

Introduction

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Ethnic affiliation and ascription, identity and representation have been for some time the subject of historical investigation. The emergence of ethnicity as an analytical category has generated new approaches to the past and at the same time stimulated a reexamination of national myths and the creation of ancient and modern communities.¹ Generally speaking, the representation of others requires a sense of belonging to one's own "community" (be it a people, a nation, a state, or a town) which is then defined by contrasting it with other communities, regarded as alien. The process of self-identification through the description of differences and the establishment of boundaries is as old as any account that can be defined as "history".² Ancient historians recognized and reported the existence of communities of others, often labeling them by assigning ethnic names whose origin is often uncertain, or, vice versa, colored ethnic names by ascribing to their bearers distinct qualities and features.

The sources of ethnic names, their changes, their significance in relation to both textual sources and material records, their linguistic import and cultural valence, are intrinsically linked to our definition of ethnicity and germane concepts, such as ethnic identity and ethnogenesis. It is possible that a definition of ethnicity may be of very limited use, especially in the absence of a critical interpretation of what an "ethnos" was in a given literate tradition or, worse, in case of a simple transfer of modern categories to ancient contexts. In modern Chinese historiography, for instance, the concept of *shaoshu minzu* 少數民族 (national minority, or minority population) is often used to refer to ancient peoples who, however they were constructed and understood, surely did not fit a twentieth-century concept. On the other hand, the wholesale elimination of "ethnic" categories from the realm of history would be ill-

1 For instance, see Geary 2002, 15-40; Smith 2000.

2 An argument made most cogently, albeit controversially, in Hartog 1988.

advised, given the omnipresent representation of “others” in literate civilizations from ancient times. The construction of the other is surely subject to the cultural forms, historical conditions, and intellectual environments from which the narrative emerges, but the overwhelming evidence is that “ethnic identities”, if by this terms we understand a set of distinctive attributes connected to a name or location, are common in every historical tradition.

The process of creation of an ethnic community (ethnogenesis) is a historical process that changes from case to case, and could be born out of an internal political or social process, registered by the historian on the basis of his cultural parameters, no less than of an external one, whereby states and nations established, and sometimes imposed, ethnic names and boundaries on peoples they saw as discrete and conspicuously different. The effort that is required of the modern historian is to interpret the intellectual and other processes at work in different traditions to establish categories, boundaries, and communities, and thus, in a word, make history. While not every literate culture and historical tradition constructed these categories in the same way, there are at times resemblances having to do with perceptions of behavioral traits (cruel, untrustworthy, prone to violence, degenerate, or courageous, peaceful, generous, and nurturing), culture (habits, customs, rituals, religion, language, entertainment), geography (location, climate, and land features), economy (life ways, sustenance, special skills and products), society (kinship, social classes, laws, military organization), and, often most importantly, politics and history (the names and *gesta* of kings and princes, legends and myths, sagas and speeches, wars, migrations, and contacts with other peoples). This is the “stuff” of ethnic representation, which, because it springs from a common need of differentiation and identification, tends to be broadly similar. The descriptions of Inner Asian nomads from ancient Greece to China are singularly similar and yet significantly different, because while they were to a certain degree observing broadly similar societies (societies of pastoralists who lived in tents, led a nomadic life, and were dominated by a warrior aristocracy) their viewpoint was different. Among other things, Herodotus (ca. 484–425 BC) and Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BC) observed their respective nomads from different cultural traditions, within a different literary milieu, and under very different historical

circumstances.³ What their descriptions can tell us is not just something about the nomads, but how their own literary traditions organized ethnographic knowledge. The “ethnicity” issue, in this light, becomes an epistemological issue, and one that deserves attention in order to understand the development of one of the central issues in Chinese civilization: its perception of the surrounding world and of itself in relation to it. At the same time, ethnographic information conveys knowledge about others that we can use, assuming this is not pure invention, to follow the development of other societies for which the only sources are Chinese. Coupled with knowledge about material culture from archaeology, and thanks to modern scientific advances in the study of ancient environments and population movements, we can hope to reconstruct at least in broad contours the history of one of the most important phenomena not just in East Asian but in world history: the rise of Inner Asian empires and the formation of an imperial culture that dominated for long historical periods large Eurasian regions.

