Towards History of the Margins: from Barbarian to Zhuang Nationality[1]

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Abstract

This article examines the historical narratives about the Zhuang ethnic minority, a Tai-speaking people in Guangxi, China from the Imperial state until the modern nation-state, and demonstrates that the narratives about the ethnic populace in the south borderland space have changed according to the transformed relations between the state center and those defined as 'ethnic' minorities. This article illustrates the individual agency of Zhuang Studies scholars and how they have negotiated, interpreted and presented what it means to be 'Zhuang'. The increased research collaboration with international scholars has created a body of interdisciplinary literature focused on the place of "Tai origin" which has contributed to the formation of an alternative narrative as the old siblings of Tai-speaking peoples in Southeast Asia.

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Introduction

The Zhuang are one of the Tai-speaking people who are distributed mainly over the Southwestern part of China, the Sino-Vietnamese border. Nowadays, the Zhuang nationality is recognized as the largest of the 55 ethnic minority groups of the People Republic of China (PRC). In 2005, there were about 17 million Zhuang in China. Most of them are concentrated in Guangxi, the Zhuang autonomous region, inhabiting the area south of five great mountain ranges. Other Zhuang have settled in Yunnan, Guangdong, Guizhou and Hunan provinces.

This article aims at examining the debate in historical narratives about the Zhuang ethnic minority in Guangxi, the south border of China, or James Scott's so-called 'Zomia.' The first part focuses on the change of narratives about peoples in the south borderland from the Chinese Imperial Era to nation-state and the role of elites and intellectuals in these narratives' construction. The next section delineates the project of ethnic identification and the early PRC's ethnic policy that affected the Zhuang identity. The last part provides a brief review of the revival of Zhuang scholarship and the discovery of Buluotuo myths and scriptures. This section illustrates the individual agency of Zhuang Studies scholars and how they have negotiated, interpreted and presented what it means to be 'Zhuang'. The increased research collaboration with international scholars has created a body of interdisciplinary literature focused on the place of "Tai origin" which has contributed to the formation of an alternative narrative as the old siblings of Tai-speaking peoples in Southeast Asia.

Guangxi as South Borderland: Narrative of place and people in the Imperial state

The border is indeed a symbolic space generating political and socio-cultural metaphors and a site for negotiating historical memories and nationalism. Borderlands represent the state margin, magnifying both interethnic relations and the explosion of identity politics. In China during the Imperial period, the borderlands were at once full of

dangers and opportunities. The court and literary elites viewed that a variety of indigenous peoples who inhabited the lowlands of South and Southeast China were barbarian and called them *Bai Yue*, meaning literally "the One Hundred *Yue*".

Guangxi is bordered by mountains that are over 1,000 meters high and has many hills and basins because it is drained by the navigable Xi River and its many tributaries. There are several noteworthy aspects of Guangxi topography. One is the diagonally-joining mountain canyons. A second aspect is that the principle mountain ranges in Guangxi are of sandstone formation. Finally, in the regions of largely limestone formations, the metamorphosis of the mountains creates two special topographical peculiarities. One is the precipitous, tower-like spires with different shapes rising out of level plains, such as Guilin. Another peculiarity is the limestone plains surrounding these tower-like masses. These plains are level, with a reddish or yellow soil. These peculiarities combine to form the so-called karst landforms.[3]

The geographical environment, tropical climate, and unpredictability of the weather in this area entail the image of danger, wildness, and un-civility in the perception of Chinese centralizing state which was particularly aware of the limits of its administrative and military reach in the border regions. It was in the border areas that the political and cultural elites of China were particularly interested in differentiating the "non-Chinese" from the "Chinese". The populations in borderlands were categorized into two main groups: *Min* -the registered subjects of the state (tax-paying) and *Man Yi* - people who were "beyond the pale."

Ethnic 'Other': People at the Empire's margin

For Ming observers, the *man yi* had an unruly nature and often used violence to resolve disputes. Some recorded that "when content they are human; when discontent they are beast" and "when a Zhuang kills a Zhuang, an official complaint would not be filed" (*Zhuang sha Zhuang, bu gao zhuang*). Ming officials also distinguished between

[3] Wiens, *Han Chinese Expansion in South China*.

Zhuang people who were "tractable" (*shan*) and those who were "intractable" (*e*).[4]

According to Record of Things Heard on the Torrid Frontier, Tian Rucheng records detailed descriptions of nineteen major categories of *man yi*: Miao, Luoluo, Gelao, Mulao, Yanghuang, Zhongjia, Songjia, Caijia, Mangjia, Longjia, Ranjia, Bo, Dong, Yao, Zhuang, Lao, Li, Dan, and Ma. It is unclear how Tian came up with his cataloging scheme, but he states that the information derived from first hand observations when he was an assistant administration commissioner of Guangxi from 1538 to 1541.

