

PERSPECTIVES

on the

Yi

of SOUTHWEST
CHINA



Edited by

STEVAN HARRELL

STUDIES ON CHINA

A series of conference volumes sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies.

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edited by Stevan Harrell,
University of California Press, 2001.

Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China

This volume and the conference from which it resulted were supported by the Joint Committee on Chinese Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Research Council.

Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China

EDITED BY

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley Los Angeles London

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China / edited by Stevan Harrell.

p. cm.—(Studies on China ; 26)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-520-21988-0 (alk. paper)—ISBN 0-520-21989-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Yi (Chinese people) I. Harrell, Stevan. II. Series.

DS731.Y5 P47 2001

951'.3004951—dc21

00-055970

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/
NISO Z39.48-1992 (R 1997) (*Permanence of Paper*). ∞

*To the memory of
Tong Enzheng (1935–1997),
the most broad-minded of men*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The First International Yi Studies Conference was supported by grants from the Joint Committee on Chinese Studies, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Science Foundation, and the China Studies Program at the University of Washington. Yu Hongmo, Hsieh Jiann, Charles McKhann, and the late Tong Enzheng provided valuable expertise and commentary at the conference. Ren Hai, Almaz Han, and David Braner ably helped me translate original papers from Chinese to English and English to Chinese.

Norma Diamond, Louisa Schein, Kent Guy, and an anonymous reader provided valuable comments on various drafts of the manuscript. Bamó Ayi helped maintain contact with far-flung authors after the conference dispersed. Laura Driussi of the University of California Press shepherded the book through its first few drafts, Bonita Hurd ably copyedited it and Jan Spauschus Johnson finished it. And the guiding hand of Sheila Levine hovered benevolently over the whole project of transforming a pile of papers into a book.

Introduction

Stevan Harrell

SCHOLARLY DISCOURSES AND THE YI

There are nearly seven million Yi people, almost all of them in Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou Provinces, with a few in Guangxi Province and Vietnam and a very small number of emigrants overseas. There are, in all, more Yi than there are Danes or Israelis or Cambodians. Yet it is quite probable that most educated people outside China have never even heard the name, let alone learned anything about the Yi. One goal of this book is thus to begin the establishment of a field of scholarship within today's cosmopolitan social-studies discourses: to inform scholars and students of China, of Southeast Asia, and of ethnic relations generally about a large part of the world that has remained largely inaccessible in European languages.

At the same time, there is no dearth of written materials dealing with Yi history, society, culture, and literature. These materials, however, belong to two widely divergent discourses,¹ both of them quite far removed in their assumptions, concepts, and methods of argument from the cosmopolitan discourses to which scholarship in European languages is usually addressed. One of these is Chinese language scholarship, encompassing the fields of ethnology (*minzu xue*) and ethnohistory (*minzu shi*), which seek to locate Yi society and culture in a temporal and spatial framework of relation and interaction with other peoples in the region and with peoples in China generally. The other is traditional Yi-language scholarship, concerned with

1. In this introduction, "discourse" bears both its linguistic sense of a conversation among a group of people using an agreed-upon, somewhat specialized vocabulary, and something of its Foucauldian sense of a set of linguistic categories that define a regime of power (see Foucault 1984).

the recording of myths, legends, and poetry and, above all, with medicinal and ritual texts and formulas used by priests and other practitioners. Another goal of this book is to make researches in and about these two traditions accessible to English-reading scholarly circles.

In the eyes of the contributors to this book, however, these two goals remain little more than means toward a third and more important goal: establishment of a dialogue between the three scholarly traditions. Not only do the works of cosmopolitan ethnologists need to be circulated and discussed in Chinese scholarly circles, both national and Yi, but the concepts and results of scholarship from within China need to be taken into account by participants in the cosmopolitan conversations about China and about ethnicity and ethnic relations. We are missing a lot if we continue to have two different conversations about the same thing, one Chinese and one cosmopolitan, and we miss even more if we do not take the Yi-language materials into account either.

