

THE BAI AND THE TRADITION OF MODERNITY

One of the hallmarks of nationalist movements and ethnic revivals is nostalgia for pasts real or invented. Longings for a romanticized ideal are obvious in overtly atavistic nationalisms, the Nazi vision of a bucolic Aryan *Lebensraum* being one example of this tendency. Backward-looking romanticism typically celebrates past glories, but great defeats may also galvanize such sentiments. The Serbian obsession with Kosovo, the site of a fourteenth century defeat by the Ottoman Turks, and the recurring motif of humiliation in Chinese nationalism exemplify this phenomenon. Nostalgia and romanticism are responsible in part for the view of nationalist and ethnic movements as inherently irrational, at least when compared to social movements based on ostensibly more instrumental bases such as class. Yet quite “rational,” progressive movements may also draw their power from sentimental longing for a bygone era of autonomy, strength, and cultural achievement.

Like the Dai, the Bai have experienced a cultural revival over the course of the reform period. Hundreds of temples have been reopened or newly constructed throughout the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, and local residents have resumed an active religious life; monuments and historical sites have been refurbished; music, dance, and the arts are flourishing; and the long and glorious history of the Bai is widely celebrated in books,

magazines, movies, and television programs. This resurgence is spurred on by provincial, prefectural, city, and township officials who hope to promote Dali as a tourist destination and raise its profile among potential investors. Local officials have sought to harness nostalgia for Bai history and culture for the purpose of economic development.

Bai nostalgia, however, is a curious thing. First, the very “Bainess” of the Bai is ambiguous. The establishment of the Bai as an official minority nationality in the 1950s entailed the invention of a great degree of Bai tradition, even to some extent a Bai identity. Second, while government officials have sought to harness Bai exoticism and difference as a means of luring tourist and investor funds, the nostalgia of some cultural activists has a very different focus. Promoters of Bai culture and identity are motivated not simply by the idea of Bai distinctiveness drawn from a distant past, but by an identity rooted in a more recent history of “civilized” achievement and modern economic success. Moreover, much of the cultural revival celebrates not Bai difference but their fundamental “Chineseness,” and their contributions to a Chinese past, present, and future.

What makes the Bai unique, or at least unusual, is not their syncretism but their embrace of it. Bai history, like the history of many other ethno-cultural entities, is one of fortuitous adoption, adaptation, and integration of diverse peoples and practices. Yet unlike many other groups, the Bai consciously celebrate that syncretism. This syncretism is reflected in the Bai revival. The Bai revival therefore encounters and reveals many of the paradoxes of minority cultural renaissance. One such paradox is that some of the practices and identities being “revived” did not exist prior to the founding of the People’s Republic. The party-state, in other words, gave birth to the “imagined community” that is the Bai, as well as some of the cultural artifacts now being revived and developed. For instance, the Bai written language was created in the 1950s by scholars at the Institute of Linguistics at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing. Yet contemporary promoters of Bai-Han bilingual education see their endeavors as enhancing the status of an ethnic collectivity with ancient roots.

The renaissance of Bai cultural identity reveals that many minority citizens embrace norms and goals that pervade popular and official discourse about what it means to be Chinese in an increasingly market-driven society. These norms and goals include economic modernization, national advancement, and cultural progress. They permeate Bai revival, even those aspects that focus on tradition. To some extent this is because Bai officials and other state-connected elites are often the instigators and promoters of the revival.

This does not mean that revival participants uncritically accept these norms and goals. Instead, they frame them in minority-centric terms. Cultural advancement and economic development are desired goals, but Bai cultural activists regard these through the prism of minority identity.

#### ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE BAI

With a population of just over 1.6 million, the Bai today are the second largest minority nationality in Yunnan.<sup>1</sup> They reside primarily in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, where they constitute roughly one-third of the prefecture's population of 3.5 million.<sup>2</sup> The Bai are not the largest single group in Dali; nearly half the population is Han. Among the eleven counties and one county-level municipality of which the prefecture is comprised, the Bai population is unevenly distributed. Ninety-two percent of the residents of Jianchuan County are Bai, while in the counties of Weishan, Nanjian, and Midu, the Bai form less than 2 percent of the population.<sup>3</sup> Dali is also home to sizable communities of Yi, Hui, Lisu, Naxi, and other groups.

Dali is located in west central Yunnan, in a geographical region known as the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau. The northern part of the prefecture abuts the foothills of the Himalayas, while the southern end stretches into the lush, subtropical areas of southern Yunnan. The region is blessed with fine, mild weather, and while the climate is somewhat dry, Dali experiences the summer monsoon rains that are a feature of the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau. The prefecture is slightly larger than the state of Maryland, and is the fifth largest prefecture in Yunnan in terms of geography and population. As is the case for Yunnan as a whole, the mountainous character of the prefecture limits cultivation; less than 7 percent of the total area of the prefecture is cultivated for crop production.<sup>4</sup> A substantial irrigation infrastructure draws from the many small streams that flow down off the Cangshan mountain range, an offshoot of the Himalayas, and from Lake Er (Erhai), the second largest freshwater lake in Yunnan. Thousands of tourists from all over China and around the world visit annually, drawn by the region's stunning scenery, its ethnic culture, and the charming cobbled lanes of Dali Old Town (fig 4.1).

Although Chinese law and policy recognize the Bai as a distinct legal and ethno-cultural entity, the issue of Bai identity is complex. As discussed in chapter 2, studies of Dali life and society conducted in the middle of the twentieth century emphasize the essentially Chinese character of the *min-jia*, the group of people later officially classified as Bai.<sup>5</sup> These works also



FIG. 4.1 Tourists and townspeople stroll the main street in Dali Old Town.

demonstrate that many *minjia* rejected the idea of themselves as being ethnic. Bai syncretism and the weakness of their “nationality consciousness” (*minzu yishi*) notwithstanding, their language and traditions were deemed sufficiently unique to justify their classification as minority. Such traditions include *benzhu*, a polytheistic religion involving the worship of local protector gods, many of them figures from myth and history such as Kubilai Khan. At the same time, official studies and popular opinion acknowledged the Bai to be highly acculturated to mainstream Chinese (e.g., Han) social, economic, and cultural practices. This legacy of Bai integration influenced the implementation of Maoist policies in the Dali region. Until the late 1950s, many minorities were subject to policies that minimized the pace of socialist transformation. In contrast, the policies applied in most Bai areas differed little from those implemented among the Han.

#### THE BAI IN THE ERA OF REFORM

If the Bai experience of Maoist socialism is noteworthy for its “normality,” the Bai experience under reform is emblematic of the post-Mao period in

Yunnan Province as a whole. The economy of the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture has grown considerably over the last two decades. Much of that growth has occurred in the collective and private sectors through the expansion of township and village enterprises. Industrial and commercial expansion has centered in Dali municipality (Dali *shi*), which includes Dali Old Town and the nearby city of Xiaguan.<sup>6</sup> More than half of the municipality's economy derives from manufacturing, construction, and mining industries, over one-third from services, and just over 10 percent from farming and other primary industries. Tourism is particularly important. By the late 1990s, more than one-fifth of all nonfarm employees in the municipality were employed in tourism and related enterprises.<sup>7</sup> Because of this growth, the municipality is considerably more prosperous than the rest of Yunnan. In 2005, per capita GDP in Dali municipality was ¥16,112, more than twice the provincial average and 15 percent higher than China's per capita GDP for that year.<sup>8</sup>

These figures, however, belie disparities in the prefecture as a whole. Despite the first-blush impression of prosperity and vibrancy that Dali creates, relative isolation and poverty persist throughout the prefecture, as they do throughout Yunnan. The prefecture's economy remains highly agricultural. Major crops include rice, corn, wheat, soy, canola, peanuts, sugar cane, and a variety of fruit and vegetables. Dairy products are also important, particularly in the counties of Binchuan and Eryuan. As in many areas of Yunnan, tobacco is an important cash crop and a key source of local revenue.

