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**Notar/Displacing Desire**

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## With the Sign Begins the Search

It was gone. The old No. 2, the center of backpacker culture in Dali for two decades, where I had first stayed as a student traveler, had been reduced to rubble. In its place stood a wall of billboards advertising that this would be the future site of “Foreigner Street Plaza,” an open-air mini-mall of elegant shops and boutiques. On “Foreigner Street” the few foreign backpackers wandered a bit forlornly. Whereas they had once congregated in this borderland town in the Himalayan foothills of southwest China to get off the beaten track and view exotic minority peoples, *they* were now the objects of exotic interest for crowds of cosmopolitan Chinese tourists. The Bai minority market women who had occupied the steps of the No. 2 Guesthouse for years selling souvenirs to backpackers had scattered and staked out spaces in side alleyways.

The story of the No. 2 Guesthouse in Dali encapsulates China’s dramatic cultural, economic, and political changes over the past half century. The No. 2 had begun its life as a landlord’s villa—a flagstone courtyard and garden surrounded on three sides by carved wooden doors and balconies. In the 1950s, shortly after the Communist revolution in 1949, the new government had criticized the landlords, appropriated their villa, added a cement-block building, and turned it into a state guesthouse. With China’s “reform and opening” to the outside world in the mid-1980s, the government had designated the No. 2 as the only place in town that officially allowed foreigners to stay overnight. Tens of thousands of “lonely planetes,” drawn to Dali as I was because of the Lonely Planet guidebook they carried, stayed there, leading to the formation of “Foreigner Street”—several blocks of banana pancake cafés, beer joints, and sukiyaki shops. Most Dali townspeople tried to avoid this place, considering it dirty and somewhat dangerous because of the grungy travelers and some of their illicit dealings in money and drugs. But minorities in Dali—Muslims, Tibetans, and Yi—opened cafés there, and entrepreneurial Bai market women gathered there to sell souvenirs and change money with the travelers. The next change came in 1995, when, to make room for the millions of well-heeled Chinese tourists who were prospering with the economic reforms and who were drawn to Dali because of a popular movie musical and

a martial arts novel, the town government tore down the landlords's villa and constructed a glass hotel in its place. A decade later, as the market reforms in China intensified, the government sold the No. 2 to a private company. The company demolished the glass hotel and started construction of a mini-mall, which was to be built in the style of an old landlord's villa. From a landlord's villa to a re-created landlord's villa, with a revolution in between, things had seemingly come full cycle.

The metamorphosis of the No. 2 Guesthouse and the transformation of Dali serve as a microcosm of the tremendous changes that have occurred across China. In the current reform-era shift from a socialist to a capitalist system, China is the world's fastest growing economy and the largest potential consumer culture in the world.<sup>1</sup> While the hallmarks of China's revolutionary era were class struggle, collectivization, and nationalization, the hallmarks of the reform era have become competition, decollectivization, and globalization. Instead of a communal culture, China is rapidly developing a consumer culture (see D. Davis 2000a; Gillette 2000; J. Watson 1997a). People have been encouraged not only to consume material goods, but to consume leisure experiences. As in other "postrevolutionary" places, Chinese officials and developers are seeking to tap into this consumer desire and collect the vast potential profits that tourism offers (Babb 2004, 2005; Bissell 2005; Kennedy and Williams 2001; Schensul 2005). In less than a decade, the Chinese tourism industry, catering to both national and transnational tourists, grew from 163.8 billion yuan (US\$19.78 billion) in 1996 to 496.7 billion yuan (nearly US\$60 billion) in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

To provide the electricity, infrastructure, and services for national and transnational consumers, existing structures have been razed, and new dams, airports, railways, highways, hotels, condominiums, shopping plazas, golf courses, and amusement parks have been constructed in their place. Not only have structures such as the No. 2 Guesthouse been demolished, homes have also been removed. Farmland has been bulldozed and built over. In this massive destruction and construction process, it is estimated that between 40 and 70 million Chinese farmers have been displaced in only ten years of development from 1995 to 2005 ("China's Land" 2005, 40; Ramirez 2005).

The transformation of Chinese urban spaces and the emergence of China's so-called floating population have been well documented (e.g., Gaubatz [1995] 1999; Pun 2005; Solinger [1995] 1999; Yan Hairong 2003; L. Zhang 2001). Rural migrants have been drawn to cities owing in part to a growing income gap between urban and rural areas, global manufacturing demands

for cheap labor, as well as the consumer desires of younger villagers. Relatively neglected, however, has been the increasingly significant reverse movement of urbanites to rural areas as part of China's emerging leisure culture and the transformations of place that this movement has wrought.<sup>3</sup> To understand reform-era China, this book argues, it is imperative to understand the relationship between socioeconomic change, transformations of place, and displacement.

