Entrapment by consent : the co-ethnic brokerage system of ethnic Yi labour migrants in China

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Chapter 2

Ethnic Yi Constructed by the State and Perceived by Yi People

Since the Communist Party came to power in 1949, ethnic minority policies in China have been institutionalized and implemented in the autonomous ethnic regions. However, a change is in the air. Recently, ethnic minorities have shown a growing trend towards migrating to Han-dominated non-autonomous regions in China. As a result, accumulating numbers of people of minority descent in cities has become an increasingly conspicuous issue, and municipal governments have had to grapple with the repercussions. This chapter begins with a historical review of ethnic recognition policies and their specific implementation in the ethnic Yi group, and then continues with a discussion of the transition of the ethnic identity of Yi migrants. By taking this track, this thesis aims at providing a background to the unfolding of ethnic politics and the social transformation of Yi society.

It is worth noting that the ethnic Yi do not form a homogenous ethnic group. This chapter reveals how ethnic Yi people themselves perceive "ethnic Yi" identity, and how this contrasts sharply with how the state defines "ethnic Yi" identity. Two core characteristics lie at the heart of the ethnic Yi group. Clan identity in Yi society is one, and the hierarchical social structure organized by the Black Yi and the White Yi is the other. These two characteristics—horizontal organization into clans, vertical organization by their hierarchical social structure (Black Yi as opposed to

White Yi)—are significant both psychologically and socioeconomically. Both characteristics existed in pre-revolutionary Yi society and continue to be in effect today.

2.1 Territory-based Ethnic Policy in China

In its official discourse, China has long claimed to be a culturally pluralistic state. A systematic illustration of the state-ethnic minority norm was framed to legitimize the authority of the Chinese nation-state over any ethnic minorities. One well-known statement of this relationship, "*Plurality in Unity*" (*duoyuan yitihua geju* 多元一体化格局), was conceived by the famous anthropologist Fei Xiaotong. As Fei has summarized,

> The Chinese nation is a single unit that consists of fifty-six ethnic groups. It is not a simple collection of fifty-six nations, even though they have different cultures, languages and customs." The underlying concept is that these fifty-six nations belong to an indivisible Chinese unit that has developed a feeling of unity and shared destiny in the course of their interactions throughout history. Chinese nationality is a higher level of identity shared by all Chinese citizens, but people also have their own sub-level national identity. "Each nationality is a fundamental component of Chinese nation (Fei, 1989).

While the slogan of "*Plurality in Unity*" aims to preserve cultural diversity among different ethnic groups, it also aims to integrate ethnic minorities into a homogenous Chinese national framework. Since Fei's introduction of the concept of *Plurality in Unity*, the Chinese government started to propagandize it as their interpretation of ethnic relationship.

Another feature of the ethnic policy in China is related to "class" discourse, a legacy of Marxist ideology. According to the ideology of historical materialism, the economic base determines the superstructure; moreover, the superstructure is a reflection of a particular stage of economic evolution. All ethnic groups can be slotted into a certain stage in the evolutionary spectrum, and each will eventually evolve via the phases of primitive society, feudalism, and capitalism to its apotheosis in a communist society. Nationalities and ethnic distinctions will eventually disappear after the inherent contradictions in the economic structure have been resolved and differences in state structure have vanished. A homogeneous

proletarian culture will eventually come into being. Soon after the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, "class discourse" as conceived by Marx was the predominant theme of official narratives. According to the concept of the evolutionary spectrum, ethnic minorities were regarded as "backward" groups. These groups were expected to learn from the Han Chinese and thereby achieve a higher economic status. In terms of class, all ethnic minorities had to be regarded as belonging to the same proletarian group as the Han.

In order to "facilitate the government of a highly diverse polity encompassing people of strikingly different linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds" (Mullaney, 2011, 10), the Chinese government launched a series of state programmes in ethnic minority autonomous regions. Like other governments worldwide, stimulating ethnic minority policies was one of the first undertakings taken by the government as a way to incorporate ethnic minorities into the dominant national regime (Harrell, 2001; Ducan, 2004). Under that circumstance, ethnic policies composed of a judicious admixture of ethnic recognition, civilization programmes, and preferential ethnic policies were conceived to legitimize the governance of the Chinese state.

The first policy relating to ethnic minorities was conceived to recognize ethnic minority groups across China. In the 1950s, the Chinese government adopted the National Recognition Projects (*minzu shibie* 民族识别) of the Soviet Union which had been set out by Stalin. This programme recognized ethnic minority groups on the basis of "four commons": namely, a common language, a common territory, a common economic life and a common psychological make-up. From the 1950s to the 1980s, fifty-five ethnic minority groups were officially recognized by the state. As a consequence of this explicit and systematic recognition programme, ethnic minority groups were considered as integral components of the Chinese nation-state and became politically relevant to the Chinese authorities (Mullaney, 2011; Pieke, 2016). Upon official recognition, these groups were ascribed "a political status whatever their stage of development" represented (Dikotter, 1992, 109).

