



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Gods of Wealth, Temples of Prosperity: Party-State  
Participation in the Minority Cultural Revival

Susan McCarthy

China: An International Journal, Volume 2, Number 1, March 2004, pp.  
28-52 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2004.0001>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/52101>

# Gods of Wealth, Temples of Prosperity: Party-State Participation in the Minority Cultural Revival

Susan McCARTHY

*This article contrasts Chinese government support for the minority cultural revival among the Bai and Dai in Yunnan Province, with a crackdown on religious expression in Beijing. Inconsistencies in the state's behaviour in these cases might be attributed to arbitrary decision-making, or to "internal orientalism". It is argued here, however, that the state's actions reflect its overarching goals of both economic modernisation and political legitimisation. Official promotion of minority cultural practice fosters the economic development of minority areas and enables local officials to justify their authority and projects in identity-based terms.*

In late 1995 and early 1996, officials in the Chinese capital of Beijing spearheaded a campaign to rid the city's restaurants of statues and shrines of the God of Wealth. Over the previous decade, these shrines had sprung up in restaurants throughout the country. They had become popular with restaurant and shop owners because they were seen as a quick route to prosperity — in part because customers often threw money at them in order to realise their own dreams of wealth. The campaign against these and other restaurant shrines began on the editorial pages of the *Beijing Daily*, which criticised the practice and

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan McCarthy (smccarth@providence.edu) is an Assistant Professor in the Political Science Department at Providence College, Rhode Island. She received her PhD in political science from the University of California at Berkeley. Her research interests include the politics of ethnic and religious identity, nationalism and the political consequences of economic reform in China's periphery.

called on restaurant managers to end it.<sup>1</sup> Beijing business groups chimed in with their support for the crackdown. The manager of one group described restaurants as “the windows of Beijing” and claimed that eliminating the shrines from the city would help “present a good and healthy image of the capital to visitors from all over the world”. Another top business leader expressed his hope that education would lead restaurant owners “to do away with their unscientific methods”. The head of a catering company stated that the restaurant sector “should support the government’s efforts to achieve a more cosmopolitan city”. The campaign also drew support from religious scholars, who claimed that the shrines were at odds with Beijing’s drive to “convey a modern and sophisticated impression”.<sup>2</sup>

The campaign against restaurant shrines was not an isolated event: two months earlier, Jiang Zemin had given a speech in which he called for tighter control over social organisations, stepped-up registration of religious institutions and the eradication of underground churches.<sup>3</sup> Nor was the anti-God of Wealth campaign particularly surprising. Crackdowns on certain forms of religious practice have been regular phenomena of the post-Mao period, in line with party-state efforts to squelch a variety of grassroots institutions and organisations, from Falun Gong to Christian house churches and radical Islamist groups. These crackdowns show that despite over two decades of market-oriented reforms, the Communist Party still seeks moral and ideological hegemony over the lives of its subjects. Yet they also remind us that a host of non-state, heterodox, religious and other institutions has emerged, or re-emerged, during the reform era, despite the state’s drive for ideological control. Post-Mao reforms have entailed a marked reduction of state control over much of the economy and social life, which has enabled non-state institutions and practices to flourish. In other words, privatisation and decentralisation in the economy have spurred similar trends in the realm of thought, culture and associational life.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Rulai Guanyin yuanhe ju jiuja” (What Brought Guanyin into the Restaurant?), *Beijing ribao* (Beijing Daily), 5 Dec. 1995.

<sup>2</sup> “China Urges End to Restaurant Prayers”, *United Press International Wire Service*, 16 Jan. 1996; also “God of Wealth Falls from Grace in Restaurants”, *China Daily*, 15 Jan. 1996, on *Lexis-Nexis* [15 Jan. 2002].

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Tony Saich, *Government and Politics of China* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have noted a recent trend towards re-centralisation, as the centre has sought tighter control over lower-level cadres and revenues. Maria Edin, “State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective”, *China Quarterly* 173 (Mar. 2003): 35–52; also Huang Yasheng, “Political Institutions and Fiscal Reforms in China”, *Problems of Post-Communism* 48, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2001): 16–26. As Edin points out, however, efforts to assert control are selective; Beijing does not try to govern everything, and much economic and social activity remains decentralised.

The God of Wealth case suggests that state-society relations in contemporary China are adversarial — state and society are pitted in opposition to each other. The state still tries to dictate the terms of social life, and sometimes it triumphs. In many ways it seems that the Chinese government would be very happy if things like the God of Wealth shrines or Falun Gong simply vanished. Yet as the central government's economic influence in society has diminished, all sorts of activity and organisations have escaped its control.

However, is this view of state-society relations accurate? Is the state antagonistic to grassroots religious activities? Research on cultural revival among minority nationalities paints a rather different picture and highlights the limitations of an adversarial state-society model. In the case of (some) minority nationalities, rather than quash religious and cultural endeavours, the party-state actively promotes and participates in them. The minority cultural revival would seem to support those who posit a less antagonistic, more interactive and mutually beneficial model of state-society relations. Scholars analysing the workings of state-created business associations, for instance, have argued that such institutions may help entrepreneurs and other business groups pursue their private and collective interests, while facilitating the flow of information to officials, thereby enhancing their control.<sup>5</sup> Anthropologists like Helen Siu, meanwhile, have discussed the ways in which local officials “recycle” traditional folk festivals in an effort to attract overseas investment.<sup>6</sup> In place of a zero-sum model of state-society relations, these scholars propose alternative schema (e.g., “socialist corporatism”, “incorporated associations”) that capture the co-operative and reciprocal aspects of this relationship. While revealing instances of conflict between and within state and society, they draw attention to the mutuality of these categories and the positive-sum quality of their interactions.

In this article, the contours and content of state-society relations are explored by analysing party-state support for the religious and cultural revival of the Dai

---

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Pearson, “The Janus Face of Business Associations in Foreign Enterprises”, *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 33 (1994): 25–38; Jonathan Unger, “Bridges: Private Business, the Chinese Government and the Rise of New Associations”, *China Quarterly* 147 (1996): 795–819; and Kenneth Foster, “Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?”, *Studies in Comparative International Development* 35, no. 4 (2001): 84–109.

<sup>6</sup> Helen F. Siu, “Recycling Tradition: Culture, History, and Political Economy in the Chrysanthemum Festivals of South China”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 4 (1990): 765–94.

and Bai nationalities of Yunnan Province. The question of the God of Wealth is thus put aside for the moment, and the extent and significance of state involvement in minority cultural and religious endeavours are considered instead. It is argued that official support for the cultural revival goes beyond mere tolerance, as the party-state helps to consolidate and expand elements of minority identity and practice. It does so to achieve a variety of political and economic goals. Yet while state-led cultural promotion serves political and economic purposes, the reverse is also true. Some minority officials mobilise state power and economic resources to revitalise minority religion and culture. Furthermore, official sanction and promotion of minority culture have enabled minorities to pursue their identity-based, cultural goals.

