Publications on the Yao minority nationality (minzu) in the post-Mao period reveal a vast range of representational strategies, but one of the more dominant concerns the place of the Yao in the history of the People's Republic of China. The Yao people are portrayed as hardy and culturally resilient mountain dwellers, having for centuries lived far removed from the administrative reach of successive imperial regimes. The Yao are known for their persistent rejection of civilizing logics claiming that participation in a tax and corvée labor system signify a kind of cultural enlightenment. As stubborn mountain recluses, the Yao are represented at once as outside the history of China's imperial past and, by virtue of their will to resist, central to social and political processes that culminated in the revolutionary victory of 1949. A remarkable transformation has thus occurred since the early 1940s, as the Yao peoples have been incorporated, both administratively and discursively, into China's modern multi-ethnic nation-state. Once viewed by Imperial and Republican officials as dangerously inaccessible, prone to banditry, and possessing strange and distasteful customs, the Yao today, under the leadership of the Communist Party, are portrayed through a wide range of media as embracing their membership in the larger national community of the People's Republic of China.

My concern here is with the writing of official histories of local Yao communities and of the Yao minority nationality. Constructing histories of China's officially recognized minority nationalities constitutes one important practice in which identification with the “imagined community” of the People's Republic of China is both produced and contested. My interest in the writing and dissemination of these histories is prompted by several interrelated questions: What is the relationship between official and popular histories? How do subordinated ethnic and social groups develop and maintain a sense of their own history? For what political purposes are such histories
mobilized? How much autonomy is there for those involved in the production of these histories to contest the theoretical contours and dominant narratives informing the practice of research and writing? How are standard versions of the past produced, privileged, and maintained as part of national discourses on the intersections between history, culture, and politics?

Stretching back at least to the “self-strengthening” movement in the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a lively history of debate and contention about how China should culturally define itself as a nation in the modern age. This nationalist and culturalist project was later fused, albeit not unproblematically, with a Marxist historiography highly informed by social evolutionary conceptions of the “movement” of history. A theoretical practice serving broader revolutionary goals, this historiography attempted to instill meaning in the great sweep of Chinese history. By focusing on urban commer-

1. The “He shang” (River elegy) television documentary is one recent example of the modern Chinese concern for culture and its relationship to a modern, national identity. See Paul A. Cohen (1988) and Watson’s (1991) study on the construction of Chinese cultural identity.
cial development, popular literature, and minority-nationality resistance to dynastic regimes, it also attempted to promulgate a new history, a history of and for the masses. With the emergence of the socialist-modernization project in the post-Mao period, these historiographical practices have moved away from the strict class-based interpretations that dominated the first three decades of post-1949 China. These writing practices have gained a renewed intellectual momentum, as histories that bring together both evolutionary and culturalist conceptions of the past are once again being written and published. For the Yao, the dominant post-Mao historical narrative delimits the stages of history the Yao minzu has developed through and emphasizes the modes of Yao resistance to imperial regimes. The Yao are represented as important historical agents, as integral members of a multi-ethnic Chinese state. Although the events and contours of Yao history differ from the histories of other minority nationalities and from the Han majority, the history of the Yao, as a history of an exploited and oppressed minzu, is also the history of the national past of the People's Republic.

While the Chinese term Yao as a referent to non-Han peoples in the south of China has been floating around official Chinese historical records since the Tang dynasty, the Yao minzu was officially constituted only in the mid-1950s. This linguistically and culturally diverse category is comprised of peoples living predominantly in the mountainous regions extending across the south of China. These peoples are dispersed across six different provinces in China, but are also said to be found in Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and a host of Western countries, where Yao peoples live without claiming membership in China's minzu category. The category includes three mutually unintelligible languages, each of which is comprised of a variety of dialects (Xu Jiewu and Deng Wentong 1985). There are over thirty different ethnonyms for groups subsumed under the category, but these groups are viewed, in China, as mere subgroups (zhixi) of the minzu.

2. A penetrating analysis of the origins of Marxist historiography in China is to be found in Dirlik (1978).

3. This Yao category is comprised of some 1,400,000 people living in six Chinese provinces: Guangxi, Guangdong, Yunnan, Hunan, Jiangxi, and Guizhou. Population figures for Yao in other parts of the world are as follows: Vietnam, 165,000; Thailand, 40,000 (half of whom are refugees from Laos); Burma, 15,000; Laos, 10,000; the United States, 9,000. There are also Yao living in France, Australia, Canada, and no doubt in other countries as well.
To further lend to this profusion of names, there are over three hundred different terms for the Yao in the Chinese language (usually descriptive of clothing or styles of ornamentation), which many of the Yao find degrading. Finally, many of the Yao groups worship deities, celebrate religious festivities, recognize historical events, and proclaim mythological origins that, at least before 1949, were not known to some of the other groups to be distinctly Yao.

