

Between Tibetan and Chinese: Identity and language in Chinese South-West

Abstract: This paper focuses on the ongoing process of changing local ethnic identities in the South-West of China. The analysis is based on a comparison of two ethnic groups: Xūmǐ and Báimǎ, both officially classified as Tibetans. While the experienced ethnic identity of the Xūmǐ is in conformity with their official classification, the Báimǎ feel their own identity as being distinct from the classification imposed by the state. The related changes in local identities are examined with special emphasis on the Xūmǐ and Báimǎ languages as an integral part of identity formation for each respective group.

1. Introduction: Ethnicity, identity and language

The People's Republic of China (PRC) officially recognizes 56 nationalities, including the Hàn Chinese nationality which accounts for 91.5% of the total population. The current framework of nationalities was established in the 1950s in the course of the PRC's State Ethnic Classification Project. Over 400 groups applied for a nationality status, but only 55 have been eventually granted the official status of 'national minority', in addition to the Hàn majority.

In the wake of international efforts of endangered language preservation and research, the PRC has in recent years recognized that it hosts a considerable number of endangered languages, in fact far exceeding the number of officially recognized ethnic groups, and has launched several programs aimed at endangered language description and maintenance.¹ Thus, according to recent official Chinese estimations (Sūn 2001: 3), China hosts 128 languages, of which two have recently become extinct. The actual number of distinct languages in China may be even higher. For example, Bradley (2006 Forthcoming) notes that within there are at least forty-one more endangered languages in the PRC, which are not on the official list. In his recent article, Sūn (2005: 28) does not exclude the possibility that more languages will be discovered in the PRC in the coming years.

Language is the first and therefore presumably the weightiest of the four Stalinist's principles on which the PRC State Ethnic Classification Project in the 1950s was essentially based. As formulated by Stalin (1913), a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language,

¹ The most notable projects carried out by the Institute of Minorities of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences since the 1990s are *Zhōngguó xīn fāxiàn yǔyán yánjiū cóngshū* [New found minority languages in China series], *Zhōngguó shǎoshù mínzú xìliè cídiǎn cóngshū* [Dictionary series of China's minority languages] and *Zhōngguó shǎoshù mínzú yǔyán fāngyán yánjiū cóngshū* [Dialects of minority languages of China series].

territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture. For Stalin thus ethnic identity was presumably intrinsically connected with language.

Large linguistic surveys in the 1950s did in fact constitute an integral part of the Ethnic Classification Project (cf. Hǎo 1999). In reality, however, final decision making in each particular case rarely relied on Stalin's criteria in their literal reading. They were employed instead, in Harrell's formulation (1995: 66), "to confirm or legitimate distinctions [that were] for the most part already there in Chinese folk categories and in the work of scholars who wrote before [the establishment of the PRC in 1949]." Thus the actual or purported historical relatedness of groups played a decisive role in the process of ethnic identifications, eventually pushing Stalin's principles into the background.

There appears to be a general understanding among ethnologists working in China that the perception and classification of minorities in the 1950s largely stem from the process of national history construction during the late Qīng dynasty (1644-1911) and the Republican period (1911-1949), which created the concept of one Chinese nation (*Zhōnghuá mínzú*), including all Hàn and non-Hàn people (cf. Wáng 2000, 2002). In this scheme, the legendary Yellow Emperor (Huángdì, trad. 2697-2597 BCE) is commemorated by Hàn Chinese as their common ancestor, while his brother, the equally legendary Flaming Emperor (Yándì), is reconstructed in national history as the ancestor of many non-Hàn nationalities. Thus the term 'descendants of the Flaming Emperor and the Yellow Emperor' (*Yán Huáng zǐsūn*) has entered the Chinese language as an umbrella concept for all Chinese people in one Chinese nation.

This construction of minority groups' identities and histories from Chinese historical sources was inevitably prone to controversy. Since the official categories and histories of separate groups were created by the Chinese, rather than by the ethnic groups involved, the new identities received by the latter in the PRC have at times come in conflict with their self-consciousness and their perceived cultural and other differences from other groups.

In this article, speaking of group's identity, I use Harrell's (1990: 517-520) three-way model of reciprocal interaction between (1) a group that considers itself distinctive, (2) neighbouring groups from which the group distinguishes itself, and (3) the state, which establishes official categories of group identification and distributes benefits to the groups so identified, which together give rise to ethnic consciousness and identity. An arguably universal pattern in present-day China is that identities,

originally not in conformity with official state ethnic distinctions, tend to gradually shape and partly solidify people's own ethnic consciousness so that they become strongly invested in the categories originally imposed upon them from outside, eventually turning ethnic identity into a recognized identity (Harrell 1996: 278-279).

