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Minorities and the Middle Kingdom: Ethnic Policies and Frontier Societies in Chinese History

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Concepts of Ethnicity, Frontier, and the "Middle Kingdom"
- **Chapter 2** Geography of Frontiers: Borderlands and Corridors
- **Chapter 3** Qin–Han Expansion and Early Indigenous Polities
- **Chapter 4** Tang Cosmopolitanism and Turkic–Tibetan Entanglements
- **Chapter 5** Song, Liao, Xi Xia, Jin: Negotiating Power with Steppe and Plateau
- **Chapter 6** The Mongol Yuan: Empire, Hierarchies, and Legal Pluralism
- **Chapter 7** Ming Rule on the Margins: The Tusi System and Tributary Order
- **Chapter 8** Qing Conquest and Consolidation: Banners, Alliances, and Empire
- **Chapter 9** Xinjiang and the Dzungars: Conquest, Deportation, and Settlement
- **Chapter 10** Tibet under the Qing: Patronage, Monastic Networks, and Ambans
- **Chapter 11** Missionaries and Mediators: Jesuits, Sufis, and Lamaist Exchanges
- **Chapter 12** Trade, Tribute, and Border Markets: Economies of Accommodation
- **Chapter 13** Law, Custom, and Courts: Managing Difference in the Late Empire
- **Chapter 14** Migration, Land, and Environment: Han Settlement and Its Frontiers
- **Chapter 15** Scripts, Schools, and Surnames: Language and Identity Projects
- **Chapter 16** Revolution and Republic: Warlords, Islam, and Ethnopolitics, 1911–1949
- **Chapter 17** Making Minzu: Classification, Autonomy, and Early PRC Experiments
- **Chapter 18** Campaigns and Culture: High Socialism and the Cultural Revolution
- **Chapter 19** Reform, Roads, and Resources: Development and Autonomy since 1978
- **Chapter 20** Xinjiang after 1990: Uyghurs, Security, and Urbanization
- **Chapter 21** Tibet after 1959: Diaspora, Negotiation, and Memory
- **Chapter 22** The Southwest Mosaic: Zhuang, Yi, and Governance in Guangxi and Yunnan
- **Chapter 23** Faith and the State: Mosques, Monasteries, and Regulation
- **Chapter 24** Tourism, Heritage, and Ethnic Branding: Markets of Identity
- **Chapter 25** Futures on the Frontier: Ecological Migration, Digital Governance, and Cross-Border Flows

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Introduction

This book investigates how a vast, enduring state—the Middle Kingdom—has governed, engaged, and been reshaped by the many peoples at its edges. From the steppe to the plateau, from the oases of the Tarim to the river valleys of the southwest, frontier societies have been central to China's formation. Rather than treating minorities as peripheral or episodic, the chapters that follow place Mongols, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Zhuang, Yi, Hui, and others at the analytical core. By tracing encounters across imperial and modern regimes, we examine how policies of accommodation and assimilation, moments of resistance, and patterns of everyday negotiation produced a multiethnic polity that is both remarkably durable and persistently contested.

Our point of departure is conceptual. "Frontier" here is not a fixed line but a social process: a zone of exchange, translation, and sometimes coercion, where institutions are adapted and identities are articulated. Ethnicity is approached historically—as a repertoire of languages, livelihoods, religious affiliations, and political claims that acquire salience in particular contexts. Governance, in turn, is treated as a shifting toolkit that includes tribute and market relations, layered legal orders, indirect rule through native chieftains, missionary patronage, infrastructural integration, and modern experiments in autonomy, classification, and development.

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The historical arc begins with early imperial expansion under the Qin and Han, when new corridors of settlement, garrisons, and diplomacy linked the agrarian heartland to mobile steppe and highland societies. It proceeds through the Tang world of cosmopolitan entanglements with Turkic and Tibetan powers and the multipolar politics of the Song, Liao, Xi Xia, and Jin. The Mongol Yuan introduced empire-scale hierarchies that formalized difference while facilitating movement and exchange. The Ming consolidated a repertoire of frontier governance—most notably the tusi system—alongside tribute and border markets. The Qing, inheriting and reinventing these tools, extended rule over Inner Asia with banners, alliances, and administrative innovations that bound Tibet and Xinjiang into a reimagined imperial space.

