Dance, Or Else: The Politics of Ethnic Culture on China's Southwest Borders

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An American researcher examines how the requirements of political assimilation have threatened the unique culture of China's Tai minority, and the Tai response.

Fields and hills in western Sipsongpanna

In 1997 I arrived on China's southwest borders planning to spend a year researching ethnic minority folklore. The only problem, as I discovered when I arrived, was that there didn't appear to be any.

Instead, government culture bureaus and Chinese entrepreneurs had turned the region into an adults-only playground for tourists—most of them male Chinese urbanites traveling in groups. Sipsongpanna, Yunnan was peopled with dancing women in tight sarongs, swaying palm trees, exotic fruits and peacocks. Perhaps equally important were plentiful and inexpensive alcohol, drugs, gambling, jade and sex workers. While many tourists visiting southern Yunnan province came for the illicit pleasures, they spent their days attending performances staged for Chinese and foreign tourists—living dioramas in state-run "ethnic theme parks," dances in "ethnic dining halls," reconstituted "living ethnic villages" and the like.

But these performances were not just the product of commodified tourist shtick, as they might have been elsewhere. They were also official policy: direct outgrowths of the government's intervention over decades in creating, pruning and regulating public expressions of minority ethnic identity.

At first I concluded, as many visitors to the region had before me, that these plastic performances—swaying girls in tight dresses, peacocks in overcrowded zoos and deforested green hills—were all that was left of local culture. However, while many ethnic minorities in Sipsongpanna participated and profited from the state-approved marketing of their ethnic identity, behind the scenes was simultaneously a roiling debate among some ethnic minorities about who they were and what their "real" culture was and should be. In hundreds of temples springing up across the region, senior monks were initiating new monks and reviving nearly obliterated Buddhist traditions. Young men were writing and performing rock songs about social issues in the minority language for crowds of thousands.

Women oral poets were performing epic oral narrations in minority languages for crowds of thousands.

However, it required persistence to gain access to this subterranean ethnic culture. Ethnic revival in China, I learned, had to be done carefully, below the government's radar, in order to avoid political repercussions.

Understanding the strange gap between the "front stage" of performances for tourism and the "back stage" of ethnic revival in Yunnan took time. Eventually, it also required slipping back in time in order to understand the context in which this gap had first appeared. I had come to Jinghong to study folklore, but found it could not be separated from this context of modernization, contest and debate. The book I eventually wrote was titled Song and Silence, because while my clunky field tape recorder captured a lot of songs, I soon found there were many silences—things that could not be said, or would not be said, about the realities of life as a Tai in China.

The Place

Ethnic minority groups, some of which once had independent or semi-independent states, occupy China's national borders and much of its arable land. Sipsongpanna, as the Tai call it, is one of the smallest such regions, but because of a tourist boom in the late 1990s it is one of the best known within China.

Xishuangbanna Dai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture ("Xishuangbanna Daizu zizhizhou", its Chinese name) lies on the southern tip of Yunnan Province, on the borders of Burma and Laos. The subtropical, mountainous region covers about 7,400 square miles. Sipsongpanna's contemporary name comes from a sixteenth-century Tai Lüe name, Muang Sipsongpanna, which literally means "the city-state of twelve townships." Administratively, Xishuangbanna is divided into three counties: Jinghong County, with Jinghong as the prefectural capital; Meng Hai County to the west, bordering on Burma; and Meng La County to the east, bordering on Laos.

Map of Xishuangbanna Dai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture (Sipsongpanna) (http://www.japanfocus.org/data/xishuangbanna_road_new%5B1%5D.rev.pdf)

Map by John Emerson

The region has an ethnically diverse population of roughly one million. Over a third are Tai Lüe, another third are Han Chinese, and the last third are made up of a number of other ethnic minorities. These include the variously named Akha (in Chinese, "Aini" or "Hani"), Blang (in Chinese, "Bulang"), Karen (in Chinese, "Jinuo"), Wa, Yao, Hmong (in Chinese, "Miao"), Lahu, Khmu and others. Official counts of the number of ethnic groups in Sipsongpanna range from 13 to 16. The Tai are valley-dwellers who cultivate wet rice and practice Theravada Buddhism.

Rice fields in a Tai Lue village in Ganlanba (Meng Han), Sipsongpanna

Before what the Chinese Communist Party refers to as its "liberation" of Sipsongpanna in 1953, the

Tai Lüe here formed a small kingdom that was partially colonized by a series of Chinese empires, but from day-to-day was largely left to run itself and to form its own alliances with neighboring states. [1]

Map of major Tai towns in the Mekong delta (http://www.japanfocus.org/data/major_tai_towns__revised.pdf)

Map by John Emerson

After "liberation," contacts with those across the new Chinese borders were restricted. Projects aiming to reform land ownership, political systems, agriculture, education and local culture, all run by Beijing, created a new sense of the Tai Lüe as subordinates within the new nation. Minorities like the Tai Lüe benefited by receiving electricity, medical care, new roads and other improvements, but they were always junior comrades, sometimes "little brother minorities."

