CHAPTER FOUR

THE THREE-RIVER BASIN

The Three-River basin (sanchuan ba) owes its name to the rivers known once upon a time as the Meng-chuan, Hui-chuan, and Ji-chuan. This expanse of rice paddies is walled in by two mountain ranges: the Dongshan (Eastern Range) and Xishan (Western Range). Its southern border extends to Chenghai, the eighth largest lake in Yunnan; its northern border meets with the river Wulang, a major tributary of the Jinsha in the west. This fertile basin (Plate 4) had been until 2006 under the jurisdiction of two sub-county administrative units: Jinguan and Liangguan townships, named after the Ming garrison commanders, Jin Mingshi and Liang Congren.1

Of the more than fifty thousand inhabitants living in the villages across the basin, the majority are descendants of officers and men from the Ming garrison, Lancang wei, who were deployed here at the end of the fourteenth century to defend and farm the southwest frontier of the Chinese empire. The garrison history is at the core of local identity: one often hears the Three-River basin residents say to outsiders, “Our forefathers came with the garrison deployment from Changsha fu during the Hongwu reign.” The villages and sub-village organizations still bear traces of the Ming garrison today, and popular religion keeps alive the memory of the Han migration from the Central Plains six centuries ago. The local saying “Yi niang (‘mother’) Han laozi (‘father’)” differentiates the descendants of the Ming garrison men from the indigenous population as well as from the Han elsewhere.2 In this somewhat closed community, the local dialect carries a distinct Hunan-Changsha flavor and the tint of indigenous languages, whereas the patrilineal kinship system accentuates the role of women in domestic affairs.

The history of the settlement of the Three-River basin and the basin’s natural endowment not only influence social organizations but

1 Jinguan and Liangguan townships were merged into one (now called Sanchuanba) in 2006 as part of the rural government reorganization in the wake of the rural tax reform (see Chapter Six).

2 The word yi in this usage is not the same as the Yi of the officially classified nationality, but rather in the traditional use meaning ‘indigenous’ or ‘barbarian’ (simply non-Han).
also shape the local economy. Rice farming in the basin is both the substance of life and cultural tradition: the paddy fields were built up by the garrison men who “from home in the Central Plains brought with them seeds and implements, in addition to livestock and technology” (Yongshengxianzhi bianweihui 1989, 138); agriculture has since constituted the major contribution to the local economy. The identity of the people with the place, the land and the basin, underpins what we may today identify as ethnic consciousness. Traditional livelihood centered on rice, and the attachment of the people to the land underscores a distinct disdain for non-subsistence production in the Three-River basin. However, the transformation of rural economy, with the current development of China’s western region, is making the Three-River basin more accessible to the outside world, while the prospect of a better life has the potential to radically alter the pattern of the traditional livelihood to which the residents of the Three-River basin have so far been accustomed.

4.1 Old Garrison Settlement

The Three-River basin is situated at 1,550 meters above sea level. Its agreeable climate (frostless for three quarters of the year), fertile soil, and abundant water resources all provide favorable conditions for crop farming and guarantee good harvests. For centuries, the basin has dependably supported the local population. Grateful, the descendants of the Ming garrison like to say to themselves and to others: “This is a great place to live” (zhege difang haozai). The tranquility and material comfort, which the Three-River basin residents enjoy, have significant bearings on the structure of social relations and the organization of the local community. The local community is rooted in, and has expanded from, the original military settlement; the history of the Ming garrison is subtly interwoven with daily life. Yet, in contrast to other frontier regions of China, the legacy of the garrison settlement has left no militant marks on the social organizations in the Three-River basin. The absence of elaborate rituals associated with extra-family organizations in the local institutions of worship serves as another sign of repose. The domestic scene in the Three-River basin is thus centered on the immediate kin relations that form a living unit.