

Remaking social boundaries: the construction of *benzhu* worship in Southwest China

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In the historical transformation of the state, *benzhu* worship in the Erhai lake basin, northwest Yunnan, an esoteric Buddhist practice developed in the period of Nanzhao Kingdom, has been continually reconstructed by the state and local agencies. As a result, social boundaries between the Han Chinese and the ethnic 'others' living in this multi-ethnic southwestern frontier of China have been constantly remade. This paper, through a review of the state's interpretations and local agencies' negotiations and contentions of the meaning and practice of the worship, is mainly intended to revisit the social and cultural consequences incurred by the transformation of the state, and highlight, among other things, how local agencies, average villagers in particular, have cautiously yet ingeniously exercised their agency since the 1950s by appropriating or recasting national and international discourses on ethnicity and diversity to serve their own ends.

Keywords: *benzhu* worship; Bai nationality; social boundary; local agency

Although once known as 'a Land of Buddhists', the Erhai lake basin has undergone remarkable transformations socially and culturally since its political reincorporation into the Chinese empire by the conquest of Kublai Khan in 1253 AD. As a result, Esoteric Buddhism, allegedly the state religion of Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms (738–1253 AD), began to yield to Confucianism, with the previously dominant and omnipresent Buddhist institutions successively supplanted by Confucian establishments sponsored by Imperial China. *Tuzhu* (土主) worship, an esoteric Buddhist practice with Mahakala as the guarding deity of its teachings, was then gradually modified and transformed into the present-day village-based worship of *benzhu* (本主).¹

However, in the making of the nation-state prior to 1949, such *benzhu* worship was invariably interpreted by intellectual elites as a cultural legacy of the Han Chinese who had immigrated to Yunnan as early as in the period of the Warring States (475–221 BC), providing evidence for their claim that Dali has long been an integral part of China. Yet, in the early 1950s, the native residents in Dali, *minjia* (民家),² were officially identified by the newly founded communist state as Bai nationality (白族),³ one of the 55 ethnic minorities in China. *Benzhu* worship has since been reinterpreted as a distinctive cultural marker of the Bai.

Benzhu worship: the natives' perspective

The Mandarin term *benzhu* is a somewhat distorted translation from its original appellation in the spoken Bai language, *laoguni*, literally 'the great-grandfather', as

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ben means 'one's own' and *zhu* 'master'.⁴ Besides, the term *laoguni* is rather emotionally charged and invariably perceived by the natives as an ever benevolent patriarch of their community,⁵ which in Dali is always a village composed of two or more patrilineal family clans. For example, in the first half of every 7th lunar month villagers collectively receive, entertain and see off the spirits of all their ancestors in their *benzhu* temple. Misled by the Mandarin translation *benzhu*, the Bai term *laoguni* is more often translated into 'patron god' in English literature.⁶ Yet, it was elsewhere translated to mean 'original ancestor' or 'founder', which I think is a more appropriate gloss, though I prefer to translate it into 'the tutelary deity' as he is not only the first ancestor but also the guardian spirit of a community.⁷ However, the term *benzhu*, as interpreted by the Bai intellectual elites after 1949, has been reduced to the equivalent of 'patron god'. This distinction from its original meaning of 'the first communal ancestor' is of paramount importance in the context of the multi-ethnic frontier in Southwest China, as ancestor worship is supposed to be a marked cultural feature of the Han Chinese.

Normally every village has its own *benzhu* temple. Sometimes, two or three contiguous villages may share one, and a town or a large village may accommodate two or more. Fundamentally, as representing a territorially based worship, there do exist territorial boundaries among these temples, which are annually confirmed when a *benzhu* takes an inspection tour on his birthday celebration, that is, Festival of the *Benzhu* Deity, one of the most important annual rituals for the Bai communities in Dali.

The temple of the Erhai Lake Deity (洱河祠), situated at Er village on the west bank of the lake in the northern part of the basin, is a *benzhu* temple shared by three adjacent villages. This sharing might be a result of the administrative demarcation designed by the Ming imperial court after it conquered the Dali Chieftainship headed by the Duan family clan in 1382 AD, as these villages were then grouped into a *li* (里),⁸ the most grassroots unit for taxation and water distribution.⁹ As pumping water up from the lake was technologically impossible back then, the water from one of the 18 alpine streams flowing down eastwards from the Cangshan mountains was the only water which could be used for the irrigation of their rice paddy fields. However, as time went by, the alliance for the temple was challenged by one of the three villages. According to the Stone Stele of the Erhai Lake Deity Temple (洱河祠碑记), Jiang village refused to make contributions to the rebuilding of the temple.¹⁰ A similar thing happened again in the 1980s, when the Jiang village residents attempted to construct a *benzhu* temple of their own. As soon as the temple was built, it was mysteriously burnt down. They then came to realize that the *benzhu* deity refused to inhabit their village. To this day, they still have to walk to Er village to worship *benzhu* although the villages were re-grouped into three different administrative units in the early 1950s.

