To the Peoples: Christianity and ethnicity in China's minority areas

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Introduction

For a very long time now, Christianity has been spreading among China’s so-called ‘minority nationalities’. In southwestern China, for example, large numbers of Lisu, Nu, and Miao have been converted since the late nineteenth century and Christianity has become part of the ‘traditional’ religion of these ethnic minorities. Christian missionaries have historically also played an important role in the process of ethno-genesis in China, such as the creation of written scripts for certain communities. Mackerras (2003) has argued that it is necessary to examine the various ways ethnic minorities in China are historically related to processes of globalization in order to understand important issues such as their self-identification, interactions with other groups, and relations with the state. For example, the arrival of a religion such as Christianity among the ethnic minorities can be seen as part of a global expansion of ties that has profoundly shaped local cultures and societal relations within China. The primary purpose of this chapter is to examine how an attention to Christianity’s indigenization in the minority regions can further help us understand the complex ways by which ethnic identity is practiced and negotiated. I argue that the arrival of Christianity among certain ethnic minorities not only stimulated their ethnic consciousness, but in some cases has contributed to the formation of religio-ethnicities – groups whose members practice a common religion, and encompass a number different officially recognized ethnic minorities. Such groups manifest many key elements that would qualify them as ethnicities.

While there is a broad range of definitions for the concept of ethnicity, most would include criteria such as a sense of common history, of common culture such as beliefs, values and language, a common feeling of survival, and the preference for group endogamy (e.g., Keyes 1976; de Vos 2006: 1). There is also a consensus among scholars that ethnic boundaries, and hence ethnic identity, develop not in isolation but through interactions with other social groups and the nation-state. Hence, Fredrik Barth (1969) emphasizes the negotiated nature of boundary making in ethnic identification in relation to changing contexts, while Thomas Eriksen (2002: 12) argues that ethnic should be conceptualized as ‘an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group’. My own approach here
broadly follows the views that ethnicity has to be regarded as contextualized and negotiated. However, I also wish to highlight the eminent role that the nation-state plays in shaping a dominant discursive practice with regard to both *emic* and *etic* forms of ethnic identification.

Between 2007 and 2009, I conducted three periods of anthropological fieldwork totalling four months among the Tibetan Catholics in three neighbouring areas. At Yajing in the Mangkang county of southeastern Tibet, I lived in the only Catholic church in Tibet for about two months. At Gongshan county, northern Yunnan, I visited all the fourteen Tibetan Catholic villages dispersed throughout the hills around the county town. I also lived for a total of about a month at Cizhong village in Deqin county in northern Yunnan. Data for this chapter is mainly based on two sources: one, field observations and interviews with Tibetan Catholics; second, the writings by foreign missionaries, county gazettes, and published works by Chinese and foreign scholars.

**Ethnic groups made ‘legible’**

There is a sizable body of literature on the state’s project in the identification of ‘nationalities’, known as the *minzu shibie*. The project is not only about the imposition of political control over the unruly minority regions. Guided initially by ideas of evolutionary Marxism which classify peoples according to their prevailing modes of production, *minzu shibie* was simultaneously a cultural project that slotted peoples into a hierarchical system that ranked them according to their economic and cultural achievements.

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) first came to power, it needed detailed descriptions of the peoples under its rule in order to determine ‘the ladder of history a particular group might have been at the time of the Communist takeover’ (Harrell 2001: 42). The *minzu* classification project was carried out in the service of development, national integration, and crucially, ordering. The CCP relied mainly on evolutionary Marxism and the Stalinist criteria for identifying nationality: a ‘nation’ refers to a group of people who share common language, territory, economy, and psychology manifesting as culture. In addition, the nations in a multinational country could be classified in a hierarchical order in terms of their progress, at the point of identification, along the evolutionary stages of modes of production. One important result of this hierarchical ordering was the positioning of the Han majority, which wielded political power at the central government, as having attained the most advanced stage of civilizational evolution. The Han *minzu* were thus held up as the model for the other minority peoples.

