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Title	Images of minorities, memories of bandits : negotiating local identities in lowland West Hunan
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Qualification	PhD
Year	1999

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Digitisation Notes:

- pag 254 and 255 same in original; deleted the latter.

Images of Minorities, Memories of Bandits:

Negotiating Local Identities in Lowland West Hunan

PhD

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The University of Edinburgh

1999



Declaration

The contents of this thesis are the work of

Mary Rack

16/7/1999

Abstract

This thesis is based on thirteen months of fieldwork carried out in the West Hunan Tujia and Miao Minority People's Autonomous Prefecture in China, particularly focusing on the city of Jishou and the surrounding area.

Official images of Jishou are loosely based on the way of life of the highland, Kho Xiong speaking Miao people, giving the impression that Jishou itself is a 'minority' (*shao shu minzu*) area. The nature of my fieldwork, however, brought me into contact with lowland, Chinese speaking people, often of mixed descent, who, though considered by outsiders to be 'minority,' describe themselves and their cultural practices as 'local' (*bendi*).

After discussing the context of the social, political and economic change in which, like other cities in China, Jishou is participating, I focus on the cultural activities which are considered to be characteristic of this area. In doing so, I contrast officially sponsored activities, which seek to promote a picture of West Hunan as a place of distinct but happily co-existing ethnic groups, with the 'local' activities recreated in recent years at local temples.

Officially sponsored representations of the Miao appear as staged performances, appealing to non-locals as visually attractive images of an aboriginal 'Other', but with limited relevance for West Hunan people. In contrast, unofficial cultural practices, such as those at local temples, are participatory activities, through which people can address the effects of the rapid economic and political changes which are occurring in China today. Moreover, local stories and practices also provide a means by which people express identities in terms of shared locality and memory, suggesting that the official categorisation of ethnic difference fails to take account of the complexities of local identities. Although they are officially discouraged, the flexibility of local cultural practices allows them to evade attempts to control them.

Acknowledgements

First I would like to thank the Liang family and in particular Liang Zhaohui, without whose help this thesis could never have been written. Thanks are also due to all those people in West Hunan who shared their experiences with me and patiently explained so much to me. I also thank Zhang Yinhe for his contributions and Jishou University for allowing me to live and work in Jishou. I would particularly like to thank Barbara Edwards for helping to sustain me through my field-work period.

In Britain, my main debt of thanks is due to Nick Tapp, who encouraged me to undertake this project and whose comments and broad knowledge of the subject have been both stimulating and formative. I would also like to thank Charles Jedrej, particularly for his help with the closing stages of writing up. In addition to this I thank Paul Bailey and Bonnie McDougall for their comments on earlier drafts, the lecturers of Department of Social Anthropology and my fellow students, particularly Fiona Harris and Guro Huby, Philippa Hall, Panayotis Dendrinis and Jon Mitchell. I would also like to thank the lecturers and students of the Department of East Asian Studies and in particular Frances Weightman for her help with the glossary.

The research was funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council.

Finally I want to thank George Hare for his patience over many years, for his help with the maps and for his proof reading skills.

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Chapter One - Introduction

Travelling by train to Jishou, capital of the West Hunan Autonomous Prefecture, one is struck by the remoteness of the setting. Far from any major centres of population, it shares a mountainous border with the eastern parts of Guizhou and Sichuan provinces. In an effort to open the area to trade and tourism, a new, direct train-service to the region from Beijing has been opened. This route takes forty hours, working its way south on minor lines through the flat rural hinterland of Central China before crossing the Yangtze and entering West Hunan. During the last few hours of the journey, one passes through dramatic but barren mountain scenery, punctuated with villages comprising mud and wooden houses. The train's destination is Huaihua, a moderately important city situated at a railway junction two hours south of Jishou.

The city of Jishou itself presents a contrast to the rest of the region. Only the surrounding mountains make it look any different from any other small city in Southern China. A mixture of work units, small shops, concrete department stores, hotels and restaurants are crowded into a narrow valley and, as always in a Chinese city, there are many building sites. In the shops, which are filled with electrical goods and convenience foods, there is a variety of Chinese, foreign and multinational brand names. There is a sharp difference between these post-1949 buildings and the older section of the city, which consists of a few streets of wooden buildings by the river. As Gaubatz suggests, with reference to other cities, this part of the city was probably left untouched because the expense of rebuilding it would have been too high (1995: 32). Today, some efforts are being made to restore this part of the city in an attempt to attract tourism.

The Beijing train has a recorded announcement for each station. When you approach Jishou, it tells you that the city is a government, education and business centre for the area and that it is also a tourist centre. The main attractions are the local Miao and Tujia minority peoples. According to the announcement, there are several Miao

festivals each year, people speak a local version of the Miao language and there is a museum housing Miao and Tujia artefacts. In fact these latter claims are pure invention since minority festivals are not held in the city itself and the museums have closed down through lack of money. Though more than two thirds of the population of Jishou is officially registered as Miao or Tujia, minority languages are rarely spoken. Visitors are usually only aware of minority people when they see women in minority dress selling produce by the road or walking into town on rainy days or when there is no work to be done in the fields.¹

In Jishou itself, images of minority nationality culture are mainly seen in public architecture. In a park on a hill overlooking the city a new pagoda has been built, with reliefs showing the traditional customs of Miao and Tujia people. At a roundabout in the centre of the city there is a socialist-realist style statue of heroic figures in Miao dress performing a drum dance. Until recently, similar statues stood in front of the main hotel, but these have been removed to enlarge the car park. Tapestry hangings on sale at the department stores repeat these themes, depicting colourful minority dances and craggy landscapes.

Jishou's main street continues as the road south to the town of Qianzhou, which was founded during the latter part of the Ming dynasty² and became the Imperial centre for the region. Mini-buses run down this street, passing the new campus of Jishou University on the outskirts of town. The university is where most of the very few foreigners who come to Jishou are based. Though uncompleted, it boasts some of the most impressive buildings in Jishou and an elaborate gateway to the campus is being constructed. Inside, an artificial lake doubles as a fish-pond, and is spanned by a newly built bridge in traditional Chinese architectural style. It was at Jishou University that I was based during my field-work, whilst working there as an English teacher.

A walk of less than two miles from anywhere in the city takes one to cultivated fields or steep hillsides. The countryside around Jishou consists of small areas of flat land,

inhabited for the most part by peasants who are classified as 'Han', and steeper more barren land inhabited mostly, but again not solely, by those classified 'Miao'. Of the latter, it is those who live further from Jishou who are more likely to speak the non-Chinese language Kho Xiong and, where women are concerned, to wear distinctive embroidered tunics.

At the time when I arrived in Jishou, I already had two distinct images of West Hunan. One was of the Miao, a people with an ancient and separate culture, an image which had been reinforced by the official promotion of the area described above. The other image was of the mysterious West Hunan of the early twentieth century as described by Shen Congwen, who presents a 'romantic vision of the region as a cauldron of different ethnic groups' in which lowland Miao and Han live side by side, sharing a common culture (Kinkley 1987: 9). The juxtaposition of these two images continued to preoccupy me throughout most of my field-work.

In the rest of this chapter I provide a brief introduction to the minority nationalities in China. This is followed by an overview of the results of recent Western ethnographic field research in China and a consideration how restrictions placed on field-workers influence the definition of a field-work site. Finally, I describe in outline the ethnographic questions raised by this research and the approach which I took to address them.

National Minorities in China

The differentiation among China's national minorities is of course the outcome of complex social and historical processes. Throughout history the area which makes up China today has been culturally heterogeneous. But out of this has emerged a majority group, the Han who, as I shall describe, perceive themselves as peculiarly different from and superior to other peoples in China. Strictly speaking, the Han came into existence with the Han dynasty (206 BC - 221 AD)³, but the word is also used to define a culture which emerged before this time. Dreyer suggests that in this looser sense the Han can be traced back to

BC 722, when a silk-wearing, rice-eating, and city building people who considered themselves descendants of the Yellow emperor began to create a civilisation that gradually overwhelmed that of their neighbours (Dreyer 1976: 7 n.4).

The word Han is used in this way by Chinese people today.

The Han, and in particular the educated Han, have long regarded themselves as different from, and superior to, other peoples. Fundamental to this perceived difference is the practice of agriculture. Historical records from the Han dynasty stress agriculture as 'the great foundation of the world' and state that official rites and ceremonies for agriculture had been established by this time (Meserve 198: 56 - 7). Hunter-gatherers and nomads were therefore regarded as barbaric. They were considered to live on the fringes of civilisation and were classified as 'the Di (north), the Yi (east), the Rong (west), and the Man barbarians (south) (Heberer 1989: 17 - 18). Over the years, the expansion of the area inhabited by the Han has resulted in the assimilation of those people perceived as non-Han, a process made easier by the fact that there were only minor differences in physical appearance amongst the peoples of South and Central China. This process of assimilation was supported by the Confucian notion that exposure to Chinese ways could transform barbarians into civilised people (Harrell 1994a: 21).

Han expansion south of the Yangtze took place later than in the north. The south of China was regarded by the incoming Han as a place both mysterious and frightening. In comparison to people in the north, who were 'more serious and worshipped terrestrial and celestial gods', it was reputed that the people of the south were 'gayer and had freer ways. They worshipped nature spirits and the crocodile-dragon' (Wiens 1967: 131). Their worship of spirits and dragon deities disconcerted the incoming Han (von Glahn 1983: 26). However, the early expansion of the Han into South China was not simply a matter of overwhelming these local practices, it also involved the incorporation of local practices as Han. Wiens (1967: 45) suggests that this incorporation contributed to the 'impact power and inner energy' of Han culture in the south.

Early settlers arrived in what is now Hunan during the Han dynasty, fleeing rebellions in East China (Perdue 1987: 94). During the Song dynasty there was increased immigration into Hunan, driven by the need for land and raw materials. Military colonists also arrived in Hunan during the Song dynasty, to protect the frontier with the non-Han peoples (Perdue 1987: 94) but, in most of Hunan itself the indigenous people were gradually assimilated and brought under the administration of the state (von Glahn 1983).

However, the Han-Chinese military and civil administrative system was instituted only in areas where numbers of Han were large, or the local population thoroughly Sinicised. The most westerly part of Hunan, which is the area I am concerned with, was mountainous and malarial, making it an unattractive and dangerous prospect for the Han. The inhabitants of inhospitable or remote areas such as this remained unassimilated and were classified as *tu* (lit. earth), meaning aboriginal or indigenous in contrast to *wen*, which 'is characterised by such qualities as refinement, civilisation and literariness' (Yokoyama 1990: 12). In situations such as this, a system of indirect rule called the *tu si* system was employed by which local, non-Han leaders were made responsible to the Han Chinese state while continuing to have power in their own area.⁴ This was to avoid the alternative possibility whereby, according to Wiens, a Han Chinese leader and a group of soldiers would be set in place of a defeated local leader. This usually resulted in the locally outnumbered Han becoming assimilated with local, non-Han, indigenous people (Wiens 1967: 208-9). Though the administrative system for these non-Han people changed over the succeeding dynasties, they were still administered as different categories within the Chinese state, and a considerable degree of cultural heterogeneity was retained in Southwest China.

On paper, the position of the non-Han people changed dramatically during the Republican period (1919 - 1949), when Chiang Kai-shek declared that 'the non-Han peoples were only 'branch-clans' of the Han who were to be deliberately assimilated' (Heberer 1989: 18). In practice this made little difference and, in Hunan at least, was

accompanied by the removal of what education provision there had been specially provided for Miao speaking people (Shi 1986: 218).

The Communist Party came to power in 1949 and, in the early 1950s, the new government had a policy of giving limited autonomy to minority peoples and also allowing some freedom for religious and cultural practices. Minority nationalities, some of the poorest people in China, were deemed to have been particularly oppressed before the 'liberation' of 1949. In 1951, following the All China Nationality Conferences on Health and Education, it was decided to send large numbers of Han and minority cadres to the minority areas, to raise standards in these fields. Areas such as West Hunan, where there were a high proportion of minority people, were made Autonomous Prefectures during the 1950s.

Under a policy loosely based on that of Stalin's concept of nationality as comprising common language, territory, economic life and culture (Heberer 1989: 30 f. Hsieh 1986: 4) a rigorous, China-wide classification project was also set up (Dreyer 1976: 141, Harrell 1991). It is as a result of this project that the national categories which are used in China today were established. However, policy towards minority people always kept open the possibility that, as well as being politically integrated with the rest of China, minority people would eventually be integrated socially and culturally too. It was clearly stated that the Autonomous Prefectures were still part of the motherland (Dreyer 1976: 105). Although it was decided to develop or use written forms of the minority languages for educational texts, Chinese was also taught (Dreyer 1976: 116-7).

There were reactions against this minority policy during the anti-Rightist campaigns of the late 1950s (Dreyer 1976: 150, Tapp 1995: 215) and, with the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, these policies in favour of minorities were termed a 'bourgeois, revisionist line' and were reversed. Heberer writes that religious and cultural practices all over China were characterised as 'backward' but nationality identity in particular was targeted. Agricultural production techniques which differed

from those of the Han were discouraged and arable farming imposed even on inappropriate terrain (1989: 23-6). By the early 1980s, these attitudes had been largely modified. The Nationalities Institute in Beijing, which had been closed during the Cultural Revolution, was reopened in 1972, minority rights were reinstated in 1975 and the 1982 Constitution confirmed in more detail rights of limited self government, religious freedom, and 'protection and preservation of cultural heritage' (Hsieh 1986: 8 f.). Since this time, legislation has ensured that the head of local government in Autonomous Prefectures, and a proportion of other posts holders, are minority people, according to the official classification system (Tapp 1995 205). Minorities have also been advantaged in education and birth control policies (Heberer 1989, McKahnn 1994: 42f.) However, as Tapp writes, praise today for the 'rich and unique cultural traditions' of minority peoples is still offset by criticism of economic backwardness and perceptions that they are at a lower stage in the 'five-stage theory of modes of production associated with Stalin' (1995: 195).

The position I take in this thesis is that terms such as 'the Miao' and 'the Tujia', though they are ones which have in many cases been taken up by Western scholars, are primarily official designations, and that promotion of them as categories is found largely in government, government influenced publications and in other mass media. The descriptions of Miao and Tujia people below is not therefore intended to be taken as an indigenous point of view. From the official perspective, the Miao are considered to be a national minority of between seven and eight million people living in Southwest China. They are often characterised by scholars as fiercely independent aboriginal inhabitants of the area, quite different in origin and culture from the Han Chinese (Geddes 1976: 3 Lemoine 1978: 801-2). Scholars also regard them as different from other minority populations because, unlike surrounding populations, they did not live in permanent settlements for long periods of time but, instead, practised shifting agriculture in the uplands, moving from time to time and relocating their villages. In the past hundred years Miao people have also extended into Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Burma. Writers also note that they are divided into three language groups, one of which, the Kho Xiong, is centred on West Hunan

(Lemoine 1978: 797, Ma 1989: 339). The best known cultural practices of the West Hunan Miao are drum dancing and the sacrifice of water buffaloes. The latter is performed if an earlier prayer for relief from sickness or for the granting of a son has been answered (Ling & Ruey 1963: 207).

The other main group in West Hunan, according to official classification, is the Tujia. In West Hunan, most Tujia people lived to the north, in what is now Zhangjiajie Prefecture, thus most of those who live in the Jishou area are people who have migrated from further north to live in the cities and towns. They are said to have had early contact with the Han (Ma 1989: 403). The Tujia language is officially classified as a branch of the Sino-Tibetan group. In the 1950s they were classified as Miao and it was only after repeated requests that they were reclassified as Tujia. Today, the Tujia are considered to be relatively Sinicised, with few people able to speak the Tujia language (Zhang & Zeng 1993: 306, Ma 1989: 401) and one of their best known distinctive cultural practices is the practice of prolonged crying by the bride and her family at the bride's departure (Zhang & Zeng 1993: 309).⁵

The Western Ethnographer in China

As is widely realised, ethnographic accounts cannot now be considered to be objective descriptions. Since the eventual form they take is influenced by the conditions under which the research is carried out and the nature of the researcher's relationship with those among whom she or he lives, it is relevant to discuss the particular conditions which influence the practice of ethnographic research in China.

In the first part of this century there was considerable contact between Chinese and Western anthropologists. During the 1930s, describes, teachers from the United States introduced functionalism into China and several Chinese anthropologists studied overseas. Among the best known of these are Fei Xiaotong, who went to study with Malinowski in LSE, and Lin Yueh-hua, who studied in Harvard (Guldin 1994). The French tradition of sociology was also influential, particularly on Ling Shun-sheng, who later wrote on West Hunan (Lemoine 1989). Several full length

ethnographic works about China were produced as a result of field-work during this period.⁶

After 1949, scholars such as Fei Xiaotong and Lin Yueh-hua participated the project to classify minority nationalities, which had replaced ethnographic research in mainland China. Between 1949 and 1979, almost all Westerners doing research on Chinese society worked in Taiwan or Hong Kong (see for example Wolf 1978, Diamond 1969) or by interviewing refugees from China (Parish and Whyte 1984, Whyte 1974). The few Westerners who were allowed to visit China were those most sympathetic to China's political programme, such as Rewi Alley, whose reportage on West Hunan I refer to in Chapter Two.

However, with the liberalisation which followed Deng Xiaoping's ascent to power in 1978, and recommencement of relationships with other countries, in particular the United States, China once again became a possible site for ethnographic field-work. Much of what has been done is by scholars from the United States, (e.g. Schein 1993, Gladney 1991, Jankowiak 1993), but research has also been undertaken by scholars from other countries such as Britain (e.g. Gamble 1996), Holland (e.g. Pieke 1996) and Hong Kong (e.g. Cheung 1996b). In recent years, Chinese scholars who have studied overseas have reintroduced ethnographic field-work to Chinese scholarship and, by 1997, at least one European anthropology research student was having her field work supervised at Beijing University.

Although it has been made possible for foreigners to do field-work in China, the process is highly regulated. In the early 1980s the non-Chinese field-worker was expected to be officially registered (Thurston 1983: 24) and this still applies today. Furthermore, permission to do field work in China is often dependant on good relations with powerful officials (Bullock 1993: 292, Madsen 1987: 196 Pieke 1996: 4) and when permission is granted, official support takes the form of elaborate and protective hospitality, making it difficult for the researcher to be in any way unobtrusive (Thurston 1983: 25 - 6). Underlying these relationships is a certain

amount of distrust of the researcher's purposes, as Pieke indicates when he writes that,

suspicious of the fieldworker's intentions and a refusal to co-operate are found in all fieldwork situations. In the case of the Peoples' Republic however, their magnitude is increased because these apprehensions are shared and often sanctioned by the state (Pieke 1996: 4).

Many writers have described the restrictions they met with during field-work. For example, Pieke writes that he was denied access to a particular neighbourhood, a site that most Westerners would consider public (Pieke 1996: 7). Gamble, Pieke and Jankowiak lived, like myself, in university accommodation, making the classic ethnographic starting point of a family or community study much more difficult. Gamble and Gladney found their interviewees aware of the dangers for Chinese citizens in talking too freely to foreigners (Gamble 1996: 25, Gladney 1991: 110-11).

In all these cases, restrictions on the researchers' activities have directed them away from pursuing intensive, small scale community studies. For example, Gladney (1991) writes that while doing fieldwork in China in the mid-1980s, he came across a series of difficulties, including 'government employees looking over one's shoulder, residence in state owned institutions or hotels, restricted access to one's informants, and the need for multiple bureaucratic procedures' all of which were hard to combine with the ideal of 'classic-style ethnography in one location' (106-7). Since he was not permitted to stay in villages for more than two weeks at a time, his study was, of necessity, multi-sited. Other writers have attempted to embrace large populations, such as Shanghai (Gamble 1996) or Huhhot (Jankowiak 1993). A result of the multi-sited and often interview based approach of these writers is that they emphasise the complexity and fluidity of their field-work site and describe their approach as 'dialogic' (Pieke 1996: 10, Gamble 1996: 10). Gamble describes his work as 'an innovative and original approach which presents a broad brush ethnographic account of a metropolis' (1996: 4). Jankowiak takes a symbolic interactionist approach which considers the whole city and takes culture as a 'dynamic process' (1993: 1). Similarly, Pieke writes of how the interview based nature of his fieldwork led him to

consider how people ‘continually renegotiated their social roles and culture knowledge’ (1996: 16-17), and Gladney’s multi-sited approach allowed him to consider ‘a polyphony of voices ... each contradicting the other, sharing different visions of Hui-ness’ (1991: 103)

Western field-workers in rural areas also describe the means by which researchers’ activities are restricted. Most rural areas are still officially ‘closed’ to non-Chinese, who are therefore not allowed to stay overnight in these places. Foreign scholars who have permission to live and study in these closed areas are closely guarded, usually on the pretext of their safety. For example, Schein (1993), who did fieldwork in Guizhou Province in the late 1980s, describes how she was required to be accompanied by a male guide from Guiyang University, who was unwilling to let her leave the village alone. She also describes how it took several months for her to gain permission from local authorities to walk across a mountain range to the neighbouring village (1993: 315). Though these interventions were couched in terms of concern for her safety, they must have restricted the types of information she was able to obtain (1993: 309, 317).

My situation, in a small city and its rural surroundings, had something in common with those of the writers discussed above. Unlike them, however, though I made an informal arrangement with Jishou University that I would teach and do research during my stay there, I had no official post-graduate affiliation, having been warned by a Western scholar that this would not be granted. Since I already had three years experience of working in China, I wrote instead to Jishou University applying to work there as an English teacher and stating that I intended to combine this with a study of the local Miao people. As a result of this approach, I was offered a post at the university for the year 1995-6. Later, in the spring of 1997, I applied for a three month tourist visa and was granted permission by the local Public Security Bureau (*Gongan Ju*) to stay in the area to ‘look at New Year customs’, provided that I did not conduct interviews or take photographs which were of political or economic significance.⁷

In practical terms there were advantages to this arrangement, since I was able to present myself as a teacher who was interested in local customs rather than as a scholar accompanied by the guide or translator which official channels might have provided. This contrasts with the case of a Japanese researcher with official permission for his research who, I was told by an employee of Jishou University was, unlike myself, a 'real scholar', but was not permitted to go out unaccompanied. However, I too met with restrictions and surveillance, some of which may have been, as Schein found, nominally for my own safety. For example, I was instructed by a member of the university's Foreign Affairs Department (*Waishi Ban*) that I was not to go out after dark. I was also restricted in the places where I could do my research, since I did not have permission to stay in rural areas. As a result of this, my visits to villages were limited mostly to day trips and only occasional longer stay.

Other restrictions on my actions appeared to be motivated by a wish to limit contact between Chinese and Western people. Academics were cautious about contacting me since, on a previous occasion, a local scholar had been punished for giving a book to a Japanese researcher. A Chinese researcher who did contact me had first to check with the local Public Security Bureau that it was permissible to do so. Any books he wanted to show me, although available in bookshops, were given to me through a third party. In this instance the Public Security Bureau gave him permission without question. On another occasion, teachers at a Jishou secondary school were discouraged from helping me after a member of the Secret Public Security Bureau (*Anquan Ju*) visited the school to tell them about the dangers of foreign spies collecting information about the area. It was only some time after I left Jishou that I learned that someone from the local government had been assigned the task of keeping me under surveillance during my stay.

Other difficulties arose from the fact that I was employed as a teacher. It quickly became clear that Jishou University's interpretation of my research interest was that I would go to markets and take photographs of rural Miao people but that they

expected me to spend most of my leisure time socialising in English with young teachers and students. The pursuit of my research interests was not helped by the fact that the cadre whom I had originally approached, and who accepted me as a teacher there, was sent to Changsha, the provincial capital, for political re-education shortly after I arrived.⁸ Combining my roles as researcher and teacher proved problematic since restrictions on students' activities, and their sometimes dismissive attitude to aspects of local culture, meant that they rarely accompanied me out of the university, except on organised excursions.

Many of the people with whom I had contact were educated people whom I met through my work as an English teacher both during the period of my research (1995-6) and earlier in Changsha (1988-90). At Jishou University I had contact with students, and to some extent I shared their social lives since I went with them on excursions and attended the performances which they organised. In addition to this, like Gamble (1996: 27), I built upon contacts I had formed during two years teaching in Changsha. In particular, Liang Zhaohui, who had been my student at Changsha, proved an invaluable source of information. He also introduced me to his family who, between them, had a wide knowledge of the area and contributed immeasurably to my understanding. His father, Old Liang, was born in a highland area and kept in close contact with his Kho Xiong speaking relatives. Liang Zhaohui's mother, Gu, was from a former gentry family in Qianzhou. During the Cultural Revolution, the whole family had been sent to live for several years in a Kho Xiong speaking village just outside Jishou. Today, as teachers and retired teachers, the family participates in the urban life of Jishou. People such as the Liangs and others whom I had taught as students were often happy to take part in long informal interviews about present and past events in Jishou. It was through these contacts that I was informed of the existence of certain aspects of life in Jishou, such as the prevalence of corruption and the presence of a number of spirit mediums. People whom I had got to know more recently did not volunteer such information, partly because it would be considered a loss of face to reveal such a 'backward' (*luohou*) aspect of people's way of life.⁹

Like Pieke and Gamble, I found that a few well established relationships allowed me to gain entrance to networks of educated and state employed people. These were in both Jishou and the surrounding area. It was through my contacts with former students that I had access to a small number of government officials whom they knew socially. This was particularly useful since I would have found it difficult to gain access to them without such contacts. When talking to these officials about government policies towards culture (*wenhua*) and religion I used relatively formal interviewing techniques. This was partly because their time and the information they imparted was perceived as valuable, both by themselves and by the people who put me in touch with them. It would be disrespectful to appear ill-prepared or casual. It was also because such officials are used to addressing the kinds of questions I was asking since I was looking for nothing more personal than an account of official policies. I also knew that these interviews were unlikely to develop into informal or social relationships.

Through these networks I was also able to build up a picture of the day to day concerns of young educated urban people through visiting them in their homes and going out with them on social occasions. As my fieldwork went on, however, I found that I was decreasingly welcome among this section of society and eventually I drew the conclusion that my behaviour was considered too strange and, perhaps, too politically suspect to make me socially acceptable. As a result of this I found myself more and more in the company of the retired, the less educated and the people who lived on the rural outskirts of Jishou. In particular I associated with the people who gathered around temples.

What follows then is a result of a particular fieldwork experience concerning the people who chose to speak to me as much as vice-versa. It is perhaps unnecessary to state that it does not claim to be an objective study, but that it springs from one person's experience. Nonetheless, I would like to stress that the research is based on a particular encounter with West Hunan life, which was influenced by the fact that I

am both a Westerner and an unmarried woman. If I seem to concentrate on the marginal and the 'superstitious' this is not, I hope, out of a misplaced search for the 'Other' but because this is where I, in the anomalous position of an unofficial researcher, found people willing to spend time talking and explaining things to me. As I came to understand the situation better I realised that the temples I visited were not as marginal as they first appeared.

At first, language was a problem since, in contrast to educated people who spoke *putonghua* (Mandarin) and English, the people I met at temples spoke the local dialect which, though a form of Mandarin, was not immediately intelligible to me. This was particularly the case with rural women who were less likely to have travelled out of the area or to have spoken with people from outside West Hunan before. However, after several months of fieldwork I found that I had become accustomed to the different pronunciation and tones and, unwittingly, was employing them myself. Strangers told me, with amazement and pleasure, that I was speaking their dialect. This, of course, greatly increased the opportunities for further contact with people met by chance at markets, in shops and on buses.

I also found increasingly that I was gathering information through conversation and participant observation rather than through interviews. Through making offerings at temples and attending festivals I was also able to experience, as well as observe, the practices which took place. Since relationships in China are built up over time and through the exchange of favours, the direction of the exchange of information was often contrary to what I had envisaged and long sessions were spent answering questions about life in Britain. It was through this and gifts of photographs (from me) and meals (from them) that relationships were built up.

It is apparent then that, like other researchers on China, I found that the restrictions which were imposed on me had a hand in determining the nature of the fieldwork which I undertook. They also influenced the recording methods which I used. I never taped conversations and interviews, nor made notes, since the few times I

suggested this I found my interlocutors to be very reluctant. Field-notes were therefore written up at the end of every day on the basis of memory. I did, however, make occasional tape recordings of chants and singing. In addition to this I recorded events through photographs and, on occasions when performances took the nature of a public spectacle, I made videos. I also collected a range of other materials. These included promotional material intended for visitors to the area, in the form of written material, still photographs and videos taken from West Hunan television. I also collected a number of Chinese language historical source-materials which provided useful information, difficult to access from outside China. I was, however, unable to gain access to certain documents, as I describe in Chapter Eight.¹⁰

Overview of the Thesis

In this thesis I contrast two kinds of cultural activity which take place in and around Jishou and use this to consider broader issues of local identities. Firstly, I look at those which are promoted by the local government. These include the nearby Dehang scenic park (*fengjing qu*) and local television programmes. The emphasis here is almost entirely on images of the Miao minority people, which usually incorporate dance, bright costumes and themes of romance and love. Often, though not always, these images are intended for consumption by educated visitors from outside the area.

This emphasis on images of the Miao implies that the Jishou area is inhabited by people who are very different from the Han. I suggest that this is part of an attempt to represent the Han as a people with civilised and homogenous culture, in contrast to the primitive, disparate and formerly rebellious minority peoples. Similar distinctions between Han and Minority have played an important part in the administration and control of West Hunan in Late Imperial times. The notion of a civilised and homogeneous Han culture has also been diffused through Chinese society. In Imperial times this was by means of formal education and the 'orthodoxy' of ritual and etiquette (Rowe 1994: 419, Watson 1988: 3, M. Cohen 1991: 117). Today, the education system continues a similar process (Lewin & Little 1993:

12). In so far as this has been influential in shaping people's views and attitudes it has constituted a 'relationship of hegemony' which pervades most of China (cf Gramsci 1971: 350).

I contrast this by looking at cultural activities which are considered to be 'local.' In doing so I look mainly, but not exclusively, at the temples and temple festivals which have recently been recreated by West Hunan people, drawing on the resources of collective memory. These activities contrast in a number of ways with the officially promoted images of the Miao. They are not rigidly defined or organised and often they are not officially sanctioned. They are not associated with a particular ethnic identity but are often characterised as 'local'. For example, people explain that these temples have not been provided by the state (*guojia*) but are *bendi* (local, of this place). They are also events in which people participate rather than spectacles to be watched. Moreover, they are highly relevant to people's concerns. In visiting temples, people attempt to comprehend and articulate their experiences of the new uncertainties introduced into their lives as a result of China's recent economic and social changes. I suggest therefore that the official images of the Miao can be seen as part of an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm 1983) to be viewed by outsiders and in a particular landscape. The stories and activities associated with the temples are, by contrast, shifting and changeable and highly relevant to the everyday life of the people of West Hunan.

The recreation of temples and the activities on temple sites are closely linked to a sense of locality, indicated by the indigenous use of the term *bendi* (local). Recent work has underlined the danger of essentialising or reifying locality as an area of study. It has become widely accepted that the 'local' cannot be discussed as if it exists beyond the influences of migration and of the state and is often in fact a form of interaction with, or response to, these influences (Appadurai 1995, Knight 1994, Fardon 1995). It is appropriate to study locality therefore, not as something which refers unproblematically to a particular territory but as an idea which people employ to express an identity. Thus we find reference to 'the production of locality'

(Appadurai 1995) and to a symbolism of locality which may be shifting and multi-vocal (A P Cohen 1985: 14, Mitchell 1998: 82). Indeed, recent work suggests that a sense of locality may be detached from an actual territory to the degree that it refers to the memory of a place which no longer exists (Mitchell 1998: 83 f.).

The suggestion that 'locality' refers to an idea as well as to a territory fits well with the situation I am describing. When people employ the term 'local' (*bendi*) to describe certain activities in West Hunan this does not imply that a bounded territory exists which is inhabited by a group of people who are united by a common practice. While some people in West Hunan are drawn to temples and deities which are described as 'local,' many are looking to the urban pleasures of television and fashion and have no interest in these 'local' sites. Conversely, many people from outside of West Hunan take an interest in Jishou's temples on the basis that they are 'local' despite the fact that the locality is not their own. The appeal of the 'local' derives in part from the fact that it is an alternative to, a means of dealing with, and sometimes an implied criticism of the current situation of rapid change. In Jishou, activities at temples are often a response to the situation of economic change initiated by the reform programme of the early 1980s. It is notable that the initiative for recreating them is found among the people who are most marginalised, in particular among older women and single women. For them, temples provide an alternative or even a livelihood. The temples also appeal to a wider group, old, young urban, rural, people who stay in West Hunan and people who leave the area to find work, but many of them visit in order to address problems brought about by social and economic changes.

Like Siu, I am not suggesting that these activities represent an 'anti-state and anti-hegemonic' resurgence of past forms of popular culture (1989: 122). They are not indicative of the return of pre-1949 symbolic forms (Potter & Potter 1990: 336) or a form of 'counter-modernism' in the face of the rapid loss of tradition (Yang 1996: 110). Instead, the forms of worship are employed flexibly. They 'acquire new meanings and speak to new experiences in changing arenas of social relationships'

(Ong 1988: 32). Furthermore, although activities at temples are not sanctioned by the state and may imply a criticism of its actions, it would be an over simplification to represent them in terms of theories of cultures of resistance (Scott 1985: 28f.). Where conflict arises between official and local meanings of these cultural forms, the response among visitors to the temple is one of elusiveness or reinterpretation rather than resistance.

I am also reluctant to discuss the recreation of temples as a response to social change as if this is a new development in response to modernity or globalisation which has no precedents in the past. To do so would be to risk a form of 'chrono-centrism' implying that '*all* contemporary phenomena are unique' (Gamble 1996: 353) and that West Hunan is a place 'without history' (cf Wolf 1982). The production of locality through forms of interaction with the state has been taking place in West Hunan for centuries. What I attempt to show is that, in the past and today, there has been an interaction between an apparently fixed and enduring official culture and a more flexible local one.

In the following I situate my discussion of these cultural forms in the wider context of political and economic change in Jishou. I look at the influence of the economic liberalisation of the past twenty years, with the resultant flows of people and images in and out of the area. I also consider the effects of the continuing presence of the socialist state. I show that new economic and leisure activities represent an alternative to the experiences of the 1960s and 1970s, when the Chinese state had almost total control over people's day to day lives. Nonetheless, these new activities are carried out within the structures still imposed by the state today rather than in opposition to them.

In Chapters Three and Four I discuss the images of Miao people which are promoted by local government, for consumption both by visitors and by inhabitants of West Hunan. This is exemplified in the scenic park of Dehang where visitors can attend dance performances in the evenings or view a Miao village and the surrounding

mountains by day. Through visits to such places, West Hunan becomes, in the eyes of visitors, a place which is contrasted to modernity and progress and associated with the natural and the 'Other'. As officially promoted images these do not, of course, represent the views of those who take part. But my approach is not so much to look at the effects of these forms of representation on the relatively small number of actors, performers and villagers who are involved in their creation but to contrast these images with the activities which take place in temples.

In Chapter Five, I consider the ways in which the Chinese administration has organised West Hunan in terms of separate Miao and Han groups, a distinction which has not always been borne out in practice. This is followed by a discussion of the term 'local' (*bendi*), commonly used to describe people and practices.

Chapter Six is based largely on accounts of Buddhist temples. I suggest that these temples are created on the basis of people's memories of the past and that they have an important role to play in their efforts to adjust to the rapid change and social insecurity resulting from the government of China's policies of economic liberalisation. I take this argument further in Chapter Seven when I consider the temple of the Celestial Kings (*Tian Wang*), based on three legendary military figures. I look in detail at how, in its present form, it is a place where people address their individual concerns and contrast this with the more community based activities which took place in the recent past. I also consider the most commonly heard story of the Celestial Kings, that they were protectors of the locality. I consider the significance of locality in this story and contrast it with official versions, in which the theme of ethnic difference is stressed. I also suggest that the significance of the Celestial Kings as figures protective of the locality is underlined by the popularity of another set of stories, about bandits and/or local heroes.

In Chapter Eight I return to the subject of Miao and Han but here I look at it from the point of view of West Hunan people rather than as official classifications. I discuss the area, not in terms of separable ethnic groups, but as a cultural heterogeneity in

which highland and lowland people can be seen as coming from two different, but related and interpenetrating broad cultural traditions. This cultural heterogeneity, I suggest, informs the sense of locality which I have been discussing, without necessarily cross cutting it or leading to conflict.

In Chapter Nine, by illustrating the theme I have been developing throughout the thesis, that of an interaction between a flexible, heterogeneous local culture and a less negotiable, fixed official culture. I do this through a description of the local government's attempt to take control of the site of the temple of the Celestial Kings and the resulting appeal by local people to the authority of spirit mediums and followed by the creation of a different temple site.

In Chapter Ten, I consider more generally the implications of the interaction between official and unofficial views of local culture.

¹ The 1990 statistics (Xiangxi Minzu Renkou Fenbu Biao n.d.), the most recent available to me, give the population of Jishou City as 230,614, of which 67,138 are Han, 90,874 are Miao and 70,491 are Tujia. The remainder is made up of other nationalities, of which the Bai, with a population of 745, are the largest.

The area officially classified as Jishou City also includes a number of surrounding villages, such as Yaxi and Pingshanpo. In my own work, for simplicity's sake, when I write of Jishou I do not include these, when I refer to the 'Jishou area' I do.

² 1368 - 1644

³ Also, the word was not used in the sense of Han nationality (*Hanzu*) until the end of nineteenth century (Chow 1997: 36).

⁴ See Dreyer (1976) for a discussion of the *tu si* system.

⁵ I witnessed this myself at the wedding of two teachers from Jishou University, where the bride was a Tujia woman.

⁶ These include Fei (1936), Osgood (1963), Hsu (1948) and Fitzgerald (1941).

⁷ I am of course aware that there are ethical issues which arise from this. In this case there was great sensitivity as a result of the outcome of the 1994 Miao/Hmong conference as I describe in Chapter Eight.

⁸ This was a form of punishment, possibly prompted by the fact that he had not been carrying out his duties adequately due to his heavy drinking.

⁹ I refer to the importance of building up *guanxi*, (personal connections, networks) in passing in this chapter. For a fuller discussion see Chapter Two.

¹⁰ See Chapter Eight, note 7.



Jishou



Statue of Miao
drum-dancing: Jishou

Chapter Two - Jishou and the Context of Reform

Introduction

In the later part of my thesis I focus on the revival of local cultural practices. In Chapter Four, for example, I discuss rural 'Miao' festivals, and New Year festivals in particular. In other chapters, I discuss the activities which take place in temples, many of which have been rebuilt without official sanction. However, too close a focus on festivals and temple activities, to the exclusion of other aspects of life, would misrepresent my material and my argument since participation in these activities is often closely linked to experiences in other spheres of life. In this chapter, therefore, I consider the wider context of everyday life in the Jishou area, drawing parallels, and pointing out some differences, between Jishou and other parts of China. Rather than being an in depth description of urban China, of which there have been many in recent years, this is intended as an introduction, providing some of the background to the subject of the revival of local cultural practices described later in the thesis.

West Hunan - a Remote Area?

West Hunan is often regarded by people from other parts of China as a mysterious place. Kinkley (1987: 15-16) writes that in the early part of this century '[s]ome, mostly outsiders, even called it Shiwai Taoyuan, the Chinese Shangri-La'. On several occasions educated and metropolitan Chinese people have told me how much they would like to visit the area, which they consider remote and mysterious. The area has all the qualifications to be perceived 'remote' since, as Ardener writes, mountains conventionally add to 'remoteness', and remote areas are perceived to be homes to 'smugglers and spies', which is also West Hunan's reputation (1987: 41-3).

Jishou, however, like the rest of China, has experienced rapid change since 1978 when Deng Xiaoping came to power and instituted a process of economic reform. People talk of how as recently as the 1970s the buildings were made of wood, the nearby hills were forested, and wolves would come into the city at night. The streets, which in 1990 were filled with pedestrians and street markets, are now busy with

minibuses, connecting the city with outlying towns and villages. One's first impression of the city is that it is still relatively economically under-developed. The pavements are poorly maintained and some of the buildings dilapidated. But, despite the apparent remoteness of the setting, and the city's promotion as a centre of minority culture, Jishou today, like any other Chinese city, is a consumer of goods and images from the rest of China and beyond. Streets are lined with small restaurants, *karaoke* bars and shops. As in the rest of China, the shops sell Chinese and imported electrical and electronic goods, multinational and joint venture household products, convenience foods and high prestige imported goods such as European whisky and brandy. Western fashions are popular, and a row of street stalls known as 'Hong Kong Street' sells cheap versions of recent western styles in jeans and other clothes. There are also video shops renting American films and music shops selling tapes and CDs of Taiwanese pop music.

In fact, despite its reputation as a 'Shangri-La', the cities of West Hunan, such as Jishou and Qianzhou, have been in close contact with the central Chinese state since the Qing dynasty,¹ when the area was closely supervised by a strong administrative and military presence including high ranking military officials. Today, Jishou is still a centre of local government administration, and includes administrative work units such as The Prefectural Forestry Council (*Zhou Linye Wei*) and The District Grain Procurement Department (*Zhou Liangshi Ju*) to name but two. A large proportion of the work available is still in the state sector. In the remainder of this section I discuss the recent history of the cities of Jishou and Qianzhou.

Jishou, formerly called Suoli was, until the early part of the twentieth century, a minor town. During the Qing dynasty, the Imperial administration was based in Qianzhou, about twenty kilometres away. Some Jishou people say that the name Suoli (*suo* = place/office) referred to the township offices which governed the surrounding area. People who remember pre-1949 times tell me that, though this may have been its official meaning, to them the name Suoli referred to the place where boats had to be pulled through rapids in the river (*suo* = rope/cableway). This is because Jishou was also the place where rapids began, and from where people took

river transport. Later, when the first motor road to the area was built in the 1930s, Jishou, still called Suoli, became an intersection of road and river transport.

During the Qing dynasty, Qianzhou, like other Chinese cities at this period, was ‘fully integrated with [central] political and bureaucratic power’ (Johnson 1992: 189). Until recently, older inhabitants told me, Qianzhou had the features of a classic walled Imperial Chinese city, with four gates and two straight roads intersecting the city, and several temples including a City God temple (*Chenghuang Miao*), a Fire God temple (*Huoshen Miao*) and a Confucian temple (*Wen Miao*). Most of these have since been destroyed, but Qianzhou still holds the biggest country market in the region. This, and the territorial cult, based on the temple of the Celestial Kings, draws large numbers of visitors, both rural and urban.

During the Sino-Japanese war (1937-45), Suoli (Jishou) was temporarily swelled with refugees and traders. In what must have been one of the most dramatic events in its history, its inhabitants witnessed the retreat of a section of the Guomindang army through West Hunan on their way to Sichuan following a new road which had recently been specially built for this purpose. A few months later the defeated Guomindang forces returned, according to local sources, followed by the Communist forces² three days later. This highway is still an important link between Hunan and Sichuan Provinces, and the section up the Aizhai slope outside Dehang scenic park (see Chapter Three) is an impressive piece of civil engineering.

The remnants of the *tun* system³ which had persisted into the Republican period, were superseded in 1949 when a new structure of local government was established. The capital of the newly formed West Hunan Miao and Tujia Autonomous Prefecture was moved from Qianzhou to Jishou to dissociate it from Qianzhou’s Imperial past. According to Liang Zhaohui, the name ‘Jishou’ was taken, because it is similar to the Miao language version of the old name of Suoli in its sense as ‘offices’, part of a process of changing Chinese names for minority ones which took place in other parts of China (Dreyer 1976: 105). Jishou University was built and there was an influx of cadres, sent to develop the area, many of whom have settled in

the city. In the early 1950s, land reform was effected and collectives were formed. Efforts were also made to develop the rural areas and Alley (1974: 25) writes of new irrigation projects and workshops which he observed in the Jishou area on his journey there in 1962.

West Hunan was also affected by the negative results of central policy during the early years of the Communist Government. In 1958, the Great Leap Forward was initiated in an attempt to make China self sufficient through mass mobilisation of the people. All over China, rural collectives were merged into larger communes, a process which was intended to bring about the industrialisation and development of the countryside, thus hastening the advent of Communism. Millions of small furnaces were built in a drive to produce steel and to enable China's economic development to catch up with that of other major powers. In the event, most of the steel proved to be unusable, and all over China the neglect of agriculture resulted in famine. In West Hunan there were thousands of deaths, particularly among highland people, and I was told that the roads into Jishou were lined with the corpses of people who had come down from the mountains to look for food.

In 1966, Mao Zedong, fearing that bourgeois revisionism had crept into post-revolution society, urged young people to criticise their teachers and cadres. They were asked to overthrow 'capitalist roaders' and to eliminate the 'four olds', i.e. old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. These young people were to become the Red Guards and this movement became known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. During this time, old buildings were destroyed, religious cultural practices forbidden and many intellectuals publicly humiliated or even attacked and killed. The movement also led to fighting in towns and cities between different groups of Red Guards. This phase of the Cultural Revolution was followed by a mass programme of sending people from intellectual or otherwise privileged backgrounds to the countryside to learn from the peasants.

The upheavals of the Cultural Revolution were less intense in Jishou than in the larger cities, such as the provincial capital Changsha. Nonetheless different factions

of Red Guards did fight on the streets of Jishou and educated people, both from the minority and Han, were sent to the countryside for re-education. As in other parts of China, minority dress and cultural practices were not permitted (Heberer 1989: 23). Often, to the great regret of older people, historic and religious buildings, such as temples, were destroyed, as were the graves of local heroes. Mrs Gu told me of a beautiful tower outside Qianzhou which had been built by a Qing dynasty scholar in memory of his wife. When it was destroyed by Red Guards, the older people all said in secret to each other that it was a terrible pity (*ke xiu, ke xiu*), but there was nothing they could do. However, some projects of lasting benefit were also undertaken during this period. A railway line was built connecting Jishou with larger centres, and young people were mobilised to build local irrigation systems. A native of Yaxi village recalled carrying rocks up the hillsides as a teenager, to make a small reservoir.

As intellectuals, the Liang family suffered during this period. Though Old Liang was from a highland, Kho Xiong speaking village, his status as a member of the village's wealthiest family and his education in West Hunan and Wuhan led to him being recognised as 'landlord'. Since Mrs Gu, his wife, was also educated, and the daughter of a famous scholar and member of the gentry class, she was directed to spend many years living and teaching in a village outside Jishou. Old Liang, however, was not permitted to teach, but was forced to do manual work and undergo repeated criticism sessions to the point where he once ran away and took refuge in a cave, and at another time attempted suicide.

In many ways however, Jishou benefited materially from the first thirty years of the Peoples' Republic, when smaller cities were favoured over larger ones, as part of an 'anti-urban model of development' (Naughton 1995: 67), and the interior was favoured over coastal cities (Pannell 1992: 21). It received money and personnel, in the form of cadres sent to develop the infrastructure and education system, and it remains a big recipient of government money from both provincial and national sources.

State Control and Liberalisation

In 1979 'the party reaffirmed the legitimacy of private business' with the result that people could, if they wished, avoid the supervision of work and lifestyle that had previously been such a feature of Chinese life (Gold 1989: 187). The reforms resulted in a relaxing of the considerable degree of control which had been effected over individual behaviour until the 1970s. Even for those still working in the state sector, time spent in political activities was reduced and unsupervised leisure time increased. As a means of stimulating the economy, contact with the rest of the world was once again permitted, through the Open Door Policy (White 1993a: 48-9).

From the work of Parish and Whyte, we learn that during the period between the 1950s and the late 1970s, there were 'rigid taboos on all forms of dress, expression, ritual life, and communication that did not conform to the official ideology' (1984: 358). Those who diverged from the officially sanctioned norms could be corrected through 'criticism and self criticism among a group of peers' (Parish and Whyte 1984: 279, see also Whyte 1974)⁴.

Between 1949 and the 1980s, the vast majority of urban people lived in work units (*danwei*), which became one of the most 'fundamental and characteristic features of the Peoples' Republic of China' (Southall 1993: 341). Work units are self-contained, enclosed compounds built around a factory, an educational institution or a government department and, as well as being a place of work, they meet accommodation and other needs. The work unit can be seen as the 'micro-level' of the Communist Party's system of organisation (White 1993a: 200, Li 1993: 346), since they have been and to some extent still are concerned with observation and control of the population (Lull 1991, Davis 1995: 3, Parish and Whyte 1984: 358). However, it also should be born in mind that this system contributed to the stability of city life (Parish and Whyte 1984: 248) and today many people prefer the security of life in the work unit to the freedom of working for a private company.

Despite the reforms, work units continue to be major employers today, especially in small inland cities such as Jishou. Usually they consist of a series of buildings,

between two and five stories high, in self contained compounds, surrounded by a wall and locked at night. The work unit with which I am most familiar, Jishou University, is a typically self contained unit. As well as teaching buildings and dormitories for students, the work-unit also provides housing, a medical clinic and a cafeteria, mainly used by students, single teachers and other workers. The university also provides for staff and students' non-working life. It arranges dances and films and there are small restaurants and *karaoke* bars on the premises. Retired teachers and workers draw a small salary and can continue to live in their work unit accommodation. The unit also provides an old people's centre where retired employees can play mah-jong, cards, croquet or practise calligraphy. Though they do not exercise the degree of control that they did in the past, the Party hierarchy still has an influence at all levels of the unit.

At Jishou University, today as in the past, almost all the people with management responsibilities are Party members and such people are usually referred to as leaders or cadres. It is important for employees of the unit to maintain good relations with party cadres who are making decisions about transfers and promotions. One of the most commonly made comments about work units is that to be happy and get on in one's job one needs to 'get on well with the leaders.' Relationships with cadres could be formed by drinking with them at banquets, joking together, doing favours or giving gifts. This hierarchy reached all levels of the unit, for example, there were also students who were attending meetings as preparation to become Party members. Usually the class monitors were from this group and they were responsible for reporting back on the behaviour of other students.

In discussing these issues I am introducing material which is relevant to the debate on civil society. While not intending to engage with this debate in any detailed way, I briefly introduce the main points here. It has been suggested that the reforms have allowed for a gradual detachment from the state and formation of organisations which have become 'nascent civil society' which in its turn contributed to the political events of 1989 (Whyte 1992: 94, Strand 1990). Indications of the formation of 'horizontal integration between economic actors' challenging 'primordial ties to

the family and to the ruler' (Flower & Leonard 1996: 199 - 200) have been seen in the formation of 'non-state economic groups' (Wakeman 1993: 110), in the emergence of a public opinion 'not created or controlled by elites' (Whyte 1992: 93) and, by widespread agreement, in the formation of non-governmental organisations (see for example, White 1993, Chamberlain 1993: 202, Whyte 1992: 91 f.).

The notion of an emerging civil society in China has since been challenged by Gu (1994) and Ding (1998) who criticise this work for under-emphasising the interpenetration of state and society. More fundamentally, they call into question the relevance of the Western notion of civil society to Chinese society. This point has been taken up by Flower and Leonard, who, in their work on rural Sichuan, argue for a 'more nuanced grass-roots view of the relations between state and society.' Rather than separation and conflict they argue that we should see the 'interpenetration of state and society' in terms of 'co-optation [and] negotiation' (1997: 200-1). My material on Jishou suggests that state and society are indeed interpenetrating, and this may be a particular feature of small cities, since, in her study of the small city of Xinji, Shue (1995) states that bureaucracy, which she describes as 'state sprawl', is as prevalent as ever. However, it is a relationship which has seen a considerable amount of change. In the following sections I consider the changes that have taken place in political activities, in working life and in leisure activities.

Making a Living

In comparison with coastal China, where privately owned companies are expanding rapidly in both urban and rural areas (Guldin 1997b, Shi 1997), private enterprise in Jishou is small-scale, evident mainly in the shops, restaurants and places of entertainment which service the city itself. A large proportion of employment is still to be found in schools and government departments and it would be difficult to argue for the existence of 'non-state economic groups' (Wakeman 1993: 110).

The most successful private businesses were factories producing *baijiu* (rice-spirits) and, during the period of my stay in Jishou (1995-97), Jishou's *baijiu* was becoming increasingly well known. In general however, there is, as Solinger suggests, a 'symbiotic' relationship between state and private enterprises (1992: 123). As in other parts of China (Gamble 1996: 189, Davis 1995: 3) work units have begun to charge for accommodation and schooling and many units have built factories and shops, often on land which was previously used for recreation. At Jishou University for example, a small business was set up to develop and sell kiwi fruit. In addition to this, many individuals combined the lucrative but unpredictable benefits of private business with the security of belonging to a work unit. For example, I knew teachers at one of the middle schools who were involved in a pyramid selling scheme, and workers at the Grain Procurement Unit who were selling-on old grain sacks. Some work units tried to stop such practices, insisting that employees must be in their place of work during working hours. At Jishou University there was no problem with this since many cadres were also involved, and a popular move was to open a karaoke restaurant or bar on the university premises. People who did this described it as a temporary measure to get them through times when they needed more money.

To be successful in private business also often requires good informal connections with local cadres, creating what Solinger describes as 'a stratum of people exclusively pursuing business, who are inextricably entangled with cadredom' (1992: 123-4). For instance, the only people I met who had become wealthy through private enterprise were a couple who dealt in timber. The husband worked for a work unit in Jishou and through this had made contacts in the Jishou Public Security Department (*Gongan Ju*), which allowed them to circumvent the red tape involved in cutting down and exporting the trees. At a higher level, the popularity of Jishou's *baijiu* reflected the area's situation as a place both 'remote' and well connected to central government. The quality of its *baijiu* had been brought to the notice of national government leaders by a local politician who had supplied it at a banquet in Beijing. It was promoted in part as a product drunk by the highest government leaders and in part through an image (and perhaps the reality) of pure, natural country ingredients.

These examples underline the importance of *guanxi*, 'personal connections', which are often built up through gift giving and doing favours. Since the reforms, as in the rest of China (Gamble 1996: 218, Yang 1994), people in Jishou claim that having good *guanxi* has become more important for one's advancement than previously. Good *guanxi* with cadres were particularly important. For example, one individual who was adept at advancing himself through *guanxi* had been transferred from working as a Middle School teacher to a post at the Jishou City Tourist Department. It was said, by people who knew him that he had originally secured this position as a *quid pro quo* for passing on information to the authorities about the student demonstrations while he was studying in Changsha. He always made a point of dressing more smartly than most people in Jishou, his hair was often slicked back, he wore waistcoats and ties, and he had many social contacts with whom he could exchange favours. Since his work in the Tourism Department was not demanding, he had recently gone into business setting up a small lakeside resort.

Yang suggests that the formation of *guanxi* constitutes an important part of the emergence of a public sphere, or *mianjian* (people's realm) which is separate from the state (1994: 174). However, it is notable that Yang's study of the use of *guanxi* is based almost exclusively on urban relations. *Guanxi* is regarded by many West Hunan people as something which excludes them. One student who was from a rural family talked about how she had been unable to get a job in business because her family did not have *guanxi* with the right people, she herself was not good at flattering people, nor did she have money to buy them presents. She said that one employer rejected her because she was not beautiful enough, and they wanted someone who would dress up and could drink a lot when taking people out for banquets, that is to further the company's *guanxi* with others. Many people I spoke to complained about the prevalence of *guanxi*, saying that they were not able to get work or school places for their children because they did not have the wealth to cultivate *guanxi*, the implication being that they might well be able to get them if they were given on merit. Furthermore, as I have shown, many of the relationships cultivated by *guanxi* are with cadres. They are, in Yang's terms, vertical ties as well

as horizontal ones, a point also made by Leonard and Flower (1997) with reference to rural Sichuan.

Some people spoke of their frustrations with the penetration of the party into their lives. Some young people I spoke to said that they wanted to leave Jishou for South China (Guangxi and Guangzhou) because there is more scope there to work in privately owned companies. One woman, a pharmacist, had been taking private lessons in English as preparation towards doing this because, she said, the cadres in her factory in Jishou were too interested in criticising people's small shortcomings and they did not care about the important things. Students, too, were looking for work in Guangzhou, either in business or in teaching, with hopes of transferring into business. The wish for a change of work situation was, of course, connected with the desire for a change in lifestyle. For example, one teacher told me he wanted to leave Jishou University and work in a university in Shenzhen, on the border with Hong Kong, because there would be many opportunities for other work, such as interpreting and translating for joint venture companies and also because living conditions were better and life would be more exciting.