The article is structured as follows: a brief overview of how the post-Mao minority cultural-religious revival has been analysed and understood is presented first. This is followed by a discussion of the ways in which, and the reasons why the party-state participates in minority religious and cultural endeavours. It draws from research conducted among the Bai and Dai minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*) of Yunnan, and demonstrates how official support for this revival is in great part driven by an interest in economic development: officials see minority “culture” as something that can, they hope, be commodified and hitched to the party-state’s economic development project. At the same time, political concerns regarding legitimisation and enhanced international relations are also served by these activities.

To underscore this latter point, party-state participation in two Dai religious and folk rituals, a temple rededication ceremony and a rocket festival is analysed. These rituals, and the prominent place accorded officials in their execution, reveal the extent and variety of party-state involvement in minority cultural activities and institutions. They also provide a stark contrast to the God of Wealth, and the discrepancies require explanation. How can we square suppression in one instance with active state participation and support in the others? It may be that the Chinese party-state is simply inconsistent in its application of religious and social policies. Differences among these cases may also reveal the workings of what Louisa Schein has termed “internal orientalism”.<sup>7</sup> In other words, behaviours that are expected and even desired of exotic, backward minority nationalities are deemed improper for would-be urban Han sophisticates, and accordingly banned. While Louisa Schein’s framework has merit for understanding the God of Wealth crackdown, it

---

<sup>7</sup> Louisa Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism”, *Modern China* 23, no. 1 (1997): 69–98.

breaks down when aspects of the minority revival are closely scrutinised. It can be argued, however, that differences among these cases are surface discrepancies that mask a consistency of official purpose, that of economic and cultural modernisation.

Divergence in the treatment accorded these religious and cultural practices also suggests that state-society questions need to be supplemented by consideration of changing centre-locality relations within the state itself. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, fiscal and political reforms have altered the incentives for local officials, whose responsibilities have increased along with their autonomy.<sup>8</sup> Officials' attempts to meet these responsibilities and fund their operations (through both sanctioned and unsanctioned means) have in some areas sparked discontent, even protest and rebellion. Local state support for the minority cultural revival must be understood in this context. Such support is linked to officials' attempts to enhance local economies and the revenue base. It is simultaneously bound up with the *local* state's efforts to shore up legitimacy and popular support.

In exploring these issues, it is apparent how analyses of state-minority relations enhance our understanding of state-society dynamics more generally. *Shaoshu minzu* studies are often assumed to be concerned primarily with questions of identity, and the identities of peripheral peoples at that. Yet minority nationalities can also be seen as critical cases, whose experiences in post-Mao China reveal key aspects of how state and society interact, and how their respective interests converge as well as conflict. A focus on cultural institutions and practice is a necessary component of such a study, as these are arenas in which state and social groups challenge and negotiate each other's power, influence and boundaries.

## Cultural Revival: Critique or Co-optation?

The minority cultural revival began around the same time as Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, and was sparked by symbolic political actions of the central party-state apparatus. One key signal was the Party's announcement in May 1979 of a "new era" in minority nationality work, one that would entail a move away from revolutionary socialism towards a more pragmatic approach to minority affairs.<sup>9</sup> Such signalling occurred at the provincial level as well, as in Yunnan in

<sup>8</sup> See Susan H. Whiting, *Power and Wealth in Rural China: the Political Economy of Institutional Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Albert Park, Scott Rozelle, Christine Wong and Changqing Ren, "Distributional Consequences of Reforming Public Finance in China", *China Quarterly* 147 (Sep. 1996): 751–78.

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Palmer Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000), p. 111.

February 1979 when the Party apologised for the 1975 massacre of Hui Muslims in the Shadian Incident.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the policies of the early Deng years promised greater tolerance for minorities' "special characteristics", which had been ruthlessly suppressed during the Maoist era.

The response of minorities to this changed climate was swift. Throughout minority regions, temples, mosques and churches were rebuilt, traditional practices re-instituted, religious education restarted, festivals once again staged and a variety of customs and behaviours were again practised in the open. Aspects of this cultural revival meshed well with new economic policies. For example, the introduction of the household responsibility system and opportunities for entrepreneurship allowed Hui traders and *getihu* (entrepreneurs) to again engage in "traditional" marketing and manufacturing endeavours. The move away from uniform agricultural policy, which reached its nadir during the "Campaign to Learn from Dazhai", made it possible again for minorities to plant traditional crops more suited to local ecological conditions.<sup>11</sup>

While the party-state in general has supported efforts to revive minority culture, that support has not been unqualified. From the beginning, officials sought to constrain and channel minorities' activities to meet the requirements of socialist modernisation. For instance, concerned with the effects of "foreign" religious influence, officials in the Dai autonomous prefecture of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan have tried repeatedly to limit the inflow of monks from Laos, Thailand and the Shan State of Burma.<sup>12</sup> Dai villagers had sought these monks out because of the dearth of religious personnel in the prefecture: during the Maoist era all but one of several thousand monks retired or fled over the border. The state has also expressed concern with the allegedly wasteful diversion of resources to temples, mosques and other institutions. While it is correct to view the party-state's attitude towards minority cultural and religious practice as generally tolerant, from the beginning of the revival the relationship has been one of contestation and negotiation.

---

<sup>10</sup> Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991), p. 140.

<sup>11</sup> In Dai areas, the cultivation of glutinous rice, a staple of the Dai diet, was forbidden during the Great Leap and Cultural Revolution. Norma Diamond details the similarly disastrous results of leftist strictures on upland Miao communities, in "Ethnicity and the State: The Hua Miao of Southwest China", in *Ethnicity and the State*, ed. Judith D. Toland (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), pp. 66–7.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with temple abbots and an official from the prefectural Religion Bureau at a training class on state religious policy, Gasa Township, Xishuangbanna, 22 Jul. 2002.

As the cultural revival has expanded, so too has scholarship about it and about minorities more generally. Scholars interpret the complexities of this revival in a variety of ways. Many note how resuscitated cultural practices function as a critique of Maoist and post-Mao projects, from historiography to family planning. Cultural resurgence can also function as a kind of non-geographic “exit” strategy by which minorities reconstitute a collective identity and existence outside the Han-centric mainstream.<sup>13</sup> For example, Mette Hansen recounts how the reopening of temple schools in Xishuangbanna sparked an exodus of young male students from the state school system. In this case, traditional Dai values regarding masculinity and religious merit-making clashed with state-sanctioned goals of Chinese literacy and educational modernisation.<sup>14</sup> Ralph Litzinger underscores the critical dimension of resurgent minority culture in his study of the Yao, *Other Chinas*. He portrays Yao cultural endeavours as an effort to “shake off the traumas of the past”, repudiate Maoist politics of class struggle and create new modes of governing at the local level that are legitimated through resuscitated cultural practice.<sup>15</sup> Revival as resistance is also a key theme of Erik Mueggler’s *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, which examines life in an impoverished Yi community in northern Yunnan.<sup>16</sup> He argues that the re-emergence of traditional practices like exorcism is bound up with criticism of the state, its grand schemes and efforts to assert control.

