The Animal Other

China’s Barbarians and Their Renaming
in the Twentieth Century

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In memory of the great Chinese ethnologist Ruey Yih-fu (1899–1991)

From the creation of the first Chinese empires two thousand years ago and up until the mid-twentieth century, the written Chinese names of China’s “barbarian” others, the non-Chinese peoples on the outskirts of the Chinese empire or in its vicinity, included components that purposefully classified such people with animals.

These classifiers (also known as signifiers or radicals) are classifying devices that remain one of the main orthographic building blocks for Chinese characters, most of which indicate both meaning and sound, using a phonetic component. The most commonly used classifiers in barbarian ethnonyms were those indicating a bug or beast (chong) and a dog (quan). These were integral parts of Chinese names for most ethnic others, reflecting a view of the world in which Chinese humanity was located near the summit of existence (though below Heaven), while the semihuman barbarians, as lower-status humanlike beings, overlapped with animals and also with intermediary figures like “wild men” or ape-men of the forest. Typically the non-Chinese peoples named have had no input in any of this. Thus there is no trace in the Chinese names of whatever meaning the peoples so named invested in their own names in their own languages (many now extinct); at most, the phonetic elements of the Chinese characters represent echoes of the sound of such autonyms, as heard by Chinese ears.

The animal classifiers for the old barbarians were abolished in the mid-twentieth century, when the written names of the barbarians were reorganized without such animality indicators, these being replaced with
human classifiers. This is when “the barbarians” were reconfigured as “ethnic minorities”—citizens, humans—and yet they are also still widely believed to be closer to animals and nature.

To explain all this, we must first explore the earlier, imagined hierarchy of animals, barbarians, and the fully human, civilized Chinese, which framed the long-standing definition of the barbarians as less than human. This conception is, of course, not unique to old China. Such imaginaries represent variations of the organization of self-identity in relation to the outside world that correlate with social formations, power arrangements, and their historical transformation. Attempting to formulate a general theory correlating the ideologies of civilization with the material relations of power, Jonathan Friedman argued that in the case of Europe, the medieval nonexpansive and static belief that the world was a finite space with edge zones inhabited by monstrous beings was replaced, along with transoceanic conquests and the attendant birth of modern capitalism. First came the Renaissance “chain of being” conception of the world as a hierarchy of fixed stations, with primitive peoples or “savages” and “wild men” permanently stationed just above animals and plants; subsequently, expansive international capitalism dissolved that understanding into a radically open-ended evolutionism with a receding frontier of modernity where savages are only temporary (as in Locke’s famous “In the beginning all the world was America”), to be absorbed and eliminated or to go extinct—just like the once living fossil species that were impossible to accept in the chain-of-being conception but became eagerly promoted as good to think under the framework of scientific evolutionism. Friedman, a non-sinologist, suggested that in China a chain-of-being conception of the world was favored, and the emergence of the latter kind of unbridled developmental-evolutionist consciousness (associated in particular with merchant-capitalists and with scientists) was stifled by the empire’s powerful ruling bureaucrat class, which sought to constrain merchant-class power and blocked such ideologies lest they threaten the elite’s “capacity to represent themselves as the universal center of an eternal order.”

This is not to deny the frequent emergence of contending evolutionist views (on which see below). But I believe the failure of such ideas and the keeping of the barbarians as ethnic minorities can explain several things at once about China, including even about its modern ruling elite. Despite its religious adherence to modern science (which in the West served as the great post-Renaissance auxiliary dissolver of mysteries), this elite even today frowns upon any challenge to the mystic naturalness of its position of power. In China today, the state—as in the “Central State” (Zhongguo), modern China’s name for itself—is no joke: it is God.

Even more to the point, the theory helps solve the riddle of why today’s rulers should also have frozen the status of the former barbar-
ians of past empires by keeping them as "minority nationalities" in the new Chinese modern state when they could perfectly well have denied their separate existence and subjected them to forced assimilation into a mono-ethnic nation-state, as other Asian states tried to do (that is, in the era before today's globalized multiculturalism, where ethnicities are recognized for other reasons, such as to ensure the flexibility of globalized labor). The literature on modern Chinese citizenship often overlooks the key issue of imperial China's ethnic others, starting instead with an assumption of "China" as somehow already a unitary ancient nation and not as the empire it really was—and yet this issue of ethnic others was the main challenge for China's reconfiguration as a single modern nation.

Modern Chinese Ethnopolitics

To clarify all this, let us retrace a few relevant steps in history, with special attention to the modern reconceptualization of the Chinese state and the identity of its subjects. The Nationalists (the Kuomintang) of the early republic after 1911 originally followed a policy of denial and assimilation of ethnic others, envisaging a homogenous nation-state in the modern Western or Japanese mold—but one that would still contain the vast footprint of the enormous conquests of the last Chinese empire, which had been a multiethnic imperial power spreading across China, Mongolia, Tibet, Manchuria, central Asia, and more. Enlightened Chinese argued intensely over how this conundrum of the new republic ought best be solved—how the still-not-assimilated imperial conquests and remaining non-Chinese people could be forged into a new national citizenship.