Although township and village enterprises have mushroomed over the last two decades, most of that expansion has taken place in Dali municipality. Approximately 18 percent of the prefecture's population resides in Dali municipality, yet in 2005 it accounted for 40 percent of the prefecture's total GDP.<sup>9</sup> That same year, per capita net rural income in the municipality was 54 percent higher than in the prefecture as a whole. Within the municipality, eight individual townships have rural enterprise revenues that exceed those of over half of the prefecture's less well-off, less well-situated counties.<sup>10</sup> Ten of the prefecture's eleven rural counties are designated poor counties and depend on provincial subsidies. Per capita rural net incomes in these counties lag behind the province as a whole, and seven of these are among the seventy-eight counties in Yunnan that suffer annual deficits. Throughout the 1990s, public finance revenues in the counties of Jianchuan, Yongping, and Heqing accounted for less than 40 percent of their expenditures, although in 1998 the counties of Eryuan, Midu, and Weishan were able to "remove their deficit hats."<sup>11</sup>

The disparities between Dali and surrounding counties, along with the relative underdevelopment of the Bai economy, have ramifications for Bai identity and for the Bai post-Mao cultural resurgence. This backwardness is at odds with what, for many people, being Bai means. In popular perception and official policy statements the Bai are, by definition, “relatively advanced.” This disjuncture between reality and perception informs the cultural revival. In a sense, the situation is the reverse of that among the Dai of Xishuangbanna. In Xishuangbanna, Dai culture is still seen by many academics and officials as inherently backward, a hindrance to modernization. According to this view, economic development and diversification have occurred in spite of the Dai’s traditional worldview with its imputed Buddhist passivity. Yet in Dali, the local economy and society remain relatively backward despite the allegedly advanced culture and character of the Bai.

On paper the economic conditions of Xishuangbanna and Dali are not all that different. Dali municipality is more modern and industrial than Jinghong, if judged by the size of manufacturing and other industries compared to the overall local economy. By other indicators such as public finance revenues, per capita GDP, and income, Dali lags behind Xishuangbanna. The facts of relative development are, however, irrelevant. What is noteworthy is the ongoing effort to understand economic development, or the lack thereof, in terms of minority culture. In the case of the Bai, their allegedly progressive culture has not translated into advancement or modernization of a more practical, material sort. This account of economic development is not a cultural-determinist one, yet Chinese nationality theory, popular thinking about minorities, and concepts of modernization are all marked by just such an understanding of the relationship between “cultural quality” (*wenhua suzhi*) and economic modernization.

#### BAI CULTURE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Nevertheless, Bai culture, or some version of it, does have some effect on economic development. The cultural revival has aided and abetted economic growth, as evidenced in the rise of the tourist industry in Dali. As in Xishuangbanna, local officials and entrepreneurs have seized on the prefecture’s fine climate, scenery, and cultural resources to promote tourism. Officials have also mobilized cultural resources in order to expand trade, outside investment, and manufacturing. A case in point is the Third

Month Market, a market fair that has been in existence since the Tang dynasty. The fair, which takes place over four or five days in the middle of the third lunar month (typically mid-April), is a commercial event that draws thousands of people from all over western and northwest Yunnan for several days of buying, selling, socializing, and horse-racing. As many of the participants and vendors are minorities, the goods they sell are deemed “minority nationality commodities” (*minzu pin*), and the event is advertised as a model of “minority nationality economics” (*minzu jingji*).<sup>12</sup> The fair is well known throughout China, having been memorialized in a popular 1959 movie, “The Five Golden Flowers.”<sup>13</sup> Official promotion of the Third Month Market is a way of showcasing state support for Bai history and culture.

Though regularized and policed, the market has historically been a fairly grass-roots affair, with thousands of individuals and families encamped on the hillside above Dali Old Town selling medicinal herbs, skins and furs, jewelry, knives, hats, shoes, and livestock. In recent years local officials have been trying to transform this five-day annual event into a quasi-permanent economic entity. In the late 1990s, officials commenced construction of permanent structures for the market to accommodate the festival annually and possibly turn it into a year-round affair.<sup>14</sup> The prefecture and municipal governments invested nearly 4 million yuan to construct roads within the fairgrounds, build several hundred shops and stalls, and supply these with water and electricity. Within a year of starting the project, officials had garnered over 13 million yuan from outside investors and had sold long-term leases on several hundred market stalls.<sup>15</sup>

State support for local minority culture has also found its way into the township and village enterprise sector. One relative success story is the case of Zhoucheng and its batik industry. Zhoucheng is a large administrative village located at the northern end of Dali municipality, in Xizhou Township. Although agriculture historically is the backbone of the local economy, it was famous for the multicolored batik cloth produced by Zhoucheng residents, which was sold throughout Yunnan, neighboring provinces, and in Burma and Vietnam by the Xizhou-based trading companies. Even the local *benzhu* deity bears witness to the importance of batik production; residents worship a Tang official who, legend has it, brought weaving and dyeing techniques to the villagers centuries ago.

Prior to liberation, roughly a third of the households in Zhoucheng were engaged in batik production. In 1984, Zhoucheng officials established the Butterfly Brand Batik Factory as a village collective enterprise. The fac-

tory initially employed just a few dozen workers, but much of the dyeing and design work was contracted out to over four thousand individual household producers throughout the area. The concomitant opening of Dali to tourism helped spur the development of this village enterprise. Five years after its establishment, the total output value of this enterprise was valued at over ¥1.2 million.<sup>16</sup> By 1997, the total output value topped 10 million yuan, and nearly five thousand people in Zhoucheng were engaged in batik production. Touted as a paradigmatic example of “Bai minority style” (*Baizu fengwei*), the tie-dyed, mostly blue fabric is ubiquitous in Dali and is sold in Kunming, Lijiang, Guilin, Beijing, and even for a while in a shop called “Dali” at the top of Victoria Peak in Hong Kong. In recognition of city officials’ efforts to modernize the nationality economy of the region, the provincial government in 1997 recognized Dali as a “culturally progressive city” (*wenhua xianjin chengshi*).<sup>17</sup>

#### BAI MUSICAL REVIVAL AND CHINESE CIVILIZATION

Although Bai cultural identity and institutions are deployed for purposes of economic development, the revival is not reducible to purely material interests. Nor is it the product simply of canny packaging on the part of prefecture officials. Rather, it is shaped by a mix of overlapping goals and interests, including aesthetics, recreation, intellectual curiosity, civic engagement, and ethnic pride, as well as the prospect of financial gain. This mix of objectives is evident in the musical revival taking place in and around Dali.