While revival embodies resistance and opposition, scholars also reveal the supporting roles played by state officials in minority identity and practice and the political interests served. Although he demonstrates how Yao revival critiques state policy and practice, Litzinger argues that official sanction of Taoist ritual practice has provided the state with new channels of surveillance and control. Katherine Kaup, meanwhile, demonstrates how the Party’s promotion of Zhuang identity in Guangxi Province during the Maoist era served its state-building project by helping overcome the fragmentation of Guangxi society.<sup>17</sup> In a quite

---

<sup>13</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

<sup>14</sup> Mette Halskov Hansen, *Lessons in Being Chinese: Minority Education and Ethnic Identity in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), pp. 119–22.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 191–2.

<sup>16</sup> Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang*, pp. 7–8, 111–20.



different vein, Louisa Schein also links the valorisation of minority culture to the project of national identity construction. Specifically, she argues that the post-Mao minority cultural revival is bound up with the desire to establish a Han-centric, masculine, national Self, one that is dialectically produced through the construction of the feminised, exotic, minority other.<sup>18</sup> Stevan Harrell, meanwhile, has stressed the linkages between the state's rediscovery of minorities and minority culture in the post-Mao period, and the "civilising discourses" of earlier regimes.<sup>19</sup> These scholars highlight the fact that while the party-state tries to constrain and channel the cultural revival, it has also helped to expand it.

### State Support and Economic Instrumentalism: The Bai

Official promotion of the minority cultural revival is in large part driven by economic concerns. Both Han and minority officials view aspects of minority nationality culture as potential commodities, and thus as tools for economic development. The rediscovery of minorities' special characteristics in the post-Mao era has, in fact, led to a surge of Chinese scholarship on "nationality economics" and the various ways in which minority traditions dovetail with an expanding market economy.<sup>20</sup>

One example of state-led cultural promotion can be found in the case of the Bai, who reside primarily in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture in west-central

<sup>18</sup> Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism". For a fascinating account of how some minorities themselves participate in orientalising practice, see Charles F. McKhann, "The Naxi and the Nationalities Question", in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Stevan Harrell, "Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them", in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, pp. 3–36.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance, Dong Zijian, "'Minzu jingji' shi yige xinxing de xueke" ('Nationality Economics' as a New Discipline), in *Minzu yanjiu wenji* (Collected Writings on Nationalities Research), ed. Nationalities Research Editorial Group (Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 1987), pp. 53–67; Du Fachun, "Gaige kaifang, shichang jinji yu minzu zongjiao guanxi" (The Relationship between Reform, Market Economy, and Nationality Religion), *Zhongyang Minzu daxue xuebao* (*Journal of the Central Nationalities University*) 3 (1993): 6–12; and He Limin, "Chongzu minzu wenhua, zhenxing Naxi minzu jingji" (Re-establish Nationality Culture, Vigorously Develop the National Economy of the Naxi) *Minzu xue* (*Ethnology*) 1, no. 2 (1995): 36–9.

Yunnan Province.<sup>21</sup> The Bai experience under reform is emblematic of the post-Mao period in Yunnan Province as a whole. Though Dali, like Yunnan generally, lags behind the eastern provinces in terms of economic growth, the reform era transformation has not been inconsequential, and the economy of Dali Prefecture has grown considerably over the last two decades. As is true for most of Yunnan outside of the capital city of Kunming, agriculture continues to dominate the local economy. By Yunnan standards, which are low, the prefecture is somewhat prosperous, and enjoyed continual bumper harvests throughout the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> As in many other prefectures, tobacco has become an important cash crop and source of tax revenues for local governments. Dali has also experienced significant growth in collective and private industry through the expansion of township and village enterprises (TVEs).<sup>23</sup> This expansion has helped absorb excess rural labour and raise peasant net incomes.

This growth, however, belies disparities in the prefecture as a whole. Despite remarkable changes, relative isolation and poverty persist throughout the prefecture as they do throughout the province. For one thing, most of the benefits of tourism and economic development have accrued to old Dali city, the adjacent commercial centre of Xiaguan and the immediate vicinity. Rural industry is also concentrated in this area. Other counties in the prefecture have benefited from reforms and expanded economic opportunities, yet for the most part they constitute a kind of periphery within the periphery that is Yunnan and Dali. Ten of the 12 counties in the prefecture are designated poor counties and depend on provincial subsidies for expenditures and investment. Per capita rural net incomes in these counties lag those in Dali municipality and the province as a whole, and seven of them suffer annual deficits.<sup>24</sup> Still, the economy and society of the prefecture have been significantly remade by reform.

<sup>21</sup> A note on terminology: “Dali” is the name of the prefecture (*Dali zhou*) that includes 12 counties. It is also the name of a county-level municipality (*Dali shi*) that includes two small cities, several townships, and many villages. One of the cities is also called Dali, specifically, the old city of Dali (*Dali gucheng*), which is a popular tourist destination.

<sup>22</sup> Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture Almanac Editorial Committee, *1999 Dali zhou nianjian* (1999 Yearbook of Dali Prefecture, hereafter *1999 DZNJ*) (Kunming: Yunnan keji chubanshe, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> The gross output value of TVEs in 1985 totalled 140.8 million yuan; by 1998 it had increased to 4.2 billion. *1999 DZNJ*, p. 268.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

The Dali Bai have also experienced a cultural revival similar to that which has occurred all across China. Its most obvious manifestations are the hundreds of reopened and renovated temples throughout the prefecture. They indicate the extent to which an active religious life among Bai and non-Bai residents alike has resumed. Monuments and historical sites have also been refurbished; music, dance and the arts are flourishing; the distinctive *benzhu* religion is practised and showcased in academic and popular publications; and the long and glorious history of the Bai is widely celebrated in books, magazines and television programmes. Much of this resurgence is a popular response to the opportunities of the reform period. It is also spurred on by local officials hoping to promote Dali as a tourist destination and raise its profile among potential investors. These officials have attempted to harness the nostalgia for Bai history and culture to their own economic development projects.

