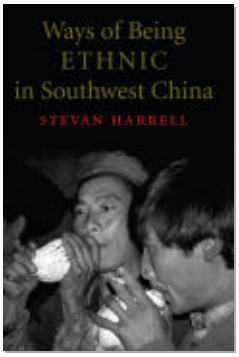
2. Foundations of Ethnic Identity



2 / Foundations of Ethnic Identity

Ethnic relations in Liangshan, complex as they are, are further complicated by the relationship between the local ethnic groups of the region and the projects of the Chinese state and the putative Chinese nation. Because the daily lives of the people—Nuosu, Prmi, Naze, Han, and others—are so embroiled in China, we need to make a few initial observations about what this China is that they are embroiled in. In order to do that, in turn, we need to place modern China and its ethnic relations in comparative historical and global perspective.

COLLECTIVITIES IN HUMAN SOCIETIES

Pre-State Societies and the Universality of Collectivities

Perceptions of difference—of culture, language, territory, kinship, and physiognomy—have been a feature of relationships between human groups as long as there have been societies. It seems clear, from ethnographic as well as historical evidence, that humans, living in one place and associating with a particular group of people, readily and universally classify humanity into selves and others, attributing to the others different ways of doing things, different ways of talking, different places where they ought to be, different relations of kinship and descent, and different looks.[1]

As far as we can tell by modern ethnographic analogy, in the period of human history before the origin of the state these culturally distinctive groups were not subject to larger social and political entities, and thus were not in competition with each other for resources allocated by some central political power. Neither were they part of any division of labor built on these cultural differences.

1. The salience of the racial component—imagined (whether real or not) differences in physiognomy between different collectivities—varies greatly from extreme in the United States to rather minor in places like China or Egypt. Thus my ambivalence in including it as one aspect of collective self- and other-perception.

In that long stretch of past time between the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens* sometime in the Pleistocene and the emergence of the first states perhaps six thousand or eight thousand years before the present, there developed great diversity in customs, language, kinship systems, and those obvious physical characteristics we now associate with notions of race. Even into our own era of intensive investigation of other peoples and their cultures, there have persisted parts of the earth where local collectivities distinguish themselves according to language, territory, and customs but are not part of any larger political unit with power over the members of the local collectivities. We can take, for example, the interior of New Guinea, inhabited according to archaeologists for at least thirty thousand years and farmed for nine thousand (Lilley 1992), where people spoke a huge variety of mutually unintelligible idioms, where they called each other and themselves by a series of distinctive names for social groups (such as Etoro, Bosavi, and Onambasulu on the Great Papuan Plateau, or Fore, Jate, and Usurufa in the Eastern Highlands), and where the social groups had continuous or sporadic relationships of intermarriage, alliance, and military hostility. Similar examples can be found on the North American Plains in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa outside the influence of West-African states.

Here, clearly, are ethnic differences in their most embryonic form. Members of one collectivity, by virtue of speaking the same language, being demonstrably related by descent and marriage, practicing the same customs, living in the same place, and perhaps believing that they look somewhat alike, differentiate themselves from those folks in the next valley, who are not closely related to the people here, and who talk, act, and maybe look funny. They often have stories about how different "peoples" originated at the beginning of the world or some more recent time, and they more often than not think that their own way of speaking, acting, and looking is both inherited from their ancestors (and thus immutable) and superior to those of their neighbors (and thus desirable). They may intermarry or not, and relations with them may be peaceful or warlike, or may shift between the two.

Such relationships have both an internal and an external aspect. Internally, there are the characteristics that group members perceive that they hold in common with one another, and externally, there are the corresponding characteristics that group members conceive differentiate them from members of other groups. These characteristics, both internal and external, are primarily of two sorts: cultural and kin-based. Cultural characteristics are paradigmatic in the Saussurian sense: they include ideas of similarity within the group and of difference from people outside the group, in all the areas listed above. Kin char-

acteristics, on the other hand, are syntagmatic: they include relatedness by descent and marriage among members of the group, and the lack of relatedness by descent or marriage between one group and another. The relative importance of inclusive or exclusive criteria of kinship or culture varies greatly from one set of intercommunity relations to another, but the presence of this kind of distinguishing criteria is pervasive in human societies.

