

EPIDEMIC SUICIDE IN A LAHU COMMUNITY: CONVERGING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS¹

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This article explores an epidemic of love-suicide in a Lahu community of southwest China in the 1950s. Suicide's rarity and the methodological constraints of ethnographic fieldwork have severely hampered attempts to understand suicide cross-culturally. Using qualitative and quantitative research methods in a longitudinal fieldwork study provides insights regarding the patterns of suicide in a marginalized ethnic group. By developing a "retrospective survey" of suicide based on cluster sampling, this research demonstrates how to effectively incorporate a quantitative dimension in community-based fieldwork. This helps develop better ethnographic methods for documenting suicide and providing better data for cross-cultural comparison. (Suicide, China, ethnographic method, ethnic minority)

Shortly before Durkheim (1951[1897]) published *Suicide*, S. R. Steinmetz (1894) challenged commonly held beliefs of sociologists concerning the rarity or absence of suicide "among savage peoples." In Steinmetz's early anthropological study of suicide, sporadic ethnographic documents were the major sources from which he collected 45 recorded suicide cases from non-European people on several continents (Steinmetz 1894:53). Lamenting the scarcity of ethnographic data for a cross-cultural understanding of suicide, Steinmetz (1894:59) urged that more attention be paid and better methods used to research this topic.

Since then, ethnographic research has made great advances in obtaining data on suicide, although the topic is usually woven into ethnographic monographs focused on other subjects. An example is the classic monograph which led to establishing the field of legal anthropology. Malinowski (1926) explored the social functions of suicide in relation to law, order, crime, and punishment among the Trobriand Islanders. In another ethnographic classic, Strathern (1972) advanced feminist anthropology by focusing on gender relations, rather than on women alone. In her analysis, suicide was treated as a significant aspect of gender relationships and demonstrated the agency of women in the male-dominated system of the Hagen people of Papua New Guinea. A varied approach to suicide is noticeable in ethnographies of the past two decades, which treat a variety of subjects, including development (Chance 1990), gender equality (Du 2002), and social memory (Mueggler 2001).

Relative to anthropological research in other subject areas, ethnographic publications that focus on suicide are few. Furthermore, publications which center on suicide are primarily articles, rather than monographs. Even though its primary emphasis is on homicide, the volume *African Homicide and Suicide* (Bohannon 1967) is a landmark anthropological study that provides a thorough theoretical engagement with and extensive ethnographic examination of case studies. More recent publications reveal the diversity of cultural patterning and the social construction of suicide in specific historical contexts. Such ethnographies have primarily focused on suicide among marginalized peoples such as the Kaliai (Counts 1980, 1992) and the Huli (Wardlow 2002) of Papua New Guinea, the Aguaruna of the Peruvian Amazon (Brown 1986), the Inuit of the Arctic (O'Neil 1986; Tester and McNicoll 2004; Wexler 2006), and the Lahu of southwest China (Du 1995, 2004). Some ethnographic research also explores suicide among ethnic groups that are highly visible in world politics, such as the Han Chinese (Lee and Kleinman 2000; Wolf 1975; Wu 2005, 2009). A joint effort among ethnographers to explore suicide of a region is shown in a recently published collection concerning South Asia (e.g., Staples 2012; Widger 2012).

Suicide takes a peripheral position in anthropological research primarily because of the methodological limitations of ethnographic fieldwork. There are great differences in suicide rates between societies, and its occurrence is extremely rare, as indicated by the fact that the unit of population comparison is one per 100,000 per year. Consequently, because ethnographic fieldwork is characteristically focused on the local or community level, conventional methods of ethnographic fieldwork are quite limited when gathering first-hand information on suicide. It is particularly difficult to collect quantitative data on suicide patterns, especially suicide rates, which are needed for cross-cultural comparison. In addition, many ethnographers conduct their fieldwork in areas where official record-keeping is woefully inefficient. This often results in a total lack of reliable statistical data on the number of suicides. Even less data are available concerning the ethnicity of victims. As a result, second-hand data are unavailable for ethnographers wanting to identify suicide rates from different regions.

