
The Visit

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Love and marriage, love and marriage

Go together like a horse and carriage

Dad was told by mother

You can't have one without the other

—“Love and Marriage,”
Sammy Cahn and
Jimmy van Heusen

Not everywhere.

Among the Na, a tribal people hidden away in the Yongning hills of Yunnan province in southern China and the subject of the French-trained Chinese anthropologist Cai Hua's provocative new monograph, there is no marriage, in fact or word. Mothers exist, as do children, but there are no dads. Sexual intercourse takes place between casual, opportunistic lovers, who develop no broader, more enduring relations to one another. The man “visits,” usually furtively, the woman at her home in the middle of the night as impulse and opportunity appear, which they do with great regularity. Almost everyone of either sex has multiple partners, serially or simultaneously; simultaneously usually two or three, serially as many as a hundred or two. There are no nuclear families, no in-laws, no stepchildren. Brothers and sisters, usually several of each, reside together, along with perhaps a half-dozen of their

nearer maternal relatives, from birth to death under one roof—making a living, keeping a household, and raising the sisters' children.

The incest taboo is of such intensity that not only may one not sleep with opposite sex members of one's own household, one cannot even allude to sexual matters in their presence. One may not curse where they can hear, or sit with them in the same row at the movies, lest an emotional scene appear on the screen. As paternity is socially unrecognized, and for the most part uncertain, fathers may happen, now and again, to sleep with daughters. A man is free to sleep with his mother's brother's daughter, who is not considered any kind of relative, not even a “cousin.” There is no word for bastard, none for promiscuity, none for infidelity; none, for that matter, for incest, so unthinkable is it. Jealousy is *infra dig*:

“You know, Luzo [who is nineteen] has not had a lot of [lovers], but he has made many visits [his friend said]. This is because he only goes to the homes of beauties. In particular, he goes to visit Seno, a pretty girl in our village. Do you want to go [visit her] at her house?” he asked me.

“No! If I go there, Luzo will be jealous,” I answered.

“How could I be jealous!” [Luzo] responded. “You can ask whomever you want. You will see that... we don't know how to be jealous.”

“He's right!” his friend interjected. And to explain himself he added: “Girls [are available] to everyone. Whoever wants to can visit them. There is nothing to be jealous about.”

Obviously, this is an interesting place for an anthropologist—especially for an anthropologist brought up on that King Charles's head of his profession, “kinship theory.”

1.

There are two major variants of such theory, “descent theory” and “alliance theory,” and the Na, Hua says, fit neither of them. In the first, associated with the name of the British anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and his followers, the “nuclear,” “basic,” or “elementary” family—a man, his wife, and their children—“founded as it is on natural requirements,” is universal, and “forms the hard core around which any social organization revolves.” The relationship between parents and children, “filiation,” is critical, and out of it are developed various “jural,” that is, normative, rules of descent which group certain sets of relatives together against others: lineages, clans, kindreds, and the like. “Families can be compared to threads which it is the task of nature to warp in order that the social fabric can develop.”

In the alliance model, deriving in the main from the French anthropologist, and Hua's mentor, Claude Lévi-Strauss, “the institutionalized exchange of women” between families “by the alliance of marriage [is taken] to be the

central point of kinship.” The universality of the incest taboo, “a natural phenomenon,” necessitates marriage and the creation of the “transversal [that is, affinal or ‘in-law’] networks of alliances [that] engender all social organization.”

Since the Na have no matrimonial relationship they falsify both theories. They neither form elementary families out of which a filiative social fabric can be spun, nor, though they have a variety of the incest taboo (an odd variety, in that with its father-daughter twist it does not exclude all primary relatives), do they form twined and expandable affinal networks, or indeed any networks of “in-laws” at all. “From now on,” Hua proclaims at the end of his book, “marriage can no longer be considered the only possible institutionalized mode of sexual behavior.” The Na “visit” demonstrates that

Marriage, affinity, alliance of marriage, family, [usually considered] essential to anthropology,... seem absent from this culture. The Na case attests to the fact that marriage and the family (as well as the Oedipus complex) can no longer be considered universal, neither logically nor historically.