More specifically, this book explores the relationship between cultural representations and material transformations of place. Although Dali is located in Yunnan province, part of the margins, the borderlands of China—that 60 percent of China's territory that is home to 100 million minority peoples—it has figured centrally in national and transnational popular culture. In fact, it is because of its borderland location near Tibet and Myanmar (Burma), its vibrant minority culture, as well as its stunning scenery of snow-capped peaks surrounding fertile valleys that Dali has been popularly represented as an exotic place apart from dominant Han Chinese culture.<sup>4</sup>

In China's reform era, millions of people have been drawn to Dali because of three popular representations in particular—a guidebook, a movie musical, and a martial arts novel. Each representation in turn has had different material after-effects on the people and the place. By material after-effects I mean social and economic consequences that arise following an interval of time, often decades after the production of the representation itself. The Lonely Planet guidebook of China, first published in 1984, represents Dali as a place “off the beaten track”; yet in so doing, it has encouraged tens of thousands of transnational travelers to trek to the town over two decades. When it was made in 1959, the movie musical *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wuduo Jinhua*) illustrated Dali as a model socialist utopia just as utopian policies were in the process of failing and creating a nightmarish place. Yet surprisingly, the movie now draws millions of nostalgic national tourists to Dali to reenact scenes from the film. Jin Yong's enormously popular 1963 Hong Kong martial arts novel *Heavenly Dragons* (*Tianlong babu*) describes Dali as a fantastic place of the past, a Buddhist “wild, wild West.”<sup>5</sup> Four decades after publication hundreds of thousands of fans travel to Dali to view and perform their favorite parts from it at a martial arts “film city” theme park, dubbed “Daliwood” in English. Almost six million people visited Dali in 2004.<sup>6</sup> This is nearly the same number who visited the Eiffel Tower that year and double the number who visited the Taj Mahal, one of the world's wonders, the previous year.<sup>7</sup>

Not only do these popular representations entice millions to travel there,

they portray Dali in different ways, as do officials, tourists, townspeople, and villagers. Since narratives and representations of place are produced and interpreted by different social actors, they may overlap, compete, and be contested, thereby reflecting power and income inequalities (Rodman 1992, 652; Shields 1991, 18; Urry [1995] 1997, 2). For example, as I will show in chapter 3, well-off national tourists view the film *Five Golden Flowers* with utopian nostalgia amidst prosperity and uncertainty, while older villagers view it as a historical document of the destruction of their place.

Because different groups use the place of Dali in different ways, it also comes to have different meanings for them (see Rodman 1992, 646–647). For example, in chapter 5 I will show differences in the ways in which tourists, townspeople, and older villagers view a newly constructed highway—as a convenient means of transport, as leading to a modern future, or as creating wandering spirits. These divergences highlight the argument that places are culturally constructed and may be more or less meaningful depending on our experience there and the cultural narratives we attach to them.<sup>8</sup>

This book emphasizes the need to analyze place as well as social relations of space. In recent years, the field of anthropology has been influenced by writings in cultural geography that have favored discussions of space over place, where space represents mobility and possibility, and place represents fixity, rigidity, and control (Certeau [1974] 1988; Harvey [1989] 1990; Lefebvre [1974] 1996). However, we do not live in abstract “space.” At any given time we are always somewhere, in some place (Casey 1996). Space and place are complementary: if “space [is] that which allows movement,” notes Yi-fu Tuan, “then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” ([1977] 1997, 6). Anthropologists of China’s reform era have only begun to research corresponding transformations of place and social space (Flower 2004; J. Jing 1996; Makley 2003; Mueggler 2001; M. Yang 2004).

By examining different representations of place, the material after-effects of these representations, and contestations over the uses and meanings of place, we can learn much about the ways in which different groups of people experience socioeconomic change. The transformations and struggles over place have been particularly intense in China, influenced by political upheavals, the rapidity of recent socioeconomic change, and population pressures—China has the largest population in the world, over 1.3 billion persons by 2005 (“China Population” 2005). This makes it a particularly compelling context for exploring popular culture and transformation of place through travel at the nation’s borderlands.

### With the Sign Begins the Search

Representations of borderland peoples and places have had the power to inspire consumers to journey far afield to view for themselves what they had seen in print or on screen; in other words, “with the sign begins the search” (Lyotard [1989] 1998, 3). Journeys are increasingly prompted by and mediated by previously consumed images. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has observed: “More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice” (1991, 198).

Although it has been suggested that “fantasy has no fixed geographic location” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 147), the case of Dali illustrates that travelers and tourists willingly journey thousands of miles to a place that inspires their fantasies. And while it has been observed that “myth and fantasy play an unusually large role in the social construction of *all* travel and tourist sites” (Rojek 1997, 53; emphasis in original), some sites such as Dali already have a heightened mythic status because of preexisting narratives that have circulated in the popular realm for decades. In Dali we will observe tensions between nostalgia for a fantasized place and the lived experience of that place, a place that is in turn shaped by nostalgic fantasies.

