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# Fertile Tattoos

## Play, Embodiment, and the Transition to Womanhood in Drung Female Facial Tattooing

This article examines the tradition of facial tattooing among Drung women in Yunnan province, China. Now obsolete, the practice of female tattooing—by puncturing the skin, causing bleeding and pain—used to enable and mark the social and physiological time of the transition to nubility, thus preparing women for their fertile becoming. The analysis focuses on the gradual, quasi-initiatory transition to womanhood established by tattoos, both during girls' playful trial tattoo sessions or on the occasion of the formal execution of the facial tattoo by a fully experienced woman. The article shows that tattooing should be understood as a processual construction of womanhood that builds on preparatory play and is inseparable from the specific relationships between women involving fertility, which is transmitted, "revealed," and represented by tattooing. Passed down exclusively by women, regardless of their relationships of consanguinity or affinity, tattooing exposes a form of transversal relatedness beyond any descent and alliance relationships. The embodiment of this mystical influence is vital if a woman is to be assigned her destiny, her social role as perpetuator of life.

Keywords: Drung (Dulong, T'rung)—tattoo—body—femininity—fertility—reproduction

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Western explorers of the early twentieth century who "discovered," as it were, the Drung people and Chinese historians and ethnologists alike have not failed to emphasize the exoticism of the practice of female facial tattooing that soon became iconic of Drung culture. Nowadays one of the smallest so-called "minority nationalities" (6,930 people in 2010) in China, the Drung (Ch. Dulongzu) live in a secluded valley of north-west Yunnan Province and until recently practiced a form of swidden agriculture. They have long been associated with images of remoteness, primitiveness, and poverty.[1] The Drung have seldom attracted ethnographic attention, but one thing about them that is relatively well known and often publicized—at least in China—is that Drung women used to tattoo their faces: journalists, image hunters, and more recently tourists continue to convey the perception of women's facial tattoos as representative of Drung culture, an image often associated with a people confined in its cultural attributes. Drung women's tattooed faces are now posted all over the internet.[2]

In fact, the display of women's tattooed faces contrasts with the superficial knowledge we have of the Drung. Their geographical isolation is no doubt the primary reason for the very limited number of ethnographic studies that exist about the Drung people (chiefly in the Chinese language). It was only in 2000 that the Dulong Valley, located to the west of the high Gaoligong Mountains, could be reached by a roughly made road. A tunnel, completed in 2014, now affords safe and reliable access to the valley—an opening to the outside world that has given development programs a significant boost and has led to sweeping socioeconomic transformations (see Gros 2014, 2017a).

Although Drung women's facial tattoos remain a cultural icon today, Drung women have not tattooed their faces for two generations. What's more, the rationale behind this practice among the Drung people and the various meanings that place the tattoo at the heart of Drung identity in the past, just like in the present, have rarely been truly explored. My aim in this article, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted since the late 1990s, is to contribute to restoring women's own voices and to propose that the meanings and values attached to this practice be reconsidered.

A common and longstanding interpretation found in the literature holds that the practice of tattooing is Drung people's adaptive response to ensure the protection of women from abductions perpetrated by their more powerful neighbors before the 1950s. This portrayal was further popularized in the novel *Bu yuan wenmian de*

*nüren* (The Woman Who Did Not Want to Tattoo) by Zhang Kunhua (1987), which was later made into a movie (Xie Hong 1993). It depicts in a highly caricatured manner women's resignation (or resistance) to imposed tattooing when faced with the threat of Tibetan women traffickers who would sell them as slaves. The logic of the tattoo as a protective facial disfigurement is also found in scholarly works, where the emergence of this practice has generally been interpreted in relation to attested forms of abduction and servitude (e.g., Liu Dacheng 1981; Cai Jiaqi 1983; Li Jinming 1994), or more recently, in a similar vein, as a means of protecting women from Lisu vendettas, retaliatory expeditions sometimes leading to the kidnapping of women (Zhou Huashan 2004).[3] This is indeed one of several justifications that are sometimes put forth by the Drung themselves: they started tattooing women's faces, so they say, to prevent the latter from being captured and enslaved.[4] The facial tattoo was therefore a practice determined by past interethnic relations. As a form of embodied violence, the tattoo is seen as the imprint of the past on the women's faces—an "incorporated" history so to speak. That being said, it is not a dominant and agreed-upon justification, and it leaves basic questions unanswered: would the tattoo play this protective role for women because it was considered ugly and repulsive to the potential thief? Or did it have a magical protective function? How effective was the tattoo to actually prevent women from being captured? More importantly, what other evidence of the existence of this purely feminine practice may be given?

The conventional interpretation that sees tattooing as a response to an external threat has received some criticism, from both local elites and scholars, although few alternative analyses have been put forth on the basis of long-term fieldwork. Some have suggested that, in the motif of the facial tattoo, one can see a representation of a butterfly linked to the Drung people's conceptions about what happens to the soul after death (Luo Rongfen 1995a, 1995b), while others have emphasized the need to address tattooing as a form of beautification or an expression of a kind of totemic worship (Chen Ruijin 1992; Duan Mingming 1999; Sheng Xingshi 2005). These interpretations fall short both methodologically and in terms of factual evidence, and the existing emic and etic interpretations of the meanings of tattooing need to be addressed in their changing historical context.

The early twenty-first century has accordingly seen changes in the dominant reasons and justifications that are given for practicing facial tattoos—and outsiders' interpretations are often overdetermined by their own personal interest. This has been emphasized by Chu Xiaobai (2007) who rightly points out the evolving construction of knowledge about the tattoos worn by Drung women—women who, for several decades, have been regularly questioned, scrutinized, and photographed by an increasing number of outsiders (figure 1). Zhou Yunshui (2009) has in turn alluded to the various layers of discourse on tattooing, from local cadres to villagers, and has acknowledged the influence of external discourses and how they deeply affect tattooed women's perception and presentation of themselves. Indeed, it seems for example that the recent popularization of the idea that the facial tattoo motif represents a butterfly has now led visitors and scholars alike to assume this link and thus to no doubt influence the responses they receive in return (e.g., Zheng Weichuan 2001, 181; Gao Zhiying 2015).

