

**Constructing an Ethnicity:
Miao in the Chinese Narratives during the Qing Era**

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Abstract

Since the Yuan Dynasty, the Chinese imperial court had established its dominance over the southwestern region and its inhabitants, the so-called Miao people. In the Qing era, with growing interaction with the Southwest, the Miao appeared more and more in Chinese narratives. However, the majority of these narratives were shaped by negative stereotypes. This essay traces the Chinese narratives of the Miao during the Qing era. These narratives represent different aspects of cultural assimilation and reflect the different challenges the Qing-Manchu court and Chinese scholars were facing. Each of the following three scholars—Chen Ding, Wei Yuan, and Zhang Taiyan—provides a unique perspective on the narratives of the Miao and reflects on the broader issues of their respective times: the Han nostalgia after the decline of the Ming, pragmatist statecraft in the context of a growing Western aggression, and finally the discourse of nation-building at the beginning of the twentieth century. It becomes clear that in the imperial hierarchy of cultures, non-Han people had little space to represent their cultures themselves and were constructed as an imagined ethnicity that marked the imagined outline of the imperial frontier.

Keywords: Miao people, Qing empire, imperial frontiers, ethnicization, nationalization

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Introduction

In imperial China, frontiers were always regions of novelty and the unknown. However, records from these remote areas never flourished until the Qing era. As the Qing empire grew its territory to an unprecedented size, it began to dedicate more attention to frontier issues and to bringing the vast territory into better control. To this end, the Qing rulers sponsored a large corpus of works in Manchu, Chinese, and other languages to describe the frontier territories. These works, in addition to the growing folk interest in the frontiers, led to the formation of a “peripheral geography”.¹ Memorials from officials, ethnographic albums, maps and drawings, travel reports, novels, etc. served as vital resources about the imperial territory for the sovereign.²

Not only were the Qing rulers interested in these resources, but so were many Chinese officials, scholars, and other members of the gentry. How can the Chinese³ interests in the frontier region be explained? As scholars pointed out, frontier narratives were a special format that enabled the Chinese to imagine the boundaries of their empire and to legitimize the “civilizing project” based on cultural assimilation.⁴ In the Qing era, these narratives also provided unique opportunities for the Chinese to look back on themselves when their own cultural and political authority was severely challenged. In this respect, it is interesting to look how the Chinese image of the frontier people changed in the context of the rise and the decline of the Qing empire. Therefore, this essay investigates the Chinese narratives of the Miao people on the southwestern frontier during the Qing era, and answers the questions of how the Miao’s image changed over time and why it changed in that way. Before going into details, I would like to introduce the term “Miao” briefly.

Emergence of the “Miao”

Already since the Tang dynasty, there were historiographical records about groups of aborigines in the southwestern mountainous areas calling themselves or being called “Miao.” The Song scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200) described these people and believed that they were the descendants of “San Miao,” the tribal people of Chi You who had had a war with Emperor Huang and Emperor Yan (ca. 2500 BCE) and had retreated to the southwest after his defeat.⁵ This assumption about the origin of the Miao was accepted by many Chinese scholars and became a popular theory in Qing times. The term “Miao district” (*Miao jiang*) was used for the territory occupied by the Miao people, which roughly included the Yunnan-Guizhou highland, the Sichuan basin, and some areas in Guangxi.⁶

The imperial political influence on the Miao district was negligible before the Yuan Dynasty. Since the Mongols conquered the Dali kingdom in the Yunnan area, the central court

¹ Liang Qichao, *Zhongguo jin sanbai nianlai xueshu shi* (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2004[1926]), 346.

² C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China’s Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Peter C. Perdue, “Nature and Nurture on Imperial China’s Frontiers”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 43.1 (2009): 245-267.

³ In this article the word “Chinese” is always used in a narrow sense, meaning the Han Chinese.

⁴ E.g. Stevan Harrell, “Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them”, in *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995), 2-36.

⁵ Zhu Xi, “Ji San Miao”, in *Hui’an xiansheng Zhu Wen gong wenji*, ch. 71, 1935[?], Chinese Text Project, available at: <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=86243&page=280&remap=gb> (accessed December 21, 2020).

⁶ Donald S. Sutton, “Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier in the Eighteenth Century”, in *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*, eds. Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 190-228; Zhiqiang Yang, “From Miao to Miao: Alterity in the Formation of Modern Ethnic Groups”, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 10 (2009): 1-28.

continued to exercise political control over the southwestern region and its inhabitants, relying on the assistance of local officials, namely the native chieftains (*tusi*). Since the early Ming Dynasty (1413), the native chieftains had been losing their power due to the policy of *gaitu guiliu* (replacing local officials with posted officials). Since the Yongzheng reign (1723-1735) in the Qing Dynasty, this policy had been conducted more thoroughly and forcibly, resulting in an ever-stricter control over the Miao district.⁷

The intensified political controls and increasing inflow of Han migrants led to numerous conflicts and confrontations between Han Chinese and the local people. The Chinese began to call different indigenous groups “Miao,” using it as a blanket term for various non-Han groups that were regarded as barbarous. In the Qing official documents, more than 50 sub-groups were recorded under the designation “Miao”⁸ that are nowadays replaced by different official recognitions such as *Gelao*, *Zhuang*, *Zhongjia*, *Luoluo*, *Yao*, *Dong*, etc.⁹

