



**HAL**  
open science

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

Ekaterina Chirkova

► **To cite this version:**

Ekaterina Chirkova. Between Tibetan and Chinese: Identity and language in Chinese South-West. Journal of South Asian Studies, 2007, 30 (3), pp.405-417. hal-00162110

**HAL Id: hal-00162110**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00162110>**

Submitted on 12 Jul 2007

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

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

Katia Chirkova, Centre de recherches linguistiques sur l'Asie orientale, CNRS

*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: Xùmǐ and Báimǎ, both officially classified as Tibetans. While the experienced ethnic identity of the Xùmǐ 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 role played by the Xùmǐ and Báimǎ languages in creating and assessing group identity. I conclude that 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 Haarmaan's (1986) postulation that language is not a necessary criterion of ethnicity.

*Key words:* Xùmǐ, Báimǎ, Tibetans, ethnic identity, linguistic attitudes

## 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.<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to recent official Chinese estimations, China hosts 128 languages, of which two have recently become extinct.<sup>2</sup> The actual number of distinct languages in China may be even higher. For example, David Bradley notes that within the PRC there are at least forty-one more endangered languages, which are not on the official list.<sup>3</sup> In his recent article, Sūn Hóngkǎi does

---

<sup>1</sup> 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].

<sup>2</sup> See Sūn Hóngkǎi 孙宏开, 'Guānyú Bīnwēi Yǔyán Wèntí' 《关于濒危语言问题》 [On the Endangered Languages in China], in *Yǔyán Jiàoxué yǔ Yánjiū* 《语言教学与研究》 [Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies], Vol.1 (2001), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> David Bradley, 'China and Mainland Southeast Asia', in Christopher Moseley (ed.) *Encyclopaedia Of Endangered Languages* (London: Routledge, fc 2007).

not exclude the possibility that more languages will be discovered in the PRC in the coming years.<sup>4</sup>

Language is 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, a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.<sup>5</sup> For Stalin ethnic identity was presumably intrinsically connected with language.

Large linguistic surveys in the 1950s constituted an integral part of the Ethnic Classification Project.<sup>6</sup> In reality, however, decisions in each particular case rarely relied on Stalin's criteria in their literal reading. They were employed instead, in Stevan Harrell's formulation, '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]'.<sup>7</sup> Thus the actual or presumed historical relatedness of groups played a decisive role in the process of ethnic identifications, pushing Stalin's principles into the background.

There appears to be a general agreement among ethnologists working in China that the perception and classification of minorities in the 1950s largely stems 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.<sup>8</sup> In this scheme, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Sūn Hóngkāi 孙宏开, 'Yòng Kēxué de Yǎnguāng Kàndài Wǒ Guó de Yǔyán Shíbié Wèntí' 《用科学的眼光看待我国的语言识别问题》 [Scientific Principles Of Linguistic Classification Of Chinese Minority Languages], in *Yǔyán Wénzì Yīngyòng Yánjiū* 《语言文字应用研究》 [Applied Linguistics], Vol.3 (2005), p.28.

<sup>5</sup> Iosif Vissarionovič Stalin, 'Marxism and the National Question', *Joseph V. Stalin: Reference Archive* (Internet edition), [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/, transcribed by Karl Kavanagh, accessed 6 Mar. 2007], first published in *Prosveshcheniye* nos. 3-5 (March-May 1913).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Hǎo Shíyuǎn 郝时远 (ed.), *Tiányě Diàochá Shìlù: Mǐnzú Diàochá Huìyì* 《田野调查实录——民族调查回忆》 [Records On the Linguistic Survey: Memories Of the State Ethnic Classification Project] (Běijīng 北京: Shèhuì Kēxué Wénxiàn Chūbǎnshè 社会科学文献出版社, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Stevan Harrell (ed.), *Cultural Encounters On China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995), p.66.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Wáng, Míng-kē 王明珂, 'From the Qiang Barbarians to the Qiang Nationality: The Making Of a New Chinese Boundary', in Huang Shu-min and Hsu Cheng-kuang (eds), *Imaging China: Regional Division and National Unity* (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, 2000), pp.43-80, and Wáng, Míng-kē 王明珂, 'Lùn Pānfù: Jìndài Yán Huáng Zǐsūn Guózú Jiàngòu de Gǔdài Jīchǔ' 《论攀附：近代炎黄子孙国族建构的古代基础》 [On Mimicry: the Ancient Foundations Of the Modern Nation-Building in China Through the Identity Of 'the Offspring of Yellow/Yan Emperors'], in *Lìshǐ Yǔyán Yánjiūsuǒ Jíkān* 《历史语言研究所集刊》 / *Bulletin Of the Institute Of History and Philology*, Vol.73, no.3 (2002), pp.583-624.

