While Premi elites of Muli have been engaged in an attempt to define the territory of Muli as Tibetan and, consequently, a large section of its population as Tibetans and therefore adherents of Buddhism, they have not made much impression on the Premi subsistence farmers of Bustling Township. The Premi elites in the neighboring province of Yunnan have been occupied with their own endeavor of constructing a modern ethnic identity based on religious practice, in this case, based not on Buddhism but on the so-called hangui religion, hangui being a variant pronunciation of anji. Although the two projects would seem on the surface to be aiming for very different goals, they are very much alike in that both are produced by state discourses on ethnic categorization, culture, and religion.

The Pumizu of Ninglang County

South of Muli, in Yunnan, lies the Yi Autonomous Nationality County of Ninglang. In spite of its name, official statistics reveal that Ninglang is also home to 9,696 Premi, or about one-third of the 32,595 Premi of Yunnan. In contrast to the Premi living in Sichuan, the Premi in Yunnan have been formally recognized as a separate minority minzu, the Pumizu.
In Ninglang, they live primarily in the central and northern townships of Xinyingpan, Xichuan, Jinmian, Cuiyu, Hongqiao, Yongning, and Labai (Ninglang Yizu zizhixian zhi 1993: 125). These last two townships, which border on Muli, contain about half the Premi population of Ninglang County. Culturally, the Premi in Ninglang and Muli are closely related. The local variations of Premihli, the Premi language, are similar enough that most Premi in these two counties are able to communicate with each other in their mother tongue.

The history of the Premi in Ninglang dates back to at least the year 1253, when Kublai Khan enlisted large numbers of soldiers from Muli in his campaign against the Dali Kingdom in Yunnan. The families of the soldiers followed in the wake of the armies, and after the war, many Premi families settled in locations such as the northwest of Yunnan (see also Yan and Wang 1988: 13). Many folk stories told among the Premi in Yunnan are related to this migration under the Mongols (Wellens 1998: 28). During the centuries that followed, more Premi, who at the time practiced a form of semi-nomadism, moved south. This later migration was to some extent induced by a continuous southward and westward expansion of the Nuosu people, an expansion that has continued into the PRC period, according to some Chinese researchers (Long 1991: 28). Until the Communist takeover, the area of Ninglang consisted of two separate territories ruled by tusi, or hereditary native chieftains: Yongning in the north and Langqu in the south. The name “Ninglang” is a PRC construction combining the names of these two former administrations.

Ninglang is also the area where most of the Na people live. In Yunnan, the Na, or Naze, have officially been classified as part of the larger Naxi minzu, but in Ninglang County—where all the Na of Yunnan live—they have obtained semiofficial status as Mosuoren, or “Mosuo people.” For various reasons, communities of both the Na and the Premi in Ninglang have been the subjects of significantly more ethnographic research than their ethnic brethren in Muli. There is therefore detailed knowledge available about Na and Premi society in Yunnan beginning in the 1950s as well as, more anecdotally, from the 1920s and 1930s through the work of Joseph Rock.

Culturally, the Premi in Ninglang do not distinguish themselves very much from the Na. Each ethnic group speaks its own Tibeto-Burman language, but most Premi in Ninglang County also speak Naru, the language
spoken by the Na. In Yongning, the Premi villages are usually situated on the lower ranges of the hillsides, while the Na occupy the valleys. In mountainous Labai, Na and Premi villages are interspersed within the same ecological space. There are also a few villages—mainly in the Yongning plain—where Premi and Na live in the same villages; these include Gala near Yongning Town and Luoshui on the shores of Lugu Lake. The close relationship between the two is expressed in the often used appellation Ba-Na, or Ba-Naze (“Ba” being the ethnonym of the Premi in Naru). As in Bustling Township, where there is frequent intermarriage between the Premi and the culturally closely related Rek’ua, Na, and Nahri, the Ninglang Premi and the Na commonly intermarry. Such relations have altered the kinship system in some Premi villages. In Wenquan, near Yongning, the Premi of the villages of Biqi, Tuoqi, Bajia, and Wadu participate in the “walking marriages,” or tisese of the local Na. These walking marriages are duolocal or natolocal unions, in which men visit their sexual partners at night without establishing a separate household. The two partners continue to live in their respective matrilineal households, and children born of such unions belong to the matriline. In 2004, on a visit to the village of Tuoqi, I was told that the shift in the kinship system in these villages is a relatively recent development. This tallies with the findings of Wang and Yan (1990: 194–98), based on fieldwork carried out in 1963, which found that many Premi families in the four villages studied had changed from a patrilineal to a matrilineal system of descent within the last two or three generations.

