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The Nation and Its Logic in Early Twentieth-Century China

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Article abstract

Of the radical transformations that have been associated with modern China, one of the most significant, historians would agree, is the permeation of the convictions — often with the aid of concepts borrowed from Europe via Japan — that Chinese people are inherently a nation (*min zu*) and that China is, by extension, a nation-state (*guo jia*). But as many have noted, the process of adopting and internalizing such convictions was far from linear. Taking as its point of departure the contested nature of the nationalist discourse and drawing particular attention to the border province of Guangxi, this paper seeks not only to identify the logic and fundamental tensions inherent in the construction of the nation (especially from the perspective of a border region) but also to explain why such tensions have continued to plague present-day China.

The Nation and Its Logic in Early Twentieth-Century China*

LEO K. SHIN

Abstract

Of the radical transformations that have been associated with modern China, one of the most significant, historians would agree, is the permeation of the convictions — often with the aid of concepts borrowed from Europe via Japan — that Chinese people are inherently a nation (min zu) and that China is, by extension, a nation-state (guo jia). But as many have noted, the process of adopting and internalizing such convictions was far from linear. Taking as its point of departure the contested nature of the nationalist discourse and drawing particular attention to the border province of Guangxi, this paper seeks not only to identify the logic and fundamental tensions inherent in the construction of the nation (especially from the perspective of a border region) but also to explain why such tensions have continued to plague present-day China.

Résumé

Les historiens s'entendent pour dire que parmi les transformations radicales associées à la Chine moderne, l'une des plus importantes est la perméabilité des convictions — souvent avec l'aide des concepts empruntés à l'Europe par le biais du Japon — que les Chinois forment de façon intrinsèque une nation (min zu) et que, par extension, la Chine est un État-nation (guo jia). Toutefois, comme plusieurs l'ont souligné, le processus d'adoption et d'internalisation de telles convictions était loin d'être linéaire. En prenant comme point de départ la nature contestée du discours nationaliste et en accordant une attention particulière à la province frontalière de Guangxi, cet article tente non seulement d'identifier la logique et les tensions fondamentales inhérentes à la construction de la nation (en particulier du point de vue d'une région frontalière), mais aussi d'expliquer pourquoi de telles tensions ont continué de tourmenter la Chine actuelle.

* I would like to acknowledge the encouragement of my colleague and co-editor Steven Lee, as well as the many useful suggestions offered by the two anonymous reviewers. All remaining errors are mine.

In the concluding section of *Special Education in Guangxi*, a report published in 1940, Liu Jie (1890–1968), a scholar, administrator, and — above all — educator, decided to offer one last pitch for what must have seemed at times a losing cause. Whereas the population of the “special” (*te zhong*) *min zu* in the province of Guangxi was no more than four hundred thousand, Liu observed that in the rest of southwest China it was “no less than thirty million.” Not only did the population of such special *min zu* almost certainly exceed that of the Manchus, the Mongols, the Hui, and the Tibetans combined, according to Liu Jie, in terms of “history and blood” (*li shi ji xue xi*), but the southwestern *min zu* had also long maintained close ties with the people of China proper. Given that the country was in “a critical juncture in which the struggle for national survival [*min zu sheng cun*] is hanging by a hair,” and given that the southwestern region was strategically bordered by British- and French-controlled territories, Liu argued that “it is our utmost responsibility” to determine, with regard to such special *min zu*, “how to educate, how to liberate, and how to achieve assimilation and cooperation.”¹

What is noteworthy about this passionate plea by Liu Jie is in part his insistence that the leaders of China must invest in a more thorough understanding of the borderland population. As a result of its geography, Liu observed, the southwestern region had long been home to a variety of *zhong zu* (a racially-charged label which Liu often used interchangeably with *min zu*). Not only did people there speak a wide range of languages, but they had also managed to preserve countless ancient customs and institutions. Even though such borderland *zhong zu* (or *min zu*) were closely related to the people living in China proper, much of what was known about the former, according to Liu Jie, had come from reports by missionaries and other foreign travellers. In Liu’s view, not only would a careful examination of the issues concerning the various *zhong zu* help avert some of the political and social tumults that had plagued China, but it would also allow the country to rid itself of its dependence on foreign informants. More to the point, given that the peoples of southwest China had long maintained close relationships with the various *min zu* immediately beyond the Chinese border, it would be to the country’s great advantage, Liu argued, if the government could conduct a systematic investigation of the conditions in this particular border region of China.²

What may now also strike a reader is Liu Jie’s optimism. For Liu and many nationalists in the first half of the twentieth century, in order for China to unite and to withstand foreign aggression, its borderland population must — and should — in time be “liberated” (*jie fang*), “enlightened” (*kai hua*), and “assim-

1 Liu Jie [Liu Xifan], *Guangxi te zhong jiao yu* [*Special education in Guangxi*] ([Guilin]: Guangxi Sheng zheng fu bian yi wei yuan hui, 1940), 73–4.

2 Ibid.

ilated” (*tong hua*). This confidence in the transformability of the people is expressed, even more explicitly, in one of Liu Jie’s earlier works. There Liu compiled an extensive list of what he considered to be the “strengths” (*you dian*) and weaknesses (*ruo dian*) of the special *min zu* in Guangxi. While they are “hard-working and simple,” as well as “obedient and daring,” Liu Jie observed, they lack education and seem to have no desire to improve their lot. But such shortcomings were, in Liu’s view, surmountable. Given their strong physique and simple nature, he assured his reader, the peoples in question — provided they were given proper guidance — can certainly “improve at a speed that meets no bound.”³

