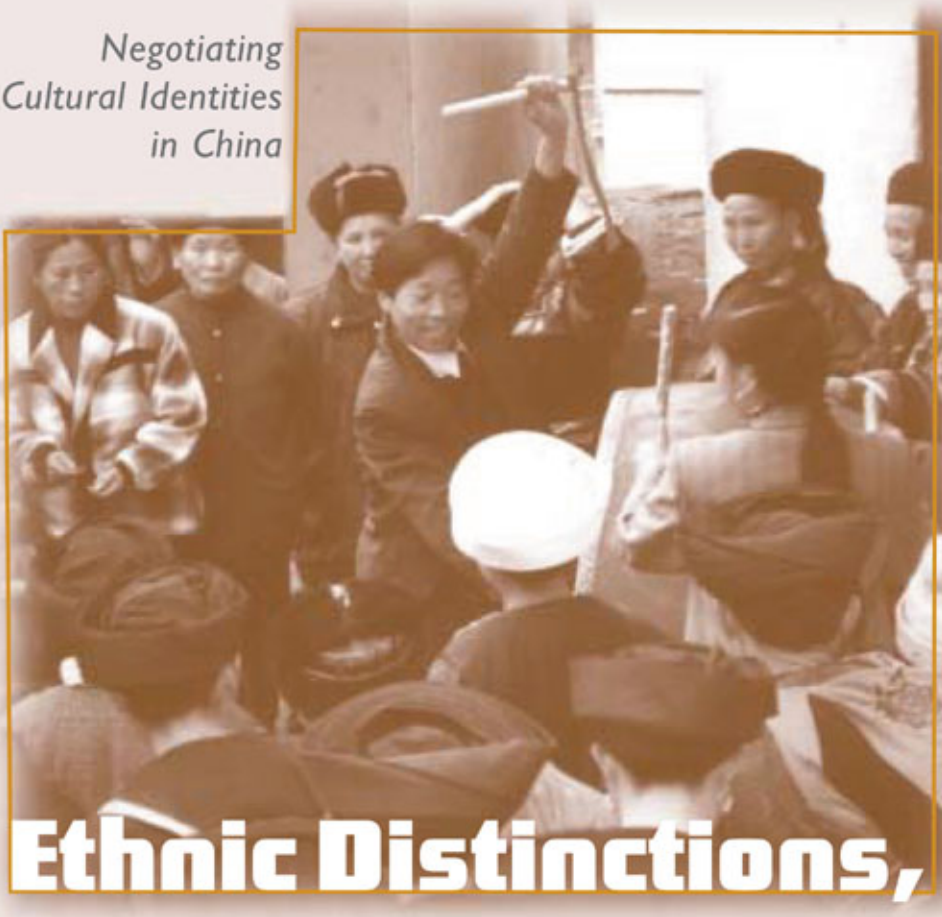
Negotiating Cultural Identities in China



Ethnic Distinctions, Local Meanings

MARY RACK

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Ethnic Distinctions, Local Meanings

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1 Where are the Miao?

The new temple of the Celestial Kings was to be inaugurated that night at a small rocky outcrop on the edge of Yaxi. The traffic on the roads was quiet by now and the rice fields round about were noisy with frogs. The village was dark, though a few lights could still been seen among the low-rise buildings of the city of Jishou a couple of kilometres away. Beyond were the dark shapes of steep hills. Near the foot of the outcrop was another temple to the Celestial Kings. Illuminated by the lights of a rice spirits factory that had claimed use of the spring in which the Celestial Kings were said to have been born, it stood deserted.[1] This temple had recently fallen into disfavour since its organisation had been taken over by a local government department. It was generally believed, for this reason, that the deities were no longer willing to reside there.

All day people had come on foot and by minibus to visit the rocky hill. With help from village women who had set themselves up as custodians, they burned incense in front of the rocks that were now believed to represent the three Celestial Kings and their mother. Then they made their requests of the deities. Many of these requests could have belonged to any era. People asked for health, a good marriage, children, grandchildren or success in their exams. Other requests were more situated in that particular place and time, the mid-1990s in a small city in China's interior. They asked when was the best time to go in search of temporary work elsewhere, or to buy up stocks of manufactured goods and fruit to sell in the city. They also turned to the deities, rather than to the police and local government, for help with a perceived breakdown in social order.

This temple, situated in the West Hunan Miao and Tujia Minority Autonomous Prefecture, was recorded as an example of Miao minority culture. No one whom I spoke to, however, regarded it in this way. Differences in ancestry among the worshippers could be guessed at from dress and language. Women from highland villages, Kho Xiong-speaking descendants of the indigenous people often classified as 'Miao', wore indigo tunics and wide-legged trousers decorated around the cuffs with embroidered strips of flowers and butterflies. On their heads were long pieces of lighter-coloured cloth wound into turbans. These clothes contrasted with the colourful Western-

style clothes of visitors from Jishou City and the more sober blue tunics of the lowland, Chinese-speaking rural people including those from the village of Yaxi itself. These apparent differences were not a source of conflict or disagreement however. All agreed that the deities refused to live in the official temple. If asked, almost everyone at the temple would describe the deities as protective local figures, neither specifically Miao or Chinese. Although the event had been arranged by lowland, Chinese-speaking Yaxi women, and lowland villagers made up the majority of those attending, many of the ritual practitioners were highlanders. A number of women in highland dress were among the spirit mediums who attended the temple, speaking sometimes in the voices of dead relatives, sometimes in the voices of the Celestial Kings themselves. Later in the evening a ceremony was performed by a group of male ritual practitioners who were dressed in the bright orange robes and ornate headdresses that are associated with the highland Kho Xiong-speaking Daoist practitioners, the *laoshi*.

The inauguration of the new temple of the Celestial Kings was one of a number of fieldwork experiences which challenged preconceived ideas I had of a separate Miao culture. As a result, this book is a study not of Miao or Tujia identity or culture but of a sense of belonging to a border place, one which often goes unmarked in written accounts. I approach this by focusing on cultural events and practices, in which people of apparently very different backgrounds participated. I juxtapose these against the preoccupation with minority identity and minority difference that is so prominent in interpretations of West Hunan by the local elite and by people from elsewhere. Indeed, I argue that this disparity reflects an unfortunate preoccupation in the discourse of social science more generally. By doing so I hope to question the continuing emphasis anthropology continues to place on a concept of cultural groups.

When I arranged to do fieldwork in and around the small city of Jishou, capital of West Hunan prefecture I had every intention of studying the Miao. I decided to go to this area because, on a previous stay in China, the Miao, with their distinctive costume and highland way of life, had seemed to present such an intriguing contrast to my life in a large Chinese city. But my fieldwork quickly led me to question the usefulness of this category, however subtly explored, as a basis for ethnographic description. It is perhaps possible that I would have continued to follow up a romantic quest for the highland Miao had restrictions placed on foreigners doing fieldwork in West Hunan

in the 1990s not prevented me from applying for permission to work in rural areas. Instead I took a job in Jishou University and undertook a study based largely on the city and the surrounding lowland areas. This seemed to offer little in the way of exotic culture. Apart from a few streets of old wooden houses by the river, the city at this time consisted of a large number of administrative and educational work units alongside a mixture of concrete department stores, hotels and glass-fronted banks, crowded into a narrow valley. Work units, built in the Socialist era, were self-contained, enclosed compounds which, as well as being a place of work, met accommodation and other needs. With the economic liberalisation that followed the ascent to power of Deng Xiaoping, small entrepreneurial businesses were also much in evidence in that the streets were lined with small restaurants, *karaoke* bars and shops. As in the rest of China, these last were filled with 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 were also popular, and a row of street stalls known as 'Hong Kong Street' sold cheap versions of recent Western styles in jeans and other clothes. I was told frequently that I would have to visit the highland areas if I wanted to find something interesting for my research. This, at first, made me feel frustrated because the conditions of my research permission did not allow me to.

During the course of my fieldwork I encountered, among some, a fascination with the Miao, among others, an almost complete disregard for incomer/indigenous differences. Young educated people such as students, most of whom were from elsewhere, were fascinated by images of the Miao and the contrast they presented to city life. As an outsider myself, it was completely appropriate that I too should consume these images.[2] The fascination with which many outsiders regarded the Miao was reinforced by local government agendas, which were themselves part of the wider politics of the nation. For example, Jishou, long regarded as a remote and mysterious region, is today connected to the rest of China by a railway line. When you approached the city, a recorded announcement tells you that, as well as being a government, education and business centre, the city is also a tourist destination. The main attractions, the announcement stressed, are the local Miao and Tujia minority peoples. There are several Miao festivals each year, the people speak a local version of the Miao language and there is a museum housing Miao and Tujia artefacts. At first these claims appeared improbable. In contrast to

the landscape of steep ravines and wooden houses through which the train had approached, the city appeared like any other. But the idea of a separate Miao people, referred to on the train, was reiterated in its public architecture and iconography. A new pagoda had been built in a park overlooking Jishou decorated with reliefs showing the traditional customs of Miao and Tujia people. At a roundabout in the centre of the city there was an older, Socialist-realist-style statue of heroic figures in Miao dress performing a drum dance. Tapestry hangings on sale at the department stores repeated these themes, depicting colourful minority dances and craggy landscapes. But the claims made for Jishou's Miao festivals and culture turned out to be promotional rather than reflections of actual day-to-day life. Minority festivals were not held in the city itself and the museums had closed down through lack of money. Though more than two-thirds of the population of Jishou was officially registered as Miao or Tujia, minority languages were rarely spoken. Visitors were usually only aware of minorities when they saw women in minority dress selling produce by the road or walking into town on rainy days or when there was no work to be done in the fields.[3]

The images found in the local government infrastructure of transport and architecture marked out the Miao as a sign, an 'Other' which is exotic and often female, but does not correspond with the actualities of daily life. These images of the Miao have multiple meanings, demonstrating the superiority of the mainstream Chinese but also the primordial and ancient nature of Chinese culture. They also justify current administrative policies for those categorised as minorities by stressing their happiness and progress. The use of images of the Miao is evidence of the superiority of what Harrell (1995) has described as the 'civilising project' of the Han Chinese.

Restrictions placed on my activities also sent me in a rather different direction. As my fieldwork went on, I felt decreasingly welcome among educated and professional people[4] and instead found myself more and more in the company of the people who gathered around temples on the outskirts of Jishou.[5] Here, lowland people, descended from a mixture of indigenous people and incomers from various periods, almost never discussed indigenous/incomer differences. It was through meeting people on the rural outskirts of Jishou city, that I became aware of the limitations of my interest in 'the Miao'. I am not the first to have found a beneficial effect in being directed away from my original aims. A decade earlier, scholars had been prevented 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 lived in cities, which is less problematic in terms of getting research permission, and 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 too emphasise the complexity and fluidity of their fieldwork site, and describe their approach as 'dialogic' (Gamble 1996: 10; Pieke 1996: 5). 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 that 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). Nonetheless, where Gladney has called for a more nuanced view of minority identities, the result of my fieldwork was to question whether it should be the central subject of study at all.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURE

Why do minority groups, such as the Miao and the Hui continue to be the focus of ethnographic works? The notion that distinguishable cultures exist has long been connected with anthropology and is hard to separate from it. There is an unspoken implication that the notion of bounded and homogeneous cultures is the basis of anthropology. As Abu-Lughod has written, '[a]nthropological discourse gives cultural difference (and the separation between people it implies) the air of the self evident' (1991: 143) and, despite critiques of area studies

paradigms, we continue to be committed to 'nationalisms, cultures and ideologies' (Karakasidou 2000: 415).

In its preoccupation with culture and difference, anthropology has its roots in the Enlightenment thought of the eighteenth century. In part this was the influence of the specific approaches to classification that had developed in this era. Cohn has written of how ethnography paralleled other Victorian classifying studies such as ethnology (1987: 24), and Pratt (1992) of how travellers' attitudes to the people they encountered were influenced by the totalising schema of zoology and botany. The Enlightenment also resulted in the emergence of specific notions of 'culture'. It was the time when the idea of the four-stage progress of humanity was developed, with hunter gatherers, or savages, developing over time through pastoralism, then agriculture to modern commercial society. This appeared to suggest that all of mankind could be differentiated only by degrees of progress and, partly in reaction to this, a rather separate tradition developed in Europe with an emphasis on the existence of different national *cultures*. Both these approaches have had their influence on an anthropological view of culture in which, as Abu-Lughod writes '"culture," shadowed by coherence, timelessness, and discreteness, is the prime anthropological tool for making "other"' (1991: 146).

In suggesting that anthropology should question its emphasis on culture my approach is close to that of Kahn who writes that 'the concept or concepts of culture can be continually shown to be part of our own discourse, rather than being situated somewhere in the world of others' (1989: 11). In making this point, we should not suggest, however, that culture and cultural distinctions are necessarily a Western conception. As Chatterjee (1996) has pointed out, classifications such as nationalism, are not the preserve of Western thought they are often considered to be. Specifically relevant to the minorities in China that I describe in the next chapter, Hostetler has shown how the classification of Chinese peoples should be seen, not as a Qing dynasty adoption of Western practices but a Chinese manifestation of early modern approaches and processes (2001: 1).

Inevitably, scholarly concerns with culture paralleled the administrative concerns of colonial powers for whom the classification of peoples was an important aspect of their control. The notion that anthropology was a 'handmaiden of colonialism' has been generally refuted. While Evans-Pritchard's work may have been undertaken to further the understanding of the colonial administration, it is widely agreed that anthropologists were not, on the whole, very influential.

Their role in supporting colonialism was 'trivial' their knowledge 'too esoteric' (Asad 2002: 134) and in many cases they were themselves critical of colonial administrations (see James 1973, Vincent 1991). Nonetheless, it was hard to avoid reinforcing assumptions about cultural difference found within colonial situations. Even if not directly supportive, social sciences developed within the political context of colonialism and drew on information itself heavily influenced by colonial administration. Thus Dirks describes how 'taxonomies of land type and use, caste constituency and status, and political status under the Raj became first fixed and then reified through the colonial institutions that promulgated and implemented this colonial sociology' (1987: 9).

While anthropologists were less reliant than historians on colonial data collection, they were nonetheless dependent on colonial authorities for permission to carry out their studies (James 1973: 42) and there developed, as Gough puts it, 'customary relations … between the anthropologists and the government or the various private agencies who funded them' (2002: 111), which may have influenced their outlook. Moreover, the object of their study, the people who lived around them, were themselves subject to rigidly upheld classificatory categories. For example, Anderson writes that in the Malaysian 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' (1983: 166). Often the categories of the colonialists were quite at odds with indigenous views. As Lentz writes:

> … the dominant characteristics of pre-Colonialist Africa were mobility, overlapping networks, multiple group membership, and the flexible, context-dependent 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)

The influence of state-held classifications on ethnogenesis has been widely discussed elsewhere (see for example Vermeulen and Govers 1997, Eriksen 1993: 87, Lentz 1997). To suggest that the people on whom these classifications were imposed passively accepted them as self-ascriptions would be an oversimplification. Often the people thus classified became involved in 'a competition for state power and state resources' (Brass 1985: 30–1, see also Despres 1975). The adoption of

'ethnic' classifications originally devised by the state has become a more complex and instrumental action aimed at taking advantage of the benefits made available by the state for recognised groups (Lentz 1997: 42, Morin and 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). But I argue that these actions, reinforcing as they do already held views on ethnic groups, did and still do give undue emphasis to the notion of separate cultures.

Nationalist classifying projects differ in some ways from the colonial ones they have succeeded. Whereas colonialism is concerned with the classification of other cultures assumed to be less developed than one's own, nationalist projects stress the progress and development of one's own unique culture. But these projects may overlap with scholarly concerns with cultures in many of the same ways, as is indicated in the work of Handler on the place of folk culture in the expression and dissemination of the Quebecois movement. And they become even closer to anthropology through the valorisation of traditional folk culture. As Handler writes '[l]ike a thing, the national or ethnic group is taken to be bounded, continuous, and precisely distinguishable from other analogous entities' (1988: 15). He regards performances of shared folk culture as expressions of a nationalist ideology that is largely supported by the elite. He writes that the 'relationship between nationalist ideology and social science discourse' is illustrated in the way that calls for 'nation building' are expressed using terms from social sciences. More specifically relevant to anthropology, many of the spectacles of folk culture through which nationalist ideology are expressed 'are researched – and often organized and legitimated – by professional social scientists' (1988: 13). Handler later acknowledged the need to deconstruct nationalist ideology, conceding that the nation is 'enunciated, translated, and received or restated at varying points in a social formation' (1998: 252). Nonetheless his main point, that the idea of bounded culture is central to both nationalists and social scientists, and that they influence one another, remains valid. The contribution of social scientific insights to popular views of national identity is by no means confined to Western cultures. Similar arguments have been put forward regarding Japan, where popular works of social science known as *Nihonjinron* state Japan's 'quintessence and cultural core' based on 'state ideology of national integration' while masking differences (Sugimoto 1999: 82–3). I now look more specifically at the ways in which scholars have tended to

present a unitary *Chinese* culture, and with what effect. I follow this by asking how far more recent concerns with Chinese minorities and with the Chinese diaspora challenge this underlying sense of a bounded culture.

ETHNOGRAPHIES AND LOCALISING STRATEGIES

It is widely argued that Western views of 'other cultures' have presented them as opposites to themselves, reinforcing confidence in Western progress and superiority. Most famously, Said has argued that a systematic body of Western scholarship has depicted a sensuous, irrational Oriental culture against which the West appears ordered and rational (Said 1978). But this is only one of a number of possible forms of 'Othering' which anthropology employs. Fardon (1990) has discussed how the West divides the world into regions and, through a process he describes as 'localising strategies', attributes different characteristics to them. Thus different areas show the West as in different ways contrastingly superior and enlightened. While the people of the Orient may appear sensual, this was only one of many possible forms in which they were represented in the West. Others were represented quite differently. So Fijians might appear childlike, Indians sinister (Kelly 1998: 73–4) and 'an African heart of darkness' was invented (Fardon 1990:6). According to Fardon, accounts of China tended to present the contrast in terms of how 'our progressive civilisation differed from the historical cul-de-sacs into which Oriental despots led their subjects' (Fardon 1990:6). Implicit in this is a sense of a static and unchanging China. In the rest of this section I explore further the ways in which this notion has characterised Western perceptions of China.

According to Schein 'a singular, ancient, and continuous civilisation' has been 'a leitmotif in Western representations of China's difference' (2000: 2–3). In particular, two theories have been put forward to account for this, the first concerned with material conditions, the second with culture. The idea of Oriental despotism, to which Fardon refers in his description of localising strategy among studies of China, stems from Wittfogel (1957). Wittfogel emphasises the material preconditions for the creation of a hierarchical state. He argues that where agriculture necessitated complex irrigation systems a quasi-military state developed to undertake the necessary organisation and construction. This he describes as Oriental despotism. In keeping with

the general trend of these 'localising strategies', his main concern is a contrast with the West. Wittfogel's emphasis is on the lack of deterrence placed on the rulers of such a state, the absence of a constitution or law (101 f.).

A more widespread approach has been to characterise China as a place with a unique, homogenising culture, which was promoted through widespread study of and adherence to the codes of behaviour set out in the works of Confucius. Reasons for this perceived stasis and boundedness were a pervasive literate culture that held back progress and promoted a sense of superiority. As is well known, during much of China's imperial history, admission to the administration was based on examination in Confucian classics. It seems unarguable that the effects of the Confucian codes shaped lives, since departure from these codes was considered idiosyncratic or even foolish (Yang-Petersen 1995: 711). Also, as I will describe in the next chapter, the same effects were intended to promote some cultural homogeneity among the disparate peoples of China. They appear to have spread beyond the educated during imperial times through the 'ortho-praxy' of ritual and etiquette (M. Cohen 1991: 117; Rowe 1994: 419, Watson 1988: 3). Nonetheless, as has been widely argued (see for example Farquhar and Hevia 1993; Jensen 1997) the reifications 'Confucianism' and 'Chinese culture' have been used to set up a contrast between Western dynamism and Chinese stasis. While this may be presented positively or at least neutrally so that Gowen and Hall, to take but one example, write of Chinese history as 'the longest unbroken highway of human life which, without a chasm stretches right back to the ages of myth and fable' (1927: 2), the impression given is more often one of 'a stagnant, slumbering, unchanging China, to be delivered from its unfortunate condition of historylessness by a dynamic, restlessly changing, historyful West' (P. A. Cohen 1996: 57).

In particular, an emphasis on Chinese Confucianism has been a means of positing a contrasting sense of Western dynamism at the level of the individual, the family and the state. This was most famously explored by Weber. As Yang points out in his introduction to the 1951 edition of Weber's book on the religion of China, more than half the book is concerned with a contrast with the West (1951: xix). Parsons assumes a quite mechanical connection between Confucianism and the individual when he suggests that the civil service exams absorbed those who had the capacity to be upwardly mobile into a gentry 'cultural value-pattern' concerned with correct order and the functioning of collectivities, rather than

leaving them free to develop the individualistic approach needed for a capitalist system (Parsons 1952: 194–5). Weber argued more subtly that Confucian culture infused all kinds of social relationships and promoted a great interest in order and traditionalism and an acceptance of this world (1964: [1948] 145). This he contrasted to the Protestant ethic, which encouraged a striving to better oneself and be worthy of the afterlife. It was this cultural difference that resulted, allegedly, in China's 'failure' to progress since, although it had bureaucracy, it failed to develop those institutions and processes held to be fundamental to Western progress, law and economic capitalism. Both Parsons and Weber have argued that the infusion of Confucian sense of order was transmitted through the medium of the family. Weber argued that the importance of the agreement of the elders (1964 [1948]: 89) held back possibilities for innovation; Parsons argued for the central part played by kinship in 'the whole hierarchical network of solidary collectivities' (1952: 197).

The influence of Confucian thought has also been argued at the level of the state itself. For example, Fairbank writes how a reluctance to treat tributary states as in any way equal led to a failure to develop a legal or capitalist system, since all peoples were expected to adhere to Chinese cultural norms (1942). Huntingdon (1993), in his essay on the clash of cultures, has argued that a discrete, Confucian culture persisted into the twentieth century. This belief in Confucian unity has perhaps influenced the assumptions of ethnic homogeneity of the region such as that from Hobsbawm, who writes of China as 'among the extremely rare examples of historic states composed of a population that is ethnically almost or entirely homogeneous' (1992: 66). In 2000 Donald and Evans could still write, critically, that 'the term "Cultural China" is commonly associated with an underlying political and ethnic centrism, according to which different practices of Chineseness are collapsed into a homogeneous and regionally fixed notion of "Chinese culture" as a unifying signifier' (2000: 5). It appears that the idea of culture as a bounding and separating entity has been all too convincing in the context of China studies.

What is the role of anthropology in this? As James (1990) mentions, anthropology has its own localising strategies, influenced by the scholarship that has gone on before. China has been known in the West largely through scholarship based on the written word, particularly history. Anthropology, which has come relatively late, has in some ways continued the existing scholarly notion of a Chinese culture. Anthropology came to China by way of Japan

in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and in the first part of the twentieth century there was considerable contact between Chinese and Western scholars. Guldin (1994) describes how, during the 1930s, 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 at the London School of Economics, and Lin Yueh-hua, who studied at Harvard. The French tradition of sociology was also influential, particularly on Ling Shun-sheng, who later wrote about West Hunan (Lemoine 1989). As a result of fieldwork during this period several full-length ethnographic works were produced. Fei writes about the excitement of introducing the more empirical approach of fieldwork, of 'the adventurous spirit of exploring living problems' and the 'traditional background long neglected by students' (Fei and Chang 1948: xii, 10). The encounter did not, however, escape the hegemonic effects of Western anthropological thought. Fei's intention to understand the 'whole of China' through village studies (1992: 18) was at times not so different from other forms of nationalist anthropology in which 'the village has often been regarded as a microcosm of the nation' (Karakasidou 2000: 415). Other works from this period also implied an underlying unity. Even works based on areas which are now considered to be inhabited by minority peoples are written in terms of Chinese culture. Thus Hsu's work takes a town in Yunnan, which is now a popular place to visit for its minority culture, and studies *Chinese* family life there (1948).

Recent work on China has, of course, challenged the idea of overlapping of peoples, cultures and places by paying closer attention to the heterogeneity of Chinese culture as well as to the Chinese diaspora. Work on diaspora, such as that by Ong (1996), shows that Chineseness is hardly limited to the Chinese nation-state itself and she argues that this is a notion rooted in a peculiarly Western perception of modernity. She suggests that, on the contrary, Chineseness takes a variety of forms throughout the world. This awareness has, as Ang writes, 'unsettled the very demarcation of China as an immensely complex yet ontologically stable object of study' (1998: 225). Nonetheless, as Ang goes on to discuss, the assumption that Chineseness exists in this diasporic form risks reinforcing ideas of a homogeneous Chinese culture (232) and the study of diaspora does not allow one to escape assumptions about cultural groups.

Further challenges to the assumption of a homogeneous China have come from the recent work on the minorities of China, such

as that by Schein, whom I quoted at the start of this section. The study of minority people is not in itself new. In the past, however, rather than challenging the idea of a unified Chinese culture, it has characterised certain groups within the boundaries of China as simply not Chinese. The work of Ling and Ruey (1963) provides an example of this. Their description of West Hunan Miao differences from the Han is based largely on language and religious practices. In their chapter on 'Magic and Religion' they describe 16 elements of 'Miao religion', including welcoming the dragon, sacrificing pigs and sacrificing water buffalo. Perhaps out of prudery, they do not mention the practice of dialogic love singing and pre-marital relationships, which fascinate many Chinese people today. Despite claims to be largely descriptive, their work is strongly influenced by notions of bounded societies. Their emphasis on the Sinicisation of Miao culture implies that an authentically Miao culture once existed, of which little now remains. As Cheung writes, 'Ling and Ruey somehow grafted an "Orientalist" strain of Sinology onto the newly transplanted Western anthropological practice in China' (1996: 78). Their account does, however, provide useful insights.

In contrast to this, Schein suggests that China's apparent homogeneity 'has had to be continually crafted out of heterogeneity and that cultural others have played a variety of parts in this productive endeavor' (2000: 3). China's minorities have an important part to play in this process and recent work, such as Schein's, has moved on to consider their place within nationalist projects. Whereas folk culture may be used to express a shared national culture, distinctions with regard to minority difference also have their part to play in nationalist projects. As Williams (1989) has shown, the definition of ethnic minority is often created by those in power and with a particular purpose, to indicate a primitive against which the progress of the majority group can be compared. By setting their discussions of minority peoples in the context of nationalism, writers such as Gladney (1991) on the Hui, Schein (2000) on the Miao and Litzinger (2000) on the Yao have built on this argument. Schein in particular has shown how the image of the Miao is taken as at once a contrastingly primitive 'Other' and as a reflection of the nation's primordial self. While Schein's concern is with performances of 'Miao culture', Litzinger considers the Yao elite, by which he refers to 'intellectuals, scholars, government officials, Communist Party cadres, and local tour guides', and their attempts to define who they are in the context of the nation's minority scholarship (2000: 21). All these writers draw

our attention to ways in which identities are constructed through ongoing and complex processes of cultural production in which the politics of class and gender, commoditisation and transnational identity movements cannot be ignored.

My intention is to build on the insights into the constructed nature of minority classifications which are found in these accounts. In Chapters 2 and 3 I consider ways in which cultural performances express political agendas. Where my work departs from these others, however, is by moving away from the assumption that ethnographies of groups such as the Miao and Yao, however much the terms are deconstructed, can still be written. I suggest that taking such a theme as a starting point can confine scholars to looking only at those who engage with this concept. Much of the material on which the ethnographies by Gladney, Schein and Litzinger are based is concerned with educated or urban people, these being the people who engage with (and rework) the post-Maoist concepts of the Miao and Yao nationalities. And the multi-sited nature of these studies may reinforce this tendency since it is the concept of minority nationality itself that becomes the unifying theme. I suggest we need to consider the possibility that other forms of identity exist and are equally meaningful but, because scholarly and political concerns with particular forms of categorisation leave them unmarked, they tend to get overlooked.

APPROACHING THE PROBLEM

I suggest that work on ethnicity (rather than ethnic or cultural *groups*) continues to be relevant to this question. Work on ethnicity has suggested that identity is a matter of process; action and interaction, which may take place quite differently in different circumstances and does not necessarily result in the formation of a group. It is therefore quite different from the assumptions of all-or-nothing categorisations often made in colonial times. In social anthropology, reference to ethnic difference as such can be dated to the publication in 1969 of the collection of essays entitled *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* edited by Frederick Barth. Before the 1960s, it had often been assumed that groups identify themselves and can be identified by others through shared cultural elements which, in themselves, reflect their particular origin (see for example Shils 1957). This primordial approach,

attributing ethnic identities to awareness of historical origins, was also expressed by Geertz (1993: 255). In his paper Barth, who drew on earlier work by Gluckman (1958) and Mitchell (1956), proposed an emphasis on ethnic boundary-making rather than on cultures or societies.

From the start these studies drew attention to the interactive nature of ethnicity, that is, the way 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. 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). People's ethnic identification of themselves and others may be brought into play differently in different situations. As Handelman writes, 'the same person can be categorized according to different criteria of relevance in different situations' (1977: 192, see also Okamura 1981: 460). And people can change ethnic identity by moving from one group to another, that is to say, the boundaries between them are seen to be permeable.

Further developments in the direction initiated by 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 that 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 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 Govers 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).

Problems arose, however, because, despite this shift to an actor-centred perspective and an instrumentalist approach, the notion of the existence of social groups with objectively identifiable cultural traits still lingered in the background. As R. Cohen writes, the use of terms like '"group", "category", "boundary" connote an actual entity, and Barth's concern with maintenance tends to reify it all the more' (1978: 386). Something similar can still be seen. Writers have tended to mention the existence of ethnic markers and then go on to describe groups through externally observed traits, that is through their assumptions of cultural groups (Kahn 1989: 11). As I have suggested, the shift to multi-sited fieldwork, though illuminating in other ways, does not necessarily help with this. Despite a greater awareness of the constructedness of identities, books continue to be written, categorised and marketed with reference to ethnic group. In part this is a matter of terminology implicit in the writing of anthropology, in which generalisation is an inevitable and essential part. As Fardon (1996: 134) points out, if we don't use terms which imply ethnic groups, what terms are left for us to use? But it is also inherent in the general direction of works on identity. Thus Blu's (1980) work, which is rightly praised for the way it undercuts essentialising views on ethnic groups, considers the blindness that people had formerly had to issues of colour in the context of the development of a new sense of group identity.