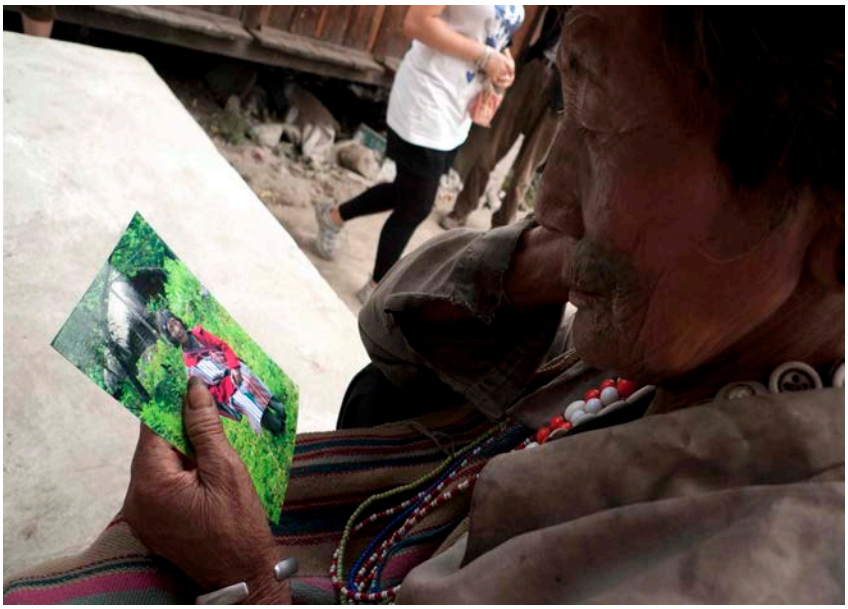

Figure 1. A Drung tattooed woman looking at an old photograph of herself offered by a returning Chinese photographer. Photo by the author, November 2010.

Today young women no longer have their faces tattooed, and the last women to wear tattoos, now very few, are relatively old: there were only about sixty tattooed women when I started my research in the late 1990s.[5] Drung women's tattooing has increasingly become an artefact for public consumption. The special attention it has attracted has triggered growing concern, because safeguarding Drung women's facial tattoos is impossible—they will disappear with the last tattooed women; though, it is hoped, not just yet. As discussed in a recent article published in the newspaper *Zhongguo funü* (Chinese Women), it was decided that the twenty-six tattooed women still alive in 2015 were to be "safeguarded" as "living fossils" of traditional Drung culture—a conventional designation derived from social evolutionist orthodoxy.[6] According to the article, the local police station in the Dulong Valley keeps health records of these last tattooed women. Their health is now closely monitored via a monthly check-up (Zhou Yulin 2015).

The disappearance of this practice today primarily raises the question of the redefinition of personal identity in the changing sociocultural and political context and how it affects the values associated with tattooing. However, far from limiting the facial tattoo's function of preventing women from being captured, Drung women's individual stories reveal its vital role in assigning a woman her destiny, her social role as a perpetuator of life.

In this article, I highlight the various ways in which the facial tattoo (*bāktūq*) is a key element for Drung women in a process of socialization. In this process, the woman's body should be considered part of a cosmological assemblage in which diverse forces condense in an interplay between the exterior and the interior. Through this lens, tattooing is regarded as part of a larger set of practices and social relations: as Terence Turner (2012) has emphasized, the "social skin" is an interface

more than a surface. The external environment does not stop at the surface of the body, and individuals are not isolated in their body but linked deep in their flesh by social relationships. The analysis of tattooing in Polynesia by Alfred Gell seems to be of a more general value and applicability here, for indeed the tattoo reveals "an inside which comes from the outside, which has been applied externally prior to being absorbed into the interior," and thus it is "the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior" (1993, 38–39). Following these insights, I demonstrate how the tattoo technique as practiced by Drung women until the late 1950s contributed to their transition to womanhood by means of productive exchanges and influences. Tattoos were the mark of time (both physiological and social) and the mark of destiny, preparing women for their fertile becoming.

## Drung tattooing in a historical and regional perspective

Many Chinese historians and ethnologists agree that Drung people's tattooing practice probably dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618–907) because of the reference to the so-called Xiumian tribe, the "Tattooed [embroidered] Faces," in the *Manshu* (Book of Barbarians). It is often assumed that these might well be the Drung people's ancestors. There is scant evidence of this, and it was only centuries later that Chinese historical documents make direct reference to a group under the name of Qiuzi who were roughly located where contemporary Drung people live. However, explicit mention of tattooed women among the Qiuzi was not to be found in historical documents until the nineteenth century. Despite the scarcity of historical documents and direct observations, we nevertheless find more or less precise indications about female facial tattooing among the Drung from the late nineteenth century onward. Among the earliest eyewitnesses was the Prince d'Orléans (1898, 235), who led an expedition across the southern part of Dulong Valley to Burma (present-day Myanmar) and mentioned seeing tattoos in the shape of a "green grid." A few years later, the Mandarin Xia Hu (named "Suppression Commissar in Charge of Nu[jiang] and Qiu[jiang] Issues," *Tanya weiyuan qianguan Nu Qiu liang jiang shiyi*) wrote a more detailed description, mentioning that "on the upper course of the valley, the whole face of women, nose, cheeks, upper and lower lips, are all tattooed," while "women of the lower reaches of the river only tattoo the upper and lower lips. At the [southern] extremity of the river, Qu [Qiu] and Li [Lissou] live together, and women do not usually tattoo." Further westward in upper Burma, women's tattoos consist, he wrote, "only in a circle on the nose and a few lines on the lower lip." The practice was also to be found in the Adung Valley where, this time, the facial tattoo only consisted of one or two lines on the lower lip (1994, 116, 118, 119).

