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The neonatal practice of *Yuezi* in Western Fujian Hakka villages

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Abstract In the Chinese traditional family system, childbirth marks the passage of the young daughter-in-law into motherhood, and also raises her status within the family. When a child is born, mother and baby are confined in the childbirth room for a period variable from 30–40 to 100 days: the *yuezi* (月子) period. This medical related practice, recorded in classical texts, is widespread in contemporary China, and in urban areas a great number of *yuezi* centers are offering their services to new mothers who do not have the knowledge, or the material prerequisites, to observe it. In this article, the author analyzes some interviews collected during her fieldwork research, which took place between 2014 and 2019 in Hakka rammed-earth building (*tulou* 土楼) communities in West Fujian. The research highlights the social function of this isolation practice in Hakka culture rural villages, where in the past women were left to take care of the household while men emigrated to earn money. In this context, the relationship between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law was the basic requisite for harmony in the family. The author demonstrates that this period of time had the function of creating and reinforcing the bond between the two women, whereas in contemporary urban society the practice appears to be confined to its mechanical performance, with diminished attention to its psycho-social implications.

Keywords Hakka culture · Chinese gender studies · Post-natal practice · *Yuezi* · West Fujian

"Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices … which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."
Hobsbawm and Ranger, The Invention of Tradition.

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Introduction

What will be analyzed here concerns the postnatal confinement period that Chinese women practice after childbirth (*yuezi* 月子). Particularly, we will focus on its core symbolic meaning for the Hakka rural communities in Western Fujian (Minxi 闽西).

In contemporary China, in its search for an identitarian sanction of a "Chinaness" in opposition to Western culture—as firmly propounded by Xi Jinping—the postnatal practice of *yuezi* is popular both in rural and urban contexts. Modern women in the city, not just rural women, recognize its medical value and appreciate its continuity with traditional culture. However, the importance of the urban—and therefore modern—practice of *yuezi*[1] is confined to its mechanical performance, to the detriment of established psycho-social implications (Quaranta 2006, p. 17). If, on the one hand, the material requirements of *yuezi* as practiced by Hakka women, in terms of nutrition, personal hygiene, and isolation, are easily met in an urban environment, on the other, the social merit of creating a bond between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and the cultural one of integration within a group—both being key marks in Hakka culture (Ardizzoni 2021)—are no longer paramount.

The present paper stems from research begun in 2014 in Western Fujian Hakka villages. The data presented here has been taken from interviews, oral communication, extensive perusal of bibliography, and discussions with local experts.

Hakka people in Western Fujian

Western Fujian is considered "the cradle of the Hakka people," the Hakkas being a Han subgroup characterized by a robust cultural cohesion.[2]

The Hakka sense of cohesion is based mainly on three factors: migration, both in the past and contemporary; rurality, inasmuch as, in the past, Hakka settlements have always been located in a rural context; a Confucian world-view, whether original within families, many of which used to belong to the elites of the Central Plains, before being by reason of necessity "reconverted" to a rural life, or as a means of rapprochement to mainstream Han culture. Within this precise socio-cultural context, women become one of the symbols of Hakka culture (Xu 2016; Ardizzoni 2021), and embody the group's cultural awareness, for their role in production and reproduction as well as in the transmission of values through education.[3]

[1] The correct Chinese expression is *zuo yuezi* 坐月子, i.e. "to sit through the month". However, among the Hakkas, it is common to use the homophone character *zuo* 做 for "doing", i.e. *zuo yuezi* 做月子, literally "to *perform* the month". This linguistic "slip-up" further highlights the pragmatic aspects of the custom.

[2] Officially, Hakkas are not a *minzu* 民族, but a *minxi* 民系 (Mullaney 2011; Wang 2015). The term *minxi* marks a hypothetical lineage of descent that may include individuals from different ethnic groups (Hu et al. 2014 [2006], p. 229, n. 539).

