Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China

Harrell, Stevan

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INTERVIEWING IN A LIPOU VILLAGE, 1988

My research collaborators, mostly graduate students from Sichuan University in Chengdu, were a bit disappointed with our preliminary visit in 1988 to the Yi village of Yishala on the Yunnan border south of Panzhihua City. It was, they said, tai Han hua, “too Hanified.” People there wore ordinary Chinese peasant clothes, lived in four-sided houses with central courtyards, and spoke fluent Chinese, even though they called themselves Lipuo and their daily conversation was usually in the Libie language, classified by linguists as belonging to the Central Dialect of the Yi Branch of the Tibeto-Burman family (Bradley 1998).

When we returned to the village for a two-week stay, there were weddings almost daily because it was the winter slack season immediately preceding the Chinese New Year. At one of these, we learned, a bride from the Mao lineage would be marrying into a Na family, and we asked about the origin of the two lineages.

“We Mao,” they said, “come from Anfu County, Ji’an Prefecture, Jiangxi Province,1 and our original ancestor was sent to the Southwest as part of a military detachment in the eleventh year of Kangxi [1672]. Our ancestors first came to nearby Dayao County and then moved to the current village site after a generation or two.” The Maos have a genealogy, written entirely in the language of the majority Han Chinese, though they think that earlier on they might have had documents written in some sort of Yi script.

Surprised at the east-China origin of the Maos, I asked several men whether there were any Yizu (people of the Yi ethnic group) in Jiangxi today. Some said there must be some, but others thought that perhaps their ancestors were originally Han who had become Yi after moving here and marrying local

1. Anfu County existed until the Republican period. Ji’an Prefecture still exists, with its current seat at Ji’an County (Xie Shouchang 1931: 308; Ditu Ji 1983: 15).
women. One said he would very much like to go to Jiangxi and see if he could find any Yi.

The Qi lineage, by contrast, traces its origin to Nanjing, and the Na lineage to Huguang.

A VISIT FROM CENTRAL TV, 1994

It was an atypically cold evening in November 1994 in the valley-bottom city of Xichang (pop. 180,000), capital of Liangshan Prefecture, when former vice-prefect Bamo Erha (a Yi, or Nuosu) came to meet me and Martin Schoenhals, another American anthropologist resident in town, in the lobby of the shabbily luxurious Liangshan Hotel. A dinner was planned for a film-and-sound crew from Central Television Studios (Zhongyang Dianshi Tai) in Beijing, who had come to Liangshan to finish filming the documentary Daughters of the Bamo Family (Bamo jia de nuermen), to be broadcast as part of a national TV news-magazine a few weeks hence.

At the meal in the heated banquet room on the ground floor of the hotel, attended by various Nuosu dignitaries including a cardiac surgeon, the term “Yizu” was more in evidence than in any conversation I have ever engaged in. The meal was mostly ordinary Sichuanese cooking, but with the vital supplements of mgemo (bitter-buckwheat pancakes) and two kinds of boiled meat, known in the Han language as tuotuo rou, but in Nuosu simply as yuoshe (mutton) and voshe (pork). When eating was underway, the hotel help—young women in “hundred pleated” full skirts with horizontal stripes, elaborately appliquéd blouses, silver jewelry, and fancy embroidered headpieces (and also, since this was Xichang, makeup and medium heels)—burst in with red-yellow-black lacquered trays bearing matching shot glasses filled with expensive Sichuanese Wuliang Ye liquor and began singing, joined by the local guests:

Su-mu di-vi wo
Qo-bo go la su . . .

[Guests from afar
Come as friends . . .]

After a round of drinks, the waitresses sang the Chinese translation

Yuan dao de gui bin
Si fang de pengyou . . .
Another round. Then, not much later, another tray of glasses, and the assertion from the waitresses that

Yizu you yiju hua shuo,
“Zou lu yao yong shuang tui zou;
He jiu yao he shuang bei jiu”

[The Yi have a saying that goes,
“When you walk, you should walk with a pair of legs;
When you drink, you should drink a pair of cups”],

and so on through the evening. Even the two foreigners in attendance were trotted out to show how much they knew of Yi language and culture, for the rather overwhelmed but still good-natured Han guests from the capital.

The next two days the crew would spend filming Vice-Prefect Bamo’s eldest daughter, Bamo Ayi, a fieldwork collaborator of mine and a professor at the Nationalities University in Beijing, out in the villages being an ethnologist and being Yi. The following December 13, the day before I left Chengdu to return home, I turned on the TV in my hotel room and was startled to find it broadcasting *Daughters of the Bamo Family*. I thought it rather superficial.

