Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China

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14 / The Majority as Minority

On the 30th of the old year, New Year’s Eve of the year of the Chicken, 1993, fifty-nine-year-old Han peasant Xu Guojun lay on his side on the pine-needle-strewn dirt floor after dinner, head propped on his elbow next to the fire, which burned day and night in a little hearth next to the mud wall in the front room of his family’s house. Things are better now, he said, since the reforms, but really only since Li Wusha became township head three years before. Yi, he said, are better than Han at that sort of thing, since they think of the collective welfare, while Han people think only of themselves.

For all the local ethnic communities described so far in this book, the Han Chinese have constituted some kind of “other,” whether it be a haunting Huixemga presence for the Nuosu of Mishi, an acculturating force and developmental rival or partner of the Shuitian in Futian, or a neighbor and possible affine for the Lipuo of Pingdi. But Liangshan as a whole is not a relatively pure minority enclave like Tibet or southern Xinjiang. Over half the population of Liangshan Prefecture, and over 80 percent of Panzhihua, are Han Chinese. To complete the puzzle of ethnic identity and ethnic dialogue in our study area, we still need to insert one more piece: identity and ethnic relations as seen from the perspective of the local Han Chinese.¹

Studying the Han is in some ways difficult, because there is a “thusness” about Hanness that resists analysis or even data-gathering. Hanness is like Whiteness in the United States; it is an unmarked characteristic that can be delineated only in contrast to an ethnic other (Blum 1994). And much has been made of the fact that “Han” itself is a constructed category, and a relatively

¹. Actually, we should also examine at least two more pieces beyond the Han: the Hui Muslims who have built a network of trading communities from Chengdu to Kunming, and the little enclaves of Tai, Lisu, and Miao who were moved to Liangshan for historical and military reasons in the Ming and Qing dynasties. But this book is too long already.
recent one at that (Gladney 1991: 81–87; Zhuang Wanshou 1996b: 48–51). This is true when one looks for the unifying characteristic, the cultural, historical, or genealogical unity that holds together Hakka from Jiangxi and boat people from Guangdong with Northwesterners who speak dialects with Altaic suffixes on their sentence-final verbs. It takes work, the work of conscious ethnic-group building, to come up with cultural markers (Watson 1993), historical common experience, or genealogical fictions such as the Han’s being children of the Yan and Huang emperors.

However constructed the notion of an internally unified Han group may be, however, there is little doubt that when we examine local Han communities in mixed areas such as Liangshan, we find a clear sense of ethnic boundary between people who now call themselves Hàchu (the local dialect pronunciation of Hanzu), whatever they may have called themselves before the ethnic identification, and the ethnic other, whom they now mostly call minchu (the local version of minzu) in public, and sometimes more pejorative names in private. Hàchu is certainly a category constructed in opposition to minchu, but it is no less real in local Han farmers’ lives for that. And, my earlier protestations notwithstanding (Harrell 1990), no ethnicity is purely local, but is rather a result of a global-local interface in which local people operate. Ethnic identity and ethnic relations for the Han communities around Liangshan are compounded of local, everyday relations between themselves and their minzu neighbors, mixed with their ideological connection to that billion-strong constructed entity known as the Han people. Examining the Han in Liangshan should thus enable us not only to complete the picture of ethnic relations in this region, but to shed further light on the processes of ethnic change examined in chapter 13, and also to offer a case study that will contribute to the understanding of the power of an idea: the idea of the Han.

FOUR KINDS OF HAN RESIDENTS

There are, roughly speaking, four kinds of Han in our study area. First, there are short-term migrants from poor areas, there to work on construction projects such the one underway while Yan Dezong and I were doing our village interviews in Futian. Unless they establish residence, however, they do not much enter into interethnic relations. Second, of the slightly more than half of the resident population of Liangshan and Panzhihua that are Han, many, of course, have migrated from other parts of China as a result of the industrialization and other development policies that the Party has followed since the 1950s. These are mostly urbanites: there are administrative and technical cadres (though
administrative cadres in Liangshan tend to be Yi), managers and engineers in the great state extractive enterprises, workers in those same factories, researchers, and schoolteachers. The city (that is, the urban area, not the municipal administrative region, or shi) of Panzhihua is almost entirely Han, and even in urban Xichang the Han are about 95 percent of the population. These urban Han are not very involved in ethnic relations unless they are administrative cadres or in some cases teachers, and they will not be considered in detail here.