[3] On the importance of migration for Hakka group awareness construction, see among others Luo 1989 [1933], Erbaugh (1992), Constable (1996), Leong and Wright (1997), Leo and Dai (2000), Xie (2002), Xie (2003), Xie (2005b), Xie (2009), Fang (2012), Wu (2012), An (2015), Leo (2015), Luo (2018).

In the past two centuries, Hakkas from villages and counties have taken part in the global diaspora, while still maintaining a strong link to their ancestors' land as overseas Chinese, *huaqiao* (Lin 2006, p. 376). Their identity narrative is thus strongly linked to the migration experience, and connects local villages with *huaqiao* all over the world.[4]

In the past 10 years, some of the Minxi rural areas have undergone radical transformation when numerous villages were inserted in the UNESCO World Heritage list on account of the rediscovery of their traditional rammed-earth dwellings known as Hakka *tulou*s (*Kejia tulou* 客家土楼); Hakka group culture strongly identifies with this traditional architectural feature, which was particularly developed in Western Fujian (Zheng 2009; Xie 2009; Xu 2016; Huang 2020).

Hakka villages consist of several *tulous*, each one being an independent dwelling unit integrated within the collective complex of the village (Luo 1989 [1933]; Liu 2004 [1957]; Xie 2005b, 2009; Zheng 2009; Huang 2020). In the past, a *tulou* hosted all the members of its founder's lineage (up to 20–30 nuclear families, *hu* 户). Men would emigrate, whereas women stayed in the village to take care of household, elderly and children. Nowadays, besides historical *tulou* buildings, *yangfang* 洋房 dwellings are being constructed, i.e. single family "foreign style" homes that attempt to preserve the traditional patterns of the *tulou*.

Despite the central role held by women, mainly due to the lack of a sizable male workforce, Hakka society is definitely patriarchal; communities are characterized by a family structure composed of clans united by large-scale kinship alliances, wherein marriages are exogamous, patrilineal, and virilocal (Freedman 1958a, b, 1970; Cohen 2005; Faure 1990, 2007; Hu et al. 2014 [2006]; Brandtstadter and Santos 2009; Malighetti 2014; Bruckermann and Feuchtwang 2016). According to fieldwork research carried out between 2014 and 2019, 99% of married women had left their original family. But, while in the generation of those born before the 1980s, women went to live with the husbands' family without exception, after 1980 many young couples set up nuclear families, abetted by migratory dynamics, both from the countryside to the city and transnational.

With the development of *tulou*-related tourism, many short-range emigrants (the *mingong* 民工, who had moved to Zhangzhou, Longyan, and Xiamen), especially women, were able to return. This back-to-the-village movement was highly encouraged by the government, to revitalize the economic, social, and demographic stagnation that affected the countryside as a result of China's conversion to a market economy and a privatization policy centered on urbanization and industrial production.[5]

[4] There are 500,000 people abroad from Yongding county alone—the current Yongding population is 5,000,000—scattered in 189 different countries in the world. (April 2018).

[5] The marketization and urbanization process that reshaped China during the second phase of the reform policy (after 1992) left rural communities in dire economic backwardness and encumbered by numerous social problems that entered the domain of public discourse at the turn of the century. As early as the mid-1980s, Wen Tiejun 温铁军 (1951-) coined the expression "Three Rural Issues", (三农问题), i.e. peasants, rural society, agriculture, thereby shaping a new grammar in the analysis of Chinese development. Wen (2001, 2007, 2008); He (2007); Zhang (2015). See also Day (2013, pp. 92–127); Day (2019, pp. 169–173) and Hayward (2019, pp. 201–206). In Sorace and Franceschini (2019).

