

“Ethnic Island System”: An Explanatory Framework for “A Community for the Chinese Nation”

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Abstract: The research on “a community for the Chinese nation” is a prominent field in current Chinese ethnology. However, the emergence of the “ethnic island theory” in the field of Chinese nation studies since the end of the last century has failed to address the issue of understanding “a community for the Chinese nation”. Using the “ethnic island theory” to explain “a community for the Chinese nation” has become a beneficial attempt to expand the boundaries of this theory. This paper starts from the existing “ethnic island theory” and integrates three types of para-ethnic islands—ethnic archipelagos, ethnic peninsulas, and ethnic continents - as well as the concept of ethnic oceans outside of ethnic islands into the theoretical framework of ethnic island. By elaborating on the constitutive elements of “a community for the Chinese nation” and the systemic process within it from the perspective of the “ethnic island theory”, the “ethnic island system” is proposed as an explanatory framework for “a community for the Chinese nation”.

1. Introduction

The research theme of “a community for the Chinese nation” and “forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation” has become a new trend in the field of Chinese ethnology^[1]. From the perspective of dialectical materialism, the sense of community for the Chinese nation refers to the psychological mapping of the objective entity of “a community for the Chinese nation” in the human brain, and therefore, before discussing how to forge a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, it is inevitable to first clarify the formation and development of “a community for the Chinese nation”^[2].

The concept of ethnic island emerged in the field of ethnic studies in China in the late 20th century. It applies the geographical concept of islands to the study of ethnic groups, referring to small ethnic groups that are geographically isolated from their cultural core and strive to maintain their ethnic boundaries within a larger ethnic environment^[3]. The theory of ethnic islands does have strong explanatory power in terms of ethnic relations and ethnic boundaries, and it possesses significant flexibility and potential in explaining ethnic group identity-related issues. However, overall, since its emergence in the late 20th century, the theory has not received widespread attention from the domestic academic community.

Therefore, this paper aims to construct a theoretical bridge connecting ethnic islands with “a

community for the Chinese nation”. In the current research on “a community for the Chinese nation”, there is a lack of study on the internal systemic elements and the process of its structuration. Applying “ethnic island theory” to understand how “a community for the Chinese nation” becomes possible is essentially addressing two issues from the viewpoint of the structural elements and the systemic process of “a community for the Chinese nation” within the framework of “ethnic island theory”.

2. Structural Elements of “a community for the Chinese nation” in the Perspective of the “Ethnic Island Theory”

“A community for the Chinese nation” is in fact the integrated whole and system of all ethnic groups in China. From this holistic perspective, “a community for the Chinese nation” essentially represents the “ethnic world” of China, a socio-cultural complex formed by the integration of all ethnic groups in China. However, this systemic wholeness does not imply the absence of differences among the various ethnic groups within “a community for the Chinese nation”. To correctly and objectively understand “a community for the Chinese nation”, it is necessary to fully acknowledge the internal differences within the community while considering it as a holistic and systemic ethnic entity. In this context, the theoretical framework of “ethnic island theory” can provide an explanatory means for understanding the internal differences of “a community for the Chinese nation”.

2.1 “Ethnic island, para-ethnic island, and ethnic ocean”: The three constituent elements