Another initiative was to demarcate ethnic autonomous regions. After the application of the national recognition programme, ethnic minority preferential policies were implemented in ethnic minority regions. The Chinese state set different levels of autonomous areas in regions where

ethnic minority citizens populated. These include five autonomous regions (*qu* 区), thirty autonomous districts (*zhou* 州), 120 autonomous prefectures (*xian* 县 or *qi* 旗) and 1,256 autonomous townships (*xiang* 乡). The Chinese government grants economic, political and cultural rights among ethnic minority groups, in order to reduce inequality between them.

In order to usher ethnic minorities into the modern age and "help them catch up with the advanced Han Chinese", the Chinese state sets out a series of development programmes to "improve" the socio-economic status of ethnic minorities. These preferential policies cover a variety of sectors. For example, a specific number of ethnic minority students enjoyed a privilege of university admission, which enabled them to be admitted with a lower benchmark then their Han Chinese fellows. These groups were also given preferential employment treatment in state-owned companies, and an exemption from the one-child policy (Sautman, 1998). In the 1990s, the Western Development Project was launched, and large investment in infrastructure and construction projects went into Western China, where most ethnic minorities dwell. By and large, the existing framework used to demarcate ethnic issues is territory based. Consequently, it does not apply to either "developed" ethnic minorities who have migrated to Han-dominated areas or to ethnic Han in non-autonomous regions.

An often-ignored agency in the implementation of policies is that of the ethnic elites. They provide the instrument through which ethnic minorities can interface with the political and economic infrastructure. On the national level, the agencies at the pinnacle are the United Front Work Department of the CCP and the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau. As a government body organizing ethnicity and religion affairs, the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau falls under the aegis of the United Front Work Department of the CCP.[1] This is regarded as a concession that the CCP has made to ethnic minority elites in order to secure CCP's power in the regions. These elites were and continue to be appointed delegates to the Political Consultative Committees (*zhengzhi xieshang huiyi* 政治协商会议) and the People's Congress (*renmin daibiao dahui* 人民代表大会). Appointing minority elites on the national level was necessary not only to deliver the promise of having "at least one representative to each officially recognized

[1] Strictly speaking, the United Front was established before the CCP came to power. The first ethnic autonomous area –Hui autonomous township was set up in Yan' an in 1936.

national minority" for ethnic minorities but also to consolidate the allegiance of ethnic minority. On the local level, appointing minority elites to similar though naturally smaller political apparatuses, including the United Front Work Department of the CCP and the Ethnic Bureau, would place these elites in the vanguard of dealing with ethnicity-related issues.

All these programmes had created a myth that presented cultural plurality and ethnic-friendly state policy as part and parcel of official discourse. Unsurprisingly, however, there is another side of the story. The constructed image of ethnic diversity has been subject to widespread criticism. The kern of the criticism has been caused by present ethnic policies and the presence of separatist movements in both ethnic minority and non-minority regions. In the first instance, the autonomy of ethnic minority regions is unquestionably subject to the supervision of the Communist Party and the hierarchy of the central state (Heberer, 1989). In the second instance, the frequent occurrence of ethnic riots has been attracting increasingly unwelcomed attention both inside and outside China in recent decades. Examples include the Lhasa riots on March 14, 2008, the violence in Xinjiang in 2009, and terrorist attacks in the metropolises of Beijing and Guangzhou (Ma, 2009). In the wake of these upheavals, discussions about Chinese ethnic policy have more forcibly highlighted.

2.2 De-territorialised Ethnic Policy in Cities

Lately, in the face of the increasing challenges raised by ethnic-related issues, scholars have been seeking a new path for ethnic policy. The following section briefly reviews the two most remarkable among all these discussions, the "depoliticization of ethnicity" (*qu zhengzhihua* 去政治化) and the "second-generation ethnic policy" (*erdai minzu zhengce* 二代民族政策).

Ma Rong, a sociologist at Peking University, has suggested that the increasing number of conflicts reflects the teething problems incurred in any nation-state building: ethnic minority preferential policies reinforce single-ethnic identity and are weakening the predominant Chinese national identity among ethnic minorities. Ma Rong has pointed out two contrasting policy orientations that can be chosen: simultaneously implementing "politicizing" and "culturalizing" ethnic policies. Each of these refers respectively to the ethnic policy approaches of Russia and the United States.

