Sometimes I think it all began the day I met Li Yun. I was taking tea in a graceful riverbank mansion, once the home of a local despot, now the seat of a township government in Yunnan Province. Li Yun staggered through the door, bent under a load of firewood. He was an elderly man in horn-rimmed glasses, very thin and very drunk. He spotted me, dumped his firewood in a corner, and bellowed, “American comrade! Chairman Mao sent this one from America to help the minority people carry out socialist reconstruction! You wear glasses and carry a pen! I too am a member of the Communist Party assigned by Chairman Mao to the task of building the new China!” I could only open my mouth and stare until a township official gently drew Li Yun into another room.

Later that afternoon, I watched the old man set off up the canyon road, stumbling and singing in the rain. The road—a footpath, really—led to a scattering of mountain villages, the township’s largest and poorest brigade, inhabited mainly by “minority people,” officially of the “Yi nationality.” For several months, I had been seeking permission to live in this brigade, known as Zhizuo in Chinese and as Júzò (“little valley”) in the local Tibeto-Burman language. A few days later, I followed the same path twenty kilometers up a canyon to a narrow valley, the center of Zhizuo, where I eventually found a place to live in an elementary school.

Living in Zhizuo, I learned to fear Li Yun’s approach. Sometimes I had warning. I would hear him coming, bellowing fragments of slogans, and I would slip out the school’s back door. Or I would spot him from...
afar, descending from his village on the sun-drenched eastern slope, and I would guess that he was headed across the valley to the large village where I lived, eventually to find his way to my room. Sometimes he ambushed me. He would materialize out of the crowd at a wedding or funeral, take my hand in a lockwrench grip, and bellow outdated Maoist slogans into my face. For these harangues, he never used either the flowing Tibeto-Burman tongue employed here in daily life or the harsher Yunnan dialect of Chinese used to communicate with outsiders. Instead, he enunciated his slogans with precision, in formal standard Chinese, the language of officialdom: “Without the Communist Party there would be no new China! Ten thousand years to Chairman Mao!” I would wince, smile patiently, and wait for some kind soul to divert his attention. Li Yun was not threatening; he was just unbearably friendly. His mission, which he pursued with energy for more than a year, was to take me home for dinner; his method was brute force. He was very strong, and once he got hold of my hand and started along the path toward his house, I could only stumble along behind until he relaxed enough for me to twist out of his grasp, voice a quick apology, and dash away.

I was desperate to ignore Li Yun. He represented a side of life here that I hated. When officials from higher levels of government visited, I watched his antics through their eyes. Filthy, alcoholic, crazy as a loon, he seemed to shamefully confirm their complaints about the local “minority population”: they drank too much; they were unsanitary and superstitious; they were enamored of their own poverty; they had no education and no culture. When he accosted me in public, I watched myself through his eyes. Clearly powerful, with connections, spectacles, and a pocket pen, I was a person with whom to ingratiate oneself, if only with a dinner of rice and chicken soup—and how could I not share most officials’ perceptions of himself and his neighbors as dirty, alcoholic, and degenerate? I tried to put Li Yun out of my mind as I went about my business of conducting interviews, listening to stories, recording statistics, attending rituals, and transcribing poetry.

But he was always there, at the edges of my perception, comic, furious, and emaciated, stumbling along the valley paths, shouting anachronistic political slogans to the melodies of courting songs, singing laments properly reserved for mortuary rituals. “He is mad [tæ, implying possession],” my friends in Zhizuo said, tolerating his interruptions with the cheerful public demeanor I soon came to expect of them. Yet what kind of madness, among the many forms they could diagnose, not even
the experts on spirit possession I had begun to consult could say. All I learned was that everyone around him associated Li Yun’s affliction in some way with his long tenure as an official—among the most eminent this brigade had produced. Beginning in the mid-1950s, he had served as the head of a neighboring township. He had been hospitalized for mental illness in 1966, as the Cultural Revolution began. He was formally reinstated to his position a few years later; he retired early in 1976, returning home to Zhizuo. His wife was dead, but he had one daughter, who worked in the country town and sent him money. I learned virtually nothing more: I could not talk to Li Yun, and others deflected my questions about him.