In previous research, the theoretical framework of “ethnic island theory” consisted solely of the concepts of “ethnic island” and “ethnic ocean”, thus understanding the entire “ethnic world” within the framework of a binary system of “ethnic island—ethnic ocean.” When applying this binary framework to understand “a community for the Chinese nation”, the ethnic composition within the community can be divided into ethnic islands and other ethnic groups collectively referred to as ethnic oceans. While this binary division is feasible, it is not precise enough, as it overlooks the development and changes within ethnic islands and also blurs the meaning of ethnic oceans. Specifically, beyond ethnic islands, there exist not only ethnic oceans but also para-ethnic islands that bear some resemblance to ethnic islands. The Gaoshan Han ethnic group in Langping, western Guangxi, China could be considered an ethnic island, surrounded by multiple Han ethnic islands, collectively known as the Gaoshan Han ethnic archipelago in the western Guangxi region. Therefore, the wider Han-inhabited areas outside of western Guangxi could be referred to as the Han ethnic continent. Whether it is an ethnic island, ethnic archipelago, or ethnic continent, they are relatively isolated from the surrounding ethnic groups as a whole. In addition, there also exist ethnic peninsulas, which are geographically distant but still have more or less connection with their cultural homeland. Apart from these “island-type societies”, all other unmentioned ethnic groups can be regarded as ethnic oceans. When considering the Gaoshan Han ethnic group in western Guangxi as an ethnic island, all other ethnic groups outside of the Han ethnic group can fall under the category of ethnic oceans. This is the depiction of “a community for the Chinese nation” using the ternary framework of “ethnic island—para-ethnic island—ethnic ocean,” originating from the Han ethnic island. Therefore, the theoretical framework of ethnic island now consists of three core concepts: ethnic island, para-ethnic island, and ethnic oceans. This transformation shifts the previous binary framework of “ethnic island—ethnic ocean” that explains the “ethnic world” into a ternary framework of “ethnic island—para-ethnic island—ethnic ocean”, making “ethnic island, para-ethnic island, and ethnic ocean” the constituent elements of the “ethnic world.”

2.2 The position and status of the structural elements of “a community for the Chinese nation”

Although it has been repeatedly emphasized that the binary element composition of "ethnic island—ethnic ocean" is inaccurate, it provides a fundamental judgment: the components within the “ethnic island system” cannot exist independently, but are complementary to each other. This judgment serves as a premise for discussing the positions of these elements within the “ethnic island system”. Therefore, the discussion of the positions among the various elements within the “ethnic island system” is not a matter of whether these elements exist within the “ethnic island system”, but rather a question of their respective positions and importance.

From the perspective of “ethnic island theory”, the position of the structural elements of “a community for the Chinese nation” has two aspects of significance. Firstly, in a practical sense, it refers to the geographical spatial positions of the three constituent elements: ethnic islands, para-ethnic islands, and ethnic oceans. Secondly, in an abstract sense, it denotes the status and importance of these three constituent elements within “a community for the Chinese nation”. Both of these meanings are reflected in a single question: in what order should these three elements be considered?

The assessment of the spatial positions of the various elements within “a community for the Chinese nation” depends on the perspective from which this issue is approached. The disciplines of ethnology and anthropology excel at the “anatomy of the sparrow” type of case studies^[4]. Therefore, in previous research, scholars have often taken a single ethnic island as the starting point of their studies, such as the Gaoshan Han in western Guangxi, the Linjiang Pinghua Han in Guangxi, the Han people in Tunbao, Guizhou, and the She people in southern Jiangxi, China. These ethnic islands all share the common characteristics of being “small, isolated, and peripheral”. The first three are all Han ethnic groups located in the southwestern region of China. From the perspective of China’s territory, their geographical positions are in peripheral areas, and the geographical positions of the latter two She ethnic groups are also not in the central region of China. When we look at the geographical space in the regions where they are located, these ethnic islands are all small groups surrounded by numerous other ethnic groups. They are indeed a minority within a minority, and their spatial positions are characterized by being surrounded by numerous other ethnic groups.

The relationship of “para-ethnic islands” with ethnic islands in terms of spatial position is very close. First, there are ethnic archipelagos, which are generally composed of multiple ethnic islands with the same ethnic attributes. The ethnic islands that make up ethnic archipelagos should belong to the same region in terms of spatial position, such as the ethnic archipelago of the Gaoshan Han in the western region of Guangxi, as mentioned above. In comparison to ethnic islands, ethnic continents are relatively distant from ethnic islands in geographical space, such as the geographical relationship between the Gaoshan Han ethnic island in western Guangxi and the Central Plains Han ethnic island, as mentioned above. The geographical position of ethnic peninsulas often falls between ethnic continents and ethnic islands. It is not a clearly defined term with a specific geographical boundary, but rather a symbol with cultural significance. For example, the Chinese community in Betong, Thailand, is considered an ethnic peninsula as it is situated in an environment with a different ethnic group. Geographically, it is distant from the ethnic continent like an ethnic island, but from a cultural perspective, it has close ties to the ethnic continent and can thus be called an ethnic peninsula. In terms of spatial position alone, the geographical location of an ethnic peninsula may be more similar to that of an ethnic island. Only after clarifying the geographical locations of ethnic islands and para-ethnic islands can the regions outside of them be referred to as ethnic oceans.