The existence of facial tattooing in the region where Yunnan, Myanmar, and Tibet meet was therefore well attested from the early twentieth century and later confirmed by other travelers. The botanist F. Kingdon Ward (1924, 196–97), who traveled extensively throughout this region, evoked the diverse tattoo designs he came across, from the complete "dots and zigzags" covering the whole face in "Upper Taron [Dulong]" to the few curved lines across the chin to the corners of the mouth

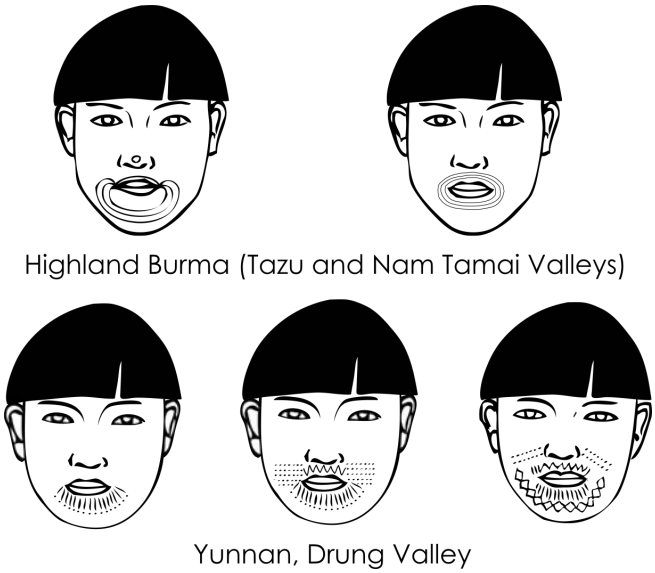


Figure 2. Variations in facial tattoo motifs. Drawing by the author (sources: Ward 1924; Duan 1999; Liu 1981, 1998).

and a circle on the tip of the nose in the Tazu and Nam Tamai Valleys (northernmost Myanmar).[7]

The rare historical documents on this region mention various tattoo motifs that previously existed among kin groups in upper Myanmar or even within the valley of the Drung (see figure 2). Facial tattoos existed up until recently among the Daru (Rawang subgroup), where they are said to have been linked to clan membership (Morse and Morse 1966, 196). One might add that the practice may have also existed among the Nung of the upper Salween Valley. The French missionary Auguste Desgodins (1872, 321–22) wrote that young girls used to have a tattoo that was "a blue moustache, going down at the corners of the mouth to the bone mandible, then back to the front of the ears."

There are other known cases of feminine facial tattoos regionally. A comparative survey is beyond the scope of this article, but it should be noted that one of the recurrent justifications for the existence of female facial tattooing, such as among the Chin (in Myanmar) or the Apatani (in the Indian Himalayas) for example, echoes the aforementioned observations concerning the Drung: these facial markings were aimed at protecting women from being captured by potential women "thieves."[8]

Among the Drung, the practice of female facial tattooing was once banned in the early twentieth century by the local Imperial Mandarin Xia Hu, who allegedly threatened to rip off the skin of those who were tattooed and to cut the hands of the tattooists. Then the same prohibition, accompanied by a fine, was enacted in 1930 under the Kuomintang rule. Finally the Communists definitively abolished this practice in the late 1950s because, besides the reference to bygone oppression, they saw in this practice a violation of women's rights.[9]

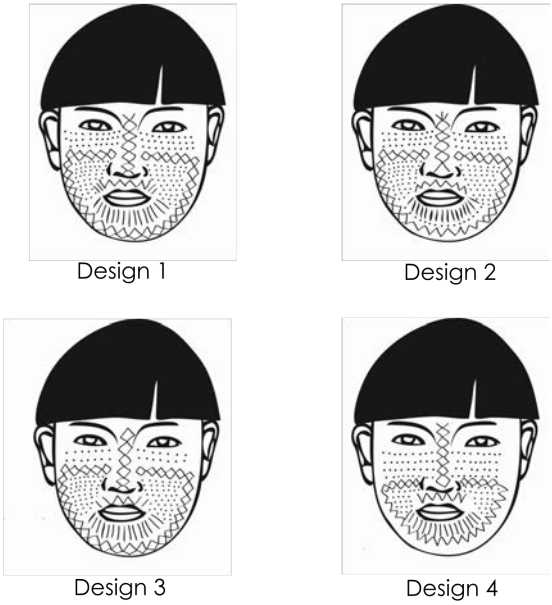


Figure 3. Variations in complete facial tattooing designs, Drung Valley. Drawing by the author.

## Tattoo motifs and techniques

The sixty or so tattooed Drung women who lived in the center and in the north of the Dulong River Valley at the time of my fieldwork had, for the most part, a facial tattoo (*bāktūq*) that covered their entire face. The designs were essentially the same, and the few variations in detail (see figure 3) were due not to variations in style but to the quality of the tattoo itself, which depended on the skill of the person doing it (a woman who "knows how to prick" or *rù sō*).

The tattoo is executed with remarkable regularity, with only very minor variations (see also Cai Jiaqi 1983, 39; Gao Zhiying 2015, 70–71); the stability of the tattoo design shows that the few motifs that together form the facial tattoo are linked to specific parts of the face. Generally speaking the related vocabulary simply refers to the design that is pricked on the cheeks (*dvbàng do rù*) or pricked on the nose (*svnā do rù*), and so on. A few more descriptive terms are used, but it is often difficult to obtain explanations about this terminology. Several named patterns or designs (*rvmū*) can be identified:

1. *Mvgōp*: designates the diamond shape characteristic of the pattern tattooed on the nose and around the cheeks.

2. *Nēq-rām*: literally "eyes-line," designates the lines of large dots under the eyes.

3. *Tùjī*: designates the smaller dots tattooed in lines on the lower part of the cheeks.

4. *Mvkāi shòn*: literally, "straight line(s) (*shòn*) on the chin (*mvkāi*)."

5. *Tākkā mvlà*: designates a zigzag pattern, such as under the nose, or on the lower part of the chin and cheeks.

It appears that these designations have no figurative meaning. Nor do these names identify a clear graphic repertoire; no symbolic discourse is drawn from this classification. The tattoo designs are made up of repeated simple geometric patterns and are not intended to function as a symbolic system. What matters most is that women's tattoos look like those of their elders—that is to say, they should conform to tradition. Thus, the meaning of the tattoo is not given by the graphic repertoire but by its properties and the context, practices, and discourses in which it is embedded.

