor does external focus need to have connotations of superficiality, lack of depth, and so on. For instance, the fact that the *Nuosu* think their souls might fall off the surface of their bodies does not make their souls superficial or lacking depth in any way.
2. While cognitive styles are assumed to be equally useful and adaptive in their respective ecological niches, which initially gave rise to and co-evolved with them, they do have good and bad consequences—due to historical contingencies. For instance, if the river dries up, the

beaver's dam-building skill will be useless and might even drain cognitive resources that could have been used for other skills. One important contingency in modern times is globalization, which privileges weak-ties rationality, for which some strong-ties societies may not be prepared.

So much for the bird's-eye view. For the rest of this book the worm's eye view will loom large. Each step of the way, as you go down the meandering path of this investigation, the worm's eye view will take you by the hand to meet the research participants, listening to their stories of suffering, and along the way finding out about their cognitive styles and how these impact on their lives and even on those of the researchers.

The Historical Background of Yi and the Native Bimo Tradition

China has 56 ethnic groups and 55 minority ethnic groups (the fifty-sixth corresponds to the Han, more than 91% of the population). According to Wickeri and Tam (2011), most of the ethnic minority groups in China have a very complex religious context and historical lineage. The diversity among them is probably greater than the mainstream (Han) group. In these 55 ethnic minority groups, some have been exposed to other religions besides their indigenous traditions, but some remain untouched, depending on their geography and historical factors. Many scholars (e.g., Wang 2009) use "Original versus Secondary" religion to differentiate between the indigenous tradition and the later acquired traditions.

According to the 2010 census data of China, the Yi ethnic minority made up 0.65% (8,714,393) of the population, with 25.55% (2,226,755) of them living in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province. Sixty percent of them are living in Yunnan province. The Yi ethnic minority is a heterogeneous group, as it consists of six different major tribes which adhere to different linguistic features and subcultures. Actually, most historians and anthropologists would argue that Yi is an amalgamation of several ethnic groups, as there are more variations than commonality between them, but the common denominator shared by the different subgroups is their identification with the Bimo tradition (Wuda 2008; Harrell 2000, 2001).

In contrast to the prominent religions in China (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Taoism, and Confucianism), the Yi group has an indigenous religion, which is called the "Bimo"(毕摩) religion (Zhang 2006). According to a prominent scholar, Bamo Ayi (1996), the Bimo religion may be defined as a culture created and inherited by Bimo (the priest), transmitted by scripture and rituals, revolving around the worshipping of spirits, ghosts and witchcraft practices, and containing the Yi group's philosophical beliefs, sociological history, ethics and education, meteorology and calendar, art and literatures, customs, medical knowledge and healing methods. It is rooted in family lineage, and includes the four main elements that constitute religion—belief system, scripture, clergy, and rituals. Suni (苏尼) is another religious figure akin to witches or shamans, who specializes in communicating with the spiritual realms, to conduct exorcism, soul-calling, and ghost-expelling, in order to bring healing and restoration to an individual's wellness (Li 1997). According to Steven Harrell (2000), the Bimo tradition has basically permeated the lifestyle, belief system, and worldview of the Yi people. Although it is displayed in different forms by different subcultural groups, Bimo religion is a strong binding force for the Yi people.

The Introduction of Christianity in Southwestern China

Regarding the spreading and development of Christianity among the Yi group, it has been documented (Long 2012; Dong 2004; Qin 2003) that the gospel of Christianity was first introduced to Yunnan at the end of the nineteenth century through several Western missionaries, such as J. R. Adam and Samuel Pollard, sent by a British missionary agency to the inland part of China. The most influential mission work was done by a British Methodist missionary to China with the China Inland Mission—Samuel Pollard (1864–1915), who built a base at the juncture of Sichuan-Yunnan-Guizhou provinces (*Shimenkan*, aka Stone-Gateway), and created a Miao script that is still in use today. He imported Western civilization, such as education and medical systems, to Shimenkan, and benefited many ethnic minority groups in that area. After his success converting the Flowery Miao tribe (大花苗) to Christianity, many Yi groups in the nearby area also started to practice this new religion (Dong 2002). Till this day, in northeast Yunnan and the northwest of Guizhou, about three quarters

of the Miao people believe in Christianity (Wickeri and Tam 2011). However, missionary work never blossomed in the Liangshan mountain area of southern Sichuan, due to its geographical isolation and the strong family lineage of the Bimo culture.[1]

In fact, there has been some cultural conflict between the secondary religion and native religion among Yi groups. Ban Li (2011) attributed this tension between the two religions to their difference in religious structure—Bimo tradition is polytheistic whereas Christianity is monotheistic. Moreover, Christian beliefs—in creation, life and death issues, cosmology, ethics, and marriage and relationships—are radically different from those found in the teaching of Yi philosophy and written traditions. Li (2011) also claims that Christianity would destroy the existing community ties among the Yi people because of its rejection of the rituals of animal sacrifice and the associated feasts of celebration.

Nevertheless, the Yi group in Jinsha River of Yunnan (northern Yunnan) has long been converted to Christianity (since four generations ago), embracing the church traditions in their village. This gives us a chance to compare these two religious systems among Yi groups, and study the difference between them, especially their suffering experiences. Why suffering experiences? Because suffering contains the richness and breadth of human psychological experience, ranging from cognitive appraisal and emotional reactions to help-seeking behavior (see Diagram 1.1). In order to develop an indigenous psychology rooted in Chinese culture, and dealing with the daily lives of its modern generation, we decided to listen to the suffering stories of the Yi using a multidisciplinary approach (to be further elaborated in later chapters).

