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Dumont's hierarchy among the Nuosu of China

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Abstract

In this article we consider whether Dumont's theory of hierarchy in the Indian caste system (or elements thereof) might be applicable to the hierarchal distinctions of Nuosu society in south-west China and vice versa. Nuosu society is characterized as both a 'slave society' and a caste society. It is the categories of 'slavery' and 'caste' that deserve our attention here. Like slaves in Nuosu society, Hindu society in India sees untouchables as 'outsiders'. They live outside the village and have to use their own wells for drinking water. At the same time, they are in fact the slaves of the dominant 'pure' caste in the village and depend entirely on it. They have to show deference when they encounter a member of the dominant caste, and in some regions, such as Kerala, there were slave markets where they could be bought and sold. We do not produce a point-by-point comparison between Indian society and Nuosu society here, but examine Dumont's theory of hierarchy in the light of what we know of Nuosu society.

Keywords: Hierarchy, Nuosu, untouchables, slavery, Dumont, internet.

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1. Introduction

Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* is a classic in anthropology, one of the major products of the French School, comparable only with Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Mauss's *The Gift*, and Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Moreover, unlike any of these classics., its theoretical breakthrough was grounded not only in an extensive analysis of the existing literature, but also in intensive fieldwork. In its combination of theory and ethnography it resembles the best products of the Oxford school of Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt, and Needham, although its theoretical ambitions are on an altogether grander scale. Because of its subject matter – an interpretation of the nature of the caste system – it is hardly surprising that it was read mainly by Indianists, who debated it for three decades and then moved on to other topics. Dumont himself, following his grand ambitions, had already shifted in the mid-sixties to a study of the ideology of modern life in three books on equality and individualism: *Homo Equalis: From Mandeville to Marx* (1977), *Essays on Individualism* (1992), and *The German Ideology* (1994). These studies were positively received by philosophers like Vincent Descombes, but they never won the attention that *Homo Hierarchicus* had enjoyed. Dumont also never received the acclaim of 'a public intellectual' accorded to Lévi-Strauss or Bourdieu. In anthropology the interest in Dumont's theory shifted from India to Oceania, mainly, in my view, because holism, the shared system of values of an entire society, was easier to discern in small-scale societies than in a hugely complex and rapidly modernizing society like India.

   In this article we consider whether Dumont's theory of hierarchy in the caste system (or elements thereof) might be applicable to the hierarchal distinctions of Nuosu society in south-west China and vice versa. The Nuosu were categorized as a subgroup of the Yi in the ethnic categorization project of the Chinese state in the 1950s. This categorization, which follows Stalin's doctrine of nationalities, is quite arbitrary from an anthropological point of view and seems more or less guided by the exigencies of governmentality. Nuosu society is characterized as both a 'slave society' and a caste society. It is the categories of 'slavery' and 'caste' that deserve our attention here.

   Dumont defines 'hierarchy as the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole, it being understood that in the majority of societies it is religion which provides the view of the whole, and that the ranking will be religious in nature'. Moreover, 'once hierarchy has been isolated as purely a

matter of religious values, it naturally remains to be seen how it is connected with power, and how authority is to be defined' (Dumont 1980, p. 66). In India, according to Dumont, the principle of hierarchy is linked to the opposition of pure and impure.

There are several elements in this formulation of hierarchy that deserve attention. First of all, Dumont stresses that the principle of hierarchy relates the parts to a whole, and is therefore holistic in nature. 'The whole' can be conceived as 'a religious worldview' in Clifford Geertz's sense of the phrase, or as a configuration of ideas and values in terms used by Max Weber. Secondly, since the ranking of status is religious in nature, Dumont raises the question of how power is related to it. Thirdly, Dumont sees hierarchy as a principle in most 'traditional' societies. In India, but perhaps also in other societies, although not necessarily, it is linked to the opposition of pure and impure.

