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Bai Identity Construction in Dali

By Bai Zhihong



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Preface

In 1999, I became interested in the impact of tourism development on local Bai gender roles in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture (DBAP), Yunnan, China.^① I had encountered many rural Bai women in downtown Dali who left their husbands and children home in order to earn cash. This questioned the assumed model of social division of labour previously in my mind and in many Chinese publications on the “patriarchal” Bai society.^② I was curious about the “newly acquired” gendered social roles brought in by the rapid social economic development after the Reform and Opening-up Policy in 1978 and was eager to explore this aspect of socio-cultural change. After I learned more from and about local people, I realised that tourism was only one of the many causes that had brought about a change in gender roles. The women’s strong identification with the officially designated Bai category and the way they perceived a distinctive Bai culture captured my attention. As will be unfolded later, I did not understand, since *minzu* labels and legal Baizu identity are all fixed there in the official documents, why people are still so sensitive as to whether they are Bai, Yi or Han, and why they keep articulating their Bai identities seriously on various occasions and in various ways. I gave up my initial interests and decided to find out why people are still so sensitive to the *minzu* label of official ethnic identity granted by the state half a century ago.

When I was writing my PhD dissertation in the department of Anthropology, Research School of Asian Pacific School (RSAPS), the Australian National University (ANU), I kept wrestling with slippery concepts such as ethnicity and ethnic identity, which are actually “fragmented and fractured” (Hall 1996: 4). The vast literature in ethnicity studies has

① See Morais et al (2005) for recent publication on the same topic in the same locality.

② For example BZJZ (1961) and YNSSMZ (1983), including my own pre-mature contribution to Doorne et al (2003).

not achieved a clear definition of the concept, and the ambiguity contained in these terms remains unresolved (see Banks 1996: 2-6). Since Leach's study on the Kachin (1954), Barth's classical theorizing on ethnic identity (1969) and Abner Cohen's contextualizing of ethnic identity in local politics (1969a&b, 1974a&b), it seems that there is no anthropological work that has been conducted without dealing with this concept. Ethnicity, often used as a synonym for culture, has become "ubiquitous" in the theoretical inquiry in anthropology (Williams 1989: 402; Banks 1996; Herzfeld 2001: 12, 32; Blum 2002), especially in debates about cultural colonialism and nationalism in the mid-1990s. After the 1990s, the anthropological study of ethnicity faded because it seemed to be, theoretically speaking, a fruitless path.

At moments of feeling disillusioned about the utility of the concept, my contacts with local people, both Bai and non-Bai, would screen automatically in my mind. The fact that the Bai are a group with real and recognised social and political voices convinced me that putting Bai identity at the centre of my research is appropriate and still timely in terms of the constantly changing social experiences of the past five decades. Such encounters helped me focus on the study of identity building and kept me on track after numerous frustrations both in the field and in the writing. In the following, I shall present five episodes to portray parts of the "scene of encounter", which is not to claim ethnographic authority but to illustrate the salience of being Bai in everyday life and why I was attracted to this topic. Bai Identity still matters among those who are, or who are not, classified so.

Before the 2004 Spring Festival on the train to Dali, I was sharing a carriage section with a local family. After I told them that I was going to do more fieldwork among the Bai people, the woman (a 53 years old, Han), a construction company clerk, expressed her understanding of my study by stating: "Oh, sure. The Bai people are a *xianjinde* (advanced) people." I was quite surprised to hear an ordinary clerk repeat what both Bai and non-Bai scholars have been repeating: the Bai have been considered a highly advanced group, it is the most advanced among all the ethnic groups in Yunnan^①. So I asked her what she meant by "advanced". She explained:

① See Ma Changshou (1991[1936]), Ren Fang (1957: 186) and Ma Yao (1994, 1995, 1998) for more. For an account of the legacy of 'advanced' Bai culture in Chinese literature, also see Notar (1999: 238); for a self-representation of the "barbarian" Bai, see Notar (2008).