Modern transformations did not erase these legacies; they reconfigured them. The Republican era saw warlord polities, Islamic reform currents, and new national vocabularies intersecting with older institutions and local authorities. After 1949, the People's Republic undertook ambitious projects of minzu (nationality) classification, regional autonomy, and socialist transformation. These were accompanied by dramatic campaigns that reached into schools, monasteries, mosques, and marketplaces, reshaping authority and community life even as local actors adapted, complied, and sometimes resisted.

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Since the reform period, development has accelerated the integration of frontier regions through roads, mines, dams, and cities, bringing opportunity, displacement, and new forms of inequality. Policy experiments have encompassed bilingual education, poverty alleviation, ecological migration, and the regulation of religion and culture. Tourism and heritage industries have commodified difference, while security-centered approaches and digital governance have restructured the everyday. In Xinjiang, these dynamics have intersected with debates over identity, mobility, and the bounds of public life; in Tibet, with questions of monastic authority, diaspora politics, and memory; in the southwest, with the governance of diversity amid rapid industrialization.

Methodologically, the book proceeds through case studies that juxtapose imperial strategies with local responses. Drawing on historical gazetteers, missionary reports, legal codes, oral histories, and ethnographic fieldwork, each chapter highlights how policies were implemented, interpreted, and transformed in practice. Particular attention is given to missionary and mediating figures—Jesuits at court, Sufi shaykhs in oasis towns, and lamaist networks across the plateau—whose activities bridged cultural worlds and complicated state projects.

Throughout, we resist linear stories of inevitable assimilation or perpetual conflict. The record suggests a patterned flexibility: states tended to alternate between indirect and direct rule, between empowering intermediaries and building bureaucracies, between recognizing plural legal orders and standardizing institutions. Frontier societies, for their part, strategically engaged the state—leveraging tribute, markets, law, and religion to secure autonomy, resources, or recognition. The resulting polity was not a homogenous nation-state writ large, but a layered formation whose coherence depended on constant negotiation.

Readers may approach the book in sequence or thematically. The early chapters establish conceptual lenses and historical repertoires; mid chapters explore law, economy, religion, and migration as mechanisms of governance; later chapters examine twentieth- and twenty-first-century policy experiments and their social consequences. Together they offer a comparative, diachronic portrait of multiethnic governance in Chinese history—its ambitions and ambiguities, its accommodations and resistances, and the frontier worlds that have continually remade the Middle Kingdom.

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CHAPTER ONE: Concepts of Ethnicity, Frontier, and the "Middle Kingdom"

Any serious conversation about China and its minorities eventually bumps into a wall of words. The vocabulary itself—"minority," "frontier," "empire," "nation"—carries assumptions that can quietly smuggle in conclusions before the evidence is even laid out. This chapter is an attempt to pry open some of those assumptions, to look at how the Chinese polity understood itself and its neighbors over the longue durée, and to explain the conceptual toolkit we will carry through the rest of this book. It is, in other words, a chapter about the lenses before the landscape.

The term "Middle Kingdom" is one of those phrases that sounds ancient and monolithic but is, in practice, a modern convenience. The Chinese term Zhongguo is older by far—it appears in bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou and means, roughly, "the central states" or "the central domain." But for much of its early life, Zhongguo did not describe a fixed nation-state with borders on a map. It described a political and cultural center, a place where the Son of Heaven held court, surrounded by regions that acknowledged, traded with, quarreled with, or ignored that court in varying measures and at varying times.

Understanding Zhongguo as a center rather than a container matters enormously. It reframes the entire question of "minorities and the Middle Kingdom" from a story of peoples on the outside trying to get in—or being kept out—to a story of overlapping, shifting zones of authority, loyalty, and exchange. The Great Wall, that most iconic of boundaries, was never a single wall built at a single moment. It was a series of structures, rebuilt and abandoned across centuries, and it functioned sometimes as a barrier, sometimes as a toll booth, and sometimes as a place where both sides mingled with surprising ease.

In classical Chinese political thought, the world was organized around a moral center. The Confucian canon spoke of huaxia—the civilized realm—and yidi, a broad term for peoples beyond the pale. The distinction was not strictly biological or even always linguistic. It was, at base, a cultural and political judgment. A chieftain who accepted the emperor's calendar, adopted court rituals, and sent tribute could be folded into the huaxia framework. One who refused could be cast as yidi. This is not a hard boundary; it is a spectrum, and the spectrum could move in either direction depending on the politics of the moment.

The famous distinction between "those who draw the bow" and "those who do not" appears in early texts and captures something of this fluidity. Attributed to King Wu of

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Zhou, it divided the world into four categories based on proximity and cultural orientation. But even in antiquity, commentators recognized that individuals and groups could shift categories. A people who today "draw the bow" might, through trade, intermarriage, or political alignment, find themselves tomorrow among those who do not. The categories were real enough to shape policy, but they were never airtight.