What is most noteworthy about the report by Liu Jie, at least for our purpose, is no doubt his commitment to the notion of a Chinese nation. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the term *min zu* (which has been used variously to render the concepts of “nation,” “race,” “nationality,” etc.) had acquired multiple, if sometimes incompatible, meanings. Of the numerous formulations, the most influential (though hardly the most rigorous) was probably the one offered by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925). While there are in China “several million Mongols, more than a million Manchus, several million Tibetans, and a million some Muslim Turks,” so observed the “father” of the Republic in his *Three Principles of the People*, “as far as the majority is concerned, the four hundred million Chinese [*Zhongguo ren*] can all be considered Han people, with shared blood ties, a common spoken and written language, common religions, and common customs — all in all, [members] of a single *min zu*.” If Sun Yat-sen appeared at times more passionate than persuasive, the same can be said also of Liu Jie. Just as Sun the revolutionary was eager to minimize the differences between the five officially recognized *min zu* (that is, the Han, the Manchus, the Mongols, the Hui, and the Tibetans), Liu the local schoolmaster was keen to emphasize the national ties — however he understood them — between the Han and the various non-Han peoples in southwest China.⁴

Liu Jie was of course not alone in trying to make sense of the Chinese nation. During the Republican period (1912–1949), much attention was given by the governing and educated elites to theorizing the unity and diversity of the peoples of China. Although it is tempting to dismiss much of such effort as pseudo-scientific or — worse — racist, it is useful to remind ourselves that the construction of the modern nation-state was almost always accompanied by the constitution of a newly conceived and energized citizenry. Just as China (and

3 Liu Xifan, *Ling biao ji man* [*Notes on the non-Han of Guangxi*] (Shanghai: Shang wu yin shu guan, 1935 [1934]), 279-83.

4 For the quotation, see Sun Yat-sen, “*Min zu zhu yi*” [“Principle of the nation”], in *Sun Zhongshan quan ji* [*Collected writings of Sun Yat-sen*], ed., Guangdong Sheng she hui ke xue yuan li shi yan jiu shi et al., vol. 9 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1986), 188.

the province of Guangxi, the focus here) was increasingly drawn into the world order of the early twentieth century, it also became necessary for its political and intellectual leaders to introduce new conceptual frameworks to organize its diverse population. The story told here is not one of success or failure in nation-building; rather, it is about the logic of the nation, and it is about the tensions inherent in its construction. More specifically, it is about how the governing and educated elites from a particular (border) region of China would come to terms with the interconnected concepts of *guo jia* (“nation-state”), *she hui* (“society”), and *min zu* (nation/race) — which had, by the early twentieth century, become key elements in political and intellectual discourses — and it is about how they would seek to resolve the intrinsic tensions in the project of nation-building.⁵

Reconstructing Guangxi

Of the challenges faced by the political, military, and intellectual leaders of early-twentieth-century China, one of the most vexing was the resolution of the tension between regionalist interests and nationalist ambition. For much of the Republican period, it should be mentioned, China was in effect under the rule of regional militarists. For many a military leader, the rhetoric of national unity and national revival was nothing more than — well — rhetoric. Although such militarists might recognize the benefits for the warring factions to unite, politics, at all levels and often played out in its most virulent forms, had time and again made it difficult (if not impossible) for them to come together. Even in the case of the leaders of the province of Guangxi, who had by the early 1930s developed a reputation for their pragmatic and progressive politics, one could observe the tension between their decision to focus on regional affairs and their frequent appeals to nationalistic sentiment. The case of Guangxi might not be “typical,” but it does offer a convenient vantage point to witness the uneasy relationship between the region and the nation in early twentieth-century China.⁶

To be sure, a major source of tensions in the Republican period had to do with political control. Ever since the fall of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and the ensuing demise of Yuan Shikai (1856–1916) — who, as the dictatorial pres-

5 Much has been written on the subject of nationalism in China. For a collection of especially stimulating essays, see Jonathan Unger, ed., *Chinese Nationalism* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996). Prasenjit Duara and John Fitzgerald have developed and published their arguments in expanded forms; see Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

6 This is a central theme in Diana Lary, *Region and Nation: The Kwangsi Clique in Chinese Politics, 1925–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

ident of the newly formed Republic, briefly held centralized rule — political, military, and intellectual leaders of all stripes had fought hard, sometimes literally, to defend their visions for China. Although the arguments for regional autonomy (and confederacy as a political model) would in time yield to that for national unity, the road to unification was far from straightforward. Not only were regional military leaders reluctant to give up control of their armies, but even when some agreed to join the government led by the Nationalist Party of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, mistrusts among the parties would confound even the best of intentions. In the case of the leaders of Guangxi, notably Li Zongren (1890–1969), Bai Chongxi (1893–1966), and other members of the so-called “Guangxi Clique,” although they did take part in the Northern Expedition of 1926–1928 (which was intended to unite China under the rule of the Nationalist Party), their failure to secure power for themselves at the national stage meant that, at the end, they had to once again settle for control at the provincial level.⁷

Political control was not the only source of tension. In Guangxi, as in other regions in Republican-period China, military leaders had long learned to couch their decisions and actions in nationalist terms. Even when such regional militarists — who derived their power primarily from their tight control of local armies — had no intention to yield command to the Nationalist-led government, they had found it useful to project the image that they were at least in support of the goal of national unification. To some extent, this façade of cooperation had worked well. Just as regional military leaders were able to gain popular support by passing themselves off as nationalists, the government under Chiang Kai-shek was able to see its position strengthened by claiming to have achieved a degree of unity. But this arrangement was not without its hurdles. The Nationalist government would from time to time find it difficult to reconcile the needs of individual regions with that of the nation as a whole. Regional military leaders would also often find it challenging to explain the precise relationships between actions at the local level and the goals of unification and revival at the national stage.

