

# Rethinking the Edge of Ethnicity and “Chinese People”

## Some Thoughts on “The Edge of China — Historical Memory and Ethnic Identity”

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### ABSTRACT

Citing a large amount of historical, archaeological and anthropological data and based on the theory of the edge of ethnohistory, the book “The Edge of China — Historical Memory and Ethnic Identity” answers the question of “what is the Chinese people” from the formation and change of the edge of the ethnic group, and clarifies that the “Chinese people” is a human ecosystem that has continued and changed throughout history. “The Chinese are a human ecosystem that has continued and changed throughout history. The research perspectives and theoretical reflections of the book are enlightening to the understanding of the historical formation and integration of the Chinese national community.

**Keywords:** *Edge of China, Historical memory, Ethnic groups.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The book “The Edge of China — Historical Memory and Ethnic Identity” (hereinafter referred to as “The Edge of China”) is one of the representative works of Mr. Wang Mingke, a renowned scholar and researcher at the Institute of History and Language of the Academia Sinica. The book is one of the representative works of Mr. Wang Mingke, a renowned scholar and researcher at the Institute of History and Language of the Academia Sinica, and has been a bestseller since it was published in 1997 in Taipei, China, with a simplified version published by the Social Science Literature Publishing House in 2006, an updated version by the Jiangsu People's Publishing House in 2013, and a reprinted version by the Shanghai People's Publishing House in 2020, which is a good example of the book's impact on the academic world and its bestseller status. The Edge of Huaxia draws on a large amount of historical, archaeological, and anthropological data, and takes “what is Chinese” as the object of study, interpreting Huaxia (Chinese people) from a new perspective - the formation of the edge of the ethnic group and historical memory - as well as from the

perspective of the Chinese people. -The author uses a large amount of historical, archaeological and anthropological data to study “What is Chinese? As the author says in the second preface, “What is Chinese”: “‘Chinese’ is a human ecosystem of historical continuity and change, which was born in the Western Zhou Dynasty, formed in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, and was first politicized by the Qin and Han Dynasties. The Qin and Han dynasties were its earliest political incarnations”.[1]

### 2. THE MAIN CONTENT OF “THE EDGE OF CHINA”

The book “The Edge of China” consists of a preface, a text and a conclusion. The first preface of the updated edition of the book is titled “What is Chinese”, which is both eye-catching and attractive to the readers. In the preface, the author firstly proposes to answer the question of “what is Chinese” with the formation and change of the “ethnic fringe” of Chinese people. In the second part of the preface, “What is Chinese”, the author corrects some terms and concepts and answers some readers' comments on the book. At the same

time, based on the viewpoint of human ecology, the author clearly puts forward that “Chinese people” is a human ecosystem with a long history of continuity and change, which is insightful and thought-provoking. As the author expects, “the establishment of a historical knowledge that focuses on environmental and human ecology will enable people to have a reflective and in-depth understanding of the human ecosystem of ‘Chinese people’ and its recent changes.”[2] The main text of *The Edge of Wachovia* consists of four major parts, fourteen chapters, plus a conclusion.

- Part I: Margins and Connotations consists of three chapters. In this part, Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the theoretical discussions on the phenomenon of “ethnicity” in today’s social anthropology, as well as the new progress in the study of the phenomenon of ethnicity from the research orientation of social memory and group identity in human society. In the third chapter, the author discusses the bias and limitation of the methodology of ethnic traceability in the traditional ethnohistorical research, and puts forward the theory of ethnohistorical research between historiography and anthropology - the marginal research, which becomes the theoretical basis of the research of the book.
- Part II: The Formation of the Ecological Boundary of Huaxia, three chapters in total, i.e., chapters 4 to 6, the author spends three chapters to discuss the “Origin of Huaxia”, taking the Huangshi River area of Qinghai, Ordos and its neighboring areas, and the Xiliao River area as examples, and hopes to illustrate the process of the economic ecological changes of the people in the above areas, and argues that pastoralization and armament were the main factors in the development of Huaxia in Shan, Jin and Ji. It is argued that the pastoralized and armed populations in the northern regions of Shaanxi, Jin, and Hebei were in fierce competition for resources with the local agricultural populations, thus creating a kind of ecological boundary between the “Chinese” and the “barbarians”.
- Part III: The Formation and Expansion of the Huaxia Margin, five chapters. Chapter 7: The Formation of the Edge of Huaxia: The Legend of the Origin of the Zhou People; Chapter 8: Huaxia’s Memory and Amnesia of the Western Zhou; Chapter 9: The Journey of Huaxiaization of the Marginalized People: The Story of Wu Taibe; Chapter 10: The Drift of the Edge of