This is a little grand, for there are other “institutionalized modes of sexual behavior”—concubinage, prostitution, wife-borrowing—just about everywhere, and whether the Oedipus complex is universal or not, or even whether it exists at all, is not dependent upon marital arrangements. But clearly, “the visit” is an unusual, perhaps—though one never knows what is coming next out of Papua, the Amazon, or Central Asia—a unique institution sustaining a most unusual “kinship system,” its existence often regarded as impossible. It is a system in which the facts of reproduction (though recognized—the Na know where babies come from) are incidental and all ties are (conceived to be) “blood ties”—the entire house can be called consanguineous.¹

The Na “visit,” for all its fluidity, opportunism, and apparent freedom from moral or religious anxiety, is as well out-

lined a social institution, as deeply embedded in a wider social structure, as marriage is elsewhere. (The Na are Tibetan-style Buddhists, nearly a third of the adult men being monks, whose sexual practices, a handful of Lhasa-bound celibates aside, are the same as those of laymen.) This is clear from the exact and explicit terminology that marks it out:

Society calls a man and a woman who set up this kind of sexual relationship *nana sésé hing*, which means people in a relationship of furtive meetings; the man and the woman discreetly call each other *açia* [“discreetly” because of the “incest” taboo against public references to sexuality where opposite sex consanguines may hear them]. The term *açia* is made up of the diminutive prefix *a* and the root *çia*. The Na add *a* to names and proper nouns to indicate intimacy, affection, friendship, and respect; *çia*, when used as a noun, means lover. The same word is used for both sexes, and as a verb it means literally to lie down and figuratively to mate, to sleep and to tempt. *Açia* means lover.

A Na saying depicts those who are *açia* very well:... It is not enough to say that we are *çia* for it to be so, sleeping together once makes (us) *çia*.

The enactment of such a relationship shows the same detailed cultural patterning: it is not a matter of brute and unfettered physical desire, but of a modeled, almost balletic self-control. The rendezvous takes place in the bedroom of the woman around midnight. (A bit earlier in the winter, Hua says, a bit later in the summer.) The man comes in near-perfect quietness, does what he does (Hua is wholly silent about what that might be and about how the cries of love are muffled), and leaves at cockcrow, creeping as stealthily back to his own house. As men and women enjoy “complete equality” and are “in daily contact, in town, in the workplace, and elsewhere,” either can make the first advance and either may accept or refuse:

A girl might say to a boy, “Come stay at my house tonight.” The boy might then respond, “Your mother is not easygoing.” And then the girl might say, “She won’t scold you. Come secretly in the middle of the night.” If the boy accepts, he says, “Okay.” If the boy refuses, he says, “I don’t want to come. I’m not going to come over to sleep.” In this case, no matter what the girl says, nothing will change his mind.

When the man takes the initiative... he often uses the expression “I’ll come to your house tonight, okay?,” to which the woman responds with a smile or by saying, “Okay.” Some come straight out and ask “Do you want to be my *açia*?” If a woman refuses..., she can use a ready-made formula: “No, it is not possible. I already have one for tonight.” In that case, the man will not insist.²

There are other, more oblique ways of making one’s wishes known. One can snatch away some personal object—a scarf, a pack of cigarettes—from the desired partner. If he or she does not protest, the tryst is on. One can shout from a distance, “Hey, hey, do you want to trade something?” If you get a “hey, hey” back, you exchange belts and fix an appointment. These days, Chinese movies—shown virtually every night, though they are imperfectly understood by the Tibeto-Burmese-speaking Na—are a particularly favored setting for putting things in motion:

The young men and women purchase tickets and wait in front of the theater, getting to know each other.... One man can offer several women a ticket, just as one woman can offer a ticket to more than one man. Once a ticket is handed over, the man and woman move away from each other and only get back together inside the theater. During the film, the viewers talk loudly, often drowning out the sound from the speakers. If they have had a good time during the movie and reached an agreement, they leave

discreetly to spend an amorous night together.

