

The Naxi and the Nationalities Question

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The fact of such a variety of families all existing at the same time is most spectacular both in Chinese and foreign society, contemporary or historical. [The Yongning Naxi] are like a colorful historical museum of the evolution of families in which one finds living fossils of ancient marriage formations and family structures.—Yan Ruxian, "A Living Fossil of the Family"

[Lewis Henry] Morgan used contemporary primitive tribal systems as a basis for inferences about the nature of ancient tribal systems. . . . This method is tantamount to making contemporary primitives into "living fossils."—Tong Enzheng, "Morgan's Model and the Study of Ancient Chinese Society"

Time was when ethnologists in the People's Republic of China had only two and a half theories of society and culture to work with: Stalin's theory of national identity, Morgan's theory of social evolution, and Engels' reworking of Morgan in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Since the mid-1980s, however, Chinese ethnologists have shown signs of increasing dissatisfaction with the limits imposed on their work by this narrow theoretical framework. Two of the sharpest critiques have appeared in the English and Chinese versions of the journal *Social Sciences in China* early in 1989. In "Ethnic Identification and Its Theoretical Significance," Huang Shupin (1989), a member of one of China's two fledgling anthropology departments, offers a critical reassessment of Stalin's criteria for determining national identity. Tong Enzheng's (1989) criticisms of Morgan-Engelsian evolutionist theory may seem old hat to Western readers, but although

The present version of this essay has benefitted from the advice of my cohorts in the dissertation reading group at the University of Chicago. I would also like to offer my special thanks to Shih Chuan-kang, whose direct knowledge of Mosuo society and the post-Liberation Chinese ethnological project has helped shape this work. Most of the views expressed and all of the mistakes are mine.

he does not directly address the issue of so-called "contemporary primitives" in China, the publication of his forthright critique reflects a significant shift away from state-sponsored dogmatism in Chinese social science theory. It is in the Hundred Flowers spirit present in the writings of these and other contemporary Chinese critical theorists that I make the following observations on the general theory and practice of ethnology in post-Liberation China, and on the particular case of the Naxi nationality of northwestern Yunnan Province.¹

THE NATIONALITIES QUESTION
AND THE CONSTITUTION OF ETHNOLOGY
IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Ethnology in contemporary China is generally regarded as an applied science, and its products to a large degree reflect the government's interest in resolving what it calls the "nationalities question" (*minzu wenti*). With a population that is 92 percent Han, the "nationalities question" in essence concerns problems with the economic, political, and social integration of the several dozen ethnic minorities that make up the remaining 8 percent of China's people. The government has correctly identified relative poverty as one of the principal features distinguishing the members of most minority ethnic groups from the average Han farmer. In an effort to redress this imbalance, laws and policies—especially in the area of education—have been designed to afford selective advantage to the members of China's fifty-five officially recognized "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*). At the same time, the government promotes a model of national culture that derives largely from the (Confucian) traditions of the Han majority, and in this respect minorities policy has been broadly assimilationist (see Borchigud, this volume).²

1. The term "post-Liberation" (*Jiefang hou*), referring to the period since the 1949 revolution, is borrowed from the Chinese vernacular in the People's Republic of China. Of the other readily available terms, "post-revolution" is ambiguous, and "post-1949" is not sufficiently imbued with political value.

2. An example of the government's desire to break down ethnic boundaries is the attention given in the late 1950s and the 1960s to determining the class structures of China's minority nationalities. In an attempt to simultaneously promote class struggle and de-emphasize ethnic differences, it was argued that in various nationalities the traditional elites (sometimes represented in aristocratic lineages) had more in common with each other than they did with the lower classes of their own societies. While crudely conceived power relations became the significant comparative dimension, culture was often treated almost incidentally.

Although the "nationalities question" in principle concerns the mutual integration of all nationalities, the discipline of "ethnology" (*minzuxue*)—translated alternatively as "nationalities studies"—has been charged exclusively with the study of China's *minority* nationalities. Before Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the study of contemporary Han society and culture was largely under the purview of political studies, economics, history, philosophy, and demography. In 1979, after nearly three decades in exile as "bourgeois sciences," sociology (*shehuixue*) and anthropology (*renleixue*) were rehabilitated—the former to extend the research being done on Han society, and the latter, in its sociocultural aspect, again focusing primarily on China's minority nationalities.³

The separation of majority and minority nationality studies into different academic disciplines is rooted in Marxist theory. Following Marx and Engels, Chinese Communist theorists consider different societies to be characterized by one of several broad types of "social formations," each representing a different stage in a more or less universal history of social evolution. In the study of China's nationalities the number of these stages has often been effectively reduced to two: modern or modernizing societies (as typically represented by the Han majority) and culturally and economically "backward" (*luohou*) or premodern societies (including almost all of China's minority nationalities).⁴ While the work of Marx and Engels centers on a critique of capitalism and includes analyses of societies characterized by slavery and feudalism (the stages thought to be the immediate predecessors of capitalism on the evolutionary scale), on the relatively rare occasions that they turned their attention to more "primitive" societies Marx and Engels drew heavily on the work of Lewis Henry Morgan.

Morgan's (1835 [1877]) theory of social evolution, outlining three main stages—savagery, barbarism, and civilization—has been the

3. The relationship between ethnology, anthropology, and sociology continues to be widely debated in China, and in the past several years the amount of cross-fertilization between these disciplines with regard to theory and methodology has been increasing. For a mid-1980s view of the revival of sociology and anthropology, see Rossi 1985.

4. I am overgeneralizing here, but only a little. The Hui—who, with the exception of their belief in Islam, are culturally quite similar to the Han—and the Koreans in China's northwest are the only significant examples of minority nationalities that are reckoned as advanced as the Han (see Gladney 1987).

cornerstone of Chinese ethnology for forty years. Apart from the study of contemporary minority nationalities, the chief application of Morgan's theory in China has been in the archaeology of the Chinese neolithic period. This dual usage serves to identify living peoples with cultures that existed four millennia ago and to distinguish them categorically from some of their more "advanced" contemporary neighbors (particularly the Han). As Stevan Harrell notes in his introduction to this volume, the hierarchy implicit in this constructed order is spatial as well as temporal: the Han represent the advanced core, whereas the backward minority nationalities exist at the geographical, social, and cultural periphery.

