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Minorities and Regional Identity: Ethnohistorical Provinces of China

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Introduction

This book examines how minority communities have shaped the histories, institutions, and everyday life of China's provinces. Rather than treating minority cultures as marginal footnotes to provincial narratives, it positions them at the center of region-making. The approach is ethnohistorical: it reads landscapes, archives, and oral memory together to trace how language, religion, land tenure, and mobility have interacted with provincial policy across time. By following roads, rivers, monasteries, markets, and migration streams, the chapters reveal provinces as mosaics, where identities are negotiated and reworked rather than fixed. The overarching aim is to equip readers—especially anthropologists and human rights scholars—with grounded case studies and policy context that illuminate cultural survival amid rapid transformation.

Provinces are more than administrative containers; they are historical projects. Boundaries have shifted, ethnonyms have evolved, and the meanings of “minority” and “majority” have been repeatedly redefined through law, taxation, schooling, and infrastructure. The concept of an “ethnohistorical province” used here foregrounds how local communities—Uyghur farmers in an oasis, Zhuang traders at a border market, She ritual specialists in a coastal hamlet, or Tujia boatmen along a river—participate in making and remaking provincial identity. In each case, what counts as heritage, who speaks which language where, and how land or water is governed are questions bound up with provincial history as much as with national policy.

Methodologically, the book integrates archival research, county and prefectural gazetteers, ethnographic fieldwork, court cases, religious registers, oral testimonies, and statistical yearbooks. These sources are read together to reconstruct long-run trajectories while staying attentive to contemporary policy shifts. Care is taken to avoid essentializing communities: identities are approached as layered and situational, with attention to intermarriage, bilingualism, occupational change, and migration. Where possible, the analysis follows terms communities use for themselves, while also noting official classifications and the historical circumstances in which they arose.

Several themes recur across provinces. Language policy and schooling shape the transmission of oral literature, ritual practice, and technical vocabularies of craft and agriculture. Religious life—whether mosque, monastery, temple, or village shrine—provides institutions for mutual aid, dispute mediation, and moral authority, as well as arenas where policy and practice meet. Land rights and resource regimes—from alpine pastures and taiga rivers to terraced hillsides and delta wetlands—structure relations between households, clans, and the state. Border-

making and corridor economics link inland counties to seaports and steppe routes, while urbanization and heritage tourism recast village life in the language of festivals and performance. Each chapter traces these dynamics through specific places and historical conjunctures.

Policy is treated comparatively at the provincial scale. Chapters assess how provincial governments interpret and implement national frameworks in areas such as language education, cultural heritage, poverty alleviation, resettlement, environmental conservation, and resource extraction. Attention is given to legal instruments, program design, and the lived consequences of policy, including how communities negotiate, adapt, or contest change. The goal is not to adjudicate single “success” or “failure” stories, but to understand patterned variation—why similar programs can yield different outcomes depending on ecological setting, institutional histories, and local politics.

The structure of each chapter is consistent to aid comparison. A brief historical timeline situates the province in broader regional networks; an ethnolinguistic sketch maps key communities; one or more case studies offer fine-grained portraits of practice; and a policy section examines current debates around education, religion, land and water governance, resource economies, or cultural heritage. Where relevant, chapters include comparative sidebars linking communities across provincial borders—for example, pastoral institutions in Qinghai and Tibet, or cross-border markets in Guangxi and Yunnan. The aim is a layered account that moves from household to village to province without losing sight of transregional ties.

Finally, a note on scope and reading strategy. The 25 provinces selected here do not exhaust China’s diversity, but they span major ecological zones, borderlands, and heartlands where minority histories have left particularly visible provincial imprints. Readers may follow the book sequentially or read thematically across chapters—for instance, pairing cases on pastoral commons, forest management, coastal ritual networks, or urban Hui quarters. By the end, the hope is that the very idea of a province appears less as a fixed map color and more as a lived, negotiated arrangement—one in which minority communities are not simply present, but constitutive of regional identity.

CHAPTER ONE: YUNNAN - CROSSROADS OF LANGUAGES AND FAITHS

Yunnan, a province in China's southwestern frontier, has long been a meeting point for diverse peoples, languages, and belief systems. Its historical trajectory as a crossroads began millennia ago when ancient kingdoms like Dali emerged, blending indigenous traditions with external influences. The region's position along the Tea Horse Road, a vital trade network connecting Tibet to Southeast Asia, further entrenched its role as a cultural and commercial buffer zone. Under the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Yunnan became a strategic outpost, its administrators grappling with managing myriad ethnic groups while extracting resources for the imperial center. This legacy of interaction—from the Dali Kingdom's syncretic Buddhism to the Ming's military colonies—laid the groundwork for a province where cultural boundaries are less rigid than fluid, shaped by centuries of exchange and adaptation.

