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Narrating Southern Chinese Minority Nationalities

Politics, Disciplines, and Public History

Guo Wu



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The Chinese Nation and Nationalities as a Process of Collaborative Knowledge Production

The defining of the modern Chinese nation-state and non-Han minority nationalities' identity and position, as well as their relations with the larger, integrated China has been a key issue of twentieth-century China, which, in the words of Timothy Cheek, belongs to one of the significant "ideological moments," i.e., "rejuvenation."¹ This current book is a result of historical research, fieldwork, and critical reflection on a series of issues concerning the building of modern Chinese nationalistic discourse, practices of modern Chinese anthropology and historiography, academic debates, representation of southern Chinese minority nationalities, and state-minority relations. It examines the process of "discursive formation" and regards this process as multilayered, incoherent, and diffusive.² While I acknowledge the modern Chinese state's rationale of justifying a multinationality Chinese nation, this study also reveals many discontinuities, ruptures, and gaps in the long process of the ideology's implementation and adaption. I focus on the intellectual and cultural producers of modern Chinese knowledge of nationalities at various and interrelated levels, and analyze how they produced knowledge while trying to reconcile their Euro-American training with Marxist theories and their Chinese identity. In some cases, I demonstrate the tension between the scholars' non-Han Chinese identity and the Han-dominated mainstream nationalist discourse.

Since late Qing and early Republican Chinese governments recognized only five nationalities: the Han, Manchu (*Man*), Mongols (*Meng*),

Muslims (*Hui*), and Tibetans (*Zang*) while leaving many non-Han southwestern minority peoples unrecognized and unclassified, this current study focuses on how these peoples, mainly Miao, Zhuang, and Buyi, and Yi were investigated, studied, and officially recognized. Indeed, the mountainous southwest part of China provides "relatively complex and diverse environments" for cross-cultural connections.³ At the same time, southern non-Han minority groups have been asserting their cultural and political differences and rewriting their history more rigorously in recent years.⁴ This complexity also contributed to multifaceted scholarly discourses and debates in the twentieth century.

To approach this process of building modern ethnic knowledge, I divide these producers of the modern knowledge of Chinese nation and nationalities into several worlds: political thinkers, parties and modern states; national-level social scientists, mainly anthropologists, ethnologists, and historians; local scholars, including curators and non-Han minority scholars, and grassroots-level community leaders. It is also important to keep in mind that modern ethnic knowledge in China is largely what Edward Said called "political knowledge," while it overlaps with what Said called "nonpolitical" "pure knowledge."⁵ The struggle between the state and individual scholars and even among the scholars as I delineate in this study is largely out of the tension between pure and political knowledge. I see the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s attempt to build a modern, unified, and multinationality China as a process of rebuilding political authority and political order, which was a recurring theme of modern China after the disintegration of the traditional imperial-Confucian political order.⁶ Political authority was and still is a pertinent issue in China. As Samuel Huntington points out, for the developing and modernizing societies in the post-WWII world, "The primary problem is not liberty but the creation of a legitimate public order," while Americans, due to their own uniquely favorable conditions in state-building, "never had to worry about creating equality," and they were "peculiarly blind to the problems of creating authority in modernizing countries."⁷ The People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1950s was a poor and backward society recovering from a century of civil and foreign wars, and that "Third World historical context" is the proper one for discussing the Chinese experience.⁸ National integration, which was the "ultimate goal" of "all postcolonial developing countries," was also a main task of modern Chinese state.⁹ This "integration" was a political process to redefine "the relationships between a majority people and

minority peoples." As Colin Mackerras defines it, a "political, cultural, social and economic structuring of a larger state which sees the minorities maintaining its own cultures and identities, but influenced by the majority and not seeking sessions in a new state with its own independent government."¹⁰ Of course, when we talk about the modern Chinese state, we are talking about two modern Chinese polities: the non-Communist Republican China (1912–1949) and the Communist People's Republic of China (1949–); however, the two governments intersect as they both assumed the modern state's role as a "distributor of privileges and a differentiator among ethnic groups."¹¹