One key issue was China's flag-to-be. To replace the traditional imperial dragon, the new republic eventually created a unified flag with one sun, shining on the united country. But this was only after an initial transitional flag that highlighted the five main ethnic groupings of the old multiethnic empire: the Manchu, whose representatives last inhabited the imperial framework; the Mongols, whose ancestors were also once imperial standard-bearers; the Tibetans, with their special relations to the empire; the Muslims; and finally, what is usually known as "Han Chinese"—a modern renaming of earlier admixtures of different ethnolinguistic lineages assimilated and unified through the written language. This flag reflected the shaky concept of wuzhong gouhe, "five peoples united," which was abandoned in the late 1920s for the sun flag and a concept of citizenship based on nonrecognition, or even the active erasure, of any ethnic differences.

The Communists, for their part, by the time of their 1949 victory in the civil war, also came to embrace the idea of inheriting the territory of the empire as a modern nation-state—but with official recognition of
minority nationalities. Their 1950s campaign identifying such nationalities eventually yielded today’s “family” of fifty-six recognized peoples.7

These points are widely accepted as fact today—but this is incomplete as a summary. In fact, the final solution to the problem of China’s ethnic others did not differ fundamentally as adopted by the Nationalists and the Communists, respectively.8 The Nationalists over time abandoned their quest for outright assimilation and instead embraced an idea of a racial-political umbrella nation under the heading of Zhonghua minzu, or (pan-)Chinese nation, which united a majority Han people alongside sub-national weaker brethren. This nationalist-racist formulation for a “race-nation,”9 which proposes the biological-natural unity of all those people living within the limits of the past imperial conquests, was likewise embraced by the Communists—and has remained a key underpinning of the new state orthodoxy since the 1950s. To accommodate this arrangement—the basis for how the present minority nationalities now live under the “leadership” of the Han Chinese—the once internationalist Communists had to break with their original policy of regarding all peoples conquered or dominated by the empire as oppressed nations deserving Communist support for their unconditional independence.10 By abandoning their original idea of a future soviet-style federation, which would explicitly support the independence both of oppressed stateless people (the Miao, for example) and of the de facto independent states once under the sway of past Mongolian and Chinese empires (most notably, Tibet), the Communists came to the same conclusion as the Nationalists: the empire must be rescued.11

The story of how both Nationalists and Communists came to embrace a multiethnic but unitary state, continuous with the Empire, is complex. It also was no foregone conclusion. The reasons why the demographically weak minorities were not simply denied autonomous existence altogether and forcibly assimilated or destroyed have never been satisfactorily explained. The usual theories—such as that the intent was to appease and enlist these non-Chinese ethnic others in the struggle against the 1930s Japanese invasion and in the civil war—are insufficient.

Friedman’s theory, however, would explain the curious modern-time freezing in place of ethnic minority identities by reference to the reconstituted state elite’s preference for a chain-of-being model of self-justification: the ethnic others are still useful and cannot be allowed to go extinct.12 By the same token, it also explains the curious persistence in China today of the highly potent, wildly popular fantasies of yetis and forest wild men13—figures supposedly thriving alongside today’s minorities, who are still seen as closer to nature and more like animals than ordinary, fully human Chinese. Such pervasive imaginaries thrive alongside the purportedly scientific new state religion (“scientific socialism”) and are officially
tolerated even if not officially embraced. They are of a piece with the useful conception of the world as a static, permanent chain of beings—an idea not even contradicted by that Chinese state Marxist evolutionism, which suggests that the contemporary primitives are living social fossils.

The Classical Chinese “Barbarian” Ethnonym

Barbarians as part of imperial-civilizational ideologies have been conjured up in many places, but the Chinese case is unique in how barbarian animality was officially written into the names of the barbarians. This was no unorthodox or secret practice but the standardized and authoritative system for writing the names of the barbarians, lasting for more than two millennia. How did it originate?

“China” began with the formations of central states arising in what is today north-central China in the late second and first millennium BCE. The conception of a duality of “Chinese” and “barbarians” arose in the same process. Before the rise of these states, myriad prehistoric communities across mainland East Asia must have entertained a virtual sea of mutual ethnonyms (names of peoples), arising from a wealth of different local traditions and exchanges between people whose names for each other and for themselves we no longer can know, because this was all before writing. (Many probably spoke languages that are now extinct.) All these many ethnonymes were formulated in the same complex processes of mistaken pronunciations, tendentious references, and crisscrossing confusions of which traces survive in every living ethnonym.

But out of this messy process, in the crystallization of written forms of the Chinese language in the last millennium BCE, and especially with the codification of written classical Chinese literature in the first empires (Qin and Han), a Chinese repertoire of ethnonyms emerged. It was then frozen into collective memory because it was codified in the written Chinese classics. Just as history ever since this time was (and today still is) reinterpreted in the light of that canon (itself, along with its fantasies regarding preceding golden ages, rooted in the last few centuries BCE), this storage of names continues to be drawn upon as if reflecting a “true” catalog of ethnonyms, one with “real” referents.

This classical ethnonymy forms part of a powerful political-philosophical tradition of denial, in which the rectification of names (zheng ming, or pairing the right label with its “right” referent) is conceived as integral to social control and harmony. All this relates intriguingly to long-running philosophical debates concerning the relations of language, thought, and social life, especially the famous investigations of Ludwig Wittgenstein and others into the nature of names and their relations to real-life referents. Wittgenstein may have created a straw man out of the
Augustinian conception of language (that is, that it consists of words that are the names of the objects they refer to, as in the original, uncomplicated Garden of Eden of referential relations), but his critique permanently demolished the view of names as “paradigmatic devices for singular reference” and established that understanding among people can and does operate objectively whether or not there is any objectivity of reference. That is to say, people make their own meanings. Indeed, an ethnonym has its own, independent existence, as a label of sorts, and there is no necessary or natural correspondence between the name and the referent, between the ethnonym and the people it supposedly refers to. Inventing or resurrecting ethonyms and affixing them onto others in order to organize classificatory systems of manipulation and domination are cultural acts committed in social life. So is any attempt at declaring ethonyms to be natural, to be exhaustively reflective of an essence, or to be necessarily true: those are in reality acts of cover-up and make-believe.

