

Not Quite Han: The Ethnic Minorities of China's Southwest

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In centuries to come, when historians look back at the history of southwest China, they will see the last half of the 20th Century not so much as the time of “socialist construction”, but rather as the age in which the various peoples of that vast region increasingly adapted to Han Chinese lifestyles. For this is the real—the lasting—story of the past five decades in this part of China. The tidal surges of collectivization and Maoist political campaigns in the region will be perceived largely as events that quickened the process of cultural assimilation. With astonishing rapidity, peoples in the southwest who had once been quite different from China's majority Han population have largely abandoned their ways of life and beliefs, even their sexual mores and family structures, and increasingly taken on the ways of the local Han. Yet at the very same time, ironically, Chinese government policy dissuades most of them from going all the way in abandoning their ethnic status.

These are the distinct impressions gained during three research trips into the hill country of China's three southwestern provinces and Hainan Island. During these travels, ordinary residents and village officials in several dozens of ethnic-minority villages were interviewed on questions of rural development and social change. In 1988, I had an opportunity to visit villages in the mountain country of northern Yunnan Province during a month's travels by 4-wheel drive. In 1991, villages in southern Yunnan, western Guangxi Province and the southern rim of Guizhou Province were visited during a similar 6 week trip. And in 1993–94, I conducted a month's fieldwork investigation by jeep in the southern parts of the countryside in Hainan Province. These travels provided an opportunity to interview farm households of Bai, Buyi (Bouyei), Hui, Li, Miao, Yao, Yi, and Zhuang extraction in counties scattered across the back country of the southwest.

This essay is not written based on in-depth anthropological fieldwork nor does it plumb in detail the socio-cultural changes under way among a single people. Rather, it is an attempt to convey my sense of the overarching circumstances and predicaments of a broad range of peoples. To be sure, no specific generalizations will comfortably cover all of them. China's southwest is home to a sizeable number of different peoples—a majority of the fifty-five “ethnic minority nationalities” officially recognized by the Chinese government. Traditionally, they possessed highly different social systems (some patrilineal like the Han, some bilateral, and some matrilineal); and they maintained highly different economic systems (some peoples engaged in sophisticated commerce and irrigated wet-rice agriculture and others, at the other end of the spectrum, in hunting and slash-and-burn agriculture). They also possessed highly different political structures. The Bai, for instance, once controlled an extensive independent kingdom with standing armies, while the Zhuang (whose population today includes millions of farmers) were traditionally organized in far smaller local groups. Other peoples such as those designated today as Miao and Yao depended upon slash-and-burn agriculture and hunting and lived in relatively small independent bands that shifted encampments whenever soil fertility and game became depleted.

Table I shows the population size of the dozen different ethnic minorities that will be discussed in this article. The accompanying map shows roughly where they live and what language families they belong to. But as shall be seen later in the article, the table and map, while useful in distinguishing between these different groups, should be taken with a pinch of salt. For one thing, the official population figures in the table are based upon the government's own peculiar way of categorizing the various ethnic groups. For another, the map cannot show that sometimes a single small county may contain the villages of four or five different interspersed peoples, including Han settlements and villages inhabited by more

than one ethnic group. The map gives a false impression of the southwest as composed of a patchwork of large single-ethnicity blocks.

Table 1

Official Category	Population (1990 census)	Normal geographic location
Bai	1,595,000	Valleys
Buyi	2,545,000	Hill country
Dai	1,025,000	Valleys
Hani	1,245,000	Hill country
Hui (for Yunnan only)	440,000*	Valleys/hill country
Jingpo	119,000	Mountains
Li	1,111,000	Hill country
Lisu	575,000	Hill country/mountains
Naxi	278,000	Valleys/hill country
Miao	7,398,000	Mountains
Yao	2,134,000	Mountains
Yi	6,572,000	Hill country/mountains
Zhuang	15,490,000	Valleys/hill country

* 1982 census figure (Minzuxue yu xiandaihua (Ethnic Studies & Modernization), 1985: 2, p. 11).

The Historical Legacy

Living so near to one another, the indigenous peoples of the southwest have long influenced each other, and thus the “traditional” societies of these peoples were constantly changing. Han immigrants who moved into this environment in turn were influenced by the local mores of their new neighbors. When I conducted interviews in Han villages throughout this region, it was obvious that the Han customs accordingly differ a bit from district to district. But it was also apparent in my travels to villages both Han and non-Han that the weight of the local interactions between ethnic groups had been very much in the direction of absorption of Han traits—either directly from the Han settlers or through the intermediation of other ethnic minorities who had already been acculturated to Han ways.

Among some of the peoples I visited, such as the Bai or the Zhuang, the adoption of local Han lifestyles had long preceded the Communist government’s ascension to power in 1949–50. A slow process of assimilation has been under way for many centuries. Indeed, throughout Chinese history the assimilation of other peoples has been one of the principal means by which the Chinese empire and Han Chinese culture have expanded outward, intermingling with and absorbing one people after another on the periphery of the empire. The wealthy Yunnan merchant village that Francis Hsu examined in his 1948 classic, *Under the Ancestor’s Shadow: Kinship, Personality, and Social Mobility in Village China*—the community that, for generations of Western university students, has epitomized upper-class

rural Chinese life—was in fact entirely inhabited by Bai people who, while retaining their own language at home, had long ago absorbed Chinese mores and practiced them to a tee.¹

Unlike the Bai, who were excellent wet-rice agriculturalists and adept at commerce, not all of the indigenous populations of the southwest were in a position to keep their territories intact in the face of Han immigration. Over the centuries, the Han advance into the region was accompanied by the slow retreat of most of the indigenous peoples southward and upward into the mountains.² The consequence is that in Yunnan, where a bit over a third of the population is listed as belonging to the ethnic minorities, 70% of these peoples today live in mountainous districts.³ In Hainan, the progressive penetration of Han settlers pushed almost all of the indigenous Li people into the southern half of the island province. Today the Li comprise 47% of the population of the six southern-most counties;⁴ and within these southern counties, as I discovered in my travels, they are located largely in the hill country away from the agriculturally richer lowland coast.