From the perspective of geographical space, the geographical position of ethnic islands, whether

viewed from a national or regional standpoint, does not belong to a central location. However, when researchers use ethnic island studies as a starting point for research, the position of ethnic islands becomes central to the research. Para-ethnic islands and ethnic oceans are then situated in the “ethnic world” outside of the central position occupied by ethnic islands. If, as in the customary approach of previous studies, a researcher takes a case of an ethnic island as the starting point of the study, the ethnic island becomes the center of the entire “ethnic island system” in terms of spatial position, and the spatial relationship between them becomes a sequence “from ethnic island to para-ethnic island and then to the ethnic ocean”. If the entire “ethnic world” is viewed as a whole, the ethnic ocean almost encompasses everything, with the para-ethnic islands occupying a substantial portion of the space within the ethnic ocean, and ethnic islands occupying the least space. This follows the logic of “from ethnic ocean to the para-ethnic island and then to an ethnic island”.

This line of thinking is equally applicable to the understanding of the importance and status of the three elements in an abstract sense. In the past research approach, discussions related to ethnic islands have followed a train of thought “from the ethnic islands themselves to the ethnic oceans”, representing a path of inquiry from the small to the large, and from the local to the whole. However, this approach has not risen to the level of discussing “a community for the Chinese nation”, and even the part related to the ethnic ocean has been largely glossed over. But if we view the issue of ethnic islands from the perspective of “a community for the Chinese nation” as a whole, it is a completely different approach from the past. When considering ethnic group issues from the perspective of “a community for the Chinese nation”, it involves a perspective of “from the ethnic oceans to ethnic islands and para-ethnic islands”, in other words, a train of thought from the large to the small, and from the whole to the part. In this line of thinking, if the internal differences of “a community for the Chinese nation” are ignored and the Chinese nation is viewed as a whole, then the entire Chinese nation can be seen as an ethnic ocean. When the internal differences of “a community for the Chinese nation” are recognized, various ethnic islands and para-ethnic islands emerge within the ethnic ocean.

From the holistic perspective of “a community for the Chinese nation”, the ethnic ocean is the most important and indispensable foundational element within “a community for the Chinese nation”, while para-ethnic islands and ethnic islands are merely unstable ethnic states that occur in the interaction of ethnic groups and are subject to change at any time. They are the “mutations” within “a community for the Chinese nation” and the “subsidiaries” of the ethnic ocean.

3. The systematization process of the “ethnic island system”

When the “ethnic island theory” encounters “a community for the Chinese nation”, “a community for the Chinese nation” becomes an “ethnic island system” composed of several ethnic islands, para-ethnic islands, and the ethnic ocean. Within the “ethnic island system”, the differences between ethnic groups within “a community for the Chinese nation” constitute the boundary issues between ethnic islands, para-ethnic islands, and the ethnic ocean^[5]. This also explains the systematization issue of the “ethnic island system”, that is, the process of interaction among the elements of the “ethnic island system” and how they become a whole. Before delving into this, it is first necessary to explain the dual nature possessed by the “ethnic island system” as a whole.

The first is the systematic nature of spatial elements. Similar to a “puzzle”, ethnic islands, para-ethnic islands, and the ethnic ocean can come together to form a complete “ethnic world”, constituting the components of the “ethnic island system”. The second is the systematic nature of culture. The interconnections between ethnic islands, para-ethnic islands, and the ethnic ocean make them a system at the cultural level. How these three constituent elements are connected at the cultural level represents the true systemic mechanism of the “ethnic island system”.

