China's Many Faces: Chapter 3

Ethnic, Cultural, and Religious Pluralism

Susan D. Blum

The noblest countries, England, France, and Italy, are those where the blood is the most mixed.... The fact of race, which was originally crucial ... thus becomes increasingly less important. Human history is essentially different from zoology, and race is not everything, . . . and one does not have the right to go through the world fingering people's skulls, and taking them by the throat saying "You are of our blood; you belong to us!" Aside from anthropological characteristics, there are such things as reason, justice, the true, and the beautiful, which are the same for all.... What we have just said of race applies to language too. Language invites people to unite, but it does not force them to do so.... There is something in man which is superior to language, namely, the will.... Can one not have the same sentiments and the same thoughts, and love the same things in different languages? . . . Th[e] exclusive concern with language, like an excessive preoccupation with race, has its dangers and its drawbacks. Such exaggerations enclose one within a specific culture, considered as national; one limits oneself, one hems oneself in.... Religion cannot supply an adequate basis for the constitution of a modern nationality either.... A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present.
—Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?," 1882

Americans most often receive news of China through three basic images: First is Political China, where everyone is preoccupied with the intricacies of political organization—who is premier, prime minister, party secretary, minister of this and that. Visually, this looks like a row of grim, late-middle-aged men either standing or seated, dressed in military garb or

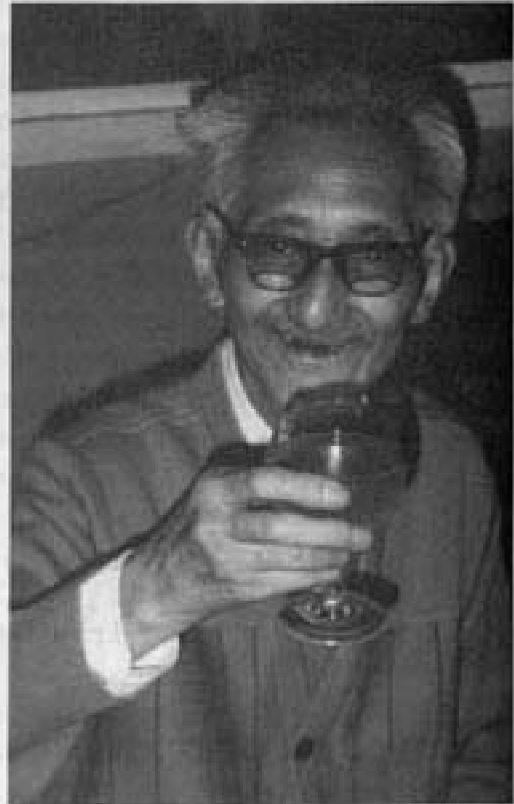

Fig. 3.1. The many faces of China. (Photos by Susan Blum)

increasingly natty Western-style suits, listening to speeches or marching political ritual. The second image is the Big Bad Chinese State in all manifestations: human rights violations, political prisoners, censorship, the Communist Party's fierce ideological grasp on people's beliefs, successfully promulgating the Party line about Chinese civilization. This looks like prisoners on their way to execution, tanks threatening lone protesters in Tian'anmen Square, monks beaten in Tibet. The third image is Business China, the most commonly portrayed China since the late 1980s. This image focuses on money making—joint ventures (preferably American companies), factories, housing projects, and so forth. One it portrayed in shiny coastal buildings, in cellular-phone-toting, motorscooter-riding, well-dressed and permed young people or in close-ups of the merchandise now available in the glittery department stores of China's cities. A fourth image is little seen now—that of Poor China, the one we pitied when we were children, forced to eat our vegetables because "children are starving in China." Bold journalists occasionally remind their readers that this China has not disappeared, and acute photojournalists note the contrasts between the increasing wealth of China's fortunate and the increasing misery of those who fall through the wide cracks.

Still, despite the existence of some variety in the Chinas presented to American viewers, the China that emerges recalls the image I have when I visit friends who live just outside Washington, D.C. The centers of their world are largely contained within the Beltway, like a New Yorker's view of the United States, where everything west of the Hudson River fades off into inconsequentiality. But just as one gets a different view of the United States from Colorado or from visiting Haitian vodou (voodoo) organizations in Brooklyn, so there are alternative views of China.

I am a cultural anthropologist who has spent most of my time in China in the city of Kunming, which is near Burma, in southwest China. This chapter relies on my own field experience as well as the research of other scholars. I will challenge any assumptions about China's uniformity, introducing three aspects of China's pluralism, though there are, of course, others that one could adduce as well. (My choice of three, both in the initial images and in my corrective, is arbitrary, though the folklorist Alan Dunhas provided a fascinating psychoanalytic discussion of Americans' use of three to list things: red, white, blue; lions, tigers, bears; the good, the bad, and the ugly; and so forth.)[1] The China that exists beyond the big three images is one that even visitors to the country might miss if they did not