Fortunately, this type of relocation of peoples throughout the southwest did not usually entail conquest or the campaigns of near-extirpation that characterized white penetration of the United States and Australia. The process was often far less brutal. The pioneering Han farmers were more intensive agriculturalists than most of the tribal peoples, and over the centuries they acquired the arable land originally occupied by these groups as much through economic competition as through force of arms.⁵

This push into non-Han lands continued after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. One of the avenues of penetration was provided by the new system of state farms. Under the old Chinese imperial dynasties, the spread of the Han population and their economic endeavors into regions such as the southwest had sometimes been promoted by military colonies of Chinese soldier-farmers. During the Mao era, state farms in the

¹ While treating the community as quintessentially Chinese, at one point Hsu notes that “In West Town both sexes dress like other Chinese and all women past thirty have bound feet, but everybody speaks Min Chia as the mother tongue. In addition, most men and fewer women speak the Yunnanese dialect with a local accent”. *Under the Ancestor's Shadow* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967 edition), p. 18. What is today called the Thai people used to refer to themselves and their language simply as the *Min Chia* (*minjia*), a Chinese term meaning “commoner” or “civilian” (perhaps initially used by the Thai in counter-distinction to Chinese military colonies, where *Hanyu* was spoken). That is, the Min Chia thought of themselves not as a separate people but as a local variety of civilian Chinese. An interesting book on the Min Chia/Bai is C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Tower of Five Glories: A Study of the Min Chia of Ta Li, Yunnan* (London: The Cresset Press, 1941). Two recent articles are Colin Mackerras, “Aspects of Thai Culture: Change and Continuity in a Yunnan Nationality”, *Modern China*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January 1988), pp. 51–84; and David Y. H. Wu, “Culture Change and Ethnic Identity Among Minorities in China”, in *Ethnicity & Ethnic Groups in China*, ed. Chien Chiao and Nicholas Tapp (Hong Kong: New Asia College, 1989), esp. pp. 15–18.

² On the historical process of Han immigration and the consequences for the indigenous populations, see C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972), Ch. 4. Fitzgerald writes that in previous historical eras the peoples who occupied Yunnan's mountain areas, “the ‘raw’ or ‘uncivilized’ in Chinese terms, were largely left to themselves. Very little conscious and planned effort was made to bring them under Chinese influence, so long as they kept the peace ... Chinese policy, on the other hand, lethargic although it seemed to be, was based on the conviction that time would bring all the peoples of Yunnan within the full pale of Chinese civilization; a century this way or that did not matter” (pp. 74–5). The ascension of the Communist Party altered official perceptions and dramatically has accelerated this process.

³ *Minzuxue yu xiandaihua* (Ethnic Studies and Modernization), no. 2, 1985, p. 11.

⁴ *1993 Hainan sheng tongji nianjian* (1993 Hainan Provincial Statistical Yearbook).

⁵ This ‘commercial’ conquest of land is repeatedly apparent, e.g., in the life stories related in Hsiao-t'ung Fei and Chih-I Chang, *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948).

southwest similarly constituted Han Chinese outposts in non-Han territory. From the 1950s onwards these state farms, which were organized at times under the auspices of the People's Liberation Army, recruited demobilized soldiers and peasants from the overcrowded provinces to the north, and later in the late 1960s and 1970s absorbed large numbers of young people dispatched from China's cities.

Sometimes the indigenous peoples were forced out by the new plantations, especially where they had been engaging in slash-and-burn agriculture and hunting, and they were obliged to settle in higher, poorer mountain country. Elsewhere, such as in the Red River valley in southern Yunnan or in Hainan Province (where I conducted research at four state farms in 1993), the state farms incorporated the village sites of the indigenous people, who were employed to help staff them. Normally outnumbered by Han, they were expected to live a Han-style life under a Han-style work regimen.⁶

Even for the great majority of the ethnic minorities who continued to live beyond the reach of state farms, the advent of socialism and of grassroots Party organization provided a dramatically effective means of penetration. The political conformity demanded in Maoist times meant conformity to Han ways. Education generally has meant education in *Hanyu* (Mandarin Chinese). New farming practices meant adoption of Han techniques and of the crops favored by the Han. During the most oppressive parts of the Maoist period, for instance during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–69, non-conformity to Han ways was interpreted by many local Han officials and farmers as deviations from Chairman Mao's teachings, and sometimes officials and mobs alike destroyed the local peoples' religious sites and forcibly imposed Han social practices.⁷ During other periods, though, it appears that the authorities' efforts to enforce assimilation were not specifically intended to denigrate and deracinate the local peoples; rather, they were unconscious reflections of the Han populace's assumptions of superiority. The extremist acts of the Cultural Revolution period were repudiated after a few years as counter-productive, and during the Deng Xiaoping era the government was careful to adopt non-coercive policies in the southwest.

While the assimilation of these non-Han populations has progressed decade by decade, government efforts have not been particularly effective in the regions to the west and north—regions occupied by peoples such as the Uighurs of Xinjiang Province, the Tibetans, and the Mongol herders of Inner Mongolia. These peoples' sense of self-identity has been bolstered by belief in a major world religion—Islam and Buddhism—which they can counterpoise to Han claims of superiority, and in the cases of the Uighurs and Mongols by a large concentration of fellow Turkic peoples and Mongols on the other side of China's border. Fueled by government suspicions, Chinese officials have lashed out periodically with campaigns of repression. Han dominance is explicitly backed up in these regions by standing armies.

The southwest is quite different. The only people there who have cross-border affiliations with any potential political ramifications are the Dai of Xishuangbanna Prefecture in southern Yunnan, who can look across to the large numbers of fellow up-country Dai in

⁶ In Hainan, the region in China with the largest concentration of state farms, I was able to conduct interviews at four rubber plantations. While the most northern of these state farms contains practically no Li at all, each that lies further south contains progressively higher numbers. At the most southern of the four, situated in territory that was inhabited almost entirely by Li until the 1950s, a bit more than half of the farm's 23,000 residents are Li, and many of them daily need to rub shoulders with Han co-workers and supervisors. They tend to occupy the lower manual positions, and according to the statistics that I gathered, Han families in these four state farms enjoy incomes 43% higher than the Li households.

⁷ A good summary of this period appears in A. Tom Grunfeld, "In Search of Equality: Relations between China's Ethnic Minorities and the Majority Han", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January/March 1985), pp. 64–5.

Thailand and to Thailand's Theravada Buddhist tradition.⁸ For these reasons, unlike most of the other ethnic groups of the southwest, they have been disinclined to assimilate to Han ways.⁹ But Beijing does not have concerns about the Dai the way it has about the Tibetans or Uighurs. The Dai themselves exhibit no inclination to separate from China; and Chinese authorities evidently believe that they pose no danger of doing so.

