"All Akha are Hani, but not all Hani are Akha": State-minority articulations of the "nation" in the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands

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Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we came from", so much as what we might become, how we might have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.  

Introduction

Modern China’s nationalist project has long had significant transnational dimensions. China’s transnationalist orientations, however, have been largely framed and analyzed in relation to the so-called overseas “Chinese”, who are further equated with the ethno-racial construct of the “Han” majority framed in opposition to the non-Han minority. As a result, the large numbers of non-Han minorities residing throughout China’s contemporary borderlands have been excluded from China’s transnational nation building efforts. Or have they?

In fact, since the early 2000s China has sought to incorporate non-Han minorities into the official discourse on overseas Chinese via the adoption and deployment of the term “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities” (shaoxu minzu Huaqiao HuaRen). In this vein, the Chinese state has sought to promote ethnic unity or unity in diversity not only within but also beyond its national boundaries. These expanded transnational nation-building efforts have arisen amidst both rising ethnic tensions domestically as well as China’s ongoing, post-Cold War

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War extraterritorial expansion in the pursuit of resources, markets, land, and labor to feed the voracious appetite of its rapidly growing economy.

State efforts to engage with certain internal Others and their co-ethnics residing beyond China proper, however, had begun some ten years prior during the early 1990s. This was especially the case for borderland minorities residing in the far southwest such as the Dai-Lue, Miao (Hmong), Yao (Lu-Mien) and Hani-Akha for whom various state organs organized and funded one or more intra-ethnic international conferences to which foreign scholars and elite co-ethnics from beyond China were invited. To date little scholarly work has either critically examined these international conferences as historical events in of themselves or considered the ways in which the various kinds of identity exchanges they brought to fruition may have contributed to the forging of a trans-or multi-national identity among each of these groups.

In this article I examine the complexities of China’s transnational nation-building project in relation to the post-1980s efforts by certain members of the Hani-Akha minority to construct and promote a pan-ethnic identity among the roughly two million Hani-Akha residing throughout the mountainous borderlands of southwest China, east Myanmar (Burma), north Thailand, northwest Laos, and northwest Vietnam. This creation of a transnational Hani-Akha identity has been made possible by the region’s gradual transformation from “battlefields to markets”. While the initial impetus for these transregional, pan-ethnic aspirations came from the Chinese state and certain Han Chinese scholars, through organizing and funding the inaugural “International Conference on Hani-Akha Culture” (ICHAC) in Kunming in 1993, an expanding array of Hani-Akha cadres and intellectuals in China have since taken the reins in organizing each of the subsequent conferences. During the conferences certain members of the Han and Akha elite from within and beyond China have gathered to not only explore and celebrate various facets of their common identity but also craft a standardized version of their common identity.

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7 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Thai Studies, (Kunming: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990); Louisa Schein, “Hmong/Miao Transnationality: Identity beyond culture”, in Hmong/Miao in Asia, eds. Nicholas Tapp, Jean Michaud, Christian Culas and Gary Yia Lee (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), pp. 283-285; Jeffery MacDonald, “‘We are the experts’: Lu-Mien (Yao) refugees assert their rights as scholars of their own culture”, in Power, Ethnics, and Human Rights: Anthropological Studies of Refugee Research and Action, eds. Ruth Krulfeld and Jeffery MacDonald (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp. 97-122; Micah Morton, “‘If you come often, we are like relatives; if you come rarely, we are like strangers’: Reformations of Akhaness in the Upper Mekong Region”, ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies 6.1 (2013): 29-59.

8 This population estimate is cited from Jianhua Wang, Sacred and contested landscapes: Dynamics of natural resource management by Akha people in Xishuangbanna, Southwest China (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of California-Riverside, 2013), p. 20.


10 Since that time, however, the Community Party has been quietly revamping its ethnic policies from an earlier integrationist approach wherein ethnicity was officially recognized to a more assimilationist approach wherein ethnicity is downplayed in relation to the nation (See James Leibold, Ethnic Policy in China: Is reform inevitable? Policy Studies, No. 68, [Honolulu: East-West Center, 2013]). As a result, Akha and Hani elite in southwest China may in the near future see declining state support in the form of funds and authorizations for their distinctly ethnic endeavors, whether on the national or transnational scale. Elsewhere, certain scholars have discussed the implications of the state’s post-1990s withdrawal of support for other minorities in China such as the Zhuang and Miao (See Katherine Kaup, Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China [Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000]; and Schein, “Hmong/Miao Transnationality”.)
In particular, I focus on the multiple and shifting “identity exchanges” that have occurred among certain Hani and Akha in the region in the context of these international conferences. Hani and Akha from Vietnam have yet to directly participate in these gatherings. With the exception of the second conference which was held in north Thailand in 1996, each of these tri-yearly conferences has been held in different urban centers of Yunnan, China with large concentrations of Hani-Akha, places such as Geiju, Jinghong, Yuanyang, Mojiang, Luchun and Yuanjiang. The conference organizers are currently planning the eighth conference which is scheduled to be held in Jinhong.

The term “identity exchanges” is adopted from Louisa Schein to emphasize both the particular kinds of imaginations, longings and expectations participants bring to these exchanges as well as the various cultural productions they co-produce during and after them.11 These identity exchanges have led increasing numbers of Akha and Hani in the region to reconfigure their local imaginations as to the possibilities of what it means to be Akha and Hani, whether in relation to the past, present or future. These identitarian productions are thus not simply about “being” but also “becoming” Akha and/or Hani.

