

Constructed History: Ethnic Yao in Modern China

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When the People's Republic of China celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, the prosperous development of the culture industry of minority nationalities was one of the national achievements it marked. As one of the representative slogans of the anniversary celebrations proclaimed: 'Colorful nationalities and the culture industry of minority nationalities have been prospering for sixty years' [*geminzu duoziduocai, shaoshu minzu wenhua shiye fanrong fazhan*].¹ This slogan revealed at least two messages. The first was that the People's Republic of China is composed of colourful nationalities; the second was that culture of minority nationalities has become an industry, an integrative force facilitating China's nationhood.

In order to describe the processes of creating nationhood and imagining ethnohistory, this article will address several issues: how is official history written and represented in China; and what purpose does official history serve? The article will illustrate a particular ideology within the construction of nationhood in modern China by analyzing the so-called Ethnic Classification Campaign [*minzu shibie yundong*] of the 1950s, as well as ethnohistories written in the same period, published in 1983 and 2007 respectively. In other words, this essay will give an account of different projects that aimed to create a modern China as a collection of ethnic nationalities present in Chinese history.

The first type of project was the Ethnic Classification Campaign, launched during the 1950s. This article argues that this campaign was not only a cultural project that aimed to draw a detailed picture of the ethnic diversity of modern China, but also a political movement that created modern China as a nation-state under the banner of Unity in Diversity [*duoyuan yiti guojia*], a slogan and an ideal proposed by Fei Xiaotong.² This ideal turned into an ideology that leads the making of modern China, as well as the writing of ethnohistories.

The second type of project was the government-sponsored writing of ethnohistories. Based on the reports written by social scientists involved in

¹ http://www.wenming.cn/gzyd/2009-10/29/content_18085151.htm, accessed February 15th, 2011.

² X. Fei, 'Theory of Unity in Diversity Society of Chinese Nation' [*zhonghua minzu douyuan yiti geju*] in: X. Fei ed., *Theory of Unity in Diversity Society of Chinese Nation* (Beijing 1989) 1-36.

the Ethnic Classification Campaign, the communist government published a series of brief histories on the 55 officially recognized minority nationalities in the People's Republic during the 1980s. *The Brief History of the Yao* [*Yaozu jianshi*] was one of the books in this series. The government-sponsored writing of ethnohistories has recently been continued after almost a quarter of a century. *The Elaborate History of the Yao* [*Yaozu tongshi*] was published in 2007 as one book in a series providing detailed histories of minority nationalities.

This article therefore tries to examine the writing of Yao ethnohistory against a backdrop of an emerging modern China that stressed Unity in Diversity and shows the current political and cultural positions of the Yao people in the context of modern China.

The Yao People

The Yao are one of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China. Yao is the ethnonym given to them by the Han, but it actually includes diverse peoples who speak different dialects and have distinct cultures. For instance, Mien, or Iu-Mien, is one of the diverse peoples classified as a subgroup of Yao, Iu-Mien being a self-designation. Linguistically, there are at least three different groups speaking distinct languages, which are part of the Miao-speaking group, Yao-speaking group, and Dong-Sui-speaking group.³ Furthermore, the exonyms for the Yao are more than 400, and some of the sub-groups labelled Yao cannot communicate with each other.⁴

According to the demographic survey announced in 2000, the Yao in China number roughly 2.63 million. In China, the Yao are found in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region [*Guangxi Zhuangzu zizhiqu*], Hunan, Yunnan, Guangdong, and Guizhou. Even though Yao origins are believed to be diverse, they are thought to stem mainly from the 'Southern Barbarians' [*nanman*], a general term for all the ethnic minorities in southern

³ S. R. Ramsey, *The Languages of China* (Princeton 1987).

⁴ Y. Z. Wu, *The History of the Yao* [*Yaozushi*] (Chengdu 1993). See also <http://ethno.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/frameD.htm> and <http://www.cnyaozu.com/html/44/1/1202/1.htm>, accessed February 15th, 2011.

China dating back to the pre-Qin era (before 221 BC).⁵ Some of the characteristics attributed to the ethnic Yao make the inquiry into the history of the Yao particularly relevant to the issues discussed here.