Political Life

Another of the changes which has taken place in China since 1978 is what Rosenbaum describes as 'the diminished appeal of ideology and official norms' (1992: 27). In the period between the 1950s and 1978 people had very limited access to information other than that disseminated by the Party and they were expected to take part in long periods of political study, the language of which was based on set formulations which were passed down through the party hierarchy (Parish and Whyte 1984: 290, Barnett 1967: 30f.). These are intended to produce 'a certain effect upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of a target audience' and the most successful are those which 'the state can use as a powerful tool of political manipulation' (Schoenhals 1992: 11).

Since 1978, access to information through books, television programmes and film has greatly increased, though censorship is still applied, and non-Chinese satellite

television is not permitted. Despite this, socialist rhetoric and imagery have not entirely disappeared. Slogans and posters about birth-control or, in 1997, welcoming home Hong Kong were found on the streets and in the work units, where notice-boards with photographs of model workers are also to be found. People who live in work units are still expected to participate in political study sessions. For example, after the death of Deng Xiaoping in the spring of 1997, adult work unit members were required to attend meetings where television programmes on his life were watched and discussed. They were also expected to encourage their children to express appropriate sentiments, since school children were required to write essays on the subject, and they needed help from their parents in choosing the appropriate phrases about 'beloved Grandfather Deng'.

Most people however did not appear to be very engaged with this political discourse. Deng Xiaoping's death was followed by saturation media coverage of his revolutionary past and his political reforms but, in Jishou, a few days later, the most common response to the event was the comment that television had become very boring, since one could not switch on the television without seeing programmes about Deng Xiaoping. Some people were more concerned by the alarming dip in the stock exchange which preceded the public announcement of his death, than with the death itself, and one teacher reportedly cursed Deng because the news of his death distracted him and caused him to lose the money he was gambling on a game of mah-jong which he was playing at the time.

Students at Jishou University were also unwilling to engage with political rhetoric. In the spring of 1996, a public-speaking competition was arranged between the English Departments of Jishou University and Huaihua Teacher's College on the subject of the return of Hong Kong to rule by the mainland. Though this was intended to encourage their study of English, there was also, clearly, a political motivation. However, while some students made use of the now familiar images of Hong Kong, the orphan child snatched away by the British Colonialists to be returned at last to its mother's bosom, many students interpreted the occasion as a chance to describe their dreams of a journey to Hong Kong and all the things they

would see there, thus subverting, or at least avoiding, the political agenda of the contest and turning it towards dreams of consumerism. These latter were not, of course, the students who won the competition.

Sometimes uncertainty was expressed about the future of the Communist Party. Even cadres were heard to say that though people would not have criticised the system a few years ago, now nobody cares, no-one is interested in politics, everyone just wants to make money. Many people I spoke to were openly critical of the cadres and government employees who got rich through corruption and spent their money on holding banquets and visiting prostitutes. The only exception, I was told, were students, who don't know much about the outside world.

Leisure Activities

Another major change which has taken place since 1978 is the increase in leisure time and in opportunities for filling it (Davis 1995: 3, Whyte 1992: 88). Shue (1995: 93) suggests that it is in the individual's increased choice concerning their personal life, choices of dress, home decoration and other private activities, that we see 'the most unambiguous "retreat of the state"'.

As Wang (1995) notes, in the 1950s people worked almost to the exclusion of leisure and the Chinese government attempted 'to restrain all leisure activities except those harmonious with the state ideology'. Later 'it became an unwritten rule that leisure activities should take the form of group action' which were dictated 'regardless of personal preferences' (153). Today, though members of work units are still expected to attend organised leisure activities promoted by their units, such as sports competitions and day-trips, many people now spend an increasing amount of time in private spaces.

A popular activity, in Jishou as in other cities, is to spend time and money on decorating one's home, making it into a place for the display of consumer goods and enjoyment of leisure time. Homes are often adorned with large ornaments and colourful artificial flowers. Beds are covered in bright shiny bedspreads decorated

with appliqué and sequins. Wealthy people buy large television sets or home karaoke equipment. Dreams of a luxurious life may be depicted in large colour calendars which may depict scenes of Hong Kong, beautiful women, or the interiors of lavishly decorated homes or fast cars.

In contrast to the recent past, there is now an emphasis on romance and feelings and this is particularly evident among young women. As in other parts of China (Lull 1991, Gamble 1996: 154-5), a large proportion of leisure time is spent in the home watching television. Particularly popular are Taiwanese and Hong Kong soap operas, which are preferred to those of mainland China, because they are about deep feelings and are considered to be more true to the lives of the audience. In contrast to the past, when expressions of romantic love were discouraged (Parish and Whyte 1984: 119f.) love stories are particularly popular, particularly among young women, and these include American and British films such as 'Casablanca' and 'Waterloo Bridge.' Young women in Jishou like to present a romantic and feminine image of themselves in the way they dress⁵ and it is not unusual to hear female students protest that they are too weak to carry things because they are girls and the boys must help them. One young woman, a Party member and teacher at Jishou University, showed me a set of photographs of herself wearing a flowery hat and posing, fully dressed of course, on her bed. In another she was sitting on the bed, lifting her skirt up to expose her knees. The pictures were intended not just to show her as alluring, but also to show off the decor of the bedroom. Here, consumerism and femininity are inter-linked, a point made by Croll who contrasts the advertising image, currently prevalent, of the sophisticated and feminine young Chinese woman as consumer, with the heroic revolutionary rhetoric attached to women in the 1960s and 70s (1995: 109, 117)

Many leisure pursuits indicate a fascination with the West (cf Wang 1995) but by no means all do. In Jishou, playing mah-jong (*majiang*) for money is also popular, despite the fact that gambling is illegal. This game is played by people from all backgrounds for increasingly high stakes. During the 1997 New Year holiday I met two young children who spent most of their time playing out on the streets or staying

at the homes of their friends, because their parents and their parents' friends, most of them school-teachers, were busy playing mah-jong and did not have time to look after them properly.

Davis suggests that leisure activities, specifically the decoration of Chinese homes, are a form of 'resistance to state intervention.' Homes, she writes, 'offer a venue for exploring subjective but potent loyalties.' In contrast to the past, these are not loyalties to the Communist Party since, while memories of family history are preserved in photographs, there is rarely any reference to the political among pictures in the urban home (1989: 89-90, 95). Lull makes a stronger case for the connection between leisure activity and resistance, suggesting that exposure to images from the rest of the world, through television, has been 'a central agent of popular resistance' and was, in part, responsible for the political upheavals of 1989 (1991: 85).

I never heard views of this kind expressed in the Jishou area, though they may be implied in the frequent indications that such leisure activities and life-styles are a response to other aspects of people's lives. For example, teachers told me that they only played mah-jong because their lives were boring, and because they didn't like their jobs and they felt there was nothing else to do. The popularity of mah-jong was also described, even by a regular player, as an indication that the general social situation in China was getting worse. It seems that, rather than being forms of resistance, activities such as these are apolitical, 'anti-political' (Whyte 1992: 88) or 'depoliticised' (Wang 1995: 165). They are a means of escaping the politicisation of other aspects of society, and a break with the extensive politicisation of the past. This was a break which could perhaps be made more successfully in this sphere than in the economic one.

Rural - urban interactions

My research is not concerned solely with Jishou, the urban area, but also with the surrounding rural area. Guldin writes of the need for a 'vision of the greater rural-urban area' and suggested that 'urbanisation' should refer to the process of 'increasing contact and interconnection between the urban and non-urban areas of

society' (1992: 5), the importance of which was demonstrated by Skinner (1977a, 1977b). Rural - urban distinctions, never very distinct pre-1949 were reinforced when the previously 'permeable' boundary was replaced by one which was 'very sharp with little back and forth movement' (Parish and Whyte 1984: 26). As I have mentioned, the population was registered in work units or communes and these, 'largely overlapped with and reinforced the urban-rural distinction' (White 1993: 199).

The rural areas, too, have experienced major changes since Deng Xiaoping took power. In 1980 rural communes were replaced by the 'responsibility system', in which land was allocated to individual households who then became responsible for its cultivation.⁶ Relaxation of laws concerning residency meant that many people were freed to work in rural industries (Guldin 1992: 4) or, in poorer areas such as West Hunan, to migrate to cities in search of temporary work.

It is obvious that there remains a great division between urban and rural people. Rural people, distinguishable by their dialect and by their less sophisticated dress sense, are disdained by urban people in Jishou. For example, friends of mine, a head-teacher from a remote school and her husband, were openly laughed at by students at Jishou University because their dress and manner betrayed their rural background. I also found that Jishou people showed great reluctance to visit rural villages and were almost incredulous that I was able to do so. Schein (1993), who describes similar experiences in Guizhou Province (311-2) suggests that urban rural difference 'order[s] much of Chinese experience' (254). The attitudes of rural people to city life are more diverse. Some, especially those who have secondary or tertiary education, prefer to live in the city, but others, including migrant workers, return to their villages after some time without regret.

Despite rural - urban distinctions, there is also a considerable amount of interaction between the two. In part, this is a result of permanent and temporary migration. There are some work opportunities for rural people in the Jishou area, although relative to larger cities, these are limited. Organised markets provide opportunities

for rural people to sell their own produce, such as vegetables, meat and eggs, and others sell charcoal by the roadside. A small ice-cream factory takes on temporary workers in summer. However, construction work, which in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, employs a large number of migrant workers, is undertaken in Jishou by several 'education through labour' units (*Laogai*), which are prison camps housing prisoners from other parts of Hunan. There is a demand for waitresses, but most of these are expected also to offer sex to male clients, so women undertaking this work often travel some distance from their home village, usually from east Guizhou and Sichuan. As a result of the limited availability of work in Jishou, most temporary migrants from the Jishou area go further afield, to the coastal cities of South and East China. As in other parts of China (Guldin 1997a: 4, Shi 1997: 123-4), this too contributes to the urbanisation of rural areas, with televisions and urban fashions in dress and music being brought back to the villages.

Many rural people who find work in Jishou do so through relatives who can find them positions in work units, often as kitchen staff, or as child-minders and shop-assistants. Rural people are more likely to achieve long term residence in Jishou through educational achievement, but this has become increasingly costly with the result that many of the poorer families do not send their children to school at all. The preferred choice for rural families who can afford to keep their children in school is to send children to Vocational or Technical Schools (*Zhong Zhuan*), which provide them with employable skills such as banking or car repair. To send a student to Teacher's College is considered a high risk strategy since this requires two years study at Senior Middle School. If after this the student fails to gain college entrance, they are disadvantaged, since the academic study at Senior Middle School has no practical application. On the other hand, if they do succeed, the family has to meet several more years of costs before they can graduate from college. Some families would have to sell land to do this and, during the period of my fieldwork, I heard several stories of suicides in the West Hunan area when a member of the family was accepted to a prestigious university but was unable to go because of the expense.

I heard about the stresses which rural parents face from Mrs Luo, a single parent who lived in the village of Yaxi. She had already sent her two sons to Vocational Middle School, and was considered by other villagers to be taking a big risk in letting her daughter go to Senior Middle School to prepare for the college entrance exam. She used to talk to me about how much money she has to pay the school, and the tens of hundreds of *yuan* it would cost to send her daughter to college or university. She was also concerned about whether her daughter could pass the exam. Like other rural people, she complained that people with money could use their *guanxi* to get people into college, but that the ordinary people (*laobaixing*) did not have this option. These pressures on her became evident when I visited her house and she asked her daughter to speak English with me. Her daughter said that she was too tired. Mrs Luo, who had been working all day, found this hard to understand and started criticising her, saying that, if she didn't work now she would fail her college entrance exam and would then have no opportunities (*mei banfa*). She wouldn't get help with any money then and she'd have to look after herself. Her daughter didn't reply. She sat outside the house in silence for a while and then went into the back room to do her homework, which was how she spent every evening. In other cases the burden for financing their education falls on the students themselves. For example, one of my students at Jishou University came from a poor family in the northern part of West Hunan. She had spent the previous term working in a toy factory in Guangzhou to earn the money for her studies.

A person with a secure job in Jishou, is often of great use to his or her relatives in the countryside. As well as finding work, they may help them in situations requiring litigation and with dealing with bureaucracies or by providing a place for them to stay when they visit town. In return, rural people may offer home-smoked bacon or other rural produce. However, the connections between rural and urban people do not always involve rural people asking favours from their urban relatives. City people also seek out the expertise of rural people, who may also be relatives, usually in religious or ritual matters. Geomancers, spirit mediums and *daoshi*⁷ are, in my experience, almost always rural people and often, though sometimes furtively, consulted by urban people, even Party members.

Urban people also maintain contact with their ancestral villages (*laojia*) because this is where the ancestral graves are. Urban people may visit their villages on Qing Ming, the day for cleaning the graves and making offerings to one's ancestors. In the following section, I describe one such visit which was made by members of the Liang family, and suggest that such visits indicate both the important connections between urban and rural family members and, at the same time, the extent of the urban rural difference (Schein 1993:254) which exists in China.

During my association with the Liang family I heard a great deal about Old Liang's grandfather's grave which was situated in a village in Baojing county, which was about fifty kilometres from Jishou. Old Liang had been adopted into another branch of the family after the death of his father and had left his village as a young child, but the graves of his father and grandfather were, of course, in his native village. In the spring of 1995 a female cousin of his, who lived in his adoptive village, dreamed that someone had ploughed too close to his grandfather's grave and made a hole in the grave mound, and that his grandfather was struggling to hold onto a dragon which was trying to escape from inside the grave. In the dream his grandfather was also angry because no-one from the family had been to visit the grave recently. This dream caused Old Liang particular concern because it was generally believed that there was a dragon in his family's grave and this was linked to the relative prosperity of this branch of the Liang family who had left rural life and were living in Jishou. Although Liang Zhaohui was sceptical, he said that his father and the other villagers believed that if the dragon was allowed to escape from the grave then it could have disastrous consequences for the family and their descendants. Moreover, the fact that the hole had been allowed to appear implied neglect on the part of the family who had rarely returned to their ancestral village, and possible wrong-doing by relatives, jealous of the success of this branch of the family.

Following this dream, Old Liang's cousin consulted a spirit medium (*xian niang*) who said that Old Liang and Liang Zhaohui, as the eldest son (*laoda*), must return. Old Liang visited the grave at night with two religious practitioners (*laoshi*)⁸ since by

doing this he was able to escape the notice of anyone who might mean the family harm. They found that, several metres from the grave, there was indeed a hole. It appeared that rocks at the mouth of a limestone pot-hole had been dislodged, revealing a shaft-like cave. The *laoshi* recited some chants at the grave and they left at dawn.

In the spring of 1997 Old Liang spent several weeks in his native village and arranged for new grave stones to be put up for his grandfather and his other relatives, carved with their names and those of their direct descendants. These were to be the only grave stones of this kind in the village and it was an appropriate sign of respect from him as a member of the richest family branch in the village.

Since a singing festival was being held nearby, on the day of Qing Ming, I arranged to hire a mini-bus and to attend with Liang Zhaohui, Wang Kaiying and their two sons and to visit Old Liang's village from there. Transport to this area was poor and this was the only way we could go and return on the same day, which I was obliged to do because the whole of Baojing county, unlike Jishou and Fenghuang counties, is closed to foreigners.

Liang Zhaohui and his wife and sons did not seem particularly keen to visit the village, but when some friends of the family invited them to lunch at the nearby small town which housed the local government offices and the primary school for the region, they accepted gratefully. Although the township was poor, the work units, piped water, electricity and dirt road made it more comfortable and familiar than a village. When we finally reached the village, Liang Zhaohui and his family were welcomed and many people recalled the last time he had visited as a small boy. After an hour they said that they did not need supper and had to get back because the driver I had hired was waiting for us.

Liang Zhaohui's family were not the only urban people to visit the village at Qing Ming, and I talked for a while to some other members of the family, a woman and her daughter, from the town of Baojing. The mother could speak Kho Xiong but told

me that she didn't like it there. It was a mountain village, it was *bu hao wan* (no fun, not interesting) and there was nothing to do. Her daughter, who could not speak Kho Xiong, also said she did not like it there. Many of the men in the village could speak Chinese, perhaps because the Kho Xiong dialect spoken in this area is incomprehensible to people outside the immediate vicinity⁹ and, while I was there, I heard several adverse comments in Chinese about young people returning to the village who could not speak Kho Xiong. However, all these people were involved in visiting the graves together.

When we learned that the new gravestone had not yet been erected¹⁰ and because I was much more keen to see this event than were Liang Zhaohui and his family, I suggested that they go back without me and that I take my chance with the public transport. The following morning we went to the graves. Old Liang and his relatives prepared incense, fire-crackers, offerings of biscuits and red paper decorations. There was much laughter when, soon after we had set out from the village, they found that they had forgotten the offering of alcohol, and it was explained to me that Old Liang could only make this offering once this year so he couldn't come back with the alcohol at a later date. When we arrived at the grave, the grave mound was still being built up by some men whom Old Liang had employed for this purpose. After this was finished, the carved stone was put in, aligned with a mountain opposite which could just be seen through a col, and cemented in. They had to be careful to get it exactly right, to conform with the best *fengshui*.¹¹ In the house the evening before, Old Liang had been explaining to his second son, Liang Zhaohui's younger brother, the genealogy relationships among his ancestors and at the graveside. He talked over the names of the lineage, which were carved on the gravestone and explained the *fengshui* properties of the grave. When the grave stone had been cemented in, Old Liang and his son made an offering.

In comparison to the period after 1949 when, as Parish and Whyte record, ritual activity at graves was discouraged (1984: 310,313) such activities have become more commonplace with liberalisation and the greater openness of the government to non-socialist points of view. This irony was not lost on the villagers who were

participating, one of whom joked 'we have reform and opening to the outside world (*gaige kaifang*) so now we do this'. These events demonstrated the reluctance of urban people to spend time in their ancestral villages and their discomfort with the conditions and what they saw as the boredom of rural life. They also indicated the connections which bind, not just rural people to their urban relatives, but urban people to their ancestral villages through the belief that the prosperity of an urban family requires the goodwill of one's ancestors in the village.

Religious and Ritual Practices

As is apparent from the previous section, ritual and religious activities are another aspect of life in China which has recently been revived. These include the consultation of ritual specialists, such as *fengshui* specialists or spirit mediums and visits to temples. The revival of ritual and religious activities may be closely connected to the forms of leisure activities described above. For example, *qigong* is a practice which is said to balance the energy flow of the body. It may be employed as a programme of physical exercise, or as a form of healing, and both these forms are practised in work units. However, it may also be the basis of a form of religious belief¹² taught by *qigong* masters, some of whom have emigrated to the West. These use audio and video tapes to disseminate teachings based on Buddhist and Daoist doctrines. Activities at temples, too, may take the form of a secular sightseeing trip and picnic but they may also involve worship of the deities.

Ritual and religious activities are more closely monitored by local government than are other leisure activities. Some are quite accepted, particularly those activities which fall under the category of religion. This is taken to refer to the widespread, text-based traditions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam. However, official policy makes a strong contrast between 'institutionalised religions which are normally recognised officially as systematised (*xitonghua*) and well-organised' and the more negative category of 'superstition' (*mixin*) which is perceived as consisting mainly in 'various forms of divination, popular magical practices, local ritual observances, and local forms of festivity' (Feuchtwang & Wang 1991: 260-2). The latter are perceived as both local and 'chaotic.'¹³

In view of this, it is not surprising that, like other leisure activities, they have been described as constituting a separate sphere from that of the state. For example, Chen writes of *qigong* societies in urban China, that they 'imply alternative mentalities outside the prescribed order of the state.' She suggests that activities such as these on the streets and in the common areas form a kind of civil society (1995: 348). Anagnost sees an opposition between local culture and the state when she writes that popular ritual resurgence 'reinvents the local traditions that have been suspended in totalising symbolic order' i.e. the totalising order of the Communist party (1994: 222-3). However, once again, the extent to which this constitutes a separation between society and state is doubtful. Chen herself writes that 'rather than think of civil society as 'subaltern' or independent associations in opposition to the state one should regard it as a more ambiguous relationship' pointing out that in some forms *qigong* is welcomed in work units and practised by some cadres (1995: 359-60).

Conclusions

To generalise about Jishou and the aspirations of its inhabitants is impossible. Among the people I have observed, there are a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, including urban and rural, local and non-local, young and old. Furthermore, far from being a remote and isolated place, the Jishou area is influenced by the flows of urban and global culture and by the policies of the socialist state. I have also tried to avoid giving an impression of discrete groups within Jishou. Urban and rural, rich and poor are often linked through family relationships.

Despite the continuing presence of the socialist state, all areas of society have experienced increased opportunities for non-state regulated activities, be they in work, consumerism or ritual activities. In this chapter I have sought to give an impression of some of the different ways in which people have been influenced by and taken advantage of these changes. For example, while many have benefited from increased opportunities for acquiring wealth and participating in urban leisure activities, others feel alienated from the social changes which are taking place. They say that through lack of *guanxi* or lack of educational attainment they cannot take

advantage of them. The variety of experience is illustrated by the different attitudes to place and migration. Educated urban people may seek to leave the work units of Jishou and move south in order to find a more exciting life. Rural people aspire to an education for their children so that they can achieve a secure status in the city by joining a work unit. Uneducated people deplore the poverty of the land in West Hunan and work in the cities on low wages as temporary migrants, but eventually most return to their villages and families. In describing this variety of experiences, I avoid suggesting that the new work and leisure activities I have described represent a separate sphere, or an outright challenge to the state. The situation calls for a more 'nuanced' view of the interconnections between state and society (Flower & Leonard 1997:219).

¹ 1644 - 1911

² According to Alley this road was also used in the early 1960s for 'bands of "Long March" youth who hike down from Chungking into Hunan on their way to Shaoshan' (1974: 25).

³ Under the Qing dynasty, the *tun* system was instituted in West Hunan as a means of controlling the population and protecting the area against possible attack by rebels. See Chapter Five for a full account.

⁴ Although a useful source of information, this work should be approached with some caution since much of it was gathered as result of interviews with people who had left the Peoples' Republic of China, often because of dissatisfaction with the political situation there.

⁵ Here again, Jishou lagged behind the more sophisticated east coast, where more casual fashions for women had become popular.

⁶ Strictly speaking, the land continues to be owned by the state, but many rural people refer to the land as theirs. See for example Chapter Nine.

⁷ For a discussion of spirit mediums and *daoshi* see below.

⁸ See Chapter Nine for a discussion of *xian niang*. *Laoshi* is the Chinese word used to describe men, usually based in Kho Xiong speaking villages, who undertake a variety of ritual activities, some of them similar to those of *daoshi*, who are the independent Daoist practitioners often called to officiate at funerals (cf Dean 1993: 26). I discuss *laoshi* and *daoshi* in Chapter Nine.

⁹ As I discuss in Chapter Eight, there are two major dialects in Kho Xiong, the Miao language found in West Hunan. However, the dialect spoken in this village corresponded to neither of them and I was able to learn of no explanation for this.

¹⁰ According to an almanac, the day on which Qing Ming fell that year was inauspicious.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of *fengshui* and the siting of graves as a source of tension between family members, see Feuchtwang (1974: 218f.), Tapp (1989: 151-2).

¹² For a discussion of *qigong* in China, see English-Lueck (1994).

¹³ The term superstition (*mixin*) like the term religion (*zong jiao*) became current in China in the early part of the twentieth century as a result of the influence of Western social science.



Main street: Jishou



Privately owned shop:
Jishou



Selling charcoal: Jishou



Making offerings at the Liang grave

Chapter Three - Images of West Hunan: the Miao and Landscape

Most people who visit Jishou, especially those on organised visits, are met with images of Miao people. These, as I have mentioned, are official images of the place, as seen in the introduction on the train and in the public architecture. Such images are closely associated with the Chinese state. They are usually created and promoted by local government departments and educational institutes, such as Jishou University, and the Tourism Department (*Luyou Ban*) of Jishou City. They are found among promotional materials, dance performances and tourist activities, and they are of course a quite artificial, commodified use of the image of the Miao. As I shall discuss, these images appeal, in the main, to educated people from outside West Hunan. They are part of a constructed other against which Han Chinese identity is defined (cf Gladney 1994: 94).

Although it is the capital of the Autonomous Prefecture, Jishou attracts only a small number of tourists each year. Most of these are from other parts of China, but there are also a small number of overseas Chinese visitors from countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. Visitors are taken on tours organised by the Tourism Department to see the local landscape and performances of ‘minority’ dancing at the scenic park at Dehang (*fengjing qu*, lit. scenic area), a few kilometres outside Jishou. They may also be taken to see a market in the highland village of Shanjiang. In addition, a small number of businessmen, who are either thinking of investing in the area or regard the area as a possible market, may also be taken to Dehang or entertained by local festivals, as I will describe in Chapter Four. Conferences on minority affairs are sometimes organised by the local government or by Jishou University, and delegates to these are often attended by female guides dressed in a colourful version of the West Hunan Miao costume.

In the rest of this section I will show that, appealing though these images are, they are carefully constructed and rarely reflect the wider situation in Jishou, or even that of the Kho Xiong speaking people of the highland areas. I consider a number of images of Miao people in more detail and I shall attempt, by analysing them, to

understand better their purpose in (mis)representing minority people in China today. I look at images found in promotional materials for the university, at the scenic park at Dehang, in television programmes on the West Hunan Miao and in the ‘minority dancing’ taught by the music department at Jishou University.¹ These cover a variety of different media and reach a number of different audiences. Before doing this, however, I consider my use of the terms Miao, Kho Xiong, Han and Chinese.

The Terms Used

As I have mentioned, ‘Miao’ is a Chinese term used to define a group of people who stretch from West Hunan across Southwest China to northern Thailand, Burma and Laos. The Miao can be divided into three main language groups, Hmong (spoken in the far south west of China and in Thailand, Vietnam, Burma and Laos), Hmou (spoken in south west and south central China) and Kho Xiong. Kho Xiong is the least extensively spoken, and is found in East Guizhou, East Sichuan and West Hunan. However, in West Hunan, the terms Kho Xiong and Xiong² are only used in the Kho Xiong language itself, that is, the word is not used in Chinese.

The term ‘Miao’ has in the past been associated with a derogatory meaning. Today, however, it is used as the official name of the minority and in this sense Miao people today include Chinese speaking people of Kho Xiong descent. When used in West Hunan, the word often refers only to the Kho Xiong and their Chinese speaking descendants, since little knowledge is shown of the other Miao groups, the Hmong and Hmou further to the West. Most people in the lowland areas of West Hunan speak Chinese and those of Kho Xiong descent who do not speak the Kho Xiong language would never be described as Kho Xiong, though they might be described as Miao or as people who used to be Miao.

In this thesis, therefore, I use the term Kho Xiong to describe people from highland villages who speak Kho Xiong since this is the indigenous term. However, if I am reporting what someone told me in Chinese about Kho Xiong speakers, I use the word Miao since, as I have said, this was the term used. The words Kho Xiong are never used in Chinese. I also use the term Miao to describe a wider group of people,

those who either speak Kho Xiong or are descended from people who speak Kho Xiong and have the classification Miao on their identity cards.

The terms Chinese and Han also need careful consideration. Although writers on the Hmong in Thailand (e.g. Tapp 1989) make a distinction between Hmong and Chinese, everyone I write about in my thesis lives in China and is therefore of Chinese citizenship. Though one can be Miao and Chinese, one cannot be Miao and Han since the two terms are descriptions of mutually exclusive nationalities. However, the distinction between Han and minority implies that the Han themselves are a homogeneous group, which is not the case.³ When writing of Han people in West Hunan, therefore, I distinguish them as such, to make it clear that I am writing of a particular group of Han. The use of Chinese to denote a language is, however, more straightforward and I distinguish between Kho Xiong speakers and Chinese speakers.

Staging and Viewing the Miao

I begin by describing images of Miao people at Jishou University, since this is where I was based. Students, like tourists, come mostly from outside West Hunan and are one group to which these images appeal. Jishou University was founded in the 1950s, soon after the Communist Party came to power. In effect, it is a teacher training college, of which there are a number scattered throughout Hunan, but it offers a four year degree course as well as the more usual three year course. The provincial capital, Changsha, is a centre of learning, but until recently Jishou's was one of only two universities built outside Changsha. The other is near Chairman Mao's birthplace at Xiangtan. Jishou University was built in the 1950s, with the intention of raising the educational level of the Autonomous Prefecture and was intended as a centre for the study of Kho Xiong. Today, there is still serious scholarship on the people classified as Miao and Tujia at the university. However, most students and teachers have little to do with minority language or culture. The university now takes applicants from all over Hunan and minority languages are rarely spoken there.



The poverty and minority status of the Autonomous Prefecture ensures that the university is a big recipient of government money and it is often promoted with reference to images of minorities. During the period when I was in Jishou (1995-7), the university was expanding rapidly and was in the process of moving to a bigger campus on the outskirts of the city. Here, impressive new buildings were being built, including a music department with auditorium, decorated with pictures of people in minority dress. As a result, apologies by university officials to the effect that they were only a poor minority area caused raised eyebrows among visitors from less well appointed teachers' colleges in other parts of Hunan.

At the time I was there, the campus was not yet finished and was by no means cut off from the surrounding countryside. Part of the old road to Qianzhou (the old administrative centre, about 10 kilometres from Jishou) still crossed the site and open sewers ran alongside it. A new road bypassing the university was being built, as was a surrounding wall and an elaborate gate, but these were not yet finished, and sometimes people from the surrounding countryside would come into the campus and look around at the buildings, the displays of photographs, and at the foreigners. It was not for some time that I realised that the campus and the new road had taken some of the most fertile land from the nearby village of Yaxi.

Apart from those staff and students who came from Jishou, contacts between the university and the city were not extensive and contacts with Kho Xiong speaking people even less so. Once, when walking through Qianzhou with some second year students from the university, I was surprised to learn that most of them had never been there before. Although students would go shopping in Jishou during the day and class trips were sometimes arranged to the surrounding countryside, few students or non-local teachers ventured off the campus in the evenings, saying that they were afraid of being attacked. Instead, the university provided its own social life, arranging dances and films and there was a street of small restaurants and *karaoke* bars on the campus. This division was probably a result of perceptions of the area

among non-locals as overwhelmingly inhabited by minority people and therefore dangerous.⁴

Despite this lack of contact with indigenous people, images of Miao people, particularly of Miao women, are prevalent at the university and, as one student said, the Miao are the university's special feature. Thus the notice boards often carried pictures of performances at the scenic park at Dehang, which has close links with the university. Graduation parties and many other student performances featured 'minority' dancing in which the Miao theme was demonstrated through semi-realistic ethnic costume, and themes of romance and simple country pleasures. Students also decorated their classrooms with images of minority people.

This emphasis on the Miao is often a means of bringing in money in addition to the government grants mentioned above. The music department, which is well known for teaching minority dancing, is financially the most successful department. Foreign NGOs such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) would be told that the standard of spoken English was low because the students are from the mountains and speak Miao at home. This, though manifestly inaccurate, was well calculated to appeal to Western sensibilities.

I was personally involved in the creation of images of Miao people to promote the university and it was as a result of this that I first visited Jishou's major tourist attraction, Dehang. Soon after I began working at the university, I and the other foreign teacher, a British man recruited through VSO, were told that the Hunan Provincial Government was preparing a book which would include pictures of all the foreign teachers in Hunan. Photographs were taken of myself and the VSO teacher talking to students and to university officials, but most care was taken over the photographs with a Miao minority theme. First, it was arranged that we were to have our photographs taken alongside students from the music department who dressed in the costumes they used for displays of minority dancing. These were an 'improved' version of West Hunan minority dress, tunics and trousers decorated with traditional Miao embroidery but made in bright synthetic fabrics, and worn with city shoes.

However, we were told that these were not real Miao people, and that the next day we should go to the scenic park at Dehang where we could find the Miao *laobaixing* (ordinary people, lit. the old hundred surnames).

Images of these kinds, found in an urban environment where there are few indications of day-to-day minority life, tell us more about the people who create them than about the minorities themselves, a process which is similar to Westerners' constructions of themselves in opposition to essentialised images of 'orientals' as described by Said (1978). Such images imply a contrast between the urban, modernising Han and a rural, even exotic, minority people. The variety of minority images found throughout China also implies that, in contrast to the minorities, the Han are a homogenous group. In order to demonstrate this opposition, images of minorities are constructed with great care. It may not be enough for the minority people to be themselves. As well as being rural and economically underdeveloped, minority people must be shown to be simple and exotic and diverse, features which contrast them with an ideal image of the Han.

Dehang Scenic Park

The setting for most interactions between Jishou people and the Miao, as well as for many photographs of the Miao and the training of Miao dancers, is the scenic park at Dehang. An account of the scenic park illustrates the extent to which images of the Miao in West Hunan are artificial constructions. The village of Dehang is about twenty kilometres from Jishou, surrounded by beautiful countryside. The scenic park was set up there in the early 1980s. The area was chosen because it combined a beautiful landscape and Kho Xiong speaking people in traditional dress in an area relatively accessible from Jishou. There is now a restaurant there and a simple hotel, although non-Chinese are not allowed to stay. (This is the case with many small hotels and may also be a result of it being in a rural area.) There is also a large courtyard, which doubles as a performance area and a basketball court, living accommodation for the employees and a building for holding performances. This last is built with a wooden balcony and pillars in a pastiche of local architectural styles.

The surrounding park encompasses a village, fields and mountains and epitomises the natural and the rural but a visit to Dehang is a highly controlled experience. Far from involving contact with the *laobaixing*, no contact takes place between visitors and villagers, apart from with those who sell noodles and with the occasional hostile small child. Instead there is a very managed interaction in which visitors and performers *look* at the village and mountains, and Miao people are presented as a visually attractive package along with the landscape.

On the road into the park there is a gate and an office selling entrance tickets. Students at the university are given reduced rates but, in a pricing system which is widespread and, until recently, officially sanctioned, foreigners must pay double the Chinese rates. Access is limited in other ways. Visitors to Dehang make contact with Miao people in the form of a group of young women employed by the park, who greet them on their arrival. There is no actual contact with inhabitants of Dehang village. The young women, who also act as guides, were often described to me as 'real Miao' girls from the village of Dehang. Though they are officially registered as Miao and speak Kho Xiong, they are in fact trained performers, recruited from a wider area.

The performers are dressed in colourful versions of West Hunan Miao costume, similar to those used by the music department at Jishou University. Sometimes they wear skirts in the style of Miao people in Guizhou. The visitors' interest in the colourful costumes is seen in the enthusiasm with which they dress up in them to have their photographs taken. They may pose with the guides in front of the performance hall or a feature of the landscape creating colourful and attractive images. These present a strong contrast with the village women who, dressed in dark or faded tunics and rolled up trousers, spend all afternoon sorting out rice on woven rush mats on the performance courtyard.

The visitors, however, are participating in a form of staged authenticity. The Miao performances appear to have nothing to do with the 'maintenance of traditions' nor

the 'positive encouragement of ritual practice' (Swain 1978), but to be something grafted onto the original village at Dehang. The scenic park appeals to the tourists' 'search for authenticity' and for the 'back region' but is in reality 'a staged back region, a kind of living museum' (MacCannell 1973: 596). They can be seen as a kind of 'invented tradition' but unlike the invented traditions described by Hobsbawm (1983), they represent an image not of one's own people, but an 'Other'.

Minority People in Pictures

Dehang is one of many places where photographs and pictures of minority people are created which then travel throughout China. With its landscape and colourful images of Miao people, Dehang was considered an ideal setting for photographs to promote Jishou University. Arrangements were made for us to have time off from classes and we were driven there in the university car. When we arrived, the car was parked on the performance courtyard and the photographer went into the restaurant and explained who we were and what we wanted. Two of the guides were chosen and sent off to change into their 'minority' costumes and fetch buckets. We then went together into the village where photographs were taken of us talking together by the river. The intention was that it should look as if we had met them by chance while washing their clothes and the artificiality of the situation was highlighted by the fact that the two guides found the idea of washing clothes in the river very amusing. When we came across an old woman in Miao dress who actually was washing her clothes in the river she was completely ignored by the photographer and did not feature in any of the photographs.

The presence of Westerners juxtaposed to these images of minorities is not so unusual. Similar situations have been described by Schein, who was often the subject of media interest during her fieldwork among the Miao in Guizhou. She suggests that both Westerners and Miao are objectified and the media interest is in the 'disjuncture' which results from 'juxtaposing these two intriguing objects' (Schein 1993: 334). Minorities and foreigners may have more in common than this suggests. Gladney points out that minorities are considered *sui bian*, which he translates as loose and can also mean casual (1994: 92). This is an adjective

typically attached also to foreigners who have a reputation in China for being casual and sexually 'loose'. It may be the unexpected similarity, as much as the disjuncture, which makes pictures of this kind so popular. However, I suggest that this photograph was posed to provide an image of Jishou as a minority area which is primitive but clean and appealing, romantic, but controlled. This could be assumed to be attractive to prospective students as well as potential conference visitors.

Visual images of minority people, often of minority women, have become widely popular in China. Similar images are promoted to tourists in other parts of China (Chao 1996: 210, Cheung 1996a: 261f., Cheung 1996b:184, 225f., Diamond 1994: 110-11, Schein 1993, Oakes 1998). Schein (1989: 201) describes how artists and television crews from all over China visited the area of Guizhou where she worked looking for images of minority people. Whilst in West Hunan, I met someone who was photographing minority people in order to collect images to include in his paintings. He told me that every Miao area has its own local special cultural features (*tese*) but, in reiterating these cultural features himself, he showed that his interest was largely in the variations in women's costumes. Similarly, the expectation at Jishou University was that I, too, would want to go and look at Miao people. The visual nature of the research I was expected to do was indicated by the suggestion made by cadres at the university that I should go to Laershan, because there 'you can see women wearing high turbans.'

Images of minorities are also widely seen in metropolitan areas. Throughout China, footage of minorities singing and dancing is some of the most popular material for television programmes. Despite their associations with remote areas, images of minorities are constantly found at the heart of Han Chinese culture, such as billboards in the middle of Beijing and television programmes for Chinese New Years. As Gladney writes, 'even in the areas of popular culture, art, film, and moral value, the so-called "peripheral minorities" have played a pivotal role in influencing and constructing contemporary Chinese society and identity' (1994: 94). Gladney suggests that images of minorities assume not just the superiority but also the homogeneity of the Han. By drawing a contrast between the alluring but exotically

different minorities and the Han majority, there takes place, he argues, a 'homogenisation of the majority and the expense of the exoticised minority' which is 'central to [China's] nationalisation and modernisation project' (1994: 95). I will discuss the question of Han homogeneity further in Chapter Five.

Minorities and Gender

In particular, the images I have described are of young minority women. Harrell suggests that the representations of minorities as female are part of a definitional process in which they are shown to be inferior to the Han. Often, images of minority women are erotic ones, part of what Harrell describes as 'the eroticisation and feminisation of the peripheral' (1994a: 9). For example, the province of Yunnan is the home of the Yunnan style of painting, initiated in the early 1980s, in which minority women are portrayed as 'colourful, erotic and exotic' (Gladney 1994: 110). At Dehang, a shop sells locally made hangings, some of which depict scenery, rural women in Miao dress and in some, almost naked dancing 'minority' women. It also sells a variety of small products including charm necklaces and fans decorated with photographs of Western women in a state of semi-undress.

These romantic or erotic images of minorities in West Hunan reinforce the notion that they are images of an 'Other' in opposition to Han perceptions of propriety. An example of this contrast is in the pictures in the locally produced *Picture Album of Xiang Xi (sic) Tujia and Miao Nationalities Autonomous Prefecture* show four nationalities, Tujia, Miao, Bai and Han. All the young minority nationality women wear festival dress and smile shyly away from the camera whereas the Han woman is dressed simply and modestly, her hair tied into bunches, and smiles directly into the camera. As Gladney points out,

Minorities become a marked category, characterised by sensuality, colorfulness, and exotic custom. This contrasts with the 'unmarked' nature of Han identity (1994: 102).

Gender difference can be taken as a metaphor of domination and this it is not of course peculiar to China. For example, Luhrman writes of the British in India that they

constructed themselves as dyadic opposites, particularly around the categories of gender, age and race. The British were hypermasculinised, scientific and progressive, a high step on the evolutionary ladder; the Indians were effeminate, childlike, primitive, and superstitious (1996: 8).

However, the metaphor of colonised people as female does not simply elicit ideas of weakness in the face of strength or backwardness contrasted to progress. The relationship between Han and minority, like that between coloniser and colonised in other parts of the world also incorporates elements of desire (cf Bhabha 1994: 44) and erotic qualities have long been attributed to the Miao (Diamond 1988). Representations of the Miao as female do not just express an idea of the Han as dominating, they also allow the Han to enjoy mildly erotic images which would not be acceptable if they were attributed to the Han themselves.

It has been argued that the image of simple and primordial minority people, may evoke not just sexual desire but desire for a more 'traditional' way of life. Minority regions are seen as 'stable, essential categories of people and places that convey timelessness and security from the uncertainties of change' (Oakes 1998: 58), places where 'traditional culture persists relatively untainted' (Schein 1993: 104). Some visitors to West Hunan do regard minority culture in this way. For example, the young artist who was taking photographs of minority people told me that Han people liked to see Miao customs because they were ancient, and an employee of the Jishou City Tourism Department told me that overseas Chinese come to the area to see ancient Chinese customs. However, there were few visitors to Jishou from larger metropolitan centres and such reactions did not appear to be paramount. Nevertheless, in describing these carefully constructed representations of the Miao as images of an 'Other' we should not lose sight of the complex mixture of superiority and desire which these images evoke in the onlooker.

Minorities and Landscape

The background to the visual images of minorities which I have been describing is the dramatic, craggy landscape of West Hunan and for many onlookers the two images are inextricably related. Both are seen to represent the natural, the antithesis of urban life and both are viewed in ways which tell us more about the aspirations of those doing the observing than of the inhabitants of the landscape.

The appreciation of the landscape of West Hunan, like that of images of minorities, has been a preoccupation of people from outside the area, rather than people from West Hunan itself. In recent years, viewing landscape has become a popular activity for many tourists from China's urban areas, and the northern part of West Hunan has become particularly associated with landscape through the fame of Zhangjiajie, a newly opened National Forest Park (*Guojia shenlin gongyuan*) two hundred kilometres to the north of Jishou. The area was unknown until it was 'discovered' by visitors from Hong Kong in the early 1980s, but since then has become Hunan's foremost tourist site. Incorporating gorges and rocky pinnacles it is sometimes described as exceeding Guilin, China's most famous scenic park, in beauty.

Like the images of minorities, the promotion of landscape is closely connected with projects to bring income into the area. Zhangjiajie has become a major source of income for the northern part of West Hunan as a result of government investments which include the building of a new airport. Originally part of the West Hunan Autonomous Prefecture, it split off from the rest of the Prefecture in the early 1990s after complaints that too much profit from the investment was going to Jishou. Today, few people combine a visit to Zhangjiajie with visiting Jishou and the promotion of the much smaller park at Dehang is an attempt to redress this. Admiring the scenery is an important aspect of a visit to Dehang. A set of steps has been built up the most sheer of the mountain outcrops, described in the brochure as 'the splendid Pangu peak which towers into the clouds'.

Appreciation of landscape in China has, of course, a long history (cf Powers 1998) and one which has been part of the world-view of the educated elite. During the

Ming and Qing dynasties the appreciation of landscape was central to Chinese travel writing. Ward, in his study of the eighteenth century Chinese travel writer Xu Xiake, concludes that Chinese travel writing was concerned with 'the fusion of the human self with the landscape' rather than with any contact with the inhabitants (Ward 1997: 118). This distancing from the indigenous people is indicated in the fact that places were not considered to be beautiful unless designated as such by a member of the elite, after which time it was the duty of the local inhabitants to look after it (Ward 1997: 13). This intimate connection between the educated observer and the landscape has been attributed to the expression of power relations on a wider scale. Noting that Chinese landscape painting flourished in the eighteenth century, at the height of China's imperial power, Mitchell suggests that landscape painting in general can be seen as, the "'dreamwork" of imperialism' (1994: 10) and it has been suggested that in China the appreciation of landscape had a 'rhetorical function' to play in a 'projection of universalising imperial claims' (Powers 1998: 10).

In West Hunan this element of power is suggested in the way that the appreciation of landscape runs parallel to the viewing of minority people. Viewing landscape is often clearly prescribed, this particular mountain is worth seeing from that particular viewpoint, and like the images of minorities it is managed rather than spontaneous. As I have said, the mountains of Dehang are often used as a background for photographs of visitors dressed up in 'Miao' costume accompanied by Miao guides. Often, images of minority peoples are seen as, almost literally, part of the landscape. It is not unusual for Chinese travellers to view minority people as part of the landscape or scenery (*fengjing*) which they have come to see. I myself have heard someone say how much he liked the well known Chinese tourist destination of Guilin because 'the place was good, the scenery was good and the minorities were also good' thus packaging them together. Usually these images are female. Gladney (1994) describes how in the narration of one film, minority women, pictured bathing in a river 'literally become the "scenery"' (101) when the voice over says, '[t]he scenery is beautiful enough, they make it more fascinating' (102).⁵

This fixed notion of landscape (including the women), as an aesthetic object which only the educated are capable of appreciating, stands in contrast to the constructions of locality by the inhabitants of the landscape. I go on to discuss this later in my thesis. Where attitudes to landscape were concerned I became very aware of a difference between local and non-local views. Far from appreciating rocky mountains or steep gorges, the inhabitants of this landscape often have good reason to avoid such sights. On a visit to a highland village I was shown a gorge which was nearby. The student who showed it to me had been taken there from her school and knew that it was a scenic sight. However, she also told me that people from her village did not like to go there because over the years, a number of people from her village had fallen and been killed while collecting animal fodder in the area.

Indeed, one of the most common topics of conversation which I had with people I met casually on buses or in the road was their aversion to the land in which they lived. Most saw it as a source of inconvenience and poverty. Complete strangers would talk to me quite bitterly about the mountains. 'It's a mountain district (*shan qu*)' was the commonest explanation given for the area's poverty and was used as an explanation for all kinds of mishaps from buses breaking down to general underdevelopment (*luohou*). People often asked whether we had mountains in Britain, and expressed surprise when they learned that such a developed country as Britain did have mountains.

The cumulative impression I gained from all these conversations and comments was that far from being seen as a place of beauty, or a 'deeply loved native land' as a West Hunan television programme promoted it,⁶ West Hunan is seen by its inhabitants as a place of last resort to which their ancestors had fled. This seems to be a view held among everyone, whether classified Miao or Han. A young Kho Xiong speaking woman told me that she had heard that in the past Miao people had lived in a level place by a big river, but that other people had wanted the land and tried to kill the Miao people so they had run away to the mountain ridges and forests. Similar stories are described by Graham who says of the Miao people of Northwest Guizhou that 'their folk tales reveal the fact that they dread the steep paths and high

mountains and live there only because they are a defeated people' (Graham 1961: 70). People of Han Chinese descent, whose ancestors had come here looking for land, were also among those who complained about the quality of the land in West Hunan.⁷

Interacting with the 'Miao'

I have described a series of images of minorities and landscape through which, I suggest, local government has produced particular images of West Hunan. While these may appeal to a nostalgia for the past, they also reinforce a sense of superiority among urban visitors. Often these involved little or no contact between visitors and villages. In contrast to the lack of contact between tourists and the villagers, there was a limited amount of interaction with the performers and tourists, as is indicated in the following introduction to the Dehang area, translated locally,

The local customs 'welcoming guest wine', 'flower drum dance', 'song and dance evening' all brim over with rich local features and make visitors reluctant to leave.

But, given the artificiality I have described, it is no surprise to find that what interaction there is has been carefully stage managed so that there is no contact with the actualities of minority life.

Interaction between visitors and Miao guides and performers often has romantic and playful elements. Visitors are greeted by young women offering them drinks, something also found in tourist activities in minority areas of Guizhou (Schein 1993: 228, Cheung 1996b: 214). Dance performances usually include one or more items, described as traditional Miao games, which involve audience participation. These games usually require a certain amount of agility on the part of the performers. In one, a pair of long pieces of wood shaped like skis, are brought out. These have multiple foot-loops in which a line of people must stand and walk simultaneously, resulting in much laughter. Visitors are encouraged to join in and male visitors are sometimes almost dragged onto the stage by the female performers.

During the day, tourists can walk around the park with one of the Miao performers as a guide and male visitors may expect something more romantic than this from the

encounter. For example, on one visit to Dehang we met one of the performers, wearing a bright pink skirt and a wide peasant hat, and leading a group of men up to the Liusha waterfall. We met her again at some stepping stones across a river. She went across the stepping stones first, laughing from the far bank at the visitors' slowness and laughing again when they were splashed and teased by children from the village. When they finally joined her, she rushed on up the hill to a small pavilion. Both sides were enjoying the game but, when we got to the pavilion, we found the Miao woman more subdued. One of the men was asking her to have her photograph taken sitting on a rock with him. As far as I could see, the only way she could do this was by sitting on his lap, and she was refusing to do so. This suggests that far from being automata, the young Miao women who are being positioned as 'Other' are also able to some extent to set their own terms revealing 'resistance to the utilisation of their bodies and their smiles' (Schein 1997: 83).

Although there was relatively little interaction between those who wanted to view the Miao and the villagers themselves, often visitors had no wish to see more. I was told that when some visitors came to Jishou University from the teacher training college at Huaihua, about 100 kilometres south of Jishou, they were driven up to a village near Dehang to see the village and the people working in the fields, but they did not get out of the bus. Then they were taken to another vantage point to look at the scenery. Further evidence of this is seen in the fact that students from other parts of Hunan would often tell me that they were disappointed because they expected to see young women in minority dress on the streets of Jishou. If I pointed out that some of the rural women in the markets were quite young they would say, yes but they are not wearing beautiful colours and jewellery. Some students would seek out festivals aimed at tourists, of which there were one or two a year in the Autonomous Prefecture, to see the colourful images of minorities they had expected. On visits to Dehang, students who admired the colourful Miao guides would laugh rather derisively when they overheard old village women speaking Kho Xiong, and try to imitate the sound of their speech.

This lack of contact contrasts with the situation in Guizhou as described by Schein (1993, 1997) and by Oakes, where the tourists have much closer contact with the villagers themselves who, in turn 'strive to mediate the construction of that landscape' (Oakes 1998: 59). In fact, many images of minorities in West Hunan are produced without minority people taking part.

Minority Dancing

In the following section of this chapter I consider in some detail performances of minority dancing at Jishou University. I suggest that these dances illustrate the degree to which images of the Miao are removed from what the Miao say about themselves and also the ambivalent relationship of fear and desire which educated people have with the images of minority people.

'Minority dancing' at Jishou University was enacted by the students themselves. It was one of the most popular forms of entertainment at the university and students and teachers often told me how much they liked it. Like the performances at Dehang, these dances made use of colourful versions of minority costume and jewellery and were often based on playful or romantic themes. Most people, when asked, would say that they knew that these images were not actually representative of life in a Miao village, but they still regarded the dancing as a local feature. For example, one young Communist Party member told me how much she had enjoyed a recent performance because the music, dancing and costume were typical of this area.

I describe one from a series of five dances, all on similar themes, which were performed by members of the Music Department at a graduation day performance. In some ways all the dances were similar. Certain steps were used repeatedly throughout the performance. Some of these were typical of the Western style disco dancing which is so popular in China today, though with the Miao style silver jewellery whirling around it looked rather incongruous. Other steps were peculiar to the 'minority dancing' style which has developed, the most characteristic being a sideways jumping with fists turned upwards and hips thrusting forwards. From time

to time the steps indicated that they were climbing steep hills and crossing fast-flowing rivers. In this way Western and 'minority' influences combined to suggest the vigorous and the erotic.

This particular dance was on the theme of lovemaking between young Miao people. The dancers appeared on the stage in two groups, girls on one side of the stage and boys at the other. Unlike some of the other dances, in which the women wore bright or light coloured costumes, the costumes in this dance were darker coloured. They differed from actual minority dress in West Hunan in that the women wore above the knee skirts rather than trousers with a band of silver jewellery across the fronts of their turbans, and a yoke of silver jewellery across their tunic tops.

At the start of the dance, one girl was standing in the middle of the group of boys whose gestures towards her suggested attention and admiration. She, however, pushed them away and went to join the other girls. The girls made a circle, all facing inwards, the music began and there was a parody of shy laughter with their hands held in front of their faces. Then the groups of girls and boys approached each other and danced. This was followed by another very common feature of 'minority' dancing where the boys picked the girls up and put them over their shoulders. The narrative of the dance proceeded with the girls running away and laughing shyly and then, one by one, consenting to form couples with the boys. Romantic gestures between them ensued, followed by each girl becoming angry and pushing her over-eager partner away with exaggerated gestures of rejection. Then girls and boys fell down into an exhausted heap and slept. Finally, one by one the girls got up and attracted their partner's attention coyly and they went off stage in couples. The last girl got up and left by herself and the last boy, the clown of the group, followed her a few seconds after her with a broad, foolish smile of anticipation on his face.

Clearly this is a representation of a Han Chinese view of Miao courtship. The dance is based on a common Han misconception that young unmarried Miao men and women meet and sing love songs to each other and that this is immediately followed by making love. The dance varied between expression of spontaneous and

uninhibited feelings to coy flirting. The only obstacle to apparently random pairing was the need for the men to overcome the girls' shyness. Although at the end of the dance it is the women who lead the men away, the dance also suggests a lack of choice. The women are picked up by the young men and cannot escape. The last young woman to pair off has no choice but to go with the remaining young man. However, a comparison of this dance with an account of Miao courtship suggests that the dance is based more on a Han Chinese fascination with minority sexuality than on reality. The Miao practice of pre-marriage sexual relations fascinates as well as repels the Han Chinese (cf Gladney 1994: 102) and it was suggested to me more than once that I should take Miao marriage as my research theme.

Liang Zhaohui had grown up near Aizhai where Miao courtship took place even during the Cultural Revolution and his account, based on what he had been told by his contemporaries there, shows how far from the truth this kind of representation is. His account was as follows: If some boys meet some girls in the market and they tease them and the girls don't get angry then one of the boys will make an appointment with one of the girls. The boy and girl who make the arrangements are usually slightly older than the others and it is for the girl to arrange the time and the place and how many 'sisters' to bring with her. The place chosen is usually somewhere in the mountains, away from the villages. There they sing songs, ask riddles or just talk and form couples. The two groups make an appointment for another night. At the second appointment they talk all night and at the third appointment they make love. The liaisons formed would not normally end in marriage, since many young people are betrothed from childhood, but might do if long term relationships were formed and the couples insisted on staying together.

His account emphasises that far from being an expression of uninhibited, primitive or natural feelings, the occasion is a ritualised event in which women play an equal rather than passive role, since the young women plan the meeting in advance and always choose the time and place. He also stresses that, unlike the dance, the young men and women choose their partners on the basis of displays of singing and wit. Such meetings are neither illicit nor casual (*sui bian*). Though not discussed with

their parents, they will be encouraged by the girls' brothers, who may help them finish their farm work so that that they will not be late. As I have suggested, the dance described above is more a representation of what the Han find fascinating and 'Other', than of actual Miao practices.

Despite the evident erotic and romantic content of some of the dancing, this aspect of it was rarely alluded to by people at Jishou University. For example, I was told by a member of staff, in English, that the dances were popular because they were lively and 'crowded' (presumably a translation of *renao*) and that the best dances were the most colourful ones. Through these dances the students are able to enact and enjoy these mildly erotic images. The fact that the Chinese educational system which has only recently permitted university students to 'date,' suggests that these images are only acceptable because they are associated with the non-Han and the rural. In enjoying them, however, the students participate in an ambiguous relationship with this constructed 'Other' which comprises both closeness and distance. That is, they are able to enact aspects of their own desire, while attributing it to someone else.

Television Series

A similar emphasis on colourful images and erotic feelings at the expense of social interaction, can be seen in a television series made to accompany the Miao/Hmong conference which was held in Jishou in 1994 (see Chapter Eight). Three, hour long episodes were based on the following aspects of Miao culture: silver jewellery, embroidery and drum dancing. Since the drum dancing was presented as entertainment for tourists, each episode was in fact also promoting investment in the area and, like the images of the Miao at Jishou University, it was a means of promoting the area.