Research Sites in Yunnan and Sichuan

Since 2014, we have been traveling to Yunnan and Sichuan for cultural immersion and field study with funding from TRI. In order to protect the privacy of our field participants, we would simply name our targeted samples as Yi-Christians and Yi-Bimo. These two groups are situated at two different locations—Meigu (Liangshan State, Sichuan) and Luquan (Yunnan). The exact residency of our study is actually in the further remote villages of these two towns, but we will disguise the village names with alphabet symbols. This is to protect the identity of our participants and interviewees. Despite their religious differences, there are some commonalities between the two sites:

- The majority of local Yi people identified themselves as ethnic Yi, and are living below the poverty line.
- They have a unified religion in their community, and have a long history of religious practices (over four generations).
- They each have key informants we could trust and have built a strong friendship with.
- They both welcomed our investigations (gained permission).
- Our team members were participant observers in both communities.

The following is an overview of these two research sites, and their religious practices.

Meigu Town (美姑)

Liangshan has been labeled the "most impoverished land" in China. Meigu is a town situated at the northeast side of Liangshan state, which is also a historical hub of the inner Liangshan area. It covers an area of about 2731.6 square kilometers and contains a population of about 200,000, 97.89% of whom are Yi ethnic people.[2] The highest altitude is about 4000 meters, and the rest of the areas range from 2000 to 3000 meters. Therefore, there is a drastic temperature change at night, with drops to below freezing from October to March. When we paid our first visit in October 2014, we saw that most of the Yi people cover themselves in sheepskin cloth to keep warm, which is a unique local custom called "Cha-er-wa," and that there is no heating system indoors. According to our local informant, the value of a sheepskin cloak exceeded 1000 RMB, and these came in blue, white or mixed colors (Fig. 1.1).

The options for public transportation to Meigu are limited. On our first trip, we had to take a local bus from Xichang (six hours drive from Chengdu, Sichuan) to Meigu (two departures per day) and bypassed many mountain ranges. Due to the poor road conditions and some ongoing road constructions, what was supposed to be a four-hour journey became six hours, and we failed to catch our connecting bus in Zhaojue. Hence we stayed overnight at Zhaojue to catch the early bus to Meigu the next day. During the trip, we witnessed an escalating verbal fight between two local Yi people over a seat on the bus, due to its having been overbooked. As it was near the Yi New Year festival, there were many Yi workers returning to Meigu to celebrate with their families. This was the reason so many

Fig. 1.1 Our pilot study team. Our local translator lent us sheepskin cloaks as it was below 10 °C outdoors

people were traveling in the Meigu area, and also explained the overbooking situation. We were told the road-construction situation would not improve for the next two years (and might even get worse), and that at some times of the year there would be roadblocks due to mudslides. The dust on the road was heavy and, after six hours, our clothing and baggage were covered with a thick layer of red sand that had come in through the open window.

In the central market of Meigu, we found modern facilities such as motels, restaurants, schools, and hospitals. However, there was no public transportation available to take people from town to the villages nearby. Local van rental, to destinations within a 15-kilometer radius, cost at least 300–500 RMB per trip. The difficulty in accessing remoter villages might explain why the cost of living is so high in Meigu town. In 2015, the local GDP was 193,350 RMB, the average annual income was 7419 RMB per person, and the average annual expenses were 5850.12 RMB. For rural residents, the annual income was 6246 RMB/year, way below the poverty line set by the Chinese government. According to a media interview with a Yi scholar, Professor Hou Yuangao from Minzu University, in around

Fig. 1.2 On our way to visit the village, the van had to drive through a creek which is at knee-high water level during October

2007, about 400,000–500,000 Yi people, a quarter of the total Yi population in Liangshan, migrated to cities to work as laborers in the modern factories (Fig. 1.2).[3]

According to the record, Meigu town has retained the greatest number of Bimo practices and rituals, as well as the highest number of Bimo priests (Vermander 1999b). There are about 685 local priests in total, which is 4% of the male population in town. Due to its isolated geographical location, Meigu's traditional heritage and religious structures are still pretty much intact (Bamo Ayi 1999). Although Meigu claims to have a center of Bimo study, this was closed most of the time during our visit there. The local people said the center was no longer active and had relocated to Chengdu, and the government effort to preserve the Bimo tradition uses a top-down approach. Nevertheless, the knowledge and practice of Bimo is still strong at the grassroots level and we were able to participate in and observe various kinds of Bimo rituals in the nearby villages without prior arrangements (Fig. 1.3).

The Yi people in Meigu can be traced back to the village near the riverside that the local people call "Lingmumogu," a historic landmark commemorating their ancestors who emigrated from Yunnan to Sichuan. Later,

Fig. 1.3 The center of Bimo culture, but it was no longer in use at the time of our visit

those Yi migrants who settled in Liangshan were named the "*Nuosu*" tribe, which was traditionally divided into five different castes (Nzymo, Nuoho, Qunuo, Mgajie, Gaxy) and ranked by social hierarchy (Wuda 2008). However, this social stratification was neither static nor permanent, and changed continually as the society developed (Ma Erzi 2003). The *Nuosu* people were generally referred to, in the works of Western anthropologists until 1949, as "Black Lolos" (Harrell 2001). Stalin's "ethnic group classification" was introduced in 1951, and about 400 tribal groups in China were condensed into 55 ethnic groups, including the *Nuosu* people. Thus, some Western scholars (Harrell 2001; Vermander 1999a) questioned the "Yi nationality" assigned by the modern Chines government. Though, in a public context, the *Nuosu* identified with their labeling as Yi people, in the tribal context, they would still differentiate themselves from other "Yi" and used their own clan (*Cyvi* or *Jia zhi*) as their major cultural identity. Early Han scholars used to differentiate the more powerful Yi groups from the less powerful using the dichotomy of "Black Yi" and "White Yi" (Lin 1947). Till this day, the label of Black versus White Yi is still loosely used in the Meigu area, although the exact meaning is not clear.