Third, aside from the urban population, large proportions of the village dwellers are Han. All along the Anning River Valley, from Mianning through Xichang, Dechang, and Miyi, and in the Jinsha Valley at Huili and Huidong, the agricultural population is overwhelmingly Han. Even in smaller valleys and plains, Han farmers predominate. In the large plain around Yanyuan, for example, there are whole townships with almost no Yi population, and traveling south from the city of Panzhihua into the mountains, one has to climb out of the fertile bottomlands into the foothills before one encounters even the culturally sinicized Lipuo. In Ganluo and Jinyang, at the opposite ends of Liangshan, there are rural patchworks of Han and Nuosu that produced the important bicultural Republican-era leaders Leng Guangdian and Long Yun, respectively.

In all of these areas, Han Chinese village life has gone on for decades or centuries more or less as it has anywhere else in China, and without much apparent influence from the surrounding Nuosu and other minority peoples. People speak local dialects that are influenced by the regional standards of Chengdu and Kunming but have their own local flavors, more Yunnanese than Sichuanese in their use of the retroflex initials not found in Chengdu or Chongqing, and in their lack of palatization in words such as ke, meaning “to go.” Some dialectologists suspect that there might be Tibeto-Burman influences in southwestern Chinese, but the almost completely monolingual speakers in these areas are unaware of any resemblances between their own languages and those of the minchu, as they ordinarily refer to minorities. For these Han villagers, the minority presence is similar to, or perhaps even less important than, the haunting presence of the Hxiemga for the Nuosu of Mishi. In Liangshan, of course,

2. I know of no source that cross-tabulates population by urban/rural and minzu. However, it is possible to estimate the size of the rural Han population in Liangshan Prefecture by taking the total Han population in the 1990 census, 1.98 million, subtracting the urban total for Xichang (about 180,000, almost all Han) and the other county towns (probably another 200,000, roughly half of them Han), and getting a total rural population of about 1.6 million Han, which is just over half of the total rural population of approximately 3.1 million (Dangdai 1992: 1, 16-17). For Panzhihua, applying a similar reasoning process yields a rural population that is about 75 to 80 percent Han (Du Weixuan et al. 1994: 74, 130-33).
Han live in a minority autonomous area, and if they know who the top local leaders are, they know that most of them are Yi and some are even Zang. They see the “Yi Bao,” the “Yi bros,” on the streets and in the markets but don’t pay much attention to them. They are simply living in Chinese peasant communities that happen to be situated in regions of the country where there are also minority communities. Their life is not very different for it.

Fourth, there is still another sort of Han people in Liangshan and the remoter parts of Panzhihua: those whose villages are tucked away in little valleys and hillsides in semiremote corners of the mountains, sometimes separate from and sometimes combined with villages populated by other ethnic groups. In their own townships and villages, they form distinct minorities, and despite their emotional and cultural connection to the billion-plus Han Chinese in the country as a whole, on the extreme periphery they are outnumbered, and despite the political and economic dominance of Han people in the Chinese polity and economy, in their local communities they exercise no kind of dominance at all. They are likely to meet and interact with members of other ethnic groups every day; in many places they have had a tradition of intermarriage with ethnic minorities for at least the last two generations, and sometimes much further back than that. Many of them are partially or fully bilingual. It is through the study of these peripheral Han, who come into daily contact with minorities, that we can shed new light on ethnic relations as seen from the Han side, as well as on the power of the idea of Han.