The episodes all include pictures of young smiling Miao women in embroidered costumes and jewellery, walking in beautiful landscapes. There are few signs of modern developments, people are shown washing in tanks and sewing by candle-light. However, they are sanitised images, no mud or dirt is shown. Many of the scenes appear to have been filmed at Dehang, since people are shown walking on

flagstones rather than ordinary paths. The inaccuracy of these images is underlined by the fact, unknown to many viewers, that most of the participants are actors, many of them brought in from other parts of Hunan.

The television programme I consider here does cover the history of the Miao rebellions and Miao marriage practices and does therefore provide a richer picture of Miao people than do the performances I have discussed above. However, the episode constantly returns to the subject of romance and its unifying theme is the beauty of Miao jewellery and the happiness this brings. There is also frequent mention of the antiquity of Miao. Their love songs, for example, have been sung 'for thousands of years, century after century'. There is no hint of poverty and in the opening moments of the episode we are told;

The clear cry of a bird leads us into a quiet Miao mountain range, leads us into a mysterious but colourful world. Six hundred and seventy thousand Miao relatives (*tongbao*) have multiplied in their ancient, deeply loved land. With their industrious hands and sparkling sweat they have cultivated the high mountains and created their own unique customs.

Wearing silver jewellery is a custom which the Miao women follow as a source of pride. Pure and beautiful, silver jewellery embodies the Miao peoples' history of appreciating beauty and it symbolises happiness and luck.

In contrast to other works on Miao people (cf Lemoine 1978: 803, Ruyi Yih-fu 1962: 184), there is no mention here of conflict with the Han Chinese. But the history of the Miao rebellions is mentioned and attributed, as is often the case, to the evils of feudalism and 'the blood stained oppression of the Qing dynasty.'⁸ The Miao are also described as heroic fighters against French imperialists and, in recent years, against the Vietnamese.⁹ This historical account is, however, trivialised by its association with jewellery and dancing and it is through a description of silver jewellery that the subject of history is introduced. Attention is drawn to an

ornamental curved silver knife in a woman's head-dress and the explanation for this is that it is in memory of the rebellions against the Qing dynasty. The description of the rebellions is accompanied by footage of a war-like 'shield dance', another choreographed 'minority' dance with as little relation to the actualities of life in West Hunan as have the performances of 'minority dancing' at Jishou University. In the scene which follows this, the camera follows a man wearing a Miao tunic and turban. The commentary says that he is a forest warden and praises his unique skills and the 'string of firm footsteps' that he leaves behind him. He too carries a curved knife and the voice-over, suddenly knowing, says 'Oh, now I understand why the Miao girls wear knives in their head-dresses, it is both in memory of their martyrs and out of reverence for their heroes!' The explanation is to turn once again to the erotic.

From here, the narrative moves on to Miao love songs and marriage. It is indicative of the relatively scholarly nature of the series that the love songs we hear sung are typical of the West Hunan Kho Xiong people, since in the depiction of courtship ritual described above, the accompanying music is of a more popular and commercial type. However, the details of the ritual are inaccurate and suggest that courtship is precipitate. Young people are shown singing love songs by the roadside and later leaving tokens on the trees to show they are not to be disturbed.

The representation of Miao as 'Other' is indicated by a number of comments to the effect that Miao practices are strange and different. For example, the courtship scene begins with a couple of young men bumping against some young women on market day, to attract their attention and we are told that 'the strange thing is that they do not mind, they even feel pleased'. Later we are told that the bride and the girls who accompany her 'are not at all put out' when they have to wait before entering the bridal chamber and 'when Miao people get married, they do not bow to the ancestors and they do not enter the bridal chamber.' There is in these descriptions an implicit contrast to Han norms of behaviour.

The television programme is filled with praise for the Miao. It ends with the words which purport to be a wedding toast; 'Sound the happy note of the horn, praise the

song of happiness, praise the pure beauty of silver, praise the sweetness of love. Praise the nationality, which is pure like silver.’ This, however, is indicative of the trivialising emphasis on colourful images and happy feelings which is found in most of these images. In its emphasis on these aspects and on the way that the Miao ‘lack’ Chinese customs this programme is similar to the images of Miao people found in 18th century Miao albums (see for example Lin 1940: 286-7, Playfair 1986). Some of these also contain pictures where, as described by Diamond, Miao people were pictured always in the forests or outside isolated homesteads without ‘any indication that people live in organised communities.’ Though the men were shown as coarse and dark, beautiful young women were depicted and the emphasis was on ‘sexual license, with variants on the theme of young men and women meeting in the wilderness to dance, sing, drink or repair to the nearest shelter for further intimacies’ (1994: 100, 103).

Conclusions

These are images which are ‘highly produced’ (Schein 1993: 10). They are rehearsed sequences in particular settings, which convey particular and repeated images. They have more appeal for educated people from outside the area than for West Hunan people, fitting in with a China-wide image of the minorities as ‘Other’ to a progressive and homogeneous Han Chinese. Ignoring the hardships of mountain life and Miao social organisation or religious belief, they are images which show Miao people as colourful and erotic, concerned with simple uninhibited feelings. In addition to this they provided a means of income for local government. As such, these images are representative neither of the Kho Xiong speaking highlanders, nor of the Chinese speaking people who live in the lowlands. Instead, they can be seen as a form of invented tradition, with particular appeal for urban people who come from outside the area to whom they are both the antithesis of civilised Chineseness and objects of desire.

What do West Hunan people and in particular West Hunan minority people make of these images? As I have mentioned, this is not a line of enquiry which I intend to cover in depth but I finish with a few observations. It would be difficult to make a

case that these images of 'Other' are hegemonic in their effects (cf Said 1978). At times, rural people would informally make use of the tourist facilities at Dehang themselves, reappropriating them and giving them their own meanings (cf Schein 1997: 86). Ordinarily the site at Dehang provides a place for village children to play and for adults to dry and winnow rice. Once when I was there, the proceedings for an inter-village basket ball match were opened with a drum dance by the performers, who were also keen members of the audience. On other occasions people might also contest the official images, such as when Miao people told me that whereas Han people think Miao women are forward, in fact they are very shy. Most commonly, however, it seemed that the images of the Miao in Jishou were of no great interest and they were rarely consumed or discussed by the people of West Hunan.

¹ I confine myself here to images which are accessible and well known to all through television and magazines and I do not cover local scholarly works.

² Though the term Kho Xiong is used in the West to refer to the people and the language (e.g. Lemoine 1978: 797), indigenously it is the word 'Xiong' which is used to denote the language, and *pu Xiong* means to speak Xiong. The word *kho* means people and Kho Xiong therefore means the Xiong people. For the sake of simplicity, however, I use the words Kho Xiong to refer to both language and people.

³ See for example, Gladney (1991) & Guldin (1984). I discuss this point further in Chapter Five.

⁴ Schein reports similar attitudes on the campuses where she studied in Guizhou (1993: 311f.).

⁵ Oakes writes that in Shen Congwen's work, the landscape of West Hunan 'was represented as a beautiful woman upon whom Shen's audience could gaze before she was inevitably "taken"' (1995: 93). Shen's work is not widely popular in China today and cannot be seen as representative of ways in which images of gender and landscape are currently expressed.

⁶ See below.

⁷ But the landscape is, of course, also invested with considerable power in the form of sacred sites and *fengshui*, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter.

⁸ For other examples of the ruling classes being held responsible for oppressing the Miao, see Ma Yin (1989) and Pu Qiu (1989).

⁹ See Diamond (1994: 110) for comments on a similar history of the Da Hua Miao of Guizhou.



Dehang



Blackboard decoration depicting a Miao woman: Jishou University

Chapter Four - Festivals as Images of Minority Culture

The colourful and romantic images I have been describing are produced largely for those from outside the area. In this chapter I consider events at which West Hunan people themselves are involved in creating and viewing images of minority culture. These are of a rather different kind, consisting of 'healthy' activities, many of which take the form of competitions. I begin by describing festivals in the Jishou area, most but not all of which were held at the Chinese Lunar New Year in 1997. These were promoted by the local government and, as with the material described in Chapter Two, they are based on particular images of minority culture. I attended these festivals as a visitor since, with the exception of the Jishou New Year procession, they were put on in small towns in rural areas, where I was not resident. Despite this, however, the material provides useful insights into the influence of the local government on local cultural events. These festivals were usually referred to as *huodong* (events, activities).

Rural festivals are held on market days, thus attracting a fairly large number of people. As in the rest of China, most festivals, particularly those considered to be minority festivals, come under the responsibility of local government (Feuchtwang and Wang 1991: 259). Two departments of the Prefecture local government are involved, the Cultural Department (*Wenhua Ju*) and Minority Affairs Bureau (*Min Wei*). However, most rural festivals are arranged, with the approval of the Cultural Department, at the relatively low level of town government, that is by the local Cultural Station (*Wenhua Zhan*).

From an interview with an employee of the Cultural Department in Jishou, I learned that the organisation of such festivals is intended to improve local culture and promote a favourable image of the area to people from other regions. He told me that the purpose of supporting such festivals was to revive local culture which had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, and to promote a warm atmosphere at New Year. He also said that such festivals are used to show how there are good relations between Han and Miao and, when I asked if holding these festivals meant that they

would attract the interest of the Provincial Government he said ‘Yes, of course.’ Some of these festivals may be granted money from the Cultural Department, but usually the money came from other sources, often private sponsorship.

In addition to the small-scale festivals arranged by the Cultural Stations, which I shall describe later in this chapter, there are a small number of ‘Miao’, ‘Tujia’ and ‘Han’ festivals which are both funded and organised by the Cultural Department.¹ In these cases the initial suggestion may come from the Cultural Department, who ask local officials to hold the festival and provide funding and experts to guide preparations. These are the festivals that will be attended and viewed by outsiders, bringing money and publicity to the area. One of these was the ‘Miao’ festival of *Si Yue Ba*, (literally the eighth of the fourth lunar month) which I will describe in the next section.²

Si Yue Ba festival

In the spring of 1996, the Si Yue Ba festival was held in Shanjiang, a Miao speaking settlement in the mountains of Fenghuang county. Shanjiang is something of a showpiece. It is a place where officially organised groups, such as the delegates to the 1994 Miao conference held in Jishou³, and groups of tourists, are taken to see a minority market day. The covered market area and some of the recent buildings have been built with traditional Chinese style roofs, which may seem contradictory until we recall that minority people are taken to be survivals of a primordial Chinese culture.

The staging of the Si Yue Ba festival alternates between Shanjiang and a location in Eastern Guizhou.⁴ On the occasion I attended, it was a relatively small affair compared with previous years. Despite this, the festival attracted tourists, journalists and some other delegates, whose importance I did not learn, as well as people from Dehang and the surrounding villages. A friend and I were the only Westerners present. The reason for the choice of Si Yue Ba for government support is that it is said, in officially approved historical accounts of the area, to commemorate a local revolutionary hero, though others say that it is a festival when young people sing

Kho Xiong dialogic love songs to each other. However, the event I attended was concerned with presenting images of the Miao, and not a chance for young people to find partners.

Though it was held on an ordinary market day, the festival was highly organised, with many people from Shanjiang performing prearranged roles. There were a number of young people dressed up in Miao costume and head-dresses, and there were women adorned with jewellery. The costumes were more 'authentic' than the colourful versions seen at Dehang and at Jishou University, but were obviously not their usual dress since the costumes were all identical. I had never seen young men wearing Miao dress in other circumstances and the girls were wearing their Miao costume together with high heeled shoes. As the young people of the township, they would normally have been wearing western style clothing. Among the crowds there were young people with name tags making sure everything was running smoothly. There were also a large number of police. As well as stalls selling the usual market day produce, some stalls selling jewellery and minority embroidery were doing brisk business with the young tourists.

The festival consisted of a series of performances representing different aspects of Miao life. It began with a performance of vigorous dancing, accompanied by drumming, in which the performers held staffs. This style of dance is often used to represent the rebellious history of Miao people. The schedule was disrupted by rain and the artificiality of the situation was made more obvious when the weather cleared and the delegates and tourists went back to the entrance of the village. Here, midway through the morning they were 'welcomed' back in by drum dancing, horn blowing and a lion flanked by two masked figures.

The welcome was followed by a performance of singing Kho Xiong songs, by a group of women in festival costume, which some of the onlookers recorded. After a while, guests, journalists and some of the villagers moved on to a stone house nearby which had been chosen to stage a scene from the ritual of 'waiting for the bride'. Inside it people were acting out the scene. One woman was untying and retying her

turban the whole time we were there. Others were sitting, looking rather bored and being photographed.

At all these events we were very aware of the presence of about fifteen photo-journalists. The situation, though based on an indigenous festival, was set up as a performance to provide raw material for making images of minority people, which could later be used as media images at provincial or even national level, for purposes similar to those described in Chapter Three. It appeared at times that the event was intended more for the journalists than for the other spectators and, as soon as a performance took place, they would rush to the fore, often obscuring the event for others. They were of course careful not to include each other in their shots, but they were anxious to include that intriguing anomaly, the foreign visitors. Usually, when photographing local people, the journalists were scrupulous about getting names and addresses and promising to send them copies. However, in their efforts to get both foreigners and exotic minority people in the same photograph, they tried to manipulate the situation, showing little respect for people's feelings. For example, at one point the photographers asked an old woman who was watching one of the performances to be photographed in conversation with me. She refused, looking upset and saying she was '*bu hao kan*' (not good looking). Despite this, the photographers urged me to go and talk to her and, when I refused, they decided to find someone young to talk to me. Later, at the 'wedding', they asked me to have my photograph taken with some young Miao women who were looking on, but the women recoiled in fear when I approached them. When I refused again, on the grounds that I was making the women feel embarrassed, the journalists replied that this didn't matter (*mei guanxi*).

The wishes of local people were ignored, not just by journalists in search of intriguing images, but by the organisers of the festival themselves. Later in the morning, two religious specialists arrived at the festival. One man, wearing gold coins at the base of his fingers and a chain between his first finger and thumb repeated a series of steps, slowly by himself.⁵ When I went to look more closely, one of the organisers approached him and told him to leave. Soon afterwards, another

man appeared, dressed in a woman's bib with flowers in his hair and rouge on his cheeks. He was accompanied by musicians with an *erhu*⁶ and flute, and danced while they played. He, too, was asked to leave.⁷ I had been told that if the weather was good the young people of the area would hold their own unofficial singing contest in the evening but since the rain appeared to have set in it seemed unlikely that this would occur and we left when the official performances ended.

The festival had provided different experiences for different people. The tourists and journalists appeared to be satisfied with the images of colourful aspects of Miao culture which the organised festival was presenting to them, as was a young artist from Sichuan who had come to collect material for his pictures. He was also pleased to have seen the ritual practitioners and he told me that Han people liked to see customs like these because they are ancient. And the young people who were walking back to their villages in the rain appeared to have enjoyed their day out.

Schein, discussing a rather similar occasion in Guizhou writes that 'local practice and official sponsorship constitute two facets of a single process' and suggests that 'as minorities celebrate their own occasions, China celebrates minority cultural practice as living evidence of cultural diversity' (1989: 210). However, at the Si Yue Ba festival it was questionable how much people were celebrating their own culture and how much they were simply taking part in a performance prearranged to official guidelines. The occasion conformed well to the officially approved approach, which, encourages a selective continuation of the colourful aspects of Miao culture. This excludes overtly religious events Yet some of the music, dance, and costume formerly associated with religious festivals are acceptable, provided that they are presented in a secular framework and packaged for tourism (Handbook for Minority Work 1985; Diamond 1994: 110).

I was also told, by people who lived locally, that rural people were becoming bored with Si Yue Ba and did not like to go because it was always the same.

It appeared, then, that people had become either performers or observers at these festivals and that their opportunities to be participants were limited. There was no

opportunity during the festival for any activities of religious significance, nor to choose a partner. The activities simply hinted at rebellious past, religious meaning, love and marriage in order to create images suitable for use elsewhere. The meaning of the day had been reduced to, as Poppi says of a reconstructed Ludin ritual, ‘a token gesture to amuse the numerous tourists who are the bulk of the audience’ (Poppi 1992: 127).

Rural New Year Festivals

The rural New Year festivals organised by the towns’ Cultural Stations are also intended to create particular images of Miao people. These, however, do not attract tourists and journalists, and the images of Miao culture which they create are rather different. They are images of ‘healthy’ activity rather than of exotic strangeness. The Ministry of Culture and its regional branches, the Cultural Departments, are concerned with ‘the selection of some “traditional customs” (*chuantong minsu*), which involve especially ““healthy” traditional annual festivals’ often taking the form of competitions (cf Feuchtwang & Wang 1991: 254, 260, Cheung 1996b: 222).

New Year festivals are almost ubiquitous throughout China. Though a time of celebration, New Year is also a time when people believe that the world has narrowly averted a catastrophe and a time when people are especially vulnerable to ghosts and demons. It is a time when people dress as dragons and lions and visit other members of the community to counter these malignant influences. Liang Zhaohui, who accompanied me to the New Year festivals and who had lived in this area as a child, told me that in these parts displays of martial arts (*wushu*) were also included in the New Year activities. Representatives from each village would arrive at the market place armed with staffs and swords and accompanied by lion dancers.

As well as their manifest purpose in quelling demonic powers, these displays were also ways of expressing and creating relationships between the villages. Both ‘Han’ and ‘Miao’ villagers had similar events but where ‘Miao’ and ‘Han’ villages were interspersed, such inter-village encounters were usually between villages of the same group. Lion dance festivals were particularly important for forming friendships

between Miao villages. They were opportunities for the girls of the village to meet young men from other, friendly villages. Sometimes, when lion dancers from one village were visiting another, the visiting lion dancers were invited to stay for supper and they refused out of politeness. If the host village insisted, the guest lion would run away and the host lion would have to catch it. If they succeeded, the group from the visiting village would all eat supper at the host village.

Lion dancing and displays of *wushu* sometimes spark off fights between villages. Liang described how, in the early 1990s, a fight almost arose between two Han villages in Majingao, where displays of *wushu*, lion and dragon dancing are put on in the fields at New Year, and people from other villages come to watch but do not participate. On this occasion, a young man from another village, who was watching the display, stepped forward and said, 'Now I'll show you how it's really done.' The response from one of the home team was, 'We'll see you at the next market,' and both sides knew that a fight had been arranged. On the next market day a group of villagers approached the market place armed with muskets and knives, accompanied by lion dancers and people playing drums. But the market was surrounded by people from the other village, also armed, some of them with staffs. In the event local government officials and the police from Jishou stepped in to stop the fight.

Descriptions of these New Year activities suggest a close link between ritual action and social action, where relations between villages, good and bad, are enacted and perhaps changed during the New Year activities. They also suggest that there is little difference between the practices of Miao and Han villagers in these activities.

Festival at Aizhai

New Year festivals today, influenced as they are by the Cultural Stations and by urbanisation, are quite different from those I have just described. The first festival we visited was at Aizhai, near Dehang scenic park. We were already prepared for the change when, on the way, the bus-driver told us that Aizhai people weren't very interested in traditional things these days and they preferred karaoke and basket-ball matches. In part this may be because, as Liang pointed out, people no longer feel the

need to use *wushu* to defend themselves. It was also partly because people now find these activities old-fashioned, especially those who have television or other ways to entertain themselves.

What struck me first at the New Year festival at Aizhai was that it was an occasion to buy or look at manufactured goods, and seemed to be an aspect of the urbanisation of rural China. It was also a place to meet people. People were converging on the market from all directions, most of them quite well dressed, many of them in western style clothing. Liang Zhaohui was recognised in the street by a former student who told him that he had been to Guangzhou to look for casual work (*da gong*) and was back in Aizhai for the holiday. Like several other young men there he was dressed cheaply but with big-city flair, and had had his hair lightened to a red-brown colour. When we arrived the activities had not yet begun and we walked round the street stalls which were selling food and household goods. Typical of the mixed array of imported goods was a stall which displayed, among other things, plastic birds, ornaments made from shells, miniature Communist Party flags and plastic idols of Guanyin. Artefacts such as these suggest that the market was an opportunity to come into contact with the outside, urban, world.

The funding for this festival had come from private enterprise, but private enterprise from another part of China. Posters said that the festival was sponsored by a Chinese medicine company from Shandong in East China, which was promoting a medicine popular for treating stomach ailments. However, this was private enterprise working together with local government, as was made evident by the inclusion of opening speeches by local officials. There were several indications that the occasion was also an attempt by the local government to promote 'healthy' aspects of 'local culture'. On the walls, as well as the ubiquitous slogans welcoming back Hong Kong, there was one about the Two Socialisms, (one material, the other spiritual) and another which said, 'Unite and Develop the Economics and Culture of the Nationality.' I asked Liang if developing the culture of the area was what was occurring today and he agreed, this was exactly what was taking place.

In contrast to lion and dragon dances, which are shared by Miao and Han, the festival appeared to be promoting a distinct Miao culture in the form of drum dancing and Miao singing.⁸ These, however, had been removed from their normal contexts and modified. The singers, middle aged women in traditional Miao dress, began with the well known Communist Party song, 'Without the Communist Party there could be no new China' (*Mei you Gongchandang, mei you Xin Zhongguo*), and proceeded with other political Chinese songs. The singing was amplified and attracted a small crowd. They went on to sing dialogic songs in Kho Xiong. However, the form was removed from its original social context, since the songs were not formerly used for public performances but would be, and still are, used to welcome guests, at weddings and to express love and flirtation.

More popular was the drum dancing competition. Drum dancing has been developed into a kind of acrobatic performance, in which its most skilled performers show considerable suppleness and agility. But, as Liang said to me, it is different from before, it has been changed, to make it into something which looks nice and can be shown on television. The event began with some old women, who were doing it for fun, but they were later replaced by younger people taking part in a competition. They were watched with fascination by a large crowd of people, many of them women in their best tunics.

Though it did not have political connotations, drum dancing was also removed from its former context. Ling and Ruey write of thirty different kinds of drum dancing which existed in West Hunan in the 1930s, some danced by men, some by women, and some together. According to these writers the dances depicted various activities such as 'The Rice-Shoot-Transplanting Dance' and 'The Turning-a-Mill Dance', and different animals, such as 'The Monkey Dance' and 'The Fish Jumping Dance'. They write that, 'in recent times the local governments have repeatedly prohibited licentious rites among the Miao, and so dances such as the drum dance are now rarely held' (Ling & Ruey 1963: 310). Ling and Ruey don't make clear why the drum dance is considered licentious, but the most likely reason seems to be that it was associated with drinking alcohol. It is clear from their description that these dances were entertaining and witty, and though dances of this kind are rarely

performed today, they are still appreciated. A young woman from a highland village told me of some young people from her village who went to market in the nearby town to meet other young people and do some shopping. They found, to their surprise, that the centre of attention was an old man who could do the old drum dances very well. Though, like most young people in the village, they professed not to be interested in such things, they came back talking enthusiastically about this incident.

As at the Si Yue Ba festival, there were people who tried to bring their own spontaneous performances to the occasion. A couple of groups of lion dancers stood around for a long time hoping to have a chance to perform and bring the village good luck, perhaps for money, since this was usually the case, but they were turned away because, they were told, there was no place to perform, since the whole area was taken up with official performances.

Festival at Daxingzhai

Another town, Daxingzhai, did arrange activities which were closer to what, according to Liang, New Year activities had been like in the past. Lion dancing and acrobatics were held, instead of drum dancing and singing. It is possible that they chose these activities, not only because the town is more isolated and less influenced by urbanisation, but also to entertain visitors from the Shandong drug company, who were also sponsoring this festival. On the first day of the competition representatives from the company attended, seated in a stand which was put up specially for them, and footage of the event was shown by the local television station.

Five days later, on the following market day, the teams which had not had time to perform at the main event were invited back. The activities were held in the school playground, a dramatic setting, surrounded by mountains and overlooked on one side by the school and on the other by an old fortified house. In the middle of the playground were fifteen tables, stacked up into a triangle with its apex five tables high. The visiting 'lions' arrived one by one, led by *wushu* experts and each was welcomed by the Daxingzhai lion and by people playing horns. The lions paraded

around the playground led by the *wushu* experts and then the competition began. The lions weaved in and out of the tables, climbing precariously to the top. Individuals and groups put on acrobatic displays, climbing and jumping. Each performance was accompanied by encouragement and, sometimes, warnings from team-mates. One man's performance was stopped because there was a loud cracking sound from the stack of tables.

With its elements of danger and skill, the display drew a large crowd, but the activities still had a controlled feel about them. They were overseen by an employee of the local government who was shouting instructions and warnings to be careful, in a mixture of Chinese and Kho Xiong, through a loudspeaker system. There was no opportunity for the lions to leave the playground to bring luck to the rest of the village, nor were there inter-village interactions of the kind Liang had described happening in the past. Again, it was being run as a 'healthy' competition rather than a socially and ritually meaningful activity.

There were, however, hints at a departure from this secular, disengaged approach. A member of the home team lit incense and burned paper money around the stack of tables, investing the occasion with supernatural meaning. There were also hints of counter-representations of authority. One of the visiting lions had come accompanied by two fierce looking men, one dressed in an American style jacket and carrying a spear, the other dressed as a rather sinister looking Chinese soldier, wielding a sword. The latter wore a green uniform, dark glasses and a cap with a red star. At first, people didn't seem quite sure what to make of him, but later, as he kept back the crowd with extravagant sweeps of his sword, people smiled or laughed.

However, as at Aizhai and Shanjiang, I was told by residents that activities of this kind were not as popular as they used to be, that people preferred activities such as basketball. There are several possible reasons for this. One is that, as is commonly said, people are more interested in what they perceive as urban matters. Another is that, as people's horizons are expanded by migration, inter-village relations are no longer so important. Also, as I have suggested, festivals of this kind, organised by

officials from the local Cultural Station and removed from social context have little in the way of social or religious meanings for the participants.

In contrast, inter-village basketball tournaments are highly popular. An inhabitant of Daxingzhai said that between the 10th and the 15th of the lunar month there had been a basketball competition at Daxingzhai involving teams from a large number of other townships, including a team from a mine in Huayuan country. When asked how the village could arrange such a big competition, he said that it was very popular in the area and could get a lot of support. Ironically, basketball appears to be more meaningful than much of the supposedly traditional activity both here and in Guizhou (Schein 1993: 272). Liang said that, in West Hunan, as with lion dancing in the past, basketball matches are a way to foster relations between villages. If a village is playing at home against a village with whom they are friendly, and the away team keeps losing, the home team allows them to win because they want the girls from the village to admire the young men from the other village and 'talk love' with them.

Schein (1993: 13) argues that in looking at Miao cultural practices, we need to get beyond the 'spurious dichotomy between the authentic and the manufactured.' Certainly, the involvement of local government officials in these festivals did not preclude them from being occasions of social interaction. However, I suggest that when looking at the festivals it is useful to keep in mind the difference between the spontaneous and the officially planned and not to underestimate the influence of the Cultural Departments in the promotion of local festivals. Chao suggests that the modification of minority culture by local officials is politically motivated. Writing of the official promotion of Naxi minority culture, she argues that

the promotion of ethnicity involves local and state efforts to appropriate, invent, and represent ethnic tradition for the purposes of controlling indigenous cosmology and creating local subjectivities (Chao 1996: 212).

Wu (1989: 15) suggests that these 'officially sponsored festivals, officially sanctioned religious celebrations, and officially approved songs, dances and costumes' all act to create images of unified minority cultures, particularly in areas where the officially classified minority itself is not locally perceived as an entity.

The festivals appear, then, to be attempting to fulfil a number of functions. They present a positive image of the minority areas, they provide an alternative to religious or 'superstitious' activities at New Year and they represent an officially sanctioned West Hunan Miao identity. However, in view of the widely held belief that these festivals are less popular than before, they are not wholly successful in this. In the remainder of this chapter I consider two New Year activities which continue to be popular. The first is Jishou City's New Year procession, which is a relatively sophisticated spectacle, and the second is an unofficial festival in which the Cultural Department plays no role.

New Year in Jishou

I have suggested that one reason why traditional festivals are losing support is because of the growing appeal of popular urban culture and the widespread popularity of Jishou City's own New Year activities seems to support this. While urban people showed no interest in going to rural festivals, the New Year procession in Jishou, arranged by the Propaganda Department (*Xuan Chuan Ju*), was popular with people from both the rural areas and the city. The crowds it drew included Jishou people and country people, and some women wore their best Miao tunics. On the morning of the procession, people gathered along the side of Jishou's main street and waited.

As with the rural festivals, part of the appeal of this event was the chance to buy things. Although there was no market, there were a few stalls around the main cross-roads at the centre of Jishou. Here one could buy locally produced foodstuffs, such as bottles of honey and sugar cane, as well as cheap manufactured products such as red balloons with double happiness characters on them⁹, paper lanterns, fold up dragons, paper windmills and cheap plastic toys.

The event consisted of a highly organised procession, the participants in which were members of work units and other urban associations, such as the Old People's

Associations. At the start, police on motorbikes kept the onlookers back but after they had gone past, people crowded onto the road, including journalists and TV cameramen, many of whom directed their attention towards me, the only Westerner present. The procession included a dragon and a lion dance, both from Jishou schools. The lions were neater and more colourful than the ones I had seen at the rural festivals. These were followed by a procession of decorated floats with school children depicting various scenes. The first floats showed current political issues; one, for example, had three children in red jumpers and the characters 'Hong Kong comes back' (*Xiang Gang hui gui*). Another had a girl and boy with a doll and the slogan 'One Child is Best.' There were also floats with children representing the armed forces and soldiers, peasant and intellectuals, followed by others who were presenting scenes of various stories from ancient Chinese history.

The procession was not characterised by a particularly strong minority theme, but one of the performances featured retired people from one of the Old People's Associations where the women were dressed in Miao costume and jewellery. I was told by a Jishou resident that they 'used to be Miao' or had Miao ancestry. Some of them were beating a drum on the back of an open truck. The rest, all women, walked along behind, smiling. Some of them looked particularly embarrassed. The people in the crowd behind me were enjoying everything, but this one struck them as particularly appealing (*you wei*, lit. appetising or interesting).

There were some similarities between this rather politicised event and the rural festivals, such as the use of lion dancing and drums. In this case, however, the Miao performance from the members of the Old Peoples' Association was particularly unrepresentative of everyday life. It was almost a caricature of the much younger urban women who are dressed up in Miao costume to represent the area in dances and at conferences (see Chapter Three). But touches such as this and the use of children to represent political themes meant that the event, though politically motivated, was entertaining. This, it appeared, was the intention. Later I was introduced to the head of the Propaganda Department who specifically asked whether I had enjoyed it, and he was pleased to hear that I had.

Opportunities to participate in this event were even more limited than at the rural festivals. People were there as spectators, but this may have been part of its appeal since it was an urban, colourful and sophisticated event, not so different from processions seen on national television at New Year.

An Unofficial New Year Festival: The Dragon Dance at Majingao

The Jishou New Year procession was not the only New Year activity which appealed to people from both urban and rural backgrounds. My final example is a New Year dragon dance which takes place in the Han village of Majingao on the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth of the first lunar month.¹⁰ The tradition of burning the dragon, usually in the form of throwing firecrackers, is widespread in China, and in Majingao it was taken particularly seriously.

The Majingao event is unusual in the Jishou area in that it is arranged by the inhabitants of the village, without any input from the Cultural Department or local Cultural Station. The fact that a Han village rather than a Miao one has taken this initiative is probably an indication that people in Han villages are less discriminated against, slightly richer and more influential than people in a Miao speaking village and so have less to fear from putting on an unofficial display. Miao people take part only as spectators, but it is also an occasion when young Miao people can 'talk love'.

It was dark when we arrived in Majingao and there was an air of excitement which had been lacking in the other festivals. In the newer part of Majingao there were three dragons, surrounded by crowds of people. Above them, on the balconies of work units, people were holding bamboo pipes, each one fitted at one end with a bamboo funnel which was filled with gunpowder and emitting a shower of sparks. Every so often, there was the sound of a muffled explosion and people gasped at the noise and drew back a little. When we got closer we saw that there were three teams, each led by people playing cymbals, horns and drums and they were running with their dragons under the sparks. I had been told that they had to dance skilfully to avoid the showers of ignited gunpowder but, on the contrary, the young men,

shirtless to avoid their clothes catching fire, charged into them, shouting and dancing around under the sparks. The dragons were smouldering in places and would have to be remade each night. Other people joined the dragon dancers, including wildly excited children and groups of young men who linked arms and danced under the sparks. One man walked under the sparks with a small child in his arms. No women participated, though they were among the spectators.

The blurring of the division between participants and spectators, and the rowdy, good-natured atmosphere, made this event completely different from the officially organised festivals, which had, for the main part, been sober, aesthetically pleasing performances. Zhang, a native of Majingao who usually participated in the dance, was accompanying us. He later told us that when he arrived and heard the drums he felt excited and wanted to join in. It was quite wild, he said, and it was more fun than other festivals. He had to look after us that night, but he would come back the next night and participate.

From the work units, the dragons moved into the narrow streets of the old part of the village where, even for the spectators, the smell of gunpowder was sometimes overwhelming. Bits of smouldering dragon brushed over people in the crowd, who had to turn away to protect their faces, but no-one seemed to mind. Later in the evening, the tail of one of the dragons broke off as two dancers tried to go in different directions and this caused much laughter. Bottles of beer were drunk, there were friendly confrontations between the teams, performers and observers mingled and both were showered with sparks.

However, this festival differed from official festivals in other ways besides its boisterousness and the chance to participate. The performance of the dragon dance was concerned with the village as a whole in a way that the reconstructed minority festivals had not been. The dragons had to follow a set route through Majingao, and Zhang mentioned several times that it was important that no family was missed out, even if the members of that family were not burning the dragons that night. Each family has a bamboo pole for burning gunpowder, which they must use to burn the

dragon. In this they were, in an overt and obvious way, including the whole village in the ritual¹¹. Nor was it confined to private houses. Work units were also visited, as was the local government, and Zhang told us that the following night, government officials would attend the festival.

The ostensible purpose of the dragon dance and dragon burning was to bring good luck to Majingao, and people in the crowd were overheard saying that if it was not performed, some disaster would befall the village. It also brought luck to individual families within Majingao, and it is particularly important for a family to burn the dragon if they have been lucky over the previous year. The need for good fortune has certainly not decreased in recent years. While opportunities to make money have increased with the freedom to involve oneself in private enterprise, the removal of the commune system has led to increased insecurity for many rural people, who are not benefiting from economic reforms (cf Flower and Leonard 1997: 214-5).

According to my companions, there were various indications of the supernatural nature of the event. Zhang told us that although the sparks from the gunpowder might land on peoples' skin and make a mark, this would never become infected. Liang Zhaohui said that he'd lived in Majingao for ten years and never heard of a building being burnt down as a result of the flying sparks, and he thought that this was strange.

The final part of the festival takes place when the dragon has been declared dead. On the sixteenth day of the first lunar month, which is market day in Majingao, if a dragon team has some money left over, the leader will buy some meat. The team then processes round the village accompanied by drums and cymbals, announcing that tonight they will eat the meat of the dragon and anyone who wants to can come and join them. People go along to the dragon dance leader's house for a taste of the dishes and this is also said to bring good luck. In ordinary life it is not, of course, normal practice to eat in each other's homes without a personal invitation. Even when an invitation is issued people often refuse, making excuses that it will give the

host trouble (*mafan ni*). Again, this part of the festival demonstrates solidarity among villagers in an overt way.

This, then, was not a reconstructed, aesthetic, performance or an attempt to preserve a tradition. Nor was it concerned with developing 'the economics and culture of the minority' or with elaborating cultural diversity. The teams of shirtless young men were, to the sophisticated eye, an uncouth sight. However, the festival also attracted people from Jishou because it was wild and exciting, and local people because they were concerned with the consequences for good fortune. Like Bakhtin's carnival, it was not a spectacle but something to participate in (cf Bakhtin 1994: 198). This, again, implies that the declining popularity of officially organised festivals may not be simply a result of increasing interest in urban popular culture but also because they deal only with 'healthy' secular activities.

Conclusions

Official rural festivals are intended to present Miao people as a happy, united group with particular features which differentiate them from the Han Chinese. However, they are events which have been removed from their former contexts and reworked into situations where distinctions between performer and observer are clearly demarcated, with further divisions between officials, who attend on stage, and ordinary people. Scheffelin writes that 'the power of performativity turns crucially in its *interactive* edge, and hence on the nature of the relationship between 'performers' and others' (1998: 200). I suggest that the lack of interaction between performers and observers is closely connected to the lack of relevance which these occasions have for the people observing them.

This is not to imply that the occasions are not enjoyed for a variety of reasons. Like ordinary market days, they are a chance to dress up and meet other people and to look at and buy manufactured products. In the case of New Year festivals, this includes migrants back for the New Year holidays. However, while the popularity of urban spectacle is demonstrated by the large crowds of people, both urban and rural,

who attend the Jishou New Year Procession, at all the official rural festivals I attended, I was told by local residents that they were less popular than in the past.

The festival at Majingao presents a strong contrast with the official promoted occasions. The visiting of every family and the invitation to the whole village to come and eat in a ritual of comensality underlines a perception of the village as an entity. Equally important is the fact that the festival is believed to be instrumental in bringing good fortune which, in a situation of out-migration and rural urbanisation is highly relevant to the everyday experiences of the inhabitants, many of whom also make up the observers. However, though this appears to be an alternative to the government supported festivals, it cannot be seen simply as a form of resistance to or conflict with the state, since the festival includes all parts of the village, including work units and government offices, and government officials are invited by the people to attend.

¹ If it is a big minority festival the Minority Affairs Bureau ('*Min Wei*') may also be involved.

² New Year celebrations, like temple festivals and the dates on which market days fall, are calculated according to the Chinese Lunar calendar.

³ See Chapter Eight for a discussion of the Hmong/Miao conference.


⁴ See Schein (1993: 249) for a full description of one such occasion.

⁵ This appears to be form of ritual which, like lion and dragon dances 'trace[s] the points and the shape marked by the stars of the Dipper, the so-called steps of Yu, the legendary sage who tamed the rivers of China and revealed the map of the world to the founders of Daoism' (Feuchtwang 1992a: 55). For an in depth discussion of the history of the steps of Yu, see Anderson (1989)

⁶ A small two stringed musical instrument, played with a bow. The *erhu* is popular throughout most of China.

⁷ On transvestism and shamanism, see Eberhardt (1968: 306).

⁸ This was a common pattern, I also came across politicised Miao songs and competitions (in this case a rock throwing competition) at another New Year festival nearby.

⁹ The Chinese character () usually associated with weddings.

¹⁰ The lunar calendar was used in Imperial times for civil purposes. Today, ritual observances, such as temple festivals and the calculating of auspicious days are still calculated by the lunar calendar. It is also used in West Hunan, to calculate rural market days. Most commercially produced Chinese calendars give both versions.

¹¹ The teams were not necessarily all from Majingao. Sometimes, dragons from Han villages outside Majingao take part and sometimes there were fights between teams from the different villages.



Girls dressed for Si Yue Ba festival: Shanjiang



Ritual practitioner at
Si Yue Ba festival



Recording Kho Xiong singing at Si Yue Ba festival



Shopping: New Year festival, Aizhai



Local officials making opening speeches: New Year festival, Aizhai



Drum-dancing: New Year festival, Aizhai



Acrobatics and lion dancing: New Year festival, Daxingzhai



Attendant to the lion dancers: New Year festival, Daxingzhai



Members of an old people's association perform drum-dancing:
New Year procession, Jishou



Spectators: New Year procession, Jishou



Street stalls: New Year procession, Jishou



Dragon dancing:
Majingao

Chapter Five - History, Administration and Classification

The officially sponsored performances as vehicles for the representation of Miao culture, which have been described in the previous chapter, derive from the objectifying concerns of scholars and administrators. Such performances and the related images of the Miao seek to characterise the whole area as 'minority'. This is despite the fact that much of the social context of lowland West Hunan, the area in which many of these images are found, is unmarked as Miao. Even as images of the highland areas, these performances reveal more about the values and identity of local government and visiting or non-local Han Chinese than they do about the highland Kho Xiong people of West Hunan.

I begin this chapter by considering how the classification Miao, with its implications of a separate and primitive people, is the work of Han Chinese and also of Western scholars. I go on to show that during the Qing dynasty, the categorisation of the population into Miao and Han was an important aspect of the administration of West Hunan and that today, those who are concerned with the official classification of ethnic groups in the region are usually educated urban people. This in turn raises the question of the extent to which such classifications, though apparently informed by distinctions made in terms of ancestry and descent, are or are not shared by others in the population. It seems that in this wider setting contemporary distinctions of identity and cultural difference are recognised and articulated in terms of a vocabulary which appeals to a spatial idiom, that of the local (*bendi*) and the non-local.

'Miao' as a Scholarly Term

Images such as those which I discussed in the previous chapter represent Miao people as a distinct and separate group. Such images form part of what Harrell (1994a) describes as the 'Chinese civilising project', in which the centre, in this case Han Chinese culture, attempts to transform the periphery, that is the minority peoples (3). He writes that, from the Ming dynasty onwards, there have been a number of 'civilising projects', Confucian, Christian and Communist, each of which resulted in

‘asymmetrical dialogues between the center and the periphery’ (7).¹ All of them involved the administration and education of the minority people and of central importance to each was ‘to define, to objectify, the objects of their civilising project’ (Harrell 1994a: 8), that is, to classify and describe them as separate groups.

A view of the Miao as a separate and distinct people is held by Chinese and Western scholars alike, and is vividly conveyed in the following quotation from Savina (1928: quoted in Geddes 1976) in his *Histoire des Miaos*;

Living continuously on the heights, away from all other Asiatics, these men speak a particular language unknown by all those who surround them, and wear a special dress which is seen nowhere else (Geddes 1976: 3).

However, a consideration of the history of the classification ‘Miao’ indicates that the term, implying a unified, discrete Miao people, is a construction employed by Chinese and Western scholarship and the Chinese administration. The people who today are officially classified as Miao, did not necessarily view themselves, and others included in the designation Miao, as belonging to the same group. Before 1949, they did not use the word ‘Miao’ to describe themselves, since, until recently, it was a derogatory term, meaning ‘barbarian’ and, of course, a Chinese rather than a Kho Xiong term. A study of the usage of the term Miao is, therefore, revealing about perceptions, by others, of Miao people as a primitive, indigenous and homogenous group.

According to Ruey Yih-fu (1962), over the centuries the designation ‘Miao’ has been used in at least three different ways. Firstly, it was used to refer to a legendary group, the San-Miao, who are said to have lived between about 2,300 and 2,200 BC. Later, between 200 BC and 1200 AD, the term was equivalent to ‘barbarian’, and Ruey Yih-fu writes that ‘the designation Miao is somewhat loosely used as an equivalent of the collective term Man or Nan-Man covering various ethnic groups in the regions concerned’ (Ruey Yih-fu 1962: 182).

Only after this did it come to refer to the people sharing particular cultural and linguistic features, who are today called the Miao. But even then the term designated

one of a number of barbarian groups as is indicated when Ruey Yih-fu writes that in the 1190's,

In his preface to Chu Fu's *Ch'i-Man Ts'ung-hsiao* or Funny Things of the Stream Barbarians, Yeh Ch'ien pointed out that there were five kinds of aborigines, known collectively as the *Wu-ch'i Man* or the Barbarians of the Five Streams, namely, the Miao, Yao, Lao, Chuang and Keh-lao (Ruey Yih-fu 1962: 182-3).

As the title of the book from which this is taken, Chu Fu's *Ch'i Man Ts'ung-hsiao* (Funny Things of the Stream Barbarians), suggests, the term continued to be used in a derogatory sense, in this case representing Miao people as objects of amusement.

In addition to its usage, the character *Miao* itself has connotations of the primitive or less than human. Another meaning of this character is 'plant shoot', with implications of the immature and this has implications of 'aboriginal tribes with the added connotation of "uncivilised"' (Geddes 1976: 14). A further association which Chinese writers have made is with cats, some saying that Miao people were popularly supposed to have tails, and Geddes writes that 'The implication of the cat association therefore seems to be the same as that implied by the other derivation of the name: the Miao were a wild species' (1976: 14-5).

Within the category Miao, the Chinese have identified and named different subgroups. These were usually based on features of costume but, as Geddes writes, 'other characteristics were used also, often of an uncomplimentary kind, making up a weirdly exotic list.' These included names such as 'the Tooth-Knocking Miao, the Dog-Ear Miao, the Horse-Saddle-Flap Miao' (1976: 15). Similarly, Lin Yueh-Hwa writes that;

A sub-group of the Hua Miao are the La-pa [Trumpet] Miao; a sub-group of the Ch'ing Miao are the Ch'ing-t'ou [Blue Head] Miao; sub-groups of the Hei-Miao are the Kao-p'o [Steep Slope] Miao and Shan [Mountain] Miao (Lin Yueh-Hwa 1940: 279).

These terms are clearly derogatory and based on observations by others rather than indigenous terms.

Moreover, these terms have not been used exclusively in China. Western writers, even those who profess a great deal of concern for minority peoples, have used the

same terms. Thus Hudspeth, a missionary who worked among Miao people, writes that Miao are,

divided into a great many tribes, numbering, it is said, more than fifty. They are often called from the colour of their clothes, Black Miao, White or River Miao, Red Miao, Magpie Miao (Hudspeth 1937: 9).

These are quite different from the indigenous naming practices I have described in Chapter Three.

Another feature evident in much scholarly material on the Miao is that, though now divided into different sub-groups, they have a common origin. For example, Wang Huiqin writes that previously Miao people had ‘only one common origin, one common history, one common language’ (1987: 1). Geddes and Tapp point out that Chinese scholars often suggest that the original ancestors of the Miao were a group known as the San Miao, who lived in the north eastern province of Gansu 4,000 years ago (Geddes 1976: 7, Tapp 1989: 174), and Schein, suggests that this assumption ‘bestows the dignity of great antiquity and a standing in the documentary record’ (Schein 1993: 25). However, these Chinese accounts are based on Miao legends and Chinese writings and it is difficult to argue for a common origin for the Miao people since it seems likely that the story of the San Miao cannot be taken as historically accurate. This point is made by Ruey Yih-fu, who writes,

we shall never be able to trace the Miao who now inhabit south China and north Indo-China back to their original seat or to say precisely where they had their beginning (Ruey Yih-fu 1962: 181).

Though in saying this he does imply that they have an ‘original seat’.

It may be the case that the people now classified as the Miao developed their broadly similar cultural characteristics as a result of a common history rather than a common origin. Tapp suggests that ‘much of what passed for specifically Hmong, Yao, Lisu or Lahu social organisation formed part of a ‘common conceptual system’ which had in the past been shared with the ancestors of the southern Han Chinese and from which ethnic identities had themselves evolved’ (1990: 116). I have already suggested that the people now classified as the Miao may have diverged from the

southern Han Chinese more as a result of different historical experiences than because of a different ultimate origin.

In addition to the difficulty in determining origin, there is considerable evidence that Miao people are not as culturally different from other groups as their classification and the description of them such as ‘stranger and traveller for five thousand years’ (Savina: Geddes 1976: 7) suggests. This is particularly the case with respect to another classified group, the Yao, since the Miao and Yao peoples share strong cultural and linguistic similarities and are often referred to collectively as ‘Miao/Yao’. It can also be argued that Miao people share many cultural characteristics with the Chinese. Tapp (1990), writing on northern Thailand, suggests that Western anthropologists have assumed certain aspects of culture, particularly material culture, to be specifically Hmong because they had come across such artefacts among the isolated Hmong populations of Thailand and Laos. However, they are in fact typical of south China as a whole and in this respect the uniqueness of Hmong culture has been exaggerated.

Moreover, an indication of the obscurity of the meaning of the term ‘Miao’ and the doubts that can be cast on any assumption that it refers to a separately identifiable ethnic group can be seen from Shiratori’s work. Shiratori argues that Miao were subjects of the Yao people and that ‘Miao’ was ‘originally a family name of the Yao which was adopted as a family and tribal name by their subjected tribes’ (1966: 151). This is an individual view but one which draws attention to the complexity of the situation.²

The evidence suggests that Miao are not in fact so different in origin from other peoples of South China, and that their categorisation has had associations with the notion of a primitive ‘Other’ long before the creation of the images I have discussed in Chapter Three.

Classification of Minorities in the Twentieth Century

After 1949, administrators were, of course, no longer recruited from the gentry classes. However, as Harrell implies when he includes the Communists in China's ongoing civilising project, some similarities in the approach to the classification of minority peoples remain. The scholarly classification of Miao people, which I describe above, has its counterpart today in the official classification of minority nationalities.

The Chinese government has, since 1949, established a systematic classification of ethnic groups throughout China, as I described in Chapter One. Heberer (1989: 39) writes that although the opinions of minority groups themselves were taken into account, this classification of nationalities has not always reflected 'everyday life and everyday ethnic relations' (Harrell 1990: 519). In some instances the process has subsumed people of different languages and cultural practices under the label of a single nationality. This has been the case with the Miao, as I have mentioned above, and also the Yi (Harrell 1990: 522, 1994b) and the Naxi (McKhan 1994). Other writers describe how classification on the basis of language sometimes resulted in contradictions (Ramsay 1987: 271), and that the categories were drawn up by minority elites (Cheung 1996b: 4,188). In West Hunan the classifications Miao and Tujia included many Chinese speaking people of minority ancestry who had previously been considered to be Han.

It has been suggested that the formal definition of these categories since 1949 has resulted in the development of a new sense of ethnic minority identity among those categorised (Gladney 1991: 302, Harrell 1994a: 29-30). This is taken to be evident in claims to ethnic identity among people who had formerly insisted that they were Han, as in the case of the people now formally classified as the Bai of Yunnan (Wu 1989: 14).

There is evidence that a similar situation has arisen where Miao are concerned. Schein writes that although, until recently, 'the name "Miao"' was 'derogatory, used mostly by Han and outsiders,' a decision was made by the post 1949 government 'to

adopt it without its original connotations' on the basis of linguistic similarities between peoples referred to as 'Miao'. Now, she writes, people use the term to refer to themselves and 'although a striking degree of cultural diversity obtains within this group, the subgroups are said to recognise each other as co-ethnics' (1986: 77). A similar situation is described by Diamond (1994: 115). However, both writers point out that this recognition of ethnic unity is found largely among the elite, educated people, and it seems possible that among others it is not widespread. In West Hunan, I found that although people might define themselves as Miao, they showed little knowledge of, or interest in, Miao people outside Hunan, apart from those just over the Guizhou border who also speak Kho Xiong³.

In recent years, there have been several cases where groups of people have contested their officially designated nationality, claiming that they belong to a smaller nationality which has been subsumed under one of the larger nationalities in the official classification system (Harrell 1990: 524-5, Wu 1990: 2). One of the best recorded cases is that of the Ge people of east Guizhou who are involved in a continuing struggle to be recognised as Ge rather than Miao (Cheung 1996b: 240). A similar situation occurred in West Hunan where people talk of how the Tujia there were also originally designated as Miao and the change was made after a delegate from the area visited Beijing. However, by seeking a change in classification, these movements are not contesting the classificatory system itself. As Cheung writes of the Ge, in their struggle to change categorisation from Miao to Ge, 'it is through the process of self-representation (such as the writing of official *minzu* [nationalities] history) according to the master narrative of the minority institution in which they are groomed that the native elite transform their local identity into an institutionalised minority identity' (Cheung 1996b: 245).

The implication of these classifying projects, like that of the images of minorities I discussed in the previous chapters, is that the minorities are discrete, classifiable entities. In contrast to this emphasis on ethnic variety and difference, Han Chinese culture itself appears, by implication, homogenous and continuous. Later in this

chapter, I consider how the development of a shared local identity in a minority area such as West Hunan, challenges both these perceptions.

Administration of West Hunan in Late Imperial times

The classification of minority peoples has not simply been a scholarly exercise, it has been of fundamental importance to the ‘civilising project.’ For example, in Guizhou, during the Ming period, one of the first tasks for the administrators of newly settled minority areas was to categorise the people in the region for which they were responsible (Lombard Salmon 1977: 280).

In this section I discuss the administration of West Hunan, during the Ming and Qing dynasty, and consider in particular the separation of the population of West Hunan into ‘Miao’ and ‘Han’ as a means of effecting control. Since the writing of history cannot be separated from the context in which it is written, I will introduce the backgrounds of the three writers on whose work I base this account.⁴

One source which I make use of is *Xiangxi Miaozu Diaocha Baogao* (A Report on an Investigation of the Miao of Western Hunan) by Ling Shun-sheng and Ruey Yih-fu. This is based on research done in 1933 and was published in Chinese in 1947 and later in translation in 1963. Ling and Ruey were non-local Chinese ethnographers educated in the Western anthropological tradition and they collected their material through interviews using local research assistants and short visits to villages. Cheung (1996b) explains how, despite claims to be largely descriptive, their work is strongly influenced by the early twentieth century western notion of the bounded society. They focus on Sinicisation of Miao culture in a way which implies that it used to be intrinsically different but that little of authentically Miao culture remained. As Cheung writes, ‘Ling and Ruey somehow grafted an “orientalist” strain of Sinology onto the newly transplanted Western anthropological practice in China’ (Cheung 1996b: 78). However, they make detailed use of local historical records⁵ and their account provides useful insights if treated with care.

After Ling and Ruey left, Shi Qigui, their Miao research assistant, continued to study West Hunan, travelling around the area interviewing people. Of the sources available, his account, with the almost identical title *Xiangxi Miao zu Shidi Diaocha Baogao* (A Report of an Eyewitness Investigation of the Miao of West Hunan) (Shi 1986), comes closest to describing the area from the point of view of the highland villages. Though published in 1986, most of this work was written before 1949, during the Republican period, and much of it is a well supported critique of the injustices of the local administration, the *tun* system, then in its last years.

Finally, I refer to the early twentieth century writer, Shen Congwen, and to Kinkley's biography of the writer (Kinkley 1977). Shen Congwen was from an educated Fenghuang family of mixed ethnic background and he wrote fiction and non-fiction based on his life in West Hunan in the early part of the twentieth century. His description of a vibrant local culture still has relevance to West Hunan today.

All these histories of West Hunan recount a series of incursions into border areas by soldiers and settlers from what was then China proper, that is the people described as the Han Chinese. I describe the history of West Hunan in more detail below but, briefly, events unfolded as follows. Han Chinese soldiers first entered West Hunan during the Han dynasty but were soon driven back by the indigenous people and by disease. At this time the indigenous population, some of whom were later classified as the Miao,⁶ practised shifting cultivation, rather than the wet rice cultivation of the Han, they did not speak Chinese and were neither literate nor directly administered by the Chinese state. Later, during the Yuan dynasty, forts were set up and a tributary system was established, with local headmen acting as intermediaries (*tu si*). The indigenous people who lived near to these forts, often developed close links with the Han. In the Ming dynasty, the area was settled more heavily by Han Chinese, including farmers and traders, many of whom had left Jiangxi Province as it became overpopulated (Perdue 1987: 103). These incomers, like earlier Han Chinese settlers, occupied the more fertile land in the valley floors. At the beginning of the Qing dynasty the *tu si* system was abolished and, after a series of rebellions, the control of West Hunan was reorganised as a military colony.

In line with other writers, I continue to use the word Miao to denote the indigenous people of West Hunan and Han to denote the incoming settlers. However, I suggest that the history of interaction has resulted in a gradation of difference in which some people were not easily classified as either Miao or Han. As I discuss, administrators, including those in West Hunan used the term *min* (lit. civilians) to denote people who encompassed incomers from the east, their descendants and the descendants of indigenous people who had been assimilated. Although these people spoke the Chinese language, many of them shared some traits with the unassimilated Miao. The term *min* is not in current use but, when I write of lowland, West Hunan people as local people or local Han it should be borne in mind that this term probably includes people of mixed indigenous and Han ancestry. Likewise, although I refer to other indigenous people as 'Miao' because this is the term used in the literature, I am aware that it is a category constructed by scholars and administrators and, where appropriate, I use terms less implicated in the official classification of the area, such as highland and indigenous.

Pre-Qing Han Chinese settlement of West Hunan

At various periods, the administration of West Hunan has encouraged contact between the unassimilated Miao and the lowland people, the *min*, and at other times it has attempted to enforce a separation, as is indicated in the following brief history of the early settlement of West Hunan.