Harrell (1995; 2001) has provided one of the most compelling accounts and critique of the *minzu shibie* project undertaken by the CCP. His analysis underscores the fact that ethnic practices in the everyday life of the minority peoples do not neatly conform to the state’s system of *minzu* classification that stresses exclusivity and permanence. This rigid system as currently applied by the state in its effort to classify, order, and control — i.e., to make ‘legible’ (Scott 1998) — the diverse populations of China, has been superimposed upon a highly fluid and complex reality. Further, the ethnic identification project was not as systematic and ‘scientific’ as many have assumed. The CCP was highly reliant on a group of experts for their taxonomic methods and advice to gain an understanding of the complexities of the minority regions and to eventually demarcate the boundaries that set one ethnic group from another (Mullaney 2010). The Communist leadership needed to establish visible units into which these groups could be assigned. The problem was that for effective management the number of such units cannot be prohibitively large. Yang Bin (2009) has examined in the case of Yunnan province the contingent and pragmatic ways with which researchers, under the state’s employment, determined which groups should be classified as *minzu*. Through an inconsistent exercise, researchers and officials involved in the project narrowed down the large number of *minzu* applications to just around twenty-two, depending on factors such as the amount of time the researchers had in the field, and whether the elites of the minority groups were convincing in pressuring their case to the researchers. In addition, *minzu* as a distinctive category did not always conform to the Soviet model and ‘includes all kinds of ethnic or pro-ethnic groups, no matter which state of society they are in ... [and] could be a mix of several ethnic groups, one single ethnicity, a sub-ethnic unit or just a tribal community’ (Yang 2009: 767).

As an ideological practice, the *minzu* project has evolved into a system of ethnic classification that stresses exclusivity and permanence, with the *minzu* categories as units that allow for strong state intervention in society. *Minzu* policies are thus double-edged: theoretically all peoples are considered equal, and many ethnic minorities have been given spaces for speaking out and are able to take advantage of resources made available by the central government for social and infrastructural development. However, the national stage is also dominated by the Han Chinese, indicating that the *minzu* system is also a state-formulated hierarchical system imposed on the ethnic minorities. The system has also allowed for state penetration into the affairs of ethnic minorities to an unprecedented degree. In the meantime, the *minzu* system has been further institutionalized via dual processes of normalization and standardization: state-sponsored and academic efforts in writing standard histories for the ethnic minorities has meant that unitary histories are produced for each of the minority groups which are assumed to be real units with distinct boundaries.

In much of such standardized accounts, religion is often considered an important marker of *minzu* identity. Representing the official position, Ye Xiaowen, the former director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, expresses the view that the ‘religious question’ is often intimately linked with the ‘national question’:

> In a nation (minzu) with a broad-based and profound religious belief, the religious and national sentiments, the religious and national psychology, and religious and national customs, religious and national culture, the religious and national consciousness of every believer are intertwined and infiltrate each other, sometimes even becoming inseparable.

(Ye Xiaowen, quoted in Sutton and Kang 2009)
Some scholars (e.g., Gladney 1991; Sutton and Kang 2009) have used the term ‘ethno-religion’ to describe the kind of religion that is closely related with ethnicity. In fact, certain minority groups such as the Uighurs, Tibetans, Hui, and Dai have been defined primarily in terms of their religions. The focus in this chapter is to present two ways of understanding how religion, in this case Christianity, might relate to ethnic identity in China’s minority areas. One is in terms of how missionary efforts to convert the minority nationalities have stimulated, sustained, and enhanced ethnic consciousness among certain groups, and how Christianity as it has been adopted by these groups has become an ethno-religion. Second, I argue that Christianity can itself be considered a kind of ethnicity, and I propose the concept of religio-ethnicity to capture the ways in which Christianity can act as a crucial principle upon which new boundaries can be drawn to form social groups that display many features of ethnicity. The existence of, and the dynamic interactions between, the officially recognized mōzu and religio-ethnicity further complicates the picture of the different ‘ways of being ethnic’ (Harrell 2001) in China.

Christians and ethnic consciousness

During seventeen years of work, a few churches were formed among the Chinese and a few Nosu were sworn to Jesus. Evangelistic, scholastic, and medical work was carried on. A few natives were trained for work among their own people, but things went slowly till Tuesday, July 12th, 1904, when, without a moment’s warning, or any expectation on our part, four strangers walked into our courtyard at Chaotong.