Critics of anthropology's generalising notions of culture tend to call for two things to undermine continuing assumptions that cultures and ethnic groups are actually out there. First, there is a call for a finer-grained ethnography. For example, Abu-Lughod writes that 'one powerful tool for unsettling the culture concept and subverting the process of "Othering" it entails is to write "ethnographies of the particular"' (1991: 149). Ethnography has a way of unsettling assumptions about groups by its messy and unpredictable nature and Farquhar and Hevia (1993) in their critique of over-essentialising approaches to Chinese culture praise the 'nuanced analysis' of Valerie Hansen's work on Chinese religion (1990) and the 'shifting and conflicting attitudes' teased out by Naquin (1992). Second, there is a call for what Kelly describes as 'more specifically adduced historical relationships' (see also Abu-Lughod 1991: 148, Gladney 1998: 189, Kahn 1989: 16). By looking at the historical construction of ideas of cultural groups we can begin to recognise and understand their continuing construction.

PLAN OF WORK

As I have mentioned, the intention of this book is to challenge the usefulness of the category Miao, and by implication other ethnic categorisations. I attempt to do so by three related approaches. In the following chapter I take up calls for a more historically situated approach by considering how the classification of the people known as the West Hunan (or Blue) Miao arose through the administration and scholarly description of the area. I then outline the problems I met in trying to apply this category to people today. In Chapters 3 and 4 I consider how the category 'Miao' is significant to the urban elite, while remaining of little interest to the wider population. I do this through considering presentations of Miao culture to outsiders at Dehang Scenic Park and at Jishou University and the interpretations which are made of these. I also consider aspects of Miao culture which are performed at New Year festivals. The latter are intended largely for West Hunan people and, rather than showing the Miao as an exotic other, they emphasise a Miao tradition in the healthy folk culture of China. Chapters 5 and 6 comprise a case study of events at the temple of the Celestial Kings through which I explore the existence of sense of shared 'local' culture regarded as neither minority nor orthodox Chinese and challenging to existing orthodoxies.

I end this chapter by considering some terms I will use, namely 'Miao' and 'Han' and 'the state'. I begin here with the state, which I take to be well described as 'a roughly hierarchical organization of offices with different amounts of power and authority in executive, legislative and judicial domains' (Reyna 2002: 302). But governance is not all that the state does since, as Abrams points out, it is also '*an ideological* thing' concerned with legitimising the power that it wields (1988: 68). In the past, the notion of the state has been integral to Western concepts of a monolithic China. As I have mentioned, Wittfogel bases his theory of 'Oriental Despotism' on the need for a strong military state in order to maintain control of hydraulic civilisations. Western studies of 'Confucianism' stress the importance of culture for entering the state administration. During the Maoist era China was regarded as an example of a totalitarian state.

In recent years the study of the state has become, as Trouillot (2001) points out 'unfashionable'. In part this has been because of the uncoupling of 'nation' from 'state' with the realisation that the nation can be imagined. But there is also the realisation that the state cannot be studied as an entity because it is diffused through

society in the form of rituals and 'political culture' (Gledhill 1994: 22). Moreover, power is recognised to be exercised through forms of scientific discourse which, though they may be closely connected with the state, are not precisely the same thing. The diverse, rather than monolithic nature of Chinese political culture was something that sensitive works on the subject had made clear even during the Socialist era (see for example Shue, 1988: 17, 66). In recent work on China the emphasis has indeed been on national consciousness rather than on the state, but the state, in its diffused form, is an ever-present reality. Litzinger (2000) addresses the question of the Yao and the state with his discussion of Yao intellectuals' attempts to reconfigure the relationship between Yao tradition and the state. The state is a prominent player in Schien's (2000) study of the 'Miao'. My intention, too, is to present the state in its diffused form, whether through the attempted transformation of New Year festivals into healthy competitions, temple cults into commercial ventures or the ubiquitous presence of the image of the young female Miao.

I turn now to the terms 'Miao' and 'Han'. In its current form, the term 'Miao' is taken to describe a national minority of between 7 million and 8 million people who live in southwest China, extending eastwards as far as West Hunan. Writers also note that they are divided into three language groups, one of which, Kho Xiong, is centred on West Hunan (Lemoine 1978: 797, Ma 1989: 339). In the past hundred years Miao people have also extended into Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Burma. The Miao have been 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. This is an over-generalisation, however. In West Hunan they have remained sedentary rice-growers since the Ming dynasty.

A view of the Miao as a separate and distinct people is vividly conveyed in the following quotation from Savina (1928) 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. (in Geddes 1976: 3)

A keenness to objectify and categorise the Miao as a separate people is indicated by the way that scholars have suggested a unitary origin for the Miao, usually in a group known as the San Miao, who lived in the northeastern province of Gansu 4,000 years ago.[6] There is however, no historical record on which to base these claims and a definitive statement on the origins of the Miao is impossible (Ruey 1962: 181). The result of this has been a situation where attempts to trace the origins of the Miao become a 'highly politicised' area where Miao claims to be the original inhabitants of the land are worked out (Schein 2000: 36f). Though the Miao have long been a source of fascination to Western and Asian scholars, it appears that the categorisation has had more to do with political and scholarly views than with the existence of an actually distinct group.

Before the twentieth century, the people who today are officially classified as Miao, did not employ the word 'Miao' to describe themselves, nor did they necessarily view themselves, and others included in the designation Miao, as belonging to the same group. They were more likely to use the indigenous terms 'Hmong', 'Hmou' and 'Kho Xiong' which refer to three non-Chinese language groups, of which Kho Xiong, found in highland regions of east Guizhou and West Hunan, is the least extensively spoken. The term 'Miao' was used as a administrative and scholarly category to classify these people (rather than as a more general description of a cultural trait) only from the Ming and Qing dynasties onwards. Similarly the term 'Han', now commonly used to denote those who do not hold minority status, was not in common usage until the twentieth century. As Chow writes that 'the terms "Chinese nation" (*Zhong-hua minzu*) and "Han race-lineage" (*Hanzu*) achieved relative semantic stability only after … 1911' (1997: 36). It is now used in West Hunan by educated Chinese-speakers to distinguish themselves from the 'Miao'.

Since these terms have particular historical origins and associations with an elite point of view I try, when discussing the history of West Hunan, to use the less loaded terms 'indigenous people' and 'incomers'. I use the term 'Miao' when recording the views of educated Chinese-speakers on Kho Xiong-speaking highland people since this is the term they used. Among the wider population of West Hunan, however, distinctions are rarely drawn in terms of Miao and Han. More common, as I will discuss, are distinctions

between West Hunan people and those from elsewhere, and between highland and lowland. When making my own observations I write of highland and Kho Xiong-speaking people to refer to what might otherwise be described as the highland Miao. Most rural lowland people themselves use the term 'country people' (*xiangxia ren*) to refer to the Kho Xiong-speaking highlanders.

2 Miao Rebels and 'Common Ground'

Before beginning my fieldwork in West Hunan I had read accounts of its history. From these I had learned about how Miao rebels had attacked the region's towns in the late eighteenth century and how, after this, the lowlands had been organised as an army of peasant soldiers, the *Gan* army, ready to defend against further attack. I had hoped to impress with my knowledge of the *Gan* and the administrative *tun* system which supported it but, in fact, mention of these drew blank looks among even the most educated local inhabitants. And while the ruins of some of the stone watchtowers from this period could still be seen on the hillsides, these were described to me not as part of the suppression of the Miao but as the strongholds of much more recent local strongmen. Rather than describing conflicts between Miao and Han, the region's past was recalled in terms of these protective figures who had kept their own areas peaceful and ensured that irrigation systems were in good repair.

This chapter discusses how the category 'Miao', particularly the Miao of West Hunan, has been constructed historically, and its relevance today. The notion of 'Miao' as a classificatory group is first seen in accounts written during the Ming dynasty and I suggest that as such it was primarily an attempt to exercise power; it did not reflect the perceptions of the wider population. In West Hunan, the attempts to separate the population into 'Miao' and *min* (citizens) which followed were intended to protect or to subdue the highland population, as necessary, but also to establish the existence of a Miao 'Other' on whom unrest could be blamed. What they did not do, I argue, was to reflect or create a widespread sense of clear Miao and Han differences and identities, nor does such a sense exist today.

It has been widely recognised that while history is ostensibly an impartial account of past events, linked together through cause and effect, it can be better seen as a means of expressing and even exercising power. This has been evident in colonial situations such as the histories through which political administrators expressed their own political agenda (Dirks 1987: 8–9). It has also been suggested that colonial histories commit 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1995: 24), exerting power in a more subtle, concealed form through their claims

to impartiality. Thus, for example, accounts of rebellions written by the colonial administrators, couched as they are in official and impersonal language, have an 'aura of impartiality', and therefore truth, which are rarely attributed to more personal accounts such as those of the rebels themselves (Guha 1994: 343). History has also had an important part to play in affirming national identities by assuring its citizens both of their common origin and their progressive development. Thus not only does history inform citizens of the traditions they share with others they will never meet (Cohn 1987: 23) but the nation 'locates itself temporally within the idea of history, of linear time, of a sequence of causes and results' (Errington 1989: 53), in order to chart that progress towards modernity to which each nation aspires.

Particularly relevant here is the tendency for national histories to create a form of 'fictive ethnicity', often on the basis of shared ancestry or language which underpins a sense of mutual belonging to the nation (Balibar 1991: 90f.). This is not illustrated simply through accounts of a common origin but repeatedly, since 'the formation of the nation … appears as the fulfilment of a "project" stretching over centuries, in which there are different states and moments of coming to self-awareness' (Balibar 1991: 86). In China a national consciousness bound up with a sense of Han identity and superiority emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. Consequently a number of early twentieth-century Chinese historians wrote histories of China dealing with the Han people's path to ascendancy marked by their various struggles with surrounding 'barbarian' peoples (Duara 1995: 36–44).[1] Each of these writers emphasised, though to different degrees, how the Han had not just overwhelmed and defeated the surrounding barbarians but had also assimilated them into Han Chinese ways. These two approaches draw on older imperial Chinese notions of the Chinese people as both a contrast to and a civilising influence upon those on the periphery.

Orthodox Chinese culture had developed its apparent unitary nature only very gradually. In this process an educated elite had emerged who regarded themselves as exemplars of a culture peculiarly different from and superior to others in China. Fundamental to this perceived difference was 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 1982: 56–7).[2] Hunter-gatherers, swidden cultivators and nomads were regarded, in contrast, as barbaric. Such people 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). Later Han ideas of civilisation were to be based on a literate elite culture, which was the basis of all formal schooling and the subject of the civil service examinations.

Imperial China was also characterised by a belief that its borders were inhabited not so much by different peoples as by people whom civilised culture had not yet reached. According to this belief, known as culturalism, 'China was a … community whose boundaries were determined by the knowledge and practice of principles expressed through China's elite cultural tradition' (Townsend: 1992: 109) and its elite believed that 'their normative "Confucian" cultural tradition was a universally valid "civilization," possession of which set one off as a civilised human being' (Langlois 1980: 356). Culturalism was also associated with the notion of tributary states which, though not themselves Chinese, deferred to and might gradually take on the superior civilisation of China. Consequently, although incomers to the south were disconcerted by the freer ways they found there and the worship of nature spirits and the crocodile-dragon (von Glahn 1983: 26, Wiens 1967: 131) they were confident that exposure to Chinese ways could transform these barbarians into civilised people. Over the years, the expansion of China proper into this area resulted in a merging between indigenous people and incomers, a process made easier by the minor differences in physical appearance amongst the peoples of south and central China.

Culturalism was, however, an ideology rather than an actuality and the 'doctrine was often used to conceal the compromises that the Imperial state had to make' (Duara 1993: 3). During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, the empire certainly did not expand as a result of a superior Chinese culture transforming all it met. Rather, it was often a process of economic expansion, backed up by military force. Moreover, though revenue was collected along China's borders no actual 'tribute system' operated since, as Millward puts it: '"the tribute system" clearly masks great differences in implementation and meaning depending on who was presenting tribute and from where' (1996: 126). Often, as I will describe with reference to West Hunan, the collection of tribute broke down as rebellions occurred in the border regions. On other occasions the system was adapted to suit circumstances. Thus Hostetler discusses how, in the nineteenth century, the border state of Kokand negotiated with the Qing dynasty to be treated on all but equal terms. Nonetheless,

the term 'tribute system', with its implications of Chinese cultural superiority, continued to be used (2001: 43).

By the time of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) an increasing emphasis on the classification and separation of different peoples developed alongside this culturalist ideology. This became part of a 'civilising project' through which 'asymmetrical dialogues between the center and the periphery' attempted 'to define, to objectify' those it classified as other peoples (Harrell 1995: 3–8). The change in emphasis can be found in writings on the Miao from this time. Between 200 BC and AD 1200, 'Miao' had been widely used in the south with a sense roughly 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' (1962: 182).[3] At the end of the twelfth century it was used to refer to a particular group of barbarians as is indicated when Ruey Yih-fu writes that in the 1190s,

> … 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 1962: 182–3)

But it was not until the fifteenth century that the term was used to denote the people sharing particular cultural and linguistic features, who are today called the Miao (see Lin 1940: 279 n. 50). This development, like the appearance of 'Miao albums' listing the name, appearance and customs of each group, was to become part of what Hostetler describes as a 'shift in ways of viewing the world' which began in China from the beginning of the Ming on (2001: 6). The Chinese, like the rest of the world, became involved in the careful documentation of populations. Scholars went on to subdivide the Miao into groups, based on colour of dress; the inhabitants of West Hunan were termed 'Blue Miao', and were again divided into subgroups.[4] These are recognisable as the precursors to the classifications used today.

NATIONALIST HISTORY – ASSIMILATING AND SUPPRESSING THE MIAO

Both these approaches are evident in nationalist histories, such as that with which Ling and Ruey (1963) open their account of the Miao of West Hunan (see pp. 18–19). They describe how, in a semi-

militaristic occupation of the region which lasted for several centuries, West Hunan's indigenous people were at times absorbed into Chinese ways and at other times separated off as potential rebels. While the lowland people quickly fell under Chinese administration and were generally regarded as potential allies, those who lived further into the highlands were more likely to be involved in conflicts with the administration. Both these aspects underlined the separateness and apparent superiority of the Han Chinese.

Views of West Hunan's indigenous people as barbarians to be overwhelmed are reflected in the history of Ma Yuan, who led a failed attempt to annex the region and died there of malaria in AD 49 (Shi 1986: 33, Sutton 1989: 102). He is known locally as Ma Fubo which variously means 'Controller of the Waves' and 'Suppressor of the Barbarians'. In general, however, the policy in West Hunan was to encourage cultural assimilation of the indigenous people. For example, after the defeat of Ma Yuan little is heard of the region until the Yuan dynasty (1280–1398), by which time the 'tributary system' had been established, with local headmen acting as intermediaries (*tu si*). Contact between incomers and the indigenous people of the lowland areas through proximity and marriage was encouraged at this time by administrators who regarded Chinese rule as a benevolent duty. There were also practical advantages to this policy since, while highland villages were organised to provide tribute, militias were organised in lowland villages so the people could protect themselves against potential attack from the more rebellious highland people (for further information on this topic see Ling and Ruey 1963: 149). And although by 1615 a wall had been built to keep the 'wild' Miao (*sheng Miao*, i.e. highland Miao) away from the lowlands, a rebellion by the highland population soon brought it down and, once again, there was considerable contact between the indigenous people and incomers. By this time landless incomers had begun to arrive from the east to settle the more fertile land in the valley floors in the eighteenth century (Perdue 1987: 103) and official policy was again to encourage them to absorb the indigenous people by allowing intermarriage.[5]

Despite these policies, the new arrivals appear to have been a factor in the unrest which was to culminate in the widespread 'Miao' rebellions. These spread throughout West Hunan and into neighbouring Guizhou between 1795 and 1806, and during this time the rebels took control of the garrison town of Qianzhou resulting in considerable loss of life. After these rebellions had been suppressed, at the start of the nineteenth century, Fu Nai, the governor of West

Hunan, instigated the *Gan* army, a body of men ready to be called upon should the need arise. This was accompanied by a strict demarcation of the population through the *tun* system, in which much of the population became at once peasants and soldiers. Influenced, no doubt, by the new classificatory rigour that had developed during the Ming dynasty, this involved a separation between the *min* (citizens, including incomers and those indigenous people who had become assimilated before the rebellions) and the 'Miao'. This separation was imposed spatially since *min* who had been living in the Miao lands were forced to move out and 'no mixed inhabitation was allowed in Miao area' (Shi 1986: 49, 53). Intermarriage was not permitted. A further division was made within the Miao who were divided into two groups, the 'tame' (*shu*, i.e. subdued) Miao and the 'wild' (*sheng*) Miao. The subdued Miao were overseen by Miao officers and lived in fortified towns and villages in the lowlands, in a system parallel to that for the *min*. The 'wild' Miao, who were not part of the *Gan* army, continued to live in fortified villages with mazes of narrow streets called *zhai*, and 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 and Ruey 1963: 153).

Although this establishment of clear administrative distinctions between *min* and Miao can be seen as the beginning of a classificatory policy which continues today, it did not preclude culturalist intentions. The *tun* was accompanied by attempts to educate the indigenous people to become, if not orthodox Chinese, then civilised indigenous people. Rather than encouraging contact with Han peasants, with whom they had all too much in common, they were taught the *wenhua* (culture, or written culture) of the Chinese elite. In neighbouring 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). West Hunan was also included in this process (Shi 1986: 215).

Everyday bodily practices were also targeted. While much of the male population (highland and lowland) was schooled in military skills, one of the most important criteria for assessing the indigenous peoples of 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, highland people

were forced to wear Chinese dress (Jenks 1994: 69) and this was part of a wider trend in China (Huang 1974: 297). It was not only the minority practices that were regarded as heterodox. As Rowe writes, 'the achievement of moral-cultural uniformity through *chiao-hua* [moral transformation] was a persistent theme of Confucian reformers in dealing with folk traditions in the Han areas themselves' (1994: 421). Buddhism also had a part to play. In West Hunan, the governor Fu Nai introduced Buddhism along with formal education, as part of his 'deliberate policy of destroying Miao culture by introducing Chinese education and by forbidding the practice of traditional Miao ceremonies' (see Jones and Kuhn 1978: 132, see also Zhang 1994: 30).

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES – A SENSE OF COMMON GROUND

These descriptions of indigenous people being absorbed by the incoming Han Chinese and the separation of populations which followed reflect Han nationalist concerns. Twentieth-century nationalist histories, like colonial accounts, do not of course go uncontested. Ethnohistorians have derived alternative histories from accounts, written and oral, of marginalised peoples. Colonial histories in particular have been challenged, notably by the subaltern studies movement which seeks to present an alternative history from the point of view of those oppressed (see for example Guha and Spivak 1988). In West Hunan alternative points of view on history also exist. Although the suppression of Miao rebellions and the separation of the Miao and *min* are central to Ling and Ruey's history, they are not recalled by the inhabitants of West Hunan today. The past is recalled not in terms of civilising projects and ethnic differences but through stories of local heroic figures whose followers were not clearly Miao or Han.

Charismatic local strongmen from the time when the *tun* system was breaking down, in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, were recalled fondly in West Hunan. Their most important attributes were that, in contrast to pejorative descriptions of them as bandits, they brought peace and renown to their home areas. Unlike nationalist histories of Miao rebellion and eventual Han ascendancy, stories of local strongmen did not foreground differences of origin. For example, on a trip to visit his ancestral village, I was told that the early twentieth-century 'bandit', Long

Yunfei, had been a Miao person who had both Chinese-speaking and Miao followers. The nineteenth-century local figure Liang Guangxing is widely remembered today, but the Kho Xiong speakers speak of him as indigenous although Chinese speakers say that he is not. The eighteenth-century hero, Yang Gongbo is remembered in a similar way. Yang Gongbo was said to have fought against the Japanese in Taiwan and people say that he could not die, even when under gunfire. During the Cultural Revolution his grave, just outside Jishou, was dug up and they found his body undecayed in its official robes. On the one hand, among residents of Jishou he is generally thought to have been a local Han. On the other, members of the Yang clan, from the Kho Xiong-speaking village of Zhaiyang, claim that he was born in their village. No friction results from these variations, since the different stories come from people who regard themselves as members of the same surname group. The Liang family in West Hunan includes people who claim incomer and indigenous descent and all take a pride in his history. 'Yang', like Liang is a surname group which includes both Kho Xiong-speaking and Chinese-speaking members.[6]

Details of written historical accounts of West Hunan suggest that even during the Ming and Qing dynasties issues of difference and superiority were not as important as nationalist history would suggest. Cultural change was certainly not all in the direction of the 'Miao' giving up their ways. The establishment of local headmen in the early days of China's expansion into the south is indicative of the actual weakness of the culturalist ideology. The alternative possibility, whereby a Chinese leader and a group of soldiers would be set in place of a defeated local leader, usually resulted in them becoming absorbed into the surrounding indigenous people (Wiens 1967: 208–9). Thus we learn that, in West Hunan, some families 'became Miao' during the Ming dynasty after arriving in the area from the east (Ling and Ruey 1963: 128). And Shi writes of a 'junior Wu' clan, which was 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).[7] This kind of process was a threat to the authorities, as is indicated by the fact that, in nearby eastern 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).

These events, though contrary to the intended direction of the 'civilising project', did not in themselves challenge the distinctions

between Miao and Han which were emerging. More of a challenge was evidence that incomers and indigenous people were finding a common cause that did not at all involve the adoption of civilised Chinese ways. Thus, for example, although the indigenous hill people were the main supporters of the rebellions of the eighteenth century, the commonly used description 'Miao rebellion' obscures the degree of common cause between poor incomers and the indigenous people. As in the later 'Miao rebellions' in Guizhou, which 'consisted of congeries of different revolts involving other ethnic minorities, Muslim (Hui), religious sects, secret societies, and disgruntled Han Chinese' (Jenks 1994: 3), dissatisfaction among the population could be subsumed under the retrospective and generalising description of Miao rebellion and thus 'the onus was removed from the government for its role in precipitating the turmoil' (Jenks 1994: 4). But an element of the rebellions in West Hunan appears to have been not so much anti-incomer as anti-official. Landless peasants from further east, driven into a largely barren landscape in search of land, had little in common with the official class. As in the Guizhou rebellions, some of them joined forces with the rebels. Shi suggests that the 'Han traitors' (*Han jian*) even instigated the rebellion (Shi 1986: 49–50). Furthermore, when the strict demarcations of the *tun* system, which was put in place after the rebellions, proved impossible to maintain, there was a gradual merging of the lowland Miao with the *min* in the lowland areas. Shen Congwen writes that, within Fenghuang city walls:

> … 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, in Kinkley 1977: 247)

When we consider the constant struggle involved in imposing strict distinctions and upholding the superiority of Chinese culture, we realise that the classifications 'Miao' and '*min*' did not so much reflect already existing identities, but rather, like Chinese culturalism itself, formed part of an ideological system. I suggest instead that lowland West Hunan people, rather than seeing themselves as Han or Miao and superior or inferior to others, experienced a sense of what, following Bol (1987), I term 'common ground': a sense of shared experience based on their position in the Chinese 'civilising project'. Bol introduced the concept of 'common ground' in his discussion of

the adoption of literati culture and the patronage of Han literati by the Jurchens, rulers of the north Chinese Chin dynasty (1115–1234). Rather than undergoing a process of assimilation to Chinese culture, they were adopting the necessary skills to transform themselves from nomadic people to the rulers of a dynastic state. He wrote, 'the Jurchen rulers recruited Han literati not as Hans but as guardians of civil ideals' and the two groups 'found common ground in the political, cultural, and educational ideals and practices associated with the idea of *wen*' (1987: 534–5). *Wen* in this context refers to the literate culture required for civil administration. Bol illustrates this by describing how the Jurchens took 'ritual and musical implements, Classics, histories, literary collections and even educated men' (489) after the sack of Kaifeng.[8]

Despite the radically different situation of the indigenous people of West Hunan from that of the Jurchens nine centuries earlier, the idea of common ground remains central. The Jurchens found a sense of common ground with the Han Chinese on the basis of literate culture. In West Hunan I think it lay elsewhere, namely between those, incomers or indigenous, seen as without *wen* in its sense of literate culture. I suggest that this is because the expansion into south China was not simply a matter of overwhelming indigenous practices, it also involved the incorporation of indigenous practices as part of non-elite Chinese culture. As Wiens (1967) writes, 'elements of the peripheral folk culture [i.e. "minority culture"] have been retained in this new culture, and ... 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 (45). I suggest that this was a two-way process whereby incomers, such as those to West Hunan, also regarded the 'peripheral folk' as people whose culture was not altogether alien. What was taking place was not 'Sinification' but 'perennial, conflicted, and two-way adjustments' (Lipman 1996: 99).

TWENTIETH-CENTURY CLASSIFICATIONS

The contrast between politically motivated Han/minority distinctions and more fluid, 'two-way adjustments' among the wider population continued into the twentieth century. The classifying processes which began in the Ming and Qing gained intensity during the twentieth

century, when notions of the Chinese people, or the Chinese peoples, became central to the nationalist project and a minorities policy came to the fore when the Communist Party came to power in 1949.[9] Because those classified as minorities had been particularly oppressed before 'liberation', and many had played a part in the Communist Party's rise to power, they became the subject of preferential policies although the government never lost sight of its 'civilising agenda'. The change in policy was supported by a rigorous, China-wide classification project (Dreyer 1976: 141, Harrell 1991) loosely based on Stalin's concept that nationality comprises common language, common territory, common economic life and common culture (Heberer 1989: 30f., Hsieh 1986: 4). In 1951, following the All-China Nationality Conferences on Health and Education, it was decided to send large numbers of cadres to the minority areas, to raise standards in these fields, and areas such as West Hunan, where there was a high proportion of minority people, were made Autonomous Prefectures during the 1950s. During the Cultural Revolution these policies were termed a 'bourgeois, revisionist line' and were reversed. Minority rights were reinstated in 1975 however, and the 1982 Constitution confirmed, in more detail, rights of limited self-government, religious freedom, and 'protection and preservation of cultural heritage' (Hsieh 1986: 8f.). Minorities were also advantaged in education and birth control policies (Heberer 1989, McKahn 1994: 42f.). 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 as well. Today, praise 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' (Tapp 1995: 195).

Although there were attempts to take the opinions of minority groups themselves into account, this classification of nationalities, like those of the past, has not always reflected views of the wider population. In some instances the process subsumed people of different languages and cultural practices under the label of a single nationality (Heberer 1989: 39). In southwest China, this has been the case with the Yi (Harrell 1990: 522) and the Naxi (McKhan 1994). Despite this, it has been argued that the formal process of definition in China has resulted in a new sense of group identity among those categorised. Schein writes that, in contrast to the past, when the term 'Miao' was avoided as derogatory, people now 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, see also Diamond 1994: 115). Gladney has put the argument for ethnogenesis strongly by suggesting that, in southern China, '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). It has been suggested that even those seeking a change in classification reinforce rather than contest the classificatory system. As Cheung writes of the Ge's struggle to change their categorisation from Miao, '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 1996: 245, see also Harrell 1990: 524–5 and Wu 1989: 2).

Nonetheless, as several of these writers have pointed out, recognition of pan-nationality minority identity is largely confined to an educated elite. I found that neither educated urban people who regarded themselves as Miao, nor highland Kho Xiong-speaking people showed any knowledge of those in Guizhou who are classified as Miao, apart from those just over the Guizhou border who also speak Kho Xiong. Moreover, even within the highland areas of West Hunan itself, people did not regard themselves as a united group. Discussion with Kho Xiong-speaking people often led 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. I was told that 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. Kho Xiong-speakers were more aware of the differences between dialects in the highland areas than the similarities, and discussion of dialects would often lead on to talking about corresponding differences in the embroidery on women's costumes. This also differed from one highland area to another, with minor differences between areas and a major difference between north and south, corresponding to the difference between different dialects.

I also found that the adoption of minority nationality did not indicate a sense of newly discovered minority identity. No one who changed their officially registered nationality did so, as far as I was

aware, for this reason. I heard of no one who learned a minority language or took part in any other practices which might associate them with a minority group. The number of Tujia had increased dramatically in the area over the past ten years, something which, in Sichuan, Gladney cites as evidence of increasing identification with a minority group (1991: 305–6).[10] But in West Hunan I was told that this had taken place because Tujia identity conferred the advantages of minority status, without some of the stigma.[11] As a result, the people I met in Jishou rarely discussed their own or each others' nationality in general conversation. Even those who showed pride in or loyalty to their rural Kho Xiong-speaking origins when talking to me or to 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 minority status of neighbours or close friends.

Though some of the changes of nationality I learned of were based on good evidence of Kho Xiong- or Tujia-speaking ancestors, their purpose was usually to gain access to the material benefits. For example, a retired schoolteacher called Mrs Gu knew that her father had been descended from a group of Bai who had migrated from Yunnan. As urban, Chinese-speaking gentry, 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, including a lower pass mark for entering university and a less strict birth control policy (see Tapp 1995: 207–8), Mrs Gu applied to have her nationality changed. This made no difference to her sons, since her husband was already registered as Miao, but she wanted proof that her nephews and nieces, who had moved away from the area, were also eligible for these benefits. Similarly, Mrs Gu's daughter-in-law, a school administrative worker, 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 classification on moving to town; when educational and birth control benefits were introduced, she had changed her nationality to Tujia.

Others 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 a number of 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. Others changed to Tujia nationality for similar reasons. A friend of mine said that the people in her village of Ganziping[12] had been there so long that, though some said they were from Shanxi, no one really knew where their ancestral home (*laojia*) was. Nevertheless, recently many of them had gone to the local government and had their nationality changed to Tujia. In West Hunan, changes of nationality were almost always strategic, based on a wish to gain advantages for oneself and one's family.

RELATIONS BETWEEN HIGHLANDS AND LOWLANDS

In contrast to the clear distinctions implied by the government's classification system, I found little evidence of discrete cultural groups in West Hunan. In the lowlands, descendants of incomers and indigenous people intermarried and lived together. In continuation of the sense of common ground, many of their cultural practices were described as 'local' and were hard to define as either Han or minority. Distinctions between highlanders and lowlanders, particularly those lowlanders who claimed incomer ancestry, were more in evidence but these were not expressed in terms of identification with the wider categories Miao or Han. Highland and lowland people drew distinctions between themselves, not so much on the basis of perceived differences in social structure or ancestry as through issues of character and manners. Since these were aspects which could be relatively easily changed, boundaries between them were relatively fluid and permeable and the cultural practices of highlands and lowlands were closely linked and readily exchanged.