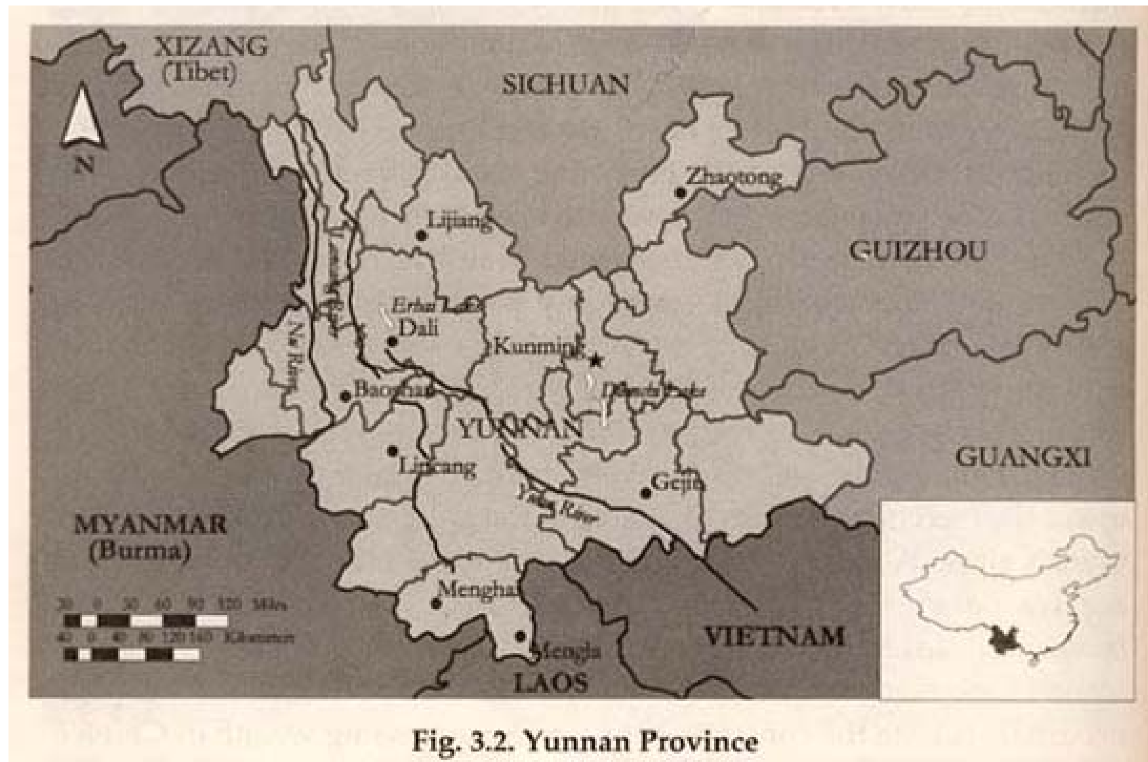

Fig. 3.2. Yunnan Province

have an introduction to it. The first subject is one that may be a bit startling to Americans who can scarcely distinguish Japanese from Chinese (on the basis of appearance)

ETHNIC DIVERSITY

My first subject is China's ethnic diversity. China is often believed to be ethnically quite homogeneous, with black-haired Chinese-speaking people constituting the majority known as Han. Indeed, the percentage of people officially classified as Han is extraordinarily high—about 92 percent (though falling). That, of course, still leaves 8 percent of 1.2 billion-96 million, or larger than the population of Mexico—who do not claim Han identity. I cannot discuss here the problematic aspects of the category "Han," except to suggest that, like a "generic American," it is hardly without a history and evolution.

My concern here is with the 8 percent, or 96 million people, classified by the Chinese state as *minzu*, a category halfway between "nationality" like in the former Soviet Union and "ethnic group" like in the United States. *Minzu* was borrowed from Japanese and has come to mean "ethnic group."

Ethnic minorities are literally *shaoshuminzu*, but used alone the term *minzu* most always refers to minorities. Some of these are fairly well known, like the Tibetans—the seventh largest group, about 4 million. Some are so few in number that only specialists are familiar with them, like the Hezhe, of whom there are only 1,500.

The current classification scheme arose immediately after the founding the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and has roots in three types of conceptual soil:

1. Qing dynasty (1644-1911) administration of border areas, in which there was a government bureau designated to handle Mongolian and Tibetan affairs.
2. Soviet-style nationality policy, especially the anti-nationality policies of Stalin, claiming a role as an interpreter of Marx.
3. Late-nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century considerations of nationalism as a desirable force. The goal of transforming a dynastic empire into a modern nation state was shared by many countries in this century; ethnic groups were seen as the building blocks of nations, with a single majority group seen as central to the nation.[2] Chinese intellectuals looked at Japan, Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States to see how such nations had been constituted and what the appropriate relations were between constituents. The Kuomintang (KMT or GMD), the Nationalist party that claimed authority from the fall of the last Chinese dynasty in 1911 until the Communist victory in 1949, was ruthless from the beginning; ethnic groups were expected to assimilate to the majority. The government saw its role as "encouraging" such assimilation through fair intolerant repression of difference.

The nationalities policies of the PRC are built upon contradictory premises (that nations are desired in a society's modernization process and at the same time that they create undesirable divisions) and hence many of the implementations of the policies have vacillated. Nationality/ethnic differences were considered inevitable in the present, but in a distant utopian future, with the accomplishment of Communism these differences were expected to wither and die, just like the nation itself. Meanwhile, differences among groups were acceptable; at more tolerant moments, they were encouraged, while at more repressive moments they were punished.
A swing between repression and tolerance of ethnic difference has followed that of political openness or closure.

In order to determine what the constituents were of this new jigsaw puzzle, using a new classificatory logic, Chinese social scientists were enlisted, to differentiate "genuine" and "spurious" cultural groups. Borrowing a notion from the Soviet Union, scholars evaluated each applicant group on the basis of four criteria: common territory, common language, common economic life, common psychological (cultural) life.[3] Notice that "race" is not among them. The classificatory schema as it stands does not focus on descent or biology but rather on contemporary practices, though it is usually assumed that the contemporary practices are similar because of shared history. People often claim that they can identify ethnic minorities by looking, but their judgment is based on a gestalt of clothing, gait, cleanliness, hair style, and many other items. It is common for individuals to change ethnic identity, either becoming Han through assimilation of Han civilization or becoming minority through marriage or migration to minority areas.

The use of appearance for racial/ethnic identification seems obvious to people in the United States but is not the primary concern in Chinese ethnic identification. Anthropologists have been demonstrating for quite some time that the physical appearance of members of given populations is not a reliable indicator of genetic relationship. There are no physical features that can uniquely specify any so-called race; all "races" contain virtually all physical features, though in varying proportions. There is much more overlap among groups than distinctions between them. Skin color is most salient for North Americans (this is what pops into our minds as an obvious index of identity), but all "races" contain a continuum of skin colors. It is as if one were to say "men are taller than women"—true in many cases and true on average, but there are certainly cases where one could find women who are taller than men. Anthropologists have avoided the term "race" as a biological (as opposed to cultural) category for many decades, because superficial physical appearance does not predict what other genetic traits a person possesses. In terms of classifying populations, biological anthropologists tend to use frequencies of genetic features much more than those of appearance (a difference between genotype and phenotype).[4] In the case of China, there may be physical features that tend to occur more often in some groups (Tibetans and Yi, for example, are often tall) but this does not provide a definitive means of classifying, and this is not what the Chinese use for classification.