In fact, there has been a long debate regarding the definition of "Black Yi" (黑彝) versus "White Yi" (白彝) among scholars. Some Chinese

scholars (Wuda 2008; Pan 1990) defined the difference in terms of family lineage (two subcultural groups), because there was no more caste system after the reformation in 1956. Regardless of the dispute and controversy over the caste system among the *Nuosu* Yi, most scholars agreed that "Black Yi" referred to the aristocratic and ruling class among the *Nuosu* Yi (normally nuoho). In the past, they had had the power to capture other ethnic groups, such as Han and Miao, to use as their "slaves" or "laborers." Hence, they were regarded as "capitalist landowners" (地主) by the socialist government, and prosecuted after the land reformation in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolutions in the 1960s (Ma Erzi 2003). However, some Western scholars (Harrell 2001; Vermander 1999a) questioned the imposed socialist label of "the last slave society" on the *Nuosu* Yi.

This clan system (*jia zhi*) was also evident during our first visit to Meigu. In our pilot study, our translator identified himself as "White Yi" because his ancestors were once enslaved by the "Black Yi." He told us it was the mixed blood of the Yi and Han peoples that created the "White Yi." This modern discourse on bloodline difference also created a tension between these two groups, which led to frequent conflicts and mistrust. However, when there were family conflicts that needed mediating, most of the "White Yi" would consult a "Black Yi" descendant as conciliator (Degu), as they still held the latter in high esteem. Even after 1949, when socialism overtook mainland China, and the caste system and so-called "landowners" were being overturned, the prestige of the "Black Yi" (Black bone) prevailed, and has done so right up until the present day. They played the role of the educated, wise, and powerful in the Meigu areas. Our interviewees (all male) also informed us that they were only allowed to marry women at the same caste level (either nuohuo or quhuo), as it is their duty to maintain the family lineage within the social hierarchy. The complex interplay between caste system and blood lineage among the *Nuosu* Yi is beyond the scope of this book. Our focus instead is on the extent to which the discourse on social hierarchy and family lineage is characteristic of strong-ties societies, and how this ecological factor shapes the suffering experiences of the Yi in Meigu areas.

Bimo Religious Tradition

We visited and interviewed three Bimo priests during our pilot study. They were more or less self-sufficient male individuals who had inherited the priesthood from their fathers. The scriptures they recited were written in

ancient Yi script, and could only be understood and interpreted by the educated Bimo priests, the ordinary people being unable to comprehend the meaning of the recitations during the rituals. The priests are usually invited to households on the occasions of births, weddings, funerals, illnesses, or other important events (such as harvest and sowing time). They are expected to say blessings, make animal sacrifices, communicate with the spirit realms (ghosts, ancestors' spirits), and expel demonic forces. They also interpret the individual's suffering through fortune-telling rituals. Hence they are not only indigenous healers, but religious leaders, as well as authorities in communal decision-making (Figs. 1.4 and 1.5).

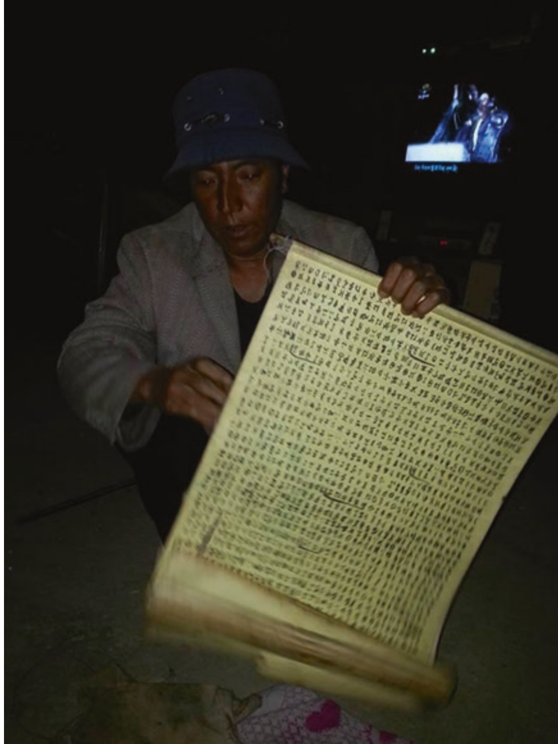


Fig. 1.4 One of the Bimo priests showed us his hand-copied scripture scrolls, which were made from a specific kind of paper and written in ancient Yi script

Fig. 1.5 A Bimo priest performing a blessing and cleansing ritual at the household of some newly-weds

In a blessing ritual we participated in, the Bimo priest sat in a specific corner of the household, facing the newly-wed couple, directing the ritual. First, he built a small altar next to him with sharpened branches, each stick representing the ghost of a particular ancestor. Then he rang the bell and chimed as the ritual began. He said he was one of the most popular priests in the area, and was invited to many other cities for rituals because he was more "powerful" than other priests. During the chiming and reciting of Yi scriptures, the priest would sometimes pause and converse with the family members. Friends in the neighborhood would also sometimes come in and out during the rituals. The whole process seemed rather casual for a formal event in the community. He then killed a black piglet as a sacrifice

Fig. 1.6 Sacrificial ritual happening alongside the cooking process

and, with the help of the men in the host family, boiled the pig in the pot on the fire pit. They also separated the blood from the meat of the piglets. The ritual ended with a big feast in the family as shown in Fig. 1.6.

During the Cultural Revolution period, many Bimo rituals were secretly practiced underground in Meigu. The modern Chinese government has labeled these religious practices as "superstitious behavior" (干迷信). Although religion has been restored and permitted by the local government since the 1980s, many ordinary Yi people in Meigu had already forgotten the specific language of the rituals and relied solely on the Bimo successor to decide what kind of rituals were needed. When we were there to witness the biggest ritual[4]—*Nimucuobi* (尼木撮毕), a ritual to send off the souls of ancestors and/or deceased family members to heaven, we observed that most of the family members were just going through the motions and playing their roles as casually as doing house chores (see Fig. 1.7). People in the neighborhood would come to eat with the host and extended relatives all gathered together for three consecutive days for this extensive ritual. They would put the names of their ancestors on branch sticks, and line up the sticks according to their status in the family. The branch sticks were usually taken from the pine tree, which symbolized

Fig. 1.7 Only the male descendants of the *jia zhi* were permitted to carry the flags in the *Nimucuobi* rituals. Female family members were mainly there as observers

the flourishing and booming of the family lineage. When it came to those ancestors without any offspring, their name sticks would be separated from those who had children.