One central criticism of Dumont is the clear-cut opposition he makes between modernity and tradition. Indian anthropologists like André Beteille (1986) were quick to point out that in the 1950s, when Dumont was doing his fieldwork, India was already a modern nation state with a secular constitution and a democracy that was based on egalitarian values. Since our ethnography of India and China is located in the modern period, we encounter modern societies in which this opposition is mainly ideological and polemical. These are societies that are compelled by their encounter with Western imperial forces to re-think their debates about cultural change in terms of modernity and tradition and use terms that are translated from Western concepts, such as religion. A possible way to apply the opposition fruitfully is by looking at the state: what comes to be seen as 'modern' is the statist attempt to modernize a 'traditional' society, and what can be seen as 'traditional' is what the state is trying to change. In the contemporary period, therefore, one finds a debate among the members of a local society about what status and power mean in a social configuration that is to an important extent determined by state power. This is conveniently overlooked by Dumont, who constructs a model of Indian society that is not historically contextualized and in which the colonial and post-colonial states are not considered relevant. Nicholas Dirks (2001) has criticized this theoretical construct by arguing the exact opposite, namely that caste, as we know it today, is a modern phenomenon that became reified as the single essence of Indian civilization only under colonial domination.

2. The Nuosu of Liangshan

When we examine ideas of hierarchy among the Nuosu of Liangshan in south-west China in the contemporary period, it is immediately evident that the characterization of that society as a slave society in Chinese ethnography and historiography is overdetermined by socialist modernism. The state does essentialize caste and slavery, not to make it an instrument of rule, as Dirks argues for India, but to demolish it and create a 'new society'. In doing so, it applies the doctrine of the five stages of history in Marxist historiography, based successively on the primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist modes of production, and decided that some Nuosu lived under slave conditions, others under feudal conditions. After 1949 the Nuosu therefore had to be brought up to date by abolishing slavery and feudalism, jumping over the capitalist phase and entering socialist modernity, assisted by their already advanced Han brethren. At the same time, the Nuosu were now identified as a section of the Yi by virtue of a number of criteria, including language and history, and as such were defined as one of the recognized nationalities of China. In the museum of Yi culture in Liangshan one finds a telling sculpture portraying the liberation of a slave from his chains. One cannot expect any understanding of a hierarchical society from such a profoundly egalitarian, communist state ideology except as a backward phenomenon that had to be removed by progressive history. Dumont identifies the failure of egalitarianism to understand hierarchy as a major conceptual problem in modern society. Thanks to the constant efforts of anthropologists to steer clear of such ideological assumptions in order to be able to grasp other social ontologies and moralities, as well as the space to do ethnographic research among the Nuosu (however limited), we can produce a more detailed view of Nuosu society.

That society follows hierarchical principles. According to Hill (2001) the Nuosu have four social strata or castes (Chinese dengji 等级): nobility (Nuo[1]), commoners (Qunuo), slaves who live on their own (Mgajie) and house slaves (Gaxi). In the 1950s Marxist scholars made a basic class distinction between oppressors and oppressed and determined that the nobility (Nuo) were the oppressors and everyone else was oppressed, despite the fact that Qunuo (commoners) could also own slaves and constitute the dominant caste in a region. The boundary between these categories, as in Indian castes, is marked by their endogamy, and they are hierarchically ranked. There is a notion of purity at work, not, as in the Indian case, ritual purity, but genealogical

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1　Yiyu zhuyi fuhao (彝语注音符号 or the Nuosu romanization system is used to transcribe the Nuosu language in this paper.

purity. The notion of being a pure Nuosu without the blood of strangers is characteristic of the nobility. As in India one finds narratives about the nature of 'mixed marriages' that have produced commoners (Qunuo). However, among the Nuosu the narratives of slavery focus on enslavement through the capture of strangers and on the varied nature of bondage and patronage that characterizes the relationship between slave-owner and slave. Enslavement implies the capture of 'others' and their treatment as movable property (usually compared to cattle). The narrativization of untouchability in India, conversely, does not mention the 'capture' of 'others', but projects a static image of society in which pure-impure relations have existed 'from time immemorial'. The eradication of the caste hierarchy among the Nuosu has to a great extent been successful: what remains today is a basic division between Nuo and Jji.