One of the prototypes of “right” names for barbarians is the very ancient ethnonym Qiang, which shows up in the earliest forms of Chinese writing after 1200 BCE and is still with us today as the name of a non-Chinese people to the west of central China. It was originally a rendering of a horned being, and scholars debate whether this referred to shepherders or to sheeplike or deerlike people. Wang Ming-ke has documented how this ethnonym was repeatedly resurrected and transferred westward, reassigned time and again as a label for “barbarians to the west.” Today it serves as the official name of a so-called minority nationality living between the Tibetan and Han Chinese populations, whose autonym is the unrelated Rma.

In the Bronze Age, this label referred to human adversaries hunted just like animals and similarly used as slaves and in sacrifices. This fits the original Aristotelian idea of the semi-human barbarians as “natural slaves” so closely that the Qiang qualify as China’s first barbarians. It also indicates another pattern repeating itself throughout history: the center dealt pragmatically with more powerful neighbors (as allies or adversaries) while using weaker and fractured neighbors like the Qiang as the symbolic foil of reference for Chinese superiority. Thus the term barbarians (whether Qiang or later forms) refers to inferior, militarily weaker people, conceptually included as integral to the state even as they are defined by this term as semi-human outsiders treated differently from fully human regular subjects.

Based on such prototypes as the horned Qiang, hunted down and slaughtered as beasts by the Bronze Age kings, the early imperial reordering of the world produced the classical ethnonymy of the “four [or many] barbarians,” each belonging with a cardinal direction: the eastern Yi, western Rong, northern Di, and southern Man. The longevity of this orga-
nizing conception over two millennia to the present day is only partially explained by the universality of cardinal directions. It drew both on the systematizing efforts of philosopher-officials in the Warring States (the “Central States” of the era prior to the first empires) to perfect universal statecraft and on the ways in which the smaller-scale Bronze Age kingdoms had begun to systematically name and classify their outsiders and neighbors. The empire’s architects construed its legitimacy as continuity with that Chinese antiquity; they recycled select parts of more ancient ethnonyms as a new reality, formalized into a grand scheme suitable for a universal empire: subhuman barbarians arranged around the central state in the four directions.

Here is one locus classicus of the classification of the four barbarians, a passage from the *Li ji* (compiled under the Han empire but presented as the truth, transmitted from antiquity), which uses the shorthand Rong-Yi for barbarians generally:

[The people of] the five regions—the central State, and the Rong-Yi—all have their [particular] natures, which they cannot be made to alter. Those on the East are called Yi. They have their hair unbound, and tattoo their bodies. Some eat their food without its being cooked with fire. Those on the South are called Man. They tattoo their foreheads and keep their feet together; some eat their food without its being cooked with fire. Those on the West are called Rong. They have their hair unbound, and wear skins; some do not eat grain-food. Those on the North are called Di. They wear skins of animals and birds, and dwell in caves; some do not eat grain-food.26

Other sources insist that such barbarians spoke not human languages but the languages of birds and beasts (*niao shou*).27 Another section of the *Li ji* elaborates on the permanent siege to the state laid by this barbarian constellation, representing it as an architectural embodiment of their stations: the “Nine Yi” at the eastern gate, the “Eight Man” at the southern, the “Six Rong” at the western, and the “Five Di” at the northern, all facing the (Chinese) center.28 Such classifications highlight the artifice of the ethnonymy, which exists in competing versions varying the names and locations of the barbarians (for instance, older sources like the *Shijing*, the revered Zhou-era classic *Book of Poetry*, list the supposedly northern Di as found in the south, the east, or other directions; the Man in multiple directions, not just the south; and so on).29

However, the normative *Li ji* suggests a static universe where the civilized and the barbarian occupy permanently separate stations, and this interpretation is sustained throughout history—as, for example, by Wang Fuzhi (1619–92), the anti-Manchu scholar influential in late Qing revolutionary times not least through his claims that the daring Manchu
taking over the Chinese empire were out of their preordained barbarian place. Wang’s insistence on the barbarians’ permanent stations, along with his angry denial of how the state’s re-creation in the outsider’s transgression merely repeats the more fundamental transgression of the state as such (a key point in China’s history)—fits eminently with Friedman’s postulate about the conservative stance of imperial China’s scholar-bureaucrat elite. Wang and his latter-day followers all preferred to forget that even the most idealized Chinese dynasty of all, the exalted Bronze-Age Zhou, was once a peripheral entity whose namesake people moved in from the outside, occupied the center, and then justified their violent transgression with the idea of a heavenly mandate. This could perfectly well be adapted by the latter-day Manchu—and by any other future contender wishing to take over the imperial state machinery.