In his entry on the Zhuang, the Zhuang are said to like to eat and drink with their hands as well as to live in two-story thatched dwellings in which the ground floor is reserved for housing animals such as oxen, pigs, and dogs, and Zhuang people are good at using poisons, especially the kind known as *gu*. Other observers associate the use of *gu* poisons more closely with Zhuang women.[5]

Moreover, the custom for young men and women to gather together and sing to one another during festivals in the spring and in the autumn and take such occasions to mate was also recorded. Zhuang women were often described in disapproving custom of courtship and associated with *gu* poisoning. The practice of shamanism was also recorded in the 19th century written document; Chinese officials described that:

> The Yao and Zhuang live mixed up together. They do not devote themselves to Poetry or to Documents...They have a crude understanding of rites and decorum. The local customs are to pay great regard for wealth, and to kill lightly. When they leave the house they carry knives for self-defense. The inhabitants labour in the rice-fields; they do not engage in trade… In the markets it is mainly the women who engage in trade. When sick they resort only to shamans and spirit mediums.[6]

[4] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State*, 124.
[5] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State,* 182.
[6] Quoted in Holm, *Recalling Lost Souls*, 11.

What is noteworthy about this passage of the non-Chinese is its clear affirmation of the distinction between "Chinese" and "non-Chinese" in the border region. It was not only to reinforce the image of the southern region as a perilous frontier, but also to reaffirm the boundaries between "civilized/ Chinese" and "uncivilized/ non-Chinese."[7] In other words, the contrast between 'Self' and 'Other', particularly in the Sinocentric view of the world, was perceived and the ethnic boundaries needed to be defined. The Other needed to be distant, hierarchically inferior, and also exceptional relative to the normative Self.

In sum, the court and literary elites during the imperial state viewed native people in the south borderland as the ethnic 'Other'. The stereotype of these groups was animalistic as we can see from the Chinese characters utilizing the "dog" or "animal" radical in the names of minority groups. In the Imperial courts' view, the south borderland was the margins or the geographical sites where nature can be imagined as wild and uncontrolled, as peripheries seen to form natural containers for people considered insufficiently socialized into the law. States attempt to manage or pacify these populations through both force and pedagogy of conversion intended to transform "unruly subjects" into lawful subjects of the state. This is equal to mark these indigenous people as civilizationally "other."[8]

Abramson also suggests that political imperatives had forced the elite social classes to highlight ethnic oppositions in order to solidify a Chinese self-identity.[9] The stereotypes of ethnic groups, such as non-Han were illiterate; non-Han drink a lot; non-Han peoples were good skill singing and dancing, provided a shift to a model of ethnic and cultural exclusivity and laid the groundwork for the emergence of the modern Chinese nation.

The term *zhongguo* [中国] or "Central kingdom" then connotes both the geographic and political concepts which the educated Han elites identified the Chinese as the center of existence. Opposition between Han (*huaren*) and non-Han ethnicity and between Chinese

[7] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State,* 205.
[8] Das and Poole, *Anthropology in the Margins,* 10.
[9] Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China*, 184.

and non-Chinese culture, Abramson argues, was central to the creation of the unified Chinese geopolity as a functioning state and as an ideal that bound the unified state together. In another words, "peripheral minorities" have played a pivotal role in influencing and constructing Chinese society and identity. This approach challenges the official narratives in which most historians tend to focus on the roles of Han settlers in transforming the native people and the success of the sinicization project. Han migrants from the central plains transformed the landscape of the border zone with their agriculture tools and techniques, and disseminated throughout the region the beliefs and practices of Chinese culture. Such a perspective assumes the superiority of Chinese culture.

However, the Imperial expansion had experienced many resistances when the Han kingdom expanded into the Yangzi and Pearl River basins. As recorded in *the Great Chinese Encyclopedia*, only in Guangxi, there were 51 uprisings during the Song (960-1279 CE) and 218 uprisings during the Ming (1368-1644 CE).[10] This shows a glimpse of strong resistance that these native people put up against increasing encroachment of Han agricultural settlers throughout the imperial state. The suppression eventually forced the Tai tribes people determined to preserve their way of life to move toward the sparsely settled frontier lands.

For the peoples who were still living in the zones of Han expansion, although they were not directly governed by the Chinese magistrate, through a multitude of activities, including registering the populace, distributing land, collecting taxes, regulating religious institutions, and promoting cultural activities launched by the Imperial governments, they were eventually absorbed as subjects of the kingdom, and acculturated with Chinese ritual and culture.

The Unruly Borderland and the Rise of Nationalism

In regards to the changing global context in the eighteenth century, the frontier regions became the site of intense imperial rivalry and of particularly fluid relations between the indigenous people, Han

[10] Wiens, *Han Chinese Expansion in South China*, 187.

Chinese, and European interlopers. The Qing court had begun imposing *gaitu guiliu*[11] policy to reform the *tusi* native chieftaincies and replace them with direct Han rule. One of the reasons was "to protect the territory and govern the barbarian," another was a moralistic reason which included a strong anti-slavery dimension. The structure of provincial administration also enabled the serfs to rid themselves of their enslavement and become free peasants owning their own land.[12] Later, these peasants became the groundwork of the revolutionary movements. Many Zhuang peasants became key members of the Tong Meng Hui, an organization of Dr. Sun Yat-sen who led the Revolution of 1911.

When Sun Yat-sen, who graduated from Japan, led the revolt that founded the Republic of China, the modern Chinese national identity was officially formed. Sun (1912) declared, "The uniting of the Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan territories into a single country"[13] and he established "the Republic of Five Groups", which was the first recognition of diverse ethnic groups' contributions to Chinese nation-building.