Like slaves in Nuosu society, Hindu society in India sees untouchables as 'outsiders'. They live outside the village and have to use their own wells for drinking water. At the same time they are in fact the slaves of the dominant 'pure' caste in the village and depend entirely on it. They have to show deference when they encounter a member of the dominant caste, and in some regions, such as Kerala, there were slave markets where they could be bought and sold. They marry among themselves and have their own families and communal life, including forms of ritual. Quite a number of them have converted to Christianity in the modern period, seeking respectability, equality and avenues for educational mobility. In India there are many narratives of downward mobility ('falling from higher status through marriage between castes', or literally 'falling', *patita*) that explain the origins of low-status groups. Since so much of the hierarchy in India focuses on ritual purity, untouchable slaves could not enter the houses of the dominant caste and thus not serve as house slaves.

In contrast, the Nuosu had a category of slaves (Mgajie) who lived apart from their masters and one of house slaves (Gaxi). Except for the notion of genealogical purity, which is very important among the Nuosu, there is no sense of the ritual purity that determines personhood and interactions in India. As in India the origin myths of all strata focus on purity and loss of status due to mixing through marriage. It is quite significant that the Nuosu were mostly not settled agriculturalists, but swiddeners and herders, living quite dispersed without much food surplus. Despite having a subsistence economy, they had a hierarchical system in which captured Han people from the rice-farming plains were categorized as slaves who could be bought and sold as property. All this confounds any simple correlation between mode of production and social structure, as well as any assumptions about the inherent egalitarianism of

these mountain-dwelling swidden agriculturalists. The connection is not with mode of production, but with the capacity for violence. The Nuosu would raid the villages of the Han and in Liangshan also of the Ersu (Tibetans), killing or enslaving the men and taking the women into their households. The Nuosu are in that sense comparable to the head-hunting Wa, who also used captured Han as slaves to work in the mines (see Fiskesjö 2010). The communist army had to ally itself with independent Yi warlords to be able to control the area. Only then could they start to disarm the Nuosu and also put an end to the very lucrative production of opium in this area. In 1958 this led to an uprising that was suppressed by the state.

3. Hierarchy among the Nuosu

We do not intend to produce a point-by-point comparison between Indian society and Nuosu society here, but rather to examine Dumont's theory of hierarchy in the light of what we know of Nuosu society. The principal opposition among the Nuosu is between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', which is determined by way of endogamy. Nuo nobility and Qunuo commoners 'belong' to Nuosu society, but Mgajie slaves and Gaxi house slaves do not. The latter are eternal 'outsiders' whose origins lie in capture and who are inferior as movable property, but their touch is not contagiously impure. They are seen as fully human and in many ways are more like bonded laborers than slaves. While the Nuo do not like to marry the Qunuo, since that would mean losing Nuo status, they do see the Qunuo as a part of their society. The hierarchical principle is thus clearly a genealogical one with the exception of the spirit priest, the Bimo, who belongs to the Qunuo stratum but is given hierarchical respect by the Nuo. It is thus in the ritual sphere that the genealogical principle is temporarily suspended.

According to Yi literature, there were five kinds of occupations in ancient Nuosu society, named Nzy, Mo, Ge, Bi, and Rro. *Nzy* are the rulers with the highest power; *Mo* are ministers of the Nzy or military leaders; *Ge* are craftsmen, *Bi* are preachers, and *Rro* are the common people (Zhu Jianxin 2012). The combination of Nzy and Mo produces a word for the occupation of ruler. Ge became a normal occupation, but Bi became a more prestigious one with a new term, Bimo, in Nuosu society. Rro was not the name of an occupation and is still used in the modern Nuosu language to mean "the common people". According to the census of 1950, the Nzymo accounted for 0.1% of the total Nuosu population and ruled one-tenth of the Liangshan Nuosu

area. The Nuo accounted for 6.9% of the total population and ruled nine-tenths. The Qunuo accounted for 80%, and the Mgajie and Gaxi for 10%. The Bimo belong to the Qunuo, the common people. The origin of the famous and populous shaman Qubi Qunuo clan is that their ancestor was the offspring of a powerful, high-ranking ruler and a slave girl. This is a Qunuo clan that dropped down from the Nzymo stratum, but became famous as Bimo shamans. The famous shaman clan of Jjike had a similar origin in the highest stratum (Zhu Jianxin 2012).

