

## ***Dai* in the “Land of Tropical Miasma”: Encounters of Early Chinese Anthropology in Yunnan**

**Qieyi Liu**

University of Toronto, Canada

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2214-6601>

### **Abstract**

In early- to mid-twentieth century China, the tropical landscapes and indigenous peoples of southern Yunnan entered public consciousness in two different modes of representation: as a desolate and unfamiliar frontier fraught with the peril of diseases and in desperate need of environmental and social engineering; or, as a haven of fertile land with an ideal of harmonious society. In the process of making new senses of this tropical border region, anthropology played a major role as Chinese anthropologists working in this newly institutionalized discipline turned the Dai, traditionally regarded by Han people as a marginal group living within a dangerous land of *zhangqi* (tropical miasma), into an ethnographic subject. From Ling Chunsheng's vision of environmental modification and medical advancement as a twofold project to engineer a new landscape and a new people, to Tian Rukang's cultural critique that imagined the way of life of Dai people as an antidote for modernity, this article examines early Chinese anthropological discourses on the Dai people and their lived environment. I investigate how technological and epistemological changes fundamentally reshaped the meaning of tropical landscapes in China, a multi-ethnic country of a vast and diverse territory struggling to rejuvenate within a new global order, and I ponder the symbolic and material consequences of this recent history.

**Keywords:** Southwestern China, Yunnan, anthropology, tropical miasma, tropical landscapes, *Dai* people, modernity

## Introduction: Entering the “Land of Miasma”

From the deep valley covered with white clouds, suddenly the sound of bells being struck was heard. Then, from the thick green mountains, came a few reverberations... The sound became louder and louder, and the faint noise of people approached, but it turned silent again. Finally, from the long winding path, a bunch of people could be seen indistinctly. Because the mountains are too richly covered with vegetations, only a few dark shadows could be recognized between the foliage... That was the procession to welcome [the statue of] Buddha (Tian, 2008 [1946], p.8).<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation was part of the account that the Chinese anthropologist Tian Rukang (1916-2006) noted of *bai*, a religious ritual central to the way of life of Dai people living primarily in southern Yunnan Province near the China-Burma border, where Tian undertook fieldwork from 1940 to 1942. In *The Bai Ritual of Frontier People in Mangshi (Mangshi bianmin de bai)*, Tian explained that *bai* entailed a family holding a lavish feast inviting all members of the village to celebrate their religious offerings and the festivities played an essential function in harmonizing Dai communities (Tian, 2008).<sup>2</sup> The popularity of *bai* and its spectacular effect was reflected in the fact that Dai people were previously called *baiyi* by Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China.<sup>3</sup>

In the above excerpt, the religious practice was deeply embedded in the tropical landscape. Mangshi, a Dai-dominated township where Tian was based, is located in “a basin at an altitude of 930m, surrounded by endless mountains. The climate is extremely humid to the point that mosquitoes and other insects survive all year round.” The town was thus “long rumoured as being haunted by smoky tropical miasma (*yanzhang*)” (Tian, 2008, p.1). It used to take 26 days to travel there from Kunming, the provincial capital, which was reduced to 4 days, after the opening of the Burma Road in 1938.

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Chinese into English are mine.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this ethnography was published in 1942 in mimeograph by Yunnan University entitled *Baiyi de bai* (lit. the *bai* ritual of *baiyi*). The English version of the work was later submitted to the London School of Economics and Political Science as Tian's Ph.D Thesis in 1948 and published in 1986 under the title *Religious Cults of the Pai-I [Baiyi] along the Burma-Yunnan Border* (T'ien, 1986). Two book reviews in English (Maule, 1988; Walker, 1989) are available. In this article I consult mainly the Chinese version, originally published in 1946 and republished in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *Yi* signifies non-Han people living quasi-autonomously at the Chinese empire's periphery and is often inaccurately translated into “barbarians.” Regarding controversies over the translation of *yi* into “barbarians,” see Liu, 1999, p.132-134. The ethnonym “Dai” was adopted after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, in order to remove the possible derogatory implication in the term *yi* and to respect the name by which the ethnic group calls itself. Dai people are closely linked, in linguistic and cultural terms, to the Lao, Thai and Shan peoples on the other side of China's southwestern border (Colquhoun, 1885; Dodd, 1923).

With the simple idea of surveying the frontier, the young anthropologist described his venture into the unfamiliar tropical landscape as very bold. Although he was a native of Yunnan Province, being Han Chinese, he did not speak the language and knew little of Dai communities previously. He even awkwardly mistook the indigenous governor's name upon his arrival (Tian, 2008, p.4). After his fieldwork, however, Tian grew extremely attached to the simple and honest locals, who offered him a friendship that "could not be easily procured in *our* society" (Tian, 2008, p.5).<sup>4</sup> His narration of the social structure, economy, and religious practices of Dai/*baiyi* people was written with deep empathy and affect, constantly contrasting the peace of *baiyi* life with the anomie of modern life that the metropolitan Han Chinese experienced due to the breakdown of moral values (Tian, 2008, p.100).<sup>5</sup>

Tian's ethnography ends with an appreciation of the *baiyi* way of life as the potential source of good civilization: "We should be glad that in this remote region, among the smoky tropical miasma, there remains a creation of human wisdom. Maybe it could serve as an example to learn from in the future when people rebuild the world" (Tian, 2008, p.104). In Tian's eyes, what Han-Chinese urban elites might perceive as an impoverished and undeveloped landscape attested to a harmonious relationship that indigenous people nurtured between themselves and with the surrounding environment. This alternative landscape was not merely an escape from the alienation of industrial societies – "the pastoral" in Raymond Williams' (1973) sense – but a creative source for reimagining and re-establishing better ways of inhabiting the world.

But Tian was a rather atypical anthropologist. Although he was perhaps inspired to pay attention to the southwestern frontier due to the then widespread intellectual concern with borderland governance (*bianzheng*), this political discourse in response to China's frontier crises in the face of European imperialisms (Zhang, 1939; Ling, 1940) did not necessarily share Tian's recognition of the alterity and value of indigenous societies and cultures.<sup>6</sup> Most contemporaneous intellectuals were more preoccupied with the question of how to integrate frontier peoples (*bianmin*) – belonging to diverse ethnic groups – into the newly founded Republic of China (1912-1949) in order to impose modern modes of sovereignty and governance on the frontier lands (*biandi*), which previously had been largely autonomous under the Qing dynasty's (1644-1912) imperial rule (Blum, 2001; Mullaney, 2010; Shen, 2021; Zheng, 2021).<sup>7</sup> The outbreak of full-scale war against Japan in 1937, which provoked the

---

<sup>4</sup> My italics.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term *baiyi* in the following to be consistent with this article's sources, mostly texts written by Han Chinese, while acknowledging full awareness of the problems associated with this word. There is no intention to disrespect Dai people.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the history of the discipline and discourse of frontier governance see Wang (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Historians have pointed out huge discrepancies in the understanding of sovereignty and governance between imperial traditions in China such as the Qing dynasty and modern colonial empires such as the British empire. See Hevia (1995).

central government's subsequent retreat to the Southwestern interior, further made it an urgent task to reconceptualize ethnic relations and infiltrate the consciousness of the *zhonghua minzu* (the Chinese nation) to secure the Great Rear (Chan, 2019). Under the wartime pressure for resource extraction and infrastructure construction, China's tropical lands and peoples were now directly subject to a new dynamic as political, economic, and cultural powers from the centre sought to impose the country's modernization plan (Mitter & Schneider, 2012; Eysenck & Chang, 2017).<sup>8</sup>

In empire- and state-building projects, the production of modern forms of knowledge, including anthropology, was always at the forefront (Cohen, 1996). A substantial scholarship has investigated the role of Western explorers in surveying the natural resources and social conditions of China and has interrogated the intertwinement between science and imperialist powers (Chiu, 1997; Mühlhahn, 2000; Fan, 2004; Yeh, 2011; Mueggler, 2011; Fan, 2012).<sup>9</sup> With the establishment of new-style universities and research institutes after the 1910s, more and more Chinese nationals took over this knowledge production project (Culp, Eddie & Yeh, 2016). Existent literature focuses primarily on how scientists' building of their own academic disciplines – be it geology, palaeoanthropology, or demography – was always simultaneously correlated to constructing the idea of the “nation” and Chinese identity (Pietz, 2002; Songster, 2003; Rogaski, 2008; Lam, 2011; Shen, 2013; Wu, 2015; Yen, 2019). Less discussed is how the politics of knowledge was likewise consequential upon the material transformation of landscapes and their nature-culture entanglements.