Both growth and uncertainty in a global market economy, I argue, lead to quests for an imagined place of the past where tourists can perform their fantasies, nostalgia, and status for themselves and others.<sup>9</sup> This performative aspect of travel highlights that tourism is not only about seeing, not only about gaze and spectacle (cf. Schwartz 1998; Urry 1991). Tourism also means experiencing for oneself—smelling, listening, trying, wearing—as well as performing for others one’s status, one’s style, one’s fantasies (see Veijola and Jokinen 1994). These experiential and performative aspects of travel consumption help to explain the growth of tourism despite the possibility of virtual travel through computers, film, television, and travel narratives. Instead, popular media enhance the desire to travel. Motivated by representations in popular culture, millions of tourists journey to Dali to consume a place of an imagined exotic past where they can perform their nostalgia for previously consumed narratives as well as enact a new social status. Dali has become a “site of desire” (Swain 2005).

In being fantasized as an exotic place in the past, Dali shares a connection with other borderland peoples and places around the world that have been represented in guidebooks, films, and novels. These borderland places and peoples may have been marginalized, impoverished, and discriminated

against, yet they will be appropriated for symbolic, economic, and political purposes. In national and transnational projects, the socially and politically peripheral often become symbolically central (Babcock 1978, 32; Shields 1991, 5; Stallybrass and White 1986, 5). This is a familiar scenario in the North American context, where images and narratives of Native American Indians and First Nations peoples have been used in advertising, popular films, novels, and children's story books to formulate a national identity (Bird 1996; Deloria 1998; DeLyser 2003; Root 1996). Similarly, in China, minority peoples, officially referred to as "minority nationalities" (M. *shaoshu minzu*), have figured prominently in constructions of the national self (Gladney 1994; Schein 2002, 29).

Fantasies of other places are not only envisioned at home, they are projected onto the places that engendered them (see Urry [1990] 1994, 3). Enraptured by images of tartan-clad men of the Highlands, tourists search Scotland for the setting of *Braveheart* (filmed in Ireland) or *Brigadoon* (filmed in Hollywood) (Nadel-Klein 2003, 180). Mainland U.S. tourists, inspired by such films as *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and *South Pacific* (1958), fly to the islands of Hawai'i to see and learn the hula (Desmond 1999, 133). Prompted by guidebooks, brochures, and films like *The King and I*, Europeans and Americans travel to Thailand envisioning a land of Peter Pan-like "eternal children" (Selwyn 1993, 123). In Germany fans of the novels of Karl May and the films based on them form "Indian" hobby clubs and travel to the American Southwest (Calloway, Gemünden, and Zantop 2002; Frayling 1995).

Sometimes the people of the place are not the draw, but the place itself. Film fans of the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Last Samurai* travel to scenic set sites in New Zealand, where in this case the indigenous Maori people simply become part of the backdrop (Olson 2004). Tourists from around the world, especially Japanese, go to Prince Edward Island to experience the place of the novel *Anne of Green Gables* (Fawcett and Cormack 2001; Hendry 2000). In the late nineteenth century Americans journeyed to California to find the imagined home of the heroine of the novel *Ramona*, a woman of mixed Native American-Scottish ancestry adopted by a wealthy Hispanic family (DeLyser 2003).

Literary fans have long journeyed to their favorite authors' haunts: Dickens' London, Joyce's Dublin, Scott's Scotland, Twain's Hartford or Missouri. (DeLyser 2003, 902; Nadel-Klein 2003, 180; "Mark Twain House" 2005; "Welcome to" 2001-2005). In *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Mark Twain describes his own journey as a nostalgic tourist to his childhood home (Melton 2002, 123), and in *Innocents Abroad* (1869) he describes his experiences as a tour-

ist in Europe, alternately thrilled and dispirited at sights that did or did not measure up to the ways in which he had imagined them from literary and visual depictions (Twain [1869] 1984; see Melton 2002; Wasserstrom 2004). Because narratives engender fantasy and anticipation (see Urry [1995] 1997, 132), there is potential for both delight and disappointment in the actual place visited, as we will see in later chapters.