In religious practice, there are also many similarities between the Na and the Premi. Today, most Premi and Na in Ninglang are adherents of Tibetan Buddhism. In the north of the county, the local center of this religion is Zhamei Gompa, which is part of the Gelug School and a dependent monastery of Muli Gompa. Unlike Muli Gompa, however, Zhamei Gompa has few resident monks. The monks belonging to this monastery either live at home or study at the Sera or Drepung monasteries in Lhasa. Even though they are away for several years, they are still counted as monks belonging to Zhamei Gompa. On my last visit in 2006, one of the younger monks had just returned from a two-year stay at Sera and had served for one year at the Potala Palace in Lhasa. A few of the monks even study at the Yunnan Nationalities University (Yunnan Minzu Daxue) in Kunming. Traditionally, the monks gathered at the monastery on the first
and fifteenth days of each lunar month to recite scriptures together, but at the present time, most monks show up only at major Buddhist festivals such as the Ganden Ngamcho, which is held on the twenty-fifth day of the tenth lunar month to commemorate Tsongkhapa’s death. About one-fourth of the 180 monks and novices belonging to the monastery are Premi, and the rest are mainly Na, which approximately reflects the proportion of the two ethnic groups in the total population in the area of Yongning and Labai townships. In the villages in this area, the monks—and to some extent their families—enjoy high social status. In Tuodian, this situation is expressed graphically in the saying “There is no person higher than the yêma (monk), just as no tree grows at higher altitudes than the kwase” tree” (Yêma ganto me ma re, kwasè ganto se ma dyé).

Close to the town of Yongning, at the foot of Lion Mountain, is the small Zhebo Temple, which belongs to the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism. Almost all of its forty-five monks are Na from the surrounding villages, but there are a few Premi as well; all reside at home. South of Hongqiao, in central Ninglang, Premi and Na traditionally adhered to the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. This was the area ruled by the former Langqu tusi, and in pre-Communist times, every second son in a household was required to enter a monastery and become a monk; if a family had four sons, two had to become monks.

Although the Sakya School today has few monks compared to the monasteries of the Gelug School to the north, this form of Buddhism is reclaiming some of its former position. The major Sakya monastery in Ninglang is Samye Gompa, and it was rebuilt in the late 1990s on a small hilltop near Daxingzhen, the capital of Ninglang. The original Samye monastery was situated at Dongfeng, sixteen kilometers to the south of Daxingzhen, but it was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. It is not far-fetched to suppose that rebuilding the monastery close to the developing county capital was a strategic decision. Not only is the location more accessible to a larger number of people, but the visibility of the new building from the center of town is a firm reminder of the existence of Buddhism in Ninglang (not necessarily obvious, given that the Yi, the majority of the Ninglang population and the basis for the establishment of a Yi autonomous county, are not Buddhists). The monastery put a lot of effort into making the premises appealing and in 1998 paid two Tibetan painters from Lhasa almost ¥20,000 to adorn the interior
and exterior front wall of the main hall with Buddhist iconography. They spent two months on the job, and the results are impressive. The thirty monks staying at the monastery in 2000 make up a considerably smaller cohort than the seventy to eighty monks connected with the monastery in pre-Communist times, yet there appears to be a tendency toward increase (e.g., on my first visit in 1998, there were only twenty resident monks). After three years at the monastery, many monks return to their home villages, where they continue their study independently while serving their communities by providing ritual services. Like the monks attached to Zhamei Gompa, they usually return to their monastery once a month, and all of the monks (as well as many lay believers) go there for the major annual festivals.

Buddhism is not only a matter of monasteries or the personal practice of monks; indeed, it is part of daily life for many of the local people, as becomes apparent in a Na or Premi house. Many houses have a prayer room—called *hlidzê* in Ninglang Premi and *ch’ako* in Bustling Township—that is dedicated especially to the recitation of Buddhist texts. If there is a monk in the family, this is where he will reside. Visiting monks also use the room when visiting a family, for example, when invited to perform a ceremony. As in Bustling Township, almost all houses—whether owned by Premi or Na villagers—have a picture or relief behind the fireplace dedicated to the wealth-granting Tibetan Buddhist deity Zambala. In addition, people often place pictures of famous Buddhist monks behind a small house altar where they make offerings to the Buddha or different bodhisattvas.

In Ninglang, as in Bustling Township, religious practice is more complicated than this superficial account seems to imply. In many of the Na villages of Yongning and Labai today, one encounters Na ritualists called *ddaba* in addition to monks who live at home. The *ddaba* base their ritual practice solely on orally transmitted texts. The relatively large amount of ethnography on the Na has focused primarily on their kinship system and sexual practices, and until recently very little research had been done on their religious practices. Christine Mathieu and Shih Chuan-kang both note the coexistence of Tibetan Buddhism and the *ddaba* tradition. Shih concludes that “Ddabaism” and “Lamaism” have reached a form of peaceful coexistence in which the *ddaba* are principally responsible for the death ritual (1998: 106–7). Mathieu argues in contrast that *ddaba* prac-
tice has been marginalized by Buddhism and forced out of the Yongning plain into the mountainous regions of Labai; furthermore, she holds that the death ritual has been taken over by Buddhist monks (1998: 210). Mathieu also notes the strong influence of Buddhism on ddaba practices themselves: ddaba ritualists do not make blood offerings anymore, and they use peaceful means to combat evil spirits rather than the violent methods used by the Naxi dtô-mbà ritualists (ibid.: 211, 219). On the one hand, most Na villagers I interviewed in Yongning and Labai did not conceptualize the ddaba tradition and Tibetan Buddhism as being contradictory. The monks, on the other hand, held different opinions: a thirty-year-old caretaker monk at Zhamei Gompa did not hesitate to express his assessment of ddaba rituals, arguing, “All this is folk superstition!” (Dou shi laoba-ixing de mixin!).

