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**Inalienable Narration:
The Nanzhao History between Thailand and China**

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Inalienable Narration: The Nanzhao History between Thailand and China¹

INTRODUCTION

‘Empire’ and ‘civilisation’—concepts that help respect the *coherent and concrete relations* of Chinese categories—offer a better understanding of China as a Maussian totality (Mauss, 2006). These two once-abandoned concepts prove to be more relevant than those that understand China in terms of a modern (or quasi-modern) nation-state. Analysing China in terms of the latter disrespects the coherent and concrete relations of Chinese categories and break China into politics, culture, economy, religion or other ‘dimensions’ which are little more than provincial categories in universal disguise, and leaves inexplicable residuals. The outcome is certainly anticipated: since these categories are ‘abnormally’ related, China is either a matter of power-play, or, worse, an exception.²

Minzu is perhaps a good test case of how China can be perceived. *Minzu* was introduced in 1900s at a time when China was undergoing the agonistic transformation from empire to nation (Wang 2008). The word was adopted from Japanese *minzuko* to foster Chinese nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*), but has been subjected to re-interpretation in terms of Marxist-Lennist theories since 1950s (Ma 2000). In its recent ‘incarnation’, *minzu* is arguably similar to ‘de-politicised’ ethnic groups (Ma 2007), or ‘a signifier without signified’ (Naran 2010). In addition, the words ‘nationalities’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘ethnic minority’, or ‘minority nationalities’ can be used as its English translations. Let alone the Russian versions. Gradually, the pragmatics of *minzu* gradually becomes obscure to non-Chinese speakers, to the extent that some (Harrell 1995) suggest ‘*minzu*’ makes more sense than any translated version. For instance, *Zhongyang Minzu Daxue*, the university in Beijing specialising in training ethnic elites, changes its official translation from ‘Central University for Nationalities’ to ‘Minzu University of China’, indicating that *minzu* is no longer an adopted concept but a proper name. Does this ‘non-translatability’ suggest that *minzu* has become a category that sustains the internal coherence of China as an empire or civilisation, instead of a nation-state?

Minzu is definitely a part of the present transformation of Chinese civilisation and this is a position explicated by Professor Stephan Feuchtwang in the article published in the current issue. He suggests that the core elements of Chinese civilisation have been so transformed that they have ceased altogether to function as they had. At the same time, he also suggests that some elements like self-cultivation and the idea of sage rule continued in ritual, breath exercises (*qigong*) and the petition offices (Feuchtwang 2010). If the transformation of sage rule into a party-state turns civilisation into a nationalist heritage, how does *minzu* function in the process of ‘nationalising China’?

Indeed, in official terms, there are 56 *minzus* in China and the majority is the Han. All *minzus* officially form the ‘Big Family of Ethnic Unity’ (*minzu tuanjie dajiating*), constitutionally called ‘a unitary multi-national state’ (*tongyi de duoMinzu guojia*). With the Han at the centre,

¹ Thanks for Stephan Feuchtwang, Thongchai Winichakul, Joyce Solomon and the ARI reviewer for their comments on earlier drafts.

² In this respect, I entirely agree with Prof Wang Gungwu’s denial of the analytical value of ‘empire’ and ‘civilisation’, as long as they were merely words arising from European experiences. However, re-introducing them into anthropology certainly suggests their viability to comparative studies.

other minzus are supposedly living in the ‘periphery and remote’ (*bianyuan*) areas, presumably backward in economy and culture (*jingji wenhua luohou*). They are represented as the (younger) brothers of the Han, have been in friendly relations with the Han and are supposedly loyal and patriotic to national unity. The mapping of minzu seems like what Feuchtwang (2009) described as the ‘centricity of Chinese civilisation’, explicated in another line of thought by Stevan Harrell (1995) as various ‘civilising projects’.

I will engage in the debate by putting the centre–periphery question in a concrete case and attempt to analyse if in modern times, minzu has become a new word that in the process of nationalising China, it sustains an old, China-centric system. This is a case about the historiography of the Nanzhao Kingdom (684–902). Around 1980s, Chinese historians launched an attack on the idea of ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’—an argument that had been part of the Thai’s migration trope in Thailand’s nationalist narration. Rather than a simple and total victory (He 1990), or a nationalist contestation (Hsieh 1993), I will explain this attack in terms of the narration of Chinese minzu.