He argues that the current Chinese ethnic policies have been deeply influenced by the former Soviet Union. However, he argues that it should be borne in mind that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was caused by its inept national and ethnic policies; in contrast, the United States is a rather successful example of assimilation. The US deals with ethnic issues as an individual social problem, not as a political issue. Ma Rong believes that China should learn from its ancestors and from other culturalizing ethnicity histories, such as those of the US and of India. This would be better than looking to the former Soviet Union, which adopted a policy that strengthened ethnic consciousness and hence consolidated ethnic identity. Using this logic, he has come up with the suggestion of "depoliticizing ethnicity": the Chinese state should intensify national identity among Han and minority citizens alike and weaken the stress on ethnic identity (Ma, 2007).[2]

Although briefly touching upon the point of depoliticizing ethnicity in China, Ma Rong did not to offer more specific policy suggestions regarding the ethnic policies. Later, two other scholars from Tsinghua University, Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe, called for a proposal for "a second-generation ethnic policy". In line with Ma Rong's main concern, they have proposed a few suggestions whose purpose is to review existing ethnic policies. Summed up briefly, these suggestions cover the following points: abolishing the ethnicity category on identification cards; abrogating the ethnic autonomous region system; redistributing preferential benefits according to regions (this would include less-developed regions dominated by Han citizens) rather than by ethnic groups, and strengthening Mandarin Chinese language education among ethnic minorities (A. Hu and L. Hu, 2012). Apparently, these suggestions were noticed and responded to by the central CCP leaders. For instance, on February 13, 2013, in his article in the party newspaper, *The Study Times*, Zhu Weiqun, the head of the United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee, addressed some points that echoed these scholarly discussions and policy recommendations. Zhu suggests the need for the abolishment of the ethnic category on the identity card, the acceleration of the integration of the ethnic minorities and Han Chinese in

[2] Although he supports the national policy, it poses a threat to national stability and ethnic integration. Therefore, he argues that Chinese ethnic policy should turn to learn from the US that in Ma Rong's view, is a successful example to deal with ethnic issues "as an individual social problem but not a political issue" (Ma Rong, 2007, 11).

cities, and the avoidance of the formation of ethnic villages, communities, and associations in cities, and so on.[3]

Unsurprisingly, the argument for the depoliticization of ethnicity gave rise to fierce debates among Chinese scholars and think tanks. Arguments over "depoliticizing ethnicity" and "second-generation ethnic policy" commenced. Scholars have pointed out that depoliticizing ethnic relations would result in a dramatic shake-up of the relationship between the state and ethnic minority groups (Zhang, 2012). Others said that it would mean a betrayal of the Marxist ethnic principle that regards all ethnic groups as equal and the requirement of mutual respect as brothers (Hao, 2012). For instance, Hao Shiyuan, a leading professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), cites classical statements from Marxism and Leninism, "in order to achieve *de facto* equality of all nationalities, all nation-states should protect all the ethnic minority rights unconditionally". As Hao points out in another article: "National questions or ethnic problems, however labelled, exist in all multinational countries... They manifest themselves in many aspects, including politics, culture and social life, making it is hard to sort them into the abstract categories of 'politicization' and 'acculturation'" (Hao, 2014, 40). In addition, scholars doubt that the idea of depoliticizing ethnicity can be implemented as at the back of idea is that the implementation of the depoliticization may encourage Han chauvinism (Chen, 2014, 142). Therefore, ethnic issues in China should not, and are not very likely, to be depoliticized (Xie, 2014).

As these debates flowed back and forth, the discussion of depoliticizing ethnicity on the national level underwent an abrupt change after China's new leadership came to power in 2013. We can find evidence of this in Xi Jinping's speech at the National Ethnic Work Conference in November 2014. The content of this speech is pretty consistent with the existing themes of ethnic policies—ethnic minority autonomy and anti-terrorist threats in autonomous regions. Nevertheless, he does not mention anything about depoliticizing ethnicity. In fact, he put a particular emphasis on ethnic policy in non-autonomous regions. In this speech, he used the new terminology of the "three-links" (*sanjiao* 三交)—intercourse, intercommunication, and integration (*jiaoliu* 交流, *jiaowang* 交往, *jiaorong* 交融). The basic purport of the three-links is to dilute the collective identity of

[3] http://www.studytimes.com.cn/2012/02/13/01/01_51.htm (download on 2th April, 2013)

ethnic minorities by increasing interactions between different ethnic groups. For the first time, collaboration between migrant-sending and migrant-receiving areas was emphasized. As Xi stated,

> We shall not close the door on the ethnic minority floating population, but we shall not adopt a laissez-faire attitude of anything goes (放任自流)... It is critical to connect the governments of the migrant-sending area and migrant-receiving area effectively.[4]

These debates and the government responses to them indicate that the Chinese state is seeking its own way to address ethnic minority problems in non-autonomous regions. Apart from their disputative and controversial points, these discussions touch a few key points faced not only by China but also by other countries across the globe: ethnic privilege, distribution, and the increasing social equality between ethnic groups. Those countries with officially recognized ethnic minorities group inevitably face a "dilemma of recognition". The tension between ethnic recognition and minorities' rights claims has been growing in significance in recent decades. To deal with the issue, some governments might wish to "reduce inequality between ethnic groups by redistributing economy, political or cultural rights among them" (Zwart, 2005, 138), and doing so may promote group inequality and social fragmentation (Zwart, 2005).

