

The
CHINESE SULTANATE

Islam, Ethnicity,

and the

Panthay Rebellion

in Southwest China

1856-1873



DAVID G. ATWILL

The Chinese Sultanate

ISLAM, ETHNICITY, AND THE PANTHAY
REBELLION IN SOUTHWEST CHINA, 1856-1873

David G. Atwill

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For Yurong, my favorite Lolo

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D.G.A.

Kunming, China (Summer 2006)

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CHAPTER I

A Mandarin's Tale

The End of the Beginning

On a warm summer evening in July 1857, Governor-General Hengchun stood on the city wall of Kunming surveying the chaotic scene all around him.¹ Dragon Gate Temple, carved into the steep cliffs of the Western Hills and normally visible across Dianchi Lake, was obscured by thick columns of smoke rising from the city's burning suburbs and adjacent fields. The wealthy caravansaries, the thriving markets, and the innumerable houses outside the massive city walls had all been looted and were now in flames.² Thousands of city residents and refugees from other parts of the province of Yunnan had thought their capital would be safe; all had been caught in the sudden offensive of the rebel army.³

Hengchun knew the Chinese Empire was staggering from advances being made by the rebel leader Hong Xiuquan and his Taiping army far to the east in the strategic lower Yangtze valley. Thus, the central government was unlikely to send him either military reinforcements or funds to relieve the siege of Kunming. Yunnan was one of the poorest and most distant provinces of the Qing Empire. Its greatest value to the imperial court had been its mineral reserves, especially copper. But early in the 1800s, many of Yunnan's mines had begun to close as the quality of the copper declined, deposits were depleted, and transportation costs rose. The trade in Yunnan's famous tea was still lucrative, but except for that the province rarely drew the court's already strained attention.

As Hengchun stood on the city wall and stared bleakly at the impending destruction of his capital, perhaps the proverb common among residents of Yunnan came to his mind: "The mountains are high and the emperor is far away." It was tragically appropriate to the devastation he saw that evening and partly explained why the multiethnic rebel forces had risked attacking the provincial capital. At the very least, the proverb underscored his despair:

he had failed to protect the people of his province from the rebel hordes and the chaos that now engulfed Kunming.⁴

With the rebel forces encircling the city, Hengchun often walked the city walls, inspecting its defenses. In this way he saw the devastation firsthand—the corpses, the ransacked shops—as well as the banners of the Muslim Chinese rebels.⁵ Witnesses would recount that the governor-general looked disconsolate. He sighed deeply time and again in remorse over the dreadful consequences of his decisions.⁶ As a youth, he had absorbed the precepts of Confucius while preparing for his civil service examinations. He measured his worth as an official by the welfare of his people. The weight of their present suffering was thus a direct indictment of his leadership.

Governor-General Hengchun was the Qing government's ranking official in all of southwestern China. He was responsible for all that happened in Yunnan and in Guizhou Province directly to the east. When the news reached Beijing that a rebel force had besieged the provincial capital, the emperor would react swiftly and without hesitation. The central court might show a modicum of leniency over a skirmish along Yunnan's remote border areas. But Hengchun had allowed a rebel army to reach the very walls of the provincial capital and kill scores of the emperor's subjects. This was grounds for censure and perhaps dismissal, and quite conceivably for charges of official negligence.

At Kunming's broad southern gate, Hengchun paused to study the damage to the wealthiest suburbs of the city and to assess the rebels' movements on the level ground between Kunming and Dianchi Lake.⁷ From where he stood he would have seen the Eastern Pagoda a few hundred yards from the wall. It was more than one hundred feet high and had been built during the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms (c. 738–1253), in the tenth century, a time when Yunnan had been free of Chinese central control. The pagoda was a visible reminder of Yunnan's tenuous historical links to the Chinese Empire. Several months earlier Hengchun had received word that Dali, Yunnan's military and commercial center in the west, had fallen to the Yunnan rebels. The top Qing administrators stationed there had been beheaded, and a king appointed.⁸ Was he witnessing the beginning of a new era of Yunnan autonomy? Was the rise of a rebel government in Dali, Nanzhao's former capital, an omen? With Kunming now under siege, the end of Qing rule in Yunnan—and his own demise—were all too conceivable. It was little consolation to him that the events that had ignited this violence had taken place the previous year while he was away in Guizhou. Only after his return had he pieced together that sequence of horrifying events.

