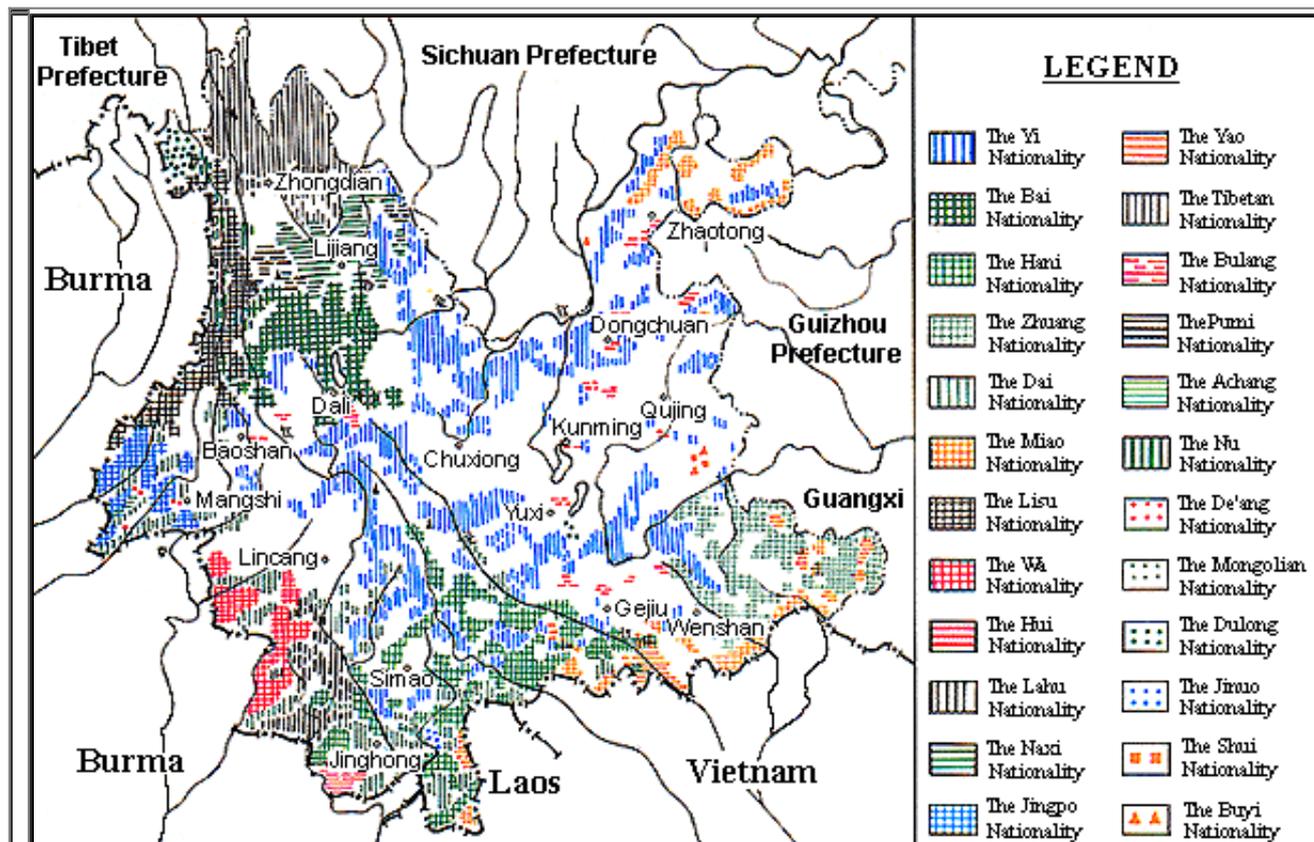


III. Minorities in Yunnan

Yunnan is known for the great diversities of ethnic minorities within the province. The 1990 Census counted 12.36 million national minorities in Yunnan (out of a total nationality population of 91.32 million throughout China), contributing to over one-third of the total population in the province (total provincial population 36.97 million). In all, fifty-six nationalities have been identified in China. As many as fifty-one of them can be found in Yunnan.

