

*Ambiguous Ambitions: Ma Rulong's Road  
to Power, 1860–1864*

The early years of the Panthay Rebellion were extremely taxing on the Qing court and their representatives in Yunnan. The central court faced threats in all parts of the empire and had few resources to spare for the provincial officials who were trying to bring the province back under government control. In spite of this lack of central support, provincial Qing officials were able to mount several concerted attacks against the rebels in Dali. That city being the former western administrative center of the Qing in Yunnan, they considered the rebels who held it the biggest threat to Qing dominion in the region; thus Dali quickly became the focus of all the military campaigns.

Between 1856 and 1860 several campaigns were launched west out of Kunming for the purpose of retaking Dali. The first, led by the provincial commander, Wen Xiang, left the safety of Kunming in July 1857, almost a year after Wen's pyrrhic victory at Yaozhou. His troops succeeded in pushing the Dali forces back from Binchuan and Jianchuan into the security of the Dali Valley.<sup>1</sup> Then, in a strategic error that would be repeated several times by Qing forces during the rebellion, Wen overplayed his advantage by advancing too quickly toward his goal. His supply lines, which stretched from Kunming several hundred kilometers westward through many pro-Dali areas, were strained to the breaking point. As a consequence, he was forced to end his offensive and return to Kunming before he could launch a decisive blow against the city.

Wen Xiang's 1857 campaign points to a second recurring feature of the Panthay Rebellion. Although the various uprisings in the first years of the rebellion reflected strong regional divisions, these divisions did not preclude rebel forces from directly and indirectly helping one another in times of crisis. In the case of Wen's push toward Dali, this help took the form of the concurrent siege of Kunming (see chapter 6), led by Ma Rulong and Xu Yuanji, which made it difficult for Wen to maintain pressure on Dali. By year's end the Dali rebels had regained control of the major cities surrounding Dali, and the southern rebels were still besieging Kunming.<sup>2</sup>

The following year, 1858, Governor-General Wu Zhenyu's deteriorating health and imminent departure broke the stalemate between those officials pursuing a peaceful end to the rebellion and those who sought to resume their project to exterminate the Hui. During his year as Yun-Gui governor-general, Wu had asserted a balanced style of leadership. His request to be allowed to step down due to illness was accepted in December 1858.<sup>3</sup> In his place the emperor appointed Zhang Liangji. Zhang had served many years earlier as the Baoshan magistrate under Lin Zexu and had returned to Yunnan several months earlier as provincial governor. Xu Zhiming, a native of Guizhou, was then promoted to governor. With Wu Zhenyu's stabilizing influence gone, this new slate of officials quickly returned to the anti-Hui policies of 1856.

Zhang and Xu had recently been battling the Taiping armies in the east. Now in Yunnan, they concurred that a continuation of Wu's conciliatory approach would lead to a complete loss of Qing control over the province. The two men reinstated a policy of suppression against all those who opposed government rule—but especially against the Hui. Throughout the spring of 1859, Zhang and Xu allowed the Han militias free reign to attack Hui communities, in effect breaking many of the promises Wu had made to Ma Dexin, Xu Yuanji, and Ma Rulong as conditions for ending the first siege of Kunming.<sup>4</sup>

To increase the pressure on the rebels at Dali, Zhang and Xu chose a young military officer, Zhu Kechang. A native of Yunnan, Zhu was a military licentiate and a decorated veteran of bandit suppression campaigns in neighboring Guangxi and Guizhou. As one of the more capable military leaders to emerge out of the 1857 siege of Kunming, he was the natural choice to lead the government's strongest offensive yet against the rebels in western Yunnan.<sup>5</sup>

In late February 1860, less than two months after Zhang assumed the office of governor-general, Zhu led his army westward from Kunming. Like Wen Xiang before him, his orders were to defeat Du Wenxiu and capture Dali; this would bring the rebellion to a quick and clear end.<sup>6</sup> At first, Zhu's military experience and knowledge of the region seemed to give the imperial forces the upper hand. In early March, Zhu routed Du's Pingnan armies in three consecutive encounters, killing more than two thousand rebels. Zhu then split his army into three smaller divisions and simultaneously attacked the districts of Yaozhou, Dayao, and Yunnan.<sup>7</sup> By April, all three objectives had been taken. Zhu now began preparing an advance on the cities that served as Dali's defensive perimeter.

Alarmed at how easily Zhu Kechang's troops were defeating all the rebel forces he launched at them, Du Wenxiu requested help from the province's religious leader, Ma Dexin; he also ordered his top general, Cai Fachun, to

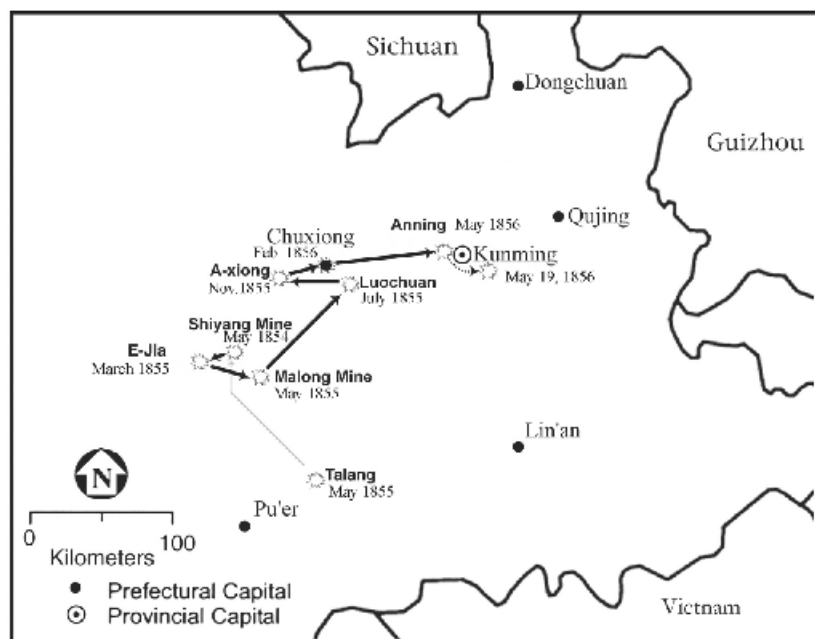
end his offensive in southwestern Yunnan in order to bring pressure on Zhu's flank.<sup>8</sup> While these requests were being sent out, the imperial forces occupied the small cities of Binchuan, Midu, and Hongyan—the last rebel garrisons protecting the Dali Valley itself. However, while Zhu and his forces were preparing a final push into the valley, the tide began to turn against them. Cai Fachun arrived with the most effective and battle-hardened of Dali's forces and swiftly worked his way north, retaking Midu and the Yunnan districts in quick succession. In Binchuan he caught Zhu's dwindling forces flatfooted and cut off their retreat. On September 9, the Dali troops swarmed the beleaguered imperial troops and killed Zhu.<sup>9</sup>

Zhu's defeat was a turning point in the rebellion. The Qing officials in Kunming did not know that Ma Dexin was also responding quickly and strongly to Du's request for aid.<sup>10</sup> At the rebels' most desperate moment since the founding of the Dali government, Ma Dexin reassured Du Wenxiu: "I have already secretly ordered my disciples [*mensheng*] Ma [Rulong] as the Grand Commander of Three Directions with Ma Rong as second in command . . . to launch a rearguard attack from their base in Yimen."<sup>11</sup> This clear signal from the most respected Islamic leader in the province seemed to signify that the regional divisions among the Hui leaders were finally ending.