The Bimo deal with the spirit world. Nuosu distinguish four strata of ghosts which correspond to the four castes of Nuosu society, namely Ssi, Tohxo, Ggidie and Shuobbi.[2] The power of these four spirit castes declines progressively from higher to lower strata. The main responsibility of Bimo is designing different rites to prevent harm being caused by these four kinds of ghost (Jiari 2010).

The Bimo is thus an exceptional figure in the status hierarchy, just like the Brahman in the Indian caste hierarchy. However, an interesting difference is that the Brahman priest is respected as superior in the ritual sphere, but at the same time is seen as compromising his exaltedness, which is based on purity and distance, by performing ritual exchanges with inferiors. It is thus the Brahman scholar (non-priest) who has the highest status, more like the selfless Confucian scholar in Han society than the spirit priest in Nuosu society. In general one may conclude that priests and ascetics, as well as scholars, are exceptions to the rule that power creates status. This view is, obviously, contrary to what Dumont posits as the heart of the Indian caste system, namely that Brahmanical values underpin the entire system, but the subsequent discussion among Indianists has seriously undermined that part of Dumont's thesis.

What it boils down to in both India and China is a split in society between a dominant group of hereditary landowners and a landless group of hereditary slaves. In both India and China the dominant group is divided in terms of purity. In south India the division is between the Brahmans and the non-Brahman pure agriculturalists (Shudra) who make up society, and the slaves who are outside it. Nuosu society is made up of aristocrats and commoners, while the slaves are outside of society. The ways in which this distinction is culturally expressed is not of crucial importance here (see Fredrik Barth on boundaries).

In our contemporary society, slavery is not acceptable. Slaves were liberated in China under communist rule and in India under democratic rule. The Indian state has outlawed the practice of untouchability, though through a system of reservation

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2 The original terms with tone markers are: Ssip, Tothxo, Ggitdie and Shuobbit.

policies it has also targeted those 'scheduled' castes that by law no longer exist. When in 2001 Dalit (formerly Untouchable) activists demanded that discrimination against Dalits be recognized as racism at the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, the Indian government vehemently opposed the idea that caste had anything to do with race. In fact, the situation for Untouchables has hardly improved under democratic rule. When they, like everyone else, move to the cities they form the largest group of poor slum-dwellers, often still living in legally unrecognized dwellings on untitled land. In short, they are still landless laborers, now not in rural areas, but in the cities.

In China communism has made a much greater difference. The slave-owning families in Nuosu society have been targeted and discriminated against. To be of upper-caste origin in Communist China was a huge disadvantage in obtaining an education or a job. Land reform has given the former slaves their first land under communal conditions, and later, with the re-introduction of private property, their own land. Many people of all strata have moved away from agricultural villages to the city. At the same time the nationalities policy of the Chinese state has created a Yi ethnic identity for all strata.

4. Lingering notions of hierarchy among the Nuosu since Liberation in Communist China

Despite these revolutionary changes, notions of hierarchy are still important under contemporary conditions in Nuosu society. Those of slave origin see themselves as Nuosu Yi. If they know they were descended from Han before they were enslaved by the Nuosu, they may see themselves as Han too, in which case they have a dual ethnic identity. The question, however, is whether they are accepted by either the Nuosu Yi or the Han as members of those ethnicities. If they self-identify as Nuosu, they are still seen as outsiders by the Nuosu. Nuo and Qunuo do not like to enter into affinal relations with them. However, whenever they try to regard themselves as Han, they are faced with the ethnic categorization of the Chinese state, which identifies them as a section of the Yi nationality. The Yi identity has been added to their ID cards and *hukou* classification, meaning that they are officially members of the Yi nationality. When Wu Da, who is a Qunuo, was in primary school, he had nine classmates in total, all Nuosu. Among them there were two classmates from the slave group, sisters from the same family, who always dressed in traditional Yi clothes when they attended

school. They could only speak Nuosu, like their classmates. Other classmates, including Wu Da himself, never treated them as Han, even though their father spoke Nuosu with a very heavy Han accent.

