The very limited number of accounts we have of Muli\(^1\) portray the area and its inhabitants as a watered-down extension of the Tibetan cultural core. In the few instances in which Muli is mentioned in Western academic writings, it has been variously described as “a transitional zone between the Tibetan culture world to the north and the only partially sinicized tribal lands to the south” (Spengen 2002: 8–9), a “Randzone tibetischer und halbtibetischer Peripherievölker” (border area of Tibetan and half-Tibetan peripheral peoples) (Kessler 1982–: 4), and “a state on the borders of Yunnan, with an only partly Tibetanized population” (Samuel 1993: 81).

Such characterizations are undoubtedly rooted in the establishment of monastic Buddhism in the area at the end of the sixteenth century. They illustrate how a religion and its institutions—Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism—are conceived as the major ingredient in the process of acculturation or “Tibetanization.” According to Samuel, such a process has been going on constantly on the margins of the Tibetan cultural region because—for the Tibetans—spreading the Buddhist dharma is a highly valued cultural goal. After adopting Buddhism, populations might gradually give up their language in favor of Tibetan dialects (1993: 147, 561).

It is true that once they had entered the region, the Tibetan Buddhist Gelugpa quickly acquired a strong and pervasive position in Muli. This
was brought about by the traditionally close association of the monastic system with the political elites, whereby the support of the ruling nobility enabled Buddhism to establish itself and spread rapidly and this elite could maintain and strengthen its leading position by acquiring religious legitimation. At the same time, it is precisely this politico-religious elite that has held a near-monopoly on providing its version of Muli as a Tibetan Buddhist territory to the outside world. It was greatly helped in maintaining this control by the fact that Muli was for all intents and purposes closed off from the outside world throughout much of its recent history. The major reason for its isolation was its forbidding geography of high snowy mountains cut by steep river canyons. But other factors also complicated contact between Muli and the rest of the world: to the west of Muli are the areas of Chatring (C: Xiangcheng), Gyelthang (C: Zhongdian or Xianggelila), and Konkaling (C: Gonggaling), which had been notorious—for at least a large part of the last two centuries—for being the home of marauding Tibetan bandits; moreover, from the northeast to the southeast, Muli was partly encircled by the independent Nuosu people, who had a long-standing reputation for enslaving or killing those who ventured into their territory.

As a result, access to Muli was limited to a few easily controlled tracks in the north toward Lithang, in the south toward Yongning (T: Thar-lam), and in the southeast toward Yanyuan. Most contacts with the outside were monopolized by the Muli rulers and their immediate entourage of high-ranking monk-administrators. These were the people who concluded official agreements with their powerful neighbors, negotiated with visiting Chinese and Tibetan officials, or acted as hosts for the handful of foreign adventurers and other travelers who were lucky enough to be allowed entry. This last category of persons provides the scant sources of data that underpin the few references to Muli in Western academic publications.

One of the first Westerners to write about Muli was the Major H. R. Davies, a Briton who traveled extensively in Southwest China between 1894 and 1900, examining the possibilities of constructing a railroad link between India and the Yangzi. After spending only a few days in Muli while passing through in 1900, he classified the inhabitants as Xifan, a local Han default category meaning “Western barbarians” and designating populations that were neither Tibetan nor Nuosu. Nevertheless, the Xifan of Muli, according to Davies, “though they do not speak the same
language as the Tibetans of Chung-tien, they are in other respects thoroughly Tibetan and are ruled by a lama king” (1909: 387).

The only substantial Western source on Muli consists of the writings of Joseph F. Rock (1884–1962), the Austrian American botanist and explorer who resided and traveled in Southwest China between 1922 and 1949. He had his major base in the Naxi town of Lijiang, in Yunnan, to the south of Muli. Rock visited Muli three times—in 1924, 1928, and 1929—and called himself a friend of the “Lama King,” the ruler of Muli.² His richly illustrated articles on the “strange Lama Kingdom,” published in the National Geographic Magazine in the 1920s and 1930s, put Muli on the West’s imaginary map of highly exotic places. His presentation of the head lama, or pönpo (P: bo"), of Muli as a naive and self-contented local autocrat, ignorant of what was going on in the rest of the world, fits well into this colorful picture. Nevertheless, such a portrayal is belied by the fact that the head lamas were able to maintain some form of independence only by applying a highly developed sensitivity to the important political issues in China and Tibet and by carefully entertaining relationships with important actors, in the local context of the Southwest, Tibet, and the central leadership in Beijing or Nanjing.

Muli’s unstrategic position as a sparsely populated and isolated monastic domain was instrumental in sparing it from becoming a battlefield where the Chinese or their Manchu overlords, the Mongols, and the Tibetans engaged in constant warfare (a fate that befell many of the other border areas of Tibet’s Kham region). Muli’s role in several of the wars and battles fought within the region was to provide troops to the side it felt it could least afford to refuse. The few passages referring to Muli in two Tibetan sources—the autobiography of the fifth Dalai Lama and a 1698 work by Sangye Gyatso on Tsongkhapa and the monasteries of the Gelugpa—make it clear that in the seventeenth century, Muli clearly was considered a part of the territory of the Dalai Lama: it is mentioned that the fifth Dalai Lama was able to confer the use of both land and taxes in this region (Ahmad 1970: 61). However, this did not mean that Muli was not simultaneously integrated administratively—on a nominal basis at least—into the Manchu empire, as indicated, for example, by the Annals of Yanyuan County (Yanyuan xian zhi) (Gu 1894) from the Qing period (1644–1911).³

The most extensive source for the history of Muli is The History [or,
The Emergence of the Dharma in Muli (Muli chöchung). This work was compiled by an official of the Muli government, Ngawang Khenrab, in 1735 and covers the period from 1580 to 1735. It is based on several earlier writings that have been lost, such as a treatise on religion in Muli written jointly by the third tulku, or incarnate lama, of Muli and the fourth head lama, as well as several shorter documents written by the other head lamas during this 155-year period. The only copy of this text, a manuscript of 196 folios, was miraculously saved from a bonfire during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). In 1992, it was published in Chengdu in a volume containing both the typeset Tibetan version and the Chinese translation (Muli chöchung 1993). The texts contain valuable data on the establishment and expansion of the Gelug School in Muli, on the succession of the different head lamas in the Bar clan, on the searches for the consecutive incarnations of the tulku, on the territorial expansion of the region, on the numerous armed conflicts in which Muli was involved, and on the relationship between the Muli head lama and the Manchu and Tibetan governments. By bestowing different official titles on the head lamas, the Qing emperor laid as much claim to Muli as did the regime of the Dalai Lamas in Lhasa.

Although the content of History of the Dharma greatly adds to our knowledge about Muli and its religious institutions, it was produced by the same elite that maintained its power through the association of worldly and religious power. Ironically, it was also through the introduction of Buddhism that the political elite became literate in Tibetan and thereby capable of recording its views on the history, religion, and politics of Muli. As a result of the sizable cultural differences between Tibetanized monastic elites and local village communities, the few existing sources on Muli history present a very narrow vision of Muli and its people. This is most obvious in the field of religion, in which Tibetan Buddhism occupies center stage due to its major role in the politics of the region. Although there can be no doubt that non-Buddhist ritualists in the Premi villages practiced actively throughout all of Muli’s recorded history, there are no references to these practices in any of the available sources. Until the late Qing, the Premi do not exist in Muli’s written history. Perhaps even more ironic, the Chinese Communists uncritically adopted the elite version of Muli’s status when deciding how to integrate Muli into the People’s Republic of China. The sources for this more recent chapter of Muli his-
terary are mainly oral interviews and several official publications on Muli, the most comprehensive of which is the *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County* (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi). One of the more interesting sections in this volume is the chapter containing detailed biographies of personages who played a relevant role in recent Muli history.

**Integration into the Tibetan Buddhist Realm**

Little is known about the religious history of Muli before 1580. Beginning in the fifteenth century, several of the valleys that are now part of Muli were controlled by the Mu kings from their capital at Lijiang to the south. The larger Lijiang area is inhabited mainly by the Naxi people. To the extent that Buddhism was established in the area, the prevalent form is presumed to have been that of the Karma Kagyu School, which had established several monasteries in the territory ruled by the Mu kings.

In addition, there was a small Sakya monastery in the north of the territory, and *History of the Dharma* mentions that a Bönpo monastery was built in the area of Liewa in the south in 1648 (*Muli chöchung* 1993: 9). Most of the villages in Muli were inhabited by Tibeto-Burman-speaking people, of whom the Premi constituted the largest single group. The villages in the north of Muli were inhabited by Kham-speaking Tibetans. It is probable that village religious practice among the Tibeto-Burmans was quite similar to the practice found in many of the Premi villages today and was centered around non-Buddhist ritualists performing ceremonies related to the worship of ancestral souls and deities of nature. Although the inhabitants of Muli had no choice but to participate to a certain extent in the monasticism enforced by the Buddhist elites, it is safe to assume that local non-Buddhist practice was widespread.

Events far away from its villages were about to have profound consequences for Muli. Changes in the relationship between the Mongols and the Tibetans would reverberate all the way to Muli and have wide-ranging repercussions for politics and religion in the region. In 1578, Sonam Gyatso managed to obtain support for the Gelugpa from the Mongol khan in the politicized conflict between the different Buddhist schools in Tibet, and he acquired the title “Dalai Lama” (Ahmad 1970: 88). Sonam Gyatso was the third incarnation of the abbot of Drepung,
a monastery established in Lhasa in 1416 by Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug School. Since the two previous incarnations of Drepung abbots were retroactively recognized as the first and second Dalai Lamas, Sonam Gyatso became the third. The close relationship with the Mongols greatly enhanced the position of the Gelugpa and facilitated the establishment of Gelug monasteries in all areas of Tibet.

