



Baijie and the Bai

Gender and Ethnic Religion in Dali, Yunnan

Contemporary scholars and tourism officials of the Bai nationality in the Dali region of Southwest China's Yunnan Province present their village god (*benzhu*) worship as part of Bai ethnic religion and use the goddess Baijie as a paradigmatic example. In recent years Baijie has become an increasingly prominent face of Bai culture and religion in the Dali region and in China. Baijie's public face is not only ethnic but also gendered, as she appears as a paragon of feminine virtues. My research in villages that worship Baijie as their *benzhu* shows that most people involved in her worship—primarily older women—discuss Baijie in gendered terms but not ethnic terms. Furthermore, male and female villagers participate in her worship in different ways and to different degrees. This reveals the danger of uncritically accepting official discourse on ethnic religion, as rhetorics of ethnicity mask diversity within officially designated ethnic groups.

KEYWORDS: ethnicity—gender—Bai—religion—Yunnan

WHEN VISITORS arrive in the Old City of Dali 大理, Yunnan, they encounter numerous sales pitches for Bai traditional costumes, Bai music and dance, or Bai food. For tourists with more than a passing interest or people who cannot travel to Dali, books on “Bai culture” explain local customs. Religion is one of the categories included in studies of Bai culture, giving rise to titles on “Bai religion” that sit on shelves next to books on “Naxi religion,” “Miao religion,” “Yi religion,” and “Yao religion.” Such labels imply that these ethnic groups follow distinctive religious traditions and conceptualize religion in ethnic terms. They further reinforce the idea of a monolithic group identity based on ethnicity and religion.

In this article, I use the worship of the local goddess Baijie to illustrate how members of the Bai 白 nationality in Yunnan’s Dali region represent the relationship between ethnicity and religion in different ways. While Bai scholars and tourism officials present Baijie’s worship as part of Bai ethnic religion, most villagers do not appeal to ethnic discourse in discussing her but instead use gendered language. This underscores the need to locate ethnicity within the complex web of identities, including gender, educational background, class, age, and locality. I argue that the intersections of gender and ethnicity are the keys to understanding the worship and representation of Baijie in contemporary Dali. Specifically, Baijie’s example shows how gender and ethnicity relate to each other dynamically: in some contexts people depict Baijie as a symbol of Bai femininity, but elsewhere people present Baijie as a chaste woman and do not mention Bai identity.

Baijie is worshiped only in the Dali region, and the name “Baijie” has a long history in Dali. It first appeared with the characters “Bai [or White] Sister” 白姐 in the twelfth century as the name of a Buddhist goddess. However, by the nineteenth century “Baijie” came to refer to a legendary widow martyr, and her name was written with the characters “Cypress Chastity” 柏節.¹ The conflation of these figures resulted from the homophones of the “White Sister” Baijie and the “Cypress Chastity” Baijie; as the identity of the Buddhist Baijie was forgotten, the form of the widow martyr arose to fill in the blanks.² The Baijie worshiped now as a tutelary village deity often contains elements of both forms. Though there is a spoken Bai language, the name “Baijie” appears to have developed in relation to Chinese characters rather than as a Bai language name. Bai speakers today pronounce the name “Baiji.”

Today there are approximately thirty Baijie temples in Dali Prefecture. They are spread over Jianchuan 剑川, Heqing 鹤庆, and Eryuan 洱源 counties, as well as



MAP I. Yunnan Province.

Dali Municipality (MAPS 1 and 2). Here I will focus on the Baijie temples of Eryuan County and Dali Municipality, where the goddess is uniformly identified with her widow martyr form. My choice of Baijie is based on her popularity in this region. Not only is she among the most widely worshiped village deities, there are also two annual festivals in her honor that transcend village affiliation.

Dali Prefecture is home to most of the two million members of the Bai nationality, which explains the full name of this administrative unit: the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture 大理白族自治州. Bai comprise roughly 33 percent of the prefecture's total population and are outnumbered by the Han, who comprise 50 percent of the population but mostly reside in urban areas. Other major ethnic groups in the area are the Yi, who constitute 13 percent of the population, and the Hui, who make up only 2 percent of the population but live near urban centers.

Like the rest of Yunnan Province, the Dali region has long been at the periphery of Chinese territory. The Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) established military outposts there, but did not bring the region under direct central control. From the seventh through the thirteenth centuries, Dali was the capital of the independent Nanzhao 南詔 (649–903) and Dali (937–1253) kingdoms, which ruled the area of modern-day Yunnan Province along with parts of modern-day Sichuan, Guizhou, Vietnam,



MAP 2. Dali Bai Autonomous Province. Shaded area indicates Erhai Lake.

Laos, and Burma. The Mongol conquest incorporated Dali into the territory of the Yuan dynasty, and Dali remained part of Ming and Manchu territory before becoming part of the Republic of China and finally the People’s Republic of China.

Today most Bai trace their ancestry to the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms, but records from those kingdoms make no mention of Bai ethnicity. The first reference to “Bai people” (*Bai ren* 白人) comes from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) *Yunnan zhibi* 雲南志略 (Concise Gazetteer of Yunnan; 127). Starting in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the Yang family in Dali’s Xizhou area wrote several texts that mentioned Bai ethnicity and used the term “Bai script” (*Bai wen* 白文) for their text that represented the spoken Bai language with Sinitic graphs.³ References to Bai people increased throughout the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, as seen through the entries in regional gazetteers. Many of these records use the term “Bo” 僰 interchangeably with Bai, and by the Qing dynasty, the term *minjia* 民家 (“civilian”) was also common. This name distinguished the indigenous population from the Ming soldiers who settled in the area.

Premodern Chinese records about the Bai usually describe them as similar to the Han or as having adopted Chinese culture. Extant sources from the Nanzhao

and Dali kingdoms show that the ruling classes used Sinitic script, followed Tang administrative structure, and raided Chengdu for Chinese technology. This is significant considering that these regimes neighbored not only Chinese territory, but also Southeast Asia, India, and Tibetan regions. Contrary to the assumption that Nanzhao and Dali elites drew from each of these bordering cultures, it appears that they overwhelmingly looked to the Tang and Song.⁴ Though Mongol, Ming, and Manchu sources justified their sovereignty in Yunnan by portraying it as a civilizing project, they still noted the relatively advanced culture of the Bai. By the Qing dynasty, many Bai (or Minjia) claimed their ancestors came from Nanjing during the Ming dynasty, which reflects the reality of intermarriage between Ming settlers and Dali locals after the Ming conquest of the region as well as the desire for the higher status associated with Han identity.⁵ The close contact between Dali and Chinese territory, especially after the Ming conquest, justifies my focus on Bai culture as it relates to the discourse of Chineseness.

Writings on Dali from the nineteenth to the twentieth century expressed uncertainty over the nature of Bai or Minjia ethnicity. Some scholars saw the Bai/Minjia as wholly Sinicized, a view that stemmed from Dali residents' self-identification to outsiders as "Minjia" (a term that implied less ethnic difference than the term "Bai") and their claims of Nanjing ancestry. HSU used Dali's "West Town" as a prototypical Chinese village. He noted that the Minjia (Min Chia) language differed from the Yunnan dialect of Chinese but accepted locals' claims of Nanjing as an ancestral homeland (1967, 17–18). FITZGERALD instead saw significant differences between Minjia and Chinese systems of society, kinship, and religion. Fitzgerald additionally pointed out that people of the Dali Plain referred to themselves as "Bai" in the Bai language, either as "Shua Bër Ni" (speakers of the Bai language) or simply "Bër Dser" (Bai) (1941, 20 and 12).