In examining popular culture, travel, and transformations in place, this book builds on burgeoning anthropological scholarship of the Chinese borderlands.<sup>10</sup> Anthropologists of China have drawn on the insights of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which highlighted the connection between exoticized "Western" literary representations of the "East" and colonial power, to examine both European colonial representations of Chinese borderland peoples and places (Harrell 1995c; Swain 1995b) and Chinese imperial and national representations of them.<sup>11</sup> Harrell's work (1995c) has been particularly important in identifying similarities in representations between the three "civilizing projects" of Chinese empire, European colonialism, and Chinese nation-building. However, scholars have focused primarily on representations of the Chinese borderlands intended for elite consumption—histories, natural and social science publications, museums, and art-house films.<sup>12</sup> Only recently have some anthropologists begun to turn to representations in popular culture in the form of postcards (Schein 2002), theme parks (Anagnost 1997; Oakes 1998, 2006), children's books (Bulag 2002; Khan 1996), and a movie musical (Swain 1994, 2001, 2005).

The three representations of Dali that this book examines—the Lonely Planet guidebook *China—a Travel Survival Kit*, the Chinese movie musical *Five Golden Flowers*, and Jin Yong's martial arts novel *Heavenly Dragons*—have been "popular" in the sense that they have circulated widely. In Chinese, one would say they had been "welcomed by the people" (M. *shou huanying*). My use of "popular culture" thereby differs from some scholarly examinations of popular culture in China where popular has been equated with the unofficial and as a site of social resistance to the state (Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz 1989, 10) or as a site of globalizing consumer culture outside of state control (Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz 2002, 3). I draw on other discussions that see popular culture as a contested site of meaning between different social actors (Baranovitch 2003; Hall 1981; Litzinger 2001; Wang 2001a, 2001b), where the boundaries between "mass culture" produced for the people and "popular culture" favored and/or produced by the people are often blurred (Chu 1978; Keane 2002; Mukerji and Schudson 1991, 3; Robertson 1998, 34).

Rather than reading popular culture as "text," I analyze popular repre-

sentations in practice: looking at the meaning, use, and material after-effects of representations both for the people of the place who are purportedly represented and for the consumers of this place. Thus, this book is based not only on my interpretation of representations, but on what Michel de Certeau has called the “secondary production” process of a representation (1988, xiii). What do people do with a guidebook, film, or novel once it is in circulation? How do people “talk back” (hooks 1989) to these representations? How do they interpret the after-effects of these representations?<sup>13</sup>

In this secondary-production process, borderland peoples are not passive objects of outside tourist gazes but are themselves cultural producers and consumers who are actively negotiating political and economic change. While officials and entrepreneurs have aggressively shaped Dali to mirror its image in popular culture, townspeople and villagers have ambivalently both rejected and embraced popular images in attempting to gain wealth and status, represent their own historical identity, and define the future of their place.

### **A Place at the Borderlands**

Focusing on one particular place, the people who live there, and the people who pass through, this book investigates processes of representation, interaction, and transformation. Dali is a dynamic place, a place shaped but not wholly defined by outside forces, a place where people attempt to define themselves and their futures within waves of local, national, and global changes. We may think of Dali as a “cultural nexus” (Duara [1988] 1991), where economic, political, and religious forces converge to shape a place. Like light through a prism (Robertson 1991), outside forces pass through Dali, altering it, but in doing so they are themselves refracted. National and transnational projects are altered, if only slightly, as they alter local ones.

Eric Wolf (1982) long encouraged anthropologists to consider places not as isolated communities but as tied in crucial ways to larger national and global processes, a point that has been reemphasized recently (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, 1997d). Cultural geographer Doreen Massey has urged us to develop a “global sense of place,” which recognizes the multiple identities and varied connections of any one place. She proposes that we consider places as “articulated moments in networks of social relations,” where each place is a “unique point of . . . intersection” (1993, 66). This view leads us to visualize each place on the planet as connected to many other places through people, supplies, products, money, and technology. These points of intersection may continually shift.

The name of the place, Dali, comes from a Buddhist kingdom that once ruled over parts of Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, and most of what is present-day Yunnan province. Yunnan is China's eighth largest province, about the same size as California and the most multicultural—or, in Chinese terms, most “multinational” (M. *duominzuhua*)—inhabited by twenty-five of China's fifty-five officially recognized “minority nationalities” (M. *shaoshu minzu*).<sup>14</sup> These minority nationality groups live spread across a landscape that ranges from nearly 7,000-meter Himalayan peaks in the north to tropical rainforests in the south. Mountains rise up from the land like the ridges on so many dragon tails, while silver snakes of rivers—the upper Yangtze, Mekong, and Salween—wind between them. One finds lonely villages perched precariously on the sides of gorges and densely populated villages and towns clustered in river valleys and lake basins (see maps).