And yet the permanence of the barbarians chained to their fixed stations is periodically undermined by competing, activist ideas about civilization as transformation—at least potentially similar to European post-Renaissance ideas. In such interpretations, the benevolence (ren) achieved by the ruler’s superior virtue (de) is graciously extended from the center to uncivilized others outside it; this is civilization as transformation (hua), brought about as kingly transformation (wanghua) and as education (jiaohua), luring barbarians “into the fold” (guihua; literally, returning-transformation) while their wild brethren remain “outside the transformed [realm]” (huawai; where the “raw” barbarians are found). Some ambitious civilizers suggested this meant that not just barbarians but even wild animals might be taught and civilized, in a process with, indeed, an indefinitely receding boundary, as in unbridled evolutionism. The philosopher Mencius in the fourth century BC illustrated this activist tradition when he stressed that he “heard that one makes use of that which is Chinese [here, Xia] to change the Barbarians [here, Yi], but never that the Chinese are changed by the Barbarians.”30 The competition between such activist and fixed-station aspects of the Chinese ideologies of civilization can perhaps be correlated with socioeconomic change threatening or dissolving established elites (as in Mencius’s time)—but this remains to be investigated seriously. In any case, it was the idea of the permanent barbarians that became a founding cornerstone of the empires. Even Mencius’s naturalization of the Center and the brazen denial of history that this entails exhibits a fundamental convergence of the potentially competing evolutionist conceptions of the barbarians with the hegemonic view of barbarians permanently occupying fixed stations: even when the Chinese idea of the barbarians is explained as the figure of a receding horizon, it serves to enable the perennial justifications for the state and its violence—with continuing appeal into modern times.
Almost the only real dissent, historically, was that voiced by the anti-imperialist Daoists, who mocked the Confucian humanism that sustained the ideology of civilization based on a presumptuous and fictitious separation and ranking of human and nonhuman that placed the statist ideologues (the Confucians) themselves as supreme human beings at the top of the chain.31 One Warring State–era Taoist sage, Zhuangzi, exposed the key position of the concept of the animal-like barbarians in the ideology of empire by explicitly highlighting how this fake idea of the barbarians really is a conceit for a universal emperor’s monopoly on violence. In his “Dialogue on Swords,” the philosopher speaks to a king who is eager to learn Machiavellian ways but who is instead shamed by Zhuangzi’s condemnation of statecraft and its logical conclusion, the universal emperor yet to come. “The sword of the Son of Heaven”—the superior sword that cuts down all opposition and all competition—is, he says, none other than the sword “wrapped in the Four Barbarians” (Tianzi shi jian . . . bao yi si Yi).32

**The Southern Barbarians**

It is the position of the wild barbarian as an idea naturalizing the force of the empire that is permanent, not any one in particular of the ethno-linguistic entities that are named as barbarians at any particular moment of history. Already in the *Li ji*, *Rong-Yi* was used as a flexible shorthand; a range of other combinations were used in imperial-era discourse to suggest the idea of the barbarians, not particular peoples: we have the ancient terms *Rong-Di*, *Di-Qiang*, *Yi-Di*, *Man-Yi*, and so on. Single terms were also deployed either in particular periods (like the terms *Yi*, *Hu*, and *Man*) or on particular frontiers, like the term *Fan* used on the late-imperial new ethnic frontier opened up on Taiwan in the seventeenth century. While the barbarians are always also real people in flesh and blood, more important is how they instantiate the Chinese imperial notion of barbarians: people who remain closer to the wild, farther from civilization. Anyone can be thus reified, whenever the empire is growing, in which case entirely new peoples (or even re-barbarized former subjects) on still farther peripheries will be re-created as the living fetishes of that empire.

This is what happened in the south. While the *Rong* and *Di* of the northern and western frontiers were written with dog classifiers and famously described as “wolves” in Chinese texts,33 the term *Man* with an animal element meaning “bug” (*chong*; also translated as “beast,” “insect,” or “snake”) became the chief southern barbarian ethnonym under which southern frontier peoples were subsumed, even as many specific names
were made with dog classifiers and later sometimes imagined to have arisen from the degenerative miscegenation of humans and animals like dogs. Anthropologist Ruey Yih-fu (discussed below) refutes the Shuowen jiezi (the pioneering early imperial dictionary) etymology of the name Man that suggests they are snakes. Ruey also argues against another tradition suggesting that the Man were originally so called because they were man ("slow", "dim-witted")—but this may actually have validity: this type of naming is common for those others whose speech is unintelligible or who cannot speak "properly" (as with the original Greek barbaros and the Russian word for "German," nemets: "dumb, mute").

The original term Man in fact came into use in written Chinese in the Bronze Age Zhou dynasty without any animal connotations; these were attached only in the course of the imperial systematizing, as I have discussed. Figure 1 shows this process. First, on the left, we see "Man" as an ethnonym comprising only what was to become the phonetic upper part of the later character—no bug classifier included—from a ninth-century BCE bronze vessel, the Guoji Zibo pan. Inscriptions on ancient bronzes, preserved unchanged, make it possible to verify traces of this ethnonym's earliest written history that would be otherwise inaccessible because most transmitted books have come to us through copying and alterations. Then, in early imperial script, a slinky bug is added underneath (fig. 1, middle), and the name is subsequently standardized in its classical form (fig. 1, right), used over the last two millennia with the bug classifier fixing its role as the name of semi-animal, southern barbarians. This exemplifies what William Boltz, in his discussion of Chinese writing, calls the "classic way" of "rescuing and restoring" the ostensibly "proper" meaning of a character whenever threatened by semantic "erosions": namely, the systematic deployment of semantic classifiers for the purpose of general rectification and the elimination of ambiguity.