In particular, with regards to social-cultural anthropology, postcolonial critiques have long demonstrated how early ethnographic knowledge procured by Westerners in non-Western regions played an essential role in mapping the temporal and spatial differences between the modern and the primitive, the West and its Other, and the ordering of cultures laid the ideological ground for multiple forms of colonialism and imperialism justified by the so-called “civilizing mission” (Fabian, 1983; Clifford, 1988). Chinese anthropologists in the early twentieth century unavoidably reproduced this colonial regime as they returned from training abroad and located their research fields among ethnic minority groups living within China, as the following sections will further reveal.

However, in revisiting the tension between “indigenization” and “universalism” faced by early Chinese sociologists and anthropologists, scholars also find that some of

---

<sup>8</sup> Similar processes in which the centre attempted to exert more direct control on previously heterogeneous rural or periphery regions were occurring in many other parts of the world, which some scholars have termed “internal colonialism.” See Hechter (1975); Weber (1976).

<sup>9</sup> In the case of Southeast Asia, there were also numerous Euro-American expeditions with the objective of scientific exploration and Christian missions were dispatched in order to get to know this tropical landscape and its peoples in preparation for advancing projects of colonialization or evangelism. See Garnier (1873); Winichakul (1997); van Bremen et al., (1999).

these scholars aspired to defend localized alternative modernities that did not necessarily follow the path of evolution towards China's complete adoption of Western modernity (Dirlik et als., 2012; Wu, 2019; Duara, 2020). These discussions imply that anthropological encounters did not always point to an unambiguous teleology of assimilating and improving Other peoples, who were supposed to be stuck in backwardness, into the self-supposed modern civilized world. The case of Tian Rukang suggests that his immersion in a different landscape stirred up alternative imaginations of how to live well and turned into a chance for this young urban intellectual to be educated by the form of nature-culture entanglements that Dai people enacted. It is against this backdrop of a country longing to catch up with Western modernity and in contrast to contemporaneous anthropological discourses carrying a developmentalist ethos, that the value of Tian's work – as well as why his message had been historically obscured – can be fully grasped.

This article examines early Chinese anthropologists' discourses on Dai/*baiyi* people and their tropical lived environment, which was previously regarded by Han people as the land of tropical miasma (*zhangqi*) with potent health hazards.<sup>10</sup> I will start with a brief retrospective of the Qing imperial state's gaze on frontier peoples and landscapes, and then investigate how this "premodern" gaze was "modernized" through the mediation of technological and epistemological changes in late Qing and early Republican periods with the example of geologist and amateur anthropologist Ding Wenjiang. Next, I focus on two anthropologists trained in different schools of thought and representative of dissimilar stances towards indigenous peoples and tropical landscapes. The first is Ling Chunsheng, a France-trained ethnographer and agent of the Republican state who envisioned development as a twofold project to engineer a healthy landscape and a new people. Then, turning to Tian Rukang's ethnographic and travel writings, I explore how his training in the tradition of the UK's functionalist school of social anthropology inspired him to elicit a critique of modernity – and yet his ethnography was also appropriated as a booster of modernization by mainstream intellectual discourses. Lastly, I conclude with a reading of a short fictional piece about a *baiyi* woman. I ponder on how the voice of indigenous people could be heard, and what it meant for them to leave and return to their homeland – a land of tropical miasma.

Underlying this article are the contested imaginations of tropical landscapes and their symbolic and material consequences. While in premodern China the tropics were often linked with imagined dangers of a foreign environment (Ling, 1938), modern scientific and technological advancement cleared away the fear – and the associated respect – and ushered tropical landscapes into the current age of the "plantationocene" (Haraway, 2015) with tropical lands in Yunnan and other provinces transformed into

---

<sup>10</sup> For the construction of the disease "zhang" from a long-durée perspective, see Yang (2010).



monoculture plantations producing economic crops such as rubber.<sup>11</sup> Anthropological discourses in early twentieth century China that often explicitly delegitimized non-modern ways of life and relations with land were complicit in this process. Yet a reading of Tian Rukang and what he learned from the tropical landscape offers a glimpse of other possibilities. At stake in revisiting this episode of early Chinese anthropological encounters is the very definition of what constitutes healthy landscape and good society. Expanding our imagination of these issues is relevant today.

## Visualizing Ethnicity: Anthropology as the Harbinger of Modernity

In the “Illustrations of Tributaries” (*Zhigong tu*) produced during Emperor Qianlong’s reign (1736-1796), which were handscrolls depicting foreign peoples and different ethnic groups living on the Qing empire’s peripheries, the description of *baiyi* people starts by tracing their historical names and geographical distribution, and then states:

Men wrap their head in cloth decorated with flowers and five-colour threads. They wear hats weaved from bamboo and clothes dyed blue. They wrap their calf in white cloth and always hold a handkerchief. Women have hair worn in a bun and wrapped in coloured cloth with hanging laces. They wear silver earrings, dress in red and green, and always bring a purse with several silver ingots (Zhuang, 1989, p.228).

**Figure 1. Baiyi Man and Woman, Illustrations of Tributaries**



*Zhigong tu*, ca.1751-1795.

Hostetler (2001) characterizes these state-commissioned “Illustrations” as composing a “global cultural map” which uses textual and visual representations to convey a

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Chapman (1991).

sense of hierarchical order and domination closely related to the Qing empire's unprecedented expansion (pp.41-47). What is intriguing is how both visual and textual narratives focus primarily on people's exterior appearance. By accentuating the visible difference of peoples paying tribute to the empire, the "Illustrations" produce a sensation of exoticism and confirm the centrality of the viewers (the emperors and high-level officials) who ruled "all under heaven" (*tianxia*).<sup>12</sup> Yet this mode of representation also acknowledges different ways of inhabiting the world, without one necessarily imposing change on the other.<sup>13</sup>

This tolerance of differences, however, was to disappear with the arrival of modern science, which was imported from the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and offered an immensely powerful new lens to understand heterogeneous peoples and their ways of life. When Ding Wenjiang (1887-1936), a geologist trained at the University of Glasgow, returned to China in 1911 via the newly opened Yunnan-Vietnamese railway, the sight of indigenous peoples stirred his interest. Later, in 1913, Ding was appointed as the head of the Geological Section, Ministry of Industry and Commerce of the Beijing government and sent to Yunnan to conduct geological and mineral surveys.<sup>14</sup> Ding's travel journals were serialized in 1932 in the weekly *Independent Criticism* (*Duli pinglun*) magazine, which included several ethnographic chapters. His textual and visual accounts revealed a brand-new way of representing and understanding other peoples and cultures.

Ding also paid meticulous attention to different ethnic groups' clothing and visible appearances: "*Baiyi* people are the most numerous.... They all wrap their head with blue cloth to hide their hair. They wear short jackets and pleated skirts. Behind the collar is a square piece of embroidered cloth, hiding upper the back and part of the shoulder" (1933, p.15). Different from the "Illustrations of Tributaries," however, Ding intended to use his camera to capture what he saw. The handscrolls took several years, and the collaboration of local officials and court painters to complete. This was typical of Qing dynasty's tributary system that was by no means monolithic but relied on mutual construction of the centre and the periphery (Song, 2012). The powerful lens of the camera, in contrast, omitted all layers of mediation and arrived directly at the empirical observation of indigenous peoples' appearances and ways of life.

Ding Wenjiang had no special expertise in anthropology. Nevertheless, in an era that witnessed the peak of colonial travels, anthropology was deemed a gentlemanly pursuit and a suitable pastime for the educated elites who ventured into foreign lands

<sup>12</sup> "Tianxia" is a commonly employed expression by premodern Chinese dynasties conveying a sense of China's exalted status in the world on moral grounds and ruling over other peoples with tributary rituals (Lin, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> For the history of Yunnan during the Qing dynasty, especially how the Qing government treated and transformed the borderland zone, see Giersch (2006) and Bello (2016).