“Dali” refers to an administrative region, an alpine basin, and a town (just as “New York” refers to a state, a metropolitan area, and a city). Since 1956 the administrative region has officially been called the Dali Bai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture (M. Dali Baizu zizhizhou) (*DZSJ* 1990, 26), after the predominant minority group who live there. The Bai nationality (M. Baizu) had a population of 1,081,167 according to the 2000 census and 1,121,700 by 2003 (*DZSJ* 2004, 31; *YNRK*, 1:105), making them the fourteenth largest minority group in China and the second largest in Yunnan, after the Yi. Bai refer to themselves as “speakers of Bair” (B. *sua Bair yin gain; sua Bair ni ge*). They have been classified as speakers of a Sino-Tibetan language (see Dell 1981; Wiersma 1990), although there has been much academic debate as to further classification (Wiersma 1990, 2003; Zhao 1982) and the origins of the Bai people—whether they are descendants of the Shan/Tai, the Burmese, the Yi, or Han Chinese, and whether or not the ancestors of the Bai ruled the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms.<sup>15</sup> These debates, in Dali as elsewhere, often assume “purity” of groups over time and overlook the possibilities of intermarriage and cultural diffusion (Litzinger 2000a; Notar 1992).

What is clear is that the Dali region has long been a crossroads between what is now China, Tibet, Myanmar, and Vietnam, and religious, cultural, and material influences have traveled these roads. In its conquest of regions to the north and south, Nanzhao generals brought back diverse prisoners to the Dali basin (see Fan [864] 1962). When Dali was conquered by Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century, by Ming troops in the seventeenth century, and again by Qing troops in the late nineteenth century, soldiers settled in the region and took local women as their wives (Armijo-Hussein 1997; Lighte 1981; *YHSLD*; Yokoyama 1994). At present Dali is still a diverse area of over

Tourist map of the Dali basin. Lake Er (Erhai) is in the center and the Mount Cang range to the west (left). Butterfly Spring is at the upper left, the old town of Dali near the Three Pagodas, and the martial arts “movie city” is just southwest of town. (YDY, detail)

three million persons.<sup>16</sup> Many of Dali prefecture's Muslims, who had a population of 66,085 in 2000 and 67,500 by 2003 (YNRK, 1:105; DZMJ 2004, 31), are speakers of Bai, yet as practitioners of Islam, they are officially called the "Hui nationality" (Huizu) (see Yokoyama 1987). Other officially recognized groups in the region include Han Chinese (1,659,730), currently outnumbering all other groups, as well as Yi (426,634), Lisu (31,972), Miao (10,967), Naxi (4,302), Achang (3,330), Dai (3,047), Zhuang (1,955), Hani (1,585), Tibetans (1,424), Mongolians (367), and 31 others (YNRK, 1:85–161).

The Dali basin centers on a large alpine lake, Erhai (Lake Er). Mountains rise up on either side of the basin: low mountains to the east and high mountains to the west, the Mount Cang range, which rise up to 4,000 meters. During the dry season (December to April) the snow-capped mountains shine as they tower over people working in fields of broad beans and winter wheat. During the rainy season (May to November) the low clouds obscure all but the mountains' feet, and farmers tend their corn and plant, transplant, and harvest rice amidst a chorus of invisible frogs.

"Dali" is also the name of an old town located in the basin that long served as the administrative, economic, and cultural center of this region. Between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, the town (or a site near the present-day town) was the capital of several Buddhist kingdoms, the Nanzhao, Houli, and Dali. After the defeat of the Dali Kingdom by the armies of Kublai Khan in 1253, Dali lost political primacy of place to what is now the provincial capital of Kunming (then called Yunnan Fu) (Armijo-Hussein 1997). Despite its political fall Dali remained the economic center of the province owing to its long-standing trade location as the place "where all important roads from mainland Southeast Asia met" (Prasertkul 1989, 72). From 1856 to 1873 Dali competed with Kunming again politically when it became the capital of a Muslim-led independent state, the Pingnan Kingdom, until it was brutally suppressed by Qing imperial troops in 1873.<sup>17</sup> After this suppression, a large earthquake in 1925, and the construction of the Burma Road (Bradley 1945; Fitzgerald 1941; Smith 1940), a city at the southern end of Lake Er, Xiaguan ("southern gate pass" in Mandarin), surpassed Dali as the administrative and trade center. Xiaguan, now called "new Dali," is the official administrative, economic, and cultural center of the region, but "old Dali" remains its true cultural heart.

Because Yunnan province was not occupied by Japanese troops during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Dali became a haven for merchants (who traded primarily in cotton, medicine, opium, tea, silver, and sulfur), missionaries, and coastal intellectuals (BSLDI, 1–78; Fitzgerald 1941). At this time

Charles Patrick Fitzgerald and Francis L. K. Hsu conducted ethnographic research in Dali (Fitzgerald 1941; Hsu 1967 [1948]). Their monographs serve as important, and contradictory, sources of information on prerevolutionary Dali, Fitzgerald describing the Bai (then called Minjia in Mandarin) as a “tribal people” and Hsu referring to them as “typically Chinese.”