It is significant that Dali residents used language as a primary criterion for ethnocultural distinction. Language was an important factor in the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) ethnic classification (*minzu shibie* 民族识别) project of the 1950s, and H. R. Davies's linguistic taxonomy of the peoples of Yunnan was particularly influential in prefiguring the *minzu* classification.⁶ DAVIES classified the Minjia or Bai language as a Mon-Khmer family language, but wrote that "Min-chia [Minjia] is undoubtedly the most puzzling language of Yün-nan to classify" because it contained elements of all four language families in the region (1908, 343–44). William CREDNER, however, claimed that Bai was an older form of Chinese with no relation to the languages of Thailand (1935, 9). The Bai or Minjia have long been seen as occupying a grey area between Chinese and non-Chinese identities.

There was no controversy surrounding the designation of the Bai as a *minzu*. As Fitzgerald noted in the Republican era, language was how the Bai identified themselves as Bai. Historical records also supported the view that the Bai *minzu* had occupied the Dali region for centuries. There was debate over the ethnonym used for the indigenous people of Dali. If "Minjia" was more commonly used in the Republican period, why was it replaced by "Bai" in the PRC? The ethnologist and Lijiang native Fang Guoyu (1903–1983) argued that "Minjia" was a term that

Ming soldiers used for the indigenous people of Dali, neither an ethnonym nor an autonym of Dali natives. In contrast, Dali natives identified as “Bai,” and “Bai” had a longer history as an ethnonym (FANG 1957, 14–16).

Even after the ethnic classification project identified the Bai as a minority nationality, the debate over their ethnic difference continues, as seen in the work of David Y. H. Wu and Beth Notar. WU follows the precedent of Francis Hsu in viewing the Bai or Minjia ethnicity as essentially empty (1989, 16–17). He argues that the classification of the Bai as a *minzu* has preserved ethnic difference while cultural differences between Bai and Han have disappeared. Notar has pointed out the problems with this position, noting that Wu conducted his field research in a Bai community in eastern Yunnan, which has a smaller Bai population than Dali Prefecture, and that he ignored expressions of ethnic difference. She further argues that most members of Chinese minority nationalities have little to gain by emphasizing their differences from the majority Han, who still serve as the benchmark of civilization and cultural advancement (NOTAR 1999, 63). By minimizing differences with the Han or representing themselves as “sinicized” (*Hanhua* 汉化), members of ethnic minorities are claiming to be similarly “advanced” (*xianjin* 先进). Susan BLUM’s research shows that Han people in Yunnan do view the Bai as an advanced nationality, precisely because they seem so similar to the Han (2001, 173).

However, the development of ethnotourism and the establishment of affirmative action for minority nationalities in reform-era China means that, for some, cultural differences bring benefits in the form of increased tourism dollars and increased government funding for studying and preserving ethnic cultures. Local officials and the tourism industry have an interest in promoting a distinctively Bai culture, and different levels of government in the PRC have supported the reconstruction of religious sites in minority regions in order to speed economic development there in the form of ethnotourism (MCCARTHY 2004, 39; OAKES and SUTTON 2010, 19). In fact, the Eryuan County government contributed funds to the reconstruction of a Baijie temple in 2008–2009 with the twin goals of celebrating Bai ethnic culture and turning the site (located north of Erhai Lake) into a tourist destination. Ethnotourism only works when tourists believe that the destination has something exotic to offer. Tourism industry employees and local officials I spoke to in Dali lamented the greater success of their northern neighbor Lijiang in attracting both domestic and international tourists. This success rests on the superior marketing of Naxi culture as an exotic commodity. In the case of ethnotourism, being “almost Han” becomes a liability rather than an asset.

Government support of ethnotourism often exists in symbiosis with minority intellectuals, by whom I mean members of minority nationalities who publish books and articles on their ethnic group and work in universities, ethnic culture research centers, and/or government offices. Scholarly work on “ethnic culture” forms a foundation for tourism projects. Bai intellectuals are often concerned with articulating the cultural practices that distinguish their nationality from others, especially the Han. Religion (usually called “ethnic culture”) is central to their formulation of a distinctive Bai ethnicity. Bai scholars point to the Buddhist tradition of *azhali*

jiao 阿吒力教 (*azhali* is a transliteration of the Sanskrit term *ācārya*, which means “teacher” or “preceptor”) and the worship of tutelary village deities called *benzhu* 本主 (literally, “local lords”) as examples of a uniquely Bai religion. Baijie falls in the latter category, so Bai intellectuals describe her worship in ethnic terms.

Minority intellectuals in China find themselves in the position of writing their nationality’s history and defining their nationality’s distinctive characteristics. Ralph LITZINGER, writing about Yao scholars’ historiography in the post-Mao era, identifies many competing narratives that minority intellectuals navigate, from Marxist theories of sociohistorical evolution to resistance against Han domination to orientalist Western ethnography (2000, 38–42). Minority intellectuals are by no means a monolithic group, and Bai scholars are no exception. Yet it is still dangerous to assume that scholars’ representations of Bai culture represent the Bai people as a whole. Bai scholars writing about Bai culture consciously address and tend to reify ethnicity, while ethnicity plays a less static role in non-scholarly discourse.

I follow dominant theories of ethnicity in treating ethnicity less as an innate, unchanging identity, and more as a category to be invoked according to circumstances. Ethnicity has salience for different people at different times. Just because a state-issued ID card classifies someone as Bai does not mean that person appeals to Bai identity in every social situation. Stevan HARRELL’s research (2001) on the different representations of Nuosu ethnicity in different kinds of communities is particularly instructive in demonstrating the diversity of ethnic discourses that the *minzu* concept can obscure. Nuosu in remote mountain villages express ethnic identification differently than urban Nuosu in predominately Han communities. Rogers BRUBAKER observes that the rhetoric of ethnicity frequently masks clan and class interests, and he warns against “reinforcing the reification of ethnic groups in ethnopolitical practice with a reification of such groups in social analysis” (2004, 10). Taking Bai intellectuals’ claims at face value perpetuates the hierarchies implicit in those claims. This approach is not meant to dismiss Bai intellectuals’ views as “inauthentic” or depict religion as merely a tool of self-interest but to explore potential alternatives for representing religion and Bai ethnicity.

In the case of Baijie’s cult, gender presents a fruitful alternative discourse to that of ethnicity, while also intersecting with ethnicity at many points. Charlene MAKLEY has called for the need to recognize the ways in which ethnic bodies are gendered and vice versa in her research on gender and religion in Tibetan areas (2007, 8–10). Often the intersection of ethnicity and gender is one in which femininity and ethnic Otherness overlap. Xiaofei KANG notes the double marginality in the cults of fox spirits, which implicitly identify female succubi with barbarians through the homophone *hu*, meaning both barbarian 胡 and fox 狐 (2006, 27–35). Dru GLADNEY has pointed out that the Han majority claims the masculine role by characterizing minorities as feminine; he cites as evidence the frequent use of women in ethnic dress to represent the various minority nationalities (2004, 58). As a result, Chinese popular culture often sexualizes and eroticizes minority women.

Though women and minorities might be identified with each other as marginal

figures in societies dominated by men and Han Chinese, MAKLEY's point that gender and ethnicity cannot be treated as symmetrical discourses is extremely important (2007, 10). This is apparent in Louisa Schein's argument that male and urban members of minority nationalities reproduce the process of "internal Orientalism" (in which Han Chinese exoticize and feminize minority nationalities) by displacing subaltern identities onto women and rural populations (SCHEIN 2000, 101; 239). These most marginalized people have some agency in wielding discourses of ethnicity and gender as well, which bears on my discussion of villagers' representations of Baijie (SCHEIN 2000, 211). My study of Baijie draws on these notions of internal Orientalism and displacement to illustrate the centrality of gender in understanding "ethnic religion."