In this respect, “Miao” was more a discriminating stereotype than a name for certain ethnic groups. It was used as an equivalent to the concept of Man (barbarians), meaning that the Miao were barbarian, uncivilized, harmful, and even inhuman. The following description from the Qing scholar Zhang Shu is a vivid example of this image: “In Guizhou, the sky is blurred by mist and rain; the earth is full of wild animals and insects; the people wear red and purple clothes, and they are as aggressive as owls and as disguised as rats”.¹⁰ Many Qing officials believed that the Miao were especially stubborn, disaffiliated, and uncooperative.¹¹ In daily conversations, Miao was sometimes used as an expression for ugliness and primitivity, for example, by calling foul smells “Miao smells” (*Miao qi*) and simple shanties “Miao houses” (*Miao fang*).¹²

Such a stereotype represents a common mode of thinking about peripheral frontier peoples, considering them to be racially different and culturally inferior. The “essentialist otherness” of the Miao was constructed as a proof of the uniqueness and superiority of the Han civilization, which might parallel the “imperial gaze” in the context of Western

⁷ Siu-woo Cheung, “Millenarianism, Christian Movements, and Ethnic Change among the Miao in Southwest China”, in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995), 217-47; Siu-woo Cheung, “Zai taodun yu panfu zhijian: Zhongguo xinan Miaozu shenfen rentong yu tazhe zhengzhi”, paper presented at the Conference on Border Societies and State-Making, organized by the South China Research Center, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2012); John E. Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist: China's Colonization of Guizhou, 1200-1700* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁸ For example, *The Miao Album (Bai Miao Tu)* presented 82 kinds of Miao in the Guizhou area (Du Wei, *Bai Miao tu hui kao* (Guiyang: Guizhou minzu chubanshe, 2002)), and the *Atlas of Miao Man (Miao Man tu shuo)* presented 79 kinds (Jiang Lisong, “Qingdai Guizhou Zhuzhi Ci zhong ‘Miaoman’ xingxiang de jiangou, yi Yu Shangsi Mandong Zhuzhi Ci wei li”, *Guangxi minzu daxue xuebao (zhexue shehuikexue ban)*, 40.6 (2018): 70-77). The biggest groups of the Miao were the *Hei Miao*, *Hong Miao*, and *Hua Miao*, characterized by the dominant color of their clothing. For more details about the various peoples subsumed under the category Miao, see e.g. Norma Diamond, “Defining the Miao Ming, Qing, and Contemporary Views”, in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995), 92-116; Cheung, “Millenarianism, Christian Movements, and Ethnic Change among the Miao in Southwest China”.

⁹ David Michael Deal & Laura Hostetler, *The Art of Ethnography: A Chinese 'Miao Album'* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Yang Zhiqiang & Zhang Xu, “Qian jindai shiqu de zuqun bianjie yu rentong: dui Qingdai ‘Miao jiang’ shehui zhong ‘fei Miaohua’ xianxiang de sikao”, *Guizhou daxue xuebao (shehuikexue ban)*, 29.5 (2011): 73-80.

¹⁰ Zhang Shu, *Xu Qian shu*, dated 1804, Chinese Text Project, available at:

<https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&res=2243&remap=gb> (accessed December 21, 2020).

¹¹ Jin Hong, “Yu man shixiang”, c. 1792, in *Guangxi tongzhi*, vol. 93, p. 76, in *Qinding siku quanshu*, Chinese Text Project, available at: <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&res=6708&remap=gb> (accessed December 21, 2020).

¹² Shi Qigui, *Xiangxi Miaozu diaocha baogao* (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1986[1940]), 207-208.

colonialization.¹³ There was also another image of the Miao that focused on the idea of “assimilating” them into the Han culture (the culturalist view)¹⁴. A deeper reading reveals that this kind of narrative was not so much a sign of a genuine interest or even admiration of the Miao culture, but was rather an expression of uneasiness about the Han culture itself, and an attempt at self-assurance. The three scholars featured in this article—Chen Ding (陈鼎, 1650-?), Wei Yuan (魏源, 1794-1857) and Zhang Taiyan (章太炎, 1869-1936)—provide us with a diachronic and comparative reading of the changing narratives about the Miao. Each of them provides a unique narrative perspective: the perspective of an early Qing travel writer, the perspective of a middle Qing imperial official, and the perspective of a late Qing anti-Manchu revolutionaries. These perspectives indirectly reflect the different challenges the Qing-Manchu court and the Chinese scholars were facing. They are to be understood as part of the changing intellectual climate throughout the Qing era: the Han nostalgia after the decline of the Ming, the pragmatist statecraft in the context of growing Western aggression, and finally the discourse of nation-building at the beginning of the 20th century.

Chen Ding: Finding the lost rituals in the wildness

Chen Ding was born during the Shunzhi reign (1644-1661) and lived in Yunnan since he was very young. After he passed the imperial examination and became appointed as a government official in the central plains, he continued to be deeply interested in the southwestern region and made many trips there. He wrote scores of travel records, novels, and essays based on his personal experiences. His *Travel Notes of Dian (Dian youji)* and *Travel Notes of Qian (Qian youji)*¹⁵ were both edited into the imperial collection *Siku quanshu*. In his later years, he wrote a memoir about the experience of marrying the daughter of a native chieftain in the Yunnan-Guizhou area, titled *Memoir of My Marriage to a Chieftain's Daughter in the Dian-Qian Area (Dian Qian tusi hunli ji)*¹⁶. These essays gave a detailed description of the native customs with abundant personal observation and comments, and are now viewed as important materials for the study of the Miao culture in the Ming Qing era.