Some people from the slave groups do not know their original Han home towns, relatives, or even their original Han family names, having been captured and sold to Nuosu masters when they were very young. They have already taken their master's family names and ethnic belonging. They could also remember their masters' genealogical trees very well and are always allowed to put their names into the same generation of their young masters. For instance, if one slave's old master is in the 30th generation of his family genealogy, the slave would put his own name in the 31st generation as his young masters do. For Mgajie of this sort, it would not be easy for an outsider to identify the original ethnic Han belonging. People from such backgrounds are always treated as Nuosu until they claim to be ethnic Han. One example is that of a young cadre called Yang Muhlie, from a slave family. Muhlie is a traditional Nuosu name that means second oldest brother in one's family, while Yang is a normal Han family name. When Yang Muhlie was chosen as a young Yi cadre by the local communist government, he was sent to another Nuosu Yi community far away from his home town, where he introduced himself as a Nuosu. But later he met a Han girl with whom he fell in love and married, then starting to identify himself as an ethnic Han. Another example is one of Wu Da's old friends, Ahe Muda in Ganluo County, whom he interviewed in 2014 on the occasion of the Torch Festival. The interview started with a question of when and why the Nuosu of Puchang region had started to celebrate the Torch Festival. The Torch Festival is a famous festival celebrated by the Nuosu and their neighboring ethnic groups in southwest China except for a small 'cultural island' such as Puchang region, which in the past did not celebrate the festival. When we were talking about the reasons why the Puchang Nuosu started to celebrate the festival, Ahe Muda said that he did the rituals for it, such as putting pine leaves on the ground in the morning and killing a sheep for dinner and lighting a torch in the evening, just like other Nuosu groups outside Puchang region that celebrate the festival. After hearing Ahe Muda's story about the Torch Festival in Puchang, Vahly Amu made a very critical remark, saying: 'That's learning from other areas just like children learn games from their neighbors. We Nuosu from Puchang never celebrate the Torch Festival because once the Goddess of Torch Festival tried to enter Puchang region, a very strange red snow started, stopping the Goddess from entering. That is why Nuosu people from Puchang and the surrounding areas don't celebrate the festival'" Amu continued, 'That some Puchang Nuosu

people celebrate the Torch Festival is just the same as some Han people only celebrating Christmas recently.' Muda was unhappy that Amu criticized him in that way. He then proceeded to claim: 'I'm a Han from Zhou family in Tianba Township'. This claim came as a little shock to Wu Da, who had known Ahe Muda for over thirty years and had always thought that Muda was a Qunuo who had adopted the name of a famous Nuo clan, the masters of certain Qunuo, Mgajie and Gaxi in their traditional region. Muda was in his fifties and had been born in Ggujjo village, the same village as Wu Da's grandfather, a Nuosu village with only two Han families with the surnames Chen (陈) and Xia (夏). These two Han families were not slave families but had migrated into Ggujjo village after Liberation (1949). Usually, they will not marry local Nuosu, nor vice versa, but Muda was an exception in that he married a woman from the Chen family. Muda's parents and members of the Ahe clan were very much against his marriage, so Muda and his Han wife escaped from the clan and went to live in the county town of Ganluo. Muda found a good job as a manager in an insurance company in Ganluo County. Wu Da knew that Muda had married a Han wife, but he never thought that his family was originally ethnic Han. That meant that his parents were originally from the slave stratum (Mgajie) in Ggujjo village. The social stratum or caste background is always a sensitive topic to ask about and discuss in Nuosu society. This is why Wu Da had long been ignorant of his old friend Muda's ethnic background until the latter admitted it in the foregoing conversation about the Torch Festival.

During the socialist reform period after 1956, the ideology of class struggle and the idea of slave ownership came to overlap. The communists tried to destroy the high-ranking 'exploiting class'. Any couple from this class would be heavily discriminated against and might actually be in danger. They therefore tried to marry a safer lower class person. Liberation therefore stimulated a lot of marriages across the boundaries of the traditional Nuosu hierarchy. Nzy married Qunuo, Nuo married Qunuo, Nuo married Mgajie and Han Chinese, and so on. However, such marriages often failed to obtain the agreement of the members of the individual's clan. For example, a Nzymo woman from the Ashuo clan of Zhaojue County married a Qunuo from Jjivot of Ganluo County, to which the members of the Ashuo clan were opposed. Her mother even threatened to kill herself if she did not leave her Qunuo husband. Thanks to support from the local government the couple insisted on staying together. More than ten years later, although the Nzymo parents would now accept their daughter and grandchildren, they did not regard their Qunuo son-in-law as a member of their family. Even so, the grandchildren have already descended

straight down to Qunuo according to Nuosu customary law. This Jjivot Qunuo son-in-law never had a chance to visit his Nzymo parents-in-law before his death in 1990 (Ma Linying 2001).

