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0521853540 - The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands

Leo K. Shin

Excerpt

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1 History of the margins

One of the first things we must do in imagining a world without tribes is to try to realize that the seemingly solid evidence of tribes in historical accounts is largely illusory.

Morton H. Fried, "Tribe to State or State to Tribe"

China's expansion to the south in the imperial period has generally produced uncomplicated stories. Han migrants seeking opportunities beyond the central plains spread to the frontier through successive waves of migration and cultivated roots in the hostile but sparsely inhabited country. They transformed the landscape of the border zone with their agricultural tools and techniques, introduced to the territory their social and economic institutions, and disseminated throughout the region the beliefs and practices of Chinese culture. In their new surrounding, settlers found opportunities not only in farming but also in hunting, fishing, gathering, logging, mining, and trading. Many who migrated to the south did so to escape wars or natural calamities, but others were soldiers sent by Chinese rulers to establish control. Han settlement was almost always accompanied by the extension of the Chinese state: civil administration was organized in areas where the fiscal base was considered sufficiently stable, and garrisons were set up at strategic locations where military presence was deemed essential. China's "march toward the tropics" – as Herold Wiens suggestively titled his now-classic study published over half a century ago – has thus been regarded by many as a process of colonization, sustained by the economic needs of Han settlers, the political interests of the state, and the "urge to civilize" of Chinese rulers and elites.

The conventional historical narratives generated from this broad framework have ranged from ones of confrontation and assimilation to ones of accommodation and acculturation. The stories of confrontation, as told by both traditional and modern-day historians, invariably emphasize the tensions between Han settlers and the native population. Seen from this perspective, the narrative of Han expansion is not so much one of taming the wild land as one of concerted annexation. Over time, migrants from

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the central plains, in trying to secure for themselves the most productive resources, are said to have had to frequently solicit help from the Chinese state to kill off or push further into marginal lands those natives who had stood in the way. The stories of assimilation, on the other hand, tend to focus on the roles of Han settlers in the transformation of the native population. While some historians have attributed the success of the project of sinicization to the presumably unifying and transformative power of Chinese civilization, others – among whom the still-influential Owen Lattimore – have pointed to the favorable natural environment of the south as the reason the Chinese state was able to extend to the border zone its administrative and cultural apparatuses.¹

The narratives of accommodation, by contrast, treat as their focus not the tensions between Han settlers and the native population but the transformations both groups had to undertake to facilitate the creation of a new order. The essential story of China's expansion, according to many a historian, is the emergence and development in the borderlands of a variety of formerly non-existent political, social, and economic relationships. To extend its political reach to the southern border zone, the Chinese state for much of the imperial period is said to have had to embrace and promote the institution of native chieftaincy. The stories of acculturation, similarly, opt to emphasize the profound influences Han and non-Han peoples have had on one another. Rather than depict the settlement of Han migrants and the extension of the Chinese state as forms of colonization, however, the narratives of acculturation tend to portray China's expansion as an almost inevitable process through which Han and non-Han peoples would eventually join together to form a unified nation.²

¹ For a classic exposition of the confrontation and assimilation theses, see Wiens, *China's March Toward the Tropics*. Among the body of scholarship that forms the basis of Wiens's synthesis are Eberhard, "Kultur und Siedlung der Randvölker China"; Li, *Formation of the Chinese People*; Xu Songshi, *Yuejiang liu yu ren min shi*; She Yize, *Zhongguo tu si zhi du*. For recent studies that place particular emphasis on the demographic, economic, and environmental factors in China's expansion, see von Glahn, *Country of Streams and Grottoes*; Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt*; Lee, "Political Economy of a Frontier." For the rhetoric, if not necessarily the practice, of assimilation, see Wang Gungwu, "The Chinese Urge to Civilize." For a recent exchange concerning the concept of sinicization, see Rawski, "Reenvisioning the Qing"; Ho, "In Defense of Sinicization." For Lattimore, see *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*.

² For the accommodation thesis, see, for example, Shepherd, *Statecraft and Political Economy on the Taiwan Frontier* (but see also the critique in Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*). For an explicit effort to apply Richard White's idea of "the middle ground," see Giersch, "A Motley Throng." For the concept of "unitary multi-national state," see Fei Xiaotong, "Zhonghua min zu duo yuan yi ti ge ju." For an application of Fei's framework to the history of south China, see Wu Yongzhang, *Zhongnan min zu guan xi shi*. For the institution of native chieftaincy, see my discussion in Chapter 3.

