CHAPTER TWO

THE OUTLYING AND THE PERIPHERAL: MYTHS OF MIGRANTS AND MINORITIES

I attempt to use Chinese, the Han language, to construct an unknown China.

– Zhang Chengzhi, *History of the Soul*

The picture of Chinese family-regional histories will never be complete without those of the outlying and the peripheral. Writing about migrants and minorities involves the politics of identity and representation, demanding different historiographic tactics. While diasporas invite discourses of displacement, minorities reconstruct myths of the marginal. More often than not, both of their images overlap in stories about a minority’s migrants and/or exiles, doubling the complexity of the narratives. The outlying group that I will concentrate on here is the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore as it appears in one of Wang Anyi’s sagas. The exodus of Cantonese and Fukienese, many of whom were Hakka (literally ‘guest people’—the Chinese Gypsy), to this island reached 224,000 in 1911 and continued to increase rapidly throughout the Republican period, dominating the population of the former British colony.

China is a polyethnic country with the Han as the dominant majority. Among the fifty-five officially grouped ‘minority nationalities’ (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族), the Manchu, the Mongolians, the Hui, and the Tibetans are the largest. Regarding the discourse of *minzu*, usually translated as ‘nationality’ or ‘ethnic group’, Jonathan N. Lipman describes contempo-

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1 Zhang Chengzhi, *Zhang Chengzhi wenxue zuopin xuanji (Xinling shi juan)* (Selected literary writings by Zhang Chengzhi: History of the soul) (Haikou: Hainan chubanshe, 1995), 245.

rary Chinese history as the “creation of a hegemonic narrative, a unified story that could demonstrate the bedrock truth of minzu continuity and consanguinity in the past, for the present.” This unified story serves to construct a unified modern Chinese nation-state as an “imagined community.” Lipman goes on to suggest:

In this account, each minzu, at its own pace and according to its own environmental and historical conditions, has followed the most advanced minzu, the majority Han people, toward higher steps on the ladder of history…. For Han—that is, Chinese—history, unlike other minzu histories, constitutes the story of Civilization or Culture itself and thus represents the Chinese version of History, the linear and rigidly structured narrative of progress….  

Here Lipman is picking up on arguments made by other scholars, in particular Stevan Harrell, who has pointed out the three images of peripheral peoples—women (sexual metaphor), children (educational metaphor), and ancient (historical metaphor)—and the three civilizing projects in the civilizers’ or colonizers’ definition of historical progress: the Confucian, the Christian, and the Communist. Except in the missionaries’ project, whose civilizing center is located in the West, it is assumed that Han ways represent a masculine, mature, and modern model for the minorities to follow.

According to the master narrative of the Han, the territories of Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Eastern Turkestan (present-day Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region), mostly conquered by the Manchu rulers and their Han collaborators during the Qing dynasty, unquestionably belong to China. The minority writers and Han authors concerned about the minorities, while not daring to openly challenge the state’s legitimacy, share a strong awareness of cultural autonomy for the non-Han ethnic groups.

Included in this chapter are Wang Anyi’s Patrilineal and Matrilineal Myths (Fuxi he muxi de shenhua 父系和母系的神話), Zhang Chengzhi’s stories of a Muslim group in northwest China, and Tibetan tales by Tashi Dawa and his peers. Wang extends her father’s biography to a migratory fiction of a Fukienese family in Singapore and traces her mother’s ancestry to a minority tribe beyond the Great Wall, the national symbol of a unified

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4 Ibid.