Still, I found I could not stop thinking about Li Yun’s mad incantations, those startling eruptions of anachronistic speech that heralded his presence at so many public gatherings. Were they merely symptoms of a personal derangement? Or did they issue instead from a collective past that also haunted others? Why did they take the form of political slogans? What was the singular power of those formulas in an alien tongue that they could haunt or possess one, and how could they still be echoing through this valley so many years after their meaning and authority had faded away? Above all, I was troubled by the enormous pain that seemed to darken Li Yun’s bellowing voice. What wounds did it reopen for those who heard it; what histories did it conceal? And how might such wounds and histories relate to the entity that Li Yun’s slogans named and renamed with such obsessive energy: the socialist state?

I was to learn that Li Yun’s affliction was not exceptional. Many people in this community referred to the present age, beginning with the catastrophic famine that followed the Great Leap Forward in 1958–1960 and continuing through the 1990s, as the “age of wild ghosts.” This phrase captured the sense that life in this era was inflected by eruptions into the present of unreconciled fragments of the past, often personified as the ghosts of people (or spirits) who had met bad ends and who frequently possessed or killed their descendants. Most such eruptions were quieter than Li Yun’s roaring. Yet many gathered force and persistence as they were elaborated in stories, their origins divined, their qualities explicated, their symptoms treated. Some eventually accumulated the coherence of strategies—to subvert state projects, to enunciate calls for justice, or to open up avenues for healing.
This book traces the struggles of the people of Li Yun’s community to find their place at the end of a century of violence and at the margins of a nation-state. These were efforts to shape a habitable place—in bodies, houses, and the national landscape—in a time when ordering space was a principal mode of state power. They were attempts to reshape past and present time in a place where ordering time was the central project and exclusive prerogative of the state. In a specific and limited sense, then, this is an ethnography of the state. It approaches the state first not as a system of institutions, a network of power relations, or a history of policies and programs, but as an aspect of the “social imaginary,” in the sense that Cornelius Castoriadis gave this term. Every social community, Castoriadis reflected, must answer a few fundamental questions:

Who are we as a collectivity? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking? Society must define its “identity,” its articulation, the world, its relations to the world and to the objects it contains, its needs and its desires. Without the “answer” to these “questions,” without these “definitions,” there can be no human world, no society, no culture—for everything would be an undifferentiated chaos. The role of imaginary significations is to provide an answer to these questions, an answer that, obviously, neither “reality,” nor “rationality” can provide. . . . Society constitutes itself by producing a de facto answer to these questions in its life, in its activity. It is in the doing of each collectivity that the answer to these questions appears as an embodied meaning; this social doing allows itself to be understood only as a reply to the questions that it implicitly poses itself. (1987, 147)

States pose and answer such constituting questions in reference to the imagined communities they govern. In practice, states are loosely coordinated systems of institutions, policies, symbols, and processes. Their capacity to affect events, produce meanings, or work themselves into the bodies of their subjects depends on how they are imagined collectively as unitary entities. As Ann Anagnost (1997) argues, the socialist state in China, especially during the Mao era, was particularly striking in this regard. It was a weak and disorganized institution; its power depended on its capacity to impose its own visions of itself on the social world. It was a “magnanimous sorcerer,” to borrow Fernando Coronil’s words, which “siez[e[d] its subjects by inducing a condition or state of being receptive to its illusions—a magical state” (1997, 5).

This book investigates concrete practices and poetics as resources for engaging, diverting, or replacing the tangible “illusions” of this magical state, and thus for submitting to or deflecting its grasp. Among these practices
are ritualized methods for doing useful things: treating physical and psychic afflictions; promoting the fertility of crops, animals, and people; ridding bodies, houses, and the proximate landscape of undesirable nonhuman entities. These methods involve two formalized “languages.” One is a language of materials: everyday objects such as twigs, grasses, string, clothing, and bowls, used to sculpt representations of ghosts or spirits. The other is a verbal poetic language: ritual chants used to communicate with nonhuman entities, their vocabulary drawn largely from daily practice. These languages are resources for thinking about the practiced diligence of everyday life—the acquired capacities for taking care of oneself, one’s family, and one’s community—and for evading the domination of others, human or nonhuman, living or dead. At the same time, as is typical of ritualized languages in China, they produce manifold, mutable images of the state. The state they imagine is not external to the fundamental concerns of daily life, nor does it penetrate this intimate sphere only from the outside. It is a constitutive force at the heart of the social world. To envision it is to pose and answer questions about the social world, about relations to this world and the objects it contains, about social needs and social desires.