None of the other minority peoples of the southwest have strong reference points external to China, be these ethnic or religious or territorial. Nor do most of these groups occupy any well-defined territories of any size that they can unambiguously call theirs alone. Their communities, whether White Yi or Miao or Yao or Hani, generally are scattered across the terrain in relatively small pockets surrounded by other peoples. In many counties, each people inhabits its own specific local niche—one ethnic group a valley bottom, another the hillsides, yet another group the eroded upper reaches of mountains. In one Guangxi county that I visited, for instance, the lowlands around the county capital are occupied largely by Han farmers while, farther out, Zhuang communities and their hillside rice paddies lie up the small twisting valleys that comprise much of the county's arable land area. Narrow trails thread steeply upward from the Zhuang hamlets toward tiny Yao settlements in karst hollows in the hills high above. During the dry seasons, Yao women descend along these on long daily trips to fetch drinking water for their families and scrawny livestock. In a different mountainous district not far from the capital of Yunnan Province, intermixed Bai and Han farmers occupy the best mountain valleys, while Yi villages lie in smaller valleys higher up, and an impoverished Miao hamlet sits alone close to the crest of a mountain.¹⁰ Similarly, a young man from Dehong Prefecture in the far west of Yunnan explained that among the indigenous population "the Dai occupy the valleys, the Lisu occupy the foot of the mountains, and the Jingpo are higher up. It's said that all three groups used to battle fiercely till it was settled where each lived, at what height". In this tiered pattern of settlement, all groups recognize that they have only very local territorial claims and that, whether they wish it or not, they are irrevocably subject to the larger Chinese whole.

With the coming of collectives and strong local government administration, the peoples who had moved about the highest hill country practicing slash-and-burn agriculture were required to settle down in permanent hamlets and to adopt agricultural practices much closer to those of the Han. The Miao who live near the crest of that mountain not far from Yunnan's capital had been relatively late in becoming permanently settled in this fashion, only in the 1960s. Since that time, the local commune/township leadership, made up entirely of officials of Bai and Yi extraction, has been energetically organizing their assimilation in

⁸ A good discussion of the Dai is contained in Shih-chung Hsieh, "On the Dynamics of Tai/Dai-Lue Ethnicity", in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), pp. 301–28. The Dai of the Dehong region of Yunnan Province, which does not face toward Thailand, have become far more acculturated in the direction of the local Han.

⁹ In a different respect, the Lisu, Jingpo, and Wa peoples who practice a slash-and-burn agriculture in the dense mountain country along China's frontier with Burma have also been in a position to use their access to the border to resist assimilation. "Whenever the situation in China worsened", a resident of the border area told me, "they'd shift over to Burma; and when it became peaceful in China again, they'd shift back. They remain outside the system."

¹⁰ The Han usually, but not always, occupy the richer lowlands. In the mountains of northeast Yunnan, where Han immigrants poured through in waves over the centuries, few minority communities remain in place. High eroded mountain territory as poor as any occupied by Miao or Yao elsewhere in the southwest is the home here to desperately impoverished Han. One such village of miserably poor mountain Han is described in Jonathan Unger and Jean Xiong, "Life in the Chinese Hinterlands under the Rural Economic Reforms", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (April 1990), esp. pp. 9–10.

the direction of Han ways. When I visited in 1988, a one-room school had recently been erected in the Miao hamlet, and a teacher of Miao origin was instructing his pupils in *Hanyu*.

Having given up their mobile existence only in recent decades, the Miao have customs that remain noticeably different from the Yi, Bai and Han communities that lie farther down the mountains. The Miao villagers told me through an interpreter that, among other things, they retain more of a collective sense of sharing within the hamlet than do the non-Miao peoples of the district, and that the Miao respected and listened to village elders more than did other nearby peoples. In fact, more than in any other village that I visited, they ironically held a certain nostalgia for the period of agricultural collectives, when they had worked together as a tight-knit community and shared their crops under the strong leadership of Miao cadres who played the role of village elders. Yet even here mores have been changing fast; and it was all too obvious as I moved about the hamlet that the newest Han ways of doing things were being adopted, including a recent shift among the younger generation toward a stronger and more competitive sense of private property. Township officials spoke approvingly of this shift, and of the plans that they had in the works to assimilate the Miao more thoroughly into the local commercial economy.

This Miao community is illustrative of a pattern encountered repeatedly in the southwest. In sum, the pace of acculturation and assimilation among the hill peoples had accelerated sharply following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, with the organization of collectives and the subsequent rise of a post-Mao “commodity economy”. Through the mid-1950s many of the hill peoples such as the Miao, Yi, Yao and Li still reportedly had held to their own distinctive mores; but over the past five decades dramatic cultural changes have been afoot.

Acculturation and Lower-class Status

In village after village, among the Zhuang, Yao, Buyi, Yi, Li and other ethnic groups, people answered questions about their customs in ways that were quite similar to how local Han farmers answered. In marriage customs, my respondents are patrilineal very much in the fashion of the Han, whereas some of the ethnic minorities had possessed bilateral or matrilineal descent systems in earlier times. In many of their homes, the main room holds a religious or ancestral altar similar to those in Han households. Almost all of them celebrate the Qing Ming festival honoring the deceased in a fashion similar to the Han, with pork holding the same significance in the rituals.

When pressed to identify the ways in which they differ from the Han, villagers would often note that the language they speak at home is non-Han, that in some cases their women still wear distinctive clothing, that they continue to attend festivities that are specific to their own ethnic tradition, that unlike the Han they enjoy singing and dancing at festivals, and that in some cases their wedding and burial rites differ somewhat from those of the Han. But in all other ways, they would assert to me, they were similar to the Han. So, too, in the Minority Affairs Commission office in every county I visited, the local commission heads—themselves from ethnic-minority background—would relate how similar or identical to the local Han the local minorities have become in a range of essential respects.

The head of one such county office in Yunnan, himself of Yi background, declared that “with progress, the ethnic groups will be assimilated, and our job is to maintain the existing cultural traditions, to prevent these from eventually becoming extinct”. Not surprisingly, the remaining differences that could most readily be discerned in visits to communities appear to be either of those that are positively encouraged nowadays by the authorities (festivals, special ethnic songs, dances, and native costumes, and the like) or are traditions that persist unconsciously. This latter phenomenon involves local ethnic mores that are partially concealed within an outer shell of the newer Han-style forms of kinship and

religion, and are not particularly noticeable to the local ethnic people. For instance, my questioning revealed that even when taking on Han-style kinship structures, the kin on the mother's side of the family often retain a social importance on occasions where the Han would not turn to such kin.

In a great many cases, the younger members of the minority populations no longer are aware that their own people's mores had once differed sharply from those of the local Han. Their knowledge of the past is limited to oral transmission, and collective memories do not go back very far. Again and again they would assert to me with confidence that the new beliefs and ways of doing things "have always been the customs of us Yi" or "us Zhuang".