By the time I reached Jinghong in 1997, it was a mid-sized town undergoing major changes. A tourist boom had hit the region. In the years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, central planners took a new tack in border regions, aiming to better incorporate them into the state via economic development. Yunnan and some other regions were chosen for the targeted development of a national tourism industry.

But with Sipsongpanna's state-inspired tourism boom came waves of new migrants: Han Chinese from other rural areas and sometimes from the cities looking for new economic opportunities. In 1999, Mette Halskov Hansen reported that while Han made up less than one-third of the population of Sipsongpanna, they made up 48 percent of the residents in Jinghong, the region's capital. She adds, "Since only those who are registered as having permanently moved to Sipsong Panna are counted in these statistics the actual proportion of Han Chinese is considerably higher." [2]

The new migrants had Chinese-language skills, education and capital that made them stronger competitors than local minorities for jobs and businesses serving the tourist market. They brought with them a flood of Chinese-language music, books, films and culture that dwarfed the meager local government productions in Tai Lüe language. While some embraced the change, other ethnic minorities feared total assimilation into the Han Chinese mainstream.

Dean MacCannell calls tourist shows the "front stage" of the industry. [3] In order to attract tourists to southwest China, local and national governments had to reinvent the previously unstable borderlands and make them a space of play. Traveling in Jinghong, visitors could see theme parks that turned local ethnic peoples into objects of visual pleasure. They could see dance shows set to new Chinese pop tunes in ethnic-themed restaurants, villages turned into round-the-clock showcases, elephants, peacocks and more. Many people in China are taught in primary school to sing songs about southwestern minorities and develop deep feelings of nostalgia about those peoples. Louisa Schein and Dru Gladney have rightly called this constructed identity "internal orientalism." Like all identities, it is constructed; in this case, as part of the twin processes of nation-building and a vast, coordinated land-grab.

The Need for Unification

In 1949, having won a long civil war, the leaders of the new People's Republic of China faced a highly fragmented country. The remains of the last dynasty, the Qing, had been split into bits by half a century of chaos. Warlords had ruled

China for decades, and because there had never been national education or anything like a national media, the country was a patchwork of localities with diverse languages, cultures and customs. In much of the country, residents of one town could not understand those in the next one.

Moreover, while the new leaders aimed to reclaim the land that had belonged to the last imperial dynasty, the presence of semi-independent ethnic peoples all around the borders posed an obstacle. Roughly 60 percent of the new nation's landmass was occupied by 10 percent of its population. As Ma Yin succinctly observes:

> Minority nationalities live in places with the following common characteristics:
>
> 1) A wide expanse of land with a sparse distribution of population. Many minority peoples have traditionally established their villages in mountains and pastoral areas, on high plateaus and in deep forests.
>
> 2) A wide range of products and abundant mineral resources.
>
> 3) Strategically important as border regions for the whole country. [4]

Security was an especially urgent concern. While these resource-rich, land-rich and potentially disloyal ethnic peoples sat on the borders, vanquished troops were gathering nearby. Sometimes funded and trained by the United States and other Western countries, they were launching periodic guerrilla attacks on the weakest points of the new socialist state. [5]

It was urgently necessary to simplify the complex problems of loyalty and territoriality posed by the chaos of the whole nation and in particular to bring those open, fluid borders under control. To do this, China's new leaders engaged in an ambitious project to radically reorganize ethnic identity and bring newly constituted minorities under the umbrella of nationhood.

Ethnic Classification

While fighting the revolution, the Chinese Communist Party had promised the ethnic minorities who assisted them (such as the Tai Lüe) self-determination, regional autonomy and the right to secede. But having achieved power, the Party withdrew the promised right to secession and instead began to speak of the importance of Beijing's help in overcoming ethnic "backwardness." Newly "autonomous regions" were established for ethnic minorities, but autonomy was always subject to the leadership of the Party and through it, Beijing. Local Party representatives delivered instructions to ethnic leaders and approved their decisions.

But now the Party faced the problem of political representation for the ethnic groups at the national level. As China's foremost anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong, wrote, the new People's Republic was committed to ethnic equality on the one hand, but on the other hand, the principle would have been meaningless without proper recognition of existing nationalities. For how could a People's Congress allocate its seats to deputies from different nationalities without knowing what nationalities there were? And how could the nation effect regional autonomy for the nationalities without a clear idea of their geographical distribution? [6]

The state invited ethnic minorities to come forward and self-identify as distinct groups. In 1955, Fei tells us, more than 400 different ethnic groups registered, 260 of them in Yunnan. [7] This created what, in retrospect, sounds like panic in Beijing: tribesmen would overrun the majority Han Chinese government. Ethnic identity had to be simplified.