With 400-500 applications, recognition has to date been granted to only fifty-five groups, resulting in the schema we now use. It was determined

that some groups shared enough traits with other groups to be merged with them, often because linguists determined their dialects to be mutually intelligible. Other groups were concluded to be authentically distinctive, even though they had believed themselves to be part of another group (see table 3.1).

New names were proposed for many groups. In the past, Han often referred to minorities, either by terms for the "barbarians" of the four directions (Man Yi Rong Di) or by other pejorative terms, such as "Lolo" for groups now called Yi, where Lolo was the Chinese version of a word meaning a basket said to hold the soul of a person upon death—an allusion to apparently "superstitious" beliefs. Respect for minority wishes was to be signaled by renaming them with desirable terms.

Of the fifty-five minority groups recognized by China, nearly all these groups live on China's borders. The territory inhabited largely by minority groups constitutes 50-60 percent of the area now claimed by China. Tom Grunfeld explains the state's deep concern over this fairly small fraction of its population as stemming from three sources: (1) this area buffers strategic international borders, (2) there are critical natural resources in this territory, and (3) China's population needs area into which to expand.[5] While ordinary people living in China's central areas may have little direct experience with minorities and may pay little attention to them, the government has devoted an enormous amount of effort to minority policies, support of minority areas, or repression of minority activities. In areas where there are sizable numbers of minorities, majorities are quite aware of them, often bemoaning the fact that there are some benefits associated with minority status—including exemption from the one-child policy (in some areas only). Han often told me that individuals asked for classification as minorities—for example, if they had one Han parent and one minority parent—to gain such benefits.

The government promotes harmony and unity among nationalities, but in fact this is not always borne out. Many people of ethnic minority status told me of instances of hostility, disdain, or prejudice. A dear friend, who is Yi, came from the countryside to Kunming. At first she was quite reluctant to venture out in her native dress, fearing ridicule or worse. In time, she appeared less and less obviously *minzu* and grew more bold. Yet I have observed Han prejudice directed at her and other minority friends in a combination of ethnic and socioeconomic hauteur, mitigated only slightly by my presence as a foreign observer. Most ethnic minorities, especially in southwest China, live in rural areas where the levels of education and

Table 3.1 Ethnic Minorities (*continued*)

Ethnic Group	*Population (1990 census)*	*World Religion*	*Principal Location*
Hani	1,253,952		Yunnan
Kazaks	1,111,718	Islam	Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu
Li	1,110,900		Hainan
Dai	1,025,128	Buddhism (Theravada)	Yunnan
She	630,378		Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Anhui, Guangdong
Lisu	574,856	Christianity (some)	Yunnan, Sichuan
Gelao, Gelo	437,997		Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi
Lahu	411,476	Buddhism	Yunnan
Dongxiang	373,872	Islam	Gansu, Xinjiang
Va, Wa	351,974	Buddhism (Theravada) (some)	Yunnan
Shui	345,993		Guizhou, Guangxi
Naxi	278,009		Yunnan, Sichuan, Tibet
Qiang	198,252		Sichuan
Tu	191,624	Buddhism (Lamaism)	Qinghai, Gansu
Xibe	172,847		Xinjiang
Mulam	159,328		Guangxi
Kirgiz	141,549	Islam	Xinjiang, Heilongjiang
Daur	121,357		Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang
Jingpo	119,209	Buddhism (Theravada)	Yunnan
Salar	87,697	Islam	Qinghai, Gansu, Xinjiang
Blang, Bulang	82,280	Buddhism (Theravada)	Yunnan
Maonan	71,968		Guangxi
Tajiks	33,538	Islam	Xinjiang
Primi, Pumi	29,657		Yunnan, Sichuan
Achang	27,708	Buddhism (Theravada)	Yunnan
Nu	27,123		Yunnan

(*continued*)

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Ethnic Group	*Population (1990 census)*	*World Religion*	*Principal Location*
Ewenkis	26,315	Christianity (Eastern Orthodox)	Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang
Gin, Jing	18,915		Guangxi
Jino, Jinuo	18,021		Yunnan
Benglong, De'ang	15,462	Buddhism (Theravada)	Yunnan
Uzbeks	14,502	Islam	Xinjiang
Russians	13,504	Christianity (Eastern Orthodox)	Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia
Yugurs	12,297	Buddhism (Lamaism)	Gansu
Bonan	12,212	Islam	Gansu
Monba, Moinba	7,475		Tibet
Oroqen	6,965		Northeast China
Derung, Drung	5,816		Yunnan
Tatars	4,873	Islam	Xinjiang
Hezhe, Hezhen	4,245		Heilongjiang
Gaoshan	2,909		Taiwan, Shanghai, Beijing, Wuhan, Fujian
Lhoba	2,312		Tibet
Others not identified	49,341		
TOTAL	1,133,682,501		

(Sources: Mackerras 1994: 238–240, 1990 Census, Ma 1989)

income are quite low (see Oakes, this volume). When they interact with urban Han, they are assumed to be poor, ignorant, and sometimes generally "backward." A kernel of truth lies within this prejudice; poverty and illiteracy are much higher in rural areas, and the majority of ethnic minorities are found in these areas.

One of the most significant policies at the political level concerns the establishment of five "autonomous regions" (zizhiqu). These are provincial-sized administrative areas in which minorities were traditionally a majority and were supposed to have substantial political power (see table 3.2). In fact, minority cadres have often occupied positions of secondary power, sometimes little more than ornamentation. A real challenge has been the fact that before 1949, most minorities were not educated in the Chinese system and were not appropriate for positions of power. Some traditional "feudal" leaders were placed into leadership positions, while younger people began to be educated in newer ways of practicing politics—and were Sinified. In many ways the classification of minorities in China is similar to the project of ethnic identification among Native Americans; a fascinating comparison could be drawn between the reservation system in the United States and Canada and the system of autonomous areas in China. The reservations in the United States were largely begun as a way of containing Native Americans in remote areas, following the violent wars with the Anglo populations. They were meant to provide subsistence, often with the support of outside resources, since they often involved relocating tribes into areas that were not their traditional homelands and combining groups that had little historical connection. Poverty and ill health often characterize life on the reservations.