The view of non-Han peoples as "barbarians" (*man*, *yi*, or *fan*) which we usually associate with the bygone Imperial Chinese world system—what is today officially called "great Han chauvinism"—is not dead in China. Like Confucian moralism, Morganian evolutionism primitivizes and exoticizes peoples who would be reckoned at the "backward" end of the cultural evolutionary scale, and simultaneously absolves its proponents of moral culpability by proposing a natural order of culture.⁵ In some of its historical forms the Confucian view has even dehumanized peoples belonging to other cultural traditions. Dating to the Han dynasty, policies for governing barbarians—such as the "loose rein" and the "bone and stick"—called forth images of domestic animals in reference to peoples whose Chinese names were often rendered in characters using the dog or insect radical (Lien-sheng Yang 1968). In 1743, the first Han magistrate to govern the Naxi territory explained the Naxi request for naturalization by supposing that "they [were] attracted by the Imperial Benevolence as animals are attracted by sweet grass" (in Rock 1947:46).⁶ Contemporary statements exhorting minority peo-

5. While pointing out the similarity between these two theories, I would hasten to add that they are not so different from two other theories that enjoy great currency in the Western social sciences today, namely, "modernization" and "world system" theories. Confucian moralism, Morganian evolutionism, and modernization theory all hinge on what Nisbet (1969) calls the "metaphor of progress." While Wallerstein (1974) and other "world system" theorists have challenged the natural agency implied by this metaphor, for the most part their work affirms the social-typological categories established by evolutionist and neo-evolutionist theory.

6. This formulaic assessment ignores the obvious reason for the Naxi request. For the entire first quarter of the eighteenth century the Naxi were piggies-in-the-middle in a prolonged war between China and Tibet.

ples to follow directives from the center often appear to be underlain by similar presuppositions regarding the self-evident value of such programs as the Four Modernizations.

The contemporary Chinese ethnological literature contains numerous examples illustrating researchers' confidence in their ability to assess the general level of sociocultural development of the different minority nationalities and to identify factors that may be inhibiting evolutionary progress. In a 1987 article in *Minzu yanjiu* (Nationalities research), for example, Long Yuanwei suggests that "an inability to administer production," "closed-mindedness," and "objectionable customs" have retarded the development of a commodity economy in minority areas (1987:20–21).⁷ The institutionalized sexual relationship called *zouhun* (walking marriage) practiced by the so-called Yongning Naxi (whom I will call Mosuo, following self-identification practices) is an example of a custom that was for many years judged "objectionable."⁸ Residence in *zouhun* relationships is duolocal: the man visits the woman and may spend the night, but they maintain separate residences in their natal households, and any children born of the relationship are raised in their mother's house. In the post-Liberation ethnographic literature on the Mosuo, *zouhun* relationships are held to represent an evolutionary stage only slightly more advanced than that characterized by Morgan's hypothesized "consanguine family"—what Chinese authors call "group marriage." According to Cai Junsheng (1983) group marriage involves the collective marriage of the men belonging to one "gens" to the women of another. Because individual marriages are not recognized, the argument goes, paternity is always in question and descent is necessarily reckoned in the matriline. The model implies widespread, continuous, and nearly indiscriminate sexual promiscuity, and assumes that women are unaware of the

7. I discovered Long's article through a reference in Meng Xianfan's (1989) article on the development of Chinese ethnology in the 1980s. While Meng praises Long's work, I suspect others might regard some of Long's statements as racist. While "closed-mindedness" and "objectionable customs" might be viewed as surmountable psychological and cultural problems, "inability to administer" would seem to imply a basic mental deficiency. Such examples echo Stevan Harrell's point (Introduction, this volume) that China's minority nationalities are regarded as at once redeemably and irredeemably "backward."

8. Following the Oxford *Concise English-Chinese Chinese-English Dictionary*, I have translated the Chinese term *louxi* as "objectionable customs." The component *lou* also carries the meanings "ugly," "mean," "vulgar," "corrupt," and "undesirable."

significance of their menstrual cycles and that exclusive sexual relations between couples do not exist even for short periods of time.

During the 1960s and 1970s Mosuo couples maintaining *zouhun* relationships were pressed to enter into "formal marriage" relations and to establish joint households.⁹ While the ethnologists studying the Mosuo were not responsible for this unfortunate situation, clearly their work was used to validate a policy that derived primarily from an incensed Confucian moral sensibility.¹⁰

It is this same moral sensibility that lies behind the feminization of peripheral peoples and the sexual exoticization of non-Han women in Chinese popular culture. Stevan Harrell (this volume) and Norma Diamond (1988) discuss these issues at some length, so I will confine myself to two examples, each with its own implications. In the early 1980s I attended a performance of the Yunnan Province Nationalities Dance Troupe as a guest of the provincial governor. As anyone with knowledge of nationality dance forms who has attended one of these events will attest, the so-called "ethnic dances" performed by such groups usually bear little resemblance to the genuine dance traditions on which they are based: clothes become "costumes," and steps become slick "moves." This and countless similar examples illustrate two points. First, the government is highly selective in what aspects of nationality culture it chooses to promote. Clothes, dance, song, and "festivals" (i.e., annual rituals with the religious content largely extracted) are the principal subjects of government presentations of minority cultures. Second, even these relatively superficial markers of cultural difference are transformed (read: civilized) to appeal to Han aesthetic standards, including standards of barbarianness. What made this particular performance even more interesting, however, was the inclusion of an "Afro-Caribbean" dance, in which the solitary female dancer wore a lurid polka-dot dress, a rag kerchief, and

9. In recent years, this policy has been discontinued, with the result that many of the marriages formed during that period are being dissolved and fewer new ones created.

10. Even armed with Morganian theory, the government had a difficult time convincing the Yongning Naxi that their *zouhun* relationships represented uncivilized sexual promiscuity. The policy of encouraging relationships defined as "formal marriage" was therefore justified as a means to reduce the incidence of venereal disease among the Mosuo population. One cannot help but feel that if this really were the issue, antibiotics, condoms, and health education might have been more effective than attempting to fiddle with social organization.

blackface. Perhaps because the signs were so much closer to home, I found it particularly appalling. And indeed, while the erotic gyrations of this stylized Aunt Jemima were loudly applauded by most of the audience, they had the only person of African descent present, an American sitting next to me, in tears.