In the case of Guangxi, this tension between the region and the nation could clearly be observed through the rationalization and implementation of the so-called program of reconstruction. As I have noted, following their failure to secure power in the aftermath of the Northern Expedition, military leaders from Guangxi — ambitious as they might have been — were forced to settle once again in the southern province. There, rather than openly plotting a comeback

7 For the early debates concerning the political model for China, see Prasenjit Duara, “Provincial Narratives of the Nation: Centralism and Federalism in Modern China,” in Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 177-204. For the military and political entanglements between the leaders from Guangxi and the Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-shek, see Lary, *Region and Nation*, esp. chaps. 6 and 7.

against the Nationalist-led government, they decided to focus their attention on transforming what had been until then a politically marginal region. In time, leaders of the province would implement a wide range of reforms, many of which were, by 1934, promulgated in a document entitled “Reconstruction Program of Guangxi” (“*Guangxi jian she gang ling*”). In the document (a revised and expanded version of which appeared in 1935), not only did the leaders offer a detailed list of areas in which specific reforms were necessary, but they also provided an explicit rationale for the reconstruction program. While one must resist the temptation of treating such official documents as politically transparent, as I will show, an examination of the rationalization and implementation of the reconstruction program in 1930s Guangxi does allow us to better understand the challenges military leaders faced in sorting out the relationships between the region and the nation.⁸

What is especially interesting about the reconstruction program is its dual orientation. On the one hand, most of the reforms in question were clearly regional in focus. This emphasis should perhaps come as no surprise, especially when it was stated explicitly in the preamble of the program document that the guiding principle for the reconstruction efforts would be “the policy of three-fold self-reliance” (*san zi zheng ce*). As a course of actions, what this meant was that: in military terms, Guangxi should promote in local society a high level of militarization so that the province could achieve the goal of self-defense (*zi wei*); in political terms, Guangxi should promote, within its boundary, a high degree of administrative centralization so that it could more effectively realize the goal of self-government (*zi zhi*); and, in economic terms, the province should implement a variety of policies to stimulate production so that the region could achieve self-sufficiency (*zi ji*). Among the particular measures recommended in the program were the reorganization of local militia; the institution of a budgeting, accounting, and auditing system; as well as the promotion of agriculture-related industrialization. It is worth noting that, even though the language of reconstruction (*jian she*) and self-reliance employed by the leaders of Guangxi was evidently borrowed from Sun Yat-sen and other nationalists, the fundamental orientation of the reconstruction program was to strengthen the region.⁹

8 The program of reconstruction is the subject of Eugene William Levich, *The Kwangsi Way in Kuomintang China, 1931-1939* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993). But see also Lary, *Region and Nation*, chap. 9; Zhong Wendian, ed., *20 shi ji 30 nian dai di Guangxi [Guangxi during the 1930s]* (Guilin: Guangxi shi fan da xue chu ban she, 1993); and Zhu Hongyuan, *Cong bian luan dao jun sheng: Guangxi di chu qi xian dai hua, 1860-1937 [From rebellion to militarism: the first stage of modernization in Guangxi, 1860-1937]* (Taipei: Zhong yang yan jiu yuan jin dai shi yan jiu suo, 1995). For a translation of the 1935 version of the “*Guangxi jian she gang ling*,” see Levich, *Kwangsi Way*, 261-4.

9 For contemporary accounts of the so-called principle of three-fold self-reliance and the program of reconstruction, see, for example, Di 5 lu jun zong zheng xun chu, ed., *San zi zheng ce ji Guangxi jian she gang ling [The “reconstruction program of Guangxi” of the principle of*

On the other hand, whether it was out of personal conviction or out of strategic consideration (or both), leaders of Guangxi did find it important to appeal to nationalist sentiment. This could be observed perhaps most clearly in the preamble of the program document. At the beginning of the final (1935) version, not only was it stated explicitly that the “Three Principles of the People,” as formulated by Sun Yat-sen, should be considered “the only fitting principles” for both the reconstruction of Guangxi and the revival of China, but it was also noted that, given the political conditions of the country, the reconstruction of Guangxi must, in the end, be guided by the goals of national liberation (*min zu jie fang*) and national independence (*min zu du li*). Although many of the twenty-seven areas of reforms identified by the program document were fairly specific in their regional focus, under the category of “cultural reconstruction,” the leaders of Guangxi did obviously deem it beneficial to include “elevating national consciousness” (*ti gao min zu yi shi*) and “developing a progressive national culture” (*chuang zao qian jin de min zu wen hua*) as two explicitly-stated goals.

As a widely-touted slogan, “Reconstruct Guangxi; Revitalize China” (*jian she Guangxi; fu xing Zhongguo*) was appealing in part because it was easy to understand and in part because it was ambiguous. For some, the catch-phrase neatly captured their conviction that the province of Guangxi should serve as a — if not *the* — model for reconstruction for the country as a whole; for others, the slogan was an acknowledgment that transforming Guangxi was just one of many steps China must take in order to renew itself. The differences might be subtle, but the implications for those invested in the governing of the province were significant. Important to note, as well, are the inherent ambiguities and tensions found in the “Program for Reconstruction.” Although it was acknowledged at the time that the design of the Guangxi program had been guided by Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People” and that one of the main objectives of the program was to “elevate national consciousness,” most of the policy directives associated with the reconstruction efforts were, in fact, shaped by the imperative of provincial self-sufficiency. And even though, by the 1930s, the governing and educated elites of Guangxi might not regard the dual goals of elevating national consciousness and promoting provincial self-sufficiency as incompatible, it was probably not by accident that both the slogan and the program they produced were decidedly ambiguous about the precise relationships between provincial reconstruction, on the one hand, and national renewal, on the other.

three-fold self-reliance] ([Nanning]: Di 5 lu jun zong zheng xun chu, 1938); Bai Chongxi, *San zi zheng ce zai Guangxi* [*The principle of three-fold self-reliance in Guangxi*] (Nanning: Min tuan zhou kan she, 1938); and Bai Chongxi, *San zi zheng ce de li lun yu shi jian* [*The theory and practice of the principle of three-fold self-reliance*] ([Nanning?]: Quan mian zhan zhou kan she, 1938).