Specifically, the Chinese narration says that the Nanzhao Kingdom was China’s ‘local separatist regime’, in which the people were longing for national unity but the ruling class, out of their selfish interest, threw the kingdom in war with Chinese court from time to time. The narration is particularly keen in arguing that the different groups mentioned in Nanzhao historical sources were actually the ancestors of the contemporary minzus of southwest China. The construction is guided by an implicit protocol that the ancestors of a given minzu must have originated in China, migrated within China, and lived in China. It is this implicit protocol that the ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ must be refuted, a protocol that I call an ‘inalienable narration’, by which I mean that the history of minzu is like presenting an ‘inalienable possession’ (Weiner 1992) to the concerned minzu. This narration is like a giving-while-keeping gift: on the one hand, it renders minzus an identity that officially places them in the ‘Big Family of Ethnic Unity’; on the other, the narration conforms to a meta-narration that reflects a hierarchy of relations similar to that of imperial China, and it is not subject to alternation or contending alternatives. In this chapter, I will argue that the historiography of the Nanzhao kingdom is not a mere academic issue, but an inalienable narration that sustains the centricity of Chinese civilisation. Therefore, the ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ argument as part of the lineal, exodus-like narration of the Thai has to be refuted.

‘NANZHAO AS A TAI KINGDOM’ AND CHINESE REFUTATION

The ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ argument was put forward by early European orientalist as part of the exodus-like trope for the ‘origin’ of the Thai. In 1885, Terrien de Lecouperie, a professor at University College London who was also responsible for advancing the western origin of Chinese race, wrote in his introduction article to Archibald Colquhoun’s *Amongst the Shans* that as early Thais, the Shan were from southwest China’s Sichuan Province. ‘They [the Shan race] developed and formed the agglomeration which became in 629 A.D. the great State of Nantchao [Nanzhao], which afterwards extended in all directions...it continued from 860 A.D. to exist under the definitive name of Tali [Dali] kingdom till its conquest by the Mongols’ (Lecouperie 1885, p. liii). His idea was expanded by E. H. Parker, a British consular to Chinese Hainan, who believed that Thai people were originally the Ailao people and founders of the Nanzhao Kingdom. In 1923, W. C. Dodd, in his masterpiece *The Tai Race: Elder Brother of the Chinese* developed the Thai’s origin as an epic of seven waves of migrations southward, each of which was caused by the Chinese aggression. The Thai was of

Mongolian origin in the Altai Mountain, driven by the Chinese all the way to the Nanzhao Kingdom, then down to Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok (Ratanakosin), and finally established Thailand. The last exodus took place in 1234, when Kublai Khan conquered the Shan (Thai) Kingdom of Nanzhao and caused mass immigration. In 1933, W. A. R. Wood's *A History of Siam*, conveying the same message, was translated into Thai, and left significant imprint on the Thai historiography.

At the end of the nineteenth century when the Asian presence of European colonialism was at its best and Thai nationalism was on the rise, Thai nationalist elites began to construct a lineal history of the Thai from the ancient kingdoms of Dvaravati, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Bangkok to Siam. The Thai migration trope invented by the early orientalist served perfectly as the building block for constructing Thai nationalism (*Rat Niyom*, and/or Pan-Thaism). The migration was then narrated as an epic of a people led by great kings. The trope also fitted in the anti-Chinese sentiment in then Siam (Barmé 1993). Prince Narathip, Prince Damring, and Phraya Anuman Rajadhon were among the most ardent promoters of the epic, but it was Prince Damrong and Luang Wichitwathakan who championed this grand narrative.

In his *Royal Chronicles* (1912) and *Ancient History of Thailand* (1925), Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), ‘Father of Thai history’, asserted the Thai were living in the area between ‘China proper’ and Tibet. In 43 AD, they were driven out of their homeland by the Chinese, and then founded the great Nanzhao Kingdom in southwest China. After the fall of Nanzhao in 1234, the kings and the people fled to Indochina in three routes: The Tai Yay into Burma; Tai I-san into Laos and Northern Thailand; and the Tai Noy into Siam, establishing Sukhothai (Hsieh 1993).

Through Luang Wichitwathakan, this narration became the official version of the Thai people. A historian, playwright, major engineer of Thai nationalism, and the head of the Fine Arts Department under military rule of Plaek Pibulsonggram, Wichitwathakan repeated in his books, plays and poems that the Thai lived in the most fertile land in China but were driven out. He also claims that ever since, this freedom-loving people were invaded repeatedly and that the Thais must always be aware of the danger of foreign invasion. In *The Jews of the Orient* and *Wake Up Siam*, he warned ‘that the wave of immigrants from China was threatening to overwhelm the indigenous Thai’ (quoted from Barmé 1993, p. 25). He was sympathetic towards Nazi’s policy to the Jews, suggesting that the Chinese were ‘worse’. He wrote a lyric for a popular song about the origin and migration of the Thai and also authored several plays about the epical history of Thai exodus from Nanzhao. All these themes—that the Thai were freedom-loving people repelled by Chinese, the Thai kings were unparallel generals, and that the last wave of exodus was from Nanzhao Kingdom to Sukhothai as a result of the Kublai Khan’s conquest—had been written in school textbooks, popular history books, and academic volumes from 1928 all the way to 1970s.