That the Bai cultural revival has aided and abetted post-Mao economic growth is seen most clearly in the rise of the tourism industry in Dali. Local officials and entrepreneurs have seized on the prefecture's fine climate, scenery and cultural resources to promote the region as a tourist mecca. Since the middle of the 1980s, tourism has become one of the most important components of the economy, particularly in and around old Dali city. Within Dali municipality, nearly one in five people is employed either directly in the tourist industry, or indirectly in restaurants, shops and transportation firms which serve tourists. Tourism is now the single largest source of non-agricultural employment.<sup>25</sup>

While Bai culture — invented or otherwise — serves as a draw for tourists, and thus aids the expansion of hotels, restaurants and tour companies, local officials have also been mobilising 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 typically takes place over four or five days in mid-April, is not exactly a “nationality culture festival”, like the Torch Festival that takes place in Yi and Bai communities later in the year. Rather, it is a commercial event that draws thousands of people from all over Yunnan for several days of buying, selling, socialising and horseracing. It just so happens that historically many of the participants have been members of a variety of minority groups. Thus many of the goods they sell are deemed “nationality commodities” (*minzu pin*), and the event is advertised as a model of minority economics (*minzu jingji*).<sup>26</sup> Official promotion of the fair is a way of

<sup>25</sup> 1998 DZSJ, p. 249 and 1999 DZSJ, p. 163.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166–7.

showcasing state support for Bai nationality history and culture, and “nationalities unity” (*minzu tuanjie*).<sup>27</sup>

Though regularised and policed, the market has historically been a fairly grassroots affair, with thousands of individuals and families encamped on the hillside above old Dali town selling medicinal herbs, skins and furs, jewellery, knives, hats, shoes and livestock. Yet Dali officials are hoping to transform this limited five-day annual event into a quasi-permanent economic entity. In 1997, officials commenced construction of permanent structures for the market, both to accommodate the festival annually and serve as a site for “nationality commerce” year-round.<sup>28</sup> The prefectural and municipal governments have already invested several million *yuan* to pave and widen the roads within the fairgrounds, build several hundred shops and stalls and supply these with water and electricity. By 1998, officials had garnered over 13 million yuan from outside investors and had sold long-term leases on market stalls.<sup>29</sup>

State support for local minority culture has also found its way into the manufacturing sector. In the reform era, as the underdevelopment of minority areas became a topic of serious concern for the party-state, the issue of *minzu jingji* or “minority nationality economics” became a focus of officials’ efforts and Chinese academic analysis. One relative success story is the case of Zhoucheng, or more precisely, the batik industry of Zhoucheng. Zhoucheng is a large administrative village located at the northern end of Dali municipality. Although agriculture historically has been the backbone of the local economy, the residents of Zhoucheng enjoyed regional fame for the multi-coloured batiks they produced, which were sold throughout Yunnan and neighbouring provinces by the Dali-based trading companies. Prior to 1949, roughly a third of the 1,071 households in Zhoucheng engaged in batik production. In 1984, Zhoucheng officials established the Butterfly Brand Batik Factory as a village collective enterprise. The factory initially employed 34 workers, but much of the work was later contracted out to 4,300 household producers in the village.<sup>30</sup>

The concomitant opening of Dali in 1984 to tourism spurred the development of this particular enterprise. In 1989, five years after its establishment,

<sup>27</sup> See Beth Notar, “Wild Histories: Popular Culture, Place and the Past in Southwest China”, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1999, especially ch. IV.

<sup>28</sup> 1999 *DZSJ*, p. 271.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Dali City Almanac Editorial Committee, *Dali Shizhi* (Almanac of Dali City) (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1991), pp. 351–2.

the output of this enterprise was valued at 1.2 million yuan.<sup>31</sup> In 1997, the total output value topped 10 million yuan.<sup>32</sup> Touted as a paradigmatic example of Bai nationality “flavour”, the tie-dyed, mostly blue fabric is ubiquitous in Dali, and is sold in Kunming, Guilin, Beijing and even in a shop called “Dali” at the top of Victoria Peak in Hong Kong. In recognition of city officials’ efforts to modernise the nationality economy of the region, in 1997 provincial authorities named Dali a “culturally progressive city” (*wenhua xianjin chengshi*).<sup>33</sup>

## Official Enthusiasm and Ambivalence: The Dai

The Bai case suggests that insofar as the Chinese state actively promotes minority cultural practice and identity, it does so for reasons of economic gain. Development and all it entails — the expansion of the market economy, revenue capacity and international trade — is officials’ chief concern. To the extent that minority religious institutions, festivals, handicrafts and images assist growth without threatening state control, the state and its representatives are all in favour of their revival.

Such economic instrumentalism is evident in the state’s treatment of minorities besides the Bai, including the Dai of Xishuangbanna Prefecture. The Dai, an ethnic Tai group, are the third largest minority nationality in Yunnan. Like the Bai of Dali, the Dai have undergone a pronounced cultural revival. This can be seen in the resurgence of Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist education in the prefecture, which were suppressed during the Maoist period. By the early 1970s, during the height of the Cultural Revolution, all temples had been shut and the number of monks had dwindled to one elderly abbot. After the reforms began, Buddhism bounced back fairly quickly and has recovered almost to its pre-1949 levels. There are now over 500 temples and approximately 6,000 monks active in the prefecture.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to this religious revival, there has been a drive by prefectural and township officials to capitalise on Dai cultural “traditions” for purposes of economic growth. As in Dali, tourism figures into this project. While the growth of

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> 1998 *DZSJ*, p. 253.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>34</sup> Mi Yunguang, “Shilun zhengque chuli shangzuobu fojiao yu Daizu jiaoyu de guanxi” (On the Correct Handling of Relations between Theravada Buddhism and Dai Nationality Education), in *Yunnan minzu jiaoyu lunwenji* (Theses on Yunnan Nationality Education), ed. Hai Song (Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 1995), pp. 119–21.