Whether ethnicity and ethnogenesis are meaningful analytical categories to address specific historical processes and interpret sources is something that has been widely debated in European history, where much interest has been devoted to the study of ethnic groups especially after the fall of the Roman empire and the post-Roman rise of barbarian states.⁴ No analogous effort can be registered in the realm of Chinese history, which has suffered, in a way, from the existence of both a long history of ethnic representation and a discourse of ethnic differentiation deeply ingrained in Chinese historiography and cultural history. If we were to draw, in extreme synthesis, a trajectory of that discourse through history, we might see (without intending to establish normative categories) a three-fold development that proceeds from simply registering the existence of undifferentiated others to the establishment of cultural boundaries, and to the development of ethnographic descriptions. Cultural distinctions and ethnographic descriptions were, then, adopted in the making of various theories that meant to explain China’s checkered history of relations with its neighbors, the dark ages of foreign domination, the diplomatic and political interactions between

3 For a comparison between the early Greek and Chinese treatment of nomads see Stuurman 2008.

4 See for instance Pohl 1998; Heather 2008. See also the synthesis of the debate (from a polemical position) by Gillett 2006.

Chinese dynasties and other peoples, including a panoply of “tribute-bearing” states (*guo* 國). The relative strengths and weaknesses of these foreign states, nations and peoples may have added dynamism to the Chinese civilization or, on the contrary, sapped its vital energy. Moreover, the cultural superiority of the Chinese has often been contrasted with the military vigor of some foreign peoples, to create an image of China whose intellectual strength eventually transformed and cured the social pathologies associated with rebellion, war, chaos, and disorder, even when these resulted in foreign domination. No such characterization, so deeply rooted in the self-representation of China, could be possible without the parallel development of a history of the other that, while a cultural product and an ideological abstraction, still contained elements derived from the observation of realities that needed to be documented in order to be accounted for. Hence, the dual path of the development of a Chinese approach to historical ethnography. On the one side, it was an instrument to understand and cope with a dangerous world in which foreigners constituted a real and present danger, and also acquire knowledge to exploit resources controlled by these people that China might need. On the other side, the utilization of these accounts for the ideological construction of the other and self-representation of China, still enduring in the modern Chinese nation as a union of peoples (*minzu tuanjie* 民族團結), was a basic element in the making of internal and external policies throughout Chinese history, as every dynasty had to seek accommodations with “unreconstructed” ethnic groups.

These foreign peoples and alien communities, on the other hand, were not always passive recipients of Chinese descriptions. As I have argued elsewhere, the Chinese ethnographic accounts included in the dynastic histories became wells of information that could be also used by other peoples as sources to build their own political or ethnic identities.⁵ Foreign leaders and empire builders developed a sense of history (their own history) by freely accessing the Chinese historical accounts and constructing analogies, genealogies, and political linkages with a past they appropriated in order to bolster their claims to legitimate rule and find useful precedents for diplomatic and political action, all enshrined by the authority that derived from the Chinese historical re-

5 Di Cosmo 2010.

cords. Hence, Turks and Uighurs could claim the Xiongnu as their political and cultural ancestors, and later foreign dynasties could establish ethnic genealogies by recourse to the Chinese records (see, for instance, the beginning of the *Jin shi*, the dynastic history of the Jurchen dynasty⁶). As a container of historical knowledge, these accounts ceased at some point to be the sole property of China but became key to the transmission of knowledge that foreign dynasties of different ethnicities, languages, and origins could still claim as their own. It is possible, although this is so far insufficiently studied and as yet unproven, that Chinese ethnographic histories were a key element of the ethnogenetic processes involved in the formation of Inner Asian polities and states.

The study of processes of ethnic differentiation, attribution of ethnic categories, and identification of ethnic boundaries in Chinese history requires a complex heuristic apparatus, since the meanings that ethnonyms may carry, as well as the contexts in which they appear, have to be mediated through a long history of reception and interpretation. When Mencius said that Emperor Shun 舜 was a man of the Eastern Yi 夷 and King Wen 文王 a man of the Western Yi (*Mencius*, 4B1)⁷ we have absolutely no clue of what this means except to assume that the Yi formed a community of people recognized in ancient Chinese traditions as separate from other communities, such as the Hua 華 and Xia 夏. The fact that Shun and Wen belonged to this community, however, may have no historical grounding whatsoever. It could be the ingredient of a legend or a myth, as it almost certainly was. Ethnic attribution, in this interpretation, was used to create a myth, and almost every time we speak of ethnicity we should be conscious of the fact that ethnic affiliation has been for ages an excellent tool for mythmaking. Nonetheless, a cultural valence must be attributed to the notion of “Yi” for Mencius’ statement to have any significance. The myth contains in itself an irreducible element of ethnic identification that must have meant something outside the myth, whether we can grasp its meaning or not. Our knowledge of the Eastern Yi (or just Yi) people, however, being limited to statements that provide no clue other than a name, can only serve to demonstrate a moment in China’s intellectual history, in which ethnic differences were recognized even though any other feature re-

6 *Jinshi* 1.1.