Chinese ethnographies mention that the Premi of Ninglang also have their own non-Buddhist ritualists, called hangui. Like the word anji (a local pronunciation of hangui in Muli), the term hangui refers both to a set of ritual practices and to the ritualist performing them. These ethnographies also note the use of Buddhist texts and other Buddhist paraphernalia by hangui ritualists. Yang Xuezheng, who wrote a very detailed ethnographic study on hangui in Ninglang, states that all hangui are supposed to have a certain level of Buddhist knowledge in addition to their knowledge of traditional Premi rituals. He uses the term haba to denote those hangui who study for several years in a Buddhist monastery and consequently enjoy the highest prestige in Premi society. He argues that at the time of his study in 1991, two-thirds of hangui in Ninglang were “lamaist monks and priests” (lama senglü) (1991: 208).

The word haba is used in somewhat confusing ways: although Chinese research suggests that hangui ritualists are all Premi, they are also consulted by the Na, who designate all Premi ritualists as haba. Wang and Zhan note that they are consulted in particular by the Na in order to exorcise evil spirits or assist with the worship of mountain deities (1988: 112). It is precisely this Buddhist aspect of hangui practice that leads Rock to conclude that the haba used by the Na, must be

sorcerers belonging to the Nyi-ma-pa (rNying-ma-pa) or Red Lama Sect. They are survivors of the adherents of Padmasambhava. They differ from the regular Nyi-ma-pa in that they have no lamaseries and, like the Nda-
pa [ddaba], perform their ceremonies out in the open. They are still to be found in Yung-ning and Mu-li. Unlike the Nda-pa they have manuscripts written in Tibetan on very thick paper; whether they chant from them or merely consult them I could not learn. In 1929 there were still a few Ha-pa [haba] alive, but with them their rites and ceremonies have come to an end. (1959: 806)

Rock does not mention the Premi origin of the haba ritualists, and his prediction of their extinction proved somewhat premature. As the work of Wang and Zhan testifies, haba were still an integral part of Na religious practice in the Na village of Zhongshi, on the Yongning plain, at the time of their fieldwork in 1963. Interestingly, while ddaba religious practice managed to survive both Buddhism and the havoc of the Cultural Revolution, hangui or haba had completely disappeared from Ninglang by the mid-1990s. During a 1995 survey of several Premi villages across the county, I could not locate one practicing hangui (Wellens 1998: 27–28).8 But older people were often familiar with the term hangui or haba, and in two villages, a practicing hangui had recently died. In all of these villages, people now invited a yèma, a monk from Zhamei Gompa living in his home village, to recite Buddhist scriptures at important ceremonies such as cremations.9 While there is no doubt that political campaigns through the twenty years from 1956 to 1976 were equally devastating for all religious practice in Ninglang (Zhamei Gompa was completely leveled in one day), it seems that only hangui practice had not recovered by the mid-1990s. That a religion such as Buddhism recovered in the politically more relaxed 1980s and 1990s is not so difficult to understand, in view of Gelug Buddhism’s status as a large and well-organized religion that could draw on a standard set of widely available ritual texts.

The answer to the question of why ddaba were better able to reestablish themselves beside the Buddhist yèma than were hangui is more obscure, and it is likely that some combination of factors may have played a role. First, there are twice as many Na as Premi in Ninglang and therefore many more active ddaba than hangui. This provided a larger pool of surviving ritualists capable of reviving the tradition after the Cultural Revolution. Second, hangui ritual practice in Ninglang was supposedly based on textual transmission, and I still have not seen any ritually used text among Premi that is not in Tibetan language. Nevertheless, Chinese researchers
and older Premi people insist that ritual texts using Tibetan script to write Premi existed in the past. While this is possible, another explanation could be that hangui, imitating the actions of Buddhist monks, looked like they were reciting from the texts while they were in fact reciting from memory. This does not mean they were cheating: the magical power was in the ritual action of turning the pages, ringing bells and other ritual instruments, and reciting the Premi orally transmitted text. Probably it was a combination of reading some of the Tibetan-language syllables constituting the magic formulas and reciting Premi language from memory. This would explain the close connection between scripture and recitation and why hangui appeared to the uninitiated to be reciting from the scriptures. In this way, the scripture also functioned as a mnemonic for remembering the orally transmitted part of the ritual. The ddaba ritualists, in contrast, did not use texts, and all their rituals were memorized. Since only the texts were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and not the people, the ddaba had an advantage in this area as well. In several villages, hangui texts had been used as fuel, first during the Campaign against Feudal Superstition (Fan Fengjian Mixin Huodong) in 1956 and then again during the Cultural Revolution, and, consequently, when religious policies relaxed in the 1980s, the surviving hangui ritualists had no texts left. And regardless of whether they were in Premi or Tibetan language, these texts were a necessary element of the ritual, and without them, the tradition collapsed.

