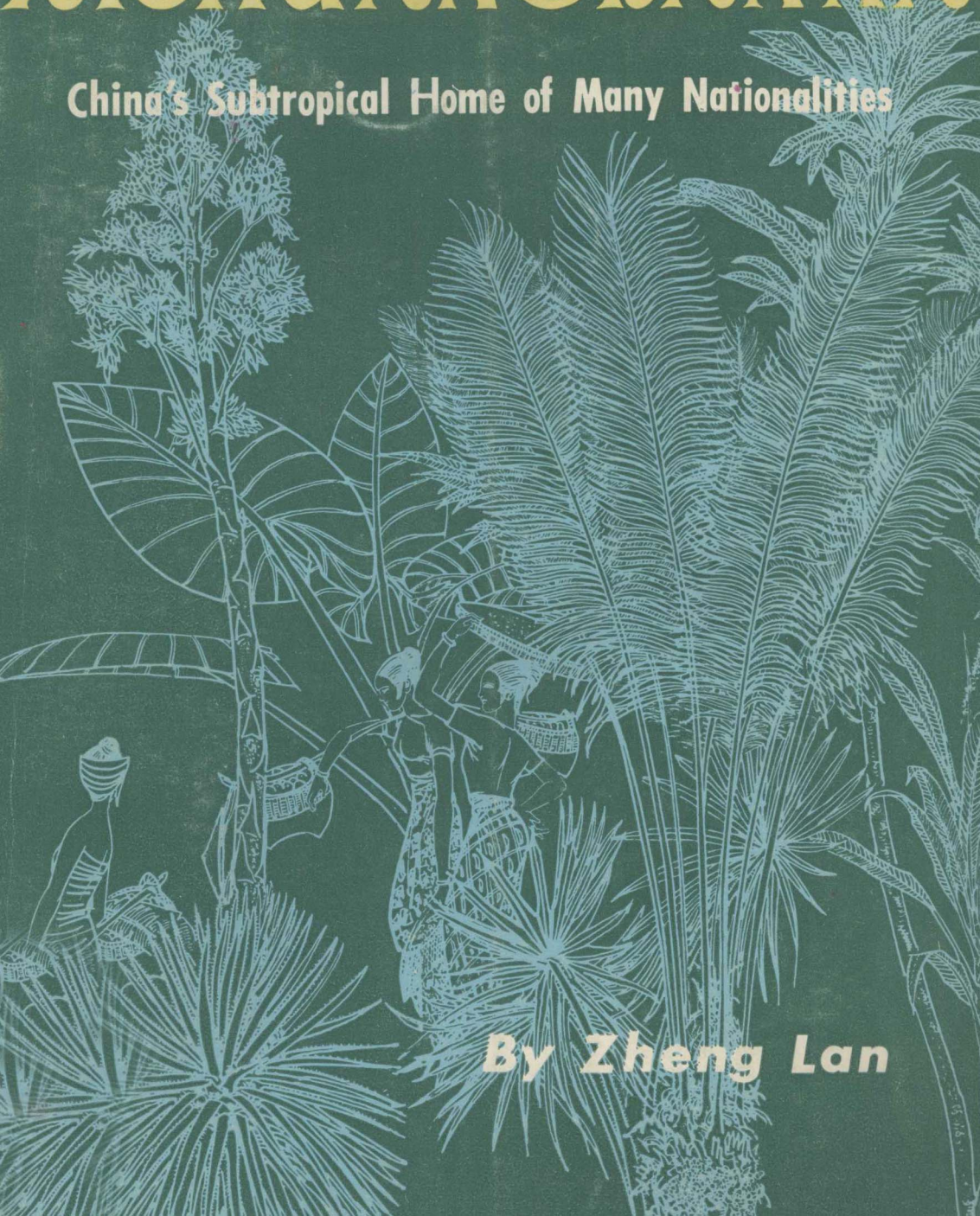


# TRAVELS THROUGH XISHUANGBANNA

China's Subtropical Home of Many Nationalities



*By Zheng Lan*

Travels Through  
**XISHUANGBANNA**

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Many Nationalities

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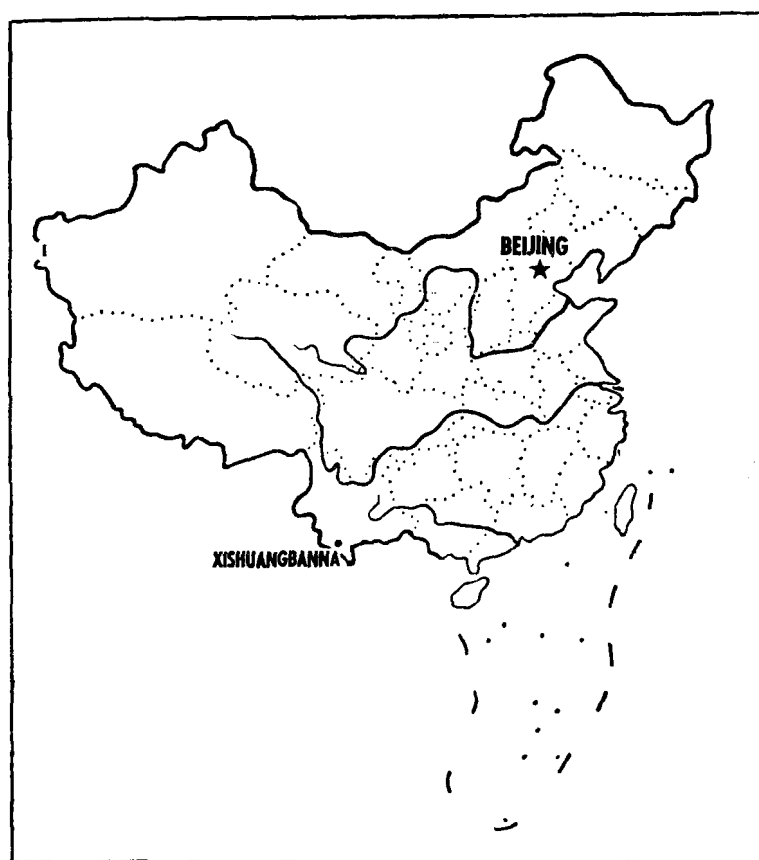
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## I. AN EDITOR'S DREAM REALIZED

Xishuangbanna — what place in China has greater fascination! In my mind it meant beauty, natural wealth, a subtropical paradise. A visit there is sure to be a rare experience in anyone's life, and a traveller from north China will be asked many questions upon return. When the invitation finally came through to participate in Xishuangbanna's most elaborate holiday of the year, the Water Splashing Festival, I was very excited.

One afternoon at the end of March 1978 I received a phone call from the Beijing Central Nationalities Institute. "I've got good news for you. You're invited to attend the Water Splashing Festival at Xishuangbanna from April 13 to 15," came a familiar voice. It was that of a person I knew was working with the Dai nationality particularly, and so I cleared my desk and on the tenth of April set out for Xishuangbanna in a surge of excitement.

## 2. ON CHINA'S SOUTHERN BORDER

Xishuangbanna was for centuries in the past a practically inaccessible place of mystery for the northern Chinese. A year was required to travel there from Beijing — a distance greater than from Paris to Stockholm as the crow flies. It is peopled largely by China's minority nationalities whose life style and customs are fascinatingly different from those of the Han majority. It is also a place rich in legend. In 1978, with the development of communications and also of mutual understanding, distance and mystery had given way to startling beauty and abundance.

We went by plane from Beijing straight to Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, in less than three hours. Then, from Kunming a small plane landed us in Simao in less than another hour. From Simao travel was by motor vehicle — five hours to the prefectural capital, Yunchang, where we were welcomed by our host organization and given a brief introduction.

Xishuangbanna in the Dai language means "twelve administrative areas", xishuang meaning "twelve", and banna for district. Comrades working at the hotel where we stayed created for us an atmosphere about the place by telling us the following story.