THE HAN OF BAIWU

Xu Guojun, who opined that Yi were better cadres than Han, and his family, together with their relatives and neighbors in Lianhe Village, contiguous with the lower end of Baiwu Town (see chap. 8), are one such remote Han community. In 1993, when Ma Erzi and I conducted a complete census, there were 160 of them, in twenty-one households. One immediately striking fact is that they are no wealthier or better-educated than their Prmi covillagers or the Nuosu in the village attached to the other end of town. In this subsistence farming area, standards of living do not vary much from one household to another, regardless of ethnicity, unless they have some outside source of income. All of the homes of the local Han have dirt floors and mud walls, and almost all of the thatched roofs have been replaced with tile during the last decade or so. Electricity was connected to the town in 1993, and by 1998 Han and minorities alike had lightbulbs in their houses, and televisions were becoming increasingly common (Ma Erzi, personal communication).
Grain-growing is not going to make anybody rich in a cold, high place like Baiwu, and in 1994 there was not a single rural industry in the entire township. To have a chance to break out of a bare subsistence economy, people in Baiwu and other highland areas in Yanyuan must rely on commercial agriculture, and in the last few years they have started planting apple trees. The stereotype, of course, is that Han have business sense, while minorities, just emerging from a primitive or slave economy based in more generalized reciprocity, are unlikely to be able to succeed as entrepreneurs. But in fact, Han and minorities are just about equally likely to become orchard entrepreneurs or to be left behind. Twenty-one of forty-six Nuosu families in Hongxing, and ten of twenty-one Han families in Lianhe—that is, between 40 and 50 percent of each ethnic group—have invested in orchards (see table 7.2). Similarly, there are Han shopkeepers in the little private stores in Baiwu Town, but there are also Nuosu; the vaunted entrepreneurial activity of the Han Chinese seems not to have been able to dominate the “tribal” Yi in a place like Baiwu.

The situation in education, another area where minorities stereotypically lag behind Han, is less balanced than the economic scene—in the schools of Baiwu, Nuosu and Prmi on the whole do better. In 1993 we conducted a survey of the educational levels of all families in the two villages connected to Baiwu Town, as well as some of the surrounding communities. Table 14.1 shows the results. The Han of Lianhe ranked below all Nuosu categories except former slaves and villagers of Changma (an hour-and-a-half walk from the school) and below their Prmi neighbors in male education; they also ranked below the Prmi but slightly above most of the Nuosu in female education. Ma Erzi told me that when he went to school in Baiwu Town in the 1960s, the Nuosu students were poorer but more diligent than the Han. At first, the Nuosu were at a disadvantage, since classes were taught in a language they didn’t understand. But by the third or fourth grade, they were trading diligence for consumption privileges. Some of the Han students at that time could afford to rent comic books, a luxury beyond the reach of their Nuosu schoolmates. So the more academically inclined of the Nuosu boys made a deal: they would do the Han boys’ homework in return for the loan of comics. In fact, all twelve natives of Baiwu Township who have gone to college or technical school have been Nuosu, without a Prmi, Naxi, or Han among them.

Part of the lack of motivation for education among Han in places such as Baiwu may stem from the perceived lack of opportunities for social mobility. Getting into college is just about out of the question, coming from such poor schools as are available in these remote districts, and a high school education does not lead anywhere in a Yi autonomous prefecture where local and middle-
### Table 14.1
Differential Educational Attainment of Ethnic Groups in Baiwu Zhen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mgebbu (Yi) Yangiuan</th>
<th>Former Slaves (Yi) Yangiuan</th>
<th>Yi Clans Hongxing</th>
<th>Prmi and Naxi Lianhe</th>
<th>Han Lianhe</th>
<th>Yi and Zang Changma</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-ed old-style few years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elem. grad</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jr. high</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sr. high</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In school</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>57</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In school (%)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jr. high (+%)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sr. high (+%)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Harrell and Ma 1999: 229.
level official posts go preferentially to minorities. Also, it is difficult for remote Han to go on past junior middle school even if they want to. Most of the places in the relatively good schools—the No. 1 Middle School in Yanyuan City for the Baiwu people, or equivalent schools in other counties—go either to Han from the core Han districts, where the elementary and lower-middle-school education is much better, or to minorities, who are given affirmative action points on the entrance exams. In Yanyuan, as in many counties, the minority middle school, where only a few Han students are typically allowed to study, has the reputation of being the second-best school in the county. This pattern is repeated at the prefectural level, where again the minority middle school is regarded as a relatively good school (Schoenhals 2001, n.d.). Remote Han are thus in a position similar to that of poor Whites in the United States in the era of affirmative action, whose perception is often that the few places not claimed by the middle and upper class go to disadvantaged minorities.

In both economic and educational terms, then, life for the remote Han is not much better or worse than it is for their minority neighbors, and this is in great contrast to the Han in Han areas. Shuanghe Township, about a thirty-minute drive from Yanyuan City on the Han-dominated Yanyuan Plain, can serve as a contrasting example. There every village has a five- or six-year school, and the town elementary school graduates about sixty students per year, over 80 percent of whom go on to middle school in the township. Televisions and other minor appliances are commonplace in new houses that are increasingly built of brick, and there are even a few local industries (such as a not-too-distant cement plant) to offer a potential way out of the poverty of subsistence farming. And even these areas are on the Yanyuan high plain, a poor region in general, impoverished and fully agricultural in comparison to the Han townships in the Anning Valley and even to ethnically mixed areas such as Futian and Manshuiwan.

