Social Refbrms and Problems of Ethnicity

Social Reforms and Problems of Ethnicity

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The main peculiarity of the last decades of the 20th century is that we are living now in the era of reforms. By no means could they be limited to economic sphere. A society is an integral unity in itself so its particular aspects can be separated just as an object for scientific research but in real life all of them are closely connected one to another. We can hardly imagine that a successful transition to a market economy will be possible without changes in political structure. Yet another point to be reformed is the domain of ethnic (national) relations. While delivering a lecture in Taipei two years before Gorbachev confessed that a neglect for ethnic problems as an object of fundamental changes has been one of the main causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately enough, this lesson is not being learnt by outsiders. In China people are eager to deal with economic problems with little if any reference to political reforms. The need to examine critically the current ethnic situation is not even mentioned. Potentially this is an extremely dangerous position.

The notion of reforms means that we are expected to reevaluate honestly and objectively our previous policies in a given sphere of social life. Ethnic problems are not an exception. It is not a complicated thing to see that, for instance, the principle of equal rights by different ethnoses (nations) solemnly proclaimed in state constitutions as well as in other legal statutes sometimes does not work. Even the most fundamental right by an ethnos — that of survival — is not being fully observed. I mean not only the fact that many nations are subject to assimilation, but also even more typical situation when the very existence of a nation is denied by the state. Today one may consider it to be a minor case; tomorrow it would be a reason of fierce conflicts.

This issue that is the main subject of the present paper is to be discussed in an academic prospective. But it of practical nature as it has important implementations for the future outcome of the current reforms as a whole.

How many nations are there in China at the present time? A relevant answer to this question depends on our definition of a nation, or an ethnos (民族). Those problems that do exist in the ethnic situation in China nowadays are in fact the inevitable consequence of the fact that in the period when the work of ethnic identification has been done in the PRC Chinese scholars appeared to be short of appropriate theoretical basis for it. In fact, Stalin's definition of nation used as the only methodological tool of such an enterprise has proved entirely impotent. Nevertheless even now many specialists on national problems consider this

notorious definition "the most scientific" one.

It is not the right place to examine this piece of quasi-theoretical writing in all details. I am going just to state that none of the four characteristics embodied in this definition can help us to determine the boundaries of an ethnos. It has been outdated from the very beginning because by the time it was formulated the international academic community succeeded in a significant breakthrough that was not noticed by Stalin. It is a shift from "objective" approach to ethnos to a "subjective" one.

The "objective" theory of ethnos that may seem appropriate and fitting to everyone's life experience was formulated at least two millennia ago. Herodotus has been one of its first advocates as he considered the main ethnic criteria to belong primarily to cultural characteristics; for his mind (Herodotus VIII), a community was an ethnos if it is of one blood; and of one speech; and has dwelling-places of gods in common; and habits of similar customs.

A similar approach is found in a number of writings by ancient scholars of different background, the author of "Zuozhuan (左传)" being among them.

It is only by the end of the nineteenth century that J.Renan proposed quite a different approach to an ethnos, labeling it 'everyday's plebiscite,' as he stressed the significance of ethnic identification based on an ethnos's seft-consciousness. In the first decades of the 20th century a considerable contribution to the modern theory of ethnos was made by S.Shirokogoroff (known in China as 史禄国) who stated that those social units that possess no consciousness of their existence have nothing to do with the notion of an ethnic group (Shirokogoroff 1935: 12–13). Later Komatsu Kentaro (小松堅太郎) (1941) developed his vision of an ethnos discriminating clearly between 'objective' characteristics (both 'natural,' or 'basic,' and 'cultural,' or 'secondary') as conditions for ethnogenesis and 'subjective' ones emerging on the basis of the above and constituting the mechanics of the maintenance of the ethnic group. Quite independently from Komatsu, Soviet scholars came to similar conclusions in the 60s. American ethnologists were rather late to accept this new theory; in the 60s there still were disputes among them as regards 'subjective' vis. 'objective' approaches.

But the greatest misfortune of the last of the Mohicans of the latter theory (in China and elsewhere) has been their adherence to the "Marxist", or, properly speaking, Stalinist quasi-interpretation of nation. It is only recently that changes can be traced in this field, some Chinese scholars having admitted that the topic of ethnic consciousness is to be discussed in one way or another.