### THE TALE OF THE GOLDEN DEER

The old folk of Xishuangbanna often say that this breathtaking and bountiful place was discovered by accident several thousand years ago by hunters chasing a golden deer. A forefather of the Dai people, Bayalawu, had led some youths into the forest to hunt and had come upon a golden deer, whose life they spared. Bayalawu purposely shot

an arrow into its leg to stop it so that they could take it home to raise. But the golden deer escaped with the arrow in its leg. He then led the young hunters in a chase after it, which took them over 77 peaks and 99 rivers before there suddenly appeared before their eyes a glittering golden lake into which the golden deer leapt and vanished from sight. In a twinkling the lake was filled with lotus flowers. Bayalawu and his hunting party were so delighted with this golden lake and the green forested hills around that they settled there with their families.

Soon the place, said to be the present-day Xishuangbanna, abounded in grain and the population increased.

This legend with its many variations is a popular one in the prefecture. Its theme is always of a people who love their homeland and describe it as a splendid place rich in water and soil which yields abundantly.

#### THERE'S NO WINTER HERE

The Xishuangbanna Dai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture, situated in China's far southwest, embraces Jinghong, Menghai and Mengla counties of Yunnan Province, an area of 20,000 square kilometres. Burma borders it on the southwest, while on the southeast its mountains and rivers link with those of Laos. The combined boundary length with these two countries is a thousand kilometres. We set out from Beijing in padded clothing, but here we were in short sleeves. There is no winter here. The two words "ice" and "snow" do not appear in any of the local chronicles.

Xishuangbanna is located between 21.1 and 23.4 degrees latitude, and between 99.55 and 101.5 degrees longitude. The Wuliangshan Mountains, which lie to its north, and part of the Nushan Mountains serve as a screen against cold north winds. To the south, the adjacent Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal from which southwest monsoons arise, and the river network and basins, none of which are high, contribute to a warm, wet climate. Temperature variations throughout the year are very small, but great within one day. Average yearly temperature is around 21° C, rainfall about 1,400 mm. in most places. There is no sharp division of the four seasons, only that between the dry season and the wet.

The monsoons usually last from May through to October; the dry season from November to the following April. But the aridity of the latter is partly compensated by damp fogs that descend over the entire region, giving rise to the term "dry season without drought".

#### ELEPHANT, WILD OX, LIVING FOSSILS

Especially impressive were the vast virgin forests and rolling green hills and valleys of Xishuangbanna. It is a place inhabited by the wild elephant, wild ox, deer, tiger, leopard, wild boar, bear, boa constrictor, hornbill, peacock, golden-haired monkey, gibbon, zibet, mongoose and many rare fowls and animals. As we travelled along the mountain road, we were often met by curious, quite fearless animals, which added much to the interest of the trip.

We were told that in the primitive forest on both sides of the road could be found the rare bruma toon, chittagon chickrassy, the banyan, lime and several thousand others. Among the tropical and subtropical plants growing there some remained as "living fossils" from the Glacial Age.

It was commented as our car wound round the hairpin turns that 96 per cent of Xishuangbanna's total area is mountainous. The highest peak is Kongming Mountain, 2,300 metres above sea level. Traversing the entire region is the Lancang River, which with its tributaries provides much fertile riverbank soil. Lying among the majestic mountains and rushing rivers are 34 "basins", or plains. These well-watered basins, accounting for the remaining 4 per cent of the area, are 24 in number, each with an area exceeding 10,000 mu. The Mengzhe Plain alone occupies 240,000 mu.

This rich environment is well suited to agriculture, particularly for the growing of tropical and subtropical economic crops. Between two and three rice harvests are gained a year, with generally good yields of fine quality large-kernel grain, giving the area the name of "granary of southern Yunnan". In the mountains and foothills grow the broad-leaf tea plant of high quality. This is also the home of the famous Pu'er tea. Rubber, camphor, cinchona (quinine), coffee, cocoa, coconuts, pineapple, bananas, mangoes and other cash crops are produced around the villages



and on the plains and slopes. The region's abundance of medicinal and fruit crops makes the area very valuable economically.

#### MANY NATIONALITIES, A LONG HISTORY

China is a country with more than fifty minority nationalities, most of whom are spread over the vast border areas. Xishuangbanna is one of these multi-nationality autonomous regions, the Dai being predominant. Others are the Aini, Bulang, Han, Lahu, Wa, Yao, Hui and Zhuang, totalling 620,000 people representing some dozen nationalities. The Dai and Han each constitute a third of the population, while the remaining third is comprised of many other minorities, the Kucong being the smallest with about 500 people.