The migration route as constructed by orientalist and early Thai historians could be depicted as a lineal migration trope in Figure 1:

Figure 1 Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom

Except for a few Chinese historians (Fang 1939a, 1939b; Xu 1947), the Thai historical narration did not trouble Chinese much until diplomatic relation was established between the Kingdom of Thailand and the People's Republic of China in 1975. Starting from 1978, Chinese historians launched a twelve-year campaign to attack the claim of Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom. In 1978, Du Yuting and Chen Lufan published a paper in a prestigious Chinese journal—*Lishi Yanjiu* (Historical Studies), arguing that Kublai Khan's conquest of Dali did not cause mass Thai migration southward. They pointed out the Thai exodus narration was not based on facts, but on 'the western "scholar's" superstitious fear of the Mongolian aristocrats' warship' (Du and Chen 1984[1978], p. 491). They argued the Mongolian conquerors had strategically stabilised the conquered people and the Thai of Sipsong Panna and of Lanna Thai were indigenous rather than being driven there.

From 1983–90, Chen Lufan, director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at Yunnan Academy of Social Science, allied with his colleagues and wrote several dozens of papers against the argument of 'Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom'. Most of these papers were published in the institute-based journal *Dongnanya* (Southeast Asia), and then presented in various occasions. In these papers, further evidence were produced and repeated. For example, Xie Yuanzhang (1983) argues that Sokuthai and Lanna Thai used animal-marked calendars instead of Chinese Earth–Sky Pair (*ganzhi*) calendars, so that they were probably the descendants of the Yue, a group of people living in South China. Chen Lufan (1985) examined some 'significant relics' of Nanzhao and Dali, pointing out that in these two consecutive kingdoms, the written language was Chinese instead of Thai, the religion was Mahayana Buddhism instead of Theravada Buddhism. In addition, the dressing, art pieces and tools were all different from those found in Thailand. Therefore, the culture of Thailand 'was distinctively different from the culture of Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms' (Chen 1985, p. 10). In

1988, Chen Lufan produced further evidence on customary differences, including the ‘father-son name-succession’, hat, blanket, barefoot, tiger cult, and fire funeral. He became much more explicit by saying ‘now we are entirely sure: Nanzhao was not established by the Thai. Instead, it was a local separatist regime (*Difang Geju Zhengquan*) established by the ancestors of the Yi and Bai at the Tang Dynasty’s Yunnan region’ (Chen 1988, p. 14). A year later, Chen (1989) raised another issue: the Ailao, alleged as ancestors of the Thai, have never moved beyond southwest Yunnan and North Burma. Thus, Ailao migration as argued by Dodd was impossible.

Along with the publication of papers, the Chinese state-sponsored scholars based on Kunming also engaged in tremendous public relation campaigns to present the arguments to scholars and statesmen from Thailand. Chen Lufan and his institute continued to play a major role in this enterprise. In 1984, they showed to a group of Thai scholars from the Office of the Prime Minister of Thailand the difference between Thai and Nanzhao. The visitors were treated with Dai- and Bai-style food—the Dai believed as the close kin of the Thai and the Bai as co-founder of the Nanzhao Kingdom. They were also brought to the Dai prefecture of Sipsong Panna and the Bai prefecture of Dali, the homeland of ancient Nanzhao kingdom. The Thai scholars were said to have admitted that ‘we did not find definite evidence to support that Nanzhao was founded by the Thai (Shen 1984, p. 45), and think that ‘Buddhism in Thailand was not from Nanzhao’. ‘We did not find any evidence that the Thai migrated from China in mass manner, as alleged in Thai’s history textbooks. On the contrary, there is evidence indicating the Thai had moved northward to Sipsong Panna’ (ibid., p. 46). Much of the same took place from 1985 to 1988, when other groups of Thai scholars and politicians visited Yunnan.