While reevaluating the results of ethnic identification work done in the 50s some Chinese ethnologists try to postulate that the definition of a nation formulated by Stalin had not been taken as a dogma at that time and that it worked merely as a framework of theoretical approach to the problem. Huang Shuping (黄

淑娉) for instance, stated that practically Chinese experts have developed a conception of their own, starting from the point of the role played by cultural characteristics of an ethnos (Huang 1989). But one may see that this "new" approach still is based on the traditional "objective" concept of ethnicity.

The main shortcoming of the "objective" approach consists in a widely known fact that cultural (and linguistic) boundaries do not fully coincide with ethnic ones. On the contrary, the bulk of numerous data accumulated by modern ethnographers make it obvious that, unlike "objective" cultural characteristics, self-identification of an ethnic group based on its consciousness is a firm and indisputable basis for isolation of its boundaries.

Ethnic consciousness originates from the blend of all major factors forming an ethnos as a reflection of the entire totality of its "objective" properties, including the language. That is why the process of formation of an ethnos terminates when its specific consciousness has taken full shape. Consequently, it is the most stable of all characteristics of an ethnos; having emerged, it may exist for a long time even if the language and other features of the group have already undergone changes. Therefore, ethnic consciousness is last to fade away in the process of disintegration of an ethnos.

As self-denomination, or endoethnonym (自称) of an ethnos is one of the apparent manifestations of its consciousness, we would agree with the idea othat the procedure of ethnic identification should start with thorough consideration and classification of ethnic names accepted by local ethnoses.

Unfortunately it has not been the case in China during the 50s. This situation was practically neglected at that time and a chance to pursue an investigation in a right direction has been lost.

The present author would try to demonstrate how useful the data on self-denomination may be for an analysis of linguistic situation of some officially acknowledged ethnoses.

The majority of modern Chinese scholars hold the view that language forms he main feature of an ethnos. However two different positions can be discerned in the understanding of the essence of this concept.

In the early 1980s Ma Xueliang (马学良) and Dai Qingxia (戴庆夏) published two articles devoted to the problems of the correlation between ethnos and language. The first one essentially advocated the need to study the ethnos through the prism of the language (the authors suggested that this specific area of human knowledge should be called "linguoethnography"). The importance of such studies was demonstrated on the example of the Hani (哈尼) people: by conducting a comparative analysis of several relatively small groups usually regarded as subethnic units (民族支系) of one nation the authors declared that with the help of linguistic methods they have proved the belonging of these groups with different

denominations to the Hani people (Ma and Dai 1981: 216).

The second article by the same authors was devoted to a theoretical procedure having an opposite direction, e.g., the study of the language through the prism of the ethnos (this aspect should be studied, in their opinion, by "ethnolinguistics". The conclusion reached by these scholars is as follows:

> It is possible to determine whether we deal with a language or a dialect only by considering the structure of the relevant ethnos; in this case linguistic arguments are not decisive (Ma and Dai 1983: 13).

There are supporters of both approaches to the problem of correlation between ethnos and language among Chinese scholars. Basically, the first view was supported as early as the 30s by Tao Yunkui (陶云逵) who believed that classification of ethnoses based on the criteria of language actually represents a classification of languages; the ethnographer simply takes the results of a linguistic study and uses them to resolve his own problems (Tao 1938: 422).

However, there are also resolute supporters of the opposite view. So Gai Xingzhai (盖兴之) maintains, for example:

> The language is not separated from the dialect by a definite barrier... There are no purely linguistic criteria for differentiating between them (Gai 1982: 120).

If he is right, language, in fact, loses its significance for ethnic identification. Nevertheless, a criterion may be proposed for such a differentiation, e.g., that of mutual understandability, which makes it possible to establish a definition of the top limits of functionally permissible differences of various dialects spoken by the members of an ethnos. According to D. Hymes, the level of mutual understandability depends on the sum total of factors most of which are extralingual ones (Hymes 1968: 29).

Although the state of mutual undersnandability often represents a continuum in which changes occur gradually, its levels can be expressed in measurable units, e.g., in percentage of the part of vocabulary in common, i.e., establishing the maximum level of lexical differences under which it is possible to have mutual understandability of speech as the condition insuring direct communication among the members of an ethnos.