The Dai, Han and Hui live mainly on the choice land along the riverbanks, while the other nationalities have traditionally lived in the poorer mountain areas. Before liberation, Dai feudal tribal chieftains hand in glove with the Han rulers exercised reactionary rule over the Aini and Bulang among other nationality groupings. In 1180 the Dai chief Bazhen conquered the Aini, Bulang and other nationalities, drove them into the mountains and himself occupied the plains. In 1912 the overpowering Han warlord Ke Shexun penetrated Xishuangbanna and again in collusion with the Dai feudal tribal chiefs divided and ruled over the other minorities. And so began a system of Han oppression of the Dai, Dai oppression of Bulang and Aini, and so on along the line, the Aini and Bulang in turn squeezing their bit out of the weakest and tiniest nationalities, like a pagoda with the Han at the top.

After China's liberation, the People's Government replaced the old system with one of equality among the nationalities, and the "pagoda" toppled. Mutual help, learning from each other and living in amity have contributed to the building of a socialist Xishuangbanna.

Each nationality has a long history and all have close bonds with the Han. Han records as far back as the second century B.C. mention the Dai nationality. According to *Book of the Later Han Dynasty*, Dai chieftains in the first and second centuries sent missions to the Eastern Han capital of Luoyang and accepted the Han emperor's land, titles and ranks. From the 8th to the 13th century, Xishuangbanna was placed

under the Tang and Song dynastic "Nanzhao" and "Dali" administrations. In the 13th century the Yuan Dynasty ended the separate rule of the "Dali" and strengthened its dynastic rule over the Dai nationality area, establishing the "Cheli military and civil administration" at Jinghong. In 1570 the ruler Dao Yimeng divided his domain into the twelve fiefdoms of Xishuangbanna. From 1253 in the Yuan Dynasty right up until the termination of Kuomintang rule the Chinese government maintained local administrative organs in Xishuangbanna.

The people of Xishuangbanna have engaged in agriculture since ancient times. Two thousand years ago the Dai nationality cleared jungle land, ploughed it with elephants and planted rice. They very early started to cultivate rice seedlings in beds, removing the seedlings to the fields after 25 to 30 days. The method resulted in sturdy plants that gave increased yields. People of the Aini, Bulang, Yao and other nationalities cleared the bush from the slopes and reclaimed the land for tea cultivation.

With the development of an agricultural economy, handicrafts made also marked headway. From the 8th century the Dai people have crafted gold, silver, iron and bamboo articles, and produced porcelain, textiles, paper and sugar. They wove a durable cotton fabric in attractive colours and designs. In the Ming Dynasty, tribute from Cheli included exquisitely woven silk gauze and velvet. Construction technique and the making of handicraft articles reached new high levels. Mural, sculpture, embroidery, trace design in gold and wine distilling developed similarly.

Each nationality has created a splendid culture through centuries of labour. From ancient times the Dai people have recorded their history in their own written language. They have also produced a vast treasury of literary and artistic works, and books on scientific knowledge. Among the literary works are fascinating long poems, legends, fables, stories and folk songs. In music and dancing there are the popular *zanba* folk singers. There is the spectacular and unique peacock dance, elephant-foot drum dance and sword dance. There are scientific treatises on the calendar and ancient books and records concerning sun and lunar eclipses in the Dai language, as well as works on herbal pharmacology, treatment by traditional methods and prescriptions which have proved effective. The Aini, Bulang, Yao, Wa and other peoples have handed

down through the generations a folk literature and knowledge of herbal medicines that is extremely rich.

### 3. FROM SLAVE TO MASTER

It was April 11 when we arrived at Jinghong. The Water Splashing Festival being two days away, we decided to spend the time filling in our general knowledge of the locality. For this, we received the help of our host organization, an official of the Dai nationality, Dao Xingcai, patiently giving the briefing.