### Reform Era Research

In the spring of 1988, when I was studying Chinese language, history, and economics in Nanjing, like many other foreign students, I was drawn to Dali because of the Lonely Planet guidebook *China—a Travel Survival Kit*. Since 1985 I had studied in or visited other major east coast cities—Beijing, Guangdong, Shanghai, Shenzhen—and was intrigued by the initial rumblings of China’s reform era: the construction of business hotels and discos for foreigners, and the proliferation of small-scale street entrepreneurs who would repair a bicycle tire, fix an umbrella, or sell warm roasted chestnuts. Yet I wondered how China’s reforms were being experienced in other parts of the country. Armed with the Lonely Planet guide, the “green bible” as we foreign students called it, because the cover showed a woman working in a bright green rice field and because we considered it the key text for accessing a “real” China beyond the gated universities and guarded dormitories where we lived, I set off during spring break to see some of the rest of the country.

In Shanghai I hopped a train to the city of Kunming, provincial capital of Yunnan province, which the guidebook told me had “remained an isolated frontier region” and was inhabited by a “veritable constellation of ethnic minorities: the Zhuang, Hui, Yi, Miao, Tibetans, Mongols, Yao, Bai, Hani, Dai, Lisu, Lahu, Va, Naxi, Jingpo, Bulang, Pumi, Nu, Achang, Benglong, Jinuo and Drung” (Samagalski 1984, 725). On the three-day train journey in my “hard sleeper” bunk-bed class, I chatted with an older couple going to visit their grandchild and with a woman surgeon going to a conference. I watched the scenery change from flat lands, to rainy red clay hills, to steeply terraced mountainsides. From Kunming I rode a rickety bus twelve hours over serpentine mountain roads to the town of Dali, which the guidebook told me was “just off the Burma road,” the former “centre of the Bai Nanzhao kingdom” and “a town of little significance” (ibid., 747).

For a town of “little significance,” Dali captivated me. As chance would have it, I had arrived right before the famous millennia-old “Third Month Fair” (B. *sawa zi*; M. *sanyue jie*). Tibetan medicine merchants selling bears’ paws and tigers’ tails, Burmese jade dealers delicately setting up stalls, Shang-

hai clothiers carrying the latest coastal fashions, Yi minority women wearing umbrella-sized black hats and long pleated skirts, and Bai minority men bearing bamboo water pipes were descending on the town along with Han Chinese bureaucrats from Beijing. I had expected a sleepy borderland town but instead found myself amidst a bustling, unconventional crowd.

Near the cement-block No. 2 Guesthouse where I stayed, I discovered that, in order to cater to other transnational travelers who were also using the Lonely Planet as their guide, a “Coca Cola Café” had opened in Dali.<sup>18</sup> The menu included “Western” food: rice noodles with tomato sauce, goat cheese on toast, yak steaks with potatoes. A Tibetan-Muslim man who called himself “Bill” had started renting bicycles and hiring a fisherman to take travelers out on Lake Er.

I could only spend a few days in Dali before I had to take the bus and train back to classes in Nanjing but decided that I wanted to return to understand China’s reform-era transformations in this place. After four years of graduate school in anthropology, I returned to Dali in 1993 to conduct research. By the time I got there, however, much had changed.

The year 1988, the year I had first gone to Dali as a “lonely planeteer,” had been a year of great hope in China. After the death of Chairman Mao in 1976 and the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the country had proceeded with a decade of economic reforms like a locomotive, starting out slowly and gradually picking up steam until it was zooming along. Although people were not sure exactly how the tracks were laid out or if the train might derail, they were jumping on board. In 1989 this hopefulness crescendoed into student democracy demonstrations in Beijing and other cities. The demonstrations grew as workers and professionals joined the students and as the international media stimulated worldwide attention. A violent state suppression on June 4, 1989, however, derailed the movement. Foreign researchers, students, and journalists fled China, as did some Chinese students who had been connected with the demonstrations. They didn’t know what direction the country would take and whether they would be able to return to China.

Events in China appeared in contradistinction to events in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In Berlin demonstrations led to the fall of the Berlin wall and the reunification of Germany. Almost overnight, it seemed, the Soviet Union broke apart into Russia and newly independent states. The cold war melted. “Why couldn’t China have taken the same road to democracy?” people in the United States asked.

Yet, by 1993, when I returned to China to conduct research, things were

once again looking hopeful. In the spring of 1992, Deng Xiaoping had taken an imperial style “southern tour.” His speeches encouraged “gutsier reform and opening” (M. *gaige kaifang de danzi zaida yidian*; DXSZ 1992, 42–44). This encouragement opened the gates to the faster development of markets, private businesses, and increased Sino-foreign joint ventures. The trickle of returning foreign business people, teachers, and students became a steady flood. However, the country could not turn the clock back to 1988, and a different mood prevailed. Economic, not political, reform was primary. No one talked explicitly about the “June 4” (M. *liu si*) demonstrations and suppression of 1989, but people would often comment: “Look at Russia. They have their democracy now but no food or money. At least we have some of both.”