Hakka women in the family

In the process of re-defining the socio-economic configuration of rural villages in contemporary China, women have a central role in reconstructing community relationships[6]; Among the interviewees, all the women above the age of 20 were married and had—or had the intention of having—at least two children. In a Hakka woman's life, marriage and the birth of a child are both mandatory stages. Barlow (2004, pp. 39–40) analyzed the genealogy of the collective noun *funü* 妇女 from the Ming-Qing period, highlighting the semantic difference between *nü* 女 indicating an unmarried woman, and *fu* 妇 referred to a married woman. This change of denomination marks an important shift in status, and is reflected in the cult system. Only a married woman may actively perform ritual services (for her husband's family) and, after her death, be entitled to receive ancestor cult. This transition is gender-defined by linguistic markers. While for woman "to get married" is expressed with the Chinese verb "leave the home", or "marry out" (*chu jia* 出嫁), for a man the expression to "take a daughter-in-law" (*qu xifu* 娶媳妇) is used: this shows that, in marriage, a women's main relational position is shaped by the link between herself and her in-laws, not by the one with her husband. In the area of the fieldwork, these expressions, together with "build a family" (成家), which applies only to men,[7] are much more frequent than the more generic, neutral, not gender-connoted verb "to get married" (*jiehun* 结婚). The bride entering the new family refers to her husband's family members as if they were her own (*mother*, *father*, *sister* and *brother*), which implies a redefinition of her family relations.

Given the high rate of male emigration, in the past and in the present, life in the traditional villages was to a great extent handled by women. This situation, on one side, allocated family power and authority to women, and on the other side was necessary to build a strong link between in-laws, especially between the mother-in-law and the bride. It was important to create a deep and harmonious relationship between the two women, who, after a definite rite, the wedding, had to build a previous non-existent familiarity.

Role building and the power transition process is well highlighted by ritual markers. In the Hakka wedding ceremony, the moment in which the bride leaves her maternal home (*niang jia* 娘家) is marked by the ceremony of "splashing bridal water" (*po xing jia shui* 泼行嫁水): the daughter leaves her father's house and does not return, like water that falls to the ground will not return to the jar. She may return to her mother's home only in some ritualized occasions, dedicated to "going back to the mother's home" (*hui niang jia* 回娘家), one of the New Year's rituals. In West Fujian, once the bride enters the *tulou*, she receives the key of the main gate from the mother-in-law, indicating a power transfer, or—better—a sharing. The transition is complete only after she has given birth to a son. Until then, she does not acquire

[6] On this aspect, related to Chinese rural women in general, not specifically to Hakka communities, see Croll (1995), Huang (1995), Li (1996), Liu (2008), Hershatter (2011); Hakka studies scholars, such as Wu (2011) and Xu (2016) among others, deal with it in the specific Hakka cultural environment.

[7] In traditional Minxi *tulou* villages this would imply the foundation of a new *tulou*.

the power given by motherhood. The accomplishment of this duty gives her more say in the house, and, on top of all, the right to get listed in the genealogy books: *jiapu* 家谱 and *zupu* 族谱.[8]

Women as social subjects play an axiomatic role in Hakka group-awareness because of their (reproductive) function, but also on account of their ethical and cultural value. A woman might be of non-Hakka origin, but as soon as she marries into an Hakka family, she becomes Hakka, and she will give birth to, and educate, Hakka descendants.

In this cultural context, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is a privileged transmission channel of Hakka cultural values and notions.

The taboo on childbirth

In literary sources, the moment of childbirth is treated both as a feature of social distinction and as an inauspicious moment, burdened by a social taboo that requires isolating the new mother. The *Neize*, 12th chapter of the *Liji* (*Liji-Neize* 礼记·内则), states:

> When a wife is about to have a child, and the month (of her confinement) has arrived, she occupies a side chamber, where twice a day her husband sends someone to ask for her. When he himself goes to ask about her, she dares not see him, but makes her maid reply. When the child is born, the husband sends someone to inquire for her. He pays his respects, and does not enter the side chamber. (*Liji-Neize*, p. 60).[9]

In 63rd chapter of Wang Chong's 王充 (27–100 d.C) *Lunheng* 论衡, the taboo that weighs upon a woman who has had a baby is mentioned, whereby, in order to repair the inauspicious action of giving birth, a postpartum confinement is prescribed. (*Lunheng—Four things to be avoided*):