Among China's minorities, Dai women especially are often depicted as sexual exotics. One example is the printed curtain fabric, very popular in Kunming, that bears images of particularly large-breasted Dai women traipsing through the lush jungles of southern Yunnan. In recent years the popular image of Dai women's sexuality has even led some Han men to make a sport of covertly photographing the women as they bathe in the Lancang River outside the popular Dai tourist town of Jinghong in southern Yunnan. Even this obnoxious behavior sometimes has its funnier moments. Several years ago, an American anthropologist doing fieldwork in Xishuangbanna spotted a man with a telephoto lens photographing a Dai woman bather from the bushes by the river's edge. At first she simply watched the scene from a distance, but when the man kept creeping closer, she finally rushed over and yelled at him to go away. Looks of surprise were exchanged all around, and after some initial embarrassment, both he and the woman bather began to laugh. Ultimately it emerged that they were a married Bai couple visiting from another part of the province. Wanting some sexy pictures, they had purchased a set of Dai women's clothes and staged the whole thing.¹¹ The story illustrates both the pervasiveness of the image, and its power of appeal—as part of the culture of the modern multinational state—even to those whom it deprecates.

In an odd reversal of the evolutionist paradigm, customs deemed "primitive" are sometimes touted as having positive value. The idea expressed in certain sectors of contemporary American society that some non-Western peoples—otherwise reckoned as "primitives"—are more spiritually in tune with the "natural" world than are Westerners is a familiar example. Two similar examples from post-Liberation Chinese ethnology concern the Wa, whose relatively egalitarian social structure has earned them the bittersweet label of "primitive communists," and the Naxi, whose traditional custom of burning the dead (which is rarely practiced nowadays due to increasing sinicization) has been opportunistically raised as a positive example in the national

11. I am indebted to Heather Peters for this story.

push to maximize the land available for cultivation by promoting cremation in place of traditional Han burial practices.

By virtue of their structural position as advisors to government policymakers, Chinese ethnologists can play a central role in framing the discourse on the "nationalities question." For most of the post-Liberation period, however, their freedom to do so has been sharply circumscribed by the theoretical framework within which they are required to work. Especially as it reverberates with traditional Han concepts of ethnicity, the use of Morganian theory largely precludes the development of an appreciation of minority nationalities' history, culture, society, and politics in their own terms. The diverse ethnographic features of minority nationalities' cultures have generally been shoehorned into the Morgan-Engelsian framework, with facts at odds with preconceived images of particular social formations either ignored completely or explained away as the aberrant "survivals" of a hypothetical earlier stage. In a recent critique of post-Liberation ethnology, Meng Xianfan writes: "... people mistakenly thought that the aim of their research work was to prove the correctness of Morgan's theory..." (1989:206). But Meng misses the point. Insofar as that aim was largely defined for them by the state, it was precisely to prove the correctness of Morgan's theory.

ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION: THE NAXI CASE

After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the first task set to Chinese ethnologists was to help the government identify China's minority nationalities. Large-scale but somewhat superficial "investigations" (involving hundreds of ethnologists) extended through the 1950s, and the findings were published—first as "internal" (*neibu*) reports, and later publicly in revised editions—in more than three hundred volumes, divided into five main categories (ibid.:213).¹² A notable feature of books belonging to the "brief histories" (*jianshi*) category is that one rarely finds reference in them to either the dates when particular ethnic groups were granted nationality status, or the procedures followed and the per-

12. These are: (1) a general one-volume encyclopedia on minority nationalities; (2) brief histories (*jianshi*); (3) language summaries (*yuyan jianshi*); (4) descriptions of minority nationalities' autonomous areas (*zizhiqu gaikuang*); and (5) field reports on society and history (*shehui lishi diaocha baogao*).

sons involved in the decision-making process (but see Lin Yaohua 1987). Insofar as other significant dates and players in a nationality's past are generally noted and incorporated into these official histories, the omission of this material serves to mystify the concrete process of ethnic identification, giving the impression that the established ethnic categories are timeless, scientifically unimpeachable, and agreed upon by all (see Litzinger, this volume).

The official criteria used to classify nationalities in China are those outlined in Stalin's definition of a nation.¹³ To wit:

A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of people, based upon the common possession of four principal attributes, namely: a common *language*, a common *territory*, a common *economic life*, and a common *psychological make-up* manifesting itself in common special features of *national culture*. (Stalin 1950:8, my emphases)

In his essay on Yi history (this volume), Stevan Harrell argues that in fact Stalin's four criteria have "not [been] employed in any strict manner, but rather to confirm or legitimate distinctions for the most part already there in Chinese folk categories and in the work of scholars who wrote before Liberation." Harrell goes on to suggest that the ultimate basis for distinguishing nationalities in China has been the creation of nationality histories within which these criteria can be credibly situated. I believe that the category Naxi is, as Harrell suggests, a thing of the (Han) Chinese past, and that post-Liberation Chinese ethnologists have necessarily relied on Morgan's historicism to validate a formulation of Naxi identity allegedly based in Stalin's essentialist criteria. In actuality, Stalin's criteria alone are inadequate. Without the support of a Morganian reading of Naxi history, their use to define the category Naxi appears highly problematic.

One of the few nationalities in whom "traces" of several of Morgan's major stages are held to exist concurrently, the Naxi are the example par excellence of the application of Morganian theory in Chinese ethnology today. The Chinese government considers the

13. There is considerable slippage between Stalin's concept of a nation and the modern Chinese concept of a nationality. I will not address the issue here, but interested readers may consult Cai Fuyou (1987).

people referred to here as Naxi and Mosuo as comprising a single nationality—the Naxi. However, not all so-labelled Naxi agree with the label or with the idea that they are members of the same group. Specifically, the peoples centered in the Yongning basin and Lugu Lake regions of Yunnan Province's Ninglang County call themselves Mosuo, Hli-khin, or Nari, and distinguish themselves from the much larger group—living mostly west and south of the Jinsha River (in Lijiang, Zhongdian, and Weixi counties)¹⁴—whom they call Naxi.¹⁵ Members of the larger western group, on the other hand, call themselves Naxi and refer to the people of Yongning as Luxi or Mosuo.¹⁶ (See map 6, p. 302.)

In the pre-Liberation Chinese literature and in contemporary Taiwanese publications (e.g., Li Lin-ts'an 1984) these groups are collectively called Mosuo or Moxie. Perhaps the earliest mention of the Mosuo is in the T'ang dynasty *Man shu* (Book of the southern barbarians 1961:39), and the name appears to have been in common use by the Han and possibly other neighboring ethnic groups since at least the thirteenth century (Rock 1947). In working among the peoples of the Lijiang plain, the Austrian-American botanist-turned-ethnographer Joseph Rock used the locally self-ascribed term Naxhi (Naxi) in his publications dating from the 1920s. Whether he was the first to make this transition is not clear. What is clear is that the name Mosuo has disappeared completely from the official post-Liberation vocabulary. Thought to originate with the Han people, it was considered pejorative by some Naxi, although the people of the Yongning region prefer it, and are called by that name by most of their neighbors. Hence, whereas the name Naxi in reference to the current Naxi nationality is a recent addition to the Chinese vocabulary, it encompasses the same semantic field as the earlier term Mosuo.