The “amorous night” itself may be a one-time thing. Or it may be repeated at shorter or longer intervals over the course of months or years. It may be begun, broken off for awhile, then begun again. It may be stopped altogether at any time by either party, usually without prior notice or much in the way of explanation. It does not, in short, involve any sort of exclusive and permanent “horse and carriage” commitment. But it, too, is, for all its fluidity and seeming negligence, carefully patterned—framed and hemmed in by an elaborate collection of cultural routines, a love-nest ethic.

When the *amant* arrives at the *amante*'s house, usually after having climbed over a fence or two and thrown a bone to the guard dog, he will give some sort of signal of his presence—toss pebbles on the roof, crouch at the woman's bedroom window (Hua says that every man in a village complex—four or five hundred people—knows the location of every woman's bedroom), or, if he is confident of being received or has been there often, simply knock on the front door. “In a household where there are women of the age to receive visitors [there may be several such on one night, and even a woman may have, in turn, more than one visitor], every evening after nightfall, the men of the house will not open the front door.”

Usually, the woman who is waiting will herself open the door and the two will creep wordlessly off to her bedroom. If the wrong woman opens the door—a sister or a cousin, or perhaps even one of those “not easygoing” mothers—this causes little embarrassment: the man simply proceeds to the right woman's bedroom. During the encounter, the lovers must whisper “so that nothing will reach the ears of the woman's relatives, above all the men (especially uncles and great-uncles).”

No one can force anyone else in these matters. The woman can always, and at any time, refuse the man's entreaties and send him packing. A woman may never, in any case, visit a man; so if she is scorned she is just out of luck. A legend

accounts for this virtually unique exception to rigorous symmetry of the system:

When humanity originated, no one knew how to regulate visits. Aboodgu, the god in charge of setting all the rules, proposed the following test: he ordered that a man be shut up in a house and that a woman be sent to join him. To reach the man, the woman had to pass through nine doors. At dawn, she had reached the seventh door. Then Aboodgu tested the man, who succeeded in passing through three doors.... Aboodgu [concluded] that women were too passionate [to do] the visiting.... The men [would have to] visit the women.

Hua goes on to trace out, methodically and in remorseless detail, the variations, the social ramifications, and the ethnographical specifics of all this, worried, not without reason, that if he does not make his arguments over and over again and retail every last fact he has gathered in four periods of fieldwork (1985, 1986, 1988–1989, 1992) his account will not be believed.

He describes two other, special and infrequent “modalities” of sexual encounter—“the conspicuous visit” and “cohabitation.” In the conspicuous visit, which always follows upon a series of furtive visits, the effort to conceal the relationship is abandoned (“vomited up,” as the idiom has it), mainly because the principals have grown older, perhaps tired of the pretense and folderol, and everyone knows about them anyway.

In cohabitation, an even rarer variant, a household that is short of women by means of which to produce children or of men to labor for it in its fields will adopt a man or woman from a household with a surplus to maintain its reproductive or economic viability, the adopted one becoming a sort of permanent conspicuous visitor (more or less: these arrangements often break up too). Among chiefly families, called *zhifu*, a Chinese word for “regional governor,” successive relationships are established over several generations, leading to a peculiar household

alternation of chiefship and a greater restriction on who may mate with whom.

Hua describes, analyzes, and re-describes larger matrilineal groupings, which are mere notational devices to keep descent straight, as well as the internal structure of the household—a matter of careful seating arrangements, ritual obligations, and double, male-female headship. He gives accounts of the physical construction of the house, of various kin-related feasts and gift exchanges, and of beliefs about procreation (the man “waters” the woman as rain waters the grass, an act of “charity” to the woman's household which needs children to perpetuate itself).

But in the end, “The visit... is essential and basic; it is the preeminent modality of sexual life in this society.... Everyone is forced to follow it, its practice being determined not just by individual will but... [by] societal coercion.”

2.