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 belonging to one Chinese nation.

This construction of minority group identities and histories from Chinese historical sources was inevitably prone to controversy. The official categories and histories of separate groups were created by the Hàn 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 differences from other groups.

In this article I use Harrell’s (1990) three-way model of reciprocal interaction to define group identity. This model distinguishes 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.<sup>9</sup> A more or less universal pattern in present-day China is that the official state ethnic distinctions tend to gradually shape and partly solidify people’s ethnic consciousness so that they become strongly invested in the categories originally imposed upon them from outside. Eventually, this turns ethnic identity into a recognized identity.<sup>10</sup>

Conflicts of identity, ethnicity and the correlation between a group’s self-consciousness and official classification among Chinese minority groups is a well researched topic, discussed in a number of case studies.<sup>11</sup> I would like to contribute to this ongoing discussion two additional case studies from China’s South-West. The

---

<sup>9</sup> Stevan Harrell, ‘Ethnicity, Local Interests, and the State: Yi Communities in Southwest China’, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.32, no.3 (1990), pp.517-520.

<sup>10</sup> See Stevan Harrell, ‘The Nationalities Question and the Prmi Problem’, in Melissa J. Brown (ed.), *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp.278-279.

<sup>11</sup> See Melissa J. Brown (ed.), *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Stevan Harrell, ‘Ethnicity, Local Interests, and the State: Yi Communities in Southwest China’, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.32, no.3 (1990), pp.515-48; Stevan Harrell (ed.), *Cultural Encounters On China’s Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995); Stevan Harrell (ed.), *Perspectives On the Yi of Southwest China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001); Janet L. Upton ‘Notes Toward a Native Tibetan Ethnology: Dmu-dge bSan gtan’s “Dwags-po (Baima)” ’, in *The Tibet Journal*, Vol.25, no.1 (2000), pp.3-26.

Xùmǐ and the Báimǎ ethnic groups present a notable contrast as to the appreciation of their official classification as Tibetans: the Xùmǐ experience their identity as being in conformity with their official classification, whereas until recently the Báimǎ challenged their official status as conflicting with their self-awareness.

My major interest is in examining the linguistic attitudes of each group. Both speak languages which are highly distinct from the neighbouring varieties of Tibetan. The Xùmǐ 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 the Tibetan Amdo dialects in its vicinity, though the exact relationship between Báimǎ and Tibetan dialects is currently subject to debate.<sup>12</sup>

The contrast in the appreciation by the groups of their official classification gives an opportunity to observe the role language plays in creating and asserting their identities. It also supports Haarmann's (1986) postulation that language is not fundamentally related to ethnicity:<sup>13</sup>

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.

On yet another level, a discussion of these two cases hopefully sheds some light on how present-day China deals with the discrepancy between the relatively small

---

<sup>12</sup> Speaking of the phylogenetic relationships between the Tibeto-Burman languages of the PRC, I use Sūn's classification, which recognizes five distinct branches within this language group: (1) Bodish (or Tibetan), (2) Qiangic, (3) Yí (Loloish), (4) Burmish (or Burmese) and (5) Jǐngpō, see Sūn Hóngkāi 孙宏开, 'Shì Lùn Zhōngguó Jìngnèi Zàngmiányǔ de Pǔxì Fēnlèi' 《试论中国境内藏缅语的谱系分类》 [A Classification Of Tibeto-Burman Languages in China], in Paul K. Eguchi (ed.), *Languages and History in East Asia: Festschrift for Tatsuo Nishida On the Occasion of His 60th Birthday* (Kyoto: Shokado, 1988), pp.61-73.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Haarmann, *Language in Ethnicity: A View of Basic Ecological Relations* (Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1986); Harold Haarmann, 'History', in Joshua A. Fishman (ed.), *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.63.

number of recognized ethnic groups 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 Hóngkāi on the scientific foundations of minority language classification) is that one minority can use several languages, which might even belong to genetically unrelated language groups, due to historical reasons.<sup>14</sup> As an example, Sūn quotes 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.<sup>15</sup> Another striking example is the Kǎzhúo language of Sìchūān Province, which is related to the Yí languages of South-eastern 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).<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Mongol nationality in China speaks languages of at least two distinct linguistic stocks: Mongolic (Altaic) and Yí (Tibeto-Burman).<sup>17</sup> 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 reflects 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

