ETHNICITY ALONG CHINA’S SOUTHWESTERN FRONTIER

BY

HEATHER A. PETERS
(Office of the Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific, UNESCO)

Abstract

In China, a multi-ethnic nation-state whose national policy regarding ethnic groups is still in flux, ethnicity is a subject worthy of serious analysis. China plays lip service to cultural diversity within the nation-state, but it is a diversity that must fit within the boundaries drawn by the government. The officially recognized ethnic groups are discriminated against while receiving economic benefits.

As far back as the second and first millennia BC, ethnic diversity has been recognized and recorded in China. Archaeologists and ethnohistorians today cite these earlier textual sources in their research and frequently associate them with archaeological material. These archaeological remains are then often directly connected with ethnic groups living in the same region today. In doing so, the archaeologists are linking today’s groups firmly within the framework of Chinese history, but they fail to address certain questions: what is the meaning of ethnicity itself? How was ethnicity perceived in the past? Is it the same as today? And can we in fact link those people living in the past with the groups living in China today? In asking these questions, this paper investigates the diverse ethnic groups living in southwestern China during the latter half of the first millennium BC, and draws not only upon archaeological and historical data, but also uses ethnographic data collected from the author’s fieldwork carried out among the Tai Lue in southern Yunnan Province during 1988–89.

Introduction

China is a multi-ethnic nation-state. Its national policy regarding ethnic groups is still in flux: the government pays lip service to cultural diversity within the nation-state, but this diversity must fit within clearly-drawn boundaries. Members of an officially recognized ethnic group are, on the one hand, faced with political discrimination, while on the other, receiving numerous economic benefits, including the privilege of bearing more than one child.
As far back as China’s earliest states, the Shang 商 and the Zhou 周 (second and first millennia BC), ethnic diversity has been recognized in China. The tradition of recording its presence also has a long history. Some of the earliest records include those written by Sima Qian 司马遷 (c. 145–90 BC), the court historian for the Han 漢 Emperor Wudi 武帝 (r. 140–87 BC). Sima Qian’s purpose in writing descriptions of different ethnic groups found in southwest and northwestern China was not dissimilar to that used by scholars today—he intended to establish and clarify the economic and political nature of these groups and, with this knowledge, suggest how they could be best integrated into Imperial Han China.

Archaeologists and ethnohistorians today continue to cite these historical passages in their research. As part of their analysis, they associate the groups cited in the historical passages with the archaeological material found in the regions mentioned in these passages. These ancient groups plus the archaeological remains are then frequently provided a direct connection with an ethnic group living in that same region today.

What we see here is a very fixed and static concept of ethnic identity and ethnicity that serves a very useful political function: it links today’s ethnic groups firmly within the framework of Chinese history. We do not find the Chinese scholars questioning this assumption, nor addressing certain questions, such as how did the ancient Chinese define and categorize the peoples living along their peripheries? Are the peoples described in the texts, in fact, ethnic groups, and if so, what did texts mean by ethnic group? This is another way of asking: what was the concept of ethnicity during the past? Did it mean the same as ethnicity today?

In this paper, I will investigate the diverse ethnic groups living in southwestern China during the latter half of the first millennium BC. In so doing, I will begin by asking some of the questions neglected by Chinese archaeologists. I will draw not only upon archaeological and historical data, but will also use ethnographic data collected from fieldwork carried out among the Tai Lue (Dai 傣) in the Xishuangbanna 西雙版納 in Yunnan 雲南 Province during 1988–89.

**Defining ethnicity and ethnic groups**

In recent years, archaeologists in China and Southeast Asia have begun to explore the issue of ethnicity with regard to historical and archaeological data, but they have rarely analyzed some of the basic issues involved. They freely use the term ethnic group, but do not ask