To the Bai natives, their *benzhu* is practically omnipotent, always there ready to ensure fertility and prosperity, as well as provide protection against any unpredictable misfortune, be it individual or communal. Though most of them may not know the identity of their *benzhu*, some do know his divine title, quite similar to the imperial titles of emperors documented in Chinese dynastic histories. These locally crafted titles symbolically constitute a loosely structured yet seemingly hierarchical bureaucracy. It is said that under the rule of the Founding Emperor, whose title reads 'great holy founding emperor coming from the far west to safeguard the preaching of the Buddhist doctrines' (大圣西来护法灵镇五峰建国皇帝), there are in the lake basin 500 king deities and 72 deities who are only secondary in standing to the Founding Emperor. It seems quite obvious that these titles

sound a lot more exalted than those of the city gods imposed upon Dali by Imperial China since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD).

As revealed by the folk tales about them, social relationships among *benzhu* deities are mostly those among siblings, rivals, father and son, or man and his mistress. These presumably have much to do with the competition for water and other resources in the region. With rice paddy cultivation as one of its major means of subsistence, Dali had long relied on the mountain streams before the electric pumps were installed in the 1950s to make use of the water in the lake.

The architectural design of *benzhu* temples bears a strong resemblance to that of the city god temples. The *benzhu* deity, always seated on the altar in the center of the main hall, is dressed up either like an emperor, a scholar-official or an armed marshal in the Ming dynasty. Standing next to him are his spouse(s) and the New Heir Apparent to the Throne. On the two sides are the altars for deities like the Son-delivering Lady, the Elder Brother Smallpox, and Mahakala. Right in front, the Six Court Judges, an emulation of *Yamen* (衙门, i.e., government offices in Imperial China) clerks, stand face to face in two rows. At the two ends of the porch are four guarding deities, kings of rooster, pig, horse and ox, respectively. Normally, the God of Wealth has a separate shrine outside the main hall.

The *benzhu* temple is taken care of daily by the members of the Lotus Pond Society (莲池会), a village-based group of sutra-chanting elderly women taking Avalokitesvara as the role model of their religious commitment.¹¹ In addition to their routine meetings in the temple on the 1st and 15th of every lunar month, their sutra-chanting calendar also revolves around the birthdays of other gods and deities, as well as communal festivals. The sutras, which they chant either in Mandarin Chinese or the Bai language, are largely adapted from the Buddhist and Daoist canons, besides the texts originating from animist beliefs. Only on such big occasions as the birthday celebration of the *benzhu* deity are the male elders involved, taking the chief responsibility of organizing the activities.

Civilizing barbarism

As generally assumed by the Bai intellectual elites after 1949, *benzhu* worship is a historical development of *tuzhu* worship, a form of faith once extensively practiced in Yunnan and parts of the neighboring Sichuan province. According to *A Collection of Historical Accounts on Ancient Yunnan* (记古滇说集) written in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 AD), *tuzhu* worship was first instituted when the statue of Mahakala was molded and enshrined by an ennobled Buddhist master in the early Nanzhao Kingdom.¹² Yet, as revealed by the Stone Stele of Jianfeng Pavilion (建峰亭记碑) inscribed in 1409 AD, the first folk document presently available concerning *tuzhu*, Zhao Kang, whose daughter was married to a king of Nanzhao, was venerated by the royal family as ‘Jianfeng Grandfather on the maternal side’ after his death in 713 AD. He was later deified by the people in Zhao Zhou, a place named after his surname, as a dragon who was believed to ensure water supply for irrigation and hence acclaimed as their *tuzhu*.

As the practice of Esoteric Buddhism has been officially persecuted since the mid Ming dynasty,¹³ it is not surprising that *tuzhu* worship and its written records can only be found in whatever folk documents have happened to survive to this day. The officially compiled local gazetteers thereafter rarely made reference to this worship. Even when a reference was made, the temples were categorized as either Temples of

the Dragon King or Temples for Loyal Martyrs or Widow Chastity.¹⁴ These deities were explicitly documented because they were believed to be highly efficacious in helping local residents to fight against such natural calamities as drought and flood or serve as good examples of loyalty to the imperial court.¹⁵ In other words, the function of *tuzhu* had been officially transformed from guarding Buddhist teachings to serving the common good of a given community or the imperial court.

Later, the rhetoric of this official discourse was domesticated by local residents. According to a folk tale collected by Hiroko Yokoyama, *benzhu* worship seems to have originated from the apotheosization of the Tang army generals who died dishonorably in their failed attempts to conquer Nanzhao Kingdom in the mid of the eighth century by Zhu Yuanzhang, founder of the Ming dynasty.¹⁶ Similarly, at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, the Mandarin term *tuzhu* began to be replaced by *benzhu*, as can be found in the Stone Stele of Jing Village *Benzhu* Temple (经庄本主神庙碑记).¹⁷ By the early 1950s, most villages in Dali have used the term *benzhu temple* to refer to their village temple. However, up until today, the term *tuzhu temple* is still in use, especially among those mountain-dwelling Yi people (彝族) around the lake basin. That is why *tuzhu* is considered by some Bai intellectuals as a Yi practice while *benzhu* is seen as exclusively their own.¹⁸ Another interesting development is that even in the newly renamed temples the *tuzhu* deity does not disappear altogether. As can be seen from the Stone Stele of the Reconstruction of South Jing Village *Benzhu* Temple (南经庄重建本主祠碑记),¹⁹ the *tuzhu* deity, popularly known as *daheitianshen* or *jialan*, Mandarin terms for 'Mahakala', was still present, though subordinate to the *benzhu* deity, a deified figure from the local history, as the *benzhu* took the central altar while the *tuzhu* sat left to him in the main hall. The same is basically true even today.²⁰

Yokoyama argues that as the Chinese term *tu*, literally meaning 'earth' in English, may suggest a sense of being 'rustic, unfashionable or boorish', and is hence derogatory, the Bai, known as one of the most acculturated ethnic minorities in China, intentionally replaced it with *ben*, which means 'one's own'.²¹ After all, the term *benzhu* definitely sounds a lot more 'civilized' to a Chinese ear.