> A woman who has just given birth is considered to bring ill luck. To recover good luck, she goes into deep woods, very far, passing rivers and streams, in order not to have any contact with anyone.[10]

In modern local sources (2018 Yongding Gazetteer,[11] but also the oral traditions that relate the life-stories of illustrious women and the literary works that preserve the collective memories of local populations in a narrative form, as in Lin 2007; Wen 2009; He 2009), the practice of *yuezi* is placed from the Song age (960–1279) onwards, and termed a medical practice meant to guarantee the mother and the

[8] The girls' names are officially included in the new editions of *jiapu*s and *zupu*s published after 1980s, as a sign of the gender equality ideology carried on by the Communist China, and brought about by notable local individuals. The patrilineal ancestor cult which concentrates on women the moral imperative of continuing progeny is closely linked to the Confucian virtue of filial piety *xiao* 孝.

[9] My translation. Original in https://ctext.org/liji/nei-ze. Accessed 05/08/2019.

[10] My translation. Original in https://ctext.org/lunheng/si-hui/zhs. Accessed 01/07/2019.

[11] See Chen, R. 2018.

baby's health (basically, to prevent the onset of puerperal fever), but it also reveals an important psycho-social cultural aspect, which embodies the subjectivity of the woman-person in postpartum and a varied set of symbolic meanings. If a woman does not practice it, or practices it only partially, this may occur only as a consequence of external adverse conditions. As an informant said:

> Women must certainly perform *yuezi* when the child is born. If you don't have much money you can do it for 30 days, but if you can afford it, it's better if it's for 40 days. In the 1980s they'd do 15 days and that was it, because one had to work, but they certainly followed the dietary prescriptions. (Mrs. Zheng, interviewed April 18th, 2018)

From the moment of birth, mother and baby are confined in the childbirth room[12] for a period variable from 30–40 to 100 days. In fieldwork villages, before 2005, when the government made giving birth in specialized health structures mandatory, birth took place in the *tulou*, usually in the couple's bridal chamber, and the mother would spend the whole time of the *yuezi* there. Today, a woman will come home from the hospital right after childbirth and spend her whole isolation period in her room.

Yuezi

As mentioned above, childbirth marks the passage of the young daughter-in-law into motherhood, and also raises her status within the family.

In the rural communities, the practice of *yuezi* is perceived as the *normal* postnatal period behavior.[13] When asked "How do you celebrate birth and death?", a woman informant answers:

> We observe *yuezi*, *manyue*,[14] and we register the birth at the town register for the birth certificate. (Mrs Lai, interviewed on May 13th, 2018)

This shows how in the childbirth event, the physical practice of *yuezi* occupies the same position of a ritual practice (*manyue*), and a civil one (birth certificate registration).

Mrs. Zhang (b.1982) from Xinluo has a degree in medicine, and though she is aware, as a woman with a scientific education, that within the rational urban medical system there is insufficient evidence on the efficacy of traditional *yuezi*, she practiced it herself when her two children were born in 2004 and 2006.

[12] On the general rules according to the official perinatal practices according to Traditional Chinese Medicine, see Wilms and Lee in Hinrichs and Barns (2013, pp. 71–75).

[13] With "normal behavior" I mean a culture-specific behavioral pattern, generally labelled as natural by the interrelated social subjects in the cultural framework where the individual is positioned. (Benedict 1934; Kleinman 1980).

[14] On the 30th day after birth, the baby is introduced into the enlarged family and the society, and, more important, to the ancestors and the spirits in and around the house, and the deities in the village are worshipped.

