

## 七十七

In Dali, we found  
a lake shaped like an ear  
biking beside it  
the water was clear  
the ancient walled city  
a backpacker's dream  
minority cultures  
Bai, Hui, and Yi



## Chapter 77 – Hello Dali

Imagine a bamboo stalk 6” in diameter reaching up into the sky higher than 20 feet. Now imagine 6-8 of those bamboo poles strapped together with bamboo fibre and floating on a giant lake the shape of an ear. Standing on the boat, a single fisherman, barefoot, wearing a wide hat with a cone on top which looks a little bit like a very large semi-flattened chocolate drop. Around the fisherman’s shoulders there is a rain jacket made out of woven grass and on his shoulders rests a pole. Balanced at either end of the pole are two massive black with a greenish-blue sheen cormorants, each weighing approximately five pounds. Cormorants have long necks and a hook at the end of their strong bills, perfect for grabbing fish out of the water. Each cormorant sports a ring around its neck to keep them from swallowing their catch. On a signal from the fisherman, the pole is steadied and both cormorants take off, one right after the other. These amazing birds have been known to dive to depths of more than 30 feet and capture fish well over three pounds. When the cormorant returns, the fishermen collect the fish that are disgorged into the boat.



Many of the fishermen on these boats are Bai (白族 Báizú) people, descendants of the Qiāng minority (羌族 Qiāngzú) who moved to Yunnan from the Himalayas to found the Nánzhào (南詔) Empire more than a thousand years ago in the area around present day Dali in Yunnan. Other descendants of Qiang people became the more powerful Yi clan (彝族 Yízú) who ultimately ruled the Bai. It is said that the Yi people dressed in black and that the people who served them, the Bai people, dressed in white. Many Bai women

continue to wear white headgear, with embroidered costumes and many Yi women continue to wear black headgear, combined with colorful, embroidered clothes, and silver jewellery. The Bai Kingdom of Nanzhao existed during the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries followed by the Kingdom of Dali from 937-1253 CE. At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Kublai Khan and the Mongols invaded the area, and the formerly independent Nanzhao kingdom became a part of Yuan Dynasty China.



Among the people accompanying Kublai Khan were members of the Hui minority (回族 Huízú), who are Muslim, but are ethnically Han Chinese. The Hui make up a part of the rich diversity of the people in Dali, a community of 650,000 residents situated in north-central Yunnan about halfway between Kunming and Lijiang. The Hui people have fully integrated with the local population, becoming shop owners, traders along the Tea-Horse road, farmers, mine-workers, and restaurant owners. Their path to integration, however was not always an easy one. During the 1860's, there was a Muslim uprising in Dali, when, for a short period of time, Dali became an "independent city state" with a Sultan. Dù Wénxiù (杜文秀), Chinese Muslim leader of the Panthay Rebellion became the "Sultan of Dali" for 16 years. In 1873, however, Qing troops under the command of Cén Yùying (岑毓英) laid waste to his "kingdom." Cen Yu Ying, from Guangxi, a province to the south-east of Yunnan, had risen quickly to power. When Cen arrived in Dali, he supervised the decapitation of Du Wen Xiu. Three days after Du's decapitation, Du's top generals were welcomed by Cen to a banquet, where 17 of the generals, on a signal from Cen, were beheaded at the table. The following day, a 3-day massacre began,

with no Muslim man, woman, or child spared. Cen, himself, estimated that 4,000 Muslims were slaughtered and that number is considered by many as a conservative estimate. For three decades after that, a sign hung over the city gate stating that “traitorous Hui” were forbidden to enter Dali.

In early 1911, Yunnan pledged its loyalty to the newly established Republic of China. Cai E (蔡锷 Càì È) a Chinese revolutionary who had been appointed provincial Governor of Yunnan, challenged Yuan Shikai after Yuan attempted to dissolve the nascent Republic of China in 1916 and establish himself as emperor. Cai went on to become the Governor of Sichuan, and finally, a very powerful influential warlord. Later, Cai served as an inspiration to Zhu De, Mao Zedong’s staunchest ally from the beginning of the Communist revolution. Cai and other warlords managed to hold on to a fair amount of autonomy thanks to both trafficking in opium and the fact that Yunnan was geographically distant from most of the action happening in China during the Republican period.

Fast forward to the opening of the bamboo curtain and backpackers discovering Dali in the late 1980’s thanks to Lonely Planet’s *China – a Survival Kit*. Dali welcomed foreign newcomers at first, even renaming one of their main roads, “Foreigners Street” (洋人街 Yáng rén jiē) in their honor, even though it retained its old name Hùguó Lù (护国路) for the Chinese. Along that road there were cafés which sold pizza and banana pancakes as well as regional cuisine at low prices. There was freshly baked bread, spicy potato and corn dishes and freshly brewed Yunnan coffee. Cafes like Marley’s, Jim’s Peace Café, and the Tibet Café (said to be the oldest western café in Dali – opened in 1984) were perfect places to read, write, and socialize with fellow travelers from around the world. Travel writer, Bruce Connolly from China Daily called Dali his personal “Heaven on Earth” in the 1990’s when there were still horse-drawn taxis that would take local people up to their homes on the mountain slope.

. . . And the beat goes on.

In March 2020, a researcher for Sixth Tone *Fresh voices from today’s China*, Xu Song wrote an article entitled “Why Dali’s Hippie Migrants are a Model for Chinese Communities” in which he introduces the Chinese public to artists, novelists, and musicians in Dali’s diverse migrant community. Dali has become a haven for people who want to break away from the hectic life of China’s megacities. They even have alternative schools there, which ameliorate the academic pressure ubiquitous in the vast majority of Chinese schools through an emphasis on creativity and self-motivated learning. Xu had personally met with other “alternative migrant communities” around the world and was running a long term study in hopes that they may learn from one another.



Within the newly restored city wall surrounding Dali's eclectic Old Town, one can sip amazing coffee at the Shi Zi Shu Café or drink beer at Baldy's Belgian Beer Garden. In the mountain village of Nuòdèng (诺邓古村) 100 miles to the northwest, Bai people still cover fresh pig legs with a half inch of salt from a thousand year old salt well and cure them in cool, dark rooms for about a week. After that, they are hung up to dry in the fresh mountain air for from one to three years. The results are a dark, fatty, flavorful prosciutto-like ham. This ham is often eaten as a solo dish, although it sometimes cooked with cabbage, or served in soups. It also can be thinly sliced and served with breakfast eggs or in a sandwich.

On one side of Dali is Ěrhǎi Lake (洱海), a 25 miles by 4 mile long lake (about the size of Flathead Lake in Montana.) It sits at the base of the Cāngshān (苍山) Mountain range with an altitude of about 6200' in elevation. The Cangshan mountains are beautiful by their own right. Steps have been replaced by a cable car (actually 3 cable cars). There are mountain streams, a beautiful lake, and an 11-mile paved trail called the Jade Belt Road which you can easily hike in a day. Perhaps, the greatest wealth of Dali and all of Yunnan is its diversity. In addition to the Bai, the Hui, and the Yi people at least 22 of the other 56 recognized minorities in China call Yunnan their home.