**A WEDDING OF HAN AND ZANG, 1993**

This wedding—most of it, at least—seemed very familiar to me, similar to those I had experienced in Han-Chinese communities in Taiwan and even closer to those I had seen a few years before in the Lipuo community of Yishala. In Yanyuan County, in the southwest corner of Liangshan Prefecture, I was attending a wedding between a groom who was Zang (a term only precariously translatable as “Tibetan”) because of his mother, and a bride who was unequivocally Han.

I had spent the past few days beginning to try to unravel the complex web of ethnicity in Baiwu, a little town of about a thousand people divided among five different *minzu*, or state-determined ethnic categories. As far as I could tell, one of these groups, called Zang in local Han-language parlance, Ozzu when speaking Nuosu, or Yi, and Prmi in their own language (insofar as any of them spoke it anymore) was nothing like Tibetan, having been classified in the Qiang branch of Tibeto-Burman, related closely to such other languages as Qiang, Nameze, Gyalrong, Ersu, and Duoxu, but only distantly to Tibetan. I had been in their houses and seen a floor plan that seemed to link them to various other...
local groups, but which was not much like those I had seen in pictures of Tibet, or even of the Khams area, usually thought to be “Tibetan,” in western Sichuan. I had spoken with these people about their knowledge of Buddhism, and it was practically nonexistent. They claimed to have scriptures, written in Tibetan, but somehow nobody could ever find them. The rituals they performed in their homes honored a series of mountain and earth deities that seemed to be elements of a purely local tradition. Their clothes were not only unlike those of any Tibetans I had ever seen but were identical to those of two other groups in the same town: one clan that was classified in the Naxi minzu, and another single household, recently immigrant from elsewhere in the county, which called itself Naze in its own language but was also known as Ozzu in Nuosu and was called Meng (precariously translatable as “Mongolian”) when speaking Chinese.

Out to deconstruct, nay to destroy, the simplistic errors of the Chinese state project of minzu shibie, or “ethnic classification,” or more officially, “nationalities identification,” I was stopped in my tracks in the courtyard where the wedding feast was being set out on low, square wooden tables, surrounded by benches, as one could see in Han or Yi communities anywhere in Yunnan or the nearby borderlands belonging to Sichuan. A drunken old man, dressed in ragged clothes with a large, dusty, faded turban around his head, was talking to me, the foreigner. Figuring, I suppose, that I did not speak any of the local languages very well, he pointed to his own painted nose and resorted to a sort of baby-talk: “Zangzu—Dalai Lama . . . Zangzu—Dalai Lama.”

STOPPING IN A WOODYARD, 1993

The trip—nine Jeeps, thirty-some cadres of every local minzu but Han, six days of dusty roads and colorful maidens, several scenic wonders and one hot-springs bath—had landed us in the overflow yard of a logging camp, with no place to go and nothing to do but sit on rotten or otherwise unusable timber and talk ethnohistory. While the cadres who made a difference were meeting somewhere, deciding how to divvy up the profits from one of China’s last old-growth forests, I decided to talk to Mr. Fu, a vice-chair of the People’s Consultative Conference for Ninglang County, Yunnan, right across the provincial border from Yanyuan, and a self-appointed spokesman for the Pumi people.

Mr. Fu was anxious to tell me about the history of the Pumi, who he thought probably came originally from what is now Qinghai but who had been in the

2. For an extended account of this trip as an idealized display of the New China as a multi-ethnic nation, see Harrell 1996b.
area of southwestern Liangshan for nearly two thousand years at minimum. His authority was “the Hou Han shu of Sima Qian” (sic),\(^3\) which records a song sung by the king of Bailang, somewhere in the Southwest, at an imperial court banquet in Luoyang. Linguists, said Mr. Fu, had demonstrated that the language recorded was that of the Pumi, whose history therefore went back to that distant period.

Mr. Fu was, however, unconcerned that people in Sichuan who spoke the same language as he, practiced the same customs, and called themselves Prmi in their own language were classified as Zang rather than as Pumi. It stemmed, he said, from the local politics of the early 1950s, when the king of Muli—who was both abbot of a Gelug-pa monastery (and thus religiously subordinate to the Dalai Lama in Lhasa) and a tusi (local native ruler) enfeoffed by the Qing empire and allowed to continue in office under the Chinese Republic—had thrown in his lot with the Communists in return for making Muli into a Zang autonomous county that was part of Sichuan. In Ninglang, where there was no equivalent Prmi local official, the Prmi had remained “unclassified” until the late 1950s but through the good offices of Premier Zhou Enlai were eventually classified as a separate minzu. His Pumi and the Zang across the border in Sichuan cooperated just fine, he told me; in fact, even in my own area of scholarship, he was hoping to organize a local Center for the Study of Pumi History and Culture, and the Party secretary of Muli Zang Autonomous County in Sichuan had already agreed to contribute some timber revenues to the effort.