#### THE DARK PAST

Before liberation the Dai region writhed under the dark rule of a serf society. A feudal tribal chieftain, the *zhaopianling* (meaning “lord of vast tracts of land”), had been the highest authority and the supreme political and military ruler for hundreds of years. Under him were instituted more than thirty *zhaomeng*, each in charge of an administrative district (*meng*). Advisory councils were set up in the higher ruling organs, and these were not only advisory. They held no little power themselves. The advisory council to the *zhaopianling* was also in charge of tribal affairs, finance and justice, comprising four ministries and thirty *bolang*.\* The *zhaopianling* and his underlings at all levels held sway by committing atrocities through this network of “advisory councils”.

Every inch of land, the mountains, all rivers — down to every bush and blade of grass — belonged to the *zhaopianling*. The very bodies of the serfs were his property, bound to the soil as they were through lineage. Serfs who tilled the land had to pay tribute, while those who did not had to pay trespassing fee, buy the water they drank, the land their hut stood on, and the earth they were buried in when they died. A serf who shot an animal while hunting had to give half of the side of the carcass that touched the ground to the *zhaopianling*. All fish

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\* *Bolang* were agents of the *zhaopianling* and *zhaomeng* sent to oversee the local tribal chieftains. “Lang” means to bind with a rope.

caught in the rivers and streams that were worth eating had to be handed over to him, while worthless ones need not. Half of anything taken from the ground had to be surrendered to this head tribal chief. When a child died, it could not be buried as it had never paid tribute to the chief and therefore "had no soul". The little body could only be cast into the river to be carried away and become food for the fish.

The feudal *zhaopianling* took 14 per cent of the total land area as his private holdings and enfeoffed his agents with it as reward for services rendered. The serfs had to supply their own implements, seed and food, and work without pay on the land, the entire harvest going to them. The remaining 86 per cent of the land was divided up among the serfs, who paid rent to the lord for their allotment. The serfs were thus subjected to every manner of levy and onerous tax burden, in addition to corvée labour. This type of "land division" was like chains binding the serfs to the soil. If they were unable to pay the levies, they could be driven from the village and their "allotment" confiscated.

Aside from the serfs, who were the feudal lord's property, body and soul from the day of birth, there were in Xishuangbanna so-called "free peasants", or *zhaozhuang*, who comprised 5.7 per cent of the population. These had declined from the ranks of the nobility. Further complicating the social order, the feudal chiefs classified the serfs as *daimeng* and *gunbenzbao*. *Daimeng*, which means "village founders", accounted for 55.3 per cent of the households and were the lord's main labour force. A certain period of corvée was demanded each year to till the agents' fiefs and the chieftains' holdings, also to build bridges, roads and other public works. The *gunbenzbao*, the "servants of the master", accounted for 39 per cent of the households. They were domestic servants to the nobility and on the lowest rung of society. Among their duties were tending the nobles' horses and elephants, carrying his sedan-chairs, husking rice and gathering edible moss. The types of corvée service came to more than a hundred, each village being assigned duties that were handed down from father to son, mother to daughter. To keep the serfs under control the feudal lords had their soldiers, courts, and prisons perform horrifyingly cruel tortures. Flogging, cutting off ears, hands and breasts, branding, boiling in oil and beheading were not uncommon.

The Dai feudal lords were especially crushing in their rule over the mountain people. The *zhaopianling* divided the mountainous region

into twelve slave districts, giving each tribal chief a venerable title such as *balong*, *zhalong* etc. Then he sent his agents to oversee the *balong* and *zhalong*, forming a very tight control net. The KMT government and Yunnan warlords hand-in-glove with the rulers of the various nationalities indulged in merciless economic exploitation of their toiling masses. But the brutal repression inevitably led to resistance by the slaves. There were frequent uprisings against the ruling class in Xishuangbanna, a major insurrection taking place in 1942 and continuing for as long as a whole year.