In this article I have framed Akha and Hani identitarian productions not so much as “invented traditions”,12 either created out of thin air or imposed on Akha and Hani by a hegemonic Chinese state, but rather “modern traditions” or “traditional modernities” creatively negotiated by certain cosmopolitan Akha and Hani actors both in dialogue with particular Akha/Hani communities and non-Akha/Hani Others as well as in response to a diverse range of practices, interpretations, longings and imaginings of Akha/Hani-ness past, present and future. This argument rests on a more implicit claim that contrary to conventional thought, communities the world over have long constructed the “traditional” by way of a continual “engagement with modernity and modernization”.13 Indeed, the very notion of the traditional/old has come about in conjunction with that of the modern/new.14

This article expands on my doctoral dissertation, focusing on Hani-Akha unification efforts from the vantage points of certain Akha figures and communities residing beyond China during the post-Cold War period.15 Beyond China and Vietnam, the state re-constructed ethnic category of “Hani” has until recently had little or no salience among individuals identifying rather as “Akha”.16 Within China, moreover, some 300,000 “Akha” have since the 1950s been officially (mis/un)recognized as part of the larger “Hani” minzu or “ethnonationality”.17

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15 See Micah Morton, From Blood to Fruit: Crypto-nationalism and Reformations of the Ancestral Burden in the Akha World of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015). In the dissertation and current article I draw primarily on an intensive period of fieldwork conducted in various parts of north Thailand, east Myanmar (Burma), southwest China, and northwest Laos between October 2009 and June 2012. My primary methodologies have included multi-sited and itinerant ethnographic fieldwork along with archival research.
16 Official estimates of national-level populations of Akha have varied from roughly 275,000 (out of a total of 1.63 million Hani) in southwest China as of 2010, to 250,000 in east Myanmar (Burma) as of 2013, 91,000 in northwest Laos as of 2005, 80,000 in north Thailand as of 2013, and an unknown percentage of the estimated 26,000-40,000 Hani in northwest Vietnam as of 2008; see Wang, Sacred and contested landscapes, pp. 20, 25-26.
17 For an excellent historical analysis of this ambitious project with respect to southwest China see Thomas Mullaney, Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012 [2011]); For a less rigorous and yet rare discussion of this historical project in relation to Akha (referred to as “Aini”) see Belinda Stewart-Cox, “We are Aini but
Depending on one’s vantage point, “Akha” in China, by virtue of their official recognition as “Hani”, have been either misrecognized or unrecognized by the Chinese state. Their mis-recognition stems from the fact that they have been lumped together as part of a larger conglomeration of ethnic groups with whom they share little or no ethnic affinity at present. Their un-recognition stems from the fact that by virtue of being swallowed by the larger category of “Hani”, “Akha” as such have been rendered invisible.

Of further interest is the fact that in large part the ethnic bonds of kinship that have emerged between Hani and Akha in China and Laos on the one hand and those in Myanmar and Thailand on the other have been forged anew and/or for the first time. In Thailand, with the exception of Akha belonging to the minority U-bya (Uqbyaq) subgroup, the idea that there are Akha currently residing in China and Laos has been a relatively novel one. The majority of Uqbyaq Akha in north Thailand and east Myanmar trace their ancestry back only a few generations to far southwest China. In contrast, ties based on historically shifting patterns of residence, mobility, kinship, marriage, and trade have long connected many Akha in contemporary Thailand and Myanmar.

Here I examine the politics of Hani-Akha unification efforts as driven by certain Hani-Akha cadres and intellectuals in China with respect to Hani and Akha both within as well as beyond China. I further consider the multi-layeredness of their efforts in relation to the transnational nation-building efforts of the larger Chinese state. The Hani-Akha case suggests that China’s 1950s ethnic classification project remains a work in progress on not only the earlier terrain of the sub-national but also the more recent terrain of the trans-national.

In Communist China, the state’s ethnic classification project in the 1950s resulted in Akha being subsumed within the larger category of Hani on the basis of linguistic, historical, and cultural affiliation.\(^\text{18}\) This categorization, however, has been problematic not the least due to the fact that the present-day Akha and Hani languages are mutually unintelligible.\(^\text{19}\) Indeed, Akha and Hani participants to the successive ICHAC have only been able to communicate with one another via either a third language such as Mandarin, Yunnanese or English, or with the aid of a translator. In short, the state’s initial categorization of Akha as Hani may have in actuality been more about meeting the demands of administrative convenience and national security given the state-centric view of Akha as a more frontier dwelling and less Sinicized group than Hani per se.\(^\text{20}\)

Nevertheless, in the post-Cold War era certain developments among Hani and Akha not only within but also beyond China have served to buttress or render their ethnic bonds of kinship (more) meaningful. These developments have entailed first, the discovery of a shared line of ancestry extending back to a common apical ancestor, and, second, the reworking of an earlier mythical sense of homeland into an actual homeland positioned in a particular place and time. The tri-yearly ICHAC has provided an important forum wherein certain Hani, Akha, and, to some extent, Euro-American scholars have introduced, negotiated, agreed upon, and complicated these genealogical and place-based reworkings of pan-Hani/Akha-ness.

A significant part of my analysis draws on a series of collaborations with a key figure in the contemporary pan-Hani/Akha movement, namely Akha scholar Wang Jianhua

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\(^{20}\) Cox-Stewart, “We are Aini but now we are called Hani”, pp. 21, 34, 40.
(Nyawrbyeivq Aryoeq)\(^{21}\) of southwest China. During the period of my initial long-term fieldwork (2009-2012), Wang was a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of California-Riverside in the USA. He has since completed his Ph.D. and become an assistant professor at the Yunnan Provincial Institute for Ethnic Studies of the Yunnan University of Nationalities in Kunming, China.\(^{22}\) Reflecting the fruitful and yet complex nature of our collaborations over the past six years I have variably positioned Wang in the article as an academic authority, collaborator and interlocutor.

Last, I must confess my uneasiness with the inclusion of this article in a journal entitled, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*. What place does an article focusing on non-Han Chinese residing within and beyond China and who may or may not identify with a larger diasporic community centered in China proper, whether in the present or distant past, have in such a journal? In short, I believe the article has its place by way of advancing the journal’s objective to “look beyond the stereotyped masks of ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chineseness’” in highlighting the historical experiences and agencies of certain members of a non-Han minority, the Hani-Akha, in relation to the transnational nation-building efforts of China in the post-Cold War period.