This is how she describes her confinement:

> Nobody neglects it (the *yuezi*). During that month, the baby keeps you very busy. Now they also do short *yuezi*, but those that can afford it economically they do even two months. You can't drink cold water, you eat chicken for two months, nothing else, they don't even let you eat vegetables. I was lucky, I ate fruit and vegetables, but some people eat nothing. If someone really does *yuezi*, according to our rules here, she won't eat vegetables or fruit, only chicken. But I took care of it myself, I knew things, and I knew that it wasn't good for me. My mother (*she means her mother-in-law*) has an open mentality, she'd let me do what I asked her: when she stir-fried vegetables, she'd add some ginger, that way it wasn't too "cold". Here, every day, a woman that has given birth must eat of an herb, then her mother (in-law) prepares a large pot in which she boils vegetables, and the woman must wash with that hot water, even when it's very hot. You can't even touch cold water. You cannot wash your hair. I did, anyway, but there are some that don't wash their hair for a whole month, they don't open the window, and don't even use a fan. Many now use an air conditioner, but not before. I had air conditioning and washed my hair. My mother-in-law prepared the water to bathe with. There are many things you have to watch out during *yuezi*. Moreover, if you live in a *tulou* you must stay upstairs, and your mother-in-law brings you your meals. (interviewed on April, 15th, 2018)

She performed a sort of personalized version of the *yuezi*, in order to make the practice more "tolerable", all on the basis of the fact that she was depositary of modern medical knowledge, that is to say an awareness of herself and of the world that allowed the existence of an individual subjectivity. The only rule that was really respected was washing herself and the baby with the medicinal water provided for by her mother-in-law. This action seems effectively directed at maintaining the heart of the social function of *yuezi*, creating a link between mother- and daughter-in-law.

In general, the main rules involve personal hygiene (daily washing) and food. Mother-in-law makes sure that the practices take place regularly. She takes care of the decoction for mother and baby's ablutions, and of the mother's food.

The main, or rather the only, culinary ingredient for the whole period is chicken, which must be male, and is cooked in a soup with ginger and pure grain wine (*nuomijiu* 糯米酒), prepared by the women of the household for the specific purpose of *yuezi*. For this reason it is called "girl's wine" *niang jiu* 娘酒. It is a sweet fermented rice wine with no added water (*jiuniang* 酒酿. In Hakka, *niàng* 酿 and *niáng* 娘 have the same pronunciation, particularly meaningful in view of this culture's attention to homophones). According to traditional Chinese medicine, ginger has the function to expel cold (*qu han* 驱寒). In the practice, there are local and family variants: for instance, in Yongding the chicken is chopped up in pieces and then boiled, but in Shanghang, sweet or salty rice flour balls cooked in chicken broth are used (He 2009, p. 138). For a standard isolation period of 30 days, the provisions for feeding the new mother amount to 30 chickens, about 5 kg of ginger, and 5 l of wine. Procuring of these foodstuffs is one of the duties of the grandmother or the mother-in-law:

> In my family, which was very traditional, every time someone got married the doyenne (grandmother) would rush to prepare rice flour to preserve it, and would raise a flock of chickens. (He 2009, p. 138)

For the mother's and the child's ablutions, which may be performed from the morning to 5 PM, a warm decoction of medicinal herbs, gathered and prepared by the mother-in-law, is used. Herbs grow spontaneously and are gathered in the family garden or along the village paths, particularly:

- *Mujing* 牡荆 (popularly *Bujingcao* 布惊草) leaves and seeds, i.e. Chinese chaste-tree, *Vitex negundo*. This is an aromatic bush that grows along village paths and is considered a mosquito repellent. It is available year round and is used also by other Asian medical traditions for its antipyretic and anti-inflammatory properties.
- Leaves and roots of *Fengxiang* 枫香, the Chinese sweet gum *Liquidambar formosana*, also known as Formosan gum. *Fengxiang* is a deciduous tree of the Altingiaceae, the leaves of which turn bright orange in the Fall, not unlike those of the sugar maple.
- *Shancang* 山苍 *litsea cubeba* or aromatic Litsea, an evergreen bush of the Lauraceae family, rich in vitamin A and very aromatic. It is also used as a fragrance for soap and is appreciated in aromatherapy for its anti-depressive properties.