As one prepares to book passage for Yunnan, however, a troubling thought arises: Can all this really be true? No-fault sexuality? Multiple partners? No jealousy, no recriminations, no in-laws? Gender equality? A life full of assignations? It sounds like a hippie dream or a Falwell nightmare. We have learned recently, if we did not know already, to be wary of anthropological stories about obscure and distant people whose thoughts and behaviors are not just different than our own, but are some sort of neatly inverse, fun-mirror mockery of them: clockwork Hawaiian ritualists, murderous Amazonian hunters, immoralist Iks, “never-in-anger” Eskimos, selfless Hopi, complaisant Samoan maidens. Such stories may or may not be true, and argument, in most cases, continues. But if even the most famous bearer of tales out of China, Marco Polo (he has a passage in his *Travels* of 1298 vaguely alluding to Na promiscuity), is now accused of having never set foot in the place, can this bit of the world turned upside-down exotica escape suspicion?

So far as the harder facts of the matter are concerned, there would seem to be little room for doubt. Hua, now professor of social anthropology at the University

of Beijing, was trained at the Laboratory of Social Anthropology at the Collège de France, and his book comes recommended by Lévi-Strauss, the founder of the Laboratory ("Dr. Cai Hua has done Western Anthropology a great service.... The Na now have their place in the anthropological literature") as well as by the former professor of anthropology at Oxford, Rodney Needham ("The ethnography is thorough and patently reliable, replete with valuable findings...").

Hua spent about two years among the Na, and, though himself a Han Chinese, he appears to have gained a good command of the Na language. He conducted systematic interviews in five villages (sixty-five households, 474 people—the total Na population is about thirty thousand), patiently constructing genealogies and tabulating *açia* relationships. (The female champion claimed 150 lovers, the male, 200—perhaps Abaodgu was, after all, mistaken.) He read through the extensive Chinese annals on the group, running back through the Qing (1644–1911) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties to the, in this part of China, barely visible Yuan (1279–1368), as well as through mountains of more recent government reports and surveys. He traveled through the region, reviewed the (somewhat confused) anthropological literature on matrilineal systems, and looked at least briefly into all sorts of collateral matters: land tenure, migration, trade, ethnic connections, folk healing, chiefship, and the local penetration of national politics. There can be little doubt that he walked the walk.

And yet, something large, hard to define, and overwhelmingly important is missing from Na's brisk, professional, conceptually self-sealing account: there is an aching hole at its very center, an oppressive absence. A few hurried and abbreviated passing remarks aside, an anecdote here, an incident there, we hear little of the tone and temper of Na life, of the color of their disposition, the curve of their experience. There is nothing, or almost nothing, of individual feelings and personal judgments, of hopes, fears, dissents, and resistances, of fantasy, remorse, pride, humor, loss, or dis-

appointment. The question that in the end we most want answered and the one most insistently raised by the very circumstantiality of Hua's ethnography—"What is it like to be a Na?"—goes largely unattended. We are left with a compact, well-arranged world of rules, institutions, customs, and practices: a "kinship system."

Can this be enough? "Na-ness" as a form-of-life, a way-of-being-in-the-world, is, whatever it is, a much wider, more ragged, unsettled, less articulated, and less articulable thing. It is a mood and an atmosphere, a suffusing gloss on things, and it is hard to describe or systematize, impossible to contain in summary categories. How are children, raised by those life-partner sister-brother pairs in those tight little consanguineous households thick with erotic pretense and incest worry, brought around to seeing themselves as tireless sexual conspirators—waiting bedside if they are women, stumbling through the dark if they are men? What does that do to their overall sense of agency? of identity? of authority? of pleasure? of trust? What does "gender equality" mean, what can it mean, in such a context?

What, really, does *çia*, which Hua so nonchalantly renders as "love" while never giving us even reported or second-hand descriptions of what goes on erotically, in beds or out of them, mean? No performance failure? no carnal inventiveness? no *folie*? no frigidity? no deviance? And what is all that business about "vomiting up" secret affairs and about mothers not being "easygoing"? The emotional and moral topography of Na life must be, surely, at least as unusual as their mating conventions and their adoptive practices. But of it we are afforded only the most general of senses; hints and glimpses, nervously brushed by en route to "findings."