On a practical level, it was relatively simple to master the tattooing technique. The ink was obtained from black smoke (*svmà*), which pine wood gives off when it burns, and was scraped from the bottom of the iron pot on the fireplace. This black soot was soaked (*jìn*) in water for about a week until it was properly diluted. The tattoo was first drawn using this ink, and then the pattern was hand-tapped onto the face so that the ink penetrated under the skin.

The pricking instruments were generally made using thorny brambles (*bǎkxreū*). A branch was cut to a length of about six inches, cleared of leaves and all thorns save for one at the end. The tattooist held this little rod in one hand, the spine against the woman's face, and with the other hand tapped it with a piece of wood to prick the skin one dot at a time. Several rods were generally used for the same tattoo, and the dull thorns were simply discarded with no special precautions.

The tattoo was generally executed in a specific order, starting at the chin and then moving up slowly. Generally speaking the *mvgōp* on the nose was the last pattern to be tattooed. The order in which the different patterns were tattooed reflects the relative importance of the lower part of the face. In the past (prior to the 1950s), one type of tattoo consisted of only the designs on the lower face, what the women I talked to—whose whole faces were tattooed—called "incomplete tattoo" (*bāktùq xuài*). Similarly, sometimes only the vertical lines under the lower lip were tattooed. A few women were tattooed this way in the late 1950s or early 1960s, when tattooing was banned. The lines on the chin (*mvkāi shòn*) seem to be the most basic component of the facial tattoo.[10]

## Playing at becoming a woman

Female initiation rites have in general received less scholarly attention than male initiations and have often been discussed with regard to their involving controversial forms of genital mutilation (e.g., Brown 1963). Their analysis has developed in light of feminist-inspired approaches to the social construction of gender, which have given rise to an increasing emphasis on women's voices and experiences and led to the reconsideration of female rites on their own terms (e.g., Turner 1985; Lutkehaus and Roscoe 1995).[11]

In the Drung case, the day a woman got her tattoo was an important event in her existence, and one might expect that an appropriate ritual formalized this kind of rite of passage. That was not the case, insisted all the women I talked to. However, one of the things I found a priori surprising is that tattooing could also be a girls'

game. Of course, the absence of a codified ritual does not mean a lack of rituality. Some connections can easily be made between play and rite. As we shall see, while female tattooing among the Drung was not an initiation rite in a conventional sense, it nevertheless constituted a prescribed and mandatory event for all girls before marriage, which contributed to their transformation.

At the time the women with whom I talked got their tattoos, that is to say before or during the 1950s, the idea of not having a tattoo was incongruous. Up until then, all women were tattooed, and to be a woman you had to be tattooed. Some of them were afraid but gave in under pressure from their parents. In many cases, however, it was a voluntary act. Most women had their tattoo drawn at the age of ten, thirteen, or sometimes a little later. However, some had their tattoo done earlier, or at least they tried, as we will see.

One day a woman pulled up her sleeve and showed me on her forearm a tattoo, a line of *mvgōp*, similar to the pattern on her nose. "It was for fun," she said, "when I was little, with [her sister]. She did it to me."

Indeed, before tattooing their faces, girls would sometimes carry out a sort of test, generally on other parts of their body. It was like a game for girls, hence the idea of "fun," my translation of the verb *agàl*, literally "to play." It could also be a solitary game; another woman told me, "I tattooed myself here for fun," as she showed me her right calf where three rows of dots were clearly visible. "I did it myself. On the forearm as well [a cross], that's someone else who did it. It was just for fun, just like that . . . it was fun." Nevertheless, when the time came, she had to go to have her face tattooed. "My parents took me," she said, and "at the beginning I was afraid."

For another woman, playing did not end with her having a small tattoo on her arm or leg but on her whole face. She said that her tattoo is not well done because she did it "like that, . . . for fun." She said: "We got a tattoo because we felt like it was fun. . . . We saw people tattooed, we thought it was fun. In the past, it was said that those who were not tattooed would be captured by the Lisu people; that is what they used to tell us before. . . . They used to say that, but we, we got tattooed just like that because we thought it was fun. . . . I was not afraid that it would hurt, it was fun. For three nights we had a swollen face, big like that."

During these games, girls who were getting a small or complete tattoo played at being adult women—all of whom were tattooed. Most often, girls drew a tattoo on each other on their arms and legs to try it out, to prepare themselves and to experiment with pain. However, playing could become decisive because, depending on how far it went, the girl could eventually end up with her whole face tattooed.

The trial runs on the arms or legs were also a way of experimenting with the pain and blood involved in the tattooing process. Therefore, before having their face tattooed, girls accessed in a playful way a sort of "social puberty," a gradual transition, which could occur at different ages, leading to their transformation into women. Even before the nubile age, the reciprocal fashioning that took place between young women through these games also implied a kind of actualization of femininity, as I attempt to demonstrate here.

The notion of play (*agàl*) that women often used to refer to these games between girls should not therefore be equated with some form of childish frivolity. The idea

that it was done "just like that," "for play," was always present as the modality of what was nevertheless to be taken seriously, given that the act performed was irreversible and resulted in a real tattoo that was different in degree more than in kind to the one on the face of adult women. To paraphrase Gregory Bateson (1987), however, we could say that the playful prick denotes the facial tattoo, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the facial tattoo.[12]

"Play" as a modality of the performance of these little tattoos on body parts differs from a well-defined "game," or "rite" for that matter, with a rigid set of rules. It emphasizes a process rather than an event, a performance based on voluntariness, intimacy, and mimicry. The tattoos that gradually took shape through young girls' repeated and evolving playful interactions constituted a preparatory phase that is characteristic of play: as a way of "pretending," "the preparation and repetition along with the representation and simulation" are, according to Roberte Hamayon (1995, 94), specific aspects of this modality of action.[13]

For those who had "fun" tattooing, the fear and the pain disappeared behind the play—or rather, they were part of it. As women often explained to me, to "dare" to have a tattoo was just as much a concern for the girl facing the pain of a tattoo as for the one who did the hand-tapping—the latter has to dare to inflict pain and cause bleeding.