Let us consider from this point of view one of the versions of classification of Miao (苗) dialects:

Table 1. Classification of Miao Dialects

Dialect	Subdialect	Localism
I. Eastern	1. Eastern	A. Southern B. Central C. Northern
	2. Western	A. Eastern B. Western
II. Central	1. Northern	A. Northern B. Central C. Southern D. Eastern
	2. Southern	
III. Western	1. First	A. First B. Second
	2. Second	
IV. Northeastern		
V. South-central		

According to the data collected by Chinese scholars the share of common vocabulary in Miao dialects amounts on the average to 35.7%:

Table 2. The Share of Common Vocabulary in Miao Dialects

	I. Eastern	II. Central	III. Western	IV. Northeastern
I. Eastern	——	41.8	28.6	24.4
II. Central	——	——	34.4	30.1
III. Western	——	——	——	54.9

The same indicator applied at the subdialect level amounts on the average to 62.7%:

Table 3. The Share 6 of Common Vocabulary in Miao Subdialects

1. Eastern		II. Central		III. Western	
1. Eastern	2. Western	1. Northern	2. Southern	1. First	2. Second
1 —	64.2	1 —	60.8	1 —	63.2

Finally, localisms have only the average 80.3% of the common vocabulary:

Table 4. The Share of Common Vocabulary in Miao Localisms

I. Eastern Dialect 1. Eastern Subdialect			I. Eastern Dialect 2. Western Subdialect	
A. Southern	B. Central	C. Northern	A. Eastern	B. Western
A —	80.8	?	A —	93.9
B —	—	81.0		

The Share of the common vocabulary represented in Miao "dialects" (35.7%)

is apparently insufficient for maintaining intraethnic communication but the same indicator for "subdialects" (62.7%) meets this requirement. Thus, it proves the conclusion that qualification of three (or four) basic varieties of Miao languages as dialects of a single Miao language seems questionable. Genetically these "dialects" are undoubtedly closely interrelated, however today they function like fully independent languages.

A similar picture emerges when we consider the problem of correlation between Bunu (Nu) dialects placed into Miao group.

Table 5. The Share of Common Vocabulary in the Bunu (Nu) Dialects

		I			II
		1	2	3	
I	1	—	52.6	64.0	40.7
	2	—	—	63.4	35.6
	3	—	—	—	41.9

In this case the share of the common vocabulary in the two bunu "dialects" (I and II) amounts on the average to 39.4% which means that A. Moskalev has been right stating that the five dialects of the nu group identified by Chinese linguists... essentially function as independent languages (Moskalev 1978: 13).

For the sake of comparison I would like to mention that lexical convergences between, say, the three main dialects of the li language at Hainan amount to 73.6%, that is, the share of the common vocabulary in them is much higher than the critical level of mutial understandability and therefore qualification of these language varieties as dialects is fully justified. It also corresponds to the fact registered by ethnographers: people speaking those dialects do not experience any major difficulties in communicating with each other (Ouyang and Zhang 1980: 98).

In this connection it is of uttermost importance to pay attention to the fact that boundaries of so called "dialects" that are not mutually understandable closely correspond to the groups with a specific ethnic self-denomination.

Unfortunately, in the past Chinese ethnography did not devote adequate attention to the study of ethnic self-denominations. Furthermore many authors even directly warned against being engaged into such an investigation:

> As regards people speaking the same language but living on different territories, using different dialects and having different self-denominations, when there is a community of political, economic and cultural specific features it is not possible to divide the common language only on the basis of particular self-denominations (Zhou 1958: 51).

It is not difficult to note that in this case the supporters of the "study of the language through the prism of the ethnos" enter into a contradiction with their own concept by refusing to consider the leading ethnic characteristic, i.e., ethnic consciousness which manifests itself in self-denomination.

I find much more convincing the position of those linguists who recognize the exceptionally important role of the analysis of ethnic self-denominations in identification of nations. Yang Kun (杨堃), for instance, is convinced that the this work should have been started with classification of all known ethnic self-denominations (Yang 1984).

From this point of view it is not at all accidental that self-denominations are possessed only by those groups in whose language differences preclude the possibility of interethnic communication. It is precisely this situation with respect to the above mentioned miao and bunu "dialects." A very clear correlation between the share of the common vocabulary and presence of self-denominations is observed also among Miao people living in the South of Guizhou:

Table6. The share of Common Vocabulary among Different Self-Denomination

Self-denomination		1	2	3	4
1	kame	—	48.5	46.0	39.0
2	kmong	—	—	44.2	41.6
3	mhang	—	—	—	43.9
4	ahmore	—	—	—	—

Here we deal naturally only with self-denominations and not with exoethnonyms (他称), e.g., names given by outsiders. The latter basically have no relation to the sphere of expression of ethnic self-consciousness. Furthermore, exoethnonyms often inadequately reflect real ethnic boundaries erroneously uniting groups that clearly consider themselves independent ethnoses. It is noteworthy that in the latest work on the problems of ethnic identification the authors fail to make a proper distinction between the two different kinds of ethnic labels (Huang 1995: 121-125).

