The Chinese Sultanate: Islam, Ethnicity, and the Panthay Rebellion in Southwest China, 1856-1873

David G. Atwill
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David G. Atwill's recent historical work joins in the anthropological stream of studying the ethnic groups of China's Yunnan province. This book presents a history of the violence in nineteenth-century Yunnan, to which ethnicity, economics, culture, environment, and politics all contributed. It consists of ten chapters, the first of which discusses the bloody history of the Hui (Muslim) genocide by the Han (Chinese). In this chapter, Atwill identifies why the Han resent the Hui and refutes conventional assumptions about the Panthay rebellion (1856-72). The second chapter situates nineteenth-century Yunnan in mosaic landscapes of region, commerce, ethnicity, and geography and provides the context for understanding the ensuing violence. The third chapter presents the history, communities, and networks of Muslims in multiethnic Yunnan, and the fourth chapter discusses Han trouble-makers (*Hanjianism*) in Yunnan's borderlands and presents a history of non-Han resistance to Han expansion.

The fifth and sixth chapters concentrate on Han hostility toward the Hui and documents in detail the massacre of Muslims by Han officials and militia as well as major Hui resistance campaigns: rebellions in Yunnan's eastern, southern, and western regions. The seventh chapter discusses divisions among Yunnan's Hui, which were largely due to differences in region, religion, and personal ambitions, along with the Qing policy of using some Hui to control other Hui. The eighth chapter focuses on the Dali regime (1856-72), which Atwill surprisingly labels as "Sultanate," and discusses its multiethnic character. The ninth chapter presents the back-and-forth battles between the Dali Sultanate and the Qing, and the fall of the Dali regime. The tenth chapter, as an epilogue, critiques the existing scholarship, which fails to note the facts of the Han massacre of the Hui and the multiethnic backing of the Dali regime. It also restates that the Panthay rebellion was primarily a Hui-led indigenous multiethnic resistance to the Han immigrants' hunger

for food, land, women, money, and power in a nineteenth-century Qing frontier area at a time when the central government was dysfunctional.

This book is superb in explaining the Panthay rebellion. Atwill positions the violence in its ethnically, religiously, geographically, commercially, and politically interwoven local context and thus avoids the reductionist and intuitional discourses often used to address violence in ethnic and cultural terms alone. He captures the tension between large-scale invading Han immigrants and local indigenous groups by tracing its trajectory and presenting patterns of historical violence between local ethnic groups and immigrant Hans. The Panthay rebellion represents the zenith of this kind of violence, and Atwill identifies the social and materialistic roots for the Hans' hatred and attempt to exterminate the Hui. Another virtue of this book is Atwill's juxtaposition of identity and violence, such as linking the Panthay rebellion to Muslim ethnic and religious identities during a time of crisis (pp. 155-60).

The only question I have is, in addition to known Manchu-Han official prejudice toward the Hui in nineteenth-century Yunnan, what was the state's degree of political complicity? Had the author focused more on the patterns and histories of administrations (e.g., the standard province-county style of interior regions, subprefecture [*ting*] mixed with administrations and regulations, and indigenous local autonomies), why the state categorized Yunnan's subject populations of Yunnan into three (Han, Hui, and Yi), and why it tolerated the massacres, the Han policy of slaughtering the Hui would have been more comprehensible. I believe that categorizing Yunnan's populations seems to be related to these administrative trivia and the need to standardize those differences that allowed the state to tolerate such events.

Administrative differences make sense to both Hui identity debates and Han identity. Atwill carefully categorizes *Huimin* and *Mumin*, respectively, as "ethnic" (Hui) and "religious" (Muslim) identities (p. 157). There is no problem with translating the latter as religious identity, for it is probably derived from the Arabic term *mu'min* (believer). However, his treatment and reading of *huimin* as ethnic identity is problematic. Ma Rulong's justification for surrendering, that "the state had treated its people (*min*) benevolently" (p. 156), seems to suggest that *Huimin* (Hui commoner) primarily expressed the person's legal status as *min* (commoner), despite the cultural-ethnic modification (Hui). Interestingly enough, in contrast to Ma Rulong's identification of the root of the Hui genocide with the Yunnan Han, Du Wenxiu attributed it to the alien Manchu ruler who refused to be a [Hui] *min* subject of the Qing and tried to establish a new regime for people of different cultures (*jiaomin*), among whom were the *Mumin* (Muslims).

Administrative differentiations in Yunnan's populations equally make sense to the self-perceived Han identity. Since the Han, new or old, belonged to the standard administration of interior regions and were the largest group of *min* subject populations, it is not surprising that they equated themselves with the whole loyal commoner population. Thanks to Yunnan's multi-ethnic setting, the state also overlapped the Han with the commoner so that, as Atwill discusses in the fourth chapter, it expressed its early concern over trouble-maker commoners via an ethnic term: *Han-jian* (Han traitor). Later on, along with the accelerated violence directed against the minority populations, the Han opportunistically identified themselves as good commoners and allied themselves with the state.

Attacking and eliminating non-Han groups thus served the interests of both the Qing, who desired to standardize the local administrations, and the Han, who desired to rob the indigenous peoples. Simultaneously, by equating themselves with commoners, the ethnic Han alienated and excluded the Hui, many – if not all – of whom were actually commoner subjects under standard administrations, from [equal] commoner status. The Qing pacification of the Panthay rebellion, as this reviewer argues, and the subsequent administrative reform was, in this sense, a great victory for the state at the political level and for Yunnan's Han population at the local ethnic level.

The book is of great help in understanding ethnic and religious revolts and violence in concrete terms in imperial as well as modern China, and for the crimes committed by the immigrant Han in China's frontier and ethnic regions in the name of state. It also reveals long-term challenges for non-Han peoples to be considered as equal subjects in a Han-dominated polity. This book deserves serious attention from students of imperial Chinese history, ethnic studies, and frontier studies, as well as policymakers.

Haiyun Ma
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of History
Georgetown University, Washington, DC