Despite this cultural and linguistic diversity, none of the Yao subgroups has ever openly contested its official designation as a member of the Yao minzu. One of the reasons for the seemingly unproblematical nature of the category concerns the popularization of the term Yao during the Ming and Qing periods. Yet the popularization of the name must be understood in the context of political and social processes underway in the south of China since the mid-nineteenth century, if not before. Many of the Yao groups practiced swidden horticulture in the pre-1949 period, which led to competition and conflict over land and other resources; this, in turn, necessitated the adoption of a common political identity in order to successfully negotiate with powerful outsiders demanding tax, labor, and allegiance.4

More importantly, the uncontested nature of the category in the contemporary period must be placed in the context of the proliferation of minority nationality and ethnological studies in the post-Mao period. The 1980s witnessed a remarkable growth in this theoretical and applied enterprise, as evidenced in the promotion of conferences, workshops, and publications exploring the relationship between traditional ethnic cultural practices and modernization. Local Yao support for the projects of socialist modernization is thus furthered through an official discourse set forth in the growing body of Yao studies. While the immediacy of this discourse to the social world of local Yao communities is questionable, its power to remake social realities lies in the fact that many of the scholars and administrators who work on the “problems” of the Yao minzu are Yao themselves, with social ties throughout Yao communities. They have been trained in the post-1949 educational system, usually in institutes far from their home villages. Many have subsequently returned to hold government positions, working as county magistrates, promoting the national birth control project, or instructing villagers in the te-

nets of the Civilized Village Campaign. Some have become scholars and hold positions at one of the minority nationality institutes across the country; they too continue to play an active role in the formation of policy, the implementation of campaigns, and the study of the many "problems" said to hinder the modernization drive. Their involvement at the local level serves as a reminder that local affairs continue to be informed by the administrative practices and discursive injunctions of the official center.

And yet, noting that the Yao have not disputed their membership in the Yao minzu category does not mean that contest has not informed the Yao relationship with the shifting goals, projects, and ideologies of the state in China. The Yao minzu is one whose members—especially those connected in various ways to the state apparatus—see themselves as important national subjects and as worthy ethnic peoples. Because the Yao are constituted by the state as an ethnic other, defined by cultural traditions said to lag behind those of the dominant Han majority, Yao ethnicity emerges as a negotiated and at times contested terrain. The history of the Yao, and its place in the historical processes that resulted in the founding of the People’s Republic, is central to processes in which Yao ethnicity is being interpreted, negotiated, and reformulated in the midst of the changing political, economic, and discursive processes of post-Mao China.

Due to the existence of numerous historical references to peoples referred to as Yao, Western and Chinese scholars in pre-1949 China produced an extensive literature on the history of the group. Who were these people? Where did they reside? What peoples were subsumed under the category and why? What did the Chinese term Yao mean? Did its meaning change through time and, if so, why? This essay addresses these questions and examines how post-1949 research by scholars in the People’s Republic on Yao origins and resistance has been informed by earlier historiography. In both periods the defining assumption is that the Yao have an ancient history, and that

5. The Civilized Village Campaign (wenmingcun yundong) is one means by which the post-Mao state attempts to institute moral and legal codes at the local level. Local government officials and villagers are together responsible for monitoring behaviors that violate the tenets of the code: excessive drinking, gambling, disorderly conduct, prostitution, and domestic disputes. See Anagnost (1992) for a discussion of how such practices reconstitute the power of the Communist Party even while the party claims to be promoting democratic self-government.
this history, the social evolution of the group, can be traced to the present moment.

The crucial difference, however, rests in what this historical "fact" has meant for those constructing the history of the Yao in the post-1949 period. One of the most important strategic moves in the ethnic-history writing project in the People's Republic has been the inclusion of ethnic subjects in the research and writing process. The history of the Yao minzu is not in any way a false construct without historical referents or significance in everyday lived reality; nor is it one merely constructed in order to legitimate Yao claims for officially recognized minzu status. There are local histories of Yao communities, of important families and Yao leaders, of the many different groups that make up the minzu. Though they may not have been articulated locally as histories of the Yao minzu, they nevertheless have been constituted as part of the history of the minzu and thus of the People's Republic of China. Many of those who have been involved in the writing of the official history of the Yao are aware of the ideological underpinnings of this project; however, as one scholar put it to me, there has been little opportunity to popularize different conceptions and understandings of the history of the Yao. China's post–Cultural Revolution economic reforms, coupled with the state's promotion of things ethnic, have allowed the Yao to begin to recover and reconstruct many cultural practices previously silenced under the dictates of the Maoist regime.

The most visible, and perhaps most highly contested, of these is the popular practice of Yao Taoism, which is seen by the state as potentially undermining modernist and evolutionary discourses which imagine a socialist-modern landscape cleansed of popular ritual and religious practice. Yet there are other practical effects as well, such as the hardening of ethnic boundaries along subgroup lines. The proliferation of these identities puts the discursive nature of the minzu category into sharp relief and speaks against ideological claims of an uncontested minority nationality unification (minzu tuanjie). It is in the recovery of such practices that the different Yao groups are negotiating the defining characteristics of their people, struggling to give voice to the heterogeneous histories and identities that proliferate amidst the homogenizing minzu history, and contesting the dominant historiography which defines traditional ethnic practices as paralyzing to the project of socialist modernization.
Two major themes structure the pre-1949 ethnohistorical research on the Yao. Both are then taken up in the post-1949 period, though they are interpreted and utilized differently. The first is the question of the origins and social evolution of a Yao ethnic or tribal people; the second is the representation of the Yao as possessing a tradition of sustained resistance to the imperial regimes ruling China until the fall of the Qing dynasty. This becomes the flip side of the dominant representation of the Yao in the Chinese historical record as barbarians, mountain recluses, and worshipers of a mottled dog-king. As barbarians on the borders of empire, the Yao persistently resisted incorporation into the administrative structures of successive dynastic regimes. Yao resistance to imperial control has been incorporated into the minzu historiography of the People's Republic. Before we turn to this history, it will prove helpful to examine how these two issues were set forth in the pre-1949 conceptions of the history of the Yao.