This is not to imply that they necessarily put much of a premium on their ethnic identity. As just one example, in the high country of Pingtang County, Guizhou Province, in a small rural township (formerly a commune) of 1,300 households that is 35% Han and 65% ethnic minority, largely Buyi,¹¹ a 30-year-old Buyi related that he and others of his generation do not speak or understand any Buyi. Nor could he pinpoint *any* differences between the local Han and Buyi of his own age group.¹² He felt no loss whatsoever, he suggested, in becoming assimilated. Similar sentiments were echoed in interviews with members of ethnic minority groups throughout the southwest.

As part of my research, I went in search of minority communities that had been the least assimilated, and asked in each county where they might be located. In Bama County, Guangxi, where the flat arable lands are occupied almost entirely by Zhuang who very largely follow local Han customs, I was told by officials that, in contrast, the high karst East Mountain district was Yao territory that reputedly has not been much affected by modern Chinese ways because it is so remote. Yet when I scrambled down narrow paths to visit several of these hamlets in hollows among the mountains, I discovered quite a different picture. In one Yao home I sat on a tiny stool talking to a man in his 30s and two younger neighbors who had drifted in. All three of them could speak an understandable Mandarin, as they had gone to the local primary school for several years. Their religious practices turned out to be the same as the Han, except that they did not maintain ancestor altars at home. They all wore the same style of clothing as the local Han and Zhuang, and said they cooked the same cuisine. When asked about the differences between the Yao and the Han, they placed emphasis upon the fact that the Yao hold the disadvantages associated with impoverishment. To them, that is the essential "ethnic" distinction, other than the fact that they speak a different language at home. The differences between them and the local Han, they said, are that the Han know how to plan out agriculture better; and that

during the slack season some of the Han can go off to be carpenters and blacksmiths. We can't because we don't have the know-how. Our homes differ from the Han, too, in that they use tile roofing while we can only afford thatch. If we could afford to, we'd live in Han homes. No, no, there's no conflict between Yao and Han culture. None. No, we wouldn't mind, if we lived where the Han are the majority, if we were to speak Han at home—and wouldn't mind if our grandchildren couldn't speak Yao.

They were amused by the silliness of my question—at my naiveté that in thinking that they should mind.

¹¹ The Chinese government, against the grain of China's official *pinyin* spelling system, for unknown reasons transliterates Buyi as Bouyei.

¹² He appears to have been bending the truth here, in that some of the Buyi of Pingtang County still follow a different marriage pattern from the Han. Rural Buyi brides today often return home to their parents' house three days after the wedding, and remain there, with visits to their husband, until the birth of their first child. This custom is on the wane, however, and has already all but disappeared among the Buyi of neighboring Dushan County, where I similarly spent a number of days going into villages.

Many of those whom I interviewed from other impoverished minority groups of the southwest similarly regard themselves as being a type of poor second-class Chinese—a situation they would like to escape. Even officials who are responsible for projecting a contrary image often confessed as much. After regaling me with a rosy official picture about the preservation of Li culture, the Li-origin head of the Minority Affairs Office in a south Hainan county where 45% of the rural populace are Li confided: “Actually, most Li feel their own customs are symbolic of being backward and poor, and so they welcome more ‘modern’ practices.” During interviewing in the hill country, farmers of diverse ethnic-minority backgrounds repeatedly expressed that same sentiment.

This perception of their ethnicity as a mark of low status and of poverty can be seen in marriage patterns. Although the majority of each ethnic minority intermarry among themselves, some of the young women, especially in mixed communities, marry into Han households. That is, these women, as is the case in many societies, have opportunities to practice hypergamy: upward mobility through marriage into a higher social status grouping than they were raised within. The converse, for a young Han woman to marry a Li or Zhuang or Yao or Miao man and thereby take on the status of his family, is rare in the countryside.

Pride in ethnicity usually appeared to belong most to those who can afford it. The Bai, who have a reputation for being better farmers than the Han of Yunnan, for enjoying higher living standards than most of the province’s rural Han, and for achieving higher rates of literacy in Han Chinese than the Han themselves,¹³ can feel superior to the Han on the Han’s own terms. It is easy for them to assert pride in being Bai, especially since, as noted earlier, they had gradually become ‘Chinese’ over the centuries on their own terms. At the insistence of the Party secretary of a very prosperous Bai community, I climbed a nearby hill to view the elaborate tomb of a local son who had passed the highest imperial exams during the Qing dynasty and had risen to the office of governor-general of two provinces. The message that the Party secretary and other villagers obviously wished to convey was that we local Bai have long been more than able to hold our own as Chinese.

It became equally evident, when interviewing in a couple of rural Hui (Muslim) communities in Yunnan, that the Hui also feel no sense of inferiority regarding their Hui identity. They are known to be more commercially astute than most of their rural Han neighbors and better in animal husbandry. They also enjoy a higher literacy rate than the Yunnanese Han.¹⁴ Historically they were of Han origin and were speakers of Chinese from the first. Separated from the local Han only by religious tradition and government labeling, they have never had to endure a ‘Sinifying’ process nor had to compromise their customs.

Prejudices

So far as I could tell, the Han in Yunnan refer to the Bai with some respect. There is little reason not to, as the Bai reflect back to the Han a cultural and economic image that is similar to that of the Han. The Hui of Yunnan are the objects of disparaging Han scuttlebutt about their being “too sharp” commercially and too clannish, but the bias against them is mixed with sour respect at their being as good or better than the rural Han in many of the things than the Han themselves value.

¹³ As of the early 1980s, the Bai recorded a literacy rate of 59%, compared to a Yunnanese Han rate of 55%. (*Minzuxue yu xiandaihua*, no. 4 of 1986, pp. 32–33.) These statistics include Yunnan’s urban population, which is overwhelmingly Han, so it can be presumed that the rural Han population had a rather lower rate of literacy than 55%.

¹⁴ The Hui population of Yunnan had a literacy rate of 58% in the early 1980s (*ibid*). Interestingly, the rate of literacy of Hui women was identical to that of Yunnanese Han women. The only other minority population in Yunnan besides the Bai and Hui with a higher literacy rate than the Han are the Naxi.

The predominant Han image of other ethnicities in the hill country of the southwest is quite different. In one respect, it is the image that these people have learned to hold of themselves: embarrassingly poor and backwater, and socially and materially so disadvantaged as to seem manifestly inferior to the Han.