\[\text{A WELCOMING PARTY, 1994}\]

It had been a rather hard hike. I, the Westerner, was as usual carrying too much stuff, and it was a warm day and we had seven hundred meters to climb. Two teenage girls were scouting our arrival just around the corner from the mountain slope that is the seat of the headquarters of Dapo Mengguzu (in English, that usually comes out “Mongolian”) Township, in the eastern part of Yan-yuan County, and they ran ahead when they saw us, to tell everybody to get ready. As we marched into the little town, firecrackers started going off, and then we were between two long lines of schoolchildren and villagers, who chanted (in the Han language) as we went, “Huanying, huanying . . . relie

\[^3\] Sima Qian, of course, was author not of the *Hou Han shu* (History of the latter Han dynasty) but of the *Shi ji* (Records of the historian), written about three hundred years earlier. The primary author of the *Hou Han shu* was Fan Ye. This passage does in fact exist in the *Hou Han shu* (chap. 11).
huanying” (Welcome, welcome, heartily welcome). Up a slope, along a ledge, into a courtyard, and soon we were met by women in plain-colored skirts bearing large bowls of delicious, lukewarm beer. Since they were Mengguzu, they should have gotten chiong (as they call it in their own language), or huang jiu (in Chinese), they apologized, but it wasn’t so common around those parts, so beer would have to do. After that hike, it did just fine.

Red papers with black writing on them adorned the walls and doorways of the school and the township government buildings; the slogans of welcome and celebration were in both Chinese and Mongolian, though only one local man, a schoolteacher, could sound out the letters of the latter. At the official ceremony the next day, the township Party secretary, resplendent in something resembling a Mongolian robe, or deel, presided in front of a framed message of congratulations on the establishment of the Mengguzu township in 1984. It had been given by the People’s Government of Yikezhao League, in Western Inner Mongolia, and although it was written entirely in Chinese, it featured a silver leaping horse and a picture of crowds on a sunny day in front of Chinggis Khan’s mausoleum in the Ordos (Khan 1995). I was told by the township head that although the language spoken here in Dapo (called Mengyu in Chinese or Naru in the local language) was superficially unlike that of Inner Mongolia, it really was 70 percent the same as the language of Western Inner Mongolia, at least. According to linguists, it too is a member of the Tibeto-Burman family (though its closer affiliations with one or another branch are disputed) and completely unrelated to Mongolian.

TWO CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ETHNICITY, 1988 AND 1994

It was already hot, even though it was only mid-morning when we completed our daily forty-minute trek through rice fields and banana trees from the Han Catholic village of Jingtang (Scripture Hall), where we were staying, to the minority village of Zhuangshang across an eroded streambed flowing into the Jinsha River. We were conducting interviews about household structure and economy. About 80 percent of the population of the village of Zhuangshang belongs to a group that called itself Laluo in its own language, back a few decades when anybody spoke it, and whose Han name was still in dispute in 1988. The household registration records, for example, had originally listed people’s minzu affiliation as Shuitian, and in ordinary conversation in the Han language (the only language most of them knew) they continued to refer to themselves as Shuitianzu, or, perhaps more commonly, simply as minzu, a term that con-
trasted with Hanzu. The government, however, had recently determined that they were Yi, and the indication in the household registration records had been crossed out and written over to reflect this decision.

Ms. Hu Guanghui, a very helpful and intelligent middle-school graduate from the village, led me to my first household for the day, and I sat down on a wooden bench in the shade of the courtyard and got out my four-color ball-point pen and my printed household questionnaire. I stood to greet the host, an uncle of Ms. Hu’s, and he, seemingly already in his cups, although it was early in the day, greeted me perfunctorily, sat down on the other end of the bench, and pronounced, “When Old Man Mao [Mao Laoye] was alive, everybody recognized that we were minzu. Now that we have Old Man Deng, nobody recognizes that we are minzu anymore.”

Mr. Hu’s resentment was shared at the time by many other villagers with whom our research team spoke—they could not see why they, as a separate group of people, who were here first after all, had to be lumped in with the Yi (Nuosu), who were nothing but savages in the mountains with whom the local people had nothing in common. The village was poor, and the dispute about ethnicity was only one of the many beefs the local people had with the government.