From Chen Ding's records, one gets the impression that Yunnan was a place with an exotic landscape and mysterious legends and occurrences. Chen also expressed obvious admiration for the beautiful landscape, the fertility of the land, and the virtues of the people. There were also stories that seemed to be products of fancy. For example, Chen Ding wrote about encountering a country named *Dog-Head Land (Goutou guo)* near the Jinsha river. People there were like animals: while having clothes just like normal humans, their faces, including eyes, mouths, noses and ears, were just like those of dogs¹⁷.

¹³ Emma Jinhua Teng, *Taiwan's Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures, 1683-1895* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004); Hu Siao-chen, “Lüxing, liequ yu kaogu: ‘Dian Qian tusi hunli ji’ zhong de lixue shijie”, *Zhongguo wen zhe yanjiu jikan*, 29 (2006): 47-83.

¹⁴ For more details see e.g. Perdue, “Nature and Nurture on Imperial China's Frontiers”.

¹⁵ Chen Ding, *Dian Qian youji*, dated c. 1694, in *Siku quanshu: shibu*, vol. 255 (Tainan: Zhuangyan wenhua shiye, 1996), see also Chinese Text Project, available at:

<https://ctext.org/searchbooks.pl?if=gb&author=%E9%99%B3%E9%BC%8E&remap=gb> (accessed December 21, 2020).

¹⁶ Chen Ding, “Dian Qian tusi hunli ji”, in *Zhi buzhu zhai congshu*, ed. Bao Tingbo (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999[1697]), Chinese Text Project, available at:

https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&res=80287&by_collection=103 (accessed December 21, 2020).

¹⁷ Chen, *Dian Qian youji*. It was a widespread belief in the writings about the Miao people that many indigenous groups in Yunnan were half animals. Many writers used discriminating characters for the indigenes that originally designated dogs and dog-like animals, such as Yao (猯), Tong (獐), Ling (猓), Ya (猓), and Gelao (猓猪).

Exoticism was characteristic of Chinese travel writings, representing a kind of “orientalist discourse”¹⁸ that produced a solidified image of the indigenous cultures.¹⁹ By presenting the utopian “noble savage” and their primitivity yet purity, Chen was actually constructing his own version of “Peach-Blossom Land.”²⁰ In *Memoir of My Marriage*, Chen expressed how surprised he was when he saw that the old complex Chinese traditions were practiced and the domesticity was kept ritualized in the family. For example, a wife and concubines had to attend to the mother-in-law, wash and sew her clothes, make her bed, and serve up dishes for her all by themselves without any help from maids. Chen wrote in admiration that these were rituals from the golden ages of the Three Dynasties. He exclaimed, “How could one expect that rituals disappeared in the central area could be found in the remote frontier!”²¹

Actually, this remote land began to become a familiar and admirable place for him as he found traces of Chinese culture there. Chen explained that the chieftain’s family were not native Miao people, but descendants of the Han who immigrated there during the Zhou Period. It seemed that although they had lived in the Miao district for thousands of years and adapted many Miao customs and habits, they still held on to the core of Han traditions and viewed them as an essential distinction between themselves and the indigenes²².

Chen’s Han nostalgia is represented most clearly in his writing about his experience in a deep cave. On a journey, he found a cave that was so huge that it took ten days to walk through it. In the depths of the cave, he found a rocky wall carved with the following sentence: “In the third year of Longqing [1569], Fang Shaozong, coming from Qiantang [a town in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province], arrived here.” He was so excited to see the traces of other Chinese scholars in this wild terrain that he added on the wall, “In the tenth year of Kangxi [1671], Chen Ding, coming from Jiangyin [a town in Wuxi, Jiangsu province], also arrived here”.²³ Obviously, it was not the beautiful local landscape that most impressed him, but the experience of meeting a former Han scholar in this remote land.

Chen was also impressed by the local fashion of respecting knowledge and scholars. He said, “The civil cultivation here was great! Even in this remote barbarian area, those educated people know to deliver the greatest esteem for their fellows; in the central cultivated

¹⁸ Some scholars have described it to be a kind of “oriental orientalism” (Dru Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53.1 (1994): 92-123, 94) or “internal orientalism” (Louisa Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism in China”, *Modern China*, 23.1 (1997): 69-98, 70).

¹⁹ Teng, *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography*.

²⁰ Many researchers have thus expressed suspicion about whether ethnological records and travel notes can really be used as sources for the study of the indigenous cultures. They have acknowledged the strong subjective character of these reports and suggested that such a subjective character reveals a self-image of the reporters themselves (Marion Eggert, “Art and Politics: The Political Dimension in Ming/Qing Youji Writing”, in *Crossing: Travel, Art, Literature, Politics*, ed. Teeuwen, Rudolphus (Taipei: Bookman Books, 2001), 167-87). Harbsmeier therefore suggested a method of looking at the travel accounts not as a way to learn about the culture that is described, but as a way to learn about the urgent topics of the authors in their own cultures (Michael Harbsmeier, “Reisebeschreibungen als mentalitätsgeschichtliche Quellen: Überlegungen zu einer historisch-anthropologischen Untersuchung frühneuzeitlicher deutscher Reisebeschreibungen”, in *Reiseberichte als Quellen europäischer Kulturgeschichte: Aufgaben und Möglichkeiten der historischen Reiseforschung*, eds. Antoni Maiczak, and Hans Jürgen Teuteberg (Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek, 1982), 1-27).

²¹ Chen, “Dian Qian tusi hunli ji”.