TVEs has helped spur development in the 1990s, tourism, both domestic and foreign, has become increasingly crucial to the Xishuangbanna economy. Tourism and its component industries (transportation, hospitality, etc.) now account for about one-third of the prefectural economy.<sup>35</sup> In a somewhat ironic twist on the theme of internal colonialism, even the State Farm Bureau has got into the act of promoting Dai nationality flavour via the hospitality industry and is trying to export it to other provinces. In 1994, the Jinghong State Farm, the largest rubber-producing farm in the country, invested over 100 million yuan to build the Xishuangbanna Nationalities Song-and-Dance Hotel in the city of Taicang, in Jiangsu Province.<sup>36</sup>

Mainland Chinese tourists make up the majority of visitors to Xishuangbanna, although foreign tourism provides the bulk of foreign exchange revenues. Local officials have been trying to capitalise on the cultural affinities between Xishuangbanna and Thailand, and between the Dai and the Thais. Many Thais view Xishuangbanna (called Sipsongpanna in the Dai language) as a kind of “motherland”, the ancestral home of the Thai people, and thousands visit annually. Yet tourism can be a risky industry to promote and depend on — the Asian financial crisis caused a precipitous drop in the number of Thai visitors to the prefecture.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned, tourism is particularly important to local officials in part because it is a major source of foreign exchange. It is also valued because it increases the contribution of the “third sector” (e.g., retail, hospitality and other services) to prefectural GNP. In other words, tourism has modernised the economy by diversifying it, moving it beyond the mono-crop tendencies that previously characterised Xishuangbanna’s predominantly agricultural economy. One result of all this has been an increase in local tax revenues. In the early/mid-1980s before the start of the tourist boom, Xishuangbanna ranked in the bottom third

<sup>35</sup> Yunnan Economic Yearbook Editorial Committee, *1999 Yunnan jingji nianjian* (1999 Yunnan Economic Yearbook, hereafter *1999 YJNJ*) (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2000), p. 432.

<sup>36</sup> Xishuangbanna Yearbook Editorial Committee, *1997 Xishuangbanna nianjian* (1997 Xishuangbanna Yearbook, hereafter *1997 XBNJ*) (Kunming: Yunnan keji chubanshe, 1998), p. 320.

<sup>37</sup> Between 1995, before the crisis, and 1998, a year after it began, the number of Thai tourists dropped by over 70 per cent. Yunnan Statistical Yearbook Editorial Committee, *2000 Yunnan tongji nianjian* (2000 Yunnan Statistical Yearbook, hereafter *2000 YTNJ*) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 2001), p. 394.

of all prefectures in Yunnan in terms of per capita tax revenues. By the mid-1990s prefectural revenues outpaced the provincial median by a margin of 1.6 to 1, and Xishuangbanna ranked third among all prefectures, trailing only greater Kunming and Yuxi Prefecture, the two most industrialised regions in the province.<sup>38</sup>

The slick packaging of Dai exoticism has been central to the selling of Xishuangbanna as an international tourist destination, and thus to the economic diversification of the prefecture. Yet not all of this activity possesses such an obvious economically instrumental or superficial character. Moreover, not all of it is aimed at tourists and tourism. Much more interesting, and curious, is the role officials play in events and institutions organised by and for ordinary Dai and the local elite. The role of the party-state in such cultural events perhaps suggests that they function as a kind of political theatre, in which relationships and expectations among the state, local elite and ordinary Dai are expressed, solidified and even contested.

An example of this kind of political theatre can be seen in a temple rededication ceremony and rocket festival that took place in a village in Menghan township, located about 40 kilometres from the prefectural capital of Jinghong. The village temple, which had been damaged by Red Guards and termites, had been recently rebuilt and redecorated with funds from the prefectural Buddhist association, local donors, tourism revenues and Thai Buddhists. A festival celebrating its reopening took place in the temple environs over a three-day period, and included singing, dancing, pop music performances and the chanting of Buddhist sutras led by the abbot. Among those present were a number of Thai and Dai elites, including a representative of the Thai consul in Kunming, the mayor of Jinghong and the head of Xishuangbanna Prefecture. Also present was Dao Meiyang, the wife of the retired prefectural head, and a former princess and member of the pre-1949 Sipsongpanna royal family. These officials and VIPs participated in the religious activities by requesting prayers from the temple abbot and making conspicuous, public, monetary offerings. Several also made large donations to the reconstruction effort: the Thai consul had given 225,800 yuan, while the president of the Thai Senate had donated 198,888 yuan (an auspicious amount).<sup>39</sup> During several hours of sutra chanting and merit making, the temple was overflowing with celebrants from the surrounding villages and nearby township.

<sup>38</sup> 1999 *YTNJ*, pp. 437–40, 457–60.

<sup>39</sup> The donations are recorded on a plaque in the temple compound, and also in 1997 *XBNJ*, p. 213.

Mid-afternoon, following a Dai-style banquet, the dignitaries moved down to a nearby beach on the banks of the Lancang (Mekong) River to join about a thousand people who had come to watch a rocket festival. This festival has its roots in fertility celebrations, and the setting off of rockets is believed to ensure abundant rains for crops. It is also a competition among teams of village men from nearby townships. During the afternoon, rockets were launched in groups of two or three, and villagers whose rockets flew the highest in each heat won prizes of money from the visiting dignitaries. The bestowal of prizes was itself as much a sight as the rocket launching. In what seemed to approximate a Bakhtinian ritual of reversal, the victors of each heat, in groups of several dozen, slowly danced and chanted their way from the launching platform to the reviewing stand, surrounded the dignitaries, and lifted them in their chairs up in the air.<sup>40</sup> They then held these dignitaries and officials aloft for about four or five minutes, until each displayed a wad of 100 yuan notes thick enough to satisfy the victors, on whom the cash prizes were bestowed. Only then were the VIPs returned to the ground and the next group of rockets launched.

The rededication ceremony and rocket festival held important religious and cultural meanings. With their opportunities for singing, dancing, mingling, flirting, and so on, they also functioned as entertainment for the hordes of people who came on foot, bus, truck and motorbike to take part. These events also provided officials, especially Dai officials from the provincial, prefectural and Jinghong city governments, a chance to demonstrate their commitment to nationality autonomy and to affirm, in symbolic form, Dai political, economic and social position in a prefecture that is increasingly overrun with Han migrants from the interior. By partaking in festival activities, making donations, requesting sutras for their families, awarding prizes in the rocket competition and toasting the longevity of villagers and the rebuilt *vat*, these officials affirmed Dai distinctiveness and their right to engage in cultural and social endeavours (mostly) unique to them as a people. At the same time, Dai members of the local and provincial

---

<sup>40</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968). The political potential of reversal rituals is contested. Gluckman argues that such rituals strengthen established orders even where they express criticism of them. Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1965). Yet Nicholas Dirks notes that such rituals frequently erupt in violent social conflict. Nicholas B. Dirks, "Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact", in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 484–6.



party-state apparatus asserted their role as mediators between the central state and the Dai people.