(Trans)Forming Society

In addition to resolving the tensions between the province and the nation, another major challenge for the leaders of Guangxi was transforming “a heap of loose sand” that was supposedly the people of China (as the latter were often compared with) into members of a cohesive “society” (*she hui*). The idea of an extended community was of course not new in China (as Bryna Goodman has pointed out, in the early twentieth century, the strengthening of regional or native-place identities in Chinese society facilitated the emergence of a national identity), but the notion that a *she hui*—a modern neologism that first appeared as *shakai* in Japanese during the Meiji period (1852–1912) — was an almost organic entity that could be dissected, analyzed, and transformed was a novel one. According to the governing and educated elites of China at the time, in order for the country to be strong, the constituents of its *she hui* must be clearly identified; how well such elements were organized must also be systematically examined using the “scientific” tools of the newly enshrined field of sociology (*qun xue* or *she hui xue*). From the point of view of the leaders of Guangxi, it was important for the government to be able to identify the organizing pattern of the local *she hui*. It was necessary as well — for the sake of its own legitimacy — for it to show that it was capable of transforming the constituents into members of a unified society.¹⁰

That the idea of *she hui* was a focus of much attention can clearly be seen in the writings found in a type of semi-official publication known as *di fang zhi* (“local gazetteers”). As a repository of a wide variety of information (from history and geography, on the one hand, to local customs and biographies, on the other), *di fang zhi*, as a genre, had a long history in China. Although the general organization of local gazetteers had remained relatively constant, by the 1930s, if not earlier, it was necessary for *di fang zhi* to include a specific section on “society” (it was in 1932 that the government of Guangxi formally set up a bureau to oversee the compilation of gazetteers within the province). As the editors of the *Gazetteer of Yongning County* (1937) explained, “It has been the convention of gazetteers to include a section on ‘customs’ [*feng su*]. Now that in modern times a new approach to history has placed a particular emphasis on

10 For an analysis of the relationships between regional and national identities, see Bryna Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853–1937* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995). For a concise discussion of the constructedness of “society,” see Michael Tsin, *Nation, Governance, and Modernity in China: Canton, 1900–1927* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 5–9; see also Joshua A. Fogel and Peter G. Zarrow, eds., *Imagining the People: Chinese Intellectuals and the Concept of Citizenship, 1890–1920* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1997). For the creation and circulation of neologisms, see Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity — China, 1900–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

the variety of affairs of the masses, ‘customs’ is no longer a sufficient category. Hence, [we have created] a section on ‘society.’” What is noteworthy is that while many of the local gazetteers from the Republican period included the new section, editors of the *di fang zhi* evidently still found it useful to explain to their readers what, precisely, a *she hui* was. For the editors of the 1936 edition of the gazetteer of Rong County (located in north central Guangxi), for example, a “society” was more than just a coming together of the masses (*ren qun*); for them, members of a *she hui* not only shared some common traits of social life (*sheng huo*), but also maintained among themselves a range of relationships (*guan xi*). From the perspective of the editors, to make sense of the society of Rong County, it was important to pay attention to the structure and composition of the population in question. It was also necessary to take note of the specific commonalities and relationships (in the forms of customs, languages, professional associations, charitable organizations, etc.) that were the characteristics of a *she hui*.¹¹

For the governing and educated elites of early twentieth-century China (among whom we may count the editors of local gazetteers), “society” was not an abstract concept but a relatively concrete entity whose components could, in many cases, be quantified, analyzed, and improved upon. To demonstrate their “scientific” approach to the study of *she hui*, leaders of Guangxi in the 1930s were especially interested in collecting and working with quantitative data. Such exercises of quantification allowed them to claim a degree of control, and they enabled the leaders to quantify potential improvements. Consider, once again, the 1937 gazetteer of Yongning County (located in present-day southwest Guangxi). Under the chapters on “society” were an assortment of topics and categories, ranging from “customs,” “languages,” and “religions,” on the one hand, to “business organizations,” “slaughter houses,” and “theatres,” on the other. What is noteworthy is not just the eclecticism of the categories included (which was no doubt a reflection of the novelty of the idea of *she hui*), but also the efforts on the part of the editors to quantify social phenomenon. On the topic of “prostitutes” (*chang ji*), for example, the editors found it useful to offer a detailed tabulation of the number of local sex workers (by age, place of origin, as well as type of service). They also considered it necessary to include information on the cases of sexually transmitted disease among those who found themselves in such unfortunate circumstances.¹²

11 For the significance of *she hui* as an organizing concept in early twentieth-century China, see Mo Bingkui, et al., eds., *Yongning Xian zhi* [Gazetteer of Yongning County] (reprint, Taipei: Cheng wen chu ban she, 1975 [1937]), *fan li* [notes on convention], 14; Long Tairen, et al., eds., *Rong Xian zhi* [Gazetteer of Rong County] (reprint, Taipei: Cheng wen chu ban she, 1975 [1936]), 2, 27 (55 in modern pagination).

12 Chapters 40 and 41 (out of 44 chapters) in *Yongning Xian zhi* are devoted to *she hui*; on prostitutes, see 41, 79-84 (1667-72 in modern pagination).

Efforts to render society “quantifiable” were evidently not limited to the local level. Consider, for instance, the 1936 edition of the *Statistical Yearbook of Guangxi*. This yearbook, which was compiled by the Bureau of Statistics first set up by the provincial government in 1932, was in many ways a prime example of the type of “social science” publications that were especially in vogue during the Republican period. Divided into twenty-one sections (each one covering a major topic, such as land, climate, population, etc.) and spanning close to 1,200 pages, the yearbook was, fundamentally, an ambitious attempt on the part of the leaders of Guangxi to demonstrate their control of the province. Although the yearbook was not organized in such a way that placed emphasis on “society” as a statistical category (“population,” “education,” “religion,” “hygiene,” among other topics that were sometimes grouped under “society” in local gazetteers were all accorded individual entries), it included a section on “social problems” (*she hui wen ti*). Despite its title, the section on “social problems” was actually made up of two parts, the first covering what may be referred to as public facilities and organizations (such as parks, orphanages, senior homes, etc.), while the second focused on problems such as suicides, gambling, prostitution, thefts, etc. In both cases, much effort was put into collecting and presenting statistical information. In the section on “suicides,” for example, not only did the compilers find it useful to organize the data by gender and geographic area, but they also deemed it important to tabulate the information according to the occupation of the victims, as well as their reasons for committing suicides.¹³

