Empire and Identity in Guizhou

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Published by University of Washington Press

Weinstein, Jodi L.  
Empire and Identity in Guizhou: Local Resistance to Qing Expansion.  
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Qing China’s Manchu rulers faced special challenges in legitimizing and consolidating their rule over Guizhou. In other newly acquired territories such as Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, and even southern Yunnan, the foreign origins of the Qing ruling house offered certain advantages. The Manchus could adopt Ming institutions and bureaucratic procedures for ruling the Han population, and could employ a variety of techniques, inherent in their own tradition, to rule the vast amounts of territory and the non-Han populations that had been incorporated into the Qing empire.

The heritage of the Manchus, especially their practice of Tibetan Buddhism and their martial and nomadic tradition, opened many avenues for legitimizing the extension of Qing rule. The Qianlong emperor even had himself portrayed in artwork as a bodhisattva in order to improve relations with Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhists. Strategic marriages with rival royal families in the north and northwest helped to secure alliances on those frontiers. In southern Yunnan, officials made an effort to understand and accommodate the traditions and institutions of the native Tai population. From the Qing perspective, the relationship of the Tai’s Theravada Buddhism to their own school of Buddhism—as well as the Tai’s sophisticated political organizations—made it possible to categorize these southern people as “acceptable barbarians.” For their part, Tai aris-
tocrats could downplay their subservience while emphasizing the benefits of mutual accommodation.²

In Central Asia and southern Yunnan, common points of reference not only legitimized Qing territorial claims, but also served as the foundation for what has been termed the Qianlong emperor’s “pluralist configuration of empire.” That is, the Qing reached a kind of mutual accommodation with local populations by appropriating indigenous beliefs, symbols, and writing systems. The Manchus, Han, Mongolians, Muslims, and Tibetans constituted five culture blocs that comprised the principal domains of the Qing realm. Each enjoyed an equivalent position in the Qing imperial polity under a “universal Heaven” represented by the emperor himself. The equal status of the five groups was symbolized by multilingual inscriptions in Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Uighur, which were found on steles, gates, and public edifices throughout the Qing realm.³ Also symbolic were two major multilingual publications of the eighteenth century, the *Imperially Authorized Mirror of the Five Scripts of Qing Letters* (Wuti Qingwen jian) and the *Imperially Commissioned Unified-language Gazetteer of the Western Regions* (Qinding xiyu tongwen zhi). The latter, completed in 1763, is a geographical and genealogical dictionary of western-region place names and personal names (in Manchu, Chinese, two Mongolian languages, Tibetan, and Uighur). The work was intended primarily as an aid in the compilation of military histories and imperial gazetteers. It also helped standardize Chinese transliterations of these non-Chinese names, thus avoiding confusion in field reports to the court as well as in historiography. Even more importantly, this dictionary represented what Millward calls “an exercise in imperial scholarship and scholarly imperialism, a linguistic conquest to consolidate both practically and symbolically the military victories already achieved.”⁴

In Guizhou, however, Qing rulers and officials confronted what must have seemed like a mind-boggling array of languages and traditions. Here, the Manchu heritage did not afford any particular advantage or status, and common points of cultural and religious reference were virtually nonexistent. Qing officials were unable to grasp any institutions or symbols upon which to build the relationships of mutual accommodation found in other frontier regions. Multilingual inscriptions and dictionaries were a practical impossibility, for most Guizhou ethnic groups lacked writing systems. So unfamiliar and so apparently uncivilized were the
Guizhou indigenes that most literati simply derided them as barbarians. However, barbarians or not, Guizhou indigenes had come under Qing jurisdiction, and officials needed a way to understand and control them. In this context, the production of knowledge about frontier areas and the peoples who inhabited them gained increasing importance.5

One product of the demand for information on Guizhou was Aibida’s *Handbook of Guizhou* (*Qiannan shilue*). Aibida compiled this book for his own reference and for the benefit of future administrators while serving as Guizhou governor in the early 1750s. He condensed information from local gazetteers and other contemporary geographic writings into a single, handy volume, organizing his material according to geographic region. Each of the thirty-two chapters is devoted to the political history, economy, climate, and population of a single administrative unit.6 Aside from its practical function, the handbook carried considerable symbolic value. To refer to the concepts introduced in chapter 3, the volume functioned as a catalogue of the state spaces the Qing had delineated within Guizhou. The very act of committing geographic information to paper signaled that these sections of Guizhou had become part of the world known to—and under the jurisdiction of—the Qing state.