**OUTNUMBERING, HYBRIDIZATION, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING HAN**

In addition to relative poverty and lack of economic or educational opportunity, there is an even more important contrast between Han in Han areas and Han as minorities in minority areas. The Han-area Han can live their lives in almost total ignorance of minority society and culture—it is almost unheard of, for example, for Han people from the areas in and around Yanyuan City to know anything at all of the Nuosu language. It was not at all atypical when, speaking my rudimentary Nuosu ddoma with a couple of friends on the street
in Yanyuan City, I was approached by an elderly Han lady who said to me, “You know their language!? I have lived here all my life and never managed to learn a word of it.” By contrast, Nuosu in core areas who know a little Han are usually proud of the fact, even if they are disdainful of the culture that sustains that tongue. In Puwei, even the Tazhi and Nasu are forgetting their Tibeto-Burman tongues, and there are Han-dominated mixed areas where minority languages are fast disappearing if they are not already gone, as in the Shuitian community of Zhuangshang (see chap. 13). But for the remote Han, life is lived in the context of minority language, culture, and society, and it is impossible for them to avoid contact with and knowledge of minority culture.

Our friend Mr. Xu of Baiwu may serve as an example. His wife is a Prmi, so all of his seven children are minorities, taking advantage of the minor but significant affirmative action benefits available to them and their descendants in schooling and birth quotas. Because of the ethnic intermarriage, Xu’s house has a hybrid floor plan. Entering their front room, one finds two altars. At the rear of the room is the Han-style altar, surrounded by red papers marking this as a place to worship heaven, earth, and the nation in the middle, the stove god on the stage left, the ancestors on the stage right, and the earth god underneath. Along the right side of the room as one enters, there is the whitewashed earth altar of the Prmi, topped at the New Year season by pine and other branches, and dedicated to the worship of the household deity Zambala.

When Xu’s son was married to a local woman who was Naxi (who in Baiwu are almost completely acculturated to local Prmi ways, which in turn have absorbed considerable Han influence), the wedding ceremony was as hybrid as the house it was conducted in. There were pine needles scattered on the floor, and plenty of Tibetan-style foods such as butter tea and barley beer, though in Baiwu the Nuosu also like to drink butter tea. Other than that, however, Han customs prevailed, since the groom’s father is a Han: the bride and groom made obeisances to heaven, earth, and ancestors, and at the ensuing meal young women dressed up in brightly colored sweaters or blazers lurked with aluminum scoops of rice, ready to fill the half-empty bowls of the unsuspecting diners, who were then semiobligated to try to finish eating them. In the evening the bride and groom served drinks to the guests, receiving in return money that would become part of the bride’s personal fund (fig. 35). So actually this wedding joined a Prmi (or Zang, anyway) boy with a Han father to a Naxi girl with a Prmi mother, using mainly Han rites, with a few Prmi touches thrown in. A large number of guests were Nuosu.

All over the remote regions of Lesser Liangshan, this kind of cultural
hybridization occurs through intermarriage. And the Han are the most intermarrying of groups in these situations. I have visited a large number of villages and townships where remote Han live intermixed with other ethnic groups, and never do the Han express any cultural or normative barriers against marrying anyone of any other minzu. Particularly since the establishment of the People’s Republic, such intermarriage has become common, and smaller ethnic groups with fewer available brides are particularly likely to marry Han. For example, a hamlet in Liziping Township in Muli County, deep in the mountains, has twenty-two households—eighteen Miao and four Han. Local people estimated that about a third of the marriages in recent years had been between Miao and Han. One of the homes I visited, which had a Han daughter-in-law, continued to follow Miao customs of ancestral worship, though the daughter-in-law, married only six months before, had not yet learned much of the Miao language. Similarly, in the Yala community at Malong in Miyi County (see chap. 13), there was little intermarriage with Han before the founding of the People’s Republic, but since then twenty-one of thirty-nine marriages have been with Han. Although the architecture and lifestyle of the Yala now conform in most

**FIG. 35.** The bridal couple exchanging drinks for money at an interethnic wedding in Baiwu
respects to the local Han norm, they still preserve certain distinctive ritual and calendrical customs (along with their Tibeto-Burman language) that serve to distinguish them unequivocally as a minority group, despite the large number of Han brides marrying into the community.