This article will demonstrate how a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in longitudinal fieldwork provides insight into the patterns of suicide among a marginalized ethnic group with an extraordinarily high rate of suicide. It will show how the methods employed in my research provide a richer and deeper understanding of a suicide epidemic in a Lahu community in southwest China.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODS

The Lahu are a Tibeto-Burman speaking people living in the mountainous border regions of China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam (Walker 1974; Wang and He 1999; Du 2002). About two-thirds of the Lahu reside in China, where their population is nearly a half-million (2010 census). Soon after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949, the Lahu became one of 55 government-designated ethnic minorities, commonly referred to as “minority nationalities” in China (*shaoshu minzu*) (Gladney 2003; Harrell 1995, 2001; Litzinger 2000:6–8).

Prior to the 1950s, the subsistence pattern of the Lahu in China was a combination of slash-and-burn cultivation and intensive agriculture (irrigated wet rice). Intensive agriculture and the growth of cash crops have greatly increased over the last few decades. Households constitute the center of Lahu village life and serve as the basic unit for production and consumption (Hill 1985; Du 2002). The Lahu practice monogamy, and married couples tend to own and manage their households jointly and co-operatively (Du 2002, 2008). The Lahu kinship system is bilateral (Du 2002; Ma 2011), but with varying degrees of matrilineal or patrilineal skewing in different regions and groups. Additionally, varying degrees of bi-local tendency mark the patterns of post-marital residence.

In Yunnan Province, there are 25 officially recognized minority nationalities whose population exceeds 5,000. Although the Lahu rank ninth highest among these minority groups (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011), they are marginalized politically and economically. Even though their culture and society drew little attention from Chinese ethnographers, I chose the Lahu as a research group while a student of Chinese ethnology in Yunnan. I began pilot fieldwork among the Lahu in 1987, and soon became aware of the area’s high incidence of suicide.

In 1988 and 1989, I conducted four months of fieldwork on suicide in three counties, where the total Lahu population was 287,166 (2010 census). In order to compare Lahu suicides with those of neighboring ethnic groups, I also conducted fieldwork among the Dai, the Hani, and the Han. Additionally, I examined mortality records from the Public Security Bureau, the Statistical Bureau, and the County Archive. This yielded only scattered information that revealed very little regarding the prevalence of suicide, and uncovered little information concerning the ethnicity of suicide occurrences.

The goals of fieldwork in the 1980s were to survey the prevalence of suicide, collect information on suicide cases, solicit local explanations concerning suicide events, and collect the texts of “love-suicide” songs. Research

methods were almost exclusively qualitative, relying primarily on structured and informal interviews and the collection of life histories of suicide victims. The findings demonstrated three striking features of suicide patterns. First, the prevalence of suicide, mainly in the form of love-suicide, was extraordinarily high among the Lahu, especially in those villages marked by extremely high levels of ethnic homogeneity. Second, suicide, especially love-suicide, was rare before 1949. Third, suicide was rare among Lahu's neighboring groups.

Local explanations identified the reasons for the prevalence of love-suicide as immorality and ignorance on the part of the victims. This, however, did not account for the fact that love-suicide was extremely rare among the Lahu before 1949. Research at the time suggested that, beyond local opinions, traditional love-suicide songs and a strong religious belief in the reality of an afterlife were important for triggering victims to take their own lives (Du 1995). Still, this understanding alone remained insufficient. After all, Lahu suicide was rare before 1949, when their cultural heritage had been more coherent and much more significant in village life. Therefore, the focus of research shifted to the perception of male and female in Lahu religion and to their oral literature (Du 1987, 1991). Fieldwork that included the Lahu in Thailand in 1993 and the Wa in southwest China in 1995 confirmed the uniqueness of Lahu suicide patterns in China. In particular, two months of fieldwork in Northern Thailand in 1993 revealed that suicide was rare among the Lahu there, who were quite surprised to learn of suicide's frequency among their fellow Lahu in China.

Fieldwork from 1995 to 1996 sparked the insight that the dramatic increase in the number of Lahu suicides in southwest China resulted mainly from a clash between the Lahu gender system and the radical social transformations imposed upon the Lahu in 1949. A shift followed, changing the focus from suicide to the unique Lahu gender system. This shift was necessary at the time because of the difficulties had in conceptualizing the gender system by itself (Du 2002:17-8).

When research on this subject resumed in 2003, I employed quantitative methods more systematically to determine suicide patterning and to identify ways of comparing it among neighboring groups. From this developed what I call a "retrospective survey of suicide," defined as a statistical survey for collecting quantitative information concerning suicide based on the recollection of local informants. The survey form included detailed and culturally specific information on demography, reasons and methods of suicide, time and place of suicide, and mortuary rituals for suicide victims. By combining focus groups and individual interviews, this survey method can be effectively applied to cluster sampling communities identified by previous ethnographic

fieldwork. This method enables generating a range of data suitable for statistical analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics 19.0.0 and Microsoft Excel.

