

**From *Miao* to *Miaozu*
-- Alterity in the Formation of Modern Ethnic Groups**

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Abstract:

In China, the Miao ethnic group has been known for its long and tragic history. This image, however, was formed only during the modern era. Using a historiographical approach, this paper reviews and analyzes the process through which the Chinese Miao emerged as a modern ethnic group. Specifically, it focuses on the transition from “Miao” as a blanket term for non-Han ethnic groups in southern China during the pre-modern period to “Miaozu” as a modern ethnic group, originally constructed in the context of the emergence of Chinese nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century in the context of the domineering “Other” of Han culture and eventuating in the official recognition of fifty-six “minority nationalities” (*shaoshu minzu*) in the 1950s. Based on this study, this paper then goes on to a theoretical discussion on the question of alterity in the formation of ethnic groups.

“Miao” During Pre-modern Times

It is generally accepted in academic circles that the earliest historical documentation about the origin of the contemporary Miao – other than the legendary story about San Miao during the antiquity of the Yao Yu period – can be traced back to *The Book on Barbarians (Manshu)* written by Fan Chuo during the Tang dynasty (618 – 907).¹ During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), more and clearer documentation of the “Miao” emerged. In his “On San Miao” (*San miao ji*), Zhu Xi, a preeminent Confucian thinker in the Southern Song dynasty, described the condition of “Miao” and “Miao people” in an area that corresponds to today’s Hunan province. He also made the connection between this group and the “San Miao” tribes during the Yao Shun Yu period

(over 4,000 years ago).² There was, however, no mention of “Miao” in the official written history of this period. During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), documentation about “Miao” began to appear frequently in the official history. According to existing research, in *Yuan History (Yuan shi)*, the records regarding the names of “Miao” alone include “Miao”, “Miao barbarian” (*Miaoman*) (such as “*Guizhou Miaoman*”, “*Pingfa miaoman*”, “*Bafan miaoman*”, “*Zijiang miaoman*”, etc.), “Miaolao”, “Miaoliao”, “Shengmiao”, and so on.³ Judging by their geographical position, the “Miaoman” here referred to mainly the non-Han groups in the area that corresponds to today’s Guizhou and Hunan provinces covering speakers of Tai and Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic languages such as the Dong, Buyi, Yao and Yi of today.

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the central government reinforced its rule in the South, especially in the Southwest. In order to strengthen the central control over Yunnan and the “barbarian” areas in between Yunnan, Sichuan and Huguang (modern day Hunan, Hubei and part of Guangxi and Guizhou) and to ensure the safety of the transportation route in the area, the central government established in the 11th year of the Yongle reign (1413) the “Guizhou Administrative Branch” (*Guizhou buzheng shisi*). This marked the official beginning of the central administration of Guizhou. Aside from the reinforcement of political control, the Ming government also implemented the so-called “border reinforcement through migration” (*yimin shi bian*) policy. This was carried out through the establishment of “*wei suo*” and “*min tun*” settlements throughout the southwestern region. As a result, large numbers of Han immigrants were resettled in this region. In Guizhou province there were about 30 *wei* communities and more than 140 *suo*, communities and the military/residential force alone amounted to more than 200,000

households and more than one million people.⁴ Within this context, the label “Miao” gradually expanded its referential range and became a blanket term for non-Han ethnic groups. Certain groups who had been referred to as “barbarian” (*Man*), began in the Ming dynasty to be called “Miao” instead.

During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) the central government further strengthened its control of the southwestern region. Beginning in the Yongzheng reign (1723-1736), the policy of “*gai tu gui liu*” (a policy to shift administrative power from local chieftains to centrally assigned officials) was widely enforced in regions of Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi that were formerly ruled by native chieftains known as *tusi*. In regions that remained for a long time outside the imperial rule, controlled by neither *tusi* nor imperial administrators (*liuguan*) - such as the La’ershan “Hong Miao” region at the border between northeastern Guizhou and western Hunan, the “Hei Miao” region located in the Qingshui and Duli River valleys in southeastern Guizhou, and the “Zhong Miao” and “Qing Miao” regions in southwestern Guizhou - direct imperial control was achieved through force, or in other words, “by exploring the Miao territory.” Starting in the mid-Qianlong reign (1736-1795), Han migration from Central China to the Southwest increased rapidly. This led to increasing conflicts and confrontations over the issue of land ownership between the native non-Han groups and the new Han “guest people” (“*Kemin*”). In this process, “Miao” replaced “Barbarian” (“*Man*”) and was positioned at the opposite end from “Han” as a blanket term for all non-Han groups living in southern China, especially the ones living in the Guizhou-centered Southwest (including some of the Hans that migrated into the area during the Ming dynasty).

We should be aware, when we perform such a review of the ethnic relations in pre-modern China, that the pre-modern concept of ethnic group differs significantly from the concept we use today. During the times of the Chinese Empire, which was a political entity centered on the figure of the emperor, there was only a vague sense of reign and no clear consciousness of territory. Within this context, both the conception of “foreigners” in the Han society and the political legitimacy of the autocratic regime were largely based on the political and cultural borderline between Chinese and non-Chinese (*hua yi zhi bian*). The so-called *hua yi zhi bian* can also be described as the cultural superiority of the Han group, formed during a long process of self-identification through “alterity,” or differentiation from others. As pointed out by scholars, this conception encompassed the cultural symbolic system of the Chinese script (*hanzi*) and the system of decorum (*li*), which embodied and materialized this cultural symbolic system. As a set of transcending and universal rules, this system of decorum should not be traced back to a specific territory or ethnic group.⁵

In other words, *hua yi zhi bian* designated not only the ethnic distinction between Hans and non-Hans; more importantly it signified an oppositional cultural binary: “*hua*” signified “civilization”, and the concrete content of this “civilization” included the acquisition of the Chinese language and identification with Confucian morality. At the other extreme, “*yi*” signified “barbarity” and was seen in nomadic farming and cultivation, non-hierarchical social structuring and other exotic customs that did not abide by Han cultural values. On another level, the division line of “*hua yi zhi bian*” was applied not only in the differentiation between superior and subordinate cultures (implied in the process of “civilization” “*jiao hua*”), but also in the establishment of political

subordination (implied in the process of “subjection” “*wang hua*”). Once outside the ruling range of the autocratic power, even Han people would be equally considered to be “people outside *hua*” (“*hua wai zhi min*”). Prior to the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the southern “barbarians” (“*man yi*”) were not subordinated to the central imperial control, the ethnic division between “*hua*” and “*yi*” was embodied in relationships of political subordination, manifested as taxation or mandatory military/labor service (“*yao yi*”).⁶ During the Ming and Qing dynasties, however, with most southern non-Han territories being subordinated to the central imperial control, the division between “*hua*” and “*yi*” changed from “*wang hua*” to “*jiao hua*”. This means that this division was now determined by whether someone learned and mastered Han Chinese culture and Confucian morality.