Incursions by the Han into West Hunan began during the Han dynasty. The Imperial general Ma Yuan, also known locally as Ma Fubo, led an expedition to the area in 49 AD but was driven back, and it is reported that he died there of malaria (Shi 1986: 33, Sutton 1989: 102). Major expansion into the area only began with the Ming dynasty. Ling and Ruey write that a native head (i.e. a *tu si*) had been set up in the area by the end of the Yuan dynasty and this practice was continued at the beginning of the Ming, by which time the institution had been recorded by a Chinese commander in chief in the settlement of Ganziping, a village not far from Qianzhou (Ling & Ruey 1963: 148).

This military settlement of the area was intended to be beneficial to the indigenous people, who were by this time classified as the Miao. By the end of the 14th century, the official Ying-lung was sent to establish a military station with 1,000 soldiers in Jishou (then known as Chen-Ch'i suo). Ling and Ruey quote from Miao Fang Pei Lan that

when the emperor went to the pavilion to send him on his way, he proclaimed, "I have a single pellet of Miao territory, and I ask you to go ahead to open up headquarters for bringing the barbarians under our administration. Do what is good for them and your descendants will enjoy the use of the office without limit (Ling & Ruey 1963: 149).

Unassimilated indigenous people were organised to provide tribute and, as Ling and Ruey write,

[t]he other 132 villages became a local army 'to protect the city moats.' When there were uprisings then they would be called to service; when conditions were peaceful they would disperse as civilians (Ling & Ruey 1963: 149).

This suggests that by the 14th century there was considerable contact between incoming Han and the indigenous people, particularly those in the lowland areas. This contact was intended to assimilate the lowland Miao who would then support the Han against attack from other, unassimilated Miao.

However, only a proportion of the indigenous population mixed with the Han. Conflicts arose between those termed the 'wild' Miao (i.e. unassimilated, usually highland Miao) and the people in the lowlands. In 1615 a wall was built to keep the 'wild' Miao away from the lowlands because 'the garrison outposts were so scattered and the Miao roads so rugged, it was difficult to defend against Miao incursions' until a rebellion by the highland Miao in 1628 brought it down (Miao Fang-pei Lan: Ling & Ruey 1963: 53). The area was continually occupied by soldiers, whose most important task at the time was to keep communications open (Ling & Ruey 1963: 70). However, according to Ling and Ruey, '[t]he 7,800 guard troops in the Miao area of the Ming dynasty were reduced to 1,600 men at the beginning of the Ch'ing dynasty' (1963: 168), and once again there was considerable contact between the Han and Miao people.

In the early years of the Qing dynasty, between 1662 and 1722, the native headman (*tu si*) system was gradually replaced by direct rule by Chinese officials, a change known as *gai tu gui liu* (changing from native headmen and going back to appointed officials), which was instigated all over southern China. This was accompanied by an official policy of attempting to integrate the indigenous people, allowing them to intermarry with the Han Chinese and setting up schools to educate them into elite Han Chinese culture (Rowe 1994, Ling & Ruey 1963: 168). I describe this policy, which was being implemented all over Southwest China, in the following section.

By this time there had been an influx into the area of Han merchants and poor peasants looking for land, and this appears to have been a factor in the ensuing unrest among the indigenous population. Shi writes,

Manchu and Han officials and soldiers, unscrupulous merchants and wealthy men from the 'guest people' [i.e. the Han] crowded into the Miao area. They exploited and cheated the Miao and annexed Miao property at will (Shi 1986).

And in the rebellions which followed, a rallying cry among the rebels was 'expel the guest people and regain our old land' (Shi 1986: 42, Ling & Ruey 1963: 168).

Undoubtedly, the main supporters of the rebellions, which spread throughout West Hunan and into neighbouring Guizhou between 1795 and 1806, were the people classified as the Miao. In the Jishou area, Qianzhou was quickly occupied by the rebels, and it was only after considerable expenditure by the state and great loss of life on both sides, including those of high ranking Chinese officials and soldiers, that the rebellion was put down.

However, despite the fact that officially they were described as the Miao rebellions, an element of this movement was not so much anti-Han as anti-official. There were disaffected Han among the rebels and Shi refers to the 'Han traitors' who had instigated the rebellion (Shi 1986: 49 - 50). It seems probable that a situation had developed not so different from that which developed in neighbouring Guizhou in the mid-nineteenth century. There, as Jenks has pointed out rebellions, also officially described as Miao rebellions, 'consisted of congeries of different revolts involving

other ethnic minorities, Muslim (Hui), religious sects, secret societies, and disgruntled Han Chinese' (Jenks 1994: 3). However, he suggests that because Miao people were seen as naturally rebellious barbarians the blame was put on them and 'the onus was removed from the government for its role in precipitating the turmoil' (Jenks 1994: 4). The situation in West Hunan was further complicated by the fact that by no means all the people engaged in suppressing the rebellion were Han. Shi's account gives numerous examples of Miao being enticed to betray their former allies and winning peacock feathers as a sign of favour (Shi 1986: 51).

The Qing administration's answer to these rebellions was to initiate a strict division of the population. As Ling and Ruey put it, 'the Manchu court realised that the time was yet inopportune to change the Miao by teaching, and the blockage policy was once again used' (1963: 168). The result was the *tun* system, a system of administration unique to West Hunan in which much of the population became at once peasants and soldiers, ready to be called upon should the need arise. The system was instigated by Fu Nai in the last years of the 18th century. Fundamental to it was the classification of the population of West Hunan into two groups, Miao and *min* (civilian), who were to be separated and administered differently. Miao were also divided into 'subdued' and 'wild' Miao and these again were administered differently.

The term *min* here is probably not strictly equivalent to the term Han. It is likely that, as in other parts of China, indigenous people who had been administered by the Chinese state for some time were classified in this way.⁷ In this case, they probably included lowland people of indigenous ancestry, and thus the term covers both Han people descended from incomers and lowland people of indigenous descent who had had close contact with the Chinese administration. The term *min* is no longer used and, as I mentioned, when I write of the West Hunan 'Han' I am aware of the fact that they probably include people descended from the *min*.

Presumably, this separation was instigated not simply in order to prevent harassment of Miao by Han (or *min*) and *vice versa* but to prevent mixing between the two. Not

only was there a danger that Miao and Han would find common cause for revolt, there had also been a continuing process by which Han incomers became assimilated with the indigenous highland minority people, that is, those classified as Miao, in contradiction to the intended direction of the 'civilising project'. It was not uncommon in China for incoming settlers to become assimilated with minority people (Wiens 1967 208-9, Pu 1989: 35, Harrell 1989: 186, Lombard-Salmon 1977: 279, Tapp 1995: 209). We learn that, in West Hunan, some families 'became Miao' during the Ming dynasty after arriving in the area from the east (Ling & Ruey 1963: 128). And Shi writes of a 'junior Wu' clan, who were originally from east China, but had adopted Miao language and culture. In the late Qing they registered as Miao to take advantage of the civil service entry quota for Miao officials (Shi 1986: 182). A similar process is indicated by the fact that in east Guizhou, in 1727, Han incomers were forbidden to marry Miao women on the grounds that their children would take on Miao culture (Lombard-Salmon 1977: 225).

Under the *tun* system, however, the Han (or *min*) who had been living in the Miao lands were forced to move out and 'no mixed inhabitation was allowed in the Miao area' (Shi 1986: 49, 53). Apart from officials, *min* were not permitted to go into Miao land, nor Miao into *min* land. Intermarriage was not permitted. All land was taxed to support an army of local inhabitants, the *Gan* army, who could be called upon to defend the area in the event of further rebellion. However, the population of this part of West Hunan was effectively divided into three groups, the *min*, the 'tame' (*shu*) i.e. subdued Miao and the 'wild' (*sheng*) Miao, that is the highland Miao. The *min* lived in fortified towns and villages (*pao*) which would also have included some Miao who had been assimilated before the rebellions (Kinkley 1977: 245). The men were divided into *tun* men and fighting men. The *tun* men received fields to cultivate, and guarded the *tun* guard houses' (Ling & Ruey 1963: 182). The fighting men were on hand to defend the area and to suppress any further rebellions.

A parallel system was set up for the subdued Miao. They were overseen by Miao officers and lived in fortified towns and villages in the lowlands, in a system parallel to that for the *min* but, unlike the *tun* system for the *min*, the soldiers also farmed.

Land which had no owners after the rebellion and land which Han settlers had seized from Miao people, was claimed by the government and granted to the subdued Miao, but administered by the *tun* administration office.

The highland Miao continued to live in *zhai*, which were mazes of narrow streets, but they too were overseen by Miao officers chosen by the Chinese administration. Sometimes the officers were those who had won peacock feathers as a result of their actions helping the government during the rebellion (Ling & Ruey 1963: 153). They had a role similar to the old native headmen 'uniting in their persons judicial, financial, and military command powers over all the Miao people in the five districts [i.e. West Hunan]' (Kinkley 1977: 15).

Though scholars agree over the structure of the *tun* system, accounts of its effects on the population differ greatly, reflecting the authors' different sympathies and sources. Kinkley writes of a relatively benign system where 'military officers would hold direct authority over most families, but only because most families themselves would be connected with the military and enjoy at least a supplementary income from their "soldiering,"' where, 'the Miao would finally be ruled by their own kind' and 'the land would be nationalised and redistributed on behalf of the common defence, or rather the public livelihood' (Kinkley 1977: 9). While Kinkley's account is based on Shen Congwen's work and the official records, Shi's was based on interviews with highland people in his own native area and he paints a much darker picture. He stresses the cruelty of the Miao officers towards other Miao and the biased responses of Han officials to disputes between Han and Miao (1986: 202-3, 221). He also claims that the Han officials often mismanaged the Miao, at times passing on to the Miao officers matters which they found too troublesome to deal with themselves and at other times installing

hot tempered and incompetent Miao people to help them deal with problems. These Miao officers can do nothing but act as puppets of the Han authorities, with whose support they abuse their power tyrannically and bully the ordinary Miao masses (Shi 1986: 208).

His account states that though some Han did enter the highland areas, interaction between Miao and Han was tense. Miao women were sexually harassed by Han males (Shi 1986: 208), relations between Miao and Han were hostile and intermarriage between the two groups rare (Shi 1986: 207).

The picture which arises, then, is one in which the interaction which had been occurring between incomers and indigenous people was discouraged by the administrative system, in part, at least, to prevent the highland Miao people having too great an influence on the lowland people that is, the incoming Han people, their descendants and the descendants of the assimilated and 'tame' Miao people. This was an attempt to draw a rigid demarcation around groups which had previously been less sharply defined. Another effect of the drawing of this boundary was that the rebellious elements in the population of West Hunan could later be subsumed into the generalising description of Miao rebellion.

Education and the Civilising Project

During the Qing dynasty, the establishment of clear demarcations between Han and minority paved the way for a further attempt to assimilate Miao people. This time, rather than permitting intermarriage, something which had not resulted in what were perceived as civilising effects, an attempt was made to bring minority people in line with elite Chinese ways of life by teaching them *wenhua* (culture, or written culture). Thus, rather than encouraging contact with Han peasants, with whom they had all too much in common, the minority people were encouraged to align themselves with the *wen* (culture) at the centre of Chinese culture. This was part of the emperor Yung-cheng's 'extraordinary attempt to make orthodox ideology not only the ideological pattern for the literati but also the political behaviour of everyone within the empire' (Huang 1974: 188). In Guizhou, for example, charity schools were set up for minority people 'to enforce the orthodox ideology and promote the imperial authority' (Huang 1974: 297) through education in the Confucian classics. The purpose of this was to effect *hua* (moral transformation) (Rowe 1994: 419).

Education was closely associated with the control of minority peoples. While scholars might describe this as ‘promoting adherence to Confucian social obligation and hierarchy’ the emperor Yung Cheng regarded it as ‘an instrument of control’ and even referred to it as “mind-washing and thought-cleansing” (Rowe 1994: 419). West Hunan also took part in this process. Shi writes that, after the *tun* system had been set up,

a certain amount of the tax levied on grain was appropriated to educate the Miao people and scores of schools were set up to civilise the Miao and educate the Miao children (Shi 1986: 215).

This move, he writes, was popular with a number of Miao people. It was followed by the reservation of a number of positions in the regional Imperial administration for which only West Hunan Miao people were eligible, though they were not permitted to rise further (Shi 1986: 215).

The transformation of minority people throughout China was not to be effected solely through literacy and formal education, since cultural traits were also to be changed. The institution of Confucian and Buddhist rituals was considered an important part of this. Rowe writes of Ch'en Hung-mou's schools for minority children in 18th century Yunnan, that he ‘devoted a major part of his schools’ curriculum to instruction in etiquette and ceremony, including visits to the Confucian temple twice a month’ (Rowe 1994: 438) and Zhang (1994) writes of the importance of schools and Confucian temples in ‘disseminating Confucian thought’ (126).

Everyday practice was also targeted. One of the most important criteria for assessing the minority peoples of Southwest China was ‘whether or not they “knew shame” (*chih-ch'ih*)’ (Rowe 1994: 424). Sexual freedom, particularly among women, was a particular target for change. In West Hunan Miao people were forced to wear Chinese dress (Jenks 1994: 69) and this was part of a wider trend in Southwest China (Huang 1974: 297). As mentioned above, Ling and Ruey (1963: 310) write that in the 1940s, Miao people were reluctant to speak about drum dances because they knew that such dances were considered to be licentious.

However, the project had only limited success. As Jenks' quote from the Qianlong emperor's edict of 1751 indicates, the successful education of minorities was not considered to be straightforward. According to the edict,

the Miao people are by nature stupid. It would be very difficult to make them comprehend the meaning of the Four Books [i.e. the Confucian Classics]. Yet after they are taught to read, it is extremely easy for them to peruse novels and other vile books (Jenks 1994: 44).

The employment of education as a means of integrating the population of China has continued since 1949. Attempts have been made to design bilingual education texts for primary schools in minority areas, but education at secondary and tertiary levels is almost always in Chinese. Moreover, political education often underlines the importance of a unified Chinese identity. Postiglione argues that one of the aims of Chinese education today is to achieve national integration by 'the socialisation of a new national person' including members of minority nationalities (1992: 329). He refers in particular to the education of an elite, but a similar process can be seen in the moral and political education which is found in schooling at all levels and in both Han and minority areas. For example the first of the 'Rules for Primary School Education' is 'Ardently love the motherland, the people, and the Chinese Communist Party, Study well and make progress every day' (Price 1992: 221).

The practices of those classified as minority people have not been the only ones to be targeted by attempts to civilise through education. In Imperial times the educated elite also regarded many peasant practices as heterodox. As Rowe writes, 'the achievement of moral-cultural uniformity through *ch'iao-hua* [moral transformation] was a persistent theme of Confucian reformers in dealing with folk traditions in the Han areas themselves' (Rowe 1994: 421). A similar attitude to local Chinese culture persists today (Tapp 1995: 196, M. Cohen 1991: 122). In particular, this can be seen in the attempts by the Chinese government today to contain 'superstitious' practices, many of which are also considered to be local practices (Feuchtwang & Wang 1992: 262, Anagnost 1994: 222-3).

It appears that, in intention at least, the educational projects in China have constituted a form of state hegemony. They have aimed to integrate the people of China by encouraging them to identify themselves with a standardised idea of what it means to be Chinese and by doing so to absorb notions of hierarchy and the authority of the emperor. The attempt to integrate by means of education has not, of course, been confined to China. For example, Weber writes of the socialising and centralising affects of French schooling in the nineteenth century that ‘there were no better instruments of indoctrination and patriotic conditioning’ (1977: 333). And the aims of the educational project in China would appear to parallel Gellner’s description of the modern nation state, where the creation of ‘large centrally educated, culturally homogenous units’ are produced through education within which ‘local sub-units of society are no longer capable of reproducing’ (1983: 33-4).

However, Chinese attempts to foster integration through education have not been entirely successful. My intention in the remaining chapters of this thesis is to consider how a sense of locality continues to be produced through the recreation of temples. In the remainder of this chapter, however, I turn to a discussion of the diversity of practices and points of view found among the people classified as the Han Chinese. To do this, I consider the literature on ‘Chineseness’ generally, before moving on to look at the situation in West Hunan.

The Heterogeneity of the Han Chinese

The civilising project is intended to promote an idea of a homogeneous, civilised Han Chinese culture which contrasts with ‘barbarian’ diversity. It does not therefore draw attention to the diverse aspects of Han Chinese culture, often referred to as local cultures, which are found throughout China. Indeed, Gladney suggests that the images of minorities themselves are intended to promote this notion of a homogeneous Han culture. By emphasising the diversity of the minorities, it distracts from the diversity within the Han (Gladney 1994: 99). As I discuss below, much of the considerable diversity found within China is nonetheless considered to be part of Han Chinese culture. Despite their divergence from elite culture, local

cultures are still considered to be Chinese, that is, separate from minority culture. An area like West Hunan, however, presents a problem. Distinctions between local Han and minority practices become blurred and uncertain making it hard to classify.

Han Chinese culture is seen by many Western scholars to have only a superficial uniformity, imposed on great regional diversity (e.g. Jenner 1992: 228). As Gladney writes, 'Ethnic differences within Han society, while readily accepted as separate cuisines, cultures, and languages outside of China, within China are regarded as local dishes, customs and dialects' (Gladney 1991: 306). Writers such as these stress the considerable amount of local diversity in China. At provincial level, different localities can often be distinguished by dialect, cooking style and other cultural practices (Crissman 1967: 185-6, Gladney 1991: 306).

The Han Chinese also perceive differences among themselves. For example, Han Chinese people who migrate from China to other parts of Asia develop communities based on place of origin and dialect. They may at different times, draw on wider or narrower group identifications, based on province, county or town. Alternatively, common surname may be used as the basis for forming a community (Crissman 1967: 190-1, Guldin 1984: 146, Blake 1981). Within China, there is considerable emphasis on *tong xiang* relationships. Today, in the People's Republic, a person with whom one shares a place of origin is referred to as a *tong xiang* (lit. 'person from the same village', but used more widely to mean 'from the same locality'). In Late Imperial times, the importance of *tong xiang* loyalty was indicated by the large numbers of merchant guilds and self-help societies in Chinese cities and among overseas Chinese, based on place of origin (Skinner 1976). The *tong xiang* relationship still implies a considerable amount of trust. Gamble writes that in Shanghai, migrant workers from out of town are often employed by someone from their home area (1996: 248). In West Hunan, students whom I met at schools or at Jishou University, made friends with and depended on their *tong xiang*, even if they were not acquainted before. *Tong xiang* relationships could be made quite casually. For example, friends who visited me from Shaoyang county trusted a street vendor

enough to leave their bags with her because they recognised her from her dialect as a *tong xiang*.

Nonetheless, there are common factors among the Han Chinese and Cohen writes that '[t]aking this Han or ethnic Chinese culture as a whole, there can be no doubt that the historical trend in premodern times was toward increasing uniformity' (M. Cohen 1991: 114). For example, Chinese is commonly held to be a unifying element. The Han themselves consider it to be a single, common language, despite including several branches, as well as the considerable variation in dialects (*difang hua*, lit. the speech of a place) which are found, especially in Southeast China (Ramsay 1987: 16, 21f.).⁸ This and other factors must have been, at least in part, a result of the attempts at integration through education described above. Cultural homogeneity among the elite during Imperial times could to some extent be accounted for by the importance of the works of Confucius, works on which 'they consciously modelled their own social norms' (Ward 1965: 115). Since educated people all over China sat examinations set on these works, in the hopes of achieving official positions, they were influential in unifying elite culture (Ward 1965: 115, M. Cohen 1991: 116). However, it is also claimed that certain aspects of life, such as 'features of family organisation' and death rituals, show considerable similarity throughout the whole of Han Chinese culture, rather than just the elite (M. Cohen 1991: 116, see also Watson 1988). Watson also suggests that it was orthopraxy, the 'standardization of ritual', which has contributed most to 'the creation and maintenance of a unified Chinese culture' (Watson 1988: 3), and Cohen extends this argument to suggest that an orthopraxy of etiquette was also a unifying factor (M. Cohen 1991: 117).

Drawing on this evidence of disparate and common factors, the argument that 'Chineseness' (Siu 1991: 19) is characterised by both unity and diversity, has been put forward by several writers (e.g. Fei 1988, Siu 1991: 20, Johnson et al. 1985: xi, M. Cohen 1991: 121). For example, Watson (1988: 17) shows that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, there were nine aspects of death ritual which were uniform among the Han Chinese, including wearing white and the burning of spirit money

and these were seen as evidence of the uniform nature of Han culture. However, he also points out that in other aspects the rituals differed considerably from place to place and might even contain elements which were considered disgusting by Han from other parts of China.

It appears to me that today, it is by discussing and comparing these differences that Chinese people confirm their sense of common identity. Variations of dialect and cooking are topics of conversation which are common, perhaps even *de rigueur*, among strangers from different parts of China who meet casually while travelling. They are also a stock component of many comic routines which are performed on television and, by amateur performers, at parties. However, these differences are recognised as variations on a common theme. Though they may fail to conform to the highest standards of orthodoxy, they are still accepted as Chinese and therefore contribute to a sense of shared identity.

It appears then that, if the Chinese are indeed unified, it is the notion of being Chinese which unifies people, rather than a common interpretation of what it means to be Chinese. Writers on Han Chinese in the People's Republic of China are struck by people's insistence that their way of life, however different from that of the elite, is Chinese. For example, Guldin writes that the Guangdongese, who are seen in the rest of China as having a local cuisine and dialect regard themselves as 'if not the originators of Chinese culture, at least its best executors' (1984: 141). Similarly, the Tanka boat people, despised as unorthodox by their neighbours on land, consider their marriage and foot-binding practices to be more correctly Chinese than those of their neighbours (Ward 1965: 114). Gamble, too, finds that the Shanghai people, though they regard themselves as very different from other Chinese people, particularly peasants and Beijing people, speak of themselves first and foremost as Chinese (Gamble 1996: 117).

Locality in West Hunan

As I have mentioned, border areas such as West Hunan present a challenge to the idea of a Han culture which, however diverse, is still regarded as having an essential

unity and being discontinuous with minority cultures. It is apparent from my discussion of the *min* that lowland practices in West Hunan have been influenced by contact with non-Han, indigenous people. In this section I consider the uncertain border between what are seen as local Chinese practices and what are seen as minority ones.

Some accounts of regional identities in China have suggested that the diversity found in South China has grown out of the remnants of pre-Han cultures (e.g. Jenner 1992: 228, M. Cohen 1991: 119). Minority people are described as being subsumed into Chinese culture (M. Cohen 1991: 114), acquiring the ‘cultural symbols’ of the majority Han (Siu 1991: 22). Cohen suggests that as Han culture penetrated the culture of the Bai minority of Yunnan, some local traits were maintained, but these came to be considered an important aspect of being Chinese, and were transformed into ‘the identifiers used by the local elite to glorify their place of origin within China’ (1991: 122). The implication here is that cultural traits which had represented differences between non-Chinese, minority peoples, were modified and contained until they became considered as local traits, which were, and still are seen as variations of a wider Chinese culture.

As I shall show below, this approach fails to take account of the interactive nature of the encounter and the counter-vailing effects of minority peoples on the Han. A situation which is closer to my field-work material is described by Watson. He writes of how in Sichuan, Han people place the coffins of their relatives in caves, a practice which has been influenced by minority peoples. In other respects, however, their rituals conform with Han Chinese cultural practices (1988: 17). I go on to consider the two way interaction between Chinese and minority influences.

It is undeniable that Han Chinese ways have been influential in West Hunan. As in many parts of China, there has been widespread adoption of the Chinese language and a Han Chinese way of life (cf Ebrey 1996: 24, Brown 1996). Shi writes that, ‘[i]n places near the Han regions, the Miao family structure has been completely assimilated with Han customs’ (1986: 171). He describes a group of Miao people

who have become assimilated with the Chinese, and found that only people over 80 or 90 years old could speak a little Miao (Shi 1986: 160f.). This process is continuing today. A teacher at one of the Jishou schools said that Miao people who came to live in Jishou, such as his students, stop speaking Miao and try to lose any trace of Miao accent in their Chinese because they want people to think that they are Han. Young urbanised minority people sometimes deny that they are minority, presumably because of its association with rural poverty. For example, I sometimes heard young people claim that though their parents were minority, they were Han.

It is the Han Chinese culture which is associated with urbanisation and, as I have discussed, television, Taiwanese pop music and *karaoke* have become widely popular in the rural areas, including Kho Xiong speaking areas. In the villages of Shizian and Pingshanpo twenty years ago, Kho Xiong was spoken and monkey dances, a form of drum dancing, were performed. Today, it is hard to distinguish them from other Chinese speaking villages, though the black turbans worn by the old women are an indication that, as urban people say, 'they used to be Miao.' Recently, the adoption of Chinese language and culture in formerly Kho Xiong speaking areas has also accelerated. I was told that, in the past, one would often hear people speaking Miao in Jishou and in the villages nearby but now even in villages far away from Jishou you hear people speaking Chinese. Such changes are not surprising since today, as in the past, Chinese language is required to advance in education and in work and even to work as a migrant labourer.

However, the influence has worked both ways. Though it appears that at the beginning of the Qing dynasty, West Hunan was characterised by 'an intense community or sub-ethnic consciousness, sharpened by the heterogeneous origins of the border region populations' (Jones 1978: 132), there is evidence that by the beginning of the twentieth century a shared lowland culture had emerged. Though the *tun* system had been intended to keep Miao and *min* peasants separate, in practice it was impossible to enforce separation in the lowland areas and there was a gradual merging of the lowland Miao with the *min*. This cannot be regarded simply as the overwhelming of the indigenous culture, and Shen Congwen, who writes in the early

part of this century, describes the merging of Han and lowland Miao when he writes that, within Fenghuang city walls,

are Miao people comprising one out of every three persons, and Han people who have been transported here from elsewhere making up the other two thirds, living together interspersed. Although the majority of Miao people still live outside the city, you can almost say that there has been a mutual assimilation in customs and ethnic characteristics, like the alloying of tin and lead in the making of a pot (Shen Congwen 1928: 39; Kinkley 1977: 247).

Rather than emphasising a distinction between Han and minority peoples, it might be more helpful to consider the area from the point of view of a difference between the centre and the border areas, where the centre is typified by literate, Chinese *wen* or *wenhua*. As I mentioned in Chapter One, Yokoyama (1990) writes that ‘the value of “*wen*” united the Chinese state, and it continuously expanded its sphere of influence towards the outside. In this “*wen*” centred structure of the society, the “*tu*” category was marked as its peripheral area, where the influence of the “*wen*” had reached but had not penetrated into the masses’ (1990: 12-13). This situation has arisen in Yunnan where, as in West Hunan, minority people, most famously the Bai, (Wu 1989, Fitzgerald 1941, Hsu 1948, Yokoyama 1990), who were classified as *Minjia*, have adopted aspects of Han Chinese ways of life.

However, rural Han can also be described as *tu* (Yokoyama 1990: 2). As Han people live further from the centre, they are seen by those in the centre as having not just a local culture but a border-area culture, one which is closer to that of minority people. For example, incoming Han Chinese soldiers have adopted indigenous ways of life in the border areas. Harrell (1989) writes of the Lipuo, who are descended from marriages between Han soldiers and local people and who today maintain that they are minority people. Yokoyama writes that in the early Qing dynasty, the Bai and the Han soldiers were classified as *minji* (citizens) and *junji* (soldiers) respectively. However, in republican times, the local Han and Bai were classified together as *benji* (local) whereas city Han Chinese were registered as *keji* (guest people).⁹

As I have indicated, contact with minority peoples also influences the incoming Han with the result that local identities have arisen in Yunnan which are seen to be, as Yang wrote of the people now classified as Bai, 'not quite minority, but not quite Chinese either' and people of whom this can be said were classified under the term *min* (1978: 23). A similar situation has arisen in lowland West Hunan today, where an awareness of a shared locality is pronounced which does not classify people by ethnic group. When I talked to people who lived in the Jishou area, I found that a discussion of cultural practices almost always led to the word 'local' (*bendi*) being applied to them, rather than the words 'Miao', 'Han' or 'Chinese'. The word 'local' was also commonly applied to people and a contrast was commonly made between local people (*bendi ren*) on the one hand and outsiders (*wai di ren*), that is, those who had come as party officials or teachers, to develop the area after 1949 or had come more recently as small traders. Unlike the situation described by Gamble in Shanghai (Gamble 1996: 117), West Hunan people did not draw a contrast between me as a foreigner (*wai guo ren*), and themselves as Chinese, but talked of themselves as 'we West Hunan people' (*women Xiangxi ren*) or, if they wanted to be more specific, used the name of their village, as in 'we Yaxi people' (*women Yaxi ren*). The salience of the local/non-local division is implied by the fact that a British teacher, on being asked where he was from and replying that he was from Britain, was told, 'Yes I could see that you are not local (*bendi*),' rather than, 'I could see that you are not Chinese'.

Often, *bendi* is taken to refer to the unorthodox. Some practices, such as consulting spirit mediums or worshipping a number of deities from different traditions in temples which were nominally Buddhist, were also described to me as *bendi* and these were often regarded by educated people, especially educated people who were not local, as backward (*luohou*) or unorthodox. These are practices which can, in fact, be found in many parts of China but local people are often unaware of this. As Johnson (1985) writes of Late Imperial China, elite culture may permeate popular culture through writing, but communication between different areas of local culture is more problematic. This has the effect of strengthening the identification of heterodox practices with locality.

However, many of these practices are closely linked to what are generally considered to be minority practices. For example, local (*bendi*) food included dishes of soured vegetables and soured uncooked fish. These were made by leaving them over-night in salted water and, in the case of the fish, in an airtight container. Although Chinese historical sources describe these dishes as Miao and, indeed, as disgusting barbarian food (Playfair 1876: 94-5), local people in the Jishou area never did so. Further examples of practices which are generally considered to be minority, which in the Jishou area were described as 'local' (*bendi*), are the burning-off of vegetation to form temporary plots, hunting and the gathering of wild plants. These were also practised by farmers who claimed Han nationality and were an appropriate response to the mountainous, and in places almost uncultivable, terrain.

This situation suggests that, despite the attempts of the administration to separate lowland people into Han and Miao a process of mixing and interaction has resulted in a situation where it is hard to classify people as either Han or minority. In using the term local (*bendi*) West Hunan people do not identify themselves as minority people, and many do not see themselves in this way, but they do characterise themselves as people of a particular area and a particular history. This is unsettling to those from elsewhere, who depend on the drawing of clear boundaries between Han and minority. Despite the fact that many lowland people claim that they are Han and that their ancestors came from Jiangxi, people from outside West Hunan often assume that all the inhabitants are minority people. Incomers to Jishou, many of whom are teachers or government cadres, explain that local people are lazy, they keep to their own way of doing things and are hard to get to know because they are minority people. Further evidence for their minority status is found in the fact that they are very superstitious, favouring, for example, Daoist funerals rather than the state run Confucian style funerals. These views were summed up in the words of one retired cadre, that 'they are all Miao people and very backward.' By classifying Jishou as a minority town the same people often also assume that there were no urban organisations, schools or city life until the area was developed by the Communist Party. This view of Jishou is also promoted by the city Tourism

Department (*Luyou Ban*). Tourists are taken to see the old section of Jishou, where a number of pre-1949 wooden houses remain, and are told that this is a Miao district, despite the fact that local inhabitants claim to be descended from migrants from Jiangxi. Here they are sometimes taken across the river by ferry and told that there is no fixed charge, they only have to pay the boatman if they want to as this is the Miao custom.¹⁰

In refusing to accept the practices of the West Hunan people as Han, incomers distance themselves from them by labelling them as minority. Like the migrants and minority people in other parts of the world, the position of West Hunan people is indicative of the 'cultural hybridity' which arises in the 'interstitial passage between fixed identities' (Bhabha 1994: 4). Their 'discordant, even dissident histories and voices' (Bhabha 1994: 5) unsettle the Chinese views of what constitutes Han and minority by continually drawing attention to the fact that the boundaries between these two groups cannot clearly be defined.

The case of *gu* magic

An illustration of the tendency of educated people from outside West Hunan to classify heterodox practices as 'minority' and to fail to see that such practices are known to people of both Han and indigenous ancestry, is seen in perceptions of the practice of *gu* magic. Though previously found all over China, from the Song period onward, *gu* magic has been associated with the minority people of the Southwest and has been used as a mark of their barbaric behaviour.

Making *gu* is said to be a form of magic performed by women, who become possessed by an evil spirit and have to practice *gu* to satisfy the spirit. Such women are said to have red eyes. To make the *gu* they put insects into a sealed pan overnight and in the morning one survives which has eaten all the others. This surviving insect can be used to make people sick and it can also wither trees.

The character for *gu* (which incorporates the components for insect and cooking-pot) was used 3,000 years ago and it is known that in pre-Han times it was already

associated with insects, disease and 'women inveigling men' (Feng & Shyrock 1935: 1). Until the Tang dynasty, the practice of *gu* was a widespread Chinese phenomenon and it 'appears to have been a cultural feature which the ancient inhabitants of the Yellow River valley shared with the inhabitants of the more southern regions' (Feng & Shyrock 1935: 10). It was even believed to have been used at court (Bodde 1975: 101). From the Song period onwards, however, it was attributed only to the minority peoples of the Southwest. Han people, such as officials and travellers, were thought to be particularly at risk, though there is a story that a 'virtuous scholar' was in no danger (Feng & Shyrock 1935: 16,23). This is perhaps because it was associated particularly with sexual approaches by minority women (Feng & Shyrock 1935).

Diamond argues that the beliefs around *gu* are 'a Han fantasy about these groups', and that 'in no way do they coincide with the practices or beliefs found within these societies' (Diamond 1988: 23). When discussing the works of researchers who describe the practice, such as Ling and Ruey (1963) and De Beauclair (1970), she argues that they have been heavily influenced by Han scholars and, perhaps, the written literature. It is, she says, a misapprehension which persists to this day, which Han people still believe in. According to Diamond, ambiguous feelings among the Han about *gu* arose because the minorities represented a disturbing 'Other' to the Chinese world view. This was particularly the case because the Miao practice of premarital freedom for young women and men shocked the Han and yet, in many cases, Han men settling in the minority areas had no choice but to marry local minority women. As Diamond says, 'In contrast to the Han society where women were politically and economically powerless and where sexual activity outside of marriage was valid cause for a woman to be put to death or at least severely beaten, here is a society that is a moral nightmare' (1988: 11), and the fear of *gu* women expressed this.

The fear of *gu* persists among Han people today. Miss Shi, a young woman student from a Miao speaking village, told me that Han people are afraid to go to the Miao areas because they are afraid of *gu*. She said that when her sister went to Huaihua

her teacher asked her if she was Miao, and when she said she was she told her a story about how she and her husband had gone to Guizhou, he had later died and she attributed this to *gu*. As a result she was very afraid of *gu* and the Miao areas.

However, contrary to Diamond's argument, concern over *gu* is not just a Han fantasy about the minorities. Cheung was told about *gu* by the Ge of Southeast Guizhou in the early 90s. Miss Shi also told me that her mother (a Kho Xiong speaking woman) also believed in *gu* and she appeared to half believe in it herself. She said that her mother told her she should never pick up small things by the side of the road and she should be careful drinking from wells in hot weather since these were both ways *gu* could get into her body, cause an illness and perhaps death. I noticed that when Miss Shi drank from wells she blew on the surface of the water before drinking, or spat most of the mouthful out again. She also said that a woman in her village had been accused of doing *gu* magic. She said it happens to women who aren't liked, sometimes single women, sometimes married. In this case it was a woman whose family was not doing well and she and her children were dressed in rags. She said she'd heard that *gu* women have red eyes but had never seen it to be the case with this woman.

Though the subject was not openly talked about, I was told by four West Hunan people that *gu* existed in West Hunan, or at least that local people believed that it did. And in all cases I was told that it could be practised by Han as well as Miao. One woman told me that it was a real danger, that *gu* women were everywhere, even in Jishou, but if you were lucky you would not come across it. Another said that they could be found in Yaxi village.

The weakness of Diamond's argument is that she presents a situation where Confucian values meet minority values head on. She suggests that Miao values as regards virginity, rank and female inheritance were completely different from those of the Han, where Han refers to the 'strict Confucian world that was historical China' (1988: 18). However, I suggest that, in actuality, this was not the case. Not only is *gu* more real than a Han fantasy, it is also shared with the local Han, either because it

was a technique acquired by Han people from Miao people or because it is part of a common shared culture. In either case, the Han soldiers and poor peasants who came to West Hunan were not necessarily part of a strictly Confucian world and divisions between Miao and Han were not as absolute as they are presented.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have shown how Chinese scholars and the Chinese administration have drawn clear distinctions between Han and minority. Following from Chapters Three and Four, I suggest that in doing so they reinforce a view of Han identity which is clearly demarcated, homogeneous and advanced. When these distinctions were applied through the administration, Han elements which were dissenting or rebellious were often characterised as minority. After this division between Han and minority had been effectively reinforced, minority people were encouraged to cross it. The intention, however, was not that they should interact with the Han peasants, who were all too likely to be influenced by the minorities rather than vice versa, but that they should be educated by the Han elite into the orthodox Chinese behaviour which was standard throughout China.

Despite the opposition between Chinese and minority and the attempt to promote elite culture, Han Chinese ways of life are by no means homogeneous. In East China differences within Han Chinese practices are usually presented as variations on a common theme of Chineseness, an identity which is characterised by both unity and diversity. The West Hunan situation is rather different however, because of the presence of the (imaginary) Han Miao border. We find ourselves at a place of cultural hybridity, where local practices are by their nature challenging to attempts to demarcate bounded groups.

Official images of West Hunan often represent it as a remote, static, timeless place of traditional people in an aesthetically pleasing landscape. It is also a place of out-migration, serving the more dynamic cities of the East and South but otherwise appearing rather disconnected from the flows of people in China today. When we listen, however, to the voices of West Hunan people themselves, we find that it has

for centuries been a place of cultural mixing and interaction. This cautions against any assumption that such movement and mixing is primarily a recent event since to do so is effectively to essentialise the people of the past as more easily definable and categorisable. In the final chapters of the thesis I will show that it is on the awareness of this mixing that much local collective memory and local cultural activities are based.

¹ In this thesis I do not discuss the influence of Christianity, since it appears to have had relatively little effect on the Miao of West Hunan.

² On the overlap between perceived status groups and ethnic groups in more recent Chinese history, see Hansson (1996).

³ I consider this point further in Chapter Eight.

⁴ It is of course risky to make too definitive a use of historical sources, particularly when I go on later in the thesis to look at how the differing histories of the Celestial Kings and the Bandits are aspects of social memory which are more informative about those telling the stories than about the past.

However, a description of the events of the Ming and Qing dynasty, though tentative, illuminates my discussion of ethnic and local identities and the part of the Chinese state in this.

⁵ In particular Yen Ju-yu 1820, *Miao Fang-pei Lan* (A Look at the Miao Defences).

⁶ Others were of course classified as Tujia.

⁷ David Faure pers. comm.

⁸ Western scholars, however, have pointed out that if languages are defined on the basis of mutual unintelligibility, branches and dialects of Chinese would be, by this definition, languages (Crissman 1967:183, Gladney 1991: 302f.), thus undermining the claim for a common language.

⁹ *Ke* is also a term used to describe the Han in West Hunan.

¹⁰ There are similarities here with the famous story by Shen Congwen, *Border Town*, which was written in 1934 and set in West Hunan (Shen Congwen 1988). In this a leading character is a ferryman who refuses payment on the grounds that the ferry is public property and he already receives payment for his work.

Chapter Six - Recreating Temples

Introduction: Buddhist and Territorial Cults

In this chapter I describe activities which take place in temples, focusing on Buddhist temples and the temple of the Celestial Gate Earth God. In particular, I show that these temples are places where people, especially women, address personal problems in their own lives and in doing so form relationships with other individuals confronted by similar anxieties. Temples are also places which are strongly connected to the sense of locality which I have discussed in the previous chapter, associated with particular sites and, often, particular stories of the area. I suggest that in recreating temples, people set them up as places in which notions of locality are expressed. My approach to the discussion of these activities is therefore to consider their relevance to other aspects of life, rather than to examine belief *per se*. As Feuchtwang writes,

by examining the practices and contexts of temple festivals and in particular by interpreting them as a kind of drama rather than as beliefs, I think we can see that they do imply and convey a moral and political nature (Feuchtwang 1992).

Broadly speaking, one can divide the deities¹ found in temples in the Jishou area into two types, Buddhist and Daoist on the one hand and territorial on the other. In the past, there was a third form of temple which was part of the Imperial state cult. Temples to *Wen* (culture), often referred to today as ‘Confucian’ temples, were part of this. These, however, no longer exist in the area. Whereas Buddhism is, of course, a widespread ‘institutional’ religion (Yang 1961: 20) in which sacred texts and organised institutions play an important part, territorial deities, which may be known within a small area only, do not have these attributes.² The two types of deities are often distinguished by local people as non-meat eating and meat eating deities.

In Late Imperial times, and more recently, Buddhism has been encouraged, or at least tolerated, as a preferable alternative to what are regarded as local practices. In the late 18th century, the introduction of Buddhism was seen, by educated people, as a means of discouraging local ‘superstitious’ practices. In West Hunan, Buddhism,

along with formal education, was introduced by Fu Nai. This was part of what Jones describes as his 'deliberate policy of destroying Miao culture by introducing Chinese education and by forbidding the practice of traditional Miao ceremonies' (Jones 1978: 132, see also Zhang 1994: 30). These Buddhist temples succeeded the Daoist temples which had been built in the area during the 18th century (Zhang 1994: 124) and at the time I was in West Hunan, I was aware of no working Daoist temples. Contrary to the widespread belief among incomers and people from other areas, that the indigenous population knew no institutions until 1949, Buddhist temples were also built in the highlands where several of them were used as schools during the Republican period. The introduction of Buddhist temples can be seen therefore as part of the state's attempt to integrate Miao people through education, part of a project which was intended to be both hegemonic and homogenising. In fact, however, Buddhism in West Hunan has accrued characteristics which are considered by many to be unorthodox and, sometimes, specific to the locality. At the time I was doing my fieldwork, most Buddhist temples contained a mixture of deities from different religious movements, in many cases Daoist, but in some cases specific to West Hunan. This is in the tradition, past and present, of popular religion all over China (Baity 1975: 47, Jordan 1972: 29).

In contrast to the institutional religion of Buddhism, territorial deities are often protective figures who are specific to particular areas. Many of them resemble the Imperial bureaucrats who wielded state power in China until the beginning of this century. Their dress is equivalent to the robes such bureaucrats would have worn and the process of drawing lots, as described below, resembles the procedure for approaching a magistrate in Imperial times.³ However, rather than comprising part of the hierarchies of the state cult, the maintenance of which was the responsibility of local officials, the cults of territorial deities often represent a distinctly heterodox point of view. They are closely connected to ordinary people and to the history and landscape of one's locality, or of the locality from which one's ancestors originated (Baity 1975:32, Feuchtwang 1992: 109, Dean 1993: 88, 218, Sangren 1987: 112).

The stories concerning local deities tell how, though originally from unremarkable peasant families or holders of some minor local state position, they displayed outstanding courage and ability so that, after death, they are held to possess the quality of *ling* (responsiveness, efficaciousness) which 'is associated in particular with those who have led extraordinary lives and died extraordinary deaths' (Feuchtwang 1992b: 101), see also Yang 1961: 162, Hansen 1987: 165). Some of these individuals lived their now legendary lives as long ago as the 5th century A.D. and some in the more recent past (Stein 1979: 59, 65, Yang 1961: 153, Dean 1993: 30).⁴ Some of these deities have been and are associated with virtue (Yang 1961: 162, Feuchtwang 1989: 19), whilst many cults are concerned with protective military figures. Such figures are believed to have command of spirit soldiers (Diamond 1969: 87, Jordan 1972: 51-3) and attendance at their festivals may include unofficial local militia bands who put on performances of martial arts (Feuchtwang 1989: 17, Jordan 1972: 48-9). In West Hunan, the most well known territorial deities are the Celestial Kings, who are three legendary military brothers. Although I heard nothing of organised militia bands, in one of their temples I did come across a group of young men who were apparently associated with organised crime.

Territorial deities are usually considered to have a close relationship with the living. Individuals could, and still can, turn to them without the need for a third party to intercede, though custodians or spirit mediums might also be present to perform this task (Hansen 1990: 13, Yang 1961: 327). If the deities' responsiveness fails, they become less popular and, as people's needs change, the deities either change in their capabilities or are replaced by others (Feuchtwang 1992: 137, 1989: 17, Hansen 1987: 7, Jordan 1972: xvi).

Often these deities are the protectors of a specific territory and this becomes particularly clear at festival times. In contrast to Buddhist festivals and to China-wide observances such as New Year and mid-Autumn festival, the dates of which are standardised throughout China, the festivals of territorial cults fall on dates which are specific to the particular deities. Each has his or her own specific festival

observances, related to the history of his or her life. In East China, festivals are often associated with a procession which marks out the boundaries of a territory. Thus, though they are dressed as Imperial officials, these deities represent something relatively heterodox, reworking symbols of the Imperial bureaucracy into places and activities expressive of local identities. As Feuchtwang writes, such cults can be seen as a form of 'dissenting history' which is 'interposed within and counterposed to a unified and single-centred history of dynastic China (1992: 7, 196).

The deities described above were, and still are, considered to be responsible for protecting a sizeable area such as a village or a region. In addition to these there are also a very large number of deities called Earth Gods (*Tudi Gong*) who protect small areas such as neighbourhoods. These too are regarded as the equivalent of officials, but of very minor officials. Usually they are identified by their position as protectors of a particular area, rather than as individual personalities, though they too may also be associated with historical or legendary figures (Feuchtwang 1992: 97,105,125, Sangren 1987: 139n, Seaman 1978: 97).

On the face of it there would appear to be considerable differences between territorial deities and Buddhist deities in West Hunan. Territorial deities are concerned with specific local histories and, in the case of military deities, have the capacity to harm. Buddhism is part of a widespread text based religion which was introduced into West Hunan as part of a civilising measure. A feature of Buddhist temples in China is the prominence of Guanyin, the Chinese form of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteswara, the goddess of mercy and the most popular deity in China (Sangren 1983: 6). However, in practice the contrast between Buddhism and territorial deities is hard to apply and many people cannot distinguish between Buddhist temples and those to territorial cults.

I leave further discussion of larger territorial cults and military deities aside until the following chapters. Here I consider Buddhist temples and one Earth God temple, all of which housed deities who were strongly associated with virtue. I begin by looking

at how the recreation of aspects of local culture is a means of coming to terms with a situation of social and economic change. I will begin by showing that what are considered to be quite orthodox Buddhist festivals and gatherings provide an alternative space and morality in which people criticise the current situation in China. This is particularly the case for women.

Women, temples and alternative moral spaces

My visits to the Clear Lake Temple with a group of women from Jishou made me aware of the needs which temple visits met. As well as places of prayer, they were places of leisure activity, places where they could make friends, and also places where they could find support and a sympathetic listener. I was told several times that the relationships formed between women who went to the temple together were special. An important element of this was the fact that Buddhism supplied a contrast to other aspects of life, associated as it was with themes of purity and virtue.

I visited the Clear Lake Temple with a group of women who came from some work units in the centre of town. They were workers and cadres most of whom were either retired or not fully occupied in their work units. Not all of them were born in West Hunan and some, like Mrs Shui, were relatively well educated. Mrs Shui was the member of the group who was most knowledgeable about orthodox Buddhist practices. She was respected by the others because, among other things, she had visited the sacred Buddhist mountain of Hengshan⁵, where she had bought a statue of Guanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of mercy. She kept this in her room and prayed to her everyday. A widow and former cadre at the Grain Procuring Unit (*Liangshi Ju*), she was originally from Changsha. She lived apart from her sons and said she preferred it that way.

In March 1997, shortly after Deng Xiaoping's death, we paid a visit to the Clear Lake Temple to pay our (Lunar) New Year respects to the deities. As well as Mrs Shui there were two other retired women from the Grain Procurement Unit and a younger woman called Mrs Fang who was from another unit. Mrs Fang was on

leave from her work unit while her children were young, a privilege for which she had to pay a small sum of money each month. She came accompanied by her mother and small niece. Her mother was retired, but busy looking after her son's daughter, Mrs Fang's niece, in another work unit.

In addition to its religious importance, the occasion was a time for forming relationships, 'playing' (*wan*) and performing favours for one another. The intention from the start was not only to pray but also to take some photographs of one another and I had brought my camera and some film. We met in Mrs Shui's flat at the Grain Procuring Unit. Before we left there was much getting ready of incense and offerings and discussion of how much of each to take. Everyone laughed when Mrs Shui's young grandson, whom she was looking after temporarily, asked whether the *e mi tuo fo*, a Buddhist mantra, at the temple was '*zhen de huozhi jia de*' (true or false). This was the title of a popular television quiz show in which participants had to guess whether items of news were true or false, but may also have reflected that even he was aware of the official attitude to religion. However, the proceedings were not just concerned with pleasure. Mrs Shui's daughter-in-law wanted to come but was told she must stay at home because she was menstruating.⁶ While we were leaving Mrs Shui's work unit, an old woman stopped one of the group to ask her to say some prayers on her behalf, apparently for peace in the days after Deng's death.

When we got to the temple, I was struck by how organised it was, compared with other temples I had been to. It is the only temple in the city of Jishou which receives money from the local government. The deities are all Buddhist and many of them are behind glass. The custodian was a nun and she was accompanied by several other old women one of them also a nun. But despite the presence of the nuns, much of the worship was organised as a shared responsibility among the women themselves. Though the nun was friendly and put on a tape of the chanting of '*e mi tuo fo*' when we arrived, she soon withdrew to the kitchen and we had little further contact with her. When we left, Mrs Fang's mother told the nun that she did not have time to come back for Guanyin's birthday and asked if it would be all right if

someone else came and prayed on her behalf that day. The nun reassured her that this would be acceptable and she left some fruit and glutinous rice cakes, a traditional New Year dish, at the temple for this festival.

The women all prayed to the deities in turn. In a procedure which is almost identical at all temples, they put offerings of food on the altar and put sticks of incense in front of the deity. Then, with their hands put together in prayer, they bowed three times before the deities, making their requests silently. Mrs Shui showed her greater knowledge of Buddhism and, perhaps, a more serious approach, by chanting some words. She also bowed much deeper, bringing her hands up towards her head each time. When I had my fortune told, a form of drawing lots, Mrs Shui organised it herself, saying that I must introduce myself to the deities, say my name and where I was from. They were happy to include others in their group and soon got talking to another woman who was visiting the temple alone. She also lived in a work unit in town and had a son who worked at Jishou University. They discussed together which temples they had been to and how this was a good thing to do. The woman said that we were all good people because we prayed to Buddha. Though it was uncommon for people to greet strangers with trust and openness, this was not so in the temple. Indeed, I had got to know the group myself through an earlier chance meeting at the Clear Lake Temple.

The subject of conversation moved on, as so often, to people's problems. Mrs Shui said that if she didn't pray everyday she felt apathetic. Then she started talking about how naughty her grandson was and she got some red cloth from the nun to tie round his waist. It was piled up in front of the Buddha, already blessed, and her friend Mrs Fang took some too. We all left together, and Mrs Fang gave me some red cloth to put around my waist and they said that now, when I was married, I would have a son. Then we walked off together and someone said that we were '*hao pengyou*' (good friends) because we had been to the temple together. Outside the temple and on the way down, we took several photographs of one another but there was no sense of discontinuity between this and praying. It was clear that the occasion was one of

pleasure as well as prayer and that much of the initiative for the activities which took place came from the visitors to the temple rather than from the custodian there. It was also apparent that visits to the temple allowed women to create an alternative place of morality, trust and relationships in contrast to the materialism and moral deterioration they perceived in modern urban life.

Such a gathering of women at temples was not exclusively an urban educated phenomenon but was a feature of all the temples I visited. Even when women go individually to pray at temples, they often walk back with the people they meet there and when they have friends who worship at the same temple they go together, combining prayer with an enjoyable day out. Women also attend the festivals in honour of Guanyin which take place three times a year. Guanyin festivals and temple visits appeal to women of all social ranks. These are held all over China at rural and urban temples and are almost exclusively female. Whereas the Clear Lake temple was in Jishou and was attended mainly, though not exclusively, by urban people, others were based in villages on the outskirts of Jishou and attracted more rural people. Some of the festivals fall at times when rural women have little to do in the fields and constitute a kind of holiday, sometimes combined with a visit to Jishou itself.

On one such occasion I went to a festival at Pingshanpo which had both Buddhist shrines and shrines of the local territorial deities, the Celestial Kings. Pingshanpo temple is situated on a hillside above Jishou near the village of Pingshanpo which, I was told by urban Jishou residents, 'used to be Miao' but now the people all spoke Chinese. Most people at the temple came from one of the villages nearby. One group of friends met one another at a pavilion on the way up, and later entered the temple together led by a woman who was chanting Buddhist scriptures. Others arrived in ones and twos and greeted friends on their arrival.

For most women, the morning was spent sitting around and talking or listening to the intermittent chanting and watching the people coming to have their fortunes told. Whereas urban women might use such occasions to meet new people, here, it was a

case of meeting again people whom they already knew. However, everyone welcomed me and several commented that they knew me by sight but had not had a chance to talk to me before. As at all festivals of Guanyin a vegetarian lunch had been arranged and money was collected to cover expenses for the lunch and work on the temple. I was told that some people would stay all night talking and singing songs. In fact, the people who attended were not exclusively village women. Others, who from their dress and manner were distinguishable as urban women, and including a group of students who turned up saying they wanted to swear sisterhood with each other, came to make offerings to the deities. One of them, who coincidentally was a student of mine, told me this was because they wanted to be friends for ever, and that her friends were Buddhists.

As at Clear Lake temple there was a concern with morality. The nuns insisted on proper conduct. A local man, apparently a spirit medium, who was keeping the company entertained by questioning me in an ebulliently friendly manner, was asked to leave because, as the nuns pointed out, he was drunk. The occasion was also a chance for everyone to discuss the conduct of the Minority Affairs Department over the temple of the Celestial Kings, which everyone disapproved of.⁷

I have suggested that visits to temples constitute a form of leisure activity. However, whereas the leisure activities described in Chapter Two indicated a wish to distance oneself from the political nature of pre-1979, and to some extent contemporary China, people who regularly attended temples often regard these occasions as an alternative to the materialism and social change which has followed the reforms. Though they have access to television and the consequent images of urbanised culture, many of the older women who attend temples cannot afford to, or do not wish to, decorate their houses or follow fashion. I often heard people at temples complain about other aspects of life today, that people have become more concerned with money, that family members could not be depended on to support each other and that there was too much crime. In particular, older women would complain that their children and in-laws were too concerned with making money, or with going out and enjoying themselves, leaving them to do the childcare. The women who attend

the temples do not regard these activities as marginal, but as an effective way of addressing issues such as the continuity of their families and of peace in the area.

In China, temples, particularly Buddhist temples, have long had an attraction for women. The marginal situation of women in pre-revolutionary Chinese society has been illustrated by several writers. Women were often not known by name, but were known as the mothers' of their sons (R. Watson 1986). Before 1949, women in rural Guangdong were often married into lineages which were in competition with their own. As a result of this they provided the means for affinal ties which connected the lineages, but they were also regarded as a potential threat to their in-laws (Potter & Potter 1990: 254). An indication of the unhappiness experienced by many rural Chinese women in the early part of the century has been demonstrated by the high levels of suicide recorded in rural Taiwan (Wolf 1975).

It has been argued that in Imperial times, the popularity of the cult of Guanyin was a response to the dilemma in which Chinese women found themselves. Marriage involved both a separation from one's family and was also believed to represent entry into a polluted state. To be without children, however, would leave one without the prayers of descendants, which were needed to ensure one's position after death as an ancestor rather than a ghost. Sangren argues that the appeal of Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, lies in the perception of her as a woman unpolluted by marriage and childbirth since Guanyin refused marriage, was killed by her father and later returned, offered her father 'her own eyes and arms in a magic potion' and 'having shown her father the true path she entered Nirvana' (1983: 7).