To cite but one example to illustrate this difference, we may refer to Loba (珞巴)living in the southeastern part of Tibet. "Lo" (or "loba") in Tibetan means "southerner"; it is the name used by Tibetans, while the Loba people do not have any common self-denomination and consist of several groups calling themselves differently: bogar, ningbo, yidu, etc. The share of common vocabulary in the bogar and yidu "dialects" amounts only to 14.0%. It means that bogar and yidu do not at all represent dialects of one language (some 80% of the vocabulary coincides in the Tibetan dialects).

Artificial extension of the self-denomination of one ethnos on ethnic groups

that are related to it but possess self-denominations of their own represents a special case of the emergence of exoethnonyms. For instance, Bulang (布朗) is identified now as an independent ethnos, although self-denomination "plang" is current only among the part of this community in Xishuangbanna (西双版纳); in the districts of Shuangjiang (双江) and Lancang (澜沧) the Bulang call themselves "awa", "rik", "wutir", etc.

Another example of the kind is provided by the problem of identification of Kucong (苦聪). It has been established that Kucong are divided into two groups: Guoco and Lafu, the former being closely connected to Hani and the latter to Lahu (拉祜). However, in 1955 both Guoco and Lafu were classified as Hani; they are united by an administrative decision under one denomination given to them externally.

Be it as it may, today the question formulated by Qu Aitang (瞿霭堂) still is highly relevant: why it is that people having self-denomination "buyai" in the Guizhou province are considered to belong to the Buyi nation, while those living across the river on the territory of Guangxi – to the Zhuang (壮); why is that the people calling themselves "wa" in Lancang, Cangyuan (沧源), and Ximeng (西盟) districts of Yunan province are attributed to the Wa (佤) nation, while those living in the neighboring areas of the same province to Bulang, etc. As stated by Qu Aitang:

> The fact that people with common self-denominations speaking one and the same language are divided into different ethnoses demands a satisfactory explanation and scientific substantiation by the ethnographers (Qu 1963: 30).

It is underestimation of the importance of ethnic self-denominations that explains also the tenet advanced by certain linguists who affirm that differences between dialects of one and the same language can allegedly be sometimes more significant than those between different languages. According to Ma Xueliang and Dai Qingxia' s data, nothern and southern dialects of the zhongjia language are more distant than northern ones and the buyi language. It would be appropriate to recall in this connection the deliberations of Fei Xiaotong(费孝通)concerning the methods used to study ethnoses of southwest China during the first years of work on ethnic identification:

> At that time, as I remember, we studied each people separately... Although the use of this method was dictated by specific requirements of that period, it had both its merits and numerous deficiences... There was a people in Guizhou then called "zhongjia'. They were against this name and therefore the name 'buyi' was given to them. The Buyi spoke the zhuang language. Later, when Buyi were recognized officially as an independent ethnos another delegation came to Guangxi and the

Zhuang were recognized as an autonomous ethnic minority. Thus Buyi (布依) and Zhuang recognized at a different time became two peoples (Fei 1980, p.2).

Exoethnonym 'buyi' stemming from the self-denomination 'bu yai' has been extended to other closely related ethnic groups with self-denominations of 'bu zhong', 'bu rao', 'bu tai', etc. However, existence of ethnic groups of 'bu zhong', 'bu tai', 'bu nong' can be discovered among the Zhuang. In view of this it is hardly possible to be surprised that the language differences within 'bu yai' group in Guizhou and Guangxi are less significant as compared to other groups.

There are even more evident problems in identification of Yao (瑶) people. To take county as an example, Yao inhabiting this mountainous area belong to five different groups with corresponding self-denominations:

I. yu mien, or 盘瑶, as Han Chinese call them;
II. kimdimun, or 山子瑶;
III. aubiao, or 坳瑶;
IV. kiongnai, or 花篮瑶;
V. lakkya. or 茶山瑶.

The authors of the monograph "A Brief History of Yao" believe that it does not have any specific importance:

> Rulers of the past used differences in those denominations in order to artificially create interethnic strife and thus reach their goal of 'divide and rule'. Although self-denominations and exoethnonyms of Yao segments are different and their language has its specific features, in the process of long historical development this people had common destinies and unity of psychological nature, while "yao" has always been its common ethnic appellation and it became formed as a single and indivisible ethnic community (History 1983: 11).