A story I was told in the context of a mortuary ritual reflects on the state in this sense, as framing the conditions for social existence. I heard several versions of this story—this one from a man in his fifties at the funeral of one of his aunts. It is about the careful operations of mourning, in which material objects such as bamboo sieves and paper screens are ritually manipulated to regulate transactions between the living and the dead, allowing the living to escape being dominated by their grief. In this story, it is the state, in the form of market officials, that sets the rules for grief’s transactions and oversees the discriminations that mourning creates between the living and their objects of loss:

Long ago, the living [tr’] could see the dead [nè], and the dead could see the living. Living and dead both attended the market: on that side of the street the dead sold their things; on this side the living sold theirs; and the dead took the same form as the living. At that time they used copper money, not paper. The dead used paper to stamp out coins that looked just like the copper coins of the living, and with this money they bought things from the living. But the living were not to be trifled with. They put the coins in a pan of water: the real coins made of copper sank, and the paper coins made by the dead floated. They returned the false money to the dead, and gradually the dead could no longer buy from the living; they could buy only from other dead. If your father died, you could go to the market the next day and see him. But it was not permitted for living
and dead to speak to each other. The dead were punished if they spoke to
the living—their officials taxed and fined them—and the living were afraid
to speak to the dead. So living and dead could only look at each other.
Then, as now, the dead sometimes harmed [kʰ, literally “bit”] the living,
but the living could beat the dead in return, so the dead had no power
over them. Disgusted with this situation, the dead petitioned for a bam-
boo sieve to be set up between them and the living. The living could see
the dead only vaguely, but the dead [being closer to the sieve’s holes]
could see the living clearly. The living did not like this, for the sieve was
too thick to beat the dead through. The living were stupid: some say they
asked for a paper screen to be placed on their side of the street; they could
beat the dead through the paper, but they could not see them at all.

The state is held at a distance in this tale. It is glimpsed only once,
through its representatives, officials who tax and fine the dead. Yet the
entire scene takes place under its watchful gaze. Its authority glimmers in
the authentic copper coins that sink in water, cutting off market transac-
tions across the street; its permission erects the sieves and screens that
curtail the “bite” of loss. The imagined state is seen to enable and struc-
ture mourning, yet it is also found to be an agent of loss: the story is told
in the context of a mortuary rite that sends back to the underworld realm
“police” who, on orders of higher officials, arrest and chain the souls of
the living to lead them away to death.

The ritual techniques examined here imagine such a state: a constitu-
tive presence at the center of the social world with an intimate relation
to loss. In these rites, the state is found to be a strange image, abstract
and uncanny, divided from this world as shade is from sunlight, as in-
substantial as it is omnipresent. It is sensed as an absent subject, from
which issue acts and commands governed by alien principals, like omens
that bridge the gulf between this world and the underworld to bring
muffled messages from the dead. The nationscape is a body, ordered
spatially and morally like a digestive tract, the nearby mountains at its
head and the governing cities at its excretory end. The imagined state
has a proper place, at the bottom of the digestive tract. Its strange pow-
ers come from beyond even there, in the absolute otherness of the sky
and sea, from whence descend the calamities of mass starvation, suicide,
or violent death. To imagine the state in this way is to find it to be at
once remote and intimate, at once alien and familiar. The body of the na-
tion can be mapped onto individual bodies, the digestive flow of its
rivers onto corporeal digestive tracts. Ritual techniques for healing find
the body and the national landscape to coexist as a single, extended,
“collective unity of habitations” (Stein 1957a, 1957b; Boltz 1983). To heal physical or psychic pain is to reorder this unity. It is to release the knots or reversals in the body’s flows; it is to locate a habitable place in a morally ordered national landscape and to guide violence and loss back toward their origins at the rivers’ ends.

