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For the La Chi people, forests are both a sacred place to worship their ancestors and a place to heal rifts through open dialogue. It is basic psychology that venting one's feelings, particularly discontent, disagreement and anger, can have a cathartic effect. This is not easy to do in the modern world, where stress and tension are so much a part of daily life that people have counselors and psychiatrists to help release them. Far removed from modern settings or psychological jargon, up in the mountains of Ha Giang Province in the north of the country, the La Chi people have for centuries incorporated a somewhat unique custom that provides a safe, divine space for people to work out their disagreements or express their angst.

The custom is usually observed at the end of the 10th lunar month in a forest area referred to as the rung cai (the forest of argument). The forest also serves as a place where the whole village makes judgments about disputes based on an analysis of what is right and wrong. Before the cathartic event, a shaman performs a ritual to ask God for a good date and time. Once the time is revealed, all families in the community will contribute rice, chickens, alcohol, or money to buy pigs. Those who have applied for arguments have to prepare their own offerings.

Early in the morning, the whole village goes to the forest where they cook sticky rice, chicken and make offerings to the shaman for conducting the rituals inviting the gods to come to judge the disputes. After the ritual, the two sides of a dispute, individuals, families, couples or others would argue with each other until everything was sorted out. At the end, the village has a feast together to welcome a new year.

Thanks to Rung cai, arguments or fights almost never happen among husband and wife, children, families, relatives, or even within the whole village of the La Chi people, said Vuong Van Phat, a La Chi resident. Tan Van Diu, of Ban Phung Village with more than 100 La Chi families, said during last year's Tet, on his way home, he saw Lung Van Pham, who was then drunk, grabbing his girlfriend Lung Thi Ha's hand.

Although he was very angry, he didn't speak out, and kept silent until he got married to Ha, Diu said. One day Diu asked the village's shaman to hold a ceremony for him to talk with Pham and his wife. After the ceremony in the forest, the incident didn't bother him anymore, Diu said. Similar stories can be heard across the village.

Lung Thi Hai once asked the shaman to hold a ceremony for her to speak about her disappointments regarding her husband's drinking. The whole village then ended up counseling the husband, Luong Van Hau, who soon quit drinking and became one of the best workers in the village.

Then and now

Vuong Van Thuan, 70, of Tan Loi Village, said, It's customary that before establishing villages, the first and most significant thing to do for the La Chi people is to look for a sacred forest to establish Rung cai. The sacred forest would be chosen by their shaman who accompanies them during the search. The choice must be approved by the gods of mountains and forests as well. Usually, the area is a primary forest of three to four hectares located where it is neither too high nor too low, Thuan said.

It must face south and be free from the activities of human beings, meaning that all noises from the village aren't allowed to bother the forest. However, these days it's hard to find a rung cai nearby the La Chi people's villages because there are people of many ethnicities in a village. Now, it is only when the La Chi account for more than half of a village's population that they establish the forest. Vuong Thi La of Tan Loi Village said, If there were no other ethnic people in the same village, for sure a La Chi husband and wife would never divorce, or even argue and fight with each other.

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