The events stemmed from the Kuomintang of Cheli County dispatching an emissary to Jinuo Mountain to collect the "tobacco tax". He died on the way back. The reactionary government seized on this incident to accuse the mountain people of poisoning the tax collector. The KMT government officials got the wink of the Dai chiefs and sent soldiers to loot, burn and kill. The Jinuo people rose up and notified the villages of the Dai, Yao, Lahu, Aini and Han nationalities by urgent letter that their delegates should assemble on Jinuo Mountain. There they pledged in the blood of a slain ox to rally to the support of the Jinuo people. Yet they were outnumbered and the rising failed, though this heroic struggle won the minority people's admiration. The Dai sang in their praise: "The strongest animal in the forest is the rhinoceros, the bravest people on the mountain are the Jinuo!" Xishuangbanna's peasant uprisings hit and to various degrees shook the feudal rule. However, owing to the degradation of the peasants and unripe historical conditions, all of these uprisings were put down. A certain amount of social progress was achieved but the feudal economic relations and political system remained pretty much the same.

In June of 1949 a guerrilla unit and a work team led by the Chinese Communist Party went into this remote area talking about revolution and giving hope to the minority nationalities there. Many of their fine sons and daughters joined the guerrillas, while some of the upper class, forced by the imminent liberation, organized self-defence units against the Kuomintang, at the same time expressing their willingness to accept Communist Party leadership.

That same year, 1949, on October 1, the People's Republic was founded, writing a brand-new page in China's history. In February of 1950

Xishuangbanna was liberated, and the slaves in the old society became masters in the new. The dark old days had gone forever.

#### FOUNDING THE NATIONAL AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE

The founding of the People's Republic ushered in a new era in which China's various nationalities may live in mutual trust, co-operation and common development. The Constitution guarantees them equality and regional autonomy.

The Dai nationality is the majority among Xishuangbanna's minorities. As rulers, and in order to maintain their hold, they too incited dissension and national discord by pitting one minority against another. When Party policy was being carried out following the liberation, reactionary local chieftains stirred up trouble and created confusion, rumouring that "rocks cannot serve as pillows; we cannot make friends with the Hans." Some were taken in and either stayed indoors, their children crying in fear, or went up into the mountains and camped there. The work teams offered help with the farm work, but the people dared not accept, for would these people not demand cash and grain afterwards as pay? Even free medical treatment and interest-free loans were refused. Further, the people were forbidden by the reactionary chieftains to talk with the work teams without the chief's permission. Even in this situation the work teams persisted, respecting the customs of the minority nationalities, going into their stilt-houses and out into the mountain villages of the Aini and Bulang. They helped these deeply oppressed people by carrying water, husking rice, sweeping the yard and distributing relief supplies. They cut bamboo together with them in the mountains and joined in transplanting rice on the plains. The people soon saw that these Hans sent by the Party were quite different from their Kuomintang counterparts. These newcomers did not take so much as a needle or piece of thread from the people but helped in production and household chores. The people's feeling towards the work teams gradually changed. At first the Dai people gave the Han cadres derogatory names. They called the men "Han bigwigs", and the women "hags". Gradually these were replaced by "comrade", "elder sister", Old Zhang, etc., and some even gave the Han cadres Dai names. In Menghai an old woman in

coma from malaria had her fortune told by a "living Buddha": she would die within three days. Doomed, as she thought, she didn't know what to say when a doctor in the work team cured her. She had her children send a fine large marrow to the team, and herself took garlic to offer them to show her gratitude.

There were frequent tragic feuds in the past due to the reactionary ruling class' discrimination against the nationalities and their setting one against another. Now, they say: "We who have suffered are shoots from the same bamboo, but the dark old society made us mortal foes." In some places Dai landholders voluntarily made over their extra land to the mountain people to till, at the same time helping them with seed, oxen and implements. They taught them how to plant rice. All of this greatly impressed the mountain people, who declared their desire to progress alongside the Dai.

On January 23, 1953, the Prefectural Autonomous Government of Xishuangbanna was established, fulfilling the dream of the various nationalities. Their representatives said: "The founding of regional autonomy put an end to the history of our living as beasts of burden through the generations; it marks our becoming our own masters." That was a bright day in Yunjinghong, and the waters of the Lancang sparkled, as a grand ceremony was held to hail the event.

Twelve governing organs at county level were set up; the "advisory councils" of the feudal lords were smashed. Bans on the common people suing officials and opposing the *zhaopianling* were removed. Arbitrary fines were forbidden, as in fact were all the devices used by the nobles to keep the people in submission. The main leaders of the Autonomous Prefecture include Dai, Aini and Han nationalities. The Bulang, Lahu, Wa and Yao also have cadre representatives in the administrative work. When the People's Congress is held, the committee members of the various nationalities discuss state affairs and study major problems in building up a new socialist borderland. Han cadres help the minorities in political study, education and culture, and in handling their own and autonomous regional nationality affairs.