Huaxia: Who are the Qiang People; Chapter 11: The Formation of the Han People: The Plurality of Huaxia’s Imagery of the Four Directions of Foreigners in the Han Dynasty. In this part, the author clarifies that by the Han Dynasty, the expansion of the edge of Huaxia had reached the limit of the environment in which the human ecosystem of “Huaxia” could exist, and was gradually clarified and fixed.

- Part IV: Continuity and Change of a Huaxia Margin, consists of three chapters. Chapter 12 is about the re-creation of the edge of modern China and Xia; Chapter 13 is about the micro-process of the re-creation of the edge of modern China and Xia; and Chapter 14 is about the continuity and change of an edge of China and Xia. In this part, the author clarifies that the modern era was a time of great change for “The Edge of China” and Xia, when “The Edge of China” and Xia became one, and those who used to be regarded as “barbarians” became minorities within the Chinese nation.
- Conclusion: Resource Competition, Historical Memory and Ethnic Identity. The author reiterates: “In this book, I interpret this ethnic phenomenon from a new perspective: the formation of ethnic margins and historical memory. What I am also explaining is how the Huaxia margins are formed and changed in the context of a specific environment of resource competition and distribution, and how the Huaxia coalesces and expands by means of historical memory, and how the marginalized people of the Huaxia become the Huaxia, the non-Huaxia, or the fuzzy margins between the two by means of historical memory and amnesia”.[3]

### 3. A FOUNDATIONAL WORK OF ETHNOHISTORICAL MARGINAL STUDIES

“The Edge of China” and *Summer* is one of the representative works of the marginal study of ethnic history that Mr. Wang Mingke has been promoting for many years, and it runs through the same research theory with *Qiang* between Han and Tibet and *Nomad’s Choice: Nomadic Tribes in North Asia Facing the Han Dynasty*. In the first part of the book, “Edge and Connotation”, after reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of the objective theory, subjective theory, instrumental theory, root

theory, and traceability research, the author puts forward the theory and methodology of “edge research”. First of all, the definition of “ethnicity” in marginal research is clarified, that is, “ethnicity” is a subjective category of identity of a group of people, rather than a combination of specific linguistic, cultural and physical characteristics. The subjective identity of a group of people is accomplished by defining and maintaining group boundaries, which are multiple, variable, and exploitable. Secondly, regarding the study of edges, the author makes an analogy: when we draw a circle on a blank sheet of paper, the most convenient and effective way is to draw a line around the edge of the circle. Within that circle, no amount of doodling will change the fact that it is a circle. Similarly, in ethnic relations, once the edge of the ethnic group is defined by some subjective criteria, people within the group do not have to emphasize their own cultural connotations very often, but rather it is at the edge of the group that people need to emphasize their own ethnic identity. Therefore, the edge becomes the best place to observe and understand the phenomenon of ethnic groups. Once again, the core issues of marginal research are clarified: firstly, from the standpoint of instrumentalism in ethnic studies, it is necessary to examine the distribution of resources and competitive factors that lead to the emergence and change of ethnic boundaries; secondly, from the viewpoint of rootedness of historical memory, it is necessary to examine how Huaxia strengthens its ethnic identity with the help of historical memories; and thirdly, how historical memory and ethnic identity are formed in the context of an ethnic group. Finally, the historical basis of marginal research, i.e., ecological archaeology, historical documents, and anthropological fieldwork. It should be said that this research method of determining the “center connotation” from the study of the “edge of ethnic groups” is of special significance for the study of ethnic history.