Women's cults often offered a practical and material alternative to marriage. For example, the White Lotus Sect, which first appeared in the 16th century and flourished in North China until this century, 'offered a community supplementary to those of family, village, market and bureaucracy' and 'this sort of sect was particularly appealing to women, providing them with a complementary community, new avenues for education and leadership and an escape from their families' (Naquin 1985: 261). Women's marriage resisting groups existed in Guangdong, from the

early 19th century until the early 20th century, because the loneliness and restrictions of a traditional marriage led some women to find the option of a celibate sisterhood preferable (Topley 1978: 245). This was made possible by employment opportunities for women in the silk industry.

The experiences of women today cannot of course be seen as a direct continuation of pre-revolutionary times. In mainland China, the Communist revolution has brought considerable changes to women's status. Marriage and divorce laws have been instituted and with the introduction of work units and communes women began to play a wider role in the work force. Nonetheless, inequalities still remain at work and in educational enrolment (Bauer 1992). Suicides among rural Chinese women also continue to take a high toll, with Chinese female suicides comprising 56% of the total of female suicides world-wide (MacLeod 1998: 62).

The experiences of Chinese women vary greatly with economic background and age. The reason given for the high level of suicides among rural women today is not so much direct oppression by men as the belief that they are losing out in comparison with urban women. The Far Eastern Economic Review quotes a Hunan woman saying "[T]he education they have had, and access to the outside world, make them realise the gap between what life could be and what they could do. That increases their despair" (MacLeod 1998: 62). Rofel contrasts the 'liberation nostalgia' among the older generation of women factory workers in Hangzhou with the 'yearning for modernity' among younger workers (1994). I found similar divisions expressed in Jishou when older women talked about their younger relatives.

Young, urban women such as those in Jishou also find that their lives are not without difficulties. For example, female students find it hard to break into business and if they did so, it was usually on the basis of their attractiveness. One student went to a recruitment fair in Guangzhou and was accepted for a job as an interpreter.

However, she later found that she was expected to have sexual relations with her employer and was forced to give up her plan to take this job. Another student talked about how she had been unable to get jobs because she didn't have money for bribes,

didn't have family connections, and was not good at flattering people. She said that one employer rejected her because she was not beautiful enough, since they wanted someone who would dress up and could drink a lot when accompanying clients at banquets. However, few of the young women I met were as critical as were older women of the changes in society and they were less likely to discuss them at temples.

Temples are places where people, particularly women, come to talk and find a sympathetic listener.⁸ Common problems brought to the temples are health, anxiety, family problems and concern over daughters' fertility. Despite the changes brought about by the Communist Party, women still express frustrations with their role in their families. While I was often told I should get married and have a child I was also told at times by peasant women that if I have money there was no need for me to get married, it was too troublesome and it was better for me to stay single. I once visited a small Buddhist temple in Qianzhou where a local woman visitor was telling a monk he was lucky having such a small temple since there was no-one for him to *guan* (take responsibility for). It was easier to live by yourself, she said, and she started to talk about herself, how she had to cook and do housework. She didn't like children and he was lucky not to have them. The monk sat listening to conversation and making sympathetic noises, which seemed to be all that was asked of him.

Many of the complaints voiced at temples are made by older women and are related to what Sangren describes as the problems of 'post-parenthood' (1983: 18).

Whereas, before 1949, married sons usually remained with their mothers in the family home, in urban China today, mothers increasingly live either alone or in the homes of their sons or sons-in-law in work unit accommodation. Here there is often little room and they are expected to take responsibility for childcare since both parents are usually working. On one occasion a middle aged woman who was discussing with a friend why she went to the temple explained that she felt worried and tense, and that her children and grandchildren gave her a lot of trouble. The two of them talked about how Chinese people in their thirties were not good these days. She said that as soon as she prayed to the deities she felt better, but it seemed that,

having someone with whom to discuss her motivations for going to the temple, was also helpful.

Temples, therefore, cannot be seen as part of a clearly demarcated women's sphere which stands in contrast to a men's sphere. Rather than being inclusive of all women, they often appealed to older women who contrasted themselves to younger women. Nor did temples exclude men. Though men did not attend the temples in the numbers that women did, individual visitors to temples often included men who had come to address specific problems.

The Birthday of the Celestial Gate Earth God

I have suggested that temple visits are often indicative of people's responses to other aspects of their lives. Evidence for this is found in the way in which worship at temples has changed in form considerably since pre-1949 times, a process which has been facilitated by the fact that often there is no custodian to oversee activities. In this section I describe the festival of the Earth God's birthday. What is interesting about the festival is the fact that, whereas in the past it was celebrated in one's immediate neighbourhood, today it is similar to the Buddhist festivals in its emphasis on communal eating and making contacts with other people.

Earth Gods are the most minor kind of territorial deity and are found all over China. They are responsible for protecting a small area such as a neighbourhood or a temple precinct and are particularly associated with protecting them from ghosts (Wolf 1978: 134). In West Hunan, the Earth Gods are usually represented as an old husband and wife. They are found in villages, in the older parts of Jishou and outside temples of all kinds, but I have never seen them around work units.

I was told about Earth Gods by Mrs Fang, one of the women who attended the Clear Lake temple. She said that, as in the ordinary world, where there are good and bad people and the Public Security (*Gongan Ju*) protect us from the bad, so in the *yin* world (the underworld) there are good and bad spirits and the Earth God protects us from the bad spirits. This view that the Earth God is equivalent to a minor official is

widely held in China (Feuchtwang 1992: 96, Skinner 1977: 262, Weller 1987: 2). I was also told by an elderly inhabitant of the old section of Jishou, where there are many Earth God shrines, that they can make direct reports to Heaven on peoples' behaviour, another commonly held view (cf Feuchtwang 1992: 96). However, although Earth Gods are important, they are also considered unremarkable. They are spoken of with affection rather than awe. I was often asked whether we have them in Britain, which suggested that they were seen as ubiquitous. People do not usually make offerings specially to the Earth Gods except on the day of the Earth God's birthday but, if people make a prayer or hold a festival for a larger deity, offerings are also made to the Earth Gods around the temple precincts in case they become jealous.

Mrs Gu told me that when she was a child, her family would offer incense to the neighbourhood Earth God and his wife, on the first and fifteenth day of each month, and make a larger offering on the Earth God's birthday, practices for which there is little evidence today. However, in contrast to the lack of interest shown in ordinary Earth Gods, the Celestial Gate Earth God (*Tian Men Tudi Gong*) is becoming increasingly popular, and in spring 1996 I attended the celebration of the birthday of the local Celestial Gate Earth God with Mrs Fang. The Celestial Gate Earth God, though of similar rank to ordinary Earth Gods, is responsible for guarding the gate of heaven. The dates of the festivals at this shrine correspond with that of the ordinary Earth God's birthday.⁹ Though few people visited the ordinary Earth God shrines that day, the birthday of the Celestial Gate Earth God attracted a large number of worshippers.

The shrine to the Celestial Gate Earth God is situated at the top of a wooded hill just outside Jishou. It has been crudely built from rocks and, on ordinary days, is unattended. In addition to shrines to the Celestial Gate Earth God and his wife there is one to Guanyin and one to the deities of Sun and Night. When we arrived, at first people were rather perplexed to see a foreigner at the temple, so we walked on through the woods for a while but on our return we were approached by the warden of the surrounding forest, a government funded post, who urged us to stop and eat. A

relative newcomer to worship at temples, Mrs Fang was as interested to find out about everything as I was. We were told that as well as being the Celestial Gate Earth God's birthday, this was the day when people gathered saplings of a particular tree which gave off a perfume when burnt. We were told that you should burn them on the first and the fifteenth of each month and then they would communicate with (*kai* lit. open the eyes of) the Celestial Gate Earth God. The warden and other people who were from the nearby area also explained that the temple¹⁰ of the Earth God was quite different from Buddhist temples and that the Earth Gods, unlike the Buddhist deities, were officials who protected the people in that area, but only those who came to worship there. In this they were like real people in powerful positions and would help you if you had good connections (*guanxi*) with them and attended their temple frequently (*lai lai wang wang* lit. came and went).

Not only was the Celestial Gate Earth God like a living person, he had once been one. We were told that the temple was first built in the early part of this century because there had been a man there who was very good to everyone around him so that when he died they built a temple to him. Two people told us this story and both drew an analogy with Chairman Mao, saying that he had achieved many things when alive and was now a god. However, only the people who lived in the immediate area of the temple showed any knowledge of this history. To others it was just like another Buddhist festival.

The activities which took place were similar to those at other festivals I had attended. Groups of people, many, but not all of them women, converged on the temple, stopping on the way up to leave offerings at the shrine of the ordinary Earth God. Many of them were from villages and suburbs on that side of Jishou. A group of women arrived from one of the Buddhist temples carrying a flag. Some people who, I was told, were from the suburb of Jishou closest to the temple had organised food and were collecting money for it. At the top, near the temple, groups of people, many of them women, were playing cards and picnicking.

Like other temple festivals, it was a chance to meet people. Mrs Fang, who accompanied me, was always interested in going to these events since she had no work, her children were at school and she found it boring staying at home during the day. In fact, the work opportunities which were open to her were not very appealing. Because her education had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, she had found it hard to get any kind of regular employment. She did now have a permanent position in a work unit but had asked for leave due to the pressures of having to look after two small children. Her husband had opened a bath house and asked her to work there but she said she didn't like doing this because the other people there were all men, their conversation wasn't interesting and they expected her to do all the cooking. She much preferred the company of the people she met at temples. She had started attending temple festivals quite recently and as a consequence already knew quite a number of other women, some of whom were also at this festival. As usual, eating lunch together was a good time to get to know other people and we got talking to a woman retired from a work unit in Jishou. She and Mrs Fang found that both of them came in part to play (*wan*), because they had nothing to do during the day. As we went back, Mrs Fang spoke happily of how she had got to know so many people now that she had started going to temples.

This festival is notable because of its departure from Earth God birthdays of the past. People chose to celebrate the Earth God's birthday now by climbing a wooded hill, rather than by marking it in their own neighbourhood or home. The contrast was discussed by the women at the temple. While we were talking over lunch, several women went into the woods to collect the perfumed saplings and the women who remained started discussing how they didn't need any because they didn't worship deities at home, or worship the ordinary Earth God. They just came out to temples. In part the change may have occurred because today many neighbourhoods do not have Earth Gods, and in those that do it can no longer involve the whole community in a ritual since most of the younger people, or those with close contact with the Communist Party, would not attend. But it must also be because people are drawn to the festival as a chance to have a day out with friends or to meet new people, forming a different kind of community from that associated with everyday urban life.

Drawing Lots

In addition to being places where people find company, another important function of local temples, including Buddhist temples, is that they are places where people address unresolved questions and uncertainties by divination through drawing lots (*chou qian*). Though some do this as part of a festival or group visit, many come alone or with a friend, and this is often the way in which men visit the temples. Like the form of the Earth God festival, the context of drawing lots has also apparently changed. For example, I was told by an older, educated woman, that Buddhist temples used to be devoted to learning about Buddhism through the study of texts, but now people just went to play (*wan*) and draw lots.

One Buddhist temple where people go to draw lots is at Shizian, a village a few kilometres outside Jishou. Twenty years ago, the villagers in this area spoke Kho Xiong and the women wore the Miao dress of embroidered tunics and turbans. Today, this minority ancestry is suggested only by the black cloths some of the old women wear around their heads. I was told that before the Cultural Revolution the temple at Shizian had been very beautiful but hidden from the road by a grove of old trees. Passers-by knew of its presence from the sound of bells. During the Cultural Revolution, like the other temples in the area, it was destroyed and the images of the deities were thrown down a cliff into the river. Some of the foundations of the old temple's walls remain but the rest of it was rebuilt in the 1980s. The trees have now been cut down and the temple, rebuilt from breeze blocks and smaller than before, can be seen positioned on the top of a rocky bank overlooking the river. There are also several shrines to guardian spirits and the Earth God and some new trees have been planted. Like everywhere in the area, it is surrounded by mountains. An old Buddhist nun and her sister take care of it during the day and tend the vegetable patches outside it, but at night they sleep down the hill in the village.

One day when I was visiting the temple in the company of a Chinese friend, the nun told us that she was worried about a man who had been loitering about for some time. She thought he might mean some harm and when we left she and her sister

would be alone with him. I'd already noticed him wandering in and out of the courtyard. He looked drawn and sunburnt and, though his clothes were not in tatters like a beggar's and his shoes were intact, his bloodshot eyes and slouched, shuffling gait were not reassuring. My friend went over and asked him what he wanted. He said he wanted to draw lots, that is, to ask the deity a question. The nun said that he had already done so once but he replied that he wanted to do it again so, looking rather resigned, the nun went over to the altar and rang the bell to attract the deity's attention. Drawing lots involves shaking a bamboo container in front of the deities and choosing one of the spills, which is read and interpreted in order to gain insight into one's circumstances and how they will unfold. While he was doing this, the man explained what his problem was. He wanted to find out whether his wife was alive or not. A few months ago he'd gone back home to find his wife gone and his two month old baby left alone in the house. He didn't think she'd run away because she wouldn't have left the baby alone like that, and he wanted to find out if she was dead or had been kidnapped. When the nun asked what had happened to the baby he said that three months after his wife left it had died. I don't know whether the lot he drew was encouraging or not but the nun's response was that he should pray to Guanyin, goddess of mercy, which he did. Soon after this we left him talking with the nun and her sister who were now quite relaxed in his company and appeared to be giving him the sympathetic attention he needed.

The man's dilemma was concerned with the widely perceived deterioration of social order, a subject which was also of concern to the women who visited temples. His appeal might, in other circumstances, have been made to the Public Security Department (*Gongan Ju*), and it is perhaps a sign of people's uncertainty about the situation today that he had not approached them. West Hunan people frequently talk about how the area has become more disordered than before, particularly at temples, and it was not a coincidence that on our way back, my companion started to talk about how there is disorder everywhere in China these days, and to talk about how it affected him. He went on to talk about how work units practise *luan shou fei*, putting extra charges onto things, an example being railway tickets. It's never made clear

what the extra cost is, though in fact it is shared among some of the people in the unit.

The practice of drawing lots is not confined to the poor or the old. It is particularly common among school children facing exams and among business people about to leave the area to do business. For example, once at a Buddhist temple outside the village of Yaxi I was present while a woman was seeking guidance through divination. She asked if she should leave the area to do business. At first the lots appeared to say that she should not do so, and the woman who was accompanying me said that this was because she was married and should not leave. Later, when she said she wanted to go to Fujian, the reading was changed and she was told that it was all right for her to go there, but not to the north or south. Party members may also go to temples to draw lots, though they do not talk about it in the work unit. Others whom I saw drawing lots at the temples included policemen and sophisticated young urban people.

The drawing of lots is often a way of finding a context to express one's dilemma, expressing it, and deciding on a course of action. Feuchtwang writes that drawing lots is 'a standardisation and an externalisation of an uncertainty' (Feuchtwang 1989: 15). The ritual is similar in form to the approach which, in Imperial times, would have been made to a magistrate, reinforcing the impression that the activity is an appeal to an alternative authority and one which has reference to the past (Ahern 1981: 87-8).

But people also turn to Buddhist temples for counselling and material help. In the case of the man at Shizian, the opportunity to raise and talk over the matter was probably as important to him as getting an answer from the deity. At the Buddhist temple outside the village of Yaxi I was introduced to the *xiao sifu* (young master), a young girl of about nine, and was told that she and her younger brother had been found abandoned in the Earth God shrine outside the temple. Her younger brother had had a hare lip which the nun, whom I was told had previously been a barefoot

doctor, sewed up. In turning to the Buddhist temples, rather than to Public Security or other forms of local authority, people are giving importance both to the past and to locality.

Official and Unofficial Contributions to Temples

Though the activities at temples are not overtly critical of the Chinese state, they imply the existence of an alternative source of authority. It is not surprising, then that there is a tension between official and local views of how Buddhist temples should be organised. This is seen in the importance, in official eyes, of distinguishing between 'religion' and 'superstition' as discussed in Chapter Two. Officially recognised Buddhist temples in China are administered by the United Front Department (*Zheng Xie*)¹¹ and are not permitted to house deities from other traditions. Some temples, such as the Clear Lake Temple which I visited with Mrs Shui and friends, receive a small amount of money from the United Front Department which supports a nun or a monk, and perhaps some repairs. These are the most 'orthodox' Buddhist temples, they house only Buddhist deities and attract relatively educated people, many of whom are not from the surrounding area. However, this status means that despite the orthodox appearance of such temples, they are all the more acceptable for work unit organised leisure activities and their clientele may not be always be as devout as the women I met at the Clear Lake Temple. At one such temple outside Qianzhou, groups of women were often to be found. They went there to have a vegetarian meal, enjoy the scenery and play mah-jong, as well as to look at the deities, have their fortunes told and perhaps to pray too. Government funded temples such as these are, of course, attended by local people but specifically local practices are not in evidence. To see the interaction between local and orthodox practices one needs to look at temples such as those at Shizian and Pingshanpo.

Shizian is one of nine temples in the Jishou area which are registered with the United Front Department but do not receive money, depending instead on local donations, often from a nearby village. The remaining Buddhist temples are those, like that at

Pingshanpo, which also depend on local donations but do not have recognition from the United Front Department and these temples have shrines to the 'meat-eating,' i.e. territorial, deities as well as to Buddhist deities. Despite this, the Buddhist ceremonies may be quite orthodox, as in the case of the Pingshanpo temple.

At Shizian there are deities which, according to other authorities, are not Buddhist. They are a Daoist goddess of childbirth and the Daoist god Yu Huang Da Di (The Jade Emperor) and his wife. There were also some painted rocks on the altar, the significance of which I did not learn¹². The nun distanced herself from these and many of the smaller deities by saying that she was not responsible for them and that the local people had brought them. However, she claimed that they were not 'meat eating' and that they were all Buddhist. Whether she knew that strictly speaking this was not so and was trying to cover herself against possible official criticism, I do not know. This mixture of deities, like other 'superstitious' activities, were perceived by the people in West Hunan as uniquely local traditions, though in fact they are found in many parts of China.¹³

It was clear that there was a conflict here between local and official ideas of what temples should comprise, and the nun at Shizian told us of other divergences between government regulations and local preferences. When I showed her some photographs of the temple which I had taken, she said at once that if she'd been there she would have stopped me from taking them. The heads of the deities in the photograph were covered with a red cloth, which was draped over the top of them, and she would have removed them because the local government did not permit them to be covered.¹⁴ She said that she didn't put the red cloths on their heads, but that people came up from the village and put them there.

The local element of temples such as Shizian was not, of course, evident only to myself. Custodians and visitors at small Buddhist temples often told me with pride that they were not like the government run ones. This was for two reasons. They said that they were not beautiful 'like palaces' as the government funded ones were

said to be, and that they had been rebuilt because the local people wanted them. The rebuilding of most of the temples has been achieved with local money, materials and labour but it has also been possible because of local memories. In the case of Pingshanpo, a temple had existed in that area before the Cultural Revolution. It had been rebuilt by local people in response to a dream in which a former monk had appeared to one of the villagers and told him that if he rebuilt the temple, not on its former site, but a little further up the hill, many people would visit it. This temple, then, was more closely connected with local memory and less connected with the government than was the Clear Lake Temple.

A Class outing to Shizian Temple

I have suggested that the temples described in this chapter represent an alternative to the centralised and organising authority of the Chinese state, an alternative which is based on places and memories associated specifically with the Jishou area.

However, these temples do not appeal only to the old, the rural or the people of Jishou. They also provide a place of entertainment for young, urban, educated people, often including those from other areas. The feelings of young educated people about temples are often ambiguous. Many find the combination of local religion and the minority area intriguing and are fascinated by the unfamiliar setting and its minority connotations. However, to dismiss the activities as simply entertainment would be to underestimate the degree to which they too are turning to a local form of authority, even though it is often not their locality.

In the spring of 1996 some students from Jishou University made a class outing to Shizian. Spring and autumn outings were a feature of student life at Jishou University. They told me that it was traditional for all students to do this, a practice which has its origins in Confucianism. In fact, I found that students in other parts of Hunan did not make these outings. Their popularity in Jishou was probably a result of the combination of lack of other places of leisure, such as boating parks, and the variety of natural scenery.

First they collected firewood and cooked a picnic by the side of a river at the foot of the cliff where the temple is situated. After lunch, some of the students stayed behind to play cards while I joined the others in climbing the hill to the temple, passing the shrines to Earth Gods and guardian spirits on the way. The students were talking about having their fortunes told and, though almost all of them said they were just doing it for fun, they seemed quite excited.

Including a visit to a temple in a class trip was not controversial, since people, especially those in work-units, are encouraged to regard temples as places of leisure. I have mentioned the Buddhist temple where visitors played mah-jong. Another site, a territorial temple in the nearby town of Fenghuang, had reopened as a tourist site and included a room of distorting mirrors beside the shrines. This appropriation of temples for secular activity can be seen as a milder form of the anti-superstition campaigns of the eighties when

local party organisations often attempt to extirpate “superstitious” practices in campaigns that are ritualised, appropriating the sites of popular ritual and converting them to purposes that it defined as “healthy” (Anagnost 1994: 222).

However, as I shall show, the interest of the educated person is not always as secular as it appears since many have an ambivalent attitude towards religion.

The layout at Shizian is, as I have mentioned, less ordered than at the Clear Lake Temple, and features rows of small deities in front of the main ones. Inside the temple, the main shrine is Buddhist. There’s also a shrine to Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy and centre of women’s activities, as well as to Bodhisattvas. There are also several non-Buddhist deities brought by visitors to the temple. The shrine opens onto a small walled courtyard in the middle of which a small shrine with a guardian spirit deity faced the main altar. Behind him, is the back of the courtyard, which is covered and contains some chairs, a hearth and a cooking pot. This is where the nun and others associated with the temple sit when not occupied in other parts of the temple.

One of the students greeted the nun and told her that we would like to draw lots. Each student had to donate a small amount of money and kneel down in front of the altar. The nun then gave him or her a bamboo jar holding bamboo spills and rang a bell to attract the attention of the *pusa* (i.e. Buddha). The student then shook the jar and selected a spill, usually the one sticking out furthest. Each spill has two numbers carved on it which are references to quotations, which are then looked up in a handbook. These, again, are interpreted in another part of the handbook (cf Ahern 1981: 47). But, before consulting the books, the nun throws two divination blocks down in front of the altar and, according to the way they fall, she knows whether the deity approves this choice or not.

The language in the book is poetic and vague and often has to be interpreted to fit one's life, though some of it is definite enough. I was told that I would go to the south and make lots of money, quite an appropriate prediction in an area where so many people move to Guangzhou to look for temporary work. After me a student who had the English name 'Ada,' a cheerful and unsophisticated young woman from a peasant family, went to draw lots. Each time she drew the spill the nun threw the two wooden blocks down and said '*bu xing*' (it won't do), though this had not happened in any of the previous cases. When she did pick a spill which, according to the divination blocks, was right for her, it indicated that she would have problems with her marriage, that she might have trouble finding a husband or she might separate from him later. When Ada heard this she looked rather pale and shaken. She explained that she'd had her fortune told before and drawn exactly the same spill. The nun said reassuringly that everything would be all right if she prayed to Guanyin, and offered her money, but Ada seemed uncertain what to do. She went and sat with some of her friends and didn't say much except to repeat several times that she hadn't believed in these things before but now she was beginning to. One of the other students consoled her by saying that the same thing had happened to him in his home town. He'd been told his fortune was bad and he'd gone back and prayed several times and everything had been all right. Ada was not obviously convinced. For a week or two she seemed subdued in class, but soon returned to her usual liveliness. When we were back at the university I never asked her whether she had

prayed to Guanyin or not, since I suspected she would not want to discuss it in this environment. Sometime later I noticed that she was wearing more feminine clothes and was, apparently, trying to modify her loud voice.

Ada may have raised the question of her future love-life out of a real concern, a worry about making the transition from peasant girl to educated woman, or it may have been just to amuse herself, for 'something to do.' But it was clear that the experience had raised some important matters for her, despite the light-hearted manner in which it had been undertaken. It is interesting that the students chose to raise these questions of their future in this particular environment, so different from their usual institutional setting. Usually, when asked directly, students would say that they did not believe, though they might say that their parents did, but this incident suggested that the outcome of their interaction with the deity did matter to some of them. There was a tension here between the students' education and the authority of the temple.

Historically and today, the educated have viewed local, non-institutional forms of religion as an embarrassment, or as downright heterodox. As discussed in the previous chapter, education in China is concerned with the inculcation of modern and patriotic values which are fundamentally opposed to such activities. The following quotation from 'Education in Contemporary China' illustrates well the moral and political dimension of education in a system so closely connected to the state.

Whether the schools can cultivate morally and intellectually qualified students who support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, love the socialist motherland, and serve the people whole-heartedly is of vital importance to the future and destiny of China' (Central Educational Science Unit 1990: 398).

This approach is not untypical, as Lewin and Little (1993) demonstrate in their summary of recent curriculum reform in primary and secondary education. Many of the reforms are progressive, taking a student and task based approach to education, but nonetheless, they are combined with close links to the Communist Party. They write of;

balancing the emphasis on basic knowledge, basic skills, and ideology and moral education. These aspects should be combined harmoniously in teaching and textbooks,

Education in patriotism, productive labour, law and collectivism were to be enhanced' (Lewin & Little 1993: 12).

This transmission of a homogenising elite culture, a culture which is unsympathetic to local forms of religion, through education, has long been practised in China. Most famously it can be seen in the tradition of the acquisition of Mandarin Chinese and Confucian learning in order to gain office through the state examination system, and in Late Imperial China, 'because there was a unified curriculum, one could assume homogeneity in elite values regardless of locality' (Rawski 1985: 16).

Today, some aspects of life in educational institutions are specifically anti-religious. Students all become members of the Youth League, a junior version of the Party, and as such, like Party members, are not supposed to believe in religion. Similarly, some religious expressions such as funerals organised by local Daoists, are not permitted in educational work-units because they will be a bad influence on the students there. Despite this, and though I was frequently told that only old women went to the temple, a common comment from young people on temple visits was that they were surprised to see so many other young people.

Students and young people are, of course, influenced by other factors, apart from their formal education, and some students would visit temples as 'something to do,' a leisure experience which made a break from their everyday life. Trips such as the one I described were common, but I also occasionally came across students from Jishou University attending temple festivals, though I believe this was considered rather daring. At the evening performances which accompanied the fourth year graduation, one of the graduating students greeted the assembled students with the words, 'what a big temple festival!' (*zhenne da de miao hui*), which was considered very funny. A few students took Buddhism very seriously, and I have mentioned the three students swearing sisterhood at Pingshanpo. Other young people went because they had questions they wanted to resolve. I have suggested this may have been part of Ada's motivation for drawing lots. On another day, at the same temple, I met two young professional people from Jishou. They were rather evasive about where they

worked, and said that they'd come partly to 'play' and partly on a serious matter. Later I saw them earnestly drawing lots before the deity.

Conclusions

Siu suggests that there are two ways of approaching current religious and ritual activities in China. One is to regard them as traditional activities which have re-emerged or been revived more or less untouched by the years of socialism. The other is that they are 'reconstitutions of tradition' with 'a different cast of performers' (Siu 1989: 122-3). The former approach is illustrated by the work of Potter and Potter, who find a 'resurgence of...ritual life' in which 'the symbolic structures which express the old social order have re-emerged' (1990: 336). Yang takes a rather similar approach to the re-emergence of tradition when she suggests that people in Wenzhou are returning to a previous tradition in order to counter the disruption caused by China's sudden involvement with modernity (Yang 1996). Siu herself, however, takes the opposing view. She does not regard ritual and religious activities today as equivalent to those of the past, but describes them instead as 'cultural fragments recycled under new circumstances' (1989: 122,134). She cites as examples the fact that people in Nanxi¹⁵ today do not know how to perform Buddhist chants and are not familiar with the correct distinctions of dress for relatives at funerals. The result is a kind of ritual 'flattening', where previous distinctions of meaning are lost (Siu 189: 130).

Like Siu, I found that the temple activities in Jishou were not continuations of past tradition. This is seen on the birthday of the Earth God, which has changed from being a household and neighbourhood activity to being a single large festival to which anyone is welcome. Buddhist temples, too, have changed, with less emphasis on Buddhist texts and chants and more on the drawing of lots. As in Nanxi, many people in Jishou know little about how ritual procedures were carried out in the past. The ritual 'flattening' which Siu perceives in dress at funeral processions is reflected in the similarities between festivals at Buddhist, Earth God temples and, as I will show in the next chapter, there is also a similarity with the territorial deity temples. It is also true that many people do not distinguish between kinds of temples. An

example of this is an incident which occurred on our return from the birthday of the Celestial Gate Earth God. Mrs Fang had said to me that she would give some perfumed sticks to Mrs Shui because she prayed to her deity, Guanyin, at home. With the perfumed sticks she would also be able to *kai* (open the eyes of) the Celestial Gate Earth God on the first and fifteenth day of each month. I pointed out that Mrs Shui might not want them. She hadn't come with us that day because she only prayed to the Buddhist deities. But Mrs Fang just said, 'Guanyin, Earth Gods, aren't they all the same?' I also found that some people spoke of Buddhist temples as being *ling*, a quality usually associated more with territorial cults. I was sometimes told that the temple to the Celestial Kings, with its fearsome meat-eating gods, was Buddhist. Another time, I was told that there was another temple to the Celestial Kings in a village called Ganziping, and when I visited found it to be Buddhist.¹⁶

However, to describe these temple activities as fragmentary would be inaccurate. Although a few people, such as Mrs Gu, are critical of the changes which have taken place, many people take part in temple activities, as a means of addressing the problems resulting from the impact of social reforms. In this it is similar to the situation in urban Malaysia described by Ong, where forms 'acquire new meanings and speak to new experiences in changing arenas of social relationships' (1988: 32). I suggest then that the reappearance of temple activities is neither a continuation of the structures of the old order nor a fragmentation of them but a flexible recreation of them in ways which are appropriate to current economic situations. In this they are similar to the activities at territorial cults described by Feuchtwang, changes which are 'responses to changes in the nature of economic activities and economic organisation' (1989: 16).

Siu also suggests that people, particularly young people, in Nanxi take an individualistic and opportunistic approach to ritual and religion (Siu 1989: 128, 134). For example, she describes young peoples' activities as having an 'indiscriminate fervour' and being 'talismanic' or 'random' in nature. Their activities are worlds apart from those of the old nuns who know the 'correct' procedures. I suggest that in making this distinction, Siu assumes too clear a contrast between the 'tradition' of

the past and the individualism of ritual observances today. Temples in Jishou today are not so much sites of individualistic activities as places where people communicate their problems and anxieties, and make contact with other people, often seeking an alternative to the deterioration they perceived in other areas of society.

Moreover, it seems likely that the unorthodox nature of many temple activities is not so much a result of the rupture which took place with the Cultural Revolution as part of a longer term interaction between state and locality. As I have mentioned, Buddhist temples were originally set up in West Hunan as part of a programme of education and civilisation in West Hunan which was linked to the late Qing programme of civilisation through education. But they became associated with particular localities and local deities long before the institution of the Socialist state.

Indeed, Buddhist temples have something in common with the territorial cults I describe in the next chapter. Most of the temples I have described have been rebuilt according to local memories of how they used to be, or as a result of dreams. Associated as they are with particular sites and particular areas, they are places which local people often describe as ours (*womende*) or local (*bendi*), or belonging to the *laobaixing* (the ordinary people). In this they have more similarities than one would expect with the territorial cults discussed as the beginning of this chapter and with the smaller Earth God cult described in this chapter. If we look at the distinction Feuchtwang makes between 'large temples of Buddhist or Daoist learning, pilgrimage and tourism' and 'smaller temples without government support, financed instead by local donations' (1989: 14), most of the Buddhist temples I have described show more similarities with the latter category than the former.

¹ The word *pusa* was used to describe the images in temples and the figures which they represent. *Pusa* can be translated as 'Boddhisattva,' but since the word was used to refer to all kinds of figures, ranging from military deities to Buddha, I use the more general term 'deity' to translate it. An exception to this are the *Tudi Gong* which I translate as Earth Gods, since this term is in common usage.

² In some areas, territorial deities are associated with Daoism and Daoist rites are an important part of the ritual calendar (Dean 1993: 3, Feuchtwang 1992:150f., 1992b: 94-7). However, during my stay in West Hunan, I only once found Daoist practices associated with the local territorial cult, and when I asked whether Daoists had been present at the temple before 1949 I was always told that they had not. Although there was a statue of Yu Huang Da Di (The Jade Emperor), head of the Daoist pantheon, at the temple, the Celestial Kings were always addressed first and at greater length.

³ The material I cite here covers a range of periods, from the Song dynasty, (Hansen 1987, 1990) and Late Imperial and Republican times, (Yang 1961) to 20th century Taiwan and mainland China (Jordan 1972, Baity 1975, Feuchtwang 1989, 1992). Despite the different time periods, the temple cults they discuss show considerable similarities.

⁴ These include figures such as Zun Wang (Feuchtwang 1989: 17) and Chen Wu (Yang 1961: 153, Seaman 1978: 109).

⁵ Hengshan, also known as Nanyue, is one of a number of sacred mountains in China.

⁶ For a discussion on beliefs concerning the polluting properties of menstrual blood, see Ahern (1978)

⁷ A discussion of these events is found in Chapter Nine.

⁸ The examples in the section are taken both from Buddhist temples and from the temple of the Celestial Kings, since the same range of complaints were made at each.

⁹ Like the ordinary Earth God, the Celestial Gate Earth God is married and his wife's birthday falls in summer on the same day as that of the wife of the ordinary Earth God, though unfortunately, I was not able to attend this event.

¹⁰ I use the word shrine here to describe small temples, including those situated within a larger temple site. Since the word *miao* was used to describe both small shrines and large temples, this should be seen as my own description rather than as a translation of an indigenous term.

¹¹ An indication of their slightly anomalous position can be seen in the fact that this is the department which is also responsible for dealings with people with connections with Taiwan and the relatively powerless minor political parties such as the Democratic Party (*Minzhu dang*), which is effectively subordinate to the Communist Party.

¹² The worship of rocks and stones is mentioned by Jordan (1972: 43) and Graham (1961:177f.)

¹³ See for example, Jordan (1972: 27).

¹⁴ I did not find out why this was so.

¹⁵ On the Pearl River Delta in Guandong.

¹⁶ This confusion was not confined to differences between Buddhism and local religion. People I met at Buddhist temples, including people who worked in them told me that Buddhism and Christianity were the same, both came from abroad and both preached compassion. I heard of a former Christian who had become a Buddhist nun.

Chapter Seven - Local deities: Imperial Officials or Local Bandits?

Introduction

I have suggested that Buddhist temples in the Jishou area are places where people can address anxieties which arise as a result of social change. To some extent, this is because they draw on forms of local authority. In this chapter I move on to consider the three territorial military deities called the Celestial Kings (*Tian Wang*), to whom a number of temples in the West Hunan area have been dedicated and who have long been associated with the Miao. Like the temples described in the previous chapter, activities at the temple of the Celestial Kings have changed in accordance with changes in their economic circumstances (cf Feuchtwang 1992: 137). However, where military, territorial deities such as the Celestial Kings are concerned, a sense of locality becomes much clearer. The Celestial Kings have their own history, one which reflects a specifically West Hunan point of view, rather than an official or general Chinese point of view. They are worshipped on festival dates which are specific to the details of their lives. Like other such territorial deities, they are concerned with the protection of a particular area.

The three largest temples are in the towns of Fenghuang and Huayuan and the village of Yaxi, situated between Jishou and Qianzhou. The temple at Yaxi, said to be the site of their birth, is the most visited of all the temples in West Hunan. This is because it is considered to be the most efficacious (*ling*). The Celestial Kings are dressed as Imperial officials and are usually shown with imposing, even fearsome faces. Like other Chinese military deities they 'sit augustly, with their legs apart and hands on their knees, gazing majestically out at their supplicants' (cf Weller 1994a: 52). The eldest brother is usually shown with a white face, the second with red face and the third, a black face. As well as being called the Celestial Kings (*Tian Wang*), these deities are variously referred to as the Three Kings (*San Wang*), the Three Great Kings (*San Da Wang*) and Lords (*Wangye*). Local people say that the Celestial Kings are protective deities, distinguishable from Buddhist and Daoist deities by the fact that they eat meat and can

do harm to, or even kill, people. This is demonstrated in the story of their life which, as it is told in the Jishou area, states that they killed seven thousand people who were threatening the area.

Though to my knowledge the Celestial Kings are not found elsewhere, some of their attributes are shared with deities from other parts of China. There are accounts of other meat-eating deities in China and Taiwan who are known by titles which imply a kingly or heroic status, some of whom are also found in groups of three (Dean 1993: 101-2, Seaman 1978: 109, Katz 1987, 1995, Diamond 1969: 85f.).¹ Many of these are reputed to be able to suppress plagues and exorcise spirits, capabilities not, to my knowledge, particularly attributed to the Celestial Kings.

One of the most visually striking features of the Celestial Kings, their different coloured faces, is also seen in other deities. The closest similarity appears to be with three deities described by Diamond though here there is no account of why their faces are coloured (1969: 85f.). Diamond was informed that they were Buddhist deities, but they were regarded as plague-suppressing meat-eating deities, suggesting that they were not originally Buddhist. Some of the plague suppressing deities described by Katz also have coloured faces, and in one case this is said to be a result of drinking poisoned water in order to save others from the plague (Katz 1995: 102 f.).² The deaths of the Celestial Kings as a result of drinking poison will be discussed below.

The popularity of the temple at Yaxi can be seen, not just in the numbers of people visiting, but in the persistence with which people have built it up. The original temple building was closed in the 1950s and the images of the deities were destroyed by PLA soldiers. The temple building itself was allowed to remain in use as a storehouse for some years, but later destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and a *baijiu* (rice-spirits) factory was built on part of the site. During the early 1980s, however, a small version of the temple, built by local people, was re-opened there. It was crudely built of rocks, and people brought small benches from their own homes to furnish it. Later, the temple was

destroyed by the members of the Public Security Bureau, and this process was repeated several times until the early 1990s, by which time a version of the temple, which I refer to as the unofficial temple, was allowed to stand.

At the time when I began my field-work the unofficial temple, built from breeze blocks and covered with a corrugated iron roof, was the centre of activities at the temple site. A shelter, rather than a building, one side of it open to the elements, it had a makeshift look about it. Inside, the altar was also made of breeze blocks and the figures of the deities were quite small and crudely carved out of wood. The Celestial Kings shared a shrine with their mother and were flanked by two smaller deities, who were described to me as their servants.³ In front of them were candles, incense and offerings of food. Usually the incense sticks were put briefly in front of the deities, but later burnt on one of the piles of ashes outside because the smoke in the small shrines was blackening the statues of the deities. The floor of the shrine was made of mud, the interior was covered with soot from the incense, and there was a pervasive smell of the alcohol which people threw on the ground as an offering to the deities.

Although described as 'The Temple of the Celestial Kings' there were several other shrines and other deities present. A side shrine to the left held Guanyin, a Daoist goddess of childbearing, and the Daoist god Yu Huang Da Di (The Jade Emperor). On the right there was another shrine with a figure who was described to me once as Dong Wang and, at another time, as Confucius. In front of the unofficial shrine there were also makeshift huts and stalls, where local people sold goods and told fortunes. The rest of the courtyard was unpaved and areas of it were taken up with heaps of smouldering incense, spirit 'money' and other offerings to the gods such as straw shoes. The whole site was dominated by the walls of a famous local rice spirits factory, and had the unfinished look of a building site.

People visited the temple at Yaxi throughout the year, and it is said to be a sign of the unusual power of the Celestial Kings that they are efficacious (*ling*) every day of the

year. The Celestial Kings were also believed to respond to the prayers of people from all parts of West Hunan and beyond. The women who worked at the temple told me that visitors had come from as far afield as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. Once when I was at the temple, I met a competent, successful looking woman who said that she was here on business from Hubei. She said that where she was from there weren't any temples, so when she came to Jishou on business she came to pray as well.

This description indicates that the rebuilding of the temple is a result of local people's memories and beliefs. Local government, as I have mentioned, encourages the revival of temples only in the form of officially recognised religious traditions, or 'healthy' cultural activities. In fact, although the main focus of activity at this time was around the unofficial shrine, there was also an official presence. The whole site was now being overseen by the Jishou Minority Affairs Bureau because the temple had now been classified as an example of Minority Culture. Employees of the Minority Affairs Bureau were overseeing the building of a much bigger and more impressive temple behind the unofficial shrine. Craftsmen inside were building huge cement statues of the three deities. There was also a small building where people who worked for the Minority Affairs Bureau collected donations for the completion of the new temple. The conflict which ensued between local points of view and local government is described in Chapter Nine.

Similarities between the Temple of the Celestial Kings and other Temples

As described in the previous chapter, deities at territorial temples differ from those at Buddhist temples. They are figures who have histories as living beings and, in many cases, they have a threatening aspect. Local people often describe the Celestial Kings as 'meat eating' deities, implying a contrast made in other parts of China by 'the juxtaposition of compassion, and sweet meatless foods, with stern military guardianship and meat' (Feuchtwang 1992: 57). Despite this, many people in West Hunan have difficulty distinguishing between Buddhist temples and temples to meat eating deities, and I found that many of the activities which took place at the temple of the Celestial

Kings were similar to those which took place at the Buddhist temples. The revival of the temple of the Celestial Kings is part of the process which I have described in the previous chapter, whereby people attend temples in order to address problems resulting from the impact of social reforms on their lives.

Most activities at the temple of the Celestial Kings took place in the middle shrine of the unofficial temple, which housed the Celestial Kings and their mother, though the other shrines were also included. Visitors brought food, usually meat, *dofu* and fruit, and alcohol for the deities, laid it in front of them and made their requests. As at Buddhist temples, the most common requests were for children or grandchildren, often more specifically for sons or grandsons, for well-being both physical and emotional and for success in business or exams. Again, as at Buddhist temples, people drew lots in order to come to a decision about matters for which the outcome was uncertain. For example, people who are leaving the area to do business come to ask if their fortune will be good or not. Like the Buddhist temples, it was also a place where women would meet one another.⁴

As I have discussed, many of the women who go to temples to pray, have problems in their home and family lives. At the temple of the Celestial Kings the same situation was apparent, not just in the visitors but also in the people who worked there. There was no designated custodian at the temple, but a number of women, living in Yaxi village, made a living there by telling fortunes, selling offerings and interceding with the deities on other people's behalf. I will refer to them as incense sellers, though this is only part of what they did. Many of them had little family support at all. For example, one of them, Miss Luo, was a single parent with a daughter and two sons. She lived in the village of Yaxi in a small house, has no land of her own and was putting her children through school. As far as I knew, her only income was from her work at the temple. Another, Miss Tian, was also single, perhaps as a result of a deformed hand. The most needy was Old Mrs Yang (*Lao Yang*), an old widow who could speak Chinese and Kho Xiong. She lived in Yaxi and said this was where she came from. When I first met her, she told me

that her children had left home and she came to the temple to find money because if she didn't do so she would be hungry. (It later emerged that, in fact, she was childless.) At this time she did indeed look thin and rather desperate. However, she became more and more closely involved with the temple and each time I saw her she looked a little better fed and more cheerful. Sometimes, if she stayed at home because of illness Miss Tian looked after her, and even when she was well, the others would sometimes bring her food.

Some of the women who worked at the temple were reputed to be able to contact spirits, a 'superstitious' activity, not encouraged by the authorities. Old Mrs Yang was a *xian niang* (spirit medium, lit., fairy woman), though she was too frail now to practice. Another woman, who wore her hair in long plaits and lived alone in the hut where she stored her goods, was referred to half-jokingly as a *shen xian* (an immortal). She was notable for the emotional way in which she called on the deities, but she did not associate with me and I found out little about her. In fact, I only found out these details about contact with spirits by accident. It was not the spirit world which was discussed between them but a need to make money.

The temple can therefore be seen as a place of refuge for women who do not have the security of family support. Here there are parallels with the Buddhist temples in the Ta-ch'i area of Taiwan where, according to Sangren, Buddhism is inclusive of socially marginal people and 'physically and mentally disabled people ... commonly find a place as custodians and assistants in Buddhist temples' (1983: 19-20). There are also similarities to the pre-1949 Yaxi temple which, local people remembered, had provided food for old people and shelter for beggars and the homeless.

The majority of visitors to the temple were middle aged or old women but, in addition, people of all ages and backgrounds attended, often when they were facing a change or a dilemma in their lives. For example, I once walked back from the temple with a couple of women in their early thirties. One, called Shi,⁵ said she was a business person, she

went to the north to buy fruit and brought it to West Hunan to sell. She said that she and her friend came every month to pray, to ensure that their business went well. She believed that it was a Buddhist temple and said that everyone in the area believed in Buddhism, though she observed that she and her friend were young compared with most people who prayed at the temple. June was a busy month, since it was the time when students came to pray for success in their exams. At this time, Junior Middle School students were preparing for the exams which would determine whether they would go to the Senior Middle School or Vocational School of their choice, and Senior Middle School students were preparing for the College Entrance exam. But the busiest times were festival days, when several thousand people attend the temple in the course of a day. Some were dressed in city clothes, others were dressed like peasants, and among the peasants one could make distinctions among the embroidered tunics of women from highland, Kho Xiong speaking villages.

As with other temples, a number of changes had taken place since pre-revolutionary times, changes which reflected changing economic and social circumstances. Many of the people to whom I spoke were aware of these differences, either because they remembered the pre-1949 period or because they had heard about it. According to them, the content of many requests made to the Celestial Kings has changed. Before 1949, one of the most common requests was for rain (Shi 1986: 539). However, with the creation of small local reservoirs, their rain-making function is no longer called upon, a change which has been noted in other parts of China (cf Feuchtwang 1989: 16, 1992: 137). Before 1949, the Celestial Kings were also called upon as judges in cases of dispute between ordinary people, or even to decide who should be punished for being involved in rebellion (Kinkley 1977: 39, Ling & Ruey 1963: 240). Although their function as judges was seen in the case of the man who was bullied by the Liu family, which I describe below, this is no longer a major function, presumably because, despite people's complaints about order in West Hunan, the local government takes responsibility in these matters.

There is also less emphasis than before on their underworld connections. Mrs Gu talked about how, before 1949, there had been a shrine to Yanwang, the God of Death, on the temple site in which there was a model of a person being burned in a furnace of hell. In those days, she said, no-one would have gone to the temple of the Celestial Kings just to have a look, as they do today, because they were afraid of the deities and the harm they might do. Like the temples described in the previous chapter, the temple of the Celestial Kings at Yaxi provides a more enjoyable, recreational experience today than accounts of the past would suggest. Like the Buddhist temples described in the previous chapter, this indicates that rather than being a re-emergence of or return to the traditions of the past, the temple represented a form of flexible recreation of the past in ways which are appropriate today.

The Celestial Kings and the Locality

Although the concerns which people bring to the temple of the Celestial Kings are similar to those brought to the Buddhist temples, the Celestial Kings differ from Buddhist deities in important ways. Rather than being concerned with morality and virtue, the Celestial Kings are portrayed as officials of a military demeanour who are protectors of this part of West Hunan. Interactions which people have with the deities therefore are not based on recognition of their virtue but on *quasi*-personal relations based on shared locality and the exchange of favours.

At the time when I first begin visiting the temple, the close connection between the temple and this particular locality was indicated by the incense sellers, who made use of their local knowledge of the temple to make a livelihood. Not everyone who came to the temple had contact with the incense sellers, particularly on festival days when the temple was very busy. But on ordinary days most people had some interaction with them, even if it was only to buy a bunch of incense sticks for one *yuan*.⁶ Incense apart, the most commonly bought items were red wax candles and spirit money which is sold as bundles of very crude, straw coloured paper cut into note sized pieces.⁷ Sometimes people also bought crescent shaped biscuits, pieces of red cloth and woven straw sandals, made in a

typical local style which was still worn by some poorer people.⁸ These offerings were usually bought to accompany important prayers, according to the instructions of the incense sellers.

The incense sellers often stressed the strong connections between the temple and locality and they claimed to be knowledgeable about the best way to approach the deities. When introducing the temple, they told me that Yaxi was the Celestial Kings' *laojia* (ancestral home) and they also told me on several occasions that the deities were there to protect the area and keep it peaceful. They often drew a contrast between this temple and Buddhist or Daoist temples, by saying that the Celestial Kings were local to this area and ate meat, whereas other deities came from elsewhere and were vegetarian. They also told me repeatedly that the Yaxi temple was not like the famous temples in Changsha or Shaolinshan, since the money for it had not come from the state (*guojia*).⁹ Instead, the ordinary people (*laobaixing*, lit., 'old hundred surnames') had donated the money to build up the temple again.

It was through their professed knowledge and understanding of the deities that the incense sellers were able to make money at the temple. For example, once while I was there a woman came to pray for her three children who were all taking exams. She worked in the Minorities Cinema, a state owned cinema in Jishou which also acted as a theatre. Her home town however, was in Yongshun, seventy kilometres to the north of Jishou. She had brought some food of her own, fruit and *dofu*, and some *baijiu* (rice spirits). She was intercepted by Miss Luo, the single parent with three children and in the events which ensued she exchanged her knowledge of the deities for the money she needed, or, at least, she persuaded her clients that this was so.

Miss Luo was a little younger than the others and dressed in a slightly more sophisticated fashion. She had her own clientele of people who would ask specially for her when they came to the temple. In public she always spoke of the deities with reverence and she had a particularly light and smiling way of addressing them and of

conducting her business with people. In private, however, she showed more faith in Buddhism than in the Celestial Kings.

Miss Luo did not have a large stock of goods that day, so she encouraged the visitor to go to another Yaxi woman who was a friend of hers. Here, at Miss Luo's suggestion, she bought incense, candles, some of the biscuits, and a strip of red cloth for one of her children to wear during the exam. There was some dispute over exactly which offerings to buy, with the visitor arguing that 'We Yongshun people don't do it like that,' and Miss Luo replying that the deities would not receive her offerings if they made them in her Yongshun way.

When they went together to the temple, Miss Luo asked for the details of the exams the children were taking and which school they wanted to get into and then put out the offerings and prayed for them each in turn. They burnt incense and a candle in front of all the deities in the temple. This was the usual practice but it varied whether people went to the minor deities or the Celestial Kings first. However, the prayers to the Celestial Kings and, sometimes, their mother are always the longest. During the prayers the food was put in front of them and the incense seller threw the *baijiu*. The straw shoes were burnt for the Celestial Kings. In this case Miss Luo described the children in turn and the exams they were taking. She also held the red cloth and circled it around the candle flame, appealing on behalf of the student who was trying to get into the District Minority School, the best local Senior Middle School. The student would then wear this cloth in the exam. However, she could not do this for the others because they were in Yongshun. Miss Luo was perhaps the most adept of the incense sellers at convincing people to buy more offerings for the deities than they would otherwise have done. Sometimes, as I have described with the woman from Yongshun, this was based on the premise that, as a local person, she understands the procedure better. Sometimes she appeared to me to take advantage of peoples' ignorance.

Once I visited the temple with a friend of mine, Miss Tang, an opera singer from the countryside and also, coincidentally, from Yongshun county. She was not familiar with the temple and she had no close connections in Jishou since she and the rest of the troupe were passing through, moving from place to place. She wanted to draw lots to have her fortune told. Miss Luo and some of the other incense sellers gathered round and she explained to them, with some embarrassment, that she was not in good spirits and she was concerned about finding a husband. They gave her the bamboo container to shake and at this point she was unlucky and drew a number which corresponded to a very bad fortune. Miss Luo, recognising the number on the spill at once, said that that if one had a bad fortune it was better to buy some offerings and worship the deities - was she sure she wanted to go ahead with it and read her fortune? Miss Tang agreed to read it, looked upset, and then seemed uncertain what to do next. Miss Luo and her friends tried to draw me in by saying that I knew how *ling* the temple here was and I'd seen how many people worshipped there. For a while, Miss Tang sat there, almost in tears, not responding to their advice that she buy some offerings. I suggested we go to take a look at the temple first, which we did, and Miss Tang was impressed by the size of the new images of the Celestial Kings in the official temple, still being worked on by the craftsmen. All the time we were doing this Miss Luo was following us around, looking at Miss Tang enquiringly and making her feel uncomfortable.

I could see that she felt pressurised to make an offering but, thinking that she would only be unhappy if she left without resolving the situation, I suggested that she get some offerings of incense and some spirit money, saying that I would pay for it and that this would be a good opportunity for me to get some photos of the event for my own use. While she was buying the offerings, far fewer than she should have had for the sixteen yuan she was charged, the other incense sellers crowded around her almost intimidatingly. When I offered to pay the money they said unanimously that I couldn't do so. This, they explained seriously, was her business and I couldn't do it for her. First, they sent her by herself to pray to the other gods, which she did, also taking it very seriously. Miss Luo gave her a piece of cloth which she had circled over the lamp and

put over her head and made her step over, something I'd never seen done before. The invocation to the Celestial Kings, for health and a good marriage, was much briefer than usual. In short, she had been cheated. However, Miss Tang did not see it in this way. Later, I said that I was sorry I had encouraged her to come when it had worked out like this and she said no, her fate was bad, it was nothing to do with me. Instead, she'd received something good from coming there. It seemed that she had been convinced by the incense sellers' understanding of the deities and had resolved her dilemma through this.

One reason why the incense sellers could convince people of their understanding of the deities and make money from it was that, like the Celestial Gate Locality God, the Celestial Kings are treated as if they were local officials and their responsiveness is attributed to the nature of one's contact with them. In contrast to the Buddhist deities, they were more likely to respond to people who gave them larger gifts or who came from the local area. Thus, the best people to intercede with them were the local people who sold incense at the temple, just as in other aspects of life, people might call upon people with whom they have *tong xiang* relationships, to help them.

Like the deities Hansen (1987: 71-2) describes, the Celestial Kings were treated as both very powerful and rather human. This was demonstrated by the way that the incense sellers would call on them in a confident but conversational tone. If someone was speaking to them on my behalf, they would always introduce me, emphasising that I was a teacher at Jishou University and a foreigner in a way that seemed suggest both that they should feel honoured to have this visit and that they might not understand about foreigners without being told.

Often, like real life officials, if they did not give a satisfactory answer, they could be won round with more gifts and by flattery, a point which has been made satirically in the Chinese press (Anagnost 1994: 242). For example, once when I was at the temple site, two women arrived and one of the incense sellers sold them some offerings and took

them to the unofficial temple to pray. However, the way the divining blocks fell indicated that the deities were not agreeing to their requests. The incense seller suggested that they buy some straw shoes, which were duly bought and burnt, but the divining blocks still didn't fall auspiciously. In an attempt to get the Celestial Kings to respond to their request she told them, having checked with the people praying first, that they would be attending the Celestial Kings' temple festival the following week. She also told them that there was a *Yingguo ren* (British person) watching the proceedings.

However, although people treated the deities almost as if they were real people with whom they had built up a relationship, it was apparent from their facial expressions, their kingly titles and official dress that these were threatening figures and that they had the capacity to do harm. An indication of this was that many people came to thank them for having granted a previous request, an activity known as performing *huan luo yuan* (redeeming a vow to the gods).¹⁰ This follows the same procedure as other interactions with the deities. The person concerned makes offerings of food, alcohol, incense and spirit money and bows or kow-tows in front of the altar. If a previous request has been granted and *huan luo yuan* is not performed, it is believed that the deities may become angry and do one harm. For example, I once came across a young couple and their child who, following a minor road accident, recalled that they had not thanked the Celestial Kings for granting their earlier request for a son and had come to the temple, accompanied by their son, to do so.

Sometimes, in their capacity to punish, the Celestial Kings are used almost literally to replace actual officials. For example, one day a man from a village in Fenghuang county came to the temple. He said that two people from the Liu family had beaten him, bullied him and forced him to leave his village. He'd been to the Prefectural Government in Jishou, but they'd been unable to help. One of the incense sellers said that even the government were afraid of the Liu family and they were unable to do anything. The man wrote down a petition to the gods in which he asked them to punish

the two Lius by killing them which he later read out to the third king and burned in front of him.