“Well, you know what. When I was small, I often saw Bai women who came to sell fresh vegetables in the street *and* who wore make-up. They actually cared a lot how they looked even if they were carrying vegetables on their shoulders. They would always put on some lipstick, powdered their cheeks and shaded their eyebrows. When Bai men came to the ancient town of Dali, they often wore sunglasses [referring to the dark glasses Bai people believe protect the wearer against evil spirits] Nowadays, we modern women all started to do so, we learnt to wear some make-up to make ourselves look nicer but they [Bai women] were actually doing so decades ago.”

Limited though this may be such a vernacular interpretation of Bai people’s “advancedness” illustrates the social aspects of the Bai. Being Bai does not merely refer to a particular geographic locality as is often the case with Chinese native-place identities; it is a metaphor for being relatively advanced, especially when the Bai have been generally perceived superior to other ethnic groups socially and culturally. And the higher social status of the Bai seems to have been embedded in the minds of ordinary people.

In the street, I stepped into the ancient town of Dali each time, local people would approach me and ask in their lingua franca (Mandarin): “Looking for accommodation? We are Bai people [*yao zhao zhuchu ma? wo men shi baizu ren*].” Or “we have standard rooms in Bai-style houses [*baizu minju*].”

In a university seminar room during the oral examination of a submitted PhD thesis, the two Bai examiners on the panel of five members were very upset with the young Bai PhD candidate in question. They would not pass the candidate because of his conclusion that Bai culture is one of the local representations of *Han* culture unless the candidate changed his conclusion to: Bai culture is one of the local representations of *Chinese* culture. The two Bai examiners insisted that the candidate drew the wrong conclusion, yet the latter thought that they reacted so strongly simply because of their identification with the Bai. This candidate then added in a private conversation with me, “it is not that I do not identify with the Bai, but we have to maintain academic integrity, don’t we?” The bottom line of the clash is where to drop the line between the Bai and the Han. Being Bai is an assertion of *minzu* dignity, inviting strong feelings and emotions.

In one village, a Mr. Wang took me to a simple tile-burning pile in the community to show me according to him “the thousand-year old pottery burning technique of the Bai”. He also proudly showed me a shoe-shaped jar which he ordered made as a souvenir because people were not making or using that sort of “traditional Bai jar” any more. Then, he started talking about the unearthed Nanzhao Tiles, claiming the characters on such tiles were Bai written language because the Yi had no burning techniques,^① he started asking “how could they do that?” and saying that the words on such tiles are not Yi written forms at all. By showing me one of the traditional skills the Bai possess, Mr. Wang highlighted with a strong sense of superiority the difference between the Yi and Bai.

On the way to the ten-day market in the region, my hostess and I went up to a rural woman who was selling home-made dried bean-fritters. The bargaining began:

- How much (a kilo)?
- 1.2 *yuan*
- Come on, mate, we are all *Beni Bezi* [self-appellations for Bai people].
- OK then, 1 *yuan* per kilo

The ethnic label identified in the five episodes above all refers to the one Bai Identity, although the subjective identification with this is in varying degrees. The state demarcated each *minzu* category in the 1950s, and one’s official *minzu* status is one of the five entries that appear on the two important identity mechanisms of a Chinese citizen: the ID card and the *hukou* (household registration booklet). *Minzu* identity is a routine entry for all forms of personal data. But Bai Identity still means something beyond this and has substantive referents for the people who either claim it or are ascribed it. Moreover, members in the Bai category frequently identify themselves with the label. I became interested in finding out why Bai Identity matters and what the Bai identify with.

① “Nanzhao Tiles” refer to the tiles which were excavated in the ancient town of Dali in the 1930s. More were found near Dali prefecture in 1958. The most striking thing on these tiles is some semi-intelligible words, some of which are Chinese characters, some are not (see Appendix 2). Signs like these are often taken as markers left by pottery-makers.