When we turn to the Western conceptual apparatus, things get equally tangled. The word "ethnicity" in English carries the weight of twentieth-century social science, with its roots in the Greek ethnos and its modern career through the work of scholars trying to make sense of nationalism, migration, and identity politics. Max Weber defined an ethnic group as one whose members believe in a common ancestry, a definition that sounds tidy until you try to apply it to a Tang dynasty court where a Sogdian merchant's granddaughter could become a duchess and a Khitan general's son could compose poetry in classical Chinese.

Fredrik Barth's influential 1969 volume, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, shifted the conversation from shared cultural traits to the processes by which groups maintain their distinctiveness through interaction. Barth argued that ethnic identity is relational and situational—it emerges at the boundary, not in the core. This framing has proven useful for scholars of Chinese history precisely because so much of that history involves negotiation at borders, in markets, and at court. Identity, in this view, is not something you simply have; it is something you do, and what you do depends on who is watching and what is at stake.

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The concept of "frontier" deserves similar scrutiny. In American historiography, Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis cast the frontier as a line of westward expansion that continually regenerated American democracy. The frontier, for Turner, was a process, not a place. Chinese historians have had their own versions of this idea. The Qing-era scholar Gu Yanwu spoke of "the peril of peripheral ministers" and worried about the centrifugal tendencies of distant provinces. In the twentieth century, scholars like Qian Mu described Chinese history as a story of expanding cultural and political space, driven by demographic pressure and institutional ingenuity.

But the Chinese frontier was never simply a line to be crossed or a void to be filled. It was a zone of encounter—sometimes violent, often commercial, and frequently familial. Steppe empires and agrarian empires did not merely clash along a frontier; they interpenetrated. Mongol elites in the Yuan court spoke Persian and patronized Tibetan Buddhism. Manchu bannermen in the Qing garrisons intermarried with Han Chinese and adopted local customs. Tibetan monasteries held estates in Amdo that were administered according to both Buddhist law and Qing statute. In each case, the frontier was less a wall than a membrane—permeable, selective, and constantly being renegotiated.

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One of the most influential frameworks for understanding this complexity is the idea of "inner Asian" or "Eurasian" history, associated with scholars like Morris Rossabi, Thomas Allsen, and Peter Perdue. This approach resists treating China as a self-contained civilization and instead situates it within a wider world of empires, steppe confederations, and trade networks. Under this lens, the Mongol Yuan dynasty is not an aberration in Chinese history but a node in a Eurasian empire. The Qing is not simply the last Chinese dynasty but a Central Asian empire that happened to rule China. The question of who is inside and who is outside becomes much harder to answer—and, arguably, much less useful to ask.

The "New Qing History" movement of the 1990s and 2000s pushed this rethinking further. Historians like Mark Elliott, Pamela Crossley, and Laura Hostetler argued that the Qing empire was fundamentally a multiethnic project, one that governed through differentiated legal and administrative structures rather than through a single, uniform policy of assimilation. The Eight Banners system, the court of colonial affairs (Lifan Yuan), the tributary hierarchy, and the tusi system of indirect rule in the southwest were not deviations from a norm of sinicization but constitutive features of how the empire worked. This scholarship has been enormously generative, though it has also drawn criticism—some of it from Chinese scholars who see it as relativizing or diminishing Chinese civilization, and some from Western scholars who worry that it romanticizes empire.

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At the same time, the older paradigm of "sinicization"—the idea that non-Han peoples were gradually absorbed into Chinese culture over time—retains considerable explanatory power for many historical episodes. The Northern Wei dynasty's move from the steppe to Luoyang, the adoption of Chinese writing by the Khitan and later the Manchu, and the linguistic assimilation of many Mongol communities in modern Inner Mongolia all point to real processes of cultural and demographic blending. The question is not whether assimilation happened; it plainly did, in many times and places. The question is whether assimilation was the only story, or even the main one.

The evidence suggests it was not. For every group that was absorbed, another maintained a distinct identity for centuries. The Uyghurs of the Tarim Basin, for example, adopted various scripts and religions over the centuries—Sogdian, Manichaean, Buddhist, and eventually Islamic—but never simply became "Chinese" in any straightforward sense. The Tibetans built an imperial culture of their own that rivaled and sometimes dominated the Tang dynasty. The Zhuang, the largest ethnic minority in modern China, maintained linguistic and cultural distinctiveness across millennia of proximity to the Han south. These are not stories of failed assimilation; they are stories of different choices made under different circumstances.