Firstly, although the Yao did not invent a writing system of their own, their religious specialists have a long history of being literate in the Chinese script. Given the fact that literacy was unusual outside the circles of cultural elites and bureaucrats, the Chinese-language proficiency of the Yao's religious specialists indicated intensive and long-term contacts between the Yao and Han culture. Traces of cultural contacts between the Yao and Han culture can be easily found in the Yao myth of origin. This oral version of the myth is written in 'the Crossing Mountains Charter' [*guoshanban*], which lists the contributions that the Yao's ancestor, Dragon Dog or King Pan, made to the emperor. It also lists the titles given to Dragon Dog's offspring by the emperor, as well as the privileges enjoyed by the Yao, such as the right to cultivate and travel freely through certain mountains and exemption from corvée labour.⁶

The Yao people, even as an ambiguous category and concept in ancient times, therefore had a particularly intimate relationship with the central powers, as embodied in the charter conferred upon them.⁷ In other words, Yao history is that of an ethnic minority that has been greatly influenced by Chinese culture and has performed meritorious service to the emperor, as stated in the Crossing Mountains Charter, both of which were highly significant for the Chinese Communist Party's goal of creating a modern China in the spirit of Unity in Diversity.

Secondly, even though in history the Yao were treated as meritorious subjects of the emperor, as recorded in the Crossing Mountains Charter, they did not lack a spirit of resistance in fighting against the feudal state [*fengjian wangchao*]. Having adopted the social theory of Marxism, the Chinese Communist Party considered all central powers in the history of imperial

⁵ A detailed discussion of the origins of the Yao can be found in E. Alberts, *A History of Daoism and the Yao People of South China* (New York 2006).

⁶ Y. Huang ed., *The Compilation of the Charters of Emperor Ping* [*Pinghuang quande jibian*](Guangxi 1990).

⁷ For R. D. Cushman, when it first appears in the records, the Yao label was more an ambiguous category than a definite referent for a people. An in-depth discussion regarding the changes to the Yao ethnic label can be found in R. D. Cushman, *Rebel Haunts and Lotus Huts: Problems in the Ethnohistory of the Yao* (Ithaca 1970).

China to be feudal states that often oppressed and exploited their subjects. Taking this into consideration, among all the histories of the 55 officially recognized minority nationalities, the history of the Yao stands out because of what is seen as their enduring resistance to the feudal powers in different periods.⁸

These characteristics of the Yao make an inquiry into their history directly relevant to the core topic ‘Forgotten History’, that is, the remaking of a forgotten ethnohistory, the formation of ethnicity, and the dynamic relationship between ethnohistory, ethnicity, and the creation of a modern nation-state. Next, I will draw a rough picture of the large-scale cultural project, the Ethnic Classification Campaign, which was launched during the 1950s, in terms of its historical background, its guiding thoughts, and its political and cultural effects.

The Ethnic Classification Campaign

Since the commencement of the 1978 Reform and Open Door policy [*gaige kaifang zhengce*], modern China has gradually been recognized as a new rising power with respect to its political influence and economic development within an international setting. While more academic attention was paid to aspects of politics and economics, scholars who research modern China also noticed the complicated interactions between its politico-economic sectors and socio-cultural domains. As early as the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, these interactions emerged in the promotion of the ideology of a nation-state characterized by Unity in Diversity and comprised of colourful ethnicities, as well as the policy of equal rights for every ethnic group in terms of politics, economics, culture, and social status.

Faced with more than four hundred self-proclaimed ethnic minorities requesting to be recognized officially in the early 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party launched a nation-wide scientific survey to help clarify the similarities and differences between these ethnic minorities. This social

⁸ R. A. Litzinger, ‘Making Histories: Contending Conceptions of the Yao Past’ in: S. Harrell ed., *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle 1995) 117-139; idem, ‘Memory Work: Reconstituting the Ethnic in Post-Mao China’, *Cultural Anthropology* 13.2 (1998) 224-255; idem, *Other Chinas: the Yao and the Politics of National Belonging* (Durham 2000) 1-31.

survey is known as the Ethnic Classification Campaign.⁹ Based on the Stalinist notion of nationality as being defined by the sharing of common characteristics, such as language, costume, culture, belief, and life-style, the campaign was carried out by the government in cooperation with academia and eventually produced 56 officially recognized nationalities, including the Han as the major nationality.