Music has never been politically neutral in the People’s Republic of China. During the more radical periods of the Maoist era, traditional music was disparaged as feudal and reactionary, while more contemporary musical forms were labeled bourgeois.<sup>18</sup> In contemporary China political prohibitions against particular musical styles have mostly evaporated. Central and local governments support professional orchestras, opera troupes, and dance companies; minority dance troupes are featured regularly on television; and a handful of minority groups and performers have won national fame and recognition. However, the vast majority of musicians and dancers are amateurs returning to an art form they enjoyed in the past or are encountering it for the first time. In Dali, hundreds of recreational music groups have sprung up in towns and villages since the early 1980s.

These groups have embraced a variety of musical styles and formats. One style receiving a considerable amount of attention is the music of Nanzhao,



a kingdom coterminous with the Tang and Song dynasties that controlled the Erhai region between 738 and 902 C.E. References to Nanzhao and its successor state, the Dali kingdom, are ubiquitous in the region; local officials and tour companies play up the Nanzhao idea as it underscores the uniqueness of the region and its history. In this increasingly capitalistic age, Nanzhao has become a commodity. Yet the fascination with Nanzhao goes beyond its marketable qualities. For many local people, it signifies the political and cultural accomplishments of their forebears.

It is not surprising that the music of Nanzhao is enjoying a revival. Throughout the area, dozens of small, amateur orchestras have sprung up, composed primarily of retired men. In 1997 I encountered one such group in Dali Old Town that at the time performed nightly in the courtyard of a house close to the cafés and gift shops that cater to tourists. The members of this group were all residents of the old city, and thus urban dwellers; they were teachers, party cadres, bureaucrats, doctors, and workers, though most were retired. Most were also Bai, but there were several Han and Hui as well, and for a few months in 1997 a Frenchman joined the group in order to learn how to play the *erhu*, a two-stringed instrument played with a bow. Initially the group was an informal affair, although it had registered with the public security bureau as all organizations, from chess clubs to choral societies, are required to do. The group received no funding, and during the first couple of years of its existence many of its performances were free. When I first made the acquaintance of this orchestra, many of the members were still learning (or relearning) to play the instruments and music, and the conductor, the most experienced musician of the bunch, frequently stopped play to go over difficult sections of the music. The group occasionally performed in more public venues such as competitions and festivals held around the Erhai region.

Several of the group's members explained that the idea for the orchestra was inspired not by other Bai but by a traditional Naxi orchestra in the northern Yunnan city of Lijiang. The Naxi orchestra, established in the 1980s, has garnered national and international recognition; it has performed on television and is written up in many travel guidebooks. Because of the Naxi orchestra's success, some of its members, including its director, have become quite well-off. Not surprisingly, its success inspired the formation of the Dali orchestra.

City officials in Dali Old Town have also taken their cue from other success stories, Lijiang in particular. Lijiang is a popular tourist destination, largely because of the quaint atmosphere of its winding, canal-lined, cobble-

stone streets. In 1995, Dali officials approved a plan to reconstruct sections of the old town that drew the most tourists, allowing long-established features to be altered. Along the main tourist street, streams that previously ran through underground culverts were opened up and diverted into narrow canals at the side of road. Perfectly good pavement was ripped up and replaced with cobblestone-like paving blocks. Part of one street was restricted to pedestrian traffic and renamed “Foreigner Street” (*Yangren Jie*). Foreigner Street is now one of Dali’s main tourist attractions. Chinese tour groups are dropped off daily at the street entrance and given an hour or so to shop, eat, and observe foreign travelers in their natural habitat, the traveler’s café, doing foreign things like eating pizza and drinking beer. Participant observation is encouraged.<sup>19</sup>

The artificiality of these promotional efforts notwithstanding, the musical endeavors of the Nanzhao orchestra were hardly false or contrived. While inspired by the Naxi orchestra’s success, the Dali men threw themselves into learning “Bai” music for its own sake and derived a great deal of enjoyment from doing so. Their activities were an obvious source of pleasure, an avenue for artistic expression, a mode of civic involvement that put them in touch with visitors and residents of their neighborhood, and an excuse to spend time with old friends.

The benefits these men received from music underscore the fact that the projects that comprise the minority cultural renaissance are not necessarily linked to any ethnic agenda. There is a risk of reducing recreational or aesthetic activities, especially those of minority groups, to political motives, just as there is a risk of interpreting cultural promotion solely in terms of market-based interests. Social scientists in particular may be tempted to impute to such activities some greater significance of which participants may be unaware. In this instance, the members of the Nanzhao orchestra themselves pointed out the greater significance of their endeavors. Their primary motivations for playing music may have been aesthetic or recreational, but these men were self-aware and deliberate regarding their musical aspirations.

This awareness emerged in interviews and conversations with the Nanzhao musicians. On one occasion, while chatting in a pharmacy run by one of them, they showed me their sheet music and described a recent performance on the other side of Erhai Lake. The music they played, explained the pharmacist, was ancient Bai music from the Dali region, but it was not “ordinary” Bai music. Rather, it had influenced the music of the Tang court and been embraced by Tang emperors. The pharmacist elaborated that the music had been

given to the Tang emperor, and it became an important part of Tang music. Most people do not know this, but Tang music is Bai music, Nanzhao music. Many of the instruments used in the Tang court were also from Nanzhao. If the Nanzhao king had not given this to the emperor, the music of the Tang would have been very different.<sup>20</sup>

The other musicians nodded their assent, and proceeded to discuss the extent to which Bai music had influenced the music of the Tang.

In making this claim, the musicians echo scholarship on the history and ethnomusicology of the Dali region that stresses the cultural links between Nanzhao and the Tang, scholarship with which these men were familiar. For instance, Dong Mianhan, a scholar in the Department of Music at the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing, has outlined the exchanges of instruments, songs, and even troupes of musicians, singers, and dancers from Nanzhao to the court of the Xuanzong emperor during the Kaiyuan period of the eighth century C.E. Citing Tang historical records, Dong argues that these transfers were mutual: the Xuanzong emperor gave gifts of musical instruments, musicians and dancers to the Nanzhao king, gifts that “assisted the development of Nanzhao music.”<sup>21</sup>

Nanzhao music was itself the product of a variety of influences. The seventh century arrival of Buddhism had brought new musical techniques, instruments, and styles from neighboring Asian kingdoms to the south and west. The subsequent offering of sacred music from Nanzhao to the Tang emperor, Dong argues, was one means by which Buddhist practices and beliefs permeated the Tang dynasty. Subsequent shifts in Tang music show that the “music and dance of border nationalities not only enriched the music of the Tang dynasty, but also became one of the most important components of Tang court music.”<sup>22</sup> The “grand occasion” (*shengju*) of the gift of Nanzhao sacred music, Dong claims, demonstrates the extensive contributions of the Bai to Tang musical culture, and the long history of mutual influence among and between the cultures of border nationalities and that of central China.

Noteworthy in Dong’s discussion is the transformation of the Nanzhao culture into Bai culture, and the music of Nanzhao into the music of the Bai. Scholars are still divided over the question of whether the Nanzhao rulers were the forerunners of the groups today known as Bai or Yi, or whether Nanzhao was in fact a Shan kingdom, ruled by ancestors of the Xishuangbanna Dai. Despite these historical debates, in popular culture, official and academic accounts, and historiography produced for tourist

consumption, Nanzhao has been firmly established as a seminal period in the history of the Bai people. Also noteworthy is the relationship established between the Bai and the Tang. As a *minzu*, as a minority nationality, the Bai did not exist prior to the founding of the PRC. Yet in contemporary Dali, the music of the Bai is the music of the Tang.