In the early years of building the new nation-state, the newly unsettled regime was still threatened by colonial invaders. The government's ceding of German colonial possessions in China to Japan roused the anti-colonial sentiment among the intellectuals and led to the May Fourth Movement,[14] in which Beijing University students led a mass street demonstration protest on May 4, 1919. These young intellectuals served to alert hundreds of thousands of Chinese, as well as a new generation of college students, to the importance of democracy, mass welfare, and, more importantly, the

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[11] "There were two meanings of *gaitu guiliu*. One was to replace the local chieftains with regular officials. Another means to confer Qing titles on the existing local chieftains, making them responsible for collecting symbolic taxes and keeping order." Quoted from Dai, *The Sichuan Frontier*, 269.

[12] See Took, *A native chieftaincy in Southwest China*, 226-257.

[13] Quoted in Yu, *Identity and Schooling*, 53.

[14] The May Fourth spirit tremendously effect Chinese society in diverse ways, especially its legacy on religious practices and folklore which have had affected the ethnic minorities in a long run.

establishment of the modern "Chinese nation" or *Zhonghua Minzu*.[15] The Nationalistic ideas among Chinese intellectuals played a central role in transmitting new ideas for recognizing the ethnic peoples on the south and southwest borderlands and for incorporating them into a new modern nation-building process.

In relation to broad socio-political transformations, the strategic battle, not only between the GMD and CCP, but also with international dynamics of territory, was waged to win more support from ethnic groups in the borderlands. Internal and international politics conditioned the knowledge production on ethnic minorities, namely ethnology. Chinese intellectuals acted as agents of social and political change and played an important role in factional and ideological battles between the GMD and the CCP.

Besides, the CCP's rhetoric of national equality aiming to enhance the "Voice" of the ethnic "Other" previously oppressed by the ruling classes attracted ethnic peoples and scholars. After the CCP took power, however, all intellectuals advocated participating in building a socialist state, and were forced into party-controlled organizations. Scholar creative activities were conducted under the party's sponsorship and directed by the Leninist-Maoist policies. Intellectuals who graduated from overseas actively contributed to define ethnic classification based on common language, blood lineage, and culture. Although there were flaws and disparity in the *minzu* identification project, it was the first time in Chinese history that large-scale research on ethnic minorities was conducted by using the "scientific method."

Building Modern Nation: the Project of Ethnic Classification

In a book titled *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China*, Kaup points out that prior to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official recognition of the Zhuang in the 1950s, the people today classified as Zhuang had no sense of a common ethnic identity and made few demands either for recognition as a group or for Zhuang

[15] Yang, *Chinese Religiosities.*

autonomy.[16] However, the revolutionary efforts of the party brought about tremendous cultural and social reform toward ethnic minorities.

In order to build a new nation and mobilize the support of the people, the CCP aimed to integrate ethnic groups along the border into a unified administration of the Chinese state. The state invited ethnic minorities to register the names by which they wished to be identified; and more than 400 different ethnic groups registered. Therefore, in-depth survey work was needed to clarify the situation. As a project of *minzu shibie* (ethnic classification) the visiting research teams composed of historians, ethnologists, and linguists were sent into minority regions around the country. These researchers spent years collecting data on their politics, social institutions, agriculture, customs, myth, and language. The CCP broadly adopted Stalin's definition of 'nationality' as "A nation is a historical formed stable community of people arising on the basis of common language, common territory, common economic life, and a typical cast of mind manifested in a common culture."[17]

The ethnic classification was a highly politicized issue. Political authorities agreed that linguistic categorization was the most effective and economical way to proceed. Therefore, the identification teams were assigned to investigate the claims of various groups by using language-based taxonomic theories as the "primary criterion of classification". The earlier works of Western and Chinese ethnologists were crucial sources to adjust the groups. Namely, that even prior to the fieldwork stage of the project, the team already had a thoroughly detailed plan about which groups it planned to recognize as full-fledged *minzu*.[18]

Finally, over four hundred groups were reduced to the officially recognized fifty-six nationalities by the state. They also placed the

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[16] One factor may rely on the various dialects of Zhuang language. From the surveys conducted in the early 1950s, Chinese linguists have delineated twelve major Zhuang dialects. These vast differences in Zhuang dialects and the lack of a unified written script have clearly limited integrating among the Zhuang. Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang,* 36-37.

[17] Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang,* 88.

[18] Mullaney, *Coming to Terms,* 84.

new nationalities on a social-evolutionary scale, drawing from Marxist theory and from the work of American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan; inevitably, minorities were placed on the lower rungs of the evolutionary hierarchy, while the majority Hans were placed on the top.

In consequence of the official recognition of 55 *minzu*, many different Tai-speaking groups become recognized under the single rubric of "Zhuang zu" – the largest minority nationality of the PRC. Regarding the pride of being the first province in which the Communist Party announced liberation, their collaboration with the Communist enabled the granting of their own autonomous area – Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. However, they were prejudiced as the most Sinicized *minzu,* without unity and unique collective identity. The remaining differences of spoken language and folk singing traditions varying from place to place were unable to construct an imagined community. This resulted in the massive propaganda campaign to build Zhuang solidarity such as the invention of the Zhuang writing system and scholarly endeavors to research and to discover the Zhuang history and cultural identity in the 1950s. It was the time that state scholars devoted to producing a local history of the Zhuang that would complement the Marxist framework of historiography.[19]

However, the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976 interrupted these efforts; the policy of national regional autonomy was condemned as creating "independent regions" and "dividing the nation". Minorities were not allowed to wear their national costumes in some places, and selling specialty goods for minorities was outlawed. In many places minorities were forced to abandon their religious traditions. Minority songs, dance, folk songs, and the like were called 'feudal, capitalist, revisionist, poisonous weeds".[20]

[19] See Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang*.
[20] Heberer, *China and Its National Minorities,* 26-27.