<sup>14</sup> For a biography of Ding Wenjiang, see Furth (1970). His ethnographic writings are less studied by historians.

for business, missionary work, or other purposes (Michaud, 2007). What made this modern scientist's perspective novel was not only the powerful medium of photography, but also his methodology of meticulous measurements and the pursuit of empiricism. The amateur anthropologist brought with him a copy of "Guide to Travelers," a handbook compiled by the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, which contained basic guidance as to how to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. In accordance with this handbook, while taking a short break in the provincial capital of Kunming, Ding ordered callipers from a local factory for the purpose of measuring human bodies. Then, in his subsequent visits to villages in Yunnan, he attempted to measure people's physical details (i.e., height, width, and perimeter of the head) whenever he could persuade villagers into this uncommon task. He also collected linguistic materials from different ethnic groups, intending to compare different dialects and languages. He used these measurements to hypothesize how far or close two ethnic groups were from each other and in what ways they were connected (Ding, 1933).

Ding did not have time to further analyse his research results before his premature death and it is therefore difficult to speculate his intention in gathering these materials. But his casual travel writings, clearly influenced by theories and methods of physical/biological and linguistic anthropology, did help him gain a reputation in this newly institutionalized academic field in China. In 1936, a memorial article written by the UK trained physical anthropologist Wu Dingliang (1894-1969) claims that Ding made no less contributions to anthropology than to geology, though he was less known in the former field. Wu points out that not only did Ding's works prove the significant difference between Chinese people (including non-Han Chinese) and non-Chinese people, but also the materials he collected help shed light on the distribution of physical, linguistic, or cultural traits within China. Wu especially admires the degree of precision Ding achieved in documenting large quantities of data, which set the criteria of scientific observation for future academics (Wu, 1936).

The academia applauded Ding's works for his scientific methods, meticulous techniques, and empiricism, which were considered the superior way to understand (and potentially to manage) ethnicity. In actual fieldwork, the amateur anthropologist established his authority and a sense of superiority by those foreign instruments he used, which elicited fear and awe among indigenous people. Ding recalled that "seeing that I wanted to take photos of them, they [*baiyi* people] all ran away, making it impossible to closely observe them" (p.15). Here, the capacity of the camera did not just lie in enhancing observation and replacing the less accurate hand-drawn portraits in the documentation of ethnic groups, adding to this power of seeing was the very materiality of the camera – a new technology symbolic of a superior industrial civilization. Indigenous people were exposed to Ding's camera and callipers as the object of gaze and measurement – though the photographer also needed to negotiate



this exposition – and at the same time, they were the audience of a spectacle that informed them of the prowess of modern science and technology.

Since the invention of the camera, historians have pointed out photography's association with imperial othering and the colonial gaze and demonstrated the medium's intrusiveness which created categories of cultures and peoples for the viewing audience of the metropolitan centre (Edwards, 1991; Ryan, 1997; Falconer 2002; Terpak 2009). Fuelled by new representational technologies and by the desire to obtain "scientific" knowledge, a modern scientist and amateur anthropologist's epistemological framework differed from that of Qing imperial commissions, despite a shared concern for discerning ethnicity.<sup>15</sup> Even at the height of what Hostetler calls the "Qing colonial enterprise" (2001), the imperial centre saw in its periphery not lands and peoples immediately knowable and potentially exploitable, but quasi-autonomous tributaries with due recognition of cultural differences. During the Republican period, however, elite intellectuals' and state technocrats' gaze on ethnic minority groups assumed new terms. During Ding Wenjiang's travels, he collected samples of people's daily utensils, such as hats, and investigated their ways of living (Ding, 1933) – reminiscent of anthropology museum collections' aims to preserve a more primitive stage of human evolution (Price, 2007). In the works of professional anthropologists, this curiosity would soon be translated into a civilizing mission to intervene in and transform indigenous peoples' ways of life and their lived environment.

### **Engineering Landscapes and People: Anthropology for Development**

In the early twentieth century, the exigency of frontier defence endowed Chinese anthropologists with the mission of integrating the borderland regions into the national polity and economy.<sup>16</sup> From 1934 to 1937, Ling Chunsheng (1901-1978), then head of the Division of Ethnography at the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, led a survey to study the ethnic minority peoples in Yunnan with photographer Yong Shiheng.<sup>17</sup> In the course of the survey, from November 1935 to April 1936, they were commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to make observations of the China-Burma border and came into contact with *baiyi* people (Tian, 2019). The texts and photos that they produced during these travels revealed how anthropology, a capable collaborator of the modern state, reshaped imaginations of tropical landscapes.

---

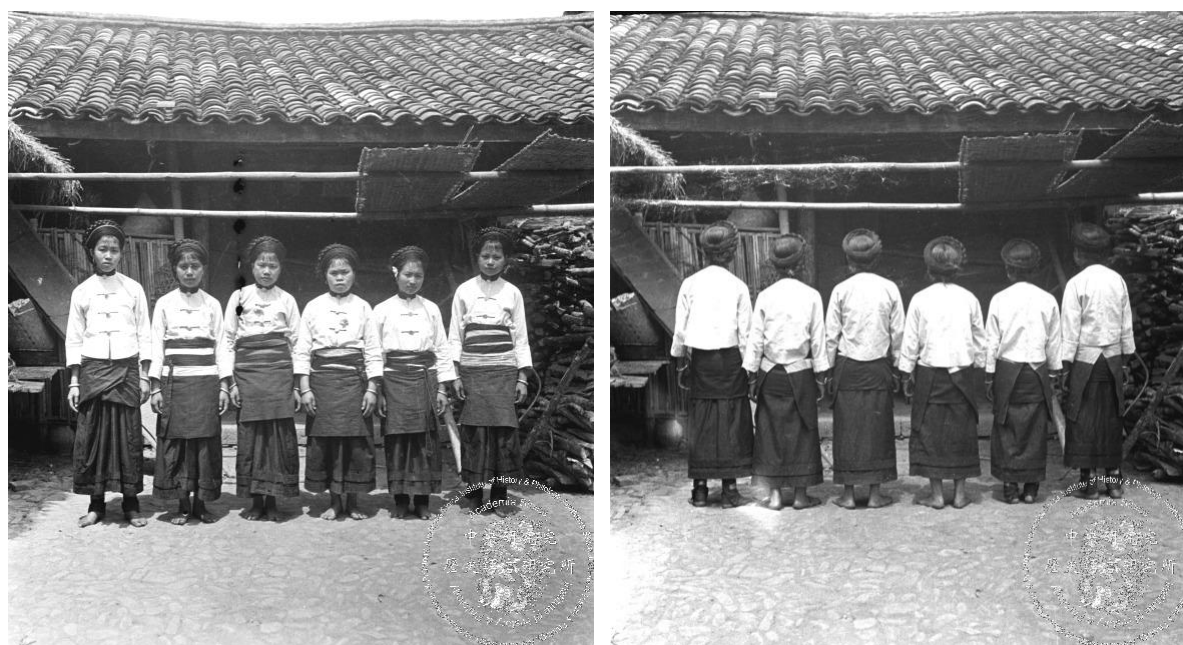
<sup>15</sup> Zheng (2016) and Zhu (2020) have examined other cases of ethnographic visual representations in late imperial and Republican China.

<sup>16</sup> Cheung (2003) studies a similar case about the struggles between intellectuals and the Republican regime on the question of the identity of Miao communities.

<sup>17</sup> Scholars have examined Ling Chunsheng's work with regards to the imagination of the ethnic and national identities (Mullaney, 2010; Wang, 2019) and the "domestication" of anthropological methods (Liang, 2016; Wang, 2018). Less analysed is the implication of his anthropological writing on the meaning of landscape.