Richard Cushman's doctoral dissertation provides the most comprehensive examination of Western, Japanese, and pre- and post-1949 publications (up until early 1966) on the Yao. Cushman explicated the dominant theoretical problems in Yao ethnohistory and charted the changing Chinese perceptions of the Yao through successive dynastic and modern political regimes. Many of the concerns in this early anthropological and linguistic literature have remained central to the contemporary field of Yao studies: how to account for the extraordinary linguistic diversity of the Yao; how to explain their wide geographical dispersal; and the problem of how the Yao, given these two conditions, have resisted absorption by neighboring peo-

6. See Cushman (1970). Cushman's study deals to a limited extent with the ethnographic research that was carried out on Mien-speaking Yao in Thailand in the 1970s. I have not presented it here because little if any of it provides a historical perspective on the Yao or discusses in any detail the Yao discourse on their own history, save for references to recent migration routes and to certain Chinese regions in traditional songs and folklore. As for Cushman's treatment of post-1949 work on the Yao in China, he refers only tangentially to the increase in linguistic research in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I have come across only nine sources on the Yao published in China between 1949 and 1979. In contrast, for the period between 1979 and 1986, I know of over 120 articles or books. Research and writing on the Yao in the People's Republic has continued to proliferate since 1986.
pies and maintained group integrity. Cushman showed how scholars of the Yao, confounded by the seemingly inexplicable diversity of the group, retreated to the historical record, seeking to trace the origins of the Yao by reference to the earliest citations in the imperial record.

The Yao have been traced back to around 220 C.E. as one of the ethnolinguistic groups subsumed under the category Nanman (southern barbarian). The origins of this term are found in the first of the official histories of China, the Shi ji, in a chapter entitled “The Aborigines of the Southwest” (Xinan Yi). This chapter is devoted solely to describing events and peoples of the South. Utilizing the classification system set forth in the Shi ji, subsequent dynastic scholars divided the peoples of the South into two broad categories: the Xinan Yi, the indigenous populations of present-day Yunnan, southern Sichuan, and western Guizhou; and the Nanman, those who lived in present-day Guangxi, Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hunan, and eastern Guizhou. From Han to Tang times these broad categories were refined into smaller units, usually by designating a group of people by their geographical location. The term man (barbarian) was not discarded, but was attached as a suffix to a place name. By the end of the Southern Song (1127–1279), new and more detailed information was being recorded about the southern peoples. This deluge of information was made possible by the transfer of the capital to Hangzhou and by the policies initiated by the first emperor of the Song, Zhao Kuangyin (known posthumously as Song Taizu). This period marks the subjugation and incorporation of the independent kingdoms south of the Yangtze (excluding the state of Nanzhao in the far Southwest) into the Song’s administrative system. Most of the terms in modern usage were in widespread use among imperial scholars by the late Southern Song.7

The term Yao as a mode of classification for a group or groups of non-Han peoples does not appear in the Chinese historical record until the Tang dynasty, when it appears in the expression moyao, usually translated as “not subject to corvée labor” (Lemoine 1982:11). Many scholars, both Chinese and Western, have attempted to link the origins of the Yao to this administrative category. The writings of

7. In the eleventh century we find for the first time references to Yao ren (Yao people), in which the character yao is written with the insect radical and is not prefixed by the word man. See Cushman (1970:50, 53) for a discussion of eleventh-century sources.
Tang Cui, an observer of events in the South during the Qing, are often cited as evidence of this link:

[The aborigines] who have diffused throughout Hunan, Kwangsi and Kwangtung are called Yao [written with the “insect” radical]. In earlier times those who had merit were released from their corvée duties [yao, written with the chi or “step” radical] and were called moyao [“not subject to corvée”]. Later the name was changed to Yao [a similar character written with the “insect” radical]. (Tang Cui quoted in Cushman 1970:56)

Cushman dismissed the entire enterprise of linking the present-day Yao to the category moyao. He argued that there are only six uses of the term moyao in five sources, the earliest occurring in the Liang shu (History of the Liang dynasty; c. early 6th cent. C.E.). In each of these sources there is no indication that the term refers to a particular ethnic group; in fact, there is evidence to suggest that it referred to both man and Han Chinese, the criteria being avoidance of tax and corvée obligations. And finally, Cushman pointed out that no one has been able to offer a reasonable explanation for shortening moyao to Yao; neither has anyone produced documentary evidence for why such a change may have occurred. In other words, the then extant historical reconstructions of the Yao failed to convincingly show that the peoples referred to in the Tang dynasty as enjoying the privileges of moyao status are the direct ancestors of those people who, in the Southern Song, were referred to as the Man Yao. In his critique of this now infamous “moyao argument,” Cushman revealed the inconclusiveness of historical reconstructions of present-day ethnic groups based solely on philological grounds.

Most importantly, Cushman argued that conceptions of the Yao history and identity owe much to the definitions set forth by imperial scholars and administrative officials. Contemporary historical reconstructions of the shifts and transmutations of Yao identity are severely constrained by the Sinocentric perspective that permeates the historical record on the non-Han peoples of the South. At best, Cushman reasoned, it is possible to arrive at certain objective criteria—language, dialects, mythology, religious practices, and cus-
toms—that indicate the existence of a historic ethnic group. But the question of subjectivity remained an elusive problem. Reflecting upon his own invocation of objective markers as the defining features of the ethnic group, Cushman saw clearly the futility of talking about Yao identity when the Yao themselves have never had a voice with which to speak. He thus stumbled upon the problem of voice, which is today so central to post-structuralist approaches to writing the history of subaltern groups: as the creation of the imperial imagination, the Yao existed only as a noncultured other, situated on the borders of empire and civilization.