With Ma Dexin's endorsement, Ma Rulong now commanded the largest single military force in Yunnan, imperial or rebel—an army of more than ten thousand Hui, non-Han, and Han. Ma Rulong quickly displayed a keen sense of strategy, playing on Zhang Liangji and Xu Zhiming's overriding concern for Kunming's (and their own) safety. He led his newly formed army out of its base south of Kunming and feigned an attack on the capital with a small vanguard force; meanwhile, the bulk of his army skirted the Kunming plain to the west. This prompted the Qing authorities to pull back their remaining forces to defend the capital. The rebels now had an open road to the east.<sup>12</sup> Ma Rulong continued to show his military acumen in a series of surprise attacks on the smaller towns of Anning and Lufeng. His rapid strike eastward, besides challenging imperial control in central Yunnan, disrupted supplies and communications between the provincial commanders and Zhu Kechang. After Kunming, Ma Rulong met no firm resistance until just outside Chuxiong, the largest urban center between Dali and Kunming [see Fig. 7.1].<sup>13</sup>

#### THE BATTLE OF CHUXIONG

Chuxiong was a prefectural capital midway along the trunk road between Kunming and Dali. Because it was protected by massive city walls, Ma Rulong and his officers were compelled to adopt new tactics. Ma knew



MAP 7.1. Ma Rulong's Chuxiong Campaign, 1859–1860

that a siege could tie up his troops for months; at the same time, he feared the loss of life a frontal assault would surely bring. So he ordered his soldiers—many of whom were miners—to build two tunnels under the wall near the city's southwestern gate. Once the tunnels were completed, they were packed with explosives. On June 11, 1860, Ma gave the order and “there was a frightening blast and then, when the huge cloud of smoke and dust had settled, there was an immense hole in the wall through which the masses of Muslim [soldiers] flowed into the city.”<sup>14</sup> All of the city's Qing officials were caught and executed—all except one, who “escaped only by dressing himself as a peasant” and who reported the devastating defeat to his superiors in Kunming.<sup>15</sup>

Stirred by this victory, Ma Rulong dispatched two of his commanders, Yang Zhenpeng and Li Fangyuan, to seize the neighboring towns of Nan'an, Zhennan, and Dingyuan. All three fell with little resistance.<sup>16</sup> Until now, Ma Rulong had never taken a city of any consequence, although large amounts of territory had come under his control. The capture of Chuxiong changed this. The successful two-month campaign catapulted Ma Rulong from middle-rank rebel leader—one among many—to a commander second only to Du Wenxiu himself in influence and military might. This campaign had

been launched as a desperate attempt to rescue Du Wenxiu; by the time it was over, in every region of Yunnan, the momentum had shifted massively to the Hui-lead rebel forces.

Yet this sudden success exposed a fundamental weakness in the regional cooperation that had carried the insurgents to this point. Du Wenxiu assumed that Ma Rulong's obliging actions against the Qing in his time of need amounted to an alliance, and he instructed his top general Cai Fachun to offer Ma Rulong a position in the Dali government.<sup>17</sup> As Cai approached the city, Ma Rulong, as if to acknowledge Dali's primacy, ordered his troops to withdraw. He then handed the city over to the authority of Du Wenxiu.<sup>18</sup> Yet paradoxically, Ma Rulong refused Du's offer of a position in the Dali regime. Instead, he and Cai negotiated a division of Yunnan into two spheres of rebel control, with Chuxiong as the dividing line: "The control of the province will be divided with Ma Rulong subduing the area from the provincial capital eastward [*shengyi yixia*] while Du Wenxiu would control from Chuxiong westward [*Chuxiong yishang*]. After Yunnan is pacified, then we will meet to carry out a unified expedition out of the province, and then recover China, and expel the Manchu Qing dynasty."<sup>19</sup>

Why, after half a year of fighting to aid Du Wenxiu, did Ma Rulong reject an offer to serve in his government and extend the multiethnic rule of the Dali sultanate over Yunnan? There is no clear answer to this. There is no indication that Ma Rulong wanted to sever relations with Du, and both men seem to have respected Ma Dexin's role as Yunnan's spiritual leader. Nor are there any suggestions of an acrimonious relationship between the two leaders. Possibly, Ma Rulong wanted to consolidate his power in the province. By the summer of 1860 he controlled a large area of southern Yunnan whereas only the northwestern edge of western Yunnan was under Du's control. Eastern Yunnan was held by half a dozen other rebel groups. After his recent victories, Ma Rulong was at the height of his power.<sup>20</sup>

So it is curious that he turned his back on the opportunity to unite the insurgents—this, at a time when circumstances seemed so favorable to handing the Qing a final defeat and thereby winning the entire province for the Muslim Yunnanese.

Several factors perhaps counted heavily in Ma Rulong's decision. First and foremost, Ma was a man ruled by his ego. Headstrong, aggressive, and a strong believer in his own abilities, he may have yearned to deliver personally the final blow to Qing rule in Yunnan.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps he also reasoned that if he captured Yunnan's greatest prize, Kunming, he would be able negotiate with Du Wenxiu from a position of strength. Du had been using the title of sultan since his investiture as generalissimo but had carefully avoided adopting a political title. Perhaps Ma was seeking to assume the position of

political head of state—something he might not achieve if he accepted prematurely a post in the Dali regime.

Du Wenxiu was nonplussed by Ma's rebuff. Ma was motivated by personal ambition, Du by the desire to provide a stable base for the Pingnan state. Du's military campaigns to secure the remaining cities in northwestern and southwestern Yunnan were progressing well, and he was reluctant to move eastward before western Yunnan was completely under Pingnan authority. At this juncture he also seems to have wanted to implement economic, social, and religious reforms in those areas already firmly under his control instead of forging ahead for territorial gains.<sup>22</sup> In the end, he did not understand Ma's rejection of his offer but was amenable to him applying continued military pressure on the Qing.

Neither Ma Rulong nor Du Wenxiu saw the decision to divide Yunnan into spheres of control as contravening the implied pact among all the Hui rebels for continuing the fight against the Qing. The agreement between Cai Fachun and Ma Rulong allowed for both sides to continue to fight to establish an Islamic state independent of imperial control. That was the common goal.

To almost everyone in Yunnan at the time, the fall of Kunming seemed inevitable. For many of Kunming's residents, the city's fall was not necessarily to be feared. The French missionaries would note in their accounts that Yunnan's rebel-controlled areas were often more stable than those outside rebel control: "The Hui rebels have already occupied a large number of towns . . . [but] for the moment at least, in this part [of the province] there are practically no more brigands."<sup>23</sup> This stability, his victory at Chuxiong, and his rising popularity in southern and eastern Yunnan allowed Ma Rulong to launch his plan to take Kunming. In the autumn of 1860, he returned to the walls of Kunming at the head of his army.

