Chapter Three

KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE IN DAIKONG

The Family and the Village Community

The primary unit in Tai village society is the family household. Basically, this household is a small-family type, which consists of father, mother and children and sometimes grandparents. At times, the family household becomes a small extended family; for example, when a son’s wife comes to live in the house and when a child is born to this marriage. Once a young couple have become parents, they usually start a household of their own. Only one son will remain in, and eventually inherit, the family house.

The household is the basic unit of the village community. All village cooperative activities centre around the family household rather than the individuals. The village community is not organised into formal neighbourhood units or divisions, but informal neighbourhood groups do exist for labour exchange in transplanting and harvesting. These groups are determined basically on a geographical basis within the village, for neighbours often work with each other, but the labour-exchange group may also include kin and friends from all parts of the village. Religious ceremonies, temple-building and upkeep, funerals and weddings and repairing of the village roads and irrigation canals are done by the community as a whole.

Every Tai village is a distinct community; spatially, historically and socio-economically separated from other villages. The people who reside in Lak Chang, for instance, feel a special bond and unity because of their common residence; they speak of “pii nong Lak Chang” and identify themselves as brothers and sisters of Lak Chang.

Village unity is enhanced by endogamous marriages. Over 90 per cent of the men and 95 per cent of the women marry within the village. This makes Lak Chang a special kind of kinship unit in which almost every villager is related by consanguineal and affinal ties of diverse kinds. All villagers address each other by appropriate kinship terms. They are grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, siblings, children and grandchildren to one another, and appropriate behaviour follows the terms of address.

The Tai kinship system is a cognatic system. Descent is reckoned through both parents and every individual is equally related to the relatives of both. Even though the family name comes through the father, who is the head of the family, both maternal and paternal kinsmen are recognised and both are equally related to the family.

**Family Relations**

In Tai village society, it is morally incumbent upon the young to render esteem and offer homage to their elders. This holds not only for kin, but also for non-kin, and it applies not only to members of different generations but also to age differences within the same generation. Hence, in the Tai address system, the honorifics that precede proper names are systematically age-graded, depending on whether the person addressed is of lower, the same or a higher age-grade than the speaker.

This same attention to absolute and relative age is found in the kinship terminology as well. Generation is a distinctive feature of every kin term. More than that, all kinsmen within the same, the first ascending and the first descending generations are also differentiated according to relative age. Thus, father’s elder brother (*lung*) has a different term from father’s younger brother (*aah*), older sister (*pii sao* or *pii nang*) has a different term from young sister (*nong sao*) and so on.
The age-graded kinship terms primarily reflect differences in the rights and duties associated with elder and younger kin, which are based on moral obligations. A younger brother, for example, has the moral obligation to pay homage to an elder brother and the elder, in turn, has the moral obligation to care for the younger’s children during his absence or after his death. Hence, not only are older and younger brothers designated by different terms, but so are father’s elder and younger brothers, and for exactly the same reasons.

In Daikong, as in almost all other societies, the closest ties of biological kinship are those found among the members of the family, the primary relatives of parents, children and siblings. In the family the father occupies the highest position and demands a marked form of respect. For example, the father has his own seat at the dining table and the wife and children who walk past must do so with his or her body politely bent. The position of the mother, on the other hand, is one of affection and tenderness rather than one of authority that demands a rigid form of respectful behaviour.2

Though the outward expression of authority should come from the man in his role as the head of the family, in the husband–wife relationship the wife’s opinion is often consulted, since Tai women in general have a considerable range of freedom of action and play an important role in economic matters. Men do respect their opinions.

Grandparents by virtue of their seniority demand deference and respect. Their advice and wishes should be followed. To a lesser degree the same holds true with regard to one’s elder siblings and other senior kinsmen. There is a strong sense of obligation on the part of children to support and look after their parents in old age. Tai are dutiful children and treat their old parents with kindness and reverence.3 Grandparents help look after the house and little grandchildren. In return, grandchildren dutifully serve their grandparents when they require help, such as escorting them to the monastery where they may spend their time in peace and quiet, in meditation or in performing religious ceremonies.4

In the Tai family, parents are not only the child’s most important kinsmen, but also the focal points for the rest of the kinship system. It is the bond with his/her

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3 Milne (1910:76).
4 Milne (1910:87).
parents that forges the child’s bonds with other kinsmen, that recruits him/her to membership in labour-exchange groups, and that creates for him/her a network of bilateral kindred.

Figure 3.1 Children in Lak Chang

The parent–child bond is the strongest of all kinship bonds. It should be noted, however, that its strength varies according to the various dyads—father–son, father–daughter, mother–son, mother–daughter—that comprise it. This being the case, family relations within each of these dyads must receive special attention. The focus here, however, is on the cultural norms and expectations that govern these dyadic relationships, rather than on their expression in actual behaviour.

For both parents, the attachment to the son is held to be stronger than to the daughter, a belief that parents generally explain by reference to the son’s greater attention to them as they grow older. Daughters, they point out, will eventually get married and leave home. Sons—and their dutiful wives—on the other hand, will care for them when they are old, do their washing, cooking and so on. Regardless of sentiment, this greater attention on the part of the son is culturally constrained by the sexual division of labour on the one hand and by prescriptive institutional arrangements on the other. The latter arrangements not only
determine certain forms of parent–son interaction, but are also institutionalised expressions of the cultural conception of, and the normative emphasis on, the strength of the parent–son bond.

For example, there is the custom of newlyweds residing postnuptially with the groom’s parents. There is also the custom of the youngest son living permanently with his parents and caring for them until they die.