In 1994 I paid a brief visit to Zhuangshang again and interviewed a local team leader. He regaled me for over an hour with success stories—tripling of household income, installation of electricity and running water in every household, a solution to their long-standing irrigation-water shortage, the possibility of developing commercial mango and pomegranate crops. But he simply would not be engaged in the question of the name of the local group. Yes, they were minorities; yes, they called themselves Shuitian; yes, it was alright to call them Yi—they were certainly a branch of the Yi.

THE CONTEXT OF THE DISPLAYS

All the preceding stories relate to the ways people present themselves as ethnic citizens in the southernmost parts of Sichuan Province and the immediately bordering areas of Yunnan, in southwest China. I conducted field research relating to the questions of ethnic relations in this area for three months each in 1988, 1993, and 1994, with brief visits in 1991, 1996, and 1998 also. This book is an attempt to make sense out of these presentations of self and the discourses of local, national, and global relations to which the presentations are directed.

When I first wrote, in a very formulaic and simplistic manner, about the specific local contexts of ethnic relations in this area (Harrell 1990), I ended up by paraphrasing the former U.S. house speaker Tip O’Neill, proclaiming...
that “all ethnicity is local.” Like O’Neill discussing politics, I suspect, I was speaking a half-truth to emphasize a point. All ethnicity is local, in the sense that every person who considers him or herself a member of an ethnic collectivity does so in the context of interaction in a local community. But at the same time, all ethnicity, like all politics, is not just local. People in the modern world of nation-states are members of nationally—and often internationally—defined ethnic collectivities of which their local communities are a part, and the dialectical interaction between local, national, and cosmopolitan discourses is what shapes their lives as ethnic citizens of modern nations.

Southwest China is one of the places where such dialectical interaction and level-jumping between local and national is at its most involved and complex. Unlike Xinjiang, for example, or the Tibet Autonomous Region, boundaries here are contingent, shifting, negotiated; ethnicity in one context is not necessarily congruent with ethnicity in another; contexts shift over space and time and particularly from one language to another. Everybody here is Chinese in a citizenship sense; there is no question of an independent Yi or Pumi or Shuitian nation, but ethnic relations are vitally important in peoples’ lives for many purposes. These include psychological self-understanding, the preservation or undermining of governmental and imagined national order, and the distribution of resources as varied as mining claims, admissions to teachers colleges, and birth-control quotas.

At the most basic level of understanding, then, it matters, in almost all contexts, what one’s ethnic identity is. At one greater level of complexity, it may not matter in the same way in each context. But even this is too simple. To approach anything like realistic understanding of the phenomena, we must go to a still more complex level and understand that even though ethnicity matters differently in different contexts, the ways it matters in one context affect the ways it matters in others.

To approach this kind of realistic understanding of ethnicity and ethnic identity in context, one must combine field and documentary research. Documents reflect one context of understanding—official policy and the principles for its implementation on the local level. They do more than simply present an ideal or a sanitized version of reality; they also dictate categories that are used in scholarly discourse and in such real situations as meetings and the writing of reports. Anthropologists too often make the mistake of discounting the kinds of formulaic or categorical understanding found in official and scholarly documents, replacing it entirely with knowledge gathered in field research. Several parts of this book rely heavily on documentary sources, since these sources define certain kinds of understanding of ethnic relations, particularly what I
call the official discourse of ethnic identification and the scholarly discourse of ethnohistory. The way that these two discourses interact with each other, the way ethnicity matters differently in each of them and in the interaction between them, is a key component of the analysis of ethnicity in Liangshan.

At the same time, however, this is primarily an anthropological account. Most of the data and most of the analytical positions taken in this book stem from the notes that I took during three long seasons of field research in Liangshan. The primary context in which this book approaches ethnicity is the context of the daily lives of local communities and their leaders, and the primary purpose of my argument is to show how ethnicity matters in this local context, along with the way this context interacts with those of the two official discourses carried out in meetings and documents. Without fieldwork, the most important leg of this triangle of discourses would be missing.

My own fieldwork in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), however, has not conformed to the traditional anthropological paradigm of an extended stay in one place, or even to the more recent method of an extended investigation of a community defined by something other than kinship or locality. Nor has my work conformed to the usual anthropological practice of a single researcher dealing with data collection independent of local authorities or local scholars. Rather, this study, from the beginning, has been both regional and collaborative. I have traveled to many communities in Liangshan, visiting some of them for an hour or a day or two; some for a few days or weeks. I know no place intimately; I know a moderate amount about a large number of places. The disadvantage of this kind of nontraditional approach is that, even more than usual in the fieldwork experience, there is undoubtedly much important and relevant information that passed me by in every single place. The advantage is that I have not been tempted to take any particular place as typical, but have tried to cover as wide a range as possible, a strategy that has shaped the most central point of this book’s argument: namely, that ethnicity in one locality is different from ethnicity in another, even if ethnicity in both places is shaped by the same triangle of discourses.