Gender is a central theme in Baijie's contemporary cult in two respects: first, Baijie herself is said to embody feminine virtues, given her identity as a widow martyr who committed suicide rather than marry her husband's killer. Second, the gender of Baijie's worshipers affects which aspects of Baijie's identity they emphasize. James L. WATSON's study of Tianhou 天后 (aka Mazu 妈祖) worship in South-east China concluded that representations of the goddess differed along gender lines, with men depicting Tianhou as a symbol of territorial hegemony, and women describing Tianhou worship in more personal and familial terms (2004, 297). Baijie worship seems to follow a similar trend. Before examining the relationship between gender and ethnicity in the present-day worship of Baijie, it is necessary to return to late imperial Dali, where this form of Baijie developed. Many of the themes related to gender and ethnicity from this period still reverberate today.

EXCEPTIONAL VIRTUE: BAIJIE, ETHNICITY, AND CHASTITY IN THE LATE IMPERIAL PERIOD

The widow martyr form of Baijie arose from the contact between Dali elites and the chastity cult of the Ming and Qing dynasties. A skeletal version of Baijie's legend first appeared in the Yuan (1253–1382 in Dali) *Ji gu Dian shuo ji* 記古滇說集 (Collection of stories of ancient Dian), but the story was not fleshed out until the early fifteenth century with the writing of the *Bai gu tong ji* 白古通記 (Comprehensive records of Bai history). Subsequent versions differed in their details, but the overall structure has remained consistent from the Ming to the present. The legend is set at the beginning of the Nanzhao king's unification of the Dali region in the mid-eighth century. I call the heroine Baijie because this is how she is known today, but before the nineteenth century she was called Cishan 慈善 ("Kindness"). The general plot of Baijie's legend is as follows:

In the eighth century, six small kingdoms ruled the Dali region of what is now Yunnan Province. The southernmost kingdom, called Nanzhao, was the strongest, and its ruler Piluoge [皮羅閣] was plotting to conquer his five rivals. He set his plan in motion by inviting the other five kings to worship their common ancestors on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth lunar month. When the ruler of

the Dengdan [鄧談] kingdom received his invitation, his wife Baijie suspected it was a trap and urged him to stay home, but he dared not offend the powerful Piluoge. Baijie then affixed an iron bracelet to his arm and sent him on his way. As it turned out, her fears were well founded; after the six kings finished their ritual obligations and were feasting in Pine Resin Tower, Piluoge snuck downstairs and set the structure aflame, killing all inside. Baijie's foresight in giving her husband an iron bracelet meant that his was the only body that could be identified and given a proper burial. Piluoge, impressed by both her beauty and intelligence, decided to take her as a wife. Baijie agreed, but only if Piluoge carried out three conditions. After he had completed the third task, they sailed out on Erhai Lake, where she plied him with liquor then tried to kill him with a knife. Even a drunk Piluoge was able to defend himself against the attack, so the defeated Baijie jumped into the lake and drowned. Piluoge regretted having wronged such an honorable woman and renamed her kingdom's capital "City of Virtue's Source" [Deyuan cheng 德源城].

Baijie's legend fits into the chastity cult promoted by the Ming and Qing courts throughout their empires. It is widely recognized that chastity became viewed as the preeminent feminine virtue in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Widows who refrained from remarriage and women who died to protect their honor were championed in gazetteers and granted awards by the state (LU 2008, 32). The discourse on widow chastity and suicide was primarily the province of men. Male writers used the symbol of the faithful widow, especially that of the widow martyr, to express their own political loyalty. This analogy of loyal official and faithful widow is found in Chinese texts from before the Common Era and was well known to all those with a Confucian education.⁷

Feminine virtues were central to Ming and Qing civilizing projects that targeted the "non-Chinese" populace. The Qing official Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀 (1696–1771), a Guangxi native, actively promoted widow chastity in border regions and pushed his subordinates to find virtuous women and nominate them for state honors. Chen saw the chastity cult as a necessary component in civilizing the frontier "barbarians" (ROWE 1992, 18). Women's sexual behavior represented the overall level of a given people's civilization. Chinese writings about "barbarians" invariably recount how their women are unrestrained by Chinese standards of propriety. According to the eighth-century *Man shu* 蠻書 (Book of barbarians; 72), under the Nanzhao kingdom a woman's "secret lovers" would see her off on her wedding night, and women were free to wander about in public. If barbarian women could be tamed, so could their male counterparts.

Several records about Baijie from the Ming and Qing reflect these stereotypes about gender and ethnicity by drawing a contrast between Baijie's virtues and the barbaric environment from which she came. The "Exemplary Women" (*lienü* 列女) section of the Kangxi-era (1662–1722) *Dali fu zhi* 大理府志 [Gazetteer of Dali Prefecture] begins by noting that Baijie's refusal to serve her husband's enemy "is difficult for the noblest of men, let alone these ladies who were born among the border barbarians" (*Dali fu zhi*, 160). A Qing inscription from a Baijie temple

at the site of her legendary deeds marvels that her heroism was not “lost in the passage of time just like barbarian clouds and miasmatic rain,” given that the “barbarians” of the Nanzhao kingdom did not know the value of chastity and took no steps to ensure the survival of her story (*Cishan fei miao ji* 慈善妃廟記). These accounts present Baijie’s virtues and the survival of the legend that recounts those virtues as exceptional.

Baijie’s exceptionalism was reinforced through the establishment of shrines in her honor starting in the Ming dynasty. State sponsorship of shrines honoring virtuous women occurred throughout the Ming and Qing empires, but in places like Dali it was part of the larger civilizing project aimed at sinicizing barbarians. In Yunnan, Baijie was one of a few pre-Ming figures commemorated in this way. An entry in the *Dali fu zhi* states, “Shrines should be built for these two people [Baijie and another widow martyr] and offerings made to them so that the women of this commandery will look up to them and be moved to emulate their virtuous spirit. This is one aspect of encouraging popular customs” (*Dali fu zhi*, 113).

The practice of enshrining virtuous women (and men) was meant to provide role models for villagers without access to formal education in the Confucian tradition. However, the didactic function of such shrines was often superseded by their religious function, as the men and women honored there came to be seen as responsive to prayers. This happened to the widow martyr Baijie in the Qing; according to a passage from a local gazetteer, Baijie was considered particularly efficacious for controlling the weather (*Jianchuan zhou zhi*, 628; *Heqing fu zhi*, 278).⁸ Spiritual efficacy (*ling* 灵) subverted the original rationale for founding such shrines, and in some regions this transformation from exemplar to responsive deity could lead to a shrine’s destruction (CARLITZ 1997, 633). In this way, treating enshrined exemplars as efficacious gods can be read as a way for villagers to exercise their agency and repurpose a state institution to their own ends.

The Baijie legend itself contains themes of resistance to the state. The Ming and Qing civilizing projects were an affront to the Dali elite, whose ancestors had been well versed in Chinese culture since the Nanzhao kingdom. Works from the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms are written in elegant Chinese and frequently laud Confucian virtues, including “women’s virtues and women’s achievements” (*fujie fugong* 婦節婦功).⁹ The local elite’s defense of their culture in response to the Ming conquest was expressed in the *Bai gu tong ji*, which depicted the Bai as a people with a shared history that began in a Bai kingdom preceding the founding of Nanzhao.¹⁰

The detailed legend of Baijie that comes from the *Bai gu tong ji* primarily serves to assert early knowledge of Confucian values in Dali, but its setting also recalls Dali’s independent history. The correlation of faithful widow and loyal official in the Chinese literary tradition lets us read it as a subtle protest against the Ming: Baijie’s refusal to marry another man is akin to an official’s refusal to serve a new dynasty, a position that many Bai elite adopted after losing the relative independence granted by the Mongols (HOU 2002, 93–102). This is underscored by the fact that Baijie

also takes up a political role after her husband's death. Her body is a metonym for her kingdom, and she shields both from the Nanzhao king's advances.