So far, the existing policy framework on ethnic minority issues has been territorially based and preferential policies are implemented mainly in ethnic autonomous regions (Sautman, 1998; Leibold, 2013). "Urban Ethnic Work Regulation" issued in 1993 touches ethnic minorities in non-autonomous cities. This lists the basic principle of ethnic employment preferential policies. For example, it states that "governments in cities shall encourage factories or companies to employ ethnic minorities" (Item 8); "governments in cities shall provide assistance to ethnic minorities and support ethnic minorities who run companies and engage in other legal activities in cities" (Item 16)[5].

The stumbling block is that, on account of a lack of substantial legal backing, such regulations mostly exist only in name. Although plenty is

[4] The entire speech at the National Ethnic Work Conference has not been released. To get a sense of what was stated, the author has collected scattered information from postings on the Wechat platform by the National Ethnic Affairs Committee.

[5] The Urban Ethnic Work Regulation has been revised for five times since the 1993.

known about ethnic politics on the national level, existing discussions have rarely captured the empirical conditions at the local government level and the ambiguity provides a space for both the local state and ethnic minority migrants to negotiate with each other. Since the ethnic policy outside autonomous regions has yet to be institutionalized, this situation will continue.

2.3 The State's Construction of "Ethnic Yi"

As a consequence of the explicit and systematic recognition programme instigated by the CCP in the Mao era, ethnic minority groups were considered to have become integral components in the Chinese nation-state. The Yi comprise the seventh largest ethnic minority group, in term of demography, in China. The "ethnic Yi", named by the Chinese state, is considered the "natural" category and identity of Nuosu people in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces. This sweeping ethnic identification has lumped together a large number of local and regional communities whose origins seemed similar, whose languages were related, and who had common customs (Harrell, 2001, 176). In the course of this rather sweeping categorization, some heterogeneous communities were recognized as a single ethnic group.[6] For example, the ethnic Yi communities can barely communicate with each other in what is supposed to be the same Yi language; nor do they see themselves as members of the same ethnic Yi group.

During the campaign of ethnic classification, ethnic Yi group was regarded as the only slavery society. This status is at the opposite end of the spectrum to the Han who are presented as the most economically and culturally advanced ethnic group. In the ethnic spectrum, they are labelled as "backward", "low quality (*di suzhi* 低素质)", and "barbarian"; ethnic Yi are expected to learn from the "advanced" Han Chinese in order to achieve civilized status. Using rhetoric that is supposed to help these culturally "backward" minorities catch up with the majority Han and, hence, climb

[6] Even the scholars who were in charge of the national recognition campaign questioned the national recognition as highly problematic. In fact, even now there are still some minorities without an ethnicity. For example, the "Chuanqing people" are recognized neither as minority ethnicities, nor as the majority Han.

the social evolutionary ladder, the state employed development and civilization projects. On the social and cultural level, the state reversed its ban on ethnic religious and and activities. These bans had been employed during the Democratic Reform period (1956–1957), the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The Bimo activity specifically concerned Yi was banned as it was perceived by the government to be nothing more than superstition and contrary to the values of modernity. This situation changed fairly recently in the 1980s, when the official discourse began to take the tack that these cultural practices belong to the traditional culture of the Yi and deserve to be preserved. Over the last thirty years or so, there has been a renewal of traditional religious and cultural practices in the ethnic Yi region.

As scholars have realized, cultural superiority is an aspect of "hegemonic rule" that enables particular ethnic groups to become dominant and take precedence over other groups, who are marginalized as peripheral. Gladney points out that "the categorization of all levels of Chinese society, from political economy, to social class, to gender, to ethnicity and nationality represents a wide-ranging and ongoing project of internal colonialism" (Gladney, 1998, 2).