Despite these cultural conceptions of, and parental expectations concerning, the son, it should be noted in passing that in everyday life the parent–daughter (especially the mother–daughter) bond is very strong. Daughters continue to provide invaluable service to their parents even after their marriage. It is not uncommon for a married daughter to return home and assist her mother at times of illness or during funerals and wedding ceremonies when helping hands are greatly needed.

If the parents’ relationship to the son is conceived to be closer than that to the daughter, the relationship of children of both sexes to the mother is thought to be more intimate than that to the father. From earliest childhood, the father is more remote than the mother, and since, normatively, the father is the primary locus of authority, he often engenders a feeling of fear which sometimes persists into adulthood. Although both parents may punish and even beat their young children, fathers do so more frequently and severely. Thus, children and teenagers will seldom go to father when they have a problem or when they are in trouble, for his initial response is expected to take the form of criticism if not punishment. Often, they approach their mother or an aunt or uncle instead and the latter will then broach the matter with the father for them. Sometimes the reluctance to approach the father is extreme, as in the case of Sam Fong’s grandson Kong who, when he wished to marry his present wife, asked his mother to speak to his father on his behalf. This, of course, is an extreme case, but even in the more typical cases the child’s relationship to the father includes a greater degree of respect and deference than of intimacy and affection.

If the father is viewed more as a figure of authority, one who must be treated with deference, the mother is viewed more as a nurturing figure and a source of

5 Milne (1910:76) has also noted a similar reluctance to approach the father among the Tai Yai in Burma, and she made the following observation: “A son who wishes to marry may not inform his father direct, but asks his mother or sister to do so.”
affection. The mother–child bond is not only conceived to be stronger than the father–child bond, but, if cultural expressions are to be taken seriously, the mother may be said to be viewed as the pivotal person in the family. The task of child-rearing is thrust solely upon her shoulders and the mother has a great influence on the children. “If the child commits evil,” a Tai saying goes, “the mother is to blame.” Because of her greater importance to the child, it is believed that a child should not be deprived of his mother. Hence, in the case of divorce (which is very rare), children are allowed to live with the mother only to return to the father’s household when they are fully grown.

Although the tie to the mother is held to be an especially close one for children of both sexes, its behavioural expression is particularly evident in the mother–daughter relationship. Even when daughters move out and live with their husbands in separate households, mothers and daughters constantly visit each other. Daughters go to their mothers above all others with their problems, mothers and daughters are close confidants, mothers take care of daughters’ children and so on. To care for her daughters’ children is the mother’s responsibility, but the care of her sons’ children, as Sam Fong’s wife, Kham, put it, is the responsibility of his wife and her mother. Indeed, the mother–daughter bond is the keystone of the Tai family. Marriage does little to attenuate it and it serves as the chief linkage between households. The mother–daughter bond, as we shall see, also serves as the main source of Tai cultural reproduction and identity formation.

Second in importance only to the parent–child bond is that between siblings. If mutual assistance and aid are normative expectations in all kin relationships, they are especially strong in the sibling relationships. The responsibilities and expectations inherent in the sibling relationship can be differentiated into sex-specific and age-specific responsibilities.

In childhood, the elder sister is important for younger siblings of both sexes and, in adulthood, the elder brother is especially important for the younger sister. In childhood, the elder sister is a surrogate mother for her younger siblings. When mother is absent—when she is busy working in the fields or going to the market—it is the elder sister who cares for them, nurtures them and plays with them. A typical scene in Lak Chang is a young girl, even of seven or eight, carrying a younger sibling on her back, giving him food or preventing him from
falling into the waterways. The elder brother, on the other hand, is a surrogate father. He has the moral obligation to watch over his sister and guard her virtue until she is married.

On all accounts, the relationship between siblings of opposite sex is especially close, to some extent they are confidants. The elder brother gives advice to his sister and vice versa. In a sharply segregated society where young men and women (unless they are siblings or cousins) sit at separate tables during a feast and in most social gatherings, the sister plays a crucial role as a matchmaker for her brother. In fact, “no love affairs could commence,” as one peasant woman put it, “and no marriages could take place without the assistance of his sister (and/or female cousin) and the blessing of his mother”. Since the mother lives with her son in old age, she usually makes her preferred choice of daughter-in-law known to her son. This by no means implies, however, that marriages are fixed and romantic love is reproached. On the contrary, courting is freely allowed in Tai village life. Young men and women have many opportunities to meet discreetly and court in the fields during transplanting and harvesting and on religious ceremonial days or other festivities.

There are, however, important social and cultural constraints on marriage arrangements, if the choice of his marriage partner is deemed undesirable by the mother. For instance, the mother may refuse to talk to the father on his behalf. On all accounts, then, the brother usually consults his sister on this matter and the sister plays a crucial role in the selection of her brother’s marriage partner. She approaches the girl he desires and if the girl entertains no fancy for him, she tells his sister directly. As a rule, the initiative for establishing a relationship between a boy and a girl is exclusively the boy’s, for however much she may be attracted to a boy, there is no socially approved means by which a girl can take the initiative directly. If a girl likes a boy, she may talk admiringly about him to her girlfriends, with the expectation that they, in turn, will report her feelings to the boy’s sister and eventually to the boy. Even the boy seldom attempts to contact the girl directly for fear of being turned down and losing face among his peers. The boy normally approaches the girl through a go-between. Generally, he chooses his sister for this function. His sister then tries to contact the girl and tell the girl of his love, or he may ask her to deliver a love-letter to her. If the girl reciprocates the boy’s wish, she may invite him to her house for a visit and the relationship between the two begins from there.
The sibling relationship is a special one in Tai social life. Siblings are expected to come to each other’s assistance in time of need and to participate in the celebration and commemorations associated with birth, marriage, death and so on. Both physically and financially, the assistance and participation of siblings at a wedding or funeral are all but automatic.