#### MA RULONG: AMBIGUOUS AMBITIONS

Dazed by Zhu Kechang's defeat (and death), by the loss of Chuxiong, and by the arrival of Ma Rulong's army outside the capital, the provincial authorities finally, four years after the Kunming Massacre, came face to face with the consequences of their anti-Hui extermination campaign. Governor-General Zhang Liangji was so "distressed and anxious, that he began to cough up blood" and handed over his seals of office to the provincial governor, Xu Zhiming.<sup>24</sup> With the rebel armies tightening their control of the area around Kunming, the provincial officials could see no alternative but to open negotiations with Ma Rulong and Ma Dexin.<sup>25</sup> The first official record of these discussions appears in a memorial dated January 17, 1861. Xu cast these negotiations as initiated by the desire of Ma Dexin, Xu Yuanji,

and Ma Rulong to surrender. He vouched for the character and intentions of the Hui leaders, described Ma Dexin as the most respected Muslim leader in the province, and characterized Ma Rulong as "candid, upright and capable."<sup>26</sup> The next communication mentioning the talks, written two months later, was not nearly as flattering. In this memorial, Xu spun a very different story, suggesting that he had been hoodwinked by the rebel leaders' initial request for clemency but had discovered their ruse and decisively suppressed them: "The Hui bandits Ma Xian (known as Ma Rulong), and Xu Yuanji falsely asked for pacification and had secretly planned a surprise attack on the provincial capital. I ordered troops to fight and strengthened the defenses of the endangered city, restoring peace. Xu Yuanji was killed. Ma Xian escaped. . . . [but] was later burned to death."<sup>27</sup>

In such a situation it is difficult to determine exactly who was acting under false pretenses, but at the very least, Xu was playing with the truth when he suggested that Ma Rulong had been killed. Evidence that Xu's conduct in this affair was questionable came a month later, when Governor-General Zhang Liangji wrote to the emperor accusing Xu of "stirring up the wicked [Han] gentry, inciting the militia, then . . . pleading for help, stating that [under these circumstances] he could not pacify the Hui."<sup>28</sup> Zhang went on that Xu had plotted with Lin Ziqing, the ranking military official in Kunming, to lure the Hui into a trap, but they had caught only Xu Yuanji. Zhang, who had been granted a leave of absence due to illness, took this opportunity to disassociate himself from Xu's actions. In a series of memorials written over the next six months, he painted a scathing portrait of Xu Zhiming as a man with a "reckless personality who enjoyed killing Hui . . . had become covetous of wealth, and who was excessively lustful."<sup>29</sup>

Other officials and residents corroborated the governor-general's harsh assessment of Xu's anti-Hui stance. One account suggested that Xu was "predisposed towards killing [the Hui] and sought to block the Hui's opportunity to return to legitimacy [through pacification] by continuing to force them to rebel."<sup>30</sup> Xu himself hardly sought to hide his hatred of the Hui, brashly claiming in a memorial written soon after the failed surrender that "the disposition of the Hui is like that of a dog or a goat, the more one attempts to pacify them peacefully the more arrogant they become."<sup>31</sup>

Zhang also informed the emperor that Xu had orchestrated the assassination of the provincial judge, Deng Erheng. Deng had served in the province since the late 1840s. He rose through the ranks until, in 1860, with a dearth of officials willing to accept a posting in Yunnan, his career began to soar. Within a year he had been promoted to provincial judge, then provincial treasurer, then finally governor of Guizhou. In early 1861, before he could even leave to take up his duties there, he received orders to take up the office of Shaanxi governor.

According to Zhang and other individuals familiar with the situation, Xu Zhiming despised Deng Erheng. The reasons are unclear. One widely circulated explanation is that Deng, while serving as provincial judge, learned about Xu's libidinous excesses when a woman publicly accused him of raping her. Deng at first dismissed the woman's account; later, however, through unimpeachable sources, he learned that her report was entirely accurate. Xu grew increasingly fearful that after he left the province Deng would inform the imperial court of his deceitful behavior. So he secretly gave the order for Lin Ziqing to assassinate Deng while en route to his new post.<sup>32</sup>

After reading Zhang Liangji's accusations, the emperor realized that the situation demanded some form of intervention, although it was becoming increasingly difficult for the central government to effect any changes in the province. Xu's actions revealed just how little control the imperial court had over many of its officials there. Few officials dared accept a posting to the province, correctly sensing that the situation in Yunnan was likely to be dangerous both for one's career and for one's personal safety.

The lengths the court was forced to go to find officials willing to accept a post in Yunnan are exemplified in its efforts to find a replacement for Zhang Liangji. The emperor's first candidate, Liu Yuanjing, preferred to accept censure and demotion rather than accept the post of governor-general of Yunnan and Guizhou. The emperor's second choice, Fuji, postponed his departure for Yunnan indefinitely, offering a series of lame pretexts, until he was finally called to Beijing to answer for his insubordination.<sup>33</sup> Faced with no viable alternative, in December 1862 the emperor finally appointed Pan Duo, a seventy-year-old with an unexceptional record, as Yun-Gui governor-general.

If the situation in Yunnan seemed hopeless from faraway Beijing, it looked even worse to those actually living in Kunming. The harvest had been poor. The winter was especially harsh that year, and with the capital crowded with refugees from all over the province, the situation had become desperate. By December, hundreds were dying every day of starvation.<sup>34</sup> Just when it seemed that the situation could not possibly get any worse, the multiethnic armies led by Ma Rulong reappeared at the walls of Kunming, beginning the third siege the capital had endured since the rebellion had begun.<sup>35</sup>

#### MA RULONG'S CHANGE OF HEART?

The impetus for this third siege lay with the actions of Lin Ziqing. Disappointed at the limited success of the ambush that had killed Xu Yuanji, he led a mixed force of Han militias and imperial troops on an offensive against Ma Dexin's home base at Chengjiang.<sup>36</sup> Incensed over Lin Ziqing's anti-Hui aggression, Ma Rulong raced north to cut off Lin's lines of supply



from Kunming. Ma then dealt a devastating blow to Lin's forces as they attempted to retreat back to the provincial capital. Emboldened by the ease with which they carried out these maneuvers, Ma Rulong and Ma Dexin returned to the roles they had played in the Chuxiong campaign, and organized a rebel force—one that included the top Hui leaders of eastern and southern Yunnan—for an all-out attack on the provincial capital.<sup>37</sup>

With the city's inhabitants starving and a horde of rebels camped outside the city gates, Xu Zhiming had little choice but to negotiate with the rebels. Unluckily for him, Ma Rulong having been deceived once was not so willing to enter into talks. Xu dispatched a series of envoys imploring the Hui leaders to spare the city. Ma Rulong, fed up with the governor's tendency to want peace only when convenient, angrily retorted: "Before when Ma Chunlin came to negotiate a peace . . . Lin Ziqing ambushed Xu Yuanji, Ma Shuangen, and Ma Minggong; and then attacked Chengjiang. I will not trust these dog-officials again."<sup>38</sup> To demonstrate his loathing for Lin Ziqing, Ma sent a courier into the city to post a public offer of "10,000 taels of silver for anyone who could produce Lin Ziqing's head."<sup>39</sup> Yet this time, Ma made no preparations to storm the city; clearly, he did want to negotiate a surrender with both Xu Zhiming and Lin Ziqing. But given the unmistakable nature of the situation, who was actually doing the surrendering?