The deities were also treated as though they were responsible for running the temple site. Although the incense sellers mediated between people and the deities, they did not consider themselves responsible for what happened at the temple, as I learned when I started asking the meaning of some items which had appeared at the temple site. For example, there were some black painted boards in front of the images of the Celestial Kings with writing on them. I was told by one of the incense sellers that these boards had been written by a *xian niang* (female spirit medium) from Fenghuang, a Miao woman. This stated that since life was becoming more and more disordered and bandit-like (*tufeide*) people should come to the temple and burn chests of paper money. She said that, originally, there had been two boards, but that now one couldn't be seen (*kan bu jian*). Another woman who had joined us told me that things like this had appeared before in the temple. The two of them spoke of these as things which came and went in ways that they could not account for. This had the effect of both disclaiming responsibility and implying that such occurrences might not necessarily be happening through human agency. When I asked if I could look at the boards more closely I was not referred to someone in charge of the temple but told, with great seriousness, that I should pray to the deities and ask them for permission. Despite the presence of people working for the Minority Affairs Bureau, it seemed that the Celestial Kings were considered to be in charge of the temple.

As an alternative to everyday life in China and as a place of refuge, the temple of the Celestial Kings is similar to the Buddhist temples. The visit of the man who was being bullied by the Liu family suggests that sometimes people turn to figures from the past, such as the Celestial Kings, as a direct alternative to secular government. The temple was also a place where people remarked on what they perceived to be the disorder in society today. This is seen in the spirit medium's boards, mentioned above, which described the situation today as bandit-like (*tufeide*) and the same word was used by old

Mrs Yang to describe the situation today. However, their appeal does not lie in their moral or virtuous nature since they have the capacity to do harm. Rather, they have a form of alternative authority, based on the fact that they are protectors of the locality.

At the temple of the Celestial Kings, the 'production' of a form of locality is more marked than at the Buddhist temples. As I have mentioned, the deities are believed to be protectors specifically of the West Hunan area and are more responsive to people from the locality and this connection will become clearer with the discussion of the histories of the Celestial Kings in the following section. This does not imply, however, that the deities are a symbol of an actual bounded community to which visitors at the temple belong. Although they are appealed to by Jishou people, who see them as protectors of their own locality, there are also visitors from elsewhere, who defer to the incense sellers' knowledge of the deities. Conversely, only a proportion of the inhabitants of the surrounding area attend the temple. Many people in Jishou show no interest in such activities, regarding them as only suitable for old people. Nor, of course, does the area they protect correspond with a politically defined area with aspirations to secession.¹¹ Rather, the Celestial Kings represent a response to or a comment on the authority of the state.

In discussing 'local' communities, Mitchell makes the point that such a community can exist as a form of memory, rather than as an actuality, and in doing so represents a response to 'the interventions of modernism' and a 'perceived decline in morality' (1998: 92-3). The example he gives is of the memories of a neighbourhood in Valletta. I suggest that the locality which the Celestial Kings protect is also a symbolic community which has become meaningful because of the effects of change. This would also account for the fact that visitors to the temple include people whose interests have not been best met by the recent economic reforms, or who are facing periods of anxiety as a result. But the production of this sense of locality is the result of an interaction with the state which has continued over a long period of time, as I discuss in the following sections.

Territorial Deities and the Chinese State

One way of looking at the connection between territorial cults and the state is to look at the way in which, during Imperial times, such cults were co-opted into the state cult and became the responsibility of local officials. This was the case with the Celestial Kings and many of the activities which took place there were organised by the officials.

Superficially, cults such as that of the Celestial Kings appear to be parallel to the official or state cult which existed in Imperial times. For example, like the deities of the state cult, they are treated as officials and wear official dress. Unlike the territorial cults, the temples of the state cult were standardised throughout China and fell under the responsibility of local officials. Each city had state cult temples to *Wen* (learning) and *Wu* (martial arts), to the City God (*Chenghuang Miao*) and the Dragon God (*Long Miao*). The rites at the official cult were also standardised and they can be seen as forming an other-world version of the state's bureaucracy.¹² Today, although the buildings of some of state cult temples have been renovated as museums, in general they attract few worshippers.

In fact the lines between state and territorial cults were often blurred. City Gods might be regarded as deifications of actual people who had formerly lived in that particular area and, conversely, many territorial deities were given official titles by the emperor and co-opted into the official cult (cf Feuchtwang 1978: 128, Watson 1985, Hansen 1990). Official recognition of local deities meant that they were given special titles and listed in the local gazetteers 'in the sections entitled "Ssu-tien" (sacrificial statutes)' (Feuchtwang 1978: 104).

The past involvement of officials with the temple of the Celestial Kings is indicated both in the written records and in people's memories, since as recently as Republican times, the temple of the Celestial Kings was attended both by officials and by ordinary people. Mrs Gu, and others, told me that in those days even officials were in awe of the deities

and there was a special stone at which they had to dismount from their horses before passing the temple. Another old Jishou resident told me that if they did not do this, the deities would show their displeasure by causing a gale to blow. Local officials also had a part to play in the arranging of temple activities. The sixth day of the sixth lunar month is said to be the day when the Celestial Kings died and on the days leading up to this date, a fast was observed. Mrs Gu remembers that one of the custodians from the temple would go from house to house collecting money. Those who did not have money could give rice or corn which would be sold at the market, to make money. If you were too poor to give anything, she said, it didn't matter, but if you weren't you'd be too frightened not to contribute. When the fast was due, people at the temple and at the *yamen* (the residence of the officials) used to throw divining blocks, to find out when exactly it was to begin and, although the answers of the two older Celestial Kings were important, it was the response of the youngest which was the most important. The custodians also threw divining blocks and a decision was reached between them. A notice was then put up in the temple giving the dates of the fast and everyone observed it. Mrs Gu also remembers visiting the temple at spring and autumn festivals which indicates that the worship of the Celestial Kings had become an officially standardised activity, 'a remembrance which became a regular spring and autumn duty' (Feuchtwang 1978: 112).

In contrast to this ordered past, at the time when I began visiting the temple there was no official custodian there and activities on festival days, as on ordinary days, consisted of individuals making requests or thanking the deities. It is tempting to regard activities at the temple today as something which having deteriorated from a more ordered past and as individual actions built on fragments of memory (cf Siu 1989). However, it seems likely that these differences between past and present are, in part, a result of the fact that officials no longer played a part in the running of the temple. The activities which take place today represent not so much a deterioration as a continuation of one aspect of past activities, that which was not concerned with official observances.

Officially registered temples in Imperial China did not lose their reputation among the local people for being *ling*, that is, for being responsive to all kinds of appeals. Even when territorial deities had been co-opted, different ways of addressing them could be distinguished. They were treated either as official representatives of the state or as responsive, *ling* individuals. According to Feuchtwang, the former kind of activity was distinguished by ‘memorialism, officials, tablets,’ and the latter by ‘magic, ritual, priests’ (Feuchtwang 1992: 71). For example, Hansen writes that ‘the register of sacrifices is just a formality when compared to the reality of a given deity’s power’ (1987: 117, see also Feuchtwang 1992: 103) and it appears that ordinary local people continued to interact on an individual basis with the Celestial Kings. Evidence for this is found in Shi who writes that during the period of the ‘Miao’ rebellions, some of the rebels appealed to the Celestial Kings at Yaxi before they attacked Qianzhou, implying a different interpretation of their role from that of protector of the area from rebels (Shi 1986: 59). Festivals in the past were also occasions for making individual requests of the deities. Older people told me that, apart from the sacrifice of animals, the pre-1949 festivals were similar in their lack of organised ritual activity to festivals today. Thus, while today personal requests to the deities for wealth and success may indicate a growing individualism (cf Weller 1994b: 149, Feuchtwang 1989 16-17), it should not be assumed that they represent a complete break from the past. Rather, they are reformulations of those aspects of the temple activities of the past which were concerned with ordinary peoples’ concerns rather than with officials.

Histories

In discussing observances at the temple, I have suggested that official and unofficial activities represented two different kinds of approach and have found little evidence of an interaction between them. A history of interaction between state and local versions is more apparent in the stories of the Celestial Kings, though initially these too appear to be quite distinct. One, which is written in the gazetteers of the Qing dynasty but today known only by academics and other educated people, depicts them as Imperial soldiers. This story is based on a clear distinction between Han and minority and the need to

protect a central Chinese from state from minority unrest. The other, which could be described as ‘dissenting’, is told by local people and represents the Celestial Kings as protectors of the locality. It is not concerned with ethnic differences. This distinction is reminiscent of the differences between local and official attitudes to identity, which I discussed in Chapter Five.

The local gazetteers are agreed that the correct version of the story of the Celestial Kings depicts them as soldiers who put down a rebellion by killing seven thousand Miao people and I assume that this, as a written text, represents a version of their story which was current among educated people (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 402, 403,404, 671-2).¹³ The following story is from a gazetteer of the Qianzhou area recorded in 1878, but based on earlier sources;

In “A History of Yuanzhou” concerning Yunsui [Huayuan], it mentions that a man named Yanglai in Chengzhou and his other two brothers were all the valiant generals in the Song dynasty. At that time the Miao were harassing the region and the three brothers commanded an army to suppress them. They knew that the Miao were greedy so they killed some pigs and cattle and had the meat cooked in the forest. When the Miao were vying with each other to eat most food the three attacked them unawares and completely defeated them, capturing nine streams and eighteen caves. After the campaign, only the remnants of the Miao with the surnames of Wu, Long, Liao, Shi and Ma were left. Later, the three turned back to claim a reward and were envied by some other officials, who gave them a poisonous wine which killed them on the Day of the Slight Heat. Today the Miao still take the day as a serious festival and now their graves are in Tuokou, Qianyang [Qianzhou] (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 402).

A similar version of the story of the Celestial Kings was recounted to me by a local academic who worked on the West Hunan Miao, and others who knew of the temple only through political education during the Cultural Revolution, suggesting that it is still the officially recognised version. This story shows the Miao as a separate, primitive and rebellious people and a threat to the harmony of Imperial control. It shares features with the accounts of the Miao as primitive which are found in the 18th century Miao albums (cf Diamond 1994) and, in its depiction of the Miao as ‘Other’ to the Chinese state, it

finds echoes in more recent representations of the Miao. The assumption that the Miao are different and rebellious is also the basis of the institution of the *tun* system.

What puzzled me was, if this was the story of the Celestial Kings, why did Miao people worship there? Sources on the area stress that in the past the Miao worshipped at the temple of the Celestial Kings (Ling & Ruey 1963: 240), and from the local gazetteer quoted above, we learn that ‘even Panhu, the ancestor of the Miao, who was also rewarded by the emperor, didn’t receive as much respect as these deities do’ (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 403).¹⁴ Worship of the deities also took place in Miao villages in this century (Ling & Ruey 1963: 240, Zhou, Zhang & Xie 1992: 338f. Shi 1986: 481) and, as I have mentioned, images of the deities were taken out to the villages by Miao ritual practitioners (*laoshi*) in the hopes that they would bring rain (Shi 1986: 539-40). Today, although lowland people are the more regular worshippers, people from distant, highland Kho Xiong speaking villages also make offerings at the temple. For example, Miss Shi told me that, though she did not believe in the deities herself, because she was studying in Jishou, members of her village gave her offerings to take to the temple on their behalf. It seems implausible that deities who, in life, had killed so many Miao rebels would be worshipped by their descendants.¹⁵

One explanation given by official sources for the worship of the Celestial Kings by the Miao is that it was imposed on the Miao people by Imperial officials, who created the deities to frighten them into submission. This appears to be a politically motivated explanation which fits well with a Chinese socialist view of the evils of the feudalist system. It is the explanation which children were taught during the Cultural Revolution and it still has some currency today. For example, I was told that local people in Fenghuang objected to a branch temple to the Celestial Kings being built in their town on the grounds that it commemorated the suppression of the Miao. It seems quite plausible that in Imperial times, the official history of the Celestial Kings was an attempt to inculcate a respect for the Chinese state. As I have mentioned, the use of ritual observances was an important part of the civilising project of the Qing Dynasty.

However, this explanation does not account for the continuing popularity of the temple among local people, both Chinese and Kho Xiong speaking, today. Another explanation was given to me by a local academic. When I asked him why Miao people worshipped the Celestial Kings, he laughed and said ‘everyone asks that,’ and went on to suggest that they were effectively worshipping the God of War. This, too, suggests that they worshipped deities because they were in awe of their power.

However, only a handful of the people I asked agreed with the official story that the Celestial Kings had killed minority people. One of these was Mrs Gu, who was at first unsure who they had killed, and then said she thought they were minority people (*shao shu minzu*) probably the Man¹⁶ but she distanced these from the Miao today by saying that they were ‘people who used to live in the area.’ When asked, people from the Jishou area gave slightly different answers to the question of who it was who had attacked the area, but very few suggested that it was the Miao. Usually they are referred to simply as enemies (*di ren*). Most people, when asked who the enemies in the story were, said that they did not know, or that they were people from another place (*waidi ren*), sometimes they were said to be from the neighbouring province of Guizhou. Here the point of view is not one of a central Chinese state in opposition to barbarians but of people from West Hunan, their nationality not specified, in opposition to people from elsewhere. This suggests that the story of the Celestial Kings is taken to represent a shared sense of locality, as I have described in Chapter Five.

The following is typical of local versions of the story, in which the Celestial Kings are presented as both military figures and protectors of the area and was told to me by Miss Luo, who sold incense at the temple.

The mother of the Celestial Kings, Mu Yi¹⁷ lived in a part of Yaxi called Yangjiazhai (literally, Yang family *zhai*) and at that time they owned the fields where the new campus of Jishou University has now been built so they were very wealthy, rather like you foreigners. At that time there was a drought in the area and the rice seedlings couldn't survive because of lack of water, so her father said that he would give his daughter, Mu Yi, to anyone who could make it rain. Mu Yi went to the well at Longqiuba to wash

clothes and her bracelet fell in and the further she put her hand in the further away it seemed to be. As she reached in to pick it up, the Dragon King snatched her down into the water. When night fell, her parents were worried about her and they went down to the well and found that only her clothes were there. Mu Yi married the Dragon King and stayed in the well for what in our time was only three days but in their time was three years and, when she came back, she had three sons with her. The Dragon King turned into human form and came with her and the family went to live with Mu Yi's parents. The three sons had to change back into dragon form if water touched them. Every day Mu Yi got water from the well and washed them while her parents were out on the mountains in the fields.¹⁸ Her parents wondered why they were washing in secret and one day they came back to have a look and saw the youngest brother in the form of a dragon.

When this happened, the Dragon King went back to the well at once, but the three sons were unable to return to dragon form again because they had been discovered. Then, Mu Yi's parents died and her brother came and destroyed her house and so the following years were very hard for Mu Yi and her three sons, since she had to bring three children up by herself.¹⁹ But the three brothers [i.e. her sons] were very strong. At that time there was a grove of bamboo near where they lived and they dug up the roots with their bare hands to make fields. After this there was a war.²⁰ The oldest brother was eighteen, the next fifteen and the youngest was twelve. Their mother did not want them to go to war but could not stop them. During the war, the three brothers killed seven thousand enemies, to protect West Hunan. When they went to tell the emperor of this they were afraid at first to tell him the truth because they thought it might make him jealous or afraid of their power so they told him that thirty six people had killed the seven thousand. Later they told him the truth and, because the emperor was afraid of them he gave them some poisoned alcohol, telling them not to drink it until they got home. If they drank it before then it would poison them. But on the way home they stopped at Luxi and they were thirsty so the first brother drank a little and he died. The second brother saw this but he thought that he was stronger than the first brother so he drank some of the alcohol. He drank more than the first brother and his face turned dark red and he died. The third brother thought that he was stronger than the first brother and the second brother so he drank even more of the alcohol and he died, his face turning black.

The horses found their way to Yaxi where they knocked on the mother's door with their hooves and bowed their heads three times in a kowtow so she knew her sons were dead. She asked them to tell her where they were, so they took her there. When she got to Luxi, the water in the river

flowed backwards to Yaxi and the water at Yaxi rose. This is why there is a rhyme about Yaxi, 'Yaxi you yi ge dao liu gou, Liu shui wang qian zou' (Yaxi has a reverse flowing ditch, the flowing water [in it] goes backwards).

This story is unusually detailed, but the main points, comprising their birth to a local woman and a dragon, their killing of seven thousand people who were threatening the area, their report to the emperor and their subsequent death as a result of drinking the emperor's poisoned alcohol, were well known to older people in the Jishou area, and to people of all ages in Yaxi.

The beginning of this story, in which Yang visits the stream, is similar to those found in some of the official stories in the gazetteers, though some of these give different versions, in which the mother of the Celestial Kings is impregnated through contact with a piece of bamboo or rays of light (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 352, 403). Stories of dragons as rain bringing deities are common in South China and have been evident since at least the Tang dynasty as have stories of young women who become impregnated while washing clothes and give birth to dragons or fish. These stories are often considered to be derived from pre-Han cultures (Eberhard 1968: 38 f., 232 f., 242 f., Schaefer 1967: 255). These and the later details of water flowing backwards to Yaxi indicate the temple's association with the control of the elements, as seen in its former rain-bringing function.

As well as stating that the Celestial Kings defended the locality against its enemies, rather than protecting the Imperial state against minority rebellion, this differs from the official version in that their deaths are clearly blamed on the emperor and the oral versions I heard without exception made this point. This is in contrast to the versions told in the gazetteers, which attribute the blame for this to the emperor's courtiers, who either give the poisoned alcohol to the Celestial Kings themselves or persuade the emperor to do so (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 402, 404, 671). Distrust of the emperor is not an unusual feature of oral tradition and similar themes are found in the stories of

Cantonese peasants. Watson describes how, while local officials may be turned into heroes, the emperor is portrayed as ‘the villain of the piece and ‘remote, unapproachable, and extremely jealous of his power’ (1991: 171, 173).²¹ This jealousy is overtly stated in the oral version of the story of the Celestial Kings. Despite this, however, they are ultimately uncontrollable, since they refuse to stay in the underworld.²²

The continued popularity of the oral version of the story of the Celestial Kings, with its emphasis on the locality and its distrust of the central state, suggests that it continues to be meaningful today. The story expresses an identification with a locality, which is at risk from outsiders. It does not comment on whether the people of the locality are Miao or Han, nor, usually, on the identity of the enemies, the important thing is that they come from outside. The fact that the Celestial Kings report their deeds to the emperor suggests that they are responsible to him and, by extension, that West Hunan is not seen as being in any way independent from the rest of China. But, as defenders of West Hunan, as well as Imperial soldiers, the Celestial Kings are at risk from the emperor, because the strength of a locality, even one administered by the Chinese state, is a threat to the Imperial order.

I will argue that this story is a form of social memory. Social memory can be distinguished from the inferential approach of historical reconstruction (Connerton 1989: 13). Where historical reconstructions are intended to determine what actually took place at a past time, social memory is often concerned with ‘how this type of memory bears on contemporary aspects of social life or social relations’ (Collard 1991: 89). Work on social memory (e.g. Connerton 1989, Fentress & Wickham 1992, Collard 1991) indicates that accounts of the past are influenced both by the experience of the individual and by what is shared by the people around, since ‘the narrative of one’s life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity’ (Connerton 1989: 21). As Collard shows, regarding accounts of the Ottoman period and the more recent German occupation and

post war periods by Greek villagers, social memory takes the form of personal biography, but it also forms a 'collective memory in that it is shared by a group of people who share a history and over which there is some consensus (Collard 1991: 90). This 'memory' may include events which occurred before one's lifetime but of which one can give an account which is influenced by the views of that event held by others around. In the case of Mrs Luo, her own personal story becomes interwoven with the stories of the Celestial Kings. When she dwells on the story of Yang, a single parent without family support, she invested the story with great feeling, reflecting her own dilemma. But in telling this story she is also expressing a point of view about the West Hunan and one which is shared with other people who tell the same story. The story of leaders who protected the locality but were killed by the emperor suggests that West Hunan is an area which, though unarguably part of China, is ill-served by the central state. The continued retelling of the story and worship of the Celestial Kings implies a continuing criticism of the Chinese state and reinterpretation of its meanings.

Bandits and heroes

Confirmation that the story of the Celestial Kings is relevant to people's experiences today is found in the fact that similar themes are found in the stories of the 'bandits' (*tufei*) of the Late Qing and Republican eras, and in stories of earlier heroic figures of the Qing dynasty. These stories, too, tell of heroic figures who defend their area and, sometimes, have an allegiance to the central state as well. Like the stories of the Celestial Kings, these stories are maintained, despite the fact that official accounts of these figures are very different.

People who defy the laws of the country by making a living from robbing others, often with the support of local peasantry, have been widespread in China, particularly in forested, mountainous and border areas and these are often pejoratively described by official sources as bandits (*tufei*) (Billingsley 1988: 17f). My use of the term does not necessarily have this pejorative sense since many of the so-called bandits were regarded

in West Hunan as local leaders. Accounts of Chinese bandit groups which developed into full scale rebellion are common, particularly from the Ming dynasty onwards, contributing to the 'unusual frequency' of peasant rebellions in China (Billingsley 1988: 3-4, Wakeman 1977: 201). Banditry was often a first step for those who became involved in the 'Miao' rebellions in Guizhou (Jenks 1994: 54, 68-9). Many bandit groups and peasant rebellions were closely linked with religious sectarianism and according to local missionary sources this was also the case in early 20th century West Hunan (Perry 1976, Wakeman 1977: 205f. Vance 1930: 190-1). The bandit leader He Long (see below) was also a ritual practitioner (Kinkley 1977: 92).

Banditry was prevalent in West Hunan during the late Qing when the *tun* system ensured a high degree of militarisation. During the Republican era, when banditry was particularly widespread in China and became 'one of the commonest peasant reactions to oppression and hardship' (Billingsley 1988: 2), West Hunan became particularly famous as the home of bandits. As in the rest of China, many of these were soldier bandits (Billingsley 1988: 27). West Hunan had become a virtually independent warlord state, and Shen Congwen calculated that by 1918 there were 100,000 armed soldiers in the area, though he adds that this is probably an over-estimate (Kinkley 1977: 61). The large numbers of weapons and defecting soldiers added to the level of banditry since it was from defecting soldiers and raids on convoys that weapons were obtained (Kinkley 1977: 56). For example, there are accounts from Shen Congwen of bandits robbing water transport (an important form of transport at the time) and sometimes overpowering boatloads of soldiers (Kinkley 1977: 117). The terrain of West Hunan must also have been a contributory factor since the mountains and the large number of caves meant that people and weapons could be easily hidden and the *tun* blockhouses themselves could easily become rebel strongholds (Shi 1986: 206).

During the Republican Period in West Hunan, it was often hard to distinguish between bandits and the local militia, since the violence of the bandits was matched by that of the soldiers, many of whom deserted to become bandits themselves (Vance 1925: 213,

Kinkley 1977: 93-4). Sometimes soldiers and bandits were reported to be ‘in league’ with each other and some former bandits joined the militia and were assigned to protect the area they had formerly controlled as bandit leaders (Kinkley 1977: 119f, Murray 1925: 389). When local bandits came into contact with Communist forces, some of them, such as He Long, joined the Communist Party.

The most famous story of outlaws, *Shuihu Zhuan* (The Water Margin), which has been widely popular for centuries, depicts these figures as an egalitarian band, protesting against Imperial policies and robbing the rich to help the poor. Some bandits may have been champions of the peasantry, or at least those in their immediate locality, in the manner of ‘social bandits’ described in Europe and elsewhere (Hobsbawm 1963: 14). However, Wakeman’s study shows that peasants themselves often regarded their leaders ‘with ambivalence’ since through their leadership they were likely to be transformed into landlords and rebel and bandit leaders were likely to reproduce ‘the very structures they ostensibly opposed’ (1977: 203-5 see also Billingsley 1988: 150f.). In West Hunan, there were bandit leaders, some of them former army leaders, who impressed locals and foreign missionaries alike by their behaviour (Murray 1925: 390, Frank 1938: 479, Kinkley 1977: 92), but often, as I will show below, one’s view on such leaders depended on whether they were local to one’s own area. In West Hunan, local leaders command loyalty from people in their vicinity, especially those with the same surname, and hostility from those from other areas. Liang Zhaohui pointed out that maybe you can never say who is really is a bandit (in the pejorative sense) because who you see as a bandit depends on where you come from.

Official and Local Images of Banditry

My concern here is not so much with historical events as with the stories of the bandits which I take as aspects of social memory. As with the stories of the Celestial Kings, there is a clear difference between written accounts and those told by local people. Previous to its promotion as a place of beautiful landscape and colourful minorities, West Hunan was most famous for its bandit stories. After 1949, the Peoples’ Liberation

Army suppressed resistance in the area, much of which was Guomindang supported, and all local leaders were labelled and vilified as bandits, representatives of the old society which the Communists were eager to overthrow (Ceng & Hou 1993: 138 f.). The subject was particularly made use of in government produced materials during the Cultural Revolution in order to illustrate the evils of feudalism. I was told that stories about bandits were the only interesting lessons for a child at school during this period. During the 1980s, a film and a television programme were made on the subject of the bandits of West Hunan and they too present the bandits as anti-Communist, violent and superstitious. Even today, students say that they were afraid to come to Jishou at first, in case they found bandits there.

The most famous of the West Hunan bandits was Long Yunfei. The official story, as told to Alley who travelled through the area during the late 1960s, claims that Long 'typified all that was worst in a rotten society' (1974: 23). He was said to have terrorised and killed people in the area, especially the people who worked for him directly and was later killed by PLA soldiers. Most famous is the treatment of his tailor. According to the official story Long 'had him stripped, nailed to a young forked tree with big nails and slowly had him skinned alive, each bit of skinning being done at half hour intervals' (Alley 1974: 24). Visitors to Shanjiang, Long Yunfei's ancestral village, can still see the tree where this event is said to have taken place.²³ Under it is a concrete platform on which people gathered during the Cultural Revolution, to learn about the feudal evils of landlords and bandits.

However, the official stories of bandits are often contested. Local people deny that all of the bandits were criminals, saying that some of them protected their local area and I was soon told that the official story of Long Yunfei as recounted above was wrong. Long Yunfei had never harmed the local people nor skinned his tailor and in his time the Shanjiang area had been peaceful. This point was made more forcibly during a trip to Shanjiang which I, with another foreign teacher and a group of Chinese school teachers

made soon after my arrival in Jishou. We were accompanied by Mrs Long, a native of Shanjiang, a Kho Xiong speaker and a distant relative of Long Yunfei himself.

The day began with a visit to view a Miao market in nearby Laershan, a trip which did not give great pleasure to our urban Miao hosts. Their fashionable, urban clothes, especially the women's high heels, drew quite as much attention as did the presence of two foreigners. Despite the fact that Mrs Long spoke the local Miao dialect she was treated with distrust. Young people by the sides of the road, who were chatting and playing tapes of locally recorded songs in Kho Xiong, stopped and switched the music off until we had passed.

The trip to Long Yunfei's house was, however, a great success. In the afternoon Mrs Long's uncle, a middle aged man, took us over to the old part of the village where his house was still standing, in ruins and unused. It was larger than the other houses, surrounded by a defensive wall with watch towers and gunlocks. He showed us around the old living accommodation and the stables and we went through an arch into a courtyard. Here there were signs that some of the rooms were still in use but it was getting dark and there was no-one else around. After a while another member of the Long family, who had seen us go into the house, came over to join us and the two men talked to us about Long Yunfei.

The teachers were curious and asked a lot of questions. They were particularly impressed when they learned that our guide had been one of Long's bodyguards and they wanted to hear all about how he had died. We were told that he had been about sixty at the time and had wanted to escape to Taiwan. His nephew however, had shot down a plane and had a number of effective weapons so he had persuaded Long to stay and try to fight the PLA soldiers who were encircling them. When it became clear that they could not win, Long had committed suicide and his son was taken to Fenghuang and beheaded. The bodyguard claimed that he himself had left Long Yunfei when he decided to fight the PLA.

‘What did he look like?’ somebody asked. The guide replied that he had been rather short and rather fat, ‘like him’ he said, pointing at one of the teachers who had gone outside for a few minutes and was walking back towards us under the arch. Everyone looked at him and laughed a bit nervously as if he really was Long Yunfei. People went on to ask whether or not he was a good person and the members of the Long family said that he was. He had kept order well, they said, and there was no unrest in the area when he was in control of it. But they added that, since he had to provide for his men he had to plunder other (*waidi*) places. As we walked back to Miss Long’s house, the teachers were concerned to explain to us again that Long had been the most important bandit in the area and that the stories which were told about his cruelty were not true.

Other stories indicate that, since 1949, bandits have at times been regarded with admiration and the actions of the PLA have been criticised. After their suppression by the PLA in the 1950s, some former ‘bandits’ served their country and developed a reputation locally for bravery. For example, Liang Zhaohui had heard of an ex-bandit, the father of one of his classmates, who had been absorbed into the PLA and sent to the war in Korea. There he fought the Americans so heroically that, being rather deaf, he did not notice the call to retreat and narrowly escaped with this life. Others were less easy to co-opt. Another story told of some former bandits who were taken for training in Yuanning where many of them were massacred, probably because they were trying to escape. Apparently this story was well known in the area and had led to widespread, though muted, criticism of the local government.

A number of other stories of bandits who are warmly remembered as local protectors are recorded in the oral histories collected by two PLA soldiers, Ceng and Hou, in their book ‘Suppressing the Bandits of Greater West Hunan’ (1993). Unlike more academic works on history, this book was much borrowed from Jishou University library and it was the only book on the area which I found on the stalls of private booksellers.²⁴ Similar stories were told about the early twentieth century Liang Guangxing who was

said to have protected the local area by making peace with a very war-like bandit who lived in Guzhang area, a little to the north. Liang Guangxing was from Majingao and, as with the Longs of Shanjiang village, members of the present day Liang surname group there claim that he was not a bandit and that he never killed anyone, though if pressed on this they conceded that some of his subordinates may have done. As with Long Yunfei, this suggests particular loyalty among members of the same surname group.

The themes which these stories share with the stories of the Celestial Kings are the defence of locality, the ambiguous relationship with the state militia and, in many cases, their ultimate death at the hands of the official security forces. However, the area which they defend is not West Hunan but smaller areas within West Hunan.

Implicit in stories of this kind is the forgetting of other aspects of West Hunan's past. Though people spoke of bandits, the institution of the *Gan* army or the *tun* system was never mentioned and fortifications which still remain from the *tun* system are described as bandits' homes and fortresses. This was the case, not just with those who 'remembered' the bandits favourably, but also with people from other areas who would assume that there had been no schools or other institutions in the area before 1949, just bandits.

Several writers have noted the emphasis given to local bandits or rebellious leaders, to the exclusion of apparently more important historical events, in oral histories of Europe. Both Connerton (1989: 20) and Fentress and Wickham cite Carlo Levi, who observed that in southern Italy during the 1930s,

[t]he peasants of Gagliano were indifferent to the conquest of Abyssinia, and they neither remembered the World War nor spoke of its dead, but one war was close to their hearts and constantly on their tongues; it was already a fable, a legend, a myth, an epic story. This was the war of the brigands (Levi 1948: 137, Fentress & Wickham 1992: 87).

Collard describes how Greek villagers recall the Ottoman empire as a time 'of freedom fighters (and brigands), of national resistance, of patriotism and heroic deeds' rather than

of oppression (1991: 96). Fentress and Wickham describe how in the 1960s, French rural people in Protestant areas of Cevennes, could tell detailed stories of the Camisards, an early 18th century Protestant rebel movement, but said very little about the French revolution (1992: 93-5). The continuing relevance of the stories of the Camisards was seen in the fact that during the resistance '*noms de guerre* such as Roland and Castanet were common, and so were eighteenth century songs, reused Camisard hiding places, and even remembered military tactics' (Fentress & Wickham 1992: 94).

Fentress and Wickham suggest two reasons for this, one being that the 'Great Events' of the past are designated as such by people external to most local societies' (1992: 96). The other is that shared memories such as these 'tend to be remembered in the first place because of their power to legitimise the present, and tend to be interpreted in ways that very closely parallel (often competing) present conceptions of the world' (Fentress & Wickham 1992: 88). Given the close contact with which West Hunan people came into contact with the *tun* system, it appears that the latter argument is more relevant to West Hunan and I suggest that 'memories' of the bandits and the Celestial Kings indicate a continuing identification with a locality, which is interposed within the Chinese state but regards the central state with distrust.

Territorial deities and Bandits

Similarity between bandit stories and local deity stories are not unusual in China. There is an association of temples with martial arts bands, etc. (Feuchtwang 1992: 83. Jordan 1972: 48-9). Both bandits and deities are in some ways superhuman individuals, outside the control of the state. Like bandits, military deities are said to be in command of spirit soldiers and this was said of Celestial Kings earlier in the century and also during the period of my fieldwork (Jordan 1972: 50-51, Shi 1986: 481). Writers on Chinese religion have drawn explicit parallels between military deities and bandits. For example, Seaman (who translates *Wangye* as god-king) writes,

These are spirits that are worshipped as gods though they are thought not to have been appointed by the Jade Emperor. They are specifically likened to the semi-independent

'country-kings' (*Kuo-Wang*) of historical China, who, although formally acknowledging the suzerainty of the Chinese Emperor, actually ran their own territories as they saw fit. It is thus not unexpected that many of these 'god-kings' are thought to have been terrible pirates or powerful robber chieftains (Seaman 1978: 55).

A similar point is made by Weller who describes military deities in Guangxi province who 'acted like the local strongmen who sometimes usurped state authority and ran their own little empires where the state grew weak' (1996: 253) and Katz (1987: 203) points out that the term *wangye* which is so often used to describe such deities, is also commonly used to refer to bandit leaders.

The story of the *quasi*-historical figure of Luo Daren, also of Yaxi village, shows striking similarities with that of the Celestial Kings. In both stories the protagonists were closely connected with water. When the Celestial Kings died, the water in Yaxi flowed backwards, when Luo Daren died, a well in Yaxi churned up silt. When the father of the Celestial Kings came to earth he turned back into a dragon if touched by water and once this was known, he had to return to the well. When Luo Daren washed (according to the local story) he turned into a fish and when this was seen by his servant it resulted in Luo Daren's death.

The deification of the Celestial Kings, with their similarities to bandits and associations with the same themes of locality and tension with the Imperial state, is part of this process whereby the past is brought into the present. Thus, when people call upon the *ling* of the Celestial Kings today, for all sorts of highly individualistic reasons, they are concerned with a shared memory of locality. For some this may not be their own locality since, as I have mentioned, many people come from elsewhere to pray at the temple, many people may not know the story of the deities, but they are ultimately involved because they are deferring to the *ling* quality of the deities and it is on this story that their *ling* is based.

Interaction between local and official versions

In contrast to this, in the official stories local mobilisation is portrayed as rebellion and, in the case of the story of the Celestial Kings, is equated with minorities. These official versions of the stories of territorial deities have been described as imposing ‘a kind of unity on regional and local-level cults’ (Watson 1985: 293) and as ‘superscribing’ (Duara: 1988), suggesting that they are means of controlling the local versions of the stories of the deities. In this section I look at the background to this and consider the interaction between official and oral versions of the stories.

I have suggested above that one of the reasons why activities at the temple at Yaxi today appear to differ from those of the past, is that past activities were to some degree shaped by an official involvement which no longer exists. In the Qing dynasty, as part of a general trend which occurred all over China (cf Feuchtwang 1978: 128, Watson 1985, Hansen 1990), the Celestial Kings were recognised by the emperor. Recognition of local deities meant that they were given special titles and listed in the local gazetteers ‘in the sections entitled “Ssu-tien” (sacrificial statutes)’ (Feuchtwang 1978: 104).

According to the gazetteers, the registration of the Celestial Kings was a reward for the continued protection they were believed to have given the lowland area during Miao rebellions of the Qing dynasty (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 404, 672). This shows that they were taken to be anti-Miao. For example, in one gazetteer account, it is said that during the Qianlong reign (the period of the greatest ‘Miao’ rebellions), ‘the gods made heavenly lights appear’ which blocked the roads between the rebels and refugees and when people took refuge in the temple, rebels who attempted to enter ‘died suddenly with blood spouting from their mouths’ (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 405). The deities were also reported to have helped the General Fu Nai himself, appearing beside him and frightening off the rebels. The titles they were given were ‘*Xuan Wei Zhu Sun*’ meaning that they ‘demonstrated impressive power and assisted righteousness’ and the second, ‘*Ling Ying, Bao An, Xian You, Hu Guo*’, meaning ‘efficacious response, protecting the peace, showing blessings and protecting the country’ (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 672).²⁵

All of this suggests that they are different because urban and/or educated people had more to fear from local rebellion and less to fear from the emperor's anger. Evidence that the gentry and/or urban people were more inclined to worship official figures is seen in the following story. Mrs Gu, always a good source on the pre-1949 gentry, talks of people in the old Imperial city of Qianzhou looking to the memory of the Imperial ruler Fu Nai, rather than local military deities, when they were under attack. Fu Nai was the official sent to West Hunan at the end of the eighteenth century to put down the rebellions and establish the *tun* system. When the city of Qianzhou was attacked by an army from Sichuan, people made shrines to Fu Nai and prayed to him, first for protection and later out of thanks because he had built the walls which were protecting them. The warlord army from Sichuan tried to blow up the walls with gunpowder-filled coffins but they made little impact and some of them did not explode at all. This was attributed to Fu Nai's protection

This implies that different stories of the deities and different ways of worshipping them were associated with different social backgrounds. However, it seems very likely that there was some connection between the two, since oral and written traditions are rarely completely separable (Fentress & Wickham 1992: 97) and the local stories of the Celestial Kings share features with those found in the gazetteers. It is unclear whether the cult of a local protective military leader was then co-opted by the state and transformed into an official cult to the Celestial Kings, in their form as subduers of the Miao rebellion, or whether an official cult to three military deities was imposed on the area, perhaps in honour of historical figures, and locally meaningful stories of protective leaders accrued to it.

Cases of the first type of interaction have been described in other parts of China, most famously the cult of Tian Hou (also known as Ma Tsu), as described by Watson (1985). Watson writes that, in the original, local accounts, Ma Tsu was 'an unusual woman who did not fit any of the stereotyped roles set aside for women in Chinese peasant society'

since as a child she never cried, as a woman she remained unmarried and childless, and she died when only twenty seven (1985: 295). Versions from Hong Kong go further and say that she was one of the low caste boat people (often referred to as Tanka) of south China, and a medium who committed suicide rather than marry (1985: 297). After the cult had been officially approved, however, and the deity given the official title of Tian Hou (Empress of Heaven), written versions of the story were produced which ignored her early death and unmarried status and ‘stress her “worthy” social origins in the family of a virtuous official of low rank’ (1985: 297). In popular versions her main role as a deity is to protect fishermen at sea but in official versions she is credited with, ‘the suppression of pirates and other “opportunists” (reading between the lines this can only mean boat people) who take advantage of disorder along the coast’ (1985: 298). This was part of a process of imposing an elite culture onto local difference by ‘imposing a kind of unity on regional and local level cults’ (Watson 1985: 293). Since the cult of the Celestial Kings was officially approved, it is possible that this too was a process of the co-option of a local cult into an official cult.

However, there are accounts of a reverse process taking place in West Hunan, that is, of official cults which were taken up and given different meanings by local people. We know that some deities were introduced into the area from outside since Lombard-Salmon writes of Han settlers in nearby East Guizhou bringing their own deities to the area (1977: 264). The best recorded case of a deity who was introduced into West Hunan by the incoming Han is Ma Yuan (Lombard Salmon 1977: 265, Sutton 1989, von Glahn 1983). Unlike the Celestial Kings, Ma Yuan is a relatively well known historical figure who died in 49 AD while attempting to bring the West Hunan area into the sphere of Imperial control. From the Ming dynasty onwards, temples were built to him in recently subdued minority areas such as Guangzhou, Guangxi and Hainan (Sutton 1989, Yang 1961: 173, von Glahn 1983: 354). In his deified form, he was worshipped as the civiliser of barbarians and was also attributed power over floods. Sutton (1989) suggests that the introduction of the cult of Ma Yuan was in, effect, an imposition of Han culture on the indigenous people. He quotes from local sources which say that the local

‘savages’ worshipped Ma Yuan and suggests that ‘Ma played his role in transforming the minorities with Han culture’ (Sutton 1989: 102).²⁶ However, von Glahn (1983: 354) suggests that rather than commemorating the subduing of the region, the adoption of this cult by local people occurred because they transformed it into a cult of a giant serpent, believed to live in local streams.

A similar case is described by Lombard Salmon, who writes of a West Hunan temple, established in memory of a local hero ‘Duke Yang’, on account of his meritorious deeds. This, too, was given local meanings, becoming a cult where local minority people prayed for protection from drought, flood and other calamities (1977: 151). It seems possible, therefore, that like these deities, the Celestial Kings were introduced as a result of the Han subjugation of the area, but were reinterpreted by local people to have other meanings. These examples would also accord with the process I have been describing whereby the administration introduced Buddhism into the area in order to civilise it and these temples are now considered characteristically local (*bendi*). It is also possible that both the above processes have taken place in an ongoing interaction, what Katz describes as a process of ‘reverberation’ (1995: 114).

So far I have concentrated on differences between local and official versions since, like Watson (1985) I found these differences apparent. Duara makes a similar point to Watson’s when he discusses the ‘superscription’ of the cult of Guandi by the state, but his emphasis is less on ‘the radically discontinuous nature of myths’ and more on the ‘commonality’ behind the different stories which gives them their ‘legitimizing power’ (Duara 1988: 778-9).²⁷ Since the official version of the myth is no longer expressed at the temple, it would be difficult to find out how far the different versions were regarded as continuous or discontinuous. From the lack of mention of the official version today, it seems possible that local people feel it has no relevance to them.

Whatever the interaction which has taken place in the past between official and oral versions of the story of the Celestial Kings, the result has been stories of deities who are

seen to be particularly *ling*. In this the temple to the Celestial Kings is a strong contrast to that of the historical figure Ma Yuan, which was formerly part of the state cult and today is barely considered to be a temple at all. The temple to Ma Yuan had been restored and is now used as an old peoples' activity centre and a theatre for local opera performances. It is rarely used for religious purposes and I never heard it described as *ling*. When I asked people who were attending the opera about it, I was told that, although there were some deities there, it was not really a temple.

To describe the temple of the Celestial Kings as a local temple is not to suggest that the power of the state has somehow failed to reach the area. Despite its reputation as a remote area, West Hunan has been closely administered by the state since Late Imperial times. Today Jishou is also a consumer of imported goods, fashions and media images from the rest of China and the world. I have drawn a distinction between official and the non-official observances which took place at the temple in Imperial and Republican times, but activities at the temple are also characterised by a process of interaction between representatives of the state and other, ordinary people of West Hunan. This interaction has continued over centuries and it is unclear whether the Celestial Kings were originally indigenous figures who were co-opted by the Chinese state or official figures to whom local meanings were attributed. What is apparent is that the images of the locality which persist at the temple and in the related stories of bandits are the result of a process of interaction with the state but they are also critical of the state. They express the view that West Hunan is a marginal place, better served by indigenous leaders than officials of the state. Nevertheless, these stories are not ones of outright resistance or secession since often the 'bandit' leaders of the locality, like the Celestial Kings themselves, continued to be responsible to the Chinese state. These images remain appropriate today since, as I have said, many West Hunan people continue to feel that their interests are not well served by recent social and economic changes. Furthermore, their criticisms are sometimes levelled directly at the local government, as I will discuss in Chapter Nine.

¹ Another possible parallel which can be drawn is with the Three Officers (*San Guan*), deities of the Daoist pantheon, who, like the Celestial Kings, were also guardians of the underworld. According to Strickman (1979) these deities occupy the very lowest rung of the Daoist pantheon, where the Daoist deities meet and control the figures of popular religion and they embody 'the radical opposition between the practice of pure Tao and worship of the sanguinary gods of popular religion' (180). However, as I mentioned, there was little reference to Daoism at the temple of the Celestial Kings.

² Another possibility is that the darker faces of the second and third brothers indicate their greater efficaciousness (*ling*) since deities who are particularly efficacious receive large numbers of offerings, the smoke from which colours their faces black. This is the reason Sangren gives for the fact that in Taiwan the Buddhist deity Ma Tsu is often represented as having a black face (1991: 72).

³ For a fuller discussion of Mu Yi, the mother of the Celestial Kings, see Chapter Nine

⁴ The kinds of problems they discussed were very similar to those discussed at Buddhist temples and I have combined the two in my discussion of women's concerns in the previous chapter.

⁵ When I asked her name she explained it was '*shao shu minzu de Shi*' i.e. minority nationality Shi.

⁶ About 10 pence.

⁷ This was made locally from the off cuts and leaves of bamboo plants.

⁸ The sandals were never seen at Buddhist temples.

⁹ In Changsha, as in most Chinese cities, a number of temples have been renovated and opened as tourist sites. The Shaolin temple, in Henan, is one of the most famous in China.

¹⁰ For a detailed account of *huan luo yuan* Chapter Nine.

¹¹ This is contrast to the past when the temple was more literally the of a focus of an actually existing community. Mrs Gu said that, before 1949, everyone, rich and poor, ordinary people and officials, would worship at the temple.

¹² For a full account of the state cult see Feuchtwang (1978, 1992) and Zito (1987). The involvement of Daoist priests does not seem to have been a major factor at the temple of the Celestial Kings, but see Chapter Nine.

¹³ I discuss another version from the gazetteers in Chapter Nine.

¹⁴ The description of Panhu as ancestor of the Miao is a common misconception. For a discussion of this, see Lemoine (1982: 12).

¹⁵ However, I discuss this possibility further in Chapter Nine.

¹⁶ A term for the minority people of the south in ancient times, often translated as southern barbarians.

¹⁷ The characters for Mu Yi are formed from the two parts of the character for her surname, Yang. In fact Miss Luo did not use her name, since this would have been disrespectful, and simply referred to her as 'she' but I have inserted her name into the story for the sake of clarity.

¹⁸ I asked what happened when the dragon father washed and she said that he too would have turned back into a dragon, but he didn't wash.

¹⁹ Miss Luo, a single parent herself, said this with especial feeling.

²⁰ Miss Luo's story was unusual in that she said that the Celestial Kings went to fight the *Yang ren*, that is, the foreigners. In this she was perhaps influenced by the story of the locally born heroic figure, Luo Daren, who is discussed later in this chapter.

²¹ It is also indicated in the story of Dong Wang, the deity at one of the side shrines in the temple of the Celestial Kings, who I was told, revolted against the emperor after the emperor carried off his wife.

²² Tapp (1996) and Faure (1988) also discuss stories, told by minority people, which depict heroic figures who come into conflict with the emperor.

²³ This was the village where I attended the Si Yue Ba festival (see Chapter Four).

²⁴ Not all bandits are remembered so favourably. It is undoubtedly true that many bandits committed violent acts, as the accounts of Western missionaries in the area testify (Vance 1930: 190, Murray 1925: 390). Miss Shi, a young woman from the highland, Miao speaking village of Liuboshan told me that there had been bandits in her area before the 1950s but that they were just people from the next village with guns who would come to your homes and steal from you. No-one would bother to rule and protect their area, as Long Yunfei had done in Shanjiang, because it was so poor.

²⁵ According to Shi, much of whose work is based on local oral history, these deities also protected the locality from attack by non-minority outside forces, in particular the Taiping rebels (Shi 1986: 252).

²⁶ Sutton also quotes a seventeenth century poem which includes the lines
‘To this day when the savage girls dance’
they still sing the Han marching songs.’

²⁷ Duara considers stories about Guandi. Known throughout China as the god of war and a symbol of loyalty, he was originally, according to *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* ‘an outlaw - a righteous outlaw who killed an exploitative magistrate - but an outlaw nonetheless.’ In elite versions, however, his story is retold as someone who has ‘assisted in the well-being and long peace in the empire’ and an example of Confucian virtue (Duara 1988: 784).



Official temple, unofficial temple and museum: Yaxi 1996



The Celestial Kings at the unofficial temple: Yaxi 1996



Incense seller and client at the unofficial temple: Yaxi 1996



Long Yunfei's house: Sanjiang

Chapter Eight - Questions of Ethnicity

I have so far made little mention of social differentiation expressed in terms of differences of ethnicity or nationality, although such matters arose when describing the work of the Cultural Department (*Wenhua Ju*) and the Minority Affairs Bureau (*Min Wei*). In part this is because the people I talked to, particularly those living in the lowland areas, generally used a vocabulary of local and non-local practices and people. Images of difference are often those presented by local government. An example of this is the New Year activities at Aizhai which the local Cultural Department makes distinctively 'Miao' through the arrangement of drum dancing competitions and Kho Xiong language singing. Until recently, however, these occasions, marked by dragon dancing and lion dancing, were very similar to those of Chinese speakers nearby.

To suggest that there is no differentiation between Chinese speakers and Kho Xiong speakers or even between people of Chinese speaking descent and those of Kho Xiong speaking descent would, however, be inaccurate. Given this and the fact that West Hunan is officially designated a Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, a discussion of ethnicity as a dimension of identity would appear to be relevant to my material.

The Term Ethnicity

I begin with a brief review of the uses of the term 'ethnicity'. In social anthropology, reference to ethnic group as such, rather than culture or society can be dated to the publication in 1969 of the collection of essays entitled *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* edited by Frederick Barth. These studies drew attention to the situationalist nature of ethnicity, that is, that ethnic groups are formed by the maintenance of ethnic boundaries through social interaction rather than given through objective and essential features of particular cultures. This contrasts with earlier work, such as that by Shils (1957) which had suggested that ethnic groups were based on quantifiable cultural differences and differences in origins. This primordial approach, attributing ethnic identities to awareness of historical origins,

was also expressed by Geertz (1993: 255). As Barth writes, in constructing a boundary, '[t]he features which are taken into account are not the sum of 'objective' differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant' (Barth 1969: 14). Ethnicity, when defined in this way, does not refer to static or pre-determined groups. By Barth's definition, ethnic divisions can be expressed on different levels and units such as "'community", "culture," language group, corporation, association or population are all potentially ethnic groups' (1969: 34). And people's ethnic identification of themselves and others may be brought into play differently in different situations. As Handleman writes, 'the same person can be categorized according to different criteria of relevance in different situations' (1977: 192, see also Okamura 1981: 460, Nagata 1974: 340).

A slightly different actor centred approach to ethnic group formation was the work of the instrumentalist school. Writers such as A. Cohen (1969) and Despres (1975) considered the role played by competition between people in order to gain access to privileges and scarce resources. Writing of this in the context of urban Nigeria, A. Cohen is critical of primordial approaches to ethnicity, stressing that the formation of ethnic groups is not the result of 'conservatism.' Instead, he shows how ethnic group identity became more clearly defined and cohesive as people attempted to gain a monopoly over a particular trade. Brass takes a similar approach to the formation of ethnicity, seeing it as 'a competition for state power and state resources' (1985: 30-1, see also Despres 1975).

Despite this shift to an actor centred perspective and a situationalist or instrumentalist approach, the notion of the existence of social groups with objectively identifiable cultural traits still lingered in the background. After all, from what was the actor supposed to select the ethnically significant facts? As R. Cohen writes, the use of terms like 'terms like "group", "category", "boundary" connote an actual entity, and Barth's concern with maintenance tends to reify it all the more' (1978: 386). Another problem which arises is the question of how far the notion of ethnic groups is descriptive of something distinguishable from groups based on, for example, religion, language or locality. Furthermore, if anthropologists do make this

distinction between ethnicity and other forms of identity, how far are they reflecting the complexities of the situation? Fardon makes this point when he writes that,

ethnic discriminations are elements of more general classifications which identify relations of similarity and difference within social universes.....Since ethnicity gobbled up these distinctions and regurgitated them as variants of a single type of 'ethnic' difference, it seems that many notes on the scale of difference have become muted if not lost (1987:171)

and the sensitivity of ethnicity as an intellectual tool has also been called into question by Banks (1996: 9). The limitations of the notion of 'ethnic' groups in representing indigenous views had already been indicated by Leach in the context of Highland Burma (1964: 105) and more recently by Linnekin and Poyer (1990) with respect to Oceania.

Further developments in the direction initiated by situationalists such as Barth have emphasised the purposes and intentions of the actors in constructing and projecting identities, an approach which is concerned with the construction of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). The reality of any collectivities which might appear in consequence is now largely symbolic and there is a corresponding theoretical shift away from ethnic groups or societies to questions concerning identity (see especially A. P. Cohen 1994). Because of its emphasis on the symbolic rather than the actually existing group, such an approach is effective at taking into account the heterogeneity within communities, the 'very different and competing notions about the origin, history, culture and boundaries of the group' (Vermeulen and Gover 1997: 15). As A P Cohen puts it 'because ethnicity is expressed symbolically, it is possible for this internal diversity to be preserved, even while it is masked by common symbolic forms' (1994: 62).

Fardon writes that he treats universalising definitions of ethnicity with suspicion (1996: 118) and in this thesis, I follow Linnekin and Poyer's search for a 'theory of cultural identity' relevant to their ethnographic area (1990: 5). In the following chapter I refer to writers who are concerned specifically with the people who lived within or at the periphery of the Chinese sphere of influence, but had not fully taken up the way of life associated with their wet-rice cultivating, hierarchical, Chinese speaking, often literate neighbours (Leach 1984, Lehman 1967, Tapp 1989).

In examining how far the notion of ethnicity is relevant to my study of Jishou, I begin by looking at identity cards. I ask whether being registered as Han or Miao is an indication of a perception of belonging to a particular ethnic group. I then consider the features which local people, both Chinese and Kho Xiong speakers, describe as being characteristically Miao or Kho Xiong and as characteristically Han and look at the circumstances in which they are categorised as such.¹

Official Classifications

In China everyone is officially registered by nationality, which appears on their identity card (*hukou*), and it is on this that official statistics on minority groups are based. Although these official classifications do not necessarily reflect the views of the population in general, one needs to consider the possibility that this classifying project may in itself have contributed to the development of ethnic groups today in West Hunan.

The influence of classification, in particular colonial classification, on ethnogenesis has been widely discussed (Vermeulen and Gover 1997, Eriksen 1996: 87, Lenz 1997). Colonial classification often took the form of rigid all or nothing categories. For example, concerning the categorisation of Malaysians by means of censuses, the British were intolerant of 'multiple, politically 'transvestite', blurred or changing categories' because 'the fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one - and only one - clear place' (Anderson 1983: 166). Often the categories of the colonialists were quite at odds with indigenous views. As Lenz writes,

the dominant characteristics of pre-Colonialist Africa were mobility, overlapping networks, multiple group membership, and the flexible, context-dependant drawing of boundaries. The concept of 'tribe' and the idea that each person belongs to one and only one 'tribe' is a colonial import (1997: 31).

To suggest that the people on whom these classifications were imposed passively accepted them as self ascriptions would be an oversimplification. Often the adoption of 'ethnic' classifications originally devised by the state has been a more complex and instrumental action aimed at taking advantage of the benefits made available by

the state for recognised groups (Lenz 1997: 42, Morin & d'Anglure 1997: 173f). In addition to this, once such 'ethnic' identities have been crystallised and particular groups formed among certain people, others may follow suit as a defensive measure (Fardon 1996: 139).

Gladney has suggested that the classification of minority nationalities in China has led to self identification along ethnic lines. For example, he argues that in the case of minorities of Southwest China such as the Bai and Yi 'the label the state has assigned, no matter how ill-suited, has led to the crystallisation and expression of identities within the designated group along pan-ethnic lines' (1991: 304, see also Harrell 1989: 196). Despite the term's derogatory connotations in the past, educated people in West Hunan today do describe themselves as 'Miao'. Schein writes that 'although a striking degree of cultural diversity obtains within this group, the subgroups are said to recognise each other as co-ethnics' (1986: 77). However, as I have mentioned, in West Hunan, the use of the term Miao does not imply an increased awareness of a wider Miao ethnic group. Although many people who can speak Kho Xiong, know something of the people of East Guizhou with whom they share this language, with the exception of Miao cadres and scholars, few people I met knew much, or anything, about the Hmou and Hmong speaking people further to the west, who are also classified by scholars as Miao. In addition to this, as I shall discuss, in Jishou and nearby villages local people were often unaware of one another's official nationality.

As evidence for the rise in ethnic consciousness in China, Gladney cites the large numbers of people changing their nationality (1991: 304) and in particular the Tujia of Sichuan (1991: 304-5). Over the past twenty years people all over China have changed their official nationality from Han to a local minority. However, changes of nationality in West Hunan were almost always a strategic change based on a wish to gain advantages for oneself and one's family, since, as in the rest of China, minority people in West Hunan have since the early 1980s been favoured with a lower pass mark for entering university and a less strict birth control policy. This situation is not peculiar to this area (cf Tapp 1995: 207 - 8).