This image is exemplified by an anti-poverty project that was initiated among the Li in 1993 using Hainan provincial government funds. This project provided grants of 1,000 *yuan* to a number of Li households to help finance the erection of Han-style brick homes. Although the Lis' thatched houses better suit the climate, Han-style houses are perceived to be superior precisely because they are associated with Han-ness. Notably, the project specified that these house-building grants were only to be made available to Li who live in thatched housing within sight of asphalted roads. The Hainan countryside contains few such roads: and these tend to be frequented by tourists from other parts of China and from overseas. What it came down to was that Li-style thatched housing was regarded by officials as embarrassing evidence of a primitive poverty that is unbecoming to Hainan's image. Among the Li themselves, it was noticeable in the villages that I visited that the most prosperous Li tend to build brick and tile-roofed homes similar to the Han, despite the fact that these are stifling in the sultry tropical climate.

House styles are not the only aspect of minority material culture that the Han officialdom holds in low regard. A Western agronomist with whom I traveled in Guizhou Province in 1991 was perturbed to find that the government agricultural extension service was trying to persuade ethnic-minority highland farmers to give up the cultivation of varieties of buckwheat and rye that were well suited to the local climate and to grow instead varieties of dry rice that are vulnerable to the highland's climatic extremes. The local Han agricultural officials were puzzled by the Western agronomist's view, as a shift to rice seemed to them an undeniable mark of the local populace's "progress".

It is not just these minorities' material culture that officials look down upon. During my travels, rural Han cadres made repeated off-the-cuff comments disparaging various impoverished ethnicities on intellectual and moral grounds. The officials perceive the behavior of these ethnic minorities largely as "slow" and "backward" and "childlike". There exists among the Han a naively open prejudice that even university-educated Han are willing to relate to a foreigner. The Li, for instance, were portrayed to me repeatedly in a Stepin Fetchit stereotype of happy-go-lucky, lazy, watermelon-eating natives of dubious moral stature.

This openly bigoted image is reinforced by the titillated Han view of them as being sexually loose. Smutty locker-room jokes about the Li and other minority hill groups were bandied about on a daily basis among the Han colleagues who accompanied me during my trips into villages. The soft-core pornography industry in China is practically built around this image.¹⁵ Han prostitutes dressed in phoney costumes as minority peoples of the southwest provide a fictional stage setting for the exhibition of bare breasts and for story lines about sexual free abandon. The technique circumvents censorship by projecting the eroticism as exoticism, a trick that, at its most subtle, *The National Geographic* made famous many decades ago in the West.

In recent times the Han have tended to be relatively puritanical when it comes to matters sexual, at least in terms of its public acknowledgement, and this stereotyping of the minority peoples at one and the same time portrays them as being not just "different", but

¹⁵ A good discussion of this ethnic-minority soft-porn industry is contained in Dru Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53, No. 1 (February 1994), esp. pp. 101-6. Also see Louisa Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China", *Modern China*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 1997), esp. pp. 77-8.

lasciviously less moral. It became evident to me from the back seat of our 4-wheel drive vehicle that my Han colleagues had a split image of the southwestern minorities: their jokes and anecdotes about a lack of sexual control are not just the stuff of voyeuristic fantasies but simultaneously cast the minorities as truly lower class.

At a state-farm rubber plantation in Hainan, the Han head of a production team, a majority of whose team membership is comprised of Li families, quite forthrightly told me with some disdain that “the Li in our team have poorer educational backgrounds and are lower in culture. They like to drink too much. They’re uncouth in their eating, dressing and living conditions. Their young men are more willing than the Han young men to make sexual innuendos in mixed company ... Their Han neighbors don’t think the Li people’s minds are quick enough, nor that their characters are good.” In short, they are pictured as possessing all of the stereotypically negative attributes that, around the world, are usually associated with being ‘lower class’.

Official Dogma and Manufactured Ethnicity

The view held by most Han about the inferiority of most of the southwestern minority peoples is reinforced by the official teachings on ethnicity. Party dogma has focused on the writings of the 19th-century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, whose ideas Friedrich Engels adopted, rendering them sacrosanct.¹⁶ The Morgan/Engels scenario propounds a hierarchy of peoples who occupy higher or lower places on a tree of human social evolution. Near the bottom sit “matriarchal” and slave-holding societies, living fossils of earlier primitive stages that modern societies supposedly have grown out of. Some of the southwestern hill peoples used to be matrilineal until they came under the influence of the Han; and some among those who are now called the Yi retained slaves as recently as the mid 1950s.

I interviewed three anthropologists at Yunnan’s Institute of Ethnology and at the University of Kunming in 1988. Each of them was patronizing and condescending about the peoples they studied. Their openly prejudiced comments fell back regularly upon the official verbiage of these being primitive “matriarchal” or slave-holding societies, remnants from a “primitive stage”. Essentially, they used this rhetoric to explain what a great many Han people viscerally seem to believe: that the more a people differs from the Han in any of its recent or remaining customs, the less civilized it is and the more “backward” it is in all dimensions, not just economic; and conversely, the more like the Han a particular group is—in having a firmly patrilineal kinship system or any other Han custom—the higher on the human tree they are.

This Party-endorsed credo reinforces a Han belief that they are “raising the minority peoples to a higher level” through efforts to assimilate them to Han culture. Yet at the same time, the official tagging of ethnic groups by a quite different set of so-called Marxist criteria freezes them in a framework that helps to maintain ethnic identities—and sometimes, in fact, invents ethnic identities for them. The various minority peoples have been labeled by the government based upon a Stalin-era Russian definition of an ethnic nationality as possessing four characteristics: a distinct territory, a common language, a common type of economy, and a distinct common culture. Investigative teams were dispatched by Beijing in the 1950s to categorize the minority populations along these lines. Even though few of the investigated peoples strictly fit every one of the four criteria, this was ignored in the end as a technicality, and in due course 55 minority ethnicities in China were formally decreed and recognized by

¹⁶ Morgan proposed his theories in a book entitled *Ancient Society* (1878), and Engels endorsed his views at length in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1883).

the state.¹⁷ It was a number small enough to conveniently be handled administratively by the national government.

The judgement that only four and a half dozen “ethnic nationalities” exist in China means that a number of the “nationalities” of the southwest were determined to contain literally millions of people. This was all something new to the affected populaces. The peoples in the southwest had always had *local* identities and an awareness that they were different from a neighboring group in the next valley over, to one degree or another. People who are now all considered “Yao” or “Yi” or “Zhuang”, or whatever, distinguished themselves by their dress not only from Han immigrants or from others very dissimilar to themselves but also from others who were only somewhat dissimilar—those now deemed by the state to be fellow “Yao” or “Yi” or “Zhuang”.