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Such narratives do contain a measure of truth – wars did break out frequently, special political, social, and economic institutions did emerge, and natives of the southern border zone did come to share many cultural traits with settlers from the central plains – but most also leave unexamined some long-cherished assumptions in the writing of Chinese history. Of such firmly-held beliefs, perhaps the most entrenched is the conviction that binaries such as Chinese and non-Chinese, Han and non-Han, are self-evident. To be sure, historians are now less likely to speak of “the Chinese mind” (or the “essence” of Chinese culture) and more inclined to draw attention to the diversity of the geography and population of China. But even as scholars become more attentive to local differences as well as to the distinctions between “Chinese” and “Han” as categories (the so-called Han nationality, according to the official census of 2000, made up 91.59 percent of China’s population), it remains the case that much of what was once deemed to constitute the essence of Chinese culture – textual traditions, social and religious practices, and so on – has simply been repackaged and reinterpreted as the core of Han ethos. And while historians are mindful that the boundaries between “Chinese” and “non-Chinese,” “Han” and “non-Han,” are necessarily fluid (members of one group could, in time, adopt the cultural or social markers of the other), many have continued to find it useful to explain the history of China’s expansion as one of interactions – whether in the form of confrontation, assimilation, accommodation, or acculturation – between inherently distinct peoples.³

More fundamental, what such narratives have in common is what may be characterized as a primordialist approach to the concept of ethnicity. For many a historian, the notion of ethnicity is closely associated with the “essence” – whether it be engendered by a common language, a set of shared beliefs and practices, a sense of a common ancestry, or a combination of such and similar elements – of individual ethnic groups. Although scholars who subscribe to this view might differ in how and how strongly they would make a case for the existence of such primordial ties (and the full range of their arguments is certainly more complex and nuanced than is often acknowledged by their opponents), they do share the belief that ethnic identities are rooted in certain “givens” and should not be attributed solely to considerations for power, status, or material gains.⁴

³ For efforts to distinguish between “Chinese” and “Han,” see, for example, Xu Jieshun, *Han min zu fa zhan shi*. For population statistics, see Zhongguo guo jia tong ji ju ren kou tong ji si, *Zhongguo ren kou tong ji nian jian*.

⁴ For an introduction to the debates concerning the concept of ethnicity, see Hutchinson and Smith, *Ethnicity*. For the case of China, see Crossley, “Thinking about Ethnicity in Early Modern China.”

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Just as clear, the narratives of China's expansion, not unlike those concerned more broadly with the history of China conceived over the past century, have also been shaped by the import of the concepts of nation and nation-state. On one level, the history of the *national* history of China could no doubt be traced to the emergence of scientific, nation-based historical writings in Western Europe toward the end of the eighteenth century. On another level, the desire among political leaders and intellectuals in the past century to construct a linear model of history for China – in which the Chinese nation as a self-evident and sovereign entity is seen as continuously evolving through a process of self-realization – has clearly been propelled by the need to create a modern nation-state following the collapse of the Qing dynasty (1636–1912). Although the languages they use to describe the nation have changed over time, most political leaders and intellectuals of modern China would agree that it is the inherent unity of the people (or, more precisely, that of Chinese civilization) that has been the nation's principal constitutive force. And although the narratives of expansion do differ in their focus, most share the assumption that the “Chinese nation,” notwithstanding its internal multiplicity, is ultimately a meaningful unit for historical analysis.⁵

In retelling the story of China's expansion, my aim in this book is not to dismiss the conventional narratives but to incorporate them into a more satisfactory one. The story told here is anchored on the simple premise that labels such as “Han,” “Yao,” and “Lao” one encounters in the historical records are not to be taken to stand for self-evident, objectively constituted ethnic groups; rather, they should be understood as historically constructed categories whose precise contents shifted with time and space. Although the assumption here is hardly novel – the works by Dru Gladney and Pamela Crossley come immediately to mind – by explicitly structuring the story of China's expansion around the supposition, it is my hope that this study would encourage its readers to step outside the limited framework of “Han” versus “non-Han” and to approach the history of China with new questions. For example, if the categories “Han” and “non-Han” are not to be treated as building blocks for the history of China's expansion, how should one make sense of the real and imagined differences between people who are identified in the records as Han and those who are labeled as Yao, Lao, Ling, Zhuang, and so on? And how should one conceive a *new* history of China's expansion

⁵ For the evolution of scientific, nation-based history in Europe and North America, see, for example, Breisach, *Historiography*, 199–267; Appleby et al., *Telling the Truth about History*, 53–90. For a critique and an explicit attempt to write against the grain of national history, see Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*.