Today, Yunnan is home to over 11 million ethnic minorities, constituting roughly 34% of its population. The province officially recognizes 25 ethnic groups, including the Yi, Bai, Hani, Dai, and Zhuang, each contributing distinct linguistic and religious traditions to the provincial mosaic. The Yi, the largest group, speak a Tibeto-Burman language and practice a blend of animism and Buddhism, while the Bai are known for their integration of Mahayana Buddhism with local deities and ancestral worship. The Dai, primarily in Xishuangbanna, embrace Theravada Buddhism, their temples and festivals a testament to centuries of cross-border ties with Thailand and Myanmar. This linguistic and religious diversity, however, is not static; it evolves under the pressures of modernization, state policy, and global connectivity, creating a dynamic landscape where identities are continuously renegotiated.

The province's ethnolinguistic map is a patchwork of over 150 languages, many of which are endangered. Mandarin Chinese dominates urban centers and official domains, yet rural areas often retain vibrant multilingual traditions. In villages like those of the Hani, children grow up speaking Akha, a Tibeto-Burman language, alongside Mandarin, reflecting the tension between state-mandated linguistic uniformity and local cultural autonomy. Language policies in Yunnan have historically oscillated between assimilation and preservation. The 1950s saw efforts to standardize minority languages through Latin-based scripts, but these were later replaced by adaptations of Chinese characters. Recent initiatives, such as bilingual education programs in Yi and Bai communities, aim to balance Mandarin instruction with mother-tongue teaching, though their effectiveness remains uneven.

Religion in Yunnan is a tapestry of syncretism. While temples, mosques, and

monasteries dot the landscape, the boundaries between sacred and secular often blur. The Bai, for instance, venerate the White Marble Mountain, a site that combines Buddhist, Taoist, and indigenous beliefs. Similarly, the Naxi people's Dongba traditions—using pictographic script to record rituals and songs—highlight a unique relationship between language, spirituality, and identity. Government policies have historically sought to regulate religious practices, especially during the Maoist era, but in recent decades, there has been a cautious embrace of cultural heritage as a tool for tourism and provincial branding. This shift has allowed some religious communities to revive festivals and restore temples, though often within frameworks that prioritize state-approved narratives over grassroots spiritual practices.

In Dali, the historical capital of the Bai, the Three Pagodas Temple complex stands as a symbol of layered identities. Built during the Tang Dynasty, it reflects the area's Buddhist heritage, yet nearby villages host annual rituals honoring the Cangshan Mountains, a testament to enduring indigenous cosmologies. The Bai's "March Fair," a pan-Bai gathering celebrating agricultural cycles, draws participants from across Yunnan and beyond, illustrating how religious and cultural festivals serve as mechanisms of interethnic solidarity. However, the commercialization of such events for tourism has sparked debates among elders about preserving their sacred meanings. These tensions mirror broader provincial struggles: balancing cultural commodification with authenticity while navigating the expectations of a Han-majority state and international visitors.

The Dai of Xishuangbanna offer another lens into Yunnan's religious crosscurrents. Their Theravada Buddhist temples, such as the Jinghong Xishuangbanna Grand Buddhist Temple, are architectural marvels that blend Burmese and Thai influences with local motifs. Dai monks, trained in monasteries near the Burmese border, often serve as intermediaries between Yunnan and Southeast Asia, maintaining transnational networks that transcend political boundaries. Yet, modernization has disrupted traditional monastic education, pushing younger generations toward urban opportunities and Mandarin-medium schools. Efforts to digitize Dai manuscripts and teach Buddhist philosophy in local schools represent adaptive strategies, but they also underscore the fragility of oral and practice-based traditions in the face of standardized curricula.

The Naxi of Lijiang, whose pictographic script was once dismissed by scholars as "primitive," have seen renewed interest in their Dongba heritage. The Naxi Cultural Museum, housed in a restored Ming-era mansion, showcases artifacts and manuscripts, while performances of Dongba rituals attract tourists and researchers alike. However, the commodification of their culture has raised concerns about the dilution of religious significance. A Naxi elder once remarked, "Our ancestors danced for the gods, but now we dance for cameras." This sentiment captures the paradox of cultural preservation in a tourism-driven economy, where authenticity is both celebrated and simplified.

Urbanization has reshaped Yunnan's linguistic and religious landscapes. In Kunming, the provincial capital, ethnic minorities often navigate multilingual environments, switching between Mandarin, their native tongues, and even English to engage with peers from different backgrounds. Mosques in Kunming's Muslim quarter, such as the Nancheng Mosque, serve as hubs for Hui and other Muslim communities, hosting Friday prayers and community gatherings. Yet, the city's rapid growth has strained traditional neighborhoods, with older districts razed to make way for high-rises. For younger minorities, the urban milieu offers opportunities but also risks disconnecting them from rural cultural practices.