It should be stressed that not all Dai people see this state-led cultural promotion as benign, or as serving the interests of their nationality. Several Dai “cultural activists” with whom the author spoke derided the packaging of so-called Dai traditions for the purpose of economic development. These monks and lay people were particularly critical of Dai cadre promotion of a sham version of Dai culture produced for predominantly Han tourist consumption. To counter this sham version, these activists have been promoting organisations and cultural forms that they view as more authentic, being produced by the Dai for Dai participation, practice and consumption. Their understanding of “authentic” does not necessarily mean traditional: among other things, these activists have produced VCDs featuring electronic pop-music performances by contemporary Dai pop groups. They are also promoting Dai literacy for both sexes, a clear break from the tradition of male-only temple education.<sup>41</sup>

It should also be pointed out that not all officials in Xishuangbanna, including Dai ones, are enthusiastic about the religious revival that has occurred over the last two decades, and several with whom the author spoke expressed their distaste for or disinterest in religion. Their ambivalence stems in part from very Chinese conceptions of what it means to be modern and advanced, and what constitutes proper *xiandai* (i.e., modern) beliefs and behaviour. A deputy head of the Minority Work Department expressed the view that Buddhism, while a constituent part of Dai identity, was backwards. “Of course I’m Buddhist,” he laughed when asked about his beliefs, “I’m Dai! But I’m not very devout, because I am educated. If I had never gone to school I might still be a practising Buddhist. Because I am educated, I do not believe in such things.”<sup>42</sup> Zheng Peng, Vice-Chairman of the prefectural Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a member of the pre-1949 Dai nobility and author of numerous books about the Dai expressed similar views. In his view, Buddhism had retarded the modernisation of the Dai people because it encouraged passive acceptance of the *status quo* and discouraged worldly striving. Dai people, he explained, were inclined to be satisfied with what they had, and as a result their “struggle spirit” was lacking

<sup>41</sup> Interviews with Dai pop music group founders, Jinghong, 7 and 8 Apr. 1997; interview with Dai literacy promoter, Jinghong, 18 Jul. 2002. See Susan McCarthy, “Ethno-Religious Mobilization and Citizenship Discourse in the People’s Republic of China”, *Asian Ethnicity* 1, no. 2 (Sep. 2000): 107–16.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Jinghong, 28 Mar. 1997.

(*fendou jingshen bu gou*).<sup>43</sup> Despite these reservations, many Dai officials support the religious revival, and as the rededication and rocket festival show, do so publicly.

## Interpreting State Support: Internal Orientalism or Legitimation Crisis

There is something odd about all this, however. State support for events like the temple rededication could be seen as encouraging Dai identification with the Thai nation-state, and with a cross-border, ethno-linguistic Tai collectivity. This seems strange in view of the government's concern with cross-border, transnational affiliations in Muslim areas of Xinjiang, and because of its oft-stated fear of regionalism and localism. It is doubly strange when viewed in the context of the God of Wealth crackdown, which underscores the state's interest in ideological hegemony and its hostility to heterodox religious and cultural practice.

What can we make of this? Why this participation in and support for Dai (or Bai) cultural production and practice? How do these instances of minority cultural promotion square with the God of Wealth incident? Why does the state encourage some social, cultural and religious institutions and identities, while quashing others?

It could be that the state is simply inconsistent. As Kenneth Dean points out in his analysis of popular religious revival in southeast China, decisions concerning the acceptability and allowable scope of religious activity are often highly localised and variable.<sup>44</sup> Another hypothesis is that the state is more flexible in general regarding minority nationalities and official policy. There is good evidence for this, as seen in the greater leeway given minorities regarding family planning restrictions. Yet while this may explain the state's tolerance of minority "special characteristics", it does not account for officials' enthusiastic participation in and promotion of ritual and institutions. Still another hypothesis is that the discrepancies between the cases reveal the dynamics of what Schein terms "internal orientalism".<sup>45</sup> That is, variation in the treatment accorded Dai festivals and God of Wealth may be linked to a larger project of Han-centric national identity construction. Internal orientalism may come into play since, as Schein

<sup>43</sup> Interview, Jinghong, 10 Mar. 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Dean, "Ritual and Space: Civil Society or Popular Religion?", in *Civil Society in China*, ed. Timothy Brook and Michael Frolic (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 172.

<sup>45</sup> Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism".

argues, state-sponsored minority cultural endeavours of the sort described here produce an exotic, traditional and typically feminised minority object against which a modern, masculine Han subject is dialectically constituted. The outlawing of God of Wealth shrines meshes well with this idea, since behaviours that are appropriate for rural minority others — who are seen as repositories of nature, culture and tradition — are inappropriate for urban Han residents of Beijing.

The distaste and embarrassment expressed by the Beijing business leaders quoted at the outset suggest that the “internal orientalist” explanation has merit. However, the model breaks down when other aspects of the situation are examined. One minor problem is the role of masculinity in the rocket festival. Schein argues that minorities are primarily constructed as a feminised other; *shaoshu minzu* are typically performed and represented as sensualised and female. Yet the rocket festival was nothing if not a performance and contest of hyper-masculinity, as male villagers competed to see whose five-foot tall rockets would fly highest, straightest and farthest. This may simply buttress the idea that minorities are sensualised. Then again, the rocket festival is not an exclusively Dai festival; the Bun Bang Fay festival, as it is called, is common throughout Tai communities in Laos and northeastern Thailand.<sup>46</sup> By participating in it, these Dai men are not just producing themselves as an instance of sensualised *shaoshu minzu*-ness, they are producing themselves as Tai.

The festival does not quite fit the internal orientalist model for other reasons. One of the limitations of that paradigm is that it rests on a dyad, a binary opposition between subject and object, master and slave (in the Hegelian sense), Han and minority. It is the construction of the minority as object, as other, that produces the Han self as subject. Moreover, it is the gaze of the subject on the cultural production of the object that serves as the mechanism of subject constitution. Yet one of the noteworthy features of the temple rededication and rocket festivals was the multitude of players, subjects and objects — even a multitude of dyads. These dyads included Han and Dai, prefectural and provincial, Chinese and Thai, Party and local government, villagers and officials, men and women. They even included a Dai/Chinese-foreigner dyad; at least this was the case briefly during the banquet when the author and the head of the prefecture (a Dai man from Menghan) toasted each other, both drinking from the same cup of *baijiu* to demonstrate lack of pretence and mutual regard.

<sup>46</sup> Leedom Lefferts, “Time out of Time in Time: The ‘Bun Bang Fay’ (Rocket Festival) in Northeast Thailand”, unpublished paper presented at the 1999 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association.

Thus it was not clear at all times who were the performers, or who was the audience. For instance, the chanting of sutras during the temple rededication ceremony could be seen as a kind of performance, carried out by a traditional religious elite whose reconstitution in the last few decades is a result of favourable Chinese minority policies and foreign (e.g., Thai, Lao, Burmese) support. Yet the gift offerings and requests for sutras by Thai and Chinese officials were themselves a performance, one that conceded some form of authority and legitimacy to the temple abbot and Buddhist infrastructure of Xishuangbanna Prefecture. The audience-performer dyad was equally confused in the rocket festival. Certainly the rocket-launching and the singing and chanting of the victors was a spectacle, and great entertainment for officials and the hundreds of Dai villagers clustered on the banks of the river. The demand for and disbursement of prizes, however, turned things around (and sent them up in the air, quite literally). Party, state and consular VIPs became the performers, captured, and held aloft until their displays of promised cash satisfied their temporary captors, the victors.