It had all begun the previous year when the emperor ordered Hengchun to Guizhou to suppress an uprising by members of the Miao ethnic group. He departed from the capital, leaving Yunnan governor Shuxing'a to over-

see the provincial bureaucracy in his absence. Shuxing'a, like Hengchun, was of Manchu ethnicity. Unfortunately, he suffered from a debilitating mental condition (*zhengchun chong*) whose symptoms were melancholia, memory loss, and fatigue.⁹ His increasingly unstable health prevented him from carrying out more than a small part of his administrative duties in Hengchun's absence. Furthermore, he detested Muslims (which Hengchun did not). He blamed them for his poor health, which he firmly believed was the result of his dealings with Muslim Chinese many decades earlier, when he served in China's predominately Muslim northwestern frontier.¹⁰ That Muslims were only 10 percent of Yunnan's multiethnic population did little to soften his enmity toward the province's Hui community. In his view, their powerful position as merchants, caravaners, miners, and soldiers lent them, as he put it, "strength far greater than their numbers."¹¹

After Hengchun left Kunming in early 1856, a strongly anti-Muslim faction quickly began to take hold in Kunming. Composed of high provincial officials, including the provincial judge (*fansi*), the local elite, and several powerful retired officials, this group fomented a policy of "attacking the Muslims in order to exterminate the Muslims."¹² These people organized and guided a reign of terror against the Muslims in Kunming. Those who opposed this faction's tactics were labeled traitors to the people (*hanjian*) and arrested.¹³

This orchestrated violence peaked on May 19, 1856, when Qingsheng, the provincial judge, issued orders allowing "the authorized slaying [of Muslims] without being held accountable [*gesha wulun*]"—a directive some say was miswritten when posted to read "kill them one and all."¹⁴ As one Chinese official described it: "Then every Muslim family within the provincial capital, regardless if they were men or women, young or old, were all mercilessly killed."¹⁵ The massacre lasted three days and three nights. The city's five mosques were looted and torched. Within seventy-two hours, as many as four thousand Muslims had been slaughtered. Several witnesses would later contend that the numbers were two or three times that.¹⁶

The governor-general had been detained fighting the Miao through the summer and into the fall and did not return to Kunming until early January 1857, months after the massacre.¹⁷ At first he blamed "the murdering of a few innocent Hui" on Qingsheng's ill-worded proclamation and the excessive vigilantism of "unlawful Han traitors."¹⁸ Slowly, however, he concluded that although violent attacks had been carried out by both Muslims and Han, the violence had escalated as a result of anti-Muslim sentiment among local, regional, and provincial Yunnan officials. Worried that their virulent hatred would only increase the violence, he warned the imperial court in Beijing that "if the extermination of the Hui is the only goal [of the Han Chinese], not only will the Muslims never yield, but it will precipitate

the Han's suffering."¹⁹ Then he acted on his belief by implementing a policy of nonprovocation.²⁰ Hengchun was correct in stating that the Han had led the attacks, but he was ignoring the fear and hostility the massacre had generated among the Muslim Chinese and other Yunnanese ethnic groups.