Some of this inability—or unwillingness, it is hard to be certain which—to face up to the less edged and outlined dimensions of Na life may be due to what we have come these days to call Hua's "subject position." As a Han Chinese, brought up in what must be one of the most family-minded, most explicitly moralized, least unbuttoned societies in the world, studying as non-Han a society as it seems possible to imagine (and one located in "China" to boot) by using the

concerns and preconceptions of Western-phrased "science," Hua has his work cut out for him. In itself, this predicament is common to all field anthropologists, even ones working in less dramatic circumstances, and there is no genuine escape from it. The problem is that Hua seems unaware that the predicament exists—that the passing of "Na institutions" through Chinese perceptions on the way to "doing the West a service" by placing them "in the anthropological literature" raises questions not just about the institutions, but about the perceptions and the literature as well.

In particular, the very idea of a "kinship system," a culture-bound notion if there ever was one, may be a large part of the problem. It may flatten our perceptions of a people such as the Na, whose world is centered more around the figuration of sexuality and the symmetries of gender than around the ordering of genealogical connection or the stabilization of descent, and turn us, as it does Hua, toward such worn and academical questions as the naturalness of the nuclear family, the function of residence rules, or the proper definition of marriage.

The "symbolic anthropologist" the late David Schneider (who, after a lifetime working on the subject, came to believe that his profession's obsession with "kinship," "the idiom of kinship," and "the kin-based society" was some sort of primal mistake brought on by biologism, a tin ear, and a fear of difference) said that "the first task of anthropology, *pre-requisite to all others*, is to understand and formulate the symbols and meanings and their configurations that a particular culture consists of."³ If he was right, then it may be that Hua's exact and careful account of the Na will be remembered less for the institutional oddities it assembles and celebrates than for the half-glimpsed cosmos it lets escape.

This is all the more saddening because, after centuries of resistance to efforts to bring it into line with what is around it—that is, Han propriety—that cosmos is now apparently at last dissolving. The pressures on the Na to shape up and mate morally like normal human beings have been persistent and unremit-

ting. As early as 1656, the Manchurian Qing, troubled by succession problems among “barbarian” tribes, decreed that the chiefs of such tribes, including the Na, must marry in the standard way and produce standard sons, grandsons, and cousins to follow them legitimately into office.

The extent to which this rule was enforced varied over time with the strengths and interests of the various dynasties. But the intrusion of Han practices—virilocality (by which married couples live near the husband’s parents), patrification (making kinship through fathers central), polygynous marriage (i.e., involving several wives), written genealogies, and “ancestor worship” (the Na cast the ashes of their dead unceremoniously across the hillsides)—into the higher reaches of Na society provided an alternative cultural model, a model that the Na, for the most part, contrived to keep at bay. Members of chiefly families, and some of the wealthy commoners and resident immigrants, began to marry to preserve their estates and to secure a place in the larger Chinese society. But most of the population proceeded as before, despite being continuously reviled as “primitive,” “depraved,” “backward,” “licentious,” “unclean,” and ridden with sexual disease. (The last was, and is, more or less true. “More than 50 percent of Na adults have syphilis... a significant percentage of the women are sterile... people are deformed.... The... population is stagnating.”)

This cultural guerrilla war, with edicts from the center and evasions from the periphery, continued fitfully for nearly three hundred years, until the arrival of the Communists in the 1950s rendered matters more immediate.⁴ The Party considered the tradition of the visit “a ‘backward and primitive custom’... contraven[ing] the matrimonial legislation of the People’s Republic of China... [and disrupting] productiveness at work because the men think of nothing but running off to visit someone.” The Party’s first move against the tradition was a regulation designed to encourage nuclear family formation by distributing land to men who would set up and maintain such a family. When this failed to have any effect at all (“the government

could not understand how it was possible that Na men did not want to have their own land”), it moved on, during the Great Leap Forward, to a full press effort to “encourage monogamy” through a licensing system, an effort “guided” by the recommendation of two groups of ethnologists, who insisted that, “with planning,” Na men and women could be led toward setting up families as economic units and raising their children together. Though this was a bit more successful—in Hua’s “sample” seven couples officially married—it too soon ran out of steam in the face of Na indifference to the sanctions involved.