Chen Lufan and other Chinese scholars made several trips to Thailand, presenting the same argument to various audiences, including public lectures at Chulalongkorn University, The Siam Society, Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and Silpakorn University. In one of the visits, Chen Lufan and his colleagues visited Prince Subhadradis Diskul, son of Prince Damrong who was responsible for popularising the ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ argument, and presented him with a Chinese painting of the Dali landscape. In 1986, a project—‘The origin of the Thai: Nanzhao or Sukothai?’—collaborated by Asia Research Institute at Chulalongkorn University and Institute of Southeast Asia at Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences was launched. The project was carried out in such a manner that the Chinese scholars were exposed to Thai archaeological materials while the Thai scholars were informed of the various evidence re-affirming that Nanzhao was not established by the Thai.

Campaign against ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ culminated in May 1990, when Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences hosted the 4th International Conference on Thai Studies in Kunming. A Chinese/English bilingual volume, *Whence Came the Thai Race? An Inquiry* edited by Chen Lufan (1990), was disseminated to the participants. The volume is a collection of major papers against the ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ argument. In addition, over twenty papers presented in the conference were intended to refute this argument, mostly written by Chinese scholars, who produced more archaeological, linguistic, and customary evidence. During the conference, Chen Lufan managed to present his edited volume and the conference proceedings to Princess Galyani Vadhana and the Thai ambassador, who was asked to present these volumes to Princess Sirindhorn, Deputy Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, and former Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj. The political efforts here were conspicuous.

The effort was concluded with an article—‘The Theory of the Nanzhao Thai Kingdom: Its Origin and Bankruptcy’ (He 1990)—published in *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* (Social Science in China), the most influential academic journals then in China. The English version was produced in 1995 with the intention of drawing attention from international audience. It was basically a comprehensive review of the genealogy of the argument of ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’. In doing so, the article constructed a narration of how this argument was put forward by ‘malicious’ and ‘imperialist’ western scholars, how it was mistakenly adopted and popularised by Thai historians, how the Chinese historians changed the view of the Thai elites, and how this argument was abandoned by the historians from Thailand, China, and the west. The paper emphasised that ‘the Nanzhao Kingdom...was a local regime established by the ancestors of the Yi and the Bai minzu. Therefore, the land of the Nanzhao Kingdom had been always a part of Chinese territory.’ (He 1990, p. 209)

A LATE ADDITION TO THE LANDSCAPE OF THAILAND HISTORIOGRAPHY

It seems that what Chen Lufan and his colleagues did must be of great significance, given the multitude of the academic and political efforts. However, a closer examination indicates that what had been done was akin to lighting a candle in a room full of light. In fact, changes have already taken place in the landscape of Thailand history even before the pressure came from Chinese scholars.

Du Yuting and Chen Lufan’s paper against Thai migration was translated into Thai (through English) in the same year by Kukrit Pramoj, former prime minister of Thailand. It was published in his daily newspaper, *Siam Rath* (28–30 June 1978), with a translator’s comment that ‘the western scholars and historians’ theory that “Kublai Khan drove the Thai off” was a distortion of 13th century history’ (quoted from Sujit 1985[1984], p. 19). Suchat Pumiboriraksa (1980) concluded on the same newspaper that the Thais were not from Nanzhao. The issue caught public attention when *Silpa Wattanatham* published *Khon Thai mai dai ma chak nai* (Thai people do not come from anywhere) in 1984, where Sujit Wongthes explicitly admitted that it was through Chen Lufan that he learned that Nanzhao was not a Thai kingdom but a Yi and Bai kingdom (Sujit 1985 [1984], p. 19). Sujit went further by saying that Thai historians already abandoned the ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ argument, even before Chen Lufan and his colleagues began the attack, ‘since 1957, the opinion [against Altai Mountain and Nanzhao Kingdom] was on the rise. Recently, Ministry of Education had deleted ‘Thai was originated from Altai Mountain and Central China’ from textbooks...We can almost say that nobody believes Nanzhao was founded by the Thai, or there were Thai-speaking people scattered in Nanzhao Kingdom.’ (Sujit 1985 [1984], p.18)

Compared with the efforts Chinese historians had made, Thailand scholars’ response to the ‘challenge’ from the Chinese side was polite and modest, but their responses were also unimportant to the overall landscape of Thailand historiography. In fact, these responses had been released in early 1980s, earlier than the 1990 conference on Thai studies where a general attack was co-coordinated by Chinese scholars. Moreover, Chen Lufan and his colleagues could not claim a ‘total victory’ in changing the landscape of Thailand historiography. They never dissuade the hardcore believers of ‘Nanzhao as Tai kingdom’ among Thailand historians. Nor did they manage to ‘correct’ the public perceptions of Thailand. Not only were some influential figures, including Kukrit Pramoj who translated Chen Lufan’s article, displeased with Chen’s suggestion, but also many conservative Thai historians reasserted their conviction of ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ in a number of different occasions (Pongsripian