In West Hunan, some of the people who changed their official nationality could make a good case for having minority ancestry, that is, ancestors who had at some time in the past come from Kho Xiong or Tujia speaking areas. For example, Mrs Gu knew that her father had been of the Bai minority, descended from a group of Bai who had migrated from Yunnan. As urban, Chinese speaking gentry people, she and her relatives had taken no interest in his Bai nationality and she told me that they considered themselves to be indistinguishable from Han people. However, when special privileges for minority people were introduced in the 1980s Mrs Gu applied to have her nationality changed. Since her husband, Old Liang, is registered as Miao this made no difference to her sons, who were already classified as Miao and therefore eligible for these benefits. However, some of her brothers had moved away from the area by this time and she wanted proof that her nephews and nieces were eligible for minority status so that they could take advantage of the benefits which go with this. Similarly, Wang Kaiying, Liang Zhaozhui's wife, had been brought up as a Han person and her parents had died when she was quite young. She had since found out from relatives that her parents had been Tujia people who had adopted Han behaviour on moving to town. Because of this, when benefits were introduced, she had changed her nationality to Tujia. Neither she nor Mrs Gu discussed their minority nationality with neighbours and friends.

Other people changed nationality despite the fact that they had no minority relatives, living or dead. For example, a young relative by marriage not only changed her nationality but also her name to suggest that she was part of Mrs Gu's Bai nationality cognatic kin group. And in the early 1980s some Han students in Jishou went to find host families in the countryside who would adopt them on a temporary basis. They then registered as Miao people so that they could claim minority nationality before taking the college entrance examination. Changes of this kind are becoming more difficult and require either a good relationship with someone in local government or money with which to pay bribes.

In order to mitigate the stigma that might be attached to changing to a minority nationality, many changed from Han to Tujia rather than from Han to Miao. This is because Tujia people are considered by the Han to be more sinicised and advanced than Miao people (Ma 1989: 403). The popularity of changing to Tujia nationality can be seen from the fact that statistics show that the number of Tujia in the area has increased dramatically in the area over the past ten years.² Miss Tian said that the people in her village of Ganziping³ had been there so long that, though some said they were from Shanxi, no-one really knew where their ancestral home (*laojia*) was. She said that though they were Han, many of them had gone to the local government and had their nationality changed to Tujia.

Though the labelling of some ethnic groups, such as the Hui (Gladney 1991: 96f.), has led to the development of an ethnic consciousness, I suggest that the argument that the numbers of people changing nationality in itself indicates a surge in ethnic consciousness is questionable. No-one who changed nationality, as far as I am aware, learned a minority language or took part in any other practices which might associate them with minority groups. This is not to claim that people made no connection between ancestry and the right to benefits. People with 'minority' ancestry sometimes became angry when others with no minority family connections changed nationality. This was the case when the former deputy head of the Jishou City Minority Nationalities School changed his nationality to Miao in order to make him eligible to take on the position of head since it was generally believed that he was descended from a wealthy Han gentry family.

In general conversation, however, people in the Jishou area rarely discussed their own or each others' nationality. Even people who showed pride in or loyalty to their rural Kho Xiong speaking origins when talking to me or their families, did not discuss this with others. I found that when the subject came up, as it did because I was interested in it, people were often not aware of the ethnic status of neighbours or close friends. For example, Old Liang's wife's best friend did not know that he was registered as Miao until I mentioned it once when she was there. This kind of situation was not restricted to urban, educated people. In the village of Yaxi where

there are descendants of Kho Xiong speaking and Chinese speaking people, I once asked a woman if her mother in law was from a minority nationality and was told that she did not know, maybe she was Han, maybe 'gujia' (ancient family, i.e. minority) I'd have to look at her *hukou* (residence permit) to find out.⁴ This is quite different from the situation in Inner Mongolia as described by Jankowiak, where urban Mongolian and Han are aware of distinguishable identities and prefer the company of their own ethnic group (1993: 42-4).

Jankowiak reports that urban Mongolian parents consider it is important for children to learn about Mongolian history and one informant is reported as saying that "if one taught children the "importance of their own ethnicity, then they would know who they were when they grew up" (1993: 45). By contrast, people in West Hunan, urban and rural, know little about the history of the Kho Xiong, apart from the origin stories (see below).⁵ This suggests that official identification as 'Miao' or 'Tujia' does not necessarily indicate a sense of having a particularly salient perception of 'Miao' or 'Tujia' identity. Although superficially it appears to be evidence for the instrumentalist paradigm of ethnicity, in fact, where many lowland people were concerned, the official registration of nationality did not appear to be reinforcing any sense of ethnic identity. Often, peoples daily lives expressed neither a sense of shared identity with other people registered as minority nor a sense of difference from Han. An exception to this was found among the scholars and cadres, who were familiar with written materials on the Miao. Included among these, is a small group of Miao scholars in Jishou who had been influenced by contact with American Hmong nationalists and I discuss this below.

The Influence of American Hmong Nationalists

Miao scholars in Jishou came into contact with American Hmong at the International Miao (Hmong) Culture Symposium and Economic Trade Co-operative Conference (*Guoji Miaozu Wenhua Yanjiujuhui, Jingji Maoyi Xiezuohui*) which was held in Jishou in 1994.⁶ Local Miao people who came into contact with them, mostly academics, students, performers and other urban, educated people, were particularly impressed by the success of these Hmong in America in the fields of business and the

military. A number of these people were also impressed by the American Hmong people's pride in their nationality and their hopes for the future of Miao people.

The conference included the reading of conference papers, an introduction to the history and culture of the West Hunan Miao, performances of Miao singing, dancing, drama and a 'sacrifice' of water buffalo which was arranged on the playing fields of one of the middle schools, though, in deference to the feelings of urban Chinese and overseas visitors, the water buffalo were not actually killed. However, the whole event was regarded locally as a financial enterprise. Students who had attended the conference as Chinese/English interpreters, and people I knew in the Tourism Department, spoke of the event mainly as an attempt to attract investment into the area. Included in the programme were 'economic and trade talks' and a brochure was produced which advertised a number of potential investment projects ranging from building a hydroelectric power station to the production of pickled mustard. Despite this, no investment was forthcoming and the conference was therefore said by many to have failed. Moreover, it later became clear to me that it was considered to have been unsuccessful in political terms. This was on the grounds that it had attempted to elevate the Miao nationality and had made no mention of the Tujia. I was also told the real reason it failed was because it had emerged during the course of the conference that the American Hmong had a long term project to set up a Miao 'homeland' in China. This was of course regarded as a highly subversive project and local delegates were refused permission to attend further conferences in the United States (cf Schein 1998).⁷

Schein writes of some American Hmong turning Chinese Miao peasants into 'a leisure activity' by means of videos which they make in China (Schein 1998: 167). This may well have taken place in Hunan. What was more apparent to me, however, was the influence which the American Hmong had on peoples' views on their own ethnicity. Scholars, and other urban people who had been in contact with the Hmong delegates, stressed that although the Miao as a group lag behind the Han Chinese in economics, they have their own traditions in areas such as medicine, music and *wushu* (martial arts) which are well developed and equal to those of the Han. In

contrast to other urban Miao, some of these scholars incorporated aspects of Miao culture into their urban lives. For example, Hua Laohu, a leading Miao scholar in Jishou, told me that his single storied house, built around a courtyard, had been designed according to the Miao style, and that all his children lived with him and worked for him which, he claimed, was also the Miao way. Hua Laohu is undertaking a project to find a cure for bilharzia according to Miao traditions of medicine and is also involved in teaching other Miao people about the history of their nationality. This is in contrast to the apparent indifference to minority ancestry described in the previous section.

However, although the Americans' influence engendered a pride in being Miao, it did not encourage awareness of the local differences among Miao people. For example, the American Hmong were shocked at being referred to by the term 'Miao', which they considered to be derogatory, and insisted that Miao people should properly be referred to as 'Hmong' apparently unaware of the terms Hmou and Kho Xiong. Though local Miao scholars knew that rural, Xiong speaking people refer to themselves as 'Kho Xiong' they too did not appear to value this term and, after the conference, several people who had had contact with the Americans took to referring to themselves and other local Miao people as 'Hmong.' Because it was endorsed by some American Hmong with their evident wealth and pride in their nationality, it was a more attractive label than was the term used by villagers, even though the latter was arguably their own term.

These views and hopes for the future of Miao people from abroad made an obvious contrast with local images of the Miao as primitive and 'Other', but they influenced only a small number of people in Jishou. Others I spoke to, even those of Miao descent, said that the American Hmong were unrealistic and that Miao were sure to continue to become more like the Chinese. It appears that Miao cadres and ordinary people have very different perceptions of their identities. However, the possibility that the Hmong nationalist movement will exert a greater influence in the future cannot be ruled out.

Highland, Kho Xiong speaking people

It appears then that in everyday life, ethnic distinctions do not necessarily follow the categorisations which are recorded on people's identity cards. However, though closer examination proves that the situation is more complex, initially there did appear to be a perception of broad differences between highland Kho Xiong speaking people and lowland Chinese speakers.

In the highland areas to the north, west and south of Jishou, and in contrast to the lowland areas which immediately surround the city, a large proportion of people speak dialects of Kho Xiong.⁸ Another feature, which is clearly visible, is that women in or from the highlands often wear distinctive embroidered tunics, quite different from the peasant dress of most parts of China. It was in highland villages such as these that I witnessed the Liang family's visit to the grave and the Si Yue Ba festival. I will refer to the people who live in the highland areas as 'Kho Xiong' or 'Kho Xiong speaking' rather than 'Miao', since this is the indigenous term, and the term 'Miao' may be used more widely to include Chinese speaking people with Kho Xiong ancestry. Since the main focus of my work is on the lowlands, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to present a full account of the highland Kho Xiong speaking people and this description is not intended to be exhaustive.⁹

One of the most obvious ways in which highland areas differ from the lowlands is that they are poorer. In the past, highland people did not grow rice, something considered by the Han and, today, by the Kho Xiong themselves, to be a sign of great poverty. Today most villages have enough rice terraces to grow it as a staple but there is little flat land for grazing, and collecting animal fodder from the mountains is time-consuming. This task is often carried out by children and is a reason given why so many children in the highland areas do not attend school. Infrastructure and transport in these areas is also undeveloped with the result that attending secondary school or going to market may involve many hours of walking. In contrast to the improvements which have been made in most other parts of Hunan, and in the lowland part of West Hunan, electricity supplies are erratic and many villages do not

have running water, though in part this is alleviated by the easy access to water from natural springs and wells.

Writers on the 'Miao' of West Hunan have put considerable emphasis on their religious practices. Ling and Ruey in their chapter on 'Magic and Religion' describe sixteen elements of 'Miao religion,' including welcoming the dragon, sacrificing pigs and sacrificing water buffalo, and twenty four of 'The Guest Religion', that is, religious practices they consider to have been borrowed from the Han Chinese (Ling & Ruey 1963). The 'Guest Religion' includes Daoist elements as well as locality cults such as Earth Gods and the Celestial Kings.¹⁰ However, most of these are, as far as I could learn, rarely practised. Some aspects of belief in the highland areas today are commonly remarked upon today; these are the fact that some Kho Xiong people go to *laoshi* for some ritual purposes and that some believe in a wide range of spirits, often associated with natural features, such as water, rocks and trees. These were mentioned to me by young highland people who claimed to know little of other aspects of belief, and were generally known about only by older people. For example, Old Liang told me that some people from his village bred fish in one of their ponds and later sold the fishing rights to someone from a different area. They drained the pool to make it easier to catch them but all the fish disappeared, reappearing only when the pool was filled again. This was attributed to a spirit in the pool being unwilling to give up the fish. And an old man from another Kho Xiong speaking area told me of a tree which was regarded as an Earth God. However, these matters are not part of day-to-day conversation, much more commonly remarked upon by both highland and lowland people was the difference in language between the two areas.

Kho Xiong is a first language for most people in the highland areas, many of whom do not speak fluent Chinese. In the highland areas Kho Xiong is the main language in most of the villages, though when I write of Kho Xiong speaking villages, I do not mean to suggest that no Chinese is spoken. Words of Chinese origin have been adopted into the language and often, whole phrases of Chinese are also used. Kho Xiong is one of three languages spoken by the people officially classified as Miao. It

has close affinities with another minority language of south China, Yao, but little structural similarity with Chinese (Ramsay 1987: 230). The Miao languages, Kho Xiong, Hmou and Hmong, had no written form before the 19th century. But, by the early twentieth century Kho Xiong speaking scholars had devised a way of writing Kho Xiong by using Chinese characters, matching the sounds of the characters in the local form of *putonghua* (Mandarin), to the language. In the early twentieth century an alphabet was developed by missionaries in Guizhou (Enwall 1995: 83, 89f), but the written forms in general use today are those which were designed after 1949. Primary school children in many highland areas of West Hunan are educated in Kho Xiong for the first year and thereafter in Chinese. However, in some areas a pilot bilingual education programme has been set up, funded by money from the Hunan Provincial Government, in which Kho Xiong is the medium of education for the first three years, followed by bilingual classes for the succeeding years.

I was told that, in a Chinese speaking environment such as Jishou, Kho Xiong speakers were particularly likely to trust others who could speak the language, since, as Miss Shi said, they felt *bijiao tuanjie* (relatively united). In markets the Kho Xiong speakers often do not trust Chinese speakers, fearing being cheated, a situation which has been reported since Han people first entered the Miao areas (Shi 1986: 40). Liang Zhaohui told me that if he spoke to Kho Xiong speaking people in Chinese, telling them that he was Miao they would not be impressed but if he spoke to them in Kho Xiong he would be trusted. Miss Shi told me that if non-Kho Xiong speaking people settle in 'Miao' villages and refuse to learn the language they are disliked. But if they learn the language, as the primary school teacher in her village had done, they are accepted. Language in itself does not always guarantee acceptance but it is an important factor.

Another way in which Han Chinese and lowland people in general distinguish the people who live in Kho Xiong speaking villages from themselves is in conduct of family and sexual relationships. The stories of pre-marital sexual freedom which so fascinate the urban Han seem to be based on actual practices and, in contrast to Han Chinese norms, it is often not important to the Kho Xiong that a woman is virgin at

the time of marriage. Though I did not hear of young people making appointments to sing love songs as they did in the past, market days in highland areas are still a time for flirtation and banter between young men and women. And, when I visited a village outside Laershan, I was told that it is quite common for a young unmarried girl to move in with the family of her boyfriend, though this met with disapproving comments from the local Han Chinese person who told me of it. Furthermore, if a Kho Xiong woman is pregnant at the time of her marriage and the father of the child is not the woman's husband to be, this is not necessarily a cause for disapproval. Liang Zhaohui told me that when he lived in the countryside as a child, a young adolescent girl had begun to associate with some older girls and used to join them and the young men in singing love songs. Because of her youth and inexperience she became pregnant, and later got engaged to a young man who was not the father of the child. Liang's mother, Gu, had asked the young man how he could marry a girl who was pregnant by another man and he had said that it was not a problem because now he could 'reap the harvest without having to sow the seed.' Finally, again in contrast to the usual Han Chinese practice, property is not necessarily inherited by the oldest son, it may often be inherited by a younger son, because he is more likely to be living at home when his parents get old, a practice which was also described earlier this century (Shi 1986: 170). These are broad cultural differences which are perceived by Han and other lowland people to distinguish the Kho Xiong speaking highland people from themselves.

However, the Kho Xiong are not such a simple, homogenous group. Discussion with Kho Xiong speaking people often leads to remarks about the differences between different highland villages and even neighbouring villages, rather than to an affirmation of a Kho Xiong, let alone Miao, group identity. Moreover, even language is cited as a source of difference among highland people. There are two mutually incomprehensible dialects of Kho Xiong, and the written form, based on the Baojing dialect in the north of the prefecture, does not correspond well to the southern, Fenghuang area dialect. In conversation with me, Kho Xiong speakers more often talked about the differences between dialects than the similarities. In every area, I was told, people spoke slightly differently. Such remarks would lead on

to talking about how the embroidery on women's costumes also differed from one area to another, with minor differences between areas and a major difference between north and south, corresponding to the difference between Baojing and Fenghuang dialects.

It does appear, however that for those living in the highland villages, leaving the area leads to a greater sense of oneself as Miao. I have already described a sense of solidarity with other Kho Xiong speaking people. I also found that, despite the poverty of the highland regions, people who have lived in the town do return to live in their natal village, saying that they prefer it there. For example, Miss Shi told me that her mother regretted the time she has spent working as a ticket seller in Zhuzhou station in east Hunan¹¹ and I have spoken to young men who have worked as migrant labourers in east China who say that they prefer their villages. This is also the case with young people who have left the highland areas to study. So, for example, a young graduate named Long Zhufeng asked to be posted to the school where she had been a pupil rather than to the school in the Han village of Ganziping, saying that she wanted to be with Miao people. And Miss Shi maintained that when she finished her studies she wanted to go back to Liuboshan to help the people there.

There is evidence that lowland people express difference between themselves and highland people in the terms which they use to describe essentialised attributes of a highland type, a typification which may be construed as ethnic and derogatory. The term 'Miao' itself is still used as a term of abuse, with connotations of 'primitive'. To the Han, to have a 'Miao temper' means to get angry quickly and be unable to hide it and 'Miao appetite' means to eat greedily without caring what it tastes like, both in contrast to the Han Chinese pride in *keqi* (politeness, correct behaviour) and cuisine. I quickly learned that to ask someone if they were Miao could be taken as an insult and I occasionally heard Han people describe other Han as 'Miao' meaning that they are uncouth. At the same time, Kho Xiong people sometimes describe Han people as untrustworthy and dirty. Miss Shi told me that when she was at school in Fenghuang, an old city about 50 kilometres south of Jishou, Han children called them 'Miao zi' (Little Miaos) and the Miao students responded by calling them pigs or

dogs. Shi writes that many Han violate the norms of behaviour in a rural Miao home and are regarded as vulgar (Shi 1986: 134).

Lowland Chinese speaking people who moved to live in the highland areas regarded the Kho Xiong as lacking refinement and organisation. A Han woman who had lived in the Miao highland town of Laershan for about ten years told me that the Miao people were lazy compared with the Han and that she had no wish to learn Kho Xiong since it was not a proper language, because it had no written form. She also believed that there had been no temples or schools in the area before the Communists came to power since the place had just been run by bandits. This was in contradiction to what I had learned from local people in a matter of days.

Similar views were found in lowland areas where villages of Han and Kho Xiong ancestry were interspersed, such as Majingao and Ganziping. Ganziping, a few kilometres south of Jishou, is the site of one of the earliest Han Chinese settlements in the area. Later, it and surrounding villages were administered as *min* under the *tun* system and the villages on the other, steeper side of the river were classified by the administration as Miao. Though the villagers are not now easily distinguished by costume or language these differences are still assumed to exist. People in Ganziping were particularly prejudiced against Miao people judging by the jokes which were being told by teachers in the primary school staffroom. For example, they were laughing about a young teacher, not himself present, who was so clever that he could speak Miao, English and Chinese - it was just a pity that his Chinese wasn't very good! When I was asked if we ate rice in Britain I said that we did sometimes but that we also often ate potatoes. It was a conversation I must have had well over a hundred times during my fieldwork but this time it led to a rather derisive aside that maybe we wore turbans round our heads too, like Miao people.

I knew that there were people of Kho Xiong descent living in Ganziping, since while I was there I saw a list of women illiterates in the village and found a number of them to have Kho Xiong surnames such as Long and Wu. However, my friend in the village denied this absolutely, saying it was impossible that there could be Miao people in her village. Questioned about the names she said they must have come

from somewhere else, perhaps Majingao. She was presumably unable to accept that people she lived so closely with were from that 'Other' category across the river, the Miao.

Other stereotyped views were found in the Majingao area, another area where Han Chinese have settled the lowlands and Kho Xiong speakers live in the hills, though here the differences of language and dress are more apparent. For example, I was told that in Majingao Miao parents tell their children, 'Don't cry or the Han people will take you away,' and the Han parents tell their children, 'Don't cry or the Miao people will kill you,' and as a result the children grew up thinking they were very different from each other. Such evidence suggests that the traits characterised as Miao are generally attributed to the people in the highland areas. Lowland and urban people of Kho Xiong descent are usually not perceived as Miao or Kho Xiong, even though they may be officially registered as Miao. I was told countless times that I could learn nothing about the Miao in and around Jishou, and that the villages nearby, though they used to be Miao were now no different. Perhaps the only trait which is often attributed both to the Kho Xiong and to their Chinese speaking descendants is that of character or temper, since they are considered to have a straightforwardness of temperament. This view is held both by urban people and by rural Kho Xiong. For example, I was told that Jishou people liked to employ young people from Kho Xiong speaking villages because they could trust them with money. I also found that, when I was introduced to people in a Kho Xiong speaking village, it was explained in my favour that the British were not like the Han people since they say what they think. City people of Kho Xiong ancestry claimed that they retained this temperament. For example, I was told of people who could not rise in the Party because they were Miao and too honest to flatter the other cadres. One such person was Old Liang who joined the Communist Party in the early eighties but was too ready to point out self-seeking behaviour and inconstancies among other cadres. It was also said of the Prefectural Party Secretary, who was imprisoned on a suspended death sentence for corruption, that he refused to divulge the names of other people who were involved because 'he had some Miao temper' and was loyal to them as other Miao people. It seems that this is also a trait which, like the learning of Kho

Xiong language, can make people who are classified as Han acceptable to the Kho Xiong. I learned that the precondition for learning about secret Kho Xiong hunting practices was one of temperament rather than birth. Liang Zhaohui told me that a lot of skill is involved in hunting and the Kho Xiong attribute their knowledge of animals to a master who is not human. It is believed that as a result of this, some people know exactly when animals will come and which path they take and can set traps for them. Sometimes this is done by tracking, sometimes by the smell, sometimes there is no easy explanation. However, he said that Kho Xiong people will only teach others the secret of this if they think they are honest. I tried to get a clearer definition of this and he said some people think the Han are cunning or that they harbour some evil thoughts, but if a Han person can convince them that he is honest he will learn the secrets of hunting.

Conclusions

I suggest that the material I have been discussing indicates the working out of a notion of asymmetry at a number of different levels. I have already discussed the asymmetry by which educated people throughout China make a distinction between the educated *wen* centre and increasingly *tu* peripheries. This is a contrast between civilised and uncivilised, literate and illiterate, sophisticated and natural. The same kind of asymmetry is also worked out on a smaller scale. In West Hunan this is between incomers and locals and between educated and uneducated, urban and rural, highland and lowland. Nonetheless, this is not simply the working out of an attitude of superiority. As I discussed in Chapter Three, people from other parts of China regard West Hunan both as primitive and as a place of untainted traditional customs, the equivalent perhaps of an earlier Han way of life. Qualities of honesty and straightforwardness are stressed by non-locals speaking of West Hunan people, as by lowlanders speaking of highlanders. Moreover, as I discuss in the following chapter, lowland people regard highland people, not just as backward but also as people who have access to efficacious ritual practices.

It is clear that ascriptions and self ascriptions of difference on the basis of language and cultural practices are made in West Hunan and that these fall within those activities which are described by anthropologists as the expression of ethnic

difference. Such distinctions are made between lowland and highland and also, sometimes, within the context of the lowlands themselves. Here some villagers characterise themselves as Han and contrast themselves with the Miao, and *vice versa*. There are in fact a number of possible ways in which ethnic distinctions are made and these vary, depending on whom one asks. While scholars and cadres may talk of a pan-Miao identity, other West Hunan people make distinctions between highland and lowland. In addition to this, highland people are aware of differences between the Kho Xiong villages themselves, as well as the differences between themselves and the lowland people. Finally, as described in Chapter Five, non-locals regard the whole population of West Hunan, themselves excepted, as minority.

In this respect, a comparison can be drawn between the situation around Jishou and that described by Honig in Shanghai. Honig writes that she set out looking for a group of people in Shanghai whose identity is based on, and named after, a common origin in a place called Subei. She continues, '[w]hen I began to probe, however, I discovered that Subei was not an objective, clearly defined place, but rather represented a belief in the homogeneity of a particular region.' This region 'could be defined by geography, language or economics - but each of these produced very different, if not contradictory, definitions.' As a result of this, rather than assuming that she could produce 'a straight history of the Subei people', she examined 'the process through which the category Subei people was constructed and the function it played' (Honig 1992: xii).

It might be asked why I have put so little emphasis on ethnic difference in earlier chapters. The answer to this is that I have found that, despite our awareness of the situational nature of ethnicity, a foregrounding of ethnic difference still leads us to lose sight of the relativity of identities and interactions. Fardon points out that 'it is difficult to avoid use of an ethnic term even in order to deny the homogeneity of those covered by that term' (1996: 134). Similarly, I have found that when I have presented this material to a Western anthropological audience and described practices in terms of 'Miao' and 'Han' ways of life, the result has been an overemphasis on the image of bounded ethnic groups. My aim has been to bring out

the shifting, context dependant perceptions of ethnic difference made by people in West Hunan, without implying that they have the ‘all or nothing’ qualities of the classifications made by official discourse.

Moreover, though I have discussed them in some depth here, ethnic distinctions are often not foregrounded in day to day life. In the following chapter I argue that, rather than seeing themselves and others primarily in terms of ethnic difference, West Hunan people see themselves as people with a shared history of ethnic interaction. I continue the theme taken up in Chapter Five, looking at the interactions which have continued to take place in West Hunan between the people now classified as Miao and Han and suggesting that the shared history of this interaction is important to West Hunan people’s sense of identity.

¹ This includes a reconsideration of some material that I have already discussed.

² Figures in the Xiangxi Minzu Renkou Fenbu Biao (n.d.) show the percentages of the Han, Miao, Tujia and Bai in Jishou city to be as follows;

	1990	1982	1964
Han	26.77	37.89	44.60
Miao	39.41	39.94	41.06
Tujia	30.57	22.00	14.26
Bai	0.32	-	-
Total population	230,614	179,783	110,981

³ Ganziping, as I discuss in Chapter Five, was one of the earliest areas to be settled by incoming Han during the Ming dynasty.

⁴ A similar situation, in Taiwan, is discussed by Brown (1996).

⁵ Having been introduced to Shi Qigui’s book as a result of contact with me, Old Liang said that he wanted to write down the history of the Kho Xiong people, as described by Shi, in the form of a Miao song and record it so that his relatives could learn about it.

⁶ The Hmong are the largest and most westerly subgroup of the Miao and most of the American Hmong are people who migrated to the United States from South East Asia as refugees, after becoming involved in American military operations in Laos.

⁷ The political sensitivity of the conference was brought home to me when, on three separate occasions I was told that someone who had attended the conference would be able to give me copies of the paper, but, on each occasion, by the time I visited the people concerned the papers were found to have been ‘lost’.

⁸ The use of the word lowland here is rather different from the way it has been employed by other writers on the area who use it to describe the eastern part of West Hunan around the Yuan valley, now in Huaihua Prefecture. I am using it to describe the relatively prosperous land in the Dong and Tuo river valleys, around Jishou, Fenghuang, Yaxi, Qianzhou and Majingao.

⁹ I have described the difficulties I experienced gaining access to rural areas in Chapter One.

¹⁰ This clear distinction between Han and Miao is of course misleading. As an example of this, I discuss the question of whether the Celestial Kings can be seen as Han or Miao in the following chapter.

¹¹ It is only recently that people in China have been allowed some choice in their place of work. Miss Shi’s parents were more politically involved than most villagers and both were posted to Zhuzhou. Her father is today a local rural cadre.

Chapter Nine - Multivocal Interpretations of the Celestial Kings

In Chapter Seven I showed how practices and stories concerned with the temple of the Celestial Kings differed depending on whether they were associated with officials and written texts or with the people of West Hunan more generally. Before 1949, temple observances by officials included the standardised rituals associated with the state cult, such as spring and autumn festivals. This reflected the concern of officials with promoting a unified and standardised form of culture throughout China. The official story of the temple carries similar implications. The Celestial Kings are Imperial soldiers and are contrasted with the primitive Miao who rebel against the Chinese state. Most visitors, however, associated the temple less with China, in the broader sense, than with things closer to home. They were concerned only with the festivals specific to these particular local deities and with addressing their own personal concerns. I also showed that official and local interpretations were different but interacting and that only the local views and observances have persisted until today.

In this chapter I look in more detail at current local views of the Celestial Kings and their stories. Today, of course, government employees are no longer involved in worship at the temple, at least not in their official capacity. But local stories of the deities continue to express a point of view which is often challenging to that of official policy and sometimes leads to outright conflict. In particular, I suggest that they have a shifting and multi-vocal quality which contrasts with official distinctions. In making this point, I draw attention to a contrast between dialogic, ambiguous local views and the more rigid and hierarchical nature of official classifications which is reminiscent of the work of Bakhtin (1994). In the first half of this chapter I show how these deities and other aspects of local culture are not defined specifically as Miao or Han.

Origin Stories and Ritual Practitioners

In the previous chapter and in Chapter Five I have made the point that despite the differences which are distinguished locally between Miao and Han, highland and

lowland, there is also a considerable amount of interaction. This is a feature of South China and Southeast Asia more generally. Writers on this area indicate that, although peoples on the periphery of the Chinese sphere of influence employ terms of ethnic difference such as Karen, Hmong, Shan, Kachin, there are intricate patterns of interaction with the peoples so described. This is indicated in the ease with which people change ethnic identity. For example, Tooker writes of people in northern Thailand who change from defining themselves as Chinese to Akha, a highland minority group (1992: 800). Most famously, Leach (1964) writes of how the Shan, rice cultivating Buddhists influenced by the Chinese trade routes which formerly crossed northern Burma, showed cultural differences from the Kachin who were mountain dwelling shifting cultivators, but could not be understood in isolation from each other. He writes that Shan and Kachin share markets 'and in the ordinary affairs of life they are much mixed up together', some individuals claiming allegiance to both Shan and Kachin (1964: 2-3, 49, 60). Leach points out the difficulty of looking at one group of people without taking into account their interactions with others, a point which is taken up by Lehman who argues that 'the structures of their social systems and cultures can be shown to be largely means of adapting to and symbolizing their essential symbiosis with civilisation', that is their 'political and economic relations with the Burma-Shan civilisation (1967: 53-4). Similarly, Tapp shows that many of the stories of the White Hmong of Thailand are concerned with their relationship with the Chinese, to whom they claim they have lost their writing systems and the chance to occupy the most auspicious burial sites (Tapp 1989: 147f).

As I explained in Chapter One, the assimilation of southern cultures into Chinese society, which took place from the Han dynasty onwards, was an interactive process. Wiens (1967) suggests that the culturally mixed nature of the resulting southern Han culture accounts for its 'impact power and inner energy.' Thus, he claims;

we have a simple explanation of the speed with which [Han culture] spread over and assimilated the adjacent peoples, whereby elements of the peripheral folk culture have been retained in this new culture, and whereby this culture has evolved out of parts of the local cultures which themselves are results of intermixtures. The peripheral folk experienced the new culture not as an alien culture, but as a further extension of its own ancient culture (Wiens 1967: 45).

Rather than talking about exclusive ethnic groups or categories, related only in terms of mutual opposition, we should perhaps think in terms of a Southern culture which shared some broad similarities, but parts of which were less influenced by *wen* (i.e. literate, Chinese speaking) culture than others. These came to be classified as minority. The people thus classified had a different relationship with the Chinese state and its administrative hierarchy than did those who had been more thoroughly assimilated. These historical connections between the populations now classified minority and Han would account for the ease with which people change nationality and the fact that today and in the past there have been similarities between minority culture and the ‘superstitious’ practices of the Han such as dragon worship and *gu* magic.

In the following sections I enlarge on the point that I made in Chapter Five. Whereas a perception of separate groups based on ethnicity or nationality takes precedence in official discourse, many West Hunan people do not talk solely in these terms. Local people consider the heterogeneity of the area, and the different histories of its relations with the state, to be not just indications of boundaries between different groups, but also as part of a shared history of interaction. I begin by looking at this in the context of surname stories.

The membership of a surname group has been described as one of the most important forms of ‘we-group identification’ for the Han Chinese (Ebrey 1996: 21). In West Hunan I found that it was significant also for people who claimed minority nationality. There are five surnames in West Hunan which are particularly associated with Miao: Wu, Long, Ma, Liao and Shi. These surnames were given to the Miao when the area first came under control of the state, as a way of making it easier for records to be kept. However, the names do not overlap with the original Miao clans, with the result that some families of the same surname can marry each other, a practice which is otherwise generally disapproved of in China (Shi 1986: 167 f.,181-2). There are also Miao people with surnames, such as Tian and Liang, which

are shared with local people who claim Han ancestry, and it is these groups that I will discuss.

When I asked lowland people about the origins of their surname groups I was told stories of people coming into the area and adopting minority ways of life. One story of this kind was told to me by a woman called Tian. She said that the Tian surname group had come from Yuanning where a cow's horn had been divided into nine parts and each one had become a brother. The nine brothers then scattered everywhere. She said that she was Tu (i.e. from the Tujia nationality) but that there were also Han people called Tian and they too had come from Yuanning. It is also a common name among Miao people, though she did not say this.

A similar story was told about the Liang surname group. The Liang family *jiapu* (family tree)¹ records that the Liang surname group had originally lived in Jiangxi province but that they scattered during the Ming dynasty, some going to Luxi on the Yuan river and from there further into West Hunan. The branch of the family to which Old Liang belonged had gone from Luxi to Baojing in the north of West Hunan, where they had assimilated with the Kho Xiong speaking population (cf Ling & Ruey 1963: 128). This is supported by the fact that the first two generations in Baojing have Chinese names and after this they take on typical Kho Xiong names. Another branch had gone to Majingao just north of Jishou. Of these, some assimilated with the Kho Xiong and some with the local Han. When Old Liang's son, Liang Zhaohui, went to Majingao to work, both Kho Xiong and Han welcomed him as another member of the surname group. In neither of the above cases was there any suggestion that this change from Han to Miao was strange or remarkable.

These stories suggest that the local lowland views about the origins of Miao, Han and Tujia were very similar since West Hunan people from these families were said to have come from further east, often from the province of Jiangxi, via Luxi or Yuanning, both towns on the Yuan river.² They also suggest that a sense of shared surname group identity has been maintained, despite differences in ethnicity. The ease with which people change nationality is surprising if we think of minority and Han

as separate groups with different origins but, as I have already mentioned, there is evidence that this is not the case.

The same perception of Miao and Han as inter-related cultures would also account for cultural practices which are found in slightly different forms in the highland and lowland populations of West Hunan. *Luo* is an example of a practice which appears in two rather different forms in West Hunan, regarded as minority and Han. In West Hunan the term *luo*, according to Zhang (1994), originally referred to a vow made to the god of pestilence which was later redeemed. Later, Miao people use the term to mean calling on the gods, usually many gods at a time, thus it was used to describe the Kho Xiong practice of stabbing water buffalo, when the gods called upon were ‘the gods from *lionl dond*, *lionl qib*³ [heaven and hell], from the sun and the moon and the stars, from wind and rain, etc.’ (Zhang 1994: 15). The sacrifice of water buffalo can also be seen as a form of *huan luo yuan* since it was done as thanks when a previous request had been granted (Ling & Ruey 1963: 207).

However, *luo* has another meaning, it has generally been taken to refer to a *luo* ceremony incorporating *luo* opera, also known as No drama⁴. This is formalised and performed in Chinese and has until recent years been popular among the Kho Xiong speaking people of West Hunan. This also involves invoking various deities. In West Hunan it invokes not only Lord and Mother Luo, but also a series of other gods, such as ‘calling for the god Xian Feng, calling for the god Kaishan, calling for the god of fortune telling and blacksmiths’ (Zhang 1994: 122). Zhang does not regard *luo* opera as Miao culture because it is spoken and sung mainly in Chinese, but despite this, it was widely adopted by the Kho Xiong, developing into a form led by *laoshi* and sung in part in the Kho Xiong language (Zhang 1994: 128-130, Ling & Ruey 1963: 266 f., Zhou, Zhang & Xie 1992). *Luo* opera continued to be popular in West Hunan and Guizhou after it was no longer performed in East China (cf Kinkley 1977: 298f.). Though I did not witness *luo* opera myself, Zhang writes that it is still performed, and I was told by Gu that about ten years ago her husband’s Kho Xiong put on a performance for her in their village because she was in bad health.⁵ It seems likely that this ready acceptance occurred because it was identified as a more

formalised version of the already existing idea of *luo* rather than the imposition of something exotic from Han culture.

A similar relationship can be argued between *laoshi*, religious specialists of the Kho Xiong population, and *daoshi*, the Daoist specialists of the Chinese speaking population. *Laoshi* is a local term for what Chinese scholars describe as *wu*, usually translated as sorcerer. The characters for *laoshi* are variously given as 老师 meaning teacher and 老士 meaning master or master of ceremonies. There are several differences between *laoshi* and *daoshi*. *Laoshi* can usually speak Kho Xiong and they wear different clothes from *daoshi* since, whereas *daoshi* wear black robes and hats, *laoshi* wear orange robes and ornate head-dresses. *Laoshi* also have a wider range of functions, protecting the village from bad luck whereas *daoshi* in West Hunan are largely associated with funerals. Like religious practitioners of minority peoples of West China, the *tuan kung*, *laoshi* are associated with intricate rituals and shamanic practices such as climbing ladders of knives (Osgood 1963: 301 f, Graham 1961: 104). However, these are not exclusively minority practices and, until the Han dynasty, they were associated with Han *daoshi* (also known as *sai kong*) all over China (De Groot 1910: 1235-6, 1251). In fact, both *laoshi* and *daoshi* are linked to the Daoist tradition and *laoshi* sometimes use Chinese texts. Everyone I asked, rural and urban, Kho Xiong and Chinese speaking, said that there were many similarities between *laoshi* and *daoshi* in West Hunan today. Miss Shi added that some Kho Xiong speakers became *daoshi*.

Furthermore, it is not unknown for Han people to consult minority ritual specialists. As I shall mention in the following chapter, *laoshi* played a role in the inauguration of a new temple at Yaxi. Graham describes how in Yunnan in the early part of this century, some Han Chinese became *tuan kung* (the local equivalent of *laoshi*) though this was considered to be unorthodox, and the very poor Han would employ *tuan kung* at funerals (Graham 1961: 104). Eliade writes that the Han Chinese used to employ ritual specialists of the Yi minority to conduct rituals for the prevention of epidemics (1964: 442-3). Clearly there is considerable overlap between the two kinds of ritual practitioner. It seems likely that the adoption by the Kho Xiong of

what might appear from their perspective to be an exotic Han practice is actually a resort to different, more text based versions of practices with which they are already familiar as part of their way of life. And, similarly, the adoption of ‘minority’ practices and ways of life by Han people can be regarded as a move towards a less text based version of practices with which they were already familiar. Here again, the interstitial spaces of the ‘border area’ of West Hunan challenge the more orthodox, educated view of Han and minority as separate peoples.

The Celestial Kings and the Kho Xiong/Miao

In the following section I discuss the relevance of ethnic distinctions and ethnic interactions to the stories of the Celestial Kings. First, I return to the possibility that minority people may, in the past, have worshipped the Celestial Kings as military figures who suppressed their ancestors, thus worshipping the greater military power of the Han in the form of these deities. I follow this by suggesting that the Celestial Kings are a multi-vocal symbol with resonances of the different histories which are described within the locality.

Some writers imply that the indigenous people of West Hunan took the works of the Han to be objects of reverence. Eberhard, for example, writes of people worshipping the copper stelae which were erected in the area during the Han dynasty to mark the then boundaries of the empire (1968: 369). However, since this instance is drawn from written sources by Chinese scholars, it may not indicate the reverence which is implied. It seems equally possible that such actions were motivated by fear. Shi (1986), a Kho Xiong speaker, records that imperial officials, who visited the Kho Xiong areas of West Hunan during Imperial times, were regarded as dangerous figures who could ‘rule both this world and the nether world’ and that the supernatural power of the brass stamp they used for signing documents could kill the dragons who were believed to live under Kho Xiong houses and bring them luck (Shi 1986: 165). As a result, their visits were followed by purifying rituals which suggest that they were regarded as a supernatural threat rather than objects of reverence. It is also possible that the Kho Xiong were concerned to use the perceived efficacy of Chinese Imperial military figures to their own benefit. For example, when Liang

Zhaohui consulted a Kho Xiong speaking *xian niang* (spirit medium) about his ancestor's grave, she called, among other deities, on Qian Long, the Qing dynasty emperor who reigned at the time of the bloody suppression of the 'Miao' rebellions. There are other accounts of indigenous people employing the might of the Imperial Chinese state. Graham records a Miao song from Yunnan, which describes how official Imperial seals were used by Miao people to dispel demons from the sick (Graham 1954: 41). However, I came across no evidence that the Celestial Kings are worshipped today as symbols of the Imperial state and I never heard worshippers describe them as people who killed the Kho Xiong.

Another possible reason for the worship of the Celestial Kings by the Kho Xiong is that they are regarded as Kho Xiong or Miao figures rather than as Han. As I have mentioned, stories of dragon birth are common in south China and are often associated with pre-Han culture. A more overt link between the story of the Celestial Kings and the Miao is found in the Miao origin story recorded in Yunnan by Graham which is as follows;

In ancient times a young unmarried woman was bathing in a pool. The pool was deep, and of course she was naked. Suddenly she felt something hard enter her vagina. The water was not very clear, and she saw nothing and supposed that she had accidentally run into a wooden snag in the water. She became pregnant and later gave birth to the son of the Dragon King, who was an ancestor to the Miao (Graham 1954: 27).

This is almost identical to the version of the story found in the gazetteer recorded in 1740, the earliest of the gazetteers collected in Hunan *Difang Zhi*. In this account, the stories of the Celestial Kings themselves are said to be connected with the Miao since the deities are said to be sons of the Bamboo King, a leader of the local minority people. The story is as follows;

The temple of the Bamboo King is situated in Yaxi, which is five *li* away from Qianzhou city in the north and is customarily called 'White Emperor Heavenly Kings Temple'. According to 'A story of Man and Yi' in the book of the Eastern Han dynasty, "A girl in Yelang [a place in Guizhou] was playing in the Dun river when three huge pieces of bamboo drifted towards her feet. She heard the cry of a baby coming from one of them, she cut it open and found a little boy inside it so she took him back with her to look after. As the boy grew up he

developed great talent and courage and later he declared himself King of Yelang and took Zhu [bamboo] as his surname. In the Yuanding, 6th year of the reign of the Emperor Wudi⁶ the minorities in the Southwest were subjugated and the territory was ruled by the Qiangke Kingdom. The Bamboo King also came out and surrendered. First he was given an imperial reward and was still entitled to call himself king but later he was given the death penalty.

The minorities of Yi and Liao all believed the Bamboo King to be not of mortal birth and respected them greatly, so they petitioned the authorities to offer the official posts to his descendants. Wuba, governor of Qianke, presented the peoples' petition to the palace and the emperor made the three sons of the Bamboo King into kings and permitted them to succeed to their father's position" (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 352).

Although the events of the story are said to have taken place in Guizhou, this version of the story states clearly that the deities in Yaxi are his sons. There are similarities here with the stories I quoted in Chapter Seven, especially in its themes of insurrection and the untrustworthiness of the emperor, but the obvious difference is that the Bamboo King is a hero from a minority nationality. This implies that the temple is concerned with the independence and military might of the indigenous people of West Hunan and it is possible that this was the earlier meaning, which was later transformed when the area came under the control of the Imperial state. Such implications would of course appear threatening to local officials and it is notable that later gazetteer accounts dismiss this version as incorrect (Hunan Difang Zhi 1991: 402, 404). Ling and Ruey, however, consider the story of the Bamboo King to be the 'correct' version of the story of the Yaxi temple and also suggest that the West Hunan Miao are descendants of the Bamboo King who migrated from Yelang (1963: 26). I have never heard the story of the Bamboo King mentioned, but its possible past connection with the temple may have accounted for the temple's popularity among Kho Xiong speaking people.

Although the Bamboo King is not mentioned, the temple of Celestial Kings is still regarded by some as a temple to a former Kho Xiong leader. Mrs Luo told me that some people from highlands confuse San Da Wang, (Three Great Kings, another name for the Celestial Kings) with Shan Dai Wang, the name of a Miao leader from the Laershan region. She said that a board about the life of Shan Dai Wang was at

one time left at the temple by a spirit medium who, she said, was a Miao woman. She said that highland people believed that Shan Dai Wang had unified the Miao people of Laershan and made them strong, so that nobody could *qishi* (humiliate) them. However, I found further information about this figure hard to obtain. On being urged to drink *baijiu* (rice spirits) in Old Liang's village, I noticed that his name was mentioned, but when I asked Old Liang why this was, he looked uneasy and said that he did not know about these things.⁷

The identification of the Celestial Kings with the Kho Xiong was not limited to highland people. For a long time, I was aware only of the consistency of local lowland peoples' stories of the Celestial Kings, that is, that they were protectors of the locality who had fallen foul of the emperor. However, as I asked more questions about the cult, I realised that these versions expressed a heterogeneous as well as a shared culture. I became aware of this when I asked about the origins or surnames of the deities. When I asked (the information was never given otherwise) I was usually told that the Celestial Kings were Han. However, I was sometimes told that they were Miao, or minority, (*shaoshu minzu* or *minzu*), or could speak Miao language. Similarly, I was usually told (if I asked) that they were called Yang or Luo, both common Han surnames in the village, but I was sometimes told that their surname was Long. This is appropriate because the character *long* means dragon, but since Long is one of five most common surnames of the Kho Xiong, it also implies that the Celestial Kings were Kho Xiong. I was told, by a woman in the Han village of Ganziping, that the Celestial Kings were called Long and their mother was called Wu, another of the old five Kho Xiong surnames. With the exception of the last case, the people who told me that the deities were Miao were themselves of Kho Xiong speaking origins, suggesting that their respect for the deities today as officials does not presuppose that they are regarded as Han Chinese officials.

These two kinds of stories reflect rather different views of the relationship between the Kho Xiong and Imperial power. In the stories of the Bamboo King and Shan Dai Wang the deity (since in both cases it is a single figure rather than three) is associated with protecting the minority or highland people and the stories present an

opposition between the Kho Xiong and the Chinese state, told from the point of view of the Kho Xiong. In the other stories I have described, however, the Kho Xiong are far more implicated with official power. It appears that the Celestial Kings are officials, who are also Kho Xiong. This may reflect the different degrees of assimilation in highland and lowland areas and it is relevant that in the stories recorded by Shi (1986) in the 1940s, the Celestial Kings are portrayed both as suppressing Miao rebels (who attack the area from Guizhou province, i.e. elsewhere) and as having elements of Kho Xiong culture. As well as expressing shared locality, the different ancestries of lowland people are reflected in the stories of the Celestial Kings.

Similar themes are present in the stories of the bandits and local heroes which I discussed in Chapter Seven. These were people who were concerned with the defence of an area rather than the defence of ethnic differences. They often numbered both Kho Xiong speakers and Chinese speakers among their followers and one would assume that the Chinese speakers included people of Han and Kho Xiong ancestry. For example, the hero or bandit, Long Yunfei, was a Kho Xiong person who had Chinese speaking as well as Kho Xiong speaking followers. However, the fact that their most loyal followers were often members of the same surname group as their leader did not necessarily mean this surname group was linguistically or culturally homogenous. As I have mentioned, the Liang family members in West Hunan included both Kho Xiong and Chinese speakers and in Majingao they live in close proximity. The hero Liang Guangxing had followers among all the Liang and today they all take a pride in his history but the Kho Xiong speakers claim that he is Kho Xiong and the Chinese speakers that he is Han. The case of the earlier, eighteenth century hero, Yang Gongbo is similar. Yang Gongbo was said to have fought against the Japanese in Taiwan and people say that Yang Gongbo could not die, even when under gunfire. During the Cultural Revolution his grave was dug up and they found his body undecayed in its official robes. 'Yang', like Liang and Tian, is a surname group which includes both Kho Xiong speaking and Chinese speaking members.⁸ Yang Gongbo is buried just outside Jishou and I was told that in Jishou he is generally thought to have been a local Han. However, it is claimed by the Yang

family from a formerly Kho Xiong speaking village on the outskirts of Jishou, that he is their ancestor. In addition to this, other members of the Yang clan, from the more distant Kho Xiong speaking village of Zhaiyang, claim that he was born in their village. Despite the disparity between these stories, I never heard that they gave rise to any kind of clash or conflict. A similar acceptance of different versions of the same story among different but related groups is described by Leach (1964: 89, 98) and I suggest that through these stories people express both the shared and the disparate nature of West Hunan culture.

These stories appear to be similar to the situation which Watson describes, where the powers which people attribute to a deity differ depending on their social status. So, in Hong Kong, 'every category or class of person had a different representation of T'ien Hou'. Government officials saw her as 'a symbol of coastal pacification' and to powerful lineage members she was 'a symbol of territorial control'. Women have a different view again, in which she is perceived as a fertility goddess and to the boat people 'the goddess symbolises mastery of the sea - she appealed to them primarily for her ability to quell storms' (Watson 1985: 317-322).

There is no suggestion, however, that the people who worship at the temple of the Celestial Kings regard themselves as different factions. Rather than representing this as indicative of separate ethnic groups I suggest that is more like a hybrid community, united by a common symbol. Both temples and bandit heroes can be seen as multi-vocal symbols of a shared identity which bring people together while allowing them to have their own interpretations. As A P Cohen writes,

symbols ... do more than merely stand for or represent someone else. Indeed, if that was all they did, they would be redundant. They also allow those who employ them to supply part of their meaning (1985: 14).

In this respect the relationship between ethnicity and worship at the temple is rather different from that described at temple cults in the south-eastern Chinese coastal area. Sangren (1987) and Feuchtwang (1992) have described situations where adherence to a particular cult was influenced by membership of a particular cultural group. Thus, Sangren describes how different ethnic groups frequent different

markets and temple cults (1992: 108) and Feuchtwang writes of how, 'the Taipei basin is defined into networks of compatriot communities by the division of incense, subfigures and regional organisations of root temples and their festivals' (1992: 109). In a similar fashion, Choi shows that on Cheung Chau island, Hong Kong, different ethnic groups are allowed to participate to different degrees in a yearly temple festival (Choi 1995). In these cults, as in other cults in East China, including those without particular relevance to ethnic divisions, particular attention is paid to tracing the boundary. At the temple of the Celestial Kings, no attention is paid to territorial boundaries. People from all over West Hunan and of all kinds of ethnic backgrounds attend, bringing, as we have seen, their different views of what the temple stands for.

Different Views of the Temple of the Celestial Kings Today

I have suggested that in the past, officials have attempted to assert fixed ideas of state and barbarian, Han and Miao and placed the stories of the Celestial Kings into this context. In the remainder of this chapter I show that employees of the state continue to impose fixed meanings on the temple of the Celestial Kings and the people who visit it counter this with different meanings which allow them to evade the attempts at control. Since the establishment of the Socialist state, officials are, of course, no longer involved in worship at the temple and the written version of the story of the Celestial Kings is no longer discussed there. However, the temple has been registered as an example of Minority Culture and therefore is the responsibility of the Minority Affairs Bureau.⁹ Thus, although, when I first visited it, the temple appeared to be run by local people based on their memories, there were two forms of authority in the temple, the other being the Minority Affairs Bureau.

During the first few months of my fieldwork, the Minority Affairs Bureau appeared to have little direction over the conduct of the people and the temple. Their influence was only apparent in the new temple building, where craftsmen inside were rebuilding the deities, and in the office where member of the Minority Affairs Bureau collected money. Visitors to the temple deferred to the deities themselves or to the incense sellers' local knowledge, where their conduct in the temple was concerned. At this time there were just hints of the tensions which were developing

between the Minority Affairs Bureau and the local people. For example, one day when I visited the temple, I found that graffiti had been written on the walls saying 'beware of being cheated here.' The person who pointed them out to me spoke quite approvingly of this graffiti, looking hard at one of the incense sellers, a woman who, I later found out, had relatives in the Minority Affairs Bureau and was distrusted by the other incense sellers. These tensions became more apparent at the Flower Bringing (*Dai Hua*) Festival in the spring of 1996.

The Flower Bringing Festival 1996

Before 1949, the most important occasion in the ritual calendar had been a fast to commemorate the death of the Celestial Kings. After the fast, a festival was held at which animals were sacrificed to the Celestial Kings under the direction of the custodians at the temple, and performances of local opera were put on. Today, the Celestial Kings are still the most important deities at the temple and, whatever their requests, visitors pay most attention to consulting them. However, though the death of the Celestial Kings is commemorated with offerings and prayers, the most popular occasion in the ritual calendar is the Flower Bringing (*Dai Hua*) Festival, which commemorates the birthday of Mu Yi, the mother of the Celestial Kings. It seems likely that her current popularity is due to the predominance of women among the people who worship at the temple.

Mu Yi, the mother of the Celestial Kings is, like her sons, considered to be very *ling* and, like the Buddhist deity Guanyin, she is regarded, particularly, as a protector of women. When recounting the story of the Celestial Kings, people usually include an account of how Mu Yi was a local woman called Yang. She is always referred to as 'Niangniang', a term of respect which can be translated as 'Lady,' and her story is clearly related to those of the river and dragon goddesses of south China, which are described by Eberhard (1968: 38 f.,232 f.) and Schaefer (1967: 219, 255).

Unlike Guanyin but like the Celestial Kings, Mu Yi is believed to be an official, capable of taking revenge on people who do not show her respect. For example, a man from the village of Ganziping told me a story about a young boy who, when he

saw the statue of Mu Yi and how small her feet were, said that when he grew up he wanted to have feet as small as that. He was struck unconscious by the deity and when he came round his hands were trembling, and did so for the rest of his life. A woman whom I met at the temple said that, quite recently, a boy had urinated in the candle holder in front of the goddess and, although no-one saw this at the time, a spirit medium met him at a bus stop, and, because of her ability to communicate with the deities at the temple, she started shouting about what he had done to everyone around. Mu Yi's official status was also demonstrated when, the day before the Flower Bringing Festival of 1996, a new image of Mu Yi was brought from Qianzhou to a shrine behind the new temple to the Celestial Kings. The journey from Qianzhou had been in the form of a procession, in which she was accompanied by people with placards bearing the instructions on their conduct towards the deity. These were worded as they would have been for a living official in Imperial times 'keep silence' (*su jing*).

Festival days, of which the celebration of Mu Yi's birthday is the most popular, may attract thousands of people to the temple. On the paths through Yaxi village to the temple there are more people than usual selling incense, paper money, red candles, straw sandals and other goods. Some people walk to the temple from Jishou or Qianzhou, others take the minibus to Yaxi village. Some of these visitors come in large groups, others in twos and threes, or alone. Many people know each other and the incense sellers and exchange greetings. If asked, people say that they are going to *bei pusa*¹⁰ or *jing pusa*, that is, to show respect to or pray to the deities. When I was present they also commented on me and, if I was alone or with Chinese people, they would assume that the foreigner had come to pay her respects to the deities.

On this occasion many people, most of them women, were bringing bunches of artificial flowers to give to Mu Yi and, on arriving at the temple, we found crowds of people in front of the unofficial shrine, making offerings and saying prayers. Piles of smouldering incense, spirit money and artificial flowers lay on the ground, throwing off a considerable amount of heat. Apart from the offerings of flowers and the large numbers of people attending, the occasion was little different from an ordinary day at

the temple, though people did sit around in front of the museum building and chat and, in a small scale reconstruction of activities at temple festivals of the past, a few women sang excerpts from opera, with encouragement and prompting from their audience.

As I had found on other visits to temples, certain aspects were influenced by people's memories of the pre-1949 temple. I was visiting the temple in the company of Mrs Gu and her friend Mrs Cai, both of them retired school-teachers from Jishou Number One Primary School. Mrs Cai had some problems, though I never learned exactly what they were. She had never been to the temple of the Celestial Kings before but had heard that they were very *ling*. Because the incense sellers were so busy, it was Mrs Gu who organised things, holding the incense and getting it ready for each deity, three sticks each as usual, and generally telling her what to do. Mrs Cai put out boiled meat and a bottle of *baijiu* in front of the old figures of the Celestial Kings and Mu Yi, today covered with flowers, got to her knees holding the incense between her palms and bowed several times, praying silently. After praying to each deity she threw a cup of *baijiu* as a libation. Although it was Mrs Cai who was asking the deities for help, she knew very little about them except that they were *ling*. She asked Mrs Gu the names of all the deities, though even she was not sure about the minor deities in the side shrines, such as the one variously described as Dong Wang or Confucius.