(Pollard 1919: 29)

Thus wrote Samuel Pollard from the United Methodist Mission of his fateful encounter with the Miao (Hmong) that was to have profound consequences for both Pollard’s life and the Miao. Over the next two weeks, the Chaotong Mission House, where Pollard was based, received a further twenty-two Miao who had travelled long distances apparently ‘to learn about Jesus’. The Miao subsequently roocked in great numbers to the Stone Gateway (shimen kan), in Guizhou province, and embraced Christianity, heralding a conversion story that was to become one of the most successful among the ethnic minorities in China.

According to T’ien (1993: 5–6), a prominent feature among ethnic minorities which had converted to Christianity in Yunnan was that many of them had been dispersed throughout the province after protracted and often bitter struggles against the Han. These groups tended to form high altitude settlements and lacked unified political organizations. The Miao, Lisu, and Lahu were some of the ethnic groups that manifested these features, and which seemed to have embraced Christianity as a rejection of sinicization while regarding Christianity and contacts with foreigners as offering alternative paths to modernization (ibid.: 11). As is well documented in scholarly literature, in the last two centuries many Western Christian missionaries like Pollard desired to bring to the minority groups not only the Gospel, but also the ‘civilization’ of modern Christian nations that included advances in health, science, and technology. What these missionaries sought to achieve was nothing short of a radical transformation of the Chinese and the ethnic minorities in the periphery (e.g., Hirono 2008; Harrell 1995; Wang 2008). When the ethnic minorities in China were faced with civilizing projects promoted by the Christian missionaries, they had to grapple with important issues concerning their own group identity: who they were and what distinguished them from those who sought to civilize them (Harrell 1995: 28–29).

One critical component of ‘civilization’, as advocated by its proponents, was the written script. From the perspective of Christian missiology, effective proselytism would also entail translating the Gospel into the languages of the evangelized peoples. As Peel (2000: 281) writes in discussing Christianity’s impact on the formation of the Yoruba people in Nigeria,

The impulse of Christianity to translate its Gospel implies its acceptance of peoples of ‘nations’ as naturally given units to which the Church must speak: in the New Testament the Church’s mission ‘to the Gentiles’ was literally ‘to the nations/peoples (pros ta ethnē)’.

For those without a written script, the imperative for the missionaries was often to invent one. For example, the writing system created by Pollard has become an integral part of Hua Miao’s total ethnic identity (Diamond 1996). Hua Miao’s Christian identity is inextricably linked to the new (as it then was) written script since most of the religious texts used, including the Bible and hymns, were printed in that script. The church’s literacy campaigns through Bible study classes and school education have resulted in the creation of a group of Hua Miao intellectual elite whose members occupy important religious and political leadership positions. These people in turn further contribute to the Miao’s overall cultural development. Some of these Miao elite were actively involved in church-related work such as pastoral care and missionary activities, resulting in the formation of an indigenous Miao church. The Pollard script and indigenized Christianity have since been accepted by the Hua Miao as part of their cultural tradition and ethnic identity.

The Hua Miao’s conversion to Christianity is a good example what Hefner (1993) terms a ‘world building’ enterprise. The introduction of literacy initiated through the arrival of Christianity among the Hua Miao has exerted profound impact on the cultural construction of their ethnic consciousness. Literacy brought by Christianity had ‘strengthened self-identity and resistance against assimilation to some of the cultural and social practices advocated by the Han Chinese state’, while tying Hua Miao transnationally and transculturally to the broader Christian world that includes ‘ancient peoples of the Near East, to the Christian martyrs, the Protestant Reformation, and the outside world’ (Diamond 1996: 156–157). The Hua Miao case is one of a number of rather successful indigenization of Christianity among minority nationalities in China (see also
Han 2000), and shows how Christianity can indeed become an ethno-religion just like Islam for the Hui or Buddhism for the Tibetans. However, there is another important impact of Christianity on ethnicity in the minority areas which I shall examine below, viz. the formation of religio-ethnicity.