Post-Liberation Chinese ethnologists distinguish between eastern and western branches of the Naxi nationality, corresponding to the

14. This division by county is intended as a rough generalization only. While perhaps 95 percent of the Naxi live in the four counties mentioned, there are sizeable populations in neighboring counties as well (see PAC 1987).

15. According to Shih Chuan-Kang (personal communication, 1990), while the people of Yongning ordinarily refer to themselves as Nari or Hli-khin (=Luxi?) when speaking in their own language (Naru), they use the term Mosuo when speaking Mandarin and prefer to be called by that term by other peoples.

16. The name Luxi means "people of Lu" and refers to the area of Lugu Lake.

groups living in the two regions outlined above.¹⁷ Whereas the people of the Yongning–Lugu Lake (eastern) region are called by the geographically descriptive term Yongning Naxi (cf. Zhan et al. 1980; Yan and Song 1983), the larger western group is usually referred to simply as Naxi, rather than Lijiang Naxi or some other term using a geographical locator.¹⁸ Since the groups presumably are equal in the eyes of the scientist, we may wonder on what basis one branch has come to represent, in linguistic terms, a marked category. To avoid confusion, I refer to the two groups by their self-ascribed names, Mosuo and Naxi, and to both groups together (as in the official category Naxi) by the term Naxizu (the Naxi nationality).

Stalin's Criteria Applied to the Naxizu

This section provides a brief overview of the Naxizu in light of Stalin's criteria. The assessment is my own, and in making it I have tried to preserve the meanings present in Stalin's original discussion of the "National Question" (1935 [1913]), the source most often cited by contemporary Chinese ethnologists.

A Common Territory. The Naxi and the Mosuo inhabit contiguous regions along the western border between Yunnan and Sichuan. Within the area occupied by both groups, they are the numerically dominant populations, and so may be said to meet the requirement of possessing a common territory.¹⁹

17. The term "branch" (*fenzhi*) has no official standing in the classification of China's minority nationalities. Its use appears to represent ethnologists' attempts to unofficially denote perceived subcategories of particular nationalities. The Mosuo ethnologist He Xuewen (1991) takes a bolder stand when he publishes using the term Mosuo *ren* (Mosuo people), in place of the accepted Yongning Naxi. My thanks to Stevan Harrell for pointing me to He's essay. Whether it signifies the beginning of a terminology shift in Chinese writings on the Mosuo remains to be seen.

18. The use of geographical locators to distinguish subclasses of general barbarian types dates to the earliest Chinese periods. In the Han dynasty, all barbarians were lumped into four categories associated with the cardinal directions. Later, these were refined as the Han created names for the distant places into which they expanded. In the literature of the Republican period, for example, one finds the term Liangshan Lolo used to designate a branch of Lolo (now called Yi) centered in the Liang Mountains of southern Sichuan. Insofar as the place names used derive from Han geography, this traditional practice is especially problematic where nationality self-identification is concerned.

19. For a county-by-county breakdown of the Naxi population, see PAC (1987).

A Common Language. Contemporary Chinese linguists divide the Naxizu language into two "dialects" (*fangyan*): an "eastern dialect" (*dongbu fangyan*), spoken by the Yongning Naxi (i.e., the Mosuo), and a "western dialect" (*xibu fangyan*) spoken by the Naxi. According to He and Jiang (1985), grammatical differences are not great, but the phonological and lexical differences between the two dialects are quite marked.

Indeed, most Naxi and Mosuo with whom I have discussed the question agree that although the two dialects are more similar to each other than either is to any of the other Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the region, they are mutually unintelligible. As Norma Diamond argues regarding the Miao in her chapter in this volume, these "dialects" could by some standards pass as separate languages. While I have little experience with the eastern dialect, I can attest to considerable variation within the western dialect alone. Naxi living on the Lijiang plain, the type locale for the western dialect as defined by contemporary Chinese linguists, find the language spoken in northern Lijiang County (which is within the western dialect area) almost as unintelligible as the eastern dialect. Moreover, the language spoken in the town of Lijiang itself differs somewhat from that spoken in the villages on the surrounding plain. The differences in the latter case, however, are principally lexical and not grammatical or phonemic. In particular, urban Naxi vocabulary includes a greater proportion of what are at root Chinese loan words, although marked differences in pronunciation often make recognition difficult for the inexperienced listener.²⁰

A Common Economy. In "Marxism and the National and Colonial Question" (1935 [1913]:7), it is clear that by a "common economy" Stalin means an integrated economic community defined on the basis of trade under a unified administration. He makes no reference to the central Marxist concepts of the means and relations of production.²¹ Both the Naxi and the Mosuo have been under nominal Chi-

20. The use of Chinese loan words in Lijiang Naxi speech derives in large part from the presence of significant numbers of Han people in the town of Lijiang dating back to the Ming dynasty. Han artisans and scholars were welcomed by the royal Mu lineage, whose position in Naxi society at that time was a product of their close relations with the Chinese authorities.

21. See Lin (1987) for a discussion of problems encountered in applying the criterion of "common economy" to the minority nationalities of southwest China during the identification project of the 1950s.

nese rule since the Yuan dynasty (1280–1368), when the Mongols established hereditary "native chiefs" (*tusi*) to govern in each area. The Naxi *tusi* (the head of the Mu lineage) was replaced by a regular Chinese magistrate in 1723, while the Mosuo *tusiship* lasted until 1956. Trade between the two regions certainly existed throughout this period, but it was not limited to direct exchange. Occupying a middle-altitude zone between the Chinese lowlands and the Tibetan plateau, both the Naxi and the Mosuo participated actively in long-distance trade that extended from Lhasa to Chengdu to Dali and involved several ethnic groups.

If we expand Stalin's explicit notion of "economy" to include the principal productive activities in which people engage, then the economies of the Naxi and the Mosuo are broadly similar. In both areas we find some combination of agriculture and pastoralism, supplemented by specialized work in trades such as mule-skinning, carpentry, basket-making, and coppersmithing. The kind of agriculture practiced, as well as the relative proportion of agricultural and pastoral production in a given location, varies greatly with altitude and the availability of surface water. In general, the warmer lowlands, especially along the Jinsha River, are devoted to high-yield summer paddy, winter wheat, and semitropical fruit crops; middle altitude areas (ca. 2,600–3,100m) produce wheat, barley, maize (all mostly unirrigated), and temperate fruits; while the highlands yield only potatoes, turnips, and fairly meager grain crops. In general, the place of herding activities within local economies varies inversely with agricultural productivity: people in the highlands raise more horses, cattle, sheep, and goats than the lowlanders do.

