Empire and Identity in Guizhou: Local Resistance in Qing Expansion

by Jodi L. Weinstein

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In her intriguing book *Empire and Identity in Guizhou*, Jodi Weinstein successfully combines two strands of scholarship that in recent decades have strongly influenced the discipline of history. On the one hand, she focuses on local history and ethnographic sources, thereby consciously not taking a major ethnic minority as an object of research, as has been done with the Manchu and the Mongols in the many publications since the 1990s that led to the foundation of the New Qing History (*Xin Qingshi*) school. On the other hand, she asks what defines China as a collective nation. Scholarship on the latter question in the past two decades has shown how the country is basically until today suffering from the failure to transform an empire into a functioning nation-state able to circumnavigate the shallow waters of ethnic conflict and disintegration. The well-known publications by Prasenjit Duara (1995), Marc Matten (2009), Thomas Mullaney (2011), and Mark Elliott (2001), to note just a few, have all shared the conviction that the European model of the nation-state cannot simply be transferred to China, despite the almost century-

long paradigm of Western impact and Chinese response.[1] Already in the 1990s scholars such as Myron Cohen described the Chinese self-perception as "amazingly devoid of elaborated cultural content." Lucian Pye understood China as a "civilization pretending to be a nation-state," and John Fitzgerald called China a "nationless state."[2] While publications by these scholars noted a lack of national consciousness or identity in modern Chinese history, thereby partly implying a deficit in modernization, the postcolonial turn in historiography has abandoned this simple model of political modernization. Yet, in many cases it has been unclear with what to replace it in order to explain the conflict-ridden relations between the Han ethnic group and the many minorities that persist until today. The sole answer to this question that is able to avoid the postcolonial trap is to concentrate on authentic sources that are closer to the historical subject, such as diaries, recordings of oral history, and, last but not least, the sources used by Weinstein so eloquently, that is, archival materials, indigenous folk narratives, and ethnographic research. Her book is a valuable contribution to the research on ethnicities at the margins, and similar to the dissertations of C. Patterson Giersch, John Hermann, and Jacob Whittaker that will hopefully all be published and made available soon. In contrast to their works, Weinstein tries to go beyond the elitist discourse and tries to recover indigenous agency.

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1 Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Marc André Matten, *Die Grenzen Des Chinesischen: Nationale Identitätsstiftung im China des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2009); Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

2 Myron L. Cohen, "Being Chinese: The Peripheralization of Traditional Identity," *Daedalus* 120, no. 2 (April 1991): 126, 128; Lucian W. Pye, "How China's Nationalism Was Shanghaied," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 29 (January 1993): 130; John Fitzgerald, "The Nationless State: The Search for a Nation in Modern Chinese Nationalism," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 33 (January 1995): 75-104.

In the first chapter of her book, Weinstein introduces a geo-economic approach to understand the livelihood of Guizhou and its impact on the socio-political context. Livelihood—a concept taken from Jean Michaud—serves in Weinstein's analysis as an epistemological principle, which allows her to grasp the close and interwoven relationship between man and nature that had an impact on the integration of Guizhou into the Qing empire. Seen from the center of the empire, this province in southwest China was defined by "harsh terrain, limited economic prospects, and unruly non-Chinese inhabitants." For these reasons, it proved in the eighteenth century to be difficult to integrate the province into the civilizational realm of the Qing. Taking the Zhongjia (now called the Buyi)—a Tai-speaking ethnic community of western Guizhou province—as a case study, Weinstein wants to show what difficulties the Qing met when first implementing their policy of "reforming the native and returning to the regular" (*gaitu guiliu*). Her purpose is twofold, namely, to provide a first introduction into the role of the Zhongjia in the late imperial era, and to show how they created a livelihood that was able to ensure their economic survival and likewise maintain their identity while negotiating their integration into the Qing empire. Her approach is promising and convincing as the local informs the national. She shows that legal and cultural norms, even if introduced by force, cannot avoid being adapted to local ethnic, social, and economic conditions. The Qing were very conscious in providing social and economic mobility for those among the Zhongjia who behaved properly, yet persecuted those who engaged in illicit activities. This is not surprising for the Qing state that was since the late seventeenth century eager to succeed in state-building and transforming the periphery into governable spaces.

The second chapter of this eloquently written and concise book focuses on the consolidation of Qing rule. The *gaitu guiliu* as endorsed by Emperor Yongzheng emphasized the role of imperial law and Confucian ethics to firmly integrate indigenous people into the central state, which, according to her, is both "an imperial and colonial phenomenon." Seeing

the Qing as an empire is certainly not a new finding (Weinstein bases herself here on previous works by Hostetler, Millward, Crossley, and Dai Yingcong), but the author shows here that the imperial court was eager to exert direct control, partly also in order to gain access to the rich natural resources in parts of Guizhou. By defining the settlement area of the Zhongjia as semi-state spaces, she shows how difficult the integration of that area into the Qing statehood actually was. The ensuing description of the efforts of Kangxi and Yongzheng provide a detailed picture of how their relations with Zhongjia translators, local chieftains, and native prefects shaped the administrative, political, and economic changes in that region. In the end, the Qing government succeeded in creating new administrative units that were now directly responsible to the court.