Based on the marginal research of ethnic history, the author has the following three thoughts on the current research of ethnic history of the borderland: First, the attributes of the borderland determine that the various ethnic groups in the borderland area live far away from the central plains, and the influence of the traditional mainstream culture is weaker, which is often regarded as “exotic” in the eyes of the majority of the people, and the culture is called “exotic flavor”, while there are also multiple margins between different regions and ethnic groups within the borderland itself. In the eyes of

most people, it is often regarded as a “foreign country” and its culture is called “exotic flavor”, while in the view of the frontier itself, there are multiple edges between different regions and ethnic groups within the frontier region. Secondly, the ethnic identity of the ethnic groups in the border areas is more obvious. For example, in the Central Plains, especially among the Han Chinese, regional identity is the main focus. However, in the border areas, because they are mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities, they have a stronger identification with their own ethnic groups. In addition, their mainstream cultural identity has been weakened by the influence of undesirable ideas both within and outside the country. Therefore, frontier areas are focusing on strengthening social and collective memory and mainstream cultural identity. Thirdly, the research on the history of ethnic groups in the borderland should pay more attention to the comprehensive study of history and anthropology, not only digging deeply into the phenomena of ethnic groups revealed in history and archaeology, but also exploring the phenomena of ethnic groups or corroborating the correctness and errors of the historical materials with anthropological field investigation. As the authors have pointed out, real-life ethnic phenomena and historical ethnic phenomena are one and the same, and the ethnic phenomena that happened to us have also happened to the ancients. Only by accurately grasping the basic trajectory of the formation of ethnic fringe and understanding the cultural origin of ethnic identity can we better bridge the tension between ethnic identity and Chinese national identity by strengthening collective memory and identity or national memory and identity based on the consideration of borderland cultural security.

#### **4. A FEW THOUGHTS ON READING “THE EDGE OF CHINA”**

##### ***4.1 “The Edge of China” and Summer***

On the formation and change of “The Edge of China” and Xia, first of all, the author believes that the pastoralism, armed crowd in the northern region of Shaanxi, Jin, Hebei and the local agricultural crowd there is a fierce competition for resources, to the Warring States period, the nomadism of the north and the Central Plains of China and Xia awareness of the formation and strengthening of each other, which created a “China” and “barbarians” between an ecological boundary. This resulted in the creation of an ecological boundary between the “Chinese” and the “barbarians”.

Secondly, the book suggests that by the Han Dynasty, the expansion of the edge of Huaxia had reached the limit of the environment in which the human ecological system of “Huaxia” could exist, and the edge of Huaxia was basically finalized. At the same time, the author takes human economic ecology and social organization as the criteria, and argues that at least four different “Huaxia fringes” appeared around China in the Han Dynasty, i.e., the sedentary, agricultural, and state-ruled populations, such as the Koreans, the South Vietnamese, and the Dian; the mixed-agricultural, but not state-ruled, populations, such as the Southern Barbarians, Qiongnu, and SiCiadu; the nomadic, and state-ruled, such as the Huns; and the centralized, and the “Chinese”, the “Chinese”, and the “Chinese”. Those who are nomadic and under the authority of the centralized state, such as the Xiongnu, and those who are nomadic or semi-nomadic and in a branched tribal structure, such as the Xikang. Finally, it is clarified that the modern era was a time of great change for “The Edge of China” and Xia, when “The Edge of China” and Xia were merged into one. Regarding the reasons for the formation of the edge of Huaxia, the author, relying on the viewpoint of “instrumentalism”, argues that in the formation, maintenance and change of Huaxia identity, there exists some kind of competition for resources and distribution of relations in the formation, maintenance and change. At the same time, the author utilizes the historical memory and amnesia of social groups to explain the maintenance of the edge of Huaxia, the cohesion and identity of Huaxia.