Enunciated in the ritual languages of healing, such images of state and nation shaped the stories people in this community told about how wounds treated with ritual had been inflicted. This book retells many such stories. To make them intelligible, I have recast them in the standard chronological framework through which we are accustomed to viewing the great transformations of rural Chinese society in the twentieth century’s last half: Liberation, land reform, collectivization, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the revival of household cultivation, market reforms, birth planning campaigns. This framework is the effect of an official perspective on time that structures both scholarship in the West and histories produced within Chinese state agencies. From this perspective, the state appears in its conventional guise: institutions, processes, policies, projects. I use this framework as a device for translation. My objective is to show how stories of past events were used to assemble an oppositional practice of time, a practice that deliberately undermined the temporality of official history. To be intelligible as historical practice, however, these stories must be translated through a more familiar vocabulary. The outlines of an alternative temporal strategy emerge from the dissonances of translation, its incapacity to fully render narrated memories as simple instances of a known history, subject to a familiar temporality. I employ this procedure because it seems to me that the alternative is to cast what is strange in these narratives outside history altogether—as effects of the tellers’ personal vagaries or as simple instances of the “popular beliefs” (or, as the official voices of the Chinese state still render them, “superstitions”) of a marginal people.

The stories I retell here persistently raise questions about what it means to live as a community in the aftermath of violence—in particular, the violence of hunger in the Great Leap famine and of revenge in the Cultural Revolution. They converge on a dream of community—a bad dream, embodied in the life, death, and ghostly revenance of a single local institution. This institution was called the ts’ici by local people and a Ch. huotou by outside officials and scholars. Oral accounts of the
ts’ici of the 1930s and 1940s described it as an arrangement by which a title and a well-defined set of political and ritual responsibilities rotated yearly among the area’s most affluent households. The ts’ici system distributed the burdens and risks of hosting influential and demanding outsiders among these wealthiest community members. Each year, the household that accepted the title of ts’ici became a kind of guest house, where visiting officials and soldiers were lodged well, fed abundantly, entertained politely, and sent quickly on their way. The host household provided a stage on which the region’s local despot judged disputes among community members; it fed and lodged prisoners arrested by agents of the local state; and it carried letters, repaired footpaths, and buried dead outsiders. It also sponsored a yearly cycle of public rituals for a family of collective ancestors. Many of its expenses were paid with the harvest of a collectively held and communally farmed ancestral estate, a fertile swath of rice land.

People in Zhizuo remembered the ts’ici as creating a houselike community, descended from a single apical ancestor and bound together in a circle of affinal relations. Their stories of the socialist period lingered over the slow disintegration, traumatic killing, and ghostly rebirth of the ts’ici. In the 1950s, local agents of the new state quickly took over most of the ts’ici’s political functions. The circle of affluent residents who had elected the host households was decimated, some executed as counterrevolutionaries, many attacked as landlords and rich peasants. Still, people in Zhizuo found ways to keep the ts’ici alive throughout the 1950s, as land and labor were collectivized. In 1965, shortly before the advent of the Cultural Revolution, this embattled emblem of community was ritually killed at a theatrical mass meeting. This killing transformed the family of collective ancestors into a cabal of wild ghosts, which haunted the community for the next thirty years. During the Cultural Revolution, these ghosts killed off those held responsible for the ts’ici’s destruction and the devastation of the Great Leap famine; during the period of national reconciliation and market reforms, they continued their depredations in other forms.

Taken together, such stories about the ts’ici constitute a narrative of a tortured relationship between a wounded community and an imagined state. In this narrative, the state gradually transforms itself from a personified external Other into an abstract internal Other. The ts’ici system remembered from the 1940s kept the violent and tattered Republican state outside and at a distance by inviting its agents within, moving them on their way, and managing the social and moral threats their incursions
entailed. In the 1950s, the socialist state efficiently penetrated this community, installing itself within, as the center of production and social reproduction. By the time of the Great Leap famine, this center had revealed itself as hollow, a spectral presence whose essence was felt in endless demands for grain and praise. During the Cultural Revolution, this ghostly state was seen to possess the bodies of ambitious activists and fearful officials (such as Li Yun), who used their mouths to voice its slogans and demands. Later, after collective land had been divided among households, the state was found to be obsessively concerned with human reproduction—it was seen to penetrate to the most intimate core of body and community: fertile and infertile wombs. As they show the state attaining an ever more invasive presence at the core of lived social and corporeal worlds, these stories describe it as ever more abstract, ever more difficult to grasp in concrete, human terms. This rift between the state’s presence at the intimate core of the social and corporeal worlds and the growing difficulties of imagining it concretely inflected many aspects of social life in the early 1990s, the period of my fieldwork.