Ling and Ruey's (1963) account of the region emphasises differences between highland and lowland ritual and family practices and I begin by considering how far the practices they describe in the highlands still exist. Concerning family and marriage practices, I did not hear of young people making appointments to sing love songs as they did in the past, but market days in highland areas are still a time for flirtation and banter between young men and women. In sharp contrast to Chinese norms, it is often not important to the highland people for a woman to be virgin at the time of marriage. For example, Mrs Gu's son, a teacher called Liang, 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'. Also in contrast to the usual 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. This practice was also described by Shi (1986: 170).

While most of the ritual practices described in Ling and Ruey's account are carried out only rarely today, some aspects of belief in the highland areas are commonly remarked upon even by young educated people who claimed to know little of highland culture. These include the fact that some Kho Xiong people go to Daoist practitioners called *laoshi* rather than the lowland *daoshi* for funerals and other rituals. It was *laoshi* who inaugurated the new temple at Yaxi (see p. 2). Also, and again in contrast to lowland people, many believe in a wide range of spirits, often associated with natural features, such as water, rocks and trees. 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. The purchaser drained the pool to make it easier to catch the fish but all of them had disappeared, reappearing only when the pool was filled again. This was attributed to a spirit in the pool who was unwilling to give up the fish.

On the whole, however, these practices and beliefs were not employed to distinguish 'self' and 'other' on the basis of different cultures, nor were they topics of day-to-day conversation. A sense of difference as such was far more likely to be expressed through derogatory comments based on the supposed poverty and backwardness of the highland people or on the supposed uncouthness and untrustworthiness of the lowlanders. Some lowland Chinese-speaking people regarded the highland Kho Xiong as lacking refinement and organisation. A woman of incomer descent, who had lived for ten years in the highland town of Laershan 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, having 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 inhabitants in a matter of days. Similar views were also sometimes expressed in areas where villages of incomer and Kho Xiong ancestry were interspersed, such as Ganziping. Ganziping, a few kilometres south of Jishou, is the site of one of the earliest Han Chinese settlements in the area while the villages on the other, steeper side of the river have long been classified by the administration as Miao. The villagers of Ganziping claim to be of largely incomer descent and were particularly prejudiced against highland people judging by the jokes that were told by teachers in the primary school staffroom. When I visited, for example, they were laughing about a young teacher, not present at the time, 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, as I must have done well over a hundred times during my fieldwork, that we did sometimes but that we also often ate potatoes. This time, however, it led to a rather derisive aside that maybe we wore turbans round our heads too, like Miao people.

These distinctions were related to the poverty and supposed backwardness of the highland regions. Poverty was indeed one of the main ways in which highland areas appeared to me to differ from the lowlands. In the past, many highland people had not grown rice but lived on other staples, including millet and barley, something considered by the Han, and today by the Kho Xiong themselves, to be a sign of great poverty. Today, most villagers grow their own rice on small terraces, but there is little flat land for grazing. As a result, rather than attending school, children often spend their time collecting animal fodder from the mountains which is time-consuming. Infrastructure and transport in highland areas is also undeveloped. In contrast to the improvements that 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, although this is alleviated in part by easy access to water from natural springs and wells. Poor roads and transport mean that attending secondary school or going to market may involve many hours of walking.

Highland people, on the other hand, do not regard themselves as in any way inferior and often describe people of incomer descent as dirty and untrustworthy. Where the former is concerned, Shi writes that many Han violate the norms of behaviour in a rural Miao home and

are regarded as vulgar (1986: 134). Miss Shi, a Kho Xiong-speaking student studying in Jishou, 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'.

Although these perceptions of difference did exist, usually they were not foregrounded and they were offset by a sense that any boundary which existed between highland and lowland was fluid and permeable. Among highland people, for example, a straightforwardness of temperament is often more important than ancestry in determining whether one belongs. For example, this came up in a conversation about hunting. Mrs Gu's son Liang told me that highland people often attribute their skill in hunting to a spirit master. Those who are in contact with such a master know exactly which paths animals will take and can set traps for them. Sometimes this is done by tracking, sometimes by the smell, sometimes there is no easy explanation. When I tried to get a clearer definition of why highland people teach the secrets of hunting only to each other I was told that it was not so much on the basis that they teach other 'Miao' as that they only teach people they think are honest. Many highlanders think lowlanders are cunning or that they harbour evil thoughts, but if a lowland person can convince them that he is honest he will learn the secrets of hunting.[13]

Even differences of language, one of the most obvious differences between highland and lowland population, were described to me in the context of trustworthiness of character. Kho Xiong is a first language for most people in the highland areas.[14] 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).[15] Being able to speak this language often did engender a sense of shared belonging. So, for example, Miss Shi told me that in a Chinese-speaking environment such as Jishou, Kho Xiong-speakers were particularly likely to trust others who could speak the language and they felt *bijiao tuanjie* (relatively united). Conversely, in markets, which have long been a place where highlanders and lowlanders come into contact, Kho Xiong-speakers often do not trust Chinese-speakers and fear being cheated, a situation that has been reported since Han people first entered the Miao areas (Shi 1986: 40). For example, Liang told me that if he told highland people in Chinese that he was Miao, they would not be impressed, but if he spoke to

them in Kho Xiong he would be trusted. Here too the boundary between highland and lowland ways is quite permeable. Miss Shi explained that lowland people can become accepted and marry into Kho Xiong-speaking villages if they learn the language and gave the example of a primary school teacher in her village who had done so. It appears then that these distinctions are not drawn on the basis of shared cultural group or social structure, nor on the basis of shared ancestry but rather according to certain behavioural and economic traits. Such distinctions do not necessarily imply identification with others designated as Miao, nor even with others described as West Hunan Miao.

A perception of what we often term 'Miao' and 'Han' as interrelated cultures would however account for cultural practices that are found in slightly different forms in the highland and lowland populations of West Hunan. This is suggested, for example, by the similarity 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 meaning 'teacher' and 'master' or 'master of ceremonies'. There are several differences between *laoshi* and *daoshi*. *Laoshi* can usually speak Kho Xiong and they wear orange robes and ornate head-dresses, whereas *daoshi* wear black robes and hats. *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 (Graham 1961: 104, Osgood 1963: 301f.). 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 1907: 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. One added that some Kho Xiong-speakers became *daoshi*.

Furthermore, it is not unknown for lowland people of incomer descent to consult minority ritual specialists. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, *laoshi* played a role in the inauguration of a new temple at Yaxi. Graham describes how in Yunnan in the early part of the twentieth 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.

A similar relation exists between highland and lowland practices of the thanksgiving ritual known as *luo*. According to Zhang (1994), the Chinese term *luo*, was brought to West Hunan referring to a vow made to the god of pestilence which was later redeemed. Later, indigenous people used 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*[16] [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 *luo* since it was carried out as thanks when a previous request had been granted (Ling and 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 drama.[17] This is formalised and performed in Chinese. Until recently it has 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, '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 (Ling and Ruey 1963: 266f., Zhang 1994: 128–30, Zhou et al. 1992). *Luo* opera continued to be popular in West Hunan and Guizhou after it was no longer performed in east China (see Kinkley 1977: 298f.). Though I did not witness *luo* opera myself, Zhang writes that it is still performed, and I was told by Mrs Gu that, about ten years before, her husband's Kho Xiong relatives had put on a performance for her in their village because she was in bad health.[18] It seems likely that this occurred because *luo* opera was identified as a more formalised version of the already existing idea of *luo* rather than the imposition of something exotic from Han culture. The two are seen as different aspects of the same cultural practice.

The lack of foregrounding given to official distinctions between Miao and Han was even more apparent among lowland people themselves. Here a sense of shared identity articulated in terms of place was far more apparent than any other form of allegiance. My queries about cultural practices concerning food or religious practices, for example, almost always met with the response that these were local (*bendi*). Such practices were contrasted not with those of the Miao but with those from other parts of China. Similarly local people (*bendi ren*) were often contrasted with 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. When drawing a contrast with me as a foreigner (*wai guo ren*), West Hunan people did not refer to themselves as Chinese but as 'we West Hunan people' (*women Xiangxi ren*). The temple of the Celestial Kings, which was attended by highlanders and lowlanders alike, was also described as *bendi*.

I suggest that these practices are a contemporary manifestation of the 'common ground' between the descendants of incomers and indigenous people in the lowland areas since *bendi* is often used to describe unorthodox practices which are associated, by those from outside the area, with minority practices. Thus local West Hunan food includes, for example, dishes of soured vegetables and soured uncooked fish. These are left overnight in salted water and, in the case of the fish, in an airtight container with corn-meal. According to Chinese historical sources, these are Miao and, indeed, disgusting barbarian dishes (Playfair 1876: 94–5), but in lowland West Hunan they are widely prepared and eaten, irrespective of family origins. Similarly, in China the techniques of burning-off vegetation to create temporary plots, hunting with dogs and gathering wild plants are widely considered to be minority practices. I found that these are practised both by descendants of indigenous people and by incomers, and are also described as *bendi*.

Like 'cultural hybridity', which Bhabha describes arising in the 'interstitial passage between fixed identities' these 'discordant, even dissident histories and voices' run contrary to existing senses of fixed identities (1994: 4, 5) and present a challenge to assumptions about the salience of Han/minority differences. An example of this is the different approaches found to *gu* magic. Diamond suggests that the Han accused the minorities of the Southwest of *gu* witchcraft because they represented a disturbing 'Other' to their own world view. Her 1988 paper on the history of *gu* accusations against the Miao in Guizhou and West Hunan has been seminal to discussion of the social

construction of beliefs about the 'Miao'. Nonetheless, I argue that in discussing the viewpoint of Han scholars, Diamond over-emphasises the importance of Han/Miao difference.

From the Song period (690–1127) onwards, the making of *gu* has been associated particularly with the minority peoples of the southwest. Some women become possessed by an evil spirit and have to practise *gu* in order to satisfy the spirit. To do so they put insects into a sealed pan overnight. The surviving insect, that which has eaten all the others, can be used to make people sick and can wither trees. Such women are said to be identifiable by their red eyes.[19] *Gu* has been associated particularly with sexual approaches by minority women (Feng and Shyrock 1935), and educated Chinese, such as officials and travellers, who visited the southwest, believed themselves to be particularly at risk. But the perceived risk is also more general and Diamond herself was warned of the dangers of *gu* during her research in Guizhou in the 1980s (1988: 1).

Like earlier anthropological insights into witchcraft accusations, Diamond's account regards them as a means of expressing social tensions (see Marwick 1965). Her paper questions whether the indigenous people themselves actually believe in *gu* magic and suggests that it is better seen as a manifestation of a Han fear of minority sexuality. She argues that 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 she writes:

> [i]n 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)

The fear of *gu* women was a way of expressing this.

I too found that fear of *gu* sometimes expressed a fear of the 'Miao' among educated people from outside the region. One young Miao woman told me that when her sister left the West Hunan Autonomous Prefecture to go to college in a nearby city, she was approached by a teacher who asked her if she was Miao. On learning that she was the teacher told her that she and her husband used to work as teachers in a Miao area of Guizhou Province. Her husband had died there and

since she attributed his death to *gu* magic she was now very afraid to enter areas populated by the Miao. This suggests a continuing fear of the Miao, perhaps particularly among the educated Han who, like the officials of an earlier age, were seeking to maintain a clear distinction between the Miao areas and the perceived orthodoxy of the Chinese world to which they would return.

I found a very different attitude to *gu* among the wider population of West Hunan, however, and my research does not suggest a situation where Han Chinese values can be sharply delineated from and contrasted with minority ones. My fieldwork suggests that accusations of *gu* are not always or necessarily expressive of Han fears of the Miao. Of the several people who discussed *gu* with me, all agreed that, rather than being confined to the highland regions, it was a typical practice of the whole area. For example, one woman in the lowlands told me that it was a real danger, that *gu* women were everywhere in West Hunan, even in the prefectural capital, but if you were lucky you would not come across them. In cases like this, accusations of *gu* seem to have less to do with ethnic tensions between lowlands and highlands than with more general perceptions of social dysfunction or weakness, often concerning women and usually made by neighbours.[20] For example, I met one woman from a highland, Kho Xiong-speaking village who told me that her mother had said 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. I noticed that when she drank from wells she blew on the surface of the water before drinking, or spat most of the mouthful out again. When I asked who might do such a thing she said that a woman in her village had been accused of doing *gu* magic, it happened to women who weren't liked, sometimes single women, sometimes married ones. In this case it was a woman whose family was not doing well and she and her children were dressed in rags. Another person, who had grown up in a Kho Xiong-speaking village some 30 years before told me strikingly similar stories of poor children being taunted on the grounds that their mothers made *gu*. Both these contacts appeared sceptical as to whether such practices actually took place. But they were in no doubt that accusations were made, not as a result of ethnic tensions but against people who, for reasons of gender or poverty, had relatively little power within their village. Conversely, I was never told that *gu* might represent a danger to myself. While this may be because, as Schein argues, an exotic commoditisation of

the Miao has replaced the earlier fear among educated Han (2000: 61), it may also be because, as an outsider, I was not involved in neighbourly suspicions and disputes. This suggests the existence of quite a different viewpoint from that in the histories and among Han scholars, one in which family and village tensions are far more salient that Han/minority ones.

Thus historical and ethnographic evidence suggest we need to move away from looking at West Hunan as a region inhabited by Miao and Han and consider the classification of the Miao in terms of a continuing struggle by the elite to establish an ideology of separateness and Han superiority. West Hunan is not the only region of China in which a congruence has been noted between indigenous people and poor Han incomers. Leong describes a similar situation among the poor migrants or 'shed people' (*pengmin*) of nineteenth-century East Hunan. Their unorthodox ways of life and proximity to indigenous people of the hills raised doubts as to whether they were actually Chinese (1997: 130).[21] Yokoyama makes a similar point when he writes that the term *wen* can be opposed here to the term *tu* (of the earth), which can be used to refer to the rural or uneducated as well as to minority people (1990). In Republican times, incomers who had settled in Yunnan Province, were like the indigenous Bai people described as *tu* (in opposition to *wen*) and both were classified together as *benji* (local). The more salient distinction was with more recent incomers, urban Chinese, who were registered as *keji* (guest people) (1990: 16–17).

In these contexts, expressions of shared local identity are particularly unsettling since not only do they disrupt assumptions of clear boundaries between Han and minority, they also draw attention to the extreme heterogeneity of 'Han culture'. Certainly visitors to West Hunan from elsewhere find this shared local culture hard to contemplate and usually assume that all inhabitants of the region are minority people. Tourists are taken to see the old section of Jishou, where a number of old 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. 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'.[22] The 'Miao' here become exemplars of an innocent uncommercialised culture. But teachers and government cadres who have settled in Jishou 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. These views were summed up in the words of one retired cadre who said that 'they are all Miao people and very backward'. To recognise the existence of a *bendi* culture would challenge the existence of a clearly separate minority Other in contrast with whom one can experience one's sense of Chinese superiority. It would also challenge the existence of a separate, civilised Han Chinese culture itself.

Like other work that undermines notions of clear distinctions between peoples, this is challenging to Western scholarly assumptions. Parallels can be drawn with White's (1991) work on the interaction between Native Americans and European fur-traders and settlers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As each side sought to communicate with the other there developed a degree of congruence between them. White shows that, while intellectuals in France continued to regard Native Americans as a separate population of primitive, or noble, savages, a 'middle ground' of mixing and intermarriage was developing based on 'a new set of conventions' which were neither Native American or European (1991 50–2). White's work is radical in that it takes the 'middle ground' itself as a central subject of study. By doing so he reveals the shortcomings of studies based on ideas of assimilation or cultural resistance, which, by their nature, had implied that the original, discrete peoples are the correct context for study. Colley (2003) describes a similar contrast in Europeans' attitudes to the Islamic world. British scholars of the nineteenth century may have held on to the clear oppositions of Orientalism, contrasting a monolithically conceived East and West. The Mediterranean of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had however told a different story: it was a 'frontier region' with frequent mixing between Muslims and Christians and a place where Prostestants might compare Muslims favourably to Catholics (121–2). The Chinese examples can stand beside these but they are, I suggest, particularly challenging to assumptions of clear-cut ethnic groups because they do not assume a pre-existing minority/Han difference. Rather, they allow us to see such distinctions as created and imposed, only with difficulty, by the administration.

3 Multiple Meanings of the Miao

A few weeks after arriving in West Hunan, I was sitting on a small wooden chair in the courtyard at Dehang Scenic Park (*fengjing qu*, lit. scenic area), not far from Jishou. I was surrounded by dramatic views of steep mountainsides topped with craggy outcrops. In the foreground there was a river. At its banks, clusters of stone and wooden houses were joined by one of the graceful, high-arched stone footbridges which are characteristic of the region. Behind them the lower slopes of the valley were green with narrow, intricate shapes of rice terraces. Above, wild bushes, bamboos and grasses grew on the mountains. A group of women could be seen returning to the village, crescent shaped knives stuck in the belts of their aprons, bamboo baskets on their backs filled with freshly cut fodder for the pigs. Closer to me, on the other side of the courtyard, an old woman squatted over her rice stores, which she had spread out on woven bamboo mats to dry in the sun. She had been there all afternoon sifting and turning the grains.

Recently arrived in the region as I was, these women with their embroidered indigo tunics and dark turbans seemed to sum up a picture of the rural Miao. The teachers from the university who had accompanied me, however, were more interested in the young women recruited from the surrounding villages and trained to work as guides and dancers.[1] Sitting out in the courtyard these guides presented a colourful contrast to the villagers. They wore tunics and trousers or skirts of artificial fabrics in bright pinks and blues and adorned their hair with flowers rather than the more usual turbans.[2] As we sat there, one of the guides, wearing a bright pink skirt and a wide peasant hat, led a party of young men across the courtyard. She waved at us cheerfully, raced down to the river and over the stepping stones there. From the opposite bank she laughed at her guests who tiptoed across uncertainly, splashed and teased by small village children as they went. When they finally joined her, she rushed on to a small pavilion with her less agile charges panting along behind. Her exotic colour, liveliness and youthful good looks typified the 'Miao' that outsiders seek in West Hunan.

During the weeks after I arrived in Jishou I had realised that I and my colleagues at Jishou University were equally, if rather differently fascinated by the idea of the 'Miao' as a separate and exotic people. This chapter is about the way that educated urban people and those from outside the region come to see Miao culture as a separate and real entity. How are such images of the Miao as 'Other' instrumental in promoting aspects of Han Chinese self-identity? They have variously, at different points in time, shown the Miao as signs of Socialist progress, as aspects of a primordial and authentic culture and as objects of sophisticated consumption. And underlying all of these is an assumption, sometimes paradoxical, of Han Chinese superiority to exotic, sensuous primitives. When these images were consumed in and around Jishou at the time of my fieldwork there was not a linear progression from one form of signification to another. Rather, images of the Miao were informed by all of these possible interpretations. It is, in fact, their multifaceted nature which made and makes them safe but exciting objects for young people to consume in the circumscribed environment of university life.

Dehang has been organised as a showcase of Miao culture for its largely urban visitors. It was chosen for the park because it combines a beautiful landscape with Kho Xiong-speaking people in traditional dress in an area relatively accessible from Jishou. The village itself also provides a romantic backdrop to more 'produced' events. Just as Volkman, in the Pacific, describes the Toraja house 'radically uprooted' from its specific context of village and ancestors to appear as a symbol of Torajaness on postcards and roadsides (Volkman 1990: 95), decontexualised and fragmented elements of highland culture were reworked as images of 'Miaoness'. The courtyard, a large tarmac-covered space used as a car park, was also a space for performing minority dances. On one of its sides stood a small guest house and a restaurant which specialises in West Hunan food. Next to these a large building with wooden walls and balconies took its inspiration from the styles of local village houses. This was used for performances of minority dancing when the weather was wet and was adorned with miniature back baskets planted with flowers. These, like the tunics in eye-catching colours, had been removed from their context of hours collecting pigs' fodder to become signs of an exotic Miao culture. Absorbed by these details, visitors would often ignore and sometimes laugh at the inhabitants of the village itself.

The people who visit Dehang bring interpretations derived from perceptions of the Miao as a separate female 'Other' whose playful

eroticism contrasts pleasingly with urban Han ways of life. Interaction between visitors and Miao guides and performers often have romantic elements and, like tourists in minority areas of Guizhou, they may be greeted by young women offering them drinks (see Cheung 1996: 214, Schein 1993: 228). At Dehang, a shop reinforces this theme, selling locally made hangings depicting local landscapes, rural women in Miao dress and, in some, almost naked dancing 'minority' women. The same shop also sells a variety of small products, including charm necklaces and fans, decorated with photographs of Western women in a state of semi-undress. But these impressions are carefully produced and do not of course reflect an actual desire on the part of highland women. This was illustrated the same afternoon, when we crossed the stepping-stones to the pavilion ourselves. Here we found the Miao guide we had met earlier more subdued. Her playfully romantic appearance had been taken too literally and one of the men was asking her to have her photograph taken sitting on a rock with him. Since the only way she could do this was by sitting on his lap she was refusing to do so. As in Guizhou, 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).

Outside Dehang Scenic Park, the actualities of village life in its relative poverty were a disappointment to urban visitors seeking a minority 'Other', being neither exotically colourful nor, on close inspection, very different. University students newly arrived in Jishou used to complain that there were no minority people to be seen. They did not recognise as minority people the highland women in their indigo tunics, who were often to be seen walking in and out of the city, because, as they said, they were not young and were not wearing their beautiful clothes. But the image of the exotic Miao village could, with careful organisation, be encountered elsewhere. For example, when teachers from a nearby college visited Jishou, they were driven to see a nearby village and to look at people working in the fields. After a short spell out of the bus, they were taken to another vantage point from which to photograph the landscape. This experience, like that at Dehang, made possible a 'tourist gaze', that is it provided a 'time limited encounter with exotic people' which allows the viewer to objectify the Miao and consume them as a 'collection of signs' (see Urry 1990: 3). Through consuming images of this kind, urban people could confirm their notions of Miao difference undisturbed by the

more mundane aspects of highland life that would have disrupted their impressions.

University officials expected my own intentions to be similarly distanced and limited to visual impressions. Thus, at a welcoming banquet, soon after I arrived at Jishou University, I was urged to visit the mountain township of Laershan. There, I was told, a thriving market was held where I could see and photograph Miao women wearing high turbans, and so record them in their exotic difference. There was no suggestion that I might want to investigate any other aspects of highland life. In sitting looking at the 'typical' highland villagers, as I described at the beginning of this chapter I had in fact been indulging in something very similar. We are reminded by the work of Fabian of the tendency of anthropologists to rest heavily on the 'pictorial-aesthetic' – to base their knowledge on 'a mode of perception' which is 'visual, spatial, or tangible' (Fabian 1983:107). I do not intend then, to condemn urban visitors' consumption of what I regarded as simulacra, but to investigate their reasons for doing so.

DRUM DANCING AND THE MIAO

Images of the minority 'Other' are often to be found in metropolitan areas in which the West Hunan Miao take their place alongside a multiplicity of others. Throughout China, footage of minorities singing and dancing provide some of the most popular material for television programmes, particularly at New Year. Colourful, various and often female, images of minorities adorn the notes of the Chinese currency and they are found on billboards in the centre of Beijing. This presence suggests a contrasting Han Chinese culture that is modern and restrained. For example, a locally produced *Picture Album of Xiang Xi* (sic) *Tujia and Miao Nationalities Autonomous Prefecture* shows four young women from different nationalities, Tujia, Miao, Bai and Han. In contrast to the (unmarked) Han woman who is shown full-length, smiling directly into the camera, dressed simply and modestly with her hair tied into bunches, the young minority nationality women typify the traditional female, sensual and exotic. They are shown in full close-up wearing festival headdresses and smiling shyly but alluringly away from the observer (see also Gladney 1994: 102). The multiplicity of images of this kind also reinforces the idea of Chinese culture as contrastingly homogeneous. Gladney

suggests that this constant contrasting of disparate minorities with the Han majority results in a perceived 'homogenisation of the majority at the expense of the exoticised minority' and that this is 'central to [China's] nationalisation and modernisation project' (1994: 95).

Othering of this kind, in which the educated, often male, Chinese draw a contrast between their civilised selves and a primitive minority group, has existed since the Qing dynasty as can be seen from the attractively presented Miao albums of the later Qing dynasty (Hostetler 2001: 182f.). While these were scholarly records, they might contain pictures in which, 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). But the minority 'Other' has also taken on other meanings during the various political junctures of the twentieth century. There is a whole series of ways in which images of the West Hunan Miao became linked with expressions of twentieth-century nationalism and the successful role of the state in governing the region. One set in particular are images of West Hunan Miao drum dancing.

Links between the nation and the vigour of the minority people were first made in the early twentieth century since, at this time, West Hunan-born writer Shen Congwen brought the region to the attention of a wider public through essays and stories. Based on first-hand experience, these presented a sympathetic, nostalgic picture of West Hunan, which dwelt on the traditional customs and personal openness of its inhabitants. They present a 'romantic vision of the region as a cauldron of different ethnic groups' in which lowland people of differing ancestries live side by side, sharing a common culture (Kinkley 1987: 9). This, as Oakes shows, was a remarkable reversal of previous 'frontier anxieties' (1995: 93–4) which emphasised Miao rebellions and their threatening sexuality. Instead the region came to represent China's primordial culture, vigorous and natural but on the verge of ruin.

Shen's work was, as Schein points out, known largely among intellectuals (2000: 113). The image of the West Hunan Miao became

known among the wider population only after 1949, and this was through the performance of drum dancing.

Previously, drum dancing had been associated with calendar-based rural festivals. There were 30 different kinds of drum dancing in West Hunan in the 1930s, performed by both men and women (Ling and Ruey 1963: 310f.). According to Ling and Ruey, 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'. Although these dances are rarely performed in the village context today, they are still appreciated as witty and entertaining. For example, a young woman from a highland village told me how, on going to a market in the nearby town she found, to her surprise, that the centre of attention was an old man who was expert in these dances. Although, like most young people in her village, she professed not to be interested in drum dances, she had gone home and talked enthusiastically about how interesting the dances were and how skilfully he performed them.[3]

In the 1950s, drum dancing was removed from the context of village festivals to become a symbol of the West Hunan Miao well known throughout China. The movements were refined and developed in order to demonstrate the dexterity and skill of the performers, who now tied red streamers to their sticks to demonstrate their support for the Socialist cause. Rather than being effective in influencing the cosmology or the social relations of the village, it had now become a sign of the vibrancy of Miao culture as an entity in itself. The suffering and extreme poverty of the Miao people under the old regime, and their support for the Communists whilst they were establishing a power base in the rural areas, meant that the Miao were now regarded as part of the vanguard of the proletariat, albeit one still in need of development. As befitted members of the proletariat, representations of the Miao from this time depict men and women as being of equal strength. Thus, in Jishou, a Socialist-realist style statue from this era shows vigorous, muscular women and men, drum dancing together but without a hint of that sensuality which pervades images of the Miao from almost any other era.

I was told that there was an old woman who lived in one of the villages near to Jishou who had been a famous performer of drum dancing in her time and had gone to Beijing to perform in front of Chairman Mao. No longer regarded as barbarians of the outer reaches, the Miao were now being praised as an integral part of the Socialist nation.

The promotion of West Hunan's culture was interrupted by the events of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1958, the Great Leap Forward was initiated in an attempt to make China self-sufficient through mass mobilisation of the people. 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 at this time, 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. Next, cultural aspects of highland ways of life were directly attacked during the Cultural Revolution. This began in 1966 when, fearing that bourgeois revisionism was creeping into post-revolution society, Mao Zedong urged young people to criticise their teachers and cadres. They were asked to overthrow 'capitalist roaders' and to eliminate the 'four olds', that is, old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. As in other parts of China, minority dress and cultural practices were not permitted.

After Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, he ushered in economic liberalisation and the start of a relative openness to the West. After this sudden, shocking contact with the rest of the world, the nature of Chinese national identity was again questioned. At first, the state discourse of modernisation combined with sudden availability of goods and images from the West resulted in an 'almost obsessive gaze turned towards the "culture" of the Occident and a process of painful self-questioning among China's educated people, in which China was regarded as backward and far from the desired goals of modernisation' (see Schein 2000: 22–3). Once again, there was an interest in the vibrancy of the folk, which had last been emphasised in the early twentieth century and 'Chinese elites turned to the non-Han folk as a resource for the re-vitalisation of a weakened China' (Schein 1996: 207). Like China's minorities elsewhere, the Miao were regarded as 'stable, essential categories of people and places that convey[ed] timelessness and security from the uncertainties of change' (Oakes 1998: 58).

As a result of this renewed sense of nationalism, there was an enthusiasm in the 1980s, especially among urban elites, to see minorities first-hand for themselves as examples of China's almost-lost primordial national culture. Visitors travelled to attend rural minority festivals, particularly among the Miao of Guizhou. Artists

and photographers visited minority villages and brought back images of the traditional and the sensual, of youth and nature. (Something of this kind continued in West Hunan into the 1990s and overseas Chinese, mostly from Singapore and Malaysia, visited the highland village of Shanjiang on market day, to see the highland people there.) Those who could not make the journey to the minority regions bought pictures. The province of Yunnan became 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). In all this activity the old sense of Han Chinese superiority was not lost and indeed was an integral part of it. As Schein describes it, the minorities served a dual, or perhaps ambiguous purpose, becoming 'an underground self that was internal, yielding an indigenous identity that allowed distinction from the West, while it simultaneously marked the modernity of Han urbanites by offering a "traditional" alter ego, as signified by the subordinate sex' (2000: 129) or, as Chao puts it, 'a double vision of both authenticity and backwardness' (1996: 234). This tendency for the 'Other' to represent both the primitive and the ideal is by no means recent or unique to China. In Western writings, as Troillot points out, the notion of the primitive has alternated and combined with that of the noble savage in the searches for Utopia that pre-dated the European Enlightenment (1991: 28).[4]

The association of minority culture with national identities was not, at least after its earliest stages, politically controversial. As well as being promoted as part of China's vigorous national culture, images of multiple smiling minorities also became demonstrations of the peace and happiness that reigned under the good government of the Communist Party and the possibility of a brotherhood of nations within one China. The state's support for these images of harmony, national vigour and, by implication, Han superiority, is indicated in its support for theme parks of which Dehang is a very modest example. More famous is China's Folk Cultural Village (*Zhongguo Minsu Wenhuacun*) at Shenzhen, which features buildings from 21 of China's 56 minority nationalities, many of them complete with inhabitants demonstrating traditional dress and crafts. The link with the nation was made clear, as Oakes points out, when the park held its official opening on National Day 1991 (1997: 42). But it was also a 'projection of recovered origins' by the state onto a multi-ethnic population removed from context of village life. As such it is not of course unique, as Pemberton's work on Beautiful Indonesia

(designed and ostentatiously opened by Soeharto and members of his government) indicates (1994). National theme parks have become a means of occluding the contradictions between the modern state, and a primordial culture which it lays claim to. They demonstrate what Balibar describes as the nation's 'impossible unity' in time and space (1991, see also Bhabha 1990) or ways of 'connecting the past and future in the form of the present' (Pemberton 1994: 245–6).