Nuosu who live in big cities like Chengdu, Shanghai and Beijing are less affected by the idea of caste. For example, Nuosu men in Beijing cannot easily find a wife of the same caste in the city and may have to go back to Liangshan to do so. However, it is not easy to bring a spouse from Liangshan to Beijing because of the restrictions of the *hukou* system. Many Nuosu men marry Nuosu women from other castes and even Han women. Ironically, many Nuosu women would rather marry Han or other ethnic groups than Nuosu men, as they are seeking to escape the Nuosu traditional hierarchy.

Ethnicity encompasses caste in contemporary Nuosu society. A very helpful case for understanding this point is that of the Nongchangs (农场or 'liberated slave farms') in Ninglang Yi Autonomous County of Yunnan Province. After liberation, slaves were freed from their masters, and in 1956 they received some land from the government. A few years later, in 1959, Ninglang County made the decision to collectivize all the lands of the slaves and establish 51 Nongchangs for them based on a slave population of 10,000 or 20% of the total Nuosu population in Ninglang County in 1959. From that time onwards, the boundary between slaves and non-slaves became clear because of the Nongchangs. However, ethnicity and clan membership overlapped. When a person from the farms is asked 'What is your nationality or ethnicity?'（你是什么民族）the answer from both those on the farms and those outside them is "I'm Nuosu Yi."（我是彝族。） But when they are asked further 'What clan do you belong to?'（你的家支是哪一支？）, the farm members will answer "Well, I'm not a true Nuosu Yi."（我不是真正的彝族。）, while those not on the farms will give you their clan name (Jiari 2010).

5. Online discussions of hierarchy among the Nuosu

A particularly important site on which to study lingering notions of hierarchy is the internet. Nuosu will not easily express such notions in face-to-face encounters, but the internet offers a more or less anonymous space for sometimes quite passionate discussions of such issues that are hidden in daily life. Wilson and Peterson (2002:457) have reviewed works on the relationship between Nuosu identity and online communities:

Within sociology and psychology, as well as in more popular genres, considerable attention has been given to the idea that virtual spaces allow for fundamentally new constructions of identity: Interactive chatrooms and online spaces were often seen to be gender-neutral, egalitarian spaces. Turkle described online interaction spaces as places where an individual could take on multiple identities in ways never before possible and indeed bring about changes in conventional notions of identity itself (Turkle 1984, 1995). Haraway (1993) conceived of entirely new constructions of individuality based on cyborgs, or hybrids of machine and human. This work had implications for the virtual individual, especially in the realm of sexuality, and deprivileges 'nature,' sexual reproduction, and identity of the discrete, identifiable self (Haraway 1993). Morse investigated the implications of cyberspace for subjectivity, identity, and presence (Morse 1998).

The Nuosu have two internet chat groups called Hei Yi Bar（黑彝吧Black Yi Bar or Nuo Bar）and Bai Yi Bar（白彝吧White Yi Bar or Qu Nuo Bar). Those in these two 'bars' have different understandings of their hierarchical position. Marriage is the most important topic distinguishing Hei Yi from Bai Yi. For example, a person belonging to the Bba Qi clan of Zhaojue County wrote a post with the title 'The Nuo clans of Mianning County make our Nuo ashamed today':

> There are a lot of Nuo clan members in Mianning County, including from famous clans like Ggo Jjy and Lo Vu, who have already married Qu Nuo. Intermarriage between the Nuo and Qu Nuo is more frequent in this county. Such a situation couldn't happen within our Nuo clans in Zhaojue, Jinyang, Meigu and Leibo Counties. If someone from a Nuo clan married a Qu Nuo, those Nuo they would lose their noble status. We should specifically praise the Nuo clans Jji Di, Bi Bbu, Jji Nge, Jji Bbo, and Jji Nyo in the Adu area,[3] and A Ly Bimo, Ma Bimo, A Ho, Su Mga, O Qy, Mu Po, She Po in the Yy Nuo area. But the bones of these Nuo clans are very ordinary. The strongest and most important Nuo clans are the A Sho and Bba Qi clans. Marriage would be the last line of defense preventing Nuo to become Qu Nuo.