Whatever the reason, by the late 1990s, religious practice among people in Ninglang classified as Pumizu was related solely to Tibetan Buddhism. In the county-town, a few urbanized Premi had turned to Christianity, and in a few villages, the millenarian cult of Mentuhui challenged the hegemonic position of Buddhism for some years before it was suppressed in 2003. In two or three villages adjacent to Muli, people occasionally invited an anji from across the provincial border. Nevertheless, by the late 1990s, hangui and their rituals were but a faint memory of bygone customs and practices through Ninglang County, victims—along with so many other local cultural practices—of the cultural radicalism of Communism and the forces of modernization.

Various ethnographical descriptions of the area in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s testify that hangui practices constituted a veritable religious tradition with a relatively widespread and consistent set of beliefs and
rituals. Although current anji practices in Bustling Township and other places in Muli are strongly connected to the defunct hangui religion of Ninglang, it is very difficult merely to equate Bustling Township practices and cosmological beliefs with what is found in these ethnographic descriptions. On the one hand, the rather isolated position of Bustling Township facilitated the survival of nonmainstream religious practices while, on the other hand, producing highly local versions of these practices through a process of constant cultural invention. Today, Bustling Township anji practice is to a significant degree molded by the recollections of a few old men and the creativity and charisma of one person, Nima Anji. Against this background, it is interesting to examine one of the more well-informed, detailed, and conscientious descriptions of hangui religion in Ninglang.

**HANGUI IN CHINESE ETHNOGRAPHY**

Yang Xuezheng, a researcher from the Yunnan Institute of Social Sciences and a Tibetan from Yongning, wrote a very informative piece on Premi religion based on his fieldwork in Ninglang County. His essay “Investigation into the Religion of the Pumi of Ninglang” (Ninglang xian Pumiizu zongjiao diaocha) was published in a book that appeared in 1991 and was part of the large series of publications that presented the results of extensive ethnographic investigations carried out in the 1950s and 1960s. Yang’s essay contains many detailed ethnographic descriptions of rituals, but unfortunately, its value is somewhat diminished because he seldom mentions place-names or the dates of investigation. Only once does he refer to the time and location of data collection, when he notes that the old hangui of Lakua Village in Hongqiao, Ninglang, was still alive and in good health at the time of the investigation in 1976. This is a common problem in earlier Chinese ethnographic writing and is connected to the supposition that it is possible to uncover a pure and timeless form of the culture of a specific ethnic group; in connection with this, the task of the ethnographer is to present this essentialized version in a generalized way as the specific culture of the specific group. Yang acknowledges that there are differences in practice between the larger geographic areas of Lanping, Lijiang, and Zhongdian, on the one hand, and Ninglang, Muli,
and Yanyuan, on the other. He even mentions occasionally that there are local variations within these regions, but the underlying assumption is that there is a common basis for all Premi religious beliefs and practices, including for Premi who are classified as Tibetans in Muli and Yanyuan in Sichuan. Variations are mostly ascribed to the influence of the cultures of neighboring ethnic groups.

Yang categorizes Premi religious practice in Ninglang as essentially a form of “nature worship” (ziran chongbai) and describes in detail large offering ceremonies to heaven, mountains, and springs. He notes that the most complex of the three, ceremonies of offerings to heaven, were already rarely held in the years immediately after Liberation (1991: 199). In these large clan-based ceremonies, people made offerings to the spirits of heaven, including the sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, thunder, lightning, hail, frost, and fog. This involved the sacrifice of large numbers of animals, and several families within a clan therefore pooled resources to provide some of the larger animals such as oxen, pigs, or sheep. In Yang’s descriptions, the worship of the deities of mountains and springs are reminiscent of the ceremonies held in Bustling Township at the turn of the millennium to worship the mountain deities, the rèdzeng rèda, and the water deities, the lwéjabu. Many elements related to the worship of these deities, such as the existence of sacred woods and trees, are very similar. Yang distinguishes two types of ritual activities: those performed at home and centered on the relationship of the family with the deities, with or without the presence of a hangui, and large clan-based ceremonies held on fixed dates, which stretch over several days and require the sacrifice of many animals. In Bustling Township, large communal ceremonies to mountain or water deities are also held on specific dates of the calendar but only in case of special need, and the whole village participates, not just the clan. This is significant, since Bustling Township is one of the very few Premi areas where jhū, or clan, still plays a role in social life.

According to Yang, the worship of ancestors and totems is among the basic ingredients of Premi religious practice (1991: 202). Totem worship in this case is the practice in which every clan worships a totemic object, usually an animal that it believes is its first ancestor; these are most often the frog, tiger, and dog. Although dogs have a special status and cannot be killed in Bustling Township, as in all other Premi communities I vis-
ated, when questioned on the subject, most people denied that there were particular objects of worship related to specific clans. One anji in Hill Village remembered a few stories telling that the Ts’uop’i clan originated from a tiger. Yang’s description of rituals related to day-to-day ancestor worship could just as easily have been descriptions of what people in Bustling Township currently do; again, however, his description of larger clan-based rituals has no parallel in Bustling Township today. This is also true of the worship of the female deity Badinglamu, which Yang describes as a general feature of Premi religion but is most likely a local cult in the Yongning area originating with the Na people.