The second theme recurring throughout writings on the ethno-history of the Yao concerns the question of Yao resistance to an ever-expanding imperial state. This theme also emerges from the historical materials of Imperial China: when the Yao were not being mentioned as descendants of the dog-king Pan Hu (who seldom ventured into cities and markets and who ate the strangest of foods), they were represented as ferocious and mountain-wise, stubborn rebels who refused to be seduced by the lure of the superior, lowland Han culture, which meant paying taxes and providing corvée labor to local imperial administrators. Take, for example, the following description written by a nineteenth-century Chinese historian:

The Yao are stupid and violent by nature and they do not have any intercourse with the Chinese. The Chinese take advantage of their stupidity by wrestling things from them by force, by stealing from them, and by raiding and insulting them. The officials are prompt to assist wicked people to bind them fast [in this condition]. The Yao accumulate malice and hatred and then rebel, and events [tribal rebellions] have ever followed this course. (Wei Yuan 1842, quoted in Cushman 1970:36)

The recurrence of Yao rebellions has been an important element in the construction of a historic Yao ethnic or tribal group. Major Yao “tribal uprisings,” as Wiens characterized these historic events, were first mentioned during the rule of the Song emperor Renzong (1023–1064); one occurred in Guangdong in 1035, another in Hunan in 1043. There is mention of a rebellion in the Guangzhou region in 1281. By the mid-Ming, the incidence of Yao uprisings had increased dramatically. And then there was the famous 1832 Yao rebellion in Hunan, in which the Yao, reacting to theft of cattle and grain by members of the
Triad Society, organized an uprising that took several months and armies from three provinces to squelch (Cushman 1970:225–31). The reports on these uprisings usually pointed to Yao refusal to pay taxes, or attempts to reclaim land confiscated by the Han. In all of these accounts, regardless of the period in which they were written, there is a persistent tension between the desire to incorporate the Yao into the administrative domain and a sense of utter hopelessness in the face of the task. The reasons provided for this feeling of desperation had little to do with the inadequacies of the civilizing regime and everything to do with the stupidity of the Yao. The Yao are depicted as a people who both resisted sinification (hanhua) and refused incorporation into the Chinese political order. As local officials in the Ming responded to increasing imperial pressure to bring the recalcitrant “barbarians” under administrative control, it may well be, as Cushman argues, that this process of interaction and conflict gave rise to a Yao ethnic identity and increased the importance of its maintenance and reproduction (Cushman 1970:233).

Whatever the relationship between Yao rebellions (or participation in major uprisings such as the Taiping) and the emergence of a Yao sense of ethnic identity, Yao resistance to imperial control is central to the construction of a contemporary Yao identity. For those writing on Yao ethnohistory in the pre-1949 period, resistance was seen s an inevitable consequence of the southward expansion of northern-

9. Kuhn (1980:106–107) discusses an entirely different series of rebellions, the so-called Xinning rebellions, the first of which occurred in 1836. Xinning is in a valley just to the west of the Xiang River valley, which was a major route by which the opium trade had spread to the North. The Yao in this region were involved in this trade as well as in a number of secret societies, such as the Black Lotus Society (Qinglian Jiao) and the Cudgel Society (Bangbang Hui). Due to yamen extortion of local peasants, several Yao leaders with connections to these societies began to secretly organize themselves, drawing support from large segments of the local Han peasantry. By 1847, another revolt occurred in Xinning lead by a Yao named Li Caihao. The Yao were brutally defeated by a locally organized militia after several months. Kuhn finds these rebellions instructive in two senses: they point to interethnic alliances that arose in the face of local imperial oppression, and they demonstrate that powerful and successful local militias, typically the instruments of lineage elites, even in the face of growing provincial-level distrust were able to put down such revolts.

10. Many scholars of ethnicity have noted the links between competition and conflict over resources and the crystallization of ethnic identity. See Keyes (1981) and Francis (1976).

11. See Cheung (this volume).
ers, be they Mongols or simple Han peasants in search of new rice land. Some saw conflict and loss of life as an invariable component of expansion into the southern frontier. For others, perhaps empathetic with the Yao, violent resistance was viewed as the only course of action available to defend one's land and clanspeople.

Both pre- and post-1949 historiography views Yao resistance as the result of conflict and struggle between opposed groups: the former emphasizes ethnic interaction and conflict, while the latter stresses feudal exploitation and oppression and the imperial quest to assimilate the noncultured other. The crucial distinction, however, is the way in which the history itself is constructed. The pre-1949 literature is remarkably devoid of the teleological conceptions of historical progress that imbue the PRC historiography of the Yao: that the Yao, through their social intercourse with the expanding imperial regime and by virtue of the conflicts this interaction engendered, socially matured as they moved through successive evolutionary stages. To be sure, this narrative strives to grant the Yao with a certain agency in this movement through history, but it is an agency subsumed to the unfolding of History itself. An essential part of being a minzu is being an active agent, however imaginatively constituted, in the historical process culminating in the people’s victory over China’s feudal past. It is this narrative of Yao history, to which we now turn, that works to firmly situate the minzu in the larger community of the People’s Republic of China.