Because the relative weight of agricultural and pastoral activities varies tremendously with village location, it is impossible to say with precision what "the" Naxizu economy is. More difficult yet is the question of how we might use an image of the Naxizu economy—however we conceptualize it—as a distinguishing feature of the Naxi nationality. There are members of the Han, Bai, Lisu, Pumi, Tibetan, Hui, and Yi nationalities, all living in and adjacent to the Naxi-Mosuo homeland, whose "economies," measured in these terms, are virtually identical to those of their Naxi and Mosuo neighbors.

A still broader Marxian sense of economy emphasizes the relations (or social organization) of production. In this respect the Naxi and Mosuo economies are radically different—so different, in fact, that the Naxi appear much more similar to the local Bai, Han, and Lisu

peoples than they do to the Mosuo. The explanation for this falls more properly under the heading of "a common national culture."

A Common National Culture. This is clearly the area of sharpest distinction between the Naxi and the Mosuo. Since Rock's and Li Lin-ts'an's pioneering studies on Naxi society and religion, researchers have recognized marked differences between the social organization, descent systems, marriage and residence patterns, and religious practices of the Naxi and the Mosuo. Traditional Naxi society is organized on the basis of exogamous patrilineal descent groups called "bones" (*coq-o*), within which major property—land, livestock and houses—is controlled and inherited by men. Patrilineal cross-cousin marriage, resulting in a pattern of delayed exchange between local "bones" whose members are related as "flesh" (*nal*) kin, represents the ideal form of marriage in Naxi society.²² With rare exception, residence after marriage is virilocal.

By our present understanding—based partly on Rock, but mostly on the post-Liberation Chinese ethnographies—Mosuo social organization is more complicated.²³ Among the aristocracy (*sipi*, *sipei*), including the *tusi* family and its collateral relatives, descent and inheritance have traditionally been reckoned in the patriline, and marriage is generally virilocal. Among the commoner (*dzeka*, *zeka*) and slave (*wer*, *e*) classes, descent and inheritance are generally reckoned in the matriline, and residence is duolocal. The most common form of institutionalized sexual relationship between men and women of the two lower classes is the *zouhun* described above. Patrilineal cross-cousin marriage is neither idealized nor practiced by any sector of Mosuo society (Shih Chuan-kang, personal communication, 1990).²⁴

22. Naxi refer to the practice of patrilineal cross-cousin marriage by the phrase *eggv zzeimej ggaiq* (the mother's brother [also *eggju*] possesses/holds the sister's daughter). The phrase implies that a girl's mother's brother has the right to bring her into his household to marry his son. In actuality, he isn't always allowed to exercise that "right." That is to say, while a girl's mother's brother may look upon his right as "prescribed," her father can sometimes "prefer" to ignore it and arrange her marriage elsewhere. Despite the fact that such marriages are illegal in post-Liberation China, they remain common among the Naxi in the more remote districts of Lijiang and Zhongdian counties.

23. Rock was the last non-Chinese to work in Yongning. Since Liberation the area has been closed to foreign researchers, although Stevan Harrell informs me that the Lugu Lake district has recently been opened to tourism.

24. According to Shih Chuan-kang (personal communication, 1990), the Mosuo have no indigenous term for the institution of "walking marriage," although they

The differences between the residence patterns, descent systems, and hierarchical structures of Naxi and Mosuo societies have obvious economic implications. The Naxi have no "slave" class (although some historians have suggested that they did have at some time prior to the seventeenth century [Guo Dalie, personal communication, 1986]) and they organize everyday productive activities on the basis of the patrilocal household. The Mosuo economy, by contrast, involves relations of production that run generally along matrilineal lines and which (prior to 1956, when the last *tusi* was deposed) sometimes included slave labor.²⁵

This is not the place to begin an involved discussion on Mosuo social organization. Several Chinese ethnologists have been studying the problems of Mosuo household structure, matrilineal descent, and "matriarchal" power (Zhan et al. 1980; Zhan 1982; Yan 1982; Yan and Song 1983; Cheng 1986), but the overwhelming influence of Morganian theory in their accounts limits our ability to generate alternative interpretations of the rich ethnographic data they contain. In the present context we are concerned more with the question of how Chinese ethnologists have reconciled the obvious cultural differences between the Naxi and the Mosuo to validate the overarching category Naxizu now recognized by the state.

CONSTRUCTING NAXI HISTORY

In the 1940s both Joseph Rock (1947 and 1948) and the prominent Naxi historian Fang Guoyu (1944) developed the thesis that the Naxi are descended from the proto-Qiang people of the Sichuan-Gansu-

have a phrase that expresses its meaning and use the term *zouhun* when speaking Mandarin. In the post-Liberation ethnographic literature this practice is usually called *azhu hunyin* (friend marriage), but Shih notes that the Mosuo term *arju* (transliterated in Mandarin as *azhu*) is used to denote "friend" in numerous other contexts as well, and he argues against regarding the institution as a kind of "marriage."

25. The terms "class," "slave," "commoner," and "aristocrat" are part of the vocabulary of post-Liberation ethnographies of the Mosuo. I use them here uncritically and without precise definition, for that is the way they appear in the ethnographies in question. For the most part, the ethnologists responsible for these writings appear to assume that everybody knows what these things are. In fact, in post-Liberation social science literature as a whole, the meanings of these elastic categories are anything but self-evident.

Qinghai border region.²⁶ They based this thesis on the similarity between Naxi and Qiang ritual forms, as well as on the Naxi written and oral traditions claiming migration from the mountain grasslands in the north.²⁷ After Liberation, Fang continued to promote this view of ancient Naxi history, and it is now widely accepted within the Chinese ethnological community.

According to Chinese historical sources (in Rock 1947), the Mosuo (i.e., the Naxizu) arrived in northwestern Yunnan around 24 C.E., settling first in the Yongning area. Later, during the T'ang dynasty (618–907), they are said to have extended their influence to the Lijiang plain, after displacing a people recorded as the Pu. This history accords well with the Naxi's own records of their past, which consist primarily of genealogies contained in pictographic ritual texts. The genealogies claim that four brothers, each the apical ancestor of one of the four recognized Naxi patrilineages, arrived in the broader Lijiang area after crossing the Jinsha River from the north, in the general direction of Yongning and Muli.