Taking a detached, neutral stance, I argue that the thesis of "civilizing project" should be reconsidered in the context of the modern Chinese state (both the Nationalist and Communist governments)'s agenda of rebuilding political authority and order, accomplishment of internal equality, even if rhetorically, and mobilization, as well as constructing cultural cohesiveness among Chinese citizens regardless of ethnic background and with various strategies. Stevan Harrell defines "civilizing project" as "a kind of interaction between peoples, in which one group, the civilizing center, interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) in terms of a particular kind of inequality."¹² In practice, this power dynamics is subtle. The PRC government celebrates the cultural differences and unique traits of the non-Han groups, as long as these cultural assertions do not challenge its political authority.¹³ In addition, the "civilizing project" was hardly a one-way process. Peripheral peoples were not merely passive victims who suffer the "effect" of the intrusive and unequal civilizing project. As Dru Gladney puts it, "Studies of China's 'civilizing mission' (Harrell 1995)...appear to be in danger of doing just that: positing a core Chinese civilization at the very same time as they criticize the civilizing mission among the 'peripheral' peoples."¹⁴ Instead, in many cases, marginalized cultural communities, or at least their elites, seek recognition, protection, and favorable treatment from the state, be it Qing China, Republican China, the PRC, or postcolonial India.¹⁵ Non-Han minorities might also choose to be "Sinicized" once they find doing so serves their interests, and thus it is simply a matter of rational "livelihood choice."¹⁶ In this book, I demonstrate how the writing of minority nationality history was not only a state cultural project and practice of Marxist historiography, but also became the personal choice of Shui nationality local cultural elite in southern Guizhou. The Chinese Communist state was also effective in using "positive incentives"

and "preferential treatment" to reward political loyalty, rather than merely exercising control.¹⁷ While the state was asserting its authority over national politics and culture to mobilize and reinvigorate the people and to reintegrate the nation, the newly formed modern Chinese cultural elites, Han and non-Han alike, who had acquired new systems of knowledge such as anthropology and "scientific" historiography through modern academic disciplines, also claimed their intellectual authority.¹⁸

My research will thus be largely about the complex relationship between the state and modern Chinese knowledge elites in collaborating to build authority, as well as their rivalry over the authority to determine the correct approaches to the minority issue. The primary concern of the book is not particularly "equality" between Han and non-Han or between the center and the periphery. Rather, it is about *how* each historical agent makes his/her own claim and exercises his/her power in each given situation while defending his/her own authority of interpreting or an autonomous sphere of influence. First, inequality cannot account for the rise of nationalism, for it overlooks the structural "competition for valued resources and opportunities" and the "relative distribution of ethnic groups."¹⁹ Second, every state intrinsically distributes ethnic privileges unequally.²⁰ The structure of inequality, which I will discuss in more detail, also points to another situation: the relationship between modern China and the West. When we talk about a "civilizing project" or "civilizing mission," we first think that it is the West that "has always been in the business of teaching the rest of the world values and culture."²¹ Whether there is true "equality" between trained modern social scientists, who are accompanied by research assistants and "informants," and the investigated "native" or "indigenous" people can also be called into doubt. Another paradox is the state's efforts to increase political integration of the multiethnic Chinese nation and its appreciation of cultural diversity, in which "integration is the crux."²²

The knowledge production mechanisms had three main layers in China. First, the politically discursive level that consists of the Communist Party's ideology and guiding principles concerning the national and nationality question, and particularly the use of the Chinese trope "family" as a metaphor of the modern Chinese nation. This process of nationality construction can be considered as a process of political persuasion, while "processes are frequently recurring causal chains, sequences, and combinations of mechanisms" that typically concatenate with other mechanisms into broader process."²³ Second, the academic