Ling had studied ethnology at the University of Paris under the tutelage of Marcel Mauss. By the mid-1930s, he was already renowned for his monograph *Hezhe People along the Songhua River* (*Songhua jiang shang de Hezhe ren*) published in 1934. With more than 330 photos, this ethnography encompasses the material, spiritual, familial, and social aspects of life of Hezhe people living in North-eastern China near the Sino-Soviet border. A book review speaks highly of Ling Chunsheng's comprehensive study of frontier ethnic groups, an enterprise previously only undertaken by foreigners (Rui, 1934). Along with the state's change in political priorities in the 1930s, Ling's fieldwork site was transferred to Southwest China. Similar to the methods of Ding Wenjiang, Ling also sought opportunities to produce photographic representations of ethnic groups (Figure 2). However, he was not a biological anthropologist absorbed in the measurement of physical bodies. The photographer's camera also wandered through people's houses, markets, religious rites, etc., capturing the living space and activities of a *baiyi* village (Figure 3, below). These photos need to be understood in the anthropological discourses that Ling borrowed from his trainings in the West and reproduced in the ethnographic field in his home country.

**Figure 1. Portraits of Baiyi Girls in Zhefang township, Yunnan, April 1935**



Yong, 1935, Registration number 00000043, 00000044.

Figure 2. *Buddhist Rites of Baiyi People, April 1935*



Yong, 1935, Registration number 00000073, 00000061.

Capturing details of *baiyi* people's villages and ways of life did not automatically imply an appreciative attitude. On the contrary, in a treatise based on his stay in Mengding, a *baiyi* village, Ling comments that southern Yunnan was an undeveloped region and proposes a scheme for development (*kaifa*). In these low-lying valleys to the southwest of the Red River, Ling finds only *baiyi* villages, for Han people usually did not dare settle down. The only obstacle to development, according to him, was the rumour of unhealthy *zhangqi* (tropical miasma) (Ling, 1938). He ridicules how people invented all kinds of tropical miasmas, named "leech miasma, crab miasma, toad miasma," etc., and spread the saying that "only the poorest and the most desperate venture to realms of *baiyi* people" (p.21).<sup>18</sup> He reads these old tales as superstitions that cast a negative influence on the development of tropical areas, hindering projects of migration and the reclamation and cultivation of wasteland.

To the anthropologist's eyes, the mystified tropical miasma was but malaria, an endemic disease transmitted by mosquitoes, which commonly inhabited places with certain topographic and climatic features. The environment, however, could be engineered to eliminate the disease and transform the area into a prosperous landscape. Southern Yunnan had a climate with extreme heat and humidity, but other famous malaria regions with comparable tropical landscapes, such as British India, French Indochina, and Southeast Asia's archipelagos, all provided successful examples of transformation. Human efforts could not change temperature, nor the amount of rainfall, but they had the capacity to ameliorate irrigation systems, drain

<sup>18</sup> For the controversial statement of indigenous people's natural immunity, see Bello (2005)

marshlands, cut down trees, and open up farmland, thus eradicating the habitat of mosquitoes. In addition to restyling the landscape, Ling suggests that people also need to launch a hygienic movement in every private household to prevent mosquitoes from reproducing inside houses. Modern medical equipment and preventive healthcare measures should also be introduced to improve people's living standards (Ling, 1938).

The movement to demystify and eradicate tropical miasma, in Ling's vision, would be a prolonged battle requiring people's heedfulness and persistence, just like the embankment of the Yellow River over centuries of Chinese history to cope with its frequent and devastating floods and course changes. Indigenous people, however, were not seen as competent enough to undertake this feat. In Ling's eyes, *baiyi* had long engaged in sedentary agriculture, yet they had failed to advance their techniques. Possibly influenced by Huntington's theory of environmental determinism (1924) then popular with the Chinese intelligentsia, Ling argues that in the tropical valleys, because the fertile lands did not require much care to yield good harvests, people became lazy. They did not know how to dig ditches for drainage, nor did they construct durable roads. Ling saw it as a failure that the *baiyi* people had made no progress in transforming their natural landscape, even though the region had been annexed into Chinese territory during the Ming dynasty six hundred years previously. In comparison, Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, once similarly infamous lands of tropical miasma, had been transformed into prosperous regions. These provinces comprised large numbers of Han-Chinese migrants. Ling thus expected that Han-Chinese migrants could also be brought to southern Yunnan to reclaim and cultivate the tropical marshlands (Ling, 1938).<sup>19</sup> It was no coincidence that at the very time of Ling's surveying and writing, with China's official declaration of war against Japanese invasion in 1937 and the central government's retreat into the interior, people and financial resources flooded into the southwestern hinterland (Kinzley, 2012). The development of this tropical landscape from an unruly land of miasma to a bedrock of wartime economy was anticipated to shortly arrive.

Development through introducing Han-Chinese migrants and landscape engineering held strong allure for intellectuals anxious about China's territorial integrity, which was under threat from both Western imperialism and the lurking discourse of pan-Tai nationalism disseminated by the Siamese/Thai state (Chan, 2019). Indigenous peoples in the Southwest, it was demanded, should become citizens of the Republic and the backbone in the war against Japan (Ling, 1940). Alongside the transfiguration of *baiyi* people, who spoke and wrote in Tai and professed a belief in Buddhism, into the imagined community of the Chinese nation, environmental obstacles had to likewise be tackled. Irrigated farming and other environment-modifying projects that

---

<sup>19</sup> Similar processes were also taking place in Northwestern China. See Muscolino (2010).



turned “raw lands” into “cooked lands,”<sup>20</sup> in turn, necessitated state planning and boosted the “sinifying (*hanhua*)” of ethnic groups through migration and cultural assimilation (Ling, 1940, p.331).

Ling’s anthropology was premised upon a linear progressive vision of history, which judged *baiyi* society to be primitive and their lands underdeveloped – a view which was by no means exceptional among elite intellectuals of the time.<sup>21</sup> This vision was, to a large extent, intrinsically embodied in the vocation of early twentieth-century anthropology. Looking back into human pasts, examples of which were supposed to be still extant in outlying tribal groups, was a way to confirm the achievements of the modern industrial civilization and to legitimize colonialist civilizing missions (Asad, 1973; Lewis, 1973). In a lecture entitled “Ethnology and Modern Culture” at the National Central University, Ling (1933) states that “from an ethnological point of view, humankind’s golden era is surely not in ancient times, but in the present or future times.” He believes that “in the future, human beings will not go back to stone artefacts, but will certainly use machines and scientific knowledge to improve their lives” (pp.40-46). This conception of historical progress foreshadowed his developmental discourse about frontier peoples and tropical landscapes in southern Yunnan.

## Learning from Tropical Landscapes: Anthropology as Cultural Critique

While Ling Chunsheng lamented Han people’s superstitious fear of miasma that left the tropical landscape of southern Yunnan underdeveloped, for Tian Rukang, Han people’s reluctance to settle in the region offered the very condition for *baiyi* people to continue to reside peacefully in this “peach blossom land” (*shiwai taoyuan*).<sup>22</sup> Before arriving in the town of Mangshi in southern Yunnan province where he carried out fieldwork, Tian studied at the National Southwestern Associated University in the provincial capital Kunming, under the tutelage of the first batch of Chinese sociologists and anthropologists including US-returned Wu Wenzao and Bronisław Malinowski’s student Fei Xiaotong.<sup>23</sup> Upon graduation in 1940, and before going to the Burma-

---

<sup>20</sup> The contrast between the raw and the cooked, the hill/forest people and the valley/flat-land people, people practicing shifting cultivation and people practicing sedentary agriculture, etc. is widely found in the context of Southeast Asia as well as other ethnographic fields (e. g. Lévi-Strauss, 1964). In imperial China this binary pair connotes the cooked (*shu*) as the civilizational centre and the raw (*sheng*) as the uncivilized periphery (Fiskesjö, 1999). While indigenous practices of shifting cultivation were previously termed “slash-and-burn” and accused of destructive impacts on the environment, recent scholarship has argued against this pejorative stance and confirmed its ecological and cultural value (Cairns, 2015). The controversy over Dai people’s Buddhist beliefs still exists today, see Borchert (2008).