In order to practice the *yuezi,* all the material requirements must be met. Among the women interviewed, those that gave birth between the 1950s and the 1980s were mostly prevented from practicing it, or were able to practice it for very short periods of time and often in secret. In many villages, local cadres forbade it, as it was considered superstition. But the know-how and the awareness of the importance of this practice survived, as a form of "persisting culture" (Wang 2006, p. 25). Women who had children after the 1980s usually performed it for a period of 30 or 40 days. But in the 1990s, when the wide-scale migration process of women from the villages to the factories and cities of South China began, not everyone was able to put it in practice because of their work obligations. Today, those migrant women-workers *dagong mei*[15] that can plan their pregnancy ahead of time, either return to the village and engage in the traditional practice, or, if they have the means for it, are assisted by their mothers-in-law in their city homes.

What emerged from our interviews was that Hakka women are deeply linked to a multilayered tradition, where they are required to embody new roles, but in continuity with the traditional narrative. In this undergoing transformation, *yuezi* is a fundamental, polysemic symbolic element, to which women attribute cultural as well as medical importance[16]. Here are some of their statements:

[15] Women who emigrate and take up heavy work in China's fast-developing urban and industrial areas.

[16] Fang et al. (2012, pp. 74–75) point out that any mistake in the performance of the yuezi may cause negative consequences to the newborn or the mother.

> If you do not respect *yuezi* you will get arthritis and the baby will be sickly."(Mrs. Chen, age 25, during her *yuezi.* Interviewed December 8th, 2018)
> We do our *yuezi*, which may last 30 or 40 days. You stay at home and do not wash your hair. You must be careful not to catch a chill, otherwise you will get arthritis." (Mrs. Lin, age 26. Interviewed February 13th, 2018)

Non-performance of the practice brings about illness, i.e. it becomes a manifestation of non-normality.

Cultural and social elements surface as well:

> It is normal for Hakka women to do their *yuezi.* If you are Hakka you must do it. (Mrs. Lin, Interviewed February 13th, 2018)
> When a baby is born, it is important to perform the *yuezi*. Your mother-in-law makes food for you, good, invigorating food. That way, afterwards, you will be grateful to her and show her filial piety when she needs you." (Mrs. Zheng, interviewed in December 2018)

In the following interview with a Hakka woman, Mrs. Que (b. 1973), together with a government official, man, Mr. Lai (new father, age 34), a difference of views between a woman and a man—who is personally taking care of his wife practicing *yuezi* in the city—emerges.

> QUESTION: When village women have a child, do they go through the *yuezi* here or in the city? And, if applicable, is there a difference between here and the city?
> Mrs. Que: Those that have bought a house outside usually do it there, but doing it here has advantages; for instance, the elderly can assist the mother in doing the *yuezi*.
> [...]
> QUESTION: So, in this case, the husband can prepare the things that the wife must eat during that period?
> Mr. LAI: Yes, yes, the husband can help.
> Mrs. QUE: No. It's something that the in-laws must do.
> (April 13th 2019)

For Mrs. Que, a mother-in-law's assistance role cannot be taken up by the husband, no matter how willing he is to do so.

In the Christian community of Aoyao village in Yongding 永定 District, the women declare that as Christians they do not perform *manyue*, but they all do their *yuezi*, thereby proving that the two practices are held to be different in nature (*yuezi* belongs to the physical sphere, *manyue* to the ritual sphere).

Voices against *yuezi*?

As a foreign interviewer, I was asked by many women about post-natal practices in European countries, and they all showed surprise at the fact that isolation is not performed in Italy.