To do this, China launched a massive research project in "ethnic identification." In 1953, the government dispatched teams of ethnographers to border regions containing minority peoples. These researchers spent years collecting data on ethnic politics, institutions, agriculture, myth and language. Ethnographers categorized groups as ethnic nationalities based on Stalin's criteria of nationalities as defined by shared language, territory and "psychology." They also placed the new nationalities on a social-evolutionary scale, drawing from Marxist theory and from the work of American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan; inevitably, nationalities were placed on the lower rungs of the evolutionary hierarchy, while the majority Hans were placed on the top.

The end result was a comprehensive list of 55 minority nationalities, folding some of the original 400 back into the Han and melding together some (such as the Tai Lüe and Tai Neua, now both named "Dai") that had previously had little or no contact. Fifty-five was apparently a more manageable number of groups than 400, and folklore had emerged as a catchall answer to several questions about how best to unify the new nation.

Ethnographic study teams then produced reports summarizing everything there was to know about each ethnic minority group. [8] Many of these reports were serious ethnographies that continue to be resources for researchers today. However, less reliable subsequent books popularized the information gathered in these ethnographic reports. Typical examples presented short overviews of Tai adorned with illustrations of women singing and dancing, women performing the famous "peacock dance," and Buddhist reliquaries and palm trees. The books described the Tai minority as a tiny group exclusive to China, without reference to the links with related kingdoms across the borders. They referred to Tai feudalism and slavery, "primitive spirit worship" and the much vaunted (though factually inaccurate) "freedom of young men and women" to practice "free love." [9] Summarizing their expressive culture, Ma Yin comments, "they love to sing and dance." [10]

Based on the research by Chinese ethnographers in the 1950s–1960s, the Tai were categorized as a feudal society and as slave-owners, placing them somewhere above the "cannibalistic" Wa but, perhaps inevitably, below the majority Han. This research was used as a tool to solidify the position of ethnic minorities at the bottom of a social-evolutionary hierarchy within the Chinese nation. Some social scientists, such as Fei Xiaotong, took a nuanced and thoughtful view of ethnic identity, but over time this initial research served to codify misunderstandings and stereotypes and to justify an ethnocentric hierarchy that became (and continues to be) the basis of state ethnic policy.

From Categorizing to Improving

As the research and categorization concluded, ethnic folklore became just one of many aspects of the newly constituted minority groups that needed improving and modernizing under the leadership of the Party.

To lead the cultural aspects of this improvement project, the government established a number of state organs. The state set up culture bureaus in each ethnic region and at the provincial level to

manage the nationalities' song-and-dance troupes. In addition to the culture bureaus, the government established local government-run news media in minority regions to broadcast news in minority languages.

In discussing these and similar efforts in the ethnic border regions, Stevan Harrell coined the term "civilizing project". [11] In Sipsongpanna and similar ethnic regions, we can chart a subset of the "civilizing project", the "simplifying project". This was a state program to systematically rewrite the culture of an ethnic minority group within its borders by editing out all complexity, ambiguity and sophistication from the group's public self-representations, establishing new parameters for that self-representation. The simplifying project was at the same time both part of the larger process of domination and incorporation of ethnic peoples, and also part of the rhetorical justification for domination.

In China, this simplifying project took the following form: Researchers and government culture bureau officials explicitly encouraged and promoted elements of minority culture deemed positive, socialist and modern, while pruning elements deemed counterproductive, counterrevolutionary or primitive. For instance, traditional minority clothing was a positive expression of ethnic identity, to be celebrated and promoted. Minority religious rituals, however, were counterrevolutionary and economically wasteful, and as such were discouraged.

Dances and oral literature were studied and in some cases "improved" by state choreographers and authors. In fact, much of the culture now performed for tourists as minority culture was created during this period in which ethnic culture was completely transformed. The end results were oversimplified caricatures of ethnic cultures that, as things turned out, also sometimes happened to have market value in a liberalizing economy that thrives by selling such caricatures to consumers. What follows is a discussion of how this process worked in the areas of folk song, dance, written language, and folk literature.

The Simplifying Project: Folk Songs

Many of the songs sung for tourists in Chinese ethnic theme parks are sung in Chinese. By any standard, it is a stretch of the imagination to call them folk songs. Tai folk songs are, of course, traditionally sung in the Tai language. In Sipsongpanna, as in much of mainland Southeast Asia, they are performed by highly trained professional oral poets in the form of duet/duels between men and women singers who may range in age from 30 to 80. The duets often become scathing put-downs and are highly bawdy. Some are also sacred, involving the citation of arcane texts and the narration of Buddhist epic legends (jataka tales) in literary language. Whether sacred or raucously profane, these folk songs are performed according to complex rhyme schemes that are recited against the rhythm of a free-reed instrument made of bamboo.

A young apprentice oral poet performs a poem, holding a fan. Her teacher, Ai (Bo) Saut, accompanies her on the bi, or free reed instrument.