**Choice of a Marriage Partner**

Marriage is a highly desirable institution in Tai peasant society. In Lak Chang, for instance, only one male (aged 50) and two females (aged 43 and 45) had never married. The small percentage of unmarried adults in Lak Chang is an indicator of the desirability and structural significance of marriage in the Tai social life.

The parents are very concerned that their children make good marriages, boys’ mothers, especially, being on the lookout for a good match for their sons. To be sure, the family plays an important role in the initiation of a marriage and in the choice of a marriage partner. Although a marriage can be initiated by the parents, it can be effected only with the consent of the children. What is meant by “parental arrangement” is that the parents—and it is always the boy’s parents who make the first move—initiate the negotiations, subject to the approval of the children.

Just as parents will not, and cannot, compel a child to marry against his will, children are similarly loathe to choose a spouse against the parents’ will. Parental approval or disapproval of a marriage depends to a large extent on the degree to which the child’s choice is consistent with the following criteria, listed in descending order of importance. First of all, it is preferred that the intended spouse should be a Tai. Lak Chang (as well as other Tai village) parents strongly oppose marriage to a non-Tai. In fact, there are no inter-ethnic marriages in Lak Chang. A second preference is that the intended spouse should be older than the intended spouse should be a fellow villager. This emphasis on village endogamy is based on several considerations. One does not know a stranger as well as a fellow villager; parents prefer that their child lives close to them after marriage; and finally a stranger is never fully integrated into his spouse’s village. A third parental preference in regard to a child’s marriage is that the intended spouse should be older than the intended
bride by at least two or three years. Tai girls are seldom married before the age of 16 and if they do not fall in love, they often remain unmarried until they are 18 or 20. The average age in Lak Chang is about 18. Men marry at the age of 20 or 22. Aside from important differences in sexual maturation between males and females, a marriage in which the wife is the elder spouse is considered inappropriate because it would cause important confusion in the sex and age respect categories; on the one hand, females are expected to show respect to males but, on the other hand, the younger are expected to show respect to their elders. Preponderantly the ages of spouses in Lak Chang conform to the expected pattern.

Based on the degree of parental approval or disapproval, the Tai classify the ways in which marriage may be contracted into three types: (1) the couple fall in love and the parents happily approve of their children’s choice; (2) the parents grudgingly consent to their children’s choice; and (3) the parents arrange the marriage with the consent of their children.

When a girl finally agrees to a boy’s marriage proposal, he returns to his home and asks his mother to tell his father. If satisfied, his father asks an intermediary—usually an elderly man—to visit the girl’s parent in order to discuss the proposed marriage.\(^6\) Should her parents give their consent, the next step is for his parents to approach the girl’s parents and discuss the amount of bridewealth. A certain sum of money must be paid by the groom’s father to the father of the bride, the amount of money varying according to the “social distance” between the two families.\(^7\) If the groom is a fellow villager, and his father is a close friend of the bride’s father, the amount asked—which is not large, usually 15,000 yuan—is at first suggested as the price by the father of the girl, but after much bargaining, 10,000 yuan may be accepted. The total amount of money must be paid a week before the wedding day. In addition to the money, the father of the groom is expected to contribute a substantial amount of pork and whisky to the bride’s father for the wedding feasts.

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\(^6\) The use of an intermediary seems to be a standard practice among many Tai groups, including those in Thailand, as well as in China. See Spiro (1977:180).

\(^7\) In earlier times, a ceiling for bridewealth was normally set at 500 yuan by the chaopha of Muang Khon, and the bride’s father could not ask for more than 500 yuan in exchange for her hand in marriage. But, in recent years, the amount of money paid for bridewealth has been sky-rocketing. A groom’s father could pay as much as 12,000 to 20,000 yuan for bridewealth.
Before the date of the wedding can be fixed, the horoscopes of both bride and groom must be carefully studied, many visits being paid to the astrologers or “wise men” of the village. When a propitious day is chosen, invitations are sent by the parents of the young couple to bid their friends and relatives come to the wedding feasts.

The Wedding in Lak Chang

During the third week of our first visit to Lak Chang, the house of Liu was suddenly bursting with activity. Sam Fong’s eldest grandson, Kong, was about to get married. Friends and relatives came pouring in to help prepare for the wedding. Unlike their counterparts in the Shan states of Burma, the marriage among the Tai Yai in Daikong takes place with a great amount of ceremony. The wedding feasts are normally held for three consecutive days. All in all, twelve meals are offered to the guests.

In Tai social life, the purpose of the wedding is publicity, in the better sense of the term. It is the announcement of a new relationship in which society—as well as the two families themselves—is interested. For this reason, there is a ceremony, receptions and witnesses. The wedding creates status, rights and opportunity. It gives the couple the opportunity to achieve a new degree of mutuality. The wedding is a major vehicle for the couple’s expression of mutual commitment. Therefore, it has a personal as well as a social function.

In theory, the most important participants in a wedding are the bride and groom. But, in reality, the wedding often reflects the dominating personalities or social ambitions of the parents. Exploiting the wedding to serve parental needs is facilitated by the fact that the groom’s parents traditionally pay the wedding expenses. In actual practice, the parents are in the middle of wedding preparations, while the young couple remain on the periphery.