The hopes of the imperial authorities were high that the reforms of Yongzheng would be successful and transform the Zhongjia into law-abiding subjects. Their creativity to generate income from different, also illicit, sources, and unorthodox beliefs originating in superstition or secret societies were all expressions of their distinct livelihood characterized by the widespread "poverty with no source of income" (*chipin wulai*). This made the fight against law-breakers and criminals an important issue for the Qing, as Weinstein argues with her detailed analysis of three criminal cases dating from the mid-eighteenth century. Taking an ethnohistorical standpoint, she shows convincingly that crime was related to economic hardship and religious beliefs.

The most complex of these three cases was the Huang San Case of 1743 in which a man of that name propagated millenarian notions and tried to find or fabricate silver. Seeing himself as a master of the magical form known as *duangong*, Huang San sold amulets that promised good luck. He boosted his sale of amulets by telling customers that he knew where to find spirit silver (*guiyin*). When the authorities became aware of his activities, they discovered that Huang had even claimed to be the new king and ordered his arrest. This arrest was made possible by three individuals of Zhongjia origin who, from the perspective of the Qing,

demonstrated their sinicization by turning Huang in to the local chieftain (*tingmu*). The *tingmu*, himself a member of the indigenous elite, had been appointed by the Qing to guarantee stability. The Qing was thus able to maintain stability by installing a liaison between the rural residents and the imperial state, i.e., installing a form of indirect rule, that in the end prevented the outbreak of rebellion. To the authorities, however, the case attested that the indigenous residents of that area had their own cultural, economic, and religious priorities that persisted despite the *gaitu guiliu* policy. Similar to the Huang San case, two other cases in 1766 were primarily consequences of economic hardship, and even if the Qing suspected otherwise, in none of these three cases was there the intention of mounting a political rebellion. Rather, one of the protagonists in the cases viewed Confucian education as a means to protect and promote economic interests.

Three decades later, the Zhongjia started an uprising against the Qing state, laid siege to the prefectural seat, and threatened to kill all Han Chinese and the representatives of Qing rule, including the local chieftains. This Nanlong Uprising proved to be a regionally limited, yet powerful insurrection in which the Zhongjia were not simply bandits, but well-organized guerrilla fighters who gained strength from charismatic leadership and magical beliefs. Though making use of charms and rituals to neutralize the Qing's military superiority, the uprising failed. Yet, it was remembered positively in folk narratives, Weinstein argues, where voices of indigenous men and women recount the events as a military defeat, but a spiritual victory. A great achievement of the book is that, by making use of these folk narratives and their inscription into the cultural memory of the Buyi, the author succeeds in reading against the grain, presenting the uprising as something more than a struggle against feudalism and class oppression (as later Marxist historiography would claim when presenting every rebellion as a peasant uprising). The ethnic consciousness of the ethnic minority in Guizhou that was defined by culture, religion, and ethnicity culminated in the "Song of the Nanlong Resistance" and laid the

foundation of an “enduring culture of resistance,” as Weinstein calls it. As argued in the concluding chapter, this resistance is still visible today, despite the many attempts of the Communist Party to firmly integrate Guizhou into the state.

What is left is a fragile hegemony that the Qing tried to uphold by depicting itself as a multiethnic empire, as highlighted in the *Qing Imperial Illustration of Tributaries*. Though this and other sources clearly contain expressions of Han chauvinism, it at the same time established a governmental logic that saw ethnicity in non-political terms. To be a legitimate ruler did not depend upon ethnicity. This political principle prevailed in the early Republic after the anti-Manchu movement waned and gained momentum again after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. These developments make it difficult to see China as a nation-state in the traditional sense. Rather, its heterogeneity and the Qing’s multiethnic empire conception that both persist until today show that certain analytical frameworks are not suitable for the Chinese case.

It is thus not surprising that Jodi Weinstein considers the ethnic integration of China to be less symptomatic for the local Guizhou ethos where the circumstances of livelihood made it possible—and even legitimate—for followers of the various social and political movements to participate in illegal activities and rebellions. This was a highly rational choice for them and shows that political integration was not of primary importance. For this reason, the author concludes, state hegemony in Guizhou “remains at best incomplete” despite Qing colonialism, which she explains by Emma Teng’s notion of superfluity where ethnic groups are situated at the margins of the empire and struggle for preserving their indigenous livelihoods in a region far away from the political center, even if it meant opposing state directives. However, when aiming at leaving behind the elitist discourse and trying to recover indigenous agency, Weinstein’s study would have profited from discussing hegemony as a counterforce to agency. This would have strengthened her book in terms of theory and provided a fuller picture of how statehood imagined by the

center is propagated in the periphery. Observing the exotization of the Buyi by the Han Chinese majority in Guizhou and outside this province strips the Buyi of their own voice, resulting in a representation that is far from being authentic. The great strength of this book is to delve deeply into sources that are often neglected in standard historical accounts. The author is thus able to provide a far richer and multi-faceted picture of what it meant to live at the margins of the empire, and how to cope with changing political and cultural circumstances. Weinstein's book is here a significant contribution to sinological scholarship.