**Ethnic Co-Productions: State-minority articulations of Hani/Akha-ness**

China’s ethnic minority policies following the end of the Cold War have been shaped by both economic prospects as well as national security concerns, especially in reference to border-dwelling minorities with trans-border co-ethnics such as Hani/Akha, Miao/Hmong, and Yao/Mien. In reference to Hani/Akha, moreover, the Chinese state’s financial support of the conference when held in China, which also allows for state surveillance and control, is the main reason it has been held almost exclusively in China. The unstable political situation in Myanmar as well as lack of state funding and support in Laos and Thailand have made it difficult for Akha residing beyond China to host the conference. Not unlike numerous other state-led projects the world over, moreover, these largely Chinese state-sponsored events have generated a number of intended and unintended consequences as explained below.

As of 2012 these concerns with national security, particularly in border regions, continued to frame the larger political-ideological contexts within which the indigenous Hani and Akha conference organizers were required to operate in framing and justifying the purpose and objectives of the conferences. Prior to even planning, let alone publicly announcing, each conference the organizers are required to gain permission from each successively higher and more centralized level of the Chinese bureaucracy under the Ministry of Culture. A now retired Akha official from Jinghong, Yunnan, China explained this process of obtaining authorization in relation to the third ICHAC held in Jinghong in late 1999 in the following manner:

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\(^{21}\) When writing Akha names and terms I use the most recent Romanized Akha writing system negotiated by a regional network of Akha in Jinghong, China, in January 2009. In this system Roman characters not used to denote initial consonants are used as tonal markers placed at the end of syllables and not pronounced. The consonants used for tonal markers in this system include q (long, low tone), r (long, high tone), v (short, mid-tone), vq (short, low-tone), and vr (short, high-tone). For example, in the word “Aqkaq” (Akha), q marks that both syllables of the word are pronounced with a long, low tone.

\(^{22}\) As cited earlier, Wang’s 2013 dissertation is entitled *Sacred and Contested Landscapes: Dynamics of Natural Resource Management by Akha People in Xishuangbanna, Southwest China*. In his dissertation Wang examines the historical dynamics of natural resource management among certain Akha communities in far southwest China between roughly 1949 and the late 2000s. He also provides an extensive revisionist account of Akha history that incorporates a variety of sources ranging from Akha oral texts to Chinese imperial records, Euro-American scholarly accounts of the region, and modern day ethnographic analogues drawn from the extant ritual practices of certain Akha communities in the region.
We must ask for authorization from each level of government. First, we had to ask the head of Xishuangbanna Prefecture. Then we had to ask (the provincial government) in Kunming. After that, we had to propose to (the central government in) Beijing. It took one year to get authorization to hold the third Akha-Hani conference here in China. After we got the authorization, we came back to Jinghong and held a meeting. We decided what kinds of topics to discuss and who the participants should be. Then we formed different groups to take care of different subjects.

This situation as described above leads one to question the real “autonomy” of ethnic minorities in China under the so-called “system of regional autonomy...guaranteeing that ethnic minorities fully perform their roles as the masters of the country…”.

From their inception, the Han Chinese, Hani and Akha organizers in turn have invariably stressed the crucial role of the conferences in promoting “harmonious” relations among the members of the larger “Hani Nation(ality)” residing in the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands. In this manner the so-called “harmonious, multi-ethnic Chinese nation” has been projected onto what might be likened to a similarly “harmonious, multi-ethnic Chinese empire” extending beyond the Chinese geo-body. These multi-layered aims and objectives are further revealed in the following abstract (translated from Chinese to English) of a paper presented by Hani scholar Long Qing Hua of the Department of Ideological and Political Theory at Honghe University at the most recent ICHAC held in Yuanjiang County, Yunnan in November 2012:

(The) Hani are an ancient nation(ality) residing across the borders of China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. Hani living on both sides of the border are closely related to each other in terms of their ethnic identity as a result of having a common historical origin, cultural background, language source, religious belief and so forth. Hani have further maintained their national cultural identity. Ethnic identity is an important part of the “cultural soft power” (ruan shi li) that plays a special role in shaping the common heart and mind of a people and maintaining harmonious multicultural relations. It is also a crucial means by which national cultural resources can be integrated and a harmonious border society constructed.

Certain developments in China were instrumental in bringing about the conditions out of which the conferences emerged. Following the passing of Chairman Mao, the end of the Cold War, and the lifting of the “Bamboo Curtain” in 1989, a state-driven cultural revitalization of sorts took place among various national minorities such as the Hani, under

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23. Miyaiv (Miyaer) Yang Lawgaw Zehua, Deputy Director of the Hani Language Department of Xishuangbanna Broadcasting Station, Yunnan, China, December 1999. Interview conducted as part of the Virtual Borders documentary production by Manu Lukusch and Aqjor Dzoebaw. See Manu Lukusch, Virtual Borders (Documentary [DVD]; UK: ambienttv.net, 2003).
25. Long’s use of the Chinese term “cultural soft power” (ruan shi li) is most likely drawing on a larger, national discourse as revealed in the following article from Xinhua on January 1, 2014: “President Xi Jinping has vowed to promote China’s cultural soft power by disseminating modern Chinese values and showing the charm of Chinese culture to the world. Efforts are needed to build China’s national image, Xi said when delivering a speech at a group study session of members of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China’s Central Committee on Monday. China should be portrayed as a civilized country featuring rich history, ethnic unity and cultural diversity, and as an oriental power with good government, developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity and beautiful mountains and rivers, Xi said…” (Xinhua, “China to promote cultural soft power”, Xinhua, 1 January 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-01/01/content_17208354.htm).
which Akha have been officially subsumed.\textsuperscript{27} During this period the Chinese state both promoted the revival of certain ethnic festivals as well as expanded the directives of numerous Nationality Research Institutes, including the Hani/Yi Nationality Research Institute in the Honghe Hani/Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan.\textsuperscript{28}