By contrast, songs sung for tourists as part of ethnic shows in theme parks and dining halls are quite different. These nostalgic songs—"Moonlight Under the Bamboo" is one especially beloved around China—usually praise the harvest and the lovely region, and stage a kind of idealized yet sexually naïve flirtation between a young man and young woman. Musically, the songs for tourists use instruments from various regions to play melodies that are traditionally Chinese in style. Many were composed and written in the 1980s by Han Chinese songwriters.

The Simplifying Project: Dance

From the 1950s to the early 1960s, groups of culture bureau workers also engaged in a related project to collect, document and improve upon other forms of ethnic folk performance besides oral narrative. One such group, led by choreographer Chin Ming, traveled from Beijing to the borderlands of Yunnan to conduct field research and "spend a happy month with the Tai people." There they "fell under the spell of the subtropical scene" and were entranced by a ritual dance that they saw while listening "to the light rustle of the breeze in the coconut palms" and "the muted boom of distant 'elephant leg' drums." [12]

This dance, which is probably related to a Shan ritual kinnaree dance still performed at Buddhist temple festivals across the borders in northern Burma, is traditionally performed by a male elder wearing a bird mask made of papier-mâché, wings on his arms, and a long train like a peacock's tail. Chin Ming wrote that with some creative thinking he and his colleagues were able to improve on this ritual dance:

> Our idea was to make it a group dance for girls so as to intensify the glory of the peacock in a resplendent scene. If the clumsy accessories were discarded, we decided, more emphasis could be laid on a portrayal of the spirit of the bird. . . . Without the mask there could be facial expression, and without the wings there would be much greater freedom of movement. [13]

Once shorn of these distracting elements and of its Buddhist context, the feminized and dramatized kongque wu ("peacock dance"), later popularized by the famous Tai Lüe dancer Dao Meilan, became renowned all over China. It became a staple of the prefectural and provincial song-and-dance troupes, and it is performed in hotels and dinner halls in Kunming and Sipsongpanna.

As a result of the dance fad, the peacock has become nationally synonymous with the similarly exotic, colorful and elegant Tai Lües of Sipsongpanna: "It is the animal most beloved by the Dai nationality," people often say. The peacock is a ubiquitous symbol in the tourism industry, painted onto the buildings of the international airport and the sides of tour buses, and printed on brochures and T-shirts. A touropop CD with the song "Xishuangbanna, My Hometown" features a picture of a beaming dancer in a peacock dress. In several villages I saw young Tai Lüe girls teaching this state-concocted ballet to each other as "our traditional Tai folk dance."

I asked a local government official, Aye Zai Guang, about the peacock. "The peacock is not our symbol," he said emphatically. "It was chosen for us by others. If we had to have an animal to symbolize us, it would be the elephant

because that was what we used to ride into warfare." Other Tai Lüe expressed similar views. Perhaps a warlike elephant is a more potent and dangerous symbol to choose to stand for the borderlands than a pretty and feminine bird.

As the simplifying project proceeded, other ballets and operas were edited. One, named after its hero, Prince Sudun ("Chao Sudun"), is based on an episode in one of Sipsongpanna's oral-narrative epic poems, "The Ten-Headed King." Some scholars believe the tale derives from the "Ramayana," an Indian epic. During the 1950s, the tale called "Prince Sudun" was cleansed of any religious or ritual meaning and rewritten as a socialist fable. An opera based on the fable was banned during the Cultural Revolution but now has been revived as a tourist show, performed daily for visitors at Jinghong's Chunhuan Park.

A government dance troupe performs the play "Zhao Sudun" for tourists in a Jinghong park.

Simplified Script

While song and dance were "improved" by culture bureau workers and are now presented as folklore, probably no cultural "improvement" of the Tai minority has been more controversial locally than the government's efforts to improve the Tai Lüe script.

In the 1950s, the government announced that the old Tai Lüe script was unwieldy and set out to reform it. The result of these efforts was a decrease in literacy in the minority script and the production of a generation cut off from their own written traditions. The old Tai Lüe written alphabet, almost identical to the script used by Tai Khun in Kengtung, Shan State, has more than 60 letters, and even those expert in the script disagree about exactly how many there are. Because historically it has been taught in temples, for the most part only Tai Lüe monks and former monks are able to read and write it. In the past, women were not generally taught the script, though some did learn it from male relatives.

Official Chinese rhetoric often refers to presumptive low levels of literacy among all border peoples, without distinction. This was often said to be because of flaws in their scripts, as well as flaws in the pre-"liberation" educational systems. Thus scripts like those of the Tai Lüe, Tibetans, Uyghurs and others were banned and replaced with new, "simplified" scripts created by linguists to facilitate literacy. Other ethnic minorities who had historically been nonliterate had new scripts invented for them. In Yunnan, language teams, working with members of the Tai elite, came up with a simplified Tai Lüe alphabet ("xin Daiwen") that had fewer letters than the original. This became the official language, written on street signs and used in government documents alongside the simplified Chinese script.

