CHAPTER SEVEN

Feminization, Recognition, and the Cosmological in Xishuangbanna

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Introduction

This chapter explores the feminization of Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) and Dai (Tai) peoples in Yunnan province within the wider Chinese polity from the perspective of Dai cosmological understandings (see map 7.1 and map 7.2). Dai peoples in China are heavily promoted through the prism of feminization and often exploitation. This chapter looks at this process from the point of view of Dai peoples. It goes some way toward understanding how they read the abounding images of Dai women that pervade in Xishuangbanna (Banna) and constitute much non-Dai experience of them as a Chinese “minority nationality.” In order to comprehend these issues from the Dai perspective, cosmological understandings of femininity, especially youthful femininity, must be taken into account. By focusing on these understandings we can better account for Dai pragmatic participation in some of these ongoing feminizing projects. Dai participation is not simply passive submission to Han fantasy but is rather part of the ongoing process of negotiation and accommodation that has a long and complex history in this border region.

The material presented in this chapter is the result of long-term fieldwork carried out in both Jinghong (Chiang Hung, the main city in Banna) and a Tai Lue village in Menghai district where interviews were carried out in Dai, Yunnan/Bannahua, and Mandarin languages.
This chapter addresses four interlinked issues. First, the feminization of Banna has contributed to its success as a tourist destination and to a view of both Dai peoples and the region as compliant and accommodating. Economic exploitation has led to the destruction of much of Banna’s subtropical rainforest and the landscape has suffered terrible damage in recent decades. But the Chinese authorities hope that tourism will be the basis of future sustainable development. It is thought that local people will be encouraged to protect their environment (both “cultural” and “natural”) in order to ensure its attractiveness for visitors and hence its profitability. Recent changes resulting from the “opening up” of the area have been of considerable financial benefit to many, including much of the Dai population. Second, the promotion of Dai women is a powerful tool in the perceived ongoing battle against the “Sinification” or “Hanification” of Banna. The Dai feminine image is so unthreatening and appealing that it provides a highly visible and acceptable Dai presence in the wider, Han-dominated polity. Paradoxically representations of Dai women have given voice to an otherwise often muted and disregarded Dai presence. Third, Dai cosmological understandings of feminine potency do not view young women as weak or cowardly: but rather as liable to unleash dangerous and unpredictable forces. Fourth, within Theravada Buddhist moral understandings the maltreatment of any female necessarily binds the supposedly dominant male into an ongoing reciprocal, moral relationship. By enduring such a relationship the woman is expected to benefit, at least materially. Thus a feminized Banna, forced to play the role of a woman taken against her will, is entitled to material compensation from her overbearing and exploitative partner, in this case the Chinese polity.

Complex ontological and cosmological assumptions permeate the everyday lives of Dai peoples in Banna, informing all manner of decisions from house building to getting a tattoo to choosing where to hang the washing. Such knowledge does not, however, form a static body of “traditional” understanding. Rather, cosmological knowledge, its interpretation, and utility are always coming into being. Dai inspirations—having shamanic, Buddhist, Chinese, Indian, Thai, and other sources—are heterogeneous, and the area has long been one of shifting identities and influences. As C. Patterson Giersch reiterates throughout his 2006 historical study of the China-Burma borderlands, adaptation and change have been constants. This is still the case, though Dai priorities have changed due to the ongoing identity negotiations and renegotiations within Banna, a land that is no longer a frontier but rather a borderland under direct Chinese control. This chapter is about