1991, p. 2). The general public, especially those who received primary or secondary education in 1970s, certainly continue to maintain their conviction of ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’, irrespective of any Chinese academic achievement (Winichakul 2010, personal communication). As Winai Pongsripian (1991, p. 19) predicted, ‘The popular Thai view of ancient Tai history concerning Tai migrations and Nan-chao [Nanzhao] will probably live on for a long time, because once a national myth is popularised it dies hard’..

The Thai historians that Chen Lufan associated with, namely, Chontira Satyawattana, Kanchani La-onsri, Wutthichai Munlasilp, and Praphrut Sukolratnamethi, are relatively less influential historians. The articles they produced were published in less popular newspapers and magazines. As Charnvit Kasetsiri (1996) commented, ‘(some historians Chen Lufan associated with), for lack of adequate exposure did not receive public attention.’ Although the politicians and prominent historians were among the listeners of the Chinese refutation, it is fair to say that the Thais abandoned the ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ argument for reasons other than the monotonous push from the Chinese side.

A review of the landscape of Thailand history (Winichakul 1995, 2008) suggests that in 1960, the ‘Altai Mountain and Nanzhao Kingdom’ narrative was already questioned. At a conference in Silapakorn University, an article that questioned this narrative was presented and published in the mainstream journal *Sankhomsat Parithat* (Social Science Reviews). Thongchai Winichakul demonstrated that the changing landscape of the past in Thailand started in 1973 with the popular uprising led by the student movement against the military dictatorship. It was a political as well as an intellectual revolution that shook the historical paradigm. As a result, historians challenged the Damrong School, especially Prince Damrong and Luang Wichitwathakan. They were accused of propelling a ‘centrist’ history of the Thai capitals—a royal/national history to serve the modern Thai state under the absolute monarchy that shows that ‘Thai history was nothing but a political chronicle of the royal/national great men’ (Winichakul 1995, p. 102). Since 1966, scholars like Srisak Vallibhotama argued for a local history instead of a history of migration. ‘He opposes attempts to find the origin of Thai people today in the Tai race, which is a popular subject even up to now...he argues, the Thai are people of mixed race. To speak of the Tai race is to address a mistaken concept. To try to solve the question of its origin is a waste of time.’ (Winichakul 1995, p. 108)

We can say the same about the ‘western’ scholars, where two examples may suffice. As early as 1960s, Cambridge anthropologist Edmund Leach pointed out that to think of the small polities in Burma as a product of migration from Nanzhao is to mistakenly think of frontier, state, and nation as the same thing. ‘Indeed Kublai Khan’s occupation of the capital—which was notably peaceful—need have had no effect on the population whatsoever...The migration hypothesis of the historians is both improbable and unnecessary’ (Leach 1960, p. 56). Charles Backus, a historian of southwest China, conclusively found out that ‘in the past two decades numerous books and articles in Chinese and Japanese, and a few articles in English, have demonstrated and reiterated that neither the rulers nor the great majority of the Nan-chao [Nanzhao] population can in any way be equated with the Thai peoples.’ (Backus 1981, pp. 48–9) While overseas Chinese historians welcomed Backus’ view (for example, Wang 1983), the total ‘victory’ claimed by PR China’s historians was nonetheless a late participation at its best. It is clear that what the Chinese historians have suggested is a false picture and that the Thai historians’ abandonment of the ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ argument was not caused by the Chinese’s persistent convincing. The changing landscape of the Thai history arose from within Thailand.

One major difference between the updated Thai and Chinese historiographies is the fact that Chinese historians have been always keen to ask the question ‘Whence came the Thai race?’, while many Thai historians already suggested it is a mistake to ask questions regarding origins since it looks for a racial history. While Srisak had ruled out the ‘origin question’ for a long time, Sujit, in response to Chinese scholars, emphatically suggested that ‘the Thai did not come from anywhere’, implying that the ‘origin question’ that the Chinese scholars kept on asking was a wrong question. In fact, by persistently asking origin questions, Chinese scholars were in complicity with the early orientalist in this respect, since both believed that people has to have an origin, while the Thai scholars have already abandoned the question altogether.