The temple of the Erhai Lake Deity is another good case in point. According to *the Scroll of Paintings of Nanzhao Kingdom* (898 AD), in the Erhai lake there dwelled two deities, a golden conch and a golden fish, the worship of whom would help eradicate calamities in the region.²² Yet, according to *the Records on the Ancient Bai Kingdom* (白古通记), assumed to be anonymously written in the early Ming dynasty, if the jade conch living in the north of the lake and the golden fish in the south happened to make presence, it was an auspicious sign.²³ As the temple was situated in the north, it was considered as the temple of the Jade Conch. Today, the statues of both Jade Conch and Golden Fish can still be seen, though worshipped only as subordinates to the *benzhu*.

As the influence of Confucianism penetrated further in Dali at the end of the Ming dynasty, the remaining local 'barbarian' customs continued to be civilized. Li Yuanyang, a retired scholar-official native to Dali, re-termed the temple 'the Temple of the Dragon King',²⁴ though several decades earlier it was still officially recorded as the Temple of the Lake Deity (海神祠), said to have been established by a king of Nanzhao to express his wish never to turn against the Tang imperial court again.²⁵ In another official document made in the early Qing dynasty, it continued to be referred to as 'the Temple of the Dragon King'.²⁶ Paradoxically, according to the Stone Stele of the Erhai Lake Deity Temple mentioned above, local residents, quite unlike

intellectual elites, still took it as the Temple of the Erhai Lake Deity. Interestingly, though, in the 1940s it was recorded by another retired native scholar-official as 'the Temple of the Dragon Mother' (龙母祠).²⁷

Who is then the *benzhu* deity in the temple? The Jade Conch (and perhaps the Golden Fish), Dragon King, Dragon Mother or someone else?

It is now generally accepted among Er villagers that their *benzhu* is Duan Chicheng, a poor young man in the period of Nanzhao who sacrificed his life when he volunteered to kill the evil python constantly causing floods to afflict the people in the lake basin. He was said to be first apotheosized as the Dragon King in the middle of the Ming dynasty (1525 AD).²⁸ Assumed to be a result of the imperial court's promotion of hero veneration, and hence inconsistent with some of the earlier historical records mentioned above, this identification is frequently challenged by the villagers.

Some would contend that their *benzhu* should be the Father of Jiulong (九隆之父), as its divine title, which reads 'great holy spirit emperor conducting heaven-human induction' (大圣妙感玄机洱河灵帝), conforms exactly to the plot of an ancient myth about the origin of the peoples indigenous to Yunnan. According to the tale first recorded in *History of Later Han Dynasty*, Sha Yi, a woman living in the Ailao Mountains, one day accidentally touched a section of log sunken under the water while fishing in a river. She then became pregnant and gave birth to 10 boys who were said to be the offspring of a dragon (incarnated as the sunken log). When the boys grew up and married, they became the ancestors of many different tribes living scattered in Yunnan.²⁹ To support this argument, they have produced some other 'evidence'. As is pointed out, Er village used to be the dwelling place of a phoenix and the Dragon Pond next to it was inhabited by a dragon, so it has long been known as 'the place where the dragon was mated with the phoenix'. In addition, the Holy Mother of Jiulong (九隆圣母), that is, Sha Yi, is still worshipped today, with her altar mounted to the left of her husband, the *benzhu* deity, in the temple.

When Nanzhao Kingdom was founded, the story of Sha Yi, held up as the origin myth of the peoples under its rule, was intentionally exploited by the royal court to set these people ethnically and hence politically apart from the Han Chinese.³⁰ Yet after Dali was again incorporated into Imperial China in the early Ming dynasty,³¹ the local narratives began to tell different stories.

In Er village, legend has it that some of the literati were mysteriously assisted by their *benzhu* when they sat for the imperial examinations in Beijing. It is also widely rumored that in the Ming dynasty a rebellion-pacifying marshal, a native of Er village, was ambushed at a night by his rivals in the Jiangxi province. In despair, he spotted all of a sudden a large lit red lantern bearing the divine title of his *benzhu* signaling to him. Out of his wits with fear, he had to push ahead desperately towards the lantern. Fortunately, his troops miraculously broke through the enemy's siege safe and sound, and then in a subsequent counterattack, overwhelmed the rebels. As revealed by these tales, the power of *benzhu* seems to be able to extend far beyond his own jurisdiction, participating in the defense of the Chinese empire, whether it be assisting the examination takers or a rebellion pacifier. In Dali, stories like these abound.

All these seem to suggest that the local agencies, intellectuals and average villagers alike, have been consciously and actively adopting, though not without reservations, the cultural values of Imperial China since the re-integration of the Dali area into the Chinese empire, in an effort to civilize their own self-perceived barbarism³² so as to push across and break down the boundary between 'the civilized' and 'the barbarians' in this multi-ethnic frontier of southwest China.