It was the latter institute that organized the First International Conference on Hani Culture in 1993 under the direction of Professor Li Zi Xian, a Han Chinese folklorist affiliated with Yunnan University in Kunming, with financial support from the Kunming Bureau for Southwest Border Nationalities, the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, and the Honghe Hani/Yi Autonomous Prefecture Government.\textsuperscript{29} The official title of the first conference did not include the term “Akha”, which was only added to “Hani” in 1996 when the second conference was held in north Thailand where, until recently, the ethnonym ‘Hani’ has had little or no salience among groups identifying as “Akha”.\textsuperscript{30} U.S. anthropologist Deborah Tooker noted that the first conference was at the time the largest of its kind ever held in the People’s Republic of China.\textsuperscript{31}

Hani and Akha from southwest China, northwest Laos, and north Thailand as well as non-Hani/Akha researchers were invited to the conference with over 180 individuals attending.\textsuperscript{32} The participation of Akha from beyond China was facilitated by Leo G.M.A. von Geusau, a now deceased Dutch priest turned anthropologist, and Paul W. Lewis, a U.S. Baptist missionary and anthropologist. Geusau, who gave one of the opening addresses, noted that in addition to being an academic forum, the conference “was also a traveling conference (as) seven buses took participants over nearly 2,500 km to and through the Yi-Hani Red River Autonomous Prefecture, to the north of Vietnam”.\textsuperscript{33}

**The Beginning of a New, ‘Postmodern’ Phase in Hani/Akha History**

The multifaceted identity exchanges that have occurred during each of the ICHAC since their inauguration in 1993 have been instrumental in laying down the roots from which a regional pan-Hani/Akha sense of belonging has gradually emerged. A key figure in the movement, Akha scholar Wang Jianhua (Nyawbyeiq Aryoeq) of southwest China, has commented:

> There are now a growing number of indigenous Hani-Akha scholars in Zomia, especially in China and Thailand, which are bringing about a new phase in Hani-Akha history, the postmodern phase. This new phase in Hani-Akha history was marked by the First ICHAC held in Kunming, Yunnan, China in 1993... (These conferences along with various other) activities are bringing about a sense of solidarity and belonging among many Akha, if not all, in Zomia once again. This reemerging sense of solidarity is expressed in the popular Akha saying Aqkaq tseir kaq tiq kaq, literally meaning “Ten Akha are (united) as one”. After all, all Akha in Zomia today have a common origin in (our ancestral homeland) Jadae....

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\textsuperscript{30} The second ICHAC was held in north Thailand in May 1996. The main organizers of the conference were Dutch anthropologist Leo G.M.A. von Geusau, U.S. anthropologist Deborah Tooker, and Dutch linguist Inga-Lill Hansson. The Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai, Thailand, hosted the conference and funding came largely from the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), based in Leiden, the Netherlands, and the Asia Committee of the European Science Foundation.


\textsuperscript{34} Wang, *Sacred and contested landscapes*, p. 78. “Zomia” as used here refers to James Scott’s reframing of much of upland Mainland Southeast Asia and southwest China as an extensive and
From the vantage point of an ethnic minority, Wang associates the “modern phase” of Akha history with:

…the deconstruction, loss and decomposition of (the) cultural identity (of Akha) under the powerful political, economic, and cultural influences of modern nation-states and Western colonialism and cultural imperialism (most notably Western Christian missionaries).35

This "modern" phase is identified as a period of "colonization" on multiple fronts by more powerful, non-Akha "Others", especially Western Christian missionaries. Wang further conceives of the more recent “postmodern” phase of Akha history ushered in by the inaugural ICHAC as a period of “decolonization” marked by reunification, revitalization, and reconstruction, albeit in a manner that neither supplants nor is subsumed by existing national structures.36

“Different Branches of the Same Tree”: Re-Discovering Ancestral Ties

In his report on the inaugural ICHAC in 1993, Dutch anthropologist Leo G.M.A. von Geusau wrote the following celebratory note:

contiguous “non-state” space or “zone of refuge” framed in antithesis to lowland states (James Scott, The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009]). It was Willem van Schendel, however, who first referred to this region as well as neighboring parts of central and south Asia as “Zomia”, albeit with different intentions than Scott (Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia”, in Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space, eds., Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben, and Henk S. Nordholt. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005[2002]), pp. 275-307. Wang’s adoption of the term “Zomia” here according to James Scott’s reinterpretation reflects his agreement with assessments of Akha as a “non-state” people only during the historical period following the demise of the Akha homeland-state of Jadae as further explained below.

35 Wang, Sacred and contested landscapes, p. 74-77. Since roughly the early 1980s some eighty percent of Akha in Thailand and Myanmar have converted to different denominations of Christianity, primarily Protestantism in Thailand and Catholicism in Myanmar. This figure represents some 238,000 people or 34 percent of the total regional population of roughly 730,000 (Morton, From Blood to Fruit, 32). In post-1949 Communist China, moreover, Akha experienced a long period of overt cultural suppression that has only recently abated in the post-Mao period (Wang, Sacred and Contested Landscapes, 75-76; and Morton, From Blood to Fruit, 35).