Even in late imperial China, when the widow martyr form of Baijie emerged, she meant different things to different people. For non-native officials of the Ming and Qing empires, she represented the potential for barbarians to learn Confucian virtues as well as the contrast between Chineseness and barbarism. For local elites who resisted Ming (and later, Qing) rule, she represented loyalty and fidelity as well as the independent regimes that once ruled the Southwest. Most non-educated residents of Dali would have encountered her through her shrines and the annual celebration of the Torch Festival (*Huoba jie* 火把节) on the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth day of the sixth lunar month, which in Dali commemorated the fiery deaths of the five rulers in Pine Resin Tower as well as Baijie's subsequent heroism. Some people also would have worshiped her as a goddess for reasons completely unrelated to chastity and might have conflated her with other figures called Baijie. It is difficult to know much about this third group from extant Ming and Qing sources, especially how or when they appealed to categories of Bai and Han in their own lives. Anthropological methodology allows for a fuller understanding of how different residents of contemporary Dali represent Baijie and of ethnic religion in general.

BAIJIE WORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY DALI: VILLAGE GOD WORSHIP

Baijie's worship in contemporary Dali is part of the regional tradition of village god (*benzhu*) worship. As in other parts of China, public religious worship ceased in Dali during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976 when temples were razed or repurposed. The revival of village religion began during the reform era but intensified in the 1990s, when improved economic conditions allowed for the reconstruction of temples. It is common to see plaques commemorating reconstructions and renovations of temples carried out during the past twenty years. The worship of village deities has been classified as a part of “ethnic culture”; the term “religion” (*zongjiao* 宗教) is reserved for the official institutions of Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity (Catholic and Protestant), and Islam. Some villagers took pains to tell me that their village god worship was not “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信), reflecting its classification as such in previous decades.

Though villagers rejected the label “superstition,” they rarely replaced it with another classification such as “ethnic culture,” “religion,” or “folk belief” (*minjian xinyang* 民间信仰). Most villagers used the terms *benzhu*, reciting scriptures (*nianjing* 念经), and paying obeisance (*bai* 拜) in talking about local religion. When villagers did label local practices, their chosen terms reflected both the influence of national political discourse in avoiding “religion” and “superstition,” and the repertoire of concepts at work in the local context. In Phoenix Town, Dali Municipality, a middle-aged man who adopted a village intellectual role referred to *benzhu* worship as “local customs” (*bendi xisu* 本地习俗). In Green Town, Eryuan County, middle-aged and elderly women distinguished Buddhism (*fojiao* 佛教) from “Lotus Pond teachings” (*lianchi jiao* 莲池教), reflecting the distinction between the local Bud-

dhist association and the Lotus Pond Society. Another example from Green Town showed the improvisational nature of these categories: a teenage girl described Baijie worship as ceremony (*lijie* 礼节), tradition (*chuantong* 传统), and virtue (*meide* 美德), but I noticed later that the terms “tradition” and “virtue” featured prominently on a poster at the temple. When I asked her about Baijie worship, she first thought of the authoritative language on the temple wall. These examples highlight the ways in which state categories shape, but do not determine, local discourses.

Benzhu was the most commonly used term for talking about local religion, but Bai scholars explain the Bai language term for *benzhu* differently. Some identify it as a term for the village ancestor, *duobo* (grandfather) (LI Zuanxu 2004, 408). Others claim that *benzhu* translates the Bai term *wuzeng*, meaning “my lord” (YANG Z. 2004a, 629). The term *benzhu* first appears in written sources in 1901, and its usage remains restricted to the Dali Plain. YOKOYAMA convincingly argues that it was seen as a more civilized substitution for *tuzhu* 土主, “native lord,” a term that connoted rusticity and backwardness through the character *tu* 土 (1992). *Tuzhu* is now used more for Yi ethnic culture. The term *benzhu* seems to have made inroads in villages, where many villagers use the Bai pronunciation of *benzhu* as *bezuni*, but people are more likely to refer to their village god by his or her title (Baijie was commonly called “holy mother,” *shengmu* 圣母, or *semu* in Bai).

Though the term *benzhu* is associated with Bai culture and the Dali Plain, *benzhu* worship displays considerable continuity with village religion elsewhere in China. Tutelary village deities govern the general welfare of the people living within community boundaries. Villagers visit their temples to pray and make offerings at the lunar New Year, annual temple festivals, and major events in their lives; they make specialized requests to other deities in the temples that govern areas such as fertility, wealth, or education. Village god temples exist alongside those of official Buddhism and Daoism, which people also visit at appointed times throughout the year or for particular concerns. These differ from village god temples in that outsiders regularly visit them. Village god temples usually consist of one main hall flanked by two smaller halls. The main village deity sits in the center of the main hall with two or three secondary gods on each side; specialized gods occupy the smaller halls.

The pantheon of primary and secondary village gods in the Dali region reflects a variety of traditions. Most primary village gods, like Baijie, are seen as figures from Dali history; others, such as the god Mahākāla, come from Buddhism. Many of the secondary gods are pan-Chinese deities, such as the God of Wealth (Caishen 财神) and Goddess of Fertility (Zisun Niangniang 子孙娘娘), though some are unique to Dali, such as the Indian monk Candragupta credited with introducing Buddhism to the region. There is no strict hierarchy of village gods, but they fit into the structure of imperial bureaucracy that characterizes local religion elsewhere in China (WOLF 1978). As such, village gods often have imperial titles. Variations on “emperor” are common for male deities, while “holy mother” is common for

female deities. Because many village gods are seen as historical figures, they possess human personalities, feel emotions, and have relationships with other gods, including romantic affairs. Inter-village networks link different gods in familial relationships of parent-child, siblings, and husband-wife, and it is not uncommon for a primary village deity to be depicted in the temple with his or her spouse and children.

In Dali, associations called Lotus Pond Societies (*lianchihui* 莲池会) or “Mama Societies” (*mamahui* 妈妈会) manage the worship of village deities. Society members are women whose children are grown and have families of their own. There is no minimum age, but most are above fifty. Lotus Pond Societies gather to recite scriptures and make offerings to the village deity at specified times, usually the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month and the village deity’s birthday. Their scriptures include familiar works from the Buddhist and Daoist canons as well as texts devoted to local and regional deities. Most society members are illiterate and memorize the scriptures, though many groups also have written versions. Scriptures can be chanted in either Bai or the local variant of Mandarin. Lotus Pond Societies are led by a Head Scripture Mother (*da jingmu* 大经母), usually the most senior member or the member with the greatest mastery of the scriptures. They are assisted by Scripture Mothers (*jingmu*), who are also relatively senior members well versed in the liturgy. Gatherings of the Lotus Pond Society are occasions for members to wear Bai clothes, identifiable by their embroidery and shades of turquoise and indigo.