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without some of the *old* conceptual tools? I do not pretend I have fully answered these questions, but I believe this book has provided a useful starting point for further reflections.⁶

The arguments of this book are relatively straightforward. In China during the imperial period, the borderlands were at once full of perils and opportunities. Contacts between natives and settlers no doubt transformed the border zones – whether in terms of political and social organization, economic relations, environmental configuration, or a combination of such – but they also shaped the ways borderlands were imagined. This book is *not* about how Han people conquered, assimilated, or co-opted the non-Han; rather, it is about how interactions between populations with unequal claim or access to power led to the construction of boundaries and hierarchies in the border zones. As the centralizing state extended its reach to the south, this book argues, the political interests of the center, the economic needs of the settlers, and the imagination of the cultural elites all facilitated the demarcation and categorization of the population in the border region. In this process, not only did officials and other observers from the so-called central plains increasingly distinguish between people who were considered subjects of the state and those who were deemed “beyond the pale,” they also became more and more interested in differentiating and categorizing the borderland “non-Chinese” populations. China’s historical expansion to the south is no doubt a story of colonization and acculturation, but just as significant, it is also a story of demarcation and differentiation.⁷

Although this book is not explicitly comparative, its arguments are intended to contribute to several broad-ranging dialogues. By framing the history of China’s expansion in terms of boundary formation and transformation, this study joins a substantial and growing body of scholarship – which can be traced to but has by now surpassed the pioneering works of Fredrik Barth – that treats as its focus not the presumed “contents” of individual groups but how particular populations, whether they are identified in racial, ethnic, national, or religious terms, have come to be defined and demarcated. Although there are clear differences among scholars who subscribe to this approach, one widely-accepted view is that identities are necessarily constructed. While this book is aimed primarily at offering a more theoretically informed narrative for China’s historical

⁶ For scholarship that shares the assumption of this book, see, for example, Gladney, *Dislocating China*; Crossley, *Translucent Mirror*.

⁷ For recent works that emphasize demarcation and differentiation as an integral part of China’s colonialism, see Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise*; Teng, *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography*. See also the contributions in Crossley et al., *Empire at the Margins*. For comparative perspectives, see Dirks, *Colonialism and Culture*.

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expansion, its approach and arguments, it is hoped, could also serve as an inspiration for historians of other parts of the early modern world. In particular, what this study underscores is that although identities were in many cases negotiated (a somewhat tired metaphor that implies both the *identifiers* and the *identifieds* were always actively engaged), such negotiations were almost never conducted on equal terms. Not only did people with greater claim or access to power have more opportunities to shape the contour of historical memory, they also had more resources to define the boundaries of collective identities.⁸

Second, by rejecting the categories “Han” and “non-Han” as the building blocks for China’s history, this book also adds to a body of scholarship that renders problematic the concepts of majority and minority. To be sure, to be perceived as a member of a minority, whether it is defined in terms of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or other criteria, has real-life consequences. But as the designations of majority and minority have repeatedly demonstrated their uncanny capacity for self fulfillment and perpetuation – one need only to consider the cases of the “minority nationalities” (*shao shu min zu*) in China or of the “First Nations” or “Native Americans” in North America for contemporary examples – it has become increasingly evident that majorities, as one scholar puts it, “are made, not born.” Just as the idea of majority is based on a presumption of homogeneity, the notion of minority is founded on the desire to mark differences. As such, the two conceptual categories – and the people they represent – are clearly interdependent. And even though the claim that majorities and minorities are necessarily constructed is not particularly original, this study is a useful reminder that how majorities and minorities were constituted did vary across time and space and that the urge to classify and to differentiate is certainly not an impulse peculiar to the modern period.⁹