36 Wang, Sacred and contested landscapes, p. 77-79.
Hani and Akha, separated from each other for hundreds of years, discovered for the first time that they were actually one people (with) a common apical ancestor, (Sm-mi-o \[Smr Mir Or\]), and genealogical system stretching back more than 1,500 years.\(^{37}\)

This 'discovery' was revealed during the conference by Pascal Bouchérie, a French scholar working with Hani and Akha in Yunnan during the 1980s.\(^{38}\) After collecting and collating the extensive ancestral genealogies of Hani and Akha in different parts of China and beyond, Bouchérie found to his surprise that the names of the first roughly 20 ancestors in the genealogies were the same beginning with an apical ancestor referred to as Sm-mi-o:

The fact that all Hani and Akha subgroups are bound by genealogical links is absolutely remarkable, if one considers the geographical distance that separates different groups of the population. For instance, Akha of Thailand and Piyo subgroups (in China and Laos), though they are for the most part ignorant of their reciprocal existence and have no contact at all, use the same common list of 20 initial ancestors names in their genealogies, with the exception of minor phonological differences. In two communities separated by more than 500 km of mountainous country, we have recorded a list of (an) initial thirty-odd nodes at a genealogical distance of 25 generations. As a result of the use of a common system, each individual can estimate the degree of genealogical kinship that links his own patrilineage and any other Hani patrilineage, regardless of its location and the subgroup of identity to which it is affiliated.\(^{39}\)

Figure 2: This photograph was taken by the author during the Seventh ICHAC in November 2012. In the photo, several Hani conference participants from China are examining a poster outlining the master patrilineal ancestral genealogy shared by all Hani and Akha and written in Chinese. The poster was prominently displayed in the hotel lobby where the conference was held.

Geusau and Thai scholar Panadda Boonyasaranai have further noted that since this initial 'discovery' of shared ancestry in 1993 and in spite of the many political, economic, and linguistic differences between and within Hani and Akha regionally, their shared genealogy and related ancestral services have emerged as a fundamental "symbol of their unity, their 'cultural citizenship' in a situation of diaspora."\(^{40}\) Geusau elaborates on this point in the following manner:


\(^{39}\) Bouchérie, “The Genealogical Patronymic Linkage System of Akha and Hani”.

Patrilineal ancestry and the associated ancestor cults form the backbone of the Akha world-view, around which is organized both everyday and ceremonial life. Major seasonal ceremonies are generally related to one of the twelve yearly symbolic ancestor food offerings, in which the deceased patrilineal grandparents participate.41

John McKinnon, however, has argued that Geusau tends to both “essentializ[e] the people amongst whom he has spent the last 30 years” as well as downplay “the degree of divergence among and/or between Hani/Akha”.42 Indeed, putting aside the even more complicated issue of Hani-Akha inter-relations, intra-Akha relations have long been characterized by differences along the lines of clan/lineage affiliation, locality of residence, socioeconomic status, migratory history, language variety, and variations in customary law in addition to more recent divisions along the lines of nationalism and religion.43 For Geusau, however, these differences, which he argued could be explained by history and geography, were of less empirical interest than that which he argued Hani and Akha have continued to share in common, namely their indigenous system of customary law or “Akha zawn” (Aqkaq zanr), in which their ancestral genealogies and related services figure prominently.44

For middle-aged and elder Akha and Hani conference participants, moreover, many of whom are illiterate, a highlight of the conferences has involved engaging in informal exchanges with other Akha and Hani during which they recite their respective genealogies and discover exactly how far back they converge.45 These particular Akha re-imaginings of the borders of belonging bring attention to the crucial role of direct or face-to-face exchanges in cultivating an “actual” in addition to “imagined community”46 that neither necessarily trumps nor is trumped by other forms of belonging ranging from the national to sub-group, dialect, clan, village, and household. The Akha significance of the face-to-face meeting is further reflected in the remarks of a middle-aged Akha woman from Kengtung, Myanmar, during the closing ceremony of the second ICHAC held in north Thailand in 1996: “If you come often, we are like relatives; if you come rarely, we are like strangers”.47

The multi-layered nature of Akha multi-national identity formations is further illustrated in the comments of Wang, who, when asked to discuss the present-day significance of genealogies, did so by likening them to “Akha passports”. He commented that wherever he travels in the larger Akha world he is able to both authenticate his Akhaness as well as position himself as a more or less distant family member to his hosts by reciting his genealogy and listening to theirs. Wang further noted, however, with hints of sadness and bitterness in his voice, that his genealogical “passport” is only useful in relation

45 Paul Lewis, personal communication, 27 February 2010; and Luksch, Virtual Borders.
47 Tooker, “No Longer the ‘Other ’.”
to Akha who continue to carry their ancestral ways in one form or another and not those that have for various reasons abandoned the latter and “taken on and gone down to” the ways of “non-Akha Others”, especially non-Akha Christian Others.48

As for Akha and Hani inter-relations, however, it must be reiterated that while they share many linguistic features,49 their respective languages are mutually unintelligible.50 As a result, apart from genealogical names, which are mutually intelligible, Akha and Hani conference participants have had to communicate with one another via a third language or translator.51 In contrast, Akha from various parts of the region have had little or no difficulty communicating with each other in Akha following some minor adjustments for language variety and borrowed terms.

Mandarin followed by English has been the dominant written and oral language used during each of the conferences. The use of Mandarin in the Chinese context reflects at least three factors. First, it can be seen as part of an effort by the Chinese state, which in this particular case is comprised of Hani and Akha representatives, to render the conferences not only legible and hence governable52 but also modern, civilized and hence Sinicized (or Han-icized). Second, many of the Hani elite participants lack fluency in either Hani or Akha language, and represent a heavily Sinicized faction of the larger Hani community. Third, as noted earlier, the Hani and Akha languages are mutually unintelligible, hence the need for a third language of communication.

Nevertheless, since the third conference in 1999 a growing number of Akha participants, particularly those from outside of China, have been calling for greater use of Akha as an official conference language in both its oral and written forms alongside Mandarin and English. Indeed, in the most recent conference in 2012 a number of Akha from east Myanmar, north Thailand and northwest Laos both delivered papers orally in Akha and also enjoyed instantaneous, on-site translation via headset of much of the proceedings which were largely conducted in Mandarin. Several Akha scholars from southwest China provided the translation services from Mandarin to Akha and vice versa.