A major component of Premi ritual practice in Ninglang at the time of Yang’s fieldwork was a very well developed system for curing disease. Yang characterizes this aspect of hangui practice as “witchcraft” (wushu). He also remarks on the Premi belief that the evil spirits cause most human ailments; as explained in chapter 4, many of the categorizations of these ailments—wet and dry diseases, bad dream diseases, and so on—are used in Bustling Township today. But in Bustling Township, there is now a considerably lower number of categories of diseases, which can to a large extent be attributed to a general improvement in health in the region in the last thirty years.

According to Yang, Premi “witchcraft” is heavily influenced by Tibetan Bön religion (1991: 205). An interesting point is Yang’s claim that the texts used at these rituals, in addition to the usual Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, consisted of texts written in Premi language with Tibetan letters, which he designates “hangui script” (hangui wen). He provides many examples of the content of these texts. Although reminiscent of the few rituals I saw performed in Bustling Township, none of the rituals was based on the kind of texts mentioned by Yang; Bustling Township ritual texts were, except for the occasional recitation of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, based mainly on orally transmitted texts. It is possible that some anji in Bustling Township did possess texts written in Premi language before the destruction of the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution, but by the early 2000s, people in Bustling Township could not remember that these texts had ever existed.

In his account of the “opening of the road” ritual performed at the cremation ceremony—called drwashu in Bustling Township—Yang compares the different routes the soul of the deceased must take in order to
reach the place where the ancestral souls dwell and concludes that the closest common identifiable place is somewhere in Muli. Yang holds that, in contrast to the cosmological beliefs of Bustling Township villagers, the beliefs of the Premi in Ninglang have been greatly influenced by Buddhist concepts such as reincarnation and transmigration (1991: 210).

In premodern Ninglang, the role of the *hangui* in society was significantly more important than that of the *anji* in Bustling Township today. In addition to being ritual experts, Yang argues, *hangui* also mediated in disputes and passed judgment in criminal cases. This last function was related not only to the *hangui*'s special social position in his local community but also to the belief that he could appeal to the deities for help in deciding whether or not a person was guilty of a crime. One method, in use at least until a 1957 case to which Yang refers, consisted of a *hangui* making the concerned parties grope for one of two stones—a black and a white one—in a pot of boiling oil. The party that grabbed the white stone was judged to be innocent. Yang furthermore observes a close association of ritual practice with other aspects of knowledge transmitted from generation to generation, including genealogies, ceremonial customs, local history, stories, and legends. In addition to teaching about ritual, *hangui* also gave instruction on these aspects of local culture and, in this way, functioned not only as bearers but as transmitters of this local culture (1991: 211). This traditional *hangui* role may contribute to an understanding of how a person such as Nima Anji of Walnut Grove came to play such a pivotal role in the revitalization of *anji* practice in Bustling Township.

Yang distinguishes three major branches, or schools, in *hangui* practice: Geimu, Kuaba, and Yinqu. These are the names of three legendary brothers who were students of the first *hangui*, Yishi Dingba, and who each started his own *hangui* branch. Ritualists of these branches traced their genealogies back to the three brothers. One such genealogy recorded by Yang went back forty-two generations, which, he argues, implies that *hangui* have a history of more than one thousand years. In examining the distinctions in ritual practice among the three branches, some of the recurring dualities and oppositions in religious practice in the border areas of Tibet again present themselves (1991: 212–14). The Geimu branch was concerned specifically with doing good: singing praises to the deities, urging people to do good deeds and avoid doing evil deeds. *Hangui* of this branch did not drive away evil spirits but were called upon mainly to per-
form ceremonies to worship the deities and to conduct rites of passage. Recollecting that *ch’wi-p’ö*, or “doing good things,” is one way of designating Buddhism in Bustling Township, it is not surprising that all the Geimu *hangui* had studied for some years in a Buddhist monastery. In contrast to the small number of practitioners of the Geimu branch, the Kuaba branch included many ritualists. The expertise of the *hangui* of this branch was varied: they performed exorcisms of evil spirits, sacrificed domestic animals, performed magic to harm personal enemies, conducted ceremonies related to the ancestor cult, and performed the “opening of the road” ritual at cremations. *Hangui* of the third branch, the Yinqu, specialized in sacrificing animals as well as performing cremation ceremonies and engaged in activities such as conveying divine judgment. Although there were only a few *hangui* of this branch, Yang recounts that they played an important role because they handled ritual services in cases of “unnatural” death. These events, such as a woman dying in childbirth or a suicide, could have catastrophic consequences for a community, and only a Yinqu *hangui* possessed the necessary magical powers to remedy such events. Because Yinqu *hangui* were associated with magic, monks and *hangui* from the other schools looked down on them.