Han peasants like Mr. Xu, whom we met in chapter 7, can usually speak Nuosu, though they do so only when facing monolingual Nuosu speakers. Here, I think, Mr. Xu exemplifies a Han attitude that persists even in the most remote periphery and which serves to remind us that ethnicity is not exclusively a relation of difference but is also a relation of inclusion. For these remote Han, however poor and disadvantaged they may feel, still think of themselves as superior to minorities in at least some respects. Mr. Xu is not the only Han in Baiwu who speaks Nuosu, and I have met Han who are so fluent in that language as to almost pass for natives. But even in these remote regions, the linguistic structure is set up in such a way that the Han language penetrates almost everywhere, and it is much more likely that minority people will find Han language useful than the other way around. After all, higher education and most governmental functions are carried out either exclusively in Han or in Han plus some other language; rarely is a minority tongue without translation used. Therefore, even remote, bi- or tri-lingual Han can be proud that their own language is the most important one and often look with disdain upon other languages.

One example of this sort of disdain comes in school situations. In most of the non-Han regions of Liangshan, particularly in the Western areas, which are not as exclusively Nuosu as the core area, schools teach primarily in Han, but also require Nuosu language classes of all students, regardless of their ethnicity. Teachers report that when Han students end up in these classes, it is often difficult to motivate them to study hard. One Nuosu-language teacher in Guabie, where the Nuosu are a majority of the township population, but there are enclaves of Naze and Han who do not ordinarily use the Nuosu language, told me that Han students who did not learn Nuosu at home were particularly difficult to teach. They could not pronounce Nuosu words at all well (indeed, in one of his classes that I observed, he gave several pronunciation tips for the Hāchu tongxio, or “Han classmates”), and since grades in Nuosu classes no longer count on the middle school entrance exams, Han students simply didn’t care, and goofed off annoyingly in class.

Other Han, who might be expected to know minority languages, somehow get by without them. For example, Mr. Zhang, an old man from Muli, was originally from a Han family who were tenants of a nuoho landowner. One year his family owed the landlord three silver ingots but could produce only two, so the landlord captured him and he worked for nine years in the lord’s house
as a slave. But now, forty years later, living in Baiwu, a community with a majority Nuosu population, he remembers only a few words of the language.

Pride in one’s language, of course, connects even remote Han to a national culture and to an idea of a Han minzu, as well as to the possibility of wider outside connections than are possible for most minorities. For example, it is quite common when conducting censuses of Han families to find daughters who have married men from distant cities or even other provinces and have gone to live with their husbands’ families there. One daughter of the Duan family in Baiwu, who was visiting at the New Year in 1993, had such an urban aspect about her dress and deportment that I was not surprised to learn that she had married a man from Nanchong and had lived for awhile in Chengdu before moving back to his rural home. I have met people whose children have married as far away as Hebei and Shandong.

There is, then, among most remote Han people, a kind of cultural or ethnic pride, expressed in China-wide connections and in condescension toward minority languages, which for some is about the only advantage or superiority they can claim over their numerically and politically dominant, and sometimes wealthier, “minority” neighbors. Once, when I went tomb-sweeping with
some Baiwu Han families (fig. 36), a teenage girl got irritated at her little brother, who was doing one of those irritating things that little brothers do, and called him a Luoluo, a pejorative term for a Nuosu (my colleague Ma Erzi, who had come along, gently pointed out that he was a Luoluo, but the point was lost, for the time being anyway, on the exasperated teenager). The little boy’s reply unconsciously reflected the predicament of the remote Han: I don’t remember exactly what he said, but it began with the exclamation abbe, which is what people say in the local Han dialect when they are startled or frustrated, as a boy would be when called a dirty name by his sister. Abbe, of course, is borrowed directly from the Nuosu language.

REMOTE HAN AND THE PROCESSES OF ETHNIC CHANGE

There seems to be no doubt that, over the longue durée of Chinese history, the trend has been for the central culture, represented in the governmental and scholarly institutions of the Confucian elite, to acculturate those on the periphery and eventually to assimilate them to the point that they identify with the local Chinese, the people who in recent centuries have come to call themselves Han. As we saw in chapter 13, this process, known conventionally as “sinicization” (Shepherd 1993: chap. 11), can take a variety of forms, as seen from the perspective of the “non-Chinese” or “minorities” who are undergoing the process. But of course the process is two-sided: it is not just a local minority undergoing a change that is instigated and controlled by a government or even an ideology (the idea of the Han); at the same time it is a process of interaction between the local minority people and the local Han. To understand the process fully, we must reexamine it from the Han perspective.