The Man character is still in use in China today when referring to the southern barbarians of the past, but it is not the name of any ethnic minority defined today. In medieval and late imperial times (Tang and later), Man was used for large numbers of newly encountered people as imperial power grew southward. The south received ever larger numbers of Chinese farmer-migrants and military agricultural colonists, expanding the state's tax base and control and provoking conflicts over land and forest resources. Many distinct peoples were either assimilated or driven into the hills. This process of colonization is reflected in the proliferation of listings of unknown southern peoples under the superheading "Man" in Chinese dictionaries and other books—such as Fan Zhuo's famous Tang-era Man shu (the Book of the Man or "southern barbarians").

The multitude of ethnicities south of the Yangtze River mostly lacked state organization, and thus, as with the Qiang, the "Man" des-
ignation served to identify the weak and disorganized as barbarians. Animal-classifier Chinese ethnonyms proliferate in the south, while at the same time few new Chinese names building on such animal classifiers were created for neighbors in the north (even as certain ancient names for northerners that had previously not included the animal identifiers were also "rectified" by their animalization). To the north and west of China, ever since the first empires, its neighbors and enemies often possessed solid military organization and political sophistication, sometimes even rivaling the Chinese state, overrunning it, and taking over the imperial Chinese framework, as for example in the Mongol (Yuan) empire. It would not have been advisable for Chinese officials to openly compose the names of state- and empire-bearing neighbors such as the Mongol or Manchu with the derogatory animal classifiers.

With the expansion of both the empire and the number of graphs in the standardized written language, the choice of names for southern non-Chinese peoples predictably used the animal-classifier template. Only the phonetic base was sometimes gathered from local or indigenous sources—as with the ancient Man. The process unfolded similarly to the ancient model of new names made and grouped conceptually under the set-formula umbrella of the barbarians of the four cardinal directions.

One instructive case is that of the Wa, whose Chinese names contain sediments of both imperial and modern history. The name Wa is a widely used example from among many of this people's autonyms, but this one has been adopted as their internationally known name. Historically, they lived between Burma’s and China’s royal realms; today they are divided across the two successor nation-states. We first find them named in Chinese sources in post-Song times, as “Ka-wa” (or “Ka-liwa”), clearly derived from the ethnonyms “Wa,” “La,” and/or “Lua” used for the Wa by the Tai-speaking Shan kingdoms, the intermediaries through which Chinese imperial representatives first encountered the Wa.

Ka, unbeknownst to these people, is not a name but a Tai term, khao, denoting “primitive” non-Buddhist people, often translated as “mountain peoples” or “slaves" (I favor rendering khao as “barbarian,” to reflect the Aristotelian sense of natural slave that khao suggests). This “Ka” was adopted into Chinese and frozen there for centuries—complete with the dog classifier for both Ka and Wa (see fig. 2, middle row, left example), in effect doubly identifying the Kawa as a barbarian people through the Tai prefix and the written Chinese animal component. The prefix was not officially dropped until the mid-1950s, when the separate meaning of Ka dawned upon Chinese state ethnographers investigating what they now decided to call the Wa people.

But the dog classifier in the name of the Wa had already come into question well before Communist Chinese military forces first entered
the previously self-governing territory of the Wa people in the 1950s to annex it into their new state. Most writings on this subject assume it was the Communists, not the Nationalist regime that they vanquished in the 1945–49 civil war, who first sought and achieved the goal of “humanizing” the barbarians as minority nationalities by replacing the derogatory animal classifiers from the ethnonyms, from scratch, in the 1950s. But this is incorrect: it was the Nationalists who began this policy in the 1930s—before the Communists.

**Renaming China’s Modern “Minorities”: The Ruey Yih-fu Project**

By the time they fought their bloody civil war, the Communists and Nationalists had arrived at a similar idea of what “new China” should be like—including the recognition of minority nationalities within a unitary state (but without the right to independence promised by the Communists before coming to power). If the former barbarians were to be nominally equal, their derogatory names had to be rectified. This Communist-Nationalist convergence is surely related to the difficult challenges faced
by the new Republic of China, in particular the Japanese invasion of mainland China in the late 1930s. Both the Communists and the Nationalists were forced by the contingencies of war to come face to face with non-Chinese peoples at the edges of the old empire. For the Communists, this encounter came mainly after 1935, in the Tibetan-inhabited regions of Kham (Xikang; today’s western Sichuan) and to the north in the Muslim and ethnic Mongolian areas in Shaanxi and Inner Mongolia: all way stations on the Communist armies’ flight from southeast China after they were driven from there by the Nationalists. For the Nationalists, these encounters were above all with Miao and other peoples of the south and southwest after Japanese advances a few years later, in 1937 and onward, that forced the Nationalist government to relocate to Chongqing and Kunming, on the supply route from India used by Americans and others helping the Chinese.

The Japanese themselves attracted some attention to the problem of the derogatory names the Chinese used for “their own” ethnic others, by trying to manipulate Chinese characters to denigrate the Americans and the British. The Japanese since ancient times have been students of things Chinese, and according to eyewitness accounts reported to me, after attacking the United States in 1941 the Japanese military organized anti-American rallies in major Chinese cities, like Tianjin, where they used signs on which the “Mei” character for America (and “Ying” for England) were written with the same dog (quan) classifier still widely in use by the Chinese in the derogatory names for their own barbarians. This was an instance of a “former barbarian” (the Japanese) applying quintessentially Chinese-imperial practices for their own purposes. But this novel application was not enough to deflect Chinese contempt away from the Japanese invaders and toward barbarian Westerners set on dominating Asia, as the Japanese saw it.