There is an obvious continuity outside the bounds of play, which of course brings to the fore the apparent paradox of the voluntariness of play in relation to the social obligation of facial tattooing: ultimately, play is constrained by the social demand, since there is a shared understanding of what it means to be(come) a woman. It now becomes more apparent that play has a kind of symbolic efficacy in common with ritual: the action makes sense because a stake is involved. Play is a modality of the transformation it triggers and, as a result of girls' play, tattoos on parts of the body, or more exceptionally on the face, seem to have also a *stimulating* role—the playful tattoos not only prepare the girls for their "real" facial tattoos but also accompany physiological changes and encourage the transition to potential motherhood.

Sometimes girls, feeling fully prepared, would go to find a tattooist themselves. In other cases, their parents took the initiative. For most women, the person who did the facial tattoo was a close relative: their own mother, a cousin, or an aunt, whether paternal or maternal. The realization of a woman's facial tattoo was not the exclusive prerogative of one parent and did not stress the orientation of matrimonial exchange. The relationship, however, was never neutral. Play took place between young girls of the same generation who could be sisters or cousins, whether parallel or cross cousins.[14] Having a full tattoo drawn by an experienced woman simply calls attention to the generation gap. Beyond the sphere of "play" among children is the "knowledge" of an adult. That is why, in spite of the absence of a specific rite—or something that can be identified as such in a conventional way—there is nevertheless recognition that a proper facial tattoo has to be done by a knowledgeable woman and that it is under this condition that one knows this is no longer play, not just a "kind of" doing but a true doing (Hamayon 2016, 8).

## The power of tattoos

The tattoo artist is in no way a professional tattooist; as they say in Drung, it is "a person who knows how to prick" (*rù sō vtsàng*). There was often only one tattooist for several hamlets. The tattooist's mastership, an expertise born of experience, is often associated with gradual progress. A woman had to test her own ability before acquiring this mastery, which earned her recognition as an expert tattoo artist.

It goes without saying that the facial tattoo is a particularly painful inscription. The pain of tattooing is real but tolerable—it is part of it, just like the pain of childbirth—and an intrinsic part of the transition to what is and ought to be a woman. For the women I talked to, the tattoo evoked the memory of the blood, the pain of the spine penetrating the skin, and the face that remained swollen for several days. One woman told me: "Hey! It hurt; one had to dare [to do it]. . . . For a whole day, a night, one could not stay near the fire and did not sleep well." "It remained swollen for a month," said another. Swelling and a sensation of heat recall the "cooking" metaphor that is often cross-culturally associated with women's tattooing. As Lars Krutak (2007, 111) puts it, "[the] tattoo also enabled life, since it was the heat that 'cooked' the woman until she had achieved maturation." In short, the tattoo *makes* a woman nubile. Whether in the preparatory, progressive aspect of girls' play or in the formality of its execution by a tattooist, the facial tattoo is a key element in the construction of womanhood.

Following on from the playful trial runs performed by girls on their bodies, the facial tattoo is not in itself acknowledgment of the menarche but nonetheless "a powerful *moment* cognate with the recurring cycles of re-birth, transformation, and accomplishment" (Krutak 2007, 18). The facial tattoo is not a formalized event or a one-time initiation or ritual of maturity but the continuation of a transformative process, a form of initiation that unfolds over time and is performed in the intimacy of the tattooist-tattooed relationship. As such, it is an identity-bestowing process whose end (the initiated woman) is the very means of its reiteration (Zempléni 1991, 376–77). In other words, in its cumulative actions, tattooing as a process is comparable to an initiation that prepared a woman for marriage and her role as a mother.[15]

While never explicitly stated by the people I talked to, many of the references to blood in relation to tattooing seem to point to women's menstruation, which, as an index of fertility, heralds the possibility of life. The responsibility of tattoo artists—of the countless stings and what they contribute to bringing about—is to reveal a power that is specific to women.

In this process that results in the tattoo "being on view," there is the potential danger for the tattooist of no longer seeing properly, of having her "eyes affected" (*nēq ma*). The woman who receives the tattoo manifests a potentiality, a power that threatens the eyesight of the other woman, the tattoo artist, who enabled this transformation. The one who receives the tattoo has to provide a retribution (*akpeù*), or compensation (*tvpeù*), in kind (various typically feminine goods). To be more precise, it is like giving birth. The woman who assists at childbirth runs the same risk of having her eyes and vision affected. She too will receive compensation for "washing [her] eyes." Seeing exposes the woman helper to the risk of no longer seeing.

In other words, key moments of transformation such as tattooing or childbirth carry a potential danger. In both cases, the woman who helps tattoo a young woman

or delivers a baby is in contact with what, in the other woman, is an exteriorization of interiority perhaps first manifested by blood: the blood that drips down the face of the tattooed young woman, the blood that is lost by the woman giving birth. This evocation of the woman's blood also refers to her menstruation, which the tattoo came to anticipate or validate, or in any case to accompany. Though menstrual blood is always a danger to men (it is likely to defile them, to diminish their strength, to ruin their luck at hunting, etc.), and is commonly interpreted as being linked to a form of pollution, the risk of a woman being affected highlights a more subtle ambivalence.[16] There is a positive side to this feminine power, symbolized by the blood but not limited to it, once its normal flow has been restored, or perhaps more accurately *stabilized*. If these transformative events in a woman's body can, under certain conditions, affect another woman's eyesight, it is because of what constitutes an "overflow" or surplus energy: the blood from a tattoo or delivery accompanies a "birth"; it denotes a life force, or what we can simply call "fertility." The potential danger that the act of tattooing could represent for the tattooist lies in this *relating through* fertility with the woman who receives the tattoo. Therefore the "problem," so to speak, is not with women's blood itself; it lies in how the two women, equally characterized by their blood and generative power, are temporarily transitively related. I would argue that the ambivalent potentiality of women's blood could also be described in terms similar to what Edmund Leach (1961, 19) calls a form of "uncontrolled mystical influence."[17] As attested to by a widely used language (shared across the most diverse traditions), the eye of women, because of their physiology, is invested with formidable power or potency. Vision and the eye are the obvious symbols of a channel of mutual influence and exchange of forces: the "envious eye" (*nēq kù*) of jealousy or the "full eye" (*nēq mvdàm*) of satisfaction locates desire in the gaze with a potentially harmful effect on a household's fertility.