Let’s turn to the change in the use of “Miao” in the context of Han Chinese culture. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, “Miao” gradually replaced “Man” as a blanket term for the non-Han groups in the South. Later Wei Yuan, a preeminent late-Qing scholar, tried to explain this shift. In his opinion, the difference between “Man” and “Miao” came from their different internal social structuring. The communities with clear internal social hierarchy and rulers were called “Man”, whereas the communities without internal hierarchy are called “Miao”. In the past the imperial authority managed to suppress “Miao” through placating “Man”. However the “Man” leaders gradually lost their ambitions and became satisfied with the status quo. This led to the rise of “Miao” power and eventually to its replacement of “Man”.⁷

It is clear here that Wei Yuan also used traditional Han Chinese cultural values to differentiate between “Man” and “Miao”. In contrast to “Man” who possessed an internal

hierarchy, Wei Yuan regarded the “Miao” society, which contained no relationship of subjection, to be a more barbarous community. The correctness of his opinion is not our concern here, but his argument does reflect the general belief in the barbarity of “Miao” in the Han society. A review of the rapidly changing social background is necessary here.

Miao-Han Relations and the “De-Miao-ification” (“*fei Miao hua*”) Phenomenon in Mid- and Late-Qing Periods

Beginning in the Ming dynasty, regions inhabited by non-Han groups such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi and parts of Hunan, which used to be more or less distant from the power center of the central plain, began to be appropriated through political and military measures such as “*gai tu gui liu*” into the direct administrative system of the imperial power. This large-scale political restructuring also meant that large numbers of Han migrants began to move into this area in the form of agricultural military forces (“*tunjun*”). In Guizhou, these agricultural military forces were located along the line from Zhenyuan in central Guizhou, through Huangping, Shibing, Kaili and Guiding, all the way to Anshun, so as to ensure the security of the post road between Hunan and Yunnan. During the Qing dynasty, as the population rapidly increased on the central plain, large numbers of Han migrated to the Southwest for the purpose of searching for land: these newcomers came to be known as “guest people” (“*kemin*”). Beginning in the Qianlong reign, the amount of immigrants increased even more drastically. Take Guizhou as an example, in the 24th year of the Kangxi reign (1685) Guizhou had 13,697 registered residents. In the 14th year of the Qianlong reign (1749) this number increased to 3,075,111. By the 56th year of that reign (1791) it reached 5,167,000.⁸ This means that during the more than 100 years from the Kangxi reign to the end of the Qianlong reign, the population of Guizhou increased several hundred times. In addition to the

enforcement of the residential registration system, this development was due to the large-scale Han immigration. According to the documentation in *Qiannan zhifang jilue*, by the time of the Daoguang reign (1820-1850), Han “guest people” (“Kemin”) populated the so-called “Miao pale” (“Miao jiang”), and “villages with *Kemin* could be found everywhere”.⁹ Within the context of such radical social changes, the ethnic relations in the region were also characterized by complexity and variety.

First, the penetration of the imperial power and the Han immigrants into the southwestern region led to more frequent interaction between the Han people and the local non-Han groups. General knowledge about “Miao” became more detailed based on closer contact. During the Kangxi reign in the early Qing period, Tian Wen, in his *Qian shu*, listed 28 different kinds of “Miaoman”.¹⁰ During the Qianlong reign, Ai Bida pointed out in his *Qiannan shilue*, “there are over a hundred kinds of Miao. In the upper reaches area there are mostly *Luoyi*, and the lower reaches area is mostly inhabited by *Zhongmiao* and *Qingmiao*” (“*miao zhi zhonglei you bai, shangyou ze luoyi wei duo, xiayou ze zhongmiao, qingmiao wei duo*”).¹¹ During the Daoguang reign (1820-1850), Luo Raodian, in his *Qiannan zhifang jilue*, listed 52 kinds of Miao in the Guizhou region.¹² During the Jiaqing reign (1796-1820), in his graphic book *Baishier zhong miao tu bing shuo*, Chen Hao portrayed with color pictures the 82 kinds of Miao in the Guizhou region. At the same time, the book also contained detailed descriptions of Miao people’s exotic customs (“*qi feng yi su*”).¹³ Because of this book, the Miao in the Guizhou region were often referred to as “hundred Miao” (“*bai miao*”), and the areas where Miao lived, including Guizhou, parts of Hunan, Yunnan, Guangxi and Sichuan, were called the “Miao pale” (“*Miao jiang*”).

Second, the strengthening of central imperial control and large-scale Han immigration reoriented the ruling relationship and initiated new conflicts over economic interest and space for survival. This inevitably led to intense confrontations between the Miao society and the imperial authority, and between the Han and Miao groups. In the mid- and late-Qing periods, there was a popular saying “no prosperity without Miao” (“*wu Miao bu fu*”) among the Han immigrants (this means, without the Miao people, prosperity is not possible because there is no one to exploit). This is an indication of the deplorable condition of the Miao society under the exploitation of the Han “guest people”.¹⁴ At the same time this period also saw strong resistances from the Miao community, which were all eventually suppressed. These uprisings did not manage to improve Miao people’s conditions. Instead, large numbers of Miaos had to leave their homeland and were exiled to Yunnan and Southeast Asia. On the other side, from the perspective of the Han society and Han culture, Miao people’s resistance further highlighted their “barbaric” characteristics. Accordingly, “Miao” was often used as a synonym of “barbarity”. Shi Qigui, a Miao intellectual in the Republican period, gave the following emotional description, “[Han people] tend to use ‘Miao’ to describe ugly things. For example, they would call simple and rustic bowls and chopsticks ‘Miao bowls’ and ‘Miao chopsticks’. Someone who is not pretty or has crude manners would be described as having ‘Miao appearance’ and ‘Miao manners’. During conflicts ‘Miao’ would also be used as a common prefix as an insult”. (“*[Hanren] fan jian choulou zhi wujian, dongze yi ‘miao’ wei bini. Ru cuwan cukuai, hanren wei zhi ‘miaowan miaokuai’.* *Pin mao bu mei, hanren wei zhi ‘miaoxiang miaoxing’.* *Yi yu jiufen, gai yi ‘miao’ wei guanci*”).¹⁵

