

COMMUNIST MULTICULTURALISM

Because of historical and racial considerations [the Chinese]
have no problem identifying those who belong to the
collective “we” and those who are the “they.”

—LUCIEN PYE, “How China’s Nationalism Was Shanghaied”

INTRODUCTION

This book is the result of a faux pas. It grew out of a gaffe committed several years before I embarked on my academic career. In the late 1980s, I spent a year teaching English at Yunnan University in the city of Kunming. Yunnan is China’s most ethnically diverse province and is home to more than two dozen minority ethnic groups, called shaoshu minzu. In Yunnan I met many people who were members of minorities, some of them students in my classes or professors at the university. On one occasion I asked an acquaintance, in English, about her ethnic background. I knew she was a member of the Yi minority, but I didn’t know if both of her parents were as well. “My mother is Yi,” she said, “and my father is Han.”

“Oh,” I replied, without thinking, “so you are half-Yi, half-Chinese.”

I sensed at once I had committed an offense. “No!” she snapped, “I am half-Yi, half-Han. I am all Chinese!”

Fortunately, my friend forgave my error; she knew English well enough to know that in the West, the term “Chinese” is frequently used as a synonym for Han. I was, for instance, learning to speak standard Chinese (Mandarin), which in Chinese is often called Hanyu, the spoken language of the Han. Yet as I reflected on my mistake, I wondered if it was purely a linguistic one. Was I just confusing terms, or did I harbor some unexamined assumptions about Chinese culture and national identity?

China is often assumed by outsiders to be a homogenous entity. Yet the Chinese are remarkably diverse in terms of language, customs, and religion. True, the Han comprise the vast majority of China's population, but they are themselves a varied lot and include subgroups that speak dozens of dialects and practice an array of social customs.¹ Moreover, the Han majority are just one of fifty-six officially recognized "nationalities," or *minzu*. The Chinese population also includes a number of so-called "peoples" (*ren*), or unofficial ethnic groups.

According to the Chinese government, this diversity is something to be celebrated. Official documents describe China as a multinational, multi-ethnic nation-state, one in which the so-called "nationality question" has been resolved. China is roughly 92 percent Han; together with the minorities, the Han constitute the great, multinational Chinese nation, the *Zhonghua minzu*. Pre-communist conceptions of China and Chinese identity may have been tainted by Han-centric bias, but officially these have been discarded in favor of a broad participatory notion of Chinese national membership. Because Chinese identity is supposedly not tied to any one racial or ethnic heritage, no group need feel excluded if its roots lie in some peripheral ethno-cultural stock.

In reality, of course, the matter is not so simple. Unrest among Uyghurs, Kirgiz, and Tibetans and interethnic violence among Han, Hui, Mongols, and others indicate that the nationality question has yet to be resolved. Complicating matters is the fact that Chinese national identity is a contested concept. The twentieth century was marked by repeated efforts on the part of intellectuals, reformers, and revolutionaries to rethink the meaning of what it is to be Chinese and to possess a Chinese identity—national, cultural, ethnic, or otherwise. Some of these thinkers eschewed ethno-cultural essentialism in favor of ostensibly neutral notions of Chinese identity, the most obvious being Maoist socialism. Others invoked a racial, quasi-kinship-based, Han-centric ideal in an effort to rescue a Chinese essence from the decrepitude of cultural tradition. Still others sought to meld Confucianism with ideals of social and political modernization.² The contradictions of these formulations and the conflicts they pose for minorities show that the nationality question is alive and kicking.

The viability of the nationality question is evident also in the minority cultural revival that began at the start of the post-Mao reform era. For the purpose of this discussion, cultural revival is the reviving for new generations and transmitting to them the beliefs, social forms, and material traits that had once characterized specific groups. Throughout China, temples,

mosques, and churches have been rebuilt and restored. Bilingual education classes are expanding, arts and culture associations are surging in membership, and Chinese minorities are discovering their religious and ethno-cultural roots. Among the groups participating in this revival are the Dai, Bai, and Hui of Yunnan—the subjects of this book.