The formation of ethnic islands originates from the migration and movement of ethnic groups. Since the mobility of ethnic groups is permanent, it means that in an ideal state, whether it is an ethnic island, a para-ethnic island, or an ethnic ocean, none of them will be a permanently stable form. Ethnic groups inevitably interact with other ethnic groups in their mobility, and it is impossible for them that they were not influenced by other cultures. The example of the Gaoshan Han people in the western Guangxi region of China and the surrounding Zhuang people is evidence of this truth. Looking from this perspective, the logic between the past research on “why ethnic islands are called ‘islands’, in that they maintain their ethnic boundaries with surrounding ethnic groups” and the “mobility of ethnic groups” seems somewhat contradictory. Perhaps it can be understood like this: when these researchers refer to them as “islands”, it may only be a spatial and geographical “island”, meaning that they are relatively isolated and have boundaries geographically. Ethnic boundaries do not indicate geographical and cultural isolation, but rather show flexibility in ethnic interaction and exchange, demonstrated in spatial movement as “you come to me, I go to you”, and in culture as “you are within me, I am within you”^[6], showing dynamic characteristics. In this sense, spatially, there is a certain distinction between ethnic islands, para-ethnic islands, and the ethnic ocean, but at the cultural level, these three can be imagined as a network woven together by the actions and social relationships of ethnic groups. As ethnic groups move in geographical space, these networks also move, and with the interaction and communication among the three elements of the “ethnic island system”, these “moving networks” intertwine and continuously update and reshape. Due to the isolation and constraints of their living spaces, they appear to have boundaries from an external perspective. In reality, the cultural and relational boundaries between the three have become very blurred, and at this point, within the “ethnic island system”, only spatial boundaries between the elements remain.

At this level, the internal systematic process of the “ethnic island system” becomes clear. first, various patterns of residence are formed through the continuous migration of ethnic groups, leading to the existence of an ethnic ocean formed by the aggregation of several ethnic groups, as well as individual ethnic islands and para-ethnic islands outside the ethnic ocean. Secondly, relationships are forged between the ethnic ocean and these ethnic islands and para-ethnic islands, resulting in the intertwining and fusion of ethnic groups through contact and intermixture, while also witnessing the fragmentation and disappearance of certain ethnic groups. Lastly, their cultures become interconnected through inter-ethnic communication and interaction, generating new relationships and altering perceptions of self, others, and the world, thus realizing the fusion of ethnicities. This aligns with Fei Xiaotong’s description of the formation process of the “The Pattern of Diversity in Unity of the Chinese Nation”. Interpreting this process through the theory of the “ethnic island system”, Huaxia is the earliest ethnic ocean within the territory of the Chinese nation, absorbing surrounding ethnic groups and forming a larger ethnic ocean—the Han ethnic group. This ethnic ocean continuously permeates the surrounding ethnic groups, connecting the surrounding ethnic islands and para-ethnic islands, thus forming the “ethnic world” of the Chinese nation, composed of the ethnic ocean and several ethnic islands and para-ethnic islands”. The various elements within the “ethnic island system” are constantly integrated into a whole through this process, providing an understanding of the internal differences within “a community for the Chinese nation” under the framework of the “ethnic island theory”.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of the community, “a community for the Chinese nation” possesses both holistic and systematic qualities, which coincide with the characteristics of the “ethnic island system”. Understanding “a community for the Chinese nation” from the perspective of the “ethnic

island system” involves two paths. The first path is the structural elements of “a community for the Chinese nation” within the “ethnic island system”, which can be described using the concepts of ethnic islands, para-ethnic islands, and ethnic oceans. The second path is the systematic process of internal elements of “a community for the Chinese nation” within the “ethnic island system”, which is formed through continuous migration of ethnic groups, resulting in different residential patterns, such as an ethnic ocean, various types of ethnic islands, and para-ethnic islands. The three elements of the “ethnic island system” are interconnected and interact with each other, breaking down cultural boundaries between ethnic groups through interactions and ultimately forming a pattern of integration and fusion where “you are in me, and I am in you.”

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