The Margin speaks back: Post-Socialist Historiography

After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of Communist Party of China in 1978, there were major changes in political and socioeconomic aspects of the PRC. The government under Deng Xiaoping began to re-assess and reform policies prominent in the late 1960s. China ended its closed-door policy and emphasized the first priority to economic development. The Four Modernizations (the modernization of agriculture, industry, science and technology and the military) were stressed all over China.

National research and academic groups were re-established. The work of *minzu* identification was resumed and some reclassifications were made. It took over 20 years, from 1953 to 1979, to complete. Finally, the Nationalities Affairs Commission (NAC) officially announced the entire 56 *minzu* (including the majority Han). There has been a movement within Chinese academic and political circles to revive the notion of a "Chinese Nation" and call it the "multicultural unity of the Chinese Nation".[21]

The government announced a "New Era of Minority Work" that focused on re-establishing the nationalities' autonomous rights and stressed moving toward "modernizing socialism" in which the Han and non-Han would both have political and economic equality. Minority autonomous areas were granted higher budgetary freedom and special investment funds to compensate them for years of exploitation by the Han. Many programs such as special programs in education and cadre training, a huge publication project, and economic development projects were launched.[22]

Traumatized by the Cultural Revolution, the minority scholars no longer speak through the rhetoric of class struggle, but instead have turned to gather the indigenous knowledge and traditions that were destroyed during the Mao era, such as popular rituals, traditional practices of medicine and healing, and other "traditional" modes of social morality. They believe that these traditional practices could be utilized in the project of bringing development to minorities. As

[21] See Fei, *Ethnic Identification in China*.
[22] See Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang,* 111-116.

Litzinger contends, discourses of tradition in the late 1980s were not only about the 'internal others', but also "about the capacity of ethnic subjects to overcome the traumas of the past and to participate in the forging of new modes of governmentality, modes of local rule that would require the recovery of indigenous knowledge and traditional cultural practices."[23]

In the case of the Zhuang, expansion of education and promotion of the Zhuang language since the 1950s has had an effect on increasing Zhuang ethnic consciousness. Kaup remarked that Zhuang who have a high educational level seem to have greater Zhuang ethnic nationalism than those who have a lower level and uneducated peasants because they have contact with other nationalities and become more concerned about Zhuang history and culture.[24] They increasingly emphasize their ethnicity and simultaneously participate in debates from the legal position of the nationalities to their territorial and other rights associated with autonomy. They were working to speak back to long-standing stereotypes of ethnic primitivity and minority backwardness.[25] In an attempt to bind the Zhuang together as a group for maximum economic, social, or political advantage, scholars tend to construct a "long and glorious" history of the Zhuang to bolster the Zhuang's own sense of pride and self-worth. Therefore, research on Zhuang social history has been revived.

The Guangxi authorities allocated funds for a publication project on Zhuang history. The first-hand materials obtained from large-scale investigations on history and traditional culture in Guangxi in the late-1950s were revised and published in a seven-volume collection of investigations on society and history of the Zhuang in Guangxi (*Guangxi Zhuangzu shehui lishi diaocha*). As Took contends, this collection offers a very valuable research resource since they never were recorded in the dynastic histories, gazetteers, statutes, imperial memorials or any other standard Chinese records.[26]

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[23] Litzinger, *Other Chinas,* 191-192.
[24] Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang,* 133-138.
[25] Litzinger, *Memory Work*.
[26] See Took, *A native chieftaincy,* 10.

In addition, several works produced in the 1960s by Huang Xianfan, who was rehabilitated from a false accusation, were published.[27] His works were substantially destroyed during the Cultural Revolution; Huang began to rewrite them until he passed away in 1982. His disciples continued his unfinished works and got them published; for example, *Nong Zhigao* was published in 1983 and *A General History of the Zhuang* was published in 1988. Research works of other scholars were also published, such as Xu Songshi's *Guangxi Zhuang Place Names Anthology* (1982).[28]

Zhuang intellectuals put their efforts towards publishing popular histories of the Zhuang, which often contain narratives of how the Zhuang's antecedents had risen up against the ''feudal'' regimes of the past and advanced the social development of the group. In 1984, a huge publication project was launched. Folk songs, folk stories, folk proverbs, folk ballads, local opera music, folk dance, and folk instrumental music of all nationalities were collected and compiled into the "10 Collections and Annals of Chinese/Folk Literature and Arts". Ancient works of ethnic minorities were valued by the State Nationalities Affairs Commission as a part of China's precious cultural heritage. All local governments were requested to provide manpower, financial, and material support for ancient works collation and research.[29]

Collecting ancient texts and documenting oral traditions became a major task in Guangxi. The Department of Guangxi Teachers College changed into the Folk Literature Research Institute. In 1985, Guangxi founded its own association of minority language and

[27] Huang Xianfan, a native of Guangxi who graduated from Japan, had devotedly partaken in a *minzu* identification and Zhuang history survey. In 1958, Huang was blamed for encouraging Zhuang separatism with the idea of setting up an "independent kingdom" in western Guangxi. Moreover, his book "A Short History of the Guangxi Zhuang People" was criticized for minimizing the role of the CCP in the Zhuang uprisings of the late 1920s. Moseley, *The consolidation of the South*, 88. Although he suffered grievously for almost 20 years, he still devotedly committed his life to teach and produce works on Zhuang history. Recently, he has been recognized as the father of Zhuang Studies. Chen, "On Bagui School" (in Chinese).