Several of the coming chapters show this narrative emerging with many diversions, contradictions, and ironies from nostalgic stories about a dream of lost community, bitter stories about hunger and injustice, comic stories about ghostly possession and toppling buildings, serious stories about killings and suicides, anxious stories about surgeons’ scalpels and dying wombs. The question that dominates these chapters is, why this narrative? What did these stories, structured in this particular fashion, do? My answer, arrived at only gradually, is that they produced an oppositional practice of time and an alternative mode of history. This was a critical history, a calculated mistranslation of the constitutive questions about the social world that the state was heard to pose and answer. It was a history of an alternative kind of doing (to echo Castoriadis again), a subversive embodiment of alternative questions and answers about the ways a human community articulates with its lived world. I read these stories as efforts to find ways to live together in a community rent by past violence, as attempts to trace the responsibility for violence to its morally ambiguous origins, as struggles to enunciate calls for justice and to articulate longings for reconciliation. In this sense, I read them as means for creating collective ethical responses to past violence and its inevitable returns to the present and the future.
This is also an ethnography of place. It is a record of my own efforts to understand how people inhabit particular places—how habitable places are made in language and in the material world and how they become foundations for social being. To this end, I have structured this book as a journey through places I found people to inhabit intensely. This journey begins (in chapter 2) with an afflicted body, the dwelling place for an improbable entity: the soul of an animal destined to be reborn repeatedly as a stillborn fetus. I suggest that this body is not simply contained within its inhabited world like an egg in a basket; rather, it is involved with the world in a mutual interleaving of place and flesh. This theme is revised and complicated several times as the journey continues. The next stage (chapter 3) is a tour through the close domestic places of houses. I investigate houses not as simple containers for lives but as material foundations for social relations that could not exist in the same way without them. Then (in chapters 4 and 5) houses open up into a valley and its surroundings. I suggest that people fashion their closely inhabited landscape on the model of a house; it is the place-foundation for a houselike community, always in disintegration and always being reconstituted through the work of memory. From the known landscape, the journey ventures onto paths that link the closely inhabited world with the imagined nation and cosmos (chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9). The directions of these paths and the flow of traffic along them situate a lived community in this more expansive imagined space. These are paths of danger and healing; they are the routes along which the worst calamities enter the lived world—yet they are walked also by people in search of relief or reconciliation.

This journey inverts a common trope of ethnography, the trope of the “setting.” Much ethnographic writing finds place to be a container for social being or a surface on which social life is played out. Ethnographies in this mode often begin with a “setting” chapter, which dispenses with the question of where the subjects of the inquiry are located in place and time. In contrast, this question animates this entire book. Neither place nor time is given in nature or by power; both are made. People are subject to the economic and political geographies that shape landscapes, but they are actively subject; they refashion these geometries locally and find their own routes through them. So too with the dominant architectures of time. My ambition is to keep the questions of where and when alive throughout this work.

Like most ethnographic ambitions, however, this one can be realized only in small part. Again, this is a work of translation: everything it com-
municates must move first through familiar vocabularies; it repeatedly imposes conventional spatial and temporal contextualizations in order to let unconventional understandings of place and time emerge in an intelligible way. I would like to stop there, allowing orientations in time and space to unfold gradually in the journey from body through house, valley, and imagined nation, but I know this would make some of what follows less readable, especially to those less familiar with China. So a few pages of “setting” follow. Much of what they state will be expanded and complicated in further chapters.