Since *Nimucuobi* is a big ritual, two Bimo priests were invited, and they would direct the family members as regards what they should do (e.g., cutting the branch, building an altar, sacrificing the animals, and so on). The family members also seemed very familiar with the routines, and would pick up the duties voluntarily without much direction. When the time was right, people knew where to stand in line, where to go, how to act, and what to say. We, as outsiders, by contrast, needed constant telling and directing so that we did not feel "left out." The atmosphere seemed casual, even jolly. The family members surrounded the hut they had built from pinewood, and lit firecrackers while marching around it. Different males in the families carried colorful flags. Women lined up at the side but did not participate in the ritual. The peak of the ritual featured the lighting of firecrackers, loud musical noises, and chit-chatting noises. The emotional climax came when the host threw bills (cash) and candies, and the

children and adults rushed to pick them up (see Online Resources for more pictures).

These kinds of rituals are normally out of the reach of ordinary people, as a big one costs up to 30,000 RMB. It requires the family members to use valuable sacrificial animals as contributions to the rituals. For example, a cow is more valuable than a goat, a goat is more valuable than a pig, a pig is more valuable than a chicken, and so forth. The siblings would discuss what share of the sacrifices they would each contribute, and the member who contributed the most would be given more respect and reimbursed with more tokens of appreciation. However, the Bimo priest did not charge much. As one priest put it, "We are all neighbors (都是乡邻乡亲的)." That is why sometimes they were only given a token of appreciation or meal in return. The major expenses of the rituals were the sacrificial animals, the meats for a big feast being divided among people in the neighborhood.

As we observed, the local Yi people normally eat meat (pork = tuotuo rou) as their main food category, and drink beer as their staple liquid. Even women would hold beer bottles during the feast, and smoke just like the men. They even presented alcoholic beverages and cigarettes at the altar, together with the innards of the sacrificed animal. The consumption of alcohol has been a major issue, and even a cultural label attached to the local Yi community (see Fig. 1.8). As we heard, there was also abuse of drugs, alcohol and other substances in the nearby towns, where AIDS/HIV was prevalent as well.

According to our guide and translator in Meigu, most of the local Yi people engage in the religious rituals performed by the Bimo priest at least once a year. This was also borne out in our interview with five self-identified Black Yi during the pilot study. Usually they would perform *shobu* once in the springtime and once in the summertime, when they needed blessing or to be cleansed of evil forces and bad luck. They would wait until family reunion time to perform such a ritual (*shobu*), to prevent evil cursing, deception, or criticism from outside, in order to protect the safety of the family. Another big religious occasion would occur at the end of November, which is also the New Year celebration for Yi people in Meigu. Occasionally, they would go to Suni, the fortune teller, when the students were facing big exams, or the youths looking for jobs. However, according to our local translator, the modern Yi family would perform a bigger ritual, such as *Nimucuobi*, if there was some major illness/misfortune occurring in the family, or they would do it simply out of filial piety. Some other families

Fig. 1.8 Beer bottles are normally seen outside Yi households

would do it for the sake of "face"—in other words, to keep up with their neighbors.

In conclusion, from both our pilot study and literature reviews, we can see that Meigu contains a rich religious tradition and heritage of Bimo practices, which are embedded in their hierarchical caste or *jia zhi* system. Though their religious narratives are evolving and being transformed gradually through the modernization of China (Vermander 2004), their Bimo tradition is still palpably manifested in their everyday religious rituals.

Luquan Town (禄劝)

The northeast of Yunnan province (near Zhaotong) is deemed the origin of the Yi ancestors. According to ancient folktales, the first Yi ancestor was called "Dumu" (笃慕) and had six sons who became the six major tribes that make up the Yi people nowadays. Two of the tribes (布/慕克克、默/慕齐齐) migrated to Jinsha riverbanks, and became the "Nasu" group (Pu 2009). To this day, there is a Yi population of 4,705,700 (60%) residing in Yunnan province,[5] and there are 102,150 of them residing in Luquan,

which is our second targeted research field. Luquan is a town located in the Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Luquan itself is an ethnic minority town, with 72.56% of its ethnic minority population being of Yi heritage, and the rest being Miao and Han people (Wang 2007). The GDP recorded in 2011 was 386,853 RMB, and the average annual income 9716 RMB/pax.[6]

The Yi tribe in Luquan is different from the Liangshan Yi (*Nuosu* tribe), as many scholars traced their lineage to the "Nasu tribe" (纳苏), which means "from the center of the earth" in Yi language (Yi 2000). Han people also called the Nasu people "the Black Yi," and they possess their own spoken dialect and written scripts, which are different from those of the Liangshan Yi tribe (Wuda 2008). In our previous dialogue with the local contacts, they also proudly presented themselves as "Black Yi" as it symbolizes bravery and aristocracy. In the past, this tribe was called "Luowubu" (罗婺部), as recorded in historical documents (Zhang 2000; Yi 2000). It was one of the strongest tribes during the Tang dynasty (Nanzhao kingdom 南诏国). Their descendants were great warriors, whose leader had a prestigious title bestowed on him by the emperors of Ming dynasty. For 600 years, they were the landowners in the area, and followed the "*tusi*" (土司) structural system set up by the Tang emperors, whereby the leadership (*tusi*) was passed down through the family, giving them the power to govern their own people. However, during the era of the Qing dynasty, they were oppressed and their land was taken away due to the policy of centralized government (Wang 2007; Pu 2009).