What makes the Chinese case especially rich for comparative study is the sheer variety of governance strategies deployed across this diversity. The Han dynasty used

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commanderies and colonies in some areas, client states in others. The Tang established protectorates along the Silk Road while maintaining marriage alliances with Tibetan and Turkic courts. The Yuan organized its subjects into a four-class hierarchy that explicitly ranked Mongols, Semu (Central and Western Asians), Han (northern Chinese), and Southerners. The Ming relied heavily on the tusi system, granting hereditary authority to local chieftains in exchange for nominal allegiance. The Qing combined all of these with banner colonies, Imperial Household Department estates, provincial bureaucracies, and a religious policy that patronized Tibetan Buddhism while regulating Islam and Christianity.

Each of these strategies reflected not only the character of the frontier society in question but also the internal politics of the ruling dynasty. Concessions to Mongol nobles were also concessions to Mongol-aligned officials at court. Restrictions on Han migration to Manchuria were as much about maintaining the Manchu military reserve as about keeping ethnic boundaries intact. Policies toward Tibet were entangled with the Qing emperor's relationship with the Gelugpa hierarchy and, by the eighteenth century, with the geopolitical rivalry between the British and Russian empires. No frontier policy was made in isolation; it was always entangled with domestic and international considerations.

The word "ethnicity" itself, when translated into modern Chinese as minzu, carries its own freight. Sun Yat-sen's early republican vision invoked the "five peoples"—Han, Manchu, Mongol, Tibetan, and Hui—joined in a single republic. This was a political claim as much as a demographic description, an attempt to hold together a fragile state by acknowledging its diversity while insisting on unity. The five-color flag of the Republic of China was a visual embodiment of this aspiration, each stripe representing one of the minzu. But the actual process of defining who belonged to which minzu was messy, politically charged, and far from settled.

After 1949, the People's Republic undertook an ambitious and unprecedented project of nationalities classification. Teams of ethnographers, linguists, and political cadres fanned out across the country to identify, catalog, and officially recognize the nation's ethnic groups. The result was the recognition of fifty-five minority nationalities alongside the Han, a total of fifty-six minzu. But this classification was anything but neutral. It involved decisions about which dialects constituted separate languages, which cultural practices deserved recognition, and which groups were "ripe" for autonomous status and which were not. Some groups, like the Zhuang, were amalgamated from many smaller, locally distinct communities. Others, like the Hui, were recognized despite enormous internal diversity of language, custom, and geography. The act of classification was itself an exercise of power, and its consequences are still being worked out today.

All of this is to say that the concepts we use to discuss ethnicity and frontiers in China are themselves historical artifacts. They carry the fingerprints of the political projects

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that created them—Qing expansion, Republican nationalism, Maoist revolution, reform-era development. Being aware of this does not mean abandoning the concepts; it means using them with care, recognizing that they simplify even as they illuminate. The rest of this book puts these concepts to work, testing them against the messy realities of particular times, places, and encounters. But before those realities can speak clearly, we need to understand the vocabulary we bring to them.

One last conceptual point before we move on. The phrase "minority-state relations" in the subtitle invites a question: which state? The question may seem obvious, but it is not. Over the course of more than two millennia, the political entity calling itself the Middle Kingdom has changed its shape, its ruling elite, its ideology, and its administrative apparatus many times over. The Qin state that conquered the Warring States was not the same polity as the Han empire that followed, and the Han empire bore little structural resemblance to the Tang, the Yuan, or the People's Republic. Each of these entities had its own way of thinking about difference, its own repertoire of frontier policies, and its own relationship to the peoples beyond its borders. To speak of "China" as a single, continuous actor across two thousand years is convenient shorthand, but it risks flattening the very tensions and transformations that make this history worth studying.

Wherever possible, then, this book tries to be specific. It names the dynasty, the emperor, the official, and the local leader. It notes when a policy was invented, when it was abandoned, and when it was revived in a different form. It pays attention to the gap between what a decree said and what happened on the ground. And it treats frontier societies not as passive objects of policy but as active participants in their own right—peoples who shaped, resisted, and reinterpreted the terms on which they were governed. The chapters that follow will bring these dynamics to life through close examination of particular episodes, regions, and individuals. This chapter has tried to lay the groundwork so that when those stories are told, the reader has the tools to understand what is at stake.

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