None of the women interviewed remarked about the constraints of isolation, but considered its medical and cultural bearing. In the interviews, there were no voices against *yuezi*, and the complaints were few. When questioned about a possible conflict between the mother-in-law and the new mother during *yuezi*, women did not deny the tension which may emerge in this special period of exclusive relationship, but described it as a transient and necessary step in a woman's life. Many women, some more and some less, work out some kind of arrangement or incur in slight transgressions that make the confinement period more bearable, but in general these are expressed less distinctly than Mrs. Zhang's (see above). In one case, it was a mother-in-law that complained about being overworked during her daughter-in-law's *yuezi*, because during the whole time all the regular household chores, usually shared by both women, were on her shoulders, in addition to the ones specific to the situation, like preparing the decoction for ablutions and the daily meals. And if the daughter-in-law is having her second or third child, taking care of the grandchildren becomes an additional burden.

Mrs. Z. (age 31), interviewed during her second 40-day *yuezi*, lamented the fact that after the birth of the second child, a boy, the first born girl, age 4, was left to the care of her paternal grandparents who, steeped in the traditional male-above-female culture (*nan zun nü bei* 男尊女卑), kept on conveying to the little girl messages stating her baby brother's superiority. According to Mrs. Z., this had led to her daughter's exhibiting an anxious and frustrated behavior, with signs of regression.

Generally speaking—despite the variety of socio-cultural conditions, the ongoing transformations on the local and national level, the differences in values among generations, and the questioning of the traditional system on the part of young women from the countryside, who appear to be distancing themselves from their mothers' model of "rurality"—the practice of *yuezi* is not being abandoned; on the contrary, it is still held in high esteem.

Conclusions

Yuezi is seen by West Fujian Hakka village women as a neonatal practice that should not be avoided in any way. It is a practice of remaking a woman's subjectivity in her passing between the condition of young woman to that of mother as subject and object of cultural value. It also establishes a symbolic fundamental element of body culture, as negligence in *yuezi* will trigger illness for the woman as well as for the adult that the baby will become. It has thus a moral value, as it not only marks the fulfilling of the most basic ethical imperative of a woman—that of perpetuating the husband's family line—but also builds the fundamental unit of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, which, in a patriarchal and virilocal society, is the book on which history is written.

Culturally, the countryside is undergoing significant socio-anthropological transformations. In this process, the subjects of this transformation implement dynamics of negotiation of cultural markers that lead them to revise their own bonds with the territory and ancestral traditions and project them towards a future increasingly centered on a paradigm of urbanity that excludes them from the new platforms of cultural production (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Wang 2006; Nedostup 2009; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Huang 2013; Scarpari 2015).

In modern society, giving birth in medically assisted hospital environments leads to a modification of women's relationship with their territory, home, and familial relationships. Ancestral traditions are swapped with material features that bring *yuezi* practices on the par with other neonatal ones centered on proper hygiene and breastfeeding, and on the assistance afforded to new mothers in the first period of the baby's life. In urban contexts, *yuezi* centers are flourishing, and not only in places where the Hakka presence is notable, like Taiwan, Hong Kong, central and southern China, but in other large cities as well. Women may spend a period of one week to two months in these specialized clinics, in a totally comfortable environment. Teams of specially-trained women, the *yuesao* 月嫂, are available to accompany the new mother through the postnatal period, and assist her in her daily needs, within the guidelines of tradition.

What my enquiry brought to light is a strict adherence to the practice also in a cross-generation perspective, with some forms of adaptation to the practical conditions in which women undergo it (duration of the isolation period, observation of some taboos, comfort). Unlike non-Hakka women living in the city, Hakka women, both in the villages and in urban environments, seem to prefer to be assisted by their mother-in-law, or by an elder woman in the husband's family, or, in case of impossibility, by a woman from their original family, in order to be sure to receive the right kind of treatment.

In Hakka rural communities, though, the postnatal practice of *yuezi* still shows a significant psycho-social importance of consolidating family ties, especially the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law, whereas in modern and urban environments this aspect is at risk.

For a young woman just married into a Hakka family, *zuo yuezi* is like weaving her subjective and social Self into the cultural and lineage group of the Hakka people.

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