For this reason, I gathered twenty scholars with interests in Yi studies for what I rather grandiosely called the "First International Conference on Yi Studies," held in Seattle in March 1995. Eleven of the participants were themselves Yi: eight came from China, two from the United States, where they were already discourse-mixing as graduate students, and one from France, where she had recently mixed discourses in a Paris Ph.D. Others were American, German, Australian, and Chinese scholars who had conducted research on the Yi or neighboring peoples. We met for four days, using Chinese (the only language we all had in common) to discuss the papers that were the predecessors of most of the chapters in this book. Our conversations were, I think, inspiring to all participants as they realized that by recognizing the parameters of contrasting discourses, and by speaking about and against those parameters, we open up a wider field of view that cannot help but enrich and broaden our individual scholarly inquiries.

Our reasons for emphasizing the importance of, and committing ourselves to, a cross-discourse conversation all stem from the initial confrontations between our respective scholarly discourses. Anyone who doubts the utility of such a concept as a scholarly discourse need only observe the vast gulf across which Western and Chinese ethnologists and ethnohistorians confronted each other when they first started to interact again in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after thirty years of enforced separation. Westerners were debating the primordial versus instrumental basis of ethnicity and ethnic conflict (Keyes 1976; Bentley 1987; and others), speculating on the nature of state power in Chinese socialism and its immediate successors (Oi 1989; Shue 1988; and others), and writing from the assumption that state-society relations in China's "minority regions" consisted of state oppression and assimilation of local indigenous peoples (Dreyer 1976; Heberer 1989; and others). Chinese, by contrast, were writing about the success of ethnic identification (Fei 1981)

and about the long and glorious histories of, and contributions to the nation by, various minority groups (Ma Yin 1984; Litzinger 1995; Harrell 1995b), using historiographic methods to trace the details of the history of each individual and scientifically organized group, and speaking of the steps of history along which various groups were advancing under Party tutelage.

In this atmosphere, attitudes of mutual contempt, condescension, and sometimes just plain wonderment quickly evolved. Western researchers, eager for “access” to remote and previously forbidden regions and peoples, dampened their public criticisms of an ethnological paradigm dating from Lewis Henry Morgan, which they considered to have been blown to insignificance before 1930 by the works of such as Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski; they certainly took the Chinese ethnological and ethnohistorical paradigms seriously, but as objects of analysis, not as contributions to knowledge. An ethnological work about the formation of slave society in Liangshan, for example (Hu 1981), was a datum, just like an interview with a *bimo* (priest) or a photograph of a historical stela. On the other side, Chinese ethnologists and ethnohistorians were flabbergasted at the ignorance, narrowness, and arrogance of their Western counterparts. Often unfamiliar with classical Chinese, certainly unfamiliar with the local histories of the areas where they worked, the Westerners nevertheless brought the possibility of material support, access to sources that had been forbidden during the reign of radical totalitarianism, and even chances for these people to study and research abroad. Within a few years of the opening of China to Western ethnologists and historians, we had settled into a comfortable system of mutual back-scratching. Chinese provided the Westerners with access to the field and the archive; Westerners provided the Chinese with money and the opportunity to go abroad. We could remain mutually contemptuous of each other’s concepts; the two discourses interacted hardly at all.

Almost as wide was the gulf between the Chinese national discourses of ethnology and ethnohistory, on the one hand, and the local discourse embodied in Yi-language materials, on the other. They had, of course, no enforced period of isolation from each other, but most scholars participating in the national discourse considered the Yi-language materials in the same way that Westerners considered ethnohistory in the Morganian paradigm—as data rather than analysis, and as data that could only be made sensible by insertion into that Morganian paradigm of the stages of history. At the same time, authors and transmitters of Yi-language materials were mostly unable to read the Chinese materials, and if they had been able to read them they would have shown little interest, because the goal of these materials was to synthesize, which was irrelevant to the local purposes of the Yi indigenous scholars.

This book is an indication that we have begun to grow out of that unfortunate situation. There are several reasons for the change. Probably first and foremost is the gradual but real liberalization of control over scholarship in

China in the 1990s. Ethnic relations and minority studies are among the more sensitive areas, and have certainly not experienced the degree of opening that has happened in, for example, literary criticism or women's studies. Nationalistic resistance in Tibet and Xinjiang is suppressed as ruthlessly as ever. But the particular view of history and society known in China as Marxism-Leninism, despite its current enshrinement as one of the "four cardinal principles," is no longer the only possible guideline for scholarship, leaving the way clear for questioning and, in some scholars' ambitions, dismantling that particular totalizing discourse.