While the research for this book has been regional, it has also been collaborative. From January through March 1988, I was one of six members of a field research team officially affiliated with the Southern Silk Road Project, directed by Professor Tong Enzheng of Sichuan University. The primary object of investigation was family economy in three Yi villages and one Han village; I discovered the problem of ethnicity when I went to Yishala and found that the villagers were “tai Han hua.” During the whole time, I was monitored very closely by as many as five different agencies of the Panzhihua city government,
and permission to conduct the research at all was contingent on cultivating good relations not only with local scholars but with cadres and bureaucrats as well. The whole project, in fact, was dependent upon the goodwill and tireless energy of Mr. Deng Yaozong of the municipal Artifact Bureau in Panzhihua; in order to go to the Nuosu village of Gaoping, for example, which was in an area closed to foreigners, we had to go together to the home of a vice-mayor of Panzhihua Municipality, unofficially to bring New Year greetings. Even after he approved the research, we had to promise not to do any research away from a road (fortunately, the Chinese word _lu_ refers to trails as well as roads). After the research was finished, we had to report results to the municipal authorities.

For further research from January through March 1993, and from October to December 1994, I continued my collaboration with the Panzhihua Artifact Bureau but expanded to the Sichuan Provincial Nationalities Research Institute and the Liangshan Prefecture Nationalities Research Institute, both also government organs. My research with Ma Erzi in Yanyuan County in 1993 was possible because of his good relations with County Party Secretary Yang Zipuo, and because of Secretary Yang’s open-minded attitude. Both the political climate toward foreigners and my own familiarity to local people had improved by this time, and there were fewer restrictions and requirements. Still, moving in on my own would have been impossible. In 1994 I continued these same collaborations and began to work closely with Professor Bamo Ayi of Central Nationalities University. This period of research was even easier. For our nine days in Manshuianne, I did not even need official clearance, since Manshuianne lies in Mianning County, long open to foreigners because of the satellite launching base there. Still, I will not forget when I asked Secretary Yang if I could go to Guabie, a remote area without roads that would have been totally off-limits to foreigners a few years earlier. His answer was, “Take care you don’t get hurt.”

This kind of close collaboration with officials and officially employed scholars brings with it an obligation to one’s official and scholarly hosts, added on top of the obligations to the subjects of one’s research. These may at times conflict with each other; the only defense is to think things through with professional ethics in mind. At the same time, there is also a danger of one’s being co-opted to the scholarly views of one’s collaborators, even if one has not acted unethically with regard to the research subjects (AAA 1976, Hsieh 1987). The views of ethnicity in the local context presented in this book are the views that emerged from conversations between me, my collaborators, local elites, and a less-than-representative sample of common people. All these people’s views—particularly the views of my closest field collaborators, Ma Erzi and Bamo Ayi—have influenced mine. A different set of conversations might have revealed still
different views; this would have happened with different collaborators as well as with different fieldsites. But I still think that the views expressed here are diverse enough to illustrate the contextual nature of ethnic identity; more views would reinforce that point but not substantially change it.

At the same time, collaboration has its advantages, and not only on the practical plane. The scholars and many of the officials and teachers I have worked with are thoughtful, dedicated, highly knowledgeable people, many of them possessed of an insider’s knowledge that no foreign researcher could hope to match. I think that if it had been possible to conduct independent field research, I would have learned far less about Liangshan, its people, and their ethnic identity. And a very important result of this collaboration has been that many of the people I first met in field research have become my close friends and colleagues.

Finally, there is the language question. I speak standard Chinese (Mandarin, sometimes referred to in this book as the “Han language”) very fluently; understand Sichuanese and Yunnanese accents to various degrees, but usually fairly well; and I can carry on simple conversations in Nuosu. I know no Prmi or Naze. This is not an ideal linguistic apparatus for a serious fieldworker, and it has meant a further reliance on my collaborators.

This short introduction to a long book does not have room for serious and detailed examination of the intellectual and ethical issues raised by regional, collaborative research. A forthcoming volume by Bamo Ayi, Ma Erzi, and myself will address these in great detail from three different perspectives. In the meantime, the data presented and the arguments made must be the standard by which the reader judges the work.

I begin with some general considerations about ethnicity and about Chinese history in chapters 2 and 3, give a brief historical overview of the Liangshan area in chapter 4, and present a series of case studies illustrating different ways of being ethnic in chapters 5 through 14. Chapter 15 assesses the significance of these observations.