

Preface

I REMEMBER VIVIDLY the sense of calm and comfort that settled over me as I made my way alone, cradling a hen in my left arm and a bag of rice in my right, along the mountain basin path in darkness. The hen was submissive; its low clucking consolingly answered my weeping. I had just returned from visiting a friend who had fallen seriously ill from AIDS. He had been bedridden for a week, and struggled to sit up when I arrived. Upon seeing him, I uttered the most common Nuosu greeting, "Is your body well?" He replied with the usual courteous response, "I am well." But he was not well at all. Knowing he would die soon, I had not brought a gift for this visit. I had learned to be pragmatic in this impoverished area. Instead I gave money to his family and asked them to buy whatever he liked to eat or use. Privately, I knew this was my condolence money for his funeral, my small effort to try and help the family prepare for his departure. I did not stay long because I felt bad for my friend, who insisted on sitting up while I was there. So I bid him a reluctant final farewell and left. Just as I was taking off my shoes to wade across the stream on the way back to my residence, my friend's young son caught up with me. He handed me the hen and the bag of rice and said these were from his grandmother, my friend's elderly mother. I politely declined them because I knew that even a hen was of great value to the poor seven-member household. But the boy insisted and repeatedly expressed his family's appreciation to me. I finally accepted the gifts and carried them home. The warm little hen was the only living being I could lean on just then, when I was wanting a comforting touch. This was not the first time, nor the last, that I would fall sad at seeing or hearing about a friend's surrender to AIDS or other drug-related illness. But the local people's courtesy,

generosity, and resilience taught me not to become defeated or depressed in the face of life's hardships.

In one important sense, I consider this book to be a memorial to the endless suffering the Nuosu people have endured. I am deeply indebted to the local people of Limu who have helped, cared for, befriended, and taught me over the course of my sometimes emotionally challenging yet rewarding periods of research and writing, which stretched from 2002 through 2009. My heart belongs to all whose names cannot be listed here in consideration of their privacy. They are always on my mind. My fervent hope is to have recaptured and vividly portrayed their lives, suffering, and dreams in this ethnography.

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Finally, this book is dedicated to my family. My mother, Peng Mei, has tolerated my incessant demands for freedom and independence, demands that were certainly unusual for a Taiwanese female of my generation. She has had to live with deep concern for my personal well-being as I have chosen to live and work in difficult areas and take on challenging tasks. My brother and sisters not only took care of my parents and grandmother while I was absent but have also been my most loyal supporters whenever I was frustrated and needed emotional encouragement. My adorable grandmother with bound feet, who left us at the age of 101 during the last phase of my long graduate work at Columbia University, had always encouraged me to see and experience the world beyond my familiar horizons. And my father, Liu Yi-huai, who left us nearly two decades ago, did not live to see his youngest daughter awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy. He would never have imagined that his Hunan accent, which I was accustomed to hearing from childhood, helped me pick up Sichuanese so quickly for this research. His reminiscences about his hometown in China and his compassion and caring for the mainlanders without families in Taiwan made a deep impression on me and taught me to always keep my eyes open to people's suffering while pursuing hope in life. This book is an embodiment of his legacy.