In 1580, the third Dalai Lama visited Lithang—two days’ travel to the north of Muli—to preside over the celebration of the completion of the Tubchen Chamling Monastery. When this news reached Muli, a small delegation composed of representatives of the local nobility went to Lithang in order to meet the third Dalai Lama and ask him to help them establish a Gelug monastery in Muli (Muli chöchung 1993: 2). One of the local ruling clans in Muli was attempting to gain greater independence from Lijiang, and the move to invite the Gelugpa was motivated in part by the need to find powerful allies. Sonam Gyatso was receptive to the plea of the Muli delegation and sent Sangye Gyatso to Muli. In 1584, the first Gelug monastery was built at Wa'erzhai; its full name was Lhakhangteng Ganden Dargye Ling, but it was usually called “Wachin Gompa.” Sangye Gyatso became its first abbot, or kempo, and since he was already considered to be a tulku, he became the first tulku of Muli.

After his death in 1584, Neten Tsultrim Sangpo, a Mongolian who had accompanied Sangye Gyatso to Muli, assumed the position of kempo of Wachin Gompa. According to History of the Dharma, Neten Tsonltrim Sangpo was extremely energetic in the propagation of the Gelug teaching and in establishing monasteries, even as the adherents of the Karma Kagyupa were doing their utmost to oppose the proliferation of the Gelugpa (ibid.: 3). Many smaller Gelug monasteries were built all over Muli, and in 1604, Neten Tsultrim Sangpo established the second of the three main monasteries of Muli, Debachen Sönam Dargye Ling, usually called “Kulu” (C: Kangwu; T: khe-'ong) Gompa. He thus became abbot at the two most important monasteries of Muli.

A few years earlier, in 1585, a boy was born into the ruling clan in the southeast of Muli. The name of this clan was Bar or Bar-sep‘i, as was the name of its estate and the surrounding area; Chinese sources note that they were of Premi or Xifan origin (Gu 1894: 10). The father of the boy was the bearer of the golden seal bestowed upon his ancestors by the Ming emperor. This seal (yinxin) was the official symbol of recognition by
the Chinese court as a *tusi*, a hereditary native chieftain, “a unique sub-bureaucratic institution created during the early Ming to extend nominal Chinese state control over the non-Han peoples located just beyond Beijing’s administrative reach” (Herman 1997: 50). The system of native chieftains was divided into two categories: military chieftains, or *tusi*, and civilian chieftains, or *tuguan*. *Tusi* tended to be appointed in areas where the emperor’s control was most tenuous. While the *tuguan* often had to accept a Chinese official at his side and meddling in his administration, the *tusi* had a considerably higher level of autonomy in the way he or she ruled the territory. Especially during the Ming (1368–1644) and the early Qing, the imperial bureaucracy did not interfere with *tusi* administration and demanded only a nominal level of tribute. A more important task for the chieftain was to maintain an army that the emperor could muster for his military campaigns in the region. For the native chieftain, the title helped legitimate his position locally, since the *tusi* could ask the court for support when his position or territory was threatened, and those who trespassed against his decrees were in principle subject to imperial legal code rather than the customary law. In addition to the seal, the *tusi* was also required to have an official charter (*haozhi*) as proof of his title. Each time a *tusi* died, the heir had to be acknowledged by the imperial court as the rightful successor, and in principle the charter had to be renewed.

According to the animal cycle of the Tibetan calendar, the boy from the Bar clan was born under the same animal as Tsongkhapa. This and other signs convinced Neten Tsultrim Sangpo and other leading monks that the boy must be a reincarnation of Sangye Gyatso, the monk sent to Muli by the third Dalai Lama, who was the first *tulku* of Muli. That the reincarnation was “discovered” among members of the leading clan was no coincidence, according to the introductory article in the Chinese translation of *History of the Dharma*: “[They] knew that if they wanted the Gelug teaching to take root in Muli and develop they first of all had to develop and rely on the local upper strata” (*Muli chöchung* 1993: 2). The boy, who later would be given the monk name of Jamyang Sangpo, was groomed by Neten Tsultrim Sangpo to take over the leadership of the Gelug monasteries in Muli and combine this position with his inherited *tusi* position, entitling him to political rule of the area. The religious aspect of his role was not neglected, however, and at the age of twenty, Jamyang Sangpo set
out on the first of three study tours to Lhasa, during which he stayed at Drepung, Sera, Ganden, and Tashilhunpo monasteries (ibid.: 5).

But once again, events in the outside world would profoundly alter the political and religious landscape of Muli for years to come. In 1604, as part of a drive to strengthen the waning powers of the Ming dynasty in the Southwest, the Wanli emperor supported the Naxi _tusi_ of Lijiang, Mu Zeng (1587–1646), in sending an army up the Chongtian River to occupy the area of Muli, Daocheng (‘dab-pa), and Lithang. He consolidated the gains of his military campaign in Muli by stationing Naxi troops and building stone watchtowers. Mu Zeng, or Mu Tian Wang (Heavenly Mu King), as he also was called, was a devout Buddhist and patron of the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism. Although his father, Mu Wang, had shown a certain respect for the Gelugpa, Mu Zeng was probably too aware of the strong connection between the Gelugpa and the powerful rulers in Lhasa not to fear their political role. Whether this was his primary motivation, or whether he was spurred on only by his religious convictions, is unclear. In either case, Mu Zeng is infamous in Muli history for his relentless campaign of spreading the Karma Kagyupa while attempting to destroy the Gelugpa. This ruthless undertaking involved the burning of monasteries and the massacre of numerous monks. According to _History of the Dharma_, sending a son to a Gelug monastery to become a monk at the time of Mu Zeng was the equivalent of cutting off his head and limbs (Muli _chöchung_ 1993: 4).

This state of affairs made Jamyang Sangpo reluctant to leave Lhasa and return to Muli. In the meantime, he had attained the Buddhist scholarly degree of _geshe_ and was planning to spend the rest of his life in retreat somewhere in Tibet. But the fifth Dalai Lama was concerned about the threatened position of the Gelugpa in the southeastern corner of Kham, and he finally convinced Jamyang Sangpo that his task was to spread the Gelug teaching and wipe out the Karma Kagyupa in his home region. Because of the situation in Muli, it was impossible for him to return immediately though, and he had to bide his time in neighboring Yanyuan, a county and military post under direct imperial rule, which officially administered the territory of Muli. In 1640, he established a Gelug monastery in Jueluo in Yanyuan, which subsequently became a safe haven for the sixty surviving Gelugpa monks who had managed to flee Muli (Muli _chöchung_ 1993: 5).

Again, events far beyond its borders were about to have important
consequences for Muli, especially in relation to religion. In 1642, Gushri Khan of the Koshot Mongols took the title King of Tibet but installed the fifth Dalai Lama as the worldly ruler of Tibet. In this way, Tibet became unified, and the Gelugpa’s position was greatly strengthened (Smith 1996: 107). At the same time, important events were taking place in China as well: in 1644, the Manchus established the Qing dynasty, and three years later an army loyal to the Qing captured Lijiang and weakened the position of the Mu clan once and for all. Jamyang Sangpo had been waiting for precisely this kind of opportunity, and in 1648, he left Yanyuan and returned to Muli with an army and defeated the remnants of the troops of Mu Zeng (Muli chöchung 1993: 7).

Soon after his return, Jamyang Sangpo convened a large meeting at Wachin Gompa, where he was able to muster broad support for his position as both religious and political leader of Muli. Moreover, he managed to find acceptance for the rule that from then on, the position of head lama would be inheritable only by members of the Bar clan. The position of head lama would go to the oldest brother; the youngest brother would become the lord of Bar, the manager of the manorial estate of the Bar clan, and—since the head lama was not allowed to marry—the provider of an heir to the head lama. If the lord of Bar had no offspring, his own position and that of the head lama could be inherited by the sons of his sister. The year 1648 then became the first year of the unbroken line of nineteen head lamas belonging to the Bar clan, which lasted until 1950. Besides holding the post of head lama, Jamyang Sangpo had also been recognized as the second tulku of Muli. Such concurrent holding of positions was not the rule in Muli, however, and subsequent tulku were recognized in different families, several of them poor farming or herding families. Tulku enjoyed enormous prestige throughout Muli’s pre-Communist history, but they generally refrained from directly interfering in politics, although their advice was sought in all major decisions made by the head lamas.

Also in 1648, Muli received a visit from two officials dispatched by the Dalai Lama. They were traveling through eastern Kham to conduct a population census and collect taxes, which indicates that Muli was considered an integral part of the Tibetan regime in Lhasa. Muli is mentioned as one of the places visited by officials in the autobiography of the fifth Dalai Lama, but there is no direct reference to the visit in History of the Dharma,15 which mentions that a small Tibetan force assisted Jamyang
Sangpo in suppressing the remaining resistance in Liewa, in the southwest of Muli, in that same year (Muli chöchung 1993: 8). It is possible that these soldiers were accompanying the two officials from Lhasa.

Jamyang Sangpo firmly established the Gelug School in Muli, largely to the detriment of the Karma Kagyupa. History of the Dharma contains little reference to direct religious suppression, but, when mentioned, opposition to the rule of Jamyang Sangpo is often framed as opposition to the true teachings of the Buddha and to the beneficial rule of the (Gelugpa) monasteries. The leader of the Liewa resistance, for example, happened to be an adherent of Bön. His crimes included the killing of several Gelugpa monks, and, the record states, when he was finally captured, “as a punishment for opposing the Gelug, he is executed by ripping his heart out from the back-side” (Muli chöchung 1993: 9). In 1656, Jamyang Sangpo died after being poisoned by one of his close followers who tried to usurp the leadership of Muli. The attempt failed when the Bar clan managed to summon the support of the fifth Dalai Lama. He sent an envoy to Muli to ensure that Samten Sangpo of the Bar clan was officially installed both as the next head lama and as the person to be recognized by the Manchu emperor as the rightful tusi (ibid.: 3). One of the first important feats of the new head lama was the establishment of the large monastery of Gaden Shedrub Namgyel Ling—namely, Muli Gompa—near the present-town of Wachang in the center of Muli.