²² This situation was typical in the chieftain families. Researchers have already pointed out that there has been a long history of migration between the central area and the southwest region. Most chieftain families claimed themselves to be descendants of Chinese migrants, such as the Song family, the Cai family, and, in Chen’s text, the Long family. They kept their Chinese identities as a symbol of nobility, and often proudly insisted on their Chinese traditions. See e.g. Herold J. Wiens, *Han Chinese Expansion in South China* (Nottingham: The Shoestring Press, 1967); Hu Xiaozhen, *Ming-Qing wenzuezhong de xinan xushi* (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2017).

²³ Chen, “Dian Qian tusi hunli ji”.

area, can the situation be like that?”²⁴ He quoted the classical expression, “When the rituals are lost, go and find them in the wildness”²⁵, viewing this remote foreign land as a retreat preserving Chinese rituals, which reveals his deep regret for the loss of culture in the central plain.

In the early Qing period, there was a climate of cultural uneasiness among Han scholars. The Manchu conquest of China severely challenged the Han people’s confidence in their own cultural and social system. Many Han scholars turned to Buddhism, either as a kind of escape or as a practical way to reject serving as officials for the Qing court.²⁶ Chen Ding also suffered a lot from the trauma of the Ming’s fall, wrote numerous novels on the background of the Ming Dynasty, and showed great interest in the reason for the Ming’s fall.²⁷ However, Chen saw the turn to Buddhism as a kind of threat to Confucian doctrines and moralities. He lamented at the end of *Memoir of My Marriage*, “How sad it is that nowadays scholars and officials who are searching for wealth and fortune just devote themselves to Buddhism, instead of sticking at filial piety and fraternity!”²⁸

Only after we take this cultural background into consideration can we understand why it was so striking for Chen to see the true meaning of the sages being kept intact in a remote frontier region. The more regretful he felt about the Chinese culture, the deeper he went into a lost time and place to ease his mind. The Miao district was just like that deep cave for him—it seemed wild, uncultivated, and mysterious at the first glance, but when he went through it patiently, he found the preserved (Chinese) culture there. The geographical marginalization of the Miao district became an advantage that allowed it to keep itself apart from the rapidly changing political and intellectual climate of the central plain.

The experience in the Miao community was therefore in Chen’s eyes a return to the old and right ways of the sages. He constructed an idealized version of the Miao region as part of his search for his own cultural roots; the Miao and their culture retreated further and further away through the lens of Han nostalgia.

Wei Yuan: Ensuring the imperial stability

Wei Yuan was born in 1794, more than a century later than Chen Ding. Though he grew up at the peak of the Qing Empire, he witnessed the outbreak of the First Opium War in his middle age and felt the urgency of strengthening the empire. He put much effort into gaining knowledge of the West and learning Western technologies, appealing to the Qing government “to learn from the barbarians in order to acquire their technology and control them” (*shi yi chang ji yi zhi yi*).²⁹ He edited the volume *Illustrated Gazetteer on the Maritime States (Haiguo tuzhi)*³⁰ which introduces different countries from various aspects, such as locations, geographical features, political institutions, and cultural customs³¹. Wei Yuan also recorded his observations and comments on the administrative and military merits of former reigns in his

²⁴ Chen, “Dian Qian tusi hunli ji”.

²⁵ Chen, “Dian Qian tusi hunli ji”.

²⁶ Chen Yuan, *Mingji Dian Qian fojiao kao* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962).

²⁷ Hu, “Lüxing, liequ yu kaogu”.

²⁸ Chen, “Dian Qian tusi hunli ji”.

²⁹ Wei Yuan, “*Haiguo tuzhi yuanxu*”, in *Wei Yuan quanji* (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2004[1844]), vol. 4.

³⁰ Wei, *Haiguo tuzhi*.

³¹ For more details about Wei Yuan and his idea of introducing the maritime world to the Chinese people, see Jane Kate Leonard, *Wei Yuan and China’s Rediscovery of the Maritime World* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984).

book *Military History of the Glorious Dynasty (Sheng wu ji)*³², hoping to reform and enhance the present imperial government with examples from previous reigns.

On the issue of frontier administration, Wei was concerned about imperial stability and the empire's ability to respond adequately to Western imperialist aggression. He therefore was eager to conduct stronger control over the frontier indigenous institutions. Wei insisted on putting the policy of *gaitu guiliu* into effect, since it was a crucial step for the enhancement of central administration³³. He pointed out that the native chief system was not only an obstacle for the central court to take direct control of the southwest frontier, but also harmful for the indigenous people. To argue his position, he reinterpreted the concept of Man (barbarian), downplaying its connotation of (essentialist) ethnicity.

For Wei, it was not the native Miao people who were Man, but the Han-Chinese who had lived in the indigenous area for generations and built their own local separatist forces. Although they were originally Han, they had become barbarian and uncivilized because they were not obedient to the central governance and tended to make themselves uncrowned kings of the locals, which severely challenged the authority of the central court. In contrast to these Man who had abandoned orthodox learning, the indigenous people were Miao, namely seedlings, wild seedlings that lacked cultivation and the spirit of cooperation. They were uncivilized but were good by nature. It was therefore important to give them proper instruction and induce them to the right way under the imperial governance.³⁴ This reinterpretation was not only a resignation of the essentialist distinction of ethnicity, but also a proposal of a new way of local governance: the previous imperial authority tended to maintain frontier security by suppressing the Miao and placating the Man³⁵, whereas Wei realized that it was the ambitions and hegemony of the Man that resulted in continuous local conflicts and uprisings.