Having followed Stalin's definition of what nationality is, however, the campaign created a primordial sense of ethnicity. As a result, not only are ethnic minorities with distinct cultures and languages grouped arbitrarily under the same ethnic labels, but also the numbers of ethnic minorities are restricted in accordance with the constructions of political institutions and bureaucratic systems.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party made policies reflecting the ideology that every ethnic group should enjoy equal rights with respect to politics, economics, culture, and social status. One way of actualizing this ideal was to set up autonomous administrative units according to the size of particular ethnic minorities. There are now 155 autonomous localities in modern China, including 5 ethnic minority autonomous regions, 35 autonomous prefectures [*zizhixian*], and 120 autonomous counties [*zizhixian*] or flags [*zizhiqi*].¹⁰ The major ethnic minorities within these administrative units have not only obtained important positions in local ruling class, but have also come to occupy seats reserved for delegates on different levels of national political representation.¹¹

Because of the rigid definitions of nationality and the political goals of the Ethnic Classification Campaign, Stevan Harrell and his students argue that the designations of the 55 ethnic labels are artificial and that they

⁹ Some scholars prefer the translation 'the Ethnic Classification Project'. For instance, N. Tapp, 'In Defence of the Archaic: A Reconsideration of the 1950s Ethnic Classification Project in China', *Asian Ethnicity* 3.1 (2002) 63-84.

¹⁰ The five ethnic minority autonomous regions are the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region [*Neimenggu zizhiqu*], the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region [*Guangxi Zhuangzu zizhiqu*], the Tibetan Autonomous Region [*Xizang zizhiqu*], the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region [*Ningxia Huizu zizhiqu*], and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region [*Xinjiang Weiwu'er zizhiqu*], whose populations number more than five million. <http://www.gov.cn/>, accessed February 15th, 2011.

¹¹ For instance, the Committee of the National People's Congress [*guanguo renmin daibiao dahui*], the highest unit of political representation in the Chinese bureaucracy, contains certain numbers of ethnic minorities' delegates. <http://www.gov.cn/>, accessed February 15th, 2011.

do not do sufficient justice to the true ethnic diversity of China. They consider this campaign to be a constructed political movement disguised as a civilizing project, and even an example of 'Internal Orientalism', meaning that the cultures and images of ethnic minorities in modern China have been essentialized by the internal other, the Han Chinese.¹²

In partial agreement with this argument, Nicholas Tapp, Thomas S. Mullaney and Cheung Siu-woo explore further the effects of the Ethnic Classification Campaign at the local level. They argue that the campaign did not seem particularly arbitrary. It was not only used politically, but it also intended to reveal some of the essential boundaries between peoples. Local ethnic groups often do tell one another apart by their distinct languages, costumes, cultures, beliefs, and life-styles, even though ethnic boundaries can also be manipulated to satisfy personal and group interests.¹³ In other words, the forming and changing of ethnic identities and boundaries should be considered from different perspectives and depend on the concrete contexts and agencies involved.

In sum, the Ethnic Classification Campaign during the 1950s was not only a political movement designed to turn modern China into a nation-state characterized by Unity in Diversity, but it was also a cultural project that aimed to reveal the ethnic diversity of modern China from a local perspective.

Next, I will conduct a textual analysis of *The Brief History of the Yao* and *The Elaborate History of the Yao* respectively, and compare these two books with a view to explore further how an official ethnohistory is written

¹² S. Harrell, 'Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them' in: S. Harrell ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle 1995) 3-36. Harrell's work is particularly inspirational because it points out the intertwined relationship between political governance and cultural projects in the context of modern China. Louisa Schein's research on Miao women in southeast Guizhou further elaborates the concept of 'Internal Orientalism'. See L. Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and Feminism in China's Cultural Politics* (Durham 2002) 100-131.

¹³ N. Tapp, 'In Defence of the Archaic: A Reconsideration of the 1950s Ethnic Classification Project in China', *Asian Ethnicity* 3.1 (2002) 63-84; T. S. Mullaney, 'Ethnic Classification Writ Large: The 1954 Yunnan Province Ethnic Classification Project and its Foundations in Republican-Era Taxonomic Thought', *China Information* 18.2 (2004) 207-241; S. W. Cheung, 'Miao Identities, Indigenism and the Politics of Appropriation in Southwest China during the Republican Period', *Asian Ethnicity* 4.1 (2003) 85-114.

and represented, and answer the question as to what purpose this constructed history serves.