Government policies in Yunnan have oscillated between integration and autonomy. The 1950s saw the establishment of autonomous counties for the Yi, Bai, and other groups, aiming to decentralize governance and respect local customs. However, economic reforms in the 1980s prioritized resource extraction and infrastructure development, disrupting traditional land tenure systems. For example, the expansion of tea plantations in Hani areas has displaced subsistence farming, altering community structures and eroding oral traditions tied to agrarian rituals. Provincial initiatives to promote eco-tourism and cultural heritage have partially offset these shifts, but they often require communities to conform to state-defined cultural norms, limiting spontaneous expressions of faith or linguistic innovation.

Legal frameworks governing land rights in Yunnan reflect these complexities. While the state recognizes collective ownership of rural lands, the allure of urban wages and agricultural subsidies for converting farmland to forest or tea has created disparities. In some Bai villages, collective agreements to preserve terraced fields for cultural festivals clash with individual households' desires to monetize their plots. Courts often mediate such disputes, but rulings favor state priorities over traditional practices. These tensions highlight how provincial policies, though framed as supportive of minority interests, can inadvertently marginalize grassroots efforts to sustain cultural and ecological knowledge.

Environmental changes further complicate Yunnan's ethnohistorical narrative. Climate shifts and dam construction have altered water access for downstream communities, disrupting irrigation systems crucial to rice cultivation. For the Hani, whose rice terraces are inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, such changes threaten not just livelihoods but also the spiritual ecology linking humans to land deities. Provincial governments have launched restoration projects, yet these often emphasize aesthetic and touristic value over the lived significance of these landscapes. The interplay between ecological degradation, policy intervention, and cultural resilience underscores the interconnected nature of Yunnan's challenges.

Cross-border connections remain pivotal to Yunnan's identity. The province's proximity to Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam has facilitated the flow of people, goods, and ideas,

particularly through border towns like Ruili and Mohan. In these areas, ethnic minorities engage in trade that bridges formal and informal economies, exchanging jade, timber, and agricultural products while maintaining kinship and religious ties across borders. However, increased militarization of borders in recent years has complicated these exchanges, forcing communities to navigate stricter immigration controls and surveillance. These dynamics illustrate how provincial policies are shaped by both internal ethnic diversity and external geopolitical pressures.

Educational policies in Yunnan reveal the state's attempt to balance bilingualism with Mandarin standardization. While primary schools in minority areas offer instruction in native languages, the curriculum emphasizes Mandarin proficiency and Han-centric histories. This has led to mixed outcomes: some students excel in both languages, while others struggle with the transition. A 2010s survey found that 60% of rural minority students in Yunnan could not fully articulate their native tongue, a decline attributed to urban migration and the dominance of Mandarin in higher education. Efforts to train bilingual teachers and develop minority-language textbooks have gained traction, but funding and infrastructure remain uneven across counties.

Religious institutions in Yunnan have also adapted to shifting political climates. During the Cultural Revolution, many temples and mosques were shuttered or repurposed, but since the 1980s, there has been a cautious revival. The Yunnan Provincial Religious Affairs Bureau has promoted "Sinicized" versions of Buddhism and Islam, aligning them with socialist values. For example, Buddhist leaders in Dali are encouraged to emphasize teachings on patriotism and ethnic unity, while Islamic clerics in Kunming must register with state-approved organizations. These measures seek to integrate religious communities into mainstream society, but they sometimes overlook the nuanced ways in which faith intersects with local identity and resistance.

Tourism, while economically beneficial, poses both opportunities and threats to minority cultures. The ancient town of Lijiang, a UNESCO site, has become a pilgrimage for tourists seeking "authentic" Naxi culture. This influx has spurred the sale of Dongba manuscripts and the staging of ritual performances, but critics argue that such commodification trivializes sacred practices. In response, some communities have established private museums and cultural centers to control their representation. For instance, the Naxi Village of Wanhua Village created a community-run exhibition space to showcase traditional architecture and agricultural techniques without tourist spectacle. These grassroots initiatives highlight how minority groups assert agency in shaping their narratives amid external pressures.

Yunnan's provincial government has also embraced cultural festivals as tools for unity and economic development. Events like the Dai-led Water Splashing Festival and the Yi-influenced Torch Festival are rebranded as symbols of Yunnan's diversity, featured in national and international promotional campaigns. However, these festivals often become politicized, with government officials presiding over ceremonies and

emphasizing “ethnic harmony” over the specific grievances or aspirations of participating communities. For many attendees, however, these gatherings remain vital for maintaining interethnic friendships and passing down folk traditions to younger generations.

The interplay between language, religion, and policy in Yunnan illustrates broader trends in China’s minority regions. Like other provinces in this book, it demonstrates how provincial frameworks both enable and constrain cultural survival. While Yunnan’s officials have historically shown more flexibility in accommodating minority practices—a legacy of its frontier status—this pragmatism is increasingly tested by national directives favoring uniformity. Yet, the resilience of communities in adapting their traditions to changing circumstances suggests that provincial identity is not a static construct but a negotiated one, shaped by the everyday actions of farmers, traders, and storytellers who call Yunnan home.

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