When I arrived in Yunnan’s provincial capital of Kunming in the fall of 1993, markets were thriving, tourists were arriving, and talk of money was on everyone’s tongue. Yet not everyone had equal amounts of money: millionaires (M. *baiwan fuweng*) in Mitsubishi sport utility vehicles were driving past street beggars. Instead of quiet avenues where people dressed in shades of blue and gray cycled slowly to and from work, the streets sizzled with mini-skirts and mini-vans, high heels and private sedans. Vendors hawked cigarettes and souvenirs on the sidewalks, while young women in tight, high-necked, thigh-slit red sequined *qipao* dresses beckoned customers into posh shops. I spent four months in Kunming at the Yunnan Nationalities Institute (now University) studying Yunnan history and Bai language while I waited for the Ministry of Education to approve my research visa. I was worried, since one of the researchers who had applied before me had been denied permission.

Fortunately, my research visa was approved. One of my professors at the institute who had grown up in Dali arranged for me to live with two families, one in the old town of Dali and one in a village north of town. This was no small feat. While Dali was “open” to foreigners, most of the foreign researchers who had preceded me in Yunnan had been required to stay in specially designated guesthouses or official government buildings. My teacher managed to convince officials that, as a single woman, I would be much safer living with families than living by myself. She further vouched to be my official research assistant (M. *peitong*) although she stayed in Kunming and I stayed in Dali. Previous foreign researchers had had difficulties with their officially assigned assistants. In at least two cases of which I knew, these assistants were not from the research area, could not speak the local language, were miserable away from Kunming, and acted more as supervisors than as assistants.

In early February 1994 my teacher accompanied me to Dali, introduced me to my two Bai host families, and negotiated what I would pay them for

room and board. Teacher Zhang and Teacher Duan, a middle-aged couple, lived in an apartment in town. Their children, who were about my age, lived away, so it was a small household of two. They had both grown up in villages but had attended college, so everyone referred to them as “teachers,” although only one of them worked formally as such. On weekend nights I ate dinner with them, and we talked about local history and current events. They introduced me to other townspeople, and from them I learned more about how people viewed the transformation of Dali through tourism. During the weekend days I would walk around the town of Dali, observing the activities of townspeople and tourists. I spent many afternoons chatting with Muslim, Tibetan, and Yi café owners, transnational travelers, and Bai women who sold souvenirs on “Foreigner Street.”

The second family, the Yaos, a father, mother, three daughters, a married-in son-in-law, and one grandchild, lived in a relatively new village home behind a centuries-old courtyard house shared by six families, a family being defined as those who ate together (A. Wolf 1974b, 176). The courtyard was a lively place: someone was always coming or going, and something was always going on. Their village had served as the setting for many of the film scenes in the movie *Five Golden Flowers*, which I will discuss in detail in chapter 3.

While living in the village, I conducted participant observation, joining in and observing events such as baby naming parties, weddings, funerals, house birthday parties, and temple festivals. I assisted the family during the intensive planting and harvesting times by providing child care or shucking corn (something familiar to me from a childhood in Wisconsin; however, I discovered I was inept at threshing beans and wheat). During the busy winter wedding season, I would spend days helping with food preparation, peeling such quantities of garlic and ginger with other women that our fingers remained fragrant for days. However, I did not participate in farm or fishing work. Schistosomiasis—an eventually fatal disease carried by a snail-borne parasite—was a village health concern, and Mr. Yao, feeling responsible for my well-being, did not want me working in the fields or marshes.

I lived in the Yaos’ village home on weekdays for over a year. Subsequently, I arranged to stay with a third family in another village located on the Yunnan-Tibet highway. This village was famous for its weekly market, which had become a tourist site for lonely planetes. Living there allowed me to conduct interviews with many market women who sold souvenirs to tourists. Transformation through tourism was also a particularly pressing topic in this village because the construction of a new tourist highway was going to displace several village households, as I discuss more in chapter 5.

While I was initially overjoyed at not having an officially assigned research assistant, after three months I came to wish that I had some kind of assistant. Although I was fluent in Mandarin, I was still learning Bai, and many older Bai did not speak Mandarin. It was difficult for me, as a woman, to speak with village men between the ages of twenty and sixty on my own, since women's and men's social and work spheres were largely separate.

Finding someone with the time, energy, and patience to be my research assistant was not an easy matter. Initially, Mr. Yao volunteered his third daughter, but she was shy and not keen on tramping around the village with me. Most of the younger people were too busy doing their own work to take on any additional activities. Elderly people had the time but not the energy. Finally, I was introduced to a recently retired middle school teacher, Teacher Du. As an active man who suddenly had too much time on his hands, Teacher Du was the perfect person.