The male counterpart to the Lotus Pond Society is the Grotto Scripture Society (*dongjinghui* 洞经会). Whereas Lotus Pond Societies have a more Buddhist orientation, Grotto Scripture Societies are more Daoist, as their name suggests. Their scripture performance is centered around music: while one man recites scriptures from the Daoist canon, the others play traditional Chinese instruments. The men of Grotto Scripture Societies wear everyday clothes or traditional Chinese dress, not distinctively Bai attire, which for men consists of white pants, an embroidered or batik vest over a white shirt, and a black or white turban. Grotto Scripture Societies perform less frequently than Lotus Pond Societies, and their social status is higher. Members of Grotto Scripture Societies are respected for their musical talent and cultural knowledge, but the members of Lotus Pond Societies tend to be dismissed as ignorant old women.

Scholarship on Lotus Pond Societies and Grotto Scripture Societies describes them both as examples of Bai ethnic culture, but in both cases evidence suggests greater continuities with religion elsewhere in China. The Grotto Scripture Societies, which have received more scholarly attention, probably entered Yunnan in the Ming and Qing dynasties from the Jiangxi-Zhejiang region (KLEEMAN 1994, 83). More research on the Lotus Pond Societies is needed, but they appear to be quite similar to women’s lay religious groups elsewhere in China, especially those in the southeast (ANDERSON 2002; CHEUNG 2008).

This overview of local religion in Dali highlights both the many ways in which village religion in Dali looks like village religion in predominately Han areas of China and the ways in which Bai intellectuals represent village religion as part

of a distinctively Bai ethnic culture. To better understand how people in villages engage with this ethnic discourse and how ethnic discourse intersects with gender, I will turn to the contemporary worship of Baijie in Dali Prefecture.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted research on the contemporary worship of Baijie from August 2007 through August 2008, with additional research in August 2009. Having compiled a list of twenty-six Baijie temple locations from Chinese scholars' surveys, I went to each village to determine whether there was a Baijie temple there and to conduct interviews with the locals if a temple was present. If I was able to find out the date of the annual temple festival, I would return at that time for further research. My preliminary research showed that Baijie worship was active in four administrative regions: Dali Municipality, Eryuan County, Heqing County, and Jianchuan County. I will focus on the first two because of the dominance of Baijie's widow martyr identity there.

Because I do not speak the Yunnan dialect of Chinese and was not able to speak the Dali Plain form of the Bai language well enough at the time of this research to conduct interviews, I was accompanied by research assistants who asked questions in the above languages and translated the responses into standard Mandarin. I identify locations of Baijie temples only by county, adopt pseudonyms for the villages, and use demographic information to identify interviewees. The interviews I conducted were informal and conversational. I used a list of questions but frequently went "off-book" based on the respondents' answers. My questions were designed to elicit responses about Baijie's identity, including relevant legends, and her possible connection to Bai ethnicity. The questions included "Who is Baijie?" "How does Baijie differ from Guanyin?" and "What kind of person was Baijie?" I quickly learned which questions prompted blank stares, though this too was informative, and I added queries to the list if they proved to be fruitful.

Several factors affected the responses I received. I conducted interviews in public places usually occupied by a group of people, which led to reticence on the part of many interviewees. Gender played a noticeable role in conducting interviews. It was not uncommon for the women of the Lotus Pond Society to profess ignorance or defer to men when asked about Baijie legends or temple history, but they would jump in with their own contributions after the men started speaking. In many cases, people might have refrained from answering my questions in detail for fear of censure by their peers. The vast majority of people I interviewed were over the age of fifty because few young people spend much time at the village temple. When I did have the chance to talk to younger people, usually at temple festivals, they were far less likely to profess knowledge of religious issues or local lore. In addition, most people I interviewed were women, despite their general tendency to defer to men, because far more women visited the village temple as part of their participation in the Lotus Pond Society.

One of the bigger surprises I experienced was that most villagers said they had no idea who Baijie was. This was unexpected because the interviews took place at Baijie temples on the occasion of the temple festival. It serves as a reminder that religious knowledge is not a prerequisite for participation in religious practice. Knowing the village deity's identity and background was not important for most villagers; they attended temple festivals primarily for the entertainment and socializing. They might donate money to the temple and pay their respects to Baijie by bowing and lighting incense, but this did not depend on knowledge of her legend.

I am also aware that my own identity as a white, American, non-Bai, non-Chinese outsider shaped people's responses to my questions. It is for this reason that I qualify my findings as the public representation of religion and ethnicity; I cannot claim to know, based on this research, how religion and Bai ethnicity are discussed privately among members of the ingroup. My status as a foreign scholar with a notepad and digital camera imbued me with some authority; I represented the outside world, which led some people to appeal to me for help with personal or village problems. At the same time, I was a relatively young woman, which made it easier to communicate with the women of the Lotus Pond Society but more difficult to learn about men's practices.

“THE ETERNAL PRIDE OF BAI WOMEN”: BAIJIE'S PUBLIC FACE

Understanding Dali villagers' descriptions of Baijie requires an understanding of how Bai scholars and tourism officials represent the goddess and her worship in ethnic and gendered terms. Therefore, before I present the findings from my field research, I will give an overview of Baijie's public image.

When Bai intellectuals write about Baijie, they always refer to her in the context of Bai ethnicity. She exemplifies the Bai adoption of Confucian values, which supports their depiction of Bai culture as a unique synthesis of elements drawn from a wide variety of sources (YANG Z. 1994, 47). Baijie's identity as a female *benzhu* highlights the gender inclusivity of the Bai pantheon (YANG Z. 2004b, 559). Bai scholars under the PRC interpret Baijie's suicide as self-sacrifice for the sake of the masses, which lends a proletarian bent to her legend (YANG Z. 1994, 155; LI Z. 2004, 412; YANG X. 2004, 418). Baijie also represents a part of Bai history, as her legend is set at the beginning of the Nanzhao kingdom's ascent. As such, she encapsulates both the distinctiveness of Bai culture and history as well as the advancement of the Bai as measured by their similarity to the Han.

In recent years, Bai intellectuals' depiction of Baijie as part of Bai ethnic religion has found support in two large public projects. The play *Baijie Shengfei* 白洁圣妃 (Holy consort white purity) was staged in 2006 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. The title of the play combines the “holy consort” title of the Buddhist Baijie with the “purity” of the widow martyr Baijie. The playwright Li Li, who adapted the Baijie legend into a drama, wrote that “Baijie was seen by later people as the incarnation of beauty, goodness, virtue, and chastity. She has been revered for generations as a Bai ‘ben-

zhu” (Li Li 2006). Li Li herself is neither Bai nor from Dali. She currently serves as the head of the Shanghai Yuejuyuan 上海越剧院 (Shanghai Yue Opera Institute). In 2008 the play toured China, eventually winning a top prize at the Fifth Festival of Beijing Opera in Shandong (WANG 2008). The resulting publicity has presented Baijie’s legend as an important part of Bai culture. One online critic from the Weishan area, the original home of the Nanzhao kings, complained that the drama overemphasized Bai culture, given that the Nanzhao rulers were the “proud ancestors of today’s Yi people” (ZUO 2008). Someone with the handle “feiyuxi2008” posted a message on the Yahoo China forums with the title “Baijie Shengfei: The eternal pride of Bai women.”¹¹ She or he recounted the plot of the play and emphasized Baijie’s Bai identity. These examples show that when Baijie is depicted for a national (or even international) audience, her ethnic identity comes to the forefront.