Underlying such efforts to render society quantifiable was the conviction among the governing and educated elites that a *she hui* was not simply a static entity but one whose problems had to be identified, analyzed, and eventually rectified. From the point of view of the leaders of Guangxi, the problems of the province were at least three-fold. First, although much effort had been made by the authorities to transform customs that were considered “unenlightened” (of which arranged marriage was apparently one), progress in getting rid of such practices had been slow. Second, even though much emphasis had been placed on the need to form a cohesive society, the fact that there was much disparity in Guangxi — between urban and rural, and between members of different classes and occupations, for example — had made it difficult to transform theory into reality. Third, even if there was present among the leaders of the province a strong desire for change, the fact that there had not been in China a branch of study that focused specifically on *she*

13 For “social problems,” see Guangxi Sheng tong ji ju, ed., *Guangxi nian jian* [Statistical yearbook of Guangxi] (reprint, Taipei: Wen hai chu ban she, 1999 [1936]), 3, 1051-84; for suicides, see 3, 1078-80.

hui had rendered even the basic task of problem identification doubly challenging.¹⁴

Despite such challenges, a major goal of the leaders of Guangxi was to transform society. In general, two distinct strategies were followed. On the one hand, efforts were made to ban practices that were considered detrimental to the well-being and cohesion of the *she hui*. This effort was evident when, over the course of the 1930s, attempts were made by the provincial government to prohibit the cultivation, sale, and use of opium (although, as Diana Lary has noted, Guangxi continued to derive a significant portion of its revenue from the transit tax it imposed on the opium trade). This effort was also evident when, during the same period, attempts were made to outlaw gambling. In both cases, it should be noted, even though there were occasional successes, the overall objectives were never achieved. On the other hand, attempts were made by the leaders of Guangxi to promote practices that were deemed beneficial to society. This strategy could be observed, for example, in the efforts on the part of the government to promote sports (especially martial arts) as worthy pastimes. This strategy could also be seen in various official programs to expand health services and to encourage the practice of hygiene. But while these initiatives by the leaders of Guangxi were in some ways successful, it was probably their education programs that had the most impact. Over the course of the 1930s, the government played an important role in expanding educational opportunities for school-age children in the province, under the rubric of what was known as the “Foundation Program for National Education” (“*Guo min ji chu jiao yu*”). It was also instrumental in providing basic education to adult learners who had until then not been able to attend school.¹⁵

Efforts to promote the idea of a *she hui* in early-twentieth-century China necessarily entailed a degree of tension. On the one hand, it was in the interest of the governing and educated elites to insist that the people of China were not just “a pile of loose sand” but did share significant cultural and social bonds. On the other hand, it was a key mission of the political and intellectual leaders

14 On the difficulties of transforming customs, see, for example, Mo Bingkui, et al., *Yongning Xian zhi*, 40, 5-6 (1593-4 in modern pagination); on disparity, see the comments on 40, 1 (1589 in modern pagination). On the absence of a tradition of studying “society,” see Long Tairen et al., *Rong Xian zhi*, 2, 27 (55 in modern pagination).

15 For the prohibition of opium use and gambling, see Zhong Wendian, *20 shi ji 30 nian dai di Guangxi*, 94-6. For the dependence of Guangxi on the opium trade, see Lary, *Region and Nation*, 190-1. For the promotion of sports and hygiene, see Zhong Wendian, *20 shi ji 30 nian dai*, 839-42; Lai Yanyu, ed., *Guangxi yi lan* [Survey of Guangxi] (Nanning: Guangxi yin shua chang, 1935), especially the section “Social Life” (*she hui*); Mo Bingkui et al., *Yongning Xian zhi*, 41, 31-3 (1619-21 in modern pagination); Lary, *Region and Nation*, 183. For the significance of sports, see Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). For education, see Zhong Wendian, *20 shi ji 30 nian dai*, 683-717.

of the time to vigorously *promote* social cohesion. While a full-scale analysis of the different — and sometimes conflicting — visions for this cohesive society is beyond the scope of this paper, it is useful to remember that such visions often shared a similar logic. At the core of the construction of the *she hui* were the efforts on the part of the governing and educated elites to identify and organize its constituents. Such endeavors, as it has been observed, were advanced not only through official censuses but also through various “social surveys” conducted by academic institutions. Integral to the project of molding the *she hui* was also the urge on the part of political and intellectual leaders to identify social problems and to devise solutions. Hence, opium-smoking, gambling, and prostitution had to be strictly controlled (while sports and hygiene be promoted). Additionally, “anti-modern” customs (such as arranged marriage) must also be gradually phased out. The key to constructing a “society,” it was widely agreed, was education. People should be encouraged to consider themselves members of an inherently cohesive *she hui*. They should — ironically — be frequently instructed to adhere to its norms.¹⁶

Configuring The Nation(s)

For the governing and educated elites of the early twentieth century, in addition to resolving the tensions between the region and the nation and fashioning a cohesive “society,” an even more fundamental challenge was to make sense of China’s diverse population. Although it was clearly in the interest of the political and intellectual leaders to underscore the common bonds shared by the peoples of China, it was obvious to all that the Chinese *she hui*, complex as it was (and should be), was far from homogenous. And though much effort was devoted by the elites (throughout the country, but especially those who came from Guangxi and other border provinces) to identifying and organizing the peoples of China based on language, religion, occupation, and other cultural and social markers, most would come to consider *min zu* (as well as *zhong zu*) as a key organizing concept.¹⁷

Of the early twentieth-century writings dedicated to the subject, among the most illuminating are no doubt those devoted to the history of China’s *min zu*. Although such works — such as Li Chi’s *The Formation of the Chinese People* (1928, in English), Zhang Qiyun’s *Record of the Chinese Nation* (*Zhongguo min zu zhi*, 1933), and four versions of *History of the Chinese Nation* (*Zhongguo min zu shi*) by, respectively, Wang Tongling (1928), Lü Simian (1934), Song Wenbing (1935), and Lin Huixiang (1936) — differ in their spe-

16 For samples of government regulations, see Guangxi Zhuangzu Zizhiqu di fang zhi bian zuan wei yuan hui, ed., *Guangxi tong zhi: min su zhi* [*General gazetteer of Guangxi: social customs*] (Nanning: Guangxi ren min chu ban she, 1992), 427-30.