The interest in the Bai-Tang connection is of a piece with a broader Bai concern with being “relatively advanced.” The fact that this scholar and these musicians seized on Nanzhao links with the Tang is not inconsequential. The Kaiyuan period of the Tang dynasty, when these musical exchanges took place, is widely seen as the zenith of Chinese culture, an era of sublime artistic, religious, literary, and intellectual accomplishment. In asserting their ancestors’ role in these achievements and in claiming credit for part of that aesthetic flowering, these Dali musicians and scholars like Dong Mianhan are providing proof of the Bai’s relatively advanced character.

Political scientist Crawford Young, who wrote in the 1970s about the global persistence of ethnic and other inter-cultural conflicts in post-colonial states, identified several types of actors who politicize cultural identity and create the groundwork for communal strife. Among these is what Young calls the cultural entrepreneur, who “devotes himself to enlarging the solidarity resources of a community.”<sup>23</sup> Cultural entrepreneurs may be historians, folklorists, anthropologists, poets, novelists, curators, or any individual who seeks to identify, classify, and codify the culture of a people. In doing so, such entrepreneurs create for that people an historical narrative the people previously did not possess. The cultural entrepreneur is devoted to expanding a people’s symbolic and cultural capital, thereby legitimizing its historical and political existence. Through these endeavors, “founding fathers, the great kings, the triumphant generals, the high priests [are] rescued from obscurity and accorded their place of veneration in the cultural hagiography,” and a people, as a self-aware, more-or-less coherent entity, comes into being. For Young, such endeavors are inherently political. They transform unreflective, unselfconscious cultural practices and traditions into “manifest nationalism” of the sort that can bring down empires and divide multiethnic collectivities.<sup>24</sup> The cultural entrepreneur may or may not desire these outcomes, but the creation of institutionalized, ethno-cultural symbolic capital lays the groundwork for that capital to be politically deployed.

The Dali musicians and scholars like Dong Mianhan can be seen as cultural entrepreneurs. What they are promoting is rather unusual, however. By highlighting the links between their current musical endeavors and

those of the ancient Nanzhao kingdom and the Tang dynasty and stressing their culture's contributions to China's glorious cultural past, the Dali musicians read themselves into the narrative of Chinese civilization and the Chinese nation. In doing so they position themselves within a Chinese present and a Chinese future, one that celebrates a traditional culture and identity in part because elements of that tradition are progressive and advanced. These musicians have appropriated a Chinese national narrative of historical greatness in such a way that they become central actors in and contributors to their culture's success rather than passive beneficiaries of civilizing projects. To be Bai and to express that identity through the practice of traditional music is to assert the links between Bai and Chinese civilization. It is thus not their separateness as a people that these scholars and musicians are trumpeting, but their undeniable Chineseness and the contributions they and their forebears have made to what is greatest and most advanced about Chinese culture. Their musical and scholarly endeavors weave a collective narrative of the Bai nationality, but this "narrative of national unfolding" places them squarely within the story of the Chinese nation.<sup>25</sup>

#### MUSICAL REVIVAL AND MAOIST CONTINUITY

Post-Mao shifts in state policy and practice are broadly responsible for the minority cultural revival. However, the renaissance of Bai culture is shaped not only by state retrenchment but by its active role in classifying, cataloguing, and promoting minority culture. Moreover, while official support for minority culture is a feature of the party-state after Mao, the practices and ideological imperatives of Maoist socialism continue to shape the direction and content of that revival. That is, institutional and even ideological elements of Maoism still influence the cultural renaissance of the Dali Bai.

The revival of another style of Bai vocal and instrumental music, called *dabenqu*, illustrates the impact of Maoism on culture. *Dabenqu* has ancient roots in the region, dating back over a thousand years to the period of the Dali and Nanzhao kingdoms. The bulk of the music extant on the eve of Liberation first emerged during the middle of the Ming dynasty. In contemporary Chinese musicology, *dabenqu* is characterized as indigenous, especially in regard to form and meter, yet scholars identify within it a *mélange* of elements that reflects the social and political transformations of the Dali region over the past millennium.

*Dabenqu* is performed by a solo singer or by one singer accompanied by another person on the *sanxian*, a three-stringed instrument. Historically,

*dabenqu* was performed only by men, unlike other types of Bai folk music. The structure of *dabenqu* is fairly standardized, with a “7-7-7-5” format: four-line stanzas comprised of three lines of seven syllables followed by a closing line of five. Lyrical content varies, and songs can be divided into three main groups or subsets. One includes songs that tell variants of historical tales and myths common in other parts of China, particularly the central and eastern parts of the country. A second subset of songs expresses religious motifs and morality tales based on Buddhism, Daoism, and the local *benzhu* religion of the Dali Bai. The third subset is based on events, myths, and aspects of daily life specific to the Dali region and the people who inhabit it. In this way, *dabenqu* epitomizes how successive waves of conquest, in-migration, and exchange between Dali and the rest of China have shaped the region, its people, and its culture.

The hybrid quality of *dabenqu* is evident also in the languages it employs. Many songs are sung entirely in the Bai spoken language, others in a mix of Bai and standard Chinese or the Yunnan dialect. Many *dabenqu* songs were written down using Chinese characters, and these scores further demonstrate the complexity of Bai music. In some cases, Chinese characters were used to indicate the pronunciation of Bai—or more precisely, *minjia*—terms; that is, the characters are used to approximate sounds, but the meanings of the characters are irrelevant. In other cases, the Chinese meaning of the character explains its usage, but the character possesses a distinctly *minjia* pronunciation. Characters’ meaning and pronunciation may also function exactly as they do in standard Chinese. Some scores contain unique characters or symbols created by *dabenqu* composers to convey the meaning and sound of words found only in the *minjia* language. It is not unusual to find these different usages within a single piece of music, even within a single stanza.

*Dabenqu* is one of many musical styles enjoying a post-Mao resurgence in Dali, thanks to the more liberal and supportive policies toward minority culture. Yet the *dabenqu* resurgence is less a new tack than a continuation of the consolidation and expansion of this art form generated by socialist policies of the 1950s and 1960s. As part of the *minzu* identification project of the 1950s, the Chinese state codified and institutionalized minority arts and music. This project was informed by notions of socialist modernization, by the perceived need to respect the “special characteristics” of minorities, and by the Stalinist conception of nationality that informs policy toward Chinese minority nationalities. Since in the Stalinist view nationality was partly a function of a common “psychological make-up”

embodied in distinct cultural identity and practices, the demarcation of minority cultures was a key element in the drive to distinguish and classify minority groups. In a way, culture and its possession justified policy and administrative practice, and culture was one arena in and through which the new socialist state was constructed. As minority autonomy policies were worked out, corresponding state institutions and mass organizations were created to promote minority culture. The designation of the Bai as an official *minzu* required organizations to showcase the ostensibly unique cultural life of the Bai.