For the next three hundred years, the system of government in Muli would remain largely unchanged. As in many other monastic domains of the Gelugpa, worldly and religious authority went hand in hand. The triumvirate of the head lama, the tulku, and the lord of Bar (the clan that provided the head lamas) held all power in Muli. Major decisions regarding Muli had to be agreed upon by these three people (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 544). There were several levels of administration. The highest level was part of the rotating staff of the head lama and the tulku. All posts at this level, except for the Chinese-language secretary (C: shiye) and the hereditary position of bazong (T: barzung rabyampa), had to be filled by monks. The Chinese-language secretary was involved in handling relations with the Chinese—official and nonofficial—and was responsible for translating and drafting documents in Chinese. There was also a Tibetan-language secretary, the trungyi (C: [da]zhongyi). In addition to drafting official letters in Tibetan, one of his most important tasks
was to issue, renew, and file land deeds within the territory of Muli. The different bazong were stationed in border areas of the territory. They were responsible for monitoring and reporting the situation at and beyond Muli’s border and for engaging in and maintaining relations with the outside world, including neighboring tusi, the Nuosu headmen, and Chinese officials. The bazong would also assume responsibility for outside visitors and therefore were expected to master different languages, including Chinese and the languages of the Naxi and Nuosu. There were four major bazong and two minor bazong, each ruling an estate at the borders of Muli containing from ten to more than two hundred tenant families.17

The highest formal position under the head lama was that of gatekeeper (C: mengong; T: dzasa). The person who held this three-year position was responsible for carrying out the head lama’s orders and handling relations with local headmen and the outside world. The gatekeeper was also responsible for overall military affairs. Other officials at this central level were an individual responsible for finances, a head clerk, and the leader of the head lama’s personal bodyguard. Below this level, each of the three monasteries had its own administration, which largely followed the general Gelug monastic system. Managing the religious affairs of the main monasteries and their subordinate monasteries was the office of the umdze (lit., “master of rituals”) under the leadership of a kempo. Another office, the labrang, administered all other affairs within its territory under the leadership of an attendant, or kuchar, and a manager, or chantsö, who took care of the economic aspects. The last level of administration was based in the villages and included an administrator sent by the monastery, the rongpo rabjampa, or rongban for short. The rongban was a monk, and his term of office was three years. He worked with two local administrators, a hereditary village chief and a baise. The baise was responsible for collecting taxes, organizing corvée labor, and collecting rent from tenants. The baise’s period of office was not fixed and depended on whether the office of the head lama was satisfied with the way the tasks were performed.18

This administrative system resembled that of other semiautonomous monastic domains under the control of the Lhasa government, yet in Muli it had a few peculiarities, reflecting some of the local conditions. For example, the territory was not ruled from a fixed monastery; rather, the seat of the head lama and his administration rotated each year between one of
the three main monasteries of Muli, Wachin, and Kulu. Muli furthermore had its own local system for accommodating cultural differences among some of the ethnic groups: the Naxi living in Eya, a strategic border area in the southwestern corner of the territory, were granted a high degree of autonomy and were ruled by their own hereditary native chiefs, the muguan. A muguan had his own administration, but his staff had to be approved by the monastic bureaucracy (Guo 1986: 6). In the few Miao villages of Muli—established by refugees who had escaped the suppression of the Miao Rebellion of 1855–72 in Yunnan and Guizhou—the baise’s powers were limited in comparison to those of baise in other villages.

The Dalai Lama’s Tibetan government recognized the authority of the head lama as that of a gyelpo, or local king, under the rule of Lhasa. At the same time, the head lamas were recognized by the Qing administration as tusi, a hereditary native chieftain. Both titles implied a substantial level of independence. As a remote border area, Muli enjoyed greater actual autonomy from Lhasa than did other monastic domains such as Chamdo. The relationship between the head lamas and the Manchu empire was also very loose, especially in the early period of the Qing. In the seventeenth century, the emperors were too busy consolidating their regime to pay attention to the Southwest. Furthermore, the Qing accepted Gushri Khan’s administrative power over Tibet and were weary of upsetting the balance of power with the Mongols (Y. Dai 1996: 79). But even a nominal inclusion into these two larger polities was not entirely without consequences: Muli was regularly forced to provide soldiers to assist either the Qing or the Tibetans and their Mongol allies in fighting battles in the region.

When Wu Sangui (1612–1678) rebelled against the Qing in 1673, Muli was indirectly drawn into a major conflict. The Kangxi emperor requested assistance in suppressing the revolt, but the fifth Dalai Lama was reluctant to become involved, according to documents on the correspondence between Lhasa and Beijing. In 1674, in a very limited response to the Qing request, he sent a Tibetan-Mongol expeditionary force to attack some of Wu’s troops who had penetrated Gyelthang, to the southwest of Muli. The Dalai Lama ordered the second head lama of Muli, Samten Sangpo, to aid this force in the attack. An army of monks and laypeople was hastily assembled and subsequently invaded Gyelthang from the northeast. According to History of the Dharma, the Muli troops performed very well, compared to their Tibetan and Mongol allies, because they were familiar
with the terrain. A year later, the Dalai Lama rewarded Samten Sangpo with five villages in the Naxi-inhabited territory of Eya to the southwest of Muli. The retaking of Gyelthang was the only real action the Tibetans undertook in response to the requests of the Kangxi emperor.

According to the autobiography of the fifth Dalai Lama, Wu Sangui also tried hard to win the support of the Tibetans, sending several delegations to Lhasa, some of them laden with gold and other treasures. The rebels even renounced their claims to the territory of Gyelthang and the whole of Lijiang Prefecture (Lijiang Fu) in the hope of forging an alliance with the Tibetans (Ahmad 1970: 216–17). This presumably contributed to the Dalai Lama’s willingness to try to convince the Kangxi emperor to enter into a truce with Wu Sangui (Y. Dai 1996: 105). But the attempt failed and greatly displease the emperor. Suspicious of the Dalai Lama’s motives, he ordered all correspondence between the rebels and the Tibetans to be collected and studied. In order not to upset the Qing even more, during the final phase of the rebellion, the Dalai Lama issued a directive to all local rulers dependent on Lhasa to block any attempt by the remnants of the rebel armies to escape toward Kham. When a thousand rebel troops entered Muli in 1680, the head lama hastily sent troops to block the invading rebels; ill prepared, Muli troops were initially defeated. After regrouping and waiting until the rebel army was concentrated at the Yu River crossing, Muli troops launched a surprise attack and annihilated the rebels. Those captured alive were handed over to the Qing in Chengdu (Muli chöchung 1993: 32).

The Wu Sangui Rebellion and its suppression marked the start of a new phase in the history of the Southwest. One of the most important lessons for the Qing was that it had to become more directly involved in the administration of this region. The tusi system was closely scrutinized, and many native chieftains were replaced by Qing administrators (the so-called gaitu guiliu system). The Qing emperor drew another lesson from the rebellion, namely, that it was necessary to keep a much closer watch on the regime of the Dalai Lama and become more involved in monitoring and controlling the border regions of Kham. This policy only intensified in the following decades, when the Kangxi emperor and the Tibetans were unable to agree on a common policy for handling a major conflict between the Oirat, or Dzungars, and the Khalka Mongols, which spilled across the northern frontier of the Qing (Ahmad 1970: 254–85). The fact
that the death of the fifth Dalai Lama in 1682 was kept secret from the Kangxi emperor for fifteen years by the regent, or desi, of Tibet did nothing to improve the relationship between the Manchus and the Tibetans.

MAINTAINING AUTONOMY IN A CONTESTED AND CONFLICT-RIDDEN BORDER REGION

In 1720, Qing forces occupied Lhasa to chase out the Dzungars. They stationed troops there, and installed a local government under the nominal control of a Qing representative, the amban. Kham was detached from Lhasa’s jurisdiction and placed under the control of the Manchu emperor through the tusi system (Smith 1996: 127–35). Qing control over Tibet reached its zenith in 1792, when the powers of the amban were considerably extended, and from that time onward, the Qing emperors had the final say in recognizing new incarnations through the system of the golden urn.

The broader sociopolitical changes of the eighteenth century did not leave Muli unscathed. The Gelug monastic system dominated by the Dalai Lama remained firmly in place and was even strengthened through the active patronage of the Manchu emperors, but the political dimension of the system was reduced to a locally significant legitimation of worldly authority. The larger political picture for Muli was now dominated by the close presence of the Qing, through its active administration of Kham and Yunnan and its control over central Tibetan politics. In order to maintain a high degree of independence, the subsequent head lamas of Muli were forced to skillfully cultivate their relationships with the Qing court. At this, they were rather successful, and in 1729, the Yongzheng emperor rewarded Lobsang Thutob, the sixth head lama, for his assistance in the Qing campaigns against the Nuosu of Liangshan with the official title of “pacification commissioner” (anfushi), and he was given the official seal in the following year (Gu 1894: 12).22

Starting in 1781, during the term of office of the ninth head lama, the Bar were awarded the Chinese family name Xiang by the emperor.23 The ninth head lama, Xiang Niancha, was the first ruler of Muli to be mentioned in the official Annals of Yanyuan County. This Qing record also clearly states the rules of succession, namely, that the position of
pacification commissioner would be inherited by the younger brother of the officeholder or, if there were no younger brother, by the son of a brother (Gu 1894: 12). Xiang Niancha left no opportunity unexplored in his attempts to bolster his relationship with the Qing court, and in 1787, he undertook the long journey to Beijing accompanied by a large mission from Muli. They carried numerous precious gifts with them and were rewarded for their efforts with an audience with the Qianlong emperor at which Xiang Niancha received several honorary titles.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that the closer relationship with the Qing meant that Tibetan influence had vanished from Muli. The Gelug monastic system brought with it a strong link to the main Gelug monasteries in central Tibet. Monks from Muli regularly participated in ceremonies in other Gelug monasteries, and at any given time a number of monks from Muli were studying in Lhasa. Since head lamas were also monks, they were required to follow certain religious regulations; as the head lama was the highest religious authority, succession to this position had to be recognized by religious leaders in Tibet. Each time a new head lama ascended to the throne in Muli, delegations would be sent bearing gifts to the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, in order to obtain approval and blessings from the new head lama. When seen in the light of the head lama’s worldly powers, this meant that Lhasa continued to play a political role in Muli, even during periods when the Manchu empire exercised stronger control in the region. This was important: although succession to the position of head lama remained the exclusive monopoly of the members of the Bar clan, their leadership did not always go unchallenged. Muli’s history is full of internal fights initiated by high-ranking monks and other local power holders who were attempting to usurp the throne in Muli. Such contenders often allied themselves with the forces of neighboring local rulers, several of whom were in almost constant conflict with Muli—and with one another—because of territorial disputes. The times when the succession passed from one head lama to the next therefore constituted vulnerable periods for Muli and its continued existence as a semi-independent political entity.