Given the lack of access to Tai Lüe historical records (none are archived in China), it is difficult to assess how widespread literacy was in Sipsongpanna before 1949. American missionary William Clifton Dodd, who was literate in Tai, reported a high degree of literacy during his first visit there in 1897. He traveled along the Mekong Delta with copies of his Tai translation of the Bible and found the Tai Lüe of Sipsongpanna to

be avid readers:

> Never before, in any place, have I met such receptivity, as well as such unbridled curiosity. . . . They take books, they beg books, they clamor for books. [14]

In Sipsongpanna he interviewed a local headman, who reported that "of the Lu [sic] of his district, one-third of the men could read, one-third could barely read, and one-third could not read at all. Only one woman, his wife, could read." [15] If these estimates were representative of the region, we could speculate that overall literacy in Sipsongpanna might have been roughly comparable to the literacy rates among Han during the same period. Evelyn Rawski estimates that throughout China in the late Qing between one-half and one-third of school-age males had basic literacy. [16] In previous eras of Chinese imperial history, because of lack of access to education, literacy among Chinese-speakers was probably far lower. Given the temple education system, it seems likely that Tai Lüe literacy was actually relatively high, and certainly higher than the Chinese government has reported.

It is clear that the new Tai Lüe script has not promoted increased literacy. Many Tai Lüe note that the state has published almost nothing in the new script, making it in effect useless. The twice-weekly four-page newspaper, Xishuangbanna bao, is one exception. Public pressure caused the Xishuangbanna bao to switch back to old Tai Lüe script during the early 1990s, only to return to the new script in 1995 in response, reportedly, to pressure from the provincial government. In 1997, some Tai believed that the newspaper would switch back to the old Tai Lüe script again and were trying to establish a publishing house to produce books in old Tai Lüe; they have not yet been successful. Worse, many Tai Lüe pointed out what they saw as government hypocrisy: despite officially promoting the new Tai Lüe script for over 40 years, the state had never produced a dictionary for it. At the main temple in Jinghong, Tai Lüe Buddhist monks succeeded in compiling a modest dictionary for the old Tai Lüe script in 2000. Two years later, after a long political struggle with the provincial government, the dictionary was published in Kunming.

Some educated Tai Lüe told me that they had never been properly taught the new script and so could not read it: "They only taught us new Tai script for one hour a week in secondary school," said one young government official. "I just never really learned it. Anyway, it doesn't have any use," because nothing is published in it. Many noted that those literate in the new script could not read the old script, so that literacy in the new script in effect cuts younger Tai Lüe off from their own written traditions. No library or archive in China houses books in the old Tai Lüe script published before 1949.

Today, the politics of language shapes class and status in Sipsongpanna. Most residents of larger towns, especially Jinghong, speak a common local version of the provincial dialect of Mandarin, Jinghonghua, or "Jinghong-ese." Tai villagers are more likely to speak Tai only, which itself has several dialects, but many young village children, surrounded by Chinese-language television, radio and music, can understand but not speak or read Tai. Sipsongpanna residents who work in the tourist industry or for the government tend to be those with better education who speak and read standard Mandarin. But as a result of government interventions in the minority alphabet, few Tai Lüe are literate in any form of their language.

In sum, the early government language policy was probably motivated by idealism and the goal of promoting widespread literacy. But if the reforms are aimed at aiding ethnic minorities, and ethnic minorities overwhelmingly reject the reforms, why continue them? The state's dogged adherence to the new Tai Lüe script in the face of widespread opposition, combined with the lack of any archive for classical texts, suggests to many in Sipsongpanna a cynical effort by the state to create illiteracy by promoting a new alphabet designed to become obsolete. [17] In recent years, the Tai Lüe script written on street signs in Jinghong has been removed. Tai Lüe officials report that fewer government documents are published even in the new Tai Lüe script. These moves have only fueled local fears of a conspiracy by the state to eradicate their language.

Intentionally or otherwise, through script reform, publishing and censorship, officials undermined ethnic institutions and written traditions to effectively create a semi-literate border people. As Anderson tells us, [18] an empire is organized around a high civilization, one with an elite culture and a sacred text. But for those ethnically and linguistically distinct peoples who are incorporated into the new state, the reimagining of the nation as a horizontal comradeship described in shared texts results not in greater equality but instead in greater marginalization from the dominant group who speak another language.

The Simplifying Project: Folktales

While language committees simplified ethnic alphabets and languages, without ever archiving the original texts, culture committees simplified ethnic minority oral traditions in edited volumes of ethnic folklore. Dozens of these volumes, such as The Seven Sisters: Collected Chinese Folk Stories, were produced (and are still produced today), and they share a number of commonalities. [19]

First, the folktales in these collections were presented as authorless. They were presented not as the creations of individual tellers, who might put their own spin or interpretation on the tales for princes or peasants, but rather as essential, idealized texts produced by a homogeneous group that spoke with one voice. This lack of authorship unified the group that the tales are intended to represent, while at the same time suggesting a lack of ability by members of the group to think critically or individually.