Our key informant in the area, Zhang Z. L., did his Master's thesis on the spreading of Christianity in the Luquan areas (Zhang 2007), and identified himself as a descendant of "Black Yi." He found that during the rule of the Longyun and Luhan enterprise from 1912–1949, the missionary activities in Yunnan reached their peak, and there was a lot of freedom for foreign missionaries to build schools in the northeastern Yunnan province. The Longyun armies were fiercely engaged in war against the Japanese from 1938 to1945, and making great sacrifices in battle. They also supported communist armies during the civil war from 1945 to 1949. In other words, the modern Yi in Yunnan had a long history of interacting with the mainstream governors, and took great pride in their ethnic identity.

In terms of religion, the involvement of foreign missionaries (especially Samuel Pollard and Gladstone Poreous) led to the importation of modernized and civil resources for the local Luquan Yi people, such as medical

facilities. The missionaries also worked closely with the *tusi* (head of the local clan) there, helping the people to get educations. They first built a church in Salawo (撒米上羅婺), which became the hub of all the mission works, and White Yi were the first to be converted to Christianity due to their marginalized status. Through the 30-year immersion of Gladstone Poreous, the Black Yi were slowly influenced by the success of his education and anti-drug campaigns. The missionaries even built a local seminary (Southwestern seminary, see Fig. 1.16) in Salawo, Luquan, which opened in 1947, with two batches of graduates. However, the seminary was forced to close after the Communist Party took over China in 1949. All foreign missionaries were expelled, and the local churches suffered persecution by different political movements till 1980. Yet, Christianity seems to have been preserved through home churches and underground worship. To this day, there are 386 registered churches in the Luquan area, with a Christian population of 80,000 (80% of the local Yi population). However, there are fewer than 15 trained pastors in the local areas, and they are not being paid by the church for their full-time work. Most Yi-Christians are still at the lower end of the economic spectrum, living in rural areas. Poverty has become a major hindrance for the local churches, as most of the younger generations are now migrant worker in the cities, and might not keep their faith in Christianity (Zhang 2007) (Fig. 1.9).

During our first trip to Luquan in September 2014, we witnessed the thick religious atmosphere in a village on the outskirts (two hours away from town). The first author stayed at the house of our key informant (a lay pastor), and participated in the Sunday services at the local church. Every Sunday, the church holds three services (12.30–1.30 pm, 2.30–3.00 pm, 7.15–8.30 pm), with almost the same group of Yi villagers attending all three services. Before the services, volunteers (mainly senior) would come to clean the church venue (see Fig. 1.10), and the church would broadcast the worship songs through their loudspeaker so the whole village could hear them for half an hour.

The service consists of hymn singing, choir presentation, and preaching. A church leader volunteers to share a sermon from the Bible, and all of these are done in Yi dialect. The church attendees are mainly seniors from the villages, as most of the youths have left their villages to make a living in various urban settings. After the sermon, they pray fervently by either kneeling on the floor, or facing the cross at the front altar, and saying the prayer out loud together. Each service lasts for about one hour, with the afternoon session offering a Holy Communion ritual. At the ser-

Fig. 1.9 There were many posters of Jesus and writing from the scriptures pasted on the walls of Yi-Christian households

Fig. 1.10 The female seniors helped clean the church building before and after the services in the village

Fig. 1.11 During the service, Holy Communion was conducted by the lay pastor

vice we participated in, a family brought a basket of duck eggs for the congregation, asking everyone to pray for the recovery of their sick grandfather. The first author was treated as an "expert" and a "family member" by the local Christians due to their shared faith (Figs. 1.11 and 1.12).

Similarly to what was illustrated in Zhang's (2007) Master's thesis, the church leaders we interviewed told us religion was prohibited during the Cultural Revolution, and that church activities were banned unless they were registered with the local government under the guise of patriotism. Even so, they were very inspired by the earlier missionaries' work, and persisted in their Christian beliefs. Their grandparents' generation were friends of Gladstone Poreous, who introduced education and medical

Fig. 1.12 The congregation praying together with some kneeling down on the floor

facilities to the Yi villagers. Their grandparents managed to quit dependency on tobacco, alcohol, and other unhealthy habits with the help of the missionaries. They also used the scripts invented by Samuel Pollard to record spoken Yi, and translated the Chinese New Testament and hymnals into Yi dialect (Figs. 1.13 and 1.14).

They were all very grateful for the work of Poreous, who died eventually in Luquan after 30 years of serving in the area. He was buried in the first Black Yi church at Salawo, but his tomb has been disguised since the time of the Cultural Revolution. Only the local people who grew up there have seen the tombstone inscribed with his name. I (the first author) was brought to the garden of burial, but it was locked and no access was available. The original church of Salawo had been governed by a closed group of Christians who refused to register with the local religious bureau and hence the church building seemed abandoned (Figs. 1.15 and 1.16).

This introduction, in its broad strokes, fails to cover diversity within Protestant groups, or the fringe groups active in both Yunnan and Liangshan, especially the Church of the Disciples (mentuhui), which the

Fig. 1.13 The front cover of the Bible—Black Yi, New Testament

local government refers to as a cult. Since our focus is on the overall group difference between Christianity and the Bimo tradition, our investigation did not go into these details of the Christian group.