These are also true of areas with dominant minority populations in China. In China the penetration of the central government is quite significant; policies set by the government may be vetted by local, native of ficials, but this is at the pleasure of the non-minority authorities. Autonomous areas exist at all three levels of administrative division: 5 province-level autonomous regions (zizhiqu), 31 autonomous prefectures (zizhizkou), and 96 autonomous counties and banners (zizhixian). They are not intended to be independent, but different rules may apply in them than in the country as a whole. Some, for instance, are multilingual, in recognition of the fact that they contain several different groups in substantial numbers. There are many areas of minority life in which the state has intervened, differing with the different groups. Some receive special subsidies in recognition of the fact that their income is significantly below the

Table 3.2 Autonomous Regions

Autonomous Regions	*Significant Ethnic Groups*	*Date Established*
Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region	Mongolian, Hui, Korean, Manchu, Daur, Oroqen, Xibe, Russian	1947
Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region	Uighur, Kazak, Hui, Kirgiz, Uzbek, Mongolian, Daur, Xibe, Tajik, Tatar, Russian, Manchu	1955
Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	Hui, Dongxiang, Bonan, Salar, Tu, Manchu	1958
Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	Zhuang, Yao, Miao, Dong, Mulam, Maonan, Hui, Yi, Shui, Jing, Gelo	1958
Tibet Autonomous Region	Tibetan, Hui, Moinba, Lhoba	1965

(Source: Ma 1989: 434–448)

average in nearby areas. Some are exempt from the one- or two-child policy. Some have bilingual schools.

In the remainder of this section, I will introduce a few of the fifty-five groups and some points of significance of each (see figure 3.3).

The largest is the Zhuang, with 15.5 million, related to people across the border in Vietnam. The Zhuang were largely assimilated, Sinified, when the PRC admonished them to pay more attention to their own cultural characteristics. Though this seems counter intuitive, because of the principles of nationality differences and classification, the Zhuang were encouraged to differentiate themselves from Han culture. Some regard the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region as a trial before the government tackled its most difficult case, that of Tibet, the fifth, and last, autonomous region to be established, in 1965.

Ten of the fifty-five recognized *minzu* are Muslim (Hui, Uighur, Kazak, Tatar, Tajik, Uzbek, Kirgiz, Dongxiang, Salar, Bonan). They speak a wide range of languages, from Indo-European (spoken by Tajiks, who speak a kind of Iranian) to Turkic/Altaic (spoken by Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Tatars, Uzbeks, and Uighurs, Yugurs, Salars—seven Turkic minorities)[8] to Chinese. (Hui).

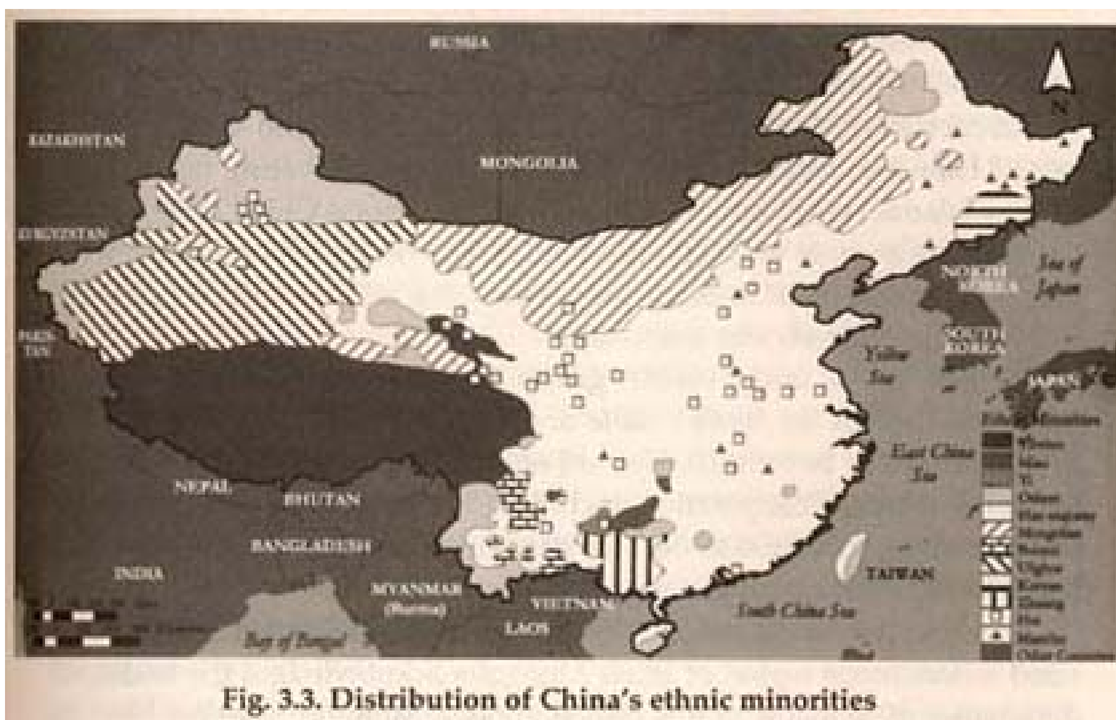

Fig. 3.3. Distribution of China's ethnic minorities

They total about 17 million, and two of China's five "autonomous regions" are dominated by Muslims: the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (formerly called Chinese Turkestan) and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Uighurs—the fifth largest minority ethnic group in China—number about 7 million. Uighur separatists in Xinjiang, in northwest China, have been creating violent incidents in the name of pan-Turkism, wishing to unite with other Turkic-speaking Muslims across the border in Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikstan (see Dautcher, this volume). Scholars who focus on these groups are often puzzled at the Western media neglect of these groups and their cause, seeing their struggles as quite analogous to the Tibetans' struggles for independence, albeit without a charismatic leader such as the Dalai Lama. There have been Muslim rebellions in China for at least a century, and some, notably the Ili Rebellion in Xinjiang (1944-49), have created a great challenge to the authority of the Chinese nation-state.