THE MAKING OF THE YAO IN HISTORY

The history of the Yao minzu has been structured in the People’s Republic by a Marxist and evolutionary historiography. This discourse has delineated the successive stages of Yao minzu social development and specified the social forces causing the transition from one stage to another. The Yao are also represented as important historical agents in their encounter with an opposition to successive “feudal” dynastic regimes. China’s so-called “feudal” past is mobilized as the very cause of Yao social and economic “backwardness” (luohou) and, at the same time, as the source of the Yao revolutionary spirit.

As I stressed earlier, the Yao themselves have been instrumental in the writing of a Yao-minzu history. When the research for this history-writing project was begun in the mid-1950s, and then, after
the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, renewed in the early 1980s, members of the Yao community were called upon to collect the information that eventually gave shape to the production of the history. They brought to the project experiences and perspectives derived from their home communities, and their own knowledge of traditional Yao cultural practices and of the assortment of Yao oral histories, expressed in traditional songs and long ritual incantations. This local perspective was then reworked into the narrative structure of the dominant historiography, as it was determined what had import within this framework and what was epiphenomenal and thus of little significance.

While the writing in China of a Marxist-informed history has not been without its moments of struggle, debate, and controversy, certain fundamental premises have remained constant: that the writing of history, like any intellectual pursuit, must “serve the people”; that popular history, the history about and for the masses, is more valuable for understanding the present than are histories about feudal emperors, scholar-officials, and imperial intrigue; that history is not a document of lifeless events and facts but an explanation for the conditions of the present and a vehicle for action and change in the world; and that statements and representations of history invariably have social and political roots and consequences (Weller 1987:731). This historiography has struggled to sever itself from the Confucian literati tradition. An assessment of the success of this purported amputation is beyond the scope of this essay. What is important for now is that this “new tradition” has represented itself as promulgating a more “real” history.

Since the early 1980s minority nationality publishing houses in China have issued works on the various Yao autonomous counties. These short and informative publications provide brief histories of the (Communist) liberation of the area, as well as information on

12. One of the recurrent struggles in the post-1949 historiography has been the debate between “historicism” (lishi zhuyi) and the “class viewpoint” (jieji guandian). The former, perhaps best represented by Liu Jie’s arguments in the early 1960s that class analysis is an inappropriate analytical tool when applied to ancient historical events, has attempted to delineate those features of China’s cultural legacy that should be preserved and embraced. For example, Liu argued that the Confucian concept of ren (roughly, “benevolence”) was devoid of class content, a position for which he was severely attacked. See Feuerwerker (1968a) for a discussion of these struggles over historiographical method.
economic development projects initiated in the reform period and an examination of forces retarding socialist modernization. In addition to these local histories, there is a general history of the Yao, *Yaozu jianshi* (A concise history of the Yao), hereafter referred to as the *Jianshi*.\(^1\) This book represents the work of over thirty scholars of the Yao in China, the majority of whom are Yao themselves (*Yaozu jianshi* 1983:132). No one pretends that the *Jianshi* exhausts every possible historical source or that it is in any way devoid of points of controversy. This history is a simplified, encapsulated version of how the Yao have progressed through history; it charts the obstacles they have encountered in their long and arduous path to realize full social and economic potential, to become a socialist, modern *minzu*.

The *Jianshi* takes the reader on a tour through the long historical stretch of Chinese history, as moments in the history of the Yao are situated in different dynastic regimes and related to social evolutionary stages. The book begins with an analysis of the theories, some already reviewed above, on the origins of the Yao. There is reference to the many *man* terms rampant in the first millennium C.E. The original homeland of the Yao is situated in the valleys and mountains south of Dongting Lake in northern Hunan. In pre-Han times, the people living in this area were referred to as Jing Man. By the Han dynasty they had come to be known as the Changsha Man or Wuling Man. In the histories of the Liang (502–557), Sui, and Song dynasties, these peoples are referred to as Wuxi Man (*Man of the Five Streams*, referring to the river system extending southward from Dongting Lake) (ibid.:12–13). As we saw in our examination of Cushman’s work on the ethnohistory of the Yao above, this style of reasoning is an example of the historical reconstruction of present-day groups based on philological grounds.\(^4\)

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\(^{13}\) A concise history has been written for nearly every minority nationality in China. Much of the material for these histories was collected during the *minzu* identification process in the 1950s, though the funds to compile and publish the histories were not made available until the early 1980s.

\(^{14}\) Philology is not the only means of attack. Reconstructions of the historic Yao are based on the relationship between present-day Yao traditional customs and apparently similar practices mentioned for this region in such sources as the *Hou Han shu* (*History of the Later Han dynasty*) (*Yaozu jianshi* 1983b:20). Unfortunately, perhaps due to the survey nature of the *Jianshi*, there is no mention of what these traditional customs might be (see Harrell, this volume).
The *Jianshi* situates the original Yao dwelling place just south of Dongting Lake. The history of the Yao therefore emanates from this geographical location (ibid.:20). We are informed that when Qin Shi Huang unified China in the third century B.C.E. and implemented the “system of prefectures and counties” (*junxian zhidu*), the Yao in this region, for perhaps the first time in their history, were brought into close contact with a centralized government. The argument of interethnic or tribal contact and borrowing is an important strategical move in this historical narrative. It constitutes the Yao in a kind of dependent relationship for all technological and social advancement. For example, Qin Shi Huang’s policy of *zheshumin*, in which low-ranking officials were sent to remote areas to establish garrison command posts, enabled the Yao to adopt more advanced agricultural tools and begin to engage in trade activities with other tribal peoples. It was also in the reign of Qin Shi Huang that the Yao were first incorporated into the tribute system. This interaction with the Qin state, although marking the beginning of feudal exploitation, is presented in an almost positive light, as a necessary moment in Yao social and economic advancement.