and practical level, which is made up of (a) the practice of anthropologists of engaging in the study of minority nationalities, their intellectual journeys, and critical reflections, (b) the collaboration of historians and anthropologists in inventing "primitive society" in classical Marxist sense in Chinese history, which is the thesis of Chapter 4, and (c) the investigation into minority nationality's society and history in the 1950s, and the writing of their "brief history." Third, the disseminating level, which mainly takes the form of construction of nationality/ethnology museums to spread the officially sanctioned legitimate knowledge to educate the public and facilitate academic research on non-Han cultures. More importantly, I devote one Chapter 6 to focusing on one Zhuang minority nationality scholar Huang Xianfan's collaboration with the state, his resistance, and his overall difficult position in China's ethnopolitics before and after 1949. As this book reveals, the deep reason for the conflict between Huang's local/ethnic nationalist sentiments and the greater nationalism for modern China, i.e., the "super-nation" lay in the semantic and conceptual ambiguity of the Chinese term *minzu*—race, nation, nationality, ethnic minority group, etc., and the lack of agreement on which "*minzu*" should be the appropriate focus of one's loyalty.²⁴

At each of the abovementioned three levels, there are interplays of multiple actors, which I will track. For instance, while acknowledging that the minorities' image was built in China as an "other" to promote Han Chinese identity and socialist ideology, China itself is an "other" for Western scholars and visitors. In the Epilogue, I show how it was Western tourists, not only domestic Chinese tourists, who first contributed to the exoticization and commercialization of the Chinese minority culture.²⁵ While the "mechanisms," as discussed above, do not work alone, power is also "a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression."²⁶ What is more important is not just networks but Foucault's emphasis on the "positive" aspect of power: "the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power," and "it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces knowledge."²⁷ It is true that in China, the knowledge about minority nationalities produced by the state, scholars, and curators is a curious mixture of official propaganda, rigid historical periodization, empirical knowledge, serious inquiries, and visual pleasures.

I suggest that in the socialist cultural production practice of the PRC, the boundary between high culture and mass culture has been blurred,

for in every field, from historical writing and ethnological surveying to museum building, we will see how the elite methodology, theory, and research results were transformed into popular discourse to appeal to ordinary readers and viewers. In addition, the CCP was skillful and resourceful enough in educating the masses from the 1930s through the 1960s in various scenarios.²⁸

Regarding the interplay of knowledge producers, my study shows that the relationship between scholars and the modern Chinese state was one of compliance, collaboration and conflict. Both the state and individual scholars shared the same goal of pursuing state-building and national integration, although there were scholarly disputes over whether the non-Han peoples in south China deserve carefully identified and classified. Historians and anthropologists who remained in mainland China after 1949 and pledged allegiance to the Communist government tried to retain their intellectual autonomy, and some were purged as "rightists." They were both employed and punished by the Communist state, which they served, criticized, and finally still served, but their own academic training and independent thinking never completely faded. Internally, there existed the tension between Han and non-Han scholars, which was exemplified by the life and career of a leading Zhuang nationality historian and ethnologist Huang Xianfan. With this case being incorporated, my analysis is not only about "the mechanisms of compliance," but also about intellectual resistance and dissent.²⁹

The relative autonomy, or at least internal strength of remaining independent and critical modern Chinese social scientists, or intellectuals as a broader social category, leads to another question that I attempt to tackle: what is the limit of the state? In her study of state-peasant relations in the PRC, Jean Oi distinguishes "between the power of the state to formulate policy and the ability of the state to implement it." The efficacy of the state was called into question because, in real life, the state was represented at the local by its *agents*—the local level cadres who are "also responsible for representing their collective's and their own interests."³⁰ Vivienne Shue, in her study, points out that "the state under Mao contained numerous shifting, cross-cutting, competitive (even hostile) centers of power," and "We had seen that the state almost never spoke to the people with one voice." She continues to assert that "Chinese social life was by no means fully penetrated or effectively dominated by the revolutionary communist values of the party..."³¹ Although Oi and Shue mainly focus on state-peasant relations in the

PRC, the same principle can be applied to the relationship between the state and intellectuals, as well as that between the state and minority leaders. Whenever the state loosens its grip, minority peoples return to their traditional practices and continue their own cultural practice, which, of course, are supposed to be "subsumed within an ultimately superior nationality identity if the nation is to achieve and maintain integrity."³² In recent years, Chinese people's outbound international tourism and nonofficial (officially monitored though) websites have provided new venues for minority nationality elites to search their cultural roots, inquire into their affinities with cultural groups ethnically close to them yet living outside of the Chinese territorial border, and share information.