[28] See Chen, "On Bagui School" (in Chinese).

[29] Zheng, *China's Ethnic Groups,* 102, 104.

literatures. In the same year the Guangxi government renamed the Zhuang traditional songs fair - *Sanyuesan* Festival - as the "Guangxi Nationalities Art Festival".[30]

Discovering Buluotuo Scriptures

Inspired by the spirit of the May Fourth Folklore movement, the CCP and scholars determined that 'the folk were oppressed by the ruling classes and their voices excised from the annals of official historiography'. Folksong and other folk genres, therefore, were perceived as the 'Voices' of the populace and minorities that were against Confucianism and the feudal state.[31] During the 1950s and 1960s, scholars and cultural workers in Guangxi were assigned to collect the orally transmitted folklores and folksongs as well as the poetry and stories that had been written down and preserved by Taoists, ritual masters, and vernacular priests, as part of a broader effort to study and document the literary culture of the common people.

On fieldwork visits to the countryside, cultural workers began hearing stories, prose tales and 'ancient songs' (*gu ge*) about Buluotuo. He was regarded as an apical ancestor of the Zhuang and a well-known trickster figure. The exact meaning of 'Buluotuo' is far from enjoying academic consensus because his name is pronounced differently according to Zhuang sub-dialects, such as Bouq Luagh daeuz, Baeuq Loegdoh, Baeuq Roxdoh in Tianyang; and Bouslaoxdauz in Dejing dialect. There are probably four meanings: 1) the mountains headman, 2) the elderly of the mountains, 3) birds' leader, and 4), the omniscient and omnipotent elderly or 'the old man who knew everything'.[32]

There are plenty of folk stories about Buluotuo in the Hongshui River region and the Youjiang River region in the western part of Guangxi. Among these stories, the most famous one is of how he outwitted his three brothers. According to the prose tales, Buluotuo had three elder brothers: the eldest was the King of Thunder; the

[30] Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang,* 101.
[31] Lee, Tears That Crumbled, 37-39.
[32] Liu, *On the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (in Chinese).

second was the Serpent; the third was the Tiger; Buluotuo was the youngest brother. In order to divide their inheritance, they decided on a contest of their special powers by letting the three brothers stay inside a hut while each brother in turn would show his powers to frighten the others into surrendering. The three elder brothers had special powers and they agreed secretly that they would eat Buluotuo and seize his share of the inheritance. But Buluotuo used his wit and tricked the others by locking them in the hut and setting fire to it. The three brothers were scorched and blackened, but then they escaped separately. The King of Thunder fled to the sky, the Serpent fled to the sea, the Tiger fled to the forest. Hence Buluotuo became the king of the human realm.[33]

Buluotuo was not treated as a god, but rather as an ancestral figure. Among the vernacular ritual masters, Buluotuo was worshipped before reciting the ritual scriptures but he was never depicted on sacred scrolls, unlike Chinese deities. Due to the limits on public discussion of religion, the materials transmitted by vernacular priests that related to Buluotuo were represented indirectly as folk songs and popular literature. A myth "Lutuo Gonggong" was published in Literary History of Zhuang zu (1958) and in Guangxi Zhuang Literature (draft) in 1961.[34]

After the halt during the Cultural Revolution, academic works to collect minority folklores were resumed. In 1978, the Guangxi Folk Literature and Art Association collected folk songs "Calling Valley Soul", "Calling cattle soul", etc. from libretto and the ritual scripture of vernacular priests. In 1980, two more complete librettos were collected.[35] In the realm of academia, the discoveries of librettos and the ritual scriptures about Buluotuo, written in old Zhuang script, or sawndip (literally means "uncooked script"), were very exciting because the content of the texts seemed to be very ancient. Although the scriptures mentioned many deities influenced by Taoism or Buddhism, it apparently connected with the Zhuang indigenous religion. For this reason, the Guangxi Minority Ancient Manuscripts

[33] Holm, *Recalling Lost Souls,* 20.
[34] See Shi, *The Zhuang Buluotuo Belief Research* (in Chinese).
[35] See Shi, *The Zhuang Buluotuo Belief Research* (in Chinese).

Editing Office determined the "Buluotuo Scriptures" as Guangxi Zhuang ancient books.