Suppressed as superstition

Since the very beginning of the twentieth century, with threats and challenges both from within and without, China had to embark on its nation-building. While modernity was instituted by the government as a kind of new national worship, traditional Chinese folk customs, perceived rather as a liability, were ruthlessly criticized and suppressed.

In Dali, as elsewhere in China, local practices of folk religion were considered 'feudal' and 'superstitious', and so temples and their assets were either confiscated, demolished or converted into establishments for modern schooling.³³ Yet, in this process of massive condemnation of the traditional culture, the official policies and practices were time and again challenged.³⁴ With support from the local residents and the generous donations made by the local gentry, temples were rebuilt or renovated and the statues of deities remolded. When China was plunged into the war against Japan in 1937, local intellectuals and some prestigious scholars then taking refuge in Yunnan also defended local religious practices, arguing that the previously condemned 'witchcraft' in *benzhu* worship actually originated in the cultural elements from Central China over 2000 years ago. Although Xu Jiarui, a native of Dali, admitted that *benzhu* worship had been first formalized by Nanzhao Kingdom as a governing institution and was therefore indigenous to Yunnan, he contended that it was actually a cultural creation under the influence of the Chu culture dating back to period of the Warring States when Zhuang Qiao, army marshal of the Chu state in Central China, was dispatched to conquer Yunnan. Fang Guoyu, a renowned historian in Yunnan, reiterated this idea in the preface he wrote for Xu's book when it was published in 1949.³⁵ What both of them tried to convey was that *benzhu* worship was a cultural legacy of the Han Chinese. Therefore, this practice, as well as other folk customs in Dali, was indisputable evidence testifying to the long history of the region being an integral part of the Chinese state. In this ideological construction of a unified Chinese nation, the 'barbarian' cultural traits originating from the local history were deliberately made inconspicuous while the 'civilized' features allegedly inherited from the Han Chinese were rendered prominent. For example, contrary to FitzGerald's idea that the *Min Chia* (M. *minjia*), known as the Bai today, were 'an outlying colony of the Tai race',³⁶ the Chinese anthropologist Francis Hsu claimed that they 'not only are Chinese in culture but also tend to insist that they are more Chinese in some respects than the Chinese in many other parts of China'.³⁷

However, when the 'nationality identification work' was launched by the newly founded communist state as a strategic move to politically placate the ethnic others and stabilize the frontier regions in the early 1950s, the *minjia* were officially identified and designated as Bai nationality in 1956. In the officially crafted version of its history, *benzhu* worship was then marked as one of the most distinctive cultural traits of the Bai, yet under the predominant influence of Karl Marx's discourse on class struggle, it was regarded as an ideological instrument used by the ruling class of Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms to govern the exploited masses.³⁸ To further consolidate and legitimize the leadership of the Han Chinese in socialist China, minority nationalities were classified respectively into primitive, slave and feudal societies. In this process of justifying the socialist ideology, contrasts between 'new' and 'old', 'advanced' and 'backward', 'civilized' and 'ignorant', 'scientific' and 'superstitious' were repeatedly emphasized in official propaganda. As a result, the societies of the Erhai lake basin were classified as one of the 'feudal' societies, and the religious practices of the people who then became the Bai nationality were stigmatized as 'feudal and superstitious' activities.³⁹

Worse still, the so-called landlords, rich peasants and local gentry seen as the representatives of the exploiting class, and the shamans and fortune-tellers as the embodiment of 'feudal superstition' were ferociously condemned and some were even jailed or persecuted. Lotus Pond Societies and Grotto Scripture Societies (洞经会)⁴⁰ were dismissed. Local artistic forms such as folk songs, dances and operas were ideologically reformed and made to serve the revolutionary cause of Socialist China as well as to eulogize the great unity among the many different nationalities. Again, though more thoroughly this time, the statues in the temples were torn down, and the temple properties were confiscated for the production brigades to process harvests and store grain. The newly installed electric pumps in the 1950s for irrigation were lauded as a victory of scientific advance over the 'superstitious' worship of *benzhu* deities, long believed to guard the natives against natural disasters. It was under such circumstances that the annual pilgrimage ritual of *Raosanling* (绕三灵) was said to be 'voluntarily abolished' by the working masses, now armed with a heightened level of ideological consciousness.⁴¹

Later, the decade-long Cultural Revolution further undermined and finally destroyed the communal festivals, as economic poverty and political repressions made it virtually impossible for local residents to mobilize traditional social resources to celebrate. With few religious establishments left to attend, *benzhu* deities were worshipped in terror only by a few elderly women who tended to be dismissed as 'ignorant and stubborn'. Briefly, in the totalitarian era of collectivism from the 1950s to the 1970s, the rural Bai residents were in a sense dually marginalized, both as 'primitive and backward' ethnic minorities and as 'ignorant and superstitious' peasants.

Commodifying 'nationality religion'

Since the 'reform and opening up' policy was implemented in 1978, the Chinese state has gradually loosened its rigid control of the local societies. With the abolition of agricultural collectivization and the economic achievements accomplished by the nationwide 'Rural Household Production Contract Responsibility System' initiated since 1983, formerly suppressed 'superstitious activities' began to be voluntarily revitalized in Dali as elsewhere in China. *Benzhu* temples as well as other religious institutions were rebuilt or renovated, and the communal festivals associated with *benzhu* worship have also been revived.