In a nonstate society, this is about all there is to it. There is no ruling organization to confer or withhold people's rights according to their membership in one cultural-linguistic-local-racial-kin collectivity or another; there is no ruling class to appropriate surplus and aggrandize status; there is no written language that becomes a key to status and power, and if there is a lingua franca that enables people to communicate with one another, it carries no particular prestige. And, as Lévi-Strauss has pointed out (1966: 232), there is usually no sense of history as a series of changes that have led to the present. In other words, the goods that are in perennial short supply in any social system—power, wealth, and prestige—may be differentially distributed among collectivities, but this is not done by any central or overriding political organization.

Nevertheless, I think it is mistaken to draw too wide a line between cultural-local-linguistic-racial-kin collectivities in non-state systems, and such collectivities as they operate after the development and imposition of state power. The majority of the *bases* of differentiation—language, culture, territory, kinship, physiognomy—were there already in New Guinea or the Amazon or the North American plains in the absence of state systems. It is the *specific manner* in which these bases of differentiation are *used* that changes when the state appears, and changes again when the state takes the form of the modern nation-state.

Collectivities as Subordinate to the State

With the emergence of states in the last few millennia, these preexisting human proclivities to differentiate one's own from other people by means of similarities and differences in language, culture, physiognomy, common kinship, and territorial affiliation began to intersect with the increasing division of labor that is the development of social classes and the state, and thus the differences began to make a different kind of difference—they began to determine, or at least influence, the allocation of prestige, power, and wealth in a situation where prestige, power, and wealth were much less evenly distributed than in the prestate situation.

As far as we know, the first states to form (what Fried [1967] calls "pristine states") were rather local affairs, and most of them probably involved, at their

core, members of only one local-linguistic-cultural collectivity, led by members of one or a series of allied kinship groups. The first states to form in north China, for example, the Shang in the mid-second millennium B.C.E. and perhaps the Xia a few hundred years earlier,[2] seem to have been based around alliances of a few powerful clans. These early, kin-based states were probably too small to contain many different cultural-linguistic collectivities, but within only a few centuries their territories expanded greatly—the Shang by the time of its conquest by the Zhou in 1049 B.C.E. probably directly controlled a territory on the order of magnitude of a modern Chinese province and a population in the hundreds of thousands (David N. Keightley, personal communication). When states such as this expand, neighboring peoples in the same region, who were not part of the collectivity that originally formed the state, come under the state's influence and must react to the threat that the state expansion poses. It seems to me that the neighboring collectivity can react in one of four ways:

1. It can imitate its threatening neighbors and form a state of its own, probably based on the same kind of clan alliance and rule. As a result, the territory will have two states rather than one. The Zhou, for example, may well have developed a state in imitation of, and to counter a threat from, the Shang; later the whole of what is now China proper[3] was occupied by states formed in this way. I call this process *imitation*.
2. It can organize itself in a more formal manner than before, giving explicit political power to certain leaders, rationalizing its political and military structure, and formalizing the rules of kinship, succession, and marriage, but stopping short of full state organization. The result is that the core of the region, perhaps the most populous and economically productive part, continues to be organized as a state, while the peripheral, less populous, and less productive parts become tribes, in the narrow sense of that word. This appears to have happened with many of the steppe peoples of Central Asia in reaction to the consolidation of Chinese state rule in the immediate pre-Imperial and

2. There has been considerable controversy over the existence and timing of the Xia dynasty, which according to traditional historiography preceded the Shang, but now looks as if it overlapped in time, if it existed at all. See Chang 1980: 335–55.

3. This is a term I hope will get revived in the current debates over national identity in China. The area I am thinking of includes all or part of each of the eighteen provinces of the Qing (though not some peripheral areas of some of those provinces, particularly in the Southwest), and probably also the three northeastern provinces, although those retain, in Western languages only, the ethnic designation Manchuria.

Imperial periods (Fried 1983), and the growth of the Iroquois confederacy from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries (Jennings 1984) was a similar process of *tribalization* in reaction to the incursion of state power in the form of European colonies.