Now, on July 19, 1857, fourteen months after the massacre of the city's Muslims, Hengchun watched hopelessly from atop the southern gate as his last attempt to break the siege failed.²¹ The Hui Islamic rebels, led by Ma Dexin and two of his former students, Xu Yuanji and Ma Rulong, routed Hengchun's remaining troops.²² With his defeated soldiers in front of him and the destroyed Muslim quarter directly behind him, Hengchun knew his fellow officials had deceived him, and despair overwhelmed him.²³

Hengchun sighed again, grief-stricken that he had been deceived. Only after his return to Kunming had he realized that his closest aides had been undermining his work. In particular, Shuxing'a despite his illness had exploited Hengchun's absence from Kunming and Yunnan's growing instability to promote a more combative solution to the Muslim violence. "If we do not use force there is no way to bring an end to the Muslim bandits' wrath," he had insisted in a memorial to the emperor, "and in particular no way to calm the Han Chinese's heart."²⁴ For many years the imperial court had emphasized, specifically with regard to Yunnan's ethnic violence, "distinguishing between good and bad [character], not between Han and Muslim." Hengchun had tried to follow this policy in his pursuit of peace.²⁵ However, given the choice between Hengchun's approach and that of Shuxing'a, the young Xianfeng emperor (or those court officials acting in his name) now preferred action. He demoted Hengchun one official rank and rebuked him, allowing him to retain his office but informing him that it was not enough to "simply sit and protect the provincial capital while doing nothing else."²⁶

Hengchun gazed sadly over the consequences of his foolish optimism, the emperor's words weighing heavily on his mind. In spite of the emperor's stern admonition, he had continued to deploy his troops sparingly. In the spring of 1857, it seemed to him that his strategy was beginning to work. In and around Dianchi Lake and the broad plain surrounding Kunming, an uneasy calm had returned.²⁷ Many Kunming residents had begun to venture outside the city walls during the day to work their fields and tend to their businesses, returning to the safety of the city walls at night. Then on July 12 the tranquility ended: a Muslim force ten thousand strong burst onto the Kunming plain, to the complete surprise of provincial officials and Kunming residents. Hengchun, who had done almost nothing to prepare for such an event, immediately ordered the city gates closed. In doing so he was abandoning tens of thousands to the rebels' wrath and ensuring that thousands would die.²⁸

The city had now been under siege for a week, and the failed sortie by his troops had been Hengchun's last hope. He could see no way to extricate himself or his city from this crisis. Shoulders slumped, he climbed down from the city wall and returned to his official residence (*yamen*) in the Wuhua district in the center of Kunming. That evening the city's residents watched the flames and listened to the shouts of the Muslim rebels, whose plundering continued through the night.²⁹

Late that night, in despair that his misguided efforts had failed to lift the siege, Hengchun sat down at his desk and wrote his last official communication. He apologized to the emperor for his failures and stated repeatedly that the situation in Yunnan was overwhelming. He then wrote "that by dying I hope I might compensate for my inabilities as governor-general."³⁰ He set down his brush and placed the letter on his bed. Then, side by side, he and his wife hanged themselves.³¹

Hengchun's suicide on that July night in 1857 brought to an end any hope for a peaceful end to the conflict in Yunnan between Muslim and Han Chinese. More critically, the court and the empire now realized belatedly that the hostilities in Yunnan could no longer be treated as a series of isolated incidents. The Qing Empire was facing a rebellion—the Panthay Rebellion.

The Foundations of Resentment

The strong response of the Muslim Yunnanese to the Kunming Massacre caught Qing officials off guard, perhaps because Han-led massacres of the Hui were nothing new to nineteenth-century Yunnan. The scale of the anti-Hui violence perpetrated by Han Chinese officials in the fifteen-odd years leading up to the rebellion was staggering. In 1839 a local military official organized a Han militia that, with the implicit consent of ranking civil officials, killed 1,700 Hui in the border town of Mianning. Six years later, in the early morning of October 2, 1845, local Qing officials, with the covert assistance of bands from the Han secret societies, barred the gates of the city of Baoshan in southwestern Yunnan and carried out a three-day cleansing (*xicheng*) of the Hui populace.³² More than eight thousand Muslim Yunnanese, men and women, young and old, were slaughtered.³³