Finally, by focusing on the roles of the state and its agents in the processes of boundary formation, this book joins a substantial body of literature that calls attention to the intricate links between frontier expansion and state-building. For historians of other periods or other parts of the world, some of the arguments found in this study would no doubt seem familiar. In particular, the observations that the state often had to negotiate with local agents to maintain a semblance of control, that the

⁸ For Barth, see his introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Two other foundation texts for the approach discussed are Said, *Orientalism*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁹ For two collections of stimulating studies, see Gladney, *Making Majorities*; Burguière and Grew, *Construction of Minorities*. For the quotation, see Gladney, “Introduction: Making and Marking Majorities,” 1.

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limit of its reach was determined to a significant extent by logistics and by a sort of cost–benefit analysis, and that imaginations and representations were often as influential as events on the ground in shaping policies and strategies would undoubtedly find parallels in studies of the Roman empire, the Ottoman empire, the Russian empire, as well as the European empires in the Americas. But while how the centralizing state sought to incorporate its borderlands remains an important area of inquiry, what this book underscores is that the construction of group boundaries, not to mention the making of majorities and minorities, was not simply a by-product of state-building but must instead be viewed as an integral part of the processes of state formation and transformation.¹⁰

“March toward the tropics”

In many ways, the story told in this book is not unique to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) but is part of a more general narrative of the history of China. Although what constituted the southern border zone has changed over time, ever since the founding of the first centralized polity of China – the Qin dynasty – in the third century before the common era, it has been the practice of the centralizing state to foster a semblance of order in its border regions by officially recognizing the rule of local magnates and chieftains. This can be seen in the early imperial period in the creation in present-day Guangdong, Guangxi, and northern Vietnam of a number of nominal administrative areas. And this can be observed even more clearly in mid-imperial times through the formal recognition by the state of a large number of “loosely reined” (*ji mi*) domains. Not only did such practices help bring about a degree of order in areas where local magnates or chieftains ruled, they also allowed the centralizing state to claim control of its southern borderland without having to expend its limited resources. Although the specific arrangements of such practices would change over time, it is evident that, for much of the imperial period, the ability of the state to maintain a semblance of political unity was founded not so much on its military prowess but – ironically – on its capacity to reinforce local distinctions and divisions.¹¹

Nor is the story of demarcation and differentiation told here limited to the arena of political configuration. Although the historical records are

¹⁰ For recent studies of the frontier or borderland histories of the empires mentioned, see, for example, Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers*; Karpát and Zens, *Ottoman Borderlands*; Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*; Daniels and Kennedy, *Negotiated Empires*. For a reflection on the functions and limits of the state, see Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

¹¹ For a history of the imperial practice, see Wu Yongzhang, *Zhongguo tu si zhi du*.

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fragmented, it is evident that long before the establishment of the first centralized polity of China, there had already emerged in ancient times a general concept of political and cultural centrality. Not only did the earliest Shang (ca.1700–ca.1100 BCE) and Zhou (ca.1100–256 BCE) rulers, who claimed authority principally over the central and lower Yellow River regions, refer to their domains, respectively, as the “central lands” (*zhong tu* or *tu zhong*) and the “central dominion” (*zhong guo*), they also consciously distinguished between people who lived within *zhong tu* or *zhong guo* and those – such as the so-called Man, Yi, Rong, and Di – who populated areas beyond the core region. During the imperial period when China was ruled, on and off, as a centralized polity, just as it was the practice of the state to recognize the rule of local magnates and chieftains, it was apparently also in its interest to identify and categorize the peoples both at and beyond its borders. As a result, long before the Ming dynasty, one could find in historical records concerning present-day south China frequent references to the Yue, the Wuhu, the Li, the Lao, as well as a variety of other “non-Chinese” populations.¹²