<sup>21</sup> Other anthropologists who did research in this area during this period and held similar positions included Fang Guoyu (Fang, 1943) and Jiang Yingliang (Jiang, 2009 [1940s]). Many politicians, including Sun Yat-sen and Mao Tse-dong, and prominent scientists and technical experts such as Zhu Kezhen, Weng Wenhao, etc. also shared this vision to some extent. See Wang (2007) and Shen (2013).

<sup>22</sup> A familiar expression in Chinese depicting an ideal existence in harmony with nature and in seclusion from the outside world.

<sup>23</sup> There are few critical discussions about Tian Rukang’s works. Zhang (2020) mentions his later career in the context of the introduction of Western historiography into China. For an account of the career of Tian see Zhang



Yunnan frontier with funding from the Ministry of Education and the Agricultural Bank of China, Tian had joined the Yenching-Yunnan Station for Sociological Research and his early works focused on the topic of female manufacturing workers (Shi, 1946).

The tropical landscape and rhythm of life of the *baiyi* people must have struck Tian as being radically different from what he experienced in the factories in Kunming. He depicts the landscape poetically: “When you look down from a high point, you can see the undulating grasses, the intermittent banyan trees, and the scattered fields and huts” (Tian, 2008, p.75). This stretch of flat plain surrounded by mountains enjoyed not only beautiful scenery but also fertile land, where people cultivated rice and always enjoyed good harvests. Famine seldom occurred, which was evident in the fact that no worship of the “god of land” or “god of grain” existed, and the surplus was all devoted to making the *bai* ritual, so evocatively described by Tian at the opening of this paper (Tian, 2008, p.77).

Tian recalls that during his sojourn, he soon lost his fear of the tropical miasma and wild animals such as snakes. Furthermore, he describes how he came to lose “all inland people’s cultural self-confidence,” seeing rather in this remote border town a superior and actually existing utopia (Tian, 1943, pp.115-16). Tian lists four main rationales why *baiyi* life was preferable to modern urban life. Firstly, *baiyi* people were not as idle as many urban modernizers accused them of being. Quite the contrary, they laboured hard from early in the morning to tend to their crops in the fields and graze cattle along the rivers and mountains, often leaving the village empty. Yet work was confined to the daytime. In the evening, elder people visited the Buddhist temple, middle-aged people sat together to chat, and young people went outside to play. This balanced rhythm of life was ideal. Secondly, *baiyi* people’s life followed a fixed course from birth to death, and at each stage, their responsibilities were predetermined by their society. They thus held an attitude of certitude and contentment towards life. With belief in Buddhism, they did not even fear death. Thirdly, they enjoyed an exceptional environment and used the gifts of nature well, to the extent that no one suffered from hunger. Fourthly, as there was no competition for living space and resources, people were all very kind and generous. Consequently, a person’s social status was not judged by his or her material possessions, but by charitable donations to the community (Tian, 1943).

Tian acknowledges that agronomists would disapprove of *baiyi*’s lack of management of their lands as a waste of natural endowments and inefficient use of time. The climate here allowed double-season rice planting, but the *baiyi* practice allowed for a fallow period and they grew rice only once a year or even one time every second years. They

---

(2014). Contemporary anthropologists in China have realized the importance of Tian’s fieldwork and have conducted revisits to Yunnan (Wang, 2021).

did not weed or apply fertilizers after transplanting rice seedlings to the paddy fields. Acknowledging their contentment with a simple life, Tian writes: “why bother when people can stay leisurely and carefree, doing nothing but sitting around and watching weeds growing on the fields?” (Tian, 2008, p.82). Tian considers it a good thing that the social customs among *baiyi* people put a limit on the pursuit of material wealth beyond subsistence, so that instances of huge wealth gaps and the strong taking advantage of the weak could not occur. This constraint on people’s excessive desires not only sustained the harmony of *baiyi* society but also prevented the decrease of nature’s treasures (Tian, 2008, p.82).

For Tian, *baiyi* life represents the antithesis of modern life. He finds in the “frontier wasteland” (*bianhuang*) peace of mind that people in the East always longed for, while modern Western-style urban life, with a swarm of material stimuli, shocks, and uncertainties, only made people feel frenzied and empty like lab rats and had long drowned him in melancholy. He gradually took delight in the tropical landscape, and grew increasingly respectful towards *baiyi* culture (1943, p.115). In his analysis, the religious ritual of *bai* played a critical role in harmonizing society. In line with Malinowski’s functionalist school’s interpretation of religion, in which he was trained, Tian proposes that the faith in *bai* and in each person’s transcendence to the Land of Ultimate Bliss after death, though seemingly unbelievable from a modern scientific point of view, was nonetheless something concrete for *baiyi* people. People’s zeal for *bai* made them assured of themselves and charitable towards others. Selfish desires for wealth did not prevail. Therefore, feasts related to *bai* were not an irrational waste of money, but played a critical function, ensuring an agreeable life and the community’s solidarity. Modern social and political institutions, in comparison, were much less “functional,” given that social welfare only relieved a little bit of suffering and left a huge wealth gap, and education only further excluded disadvantaged people from the system (Tian, 2008, pp.99-104). Tian’s analysis reversed the linear vision of historical progress that pinned non-modern societies as humanity’s primitive past. Instead, the tropical landscape was a place that helped him, a young man disillusioned with modern society, to de-learn the colonial regime and re-learn the value of social and environmental well-being.

However, his message was easily overlooked under the era’s zeitgeist for development. Although Tian’s functionalist theorization helps bring religion’s value to the foreground, in his mentor, social anthropologist Fei Xiaotong’s (1910-2005) preface to his ethnography, it is assumed that other social institutions could serve as “functional substitutes” and fulfill the same purpose of social integration. In other words, the entanglement of people, religion, and landscape could potentially be unbound and rearranged into a different social form. Fei even suggests that the police system was one experiment in modern society to replace the function of Buddhist statues in *baiyi* societies and Confucian classics in Han societies to regulate and guide people’s

behaviours (Fei, 2008, p.10). Fei further proposes that anthropology should be open-minded and study non-religious social institutions, including humanism (*renben zhuyi*) in China and materialism (*wuben zhuyi*) in the contemporary West. He believes that it is only in this way that anthropology can avoid ending up as antiquarianism and a backward science only interested in primitive peoples (*chumin*) (Fei, 2008, p.12). Here, in Fei's understanding, Tian's appraisal of the "primitive" not as a distant past but as a creative source of good civilization in the future was quickly diluted, overwhelmed by the more compelling drive towards modernity.<sup>24</sup>

In the eyes of fellow colleagues, the merit of Tian Rukang's work was reduced merely to his methodological rigor – the empiricism and rigorous causal inference exemplary of modern social sciences. A typical review was written by sociologist Li Jinghan (1894-1986). Li's own trip to the same tropical area in 1938 gave him the impression that *baiyi* people lived a peaceful and harmonious life in a beautiful environment. At first, he attributed this condition to their relatively egalitarian social system (Li, 1940). After reading Tian's work, he was amazed by Tian's scientific investigation and fidelity to facts. Therefore, Li felt obliged to comply with Tian's conclusions about the role of religion. In addition to the contribution to research methods, Li talks about the book's significance for frontier governance. As the Burma Road provided China's only wartime overland communication abroad, Li finds it regrettable that little was known about the indigenous societies along the road. Ethnography, in this light, would be a useful means to learn about diverse peoples and resources (Li, 1942). Implicit in Li's discourse is that the road would incorporate *baiyi* people and tropical landscapes more closely to the governance and economy of the Republican state, and intellectuals with expertise in social surveys and ethnography had the responsibility to serve as the pioneers in this enterprise.

### Road to the Outside World: An 'Indigenous' Perspective

It was certainly inaccurate to say that *baiyi* people lived in complete seclusion from the outside world and therefore retained traditional ways of life until the mid-twentieth century. In fact, it was common for them to seek short-term work in nearby Han people's villages when they did not need to take care of their own crops. Many had travelled to Burma and seen modern facilities like electric lights and broadcasting. However, according to Tian Rukang, "they do not necessarily appreciate Western-style houses and tall buildings. We cannot convince *baiyi* girls to wear fine evening dresses. Nor do *baiyi* drink whisky. For them, these things are incomparable to the comfort brought by a practical jacket made of white handwoven cloth or a refreshing

---

<sup>24</sup> Lam (2010)'s study of the establishment of modern police system in late Qing China convincingly shows how the image of the police was regarded as one of the signs of advanced modern civilization.

bowl of local alcohol” (Tian, 2008, p.80). The improvement of living standards and level of consumption did not seem to be desirable.