For the young couple, the ceremony marks the beginning of a new way of life. Marriage and parenthood both hinge on this event. The wedding can be properly

10 Tai villagers normally eat four meals a day: breakfast (kao gon); lunch (kao pul); supper (kao poi) and dinner (kao kum).
labelled a “rite of passage”, for it is the culmination of careful planning, the fulfilment of childhood dreams and the high point in many a girl’s life. Though handicapped by the Tai tradition of masculine unemotionalism, the groom, too, often finds his wedding deeply significant.

Although the wedding makes a tremendous difference in the lives of the couple, it marks a turning point for parents as well. When their first child is married, the wedding ends the child-rearing stage and begins the “launching” phase in the cycle of family living. With their last child the launching process is completed.

For parents of the bride, their daughter’s marriage is a kind of bereavement. There is a joy of course in the child’s happiness. But when she leaves home, a void is left behind, even though the family ties are unbroken. Home is still the place to go for a visit or in times of trouble. After marriage, however, the child shifts her loyalty, her dependence and her home base. As a result, life never looks quite the same again to the parents.

For the groom’s parents, the wedding is a major social event and provides an opportunity to create a social display and to make a distinctive impression in village circles. A large wedding should not be a burden that the groom’s parents could not readily bear. After all, the family name is at stake. It is the face-saving, prestige-seeking personality that moves Tai villagers to put a great deal of money and effort into organising social festivities. And Kong’s wedding was no exception.

A week before the wedding, Kong’s parents called on his wife-to-be’s parents to discuss the bride-price and the details of the wedding ceremony. The whole wedding process was planned rather in haste since the girl was already pregnant.¹¹ The bride-price was agreed at 11,000 yuan, in addition to 1,050 kilograms of pork and 250 bottles of rice wine.

As the wedding day drew closer, the house of Liu became even more chaotic. Preparation for a wedding involves innumerable details and activities, especially for the groom’s household: the furnishing of the bridal chamber, the making of home-brewed rice wine and the preparation of the wedding feasts. Kong’s old bedroom was refurnished and turned into the bridal chamber. The bamboo wall that separated his room from the family living room was torn down and replaced

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¹¹ In recent years, premarital sexual relationships have become more common among the younger generations of Tai villagers. If an unmarried girl is pregnant and the father of the child does not intend to marry her, she is considered disgraced.
with a new one. A new coat of white paint was applied and brand-new red curtaining was hung on all the walls. Kong’s uncles were busy with making his new bed. The Tai villagers believe that the bridal chamber must be totally refurnished for the wedded pair. The bed, mattress, bed-sheets, blankets, pillows, coverlet, mosquito net and other bedroom decor should be brand new.

Two days before the wedding, tables, chairs, cooking utensils, rice bowls and other dining paraphernalia were prepared. About 25 tables were set up within the household compound. A temporary fireplace was made in the open air behind the household kitchen and the women of the family, female cousins and relatives gathered round the kitchen and the cooking pots, helping to prepare the food. There was much cooking to be done, and they were to cook almost continuously for three days during the wedding.

The wedding feasts were held separately at the houses of the bride and the groom. Separate invitations were sent by the parents of the couple to their friends and relatives. It was almost as if the entire village was temporarily split into two friendly camps, friends of the bride’s and the groom’s households, even though in actual practice these two groups had a great deal of overlapping membership.

Guests arrived at the groom’s household in the early morning of the wedding day and the first meal of the day was being prepared for them. As the guests entered the groom’s household, each made a cash contribution which was used to help defray the expenses. The amount of each contribution was recorded so that the delicately balanced system of reciprocity might be maintained. The guests then proceeded to the household compound and were greeted by the family members. They were invited to sit down and enjoy a sumptuous meal with rice wine. The feasts went on and on from early morning until midnight and guests would come and go as they pleased. Younger villagers, especially friends of the groom who had time to spare, could stay and party all day long.

Early in the evening of the second wedding day, the bride’s father sent his “presents” over to the groom’s household. It is customary that the bride’s father spend at least one-third of the bridewealth buying gifts for the wedded couple. The presents are mostly household items: cooking utensils, mattress, blankets, cupboards, stereo, television set and bicycle. All the gifts were displayed in the middle of the compound so that they could be seen by all the guests. If the gifts are too little, the bride’s father will lose face among his fellow villagers.
At about six o’clock in the evening, the groom’s friends came to his home to escort him to the bride. In front of the procession went musicians, with drums, gongs and flutes. After the band came the “escort girls” (sao hub) who went to greet the bride and escort her back to the groom’s household. Dressed in finest Tai costume, the escort usually consists of two married women and two unmarried ones. After the escort girls came several elderly men, friends of the father of the groom, then the groom and his friends. When they reached the house of the bride, the elders were the first to enter and they asked the bride’s parents that she be brought to her husband. The custom is that they should ask for her three times. Twice the father refused the request, saying that he had changed his mind and preferred to keep his daughter a little longer at home; the third time he sent her mother for her. Now the bride had a part to play, and she refused to leave her bedroom. The young married women who were part of the escort girls went to her, begging her to come with them to her husband who was waiting for her. At first she told them to back off, and started to weep bitterly. It is considered correct behaviour for a bride to shed many tears, or at least pretend to do so. At last they persuaded her to go to her father, who placed her hand in the hand of the groom saying, “Here is your wife, you may take her.”
The ceremonial fetching of the bride by the groom and his party was now almost over. The procession was on its way back to the groom’s household. The band went first as in the former procession. The newly married pair did not walk together: the groom, with his escort girls, preceded by the elderly men, followed the band, then the bride with her escorts. Another set of escort girls (sao song)—two young married women and two unmarried ones—was added to the procession. The bride’s parents and all her relatives remained in their own home.