17 One of the indications of the growing significance of the term *min zu* was its frequent appearances in the local gazetteers (usually under the section of “society”) published during the Republican period.

cific approaches, they also share much in common. Not only did they appear just as China was increasingly under foreign threats, but their analyses were also, to varying degrees, informed by the “scientific” theories that had been introduced to the country from the West. Consider, for example, *The Formation of the Chinese People* by Li Chi (Li Ji; 1896–1979), a Harvard-trained anthropologist-turned-archaeologist. An archaic work in many ways (suffice to say that skull and body measurements make up the core of its data), Li’s book was (and is) important because it is emblematic of the “scientific” approach intellectuals in early-twentieth-century China brought to the task of explaining who, after all, the Chinese were. What is noteworthy about Li Chi’s work is that, even though it was methodologically innovative for its time, its conclusion was not, in general terms, markedly different from that of other, more textually oriented, scholars. For Li Chi, the Chinese people, not unlike “an organic chemical compound,” were made up of a variety of elements. As the “silk-wearing, rice-eating, and city-building Descendants of the Yellow Emperor” expanded outward, Li argued, they absorbed or incorporated, among other peoples, the “horse-riding, kumiss-drinking, flesh-eating Hsiung-nus,” the “yak-driving Ch’iangs,” the “pig-rearing Tungus,” the “cattle-stealing Mongols,” the “tattooing Shan-speaking group,” the “cremating Tibeto-Burman-speaking group,” and the “Kanlan-dwelling Mon-Khmer-speaking group.” Li’s choice of metaphor was far from arbitrary; the Chinese people might be a diverse and changing lot, but as in the case of a chemical compound, Li Chi seems to suggest, the particular configuration of the constituents was what allowed them to continue to appear as an identifiable and independent unit.¹⁸

Consider also the work *History of the Chinese Nation* by Lin Huixiang (1901–1958). Among the first generation of foreign-trained anthropologists, Lin set out to provide an account that would not only contribute to the disciplines of history and anthropology, but also help promote “nation-ism” (*min zu zhu yi*) and, ultimately, “commonwealth-ism” (*da tong zhu yi*). In particular, Lin Huixiang was interested in the distinctions and links between what he refers to as “the *min zu* of the past” and “the *min zu* of the present.” It was because of their lack of attention to such distinctions and connections, he argued, that scholars (such as Li Chi, Wang Tongling, Lü Simian, and Song Wenbing) came up with a variety of often incommensurable schemes to explain the composi-

18 Zhang Qiyun, *Zhongguo min zu zhi* (reprint, Taipei: Shang wu yin shu guan, 1969 [1933]). The four versions of *History of the Chinese Nation* are Wang Tongling, *Zhongguo min zu shi* (reprint, Taipei: Hua shi chu ban she, 1977 [1928]); Lü Simian, *Zhongguo min zu shi* (reprint, Shanghai: Zhongguo da bai ke quan shu chu ban she, 1987 [1934]); Song Wenbing, *Zhongguo min zu shi* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shu ju, 1935); and Lin Huixiang, *Zhongguo min zu shi*, 2 vols. ([Shanghai]: Shang wu yin shu guan, 1936). For the findings of Li Chi, see his *Formation of the Chinese People: An Anthropological Inquiry* (reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1967 [1928]), esp. 273-76; the quotation is from 275.

tion of the Chinese people. In Lin's view, whereas the peoples of early China could in general be classified into fourteen *min zu*, those of modern-day China could be grouped into eight. While each of the modern *min zu* traced its roots to at least one of the *min zu* of the past, Lin Huixiang argued that it was obvious from the textual records that all had incorporated elements from other early *min zu*. This phenomenon, according to Lin, was especially true in the case of the modern-day Han, who traced their origins not only directly to the Huaxia, the Dongyi, the Jingwu, and the Baiyue (all prominent groups that appeared in the records), but also indirectly to all the other early *min zu*. To Lin Huixiang, the Han were an amalgam of the *min zu* of the past. In time, they would also come to assimilate (*tong hua*) all the other *min zu* in modern-day China.¹⁹

In addition to such general works, efforts to make sense of the *min zu* of China can also be observed through a wide array of "field reports" (*diao cha bao gao*). Although ethnology (*min zu xue*; literally, "study of *min zu*"), as an academic field, was established in China by the late 1920s, some of the most detailed studies of the "non-Han" peoples from the early twentieth century were, in fact, conducted by administrators and researchers who had never been trained in the discipline. One such example was the work *Notes on the non-Han of Guangxi* (*Ling biao ji man*, 1934) by Liu Jie, mentioned above. Liu was particularly concerned with the urgency and difficulties of transforming the non-Han (whom he also collectively referred to as *man*, an archaic label found mostly in early historical records, or "special" *min zu*). In his view, the main obstacle in facilitating the "enlightenment" (*kai hua*) of the non-Han was ignorance (both on their part and, especially, on the part of the Han). The central arguments in Liu's *Notes* — which, unlike most previous studies on the subject, was based on extensive fieldwork — were two-fold. First, as he again argued in his report on "special education," it was important that more systematic efforts be devoted to the examination of the history and conditions of the non-Han. Second, given the similarities between them (in the areas of family names, languages, social customs, etc.), Liu contended, the Han and non-Han should be considered members of the same *min zu*.²⁰