The Hui ethnic group—third largest minority in China, at about 8.6 million—live everywhere in China, mostly in cities. They are not usually concentrated in particular areas but live throughout China, hence are probably the most widely known by inhabitants of central China. Chinese-speaking Muslims, they probably have some central Asian ancestry dating

from the seventh to the fourteenth century,[9] followed by frequent intermarriage with Han. Devout Hui chant the Koran five times a day in Persian, observe Ramadan, and refuse to eat pork. At least a thousand go to Mecca each year. Han often clash with Hui, and there is no shortage of stories of Han-Hui conflict. Some Hui have begun cultivating ties with the greater Islamic world outside China, which supports China's foreign policy interests in some ways (political alliance, economic cooperation) while also threatening them in other ways (fostering religion and allegiance to sacred rather than secular authority).

The Hui are a fairly visible group in Kunming. The city has five mosques, though the most visible and well attended was torn down in 1997 (perhaps to be rebuilt). Hui are often mentioned for their "independence" and lack of cooperation, including the possession of weapons and being fearless, "unafraid to die" (*bu pa si*), making them a formidable challenge to the authority of the central government.

Other groups with secessionist tendencies include Mongols. The province-sized autonomous region of Inner Mongolia acknowledges the traditional dominance of Mongols in this region, though Mongols have not been the majority for quite some time. The people of this autonomous region share many features with the Mongolians who live in the independent country just to their north. Some rely on pastoralism as a subsistence system, and some speak the Mongolian language as their native tongue. Chinese government policies have reflected disdain for traditional Mongolian herding practices for centuries; in this century the efforts to transform such practices have been quite effective, often with disastrous consequences.

Not all minority groups have secessionist tendencies, yet they often have many features that set them apart from the other groups surrounding them. For instance, in Yunnan province in southwest China, where twenty-five minority *minzu* have been recognized, there are groups (Wa) who are reported to have practiced head-hunting as recently as the 1950s. These people are often seen as extremely "primitive" and in need of guidance by the more developed Han people, who are the majority group. Many ethnic groups have their own system of religious beliefs, usually called "animist," speak their own non-Chinese language, wear different clothing, practice different marriage customs, and have their own forms of musical, verbal, and visual arts.

The Dai ethnic group in Yunnan are kin to the Thai people of Thailand: they speak the same non-Chinese language (Thai), practice the same brand of Buddhism (Theravada, in contrast to the Jingtu, Pure Land, Buddhism

practiced by most Chinese Buddhists), wear the same clothes, and eat the same food. There are just over a million Dai in China. They are often mentioned in conversation as being gentle, clean, and picturesque; their pavilion at minority villages is usually the most elaborate, and their representation is found in virtually all complimentary contexts, such as tourist brochures or murals.

Other ethnic groups include 1.9 million Koreans in northeast China, some 13,500 Russians, and 9.8 million Manchus. Some groups are nomadic pastoralists, raising livestock and living in grasslands. Some are fishers, living on boats. Some eke out a living in fairly barren mountain regions, like the various Yi of Sichuan and Yunnan (about 6.6 million, the sixth most numerous minority ethnic group). Some eat corn as their staple food, some potatoes, some rice. Historically acute readers will recall that corn and potatoes are so-called New World crops, introduced from the Americas by Portuguese missionaries via the Philippines in the fifteenth century. Recent in Chinese terms, these are considered "traditional" foods for these groups by most analysts.

Most Chinese know of ethnic minorities as quaint relics of humanity's more "primitive" past, seeing their images on China's paper money and in song-and-dance performances that portray each ethnic group in succession—often by performers of different ethnic groups. Those who travel may visit "minority villages," ethnic theme parks where young people represent their "typical" rural brothers and sisters (see Lam, this volume). These exist in many areas in China, with a famous one on the outskirts of Kunming. It is expensive to enter, and only some of the more dramatic minorities are represented. One of my most memorable sights is of the "primitive" village, portraying four ethnic groups categorized as "primitive." Their religion is "animism," they practiced head-hunting and totemism, produced fertility symbols, and constructed longhouses where unmarried youth could meet.

Ethnic minorities are often misunderstood, stereotyped, and scapegoated. Yet the enduring presence and increase of ethnic minorities suggests that they are important for an understanding of China, beyond the small percentage of the population that they represent.

This brief introduction of minority groups and some of their characteristics should alert the reader to some of the complexities China faces—considerations of how to combine a tolerance for cultural diversity with goals of national integration and modernization. China has vacillated between policies of tolerance for pluralism and policies that urge assimilation or

prohibit traditional practices. It is currently in a period of relative tolerance, yet there are clear limits to how much minority practices may diverge from those of the majority. Tibet and increasingly Xinjiang are places where the state feels its political and cultural authority to be greatly challenged. Its response is generally repression.

CULTURAL AND REGIONAL DIVERSITY

Another complicating factor in China, even disregarding the 96 million non-Han, is cultural diversity among Han Chinese. Here I will use "culture" to mean lifeways in general, foodways, and language; my main contrast will be between North and South China. For most of China's history, these areas were not equally part of something we might now term "China proper." South China was incorporated into "China" only in the latter half of the Song dynasty (960-1279)—a thousand years ago, it is true, but still nothing like the virtual eternity that many speak of when talking about China. (In fact, the Song is often considered the beginning of "modern China, for a variety of economic and social reasons.) At the time, the people living in what is now south China were "barbarians," believed to eat all sorts of repugnant things—snakes, rats, and frogs. In time, these people were Sinified, and many would argue that the cultural and economic centers of China have been southern ever since. The north is the land of government and politics but is otherwise far from being the gravitational center of the polity. The south is the land of rice, water buffalo, dramatic landscapes, richly developed cuisine, and revolution. The north is the land of noodles, steamed bread, garlic, cabbage, and yellow dust.