In asserting the common identity of the Naxi and Mosuo, contemporary Chinese ethnologists point to these recorded myths and argue that the Naxi in Lijiang are a derivative branch of the Yongning Naxi (i.e., the Mosuo). This claim is supported by an interpretation of Naxizu social history that, following Morgan, regards the patrilineal descent system of the Naxi as a natural evolution of the system of matrilineal descent found among the Mosuo lower classes.²⁸ The transformation is thought to have begun with establishment of the *tusi* system in both regions. However, due to their relative isolation from the more advanced Han, the argument goes, the process of

26. The authorship of this thesis seems to have been centered between Rock and Fang. Although Fang's article appeared earlier (1944), Rock (1948:8–9) claims that in reading the Reverend Thomas Torrence's essay on Qiang religion (1920) he had suspected a connection between the Qiang and the Naxi, wrote Torrence, and received confirming information in a letter from Torrence dated March 20, 1933. Although Rock makes no mention of Fang's article, his insistence on detailing his correspondence with Torrence suggests that he was on the defensive. I want to thank Shih Chuan-kang for pointing Fang's article out to me.

27. Rock (1963a:xxxviii) says that the Tibetan name for the Naxi, ljang, is identical to that for the modern Qiang in Sichuan. Lawrence Epstein, a Tibetologist familiar with the Khams dialect of Tibetan, has expressed doubts to me on this claim.

28. Given this interpretation of Naxizu history, the semantic marking evident in the category Yongning Naxi (see above) makes even less sense. One would expect the group held to represent the primordial state to be labeled with the unmarked term.

evolution has been slower among the Mosuo, affecting mainly the aristocratic lineage, whose ties to the Chinese government have been strongest. In the Lijiang area, on the other hand, the origin of socioeconomic conditions favorable to the rapid development of a patrilineal system is located in the early replacement of the *tusi* by a Han magistrate and the direct integration of the Naxi into the Chinese state. Note that in both cases it is the Chinese government, the civilizing center, that is cast as the agent of change.

Following a different logic, Anthony Jackson's study of Naxi religion (1979) arrives at this same conclusion. Where Chinese ethnologists see the transformation from matrilineal to patrilineal descent as a natural process of social evolution, Jackson sees it as resulting from a policy of forced sinicization. Writing at a time when fieldwork in China was not possible and post-Liberation Chinese ethnographic literature was unavailable in the West, Jackson had to rely almost exclusively on the earlier work of Joseph Rock and a Soviet ethnologist, A. M. Reshetov, whose work on the Mosuo appears to have consisted of translations from Chinese investigation reports of the 1950s.²⁹ In his early days in Lijiang, where he lived off and on between 1924 and 1949, Rock subscribed to the prevailing Han notion that the Na-khi (Naxizu) were a unified people. Rock specialized in Naxi religion, and it was in reference to their differing religious practices that he later came to distinguish between the Na-khi of Lijiang and the people he called the Mo-so (or Hli-khin) "tribe" of Yongning (Rock 1947). In his visits to Yongning, Rock noted that the indigenous Mosuo ritual specialists did not possess the pictographic texts used by the Naxi, nor did they perform the Naxi Sacrifice to Heaven (Mee Biuq) ritual.

Banned by the government since 1949, the Sacrifice to Heaven was traditionally performed collectively by the members of local patrilineal "bones" at the time of the lunar new year. Focussing on the opposition between "bone" and "flesh" relations, the ritual's charter is located in the Naxi myth of anthropogenesis, which relates the first

29. Reshetov studied in China between 1958 and 1961, but according to his Chinese advisor, Chen Yongling, did not travel to the Yongning area (Shih Chuan-kang, personal communication, 1990). I have never seen a copy of Reshetov's book, cited in Jackson (1979) as *Matrilineal Organization Among the Na-khi [Mo-so]* (Moscow, 1964). From the phrasing of the quotations translated into English in Jackson (1979), Shih believes the material to have come directly from the Chinese investigation reports.

instance of marriage, including a dispute over the mother's brother's right to arrange his sister's daughter's marriage. Naxi *dobbaqs* (ritual specialists) regard the Sacrifice to Heaven as among the most ancient of Naxi rituals, but more importantly for our purposes, it serves as an important element in Naxi self-identification.³⁰ According to the myth, it is the performance of the Sacrifice to Heaven that distinguishes the Naxi from other ethnic groups in the region. The Naxi are quite conscious of this, and so every performance of the ritual serves to re-establish ethnic boundaries.³¹

Apparently influenced by his reading of Reshetov, Jackson (1975 and 1979) argues to the contrary that the Sacrifice to Heaven is a recent creation. In his view, it (and indeed the whole complex of *dobbaq* rituals and ritual texts) originated among the Naxi at a time when their historical transition from matriliney to patriliney required ideological support. He interprets the high status of the mother's brother in Naxi mythology and society as a trace of the matrilineal period.³²

30. Some empirical evidence supports claims for the antiquity of the Sacrifice to Heaven. First, as the botanist in Rock initially noted, many of the plant and animal species recorded in the Sacrifice to Heaven ritual texts are not local to the present Naxi homeland, but are found further north, in the area from which the Naxi claim to have emigrated two thousand years ago. Second, the Sacrifice to Heaven belongs to a general class of Naxi periodic rituals called "Rituals to obtain *neeq* and *oq*, the male and female elements of reproduction" (*neeq xiu oq xiu bbei*), which is distinguished from the other two major classes—funerary and demon-eviction rituals—by a relative absence of introduced Buddhist symbolism.

31. While the Mosuo are not among the several groups distinguished in the Naxi myth of anthropogenesis, neither do they perform the Sacrifice to Heaven. The idea held by some Naxi that the performance of this ritual is a determining factor in Naxi identity is reflected in the historical relations between local groups in the Mingyin-Baoshan region of northern Lijiang County. While the vast majority of the lineages in that area do perform the ritual, a few do not, and for this reason members of the other lineages have traditionally refused to intermarry with them. While all of these people are now included in the category Naxi, the nonperforming lineages were considered something less than Naxi in the recent past.

32. While I agree that patrilineal cross-cousin marriage and the high status of the mother's brother are important features of Naxi kinship organization, I disagree with Jackson's conclusions. Based on discussions with *dobbaqs*, my own analyses of Naxi kinship, ritual, and cosmology (McKhann 1988, 1989, and 1992) suggest that these features can be adequately explained within the patrilineal framework as it is currently constituted and without recourse to a theory of matrilineal-patrilineal transformation.