---

<sup>14</sup> See Sūn Hóngkāi 孙宏开, 'Yòng Kēxué de Yǎnguāng Kàndài Wǒ Guó de Yǔyán Shíbié Wèntí' 《用科学的眼光看待我国的语言识别问题》 [Scientific Principles Of Linguistic Classification Of Chinese Minority Languages], in *Yǔyán Wénzì Yìngyòng Yánjiū* 《语言文字应用研究》 [Applied Linguistics], Vol.3 (2005), pp.26-8. This reasoning put forward by Sūn is very far indeed from Stalin's postulate that '[t]here is no nation which at one and the same time speaks several languages'.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27. On the history of the group, see also Liáng Mǐn 梁敏 and Zhāng Jūnrú 张均如, *Língāoyǔ Yánjiū* 《临高语研究》 [A Study Of Língāo] (Shànghǎi 上海: Shànghǎi Yuǎndōng Chūbǎnshè 上海远东出版社, 1997), pp.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. See Paul K. Benedict (Contributing editor James A. Matisoff), *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Robert Shafer, *Introduction to Sino-Tibetan* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974); and James A. Matisoff, *Handbook of Proto-Tibeto-Burman* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Sūn, *ibid.*, p.26. For the history of the Kǎzhúo language, see also Mù Shìhuá 木仕华, *Kǎzhúoyǔ Yánjiū* 《卡卓语研究》 [A Study Of Kǎzhúo] (Běijīng 北京: Mínzú Chūbǎnshè 民族出版社, 2002), pp.2-8.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, in addition to Mongolian and Kǎzhúo, the Mongol nationality of China is known to speak also a Turkic language Tǔwǎ, closely related to Kazak. Turkic and Mongolic languages are separate branches of the putative Altaic language family.

The two groups that this study focuses on are both situated in the South-West of China: Xùmǐ 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 of Tibetan culture persists there until the present day. This is largely due to the pervasive spread of Lama Buddhism in this zone during the Yuán (1280-1368) and Míng (1368-1644) dynasties. Since the 18th century, when Sìchuān and Yúnnán provinces were adjoined to the Chinese empire by the Qīng emperor Yǒngzhèng (reigned 1722-1735), they belonged to border areas with mixed Tibetan and Hàn influences. The Hàn presence there has 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 *Túbō* or *Tūfān*, a Chinese transcription of a Turkic word for Tibet \**Töpän*/\**Töpüt* ‘peaks, heights’.<sup>18</sup> 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, Xùmǐ and Báimǎ.

### 3. Xùmǐ Tibetans and the Shìxīng language

The Xùmǐ Tibetans of Shuǐluò Township, Mùlǐ County, are a relatively little studied group. They are mostly known in academic literature for their language, discovered in 1980 by Sūn Hóngkāi.<sup>19</sup> Sūn named the language and subsequently also the ethnic group that speaks it ‘Shìxīng’, which is a Chinese transliteration of the autonym of the

---

<sup>18</sup> See Louis Bazin and James Hamilton, ‘L’origine du nom Tibet’, in Ernst Steinkellner (ed.), *Tibetan History and Language: Studies Dedicated to Uray Gēza On His Seventieth Birthday* (Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 1991), pp.11-7.

<sup>19</sup> Sūn Hóngkāi 孙宏开, ‘Liùjiāng Liúyù de Mínzú Yǔyán jí qí Xìshǔ Fēnlèi’ 《六江流域的民族语言及其系属分类》 [Minority Languages Of the Six River Valley and Their Genetic Classification], in *Mínzú Xuébào* 《民族学报》 [Scholarly Journal Of Nationalities], Vol.3 (1983), pp.196-213.

group recorded by Sūn as [ʃɿ<sup>55</sup>hĩ<sup>55</sup>].<sup>20</sup> The name Shǐxīng is currently widely used in scholarly discourse, but is generally unheard of in Mùlǐ, where the group resides, and the Xùmǐ Tibetans do not identify themselves with this label.

The group is locally known under the Chinese name Xùmǐ or Sùmǔ, which are renderings of the group's autonym 'people of the Shu river' in local languages.<sup>21</sup> Hereafter I will use 'Xùmǐ' when speaking about the ethnic group, as this name was the preferred self-denomination used by my Xùmǐ informants during my fieldwork in Mùlǐ in 2005-2006, and 'Shǐxīng' when speaking about their language, as customary in linguistic literature.