The performances of minority culture that took place in Jishou during the 1980s could be seen as fragments of this nationwide picture. Official visitors were greeted with minority dances, with an emphasis less now on the skill of the rural people and more on their (female) beauty and light-hearted happiness. Drums and drumsticks decorated with many-coloured streamers had become a prop for enacting the love scenes which by then had become the main theme of minority dancing. I met a number of young people who had previously been trained and paid by local government specifically for these dances, which, increasingly, were no longer performed by villagers but by urban people, many of whom had no Kho Xiong ancestry. By the 1990s, however, the situation had changed again. Work units were increasingly expected to fund their own activities and their priorities changed. Government money for minority dancing in Jishou was no longer available and the Socialist-realist-style Miao statues which had stood in front of Jishou's main hotel were removed to enlarge the car park. Moreover, although visitors to Jishou continued to be fascinated by the Miao, the celebration of China's national identity and harmony seemed far from their minds. Instead there was a new preoccupation with enjoying youth as a time of freedom before moving on to marriage and adulthood. Zhang writes that 'the rice bowl of youth is imbricated with the emergence of an urban space suffused with new venues for commodity consumption and libidinal indulgence' (2000: 95). Minority goods, increasingly available, had a part to play in this. I myself, alongside the students from the university, consumed images of the Miao as part of this new sensual culture.

JISHOU AND URBAN PLEASURES

Despite the economic liberalisation of the 1980s and the economic development that had taken place on China's east and south coasts, Jishou in the 1990s had remained an administrative capital, dominated

by state-run work units, which provided limited opportunities either for making extra money or for spending it. The area had benefited from earlier policies which, during the Maoist era, aimed successfully at developing rural and minority areas. It now had a school system, a railway connection and reliable irrigation. Nevertheless, until the 1970s, it had still remained an out-of-the-way place. Older residents described how the buildings had been made of wood, the nearby hills had been forested, and wolves would come into the city at night.

Even after the reforms of the late 1970s, local government continued to be a major influence in the city. As elsewhere in China, small entrepreneurial businesses developed. In comparison with coastal China, however, where privately owned companies were expanding rapidly in both urban and rural areas (Guldin 1997, Shi 1997), private enterprise in Jishou was small scale, evident mainly in the shops, restaurants and places of entertainment which serviced the city itself. Jishou, which had little in the way of a productive base, continued to be largely an administrative and educational centre. Success in any larger-scale private business could only be achieved through good informal connections with local cadres who were involved in these institutions, creating what Solinger describes as 'a stratum of people exclusively pursuing business, who are inextricably entangled with cadredom' often involving corruption (1992: 123–4). The situation was one of an 'interpenetration of state and society' in terms of 'co-optation [and] negotiation' similar to that described by Flower and Leonard in their work on rural Sichuan (1997: 200–1). This may be a particular feature of small cities in the 1990s where, as has been described in a study of the small city of Xinji, 'state sprawl', was as prevalent as ever (Shue 1995).

As a result of this, young people in Jishou were frustrated, not just by lack of opportunity to work in private enterprise, but also by the shortage of opportunities to enjoy themselves. I spoke to some young people who said that they wanted to leave Jishou for south China, particularly the city of Guangzhou, where there was more scope to work in privately owned companies. Graduating students were also looking for work in business or in teaching, with hopes of later transferring into business. One woman was preparing to move to Guangzhou, not just to make more money but because, she said, the cadres in her factory in Jishou were too interested in criticising people's minor shortcomings. The wish for a change of work situation was, of course, connected with the desire for a change in lifestyle. A young teacher told me he wanted to leave Jishou University and

work in a university in Shenzhen, on the border with Hong Kong, because life there would be more exciting.

Students at the university frequently expressed their disappointment with what Jishou had to offer in the way of entertainment, which fell far behind Hunan's larger cities, not to mention the television images of the south and eastern coastal belt which they could see daily. This was compounded by the fact that many were afraid to leave the campus after dark, saying this was because the region was a backward minority place. It was in this context rather than out of a concern with national culture that they turned to the Miao, not as aspects of primordial culture, but paradoxically, as elements of a sophisticated, urban way of life. As Schein has described, after the anxieties of the 1980s abated, tourists to minority areas became more concerned with landscape and with the sensuality of the minorities (1996). Similar preoccupations with landscape and sensuality could be found around Jishou.

LANDSCAPE AND THE MIAO

The appreciation of landscape, while not obviously modern or urban, has long been a mark of elite Chinese culture. Adler has suggested that an emphasis on the visual aspects of travel, such as landscape and architecture, should not be seen as a universal aspect of this, pointing out that only recently has an emphasis on the visual replaced a more interactive approach to European travel in which relations formed with others were seen as key (1989: 8–9). But, while she draws a parallel between the systematic 'envisioning' of countries and the growth of European nationalism, in Japan and China, landscape is part of a much earlier form of affirmation of identity. Since the fifth century BC, a literate Chinese elite has employed landscape paintings and poetry to convey religious and philosophical thoughts (Yang-Petersen 1995: 143).

The landscape at Dehang is appreciated within this tradition. West Hunan as a whole is in fact better known for its landscape than for its minorities, particularly for the Zhangjiajie National Forest Park (*Guojia Shenlin Gongyuan*), 200 kilometres north of Jishou and now Hunan's foremost tourist site.[5] The steep valleys in which Dehang is situated provide a number of views of mountains, rocks and water, reminiscent of the compositions in Chinese art. A bird-shaped rocky pinnacle can be seen from the courtyard and paved paths direct one

to other well-known viewpoints. One, for example, follows the river up to a point where one can view a waterfall disgorging into a circular pool. Along the way, small pagodas, a familiar detail in Chinese landscape paintings and in Chinese parks everywhere, provide places to rest and view the mountains from different angles. A set of steps has been built up the most sheer of the mountain outcrops, described in the brochure as 'the splendid Pangu peak that towers into the clouds'. All these were places where students at the university, like other visitors, would have picnics and take photographs of each other.

In appreciating this, students, like so many others, were taking part in a long tradition concerned not so much with nationalism as with an earlier exercise of power. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the appreciation of landscape, like the images of minorities today, were consumed in a highly organised fashion, as Ward explains in his study of the eighteenth-century Chinese travel writer Xu Xiake (1996). Places were not considered to be beautiful unless designated as such by a member of the elite, who could appreciate its aesthetic value. (A modern parallel to this can be found in the West Hunan landscape of Zhangjiajie, unknown until it was 'discovered' by visitors from Hong Kong in the early 1980s.) After being designated as such, these sites were intended to be gazed upon by the elite, the aim being 'the fusion of the human self with the landscape' (Ward 1996: 118). In appreciating the landscape, one set oneself clearly apart from its inhabitants since, according to Ward, although it was the duty of the local inhabitants to look after a place designated as beautiful by the elite, there was little or no other interaction with the people who lived there (13).

This intimate connection between the educated observer and the landscape has been linked 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 has suggested that landscape painting in general can be seen as, the '"dreamwork" of imperialism' (1994: 10). It has also been suggested that Chinese appreciation of landscape had a particular 'rhetorical function' to play in a 'projection of universalising imperial claims' (Powers 1998: 10). The appreciation of exotically primitive minority people as part of this landscape serves to underline this claim to power, and the incorporation of Miao people into depictions of landscape dates back to the Qing dynasty, as Hostetler's work on the Miao albums demonstrates (2001: 182). Like the eighteenth-century landscape paintings described by Bermingham (1987), in

which agricultural workers disappear completely or are relegated discretely to the margins in order to satisfy 'the gentry's prideful need to advertise its leisure' (30), these were not images of rural life and work. Rather, the landscape and the minorities had been removed from context to become an element of elite Chinese culture. Thus 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). 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. And in the eyes of visitors to Dehang, the village and the Miao performers who worked there were one of the main advantages it had over the much larger park at Zhangjiajie. The wooden houses of the Miao village add to the landscape's appeal and, while its inhabitants are largely ignored and sometimes mocked, the brightly dressed performers were frequently included in photographs. Those who could afford a costumed guide posed next to them at scenic points. Others hired costumes at the courtyard and had themselves photographed there with the mountains behind.

The degree to which these are the concerns of outsiders is seen in the degree to which the meanings urban visitors drew from the landscape of West Hunan differed from those of the people who lived within it. One of the most common topics of conversation with people I met casually on buses or in the street, was their aversion to the landscape in which they lived. Most saw it as a source of danger inconvenience and poverty. They were unable to confine their relationship with it to simply viewing it and, indeed, were unconcerned with doing so. Instead they had to risk their physical safety in making a living from it. Far from appreciating known beauty spots, therefore, the inhabitants of this landscape often have good reason to avoid such sights. For example, on a visit to a highland village I was shown a nearby gorge. The student who accompanied me knew that it was a scenic sight because she had been taken there by her school-teacher. However, she told me that no one from her village would go there because, over the years, a number of villagers had fallen and been killed while collecting animal fodder there. Complete strangers would talk to me quite bitterly about the mountains. They often asked whether we had mountains in Britain, and expressed surprise when they learned that such a developed country as Britain

did have mountains. In West Hunan '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 a perception of general underdevelopment (*luohou*).

MINORITY DANCING

If viewing landscape and minorities within landscape was a way of placing oneself as part of an elite culture that pre-dates the nationalist era, viewing minority dancing was part of the desire for modern urban sophistication that followed it. In the 1990s, as I have mentioned, the popularity of minorities rested less on a search for a primordial national culture and more on the perceived sensuality of the minority people and the opportunity for 'libidinal indulgence' associated with youth. This could be quite overtly expressed. So, for example, Schein writes that the Miao women found at the theme park in Shenzhen became objects of actual sexual relations rather than a symbol of the nation (1994: 153), and Hyde (2001) describes how sex work has become a popular element of tourism in China's far southwestern region of Xishuanbanna. Similar relations could be found in Jishou. As in most Chinese cities, Jishou's restaurants employed young girls who would take extra money in return for sex. I gathered from conversations with personnel on leave from the Three Gorges dam-building project, that its minority status made this aspect of a visit to Jishou particularly appealing. In fact the women employed in these restaurants were not rural minority people but temporary urban migrants from further afield. But, like the similar situation which Hyde describes in Xishuanbanna, this did not prevent these relationships from being read as an encounter with the exotic. Such interactions call up the ever present image of the primitive Other, the subordination of which confirms one's superiority and, as Hyde suggests, a sense of 'Chinese modernity and urbanity' was reinforced among male tourists 'through the performance of sex and the eroticisation of ethnicity' (2001: 154).

Among students at the university, however, who had only recently been permitted to 'date', images of minority sexuality were consumed more subtly. I found that men did not reinforce their sense of superiority through overtly sexual encounters with minority women, but that both men and women explored sensuality through watching and performing minority dancing. Dances of this kind were very

popular with students and teachers alike. While it was the students from the music department, who put on performances at the end of term, many other students took lessons in their spare time. They practised dances and borrowed costumes to put on performances at their own end-of-term parties. People at Jishou University rarely referred to the erotic and romantic implications of these, but emphasised instead the fact that they were lively and 'crowded' (presumably a translation of *renao*) and that the best dances were the most colourful ones. Nevertheless, I suggest that their popularity is largely due to the fact that they provide young people with a suitable occasion to pursue fantasies, not of highland ways of life, but of a free and sophisticated sensuality.

The dances taught and performed at Jishou University expressed a fantasy of casual sexual encounters placed unequivocally in the context of a natural, rural Miao culture. The context of highland village life, such as walking in the mountains to collect animal fodder, was worked in with dance steps cleverly expressing climbing steep hills and crossing fast-flowing rivers. Costumes, too, set the dances firmly in the highlands and these were also modified to introduce a mildly erotic note. For example, in one dance the women wore bibs, in the style of the Fenghuang area of West Hunan, but without the shirts normally worn under them thus leaving their backs bare. The dances also included reference to another form of sensual expression that could be safely attributed to others, the Western disco dancing steps which were very popular with students at the time. Other steps, associated only with minority dancing, expressed a vigorous, primitive energy, the most characteristic of which was a sideways jumping with fists turned upwards and hips thrusting forwards.

Not surprisingly, one of the most popular themes for minority dancing was the singing of dialogic love songs. There was, for example, a dance on the theme of Miao love-making, in a series of five dances on Miao themes which were performed by members of the Music Department at a graduation day performance. Extemporised songs in Kho Xiong are a feature of events such as weddings and receiving honoured guests in highland regions, but it is their role in Miao love-making that most fascinates urban people.[6] The dance is based on a common urban Chinese misconception that young unmarried Miao men and women meet and sing love songs to each other and immediately, almost randomly pair off, putting aside shyness for casual sex. This is an urban fantasy of simple, carefree sexual encounters made acceptable because it is attributed to a primitive

'Other'. The degree to which this is a fantasy is made clear shortly when I show how it differs from the way in which young highland women and men actually managed their courtship on a mutually agreed basis.

The dance begins with the performers appearing on the stage in two groups, women at one side of the stage and men at the other. The women wear tunic tops with above-the-knee skirts rather than trousers. They also wear bands of silver jewellery on their turbans and yokes of silver jewellery across their tunic tops in a loose imitation of Guizhou festival dress. The dance quickly establishes the women's reluctance. At the start, one woman is standing in the middle of the group of men whose gestures towards her suggest attention and admiration. She, however, pushes them away and goes to join the other women. They make a circle, all facing inwards, the music begins and there is a parody of shy laughter, their hands moving rapidly to and fro in front of their mouths. Then the groups of women and men approach each other and dance followed by another very common feature of 'minority' dancing in which the men pick the women up and put them over their shoulders and the women kick their legs in protest. After they have been put down, the women run away laughing shyly and then, one by one, consent to form couples with the men. After further quarrels in which the women push their over-eager partners away with exaggerated gestures of rejection, women and men fall down into an exhausted heap and sleep. Finally, one by one, the women get up and attract their partner's attention coyly. They leave the stage in pairs until the last woman gets up and leaves the stage alone. The last man, the clown of the group, follows her a few seconds later with a broad, foolish smile of anticipation on his face. The conclusion of the dance seems to suggest that the women choose their partners, but this is undercut by the fact that they leave only with those men who had chosen *them* and that the last woman must expect advances from a man she has rejected.

A comparison of this dance with an account of highland courtship during the 1970s stresses the degree to which it is, in fact, a fantasy. Far from being the result of casual or unthinking desire, these courtship rituals were a socially accepted part of highland teenage life in which both young women and men exercised choice and displayed their wit and character. I learned about this from someone who had grown up near Aizhai, whose account was based on what he had been told by his contemporaries there. He describes how, far from being persuaded to overcome their shyness in order to have casual,

illicit sex, young women played an equal and active role, since they planned the meeting in advance and always chose the time and place. These meetings took place, he told me, if some young men teased some young women they had met at market and the young women didn't get angry. One of the men would make an appointment with one of the women. The two who made these arrangements were usually slightly older than the others and it was for the woman to arrange the time and the place and how many 'sisters' to bring with her. The place chosen was usually somewhere in the mountains, away from the villages. When they met for the first time the young people chose their partners on the basis of displays of wit and skill through singing songs, asking riddles or just talking. There was no obligation to return but usually the two groups made an appointment for a second night. At this appointment the couples, which formed the previous meeting, talked all night and at the third appointment they made love. Rather than disparaging these meetings, the young women's parents turned a blind eye to them, while their brothers might help them finish their farm work, so that that they would not be late. Though not illicit, the liaisons formed would not normally end in marriage, since many young people were betrothed from childhood, but might do so if long-term relationships were formed and the couples insisted on staying together.

The contrast between these two accounts of dialogic love songs underlines the fact that minority dancing is based on an urban fantasy of casual sex. This was acceptable in the context of minority dancing because one's sensuality was simultaneously enacted and denied by being attributed to a primitive other who cannot of course be oneself. For while the 'Other' can provide a way of demonstrating one's contrasting superiority, it can also, simultaneously, be a way of expressing a kind of 'underground self' (Said 1978: 3). The process of copying – mimesis – makes the dual possibilities of Othering particularly clear, we see what Taussig describes as 'the two-layered notion of mimesis' in which there is both a copy and 'a palpable, sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived' (1993: 21).

THE MIAO AS A COMPOSITE SIGN

It has been suggested that this fascination with consuming images of sensual minorities indicates an unruliness, a detachment, and

that such images of minorities have become divorced from earlier concerns with the nation and the state (Schein 1996). I do not believe that this is so in West Hunan. On the contrary, the Miao become the subject of erotic fascination *because* these images are legitimated by their association with nation and state. Moreover, as I shall argue, the preoccupation with simulacra of the Miao, which I have seen both at Dehang and at Jishou University, did not prevent the encounter being full of a sense of authenticity. The image becomes a 'palimpsest of meanings' (Schein 1994: 144).

Minority dancing and visits to Dehang appealed to students because, as well as being sophisticated they are politically irreproachable, since the image of the happy and colourful Miao had been associated with national progress for so long. This was highly relevant in the conservative political climate of the place. A similar appeal can be seen in the images of the Miao at Jishou University that were objects of consumption, or promises of possible consumption, as well as legitimating references to the university's role in the social development of the West Hunan Autonomous Prefecture. The university's connections with the Miao were advertised at every possible opportunity. Parts of it were decorated with reliefs showing Miao people. Promotional literature on the university, too, would feature pictures of 'Miao' women, either students from the music department in colourful costume, or performers from Dehang. The sensual appeal of the minorities made Jishou an attractive venue for conferences, where delegates were often accompanied by urban woman dressed in colourful 'minority' dress. Sometimes these images were money-making ventures in themselves. The Music Department had a lucrative role in training performers for hotels throughout Hunan and further afield. More often, these images served both to promote the university through their aesthetic appeal and at the same time to confirm the existence of the Miao in Jishou as a justification for the funding they were receiving.

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. Serious scholarship on the people classified as Miao and Tujia continued at the university. In the mid-1990s however, most students and teachers had little connection with the region itself. The university took applicants from all over Hunan and minority languages were rarely spoken there, though there was a move to accept more local students. Despite this, it received a lot of money on the basis of its minority

connections. During the period when I was in Jishou (1995–7), it was in the process of moving to a bigger campus on the outskirts of the city, and impressive new buildings were being built around a lotus lake. Foreign NGOs such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) would be told that the standard of spoken English was low because the students were from the mountains and spoke Miao at home, a statement which, although manifestly inaccurate, was well calculated to appeal to Western sensibilities. These different references to the university as a place of Miao culture complement each other.

The multiple meanings that could simultaneously be attributed to the Miao were further illustrated in a television programme made in 1994 to promote tourism and handicrafts in the region.[7] Three hour-long episodes were based on three well known aspects of West Hunan Miao culture: silver jewellery, embroidery and drum dancing. The sensual appeal of the Miao, here enacted by urban Chinese actors, and the consumable goods they produce are intertwined with earlier political agenda. For example, in one scene attention is drawn to an ornamental curved silver knife in a woman's head-dress, the explanation for which is that it is in memory of the rebellions against the Qing dynasty. In the scene that follows this, the film shows 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!' Thus the jewellery is promoted through hints of minority sensuality which is in turn linked with, and legitimated by, reference to Miao revolutionary history.

Further evidence that the image of the Miao had become a composite sign is seen in the appeals to their authenticity. Despite the fact that, as I have described, experiences of 'Miao culture' had little in common with highland ways of life, it would be naïve to suggest that my companions from urban areas were not concerned with their supposed connection to an authentic national culture. Rather, they were searching for authenticity in places that differed from my own initial search. If political associations often legitimated public images of Miao sensuality, personal consumption was also legitimated by reference to the authenticity of these images. This became clear to me quite soon after I arrived, when the university was putting together some of its promotional material. In this, images of the Miao were both an attraction in themselves and an indication of the role of

the university in the development of the region. The other foreign teacher, a British man recruited through VSO, and I, were told that the Hunan Provincial Government was preparing a book which would include pictures of all the foreign teachers in Hunan. First we were photographed talking to students and to university officials with the new moon bridge and lake in the background. Most care, however, was taken over the photographs with a Miao minority theme. We had photographs taken alongside students from the Music Department, who were dressed in the costumes they used for displays of minority dancing. The next day we were driven to Dehang in the university car. Two of the guides were chosen and sent off to change into their 'minority' costumes and fetch buckets. We then walked together to a rocky stretch of the river-bank where the village and the mountains provided a suitable background. Here we were photographed talking to the young women as if we had met them by chance washing their clothes.[8] In between shots, the guides kept laughing. Urban educated and living in the Dehang Scenic Park hotel guesthouse, they found the idea of washing their clothes in the river very amusing.

This encounter appeared to them, as to us, inauthentic, a point that was highlighted when we came across an old woman in an indigo tunic who actually was washing her clothes in the river. She was ignored by the photographer and did not feature in any of the photographs since she did not represent the ideal of minority colour and beauty that we were seeking. Our friends from the university, however, saw the morning's events quite differently. While they conceded that the dancers, with whom we had our first pictures taken, were not real Miao, they insisted that those we met at Dehang were the Miao *laobaixing* (ordinary people, lit. the old hundred surnames) from the village, despite the fact that I had learned that the women concerned were not natives of Dehang. In part theirs may have been, what Brown describes as 'the quest for the Authentic self' (1996) rather than for the folkloric roots of the nation. Indeed, the Miao guides at Dehang can be seen as facilitating the visitors' search for their own sense of personal authenticity. They would greet visitors in Kho Xiong and, if a West Hunan person had a few words or more, they would praise and compliment them. But involvement with the personal should not distract us from the fact that they were also seen as authentically placed in landscape. Thus while most people, when asked, would say that they knew that minority dances did not replicate what happens in a highland village, they still regarded the dancing as representative of the Miao. For example, one young

teacher told me how much she had enjoyed a recent performance because the music, dancing and costume were typical of this area. A performance of dancing from Xinjiang or Tibet would have had nothing like the same resonance.

IMAGES OF THE MIAO – APPROPRIATED OR IGNORED?

Simplified images of the Miao, then, removed from context and contrasted to the Han, have been and continue to be interpreted in numerous different ways and at different levels in which agenda of state and individual intersect. It remains to say how the inhabitants of the region themselves interact with the images which portray them. In general I suggest that there was limited occasion for interactions of this kind. When urban visitors consumed aspects of the region as a form of cultural sophistication, there was a gulf between their perceptions and those of the inhabitants at large. I have illustrated this by the latter's perceptions of landscape, and by the realities of highland courtship. This gulf was further indicated by the fact that, with the exception of Dehang, those involved in most of these performances of Miao culture where not themselves highland people. This was the case at the university and in the television series I have described. At times, rural people did informally make use of the tourist facilities at Dehang themselves, reappropriating them and giving them their own meanings. Once when I was there, the Miao performers opened the proceedings for an inter-village basketball match with a drum dance performance. I did occasionally meet urban people of highland ancestry who were attending Miao dance performances and who told me proudly that they were themselves Miao. But the performances held at Dehang evoked no interest among the villagers themselves and the wider population.

These findings suggest that the process of appropriation which is described so often in the literature on folk tourism and in particular in the literature on the Miao is not to be found in every case. Oakes (1998) describes how Guizhou Miao villagers 'attempt to carve a sense of identity and produce a landscape that is meaningful to them, using the very tools that continuously work to alienate them' (63) in a process of appropriation which can involve both resistance and accommodation (71). Schein, also writing about Guizhou, describes a Dragon Boat Festival (*Longchuan Jie*) dragon boat race attended by spectators from elsewhere, including television crews, film students

and a number of foreign tourists. This took place in a Miao township in Guizhou. Her subtle approach goes beyond ideas of resistance and appropriation. Instead she shows how a variety of different meanings are found in the event by different people and at different points. What she describes is nonetheless a process of interaction. As she writes,

> … [i]t was a multicommunity happening that thrived on *renao* (exciting, densely peopled, carnivalesque), and the attention it received from high-status, affluent outsiders only enhanced this atmosphere. The packaging of Longchuan Jie for consumption, then, far from being seen as corruption of ancient purity, was viewed as consonant with its embrace of the logics of spectatorship. (2000: 198)

What my material shows, however, is that there is not *necessarily* a process of interaction, there may be instead a turning away and ignoring of what is taking place. This is not unique to this study. On the whole, the situation I describe had more in common with that described by Leong, who suggests that the tourist performances which illustrate designated ethnic distinctions in Singapore are of little interest to the wider population and have little relevance to everyday life (1989: 366). It also had parallels with the attitudes to ritual practice among the Naxi of Yunnan, where 'the process of transforming dongba religion into dongba culture inherently entails an alienation from its former expression and purpose' (Chao 1996: 225). We need to recognise that the material that minority performances offer for reworking may be very limited and may offer little that resonates with those people it seeks to present as mere spectacle.

4 The Rituals of New Year

The first New Year festival I visited was in Aizhai,[1] a large village about 20 kilometres upstream from Jishou and close to Dehang. Unlike the villages nearer to Jishou, many of the older people here speak the Kho Xiong language. A few fertile rice fields on the valley floor are overshadowed by steep terracing on the hillsides beyond, where wild plants are also collected to provide fodder for pigs. Concrete buildings, including a school and local administrative offices line a busy road, which carries the traffic to the towns of Baojing and Huayuan. There are also clusters of wooden houses, many of them built with balconies in a style typical of the area. When we arrived, the festival activities themselves had not yet begun. People were walking in from nearby villages, converging on the main street from all directions. Older women in the crowd wore the typical dark indigo, dyed tunics and trousers, cuffs embroidered with patterns of birds and flowers. Villagers were greeting each other, buying snacks and goods or looking at the small wooden shops and street stalls which lined the road. Some took the opportunity to sing karaoke in a roadside booth. We joined the crowds who were looking at the mixture of manufactured goods and foodstuffs that were on offer. My eye was caught by a stall that sold plastic birds, ornaments made from shells, Buddhist icons and miniature Communist Party flags as well as vegetables.

Like the New Year festivals I was to witness elsewhere this one was a showcase for activities widely considered as 'Miao'. It was held, not on New Year's day itself but on the market day subsequent to it and as in the rest of China the festival came under the responsibility of the local government. In West Hunan most New Year festivals fall under the auspices of the Prefectural Cultural Department (*Wenhua Ju*) but the day-to-day organisation is overseen at the relatively low level of township government, namely by the local Cultural Station (*Wenhua Zhan*). These departments have a carefully worked out political agenda concerned with raising a sense of general national culture, as I discovered when I interviewed an employee of the Cultural Department in Jishou. He told me that New Year festivals in the region were intended to revive and 'improve' local culture, which had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, as well as to promote a

warm atmosphere. These sentiments were reinforced in the slogans that were pasted to walls around the village at this time. Alongside the slogans welcoming back Hong Kong (in 1997), others encouraged participants to 'Unite and Develop the Economics and Culture of the Nationality'. The resulting festival promoted a general sense of national identity through a demonstration of healthy individual bodies, working in unison towards building the nation.

'Miao culture' is not only employed to provide images of the 'Other', but as an attempt to situate highland people as loyal citizens of the nation through disciplining the body. The festival days following lunar New Year (usually referred to as *huodong* [activities]) are reworked by local government officials and local cadres through timing, place and use of the body to turn them into 'spectacularised' competitions. They reflect a national agenda rather than the village and family relations and tensions that were previously expressed at this time. These events do not achieve widespread popularity among the inhabitants of West Hunan. This is not because their 'spectacularised' nature renders them inauthentic, since other New Year spectacles do become popular and participatory events. It is because they do not reflect the concerns of the villagers themselves, who are prevented from bringing their own concerns to them.

The word 'ritual' can be meaningfully applied to New Year Festivals but it is best used as an analytic tool rather than 'an entity to be discovered' (Kertzer 1988: 8). Ritual is held to be an aspect of human behaviour set apart from other human activities either through its action or its purpose (Bell 1992: 74), which makes 'reality more complex and unnatural than more mundane instrumental spheres of human experience assume' (Hughes-Freeland 1998: 2). In this it draws attention specifically to particular aspects of social experience. For the participants, what is significant is a ritual's efficacy, since 'while anthropologists may stress the purported meaning, participants care about whether what they are doing is effective' (Howe 2000: 65). In pursuing efficacy, as Durkheim argued long ago, ritual is also expressive of a collective or society. He urged us to regard religion and its ritual manifestations as 'a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it' (1976: 225). The enacting of ritual was, however, no mechanical expression of shared belonging. An important aspect was its emotional effect and he showed that collective identity was expressed through highly charged feelings, through a sense of 'effervescence'.

Over the years that followed, anthropological approaches to ritual became formalised into what Baumann describes as 'a narrow and one-sided reading of Durkheim', one that assumed bounded, discrete cultures. In these cases, as Bauman writes, anthropologists have tended:

> … to take it as given, on the whole, that rituals are symbolic performances which unite the members of a category of people in a shared pursuit that speaks of, and to, their basic values or that creates or confirms a world of meanings shared by all of them alike. (1992: 98)

Alongside this, a tendency developed that regarded rituals, like the societies they expressed, as relatively unchanging, as having 'connections to "tradition," and to the sacred, to structures that have generally been imagined in stasis' (Kaplan and Kelly 1990: 120).