Jackson points to the relatively high Naxi suicide rate as another indication of the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal organization. He suggests that with the

In his preliminary study of Mosuo society, Shih Chuan-kang (1985) pays scant attention to the history of patrilinearity among the Mosuo aristocracy. Ignoring Jackson's (1975 and 1979) "forced sinicization" theory and studiously avoiding comment on the evolutionist cast of post-Liberation Chinese interpretation (Zhan et al 1980, Yan and Song 1983), he nevertheless regards patrilocal marriage and patrilineal kinship as adopted practices, linked first to the establishment of the *tusi* system and later emulated by wealthier households from the lower social classes as a kind of "noble fashion" (1985:23).³³

In yet another interpretation, G. Prunner (1969), following Rock, considers the Na-khi (Naxi) and Hli-khin (Mosuo) as separate yet closely related peoples. On the basis of kinship terminology found in the Naxi ritual texts, Prunner argues that the Naxi have always been patrilineal and, in light of the fact that none of the other Tibeto-Burman groups in the region possess similar traits, treats skeptically the claim that the Mosuo are matrilineal. As regards Naxizu religion, Prunner asserts the exact opposite of Jackson, suggesting that the Hli-khin (Mosuo) "have lost the knowledge of pictographic writing" (1969:102). Thus, the impression conveyed is that the Naxi have better preserved some of the characteristic features of a primordial Naxi-Mosuo culture, while it is the Mosuo who have changed.

We are left, then, with the none-too-clear picture that the Naxi and the Mosuo are either distinct peoples, or that they are the same people, but that one or the other of them has gained or lost something over time. Never having done ethnographic research in the Yongning-Lugu Lake region, I am hesitant to comment on the "scientific" validity of the category Naxizu. Nevertheless, I would

establishment of a Han magistrate in the county seat of Lijiang in 1723, the Naxi were forced to follow the Han practice of arranged marriages and give up the system of "free love" reflected in contemporary Mosuo *zouhun* relationships. The transition from "free love" to arranged marriage is argued to have had a negative psychological impact on the Naxi, many of whom have chosen to commit suicide with their lovers rather than accept their parents' choice of a spouse. Considering the lack of historical evidence that Han practices were imposed in this way, and that patrilineal cross-cousin marriage did not exist in Naxi society prior to their incorporation into the Chinese state, this position is untenable. There is certainly nothing "free" about patrilineal cross-cousin marriages, some of which are arranged even before the candidates are born.

33. Shih's doctoral dissertation (1993) contains a more complete treatment of this issue.

like in conclusion to offer some observations on the differing social histories of the Naxi and the Mosuo as possible subjects for future research.

First, although a generic relationship clearly exists between them, I think there is a danger in relying on the Naxi and Mosuo migration legends as a means to reconstructing history.³⁴ The problem with using these genealogical road maps is in deciding which exit to take. In both Naxi and Mosuo culture, unilineal descent is the dominant metaphor of history, a metaphor which at its limits can and does subsume the universe. In the Naxi myth of anthropogenesis, for example, not only are all Naxi related as the descendants of four brothers, but the Tibetans, Naxi, and Bai (or in some versions, the Han) as separate peoples are also regarded as elder, middle, and younger brothers, and even Earth and Heaven sleep together as husband and wife. The Mosuo myth of anthropogenesis is a little different. Today the Mosuo recognize four matrilineal clans, but claim that there were originally six. In some versions the four apical ancestors of these clans are also regarded as brothers: Mosuo, Tibetan, Naxi, and Han (Shih Chuan-kang, personal communication, 1990). While a comparison of these myths and the rituals in which they occur may improve our understanding of Naxi and Mosuo conceptions of self-identity, I do not think they will get us very far toward writing an "objective" history of the Naxizu.

The relatively recent history of the Naxi and Mosuo is better documented and presents another set of problems. One subject requiring further attention is the question of Tibetan influence in the Mosuo area. Just when the Naxi were coming under direct Chinese rule, the Mosuo converted in large numbers to the dGelugs-pa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The dGelugs-pa monastery in Yongning is to this day populated largely by Mosuo monks, and Shih Chuan-kang (personal communication, 1988) estimates that prior to 1949 as

34. Both sets of legends emphasize migration from the north, recorded as lengthy series of place names leading to present locations. Ethnologists who have attempted to trace these routes have positively identified a few locations in southern Sichuan, but none farther north (He Fayuan, personal communication, 1988). As in the use of genealogical reckoning in contemporary Naxi and Mosuo societies, historical realities quickly give way to mythical ideals. In Naxi society, for example, the disjuncture between the realpolitik of relations between existing patrilineal "bones" and the idealized relations between the four primordial patrilineal clans is nearly absolute: all Naxi can name their clans, but no one can tell you how they know, what it means, or why.

much as one-quarter of the male Mosuo population may have been living the religious life.³⁵ Conceivably, the large-scale movement of Mosuo men into Tibetan monastic institutions may have produced changes in Mosuo household structure, inheritance, and descent. In the fragment quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Yan Ruxian marvels at the structural diversity of Yongning Naxi (i.e., Mosuo) households, calling it "spectacular both in Chinese and foreign society" (1982:61). But as studies by M. C. Goldstein (1971), B. N. Aziz (1978), and N. E. Levine (1988) indicate, diversity in household structure is hardly uncommon in Tibetan society. Moreover, such variation appears to be especially true for the Kham region, which abuts Naxizu territory. Li An-che notes in one of the few descriptions we have of Kham society:

Being bilateral in descent (either matrilineal or patrilineal), the Tibetans are not particular whether the male or the female inherits the family line. When girls pass a certain age, say 17, they are free either to marry formally or to accept informally a lover without entering into matrimonial ties. In the latter case, when babies are born they belong to the mother and are taken as such by the society. (Li An-che 1947:291)

Here and elsewhere, Li's discussion of Kham Tibetan society bears a strong resemblance to current accounts of the Mosuo, perhaps even more so if we consider the possibility that the Mosuo "class" system described by contemporary Chinese ethnologists may in some way be related to the system of manors and hereditary land and tax relations in Tibet.

The Mosuo bear other similarities to the Nuosu and Pumi who live alongside them in Yunnan's Ninglang Yizu Autonomous County, where Yongning is located. Before Liberation, the Nuosu (formerly Lolo, now officially Yi) had a similar tripartite class system of aristocrats, commoners, and slaves. The Nuosu prohibited sexual relations (and marriage) between aristocrats and the two lower classes—leading some to dub it a "caste" system (Pollard 1921)—and while the

35. There are several Karma-pa lamaseries in the Lijiang area, but they never attracted the local population to nearly the degree that the dGelugs-pa lamaseries did in the Yongning-Lugu Lake region, and were continuously forced to recruit new members from Tibet.