This minority culture fever (*wenhua re*) raises important questions regarding identity, culture, and the nation—in China and elsewhere. First, how should we understand these efforts to promote minority culture and identity? What significance does the revival have for prevailing theories of the nation-state and national identity? Does minority revival compromise Chinese national cohesion, given that some aspects of it tap into cross-national memberships and identities? What does it tell us about Chinese national identity and the Chinese nation-state? What role has the state played in cultural resurgence, and how have state actions shaped it?

Several hypotheses can be advanced to explain and interpret this revival. First, it may be a form of separatist or proto-separatist behavior. If cultural revival is an indicator that minorities increasingly identify with non-Chinese collectivities and are organizing on the basis of these other identities, the revival may engender challenges to the Chinese state and its territorial integrity. There is evidence to support this hypothesis: during the 1990s, members of some *minzu* engaged in violent anti-state activities, and cultural and religious institutions at times served as bases of organization. Another hypothesis is that minority revival represents a kind of nonterritorial exit strategy.³ By rebuilding and expanding cultural institutions, minorities are fostering a collective identity and existence outside the Han-centric mainstream, without engaging in actual secessionist politics. Scholars of contemporary China have noted that nonminority organizations and cultural practices enable participants to circumvent constraints on private and social behavior dictated by party-state norms. The Chinese healing art of *qigong* is one example. Anthropologist Nancy Chen argues that *qigong* has “reframed the very boundaries of public and private spheres, opening up different possibilities for the organization of daily life in time and space.”⁴ With regard to minorities, examples of cultural revival as a kind of quasi-separatist but nonterritorial exit strategy can be quite concrete. For instance, in many parts of the country the re-opening of religious schools affiliated with temples and mosques has sparked an exodus of minority students from the state school system. While the state tries to curtail institutions and activities that contravene its goals and interests, it generally regards these phenomena quite differently from overt challenges to its authority and territorial integrity.

A related hypothesis is that minority cultural revival is one element of an emerging Chinese civil society. In the wake of the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement of 1989, some scholars began using the concept of civil society to analyze popular protest and social movements in China.⁵ They argued that post-Mao reforms, by decentralizing political and economic power, had facilitated the emergence of social organizations relatively free from state control. This sphere of association and organization, some argued, engendered critical discourse and the emergence of alternative identities that made anti-state resistance feasible, in both thought and action. The florescence of cultural, religious, and other organizations among minorities might be part of this more general civil society formation. Yet minority cultural activism has an added significance, insofar as it stems from ethno-cultural notions of collective selfhood that may be at odds with those propagated by the party-state. Dru Gladney has suggested that increased political protest by and organization among Hui Muslims is evidence of an emergent civil society and a Chinese public sphere. At the same time, he characterizes these actions in almost separatist terms, as part of a “new tide in ethnic nationalism and ‘primordial politics’ sweeping China.”⁶

Minority cultural revival can also be seen as a critique of Chinese economic, social, and minority policies and of dominant notions of what it means to be Chinese. This argument is advanced in a number of contemporary analyses of Chinese minority identity and culture. In *Other Chinas*, Ralph Litzinger argues that Yao cultural and religious revival entails a repudiation of Maoist politics of class struggle and a search for new forms of what (borrowing from Foucault) he calls “governmentality”—ways of governing at the local level that are legitimated through resuscitated cultural practice.⁷ Revival as criticism and resistance is also a key theme of Erik Mueggler’s *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, which examines life in an impoverished Yi community in northern Yunnan. Mueggler demonstrates that the return of traditional practices such as exorcism is bound up with a rejection of the state’s efforts to control land, bodies, and behavior. Maris Gillette’s *Between Mecca and Beijing* focuses on a different kind of challenge to the powers that be; her analysis of urban Hui Muslims in Xi’an shows how Hui aesthetic and religious expression opposes mainstream Chinese understandings of modernity by asserting alternative Islamic ones.

