CHAPTER ONE

THE SOUTHWESTERN FRONTIER

Yunnan, the modern Chinese province, lies south of the traditional border between the Chinese empire and the independent kingdoms of the southwest. The first unified political power to rule this rugged terrain was the Nanzhao (A.D. 738–902), or ‘Southern Kingdom.’ As a regional power on the rise, it sought expansion in competition with two formidable contemporaries: the Tubo (Tibetan) Kingdom in the west and Tang China in the east. Prolonged conflict led eventually to the disintegration of the Tibetan Kingdom and the collapse of the Tang dynasty, both having been beleaguered by increasing internal turmoil, which ultimately contributed to the demise of the Nanzhao itself. The succeeding Dali reign (937–1253) witnessed reasonable tranquility until its kingdom was crushed by invading Mongol armies. The fall of the Dali Kingdom in 1253 set the stage for a fundamental transformation of China’s southwestern frontier from an independent kingdom to a Chinese province that was given the name Yunnan.

The incorporation of Yunnan into China was accidental from a military point of view, but in political, social, and economic respects this territorial integration would appear to have been inevitable. The strategic position of the southwestern frontier and its geographic remoteness would define the special relationship between the province and the central government from the start, and in the centuries to come, that relationship would have a significant impact on socio-economic developments in Yunnan. This political legacy is central to our understanding of China as a polity that made territorial integrity its utmost concern while abiding differences in cultural practice and even conceding to indigenous rule.

The Mongol conquest of China and its periphery began the history of dual rule—a highly centralized Chinese bureaucracy on the one

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1 It was founded upon the unification of six political-cultural entities (zhao): namely, Yuexi, Langqiong, Tengtan, Shilang, Mengxi, and Mengshe, surrounding Er-hai. Among them, Mengshe was the dominant one, located furthest to the south, hence the name of the kingdom.
hand and local-level autonomy on the other—which was to survive through the dynasties that followed. Modern state building in the twentieth century continued, without exception, to “draw upon the deep administrative experience of the Old Regime” (Kuhn 2002, 133). The ideology of the ruling party (nationalist or communist) in actuality has only had a limited bearing on state practice that has been adapted to the vastness of the territory and ethnic diversity of the population. The burden on the head of the state to ‘preserve the estate’ (to play again on the metaphor of the extended family) saw the PRC state invariably identifying with its predecessors. History, one may say, is not simply the past, but a mirror of the present. It ties all political issues dominated by territorial and administrative integration, the context in which the imagined ancestry by the ruler bolsters the sense of identity that holds China together. In this light, ‘Chinese-ness’ is constructed with references to the country as a political entity, which makes the Chinese issue of ethnicity very different from what it is in the West.

1.1 Imperial Rule

The Mongol conquest began a chapter in history during which China’s population was subject to rule established by non-Chinese/Han. Chinese, in this historical context, referred to the people of the Central Plains, who identified themselves with the central state adhering to the imperial Confucianism. The Mongol rule of China for the first time set up a formal state apparatus in the territory inhabited by non-Han peoples. Modifying the existing Chinese system, the Mongols brought significant changes to traditional rule. As such, the dynasty established by Mongols but ruled under the Chinese name Yuan (‘Original’) became “the seedbed of important phenomena” that further developed in the Ming and Qing dynasties (Fairbank and Goldman 1998, 119). The founding emperor of the Yuan and those of the succeeding dynasties may well have differed considerably in their visions of China, but they all adhered to similar practices to sustain their rule. Their success rested on a dualism that upheld imperial Confucianism and Han-Chinese bureaucratic institutions, while selectively incorporating non-Han (Mongol and Manchu, in particular) devices in the management of military and religious affairs on the frontier. The integration of the non-Han population was achieved through the administrative device of employing