

## PREFACE

This book is the fruit of many years of thinking about questions of cultural identity in the Chinese context. It analyzes the politics of post-Mao cultural revival among three Chinese minority groups, the Dai, Bai, and Hui, and explores how minority cultural practice and identity reflect, refract, and challenge broader Chinese discourses of membership and national identity. It also considers the implications of the Dai, Bai, and Hui revival for common conceptions (and misconceptions) of culture, identity, and the nation.

My interest in the subject of Chinese minorities grew out of experiences teaching English in China in the late 1980s. During the year I spent in Yunnan, it was obvious that minority culture was undergoing a renaissance of sorts, following decades of enforced conformity. I wondered how minorities perceived this revival, and what it meant to them. I also wondered about the state's role in promoting it. What oversight did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Republic of China exercise over minorities' cultural activities? Did officials merely tolerate this revival, or did they participate in more active ways, and if so, why? Moreover, what did this ethnic and cultural ferment mean for the coherence and viability of the Chinese nation?

It was several years before I began to investigate these issues in a more systematic fashion. As a graduate student of political science in the mid-1990s, I found myself drawn to questions of culture and identity. These issues were particularly salient during that time of the Soviet Union's collapse, the genocide in Rwanda, and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. These crises pointed to problems inherent in multiethnic, multinational states. In the media, such events were frequently described as the fruit of ancient hatreds or as stemming from failures of cultural and national integration. Another issue garnering attention during this period concerned civil society and its liberalizing potential. The collapse of communist and authoritarian governments from Czechoslovakia to Chile and from South Africa to the Soviet Union focused attention on the power of citizen-led associations to challenge repressive regimes. Some observers argue that autonomous social organizations—civil society, in other words—helped bring about the end of these regimes and establish the conditions for democracy. In China, the Communist Party was firmly in power, but events such as the 1989 Tiananmen student movement revealed the potential for grassroots institutions to mobilize public action.

This book is an effort to understand the nature and meaning of cultural revival among the Dai, Bai, and Hui. It traces these groups' efforts to resuscitate and expand traditional customs, religion, language, art, music, and community institutions. In doing so, it explores what, if anything, this revival says about "Chineseness" and membership in the Chinese nation-state. At the same time, it examines whether and how Chinese national identity and membership shape the minority revival. The book also considers what the revival says about changing state-society relations in China.

#### RESEARCH METHODS

The research for this book was carried out over a number of years, and consists of fieldwork conducted in Yunnan and analyses of published research and other documents. Publications include Chinese government reports, statistical yearbooks, county almanacs, academic books and journals, special interest magazines, websites of religious schools, memoirs, etc. During the fieldwork portions of my research, I conducted semistructured and open-ended interviews with members of the Dai, Bai, and Hui, and other *minzu* (ethnic groups), including the Han majority. Interviewees included peasants, laborers, academics, students, officials, entrepreneurs, retired cadres, monks, imams, teachers, shopkeepers, and even ex-royalty. Some of

my respondents and informants were retired cadres who had fought with the People's Liberation Army against the Nationalists, while others were young men and women whose knowledge of the Mao years is limited.

Fieldwork was carried out in a number of locales, from October 1996 through October 1997, and again in the summer of 2002. During the first year of research, I spent about two months each in the prefectures of Dali and Xishuangbanna, with the interludes spent in Kunming. I also made subsequent two- or three-week trips to these prefectures toward the end of my stay. While in Dali and Xishuangbanna, I lived in guesthouses, occasionally staying in people's homes. I conducted interviews in the main cities of Dali and Jinghong, as well as in nearby counties, townships, and villages. Many of these trips were one to several days in length, though some were several days to a week in duration. I made multiple visits to a small number of sites. In Xishuangbanna, I was usually accompanied by a Dai guide (*peitong*) who also served as a translator, necessary since I do not speak Dai. In Dali, I was sometimes accompanied by a Bai guide, though on many occasions I was by myself, especially when going to Muslim communities. Local people I befriended also took it upon themselves to show me around and introduce me to their friends, family, and neighborhood. In Kunming, I spoke to people in the city and nearby counties. In the summer of 2002, I revisited almost all of these places, saw some of the same people, and also traveled to a Hui community in the Tibetan autonomous prefecture of Shangri-la.

My fieldwork experience initially encountered problems. It took four months to receive permission from the provincial Foreign Affairs Office and Educational Committee to conduct research, during which I forlornly drew up lists of possible career alternatives, since it seemed clear I would never get my Ph.D. In the end, it turned out that my application had been misplaced and thus was never submitted to the provincial agencies. When I resubmitted the proposal, I received approval in less than a week.

Another problem concerned my topic: I was told it was not possible to do field research on the Hui. For reasons I touch on in chapter 5, the Hui were deemed too sensitive and thus off-limits to foreign field research. I quickly rethought my project, originally a two-case study of the Dai and Hui, and decided to add the Bai as another case. The Bai are interesting in their own right, but the choice was partly strategic. There are many Hui in and around Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, and I reasoned that once I got approval to conduct research there, I would be able to move about freely (I was correct). There are also many Hui in Kunming, and I did not

need permission to wander around the city talking to people. However, the limitations placed on me made it difficult to conduct formal interviews with the Hui, especially Hui officials. These constraints hampered my efforts to systematically collect data.

In the end, however, many of the most interesting comments, observations, and insights emerged not in formal interviews but in informal conversations that began once the tape recorder was turned off and my notebook put away. Helping me in all this was the friendliness and hospitality of the Chinese people, minority and Han alike. I hope that what follows does justice to their experiences, hopes, and ideals.