Still another hypothesis is that cultural resurgence ultimately serves state interests, sometimes at the expense of minorities’ own goals. In other words, cultural revival may be not so much an assertion of minority identity and

interest as it is a Han-centric tool for the advancement of the state's agenda. There are precedents that support this argument. Katherine Palmer Kaup shows how the creation of the Zhuang *minzu* in the 1950s helped the CCP consolidate its control over the province of Guangxi.⁸ Louisa Schein and Dru Gladney demonstrate the ways in which the promotion of minority identities feeds an ongoing, Han-centric project of national identity construction.⁹ Stevan Harrell, meanwhile, argues that the Chinese state's post-Mao concern for minority development echoes the "civilizing discourses" of earlier regimes, discourses that ultimately sought to bring diverse peoples under state control.¹⁰ Although Ralph Litzinger highlights the ways in which Yao revival critiques modes of governance, he also shows how state approval of Yao ritual practice has generated new channels of surveillance and control.¹¹

The research in this book supports a number of these hypotheses. Cultural and religious revival among the Dai, Bai, and Hui has made it possible for some members of these groups to establish modes of existence detached or separate from the larger social milieu in which they live. For instance, the version of Islam embraced by some Hui Muslims promotes identification with a global Sunni Islamic community and a concomitant turning away from non-Muslim culture and society. Other Yunnan Hui Muslims, however, view Islamic faith and practice in ways that celebrate their distinctly Chinese Islamic history. They counter what they see as self-defeating isolationism with an integrationist Islam they believe is more authentic, more traditional, and more in keeping with the precepts of their faith.

Dai, Bai, and Hui articulations of identity also express criticism of official policy. One manifestation of the Bai cultural revival is the valorization, in books, articles, exhibitions, and media productions, of Dali-area capitalists from a century ago—precisely the kinds of figures long vilified as bourgeois enemies of the people. This celebration of Bai (or proto-Bai) economic achievement reflects the national emphasis placed on the market, and on the idea that getting rich is glorious. Yet it also hints at dissatisfaction with socialist policies that some Bai believe rendered them poorer and more isolated than their forebears. The rediscovery of Bai capitalists' contributions to local and provincial development also challenges the stereotype of minorities as backward. The embrace of capitalist heroes is of a piece with other aspects of the Bai revival, such as the promotion of bilingual education and the celebration of their ancestors' contributions to the arts and music of the Tang dynasty. However, continuities between the Maoist socialist period and the policies of the present persist. Elements of the

contemporary cultural revival entail rejections of Maoist policies, but others build on the policies, projects, and accomplishments of the Maoist era.

One noteworthy feature of the revival is the role of the state in nurturing and supporting it. This support takes the form of legal guarantees of minority autonomy and specific minority rights. China's Constitution of 1982 and the Law of Regional Ethnic Autonomy of 1984 guarantee, among other things, freedom of "normal" religion, so long as religious activities do not undermine stability and the social order. These laws also promise the right to self-government in minority regions, to the development of minority languages, and to autonomy in administering the finances of minority regions. The maintenance of these rights, however, is uneven. The state determines what "normal" religion is and whether religious activities are disruptive or threatening. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons local and national officials often acknowledge these rights.

Yet Chinese officials do more than tolerate cultural resurgence. Han and minority officials at the central, provincial, and local levels are actively involved in promoting it, and they participate in it in unexpected ways. To a great extent the state's promotional efforts can be chalked up to its interest in expanding trade, tourism, and tax revenues. The commoditizing of minority culture, religion, and history is, in short, a development strategy. This does not mean that officials are necessarily concerned with historical accuracy, authenticity, or even reality. As Beth Notar shows in *Displacing Desire*, the packaging and marketing of minority culture are at times shaped by ideas that are fantastical, if not "preposterous."¹² State promotion of minority culture and history is also a legitimization strategy. National, provincial, and local governments use—and manipulate—cultural institutions to enhance their authority over and relationships with a diverse minority population. The state at times also involves itself in cultural and religious affairs in an effort to define tradition and identity in ways that support its own agenda. Its support for minority culture thus reflects the government's interest in maintaining power and control. Yet not all of the government's actions are control-driven or instrumental in promoting government agendas. This is apparent when the state is disaggregated and the interests and motivations of local minority officials are taken into account. Local officials who are themselves minorities can and do mobilize state resources to achieve minority-defined goals.¹³

The role played by officials in the revival underscores the evolving nature of state-society relations in contemporary China. These relations are often adversarial, as seen in government efforts to crack down on activities by

Falun Gong and Tibetan Buddhists, among others. However, interactions between the state and social groups can also be cooperative and mutually beneficial. Scholars such as Jonathan Unger, Anita Chan, Ken Foster, and others have shown how state-created business associations help entrepreneurs and business groups pursue their interests while facilitating the flow of information to officials, thereby enhancing government control.¹⁴ These scholars have proposed concepts such as “socialist corporatism” and “incorporated associations” to capture the cooperative and reciprocal aspects of this relationship. While revealing instances of conflict between and within state and society, scholars draw attention to the interworking of these categories and the positive-sum quality of their interaction.