The more sizeable groups include:

	1990 Population		1990 Population
Mongolian (蒙古)	13,148	Wa (佤)	347,731
Tibetan (藏)	111,335	Lahu (拉祜)	408,304
Miao (苗)	895,704	Shui (水)	7,971
Yi (彝)	4,060,327	Naxi (納西)	265,450
Zhuang (壯)	1,010,876	Jingpo (景頗)	118,412
Bouyei (布依)	34,101	Bulang (布朗)	81,876
Manchu (滿)	7,044	Achang (阿昌)	27,619
Yao (瑤)	172,722	Pumei (普米)	29,333
Bai (白)	1,341,508	Nu (怒)	26,667
Hani (哈尼)	1,249,297	Deang (德昂)	15,397
Dai (傣)	1,014,643	Dulong (獨龍)	5,539
Lisu (傈僳)	556,533	Jinuo (基諾)	17,851



Diagrammatic sketch of Yunnan's minority nationalities distribution
(source: http://www.sinohost.com/yunnan_travel/festival/sketch.html)

There are so many ethnic minorities in the province essentially because in historic times Yunnan was extremely inaccessible due to its remoteness and its rugged terrain. People there were then left alone to survive without much interactions with other cultures. Han Chinese exerted much influence on the development of Yunnan. Nevertheless, the Han civilization penetrated predominantly lowland areas, political centers, localities that were more accessible, or places that interactions between Han and local peoples could have easily proceeded. Indigenous cultures have thus prevailed in faraway and mountainous areas, and have contributed to the great diversities of ethnic minorities in the province.

The way of life of the ethnic minorities in Yunnan varies tremendously from place to place, and from group to group. In a sense, each ethnic culture is unique in some way. The following dimensions in languages, marriage forms and family structure, and religions are especially worth to notice.

Languages

With the exception of the Hui, who have adopted the Chinese language, all ethnic minorities in Yunnan use languages of their own. Yi, Bai, Naxi, Tibetan, and Dai peoples have not only languages of their own, but also rich heritage in the documentation of studies in astronomy, history, literature, and medicine. Some others, however, have developed oral but no written languages. Often, too, different dialects, and even written languages, prevail in different localities within the same ethnic nationality. Among the Dai, for instance, five different languages are in use; among the Naxi, four.

Religion

Like languages, religious beliefs also vary tremendously among the ethnic minorities in Yunnan. Most of them have still preserved traits of indigenous religions that used to thrive in local areas, such as **totemism** (the worship of symbols representing ancestors), **animism** (the worship of natural objects), and **shamanism** (the use of witchcraft, etc., for fortune-telling and healing purposes). In addition to that, among the Bai, **ancestral worship** prevails. The Naxi believe in their own **Dongba** religion. Some Naxi and Bai believe in **Chinese Buddhism**. Tibetans and a few Naxi believe in **Tibetan Buddhism**. Most of the Dai, Bulang, Achang, and Deang nationalities believe in **Hinayana Buddhism**. The Hui believe in **Islam**. Some Jingpo, Lahu, Lisu, Hani, Wa, Dulong, Miao, and Yi believe in **Protestantism**. A small number of them are **Catholics**.

Family structure

Marriage rules vary tremendously among nationalities. In addition to the norm of **monogamy** (one man being married to one woman), other traditions have also prevailed, including **polygamy** (the marriage of one man to two or more women), **polyandry** (the marriage of one woman to two or more men), and even **“group” marriage** (with no marriage form but people would live in a state of promiscuity, i.e., having sexual relationship with many people). Ever since the 1950s, due essentially to the increasing influences of Han Chinese and governmental policies, however, monogamy has gradually been adopted as the prevailing norm among most nationalities in Yunnan.

The “good” and the “bad” of such cultural diversities

Here are some points to think of and consider during your trip to Yunnan. You may come up with your

own judgement and conclusion as well on the basis of your own observations in the field.

- (1) They make Yunnan a good “classroom” for cultural studies, promising clues for better knowledge of human and cultural development.
- (2) That makes Yunnan an attraction for tourists and ideal for the tourist industry, because the cultural traits and artifacts promise so many unique human elements that cannot be found elsewhere.
- (3) Nevertheless, great diversities among the ethnic groups make it difficult for policy makers to formulate strategies to promote educational and economic development, leaving many members of minority nationalities in higher levels of poverty.