It should be said that Mr. Wang Mingke's unique perspective and theory have brought new thinking and understanding to the study of ethnic history in the border area. Firstly, there are many factors that contribute to the formation of the edge of Huaxia, besides ecological and resource factors, there are also political, economic and cultural factors. As Mr. Wang Mingming pointed out, a big problem in Mr. Wang Mingke's thesis is that, on the basis of the theory of “postmodernism”, he adopts the obvious materialistic tendency of “competition for resources”, and the comparison between ancient ethnic history and oral history lacks what American sinologists call the “materialistic” tendency, which is the lack of the “materialistic” tendency. A major problem is that, apart from the obvious materialistic tendency of “competition for resources” based on the theory of “postmodernism”, the comparison between ancient ethnic history and oral history lacks the important link of the so-called “late

dynasty” by American sinologists[4]. However, more important symbols and cultural structures were overlooked. Such as farming and nomadic economic form of different cultural differences, the Central Plains agricultural people to “South Barbarians, East Barbarians, West Rong, North Di” to call the neighboring communities, more or less with a certain degree of discrimination or prejudice, as they are backward or barbaric people, this cultural cognitive difference is also one of the factors in the formation of “The Edge of China”. Secondly, the edge of Huaxia is a historical and dynamic development process. In the formation and expansion of the edge of Huaxia, it is not only due to resource competition, historical memory and ethnic identity, but it should also contain two factors: first, the dynamics of ethnic integration. As a result of the mutual influence and absorption of ethnic groups due to their intermingling and intermarriage between different ethnic groups, ethnic minorities were constantly integrated into the Chinese family, and many people who considered themselves “Chinese” were integrated into “non-Chinese” ethnic groups, thus forming new Chinese fringes and expanding their influence on the Chinese society. There were also many people who considered themselves “Chinese” merging into the “non-Chinese” ethnic groups, thus forming new Chinese fringes and Chinese subjects. As Mr. Fei Xiaotong put it, “The northern peoples have constantly imported new blood into the Han, and the Han have likewise enriched the other peoples”. Finally, there is not only competition and confrontation between Huaxia and non-Huaxia, but also exchange and integration. Historically, the competition and confrontation between the Chinese and non-Chinese is not the mainstream, but the mainstream should be the long-term communication and interaction and exchange and integration. The edge is both a boundary but also a dependence. It is precisely because of the mutual dependence and continuous integration of the Chinese and non-Chinese in the long course of history that the historical development trend of the fringe of the Chinese and the Chinese becoming one after the modern era has been realized.

#### 4.2 “What is Chinese?”

Mr. Wang Mingke answers the question of “what is Chinese” and how the definition of “Chinese” has changed throughout history from the formation and change of ethnic fringes. The reason why we are considered as “Chinese” is that we are similar in every way, while some people around us

look very different. However, the author does not give a clear definition of “Chinese”, nor does he answer the question “why do people claim to be Chinese”, but he always explores this topic and puts forward an “ethnic perspective” that is suitable for explaining any ethnic group. The “ethnic viewpoint” is suitable for explaining any ethnic group. It is only in the second preface of the updated edition that the author gives an answer to the question of “Chinese people” as a human ecosystem that has continued and changed throughout history. In Chapter 11 of Part III, the author explains that the Han Dynasty was a key era in the formation of the foreign and self-image of “Chinese people” and explains the reasons for this, which led to the formation of the image of the frontier peoples of Han China, the northern edge--Xiongnu, the western edge--Xiqiang, the northeastern edge--Xiqiang, and the northeastern edge--Xiqiang, and so on. --Western Qiang, the northeastern edge--Korea, the southern edge--Southern Barbarians, the southwestern edge--Southwestern barbarians, the The southeastern edge - South Vietnam and East Vietnam, and at the same time, the central government of the Han Dynasty adopted different policies towards the foreigners in the four directions, which made this borderland ethnic imagery deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese people.[5] However, the author does not clearly distinguish the similarities and differences between the “Huaxia” and the “Han” to the readers, but has the implication of equating the “Huaxia” vaguely with the “Han”. The author also mentions the similarities and differences between the “Chinese” and the “Han Chinese” in the book. Although the author also mentioned in the book that the concept of “Huaxia” appeared after the establishment of the Zhou Dynasty, and that the concept of “Han nationality” appeared only during the Han Dynasty, he also mentioned in the books “The Formation and Maintenance of the Edge of Huaxia in the Han Dynasty However, in the sections “Formation and Maintenance of the Han Chinese Margins”, “Han Chinese Policies toward the Marginalized”, and “Maintenance of the Huaxia Margins”, the authors almost put the term “Han Chinese” into the context of “Han Chinese”, The author almost equates the three concepts of “Han Chinese”, “Huaxia” and “Han Chinese”, which is extremely inappropriate.