Before the Party made these determinations, the words “Zhuang”, “Yao” and “Yi” never even existed as terms designating a whole people.¹⁸ In fact, the words Zhuang, Yao and Yi all were Chinese epithets used by incoming Han in the loose sense of “primitive” (the written characters all contained the dog radical, denoting savagery). One Zhuang told me that, decades ago, the word Zhuang had been used by his own relatives as a derogatory word in reference to *other* ethnic groups such as the Yao. The story is that Zhou Enlai instructed that a different character which is pronounced “Zhuang” and that means robust or grand in Chinese be adopted as the name for the newly designated Zhuang people. Similarly, the characters for Yao and Yi were altered to provide them with more favorable connotations. These were then attached to peoples for whom there had not previously been any overarching formal designation.

In the early 1950s, I was told, the inhabitants of some of the villages in Guangxi were surprised to learn that the state had decided they would be listed as Zhuang largely on the basis of language. The villages had previously assumed they were just an ordinary local version of Chinese. For the sake of argument, had the Chinese government’s policy taken a different road, the Zhuang language could have been deemed to be simply another Han Chinese dialect. A fair part of its vocabulary derives from Cantonese, and in important respects the grammar of Cantonese, in turn, appears closer to Zhuang (and Miao/Yao) than it does to Mandarin or other Chinese dialects.¹⁹ The Zhuang tongue could have been perceived in the same way that Cantonese is today—quite unlike the Mandarin of north China, but undeniably Chinese in the eyes of other Chinese.²⁰ Instead, today’s Zhuang were rigidly *defined* in the 1950s as non-Han, as “Zhuang”. Thus by definition they spoke an entirely separate language and are a distinct and immutably separate people. They are taught this and believe it themselves today.

¹⁷ A good recent discussion of the labeling process, especially as it had applied to the Moslem Hui, is Dru C. Gladney, “Salman Rushdie in China: Religion, Ethnicity, and State Definition in the People’s Republic”, in *Asian Visions of Authority*, ed. Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall, and Helen Hardacre (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 255–78.

¹⁸ On this, see Norma Diamond, “Defining the Miao: Ming, Qing, and Contemporary Views” and Ralph A. Litzinger, “Making Histories: Contending Conceptions of the Yao Past”, in *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell, pp. 92–116; 117–139.

¹⁹ Alain Peyraube, “Is Cantonese Really Chinese?”, *China Perspectives*, no. 5 (May/June 1996), p. 54.

²⁰ It appears that through a process similar to what has been occurring in the southwest but far earlier in Chinese history, the Cantonese population of Guangdong Province is a product of penetration and absorption: biologically partly descendant from Han immigrants from the north, partly descendant from indigenous Yao and Vietnamese and Zhuang peoples who did not flee but rather adopted Han ways, intermarried with Han pioneers, and invented Han-style lineage records.

A second pertinent example relates to the Bai of Yunnan, who, as we observed earlier, had very largely been assimilated into the Han over the centuries. Over the past four decades, however, they too have been taught by the state to perceive themselves as “Bai”, as somehow non-Han. They too have been taught that they speak a non-Chinese tongue, and festivals that have been promoted by the state have been played up as “markers”—trappings—of their traditions and ethnic identity. Whereas half a century ago, if we can go by the accounts of researchers who lived among them such as Francis Hsu and C. P. Fitzgerald, the Bai did not perceive themselves as particularly distinct from the rest of the Chinese. Today they do.

In some cases in the 1950s, groups that spoke mutually unintelligible dialects and followed dissimilar customs were simply merged together by the state under a single umbrella heading. The Yi provide a case in point. They comprised a whole range of disparate groups that Chinese linguists determined spoke related languages²¹. In one county in Yunnan that I visited, four different “branches” of the Yi live in adjoining districts. It was clear from interviews in farmers’ homes that the Bai Yi (the White Yi) do not perceive any similarities between the Gan Yi and themselves, and vice versa, but each acknowledges that they themselves are “Yi” and that the others, bewilderingly, must somehow be broadly Yi too.

In such circumstances, an ethnic group may adamantly reject the notion that a certain other group shares the same ethnic label as themselves. The Naxi and the Mosuo, which the government has decreed to be a branch of the Naxi, are cases in point. A colleague on my travels who is a Naxi, born and brought up in the city of Kunming, relates that when he visits his rural Naxi grandparents in Lijiang County, Yunnan, he is struck by a strong sense that “the Naxi are the same as the Han other than in language and the women’s dress. They feel today they must be different from the Han, but being from Kunming I can see they’re entirely the same.” Having adopted a large number of Yunnanese Han social attributes many centuries ago, firmly patrilineal and sharing the Han prejudices against “loose sex”, they are, he says, “ashamed” to be pigeon-holed together with the Mosuo, who famously are the last remaining matrilineal society in the southwest and do not adhere to steady married sexual relationships. Chinese books and videos almost invariably refer to the Mosuo as “Naxi”, and the Naxi feel frustrated, up against a rigid government refusal to exclude the Mosuo from the Naxi fold.²² (Indeed, over the past four decades the government has acceded to only a single request [in 1979] to recognize a new ethnic grouping).

Among the Zhuang (population 15½ million as of the 1990 census) and the Buyi (population 2½ million), which are the largest minority populations in Guangxi and Guizhou Provinces respectively, the confusion of labeling was the reverse. I stayed for a week in Guizhou Province in a largely Buyi county in the mountains bordering Guangxi. The people here still could speak Buyi, and they related that their language was practically identical to that of the Zhuang people who lived in the county next door in Guangxi Province. So too, several older Buyi told me at dinner one evening that the customs of the peoples in the two

²¹ The anthropologist Stevan Harrell has written several excellent papers on the Yi and the artificial common identity with which they have been labeled. See Stevan Harrell, “The History of the History of the Yi”, in *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell, pp. 63–91; “Ethnicity, Local Interests, and the State: Yi Communities in Southwest China”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (July 1990), pp. 515–48; and “Ethnicity and Kin Terms among Two Kinds of Yi”, in *Ethnicity and Ethnic Change in China*, ed. Chien Chao and Nicholas Tapp, pp. 179–98. Harrell notes, in a recent letter to me, that “Yi intellectuals really do see themselves as Yi, even though for many peasants it doesn’t matter—an artificial identity, yes, but not less real than an artificial lake”.

²² Two studies by anthropologists of the Naxi/Mosuo and their self-identity/label are Charles F. McKhann, “The Naxi and the Nationalities Question”, in Harrell, ed., *Cultural Encounters*, pp. 39–62; and Emily Chao, “Hegemony, Agency, and Re-presenting the past”, in Melissa J. Brown, ed., *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan* (Berkeley China Research Monograph No. 46, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 208–239.

counties traditionally had been extremely similar. They insisted to me, however, that they comprised two separate peoples. I was left with a bemused suspicion that, whatever their protestations, the Buyi and the Zhuang of the neighboring county in Guangxi might actually be one and the same people.