One major incident occurred in 1867, when a conflict between one of the higher-ranking monks and the twelfth head lama, Xiang Zhishi, escalated after the monk managed to get help from a Han opium dealer and his well-armed troops. The result was disastrous for Muli. Several
hundred Muli soldiers were slaughtered, Wachin Gompa was destroyed by fire, and Xiang Zhashi was strangled and the official seal of the pacification office was lost (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhu 1995: 706; Gu 1894: 13). In spite of these adversities, the Bar clan managed to cling to power, and in 1868, Xiang Zhashi’s younger brother Xiang Songlang Zhashen was installed as the next head lama. In the same year, because of his achievements during a Qing campaign in Yunnan, the Tongzhi emperor awarded Xiang Songlang Zhashen with the title of “control commissioner” (xuanweishi), which Hucker defines as “one of the most prestigious titles granted aboriginal tribes in south-western China and their natural, mostly hereditary chiefs” (1985: 251).26 The appointment expressed the Qing’s appreciation of the head lamas’ valuable contributions and would prove an important asset in the final years of the dynasty.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Qing influence in central Tibet and Kham gradually waned. The emperors were fully occupied with major conflicts threatening the survival of the dynasty, such as the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion. Qing interest in Tibet was dramatically aroused again in 1904 by the British military expedition into Tibet led by Francis Younghusband. The Guangxu emperor realized how exposed Tibet was to foreign intervention and decided that more troops had to be stationed in Tibet and that Kham had to be brought under direct imperial rule. More effective control of the major towns in Kham would safeguard the route to Lhasa, protect the Qing’s income from taxes on the lucrative trade in tea and salt, and open up the region for economic development (Coleman 2002: 37).

In Bathang, Sichuan authorities had planned a small-scale project under which Chinese farmers were to constitute the vanguard of a process of economic development in Kham. When a Qing official passed though Bathang on his way to Chamdo in 1904, he decided that the time was ripe for implementing the project (Sperling 1976: 12–13). With great zeal, he imported Han farmers, enlisted local Tibetans in his army, allowed French missionaries to set up a mission station, and punished bandits, all without consulting the local rulers. Not surprisingly, these actions provoked an uprising, and the Qing official was killed by a monk-led mob. The reaction of the Sichuan government was as heavy-handed as could be expected: the local rulers and all the principal monks were killed. Zhao Erfeng was one of the Qing magistrates who led the punitive action. In
hindsight, it is clear that this was just the occasion Zhao had been waiting for in that it provided the opportunity to implement a series of radical changes in Kham and establish firm control in the whole area. Over the next few years, he abolished the *tusi* system in the whole of Kham and replaced these native rulers with Qing officials, forcefully curtailed the power of the monasteries, initiated the establishment of Chinese schools to “civilize the natives,” and promoted permanent Han migration to the region (ibid.: 19–21). All opposition was brutally suppressed: large numbers of Tibetans, whether local rulers, monks, or ordinary villagers, were killed, and not a few monasteries were burned to the ground.27

The fall of the Qing in 1911 effectively undid many of Zhao’s reforms (he was murdered in the same year), but the ensuing chaos was not necessarily an improvement for the people of Kham. The Qing administration installed by Zhao crumbled, but the traditional Tibetan system of indirect rule by local hereditary rulers (*depa* or *gyelpo*)28 or monasteries had been thoroughly dismantled and could not easily be resurrected to provide alternative power structures that would provide some stability for local populations. After the death of Yuan Shikai in 1916, Yunnan and Sichuan declared their independence and then went to war against each other. Eastern Kham became part of the battlefield. In 1917, after the debacle of the Simla Conference, conflict between Tibetan and Chinese troops erupted in Chamdo and escalated into a full-blown war over territorial authority in central Tibet and Kham. This time, the main battlefield was western Kham. The de facto border between the Tibetan regime in Lhasa and the Chinese Republic stabilized after a truce in 1918, although neither side accepted the status quo as a definitive solution to Tibet’s status in relation to China (Teichman 1922: 58). Armed conflict between the two sides broke out intermittently—as in 1931—but otherwise this state of affairs lasted until the Communist takeover in 1949.

However, the absence of major wars did not mean that the region became peaceful: banditry and minor local conflicts were rife. The areas immediately to the west of Muli, Chatring and Kongkaling, were especially affected.29 This development, too, could be attributed largely to Zhao Erfeng. His removal of the *depa* of Lithang and destruction of the monasteries in the region effectively eliminated functional authority, and agriculture almost came to a standstill since nobody protected the harvests. This left villagers with only two alternatives: to leave the region
or to join the numerous bands of armed bandits and live off the booty they obtained through attacking caravans passing through the region or raiding some of the richer areas surrounding Chatring, Kongkaling, and Gyelthang. In addition to banditry, the whole Southwest region was a theater for petty conflicts between local warlords: eastern Kham was for several decades ruled by the warlord of western Sichuan, Liu Wenhui, who regularly engaged in conflicts with other warlords vying for control of Sichuan and the Southwest (Peng 2002: 62). In 1939, Kham was officially designated the Chinese province of Xikang.

Events in this macro-level context of political upheavals, forced reforms, uprisings, and border wars did not leave Muli unaffected, although it managed to retain its autonomy and members of the Bar clan remained the undisputed autocrats of their kingdom. There are very few references to Muli in the available literature, and consequently one can only speculate as to why Muli escaped from direct political or military interventions such as those conducted by Zhao Erfeng and his officials.30 Most likely, several factors were responsible: First of all, Muli was not situated on major trade routes and was a small area with a small population. Second, the position of control commissioner held by the head lama conferred a certain prestige and a well-developed network that included ties with elites in the Southwest and Nanjing. Third, Muli might have been overlooked because of its administrative status: although Muli was part of Kham from a Tibetan point of view,31 the Chinese officially classified it as part of Yanyuan County, which was one of the counties of Ningyuan Prefecture (corresponding more or less to present-day Liangshan Prefecture). A final reason was surely the astute diplomatic skills of the head lamas, who avoided confrontations they could not win and constantly built alliances with the strongest parties. Although Muli avoided many of the major upheavals of this violent half century, it could not escape the occasional disturbance. The turbulent career of the sixteenth head lama, Xiang Cicheng Zhaba (1877–1934), presents a telling illustration, not only of how developments in the larger region affected Muli, but also of the need to carefully balance relationships with important regional players and that the inevitable occasional miscalculation could have fatal consequences. Xiang Cicheng Zhaba was the head lama visited by Joseph Rock and mentioned in several of his writings (see, e.g., 1925). Originally, Xiang Cicheng Zhaba’s older brother was in line to take up the position of head
lama. Moreover, at a very young age, Xiang Cicheng Zhaba had been recognized as the reincarnation of the Miji Tulku of Molashog Gompa just north of Muli, halfway to Lithang. After receiving a thorough education in Buddhism and visiting Tibet on several pilgrimages, he began traveling around Kham to expound Buddhist teaching. But when fate struck, he was pulled back to Muli. As his biography in the *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County* tells us:

His reputation steadily increased, and he developed a large network within Kham. When the fifteenth head lama [his brother] died in 1924, Xiang Zhaba Songdian [his nephew, the next in line] was too young to take over, so Xiang Cicheng Zhaba returned to Muli and convinced local religious leaders that he should become the acting sixteenth head lama of the Muli Pacification Commission. As was customary, this succession had to be recognized by the Dalai and Panchen Lamas. At that time, the eighth Panchen Lama happened to be in Inner Mongolia, and people from Muli had to travel the whole way through Yunnan, Vietnam, and Nanjing to reach him and present gifts. . . . At the same time, people were sent to the Yi areas to purchase good horses to send them as gifts to the thirteenth Dalai Lama.

After Xiang had usurped the post . . . he expanded the military. As to relations with the outside, he enlarged ties with army and government officials and important social figures in Xikang, Tibet, and Yunnan. He became a celebrated personality, with the power of a tusi of the nine suo [military commanderies] of Yanyuan. After some time, Xiang received the order from the Sichuan frontier commissioner Chen Xialing\textsuperscript{32} to come and assist him in suppressing a rebellion in Lihuo. They were victorious. The Xiang army captured a small cannon and 250 rifles. Xiang escorted them personally to Chen in Kangding [Dartsendo] and received his praise.

