Northwest Yunnan is where the eastern flank of the Himalayas, in a spectacular bend, turns abruptly south. This is the heart of what is called the Hengduan Mountains, where the main rivers of Asia flow southward in parallel gorges separated by high altitude mountain ranges. Here, the administrative boundaries of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, and the country of Burma (Myanmar) meet. It is the home of Tibetans, but also of several Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples, such as the Naxi, the Lisu, the Nung and the Drung, amongst a few others. From the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, only a few explorers, geographers, botanists and scholars had crossed these mountains. Despite the increasing amount of research done during the last decade, we still know very little of northwest Yunnan’s history and ethnology, especially of its more remote parts, such as the upper reaches of the Salween river (Nujiang) and the easternmost source of the Irrawaddy, where the Drung people live.

1 For recent studies on Naxi (and Moso) see for example Oppitz and Hsu (eds), 1998; Mathieu, 2003.
2 For the Lisu people of the upper Salween river valley, see the long introduction in Dessaint and Ngwâma, 1994.
3 Nu and Dulong are respectively the standardized form (and official name in Chinese) of the names of these two groups. The Drung are part of a linguistic group together with the Nung and the Rawang of Burma. About the relationships between these groups, see Gros, 2004.
4 The French missionaries of the Foreign Missions Society of Paris were among the first westerners to discover this part of the Sino-Tibetan border, and because of their long term relationships with the local populations, they were also able to provide detailed information about many aspects of this area, including its geographical, cultural and political particularities. See Gros, 1996, 2001.
5 The anthropological research I undertook about the Drung (Dulong) people, and the several fieldwork assignments I conducted between 1998 and 2003 for a total of eighteen months, was largely funded by a Franco-Chinese Bilateral Grant (1997–1998), a Lavoisier Grant of the French Foreign Affairs (1999), the financial support of the France Foundation (1999), and that of the Louis Dumont Fund for Social Anthropology (2003).
Historically, the northwestern borders of Yunnan province lay at the juncture of both Chinese and Tibetan expansion. This remote area was coveted by Tibetans, Naxi and Chinese, and has been a theatre of unceasing conflicts. For a long time, several political legitimacies coexisted, with the empowered parties exercising quite freely their rights on this territory. To this configuration was then added the progressive influence of the Qing dynasty, and later on that of the Republicans with their respective colonial policies. Nevertheless, until the first half of the twentieth century, this patch of land between Tibet, China and Burma was like a free zone, where only local chieftains retained any real authority.

As with some other Tibeto-Burman speaking people still presently living in the area, the Drung, long known under the Chinese name of Qiuzi (Kiutzu), were caught between their more powerful neighbours, despite the isolation of their mountainous valley. While very little was known about these people, their valley soon became a pawn in imperial rivalries. As the British botanist, F. Kingdon Ward once wrote:

> It is certainly curious that no less than three empires should have laid claim to this wild valley. China has claimed it on the rather shabby plea that she was the first to oppress the Kiutzu [Qiuzi]—taxation without compensation is a sheer oppression. Tibet claimed it on the ground that she had long been accustomed to extract slaves from that region. Britain’s claim rests, in part, on the perfectly absurd ground that the inhabitants want her to take it over. (1924: 190)

Since the end of the nineteenth century up to the 1930s, this area was considered an “un-delimited frontier.” China and Britain were not the only two rivals. Local rulers, Tibetans but also Naxi, added to the complex layering of spheres of power over this area. Here, interethnic relationships were framed by power relations between these neighbours, a configuration in which the Drung people could only occupy the lower end of the political hierarchy. Though not reported with much detail in historical documents, some Drung women and men were indeed at times taken away, or exchanged for oxen as we will see, to become slaves in an alien land. I will here argue that such facts can better be understood in this context by taking into consideration the whole system of goods exchange and political relationships, which reveals not only a social hierarchy, but also cultural values that are important for our understanding of the socio-political specificities of this area.

In northwest Yunnan and its adjacent regions (upper Burma, eastern Tibet), I believe there is something like a “ritual language” that is