Based on data from qualitative surveys in a large Lahu area between the 1980s and 1990s, retrospective surveys of suicide were conducted systematically by me and my Lahu assistants from 2007 to 2012 in what seemed to be the center of the suicide epidemic. Residing in four village clusters composed of 41 villages, the sampling Lahu population was 9,224 in 2008. The data of previous qualitative studies was first processed; then each suicide case with relevant descriptions went into the variables in a survey form. The missing information was filled in during retrospective surveys that focused on collecting new cases. Focus-group meetings ($N > 80$), interviews with the oldest villagers ($N > 160$), and other methods utilized between 1987 and 2012 generated a total of 776 suicide cases which occurred between 1910 (ca.) and 2011.²

Compared to the statistical data derived from official records, data obtained from a retrospective survey rooted in long-term ethnographic fieldwork has the advantage of enabling the generation of quantitative models depicting the cultural particularity of suicide patterning. This can be demonstrated by the examples presented below with data gathered from my retrospective survey form, which consists of 23 variables. First, even though love-suicide is the primary cause of the suicide epidemic among the Lahu, that detail is typically omitted in the statistics of suicide cases, even in those countries with comprehensive official records. Additionally, official records give the time of a suicide only by year, which is of no help in confirming that most Lahu suicides occurred around the Lahu New Year. Furthermore, a retrospective survey can demonstrate different treatments of suicide victims with mortuary rituals and the selection of burial sites.

The retrospective survey of suicide has certain limitations. Most important, the need of ethnographers to establish rapport with local people and various practical restraints in fieldwork render both whole sampling and random sampling unfeasible unless the population of a group is small and concentrated. An effective remedy to this shortcoming, however, is cluster sampling of relatively homogenous groups in order to select research sites based on extant ethnographic knowledge. Retrospective surveying of suicide as an ethnographic method is also challenged by memory lapses, which can undermine the accuracy of data with cases that occurred decades earlier. Fortunately, such inaccuracies can be minimized by such strategies as using focus groups comprised of village elders, followed by visits to very old villagers who were unable to attend the focus groups. Out of concern for the well-being of informants who were survivors of attempted suicides and lovers and family members of suicide victims, I avoided discussing the subject with

them unless they voluntarily initiated such conversation. Accordingly, this vulnerable population was excluded from the retrospective survey form. Similarly, prior to interviewing individuals or focus groups, the participants were orally provided with information concerning voluntary and informed consent and told that they were not obliged to participate, and were free to leave at any time for any reason. Additionally, as an integral part of this research, culturally appropriate and effective ways of suicide prevention have been explored during interviews.

The remainder of this paper will demonstrate the patterning of epidemic suicide among the research community (population 2,195 in 2011). This community is officially an administrative village (*xingzhengcun*) consisting of eight spatially proximate yet separate villages, all governed as a single village cluster. There were a total of 178 suicides between 1910 and 2011. The following methods were utilized to obtain yearly population in order to compute suicide rates. From the administrative office (*cungongsuo*) and the archive of the township to which it belongs, census data about this community was gathered from all but eight years between 1950 and 2011. This missing information was filled in by the weighted mean method. The yearly population from 1910 to 1949, when no population records were available, was calculated by utilizing the average population increase rate from 1949 to 1954 (1.9 percent) backwardly.

THE RARITY OF SUICIDE AND ABSENCE OF LOVE-SUICIDE BEFORE 1949

Love-suicides result from the rupture of either romantic passion or companionate love (Jankowiak 2008; Jankowiak and Paladino 1995). The loss of companionate love here refers to the death of a spouse in an intimate marital bonding. The passion of romantic love can be quenched when love is unrequited or when the prospect of a romantic relationship faces insurmountable obstacles. The latter is the main reason for the vast majority of love-suicides among the Lahu.