Defining “Chinese” as a human ecosystem of historical continuity and change seems to exaggerate the human ecology. As far as the concept of “China” is concerned, it originally

originated as a geographical term, referring only to the Central Plains, and later evolved into a common concept for the whole territory. After the Qin and Han Dynasties, the meaning of the word “China” was also loosened and tightened from time to time, referring to the whole country when it was united, and specifically referring to the Central Plains when it was divided. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the arrival of Westerners in China, the term “China” became a concept symmetrical with “foreign country”. After the formation of the modern concept of the country, “China” became a well-deserved title for this ancient country. The word “China” has evolved from a geographical concept to the name of the country today. With the change of the concept of “China”, the concept and connotation of “Chinese” in different periods of history are also very different. During the Zhou Dynasty, “Chinese” initially referred to the people of the country living in the city, but also referred to the people of the feudal states or the people of the Central Plains. During the Han Dynasty, the Han Dynasty people called themselves “Chinese”, and the residents of Han Dynasty territories also became “Han Chinese”. With the migration and integration of ethnic groups, “Chinese” became a common title for all ethnic groups in China. After the modern era, when the Western powers invaded, “Chinese” became a symmetrical term for “Westerners” and “foreigners”. [6] Therefore, “Chinese people” is not only the result of human ecological continuity and change, but also shaped by the political changes in ancient China, the political tradition of “great unification”, the complementary agricultural and pastoral economy, and the unique Chinese culture. The bloodline and genes of “Chinese people” are also shaped by the political changes in ancient China, the “great unification” political tradition, the complementary agricultural and pastoral economy and the unique Chinese culture. Especially after the modern national crisis, the ideological, emotional, psychological and cultural convergence of “Chinese people” and “children of the Yellow Emperor” has increased significantly, “Chinese people should be united to resist foreign aggression” and “Chinese people should be united to resist foreign aggression”. “Chinese people are not afraid of death”, ‘Chinese people are not to be bullied’, ‘Chinese people do not fight Chinese people’ and other slogans reflect more unyielding will and spirit.

To summarize, “what Chinese people” has different meanings in different contexts and dimensions. To equate the understanding of “who is

Chinese” with the formation process of the Han race, which is the main ethnic group in China, and to neglect the important role of ethnic minorities, especially the Mongols and Manchus during the Yuan and Qing Dynasties, in promoting the formation of the “Chinese”, is to fall into the framework of understanding of one nation and one ethnicity in the traditional study of ethnic groups, which is not the same as the traditional understanding of one nation and one ethnicity. This is inconsistent with the historical fact that China has been a multi-ethnic country since ancient times.

### **4.3 The Nature of the Great Wall**

In explaining the formation of ecological boundaries at “The Edge of China”, “The Edge of China” offers a relatively new interpretation of the nature of the Great Wall, namely that the establishment of the Great Wall was causally linked to the full-scale nomadization of the area beyond the Great Wall. Nomadic areas, with their monolithic economic structure and their mobile possessions consisting mainly of livestock, may often have been forced to rely on animal milk, meat, and the occasional plundering of other sedentary or semi-sedentary populations for subsistence resources. These marauding populations, however, may have lived on the fringes of agriculture, and they may have chosen to devote themselves to the Hwa Hsia regime in the south, which could protect agriculture, in order to avoid the encroachment of the nomadic tribes. On this basis, the author argues that the establishment of the Great Wall was a compromise between the need of the northern Huaxia states to expand their resources and the cost of protecting them, and that the nomadic and agricultural populations have been competing for and maintaining resources along the Great Wall for more than 2000 years since then.