After obtained approval from the Ethnic Affairs Commission in Beijing, the work of systematically collecting Buluotuo scriptures began in 1986. A coordinating group that included Yu Dajia, Qin Yaoting, Lan Hong'en, Lan Huaichang, and Nong Guanpin under the leadership of Zhang Shengzhen was set up. A large-scale survey and extensive collection of materials in Guangxi was launched from 1986 until 1988. The collection teams initially encountered considerable mistrust from villagers and religious practitioners who owned the scriptures because of severe harassment during the Mao regime. Finally, a total of 22 ritual scriptures were collected from the western highlands of Guangxi.[36]

Mainly, the scriptures came from two quite different areas. One was located along the border between Bama and Tianyang counties in the eastern part of Baise. Tianyang is connected with Bama by a motor road over the mountains. The other area was located on the Hongshui River in the southeastern part of Donglan County. These two areas had marked differences in local dialect and ritual traditions. The scriptures of the Bama-Tianyang belong to Mogong or bumo in Zhuang, which means 'a man who recites scripture', but those from Donglan belong to Shigong or busae in Zhuang. Bumo perform a wide range of rituals, including exorcisms, sacrifices and healing rituals for people. They also select auspicious days for special occasions and conduct divinations. When they conduct a ritual, they just recite the scriptures entirely in the Zhuang language.[37]

In general, these scriptures are written in the 'old Zhuang script', cast in an archaic form of five-syllable verse, and "The Three Realms were established by the Three Kings, The Four Realms were created by the Four Kings," appear in the opening formula of each scripture. According to folkloric evidence, Zhuang scholars interpreted that 'the Four Kings' refer to the King of Thunder, the Serpent, the Tiger and Buluotuo. The content of texts appeared to be connected with

[36] Holm, *Recalling Lost Souls*, 35.
[37] Holm, *Recalling Lost Souls.*

Buluotuo and Muliujia, the apical ancestors of the Zhuang, as the phrase 'they went to ask Baeu Rodo, they went to ask Mo Loekgyap. Baeu Rodo then spoke, Mo Loekgyap then said' often appeared in the scriptures.

Finally, Buluotuo jingshi yizhu (The Buluotuo Scriptures - an Annotated Translation), edited by Mr Zhang, was published in 1991 within the parameters of a national-level five-year plan of collating the textual heritage of China's national minorities. Thus, it was regarded as a party-approved expression of the Zhuang's ethnic cultural marker. Moreover, in response to the increased interest of international academia on Zhuang language and culture, the preface of this book was also translated into three foreign languages – English, Japanese, and Thai. I will further discuss this issue in the next section.

In brief, the Buluotuo myth in the scriptures is a cosmogonic myth that describes the origins of the world, how the earth and sky were separated at the beginning of the world. It is accompanied by a sequence of myths describing how human beings found water and learned to harness it, how fire was tamed, how rice was domesticated, how domestic animals were first created. At the same time, the myths recounted how the earliest ancestors of the Zhuang, acting on the advice of Buluotuo, established human institutions such as writing, chieftaincy, and family relations, and religious practices. Hence, scholars considered Buluotuo as the cultural ancestor of the Zhuang Nationality, who "not only created everything, but also conquered the tough natural conditions and strong social forces with the Zhuang people who had become a civilized ethnic group".[38]

In general, the Buluotuo scriptures were evaluated as precious literature which reflects the historical and socio-cultural changes of the Zhuang. Scholars highlighted the taboos and morality in the scriptures and emphasized harmony in the relationship between humans and nature, man and society, and among family members, while discarding some supernatural aspects that did not match with modern society. The publication of the Buluotuo scriptures was thus regarded as a source of great pride for Zhuang scholars and officials.

[38] See Holm, *Recalling Lost Souls.*

Borrowing Holm's words, it "served as a kind of historicised origin-myth for a newly-resurgent sense of Zhuang identity".[39]

As noted by Tapper, ethnographers, historians, and political scientists have played a crucial role as "creators" and "manipulators" of identities.[40] Zhuang studies scholars had to convert from a Marxist ethnology, which focused on social evolution and class struggles, to one of "staging to a nativist ethnography of ethnic assertion".[41] Since the 1980s, we have seen that Zhuang intellectuals have been expressing their heritage through their publications. Zhuang scholars tried to write Zhuang culture and their long-glorious history back into the time and space of the Chinese nation.

The year 1991 also marked the advent of re-establishing cross-border economic cooperation between China and Vietnam as a summit was held in Beijing which normalized bilateral relations.[42] In 1992, Deng Xiaoping visited many provinces during his 'Southern Tour'. After that, the Chinese government launched its frontier opening-up strategy, designating 13 open cities and 241 first-grade open ports, and establishing 14 border economic and technological cooperation zones, most of which are in ethnic autonomous areas. During the same year, the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) was formed and included Yunnan and Lao Cai provinces on the Sino-Vietnamese border.[43]

As a result, the Sino-Vietnam border areas became peaceful and more stable for international scholars to investigate the place of "Tai origin". The following section demonstrates that the cultural awareness of the Zhuang was heightened by foreign professional archaeologists, ethnologists, historians and linguists from Thailand and other countries like America, Australia, Japan, etc. This academic attention from foreign academia provided the Zhuang with a more positive attitude toward their own group and gave new meaning to

[39] Holm, *Recalling Lost Souls.*
[40] Tapper, *Ethnic identities and social categories.*
[41] Harrell, *Ways of Being Ethnic.*
[42] Hensengerth, *Regionalism in China-Vietnam,* 65.
[43] Hensengerth, *Regionalism in China-Vietnam.*

Zhuang culture and their way to express their identity on a national and international level.

