

Thomas S. Mullaney

*Coming to Term with the Nation*  
*Ethnic Classification in Modern China*

Foreword by Benedict Anderson  
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**Dominique Tyl**

The book has been highly praised by Benedict Anderson, who has written its foreword, as well as by academics quoted in the back cover; and rightly so! It is a marvelous reading with fascinating information and insights based on carefully analyzed documents hitherto practically unknown. The question it addresses simply put asks: How China discovered that it is comprised of 56 “nationalities”, as proclaimed today by the government? Pictures of delegates to the National People’s Congress reaffirm the dogma each year with representatives of ethnic minorities in their colorful attires. It was imaginarily said, during the late Qing, that there were many hundreds groups; then the Republican Guomindang government had other worries and desired more unity...

As Mullaney explains in the Introduction, his research is based on extremely rich sources. First, the 1953-1954 Census Register: The four hundred-plus *minzu* (ethnic groups) registered at the beginning of the census had to be reduced for practical and political reasons. Then, a second series of documents: a collection of reports from the 1954 Ethnic Classification Research Team. Mullaney has also spent time to read works by early Chinese ethnologist during the Republican era. Next, he has studied the unpublished materials of the British military officer Henry Rodolph Davies, who, at the turn of the 19 and 20 centuries developed an ethnic taxonomy, so influential for the development of Chinese intellectuals’ work in the field, including the team of experts in 1953. Interviews with members of the team add, not only a human touch of the hard work expected from them, but serve as another proof of the importance of reports written at that time.

Following in the same introduction, a section, “Structure and Methodology”, is of some importance. The first remark concerns the scope of the book, which is investigation of the 1954 Yunnan Province Ethnic Classification Project.. The introduction ends with the final remark, by the author, that he does not attempt to “falsify the findings” of the 1954 Project; but he does reflect the opinion of the member of the team that their reports and recommendations are not a “high-fidelity

representation of presently existing realities, but rather a semidescriptive, semi-prescriptive blueprint of what could exist in the future with the help of state intervention.” (p.16) The five chapters of the book develop chronologically the position of the question of ethnic minorities in China from Imperial time to the advent of communist government, then the work proper of the classification team who had to work under very strict time limits, to include representatives of minorities among the participants of the first National People’s Congress in autumn 1954.

H. R. Davies work and model of taxonomy, based on comparative linguistics, which had already influenced ethnologists during the Republican period, was adopted by the classification team of 1954, to quote Mullaney, rely on a categorization focus “on a feature of individual and communal identity that could be considered fundamentally personal, at once the foundation of group identity formation and the result thereof.” (p.56) He concludes the analyses of evidences that the Davies model followed by the team refutes too simple communist imposition hypothesis and demands to recognize the role of social scientists service as advisor to the political decision makers in the People’s Republic of China.

One of these was Lin Yaohua, who advanced a new concept, the “potential *minzu*”, which was not in the theory of Stalin concerning nationalities which was the basic theoretical framework. A practical solution to reconcile ethnological and political, theoretical and practical paradigms. Mullaney cites Lin :”As for those ethnonational blocs (*minzu jituan*) who constitute one *minzu*, but due to pressure of reactionary rule have come to live under different names (of which there are many examples in Yunnan)...merging them together is to be encouraged” (p.85) Remain the task to get the “consent of the categorized” which is the title of Ch.4, in which examples are given of more or less resigned acceptance.

What about the other groups, which could not become *minzu*? They had to fit into the official classification. But as late as 1990 the official census counted some 750 000 people belonging to “yet to be classified *minzu*.” (p.129) It will be interesting to see what has been done for the census of 2010. But, writes Mullaney,”...no ethnotaxonomic discourse can ever become fully self-sustaining. Its continuity requires perpetual management by the state and continued participation by the people”. (p.135). Whatever happens in the future (including dissatisfaction or other demands...), concludes the author, the classification is now a vital part of Chinese history. The assertion appears like a good reminder that even ethnicity presents aspects of a socio-historical construct.

What about ethnic classification in Guizhou or Guangxi? Mullaney mentions those two places in connection with the work in Yunnan, but that is beyond the scope of his excellent book. Nevertheless it would be interesting to compare the work of

classification in Yunnan with what happened in other places across the country, to confirm or to add precisions to the main theoretical and political work realized with regional adaptation of national imperatives.

The book possesses a huge lot of captivating information on a clearly circumscribed topic. And it is so well organized and written that the reading is easy even for non-experts. Because of that, one would like to know more about this or that period of the classification process, or, for example, concerning the Yi spread over vast areas in different provinces (see figure p.116). Perhaps also on some issues debated today among Chinese ethnologists. But Mullaney is now researching the history of Chinese typewriter...The result, surely, will be another brilliant book.