19 Lin Huixiang, *Zhongguo min zu shi*, preface, 1, 2; 1, 17.

20 For the establishment of ethnology as an academic discipline, see Gregory Eliyu Guldin, *The Saga of Anthropology in China: From Malinowski to Moscow to Mao* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), esp. 30-4; Wang Jianmin, *Zhongguo min zu xue shi* [*History of ethnology in China*], Vol. 1, 1903-49 (Kunming: Yunnan jiao yu chu ban she, 1997), esp. chap. 4. For the principle observations and arguments of Liu Jie, see *Ling biao ji man*, esp. "abstract" (*ti yao*), chaps. 28-30. On Liu Jie and his works, see Pan Fudong, "Ji min zu jiao yu de tuo huang zhe Liu Jie xian sheng" ["Remembering Mr. Liu Jie, a pioneer in *min zu* education"], *Wen shi chun qiu*, 2 (2001): 65-8; Tsukada Shigeyuki, "Xin Zhongguo cheng li qian hou you guan Zhuang zu lun zhu de bi jiao yan jiu: yi Liu Jie yu Huang Xianfan de zhu yao zhu zuo wei li" ["A comparative study of research on the Zhuang nationality before and after the establishment of the People's Republic: on the works of Liu Jie and Huang Xianfan"], trans., Jin Wenjie, *Guangxi min zu yan jiu*, 3 (2005): 123-30.

Efforts to make sense of the *min zu* of China can also be observed in the works of Xu Songshi (1899–1999). In his well-known study *History of the People of the Yue River Region* (*Yuejiang liu yu ren min shi*, first published in 1939), Xu set out to show — through fieldwork and his own brand of linguistic analysis — that the so-called non-Han (or *man*) peoples in south China were actually not members of distinct *zhong zu* or *min zu*, but were those of the *bu zu* (“tribes”) of an inclusive Han *min zu*. The distinctions Xu Songshi sought to make were not simply semantic. Perhaps more firmly than Liu Jie, Xu, a native son of Guangxi and a Christian minister by calling, was convinced that the Han and non-Han were in fact the same people. In Xu Songshi’s view, the so-called *man* people were the earliest settlers of south China and should rightfully be regarded as “the purest Han” (*zui chun cui de Han ren*). As far as he was concerned, the differences between the Han and *man* were not genetic but historical. It was people from the “central plains” — where political power had traditionally been concentrated — who had persistently sought to distinguish between those who were closely associated with the political centre and those who are not. “It is only after the culture of the central plains had become the orthodox culture of China,” Xu reckoned, “that there emerged the boundary between Hua and *man*.”²¹

Notwithstanding the works by Liu Jie and Xu Songshi, not all writers were ready to concede that the Han and non-Han were fundamentally members of the same *min zu*. To be sure, most (if not all) accepted that the *min zu* of China must unite. But while some emphasized the commonalities between the Han and non-Han, others underscored the importance of assimilation. Consider, for example, the descriptions found in the 1937 edition of the *Gazetteer of Yongning County*. While the compilers of the work clearly acknowledged that there live in the county four distinct *min zu*, they were quick to remind the reader that the Hui, the Tu, and the Zhuang — except in the areas of “religion, language, and attire” — “are now all assimilated into the Han” (*xian jie tong hua yu Han*). Whereas women of the Zhuang once took to the practices of blackening their teeth, tattooing their faces, and dressing in blouses that exposed their chests and shoulders, by the early Republican period, according to the compilers, almost all of such customs had vanished. In ten years’ time, with the disappearance of the remaining Zhuang markers, the compilers predicted, the label of the Zhuang race (*zhong*) would become extinct as well. From the point

21 Xu Songshi, *Yuejiang liu yu ren min shi*, rev. ed. (reprint, Guangzhou: Guangdong ren min chu ban she, 1993 [1963]), collected in *Xu Songshi min zu xue yan jiu zhu zuo wu zhong* [*Five ethnological studies by Xu Songshi*]; for quotations, see his preface to the original edition and page 40. As recently as 2005, a major academic conference was held in Guangxi in honor of Xu. For an introduction to the scholarship of Xu Songshi, see the articles in *Guangxi min zu yan jiu*, 1 (2006).

of view of the compilers of the gazetteer, such developments did not prove that the Han and the Zhuang were essentially the same *min zu*; rather, they showed that human races (*ren zhong*) could be perfected and that “it is the law of natural evolution that barbaric peoples [*ye man ren*] would eventually be overcome by civilized ones [*wen ming ren*].”²²

In drawing attention to the different conceptions of *min zu*, my goal is not to belittle the challenges the elites faced in constructing a cohesive political and social body, or to emphasize the state of confusion in early-twentieth-century China. In fact, despite their differences, it can be argued that scholars such as Li Chi, Lin Huixiang, Liu Jie, and Xu Songshi did share a vision. For them, in order for China to survive as a sovereign political entity, the Chinese as a *min zu* must unite. For some, what this meant was the need for all to recognize that, despite their apparent diversity, the “peoples” of China were ultimately tied by blood. For others, what was most urgent was not the recognition of the common origins of the peoples of China but the need to assimilate those who, for various reasons, had remained “backward” or “unenlightened.” While there was a degree of logic in their formulations of the issues, there were also clear tensions in how the governing and educated elites of early-twentieth-century China conceptualized the notion of *min zu*. Was there in China a single *min zu* or were there many? If it was the former, how should one account for the vast linguistic and — for lack of a more convenient term — cultural differences among the people? If it was the latter, how should one explain China’s perceived unity? What the political and intellectual elites in China disagreed on was not simply the definition of a *min zu*; what they also differed on was nothing short of how to conceive China’s past as well as how best to characterize the “Chineseness” of China.²³