3. It can be conquered or otherwise overcome and absorbed without much trace into the polity of the expanding state. Language, customs, and even physiognomy may retain traces of the former difference from the central norm, but descendants of members of the previously different cultural-linguistic-local unit come first to deny and then to forget them, voluntarily or involuntarily assuming totally the culture and language of the rulers, though perhaps as individuals initially retaining lower status in the society. Much of what is now south China has undergone this process of *assimilation*; people whose ancestors were unequivocally something else are now nothing but Chinese (Brown 1996).
4. It can be incorporated into the political structure of the state, but with a separate and distinct (and usually lower) status from that of the original subjects of the state rulers. Language, customs, religion, endogamy, separate territory, and sometimes race clearly distinguish the incorporated protoethnic group from the rulers and their cultural group at the center. The result of this process of *ethnicization* is an empire—a state and territory that include different peoples, as those are defined by the preexisting (but sometimes altered or even reemphasized) differences in language, customs, and so forth. Empires, of course, have existed in many parts of the world since the first millennium B.C.E.

These four processes are all characteristic of the expansion and strengthening of state power that has been the main trend in human history for the past few millennia. They may, of course, succeed one another temporally in a particular region: the inhabitants of the central Yangzi Valley, for example, may first have undergone tribalization (records are scanty) but certainly imitated the states to the north in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., then were incorporated into the Chinese empire, almost certainly by ethnicization, in Qin (221–206 B.C.E.) and Han (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) times, and then were slowly assimilated until they became "nothing but Chinese" since at least the Tang dynasty (618–907). In a different sequence, steppe-dwellers of Central Asia tribalized over a thousand years ago were ethnicized into the Russian Empire and had their ethnic identity consolidated and strengthened under Soviet rule, only to experience a process of imitative nationalism with the breakup of the Soviet Union and the formation of the independent -stans in the 1990s.

With the exception of complete assimilation, these processes are potentially reversible. States may revert to tribal polities or even to collections of independent villages when external pressure goes away or when demography collapses. Ethnic groups incorporated into empires may aspire to or achieve political independence, either as states or as nonstate polities. And even assimilation can be reversed if it has not gone all the way to disappearance, as when long-lost ethnic identities, such as that of the Muslim Hui of coastal Fujian (Gladney 1991: chap. 6; Fan Ke n.d.), are revived for political and/or ethnic advantage.

In none of these four processes do the cultural differences themselves lead to the status of a people as an ethnic group, a nation, or simply a category inside or outside a state polity. The existence of these cultural differences is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the formation or persistence of ethnic groups. The cultural differences need not be great—they can be something as small as the memory of a language once spoken or the consciousness of a shared history, but there must be something there for ethnic identity to build on, to serve as what we call an ethnic marker (Keyes 1996). And in addition to cultural difference, there must be a sense of relatedness as a people, an ideology of descent from common ancestors (Keyes 1976), and marriage and affinity within the group. These, too, can be put in the foreground or laid aside, but as long as they are not completely forgotten, they can become the basis for ethnic identity.

With the emergence of the state—and particularly with the development of ideology as a buttress to state power, and the use of written languages to formulate, disseminate, and preserve state ideology—a third basis for in-group solidarity and out-group exclusiveness emerges: common and divergent history. Empires and nations both (see below) depend partly on history for their legitimacy, demonstrating that the in-group has a common past, and a past different from those of the other groups with which it comes into contact. With the advent of state power and ideology, then, history is added to culture and kinship as a possible basis for group identity. The different ways in which history-, kinship-, and culture-based ethnicity interact in local contexts are the main subject of this book.

The Empire and the Nation-State

Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China is concerned with a particular historical sequence during which the Chinese state has included under its rule peoples who distinguish themselves from one another by the aforementioned

cultural, linguistic, territorial, and kin boundaries and share a sense of a common history and kinship, including descent from common ancestors (Keyes 1976). States that include such diversely perceived peoples are often divided into two types: empires and nation-states, with the former replaced by the latter in the last few centuries. Ernest Gellner, for example, asserts that

> there are two great types or species of the division of labour, of social structure, *both* of them being marked by very great complexity and size, but which differ radically in their implications for culture, in the manner in which they make use of culture. . . . One of these, which may be called advanced agrarian-based civilization, makes for great cultural diversity, and deploys that diversity to mark out the differential situations, economically and politically, of the various subpopulations within it. The other, which may be called growth-oriented industrial society, is strongly impelled towards cultural homogeneity within each cultural unit. (1987: 17–18)

Benedict Anderson's now-classic treatment (1983, 1991) similarly traces the process of development from the "dynastic realm," held together by divine kingship and a sacred "truth-language," to the modern nation-state, held together by ideas of citizenship and a common "national print language," the former consisting of diverse peoples bound by allegiance to the monarch and his associated clerisy, and the latter of a people with the perception that they share a common heritage and culture.