From the unofficial shrine we went to look at the new figure of Mu Yi, which was in a new shrine behind the new temple. Women were giving her plastic flowers or burning them outside the shrine and propped up next to her were the banners from the procession. While we were there, someone came up and started listing all the things wrong with the image of Mu Yi, the face too fat, the eyes not well drawn, the hands too big. Others came and agreed that it was not good, looked like a man and in the following weeks these features were altered. However, the revival of the festival was not wholly free from state regulation. The presence of the Minority Affairs Bureau became clear when I started to take an interest in the spirit mediums

who were attending the occasion. Before describing this, however, I discuss spirit mediums more generally.

Spirit Mediums in China

Spirit mediums (*xian niang* lit. fairy women), were quite numerous in the Jishou area and were people who were said to be able to communicate with the spirits of the dead and with the deities. As has been described in other parts of the world (cf. Lewis 1971: 59f), in West Hunan, a spirit medium's career would begin with an initial possession, which was involuntary, and took the form of a period of illness. As a result, the woman concerned would accede to the deity or spirit who possessed her and would communicate with him or her, and other figures, at regular intervals. New mediums might seek the advice of another medium and develop their skills so that they could enter a trance when asked to do so, but they would also be susceptible to continuing episodes of involuntary possession. All the mediums I knew of were rural women, and I heard that it was possible, though rare, to find male mediums (*xian gong*).

People who need help from a medium often invite them to their homes, though mediums may also receive people in their own homes or they may set up at a small temple and receive clients there. Often the mediums refuse payment for their services and the reason given is that it is through the agency of the possessing spirit, not themselves, that the activities are carried out. As a result of their possession, many of them assert that they have also learned skills in healing, in reading people's pasts and their futures. For this, they do not have to be in a trance, but in order to communicate with dead relatives or to contact spirits which are thought to be haunting one's house, a seance must be held. A spirit medium's seance is a highly theatrical experience. Her possession begins when her foot, and sometimes her whole body, begins to shake. This is said to be a sign that she has mounted her horse to take her to the spirit realm. The medium then takes on the voices of deities and of the dead and her words are interpreted by a companion or by the audience generally. During the seance, offerings are made to the deity or the deceased with whom she is communicating. Such sessions may involve emotionally charged communication

between people and their dead relatives, but, in the cases I have seen, they also resulted in some kind of resolution, either reassurance that the dead relative is content, or a decision on a course of action, perhaps involving modifying the *fengshui* of the grave. Healing sessions, where the medium is not in a trance, may also involve emotional outbursts from those concerned. Since a consultation may attract interested onlookers, it can appear to be a public airing of personal issues which is in complete contrast to everyday life.

The spirit mediums differ from the male ritual practitioners also found in West Hunan who are known as *daoshi* and *laoshi*, some of whom can also contact spirits. These are associated with Daoist practices involving chanting, music and ritual paraphernalia and they are asked to perform rituals at temples, including Buddhist ones. Whereas spirit mediums begin their careers with an involuntary possession, this is not necessarily the case with *daoshi* and *laoshi* whose positions depend more on training and knowledge of appropriate rituals and texts. Unlike the ritual practitioners, mediums wear ordinary clothes and do not refer to texts and, in contrast to the ritual activities of the *daoshi* and *laoshi*, their contact with the deities is very personal and unpredictable.

Kinkley writes that in West Hunan in the early part of this century, '[m]ale shaman-priests among the Miao performed only at the prescribed ceremonies,' and contrasts them with mediums (*xian niang*) who could communicate with spirits and cure illness (1977: 293-4). An association between individual, female spirit mediums and communication with spirits of the dead has been noted in other parts of China. De Groot writes of women mediums riding spirit horses or tigers to reach the spirit world and states that women's seances were small affairs conducted from home rather than at temples (1907: 1324, 1332). Osgood, writing on Yunnan in the 1930s makes a distinction between the male shaman (*tuan kung*, equivalent to the West Hunan *laoshi*) who employs chanting, dancing and various ritual equipment and wounds himself, and the female medium whose initial possession was involuntary, who dressed in ordinary clothes and whose seances were a low key, 'private matter' (1963: 301f., 313-4). Elliott describes how communication with dead relatives is

more likely to be done by a woman medium working from home, or visiting one's own home (1955: 134-5).

Although female mediums working from home are often possessed by 'third aunt', another term for Guanyin (see for example Elliott 1955: 137) the spirit mediums of whom I am writing are not associated with orthodox Buddhist or Daoist temples. This is not unique to West Hunan, as Osgood indicates when he writes that in the home of a medium in Yunnan, 'was a roomful of images which were so atypical of the usual religious figures that they frightened the visitors' (1963: 315). Similarly, De Groot writes that 'classical books and almanacs' were removed from the room when female mediums were holding a seance in case they thwarted practice (1907: 1333). Seaman describes a medium, in this case male, who communicated with the Emperor of the Dark Heavens a Taiwanese military deity of the underworld and, in contrast to the daoshi, became possessed only 'according to divine whim' (1978: 156-7).

In West Hunan the deities with whom the mediums most often communicated were the Celestial Kings, but new temples could be set up to other deities if the spirit mediums declared that the deities had asked for this. For example, on the outskirts of Jishou, a temple had been set up to Mao Zedong and other deceased leaders of the Communist Party who were now considered to be deities. This was because they had communicated this wish to a local medium. It appears then that mediumship, even more than Daoist rituals, is a heterodox practice, unpredictable, inconsistent and removed from the influence of written texts or institutional religions.

However, it should not be assumed that this is the form which possession takes all over China. There are many accounts of mediums who, after the initial involuntary possession, become involved with groups of mediums associated with particular temples, though beliefs may differ greatly between each them (Jordan & Overmyer 1986: 6). Such groups may be involved with spirit writing cults which produce and circulate written texts, and are particularly concerned with morality (Seaman 1978 : 156-9). Other accounts describe groups of young men associated with temples

whose activities when in a trance may include wounding themselves or performing exorcisms by using tridents and smashing jars and they also are believed to have the ability to heal and to communicate with deities (Elliott: 1955: 63 , Jordan 1972: 78-81, Harvey 1933: 133 f.). I was told that in West Hunan today, though an increasing number of local women are becoming spirit mediums and they often know each other, they do not form associations. The boards at the temple indicate that there are also spirit mediums who write down the messages which the deities communicate to them but these too do not appear to be members of associations.

Spirit mediums were not talked about openly in Jishou. In part this is because they come under the classification of 'feudal superstition' (*fengjian mixiu*) (Anagnost 1994: 234) and were therefore potentially at risk of criticism from local government. However, Jordan, writing of Taiwan in the 1960s, also experienced difficulty obtaining information on this subject and several writers mention that mediumship in Taiwan and Singapore is regarded by some with disdain and associated with the poor and low class, though those involved with spirit writing cults may have higher status (Elliott 1955: 15, 71, Jordan and Overmyer 1986: 86, Jordan 1972: 69). This suggests that reluctance to discuss these matters in mainland China may not be simply a result of government policy.

Many urban people claimed that mediums were insane, though whether this was because they did not understand what mediums were or because of disapproval or embarrassment, I did not find out. Once, on the bridge in Jishou, I came across a spirit medium who had come in from the country with some vegetables to sell. For reasons I never established, she was singing to the river, not responding to people who asked her for vegetables. A crowd gathered around to watch and most of the onlookers whom I asked about her said that she was mad.

One result of the lack of general information about the subject is that spirit mediums in West Hunan are considered to be a *local* feature, and some people I spoke to were quite surprised when I said that I thought other parts of China also had mediums. In the incident I described above, one woman told me, rather disparagingly, that the

medium was doing this because she was a Miao woman. She appeared to be using the word Miao, in the way that many urban people do, to say that the medium was a local rural person since from her appearance, it was by no means apparent that she was Miao. Despite this evidence of disapproval, there were a number of urban people who would make use of them, inviting them to their apartments if they felt that there was an unquiet spirit there or if they wanted to contact a dead relative.

A similar ambivalence towards mediums was exhibited at the 1996 Flower Bringing Festival. A number of spirit mediums had attended the festival and some were telling fortunes. We came across one who was sitting in a shelter on the path to the temple, where one of the incense sellers has a stall. She wore her hair in a plait down her back and smoked a cigarette and was surrounded by a large group of fascinated onlookers. She was reading a young woman's palm and most of the time she was singing or chanting. She seemed quite lucid and I noticed that she kept asking checking questions such as 'you're not married are you?' However, her foot was shaking and Mrs Gu said that that this was because 'she had got onto her spirit horse' indicating that she was possessed. She said that the medium could tell people about what had happened in their past, about their parents' lives in the spirit world and about their future. Sometimes the medium's friends went past on their way to the temple and they greeted each other warmly.

Later we came across three mediums sitting, surrounded by onlookers, behind Mu Yi's shrine. Each appeared to be in a trance, one of them holding a soft drink can, but no sooner had I laid eyes on them than I was hustled away by one of the woman connected with the Minority Affairs Bureau. They were mad, she said, and *bu hao kan* (didn't look nice). She directed me to look at some old women who were singing excerpts from local opera, saying, 'isn't that better?' This incident was precipitated by the fact that I was there and it was an unsuitable sight for a foreigner. But it was also the first indication, for me, of the incipient conflict between the Minority Affairs Bureau and those who claimed to have a local knowledge of the temple, particularly the incense sellers and the spirit mediums.

Control of the temple by the Minority Affairs Bureau

Over the year between the Flower Bringing Festival of 1996 and the one in 1997, the Minority Affairs Bureau gradually took control of the temple. Although they did not openly challenge people's ways of interacting with the deities there, by establishing control over the temple site and the money which came from it they greatly affected activities at the site.

When I left Jishou in the summer of 1996 the Minority Affairs Bureau was overseeing the building of a wall around the temple site and I was told that I should go in and look at the new images of the deities now because when I came back, as I planned to in the spring of 1997, I would have to pay. When I did return in 1997 the wall had indeed been completed and the unofficial shrine removed. The new temple building had been opened and the unofficial temple, which had previously been the centre of so much activity, had been moved to the back of the site and walled up. The old deities were still inside, presumably because the Minority Affairs Bureau feared the reaction which their destruction might cause. A few sticks of incense suggested that people were still trying to make offerings to them through the cracks in the wall.

Other changes had been made. During the time I had been away the Minority Affairs Bureau had announced that only those who had paid them a fee of 5,000 yuan¹¹ could work inside the temple site. In return, these official incense sellers were registered, provided with a small shop within the walls and allowed to go into the new temple to throw the divination blocks and address the deities. Most incense sellers, including my friends, couldn't afford to do this. One day, I arrived to find them sitting in the middle of a now open space inside the walls, all very gloomy. They said that the unofficial incense selling shops inside the temple wall had been destroyed that day, because the Minority Affairs Bureau wanted the land to build shops for the official incense sellers. From this day on they did not sit inside the temple wall and talked of the people who had registered with the Minority Affairs Bureau as 'the ones inside' (*limiande*). There was an ongoing antagonism between the unofficial incense sellers on one hand and the employees of the Minority Affairs

Bureau and official incense sellers on the other. I was told that while I was away, two women had come to blows as a result of this.

Officials from the Minority Affairs Bureau did make a special concession for Old Mrs Yang, the single childless Miao speaking woman who was the most needy of the women who made their living at the temple. They gave her a cloth tag to wear, authorising her to work there and, unlike the others, she was allowed to throw divination blocks inside the new temple. Those incense sellers who were not allowed into the temple used to pass their clients over to her after they'd sold them the offerings. But she was very cynical about it all. In an attempt to cheer her up, I commented on her tag and said she was a *gongguan* (official) but she replied with angry humour that she was a *gongguan* and her work here was to *fang da pi* (do big farts).

Though the drop in their income was the biggest threat to the incense sellers' livelihood, their complaints went beyond their own financial loss. Most of the complaints were that the Minority Affairs Bureau was taking land that belonged to the Yaxi people and that they were taking money that belonged to the temple. Visitors to the temple now had to buy entrance tickets and there were widespread complaints that, by controlling the temple and the money from it, the Minority Affairs Bureau was taking money and land which belonged to the temple and the Yaxi people. It was indeed the case that the Minority Affairs Bureau was using money from the temple for other purposes. I experienced this myself when, on being taken out for dinner by senior members of the Minority Affairs Bureau, I was told that they had plenty of money to spend on the meal because of the income they were getting from the temple at Yaxi. The matter of land was complicated. Though all land in China is officially still owned by the government, farmers have had responsibility for 'their' land since the early eighties and people frequently referred to the land as 'our' land or 'Yaxi peoples' land'. However, ultimately it is still owned by the state and could be reclaimed by the state. To protect themselves, many of the incense sellers had built their huts over a small stream to escape eviction from illegally occupied land, but there was little people could do in material terms to retaliate.

Their anger over the government's appropriation of the temple land reflected a more general concern. The land at Yaxi was particularly in demand since it comprised much of the flat land between Jishou and Qianzhou and was therefore a site of urban expansion. Yaxi had already lost land to the new campus of Jishou University, to the new road between Jishou and Qianzhou, and to the (rice spirits) *baijiu* factory. One day while I was visiting the incense sellers, officials came from Jishou to measure out another piece of land with a view to building another factory. Though the people to whom this land had been allotted were given financial compensation, these actions, like the walling-off of the temple, were resented since, Yaxi people said, 'it is our land'. Concern over land had already been framed in supernatural terms and I had heard that a spirit medium was claiming that the building of the new road and the rice-spirits factory had upset the fengshui of the area. In the past, it was said, Yaxi used to produce great people, such as Luo Daren, but today the village was doing poorly.

Local people were also angry because the employees of the Minority Affairs Bureau had disposed of some of the objects from the unofficial temple which had been invested with authority by the local people. As I have mentioned, they had closed off the unofficial temple and I was told that the wife of the man who had done so had become ill as a result of the deities' anger. They had also thrown away the boards written on by the spirit medium. The authority of the temple site was also undermined by the irreverent approach of the employees of the Minority Affairs Bureau towards the deities. The people who sold tickets at the door did not themselves believe in the efficacy of the deities and did not address them. They sometimes laughed at the people praying there and they urged me to take photographs. This was in contrast to the previous situation at the unofficial temple where I had been instructed by the incense sellers to ask the deities for permission before taking photographs.

The apparently material concerns of money and land were also closely connected to the temple's authority. I was told that fewer 'country people' (*xiang xia ren* as Yaxi

people described the highland Miao) came now. In part this was because, though they had enough money to buy incense, if they had to pay to go into the temple and again to have the blocks thrown, it was too expensive but it was also because they believed that if you had to pay an entrance fee it wasn't a real temple. They also said that it couldn't be a real temple because the people there were always quarrelling. It was becoming apparent that though the Minority Affairs Bureau was controlling the site, it couldn't ensure its legitimacy in the eyes of local people.

The Festival of Guanyin and the Flower Bringing Festival of 1997

Though the actions of the Minority Affairs Bureau were widely discussed, it was not until the day of the festival of Guanyin¹², ten days before the 1997 Flower Bringing Festival, that events changed dramatically. I arrived to find that although some people were making their way around the side of the rice spirits factory to the temple as usual, others were climbing the hillside opposite the main gate of the factory where there was a collection of rocks and boulders. I could see that these were adorned with red flags and the smoke from firecrackers and offerings. This did not come as a complete surprise to me since I already knew that one of the spirit mediums had declared that the Celestial Kings were no longer willing to live in the official temple and had moved over into these rocks.¹³

A small shop had recently been set up outside the gate to the *baijiu* factory, to sell offerings to the people who were heading up the hillside but there was some dispute over what was happening. Some people said that there was nothing worth seeing on the hillside, just some big rocks, and that I should go to the temple as usual. There, however, I met one of the unofficial incense sellers who urged me go to look at the rocks though she refused to accompany me, saying that she would get into trouble with the people from the Minority Affairs Bureau if she did so. She sold me 18 yuan worth of offerings including biscuits, candles and firecrackers as well as incense. I went back to the factory gate and climbed up through the orange grove, where a muddy path was already being worn.

At the rocks I came across a number of local people and three of the women who worked for the Minority Affairs Bureau who were telling them to go down saying that this wasn't a temple and there were no spirit mediums there. At this point I thought it best to hide behind some orange trees until they left. Since I had a large bag of offerings with me I thought it would be hard to convince anyone that I was just an interested bystander. Despite this, people continued to climb up to the rocks, some of them left cloths and flags and everyone burned incense or other offerings. They confirmed that the Celestial Kings and their mother no longer lived in the official temple but in these rocks. Everyone was very cheerful and friendly towards me and one young woman said that it was '*hen you yisi*' (very interesting/enjoyable). In contrast to the official temple where people complained in hushed voices, people here were freely discussing the events, making the usual complaints that the official temple was no good. When I asked someone, 'whose land are we on now?' everyone replied in chorus that it was '*women laoxiang de*' (it belongs to our home village).

A week later a new temple had been half built on the new site on the hill opposite the official temple. Steps had been cut in the approach to it, the land had been levelled out and crude breeze block supports were going up. The majority of people working on it were old women who told me that they were Yaxi people. They were working hard, they said, to get it ready before the Flower Bringing Festival, a few days later. I was visiting with a friend and we were shown around the temple and told which rock represented which deity. The positions of some of the deities had changed and I could see that it was more convenient that way, with more space in front of the main altar. We were also told to climb up the steps to the shrine to Guanyin, which was a rock higher up the hillside and that the scenery was good and we could play (*wan*) there. The scenery was especially good on the skyline, she said, but they hadn't made a path there yet. When we got to the Guanyin rock we found that part of the pre-1949 temple had been put there and three cigarettes were laid on top of it as if for an offering.

By the time of the 1997 Flower Bringing Festival, a few days later, the new unofficial temple was well established and the Minority Affairs Bureau was making an effort to defuse the antagonism. The old, unofficial shrine had been re-opened and the old images of the Celestial Kings had been put in the new temple, next to the ones which the Minority Affairs Bureau had arranged. There was quite a lot of activity around the Mu Yi shrine and people were buying flowers but the occasion lacked enthusiasm. There were people sitting around resting, but there were no performances of opera this year and, of course, no spirit mediums.

The people at the new temple were interested when I told them about this and they said that the Minority Affairs Bureau had done this because they knew that the *guanxi* over there were not good, and that Mu Yi would not accept their behaviour and had moved over to the new temple. By contrast the new temple at the rocks was busy and I was told that more than a thousand people came during the course of that day. Many people visited both temples. In the afternoon an opening ceremony was held at the new temple which included a performance of Miao drum dancing given by people from the Old Peoples' Palace. In the evening the temple was attended by spirit mediums and the people consulting them. Any money they received was to be given to the temple and one woman who kept money for herself was quickly asked to leave by another woman, who told me that this behaviour was wrong. Other people were sitting around chatting. Later in the evening some ritual practitioners arrived. They had been asked to perform a ritual to inaugurate the temple, which lasted until the following morning. They were described by one of the women who had taken it upon herself to organise the occasion, as *daoshi* (Daoists) but she did not appear to take them very seriously since she also described them to me as mad people (*feng feng de*). During the course of the ceremony, a list of people who had given money for the new temple was also read out.

In this way the tensions arising from the Minority Affairs Bureau's control of the temple site had been resolved. The deities were believed to be at the new temple because they had expressed a wish to live there. and because the site was on what was considered to be the Yaxi people's land so that people could worship the deities

without having to pay money to the local government. As I have mentioned, and in contrast to affairs at the official temple, it was clear that money given to people at the temple, such as the spirit mediums, was to be donated to the temple. Again in contrast to the official temple, people came there to enjoy themselves. Evidence for this is seen in the fact that, as I have mentioned, the Guanyin festival was considered *hao wan* (enjoyable) and we were urged to combine our later visit with enjoying the view. And, the day after the inauguration, I met old people who had come there for a chat, and a mother who had brought her child there to play.

Despite its registration as Minority Culture, as far as I knew, the Minority Affairs Bureau had made no attempt to prescribe activities at the official temple. However, their presence and their control of the space had discouraged mediums from going whereas at the new temple, 'superstitious' practices such as consulting mediums and performing Daoist ritual could be performed. In contrast, people brought contributions to the new temple on their own initiative, such as the part of the old temple which, presumably had been hidden somewhere in the village.

Activities at the new temple also indicated the cultural heterogeneity I have been discussing in previous chapters. As always, women's dress indicated that some of the visitors were highland Miao, some lowland Miao and others Han, and the same was the case with the mediums. The delegation from the Old People's Palace, a government run organisation, brought a display which would more normally be seen at New Year in Jishou but which was felt to be a contribution to the new temple. The ritual practitioners, though referred to as *daoshi*, and Chinese speaking, were dressed in the bright orange robes and ornate head-dresses which in West Hunan are associated with the Kho Xiong speaking *laoshi*.

It was also clear that while to the Minority Affairs Bureau the Celestial Kings was an example of past culture which was being revived, to the local people they were active agents with whom they themselves interacted. Though the Minority Affairs Bureau controlled the site they did not control the deities to whom local people claimed a particular closeness. This was expressed both through stories of shared locality and

through their identification with the Celestial Kings. Even people who were not mediums claimed that when they called on them they felt their presence in their bodies. Thus, the events which I have described indicate the contrast between the Minority Affairs Bureau's fixed conception of what constituted a temple and the more changeable or flexible point of view of the ordinary people. One is reminded of Bakhtin's distinction between the fixed nature of official festivals and the unpredictable, shifting nature of carnival (1994).

A major contribution to the unpredictable and open nature of events at the temple was made by the spirit mediums. Vitebsky writes that shamanism in the former Soviet Union has been seen as 'politically dissident and anticentrist', their 'local knowledge' characterised by a fluidity of thinking rather than doctrine (1995: 185). In Chinese culture too, mediumship has been seen as dissenting, associated as it is with subcultural identities (Debernadi: 1987: 311) and with rebellion (Weller 1994a: 69 f). The spirit mediums involved in the events I have described did make statements which were challenging to local government, notably the statement that the new road had adversely affected the *fengshui* of the area, but also in their criticism of the Minority Affairs Bureau's running of the temple. However, it was through the fluidity of their approach to the deities, in contrast to the Minority Affairs Bureau's rigidity, that they were able to encourage the people of Yaxi and the other visitors to the temple not to rebel, but to evade the government control of the temple by declaring that the deities had moved elsewhere. Both the stories of the deities and the interpretations of their wishes are thus multi-vocal and shifting. It is through this that they are not only expressive of the complex and heterogeneous nature of local identities but also evasive of government control.

¹ In view of the prevailing attitude that the Kho Xiong are primitive, it is interesting that the only family I came across in West Hunan who told me of a document recording their family tree was Old Liang's family. Most of his relatives spoke Kho Xiong as a first language but their family tree was in Chinese. When I asked Chinese speaking families in Yaxi they said that they did not keep such documents.

² Before the railway was built, when transport was by river, Yuanning and Luxi were starting points for travelling to and from West Hunan because they are on the Yuan river, which is easily navigable to Changde, a sizeable city in north Hunan. Further west the rivers are navigable only for smaller boats.

³ The original Kho Xiong was used in the Chinese text. The writing system used here was introduced in the 1950s and the final letter of each word indicates the tone.

⁴ For a discussion of the development of No drama from *luo* or exorcism, see Bodde (1975).

⁵ A form of *huan luo yuan*, (redeeming a vow to the gods) is found in the worship of the Celestial Kings, as I have mentioned in Chapter Seven. Zhou, Zhang & Xie describe the process of setting up the altar and the *luo* verses which are recited to them (1992: 338 f.). I have also heard a woman from a formerly Kho Xiong speaking village, who acted as custodian at one of the temples which had Buddhist deities and the Celestial Kings, calling a number of deities to be present at the altar of the Celestial Kings.

⁶ 111BC

⁷ This may be a reference to Wu Laoyao who lived in the Laershan district during the Ming dynasty and 'was the leader of the Miao villages in this part for a long time and dominated the boundary areas of Hunan and Guizhou provinces' (Zhang 1994: 39).

⁸ The Yang surname discussed here is written 杨 . The surname Yang 羊 is also found in West

Hunan but only among people who claim Han descent.

⁹ Since it is not part of an institutional religion, it cannot be registered with the United Front Department, as the Buddhist temples are.

¹⁰ In Mandarin, *bai pusa*.

¹¹ About £500

¹² The festival of Guanyin was celebrated on slightly different days in different temples. Thus, at the Guanyin festival at Pingshanpo, which was held the next day, the events at Yaxi were a major topic of conversation and it was also said that, before the temple was built there, it had been just rocks.

¹³ The worship of rocks has already been mentioned, see Chapter Six, note 12.



Finishing the statues of the Celestial Kings at the official temple



Procession bringing the new statue of Mu Yi to Yaxi



Spirit medium at the *dai hua* festival: Yaxi 1996



Incense seller at the official temple: Yaxi 1997



The new temple of the Celestial Kings at the rocks: Yaxi 1997



Inaugurating the new temple to the Celestial Kings: Yaxi 1997

Chapter Ten - Conclusions

It is evident from the material which I have presented in the previous chapter and in this study as a whole that there is a contrast between the flexible cultural productions of the ordinary inhabitants of the Jishou area and the more rigid and standardised official promotions and images of the area. Local cultural productions such as unofficial temples and the dragon burning festival in Majingao (see Chapter Four) have qualities which make them an effective means of addressing problems arising in day to day life including the economic and social uncertainties which follow China's reform process. Official forms of culture, on the other hand, such as the Si Yue Ba festival and the scenic park at Dehang are promoted as visually appealing spectacles and secular leisure opportunities. Often, whereas unofficial cultural forms are expressive of a sense of locality and of collective memory, official ones serve to reinforce ideas of broader Chinese culture. Where temples are concerned, local government in Jishou, as in other parts of China, has attempted to organise them as examples of institutional religion or as cultural relics, discouraging any connections which people might make with local memories and landscapes. This is intended to discourage belief in local forms of efficacy, usually classified as 'superstition', and may also provide a means of bringing in an income. The view that temples are a surviving relic from the past is reinforced through state directed educational and other work units, which discourage religious activity and encourage the use of temples for leisure activities. I take the categorisation of minorities to be a part of this official process of the standardisation of culture, since it is a means by which Chinese culture is made to appear contrastingly homogeneous. By characterising West Hunan as a minority place, non-local Chinese people can also disassociate themselves from some of the more unorthodox 'local' practices.

This disparity between the homogenising and secularising approach the government and the more flexible and responsive one of ordinary people has been described in a number of contexts. There is the contrast between official festivals as 'healthy' activities and spectacles and the more efficacious, participatory event of burning the dragons. The same contrast is seen at temples, particularly the case in the different

stories told of the Celestial Kings. It is also seen in the conflict between attempts by local government to organise temples as a means of income, whilst ordinary visitors are more concerned with the relevance of the deities to their own lives. In more abstract terms, the same contrast can be seen between the official promotion of West Hunan as a series of fixed, aesthetically pleasing landscapes, as part of an elite Chinese way of looking at the world, and the unofficial recreation of ideas of a locality seen in the association of the deities with the protection of the area. It is through the continued recreation of flexible 'local' cultural forms, in interaction with official ones, that ordinary people negotiate their identity.

An emphasis on the effects of the state might appear to be contrary to that of recent studies of China, particularly those based on the cities of the East coast which stress the effects of transnational flows of people and media (see for example Gamble 1996, Ong 1997). Jishou, as I have described in Chapter Two, has also been influenced by the reforms and open door policy, but the effects are less pronounced than elsewhere. In contrast to East China where contact with relatives and visitors from overseas is common, it is rare for overseas Chinese to visit Jishou. Whereas Gamble writes that by 1996 there were 40,000 Internet users in Shanghai (1996: 333), Hunan province at this time was not connected to the Internet. In 1997 provision had been made, but in Jishou there was as yet no public access. Emails could only be sent if they were written down first and handed in at the main post office. Many aspects of everyday life still appear to be dominated by local government or dependant on the goodwill of cadres. Money is brought into the area through government grants and through state run administrative work units. As I have described, with few private businesses, aside from family run shops and restaurants, the state is still the major employer. The images of minorities and minority festivals convey ideas of a primitive 'Other' and of happily co-existing minority groups. Both these images appear to be politically motivated and the use of images of minorities at national level state occasions confirms this. The same activities, however, provide a source of income, attracting sponsorship from companies, as in the case of the involvement of a drug company in the New Year festivals at Aizhai and Majingao and attracting funding for Jishou University. The

public event of the year which was most sophisticated in its presentation was that prepared by the Propaganda Department at New Year.

China's reforms have made possible many of the activities I have been describing. They have brought increased opportunities for leisure and employment, especially to urban people. They have also made possible the recreation of local temples. Nevertheless, their effects are regarded negatively by many, particularly the old and the poor and these effects are not distinguished from the actions of the state. The situation is seen in terms of an 'inter-penetration of state and society' (Flower & Leonard 1997: 200). Activities at temples are often a response to the perceived disorder (*luan*) which has followed the reforms, or to the dilemmas posed by the new opportunities for trade and travel which arise. The deities of the past are turned to for help in ways which imply a lack of confidence in the Public Security Bureau and other branches of the local government. Visitors to the temples talk nostalgically about the past, and a respect for past leaders is seen in the status of Chairman Mao as a new deity. This recreation of temples by ordinary people, therefore, is not so much the emergence of past forms as their re-use, through which they acquire 'new meanings and speak to new experiences' (Ong 1988: 32).

I have shown that this recreation of temples is reactive, in that it is a response by local people to the uncertainties which have followed the reforms. But another form of interaction arises in the tension between local government attempts to standardise temples and the determination among their local clientele that they commemorate figures who were responsible to the Jishou area. This is particularly an issue among people who are native to the area, since visitors from outside the area are often unfamiliar with the stories of the deities and are drawn by a temple's reputation for being *ling* (efficacious), *hao wan* (enjoyable) or a combination of the two. It is through this form of interaction with the state, as well as in response to the perceived disorder of the post-reform era that activities at the temple recreate a sense of locality. This is particularly the case with the temple of the Celestial Kings. The temples which were associated more exclusively with the state-cult such as the temple to Ma Yuan are almost forgotten. It becomes apparent that temples are not

just a response to a current situation but also show the continued relevance of a long process of interactions and the creation of meanings relevant to the people who visit them.

Often, the idea of 'local' culture is both evasive of and challenging to the actions of the state. For example, attempts by local government to organise the temple of the Celestial Kings and to draw income from it received a set back when it became apparent that the deities could not be controlled in this way. In terms of local belief, the deities too could react to changing circumstances and could communicate this to the inhabitants of the area. In a different way, the attempts to educate young people into a distrust of religious activities and an allegiance to China in its broadest sense, as in the formal structures of education within which I worked, cannot prevent their fascination with temples and with the locality. Although, as I have described, this often appears to be part of the secular leisure activities through which young people express a sense of discontinuity with the politicisation of the past, many young urban visitors are attracted by a sense of locality despite the fact that it is not their native area and are ambivalent, or even reverent in their approach to the deities.

The themes of culture, locality and identity which run through this thesis, are closely inter-related and, in recent years, all of these terms have been involved in the same kinds of redefinition. Where once cultures, localities and group identities were treated as bounded entities, they are now viewed as interactive, heterogeneous and changing. Culture, for example, is treated as a verb (Street 1993) and a production (Rosaldo 1989: 93). It is also seen as a process of interaction and change in which 'symbols and ideas never acquired a closed or entirely coherent set of meanings: they were polyvalent, fluid and hybridised' (Wright 1988: 9). This understanding of culture is clearly related to the view of 'locality' which sees it as something which is continually produced through interaction with others, as I have used it in earlier chapters (cf Appadurai 1995, Knight 1994, Fardon 1995).

A similar approach is taken to identity, as exemplified by Hall who writes that a former essentialising notion of identity has been replaced by a 'strategic and

positional one' (1996:3). I take the cultural productions I describe to be expressive of identities. In assuming a close interconnection between these two I follow Friedman who illustrates the 'practice of identity' in terms of cultural productions (1995: 86) and writers who look more specifically at ritual as the performance of identity. As Crain writes, it is through cultural performances that people 'affirm, negotiate, and/or challenge particular identities' (Crain 1998: 253).

The fluidity of identities and hybridity of cultures has been discussed largely in the context of globalisation. For example, Hall writes that,

[w]e need to situate the debates about identity within all those historically specific developments and practices which have disturbed the relatively 'settled' character of many populations and cultures, above all in relation to the process of globalisation (Hall 1996: 4).

My material suggests, however, that West Hunan has for centuries been a place of cultural hybridity. The only sense in which West Hunan has been a place of settled and bounded cultures had been in the official classifications which have been imposed upon it. The production of locality as a response to the state's attempts to separate and standardise, is a process which has been going on over hundreds of years, as we can see in the 'contested histories' of the temple of the Celestial Kings.

This of course draws attention to the fact that the notion of China as a place of homogeneous culture, in the past and today, is itself an ideology, rather than an actuality, and the imposition of Miao/ Han boundaries in lowland West Hunan was a constant struggle. Moreover, the Chinese state, with which Han Chinese identity has been so closely associated, cannot be taken to be a monolithic entity. The pervasive presence of the Communist party has led some to write of a 'totalising' Chinese state. It seems more probable that this situation does not and has never existed. As Shue writes, the Chinese state under Mao, 'contained numerous shifting, cross-cutting, competitive (even hostile) centres of power' (1988: 3).

If the flexible, locally recreated forms of culture which I have described are used to address current, local concerns, despite the attempts of the state to standardise them, why are images of minorities not the site of similar interactions? Despite images of Miao people in the public architecture very few people in Jishou or in the immediately surrounding area identify themselves as Miao. A large proportion of

lowlanders claim ancestry from incomers from Jiangxi and many of those who are of minority descent do not feel it is appropriate to speak about this in the urban environment. And Kho Xiong is no longer spoken in the surrounding villages as it once was.

The lack of local interest which Kho Xiong speaking people show in the images of Dehang and at New Year festivals suggests these images are not considered relevant, even to the people which they purport to represent. These images are officially promoted and intended to show images of the Miao to others, as separate and exotic or separate and contented. They are not indigenously produced images expressive of the identities of the people themselves and are considerably less popular than the basket-ball matches which foster inter-village relationships. Drum-dancing, for example, is represented in a form which is taught by local cultural officials rather than based on memories of the drum-dancing of the past. There is little room at festivals for participation by the general population or the presence of ritual practitioners. Attempts to bring unofficial meanings to these festivals are hampered by the fact that the festivals are arranged and attended by officials, though counter-representations of officials may appear briefly as at the lion-dancing at Daxingzhai.

It has not been the aim of this thesis to present a detailed account of the highland people of this area. I have concentrated on lowland West Hunan and the ways in which cultural productions there transgress the ideas of bounded groups which the state tries to promote. In showing that these boundaries do not reflect indigenous views, I do not, however, want to imply that Kho Xiong speaking people see themselves as being no different from lowland people. What I suggest is that this difference is part of a complex series of interactions rather than an all-important, primordial ethnic distinction. But descriptions and classifications, always made by the more educated, more urbanised of the less so, continue to assume broad, essentialised groups. The most recent example of this is of course a result of the influence of American Hmong.

Urban Miao, particularly scholars and cadres, identify themselves with a broader 'Miao' category, in line with official classifications. I have suggested that, partly at least, this is often an instrumental approach since the position of cadre also ensures that such people are unwilling to participate in what are seen as the 'primitive' aspects of Miao culture. The American Hmong, however, combine a belief in the unity of the 'Miao' people with a pride in Miao culture. They insist on the use of Miao languages and the promulgation of histories which show that the Miao once had a state which was equal to that of the Han Chinese. At present this has influenced only a few people in Jishou, but since one of their projects is the education of village people in Miao history one may expect this influence to spread.

But in effect, this is another form of categorising the people of West Hunan which does not take account of the identifications of the people themselves. In describing themselves as 'Hmong' and talking in essentialising terms about Hmong history and Hmong culture, the scholars who are involved appear to devalue the complex identifications of the Kho Xiong altogether. In addition to being promoted as a place of otherness and primordial origins for the Han, West Hunan is now promoted as the place of origin of the 'Hmong.' Skinner writes that peripheral areas of China, become exporters not so much of goods as of people usually in the form of soldiers (1976: 351). In the past this has been true of West Hunan, but today its major export is its images of people and landscape, images which often bear little resemblance to the identifications made by the West Hunan people themselves.

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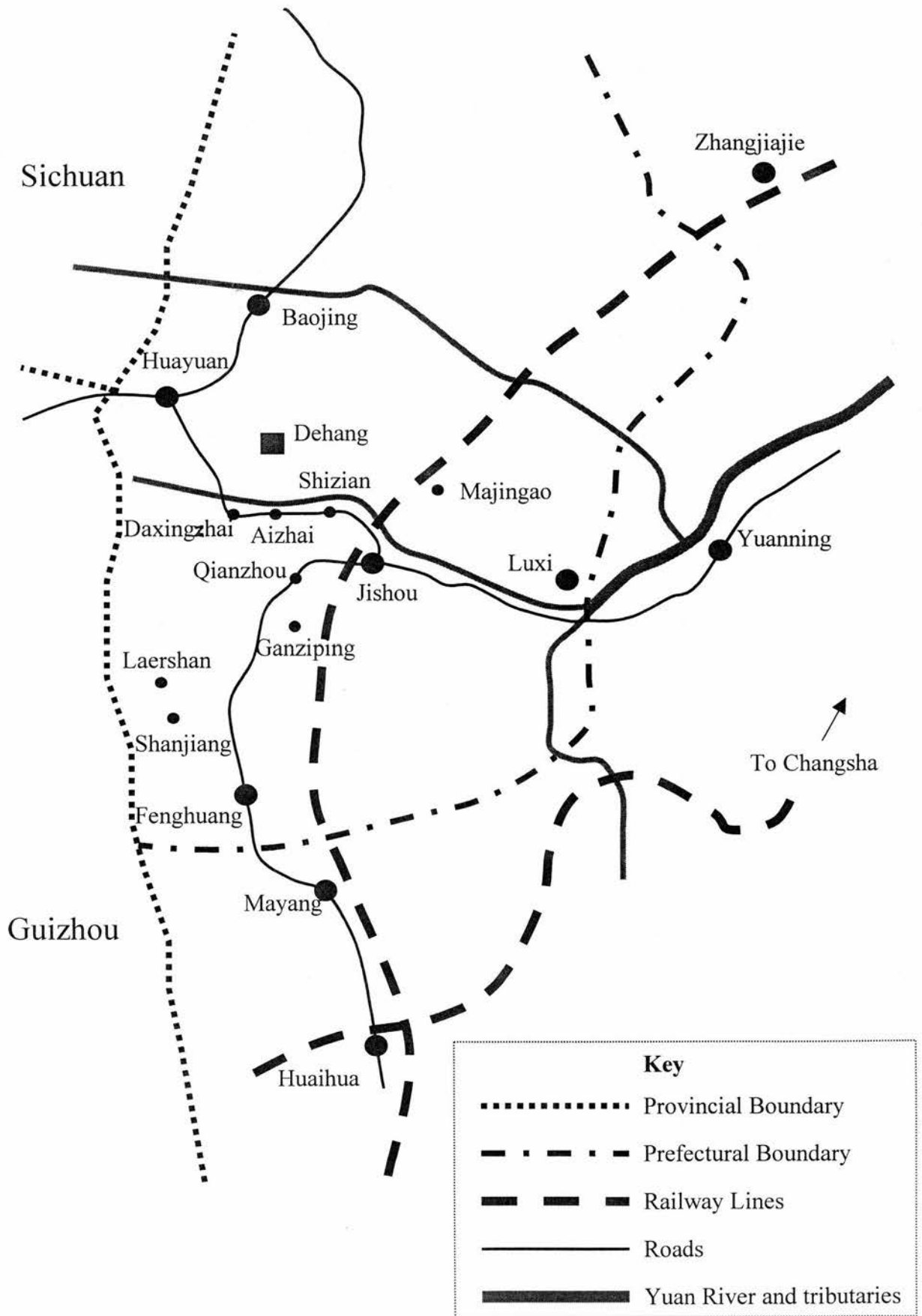
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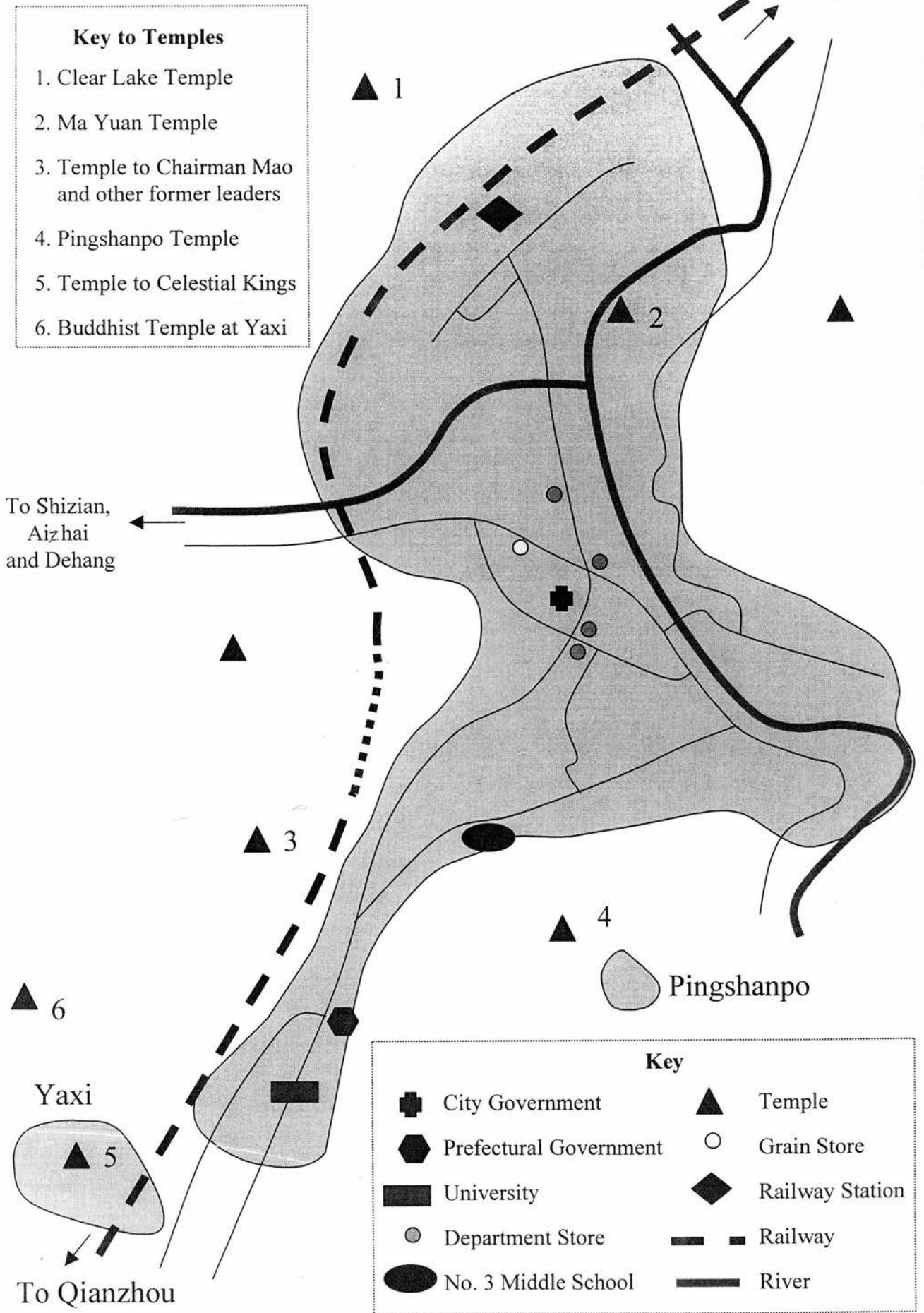
Thanks are due to Liang Zhaohui for his excellent work in translating the following works;

*Hunan Difang Zhi,
Xiangxi Miaozu Shidi Diaocha Baogao,
Dang Fei Da Xiangxi: Xiangxi Chaofei Jishi,
Miaozu Huan Luo Yuan Yuanshi Liu Kao*

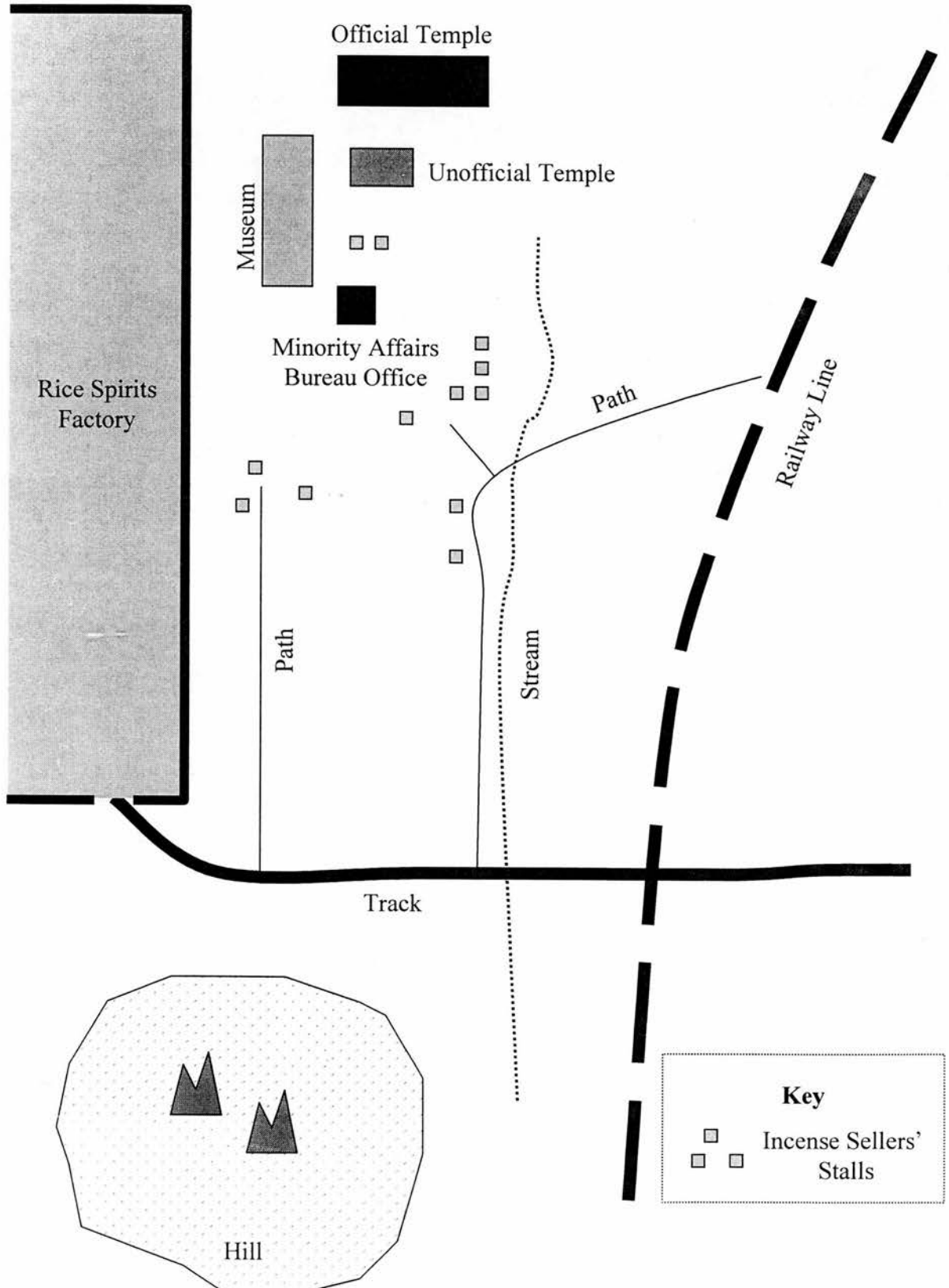
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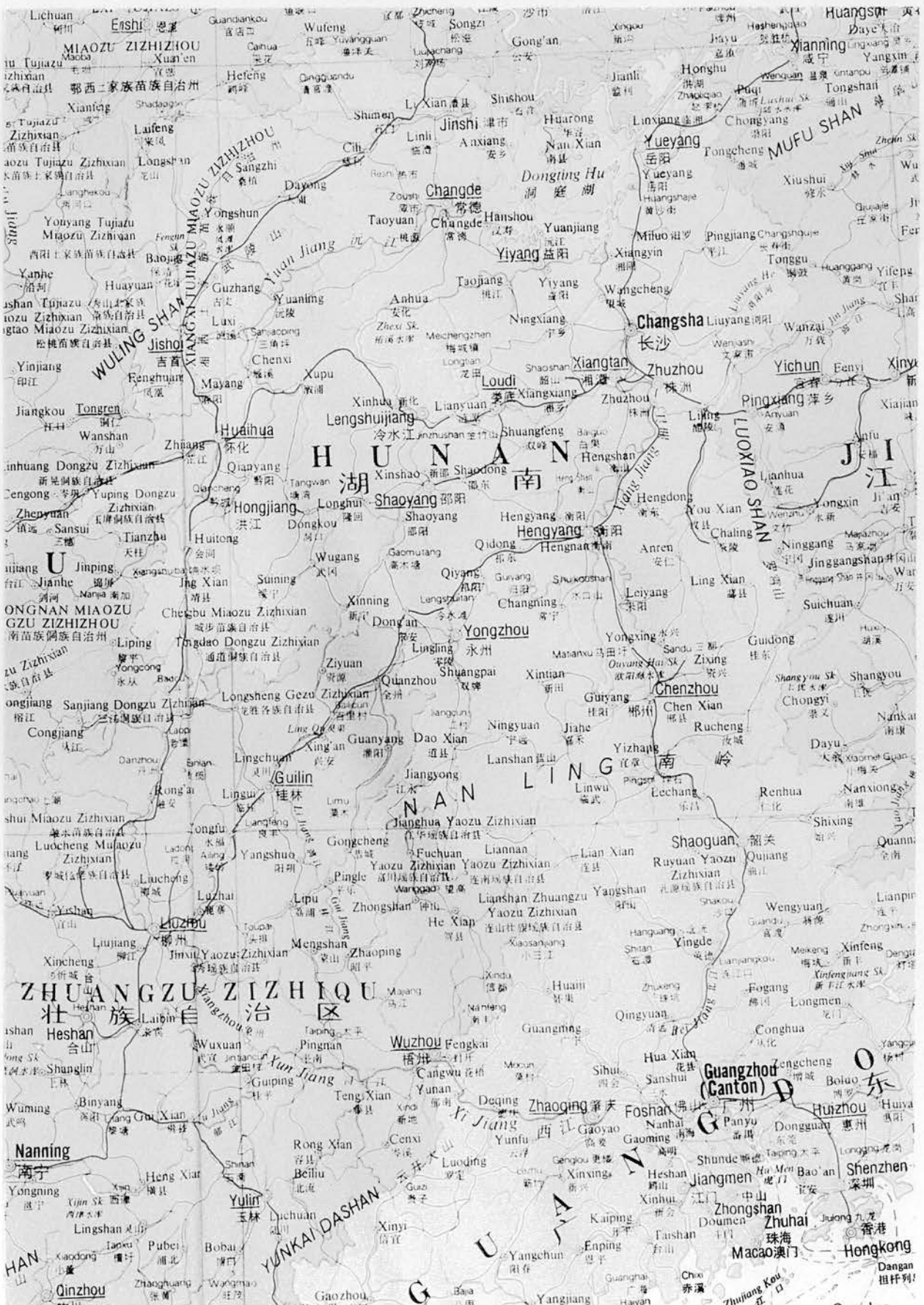
Jishou City



Temple of the Celestial Kings at Yaxi 1995-96



Hunan Province



Glossary of Chinese Terms

Anquan Ju	安全局
baijiu	白酒
Baojing	保靖
bei pusa [bai pusa]	拜菩萨
bendi	本地
benji	本籍
bijiao tuanjie	比较团结
bu hao wan	不好玩
bu xing	不行
Changsha	长沙
chenghuang miao	城隍
chou qian	抽签
chuantong minsu	传统民俗
da gong	打工
Daxingzhai	大兴寨
dai hua	带花
danwei	单位
daoshi	道士
diren	敌人
e mi tuo fo	阿弥陀佛
erhu	二胡
fang da pi	放大屁
feng feng de	疯疯的
Fenghuang	凤凰
fengjian mixin	封建迷信
fengjing qu	风景区
fengshui	风水
Fu Nai	傅鼐
gaige kaifang	改革开放
gai tu gui liu	改土归流
Gan	算
gong guan	公官
Gongan ju	公安局
gu	蛊
gujia	古家

guanxi	关系
Guoji Miaozu Wenhua Yanjiujuhui, Jingji Maoyi Xiezu Hui	国际苗族文化研究聚会，经济贸易 协作 会
guojia	国家
Han	汉
Hanzu ren	汉族人
hao pengyou	好朋友
hao wan	好玩
hen you yisi	很有意思
hukou	户口
huan luo [nuo] yuan	还傩原
Hunan Difangzhi	湖南地方志
Huo shen miao	火神庙
Jishou	吉首
jing pusa	敬菩萨
junji	军籍
kai	开
kanbujian	看不见
keji	客籍
keqi	客气
kexiu	可羞
lai lai wang wang	来来往往
laobaixing	老百姓
laoda	老大
laogai	劳改
laojia	老家
laoshi	老师，老士
limiande	里面的
Liao	廖
Liangshi Ju	粮食局
ling	灵
Ling Ying, Bao An, Xian You, Hu Guo	灵应保安现祐
Long	龙
Long Miao	龙庙
luan shou fei	乱收费
luohou	落后
lüyou bu	旅游部

Ma	麻
mafan ni	麻烦你
majiang	麻将
Majingao	马颈坳
Man	蛮
mei banfa	没办法
mei guanxi	没关系
Meiyou gongchandang meiyou Xin Zhongguo	没有共产党没有新中国
Miao	苗
Miao Fang-pei [bei] Lan	苗防备览
Miaozi	苗子
min	民
minji	民籍
Minjia	民家
Min Wei	民委
minzu	民族
Nan Man	南蛮
pao (bao)	堡
Pingshanpo	平山坡
pusa	菩萨
putonghua	普通话
Qianzhou	乾州
qigong	气功
qishi	歧视
renao	热闹
San Miao	三庙
San Wang	三王
San Da Wang	三大王
Shanjiang	山江
shaoshu minzu	少数民族
shenxian	神仙
sheng	生
Shi	石
shu	熟
Shuihu zhuan	水浒传
Si Yue Ba	四月八
su jing	肃静
Subei	苏北

suibian	随便
suo	所
suo	索
Suoli	所里
Tian Hou	天候
Tian Wang	天王
tongbao	同胞
tu	土
Tudigong	土地公
tufei	土匪
tufeide	土匪的
Tujia	土家
tun	屯
tu si	土司
waidi ren	外地人
waiguoren	外国人
Waishi Ban	外事办
wan	玩
Wangye	王爷
wen	文
Wenhua Ju	文化局
Wenhua Zhan	文化站
Wen Miao	文庙
women Xiangxi ren	我们湘西人
women laoxiang de	我们老乡的
Wu	吴
wu	巫
wushu	武术
xian gong	仙公
xian niang	仙娘
Xianggang hui gui	香港回归
Xiangxi	湘西
Xiangxi Miaozu Shidi Diaocha Baogao	湘西苗族实地调查报告
Xiangxi Miaozu Diaocha Baogao	湘西苗族调查报告
xiangxia ren	乡下人
xiao sifu	小师父
xitonghua	系统化
Xuanchuan Ju	宣传局

yamen	衙门
Yanwang	阎王
Yao	瑶
Yaxi	鸦溪
Yaxi you yige dao liu gou, Liu shui wang qian zou	鸦溪有一个倒流沟，流水往前走
yin	阴
Yingguo ren	英国人
you wei	有味
Yu Huang Da Di	玉皇大帝
yuan	元
zheme da de miaohui	这么大的庙会
zhai	寨
zhende huozhe jiade	真的或者假的
Zheng Xie	政协
Zhong Zhuan	中专
Zhongguo ren	中国人