It is possible to argue that regional identification in China exceeds national identification (though these are hard to assess). People hold very strong stereotypical beliefs about regions other than their own—usually negative: Sichuanese are sly and tricky, Hunanese are quick-tempered, Guangdong people are only interested in business, Shandong people are bumpkins. It is true that the rich in China hop on planes and travel for business and pleasure. For instance, in January 1997 I flew from Kunming to Beijing; my seatmate was a former teacher who is now a stock investor from Shandong. She was returning from a stock-buying trip in Yunnan, where a hot stock market had just opened—people had to buy in person. Similarly, the desperate poor wander the land in search of employment or, failing that, some other way to survive. But still the majority of people in

China scarcely leave their home towns. China's growing middle class is traveling for pleasure, but we should be cautious about drawing an analogy from the United States where nearly everyone claims middle-class status. In China most people may still live their entire lives without leaving their own provinces.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the city of Canton, in southern China near Hong Kong, as well as other economically strong regions, refused to pay the full amount of taxes demanded by Beijing. Why should they? They saw themselves as the productive members of the country, contributing to programs that did not benefit their own region at all. (Tension about the issue of taxation is certainly a common feature in China and the United States. Many people dislike paying for things that do not directly benefit them, though one could argue that a common good in a nation benefits all citizens.) The central authority was insufficient to combat regional strength.

There are also differences in physical type between north and south China. In China's southward march, Chinese civilization was adapted by people who encountered it, but the overall population was not annihilated. In general, northerners are taller and have "higher" noses, while typical" southerners are shorter and have "flatter" faces. Even in matters of kinship there are differences. In south China, lineages—extended families on the male line—often constitute the backbone of villages, with lineage halls supported by a large kinship network. In north China, such clans are not as a rule the core of villages, though people may keep track of their kin relations as well.

Another important aspect of regional diversity involves language. It is a commonplace that there are many dialects of Chinese (see figure 3.4). The official national language, Mandarin (or Putonghua or guoyu), is the native tongue of only 70 percent of the people of China. That leaves 360 million— one and a half times the population of the United States—who speak some other dialect at home. These "dialects" cannot be understood by speakers of other dialects without long contact and vary as much as European languages such as English and Dutch. The decision whether to call these "dialects" or "languages" has political ramifications, as "languages" are often considered properly to belong to different countries. Victor Mair has attempted to bypass this dilemma by translating the Chinese term *fangyan* as "topolect." This issue is long-standing; Uriel Weinreich, a famous sociolinguist, claimed that "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy"—pointing out the arbitrary division between the two. (This quip is also attributed to George Bernard Shaw.) The standard definition is that

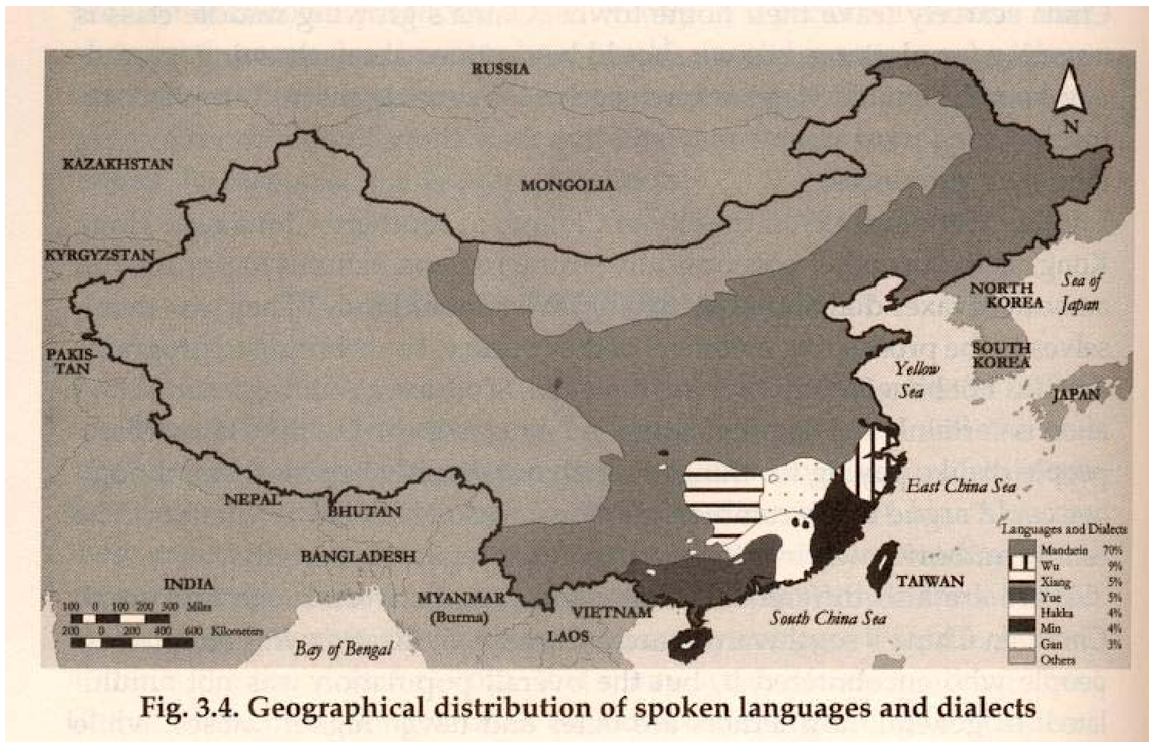

Fig. 3.4. Geographical distribution of spoken languages and dialects

dialects are mutually intelligible, but, of course, there is a continuum rather than a clean boundary between them. Think of Cockney English, or certain varieties of African-American Vernacular English, or French and Italian.