Much more important, the Chinese themselves were changing at this time. A general policy shift was being implemented on several fronts, including but not limited to ethnopolitics, to mobilize all forces that China could muster against the Japanese. China and its citizenry were remolded in this process — especially by the intensified schemes for classifying, registering, and mobilizing sometimes reluctant “citizens.” Some intellectuals took action as a vanguard, urging the central Nationalist government to mobilize even the ethnic groups of the south and southwest, encouraging them to aid China and not Japan and to aid the Nationalists instead of the Communists.

The Communists at this point were still a much smaller and weaker force. As Liu Xiaoyuan points out, the Communist Party elite was a small group of southern Han Chinese with little exposure to any ethnic others before their confrontations with Tibetans, Mongols, and others in the mid-
to late 1930s. But now they too were redesigning their ethnopolitics and attempting to present it as superior to that of the Nationalists.49 While they began to shed certain obviously derogatory names for ethnic others (one outstanding example was the Luo, who became the Yi), before their 1949 victory the Communists simply did not have the means to systematically redesign the representation of all such Chinese "internal" others for the purposes of administering the new state; for them, that came only after 1949.

The Nationalist government, on the other hand, after coming around to the idea of recognizing the ethnic others and conceiving of them as future minorities, did have the means. They took up this challenge ten years ahead of losing power on the national stage. In January 1939, the central scientific academy of China—which had been established just over ten years earlier—received a government-issued instruction to review Chinese ethnonyms and propose a scheme for re-presenting the names of the various ethnic groups of southwest China by extracting the derogatory animal classifiers that flagged them as subhuman. The government had been urged on in this endeavor by the China Mass Culture Society (Zhongguo Dazhong Wenhua She) led by the writer-educator Yao Jiangbin and established in Chongqing only the year before as a group drumming up grassroots support for national heroes, for the new concept of Chinese citizenship, and so on,50 all in the context of the efforts to build a unified state on the fading ruins of the dynastic empire that had ended in 1911.

The man charged with leading this remarkable project and recommending what then became, and in many cases still are, the modern names for the non-Chinese peoples, was Ruey Yih-fu (1899–1991; Rui Yifu in today’s spelling), as an ethnologist with long experience researching border areas.51 Ruey’s project was focused mainly on southwest China, the center of the Chinese defensive war effort against Japan at this time, yet this region displayed by far the richest mosaic of non-Chinese identities, making the project a key step in the re-creation of the former imperial barbarians as minority ethnicities within the post-imperial Chinese state.

The project was drafted in 1939–40, accepted, and issued as an order from the Nationalist government in January 1940.52 Ruey’s seventy-six-page blueprint was published in the midst of war in 1941. It was reissued in 1972 in his collected-works volumes—but the original wartime publication on poor-quality paper is fascinating not least for the voluminous errata list: twenty handwritten pages with corrections to the confused typesetters’ mishandling of the myriad ethnonyms, both imperial and those “modern,” never-before-used forms that Ruey proposed.53 Even though this was the first formal, systematic disassociation of the barbarians from animals, and even though this was a direct stepping-stone for the identical efforts continued in the Communist version years later,54 these efforts have been overlooked in contemporary scholarship with a few recent
exceptions, such as the historian Ma Yuhua, who has located their traces in provincial archives. 55

Ruey retraced how these names originally came to be, including some of the older theories regarding barbarian animality. He began by dispensing with theories linking barbarian and animal lifestyles as the true explanation for why peoples' names were composed with animal classifiers (these people supposedly speak like birds and live like crabs, snakes, and monkeys, here referencing the Wei shu, or History of the Wei Dynasty). Ruey noted how in later centuries Chinese observers were unable to sustain such fictions and began to claim that it is not outward appearances or manners but the innate character of these people that is similar to the animals—this claim itself, of course, was merely a reformulation of the earlier idea of the barbarians. 56

Ruey identified four main causes of these Chinese names for ethnic others: a widespread and consciously derogatory motivation; an actual belief in real animal-to-people genealogies (which he thought was rare); a rational association based on environmental facts, as when the preponderance of a certain animal in the region of a people may have triggered the borrowing of that animal's name (the many snakes in the southern forests could account for the choice of the name Man, the many sheep herded by the Qiang would account for their "sheepish" name, and so on); and finally, a totemic association claimed in local, indigenous traditions, such as the famous but one-off case of the Yao claim to have descended from Pan Hu, supposedly a dog owned by the Chinese Yellow Emperor that in some versions of this story was rewarded with a princess in recognition of his help in eliminating the emperor's rivals for power. Ruey suggests this too is a recent artifact: the name of the Yao's ancestors was actually written with the classifier for people (they were classified as servants, not barbarians) long before the Song period, and it was changed to the dog classifier only in that period's re-rectification. 57 And of course this explanation cannot accommodate the multiple other dog-classifier names for people without any such totem.