One can conclude that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, especially during the Qing dynasty, “Miao” was not only one of the blanket terms for the non-Han groups living in Guizhou-centered South China; in the cultural political structuring anchored on “*hua yi zhi bian*”, “Miao” was also placed at the lower end of the binary opposition between “civilization” and “barbarity”. Such distinctions between “Han” and “Miao” or between “hua” and “yi” led to alienation and prejudice against the non-Han communities on the ethno-cultural level. Politically and economically these communities were also marginalized and had to suffer under brutal suppression and exploitation. Under the force of these external suppressions, the non-Han societies had also undergone transformation and stratification during the mid- and late-Qing period. On the one hand, in areas where Han population dominated or where Han-Miao mixed habitation was common, the phenomenon of “Han-ification” (“*hanhua*”) was very common. In some Miao regions that neighbored with Han regions, such as certain Miao regions in western Hunan, there were even cases of bribery from Miao people to Han local lords, so that they could be registered as Han and their villages could be changed to Han regions.¹⁶ On the other hand, in certain “*Miaozhong*” communities with relative internal cultural uniformity and frequent interaction with Han people, such as the “Zhong” (“*Zhongjia*”, Buyizu) and “Dong” (“*Dongren*”, Dongzu) groups, great efforts were made to incorporate Han culture and to move closer to the mainstream society so as to avoid the stigma of being labeled as “Miao”. There was a strong tendency in the collective consciousness of these communities to avoid being seen as “Miao” by the outside world. Those who are called “Dongzu” today, for example, were referred to in the documentation of Ming and Qing dynasties as “*Dongren*” or “*Dongmiao*”. Before that they were however generally

considered a part of “Black Miao” (“*Heimiao*”).¹⁷ Because they lived in areas suitable for rice cultivation and not far from Han areas, they had had frequent interaction with the Han people for a long time. During the early Qing period, the Han documentation about Dong people was still emphasizing their “barbarity”, although it also documented their incorporation of Han culture.¹⁸ In mid-Qing period, however, as the Dong community’s assimilation of the Han culture further developed, Han documentation about the “Dong people” (“*Dongren*”) or “*Dongmiao*” also changed. For example, in *On Barbarians* (*shuo man*) it was noted: “*Dongren* are now called *Dong jia*. They dress like Han people and also don’t call themselves *Dongren*. They have practiced Han customs for a long time, and their young people often get education in order to pursue a career. The best of them serve in the local government. No one can tell that they are Dong people..... *Qian shu* claims that they are choleric and prone to violence. Perhaps that was the case back then. Today they are not so” (“*Dongren jin cheng Dongjia, yiguan ru Hanren, yi zi wei qi Dongren ye. Xi Hansu zhe jiu, zidi duo dushu bu zhusheng, qi neng zhe, duo yi yu junyi wei lixu, bu zhi qi wei Dongren ye Qianshu cheng qi duo ji xi sha..., huo dangshi you ran, jin bu jing ru suo shuo y.*”).¹⁹

In addition, in *juan 12* of *A General Introduction to Southern Guizhou* (*Qiannan shilue*), under the entry on Zhenyuan town there is the following description about the local “Dong”: “they are ashamed of being categorized as ‘Miao’. When addressed as Miao, they will stare back hostilely.” (“*chi ju Miaolei, cheng zhi yi Miao, ze numu xiangxiang yun.*”)²⁰ In *juan 6* of *Qiannan zhifang jilue*, under the entry on Tianzhu county, the following is documented:

Within this county, in the Liuji and Nandong regions, which belong to the administration of Qingjiangting, the residents of the Miao villages are

actually “shaven” Dongmiao. Their language and clothing are not different from those of Han people, and they are not mixed with the ‘unshaven’ Miaos. During the Kangxi reign, the local school designated three extra spots for Miao students (“*Miaosheng*”) apart from the normal quota. However, because the Dongmiao were ashamed of being included in Miao, they were unwilling to carry the *Miaosheng* title. Therefore requests were sent to the local authority for these titles to be removed” (“*xian shu difang bilian qingjiang tingshu zhi liuji, nandong yidai, miaozhai suo xia, xi xi tifa Dongmiao, yuyan, fushi yu hanmin wu yi. bing wu xufa miaoren canza qi jian. Kangxi jian, xian nei tongsheng ruxue, e qu zhi wai, shang you Miaosheng san ming, yin Dongmiao chi ju Miao lei, bu yuan you Miaosheng minmu, yi jing qian xian xiangqing cai tai*”).²¹

The “*Miao sheng*” mentioned here, refers to a measure adopted by the Qing government to speed up the civilization process of the Miao people. Within the Miao territory, the schools of various levels always designated extra spots for the Miao people apart from the normal quota. This was meant to encourage the Miao people to read Han Chinese books and practice Han customs and attend the administrative exams. According to the entry on Lipingfu in the same book, during the reign of Daoguang, Lipingfu in Tianzhu county had about 13 such extra “*Miaosheng*” spots every year. As explained by the excerpt above, for the “Dongmiao” in Tianzhu county, not only were their clothes and language identical to the Han people, they were even resistant psychologically to the character for “Miao” in the title of “*Miaosheng*”, which was designated by the government for the Miao people. So “ashamed were they of being included in Miao,” that the government had to remove the words of “*Miaosheng*” in their official documents.