Conflicts of identity, ethnicity and correlation of group's self-consciousness and official classification among Chinese minority groups is a well researched topic, discussed in a number of case studies (cf. Brown 1996; Harrell 1990, 1995, 2001; Upton 2000). I would like to contribute to this ongoing discussion two additional case studies from China's South-West, the Xūmǐ and the Báimǎ ethnic groups, who present a notable contrast as to the appreciation of their official classification as Tibetans: the Xūmǐ experience their identity as being in conformity with their official classification, whereas the Báimǎ until recently challenged their official status as conflicting with their self-awareness.

My major interest is in examining linguistic attitudes of each group. Both speak languages which are highly distinct from their neighbouring Tibetan varieties. The Xūmǐ speak a language (known in linguistic literature as Shǐxīng), which belongs to the Qiangic branch of the Tibeto-Burman language group, i.e. a branch distinct from the Bodish languages of the same language group, to which Tibetan in turn belongs. The Báimǎ speak a language that is mutually intelligible with Tibetan (Amdo) dialects in its vicinity, though the exact affiliation of their language is currently under dispute.²

The contrast in the respective appreciation by the groups of their official classification gives an opportunity to observe the role language plays in creating and asserting their identities as well as supports Haarmann's (1986) postulation on the relativity of language and its significance in ethnic processes (cf. Haarmann 1999: 63):

If ethnicity provides the most elementary framework of human relations on which identity can be constructed, then language provides the most elementary means for fulfilling this task. Language is always involved in ethnic relations as the most refined vehicle of interacting according to local behavioural traditions, of expressing attitudes and values, and of stereotyping culture. This elementary function of language in ethnicity, however, does not support the idea of language always being the major constructive element of ethnic boundaries or an exclusive marker of ethnicity.

² Speaking of the phylogenetic relationships between the Tibeto-Burman languages of the PRC, I use Sūn's (1988) classification, which recognizes five distinct branches within this language group: (1) Bodisch (or Tibetan), (2) Qiangic, (3) Yí (Loloish), (3) Burmish (or Burmese) and (3) Jǐngpō.

On yet another level, a discussion of these two cases hopefully shed some light on how present-day China copes with the discrepancy between the relatively small number of recognized ethnic group and the much larger number of distinct languages spoken in the PRC.

The official line on this issue (see, for example, the recent article by Sūn 2005 on the scientific foundations of minority language classification) is that one minority can historically evolve to use distinct several languages, which might even belong to genetically unrelated language groups.³ As an example, Sūn quotes (2005: 27) the language of Língāo County (Hǎinán Province), which genetically belongs to the Kam-Tai (Tai-Kadai) language group, but is spoken by a group of ethnic Hàn Chinese.⁴ Another striking example is the Kǎzhúo language of Sìchuān Province (2005: 26), which is related to the Yí languages of Southeastern China, but is spoken by an ethnic group officially classified as Mongolians, as they historically stem from a Mongol army stationed in the area during the Yuán dynasty (1271-1368) (Mù 2002: 2-8). Thus, the Mongol nationality in China speaks languages of at least two distinct linguistic stocks: Mongolic (Altaic) and Yí (Tibeto-Burman).⁵ In sum, ethnic identification in China cuts at times in quite an unparalleled fashion across established linguistic groupings.

As appears to be the case with one of the groups discussed in this article, this unusual situation does in fact reflect acceptance of loose standards of linguistic unity and prevailing tolerance to linguistic diversity within one ethnic group.

2. Chinese South-West and the tǔbō people of the Chinese western frontiers

The two groups in the focus of this study are both situated in the South-West of China: Xūmǐ in the South-West of Sìchuān Province, bordering the Yúnnán Province; and Báimǎ in the North of Sìchuān, at the border of Sìchuān and Gānsù provinces. These areas traditionally fall under the realm of Tibetan influence. They originally constituted part of the Tibetan Yarlung Empire (7th-9th centuries), and the influence

³ This is very far indeed from Stalin's (1913) postulate that "[t]here is no nation which at one and the same time speaks several languages".

⁴ On the history of the group, see Liáng and Zhāng (1997: 4-16). Tai-Kadai languages are considered to be part of the Sino-Tibetan language family in Chinese linguistic tradition, but are seen as unrelated to Sino-Tibetan languages in Benedict's (1972), Shafer's (1974) and Matisoff's (2003) classifications.