NANZHAO AS A ‘LOCAL SEPARATIST REGIME’ INHABITED BY CHINESE MINZUS

The ‘origin question’ should be understood in the light of the century-long effort of Chinese nation-building, whereby academic construction of the Chinese nation has been under the influence of German-Austrian diffusionism (Yue 2008). In fact, the origin of the so-called ‘Chinese race’ (*zhonghua renzhong*) was itself one of the most intensive debates in pre-1949 Chinese academia (Liu 2005). The origin question has been so important to imagining a unitary Chinese people that despite strong contention over indigenous, western and eastern origins, the idea that a people must have an origin has never been questioned and that origin is believed to be a default property of a given people. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Liang 2010), the idea of *minzu* has been essentialised in China and this essentialised concept, almost never questioned in the last century, has played an important role in creating the contemporary Chinese *minzus*.

The “Ethnic Classification Project” (*minzu shibie*) is perhaps one of the most significant efforts to reify this essentialised concept of all the Chinese *minzus*, each of which must be endowed with a separate history starting with its origin. Since Nanzhao and its successor, the Dali Kingdom, sit in the western Yunnan province where in 1950s a large proportion of the population was classified as minority *minzus*, their historiography became much more important than ever: the kingdoms have to be proved as inhabited by the ancestors of these *minzus*. Otherwise, the historical unity of a multi-ethnic China will be questioned in this part of the territory. In other words, the kingdoms should be presented in the spirit that all Chinese *minzus* ‘have always been’ and ‘will always be’ part of Chinese ‘Big Family of Ethnic Unity’. The historiography since 1950s was produced by Chinese scholars who have thorough command of the vast Chinese sources, producing tremendous amount of evidence to support various *minzus*’ essentiality. Since it is claimed that a *minzu* must have an origin and have always been part of China, two related post-1949 themes dominated the study of Nanzhao Kingdom: first, that it was a ‘local separatist regime’ and second, it was inhabited by the ancestors of present-day *minzus*.

‘Local separatist regime’ (*difang geju zhengquan*) implies that the regime was temporarily separated from China and it will be ultimately reunified. Sometimes, it was simply put as ‘local regime’ (*defang zhengquan*), which implies an even lesser autonomy. Under such bearing, good relations were emphasised, especially the events marking the regime’s submission to the imperial Chinese rule. The kingdom was represented as being heavily influenced by Chinese economy, politics, and culture. The people were portrayed as being fond of Chinese custom and always longing for national unity. The Nanzhao Kingdom was

believed to be consolidated as a result of the Tang's strategic containment of the powerful Tubo. The Nanzhao's annexation to the other five chiefdoms were thus backed and authorised by the Chinese Tang court. Successive kings received the imperial titles of prince and governor, and regularly sent envoys and tributes to the Tang court—a sign of recognition for the Chinese rule. Out of the envy of the Chinese 'social and economic superiority', Nanzhao also sent thousands of students to Chengdu and Chang'an to learn the 'advanced' culture and technologies from Chinese. The kingdom was also said to have adopted the Chinese characters, civil governance, technology, dressing code, and art.

In the official version of the history of Bai minzu—*The Baizu Jianshi* (Concise History of the Bai)—a section entitled as the 'Intimate Relation Between Nanzhao and its Motherland' depicts that the Nanzhao kingdom was nothing more than a subject of Chinese empire, and the people of Nanzhao were the loyal minzus of China. The violence between them was committed against the people's will:

Throughout the Tang dynasty, Nanzhao had been an intimate subject of the Tang Court. Envoys and communications were always kept...Although as slave-owners, the Nanzhao rulers robbed Sichuan and Guangxi for their class interest, all the Nanzhao people of different minzus were against these wars of robbery, and they had successfully forced the Nanzhao rulers to resume friendly relations with the Tang court, the motherland (Ma 1983, p.98–9).

In fact, Nanzhao and Tang were often at wars, and since 9th century, Nanzhao ceased to consider itself a subordinate of China (Hou 2006). In the official versions of Nanzhao history between 1949 and 1990, these unpleasant evidence were either simply ignored or interpreted as unfortunate sideways of history caused by the ruling class' violation of the principle of 'ethnic unity'. This is especially the case for the Tianbao War (749–54), which involves several battles of mass slaughters between Tang and Nanzhao. It was interpreted as the result of the Tang's frontier governor's greed and the disloyal ministers' cheating over the emperor. The Nanzhao war memorial, *Nanzhao Tablet of Moralisation* (Nanzhao Dehua bei) was interpreted as Nanzhao's implication of temporary breakaway and the promise of ultimate reunification. In *The Concise History of Yunnan*, Ma (1983, 75) says,

The Tianbao War exposed the various conflicts between the Tang Court's 'Han Chauvinism' and the Nanzhao ruler's 'local nationalism', but it did not change the general trend of the unification and unity of Yunnan with its motherland. All minzus had been always engaged in the various activities of state unification and ethnic unity.

