

# Constructing Identities: Tensions in Defining Naxi/Mosuo and Bai/Yi Ethnicities

Marsha Smith\*  
Augustana College

Although there are approximately 26 different minorities officially identified in Yunnan province, this paper focuses specifically on four groups: the Yi, the Bai, the Naxi, who are officially recognized, and the Mosuo, who are not. I wish to pair the Yi with the Bai on the one hand and the Naxi with the Mosuo on the other. All four of these groups reside primarily around the cities of Kunming, Dali, LiJiang, and in the rural areas around Lugu Lake. All of them have long had contact with Han Chinese, all of them have experienced varying degrees of “Hanification” in earlier eras and both Communist “assimilation” after 1949. Even today, in some areas of life (particularly education and job or career placement) group members experience pressure to assimilate. However, some groups do receive a great deal of provincial and national subsidization to re-establish cultural educational centers and religious activities, to “re-capture” folk cultures such as dance, music, script, and festivals as a means to improve tourism. Other groups have been relatively ignored, unsubsidized, and unsupported. Some of the questions that I examine in my classes and that I wish to elaborate further on in this paper include:

1. How does one define “minority group” status? Who does the defining and to what extent is identity self-determined or state-determined?
2. When and how do these definitions become important in understanding changes in the quality of life of the Chinese who are so-identified?
3. To what extent is the expression of minority culture “authentic” or “inauthentic?”
4. What is the impact of tourism on changing identities?

To begin talking about the defining of minority groups, one must realize that after 1949, the CCP applied a Leninist definition of minority group, a definition that is not based on racial or physiological

characteristics, as is often the case in the West, but on the following criteria:

## A. Distinctive language

While hundreds of different dialects are spoken across China, a minority language is viewed somewhat differently than a dialect. It is viewed as a language with distinct grammatical and phonological differences from Chinese. Twenty-nine of the recognized minority languages are in the Chinese-Tibetan family (including all 4 that I will discuss). Others include Altaic (in the Northeast), Indo-European (e.g., Russian) and South Asian. Twenty-one ethnic minority groups had unique writing systems prior to 1949 including at least two and possibly three of the four groups I will examine. However, many new written systems were created for minority groups by the CCP in the mid to late 1950s. For example although the Yi were known to have a syllabic script of about 1000 characters since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the CCP reformed it after 1949. The Mosuo were not given a created, separate script and are viewed as not having a written form of their oral language. (Ma, 1994) According to Blum (2001), the Bai really do not have much of a traditional language left.

Minority nationalities are taught in Mandarin, at least by middle school. Some elementary schools may provide education in minority tongues for the first few years, but there is little support for those tongues as education progresses. While some of the larger minority groups (Tibetans, for example) do have governmentally-provided education in native language, Swain (2001) notes that the Yi have faced uphill battles to provide regional Yi language schools. Most Naxi,

although having a valued “pictographic” script, will speak Mandarin in their daily lives, and only the oldest members will still speak in traditional Naxihua. (personal conversation with Li Guowen, 1999).

## B. Recognized Indigenous Homeland

Supposedly a Chinese minority should have a traditionally recognized territory within China, somewhere close to if not where the group originated. Minority groups that are identified by the state tend to live in identified autonomous prefectures: for example, Lijiang Naxi Autonomous Prefecture (Naxi), the Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture (Yi) and the Dali Bai Autonomous Region (Bai). Again, because the Mosuo are not viewed as a separate group, they do not have a recognized region per se; their traditional indigenous homeland is incorporated into the Naxi Autonomous Prefecture.

## C. Distinctive Customs

Distinctive customs may range from unusual dress, marriage rituals, cuisine, religion, special holidays and the like. This is an area where issues of “authenticity” or “inauthenticity” emerge.



The “Three Pagodas” in Kunming



The “Three Pagodas” in Dali

For example, compare the following photos. The first was taken from the Kunming Minority Village, a “themed park” that was established in order to introduce Chinese tourists to “Yunnan’s many minorities.” It’s rather like

“Splendid China” in Shenzhen (or formerly in FL) but devoted to minority differences. What is usually presented is dance, music, costume, and artifacts and architecture from a variety of recognized minorities. On the left, represented for tourist consumption, are the famous “Three Pagodas” in Kunming. On the right are the Three Pagodas in Dali.

#### D. A Sense of Identity

Most western scholars assume identity is the most important component of nationality. And, in fact, if you ask members of each of the minority group whether or not they have a sense of identity as a Chinese minority groups member, they will tell you yes. But what that means may vary for each group. For example, Naxi people will clearly distinguish themselves from Yi or Bai, but will tell you that Mosuo are also Naxi. Mosuo people will tell you, in fact, they are not Naxi. Although Bai and Yi historically seem to have come from the same root, they see themselves today as quite distinct. Even so, a number of different Yi, as I note below, have been incorporated together, so you might hear someone say that they are a special type of Yi. Often Naxi, Yi, Bai, Mosuo may not look much different or speak much differently than Han Chinese. Often they have spouses who are identified as Han Chinese. Many young Bai and Naxi don't even speak a traditional language at home, choosing only to speak Mandarin. However, the definitive measure of nationality is the possession of the ID card that indicates one's nationality. This can often be used to obtain benefits such as easier enrollment in higher education or the opportunity to apply for more than one child.