Wary of another of Xu's traps, the rebel leaders extended negotiations over several weeks. Always, the imperial envoys were obliged to travel to the rebel camp outside the city. At one point in the negotiations, Lin Ziqing was "compelled to climb over the city wall using a rope in order to offer his petition for peace."<sup>40</sup> All of this indicates that it was the Qing officials who were desperate for a settlement.

When the siege ended on March 1, 1862, the arrival of Ma and his rebel forces in the capital was more like an occupation than a capitulation: "[Ma] Rulong led his party into the city, issuing a thousand demands to Xu Zhiming with none refused. Ma Rulong was given the office of Lin'an regional commander, the Muslim religious leader Ma Dexin conferred with the title of *beg* of the second rank, the rebel leaders in [Ma Rulong's army] . . . received a variety of ranks."<sup>41</sup>

It was, however, the actions taken by Ma Rulong, Ma Dexin, and the other rebel leaders on entering the city that left no doubt about who controlled the capital: "After outwardly submitting to the Chinese authorities [the Hui] dominated the capital of the province, acting as if they were the masters . . . when a Muslim passed on the street, no one dared quarrel over the higher path."<sup>42</sup> The Hui also physically occupied many of the Han households and yamens. There are indications that they also imposed many of their ethnoreligious convictions on the Chinese populace. For example, "street markets did not even dare to sell pork."<sup>43</sup>

There are other indications that Ma Dexin and Ma Rulong made only the pretense of capitulating in 1862. Even after taking up residence in the capital, Ma Rulong continued to issue proclamations bearing his seal of "Generalissimo of the Three Directions," hinting that he never fully intended to relinquish his authority as a rebel leader.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, those Hui who had remained within the city and not gone to fight were openly taunted by the Hui rebels as "fake Hui [*jia Hui*]." <sup>45</sup> Ma Dexin accepted his promotion in rank as religious leader but refused to accept the civil title offered him, declaring that he did not want to be associated with the political dimension of the Qing regime.<sup>46</sup> These actions and the fact that Xu Zhiming granted the official titles to the rebels without consulting the emperor underscore the questionable validity of the "surrender."

When the imperial court finally received word of the conditions of surrender, it was highly skeptical of both Xu's motives and those of the rebels.<sup>47</sup> In particular, the high ranks of office granted to Ma Rulong and his cohorts troubled the court. Fearing that any lesser offer might jeopardize an already precarious position, the court acquiesced, but not without warning Xu Zhiming that his actions were being scrutinized.<sup>48</sup> In an edict addressed jointly to the newly appointed governor-general, Pan Duo, and the governor, Zhang Liangji (who had been ordered to return to Yunnan), the emperor stated that "for the time being [I] will permit these Hui to revert from their insurgency and be ruled under the loose-rein policy."<sup>49</sup> He also ordered Pan and Zhang to send him reports on the situation by secret means. Hoping to deprive the provincial clique of their military support, the emperor also suggested that Lin Ziqing be ordered on a mission that would take him out of Kunming into Sichuan.<sup>50</sup> Finally, the emperor sent an edict to Xu warning him that his transgressions were known to the court and that although the emperor was showing his mercy, further violations would not be tolerated and the "court could not be so forgiving and lenient."<sup>51</sup>

With the emperor against them and the rebels now masters of the city, the outlook for the core group of Han who had worked so hard to exterminate the Hui since 1856 was bleak. Émile Rocher captured their new mood: "What a humiliating finish for the mandarins who had, by their bad faith, even more than their remarkable oversight, ignited the insurrection and who were delighted [with their actions] right up until the last moment when they were overpowered."<sup>52</sup>

Huang Cong, the retired war ministry official who played such an instrumental role in coordinating the Kunming Massacre, committed suicide rather than submit to the domineering presence of the Hui.

Despite the court's own suspicions at the time and the distinctly ambiguous circumstances in which Ma Rulong and the other leaders surrendered, most postrebellion accounts of the surrender have taken Ma's actions

at face value and declared him either a hero to the Qing for attempting to end the rebellion or, conversely, as a traitor to the Hui.<sup>53</sup> Yet as Taiwanese scholar Li Shoukang has pointed out, although Ma Rulong professed that his actions were in response to the treachery of local officials, he was not above using any pretext he could to enter the city.<sup>54</sup> Li asserts that Ma's decision in 1862 to accept Xu Zhiming's offer of capitulation was likely reached hastily and without any clear objective other than to gain access to the capital.<sup>55</sup> Supporting this thesis is the fact that accepting government terms for surrender as a means to enter a walled city was a ruse quite often employed by Hui rebels in the early years of the rebellion. It would surely have been a familiar tactic to Ma Rulong, given that such ruses had been employed on numerous occasions by southern and eastern Hui leaders.<sup>56</sup>

Having occupied the provincial capital Ma Rulong still was faced with the decision of which side to play against the other: Should he remain a rebel leader and join Du Wenxiu, or should he leverage his rebel status to bring piece and imperial control back to the Qing court? Perhaps Ma Rulong believed he had more time to establish himself as an important third power. If that was so, then he quite quickly would have realized his error, since a major factor in the court's acceptance of Ma Rulong's pacification, even though they questioned its authenticity, was the almost complete lack of Qing authority in the province. As noted earlier, the first two appointees to the office of governor-general had refused to enter the province. Without a high official to report on Xu Zhiming and curb his behavior, the court was powerless.

Then on November 2, 1862, roughly six months after Ma Rulong entered Kunming, the court's third appointment to the office of Yun-Gui governor-general, Pan Duo, finally entered the provincial capital.<sup>57</sup>

### *Things Fall Apart: The Occupation of Kunming, 1863*

The emperor eagerly awaited news from the first provincial-level official willing to enter the province in nearly three years. Contrary to what the court expected to hear, Pan Duo reported that the Muslim Yunnanese leaders and "the populace was all content [*xise*]."<sup>58</sup> Pan claimed that the Han gentry, in discussions with him, all praised Xu Zhiming's efforts to achieve peace with the rebel leaders. In light of this, he asked the court to delay any action with regard to Xu Zhiming, Ma Rulong, or any other of the newly appointed former rebels.<sup>59</sup>

Nor did the passage of time cause Pan Duo to change his opinion. Two months later, he was still reporting the positive results stemming from Ma Rulong's surrender: "Since the settlement of March of 1862, over ten months have already passed. Han and Hui in areas in and around the

provincial capital and in eastern Yunnan, have returned to a routine and peaceful life. . . . I have been here for two months observing Ma Rulong. Since his acceptance of the terms of pacification, he has unreservedly had a complete change of heart [*sichu chengxin*]."<sup>60</sup>

In late 1862, Ma Rulong was given his first test of loyalty. He and a rising young Han military official named Cen Yuying were dispatched to Lin'an against Liang Shimei, a renegade magistrate of Lin'an in southern Yunnan. Enraged over the government's decision to accept Ma Rulong's surrender, he had severed all relations between the prefecture and the provincial government and was refusing to remit taxes and other remuneration to the capital—a serious offense in peacetime, but even more so given the Qing court's tenuous hold in the region. Yet the operation's target, the selection of Ma Rulong, and the timing of the campaign were based on more than political imperatives.