From 1910 to 1949, there were only two incidences of suicide in this community. Both victims were males who committed suicide because of domestic conflict. One, around 1910, was 20-year-old Cal Si.³ Following a quarrel with his wife, with whom he did not get along, he took his life by swallowing opium. The other was an 80-year-old man named Cal Lawd, who committed suicide in 1932 because of his son-in-law's disobedience. He hanged himself on a tree at a flat-topped ridge on the mountain, where his body was accidentally discovered quite a long time after his death. Because villagers were unable to carry the decomposed body to the village burial site,

he was buried in the same spot where he had committed suicide. Since that time, this particular mountain ridge has been called “the Grave of Cal Lawd.”

Prior to 1950, the most striking characteristic of suicide patterning in this community was the rarity of its frequency. During the 40-year period between 1910 and 1949, the average suicide rate was 3.9 per 100,000 of population per year. That figure is very low when compared with the median suicide rate (13.3 per 100,000) for the 61 countries reporting to the World Health Organization. The low rate prior to 1949 forms an even sharper contrast to the rates in the next two decades.

Another major feature of suicide patterning in this community before 1950 is the virtual absence of love-suicide. As described above, the two existing cases were both caused by domestic conflict. According to the elders I interviewed (N>40) and their recollection of what parents and grandparents had to say, the community had never experienced love-suicide until after 1949, when cases seemed to burgeon overnight. While all the elders interviewed agreed upon the extreme rarity of love-suicide in the surrounding area in years gone by, several elders I interviewed in the 1980s mentioned that they had, indeed, heard of love-suicide occurring elsewhere before 1949. Their memories of the phenomenon were confirmed by my research in the surrounding Lahu communities where, during the past two decades, I collected only two instances of love-suicide prior to 1949.

THE OUTBREAK OF EPIDEMIC SUICIDE IN THE 1950S

A radical change of suicide patterning developed in the 1950s, the most dramatic characteristic being the sharp increase in the number of suicides. The next ten years witnessed 13. Consequently, the average suicide rate soared from 3.9 per 100,000 per year to 85.9 per 100,000 during the 1950s. The earlier rate had increased by a factor of 22. In addition, the average suicide rate during the 1950s was 13 times higher than the mean suicide rate of the 61 countries reporting to the World Health Organization (Rudmin, et al. 2003: 373). Most striking is that the average suicide rate reached as high as 134.1 per 100,000 during 1950–1952, and 159.2 per 100,000 during 1958–1959. These periods coincide with when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began to organize militia in the community and, later, to mobilize village labor with the “Great Leap Forward Movement.”

In stark contrast to its virtual absence in earlier years, love-suicide became the leading cause of suicide in the 1950s. To be exact, 12 of the 13 suicides were specifically love-suicides. The single exceptional case was provoked by political persecution in 1958. As shown in Table 1, the average

rate of love-suicide was 134.1 per 100,000 between 1950 and 1952, and 127.3 per 100,000 between 1958 and 1959.

Table 1
Annual Suicide, Love-suicide, and
Other-suicide Rates (per 100,000 population), 1910–1967

Year	Suicide Rate	Love-suicide Rate	Other-suicide Rate
1910 to 1949	3.9	0.0	3.9
1950 to 1952	134.1	134.1	0.0
1953 to 1957	26.4	26.4	0.0
1958 to 1959	159.2	127.3	31.9
1960 to 1967	84.4	53.9	30.5

Of the 13 suicide cases which occurred during the 1950s, the three described below are manifestations of the epidemic outbreak of suicides in this community. These villagers' decision to kill themselves, which may seem to be individual and idiosyncratic, collectively reveal the historical context in which the epidemic became an embodied expression of social suffering (Kleinman 1997).

Case 1: The Community's First Love-suicide.

Na Si, a 25-year-old woman, committed suicide at home by swallowing opium soon after the Lahu New Year in 1950. While emphasizing that she was the first love-suicide that occurred in their community, many elders expressed fond memories of her. According to their recollections, Na Si was very nice-looking, with a fair complexion. She stood out in her community because she embodied the Lahu ideal of personhood, an ideal identical for both sexes (Du 2002:71–75). Her personality was described as being “soft” or “tender.” She had a good disposition, was respectful to elders, and showed affection toward children. She “worked hard to eat,” which is the Lahu way of saying that she was able to perform both farming and domestic work with excellence. She was particularly admired for her extraordinary physical strength, being able to carry as much weight as a man. Coming from a family that was financially better off than most, she was able to “eat and dress well.”