Another hypothesis drawn from observation has been overlooked or downplayed in much of the scholarship on Chinese minorities. For members of the three groups that are the focus of this study, cultural revival can be as much about being Chinese as it is about being minority. Many participants in this revival view their endeavors in terms of several discourses that relate directly to concepts of citizenship and Chinese national identity more generally, including the discourses on minority autonomy and on China’s post-1949 modernization. Certain instances of minority cultural promotion are efforts to put teeth into the party-state’s promises of autonomy, to modernize minority religion and culture, and to reject the stereotype of minorities as backwards and uncivilized. For many Chinese minorities, the modernization of minority culture is a means of asserting citizenship and membership in the national body politic.

The findings of this book dovetail somewhat with Gillette’s study of urban Hui in the city of Xi’an. Gillette argues that consumption patterns and Islamic practice among the Xi’an Hui demonstrate that Hui Muslims have internalized state-sanctioned norms of modernization. At the same time, the Hui counter these Han-centric, state-led definitions of modernity with Islamic (or Islamicized) versions, a strategy Gillette interprets as counter-hegemonic. For these Hui—and for the rural Yunnan Hui of this study—Islam serves as an alternative “index of civilization” that allows Muslims to assert their distinctive religious identity while demonstrating their success in light of norms broadly accepted throughout China.¹⁵ While this book reiterates many of Gillette’s findings, for the Dai and Bai as well as for rural Yunnan Hui, it takes the argument further. Efforts to modernize minority culture while preserving distinctiveness are more than counter-hegemonic challenges to Han-centric national ideals. They are—or rather, can be—forms of citizenship practice.

This discussion of the relationship between minorities and the party-state or of the cultural revival does not imply that everything is rosy. For one thing, the Chinese government's commitment to cultural pluralism is limited and ambiguous. Official tolerance is trumped by the state's concern for stability and its commitment to a Han-centric vision of Chinese modernization. Furthermore, although the goals of those who champion minority culture frequently cohere with the ideals embedded in Chinese nationalism, the identity-based ferment analyzed in this book can and does hold counter-state or counter-hegemonic potential.

Minorities may link their cultural and religious endeavors to the norms of Chinese national discourse, but they are not uncritical of those norms, or of the policies in which they are enshrined. Rather, in positioning their activities in relation to economic development, minority autonomy, and even socialist modernization, minorities "wave the red flag to oppose the red flag": they deploy these methods to criticize the shortcomings of CCP policy and practice. Nevertheless, evidence that minority citizens accept these ideals suggests that, to paraphrase Tip O'Neill, all nationalisms are local. For the Dai, Bai, and Hui, being minority is, or can be, one way of being national.

CHINA'S MINORITIES

What often perplexes outside observers about Chinese minorities is the variation among minorities. Some minorities appear quite ethno-culturally distinct from the majority Han, while others are relatively indistinguishable from the Han or other groups among whom they live. Some groups are geographically concentrated, or stand out in terms of dress, religion, speech, and custom, and yet still lack any strong sense of themselves as a distinct ethnic group. Other minorities are widely dispersed and appear assimilated to dominant regional customs, but possess a cohesive ethno-cultural identity.

This complexity stems in part from the official Chinese understanding of the term "minzu" and the broad way it has been applied to ethno-cultural groups. In the 1950s, China's new communist regime embarked on a project of classifying the country's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity and establishing which groups should be granted minority status. Teams of ethnographers, linguists, and historians were dispatched throughout the country to collect data on the language, customs, arts, folklore, religion, economic practices, and social structure of hundreds of self-identifying

groups. As has been well documented elsewhere, the state's effort to sort through this material and identify particular minorities was informed, at least in theory, by Joseph Stalin's definition of a nation. Stalin delineated four criteria that had to be met for a group to achieve status as a nation (*narod*). A nation, he claimed, was "an historically evolved, stable community of people, based upon the common possession of four principal attributes, namely: a common language, a common territory, a common economic life, and a common psychological make-up manifesting itself in common special features of national culture."¹⁶