## Vital relations

It now becomes easier to understand why, in Drung society, women alone have a facial tattoo. As we have seen, in Drung women's own accounts, the irrevocable change the tattoo represents is the end result—often after successive trial runs—of the construction of what enables them to become fully fertile women.

In the previous sections, I have shed light on what happens among women and how they intimately live the tattoo experience. The gradual construction of femininity revealed by the tattoo on Drung women's faces seems to be inseparable from the transactions that take place between women, sometimes starting at a young age, and which are parallel (complementary, one might say) to descent and alliance relationships where men often exercise their control. It is a properly feminine transmission and, as such, it establishes a form of relatedness that associates women with a generative capacity implicit in the symbolism of key elements of the tattooing process, such as the stings, the blood, and the heat of the hearth and of the swollen face. The ink is an active agent in this process, made of soot scraped off the bottom of the cooking pot in which women cook family meals on the hearth—the very center of the house, a space of cosmic ties and a symbol of matrimonial alliance.

Tattoos are vectors of womanhood whose effectiveness depends just as much on the cumulative aspect of preparatory play, the multiple stings of the spine, as on what circulates between and through women: a stimulating flow of female generative properties that allow each individual to ensure her destiny, whose collective goal is to perpetuate society. It is, of course, very common in many societies for women to be regarded as a source of life. However, it is not so much because they give birth to children or perpetuate the lineage but because, as Nicole-Claude Mathieu (2007, 16) writes, they are "a source of *regeneration* and continuation of *Life* in its primordial cosmic dimension" (emphasis in the original).[18] This cosmic dimension and the notion of destiny can both justify the parallel, alluded to earlier, with the notion of mystical influence as characteristic of relations of alliance and affinity in contrast to relations of incorporation such as filiation and descent (see Leach 1961, 19–20).

This logic is explicitly personified in the figure of the female ancestress in a mythical motif shared—with some variations—among several ethnicities across southwest China. Stories of origins often include the motif, which either precedes or follows the one of the great flood, of a primordial union between an earth-born man and a sky-born woman from which humanity originates.[19] In the Drung story of origin, the first Drung ancestress, Muqneqkyen, is a celestial girl who marries a man from earth.[20] Through this marriage, humanity is able to develop. The celestial deity Gvmeu is first and foremost a wife-giver, and it is through his daughter Muqneqkyen that humans receive cultivated grain and domestic animals. There is no better way of saying that life (wealth, fertility, etc.) comes from women, and the "mystical influence" that comes through women appears to be more generally linked to a form of alterity that is itself seen as generative, the source of all fertility (see figure 4).

The story does not go on to say whether Muqneqkyen's face was tattooed, but the personification in her of the circulation of fertility seems to exemplify the logic manifested by facial tattoos.[21] Whereas the story carries a broader message about matrimonial alliance and social order, the tattoo could be interpreted as a form of embodiment of this fertile mystical influence otherwise manifest in the role women play in the household economy.

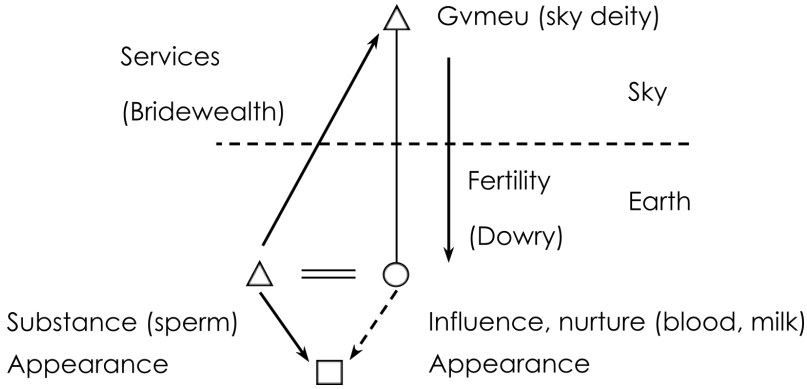


Figure 4. The primordial marriage and the external source of fertility.
Drawing by the author.

Women's tattoos reveal this strictly feminine generating force: "what comes from women" (and originally from the celestial bride) to be finally monopolized by men, via marriage. What in Drung language is generally called "good fortune" (*kărji*) is associated with the movement of alliance itself, with the married woman manifesting, in her productive activities as well as in her ritual acts, a generative power. Obviously women play a key role in the mechanism of social regeneration: however, this mechanism should be addressed more globally, not simplistically through the lens of a so-called "exchange" of women, or their fertility, by men. Here, I highlight the transmission by women of a form of relatedness, distinct from corporate kinship, constitutive of a specific power, or mystical influence. This influence is linked to processes of ritualized circulation of reproductive vitality and a more general dynamic logic that I have called the "missing share" (Gros 2007, 2012), which articulates a sense of "lacking" with the notion of the exteriority of the source of generative power; a logic similar to that of the "economies of fortune" aptly described by Giovanni Da Col (2012a, 2012b). An important characteristic of this vital influence is its outsidedness, which "can be deployed as a source of regeneration, reproduction, or circulation of life" (Da Col 2012a, 16). Clearly articulated in the mythical motif described earlier, this generative potential of outsidedness is also at play in the process of tattooing and in its interplay between interiority and exteriority. The face is the interface that mediates the process of the individuation of the woman through the permanence of the tattoo that is necessary to stabilize the generative force of life as socially reproductive. The female facial tattoo shows a power unique to women and materializes a form of relatedness that constitutes a space of their own.

## Conclusion

For Drung women, tattoos are part of a longer process of shaping the individual and the body that consists of a series of cumulative actions supplemented by the marriage alliance. It is therefore inappropriate to isolate the tattoo from the body of the woman and to consider it, like any other type of ornament, as a purely stylistic system. The aesthetic interpretation distorts the value of the tattoo and its connection to the person. The important thing here is the connected body, and it is by actualization that the tattoo "makes one beautiful," so to speak. In this sense, beauty as a vitalist notion is anchored in the function that is, for the tattoo, to ensure sexual maturity, reproduction, and the creation of new social bonds.