In Search of Origin: the Discourse of Tai-Sibling

As mentioned earlier, there are extraordinary amounts of linguistic, ethnological, archaeological and historical research about people subsumed under the rubric of "Tai." International and Thai scholars have discussed theories about the place of "Tai origin", most of which point to several areas in China. For instance, a prominent linguist, William J. Gedney, proposed a hypothesis that the area of greatest diversity of the Tai languages is the original homeland of the Tai peoples. In his influential article "Linguistic Diversity among Tai Dialects in Southern Kwangsi", he contended that:

> the point of origin for the Thai languages and dialects in this country [i.e. Thailand] and indeed for all the languages and dialects of the Tai family, is …perhaps along the border between North Vietnam and Kwangsi or on one side or the other of this border.[44]

In the meantime, when the communist party won the war, Chinese scholars who conducted research in the Lingnan area during World War II, like Li Fanggui/Li Fang Kuei and Xu Songshi/ Hsu Sung-shih emigrated to the U.S. and Hong Kong. Li Fang Kuei classified the Tai language family and pointed out that the Northern Zhuang dialects belong to the Northern Tai language and the Southern Zhuang dialects belong to the Central Tai. His theory of Tai language is widespread among linguist circles.

By combining comparative language, place names and archaeology, Xu Songshi made the hypothesis that the peoples of Southeast Asia were all descendants from "the ancient inhabitants of the south of China".[45] Furthermore, he continuously researched the Zhuang and the Thai. He was known as Princeton S. Hsu when he

[44] Gedney, "Linguistic Diversity", quoted in Holm, *Linguistic Diversity.*
[45] Xu, *The Blood Ties* (in Chinese), quoted in Lary, *The Tomb*, 11.

visited Thailand. Chin Yudee, a professor at Silpakorn University, met Princeton S. Hsu and was inspired by his papers. Chin translated Hsu's two papers into Thai in 1968: "The Origin of the Chuang (Zhuang)" and "The Origin of Thai people". Chin researched the bronze drum and conducted ethno-archaeological comparative studies of the bronze drum culture in various ethnic groups. He was venerated as the first Thai archaeologist who began to study ethnological data to search out "Tai origin". However, under the pressure of the Cold War, as well as due to American influence in Thailand, diplomatic connections to the PRC were discouraged. Chin just kept his research interests to himself, and then transmitted it to his students at Silpakorn University to further conduct research on the Zhuang whenever it was possible.[46]

When the PRC launched its open-up policy, diplomatic relations between the PRC and Thailand were inaugurated. Deng Xiaoping was the first Chinese leader to visit Thailand in November 1978. Subsequently, Premier Zhao Ziyang visited Thailand in 1981, followed by President Li Xiannian in 1985, and Premier Li Peng in 1988 and 1990. In this context, Thai linguists from Chulalongkorn University became the pioneering group of Thai scholars who were permitted to research in Guangxi. Pranee Kullavanijya is a former student of Li Fang Kuei. Moreover, influenced by Gedney's theory of the Tai language origin, Pranee led a group to conduct a research project, "The Relationship between the Zhuang and the Thai" (1987-1990) in Guangxi.[47]

Afterwards, scholars from Khon Kaen University, Payap University, Silpakorn University, Thammasat University and several other institutes went to Guangxi.[48] In the 1990s, there were a number of research projects investigating the roots of "Tai origin" by using multidisciplinary approaches like historical linguistics, anthropology, archaeology, folklore, and genetics, most of which were short-term surveys to the sites that scholars in Guangxi had suggested. As a

[46] Rasmi, "Ethno-archaeology and Research on Tai People" (in Thai).
[47] Pranee, *A Study of Lexical Variation.*
[48] See Fan, *The Connections of Ethnic Groups.*

result, the Zhuang have been seen as "the oldest of the Tai sibling groups".[49]

Among these projects, Silpakorn University cooperated with the Guangxi Research Institute for Nationalities to conduct a multi-disciplinary research project on the comparison of the Thai and the Zhuang cultures from 1992-2002. The topics studied were anthropology, archaeology, architecture, education, economics, social science, and languages.[50] According to informal interviews with Zhuang scholars, it was the first time they had a chance to go overseas. There was an agreement that Silpakorn University would host accommodation and other research expenses when a team from Guangxi arrived to Thailand, and the Guangxi Research Institute for Nationalities hosted similarly for a Thai team.

In retrospect, Qin Shengmin recalled with a laugh that he felt uneasy at first when he came to Bangkok, because there was only one Taiwanese translator for a whole team and there were some difficulties in communication. During the meal, however, he recognized that he understood some Thai words that Thai scholars spoke, such as *nang* (to sit), *kao* (rice), *lao* (alcohol), *neua mu* (pork), *neua kai* (chicken), etc. After that, the Zhuang scholars felt encouraged to speak Zhuang with the Thai scholars and they felt happier that they could communicate with each other within a particular set of vocabulary, such as the names of domestic animals like *khwai* (buffalo), *pet* (duck), and *ma* (dog).

Using a comparative method, the research findings show some linguistic and cultural commonalities between the Thai and Zhuang. For example, both the Thai and Zhuang in Guangxi have the same methods in naming places after geographical characteristics of the places; settlements and occupations of the landowners; animals and plants commonly found in the regions; local legends or folktales; and beliefs.[51]

As the Thai and Zhuang farmers were specialized in growing rice in irrigated fields, they lived primarily in the lowlands close to

[49] Srisakara, *Zhuang* (in Thai).
[50] Maneepin, *Place Naming of the Thais*.
[51] Pranee, *Village Names in Guangxi*; Maneepin, *Place Naming of the Thais*.

rivers and streams so that they could divert water into their rice fields. Hence, the traditional houses of the Thai and the Zhuang were similar. The Zhuang called the stilted houses made of wood or bamboo where people live on the second floor high above the ground, whereas the ground floor houses animals and equipment, as 'Ganlan' house. The *lan* in 'Ganlan' came from the proto-Tai word *ruean* (house). This style of house is found today mainly in Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangdong and Guangxi, as well as in Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand.[52] Nonetheless, rituals associated with rice cultivation such as 'calling rice soul' and 'calling cattle soul' are common in this region.