Nowadays, rituals are seen less as templates and more as processes of ritualisation in which each ritual event unfolds differently. This is a development of, rather than a radical shift away from Durkheim's initial insight. One example argues that rather than being 'primarily concerned with "social integration" alone in the Durkheimian sense … loosely co-ordinated activities are constantly differentiating and integrating, establishing and subverting the field of social relations' (Bell 1992: 130). This allows an important shift of focus from a notion of an integrated society to the possibility of different agenda and loyalties such that Howe writes:

> … officiants and participants always bring their own competencies, reputations and interests to a ceremony, so that the ritual becomes a specific performance rather than an exercise in repetition, and what is important about it is what the personnel make of their opportunities. (2000: 63)

This move away from assumptions of ritual as an expression of 'society' to an interest in its performance does not assume, however, that ritual is a kind of free-for-all. Rather, as contributors to one collection indicate, it involves a process at once creative and constrained by precedent and custom (Hughes-Freeland 1998: 7–8). Even at their most innovative, the form of previous events is not lost sight of since, as Coleman, in a discussion of pilgrimage suggests, we need 'the presence of traditional structures … for there to be

material to "play" with' (2001: 23). This change of emphasis actually involves a renewed interest in Durkheim's insight that what takes place in ritual is expressive of wider concerns as writers consider why particular events unfold as they do (Mitchell 1998b: 68–9, Parkin 1996: xxix).

Until recently, New Year festivals, which were celebrated almost everywhere in China, expressed the continuation of village and family relations in the context of the avoidance of cosmological danger. New Year is a time when it is believed that the world has narrowly avoided a catastrophe. Its inhabitants are especially vulnerable to ghosts and demons that must be warded off with firecrackers. These references to threatening cosmology persist despite the efforts by local government to discourage them. The groups of people, usually men, who visit other members of their village (or if they live in a city, their neighbourhood) performing lion and dragon dances are intended to counter the possibility of such malignant influences (Feuchtwang 1992a: 51–2). On New Year's Eve and during the following days, words which are associated with death, or even which sound similar are, if possible, avoided. New Year is, however, also an affirmation of social connections and a time of celebration that the potential catastrophe has been averted. A large New Year supper with one's extended family expresses a sense of family harmony. Visits to friends and family on the subsequent days draw wider social contacts into this sense of shared belonging. Until recently, events that took place at this time could also be concerned with wider collectivities. Liang, the Kho Xiong-speaking resident of Jishou, who had been sent to the Aizhai area with his family during the Cultural Revolution, told me that, in the 1970s, lion dancers were particularly important for forming friendships between the Kho Xiong-speaking villages. They were opportunities for the young women 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, which they would refuse to do, 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.

On other occasions, New Year festivals could also express inter-village tensions. Liang told me that displays of martial arts (*wushu*) had been an important part of the New Year activities, even during the Cultural Revolution. Representatives from each village would arrive at the market place armed with staffs and swords and accompanied by

lion dancers. He described how, as recently as the early 1990s, a fight almost arose between two Chinese-speaking villages in the Majingao area. At this time Lion dancing and displays of *wushu* were put on in the fields at New Year. People from other villages could come to watch but were not expected to 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 representatives from the other village, also armed, some of them with staffs. At this point, local government officials and the police from Jishou had stepped in to stop the fight.

HEALTHY BODIES, COMPETITION AND NATIONAL PROGRESS

In describing how New Year festivals express social relationships in the context of reaffirming 'the ultimate coherence of a cosmos in which one takes a particular place' (Bell 1992: 141) one should not ignore the context of the nation-state in which they are set. Boissevain (1992), who has discussed festivals in the context of late twentieth-century Europe, writes of the 'revitalisation' of rituals as they change but persist. Migrants seek to reconnect themselves with their villages through rituals when they return. Elites seek to associate rituals with national pride and state power, revitalising them both to express national identity and to generate income from tourism (Boissevain 1992: 8). In China too, festivals have long been linked to state power. The lunar calendar, on which New Year Festivals are based, was closely associated with the ruling emperor to the point where its date changed with a change of emperor, since '[t]o establish a new dynasty was, indeed, to re-make the calendar' (Feuchtwang 1992a: 26–7).

Since 1949, ritual events in China have undergone sweeping changes and reformulations as the state has become even more intensively involved. Music, dance and costume formerly associated with religious festivals are acceptable in China, provided that they are presented in a secular framework (Feuchtwang and Wang 1991: 260; see also Cheung 1996: 222). When images of the 'Other' are not a

concern, images of 'healthy' activity rather than of exotic strangeness are promoted. Thus 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' that often take the form of competitions (Feuchtwang and Wang 1991: 254, 260, see also Cheung 1996: 222).

The festival at Aizhai, with which I began this chapter, is an example of such healthy competition, promoting ideals of the nation through careful control of the timing, placing and content of the ritual. The start of the festival proper was signalled by a move in the general direction of the village basketball courts. There, a group of village cadres made speeches from a raised daïs, announcing the events which were to take place. Carefully controlled, designated events were to be held at designated places, usually outside public buildings that had no association with particular families. All this avoided the unpredictability that is often inherent in ritual, when, a form of ritual time takes over (Volkman 1990: 105). Also, in contrast to festivals of the past, which had shown little difference between highland and lowland, but in keeping with promotions of the Chinese nation, activities included those, like drum dancing and singing, that had become emblematic of the West Hunan Miao.

After the festival was declared open, villagers walked around from one event to another, watching and chatting. A large drum had been set up just off the main street and in front of one of the administrative buildings. It rested on its side ready to be played and two sticks were provided, adorned with red streamers, for those who wanted to participate. Some old women, took up the sticks and tried a few steps, to general applause and then the competition began in earnest. One by one, younger people showed what they could do, watched by a fascinated crowd. They displayed their skills through rhythmic beats and footwork and through the speed and accuracy of their movements. This was quite different from either the sensuality of performances intended for outsiders or the witty impersonations of village events and animals that had previously been a part of such festivals. A dialogic singing competition was held in another part of the village. This was less popular than the drum dancing but the participants, a group of middle-aged women in traditional highland dress, did attract a small crowd. Unlike the drum dancing and in striking contrast to the erotic representations of dialogic singing found in Jishou's 'minority dancing', the event

overtly praised the leadership of the Communist Party, beginning with the song, 'Without the Communist Party there could be no new China' (*Mei you Gongchandang, mei you Xin Zhongguo*) amplified through loudspeakers. Other songs on political themes were followed with dialogic songs in Kho Xiong describing the progress brought by the Communist Party.

Even those New Year festivals that took the form of lion dances had a largely competitive rather than cosmological purpose. Thus, at Daxingzhai, another highland village, lion-dancing teams from nearby villages visited the event. They were led by experts in *wushu* (martial arts) and welcomed at Daxingzhai by the village lion and by villagers playing horns. The activities that followed were held in the school playground, a setting with dramatic mountain views, which was overlooked on one side by an old fortified house, a remnant of the days of the local strongmen. In the middle of the playground were 15 tables, stacked up into a triangle with its apex five tables high. The occasion opened with songs praising the Communist Party. As the competition began, lion dancers weaved in and out of the tables, climbing precariously to the top. Individuals and groups also put on acrobatic displays, climbing and jumping, accompanied by encouragement and, when the tables began to creak alarmingly, warnings from team-mates. It was nonetheless an event that followed the agenda of the local Cultural Station. The whole event was introduced and overseen by employees of the local government whose role was to judge the performances and ensure that they were carried out in an orderly and safe manner. Throughout the day one of them shouted instructions through a loudspeaker system in a mixture of Chinese and Kho Xiong. 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 as happening in the past.

When describing how festivals such as these promote the idea of the progress of a new Socialist nation, I do not mean to imply that the political agenda of the local Cultural Stations was somehow divorced from the entrepreneurial activity and desire to consume which was so prevalent in China. Nor is this link with consumption new, since village festivals have long been held on rural market days also decided according to the lunar calendar. Recently, however, they have become associated with wider networks of consumption. The festivals I attended were opportunities for rural people to view or consume goods from urban areas, and for returning migrants to show off their

newfound sophistication. At the Aizhai festival my companion, once a teacher in the region, was quickly recognised in the street by a former student who told him that he had been to Guangzhou to look for casual work (*da gong*). 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. The organisation of the festivals itself was also dependent on commerce and, at Aizhai, slogans urging us to develop the national culture were interspersed with others advertising a remedy for stomach complaints which was being marketed by a company from the eastern province of Shandong. This particular company sponsored most New Year festivals in this area. It could expect to find a market there since stomach problems are extremely common in poor rural areas such as West Hunan. The festivals were not immune to urban concerns with the exotic. Though the festival at Aizhai was not attended by casual urban visitors, guests of honour from the Shandong drug company that had sponsored many of the New Year festivals attended the Daxingzhai lion dancing festival.

NEW YEAR FESTIVALS – UNSUCCESSFUL RITUALS?

Rituals are of course participatory events and, if a successful ritual is marked by enthusiastic participation, then in recent years, festivals of the kind I describe have become less successful. Fewer people attend them and, even before I arrived at their festival, others on the bus had told me that Aizhai people weren't very interested in New Year festivals these days. Similarly, at Daxingzhai I was told that a much larger crowd would come to see the basketball tournament which was also held over New Year. Nor did these festivals invoke the enthusiasm or effervescence which is usually associated with ritual. While the competitions that took place always attracted an audience, in comparison with other events I describe in the rest of this chapter, this was often subdued. One possible reason for this is that these spectacularised events have become performances in the sense of 'display[s] of expressive competence or virtuosity by one or more performers addressed to an audience' (Schiefflin 1998: 195) rather than participatory rituals (see also Schechner and Appel 1990). Another is that the inhabitants of West Hunan are unlikely to describe themselves or their practices in terms of nation or minority group and do not identify with these events.

To take the first point, performance, when used in the sense referred to above, tends to be associated with 'Western assumptions about theatre as illusion and acting as a form of inauthenticity' and therefore distanced (Schiefflin 1998: 201). But it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the spectacularisation of the festivals through the involvement of the Cultural Stations, the media and entrepreneurs necessarily rendered them irrelevant and inauthentic. As Schiefflin and other contributors in the same volume discuss (Brown 1998: 162, Davies 1998: 142–3), what we consider as performance in this sense does not preclude a sense of participation and even effervescence among the audience. In Papua New Guinea, for example, performance of the Gisalo ceremony among the Kaluli people does involve distance or illusion but violently emotional tensions between performers and audience still occur (Schiefflin 1998: 203). Even Western experimental theatre and key sports events set up no such division. This suggestion that performance is a potentially participatory event is supported by the fact that 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, despite being organised by local government.

The New Year procession in Jishou drew urban and country people, the latter including highland women in their best Miao tunics. On the morning of the procession, crowds gathered along the sides 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, and there was an exchange of goods between urban and rural people. Although there was no market as such, there were a few stalls around the main crossroads at the centre of Jishou which did good business. Here urban people could buy country-produced foodstuffs, such as bottles of honey and sugar cane, and rural people had an opportunity to buy cheap manufactured products, such as red balloons with double happiness characters on them,[2] paper lanterns, fold-up dragons, paper windmills and cheap plastic toys.

The themes of the procession paralleled those at the rural festivals, with elements of Miao culture presented alongside promotions of the nation, including its economic development, its ancient history and the return of Hong Kong. Participants included members of work units and other urban associations, such as the Old People's Associations, and the procession also included a dragon and a lion dance, both by Jishou school students. These were followed by a procession of decorated floats with various scenes. The first floats

showed current political issues; one, for example, had the characters 'Hong Kong comes back' (*Xiang Gang hui gui*), another 'One Child is Best'. Floats representing the armed forces and workers, peasants and intellectuals followed, along with others that presented scenes of various stories from ancient Chinese history. Thus they illustrated at once the successes of the Socialist state and the ancient nature of the Chinese nation. The procession did not have a particularly strong minority theme, but one of the floats carried a woman dressed in a colourful version of the highland tunic, beating a drum, while others, similarly clad, walked behind smiling and waving.

One reason for the popularity of this procession appeared to be the sophistication of the displays relative to the village festivals and their now old-fashioned Communist Party songs. Although they repeated well-known themes, to rural observers it was an urban, colourful and sophisticated event, not so different from processions seen on national television at New Year. For example, the lions were neater and more colourful than the ones I had seen at the rural festivals, the floats made use of colourful synthetic materials and the participants wore make-up. This sophistication was underlined by the lightness with which the themes were dealt with. The dragon dancers and all those on the floats were children, the One Child Policy was illustrated by a girl and boy with a doll and the armed forces by children with toy guns. These prompted comments of *ke ai!* (cute!) and laughter from the onlookers. The Miao procession, by contrast, was enacted by members of the Old People's Association who, a Jishou resident told me 'used to be Miao' or had Miao ancestry. The juxtaposition of their age and the bright costumes and jewellery caused appreciative laughter. They appeared almost as caricature of the much younger urban women who represent the area in dances and at conferences, and some of them looked acutely 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).

Far from being a distanced performance, then, the sense of participation and effervescence was more apparent here than at the rural New Year festivals. Even the distinction between procession and observers was not absolute. At the start, police on motorbikes kept the onlookers back, but after they had gone past, people crowded onto the road. The event was widely enjoyed, not so much as a celebration of the nation, nor as a 'traditional' festival but as an occasion to consume images of sophisticated urban life. Indeed, it appeared that this was not far from the intention of the organisers

themselves. Later I was introduced to the head of the Propaganda Department who specifically asked whether I had enjoyed it and was clearly pleased to hear that I had. The popularity of this event suggests that the spectacularised nature of the festivals is not in itself the reason for their decline in popularity. Neither, in itself, is their promotion of national culture. This raises the question of why rural New Year festivals were not being reappropriated and given different meanings.

There has been a move away from consensual approaches to rituals which are now regarded as occasions when a number of different, possibly subversive, views can be expressed. For example, Crain describes the San Juan festival in the Ecuadorian Andes where 'indigenous people and elites engage in identity politics' (1998: 137). The explanation for why this does not take place in West Hunan, I suggest, lies in the power differences between those participating. Some attempts were made to bring more various meanings to the rural New Year festivals. At Daxingzhai, for example, where the lion dance had taken place, a member of the home team drew a cosmological reference for the occasion, by lighting incense and burning paper money around the stack of tables.[3] Another team hinted at an attempt to subvert the more orthodox view of the state: while one of the young men who accompanied the lion was dressed in a trendy American-style jacket and carried a spear, the other was dressed as a Chinese soldier. His green uniform and Red Star cap were made sinister by the addition of dark glasses and a flailing sword. At first, onlookers watched in silence, as if unsure what to make of him, but later, as he kept back the crowd with extravagant sweeps of his sword, people smiled or laughed. More often, however, cadres, who were organising the festival, turned away contributions that did not fit in with their ideas of how a festival should proceed, often on grounds of lack of time or space. For example, at the Aizhai festival, a couple of groups of lion dancers stood around for much of the afternoon. They were hoping to have a chance to perform and bring the village good luck, perhaps for money, since this was usually what happened, 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.

A similar control of content took place at the Si Yue Ba (Fourth of the Eighth month) festival. Not a New Year festival, this was organised at the relatively high level of the Prefectural-level Cultural Department, which asked local officials to hold the festival and provided funding

and experts to guide preparations. Based on a festival when young people sing Kho Xiong dialogic love songs to each other, the date also commemorates a highland revolutionary hero. This event was attended by visitors from elsewhere, including a small number from Hong Kong, as well as the villagers and a few journalists, and it included enactments of 'traditional' domestic scenes alongside performances of singing and dancing. Like the other festivals, it had declined greatly in popularity in recent years. On the occasion when I attended the festival, I came across two male religious practitioners attempting to bring elements of Daoism to it. One, 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, symbolic, it appeared of the Daoist foundation of the world.[4] When I went to look more closely, however, one of the young urban people who were organising and overseeing the festival approached him and told him to leave. Soon afterwards, another man appeared and danced, accompanied by musicians with an *erhu*[5] and flute. In the tradition of shamanistic practioners in the highland area, he was dressed as a woman, with the embroidered bib that was worn in this area rather than a tunic, flowers in his hair and rouge on his cheeks. Although the young organisers of the occasion themselves watched for a while with fascination, he too was quickly asked to leave.[6]

These New Year events are not occasions with which the wider population can necessarily engage, either by expressing their identities or by underlining social relationships. Once again, it seems that we need to shift our attention from those events designated 'minority' events and look at other occasions where meanings are expressed. This was illustrated to me as I left the festival at Daxingzhai and got into conversation with one of the men there. Like others, he said that the festival was less popular than before and he added that the basketball tournament, also held over New Year, attracted much larger crowds. Basketball is played in every village. It was introduced into the area after 1949 as part of a concern with healthy, competitive bodies discussed above. Since then it has come to take on wider meanings. Schein describes how in Xijiang township in Guizhou basketball has become 'naturalised' as a Miao activity to the extent that '[a]n elder had listed it, together with bull fighting, cockfighting, horseracing and singing in his handwritten account "as a central element" of Xijiang festival activities' (1993: 272). In West Hunan, however, it appeared that the basketball tournament had taken on one of the roles that the festival itself no longer had, namely, to form

relationships between young people of the village. In the past, the good relations fostered between villages by the lion dancing teams had provided a way for young people from each village to meet up and talk of love. Though this no longer took place I was told that, if a village was playing basketball at home against a village with whom they were friendly, and the away team was losing, the home team would allow them to win and so impress the young women of the village. Instead of carrying out its usual function of demonstrating healthy, competitive bodies, or even serving as an expression of Miao culture, the event had taken on the implications of a New Year ritual by expressing and influencing social relationships. It was able to do so because, unlike the designated New Year festivals, it was not the subject of scrutiny and reworking on the part of the local Cultural Station.

THE DRAGON DANCE AT MAJINGAO – ENSURING GOOD LUCK

Given what has gone before, it is not surprising that the most popular New Year festival in the region was not organised by the local Cultural Stations. This was the dragon-burning festival that takes place in Majingao on the 13th, 14th and 15th of the first lunar month. The tradition of burning the dragon, usually in the form of throwing firecrackers, is widespread in China, and in Majingao, a lowland village, it was taken particularly seriously.[7] Freed from the surveillance of the local cadres, the festival differed from those I have already described in that it did not make reference either to Miao or to national culture and nor did it involve competition. Instead, since many of Majingao's inhabitants returned for New Year from casual work elsewhere, the festival clearly expressed and affirmed their relations with their neighbours and with the cosmos, while also providing an exciting spectacle for anyone who chose to come out from Jishou to view it.

I attended the festival with Zhang, a native of Majingao who now worked and lived in Jishou. We arrived in the area when it was already dark and it was clear from the thronging crowds and the noise that there was an air of excitement that had been lacking in the other festivals. I soon discovered that there was also a greater element of physical danger. In a street that ran between the work units in the newer part of Majingao and the wooden buildings of the village there were three dragons made of wooden frames covered with thin paper and mounted on wooden poles. Each one was held aloft by five or six

young men and accompanied by young men playing cymbals, horns and drums. The dragons were smouldering in places by now and I was told that they would have to be remade each night. Above them, on the balconies, employees of the work units held bamboo pipes, filled with gunpowder and fitted at one end with a bamboo funnel. These emitted showers of sparks that fell on the dragons who danced underneath. Every so often, the gunpowder in one of the funnels burnt out of control with a muffled explosion. This was followed by the sound of gasps as the crowds drew back a little before crowding forward again. 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.

The most striking aspect of the event was the emotions which heightened the occasion, the thrill of fear, the release brought about by drinking to excess and ebullient good spirits which in turn broke down any distinction between performer and onlooker. For example, I had been told that the dancers 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. Other people joined the dragon dancers, including wildly excited children and groups of young men who linked arms and danced. 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. The visceral and all-inclusive nature of the event was articulated by Zhang, a native of Majingao. Zhang usually participated in the dance himself but today was accompanying us. He 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.

As in the past, an important aspect of this event was its efficacy within the cosmological context of New Year. In the eyes of those who took part, its fundamental purpose was to avert the possibility of bad fortune, a need that had 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. Members of the crowd were overheard saying that if it was not performed, some disaster would befall the village. According to my companions, themselves urban residents, there were various indications of the event's efficacy. One told us that although the sparks from the gunpowder might land on people's skin and make a mark, this would never become infected. Another 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.

As well as averting the potential catastrophes of New Year, the participants were reaffirming the social relations in the village. By this I do not of course mean to imply that festival mechanically expressed the village as a collective whole but that it affirmed the various relations within it and between it and those from elsewhere. A particular feature of the event was that it is concerned with each family in the village. Unlike New Year events organised by local government, which were carefully confined to the administrative areas of the village, the dragons danced everywhere and it was vital to the efficacy of the ritual that they did so. The dragons had to follow a set route through Majingao, and Zhang mentioned several times that it was important that no family house was missed out, even if the members of that family were not burning the dragons that night. And since it was believed to bring luck not just to the village *en masse* but to individual families within Majingao it was particularly important for families which had been lucky that year to burn the dragon and avert any potential change in fortune. The shared experience of the people of Majingao itself would be further confirmed the next day by a shared meal; a ritual of commensality. On the sixteenth day of the first lunar month, which is market day in Majingao, the dragon is declared dead. 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 that, like the dragon dance itself, are said to bring good luck. The ritualised nature of the meal was highlighted in the way that it overturned social norms. On ordinary days one would not think of eating at another's home without a personal invitation. Even if such an invitation was issued, people would often refuse, making excuses that it would give the host trouble (*mafan ni*).

At this event, however, food could be shared among whoever chose to attend. The event did not, however, assume that the village was made up exclusively of family homes, nor that this was in some way the real village. The work units were also included as one of the parts of the village. When I arrived, the dragons were dancing around the work units in the newer part of the village, affirming that it was part of the whole. Each work unit, like each family had a bamboo pole for burning gunpowder and ensuring their good luck for the following year. The cadres themselves did not object to this and I was told that on the following night they would be present at the festival.

The festival was not just about reaffirming the place of families and work units as component parts of the village in the face of potential cosmological danger, it was also about 'us and them' (see Baumann 1992: 98). Like other New Year festivals, the one at Majiangao could express inter-village friendships and tensions. That night, all the teams were from the village itself. But I was told that sometimes dragons from other Chinese-speaking villages would take part and that, although this might go smoothly, it could result in fights between teams, which expressed or perhaps created anger between villages. It could also express the differences between highland Kho Xiong people and lowland people. Although no Kho Xiong-speaking families took part in the dragon dance itself, they were present among the crowd and it was an occasion when, later in the evening, young Kho Xiong-speaking people would 'talk love'. I was told that similarly in the past there was little difference between the practices of villagers of incomer and indigenous descent on these occasions since both 'Han' and 'Miao' villagers held lion and dragon dances and shows of *wushu*. Differences of descent were expressed, since the lion and dragon dancers of a Kho Xiong-speaking village would only visit other Kho Xiong-speaking villages, and the same applied to Chinese-speaking villages. Thus the social complexities of friendship, courtship and openly expressed hostility were confined to one's own language group. But all this was expressed through shared ritual forms that were known to all and were not regarded as Miao or Han in origin. Rather than putting concerns of minority nationality centre stage, festivals of the past indicated them as an element in processes of courtship and so on that were broadly similar in all villages.

5 Authority and the Local

In contrast to the celebrations of Miao culture which I have already described, the temple to three military figures known as the Celestial Kings at Yaxi was always well frequented. Although the site, now almost on the outskirts of Jishou, is not the only temple to these deities, it is the best-known one. It is after all, as visitors would be told, the deities' *laojia* (ancestral home).

This temple attracted visitors of all kinds. Lowland rural people, in particular, came on market days, since a large country market (*ganchang*) is held in nearby Qianzhou every five days.[1] Highland people might also make the long journey, or send offerings through an intermediary. Visitors made their way through the narrow streets of Yaxi village and took one of the paths that skirted the rice terraces beyond. From here the temple itself was easy to spot from the crowds of worshippers and the pervasive cloud of smoke from burning incense and spirit money. On ordinary days there were always a number of people there, alone or in small groups. On festival days more than a thousand people might visit the temple in the course of a day.

At the time when I first began visiting it, the site, surrounded by the village's fertile, level rice fields and, beyond this, a backdrop of steep mountains, was dominated by a large red-roofed temple building. This was not in use, however. The focus of interest was instead a crude mud-floored shrine, its breeze-block walls black with incense soot. A shelter rather than a building, one side of it is open to the elements and, with its roof of corrugated iron, it had a makeshift look about it. A similar side shrine to the left held the Buddhist figure of Guanyin.[2] A Daoist goddess of childbearing was also present as was the Daoist god Yu Huang Da Di (the Jade Emperor). In front of these buildings were several huts and stalls where a number of women from the village could be found, chatting to the visitors and keeping their eyes open for potential business. These were people who made a living from selling incense and interceding with the deities. The rest of the courtyard, which was overlooked by the walls and imposing buildings of the rice-spirits factory, was unpaved and punctuated with smouldering heaps of offerings.

Inside the breeze-block shrine itself there was a pervasive smell of the alcohol that was thrown on the ground as libations. Offerings of

candles, incense and food lay on an altar before three small wooden figures dressed in bright silken fabrics. Most prominently displayed were the Celestial Kings, the eldest brother shown with a white face, the second with a red face and the youngest with a black one.[3] To one side of them stood their mother, Mu Yi, also richly dressed. It was clear that this was the home of highly respected figures who were not, however, clearly definable as Han or Miao. Although dressed in the robes of imperial officials they were not without reference to highland cultural practices. For example, on one side of the altar there was a figure described to me as a *laoshi*, the term widely used to describe highland, Kho Xiong-speaking ritual practitioners.[4] Another shrine to these deities, in a nearby Buddhist temple, displayed Mu Yi dressed in the tunic, trousers and head-dress of highland people. Instead, it was generally agreed that the Celestial Kings were local figures who protected West Hunan. The women who worked there drew a contrast between the Celestial Kings and Buddhist or Daoist deities by explaining that they were local and ate meat, whereas other deities came from elsewhere and were vegetarian. They were also particularly anxious to distinguish it from temples supported by the government, telling 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*).[5] Instead, the ordinary people (*laobaixing,* lit., 'old hundred surnames') had donated the money to build it up again.

The belief in the efficacy of the Celestial Kings as a form of local, alternative authority is, I will suggest, based on a belief in their quality of what Weber styled 'charismatic authority' (see Weber 1948: 295f.). Weber's concept of charisma is a form of leadership based on personal qualities rather than the bureaucratic structures of the state. More recently the idea has been drawn on by a variety of writers who show how the renewed enthusiasm for religious figures, such as evangelicals, prophets and mediums, rests on the way their presence challenges existing orthodoxies (Comaroff 1994: 306). As these writers show, particular situations of insecurity and change can themselves result in movements that posit religious or even historical figures as charismatic leaders. Increasingly, the roots of charisma are recognised not just in the personality of the leader but also in the surrounding circumstances and the activities of the followers. Thus Feuchtwang and Wang (2001) suggest that 'charisma is not so much a personality as a message which has been recognised because it resonates with and gives authority to followers' expectations and

assumptions' and that 'charismatic personality and its following arise in situations of crisis within the other … types of authority to create a new legitimacy' (11, 16). In this case, the popularity of the deities rests on the way that the story of their lives and the quality of efficacy (*ling*) attributed to them resonates with a sense of distance from Chinese orthodoxy.

The deference that was shown to the Celestial Kings demonstrates the particular kind of personal relationship one had with them, as well as their capacity to do harm. Addressing the deities was not something to be taken lightly, as is indicated by the number of people who returned to thank them for having granted a previous request, an activity known as performing *huan luo yuan* (redeeming a vow to the gods). 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. They had come to the temple, accompanied by their son, to do so. Nonetheless, the deities were also credited with some compassion. On another occasion a Kho Xiong-speaking friend of mine from a highland area was given some glutinous rice cakes by members of her village to offer to the deities in thanks for a prosperous year. This she was unable to do after one of the girls in her dormitory stole and ate them. The villagers reassured her, however, that all would be well as long as she kept herself at home over the risky days of the lunar New Year.

Although the Celestial Kings deities were known only in West Hunan, protective territorial deities with similar characteristics are found all over China. Many territorial deities are, like the Celestial Kings, military figures. Others take the form of virtuous officials. In many ways, however, territorial temples are not so different from the village Buddhist temples, of which there are many around Jishou. Buddhist temples also included shrines to the Celestial Kings and many people could not distinguish clearly between the two kinds of deities. Indeed, if we follow the distinction drawn by Feuchtwang between Buddhist temples as places of retreat and economic activity associated with institutional religion and 'local' temples which depend on donations from the surrounding area, which they serve, the Buddhist temples around Jishou have more in common with the latter (1989: 15). Both kinds of temples are places in which lots could be drawn, requests could be made and frustrations with daily life could be aired.

THE DEITIES AS EXPERTS ON POST-REFORM CHINA

Most of the temples' clientele were people for whom China's narratives of national progress and modernity had little resonance, who turned to the local, charismatic authority of the deities as an alternative. Young educated urban people, including the teachers and students with whom I spent my working life, did sometimes visit the temple. Although such activities were discouraged by the cadres in their work units, they might approach the deities discretely if they were having problems with matters such as finding a suitable partner or conceiving a child.[6] Even those closely associated with mundane authority, such as policemen and cadres came, if they were experiencing particular difficulties. But most visitors were those more marginalised by recent social changes. These included older urban women who felt that social changes had left them isolated and exploited, and who felt out of step with the materialistic ambitions of their offspring. Others were rural people who had become small traders or migrant workers as an attempt to make some money in reform era China and who were facing anxieties and insecurities as a result.

Although the deities were approached as figures who embodied a quite different form of authority they were similar to imperial officials in appearance and in the forms of address they expected. The rich clothes and head-coverings in which the deities were dressed resembled the state robes of officials, and the central aspect of many visits to the temple, the casting of lots, also echoes the authority of the imperial past. Visitors begin by lighting incense and laying food and alcohol in front of the deities. After bowing (*koutou*) three times, they kneel before them holding a bamboo container full of bamboo spills. They shake this and choose one of the spills, usually the one sticking out furthest. Each spill has two numbers carved on it, references to quotations in a handbook, and they resemble closely the bamboo sticks on which imperial magistrates gave out their orders (Ahern 1981). Before consulting the book, the custodian throws two divination blocks down in front of the altar and, according to the way they fall, will know whether the deity approves this choice of spill. The relevant quotation in the handbook is then interpreted in order to gain insight into one's circumstances and how they will unfold. Despite these references to the administrative system of the imperial past, then, the deities are not flattering representations of the imperial administrative system. Rather, drawing lots can be seen as a way in which supplicants can express their dilemmas, and, if

appropriate, decide on a course of action; it is 'a standardisation and an externalisation of an uncertainty' (Feuchtwang 1989: 15). The visitors turn to them as experts on modernity itself and, most importantly, as experts who are attributed with a trustworthiness which mundane government employees cannot claim. Often, people who have recourse to the deities are those who feel they are ill served by the current government. The deities' appeal rests both on a belief in their efficacious response to supplicants' requests and on the local, alternative nature of their authority.