The tales in these folklore collections tend to be simple, even childlike in style and language. They are published in the national vernacular, usually without passing through an intermediate stage of recording and notating in the original language. Thus complexities of repetition, allusion and indirection are edited out at an early stage, as are references to specific places or times; this places the folk group in an eternal present. References to texts and to religious literature are omitted. There are no puns or wordplay. The tales are cleansed of the sexual joking that characterizes Tai Lüe oral poetry, and adult flirtation is replaced with innocent romanticism. In effect, this infantilizes the collective that the songs are said to represent.

The tales or discussions of them also emphasize an ethnic intimacy with nature. For instance, the Simple History of the Dai Nationality refers to a Tai legend in which an ancestor marries several women who are part-tiger as evidence of the "chaotic" nature of Tai Lüe marriage practices. [20]

Finally, the politics of the tales are nationalized. Poems that may have originally ironically satirized local nobility were replaced by

unambiguous praise for the Party; editors of folktale collections could thus claim that the tales "reflect the pursuit of an ideal society and happiness of the Dai people." [21] References to other places in mainland Southeast Asia were often omitted, and where there was mention of a location outside of Sipsongpanna, that location was always Beijing. Such texts reoriented border-crossing minorities such as the Tai Lüe toward their new center and emphasized their containment within the borders.

Collectively, these tales have served as instructional tools for the discipline of minorities, teaching them what kind of ethnic culture would be permissible in the public realm and what would not. They also teach Chinese readers browsing through bookstores all over Yunnan and the rest of China, who are wound into the national narrative in the vernacular language that joins center with periphery. The edited collections often place a Han story alongside stories by Hui, Mongol, Miao, Zhuang, Tibetan and other ethnic groups, all equally bereft of local history, local language, ethnic religion or local specificities.

Similarly, the tales have become part of foreign policy. Chinese ethnic folktale books like the Seven Sisters series, published in English, teach international audiences how to think about Chinese ethnic groups through tales that "embody a simplistic dualistic vision of reality that is distant and distinctive from the complicated ambiguity found in literate culture." [22]

From Simplified to Silenced

By reinventing folktales, folk dances, ethnic dress and even local scripts, China's simplifying project changed the Tai Lüe and other ethnic minorities from peoples with complex oral and written traditions into simple and romantic "folk," and ultimately into silenced and commodified spectacles—feminine bodies on display.

The end result of the state's intervention in ethnic culture in this region was to create a public image of the Tai as simple, happy, dancing people. Yet while some, including Tai government officials, cheerfully participated in this process and profited from the results, others felt alienated. Many told me that they felt they could not recognize themselves in the state's public representations of their ethnicity. As one Tai put it, "There are two Sipsongpannas. Hans see the one they want to see."

In effect, the Han conquest of southwest China was done through culture, and via the strategic deployment of dancing girls. The approach was always carrot and stick: those who participate in the songs and dances for tourists could profit nicely, but those who tested the limits—like Tibetans in Yunnan's neighboring province—felt the repercussions. Tais I met in Yunnan spoke of Tibet, always with a warning tone. They knew what happened to monks and lay activists there, and were not eager to replicate the Tibetan experience in this border region.

While Tais were involved in reviving and reinventing their culture, it was largely done quietly, away from the all-seeing eye of the state. Many Tais feared that allowing a foreign ethnographer to document their oral poetry and songs, especially Buddhist oral traditions, would lead to political repercussions. Thus, when I arrived in 1997 with my tape recorder in hand, looking for epic oral poets, performances were difficult to track down. Singers lied and said that they never performed anymore; some made appointments and then slipped quietly out of town; many said that they knew nothing about performances and that I should ask someone else.

At first I thought I had flown a great distance for nothing. Fortunately, this was not the case, and my Tai language lessons at a local Buddhist temple opened the door to a parallel, underground word of living culture.

The Rock Concerts—A Glimpse

The crowd of Tai villagers surged forward as I scrambled on my knees in the dust to protect the tape recorder and microphone, aimed up at the lip of a handmade stage. The crowd smelled of sweat and dust. Little boys in long-billed baseball caps and small girls in long skirts, lipstick and earrings crammed around, torn between staring at the stage and staring at the foreigner.

Above us, on a stage festooned with pastel paper cutouts of Buddhist dharma wheels and lotus flowers, a rock band was playing, and a short, muscular man with long hair and a string of blue tattoos on his arm was singing in Tai Lüe:

> Tais, Tais, Tais, should speak the Tai language
>
> Tais, Tais, Tais should learn the Tai alphabet...

This was the second Tai pop concert and it was being held in the courtyard of Wat Pajay, on the anniversary of China's granting of "religious freedom" to its citizens. That date had begun a gradual resurgence in Tai Lüe Buddhism. By the year 2000, there were 560 village temples and more than 7,000 monks and novices in Sipsongpanna. Most villages had their own local temples, supervised by Wat Pajay.