In addition to the restriction of local Man powers, Wei also proposed different measures for protecting the indigenous people, such as ensuring the Miao's land rights in the face of the Han immigrants.³⁶ He criticized the discriminating designations for the indigenes (for example, the addition of a component which meant "dog" to the original indigenous denotations) and proposed establishing an Institution of the Hundred Barbarians (*baiyiguan*) in order to learn more about indigenous customs and cultures.³⁷

Wei summarized his general attitude toward the Miao as follows: "Taking care of the Miao is like taking care of a child; taking precautions against them is like taking precautions against diseases"³⁸. The Miao were uncultivated children who needed the right guidance, and their potential hostility should never be neglected. The Miao could be loyal subjects (*min*) when they received the correct guidance and cultivation; meanwhile, they could be dangerous enemies and barbarians (*Yi*) when they built up their own forces and hindered the central governance. It is this very potential of becoming either imperial subjects or enemies that concerned Wei Yuan mostly. This concern led him to a standardized differentiation between the Miao and other Man/Yi groups: while the Miao were the undetermined imperial subjects, all those who are dangerous to imperial security were to be designated as Man or Yi, no matter whether they were foreign people or inland people.

³² Wei Yuan, *Sheng wu ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984[1842]), Chinese Text Project, available at: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=329092&remap=gb> (accessed December 21, 2020).

³³ The character *tu* (土) refers to *tu guan* (土管), meaning officials who came originally from the local area; *liu* (留) here refers to *liu guan* (流管), namely Chinese civil magistrates who were designated by the central court; they were characterized by their "flexibility" because they had to change places of employment every few years and were therefore unable to build local factions compared with the *tu guan*.

³⁴ Wei, *Sheng wu ji*, 283ff.

³⁵ Yang, "From Miao to Miaozi".

³⁶ Wei, *Sheng wu ji*, 314.

³⁷ Wei, *Sheng wu ji*, 497ff.

³⁸ Wei, *Sheng wu ji*, 540.

It was therefore a crucial task for the empire to take care of and take control of the frontier Miao groups so that they stayed loyal to the Qing. Not only the Miao, but all the frontier groups, should be carefully treated and transformed into Qing subjects. In this way, Wei integrated the formerly fractured frontier policies into a broader coherent foreign policy, which ultimately helped to maintain frontier security and enabled the Qing government to stand against the British threat.³⁹

Obviously, Wei's narratives of the Miao and the frontier issues were mainly shaped by pragmatic statecraft thinking, rather than cultural or ethnic considerations. His main concern was the Qing empire's struggle in face of Western aggression, and all other issues such as the frontier minorities and cultural differences between the Han, Manchu, and other ethnic groups, should be considered and integrated as components in this struggle and dealt with at this level.⁴⁰ As Benjamin Elman pointed out⁴¹, Wei Yuan "signaled the rise of Han Chinese scholar-officials as loyal guardians of the dynasty" in the dawn of crisis. This can be also seen in his idea of learning European technologies, as well as in his positive descriptions of foreign regimes in Chinese history: he devoted sincere praise to the Yuan Dynasty for its success in conquering a vast territory⁴²; as an imperial official he believed that it was possible to save the nation and preserve the Han tradition through the reform of Qing governance.

This idea was not unique to Wei, but a gradually wide-spreading scholarly attitude from the middle Qing to the late Qing period. Many scholar-reformers of the period of the "statecraft" (*jingshi*) school embraced this pragmatic attitude in cultural and scholarly discourses and put salvation of the empire in front of the mission to preserve the "pure Han civilization".⁴³ The most urgent task for Wei was to solve the problem of the riots in the frontier areas and guarantee the stability and security of the empire. Nevertheless, this pragmatic attitude did not mean that he lost the ambition to maintain the classical Confucian doctrines. On the contrary, Wei was so confident in the Confucian culture that he believed adopting foreign technologies and even administrative systems would not harm the Han cultural foundation and prosperity. Wei was convinced that when the administrative adjustment and military development in the Miao district were put into effect, cultural assimilation would naturally and spontaneously take place.⁴⁴ He seemed to have a theory of cultural adaptation that regarded culture as a dynamic variable that could automatically adjust to social transformation. This corresponds to his role in the renaissance of the Confucian New Script School in the Qing era: Instead of following the philological study of the classics, scholars of this school interpreted the classical texts with more hermeneutical flexibility, relating them to current political problems like reforming the state apparatus or learning from foreigners.

In this context, the ethnic distinction and cultural features of the Miao did not matter at all as long as they remained faithful subjects and contributed to the imperial prosperity. The Miao became, in Wei's narratives, a replaceable example of his ideal in controlling the frontier and guarding the large and mighty empire.

³⁹ Matthew W. Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*.

⁴¹ Benjamin A. Elman, Review on *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China*, by Matthew W. Mosca, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 12.2 (2015): 241-243, 242.

⁴² Wei Yuan, "Ni jin cheng Yuanshi xinbian biao", in *Wei Yuan quanji* (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2004[1853]), vol. 8, 4-6.

⁴³ E.g. Ren Chao, "Wei Yuan and the Chinese Totalistic Iconoclasm: The Demise of Confucianism in Matter and in Form", *Honors Projects*, 48 (2011), available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/history_honproj/48 (accessed December 21, 2020).

⁴⁴ Wei, *Sheng wu ji*, 295ff.