Apart from the Dongzu, we can also notice the same tendency among Buyizu [Zhong], recorded in the Han documentation during the Qing dynasty. In *Qiannan zifang jilue*, quoted above, in *juan 5* under the entry on Dushanzhou there is the sentence “the Zhong people usually don’t think of themselves as Miao”.²² In *juan 1* of *Qiannan shilue*, under the entry on Guiyangfu, it is mentioned, “Most of the Zhong people have long been

civilized and are familiar with the Chinese ways. When called Miao, they would certainly become angry and start to argue back” (“*da lü zhongjia...yu jin jiu bei sheng jiao, jian xi huangfeng, you hu wei Miao zhe bi dong se, fanchun yi wei gou li*”).²³

From this scattered documentation in Han records, we can clearly sense the tendency of certain non-Han groups in southern China to refuse to be seen by the outside world as Miao during the late Qing period. This is what I call the phenomenon of “de-Miao-ification” (“*fei miao hua*”). This so-called “de-Miao-ification” refers to a collective psychological denial of Miao identity. This occurred within certain non-Han groups during the process of “Han-ification” (“*han hua*”). During this process the non-Han groups actively absorbed the Han culture and their values, trying to achieve the transition from “Miao” (barbarity) to “Han” (civilization). At the same time, in terms of ethnic identity there was also a strong collective denial of their own “Miaoness.” From today’s point of view, this phenomenon is related to formation of the often-discussed traditional “ethnic boundary.” In the context of the “Hua/Yi” binary at the time, this could be understood as the self-alienation of collective identity. This is to say that this transition from “Miao” to “Han” was shaped by very real factors, such as interests and benefits. At the same time, within a society dominated by Han culture, the difference between various non-Han groups formed through the process of “Han-ification” became the major content that defined the so-called traditional “ethnic boundary” (“*zuqun bianjie*”). Such *zuqun bianjie* is in essence different from the “ethnic boundary” (“*minzu bianjie*”) that often appears in discussions today.

Han documentation of these groups has also undergone a process of transformation. In early Qing documentation, the “barbarity” of the non-Han groups was

often mentioned at the same time as references to their acquisition of Han language and culture. In the mid- to late Qing Han documents, however, we see mainly the positive evaluation of the “Han-ification” phenomenon within such communities, without references to their barbarity. This is an indication of the mainstream society’s acceptance and approval of these groups’ assimilation to Han culture. Meanwhile, the negative impression and symbols surrounding “Miao” as seen through the lens of Han culture now have to be borne to a large degree by today’s Miaozu.

From “Miao” to “Miaozu” – the Construction of the Modern Ethnic Group Performed by the “Other”

We can conclude from the previous discussion that before the modern era, the so-called “Miaozhong” was a blanket term for the non-Han groups living in the “Miao pale” (“*Miaojiang*”), which was centered on today’s Guizhou province and covered Yunnan, Sichuan, Hunan and Guangxi. As a term used by the Han people for a foreign group, the “zhong” here signifies a vague cultural boundary between “Hua” and “Yi”, different from the modern concept of “race” (“*zhongzu*”) or “ethnic group” (“*minzu*”). However, in the 19th century, challenged by serious internal and external crises, China abandoned its old concept of sinocentric “universalism” (“*tianxia zhuyi*”) and began the difficult transition from an empire to a modern nation with national consciousness and a clearly-defined territory. The concept of “minzu” was introduced into China during this period by Chinese students who studied in Japan.²⁴ In this historical transition, “Miao” experienced the transition from “Miao” to “Miaozu” – the transition from a blanket term to a modern ethnic group designation. At the same time, this transition also played a very special role in the emergence of Han nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century.

Much has been written on the intellectual movement among the overseas Chinese students and within the Chinese society at the beginning of the 20th century. What concerns us here is the wide interest in “race” (“*zhongzu*”) in this intellectual movement, generated by the then popular theory of social Darwinism. On the one hand, the western powers’ intrusion into China was interpreted as a confrontation between the “white race” and the “yellow race” (“*baizhong*” and “*huangzhong*”), and the theory of survival of the fittest led Chinese intellectuals to experience a crisis regarding the future of their own nation. On the other hand, Han revolutionaries used the theory of “race” as a weapon and put the label of “rule of foreign race” (“*yizu tongshi*”) on the ethnically Manchurian Qing regime.²⁵ Interestingly both reformists and revolutionaries mentioned “Miaozu” in their argument and discussions. During the emergence of modern nationalism, the image of “Miao” changed its meanings again within the context of Han culture.

First, from 1902 to the 1911 Revolution, “Miao” began to be differentiated as an individual “race” (“*zhongzu*”) or “ethnic group” (“*minzu*”). For example, in the anti-Manchu pamphlet *The Revolutionary Army (Geming jun)*, written by Zou Rong, a Chinese student in Japan at the end of the Qing dynasty, the author divided the world into two broad categories “the white race” (“*baizhong*”) and “the yellow race” (“*huangzhong*”). Under “*huangzhong*” there were “the Siberian race” (“*Xiboliya zhong*”) and “the Chinese race” (“*Zhongguoren zhong*”). Within this category, the Manchu rulers were considered a “foreign ethnic group” (“*yi zhu*”), and put under “*Xiboliya zhong*” together with the Mongolians and the Tonggushi, whereas the “*Zhongguoren zhong*” included the “Han group” (“*Hanzu*”), the “Tibetan group” (“*Xizangzu*”) and the “Vietnamese group” (“*Jiaozhizhinazu*”). Zou included the “Miao people” (“*Miaomin*”) in

the “*Jiaozhizhinazu*” and wrote: “This group used to live in China in the ancient times. Later it was gradually pushed out by the Han group. The Miaomin and Jingman of the early Zhou period and the Nanzhao kingdom of the Tang dynasty probably all belonged to this group” (“*ci zu gudai ceng zhanju Zhongguo benbu, hou wei Han minzhu jianci qugan. Qianzhou zhi Miaomin, Jingman, Tangdai zhi Nanzhaoguo kong jun shu ci zu*”).²⁶ In *A Bell to Warn the World* (“*Jingshi Zhong*”), an equally famous anti-Manchu pamphlet from the same period (1903) written by Chen Tianhua, another Chinese student in Japan, the author made sub-divisions over and above from the reiteration of the division of races popular at the time: white race, yellow race, black race, red race and brown race (*baizhong, huangzhou, heizhong, hongzhong, zongzhong*). According to Chen, within the “yellow race”, there were “Han race” (“*Hanzhong*”), “Miao race” (“*Miaozhong*”), “Donghu race” (“*Donghuzhong*”), and “Mongolian race” (“*Mengguzhong*”). He stipulated in parentheses that the “Miao race” here referred to the “Miao ethnic group” (“*Miaozu*”).²⁷

Second, in the formation of the ethnic/national self-identification of the Hans, the “Miao” group was put in a special reference system, and the image of Miao as an “ancient” and “declined” ethnic group associated with a tragic history began to be formed. “Miaozu” became involved in the anti-Manchu debate that aimed to repel the Manchurian rulers and revive the Han group. The Miao-related theories and arguments that emerged in this debate would later become core material in the reconstruction of self-identification of Miao intellectuals as well as the basis for the reconstruction of the Miao group’s chronological formation.