In Dali, these developments were a boon for many artists and musicians who found themselves celebrated as representatives of the Bai people and provided with institutional and financial support. According to the *Almanac of Bai Music*,

After the founding of the People's Republic, in keeping with the Party's arts policies, *dabenqu* arts flourished and developed. First, the Party's policies toward nationality folk arts greatly raised the social standing of *dabenqu* performers, as many older artists became people's representatives and members of the China People's Political Consultative Conference, enabling them to participate in national affairs and receive recognition. . . . In the period before the founding of the PRC, the number of *dabenqu* artists had dwindled, and only a few remained. Those who remained survived through other occupations such as fortune-telling, and could perform *dabenqu* only during their scarce free time. After the founding of the People's Republic, the Party and government promoted these performers and cultivated a new cadre of *dabenqu* specialists.<sup>26</sup>

Certain noted performers were given positions within orchestras, opera troupes, and the prefectural Bureau of Culture. Government-appointed specialists collected, recorded, archived, and analyzed hundreds of folk songs and operas, presenting research on them in academic publications. Many compositions were scored for the first time, allowing them to be preserved and performed on a scale much broader than before.

Though ostensibly aimed at preserving and promoting minority culture, these actions were also aimed at developing minority traditions in line with the Chinese Communist vision. The aim of all this cultural promotion was not simply the preservation of the past, but socialist modernization. One manifestation of this goal was the creation of a cadre of female singers who were trained in this traditionally male art. Bai musical history was made in 1954 at the Third Month Fair, when Hei Bilang became the first woman to

perform *dabenqu* when she sang the lead role in a newly composed opera, “Shi Shance Joins the Collective.” This event reportedly created a sensation throughout Dali; shortly afterwards, several hundred young women were selected for cultivation as “backbone” (*gugan*) *dabenqu* performers. These changes “broke through the longstanding male dominance of *dabenqu* music, thereby advancing its progress and development.”<sup>27</sup>

Hei Bilang’s debut reveals another way in which the state sought to harmonize minority culture with the goals of Chinese socialism. Traditionally, *dabenqu* was performed solo or by a duo, with one singer and one accompanist on the *sanxian*. In 1954, however, Bai musicians and culture workers from the Dali County bureau of culture forged an entirely new form of opera based on the *dabenqu* structure, despite the fact that a type of *minjia* opera, known as *chuichuiqiang*, already existed. New operas incorporated *dabenqu* style and meter, and, in some cases, traditional song content was the springboard for plots. For the most part, however, only the music’s formal qualities were borrowed. The new operas told tales not of Bai mythology or traditional morality, but of class struggle, revolution, and life under the new socialist regime. These themes are evident in the titles of the new compositions: “Shi Shance Joins the Collective,” followed by “Remembering Fanshen,” “The Gate of Socialism,” “Two-gun Granny,” and “A Flower Grows in the Experimental Field,” among others. These operatic adaptations transformed a style from one traditionally practiced by no more than two persons into a collective one that could be performed by dozens of people simultaneously. The operas were staged by troupes organized under the auspices of the Bureau of Culture and the guidance of the *dabenqu* masters whose old-regime expertise had propelled them into positions as representatives of the people. Troupes were dispatched throughout the Erhai region to introduce the new operas and the ideals they conveyed to peasants and townspeople. Singers and culture workers also helped their rural audiences learn the new operas so that they could stage their own amateur productions.

*Dabenqu* thus served the state-building project. The modified and modernized musical form became a vehicle for the expression and enactment of the ideals and concepts of socialism, collectivization, scientific farming, class struggle, and party leadership. It facilitated the construction of the party-state, insofar as the mass organizations associated with *dabenqu* enabled the party-state to connect with Bai peasants and townspeople and communicate its authority and ideals. It also served as an avenue for the establishment of a cadre of minority officials and people’s representatives.



*Dabenqu* became a cultural interface linking state, minority official, and Bai peasant.

The music itself served a nation-building function as well. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that the transmission of the idea of the nation in European states and the non-European colonial world occurred through newspapers and other vernacular print media. Anderson hypothesizes that the regular consumption of vernacular print-media created a sense of experiential and temporal commonality among people living within the boundaries of a territorial state. This sense of shared experience in turn facilitated a collective sense of nationhood. Print-media are not the only means by which that sense of common experience so key to national identity transmission is created; the CCP, for instance, used a unified time zone and nationwide broadcasting system to establish simultaneity and commonality among a far-flung, mostly illiterate population. Art supplemented these devices. Among the Bai, *dabenqu* operas were one means of expressing how their pre-Liberation and revolutionary experiences fit within the broader struggle of the Chinese peasant and proletarian classes. The idea of a revolutionary, socialist Chinese nation, and of Bai membership within it, was communicated through *dabenqu* opera.

This was not a one-way process. Along with other forms of Bai music and dance, *dabenqu* received national attention through television, competitions, and traveling performances. One of the most well-known depictions of the Bai and Dali life is found in the movie “The Five Golden Flowers,” which includes *dabenqu* performance. Bai music also garnered international attention. In 1957, singer Zhou Qiongyi, a member of the Naxi minority, performed a traditional Bai folksong at the Sixth World Youth Solidarity Festival in Moscow. Music communicated the fact of Bai membership in the People’s Republic of China to a Chinese and socialist international audience.

Promotional and modernizing activities accelerated after the 1956 founding of the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. That year saw the creation of the Bai Song and Dance Troupe. Ironically, the efforts made toward modernizing *dabenqu* also entailed what can perhaps be called Bai-ification. In the traditional *dabenqu*, a substantial number of elements are not unique to Bai culture. A large subset of songs were variants of “Han” songs from central and eastern China, and the language of *dabenqu*, and of the Bai more generally, contained loanwords and characters drawn from Chinese. The instrument that accompanies singers, the *sanxian*, is not unique to the Bai people or to Dali, but is found elsewhere in China. In this way, *dabenqu*

serves as a microcosm of Dali and its people; it reflects their longstanding interactions with the greater Chinese cultural and political order.

Beginning in the 1950s, however, a concerted effort was made to compose songs and operas that dealt more specifically with the Bai and their experiences under the old oppressive order and the new regime. Plots and themes of the new *dabenqu* operas in particular incorporated Bai subject matter. Since the vast majority of these operas were composed in the 1950s and 1960s, nearly all of them dealt with politically correct socialist themes. Bai-ification was formalized in 1959 when the prefectural department of culture announced the establishment the Dali Autonomous Prefecture Bai Opera Company, which was to specialize in traditional *chuichuiqiang* opera as well as in the new variant of *dabenqu*.

The ironies of this Bai-ification are many. Because of centuries of cultural and commercial exchange with China's interior, typically Chinese musical forms like Beijing and Yunnan opera—*jingju* and *dianju*, respectively—flourished in Dali. They were popular *and* widely performed; they were in fact integral to the cultural fabric of the Erhai region. But in the view of a bureaucracy operating under Stalinist principles of nationality, they were not unique to and thus not authentically Bai. Consequently they were excluded from the repertoire of the Bai opera company, whose mandate was to perform works specific to the minority nationality they represented. Before 1949, *minjia* language and culture may have been a *mélange*, but under the cultural apparatus of the PRC, a distinct, bounded, and identifiably Bai culture was called into being, one of and for this minority nationality. The revival of *dabenqu* continues this project.

Not all observers are thrilled with how the revival has proceeded. One Bai scholar of traditional music laments that the great variety of local *dabenqu* music is being ignored and may be lost, as the music garnering local and national attention is generally the nontraditional operatic form created under the new socialist regime. The fact that this ersatz “traditional” *dabenqu* opera is being revived indicates how the Maoist Communist project continues to shape the content and meaning of minority identity. A Bai cultural form rooted in the communist values of the 1950s and early 1960s, and in the state- and nation-building aspirations of the new socialist regime, has assumed a position of primacy in a project that asserts an ostensibly traditional ethno-cultural identity. The resurgence of *dabenqu* opera shows how the specter of Maoism continues to haunt minority identity and practice.