Ma Rulong was a native of Lin'an, so his intimate knowledge of the region made him a natural choice to lead the expedition. But it is equally likely that many officials in Kunming hoped the Hui would loosen their grip on the capital in his absence. Ma Rulong for his part did not accept the assignment out of altruistic motives for the Qing. Liang Shimei and Ma Rulong had been feuding since the outbreak of the rebellion, with Liang getting the better of Ma in each encounter. All of this was common knowledge, so rumors were flying regarding the actual motives of everyone involved. Some even conjectured that Pan Duo hoped Liang would defeat and perhaps even eliminate Ma Rulong.<sup>61</sup> Whatever his motives, in the winter of 1862 Ma Rulong set out southward toward Lin'an. The events his departure set in motion would have profound consequences; if indeed the Qing officials secretly hoped to rid themselves of Ma Rulong, they misjudged the part he played in controlling those rebels who had entered the capital with him.

Few sources are available to explain the actions of the rebels who ostensibly capitulated with Ma Rulong; even fewer are available to explain the actions of those Hui rebels who controlled many cities east of Kunming and into Guizhou. It was from both these quarters that the most serious threat to Qing control in the province arose since the beginning of the rebellion. In early March 1863, several weeks after Ma Rulong's departure, the Hui generals Ma Rong and Ma Liansheng stormed in from eastern Yunnan and seized control of Kunming.<sup>62</sup>

The leader of the insurrection, Ma Rong, had received the rank of assistant regional commander of Wuding after Ma Rulong's surrender in 1862.<sup>63</sup> Ma Rong's attack on Kunming suggests that he and many other rebels had no intention of passing their full support to the Qing. Indeed, Ma Rong's assassination of Pan Duo on March 4, 1863, left no doubt that many of Ma

Rulong's followers no longer trusted him to act in their broader interest to unify Yunnan under a rebel government.

The assassination of Pan Duo and the occupation of Kunming were glaring indications that the rebel leaders were attempting to transcend past regional divisions and unite under the Pingnan State's white banner. Hui accounts from this period drop the terminology of western, southern, and eastern Hui—a terminology encountered throughout the records of other periods of the rebellion. Instead they refer to themselves as Muslims (*jiaomen*) who for that brief moment see an opportunity to unite in opposition to the Qing.<sup>64</sup> Most striking is the single-minded goal of joining forces with Du Wenxiu. Clearly, they were beginning to understand that “the success or failure of the Muslims [in Yunnan] all rode on this one opportunity.”<sup>65</sup>

On March 9, 1863, Ma Dexin accepted the office of governor-general and adopted the title “King-Who-Pacifies-the-South [*Pingnan Wang*].”<sup>66</sup> He occupied the governor-general's yamen, took possession of the official seals, and stopped using the Qing reign year when dating documents.<sup>67</sup> It seems that in accepting the position of governor-general he was not motivated solely by self-aggrandizement.<sup>68</sup> In imperial accounts, Ma Dexin's actions are described as motivated by “city elders (*qimin*) who . . . urged him to take over the office of Yun-Gui Governor-General.”<sup>69</sup> However, his other actions do not reflect this. Given that the rebel leaders involved in the coup felt a strong allegiance toward Du, it is more probable that Ma Dexin hoped to hold the precarious alliance of rebel leaders together until control could be handed over to Du Wenxiu.<sup>70</sup>

From the first years of the rebellion, Ma Rong and Ma Liansheng had had strong ties with Du Wenxiu and the Dali regime. According to imperial accounts, the month before control of the capital was wrested away from Pan Duo, Du Wenxiu had conferred the titles of “General-Who-Pacifies-the-East [*pingdong dajiangjun*]” and “General-Who-Safeguards-the-North [*dingbei dajiangjun*]” respectively on Ma Rong and Ma Liansheng.<sup>71</sup> Their allegiance was hardly exceptional: many other local rebel leaders cooperated with Ma Rong and Ma Liansheng's plot by carrying out insurrections in districts that still lay outside rebel control. Xu Zhiming, in one of his last memorials to the throne, described the broad wave of support that rose with the news of Ma Rong's attack:

Rebel leader Du Wenxiu notified the various [rebel] groups to unite and attack in four columns, taking the opportunity to converge on the center of the province that was in disorder [due to Ma Rong's attack]. During this insurrection, the [rebels] rose up in revolt attacking simultaneously Fumin, Luoci, Wuding, Lufeng, Songming, Xundian, Luquan, and many other counties and districts. The bandits and rebels everywhere all responded [to Du's call] and throughout this period captured the

cities. The acting Songming Department Magistrate, Zhang Hualong and the Luliang Department Magistrate, Song Gui were both killed. Also, the spreading disturbances affected the county and district seats of Lufeng, Guangtong, and Nan'an, as well as the three salt mines of Hei, Yuan and Yong.<sup>72</sup>

But before Du Wenxiu's Dali forces could reach Kunming, there was a surprising turn of events. Ma Rulong, having heard about Ma Rong's actions, returned from Lin'an, recaptured Kunming, and handed control of the city back to Qing officials and sympathizers.

#### TRUE COLORS?

Ma Rong's conquest of Kunming rapidly and irrevocably changed the political landscape for the various rebel factions. Ma Rulong did not believe that Ma Dexin's motives for declaring himself king were entirely altruistic; he interpreted his actions as a plot to hand the province over to Du Wexin and recognize him as the new ruler of Yunnan.

The events leading up to Ma Rulong's return are murky. One account has it that Cen Yuying dispatched a "letter in a wax ball" to him, urging him to set aside his personal ambitions as a former rebel leader and return Kunming to imperial control.<sup>73</sup> Ma rushed back to Kunming with a small force and was met outside the city walls by several of his former officers, who rebuked him for abandoning his earlier goals and aiding the Qing: "If you only crave to be an official with no thought for your fellow Muslims, you should return to [your home in] Guanyi."<sup>74</sup>

Ma's sudden fall from grace among the eastern and southern Muslim Yunnanese was a consequence of two increasingly apparent realities. First, Du Wenxiu had assumed control of most of western Yunnan and over the past six years had established a viable alternative regime to that of the Qing. Second, many of the Hui who had surrendered with Ma Rulong had believed that their surrender was simply the most expedient means to take control of the province. If Ma Rulong was ambivalent about his role as a rebel—and perhaps he was—many of those who had surrendered with him clearly were not.<sup>75</sup> The rebels saw Ma Rulong as a defector because he had betrayed the anti-Qing cause, and this betrayal generated widespread resentment of his leadership.

Although their coup d'état had been quick and efficient, the rebel forces within Kunming were not very large. Ma Rulong and Cen Yuying quickly realized this and merged the forces from their campaign on Lin'an with other local militias. On March 19, Ma and Cen launched a ferocious attack on two of the capital's massive city gates and stormed the city.<sup>76</sup> The ensuing battle lasted several days, with hand-to-hand combat in many districts.