While the internal orientalist model does not quite fit this case, the discrepancies between the God of Wealth and these minority rituals perhaps do obscure a consistency of purpose on the part of the state. It is also argued that a particular vision of modernisation figures into these discrepancies. That is, the state's behaviour regarding both the God of Wealth and the temple and rocket festivals is consistent with its overarching goal of modernisation. The Four Modernisations not only include economic modernisation, but also the modernisation of thought and culture. The God of Wealth crackdown was aimed at eliminating feudal, superstitious, ostensibly backward behaviour unsuited to a Beijing that sees itself as an increasingly first-world city. In this regard, the Beijing clampdown echoes not only the anti-religion, anti-superstition policies of Maoist Communism but also the campaigns against popular religion of the Republican period, which were similarly bound up with conceptions of modernising nationhood.<sup>47</sup> Groups like Falun Gong, Tibetan activists and protesting Uighur Muslims are silenced because they are seen as actively contesting and threatening state power. In contrast, the God of Wealth shrines pose no such obvious, overt threat. Rather, they are a feudal and superstitious embarrassment, out of sync with Beijing's modern self-image.

In the case of the Bai and Dai, however, state-led cultural promotion is part of the drive to modernise the economies of minority regions. The markers of

---

<sup>47</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 95–110, 160–8.

economic modernity include such things as a diversified economy, the expansion of manufactures and improvements in revenue extraction. The marketing of minority culture has served all these ends; minority culture (or some *ersatz* version of it) is simply one resource among many that assist the developmental project. The prominence of the Thai consul and representatives of the Thai Buddhist *sangha* at these festivals underscores this point. The location of Jinghong on the banks of the Lancang River, known outside China as the Mekong, is a major factor in its transformation from remote, romanticised idyll into a commercial gateway to Southeast Asia. For over a decade, China and the neighbouring ASEAN countries of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma and Thailand, in concert with the Asian Development Bank, have been discussing plans to develop the so-called "Greater Mekong Sub-region". Mekong-based trade between Thailand and China, via the port of Jinghong, rose considerably in the 1990s, and in June 2001, the Mekong opened for passenger travel from Thailand to Yunnan via Xishuangbanna. Officials are also planning to build a dam in Jinghong to produce hydroelectric power for export to Thailand. The Yunnan government and its neighbours are also rebuilding roads from the prefecture through Laos to the northern Thai province of Nan, and trying to construct new ones through the Shan State in Burma to the Thai border.<sup>48</sup>

There are other issues at play in the seeming discrepancies between the minority cases and the God of Wealth incident. As claimed at the outset, the party-state's concern with modernisation is tied to its desire for ideological control and to matters of legitimacy. The leadership fears the real or apparent destabilising effects of Falun Gong, underground Christianity, etc., and seeks to quell them. In the minority cases described here, cultural institutions and practices offer means through which state authority is buttressed and affirmed. Cultural promotion thus serves as a kind of state-building project. Through it, the party-state tries to ground acceptance of its authority in a variety of local, diverse, decentralised institutions.

This works in part because, by allowing these institutions and practices to flourish, the post-Mao state distinguishes itself from its predecessor. The state seems to have recognised, at least in the case of some groups, that symbolic and meaning-laden cultural institutions — what Prasenjit Duara in another context

---

<sup>48</sup> Saritdet Marukatat, "Oil Firm has Stake in Big Chinese Store", *Bangkok Post*, 20 Dec. 1996; Michael Sheridan, "Chinese Dams 'Threaten 100m'", *Sunday Times* (London), 6 May 2001; "China-Laos Mekong Passenger Route to Open on June 26", *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 13 Jun. 2001, on *Lexis-Nexis* [15 Jan. 2002].

called the cultural nexus of power — may actually facilitate its authority and control.<sup>49</sup> In the reform period, local channels of authority have become crucial given the decentralisation of much economic and fiscal activity to localities and given fiscal and budgetary politics in contemporary China. Struggles between the centre and localities over budgets and revenues have created what one scholar calls a “legitimacy deficit” and Beijing has sought new means of ensuring compliance.<sup>50</sup> As part of this drive for compliance and control, the centre has sought alternative, often cultural means through which to assert its authority. The ongoing spiritual civilisation campaign is a case in point. It is a drive to get the moral-spiritual aspects of civilisation to catch up with material improvements. In essence, it aims to create moral, dedicated, public-minded citizens who will, of course, pay their taxes. Government support for minority cultural institutions, even cross-national, heterodox ones, is part of this effort to shore up legitimacy and power.

These issues are arguably more pronounced at the local level — the level at which much revenue extraction, economic development and policy implementation take place. Due to economic and fiscal reforms, local officials have seen their responsibilities increase, and they have tried a variety of methods to fund their obligations. Some of their schemes have successfully expanded local economies and thus the local revenue base. Others, such as the imposition of arbitrary and illegal fees, have sparked protest and even violence, and it is the local state that is the focus of unrest.<sup>51</sup> Both Xishuangbanna and Dali have so far avoided such overt displays of public discontent. Also, as minority autonomous prefectures in a poor province they are in a somewhat advantaged position since they receive preferential budgetary and fiscal treatment from the centre and province. Still, the incentives guiding officials in these prefectures are similar to those elsewhere in China. Official support for minority religious and cultural practice should be seen in this light. Such support kills several birds with one stone — if successful, it attracts tourism and foreign investment, and enables local officials

<sup>49</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> Pak K. Lee, “Into the Trap of Strengthening State Capacity: China’s Tax Assignment Reform”, *China Quarterly* 164 (2000): 1023–4.

<sup>51</sup> Erik Eckholm, “Chinese Raid Defiant Village, Killing 2, amid Rural Unrest”, *New York Times*, 20 Apr. 2001, p. A1; Elizabeth J. Perry, “Crime, Corruption, and Contention”, in *The Paradox of China’s Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 308–29.

to justify themselves, their power and their projects in local identity-based terms.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

In the wake of the Tiananmen Uprising, some scholars wondered whether China was seeing the growth of civil society, that is, a realm of privately organised, publicly-oriented autonomous institutions that might serve as the base for citizen-led challenges to the party-state. Others have argued that the civil society construct, as Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan put it, “assumes too much independence in associational life” in post-Mao China.<sup>53</sup> They note the degree to which many social organisations in contemporary China are products or adjuncts of the state. These organisations are tolerated and promoted by the state, in Michael Frolic’s words, “to help it govern, but also to co-opt and socialize potentially politically active elements in the population”.<sup>54</sup> This observation applies as much to minority nationalities and their cultural institutions as it does to neo-corporatist labourers’ associations. Minority cultural institutions — not to mention catering companies in Beijing — can serve as vehicles for the state’s own legitimisation project.