## THE BAI-HAN BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Music is an aesthetic phenomenon, and in contemporary Dali, musical endeavors are mostly part-time and amateur, excepting those of professional groups. The development and revival of Bai music, however, reveal the intersection of aesthetics with commerce and of the state's ideological and institutional agenda with amateur pastimes. The words and self-concepts of amateur musicians and the writings of scholars furthermore suggest how Bai identity is embodied in and expressed through cultural endeavors. While traditional Bai music, like other traditions, is no longer the political liability it was during the Mao years, politics and political legacies remain central to the context in which that music is played and performed. The politics of Bai music are not overt, but rather bubble just under the surface.

Politics are more overt, however, in the case of another element of the Bai revival—the effort to promote both bilingual education and the use of the Bai script. This effort culminated in the establishment of the first Bai-Han bilingual primary school, located in the village of Xizhong in Jianchuan County, Dali. The school itself grew out of an experiment in bilingual education initiated in 1986 by county officials and educators. Jianchuan educators are also using Bai-Han bilingual instruction to reduce illiteracy among adults.

The issue of education has a particular resonance for many Bai, given their concern with modernization and cultural development. Moreover, education in China is to some degree synonymous with culture. One's “cultural level” (*wenhua chengdu*) is the level of education one has achieved; when officials speak of raising the cultural quality of minority peoples, they usually mean raising education levels and literacy rates. The educational attainments of a particular nationality are thus both indicators of their progress along the route to modernity and causes of their advancement.

Among the Bai, the focus on education is influenced by the history of *minjia* adaptation of traditional Chinese practices and institutions. Because the Erhai region was politically integrated into the Chinese imperial system during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the imperial system helped disseminate cultural practices of central and eastern China, including classical education, throughout the region. The spread of classical learning was not limited to major population centers. The history of education in Heqing, one of the more remote counties in Dali Prefecture, demonstrates the extent to which *minjia* society was integrated

into a broader Chinese cultural sphere. In Heqing, a dozen tuition-free community schools were in operation by the middle of the 1700s, and by the mid-1800s, five classical academies had been established. Chinese cultural tradition was not the only font of learning: French Catholic missionaries established Heqing's first modern primary school in 1890. In the waning years of the Qing, local notables opened a handful of new primary schools that were soon taken over by the local Guomindang government. By the 1920s, Heqing County had 163 elementary schools with nearly five thousand students, both male and female, in attendance. In 1926 the first county middle school opened, and two years later the provincial government established a teacher training college to serve western and north-west Yunnan. Elementary education was thus widespread by the late 1940s: every township had at least one national primary school (*guomin xiaoxue*); the number of public and private primary schools grew to 158; and, according to the *Almanac of Heqing County*, almost two-thirds of the school-age population was in attendance.<sup>28</sup>

The situation of Heqing, which is fairly typical of the Dali region, contrasts sharply with that of the predominantly Dai prefecture of Xishuangbanna. In the late 1940s, there were fewer than eight hundred primary school students in Xishuangbanna, most of them the sons of Han, Bai, and Hui merchants and settlers.<sup>29</sup> However, although education was more extensive in Dali than in most other regions of Yunnan before the founding of the People's Republic, throughout the region high rates of illiteracy were the norm. In Jianchuan, for example, over 90 percent of the population was illiterate.

Today the situation regarding education and literacy among the Bai is mixed. By some measures they are doing well. In the post-Mao era Bai have accounted for approximately 40 percent of all minority university graduates in Yunnan Province, even though they constitute less than 10 percent of the minority population.<sup>30</sup> The Bai are also well represented, as a minority, among the faculties of colleges and universities throughout the province and even nationally. While high illiteracy rates remain a problem in the counties of Yunnan that have been officially designated as at or below the poverty level, rates are relatively low in Dali. By the end of the 1990s, only about 3 percent of Dali youth were estimated to be illiterate, compared to 17 percent of youth in Yunnan. Dali counties were among the first in the province to fully implement nine-year compulsory education.<sup>31</sup> Elementary and middle school enrollment and retention rates in Dali now exceed the provincial average.<sup>32</sup>

In other respects the Bai have fared less well. Despite some important improvements in education and literacy in the first decade of reform, by some measures their situation stagnated. According to the 1982 census, the proportion of people with university degrees was higher among the Bai than among all Yunnan residents and all minorities nationwide. By 1990, however, fewer Bai were receiving university educations, while the proportion of university graduates among all minorities and the population of China as a whole had more than doubled.<sup>33</sup> A similar decline was seen in the proportion of people with a high school education. And while advances in literacy were achieved across the board, improvements were not as dramatic among the Bai. The 1990 census data also showed persistent gender disparities in terms of literacy.

These realities were a source of concern to those involved in the push for bilingual education in the 1980s and 1990s. One supporter of the program explained that while the Bai are known for being relatively advanced, they are so only in comparison to the most backward minorities of Yunnan and other poor provinces:

According to some people, the Bai *minzu* are comparatively advanced (*bijiao fada*), mainly because they study and use the written and spoken Han language. The use of Hanwen has been of great importance to the development of Bai society, this fact is undeniable. But this line of thinking is one-sided. The so-called progressiveness of the Bai is only in relation to the backwards nationalities of China; in regards to the Han and other advanced minorities, large gaps remain. Moreover, these gaps have reached a point that is beginning to make people worry. . . . In terms of education and the economy, the Bai nationality is not advanced, but still quite backward.<sup>34</sup>

Awareness of these problems and fears of how they might affect the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the Bai people galvanized the educational activists of Jianchuan.

In promoting the Bai language and bilingual education, Jianchuan officials and educators were advancing a minority agenda that in many respects meshes with that of the Chinese government. All minorities in China—in fact, all citizens in general—are exhorted by the state to do their part to raise the cultural quality of the people and advance the national project of modernization. For the Bai, these issues of backwardness and modernization have an added urgency, for they are in fact issues of identity. The conditions of social life and economy in Dali may be backward (*luohou*),

but the historical narrative of the Bai is one of relative advancement and cultural sophistication. As in the case of the Nanzhao musicians, the aims of many of the projects of the Bai cultural revival are both to express and to recapture the Bai's advanced status and to bring the realities of Bai life in line with their identity and self-image.

The story of the Xizhong Bai-Han Bilingual Primary School should be seen in this context (fig. 4.2). In the early 1980s, a group of Bai educators engaged the support of UNICEF and its Chinese partner, the China Center for Child Development (Zhongguo Ertong Fazhan Zhongxin), to initiate a six-year experimental bilingual program at a primary school in Jianchuan. Jianchuan lies fifty miles north of the prefectural capital. Mainly agricultural, it has been largely bypassed by the tourism boom that has occurred in and around Dali Old Town. Local officials are trying to develop a local hot springs and lake into a point of interest, and an increasing number of visitors are making their way to the Buddhist grottoes on Stone Bell Mountain. However, most of the tourist traffic is merely passing through on the way to Lijiang and the Tibetan autonomous prefecture of Diqing.