After five or six days of street fighting, those loyal to the imperial cause gained the upper hand and restored order.<sup>77</sup> Ma Rong and Ma Liansheng fled east to their base in Xundian, where they continued their resistance.<sup>78</sup>

Immediately on entering the city, Ma Rulong proceeded to the governor-general's yamen, where he accosted Ma Dexin and ordered him to abandon his seals of office. Ma Rulong then placed him under what amounted to informal house arrest for the remainder of the rebellion.<sup>79</sup> He then began identifying those rebels who had assisted Ma Rong's coup. On discovering that many of his closest associates had "secretly received documents and seals [of office] from Du Wenxiu, Ma Rulong quickly investigated and had them summarily executed."<sup>80</sup>

*Rationalizing the Unknowable:  
Religious and Regional Divisions*

Why did Ma Rulong, who had been a rebel leader just months earlier, turn against his fellow Hui and race back from Lin'an to help the Qing retake Kunming? Ma, who would later try to characterize himself as having wholeheartedly submitted to the Qing in 1862, destroyed his own rebel seals only after returning to Kunming in 1863.<sup>81</sup> Any attempt to uncover Ma Rulong's true sentiments inevitably encounters a multitude of contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities. But his actions do seem to have been influenced by several constants.

First, Ma Rulong's actions were driven mainly by a desire to remain autonomous from Du Wenxiu, whose influence was growing. It was because of this desire to stymie Du, rather than any strong loyalty to the Qing, that he never completely embraced his position as a Qing functionary during the critical fourteen months between his surrender and his counter-coup. This ambivalence came to an abrupt end when, in his absence, Ma Rong, Ma Dexin, and others acted to hand Kunming over to Du Wenxiu. He now had to choose: Would he acknowledge his rival's authority or that of the distant emperor? He cast his lot with the Qing.<sup>82</sup>

Ma Rulong's intense regional pride was an equally strong factor in his reluctance to join Du Wenxiu, the rebellion's principal leader. Regionalism was pervasive in Yunnan society and profoundly shaped the actions of both men. Ma's rebel title, "Generalissimo of the Three Regions," underscored his adherence to the view that Yunnan was a sum of its parts. Was it also an overt challenge to Du's more conventional project of a united and monolithic Yunnan? Regional faultlines ran across many of Yunnan's otherwise durable identities, and it is clear that Ma's regional sensibilities were especially sensitive. In particular, it seems that he felt that the south's role in the rebellion was insufficiently appreciated. In a letter to Du, written several

months after he returned to Kunming in June 1863, Ma claimed that the Dali regime owed its very existence to the support of southern Yunnan: "On Zhu Kechang's campaign [westward], the [troops] at Yunzhou immediately responded. Tian Zhongxing flanked him, and those who were guarding Chuxiong fled. If it had not been for the Southern Yunnanese [Hui] forces attacking his rear, then there was nothing the western region [Hui] could have done, and there is no way you could not have known this."<sup>83</sup> It was Ma Rulong's regional pride—not a sense of loyalty to the Qing—that motivated him to rally to the aid of the imperial court.

Ma Rulong's reasons for capitulating in 1862, and for supporting the Qing cause in 1863, when examined carefully, do not reflect a predetermined plan thoughtfully pursued over time. Instead, both moves were reactions to events as they unfolded. After Ma delivered Kunming back to the Qing in 1863, his real motives would continue to be unclear to all but himself. One of his staunchest defenders, Governor-General Lao Chongguang, would later remark that although he felt Ma's loyalty to the Qing was beyond reproach, he "dare not think about what thoughts were hidden in the recesses of Ma's heart."<sup>84</sup>

#### NEW TENSIONS OVER THE "OLD TEACHINGS"?

Despite the overwhelming evidence regarding Ma Rulong's personal motives, many analyses of the rebellion continue to hypothesize that sectarian differences among the Muslim Yunnanese heightened tensions between Ma Rulong and Du Wenxiu and their followers.<sup>85</sup> The question, generally speaking, is whether the Sufi-inspired teachings—referred pejoratively to as "new teachings" or *xinjiao*—had spread among those Muslim Yunnanese communities which practiced the Sunni Hanafite (referred to as "old teachings" or *laojiao*). And if they had, how widely?

This controversy over sectarian differences among the Yunnan Hui is part of a much broader debate on the effects of Sufism in Muslim Chinese communities in other parts of China during the Qing era. From the time Islam entered China in the seventh century until the late seventeenth century, almost every Muslim Chinese practiced the traditional Sunni, Hanafi Islam. By the nineteenth century these traditional Sunni groups were being referred to as *Gedimu* (transliterated from the Arabic term for old, *qadim*—or more colloquially as the "old teachings").<sup>86</sup> Most *Gedimu* communities centered on the village or neighborhood mosque. Besides being spiritual centers for the Muslim Chinese, these mosques served as the primary gathering points for contact with other Hui communities.<sup>87</sup>

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Muslim communities in many parts of China but especially in northwestern China formed two dis-



tinct Islamic communities: the Gedimu and the Naqshbandi. Two orders within the Naqshbandi flourished in China during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first, the Khufiyya order, was “permeated with an emphasis on a more active participation in society, the veneration of saints, the seeking of inspiration at tombs and the silent *dhikr* (‘remembrance,’ properly ‘Khufiyya,’ the ‘silent’ ones).”<sup>88</sup> The second, the Jahriyya order, advocated the “vocalization of the *dhikr*, wearing shoes at funerals, the length and cut of beards or mustaches,” and disapproved of the veneration of Sufi saints.<sup>89</sup> By the late eighteenth century, tensions were beginning to increase between Jahriyya and Khufiyya in northwestern China.<sup>90</sup> For the purposes of this study, a key point is that as the violence escalated in the northwest, the Qing authorities began to blame the Jahriyya order for the growing social instability. The state proscribed the New Teachings and established heavy sentences for any Muslim involved in religious disputes.<sup>91</sup>

In contrast to the Gedimu communities, the Sufi orders of the Naqshbandi tradition were organized principally around Sufi “saints” and their *menhuan*, or saintly descent groups.<sup>92</sup> The finer points of Sufism are beyond the scope of this study; it should simply be noted that the introduction of this revivalist branch altered the traditional Islamic order in many parts of China. In Sufism, “the leaders of mosque throughout their [Sufi] order owed their allegiance to their *shaykh*, the founder of the order who appointed them.”<sup>93</sup> The lineage-based *menhuan* could spread to noncontiguous areas much more quickly than the community-oriented networks of traditional Gedimu groups. This dimension of the Sufi orders meant that adherents could travel to other areas of China, even among other Gedimu communities, to compete for new converts.

Although these Sufi orders were flourishing in northwestern China by the beginning of the Panthay Rebellion, there is very little evidence that they had widespread appeal in Yunnan. It is true that there were Sufis in Yunnan and that Muslim Yunnanese Hui were exposed to Sufi beliefs; but it is difficult to ascertain with any precision the nature of the Muslim Yunnanese communities’ pre-Rebellion contact with the new teachings. Several Chinese scholars have argued that the Jahriyya order arrived in Yunnan in the late eighteenth century with Ma Shunqing, son of Ma Xingyun, the order’s founder. Ma Shunqing came there because of government persecution in the northwest.<sup>94</sup> Yet the evidence shows that after he arrived there was only minimal conversion to the Jahriyya order among the traditional Hui communities.