The attitudes toward cultural, linguistic, and kin-community difference are said to differ greatly in these two kinds of polities. In the empire or dynastic realm such difference is tolerated, even promoted, by state authorities, because it not only is accepted as inevitable but also facilitates both division of labor and political control in a society with a weak state and low revenue base. Examples abound in actual empires. The Ottomans, for example, minutely classified the population of their realm; Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Arabs, and Georgians each had their own religion, culture, language, territory, marital community, and, most importantly, their legally recognized position as part of the larger imperial community (Sonyel 1993, Batatu 1978).

The transition to modern Turkish nationalism under Atatürk eliminated all this qualified inclusiveness; Turkey was now the land of the Turks, who had their language (which was pointedly now written in the Roman alphabet, in contrast to the earlier Arabic one), and the minorities, though they were not entirely eliminated or assimilated, now had a problematical status: they were less than full citizens in the ideological sense that their cultural difference made

them a kind of defective Turkish citizenry, rather than members of groups that combined to make an empire (Gunter 1994). Until very recently, Kurds were often not allowed to use their written languages in schools or other public contexts, and they were considered not only defective but rebellious if they did (Gunter 1994).

The same kind of process has occurred, in even more violent ways, in many of the new states that emerged from the decolonization of Asia and Africa after World War II. In many cases a national print language has had to be constructed, if not from whole cloth, at least from quite variable threads, as with Tanzanian Swahili and Bahasa Indonesia, and myths of origin in the remote past have been the basis of what I have elsewhere called "the hiding of a history of negotiation behind a narrative of unfolding" (Harrell 1996a). In the rare case where intellectuals attempt to create a nation (necessarily including a national historical narrative) in a relatively democratic environment, as in Taiwan or Belize in the mid-'90s, there develops a real puzzlement over what the national history ought to include (Zhuang Wanshou 1996a,b; Haug 1995). In most places, however, intellectual stooges in the service of a ruling class create a narrative that serves the fictitious but compelling idea that the nation—with a *common* culture, language, kinship, territory, physiognomy, and history—is an eternal thing, and citizens can and should point to a glorious past, a proud present, and a bright future.

In many polities, of course, the attempt to impose state nationalism on a multicultural population is not entirely successful; cultural and territorial minorities who are included in the new national whole may resent and/or resist. In doing so, they also incorporate the third basis of group identity—a common history—into their identity, along with culture and kinship. When this happens, ethnic conflict is born, with results obvious today from Tibet to Bosnia to Kurdistan. But direct resistance is not the only strategy available to leaders of local minority communities. Where the state attempts to co-opt the leadership and ordinary people of minority collectivities, it may be just as possible, and much more advantageous, for elites among the minorities to co-opt state policies for local purposes, especially where the policies are less than completely assimilationist and recognize some rights to cultural and other distinctiveness on the part of the minority collectivities. This can lead to a situation in which the central authorities and local leaders are using each other for rather divergent but not directly contradictory ends. (I see this as the prevailing mode of interaction in the area described in this book.) Resistance and accommodation are, of course, not mutually exclusive strategies, and members of minority groups may use both, either simultaneously or at different

times. In either of these situations, however—resistance or accommodation—the ethnic identity of the minority people tends to be strengthened.

We must remind ourselves that the stable and rather unproblematic distinction between the ruling class and the protoethnic collectivities found in agrarian polities or empires, as well as the much more contentious distinction between the national culture and minority ethnic cultures characteristic of nation-states, are not fundamentally different from each other. Both are based on the aforementioned human universal of forming cultural, linguistic, local, and marital communities (along with, of course, other kinds of communities based on gender, age, occupation, or even artistic and musical interests). And nearly everywhere, whether in an empire, a nation-state, or even a prestate situation, members of such collectivities see themselves as being related by common descent and intermarriage (Keyes 1976; Horowitz 1985: 59), and in many cases they strengthen these feelings of commonality and difference by writing historical narratives demonstrating the inevitable unfolding of the group and its identity through time (Harrell 1996a). The difference is between the tolerance or even promotion of differences in empires and the suspicion and often attempts to eliminate them in nation-states. As Keyes points out, "Ethnicity has become a much more significant factor in social relations since the emergence of the nation-state" (1996: 153).