Drung women's facial tattoos contribute to achieving a transformation and to ensuring a form of permanence. What is manifest in the tattoo—and this holds true for all women beyond their individualities—is precisely this ability to ensure the continuation of life, the permanence of the succession of generations. Each tattoo is a unique actualization but also a sign of belonging and relatedness. Women's facial tattoos therefore individualize them just as much as they bind them together through a form of "mutuality of existence" (Sahlins 2013). This circulation and appropriation of a feminine generative power leads one to consider the body as the site of an intersubjective actualization and participation. In this bio-economy of relatedness

and subjecthood, according to a constructivist view the body can therefore be understood as a provisional unit, an assemblage actualized by a multiplicity of forces and affects (Farquhar and Lock 2007).

In sum, tattooing relies on a strictly female flow of similarity that, to come back to Alfred Gell (1993) cited in the introduction, implies concomitantly the incorporation of the outside and the exteriorization of the inside, a process that in turn instantiates a differentiation in each woman. Lars Krutak (2007, 226) in his overview of female tattooing, describes this process as a reconstructed personhood "not only through the intervention of an exterior and environmental agent (spirits), but also through the creation of a 'skin ego' which was fundamentally derived from successive stages of bodily sensations (and the memory of them) experienced at the moment of tattoo application." The notion of "skin-ego" referred to here is borrowed from the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu (2016) whose analysis of the construction of the subject through the image of the double-sidedness of skin also inspired Alfred Gell's (1993) interpretation of the layering and wrapping—the folding of the skin upon itself—produced by the act of tattooing in the actualization of the social person.[22] The process thus intimately links the individual to the social milieu and the field of relations in which they are embedded. The tattoo reflects the woman's identification with the collective group: from then on she is not so much the object of socialization as its *agent* (Turner 2012, 494). A woman's tattoo is therefore not so much about her identity but, more essentially, about her generative value, which is also made up of affect, temporality, and memory. The tattoo is an actual sign of active participation. What is at stake during this *passage* that is manifested in the tattoo is the transmission of the feminine, the construction of a social being beyond, strictly speaking, any descent and alliance relationships. This transversal relationship that is (necessarily) established between women is an essential part of the logic of social reproduction.

Beyond the inescapable reality of dominant patriarchal values in Drung society, the practice of female facial tattooing should not be viewed only as a particular cultural form of a "conflict in sex identity" (Brown 1963, 842ff.) that would express male domination and the way women are forced to accept having their female role as wife and mothers inscribed on their bodies. In her cross-cultural study about female initiation rites, Judith Brown (1963, 849) also points out that they could be correlated with the relative importance of women in subsistence activities. In light of this, we may consider tattooing as "gynotechnics" (Bray 1997), along with cooking, weaving, brewing beer, and many other productive activities that women carry out.[23] The facial tattooing technique, more than any other activity, engages the body and asserts the materiality of the construction of gender and of the expression of social principles. Here we are reminded of the work of Pierre Clastres (1973, 116) who, in another cultural context, describes tattooing as an incorporation of social order and highlights how society designates "the body as the only suitable space to carry the sign of *time*, the trace of a *passage*, the assignment of a *destiny*" (emphases in the original). Tattoos are the mark of time: the body is memory. To borrow from Maurice Godelier, the body is a "ventriloquist's dummy" that, through a process of appropriation, "is asked not only to bear witness to, but to bear witness for the order

that prevails in society and the universe" (2011, 335). And as we have seen, it is the marriageable destiny that tattooing ultimately ends up revealing.[24]

Proper attention given to women's voices and experience has allowed me in this article to point to a form of agency that does not present itself as a form of resistance to patriarchal rule. Rather, it shows how women create meaning within a structure of domination, and if there is a (feminine) code to facial tattooing, it is not strictly speaking a "covert feminist message" (see Radner 1993). Facial tattooing among Drung women clearly played a role in producing a sense of selfhood, person, gender, and reproductive roles, in relation to various other social and cultural factors. Its importance for the social reproduction of society is of course relative, as can be said of other aspects of Drung cultural tradition that are similarly disappearing. Some women resisted the interdiction of the practice until the early 1960s, and a few had minimal tattoos drawn on their chin. Nowadays women no longer have tattoos. Further research remains to be done to assess whether the increasing global fashion of tattooing influences the possible adoption of non-traditional tattoos on other parts of the body, and how this practice would play a role in gender differentiation. It is also likely that, following tremendous changes affecting livelihood and agricultural practices, a drastic decline in traditional religious practices and a surge in the number of Christian converts, indigenous conceptions of gender roles and social reproduction are being fundamentally reshaped.

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## Notes

1. Among the earliest historical mentions by Western explorers, see d'Orléans (1898) and Kingdon Ward (1923, 1924). The most relevant references to academic writings, especially in Chinese, will be provided in the course of this article. I have reviewed some of the representational tropes of primitiveness and picturesqueness elsewhere; see Gros (2001). Drung women's facial tattooing is also mentioned in Jablonski's (2013) seminal natural history of skin (see plate 13).

2. A web search on "Dulong women" results in numerous links and images that are predominantly about tattooed women. Among many others, the All-China Women's Federation lists the "Dulong Ethnic Group" as the "Face Embroidery Tribe" (https://web.archive.org/web/20181011091132/http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/special/minority/1707/3292-1.htm; accessed August 28, 2021). For tourist-style descriptions over the years numerous articles in Chinese exist; for recent coverage in English, see the feature by Aviram (2017).

3. The Lisu are a numerically important group whose population is scattered over Yunnan, Myanmar, and Thailand. While trade relations and intermarriage between Lisu and Drung people were fairly common in the past, there are also stories of blood feuds and vendettas, or what is sometimes referred to by the Drung as "plunder" expeditions, during which bands of lawless Lisu would capture some individuals, women or men. For a discussion, see Gros (2011, 31–34; 2012, 177–80).

4. For a detailed discussion based on Western and Chinese sources as well as oral history, see Gros (2012, chaps. 4 and 5).

5. Given that I was unable to observe the practice of tattooing, the methodological limitations of my investigation imply that what I learned about tattooing was through the narratives of tattooed women themselves, their daughters, and their male relatives.