Culture and Cognition: Theoretical Predictions

Cognitive styles of information processing differ along two axes: A. experience-near versus experience-distant; and B. external/physical versus internal/mental. Together, these two axes can be used to differentiate the cognitive styles of cultures. For instance, according to Sundararajan (2015), strong-ties societies privilege experience-near, perceptual modes

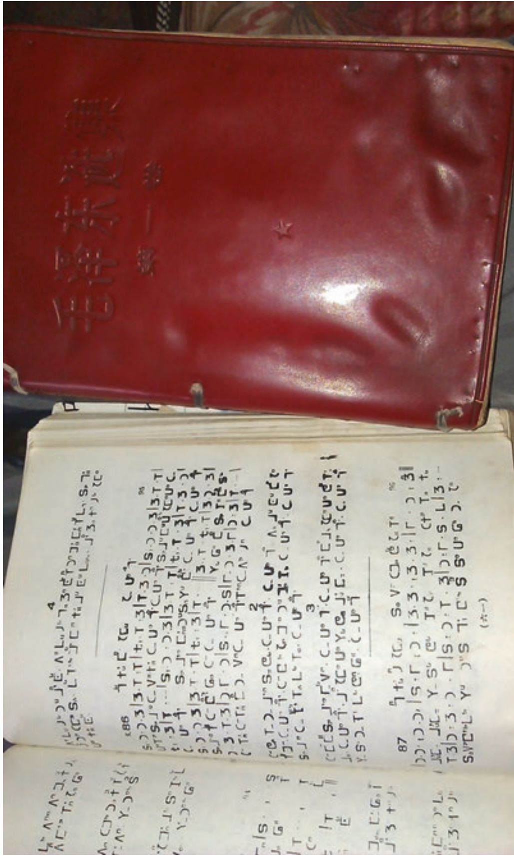


Fig. 1.14 The Yi hymnal, wrapped in the cover of Mao's Red book as a disguise

Fig. 1.15 The tombstone of Gladstone Poreous was inscribed with his Chinese name—Zhang Er Chang

of processing, whereas weak-ties societies give preference to the experience-distant, conceptual mode. Within the strong-ties societies, we can further differentiate cultures along the divide between internal versus external orientation—Confucianism privileges the former (Sundararajan 2015), whereas Yi-Bimo tradition may privilege the latter. As for Yi-Christians, they may share with weak-ties societies, via Christianity, a tendency to engage in the experience-distant, conceptual mode of processing, with an internal/mental focus. Mapping out the two axes of cognitive processing (see Diagram 1.2), we can formulate our predictions as follows: (a) Confucianism falls in the experience-near x internal/mental quadrant; (b) Yi-Bimo, the experience-near x external/physical quadrant;

Fig. 1.16 This building was built as the first seminary in Southwest China, but was shut down after 1949

(c) Yi-Christians, the experience-distant x internal/mental quadrant. Only (b) and (c) are tested in this study.

Research Methodology

Building on our pilot study in 2014, this research study was carried out between 2015 and 2016 using a mixed-method approach in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the suffering experiences within both religious communities. Belzen (2010) called for a paradigm shift in psychology of religion, especially in the cross-cultural setting, which warrants a shift from standard Western quantitative measurements to qualitative research as "religion" entails co-constructed meaning between the researcher and the participants. In our study, we utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods to shed light on our subject matter, which is the holistic experience of suffering events. To be ethically appropriate and culturally sensitive, we also believe that a less intrusive research protocol should be utilized as this is an ethnic minority group that has been mar-

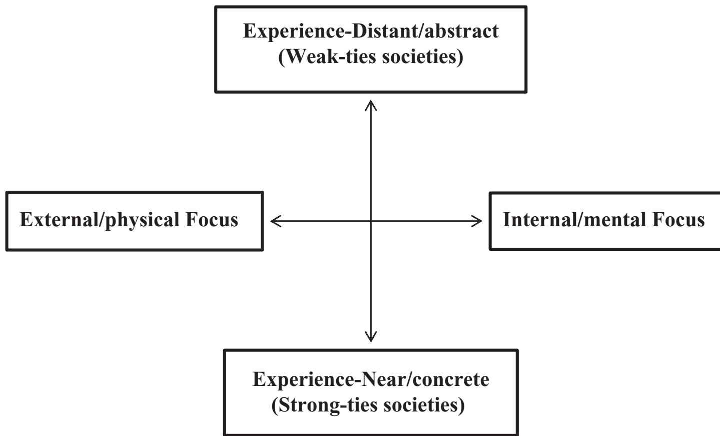


Diagram 1.2 Mapping cultures along the axes of cognition

ginalized in the past. Following our research framework, we decided to proceed in three phases.

First Phase

Using a criterion-selection process, we asked the local informants (usually religious leaders) to refer those religious families with a Yi ethnic background who were currently in "difficulties" or "suffering" to us. During the first visit, we aimed to build rapport and gather basic information. All were accompanied by a local translator, and a token of appreciation[7] was given after the short visit (around 30 minutes in each household). We also conducted focus groups with the religious leaders at both sites respectively, to gain a deeper sense of their religious practices, beliefs, worldview with regard to suffering, and healing resources (see Appendix for interview guidelines). In the following chapters, we will also incorporate the themes generated from the focus-group members, to illustrate the unique cognitive styles and forms of emotional expression among Yi communities.

Second Phase

After three months of follow-up with phone calls, we visited both targeted locations in order to conduct semi-structural interviews. The purpose was to test the validity of the suffering narratives we had initially gathered.

Because some participants withdrew from the study and one died of AIDS, we invited more participants to join the study on our second trip. Twenty-four Yi-Bimo participants from Meigu, and 23 Yi-Christian participants from Luquan were finalized as our interviewees (see Table 1.2). The gender ratio was quite similar in both groups of participants. The average age of the Yi-Christian group was significantly older than the Yi-Bimo group, due to the presence of the (relatively young) migrant workers who had returned home in the latter. Their socio-economic status was also quite similar, as the majority of them were farming their own lands, except that the Yi-Bimo group had some returned migrant workers, whose counterparts in the Yi-Christian group had managed to stay in the city rather than returning home. The level of education in the two groups was also quite similar, as most of them were illiterate and did not attend school. The proficiency in Mandarin was also equally limited in both groups, as 22 out of 23 participants from the Yi-Christian group and 21 out of 24 participants from the Yi-Bimo group needed assistance when it came to translating the Yi language into Mandarin during the interview sessions. In the larger context, however, GDP in Meigu is lower than in Luquan. Thus, although samples from the two groups were both low-income and did not differ significantly, at the level of the general population, economic development between the two towns was different.