It is obvious from Yang’s study that before the Communist takeover, *hangui* practices were widespread throughout Ninglang and in the two adjacent counties of Muli and Yanyuan in Sichuan. Every family with more than three sons wanted one son to study to become a *hangui*, and, according to Yang, on average, every village had more than ten practicing *hangui*. In Zuosuo in Sichuan, very close to Yongning, the village of Taozi was famed as a “*hangui* village”: with a population of forty-two households, it could boast twenty-eight practicing *hangui* (1991: 214). Interestingly, Yang remarks that although *hangui* activities decreased after the 1950s, in recent years—and by this he presumably refers to a period not too remote from his publication date of 1991—young people have again begun to study *hangui*, especially village cadres and people who left school after finishing “junior middle school” (*chuzhong*). The survey I undertook in the mid-and-late 1990s did not really support this claim for Ninglang County; then again, Yang himself does not make clear whether he is referring only to this county in this context or whether he also includes the areas of Muli and Yanyuan.
THE HANGUI SCHOOL OF CHICKEN FOOT VILLAGE

Chicken Foot is a Premi village of about eight hundred people, situated no more than half an hour by bus from the county capital of Ninglang, Daxingzhen. Houses in Chicken Foot Village resemble those in many other traditional agricultural villages in northwestern Yunnan because of their construction method, which combines the pressed earth technique for the ground floor with a wooden structure for the first floor. At first glance, the most noticeable difference between the houses of Chicken Foot Village and the log houses in Bustling Township is not their construction method but the strikingly larger size and better condition of the houses. Many houses in Chicken Foot Village have glass windows and concrete courtyards, and all the roofs are tile covered. This last feature contrasts markedly with the shabby-looking roofs in Bustling Township, which consist of loose planks held in place by heavy stones.

As with all the villages in Bustling Township, Chicken Foot Village is also an agricultural village. Most families still work on the plot of land, averaging ten mu, that they have contracted from the collective. In contrast to Bustling Township, however, in the last ten to fifteen years, people in Chicken Foot Village have abandoned subsistence farming. Many of the crops they produce are now sold on the market, and in most families, there is at least one person who has a paid job outside the village. In recent years, an increasing number of families have begun to rent out their land to poor Nuosu living across the valley. All in all, in the local context of a poor county in Southwest China, Chicken Foot Village has fared rather well economically. At the time of my fieldwork, there had been electricity for several years, and all the houses I visited had a television set. Judging by the ten families I interviewed in Chicken Foot Village, it seems clear that the general level of education was significantly higher than in Bustling Township. This is not so surprising in view of the fact that a junior middle school is just a fifteen-minutes walk from the village, and a “senior middle school” (gaozhong) and several technical secondary schools are located in the county capital, half an hour from the village by bus. In contrast to Bustling Township, the county-town, by virtue of its proximity, provides a job market, where acquired skills can be put to use, in this way greatly motivat-
ing young people to participate in the educational opportunities available.

As a result of broad participation in the Chinese educational system, Chinese language is understood and spoken by most people under the age of sixty in the village, although Premi is still the major language of communication within the village. Villagers also point to many other aspects of their lives as ethnic markers that distinguish them from surrounding ethnic groups such as the Han and the Nuosu. For example, on festive occasions, the women of Chicken Foot Village put on their traditional pleated skirts and arrange their hair in the typical Premi fashion, which involves braiding black woolen threads into it and winding it around the head. The Premi of Chicken Foot Village also have not adopted the custom of the surrounding Han of burying the dead, remaining loyal to the tradition of cremation and guiding the soul back to the ancestral lands. Furthermore, they honor their ancestors by offering some food to them before each meal on the iron tripod in the fireplace, and on the sacred offering stone next to it. Cremation ceremonies are now conducted exclusively by yèma, or Buddhist lay priests, without the traditional participation of a hangui. Unfortunately, the last practicing hangui of Chicken Foot Village had passed away only a short time before my first visit in 1998; as he had not had any students, the tradition died with him. Several young boys from the village had just entered the newly rebuilt Samye Gompa at Daxingzhen to become monks, and several people considered the defunct hangui tradition to be something rightly belonging to the past.

When discussing this tradition, the expression mixin, “superstition” or “confused beliefs,” often popped up, reflecting familiarity with official Chinese discourse on nonmainstream religious practice. This did not mean that villagers interpreted official policy as condemning hangui ritual practice as superstition; although some villagers held such views themselves, many others were uncertain. As one sixty-three-year-old man exclaimed in exasperation: “What constitutes superstition and what constitutes religion is something we, common people, are not clear about!” (Shenme shi mixin, sheme shi zongjiao, women laobaixing bu qingchu!). But there are also other opinions on the hangui tradition of Chicken Foot Village and other Premi places in the area. A small number of elderly cadres from the county government, most of them originating from Chicken Foot Village, had become interested in many aspects of Premi culture. After they retired, this interest developed into a desire to “restore” what
they saw as some of the most salient and important parts of this culture, the *hangui* tradition. One of them was Waija Dorje Tsering (Premi name), who had held a leading position in Ninglang’s Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Another was Hu Jingming, also from the CPPCC and the son of Hu Wanqing, who was famed for informing Premier Zhou Enlai about the existence of the Premi in Yunnan and, as such, for being instrumental in bringing about official recognition of the Premi as a national minority. On a subsequent visit in 2000, I found that these cadres had started a veritable *hangui* school in Chicken Foot Village and had contracted as the teacher an old friend of mine, Nima Anji from Walnut Grove. The *anji* tradition of Bustling Township had been “discovered” not only by a foreign anthropologist but also by urbanized Premi elites from the neighboring province.

The presentation of their restoration project in a modern PRC context is tellingly illustrated in a pamphlet issued in October 2000 to raise funds for the *hangui* school. It was distributed to those families in Chicken Foot Village whose members generated income by working outside the village:

Make your contribution to the continuation of the *hangui* religion!

