

Review Article

QUESTIONING THE ESSENCE OF FORGOTTEN NATIONS

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Stevan Harrell ed., *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, xi + 321 p. ISBN:0520219880 (hbk); 0520219899 (pbk).

Erik Mueggler *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, 360 p. ISBN:0500226232 (hbk); 0520226313 (pbk).

In the last few years those with an interest in the peoples of the Central Massif of Southeast Asia have been well served by two changes: the setting up of international minority forums; and, by an increasing number of publications by, and about these peoples published in English. These two books are a welcome and accomplished addition to the literature.

These forgotten nations are well enough known in their own part of the world and in the languages of the region. If the English speaking world does not know much about them it is because most of what is written is published in Chinese, Thai and other vernacular. Let me briefly place these two books in a wider context. International conferences have played an important part in drawing indigenous scholars into forums in which English, Mandarin and the vernacular are used as the languages of presentation and discussion. Several, separate international Yao, Miao, Hani/Akha and Yi conferences have been held to date. Indigenous scholars belonging to the particular ethno-linguistic diaspora have gathered in the company of international researchers to discuss their common interest, the shared and divergent linguistic characteristics, histories and cultures of the named group.

Readers unfamiliar with the peoples named above need to take care not to carry too many preconceived ideas about even the most common words used to describe them. Many would challenge the term “diaspora” and

justifiably so. The degree of divergence among and/or between Hani/Akha would be minimised by well established scholars such as Leo Alting von Geusau who inclines toward essentialising the people amongst whom he has spent the last 30 years. The Yi on the other hand are culturally quite diverse. Stevan Harrell's short answer to the question 'Who are the Yi?' is 'that they were so classified in the 1950s, (as part of an official survey) which was undertaken according to "scientific" principles of classification first outlined by Stalin' (Harrell, 2001: 7). This he tells us could have been done in another way and often resulted in people not closely related being included in an inappropriate classification. David Bradley describes the classification system as 'procrustean... with different groups lumped together under one term' (Harrell, 2001: 195). Both Harrell and Bradley have reported cases in which the classification imposed by the state has been contested, and on rare occasions, changed.

These ethno-linguistic groups then are loose configurations of people who share a distant cultural and linguistic past and which have little coherence in terms of contemporary social or political significance. People drop out to become Han, Thai or Vietnamese. Those working in the field with their eyes open who resist the temptation of essentialising yet another chosen people constantly remind us that in this part of the world 'Ethnic groups are not closed, isolated and independent population units living in autonomy in "remote" areas. On the contrary it is evident that relationships between ethnic groups are multiple, albeit differential and circumstantial' (Conrad, 1989: 204). In concrete terms, in open parts of the Central Massif it is possible for people to change their identity with reference to a set of multiple choices depending on the circumstances and the perceived benefits.

These are political groups only in the very contemporary sense that international meetings encourage people to think of themselves as such. At best, within the state systems to which they are subordinate, they can only run their own affairs in a fragmented and closely supervised manner. Because the dialects they speak are often mutually unintelligible they do not use their indigenous language to talk across the group to one another. When they meet they often find it easier to speak to one another in a majority language such as Mandarin, Thai or Vietnamese or increasingly English.

These peoples are usually referred to as minorities. This needs to be clarified. We are not discussing small groups in any but the most relative terms. In the Central Massif there are more than 2.5 million Yao, 8 million Miao, 1.5 million Hani/Akha, and 7 million Yi. As Stevan Harrell implies in his introduction to *Perspectives on the Yi*, what is so minority about these numbers? 'There are, in all, more Yi than there are Danes or Israelis or Cambodians' (p.1) or for that matter New Zealanders. These are minority peoples because they happen to find themselves in a part of the world dominated by either the Han, the biggest, most complex ethno-political construct history has ever seen, or other regional lowland peoples like the Khmer, Tai (Lao, Shan, Thai etc.) and Burmans. Indigenous attitudes and beliefs were not, and in many cases are not, too different from the views European colonial masters as a dominant minority, entertained about their subject peoples. Strictly speaking, as has been pointed out by Ben Anderson, the term "minority" itself was a colonial invention. In modern times, both

colonial and post colonial, all these minority people have in their various ways been subject to what Harrell (1995) has called “civilizing projects” mounted by dominant minorities or majority peoples. From Christian missionaries to Red Guards, ideological activists all, these people have, to some extent or other, been led down the proverbial road of good intentions.

In China these peoples are referred to as *minzu*; in Thailand, *chao khao* or ‘Hill Tribes’. In Thailand the term is so widely accepted that a publication aimed at a popular market is obliged to use the term but the word “tribal” implies a form of polity that is entirely out of place. These ethno-linguistic groups may share a history which makes reference to common events, even trace a genealogy back 64 generations (i.e. Akha see Geusau, 2000: 127), but these stories do not enjoy a wide enough currency to unite broad and deeply divided groups to a common purpose. The best stories are more likely to be traced back to amateur ethnographers like Young (1962) or their contemporary equivalent caught with a camera and an eye for the exotic in the act of dreaming a perfectly fascinating, ancient and united people.