The Xùmǐ 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 Mandarin Chinese as a result of education and mass media in recent years. The Shǐxīng language is classified as belonging to the Qiangic branch of Tibeto-Burman. It has received little academic attention to date and is poorly understood.

The Xùmǐ 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*). However, the composition of Tibetans of Mùlǐ is 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, only one of which speaks a Tibetan dialect proper (that is to say,

---

<sup>20</sup> Subsequent fieldwork on this language by Huáng Bùfán in 1987 and myself in 2005-2006 shows that it displays some dialectal variation, and the autonym of this ethnic group is pronounced as [ʃu<sup>55</sup>hĩ<sup>55</sup>] in the dialect of the upper reaches of the Shu river and, allegedly, [ʃɿ<sup>55</sup>hĩ<sup>55</sup>] in that of the lower reaches, investigated by Sūn.

<sup>21</sup> See Huáng Bùfán 黄布凡, 'Shǐxīngyǔ' 《史兴语》 [The Shǐxīng Language], in Dài Qìngxià 戴庆夏, Huáng Bùfán 黄布凡, Fù Àilán 傅爱兰, Rénzēng Wāngmǔ 仁增旺姆, Liú Júhuáng 刘菊黄 (eds), *Zàng-Miányǔ Shíwǔ Zhǒng* 《藏缅语十五种》 / *Fifteen Tibeto-Burman Languages* (Peking 北京: Běijīng Yànshān Chūbǎnshè 北京燕山出版社, 1991), p.174; Mùlǐ Zàngzú Zìzhìxiàn Zhì Biānzǔǎn Wěiyuánhuì 木里藏族自治县志编纂委员会编纂 (eds), *Mùlǐ Zàngzú Zìzhìxiàn Zhì* 《木里藏族自治县志》 [Gazetteers Of Mùlǐ Tibetan Autonomous County] (Chéngdū 成都: Sìchuān Rénmín Chūbǎnshè 四川人民出版社, 1995), p.133; Sūn, *ibid.*, p.196.



a dialect related to the Tibetan dialect continuum on linguistic grounds):<sup>22</sup> (1) Khams Tibetans (speaking a dialect belonging to Khams Tibetan group); (2) Prinmi Tibetans (speaking the Prinmi (Qiangic) language); (3) Xùmǐ Tibetans (Shǐxīng, Qiangic) and (4) Bùláng Tibetans (speaking the western dialect of the Ěrsū (Qiangic) language). Multilingualism has always been the norm for the Xùmǐ people, who even perceive their own language as a non-standard variety and an amalgam of the neighbouring languages.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, all different Tibetan groups of Mùlǐ share, despite this linguistic diversity as well as some minor cultural variations, one Tibetan lifestyle.<sup>24</sup> This is manifest in housing, diet, culture and, most importantly, religion. Tibetan Buddhism is the fundamental building block of Tibetan national consciousness. Thus, the Xùmǐ group 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 Xùmǐ ethnic identity with a larger, primarily religious, Tibetan identity. Their 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 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. Therefore, linguistic distinctiveness does not play a decisive role in the self-awareness of local groups.

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

---

<sup>22</sup> The term ‘dialect continuum’ refers to a series of historically related varieties which differ from one another with respect to one or more features.

<sup>23</sup> According to Xùmǐ legend, languages were distributed to various ethnic groups at the beginning of the world. The representative of the Xùmǐ group came too late, when all languages were already given away. Left without a language, he then put together the Xùmǐ language from words and sentences borrowed from languages of other groups. Also, Sūn observes that the Shǐxīng language is perceived by its speakers as a mixture of Tibetan and Nàxī, see Sūn, *ibid.*, p.196.

<sup>24</sup> For example, the Xùmǐ group and local Tibetans have different legends of origin: the Xùmǐ believe to have arrived to their current place of residence from what is present-day Shānxī Province via Dàlǐ in Yúnnán.

## 4. Báimǎ Tibetans

### 4.1 Overview

The group known under the name ‘Báimǎ Tibetans’ number 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 [pe<sup>53</sup>] and they are known as Dwags-po in Tibetan.

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 Xùmǐ 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 animist religious tradition of the Báimǎ, who revere a local mountain as their ancestor and god-protector.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the Báimǎ do not identify themselves with the religious (Buddhist) Tibetan identity.