As will be scrutinized in Chapter Two, my anthropology training had provided me with much literature on the studies of Chinese *minzu* groups in English. Viewing socialism as a kind of colonialism (such as Bulag 2000), all the post-colonial criticism on state agency seemed to emphasize that the Chinese *minzu peoples* were totally brainwashed, if not colonized, and they were merely reproducing state discourses. And there is criticism of the Chinese state for “the assumption the groups gathered into one nationality (*sic*) would be happy to integrate into such a political entity”. (Lemoine 2005: 1) But my fieldwork suggests that the situation is more complicated. Agency is not solely in the hands of the state; it is also at the local level and expressed on different occasions in different ways, as in the above. Besides the local lay people and *minzu* intellectuals, most of the local cadres I met at the village or township or county level might be Hanised (Sinicised or Hanified) but they did not necessarily want to be Han. They still identified with the Bai, they preferred to speak minority languages, maintained close kinship ties to people in their natal place and observed their own customs wherever they were. My educated informants often explained their strong Bai identities in terms of spoken language, diet and women’s clothes and other unique cultural tradition that exclusively belongs to the Bai. Moreover, despite the continuous assimilation projects since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and intense political pressure during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), state mechanisms had not destroyed Bai Identity as evolutionist ideology expected before 1980s. Instead, reinforced *minzu* identities^① unexpectedly have boomed in the new socio-political contexts.

I became interested in what the cultural traditions of the Bai are, and how they perceive or practice Bai-ness in the current socio-political context. Between 1999 and 2005, I went to Dali four times every year and each stay lasted from two weeks to two months. In most cases, I tried to mingle with whoever was willing to facilitate my research. After knowing my background as a staff member at the provincial state university working for a PhD degree and my research interest in Bai culture and history, many people expressed their strong self-proclaimed obligation to facilitate my research. I went to tomb sites on scorching afternoons with people who insisted that those were valuable relics, and I could find all the historical records that I

① Which are sceptically referred to as “officially named identity” by some researchers though (D. Wu 1994[1991]: 159).

needed in the inscriptions there. Such trips sometimes turned out to be in vain, either because they could not identify which tombs they meant to show me, or such tombs were not there at all. I also had other moving experiences, such as someone carrying his grandchild on his back and walking miles to another village to show me the old house of his family or their communal god, or to introduce me to someone who knew more about Bai history. I also had a taxi-motorist who thought I had missed some important historical sites and was willing to take me there free upon realising that I was not planning to go. These kinds of instances happened frequently, if not every day. Compared with the ripped-off tourists, I was well taken care of and meticulously attended to. But why? Their motivation seemed to be beyond simple hospitality. One possible explanation is that finding out (no matter by whom) who they are and where they come from is very important and highly regard. The desire to know the history of themselves and their place overrides commercial motivations even under the current market economy.

Since the term “identity” is not something found in the lexicon of the Bai language, this book tries to look into different ways of *being* and *making* Bai, so as to pin down scattered ideas implicitly held by the people and to unscramble what people mean when they say that they are *Baizu*. Moreover, the Bai have been recently formally and informally organising themselves, to show that “they are in fact subversive, talking of Bai, not Han, matters” (see Blum 1994: 325n31).

This book aims to contextualise the construction of Bai identities in various arenas and how Bai ethnicity has been institutionalised, internalised and substantiated through subjective identification of the Bai since the National Ethnic Classification Project (NECP).^① This book maintains that the interactions between the predecessors of the Bai and the state prior to 1949 and the NECP in the 1950s laid the foundation for who the Bai are both in terms of their self-perceptions and in the eyes of other Chinese. The state, local elite and ordinary people constantly dialogue with each other, bringing about different ways of being Bai and changes in the meanings of being Bai. Bai identities have become diffused and standardized within China, and re-emerged after the state repaired past wrongs done during the political

① Western researchers have noticed the importance of history in formulating a particular ethnicity or ethnic identity. For instance, among the Hmong (Tapp 1989), the Yi (Harrell 1995b) and Wu Gu (2001), the Hua Miao (Diamond 1995), the Manchu (Rigger 1995).

movements from 1957 to 1976.