Ethnographic accounts found in local gazetteers, the *Qing Imperial Illustration of Tributaries*, and especially the Miao albums, also became crucial administrative tools during the Qianlong reign. The Miao albums were illustrated manuscripts that described non-Han populations in the southern Chinese provinces. Each manuscript featured illustrations and texts that defined and categorized the different groups that inhabited a given province. The genre began as an administrative document designed by, and intended for the use of, officials responsible for governing the peoples therein. Each album entry featured a detailed illustration of a particular non-Han population with a caption noting the group’s geographic location, economic activities, physical attributes, clothing and hairstyle, religious practices and festivals, and marriage and funeral customs. Some captions also described the dietary habits of a given group, commented on the extent of Chinese proficiency among its members, and even made pronouncements on the general “nature” of the population.7 An entry on the Bulong Zhongjia, for example, highlights not only the group’s funeral customs, but also points to a potential for unruliness: “At funerals, cattle are butchered and dressed, and relatives and friends are invited. Drinking
from the ‘ox-horn of happiness, the guests often get drunk and sometimes even wind up killing each other. . . . By nature, the Bulong are alert and fierce. When coming and going, they carry sharp knives. They will avenge even an angry look.” Such descriptions served a dual purpose. On a practical and administrative level, they provided valuable information to local officials dealing with non-Han populations. On a cultural and ideological level, they helped establish where a given group fell on a continuum from “like the Han” (yu Hanren tong) to savage or in some way “other.” However, this rubric went beyond a simple dualistic conception of barbarian versus civilized. It measured a group’s distance from Sinocentric ideals by considering a variety of different criteria. As a result, a group might be drawing closer to certain ideals even as it lagged behind on certain others. This complex formulary might help to account for the contradictory and ever-changing portrayals of the Zhongjia noted in chapter 2. At the same time, the depiction of various non-Han groups enabled the Qing to exalt the ethnic diversity within their realm. In this respect, the Miao albums roughly paralleled the multilingual inscriptions and dictionaries employed in Central Asia. The albums also represented an exercise in imperial scholarship and scholarly imperialism, in this case an attempt at artistic conquest designed to consolidate both practically and symbolically the military and administrative goals achieved in Guizhou.

There was, however, a crucial distinction between the multilingual works and the Miao albums. Whereas the inclusion of a given Central Asian language in a gate inscription or dictionary affirmed that the ethnic group now ranked among equals with the other cultural blocs of China, representation in the Miao albums signaled that a given ethnic group was, in theory at least, subordinate to the Qing. The very act of ethnographic depiction signifies an unequal power dynamic. Those who do the depicting—writers and illustrators working at the behest of a colonial or imperial authority—control the process of defining or constructing the identity of the ethnic groups described. Those who are depicted—members of the ethnic groups described—do not have the chance to participate in this process, or to ensure that their own opinions and self-perceptions are incorporated into official depictions. The governing logic, it seemed, was that even if the peoples described in the Miao albums had opinions about those who depicted them, they had only limited power to convey their views in ways persuasive to those in power.
However, this logic suggests a hard binary of dominance and subjugation that did not exist in southwestern Guizhou. This book has explored the other side of the story—that of a people who refused to accept the subordinate status assigned to them and who found ways to communicate their resentment to those in power. The Miao albums codified the indigenes’ inferior status for Qing authorities, but not for the indigenes themselves. As previous chapters have shown, many local residents found creative ways to circumvent Qing laws and norms, and thus preserve their own identities. The perseverance of local residents prevented the Qing from achieving a total monopolization of cultural, political, and economic space in Guizhou, and limited the imperial enterprise to what Peter Perdue terms a “hegemonic project with incomplete results.”

Qing domination, at least in the military, administrative, and geopolitical sense, was more or less a given: the Zhongjia were too small in number for real resistance, and they had only existed as semi-autonomous entities within the Chinese imperium, never as independent kingdoms. The Zhongjia never harbored illusions of breaking free and establishing an independent state. The trick was to maintain as much room to maneuver as possible and, if possible, negotiate a little more.

LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES

This book has explored the ways that the Zhongjia of Qing-dominated eighteenth-century Guizhou maintained—and sometimes expanded—their room to maneuver through their livelihood choices. Many Zhongjia faced poverty and a dearth of economic opportunities. However, a few Zhongjia with creative resources—that is, those who possessed literacy, religious training, martial arts skills, or supposed supernatural powers—found ways to make their own economic opportunities. Such individuals sometimes attracted the less fortunate (and more easily duped) and enticed credulous followers to participate in illicit activities with a strong anti-Qing flavor. This produced a temporary and fragile new social order, in which a few poor but resourceful indigenes gained some power, thanks to support from their poorer and less resourceful brethren. This new order pivoted on a relationship that was exploitative in the sense that the leaders preyed on their followers’ desperation by manipulating their superstitious
beliefs. At the same time, the relationship between leader and followers was also symbiotic because all parties benefited in one way or another. For example, ringleaders like Wei Qiluoxu and Ran Jing, described in chapter 4, were able to realize their own fantasies of wealth and power; at the same time, their followers also gained new wealth while imagining themselves as participants in an important social movement that would create a world free of oppression. Most important of all, ringleaders and followers alike shared the desire to negate the existing order.\footnote{16}

To be sure, there was an element of coercion in these movements, and many followers only joined under threat of death. Still others joined out of sheer gullibility. But for many followers, taking part in illegal schemes or rebellions represented a rational choice. The impoverished residents of central and southwestern Guizhou understood that they could either passively accept their straitened circumstances or pursue extralegal livelihood choices.\footnote{17} After weighing their limited options, many chose the extralegal route. This calculated disregard for the law persisted well into the nineteenth century in Guizhou, when residents persisted in growing and selling opium despite government prohibitions. Even after Qing officials tried to substitute other cash crops for poppy, peasants continued to grow opium because it was more profitable than other crops.\footnote{18}

The local Guizhou ethos that favored local livelihoods over imperial fiat undermined Qing plans in the region. As discussed in chapter 2, government officials of the Yongzheng period went to great lengths to impose order on Guizhou and its people. Qing policy showcased the Qing government’s newfound ability to “see like a state,” that is, to implement schemes of legibility and standardization that would enable the central government to extend its reach into the remotest areas.\footnote{19} Such policies gave the Qing state a firmer foothold in some areas of central and southwestern Guizhou, but instead of making the region more tractable overall, these policies only generated resentment and resistance from the local population. Even as the government showed an increasing capacity to “see like a state,” the people of Guizhou exhibited an equal talent for throwing sand in the state’s eyes.\footnote{20}

Clearly, then, Qing rule did not deprive indigenous communities of their voice or their agency. Frequent, creative resistance enabled local residents to maintain a continual dialogue with imperial authorities—an unceasing argument about power, authority, and legitimacy.\footnote{21} The
instances of unrest examined in this book were, in essence, episodes in an ongoing dialogue between the Qing state and the people of Guizhou. On numerous occasions, the Qing state tried to end the argument by silencing local voices through punitive measures or military suppression. But new sets of local speakers continually emerged to resume the discussion, preventing the Qing state from ever gaining full control over cultural and political space. Qing rule was therefore not hegemonic, but rather a hegemonic project with incomplete results.22

The remainder of this chapter explores the unfulfilled hegemonic enterprise in Guizhou by returning to three larger issues raised throughout the book. First, I examine the nature of Qing colonialism and imperialism in Guizhou. As suggested in chapter 3, the attitudes and policies of Qing officials indicate that the imperial government viewed the Dingfan-Guangshun and Nanlong regions as something akin to colonial space—specifically as internal frontiers to pacify, civilize, and domesticate. Next, I locate a place for Guizhou’s indigenes, particularly the Zhongjia, in the Qing vision of multicultural empire, elaborating upon Emma Teng’s assertion that ethnic groups in Taiwan and southwestern China were superfluous to this vision. I suggest that this superfluous—that is, a position on the margins of empire—could confer a great degree of power and autonomy to an ethnic group, particularly in the case of the Zhongjia. Finally, I briefly discuss the legacy of Qing rule in Guizhou today. As in imperial times, local communities still manage to resist (or negotiate their way around) state directives to preserve indigenous livelihoods, and in some cases create new ones. State hegemony in Guizhou, therefore, remains at best incomplete.