Zhizuo comprises some twenty-four villages and hamlets built on the slopes of a small mountain valley and its tributaries. These valleys lie in the Baicaolin Mountains, part of a vast chain of mountain ranges that forms the frontier between two of the economic and physiographic macroregions into which G. William Skinner (1977, 1985) divides China—and which scholars of China across many disciplines have found to be indispensable aids to analysis. These are the Yungui macroregion, covering most of Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces, and the Upper Yangtze macroregion, coinciding largely with Sichuan Province. Skinner notes that each of these regional systems has a core-periphery structure with further, internal cores and peripheries. In general, key resources such as arable land, population, and capital investment are concentrated in the lowland riverine core areas. Agriculture is more intensive there, transport more efficient, economic transactions more dense, towns and cities closer together; all these goods thin out toward the mountainous peripheries (Skinner 1997). Zhizuo is triply peripheral in this regional-systems methodology. It lies in a peripheral region of the nationally peripheral Yungui macroregion, an area now known as Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture. It is perched on this prefecture’s northern edge, in mountains that divide two of its economically least significant counties, Dayao and Yongren. During the twentieth century, Zhizuo was swapped several times between these counties; today it lies mostly in Yongren.4

The occupants of these mountains have long been marked as different from their lowland neighbors by their language, customs, clothing, and “character.” In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their Chinese-speaking neighbors knew them as Luoluo. The Dayao County gazetteer of 1825 called them White Luoluo to distinguish them from the Black Luoluo living in the Liangshan Mountains to the north. Unlike
the latter, the gazetteer noted, they were little trouble to administer. They did not often engage in banditry, and they did not raid lowland villages for slaves; they were poor, timid, and peaceable: “The White Luo-luo are tame and foolish of character. The men wrap their heads, go barefoot, and throw a black goatskin over their shoulders; the women plait their hair. Occasionally men and women come into town to sell hempen cloth, hempen thread, honey, and pitch pine” (DXZ 1825, 7,1b). In 1922, the gazetteer of Yanfeng County, established eleven years earlier to administer the salt mines where many men from these mountains worked as porters, made similar observations about these people, calling them Yi and describing a few of their “customs”: “The Yi men dress in goatskins and hempen cloth; the women are distinguished by cloth capes on their backs and also by goatskins. They live in grass-roofed houses or houses roofed with wooden shingles. Men and women are free to choose marriage partners. When they fall ill, they don’t use medicine; they do a sorcerer’s dance and chant, and that is enough” (YXZ 1922, 3,61b).

Apart from such brief characterizations, the local histories and gazetteers of the late Qing and Republican years took little notice of these people. Still, administrators did remark on one aspect of their lives: many of their villages appeared to form cooperative associations, founded on land held in common. In 1912, negotiators attempting to resolve a dispute over the boundary between Dayao and Yanfeng Counties took note of one such group of Luoluo villages in the border area, in a place called Liushutang: “These five small villages and the seven small villages on the road to the temple make up a huotou territory. This is a community organization. Up and down the road they hold real estate in common, and when they encounter disaster, they distribute its burdens” (YXZ 1922, 1,16a). The existence of this “community organization” supported an argument that these villages should not be split up but should instead belong as a unit to one of the two disputing counties. In these mountains, administrators noted, many groups of villages were united in similar huotou territories, with land held in common and rules that rotated ritual and political responsibilities among villages and households.

More detailed descriptions of these mountain residents did not appear until the 1950s, when the new socialist government conducted a series of social history projects among the nation’s “minority” peoples. About two hundred investigators, trained in the Soviet model of ethnography, descended upon China’s mountainous and border areas to study the culture and society of non-Han peoples. At least two separate
teams assembled reports on the history, folklore, and economic circumstances of people living in the Baicaolin Mountains. Like the compilers of gazetteers and local histories before them, these ethnographers noticed many cooperative associations with elected heads and common funds of grain and land used for collective rituals (YSB 1986, 109, 111). They too remarked that locals treated death, illness, and affliction with “sorcerer’s chants” directed to a bewildering variety of nonhuman entities. One team collected some such chants from Zhizuo and its environs, compiled them with songs and chants from nearby regions, and translated them into Chinese; the text that resulted remains the most comprehensive written record of this area’s extraordinary oral literature (YSMWCD 1959).