There is no question that there were religious tensions within Yunnan over the proper interpretation of Islamic beliefs; however, the religious frictions seem to have been largely within the mainstream dialogue, not between the larger orders. In the early Qing, Ma Zhu, a revered Muslim Yunnanese imam, devoted an entire chapter of his influential *Islamic Compass*

to admonishing Yunnan Hui about the dangers of committing Islamic heresies. In it he offered a cautionary tale about one heretical episode that had occurred in southwestern Yunnan in the seventeenth century.<sup>95</sup> Another instance of religious division is recorded immediately before the rebellion transpired in 1852 near Dali, when "Hui bandits named Ma Alue, and his daughter, called A-feng, were practicing heretical Islamic teachings. [She] was venerated and referred to by the term immortal [*xiangu*]."<sup>96</sup>

This narrative, which was included in the provincial gazetteer, implies that the bandits incited religious divisions between "city Hui" (from Dali) and "heretical Hui." Yet nowhere in the narrative is any mention made of the proscribed New (Jahriyya) Teachings. This is a conspicuous omission, given that the overwhelming majority of officials posted to Yunnan in the late 1840s and the early years of the Panthay Rebellion had had extensive experience with the bloody violence between practitioners of the New and Old Teachings in northwestern China. Considering the renewed violence in the northwest in the 1860s, few officials would have missed an opportunity to label any Yunnan Hui "bandits" as heretical; after all, this would have provided a justification to suppress them. Yet nowhere in any government report or local gazetteer is there any hint that proscribed Sufi beliefs were being practiced in the region.<sup>97</sup>

Against this fragmentary proof that Jahriyya was taking root in Yunnan, there is considerable evidence that the vast majority of Muslim Yunnanese adhered to traditional Islamic beliefs. Du Wenxiu and Ma Rulong and many of the Hui rebel leaders had been students of Ma Dexin, a practitioner of traditional Gedimu teachings. Ma Dexin embraced a relatively conservative interpretation of Islam, one that emphasized a synthesis between Chinese culture and Islamic beliefs.<sup>98</sup> A primary obstacle to the theory that religious differences divided the Hui rebels is that Ma Dexin continued to instruct and communicate with both Du Wenxiu and Ma Rulong throughout the rebellion.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Ma Rong, Ma Liansheng, and the other prominent leaders of eastern and southern Yunnan did not show any reluctance to establish relations with Du Wenxiu before and during the occupation of Kunming in 1863. And among those Dali Hui who fled Yunnan after the rebellion ended in 1873, one might expect to find evidence of Jahriyya teachings. There is no such evidence.<sup>100</sup>

Du Wenxiu's religious beliefs are perhaps the most opaque. It is clear he was a devout Muslim who sought to promote Islam, but there is little in the records to suggest a religious inclination that deviated from that of most Muslim Yunnanese. Lin Changkuan, one of the strongest supporters of the view that Jahriyya teachings influenced the Pingnan government, contends that "the Dali regime was heavily colored by the New Teachings (Du Wenxiu had many Jahriyya *ahongs*)."<sup>101</sup> Yet even though he is certain that the

top Pingnan Hui shared those teachings, he also admits—tellingly—that “the evidence that Ma and Du split over the religious factional conflicts is not very convincing.”<sup>102</sup>

There is, however, one tantalizing piece of evidence supporting religious differences, and it comes from the Frenchman Émile Rocher, who witnessed the end of the rebellion. In describing one clash he suggests that the siege of one rebel stronghold was prolonged due to “the fact that Ma Chenglin, although a Muslim, belonged to the New Teachings which had been established [in Yunnan] for some years; Ma Chenglin was considered as the head of this sect and Ma [Rulong] belonged to the Old Teachings. This created a certain enmity between them.”<sup>103</sup> Rocher goes on to state that when Ma Chenglin was killed, his lieutenant Yang Jingping capitulated to Ma Rulong because he was “informed by different sentiments [than Ma Chenglin].” This suggests that although Yang and Ma Chenglin did not both embrace the New Teachings, they put aside their differences to fight the Qing together.<sup>104</sup>

To put it in somewhat different terms, there is clear evidence that an increasing variety of Islamic religious teachings did exist in Yunnan by the mid-nineteenth century. These disparate beliefs were held by the followers of Du Wenxiu as well as by those Hui who supported Ma Rulong. From events both prior to and during the rebellion, it is also clear that Hui from northwestern China were present in Yunnan. One source even suggests that Du Wenxiu was aided by “outsider Hui [*waihui*].”<sup>105</sup> However, the political and regional divisions between the Dali Hui and the other Hui leaders never seem to have been a function of religious differences. What seems far more likely is that the tolerance for ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences that permeated the rebellion's leadership extended to religious differences as well.

### *New Stratagems and Old Biases*

With Ma Rulong's surrender in 1862 and his subsequent reoccupation of Kunming in 1863, the face of the rebellion was dramatically altered. The Qing court was beginning to realize that the situation in Yunnan was not a simple ethnic conflict between Han and Hui.<sup>106</sup> One of the earliest critiques of Qing policy came from Zhang Liangji, who wrote a series of memorials in 1862 offering one of the first accurate and pointed criticisms of the Qing court's policy toward Yunnan. Zhang expressly warned that among Han and Hui throughout Yunnan, “bad elements seem to be winning over the good, instead of the other way around.”<sup>107</sup> In a remark notable for its sweeping indictment of the Han, Zhang stated “the Han definitely sought to force [the Hui] to rebel, it was [only] then that the Hui began to start to

harbor thoughts of rebellion.”<sup>108</sup> Zhang provided specific details and suggestions; however, it seems that his forceful indictment of the Han is what caused the court to reconsider using the pacified Hui to help end the rebellion.

In the wake of Pan Duo's assassination, in an effort to take advantage of Ma Rulong and Ma Dexin's professed desire to aid the Qing, the emperor instructed that a new policy of “using Hui to control Hui [*yi Hui zhi Hui*]” be implemented.<sup>109</sup> This new policy, which resembled a centuries-old strategy of “using barbarians to control barbarians [*yi yi zhi yi*],” sought to end the rebellion in a way that would not involve large infusions of money from the court, nor any expenditures of Qing personnel or military resources (which were sorely needed for the Taiping Rebellion). The shift in policy was rather half-hearted and even duplicitous, in that the emperor and many powerful officials doubted Ma Rulong's fealty to Beijing. The court's choice of this policy reveals an emerging pragmatism among central court officials to pursue policies that would require the barest allotment of court resources—even if it meant disregarding their own instincts.<sup>110</sup> The catalyst for this policy was the appointment of Governor-General Lao Chongguang, who had previously served as governor of Guizhou and who was thus perceived as conversant with the political, ethnic, and military terrain of southwestern China. Lao, a strong proponent of enlisting Ma Rulong to spearhead the Qing attack against Du Wenxiu, was appointed governor-general in June 1863.