To my great good fortune, Teacher Du had patience, a sense of humor, and a worldly perspective. To offset his family's "landlord" assigned class status, he had volunteered to join the People's Liberation Army in the early 1950s. The army sent him to Korea, where he fought in the "American War" (what people in the United States call the Korean War). Through this experience he had seen other parts of China and the world, and had developed a deep sense of compassion for human suffering. Later we reflected on the twists and turns of history: as a younger man he had fought against Americans; as an older man he was helping an American woman understand his home.

Together Teacher Du and I conducted random sample surveys of 113 households in three villages. These surveys gave me a broader understanding of village household economies and villager perspectives on transformations in Dali. Teacher Du would knock on a courtyard door and call out in Bai, "Is anyone home?" (B. *ni ge ze hodv nimu?*). If someone answered the door, Teacher Du would assure him or her that we were not with the tax bureau or the health department, and in all cases except two the person invited us in. Teacher Du would then explain what we were doing. If men or older women (younger village women did not smoke) were present, Teacher Du would pass around cigarettes (which he told me to purchase), as was the usual way for men to start a reciprocal social relationship (see Wank 2000). Teacher Du would then ask the survey questions (on family size, education levels, land use, supplemental income, consumption, and views on socioeconomic change) in Bai and translate the answers back to me in Mandarin. As my Bai improved, I was able to ask questions and understand responses. However, we continued to follow the original format, for it allowed me time to write and observe. Our

survey would last anywhere from thirty minutes to five hours, depending on how many people were at home, how much they wanted to talk, and whether or not they invited us to join them for a snack (for example, homemade rice flour dumplings with brown sugar filling).

Many times after we had asked people questions, they would ask me about life in the United States—family, food, crime, and American views of China. They were as curious about me as I was about them. Especially for older villagers, my identity was not at all clear. Since I spoke Mandarin (what Dali Bai speakers called *Ha hua*), people wondered whether or not I was a strange-looking urban Chinese. However, since I did not eat pork—I had once eaten one too many pig's feet at a Chinese luncheon and was thereafter hampered from enjoying future pork delights—almost a travesty among Bai in Dali, where the local specialty was a kind of *porc tataré*, ground raw pork with chili sauce (B. *he gai, he xiu*; M. *shengrou*), and since I had brownish curly hair and hazel eyes like some of Dali's Muslims, people asked me if I was Muslim (Huizu). Others knew that I was a “foreigner” but couldn't quite place me: was I American or Japanese? I looked like some of the Americans on television, but I could use chopsticks and liked to drink tea like Japanese. People had heard rumors that perhaps I was one of the new transnational investors or missionaries in the area. I heard my favorite of the rumors circulating about me when my Asian American fiancé came to visit. From a distance, villagers thought that he looked Bai (which indeed he did). “Now we know why you have come here!” several villagers said to me. “Your father was one of the American army men stationed here during World War II, when supplies were flown from India over the mountains or trucked along the Burma Road just south of Dali. He arranged a marriage for you, and you have returned to get married.” I was sorry to tell them that this was not the case.

In the town of Dali, people initially assumed that I was a “lonely planeteer,” simply one of the thousands of transnational travelers who passed through town. However, as I spent more time there and as I got to know shopkeepers, restaurant owners, and souvenir sellers, I became not just an “outsider” (M. *laowai*) or a “foreign ghost” (M. *yang guizi*) but a person with a name, Na Peisi.

Four years later, in 1999, I returned to Dali for three months to conduct follow-up research. I visited my former teachers, host families, and friends, eager to discuss with them the astonishing changes that had taken place since I had been away. I conducted formal interviews with local officials, transnational tourism developers, and ritual specialists, and joined tourists on their rounds of Dali.

That spring the United States had bombed the Chinese Embassy in Budapest. Teachers, friends, and strangers all asked me: “How could your country do that! For what reason?” No one believed that it was a mistake. “How can your government say that it was a mistake when they have such advanced military technology and can do ‘surgical strikes’?” I deeply regretted that I did not have an answer for them. “I cannot explain it to you,” I said. “It makes no sense to me. I am sorry that Chinese people were killed there.”

In the spring of 2005, as I was completing this book, I returned again to Dali to conduct follow-up research on the recently opened “Daliwood” martial arts theme park, where much of a forty-part *Heavenly Dragons* television series had been filmed. Everyone with whom I spoke asked me about the U.S. war in Iraq, and again I could not explain why, given U.S. satellite technology, my government had not known that there were ultimately no “weapons of mass destruction” there, the justification for the war. It seemed to me more important than ever for there to be attempts at cross-cultural understanding. I hope that this book will contribute to that goal.