Besides, another prominent shared culture is the traditional marriage custom. Recorded by the old Zhuang script, "欧贵" can be translated literally in Thai as *ao-kheoy* and means that a man/son-in-law often went to live with/serve his wife's family. This custom reveals that marriages were free choices for the partners and traces back to the matriarchal society of the Zhuang before it was replaced by the patriarchal society of Chinese Confucianism. The result of this comparison between Thai and Zhuang cultures indicated many more elements of shared beliefs and of artistic styles, but that lies outside the focus of this article. The reports of this project were published in Thai language in 1996. Later in 2003, it was published as the five-volume set of A Comprehensive Comparative Study on Zhuang and Thai Nationalities' Traditional Culture in Chinese language.

Generally speaking, linguists identified that sharing a basic agrarian vocabulary and naming tradition proved that the Thai and the Zhuang, who live far apart today and have little sense of commonality, must have lived together in times long ago. Scholars agreed that they are the descendants of Baiyue. Historical records indicate that the ancestors of Zhuang people settled in Guangxi more than 2,500 years ago. Moreover, Fan Honggui speculated about the time that the Thai and the Zhuang had separated by pointing out that Thai and Zhuang have the same exonym, *kaew* for Vietnamese. This word is taken from the name of a Chinese garrison called Jiaozhi, established in Vietnam

[52] Edmondson, *The power of language*.

about 112 BC. Therefore, the time of separation should be after this period.[53]

In conjunction with an increasing amount of archaeological evidence, scholars summarize that several centuries prior to Han Chinese expansion, the Tai settled in southern China and developed centralized societies which were based on wet-rice cultivation, a stratified aristocratic society with special classes of artisans and warriors, as it can be seen that these people made use of the bronze drum as an instrument of authority or worship and other artefacts. With the hypothesis of Tai language origin, the number of linguistics, historians and archaeologists conducting research in Guangxi have been increasing.

More specifically, David Holm, an Australian scholar who first came to conduct research on folk dance and folk plays in China in 1982, was attracted by the 1991 publication of Buluotuo scriptures. In retrospect, he went to interview Zhang Shengzhen and Lan Hong'en in 1993 and then was entrusted to produce an international English edition of the Buluotuo jingshi. For him, it was not just a simple translation of the original Chinese glosses and notes into English. Since the scriptures were collected from different areas, they then belonged to different dialects and ritual traditions. To meet the standard of international academic work, Holm discussed with Mr. Zhang that he must select the scriptures from the same area and transcribe them based on that local dialect.

Finally, Holm's work entitled *Recalling Lost Souls: the Baeu Rodo Scriptures, Tai Cosmogonic Texts from Guangxi in Southern China* was published in 2004 by White Lotus, a publishing house in Thailand. In addition, he separately published the annotated translation of ritual scriptures collected from Donglan County because of the differences in local dialects and ritual traditions. His work *Killing a Buffalo for the Ancestors: A Zhuang Cosmological Text from Southwest China* was published in 2003 by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Northern Illinois University. Interestingly, these

[53] Fan, *Draft Articles on the Zhuang* (in Chinese), quoted in Edmondson, *The power of language over the past*.

books addressed the commonalities of language and ritual traditions related to wet-rice cultivation between the Tai-speaking peoples in Southeast Asia and in the south of China.

In summary, research collaboration with Thai academia and Western scholars created a body of literature focused on tracing the roots of "Tai origin", which contributed to a new Zhuang ethno-consciousness. Zhuang scholars were conscious of being an integral part of an emerging transnational entity. These scholars strove to make sense of their newly opened-up world at a time when foreign interest in Zhuang culture and history was growing. They were in the novel position of defining what it meant to be Zhuang. Zhuang studies are moving towards recognition of much more extensive relations with the Tai than in the past. Therefore, borrowing Keyes' term, the Zhuang are no longer only a *minzu* within the borders of China; they are also a Tai people with transborder connections to other Tai peoples in Southeast Asia.[54]

To conclude, the historical narratives about the Zhuang ethnic minority in Guangxi has changed according to the transformed relationship between the state center and the margin. Tracing back this transformation, we witness how ethnic and religious minorities are positioned with the construction of citizenship, of discrimination, exclusion, and suppression of various kinds of minorities. In Imperial narrative, ethnic minorities at the border were imagined as barbarians and it was a mission of the center to civilize them. While the CCP claims its ethnic policies are unique in the world and unprecedented in history, the communist narrative and ethnic approaches still are the same, which emphasizes that Communism has been bringing about the liberation of minorities from "the dark, old society." However, within the context of globalization, geopolitical entity is increasingly intersected, disrupted, displaced, and interpolated by media, movements of people, information and neoliberal capitalism. The bounding of new regional identities like GMS, and China-ASEAN has affected not only the lives of border people on vast scale, but also the scholar discourse of new Zhuang ethnic identities.

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[54] Keyes, *President Address: "The Peoples of Asia"* , 1188-1189.

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