In the Later Han dynasty the Yao began what was to become a long history of revolt against “feudal” China’s tribute and tax systems. The *Hou Han shu* records uprising after uprising among the recalcitrant Yiren, the category thought to have subsumed the Yao (ibid.:21). By around 300 C.E., due to the increased migrations of people from the North, the Yiren (the Yao) established closer ties with the northerners and began to adopt surnames and other elements of Chinese culture. Some of the Yiren became “aristocrats” (*guizu*) themselves, owning large tracts of land and bringing other Yi peoples under their control. This represents the beginning of processes of assimilation for some Yao peoples (ibid.:23). Yet, more importantly, it divided the historic Yao community. By the middle of the sixth century the Yao had begun to migrate into the region that would later come to be known as Nanling Shan, the mountain range that forms the borders of present-day Hunan, Guangdong, and Guangxi.

The *Jianshi* also notes the controversial Tang dynasty *moyao* institution (ibid.:24–25). Yet, unlike the Western and pre-Liberation Chinese research that concerned itself almost solely with the origins of the Yao, the *moyao* category gets only scant attention in this regard. This is because the origins of the Yao have already been
traced back to the pre-Han period. The term is presented as just one more way in which feudal rulers classified the Yao; in no way is it used to search for the origins of the Yao minzu. Yet moyan, as a political category, marks an important historical development. It represents a negotiation between isolated tribal peoples and an imperial state extremely wary of the “barbarian” other—an other who, in the official imagination, was more often equated with monkeys, wild dogs, and quick and elusive deer than with the civilized center. The granting of exemption from taxes and other obligations was a way for the Tang court to maintain cultural distance; it was also a way to induce the “southern barbarians” to open up the mountains for agricultural purposes. Thus, through the widespread adoption of iron tools and other advanced agricultural implements, these Tang dynasty institutions contributed to the further development of the Yao economy.

These social developments, not unlike those in Qin-Han times, brought with them a certain cost: inter- and intra-ethnic conflict. Due to the introduction of the so-called “loose reign policy” (jimi zhengce) of “using barbarians to rule barbarians” (yi yi zhi yi), the Yao, especially those in the area known in the Tang as Lingnan Dao (comprising the eastern, Guilin section of present-day Guangxi and all of Guangdong) were increasingly pitted against each other. This system, the precursor to the Ming and Qing tusi, was constructed so that local tribal leaders were induced, usually by the granting of official rank, to govern Chinese-style administrative districts. These tribal chiefs (qiuzhang) were required to collect taxes and goods—such as the high-quality silk knit goods (sizhipin) produced by Yao women—for tribute (ibid.:28). Yao farmers, presumably skeptical of the practical use of symbolic titles, refused the tax system and were subsequently pushed deeper and deeper into the mountains. The political divisions and class contradictions (jieji mandun) that Communist Party cadres found rampant in the Yao mountains in the 1940s are said to have their social roots in the expansion of the imperial state into the south of China in the Tang and the Song. Although the Yao economy saw further advances in its productive base, society was increasingly divided. Tribal chiefs were increasingly

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incorporated into the imperial system, while farmers and peasants were driven into isolation. In the *Jianshi*, this constitutes the “feudalization” (*fengjianhua*) of Yao society.

The Song empire succeeded in incorporating large tracts of “untamed” land into its administrative domain. As the *Jianshi* points out, this was accomplished by the further exploitation and elaboration of the Tang “loose reign policy.” In the Song we begin to see the use of the term *tuguan*. These were “local officials,” usually Zhuang peoples in the areas of present-day Guangxi and Guangdong, who were given the responsibility of distributing land to the Yao and other tribal groups. To receive land, however, one had to register with the *tuguan* through either the *jikou jitian* (distributing land by population) or *jihu shoutian* (allocating land by household), which determined the amount of land per household (ibid.:31). In return, taxes would be collected in the form of crops and other locally produced goods. Those who failed to pay their required tax or refused to offer corvée labor in its place were harassed and sometimes severely punished. In social evolutionary terms, the *Jianshi* (ibid.:32–33) argues that these Song and Yuan dynasty methods of feudal control represent the shift from the stages of primitive society (*yuanshi shehui*) and agricultural communes (*nongcun gongshe*) to that of feudal society (*fengjian shehui*), bypassing, unlike other minority nationalities in the South and Southwest, the stage of slave society (*nuli shehui*). The reasons provided for this are consistent with the evolutionary paradigm. Driven to isolated regions in the mountains, the Yao were forced to practice swidden horticulture and, having never established permanent, stable residences, they were unable to support political, economic, and cultural centers that would allow the emergence of a slave society. The imperial practice of “using barbarians to rule barbarians” and the *tuguan* institution kept the Yao competing against each other. While some maneuvered to open up land for wet-rice cultivation (which could be acquired only through the household registration system), most remained tied to a migratory existence in

16. This argument can be contrasted to one set forth in Cushman (1970:168). He states that according to the Guangxi tongzhi (Provincial gazetteer) eleven of the twelve tribal officers recognized by the Song court whose ethnic origins were recorded were Han from the province of Shandong. It is not certain, however, whether this reflects the ethnic distribution of hereditary tribal positions or whether local tribal officers fabricated Han descent in order to pursue political interests.
the mountains. The Yao were forced, due to historical processes beyond their control, to "eat up one mountain and move to the next" (chi yi shan, guo yi shan).