Ruey went on to methodically list all the ethnonyms he deemed still plausible as referents to existing ethnic groups and tabled them first with their derogatory animalistic composition and then with replacement modern forms with the human classifier (a move identical to that presented as new in the 1950s for the Wa and others, implemented by Communist administrators). Figure 2 shows three of Ruey's sixty-six cases: the dog classifier is here seen as the left part of each name as shown in the left column; in the proposed versions that appear in the right column, the left-side dog classifier is replaced with the human. The examples selected show the written names of the Lisu, Kawa, and Luohai, who all became present-day minority nationalities. 58
Even if this plan could not be effectively implemented in the midst of a life-and-death struggle with the Japanese invaders who had overrun most of continental China (and even threatened the survival of the Nationalist government in the far southwest, up until their ultimate defeat in 1945), Ruey’s assignment was successfully completed on the conceptual level and clearly became the foundation for later efforts, though this has been purposefully forgotten. Even in terms of practical implementation, a process was initiated from above to redesign character sets used for typography so that printed materials from this time on (whether Nationalist- or Communist-controlled materials) would no longer include the animal components. It was the confusion of war and, after 1949, the victors’ history writing that obscured this for us.

The Barbarians Resurrected

Even as the convergences of the supposedly diametrically different Nationalist and Communist configurations of modernity are coming into view, we are only in the initial stages of grasping the implications for understanding the “multiculturalism” that modern China presents today, which is rather different from that of Western countries because it builds on continuities with China’s past.

Our overall amnesia regarding these points obscures how China’s barbarians were construed differently from today’s ethnic minorities and how China’s current minority nationalities differ from the ethnics of Western multiculturalism. In this article I have used the key practice of naming to illustrate aspects of the Chinese-imperial idea of “the barbarian” but also to suggest how the break with the past represented by the abolition of animal-classifier names for China’s ethnic others is not necessarily a definitive rupture with that past. The official equality of today’s nationalities conceals the fact that the schemes in which such others are conceptually identified as less than fully human are still current today, complete with the divergence between powerful others as competitors and more primitive ones as the best stand-ins for the idea of “the barbarians.”

The 1939–40 renaming certainly was a significant break with the past: today the computer character sets for Chinese fonts no longer include the once ubiquitous animal-classifier names so that they can no longer be written; they cannot be looked up in dictionaries apart from advanced classical Chinese dictionaries listing them as obsolete alternates, not for current use. The effect, however, is an illusion that the system under which the barbarians were named as animals is firmly relegated to the past, safely insulated from today’s more reasonable modernity.

Some former barbarian ethnonyms have become obsolete, even in cases where Ruey and his fellow scholars in 1939–40 regarded the terms
as alive and meriting new, modern forms. This applies to the fabled Man, which now refers to nobody in particular, though Ruey proposed to revive the ninth-century BCE form, without the beast classifier. Importantly, with this term Man, the issue is not so much its lack of minority referent as the continuing availability of the schemes in which it figured. These linger, potentially more powerful than the awkward framework provided by current officialdom. The beast classifier does remain in the name of the Man in all of the books at the library and on our office computers and still enables the idealized compound formulations of the barbarians, including the Man-Yi-Rong-Di formula—which is frequently revived in contemporary discourse as a ghost summoned from history when the need arises. More powerful than the official discourse of equality for the (less fortunate and less “developed”) minorities is the vivid reminder in the Chinese language that “wildness” is inextricably synonymous with those Man barbarians: the standard compound term for “wild” (as in “wild animals”) is ye-Man—“wild Man.” The older Chinese “anthropological machine” remains available, if ambivalently so; there is no telling how it might be revived in China’s future to bolster a sense of superiority regained.

As I have argued, the present-day minorities already occupy a kind of fixed station similar to that of the barbarians of empires past, continuously associated with animality even as the official rhetoric claims they have been liberated and elevated to the status of full citizens. Elements of a Chinese-styled chain-of-being conception of the barbarians are prominent both in popular consciousness and in the current elaborations of Chinese state Marxist formulations of the “minorities,” in which these people (including such contemporary minorities as the Wa) somehow remain primitive and therefore closer to wild nature in their authentic lifeways. Today this is becoming especially prominent in the deeply significant domestic mass tourism industry (destination: “the minorities”), in which these notions are the main selling points behind the allure of vigorous folk dances and other seemingly innocuous cultural performances. In closing this brief article, I ask again why it should have been that the minorities were not suppressed and brought to extinction right away, to make way for modernity. Despite several possibilities, I myself can see no other really convincing answer than the superior usefulness of a reformulated conception of “the barbarians” in guaranteeing the capacity of the ruling elite to continue to represent themselves credibly before the majority of their subjects as “the universal center of an eternal order.”
Notes

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8. As Liu (Frontier Passages, 21–25, 120–26, 166) and others have explained; also see Fiskesjö, “Rescuing the Empire.”


10. Fiskesjö, “Rescuing the Empire,” 18–19; Liu, Frontier Passages; Tony Saich,

11. The exception was “Outer” Mongolia, which became an independent country in the 1920s with Soviet-Russian support but which, much like Taiwan, is frequently the subject of Chinese speculation as to when it, too, will be “recovered.”


16. An ethnonymy is the system of ethonyms (names of peoples) used in a specific language to refer both to one’s own group (autonyms) as well as others (exonyms). As such, it is also a branch of onomastics, the study of names and naming.


