

Book Review

Thomas Mullaney. *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 256 pp. (ISBN 9780520272743)

In *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, Thomas Mullaney outlines how the Chinese Communist state developed its minority taxonomy through the 1953-1954 Yunnan Classification project. The Yunnan Classification Project placed educated ethnographers and anthropologists throughout Yunnan province to identify and classify ethnic minority groups. Instead of criticizing the project's empirical conclusions, Mullaney tries to understand the intricacies of the initial Chinese Communist ethnic taxonomy process. By exploring the reasons why the project was initiated, what theoretical models were used, and how the study was implemented, he concludes that the 1956 nationality model was not inevitable. Rather, the process that created it was dependent on both political realities and the need to simplify and reclassify ethnic groups after the 1953 census.

Mullaney argues that the Yunnan classification project had three primary rationales: to maintain territorial integrity in the ethnically diverse borderland regions, to oppose the previous Nationalist government's policy of a single *Zhonghua minzu* nationality paradigm, and to rectify the failed self-register census system in 1954, which identified over 400 different groups. Since each nationality was guaranteed a seat at the National People's Congress in the autumn of 1954, if the classification system was not reformed much

of the Congress would consist of minorities, even though they constituted only 6% of the total population. This created an immediate need for a provincial ethnic taxonomy project to reclassify diverse nationalities into a manageable number of political groups.

Mullaney argues that the classification project did not start with a blank slate, but relied heavily on the linguistic classification techniques used by H.R. Davies, who in 1899 had been on a British railway exploration fact finding mission. This conclusion is surprising, considering Chinese Communists' heavy reliance on the ethnic taxonomy models of the Soviet Union. Using a common word list, Davies was able to classify ethnic groups based on linguistic similarities rather than tribal customs, creating an "objective" or empirically-based classification system. Later labeled an imperialist spy, Davies heavily influenced how Chinese ethnographers could reclassify outdated or ambiguous ethnographic data using "modern" indisputable scientific methods. Science became a useful political tool to lend a façade of authenticity to the classification project. Chinese ethnographers were compelled by time constraints to combine Davies' methods with Marxist rhetoric to make a practical assessment to fit the needs of the communist Chinese state.

In addition to exploring Davies' linguistic techniques, Mullaney also argues that the ethnic project needed to be affirmed not only by the Communist government but by those being categorized. Chinese ethnographers held meetings with various ethnic groups, who sometimes could not even communicate without translators, to convince ethnic leaders of possible inclusion into larger classification groupings. Classification teams relied heavily on the political elite or cadres within the minority groups for both logistical and ideological support. Thus, the opinions of the local elite could influence the research team's conclusions. Furthermore, Yunnan already had fourteen established minority groups, so the team's focus was not so much on raw classification, but rather the viability of

reclassifying outlying groups into larger, politically manageable ethnic nationalities.

The 1953-1954 Yunnan Classification Project not only addressed the need for state-sponsored taxonomy, but was also part of a concerted effort to transform Chinese national and cultural identity. The author's ability to extrapolate the project's relevance to the larger nation-building project is one of the book's greatest strengths. As more and more people were born into the 1956 nationality model, it gradually became fixed through the individual self-affirmation process of the ethnic classification system. Any change to the current nationality paradigm must therefore come out of the current taxonomy system.

Although Mullaney offers intriguing insights into ethnicity and identity politics, he poses Marxist-Leninist idealism as the driver of the Yunnan survey team's work. Problems related to applying theory, however, often matter less when confronted with localized problems. Stalin's nationality schematic may have been important as a theoretical springboard, but ultimately Marxist theoretical complications yielded to social and political realities on the ground. Political rhetoric can always be molded to meet immediate political needs, and Mullaney perhaps overstates the extent to which the survey team felt constrained by orthodoxy.

Mullaney does an excellent job throughout the book of referencing primary source materials used by the Yunnan expedition. Mullaney's interviews with the Yunnan ethnographers lend a personal touch through individual stories and descriptions of problems that the team encountered. This book will be an important work for anyone interested in identity politics or ethnicity and its relationship to nationalism. Chinese scholars continue to wrestle with how ethnic identity was shaped and changed through interaction with the state. The Yunnan Classification project's significance lies not only in its empirical conclusions, but also in the new political culture it fostered. Ethnographers solidified the importance of their field of study

through service to the state, and in doing so transformed the process of conceptualizing ethnic identity. This book will continue to be important in unraveling the nuances of how politics influenced ethnic nationality, and how that culture continues to be relevant today.

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