**THE COLONIAL CONCEPT IN GUIZHOU**

Qing expansion in the regions of Dingfan-Guangshun and Nanlong had little to do with the resource extraction usually associated with colonialism. Instead, the annexation of indigenous lands was above all an attempt to ensure that the emperor’s writ extended to all corners of the realm, and to create administrative order where none had existed before. Yongzheng-era policy envisioned the pacification of indigenous populations, reinforced by administrative, moral, and cultural transformations. Such mea-
sures amounted to what Stevan Harrell has called a “Confucian civilizing project.” That is, Qing authorities attempted to bring indigenous populations to heel by introducing the presumed benefits of Chinese moral and cultural standards. In contrast, James Scott prefers to view civilizing projects as attempts at domestication, that is, “a kind of social gardening devised to make the countryside, its products, and its inhabitants more readily identifiable and accessible to the center.” I would argue that the Qing enterprise in Guizhou involved both civilizing and domestication. The aims of the Qing government included the moral transformations Harrell describes, as well as the social and administrative changes that concern Scott. Qing authorities believed that the twin processes of civilizing and domestication would reinforce each other, ultimately transforming the region’s geopolitical and human landscapes.

Few if any of these transformations came to fruition. The Qing venture in central and southwestern Guizhou stands out as a project of civilizing and domestication with less than satisfactory results. In this context, a project refers to a set of objectives that may never be realized, with outcomes that may deviate wildly from the anticipated. When Peter Perdue and Stevan Harrell write of hegemonic and civilizing projects, we can infer that they mean goals articulated but incomplete in the face of resistance from targeted populations. Nicholas Thomas promotes a similar idea when he defines a project as a transformative endeavor that involves “... a particular imagination of the social situation, with its history and projected future, and a diagnosis of what is lacking, that can be rectified by intervention, by conservation, by bullets, or by welfare.” Thomas also stresses that “... projects are of course often projected rather than realized; because of their confrontation with indigenous interests ... [they are] frequently deflected or enacted farcically or incompletely.” The idea of goals projected but largely unfulfilled aptly describes the Qing attempts at civilizing and domesticating central and southwestern Guizhou.

**THE ZHONGJIA IN THE MULTICULTURAL QING EMPIRE: TOWARD A HIERARCHY OF PERIPHERAL PEOPLES**

The Qianlong emperor envisioned the Qing Empire as a “great unity” (datong) of five domains: Manchu, Mongol, Han, Tibetan, and Muslim.
The status of these five “culture blocs,” was signified through the use of Manchu, Mongolian, Chinese, Tibetan, and Turki/Arabic for multilingual imperial inscriptions on gates, stelae, and monuments. In this imperial ideology, which James Millward calls “Five Nations, Under Heaven,” the emperor claimed to rule impartially over his diverse subjects. Millward provides a diagram for this model in which the five major culture blocs occupy parallel positions centered on the Qing imperial house. At the center of Millward’s model is not an abstract “Chinese civilization,” but the Qing emperor himself, who showed a different face to each of the five blocs, yet did not favor one above the other—at least not in the ideal system.27

Notably absent from the five blocs are the Guizhou indigenes—or indeed any of southwest China’s non-Han populations. Far from enjoying the emperor’s impartial benevolence, it appears that they were targets of official chauvinism. Although Qing authorities stopped using derogatory language to describe Mongols and Uighurs after their homelands were incorporated into the empire, derogatory terms continued to appear in government communications about Guizhou’s ethnic groups. As noted in chapter 2, Qing officials made particularly liberal use of the “dog” character component when writing about the Zhongjia.

If the Qing emperor claimed to be an impartial ruler over diverse peoples, then why accord different status to different ethnic groups? Quite simply, it was because the Tibetans, Mongols, Manchus, Turks, and Chinese were, in fact, national political entities, at least in the pre-modern mode of being national. In contrast, most southwestern peoples were not such political entities, with the possible exception of some Tai polities, which were treated administratively like the Inner and Central Asian groups—although these Tai groups never reached the theoretical political level of the five nations under Heaven.28 Given the limited role in the national polity available to these Guizhou outlier groups, was there a place in the Qing vision of multicultural empire for peoples who did not constitute national political entities? Some answers may lie in Emma Teng’s work on Taiwan. She explains that a combination of cultural and political factors excluded the island’s indigenes from the Qing concept of “great unity.” Unlike the Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, and Chinese, the Taiwan indigenes did not contribute to the creation and development of the Qing state.29 Moreover, the Qing did not view Taiwan indigenes as a “nation”
because they lacked centralized leadership. Without a king, a khan, or prince, these Taiwan residents appeared to be no more than a collection of primitive tribes. Teng also notes a vast difference in the cultural status the Qing accorded the Taiwan indigenes and the Five Nations. The indigenes had no written language, no genealogies, no history, no recognizable religion, and above all, no recognizable state. Without these key elements, Taiwan’s indigenes could never rise to the level of the five culture blocs. Thus, the Qing made no effort to codify their language and culture in imperially sponsored dictionaries, or in vast multilingual gazetteers such as the *Imperially Commissioned Unified Language Gazetteer of the Western Regions*. Instead, Taiwan’s indigenous people became the subjects of ethnographic writings on “savage customs.”