These efforts were part of a nationwide project to systematically assign official “nationality” designations to all the non-Han groups in China. In this task, ethnographers were initially guided by Joseph Stalin’s four criteria for defining a unique nationality: common language, common territory, common economic base, and common psychological character (Fei 1980). Among the varied and scattered peoples of the southwest, however, most of these criteria proved impractical, and investigators of the peoples formerly called Luoluo largely abandoned their use. Chinese scholars had dreamed for two decades of discovering a common historical relationship among these peoples; the ethnologists of the 1950s continued this work by tracing genetic relationships among linguistic vocabularies and cultural traits to assemble most into a single “nationality” (Harrell 1995). They gave this group the name “Yi”—pronounced the same as the term “Yi” that had once been applied generally to non-Han peoples in the southwest, but written with a less derogatory character. This is now among the largest and least well understood of the “minority nationalities” on China’s official list of fifty-five, with a current population of more than six million.

Linguists in the 1950s distinguished six mutually unintelligible dialects spoken by Yi peoples. The speakers of the Northern dialect proved most problematic for the socialist state, and only they have been objects of substantial social or historical research. Notorious for enslaving their neighbors, many clans of Northern dialect speakers resisted incursions of the People’s Liberation Army into stronghold territories in Sichuan’s Liangshan Mountains until 1956, when they were pacified and their slaves liberated. Speakers of the other five dialects have been written about very little in Chinese and almost not at all in Western languages. Despite great historical and cultural differences among Yi groups, even
the best descriptions of minority languages and cultures in English still take Northern dialect speakers as representative of Yi. Most describe this “nationality” in blanket terms as descendants of the famous “independent Luoluo” and as organized into exogamous clans and strictly divided into endogamous and hierarchical castes, including noble “Black Yi,” commoner “White Yi,” and slaves (see, for example, Ramsey 1987). At best, this applies only to the minority of Yi who speak the Northern dialect and reside mainly in Sichuan’s Liangshan Prefecture and Yunnan’s Ninglang County. Baicaolin Mountain residents, like most of the varied peoples called Yi who are scattered throughout Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi Provinces, have been under state rule for centuries and have never had exogamous clans, caste hierarchies, or slaves.

Most residents of the Baicaolin range speak what is now known as the Central dialect of Yi. Some linguists have noted that this dialect is much closer to the language of another “nationality,” Lisu, than to any other Yi dialect (Bradley 1978). Chinese ethnographers have divided Central dialect speakers into Lipo and Luoluopo (omitting the offensive “dog” radical from the first two characters), according to dialect differences and reported self-appellations (Yang H. 1990, 117). The non-Han residents of the Baicaolin are classed as Lipo, a group that numbers about ninety-four thousand people. While many in Zhizuo were pleased to claim kinship with other Central dialect speakers in the surrounding mountains, they rejected as ridiculous the notion that they could share a “nationality” with Northern dialect speakers, who once preyed on their villages as bandits and still ate like barbarians, tearing chunks of meat from the bone without chopsticks. Most applied the term “Yi” to themselves only when traveling or speaking Chinese to outsiders. They found the designation “Lipo” more accurate: many traced their ancestry to people they called Líp’ò (in their own language) from a few valleys to the south. Nevertheless, most were agreed, the proper appellation for non-Han in the Zhizuo ts’ici (or huotou) was not Líp’ò but Lòlop’ò or, more formally, Lòlop’ò Lòlomo, “Lòlo men and women.” And the language spoken in this region should be called Lòlongo, “Lòlo language.” These terms, Zhizuo residents insisted, were unrelated to the contemptuous Chinese appellation “Luoluo.” They derived instead from lò, an ancient word for “ox” or “tiger,” still used in ritual language. Of course, all these claims were inflected by the discourse on “nationalities”; during the period of my fieldwork, some in Zhizuo were pushing the idea that Lòlop’ò should be considered its own nationality, the nation’s smallest, exclusive to the occupants of the Zhizuo ts’ici. About 5 percent of Zhizuo
residents considered themselves not Lòlop’ō but Han (or Cep’ō). Many formerly Han families had become Lòlop’ō after moving to Zhizuo; these remaining Han spoke Lòlongo as their first language, intermarried with their Lòlop’ō neighbors, and found themselves hard pressed to preserve their Han identity.