A Zhuang scholar who specializes in ‘ethnicity’ later explained to me that when an investigative team headed by Fei Xiaotong came to Guizhou in the 1950s to demarcate the ethnic peoples of the province, the team had hit upon one of the names by which the people locally had designated themselves, Buyi, and had declared them a distinct ethnic “nationality”. This designation was duly recognized by Beijing. Years later, Fei reportedly confided that when he subsequently went on a research trip to Guangxi he discovered that the Buyi and Zhuang are the same ethnic people, but it was too late. The administrative die had already been cast. According to the Zhuang scholar, the government reasoned that the mistake was all for the good: it was preferable for there to be two smaller groups of people, each enclosed within a different province, than one large multi-provincial Zhuang populace who might eventually prove politically troublesome.

Two quite different writing systems were approved by the government for what were now declared to be two different languages (though I am told that if written in international phonetics, the two come out almost entirely the same). Different dances and other cultural markers were separately attributed to the Buyi and Zhuang and were highlighted in government-sponsored festivals. Two different sets of ethnic affairs bureaucracies were established, staffed separately by Zhuang and Buyi officials. Each of these groups of ethnic officials enjoyed its own set of seats at national assemblies. Through these separate bureaucratic structures, with their attendant perks, vested interests soon developed from within each group to actively support separate identities. Simultaneously, the local schools, the mass media, indeed all channels of information reinforced the conviction that they were different peoples. Having been identified as “Zhuang” or “Buyi”, they have *become* separate peoples, because they readily today *believe* they are separate.

Pride in Ethnic Labels

In some respects the various recognized ethnic groups appear to take a certain pride in their own ethnic label, a pride reinforced by government policies that play up the picturesque aspects of ethnicity. For their own traditionally honed reasons—to affirm their place in the microenvironment in which they live—some of the groups among the so-called Yao, Miao, Yi, Zhuang, Buyi, and others still wish to wear this identity in public. A great many minority women, at considerable expense and effort, continue to wear beautifully distinctive clothing that deliberately sets them apart both from the Han and from neighboring ethnic minorities. The colorful garb sets them off also from other groups whom they have always considered different from themselves but whom the government has now officially designated belong to the *same* ethnicity as themselves.²³

Importantly, many among the ethnic minorities are aware today, too, that ethnic identification can bring its own rewards. For instance, the government pursues an affirmative action program that makes it easier for ethnic minorities to get through admissions exams at the higher reaches of the education system. Much more significantly for most people, in some

²³ Notably, a functional distinction in gender comes into play. The men, who almost invariably dress in the same attire as the Han and who can normally speak some Hanyu, stand at the cutting edge of the shift toward acculturation. The womenfolk not only sometimes continue to wear a distinctive ethnic attire, but also are less often educated than the men and thus more often entirely dependent on the indigenous language. During this period of transition the women seem to occupy a position that represents to these peoples themselves the symbolic pull of tradition and of ethnicity.

districts and provinces the ethnic minorities can have one more child than the Han under the government's birth-control program.²⁴

Thus, two factors have combined to produce a new willingness to identify oneself as being of non-Han birth: (i) pressures to conform to Han ways have lessened with the break-up of the socialist collectives, and (ii) an affirmative action program presently is being pushed by the government. In the 1982 census, a great many minority households that had been largely assimilated to Han ways declared themselves to be Han. In the 1990 census, however, many of those same households claimed an ethnic-minority identity. In many cases, the children of mixed Han/non-Han homes, even in urban China, are declaring themselves to be of minority status in order to take advantage of educational and child-bearing opportunities. The census statistics for the ethnic peoples from the southwest show that in 1982 five million people had identified themselves as Miao; in the 1990 census, 7,400,000 declared themselves as such, a 47% leap. In 1982, 1.4 million people had declared themselves to be Yao; in 1990, 2.1 million identified themselves as Yao, an astonishing climb of 52%. Those who identified themselves as Li jumped by 36%; the numbers for the Bai leaped by 41%.²⁵

Natural increases in population cannot account for such steep increases. In most cases, the minority peoples have been restricted to one more child per family than the Han—in rural areas three children rather than two. Nationally, the Han population grew by 10.8% from 1982 to 1992, and so it can be estimated that the natural rate of increase among the ethnic peoples did not exceed 15–20%.

In some cases, the new surge of ethnic self-identity has led to a cultural revival and a reaffirmation of roots. This does not seem to be true of the peoples I interviewed, but in a personal communication, Stevan Harrell, who has studied the Nuosu, relates that among the two million Nuosu of the Liangshan region of Sichuan, not far from the border with Yunnan, a grassroots cultural revival is under way, now that the fetters of the Maoist era have been removed. These Nuosu people (who are designated by the government as part of the Yi) have continued throughout to practice their native religion; as a cultural marker, not just the women but also the men dress conspicuously differently from the Han (something I did not observe among any other people); and they have devised a school curriculum using the Nuosu written language. One distinguishing feature of the Nuosu is that they predominantly live as a contiguous block of people, not intermingled with villages of other ethnic groups. This may well explain why they have been able to retain and rejuvenate their culture in these varied ways.

During my travels, I did encounter a cultural revival of a very different sort. During the past century, missionaries had converted large numbers of Miao to Christianity, and in Guizhou Province I witnessed a vast outpouring of Miao for Sunday worship. To be sure, a purist would not consider this Christian religiosity to be evidence of an indigenous Miao cultural revival, but it nonetheless it is clearly a reaffirmation of Miao distinctiveness in that region of Guizhou—through a world religion that, akin to Tibetan Buddhism and Hui Islamic

²⁴ The numbers of children that an ethnic minority are permitted to have seems to depend upon how anxious a provincial government is to keep population growth under control. In Yunnan Province, the minority communities that I visited are only allowed to have two children without suffering a fine, the same number of children as are allowed to rural Han families in Yunnan. In Hainan Province, in contrast, the indigenous Li are normally allowed one more child than the Han: a Li farmer is allowed three children, one more than a Han farmer; a Li state-farm worker or city dweller is allowed two children, again one more than his or her Han workmate. (In practice, the poorest Li farmers in the villages I visited tend to have 4–5 children. Among other things, they are too impoverished to be vulnerable to fines or other sanctions.)

²⁵ For a Table showing the minority-population figures from the two censuses, see *Beijing Review*, December 24, 1990, p. 30.

beliefs, can be counterpoised to Han claims of superiority. Questions of “cultural revival” can be complicated indeed.