6. I do not have a reliable updated figure for the actual number of tattooed women at the time of publication of this article. The idea of "living fossils" of history is commonly used in China. People as well as practices have been designated as "living fossils" (such as the matrilineal Mosuo of Yunnan Province, whose matrimonial practices would attest to a surviving form of presumed "matriarchy"). The term has been applied quite broadly since the early 1990s to various sorts of customary practices or performance traditions, many of which have since entered the category of "intangible cultural heritage."

7. Kingdon Ward's numerous writings provide evidence of the practice throughout the region of the eastern Himalayas. He saw in the progressive disappearance of tattooing further west evidence that the practice may indeed be linked to forms of servitude that were more widespread when in contact with the Tibetans; see Ward (1923, 13; 1924, 196). For a classification of the so-called Qiuzi based on variations of tattoo motifs, see Siguret (1937, 1:105).

8. About the Chin, see Diran (1998, 167) and Risley (1902, 9). The Li of Hainan Island used to practice body and facial tattooing on women; see Chen Rui (1998) and Stübel (1937).

9. Women mentioned the first two decisions to prevent tattooing to me during my fieldwork. The more recent interdiction under Communist rule is congruent with that of other practices, among

minorities in particular, which were considered "primitive" or contrary to ideals of gender equality for example.

10. As Krutak (2011) pointed out, the lines on the chin were the most common tattoo motif for Eskimo women (St. Lawrence) and were "part of the ritual of social maturity, a signal to men that a woman had reached puberty. Chin stripes also served to protect women during enemy raids. . . . [T]heir chin stripes made them more recognizable as females and their lives would be spared. Once captured, however, they were bartered off as slaves."

11. The study of initiation rituals (not to mention rites of passage more generally) is of course a classic theme within the field of anthropology. Female initiation rites have received greater attention since Richards's (1982) classic monograph and especially over the last thirty years, with significant contributions about Melanesia and sub-Saharan Africa. The literature is too vast to be mentioned here, but see Johnson (2018) for a recent stimulating reappraisal in the context of social transformations in Malawi.

12. The original statement by Bateson (1987, 139) in "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" is as follows: "the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite."

13. The literature on the notions of "game" and "play" is extremely vast: beyond the pioneering work of Huizinga (1949) or Callois (1961), and the psychological-anthropological intervention of Bateson (1987), particularly noteworthy are the works on children's folklore in Sutton-Smith et al. (1999), and the more recent theoretical contribution by Hamayon (2016). The latter builds on earlier contributions on the topic and convincingly demonstrates how "play" constitutes a multidimensional phenomenon, a modality of action rather than a type of activity, and "is a *process* that constructs itself" in a generative way (Hamayon 2016, 8, 65).

14. Given that villages were often relatively small and mono-lineage, and given the classificatory nature of the kinship system, there are no cases that I know of where there was no kinship relation at all between the tattooist and the tattooed.

15. For a parallel to this, in a different ethnographic context, see Turner's (1985, 28) classic description of a woman's initiation rite.

16. This is of course not all there is to the symbolism of blood, and menstruation in particular. See for example Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) and Knight (1995) for some of the earliest anthropological reconsiderations.

17. The logic of the ambivalent effects of conjoining particular substances like blood, semen, or salt has been theorized by Testart (1991) through a comparative analysis of mythology and beliefs. Testart's theory (already developed in some of his earlier writings about the "ideology of blood") shares some commonalities with Héritier's (1994) conceptualization of the "incest of the second type" and the idea of the problem of "combining the identical" (*cumul d'identique*), which is for example said to have negative biological and social effects (diseases, infertility, wars, etc.) or climatic effects (drought or flooding). In relation to the idea of mystical influence, she states: "bodily substances and mystical substances, it's all alike" (*substances corporelles et substances mystiques, c'est tout comme*) (1994, 326).

18. In other words, the regeneration mechanism must be apprehended in its entirety, not in its limited role in the "exchange" of women, or their fertility, by men, even if one can recognize in men the task of operator in matrimonial exchanges. There are many possible regional parallels,

and March (1984, 1987) has for example very skilfully emphasized the pivotal role of women and their link to fortune among the Tamang and Sherpa of Nepal. For further discussion in the case of the Drung, see Gros (2012, chap. 8).

19. This primordial union is generally part of a longer story of origin in which another key element, widespread throughout China and Southeast Asia, is the well-known and much-written-about motif of the flood. The Drung story of the origin is very similar to the one found among their immediate Rawang and Nung (Nu) neighbors on both sides of the Myanmar/China border. Many features are common to other ethnicities: for example, for sources available in English, among the Naxi see Jackson (1975, 222–35) and McKhann (1989, 169–71), or for the Yi see Bender and Wuwu (2019, lxxi).

20. Muqneqkyen is one of the two daughters of the sky deity. I do not have enough room here to go into the details of the story, but it is worth mentioning, in relation to my aforementioned discussion about the link between the eye and fertility, that Muqneqkyen was one-eyed (the meaning of her name) and that after marrying the earth-born man, they could not at first conceive human babies. Her older sister Muqneqram ("Sky-eye-row") had even eyes, was pretty and hardworking, but her father did not want to give her in marriage. An equivalent difference is to be found in a version of the Naxi myth of origin, regarding the link between fertility and the eyes (horizontally or vertically aligned) of two daughters of the sky deity (Jackson 1975, 22).

21. Chen Rui (1998), writing about the Li of Hainan Island, mentions several versions of the myth of origin that explicitly link women's tattoos to matrimonial alliance and the perpetuation of society.

22. "Skin studies" have hugely developed over the last fifteen years with works often inspired by psychoanalysis or phenomenology and especially concerning various forms of bodily transformations in Western societies. For a recent overview, see Lafrance (2018). I have elsewhere (Gros 2019) briefly discussed the process of tattooing through the lens of topology, but this is a theoretical development that goes beyond the scope of this article.

23. See Gros (2012, 396–98, 443–44) for more detail about the role of women in these activities. Fermented beer (*neù*), which was traditionally made of corn, is essential for practicing hospitality and ritual ceremonies. The process of fermentation (a typically "generative" transformation) is the domain of women, and the making of this kind of fermented alcohol among the Drung is very similar to that found elsewhere in Southwest China, Southeast Asia, or the Himalayas for example.

24. Rajaure (1975) mentions that tattooing practices among Tharu women in Nepal were a form of sexual stimulant.

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