Table 1.2 General background information of the participants

	Yi-Christians	*Yi-Bimo*
	N = 23	*N = 24*
	% (n)	*% (n)*
Gender		
Male	39.1 (9)	33.3 (8)
Female	60.9 (14)	66.7 (16)
Occupation		
Farmer	87.0 (20)	54.2 (13)
Migrant worker	0.0 (0)	16.7 (4)
Irregular migrant worker	0.0 (0)	8.3 (2)
Unemployed	13.0 (3)	12.5 (3)
Student	0.0 (0)	8.3 (2)
	Mean (*SD*)	Mean (*SD*)
Age	65.3 (2.7)	44.3 (17.1)
Education (years)	1.1 (2.4)	1.3 (2.8)

Interview Protocol
After gaining verbal informed consent for audio or video recording, we proceeded with a semi-structured interview with three major queries: first, their suffering experiences (past or present); second, their explanations of the suffering; and third, their help-seeking behaviors during the suffering. In order to elicit more natural emotional expression in telling the stories of suffering, it was decided to use minimal probes with empathic, nonverbal encouragement. When the participants became emotional in the process, we continued to listen, and did not pressure them to talk. The interviews normally ranged from 30 to 60 minutes (see Appendix). Some interviews were conducted by the research assistants (RAs) with the assistance of several Yi translators. The Yi translators chosen were fluent in both Mandarin and the Yi language and had gained college degrees. In the process of transcribing the interview sessions, the RAs would try their best to transcribe the Mandarin conversation into verbatim transcripts, and leave the Yi conversation for our employed translators to fill in. In the end, all the translated transcripts were double-checked by the RAs for consistency. All of the participants and translators were remunerated financially for their participation in our study (see Diagram 1.3 for research protocol). After the interviews, we also followed up monthly through phone calls with these 47 individuals for over a year to see how they changed and grew. Unfortunately, during this process, seven more of our participants passed away due to their terminal illnesses.

Data Analysis
After the interviews, all the transcripts were processed using two kinds of textual analysis:

1. ***Thematic Analysis***

In order to elucidate the essence of the phenomenon as it exists in participants' concrete experience, we as a research team adopted the thematic analysis proposed by the Duquesne school of empirical phenomenology (McLeod 2001) to do systemic-committee coding of the transcripts. This gives us an overview of the suffering theories embedded in each religious community.

First, we divided up nine RAs into two big groups according to the interview locations, then each RA coded between 10 and 12 transcripts on the basis of four dimensions—suffering types, cognitive appraisal of the

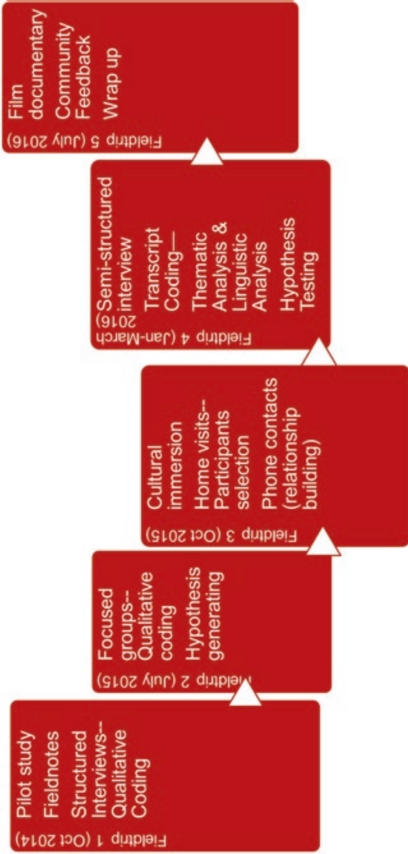


Diagram 1.3 A schematic representation of the research process

suffering events, expressed emotion when talking about suffering events, and attempted help-seeking behavior during those events. They were trained to do qualitative coding by the authors and practiced with trial runs.

Second, each RA then compared the first-tier coding with that of their team member to reconcile the discrepancy in coding tables.

Third, two groups of RAs met separately to discuss the second-tier coding, i.e., the subthemes relating to each of the four dimensions.

Fourth, the first author (PI) met with each RA team to discuss the themes generated from the subthemes developed from those four dimensions.

The results of the thematic coding will be presented in the following chapters, each devoted to a specific dimension of suffering.

2. ***Psycho-linguistic Analysis***

In order to test the differences between two religious communities, we employed psycho-linguistic analysis to quantify the interview transcripts. We created linguistic scales that accounted for distinctive thematic categories under four dimensions of suffering narratives—What (suffering types), Why (cognitive attribution), How (emotion expression), Help (help-seeking behaviors). The construction of the scales was based on the themes that emerged from phenomenological analysis of the pilot study and the focus groups.

Due to the novelty and complexity of our linguistic variables, we conducted a comprehensive training in coding using our coding manual (created by the authors for the purpose of this study). All nine RAs were involved in the first round of coding. They were paired in dyads or triads, and assigned to different coding groups. Each group was responsible for coding all 47 transcripts on a specific domain: types of suffering, emotion of suffering, explanation of suffering, and help-seeking behavior.

In the first stage, each RA coded the categories independently by counting the frequency of relevant phrases/words and then comparing them with their teammate to discuss any discrepancy. The RAs would reconcile the difference among themselves, and pass on any unresolved discrepancy in coding to the first author. The first author would resolve the discrepancy in consultation with the second author of this paper. Then we provided feedback for correction to the RA team, until all were in agreement. Prior to the formal phase of coding, we had five practice runs of case

coding to increase the inter-rater reliability and accuracy in coding among us. In the inter-rater reliability check, the agreement between the raters averaged over all 37 variables was 68% (range: 9–100%), and the average kappa value was 0.49 ($p < .05$). The results tables regarding this part of the study will also be presented in the following chapters.