Zhang Taiyan: From racialism to instrumentalized nationalism

Zhang Taiyan was known as a representative scholar of the Classical Old Script School of thought and as a revolutionary for his political ideas against the Qing government. Born 75 years later than Wei Yuan, Zhang experienced the decay of the Qing and believed that subverting the Manchu government and building a modern Chinese nation-state was the only solution for the Chinese nation.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, discussions about the Chinese race (*zhongzu*) and Chinese ethnicity (*minzu*) had evoked wide interest among reformists and revolutionaries. While late Qing Confucian New Text scholars like Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929) held a culturalist view and argued that every “barbarian” could become Chinese by using Chinese rites and teachings, Zhang insisted on “exclusivist racialism” and considered the Manchu government as the very origin of Chinese suffering.⁴⁵ According to Zhang, the Chinese nation was based on its particular, historically defined culture and on its ethnically defined people, and other races should not be amalgamated with the Chinese because (as written in the “Annals of Zuo”) “he who is not of my kind has a heart unlike mine”⁴⁶.

The differing views on ethnicity of the scholars in the Classical Old Script School and the late Qing Confucian New Text School were displayed in their differing narratives of the Miao. The legendary war between Emperor Yan, Emperor Huang, and Chi You was considered by both sides as a foundational event for the Chinese settlement on the central plain. For Kang and Liang, the image of the Miao as an ancient and declined ethnic group retreating to the southwestern borderland after their failure in the competition with Chinese ancestors provided a proof of the idea of cultural competition and evolution in the sense of social Darwinism. They were concerned that, if the Chinese nation failed to fight against the Western invasion, it would be on the verge of extinction just like the Miao.⁴⁷ Zhang focused rather on the otherness of the Miao. He believed that the Miao race was fundamentally different from the Chinese nation because they had different languages, different customs, and different social systems. He even went so far as to say that “the descendants of *San Miao* in the south were especially rude and stupid...Are they people? No. They just look like people”.⁴⁸ This radical racialist assertion served to prove his idea of racial separatism and anti-Manchuism: different races should not and could not be amalgamated; every race should have its own sovereignty.

As a revolutionary, Zhang saw nationalism as an important way to get rid of foreign imperialism and inland Manchu oppression. In the later period of his life (i.e. the years after he was released from jail in 1906), he was increasingly influenced by Buddhist Yogācāra teaching and Daoist thinking, and therefore had deep doubt about racialism, any essentialist view of ethnicity, and any progressive view of culture. He began to abandon the idea of racial and cultural hierarchies and paid special attention to the idea of equality⁴⁹. He went so far as to

⁴⁵ Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Perdue, “Nature and Nurture on Imperial China’s Frontiers”; Julia C. Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity: Chinese Discourses on History, Historiography and Nationalism (1900s-1920s)* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

⁴⁶ Charlotte Furth, “The Sage as Rebel: The Inner World of Zhang Ping-Lin”, in *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternative in Republican China*, ed. Charlotte Furth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 113–150, 117; Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, 357.

⁴⁷ Liang Qichao, “Lishishang Zhongguo minzu zhi guancha”, in *Yinbingshi heji: zhuanji* 41, 1-13 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983[1905]); Yang, “From Miao to Miaozi”.

⁴⁸ Zhang Taiyan, “Yuanren di shiyi”, in *Qiushu: chukeben, zhongdingben*, ed. Zhu Weizheng (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2012[1898]), 17-21, 19.

⁴⁹ This idea of equality is not to be understood in the modern liberal sense. Instead, Zhang’s version of equality was shaped by Zhuang Zi’s idea of “seeing the different things equally” (*qi wu*) as well as by the Buddhist idea of “nothing beyond consciousness” (*wei shi*). For a detailed reading about Zhang’s Daoist-Buddhist version of equality, see e.g. Young-tsu Wong [Wang Rongzu], *Search for Modern Nationalism: Zhang Binglin and*

deny the existence of any national or ethnic boundaries and explained that eventually the existence of nations only led to competition and violence. Zhang held a critical attitude toward nationalism and realized that nationalism was the very origin of imperialism. His ideal was to destroy not only nations, but all kinds of collective communities where boundaries exist because wherever there are boundaries, there are struggle and expulsion.⁵⁰ To reconcile his later thoughts with his previous ideas on Han nationalism, he seemed to promote an instrumentalized view of nationalism, which should help to achieve national salvation and then be abolished to proceed towards equality in the future.

With the idea of instrumentalized nationalism, Zhang formulated a new version of the Chinese nation-state that focused more on ethnic inclusion instead of exclusion. In accordance with his idea of the self-governance of different races, he asserted that the Tibetans, Turkic Muslims, and Mongols could establish their own sovereign states. However, the Mongols and the people of East Turkestan at that time were too weak to build their own states. If they became controlled by the European imperialist forces, the security of China's frontier would be in danger. Therefore, a unified country with Tibet, East Turkestan, and Mongolia would provisionally be a better solution for all sides.⁵¹

Zhang's changing views on ethnicity also led to a change in his narratives of the Miao. By re-examining the origins and customs of the Miao, he finally gave up the theory of San Miao descendants and came to believe that the present Miao people were descendants of Malay people who had originally come from the southern islands of Asia. He argued that it was in the Song Dynasty that those who called themselves Malio were mistaken for "Miao" and were therefore mistakenly believed to be descendants of San Miao.⁵²