Being aware that Bai identity is a complexity with multiple actors and agencies, I originally intended to explore the meaning-making and some aspects in social practices of the Bai, in which I found confusions and contradictions between official categories and subjective identities, but the Bai seemed to handle these contradictions well. So instead of “trying to find an order behind what is given to us as a disorder” (Levi-Strauss 1978: 11)^① or an underlying “superstructure”, this study tries to show what is seemingly chaos and disorder has a logic within its own disorder.

This book also aims to enter into dialogue with scholars and texts produced inside and outside China so as to recognise the context-shaped characteristics of the *Baizu* category and various degrees of Bai identities. Hopefully, this book will help an English readership understand the Chinese perceptions and reflect on some of the relevant debates in anthropology. As will be emphasised in the section on methodology, in no sense am I claiming to represent an “objective” insider experience or perspective. I maintain that Bai identities grow and persist, not because of the persistence of Bai ethnicity, but the continuous articulations of a unique Bai Identity by the people concerned.^② Ethnicity is also a product of subjective identification.

This study has benefited tremendously from many traditional single-village-based studies in China. Yet not until I was in the field did I realise that a single village study would miss the complexity of Bai identity building. Given the long history and complex composition of the Bai population, a single case study could not provide an adequate basis for understanding the current Bai. It seemed awkward to confine my research to one particular village because each village had close ties with other villages in terms of annual rituals and social events. When it came to local deity worship (see Chapters Five and Six), it was common to find more than one local deity in one village temple or several villages worshipping the same deity. Informants’ suggestions guided my multiple visits within DBAP and allowed me to see the limited value of single village research on the topic. So I decided to conduct multi-sited regional research and came to see the implicit constructive nature at work in local people’s lives, and the

① On the assumption of there is an order for it is “absolutely impossible to conceive of meaning without order.” (Levi-Strauss 1978: 12)

② For a theoretical discussion of the persistence of cultural system, see Spicer (1971).

connections and disconnections, continuity and discontinuity between Bai people's identities and their multiple claimed sources.

I have made multiple visits, over an extended period of time of more than five years (since I started to study the Bai) to a number of rural and township Bai communities. Each visit built on what was previously learned, guided by what was suggested or discovered in the previous field visits. Some visits were for specific purposes such as attending annual festivals, weddings or funerals.

Multiple fieldwork visits have advantages and disadvantages. There was a natural rhythm and flexible working schedule of the fieldwork visits. Knowing that I would return again to the field or be able to go to another village, I felt quite relaxed rather than desperately compelled to squeeze out information from any single interview or field visit (also see Siu 1983). Each visit refreshed myself and my informants. I found that follow-up visits to a particular site were always fruitful and necessary in clarifying blind spots.

There were disadvantages of multiple visits. Short-term stay often did not allow me to establish in-depth relationships with as many locals as I hoped. Multiple visits duplicated my task of explaining my research to interviewees, and involved more time to make myself acceptable to the community. Suspicions and misunderstandings were common, especially under the market economy; cheaters from the outside were common in the countryside. Even those with whom I spent much time and energy building up trust found it difficult to understand why an urbanite would give up "modern" urban life and come all the way to take part in rural daily life for non-monetary ends.

Encountering difficulties common to anthropologists, but unique from person to person.^① I cast my net wide, kept explaining research ethics in ways that the local people could understand, and kept socialising with anyone who was happy to share their opinions and experiences with me. I was aware that in spite of their friendliness and hospitality, villagers who were happy to be interviewed did so with reservations. There were certain points that I could not go deeper. Some questions could be openly discussed with some people, but were embarrassing to others. And I was aware that leaving fieldwork sites was an inevitable betrayal to their trust

① For more accounts, see Anne F. Thurston & Burton Pasternak (1983) ed. *The Social Sciences and Fieldwork in China: Views from the Field*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

and expectations. I tried to minimise such “betrayal” by sending seasonal greetings to major interviewees and responding to their occasional requests promptly.