It is perhaps not surprising that these and other massacres heightened Han antagonisms rather than assuaging them. As described earlier, the government's collusion in these massacres culminated in early 1856 when, in the absence of Governor-General Hengchun, the Han elite and ranking civil and military officials in Kunming set into motion a plan to eradicate the Hui.³⁴ The causes of the anti-Hui sentiment that fueled these massacres are unclear; that said, one obvious factor was that more and more Han immigrants were flowing into the province.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, Yunnan underwent a dramatic transformation. With population growth placing immense pressure on China's already overpopulated interior, Han Chinese, encouraged by incentives from the central government, began migrating in ever increasing numbers to Yunnan. Between 1775 and 1850 the province's population increased from an estimated four million to roughly ten million.³⁵ Immigration *per se* was not new to the region: ever since its integration into the Chinese Empire under the Yuan, Yunnan had been a magnet for internal migrants. However, this new wave was composed almost entirely of Han immigrants; in this, it was profoundly dissimilar to preceding waves, which had been ethnically diverse.

These new Han settlers differed from the local Han, who for generations had lived alongside the Muslim Yunnanese (Hui) and the indigenous non-Han groups. The new immigrants tended to be far more assertive than the Han who arrived earlier.³⁶ For example, they occupied non-Han lands illegally, appropriated productive mines by force, and both submitted to and helped enforce the economic and political strictures of the Qing government. Yunnan's transregional ties had traditionally been with Tibet and Southeast Asia; the new Han were seeking to turn the region toward China.³⁷

This influx of Han settlers led to widespread violence between the newcomers and the established Yunnanese, and the Han directed most of their animosity toward the Hui. Why this was so is unclear. Perhaps it was because the Hui dominated the same occupations (mining, trading, agriculture) sought by the Han and were more numerous than other non-Han in the Han-dominated urban centers. Perhaps it was because the Hui were well familiar with Chinese laws and with their rights as Qing subjects, and thus were able to defend themselves more effectively than the other ethnic groups the Han encountered. The new Han arrivals would have resented this. Whatever the reasons, by the early nineteenth century, disputes between the Han settlers and the Hui had escalated into large-scale confrontations during which Qing officials sided more and more with the Han.³⁸ This rising anti-Hui sentiment culminated in the Kunming Massacre of 1856, which led to the Panthay Rebellion and, after Hengchun's death, the loss of imperial control over much of the province.

One of the many paradoxes of the Panthay Rebellion is that while many Han actively despised the Muslim Yunnanese, the Yunnan Hui were arguably the most sinified non-Han group in Yunnan. This is especially ironic given that Yunnan was home to a broad spectrum of ethnic groups—groups far less “civilized” as well as less tolerant of Chinese society and governance. Despite this, the Han consistently differentiated the Hui both from the indigenous non-Han population and from themselves. Chinese documents (both popular and imperial) routinely divided the population of Yunnan

into three categories: Han, Hui, and Yi. The Hui were not included in the non-Han indigenous category in large part because of the prominent and well-documented role they had played in the Mongol Conquest of 1254, which had fully integrated Yunnan into China after several centuries of independence under the Nanzhao (738–902) and Dali (937–1253) kingdoms. The central court of the Yuan had at first considered Muslims more trustworthy than either the indigenous Yunnanese or the Chinese; as a consequence, the Muslim Yunnanese often attained the highest local and regional offices in the Ming and early Qing bureaucracies.³⁹

The Hui had retained a strong sense of identity over the centuries and tended to live together in their own villages or neighborhoods and to work together in occupations such as mining and the caravan trade. Perhaps because of their success in these ventures, the Hui were described by the Han in some rebellion-era accounts as “full of strength and able to endure hardship, full of vitality, fierce and brave.”⁴⁰ However, terms applied to the Hui more often than not expressed disapproval: fierce (*han*), combative (*xidou*), and assertive (*qiang*). Such terms inevitably led to the Hui being characterized as having “a propensity to stir up trouble.”⁴¹ Also, the Hui prohibited the eating of pork. The Han found this incomprehensible and often used it as the differentiating marker between Han and Hui.⁴²