The only problem with her seemingly perfect life was the arranged marriage forced on her by her parents. Even though it was against Lahu norms, arranged marriages still occurred occasionally before 1949. In the case of Na Si, the villagers speculated that her parents wanted to avoid the risk of having her fall in love with and marry a young man from a poor family. She wed out of obedience to her parents but refused to co-habit with her husband for a long

time after the wedding. This was not uncommon for those forced into arranged marriages.

When the People's Liberation Army (PLA) assumed power in 1949, it introduced a radically different social and cultural milieu and set the stage for what ensued. During the first few years after the CCP took power in the Lahu area, some rebel forces and some remaining soldiers of the Nationalist Party continued to fight the PLA. The CCP established a militia in many village clusters, where the leaders supported the militia in order to protect their communities. After joining the militia, Na Si fell in love with a fellow villager with whom she had often patrolled the village at night. She took her own life before rumors broke out concerning their extramarital relationship.

Na Si seems to have committed suicide in response to a romantic relationship that had no future yet trapped her in a moral and emotional dilemma. The relationship occurred in an unprecedented social environment that came when the CCP took power in the area and made young married couples serve in the militia while still managing household chores. This separated spouses and eroded tradition, which demanded that couples do everything together (Du 2000, 2008). The demands of the system imposed by the CCP fostered "wandering." According to some elders, a rumor usually started when people sensed any subtle expressions of illicit romantic attachment. However, such couples had little, if any, private space for physical contact because the village militia conducted its activities in the open and always in groups.

As a young woman who enjoyed an exemplary reputation in the community, Na Si seemed to have internalized the Lahu ethical perception of an extramarital relationship as the worst breach of the moral code. Accordingly, she might have been terrified by the possible rumors and ensuing shame of an affair. The conflict between her moral and emotional desires was unresolvable in a community where divorce was effectively forbidden, and she took her life in desperation.

Case 2: A Love-pact Suicide during the Great Leap Forward Movement.

Cal Yawl and San Mei were one of the two couples who committed love-pact suicides in 1959. Cal Yawl was a 37-year-old man who did not get along with his wife of many years. He was remembered as being average in personality and family background, but was held in high regard for his strength and his ability to perform agricultural labor and domestic tasks with excellence. Additionally, the villagers sympathized with him for losing a brother, for reasons that were unclear, to a labor camp in another county in 1958.

San Mei was a 22-year-old woman who was married but had not yet given birth. Her personality was regarded as excellent, but her capacity to work was only “average.” The relationship between San Mei and her husband seemed normal. They were “getting along,” but were not “admirably close.” A drawback in this marriage was the shame associated with the husband’s family. They had been landlords, and thereby classified as “enemy of the state” during the Mao era (1949–1976). The Great Leap Forward Movement disrupted her marital bond and fostered an illicit relationship that cost her life.

Everywhere in China, the Great Leap Forward Movement overturned the social order and normal everyday life. Between 1958 and 1959, a period when the population of this community was around 1570, nearly 500 laborers were drafted to work in projects like coal mining and iron smelting in various places. As a result, spouses had to live separately for months at a time.

The romantic relationship between San Mei and Cal Yawl began after San Mei’s husband had been away for three months in a neighboring region to construct a reservoir. It developed during the rush harvest. At that time there was an acute shortage of laborers to bring in the harvest. Small groups of young people from the village often worked together from early morning until midnight to do the harvesting. Some of the fields were far from the village, so it was not uncommon for laborers to spend the night camped near the fields. During this period, Cal Yawl’s wife had remained in the village, caring for their children and working with elderly villagers in nearby fields.

Being physically fit, Cal Yawl remained strong day after day. San Mei, on the other hand, was struggling under the grueling labor and, because of her weak physical condition, Cal Yawl often helped her. Sharing the difficult challenges they faced stimulated a mutual attraction. Even though it was against the rules imposed by the militia and labor teams, camping away from the village had provided the couple some limited opportunities to engage in a forbidden relationship.

During the night, a militia man on patrol came upon the two talking intimately in a place away from the camp site. This behavior was scandalous and would bring shame upon them and their families. Whether they had actually engaged in illicit sex was irrelevant. The next day the couple was found dead, having hanged themselves from a tree some distance from the camp.

THE PERVASIVENESS OF LOVE-SUICIDE SINCE 1950

The suicide epidemic that erupted in this community in 1950 continued with the same intensity and general patterning since its beginning. Between 1950 and 2011, the average suicide rate (per 100,000) for all types was as high

as 133.4, while that for love-suicide alone was as high as 88.4 (see Table 2). These figures are astounding in comparison to the overall suicide rate for all of China, which was 28.7 per 100,000 from 1990 to 1994 (Phillips, et al. 1999:29).