After 1902, in the heated debate over the “preserving the race” (“*bao zhong*”) theory of the revolutionaries and the “preserving the civilization” (“*bao jiao*”) theory of the reformists, it began to be widely promoted that the “Yellow Emperor” (“*huangdi*”) be established as the ancestor of the Han people and the beginning of the Yellow Emperor reign be used as the beginning of the Chinese historical chronology.²⁸ The theory that the Han Chinese are the descendants of the “Yan” and “Huang” emperors was also formed during this period. Due to the influence of the “White supremacy” theory in the West, among the varied efforts to locate the origin of the Han ethnic group, the belief of “Hans coming from the West” was very popular. According to this theory, the Miaos were the oldest residents on the land of China, who were later forced to move to the South when expelled by the forces of Huangdi and Yandi. The legendary war between Huangdi and the Miao chief Chiyou - in which Huangdi defeated and eventually killed Chiyou - was then considered a decisive historical event that laid the foundation for the Chinese settlement on the central plain. For example, in *Jingshi zhong*, Chen Tianhua pointed out in the section on “race” that it was through Huangdi’s defeat of Chiyou, the ancestor of “Miaozu”, that the foundation for the development of Han Chinese in this land was established. This was, at the same time, a turning point for the Miao, who began to decline after this point.²⁹ Before Chen, another famous revolutionary Zhang Taiyan also wrote in his *Jiushu* (1898): “Huangdi’s force advanced into China and battled with the native chieftain Chiyou at Banquan. It was here that the ancestors of these people were killed or expelled....After the extinction of Sanmiao, groups like Li and Yao lived in isolation in Hubei and Guangdong until today” (“*Zi huangdi ru Zhongguo, yu tuzhu*

junzhang chiyou zhan yu banquan, yi qi zong.... (zhong lue) Sanmiao yiwang, zishi liyao zhuzu, fen bao jing yue zhi jin”).³⁰

As we know, Zou Rong, Chen Tianhua and Zhang Taiyan were among the most prominent anti-Qing fighters during the late Qing period. The revolutionary thoughts that they propagated were widely and deeply influential in their contemporary society.³¹

Therefore their descriptions of the Miao perhaps also affected many as their revolutionary theories spread. Why did the Han intellectuals consider Miao, a blanket term for the southern ethnic groups, to be the most ancient residents of China and associate them with the ancient “Sanmiao”? Later ethnologists Lin Chunsheng and Rui Yifu pointed out two reasons in their *A Survey Report on Miaos in Western Hunan*: the first reason was the tendency among the literati since the Song dynasty to associate “Miao” with “Sanmiao”; the second reason was the influence of Japanese historians.³²

There are two ways to interpret the antiquarian image of Miao presented by the Han nationalists. First, Huangdi and Yandi, the ancestors of the Han Chinese, were able to first establish Han domination on the central plain through their defeat of Chiyou, the ancestor of “Miao”. Here “Miaos” were imagined as the earliest “foreigners” and “enemy” that the Han Chinese encountered. This opposition, a racial/ethnic (“zhongzu”) opposition, was then reframed as the opposition between “civilization” and “barbarity”. Second, “Miaozu” was also highlighted as a negative example, a loser in the competition for survival. In this sense, their history had pedagogical value for Han people. Social Darwinism was widely influential during this period. In addition, after experiencing the shame of the First Sino-Japanese War and the danger of China being divided by the western powers after the Boxer Rebellion, the Chinese intellectuals at the time were

generally haunted by the fear of national annihilation. In their eyes, the “Miaos”, despite the fact that they were the oldest residents on the land of China, were eventually defeated by the Hans, forced to live in the mountains and then spent their years in a state of stagnation. Agreement seemed to be reached on this point within the society of that time and among both reformists and revolutionaries. For example, Kang Youwei wrote in his *Baojiu daqing huangdi gongsi xulie*, “the southern provinces of this country used to be the land of Miao, Yao, Dong and Tong, but these days these people are on the verge of extinction because of the force of our people, the descendants of the Yellow Emperor” (“*wo nansheng yuan jie Miao, Yao, Dong, Tong zhi difang, jin yi wei wo huangdi zisun bi chu, miao, yao, tong yi jiang jue yi!*”).³³

Liang Qichao also made frequent references to Miao in his writings. On the one hand, he followed the historical documentation and saw “Miaozu” as an ancient ethnic group that first founded criminal law and religion and invented metal in China. On the other hand, he also frequently mentioned the failure that the Miao group encountered at the hands of the Hans in the competition for survival. In *A Historical Survey of the Ethnic Groups in China (Lishi shang zhongguo minzu zhi guan cha)*, he wrote, “these people have interacted with us for the longest time. Since the Yellow Emperor’s time to the time of Shun and Yu, the competition between these two groups, as everyone knows, has been very fierce. When they were strong, they marched across the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers and fought the Han Chinese under the leadership of the Great Chiyou. They were as resilient as strings of silk and could not be eliminated by us. The Yellow Emperor first rose to challenge them. After that it took hundreds of years of fighting under Emperors Zhuan, Ku, Yao, Shun and Yu until the Miaos retreated to the South and hid in their old

fortresses.... For thousands of years they fled from the north to the south of the Yangtze River, from east to west of Dongting Lake, and then along the Yuan River to the barren land of its upper reach, and finally settled where they are today” (“*Cizu yu wozu jiaoshe zui gu, zi huangdi qi yu shun, wei jilie zhi jingzheng, jing ren zhi zhi.....dang qi sheng shi, you jueshi weiren chiyou wei zhi qiushuai, she jiang yu he, fa wo yan huang, huazu zhi bu zhan ru lü. Huangdi qi er rang zhi, jing Zhuan Ku Yao Shun Yu shu bai nian xuezhan, shi ou zhi fu nan, bao canchuan yu guleigai ci zu shu qian nian lai tuibi qianxi, qi ji zui lili fenming, you Jiangbei er Jiangnan, you hudong er huxi, zu su Yuanjiang yi da qi shangyou kuji zhi di, zhanzhan weimi yi ji yu jinri*”).³⁴ These discussions of the failure of the “Miao” were carried out at an historical moment when China was at peril of being divided by the western powers. What was indicated in these discussions was that China or the Han Chinese might also follow the steps of the Miao if they did not try to revive the nation. In other words, as a people they might decline or even face extinction. This was perhaps the real purpose of the discussions of the Miao.³⁵