⁵ In fact, in addition to Mongolian and Kǎzhúo, the Mongol nationality of China is known to speak also a Turkic language Túwǎ, closely related to Kazak. Turkic and Mongolic languages are separate branches of the putative Altaic language family.

of Tibetan culture persists there until the present day, largely due to the pervasive spread of Lama Buddhism in this zone during the Yuán (1280-1368) and Míng (1368-1644) dynasties. Since the 18 century, when Sìchuān and Yúnnán provinces were adjoined to the Chinese empire by the Qīng emperor Yǒngzhèng (r. 1722-1735), they lay in the border areas with mixed Tibetan and Hànn influences, and the Hànn presence there considerably intensified since the establishment of the PRC.

The ethnic groups of this zone are associated in China with Tibetans and from the Sòng dynasty (960-1279) onwards, are commonly referred to as *tǔbō* or *tǔfān*, a Chinese transcription of a Turkic word for Tibet **Töpän/*Töpüt* ‘peaks, heights’ (Bazin and Hamilton 1991: 11-17). The common designation of these groups in the later Chinese historiographic tradition is also *fān* ‘inhabitants of outer regions of the empire, barbarians’ or *xīfān* ‘western barbarians’. Overall, the *xīfān* people form a heterogeneous group comprising, besides the Tibetans, ethnic groups speaking various Qiangic languages, such as Nàmùyì, Mínyak (Mùyǎ), Ěrgōng, Ěrsū, rGyal-rong (Jiāróng), Prinmi (Púmǐ) and Guìqióng. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, most of the *fān* people were incorporated into the Tibetan nationality, including the two groups discussed presently, Xūmǐ and Báimǎ.

3. Xūmǐ Tibetans and the Shíxīng language

The Xūmǐ Tibetans of Shuǐluò Township, Mùlǐ County, are a relatively little studied group, mostly known in academic literature for its language, discovered in 1980 by Sūn Hóngkǎi (1983: 196-213). Sūn named the language and subsequently also the ethnic group that speaks it ‘Shíxīng’, which is a Chinese transliteration of the autonym of the group recorded by Sūn as [ʃl⁵⁵hǐ⁵⁵].⁶ The name Shíxīng is currently widely used in scholarly discourse, but is generally unheard of in Mùlǐ, where the group resides, and the Xūmǐ Tibetans do not identify themselves with this label.

This group is locally known under the Chinese name Xūmǐ or Sùmǔ, which are renderings of the group’s autonym ‘people of the Shu river’ in local languages (Huáng 1991: 174, Mùlǐ Zàngzú Zìzhìxiàn Zhì Biānzhuǎn Wěiyuánhùi 1995: 133, Sūn 1983: 196). Hereafter I will use ‘Xūmǐ’ when speaking about the ethnic group, as this

⁶ Subsequent fieldwork on this language by Huáng Bùfǎn in 1987 (Huáng 1991) and myself in 2005 shows that it displays some dialectal variation, and the autonym of this ethnic group, ‘people of the Shu river’, is pronounced as [ʃu⁵⁵hǐ⁵⁵] in the dialect of the upper reaches of the Shu river and, allegedly, [ʃl⁵⁵hǐ⁵⁵] in that of the lower reaches, investigated by Sūn. I have not yet been able to verify this information.

name was the preferred self-denomination used by my Xūmǐ informants during my fieldwork in Mùlǐ in 2005, and ‘Shǐxīng’ when speaking about their language, as customary in linguistic literature.

The Xūmǐ group counts approximately 1.800 people, compactly residing in Shuǐluò Township. Due to its geographical isolation, the cultural integrity and the language of the group are relatively well preserved, even though the language has come under increasing pressure from neighbouring languages as well as from Mandarin Chinese through education and mass media in recent years. The Shǐxīng language is classified as belonging to the Qiangic branch of Tibeto-Burman, has received little academic attention to date (with only two brief accounts by Sūn 1983: 196-213 and Huáng 1991) and is poorly understood.