7 Bloom and Ivanhoe 2009, 86.

mained undifferentiated. This is the first stage of recognition of alien communities. The oracle bones of the Shang dynasty document the existence, by citing their names, of communities of peoples (*fang* 方) located outside the Shang domain that were hunted down, enslaved and used in human sacrifices, but this is an ethnically undifferentiated world, in which no specific attributes are provided to describe the other.

A higher level of consciousness, which develops during the long Zhou dynasty consists of the description of cultural differences. Yet the descriptions of these differences and their exact meanings remain a matter of complex and often uncertain interpretation. Referring to someone as a Di 狄, Rong 戎 or Yi person could reflect, at the time of the Springs and Autumns, as much a political as a cultural statement. The question of “ethnicity” in ancient China must take into account the context in which statements are made, because of the widespread use of cultural differences to make a political point or derive a philosophical concept. The emergence of cultural boundaries between a “Chinese” world enclosed in a common sphere of shared rituals, written language, and political forms, and the many peoples perceived as external to it, or at any rate collocated outside it, signals a stage in the formation of Chinese culture in which self-representation required the mirror of an alien other. Unlike the Graeco-Roman world, however, a notion of “barbarism” in Chinese culture did not arise as one half of a bipolar, dualistic world in which a single boundary separated civilized and uncivilized, but rather as a series of alterities located at different cardinal points and at different distances from the putative civilized center. The relativism in the description of cultural differences (in contrast to the universalism of Chinese cultural values) that we find in the earliest representations of ethnic groups could perhaps also be detected – as cultural archetype – in much later theories on “Sinicization” (to be discussed below) whereby the foreign conquerors’ different degrees of assimilation and acculturation were assumed to be a factor of their greater or lesser cultural distance from China.

If Zhou-period China developed a more profound consciousness of the limits of its culture and acquired a sense of its own history, reflected in the prismatic mirror of their many neighbors, enemies, and outsiders, it did not develop a clear sense of these alien cultures, or of their historicity. While foreigners abound in Zhou records, and participate in

essentially every aspect of political life, from treaties, alliances and marital relations to military expeditions, battles and invasions, they do not have an independent existence, but come to life only in function of the history of the states that had relations with them. As a result, we know next to nothing about the features that may differentiate a Di from a Rong or a Man 蠻 from a Yi (except, perhaps, a vague sense of cardinal direction). What we know is that these peoples are said to behave in non-Chinese ways, that is, to be outsiders with respect to the Zhou “club”. Very few references are reported in which we are allowed to perceive the “inside” of the outsider, beyond the wall of constructed cultural differentiation that surrounds these peoples. Episodic, if frequent, participation in the political affairs of the Zhou state, to the point of sacking its capital and endangering the very existence of the royal house, does not lead to the composition of chronicles and treatises that shed light on the ethnic characteristics of these people, on their “ethnogenesis” and emergence as political communities, on their history, or on their origins. The process of consolidation of political power in the hands of an ever smaller number of states that took place during the late Springs and Autumns and Warring States periods also led to confusion between outsiders and insiders and made such cultural boundaries fragile and easily permeable. Supposedly *bona fide* Chinese states were painted with negative cultural attributes normally reserved for foreign peoples, and territorial and cultural boundaries were redrawn as political circumstances changed. The referents of these names also shifted, disappeared, or acquired a metaphoric valence entirely divorced from whatever original ethnic meaning may have existed. Some terms changed over time from simple ethnonyms to ethnophaulisms. Not unlike the term Vandal in European languages, terms such as Di, Rong, and Man were used as synonyms for savagery or at the very least uncouthness. Taken as “absolutes”, and therefore sublimated from their historical contexts to the level of cultural *topoi*, such names lost their already weak ethnic value (that is, the reference to a specific community of people) to become generically applicable to undifferentiated outsiders. Likewise, the term Hu 胡 used in pre- and early imperial times to indicate a specific ethnic type (the mounted nomad) and possibly at some point also a specific people akin to the Xiongnu 匈奴 (as in the term Dong Hu 東胡), in Tang times had turned into a term descriptive of a generic non-Han person and sometimes of a Persian, Sogdian,

and other Central Asian types that had nothing in common with the original mounted nomads or Xiongnu.⁸ The terms that emerge from this pre-imperial tradition are especially plastic *because* they lack precise ethnic descriptions, and can therefore be adopted in various rhetorical forms (metaphoric, metonymic, *pars pro toto*, figurative, allegorical, and so on) to strike a political, philosophical, or ideological point.