19. For example, Gottlob Frege, Saul Kripke, and others.


28. In the Ming–tang complex; see Tong Yi, “Yi-Man-Rong-Di”; also Li ji, juan 14, “Ming tang wei.”

29. For example, the “hundred Man” of Poem 261; the Man are sometimes paired up as “Man-Mo” (juxtaposed with the Chinese Hua-Xia, as their others) or as “Huai-Yi Man-Mo” (“the Huai River Valley Yi; the Man and Mo,” Poem 300), or as “Jing-Man” (“the Jing kind of Man,” Poem 178), etc.; see Tong Shuye, “Man Xia kao” (“Investigations of the Man and the Xia”), Yungong 2, no. 8 (1934): 25–26.


36. My paper “On the Ritual Celebration of Military Victories as Described in Forty-Nine Bronze Inscriptions from the Western Zhou Period, with Special Reference to the Guoji Zibo Pan Inscription” (n.d. [1994]) examines this inscription in full. It uses both “Man-fang” and “Xianyu” without animal classifiers. Compare the Shi Qiang pan, which also speaks of the conquest of barbarians named without animal classifiers. Edward Shaughnessy, Sources of Western Zhou History: Inscribed Bronze Vessels (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2, 189.

37. The reconfiguration of written names for the barbarians was not instantly complete everywhere: for example, the graph for Man is still used without the beast classifier in certain later bronze inscriptions such as the Qin zhong bells—from what has long been a Chinese periphery. (I thank Lothar von Falkenhausen for pointing this out.) On the history of Man see also Ruey, “Xinan shaoshu minzu chong shou piaopian,” 121–22.

38. Including with regard to Vietnam and other areas. (I thank John Phan for reminding me of this point.)


40. A further proliferation of southern names took place in Song times and onward, when many Man people were reidentified as “Miao,” another strange term resurrected from ancient times (Fiskesjö, “On the ‘Raw’ and the ‘Cooked,’” 148–50).

41. Similar to the way Man was once “rectified” with a beast classifier, the comprehensive ascription of animality to the barbarians is seen for northerners like the Xianyu; see Hilda Ecsedy, “Cultivators and Barbarians in Ancient China,” Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 28 (1974): 331n6.

42. As mentioned, successful outside invaders often themselves took over the imperial ideology for their own use. On the ambivalence of Chinese empires faced
with equals, see Morris Rossabi, ed., China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, Tenth–Fourteenth Centuries (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Note here that Lydia Liu’s otherwise productive perspective on the modern-world politics of China’s “barbarian” terminology (The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004]) loses sight of the life of the Chinese imperial terminology both as ideology and as practice, by narrowly focusing on the recent clash with the contending British empire (its representatives refused the “barbarian” label—like some of the northerners discussed in Rossabi’s volume).


44. Rye, “Xinan shaoshu minzu chong shou pian pang,” 79 and following, listed a dog classifier “Ka” as if it were a separate ethonym, demonstrating lingering ignorance over this secondhand term for a people historically rather distant from the Chinese state. On the complexities of indigenous Wam speaking and the clash between Wa and Chinese systems, see Magnus Fiskejö, “The Autonomy of Naming: Kinship, Power, and Ethnonymy in the Wa Lands of the Southeast Asia–China Frontiers,” in Zheng and Macdonald, Personal Names in Asia, 150–74.

45. Liu, Frontier Passages. Edgar Snow’s wartime interview transcripts reportedly relate how Mao, still in line with an earlier internationalist Communism, admitted that the Tibetans constituted a foreign nation.

46. Earlier in their history, the Japanese similarly had applied the “Man” ethnonym to the Dutch, whose ships arrived from the south. I thank John Whitman for reminding me of this.


49. Liu, Frontier Passages.


51. Rye is most famous for his 1947 Miao monograph, written with Ling Shunsheng. Like many scholars, both left for Taiwan after the Communists’ 1949 mainland takeover.

52. Ma, Guomin zhengfu, 125n2.
53. Ruey, “Xinan shaoshu minzu chong shou pianpang.” Curiously, a similar fate afflicted the summary article by Ma Yuhua, “Guomin zhengfubianjiang minzu zhengce chutan” (“Exploring the Nationality Policy on the Frontier by the National Government of Nanjing”), in Guizhou minzu yanjiu (Guizhou Ethnic Studies), 2007.5 (27.115), 93–102, 131; cf. 97, where the computer-set text fails to reproduce the now obsolete animal-classifier graphs discussed here.

54. They also returned the flag to a five-part structure, now with five stars symbolizing the Communist Party and its cast of supporters.

55. Even the best historical overview of Chinese ethnology (Wang Jianmin, Zhongguo minzu xue shi [History of Ethnology in China], vol. 1 [Kunming: Yunnan Jiaoyu, 1997]), with ample material on Ruey, omits the reclassification project. This general amnesia probably was caused by how early People’s Republic propaganda portrayed the new state as new and improved, on every front, and the Nationalists as hopelessly corrupt. For Ma Yuhua’s research see Ma, Guomin zhengfu, 124–26.

56. See note 30.

57. During the tenth through thirteenth centuries CE. Ruey, “Xinan shaoshu minzu chong shou pianpang,” 79.

58. Today the name Lisu is still used, but the Kawa are known as the Wa, the Laoheis as the Lahu (“hei,” meaning “black,” could also be read as derogatory and thus, as indicated here, the earlier term did not even have to include the “dog” insult).

59. There is a parallel in the image of a threatening pack of wolves in the forest, summoned in an advertisement broadcast during October 2004 on many television stations in the United States for then-president George W. Bush’s reelection campaign, and in the contender John Kerry’s suggestive decrying of Al Qaeda (“Barbarians! They are barbarians!”) in a 2004 TV debate with the same President Bush.