To be recognized as a *minzu*, a group had to demonstrate that it possessed these four attributes. Official Chinese understanding of who constituted a minority was also influenced by Marxist stage theory and the social evolutionary theory of Lewis Henry Morgan, which had also influenced Stalin.¹⁷ Thus, while Chinese ethnographers tried to figure out which groups deserved minority status, they also sought to determine the stage of economic development to which these groups had progressed. A group's level of development depended on the possession or lack of a written language, kinship and political structures, religious organization, and the nature of the local economy. Thus the Akha and Wa, who practiced shifting cultivation (so-called "slash and burn" agriculture) and lacked a written script, were considered more backward than the Bai, who were sedentary wet-rice cultivators well integrated into the regional market economy of early twentieth-century Yunnan.¹⁸ In actual practice, however, political expediency and matters of convenience generally won out over theoretical purity in the categorizing process.¹⁹ The party-state's desire to avoid a bureaucratic nightmare also informed its decision to amalgamate over four hundred groups seeking recognition into fifty-five officially recognized minorities.

The Dai, Bai, and Hui exemplify this complexity of identity and practice. There is significant linguistic, religious, and cultural variation among them, and analysis of their post-Mao experiences provides a broad, comparative view of the minority cultural revival. These three groups also vary in their similarity to or difference from the majority Han, in their geographic cohesion or dispersion throughout Yunnan and China, in the degree to which they were socially and culturally integrated into Chinese society prior to 1949, and in subjective matters of self-identity. In both official and popular perception, the Dai, Bai, and Hui are also characterized according to their level of docility and quiescence or restiveness and rebelliousness, perceptions that seem to have become an index for government in determining how receptive they are to state-led, Han-centric civilizing projects. In other

words, these three groups represent the variation that characterizes Chinese minorities as a whole.

Historically, Chinese thinking about ethno-cultural differences distinguished peoples by the degree to which they had adopted and adapted to traditional Chinese cultural practices. Those who measured up to Chinese standards of behavior, etiquette, and learning were considered civilized, or “cooked,” while those whose folkways, customs, language, and actions were irredeemably foreign were viewed as barbarian, or “raw.”²⁰ This raw versus cooked, barbarian versus civilized dichotomy established a continuum of difference and assimilation. A group’s place on this continuum was determined not by blood or kinship-based notions of ethnicity but by its members’ adherence to behavioral standards.

A continuum of assimilation and difference informs Chinese thinking about minorities, although the meanings of “integration” and “difference” have changed over time. The three cases examined in this study could be positioned along this continuum, with the rather “exotic” Dai at one end, the relatively integrated Hui at the other, and the Bai somewhere in between. Such a continuum, however, fails to capture the ambiguities of how minorities perceive themselves and are perceived by others in the wider society. It also fails to capture the fact that ethno-cultural distinctiveness can vary through time and circumstance; such distinctiveness can be a reaction to the experience of political and social alienation rather than its cause.

This continuum also overlooks other criteria by which minorities are judged in popular opinion, if not in policy. As mentioned above, minorities are distinguished according to how docile or rebellious they are or are perceived to be. The ideal of a “model minority”—an ideal type that is exotic, docile, and, as many scholars have shown, typically feminine—informs official, academic, and popular Chinese discourse.²¹ As a corollary to the model minority ideal, there is also a type of pecking order or scale of authenticity in popular and even official discourse. The more culturally distinct (from the Han) a group is, the higher its place on that scale. Minorities whose customs differ little from the Han and who are well integrated into modern Chinese life thus deviate from the minority ideal. Groups that are highly acculturated to Han society and are also restive or rebellious are even more suspect. During my fieldwork, all sorts of people—academics, officials, taxi drivers, urbanites, peasants—expressed doubts about my case selection, usually to suggest that I drop the contentious, highly integrated Hui and examine instead the more exotic, impoverished, matrilineal Mosuo or the

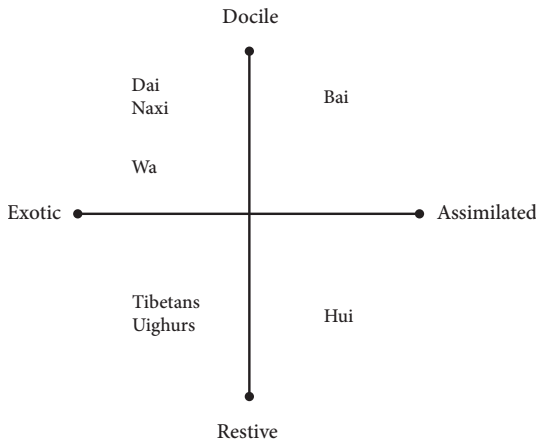


FIG. 1.1 Perceptions of variation among Chinese minorities

equally exotic and isolated Wa. My decision to study the Dai was met with universal approval.