From ancient times up to the present, [it has been the case that] a nationality that does not have religious beliefs is an ignorant nationality; the religious beliefs of the Pumi Nationality [Pumizu] is the “*hangui* religion.” “*Hangui* religion” is the culture of the Pumi Nationality. The “*hangui*” is the person who takes care of the ceremonial customs among the social activities of the Pumi people. Whether in holding activities such as festival rites or marriage and funeral customs, gathering the people to discuss official business, going on military or punitive expeditions, and so on, all this was bound to be led by the “*hangui*” offering sacrifices. Over the long course of our history, he, with his religious rules, has provided ceremonial, ethical, and behavioral norms for conduct in human life; with his religious doctrines, he has nurtured the multiplying lives of our every generation, the traces of the civilized culture of our forefathers that have been kept until this day, making it hard for us to forget. At one time, it [*hangui* religion] constituted the spiritual pillar for the Pumi Nationality, for over the course of a people’s long history, the old and rich ethnic traditional culture sometimes had its peculiarities. Nowadays, this
can still be one of the important elements in constructing a “Socialist civilization with Chinese characteristics” [Zhongguo tese de shehui zhuyi wenming] and in establishing “a province with ethnic culture” [minzu wenhua sheng]. By taking advantage of the favorable situation to make use of the old and the contemporary, we can transform the old by getting rid of the rough while grasping the essence and by getting rid of the false while retaining the true. In order to serve the development of the economy and culture into the twenty-first century, it is also valuable to increase the popularity of one’s own nationality.

As a result of several social factors, the continuation of the outstanding culture of the Pumi Nationality, the “hangui religion,” has been broken—prayer halls, texts, and religious instruments have been completely destroyed—and this has resulted in the decline and confusion of the nationality, leading to ethnic self-confidence being strongly impaired. Although, ever since the Third Plenary Session of the Tenth Central Committee, our county has earnestly implemented the policies of “freedom of religious beliefs” and “respect for minority nationalities’ customs,” it has all along been unable to reverse the loss.

As former government and party cadres, the authors were clearly aware of how to frame their arguments within the limitations of prevailing official policies and discourses. Religious practice in China is strictly regulated, and in general, only practice defined as part of one of the five official religions is accepted. Folk religious practices such as ancestor cults have been officially frowned upon, but in the case of ethnic minorities, such practices can be defined as part of the ethnic minority’s culture and therefore, in principle, are tolerated and protected by legislation such as the Autonomy Law for National Minorities (Shaoshu Minzu Zizhifa). The authors’ statement that the “hangui religion” is the culture of the Pumi is therefore intended not so much to convince possible donors as to justify their project within the official framework. Furthermore, they firmly place the project within the modernization discourse of the post-Mao period by referring to the focus on nationalism (Chinese characteristics) and the provincial-level drive to commodify ethnic culture in order to attract tourists (establish a province with ethnic culture). They express their strong conviction that the so-called hangui religion can be adapted to fit this framework.

The rest of the pamphlet is addressed to possible donors:
On the grounds of pressing demands and hopes of elderly fellow townspeople over the last many years, we have been looking everywhere for a teacher who is carrying on the “hangui” tradition. In the autumn of 1999, we engaged the famous teacher of religious scriptures [Nima Anji] from Muli County in Sichuan, and with the help of the cadres [names of three cadres], it was decided in consultation with the popular will to run a class to carry on the tradition of “hangui religion” in [Chicken Foot Village]. The time limit will be three years, and a monthly salary of ¥600 amounts to a total of ¥21,600 for the three years. When we have come to the end of the teaching period, comrade [name of cadre] also promised to give the teacher ¥2,000 and a big riding mule as a farewell present for his return home.

The teaching of carrying on the tradition of the “hangui religion” starts at this year’s “Grave Sweeping” festival. Currently there are five apprentices, and starting in the spring of next year there will be seven; altogether, there will be two classes with more than ten apprentices. We plan to construct a scripture hall and purchase scriptures and religious instruments. When this cost is added to the remuneration for the scripture teacher, expenses will be pretty high. At the moment, our home village has barely attained the level of having adequate warm clothing and enough to eat; it still has not escaped from poverty. If we are only able to rely on the income of the peasants, we will not be able to achieve major undertakings; instead, we must rely on the assistance of our fellow villagers who work outside the village.

The Pumi Nationality, standing on its own in the forest of nationalities in the world, must continuously seek its own road to subsistence and development, knowing the main principles and looking after the interests of the nation, knowing its past, recognizing its present, and looking into the future. At present, it is the springtime season for greatly developing nationality culture; we must not let the opportunity slip. We hope that all those working outside the township—the Party and government cadres, workers and staff members, enterprise managers, merchants with breadth of vision, and intellectuals—will follow with interest the development of our hometown and the progress of our nationality. As to giving a fitting amount of support, give what you can afford: [if you have] a lot, [you can give] a couple of thousand; [if you have] a little, [you can give] a few hundred. But for the continuation of the “hangui religion” of our fellow townsmen and our nationality, please make some contribution!
Fellow townspeople, in order to rescue the culture of the “hangui religion” of the Pumi Nationality, we hope that in your different job positions you will carry on our concerted effort, strive for solidarity, have the courage to assume your social duties, and [carry on] our nationality’s traditional spirit of almsgiving. Our fellow townspeople look forward to your close and long friendship.