The Brief History of the Yao

The Brief History of the Yao was written in 1964, but only published officially in 1983. The book was a representative outcome of the Ethnic Classification Campaign, the nation-wide socio-political project of the 1950s, in which many local communities and ethnic groups were to be transformed through a series of intensive political campaigns into socialist or even communist societies. The epilogue to *The Brief History of the Yao* clearly states that its writing took place ‘under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party’ [zài dāng de lǐngdǎo xià]. Also, the book was adapted from the manuscripts produced during the Ethnic Classification Campaign in 1964.¹⁴

The words ‘under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party’ can be interpreted in three ways here. The first interpretation is that the authors of *The Brief History* and *The Elaborate History* have to accommodate Yao history to Marxist social theories, which is the worldview of the Chinese Communist Party regarding the course of history and the construction of society. The second interpretation is that the writing of Yao ethnohistory should help legitimize the governance of the Chinese Communist Party. The authors thus highlight the Yao’s spirit of resistance to feudal powers [fēngjiàn shìlì] as a way to celebrate the glorious rebellious history of the Chinese Communist Party. The third interpretation is that the writing of Yao ethnohistory should also resonate with the party-promoted ideology of Unity in Diversity. The authors of *The Brief History* and *The Elaborate History* resort to this political appeal by seeking to establish an intimate historical relationship between the Yao people and Chinese culture in order to situate the Yao within the larger family of Chinese nationalities.

Next, I will elaborate more on the Marxist social theory, the spirit of resistance, and the discourse of Unity in Diversity that are present in the writings of *The Brief History* and *The Elaborate History* respectively.

Marxist Social Theory

¹⁴ The Writing Team of *The Brief History* [Yaozu jianshi bianxiezū], *The Brief History of the Yao* [Yaozu jianshi] (Nanjing 1983[1964]) 132.

The first understanding of the statement ‘under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party’ is that Yao history is made to accord with party-promoted Marxist social theory. The social theory of Marxism is greatly influenced by *Ancient Society*, written by Lewis Henry Morgan, in which different types of society are arranged in linear fashion and divided into three stages: Savagery, Barbarism, and Civilization.¹⁵ Marxist social theory further accommodates five types of society with a consecutive relationship between these three stages: primitive society [*yuanshi shehui*], slavery society [*nuli shehui*], feudal society [*fengjian shehui*], capitalist society [*zibenzhuyi shehui*], and socialist society [*shehuizhuyi shehui*]. Socialist society is considered to be the most ideal evolved form of human society while feudalism and capitalism are the triggering forces to cause oppression and inequality.

Following Marxist social theory, the authors of *The Brief History* label the Yao society before the Song (960-1279 AD) and Yuan (1271-1368 AD) dynasties as a primitive commune [*yuanshi gongshe*] that gradually evolved into a feudal society.¹⁶ Chapter two, which describes Yao society before the Song and Yuan dynasties, has a section entitled ‘Yao Society into a Feudal Society’ [*Yaozu shehui de fengjianhua*]. In the beginning of this section, the authors start with the following statement:

The process of the transformation Yao society into a feudal society went through a relatively complex development. The process was facilitated by the continuous development of productive power, the ensuing enforced governance of a feudal state, and the commencement of the system of local chieftainship [*tushi zhidu*] in some Yao areas.¹⁷

This statement is intended to explain how Yao society was transformed into a feudal society. Furthermore, the causes of its transformation into a feudal society are thought to be the political penetration of feudal states and the development of social production.

Another example comes in chapter three, on Yao society during the Ming (1368-1644 AD) and Qing (1636/1644-1912 AD) dynasties, in which there is a section on the ‘Development of Feudal Society’ [*fengjian shehui de*

¹⁵ L. H. Morgan, *Ancient Society* (London 1877).

¹⁶ *The Brief History*, 15-38.

¹⁷ *The Brief History*, 29.

fazhan]. The authors explain that the Ming dynasty had further extended its governing power to Yao areas along with the development of the economy in Yao society, and had commenced the system of local chieftainship among the Yao people residing in the mountains of Guangdong and Guangxi.¹⁸ Again, the increasing contact with the feudal state is seen as the major force accelerating the development of feudalism in Yao society.

Undoubtedly, the writing tone of *The Brief History* resonates with Marxist social theory in which feudalism sometimes serves as a demonic power oppressing people and also provoking rebellions. However, the rigid division of the course of Yao history faces difficulties in explaining the unbalanced economic and cultural developments in Yao societies in different localities, and also risks simplifying the course of Yao history.