This picture is complicated by the understandings of modernization that infuse much Chinese thinking about minorities and economic development. Exoticism is valorized, but so too is the embrace of a modernizing project that has assimilative consequences. Minorities are expected to be exotic, even quaint, but they are also expected to accept the assistance of the “elder brother” Han nationality along the path to modernity.

Rather than viewing minorities in terms of a continuum of assimilation and difference, it makes sense to situate them within a schema that includes two dimensions. Such a schema, as presented in Figure 1.1, indicates where the Dai, Bai, and Hui fit. The horizontal axis indicates the degree of cultural distinctiveness, ranging from “exotic” to “assimilated,” they are perceived to demonstrate. The vertical axis indicates the nature of their responsiveness to state-led control, ranging from “docile” to “restive” (or rebellious). This way of characterizing minorities is not exact, and certainly is open to interpretation. For one thing, groups may vary over time in terms of how assimilated or quiescent they are or are perceived to be. The cultural revival itself has engendered assertions of minority uniqueness and a rejection of Han-centric conformity. It should be noted that characterizing a group as restive or docile in no way means that all members of that group are rebellious, troublemakers, separatists, passive, etc. These characterizations are generalizations of views—what Susan Blum refers to as cognitive prototypes of ethnic others—expressed in official and academic classificatory schemes as well as in statements by ordinary people.²²

Of the three cases analyzed here, the Dai most closely approximate the minority ideal. Prior to their incorporation into the Chinese nation-state, the Dai of what is today called Xishuangbanna Prefecture constituted a fairly distinct political entity, whose linguistic, religious, and other cultural practices set them apart from mainstream Han society.²³ The Dai polity persisted several years after 1949, albeit in diminished form, due to CCP efforts to incorporate the region by co-opting the existing political and religious elite. The Dai, who number 1.3 million in Yunnan, are related to Tai peoples in Myanmar, Laos, and Northern Thailand, and their cultural revival has augmented their connections to some of these Tai groups.

The Bai are an intermediate case, and somewhat difficult to categorize. Although there are small communities of Bai in other provinces, the Bai reside almost entirely in Yunnan, mainly in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. With 1.6 million people, they are the second-largest minority in the province. The Bai speak a Tibeto-Burman language from which a written form was recently derived, and they are the descendants of various tribal and ethnic groups that held sway over Yunnan for over five centuries until the thirteenth-century Mongol conquest. They possess a number of cultural and religious practices that appear to be specific to them as an ethno-cultural entity.²⁴ In other words, the Bai evince many external markers of ethnic difference that justify their minority status. In terms of subjective matters of self-identity, however, the Bai are a bit of a paradox. Prior to and even after Liberation many Bai rejected the idea that they were a minority nationality. They called themselves not Bai but *minjia*, a term meaning “civilian households” that possesses no ethno-cultural connotation. They also emphasized their ancestral ties to eastern Han China and their cultural and economic accomplishments in a Confucian Chinese world. Even the “Bainess” of Bai cultural practices is somewhat murky. Past studies of *minjia* life portrayed them not as ethnics but as paragons of mainstream Chinese rural society.²⁵ For centuries the Bai have been well integrated in terms of culture, education, politics, and economics. Their contributions to Chinese culture and their cultural revival reflect this adaptation; they are proud of this history.