2.4 Nuosu's Perception of "Ethnic Yi"

To what extent do the recognized ethnic minority groups correspond to the ethnicity perceived by the local people? Answers to this question are subject to considerable disputes. The Yi people perceive their ethnic identity differently from the way their ethnicity is defined by the Chinese state. A strong clan identity demonstrated in the core of the Nuosu society is the primary source of the difference in perspective. Ethnic Yi people in the pre-migration period seldom had to picture what an ethnic Yi looked like. Today, those who live in the nuclear area of Liangshan region barely interact with other ethnic Yi groups; thus, they have no reference for how other groups might be similar or different from themselves. In this sense, rather than being a homogenous group, Yi people identify themselves according to the clan and class stratification to which they belong. In the next section I will discuss two main characteristics of Yi society, namely clan identity and social stratification, which are crucial for readers to

understand Yi society both in the past and in the present.

2.4.1 Clan: the Core of Nuosu Society

The prerevolutionary society of old Liangshan was a clan-based society without a centralized government. In people's everyday lives, clan identity is perceived to be more significant than overall ethnic Yi identity. As the core of Nuosu society, clan identity has continued; even after the great social and economic transformation that started in the mid-1950s, this was not disrupted.

Community values and public participation

The clan once functioned as a military organization to protect its members from outside attacks and provided a mechanism to solve internal disputes. In the prerevolutionary period, acting under the authority of clan chiefs (*touren* 头人), clan members were deployed to fight for the clan's interests in inter-clan disputes concerning land, property, and marriage. Adult male clan members were also expected to participate in public affairs, such as making important decisions democratically, voting, and debating in the public sphere. When a member of the clan was offended or injured by foreign clan members and was refused compensation, mediators and arbitrators (*ndeggu* and *suyy*) from the two concerning parties would be called to assist in solving the disputes (Lin, 1995, 71–80). Such group fights and participations in public affairs demonstrate masculinity and bring honour to one's community. Only males who are able to provide support to the clan are considered eligible clan members.[7]

Public participation in the clan's affairs is still an important part of Yi males' lives. During my fieldwork during the Yi's New Year I followed workers and brokers home. At that time, I frequently attended clan meetings, weddings, and funerals. Attendance, as they explained, was an important part of being a clan member in Liangshan. On the second day after I arrived in Luobo village, the head of the village invited me to watch a video about their clan meeting and a number of villagers from the same clan joined us. In their eyes, a large-scale clan meeting is a public

[7] Regarding public participation in clan meetings, see the documentary of "Hu Ri"(Tiger Day).

manifestation of their clan's solidarity and power. This situation is neatly summed up in the traditional Yi saying, "Just as monkeys rely on their forests, we Yi people have to rely on our clans" (猴子靠山林，彝人靠家支). Such clan-centred culture was also reflected in their punishment system. The most severe punishment in traditional Yi society is not death, but to be expelled from the clan (social death). Yi men's public participation in clan affairs is an outward and visible sign of their clan memberships.

The two dispute-resolving mechanisms—armed violence and intermediation—were not abandoned after members' migration to places outside Liangshan. Adult males are still required to represent their own clan in conflicts, and armed violence is still an available solution. In a modern setting, Yi men are now expected to participate in another set of collective actions. While the particular actions may be new, participation is carried out in a fashion that is in keeping with how they were taught to observe their clan obligations in traditional Yi society (chapter 6). As I will elaborate in chapters six and seven, the idea of clan solidarity is still very much alive among Yi men. In many cases, it is strongly demonstrated in strikes, street fights, and other forms of violence; in other cases, clans' mediators and arbitrators (*ndeggu* and *suyy*) are involved in these disputes.

Photo2.1 Yi men discussing rewriting a genealogy in a clan meeting

Clan, kinship and inter-clan marriage

People from the same clan share a stronger solidarity and a closer reciprocal relationship than they do with other people. This sense of solidarity is achieved through inter-clan marriage. In traditional Nuosu society, almost without exception, only people from matched clans can marry each other. Seldom do the Yi people marry members of another ethnic group or form marriage alliances with people from another class within Yi society. Marriage between people from the same class is also strictly limited within matched clans, and consequently cross-cousin marriage is common in Liangshan. These rules allow Yi people to retain the putative "purity" of their blood. From an early age, most Yi youth are betrothed by their clan elders to someone from their matched clans. Any other sort marriage that is not within the matched clans, not to mention one between Yi and non-Yi, is severely criticized by the elders. Clan marriage is also imbued with the very specific purpose of reinforcing the solidarity of kinship ties. The purpose is to maintain clan alliances, rather than a free choice between individuals. These regulations are still enforced today by the elders, although young members have started to resist this marriage tradition.