In every respect, then, the Taiwan indigenes were peripheral to Qing interests and occupied at best a secondary status in the multicultural realm. Accordingly, Teng creates a place for them in Millward’s schemata by adding a second tier beyond the five major cultural blocs. I would also place the Guizhou indigenes on this second tier, although the Zhongjia might be a fraction closer to the five major blocs than the various ethnic groups on Taiwan. I limit my comments here to the Zhongjia because they have received the most attention in this book.

If we look again at the political and cultural criteria Teng lists as prerequisites for inclusion in the “Great Unity,” it appears that the Zhongjia came marginally closer to meeting them than did the Taiwan indigenes. First, as noted in chapter 3, the Sicheng native official played an important role in helping Qing generals defeat the Southern Ming remnants in Guizhou. In this way, the Zhongjia made a small contribution to the development and consolidation of the Qing Empire—a contribution that was certainly smaller than the Mongols or the Manchus but greater than the Taiwan indigenes. Secondly, although the Zhongjia did not constitute what the Qing viewed as a “nation,” they did have readily recognizable leaders in their native officials, at least until the native official system was mostly dismantled in the 1720s. Moreover, native officials’ families maintained genealogies to facilitate the succession process. This gave the Zhongjia a history of sorts, although the Qing would never grant this history the same legitimacy they gave the history of the Mongols, Manchus, or Tibetans. In addition, most Zhongjia communities maintained a clear political structure with easily identifiable leaders. These were usually vil-
lage headmen who, in theory at least, were directly answerable to Qing authorities. Finally and most fundamentally, gaitu guiliu made the Zhongjia full subjects of the Qing Empire by bringing them under the emperor’s direct authority. The Taiwan indigenes, by contrast, did not gain recognition as full subjects until late in the nineteenth century.32

These political and cultural factors combined to give the Zhongjia a slightly higher status than the Taiwan indigenes. This marginally higher position did not, of course, give the Zhongjia any special privileges. They would never be partners in empire, nor could they even attain the level of the Tai in southern Yunnan, whom the Qing accorded a special status for their role as a buffer between China and the powerful kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia. These distinctions suggest that there was a hierarchy of peripheral peoples on Teng’s proposed second tier, with the Tai on top, the Zhongjia somewhere in the middle, and the Taiwan indigenes and the Miao (Hmong) close to the bottom.

That such a hierarchy existed gives lie to the notion of the emperor’s impartial love. Only those groups with a sufficiently high cultural and political level—the Han, Manchu, Muslims, Tibetans, and Mongolians—received imperial favor.33 Those deemed culturally inferior—the Taiwanese aborigines and most southwestern indigenes—became the targets of Qing civilizing projects. However, participation in these projects was no guarantee of acceptance in the eyes of imperial authorities. Guizhou provincial officials occasionally remarked that some Zhongjia were “no different from the Han” because they had adopted Chinese clothing, spoke reasonable Mandarin, and had learned to read and write. But the simple fact that officials made such observations suggests that the Zhongjia were indeed still different from the Han in the eyes of Qing officialdom. If the Zhongjia were truly indistinguishable from the Han, then not even the most acute observer would have been able to differentiate between an acculturated Zhongjia and a true Han.

Moreover, being “no different from the Han” did not confer the same status as being Han. For a Zhongjia to be “no different from the Han” simply meant that he had assumed the trappings of Han culture, not that he had actually become Han.34 In terms of Millward and Teng’s schemata of the Qing multicultural world, this meant that a Zhongjia could not move from the second tier of peripheral peoples to the primary tier of the five culture blocs. The Qing world, then, appears not as a broadly inclusive
multicultural realm, but rather a rigid two-tiered society. On the first tier were the partners in empire. On the second tier were the peripheral peoples of southwestern China and Taiwan. The peripheral peoples were encouraged and sometimes even forced to change, but not even total conformity to Han cultural norms would elevate them to the status of partners in empire.