The Burma Road, opened in 1938, was by all means transformative to *baiyi* communities and the tropical landscape (Yang, 2009). With the wartime pouring in of vehicles, experts, and Han immigrants, indigenous people were exposed to modern infrastructure facilities that claimed to bring progress to an unprecedented degree, as shown in a series of photos in *Young Companion* (Liangyou), the Shanghai-based popular pictorial in 1941 (Figure 4). Anti-malaria medical facilities, as Ling Chunsheng wished, were also introduced. These photos, however, took the perspective of metropolitan urbanists to capture spectacular and celebration-worthy scenes of modernization. What was often lost in historical archives of both ethnography and journalism was the lived experiences and voices of local people, which did not necessarily perceive development as the only value to pursue.

Figure 3. *Burma Road Functioning Well in spite of Constant Bombings*



Unknown photographer, 1941, p.63.

A short story entitled “Mangshi: Foams in Turbulent Currents” appearing in 1944 in the Chongqing-based *Pioneers of Overseas Chinese* (Huaqiao xianfeng), a journal of the Overseas Department of the governing Nationalist Party targeting overseas Chinese readers, captured the feeling of restlessness engendered by the encounter between



indigenous culture and the imposition of a modernizing ethos. Such a piece written in the Chinese language and published in a journal associated with the ruling party does not transparently reflect a *baiyi* perspective, and it is difficult to speculate who the writer under the pseudonym Yuelan is, or why he/she wrote this fictional piece.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, it offers some clues about how people might understand and deal with this new situation of increasing contact between different ethnic groups, cultures, and landscapes.

The protagonist, a *baiyi* girl named Xiaobao, left home with a truck driver on the Burma Road. She was enticed by nice restaurants and luxurious hotels newly established in town, as well as goods indicative of personal wealth. She started to despise agricultural labour, the habit of chewing betel nut, and the local fashion of painting teeth in black. In Lashio, Burma, she wore fashionable modern clothes, and realized her own beauty for the first time, “like a Western woman” (Yuelan, 1944, p.52). However, just a few days later, her lover went into prison, leaving her no means by which to live. She went home with the help of another driver from the same village. Back at home, no one seemed to have noticed her departure, since everyone was busy with the preparation for New Year. Sitting around and doing nothing, she gradually felt bored. In the end, changing back into *baiyi* clothes, she started husking rice again, and concluded that her hometown, with simple dishes and bamboo-made houses, was still the better choice for her life (Yuelan, 1944).

It is revealing that Xiaobao was attracted by a truck driver, who received special prestige as roads and automobiles became the symbol of wealth and Western modernity. Becoming a “modern girl,” she was also enlightened about “beauty,” which was built upon material consumption. But Xiaobao was too naïve in believing that a luxurious life had no price. Fortunate for her, a person from her own village was able to help her return, so that she was not driven to low-paid labour or prostitution. This image of the modern girl is more telling of male anxieties about nationhood and gender ideologies during this period and should not be taken at face value.<sup>26</sup> However, with an imaginative edge, this fictional piece also touched on feelings of alienation and loss of certitude in face of urban modernity. Its ending, the unexpected return of Xiaobao, questioned whether indeed everyone desired modernization and development, and alluded to the possibility of indigenous people making their own choices of how to inhabit the world.

---

<sup>25</sup> The writer, whose penname is Yuelan, also wrote several pieces about the labour movement and labour rights for the Chongqing-based journal *Labour in China* (*Zhongguo laodong*). But it is difficult to obtain more information about him/her.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Sarah (2003).



## Conclusion: Resistance of the Tropical Landscape

This paper juxtaposes three anthropologists' (amateur and professional) representations of *baiyi* people and the tropical landscape that they inhabited during the Republican period in China (1912-1949). Among them, Ding Wenjiang and Ling Chunsheng were government agents with influence in both the intelligentsia and policymaking. Their works manifested the modern intellectuals' firm belief in science as a superior way of knowing and a transformative force to reshape cultures and landscapes to make peoples and lands an integral part of the modern nation-state and its economy. Tian Rukang's voice was less known and, to an extent, misunderstood by his contemporaries and remains underestimated today.<sup>27</sup> His fieldwork suggests the radical alterity of the *baiyi* way of life, where religion, labour and leisure, human beings and tropical landscape formed a harmonious whole, and from which much could be learned. His message, however, was shunned by his colleagues who were preoccupied with social and landscape engineering for the pursuit of progress and development.

In addition, the paper uses the fictional piece about a *baiyi* girl as an example of a hidden transcript (Scott, 1992) that potentially challenged mainstream anthropological representations. That the boundary between a *baiyi* village and the foreign world was constantly crossed suggests that the tropical landscape was never stagnant or unchanging. Instead, indigenous subjects' own encounters with other kinds of societies and landscapes continued to shape their understandings of place-making and community well-being in the world.

---

<sup>27</sup> One reason is his discontinuation of anthropological studies, a discipline removed after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

## References

- Asad, T. (Ed.). (1973). *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*. Humanities Press.
- Bello, D. (2005). To go where no Han could go for long: Malaria and the Qing construction of ethnic administrative space in frontier Yunnan. *Modern China*, 31, 283–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700404274039>
- Bello, D. (2016). *Across forest, steppe, and mountain: Environment, identity, and empire in Qing China's borderlands*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107706095>
- Blum, S. D. (2001). *Portraits of "primitives": Ordering human kinds in the Chinese nation*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Borchert, T. (2008). Worry for the Dai nation: Sipsongpannā, Chinese modernity, and the problems of Buddhist modernism. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 67(1), 107–42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911808000041>
- Burma road functioning well in spite of constant bombings. (1941). *Liangyou* 良友, 162, 63.
- Cairns, M. F. (Ed.). (2015). *Shifting cultivation and environmental change: Indigenous people, agriculture and forest conservation*. Routledge.
- Chan, Y. (2019). Ethnicity and frontier studies in southwest China: Pan-Thai nationalism and the wartime debate on national identity, 1932–1945. *Twentieth-Century China*, 44 (3), 324–344. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2019.0033>
- Chapman, E. C. (1991). The expansion of rubber in southern Yunnan, China. *The Geographical Journal*, 157(1), 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/635142>
- Cheung, S. (2003). Miao Identities, Indigenism and the Politics of Appropriation in Southwest China during the Republican Period. *Asian Ethnicity*, 4(1), 85–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360301649>
- Chiu, F. Y. L. (1997). Re-reading the “Taiwan studies” of a Japanese colonial anthropology: A proposal for re-evaluation 日本殖民地人類學“台灣研究”的重讀與再評價. *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies* 台灣社會研究季刊, 28, 145–174. <https://doi.org/10.29816/TARQSS.199712.0004>
- Clifford, J. (1988). *The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674503724>
- Colquhoun, A. R. (1885). *Amongst the Shans*. London: Field and Tuer etc.
- Cohen, B. S. (1996). *Colonialism and Its forms of knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton University Press.
- Culp, R., Eddy, U., & Yeh, W. (Eds.) (2016). *Knowledge acts in modern China: Ideas, institutions, and identities*. Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.
- Ding, W. [丁文江]. (1933). Manyou sanji (shisan): Yunnan de tuzhu renzhong 漫遊散記 (十三): 雲南的土著人種 [Travel journal 13: Aboriginal peoples in Yunnan]. *Duli pinglun* 獨立評論, 34, 14–20.
- Dirlik, A., Li, G., & Yen, H. (Eds.) (2012). *Sociology and anthropology in twentieth-century China: Between universalism and indigenism*. Chinese University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1p9wr0v>
- Dodd, W. C. (1923). *The Tai race, elder brother of the Chinese*. The Torch Press.