These mountains, with their high elevations, narrow valleys, and deeply peripheral situation, have always been a difficult place to make a living. The 1950s ethnographers found most families getting by on a mixture of farming, goat herding, and household-based hempen cloth production. Zhizuo’s central valley lay on a trade route from the nearby salt wells of Baijing to the lowlands. During the Republican era, many men worked as porters or muleteers along this route, but these opportunities melted away in the 1950s as the salt business was brought under firmer state control. Land in these mountains was divided between precious irrigated paddy land on the valley floors for rice and winter wheat; unirrigated terraces for maize, wheat, and barley on hillsides near the villages; and swidden land for oats, buckwheat, potatoes, and hemp higher in the mountains. Land of all classes was scarce. Before the land reform movement, a few landlord households produced enough grain on their own land to feed their numbers for the entire year. Afterward, however, virtually no household could feed itself entirely on its own land (of about 2.1 mu per capita); all supplemented their grain income with hempen cloth production. These mountains had long been renowned in Yunnan for the quality and quantity of their hempen cloth; during the first three decades of socialism, more hempen cloth flowed from here than from any other part of the province. Women raised hemp on swidden acreage high in the mountains; soaked and washed it in the cold streams; pounded, boiled, spun, and wove it in their courtyards; and sold it to state-run supply and marketing cooperatives to make grain bags.

From 1952 to 1978, the state subsidized hemp prices relative to prices for grain and cotton. High hemp prices brought unprecedented prosperity to these mountains for nearly three decades, in a period when real incomes for most peasants in China were stagnating and declining. But this good fortune ended with market reforms. In 1978, the state raised prices for grain; in 1980, it instituted a floating price for hemp procurement. China had begun to produce synthetic fibers in the 1970s, and one of their earliest uses was to replace hemp in bags for grain and fertilizer.
Hemp prices plunged more than 12 percent in one year, and they never recovered. By the early 1980s, households in the Baicaolin Mountains could not sell hempen cloth for any price.

Hempen cloth production, like cotton production in the Yangze Delta, had encouraged population growth and made grain land even more scarce. In the 1980s and 1990s, Zhizuo residents farmed about .93 mu per capita of unirrigated land and .36 mu per capita of irrigated land. Most households could grow enough grain on this land to suffice for about half the year; nearly all relied heavily on state relief grain. Some households raised herds of black-haired goats; some had a few walnut trees; many harvested timber illegally from higher in the mountains; a handful opened tiny shops or developed businesses as tinkers; the most fortunate produced educated sons and daughters who found work in lowland towns or cities and sent money home. Everyone ate two meals a day, usually of steamed grain with a soup of boiled greens on the side. Most households killed one small pig a year, salted its meat, and used it sparingly in cooking for the entire year. On special occasions, people killed a chicken, burned off its feathers, and boiled it in a soup. At weddings and funerals, goats were slaughtered and eaten in quantity. During the rainy season, however, when the fall harvest was but a dim memory and relief grain was running out, many people routinely went hungry.

The rapid economic expansion that transformed many parts of China in the 1980s and 1990s bestowed few benefits on this deep periphery. By the mid-1990s, Zhizuo still had no village industries and no legal sideline occupations that turned a profit. One youth had a tape deck on which he recorded courting songs; three or four families had battery-powered radios. Some houses sported electric lines—the remains of past, failed attempts to electrify villages by installing small generators in mountain streams—but not a single house had electricity. Although pipelines had been installed from mountainside springs to tanks in the centers of the largest villages, many of the pipes were broken, and residents walked the steep, root-strewn paths to draw water from the streams. Zhizuo residents had expended immense effort during the Great Leap Forward to build a road to span the twenty-five steep kilometers from the township center, but it was rough and dangerous, and the only vehicles to bounce up it were the jeeps of county officials on their semiannual visits. For most people, life was growing gradually harder, as prices rose and entitlements for free medical care and education disintegrated.