In this study, I break the political dividing line of 1949, when the Nationalist government was toppled and replaced by the Communist-led PRC, to emphasize continuity and inheritance, for the historians and anthropologists under discussion in this study all lived under two governments, and none was trained in the beginning by the Communist party. Rather, anthropology, as with many other natural science and social science disciplines, took roots in Nationalist China, and from the Chinese anthropologists, we see entrenched intellectual influences of leading Anglo-American anthropologists of the twentieth century. The two regimes across the Taiwan Strait after 1949, as both manifestations of Chinese modernity, share many common approaches and similarities state-building and social mobilization.³³ To be sure, the democratized Taiwan has demonstrated more flexible and open-minded attitude toward in ethnic issue. Geographically, I focus on the studies and representations of southern Chinese minority groups such as the Miao, Buyi, Zhuang, Qiang, and Tujia rather than northern ethnic groups while also referring to the minorities and their (self-) representations in Taiwan.

Focusing on elite discourse, the relationship between elites and the state, as well as their internal competition and disputes, I believe it is the articulations of the knowledge elites, i.e., professional academicians and relatively well-informed and educated local people, which epitomized Chinese reflections on the complex issue of nation, nationality, ethnicity, identity, and self-positioning. As Anthony Smith points out, "it is the intellectuals—poets, musicians, painters, sculptors, novelists, historians, and archaeologists, playwrights, philologists, anthropologists and folklorists—who have proposed and elaborated the concepts and language of

the nation and nationalism.”³⁴ As with their European counterparts in the nineteenth century, Chinese “professional intellectuals” played the pivotal role of shaping nationalism.³⁵ While I do not deny the sincerity of the Chinese state in upholding the ideology of a unified Chinese nation, I also do not whitewash the pervasive Han-centric essentializing and primitivizing language and practice of non-Han peoples in contemporary Chinese culture. Yet, it is also conceivable that the modern Chinese imagination of a Han-centered multinationality Chinese nation is deeply rooted in an old Chinese perception of cultural China being surrounded by non-Chinese “barbarians” in the all four directions, a structure that had been entrenched in the late Shang Dynasty (ca. 1200–1045 BCE).³⁶ I also do not think, as stated above, resistance was the only mode of non-Han people’s relationship with the state, nor was compliance. In the last chapter, the epilogue, I incorporated my own fieldwork and observation of Miao shamanism, because it was up to date—conducted in 2016—and because the experience of visiting a Miao shaman, or village-level non-Han cultural elite was unique. I hope that this account may also help achieve a better understanding of contemporary Miao culture, its communal power relations, and the reach of the state at the grassroots level.

In general, this current study attempts to strike a balance between the state discourse, academic approaches, and grassroots-level practices concerning southern Chinese minorities and twentieth-century Chinese nationalisms.

NOTES

1. Timothy Cheek, *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.
2. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 38, 137, 151, 169.
3. C. Patterson Giersch, “From Subjects to Han: The Rise of Han as Identity in Nineteenth-Century Southwest China,” in Thomas S. Mullaney et al. eds., *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China’s Majority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 200.
4. Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 23.
5. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 9–10.