The Spirit of Resistance of the Yao People

The second meaning of ‘under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party’ is that it celebrates the spirit of resistance of the Yao people by stressing the historical revolutions in which they were believed to have participated. *The Brief History* is composed of six chapters, together with an introduction, an appendix, and an epilogue. Among these six chapters, the resistance struggle of the Yao people against the nation-state [*Yaozu renmin de fan kang dou zheng*] is a recurrent theme. In addition to the basic description of the social-economic situation of Yao society, the authors deliberately illuminate the spirit of resistance of the Yao people to the feudal states during the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, the Opium Wars, and the era of the Republic of China of 1911 to 1949.¹⁹

Clearly, fighting feudalism and class struggle are the main motifs in the writing of the Yao’s past. For instance, chapters two, three, and four all include a specific section describing the rebellious spirit that the Yao embody. The authors draw heavily on the historical revolutions against feudal elites that the Yao were involved in. Even though relations between the Yao and other minority peoples were not always tense, the authors emphasize that they had been so brutally oppressed by the feudal powers through severe taxation and corvée labour that they were forced to act against those powers.

¹⁸ *The Brief History*, 42.

¹⁹ *The Brief History*, 34-38, 53-63, 78-98.

Therefore, the authors of *The Brief History* always describe the attacks of the Yao in history as ‘rebellions’ [*qiyi*]; the Yao who were involved in these attacks are called ‘rebellious soldiers’ [*yijun*], and the aim of these attacks is described as ‘resisting the governance of feudal states’ [*fankang fengjian tongzhi*]. There are numerous examples of this, but I will just give a few here.

For instance, section four of chapter two states that: ‘(...) hundreds of the Yao people in the Guanyang area of Hunan were forced to ‘rise in rebellion’ [*juqi fankang yiqi*], stealing salt and killing the local officials in 1043.’²⁰ In section three of chapter three, the authors write about two large-scale revolutions in which the Yao people participated from 1375 to 1627. The description goes like this:

From 1375 to 1627, the Yao people residing the mountainous areas of Guangxi, Guangdong, Hunan, and Jiangxi could not stand the racial oppression and class exploitation that the Ming state imposed; therefore, they undertook a series of enduring and glorious rebellions. Among these rebellions, the Gorge of Big Vine [*datengxia*] in Guangxi and the area of Luopang in Guangdong were the locations of two of the biggest rebellions, considering the time they lasted and their spatial scale. These two rebellions were not only unprecedented heroic undertakings in Yao history, but were also uncommon events in the history of the struggles of minority nationalities.²¹

From what is described above, it is not hard to note that the authors of *The Brief History* intentionally elaborate on the revolutionary history of the Yao and create Yao’s place in the making of a socialist nation.

Discourse of Unity in Diversity

The third connotation of ‘under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party’ is that it constructs Yao history in a manner that conforms to a unitary image of racial and cultural relationships. Making a unitary relationship among different nationalities resonates with the national project of making Unity in Diversity in modern China. Therefore, in *The Brief History*, not only are the Yao depicted as a people united in their struggle

²⁰ *The Brief History*, 35.

²¹ *The Brief History*, 53.

against unjust feudal powers, but the cultural relationships between the Yao and the other nationalities, especially Han Chinese culture, are described as sharing the same historical roots.

In the introduction to *The Brief History*, the very first paragraph goes as follows:

The Yao nationality is a member of the big family of Chinese nationalities [*zhonghua minzu dajiating*]. The Yao have a long history. The Yao are industrious and fearless. In a long run, the Yao have stayed together with the other nationalities, fighting it out with nature, starting from difficulties, and creating a long and profound history as well as a glorious and illuminating culture for the mother China [*zhuo*]. The Yao have made a significant contribution to the creation and development of our Unity in Diversity country [*tongyi de duominzu guojia*].²²

The intention of this opening paragraph is obviously to appropriate a family metaphor and to bind the Yao together with the other nationalities as members of a big family of Chinese nationalities. Furthermore, the authors illuminate the qualities of being brave and hard workers as characteristic of the Yao, all of which are important bases for forging Unity in Diversity, or even modern socialist China. Similarly, as the last paragraph of the introduction states:

Now the Yao people are together with the other nationalities, insisting on the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, persisting in the road to Socialism, holding fast to the People's Democratic Party [*renmin minzhu zhuanzheng*], keeping up with Marxist-Leninism, standing on Maoist thoughts, and fighting to create a powerful modern socialist nation.²³

In order to demonstrate that the Yao have a relatively long history, the authors of *The Brief History* trace Yao history back to before the Southern and Northern dynasties (420-589 AD), even though the name 'Yao' did not appear until *The Book of Liang* [*Liangshu*] in the early Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). Prior to the Southern and Northern dynasties, the Yao's forebears were believed to be called 'barbarians', a term also used as

²² *The Brief History*, 5.