The following phase can be regarded as one in which ethnic groups are studied in their own right, and therefore coincides with the development of ethnic narratives and ethnographic descriptions. The invention of ethnographic narratives is to be attributed to Sima Qian and the beginning of systematic historiography, both in its “universal” and “dynastic” forms. By systematic I mean the compilation of thematic accounts based on the collation, compilation, and organization of knowledge into a narrative structure. The first such work is the *Shiji* 史記 by Sima Qian, and it is in it that we find the first accounts specifically dedicated to foreign peoples. Of them we learn a great deal, and while we do not have access to the sources used by the historian, it is a reasonable assumption that they were of various types: direct observation, oral accounts, and written documents. The extent of the relations between the Han dynasty and its neighbors following the Han re-constitution of the unified empire may have been one of the motives behind the rise of a new, “imperial” ethnography, but the intellectual tools that were forged to investigate the other are Sima Qian’s (and perhaps Sima Tan’s) personal creation. Sima Qian’s historical and ethnographic accounts of alien peoples produced also *topoi* which to a certain degree become later codified, used as blueprints for the description of different peoples, but the boundary between the mere making of cultural others and the understanding of others as separate societies and historical agents (who therefore deserved their own ethnographic and historical narratives) had been crossed once and for all.

The accounts of foreign peoples that we find in the dynastic histories are an altogether different intellectual operation than the value-laden attribution of difference found in previous historical works. They allow us to see beyond the fence and qualify the other by a series of attributes that we assume to be the product of ethnographic observa-

8 On the Tang view of barbarians and ethnic identity of Central Asians, see Abramson 2008.

tion filtered through the intellectual sensibilities and the intentionality of the author. Regardless of the specific process and operations involved, it is here that for the first time foreigners are configured as different cultures, and historicized as such, in an effort on the one hand to make them consistent with past records, but also, and especially, to define them as historical partners of China, whether they were in the position of subordinates, antagonists, or allies.

The Chinese historical tradition has preserved this level of ethnographic inquiry, and the study of these texts has made some steps forward in recent years, but has remained behind the levels of interest generated by similar accounts in European history, and has also lagged behind the considerable advances made in the identification of “non-Chinese” cultural areas in Chinese archaeology. This may be the effect of a historical tradition that has left those periods of Chinese history dominated by foreign invaders in relative obscurity, or that has been more interested in looking at foreign dynasties as essentially Chinese, thus sanitizing ethnic elements and playing down ethnogenetic processes. Be as it may, the study of “ethnogenesis” in Chinese history, because of the connections with material culture, of the potential interest derived from comparative studies between Europe and China (for instance, with regard to the phenomena of ethnogenesis and state building in both Europe and China between the fourth and the sixth century AD), and the novelty represented by a poorly explored textual tradition promise to quickly emerge from a position of marginality and “subalternity”.

The four studies in this issue of *Crossroads* represent a cross-section of the ways in which historians have addressed ethnicity, or rather of ways in which historical questions require a reflection about ethnic issues. The levels at which ethnicity operates as a means of analysis are multiple, and are illustrated here as boundary crossing in Hans van Ess’s essay, as political discourse in Pamela Crossley’s study, and as debate over the origin and implications of “Sinicization” in Evelyn Rawski’s paper.

Hans van Ess’s study of diplomatic relations during the Han dynasty proposes the investigation of a particular kind of boundary-crossing by looking at the ethos of ambassadors and envoys. In the conclusion van Ess stresses three aspects, one that refers to relations between the Han and polities that could be regarded as inferior, and

were treated as vassal states, and two in relation to the relations between Han and Xiongnu, namely the issue of “trustworthiness” and the question of the detention of envoys.

Premising that diplomatic relations were in any case based on the mutual exchange of envoys, the Han behaved differently in relation to different states. Those regarded as vassal or “tribute bearing” were “rewarded” by the Han with titles and seals and thus effectively incorporated into the body of the empire as polities and regimes formally under Han suzerainty. These were not, however, static relationships. During the Han dynasty itself such relations could change, and formal vassalage be transformed into a much more concrete subordination, following military conquest and the establishment of prefectures that replaced the formerly *de facto* independent polity. During the reign of Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 140–87 BC) several of these vassal states, such as that of the Southern Yue 南越, were turned into Han prefectures.⁹ There is no doubt, as van Ess explains, that envoys were expected to be returned unharmed, and that there was an obligation on the party that received them to send envoys back. Envoys could also act as proxies for the ruler in paying ritual homage to the emperor, a practice that in itself, in virtue of its similarity to the missions sent to the court by regional lords, implied that Han sovereignty extended (in some form) to them.