Several caveats are in order, however. First, the fact that minority cultural practice on some level dovetails with state interests does not mean that minorities’ own agendas are being ignored, or that the cultural revival is entirely a sham. Aspects of what is packaged as *shaoshu minzu* culture are superficial and targeted at tourists or foreign investors. Yet wholly invented traditions exist alongside practices with meaning and significance for minority communities. The projects of the Dai cultural activists mentioned previously are cases in point. So too are the rededication and rocket festivals — in these events a number of political, economic, social and religious interests of state and non-state constituencies are

---

<sup>52</sup> It is increasingly important for local Dai officials to present themselves as tied to and concerned with local interests. On occasion, candidates for prefectural office have been rejected by the prefectural National Peoples’ Congress (NPC) because they were seen as too beholden to the provincial state apparatus, and not sufficiently “local” in their orientation. Interviews with an official in the prefectural tourism bureau, Jinghong, 20 Mar. 1997, and a township official, Menghan, 14 Apr. 1997.

<sup>53</sup> Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger, “China, Corporatism and the East Asian Model”, *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 33 (1995): 39.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Frolic, “State-led Civil Society”, in *Civil Society in China*, ed. Brook and Frolic, p. 56.

expressed, pursued, even satisfied. For this reason, it is argued that state support of commodifiable culture has created a space for activities that minorities themselves perceive as authentic and meaningful.

A second caveat is that state efforts to control religious and other social activity can and do abate on occasion, leaving grassroots activities more-or-less unscathed. The variability in how religious policies are implemented, noted by Dean, is temporal as well as geographic. The God of Wealth case is instructive in this regard. In late January 1996, roughly a month and a half after the clampdown on the shrines was announced, the Associated Press reported that God of Wealth and other shrines had been removed from nearly 600 state-run Beijing restaurants.<sup>55</sup> Yet a visit to the capital in August 2002 revealed that restaurant shrines were up and running again, attracting donations and apparently unhindered.<sup>56</sup>

A third caveat relates to the issue of how minority culture serves official purposes. Interviews with minority officials reveal that some of them view the state-minority culture nexus in a manner that diverges from what has been described so far. Rather than seeing the strategic deployment of symbolic practice as useful for political or economic ends, they view state resources and authority as instruments for restoring the cultural vitality of minority peoples. In other words, they see religious and cultural revival as the end and government resources (including authority) as means to that end. For instance, the deputy mayor of one Dai township described how he was using the resources and authority of his office to counteract *hanhua* by promoting familiarity with the Dai written language. This official was responsible for educational affairs in the township, and because of his efforts the Dai written language was being taught in elementary and secondary schools in the township on a regular basis. He has also teamed up with several officials and monks at the prefecture's Central Buddhist Temple and Buddhism Association to develop an HIV/AIDS information campaign for rural villages, in which village monks, if the project materialises, will help educate villagers about disease prevention. In addition, they are hoping to convince the prefectural and provincial governments to fund Dai-language radio and television programmes about HIV/AIDS, in an effort to reach more of the local population. This issue is pressing: Yunnan has one of the highest infection rates in China and minority border areas have been especially hard hit. Xishuangbanna officials are

---

<sup>55</sup> "State-run Restaurants Take Down Buddhist Shrines", *Associated Press*, 21 Jan. 1996, on *Lexis-Nexis* [15 Jan. 2002].

<sup>56</sup> Interview with restaurant manager, Beijing, 18 Aug. 2002.



hoping to avoid the kind of disaster that has befallen Dehong, a Dai and Jingpo autonomous prefecture in western Yunnan.<sup>57</sup> For the deputy mayor and his colleagues, Dai culture and the vitality of the Dai people (and other minorities) are their concerns. Government resources and institutions are the means to achieving their health and survival.

While such officials may be more the exception than the rule, they demonstrate the gains to be won from co-operation with — if not co-optation of — institutions of state power. These officials' ability to deploy state resources for local projects is, of course, constrained by the actions of the higher party-state levels. Beijing's recent drive to re-centralise power has included political reforms aimed at buttressing its control of lower-level cadres.<sup>58</sup> Still, these changes do not necessarily preclude Dai cadres from mobilising resources in the service of Dai-specific goals. Being enmeshed with the state has benefited them, and should continue to do so as long as their actions do not appear to undermine national priorities.

The cases of the Bai and Dai reveal the strategies used by a reforming authoritarian state to modernise local economies and legitimate itself among diverse, far-flung social groups. It is not clear, however, that the findings here can be generalised to all other minority nationalities. The Bai and Dai may be in a somewhat unique position, one shared with some but not all *shaoshu minzu*. For one thing, both groups have the advantage of long being seen as exotic and co-operative. In a way, the phenomenon of "internal orientalism" — the idealisation of certain minority nationalities as exotic others — may actually benefit these groups. The Bai and Dai and their respective prefectural leaderships have successfully packaged their identities in ways that attract tourism, foreign investment and financial attention from above. As they are perceived as co-operative, even docile, the risks of cultural promotion and revival — in terms of fomenting group solidarity and identity in ways potentially at odds with national cohesion — are seen as small. Minorities viewed as troublemakers or hostile, such as Xinjiang Uighurs, Tibetans in Tibet, or Hui Muslims, appear to have a very different relationship with the state.<sup>59</sup> The state certainly regards the Islamic revival in China more warily than it does religious revival among the Bai and

<sup>57</sup> Interview, Jinghong, 25 Jul. 2002. See Sandra Hyde, "Selling Sex and Side-stepping the State: Prostitutes, Condoms and HIV/AIDS Prevention in Southwest China", *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 108–36.

<sup>58</sup> Edin, "State Capacity and Local Agent Control".

<sup>59</sup> Perry, "Crime, Corruption, and Contention", pp. 325–9.

Dai. Finally, these two groups are politically powerful in their respective prefectures. Official participation in religious ritual and cultural practice is in a sense an acknowledgement of these groups' local power and position. The relative influence of minorities in autonomous and non-autonomous prefectures, counties and regions may be a key variable in determining the treatment they receive from the state and whether state-created organisations, such as religious and cultural associations, actively promote their interests and agendas. Whether less well-positioned minority nationalities are treated similarly is a matter for further research.

---

Research for this paper was funded by grants from the MacArthur Foundation and the University of California Berkeley Institute of International Studies. A version of this article was presented at the Fairbank Center, Harvard University. I wish to thank Elizabeth Perry, Robert Weller, Jon Marshall and Gardner Bovingdon for their comments on previous drafts.