In spite of the resolute tone of this assertion it does not hold any serious criticism. Let us examine it from the point of view of "the four characteristics of a nation" coined by Stalin that have reportedly used in establishing "Yao" as a single and indivisible ethnos.

(1) The language
"Yao" of Jinxiu (金秀) county speak three different languages:
A. Groups I-III speak mien language (placed by Chinese linguists into the group of yao languages);
B. Group IV speaks bunu (miao language group);
C. Group V speaks lakkya (kam-sui language group).

(2) The territory

"Yao" speaking these diverse languages occupy different portions of the territory of Yaoshan (瑶山): group V in the northern part of it, group IV in the center, group III in the south, group II in the southeast; it is only group I that is disperced over various parts of the county (see the map on p.239).

(3) The economic life

Before the early 50s these "Yao" were traditionally divided into two main categories according to rights on land:

    (a) 'Owners of the mountains' (山主), or 'Yao with long hair' (长毛瑶) – groups III, IV, V;

    (b) 'Tenants of the mountains' (山丁), or 'Yao that have crossed the mountains' (过山瑶).

(4) The psychomental complex

The differences in this respect are so large that yiu mien even consider lakkya entirely alien, comparable to Han Chinese or others; a special terminus technicus gan is used by them to denote these creatures that are like human beings just by appearance but are short of primary human (mien) qualities. Coming across this opposition, one may immediately recollect a similar idea of 'creatures with human faces but with hearts of animals' (人面兽心) typical for the conception of ethnic differences by ancient Chinese.

As a common yu mien saying puts it,

Gan duan dai,
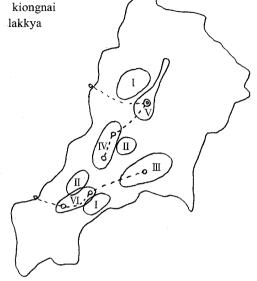mien duan nong,
gan duan aili dong de,
man man yang.

A similar opposition of real human being to dou (or dau), whom not only Han Chinese but also lakkya are ranked with, exists also in the language of kimdimun and aubiao.

We can see that none of the four criteria advocated by Stalin and used for identification of ethnoses in the PRC in the 50s allow us to the conclusion of indivisibility of "Yao" in Jinxiu.

As to the alleged use by all of them of the common ethnic denomination, local speakers apply it while speaking Chinese but fail to isolate any denomination common for al the five groups used in the mother-tongue. So in the lakkia language, for example, a sentence like "He is Yao, and you are Yao" may be pronounced only as 'Lak tuk lakkia, ma tuk huai tuk lakkia'.

Ethnic groups in Jinxiu (金秀) county

I   yu mien
II   kimdimun
III   aubiao
IV   kiongnai
V   lakkya

Let's turn now to the material culture of these groups; it is up to everybody to decide if there are decisive similarities in their traditional costume or dwellings, etc.

Putting different ethnic groups under single label is not so harmless as one may think. Arbitrary manipulation with self-identification of an ethnos will arouse discontent and result in conflicts. Besides it is due to the artificial construction of the Yao nation it till now lacks its own script and consequently local language can not be used in education.

Proceeding from the general considerations outlined above I may state that the real ethnic situation in southwest China is much more complex than one reduced from officially adopted list of nations of the PRC. In this regard it is possible to identify three different groups of problems.

First, when some closely related ethnoses had no common self-denomination they have been united under one exoethnonym. "Yi"(彝) may serve as an example of this type; characteristically enough, individual groups covered by the Han Chinese appellation "Yi", such as Lolo, Pula, etc. are considered as independent ethnoses on the neighboring territory of Vietnam.

Second, due to specific historical conditions a common exoethnonym appeared to be extended to genetically unrelated groups. Such is the case "Yao" with their three different languages.

Third, some ethnic groups having a common self-denomination and speaking similar language were placed into different ethnoses. It so happened to 'bu yai'; another striking instance are 'kimmun' of Hainan: they are considered not to be a part of a single ethnos together with those 'kimdimum' of Jinxiu in Guangxi but are attached to "Miao".

Let me finally cite a statement by Gu Xuejin (顾学津) He wrote:

> At present no one dares to affirm that only 56 nationalities really live in China (Gu 1984: 20).

If we agree that reforms in China just as in other post-communist countries can not be limited to economy and need to deal with other spheres of social life, including ethnic problems as well, clearly quite a lot of problems is to be solved.

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