A multitude of book and article manuscripts on the history and culture of the Bai nationality, long delayed by the political campaigns in the Cultural Revolution, finally got published in the 1980s. Yet, as previously labeled 'primitive and superstitious', *benzhu* worship was still cautiously categorized by the Bai intellectuals into witchcraft cult or primitive religion.⁴² In the 1990s, as more and more national tourists and international backpackers came to visit Dali, Dali seemed to regain self-confidence in its ancient cultural traditions. Witchcraft cult was then re-termed *benzhu* culture⁴³ instead of *benzhu* worship in the fear that the term *worship* might still invoke official criticism or accusations of 'advocating' the long condemned 'feudal superstitions'. Nevertheless, it was once boldly argued by a Bai intellectual that *benzhu* worship should be officially established as the 'nationality religion' of the Bai,⁴⁴ as it is the most distinctive feature that distinguishes the Bai from other nationalities. In this ongoing process of knowledge production of ethnic cultures, the myths, legends and wild histories which are associated with the 'local' kingdoms of Nanzhao and Dali, considered indigenous and hence more authentic, were further collected and published

while those cultural transformations and inventions achieved in the Confucian civilizing project since the Yuan dynasty were downplayed or disregarded altogether.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, boasting about its 25 ‘colorful’ and ‘mysterious’ ethnic minorities, Yunnan provincial government launched its campaign to ‘Construct a Great Province of Nationality Cultures’ in an effort to boost its ethnic tourism. In this era of globalization, ‘exotic’ ethnic cultures are indisputably celebrated as a blessing. *Benzhu* worship and the associated communal festivals were then reinterpreted and marketed through modern media by the local elites for the tourist gaze as well as for further legitimization of their officially granted ethnic identity. For example, to better showcase the ancient history and exotic culture of the Bai, a resort palace for the kings of Nanzhao, stone sculptures of Sha Yi and Avalokitesvara, and a Plaza for the Statues of *Benzhu* Deities were erected on the Nanzhao Folk Island, one of the so-called ‘25 top-quality tourist destinations’ in Yunnan. *Benzhu* worship was thus commodified in the landscape of the island as an essential feature of Bai identity, with the deities on display reified by the local government as heroic figures in the history of Nanzhao Kingdom,⁴⁵ an idea quite alien to the local residents.⁴⁶ When a tourist destination in the lake is marketed as the landscape of Nanzhao, the ‘centrality’ of Dali in Southwest China seems to have been anchored in time and space and symbolically revitalized, which not only suggests nostalgia for and pride in a period of independence but also defies its social marginalization and cultural stigmatization previously imposed by the Chinese state in its early practices of socialism.

In addition, *Raosanling*, an annual trans-local ritual in the Erhai lake basin and the neighboring areas to ‘ensure the fertility of both food and family’,⁴⁷ has been included in the past decade as a festival exclusively of the Bai successively on the prefectural, provincial and national Lists of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The generally alleged ‘extramarital sexuality’ in the festival, though formerly condemned as ‘erotic’, is now lauded by the Bai intellectuals as ‘the historical evidence for and the remains of the aboriginal procreation magic and group marriage customs of ancient China’. It is not only taken as living evidence of the long history that the Bai have enjoyed, but also reinterpreted as a sign of their ‘greatest respect and care for humanity’, which is in a sense a ridicule of the absurd puritanism of the Han Chinese toward sexuality. To further enhance the visibility and the marketability of Dali and the Bai, the government of Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture now continues to work hard to get the festival included on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.⁴⁸

With political and financial support from government at different levels, *benzhu* worship unprecedentedly flourishes as a result. Building or renovating of temples, and training of heritage inheritors, are all encouraged and subsidized. Consequently, memberships of Lotus Pond Societies expand and the money contributed to temples multiplies, part of which is in turn donated by the sutra-chanting elderly women to the elderly men to perform ancient Daoist music.

However, with official reinterpretations of the local history and culture established as the standard discourse, the government sponsorship mystifies or mythologizes the average Bai villagers’ flexible, situational and inconsistent narratives about the deities in the *benzhu* pantheon and their communal festivals, as their perceptions and understandings of local history and customs have more or less been reshaped by this discourse. They have to learn through various media about what is the appropriate way to be an ethnic minority, and then act accordingly. Hence, this process of official commodification of the ethnic

culture and the 'self-othering'⁴⁹ on the part of the Bai further consolidates the social boundary between themselves and the Han marked out in the early 1950s. Nevertheless, the glorious history of Dali as the center of the ancient yet peripheral kingdoms in Southwest China has also been highlighted, which has not only reconstructed its subjectivity but also challenged its marginalized status formerly insisted upon by the socialist state. Again, in the pursuit of authenticity in the current context of cultural pluralism, the previously condemned sexually unrestrained popular customs have now become celebrated as an emblem of modernity rather than primitivity, and hence an example to admire and follow on the part of 'civilized' modern tourists.