6. For China's need for state control and state mobilization of society in the twentieth century as a reaction against its political integration, see Tang Tsou, "Revolution, Reintegration, and Crisis in Communist China: A Framework of Analysis," in Ping-ti Ho and Tang Tsou eds., *China in Crisis: China's Heritage and the Communist Political System, Volume One, Book One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 277–347; for both the Nationalist government's and the Communist government's efforts to establish new domestic order under internal and international pressures, see S.N. Eisenstadt, "Tradition, Change, and Modernity: Reflections on the Chinese Experience," in Ping-ti Ho and Tang Tsou eds., *China in Crisis: China's Heritage and the Communist Political System, Volume One, Book Two* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 753–774.
7. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 7.
8. Arif Dirlik, "Modernism and Antimodernism in Mao Zedong's Marxism," in Arif Dirlik, Paul Healy, Nick Knight eds., *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), 59–80.
9. For national integration in India after independence, see Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991), 314–316.
10. Colin Mackerras, *China's Minority Cultures: Identities and Integrations Since 1912* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 7. This is one of the definitions of integration that Mackerras provides, which I think can apply to the discussion of this research. The other means mainly the patterns, manners, and degree of interaction and cohesiveness.
11. Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991), 252.
12. Stevan Harrel, "Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them," in Stevan Harrell ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 4.
13. In the Qing dynasty, the form of Miao people's submission to the central government and their acceptance of their position as imperial subjects was to pay tax grain and to be organized into the baojia system of local governance and mutual surveillance, see Guo Wu, "Accommodation and Conflict: The Incorporation of Miao Territory and Construction of Cultural Difference During the High Qing Era," *Frontiers of History in China*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2012): 242.
14. Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China*, 2.
15. For Miao communities' seeking of protection from the Kangxi Emperor of the early Qing, see Wu, "Accommodation and Conflict," 247. This

- study will discuss Miao scholars Shi Qigui's pursuit of the Miao people's political recognition from the Republican government and Zhuang scholars' push for a Zhuang local autonomy in the 1950s; for the Nepali-speaking minority group's application for the Indian government's official recognition, classification, and granting of special treatments, see Townsend Middleton, *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).
16. Jodi L. Weinstein, *Empire and Identity in Guizhou: Local Resistance to Qing Expansion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 2, 81.
 17. Andrew G. Walder, *Communists Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 5–6.
 18. Robert Culp and Eddy U, "Introduction," in Robert Culp, Eddy U, and Wen-Hsin Yeh eds., *Knowledge Acts in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 23.
 19. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, 47.
 20. *Ibid.*, 255.
 21. Vassos Argyrou, *Anthropology and the Will to Meaning: A Postcolonial Critique* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 5.
 22. Guo Xiaolin, *State and Ethnicity in China's Southwest* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 311–312.
 23. Doug AcAdam, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26–27, 232.
 24. James Leibold, "The Minzu Net: China's Fragmented National Form," in "Nations and Nationalism Roundtable Discussion on Chinese Nationalism and National Identity," *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2016): 425.
 25. For urban Han Chinese's image of an exotic Miao culture and the role of Chinese domestic tourism in reinforcing the stereotype, see Mary Rack, *Negotiating Cultural Identities in China: Ethnic Distinctions, Local Meaning* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 46–47. Based on my reading of their works, I believe most Western anthropologists who conduct fieldwork in southwest China ignored the detrimental influence and the nature of gazing on the "other" in international, mainly European and American, ethno-tourism activities in southwest China.
 26. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 61.
 27. *Ibid.*, 60–61.
 28. For recent studies of the CCP's education, or political indoctrination of peasants, soldiers, students, and petty urbanites with different forms, see Guo Wu, "Speaking Bitterness: Political Education in Land Reform and Military Training Under the CCP, 1947–1951," *The Chinese Historical*

- Review*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2014): 3–23; Guo Wu, “Recalling Bitterness: Historiography, Memory, and Myth in Maoist China,” *Twentieth Century China*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2014): 145–168; Guo Wu, “The Social Construction and Deconstruction of Evil Landlords in Contemporary Chinese Fiction, Art, and Collective Memory,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2013): 131–164; Feng Miao, “Education as a Continuation of Revolution: Everyday Life and the Communist Education of Petty Urbanites in 1930s China,” *Twentieth Century China*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2017): 138–160.
29. For the concepts “structures of compliance” and “mechanisms of control,” and their application in the study of PRC politics, see Timothy Cheek, “Introduction: The Making and Breaking of the Party-State in China,” in Timothy Cheek and Tony Saich eds., *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 3–19.
 30. Jean Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Political Economy of Village Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 3.
 31. Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 17.
 32. Susan McCarthy, *Communist Multi-culturalism: Ethnic Revival in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 25.
 33. Michael Szonyi, *Cold War Island: Quemoy on the Frontline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 250–252.
 34. Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 93.
 35. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 71.
 36. David N. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2000), 74–129.