The Xūmǐ people have all along resided in complex multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic surroundings. Present-day Mùlǐ County hosts 18 ethnic groups—including Chinese, Tibetans, Yí, Nàxī, Miáo, Zhuàng, Bùyī and Lisù, with Tibetans accounting for the majority of the population—and has therefore received the status of an autonomous Tibetan County (*Zàngzú zìzhìxiàn*). The composition of Tibetans of Mùlǐ is however diverse and includes, apart from ethnic Tibetans, several groups speaking a variety of Qiangic languages. For example, based on their language and self-designation, the Tibetans of Shuǐluò County alone can be further subdivided into four separate groups, of which only one speaks a Tibetan dialect proper (that is to say, a dialect related to the Tibetan dialect continuum on linguistic grounds): (1) Khams Tibetans (speaking a dialect belonging to Khams Tibetan group); (2) Prinmi Tibetans (speaking the Prinmi (Qiangic) language); (3) Xūmǐ Tibetans (Shǐxīng, Qiangic) and (4) Bùláng Tibetans (speaking the western dialect of the Ěrsū (Qiangic) language). Multilingualism has always been the norm for the Xūmǐ people, who even perceive their own language as a non-standard variety and an amalgam of the neighbouring languages.⁷

⁷ According to Xūmǐ legend, languages were distributed to various ethnic groups at the beginning of the world. The representative of the Xūmǐ group came too late, when all languages were already given away. Left without a language, he then put together the Xūmǐ language from words and sentences borrowed from languages of other groups. Also, Sūn (1983: 196) observes that the Shǐxīng language is perceived by its speakers as a mixture of Tibetan and Nàxī.

Overall, all different Tibetan groups of Mùlǐ share, despite this linguistic diversity as well as some minor cultural dissimilarities,⁸ one Tibetan lifestyle, as manifested in similar housing, diet, culture and, most importantly, religion, Tibetan Buddhism, the fundamental building block of Tibetan national consciousness. The Xūmǐ group thus by and large identifies with Tibetans and appears to have successfully developed not only bilingualism in the local Tibetan variety, but also a bicultural identity, which combines their own Xūmǐ ethnic identity with a larger, primarily religious, Tibetan identity. The official status as Tibetan is therefore in conformity with their religious identification.

Moreover, the linguistic diversity of the area (and of Tibet at large) is locally perceived as natural. This tolerance to linguistic multiplicity is crystallized in a local adage that each valley in Tibet has its own dialect (which is moreover not necessarily mutually intelligible with the dialects around it). In this view, the Tibetan language is perceived as a broad range of discrete varieties, to which virtually anything can belong. Linguistic distinctiveness does not therefore play a decisive role in the self-awareness of local groups.

In sum, in the case of Xūmǐ Tibetans, there is no overt or active conflict centering on the contradicting Xūmǐ-Tibetan identities and religion is the major marker of Xūmǐ ethnic identity, more important than language.

4. Báimǎ Tibetans

4.1 Overview

The group known under the name “Báimǎ Tibetans” counts approximately 10.000 people residing in three counties in Sìchuān Province (Jiǔzhàigōu, Sōngpān (Zungchu), Píngwǔ) and one county in Gānsù Province (Wénxiàn). They immediately border the Qiāng (to their South-West), Chinese (East and South) and Tibetan ethnic groups (West and North). Despite the relatively large area of residence, all Báimǎ in different counties identify themselves as one ethnic group with a common self-appellation, common language, culture and history. The autonym of the Báimǎ people is [pe⁵³] and they are known as Dwags-po in Tibetan.

⁸ For example, the Xūmǐ group and local Tibetans have different legends of origin: the Xūmǐ believe to have arrived to their current place of residence from what is present-day Shānxī Province via Dàlǐ in Yúnnán.

The Báimǎ appear to be traditionally monolingual, but they are currently by and large bilingual in Báimǎ (language of interpersonal communication in Báimǎ villages) and Mandarin Chinese (language of education and communication with neighbouring ethnic groups).

In contrast to the Xūmǐ group, which largely shares a Tibetan lifestyle, the Báimǎ historically gravitate towards Chinese standards of living. Furthermore, Báimǎ lifestyle appears to be, in the opinion of the group, considerably dissimilar from that of grassland Tibetans. For example, one notable difference is that the Báimǎ do not drink milk or use milk products, which are essential to the Tibetan diet. The Lama Buddhism present in the area at some period of time in the past and now widely practised by neighbouring Tibetan groups, never replaced the indigenous animalist religious tradition of the Báimǎ, who revere a local mountain as their ancestor and god-protector.⁹ The Báimǎ thus do not identify themselves with the religious (Buddhist) Tibetan identity.