²³ *The Brief History*, 9.

the ethnic name for the other southern minority peoples at that time.²⁴ The discourse aims to create a seemingly unambiguous agent, the Yao, by distinguishing them from the obviously ambiguous labels, such as barbarians [*manyi*] or southern barbarians [*nanman*].

The authors then explain that the ethnonym 'Yao' itself, as a Chinese character, has gone through three different changes over three periods of time, reflecting the policies and attitudes of the governing powers towards the Yao. Firstly, during the Sui (581-619 AD) and Tang (618-907 AD) dynasties, the term 'Yao' appeared on record for the first time, meaning the people responsible for corvée labour. The character 'Yao' was written either with a walking [*chi*] or human [*ren*] radical.²⁵ Secondly, during the Yuan dynasty, the character 'Yao' began to be written with a canine [*quan*] radical. The authors argue that the added canine radical was a signifier showing the humiliating attitude of the feudal states towards the Yao. The character 'Yao' with the canine radical was used through the Yuan dynasty to the era of the Republic of China of 1911 to 1949. Thirdly, the authors continue describing the policy of racial equality since the establishment of Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, the character Yao with the canine radical was changed into Yao with the jade [*yu*] radical after 1949.²⁶

In other words, the Yao as an ethnic subject did not acquire liberation and autonomy until 1949. However, when the authors make the Yao out to be a people sharing a sense of togetherness, they also risk disregarding the fact that the ethnic label 'Yao' subsumes a wide variety of sub-ethnic groups. The narratives tempt an innocent reader to believe that 'the Yao people' represent a genuinely historical subject with a clearly bounded society and a well-defined identity. As Nicholas Tapp argues, the reification of ethnicity and the immobilization of culture (i.e. its removal from historical change) result from the 1950s Ethnic Classification Project.²⁷

The discourse of Unity in Diversity was thus based on the reification of ethnicity and the immobilization of the culture of the 55 officially recognized minority nationalities of modern China. With clearly defined

²⁴ *The Brief History*, 10.

²⁵ The radical is the root or base form of a word. Any of the basic set of 214 Chinese characters constitutes semantically or functionally significant elements in the composition of other characters and is used as a means of classifying characters in dictionaries. <http://oxforddictionaries.com>, accessed February 15th, 2011.

²⁶ *The Brief History*, 10-11.

²⁷ Tapp, 'In Defence of the Archaic', 73-74.

ethnicities and well-represented cultures, modern China is presented not only as a multicultural country, but also as a country with a unitary basis from which to evolve into a powerful socialist nation. In other words, the purpose of making the histories of minority nationalities is, on the one hand, to write histories of peoples without histories, and on the other to connect their histories with Chinese history and culture.

The Elaborate History of the Yao

After almost a quarter of a century, the publication of *The Elaborate History of the Yao* in 2007 was also undertaken under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party, and it continued similar narratives, but with a much lengthier description regarding the history of the Yao. The writing of *The Elaborate History*, moreover, bears a more reflexive viewpoint regarding the course of Yao history and the historical interactions between the central powers and the Yao.

Firstly, the authors of *The Elaborate History* – five authors of *The Elaborate History* were also members of the writing team of *The Brief History* – still follow Marxist social theory by dividing Yao society along linear lines in accordance with the development of Chinese history. But *The Elaborate History* pays much more attention to the unbalanced social development of different Yao societies in different localities.²⁸ For instance, the Introduction contains several sentences like this one:

Due to the continuously unbalanced development of Yao society, it is difficult to determine whether different Yao sub-groups and the Yao residing in different localities have all gone through developmental stages similar to the Han or not.²⁹

This kind of narrative reveals that the authors are sensitive to the fact that the Yao do not form a homogenous ethnic unit.

Secondly, *The Elaborate History* still has chapters devoted to the resistance struggle of the Yao people against the nation-state [*Yaozu renmin de fankang douzheng*].³⁰ These three chapters are elaborate versions of the

²⁸ H G. Feng ed., *The Elaborate History* [*yaozu tongshi*] (Beijing 2007) 34-36.