Jianchuan was chosen as the site of the experiment for several reasons. First, over 90 percent of the population is Bai, making the implementation of Bai-Han bilingualism more feasible than it might be in a mixed setting. By some estimates, more than 60 percent of that Bai population cannot speak standard Chinese, let alone write it.<sup>35</sup> The village of Xizhong, located several kilometers from the county seat, is almost entirely Bai, and economically quite typical for the region. There is no industry to speak of, and farmers continue to employ traditional, nonmechanized methods. The county's income, industrial output, and tax revenues consistently lag behind prefectural as well as provincial averages. The gap between Dali municipality and Jianchuan is particularly stark. In 2005, Jianchuan's per capita GDP was ¥4,056, compared to ¥16,112 in Dali municipality and ¥7,835 in the province. That same year the average rural income in Jianchuan was ¥1,296, the lowest among the eleven rural counties in the prefecture. In comparison, the 2005 per capita net rural income in Dali municipality was ¥3,457, roughly two and a half times the level in Jianchuan. The backwardness of Jianchuan's economy relative to Dali's stems in part from the weakness of the rural enterprise sector. The population of Jianchuan is one-third that of Dali municipality, but it possesses just one-fifth as many enterprises, which are considerably less profitable than those in Dali municipality.<sup>36</sup>

The experimental program in bilingual education was launched against this socio-economic background. Program officials chose one out of the



FIG. 4.2 The Xizhong Bai-Han Bilingual Primary School, Jianchuan



FIG. 4.3 Textbooks employing the Bai written language. The Bai alphabet was devised in the 1950s by scholars at the Institute of Linguistics at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing.



three entering primary school classes to receive education primarily in Bai, both written and spoken. As mentioned earlier, historically the Bai did not possess a written script specific to their spoken tongue. During the period of the Nanzhao and Dali regimes, the ruling elite adapted Chinese characters for use with the Bai tongue, eventually producing works of poetry, calligraphy, history, and religious literature. Most of these Bai works were lost or destroyed during fifteenth-century Ming campaigns to stamp out local written vernaculars; many of those that do remain are unintelligible to contemporary Bai, since the ability to read them has been lost as well. In the late 1950s, however, scholars at the Institute of Linguistics at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing devised a phonetic writing system based on the Roman alphabet (fig. 4.3). This script has since been revised several times to better harmonize it with the spoken vernacular.

In the experimental program, instructors conducted first-year classes solely in spoken and written Bai. They gradually introduced Chinese characters along with spoken standard Chinese in the second year, and increased education in standard Chinese over the course of the six years, alongside instruction in the Bai language. The thinking behind this program was that students would not only learn to read and write more quickly, since phonetic Bai corresponds with their mother tongue, but they also would be less likely to confuse Bai and Chinese, becoming more aware of Bai and standard Chinese as separate languages and less inclined to apply Bai pronunciation to Chinese characters. The other two classes at the primary school were taught according to the usual methods: standard Chinese was the written language of instruction, although out of necessity the Bai spoken language often predominated in the classroom.

By a number of measures the experiment was a success. Average test scores of students in the experimental class surpassed those of students attending regular classes in Xizhong and at other schools in the township. Students in the experimental class scored higher on Chinese reading comprehension tests taken at the end of their second year, despite the fact that they had spent fewer semesters studying written Chinese. At the end of the six-year program, a greater proportion of students from the experimental class passed the county middle school entrance exams.<sup>37</sup> On the basis of this success, the county decided to turn the entire school into a Bai language elementary school.

In promoting the experimental program, and in trying to implement Bai language education more generally, project supporters were not working blindly, but rather within the context of key national laws and policies



regarding minority autonomy and education promulgated in the early and mid-1980s. In 1981, a joint conference of the Ministry of Education and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission established education policies in line with principles of minority autonomy, which led to the establishment of a new Department of Minority Education.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, according to article 37 of the Law on Nationality Autonomy of 1984, schools in predominantly minority areas “should, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use these languages as the media of instruction.”<sup>39</sup> Major education reforms were also announced in 1985 by the CCP Central Committee and in 1986 by the National People’s Congress, which called for the nationwide implementation of compulsory nine-year education by the year 2000.<sup>40</sup> Bilingual minority language education in some areas is widespread. By the middle of the 1990s, about ten thousand schools across the country were holding bilingual classes, and an estimated 6 million students from eleven minorities were receiving bilingual instruction.<sup>41</sup>

Despite this favorable legal and political context, and despite the apparent success of the program, bilingual education in Jianchuan ran into roadblocks. After the end of the UN-sponsored experiment in 1992, the government of Dali prefecture refused to provide the funds needed for materials and extra teacher training. Villagers, cadres, and officials in the county government were dismayed by the prefectural government’s lack of support. Several characterized the situation as a violation of constitutional provisions for minority bilingual education. They also argued that the refusal to promote Bai language instruction amounted to an obstruction of *minzu* development; one village cadre explained:

We Bai have always been a comparatively advanced *minzu*. But we never had our own written mother tongue (*muwen*). The Han have *hanwen*, the Dai *daiwen*, and the Hui have Arabic. Now we have a written language, and now we can genuinely say we are an advanced *minzu*. But the government in Dali doesn’t support us.<sup>42</sup>

As this man saw it, the possession of a written language was a marker of development, a sign that the Bai were not a backward people. Prefectural officials’ disinterest in bilingual education was undermining the “relatively advanced” status of the Bai.

Ironically, one factor that influenced the prefectural government’s intransigence is this perception of the Bai as being relatively advanced. Since the Bai have long been well integrated into mainstream Chinese

society and culture, Bai language education is viewed by some as a point-less step back. Historically and traditionally, the Bai embraced Chinese culture and learning, so in some respects the Jianchuan program deviates from tradition. Many officials and ordinary Bai people in other parts of Dali also believe that a written Bai script is useless. Since the Bai are only a small, local minority, Bai language has no relevance for students hoping to get ahead in the broader Chinese society. In neighboring Eryuan County, for instance, many Bai families with young children reportedly are eschewing the use of spoken Bai in the household in favor of standard Chinese. They are doing so in the hopes that their children will develop a more solid grasp of Chinese than if they spoke Bai as their mother tongue, thereby enhancing their education and employment prospects.<sup>43</sup>

The opposition from officials and ordinary people in the 1990s frustrated supporters of the program, who had noted its success among primary school students and among adults in literacy classes. Several local officials and educators explained that the government's refusal stems from officials' fear of being labeled "local nationalists." One Dali-based supporter of the program stated that the government's position arises from concerns that the spread of Bai-language education throughout the prefecture's Bai counties would cement nationality consciousness and cohesion.<sup>44</sup>

To be fair to those opposed to the project, many prefectural officials are concerned that bilingual education diverts funds and energy from more pressing and high-profile goals, such as the implementation of universal compulsory nine-year education. Educational officials also face the ongoing task of eradicating illiteracy among youth and adults. The compulsory education and youth literacy projects—known as the "two basics"—are part of a nation-wide strategy to improve the "cultural quality" of backward regions like Yunnan, and thus improve the prospects for economic development. While the Jianchuan activists regard their own project as furthering Bai literacy, many officials believe that furthering literacy in Chinese is a more urgent task. Many Bai people would also prefer that their children learn English; in the nearby town of Jinhua, the Jianchuan county seat, primary school students do not study the Bai script, but they begin learning English in their third year.