Another member of the chat group Hei Yi Bar, whose name is Hlie Vu, responded:

> Some young Nuo members claim that they should have the freedom to choose a spouse for marriage. Some middle-aged Nuo people go for wealth or are looking forward to being politicians in the government, which makes them give up their Nuo identity. So it is not impossible that the Nuo nobility will disappear someday.

Hlie Vu tells the story of his life experience:

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3 Liangshan Nuosu Yi belong to four areas: Shy Nra, Yy Nuo, Suo Ndi or A du and Li ddi Mu. Usally, these four areas correspond to the four local dialects of the Nuosu Yi language.

When I was a child, my parents would always tell me: 'You are a Nuo, you should not visit other families without permission to ask for some good things to eat. You should not speak and laugh as you usually do. You should not bully weak persons; you should not lie; you should not wear bright-colored dress; you should not be a person always on the fence; you should not speak to much; you should remember your family genealogical tree in your heart, and so on. In the beginning I was a little proud of this. But later, after suffering too much, I changed my mind. I remember I once contradicted my parents by saying: 'Can we soak the bone in water for drinking?' Of course, the bone can't be soaked in water for drinking, but the bone is a person's most constant and valuable treasure. I got to this understanding after many years. Which outstanding nationality doesn't have a certain backbone? No excellent ethnic group doesn't have some sort of temperament. Finally, I saw aristocratic features, and then I understood my parents' meaning immediately.

On the other hand, the White Yi Bar has another perspective. For example, in a post entitled 'A brief analysis of why the Black and White are sensitive, Ggushu Sseni says:

It's true that the Black Yi and White Yi belong to two groups. In everyday life the Black Yi are proud that they are Black Yi, and the White Yi are proud of their White Yi status. We respect each other in real life. But why does it become a sensitive topic on the internet? It's simply because the internet is under the control of certain persons. That makes Yi people from Yunnan consider that the Black Yi are their relatives and that the White Yi are nobody. Ha ha ha…

Actually, the White Yi have very powerful clans, and the Black Yi have powerful clans too. We can't say whether the Black Yi is the most powerful or the White Yi. That's not true and makes the topic descend into endless quarrels. In my home town in Leibo County, there are some White Yi who depend on the Black Yi (that's true). This kind of relationship is just like Korea depending on the USA: usually, the USA has the leading role. But when the Black Yi harm the dignity of the White Yi, the latter will fight back. There are four independent White Yi in our county. They are Orro Guobbu Qu (belonging to the Synzy Pacha clan), Homu Yybu Qu (belonging to the Muggu Sseggu clan), Yyggu Lyba Qu (belonging to the Aly Sseshy clan (my mother belongs to this clan; I'm proud of it) and Lonuo Gubu Qu (belonging to the Azho Jjylu clan). Among these Qu clans, some once owned a Nuo as their slave; some inherited the local chiefship of Tusi;[4] Some had been at war with Black Yi until the liberation… Are they worse than those you are talking about? And the Black Yi distinguish the Nuo Shy or Nuo Bie.[5] The White Yi look upon

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4 Tusi: system of appointing hereditary headmen to ethnic groups in the Yuan, Ming, Qing Dynasties and even until the period of the Republic of China.
5 Nuo Shy: 'shy' means 'yellow'. 'Nuo Shy' means these Nuo who have 'yellow bone' not the 'black bone' like pure Nuo, in other words, they do not have pure Nuo bloodlines. 'Bie' means ' inferior or bad'. Nuo Shy are also called 'Nuo Bie', i.e. 'inferior Nuo' or 'bad Nuo'.

the Nuo Bie almost as people who have Han slave ancestry. I estimate that half of Nuo belong to the Nuo Bie. I used to think that the Nuo Bie and Nuo do not belong to the same group until I was told very recently that they have a blood relationship.