During his time in office, Xiang did not submit to the jurisdiction of Yanyuan at all; he did not obey orders and acted like a king. He even went so far as to threaten to break away from Yanyuan in Sichuan and become part of Yunnan Province. In 1928, the Preparatory Committee for the Establishment of Xikang Province listed Xiang’s nine major crimes in its “Survey of Muli tusi.” At the same time, it announced that troops would be sent to abolish the tusi system in Muli. . . .
In 1930, the Yunnan army was engaged in fierce battle. The Thirty-ninth Infantry Army of the Nationalist Party stationed in Yunnan was defeated by the army of [warlord] Long Yun, and the survivors—led by commander Hu Ruoyu and vice-commander Meng Kun—fled to Muli. Xiang received orders from Long Yun to send troops to make surprise attacks at strategic passes and exterminate soldiers who fell behind. They captured more than one hundred guns. The soldiers led by Hu suffered tremendous losses while under way, and when they crossed the Yarlong Zangbo River in their retreat to Jiulong, they were blocked by the Long and Xiang armies and then almost completely annihilated. Only four hundred of the men originally led by Hu found refuge with Liu Wenhui. As a result, Xiang’s relationship with the Sichuan and Xikang militarists worsened further.

In March 1931, Xiang Cicheng Zhaba sent [two high-placed officials from Muli] to Jiang Jieshi [Chiang Kai-shek] in Nanjing carrying many gifts. Although they did not obtain the audience with the president they had hoped for, Jiang granted the official title “Nomihan” for Xiang. [After a subsequent delegation visited Nanjing], Jiang Jieshi gave one hundred rifles and ten thousand bullets to the Muli tusi.

In 1933, [a] Nationalist army [under the command of Liu Wenhui] dispatched troops to Muli to begin mining gold in order to pay the soldiers. Xiang was not pleased and did his best behind the scenes to stop the project. He petitioned the Republican government to stop the mining and promised to pay compensation. At the same time, he gave support to [local bandits] to harass the miners and the accompanying soldiers. They wiped out these troops, forcing the mining to stop. Xiang never paid any compensation.

In Republican times, bandits constantly attacked the [eastern part of Muli]. In 1933, Xiang organized a standing army of one hundred well-equipped soldiers and transferred twenty contingents of regular soldiers to this region, each contingent being made up of twenty-five people. They were placed to guard strategic spots. . . .

In 1934, Xiang, through Long Yun’s recommendation, received the title “Lieutenant General of the Ground Forces” from the central Nationalist government. . . . In November of the same year, the army commander Liu Wenhui retaliated against Xiang for Xiang’s rapprochement with Yunnan and for the mining incident. He dispatched [an army com-
mander] with a company of soldiers to Muli under the pretense of carrying a letter stating that Xiang had been appointed control commissioner together with the appropriate official seal. When Xiang Cicheng Zhaba came out to meet the commander near Kulu Gompa, he was shot dead by Liu’s soldiers. He was fifty-seven. (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 937–39)

Clearly the good relationship Xiang Cicheng Zhaba had cultivated with Chiang Kai-shek could not save him from his local warlord enemies. Liu’s troops moreover seized the Muli tulku and Xiang Zhaba Songdian, Xiang Cicheng Zhaba’s nephew and successor, and transported them to Xichang. According to its official gazetteer, Muli was also forced to pay Liu between four hundred thousand and six hundred thousand silver dollars as well as large quantities of precious medicinal herbs as ransom (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 708, 949), to which the villagers of Muli had to contribute. After his release in 1935, Xiang Zhaba Songdian was instated as the seventeenth head lama. Xiang continued the difficult task of building alliances to maintain Muli’s independence. Nevertheless, he had learned from the tragic death of his uncle and his own abduction to Xichang. Soon after taking up his post, he contacted Liu Wenhui and managed to mend fences. At the same time, he sent a delegation to Kunming to strengthen his alliance with Long Yun, the Yunnan warlord. In 1936, Long Yun provided Xiang with modern military equipment and recommended to the government in Nanjing that he receive a high military post. One of his tasks would be to block the Red Army in its advance in the Southwest. This responsibility involved the maintenance and training of a large army. According to a Chinese visitor to Muli in the late 1930s, one young man in each family in Muli was forced to participate in a one-month training session each year, and if there were no men in the family, a woman had to work for the army by taking care of provisions (Liu 1939: 66).

In the years just before the Communist takeover, Xiang was embroiled in a prolonged armed conflict with the tusi of Zuosuo, also one of the nine chieftains classified within the territory of Yanyuan County. This conflict erupted when the Zuosuo tusi interfered in a local succession feud in Qiansuo—a third chieftaincy under Yanyuan—and in this way provoked the Muli tusi, who claimed a legitimate interest in the conflict due to his close religious ties with a Gelug temple in Qiansuo. Over the next two years, the standing armies and conscripts of the chieftaincies fought sev-
eral battles, which resulted in many casualties (*Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi* 1995: 80–82). The conflict is worth mentioning because the older people in Bustling Township still had vivid memories of the fighting. An eighty-year-old man from the village of Ten Houses recalled:

> There once was a big fight between Muli and the Zuosuo tusi. I was twenty to twenty-five then. There was no way to escape; every family had to send one soldier to fight Zuosuo. Even the Han had to participate. Nobody from here died though. The idea was to muster as many people from Muli as possible to demonstrate to Zuosuo how strong we were. We, the common people, only had single-shot rifles that had to be filled with powder up front and fired by a piece of burning wood. This [participation in military actions] we had to do several times in that period.

Reading about the lives and exploits of the head lamas of Muli is like reading about the lives of celebrated generals or warlords in the Chinese historiographical tradition. Of course, to a large extent this impression may be attributed to the form of historiography available, in which wars and related events are considered to be the information most worthy of being recorded. Nonetheless, in between listings of weapon purchases, records of battlefield merits, or the reception of military titles, there are references suggesting that the head lamas and their entourages were also preoccupied with activities more aligned with their role as Buddhist monks. For example, the *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County* mentions that in 1940, Xiang Zhaba Songdian went on a pilgrimage to Lhasa during which he visited all of the major monasteries and paid his respects to the fourteenth Dalai Lama (*Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi* 1995: 950). In fact, Xiang stayed in Lhasa for fifteen months to pursue religious studies and build close contacts with the religious elite. But no details were written down about his stay. In 1944, Xiang Zhaba Songdian resigned, and his nephew Xiang Songdian Chunpin became the eighteenth head lama.

While the few sources on Muli history give us at least a limited insight into some aspects of the lives of the pre-Communist elites, there is very little to be found about village life during this period. There are few traces suggesting the existence of separate local cultures within villages inhabited by Premi, Na, Shuhi, or other ethnic groups. In contrast to many other ethnic minority areas of China, Muli was the subject of only a few
sporadic research projects in the early PRC period that might have documented social organization before the Communists arrived. Some patchy data on village life can be found in the Muli gazetteer, but as could be expected, most of the data included appear to have been selected in order to expose the hardship borne by ordinary villagers under an oppressive regime that combined religion and politics and consequently to legitimate the toppling of the head lamas’ regime. That does not belie the fact that life probably was quite difficult for the majority of the inhabitants of Muli. One of the very few surviving eyewitness accounts about life in Muli before 1949 is the short article by Liu Lirong, who stayed there for a month in 1938. Liu does not paint a rosy picture of village life under the head lama and his administration. There were 3,700 commoner households, including the Xifan (Premi), the Gami (Kham Tibetans), and the Moxie (Naxi, Na, Rek’ua). The commoners (baixing) had to pay taxes and perform corvée duties, called ulag. The approximately 3,000 other families living in Muli in 1938 were almost all tenant farmers who were migrants or descendants of recent migrants. About one-third were Han, and the remainder mainly Lolo (Nuosu) and Miao. Tenant farmers were free of corvée duties but had to pay around 40 percent of their harvest as rent for their land as well as taxes to the head lama (Liu 1939: 67–68). Some of the old people in Bustling Township still remembered trying to hide some of their goods when the taxman came on his yearly visit after the Premi New Year period. In each house, he would make an inventory of the family’s possessions and calculate the taxes due, and the villagers then had to deliver the taxes to the monastery.

In addition to taxes and corvée duties, commoners also had to send their sons to the monastery or to fight in the countless conflicts in which the head lamas were involved. In special circumstances, tenant farmers could also be called to arms, as described by the Ten Houses villager who took part in the war between Muli and Zuosuo. An effective system of public security ensured draconian enforcement of these duties and the regulations of the local penal code. Consequently, according to Liu, there was little crime, at least until the arrival of several hundred migrants in the early years of the Republic (1939: 68). Those who broke the laws met with cruel punishment, such as being skinned alive, as the Muli gazetteer is careful to mention (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 672). Nevertheless, bandits from neighboring territories regularly raided people living in the
border regions of Muli. In the west, these bandits were Tibetans from Chatring and Kongkaling. In the east and south, villagers were attacked by Nuosu people plundering and capturing slaves. But not all Nuosu bandits came from outside Muli, and sometimes they even had accomplices among the non-Nuosu population. People did not wait for the monastery’s judicial system to settle the case, as my eighty-year-old Rek’ua informant from Ten Houses revealed:

[In the 1940s] I was wounded by the Gaⁿyè [Nuosu]. A bullet went right through my lower arm. One other person was wounded and two died; one of them was my relative. This happened when about twenty Gaⁿyè came from [the neighboring township, also in Muli]. They had been called in by two Premi from [Flowery Valley, in Bustling Township]. These two Premi knew the region well, so they could inform the Gaⁿyè precisely where they could steal what. These Gaⁿyè stole everything, that is, including all domestic animals in [Walnut Grove] and [Ten Houses]. They gave part of the booty to the two Premi from [Flowery Valley]. The Gaⁿyè also kidnapped two children to make them into slaves. Afterward, the people from [Ten Houses], [Walnut Grove], and [Uphill and Downhill] went to [Flowery Valley] and killed the two Premi.