In addition, the allegiance to the shared ancestors contributes to the strength of Yi clanship. Yi people regard each other as blood relatives as long as they come from the same clans and share the same ancestors. Regardless of where they are, knowing their fellow clan members and drawing a line with these from the opposite clans is important to Yi people. Because of that, I often came across people tracing-back their genealogy when they meet for the first time in cities. It is important for people from the same clan to find out their seniority within the clan.[8]

Moreover, people take considerable pride in being born into a big, solidly constituted clan with a "hard bone" (authentic). The following quote from Yishi, from Meigu prefecture well demonstrates the confidence and prestige with which her clan imbues her:

> A person's social status is virtually determined by the clan into which he or she was born. Sometimes when we quarrel with a person, you know, one

[8] This happens in cities where many Yi people have begun to use a Han Chinese name instead of their Yi name. People usually first state their clan allegiance and then recount their genealogy in order to establish closer relationships with each other.

> sentence is enough to make him or her shut up/fall silent: You are from such a clan, no wonder you are behaving like that". People from big clans are thought to be more cultivated, generous, and supportive. To preserve clan solidarity, clan members are obliged to support and offer their clan members help. Usually, we kill animals, cows, and lambs, at least chickens, to serve our important guests. If one family does not have these animals to serve, other clan members will help or voluntarily provide the food for the guest. Likewise, you will never find a beggar in Nuosu society. This would be shameful for any clan that values solidarity.

The meaning of *jiazhi*, *jia*, *Jiamen* in the narrative of the Yi is usually misunderstood by non-Yi. In fact, unlike the meaning of *jia* as it is used by present-day Han Chinese to refer to their nuclear families, *jiazhi*, *jia,* or *jiamen* sometimes refers to the same thing - the whole clan to which a Yi individual belongs. Heberer provides a good summary of clan solidarity in his study of Liangshan Yi entrepreneurs, "The clan is segmented into lineages that constitute the branches of descent from a common ancestor, and plays a particularly important role in Yi society both as an economic unit and a source of solidarity. Its members commit themselves to the same obligations as close kin, such as the duty to mutual help and support. A clan may encompass tens of thousands of people e.g., the Shaga clan in Ganluo County which comprises more than 20,000 people and ten lineages" (Heberer, 2004, 3). As a Nuosu proverb says, "all the Yi under heaven belong to the same family". With the exception of a few clan feuds, almost all clan members have been interrelated for centuries through inter-clan marriages.

Bearing Heberer's observations in mind, emphasis on specific clan solidarity does not mean that overall ethnic identity is obscured. One can still see that Yi people have more in common with each other than they do with non-Yi. Members of a particular ethnic Yi clan share the same beliefs, obligations, and symbols. As Heberer has observed, "Each individual knows how he/she has to behave to other clan members. But since these values (patterns of reciprocity, norms, solidarity and behaviour) are equally binding for all Yi clans, one can perceive them too as the makers of ethnicity" (Heberer, 2004, 4). As I will demonstrate in other chapters, when ethnic Yi people migrate outside the Yi Autonomous Region, they vividly express their ethnic Yi profiles when encountering with other migrants.

While it effectively cements people together, clan identity makes it

difficult for the state to penetrate Yi folk society. This is especially the case in rural regions. As noted above, the prerevolutionary society of Liangshan was a clan-based society without a centralized government. This means that in spite of its historical political alliances (*chaogong guanxi* 朝贡关系) with the central state, the clan-based Nuosu society could still remain fairly independent of the state for dynasties. For many Yi, the formal institutions represent "others"—the Han Chinese or the CCP. Even today, the Nuosu elders retain a clear memory of their experiences before and after the Communist Party came to Liangshan in 1930s. Their experience subsequent to this encounter presents a sharp contrast to their historical past when people governed themselves under their own authority.[9] Nuosu people who live in tribal society became involved in the Chinese state under the leadership of the Communist Party. Meanwhile, in spite of their consensus regarding the necessity of development in response to the call of the Chinese government, Nuosu people, especially the elders, still inadvertently express their frustration over having to adjust themselves to the Chinese society. As an elder in the village told me, "After the arrival of the Communist Party, everything under heaven has been under their control, and we ethnic minorities have had to develop".

Nowadays, as an ethnic group presenting themselves to non-Yi groups and as an entity that is involved in Chinese nation-state building, ethnic Yi people find themselves situated between a proverbial rock and hard place. They are continually caught between responding to the demands of modern nation-state building and maintaining their traditional social norms. In many aspects, Yi people in the countryside still trust their own clan regulations more than any formal institutionalized bureaucracies and political agendas set by the state. For instance, rather than turning to the formal legal system for mediation, Yi people in rural areas mostly resolve disputes with reference to their own customary law with the assistance of *ndeggu* and *suyy*. Insisting on their kinship and child-raising traditions, ethnic Yi people resist the birth-control policy. They hide from state surveillance and give birth to their babies in the vastness of the mountains. This results in an average of four to seven children in Yi families. Confronted with admonitions by the state that they are destroying the

[9] Yihai alliance (*Yihai jiemeng* 彝海结盟) refers to the 1935 historical alliance made by the leader of the Red Army of the Communist Party, Liu Bocheng, with the leader of a Black Yi clan, Xiao Yedan. It helped the army take control of the Liangshan region.

environment, Yi people frame a counter-discourse by saying that Yi culture has a strong tradition of preserving the environment (Heberer, 2014, 752). The contradiction between "traditional" and "modern", between centre and periphery, and between majority and minority, has continued unbroken in the nearly seventy-year process of adjusting to the modern Chinese state.