The Hui appear to be the most integrated of the three cases I examine. As the descendents of the historic latecomers to Yunnan who arrived with conquering Yuan, Ming, and Qing armies, many Hui appear indistinguishable from the Han or minority groups among whom they live. They share a language, an economy, and general cultural practices, although the degree of integration varies by region and even by settlement. Yet even

where they appear mostly integrated or completely assimilated, the Hui possess a strong self-identity as a distinct ethno-religious collectivity. To an outsider acquainted with non-Muslim Chinese society there may be much that is familiar about the Hui, but they are, in Jonathan Lipman's formulation, "familiar strangers."²⁶ While many Hui live in communities that have undergone a significant religious revival, others neither practice Islam nor even adhere to prohibitions on the consumption of pork and alcohol. The Hui are both the smallest and the largest of the three groups examined here. Within Yunnan, they number over six hundred thousand, but nationwide the Hui number nearly 10 million. Yet many Hui scoff at the idea of the Hui as a separate *minzu*, seeing themselves instead as part of a more than 20-million strong Chinese Islamic entity some call the "Islamic nationality" (*Yisilan minzu*), a category not recognized by the Chinese government. The Hui are also the most "restive" of the three cases. Rightly or wrongly, they are viewed as the most prone of the three to be involved in ethnic conflict and criminal behavior and are regarded by many non-Muslims as troublemakers. Restive Hui are not, however, separatist rebels; interethnic and Hui-state conflicts usually arise out of local, specific grievances.

The characterization of the Hui as restive must be regarded critically. Thinking about minorities in terms of their responsiveness to the rules of Chinese society at large tends to obscure the historical and contemporary mistreatment of certain groups by successive Chinese regimes. The Hui are perceived as prone to rebellion because during the Qing and Communist regimes they were the targets of pogroms and persecutions.²⁷ Efforts to combat oppression have enhanced Hui cohesion and collective self-identity, and they are quick to defend themselves and their religion. There is a dynamic quality to Hui-state and Hui-Han interaction and conflict not captured in the diagram above, and both this dynamism and the history of anti-Hui persecution must be acknowledged.

The Dai, Bai, and Hui also differ from each other and the Han in terms of the contacts they possess with political and cultural collectivities beyond China's borders. Cultural resurgence among the Dai, for instance, has been facilitated by exchanges with Tai communities in neighboring Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand and has led to broader identification by Dai people with a greater Tai ethno-cultural milieu. Among the Hui, Muslim religious and educational activism is inspired and assisted by international Islamic organizations and the governments of Muslim nations. Since the Bai are found almost exclusively in Yunnan, their cultural activism has a more localized character. Yet this has not prevented Bai cultural and educational activists

from looking beyond their locale—for instance, to international agencies like the United Nations—to promote their cause.

YUNNAN PROVINCE

Located in the far southwest of China, on the borders of Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, Yunnan is the most ethnically and culturally diverse of China's provinces (fig. 1.2). The majority of China's fifty-five minorities are represented in the provincial population; the populations of twenty-four of these groups exceed four thousand. About one-third of Yunnan's 45 million residents are members of minority ethnic groups.²⁸ The diversity of the minority population and the province's historical isolation make it a fruitful test case for examining the relationship between national and minority identity.

Yunnan has long enjoyed, or endured, isolation from the heartland of Han China. Despite the spread of the silk trade into Yunnan as early as the second century B.C.E., the region was for centuries dominated by disparate tribal groups. From the eighth through the middle of the thirteenth centuries, successive Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms ruled much of Yunnan. These kingdoms participated in tributary relationships with the imperial courts of the Tang and Song dynasties. Cultural and technological contacts with the Chinese heartland increased, facilitating the adoption of Chinese writing and agricultural techniques. Yunnan's administrative and political independence ended with the Mongol conquest. In 1253, Kubilai Khan defeated the Dali kingdom and reorganized Yunnan as a province under the governorship of Sayyid 'Ajalls Shams al-Din, a Muslim from Bukhara in Central Asia. Under Mongol rule, that is, the Yuan dynasty, tens of thousands of Mongol, Chinese, and Muslim soldiers and civilian support personnel migrated to Yunnan and established settlements throughout the province. These settlement policies continued under the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties (1644–1911), accelerating the political and cultural integration of the province. The incorporation of Yunnan into imperial China, however, was not a one-way process. Chinese practices, norms, and institutions increasingly permeated Yunnan culture and society, but as C. Pat Giersch demonstrates, newcomers and their customs were often indigenized.²⁹ The province was and is today a cultural and political *mélange*.