The region has the constitutional right to exercise self-government, and in consideration of the various nationalities' politics, economics and culture, there is regional autonomy over social reform and economic construction. Both the Dai and Han languages are operational. The

Prefecture has its own newspapers and broadcasting stations. It receives special financial grants from the central government for construction, and if income from certain enterprises does not meet costs the government again steps in to help. In some twenty years, government investment in the Prefecture has amounted to 38 million yuan. Of the region's products, 45 per cent are tax-free, while the tariff rate on the remaining items is lower than in most of China. The slaughter tax is not collected at festival times in minority areas.

Stress is placed on selecting and training minority cadres, and since the founding of the Prefecture the government has made a point of bringing into leading positions cadres of minority origin. In the early days of liberation, minority youths joined nationality work teams, gaining experience in practice. The government encouraged these teams to travel and study in other parts of the country.

In 1955, the Prefecture set up minority cadres schools as well as various political and cultural training classes at county level. Young people were sent group by group to nationalities colleges set up in Yunnan Province and in Beijing and to other branch schools, to raise their technical, political and cultural level.

In 1978 there were in the Prefecture 3,400 cadres of minority nationality, twenty times the number in 1953. In the nine-member leading body, seven are of minority nationality origin. More than 95 per cent of all agricultural brigade leaders in Xishuangbanna are of minority nationality. This stress on minority nationality cadres handling their own affairs is important in socialist revolution and construction.

#### 4. VISITS TO THREE VILLAGES

The first village we visited was Manjinglan, near Yunjinghong, half an hour by car from our hotel.

##### A VILLAGE THAT KEEPS VIGIL AT A TRIBAL CHIEF'S GRAVE

Manjinglan, on the bank of the Lancang River, has 137 households of 700 people. It is a typical Dai nationality village of superb beauty.

It was not always so. From olden days up until its liberation it was



stifled and dark, as though a giant cauldron had been overturned on it. Manjinglan's history speaks volumes of Chinese minority labouring people's sufferings in the bitter past. It is said that long, long ago the area was densely wooded, and beyond the forest flowed the turbulent Lancang River. A local tribal chief, nephew of the *zhaopianling*, died and was buried here. And lest his soul be lonely the *zhaopianling* dispatched servants to keep vigil at his grave. The years wore on, and the descendants of the servants and refugees fleeing famine and fleeing by the nobles reclaimed the land and built homes on it. Manjinglan means "desolation" in Dai language.

Today this "desolation" has given way to natural richness which is being fully utilized. Before liberation, production was low. In this lushness there was but a single rice crop a year and the per-mu yield was only one to two hundred jin. Now the commune members had levelled 900 mu of small and irregular plots of land to facilitate mechanized ploughing, irrigation, drainage and transportation of the crop. They were using fertilizer and weeding the plots. Two crops were gained a year, and fine strains of rice popularized; production steadily increased. In 1978 the area was hit by a serious natural disaster, yet a yield of 1,000 jin per mu was reaped, and 650,000 jin sold to the state — exceeding the annual quota.

Rubber plantations, orchards and medicinal plant gardens covering 850 mu were opened. The annual income from bananas, plantain and mango amount to more than 20,000 yuan. Sugar cane, peanuts, cashew nuts and timber are all of major economic value, while ponds for ducks and fish provide subsidiary farm produce. The village also has food-processing plants and kilns earning collective funds. In 1965 there were only four horse-carts in the village, while now there are three standard and three walking tractors, as well as pumps, electric threshers, pedal huskers, seeders, corn hullers and rice polishers, altogether 27 types of machine. The village was proud too of its four tractor-drawn carts and implements, 120 hand carts and two electric flour-mills.

The material and cultural life of the people has steadily improved with the development of the collective economy. Before liberation there were only two tile-roof houses in the village. In 1958, four-fifths of the families lived in new houses. Most families have bicycles, radios,