4.2 Ethnic identification (the 1960s-1980s)

The Báimǎ were classified as Tibetans in 1951, which identification was made based on the opinion of local representatives (Sūn 1980: 33) rather than on an in-depth study. They questioned this conclusion on numerous occasions in the 1960s and 1970s and, pointing out their differences from Tibetans, they repeatedly demanded reclassification. This appeal was granted in the late 1970s, when a group of PRC researchers conducted two surveys in the Báimǎ areas. As a result of these surveys (1978, 1979), the research group published two collections of papers (Sichuān Shěng Míngzú Yánjiūsuǒ 1980; Zēng and Xiāo 1987), in which the majority of researchers argued that the Báimǎ were descendents of the ancient Dī tribe (probably related to the Qiāng ethnic group), which set up influential kingdoms in the 3rd through the 6th centuries CE in the areas currently inhabited by the Báimǎ.¹⁰

The designation of the group as “Báimǎ” probably also stems from these surveys. “Báimǎ” is known from the *Historical records* by the father of Chinese

⁹ Notably, in their rituals, local priests, [pe¹³mbu⁵³] (in all probability related to *bon-po* in Tibetan), make use of hand-written Tibetan books (mostly on divination), which appear to belong to the Bon tradition (Henk Blezer, personal communication, January 2005), the indigenous religion of Tibet partly absorbed by the Buddhist tradition introduced in Tibet in the 8th century. The legendary founder of the Bon religion, sTon-pa gshen-rab mi-bo, is also a prominent character of Báimǎ folklore.

¹⁰ For overview works on the Dī, see Hé (1998), Hú (1991: 27-35), Mǎ (1984) and Yáng (1988: 163-186).

historiography Sīmǎ Qiān (c. 145-90 BCE) to be the largest of the Dī tribes, with whom present-day Báimǎ were argued to be related in the 1970s. This tribe is also known to have historically resided in the neighborhood of the present-day Báimǎ group.

Despite the conclusion that the Báimǎ people constitute a distinct ethnic group rather than a branch of Tibetans, they were never officially reclassified. According to Harrell (1996: 285-286 n. 6), the general word among ethnologists working in China is that the reclassification of the Báimǎ as a separate nationality was blocked by the tenth Panchen Lama. Overall, reclassification of ethnic groups listed as Tibetans remains a sensitive issue in the PRC and is considered by many Tibetans as an attack by the Chinese government on the Tibetan identity. In the minds of many Báimǎ and Chinese, on the other hand, it was a 1986 resolution of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, which served as the final word on the reclassification issue, stipulating that the temporary preservation of the current classification of the Báimǎ group as Tibetans is in the interest of stability and unity (Zēng 2005: 215).¹¹ Since then, the established designation of this group is “Báimǎ Tibetans”, asserting in one name their official ethnic affiliation to Tibetans, but recognizing at the same time their distinctiveness as Báimǎ.

On the whole, since the mid-1980s, the group advanced no more claims of independency and in my experience, now generally accepts their Tibetan-ness and routinely speak of themselves as Tibetans and of their language as Tibetan. The Tibetan-ness of the latter was after all supposedly not difficult to accept in view of the broad understanding of the Tibetan language as embracing many highly distinct varieties, as discussed above. In fact, the linguistic distinctiveness of the Báimǎ language was always contested by Tibetan intellectuals as a valid argument for seeing the Báimǎ as a separate ethnic group.¹²

Paradoxically, even though the group considers the issue finalized and the link between the Báimǎ and the Tibetans is no longer openly questioned, a vivid discussion on the origins of the Báimǎ people in Chinese scholarly circles continues. Moreover, recent publications on the “Báimǎ Tibetans” indicate that their descent

¹¹ For a history of dispute see Chirkova (2005, 2006), Upton (2000) and Zēng (2002, 2005).

¹² See, for example, dMu dge bSam gtan’s “On the question of the ‘Dwags po’ nationality”: “although the language of all Tibet has one root, there have developed differences in pronunciation due to the large area of language and the great dispersion of settlements [in Tibet]” (Upton 2000: 8).

from the ancient Dī people is now generally seen as a well established fact (e.g. Cháng 2003, Chén 2002, Ji 2002, Tán 1989).

4.3. Dī-Báimǎ relationship

Given the controversy surrounding the ethnic classification of the Báimǎ in the 1960s through the 1980s, research on the Báimǎ language mostly focused on the—by and large non-linguistic—issue whether the Báimǎ language should be considered a dialect of Tibetan or an independent language. An interesting detail here is that even convinced supporters of the Báimǎ language being a Tibetan dialect acknowledge that the Báimǎ language exhibits a number of distinctly non-Tibetan features in its lexicon, morphology and syntax. Huáng and Zhāng (1995: 116-117) argue that these features are the result of substratum interference of the original language of the Dī people, whose descendants the Báimǎ were claimed to be during the Báimǎ surveys in the late 1970s. But what do we know about the Dī and their language?