Christianity and religio-ethnicity

Taking Madsen's (1998) point that Catholic communities in many parts of rural China constitute themselves with strong ethnic features, I propose the concept of religio-ethnicity as a useful way to analyze the experience of Christianity among the minorities who have converted to the faith. Religio-ethnicity, in a broad sense, refers to a social group whose members' sense of belonging and solidarity is based upon their common adherence to a religious tradition, a shared sense of history, and a religious identity that strongly reflects an ascribed status. A religio-ethnic group is more a cultural phenomenon than a political designation, and can include a number of different state-designated ethnic groups. Below, I shall discuss the cases of Lisu Protestant Christianity and Tibetan Catholicism as two examples of religio-ethnicity.

Lisu Protestantism

Over the last century, Christianity has spread rapidly among the ethnic minorities in Yunnan province, where in many areas whole villages and clans consider Christianity — either Protestantism or Catholicism — as their traditional religion. For example, in 1997 an estimated 70 percent of the people in the Fugong county of Nujiang Prefecture were Christian (Yamamori and Chan 1998). Most of these Christian communities are legacies of the foreign missionary efforts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. One of the most successful efforts was undertaken by James Fraser from the China Inland Mission, who managed to convert many Lisu to Christianity by the 1920s. Covell (2008) estimates that there are now nearly 300,000 Lisu who are Christians. The Lisu’s adoption of Christianity has also exerted profound impact on other neighbouring ethnic groups, such as the Nu. The majority of the Lisu and the Nu have historically shared the same living environment and many social and cultural traits (Han 2004). While the Lisu can be found in the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, the majority of them live in the northern and northwestern parts of Yunnan, in valleys which are carved out by Lancang, Nu, and Jinsha rivers. For the Nu, an important feature of their geographical distribution is that they tend to live in ‘pockets’ of communities surrounded by the Lisu (Han 2004: 126).

The spread of Christianity among the Lisu and the Nu can be classified into three broad stages (Han 2004: 131). In the first stage, Protestant missionaries, bolstered by their success among the Miao in the Yunnan northeast, intensified their effort to bring the Gospel to the neighbouring regions, where Lisu and the Nu lived. In the second stage, evangelism focus shifted to the areas around the Nu river, such as Weixi, Lijiang, Yong Teng, Teng Chong. The third stage of the development saw the establishment of Protestant communities in the Nu areas as the main springboard for further evangelism. Around the 1910s, following the development of the Miao script, Protestant missionaries began an effort to do the same for the Lisu, first with the so-called ‘Eastern Lisu script’. Subsequently the ‘Western Lisu script’ was developed using Latin alphabets in capital. The church actively promoted the use of the Lisu scripts in their religious publications, in liturgies, and in mission schools, resulting in their widespread adoption not only by the the Lisu, but also in other minority nationalities such as the Nu who attended the Lisu churches (Han 2004: 134–135).

Importantly, the Nu generally did not regard Lisu Protestant missionaries and the Lisu language as elements of alien culture to be resisted or rejected. One important reason, as Gao and Gong (2010) argue, is that the Nu have historically shown strong affinity with Lisu culture. In the areas where the Lisu predominate, there has been significant Lisu-ization among the other minority nationalities who long have had intensive social, economic, and cultural interactions with the Lisu. The Lisu script, the Lisu Bible, and the Book of Praise have been accepted by both the Lisu and the Nu as important parts of their own ethnic culture and sources of religious knowledge. The Christianization of the Lisu and the Nu in turn further strengthens the cultural identity shared by both nationalities. In recent years, Lisu Christians have intensified efforts to evangelize their neighbouring minority nationalities, such as the Dulong. By 1998 at least 800 out of 4000 Dulong living in the Dulong Valley had become Christian through Lisu missionary efforts (Yamamori and Chan 1998: 411).