### 4.2 Ethnic identification (the 1960s-80s)

---

<sup>25</sup> Notably, in their rituals, local priests, [pe<sup>13</sup>mbu<sup>53</sup>] (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). This indigenous religion of Tibet was 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.

The Báimǎ were classified as Tibetans in 1951, an identification which was made based on the opinion of local representatives rather than on an in-depth study.<sup>26</sup> 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 surveys conducted between 1978 and 1979, the research group published two collections of papers, 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.<sup>27</sup>

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 historiography Sīmǎ Qiān (c. 145-90 BCE) to be the largest of the Dī tribes, with whom present-day Báimǎ claimed to be related in the 1970s. This tribe is also known to have historically resided in the neighbourhood 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, the general word among ethnologists working in China is that the reclassification of the Báimǎ as a separate nationality was blocked by the tenth

---

<sup>26</sup> Sūn Hóngkǎi 孙宏, ‘Lìshǐ Shang de Dīzú hé Chuān Gān Dìqū de Báimǎrén’ 《历史上的氏族和川甘地区的白马人》 [On the Historical Minority Dī and Báimǎ People Of Sichuān and Gānsù Provinces], in *Mínzú Yánjiū* 《民族研究》 [Minority Studies], Vol.3 (1980), p.33.

<sup>27</sup> See Sìchuān Shěng Mínhú Yánjiūsuo 四川省民族研究所 [Sichuān Nationalities Research Institute] (eds), *Báimǎ Zàngrén Zúshǔ Wèntí Tǎolùnjí* 《白马藏人族属问题讨论集》 [A Collection Of Discussions On the Question Of the Ethnic Classification Of Báimǎ Tibetans] (Chéngdū 成都: Sìchuān Shěng Mínhú Yánjiūsuo 四川省民族研究所, 1980); Zēng Wéiyì 曾维益 and Xiāo Yóuyuán 萧猷源 (eds), *Báimǎrén Zúshǔ Yánjiū Wénjí* 《白马人族属研究文集》 [A Collection Of Research Papers On the Genetic Affiliation Of the Báimǎ] (Píngwǔ 平武: Píngwǔxiàn Báimǎrén Zúshǔ Yánjiūhuì 平武县白马人族属研究会, 1987). For overview works on the Dī, see, for example, Hé Guāngyuè 何光岳, ‘Dī Zú de Láiyuán hé Qiānxì’ 《氏族的来源和迁徙》 [On the Origins and Migration History of the Dī People], in *Tiānshuǐ Shīzhuān Suébào: Shèhuì kēxuébǎn* 《天水师专学报（社会科学版）》 [Journal Of Tiānshuǐ Normal University: Social Science Edition], Vol.1 (1998), pp.37-45, Mǎ Chángshòu 马长寿, *Dī yǔ Qiāng* 《氏与羌》 [The Dī and the Qiāng] (Shànghǎi 上海: Shànghǎi Rénmín Chūbǎnshè 上海人民出版社, 1984) and Yáng Jiàn xīn 杨建新, *Zhōngguó Xībēi Shǎoshù Mínhú Shǐ* 《中国西北少数民族史》 [Histories of Northeastern Minorities of China] (Yínchūān 银川: Níngxià Rénmín Chūbǎnshè 宁夏人民出版社, 1988), pp.163-186.

Panchen Lama.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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 from the ancient Dī people is now generally seen as a well established fact.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Stevan Harrell, ‘The Nationalities Question and the Prmi Problem’, in Melissa J. Brown (ed.), *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp.285-6 note 6.

<sup>29</sup> See Zēng Wéiyì 曾维益, ‘Báimǎ Zàngzú jí qí Yánjiū Zōngshù’ 《白马藏族及其研究综述》 [Summary of Research Works On Báimǎ Tibetans], in Shí Shuò 石硕 (ed.), *Zàngzú Zǒuláng: Lìshǐ yǔ Wénhuà* 《藏彝走廊：历史与文化》 [Tibetan Ethnic Corridor: History and Culture] (Chéngdū 成都: Sìchuān Mínzú Chūbǎnshè 四川人民出版社, 2005), p.215).