Much more complicated was the relationship with the Xiongnu, which was regulated through actual treaties that placed the two states in a position of diplomatic equality. Yet there was constant diplomatic sparring between Han and Xiongnu, and while the Xiongnu, in van Ess’s words, only wanted equality, this was not to be easily negotiated. If envoys had to respect the protocol of the hosting court, there were still issues at stake that placed one of the two sides in a position of potential inferiority. Han politicians complained that sending brides and valuables to the Xiongnu subverted the proper relationship by putting the Xiongnu on top, and the Xiongnu did not want to hear Han sermons on the presumed superiority of Han values and virtues.

Yet, as van Ess argues, the ethos of the envoy was one in which “trustworthiness” was a critical attribute, which was especially based on the ability of a given person to display appreciation for “the other”. Zhang Qian 張騫 (2nd century BC) was trustworthy because he had

9 Di Cosmo 2009.

gone through a process of cultural transformation. Clearly not all envoys were fit to do that, and we can even say that, as a rule, envoys were more concerned with representing their own country and civilization in a manner that preserved dignity and honor than to make an effort to appear “friendly” (and thus trustworthy). The success of the mission, however, was not based on the ability of the envoy to represent his own civilization, or to score philosophical points, but on the actual outcome of the negotiation: obtaining favorable terms, spying on the strength of the enemy, ensuring that future diplomatic exchanges continued to take place. Hence, the envoy was supposed to convey the exact meaning of his side’s arguments, and in that rested the need for trust. But trustworthiness, that is, the individual quality of the envoy, was not the sole or ultimate guarantee, and, judging from the frequent mutual accusations of having detained envoys, it remained in short supply. The concept of reciprocity in the exchange of envoys, rather, was meant to ensure that the promises and pacts were going to be ratified and observed. In practice, an agreement could not acquire political currency unless a firm understanding by both sides had been reached, and for that one needed confirmation.

As also argued in this essay, trust was something that, as even the Chinese authors state, was frequently betrayed. Why? Answering this question may require an analysis of the systems of international or interstate relations prior to the Han dynasty. Chinese political culture was anything but naïve. During the Warring States the treaties stipulated with non-Zhou states were regularly ignored in the name of *Realpolitik*, and it is highly doubtful that any moral imperative was observed in the relations with “barbarian” states. Political stratagems meant to outwit the enemy were common practice. Such concepts were not foreign to the Han dynasty, and if envoys were expected to be trustworthy, Han political culture allowed sufficient latitude to outwit the enemy, if necessary, by any means, including treachery. The very adoption of the *heqin* 和親 policy in its original Han formulation can easily be seen as a “confidence trick” meant to eventually bring the Xiongnu into a position of subordination and submission.¹⁰

At a different level, namely in terms of the relevance of certain moral concepts in the political arena, we should also recall that Naomi

10 Di Cosmo 2002, 193.

Standen, in her study of border-crossing in the post-Tang world, adopted “loyalty”, rather than ethnicity, as a central category to explain the political world in which various agents operated. While “loyalty” and “trustworthiness” are concepts expressed differently in Chinese (*xin* 信 and *zhong* 忠) they are semantically close, in a political sense, and a comparison between the two would be useful to investigate the political culture of the frontier. On the other hand, there are clear differences between the Han-Xiongnu confrontation, which involved two empires locked in a prolonged and deadly war, and the post-Tang world of multiple polities, where political and ethnic boundaries were much more fluid.

Is there, beyond the question of political rationality and philosophical ethos, an ethnic “discourse” in the border crossing of envoys? We know nothing of the ethnic identity of the Xiongnu, except for what Sima Qian and Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 AD) tell us. Surely there is an ethnographic element in the depiction and representation of the world of the northern nomads, but we are not able to say whether the Xiongnu had “ethnic” consciousness, or what that may have meant to them, beyond the ethnographic codes introduced by Sima Qian. If the Xiongnu were a multiethnic empire, in the sense that its constituents parts, while recognizing themselves as members of the Xiongnu “polity”, retained their own separate, local or tribal, identities, than it makes little sense to speak of a Xiongnu “ethnicity”, except for something akin to that created by the Mongol conquest and by the Manchu state-building enterprise. What the Han records do is to represent the northern nomads, of which the Xiongnu were the most important (but not the only) political expression, as an “ethnographic type”. Still what we can say with a certain degree of confidence is that the adoption of ethnic features, in the Han world, could carry political significance. As a telling example, Ban Gu reports the encounter between a Han envoy and Li Ling 李陵 (d. 74 BC). Li Ling was wearing nomadic clothes (*hufu* 胡服), and his hair was braided in Xiongnu style, and when pressed by the Han envoy to return home, “he went silent and made no reply, and after turning his gaze to the length of his hair, he answered, ‘I am now dressed like a nomad!’”¹¹ This type of “ethnic” crossing probably went both ways, and is especially significant in a frontier context, where cul-