There is no special form of dress for bride or groom. Kong, the groom, wore a brand-new, Western-style suit and tie, while his bride was in her finest Tai costume. Her skirt was of black cloth with velvet bands near the foot; the skirt was decorated with panels of woven silks of bright colours. The jacket was of pink coloured silk with a high collar hiding the throat. Her powdered face was covered with red silk and the dangling pearls of her headdress.

Figure 3.3 The bride on her way to the groom’s household

When the wedding procession approached the groom’s household, they were greeted by a cheering crowd and the loud noise of firecrackers. The groom waited for his bride in front of his house and, when she arrived, he took her hand and led
her to the family living room. There, the bride and groom knelt side-by-side facing sets of seated village elders, the groom’s grandparents and parents. A village elder instructed the couple to worship the elders and the groom’s parents, to prostrate themselves before them, to request their formal approval for their marriage, and to beg their forgiveness for any offence they might have dealt them. The parents and the most senior elder signified their approval by saying “yuu dîi gin waan” (literal translation: live well, eat deliciously) which expressed their hope that health, wealth, longevity and happiness be vouchsafed to the couple.

After the ceremony, the bride was escorted to the bridal chamber. Two red candles were placed on a stool near the bed. The candles were to last out the night. So was the oil lamp under the bed. They were symbols of their long life together. A red silk quilt was spread on the bed. The bride, still in her wedding gown, sat on the edge of the bed, her head bowed a little and waited for the groom. The groom, however, did not see his bride until the small hours of the morning as his friends tried their best to keep him outside the bridal chamber. This was part of the ceremonial obstruction to the completion of the wedding. In addition, the groom was prevented by the bride’s party from entering the bridal chamber until they were paid a ransom. It is customary that the groom should overcome all the ceremonial obstructions and complete the wedding by entering the bridal chamber and removing the bride’s headdress.12

The day after the ceremonial fetching of the bride, the wedding feasts continued for the third day. On this day, the bride, dressed in appropriate costume for a married woman, could appear from time to time to help out in the kitchen, and the guests could get a glimpse of her. For the first time in her life, her long black hair was combed back, knotted into a chignon and covered with a pink turban, the symbol of a married woman. By the end of the third day, the wedding feasts were over.

The Tai wedding is a purely civil contract and in no way a religious function. Monks are never invited nor are they present at the ceremony. The wedding is merely a public announcement of the couple’s intention of living together as man and wife. The wedding is nevertheless a very important ceremony in the eyes of the Tai villagers. A marriage which is not a family affair is not a marriage. And a

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12 A great many wedding symbols—the headdress, the red candles, the lamp, and the firecrackers, to name just a few—have been influenced by the Han Chinese.
girl, despite her upbringing and the prestige of her family, is not respectable if she enters into marriage unauthorised and unrecognised by the families of both sides. For the parents, and especially the girl’s parents, elopement is a cause of such intense shame that they will often agree to their daughter’s marriage, despite their disapproval of her intended husband, just so she will not elope.

The wedding is also important for other practical and culturally defined functions as well. First, the wedding represents the only unambiguous means of announcing to the village that the couple intend to live together as man and wife. Second, the wedding is the only means of publicly declaring that the parents of the couple have consented to their marriage. As such, the wedding establishes that the couple are truly married, no one can contest the rights of inheritance by which, in the event of death, the property passes, first to the surviving spouse and then to the children. Even more importantly, the wedding represents the only means of establishing a new household and a new membership in the village community. Only by means of a “proper” marriage can a couple and their children be assured of a fair share of farm land which will be allocated to them by the village land committee.

For the parents, the most important culturally defined functions of the wedding are related to the ever-present Tai motives of prestige enhancement. In Tai village society, prestige derived from wealth is directly proportional to the magnitude of conspicuous display, including both conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste; and there is little doubt that for the groom’s parents, at least, the wedding provides an opportunity for significant social display, because it is they who finance the wedding. Thus the cost of a wedding in Lak Chang, a village whose annual average family income is 12,000–15,000 yuan, ranged from 25,000 to 30,000 yuan.13 In short the cost of a wedding is twice the annual income of the average village family.14

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13 There are two primary expenses of the wedding: one is the bride-price (approximately 10,000–15,000 yuan) and the other is the expense of the wedding feasts (approximately 15,000–20,000 yuan).

14 The magnitude of the wedding expenditure is not unique to Tai village society. The wedding is an occasion for conspicuous display of wealth in many societies of south and southeast Asia. Spiro (1977:189) notes that in Burma the cost of a wedding is equal to the annual income of the average village family, and Indian weddings, according to Mandelbaum (1970:115), are often more lavish than the Burmese.
What is impressive about these figures is that the primary expense of the wedding has no relationship to the ceremony itself, but rather to the food offered at the wedding feasts. Since wealth-derived prestige is a function of conspicuous display, the greater the number of guests, the more refined the quality of the food served and, hence, the greater the expense of the wedding feasts, the greater the prestige value of the wedding. By the same token, the greater in number and the more expensive the wedding presents are, the greater the prestige of the bride's parents.