Table 2
Average Annual Suicide Rates (per 100,000 population),
1910–2011

Year	Suicide Rate	Love-suicide Rate	Other-suicide Rate
1910 to 1949	3.9	0.0	3.9
1950 to 2011	133.4	88.4	4.5

Table 3 offers the alleged causes of recorded suicides. Among the 176 suicides between 1949 and 2011, 114 were love-suicides, accounting for 64.8 percent of the total. The next leading cause of suicide was domestic conflict, which accounted for 23.3 percent of the total. The remaining suicides (11.3 percent) were attributed to five other reasons.

Table 3
Alleged Reasons for Suicide (1950–2011)

	Frequency	Percent
Love-suicide	114	64.8
Domestic Conflict	41	23.3
Wrong Doing	6	3.4
Political Reasons	5	2.8
Physical Illness	5	2.8
Addiction	3	1.7
Mental Illness	1	0.6
Reason Unknown	1	0.6
TOTAL	176	100.00

The survey forms also include data for specific types of love-suicide. Among the 114 love-suicides, 104 cases (91.2 percent) took place when the prospect of a romantic relationship resulting in marriage faced insurmountable obstacles. Among these star-crossed lovers, 85.6 percent committed love-pact suicide, while the rest committed suicide individually. Other causes of love-suicide were spousal death (four cases, 3.5 percent), alleged spousal infidelity (four cases, 3.5 percent), and unrequited love (two cases, 1.8 percent).

The pervasiveness of love-suicide since 1950 is reflected in the age range of the victims. Of the 176 suicide victims, 91 (51.7 percent) were between the ages of 15 and 29 (see Figure 1). Within the three age ranges representing the highest frequency of suicide, the vast majority of victims committed

122 ETHNOLOGY

love-suicide: 72.4 percent for the 15–19 range, 76.2 percent for the 19–29 range, and 74.3 percent for the 30–39 range.

A SPSS analysis of burial-site choices suggests different treatments of love-suicides and other suicides. Table 4 demonstrates a statistically significant association between love-suicide and the choice of a burial site: $\chi^2(1, N = 175) = 22.67, p < .01$. Nearly half the suicides committed for love received an abnormal burial site (46.5 percent), while half received a normal burial site (53.5 percent). However, the majority of other suicides received a normal burial site (88.5 percent). This reveals a high degree of consistency between mortuary practices and local opinion that condemns love-suicide as immoral.

Figure 1
Age Range of Suicide Victims, 1950–2011
(N = 176)

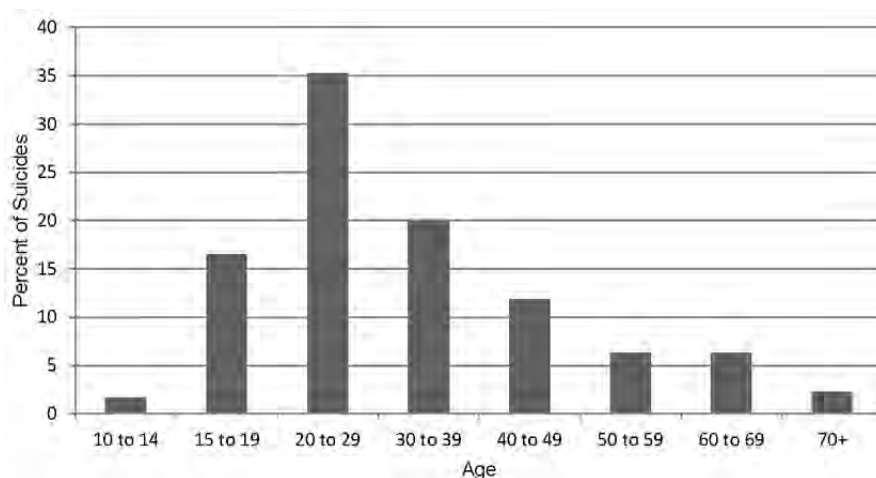


Table 4
Burial Site and Love-suicide Victims, 1901–2011
(N = 175)

	Total	Love-suicide	Other-suicide	Chi-Square Test
Abnormal Burial Site	60 (34.3%)	53 (46.5%)	7 (11.5%)	**
Normal Burial Site	115 (65.7%)	61 (53.5%)	54 (88.5%)	

Lahu egalitarianism is manifest in the gender balance of suicide patterning. From 1910 to 2011, the average suicide rate for males and females was, respectively, 85.0 and 79.9 per 100,000. This stands in stark contrast to the gendered patterning of suicide for the rest of China, which has twice as many female to male suicides (Ji, et al. 2001:2) and an extremely high percentage of suicides among young, rural women (Phillips, et al. 1999:29; Chan, et al. 2001:787–91; Zhang 2010).