Tibetan Catholicism

It was the Feast of the Sacred Heart, and Catholics of Ailhaka village, perched on top of a hill in the remote Gongshan county in the Nujiang region, gathered in the newly built chapel for Mass officiated by Fr. Ambrose, the Tibetan priest who hailed from the village. Halfway through Mass, Fr. Ambrose, holding high the monstrance containing the Eucharist, led the congregation out of the chapel and the whole group slowly traced a route that marked out the boundary of the village. At certain locations, the priest would pause and raise up the monstrance to bless the village and the congregation. After about forty-five minutes, the entire procession returned to the chapel to conclude Mass. The purpose of this act of circumambulation, the priest told me later, was not only for him to bless the village, but also to mark out the boundary of the religious community of Ailhalka. The Ailhaka chapel was part of a network of fourteen chapels located in the remote hills around Gongshan county town, where the main Catholic church of the county was located. This network of chapels and churches, together with those in the neighbouring counties in northern Yunnan, are in turn part of the Dali diocese. At least this is how the official China Catholic Patriotic Church currently draws the boundary of the diocese. From the Vatican’s perspective, the churches in Gongshan, Deqin and neighbouring counties in Yunnan, Yanjing in Tibet, and Barthang, Lhasang, and Kangding in Sichuan, still
belong to the Diocese of Kangding that was established in 1946. This diocese followed the Vatican's successive establishment of Vicariates Apostolic (that of Lhasa, Thibet, and Tatsienlu) since 1846 for the evangelization of Tibet. The responsibility for converting the Tibetans had first fallen on the shoulders of French missionaries from the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), and later, on the Swiss missionaries from the Order of the Grand St. Bernard.

Despite persistent efforts, the missionaries failed to establish a permanent mission in central Tibet. However, they were successful in maintaining a lasting presence in a number of Shino-Tibetan border regions that included western Sichuan, southeastern Tibet, and northern Yunnan. The missionaries learned Chinese and Tibetan, and translated Bible passages, hymns, prayers, the liturgy of Mass, and other devotional material from Latin and French into the Tibetan language. They also set up schools, seminaries, medical clinics, and orphanages. While the Tibetans were the main focus for the missionaries, members of other neighboring ethnic groups also utilized the services provided by the church and some converted to Catholicism as well. In other words, with regard to religious-ethnicity, like Lisu Christianity the community of Tibetan Catholicism also comprises of non-Tibetans such as the Naxi and the Nu, who live in areas dominated by Tibetans who are Catholics. For example, the mission at Baitahluo, in the remote hills of Gongshan county, northern Yunnan, in 1898 comprised more than 1000 Catholics, drawn mainly from the Tibetan, Nu, and Lisu (Liszu Jianshi, 1983: 65–66). The pattern persists to this day: when I visited Baitahluo in 2007, Tibetan, Nu, and Lisu Catholics share the same hymnals, prayer booklets and devotional texts with biblical passages in the Tibetan language, based on editions first published by the French missionaries in the early twentieth century. The two Tibetan Catholic priests who periodically visit Baitahluo and surrounding Catholic villages also use these same texts when leading prayers and giving sermons.

Many Tibetan Catholics remember 1905 as a particularly painful year. The persecution against Catholics that had started in Bathang in Sichuan province spread to the neighboring regions in Yunnan and Tibet where communities of Tibetan Catholics and the foreign missionaries lived. In Bathang, church properties were destroyed and nine lay Catholics were killed together with two missionaries. At Yerkalo-Yanjuing in Tibet, anti-Christian Tibetans comprising of Tibetan monks and ordinary Tibetans destroyed the church building, school, priest residence, and the oratory. Thirteen members of the Tibetan community were shot dead, and the resident priest was beheaded. The bodies of many of the dead were then thrown into the Lancang River. Not far away, in Tsekou, Yunnan province, the Tibetan Catholics faced similar ferocious attacks by the Tibetan Buddhists. There, around eight Catholics were killed and the church destroyed. Two priests, Fr. Dubernard and Fr. Bourdonnec, were brutally killed. The latter was first shot with poisoned arrows, and his head was cut into half at the mouth by a broad blade (Loup 1956: 147). As I stood before the grave of Fr. Dubernard while visiting Tsekou in 2008, my guide, John, a leader of the local Tibetan Catholic community, told me with a grim face,

You know how they killed him? First they beheaded him, and then they dug out his heart and threw it into the river. The other priest [Fr. Bourdonnec] was also killed not far from here. Later, someone found and took the body of Fr. Dubernard and buried him here.

These days, local Catholics often come to the grave to pray, especially during the Feast of All Souls and when there is drought. According to John, praying for rain at these martyrs' graves is particularly efficacious.