Although the tusi system came into full bloom under the Ming and the Qing dynasties, the patterns of development and forced migration remained the same. In both periods the Yao continued to encounter the ever-expansionary imperial state. By the mid-Qing, it is said, the present-day Yao regions in China were all established. However, certain regions—such as the Da Yao Shan (Great Yao Mountains), Shiwan Yao Shan (Hundred Thousand Yao Mountains) in Guangxi, and areas in southern Hunan—were never brought under effective control. This returns us to the other foundational theme circulating through the Jianshi: the Yao as historical agents, fomenters of uprisings and rebellions.

In the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods the Yao were caught up in the stormy “feudalization” of the South. While Yao encounters with Han society and with imperial administrators facilitated the development of the Yao economy, feudal exploitation and oppression drove the Yao deeper into the mountains and thus undermined any gain in social development. As this process unfolded—as more and more Yao refused administrative incorporation—the local officials attempted to cut off trade between various regions, blocking the importation of salt and other foodstuffs that could be had only from markets at lower elevations. These actions left the Yao with no alternative but to attack the garrison command posts, which in turn led to imperial retaliation. In the year 975, for example, one third of the Yao in the Mei Shan area in Hunan were murdered by imperial troops (ibid.:34–35). This led to a series of skirmishes, which finally culminated in a large-scale Yao uprising. The Yao of southern Hunan organized themselves and on fifteen occasions attacked the command posts at Lianshan and Lianyang in the northwest corner of present-day Guangdong. The pacification officer (anfushi) in the area was thus forced to resort to the then extant zhaofu or zhaoran policy, whereby amnesty was offered to the rebels if they agreed to halt their attacks. These offers were considered by five leaders of the rebellion, but the struggle was sustained for another five years, until it eventually died out (ibid.:36).

17. For an important work on the tusi system, see She I-tse (1947). See also Wiens (1967).
Circulating throughout the history of the Yao minzu is the assumption of historical continuity: the Yao, bounded by distinct and essential cultural traits and ethnic practices, have been around since the beginnings of recorded history in China. In contrast to the pre-1949 ethnohistorical work, the writing of ethnic history within a nationalist framework precludes the search for the Yao in history. The project is rather one that traces the Yao movement, the Yao progression through history. History here is constructed as a body of knowledge that reveals the making of a modern Yao identity, and becomes the very foundation by which to interpret what it means to be Yao. Throughout the Jianshi, we see an unfolding of a governing structure of Yao self-realization, a narrative resolutely Hegelian, even though the Jianshi always portrays Yao social development in materialist terms. Of course, as many scholars in China have pointed out, the historical sources are continuously being debated and reinterpreted, but what remains constant is the unfolding of history. The category minzu is taken not as a cultural construct but rather as an unproblematic embodiment of objective reality. For those who write and contemplate the history of the Yao minzu, it is a fact of everyday lived reality that the Yao have a long history, that they are a people who have been exploited by successive feudal regimes, a people driven to the mountains, who have for centuries carved out a meager existence on unforgiving terrain, struggling against the elements and encroaching, arrogant, feudal masters. The claim that the Yao minzu has evolved through clearly defined stages of social development remains unchallenged—how else, as one scholar answered my stubborn queries, could Yao minzu history be understood? What seems to matter is that the discourse offers a consistent explanation of the current “backward” economic and social state of Yao communities and, at the same time, justifies their involvement in the struggle to liberate the country and their current participation in the nationally defined projects of modernization and nation-building.

The interpretation and construction of Yao histories through this

18. See Young (1990) for a discussion of the concept of History in the modern West, the Hegelian roots of many materialist conceptions of history, and the problems involved in poststructuralist attempts to reconceptualize and indeed politicize the writing of history.
conceptual framework work to situate the Yao minzu within the larger community of the People’s Republic of China. The historiographic framework that informs the Jianshi also demonstrates how the structure of the Yao past closely corresponds to that of other minority nationalities in the People’s Republic of China. This is not simply an enterprise whereby a past of exploitation and oppression at the hands of feudal rulers is made visible, so that a once-subordinated ethnic group can now reclaim its history. It is rather a means by which local Yao histories are expropriated and incorporated into larger discursive constructs. These constructs infuse meaning into the sorted jumble of local Yao specificities and provide the very voice whereby the history of the Yao past is articulated within the contours of a larger political arena, the multi-ethnic community of the People’s Republic.

Have the Yao finally acquired the capacity to represent themselves in history within China? Through the “making of histories,” Yao scholars and others instrumental in this practice have seemingly embraced their participation in the state apparatus and their apparent incorporation into the Chinese multi-ethnic nation. Those Yao who are in positions of power and able to do research and write know perfectly well what they are doing when they “make” these histories. They are not only rediscovering and bringing to the written page a past that has been silenced by the previously dominant Confucian-literati tradition of historiography. They are also constructing conceptions of Yao history, society, and culture that become the official representation of what demarcates the Yao as a bounded minzu community. These histories are on the lips of many a Yao scholar, local teacher, and Communist Party member. They are lived and experienced and have become an important part of these people’s sense of what it means to be Yao.

Because it takes social backwardness and the revolutionary spirit as its foundational themes, Yao history, as with other nation-oriented histories, homogenizes that which remains heterogeneous to it (see Prakash 1992). For this reason the expropriation and incorporation of local Yao histories into nationalist and modernist frameworks of conceptualizing the past call up points of contestation and negotiation. The Jianshi touches only tangentially upon many of the cultural features that Yao, in other contexts, assert mark the boundaries that define their minzu. It is at the juncture between a narrative that tells a story about historical self-realization and the cultural traditions and
local histories that don’t easily conform to this governing structure that debate, negotiation, and contest become possible and apparent.