Past, Present, and Beyond

The desire to give names to and make sense of China’s diverse population, it should be noted, was not solely a phenomenon of the early twentieth century. As has been demonstrated elsewhere, the urge by local or central authorities to identify and categorize the “non-Chinese” peoples of China had manifested itself throughout the imperial period (221 BCE–1911). To be sure, the contexts in which such identification and categorization took place changed over time. To cite one example, whereas during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) — whose

22 Mo Bingkui, et al., *Yongning Xian zhi* 40, 23-7 (1611–15 in modern paginatin); for quotations, see 4, 23 and 27.

23 For other efforts to make sense of the “Chinese nation,” see, for example, Magnus Fiskesjö, “Rescuing the Empire: Chinese Nation-Building in the Twentieth Century,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 15-44; James Leibold, “Competing Narratives of Racial Unity in Republican China: From the Yellow Emperor to Peking Man,” *Modern China* 32, no. 2 (2006): 181-200.

founders were responsible for pushing back the Mongols — it was in the interest of the rulers to emphasize the “Chineseness” (*hua*; *xia*) of their realm, in the Qing period (1644–1911), it was in the interest of the Manchu emperors (who, as in the case of the Mongols, had come from beyond the Great Wall) to cultivate the image that they were overseeing a multi-ethnic empire. Despite their differences, however, rulers of both the Ming and Qing dynasties were keenly interested in identifying and mapping (often literally) the variety of peoples under their rule.²⁴

The need to label, organize, and represent the peoples of China, perhaps not surprisingly, has remained a major concern for the central authorities since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. Guided in part by its professed commitment to the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology — according to which nationalism was a means to communism — the Chinese Communist Party has long declared that China is a “unitary multi-national state” (*tong yi duo min zu guo jia*) and that it is in general support of the right to self-governance of China’s “minority nationalities” (*shao shu min zu*). To promote equality and, thus, social stability, the Communist Party set in motion, as early as the 1950s, several far-reaching initiatives. Not only did the party-state establish special institutions of higher education to recruit and train minority cadres, but it also carried out a large-scale “nationality classification” project, in which teams of scholars and cadres were dispatched to the far and wide of China to conduct fieldwork and to differentiate and categorize its “minority nationalities.” In time, the party-state deemed it advantageous to set up so-called autonomous administrative units in areas where there were significant non-Han populations. It also found it useful to promote the culture and history of individual *shao shu min zu* — so long as such an exercise was conducted within the official framework of “a unitary multi-national state.”²⁵

24 Leo K. Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For the Qing period, see, for example, Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Emma Teng, *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures, 1683–1895* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004); and Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, eds., *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

25 For the classification project, see, for example, Wang Jianmin, Zhang Haiyuan, and Hu Hongbao, *Zhongguo min zu xue shi* [*History of ethnology in China*], vol. 2: 1950–1997 (Kunming: Yunnan jiao yu chu ban she, 1998); Nicholas Tapp, “In Defense of the Archaic: A Reconsideration of the 1950s Ethnic Classification Project in China,” *Asian Ethnicity* 3, no. 1 (2002): 63–84; Thomas S. Mullaney, “Ethnic Classification Writ Large: The 1954 Yunnan Province Ethnic Classification Project and its Foundations in Republican-Era Taxonomic

The urge to create citizens out of subjects was not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon. Whether it was the case of transforming peasants into Frenchmen or molding school children into Japanese citizens; whether it was the case of taking advantage of print technology to foster the imagination of a community or consciously reaching into the past to locate the “essence” of a nation’s identity, it has been shown that there was much in common among the governing and educated elites (of diverse contexts) in how they helped construct their respective nation-states. The point is not that there was present in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries a universal model of “national” development (in fact, as others have demonstrated, *timing* was an important factor for the different experiences); rather, it is to remind ourselves that the challenges China faced must be understood in the wider context of global transformations and upheavals.²⁶

Though the political and intellectual elites in early twentieth-century China were far from alone in choosing to stretch “the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire,” the particular problems they met were complicated by both the sheer size of China’s political body and the urgency to appropriate a “skin” — foreign in origin as it might be — to cover it. Self-appointed leaders of China in the Republican period, it has often been noted, were confronted with impossible choices. For many of them, the extinction of the Chinese people as a *min zu*, however they might have understood the concept, was not simply a theory but a distinct possibility. The key to national survival, from the point of view of the governing and educated elites, was to reconstruct China by transforming its society. Although many of us may now still take for granted the “naturalness” of the notions of *guo jia* (country; nation) and *she hui* (society), leaders of China in the early twentieth century not only

Thought,” *China Information* 18, no. 2 (2004): 207-41. For Guangxi, see Katherine Palmer Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China* (Boulder, CO: L. Rienner, 2000), 86-91. For the notion of “unitary multi-national state,” see Fei Xiaotong, ed., *Zhonghua min zu duo yuan yi ti ge ju* [*The pattern of diversity in unity of the Chinese nation*], rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhong yang min zu da xue chu ban she, 1999). For recent ethnographic studies, see, for example, Ralph A. Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2000); Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China’s Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2000); and Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

26 For comparisons, see, among others, Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976); Carol Gluck, *Japan’s Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1991); and Stephen Vlastos, *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

had to persistently educate and mobilize the newly constituted citizenry, but also found it necessary to adopt a new lexicon — much of which came from Europe via Japan — to describe and explain the relationships between the constituents of the imagined nation. For the governing and educated elites, the fundamental component of this new China was the Chinese *min zu*. While one may view the various attempts over the past century to define and objectify the *min zu* of China as signs of the country's adaptability, it is clear there were (and are) deep-rooted tensions in China's nation-building project. And though it is not my goal to offer a complete account of the sources of such tensions, it is useful to remember that the full import of imperialism on China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was manifested not in the blatant appropriation of resources (which was often reversible), but in the subtle — though irreparable — reordering of China's sense of its place in the world.²⁷

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27 For the quotation, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 86.