In the final decades of the Republic, the relative stability of Muli attracted refugees from the more volatile regions around its perimeter, doubling its population, according to Liu (1939: 68). Many newcomers were Han and Nuosu people. The Nuosu from the Liangshan area were pressed ever closer to Muli in their search for more arable land, and in 1940, the head lama granted a Black Nuosu³⁸ leader from Guabie in Yanyuan a “red permit” (hongzhao), allowing him to open up land in Muli and move in Nuosu tenant farmers in exchange for a considerable amount of money. Relations between the Nuosu and their neighbors were not very cordial, though, and in 1950, a disagreement between the Nuosu clan leader and the Muli administrators about payment of land taxes led to a major armed conflict. For several months, both sides conducted raids and counter-raids into each other’s territory, resulting in scores of casualties. According to the villager from Ten Houses, some of these raids extended as far into Muli territory as Bustling Township: “Another time when the Gaⁿyè attacked, the Muli army was in [Gaku]. I ran as fast as I could to
[Gaku] to call for help. The Muli army came immediately and killed one Black Gaⁿyè, but two from the army were wounded, one of them got a bullet through his mouth which went out through his neck. The others ran off.” Only under strong pressure from the new Communist regime was the conflict resolved, in June 1951, more than a year after the “liberation” of Yanyuan and Muli (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 82–84).

INTEGRATION INTO THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

At the beginning of 1950, the cornered Nationalists in the Southwest sent a delegation to Muli to convince the retired head lama Xiang Zhaba Songdian to organize a military blockade against the advancing People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and prepare for resistance in case the Communists took over. Xiang Zhaba Songdian had abdicated in 1944 in favor of his nephew, Xiang Songdian Chunpin, the eighteenth head lama, who in turn abdicated on 1 January 1950, leaving the Muli throne to his own nephew Xiang Peichu Zhaba—also known as Pencozaba—the nineteenth and last head lama. Xiang Zhaba Songdian nevertheless still played an important role behind the scenes, and he had excellent connections with the Nationalists. The Muli leadership was initially favorably inclined toward the request, but opinions diverged after Xichang fell to the PLA at the beginning of March 1950. While one faction of the elite advocated a plan to mobilize a force of three thousand men at arms to block the PLA from entering Muli from the southeast, another faction under the leadership of Gatekeeper Wang Peichu Qudian strongly opposed such an action, believing that it would be utterly futile. According to the Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Wang argued that “fighting the PLA with lama soldiers was like smashing rocks with eggs” (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 84). The thirty-eight-year-old Wang enjoyed a high level of prestige in Muli and the trust of the nineteenth head lama, Xiang Peichu Zhaba. Wang had been sent to a monastery at the age of seven and made a brilliant career in the monk-bureaucracy of Muli, becoming gatekeeper in 1947. During a longer stay in Kangding (Dartsedo) in 1949, on official business, he came to understand that the days of the Nationalists were numbered. Nevertheless, he was unable to convince either the other faction or the two Xiangs. In this stalemate, the two factions agreed to
request that the ninth tulku of Muli, Jiayang Zhigu, perform a divination, and the result would prove auspicious for Muli’s elite: “do not dispatch troops!” (ibid.: 84). While the Annals gives the impression that the outcome of the tulku’s divination tipped the balance, it is hard to believe that a result supporting the momentous decision to militarily oppose the PLA would have been accepted. In view of the long-standing tradition of pragmatism and realpolitik the head lamas followed when faced with unwinnable military challenges, compliance and submission were the sole logical reactions.40

After taking Yanyuan at the end of March 1950, the PLA was keen to avoid having remnants of routed Nationalist forces escape through Muli. Mu Wenfu, a local Tibetan accompanying the PLA, sent a letter to Wang Peichu Qudian.41 Extolling the wonders of the Communists’ ethnic minority policy, he asked Wang to assist the PLA in blocking the Nationalists and to prepare for the PLA’s entry into Muli. Finally, in its pursuit of the fleeing Nationalists, the PLA marched unopposed into Muli on April 25. Wang managed to convince those members of the elite who had fled into the mountains to return and meet the PLA officers. Both he and the head lama Xiang Peichu Zhaba received letters of recognition for their contribution to the “liberation” of Muli (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 939).

The smoothness of the Communist takeover in Muli was not without significance for the manner in which the area would be further integrated into the new People’s Republic of China. It was especially important in determining the role the former elite would be allowed to play in rebuilding Muli within the narrow frame of a Chinese Communist state. Under the United Front policy of the early years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committed significant resources to the effort of winning over so-called progressive former elites in ethnic minority areas. Melvyn Goldstein argues that this was one of the principal policies shaping the Sino-Tibetan relationship between 1951 and the Tibetan uprising in 1959. He underscores this by referring to instructions the Party’s Central Committee sent to the Chinese leaders in Lhasa in mid-1952 regarding the three monastic seats of Drepung, Sera, and Ganden:

The united front work of the three main monasteries is like other united front work in Tibet. The emphasis should be on the upper hierarchy. We
should try to win any of those close to the top of the hierarchy, provided that they are not stubborn running dogs of imperialists, or even bigger bandits and spies. Therefore, you should try patiently to win support among those upper level lamas whom you referred to as those full of hatred to the Hans and to our government. Our present policy is not to organize people at the bottom level to isolate those at the top. We should try to work on the top, get their support, and achieve the purpose of building harmony between the masses and us. (Telegram from the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 19 May 1952, cited in Goldstein 1998: 23, Goldstein’s emphasis)

The Communists did not consider Muli to be part of Tibet and were therefore technically not required to use these indirect methods of imposing their regime. Nevertheless, the establishment of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County unfolded in such a way to make it clear that the Communists rigorously followed a policy of co-opting the local elites. In view of the strong link between religious and worldly rule, this policy would have important consequences for how religion would be defined in Muli under the new Communist regime.

In January 1951, the military control commission in Xichang sent two high-ranking cadres to Muli—one of them the Tibetan Mu Wenfu—to convince Xiang Peichu Zhaba and Wang Peichu Qudian to send students to the Xichang Nationality Cadre School (Xichang Minzu Ganbu Xue-xiao) and to send a delegation to the second Conference of Representatives of People of all Ethnic and Other Groups (CRPEOG) (Ge Zu Ge Jie Renmin Daibiao Huiyi) in Yanyuan. They were successful, and at the beginning of April, Wang led a delegation of forty representatives from the three main monasteries of Muli to Yanyuan to participate in the conference. There, Xiang Peichu Zhaba was elected the vice chairman of Yanyuan County, of which Muli was still officially a part, and Wang was elected a permanent member of the conference. A week later, Wang participated in a Yanyuan delegation of minority minzu to Xichang, where he was received by high-ranking CCP cadres.

A month later, on 20 May 1951, the Xiangs and the other elites must have realized that a radical new era had begun when a twenty-member delegation arrived and initiated a comprehensive reform agenda that would keep them in Muli for almost two months. The delegates organized
mass meetings during which the propagation of CCP policies was accompanied by gifts of tea, salt, and cigarettes. They set up several committees for different purposes such as organizing education, recruiting students for cadre schools, mopping up remnants of the Nationalist armies, preparing to abolish the corvée system, and resolving the dispute over land taxes between Muli and the Black Nuosu headman from Guabie, which had resulted in armed conflict the year before. The delegates were careful to involve the head lama and other members of the elite, such as Wang and Lin Jiayong, the lord of Bar, in most of this work and, in particular, in the creation of a preparatory committee for the establishment of a Muli Tibetan Autonomous Region at the county level. Xiang Peichu Zhaba became its head, and Wang Peichu Qudian, Mu Wenfu, and a Yanyuan CCP vice chairman were made its vice-leaders.

After the departure of the delegation, Wang worked to involve the lower echelons of the old Muli administration—such as the abbots of the smaller monasteries and the local headmen—in the reforms of the PRC regime. But his revolutionary zeal was not shared by everyone in Muli, and on 27 August 1951, he was shot and killed on his way to work at the preparatory committee. As the Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County reports: “The progressive activities of Wang Peichu Qudian were looked upon with hatred by a small number of reactionary upper-strata” (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 940). Through the organization of large-scale ceremonies in Muli, Yanyuan, and Xichang, the new regime took great care to display its appreciation for a member of the former elite who had made the ultimate sacrifice for the “New China.”

The preparatory commission continued its work without Wang. According to Hu Jingming, now a retired Premi cadre from Yunnan, who participated in one of the meetings of the commission, Xiang Peichu Zhaba wanted to establish the Tibetan Autonomous Region at the county level, since this would make Muli independent of Yanyuan County (Hu Jingming, pers. comm., 18 May 2004). He found support for his wishes when he visited Party leaders in Beijing in 1951 (Harrell 2001: 210). Opinions were divided, though, and there were several conflicts within the group; one of them—between Lin Jiayong, the lord of Bar, and two of the former head lamas—had to be settled with a visit from a special working group from Xichang. Finally, at a large meeting at Muli Gompa on 19 February 1953, the Xikang provincial government officially declared
the establishment of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County. The new county was divided into three “districts” (qu) according to the domains of the three monasteries: first district, Muli; second district, Kulu (Kangwu); and third district, Wachin (Wa'erzhai). Below the district level, nineteen townships were established. Xiang Peichu Zhaba, the nineteenth and last head lama, became the county head, and both Xiang Songdian Chunpin, his predecessor who ruled Muli from 1944 to 1949, and Tulku Jiayang Zhigu, were each given one of the four vice-leader posts. Han Jiayang, the former gatekeeper for the seventeenth and eighteenth head lamas, became vice-head of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC); Shu Yuanyuan, the former Naxi bazong of Baiwu and attendant for the head lama, was made vice-head of the civil administration of the autonomous county. In all, nine members of the former high-level elite were given leading posts in the new administration, almost thirty of those categorized as medium-level leaders were given positions, and more than one hundred headmen and local administrators of the old regime were given positions such as heads and vice-heads of townships (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 87–88). As elsewhere in China, members of the former elite were also given posts in the CPPCC; although this organ has limited direct political power, membership carries a certain prestige and provides access to important personal networks. Besides co-opting the Muli elites by drawing them into the new political system, these appointments served another purpose: in order to obtain their support in carrying out more radical reforms such as the abolishment of the corvée and tax systems (also called the “thirty-three burdens” [sanshisan zhong fudan]), it was necessary to provide the former leaders and administrators with a regular income in place of their traditional source of income. The 1,100-strong monk population living in the monasteries needed a source of income now that the Muli villagers were no longer forced to provide for their livelihoods; therefore, each monk was allotted a fixed amount of 25 jin of grain per year.43

The integration of Muli into China followed a model the Communists had used in other areas inhabited by majority non-Han populations who had enjoyed a high degree of de facto independence and would therefore be more difficult to integrate, for example, the Shan/Tai kingdom of Sip-song Panna (Xishuangbanna), on the Burma border, and the famed independent Lolo (Nuosu/Yi) of Liangshan. The approach was different with
many other ethnic minority areas in the Southwest, where local autonomy vis-à-vis the Chinese state had long since withered because of such factors as large-scale Han in-migration or the Qing’s *gaitu guiliu* policy of replacing native rulers with its own administrators. Rather than risking a bloody takeover that might generate resistance in other ethnic minority areas and jeopardize the Party’s ethnic minority policy throughout the sensitive border regions, the Communists chose not to carry out radical reforms in the initial phase of their regime and instead worked to co-opt the local elites.