Diasporic Constructions of Identity: Akha & Hani Rearticulations of Homeland

While Akha residing in various parts of contemporary Myanmar and Thailand have long conceived of their long lost ancestral homeland as being located “somewhere to the north on higher ground”, recent direct and indirect exchanges with Hani and Akha and notions of Hani-ness and Akha-ness from China have transformed earlier notions of homeland as embedded in oral traditions and ritual practices into an actual homeland-state positioned in a particular place and time. Since the late 2000s a growing number of Hani and Akha scholars from China have been mining the vaults of their ancestral memories in conjunction with written Chinese records to construct a historical narrative in which Hani and Akha figure front and center rather than on the periphery. In brief, these scholars have concluded that

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48 Since roughly the early 1980s some 80 percent of Akha in Thailand and Myanmar have converted to different denominations of Christianity, primarily Protestantism in Thailand and Catholicism in Myanmar. This figure represents some 238,000 people or 34 percent of the total regional population of roughly 730,000 (Morton, From Blood to Fruit, 32). For an extensive discussion of the religious dimensions of contemporary Akha identitarian politics see Morton, From Blood to Fruit.


the Yuanjiang valley of the Red River was the seat of their ancestral homeland-state of *Jadae* (in Akha) or *Luopan* (in Hani and Mandarin) (see Figure 3 below).53

These scholarly reworkings of the place-based anchors of Hani/Akha-ness figured prominently in the 2008 and 2012 ICHAC. Indeed, the most recent conference was held in Yuanjiang County, Yunnan, China, in late November 2012 (See Figure 1 above).54 The following excerpt from the opening address for the 2012 conference highlights the significance of its location for the Hani-Akha organizers:

Yuanjiang County is the gathering place and traditional homeland of the international Hani and Akha ancestors which was settled after the ancient tribes migrated southwards. In fact, it is better known as the Hani Holy Land. It was the Hani who began to live in this uninhabited region, extending their farming activities southwards. Historical records tell us that the Hani began to make a living in the Yuanjiang plain at the beginning of the Wei and Jin Dynasties. They (eventually) established a kingdom, known as the "Luopan Kingdom", which occupied an area as large as 30,000 square kilometers and lasted for more than 300 years….55

At the same time, however, certain Akha scholars have in recent years further investigated, endorsed, and yet complicated these claims on Hani-Akha history wherein Akha are subsumed under the larger category of Hani.56 For example, Wang Jianhua has argued that the ethnogenesis of the “Akha” as a distinct people, and, most importantly, as


54 For reasons stemming largely from the highly bureaucratic nature of the Chinese state, the most recent seventh ICHAC was held four rather than three years after the previous conference held in November 2008 in Luchun County, Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. A series of permissions from the heads of each level of government ranging from county to prefecture to province and nation, and in that exact order, must be obtained before the conference organizers can even begin to plan yet alone publicly announce the conference.

55 Opening Address, Seventh International Conference on Hani-Akha Culture, Yuanjiang County, Yunnan, China, 24 November 2012.

separate and apart from “Hani”, occurred as a result of their unique experiences during a particular period of the much longer durée referred to above by the Hani hosts of the 2012 ICHAC. Wang writes:

…That which has quintessentially...“made” the Akha as a people is their collective experiences in cultivating and transforming their homeland Jadae—particularly their experiences building, defending and eventually losing...Jadae. The Akha ethnic identity has been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed under certain sociopolitical circumstances through time and space. At the same time, however, their shared history, especially during the classic period of Jadae state, has remained as the ultimate source for Akha to negotiate their identity and maintain their collectivity.57

In brief, Wang and others have argued that the “Akha” ethnogenesis occurred in conjunction with the establishment of their own, albeit short-lived, ancestral homeland-state of Jadae Mirkhang between roughly 1054 C.E. and 1274 C.E. when it was overcome by the Mongol Empire’s Yuan Dynasty.58 For Wang, moreover, it is the historical memory of these collective experiences in relation to Jadae that fundamentally animates and calls into being the very nature of Akha-ness past, present, and future:

All Akha have their roots in the homeland of Jadae and as such are part of the Akha diaspora of Jadae. It is in the latter sense alone that all of the various meanings of being “Akha”, that is, “people of the middle”, “people in-between”, “people of the center” and “people of distance”, are coalesced (or united). Akha oral historical texts, particularly those related to Jadae, remain as fundamental sources that Akha use to (re)negotiate and (re)construct their collective identity today...(T)he term Akha itself articulates inter-relation between the Akha people and Jadae—the Akha people as a diaspora of Jadae in the sense of being a place of (both) belonging and loss....59

These contemporary rearticulations of Akhaness are not simply about connecting the past (“our roots”) and present (“who we are”) but rather reworking the past (“how we might have been (mis/un) represented”), present (“how we might represent ourselves”), and future (“what we might become”) all at once.60

In recent years an expanding network of Akha elite from various parts of the region has worked to further buttress these historical productions of Akha-ness as seemingly distinct and separate from Hani-ness with additional work in the domains of language, culture, and religion.61 In response to their efforts some Hani elite and Han Chinese scholars have accused these Akha ethnic intrapreneurs of attempting to secede from the larger Hani nationality, undermine the strength of the Hani, and ultimately challenge the Chinese state. Wang, however, has rebuffed these claims by arguing that while he fully agrees with and celebrates the “ancient ties of kinship” between Akha and Hani, he is merely interested in uncovering the more recent historical period during which Akha splintered off from Hani and emerged as a distinct people.

Wang further stressed that in actuality he has been working to unite Akha both within and also beyond China with Hani within China. The latter efforts, he noted, have only served to strengthen rather than weaken the larger international Hani-Akha community of some 2 million people. Nevertheless, Wang has made a strong case for positioning Akha as both a sub-group of sorts within the larger Hani ethno-nationality (and by extension Chinese nation) as well as a distinct people in their own right:

57 Wang, Sacred and contested landscapes, pp. xi, 79-80.
58 Wang, Sacred and contested landscapes, pp. xi, 60.
59 Wang, Sacred and contested landscapes, pp. 79, 81.
While all Akha are Hani due to our common ancestral roots, not all Hani are Akha. Rather, Akha branched off from the Hani and became their own ethnic group, their own people, namely the Akha, in the context of forming their own, ancient homeland-state of Jadae...  