- Duara, P. (2009). § 7. The Nationalization of Anthropology: Japan and China in Manchuria. In E. Tagliacozzo & A. Willford (Eds.), *Clio/anthropos: Exploring the boundaries between history and anthropology* (pp. 187-222). Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1126/stanford/9780804760201.003.0007>
- Edwards E. (Ed.). (1991). *Anthropology and photography, 1860-1920*. Yale University Press.
- Eysenck, S. B. G., & Chang, J. K. (2017). *Industrial development in pre-Communist China, 1912-1949*. Routledge.
- Fabian, J. (1983). *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. Columbia University Press.
- Falconer, J. (2002). "A pure labour of love": A publishing history of *the people of India*. In E. M. Hight & G. D. Sampson (Eds.), *Colonialist photography: Imag(in)ing race and place* (pp. p.64-96). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315015262>
- Fan, F. (2004). *British naturalists in Qing China: Science, empire, and cultural encounter*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674036680>
- Fan, Y. [范燕秋]. (2012). Taiwan natural history society in the early period of Japanese colonial rule: Japanese naturalist and construction of Taiwan natural history 日治初期的臺灣博物學會—日本博物學家與臺灣自然史的建構. *Bulletin of Taiwan Historical Research, NTNU 師大臺灣史學報*, 5, 3-39. <https://doi.org/10.29883/BTHRNTNU.201212.0001>
- Fang G. [方國瑜]. (1943). *Dianxi bianqu kaocha ji 滇西邊區考察記 [Surveys of the frontier region in Western Yunnan]*. Yunnan daxue xinan wenhua yanjiu shi [雲南大學文化研究室].
- Fei, Xiaotong [費孝通]. (2008 [1946]). Xu 序 [Preface]. In Tian Rukang, *Mangshi bianmin de bai 芒市邊民的擺 [The bai ritual of frontier people in Mangshi]* (pp.1-12). Yunnan renmin [雲南人民出版社].
- Fiskesjö, M. (1999). On the "raw" and the "cooked" barbarians of imperial China. *Inner Asia*, 1(2), 139–168. <https://doi.org/10.1163/146481799793648004>
- Furth, C. (1970). *Ting Wen-chiang: Science and China's new culture*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674332980>
- Garnier, F. (1873). *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine, effectué pendant les années 1866, 1867 et 1868 par une commission française présidée par M. le capitaine de frégate, Doudart de Lagrée*. Hachette.
- Giersch, C. P. (2006). *Asian borderlands: The transformation of Qing China's Yunnan frontier*. Harvard University Press.
- Harraway, D. (2015). "Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin." *Environmental Humanities*, 6, 159-165. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934>
- Hechter, M. (1975). *Internal colonialism: The Celtic fringe in British national development, 1536–1966*. Routledge.
- Hevia, J. (1995). *Cherishing men from afar: Qing guest ritual and the Macartney embassy of 1793*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822396284>
- Hostetler, L. (2001). *Qing colonial enterprise*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Huntington, E. (1924). *Civilization and climate*. Yale University Press.

- Jiang, Y. [江應樑]. (2008 [1940s]). *Baiyi de jingji wenhua shenghuo 擺夷的經濟文化* 生活 [The economic and cultural life of baiyi people]. Yunnan renmin [雲南人民出版社].
- Kinzley, J. C. (2012). Crisis and the development of China's southwestern periphery: The transformation of Panzhihua, 1936-1969. *Modern China*, 38(5), 559–584. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700411436227>
- Lam, T. (2010). Policing the imperial nation: Sovereignty, international law, and the civilizing mission in Late Qing China. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 52 (4), 881-908. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417510000496>
- Lam, T. (2011). *A passion for facts: Social surveys and the construction of the Chinese nation-state, 1900–1949*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520267862.001.0001>
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1964). *Totemism*. Merlin Press.
- Lewis, D. (1973). Anthropology and colonialism. *Current Anthropology*, 14(5), 581–602. <https://doi.org/10.1086/201393>
- Li, J. [李景漢]. (1940). Baiyi renmin zhi shenghuo chengdu yu shehui zuzhi 擺夷人民之生活程度與社會組織 [Living standards and social organization of baiyi people]. *Xinan bianjiang 西南邊疆*, 11, 1-19.
- Li, J. [李景漢]. (1940). Baiyi de bai 擺夷的擺 [The bai ritual of baiyi people]. *Bianzheng gongbao 邊政公報*, 1(7-8), 51-62.
- Lin, H. (2009). The tributary system in China's historical imagination: China and Hunza, ca. 1760-1960. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 19(4), 489-507. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186309990071>
- Liang, H. (2016). Chinese anthropology and its domestication projects: Dewesternization, Bentuhua and overseas ethnography. *Social Anthropology*, 24(4), 462-475. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12307>
- Ling, C. [凌純聲]. (1933). Minzuxue yu xiandai wenhua (xu) 民族學與現代文化 [Ethnology and modern culture]. *Guofeng 國風*, 2(1), 40-46.
- Ling, C. [凌純聲]. (1938). Mengding – dianbian yige zhangqu de dili yanjiu 孟定—滇邊一個瘴區的地理研究 [Mengding – geographical study of a miasma region on the border of Yunnan]. *Xinan bianjiang 西南邊疆*, 1, 20-26.
- Ling, C. [凌純聲]. (1940). Zhongguo yu suowei taizu zhi guanxi 中國與所謂泰族之關係 [The relationship between China and the so-called Tai race]. *Qingnian zhongguo jikan 青年中國季刊*, 1(2), 331-36.
- Liu, L. H. (Ed.). (1999). *Tokens of exchange: The problem of translation in global circulations*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381129>
- Maule, R. B. (1988). Review of Religious Cults of the Pai-i Along the Burma-Yunnan Border, by Ju-K'ang T'ien. *Pacific Affairs*, 61(2), 367–368. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2759345>
- Michaud J. (2007). *“Incidental” ethnographers: French catholic missions on the Tonkin-Yunnan frontier, 1880-1930*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004139961.i-286>
- Mitter, R. & Schneider, H. M. (2012). Introduction: Relief and reconstruction in wartime China. *European journal of East Asian studies*, 11(2), 179-186. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700615-20121103>



- Mueggler, E. (2011). *The paper road: Archive and experience in the botanical exploration of west China and Tibet*. University of California Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520950498>
- Mühlhahn, K. (2000). *Herrschaft und Widerstand in der "Musterkolonie" Kiautschou: Interaktionen zwischen China und Deutschland, 1897-1914*. Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag. <https://doi.org/10.1524/9783486713695>
- Mullaney, T. (2010). *Coming to terms with the nation: Ethnic classification in modern China*. University of California Press.
- Muscolino, M. S. (2010). Refugees, land reclamation, and militarized landscapes in wartime China: Huanglongshan, Shaanxi, 1937-45. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 69, 453-78. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911810000057>
- Pietz, D. A. (2002). *Engineering the state: The Huai River and reconstruction in Nationalist China, 1927-1937*. Routledge.
- Price, S. (2007). *Paris primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rogaski, R. (2008). *The people's Peking Man: Popular science and human identity in twentieth-century China*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rui [瑞]. (1934). Xinshu jieshao: Songhua jiang xiayou de Hezhe zu 新書介紹: 松花江下游的赫哲族 [New book: Hezhe people along the Songhua River]. *Tushu jikan 圖書季刊*, 1(4), 226.
- Ryan, J. R. (1997). *Picturing empire: photography and the visualization of the British empire*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Sarah, E. S. (2003). Figuring modernity: The new woman and the modern girl in Republican China. *NWSA Journal*, 15(3), 82-103.  
<https://doi.org/10.2979/NWS.2003.15.3.82>
- Scott, J. C. (1992). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.
- Shen, G. Y. (2013). *Unearthing the nation: Modern geology and nationalism in Republican China*. The University of Chicago Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226090542.001.0001>
- Shen, Y. (2021). Cultivating China's cinchona: The local developmental state, global botanic networks and cinchona cultivation in Yunnan, 1930s-1940s. *Social History of Medicine*, 34 (2), 577-591. <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkz099>
- Shi, G. [史國衡]. (1946). *Kunchang laogong 昆廠勞工 [Factory laborers in Kunming]*. Commercial Press [商務印書館].
- Song, N. (2012). "Tributary" from a multilateral and multilayered perspective. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5(2), 155-182.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pos005>
- Songster, E. E. (2003). Cultivating the nation in Fujian's forests: Forest policies and afforestation efforts in China, 1911-1937. *Environmental History*, 8, 452-73.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3986204>
- Terpak, F. (2009). The promise and power of new technologies: Nineteenth-century Algiers. In Z. Çelik, J. Clancy-Smith, & F. Terpak (Eds.), *Walls of Algiers: Narratives of the city through text and image* (pp. 87-133). Getty Research Institute.
- Tian, G. [田耕]. (2019). Zhongguo shehui yanjiu shi Zhong de xinan bianjiang diaocha: 1928-1947 中國社會研究史中的西南邊疆調查: 1928-1947 [Frontier