One of the results was that these elites were able to exercise considerable influence on the process of integration. Normally, the establishment of so-called autonomous areas for ethnic minorities—one of the cornerstones of the ethnic minority policy—was based on thorough ethnographic research and consultation with many different representatives of the population concerned, potentially giving rise to the official classification of a “minority minzu” (*shaoshu minzu*). Since most of this research was published in the 1980s and articles based on fieldwork in Muli are almost totally absent from these publications, it is reasonable to conclude that no such ethnographic research was carried out.

A census conducted in 1952 divided the population of Muli as follows: the Zangzu (Tibetan minzu), 18,057, or 33.26 percent of the population; the Hanzu (Han minzu), 13,265, or 24.45 percent of the population; the Yizu (Yi minzu), an umbrella label designating several linguistically related groups, one of which is the Nuosu of Muli, 12,450, or 23.14 percent of the population; and the remaining 20 percent consisting mainly of the Mengguzu (Menggu minzu) (meaning Mongol, the minzu label given in Muli to the people known as Mosuo by the Chinese and who call themselves Na and Rek’ua), the Miaozu (Miao minzu), and the Naxizu (Naxi minzu). Based on these statistics, it must have seemed logical to establish a so-called Tibetan minzu autonomous county (*Zangzu zizhixian*) in the area, since the people labeled as Tibetans were the largest ethnic group. Nevertheless, there could have been good reasons to reach a different conclusion concerning the ethnic makeup of Muli. The Qing gazetteer from Yanyuan differentiated between five kinds of “barbarians” (*yiren*) living within the territory of Muli (among the people counted as commoners), and excluding, for example, the Nuosu/Yi): the Gami, the Yuegu, the Xumi, the Moxie, and the Xifan (Gu 1894: 13). The 1987 fieldwork of
Long Xijiang would also confirm that the 1952 classification perhaps did not follow the more rigorous principles applied in other parts of China inhabited by ethnic minorities. According to Long, the people whom the local Chinese called “Xifan” and who ended up being officially classified as Tibetans consisted of several groups with not only distinct, mutually unintelligible, languages but also other distinguishable cultural attributes such as religious practices. Extrapolating from his data and those in a few mainly linguistic studies and combining this information with the township population figures and other data in the *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County* yields the following breakdown of the 35,000 people classified as Tibetans in the year 1990: roughly 22,000 Premi speakers living in central and southern Muli; about 10,000 speakers of Kham or eastern Tibetan dialect who call themselves Pöpa (as Tibetans in other regions of Tibet call themselves) or Ba (Harrell 2001: 212), called “Gami” by other Muli inhabitants, and who live mainly in the north of the county; about 2,500 Shuhi (also Xumi, Shumu) people, all living in the western township of Shuiluo (T: Sulu); approximately 2,000 Liru and Lamuzi (also Namuyi) in the eastern township of Luobo. All these people were called “Xifan” by the Han before the ethnic classification project of the 1950s and 1960s. In Yunnan, the Xifan, who almost all spoke Premi, were classified as a separate minority minzu, the Pumizu.

It is possible that one important argument for not recognizing the Premi as a separate minority minzu was that doing so would make the number of Tibetans in Muli too low to establish a Tibetan autonomous county. But it is likely that other factors played a role in determining the official classification of the Premi in Muli as Tibetans. The whole process of setting up an autonomous county was to a large extent left in the hands of the former elites, namely the former head lamas and their top administrators, such as Wang Peichu Qudian. They were the leading members of the committee charged with preparing the establishment of a Muli autonomous county, and in view of the United Front policy, it is reasonable to believe that their opinions carried great weight. Although most of them were of Premi origin, they had a vested interest in identifying Muli as a Tibetan area because this “naturalized” the Gelug monastic tradition as an integral part of Muli culture and, by implication, legitimated their leadership positions. Moreover, the elites would be inclined to identify themselves as Tibetans, since their long-standing participa-
tion in monasticism and Buddhist studies implied familiarity with the Tibetan language and entailed frequent, long stays in central Tibet. In this way, they were also instrumental in defining the major religion of Muli as Buddhism.

When Long Xijiang, one of China’s experts on Tibeto-Burman cultures in Sichuan and one of the few anthropologists who has conducted fieldwork in Muli, addresses the intriguing incongruity of the Premi-speaking Tibetans of Muli, he is not in doubt about the role the pre-Liberation elites played in the ethnic classification process. In a Web publication (which perhaps did not fulfill all the criteria of political correctness that would be required in another form of publication), he writes:

According to our fieldwork, the upper strata [shangceng] of the Pumi of Muli (meaning mainly the cadres [ganbu]) all held the opinion that they were Tibetans [Zangzu], but the broad masses of the lower strata [xiaceng] all held the opinion that the Pumi were one separate nationality and that they were not Tibetans. The Pumi from Muli County and the Pumi from Ninglang County in Yunnan were the same nationality, but in the ethnic classification [minzu shibie zhong], the Pumi from Ninglang County in Yunnan were classified as a separate nationality and as one of the fifty-six nationalities of our country. But the Pumi in Muli were classified as Tibetans. Muli Gompa, the large Gelugpa monastery in Muli, was the largest monastery within the county, it was where a disciple of Tsongkhapa expounded the teachings to the Pumi of Muli, and it was constructed by the Pumi people. The Ba’er clan to which the Muli tusi belonged were Pumi people; in Tibet he was called “Muli Jiabo,” meaning “King of Muli.” The Pumi are the oldest inhabitants of the area of Muli. Muli Gompa and the Ba’er clan of the Muli tusi had a high position and reputation among the upper strata in Tibet and within the three large monasteries. (1997)

Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to claim that the pre-Liberation elite also became the elite in Muli after the establishment of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County. Besides holding top government posts and leading positions within the CPPCC in Muli, some elites even obtained positions beyond Muli. It is not surprising then, that their version of Muli as a Tibetan territory also becomes the politically correct PRC version
of Muli’s ethnic and, by deduction, religious makeup. The *Survey of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County*, published in 1985, states that 29.9 percent of Muli’s population are Tibetans and that the majority of them speak the Kham Tibetan dialect (*Muli Zangzu zizhixian gaikuang* 1985: 2, 18). Nothing in this 165-page-long description of Muli, which addresses its history and the cultures and societies of its different minorities, points to the existence of the Premi.

The year 1956 heralded a dramatic new phase in Muli history and a new test for its old ruling class. In February of that year, on the basis of instructions from Beijing, the Democratic Reforms (Minzhu Gaige) campaign was launched. Its purpose was to push ahead with Communist reforms, especially in the area of land and property redistribution and the abolishment of what were dubbed “leftovers of feudalism.” The attribution of class labels to the entire population was not without importance in light of later developments in revolutionary China. In Muli, the campaign was to be carried out “through the method of peaceful consultation and in a mild way” (*Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi* 1995: 88). Nobody would be struggled against, participation would be voluntary, and some form of compensation would be paid; the positive assessment of the Muli elite as progressive was certainly a factor in this decision. And, at least according to the narrative of the *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County*, once again the elite did not disappoint and took the initiative in carrying out the campaign. Although the Communists had expressed their intention to slowly dismantle the corvée, land tenure, and slave-holding systems, figures from the campaign reveal that in 1956 not much progress had been made. At one of the first meetings of the campaign, Xiang Zhaba Songdian, Lin Jiayong, Shu Yuanyuan (the former Naxi bazong), and forty-five others freed 534 slaves. By 1959, when the reforms ended, 3,682 slaves had been set free and almost 50,000 *mu*, or 3,335 hectares, of land had been confiscated (ibid.: 89). The annals also mention that members of the former *minzu* and religious upper strata who showed a patriotic attitude after education and reformation were rewarded with positions within the administration.

The *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County* clearly aims to give the impression that members of the Bar clan, such as the Xiangs and Lin Jiayong, as well as many other members of the elite, such as Shu Yuanyuan, were actively engaged in the Democratic Reforms campaign.
and did their best to push ahead faster than was expected. From a more cynical perspective, it could be argued that they had no choice and were forced to demonstrate revolutionary zeal in order to keep their positions of influence. Nevertheless, a large part of the religious and political elite, as well as many people further down the hierarchy, did make radically different choices. Indeed, in view of how these people fared—many were killed—and with the wisdom of historical hindsight, it must be said that the former head lamas and other members of the Bar clan once again made a pragmatic and wise decision to support the Democratic Reforms campaign.