Sex and Marriage

In Tai village society where premarital and extramarital sexual relations are either prohibited or difficult to achieve, sex is one of the most important motivational bases for contracting a marriage. This does not mean that Tais are especially concerned with sex. On the contrary, the Tai villagers, like most other peoples, view sex and marriage as intimately related, sex being one of the prime motives for, and an important ingredient of, marriage.

Most Tais in Lak Chang assert that of all drives the sex drive is the strongest and the most intense. The men admit that the intensity of the sex drive diminishes with age; as people grow older, other drives, first economic and then religious, become stronger. In any event, most Tais, both male and female, agree that sex is a strong drive, although it is one in which a woman has more self-control. Men, on the other hand, have a low threshold for sexual temptation and, if the conditions are propitious, a man will sleep with any woman he can lay his hands on.

The low threshold for sexual temptation among men explains why, in ideal terms, a male and a female are prohibited from being alone together. It is assumed that all men will be sexually tempted if they are alone with a woman. If a man and a woman are seen together, especially at night, it is simply taken for granted that they are sexually attracted to each other. Hence proper women will not be seen with a man outside her village unsupervised by her mother or brother.

Furthermore, there is a strong cultural emphasis on modesty concerning bodily exposure. The Tai consider it shameful to be seen nude, and one of the most impressive feats of young village women is their agility in changing into fresh clothing, after bathing or washing their hair at the village waterways without exposing any part of their body. Modesty concerning bodily exposure does not
apply, however, to married women, who are often seen semi-nude when nursing a baby. When the weather is hot, it is not uncommon for elderly women to wear neither turban nor jacket. The upper skirt is sometimes discarded and the under skirt is tied very tightly under the arms by a string which is knotted across the chest. When a Tai woman is working in the field, for instance, she is not ashamed to be seen in this undressed state. Elderly women sometimes work nude to the waist but one rarely sees young women in a semi-nude condition.

In addition, there is also a cultural emphasis on modesty concerning the discussion of sexual matters in mixed company. Although sex is a favourite topic of conversation in unisex associations, and although sexual banter and obscene sexual humour expressed in double entendre are permitted in certain contexts in sexually mixed groups—for instance, at the wedding feasts—serious sexual discussion is never engaged in in the presence of the opposite sex.

It is paradoxical that despite the strong emphasis on modesty concerning the discussion of sexual matters or bodily exposure, Tai cultural values concerning sexual relations are neither puritanical nor restrictive. In ideal terms, premarital sexual behaviour is regulated and virginity, especially in girls, is highly valued. But, in reality, young men and women have a great deal of freedom; and though such freedom rarely tends to promiscuity, premarital sexual relations and pregnancy are not uncommon in Tai villages. Indeed, it is considered quite normal for a young woman to have had several boyfriends. The parents’ major concern is for their daughter to avoid giving birth to an illegitimate child.15 When an unmarried girl is pregnant, the immediate problem at hand is to arrange a marriage between her and the father of the child. If the father is known and does not intend to marry her, she is considered disgraced.

Although the unwed girl’s child is not stigmatised, her parents are. Hence the values concerning sexual modesty are transmitted fairly early from mother to daughter and a thorough sexual education is provided to teenage girls. Daughters usually learn from their mothers about the origin of babies, and how to behave and control themselves in front of boys. From early childhood, girls are taught how to behave in a lady-like manner and they are prohibited from using obscenities. Girls freely discuss sexual matters with their mothers, aunts and grandmothers, while boys learn about sexual behaviour from friends and elder brothers.

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Among the various forms of sexual behaviour, only heterosexuality is found in Lak Chang. Other forms—homosexuality, various perversions and rape—are absent. In general, village sexuality consists of normal heterosexual behaviour, typically with one’s spouse. Extramarital sexual activities and adultery are considered grave offences for both men and women.

**Family and the Life Cycle**

An important culturally defined function of the marriage is to produce offspring. In recent years, the number of children a village family could have is regulated by a strict birth-control policy whereby the Tai, as an ethnic minority group, could have only two children per family. This means, in effect, that the size of the family has become considerably smaller, with an average of four to five persons per family.

Tai villagers firmly believe that children are given as rewards for merit earned by the parents in previous existences. When many children are born in a family, they show that the parents in their previous lives were known for their kindness and charity and for their good deeds among far-away and forgotten generations of men and spirits. On the contrary, to have no children is a very deplorable state. It signifies that either husband or wife, or both, has been sadly lacking in merit in previous existences. The baby is a sign of moral respectability, a proof of excellence of the past lives of the parents.

Therefore when a baby is born it receives a warm welcome in a Tai home. An ideal Tai family today consists of the parents and two children, a boy and a girl. A boy brings more gladness into the family than a girl, as all Tai believe that a man stands on a higher stage of existence than a woman, and a son is expected to

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16 Adultery is very rare in Tai village society. According to one village elder I interviewed, there had been only one known adultery case in Lak Chang during the past several decades, one in which the husband was having an affair with the wife of his closest friend. Both were subsequently banished from the village.