From the discussion above we can sense the gradual change in the image of Miao. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries and especially during the nationalist movement represented by the theme of “Expel Manchu and revive Han” (“*pai Man xing Han*”) organized by the Chinese students in Japan, the image of Miao was developing in the eyes of the “Other”. On the one hand, as the concepts of race and ethnic group were introduced into China, Miao, which used to be a blanket term for the non-Han groups in the South and a term bound by the hierarchy of “*hua yi zhi bian*”, developed to denote an ethnic group in the modern sense. On the other hand, within the “Expel Man and revive Han” discussion at the time, Miao, which used to have many negative connotations in the

Han cultural context, began to be imagined and highlighted as an “ancient” but “declined” ethnic group that was defeated in the cruel competition for survival. The Chinese intellectuals at the time frequently mentioned “Miaozu” in their discussions only to use it as an example of failure, so as to warn the general public and awaken their national consciousness. Starting from this point, “Miaozu” began to be seen as an ancient ethnic group with a tragic history.

Discussions in the early 20th century also demonstrated that there was considerable ambiguity in the concepts of “*zhongzu*” and “*minzu*”. During this period, there was not only overlap and confusion between the concept of “*zhongzu*” and “*minzu*”; the differentiation of “*minzu*” and “*guojia*” also seemed to be randomly constructed. Take Zou Rong’s *Revolutionary Army* for example, it explained the theory of “*zhongzu*” with the concepts of “*renzhong*”, “*minzu*”, “*ren*” (such as “*Zhongguoren*”). The Manchurians that were ruling China at the time were placed in the “Siberian race” and were therefore considered “foreigners”, whereas Japanese, Koreans, Tai, Tibetans and Chinese were all placed in the Han ethnic group and were therefore considered “compatriots”.³⁶

A similar tendency can be observed in discussions of “Miaozhong” or “Miaozu” at the time. Although “Miao” began to be associated with the concept of ethnic group and were called “Miaozu”, in essence the meaning of the group did not change much from the “Miao” in pre-modern times. The “Miaozhong” or “Miaozu” in the writings of Zou Rong, Chen Tianhua, Liang Qichao, quoted above, was still used as a blanket term for the non-Han people across southern China and even in areas such as Southeast Asia and Indochina. As China began to interact with the world, “Miao” was even associated

with native Americans. For example, an article on policies regarding native Americans in different countries in the Americas used the name of “Red Miao” (“*Hongmiao*”) to refer to the native Americans. The word “red” here referred to the skin color of the native Americans and had no connection with the “Hongmiao” branch of the Miao ethnic group.³⁷ Why should “Miao” be used for the native Americans? Here we can observe some cognitive shift. As the times changed, so did sinocentric universalism and the *hua/yi* cultural hierarchy subtly change. This cultural hierarchy, which used to show the absolute supremacy of the Chinese Empire, was now used as a paradigm for understanding the world. On the one hand, the yellow and the white races were in conflict. On the other hand, despite their color difference both the Euro-American white people and the Han Chinese were “people of morality and knowledge” (“*de hui shu zhi zhi min*”). They were therefore on the side of civilization, i.e., on the side of “*hua*”.³⁸ In this sense, the images of the Chinese Miao and the native Americans overlapped with each other in the paradigm of “*hua yi zhi bian*”. Aside from the scarcity of information, a more important reason for such an overlap to occur in people’s minds was perhaps the belief in the similarity between the Miaos and the native Americans, as they were both seen as displaced “barbarians”. At the turn of the 20th century, a historical moment of dramatic intellectual development, Miao became Miaozu, and their image also adopted multifarious meanings in the eyes of the “Other”.

Conclusion

This historical analysis has examined the process by which Miao – one of the fifty-five ethnic minority groups in China today – transformed from a blanket term for non-Han groups during pre-modern times into a modern ethnic group. One can see from

this review that the period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a time when China experienced not only the shift from an empire to a modern nation but also the construction and emergence of modern “ethnic groups” (“*minzu jituan*”). Here I would like to make two comments regarding the key factors that affect the formation of ethnic groups.

First, in the existing theories and discussions of the definition of ethnic groups, both the “subjectivists” and the “objectivists” consider some kind of “shared culture” one of the most basic prerequisites for an ethnic group. However, the above review of the history from “Miao” to “Miaozu” has demonstrated that the earliest “embryonic form” of Miaozu as a modern ethnic group was first imagined and constructed by the “Other”. The idea that Miao is an ethnic group in China with a long history has become common knowledge today. And yet how do we explain the enormous internal variety in this ethnic group, in terms of language, areas of habitation, agricultural practice, culture and customs? The answer to this question can only be found through the examination of history. And my contention here is that only by understanding the role of “alterity” can we understand the historical formation of ethnic groups. As different ethnic groups interact with each other, the domineering ethnic group exerts continuous influences on the surrounding smaller and “weaker” ethnic groups in areas such as politics, economy and culture. In addition to these direct influences, the impressions of the smaller and “weaker” ethnic groups – formed by the “Other”, the stronger ethnic group – can also be “grafted” onto the weaker groups as such impressions become assimilated. These types of modern ethnic groups were formed almost always simultaneously with modern nation-states, and the most important determining factors in the formation of these types of

ethnic groups were often the forces of the state power, the mainstream society and modern society, in other words the forces of the “Other”, rather than the factors that have long been emphasized, such as “shared culture”.