In many villages where the crumbling state education system failed minority students, the temple was the only place to study. Some Tai Lüe parents preferred the temples to the public schools anyway, because in public schools their children were taught that the Hans were more advanced and minorities were backward. In the temples they heard about Buddhism and Tai Lüe history, learned to read the old Tai Lüe script, and teachers had the high status of holy men of learning.

Panel of a narrative mural in a Buddhist temple near Meng Zhe, Sipsongpanna

At Wat Pajay, where I began to study spoken and written Tai language, I saw young Tai men (and sometimes women) who were daily engaged in thinking about and debating what it meant to be minority in China. They were actively and self-consciously engaged in excavating past traditions, finding things about their past that showed they could be civilized, complex, mature and sacred—rather than primitive, simple-minded, child-like and adorable.

The monks had two brand-new Power Macs donated by businessmen in Thailand, and a few disks, passed along by a friend, containing a font developed in Kengtung, Burma, which enabled them to print in the old Tai Lüe script. Using this font, they had begun a small-scale publishing project, typesetting the novices' primer, a few old scriptures and a calendar for the temple. Now, they were opening up their temple grounds for

some young laymen and women to promote Tai Lüe culture in a slightly different way. Some of the monks invited me to stop by, and said it would be fine to record some of the songs.

On the day of the rock concert, thousands of Tais packed the courtyard, though the only advertising the organizers had done was a handful of posters. Word of mouth—in Tai Lüe—had done it all, bringing thousands from around the prefecture.

E Guang, a traditional oral poet, climbed onstage to an ovation. She wore a dazzling blue dress, gold jewelry and makeup, her hair in its Tai Lüe bun decorated with plastic flowers and ribbons. She began an a cappella song in the genre called "Heaui heaui naw," for its opening phrase, literally, "Hey hey now." This genre is usually sung by a woman as part of an improvised duet with a man in which they challenge each other. Typically, their rendering in Chinese videos and recordings is as lyrical love songs performed by pretty girls, but they are not always so simple in practice; in the hands of a skilled singer, they are an invitation to a duel. E Guang sang:

> Hey hey now,
>
> At sunset, when the sky turns yellow,
>
> We two agreed to meet in a certain place.
>
> I have waited since sunset for you,
>
> Waited for too long, looking around, waiting,
>
> I did not see you,
>
> I stood up for a while, then sat down again,
>
> Took a palm tree leaf to sit on in the grass,
>
> And stayed until it had turned yellow and withered.
>
> The leaf I had wrapped rice in
>
> Turned bitter and yellow,
>
> The salt I had wrapped up (as a love token) turned brown.
>
> Why have you still not come out of the house?

Meanwhile, a man of about her age, accompanied by a few women, walked backstage and asked the monk who was engineering the sound for a microphone. The monk, puzzled, turned it over to him, and encouraged him to join E Guang onstage. The man with the microphone declined with a wave of his hand and sat down backstage, where E Guang could not see him. After another line or two from E Guang, he interrupted with a sung lyric:

> Hey hey now,
>
> E Guang, you great lady poet,
>
> You are as lovely as a cucumber flower.

The audience laughed and began to call for him to come onto the stage. E Guang looked around to see where the voice was coming from but could not see the singer. She smiled wryly and responded to his challenge, inviting him to join her onstage.

The man responded: E Guang should not wait for

him anymore; like the banana leaf she used to wrap her rice, the bloom of her youth was also beginning to fade.

E Guang sweetly asked again why her challenger did not dare to join her onstage:

> Why are you singing from a place where I can't see you?
>
> Brother, perhaps I could fall in love with you,
>
> You should not hide in the dark and be so shy.
>
> A man should be like water in a village well,
>
> Deep and glimmering, a jewel that emits light for all to admire.
>
> But you—you hide in the dark like a mushroom.

The audience roared. E Guang continued,

> Perhaps I won't be able to love you after all,
>
> Perhaps it is not meant to be.

The concert was one of many I was ultimately able to document, including both rock concerts and epic Buddhist oral narrations performed for rituals, for family celebrations, monk initiations and temple openings. I learned to sing a song in Tai and on occasion was even compelled to sing it in public. The song, "Sao Tai Bai Fon Muang Haw," tells of a Tai girl who goes to dance in a dining hall in a Chinese city. "Don't go so far away... Lovely Tai girl, wherever you go, don't forget how to speak Tai, don't forget our Tai homeland."

That evening, as I biked in the darkness down the bumpy hill that led from the temple to Manting Road, a group of teen novices raced past on motorcycles, heading home to a nearby village temple. In the light of a heavy full moon, their robes whipped out behind them like wings.

The revival of ethnic traditions in the context of a tourist boom had created a space for the expression of "coded dissent"—subversive messages delivered under the eyes of the dominator, in ways that the dominators might not recognize. The monks and their lay friends had created a cultural and religious movement that was now firmly part of the Yunnan landscape, but how far could it go?

A Land in Flux

Sipsongpanna flooded during the annual monsoon

While the concerts were peaceful and tremendously popular events, the state shut them down the year after I left Jinghong, telling Wat Pajay they were inappropriate for temple grounds.