18 It is interesting to note here in passing that childless mothers are often instructed by the village elders to make a tiny baby doll, dressed in beautiful costume, and hang it near the Buddha image in the monastery. It is believed that, by so doing, the good spirits who carry the souls of the children to their mothers may see and understand the message.
inherit the family household, carry on the family name and take care of the aging parents in their golden years. A woman, however, also holds an important place in the family and, therefore, a baby girl is also cherished and welcome.19

Birth usually takes place in the home. During and immediately after the delivery, the household is filled with female relatives—mother, sisters, nieces—and friends who come to help with the cooking, cleaning and other household chores. During the birth, the husband and all the male relatives are not allowed inside the room. The wife’s mother, or an aunt, and a midwife help during the delivery. When a baby is born, she is made to cry by patting or by pouring a little cold water on her head. When she has made her voice heard, her grandmother or her aunt gives her the first bath by pouring warm water over her and rubbing her gently. Then she is dried and dressed. Her little stomach is wrapped with a strip of cloth, and a silk scarf is twisted round her head. A large needle is attached in front of the scarf to ward off bad spirits.

When the mother has rested for a little while her baby is handed to her, and the baby may have her first meal. The mother will afterwards feed the baby at any hour, day or night: whenever she cries, she is fed.

After the baby is born, a fire is lit near the mother and is kept burning day and night in all weathers for 29 days, during which time she is not expected to do any housework, so she has a quiet time to rest and grow strong. Her mother, an aunt or a sister stays with her and helps with the cooking and taking care of the baby. It is also the time when the woman learns the art of mothering from her mother. The practice of yuu fai or lying near the fire or “roasting”20 is common among the Burmese and the Thai21 as well. In childbirth there is discharge of blood and filthy matter; this is regarded as impure. The purpose of yuu fai is thus to clean22 the mother of impurities and perspiration in the body. Lying near the fire is “cleansing with fire”, as a village midwife put it, “in order to dry up the things which are impure”.

19 Indeed, when two boys are born to a Tai mother, she often bemoans the daughter that she is deprived of. A daughterless mother often develops close relationships with her nieces or, later on in life, her granddaughters.
22 Tai villagers regard childbirth as an impurity. If anyone approaches and witnesses childbirth, he or she is rendered impure. Therefore, a man cannot come within the area for fear that the charms tattooed on his body will lose their efficacy.
While lying near the fire, the young mother undergoes a number of post-partum medical-cum-psychological treatments. Every morning, her mother prepares a medicine ball by pounding salt, tamarind leaves, turmeric and other medicinal herbs, wraps them in a cloth and ties them tightly, forming a ball for massaging. The ball is then dipped in a warm liquid medicine that is mixed and rubbed all over the body, especially the breasts and the nipples. Tai villagers believe that immediately after the birth of a child, the mother’s breasts contain hard lumps which hurt and cannot be touched. In order to relieve the pain and facilitate the flow of milk, the lumps must be massaged daily until the pain gradually lessens and disappears.

After massaging with the ball, the young mother’s body is pressed with a salt pot. The salt pot is prepared by putting salt into a clay pot covered with a lid and heated until the salt in the pot pops and crackles. The whole pot is then wrapped in a cloth, leaving enough of the ends to gather in a bunch for carrying. The salt pot is then pressed on the young mother’s body, especially rolling it over the pubic mound, believing that this practice causes the womb to shrink and return to its “cradle”, i.e., to its original position. After the massage, the young mother baths in the liquid medicine and then washes it off with warm water. The entire procedure is repeated daily until she emerges from the fire a month later.

During the whole period of lying near the fire, the young mother is prepared a special diet. Normally she eats boiled rice with salt or dried fish and hot vegetable soup. She is not allowed to have anything cold and must also take special medicine for the blood. Doors and windows in her room must always be kept closed, for it is feared that even a gentle breeze could cause a fever. The susceptibility to fever and cold is said to be due to the fact that the young mother is still weak. Traditional wisdom also has it that bad spirits may slip in through the open doors and windows.

A Tai father plays very little role during the birth of his child and, after the birth, he is asked to perform a simple ceremony of burying the afterbirth, that is, the placenta and the umbilical cord which has been severed by a piece of newly-cut and sharpened bamboo. The afterbirth is washed, rolled in a banana leaf, put in a bamboo cup and buried under a tree. The ceremony is simple and carried out in a pleasant and gentle manner, for this is believed to affect the future temper and well-being of the child. When the father takes the cup containing the afterbirth to
bury it, he has a special way of carrying it. For instance, it is believed that the father should shift the cup alternately from left to right, saying that when the child grows up, the child may be ambidextrous. If he carries the cup in only one hand, the child will be handy with only that hand. Burying the afterbirth at the base of a tree is said to be because it is a cool and shady place, and the child will live in happiness and have a long life like a tree. Sometimes Tai villagers bury the afterbirth under the stairway of the house, believing that, by so doing, it will bring more children and prosperity to the family.

The birthday of the child, that is, the day of the week on which he or she was born, is believed to be most essential to the child’s happiness in after-life. There are many beliefs connected with this day in many activities throughout the life of the person. Such activities range from house-building, garden planting, business transaction and marriage, to more mundane activities such as hair- and nail-cutting, in all of which the birthday would determine the lucky or unlucky day for the undertaking. For instance, a man born on Saturday should not marry a girl also born on Saturday, otherwise the couple will spend the rest of their lives in poverty and sorrow. The birthday is therefore very important in Tai social life.

After the baby is born, the parents adhere to a strict post-partum sex taboo and sleep in separate rooms for at least a month. When the baby is one month old, there is a ceremonial washing. The parents, the baby, the midwife and other relatives who were present when the child was born, go to a village waterway where the mother washes herself from head to foot, washes her baby and pours water over the hair of her husband and the midwife. The mother is now purified and may assume her conjugal role and household duties.