I realised in the end that being a local Han woman was neither a privileged nor disadvantaged position in understanding the Bai. In-depth interviews were conducted in local Yunnan dialect which did not create much inconvenience to most of my interviewees because most of my in-depth interviewees were bilingual except for a few senior women.^① Under such circumstances, a member from the family or village was often invited as an interpreter to facilitate interviews. I was also interested in finding out how they expressed ethnic identity in Han dialect when spoken language has been such a marker of Bai ethnicity in people’s daily interactions since C. P. Fitzgerald’s day (1941) .

I asked a similar set of semi-structured and open questions of most of my informants, which was intended to solicit different opinions and ideas about the same topic. Most interviews were conducted on an unstructured basis and on informal occasions. Those casual conversations were as important as formal interviews in demonstrating what it meant to be Bai. More often than not, the mere mention of my research topic would elicit great passion and pride. One informant said to me: “we welcome people like you [non-Bai] to come to study us, the Bai, and we hope more people would know more about us”. This is a common view. After asking for oral permission, I taped the songs they sang and took photos of them on various occasions. Unless specified, all photos were taken by myself, and all quotes were from my fieldwork notes under pseudonyms. I frequently quoted from my field notes, not only to support my arguments, but also to call attention to the ethnographic process and the contexts in which data was collected.

One question often came up: whether individuals were speaking for themselves or at a collective level, or both. It was hard to distinguish. But one thing is certain, as illustrated through the four episodes at the beginning of this book: a strong sense of being Bai was often reiterated. To an outsider, Bai ethnicity may exist merely at a symbolic level, but to my informants it is part of their daily life: in the ways they eat and dress, the houses they dwell in, and the deities they worship.

① Also see Wu (1989, 1990, 1994[1991]) and Blum (1994: 235) for their reports of widespread bilingual ability among the Bai.

My writing is based on first-hand field data that I collected from a number of villages in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture where I have visited since 1999. I had to use such general terms as “religion”, “ethnic groups”, “east”, “west,” the “Bai”, “Han” and “Yi” as basic entities to ground my study. I was trying to experience, not only merely to participate and observe, as much as possible and to represent their acting-out of self-ascribed Bai identities rather than to present the full range of Bai social life. I have also drawn heavily on documentary sources, including previous studies done by both Chinese and international, Bai and non-Bai researchers.

As a researcher studying China *minzu* and writing in English, I am, to various degrees, both an “insider” and “outsider”, if not “native” enough. The state, the people under study and the English scholarship hold *minzu*, ethnic group, its accountability and boundaries differently. And I intended to write “counternarratives” (Duara 1995: 66) to portray a fuller picture of the Bai, which made it impossible to avoid the issue of positionality.

Standing between insider and outsider, I found my “halfie” (Abu-Lughod 1991) status brought to me more advantages than disadvantages. The ambiguity of my position was useful in negotiating issues of positionality. Writing “for” and speaking “from” where I come from, my halfie position prevents me from thinking or writing my research subjects as the Other. Sometimes, this halfie position enabled me to benefit from both ends, rather than lingering on the reductionist question of “who has the right to speak?” I do not justify a researcher’s domination in the representation of research subjects, nor do I justify “ethnic scepticism”, which means, in this case, that only Chinese or Chinese ethnic people have the right to speak.^① I agree that “the anthropologist’s identity may not be an overwhelmingly relevant criterion of a work’s value.” (Blum 2006: 81) This is not a matter of who the researcher is, but how he/she approaches the issue and represents it.

I was aware of the importance of my own voice and my interactions with both Chinese and English literature. As a non-Bai Chinese, I can write about the Bai in a way that the Bai and non-Chinese cannot, even though it is from a perspective unavoidably coloured by my own social, personal and professional experiences. There are a lot of “I”s in the book which are not for “concentrating authority in my own words, interpretations and perspectives”

① I coin this term from Susan Dordo’s “gender scepticism” (1994: 458)) that only Chinese or Chinese *minzu* have the right to speak.