Meanwhile, however, the region's Buddhist temples continued to organize well-attended rituals and ceremonies. Some drew thousands of worshippers from as far away as Laos, Thailand and Burma. Today, the Sipsongpanna temple continues to be a powerful force in the region and a platform for cultural and educational programs.

Since 1997, Tai pop singers and recording artists have become prolific, producing numerous VCDs (Chinese DVDs) of vibrant Tai-language pop songs about such issues as social change, HIV/AIDS, and environmental degradation of their homeland. The lyrics, karaoke-style, typed in the old banned Tai script, scroll across the bottom of the television screen.

How is it that the Tai have succeeded in reviving Buddhism and in creating new cultural materials in a once-banned writing system—rock songs, even—when other Chinese minorities seem to face ever-greater restrictions?

The answers are complex. For one, Sipsongpanna Tais have never openly challenged China's right to "improve" them, or its right to engage in a "simplifying project" that warps and distorts their public identity. They play the game, for the most part. Meanwhile, all alternative ethnic culture takes place behind the scenes, off the beaten track, and far away from the front stage of the tourism industry.

As long as they continue to hide below the radar, their ethnic revival will probably be safe. Despite what those of us critical of its human rights record might think, China doesn't need or want to eradicate its ethnic minorities. The goal is rather to keep minorities in a very specific place on the national hierarchy. Before "liberation," some minorities might have had the idea that they were the center of their own worlds. As part of incorporation into the new nation-state of the People's Republic, they had to be taught that they were no longer at the center. The center was now Beijing, and their new job was to mark the borders. Ethnic minorities and their "primitive, simple" culture mark the edge of the national map, the limits of the known, and the low point beyond which no one cares to go: Here lie serpents.

China has created a clear social compact with its border peoples. Certain kinds of ethnic identity are perfectly fine: those that have been created by the state, carefully pruned and managed; those that are non-threatening, playful, entertaining.

Perform this identity for pay, and you may be enriched, may even be held up as a model minority to the nation, celebrated on television and in newspapers. Go outside the box, as some Tibetans, Mongolians and Uyghurs have dared to, and you face prison, torture, even execution.

It is important to note, therefore, that another reason why their cultural activism may be tolerated is that Tais in Yunnan have never advocated separatism. Rather, they have taken what little space they could, and gradually, diplomatically danced around the edges of state rhetoric, expanding their political space inch by careful inch over the years.

Conclusion: The Party Leads the Way Again

In this regard, it may be illuminating to describe an instance of deft Tai management of the authorities that I witnessed during a Buddhist epic storytelling performance. The story was performed in the middle of a ceremony to celebrate the promotion of six Buddhist monks to the status of khuba, or master. This ceremony marked the first time since the Cultural Revolution that Sipsongpanna had promoted its own khuba, and as such it was a major event. After a day of feasting and rituals, the temple hosting the ceremony invited two top changkhap (Tai oral poets) to perform "Sithat auk boht," the legend of the Buddha's enlightenment. Hundreds of Tai villagers, mostly women, crowded into the courtyard to listen raptly to the all-night performance.

The two storytellers, a man and a woman, took turns continuing the tale, weaving witticisms, flirtations and praise into their lyrics about the Buddha's quest for wisdom. As the male narrator began a chapter, there was a rustle at the back of the crowd. A few Tais and a Han Chinese man of about 30 climbed into the circle, and everyone in it tensed.

The Chinese man was cheerful with drink, having made the rounds of a series of village feasts celebrating the ceremony. Surprised to see a foreigner in this gathering who could speak Chinese, he introduced himself: He was the Communist Party secretary, the highest-ranking official in the area. The Party secretary did not speak Tai; he was an educated young man of about my age, and perhaps he had not been in the area very long. He beamed around at the crowd and then began to question me in a normal speaking voice, while Aye Kham Naun, the performer, continued to sing.

"What are you doing?" he asked, pointing at the cassette recorder.

"I'm taping the tale," I whispered. I didn't want to alienate the Party Secretary, but it had not been easy to get into this performance.

"What's the point of that?"

"I'm going to write it down and translate it into English."

This surprised him. "What for?"

"To put it in a library in America."

"Do you actually understand this stuff? I don't understand a word!"

Aye Kham Naun sang,

Now,

> The Communist Party has come to lead the way again,
>
> The Party Secretary has come to sit here,
>
> he sits for a long spell, making up half of a happy pair—
>
> a young lady chats with him politely.
>
> Whoever enters this place today, may he live to a ripe old age!

"He is praising you," one of the elders across the circle said to the Party secretary in Chinese.

"Ta shuo nide hao hua! He's saying good things about you!" another elder, loudly added.

"Thank you!" said the Secretary, folding his hands together in a gesture to the singer. He sat fidgeting for another few minutes, then reeled out mid-lyric to go to another banquet.

The gathering visibly relaxed, closing the circle again. No one had gotten into trouble, and the performance could go on.

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Notes

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