I began pursuing the idea of doing fieldwork among the Tai ethnic minority\(^1\) group in Yunnan twenty years ago when I was a graduate student at Berkeley. China later became a tempting destination left off the itinerary in the early 1980s when a graduate student from Stanford published an article in a Taiwanese newspaper on abortion practices in China. After that it became increasingly difficult for students from American institutes to obtain permission to do field research in rural China.

But the prospects remained within me throughout the years and when Professor Chatthip Nartsupha, head of the Tai History and Culture Studies Project, invited me to join him on a trip to Daikong, Yunnan, I readily accepted his invitation. In March 1997, I bid him goodbye in Kunming and took my family to Muang Khon in Daikong prefecture. The task I had set myself—indeed, the general theme which sustains my study—is to discover how, over the last four centuries of Chinese domination, the Tai groups in Daikong managed to maintain a strong sense of cultural continuity and ethnic identity.

After a brief survey of Tai villages in Muang Khon, Muang Wan, Muang La, Muang Ti and Muang Mao, I chose Lak Chang village as my research site for several reasons. First of all, compared to other villages in Daikong, Lak Chang was rather small (203 households) and hence more manageable as a research unit. More importantly, the villagers of Lak Chang impressed me in various ways. Even though most villagers now live in wattle and daub houses with cement floors and

\(^1\) I use the term Tai to refer to various Tai ethnic groups in Southeast Asia and its periphery, such as the Tai Ahom of Assam in India, the Shan of Shan State in Myanmar, the Tai Daikong in Yunnan, the Tai Lue in Laos, the Tai Dam, Tai Dang and Tai Khao in Sipsong Chu Tai and Vietnam, including the Zhuang and the Dong of Kweichou, Hunan and Kwangsi in China, etc. Chinese scholars invariably call these ethnic groups ‘Tai’. The word Thai, on the other hand, refers to the Thai people in Thailand, who are a part of the Tai ethnic groups in Southeast Asia.
shingle roofs, rather than timber houses with thatched roofs, they still retained a great deal of the Tai cultural traditions and a strong sense of ethnic identity. The village was a typical rice-farming community in the main paddy-growing area of Muang Khon which had begun double-cropping in the late 1960s. Land was increasingly valued because of expanded markets and increased demand for local agricultural products. The introduction of combine-harvesters a decade later resulted in more intensification of land-use and increasing ethnic tensions over landholdings, as the Han Chinese migrants began moving in and laying claim to a share of the village’s paddy fields.

But the struggle between ethnic groups in Daikong is not merely a struggle over land, property rights, agricultural products and cash income. It is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and represented, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give meaning to local history and ethnic identity. This book is an attempt to present an ethnographic account of how a sense of Tai ethnic identity is situationally reconstructed and reproduced in Daikong.

To conduct a research project in rural China between 1997 and 1998 and spend another two years at work in libraries and archives is to incur a mountain of debts that can never be fully repaid. I wish to record here my thanks to the villagers of Lak Chang who received me and my family with a courtesy and warmth I shall never forget. The same generosity was displayed by Mr and Mrs Gong Su Zheng, directors of the Tai Association in Daikong, who have taught me a great deal about Tai social life. I am indebted to Dr Sompong Wittayasakpan for his sound advice and to Mr Zhao Hong Yun at the Yunnan Nationalities Research Institute and Mr Ping Long Fang for his assistance in the field.

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