The small carrot and the little stick having failed to produce results, the Party proceeded in the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969) to get real about the problem. Dedicated to the national project of “sweeping out the four ancients” (customs, habits, morality, culture), the People’s Commune of Yongning pronounced it “shameful not to know who one’s genitor is” and imposed marriage by simple decree on any villager involved in a conspicuous visit relationship. But this too failed. As soon as the cadres departed, the couples broke up.

Finally, in 1974, the provincial governor of Yunnan, declaring that “the reformation of this ancient matrimonial system comes under the framework of the class struggle in the ideological domain and therefore constitutes a revolution in the domain of the superstructure” (one can almost hear the collective Na, “*Huh?*”), made it the law that: (1) everyone under fifty in a relationship “that has lasted for a long time” must officially marry forthwith at commune headquarters; (2) every woman who has children must publically state who their genitor is, cart him off to headquarters, and marry him; (3) those who divorce without official sanction will have their annual grain ration suspended; (4) any child born out of wedlock will also not get a ration and must be supported by his genitor until age eighteen; and, (5) visiting, furtive or conspicuous, was forbidden.

This, supported by nightly meetings of the local military brigade and some

collusive informing, seemed finally to work—after a fashion, and for a while:

[The] District government sent a Jeep filled with marriage licenses to the People’s Commune of Yongning. Ten and twenty at a time, couples were rounded up in the villages... and a leader would take their fingerprints on the marriage form and hand them each a marriage license.... [When] the day [for the ceremony] came, horse-drawn carriages were sent into the villages to provide transportation for the “newlyweds” to [Party] headquarters... They each received a cup of tea, a cigarette, and several pieces of candy, and then everybody participated in a traditional dance. The government called this “the new way of getting married.”

It was new enough, but for the Na it was ruinous. “No other ethnic group in China underwent as deep a disruption as the Na did during the Cultural Revolution,” Hua writes in a rare show of feeling. “To understand the trouble this reform caused in Na society, it is enough to imagine a reform in our society, but with the reverse logic”:

During that period [one of Hua’s informants said], the tension was so high that our thoughts never strayed from this subject. No one dared to make a furtive visit. Before, we were like roosters. We took any woman we could catch. We went to a woman’s house at least once a night. But, with that campaign, we got scared. We did not want to get married and move into someone else’s house, and as a result, we no longer dared to visit anyone. Because of this, we took a rest for a few years.

After the accession of Deng Xiaoping in 1981, the more draconian of these measures—the denial of rations, the exposure of genitors—were softened or suspended, and emphasis shifted toward “educational,” that is, assimilationist,

approaches. In particular, the expansion of the state school system, where “all the textbooks are impregnated with Han ideas and values,” is leading to rapid and thorough Sinicization of the Na. Today—or, anyway, in 1992—the school, assisted by movies and other “modern” imports, is accomplishing what political pressure could not: the withering away of “Na-ism”:

When students graduate from middle school, they must complete a form that includes a column requesting information on their civil status. Unable to fill in the blank asking for the name of their father, they suddenly become aware they do not have a father, while their

classmates from other ethnic backgrounds do. Some of the Na students, usually the most brilliant ones, find a quiet spot where they can cry in private.... The message [of the school] is clear.... There is only one culture that is legitimate, and that is Han culture.

In China, as elsewhere, it is not licentiousness that powers most fear. Nor even immorality. It is difference.

NOTES

1. For the supposed impossibility of purely “consanguineous” (here, purely matrilineal) kinship systems, see G.P. Murdock, *Social Structure* (Free Press, 1996), pp. 41ff.; cf. D.M. Schneider and

K. Gough, *Matrilineal Kinship* (University of California Press, 1961). Of course, “consanguineous” ties are not always phrased in terms of “blood,” as they are with us. Among the Na, the idiom is “bone”: matrilineally connected individuals are said to be “of one bone.”

2. Hua includes the Na vernacular for these various phrases in his text; I have removed them and repunctuated accordingly.
3. David M. Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (University of Michigan Press, 1984), p. 196. Italics original.
4. The Communists of course came to power in 1949, but the Na area remained essentially Kuomintang country until 1956, when the Party installed its own local government, placing Han commissars in the region and effectively ending the traditional chiefship system.