This distinction, however, like so many distinctions of ideal types, runs into problems when we look at actual cases. The Ottomans and Romans ran unequivocal empires, and the Turks and Italians have more recently run unequivocal nation-states in the same places, but certain cases are in-between, even at the end of the twentieth century. In other words, not all states in the contemporary world are unequivocally nation-states. The United States (whose very name connotes at least a nod toward pluralism) is riven by debate today over the extent of cultural commonality that ought to be required or expected of citizens; opponents of multiculturalism display the classical nationalist's fear that too much diversity will lead to separatism and disunity, while liberals see the United States as a political, rather than cultural, community. Muslims are now as much as 9 percent of the population of France (Tash 1997), and while the assimilationist project goes on in the schools, media, and town halls, there are voices arguing for a more pluralist society even in that locus classicus of modern nationalism. The issue of the nation-state is far from settled.

At the same time, not all state-minority relations are structured the same way, even in the same state. In the United States, for example, the relationship between the state (or the majority Euro-Americans) and Native American tribes—governed by treaty and administered territorially, and involving local

government of the Native communities—is very different from the relationship between the state or the majority and African Americans, which involves no territorial base or governmental autonomy, and whose legal aspects are more ambiguous. At the same time African Americans pose a much greater threat to state legitimacy, because of their numbers and relative power in many social contexts, than do the few remaining Natives, living mostly in remote areas. In China the nations of the northern and western periphery have a very different relationship to the state and to the Han majority than do the nonnational ethnic groups of the South, Southwest, and Northeast. The case studies in this book deal with different ways of being ethnic even *among* the southwestern groups.

THE CHINESE CASE

Nowhere does the conflict between the two models of a political system—empire and nation-state—manifest itself more acutely or more ambiguously than in the People's Republic of China. China was once an empire, though more assimilationist and thus further from the ideal type than many, and in the world of nation-states today, it explicitly proclaims itself a unified, multinational state (*tongyi duominzu guojia*, lit., "unified country of diverse nationalities"), which in many ways looks somewhat like an empire. There are "autonomous regions, prefectures, and counties" for various minority peoples; there are special dispensations in language, religion, and even childbearing, made for members of minorities; there are officially promoted attempts to glorify the culture and the history of minority "nationalities" classified according to a meticulous, "scientific" process. At the same time, all the elements of the ideal type of a nation-state as outlined by Gellner and Anderson are there: the myths of a common origin and a glorious past; the idea of sacred territory, clearly distinguished from foreign soil, to be defended with the blood of its sons and daughters; a national print-language, also taught universally in the schools; and a visceral distrust (sometimes combined with envy or even admiration) of everybody and all things foreign.

This book is to a large extent concerned with the ways in which these two models of empire and nationhood conflict with each other in the context of their interaction with local cultural, linguistic, marital, and territorial collectivities. In other words, the people of Liangshan organize a great part of their lives in terms of strongly held, sometimes unquestioned beliefs that they are members of groups that share kinship, territory, and culture. As long as there have been people in the region, they have probably held these kinds of beliefs. But even before they faced the nation-building projects of the People's

Republic, the ways these groups were constituted, the characteristics they saw themselves as holding in common, and the nature of the boundaries between themselves and other groups were all quite variable. Since the project of ethnic (or "nationalities") identification (*minzu shibie*) began in the 1950s, the beliefs and practices of all these collectivities have been partially transformed in accordance with the categories in which they emerged from the project. The categories, in terms of their commonalities and boundaries, are more similar to each other than they were previously. The members of these groups have all been incorporated, unquestionably, as citizens of the Chinese state and as members of state-defined "nationalities," or *minzu*. But the differences in the nature and boundaries of these groups have not been eradicated by the state project; there are still different ways of being ethnic in the region, and this book is about them. Before we proceed to examine in detail the ways of being ethnic in Liangshan, however, we need to review briefly the process by which China came to the contradictory juncture of being both an empire and a nation-state.