2.4.2 Social Stratification: "Black Yi" and "White Yi"

Traditional ethnic Yi society has five hierarchical classes: *nzymo*, *nuoho*, *quho*, *mgajie,* and *gaxy*. Historically, *nzymo* were the highest class of people. They were officially appointed local leaders by the central state; *nuoho*, are the *de facto* ruling class who used to own the *mgajie* and *gaxy* as their personal servants. The *quho* is the largest class within Yi society. They are subordinate to the *nuoho* class, but had a certain authority over their personal property and used to own some slaves. *Gaxy,* the lowest class, who were originally Han Chinese, were considered slaves captured to serve the *nuoho*. Since the *gaxy* were the physical property of their owners, they could be bought and sold by their masters.[10] The caste order in Nuosu society is usually fixed and immutable, but a small number of *quho* have been able to marry *nuoho*. This has allowed some *quho* to become *nuoho* after several generations (see also, Harrell, 2001, 94).

Today, of the five ranks of social stratification—*nzymo*, *nuoho*, *quho*, *mgajie and gaxy*—only *nuoho*, *quho* and *maajie* still exist. *Nzymo* and *gaxy* have disappeared. In the official categorization, Yi society was officially restructured into two different classes: Black Yi (*nuoho*) and White Yi (*ounuo* and *mgajie*). Clearly, the classification of the Black Yi and White Yi does not tally with the ranks of old Yi society. In my field research, I came across some clan members who are as powerful as some Black Yi; in spite of their authority, they are still classified as White Yi. One example is the White Yi

[10] Regarding the Black Yi and White Yi in Liangshan society, see the historical studies documented by Lin Yaohua, Ma Changshou amd Zeng Zhaolun. Ma, Changshou, 2006. *Liangshan Luoyi Research Report*. Sichuan Bashu Publisher. Lin, Yaohua. 1947. *The Lolo of Liangshan (Liang-shan I-cha). [Shanghai: Shangwu yinshua Guan]* 林耀华，1947, 凉山彝家，上海：商务印书馆。马长寿, 2006，凉山罗彝考察报告，四川巴蜀书社。Zeng Zhaolun. 1945. *The Investigation of Big Lingshan Yi Region [Daliangshan Yiqu Kaocha Ji]*. Chongqing: Qiuzhen Shekan. 曾昭伦，1945，大凉山夷区考察记，重庆：求真社刊。

people from the Shama Qubi clan. They are officially recognized as White Yi, but they feel superior to the other White Yi clans. Another example, are some people from the formerly independent *quho* who own slaves belonging to the lower stratum. I was told by some of them that, until the 1990s, there were still servants who were subordinated and worked for their family for free. To simplify the analysis, this chapter will primarily use the terms Black Yi and White Yi in discussing the social stratification of the Yi group.

Before the Democratic Reform in the 1950s, in the official discourse, Yi society was still known to retain the slavery system. According to Marxist scholars, the reason Yi society was considered a slave society was that it used to have a slave-based model of production. In contrast to the definition of a slave society made by Chinese scholars (mostly Han Chinese), many Western and local Yi scholars point out that this classification does not reflect reality. For example, Ann Maxwell Hill demonstrates that, although slaves played a role in household production in traditional Yi society, the Yi slavery system was not solely an economic system; moreover, people were not completely forced nor did they lose all their freedom. Both slaves and servants in Yi society could achieve upper class status through cross-class marriages or through land grants. However, this transformation was usually not immediate but took several generations (Hill, 2001). Hill argues that Yi society was a society with slaves, but not a "slavery society" in the modern Western sense. From an insider's perspective, the Yi scholar Ma Erzi argues that slavery was a social rather than an economic institution whose purpose was to integrate non-Yi people such as Han Chinese into Yi society (Ma, 1993). These arguments have been generally agreed upon by scholars who study the Yi people, with the exception of some scholars who focus mainly on the system of national recognition.[11]

The class structure and clan differences in Yi culture are known to have diminished since the establishment of the PRC. During the era of the Democratic Reform in the 1950s, the CCP led a movement to redistribute the property of the ruling class of the Black Yi to the subordinated class of the White Yi. This reform put into practice the communist ideology of equality and was used to establish the legitimacy of the CCP on the local level. As a result, the hierarchy between Black Yi and White Yi is really no