In both coding tasks, when RAs encountered confusion regarding the nuance of a specific keyword or context, we would go back to the original translator for consultation regarding semantic accuracy.

Third Phase: Validity Check and Case Study

In hermeneutic research, the researchers' reflection becomes an instrument and their relationship with the local participants is considered a dialogue (Bernard 1988). The RAs were trained to take analytic memos and field notes throughout the study. By the end of the study, each RA had written three case reports based on the longitudinal (one-year) case notes, using individual case study method. These are the cases they deemed as having an "impact" on them and are "representative" of the local cultures. After one and a half years of interaction with the two locations, our research team had gained credentials as community "insiders" with the Yi families we followed up. Our participants constantly invited us to visit them during special festivals and celebrations. In the case report, besides writing objective narratives about their cases, we asked the RAs to reflect on their personal relationships with the participants and the encounter, on any problems with the study, on any ethical dilemmas, and on future directions for the study. A total of 25 case reports will be quoted in the later chapters to highlight the important themes, and the RAs' reflective memos will also be grouped and shared in Chap. 6 as a meaningful tool for future studies in this area.

Cultural psychologist Belzen (2010) proposed that we check the ecological validation, communicative validation, and cumulative validation while performing interpretation of the field data. Following his suggestions, we made an attempt to establish ecological validation through participatory observation, interviews and group discussions during the first phase of our study. The communicative validation involved returning to the research participants for verification of the results, to ensure the interpretation was valid. To achieve this purpose, our team also edited and compiled two short films (see Online Resources) for two different study

groups, which highlighted the interviews with each participant. At the end of both films, we also added in our words of appreciation and blessings to the community, as our parting gift. Each of our participants was given a mobile cellphone with the video clip on it. All of them expressed gratitude toward us and there were invitations for us to return in the future.

Structure of This Book

This chapter provides the psychological framework and research orientation, as well as background information on the two Yi groups, that the reader will need in order to understand the research findings in the next few chapters. Chapter 2 narrates the suffering events of these religious communities, using both the case study approach and the comparison approach. Toward the end, readers will have a better sense of the similarity and difference between these two communities in terms of their current predicament and historical trauma. Chapters 3–5 each tackle an independent dimension of suffering experiences (see Diagram 1.1), hence readers do not need to follow the specific order of these chapters in order to go in depth with these topics. They are all organized in a similar format—starting with two case narratives from the respective religious communities, followed by thematic analysis from the interview transcripts, and ending with psycho-linguistic analysis of the interview transcripts from the two religious groups. Readers will learn about attribution styles in Chap. 3, the ecological niche of social-ties in Chap. 4, and psychology of emotion in Chap. 5. All of these theories help shed some light on our data. Readers with a certain empirical research background in psychology will find our arguments and discussion easy to grasp.

The last two chapters of this book contain the reflections of and conclusions drawn by the authors during the research project. Chapter 6 utilizes the reflexivity of the researchers to demonstrate the impact of the research on the researchers themselves in terms of the phases of personal changes in cognition, emotion, and relationships with the participants. Extending the ecological rationality framework to the survey locations as the respective ecological niche for the RAs assigned there, we were able to see the differences in the research team's approach to the participants that mirror the strong- versus weak-ties rationality of their survey sites. In Chap. 7, we conclude the study from a macroscopic viewpoint to further review our

methodology and epistemology in this indigenous study, and dialogue with Western psychology on issues of social justice, urbanization, HIV prevention, and community resilience.

Before we end this chapter, we want to acknowledge the research team's feeble attempt to understand "the other"—an ethnic minority different from us, who speak a different dialect and live in a different ecological system. We appreciate the involvement of all the RAs, translators, local informants, and interviewees in this study. Without their persistence and resilience, this project would not have been able to shed light on so many intricate aspects of human suffering. We would like to invite you to venture with us into this labyrinth of human suffering in the following chapters.

Notes

1. According to Vermander (1999b), there were sporadic sects of "The church of the disciples" (men tu hui), which is secretly evangelizing in Liangshan Yi territory. In our interviews, we also heard someone mention this sect, but could not verify the exact location of this church activity. It is deemed a cult by the modern Chinese government.
2. Bureau of Statistics of Meigu County on the 2015 National Economic and Social Development. Excerpt from the website of Meigu County Council.
3. Excerpt from the online resource http://mzb.com.cn/html/report/1512378318-1.htmHere
4. The ritual was held in a village on the outskirts of Meigu. We were invited by a local friend to participate in the ritual, as outsiders, on the second day. They were curious about us, but not intimidated. We were free to explore and took pictures of the villagers, but not the children, as they believe picture-capturing takes the soul out of the children.
5. Census Data by the Autonomy County Council of Luquan among Yi and Miao Groups: http://www.luquan.gov.cn/01B/2010/4/10425327137002.html
6. Cited from Baidu: baidu.com/link?url=U8kisMxptrVXJtwseGQKQez4t1-qnvD6RW0gZtFVOKx3fPaTcRrjEXkz3F9NJZMiDxNjWohCifVDRLDG-2ZFiewmN9fftUU8k9j6vNg8haGFWHy5mj1MMG7x6ya35DCVjV8naN5UcpO83qqpLcN0FF8tQrjztgIRJL5i8XS1DOw-O
7. We gave 50 RMB in cash on our first visit, 100 RMB of groceries (a box of nutritional drinks and crackers) on our second, and a cellphone worth 200 RMB on the last visit as our parting gift, with the interview video downloaded onto it.

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Online Resources

Interview clips in Meigu: https://youtu.be/6mZnGBIQvvU
Interview clips in Luquan: https://youtu.be/ijSEQOvFDKA
More pictures for this chapter: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bxcr-yTD_netRU5oX2RpZ01HUm8/view?usp=sharing