In contrast, the American scholar Barfield, in his book *Dangerous Frontier*, describes the historical function of the Great Wall: “The Qin government notified the use of laborers to connect the original border walls built by various countries into the Great Wall, which separated the central plains from the steppes. .... The construction of the Great Wall was the culmination of an ancient tradition of countries enclosing themselves with walls, both along the northern border to isolate themselves from nomads and within the Central Plains to outline their borders with other countries. .... In this context, the construction of the Great Wall was both a military and a political

construction, was both a military and political construction. In the eyes of all subsequent rulers of the Central Plains, the Great Wall marked the edge of Central Plains culture and the beginning of a barbaric territory, and was designed to dismantle as far as possible any potential alliance between the borderland populations of the Central Plains and the steppe, that is to say, to exclude nomadic populations from the Central Plains.”[7] Indeed, as far as the military significance of the Great Wall is concerned, the traditional viewpoints have positioned the Great Wall as a defensive military act of the Central Plains Dynasty, but Barfield positioned the Great Wall as an offensive military act, which was considered as a reaction of the offensive frontier policy of the central regime of the Chinese in order to solve the contradiction between people and land in the area of its own dominion, and it also had the purpose of expanding the territory of the regime and conquering the frontier areas.

Regardless of the controversy of academic views, the nature of the Great Wall needs to be recognized from different perspectives. From the military point of view, both offensive and defensive aspects seem to have their own rationality. If from the economic production point of view, the Great Wall is not only the demarcation line of the agricultural and animal husbandry economic zone, but also the interlacing zone of the complementary agricultural and animal husbandry economic forms. From the perspective of ethnic integration, the Great Wall is a product of the common creation of all Chinese ethnic groups, condensing the efforts and wisdom of Chinese people of all ethnic groups through the ages. Over the past 2,000 years, the Great Wall has formed a situation in which there are Huized Han people to the north of the Great Wall and Hanized Hu people to the south of the Great Wall, and the Great Wall has witnessed the historical fact of “Chinese Xia into the barbarians, and barbarians into the Huaxia,” which is the historical fact of the national communication and exchange and mingling of nationalities. Taking the Warring States Qin Great Wall as an example, its construction promoted the peace and friendly coexistence between the Chinese community and the Western Rong, and the various ethnic groups migrated frequently from north to south, with close economic and cultural relations. In the region, both the Han Chinese people continue to move west and north, but also a large number of ethnic minorities to the south; both ethnic minorities continue to integrate into the Han Chinese, but also a large

number of Han Chinese were absorbed by ethnic minorities to integrate, so that the characteristics of the you have me, I have you is more obvious, and all ethnic groups are connected to each other by blood, the fate of the feelings of the commonwealth is more and more deep. By the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the distribution pattern of intermingling and intermixing was largely formed. In addition, the frequent economic exchanges, social interactions and cultural penetration of the ethnic groups along the Great Wall gradually led to the formation of a common economic and cultural community. Therefore, although there were love-hate relationships between various ethnic groups along the Great Wall in history, peaceful coexistence and intermingling of various ethnic groups were the mainstream, and the Great Wall witnessed the formation and development of the Chinese national community.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although some of the theses in the book “The Edge of Huaxia” are not yet perfect or have certain defects, there is still room for further discussion. However, the book is a good example of historical anthropology and a founding work of ethnohistorical fringe research. Mr. Wang Mingke's unique research perspective and theoretical construction is unique, breaking the traditional “centrality” of ethnohistorical research and providing later scholars with new theoretical thinking and research perspectives, which is of great benefit to the understanding of the historical formation of the Chinese ethnic community and its integration and cohesion.

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