In March 1956, when the campaign was being implemented, a triumvirate consisting of a Gami landlord from Donglang, in the north of Muli (at that time the vice-leader of the Third District), the kuchar of Wachin Gompa (at that time the district leader of the Third District), and a high monk from Kulu Gompa banded together with several Black Nuosu leaders from the southeast of Muli and rose in rebellion. They obtained arms and quickly assembled a force of three thousand men. Initially, they attacked government buildings in the northern Gami region of Muli, but the rebellion soon spread to other areas, and by the middle of April, there was fighting in fourteen of the nineteen townships of Muli, although the south and southwest of Muli, inhabited mainly by Naxi and Premi, and the majority of the monks of Muli Gompa were not involved.

This uprising was not an isolated event but part of a pattern of revolt among Tibetans all over Kham and among the Nuosu of Liangshan, to a large extent provoked by the enforcement of the Democratic Reforms campaign. While the Communists had initially proceeded very slowly with initiating reforms in ethnic minority areas, including the Tibetan areas outside central Tibet, they believed their rule was now sufficiently established to start the process of radical social change and did not foresee the extent of the opposition this would provoke. The attempt to divide the clergy and the elite from the “lower strata” through class struggle in many cases had the opposite effect and united the Tibetans in armed struggle. The move to force the Khampas to hand in their guns did nothing to defuse the explosive situation in the area. Since both the Tibetans in the rest of Kham and the Nuosu in the areas surrounding Muli had revolted, it is likely that the conflict spilled over into Muli to some extent. It took three and a half years to completely suppress the rebellion
in Muli. According to the minute statistics of the *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County*, 661 battles were fought, 432 rebels were killed, the PLA lost 8 officers and 55 soldiers, and 49 local militia lost their lives (*Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi* 1995: 94). Although no specific data are given about ethnic affiliation of the rebels beyond the recognized minority *minzu*, such as the Tibetan and the Yi people, it seems the uprising was most pronounced among the Gami and the Black Nuosu. One of its main leaders was a Gami from northern Muli, Jiayang Chunpin. A monk at Wachin Gompa who held the high position of *umdze*, he had been co-opted by the new regime and given the position of head of the Third District. The uprising began in the Third District, which is adjacent to Lithang, where, in the spring of 1956, the PLA committed one of its worst atrocities, killing hundreds of Tibetans, laypersons, and monks by bombing Lithang Gompa from the air (Smith 1996: 409–11). Several survivors fled to the safety of the mountains south of Lithang; some came to Muli, where they found support among the local Khampa, the Gami.

It is noteworthy that the areas in Muli with the densest Premi, Naxi, Na, and Miao populations were the ones that did not experience any fighting (including Bustling Township, as was confirmed by my interviews). While there are strong indications that ethnicity might have played a role in drawing the battle lines in Muli—placing the Gami and the Nuosu on the rebel side—there is not enough data to fully substantiate this claim. The *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County* does mention that the rebels did not succeed in attracting the *tulku* Jiayang Zhigu, the Xiangs, or Lin Jiayong to their cause. On the contrary, the authors claim that Lin Jiayong, Xiang Zhaba Songdian, and Xiang Peichu Zhaba (all from the Premi Bar clan) were actively engaged first in trying to convince rebels to switch sides and later in providing arms to suppress the rebellion. Shu Yuanyuan, whose former position as *bazong* had involved military training by the Nationalists, became actively engaged in suppressing the rebellion, for which he was officially commended. As a result of their active collaboration with the Communists, these members of the former elite kept their positions throughout the Democratic Reforms period and also managed to emerge relatively unscathed from subsequent campaigns such as the Four Antis (Si Fan) movement of 1959. Except for Xiang Peichu Zhaba, who was still alive in 2004, almost all the pre-Liberation leading elite died of natural causes in the early 1960s and did not have to experi-
ence the Cultural Revolution nor witness sad events like the destruction of Muli’s monasteries.56 The local leader of the revolt, Jiayang Chunpin, was captured by forces including Shu Yuanyuan in the summer of 1958 and executed in public in Wa’erzhai in March 1959. A similar fate befell eight other captured rebels in the following two months. In September of the same year, the last twenty rebels were shot dead in a concerted military action, effectively ending the rebellion in Muli.

Muli’s remoteness did not protect it from the different political campaigns that took place all over China at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. Some were only mildly implemented in Muli, such as the Rectification and Elimination of Counterrevolutionaries campaigns of 1958, in which only nineteen people were labeled “rightists.” Others hit especially hard, such as the Four Antis movement launched in March 1959 by the Muli Party Committee. The Four Antis movement—anti-uprising, anti-lawbreaking, anti-privileges, and anti-oppression—was directed specifically against religion and focused on controlling and curtailing the influence of the monasteries; the title of a Party document issued on April 18, “Resolution on Launching the ‘Four Antis’ Movement among the Lama Community in Muli County,” leaves no doubt about the campaign’s target (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 891). One major outcome was the virtual destruction of organized religion in Muli: the monks were forced to leave their monasteries, and soon afterward, many of the territory’s religious buildings were destroyed or fell into disrepair.

Profound changes were also taking place in the villages. In 1957, the first People’s Commune was established and collectivization reached its zenith during the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), when domestic animals became the property of the commune, common kitchens were established all over Muli, and small steel factories sprang up everywhere. The older people in Bustling Township still had vivid memories of this period, especially the consequent famine of 1960 and 1961. It was a terrible time when many people became ill and there were more deaths than usual. Large-scale slaughter of livestock to supply the common kitchens with meat at the start of the Great Leap inevitably led to disaster. When the common kitchens were finally abandoned in Muli in August 1960, food shortages were rampant, especially in the towns. In spite of the obvious disastrous effects of the radical new policies, those clear-sighted cadres and others who bravely opposed the Great Leap were viciously attacked in the Anti-
Right Deviation campaign, which began in November 1959. According to the *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County*, 375 cadres from all levels of government and the Party in Muli were “wrongly” labeled as “right deviationists and opportunists” (*Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi* 1995: 102). Many were “progressive” members of pre-Liberation elites who had been given government positions to reward them for collaborating in the transition from the old monastic structures of government to the new Communist administration. But worse was still to come . . .

After a few years of more relaxed policies in the first half of the 1960s, such as allowing households to keep a limited number of domestic animals, in 1966, the Cultural Revolution once more turned people’s lives profoundly upside down. Students at two middle schools in the district-town of Wachang, near Muli Gompa, initiated the movement, and it soon spread to every corner of Muli. In the autumn of 1967, guided by the slogan “Smash the Four Olds!” the remnants of Muli Gompa, including bronze Buddha statues and most of the scriptures, fell prey to the local Red Guards. The former elites were paraded at gunpoint through the streets, publicly criticized and beaten up, and had their property confiscated. Most were sent to the countryside to the so-called May 7 Cadre Schools, where they were forced to do hard manual labor while living under very basic conditions; occasionally they were rolled out and subjected to verbal and physical abuse. In 1970, many were able to return home and not a few of the former government and party cadres were reinstated in their former positions. One of them was Da’qu Ya’p’i from Bustling Township. He was a monk and former manager, or chantsö, of Muli Gompa and had been given a high position in the new administration of Muli. In 1967, he was labeled a “feudal leading monk” (*fengjian da lama*) and sent from the county-town to the countryside to work the land. He was fortunate to survive his ordeal, and his family in Bustling Township was only mildly criticized. After the Cultural Revolution, he was rehabilitated. Many other members of the former elite were not that lucky. The *Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County* gives the official figure of ninety-eight people killed by the Red Guards (*Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi* 1995: 107). This number does not include the many casualties sustained during the heavy fighting that took place in 1968 and 1969 between different factions, including well-armed Red Guards who had raided the local army weapons depots.
While the campaign was less violent in the villages, few households were left untouched. Red Guards from the county- and district-towns also found their way to remote Bustling Township and mobilized local youth in starting “revolutionary activities” such as organizing study groups and criticism sessions for people from “bad classes.” The families who bore the brunt were the few that had been classified as “rich peasants” (funong) and the one “landlord” (dizhu) family. Villagers in the township insisted that none of those criticized—or sometimes even beaten—were significantly richer than the others. The so-called landlord family had simply saved a bit more silver than its neighbors, “all through hard work and certainly not by stealing or exploiting anybody,” as other families in the village insisted. These “revolutionary activities” were usually carried out by youths from the neighboring villages. People mostly did not dare to attack their fellow villagers, many of whom were also close relatives or fellow clan members. In smashing the Four Olds, the Red Guards directed their revolutionary zeal toward destroying the few visible signs of religious practice in Bustling Township, such as the mani (piles of stones erected on ritually important places), the zabala (Tibetan Buddhist picture or relief found in all houses in Bustling Township), and the ritual paraphernalia of the local anji, such as scriptures and effigies of deities. In order to avoid criticism, many anji took the initiative or participated actively in the destruction. The collectivization of livestock also precluded the ritual sacrifice of animals. Religious activities disappeared from the public sphere. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, afraid of exhibiting any trait that could be viewed as belonging to the “old feudal society,” the women in the township stopped wearing their traditional plaited skirts, and both men and women modeled their haircuts on those of the Han.

In late October 1976, when news of the arrest of the Gang of Four—the leadership group held responsible for the Cultural Revolution—reached Muli, a big spontaneous celebration took place in the county-town (Muli Zangzu zizhixian zhi 1995: 109). Not long after, the Chinese Party-state under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping embarked on a radically different course, heralding once again a new period in the history of Muli. From being all-encompassing and meddling in the minutest details of people’s lives, the state permitted economic liberalization and ideological relaxation. Villagers in Muli were free to decide what to grow in their fields or even to leave and try their luck in one of China’s booming cities. The
women could again wear plaited skirts and adorn their hair in the local traditional fashion. But when somebody got sick, there was no barefoot village doctor providing free medical care. And when the new seedlings were threatened by heavy spring rains, the people of Muli could rely only on the benevolence of the water deities.