It seems quite probable that in the past, the kinds of close everyday interaction and intermarriage that went on between Han (or its pre-essentialist equivalent) and minorities usually resulted in what Melissa Brown (1996) has described as the “long-route” process toward sinicization. As more and more Han (usually men) moved into a community, there would be a gradual acculturation to Han ways, and when the acculturation had been complete for a few generations, people would no longer stigmatize the locals as fanzi or manzi (foreigners or barbarians), and they would be Chinese peasants, pure and simple. Several variations of this process (most of them incomplete) have been described in chapter 13. But the reverse process is also possible, and it is also documented that in the short run and in more remote areas at least, acculturation often went the other way. Particularly in Nuosu communities, where Han
peasants were sometimes captured and made into slaves, they lost their Han culture and identity within two generations. The two hamlets in Mishi that together were once known as Jiefang Cun, or Liberation Village (see chap. 6), are good examples of this. Nowadays, when villagers tell their stories, they mention having been slaves but never mention having ancestors from the Hxiemga. And back in Baiwu at least one former slave family, completely Nuosu in culture and identification, still remembered that they had a grandmother who had been a Han.

In recent decades, with affirmative action an important component of minority policy, there seems to have arisen a third kind of process, where sinicization proceeds apace on the cultural front, as people trade their original language, economy, and customs for those of the generic “Chinese peasant,” known locally as Han customs and culture (Unger 1997), but never even consider the possibility of changing their identity to become Han in identification as well as in culture. In this process, which was described for the Shuitian in chapter 13, Han people who enter minority communities do not become either agents of sinicization or objects of the inverse process, since the minzu identities are fixed by the ethnic identification process. Rather, the local Han are minor agents of cultural sinicization (the major agents are the schools and the propaganda system in general), while at the same time they become the parents and ancestors of people whose identity will be other than Han. In the past, this was a transitional stage in a process that eventually led toward cultural acceptance as Han, but now, because the descendants of mixed marriages almost always choose the non-Han identity, it is possible to become more and more Chinese culturally while still remaining firmly members of an ethnic minority category in an ethnically mixed community. Paradoxically, when these communities evolve, the role of the Han in them is not necessarily a predominant or leading one. In places such as Baiwu or Liziping or even Manshuiwan, the Yi or Miao or Prmi join the cultural community of Chinese through their direct contact with state institutions, particularly the schools and increasingly the market economy. If, as happened in Baiwu for example, a young Naxi becomes a traveling merchant and goes all over the Southwest selling stuff, he becomes competent in the ways of China’s new market culture, fluent in standard Chinese and not just the local Han dialect, and able to operate as an urban migrant in a Chinese city without reference to his ethnicity. But he retains that ethnic identity nevertheless. And the culture to which he has assimilated is not that of the local, backward, poor, and peripheral Hâchu in his village but rather that of urbanizing, modernizing China.
In light of this experience, we need to reexamine our notions of China as a Han-dominated society. The status of being an official member of the Han minority confers no privilege or ability to dominate in its own right. As the Shuitian and Tai peasants of Futian are economically better off than people around Chongqing, where Yan Dezong came from (see chap. 13), so the Nuosu dominate the political, cultural, and educational landscape of Baiwu, and to a lesser extent of Yanyuan County as a whole. The route to mobility is not facilitated by Han status; in fact, in the era of affirmative action, Han identity can be a handicap.

Does this mean that minorities are equal in Chinese society? Of course not. Insofar as they are recognized as minorities, they are constantly stigmatized as backward, dirty, lazy, and a host of other negative stereotypes. And insofar as they do not necessarily grow up familiar with or sympathetic to Han culture, they have little chance to succeed in business, education, or politics. The poverty and isolation of a place like Mishì is testimony to this kind of disadvantage. But when members of minority minzu can get a college education (which is much more difficult for the Nuosu of Baiwu than it would be for an ordinary worker’s daughter in Shanghai, but it does happen), when they can make money selling things, when they become indistinguishable in their behavior from the Chinese norm, then they have equal respect and opportunity. What is dominant, then, or perhaps better said, hegemonic, is a cultural and behavioral norm, not the Han as a group; in fact it is clear that such an internally diverse category as Han is not a group at all. China is best seen as dominated not by an ethnic group, but by a social elite of cadres, intellectuals, and, increasingly, businesspeople, who espouse a particular model of culture—socialist, modern, educated, Chinese—whose content is that of the standardized national culture called, in a shorthand way, Han culture, or Hanzu wenhua.