Second, ever since anthropologist Fredrik Barth, at the end of the 1960s, first proposed his “boundary theory” for the formation of ethnic groups, it has been the focus of much discussion. In subsequent studies of ethnic group definition, “the identification of the other” (who are they?) and “self-identification” (who are we?) have become perhaps the most important criteria.³⁹ The dilemma is that, in the interaction between the self and the other, “identification of the other” and “self-identification” often do not occur at the same time. In China, because of the absolute dominance of Han Chinese and their culture in thousands of years of interethnic interaction, the existing historical records and writings about the minority ethnic groups and the discourse on “foreign ethnic groups” (“*yizu*”) were by and large constructed in the context of Han Chinese language and culture (including the central authority, which was also founded on Han Chinese culture). They do not necessarily reflect the actual self-identification within the non-Han communities, which were deemed “foreign ethnic groups”. The image of Miao as the oldest ethnic group in China was formed at the beginning of the 20th century, and yet the construction of self-identification within the Miao ethnic group began only in the 1980s, almost a century later. This issue remains to be pursued in future inquiry.

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About the Author

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Endnotes

¹ (Tang) Fan Chuo, *Manshu*, *juan* 10, *Wenyuange Sikuquanshu*, *Shi* section.

² (Song) Zhu Xi, *Ji sanmiao. Hui'an xiansheng zhuwengong wenji*, *juan* 71, *Sibu congkan*, Republic of China, Shangwu yinshuguan, (jing ying ben).

³ Yang Tingshuo, *Renqun daima de lishi guocheng – yi miaozu zuming wei li*. Guizhou renmin chubanshe. 1998, pages 98-100.

⁴ *Wei* and *Suo* were military settlements in which relocated agriculturalists from the north were positioned to participate in military conflicts when needed. *Mintun* communities were also relocated northern farmers but did not serve a military function. Fan Tongshou, *Guizhou jianshi*, Guizhou renmin chubanshe. 1991, page 80.

⁵ Murata Yujiro, “Chinese Nationalism and the ‘Last Empire’: China”. *Why Should We Discuss Ethnicity Today*. Eds. Hasumi Sigeihiko and Yamauti Masayuki. Tokyo University Press. 1994, page 33.

⁶ During the Song dynasty, the relationship of political domination, demonstrated by taxation or labor service, was the major criterion that the imperial court used to determine whether a certain southern non-Han community belonged to “*hua*” or “*yi*”. The names of “*moyao*” and “*yaoren*” during this period were determined this way. Furthermore, the concepts of “raw” (“*sheng*”) and “cooked” (“*shu*”) were also used in this process of differentiation. For example, in *Song hui yao gao* there is the following passage: “in the three *zhou* [an administrative unit] of Cheng, Yuan and Jing, inside there are the provincial residents, outside there are the ‘cooked’ households of *Shanyao*. And then there are those that are called *Dongding*, who are close to being in a raw state. The peaceful life of the provincial residents actually depends on the military service provided by the ‘cooked’ households, who defend them from the *Dongding*” (“*cheng yuan jing sa zhou, nei ze shengmin ju zhi, wai ze wei shuhu shanyao, you you hao yue dongding, jiejin shengjie. Pingshi shengmin deyi anju, shi lai shuhu zhi yao yu fu dongding xiang wei hanbi*”). Here, the “inside” refers to the provincial residents, i.e. Han people, and the “outside” refers to the “cooked households of *Shanyao*”, who were barbarians that had been civilized. The concept of “raw state” has the following explanation in Zhu Fu’s *Xi man cong xiao*, written during the same period: “The raw state: the areas that are far away from administrative centers are not yet civilized and therefore belong to the raw state.” (“*shengjie, qu zhouxian bao zhai yuan, bu shu wanghua zhe, ming shengjie.*”) In other words, these were the barbarians that refused to be ruled by the imperial court. The criterion for differentiating between “cooked” and “raw” can be seen in the documentation in the following historical records: *Wenxian tong kao*, *juan* 331, entry of Litong, “The barbarians that flee far away from the provincial land and refuse to provide military and labor service are called raw Li. Those that till the provincial land and provide military/labor service are called cooked Li” (“*Man qu shengdi yuan, bu gong fuyi zhe ming shengli. gengzuo shengdi, gong fuyi zhe ming shuli*”). *Ling wai dai da*, *juan* 2, entry of *haiwai liman*: “There is a Limu mountain in Hainan. In the mountain live the raw

Li. They avoid administration and do not provide military/labor service. Outside the mountain live the cooked Li, who farm the provincial land and provide military/labor service” (“*Hainan you limu shan, nei wei shengli, qu zhouqian yuan, bu gong fuyi. wai wei shuli, geng shengdi, gong fuyi*”). *Weixian tong kao*, *juan* 328, entry of Tongzhou: “The people in the South used to be called barbarians. However, the Jimizhoudong region, which is outside the county seat and used to be a barbarian region, is now similar to the Han region. Its inhabitants pay taxes and provide military/labor services. Therefore these people are no longer called barbarians. The people living further than Jimi are however uncivilized real barbarians” (“*nanfang yue man, jin junxian zhi wai jimizhoudong, sui gu jie man di, you jin shengmin, gong shui yi. gu bu yi man ming zhi, guo jimi ze wei zhi hua wai zhen man yi*”). *Songshi*, *Sijiu siman yi er*, entry on *Chenghuizhou man*: “In the eighth year of the Xining reign, a person called Yang Changxian was willing to stop paying tribute, and instead pay tax and provide military service so as to become a Han” (“*Xining ba nian... you yang changxian zhe, yi yuan ba jinfeng, chu zufu wei Hanmin*”). These records demonstrate the following: during the Song dynasty, the imperial court’s classification of the southern “barbarians” depended on the latter’s relationship with the imperial power. Whether they obeyed the autocratic authority and whether they paid tax or provided military service determined whether they belonged to “*hua*” or “*yi*”. The “barbarians” that paid taxes and provided service were in turn considered “cooked” barbarians or even considered Han.

⁷ (Qing) Wei Yuan, *Xinan yi gai liu ji. Xiaofanghu zhayudi congchao*, *tie* 8, page 147.

⁸ Quoted in Liang Fangzhong, *Zhongguo lidai hukou, tiandi, tianfu tongji. Qingchao wenxian tongkao*, *juan* 19, *hukou*; *Jiaqing huidian*, *juan* 11. Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1980.

⁹ (Qing) Luo Raodian, *Qiannan zhifang jilue*, published in the 27th year of Daoguang reign (1847), revised in the 31st year of Guangxu reign (1905). Holdings of the Toyo Bunto.