<sup>30</sup> 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]’ (quoted from Janet L. Upton, ‘Notes Toward a Native Tibetan Ethnology: Dmu-dge bSan gtan’s “Dwags-po (Baima)”’, in *The Tibet Journal*, Vol.25, no.1 (2000), p.8.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Chén Zìrén 陈自仁, ‘Shénmì de Dī Rén Hòuyì’ 《神秘的氏人后裔》 [Descendants Of the Mysterious Dī People], in *Native Of West*, Vol.10 (2002), pp.46-7; Jì Fùzhèng 季富政, ‘Dī Rén Jùluò yǔ Mínjū’ 《氏人聚落与民居》 [Villages and Houses Of the Dī People], in *Sìchuān Wénwù* 《四川文物》 [Sichuan Cultural Relicts], Vol.5 (2002), pp.50-3; Tán Chāngjí 谭昌吉,

### 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 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.<sup>32</sup> 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, Shǎnxì and Sìchūān provinces), in other words, the western edges of the Hàn empire.<sup>33</sup> 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 meagre 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,

---

‘Báimǎ Rén Lùngǎo’ 《白马人论稿》 [On the Báimǎ], in *Xīnán Mínzú Xuébào: Zhéshèbǎn* 《西南民族学院学报：哲社版》 [Bulletin Of the Southwestern Institute Of Minorities: Philosophy and Sociology Edition], Vol.1 (1989), pp.49-54.

<sup>32</sup> See Huáng Bùfán 黄布凡 and Zhāng Míng huì 张明慧, ‘Báimǎ huà Zhīshǔ Wèntí Yánjiū’ 《白马话支属问题研究》 [A Study Of the Genetic Affiliation Of Báimǎ], in *Zhōngguó Zàngxué* 《中国藏学》 [Tibetology in China], Vol.2 (1995), pp.116-7.

<sup>33</sup> See Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Central Asia and Non-Chinese Peoples Of Ancient China* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 419; Wáng, Míng-kē 王明珂, *The Ch’iang Of Ancient China Through the Han Dynasty: Ecological Frontiers and Ethnic Boundaries* (Ph.D. dissertation: Harvard University, 1992), pp. 116-120; Yáng Jiàn xīn 杨建新, *Zhōngguó Xībēi Shǎoshù Mínzú Shǐ* 《中国西北少数民族史》 [Histories of Northeastern Minorities of China] (Yínchūān 银川: Níngxià Rénmín Chūbǎnshè 宁夏人民出版社, 1988), p.164.

it is so general that the Dī can in fact be linked to almost any ethnic group in present-day Sìchuān and Gānsù.<sup>34</sup> 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. This incorporated the newly fledged nationality into one Chinese 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 people who are regarded Báimǎ have never heard of either the Dī or the Báimǎ and are largely unaware of their alleged connection to these groups.

In sum, Báimǎ Tibetans have faced a conflict between 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 did not result in a change of status.

## 5. Conclusions

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

For the Xùmǐ group, linguistic distinctiveness plays no essential role in identity formation. Given the multilingualism of the area of its distribution, Xùmǐ 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

---

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion, including an examination of linguistic evidence, see Katia Chirkova, 'Báimǎ Zàngzú Wéi Dīzú Shuō Xīntàn' 《白马藏族为氏族说新探》 [On the Relationship Between the Báimǎ and the Dī], in Pān Wùyún 潘悟云, William Baxter and Laurent Sagart (eds), *Hànyǔ Shàngǔ Yīn Gòunǐ Guójì Xuéshù Yántǎohuì Lùnwénjí* 《汉语上古音构拟国际学术研讨会论文集》 [Proceedings Of the International Symposium On Old Chinese] (Běijīng 北京: Zhōnghuá Shūjú 中华书局, fc 2007).

them one single identity, which is generally not contested by the groups involved.<sup>35</sup> Thus, there 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. The group was provided with new identities: Firstly, descendants of the Dī, which was constructed through selecting and remodelling historical and ethnographical information. Secondly, the group was considered Tibetan. This discouraged the group to promote its own identity, and it 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. This confirms Haarmann's (1986) conclusion that language is not a necessary criterion of ethnicity.

Historically positioned in the realm of Tibetan influence, the Xùmǐ and Báimǎ groups have chosen separate strategies of contact with this dominant majority. The Xùmǐ 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 Xùmǐ into the Tibetan group and the Báimǎ into the Chinese group, but it is a question what kind of identity—their local, Tibetan, Dī or Chinese—they will develop then.

---

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion, see Dory Poa and Randy J. LaPolla, 'Minority Languages Of China', in Osahito Miyaoka and Michael E. Krauss (eds), *The Vanishing Languages Of the Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, fc 2007).