Unlike many of the anti-Hui officials who preceded him, Lao sought to bring about more parity between the Han and the Hui with regard to how the state treated them.<sup>111</sup> Lao's stance was premised on the conviction—rare in Qing circles—that the Han were as much to blame for the rebellion as the Hui. Following this reasoning, he concluded that the court had two choices: the Qing could mount a massive military campaign with non-Yunnanese forces, a stratagem Lao knew the empire could hardly afford; or it could utilize Muslim Yunnanese leaders to help pacify the remaining rebels.<sup>112</sup> The court accepted Lao's strategy of procuring Hui support, even though this approach was still at odds with the position of many in the inner court, including the emperor. In accepting Lao's stance, the court also cashiered Xu Zhiming. The emperor remarked that “everything Xu Zhiming said and did all came from whatever the Hui told him to do”—a rather amazing declaration, given the many actions Xu carried out against the Hui.<sup>113</sup>

With Lao's appointment, Qing policy within Yunnan did turn more pragmatic. Many of Zhang Liangji's earlier proposals were significantly altered by Lao's approach. In one of his more colorful memorials, Lao lambasted a plan suggested by an official who had never been to Yunnan that had

proposed “six difficult and six easy steps [*liunan liuyi*]” to resolve the rebellion.<sup>114</sup> With typical aplomb, Lao dismissed the six difficulties as “self-evident and the six easy steps, while appearing simple on the surface, in practice difficult to implement.”<sup>115</sup> In particular, he argued against the central premise of the report—namely, that the Hui were the greatest barrier to peace. Lao contended that the greatest barrier was not the Hui but the obsessively anti-Hui local Han gentry:

Even if we began with ten thousand soldiers and divided them into three columns of three or four thousand each, how would this be enough since [we] could not avoid using the local militia? Unless we had a large military force to keep the local militia in control it would be a case of “the tail wagging the dog” (*weida budiao*). People such as Lin'an's Liang Shimei and Dongchuan's Yang Shencong all view themselves as the strongest, but are largely recalcitrant and overbearing, and if used incorrectly, likely would follow in the tracks of He Youbao and Lin Ziqing.<sup>116</sup>

Lao's dual policy—trust the Hui leaders, and be vigilant against anti-Hui actions by the Han—ushered in a new period of tense peace in Yunnan, although the court would remain skeptical throughout.

Lao's sponsorship of Ma Rulong was one of several factors that helped to make Ma's leadership more palatable to the Qing court in the months after his capture of Kunming and Pan Duo's assassination. The first of these was a report by Zhao Guang, president of the Board of Public Works and a native of Yunnan. In it he informed the emperor that the local gentry felt Ma Rulong and Cen Yuying had “fought as one . . . to defend the provincial capital.”<sup>117</sup>

The second factor was grounded in Ma Rulong's realization that his only real defense in the controversy over his motives was to act decisively against the Hui rebels. To prove his loyalty, he set out on a campaign of many months to capture Ma Rong, who had established a base in Xundian and Qujing after fleeing Kunming.<sup>118</sup> In the autumn of 1864, Ma Rong was captured and brought to Kunming to be tried and executed. Émile Rocher, in a graphic rendering of the event, recounted that Ma Rong was “brought under guard to the capital. There he was displayed in an iron cage for a month, when after the people were convinced of his identity, he was condemned to death by first having his legs severed and then being decapitated with ten strokes of the saber.”<sup>119</sup> Cen reportedly offered Ma Rong's severed head to the Pan Duo's memorial tablet in the local Confucian temple.

Ma Rong's capture highlighted the effectiveness of using Ma Rulong to pacify the Hui. By executing only the ringleaders, they could disarm a large majority of common soldiers; this would greatly facilitate their pacification efforts. At the same time, by allowing Ma Rulong to maintain a force largely composed of Hui, they could avoid being accused of perpetuating the anti-Hui policies of the earlier provincial officials.<sup>120</sup>

Notwithstanding Ma Rulong's successful pacification strategies, the court and other officials continued to express doubts about him. These stemmed not only from his being a former rebel and a Hui but also from reports detailing the chaotic administrative situation in Yunnan. Qing officials in Beijing and neighboring provinces were wondering more and more if Ma Rulong had saved them from losing the province to Du Wenxiu, only to establish his own seat of power there. At one point the Sichuan governor-general reported that Ma Rulong was in control of the provincial capital and that Cen Yuying had "secretly established his own clique," making any court-sponsored action difficult.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, no matter which way the court looked at it, by 1865 they were far more dependent on Cen Yuying and Ma Rulong than the other way around.

To understand the roots of the insurrection, it is crucial to look closely at its first phase, for it reveals the deep roots of religion, ethnicity, and regionalism in all regions of Yunnan. Past studies have assumed that Islam was the common denominator among the rebels and the basis of their ideology. Yet the rebellion never did solidify along religious lines, and many scholars have taken this as evidence of religious factionalism. Yet, although there seem to have been some sectarian differences among the Hui, religion was never the main cause of dissent among the various Hui leaders. Sectarian-based explanations ignore the fact that Du Wenxiu and Ma Rulong, although both Muslim leaders, at the same time were both quite clear that the Hui were, as a people, a minority among the Han and Yi.

Efforts to use religious differences to explain the breach between Ma Rulong and Du Wenxiu have often overlooked the roles played by the many non-Han allies. Ma Rulong may have been reluctant to join Du because he realized that his indigenous support rooted him to the south. He could not take Yi support for granted; their strength in numbers was an important source of his power. Had these groups turned against him, the result would have been devastating. Perhaps Ma even sensed that his non-Han allies were dissatisfied, for in November 1860 a French missionary noted that the Yi were not blindly following the Hui, as some of the Chinese documents suggest: "The *Lolo* . . . have also risen en masse against the Chinese who have vexed them for centuries. We were told that in these last few days the *Lolos* are now battling against the Muslims and maintain they too want to seize all of Yunnan!"<sup>122</sup>

Only in the early 1860s, nearly a decade after the rebellion began, did provincial officials begin to realize that the non-Han were a key element in the success the Hui were enjoying. The loss of Chuxiong and the obvious role the yi had played in that and in other Hui victories prompted the provincial authorities to begin rethinking the rebellion in terms of the Yunnan context: "Over the past several years throughout [the province] there

have been disturbances that involved Hui linking up with *yi*. Within the province of Yunnan, the *yi* are the majority. . . . It is Hui who dare to cause these disturbances, completely reliant on their relations with the *yi* to become a force. [We] must first pacify the *yi*, and then the Hui will be isolated."<sup>123</sup> The problem with this strategy was that the government tended to err in thinking of the non-Han as a single monolithic entity.

We can fully understand the divided loyalties among the Hui only when we stop perceiving the "Muslim Chinese" as a static or monolithic body. That the Muslims did not respond to Han aggression in a uniform manner is consistent with the dynamic and multivocal nature of ethnic groups in general. Their actions must be understood in a local and regional context. Any effort to explain the Panthay Rebellion must address the issue of regionalism within the demographic context. The Muslim religious and ethnic identity was often the more visible of the three elements under discussion here (especially to the court); but it is the local and regional loyalties of the Hui that will allow a balanced understanding of the rebellion.

Ma Rulong, Ma Dexin, and the other rebel leaders of southern and eastern Yunnan figured prominently in the early years of the rebellion, but clearly, the Qing were most afraid of Du Wenxiu in western Yunnan. By 1863 his sphere of control extended from the highlands of Southeast Asia to the Tibetan borderlands. As the fall of Kunming in 1863 and the assassination of Pan Duo had demonstrated, Du's influence extended far beyond those areas of western Yunnan that were directly under his control. Although the rebellion was in its seventh year, the Dali sultanate was still shrouded in mystery for most Chinese. And as the court turned its attention westward, what they found startled even the battle-hardened central government.