The Rise of Chinese Nationalism

In the past century and a half, China has moved from being an empire that had many characteristics of nationhood (Townsend lists "a sense of a common history, with myths of origin and descent; a distinctive written language and literary forms associated with it; some common folklore, life rituals and religious practices; and a core political elite, with a common education and orientation toward government service" [1992: 125]) to being a modern state that still has one extremely important aspect of empire: rule over diverse ethnic groups whose cultures are, officially at least, promoted and celebrated rather than repressed or denigrated.

This does not mean, however, that China has, through the turmoil of the last 150 years, simply floated somewhere in a happy compromise between Gellner's ideal types. Rather, there has been a significant transformation in the ideas about and practice of relations between the core and the periphery of regions ruled from Beijing (or, very briefly, Nanjing) or, to put it another way, between those practicing the "core culture" that we usually refer to as Chinese and those coming under their influence, or in a third formulation, between Chinese living under Chinese jurisdiction and Chinese living elsewhere. In order to understand how Liangshan came to its present predicament, we need to explore how the center-periphery relations in which Liangshan is entangled got to be the way they are.

The Chinese empire, at least during its last few periods of dynastic rule, was

characterized by a particular set of doctrines and practices that have come to be known as "Chinese culturalism" (Levenson 1968, Townsend 1992). A ruling elite defined itself and its criteria for membership not in terms of belonging to any particular kinship-and-culture collectivity, but strictly in cultural terms. Those who were able to master the principles of civilized political discourse embodied in certain texts known in the West as "Confucian classics" had the right and duty to rule. Most of those who achieved this mastery came in fact from the ethnic group of Chinese-speakers (known at least in the Qing dynasty as "Han people"),[4] but members of other ethnic collectivities, such as the Mongols of the Yuan and the Manchus of the Qing (1644–1911), could gain legitimacy in the eyes of the elite if they mastered the classical rhetoric and principles. This is why Mongols and Manchus could rule the empire and not be faced with constant, ethnic nationalist revolt.

At the same time, mastery of high culture and its consequent political and social status were hardly independent of Han ethnicity. The classical language in which not only the canonical texts but also the official documents of the Ming and Qing were written was a Han language; even though it differed greatly from any currently spoken form, it was much closer to those spoken forms than to any other language. Non-Han could and did master it—even the late Ming Jesuit Matteo Ricci seems to have come close—but it did not belong to them in the same sense that it belonged to Han officials and scholars. In addition, there were numerous and pervading resonances between the elite culture of Confucianism and the folk cultures of Han communities all over China and beyond. Operas and oral stories told tales that demonstrated the virtues analyzed and systematized in the classics; ancestor worship enacted Confucian notions of proper lineage and family organization; customary law of family and inheritance reflected Confucian notions of proper relationships and behavior. And most important, as there was no sharp dividing line between

4. The term "Han" has a varied history. It was the dynastic name adopted by the Liu family from 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E. and came to be something of an ethnonym in later times. In the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), however, it referred to the people of north China, including Khitan and Koreans (Endicott-West 1989: 13). The Qing dynasts, themselves Manchus, used the word when writing in the Chinese language to refer to what we now call Han or "ethnic Chinese," and it has come in modern times to refer unambiguously to this group. Hence I will use the word throughout this book for consistency, realizing that certain particular usages are anachronistic. Unlike certain authors, I do not want to use "Chinese" to refer to this group, since, in the Southwest in particular, there are millions of people who unequivocally consider themselves to be Chinese (Zhongguo *ren,* Zhoguoco, etc.) and just as clearly deny that they are Han.

ruling class and peasantry or merchants in Qing China, there was also no sharp line dividing elite from folk cultures. An unassimilated Yi or Yao who passed the examinations and became an imperial official had to be markedly bicultural, operating in the home sphere with one set of assumptions, practices, and vocabulary, and in the official sphere with quite another set. But a Han villager who made it in the official world simply had to shade over from a folk to an elite version of the same language, rituals, and manners. Elite Chinese culture claimed universality; this claim was justified in the sense that anyone could participate. But it was universality on the condition that one act in a literized (*wen*) manner, and the basis of that literization was Han culture.