In a place like Baiwu, the local Han have only marginally better access to this cultural model than do the Nuosu or Prmi, and the opportunity structure created by affirmative action has probably equalized the local playing field, as it certainly has in Manshuiwan, another place where the Nuosu are wealthier and more successful than the Han. The place is bilingual and bicultural, after all. A place like Mishì is entirely different—only one person from there has ever made any money, and only one has ever been to college.

IMPLICATIONS

The remote Han thus tell us about a series of issues. They tell us, and they sometimes complain a bit about it, that affirmative action works. Though there is
still overwhelming Han dominance in education and entrepreneurship at the
prefectural and even county levels, those from certain ethnically mixed local
communities such as Manshuiwan and Baiwu who have been successful have
almost all been minorities. And the pattern repeats itself politically at the higher
levels of county and prefecture. There are many Han cadres at these levels, par-
ticularly in the technical and financial areas that require better specialized edu-
cation than is available in many minority communities. But almost all of the
Han cadres are from outside; natives who make it to high places in govern-
ment are almost invariably minorities.

In addition, the remote Han shed light on the process of sinicization, which
has been going on, a few steps forward and a few back, for at least two thou-
sand years in this area. The most important lesson is that this process is not a
one-way thing. Depending on the demographic, military, and political condi-
tions in a specific locality at a particular time, minorities may become Han,
Han may become the parents of minorities, and these days, minorities may
acculturate to Han ways at the same time that the children of Han are devel-
oping strong and unequivocal minority identities.

Finally, the remote Han also tell us that even though they are at a marked
political and educational disadvantage with respect to their minority neigh-
bors (and no particular economic advantage one way or the other), they also
retain a kind of cultural pride in their Han heritage, expressed sometimes
through negative stereotypes and ethnic slurs but more often through pride
in their own language, disdain for the languages of others, and the memory
and possibility of long-distance connections with Han in other parts of the
country. This is the power of an idea, which is perhaps more appropriately
called “Chinese culturalism” (Townsend 1992, Levenson 1968). The premod-
ern empires up to and including the Qing were founded on an idea of uni-
versal cultural superiority, in which dynasties of varied ethnic origin—even
the “alien” or “non-Chinese” rulers in the case of the Yuan, Qing, and other
“conquest dynasties”—sometimes managed to control the means of cultural
reproduction through the performance of acts that came under the direction
of the Board of Rites, including, most importantly, the examination rites that
guarded the gates to official privilege, wealth, and status. All of this is suppos-
edly changed with the equality of minzu and the criticism of “Han chauvin-
ism” in the People’s Republic. But in fact it is still the universal cultural norm,
now justified in terms of its supposed modernity and advanced economy, that
is important in setting the standard for the country. The remote Han both gain
and suffer from this modern version of culturalism. They gain in that they can
feel culturally superior to their neighbors, and feel part of a group that extends
all the way to Hebei and Gansu. They lose in that the cultural standard is only a little bit more accessible to them in their mountain hollows than it is to the ethnic Other next door.

In conclusion, I want to come back to Mr. Xu, and his comment that Yi think of collective good, while Han think only of their own families. The poorest family I interviewed the whole time I was in Baiwu was a Han family, and when we went to their house, we found an old lady home alone in a ramshackle, unkempt courtyard. It was right after the New Year, but there were no red couplets on her doorway, and she explained that they were too poor to celebrate. Her eldest son had never married, and her second daughter-in-law was dead, leaving her and her second son to raise five grandchildren, two of whom had quit school out of poverty that year at ages twelve and thirteen, and two others of whom never went beyond the second grade. Her third son, a truck driver, had lost his truck to a raging river, and then drowned trying to save the vehicle. There was no Lei Feng campaign in his memory. My Nuosu colleague was quick to point out that this would never happen among the Nuosu. Someone, a clan-mate perhaps, would give a poor family something—a couple of chickens maybe—so they could celebrate the New Year.
CONCLUSION