Records on the Dī, believed to ultimately stem from the legendary Flaming Emperor, appear in Chinese sources early (the Dī are for instance mentioned in the *Book of Odes*, a collection of poems dating from the Zhōu dynasty (1022-256 BCE), but consist rather of legendary accounts based on hearsay. In the Hàn dynasty (206 BCE-220 AD), the Dī were primarily associated with and mostly mentioned together with the Qiāng group and used to refer to a vast range of people living mainly along the eastern edges of the Tibetan Plateau (i.e. present-day Gānsù, Shǎnxi and Sìchuān provinces), in other words, the western edges of the Hàn empire (Pulleyblank 2002: 419; Wáng 1992: 116-120, 1997: 236-243; Yáng 1988: 164). Despite frequent mentions (as a rule of military encounters) in Chinese historical sources between the Hàn and Northern Wèi (386–534 AD) dynasties, there is little concrete information on the group, the most detailed account being a meager 375-character long description of the Dī by Yú Huàn in the chapter on the people of the Chinese western frontiers in the Wèi chronicles (*Wèilüè*). This report contains the autonym of the group, names of Dī chieftains, and some fairly general remarks on Dī customs and language. Altogether, it is so general that the Dī can in fact be linked to almost any ethnic group in present-day Sìchuān and Gānsù (for a discussion, including an examination of linguistic evidence, see Chirkova 2006). Nonetheless the link between the Dī of Chinese historical sources and a group with a disputed ethnic status brought forward in the surveys in the late 1970s is most likely anything but accidental. When in the course of

the surveys, the group was found distinct enough from Tibetans to be granted an independent nationality status, the Dī, reconstructed from China's historical memories, presented themselves a convenient construct, incorporating the newly fledging nationality into the family notion of one nation descending from the Yellow and Flaming emperors.

Needless to say, this reconstruction of history from Chinese historical sources has little to do with the actual history or self-awareness of the group involved. In my experience, many older ethnic Báimǎ have never heard of either the Dī or the Báimǎ and are largely unaware of their alleged connection to these groups.

In sum, for Báimǎ Tibetans, there has been an active conflict centering on the contradicting local and Tibetan identities. The distinctiveness of their language from the neighbouring Tibetan dialects played an important role in their feeling of separateness, but even together with many other factors, it could not contribute to the change in their status.

5. Conclusions

How important is language in creating and asserting group's identity in the Chinese South-West? And how many distinct languages can one nationality have without disturbing its unity?

For the Xūmǐ group, linguistic distinctiveness plays no essential role in identity formation. Given the multilingualism of the area of its distribution, Xūmǐ take linguistic diversity for granted and consider general leniency towards linguistic and cultural diversity within one, Tibetan, group as the norm. In fact, this situation mirrors that of the Hàn nationality, which similarly treats a host of mutually unintelligible linguistic varieties (Sinitic languages) as dialects of one Chinese language, giving them one single identity, which is generally not contested by the groups involved (for a discussion, see Poa and LaPolla forthcoming 2006). There thus appear to be no limits to the number of distinct languages one nationality, descending from one common origin, can have. Historical reasoning here outweighs linguistic interpretation.

For the historically largely monolingual Báimǎ, the distinctiveness of their language played a significant role in their feeling of separateness from other groups. However, provided with new identities, one, descendants of the Dī (constructed through selecting and remodelling historical and ethnographical information), and the

other Tibetan, and discouraged to promote its own identity, the group is now in the process of turning its original ethnic identity into these recognized identities.

Hence for both groups, albeit for various reasons, language is neither the major constructive element of ethnic boundaries nor an exclusive marker of ethnicity, which confirms Haarmann's 1986 conclusion that language is not a necessary criterion of ethnicity.

Historically positioned in the realm of Tibetan influence, the Xūmǐ and Báimǎ groups have chosen separate strategies of contact with this dominant majority: the Xūmǐ have chosen integration while maintaining some degree of cultural integrity, whereas the Báimǎ have chosen separation, explicitly rejecting some features of Tibetan culture. In view of recent globalisation trends, however, both groups are probably inevitably heading towards assimilation, the Xūmǐ into the Tibetan group and the Báimǎ into the Chinese group and it is a question what kind of identity—their local, Tibetan, Dī or Chinese—they will evolve to develop then.

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