In late Imperial China, the idea of a superior culture at the center went along with the imperial version of what I have elsewhere called a "civilizing project" (Harrell 1995a) but will refer to here with the neologistic but more accurate term "literizing project," since the basis of status was not urbanism but familiarity with texts. The universal validity of the high culture meant that anyone could adopt it; its moral superiority meant that the ruling class was duty-bound to acculturate others to it. If peoples were originally included in the Chinese empire by a process of ethnicization—political subjugation with minimal cultural change—the ideal of the literizers was still assimilation, making others literate and moral by persuading them to conform with norms dictated by the high culture, whose basis was Han. As Townsend points out (1992: 125), this amounted to "state nationalism"—pursuit of the idea that citizens of a state should have a common culture and thus constitute a nation—on the part of the imperial authorities. That this state nationalism was successful is of course demonstrated by the expansion of Han culture from the North China Plain in the third millennium B.C.E. to the eastern and southern oceans and the southwestern mountain walls by the twentieth century C.E.

What differentiates this imperial form from the present one, however, is very clear. In Imperial times, the high, literate culture was valid for everybody; no other culture was as good, for anyone. People around the peripheries were inferior because they had different and thus inferior cultures. Since the early twentieth century, the new versions of the high culture have been seen as the exclusive property of the Chinese (whether just the Han or all Chinese within the borders is still a matter of contention), and people around the peripheries have been thought to have different cultures because they are inferior. This transformation has come about as China has become a modern state, still struggling with whether it is really a nation-state.

Through a series of historical events beginning with the Opium War (1839–42) and proceeding to the semicolonial imposition of unequal treaties, the failed

reforms of 1898, the Republican revolution of 1911, the May Fourth Movement of the late teens and twenties, the Japanese invasion, the Civil War, and the whole set of cataclysmic social changes brought about by the imposition of communism beginning in the late 1940s, Chinese intellectuals and politicians came to the realization that China would have to become a state like other states, and they set about creating such a state in much of the territory that had been ruled by the former empire. We need not rehearse modern Chinese history here, but we should outline briefly a set of processes that effected the change from imperial to national ethnic relations.

First, as intellectuals around the turn of the century increasingly despaired of China's ability to survive as an empire, Republicans began to identify China as a nation—an ethnic group with common descent, territory, and culture, but which was also politically sovereign. It was at this time that radical reformers, beginning with Liang Qichao in 1902, began to think and write of China as a *minzu*, a term probably first used in Meiji-era Japan (and pronounced *minzoku* in Japanese, but written with the same characters in Japan as in China) as part of the process of building a nation out of the fragmented feudal order that was Japan of the Edo period (1615–1868) (Morris-Suzuki 1996). When Liang picked up the term, he first defined it as a group with a common geographic origin, a common bloodline, common physical characteristics, common language, common writing, common religion, common customs, and a common mode of livelihood (Peng Yingming 1985: 9). For Liang and his associates, the unification of China as a nation could still be accomplished under the overlordship of the Manchu Qing dynasty, but radical revolutionaries who picked up the usage—the most prominent among them Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen)—began to identify the culture of the Chinese nation explicitly with a single ethnic group (the Han) and to exclude others (particularly the ruling Manchus) from this national-cultural community (ibid.: 9–10).[5]

But this explicit Han nationalism was unworkable unless the Chinese patriots who advocated it also wanted to give up half or more of the territory that had been under imperial rule. A strong China, for reasons of pride as well as natural resources and military defense, had to include parts of Central Asia, Mongolia, and Tibet, as well as the ethnically mixed areas of the South and Southwest. So the original idea of the nation-state, so effective in exciting anti-Manchu rebelliousness, evolved quickly into Sun Zhongshan's idea of a "Republic of Five Nationalities"—Han, Zang (Tibetan), Meng (Mongolian),

5. I am indebted to Zhang Haiyang for pointing me to Peng Yingming's invaluable essay discussing the earliest uses of the term *minzu* in China.

Hui (Muslim—but in this case referring to the Turkic speaking peoples of what is now Xinjiang), and Man (Manchu)—each represented by a stripe on the new Republican flag (Sun 1928: 12).

It is quite significant that the four minority groups represented in this formulation are all, in our modern sense, nations—large, territorially compact ethnic groups with reasonable, and in these cases historically founded, claims to political sovereignty. Though the Republicans opposed sovereignty for the Turkic or Mongolian peoples then within China's territory, they recognized its possibility. These groups' incorporation into the Republic would thus have to be in a process of ethnicization; previous imitation had precluded assimilation, at least in the short run.