11 *Hanshu* 54.2458: 墨不應，孰視而自循其髮，答曰：吾已胡服矣。

tural hybridity was probably the norm rather than the exception, but how it played out politically depended on the context. Zhang Qian remained a loyal Han servant even though he lived with the Xiongnu for a long time and married a local woman, while Zhonghang Shuo (or Zhonghang Yue) 中行說, the eunuch who defected to the Xiongnu, retained the full appearance of a Han person while serving the nomads. Ethnic features, including the specific protocols that envoys were asked to (painfully) subject themselves to, remained significant elements in the definition of the frontier, and forced the Han to assess the “other” and its level of “outsideness” to the Han civilization in terms that were materially defined in customs, rituals, clothes, lifestyle, and every other aspect that the Han regarded as relevant to both the identification of a given people and assessing the distance between themselves and the group in question. In order to deal with the Xiongnu the Han had to invent, to a degree, a new diplomatic language. Former concepts, inherited from a pre-imperial age, were drastically modified and adapted to new circumstances. Exchanging, detaining, and even the possibility of killing envoys was an essential feature of Han-Xiongnu diplomacy, and concepts of trust or trustworthiness were critical to it, but the cultural environment and intellectual background in which these relations were “acted out” was indelibly colored by moral values. The great invention of Han historiography is to have begun *ex novo* a tradition of ethnographic inquiry about the “other”, thereby enabling the acquisition of new knowledge and the forging of new instruments (political, diplomatic and military) to respond to foreign challenges, and therefore the ethos of the envoy during the Han period represents also something new, in which moral values and political realities meet ethnographic features and thus transform the frontier into an area in which cultural differences are negotiated through a much closer observation of the other.

Crossley’s revisitation of a famous episode of Qing history, namely the trial for sedition of Zeng Jing 曾靜, the condemnation of Lü Liuliang 呂留良 (with the punishment of his descendants) and the writing by the Yongzheng 雍正 Emperor (r. 1723–1735) of the *Dayi juemi lu* 大義覺迷錄 and subsequent extraordinary censorship by the Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor (r. 1736–1795) of his father’s work, examines, among other aspects, the nature of the Hua and Yi, taken as antithetical concepts. The term Yi had long become a proxy term for “barbarian” in the sense

of someone external to the Chinese ecumene. As such, Yi stood for the many different terms that had signified essentially the same thing, but had not “qualified” for the privileged position of “alter-ego” of Hua: it ceased to be an ethnic term and became a civilizational term, just as Hua. The fundamental nature of the barbarian, whether closer to humans or to beasts, is something that has been questioned since ancient times, and became a recurrent *topos* in policy debates on how to deal with foreigners, especially when aggressive, militarily stronger, or, in other words, not easily receptive to the blandishment of the goods that China had to offer.¹² Animal metaphors (wolves, birds, tigers) abound in China’s descriptions of some of these barbarians, and even if contextually delimited they tended to acquire universal meaning, such as in Ban Gu’s discussion of Han frontier policies.¹³ Generally speaking, Chinese writers questioned whether the simple application of moral suasion was sufficient to educate the foreigners.

Much time had gone by since the time when these metaphors first arose (the cultural paradigm established in the Zhou period in works such as the *Zuozhuan* 左傳). Since then foreign dynasties had been accepted and rejected and it would have been difficult to see the “Yi” as being outside the human sphere, but animal analogies lingered on. Particularly vitriolic assessments of Mongol rule had led early Ming writers to conclude that no political compromise and no educational strategy could lead to an accommodation with the Mongols, who were again regarded as especially refractory to humanity or civilization. Yongzheng’s appeal to the argument that the Yi lived under the same Tian 天 as the Hua, and obeying essentially the same rules, as Crossley points out, goes back to early Manchu ideology and to Nurhaci’s “universalizing” of the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven. Yongzheng’s position went also, possibly, beyond it, arguing for a non-ethnic and non-cultural but purely moral standpoint: the ability of a ruler to restore order, peace, security, and to prevail against wicked enemies (who had normally been previously accused of wronging him and his people) was protected and in certain sense guaranteed by a Heaven that recognized and supported virtue no matter who displayed it. From this position, it did not matter whether the cat was Hua or Yi (so to speak) as

12 See Pines 2004.

13 *Hanshu* 94B.3834.

long as order, security, morality, and a nurturing universal peace were restored. The notion of a “great unity” is therefore a moral, not a cultural one.