[11] See Wu, Jinhua. 2002. *We Came Through This Way- the Transformation of Liangshan. [Wo Men Shi Zhe Yang Zou Guo Lai De].* Beijing: Minzu Press. 伍精华，2002，我们是这样走过来的：凉山的变迁，北京：民族出版社。

longer valid, and the system of slavery has waned in Yi society. During the Cultural Revolution era in the 1960s and 1970s, traditional Yi class structure underwent significant changes. In many Yi regions, there were violent insurgencies, such as the physical beating of local tyrants and the seizure of their property. In Liangshan, people who were identified as local tyrants were usually Black Yi (Nuoho).

According to the official discourse, the social hierarchy of Black Yi and White Yi has been abolished in Yi society. In spite of this official rhetoric, the social hierarchy of Black Yi and White Yi has undergone something of a revival in Liangshan in recent years. Despite the historical changes in the class structure of Yi society over time, a handful of Black Yi have still clung on to their prestige and power in Yi society. These attributes have been reinforced by strategic inter-clan marriage, which is a traditional means for people from specific clans and social stratifications to establish alliances. This trend is especially obvious among the Black Yi clans. Compared with the demographical majority of the White Yi, it would be fair to say that the Black Yi restrictions on inter-clan marriages have been implemented far more stringently than among the White Yi clans, and, generally speaking, they have been able to keep their blood "pure" and retain their prestigious status.

The hierarchy between the White Yi and the Black Yi was a very prominently visible when I observed the wedding ceremony of a Black Yi, Ahuo, in Meigu prefecture. During the wedding ceremony, the power relationship was clearly manifest in the interactions between the Ahuo (Black Yi) family and the other villagers. The Ahuo family was privileged in terms of sitting, speaking, and organizing the activities throughout the entire event; the White Yi usually squatted far away from the centre of the Black Yi group. The White Yi people remained silent, while Ahuo and other Black Yi delivered speeches. In response to my curiosity whether this was because of the Black Yi leader Ahuo's business successes, the White Yi villagers told me that the most crucial factor was that the Ahuo family has been in charge of this area for decades. Ahuo did not have any formal education. As a local Black Yi leader, he was well educated in Yi literacy, traditions, proverbs and rules. As a Black Yi leader endowed with clan power and prestige, Ahuo undoubtedly had no difficulty exercising authority and power over his White Yi fellow-villagers.

Picture2.2-3: a Black Yi women's wedding ceremony

In sum, Yi social stratification and clan hierarchies in the prerevolutionary period are helpful in trying to form a picture of present-day Yi society. Lying at the heart of the Yi out-migration are two characteristics inherited and embedded in traditional Yi society. One is reciprocity and solidarity of clan, and the other is the social hierarchy of Black Yi and White Yi. On the one hand, Yi migrants from Liangshan rely heavily on their ethnic kin networks throughout their migration process from their rural hometowns to urban areas where work can be found. On the other hand, the social stratification between the Black and White Yi, the main characteristic that differentiates the Yi from other ethnic groups in China, plays a significant role in the formation of brokerage in the context of migration.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a historical background, setting out the contested relationship of the Yi with the Chinese state nation-building project and the traditional social relationship of the Yi with a particular focus on the clan system. It begins with a discussion of the overarching ethnic policy in China and underlines the new challenge the Chinese government has been facing in recent years— from its inception the existing policy framework on ethnic minority issues has been territorially based, and consequently the vast majority of preferential policies have been implemented within the boundaries of ethnic autonomous regions but do not extend beyond their boundaries. Nowadays, Yi identity and class differences have been subsumed into the ethnic Yi category and social structures are continuously reshaping and adjusting as people wrestle with coming to terms with nation-state building. Neither the ethnic Yi identity nor the traditional social structure still exists as it did in the erstwhile tribal society; nevertheless, neither has completely vanished in the new social context.

Against this background, this chapter depicts the internal and external ascriptions of the Yi. The ethnic Yi group was recognized by the Chinese state in the 1950s. In contrast to the category of ethnic Yi recognized by the Chinese state as a homogenous ethnic group coming to terms with nation-state building, the Yi people themselves have a heterogenous

perception of the meaning of what it is to be an ethnic Yi. To reveal the perspective of Yi people themselves, this chapter has placed a particular focus on two characteristics: clan identity and hierarchical social structure (Black Yi vs. White Yi). These two social elements were present in the pre-revolutionary period and continue to contribute heavily to the fundamental picture of present-day Yi society. Without understanding these elements, it is impossible to get a clear picture of the formation of co-ethnic brokerage in the migration process.