Zhang argued against the claim that the Chinese ancestors had expelled the Miao and invaded their territory just as Manchus did to the Chinese. He clarified that the ancient Chinese had arrived in the southwestern region since the times of Emperor Zhuangxi (ca. 2514 BCE - 2437 BCE); there was no historical record to support the claim that the Miao people arrived in the region before the Han people. From a cultural point of view, as the Han and the Miao had lived together for thousands of years and mutually influenced each other, they could not be strictly separated as distinct ethnic groups anymore.⁵³ To be more accurate, the Miao had long been assimilated by the Chinese culture.⁵⁴

By insisting on the foreign origin of the Miao and their cultural assimilation into the Han, Zhang contradicted himself. On the one side, he held onto the idea of "pure Han

Revolutionary China 1869-1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Wong Young-tsu, "Zhang Taiyan dui xiandaixing de yingju yu wenhua duoyuan sixiang de biaooshi", *Jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan* 41 (2003): 145-80; Wang Hui, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004); Viren Murthy, *The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan: The Resistance of Consciousness* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

⁵⁰ See e.g. Zhang Taiyan, "Si huo lun", in *Zhang Taiyan quanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1985[1906]), 443-457; Zhang Taiyan, "Wu wu lun", in *Zhang Taiyan quanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1985[1906]), 457-463.

⁵¹ Zhang Taiyan, "Zhonghua minguo jie", in *Zhang Taiyan quanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1985[1907]), 252-262. There are different opinions about whether Zhang was sincere in claiming no wish to prevent these areas from splitting off. Scholars like Wong, Crossley, and Leibold believe that Zhang stuck to his idea of non-assimilation and pure nationalism, and saw the incorporation of the three regions as a provisional solution (Wong, *Search for Modern Nationalism*; Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*; James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and Its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)); other scholars like Schneider believe that Zhang was actually eager to assimilate the three regions and strengthen the Chinese national power (Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity*).

⁵² Zhang Taiyan, "Pai Man pingyi", in *Zhang Taiyan quanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1985[1908]), 262-270.

⁵³ Zhang, "Pai Man pingyi".

⁵⁴ Zhang Taiyan, "Tao Manzhou xi", in *Zhang Taiyan quanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1985[1907]), 189-194.

nationalism” that refused any kind of “cultural assimilation”; on the other hand, he believed that the Miao were acculturated by Han culture.

Even if we accept Zhang’s argument of assimilation, in the context of imperial dominion, there is hardly such a thing as “spontaneous” assimilation. Ethnic separation between the Miao and the Han was a long existing policy in the imperial governance of the southwest. During the times of Kangxi and Yongzheng, interaction between the Miao and the Han was taken as a threat to the imperial governance. Therefore, marriage between the Miao and the Han was forbidden; extra city walls were built between Miao and Han neighbourhoods to hinder their contact.⁵⁵ After observing various Miao rebellions, some Qing officials began to think about assimilation of the Miao as a practical way to maintain local stability. “Transforming the Miao customs and changing their mind”⁵⁶ became a special policy to turn the frontier people into imperial subjects and to ensure frontier security. Throughout the imperial history, assimilation has never been a mere cultural issue but a question of political interests (as we saw in the case of Wei Yuan, too).

The loophole in Zhang’s theory of cultural assimilation actually reveals the blind spot in his idea of instrumentalized nationalism and the ideal of ethnic equalization. He adopted the Buddhist doctrine of nothingness and tried to abandon the obsessive belief in any cultural or national entity. Meanwhile, he cherished Han history and culture so much that he just could not follow his new ideas to their conclusion and admit Han traditions to be an illusion. He certainly knew about the strategical play of cultural assimilation, but he just could not rid himself of Han-centrism and could not stop believing that the Miao would certainly spontaneously identify with the Chinese culture. In this way, his narratives of the Miao remained politically biased and became a reflection of his equivocal attitude toward ethnicity and culture.

Conclusion—Constructing the ethnicity of the Miao

Chinese scholars had diverse narrative patterns of the Miao during the Qing period. They might be barbaric, primitive, dangerous, as well as exotic, romantic, and virtuous. Most of the narratives were not aimed to provide further understanding of the described group but to serve as assurance for the writer’s own culture. As Harrell revealed, the imperial cultural centre develops a more conscious and sharper image of itself through the contrast to its image of the periphery.⁵⁷ As we see in the above narratives, representations of the Miao helped to maintain the hegemonial relationship of Han superiority and the inferiority of others, which further legitimized processes of acculturation and assimilation as part of the imperial civilizing project. Moreover, these narratives played a critical role in scaling the imperial boundaries that laid the foundation for imperial sovereignty, because—as Fiskesjö pointed out—civilization as a transformative force requires a primitive, backward periphery as its object.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Sutton, “Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier in the Eighteenth Century”; Ji Ai-min, “Yi ‘qiang’ wei ‘jie’: Qingdai Xiangxi Miao jiang ‘bianqiang tixi yu ‘min’, ‘Miao’ quge”, *Zhongyang minzu daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)*, 44.03 (2017): 92-99; Wang Hong, “Cong Miao zu dao bian zu: Qingdai ‘Hunan Miao jiang’ de zhengzhi guojian yu shehui jiegou bianqian”, *Beifang minzu daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)*, 06 (2018): 96-104.

⁵⁶ Fu Nai, “Zhi Miao”, in *Huangchao jingshi wenbian*, eds. He Changling and Wei Yuan (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 2011[1827]), Chinese Text Project, available at: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=331523> (accessed December 21, 2020).

⁵⁷ Harrell, “Introduction”.