The failure of higher authorities in the prefecture to support the program after its initial success distressed its supporters, including Jianchuan officials and ordinary Xizhong villagers. They perceived this lack of support as denying the Bai the opportunity to advance their culture on their own terms, as the Bai *minzu*. In discussing this dilemma, and in advocating for

their cause, local officials used the discourse of modernization and minority development, and even Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought, to justify their endeavors. As one respected local educator put it:

To understand the Bai nationality fully, we must see that on the one hand, Bai culture and education are relatively developed; yet on the other hand, among the Bai there is much illiteracy, and the culture is very backward, especially in remote, mountainous areas. Everyone knows that historically the Bai have . . . lacked a written language; this is a major obstacle hindering nationality development and progress. After Liberation, Bai writing was invented but not implemented; still Bai culture and education have not developed quickly, and this is the main reason why the quality of the Bai people has not greatly improved.<sup>45</sup>

A Jianchuan official argued that the implementation of the Bai alphabet was both a policy of the party-state and “a right of nationality autonomy” (*ye shi minzu zizhi quanli*). Another supporter, a highly decorated Bai hero of the Chinese Revolution and former head of the Yunnan Nationalities Institute, cited Marx and Lenin in claiming that “socialism cannot be built on a foundation of illiterate masses” and that the use of Bai to “sweep away illiteracy” (*saomang*) is necessary to socialist construction.<sup>46</sup> Along with Marx and Lenin, the twelve-hundred-year-old example of Nanzhao is used to bolster the bilingual position. One supporter has argued that the bilingualism of the Nanzhao rulers was fundamental to their achievements, proof that facility in both the Bai and Chinese languages is conducive to economic and cultural development.<sup>47</sup>

Those in favor of the Jianchuan project view the issue not only as one of cultural development, but also in terms of minority autonomy and rights. Like the Dai activists, these individuals express their support for Bai language education in terms of autonomy. Said one, “we Bai have the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, but we don’t have real autonomy. Our officials, especially Bai ones, are afraid of what higher authorities might say.”<sup>48</sup>

In early 1998, prefectural officials had a change of heart regarding Xizhong’s bilingual program. This switch was due in part to the prodding and lobbying of Zhang Wenbo, a retired teacher and one of the original proponents of Bai-Han instruction. In the mid-1990s, Zhang served as a member of the county CPPCC and as a representative to the prefectural National People’s Congress. According to Zhang, he used his position in these bodies to repeatedly raise the issue of Bai-Han bilingual education and request that

the prefecture carry through on its promises of support. Zhang also wrote a letter to the Party Secretary of Dali in late 1997 regarding the situation.<sup>49</sup> In January 1998, prefectural head Li Yangde traveled to Jianchuan with other high-ranking officials to investigate the Xizhong School. During his visit Li called for the continuation of the experimental project and promised that funds for the bilingual program would be forthcoming.<sup>50</sup>

Although the program thrived for a number of years after Li Yangde's visit, by 2007 it was moribund. Bai-Han education depends ultimately on the attitudes of local and prefectural leaders, and changes in leadership effectively killed the program. In the last few years the prefectural head, the Jianchuan mayor, and the principal of the Xizhong elementary school have all been replaced at least once and in some cases twice. According to Zhang Wenbo, these newer leaders lack commitment to and understanding of the purpose and nature of the program; they "don't want the trouble" of supporting Bai language instruction, paying for and organizing teacher training classes, and paying for Bai language textbooks in addition to standard course materials. Furthermore, a number of the original proponents of bilingual Bai-Han education, already prominent retired educators and officials in the 1980s when the program was initiated, have passed away. To Zhang, the reluctance of newer officials is misguided, as one of the goals of bilingual education is to improve overall academic achievement as well as literacy in Chinese.<sup>51</sup>

The term "bilingual" is a bit misleading, though, and never quite fit the circumstances of the school. While the program was in force, instruction for the first two grades at Xizhong Primary School was conducted primarily in Bai. Teachers and students spoke Bai, and students learned the Bai alphabet and basic grammar. This enabled them to very quickly develop the ability to write simple sentences and stories in their native tongue. Standard spoken and written Chinese were gradually introduced. By the third year, Chinese became the main language of instruction. From that point on students studied geography, history, math, and other subjects using standard Chinese textbooks. Bai language instruction continued through the upper grades, but was relegated to just several hours per week. Thus from the third year on, Bai was taught much like a second language.

Though he would have preferred more comprehensive Bai language instruction, Zhang Wenbo emphasized the benefits of the program. He is, he states, "the biggest supporter of standard Chinese language literacy in Jianchuan County." The approach, he argues, should be "*xian Bai, hou Han*"—Bai language first, then Chinese. The goal is not to teach Bai at the

expense of spoken and written Chinese but to facilitate overall language development, which will assist in the acquisition of Chinese literacy. Teaching young children in a language they do not understand discourages them and retards the development of their reading and writing abilities:

We must raise the cultural level [*wenhua shuiping*] of the Bai people, but we can't raise them up by pulling on their hair. Instead we must build up the base they stand on. Here in Jianchuan, many children can't understand or speak standard Chinese. How then can we use Chinese to raise their cultural level? We must rely on their actual conditions [*juti qingkuang*].<sup>52</sup>

Those conditions, argues Zhang, include the Bai language.

#### MODERNIZATION AND BAI IDENTITY

Like the Dai cultural activists discussed in chapter 3, Bai promoters of musical revival and bilingual education are motivated by a variety of goals and interests. Many of them also conceive of modernization and cultural development in a very *minzu*-centric fashion. For these activists, minority autonomy ought to entail the modernization of Bai culture in ways that allow it to flourish and remain distinct. Modernization can benefit them only if it preserves the Bai as a distinct collectivity and preserves that which makes them unique.

These *minzu*-centric understandings of modernization characterize all three of the cases analyzed in this book. However, there is an added level of complexity, even poignancy, in the case of the Bai. For the Bai, literacy, education, and modernization are more than just goals to be achieved—they are normative ideals, constitutive of Bai identity. The renaissance of Bai culture is infused with nostalgia, as many cultural movements are, but it is nostalgia for a past in which their forebears were the cultural and political vanguard of southwest China. Being modern and advanced is what the Bai supposedly are; history proves this notion and the Chinese government has codified it. Many of the cultural projects are intended to restore the Bai to the position of relative advancement that they see as their historical legacy.

Bai musical revival and bilingual activism also highlight the important role played by both elites and those at the so-called “grass roots” level in the resurgence of minority culture. These projects emerge out of complex interactions among ordinary people, local and prefectural cadres, teachers,

scholars, and in some cases international organizations and revolutionary heroes. Nevertheless, the state, or parts of it, has resisted projects like bilingual education, often because of practical and resource constraints. Dali officials are under pressure to implement compulsory nine-year schooling and eliminate illiteracy, and many feel that bilingual education diverts scarce resources from these more pressing goals. Yet their reluctance also reflects competing understandings of what it means to be Bai and to be “relatively advanced.” In a way, these resistant officials are upholding Bai tradition, although they do not necessarily explain their actions in that way. In fact, throughout history, the forebears of the Bai flourished because of their cultural integration with the Han, and with greater China. Jianchuan activists could even be accused of deviating from that Bai tradition. The supporters of the Jianchuan program, of course, do not see things this way. Like their critics, they are motivated by ideals of modernization and minority cultural development, which they argue are inextricable. In their efforts to promote bilingual education, they advance not just alternative notions of what it means to be Bai, but alternative ways of being modern.