The southern dialects, such as Cantonese and Hokkien, spoken in Taiwan and the province of Fujian, are gaining in strength and power as the regions where they are spoken increase their economic power. Literature and films in those languages are flourishing. Even Hakka, the language of a sub-Han ethnic group, often stigmatized and very poor, has risen in status. Deng Xiaoping, the leader of China during its post-Mao transformation, was whispered to be a Hakka (Erbaugh, 1992). Some people have claimed that his 1992 visit to Shenzhen, the first and most spectacular special economic zone near Hong Kong, though usually understood as giving his blessing to economic development, was actually a gesture of support for the Hakkas.

China's policies regarding linguistic pluralism have been much more realistic than most of its early economic policies. Most leaders came from the south. Recordings of Mao Zedong, Sun Yatsen, and Chiang Kai-shek all reveal speakers with nonstandard accents. Such accents are not stigmatized, since they are so common. Many speakers are multilingual, hav-

ing knowledge of a local and regional variety along with some familiarity with the national language. All education is officially supposed to be conducted in *Putonghua* but in fact in most local schools only the Chinese courses (like American "English"—writing and literature—courses) are actually conducted regularly in *Putonghua*. Complex material is usually presented in local varieties.

The intersection of ethnicity and language produces a complex situation; in most autonomous areas some of ficial status is granted to the dominant minority languages. Many minorities (including most of the Muslim minorities) speak non-Chinese languages; some represent their language in scripts that are not Chinese and not roman—usually inspired by either Sanskrit or Arabic. In the Dehong Dai Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, on Yunnan's west border, both Dai and Jingpo are "official languages." In practice, this means that government buildings have plaques in three languages (Han Chinese is always included), that in bookstores some works available in Dai and Jingpo, that radio broadcasts may be done in Dai and Jingpo, and that in some cases elementary school instruction is conducted in the minority languages.

Fig. 3.5. A building in western Yunnan bears its name in three different scripts. (Photo by Susan Blum)

Regional and local diversity has been one of China's greatest challenges and great strengths, at least when acknowledged. Any nationally uniform policies have been accepted differently in different regions, and even with a veneer of uniformity, enormous variations in wealth, style, strength, and social relations lie brewing just beneath the surface.

DIVERSITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

Finally, I will address briefly the diversity of religious expression in China, something that casual observers may miss if not seeking to notice it. Officially an atheist state, with a belief in "historical materialism," yet tolerating diversity of religious belief, China nevertheless is host to a great variety of religions, some permitted and others forbidden. China has been tolerating institutional, world religions for several decades now, especially when support has come from foreign "brothers" across national borders. These include Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. When people from Thailand wanted to build a Theravada-Buddhist temple in Yunnan, the Chinese government permitted it. Muslim investment in religious architecture in northwest China is, sometimes, tolerated (see table 3.3).

Buddhism, whether the popular Tiantai or Jinglu sort commonly practiced, or variants such as Tibetan Buddhism or Theravada Buddhism in southwest China, is flourishing. Some estimate more than 100 million Buddhists—but the figure is misleading since Buddhism is not an exclusive religion, which is to say one can be both Buddhist and the follower of another religion, such as Daoism. Daoist temples, especially in Fujian province, across the Taiwan Straits from Taiwan, are bustling with life and activity. When the economic reforms began in 1978 and 1979, Fujianese first invested in refurbishing their temples, even before they repaired their homes.[11]

Table 3.3 Religion in China

Religion	*Number of Adherents (estimated)*
Buddhism	100,000,000
Daoism (Taoism)	?
Protestantism	12,000,000 to 20,000,000
Islam	17,000,000
Catholicism	4,000,000 to 12,000,000

China is a place where religion, commerce, and politics have coexisted for thousands of years,[12] and despite Western inclinations to keep these domains separate, they interact and intersect significantly in contemporary China. It may be the god of wealth who is restored first as people become prosperous, or it may be that religion functions as just another form of insurance. But however explained, religious expression is a significant feature of Chinese life today (see figure 3.6).

Christian missionaries first entered China in the fifteenth century. These were Jesuits (belonging to a scholarly branch of Catholic monks), and their success in China was fairly modest. Their greatest impact may have been back in Europe, where they introduced Chinese thought to curious Europeans. Protestant missionaries, especially of the nineteenth century, had much more success establishing converts in China. Chinese distinguish between "Christians" (i.e., Protestants), *Jidujiaotu*, and "Catholics," *Tianzhujiaotu*, as these entered China in distinct ways and have quite different profiles. Associated with foreign imperialism, missionizing activity was made illegal in 1949, and much policy toward religion has been extremely restrictive in this century.

Missionaries are still illegal, though as every long-term visitor to China

Fig. 3.6. *Caishen* (wealth god) ensconced in a make-do shrine on the northern periphery of Kunming. (Photo by Susan Blum)

knows, there are great numbers of them, well entrenched in a variety of activities— some religious, many economic. The state permits Christian worship but with great restrictions. Chinese Catholics are not allowed to accept the doctrine of papal infallibility, because that would make the Pope higher than the Communist Party, and no human can surpass that august body. But the Catholic Church insists on this doctrine, so if Chinese Catholics want to follow the Vatican's teachings, they do so at their peril. Bishops have been jailed for refusing to renounce their loyalty to the Church. Rather than belonging to world Catholicism, Chinese Catholics must belong to the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. In cities throughout China, Christian services are well attended, often overflowing with worshipers. Informers from the state attend as well, so foreign Christians are careful not to associate too much with Chinese Christians, lest a crackdown on religious activities endanger their friends. The very numbers of believers are contested, China claiming 4 million Catholics and the Vatican as many as 12 million.[13]

Protestants also continue to increase in number, much through surreptitious conversion. Many people I have known in China are foreign Protestants sent either by conscience and calling or by an organization to carry out a combination of good works and missionizing. Those who convert then function as liaisons to other Chinese. Protestantism is especially successful among minority groups in Yunnan. Some of these converts explained that Christianity celebrates qualities that they themselves value, such as honesty and humility, while Han Chinese are known to outwit the minorities by being wily and proud.