⁵⁸ Fiskesjö, Magnus. “On the ‘Raw’ and the ‘Cooked’ Barbarians of Imperial China”. *Inner Asia*, 1.2 (1999): 139-168; Magnus Fiskesjö, “Rescuing the Empire: Chinese Nation-building in the Twentieth Century”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 5.1 (2006): 15-44.

Through his admiration of the Miao people's virtues, Chen Ding was expressing a deep concern and anxiety about the declining Han culture after the fall of the Ming. By viewing the Miao as children, Wei Yuan was able to formulate a rather undifferentiated frontier policy (regarding race and culture) that ultimately served to strengthen the imperial borderland. The continuous re-examination of Miao cultures and history granted Zhang Taiyan the opportunity to polish and adjust his theory of nation-building in a systematic way. What really concerned all three writers was clarifying the position of the Chinese culture through highlighting the contrast between the Chinese and other people, especially during times when Chinese cultural and political authority was severely challenged. Therefore, it is not enough to consider these narratives of the Miao in a simple schema of Han-Miao relations (or the simple Hua/Yi binary); instead, they should be put in the triumvirate of Miao-Han-Manchu relations. From the early Qing to the late Qing, the Han scholarly attitude toward the Manchu government was changing, and this inevitably influenced Han scholars' narratives about the Miao: the Miao were constructed as a proof of persistent Chinese cultural vitality in a state of political marginalization (in Chen's narrative), as a practical example of the imperial territorial governance that set aside ideological (i.e. racial and cultural) differences (in Wei's narrative), and as a complement in the theory of Anti-Manchuism and national salvation as well as a Buddhist-Daoist version of equalization (in Zhang's narrative).

Through the construction of the peripheral Miao, the Han people developed a more conscious and clearer image of themselves. Interestingly, in the Chinese origin legend, the formation of the Han ethnicity was based on the suppression and expulsion of the imagined Miao ancestor, Chi You, whereas in the expansion of the empire and in the project of creating a modern nation-state, this former expelled enemy was described as a part of the self and his descendants as an inseparable shadow of the Han people, respectively.

The point here is not to say that a group of people calling themselves "Miao" does not exist, but to emphasize that from the view of social constructivism, ethnicity was always made and unmade with different purposes. An interesting point here is also that during the Qing times, some ethnic groups rejected being called Miao and insisted that they were Chinese; whereas in Republican China and PRC, these same groups actively used Miao as their official designation in order to maintain their minority status and establish their position in the national system of ethnicity.⁵⁹ Some people beyond China called themselves Hmong and claimed themselves to be the real Miao people; whereas others believed that a unified Miao identity was not constructed until the 18th and 19th century when the Miao military alliance was formed through the local rebellions.⁶⁰ Therefore, different people have different answers to the question: "who are the Miao?", and my attempt here is to reveal the question of ethnicity not as a question about primordality, but as a question of discourse and political interests.

What about an emic perspective of the Miao? Actually, throughout the Qing era, the Miao only existed in narratives from outsiders' perspectives. Diamond pointed out that the term "Miao" did not refer to any self-defined ethnic group; there is neither a territorial unity among the Miao nor a linguistic unity.⁶¹ Miao was simply a generalized, blurry denotation for those people who were unable to express themselves within the imperial political and cultural hierarchy⁶². They could only be passively "discovered" and represented by the potentates. They

⁵⁹ For example, Wang Mingke, *Huaxia bianyuan: lishi jiyi yu zuqun rentong* (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua, 1997); Yang & Zhang, "Qian jindai shiqu de zuqun bianjie yu rentong"; Cheung, *Zai taodun yu panfu zhijian*".

⁶⁰ Fei Xiaotong, *Xiongnu minzu zai Guizhou* (Beijing: Sanlian shushe, 1985[1951]).

⁶¹ Diamond, "Defining the Miao Ming, Qing, and Contemporary Views".

⁶² This can also be seen through the establishment of the Court of Colonial Affairs (*Lifan Yuan*). Whereas the stronger groups such as the Mongols, Tibetans, and Turkic peoples were allowed to keep their hereditary elites, who were granted court titles and leadership positions in their areas (Diamond, "Defining the Miao Ming, Qing,

were variously constructed and defined by different people with different purposes.⁶³ What was constructed as Han cultural assimilation by Chinese scholars might have been cruel territorial and economic invasions in the eyes of the local people. Looking at the official documents of the Qing court, we can see that the interaction of the Miao and the Han was marked with conflicts caused by land encroachments and trading frauds.⁶⁴ There is an old saying among the Miao people that sentimentally reveals their history of losing their land and being expelled: “The birds of the air have their nests, and foxes their holes, but the Miao have nowhere to rest their heads”.⁶⁵

With little space to present themselves in the imperial hierarchy of political and cultural power, the Miao became the passive others that were imagined and narrated with different patterns; their ethnicity was constructed to represent the imagined frontiers of the empire.

and Contemporary Views”, 105), the weaker ethnic groups in the southwest were deprived of any political autonomy.

⁶³ Fiskesjö, “On the ‘Raw’ and the ‘Cooked’ Barbarians of Imperial China”; Sutton, “Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier in the Eighteenth Century”.

⁶⁴ E.g. Robert Darrah Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: The “Miao” Rebellion, 1854-1873* (Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 1994); Sutton, “Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier in the Eighteenth Century”.

⁶⁵ Diamond “Defining the Miao Ming, Qing, and Contemporary Views”, 110.

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