What, then, are the other modes of reckoning social reality that potentially disrupt these dominant conceptual frameworks? At the present time the most important of these seems to be Yao Taoism, a practice that the Maoist regime effectively silenced but is now being rediscovered as an important element of Yao identity. The Jiānshì provides a brief concluding section on the religious beliefs of the Yao, yet the approach to religion and popular ritual is marked by ambivalence: ritual and religion are apprehended as lingering survivals of the primitive and feudal stages of Yao social development, although the connection to Taoist practices and traditions is noted as somehow central to a Yao identity. The spread of Taoism into Yao regions in the Song and the Yuan periods is treated, for example, as being paralyzing (mābì) to the historic Yao revolutionary spirit, just one more example of the many innovative methods of feudal control (ibid.:122–27). And yet as a symbol of traditional Yao identity, the Jiānshì opens up the possibility that Yao Taoism may have a place in a modernizing China.

The ambivalent treatment of religion and popular ritual is thus further played out in the increasing expression of, discussion about, and action upon Taoism as an integral element of what it means to be Yao. This raises important questions about the interaction between the traditional practice of Yao ethnicity and the official conception of what constitutes a Yao minzu identity, of how this official discourse has influenced popular practice, and how, in turn, the popular has shaped and is reshaping the official. Kandre’s (1976) work on the relationships between supernaturalism, language, and ethnicity among Mien-speaking Yao in Thailand provides an interesting contrast to the discourse on matters of identity among the Yao as set forth in official publications in China. Kandre begins by pointing out that for the Mien (known in China as the Pan Yao and by other Han appellations) with whom he worked, linguistic competence in the Mien dialect is not coextensive with a specific identity. Rather, Mien identity is “ascribed as a combination of name and rank, to which graded doses of supernatural power, blessing, and purity are usually attached” (ibid.:13). In other words, ethnic identity is indirectly ascribed as a result of the individual’s ritual incorporation into a patrilineal unit of a clan defined in terms of descent from the mythological dog-king Pan Hu. “One is Mien by
virtue of his belonging to certain temporal or supernatural masters who in turn belong to other masters” (ibid.:14). My own fieldwork among Yao in China suggests that this ritual basis of Mien identity, created and reproduced by the ritual intervention of Taoist priests, is today a significant aspect of native practice among Mien and other Yao subgroups. Taoist practice among the Yao is being rediscovered by scholars working on the Yao in China. Yao Taoist practice is increasingly becoming a mode of minzu identification for those scholars who are Yao themselves. Yao Taoist funerals and other rituals that call for the intervention of trained priests in everyday human affairs are once again becoming popular. The resurgence of Taoist practice among the Yao therefore poses interesting questions concerning the relationships between state discourse on religion, local religious beliefs and practices, and the ways in which the state attempts to interpret, manipulate, and control these practices, and how locals, in turn, respond to the everyday state penetration into local religious and social affairs.

That religion and other features of traditional culture are increasingly becoming the focus of scholarly attention also raises the question of whether the Chinese Marxist conception of the influence of traditional culture on the revolutionary—and now modernizing—potential of the peasantry is currently being reevaluated. The Yao minzu, as an oppressed minority that throughout history has undertaken rebellions aimed at overthrowing China’s feudal system, is represented in the Jianshi, by virtue of this oppressive past, as invariably revolutionary. The contemporary discourse on the relationship between traditional culture (chuantong wenhua) and modernization (xiandaibhua), with the assumption that the two invariably confront and oppose each other, suggests that the Yao have not been able to overcome the cultural and social influences of the old feudal system. And yet many Yao scholars have suggested to me that traditional culture should not be viewed as inherently contradictory to projects of development and social transformation. The official practice is still to approach traditional practices with caution; the state still closely monitors local events, and local administrators continue to discuss and haggle over which features are appropriate to the times and which are dangerous and counterproductive to the socialist modernization agenda. The historic and contemporary practice of Yao Taoism is increasingly at the center of this discourse.

We have seen here that the creation and reproduction of an identifi-
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cation with the People’s Republic among members of the Yao minzu is realized in part through the practice of writing and disseminating state-sponsored official histories. Yet we need to distinguish between writing and dissemination. For many Yao peasants these official histories make little immediate sense; they are probably rarely read and they certainly have not yet replaced the oral historical traditions that remain widespread in the majority of Yao villages. Rather, they are significant for those who are connected with the state apparatus—such as scholars, local administrators, and teachers. And they are increasingly becoming relevant for those local Yao who make their way through the educational system, who acquire training in the official discourses of the past and the present. These official histories, then, are part of a larger state modernization project that aims to create “nontraditional” persons, agents of the state who will return to local regions and organize and facilitate projects of economic development and social change. Such histories are important not only because they interact with and possess the potential to supplant popular oral histories, but also because they provide continued reminders that the dispersed communities that comprise the larger community of the Yao minzu are, in fact, an important part of the larger community of the People’s Republic of China. As a member of the state apparatus, one becomes involved in the creation of new histories, often at odds with the older, more traditional ones. The potential power of official conceptions of the Yao past to reinscribe the meanings of Yao history and culture rests in the return of these people to their home villages, whether for extended visits or as newly appointed local administrators. New worlds are then opened up for those who have remained behind, as the images of the Chinese nation, the Party, and the state find their way into the imaginative contours of everyday social life.