When asked about the history of their faith, the Catholics – Tibetan, Nu, Naxi, or other nationalities – would inevitably recount the martyrdom of the foreign missionaries to highlight the persecution that their faith had suffered in the past, while linking the historical narrative with the present challenges they faced. As I have written elsewhere (Lim 2009), historically the Tibetan Catholics as a religious community had to deal with what many in the broader Tibetan and Chinese societies viewed as the political and cultural 'foreignness' of their religion. The Tibetan term for Catholicism is 'nangda pichi' (written form: gnam bdeug po'i chos), 'Religion of the Heavenly Lord'. Tibetan Catholics refer to themselves, and are referred to by others, as 'je to pa' (je is translated from Chinese jidan, for 'Christ'; pa is the Tibetan suffix). A strong symbolic boundary is established between the Tibetan Catholics and the wider Buddhist Tibetan society as Buddhism is referred to as 'bichi' (bod chos), literally 'Tibetan

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Figure 7.1 Graves of murdered European missionaries and Tibetan Catholics (source: image © Francis Lim).
Here, it is necessary to refer to an important missiological principle for Catholic and Protestant missionaries — conversion by families. This is how James Fraser, the most famous missionary to the Lisu, describes the strategy in 1916 in a letter:

> When these tribespeople turn to the Lord en famille it does not necessarily mean that every member of the family is whole-hearted about the matter — indeed this is seldom the case — but it does mean that the responsible members of the family turn from Satan to God with a definiteness otherwise lacking. When, accordingly, I speak about so many Christian 'families' I mean families where those responsible have removed all vestige of demonolatry from the home.

(quoted in Covell 1995: 142)

This missiological principle, I would argue, is a significant factor in the formation of Christianity as religio-ethnicity because, as noted by many ethnographers, many families in China’s minority areas are multi-ethnic, often across generations. Below are two examples from my fieldwork area.

Joseph Xiao was a twenty-year-old Catholic from Gongshan county in the Nujiang Autonomous Prefecture, northwest Yunnan. When I first met him in 2007 he was enrolled as a seminarian in a junior seminary in Xi’an, Shaanxi province, hoping to become a Catholic priest and eventually return home to serve his community. Joseph’s identity document indicated his nationality as Tibetan, which was the same as his father’s. However, Joseph’s mother was Nu and his sister was also registered as Nu. *Minzu* identity within the Joseph family and others are often chosen with pragmatic aims in mind; Joseph’s sister was registered as a Nu to take advantage of the preferential treatment that the Nu *minzu* but not the Tibetan — enjoy in the Gongshan Dulong-Nu Autonomous county. Joseph and his family and their religious faith confound the state’s effort to classify peoples according to neat categories of *minzu*. Tibetan and Nu are the main languages spoken in Joseph’s family, while Tibetan is widely spoken among the different *minzu* in the area where Joseph and his family lived.

The family history of the Tibetan Catholic priest, Father Ambrose, is another poignant illustration. While Fr. Ambrose was officially registered as Tibetan, his great-grandfather, by the name of Li Changsheng, was a Han Chinese originally from Sichuan province who married a Tibetan Catholic woman after arriving in Gongshan county. Li Changsheng’s children were all baptized as Catholics and registered as Tibetan, while retaining the Han surname, Li. One of the children, Renata, married a Nu woman called Sara who converted to Catholicism following the marriage, and the couple gave birth to three sons, the youngest was Fr. Ambrose. After the priest’s mother died, his father re-married a Tibetan Catholic. The multi-ethnic feature of Fr. Ambrose’s family history is not uncommon in the minority areas of China (cf. Harrell 2001). Important to my argument here is that Fr. Ambrose’s kinfolk, while belonging to a number of different officially recognized nationalities, belong to a Catholic community which has historically been formed as a result of missionaries’ effort to convert the Tibetans.
Thus, due to the historical patterns of evangelism and the subsequent development of the Catholic mission that was established in the Tibetan regions, most members of the Tibetan Catholic community live and identify with a specific geographical area in southwestern China. This area is largely that of the old Kangding Diocese that spills over into a few neighboring provinces. Catholics from different officially designated ethnic groups use liturgical and devotional tracts in Tibetan first produced by the missionaries, and recount a social history related to efforts initially to convert the Tibetans. The multi-ethnic feature of Tibetan Catholicism is today reflected in the different languages used in the liturgies of some churches and community, even while Tibetan remains the dominant language. Thus, as regards religio-ethnicity, members belonging to what I call 'Tibetan Catholicism' do not all belong to an officially defined Tibetan 'nationality', just as those who belong to 'Lisu Christianity' are not all Lisu people.