The second large public project was the new Baijie temple constructed in 2008–2009 at the “City of Virtue’s Source,” the site of the former Dengdan capital. This new temple, which had its grand opening on 14 August 2009, was far larger than the previous one. After talking with an official in the Eryuan County Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (Minzu zongjiao ju 民族宗教局), I learned that the project had been partially financed by the Eryuan County Government, though private donations supported most of it. For a branch of the local government to support this kind of project, even if it was euphemistically cast as “ethnic culture,” marks a departure from previous government attitudes toward local religion under the PRC. Adam Yuet Chau’s work on the ways in which local government officials choose how much to enforce the central government’s policies on religion and invest in religious revivals sheds light on the processes at work in Eryuan (CHAU 2006, 213). In Dali, local officials have leeway to categorize practices like *benzhu* worship as “ethnic culture” if they do not fit neatly into the “religion” paradigm (and the same government office conveniently manages both).

Local intellectuals were consulted about cultural and historical issues surrounding the temple, which explained why the main plaque read “Holy Consort White Purity” (using the same characters as the play), in reference to Baijie’s earlier identities. The title “holy consort” (*shengfei* 圣妃) bothered the older women I spoke with at the grand opening ceremony, who saw it as disrespectful, as they referred to Baijie as “holy mother,” *shengmu*. Even the intellectuals who had served as advisors on the project were unhappy with certain parts of it: one complained that the giant statue of Baijie made it seem more like a Buddhist temple than a *benzhu* temple, because *benzhu* statues are human sized (FIGURES 1 and 2). These complaints speak to tensions between villagers and intellectuals, culture and tourism, and history and modernity. So far, *benzhu* worship has not been commodified by the tourism industry, but the reconstruction of Baijie’s temple might have been the first step.

It is still too early to tell if these examples presage a larger role for Baijie as the face of Bai ethnicity, but they show that public representations of Baijie place her in

the context of Bai religion. These two projects are based on Bai intellectuals' representations of Baijie and *benzhu* worship. The same intellectuals who write on Bai culture are also the experts consulted by the government and tourism industry. In this way, intellectual representations of Bai ethnicity and religion spread throughout Dali and beyond. However, these representations are not necessarily accepted at face value. The Weishan native criticizing Baijie Shengfei for its neglect of Yi culture, and the older women complaining about the use of the title "holy consort" instead of "holy mother" show that intellectual discourse is not completely authoritative.

Representations of Baijie in the writings of Bai scholars and public projects emphasize Baijie's ethnic identity, but they also present Baijie in highly gendered terms. LI Li (2006) and the online source referred to in note 11 describe Baijie as embodying feminine virtues, and the characters used for her name denote the virtue of sexual purity. In some ways, this echoes the local elite's adulation of her in the Ming and Qing. Baijie could serve as a counterweight to the image of unrestricted minority female sexuality, proof that Bai ideals for women's behavior are in line with those of the Han, and that the Bai are therefore an advanced nationality. While Dali intellectuals in the Ming and Qing increasingly minimized their cultural differences from the Han, in contemporary Dali both Bai scholars and tourism officials must confront the perception that the Bai are too Sinicized to



FIGURE 1. Previous statues of Baijie and her husband at the "City of Virtue's Source," 2006 (all photos by author).



FIGURE 2. New statue of Baijie at the “City of Virtue’s Source,” 2009.

attract government funding for research projects or tourists interested in exotica. They can use Baijie to emphasize the differences between Bai and Han.

Minority women are still seen as sexually freer than their Han counterparts, which has led to ethnicity-based sex tourism and the rise of the “Yunnan school” of painting that centers on erotic images of non-Han women (HARRELL 1995, 11). As the name of the Yunnan school suggests, southwest China is a hotbed of this phenomenon: from the so-called matriarchal society of the Mosuo with its practice of “walking marriage,” to the Dai women of Xishuangbanna bathing in rivers, minority women have become a commodity that brings in tourist dollars.

Beth Notar has noticed a similar phenomenon in the Dali region, where young Bai women appear in ethnic dress as “public relations props” and male tourists remark on the attractiveness and desirability of Bai women (NOTAR 1999, 138 and 142). Depictions of Baijie appeal to this image of minority sexuality—she always appears as an attractive young woman—while claiming a higher moral ground.

ETHNICITY, LOCALITY, AND GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY BAIJIE WORSHIP

It is more difficult to discuss Bai villagers’ representations of Baijie and ethnicity because villagers constitute a more diverse group. In fact, not all villagers who worship Baijie are Bai; another surprise in the course of my research was discovering that the residents of one village with a Baijie temple identified as Han (though one man said they were originally Bai and converted en masse to Han identity in the Qing to avoid ethnic discrimination). Even Bai intellectuals acknowledge that village god worship in the Dali region can include Han and Yi people, but they still characterize the practice as Bai. Villages in Dali have different economic conditions, with more prosperity in the plains and poverty in mountainous regions. This has a straightforward relationship to villagers’ education levels, as poorer families cannot afford schooling and there are few academic institutions away from the county and district seats. Within villages there are a variety of educational backgrounds, and people who have worked as teachers, doctors, or held government positions tend to command the most respect with relation to cultural knowledge. Unsurprisingly, these village intellectuals are almost all men.

I distinguish “village intellectuals” from “Bai intellectuals” by defining the former as those who do not publish books or articles on Bai culture, but who read those works and communicate their contents to other villagers. This top-down influence is apparent in the spread of the widow martyr Baijie legend. Other forms of Baijie are being replaced by this form due to the emphasis on the widow martyr Baijie in the writings of Bai intellectuals. For example, in Jianchuan County, Baijie’s original Buddhist identity has largely been forgotten, but the widow martyr identity has not fully replaced it, leaving most villagers in towns with Baijie temples unsure about who their tutelary deity is. A retired doctor in a town with a Baijie temple took it upon himself to research her identity using newspapers, magazines, and books written by Bai scholars. He ended up composing a twelve-page account of Baijie’s widow martyr legend and pasting it at the temple for locals’ edification. The account invokes ethnic discourse by beginning with an overview of Bai history and *benzhu* worship, of which the author writes, “Benzhu are a distinctive religious belief of the Bai people.”

The regions that are my focus in this article, Eryuan County and Dali Municipality, lie in the Dali plain, which is marked by Erhai Lake in the east and the Diancang Mountains in the west. Eryuan County extends north into a somewhat mountainous region, but transportation in both Eryuan and Dali is convenient, unlike the more isolated counties of Heqing and Jianchuan to the north. The close proximity

of Dali and Eryuan to each other and the ease of communication within this area have contributed to the uniform representation of Baijie I found there.

Residents of Dali and Eryuan uniformly identified Baijie as the widow martyr and recounted at least parts of her legend. They talked about her in terms of local history and geography: people frequently identified her as coming from their village and connected her life story to familiar landmarks such as the Erhai Lake and the City of Virtue's Source. Knowledge of Baijie was reinforced through two annual festivals: the Torch Festival, which commemorates the burning of Pine Resin Tower and Baijie's loss of her husband, and a festival that commemorates Baijie's drowning. The Torch Festival is celebrated throughout central Yunnan. It probably originated as an agricultural festival that aimed to rid the fields of potential blight, but various legends became tied to its observance, including that of burning Pine Resin Tower. Today it also celebrates the birth of firstborn children (especially sons) (BORETZ 2011, 91). The main practice of the Torch Festival is the lighting of huge communal torches that provide fuel for smaller hand-held torches, which people then wave around the fields or at their friends and neighbors for good luck. I discuss the gendered practices of the Torch Festival below.