²⁹ *The Elaborate History*, 35.

³⁰ *The Elaborate History*, 354-378, 520-547, 548-563.

chapters about the Yao's resistance activities that were described in *The Brief History*. The ethnic image of the Yao thus remains one of a people full of the spirit of resistance even in a modern context. However, the major difference in the narrations of the Yao's spirit of resistance between *The Brief History* and *The Elaborate History* is that the writers of the latter do not just illustrate the central states as demonic feudal powers, but draw on some of the benevolent governing policies that different central states in Chinese history applied to minority areas. From this, we are able to obtain a more dynamic picture of the historical relations between the central states and the Yao.

Thirdly, just as in *The Brief History*, the Unity in Diversity discourse also has a great presence in *The Elaborate History*. In the explanation of the style [fanli] of *The Elaborate History*, the third style states clearly that the history of the Yao is used to confirm the pattern of Unity in Diversity. The expression of the third style goes as follows.

The edition and compilation of this book have appropriated the theories and methods of history and anthropology, the arrangement of the chapters is in accordance with the sequence of historical development [lishi shunxu], following the style of discipline [xueke fanli], embodying the logic of history [lishi luoji], and highlighting the historical and cultural features of the Yao [Yaozu lishi wenhua tese]. [The aim of] this book is to confirm the pattern of Unity in Diversity by using the history of the Yao.³¹

In order to probe that the Yao also has a long and profound history as Han nationality does, *The Elaborate History* even traces the origin of the Yao further back to one of the three Chinese ancestors, *Chiyao*, a tribal leader of the ancient nine barbarian Li tribes [jiuli]. 'By compiling eloquent historical evidence, here it is to prove that there is also a nationality, the Yao, with a long and profound history within the Chinese nation in Chinese history'.³²

From what is discussed above, the writing of *The Elaborate History* can be viewed as an elaborate version of *The Brief History*, yet with a more balanced and reflexive point of view. This more balanced and reflexive attitude of writing can be found further in the chapters on 'The Influences of the Cultural Revolution on the Yao Areas' [wenhua dageming dui Yaozu diqu

³¹ *The Elaborate History*, 1.

³² *The Elaborate History*, 1.

de yingxiang].³³ In these chapters, the term ‘Cultural Revolution’ [*wenhua dageming*] is always placed in quotation marks as if the evaluation of this political movement is not yet close to completion. Even though the criticisms of this period of time appear euphemistic, they still point to the negative and even devastating influences the Cultural Revolution has wrought on Yao society. It can also be seen that, even though the writing of ethnohistories still has to be conducted under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the academic atmosphere seems to be more open for scholars to make criticisms of a general nature.

Conclusion

This article has elucidated the constructed aspects of the history of the ethnic Yao in modern China by exploring three examples: the Ethnic Classification Campaign during the 1950s, *The Brief History of the Yao* published in 1983 and *The Elaborate History of the Yao* published in 2007. I have argued that the Ethnic Classification Campaign during the 1950s was not only a cultural project aiming to draw a detailed picture of the ethnic diversity of modern China, but also a political movement for making modern China a nation-state characterized by Unity in Diversity. Then the ideology of a united but pluralistic country was further promoted in the government-sponsored writing of ethnohistories. Based on the reports written by the scholars devoted to the Ethnic Classification Campaign under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the authors of *The Brief History* followed the social theory of Marxism, emphasized the resistance aspects of the Yao, and situated the Yao as a family member of the big Chinese nation. After a quarter of a century, *The Elaborate History* was also composed under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party, but it can be seen as having a more balanced and critical perspective.

In sum, having gone through several drastic social changes and political movements during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, a forgotten ethnohistory, the history of the Yao, was still constructed to serve a national project of facilitating the spirit of Unity in Diversity in modern China. However, there seem to be more possibilities for cultural elites, as Ralph Litzinger argues in his analysis of Fei Xiaotong’s study of the Jinxiu Yao, to

³³ *The Elaborate History*, 722-740.

narrate an ethnohistory with a critical viewpoint that extends beyond the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.³⁴

³⁴ R. A. Litzinger, 'Dissecting a Sparrow: Ethnology, Locality, and the Study of the Jinxiu Yao' in: T. P. Ho and B. Chiang ed., *State, Market and Ethnic Groups Contextualized* (Taipei 2003) 339-381.