- surveys of the southwest in the history of Chinese social studies]. *Xuehai* 學海 2, 21-33.
- Tian, R. [田汝康] (T'ien, J.) (1943). Yi mangshi – biandi wenhua de sumiao 憶芒市—邊地文化的素描 [Memories of Mangshi: Sketch of the culture of a frontier land]. *Lüxing zazhi* 旅行雜誌, 17(3), 112-16.
- Tian, R. [田汝康] (T'ien, J.) (1986). *Religious Cults of the Pai-I along the Burma-Yunnan Border*. Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Monograph.
- Tian, R. [田汝康] (T'ien, J.) (2008 [1946]). *Mangshi bianmin de bai* 芒市邊民的擺 [The bai ritual of frontier people in Mangshi]. Yunnan renmin [雲南人民出版社].
- Van Bremen, J. & Shimizu, A. (Eds.). (1999). *Anthropology and colonialism in Asia and Oceania*. Curzon Press.
- Walker, A. R. (1989). Review of Religious Cults of the Pai-I along the Burma-Yunnan Border, by T. Ju-K'Ang. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 20(1), 144–147. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463400020105>
- Wang, H. [汪洪亮]. (2014). *Minguo shiqi de bianzheng yu bianzhengxue* 民國時期的邊政與邊政學 (1931-1948) [Frontier governance in Republican period (1931-1948)]. Renmin [人民出版社].
- Wang, L. (2019). Internal orientalizing or deorientalizing? Disciplinary conflicts and national imaginations in China, 1912–1949. *Modern China*, 46(4), 339–371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700419857522>
- Wang, M. (2018). The West in the East: Chinese anthropologies in the making. *Japanese review of cultural anthropology*, 18 (2), 91-123. [https://doi.org/10.14890/jrca.18.2\\_91](https://doi.org/10.14890/jrca.18.2_91)
- Wang, M. (2021). Inheritance and reflection: “re-study” of three anthropology fieldwork sites in China's Yunnan Province. *International journal of anthropology and ethnology*, 5 (9), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41257-021-00050-9>
- Wang, Z. (2007). Science and the state in Modern China. *Isis*, 98(3), 558–570. <https://doi.org/10.1086/521158>
- Weber, E. (1976). *Peasants into Frenchmen: The modernization of rural France, 1870-1914*. Princeton University Press.
- Williams, R. (1973). *The country and the city*. Chatto.
- Winichakul, T. (1997). *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of a nation*. University of Hawaii Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824841294>
- Wu, D. [吳定良]. (1936). Ding Zaijun xiansheng duiyu renleixue zhi gongxian 丁在君先生對於人類學之貢獻 [Ding Zaijun's contribution to anthropology]. *Duli pinglun* 獨立評論, 188, 28-29.
- Wu, G. (2019). *Narrating Southern Chinese minority: Nationalities, politics, disciplines, and public history*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6022-0>
- Wu, S. X. (2015). *Empires of coal: Fuelling China's entry into the modern world order, 1860-1920*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2016.0015>

- Yang, B. (2010). The “Zhang” on Chinese Southern Frontiers: Disease Constructions, Environmental Changes, and Imperial Colonization. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 84(2), 163–192. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.0.0336>
- Yang, W. [楊維真]. (2009). Commercial port, railway, and cultural interaction – A case of modern Yunnan 商埠、鐵路、文化交流—以近代雲南為中心的探討. *Fu Jen Historical Journal 輔仁歷史學報*, 24, 93-115. <https://doi.org/10.29439/FJHJ.200912.0003>
- Yeh, E. [葉爾建]. (2011) Networks and the environmental knowledge: A case of savage districts in Taiwan during the early Japanese administration 網絡與環境知識—以日治初期的臺灣蕃地為例. *Bulletin of the Geographical Society of China 中國地理學會會刊*, 47, 1-26. <https://doi.org/BGSC.201112.0001>
- Yen, H. (2019). Chapter 17 Anthropology. In H. Chiang (Ed.), *The making of the human sciences in China: Historical and conceptual foundations* (pp.354-373). Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004397620\\_019](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004397620_019)
- Yong, S. [勇士衡]. (1935). Untitled Photos. Registration number 00000043, 00000044, 00000073, 00000061. Zhongguo xinan shaoshu minzu ziliaoku 中國西南少數民族資料庫, Academia Sinica. [http://ndweb.iis.sinica.edu.tw/race\\_public/System/photo/introduction.htm](http://ndweb.iis.sinica.edu.tw/race_public/System/photo/introduction.htm)
- Yue, L. [約蘭]. (1944). Mangshi: jiliu zhong de paomo 芒市: 激流中的泡沫 [Mangshi: Foams in turbulent currents]. *Huaqiao xianfeng 華僑先鋒*, 6(2), 54-57.
- Zhang, F. [張鳳岐]. (1939). Xianluo gaiming Taiguo yu Zhongguo xinan taizu zhi qiantu 暹羅改名泰國與中國西南泰族之前途 [Siam's name change to Thai and the future of Tai peoples in southwestern China]. *Xin dongxiang 新動向*, 3 (4): 12-18.
- Zhang, Z. [張梓軒]. (2014). Tian Rukang xueshu shi yanjiu 田汝康學術史研究 [A study of Tian Rukang's academic career]. Master's Thesis, Shaanxi Normal University.
- Zheng, Y. (2016). (Un)Signifying ethnicity in Republican China: State-sponsored ethnographic photographs from the 1930s and 1940s. *Self and Nation* 7(1), 1-17. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0007.105>
- Zheng, Z. [趙崢]. (2021). The art of seeking state governance: The petition activities of representatives of the “Yi ethnic group” in Southwest China in the 1930s era 尋求國家統治的藝術：1930年代西南「夷族」代表的請願活動. *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica 近代史研究所集刊*, 112, 55-99. <https://doi.org/10.6353/BIMHAS>
- Zhigong tu 職貢圖 [Illustrations of tributaries]. (ca.1751-1795). Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France. <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb444796527>
- Zhu, J. (2020). *Visualising ethnicity in the southwest borderlands: Gender and representation in late imperial and Republican China*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004422766>
- Zhuang, J. [莊吉發]. (1989). Xiesui zhigong tu manwen tushuo jiaozhu 謝遂《職貢圖》滿文圖說校註 [Notes to the Manchurian texts on Xie Sui's 'Illustrations of Tributaries']. Guoli gugong bowuyuan 國立故宮博物院.

---

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank members of the Ecographers writing and reading group at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Toronto for helping me sharpen my arguments. An earlier version of this paper was presented 29 May - 2 June 2019, at the international conference “The Nature of Health, the Health of Nature” in Beijing cosponsored by Renmin University of China and Rachel Carson Centre for Environment and Society. I am grateful to the conference organizers for this opportunity to share my ideas and all the conference participants for their generous feedback. I also very much appreciate the insightful comments from two anonymous reviewers and the warm encouragement of the *eTropic* journal editor.

**Qieyi Liu** is a PhD Candidate in East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada, specializing in modern Chinese history and culture. Her research examines the frictional yet productive encounters between translated Western biological sciences and literati and folk knowledge and practices of nature in late nineteenth and early twentieth century China. Trained in sociology and cultural history, she is more broadly interested in exploring diverse ways of nature-culture entanglements in historical archives, literature, ethnography, and everyday practices.