The semiotic appeal of the exotic and united tribe is so seductive that even a sophisticated scholar like Andrew Turton writing about the work of Leo Alting von Geusau is willing to make a surprising announcement. He tells us that it is ‘only recently (that) Akha/Hani people themselves (have) become aware of the widest extent of their own unity, despite dispersal and separation in some cases for as long as six hundred years,’ (and although we) ‘need to avoid “paradigms of cultural essentialism” and emphasise “historical disjunctures and discontinuities” ... the core of Akha culture and identity (as constructed by Leo Alting von Geusau) turns out not to be any essence but paradox and dialectic: the history of their political and ecological marginalization and their overcoming this in continuous adaptation constitutes the very heart of (Akha) culture’ (Turton, 2000: 35-6)

If in the past we did not know much about these people other than that they have chosen or been forced to live apart from each other in mountainous areas at some remove from the politically dominant, and have long been identified as different by their language, customs, culture, dress and behaviour. this has changed. English speakers are now well served by publishers. Last year Curzon Press brought out two publications of interest: *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities in the South-East Asian Massif*, a collection of papers prepared largely by European scholars and edited by Jean Michaud; and, *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai states*, edited by Andrew Turton, which grew out of the 5th International Conference on Thai Studies. There are other serious international books published by less well known houses that are available, like the nearly forgotten *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia* (Silkworm Books: Chiang Mai), edited by Don McCaskill and Ken Kampe brought out in 1997.

Lacunae remain. The Burmese hinterland has remained beyond reach of contemporary international scholarship just as Burmese scholarship itself has remained suppressed by the military goons who run that fair country. Vietnamese work is increasingly becoming available. In China, as Erik Mueggler points out, “ethnic studies” (Ch. *Minzuxue*) is an industry;. Departments of universities and research institutes now churn out descriptions of every officially defined nationality, emphasizing the attributes

that distinguish them from Han' (Mueggler 2001: 19). For those of us who do not read Chinese the publications under consideration here provide a marvellous insight into how contemporary international, national and indigenous scholars go about the task of telling each other and the world about one of these forgotten nations, the Yi.

Both books on the Yi reviewed here are each in their own way extremely valuable. They are the work of leading scholars. Stevan Harrell, the editor of *Perspectives on the Yi*, has a long list of excellent publications to his credit and brings an understanding of ethnicity to his work which is deeply informed by fieldwork and respect for the work of Chinese colleagues. His preference for plain English accompanied by a refreshing directness makes his text readily accessible to readers with a casual interest in the subject. It is a pity that he did not insist on all other authors maintaining his standard of plain English. In this volume he truly brings together a wide range of perspectives. Ten of the eighteen contributing authors are Chinese, most of them with family connections into the Yi world. These latter contributions are immaculately edited. We learn enough about the Yi to develop an understanding of the complex nature of the ethno-linguistic classification, the range of scholarly interests and skills brought to the task, and enough detail about Nuosu society of Liangshan in particular to gain a good understanding of what the study of specific subgroups might yield.

In the 1950s Chinese scholars working with the official system of classification identified six mutually unintelligible dialects spoken by Yi peoples. Chinese scholarship also acknowledges seventy branches of the Yi group (Li Yongxiang in Harrell, 2001: 135). Bradley provides a comprehensive review, which outlines the distribution, linguistic characteristics and a brief history of language policies and writing systems. It is entirely up to the standard we have come to expect from such a competent researcher. The mix of scholarship traditions provides interesting insights into the epistemologies used. Liu Yu's "Searching for the Heroic Age of the Yi People of Liangshan" would have us believe that this is an evolutionary stage that must have happened. The illuminating if technical contribution of Ann Maxwell Hill and Eric Diehl, "A Comparative Approach to Lineages among the Xiao Liangshan Nuosu and Han" takes us to the heart of a different tradition. All of the papers offer interesting material.

It was the carelessness of Thomas Heberer's paper that annoyed me. Anybody who opens their paper with a sentence 'Most of the earth's surface consists of states inhabited by several nationalities' (p. 214) ought to be cautioned and the reader given a free kick. At the end of the first paragraph we are told that in 1962 Raymond Aron asserted that 'from a global perspective, ethnic conflict would take the place of class conflict,' then, in the very last sentence, that this is true because 'If we look at contemporary developments in the world, this prognosis has already become fact' (p.214). Has it indeed? Statements like this need to be problematised rather than tossed in the readers' face like some religious orthodoxy.

In a chapter that presents so much useful information Heberer is disappointing. He cannot restrain himself. It is too much to connect 'Despoliation through deforestation, overgrazing, environmental pollution and ecological destruction through industrial colonization (which) have led to climate change and lowering of the water table' (p.223). Climate change

may be manifest in Liangshan Prefecture but no one country, even one as big as China, has caused it. Trees may pump more ground water into the atmosphere than help capture and keep it underground. Heberer is much better writing about the detrimental impact the withdrawal of subsidies has had on health, the number of local clinics, the number of primary and secondary schools and so forth. There is a wealth of information which could have been woven into a more coherent and measured discussion.