Both qualitative and quantitative data support the view that the outbreak of the love-suicide epidemic among the Lahu was primarily caused by a collision between the Lahu gender system and the radical social change imposed by the CCP after its takeover in 1949 (Du 2002, 2004). The indigenous gender system of the Lahu revolves around an egalitarian principle of husband-wife unity, illustrated by the oft-cited metaphor, “chopsticks only work in pairs” (Du 2002). Lahu gender ideals bestow upon men and women identical standards for morality, personality, and beauty. They are expected to play joint roles as a husband-wife team in childcare, domestic chores, and subsistence work (Du 2000, 2008). Indigenous traditions also institutionalize the co-leadership of married couples in the household, the village, and the village cluster. In the Lahu kinship system and social structure, monogamous dyads constitute the knots of numerous relational webs (Du 2002; Ma 2011). The strongest threads of social webs are the relations between parents and their children and children-in-law, those among siblings and siblings-in-law, and among in-laws whose children are married to each other.

Since 1949, however, the sweeping and radical social changes imposed by the CCP have undermined Lahu social organization, tearing apart the institutional integrity and moral cohesion of husband and wife. The establishment of a militia and collectivism severely eroded the ties between spouses who once daily engaged in jointly shared social and economic activities. It also dismantled traditional restraints on interaction between married and unmarried youth. Consequently, extramarital liaisons and marital conflicts have increased dramatically. At the same time traditional, stringent restrictions on divorce, along with the relentless censure and punishment for those caught in an illicit relationship, have persisted in rural areas until recently. As a result, many individuals found themselves trapped in a dilemma between emotional longing, social obligation, and shame. In response, some of them chose escape by committing love-suicide, especially love-pact suicide.³

CONCLUSION

Inspired to provide a cross-cultural insight on suicide, anthropologists began to explore this phenomenon at the infancy of the discipline. While great

progress has been made during the past century, cross-cultural understanding of suicide is still severely hindered by the lack of ethnographic data suitable for comparative study. The marginal position of suicide study in anthropology seems to derive mainly from a mismatch between the rarity of this behavior and the methodological constraints of ethnographic fieldwork, especially in terms of the systematic collection of quantitative data on suicide patterning.

Developing the method of “retrospective survey” based on cluster sampling, this research suggests the potential to incorporate a quantitative dimension in community-based fieldwork. Rooted in previous qualitative research, the data gathered by this method have enabled statistical analyses of suicide patterning among the Lahu in southwest China. Space limitations here have permitted only a brief presentation on patterning the suicide epidemic since 1950 in the Lahu community I researched most. The retrospective surveys conducted in a total of four Lahu communities have systematically collected data concerning 680 suicides which occurred between 1930 and 2007. Initial analysis of these data by IBM SPSS Statistics and Microsoft Excel has demonstrated similar patterns.

Echoing Steinmetz’s (1897) appeal, this article urges that more attention be given to the ethnographic study of suicide. The availability of more ethnographic data, especially those suitable for statistical and cross-cultural analysis, can facilitate anthropologists engaging more effectively in developing interdisciplinary theories of suicide. Most importantly, however, such ethnographic data and analysis can be a critical means of revealing the suffering of marginalized groups having suicide epidemics. Moreover, while documenting the severity and patterning of epidemic suicide, a convergence of qualitative and quantitative approaches in ethnographic research can also identify the socio-cultural and historical causes of suicide epidemics. Such knowledge is important for the development of culturally sensitive methods of suicide prevention, and thus contributes to the alleviation of this tragic form of suffering.

NOTES

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2. While the data of some villages were updated to 2011, others were updated to 2009 or 2007.

3. Prior to 1949 this had been appreciated primarily as an artistic expression in Lahu oral literature (Du 1995, 2004).
4. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

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