It became particularly clear that the deities were being treated as alternative authority figures when they were asked to help with issues which mundane officials couldn't or wouldn't address, such as the increasing unrest and crime which many believed had accompanied the reform era. For example, on one occasion 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 women who worked at the temple 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. On other occasions the temple became a place for outright criticisms of the government. One day some black-painted boards appeared in front of the images of the Celestial Kings, covered with painted characters. 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 highland woman. This stated that, because of the general climate of lawlessness, people should turn to the temple authority instead. Since life was becoming more and more disordered and bandit-like (*tufeide*) they should come to the temple and burn chests of paper money.

More often, however, visitors to the temple made complaints about their situation in which criticism of local government was implicit. By far the largest group of urban people who visited temples outside festival days were women. Since 1949, with the introduction of marriage and divorce laws, there have been considerable changes in women's status. Nonetheless, inequalities still remain, both at work and in educational enrolment (see for example Bauer 1992). Temples, particularly Buddhist temples, have long had an attraction for women in China as an alternative to the restrictions they experienced in

family life. In this, the women who visit temples are not so different from those who did so in the past.

Several writers have discussed the marginal situation of women in the pre-revolutionary Chinese family. Women were often not known by a specific name, but were merely known as the mothers of their sons (R. Watson 1986). Before 1949, women in rural Guangdong were often married into lineages that were in competition with their own. As a result of this they provided affinal ties that connected the lineages, but they were also regarded as a potential threat to their in-laws (Potter and Potter 1990: 254). The high levels of suicide recorded in rural Taiwan (Wolf 1975) provide an indication of the unhappiness experienced by many rural Chinese women in the early part of the century. It has been argued that in imperial times, the popularity of the Buddhist 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 lies in the perception of her as a woman unpolluted by marriage and childbirth, since Guanyin refused marriage and was killed by her father. She 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 also offered a practical and material alternative to marriage, thus sidestepping the need to take on the role of wife and mother. For example, the White Lotus Sect, which first appeared in the sixteenth 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).

The continuing unhappiness of rural women into the twentieth century is illustrated in the persistent disproportionate number of suicides, with Chinese female suicides comprising 56 percent of the total of female suicides worldwide (MacLeod 1998: 62). The reason given for the high level of suicides among rural women today, however, 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). Family problems were by no means confined to rural women, since the move to work units and China's continuing urbanisation both appear to have brought new problems. Many women's complaints were related to what Sangren describes as the problems of 'post-parenthood' in an urban society (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. This has brought them into close contact with what they regarded as the selfishness and materialism that had followed the reforms and, like the older generation of Hanzhou women factory workers, whose 'liberation nostalgia' contrasted with the 'yearning for modernity' amongst younger workers (Rofel 1994), they feel alienated from younger, more materialistic generations.

Temples continue to be places where women can express and share difficulties not normally expressed in day-to-day life. For example, 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 on your own, 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 her conversation and making sympathetic noises, which seemed to be all that was asked of him. Visiting temples alleviated these problems not so much through solving them as through providing an opportunity to talk them through. Women would often visit in small groups and regard a visit to the temple as a day out, a chance to enjoy oneself as well as address the deities. Once arrived at the temple, they would talk freely among themselves or to new friends they had met, since it was generally held that one could meet only good people in temples. They would complain that their children and in-laws were too concerned with making money, or with going out and enjoying themselves, and that family members could not be depended on to support one another as they had done in previous times. But many of the women I spoke to also trusted in the efficacy of the deities. They would say that addressing the deities brought relief from a sense of unease or from sleeping problems.

Others who turned to the alternative authority of the deities were rural people facing the anxieties and uncertainties of private enterprise. As I have mentioned, the reforms, which took place after Deng Xiaoping's ascent to power, had provided new opportunities for enterprise. In 1980, rural communes all over China had been replaced by the 'responsibility system', in which land was allocated to individual households who then became responsible for its cultivation and had opportunities for selling produce. Relaxation of laws concerning residency meant that many people were also freed to work in rural industries and migrate to cities (Guldin 1992: 4). Access to wage labour did not necessarily bring great improvements, since it was offset by the need to provide money for food and medicine. Indeed, these reforms opened a gap between rich and poor and in particular between the urbanised coastal areas and a rural interior which, as Anagnost describes, 'seems to have become almost a different "time" as well as place' (1997: 4). This resulted in complaints that were not just about money. So for example Liu, writing of the northern province of Shaanxi, notes the bitterness about a loss of 'collective sentiment', a loss of egalitarianism and a loss of control over local representatives of the state. This, as he points out, involves a nostalgia for a Maoist 'dreamworld' which can be distinguished from actual experience, but nonetheless indicates a very real frustration with an insecure and individualistic present (2000: 13–14).

In Jishou there were some opportunities to take part in private enterprise. Rural people could sell their own produce, such as vegetables, meat and eggs in the market, and others sold charcoal by the roadside. These opportunities were limited, however, by the city's small size. Although there were openings for casual labour in places such as restaurants and a small ice-cream factory, which took on temporary workers in summer, these too were limited. Moreover construction work, which in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing employs a large number of migrant workers, was undertaken in Jishou by several 'Education through Labour' units (*laogai*), prison camps housing prisoners from other parts of Hunan. As a result of this West Hunan people, like many others from China's rural interior, had little choice but to make a precarious living far from Jishou. They were forced to take temporary jobs in the coastal cities of south and east China, or to buy goods in larger cities to sell by the roadside at home. None of these attempts to move out of the relative poverty of rural life resulted in riches, and there were many stories of migrant workers from West Hunan being cheated out of their wages.

In contrast to the rhythms of peasant agriculture and the now nostalgically remembered securities of the Socialist era, the reform era had brought a sense of unease and a distrust of mundane authorities. Many approached the deities to resolve the difficult decisions involved, often through drawing lots. For example, I once walked back from the temple of the Celestial Kings with a couple of women in their early thirties. One, when I asked her name, explained that it was '*shao shu minzu de Shi*', that is, minority nationality Shi. She was, she said, a business person, she went to the north to buy fruit and brought it to West Hunan to sell. She and her friend came every month to pray, to ensure that they made the right decision when to leave. On another occasion I was at a Buddhist temple outside the village of Yaxi when 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. Drawing lots, as mentioned above, was a means of addressing or solving a dilemma.

Another way out of rural poverty was success at school and consequent secure employment and residency in the city. Because of this, a concern frequently brought before the deities was the uncertain outcome of school exams. The process of putting children through school brought its own anxieties and insecurities. Education had become increasingly costly and many of the poorer families did not send their children to school at all. Those that sent children to senior-middle school faced economic hardship, some families selling their land to do so. This was a calculated risk since those who did so might lose their investment if their child failed college entrance exams. And secondary school was not the end of it. During the period of my fieldwork, I heard of several suicides in West Hunan among families where a student had been accepted to a prestigious university but was too poor to take up the place. Many rural families managed this risk by sending their children to the less competitive Vocational or Technical Schools (*Zhong Zhuan*), which provide them with employable skills in, for example, banking or car repair.

I learned about the stresses that rural parents face from Mrs Luo, a single parent who lived in the village of Yaxi and worked at the temple there. The pressures on her had become evident when I visited her house and she asked her daughter, who was studying at senior-

middle school, 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 any help with money then and she'd have to look after herself. Her daughter didn't reply. After sitting outside the house in silence for a while she went into the back room to do her homework, which was how she spent every evening. Mrs Luo talked to me about how much money she had to pay in school fees and the tens of hundreds of *yuan* it would cost to send her daughter to college or university. But she was also worried about whether her daughter could pass the exam. Like other rural people, she complained that people with money could use their connections (*guanxi*) to get people into college, but that the ordinary people (*laobaixing)* did not have this option. As a consequence of this, temples were particularly busy at exam time, with children, their parents and their grandparents asking the deities for help.

Siu suggests that there are two ways of approaching current religious and ritual activities in China. One is to regard them as traditional activities that 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). 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 Nanxi[7] today do not know how to perform Buddhist chants and are no longer 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 1989: 130).

My visits to temples suggested that, although the procedures there make reference to the past, it is not useful to see the practice of drawing lots as 'flattening' or as a return to tradition. The forms of worship are employed flexibly and they 'acquire new meanings and speak to new experiences in changing arenas of social relationships' (Ong 1988: 32). People did discuss the past, particularly in context of correctly rebuilding the temple, but their main concern was with issues in the present and the capacity of the deities to address

these. The deities were believed to give advice on current business opportunities. This fits with Hansen's argument that temple deities, previously appealed to for control over the elements, performed a similar (adjusted) role in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1276). Following the rise of marketing systems, the deities were attributed new forms of knowledge. Hansen writes:

> They [the deities] demonstrated sophisticated commercial talents ... Familiar with price variations among different markets, they advised their followers where to trade. One deity was even able to manipulate national demand … to make an enormous profit. (1990: 10)

This leads me to disagree with writers who argue that unauthorised temple activities constitute a turning back to the past. Yang, for example, writes that temple rebuilding, together with the revival of lineage in Wenzhou, Fujian, constitutes a 'revitalisation of tradition' which 'knitted together local community relationships … and enhanced local cultural, economic and political autonomy from the state' (Yang 1996: 109–10). This implies that there has been a conscious return to tradition as an alternative to the uncertainties of modernity. Rather than being authorities on the past, however, the Celestial Kings can be seen as highly knowledgeable about aspects of modernity. Temple activities must therefore be understood as 'localised modernities' or experiences which interrelate 'aspects of both modernity and tradition' (Arce and Long 2000: 3, 15). They are not indicative of the return of pre-1949 symbolic forms (Potter and Potter 1990: 336) or a form of 'counter-modernism' in the face of the rapid loss of tradition (Yang 1996: 110). As Comaroff suggests, their charismatic appeal is not so much a remnant of pre-modern authority, a trace of 'traditional' cosmology, but a response to the confusion felt by people experiencing rapid modernisation (1994: 302–3).

Not only are the deities knowledgeable, they are also believed to be responsive and to reciprocate the offerings made to them. It has been widely discussed that territorial deities are believed to have a close relationship with the living (see for example Hansen 1990: 13, Yang 1961: 327). Like mundane officials, they could be venal. If they did not at first give a satisfactory answer, they could be won round with more gifts and by flattery, a point that has been made satirically in the Chinese press (Anagnost 1994: 242). But the point was that they *would* respond to these approaches from rural people.

Whereas a commonly heard complaint was that rural people did not have the network of personal contacts, *guanxi*, needed to get on in life, anyone could build up a good relationship with the deities by attending their temple frequently (*lai lai wang wang*). In this the deities differed from actual or mundane officials who often appeared to be distant, uncaring figures and, like other charismatic figures, their presence 'opened up a space from which the established world could be judged and acted on in terms other than its own' (Comaroff 1994: 306).

PERSUASIVE PROCEDURES AND THE INCENSE SELLERS

The activities at temples which I have described suggest that the Celestial Kings are regarded as a source of local authority but do not in themselves explain why this should be so. How is the charismatic nature of the deities made clear to those who worship at the temple? Feuchtwang and Wang (2001) point out that, although it is often 'the story of the charismatic leader' which becomes 'the authorising symbol' (16), belief in charismatic authority may also be induced among followers by 'procedures of persuasive performance' (14). Where the temple of the Celestial Kings is concerned, their reputation for efficacy is perpetuated both through the 'dissenting history' of their lives and deaths and, on a day-to-day basis, through the actions of the women who work at the temple. All of these women were settled in the village of Yaxi and this gave them a certain credibility when they promoted the deities' efficacy both through story-telling and through facilitating relationships between the Celestial Kings and visitors to the temple. Most of these, who were referred to as incense sellers, sold a variety of offerings and, at the same time, helped people to address the deities and draw lots before them. Others had small shops that sold everyday items to visitors and villagers alike, such as sweets, soap, pens and paper. Most people who came to the temple had some interaction with them, even if it was only to buy a bunch of incense sticks for 1 yuan.[8]

The women who worked at the temple were not an ethnically homogeneous group. Some of them were of Kho Xiong descent, others, as far as I could tell, were not but seemed unconcerned by the fact that they had different ancestries. The lack of distinctions based on indigenous or incomer ancestry was brought home to me when I visited one of the Yaxi women for supper. Young Mrs Tian, a married

woman with children, did not sell incense but she lived very close to the temple. She had a small shop selling sweets, cigarettes, paper tissues, etc. to other villagers and temple visitors. She was friendly with the women who sold offerings there and sometimes took food to the poorer ones among them. Unusually, and perhaps because she knew of my interest in the subject, Mrs Tian told me that evening that she was a minority person and her husband was from a Han family which had originated from somewhere in Zhejiang province. But she placed no particular emphasis on this and when I asked whether her mother-in-law, who was sitting outside the house at the time, was a minority person she said she didn't know, maybe she was Han, maybe '*gujia*' (ancient family, that is, minority), I'd have to look at her *hukou* (residence permit) to find out.

Like others, she drew more on what I described in Chapter 2 as a shared *bendi* culture. This involved practices which, according to written records, are minority practices but are followed both by descendants of indigenous people and of incomers. For example, the dishes young Mrs Tian cooked for us, included soured vegetables made by leaving them overnight in salted water. These are widely regarded as Miao dishes and are offered as such at the restaurant at Dehang, but Mrs Tian explained that they were 'local' (*bendi*) and this is how they are always referred to in lowland West Hunan. For example, the family owned a dog since, in common with many Yaxi people, Mrs Tian's husband liked to go hunting in the mountains. In contrast to the guard dogs chained up in the fields that are often found elsewhere in Hunan, it was allowed to enter the house and mix with the family. Like the burning-off of vegetation to form temporary plots and the gathering of wild plants, hunting is widely regarded elsewhere as part of minority ways of life, but in West Hunan this too is regarded simply as 'local'.

Like many who frequented the temple, most of the women who worked there had not been well served by China's recent modernisation and had little family support to draw on. Mrs Luo, the single parent who was trying to support her children's education through selling incense, was a little younger than the others and dressed in a slightly more sophisticated fashion. Miss Zhang was also single, perhaps as a result of a deformed hand. The most needy, Old Mrs Yang (*Lao Yang*), was a widow who could speak Chinese and Kho Xiong. She told me that she came from Yaxi and had certainly lived there for some time since she described vividly how PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldiers had come in the 1950s hoping to find treasure and

had broken open the figures of the deities with a tremendous noise. When I first met her, she told me that her children had left home, and that 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, the temple provided her with some security 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 Zhang looked after her and, even when she was well, the others would sometimes bring her food. Another woman, who lived alone in the hut where she sold her goods, claimed to be an immortal. She was notable for the enthusiastic manner with which she called on the deities but she kept herself to herself and I learned little about her.

As I mentioned, the women who worked at the temple were instrumental in promoting the deities as a form of local authority. Like deities elsewhere (Hansen 1987: 71–2) the Celestial Kings are treated as both very powerful and rather human and the incense sellers claimed to know how to build up a relationship with them. They called on the deities in a confident but conversational manner and sometimes used flattery. For example, when I was making an offering, they would always introduce me, emphasising that I was a teacher at Jishou University and a foreigner. Their tone suggested both that they should feel honoured to have this visit and that they might not understand about foreigners without having it explained. If the way the divining blocks fell indicated that the deities were not agreeing to a request the incense sellers might suggest buying straw shoes or might tell the deities that the supplicants would be attending a temple festival to be held in the future. On one occasion they were told that there was a *Yingguo ren* (British person) watching the proceedings. Just as in other aspects of life, you can depend on people with whom you have *tong xiang* (same village) relationships, the best people to intercede with the deities were those who lived in the same village.

Of course, it was in the interests of the incense sellers to make money from their claims to understand the deities and it did sometimes appear that they abused this. Generally, however, they succeeded in reassuring their clients that the deities had responded to them. By encouraging visitors to the temple to believe that they were building up a relationship with the deities, the incense sellers were instrumental in reinforcing the deities' authority, not just with these particular clients but in the eyes of the wider public. The

reputation of the deities was based on the number of people they could draw to their festivals, the number of people who believed in its efficacy. As Sangren writes, 'an unacknowledged circularity' in which evidence of their popularity is interpreted as an indication of their *ling* qualities so that, for example, the blackened faces of older figures of deities in Taiwan are indicative both of years of incense and of their responsiveness itself (1991: 70).

Once, while I was at the temple, a woman was intercepted by Mrs Luo, the single parent. Although she worked at the state-owned Minorities Cinema in Jishou, her home town was in Yongshun, 70 kilometres to the north, and she was unfamiliar with the temple. She had brought some food of her own, fruit and *dofu*, and some *baijiu* (rice spirits) but she was quickly persuaded to buy more goods. The stalls at the temple offered incense sticks, red wax candles and spirit money that is sold as bundles of very crude, straw coloured paper cut into note-sized pieces. Less commonly bought items were crescent shaped biscuits, pieces of red cloth and woven straw sandals of a style still worn by some poorer highland people. After some discussion she bought incense, candles, some of the biscuits and a strip of red cloth. Sometimes during these procedures the woman from Yongshun protested. She did not want to spend the extra money on offerings arguing that 'We Yongshun people don't do it like that,' but was told that the incense sellers, coming as they did from Yaxi, knew the best way to approach the deities. The deities would not receive her offerings if she made them in her Yongshun way.

They then went to the temple. The woman had explained that she had come to make offerings for her three children who were taking end of year exams. Having ascertained the details of the exams that they were taking and the schools they wanted to get into, Mrs Luo began to intercede with the deities on their behalf. First she instructed her how to burn three sticks of incense and a candle in front of the minor deities in the temple, bowing to each of them three times. The candles were allowed to remain but the incense had to be burned outside the temple to protect the deities from the accumulation of smoke. A longer period of time was spent in front of the figures of the Celestial Kings and their mother. As well as the candles and incense, the straw shoes were burned in front of them. Then they were offered food and Mrs Luo threw the *baijiu* on the ground in front of them. As these offerings were made, Mrs Luo explained to the deity concerned the ages of the children and the exams they were taking, asking for their help. She also held the red cloth and circled

it around the candle flame, appealing on behalf of the daughter who was trying to get into the District Minority School, the best local senior-middle school. The daughter would then wear this cloth in the exam. Although she had spent a considerable amount of money, the Yongshun woman appeared convinced by these procedures and went away happy.

On other occasions, visitors arrived who were ignorant of temple procedures but they too became convinced of the efficacy of the deities there and the ability of the incense sellers to intercede. Once I visited the temple with a friend of mine, Miss Tang. She was 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, however, to draw lots to have her fortune told. While Mrs Luo and some of the other incense sellers gathered round, almost intimidatingly, she explained with some embarrassment her difficulties. She was not in good spirits, she said, and she was concerned about finding a husband. One of the incense sellers gave her the bamboo container to shake and at this point she was unlucky and drew a number which corresponded with a very bad fortune. Mrs Luo, recognising the number on the spill at once, said 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. At this point I suggested that I pay for some offerings for her, arguing that it would help me with my research but the incense sellers told me firmly that I could not do this, it was Miss Tang's business. They then tried to convince her of the popularity and therefore the efficacy of the temple. They suggested that she talk to me about it, I knew how *ling* the temple here was and I'd seen how many people worshipped there. Miss Tang sat there, almost in tears.

To break the tension I offered to show her around the temple, which I did, with Mrs Luo who was following us around, looking at Miss Tang enquiringly and making her feel uncomfortable. Finally Miss Tang responded to their advice that she should buy some offerings. She was then treated rather differently from regular visitors to the temple. In part it seemed she had been cheated. The offerings she bought were far fewer than usual for the 16 yuan she was charged, and the invocation for health and a good marriage, was also much briefer than usual. The interaction with the deities which took place,

however, seemed more intended to impress her in her vulnerable state than to follow usual procedures. First, they sent her by herself to pray to the other gods, something I had never seen suggested before. This she did, taking it very seriously. Then Mrs Luo circled a piece of cloth over a candle that burnt before the deities. She put this over Miss Tang's head and then made her step over the candle, another thing I'd never seen done before. These procedures appeared to be effective. Later, when I said that I was sorry I had encouraged her to come when it had worked out like this she said no, her fate was bad, it was nothing to do with me. Instead, she'd received something good from coming there and would go again. She had been convinced by the incense sellers' understanding of the deities and had resolved her dilemma through this.

In both these cases the incense sellers were convincing in the way that they advised visitors of the correct ritual actions and drew them into a reciprocal relationship with the deities. It was, as Feuchtwang and Wang put it, a form of 'persuasive performance' (2001) which promoted belief in the deities as charismatic figures, that is, figures who demonstrated their efficacy while responding in a human and personal way to their supplicants. This in turn would bring more visitors to the temple thus further demonstrating their authority. But if the actions of the incense sellers were one means of promoting the charismatic authority of the deities, the other source is the stories of the deities themselves, as I describe in the next section.

THE DISSENTING HISTORIES OF THE DEITIES

Like other Chinese territorial cults, the Celestial Kings represent a distinctly heterodox form of authority, closely connected with demotic versions of the locality's history (Baity 1975:32, Dean 1993: 88, 218, Feuchtwang 1992a: 109, Sangren 1987: 112). 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 (1992a: 7, 196). Stories concerning territorial deities often 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

Hansen 1987: 165, Yang 1961: 162).[9] Whilst some of these deities have been and are associated with virtue (Feuchtwang 1989: 19, Yang 1961: 162), many cults, including that of the Celestial Kings, are concerned with military figures. All of them are regarded as figures who are protective of the locality in which they are worshipped.

The dissenting nature of the story of the Celestial Kings told at the temple becomes particularly clear if contrasted with the literati version with which I begin.[10] As I have mentioned, and in contrast to stories told at the temple itself, official accounts of the temples portray an elite notion of the Miao as a barbaric and rebellious foil to a contrastingly civilised Chinese culture. The gazetteers of West Hunan are agreed that the correct version of the story of the Celestial Kings depicts them as soldiers who put down a rebellion by killing 7,000 Miao people (*Hunan Difang Zhi* 1991: 402, 404, 671). Most versions also explain that they were born to a young girl who became impregnated by a dragon and that they died after the emperor's jealous courtiers gave them poisoned alcohol. This story of the Celestial Kings as suppressors of the Miao was also recounted to me by a local academic who worked on the West Hunan Miao and is found in handbooks to the area, suggesting that it is still the officially recognised version. The contrast between civility and barbarity implied in this clash between the imperial soldiers and the Miao comes out particularly clearly in the following version 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 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)

This is a story that both describes and justifies the subjugation of the Miao to the Chinese Empire. The Celestial Kings are lauded as imperial soldiers, who defend the integrity of the state against rebellious minority people. The disorderly nature of the Miao is indicated, not just by the fact that they try to overthrow the seat of power, the local garrison city of Qianzhou, but also by their lack of civility. A series of contrasts can be drawn here between the civilised, orderly and cunning Han soldiers and the barbaric, impetuous and gullible Miao. In particular, it is through the Miao's heedless consumption of food, without thought for the niceties of table manners, that the 'civilised' confirm their superiority. As Sutton points out, the story reinforces the unambiguous superiority both of the Chinese state and its civilising project, though, as he also suggests, this version of events would not have found favour among those literati who were highly critical of Chinese frontier policy (2000: 462).

A rather different story of the Celestial Kings' authority was told to visitors who were new to the temple and to anyone else who enquired about the deities. In contrast to the written record, stories told at the temple made clear that the Celestial Kings were locally protective military heroes born to an ordinary Yaxi family, albeit a rich one, and possessed of superhuman strength. The stories have a clear concern with fertility. Like many of the earlier literati versions, they begin with a young girl being impregnated by a river animal, a common element in pre-Han dynasty southern stories. And although they too are concerned with superhuman military figures who are loyal to the emperor their main concern is with protecting the locality rather than with the wider Chinese state. Indeed, their power is threatening to the Chinese state and in these stories it is the emperor who kills them, whereas the literati versions suggest that his courtiers do so. The following is typical of local versions of the story, though longer than most. The main points of it, comprising their birth, protection of the area from attack and their death, were well known to older people in the Jishou area, and to people of all ages in Yaxi. It was told to me by one of the women who worked at the temple.

> The mother of the Celestial Kings, Mu Yi[11] 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 three brothers grew up to be 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.[12] The oldest brother was 18, the next 15 and the youngest was 12. Their mother did not want them to go to war but could not stop them. During the war, the three brothers killed 7,000 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 36 people had killed the 7,000. 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). But the emperor

was unable to control them and they rose again to become deities, appearing several times to avert further catastrophes in the area.

Like the Celestial Kings in the official version these are held to have once led real lives and are attributed with extraordinary qualities, a precondition for charismatic authority. In this story however, unlike the literati one they are closely concerned with the locality, both in the narrow sense of Yaxi and with West Hunan more widely. The local nature of this version is clearly apparent in the links that are drawn with the terrain of West Hunan itself. The Celestial Kings' origin in Yaxi is clearly indicated by the story of their birth in the well, though others would tell me sadly that this was now part of the rice spirits factory. The story also associates them with the wider region of West Hunan through their death at Luxi. Before the railway was built, Luxi was considered the gateway to West Hunan since it was the point where one changed from the larger boats that served the Yuan river to the smaller craft which entered the valleys of West Hunan. Their loyalty to the locality is particularly dramatically illustrated by their defeat of its enemies. Unlike the literati versions this story does not draw the same contrast between civility and barbarians, the enemies are identified as 'people from elsewhere' rather than as the old antithesis of Chinese civilised behaviour, the Miao. Sometimes the enemy were said to be from the neighbouring province of Guizhou. But people usually spoke simply of enemies (*di ren*) and, if asked who these were, said that they did not know, or that they were people from another place (*waidi ren*). Finally, this version incorporates a sense of being distanced from or on bad terms with central authority. The blame for their deaths is attributed unequivocally to the emperor himself. Distrust of the emperor among the not quite orthodox Chinese populations of the border areas is a feature of a wider Chinese oral tradition. Similar events are described in the stories of Cantonese peasants of the south coast. 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).[13] Here, though the Celestial Kings show their loyalty to the emperor, reporting to him despite their misgivings, the emperor is contrastingly unreliable, first praising and then poisoning them. There is a clear parallel between contemporary resentments over central policy and the way West Hunan's economic development has lagged behind and this version of the story.

THE DEITIES AND LOCAL AUTHORITY

I have several times mentioned that the Celestial Kings, and other aspects of culture, are often described as *bendi* (local). Recent work has underlined the danger of essentialising or reifying locality as a field 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, Fardon 1995, Knight 1994). It is appropriate to study locality, therefore, as an idea that people employ to express an identity, rather than as something that refers unproblematically to a particular territory. The idea of locally rooted cultures has been held to reflect the tendency of colonial and nationalist governments to 'map' cultures onto specific locations (Hastrup and Fog Olwig 1997). The coincidence of this with anthropological approaches is evident in the continuing emphasis on regional areas. In response to this 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 1998a: 82). The suggestion that 'locality' refers to an idea as well as to a territory fits well with the situation that I am describing.

The temple of the Celestial Kings contrasts with temples in southern and eastern China where attendance is often linked to family or ethnic group (Choi 1995, Sangren 1991: 108). Even when this is not the case, the territory of the temple is clearly delineated by rituals of marking the boundary. Where the temple of the Celestial Kings is concerned, no clearly defined associated territory exists.[14] Also, many people from outside of West Hunan take an interest in Jishou's temples on the basis that they are 'local' (*bendi*), despite the fact that the locality is not their own. Thus the local nature of the temple does not imply that a bounded territory exists which is inhabited by a group of people who are united by a common practice.

In discussing 'local' communities, Mitchell makes the point that such a community can exist as an idea, rather than as an actuality, and in doing so represents a response to 'the interventions of modernism' and a 'perceived decline in morality' (1998a: 92–3). The example he gives is of the memories of a neighbourhood in Valletta. I suggest that the locality that the Celestial Kings protect is also a symbolic community which has become meaningful because of the effects of change. As in Valletta, 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. Activities 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 revitalising events at the temple is found among the people who are most marginalised, in particular among older women and/or single women. These are the people to whom the locally protective, reliable and unorthodox authority of the deities is most relevant.

To suggest that the local nature of the deities is solely a response to current material conditions is, however, inadequate. We also need to see them as a result of what, following Bakhtin, Sutton describes as 'dialogic' nature of the frontier (2000: 452). In suggesting that stories of the deities promoted them as authority figures concerned with the *local* rather than with Han/minority distinctions I do not mean to imply that the question of incomer and indigenous ancestries is irrelevant in the lowland areas. 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. This seemed to fit in with the idea of a local culture that was shared between people of different ancestries. However, as I learned more about the temple I realised that expressed in these versions was a heterogeneous as well as a shared sense of locality. If I asked the people in Yaxi (the information was never given otherwise) I was usually told that the Celestial Kings were Han. However, I was sometimes told that they were 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 incomer surnames in the village, but I was sometimes told that their surname was Long and their mother was called Wu. This is appropriate because the character *long* means dragon, but since Long and Wu are two of the five most common surnames of the Kho Xiong, it also implies that the Celestial Kings were of Kho Xiong origin. Usually the people who told me that the deities were minority were themselves of Kho Xiong-speaking origins. It seemed that a sense of locality was not without reference to ethnicity. But these details were rarely mentioned and I never heard that they gave rise to any kind of clash or conflict. They give expression to a sense of identity which is based on a border identity, a sense of common ground, in which indigenous/incomer interactions are part of a shared past, that is, the memory of ethnic interactions becomes a shared element in itself.[15]

6 Conflict at the Temple of the Celestial Kings

I returned to West Hunan in the spring of 1997 after a few months' absence and found the temple site radically changed. Employees of the Jishou Minority Affairs Bureau had surrounded it with a wall and had told the incense sellers that they had to pay a sum of money in order to continue to work there. In return for this they would be 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. Those who could not afford to pay this sum were to stay outside its walls. A few days later I found my friends sitting in the middle of a now empty space inside the walls, all very gloomy. They said that their shops had just been destroyed because the Minority Affairs Bureau wanted the land to build shops for the official incense sellers. After this day the other incense sellers did not sit within the temple walls again and they began to refer to those women who had registered with the Minority Affairs Bureau as 'the ones inside' (*limiande*). To protect themselves, many of them had already rebuilt their huts over a small stream to escape being evicted from illegally occupied land.