There is much information that crosses from one chapter to the other: the general impact of events associated with the ideological juggernaut and assertion of Maoist praxis; the fantastic misrepresentations of modernisation; the assault on the “olds” which made victims of vulnerable peoples; the specific impact recent history had on the role of *bimo*, or priests, as carriers of historical and ritual knowledge; the fate of the ruling elite (*nzyimo*); and the representation and misrepresentation of past Nuosu practices as common to the Yi in general and the people of Zhizuo, Yongren County, Yunnan, in particular.

Of outstanding interest to me was the contribution of Erik Mueggler to the Harrell volume, “A Valley-House: Remembering a Yi Headmanship,” and his book *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China*. In the Harrell volume, as in his book, Mueggler focuses on the *huotou* (*ts’içi*) which administered a small group of villages, of which it is said: it ‘still exists in the people’s hearts. It is the heart of our (Lólop’ó) nationality’ (Mueggler in Harrell, 2001: 145). Under this *huotou* system a household was chosen to feed and entertain ‘visiting officials, soldiers and other influential outsiders’ who bludged relentlessly on their hospitality. For the Han it was seen to be the lowest level of an oppressive administrative hierarchy dominated by ‘local tyrants and evil gentry’ (Ibid.: 145). As he began his investigation Mueggler faced the villagers

fluent discourse on “rules and procedures” with a sense of unease. This talk often seemed to refer to a bounded, timeless world that could have had no real existence in the violent, conflict ridden, and rapidly changing context of early twentieth-century China ... divorced from the confusion and ambiguity of daily life (Ibid.: 146).

It was only after sometime that he realised to the contrary that

the system amounted ... to a powerful strategy of self representation, which drew its force from the capacity of formal, reflexive speech to frame a coherent, synchronic world removed from present conflicts and ambiguities. A “strategic essentialism” (Spivak, 1988)... an effort to seize control of collective self-representation from those who promoted and distributed the official revitalization of “nationality customs” and “nationality religion” (Ibid.).

Recalling *huotou* (*ts’içi*) served to collapse ‘contrary ideas about descent and affinity into a single institutional container (Levi-Strauss, 1983: 185) and create an imagined unity for all those who claimed to be Lólop’ó’ (Ibid.:

168). The identity of the Lólop'ó was then presented not only as a separate nationality, as a subgroup within the broader Yi Diaspora, but a separate nationality outside it. Mueggler claims for this not a study of 'how local identities are forcefully produced or moulded by state policies ... (but how) older local self-representations engage or absorb state discourses about ethnicity to create new possibilities for struggle or self definition' (Ibid.:169).

The point is a refined one. Pragmatism rules, but is Mueggler seduced like Leo Alting von Geusau? It is interesting how in her discussion of "Native Place and Ethnic Relations in Lunan Yi Autonomous County, Yunnan," Margaret Byrne Swain points out that

There are strong parallels between the duties of the *okotso* and the rotating *huotou* (*ts'iči*) headman among the Lólop'ó, but, in contrast to the Lólop'ó Sani people make nothing of this while making a case to achieve a similar outcome for a distinct identity built on Sani-Yi myth and material culture tied to the landscape. ... Since the county's founding in 1956 there have been at least three attempts by Sani to have their group declared a separate *minzu* rather than a branch or *zhi* of the Yi (Swain in Harrell, 2001: 191).

Harrell himself has little to say on Mueggler's conclusions except to suggest indirectly that the considerable number of Han in the Lólop'ó area may have contributed to the 'strategic essentialising' focused on *huotou* (*ts'iči*), and that perhaps Mueggler has not 'problematized the historical Yi connection' enough. The appointment of a 'local official whose entire purpose was to keep visitors and government officials – Han in general – at arms length' only dates from the 1950s (Harrell in Harrell, 2001: 13-14). Is there a dispute here? I may well be reading too much into Harrell's silence. Harrell has in the past addressed the issue (1990) from what Mueggler positions as the other side of the argument, how ethnicity is moulded by state policy rather than by the people themselves. Is the difference so huge? It takes two to tango. Is Mueggler making a point simply to claim a more politically correct edge over Harrell? Am I making an argument where none exists?

If seduction is a major factor in essentialising ethnic identity then Mueggler does it extremely well. His book *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* on the Lólop'ó (whom Harrell calls the Lipo-Lolopo) is a marvellous work of literature. By focusing on a single institution, the *huotou* (*ts'iči*) he is free to tell a story from which individuals emerge with foibles, rituals, and poetry attached. He is able to present esoteric detail in a human context that remains engaging. The book reminds me very much of the work of the novelist Lloyd Jones whose *Biografi*, set in the aftermath of Communist Albania, was taken for real. Mueggler impresses with his familiarity of place and people, his profound knowledge of both literary analysis and the relevant social science literature. The text has an ambiguity and liveliness that conveys a strong sense of grounded experience. If we are presented with the bare bones in the Harrell collection here we have the full monty: a near perfect seduction.

I can recommend both of the texts under review to readers looking for an introduction to the intellectual challenge presented by the study of the peoples of the forgotten nations of the Central Massif of Southeast Asia with

the focus on Southwest China. I look forward to Stevan Harrell's review of Mueggler's book

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