Exploiting 'cultural heritage'

Er village, with a population of 2728, is the seat of *Jinhe* Villagers' Committee with jurisdiction over two villages, Er and Jin. This committee is the latest transformation of the Production Brigade, the most grassroots administrative unit of the socialist government in the era of agricultural collectivization. In Er village alone, there used to exist many religious institutions, including the Temple of Literary Prosperity with a Pavilion of the *Kuixing* Deity (魁星) inside its compound, the Hall for the God of Wealth, and a Buddhist establishment, Longqing Temple, as well as the Temple of the Erhai Lake Deity. However, in the early 1950s, the Hall for the God of Wealth and Longqing Temple were converted into an elementary school and the Temple of Literary Prosperity into a place to process and store agricultural harvests. The Erhai Lake Deity Temple was razed, and part of its land was taken by the local government to construct the office building of the Production Brigade. Worse still, with the persecution of local gentry, shamans and fortune-tellers, as well as the suppression of the so-called 'feudal and superstitious' activities, worship of *benzhu* had to go underground and be practiced only by a handful of so-called 'ignorant and stubborn' elderly women.

The trend, however, began to be reversed with the 'reform and opening up' policy implemented since 1978. With family income steadily raised and political control gradually loosened, Er villagers were determined to have their Temple of the Erhai Lake Deity rebuilt. Some religiously pious and hence 'courageous' sutra-chanting elderly women successfully took back the land 'illegally' seized by the former Production Brigade after countless negotiations with and fights against village cadres. With generous monetary contributions voluntarily made by the residents of the three villages sharing the temple, the reconstruction work was soon under way and finally completed in 2003. With the membership of the village Lotus Pond Society constantly expanding and the active involvement of other villagers, the ancient tradition of annually celebrating the birthday of the *benzhu* deity on the 3rd day of the first lunar month and other communal festivals was revitalized.

Then in 2005 it came to the elderly men's turn to win back their right to a traditional cultural practice, namely performing the ancient Daoist music, which is considered to be an essential component in the celebration of the communal festivals like the Festival of the *Benazhu* Deity. However, their fight turned out to be not easy at all. To set up a Grotto Scripture Society, which is assumed to be an 'unofficial and self-governing organization', synonymous with a gang of potential troublemakers in the official ideology of the socialist state, they were required to apply to the Villagers' Committee, supposedly a villagers' self-governing body but actually a local agent of the state power. Politically traumatized in the past decades, in their application they wrote, discreetly yet ingeniously, 'We herein

pledge that all our activities shall be conducted under the full endorsement of the villagers' committee. The ultimate goal of our organizing such a society is to enrich village life by means of inheriting the 'nationality culture' (M. *minzuwenhua*)⁵⁰ and promote a healthy development of the folk customs. We also would like to pledge here that we shall never engage in any feudal and superstitious activities'.⁵¹ It was on the 27th day of the 8th lunar month, allegedly the birthday of Confucius, that the Er Village Grotto Scripture Society declared its formal establishment. Interestingly, though, both the Daoist music the society performs and its worship of Confucius are justifiably 'civilized' cultural traditions originating from the Han Chinese.

As most young and middle-aged villagers work far away from home as migrant workers, the newly established society soon took the chief responsibility of organizing communal events. In 2006, the elderly men first renamed the Festival of the *Benzhu* Deity 'the Festival of *Benzhu* Culture' in an effort to sanitize the religious connotations otherwise invoked. As the long levied agricultural taxes have now been completely abolished by the central government, cadres are no longer able to control and order about villagers at their own will as they used to do. As a result, the male elders, now with a much more powerful capacity than the allegedly unreliable cadres to mobilize social resources, began to dominate social affairs in the village. In 2007, they initiated reconstruction of the Temple of Literary Prosperity. In the name of building an 'Entertainment Center for the Village Elderly', they tactfully secured a financial grant from the Civil Affairs Bureau of Dali prefectural government and received generous donations from the village Lotus Pond Society, as well as from other villagers. Yet, their remarkable capability for social mobilization triggered tensions between them and village cadres, who more often than not fail to enlist popular support, if any. The communist party members in the Grotto Scripture Society were then warned by the Villagers' Committee that they were suspected of participating in the 'feudal and superstitious' activities, and therefore must mind their manners so as not to go against the guidelines of the Party at a time when the educational activities of the Communist Party's Progressiveness were being campaigned nationwide.

With dreadful memories of political suppressions in the past still fresh in mind, the male elders decided to transform the society into 'Er village Bai Nationality Dragon Lantern Ancient Music Association' with more villagers, mostly middle-aged and elderly women, recruited to set up two more recreation teams, a team of dancers performing traditional folk dances and a dragon-dancing team. To further avoid being politically misjudged by village cadres, they once again pledged that the aim of the association was to promote the traditional culture of the Bai nationality and to assist the cadres to fulfill the task of 'constructing new socialist villages' mandated by the central government since 2005. In the celebration of *Raosanling* on the 24th day of the 4th lunar month in 2007, the elderly men performed, among the Daoist musical pieces, *the Music Dedicated to the Tang Emperor by Nanzhao Kingdom* to commemorate, as so claimed, the historical event when Yimouxun, king of Nanzhao, dispatched a large troupe envoy in 800 AD to Chang'an, capital of the Tang dynasty, to express his loyalty and subordination to the Tang imperial court. With the theme of 'may peace be achieved under the heaven' emphasized, this piece of music, so maneuvered by the male elders, ingeniously achieved their 'noble' aim of safeguarding the unity of the Chinese state symbolically delivered to the cadres.