The Communist Party members who worked at the temple for the Minority Affairs Bureau were, in other respects ordinary middle-aged Yaxi people. They were not unaware of the cost, in personal terms, of these new arrangements. As a special concession they had given a hand-written cloth tag to Old Mrs Yang, the single childless Kho Xiong-speaking woman who was the most needy of those who made their living at the temple. This authorised her to enter the new temple and to throw divination blocks there. Nonetheless, Mrs Yang succinctly expressed the anger which they all felt. When, in an attempt to cheer her up, I commented on her tag and said that she was a *gongguan* (official) she replied with angry humour that she was a *gongguan* and her work here was to *fang da pi* (do big farts).

Unlike the people I described in the previous chapter, who treat the deities as form of local authority, local government regarded them as a cultural relic. Jishou's Minority Affairs Bureau, known locally as *min wei*, had been responsible for the site since the late 1980s

and was preserving it as an example of China's ancient national heritage. On busy days, some of the older Party members of the village would open a small hut and collect donations towards new temple buildings. The large building, which already stood at the back of the site, its roof tiled in red, dragon decorations along its ridges, had been built from this money. During the period of my fieldwork, craftsmen had begun building huge cement statues of the three deities inside. Although this official presence had had little effect on the day-to-day running of the temple it was clear that many distrusted those associated with the Minority Affairs Bureau. On one occasion, I found that graffiti had been written on the temple walls saying 'Beware of being cheated here.' The person who pointed them out to me spoke quite approvingly of the graffiti, looking hard at one of the incense sellers. She, I later found out, had relatives in the Minority Affairs Bureau.

A conflict was to ensue, ostensibly between those who wanted to run the temple as a relic of the nation's minority past and those who regarded it as a living source of authority. It was also, however, about wider issues than the use of the temple itself; it was about land, money and, ultimately, identities. I will present the events that followed, the split between official and unofficial temple sites with which I opened this book, in terms of two ritual events which took place almost a year apart. Each can be treated as a 'cultural performance' which 'once interrogated, reveals key interests and their value as perceived by the people themselves' (Parkin 1996: xvii).

The study of cultural performance involves in-depth study of particular events. It has its roots in the critical case study approach, associated with the Manchester School, in which an event is described in detail and the insights drawn from it used to illuminate wider social issues. The seminal example of the critical case study is Gluckman's *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand* (1958), in which he describes interaction between white administrators and Zulus at the official opening of a new bridge. Gluckman describes the formalised interactions of the opening ceremony itself, the less formal activities which take place around this and the minutiae of dress and behaviour. He goes on to interpret these details in terms of the 'differentiation and co-operation between economic and political groups' (1958: 17). Case study approaches can and have been criticised for being artificially constructed. In Cohn's play on words, a case can become a means of applying predetermined criteria, a 'box into which to cram

events' (1987: 20). Nonetheless, the study of cultural performances, if carefully applied, becomes a useful 'methodological metaphor for exploring issues of conflict and contradiction in wider society' (Parkin 1996: xvii).

THE CO-OPTION OF TERRITORIAL CULTS

There has been a long history in which tensions between the state agenda and the wider population have been expressed and acted upon at temples. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the ritual sphere had been an important manifestation of the power of the emperor, particularly within what is generally referred to as the state cult. Each city had temples to *Wen* (learning) and *Wu* (martial arts), to the City God (*Chenghuang Miao*) and the Dragon God (*Long Miao*) and these were regarded as forming an other-world version of the state's bureaucracy, a 'celestial bureaucracy'. The state cult was concerned with literate culture and with the idea of China as a coherent entity. Thus Feuchtwang contrasts the 'memorialism, officials, tablets', of the state cult with the 'magic, ritual, priests' (1992a: 71). Rites of the state cult, which included the lunar New Year and mid-autumn festivals were China-wide events, led by officials and held at particular points in a standardised ritual calendar. This was in contrast to territorial cults whose festivals were specific to that temple and based on noteworthy incidents in the deities' own charismatic lives. Since these deities also embodied unorthodox localised attitudes, attempts were made to contain them through their incorporation into the state cult. This was what J. Watson describes as a process of 'co-option', which imposed 'a kind of unity on regional and local-level cults' (1985: 293). As part of this, stories of the larger-than-life, the unorthodox and the particular, the dissenting histories on which their charisma rested, were modified and brought into line with more standardised notions of the Chinese state and Chinese civility.

Watson (1985) famously described this process with reference to the cult of Ma Tsu, a female deity found particularly in the coastal regions of southeast China. In the original oral accounts associated with her territorial cult, Ma Tsu was an unorthodox figure, both in her comportment as a woman and in her allegiances. As Watson writes, she 'did not fit any of the stereotyped roles set aside for women in Chinese peasant society'. As a child she never cried, as a woman

she remained unmarried and childless, and she died when she was only 27 (1985: 295). Versions from Hong Kong go further and say that she was a medium who committed suicide rather than marry (Watson 1985: 297). She thus stood outside the roles expected of women, who were often subsumed into family to the point where they were not known by name, but merely as the mothers of their sons (R. Watson 1985). Her wider associations are also unorthodox since stories from Hong Kong associate her with the low-caste boat people (often referred to as Tanka) of south China (see Watson 1985: 117). They, rather like the people of West Hunan, are regarded as barely Chinese and are often considered to be minority people.

As the popularity of Ma Tsu spread among the wider population, it posed a threat to elite Chinese notions of order. In an attempt to contain this source of authority, her story was rewritten. The new versions ignored her early death and unmarried status and stressed 'her "worthy" social origins in the family of a virtuous official of low rank' (J. Watson 1985: 297), thus upholding the virtues of the civilising project over the individual unorthodoxy of mediumship. According to these rewritten versions, she supported Chinese orthodoxy after death by defending China's borders against less orthodox peoples. As Watson writes, 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). Similar processes of co-option have been found in the cults of 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 and he is someone who has 'assisted in the well-being and long peace in the empire' and an example of Confucian virtue (Duara 1988: 784). As both Duara and Watson suggest, however, elite versions of these stories did not replace earlier ones, rather, they became part of a variety of beliefs and approaches to be found at temples.

Alongside the rewriting of stories, there were changes to how these cults were organised. Where cults were 'co-opted', deities were given special titles and listed in the local gazetteers in the sections entitled '"Ssu-tien" (sacrificial statutes)'. These names celebrated the deities' new association with the state and its cult, thus Ma Tsu was officially renamed Tian Hou (Empress of Heaven). Rituals were held at New Year and mid-autumn, as in the state cult. Nonetheless, officially registered temples in imperial China maintain their reputation among the local

people for being responsive to all kinds of appeals. For example, Hansen writes that, in the eyes of the wider population, 'the register of sacrifices is just a formality when compared to the reality of a given deity's power' (1987: 117, see also Feuchtwang 1992a: 103). It seems likely, then, that temple festivals were occasions when a variety of perhaps conflicting points of view could be expressed at apparently shared ritual events.

This kind of 'co-option' appears to have taken place at the temple of the Celestial Kings and, in the nineteenth century, they were given the official titles '*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).[1] A friend of mine recalled attending the China-wide mid-autumn festival there as a child in the company of Qianzhou's gentry class. Old people remembered how, even in Republican times, employees of the *yamen* (the residence of the officials) used to throw divining blocks when the date of the Celestial Kings' death was due, in order to find out when exactly a commemorative fast was to begin. Officials were also involved in the making of sacrifices. According to the gazetteers, this recognition of the Celestial Kings as part of the state cult had originally been a reward for the protection they were believed to have given the lowland area during Miao rebellions of the Qing dynasty (*Hunan Difang Zhi* 1991: 404, 672). It is said that '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 General Fu Nai himself, appearing beside him and frightening off the rebels. Officially, then, their role was one of defending state rather than the locality. Nonetheless, as today, it was the individual making of offerings to the *ling* deities that was the central activity for most visitors. I was told that, alongside these organised rituals, supplicants called on the individual responsiveness of the deities, much as they do today.[2]

It seems likely that the stories of the Celestial Kings, which I described in the previous chapter, were also involved in a process of official co-option. The version given in the gazetteers, in which the Celestial Kings put down a Miao rebellion, asserts the legitimacy of state power by drawing contrasts between Chinese civility and Miao barbarism. Certainly there are clues that these literati versions have been added to an earlier, unorthodox cult. Sources on the area stress

that, in the past, the Miao worshipped at the temple of the Celestial Kings (Ling and Ruey 1963: 240)[3] and from the gazetteers 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).[4] The story of Mu Yi becoming impregnated while washing clothes and giving birth to dragons, which is found in the earlier literati accounts as well as today's versions, has elements of the river and dragon goddess stories that are often associated with pre-Han southern cultures (Eberhard 1968: 38f., 232f., 242f., Schaefer 1967: 255) particularly the 'Miao'.[5]

If, as seems possible, the literati version of the story of the Celestial Kings is indeed a co-option of an earlier indigenous version, the process is unlikely to have been one-way. The currently popular version, in which the deities are imperial soldiers with local loyalties, not clearly defined in terms of Han/Miao differences, may well be the result of further reworking of the officially sanctioned version. There are precedents for this in other officially sanctioned cults in West Hunan. The cult of the Han dynasty general Ma Yuan, who was the first to attempt to invade the region, was introduced into West Hunan as a symbol of its incorporation into the civilised state (Lombard-Salmon 1977: 265, Sutton 2000, von Glahn 1983).[6] However it is likely that, rather than commemorating the subduing of the region, the adoption of this cult by local people of West Hunan occurred because they transformed it into a cult of a giant serpent, believed to live in local streams (von Glahn 1983: 354).[7] Rather than regarding the interaction between territorial cults and the state simply as co-option, it may be more helpful to consider an ongoing interaction and a blending of two (or more) kinds of stories (see as an example Katz 1995: 114 on the plague-suppressing Wangye of Taiwan) which parallel the different kinds of ritual action taking place.

In the twentieth century, after the establishment of the Republic, this tension between locality cults and the state could no longer be accommodated by ritual and became more overt. After the Communist Party took power in 1949, temples were closed down altogether on the basis that they were 'superstitious'.[8] As a result of these campaigns, the old temple of the Celestial Kings, a fine stone building, was closed in the 1950s and the images of the deities destroyed by PLA soldiers, as old Mrs Yang, the incense seller, had recounted. The building itself was allowed to stand, and was used as a storehouse for some years, but was destroyed during the Cultural

Revolution, when the harshest campaigns against superstition took place. By the 1980s, there was no trace of the old temple of the Celestial Kings, apart from a few carved stone slabs in the paved paths on the hillsides behind the site.

With the liberalisation of the 1980s, however, both an official presence and a contrasting sense of local authority once again became apparent at territorial temples. Official policy now permitted 'institutionalised religions which are normally recognised officially as "systematised (*xitonghua*) and well-organised", though it still made a strong contrast between these and the more negative category of "superstition" (*mixin*)' (Feuchtwang and Wang 1991: 260). At the site of the old temple of the Celestial Kings itself, villagers rebuilt a small, crude version from rock, furnishing it with small benches from their own homes. But, as a place of worship not connected to any institutional religion, it continued to attract hostility and was destroyed by the members of the Public Security Bureau.[9] The process was repeated several times until the early 1990s.

A form of accommodation with the authorities was again achieved when villagers in Yaxi applied for the temple of the Celestial Kings to be recognised as a minority cultural relic. Like cultural events (see Chapter 3), heritage is often seen as beneficially fostering notions of ancient cultural roots. As Lowenthal writes, it 'enhances communal and national identity, legitimating a people in their own eyes' (1985: 44). Since national heritage must paradoxically incorporate both ancient roots and current progress towards modernity (Duara 1993: 12), it is likely to be more concerned with the secular than the efficacious, and to be organised for commercial gain. In China some temples have become secular, commercial venues to the point where they cease to be treated as temples at all. Thus a branch temple to the Celestial Kings in Fenghuang, a town about 50 kilometres to the south of Jishou, contained a small bonsai garden and a hall of mirrors. On paying a small sum, visitors could also beat the temple drum. Other temples have managed to combine their existence as cultural relics with a 'revitalisation' of their past role. Jing describes the rebuilding of a lineage temple in which, although the element of ancestor worship was played down, its role as a focal point of the community was retained (1996). In this case the rebuilding of the temple was all the more meaningful because its original site and that of its associated village had been flooded. At the temple of the Celestial Kings a similar situation appeared to have taken place.

Although the Minority Affairs Bureau was officially in charge of the site and had organised a new, red-roofed temple, the unofficial breeze-block temple had been allowed to stand.

THE FESTIVAL OF MU YI – CONTAINING DIFFERENCE

An overview of the history of the temple of the Celestial Kings and a comparison with work on other territorial cults suggests that it may well have been a place where an apparent unity of purpose, the worship of the same deities, concealed a far more disparate set of opinions. Whether this is the case today is best explored through a more detailed study of cultural performance. As I have mentioned, work on cultural performance has tended to illuminate conflict and disagreement. This, however, is not always or necessarily the case. Turner (1957) considered ritual as a means of preventing rather than expressing tensions within social relations. His original work is based on a study of Ndembu villages where marriage and residency practices resulted in conflict between local and kinship groups. He considers the cults of affliction that address the suffering caused by the many kinship or neighbourhood conflicts that take place. These cults and their associated rituals express, often symbolically 'the common interests of all Ndembu' (302) thus affirming a sense of being Ndembu which is otherwise problematic. In many cases, however, this was eventually insufficient and the village experienced a schism. The festival I describe first appeared to have a similar effect to those described by Turner, maintaining a sense of shared purpose between those associated with the Minority Affairs Bureau and other visitors to the temple.

Mu Yi's birthday took place on one of the earliest warm sunny days of spring and the event I describe took place a year before the temple was walled off. Although in earlier times, the death of the Celestial Kings was marked by the grandest festival, today the celebration of their mother Mu Yi's birthday is the most popular.[10] She too is considered to be very *ling* and is a form of alternative, protective authority. By ten in the morning, the paths to the temple were lined with stalls. These were selling incense, paper money, red candles, straw sandals and other goods to passers-by. Visitors were arriving from all around, some in large groups, others in twos and threes or alone. As they passed me, several people commented approvingly on the fact that a foreigner had come to pay her respects to the deities

(*bei pusa*).[11] A large group of women bearing banners came from the highland area led by a woman who spoke good Chinese. At the temple itself, crowds of people were making offerings accompanied by requests at the unofficial temple. Piles of burning offerings lay on the ground throwing considerable heat into the already warm air.

The central activity at the festival was, as it always had been, the individual making of offerings before the deities. Like the Celestial Kings, Mu Yi is always dressed appropriately like an official and is referred to as 'Niangniang', a term of respect which can be translated as 'Lady'. Like other deities who take the form of officials, Mu Yi is capable of taking revenge on people who do not show her respect. For example, I learned the story of 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 at once struck unconscious by the deity and, when he came round, his hands were trembling, and continued to do so for the rest of his life. On a similar note, a woman whom I met at the temple said that, quite recently, a boy had urinated in the candle-holder in front of Mu Yi's altar. Although no one witnessed this event, a spirit medium later met the offending boy at a bus stop. Because, as a medium, she could communicate directly with the deities at the temple, she started shouting what he had done to everyone around, thus humiliating the perpetrator.

I was in the company of Mrs Gu, the old woman who could recall visiting the temple in pre-revolutionary times with her gentry family, and her friend Mrs Cao, both of them retired school-teachers from Jishou Number One Primary School. Mrs Cao had some problems; I had earlier heard her say that she was worried and tense, and her children and grandchildren gave her a lot of trouble. She had never been to the temple of the Celestial Kings before but had heard that they were very *ling*. Mrs Gu made sure she approached the deities properly, holding three sticks of incense out to give to each. Under Mrs Gu's instruction, Mrs Cao put boiled meat and a bottle of *baijiu* in front of the old figures of the Celestial Kings and Mu Yi, 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. All around us others were going through the same procedures.

Although activities were very similar to those on other days at the temple, the occasion also affirmed a sense of shared experience among those who attended. In contrast to ordinary days, visitors had

brought bunches of artificial flowers not with a view to immediate reciprocity, but to pay respect to Mu Yi by honouring her birthday. Large heaps of these flowers were already burning around the temple, intermixed with other offerings. The opportunities to meet old friends and make new ones were also greater than on ordinary days at the temple. Many visitors already knew each other and the incense sellers, and exchanged warm greetings with them. Others sat around and chatted to complete strangers. The sense of effervescence and unity described in Durkheim's classic accounts of ritual were expressed in other activities not seen on ordinary days. A communal lunch was cooked in enormous woks. A few women sang excerpts from the West Hunan-style operas that would have been performed at temple festivals of the past, encouraged and prompted by their audience.

Employees of of the Minority Affairs Bureau and volunteers working on their behalf seemed to be a part of all this activity. Their small building was open to collect donations for the new temple and they appeared to have no problems with these elements of ritual. They also seemed prepared to compromise in order to prevent potential conflicts from developing. For example, a new statue of Mu Yi had been made in Qianzhou, unlike the other statues which were being sculpted *in situ*, and had been brought from there the previous day. The statue itself had been commissioned by the Minority Affairs Bureau, who presumably regarded it as a copy of statues of the past rather than an object of reverence in itself. A ritual journey to the temple was nevertheless allowed to take place, based on the memories of older people. Mu Yi was accompanied by placards that underlined her authoritative presence. They were worded, as they would have been for a living official in imperial times, 'keep silence' (*su jing*) and 'show respect'. The deity was installed in a small building recently put up behind the new temple and had quickly become the focus of much comment. For example, while I was looking at her, accompanied by Mrs Gu and Mrs Cao, a middle-aged man came up and started listing all the things wrong with her; the face was too fat, the eyes not well drawn, the hands too big. Others joined him, agreeing that 'it was not good, she looked like a man'. But rather than taking offence, the workers for the Minority Affairs Bureau listened to their opinions and in the following weeks these features were altered.

Turner suggested that, 'ritual among the Ndembu does not express the kinship and political structure as in a firmly organised society; rather it compensates for their deficiencies' (1957: 303). In a similar way, the festival of Mu Yi appeared to affirm an otherwise problematic

sense of shared involvement. There was, however, another presence which indicated the conflict and the eventual schism that was to ensue. Spirit mediums (*xian niang*, lit. fairy women) had joined the festival in large numbers. As far as local government was concerned, mediums were even more to be discouraged than other forms of 'superstition'[12] and came under the official classification of 'feudal superstition' (*fengjian mixin*) (Anagnost 1994: 234). Their capacity to speak directly and often controversially on behalf of the deities made them a potentially disruptive element.

The first mediums we met that day were on the paths to the temple. I had noticed one in particular, who was sitting in a shelter on the path to the temple, where one of the incense sellers had a stall. She wore her hair in a plait down her back, smoked a cigarette and was surrounded by a large group of fascinated onlookers. As her friends passed on their way to the temple they greeted her warmly. She was reading a young woman's palm, singing and 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.

Mediums were quite numerous in the Jishou area and were becoming increasingly so. The path of a spirit medium's career was similar to that of mediums observed in other parts of the world (see Lewis 1971: 59f.). In West Hunan, a 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. The majority of the mediums in the Jishou area were rural women, but this was not always the case. They were not necessarily of either indigenous or incomer descent, and Kho Xiong-speaking mediums were certainly not unknown. Old Mrs Yang herself, the Kho Xiong-speaking incense seller at the temple, was a *xian niang* (fairy woman), though she was now too frail to practise. When possessed, mediums are said to communicate directly with the dead, often with unorthodox figures such as territorial deities but also with China's former leaders, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. In Jishou, mediums had a tendency to speak critically of the current situation, sometimes quite specifically, as when one stated that the new building in the area, including the new road between Jishou and Qianzhou and the rice spirits factory, had upset

the *fengshui* of Yaxi village. As a result, whereas Yaxi had previously produced great people, today the village was doing poorly.

The individual consultation we had witnessed on the way to the temple, with its emphasis on mundane aspects of one woman's life, did not represent a particular threat to the smooth running of the day. Of more concern was the small group of mediums we came across behind the new temple building itself. I was astounded by the sight, never having seen anything like this at the temple before, but Mrs Gu was unsurprised and I realised that she had been looking out for them. Several of the mediums were in an apparently trance-like state, one of them holding a soft drinks can. Some of them were speaking, although it was hard for me to understand anything they said. Each one was surrounded by a group of people who were watching intently. I had no sooner laid eyes on the mediums, however, than I was approached by a woman from the Minority Affairs Bureau who made her disapproval of this aspect of the festival very clear. She hustled me away saying that these women were mad and not nice to look at (*bu hao kan*). She then directed me to look at some of the old women who were singing excerpts from local opera. 'Isn't that better, then?' she asked me. While the threat posed by the mediums was largely contained, her response indicated the underlying tension between the event as a largely secular celebration of the nation's heritage and as an opportunity to communicate directly with an alternative authority.

Thus, although it appeared at first to be a means of containing difference, the festival I have described could also be usefully compared with events described in work on the capacity of cultural performance to express more than one meaning and to express political issues within an apparently purely aesthetic event. A famous example is Cohen's work on the Notting Hill Carnival. The cultural nature of Notting Hill Carnival, as Cohen describes it, has particular advantages for the disparate population involved, immigrants and their descendants from a number of Caribbean islands. Regarded among the wider population as politically inoffensive, it provides a way for this heterogeneous population to enjoy a sense of collectivity which, as he writes, neither politics nor religion nor place of origin could encompass (1993: 90). Music, as Cohen writes, is a way of bringing people together to form a collectivity that was permitted during slave era when other forms of self expression would have been regarded as rebellious (1993: 92, 95). Its aesthetic nature allows it to make political points about Afro-Caribbean identities, which could

not as easily have been made in other ways. Thus Cohen writes that 'frivolous as it seemed', the Carnival 'had proved in that respect to be more powerful and efficacious, both culturally and politically … a great many cultural forms were revived, not as regression to the past, but to serve new purposes' (1993: 90). Alongside this apparently transient expression of shared feeling, however, is the development of conflicting positions. On the one hand there is the influence of (white) British concern 'to institutionalise the London Carnival, to integrate it with the major institution of British society, and thereby to contain it and to some extent control it' (1993: 49–50), on the other hand, that of Afro-Caribbean leaders keen to stabilise it as a symbol of a particular kind of heritage (1993: 74). Similarly, at the festival I describe, we see on the one hand a day of shared enjoyment in the sun, and on the other hints of very different attitudes to the temple's role.

THE FESTIVAL OF GUANYIN – LAND AND MONEY

Writers on cultural performance stress that the interactions that take place are not simply about culture or ritual but are 'always political, intimately and dynamically related to the political order and to the struggle within it' (Cohen 1993: 4). Moreover, for the participants, cultural events are not only, or even mainly, a way of expressing relationships, they are also a means by which action can be taken and situations changed. They may be a means, as Turner (1957) shows in his study of the Ndembu, of deflecting attention from tensions within social relations and preventing the development of a schism.

It is the word 'schism' that best describes the situation that arose following the walling off of the temple site. Not surprisingly, the incense sellers were angry that their livelihood was threatened and I was told that, while I was away, two women had come to blows as a result of this. Shockingly, the Minority Affairs Bureau had announced that only those who paid them a fee of 5,000 yuan[13] would be allowed to work inside the temple site. Most incense sellers, including my friends, couldn't afford to become officially accredited. But they were also angry at the wider implications of the actions of the Minority Affairs Bureau. Most visitors to the temple, particularly those who lived in Yaxi itself, regarded the deities and the land on which their temple stood as a part of their own lives. To express it in economic terms, it was their inalienable possession. The central element of each

visit was the reciprocal exchange of spirit money and other offerings for trusted advice or hope of help. Local government policy however was to treat the temple as national heritage and this involved treating it as a separate, secular, commercial enterprise.

Where the temple of the Celestial Kings was concerned, it was this attempt to alter the nature of economic relations that finally caused the underlying tensions apparent at the Mu Yi festival to become overt. In the past, visits to the temple had centred around a reciprocal relationship in which goods were offered to the deities in return for help and advice. In commercial terms these goods were almost worthless. The spirit money, for example, was made locally from small offcuts of bamboo and on cold days the incense sellers sat round small open hearths and burned piles of it to keep warm. But in its proper place it represented a relationship in which, unlike that with officials in everyday life, the deities could be trusted to reciprocate fairly. With the exception of dealings with the incense sellers, who sold their knowledge of the deities as well as their offerings, commercial transactions were not approved of at the temple. So, for example, spirit mediums, who could speak most directly for the deities, should not, it was said, take money for their services. Even transactions with the incense sellers were not purely commercial. On one occasion I was told firmly that I could not pay for another's offerings. It was therefore shocking that local government was making money out of the temple.

We need to be careful about setting up too clear an opposition between moral and commercial approaches to goods and services. Anthropology has long been concerned with contrasting the commercial economic relations of the 'Western' world with the more embedded economic relations they perceived among the people they traditionally studied. As Carrier puts it, in his critique of this kind of approach:

> … at one extreme are gift societies, dominated by kinship relations and groups that define individuals and their relations, with and obligations to each other. In transactions in these societies, objects are inalienably associated with the giver, the recipient, and the relationship that defines and binds them. Consequently, objects and people are seen as defined by their locations in a web of social relationships. At the other extreme are the commodity systems of the modern West. Here, people are not defined by kin relations and groups, but are independent individuals who transact freely

> with each other. In transactions in these societies, objects are alienated commodities, separate from their giver and the recipient. Consequently, objects and people are defined by their autonomous identities. (1995: 86–7)

Where the exchange of goods is concerned, Malinowski, influential in anthropology in so many ways, was seminal in exploring this contrast. His work on the *kula* of the Trobriand Islands showed how the exchange of ritual goods along a circular route gave a sense of common history and identity to the region. The objects, fashioned from shells, had no practical use value in themselves but gathered renown from the high status of people who had previously handled them. The rituals involved in exchanging these goods served to build up enduring ties between the *kula* partners. This idea was taken further by Mauss who, in his book *The Gift* argues that not just relationships but whole societies can be characterised as gift societies in which people are defined by the goods they exchange to the extent that 'souls are mixed up with things, things with souls' (1990: 20). This he contrasts implicitly and explicitly with the 'utilitarianism' which in the West we consider to be 'natural economy' (71–2). Alongside this contrast in exchange relationships is the belief in a different relationship with the things themselves. Goods are regarded as being embedded in traditional societies, inalienably associated with the people who own them. Thus the goods exchanged in the *kula* ceremony are revered because of their associations with esteemed former owners, whose influence never quite leaves them. On a more mundane basis, land is often seen as inalienably associated with those who work it in peasant society, in which 'the earth is not simply a material resource, to be used or neglected; it is the repository of the "strength" or "force" (*la fuerza*) that is drawn upon in agriculture and contained in a harvest' (Gudeman and Rivera 1990: 18). This is in contrast to the easy-to-replace nature of goods assessed purely on the basis of their monetary value.

Of course, as Carrier is concerned with demonstrating, the assumption that cultures can be characterised by different kinds of economic relationships is an over-generalisation and one that is based on our own world view. Bloch and Parry write '[t]he radical opposition which so many anthropologists have discovered between the principles on which gift and commodity exchange are founded derives in part, we believe, from the fact that *our* ideology of the gift has been constructed in antithesis to market exchange' (1989: 9).

No society can in fact be characterised by one or the other kind of relationship. As Malinowski described, commerce-type exchange of commodities took place alongside the *kula* in a separate sphere of exchange called *gimwali*.

Nonetheless, if we take a finer-grained approach, the basic tenet that different spheres of exchange express very different kinds of social relations often seems to hold good. Carsten (1989) describes, for example, how in a Malaysian fishing village exchange with a view to personal gain exists alongside exchange within households that reinforces kinship ties. The two are, however, clearly demarcated since only men can fish, the main means of earning a living, and women play no part in processing the fish. The money that men earn is immediately passed on to their wives and, in this way, 'the individuation represented by the money earned through fishing is negated by the interposition of the women' (1989: 132). Similarly, Hutchinson (1992) describes how, among the Nuer before the 1940s, cattle were a form of bridewealth and a means of expressing family ties and were never owned by individuals and never exchanged for money (299). Although by the 1980s cattle could be purchased with money, distinctions were drawn between 'cattle of money' and 'cattle of girls', with different meanings attached to the two kinds (305). It seems apparent, then, that it is not just anthropologists who contrast ideas about reciprocity and inalienable goods with another world of commerce and commodity.

The commercialisation of the temple indicated a very different relationship with the deities. In the past, the figures of the deities had been flattered and deferred to, their authority apparent in the numbers of people who had worshipped them. When I had wanted to take photographs of them, the incense sellers had told me to ask their permission first. Now they were treated as inanimate, alienable objects. Not only could they and the objects associated with them be commercially exploited, they could be changed and replaced at will. By the time I returned, local government cadres had already disposed of some of the objects from the unofficial temple such as the spirit medium's board. They had also moved the breeze-block building to the back of the site and walled it up with the old deities still inside. Attention was now to be centred on the large red-roofed temple with its enormous figures of the Celestial Kings, their imperial robes sculpted from cement and painted in bright colours. The employees of the Minority Affairs Bureau who sold tickets at the door of this temple treated these figures as objects of secular consumption. They

urged me to take photographs and sometimes laughed at the people praying there.

As a result of their disapproval of the involvement of the deities in this different kind of economic relationship, many visitors began to question the legitimacy of the temple. I was told that fewer 'country people' (*xiang xia ren*, as Yaxi people described those from the highlands) came now. In part this was because, although 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. It was also because they believed that if you had to pay an entrance fee there could not really be deities living there. Many believed that the *ling* quality of the deities was still present at the temple but in the wooden figures now bricked into the old temple. This was indicated in the sticks of incense that were being left in the cracks between the breeze-blocks. As at other temples, the Celestial Kings' eyes had been 'opened' by a special ceremony that made them deities rather than just representations, and their faces had been blackened by years of offerings. They could not so easily be replaced since they had been legitimated by years of ritual interactions with visitors to the temple. Some said that the deities had shown their continued efficacy, punishing the cadre who had bricked them up by bringing sickness to his wife. Finally, many said that it couldn't be a real temple because there was no sense of harmony there, people were always quarrelling.

The role of commerce had become more important but these events drew particular attention to government venality and appropriation of rural land. People who visited the temple told me that they disapproved of the actions of the Minority Affairs Bureau, not just because it was a commercial venture but because, like so many dealings in which local government was involved, it was also a corrupt one. It was certainly true that not all the money was being put back into the temple. I had direct evidence of this myself when, on being taken out for dinner by senior members of the Minority Affairs Bureau, I was told that we could order as many dishes as we wanted; they had plenty of money because of the income they were getting from the temple at Yaxi. It was also widely believed that several of the new incense sellers had not paid the full 5,000 yuan to the Minority Affairs Bureau but, had instead, used their *guanxi* with them.