Despite these perceived differences and the liminal status of the Muslim Yunnanese, to be Hui was never seen as antithetical to being “Chinese” or a Qing subject. The state did not see it that way and neither did the Hui themselves. In addition, the elements that defined one as Hui were not necessarily the same as those that defined one as Muslim. Many nineteenth-century Hui did not base their identity solely on religious faith; they also based it on occupation, community solidarity, and putative common origins.⁴³ Significantly, Han antagonism toward the Hui in the nineteenth century was based more on assumed behaviors or “customs” and specific practices (violence, cross-border trading, and the like) than on religion. As will soon be clear with regard to the Panthay Rebellion, the boundaries of religion, ethnicity, and other salient categories—boundaries that today are often perceived as sharply etched—were at the time considerably more fluid.

Reframing the Panthay Rebellion

The Panthay Rebellion, more than any other event in Yunnan's history, has dominated both Chinese and Western representations of the Yunnan Hui in historical treatises. The theoretical frameworks employed in these narratives diverge in many ways, but they all filter the insurrection through the political and military lenses of the Chinese center; they also perpetuate two fundamentally false assumptions. The first is that the rebellion

was rooted solely in Hui hatred of the Han Chinese. The second is that the rebellion was primarily Islamic in orientation. Both assumptions have had the effect of dismissing out of hand the significant contributions to the rebellion's success of Yunnan's myriad indigenous groups and their local Han Chinese allies.⁴⁴

I challenge both assumptions. In doing so I am deliberately positioning this study of the Yunnan Hui and their role in the Panthay Rebellion at the intersection of two contentious debates in Chinese and Islamic studies. The controversy in Chinese studies centers on the utility of the terms "ethnicity" and "ethnic groups" when discussing the peoples of various cultures in nineteenth-century China.⁴⁵ In their studies of the Manchu culture and Qing rule, Evelyn Rawski and Pamela Crossley have recently asserted that to apply the term "ethnicity" "to earlier periods is anachronistic and distorts the historical reality."⁴⁶ Challenging this stance, Mark Elliot proposes that "thinking about the Manchus in ethnic terms is helpful because it enables us to . . . understand Manchu ethnic coherence in spite of apparent cultural incoherence."⁴⁷

Similarly, within Islamic studies in China there has been an ongoing dispute, at times vociferous, over whether the Hui should be viewed solely as an ethnic or religious group in the late imperial era.⁴⁸ In this study, a primary concern is the manner in which the Hui expressed their faith, identity, and resistance during the Panthay Rebellion and how that expression challenges assumptions that are fundamental to both debates. The Panthay Rebellion marked the zenith of Hui dominion in Yunnan, yet few accounts of the rebellion focus on the Yunnan Hui and Yunnan society.

Yunnan Province is in the southwest corner of China, bounded by the Tibetan Plateau to the northwest, tropical Southeast Asia to the south, and the mountainous Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi to the north and east. For centuries this area constituted the outermost zone of imperial control. Yunnan's varied topography, and its unique geographical position at the confluence of Tibetan, Chinese, and Southeast Asian cultures, made for an ethnically diverse population unlike any other in China. This multiethnicity, more than any other factor, would set the course of the Panthay Rebellion.

Conventional accounts too often overemphasize the part played by the Muslim Yunnanese in the decades of violence that led up to the rebellion and in the rebellion itself. Yet even a cursory reading of the sources reveals that many indigenous groups besides the Muslim Yunnanese were resisting the rising economic, cultural, and political pressures generated by increased Han immigration to Yunnan. Indeed, perhaps the greatest miscalculation made by the anti-Hui faction in Kunming related to the degree of non-Han support the Hui would receive: there was much more than expected. In al-