Costuming or specific songs and dances may be ways in which identity is fostered. In rural areas one may find people still dressed in identifiable costumes. However, for tourist purposes, sometimes costumes are transformed to become more colorful and identifiable, and described in rather poetic terms. For example tour guides will discuss Bai headdresses as having a variety of symbolic meanings, but most rural Bai women don't wear these ornamental hats (see photos).



Rural Bai headwear

#### *Yi and Bai: Separate but Together*

The Yi are one of the largest ethnic minority groups with a population of about 6.5 million (Li, 2003) They are the 4<sup>th</sup> largest group, following Zhuang, Hui and Uygur. (Blum, 2001). In part, they are “large” because the Yi really are not just one minority group, but seemingly a number of different groups that have been lumped together (Unger, 1997). There are at least 6 different dialects that were merged together in the 1950s by the P.R.C. as Yi. (In rural areas Yi are often seen wearing large black hats, although there are many other clothing styles that represent Yi.) In urban areas, Yi may dress much as any other Chinese might. Most tourists encounter Sani Yi, located to the Southeast of Kunming, who are dressed in colorful costumes as guides in the Stone Forest or as vendors outside the park. But in many ways, Sani Yi have distinctive customs from other Yi (Harrel, 1995).

How well do the Yi fit this “template” of characteristics that form a minority group? Do they have a distinctive language? Yes, many many languages, if scholars are accurate. Do they have distinctive customs? Yes, quite varied among some rural areas; but perhaps not “one” custom form. Within Kunming and urban areas, Yi are indistinguishable from other Han Chinese. Do they have a recognized homeland? Yes, there is an autonomous area identified for Yi; Yi live there, but so do other minorities. Yi also live outside the area. Do they have a sense of identity? Yes, according to Unger (1997), even when Yi acknowledge a great deal of difference from “different

branches” such as “White Yi”, “Black Yi,” “Multi-colored,” or “yellow” (also known, perhaps as: nzymo, nuoho, quho, shuo [Pan, et. al, 2004] or nzymo, nuoho, qunuo, mgajie, and gaxy [Ma, 2004]). At any rate, all of these scholars agree that “Yi” originated as a pejorative term by the Chinese. They realize that the Yi don't share much in common, but all of these groups have experienced “hanification”

to some degree and Unger (1997) quotes Harrel as follows: “Yi intellectuals really do see themselves as Yi, even though for many peasants it doesn't matter—an artificial identity, yes, but not less real than an artificial lake.”

The Yi, because they have been identified by the CCP as “owning slaves,” have often been

classified as a more “primitive” or “backyard” minority group than have the “merely feudal” cultures of the Bai or the Naxi. The Yi haven't received the same financial or social supports that these other two groups have received. Besides the Sani Yi in the Stone Forest, the Yi don't have quite the tourist visitation that the Bai or Naxi have. In fact travelers entering Yi areas are often warned about the violence or duplicity of the Yi.

The Bai population is about 1,891,508. The Bai are argued by some to be part of the Yi, but most see them as a distinct group. Blum (2001), however, argues that the Bai are really Han that have “reverted” to minority status. Bai people, for the most part are surrounded by Yi. Historically, Dali was the home for the Nanzhou Kingdom during the Tang dynasty, finally conquered by the Mongolians in 1253 AD (Ma, 1989).

Dali was one of the first tourist sites in the region that opened to the west in the 80s and boasts the lovely Erhai lake, the Three Pagodas, Dali marble, tie-dying and the weekend Sharping trading market. Tourists can visit the “Bai Family trader house” or take a boat ride and experience drinking the “Three teas.”

Most Bai people don't speak a separate dialect or language, don't have a specific religious tradition, but do have



Bai “costumed”headwear

some beautiful landscape and have created a “tourism” based culture that welcomes many visitors throughout the year. According to Unger (1997) forty years ago, most Bai did not perceive themselves as a separate minority. Today they do, and they will tell stories about love songs, the meanings attached to costumes, and the like. Much of this has been promoted by the CCP as a way to bring money into the area. They represent a group for whom tourism has played an extensive role in the recreation and maintenance of an identity.

Despite these varying definitions, interconnections, and long-standing relationships, most Yi or Bai don't feel uncomfortable with their state-sponsored self-identities. This is not the case however for the following tandem, the Naxi and the Mosuo.