In a great many other cases, however, the “cultural revival” that has become evident in China’s southwest appears to be largely an artifice of the political and intellectual elites of the ethnic minorities for their own strategic purposes, without much grassroots support or participation. The anthropologist Emily Chao has studied the effort by state-financed Naxi intellectuals to transcribe and glorify the indigenous *dongba* religious culture, and she has discovered that

the promotion of *dongba* culture is not a grassroots phenomenon ... Today the *dongba* culture is safely dead for the vast majority of the Naxi population and is even declining in the remote mountain villages on the periphery of Naxi territory. It is something to be exhibited at the institute’s museum, a prestigious item to be stored and interpreted ... [T]he representation of a distinctly Naxi identity, as separate from a shared Chinese identity, placed [state-financed] Naxi nationalists at odds with the broader Naxi public, who had come to see themselves as indistinguishable from the Chinese. With the revival of popular Chinese religious observances among town and lowland Naxi, popular culture is again being aligned with a broader Chinese cultural identity.²⁶

Louisa Schein has discovered from her work in a largely Miao county in Guizhou that the much-vaunted reinvigoration of costumed Miao women’s song and dance programs similarly reflects the ethnic elite’s projection of Miao culture for its own strategic and emotional uses. It is not so much a grassroots movement among ordinary Miao people.²⁷

Protection and Dispossession

It is evident that two cross-cutting trends have been at work. On the one side, people from the southwestern ethnicities have a reason—an increasingly strong reason—to identify themselves as such, even when their particular ethnic designation has been invented, wittingly or unwittingly, by the state. This is particularly true among the political and educated elites of these minority groups. Yet at the same time, most of the ethnic-minority populace have increasingly taken on the attributes of local Han culture. And in doing so, at the very same time as they maintain a minority ‘ethnic’ label, many of those who are from poorer groups are seen by others, and by themselves, as a type of lower-class Chinese, with Han-like, but lower-class Han-like ways.

Notwithstanding the prejudices of many Han officials and the arbitrary manner in which minorities have been categorized, it should not be concluded that the Chinese government is guilty of discriminating against or knowingly harming the interests of these peoples. In fact, in contrast to Beijing’s record in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, the Chinese authorities deserve credit for handling relations with the ethnic groups of China’s southwest more humanely than most of the nations of Southeast Asia have treated their own minority populations. Whatever the flaws, the Chinese government has generally followed a program in the southwest that respects ethnic traditions, or more specifically ethnic folkways,

²⁶ Emily Chao, “Hegemony, Agency, and Re-presenting the Past: The Invention of Dongba Culture among the Naxi of Southwest China”, in *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan*, ed. Melissa J. Brown, pp. 216, 217, 235.

²⁷ Schein writes, e.g., “It must be stressed that Miao elites not only facilitated *Han* consumption of their culture as embodied by their women, but also engaged in a kind of ritualized objectification in which they themselves partook of reified representations of their own ‘traditions’. This was especially common among those who had left the countryside and, living among the majority, separated in space from their home villages, had begun to cultivate a kind of romantic nostalgia for essentialized versions of their forgotten culture. The chief symbol of this still-recoverable past was the richly adorned Miao girl, usually in song.” (“Gender and Internal Orientalism in China”, p. 86).

and has even earmarked funding to promote the retention of the ethnic groups' dance, languages, and other cultural markers. Perhaps more importantly, the government has provided the minorities with state-sponsored advantages in the shape of affirmative action programs. Simultaneously, through the school system and a variety of other means, efforts have been directed toward the *de facto* cultural assimilation of all of these groups, at a pace far outstripping any previous period of Chinese history; but even this can be considered a well-meaning effort, one that, in many cases, enjoys the cooperation of the local minorities.

Significantly, too, the very shape of local administration and of land ownership helps to protect the minorities from being dispossessed of their lands by commercially astute Han, as had occurred so often previously in history. The system of state farms no longer is expanding (and indeed some in the southwest have all but collapsed and the land there returned to villages and families for their own use). At the same time, in all of the villages that lie outside the boundaries of state farms, the administrative shell of the previous collective era has been retained. This means that while farmers cultivate their land privately, the land continues to "belong" to the hamlet or village, and cannot readily be sold away to Han immigrants and entrepreneurs.

In the Tuanjie [Unity] Yi-Bai Autonomous Township, a former commune in Yunnan that I visited for several days, non-Han people comprise more than two thirds of the population, and the word "Autonomous" in the title provides an assurance that some of the leading posts are reserved for people of non-Han origin. The township Party Secretary is a Bai, and the township administrative head is an Yi. Since land ownership ultimately rests with the township and its constituent villages, it would require the collusion of such local leaders to alienate fields and pasturelands from local use and transfer them to Han outsiders. This serves as a brake on land dispossession in cases where, say, destitute households among the local Yi individually might otherwise be vulnerable.

In the present economic climate, however, even this local administrative and land ownership structure does not always suffice to protect a local ethnic population from dispossession. In late 1993 I spent a week in the countryside of Ledong County, Hainan Province, a ruggedly beautiful landscape of rolling hills that would be a perfect setting for large-scale tropical fruit production. But the local Li populace, who inhabit all of the hill acreage, are starved of capital and so are in no position to develop, fertilize and irrigate large-scale commercial fruit orchards. Li officials in one entirely Li township told me that they had no way of making use of the township's 20 000 *mu* of hill land (6½ thousand acres), and so were in the midst of negotiating a very long-term lease of 15,000 *mu* of the land—at a surprisingly small annual rent—to a semi-private enterprise titled the Chinese Mango Co., Inc. This company was reportedly also looking to take over an additional 30,000 *mu* elsewhere in the county.

In another entirely Li township that was desperate to find a way to keep paying the salaries of its local cadres and teachers, an entrepreneurial state-owned company had recently leased for 50 years—again at a dirt-cheap price—a block of hill land that local Li farmers had been planting with crops. In keeping with Han prejudices, the company had brought in a group of Han farmers from Manchuria, who presumably knew nothing about tropical fruit production, to develop the orchards, leaving the local Li under-employed and without access to needed land. At yet another site in the county, a county-government-owned enterprise had contracted out a swath of Li hill country and had hired unemployed Han from the county capital to plant the new orchards rather than the local Li. Whatever the safeguards of central government policy and local administrative structures, the pull of historical trends and Han prejudice is once again at work. This time it is in the shape of agri-business, gradually dispossessing minority hill farmers in favor of Han commercial interests.

At the same time that cultural assimilation progresses among the hill-country ethnic groups of the southwest some of them, as among the Li of Hainan, increasingly are becoming marginalized, poor bystanders to China's development.