Responsibility for management of the funds will be borne by the retired county-town cadre [name of cadre]. Please, fellow townspeople, hand your contribution over to him before New Year’s Day.

Expecting to see you at Spring Festival in our hometown,
I hereby wish you a successful project!
Village committee of [Chicken Foot Village]
5 October 2000

The campaign had brought in ¥10,000 by the end of 2001. Somebody donated as much as ¥3,500, but most people gave ¥100–300. The first class, which started in the spring of 2000, was held in the existing school buildings of Chicken Foot Village, after normal classes were finished. Later, the local people refurbished a few unused buildings at the school to provide living quarters for Nima Anji and a room for teaching, practicing rituals, and keeping religious implements. The first five apprentices were all young men in their early twenties from Chicken Foot Village. Three had finished junior middle school, and one had even studied one year at senior middle school. Nima Anji was a demanding teacher, knowing that he had only three years to bring his students to a level that they would be able to conduct most rituals by themselves. In addition to learning to read and recite Tibetan texts, hangui-to-be were required to memorize countless rituals as well as all the intricacies of Premi cosmology as it had been transmitted in Walnut Grove. Most of this knowledge was entirely new to the apprentices, except for one student who had studied for four months in 1999 with an anji colleague of Nima Anji’s in Walnut Grove. Not all apprentices were equal to the task, and during the first year, two of the five apprentices were kicked out. Given the yearly tuition fee of ¥650, regular fees for copies of ritual texts, and the prospect of having to invest in a full “hangui suit,” the apprentices admitted that motivation had to be strong. This did not deter other hopefuls, and in the following years, the number of new apprentices increased steadily. In 2004, there were eight
students in the two advanced classes and twelve in the beginners’ class. Many of these students were around fifteen years old, or even younger, and came from Premi villages all over Ninglang County. Since many of these places were as far as several days’ journey from Chicken Foot Village, these students boarded at the school. Two classes had finished the whole three-year course, and most of these first new hangui had returned to their villages to start their practice, while a few had stayed on to help teach the new classes.

The spiraling expansion of hangui teaching is certainly an expression of a larger interest in the hangui tradition among Premi in Ninglang. Although a select elite initiated the project, the response it provoked could indicate a more general concern with what Premi perceive to be important elements of their culture. In a modernizing society, such elements play a central role in the construction of ethnic identity. The hangui school is just one of several such activities taking place in Ninglang, not a few of which involve Nima Anji and the retired cadres. During my earlier visit, an altar to offer sacrifices to heaven was being constructed on a hilltop near Chicken Foot Village, and in the village itself, several families had received advice on how to turn one of the rooms in their houses into a hlidzê", or prayer hall. On my visit in 2004, I learned that Nima Anji, while still teaching in Chicken Foot Village, had moved into the house of one of the CPPCC cadres in Daxingzhen. They were collecting rituals—both the written Tibetan texts as well as the orally transmitted Premi “texts”—and planned to translate and publish them. Of the twelve kinds of ritual texts, they had found versions of ten, consisting of more than nine hundred parts. They still had not located any versions of rituals related to Premi medicine or those used for making people ill. As mentioned earlier, it was especially the latter category of Tibetan-language texts that had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. A publishing house had already agreed on a contract for a book, and out of philological considerations, the book would contain both the original “text” in the international phonetic alphabet and the translation in Chinese. In order to preserve the iconographic tradition, Nima Anji was also going to provide paintings used in the different rituals. Another retired cadre was working on a dictionary project and was on his way to Kunming to conclude a contract with a publishing house. Not all of the initiatives were as successful: an attempt to establish the Pumi Research Centre in Hongqiao
on the road between Ninglang and the tourist spot of Lugu Lake collapsed due to lack of funds.\textsuperscript{13}

It is probably too early to determine whether this interest in \textit{hangui} tradition in Ninglang can be termed a genuine revival. Additional fieldwork is needed to find out whether newly educated \textit{hangui} will come to play a role comparable to that of \textit{anji} in Bustling Township. It is obvious that in spite of their different histories and different official ethnic classification, the Premi in Muli and Ninglang are culturally closely related. This is borne out by the fact that the most important \textit{anji} from Bustling Township in Sichuan, Nima Anji, is at the center of the \textit{hangui} resurrection project in Yunnan. At this level, the Ninglang elites who initiated this project do not care that Nima Anji is classified as a Tibetan. The Chinese state has recognized their separate ethnic identity of Premi as Pumizu, and Nima Anji is a crucial means of infusing this identity with meaningful cultural content. Their project is therefore entirely in line with the official discourses on religion and ethnic identity. As things stand at the start of the new millennium, none of the Tibetan elites in Muli would include Nima Anji in any project to revitalize religious practice in their county. For that, his ritual expertise is not only entirely redundant but, to some extent, presents a threat to the officially sanctioned version of Muli as a culturally Tibetan territory.