As the Temple of the Erhai Lake Deity is one of the most important three 'sacred places' in the lake basin where all the pilgrims participating in *Raosanling* come and make

their offerings, the associated cultural activities of Er village are now sponsored by local governments in their effort to boost ethnic tourism. Under such circumstances, the village cadres have to refrain from their political intimidation of the male elders and begin to cooperate. They are now more than willing to offer help in maintaining social order in the massive celebration of the communal festivals. What's more, with financial support from the Culture Bureau of Dali prefectural government, new musical instruments, dancing costumes and other festive equipment have been purchased, and a large stone stele bearing two Chinese characters 仙都 (i.e., Capital of Immortals) has also been mounted in front of the temple, an official title previously unknown to villagers.⁵² The communal festivals thus revived, though with new inventions and meanings added, are in a sense a eulogy to the inevitable waning of the ideological and social repressions mounted by the socialist state decades ago.

Conclusion

Originally instituted as a practice of Esoteric Buddhism, *tuzhu* worship has been gradually 'civilized' and transformed into a village-based worship of communal ancestors since the Erhai lake basin was politically reincorporated into Imperial China in the Yuan dynasty. Yet, in the making of the nation-state since the 1920s, it was condemned as 'feudal and superstitious'. Nevertheless, it was interpreted by the intellectual elites in their efforts to build the Chinese nation in the 1940s as a cultural legacy of the Han Chinese, meaning the local residents or *minjia* were no different, at least culturally, from the Han Chinese. However, they were officially made different in terms of ethnicity in the 1950s, and *benzhu* worship thus became marked as a distinctive cultural trait of the Bai. With the subsequent implementation of agricultural collectivism, it was made socially and economically impossible for them to celebrate their communal festivals in their own way, though worship of *benzhu* was somewhat maintained among a few so-called 'ignorant and stubborn' elderly females. However, in the 1980s, some Bai intellectuals began to cautiously remove the stigmas previously labeled on their worship. Soon with the official promotion of ethnic tourism, it became proudly lauded as a 'nationality religion', and the associated communal festivals were revitalized and then commodified. Yet, never did villagers' efforts to self-govern their own social and cultural affairs not meet with political coercion. It is the state's active embrace of the UNESCO values concerning cultural diversity that has ultimately brought about compromise and cooperation between cadres and villagers. Though previously silenced and disciplined, villagers have now been enabled to boldly defy the social marginalization and cultural stigmatization imposed on them by the state in its early practices of socialism.

Needless to say, villagers' interpretations of their worship and the associated communal festivals are not necessarily the same as those of the intellectual elites, that is, 'compradore elites',⁵³ mostly acting upon the principle of 'political correctness' and currently more than willing to exoticize and eroticize their ethnicity to seduce tourist gaze.⁵⁴ As in the case of Er village, a much stronger 'native historical consciousness'⁵⁵ has been well kept among the villagers. Obviously, the state's interpretation of the worship as hero veneration has not fully blanketed out their narratives. Up until today, they still seem to be empowered by the prominent status of their temple in the 'sacred geological space' developed since Nanzhao Kingdom to construct and interpret their relationships with other villages in the region and the state. This case study, among other things, highlights how the local villagers have, since the 1950s, discreetly yet

ingeniously exercised their agency, regrettably underestimated in the current literature on ethnicity in China,⁵⁶ to repurpose national and international discourses on ethnicity and diversity to their own ends.

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Notes

1. Historically, deities from different sources have also been included in the current pantheon of *benzhu* deities, yet the esoteric Buddhist worship of Mahakala can still be arguably conceived of as the historical origin of this practice.
2. The term *minjia* is believed to have come into use in the Ming dynasty for the purpose of distinguishing the native civilian households from those registered as the households of Han military immigrants, that is, *junjia* (军家). See Fang, “关于白族的名称问题.”
3. The identity of the Bai is still quite controversial today, for example, see Wu, “Ethnic Identity among Minorities.” Besides, the official version of its historical origin remains to be justified. See Zhao and Notar, “Bai Nationality.”
4. This paper is written on the basis of my ethnographical notes primarily taken in the period from July 2007 through February 2008 when I did anthropological fieldwork in the Erhai lake basin for the preparation of my PhD dissertation. Both village and non-village actors were interviewed, and the historical documents and folk tales concerning this region were extensively researched. Village names mentioned here are customarily pseudo-named. By the way, I was born and raised in this region as a member of Bai nationality, and hence speak fluent Bai language.
5. *Benzhu* deities are generally represented as male figures, though there are a few exceptions.
6. Liu, “Religions of Hsichow;” and Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*, 140.
7. See FitzGerald, *Tower of Five Glories*, 86.
8. *Baizushehuilishidiao cha(si)*, 白族社会历史调查(四), 210.
9. To avoid the ever-intensifying conflicts over water supply between the native civilians and the troops deployed to garrison as well as cultivate military farms in the Erhai lake basin by the Ming imperial court, a stone stele was erected to regulate water distribution in the 1420s. See *Daligubeicunwenlu*, 大理古碑存文录, 115–7. Please also refer to the analysis of Elvin et al., “Clearance and Irrigation,” for Imperial China's efforts to address contentions among the local residents over their access to the limited water supplies.