**Conclusion**

In many Catholic and Protestant communities in rural China, the Christian faith has been transmitted inter-generationally from respected elders to the younger ones via kinship ties, ensuring a steady growth even in times of severe state persecution. Through this mode of transmission, Christianity becomes intertwined with kinship to constitute an integral part of rural life: people consider the faith as bound up with their own identification with particular lineages or villages. The shared social memory of the sufferings of Christians for their faith further strengthens a sense of solidarity among these Christian communities. This melding of kinship ties, religious identity, social networks and historical memory indexes the deep processes at work in the indigenization of Christianity in China (Lee 2007; Ng *et al.* 2005).

I have discussed two possible approaches to conceptualize the impact of this form of Christian indigenization on ethnic identity among the minority groups.
The first approach, common among researchers and other commentators on religion and ethnic minority, examines how the expansion of Christianity, via the religious pluralism of foreign missionaries and subsequently through the local ones, has precipitated new ethnic consciousness in China’s minority areas. The formation of new ethnic consciousness can proceed in a few ways, such as in responding to the ‘civilizing missions’ of Christian missionaries and groups (and later, of the state), through the invention of a written script, and resulting from the production of cultural institutions such as literary works, educational enterprises, religious practices, etc. In short, Christianity is considered by these ethnic minorities who have adopted it as a kind of ethno-religion, as shown in the Hua Miao case.

The second way to analyze the relationship between Christianity and ethnic identity in the minority areas is through what I term religio-ethnicity. This does not mean that members of a religio-ethnic group would refer to their community as a separate minzu. My main point is that there are certain Christian communities that manifest many elements of what scholars have conceptualized as an ethnic group. From the discussion of ‘Lisu Protestantism’ and ‘Tibetan Catholicism’, we can identify at least five features of religio-ethnicity. First, the presence of an ethnic group which was historically the target population for Christian evangelism. This ethnic group would usually be culturally dominant in a multi-ethnic area, but at the same time not viewed as a cultural or political threat to smaller neighbouring groups. Second, concerted effort was expended on the part of missionaries to translate the Gospel and other religious tracts into the dominant group’s language, which was also widely used by other ethnic groups living in the same geographical area. These two features combined to facilitate the transmission of Christianity to the surrounding groups following the conversion of the culturally dominant group so that Christianity became an additional integrative factor for these groups. Third, the ‘ethnic’ component of this religious community is further shaped by a shared sense of history and internal solidarity generated through common historical experience of interacting with other local non-Christian groups, the state, and transnational social actors. Fourth, the religio-ethnic group is often associated with a particular geographic area. This is partly due to the traditional settlement pattern of constituent members of the religio-ethnic group, and partly due to the state’s residential policy in terms of the hukou system that made it very difficult for rural Christians to migrate permanently to other areas. Finally, religious and geographical identities overlap with kinship such that being a Christian to large extent is an ascribed status.

Of course, Christianity as ethno-religion and as religio-ethnicity are not mutually exclusive phenomena. In fact, the former could be an important foundation for the latter. Take for instance ‘Lisu Protestantism’: while Christianity’s indigenization can be considered an example of it becoming Lisu’s ethno-religion, in that it has become integral to Lisu ethnic consciousness, ‘Lisu Protestantism’ can also be a religio-ethnicity as an indigenized Lisu Christianity, using Lisu script and language, spread to neighboring ethnic groups such as the Nu or the Dulong which are not averse to Lisu cultural influences. The phenomenon of religio-ethnicity thus underscores the limitation of how ethnicity is understood via the state’s minzu classification system, which has become the dominant frame with which many people view ethnicity in China – the statement “there are fifty-six nationalities/ethnic groups in China” appears in countless scholarly and official documents. This chapter’s examination of how Christianity can shape ethnicity highlights not only the multiple ways of being ethnic in the minority areas on China, but also the limitation of viewing ethnicity through the eyes of the state.

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Part III

Civil society