(Wilson 1995: 191), but to distinguish *my* understanding or *my* position from that of my informants, and to fully present myself, as Wallman (2002) recognizes, as one of the actors on the stage. And I was trying to balance *my* story and *their* in dialogue with the English scholarship. In so doing, I also try to avoid only presenting positive aspects for foreign readership. If this book gives such an impression, this is mainly because the Bai people are different, in terms of their identification and social relations with the state, from other ethnic minorities that frequently appear in English literature.

In questioning the colonialism in research and representation that has been well debated in anthropology and postmodernism, I handled directly issues of voice and authority by trying to bring out those of the Bai elite, who have often been ignored, if not missed altogether, in the English literature. I took seriously the publications of those well-educated and non-educated Bai individuals so as to expose their voices to English readership. It should be pointed out that individuals vary and what I describe here does not necessarily apply to all members of the group. Nor do I claim to represent Chinese perspectives in a literal sense.

To some degree, writing up and revising is less an issue of what the reality is but how it can be presented and communicated to an English readership. I use the term “identity” as a cover label for the positional definitions of social actors. All I have tried to represent is how those different participants have taken up meanings from, or given meanings to, the Bai category; in this I agree with Hall (1997) that taking up meanings is as important as putting into meanings in this process. There is no singular, fixed and unchanging identity; nor such a meaning. Every event of agency constitutes and reproduces an actor’s identity in a certain social structure.

The book tries to be history-based. I maintain that it is impossible to examine ethnic groups and ethnic identities without going into certain parts of the history of the people under study. One’s ethnic identity comes from what one was in a non-primordialist sense. However, there is not a chapter on history in this book because history suffuses every chapter.

This book argues against treating history in a unilinear way. History itself is a construction, which is evident in the chapter on Bai studies by the Bai. Being a past-oriented form of identity (De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1995), Bai Identity and Bai identities are in fact present-based. History was one of the significant sources that the Chinese ethnologists relied on during

the NECP, and was what the Bai have drawn on frequently to fill up their “vessel” (Barth 1969), “tool-kit” (Swindler 1986) or “shopping cart” (Negel 1994) today. Local history and Bai identities have been intricately linked. Bai identities have arisen in the interplay between local history, the state and the people. The constant “play” of history has been grounded in local history studies and various oral accounts of local events or places. There were, and still are, a number of presumed “true” histories which have their material and symbolic effects in the present despite constant transformations and social changes.

Moreover, relying on history did not mean that I was taking historical documents for granted as some historians seem to have been doing. I am aware that studies of the Bai from a historical perspective are inevitably constrained by the validity and biases of historical documents as discussed in Chapter Three. Yet, despite the notorious inaccuracy, prejudice and biases in Chinese historical documents, some agree in the main with indigenous history.^① Whether this was a result of Hanisation was not important; the important thing was, there was something there we could not ignore. To minimise such constraints, this book has focused on the light that these documents shed in terms of the external identification of the Bai. For instance, Nanzhao history is brought up in the book because it has been used as a source of identification, rather than for the sake of seeking a “true” history.^②

It was from such historical documents that I found glimpses of how the people under study were described under an imperial pen. I emphasised that history was constrained by the space and time in which it was written. Meanings of ethnic group and identity can change from time to time, and people’s identifications are shaped in part by the histories written of them. Yet people’s subjective identity and the very act/action of identification have often remained unchanged. It is in this direction that I am pressing, not for any political ends or exclusive concerns for a particular theoretical explanation, but for what had happened before (to a certain extent) and after

① Such as records in the Naxi pictographic texts, see McKahn (1998).

② Historians point out that the study of Nanzhao kingdom (752-902AD) was actually a study of Tang (618-907AD) periphery due to lack of Nanzhao records (Lien 2003: 4). And I understand it was the biased and Han-centric literati tradition that made Yang Chengzhi call on to abandon our understanding of ethnic groups based on provincial, prefectural and county gazetteers (from Mullaney 2004b: 216).

the Bai label was demarcated.