### ***Naxi and Mosuo: Together but Separate***

The Naxi and Mosuo both have much smaller populations than the Yi and Bai. The Naxi are about 290,000 people (Guo, 1999) and the Mosuo number about 15,000. The Mosuo are almost always referred to as a side branch of the Naxi, and herein lies the complaint.

The Naxi are viewed as one of the more “advanced” and “obedient” of the minorities (White, 1999). As such they have received a great deal of support from the P.R.C. Compared to most of the other minorities in the area (the Yi, the Bai, the Tibetans, the Mosuo), the Naxi have a disproportionate number of educated scholars. Naxi, in written text books in Yunnan, are afforded special recognition for their “dongba” religion and early “pictographic” written language. (Hansen, 1998) The Naxi currently see themselves as a cut above other ethnic minorities in the area. With long-standing traditions that are valued and honorable, the Naxi possess more than just the costuming, language, songs, and myths and fairy tales that other nationalities might claim. In post-Mao China, the re-emergence of dongba religion and language among educated scholars has been a boon for tourism, although Chao (1996) notes that in contemporary daily life, this religious system is “safely dead” (p. 217).

After a tremendous earthquake in the area in 1995, the government spent a

great deal of money building new housing around the Lijiang area. By 1999, a center was built for the preservation of Naxi Minority heritage. Lijiang's Old Town (Dayan) is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is probably the hottest tourist site in China today. Baisha village, nearby, is still kept relatively traditional for tourist visits.

However, there remains some disagreement about the naming and identity of another group – the Mosuo. Rock (1967), Jackson (197, Chao (1990) and McKhann (1989) suggest that the Naxi and Mosuo are parts of the same group, but that Naxi were “sinocized” or “Hanified” (like the Bai) to a greater degree, since they primarily lived around Lijiang, which had been occupied on various occasions by the Chinese military (during the Tang (6-8-970 AD), the Ming (1368-1644 AD) and the Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties. They suggest that the more remote Mosuo retained many of their matrilineal, matriarchal systems. Mattheiu (1996), alternatively, suggests that Naxi and Mosuo were always different groups who shared some historical roots perhaps but separated far earlier than these other scholars maintain.

The Mosuo are a self-identified minority. The P.R.C. rejected a third petition in 1993 asking that the Mosuo become a separate minority. The P.R.C sees them as an off-shoot of the Naxi; a more “backwards”, “rural”, “less-educated” group that still practices matrilineality, “walking marriages”, and other exotic behaviors (Matthieu, 1996). It's telling that at the Kunming Minority Village, sponsored by the government, at the Naxi section of the park there is a small sign, pointing to a side path leading to a “Mosuo” matrilineal house where “walking marriage” is performed daily. It's clear that they are identified by the state as a part of Naxi society.

Most Mosuo live in or around Lugu Lake, the most “recent” hot tourist spot in China. When I was in Lijiang in 1999 I attempted to travel to Lugu Lake, but the roads had washed out (as they regularly did) and I was not able to travel there. In 2002 a new highway to the Lugu Lake area was completed and the first international Mosuo Cultural and Tourism Conference was held. Since then, a number of advertisements for the exotic Mosuo “Kingdom of Girls” or

“Matriarchal Society” have appeared encouraged by the pop-star, Yang Erche Namu, who has written a book *Leaving Mother Lake*, now published in a number of languages. “Namu” has now opened a museum with a bed and breakfast run by her mother, to “preserve” Mosuo culture.

Lugu Lake will increasingly draw visitors in the next few years. The Mosuo will continue to be “eroticized” with tales of “walking marriages,” “girl kingdoms,” and “matriarchal society.” Despite the romanticism of tourist ads, life in Lugu Lake is still difficult. Most Mosuo still live in primitive, rural settings. With the access of the new highway into this area, it remains to be seen what the future holds for these people living in “*The Remote Country of Women.*” (Bai, 1994)

\*The relevance to my teaching of issues currently facing many “Chinese Nationalities” in the Southwestern part of China became exceptionally clear to me as I worked recently with two groups of teachers. They had either attended a University of Colorado-Boulder Teaching East Asia summer seminar and had applied to study abroad, or they had successfully completed an NCTA (National Consortium for Teaching About Asia) seminar under the auspices of the University of Colorado-Boulder TEA program. Both of these groups traveled to Kunming, Dali, Li Jiang and Shangri-La (formerly Zhongdian) during the summer of 2004, in part to explore the diversity of China, as part of the study-tour theme. My role was to provide interpretation and analysis of what they learned and experience as a part of this study tour.

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**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Joseph Y. S. Cheng, ed., *Guangdong in the Twenty-first Century: Stagnation or Second Take-off?* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press), 2000.
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- <sup>7</sup> Huang Shumin, *The Spiral Road: Change in a Chinese Village Through the Eyes of a Communist Party Leader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).
- <sup>8</sup> For further details of the participants' follow-up activities to the GPRD study tour, please see the various reports posted on [www.asianetwork.org](http://www.asianetwork.org).