Yunnan's character as peripheral to China's political, economic, and cultural core is a function of its topography and geographic location. The



FIG. 1.2 Yunnan and its neighbors

province is extremely mountainous, severely constraining the amount of land available for high-yield agriculture.³⁰ Until recent decades, the terrain made travel between Yunnan and the rest of China treacherous and time-consuming. Before 1966 no rail line linked Yunnan with the rest of China, although in the early 1900s, the French built a railroad connecting Kunming to Hanoi, in what was then French Indochina. Yunnan is also a border province and shares a boundary with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. The province's peripheral status was mitigated somewhat during World War II, when thousands of American and Chinese troops were stationed in the province. During this period the Burma Road was constructed, the Flying Tigers flew supplies into the capital of Kunming, and major inland universities relocated from Japanese-occupied regions to the Yunnan countryside. Yet Yunnan was also one of the last areas of the country to be "liberated." The founding of the People's Republic was declared on October 1, 1949; Yunnan's liberation was accomplished half a year later in 1950.

Although Yunnan is increasingly tied into the global economy, a fact signified by the opening in 1999 of a Wal-Mart in Kunming, social

problems continue to affect minorities and the province as a whole. The province copes with poverty, underdevelopment, illiteracy, and a growing AIDS problem. Yunnan is one of China's poorest provinces (table 1.1). In 2006, the per capita net rural income in Yunnan was ¥2,251 (approximately \$281), just 70 percent of the already low average rural income in China of ¥3,255 (\$408). Residents of cities and towns in Yunnan are considerably better off than those in rural areas; in 2006, net urban incomes averaged ¥10,070 (\$1,259).³¹ There are no figures on the number of minority poor, but the State Ethnic Affairs Commission estimates that minorities account for 40 percent of China's poor, despite comprising just 9 percent of the total population.³² In Yunnan, as in other provinces, underdevelopment and poverty are aggravated by illiteracy and low levels of education.

Yunnan officials have been trying to expand the rural enterprise sector so as to increase incomes and the revenue base. The provincial government is seeking to refashion Yunnan as a gateway to Southeast Asia and to utilize its border location to economic advantage. Provincial officials have focused particular attention on the tobacco and cigarette, mining, tourism, and horticulture industries. Contraband markets and industries have mushroomed in tandem with officially sanctioned economic endeavors. Yunnan has also long been a major conduit for heroin trafficked from the Golden Triangle to the West. The province's border character is a decided advantage, or disadvantage, depending on one's perspective.

The peripheral character of the province and its peoples shapes cultural activism among the Dai, Bai, and Hui. Although concerns and interests specific to them motivate their endeavors, they are also responding to the disadvantages of residing in the geographic and cultural periphery. Minority entrepreneurs and officials are exploring how cultural institutions,

TABLE 1.1 Per Capita Rural and Urban Disposable
Incomes (in yuans) in Yunnan and China, 1980 and 2005

	1980	2000
Rural, Yunnan	148	2,042
Rural, all China	191	3,255
Urban, Yunnan	420	9,266
Urban, all China	478	10,493

SOURCES: 2006 *Yunnan tongji nianjian*, 687, 754; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2006 *Zhongguo tongji nianjian*, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2006/indexch.htm> (accessed May 27, 2007).

artifacts, and practices can contribute to economic development. While economic development is important, minorities think about development in more than just economic terms. For many, cultural revival means modernizing their cultures while preserving their identities.

Until recently, analyses of ethnicity and nationalism in the field of comparative politics mostly ignored questions regarding Chinese minorities. This neglect has stemmed in part from beliefs about Chinese homogeneity and exceptionalism. For good reason the Chinese were viewed as homogeneous, despite significant regional diversity. Political science scholarship on contemporary China focused primarily on the big events of the twentieth century, such as imperial collapse, civil war, revolution, communism, and reform after Mao. Research on Chinese ethnic and religious groups was hampered for decades by restrictions on access and information. In the decades since 1978, however, scholarship on Chinese minorities has blossomed but few comparative political studies of Chinese minorities have been produced.³³ Moreover, Chinese minorities typically have been studied as minorities; their status as citizens and members of a Chinese national entity has been neglected, though recently that has begun to change.³⁴ While this book focuses on the experiences of the Dai, Bai, and Hui, it is about much more than that. It poses broader questions about culture, the nation, and the politics of national identity in China and elsewhere.