Mosuo did not enforce so strict a separation, the division was nonetheless marked by different rules for reckoning the lineage affiliation of children born of aristocrat-lower class sexual relations, depending on the sex and class affiliations of the parents and on the sex of the child (Shih 1985).

Recent fieldwork by Stevan Harrell suggests an even stronger cultural affinity between the Mosuo and neighboring Pumi (Prmi) groups, with whom they regularly intermarry. In the Yongning area, Pumi religious practices, dress and architectural styles, and patterns of institutionalized sexual relations—including *zouhun*—are virtually identical to those of the Mosuo. Said one self-identified Pumi woman to Harrell (who had taken her as Mosuo): “Pumi, Mosuo . . . it’s all the same” (Harrell 1993a:30).

By pointing out these similarities I emphatically do not mean to imply a need to run out and reclassify the Mosuo as Tibetans, Nuosu, Yi, or Pumi. I am simply suggesting that a variety of plausible alternatives to the Morganian theory of Mosuo-Naxi history can be constructed on the basis of the limited historical and ethnographic evidence that we now possess.³⁶ Although the complexity of Tibeto-Burman kinship systems and their implications for social and political organization has long been recognized (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1949] and Leach 1954), our models for understanding them remain inadequate. Roughly equal cases can be made for the positions that Mosuo and Naxi forms of social organization are: (1) essentially unrelated; (2) related as contemporary structural variants (in the manner of Leach 1954); or (3) stand with respect to each other as successive historical transformations. Most of all, we need to look more closely at indigenous Mosuo and Naxi models of cosmos and society, and at the same time divorce our questions

36. Superficially at least, *zouhun* relationships among the Mosuo appear similar to some patterns of sexual-residential relationships found in the West, namely, “visiting” relations in the Caribbean and “matrifocal” households among urban African Americans in the United States. Usually these Western institutions are associated with what are considered “modern” socioeconomic conditions, a well-developed system of class relations in particular. Similarly, the Nayar of Kerala, who had in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a family and marriage system very similar to that reported for the Mosuo, were also part of a society with complex class relations (Gough 1961). Because Naxi relationships are also linked to class distinctions (see below), perhaps a better explanation might be found by pursuing this tack and abandoning the evolutionary paradigm.

about structure and history from the antiquated propositions of Morganian evolutionism.

Finally, to return to the politics of the “nationalities question,” there is an important point to be made about the way the Mosuo regard their own history and identity. Members of the former Mosuo *tusi* lineage claim direct patrilineal descent from a Mongol officer said to have remained behind after Qubilai’s armies swept the area at the founding of the Yuan dynasty. Accordingly, some Chinese ethnologists believe the reckoning of patrilineal descent within the Mosuo aristocratic class to be a Mongol invention. The Naxi have similar legends relating their chiefly Mu lineage to the Mongols, but it is the Mosuo villages just north of Yongning in southern Sichuan that have capitalized on their alleged Mongol ancestry. Virtually indistinguishable in terms of language, custom, and so forth from the Mosuo in Yunnan, these people made a successful bid for Mongol identity. The fact that this group has been officially recognized as Mongols raises a number of issues concerning the identification of minority nationalities in post-Liberation China. First, provincial politics is clearly a factor: groups that “objectively” appear identical may be differently classified on either side of a provincial border. Second, although unrecognized in the Stalinist formula, the case suggests that people’s subjective views of identity may be effectively expressed in certain circumstances. Most Mosuo with whom I have spoken strongly object to being classified as Naxi. In Yunnan, this objection has not made any difference. In Sichuan, which also has people classified as Naxi, it has.³⁷ Perhaps the Mosuo of Yunnan should exploit their “living fossil” status and try to get themselves reclassified with their ancient brethren, the Qiang.

In a well-worn passage, Marx reminds us that “Men make their own history, but . . . they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves” (in McLellan 1977:300). The “circumstances” under which Chinese ethnologists labored during the busy period of nationalities identification in the late 1950s included two countervailing influences. The first was political pressure from a young

37. Whether these Mosuo first attempted to get themselves classified as a separate nationality, I am not sure. One suspects they were fortunate to have plausible (if tenuous) arguments linking them to one of the established minority nationality categories (i.e., Mongol).

government whose ideological program called for the immediate emphasis of class relations and the ultimate de-emphasis of ethnic distinctions. Equally important was the received weight of ethnic categories long ascribed to, validated, and revalidated in the Chinese dynastic histories and local gazetteers. The Mosuo, now Naxizu, constitute one such category.

The History of the History of the Yi

Stevan Harrell

YI AS AN ETHNIC CATEGORY

The question "Who are the Yi?" was much more puzzling to me, a neophyte in Yi studies, than it seemed to have been to most Chinese writing on the subject either before or after 1949. The Chinese, in fact, be they scholars or ordinary southwestern peasants, seem to have always known who the Yi were or, before 1949, who the Lolo were.¹ But to me the answer was not an entirely obvious one. There was, to begin with, considerable diversity within that group of approximately six and a half million people defined as Yi by the Chinese People's Government.² For example, I knew that they spoke languages that, while fairly closely related to each other, were by no stretch of the aural imagination mutually comprehensible. *Yiyu jianzhi* (A short account of Yi languages) gives figures of anywhere from 20 to 42 percent shared vocabulary between the Northern Dialect standard (Xide accent) and examples of the other five regional dialects of Yi (Chen Shilin et al. 1984:178). The fact that, after studying the Nuosu language of Liangshan (Northern Dialect, in the official classification), I could in fact converse in that tongue, but could understand nothing of the Lipuo (Central Yi) language of north-central Yunnan, confirmed in practice what I had learned in theory. And when the Lipuo people told me they could understand Lisu (the language of a non-Yi ethnic group) pretty well, but could make no sense of Nuosu,³ I began to wonder how the Chinese government structured its ethnic categories.

1. There have been a number of names for these people in the Chinese language. Before 1949, the most common were Luoluo (usually spelled Lolo in Western languages), Manzi 蛮子, Yiren 夷人, and Yijia 夷家. Western and Chinese authors alike tell us that the people themselves much preferred the latter two names, considering the former two to be insulting (Lietard 1913:1; Lin 1961:2; Mueller 1913:39).

2. For a general account of the official position, see Guojia Minwei (1984:296-318).

3. This is confirmed by Bradley (1979) who places Lipuo (he spells it Lipo) and Lisu in the Central Loloish subgroup, but Nuosu in the Northern Loloish subgroup. See also my article "Linguistics and Hegemony in China" (1993).