That said, the story of this book is focused on Ming China (see Map 1.1) for at least two reasons. First, how we now think of the southern borderland of China has, to a significant extent, been shaped by the experiences of the Ming. Although Ming rulers and officials did not find it necessary to build a Great Wall – as they did in the north – to physically separate the “Chinese” from the “non-Chinese,” it was in the late imperial period that many of the boundaries we now take for granted in relations to southern China came into being. In terms of the transformation of political boundaries, the region of Yunnan was officially incorporated into the “central dominion” during the Ming, the area of Guizhou was organized into a province in 1413, and the boundary between present-day China and Vietnam was more or less settled in its present form following the debacle in the early fifteenth century in which the Ming sought but failed to extend its rule to what was then Annam. In terms of the demarcation of borderland peoples, it was during the Ming as well that many of the categories we now use to classify the “minority nationalities” of China first appeared in the records. Although modern-day scholars have used the appearance of such categories to trace the history of individual nationalities to the Ming period, as I will explain, it is perhaps more meaningful

¹² For the etymology of the terms *zhong tu* and *zhong guo*, see Chen Lian kai, “Zhongguo, Hua–Yi, Fan–Han, Zhonghua, Zhonghua min zu.” For more sophisticated analyses of the relations between the people of the “central dominion” and their neighbors, see Wang Mingke, *Huaxia bian yuan*; Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*. For a survey of the southern “peoples” identified in the historical records, see Wu Yongzhang, *Zhongnan min zu guan xi shi*.



Map 1.1. Ming China, ca. 1580. *Source: Mote, Imperial China, Map 15.*

to think of such labels not as references to self-evident *peoples* but as both political and cultural markers for demarcation and categorization.¹³

¹³ For a survey of the Ming borderlands, see Mote, *Imperial China*, Chap. 27. For the building of the Great Wall, see Waldron, *Great Wall of China*. For China’s expansion to Yunnan and Guizhou, see Lee, “Political Economy of a Frontier,” and the forthcoming books by C. Pat Giersch and John Herman. For Vietnam, see Shin, “Ming China and Its Border with Annam.” For the relations between Ming China and the polities in Southeast Asia, see Wang Gungwu, “Ming Foreign Relations”; Wade, *Southeast Asia and the Ming Shi-lu*.

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Second, although historians have observed that the Ming was the only “native” or “Han Chinese” dynasty in the later imperial period, neither the assumptions nor implications of this claim have been adequately scrutinized. To be sure, that the rulers of both the Yuan (1271–1368) and Qing dynasties – which immediately preceded and succeeded the Ming, respectively – had come from beyond the “central plains” did profoundly shape the ways China was administered. But instead of reflexively framing the differences between the Ming, on the one hand, and the Yuan (or the Qing), on the other, in terms of native versus alien rule, it is probably more revealing to examine how the rulers of different periods chose to portray themselves as well as to compare and contrast the assumptions and implementation of their specific policies. Not only would understanding how Ming emperors and their representatives conceived and administered the southern borderland allow us to explain more satisfactorily what it meant then to be Chinese and non-Chinese, given the renewed interests in issues concerning identities in the Qing context, it would also enable us to recognize more readily the changes and continuities in the later imperial period.¹⁴

In this book, I focus on the province of Guangxi for also at least two reasons. First, unlike that of Yunnan and Guizhou, the region of Guangxi has been claimed by the centralizing state since almost the start of the imperial era. Following his conquest of all major rival states, the First Emperor of Qin (r. 221–210 BCE) apparently sought also to incorporate into his newly found empire areas corresponding to present-day Guangdong, Guangxi, and northern Vietnam. Not only did the Qin emperor order some half a million soldiers to the southern region, according to the records, in 214 BCE, he also decreed that three commanderies – Nanhai (Southern Seas), Guilin (Cinnamon Forest), and Xiang (Elephant) – be set up in the borderland. Although it was not until the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 that the centralizing state was able to claim something close to firm control of the region, the desire by successive dynasties to extend their rule to the southern border zone had from early on led to the establishment in Guangxi relatively elaborate administrative and military hierarchies. As a result of this considerable presence of the state in the region, as the central authorities sought to strengthen their rule in

¹⁴ For a strong claim of the Ming as a Han Chinese dynasty, see, for example, Mote, “Introduction,” 1. For an introduction to Yuan-dynasty rule, see Twitchett and Franke, *Cambridge History of China*. For the Qing period, see the discussion in Chapter 6. For recent studies that place the Ming dynasty in the broader context of later imperial China, see Smith and von Glahn, *Song-Yuan-Ming Transition*; Struve, *Qing Formation in World-Historical Time*.