CHAPTER FIFTEEN

COMING-OF-AGE

Samp liinh leix yaw mas, ams qamt lenx dees mas.
After ploughing the field three times it becomes soft, and you
dare to walk to the very ends of the earth.\(^1\)

Boys wore jackets with buttons down the front and one pocket. While
still small, they wore split-seat trousers (or pants).\(^2\) On their foreheads
a rectangular piece of hair was left unshaved. They played with other
boys and girls in the drum tower or on open grassy areas around the
village.

Around the time when he was 10 or 12 years old, on the first day
of Chinese or Kam New Year, a boy was summoned by his mother to
change into his coming-of-age clothing. The mother prepared a warm
fire for the occasion. The whole family sat around the fire while the
mother produced the new set of clothing for the son: a jacket with two
pockets, or sometimes three, and a pair of closed trousers. The son
stood up while his mother helped him put on the new jacket. When
she presented him with his new trousers, he took off the old split-seat
ones and quickly put on the new ones. Then the boy typically patted
himself contentedly, to express satisfaction at his new clothes.

During the previous month, the parents chose a bright sunny morn-
ing to invite an old man skilled as a barber to cut their son’s hair in
the open air outside their house. Relatives and neighbours sat around
watching as the boy’s hair was cut. Using a knife, the old man shaved
the rectangular piece of hair on the boy’s forehead, the hair that had
signified his childhood, and shaved him bald just like older men at
the time. In those days, all the men shaved their heads bald. In the

\(^1\) The three times ploughing the field represent three distinct periods in a boy’s life:
from 0 to 5 years old, from 5 to 10 and from 10 to 15.

\(^2\) These are trousers that are deliberately left unsewn between the legs so that small
children can squat whenever necessary and relieve themselves without dirtying their
trousers or having to pull them down.
A boy’s coming-of-age clothing.