The festival that commemorates Baijie's drowning is celebrated at different times under different names: in Eryuan it occurs on the first day of the seventh lunar month and is called *Youhaihui* 游海会 ("Lake Touring Festival"), while in Dali it is celebrated on the eighth day of the eighth lunar month and is known by the gruesome name *Laoshibui* 捞尸会 ("Corpse Recovering Festival"). The Lake Touring Festival coincides with the pan-Chinese Ghost Festival, which focuses on propitiating those who died particularly violent deaths or ended up in liminal states in the afterlife, and thus has clear connections to Baijie's death by drowning. Festivals commemorating Baijie's death by drowning also recall the Double Fifth Festival, or Dragon Boat Festival, which became connected to the poet Qu Yuan's drowning death, and in fact the Corpse Recovering Festival also involves dragon boat races on Erhai Lake.

The Torch Festival and festivals commemorating Baijie's death have ensured her survival by anchoring her story in time and space, and they distinguish her from other village gods, who do not have translocal festivals dedicated to them.¹² They also constitute local variations of regional or national festivals: the Torch Festival, celebrated throughout central Yunnan, has many different legends explaining its origins, while the Lake Touring Festival fits into the widespread rites on behalf of the dead in the seventh lunar month as well as the Dragon Boat Festival. This ties into the theme of Dali culture fitting into larger patterns in religion throughout China.

In addition to talking about Baijie as a part of their local history, people in Dali and Eryuan frequently described her in gendered terms as a chaste, virtuous woman. The middle-aged Head Scripture Mother of the Lotus Pond Society in North Town, Dali, told me that Baijie is called "Holy Consort" because she never slept with a man and possesses "holy purity" (*shengjie* 圣洁). They worship her as their village deity because she is pure (*ganjing* 干净), virtuous (*shoujie* 守节), and beautiful. The elderly woman in charge of a temple in White Town,

Dali, where Baijie is worshiped as one of nine altar gods, also emphasized Baijie's chastity (*zhenjie* 贞洁). Though none of the men I interviewed in Dali and Eryuan emphasized Baijie's chastity, an elderly man and woman in Heqing County together described the widow martyr Baijie as "the most chaste woman" and "a role model for women." Written scriptures and inscriptions composed by men at Baijie's temples also mention her chastity as a central part of her legend. For example, a text titled *Huo shao Songming lou* 火烧松明楼 ("The Burning of Pine Resin Tower") inscribed on a stele at the village temple in Green Town, Eryuan, described Baijie as follows: "The lady's most virtuous behavior was such that she did not fear violently sacrificing her life to kill her enemy. She was truly a heroine!" It appears that women and men alike emphasize Baijie's feminine virtues, but these virtues have different implications for men and women.

As a chaste, virtuous woman, Baijie serves as an example for village women. In Green Town, Eryuan, I asked an elderly woman who belonged to the local Buddhist organization how Baijie differed from the bodhisattva Guanyin. She responded that Buddhists also revere Baijie and see her as a role model and compassionate figure that deserves emulation. Baijie is a woman of exceptional character, whereas Guanyin is a universal savior. Men and women referred to Baijie as a *bangyang* 榜样 (role model), a term that was popularized in the 1960s through the "Xuexi Lei Feng hao bangyang" 学习雷锋好榜样 ("Study the good role model Lei Feng") campaign. This bears similarities to Bai scholars' characterization of Baijie as a self-sacrificing hero of the masses and reflects the incorporation of socialist discourse in representations of "traditional culture." Though both men and women spoke of Baijie as a role model, the gendered virtues they ascribed to her implied that she was specifically a role model for women. A woman in her sixties from North Town, Dali, defined Baijie's chastity (*zhenjie*) as not remarrying. She claimed that many older women in the village followed Baijie's example in this respect, but that younger women did not.

Baijie's status as a moral exemplar for women was apparent through rituals in which women physically identified with her. Lotus Pond Societies managed the celebrations of the Torch Festival and Lake Touring Festival. Part of their celebration involved reciting a scripture that recounts Baijie's story, which reinforced their knowledge of the legend and symbolically reenacted the legend through ritual recitation. During the Torch Festival, women used a mixture of garden balsam stem and vinegar to dye some or all of their fingers red from nail to knuckle. The color faded from the skin in a few weeks, but the fingernails remained red until they grew out. This practice, which was widespread throughout the Dali and Eryuan region, indicated a strong identification of local women with Baijie: it commemorated how Baijie bloodied her hands when she clawed through the ashes for her husband's remains. At the Eryuan celebration of the Lake Touring Festival, Lotus Pond Society members recreated Baijie's final journey by taking canoes out on West Lake, reciting her scripture, and making offerings of incense and spirit money to her.

The research I conducted during the Torch Festival and Lake Touring Festival centered on middle-aged and elderly women in Lotus Pond Societies who gathered to recite scriptures and make offerings at the legendary sites of the Dengdan

capital and the lake where Baijie drowned. In both festivals in two consecutive years, I observed gatherings of almost exclusively women. However, research by other scholars shows that men participate in these festivals too—especially the Torch Festival—but in different ways. This reflects the overall gendered division of labor in village religion.

In analyzing the masculine symbolism of the Torch Festival, Avron Boretz focuses on its connection to virility, represented clearly by the phallic torch, but also through the practice of only allowing fathers of firstborn sons to sponsor and build the torch; fathers of firstborn daughters traditionally suffered the humiliation of digging the hole into which the torch was erected. Boretz also writes of the competition between young men to seize the *shengdou*, a papier-mâché model of traditional rice containers that is inserted near the top of the communal torch. Winning the *shengdou* portends future sons and hence enhanced social standing for the victor (BORETZ 2011, 95–97). Though the legend of burning Pine Resin Tower can still be incorporated into lighting the large torch, men do not focus on the figure of Baijie.

Gender differences in the celebration of the Torch Festival point to differences in how men and women approach Baijie. For women, the celebration of the Torch Festival (and the Lake Touring Festival) reinforces a corporeal identification with Baijie through dyeing their fingers, reciting her story, and recreating her final journey. Baijie’s embodiment of chastity and purity also relates to social discourses that define and control women’s bodies. To echo James L. WATSON’s conclusions (2004) about the gendered worship of Tianhou in Southeast China, men appear to encounter Baijie more at the level of village or locality, while women also encounter her as a personal deity.

Villagers in Dali and Eryuan did not talk about Baijie in ethnic terms. This surprised me because I had initially read the name Baijie—particularly written as White (Bai) Sister—as a general symbol of Bai femininity. One of my standard interview questions was “Do only the Bai worship Baijie?” In Dali and Eryuan, no one responded in the affirmative, though in Phoenix Town, Dali, a middle-aged man who had read extensively on Dali history said, “It seems like only the Bai worship Mother Alidi [aka Baijie] as a *benzhu*, as the *benzhu* are indigenous. In the Ming dynasty many Han people migrated here, married locals, and adopted local customs.”¹³ He identifies the origins of *benzhu* worship as Bai, but acknowledges that members of different nationalities also participate.

If I asked about Baijie’s *minzu* identity, most respondents seemed unsure but would identify her as Bai if given a list of options (for example, Han, Yi, Tibetan, Hui, Bai). In North Town, Dali, two women in their sixties identified Baijie as Han and explained that her father was Han, but her mother was Bai. This reflected their identification of their neighborhood as predominately Han, with some Bai families, and several people claiming both Han and Bai descent. This was understandable for villages with mixed Han and Bai populations or for the one village with a Baijie temple where residents identified themselves as Han (mentioned

above), but I was still confused by the apparent gap between Baijie's identity as a part of local history and Bai ethnicity.