The offence caused when local government treated the site, and the objects in it, as alienable things paralleled wider dissatisfactions concerned with land ownership. People frequently referred to the

land in Yaxi as 'our' land or 'Yaxi people's land'. Although farmers had had responsibility for the land they work since the early 1980s, ultimately it was still owned by the state and could be reclaimed as such. The land at Yaxi was particularly likely to be claimed at this time since it comprised much of the flat land between Jishou and Qianzhou and was therefore a site of potential 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, whilst I was visiting the incense sellers, officials from Jishou came to measure out a nearby plot with a view to building another factory. They were watched with hostility and many a muttered comment. Though the people to whom this land had been allotted would be given financial compensation, these actions, like the walling-off of the temple, could not be made up for by monetary recompense. As the villagers said angrily, 'It is our land.'

In the days preceding a major festival of Guanyin, also celebrated at the temple, one of the local spirit mediums, who was regularly possessed by the Celestial Kings, declared that the deities were no longer willing to live in the official temple and had moved over to a rocky outcrop on a small hill which overlooked the gate to the rice spirits factory. The Guanyin festival did not draw such big crowds as the Mu Yi festival, but it was still a big enough occasion to make very clear the differences of opinion that existed. On the day of this festival I arrived to find that a new stall had recently been set up to sell offerings directly outside the gate to the rice spirits factory. This was at the foot of the path to the rocks that were already adorned with red flags and wreathed in the smoke of firecrackers and offerings. At first, not everyone knew of, or agreed with, the challenge to the Minority Affairs Bureau. Some were making their way around the side of the rice spirits factory to the old temple site. Others were climbing the hillside opposite the main gate of the factory to an outcrop of rocks and boulders. A knot of people stood at the stall arguing over the correct venue for the festival. One of the more vocal members of the group in front of the shop told me that there was nothing worth seeing on the hillside, just some big rocks, and that I should go to the old temple site as usual.

Feeling uncertain how to proceed I did go to the old site, now enclosed by the wall, but when I got there I found it relatively empty. One of the unofficial incense sellers now based outside the walls urged me go to the rocks instead and have a look. Too discreet to state her opinion openly, she sold me a large bag of offerings instead, including

biscuits, candles, firecrackers and incense. She refused to accompany me herself, saying that she would get into trouble with the cadres from the Minority Affairs Bureau if she did so. Rather apprehensive, I turned back to the factory gate and made my way up through the orange grove on the opposite hillside, where a muddy path was already becoming worn. The incense seller was correct to assume that the employees of the Minority Affairs Bureau would attempt to stop people from accepting the spirit medium's authority on the whereabouts of the deities. As I arrived at the rocks, I saw that three of them had already arrived there and were urging everyone to go back down. Thinking that, with my large bag of offerings, it would be hard to convince them that I was merely an interested onlooker, I hid behind some orange trees and listened. The Minority Affairs Bureau employees tried to undermine the authority of the new site, saying that this wasn't a temple and there were no spirit mediums there. But they were unable to deflect people from ritual reaffirmation of this site as the deities' legitimate home.

After this, visitors climbed up to the rocks all through the day, burning incense and leaving other offerings. Many of them left cloths and flags, and other traces of their interaction with the deities, now believed to reside in these rocks. This evidence of worship provided further confirmation to those who followed that these were indeed the *ling* figures of the Celestial Kings and Mu Yi. The absence of spirit mediums was of no significance since everyone by now had heard their pronouncement. The break with the old temple was widely discussed by those who visited this temple, and also at the other Guanyin festivals that took place at Buddhist temples over the next few days. Many made a point of explaining to me that the Celestial Kings and their mother no longer lived in the official temple because it was no good. The figures of the deities there were empty (*kong*).

In contrast to the official temple, where hushed complaints and occasional violent quarrels had called its status into question, there was a striking sense of enjoyment at the new site. Everyone was very cheerful and friendly towards me and, as one young woman put it to me, spending time there was '*hen you yisi*' (very interesting or enjoyable). In the days following the Guanyin festival, old women from Yaxi village worked hard to get it ready for the Mu Yi festival. Steps had been cut in the approach to the site and crude breeze-block supports put up for corrugated iron roofs to shelter worshippers from rain and sun. It became a place for enjoying oneself and old people would gather there to talk and women bring their children

to play. A shrine to Guanyin was placed on a rock higher up the hillside because the scenery was good and one could play (*wan*) there. A further path was planned to the skyline, where the views were particularly good.

When I asked someone, 'Whose land are we on now?' wondering in fact who owned the orange trees which were all around, everyone around me replied in chorus that it was '*women laoxiang de*' ('It belongs to our home village') with no attempt to explain exactly whose it was. Correct exchange relationships with the deities were seen to have been re-established because the temple was on the Yaxi people's land. I was told then, and several other times over the next few weeks, that people who came to this temple could worship the deities without having to pay money. This attitude to money was reinforced at the Mu Yi festival, a few days later, when spirit mediums gathered at the rocks in the evening. All the money donated to them had to be passed on to the new temple. Any medium who attempted to keep a donation was asked to leave. This kind of behaviour, I was told firmly, was wrong. Thus, although nothing could be done about attitudes to land and money in the wider world, at this temple site conflicts had been resolved. The ritual action at the new temple reaffirmed how relations regarding land and money should be conducted.

By the day of the Mu Yi festival itself, the Minority Affairs Bureau had made an effort to defuse the antagonism. The unofficial shrine at the old temple site had been re-opened and the small images of the Celestial Kings from inside had been put into the new temple, next to the towering sculptured ones. The incense sellers, both those inside and outside the wall, were selling plastic flowers, and there was a certain amount of activity around the Mu Yi shrine. It remained, however, a commercialised event and the situation lacked the shared enthusiasm that was so apparent at the new temple. Although some of the visitors sat round in groups, resting and chatting, there were no performances of opera this year and, of course, no spirit mediums. The new temple, by contrast was now a well-established structure. More figures had been brought to represent the deities and I was told that more than a thousand people came during the course of that day.

This was not the end of the story, however. Some time after I had returned home, I received a letter telling me that the temple at the rocks had been destroyed by members of the Public Security Bureau on the pretext that it was a form of superstition.

THE TEMPLE AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Discussion of the temple of the Celestial Kings gives us a an insight into the conflict between government views of it as a secular part of the national heritage and economy, and worshippers' belief in the existence of a reciprocal relationship with the deities themselves. Through exploring the cultural events which take place there, we become aware of how these conflicts express wider concerns over land and money. Anger over government appropriation of the site parallels anger over the loss of village land to Jishou. Criticism of the commoditisation of the temple reflects the distrust and anxiety caused by China's sudden adoption of a market economy, and the corruption and venality which accompanies it. The study of cultural performance is also an effective means of considering the way in which ethnic behaviour plays a part in wider social relations without falling back on assumptions about ethnic groups. This is because such an approach puts people who are often considered as being parts of different cultures into a 'single field of cultural relations' (Frankenberg 2002: 60). For example, in Gluckman's account of a social situation in Zululand 'there is no monolithic and homogeneous Zulu (or European) identity or ethnicity, but rather a number of identities are manifest depending upon the situation' (Banks 1996: 27).

Clearly the conflicts that took place at the temple were not expressions of 'ethnic tensions'. Among lowland people, the temple was an exemplar of *bendi* (local) culture, something also reflected in the stories told about the deities. Though the practices of highland and lowland people did not have the close similarity which leads me to describe all lowland practices as 'local' without reference to claims of ancestry, there are relationships between highland and lowland which make the concept of 'common ground' still applicable. Differences of dress, language and, to some extent, belief were apparent between the highland and lowland people. Although highland people might bring different approaches to the temple, lowlanders did not regard these as separate. Indeed, the people who worshipped there particularly valued the highland perspective on the temple. As I have described, criticisms of the official temple by highland or *xiangxia* (country) people had been one cause of its decline. At the inauguration of the new temple, ritual practitioners conducted a *jiao* ritual. Though referred to as *daoshi*, and Chinese-speaking, they were dressed in the bright orange robes and ornate head-dresses which in West Hunan are associated with the Kho Xiong-speaking *laoshi*. Moreover, highland

women were also among the mediums who visited in the evening, contacting dead relatives and looking into the future.

The local government agenda to commercialise the temple as an example of Miao culture was never mentioned. It is perhaps an indication of the depth of this sense of the temple as a form of shared culture that, in contrast to all the other things for which the Minority Affairs Bureau was criticised, this appeared not to be regarded as a threat. Nevertheless, the conflict at the temple was ultimately about asserting where one's allegiances lie. Is one a part of a secularised Chinese nation in which the Miao 'Other' now represents an element of heritage? Or does one identify with a shared sense of disenfranchisement, a shared sense of distance from secular leadership and a need for an alternative form of authority?

7 Conclusions

The intention of this book has been to explore a situation where the idea of clearly defined ethnic groups (as opposed to the more fluid possibilities of ethnic relations) is clearly related to an elite political agenda. Historically, I have argued, separate classification of the West Hunan Miao has been a means both of controlling the highland population and ensuring that unruly activities can be clearly attributed to an 'Other'. In more recent times, the organisation of what are taken to be highland cultural practices into displays of healthy, individuated Miao bodies continues to be a means of attempting to ensure loyalty to the nation. At the same time, images of the Miao continue to appeal to those from outside the region, previously as an expression of national identities, now as a form of sophisticated consumption. In contrast to this, however, an ethnography of cultural practices in the lowland areas of West Hunan shows that it is the notion of the 'local' (*bendi*) which is foregrounded. This is clearly demonstrated at the temple of the Celestial Kings. Although the government promotes it as a relic of past minority culture and an object to be commoditised, this is a place where people of all kinds of descent implicitly and explicitly criticise mundane authorities. This sense of locality is not a simple mapping of identity onto place, since *bendi* also implies a contrast with elite culture, an unorthodox and heterogeneous culture where incomers and indigenous people are either indistinguishable or have much in common.

In suggesting that the idea of separate groups is a political imposition rather than a more widely held viewpoint I do not mean to deny that a sense of belonging to an ethnic or cultural group exists. Any newspaper can give accounts of conflicts attributed by those who take part in them to injustices perpetrated by one ethnic group on another. These cannot all be assumed to be due to the agendas of elites. Moreover, clear allegiances to ethnic groups can be found in other parts of China. There is a clear contrast between the situation which I have described in West Hunan and that in Chinese Mongolia, for example, where a study of the complexities of ethnic identification can still conclude that Mongolian identity is a meaningful term (Bilik 1998). Jankowiak finds that urban Mongolian and Han Chinese are aware of distinguishable identities and prefer the company of their

own ethnic group (1993: 42–4). He also reports that urban Mongolian parents consider it 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). Thus clear distinctions are drawn between Mongols and Chinese-speaking urban incomers, distinctions which, unlike those in West Hunan, are also clear to outsiders (Borchigud 1996). Nor am I suggesting that a more clear-cut sense of Miao identity is never present in West Hunan, though at present this is limited. Among some educated urban people such a sense does exist. We see it in the influence of a group of Hmong visitors from the United States who attended a conference in Jishou in 1994. Their experience of migration and familiarity with the context of United States identity politics had given them a clear sense of ethnic group identity and pride[1] which found ready sympathy among some of the local hosts.

The US Hmong were attracted by West Hunan's reputation as their place of origin since it is said to be the place from which the Miao began their migration westwards into Southwest China and southeast Asia. Indeed, many American Hmong regard the rural Miao of China as examples of their lost rural culture, enthusiastically recording scenes of farming life on video (Schein 1998: 167). To appeal to this interest the Jishou conference included a visit to the highland village of Shanjiang[2] where, reportedly, Hmong delegates greeted market-goers as brothers and plied them with gifts. Performances of Miao singing, dancing, drama and a 'sacrifice' of water buffalo were also arranged on the playing fields of one of the middle schools in Jishou, though, in deference to the feelings of urban Chinese and overseas visitors, the water buffalo were not actually killed. The degree to which this identification with highland culture was a form of 'fictive' ethnicity is indicated by the delegates' lack of knowledge of and perhaps lack of interest in the actual situation in West Hunan. The visitors insisted that, since Miao was a derogatory Chinese term, the local inhabitants must be Hmong. They were apparently unaware of the terms Hmou and Kho Xiong which, in Guizhou and West Hunan, those designated 'Miao' use to refer to themselves, or of the languages spoken there. As a result, they were disconcerted during their visit to Shanjiang to find that people there did not understand them.

Nonetheless, a number of Jishou people of highland descent were deeply impressed by the delegates' pride in their nationality and their hopes for the future of the Hmong/Miao people. This is indicated

in the way that they took to describing themselves as Hmong, with scant regard for the indigenous term Kho Xiong. Scholars who had contact with the US Hmong were also keen to learn and recount a history of the Miao, or the Hmong as they called them, which told that, rather than being a primitive, aboriginal people, they had once had their own state. Thus I was told that the ancient southern state of Chu had in fact been a Miao state. Not only had the Miao been united at this time but all the other peoples of the south had also been Miao. They were also concerned to show that, although the Miao as a group lagged behind the Han Chinese economically, they had their own traditions in areas such as medicine, music and *wushu* (martial arts) which are well developed and equal to those of the Han. Thus, for example, the Kho Xiong-speaking scholar known as Hu Laohu was undertaking a project to find a cure for bilharzia according to Miao traditions of medicine. Though these views and hopes for the future made an obvious contrast with local images of the Miao as primitive and 'Other', they influenced only a small number of people in Jishou. Others I spoke to, even those of highland descent, said that the US Hmong were unrealistic and that Miao were sure to continue to become more like the Chinese. Nonetheless the possibility that the Hmong nationalist movement will exert a greater influence in the future cannot be ruled out.

My interest, however, has been how the lack of interest shown in the widespread images of a separate Miao culture contrasted with vibrant participation in 'local' forms of ritual action. This suggests that ideas of bounded ethnic groups are inadequate to convey the kinds of interactions which were taking place. One way of approaching this problem is to look at the ways in which particular historical circumstances may have resulted in particular kinds of ethnic relations and to develop a 'theory of cultural identity' relevant to one's ethnographic area (Linnekin and Poyer 1990: 5). It does appear that the situation I have described has much in common with that of other highland people of Southeast Asia and their relationships with their wet-rice cultivating, hierarchical, often literate neighbours – the Chinese to the north and the Burmese, Vietnamese and Thai to the south. While different in many ways from their more sedentary neighbours, they often regard themselves as culturally linked to them and the boundaries between them and their neighbours are often highly fluid. For example, Tapp suggests that:

> … much of what passed for specifically Hmong, Yao, Lisu or Lahu social organization 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)

Tapp has described in detail how the Hmong of Thailand share cultural practices such as *fengshui* with the southern Chinese and their stories of the past describe their origin as the brothers of the Chinese (Tapp 1989: 147f.). Lehman has suggested that relations of this kind are part of a situation found more widely on the outskirts of sedentary rice-growing populations. He suggests that highland people in Southeast Asia and India are characterised by 'subnuclear social systems' whose 'social systems and cultures can be shown to be largely means of adapting to and symbolizing their essential symbiosis with civilisation' (1967: 53). Though his assumption of particular types of interacting social systems now appears unduly essentialising, his work usefully raises the question that different kinds of ethnic relationships are found in different contexts.

A number of challenges to Western assumptions of cultural groups have been based on ethnographic accounts of Southeast Asia. Moerman shows how the traits on which the Lue of northern Thailand based ethnic distinctions may be quite different from those apparent to an outside observer (1968: 164). Moerman's article, written soon after Barth's paper on ethnic boundaries raised similar points and has also been widely influential. More recently, Tooker has written of the need to look at ethnicity and religion in terms of *practice* rather than belief, taking her evidence from people in northern Thailand who change easily from defining themselves as Chinese to Akha (1992: 800). Most famously, Leach (1964) has challenged assumptions of clear bounded societies on the basis of the ethnography of Southeast Asia. Leach describes how the Shan, rice-cultivating Buddhists influenced by the Chinese trade routes which formerly crossed northern Burma, lived alongside the Kachin who were mountain-dwelling shifting cultivators. Despite their different cultural practices, they could not be understood in isolation from each other and distinctions were often surprisingly hard to draw. He writes that Shan and Kachin share markets 'and in the ordinary affairs of life they are much mixed up together' with some individuals claiming allegiance to both Shan and Kachin (1964: 2–3, 49, 60). In terms of cultural practices, too, the Kachin show interconnections with the Shan. Like others in the

region, they regard themselves as siblings of their more sedentary neighbours (253). Leach describes how the Kachin at times develop a more Shan-like *gumsa* social structure. His analysis of this challenged the assumptions about social systems which underpinned British functionalism. That Shan/Kachin relations were also regarded as a challenge to colonial administrative categories is indicated by the attempts made by British administrators to formalise the distinctions between them (36, 244).

Although studies of the fringes of Asian rice-growing regions have provided a rich source of challenges to Western notions of ethnic and cultural groups, these should not be presented as some kind of Asian special case. The questions raised by these studies are also found in fine-grained ethnographic studies from other parts of the world. These have described situations which fail to fit with essentialising ideas of identity found in liberal ideas of multiculturalism, identity politics and the assumptions of shared identity found in the idea of the imagined community itself. Writers of these studies have themselves made the point that people who do not fit with existing ideas on ethnic groups are all too easily ignored, and that to ignore these different forms of identity is to ignore a challenge to ways of academic thinking.

Fog Olwig's (1999) work on the Caribbean island of St Johns shows how some forms of identity are ignored because the people who express them do not conform to ideas of cultural or ethnic groups which have a wider currency. She describes how older people on the island share a sense of belonging through memories of a sense of moral community. This was based on generous reciprocity or 'givishness' between small landowners, some from St Johns, others more recent incomers from nearby islands. Among the younger population, however, this was being replaced by an ethnic St Johns islander consciousness that saw its defining moment as a rebellion by black African plantation workers against the plantation owners. Fog Olwig suggests that this later form of identity has arisen as a result of 'a dominant global discourse on cultural heritage that emphasizes cultural resistance, ethnic roots, and structures of common difference' (1999: 372). As a result, while the cultural heritage movement has become a platform from which to argue for political rights, others, whose sense of belonging rests on a sense of shared place and moral community, 'have been defined as being without culture or history by this same understanding' (1999: 384).

Hayden's (1996) work on the former Yugoslavia makes the point that the imagined community of the nation may not be everyone's imagined community through choice. On the face of it, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia is a powerful example of the existence of exclusive national groups. Hayden however, questions this assumption in two ways. He describes how 'national identity was not a primary focus of most people's concerns in the early 1980s' (1996: 789) since in former Yugoslavia a considerable degree of intermarriage took place and in the 1980s there was a tendency to define oneself as Yugoslav rather than as Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, etc. Then he makes the point that what took place in the 1990s was not so much the resurgence of primordial identities as 'the brutal negating of a social reality in order to reconstruct it' (784). The imagined community was imposed by force, to make 'existing heterogeneous [identities] unimaginable' (783).

If Hayden questions assumptions about ethnic groups from the starting point of ethnic cleansing, Kelly (1998) makes a similar point from the starting point of an unexpected lack of ethnic violence. He considers the situation in Fiji, where a Fijian minority has taken power from the majority Indians in a series of coups but, contrary to expectation, 'ratcheting ethnic violence' has not resulted. This, he argues, should indicate to scholars that '[t]here is more to the politics of culture than liberal democracy seeking to accommodate ethnic self-assertion' (174–5) and that we should broaden our subject of study beyond 'claim and counter-claim dialectics' to look at 'refusals, deflections and alternative assertions' (176). My study has been an attempt to do just this. As such, the questions raised in this book are, therefore, relevant not just to the problems posed by so-called ethnic minorities in China but also to the more general problem of ethnicity and minority nationalities worldwide.

Notes

1 WHERE ARE THE MIAO?

1. Aside from its exotic images, rice spirits was the only product for which this region was well known. The combination of hill-rice, limestone spring water and the region's reputation for traditional ways made these spirits a very marketable commodity.
2. I was also able to build upon contacts I had formed during two years I had spent previously teaching in the provincial capital of Changsha.
3. The 1990 statistics (*Xiangxi Xhou Minzu Renkou Fenbu Biao* n.d.), gave the population of Jishou City as 230,614, of which 67,138 were Han, 90,874 were Miao and 70,491 Tujia. The remainder were made up of other nationalities, of which the Bai, with a population of 745, was the largest.

   The area administered as Jishou City also includes a number of surrounding villages, such as Yaxi. 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.
4. On one occasion I was instructed by a member of the university's Foreign Affairs Department (*Waishi Ban*) that I was not to go off the campus after dark. 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.
5. 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 *putonghua*, 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. After several months of fieldwork, however, 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.
6. For a fuller discussion of this, see Schein (2000: 37f.) and (Tapp 1989: 174).

2 MIAO REBELS AND 'COMMON GROUND'

1. For historians writing before the establishment of the Republic in 1911 this had a particular relevance since the emperors and much of the army during the Qing dynasty were Manchus.

2. This supposedly homogeneous culture is often referred to as 'Han' although, strictly speaking, the Han came into existence with the Han dynasty (206 BC–221 AD). Dreyer suggests that, in a looser sense, the 'Han' can be traced back to 722 BC, 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 (1976: 7 n. 4).
3. Sometimes educated lowland people made use of the older sense of the term 'Miao' as meaning uncouth and primitive. They used the words 'Miao temper' to mean quick to anger and unable to hide it, and 'Miao appetite' to mean greedy, not caring about flavour. Both these traits can be contrasted to the educated 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.
4. For example, Lin Yueh-Hua writes '[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' (1940: 279).
5. 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.
6. For a more detailed description of this aspect of West Hunan history see Rack (2005).
7. Taking on what we now think of minority identity was not uncommon in China at this time (see Harrell 1989: 186, Lombard-Salmon 1977: 279, Pu 1989: 35, Tapp 1995: 209, Wiens 1967: 208–9). Hill (2001) has written recently of the varying degrees of assimilation to Nuosu identity among Han strangers and slaves.
8. Howland describes a similar situation concerning relations between the Chinese and Japanese elites which were, until the twentieth century, also based on shared written forms and a shared sense of what constitutes the civilised (1996: 7).
9. On paper, the position of the non-Han people changed dramatically during the Republican period (1919–49), 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), but this was also a period of greatly increased interest in minority difference as seen in the ethnology of minority people and works describing their cultures.
10. Figures in the *Xiangxi Xhou Minzu Renkou Fenbu Biao* (n.d.) show the percentages of the Han, Miao, Tujia 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

11. The Tujia are considered more advanced than other minorities such as the Miao (Ma et al. 1989: 403).
12. Ganziping was one of the first areas to be settled by incoming Han during the Ming dynasty.
13. It was often hard for highland people to change in this respect, and 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 1980s but was too ready to point out self-seeking behaviour and inconsistencies 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.
14. Words of Chinese origin have been adopted into Kho Xiong and, often, whole phrases of Chinese are also used, but many highland people do not speak fluent Chinese.
15. Primary school children in many highland areas of West Hunan were 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.
16. 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.
17. For a discussion of the development of No drama from *luo* or exorcism, see Bodde (1975).
18. A form of *huan luo yuan*, (redeeming a vow to the gods) is found in the worship of the Celestial Kings. Zhou et al. describe the process of setting up the altar and the *luo* verses which are recited to them (1992: 338f.). This, too, might involve calling on multiple deities in addition to the Celestial Kings themselves. I have heard a woman from a formerly Kho Xiong-speaking village, who acted as custodian at one of the temples which had Buddhist deities as well as the Celestial Kings, calling a number of deities to be present at the altar of the Celestial Kings.
19. 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 and Shyrock 1935: 1). The practice of *gu* was once 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 and Shyrock 1935: 10).
20. This is a point which Diamond herself raises, but does not emphasise (1988: 4).
21. Incomers into West Hunan were also described as 'shed people' (Ho 1951: 145–6).

22. This view may have been influenced by the famous story by Shen Congwen, 'The Border Town', written in 1934 and set in West Hunan (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.

3 MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF THE MIAO

1. As in other situations where 'a place, a sign, an objectified value' (Chatterjee 1989: 632) is attributed to members of the nation, it is women who become signifiers of tradition (see also Mani 1987: 123).
2. The latter are more usually associated with the Hmou-speaking people of Guizhou.
3. These dances were not without political implications, however, and in the 1940s highland people were reluctant to speak about them because they knew that such dances were considered to be licentious (Ling and Ruey 1963: 310).
4. Harrell has pointed out that, in their accounts of national minorities, Chinese ethnologists and anthropologists are active agents of the projects of both state-building and nation-building (1991: 4).
5. Concerned that too much of its revenue was going to Jishou, the Zhangjiajie region split off from the rest of the Autonomous Prefecture in the early 1990s and I was told that Dehang Scenic Park was established in response to this.
6. More than once it was suggested to me that I take this as the subject of my research.
7. The television series was made to accompany the Miao/Hmong conference that I mention in Chapter 7.
8. The presence of Westerners juxtaposed to these images of minorities is not 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 also 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.

4 THE RITUALS OF NEW YEAR

1. Aizhai is close to Dehang Scenic Park.
2. The Chinese character usually associated with weddings.

3. The competition at Daxingzhai took place on two successive market days. These events did not occur on the day when the representatives of the Shandong Medicine Company were present.
4. This appears to be a 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)
5. A small two-stringed musical instrument, played with a bow. The *erhu* is popular throughout most of China.
6. On transvestism and shamanism, see Eberhardt (1968: 306).
7. The fact that a Han village rather than a Kho Xiong-speaking 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 Kho Xiong-speaking village, and so have less to fear from putting on an unofficial display.

5 AUTHORITY AND THE LOCAL

1. Like temple festivals, these dates are calculated according to China's lunar calendar.
2. The Chinese form of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteswara, she is regarded as a goddess of mercy and is the most popular deity in China (Sangren 1983: 6).
3. 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, Diamond 1969: 85f., Katz 1987, 1995, Seaman 1978: 109). 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: 102f.). Another possible parallel that 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, there was little reference to Daoism at the temple of the Celestial Kings.

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).

4. For a fuller discussion of Mu Yi, the mother of the Celestial Kings, see Chapter 6. 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*).
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. On the Pearl River Delta in Guandong.
8. About 10 pence.
9. Some of these individuals lived their now legendary lives as long ago as the fifth century AD and some in the more recent past (Dean 1993: 30, Stein 1979: 59, 65, Yang 1961: 153). These include figures such as Zun Wang (Feuchtwang 1989: 17) and Chen Wu (Seaman 1978: 109, Yang 1961: 153). 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 marital arts (Feuchtwang 1989: 17, Jordan 1972: 48–9).
10. For a detailed account of the stories associated with the Celestial Kings see Sutton (2000).
11. The characters for Mu Yi are formed from the two parts of the character for her surname, Yang. In fact the teller 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.
12. This story was unusual in that she said that the Celestial Kings went to fight the *Yang ren*, that is, the foreigners.
13. 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.
14. This is by no means unique to West Hunan.
15. Some highland people, however, had a quite different account of who the deities are. The incense seller, Mrs Luo, had told me that some people from the highland areas confuse San Da Wang (Three Great Kings, another name for the Celestial Kings) with Shan Dai Wang, the name of a highland 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 whom she said, was a Miao woman. She said that highland people believed that Shan Dai Wang had unified the people of Laershan and made them strong, so that nobody could *qishi* (humiliate) them. I found further information about this figure hard to obtain. On being urged to drink *baijiu* (rice spirits) in a highland village, for example, I noticed that his name was mentioned, but when I asked why this was, my friend looked uneasy and said that he did not know about these things. It seems possible that this is 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). Whatever the case, it seems that he is a figure associated specifically and proudly with the highland regions.

6 CONFLICT AT THE TEMPLE OF THE CELESTIAL KINGS

1. 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).
2. We should not assume, however, that all unorthodox temple cults met with the same treatment. Stein writes that, while some were encouraged, many were destroyed 'by both court and literati officials' (1979: 59).
3. It is recorded that, in the mid-twentieth century, images of the deities were taken out to the villages by Miao ritual practitioners (*laoshi*) in the hope that they would bring rain (Shi 1986: 539–40).
4. The description of Panhu as ancestor of the Miao is a common misconception.
5. 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)

The gazetteers themselves link the earlier cult with well known figures of 'Miao' history, such as the Bamboo king of Guizhou although, as Sutton suggests, this may be based on a need to explain the deities' popularity among indigenous people rather than first-hand information (Sutton 2000: 458). Another story links the cult with a local rebellious figure, suggesting a link to more generalised frontier loyalties (see Sutton 2000: 464–5).

6. Unlike the Celestial Kings, Ma Yuan is a relatively well known historical figure who died in AD 49 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, von Glahn 1983: 354, Yang 1961: 173).
7. 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).
8. The term 'superstition' reached China, via Japan, at the beginning of the twentieth century, together with a number of Western social scientific terms (Feuchtwang and Wang 1991). In both countries it was regarded as an antithesis of 'progress', which in turn was associated with the rise of nation-building projects (the Meiji reforms in Japan and the Republican movement in China), as well as the wish to make a break with a perceived feudal past. The subsequent campaigns against 'superstition' by the Communist Party also had this aim, since, as Anagnost writes, 'out of these practices is constructed an "otherness" against which the Party can exercise its legitimating activism' (1994: 231).
9. As elsewhere in China, activities which appeared to be 'a living thing in the present' were likely to be ignored or discouraged (Yang 1996: 95, 97), although if they were treated as historical reconstructions they were more acceptable and might be viewed positively by national media.
10. This may be because of the current popularity of the temple with women, since she is regarded, particularly, as a protector of women.
11. In Mandarin, *bai pusa*.
12. Mediums were often disparaged by urban people who claimed that they were insane. Despite this, urban people would often 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.
13. About £500.

7 CONCLUSIONS

1. A large number of Hmong had left their homes in Laos after becoming involved with hostilities there and, in 1994, a group of them were invited to Jishou to take part in the International Miao (Hmong) Culture Symposium and Economic Trade Co-operative Conference (*Guoji Miaozu Wenhua Yanjiujuhui, Jingji Maoyi Xiezuohui*). Jishou University, which hosted the conference, regarded it as an opportunity to attract investment into the region but, on this count, the conference was largely unsuccessful. During the course of the conference Hmong nationalist sentiments were expressed and it became apparent that some 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 (see Schein 1998). 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'.

2. Shanjiang is where the Si Yue Ba festival mentioned in Chapter 4 was held. It has a market recently rebuilt with heritage-style Chinese roofs and groups of tourists are sometimes taken there to see a minority market day.

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