There were no stripes on the flag, however, for any of the peoples centered in the Southwest, including the ones described in this book. In addition to cultural inferiority—something they at least implicitly shared with the Mongols, Manchus, Muslims, and Tibetans—they also had the added disadvantage of having no recent state sovereignty.[6] They were, in a sense, the peoples who remained on the far peripheries after those somewhat closer to the center had become assimilated; in the last centuries of the empire a few of them, such as the Nuosu, had responded by conscious tribalization, whereas others were in the process of being assimilated. Neither tribalization nor partial assimilation was perceived by Chinese nationalists as a barrier to eventual total assimilation, which became the explicit policy of the Republican government. When the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek referred, then, to the *Zhonghua minzu*, or Chinese nation, he meant, ideally at least, a potentially culturally uniform national population living within China's borders (Chiang 1947: 39).

The Communist Variant

The Chinese Communist Party, upon taking power in 1949, inherited both the remnant cultural nationalism of the Republic and the very different Marxist-

6. One could argue that the Tai (or Dai) of Sipsong Panna (now called in Chinese Xishuangbanna Daizu Autonomous Prefecture) did have a functioning sovereign state into the twentieth century, but the combination of the fact that Chinese imperial regimes from the Yuan on had conferred titles on the ruler, implying his subordination, and the ignorance on the part of the Republicans about this area in general prevented the early Republicans from taking any Tai claim to nationhood very seriously. And of course the Tai state was small and weak, so no Chinese state was very afraid of its claims, though it is still not allowed in Chinese publications to refer to pre-1951 Sipsong Panna as a kingdom. See Hsieh 1995.

Leninist views on "the national question" (Connor 1984). This latter, of course, had to take priority in official policy at least, and it demanded that Han culture no longer be considered superior a priori and that no group be either legally disprivileged or subject to overt pressures of cultural assimilation. In short, Communist doctrine resisted both the empire model, in which ethnic groups were legally unequal, and the nation-state model, in which equality was based on the real or promised erasure of ethnic distinctions. The Communists could neither ignore ethnic distinctions nor make these distinctions invidiously, as either one would be cultural nationalism, or *da Han minzu zhuyi*—"great Han chauvinism." Instead, they had to create what they called a "unified country of diverse nationalities." What this meant was that all the ethnic groups in China, however many there turned out to be—and explicitly including not only the historical nations represented in the five-color flag but also the smaller and politically less organized groups in the Southwest and elsewhere—had to be recognized and accorded equal status as elements of the new state.

At the same time, the Communists were committed to economic and political development. As orthodox Marxist-Leninists, they espoused an idea of development that divided human history in general into five stages, originally systematized in Stalin's Soviet Union: the primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist modes of production, in scientifically discovered historical order. It was empirically obvious in the China of the 1950s that members of different ethnic groups stood on different rungs of this ladder of human progress, and in general the Han (along with perhaps a few Hui Muslims, Manchus, and Koreans) stood at the top. The Communists thus formulated a policy of development that urged the "brother nationalities," or *xiongdi minzu*, to follow the example of the advanced Han and move quickly forward in history, even to skip some of the rungs on the ladder. One effect of this policy was to confirm the Han in their place of prominence as the most developed and the people whom the others should follow. The only difference between the Communist development project and the literizing project of the old Empire was thus the rationale: in Imperial times, peoples of the periphery had been urged to follow the Han example because it was morally superior in its own right; in Communist times they were urged to follow the Han example because it stood higher on an objective scale that was originally formulated without respect to who occupied its higher gradations, but conveniently placed the Han at the top.

Communist nationality policy was thus quite simple in its conception. First, the People's Republic's constituent "nationalities" (*minzu*) had to be identified, along with their position on the scale of progress. Second, they had to be given

the opportunity (or coerced, depending on one's point of view) to develop in the direction of universal progress. Given the preexisting situation on the ground, particularly in such areas as the Southwest, identification was no easy task, and the development would be as hard or harder for the minorities as it turned out to be for the Han core. The ways in which these two prongs of Communist policy—ethnic identification and economic and cultural development—interacted with local categories and local society are the subjects of chapter 3.