One interpretation of this gap goes back to Notar's explanation for why Bai people minimize differences with the Han: they do not benefit from accentuating these differences. Usually Bai people cite only language and eating habits (referring to their consumption of raw pork) as examples of ethnic difference, and are more likely to emphasize their differences with neighboring Bai villages than with the Han (NOTAR 1999, 74). Language is particularly important in this respect, given that in the Bai language the term for "Bai people" is "Bai speakers" (*sua bei le*), while the Han are called "Han speakers" (*sua ha le*). In addition, the boundaries between Bai and Han in the Dali and Eryuan areas are fairly fluid and intermarriage is common. Bai villagers might not describe Baijie worship or their religious practices in general in ethnic terms, because they do not see much difference between these practices and those of their Han neighbors. Commonalities between Bai and Han religion are highlighted in contrast to the Islam practiced by the Hui people, who despite constituting only 2 percent of Dali Prefecture's population are a visible minority in the Dali plain.

There is no question that some Bai people, especially those who write and read about Bai ethnicity, characterize village god worship as a distinctive part of Bai culture that is closely tied to the history of the Dali region. However, my findings suggest that most people who engage in or are conversant with village god worship do not talk about it in terms of ethnicity, but in terms of locality and gender. This difference in the representation of Bai ethnicity and religion reflects the variable salience of ethnicity as a category in Bai people's lives. Though their state-issued ID cards classify them as members of the Bai nationality, the meaning of this classification varies based on class and educational background as well as circumstances. Though I did not encounter many representations of Baijie worship as an ethnic practice, it is possible that under different conditions the same respondents would appeal to ethnicity in talking about village god worship or Dali history.

CONCLUSIONS

When I began my field research in the Dali region in 2007, I thought that if any village deity represented Bai ethnicity, it would be Baijie. Her name included the sound "Bai," she played an important role in Bai legendary history, she was worshiped in two annual Bai festivals, and Bai intellectuals talked about her as a symbol of Bai femininity. The fact that most people did not talk about her in ethnic terms was completely unexpected and prompted me to reconsider my assumptions about Bai ethnicity, history, and religion. Baijie's example illustrates the dangers of accepting elite claims about ethnicity as representative of the whole group and treating ethnicity as a constant, uniform category in people's lives.

Gender is an important theme in depictions of Baijie in the writings of Bai scholars and public projects related to tourism, but in these examples it is clearly related to ethnicity, which remains the dominant theme. It is possible that the intersection of ethnicity and gender is also a factor in the very lack of ethnic discourse in

villagers' representations of Baijie worship. If women's sexual continence remains a benchmark of civilization, villagers are highly unlikely to emphasize ethnic difference where chastity and fidelity are concerned. One female Mosuo restaurateur I spoke with in the touristy Old City of Dali asserted (in reference to stereotypes of Mosuo women as promiscuous) that Mosuo women were even more Confucian than the Han. Ethnicity can still play a role even if people do not explicitly invoke it.

However, in the case of Baijie's worship, the absence of ethnic discourse can be better explained by the greater relevance of village identification and gender in people's daily lives. Most villagers did not claim to speak for their entire *minzu*, as do Bai intellectuals, so the question of how their culture differs from that of the Han had little bearing on their day-to-day existence. While gender intersects with ethnicity in Bai intellectuals' and tourism officials' representations of Baijie, gender operates separately from ethnicity in villagers' representations. To place Baijie worship within the category of "ethnic religion" would be to privilege the views of Bai intellectuals over those of Bai (and some non-Bai) villagers.

Baijie's example illustrates how gender and ethnicity intersect dynamically, such that she represents ethnic femininity for some and sexual purity for others. Moreover, her worship is gendered in ways that have little to do with ethnicity, as in men and women's divergent participation in her cult. Discourses of ethnicity and gender produce and demarcate boundaries. For Bai scholars who write for a Bai and non-Bai audience, tourism industry personnel, and state officials, demarcating the ways in which the Bai differ from the Han (and from the Yi, Naxi, and other minority nationalities in Yunnan) is an important concern. It is not surprising that people in these areas present Baijie as an example of distinctively Bai religion, nor that they use her embodiment of feminine virtue to depict Bai culture as relatively advanced. For most villagers in Dali, demarcating ethnic boundaries between Bai and non-Bai (especially Bai and Han) could stir up conflict, but demarcating gender roles is important because so much of village life, including religion, is based on gender. It is possible that villagers will start talking about Baijie in more ethnic terms as ethnotourism spreads into *benzhu* temples and villagers increasingly encounter Bai scholars' work on ethnic religion. Now, however, Baijie demonstrates the dangers of assuming that everyone subsumed in the category of "Bai religion" or "Bai culture" would understand the category in the same way. Baijie's Bai identity is far less static and monolithic than her name implies.

NOTES

1. In all the ways of writing Baijie's name, the characters can be pronounced as either "Baijie" or "Bojie." There is no separate name for the goddess in the Bai language. "Cypress Chastity" is an allusion to the "Cypress Boat" (*Bai/bo zhou* 柏舟) poem in the *Book of Odes* (*Shi jing*) in which the cypress boat is a symbol of a faithful woman.

A third figure in Bai historical legend shared the name Baijie (White Sister), namely the mother of Duan Siping 段思平, founder of the Dali kingdom (937–1253). However, she does not play as prominent a role in historical records as the Buddhist Baijie and widow martyr Baijie.

2. This is apparent in records from Langqiong, Eryuan County: the White Sister temple (Baijie miao 白姐廟) mentioned in the Kangxi-era county gazetteer has become a “Cypress Chastity Shrine” (Baijie ci 柏節祠) in the Daoguang-era gazetteer, which explicitly identifies its deity as the wife as the widow martyr (*Langqiong xian zhi* I, 793; *Langqiong xian zhi* II, 375).

3. I examine the Yang family’s role in promoting the idea of Bai ethnicity in chapter 4 of my dissertation (BRYSON 2010, 211–12).

4. This is particularly clear from the objects and texts that were sealed in pagodas at the end of the Dali kingdom, as they were not affected by cultural changes brought by the influx of migrants from central and eastern China in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

5. Sydney White notes that some Naxi people also claim Nanjing ancestry (WHITE 1997, 310).

6. Thomas Mullaney has shown that the short time period allotted for the classification forced government officials to rely on existing models for ethnic classification. Linguistic taxonomy offered the best classification system, as it was sufficiently “scientific” and much of the groundwork had already been done (MULLANEY 2004, 212; 217).

7. As early as the *Shiji*, the official Wang Zhu declares, “loyal officials do not serve two lords; virtuous women (*zhennü* 貞女) do not have two husbands” (*Shiji*, 2457). Chinese writings throughout the Qing continue to use this line in discussing the proper conduct of both officials and wives; the latter appears most frequently in biographies of “exemplary women.”

8. These two accounts are identical. They identify Baijie as Cishan and Ningbo fei 寧伯妃, an error for Ningbei fei 寧北妃, as “Ningbei Consort,” another of the widow martyr’s titles.

9. This reference appears in the epitaph of a high-class woman of the Dali kingdom (YANG 1993, 11).

10. HOU Chong makes this argument compellingly in his study of the *Bai gu tong ji* (2002).

11. See the thread by “feiyuxi2008” titled Baijie Shengfei: Baizu nüxing yongheng de jiao’ao 白洁圣妃:白族女性永恒的骄傲. Zhongguo Yahu luntan 中国雅虎论坛, 30 January 2010, <http://bbs.yahoo.cn/read-htm-tid-597711.html> (accessed 3 March 2010).

12. Other translocal festivals in Dali that incorporate village god worship, such as the three-day festival Raosanling (or Raoshanlin), involve multiple temples and multiple gods.

13. This informant explicitly identified “Mother Alidi” (originally the Buddhist fertility goddess Hārītī) as Baijie. The two figures have been paired in Dali since the Dali kingdom.

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