Yet, Crossley perceptively reads in this message a Confucian overtone towards “educating” oneself that may imply adherence to a special set of moral values, namely those that were closely associated with notions of cultivation and virtuous universal rulership that belonged to the Chinese philosophical tradition. Crossley argues that this line of argument, aside the issue of the possible defensiveness of Yongzheng over the controversial events that accompanied his own accession to the throne, displeased Qianlong as the latter was to promote an entirely new vision of the historical role of the Qing dynasty, in which cultural distinctiveness indeed had to play a central role. Manchu heritage was important to explain the specific position of the Qing dynasty in China’s history. Had the ethnic and historical roots of the Manchus been subsumed into a discourse of a-cultural political theory, there would have been no defense against their eventual erasure, when confronted with the weight of Chinese civilization. The Manchus could not hold on to their right to rule over China simply by urging critics to look around and see peace as evidence of virtue. In the long run, this would have been a sterile argument, because to a large extent the Qing dynasty’s right to rule rested on their distinctiveness and on the privileges acquired by a conquering caste. Institutions such as the Eight Banners – the Manchus’ most important political creation – and the position of the Royal Household and the Bannermen in China’s political order, could not be justified simply in terms of the “Yi” being just the same as the “Hua”. The critical recognition that, in the rulership of China, culture and politics could not be divorced made it imperative to give ethnic and cultural coherence to the “Yi” (i.e., the “tartarized” ruling class, if we are allowed to use the Western writings’ operative term for the Manchu-Mongol and Banner population). Once again, the ethnographic discourse of Chinese historiography comes to the rescue by making it possible for Qianlong to reconstruct the northeastern civilization as a separate cultural-historical entity.

It is worth reflecting whether we can see in the dual and opposite interpretation of the “Yi” the double path of China’s history of the other, as moral entity and as ethnic reality. Both have agencies that can be mobilized around a political project but their “reach” is different, and in

Qianlong's "ethnic turn" we see how it is the Chinese ethnographic tradition (the only repository of northeastern history) that allows him to move away from any discussion about whether the Yi can be just as "humane" and "virtuous" as the Hua, and thus establishes the essential equivalence of different cultures and civilizations. It is possible that in this dependency upon long established paths towards the definition of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness, which had been surely to a degree "internalized" by the Manchus, lie also the different interpretations towards Manchu ethnicity. It seems to me that neither the construction by Qianlong of an essentialized Manchu heritage, nor the Qing discourse of Manchu ancestral virtues can be separated from questioning the process of "ethnogenesis" of the Manchus that preceded the conquest of China (and was ideologically modified after it). Neither the Yongzheng position expressed in the *Dayi juemi lu*, nor Qianlong's reaction to it can be properly assessed without a preliminary understanding of the political culture that allowed the emergence of the Manchus as a people and shaped its early history. Pamela Crossley indeed makes valuable references to several important concepts derived from the Inner Asian tradition. These concepts are not political abstractions, but were mobilized selectively in the course of a political project for the creation of an independent state, regime, or dynasty (*gurun* in Manchu) that coincided with a process of "ethnogenesis" at the end of which a people (the Manchus) and a dynasty (the Qing) emerged. Whether the process of state-building created the "people", or whether an ethnogenetic process already under way cohered into and gave rise to an independent political formation are classic "ethnogenetic" questions, which remain for the time being without a clear answer, but which can contribute to a better understanding of the "ethnicity" issue on Qing history.

Evelyn Rawski's essay links the development of "national histories" in China and East Asia with the theory of "Sinicization", adopted by modern China historians to explain and justify the essential unity of Chinese history notwithstanding long periods of political fragmentation and domination by foreign dynasties. The term "Sinicus" (Chinese) from which the word derives, is an ethnic term, whose Chinese translation is "Han" 漢. At its simplest level, it means that people who are not Chinese "become Chinese". The discourse of ethnicity is directly relevant to the making of this theory, not because, as in the construction of

other national histories, an original *ethnos* is mythicized and taken to be the core of the new nation, but because of the ways in which notions of cultural transformations that belonged to the “tool box” of Chinese political theory are woven into a new paradigm of historical representation. In a nutshell, the fundamental continuity of China as a unified political and cultural entity can be asserted and used as the foundation of the modern nation by assuming that the periods of disunion were only temporary hiatuses (and perhaps preparatory steps) for more elevated forms of unity, and that foreign domination was so only in name. The theory is meant to demonstrate that the conquerors had *de facto* become indistinguishable from the Chinese in matters of moral values, political forms, and cultural production.