In stark contrast to the technical tolerance for "religious belief," the official attitude toward less institutionalized practices is of intolerance. "Superstition" is strictly forbidden, as this is believed to threaten people's livelihood and even lives, in extreme cases. This may include spirit repossession and other contact with spiritual entities—practices increasingly common, especially in the countryside where the majority of people in China live. These practices, along with more institutionalized reli- gions, were severely punished during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, as stemming from "feudal" ideas. All of these practices, and others, have experienced a resurgence in the past decade, especially in the south. Outside Buddhist temples one can find a treasure-house of fortune-tellers, using a variety of techniques, and at every large market one can buy the religious paraphernalia needed for an assortment of traditional ways of carrying out matters of the spirit.

The traditional practices known in the West as "ancestor worship" (an

unfortunate translation) have been revived throughout China in recent years, and paper money and goods burned for the use of ancestors in the after world are easily found on city streets, at least in the south. (My favorite paper goods are computers, cell phones, and credit cards, burned so that ancestors can acquire anything they might need. In the past the paper goods consisted more typically of everyday objects such as food and clothing.) Nearly every restaurant now has a family shrine. Beyond the familial aspects of household worship, there are a vast number of other forms of belief—many of which can coexist quite well with worldly success and so-called modernity. The venerable practice of *fengshui*, or the science of optimal placement according to geomantic principles, is maintained in Hong Kong alongside some of the world's most sophisticate engineering.

Akin to some ancient Daoist practices, *qigong* is a collection of exercises having to do with regulation of *qi*, often translated as "vital energy." This includes most martial arts, *taijiquan* exercises, and some more mystical practices involving lifting heavy objects through concentration and curing at a distance. Enormous numbers of people practice various forms of *qigong*, often forming voluntary associations to study, usually under a master. *Qigong* research institutes investigate its efficacy using "scientific" methods.

In the spring of 1999 a group called Falun Dafa (Great Method of the Wheel of Law) and also known as Falun Gong (Skills of the Wheel of Law) became prominent in the West because of a peaceful demonstration organized spontaneously in front of Zhongnanhai, the Beijing residential compound of China's political leaders. Ten thousand followers of this New Age faith meditated silently at dawn. They were forcibly removed and the sect," which claims a great number of Communist Party members as followers, was outlawed. Their leader, Li Hongzhi, had been in exile in the United States since before that time. At the time that this book went to press in late 1999, the increasing international celebrity of Falun Dafa (it has a popular Web site at www.falundafa.org) and the stridency of its followers in China have prompted the Chinese government to seek Li's extradition and to make new laws forbidding cults and imprisoning cult followers.

Falun Dafa uses most of the *qigong* methods for health, becoming wealthy and powerful, and so forth. Their name is Buddhist, but most of their methods are more traditional; the form of the organization resembles that of a secret society" in which information is carefully concealed. Their membership internationally is estimated at 3 to 100 million! In past centuries,

such secret societies have proven critical to the overturning of dynasties; the government is quite wary of them. The mixture of religion and politics and information is both precedented and ever-changing. Thus, the few types of religious expression I've mentioned here should give us pause as we try to generalize about what China is like and where it is going. It is certainly not returning wholesale to some late-imperial form of society, nor is it plunging ahead to a purely scientific, rational, monolithic economic and political "player" on the stage of world affairs. The local aspects of China are unfolding in complex and often unique ways that can't be grasped entirely from watching the news deemed of global significance.

CONCLUSION

I have catalogued a few of the lesser known aspects of China to remind us that, as Conrad Schirokauer points out in his popular textbook, for most of China's history "the web of government rested only lightly on society and . . . the world of officialdom was remote from most people's lives."[14] Though this formulation must be reversed in the twentieth century, in some ways China may be seen as returning to an earlier structure, wherein the government and politics operate at one level and people operate their lives at another. Cynics might observe that politicians are counting on that separation, permitting economic development to placate people while at other levels of politics, repression is the watchword.

There are challenges, struggles, and holes in any sense of China as a unified monolithic nation, and potential challenges to authority are well understood by the authorities to come from China's plural nature. In traditional China, threats to ruling houses often came from charismatic cult-like leaders who would now be classified as practitioners of "superstition," or they came from non-Han, non-Chinese "barbarians," often pastoralists, living north of China proper. China's leaders are increasingly concerned about south China's strength, though no public acknowledgment of the possibility of secession or rebellion is heard.

Challenges as well as possible sources of creativity and diversity may both be seen to lie within China. Future developments in that vast country will be determined at least in part by the paths taken by all those groups, not only by China's foreign policy and economic development. The character of nations lies in the unique configurations of those who speak to the outside world and of those who speak only to their neighbors. In trying to

comprehend China's position in the world, it behooves us to remember that China is a place of many faces, even if they don't all have an equal voice. When they speak, they may speak in a cacophony of tongues about quite diverse topics.

The final image I would like to suggest as a supplement to the other big three is that of Multilingual, Multicultural, Local, Religious China. This one can't be as easily visualized, since its essence is variety. It may look like a national minority worshiping a local spirit in a non-Chinese language. Or it may look like a southern business person speaking a local dialect, talking about the *fengshui* results and how to incorporate them into the building of a new university. The moral is: Beware of pat generalizations! They can almost all be challenged.

Is there an advantage to multiculturalism? In the United States, in Europe, Africa, and China—to name just a few places—debates about how to think of cultural differences abound. Some places celebrate differences, some deplore them and seek ways to eradicate differences. In some places coexistence between divergent groups is possible; in other places there is nothing but tension and schism. One could argue that there are multiple ways of thinking of multiple cultures. Just as plant diversification endures because of its benefits to the plant kingdom, in the realm of humankind we see a profusion of cultural forms, even within the artificial political boundaries that we call nations. I would argue that a nation's strength may be
viewed in its tolerance of pluralism, but that permitting such pluralism may be one of its greatest challenges. In this chapter I have demonstrated some of the ways China has struggled and continues to struggle with the question of multiplicity of cultural forms. My point is not to judge it as good or evil but to show that like other nations, its path must be forged anew. Unlike other nations its scale is enormous, and even tiny minorities number in the millions. Keep your eyes on this complex kaleidoscope, recalling that any image you see at any moment is only one of the many possible images of Multilingual, Multicultural, Local, Religious China.

NOTES

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