The findings in this book suggest that the Zhongjia and other ethnic groups in Guizhou recognized and even embraced their marginal status. Unlike the Han, Manchu, Mongols, Tibetans, and Muslims, the Zhongjia had only a conditional stake in the Qing Empire. They could only become partners in empire if they advanced toward culture (xianghua) and effectively ceased to be Zhongjia. Faced with such a dilemma, many chose not to advance toward mainstream Chinese culture and instead to advance in their own way, by making the livelihood choices that best suited their economic and cultural needs. Their peripheral status gave the Zhongjia license to pursue their livelihood choices—and, when the state interfered, gave them more opportunities to rebel. By relegating these Guizhou indigenes to a marginal position, the Qing government effectively rendered them ungovernable—a great irony in view of the various Qing efforts to make the region more tractable. In the end, this peripheral status may have been the indigenes’ greatest asset in their quest for cultural and economic autonomy.

GUIZHOU TODAY

It now remains to take a brief look at contemporary Guizhou. The province is still one of China’s poorest, and for many of its inhabitants, living conditions have not improved appreciably since the eighteenth century. One mitigating factor is that current inhabitants now enjoy a wider range of economic opportunities and livelihood choices than did their ancestors during the imperial period. Instead of resorting to banditry and rebellion, young people in search of better prospects can leave Guizhou for the booming coastal province of Guangdong, where they can find work in manufacturing or construction. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, social discontent is not uncommon in Guizhou. In 2002, for example, retired workers from the state-owned Guiyang Steel
Factory blocked two major highways to protest their low pensions. Six years later, during the summer of 2008, residents of the southern Guizhou town of Weng’an set fire to government buildings to protest an alleged police cover-up in the rape and murder of a teenage girl.

It is true that such incidents are not unique to Guizhou and increasing numbers of people throughout China have taken to the streets to protest a variety of economic grievances and abuses of power. But some instances of Guizhou social unrest do carry echoes of the past. For example, the story of the Caohai Nature Reserve in northwestern Guizhou demonstrates that local residents still mount a vigorous response when the state interferes with indigenous livelihood strategies. In 1972, Guizhou provincial officials drained Caohai Lake in order to create more productive farmland. Ten years later, these officials restored the lake after neighboring counties voiced concerns about microclimate changes. Farmers living nearby were never informed that officials planned to refill the lake; one day the farmers found their lands inundated. They assumed that the water would recede, but it never did. Left with only minuscule plots of arable land, many farmers could not grow enough to feed their families; they thus resorted to fishing and trapping waterfowl in the lake. In 1985, to protect the region’s population of migratory birds and other wildlife, the Guizhou provincial government declared Caohai a national nature reserve. With the establishment of this reserve, the farmers’ supplementary activities became illegal. Nonetheless, many farmers continued to fish and hunt waterfowl well into the late 1990s. Reserve managers enforced the prohibitions only intermittently, but when they did, they met with stiff resistance. On several occasions, reserve authorities destroyed fishing huts, burned nets, and confiscated poached fish. Villagers vehemently protested these actions, sometimes even physically attacking the reserve staff. The Caohai farmers viewed the state’s interdictions on fishing and trapping as a violation of their right to maintain a basic level of subsistence, and responded with violence.

Other problems may arise from the increasingly large gap between rich and poor residents of Guizhou. When I visited the Xingyi region in May 2001, I had the opportunity to interview a rural Buyi family—the modern-day descendants of the Zhongjia. Eight people lived in a single-room stone house without running water or electricity. The youngest members of the family, two small girls, showed signs of undernourishment; I guessed
their ages to be six and nine, but their father told me they were nine and thirteen. Everyone spoke the southwest variant of Mandarin, and the two girls proudly showed me their schoolbooks. No one in the family showed much interest in the history of their own ethnic group, although an elderly man did tell me that they maintained a genealogy dating back to the early Ming period.

The contrasts between this family’s village and the city of Xingyi, only fifteen minutes away by car, were striking. Xingyi has a thriving downtown area with enticing restaurants and bright shops selling the latest in Western music and fashion. One evening, I had dinner with a family whose three-bedroom apartment would have been the envy of any Chinese city-dweller—and perhaps of many American urbanites, as well. The apartment was spacious, airy, and tastefully decorated, with a fully appointed kitchen, satellite television service, and a digital video disc player. The family, not surprisingly, was Han. Asked about the rural minority areas just outside Xingyi, they remarked only that the people there were extremely poor. Such socioeconomic disparities indicate that the Buyi and many of Guizhou’s other ethnic groups are still largely peripheral to the Chinese world.