Wang further informed me that “Akha” as such are “invisible” in China by virtue of being recognized by the state as “Hani” rather than “Akha”. He stressed, however, that in recent years he has come to the realization that this lack of recognition is warranted as a result of first, the ancient bonds of kinship uniting Akha and Hani in the distant, pre-Jadae past, and, second, and perhaps even more importantly, the contemporary bonds of kinship that have emerged among Akha and Hani since the early 1990s. Nevertheless, Wang noted that Hani within China, by virtue of their official recognition as “Hani”, perceived greater degree of Sinicization, and closer proximity to Beijing, have to date had greater access to state resources and opportunity structures than “Akha”. These debates highlight unresolved tensions between notions of ethnicity and belonging as variably constructed by the Chinese state, Hani and Akha elite in China, and members of the Akha diaspora within and beyond China.

**Beyond elite? Romanticized pasts and conflated identities**

The ancestral homeland has been an especially salient domain in which the work of Wang and others before him has borne fruit among certain members of the larger, non-elite Hani and Akha populations in the region. Among Akha, in particular, these fruits have taken the form of sentiments supportive of notions of Akha-ness as simultaneously subsumed under the larger Hani nation(ality) and yet separate and apart from Hani. Akha have variably reworked their own dynamic articulations of the ancestral homeland and in turn Akha/Hani-ness in response to a variety of direct and indirect exchanges with certain Akha/Hani elite and notions of Akha/Hani-ness originating from China.

The main articulations of homeland that Akha have reworked out of these exchanges have included first, popular cultural productions emphasizing a “lost” and “never to be regained” experience of homeland (i.e. “We, Akha, are a people without any state of our own”), and, second, an experience of a “rediscovered” homeland in the form of real, media (ted) and virtual experiences of China as the Akha-Hani homeland writ large. A salient example of the first articulation of a “lost” and “never to be regained” homeland can be found in the folk song “Jadeh Homeland” written in 1996 by A-ju Jeu-baw (Aqjur Dzoebqaw), an Akha musician and NGO leader from north Thailand. In “Jadeh Homeland”, which has since gained popularity throughout the larger Akha World, A-ju juxtaposes the glorious past of the Akha in Jadae and in turn China with their downtrodden present in Thailand where they have long faced hardships at the hand of the Thai authorities:

The Akha...have come down from Jadae...
In the old days, we used to have irrigated rice fields in China.
One day an Akha woman married a Dai man,  
We’ve been on the move for a long time, always on the move,  
After staying with his wife for a long time, the Dai man tied up the cat,  
He hit the cat, and ran all over the land, taking our land.
Our rice fields, our expansive rice fields, are now gone,
We could not stay any more, we had to move down south,
Our land was all gone, we had to move down south,
After we moved south, we never lived in Jadae again.
As we moved down south we faced many problems,
all of the good land was gone,

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62 Wang, personal communication, 10 June 2010.
63 “Dai” here refers to the “Dai-Lue”, a lowland and largely Buddhist Tai-language speaking group residing throughout much of the same areas as Akha in the Upper Mekong Region.
there was no more left....

The second articulation of a “rediscovered” homeland includes a variety of direct and indirect experiences of the homeland past, reconfigured and re-territorialized as “China” present. In recent years an expanding number of Akha from beyond China have traveled into areas of southwest China in order to not only participate in the tri-annually ICHAC but also to attend regional festivals, visit long lost relatives, establish business ties, tour the ancestral homeland, travel more broadly, as well as work and study in urban centers such as Jinghong and Kunming. At the same time, an increasing number of video productions in the form of amateur and professional documentaries and musical productions focusing on various aspects of Akha/Hani-ness have flowed out of China into other parts of the region by way of VCDs, DVDs, the internet and cellular phones.

For example, in 2003, A-ju reworked his 1996 instrumental production of “Jadeh Homeland” into a karaoke-style music video. The video accompanying the song was cut and edited from a recording of an excursion arranged for the participants of the fourth ICHAC in 2002. Notably the conference was held in the Hani-dominated areas of Yuanyang and Honghe counties in the Honghe Hani/Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan. During the excursion the conference participants were taken to a scenic viewpoint along a steep mountain road from where they could observe an extensive array of ancient Hani irrigated rice terraces expanding as far as the eye could see. For A-ju and many of the other Akha participants from Thailand and Myanmar, these soaring mountains, extensive irrigated rice terraces, and the relatively better-off position of Hani and Akha in China economically and politically, have all since come to stand for the ancestral homeland of Jadae – whether in the form of a long-lost and distinctly Akha homeland past or a rediscovered and conflated Akha-Hani homeland present.

In spite of these tendencies towards romanticizing Akha-ness past and conflating Akha/Hani-ness present, however, the majority of Akha beyond China have neither considered themselves to be a part of nor identified with Hani in China per se. I cannot comment on the nature of Hani and Akha inter-relations in Vietnam. Moreover, it has only been by way of their ever-expanding direct and indirect ties with certain Akha in China that Akha beyond China have come to know and, in some cases, identify with Hani in China.

In addition, while the Chinese state has officially identified Akha within China as “Hani” and afforded them certain rights as such, the ethnonym “Hani” has acquired little or no currency in the everyday vernaculars of most Akha who not only live apart from Hani at significant geographical distances but also must communicate via either Yunnanese and Mandarin or with the aid of a translator rather than in Akha or Hani. The Hani-Akha case thus suggests that China’s 1950s ethnic classification project remains a work in progress on not only the much older terrain of the sub-national but also the more recent terrain of the trans-national.