Looking for the cultural foundations of this theory, it seems to me that it rests on two pillars. One of the elements in traditional Chinese philosophy that was summoned by the Sinicization theory was the assumption of the moral and cultural transformation of the other – traditionally not linked, however, to a discourse of nation-building, but rather to the elaboration of philosophical and political theories about the state, sovereignty, and the nature of emperorship – that was expounded in a series of ancient treatises. This discourse assumes that a superior virtue, expressed in rituals, music, religious cults, and moral norms, has a transformative power and thus can expand the range of civilization and forge a coherent community by its magnetic force. The centrality of the emperor as the catalyst of the transformative power of culture is key to this world view and thus foundational to a notion of universal emperorship. In the Sinicization theory the transformative power of Chinese culture appears to work, on the other hand, more in terms of “taming” the foreigners even when they occupied the imperial throne. In an apparent reversal of meanings, the position of the emperor, normally expression of virtue and Heavenly favor, ceases to be a source of “civilization” when the occupant is not Chinese. However, a central aspect (and something of a dogma) of “Sinicization” is the assumption that, in order to conquer China, a process of transformation of the foreign power, implicit in the adoption of an imperial “technology” made of administrative, political, ideological, linguistic, religious and moral elements had to be already under way. Thus, the cultural transformation can still take place from a position of political subordination. This type of moral discourse whereby what matters is to behave

“like a Chinese” and to adopt Chinese values goes back to philosophical theories of the construction of the “other” based on moral and cultural boundaries developed in the pre-imperial period and repeated ever since in different contexts.

The second pillar of the Sinicization theory is one that, on the other hand, has a more ethnographic content, and is related to the aforementioned differences in ethnic features that Chinese historiography has documented. Not all foreigners are the same, and therefore not all conquerors are the same. The categories of “cooked” and “raw” foreigners to be found in Chinese ethnographic accounts, and the notion of a frontier where the cultural distance increases with the geographical distance from the civilized center indicate that “Sinicization” also functions in degrees, building on different levels of receptivity to Chinese culture determined by the particular nature of the “barbarian”.¹⁴ The ethnic differences found in accounts of different foreigners, and in particular of the Inner Asian peoples who eventually conquered China (Turkic, Mongolic and Tungusic peoples) could therefore explain why certain peoples could attain a higher or lower level of Sinicization. The validity of the Sinicization thesis would therefore not be denied by the many original features that the “conquest dynasties” produced in their governance of China, or even by their resistance to cultural change. Not all foreigners were sinicized in the same way because not all foreigners are equal (each “barbarian”, in other words, is a version of “non-Chinese”).

The Inner Asian frontier is of course the source of all conquering dynasties, and therefore it is this frontier that has been the chief *locus* for the discussion of Sinicization, and it is not by chance that most discussions have revolved about the historical role of the Qing and other Inner Asian dynasties. The intellectual roots of the Sinicization thesis, mobilized to show the enduring power of attraction and transformation of Chinese culture, meet insurmountable challenges when confronted with the close study of specific institutions, political culture, social structure, and ideological tenets through Chinese history, which not only inevitably change (this would be a trivial consideration) but change through innovations that are contingent to the specific circumstances of the rise and establishment of a new power. This applies to

14 Fiskesjö 1999.

every dynasty in Chinese history, and the many assumptions inherent in the Sinicization theory (for instance that the Ming dynasty was, as a Han-dominated dynasty, closer to the Song than to the Jin or Yuan) remain open to challenge, as they require an amount of historical evidence that would be difficult to produce, and would also have to justify the purpose such a research might serve.

To conclude, I shall refer to the detailed essay by Veronika Veit on the text known in Mongolian by the abbreviated name of *Iledkel Šastir* as an indispensable source for Mongol history during the Qing dynasty. The theme of multilingual production under the Qing has been addressed elsewhere by Evelyn Rawski, and represents an important feature of Qing historiography.¹⁵ Some of the documents reported in Veit's paper, when compared with earlier sources, show a degree of historical revisionism that Pamela Crossley has identified in *The Translucent Mirror* as a fundamental feature of the Qianlong period.¹⁶ Without entering the details of the history of the Mongols under the Qing, the study of Mongol-language sources of the Qianlong period shows how deep and pervasive the re-writing of history could be. At the same time, the compilation of massive historical works allowed the preservation of the kind of records that Veit sees as critical to a reconstruction of Mongol history, such as people's names, genealogical data, summaries of documents, and accounts of events. Compiled after the conquest of the northwest (Dzungaria and the "western regions"), it was meant to provide a general record of the Mongol and Turkic (Muslim) aristocrats in the *wai fan* 外藩, the external territories of the Qing empire, namely Outer Mongolia and Xinjiang. It responded, therefore, to the Qing imperial design of rationalization of the conquered territories, and political integration of their history within the history of the Qing dynasty. As such, this is a document that can not only provide precious information on the over one hundred and fifty years of history between the Manchus and several Mongol nations, but does shed much light on the evolution of Qing historiography of the frontier, and of the place of the frontier in the creation of the Qing empire.

15 Rawski 2005.

16 Crossley 1999.

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