In more recent years, however, there have been signs of change, with new initiatives to bring tourist revenue into Buyi areas. This will present local populations with new challenges, as they seek to preserve their culture in the face of an increasingly market-oriented economy. Ethnic minority culture has become a fundamental aspect of promotional activities. Officials actually consider tourism itself to be ideally suited for these regions because it capitalizes on the very conditions which make Guizhou so poor: the harsh but picturesque mountain landscapes, and the social and cultural distance from China proper. As geographer Timothy Oakes explains:

The representations of minority culture which became ubiquitous features of promoting the province would not only make Guizhou more interesting to outsiders, but were meant to establish a model for the “cultural development” of minority groups themselves, conditioning them to articulate symbolic cultural practices with commercial projects. Tourism was thus seen not simply as a propaganda and marketing tool for Guizhou, but also as a process of development and integration encouraging minority regions to become more modern.
During the first decade of the twenty-first century, this enterprise was producing uneven results. Some areas have benefited from it, while others, including the Buyi village I visited, have been bypassed altogether. Perhaps authorities simply do not see any commercial potential in the Xingyi region. If so, their reasoning is difficult to understand because the area’s landscape of limestone hills and green fields rivals anything in Guilin or Shilin’s Stone Forest in Yunnan.

Regions that have been targeted for modernization and development include Buyi areas near the famous waterfalls at Huangguoshu, Miao and Dong (Kam) villages in southeastern Guizhou, and, most recently, so-called Tunpu villages near Anshun. The Tunpu claim descent from the first Han settlers in Guizhou and trace their ancestry to thirteenth-century Jiangsu. Visitors to Tunpu villages apparently get a taste of old and “original” thirteenth-century Han culture in the form of rustic-looking buildings and an archaic-sounding dialect. The authenticity of this culture is questionable, but domestic tourists seem drawn to the region.43

Ethnic groups engaged in the tourism trade typically sell handicrafts such as batik and embroidery and participate in an assortment of performances and festivals. Crafts, songs, and dances are all carefully packaged for predominantly Han tourist-consumers. Ethnicity has, in effect, become a mass-produced commodity. Oakes has expressed concern that the standardization and commercialization of ethnicities may dilute the original cultures and ultimately result in a form of internal colonialism. As he explains:

Cultural development and the preservation of “authentic minzu culture” legitimize a division of labor in which rural labor remains subordinated to urban modes of production. . . . The ideology of preservation, in this case, colludes with capital to fossilize rural modes of crafts production as a national cultural resource, and as a reservoir of skilled yet cheap exploitable labor.44

In view of the state-society relations explored in this book, I look at the matter from a different point of view. The ongoing effort to develop tourism is in many respects similar to the Confucian civilizing project of the Qing period. It is above all a state-sponsored attempt to impose order and orthodoxy on Guizhou’s indigenous populations. However, unlike the
civilizing and domestication projects of eighteenth century Qing authorities, PRC efforts promise immediate and tangible benefits—namely cash infusions for poverty-stricken communities. From the standpoint of these communities, producing commodities for the state tourism enterprise represents a new type of livelihood strategy. In contrast to the illegal and extralegal strategies used during Qing times, these are state-sanctioned. But a common theme still unites present-day Guizhou with its past: People adopt only those strategies that serve their own interests. Moreover, minorities who participate in the tourism trade do not sacrifice their own agency. They find ample room to negotiate with the state and with tourists, and sometimes even gain control of the commodification process.45 Thus, as in imperial times, local communities still manage to resist (or to bargain their way around) state directives, in order to preserve indigenous livelihood strategies. If these strategies do not work, Guizhou indigenous communities adopt new ones that suit their needs.

As I suggested earlier, Qing-era Guizhou was an arena for an ongoing argument between rulers and the ruled about power and legitimacy. In recent times, this argument has become a relatively civil conversation, but state hegemony in Guizhou still remains fragile and incomplete. During the Qing period, local resistance undermined imperial efforts to assert hegemony. Today, the quieter, but still persistent, voices of indigenous self-interest still prevent the central Chinese government from gaining full control over Guizhou’s cultural and political space. The state is omnipresent but not omnipotent, and there are still myriad ways for the indigenes of Guizhou to resist and circumvent it.