The 'Han Chauvinism' (*da hanzu zhuyi*) and 'local nationalism' (*defang minzuzhuyi*) are officially claimed in the P. R. China's ethnic policy as two dangers that everybody should not violate. These dangers have been held to be the two major threats to the 'Big Family of Ethnic Unity'. The comment of the Tianbao War in such terms was certainly politically correct, though it was apparently an over-interpretation.

Within the China-centric narrations, Nanzhao kingdom was put with the responsibility of incubating various minzus that formed later as part of the 'Big Family of Ethnic Unity'. Therefore, it goes without saying that Nanzhao was inhabited by the ancestors of the present-day minzus, as reflected in the premises of two relevant questions: What was the nature of the Nanzhao kingdom in the social ladder? What was the 'ethnic composition' of the kingdom?

For the social ladder question, Yang Kun (1957) had collected different opinions, but the conclusion tends to show that Nanzhao was a slavery society. For the ‘ethnic composition’ question, the diverse names of groups of people that appeared in the bulk of literature were grouped into genealogies of individual minzus. In the *Concise History of Yunnan* and *History of Yunnan Minzu* (You 1994), various groups were joined into the larger genealogies of individual minzu in terms of the present-day Minzu classifications (see Table 1 and Table 2):

Table 1: Genealogies of Minzu Appeared in *Concise History of Yunnan*

| Pre-Nanzhao Names | Nanzhao Names | Present-day Minzu names |
|-------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Kunming Yi | (Western) Wuman (incl. Shiman/Shuman, and Mosha Yi) | Yi (Yunnan) |
| | Eastern Wuman (incl. Qiongbu) | Yi (Liangshan) |
| Kunming Yi /Sou | Heman | Hani |
| Di/Qiang_ | Modiman | Yi |
| Moshayi | Moxie | Naxi |
| Bo | Baiman | Bai |
| Yue | Jinchi | Dai (Dehong) |
| | Puziman | Bulang/Benglong |
| | Wangman/Waiyu Tribes | Wa |
| | Xunchuanman/Luoxing | Jingpo/Achang |
| | Mangma/Baiyi | Dai (Sipsong Panna) |

Table 2 Genealogies of Minzu in *History of the Yunnan Minzu*

| Nanzhao Names | Present-day Minzu names |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Baiman | Bai |
| Wuman | Yi |
| Shiman Shunman | Lisu |
| Moxie | Naxi |
| Guocuo man | Lahu |
| Xunchuanman | Achang |
| Jinchi, Mangman, Baiyi, Tangmoman | Dai |
| Liao | Zhuang |

The minzu mapping corresponded to the present-day ethnic location, so that many ancient names of people have to be tactfully arranged. Some group names had to be broken into two or three areas, and were claimed to be the ancestors of different minzus. For example, the Moshayi was said to be the ancestors of Yi and Naxi. Some names were grouped together as ancestors of a single minzu, such as the Eastern Kunming Yi and Sou, who were believed to be the ancestors of the Hani. In some cases, a present-day minzu had to be broken into many sub-groups in order to make genealogies in terms of location. This is the case for the Yi—While the Yi in Liangshan was said to be the descendants of the Lolo, the Yi in Yunnan was the descendants of Modi Man.

Despite some doubts, Nanzhao kingdom was believed to be composed of the Wuman (the Black Barbarians) and Baiman (the White Barbarians), but all other ethnic minorities are also the origin of other Chinese ethnic minorities. A Prominent historian, Ma Changshou (1962), changed his view from the pre-1949 stand point, which favours ‘Nanzhao as a Tai state’ to one that argues ‘Nanzhao as a Yi and Bai state’. His argument was mainly based on linguistic and ethnographic evidence, both of which being rather partial. He argued that the Black and White Barbarians comprised the major tribal groups of the Nanzhao Kingdom. These two groups of people were the ancestors of the Yi and Bai, two major minzus of present-day Yunnan. They originated in China, migrated within China and lived in China. In denouncing the argument ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’, Ma (1962, p. 99) was explicit in the reasons behind it:

...the Black Barbarians and White Barbarians comprised the major tribal groups in the Nanzhao Kingdom. In addition, there were other tribal groups and tribes that were not under Nanzhao’s control, and their relations with Nanzhao were no more than tribute or military allies. They were therefore not the major tribal groups of Nanzhao. What draw our attention are the tribes of the Dai minzu (*daizu*). The reason why we raise this question is that many ‘sinologists’ of the contemporary western capitalist countries, in defence of the imperialist colonial order, argue that the Nanzhao Kingdom was founded by the Thai. Those with evil ambitions in Thailand, influenced by this colonialist theory, attempted to take advantage of China who was at war with Japan by persuading the Dai to break away from their motherland and found a Thai federation in Indochina. Though this shameful attempt already failed, there are still many in UK, US, France, and Japan, who believed that Nanzhao was founded by the Thai. Therefore, we must demonstrate where the ancient Thai were living and their relations with Nanzhao, in order to refute various absurd ideas held by various imperialist ‘scholars’ who argues for Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom.

The aim of asking the origin question was therefore clear: Writing histories in terms of an essentialised concept of minzu is an integral part of the entire nation-building effort in which various minority minzus must: 1) stay at the periphery; and 2) be loyal to the centre (see map 2). Minzu thus sustains a hierarchical order, in terms of history, by which the civilisational scheme of Chinese empire persists in modern nation-building.

Figure 2 Nanzhao as a Local Separatist Regime

CONCLUSION

Yang Bin (2009) has demonstrated that the minzu identification in Yunnan was not based on Stalinist ideal or liberal-democratic principles, but on imperial Chinese ideology—the division of ‘raw’ and ‘cooked’ ‘barbarians’. The various minzus in the homeland of ancient Nanzhao kingdoms were either ‘cooked’, like the Bai who were already assimilated (Fitzgerald 1941; Liang 2010), or ‘raw’, like the Wa and the Hani who were more often than not out of the imperial control, or semi-‘cooked’, like the Yi and Miao who spasmodically engaged in armed insurgence.

Establishing diplomatic relation in 1975 forced Chinese scholars to tackle the historiography of Nanzhao in Thailand. The ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ constitutes a serious threat to the ‘Big Family of Ethnic Unity’, because if Nanzhao was built by the Thais, China will lose the legitimacy of writing history for the various minzus living in Yunnan. Therefore, despite the changing landscape of the Thai historiography, Chinese historians tried laboriously to ‘dissuade’ the Thais and international scholars on the idea that Nanzhao was not founded by the Thais. There seems to be an implicit suggestion that once the writing of history is monopolised, legitimacy is established. This has been the case for several more serious ‘border disputes’ between China and its neighbouring countries or between the Chinese government and its separatists. For instance, we see Chinese official announcements that seem to always start with ‘[this or that place] had been always part of Chinese territory *from the very beginning (zigu yilai)*...’

In the academic sense, ‘Nanzhao as a Tai kingdom’ is a flawed, outdated argument. In comparison, ‘Nanzhao as a local separatist regime’ is supported by more convincing evidence. However, both arguments were successful in the nation-building projects, especially in PR China, where the historical narration of a certain minzu is crucial to the imagination of the Chinese nation, as the case of Yi (Harrell and Li 2003). Therefore, Nanzhao history, like any other history concerning minzu issues, cannot be subjected to alternative narrations, especially when this alternative version was part of the nation-building efforts of another country. Like the controversy over the historical narration of Mongolian, Tibetans, and Uyghur, the alternative versions of Nanzhao history must be refuted.

With this task, writing Nanzhao history revolves around two issues: its ‘social nature’ and its ‘ethnic composition’. Both questions are intended to sustain the hierarchical mapping of Chinese minzu in which the majority is represented at the centre while the minority is represented at the periphery, the minority who have been always loyal and envious to the centre, longing for national unity.

This brings us back to the civilisational scheme of Chinese empire, by which Prof Feuchtwang argues for centrality and profound transformation. In this regard, the Nanzhao historiography between 1949 and 1990 is a typical case demonstrating three points. First, the centre in China is still held as encompassing, more than a political one, adding yet another aspect to the persistent features of Chinese civilisation characterised by centrality. Second, the Chinese centrality is in this case, sustained by an adopted concept—minzu, which has been successfully transformed to describe a type of coherent and concrete relations pertinent to Chinese empire as a civilisation. Third, writing history in post-1949 China is like presenting an inalienable gift: by giving history to the subject, the subject is subjected to a larger narration of China. The local is written for the sake of the central. The Minzu is written for the sake of the multi-ethnic polity. In these respects, Nanzhao historiography is one of the examples among hundreds of such cases in the periphery China.

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