In our own particular field, this has left the way open for attacks on the Morgan-Engels paradigm from two sides: a local-particularistic one led almost entirely by Yi scholars, and a cosmopolitan one in which Yi, other Chinese, and Western scholars have all had a hand. From the Yi side, what has been at issue is the "standard interpretation" of Nuosu (Yi) society in Liangshan and, by analogy or implication, of other Yi societies in other areas in earlier times. This interpretation took Liangshan before 1956 as the paradigm case of the "slave society," the second of the five universal stages of history, coming after the end of primitive society (sometimes referred to as "primitive communism" in the West) and before the development of feudalism. Field research on the Nuosu in the 1950s, a time when social class was held to be the most important factor in human society, had led to a paradigm in which the most important relations of Nuosu society were the relations of production between slaves and slave owners (Hu 1981; Sichuan Sheng bianji zu 1985, 1987). In the more political sections of these works, the cruelty of the system was also emphasized.

There was no other way to write about Yi society in the 1970s and early 1980s, but in the more open and tolerant atmosphere of the last few years, it has been possible to come forth with different models, and Nuosu scholars in particular have responded with a series of very different interpretations of social stratification and the caste system in Liangshan (Ma Erzi 1993; Pan Wenchao 1994). In another example, that aspect of the Morgan-Engels historical paradigm that enshrined the Han as the leading nationality and big brother to the backward minorities has also been challenged. Yi scholars, led by Liu Yaohan, have set forth a series of books and articles that places the ancestors of the Yi at the center and forefront of the development of early Chinese civilization and portrays them as having been pushed to the periphery only in the last thousand years (Liu Yaohan 1985).

But the weakening of the Morgan-Engels paradigm has stemmed not only from local pride and the resentment of outsiders less knowledgeable about local history but also from the increasing interpenetration of Chinese and cosmopolitan ethnological and ethnohistorical discourses. Within China, this perhaps had its strongest beginnings in mid-1980s self-critiques by those who had participated in the "ethnic identification" (*minzu shibie*) project of the

1950s, who conceded that Stalin's notions of "nationality" had not actually fit the Chinese realities of the 1950s, so that the identification project had proceeded on quite different grounds (Jiang 1985; Lin 1987). There was also recognition among experts, albeit expressed mostly privately, that it had been difficult in many instances to draw sharp boundaries between *minzu* (ethnic group or nationality) at all, and that situations had been much more fluid than the old hegemonic paradigm would admit (Li Shaoming 1986; Li Xingxing 1994).

The cosmopolitan attacks were, of course, more straightforward and less constrained. Western scholars earned many cheap points by pointing out the discrepancies between the paradigm and more interesting ways to view local realities (see the articles in the edited volume Harrell 1995 for examples). More significant was the effect these analyses had on Chinese scholars, both Yi and non-Yi, in their own analyses of ethnic relations. It is now common enough to hear arguments between an older generation of ethnologists, who insist that *minzu* categories are not, as overseas and Taiwan colleagues maintain, "invented," and younger scholars who are respectfully contrary in public and broadly dismissive in private of this "old thinking."

At the same time, the beginning of paradigm chaos in China has caused Western scholars, formerly contemptuous of Chinese counterparts as hopelessly brainwashed if admirably knowledgeable, to reconsider their Chinese colleagues as partners in dialogue with a depth of experience and local knowledge that almost no outsider can hope to match. And, in concert with the "indigenization" of anthropology and history in the "non-Western" world generally, the study of ethnicity and ethnic relations in China now seems destined to become a true transnational conversation that locals and outsiders can share in, and in which they can argue about the implications of local knowledge.

We are, however, still at the beginning stages of this process. Most Chinese scholars, Yi included, who are working out the possibilities of new paradigms for understanding their own history and current situation are doing so with only fragmentary knowledge of and exposure to the theoretical formulations that have so long been argued about in *waiquo* (foreign countries). There is the real danger that they will reinvent the wheel. Also, there are too many anthropologists and not enough historians studying ethnic relations in China (but see Lipman 1998); anthropologists tend not to be respectful of written sources in the Chinese and Yi languages because they do not have time to read enough of them. Further exposure to each other's work, and further collaborative work, is absolutely necessary before we can build a truly open transnational dialogue about these questions.²

2. Why we need a transnational dialogue about, for example, Yi social stratification and not about American inner-city social disintegration is not immediately clear, but is at any rate outside the scope of this book, which for better or for worse is about Yi society and culture.