After the ceremonial washing, a feast is made for the naming of the baby. Parents invite their friends and relatives to be present and the food is prepared by the midwife who helped the mother when the baby was born. When the guests arrive, each drops a little present—a small cash contribution of one to five yuan—into a small jar. Then the guests proceed to admire the baby, taking care not to say that the child is beautiful or big, for that might bring bad luck. Instead they make nice little speeches to the parents, saying “yuu dii gin waan”—may you and your family live in good health and prosperity. When all the guests have arrived, the village elders pour water over the baby, and the midwife ties white cotton thread round the wrist of the baby. Sometimes, a small coin is pierced and strung on it,
with the idea of having tied the prosperity and locked it. The midwife then gives her blessing to the baby, saying “yuu dii gin waan”. The mother washes the hands of the midwife and the baby is now ready to receive his name. A village elder ties cotton thread round the baby’s wrist, and tells him the name that has been chosen for him, usually by his grandfather or his father.

After the child is named, the midwife or the child’s grandmother then shaves the first hair of the child, leaving a clump at the top of the head, saying that it protects the top of the head which is still thin. The hair that is shaved off is placed in a lotus leaf and floated on the water or is thrown away, whichever is convenient. In shaving the first hair, it is customary for the parents to make an offering to the chao baan (the village spirits). The naming of the child, the shaving of his hair and the offering to the village spirits are all part of the process whereby the new-born child is registered as a full member of the family and the village.

In later life, a child who suffers many illnesses or accidents may have his or her name changed more than once to puzzle the evil spirits that are tormenting him or her. Some symbolic ceremony is sometimes performed by throwing away the child and finding it again at full moon, by giving it to a visitor who sells it back to the parents or by mock burial. Tai villagers believe that all ills, sickness and accidents come from evil spirits. When a child suffers many illnesses, a village wise man or a diviner may advise that some symbolic ceremony be performed. For instance, the child may be dressed up as one of the opposite sex, the child’s name may be changed or the parents may pretend that the child is lost or stolen. If there is no baby to torment, the spirits will certainly be deceived and leave the house.

Tai boys and girls play together and are treated alike until they are five or six years old. From seven to twelve years old children of both sexes begin their formal education at the village school where they are taught reading and writing, arithmetic, geography and Chinese history. Chinese is the only language of instruction.

When they are not at school, children, especially girls, are expected to help with the household chores; they are taught to sweep the floor, clean the house and wash the clothes. Tai children today have been quick to adopt modern-style dress,

24 Traditional beliefs in evil spirits continue to persist in Tai village society today. For more details on Tai religious beliefs and rituals, see Chapter 5.
which is greatly influenced by the Chinese. Boys now prefer to wear pants, T-shirt and sneakers, while girls wear Western-style dresses of brilliant colours, and when they go out or go to town they wear slacks and shirts instead of their traditional paa sin.

After completing the sixth grade, boys and girls—now teenagers—become more and more segregated. Village boys and girls become young men and women between the ages of fifteen and sixteen. Young men and women attain recognised social status in Tai village society. A boy is considered to have reached manhood when he has been tattooed. Until he has enough courage to endure the painful and trying operation, his status is that of a child. Tai men are always tattooed, the traditional norm is to tattoo both legs from waist to knee, the thighs being completely covered with an elaborate design in dark blue. This ornamentation may be continued to the ankles. The backs and chests of boys are seldom tattooed. Tattooing on the legs is chiefly practised as a decoration; it is a sign of manhood, no girl recognises that a youth is a man of marriageable age until his legs show the blue markings. Designs, added from time to time on the arms and shoulders, are charms to ward off evil spirits or accidents. Love-charms are tattooed on the tip of the tongue.

No ceremony marks the passing of childhood into womanhood. A girl becomes a “saao” when her body matures enough to be noticed by young men, who validate her new status by starting to flirt with her. A marriageable girl wears no turban but lets her long and shining hair hang loose over her shoulders.

As in all societies that allow young people some choice in relation to their marriage partner, the years of courtship in Tai village society are bittersweet. There is the fun and excitement of the courtship and the eternal flirting, gossiping and teasing. There is also the painful lack of confidence of parental approval. But once two lovers are able to be married, the marriage usually lasts until death do them part. Divorce is rare in Tai village society.

As husband and wife grow old, they spend more time in prayer and meditation. Women in their late 40s cease to wear bright colours; their paa sin, blouses and turbans become a uniform black. Old people become caretakers of the houses and small children, and spend much of their spare time at the village temple. Old people normally are active in the religious affairs of the village. They spend more time at the temple in meditation and performing small services in the caretaking

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of the temple, such as sweeping the floor and arranging flowers at the altar.\textsuperscript{25} They also take the leading role in the performances of religious feasts.\textsuperscript{26}

Old age confers a distinct social status in Tai village society. Even though old people lead calm and placid lives, they are respected by virtue of their seniority as well as by the wealth of knowledge and wisdom acquired by long years of experience. In fact, the “elders” are the most important leaders in Tai village society. They are present in, and chair, all important religious and social activities, from the naming of the baby, weddings and funerals, to land allocation meetings. Each of these elders has an entourage—members of his family and kinship group—which is the basic structural feature of the Tai village society. To be a Tai villager is to be a member of a family and kin entourage of an elder, whose basic constituents are the family households—the land holding units of the village society. The family households are also residential units in Tai village society which reinforce and are reinforced by ties of cooperation, neighbourliness and political alliance. The family thus remains the cornerstone of the Tai village society in Daikong.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{25}] cf. Milne (1910:86–87).
\item[\textsuperscript{26}] cf. T’ien (1986:46–48).
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