10. *Daligubeicunwenlu*, 大理古碑存文录, 546–7.
11. A Lotus Pond Society reveres Buddhist deities, most prominently Avalokitesvara (M. Guanyin). That is why it is signified as an association of ‘lotus pond’, though the sutras it recites are a collection of texts with Buddhist, Daoist and animist origins. Its historical origin remains something of a mystery, yet it was, as suspiciously claimed in a local gazetteer, emanated from outside of Yunnan. See Zhou et al., 大理县志稿, Vol. 10, Religion No. 12.
12. Li, 正续云南备征志精选点校, 10.
13. Fang, 云南史料丛刊 (第四卷), 511–3.
14. Bryson notes that the twelfth-century worship of a Buddhist goddess was transformed into a worship of widow chastity in the nineteenth century. See Bryson, “Baijie and the Bai.”
15. Ai, 重修邓川州志, 98–9.
16. Quoted in Liang, 地域的等级, 190.
17. *Daligubeicunwenlu*, 大理古碑存文录, 560.
18. Zhang, 元代大理段氏总管史, 233–8.
19. *Daligubeicunwenlu*, 大理古碑存文录, 660–1.
20. In the Erhai lake basin today, a few temples still take Mahakala as the *benzhu* deity.
21. Yokoyama, 离开‘土’范畴.
22. Li, 南诏大理国新资料的综合研究, 139; 149–50.
23. Wang, 云南古佚书钞, 55–6.
24. Li, 万历云南通志, 11.
25. Zhou, 正德云南志, Vol. 3, No. 3.
26. Huang, 康熙大理府志, Vol. 17.
27. Zhao, 龙湖文录, 308.
28. You, 樊古通纪浅述校注, 61.
29. Fan, 新校本后汉书, Vol. 86, 2848.
30. Lien, “姓氏与祖先.”
31. It is arguably true that Dali was politically re-integrated into Imperial China in the Yuan dynasty. However, under the rule of the Mongols, the hereditary chieftainship headed by the *Duan*, the deposed royal family of Dali Kingdom, was intentionally kept in Dali till it was again conquered in 1382 AD by the Ming imperial court.
32. Harrell, “Introduction.”
33. Zhou et al., 大理县志稿, Vol. 6, No. 6.
34. Zhao, 龙湖文录, 308–11.
35. Xu, 大理古代文化史, 22; and Fang, “大理古代文化史序.”
36. FitzGerald, *Tower of Five Glories*, 22.
37. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 19.
38. *Baizujianzhichugao*, 白族简志(初稿), 49–50.
39. Yang, 本主文化论, 272–8.
40. A Grotto Scripture Society is an association of elderly male amateur musicians that recites scriptures in Mandarin in a variety of village-based ritual contexts to the accompaniment of ancient musical instruments. Its scriptures are documented in classical Chinese and adapted from Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian canons. This ritualistically mixed tradition is believed to have entered Yunnan from a Han-dominated area as early as sixteenth century. See Kleeman, *God’s Own Tale*, 82–3; and Rees, *Echoes of History*, 41.
41. *Baizujianzhichugao*, 白族简志(初稿), 45–6.
42. Zhu et al., “大理县喜洲白族社会经济调查报告.”
43. Yang, 白族本主文化, 1–3.
44. Zhan, “试议将白族的本主崇拜定为民族宗教.”
45. Yang, “Role of Nanzhao History.”
46. As revealed by the aforementioned inconsistent locally crafted narratives, *benzhu* deities are dynamic, situational and more often than not, anonymous. It is this ambiguity of their identity that makes it possible for the Bai people, by virtue of narrating and crafting stories about them, to (re)construct and (re)interpret their own social relationships, be they individual or communal, internal or external.
47. Notar, “Wild Histories,” 219.
48. Zhao, “非物质文化遗产、国家与地方社会.”
49. Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism.”

50. In Mandarin, *minzuwenhua* (民族文化) is very ambiguous and can be misleading. It may refer to either the culture of the Chinese nation or the culture of a given minority nationality. The phrase used here is actually an ingenious domestication of the Central Government's call to strengthen the soft power of China by 'constructing the national culture'.
51. *Erhedongjingguyuehuihuiyuanshouce*, 洱河洞经古乐会会员手册.
52. As officially interpreted, the three 'sacred places' in this pilgrimage ritual are Capital of Buddhism (M. *fodu*), Capital of Deities (M. *shendu*) and Capital of Immortals (M. *xiandu*). However, this interpretation is rather different from that of the local residents. This new official title of the temple, though still occasionally challenged, seems to be well accepted by villagers, as such a high-sounding name is good, after all, for its publicity.
53. Harrell, "Introduction."
54. By contrast, in daily encounters with tourists and in inter-village competitions for a higher social standing in Dali, the Bai villagers take pains to minimize their differences with the Han Chinese or claim to be similarly 'advanced', as they do not benefit from accentuating these differences. See Notar, "Wild Histories," 63.
55. Sangren, *History and Magical Power*.
56. See, for example, Litzinger, *Other Chinas*; Rees, *Echoes of History*; and Schein, *Minority Rules*.

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