Conclusions: Non-Han Chinese diasporic communities within and beyond China?

“China is a unified multi-ethnic country jointly created by the people of all its ethnic groups. In the long course of historical evolution people of all ethnic groups in China have maintained close contacts, developed interdependently, communicated and fused with one another, and stood together through weal and woe, forming today’s multi-ethnic Chinese nation, and promoting the development of the nation and social progress.  

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China’s post-1950s policies towards minority ethno-nationalities (minzu) are distinctive in their emphasis on ethnic unity or amalgamation (ronghe) by way of official recognition and endorsement of ethnic diversity. The state, however, has significantly ordered, categorized, and indeed constructed this ethnic diversity according to a particular Sinicizing logic. According to this logic, certain groups such as the Akha, that have been perceived as more “raw” and hence less Sinicized have been (mis/un) recognized as sub-nationalities of sorts within certain larger nationalities such as the Hani, that have been perceived as more “cooked” or Sinicized. These official minzu, moreover, further represent the larger national geo-body of China and the Han ideal type toward which the multi-ethnic nation is perceived as evolving through history in unilineal fashion. Hence, these policies have been deeply engrained with a Han chauvinism wherein “Chineseness” is unequivocally reduced to “Han-ness” and Han-ness alone.⁶⁶

While these policies have been geared towards gradually assimilating non-Han minzu to the Han ideal type, they have also led in certain cases to the flaring of ethnic demands on the part of ethnic elite cadres who by virtue of receiving a state education “have been provided with the means to strategically formulate their ethnic demands within the politically acceptable framework”.⁶⁷ It is the grand multi-ethnic narrative of the unified Chinese nation from time immemorial, moreover, that forms the ideological foundation of this politically acceptable framework. In addition, while officially the Chinese state boasts that its “system of regional ethnic autonomy has...guarantee(d) that ethnic minorities fully perform their roles as the masters of the country”,⁶⁸ in actuality it has only been on the basis of their degree of Sinicization or becoming Han-like that non-Han minzu have been afforded any real “power”. “Ethnicity”, unequivocally equated with non-Han-ness, has in turn been largely reduced to the politically acceptable, presumably neutral, and yet eroticized/exoticized form of feminized performative culture whether in the case of ethnic costumes, music, dance, or drinking charades.⁶⁹

What are the implications of this national or sub-national framing of ethnicity and ethnics in the case of ethnic elite that have crafted their ethnic demands in reference not only to their co-ethnics residing within but also beyond the territorial boundaries of China? Shih Shu-Mei has argued that, “the Chinese diaspora refers mainly to the diaspora of the Han people”, thereby excluding non-Han groups such as the Uigur, Tibetans, Mongolians and so forth that have emigrated beyond China.⁷⁰ She has further argued that the “measure (for) inclusion” within the so-called “Chinese diaspora” has largely been the perceived degree of a particular ethnic group’s Sinicization and hence assimilation to the Han national ideal type:

The reduction of Chineseness to Han ethnicity in places outside of China is the inverse of the hegemonic claims on Chineseness by the Han majority within China.⁷¹

Shih brings attention more generally to the “margins” of not only China but also Chineseness, with the latter referring to “non-Han cultures within China where the imposition of the dominant Han culture has elicited numerous responses, from assimilation to anti-

colonial resistance in the dominant language, Hanyu". Non-Han minorities have responded to their experiences of internal colonialism in a variety of ways depending on the particulars of place and time as well as their historical and contemporary representations within Han Chinese imperial records, modern state discourse and popular culture.

Southwest border dwelling minzu such as the Dai-Lue, Miao (Hmong), Yao (Lu-Mien), and Hani-Akha have negotiated with as well as been represented and governed by the Chinese empire, and then Chinese state, in distinct ways when compared to northwest border dwelling minzu such as the Uigur, Tibetans and Mongolians. To what extent have these divergent experiences of internal colonialism shaped each group’s respective diasporic formations crisscrossing and overlapping the Chinese geo-body? Might these divergent experiences help explain why the Chinese state has more readily endorsed and in certain ways contributed to shaping the diasporic orientations of some groups more than others? Due to limitations of space, however, I will leave these important questions for further consideration at either another time or by other scholars.

On first impression, the ever-evolving diasporic world of the Hani-Akha appears to be framed in large part in the image and likeness of the Chinese diaspora, in spite of, or, perhaps, because of their exclusion from it. Hani elite, moreover, have made similar kinds of claims over the domains of (trans/sub) national belonging - in this case to the Hani nation(ality) - like the Han Chinese in reference to Chineseness as the nation writ large. Upon closer analysis, however, this diasporic world is both more complicated as well as diffuse.

In actuality, Akha from within and beyond China have crafted a range of dynamic spaces of belonging expressive of both their distinctiveness as Akha and also their membership within the larger Hani trans/nation(ality). Akha and Hani alike have crafted these spaces of belonging in relation to a series of direct and indirect identity exchanges with certain Akha/Hani and notions of Akha/Hani-ness that have circulated throughout various parts of the Upper Mekong Region since the early 1990s. In this manner, Akha and Hani identitarian productions, in their separate and conflated forms, have taken the form of “modern traditions” or “traditional modernities” rather than “invented traditions” per se. These rearticulations of Akha/Hani-ness have not been so much about connecting the past (“our roots”) and present (“who we are”) but rather reworking the past (“how we might have been (mis/un)represented”), present (“how we might represent ourselves”), and future (“what we might become”) all at once.

In closing, in this article I have examined Akha and Hani articulations of belonging in relation to the transnational nation-building efforts of China in the post-Cold War period. In doing so I have sought to highlight the margins of ‘China’ and, indeed, ‘Chineseness’ and thereby complicate the dominant discourse on Chinese nationalism and by extension the Chinese diaspora. It is in this manner, I believe, that the article has its place in a journal entitled Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies.

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