I have not attempted anything like a complete, well-rounded ethnography, but have tried to concentrate on those aspects of daily life and local practices that most influenced or represented Bai identities. In most cases, doing fieldwork geographically “at home” did not ensure that locals took me as culturally/ethnically “native.” Nonetheless, I deliberately posed myself as a student, trying to understand Bai culture and their daily life experience. People were highly self-motivated to produce evidence of Bai-ness and its uniqueness, and quick to point out what was not Bai. Sometimes, such reactions/responses were performed particularly in front of me to draw boundaries, precisely because I am not a member of the Bai.

Revising the PhD dissertation is a daunting task. I have been reflecting on the manuscript since it was completed in 2007, wrestling to communicate in an accessible way with English readers and to meet academic expectations from Chinese readers. A theme that underlies all chapters is: how has a unifying Bai Identity been defined by different actors? What is the situation within the clear-cut state demarcation?

Chapter One shows some general information and historical background of the Bai people. Chapter Two addresses the theories relevant to my research topic and calls attention to the need to contest and reconceptualise “ethnicity”. I argue that available concepts may be problematic in a southwest Chinese context. Chinese *minzu* groups do exist in different ways from ethnic groups defined in anthropological scholarship. By attending to the five-decade discussion on the origins of the Bai, local history and Bai language by Bai elite, Chapter Three will demonstrate how the Bai elite constructed “Bai” features to distinguish them from Han, Yi and Dai in their study of Bai history and culture. I argue that state and society does not necessarily lead to confrontation, there are numerous niches in between allowing negotiations and the Bai elite have taken active actions. Chapter Four explores how time division (after/before the NECP), memories of Han ancestry, recent history, geographic location, spoken language and ancestor-worship can become “a site of identification” (Antze and Lambek 1996) in defining what degree of Bai-ness one possesses. Here native-place identity is subsumed under the Bai category, and people are happy to adopt the category simply because the Bai label is politically correct and handy to mark and make differences. Memories are appropriated and relocated to

back up the subjective identification with the state-defined group label.

Chapter Five highlights the unruly nature of local religious practice by revealing how people negotiate Bai identities through the medium of Bai and non-Bai deities, and how they justify their religious activities in terms of their desired meanings. Chapter six represents a social event — *gua sa la*, another one of the overlapping and interlocking arenas. Chapter Six shows how Bai identities can be found in state symbols that have been transformed into local versions. This is also true the other way round. Local symbols have been incorporated into state discourse. Thus a balance is achieved between the state and society where both parties can accept the same structure of symbolism but with different meanings.

Chapter Seven shows how Bai ethnicity is advocated as a product loaded with potential economic values in the tourist market. Tourist promotions help envisage and enhance a unified Bai Identity, and “commerce of authenticity” (Oakes 1998). Different forms of ethnicity and artefacts promoted in the tourist market have not drowned out the sense of being Bai. Chapter Eight presents the general findings from my research. Bai identities are quite diffused and can be found in a complex and multidimensional arena. I return to the theoretical concerns I raised in Chapter Two and readdress some of my critiques of Chinese and Western anthropological approaches. I conclude that Bai identities are “both an act and a concept” (Blum 1994: 34).

This book provides several contexts to capture the relational characteristics and situational dependency of Bai identities. Hopefully the book will help readers understand moments of unity and diversity in a rapidly changing Chinese society. As Ortner (1984: 144) points out, human actions are not determined by a set of cultural features alone (e.g. Shih 2002) but also by social relationships. I am fully aware that individual consciousness, responses to the official label and social relations may vary from one person to another and one place to another, so that this book only covers then and there within a specified time and space. However, if one looks into other *minzu* categories in China, one may also find similar construction process has happened to different degrees and at different levels. For anthropologists, this calls for a new way of rethinking ethnicity. For a general reader, this book provides an in-depth understanding and insights of the dynamics of an ethnic group in the remote southwest China frontier.