¹⁰ (Qing) Tian Wen. *Qianshu*, *juan* 1, *Miaoman zhonglei buluo. Guizhou guji jicui, Qianshu, Xuqianshu, Qianji, Qianyu*. Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1992, page 16.

¹¹ (Qing) Ai Bida, *Qiannan shilue*, *juan* 1. Compiled in the 14th year of the Qianlong reign, printed in the 27th year of the Daoguang reign. Holdings of the Toyo Bunto.

¹² See note 11.

¹³ Li Hanlin, *Bai miao tu jiao shi*. Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2001.

¹⁴ Many studies have been done on the confrontation between the Miao society and the national authority and between the Han and Miao groups. The campaign against “Han Chauvinism” at the beginning of the People’s Republic of China was a reflection of the communist leaders’ recognition of this history. The social reforms that were based on this recognition were also welcomed and supported by different ethnic groups. This led to

rapid and essential change in the ethnic minority's national identification and interethnic relations.

¹⁵ Shi Qigui, *Xiangxi miaozu diaocha baogao*. Hunan renmin chubanshe. December 1985, pages 207-208.

¹⁶ See note 20, pages 209 and 212.

¹⁷ The official records during the Qing dynasty referred to this non-Han group as “Miao” or “Heimiao.” See *Dongzu shehui lishi diaocha baogao*, Guizhou renmin chubanshe. 1988, page 37.

¹⁸ (Qing) Lu Ciyun, *Dongxi xian zhi*, has the following description: “Tongren carry Miao names and are quite violent. They often fight because of small quibbles. The ones living in Shixian and Langxi are similar to Han people. The ones in Yongcong are often aggressive. Hongzhou has fertile land, but the Dongren living there do not like to farm and only like to steal and rob. The Dong people in the western Yue are good at playing huiqin and liuguan (musical instruments). The women are good at singing Han songs” (“*Dongren, yi Miao wei xing, hao zheng xi sha, pian yan bu he, ji qi gangge. zai shixian, langxi er si zhe, duo lei Hanren, zai yongcong zhe juchang fugu. Zai Hongzhou di, po gaoyu, ran bu shi gengzuo, wei xi piaolue. Yue xi you Dongren zhe, hao tan huqin, chui liuguan, nü shan hanyin*”). *Xiaofanghu zhayudi cong chao*, zhi 8, page 55.

¹⁹ (Qing) Tai Cui, *Shuo man, Xiaofanghu zhayudi cong chao*, zhi 8, p62.

²⁰ (Qing) Ai Bida, *Qiannan shi lue*. juan 12.

²¹ (Qing) Luo Raodian, *Qiannan zhifang jilue*, juan 6, Tianzhu xian.

²² (Qing) Luo Raodian, *Qiannan zhifang jilue*, juan 6, Liping fu.

²³ (Qing) Ai Bida, *Qiannan shi lue*, juan 1, Guiyang fu. What needs to be pointed out here is that this book was reportedly written by Ai Bida who was the governor of Yunnan and Guizhou during the early period of the Qianlong reign, but the book was published during the Daoguang reign, and includes a lot of material from both periods. Judging by the content, what is quoted above probably documents the situation during the late Qianlong and early Daoguang reigns.

²⁴ Jin Tianming, Wang Qingren, “*Minzu yici zai woguo de chuxian ji shiyong wenti*”, *Minzu jianjiu lunwen ji* (volume one). Zhongyang minzu xueyuan minzu jianjiusuo. 1981. Wang Songxing, “Chinese – the Center and the Boundary”. Ed. Sumida Etuko. *Types of Ethnic Encounters*. The Asahi Shimbun Company, 1994, page 245.

²⁵ Sun Longji, “Qing ji minzu zhuyi yu huangdi chongbai zhi faming”, *Lishi yanjiu*. 2000 (3).

²⁶ Zou Rong, *Gemin jun*, included in *The Thoughts of Xinhai Revolution*. Eds. Simada Kennji and Ono Sinnji. Chikumashobo. 1958, page 47.

²⁷ Chen Tianhua, *Jing shi zhong*, included in *The Thoughts of Xinhai Revolution*, Ibid. Page 115-116.

²⁸ Yosizawa Seiyitiro, *The Emergence of Patriotism – Modern China through the Lens of Nationalism*. Iwanami, 2003, pages107-116. See also the article by Sun Longji, quoted above.

²⁹ See note 33.

³⁰ Zhang Binglin, *Jiushu xiangzhu*, annotated by Xu Fu. Shanghai guiji chubanshe. 2002, page 235.

³¹ *The Thought of the Xinhai Revolution*, quoted above, page 69.

³² See note 33.

³³ Quoted in Sun Longji. See note 25.

³⁴ Liang Qichao, “*Lishi shang zhongguo minzu zhi guan cha*”, *Yinbingshi heji*, *Yinbingshi zhuanji* 41. Shanghai zhonghua shuju.

³⁵ Yosizawa Seiyitiro, *The Emergence of Patriotism – Modern China in the Lens of Nationalism*. Iwanami, 2003. Pages 38-40.

³⁶ Zou Rong, *Gemin jun*, included in *The Thought of the Xinhai Revolution*. See note 26. Page 48.

³⁷ Cai Xiling, “*Hongmiao jilue*”, *Xiaofanghu zhayudi congchao*, zhi 12.

³⁸ Kawata Teiichi. *Chinese Modern Thought and the Contemporary Times -- Reflection on Reason and Its Condition*. Kenbun Shuppan, 1987, page 110.

³⁹ Fredrik Barth, “Ethnic Boundary”, translated by Aoyanagi Matiko. *What Is an Ethnic Group?* Shinsensha. 1996, pages 33-34. The concept of the “ethnic boundary” used in this paper is based mainly on the definition given by Japanese scholar Ebuchi Kazuhiro. In his definition, the ethnic boundary refers to the criteria for inclusion of people (with shared culture) in a certain ethnic group. The most important point here is that the identification of an individual is made not only by the Self, but also by the Other (other groups). That is to say, there are two aspects in the formation of an ethnic boundary: a boundary formation from within through socialization and a boundary formation from outside through the interaction with other groups. Ebuchi Kazuhiro. *The Stigma of Ethnic Boundary*. In *Cultural Anthropology 2: Ethnicity*, edited by Ayabe Tsuneo, Academic Press. March 1993.