In a post entitled 'I am a White Yi, so who should I be afraid of' (我是白彝我怕谁), the author Ergaizi Ge claims:

> People who belong to the White Yi but don't identify themselves as such are not White Yi. They are not White Yi if they serve others like a dog. Those who identify themselves as Yi in general terms and dare not admit that they are White Yi, then they are not White Yi. Those who dare not speak on White Yi's behalf, they are not White Yi. The White Yi should have to have a backbone with 'I am a White Yi, so who should I be afraid of?'

In India the internet has also become a crucial site on which to exchange information, trade insults, and generally get things done that were previously done through face-to-face communications. Since India has political parties and democratic elections, much discussion is related to different interpretations of political issues. Since caste discrimination and caste hierarchy are political issues, they are widely debated in the social media. The internet is also an important site for connecting people for the purposes of marriage, with matrimonial web-sites that enable people to find partners who match their caste status. They reflect what one can also see in the matrimonial advertisements in newspapers, namely that caste is more generally defined, for example, a Brahman man looks for a Brahman woman, rather than a particular kind of Brahman looking for a woman of the same kind, and of another exogamous clan within the caste. Rather than these caste specifics, the search is for someone with a certain level of education. It is especially urban professionals that use the social media to find marriage partners. Caste has not become irrelevant here, despite advertisements stating that 'caste is no bar', but class is a significant addition to the search criteria.

Ironically, former slaves or Dalits also use social media for this caste-conscious kind of search for marriage partners, indicating that they do not wholly reject the caste system that discriminates against them. At the same time they also use the internet to criticize the caste system and promote their struggle for social justice, as, for example, on Dalit Camera **https://www.youtube.com/user/kadhirnilavan** and **http://roundtableindia.co.in/**

As Wilson and Peterson (2002:457) point out: 'Of course, identities are negotiated, reproduced, and indexed in a variety of ways in online interactions, and these often cannot be understood without considering the offline context.' The discussion of

hierarchy in the chat groups of Hei Yi Bar and Bai Yi Bar, as well as on the Indian internet, allows us to reveal some of the undercurrents that remain hidden in off-line interactions.

6. Conclusion

This article has focused on notions of hierarchy and slavery in both Indian and Nuosu society. Dumont's understanding of hierarchy as a way of relating the parts to the whole is important for both societies, but it is much less systematic than he postulates, nor is there such a sharp dichotomy between tradition and modernity as he suggests. This article has not made an attempt to reconstruct the 'traditional order' of society, but instead it has tried to set out the nature of hierarchical distinctions and slavery in both Nuosu and Indian society and its partial perpetuation under both liberal democracy and communism. It is clear that government intervention does not completely erase hierarchical distinctions but may actually reinforce it in new ways. On the other hand, the communist revolution has taken away the basis of slavery, which liberal democracy has not done.

Even without a material basis for hierarchical distinctions, they are still being made. For instance, there are over 6,000 Nuosu in Meigu County of Liangshan who came from the slave groups (Mgajie and Gaxi) but have now migrated to Meishan County near Chengdu city. When these people lived in Liangshan, they were treated as 'Hangen Yizu' (汉根彝族Nuosu with Han roots) and were looked down upon. They accordingly tried to reconstruct their Han ethnic identity and looked forward to escaping from Liangshan to their 'Han homelands'. Unfortunately, today they are also looked down upon by local Han residents because of their poor economic situation, to which they have responded by again trying to express a Nuosu Yi identity as the reason for this.[6] Similarly Indian Untouchables who have escaped the oppressive discrimination of village society by migrating to India's cities today form a slum-dwelling urban underclass and materially are hardly better off than they were in the villages. Those who have been able to move into higher education and the professional class are using the internet in their struggle for social justice.

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6 Private conversation with Dr. Ji Tao(季涛), June 2015. Dr. Ji Tao finished his PhD thesis at Minzu University of China in 2016. His thesis is on Nuosu Yi immigration from Liangshan to Meishan County during the last twenty years.

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