

## Book Reviews

### Asia

*Between winds and clouds. The making of Yunnan (second century BCE to twentieth century CE)*

By BIN YANG

New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. Pp. x + 338. Also in the Gutenberg-e online history series.

doi:10.1017/S0022463410000081

Comprehensive surveys of China's periphery abound. The relevant literature in English often aims at viewing these regions quite independently from the rest of China. Chinese language works usually take a different approach: they portray areas like Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, Guangxi and Yunnan as integral parts of a multi-ethnic state, and assume that these territories became Chinese at an early stage, culturally, administratively, and also in other respects. The present book seeks to explain how the space now called Yunnan managed to stay separate across successive ages before it became absorbed into the realm of its northern neighbour. Broadly speaking, there was an initial phase of military colonisation through the Han, followed by three centuries during which Yunnan remained nearly 'independent'. The Sui and Tang resumed old expansionary dreams, and thereafter we see the rise of Nanzhao, an aggressive kingdom later annexed by the Mongols. According to Yang, it was only from this period onwards, especially under the Ming, that Yunnan really turned into a solid part of the Chinese empire.

This entire process is described by analysing administrative developments, the influence of Chinese civilisation on local cultures, indigenous impacts on Han migrants and settlers, the rise of new 'identities', economic changes, the collapse of the cowrie currency system and so forth. Economic issues are particularly useful when one seeks to explain why and how, over centuries, parts of Yunnan remained closely linked to the regions now called Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar — and even to eastern Tibet. Inland routes, along rivers and across mountains, also tied Yunnan, mainly via Myanmar and Bengal, to the Indian Ocean trading system. Seen more broadly, one 'branch' of trade between India and China went through the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau. Yang is correct in stating that economic changes in this area cannot be disassociated from global changes in silver and copper flows, especially under the Ming. The circulation of horses and gems connected Yunnan to the 'outside' world as well, in Song times, and again under the Ming. Further commodity studies, I suspect, would shed additional light on these geo-economic dimensions. One issue not really discussed by Yang, relates to the Malay Peninsula: Can we detect periods in India–China relations, during which trade from Arakan and lower Myanmar – via Yunnan – to the heart of China 'proper' substituted, in part or full, possible trans-isthmian passages, i.e., the circulation of goods from the shores of the Andaman Sea, across the peninsula, to the *Nanhai* area?

Be this as it may, in spite of a widely woven web of inland routes, ‘centred on’ Yunnan (as seen from a local perspective), it is my understanding that one should not overestimate the southern ‘branches’ of this system, neither in volume nor in qualitative terms. Through long centuries, Yunnan was influenced much more by the north than by its southern or eastern neighbours. The fact that Nanzhao came to imitate various aspects of Chinese culture is a good example for this predominantly northern orientation. One cannot but admit that Han civilisation, due to its overall superiority, must have played a dominant role in Yunnan, not only under Nanzhao, but probably from very early times onwards.

From that point of view it is rather amusing to read about the emergence of ‘Southeast Asian sex practices’ in Chinese elite circles, a ‘process of Southeast Asianization’, according to Yang (p. 170). The curious consumer’s contingent conclusion: the concept of ‘Greater Southeast Asia’ (or ‘greater Yunnan’?) is built on carnal desire (possibly, with modern ‘extensions’ to Europe and North America?), while ‘greater China’ rests on a variety of other – perhaps subordinate (?) – criteria. Are we looking at a *longue durée* phenomenon in Asian history? There are, as a matter of fact, several studies on the multilayered service sector in contemporary Yunnan. To return to a more serious note: ‘Exotism’, of a northern origin, would have been an excellent topic for a further chapter in Yang’s book. Finally, ‘Southeast Asia’ is a very young concept as compared to the concept of ‘Yunnan’.

The last section of Yang’s account analyses the complex semantics of the term *minzu*, which, as he explains, differs considerably from the conventional term ‘ethnicity’. It examines why and how the government of the Peoples Republic of China came to define Yunnan’s ethnic groups as *shaoshu minzu*, or ‘minorities’. This rather complex process went through several stages and is not totally devoid of certain legacies from the past. The results, according to Yang, led to vivid discussions about possible improvements; indeed, further adjustments may be required in the years to come. Positively put, most ethnic groups in Yunnan have been transformed, after all, from ‘barbarians’ into members of a larger and harmonious family, which, as one might want to add, is cautiously guided by the central authorities in Beijing. Finally, the creation of Yunnan, conceptually and as an administrative entity, has given birth to a new ‘sub-Chinese identity’, namely that of being Yunnanese.

Yang’s book is a comprehensive monograph, following both chronological and thematic considerations. It expresses fresh ideas and is based on a large variety of sources, especially on works reprinted in the multivolume collection *Yunnan shiliao congkan*. The bibliography lists a good selection of secondary items to which one might add only a few extra titles, such as the book on Guizhou by Cl. Salmon, the old translation by C. Sainson, one or two more studies by H.U. Vogel (whose articles on cowries were extensively used by Yang), E. Dreyer’s monograph on the early Ming, B. Eberstein’s account of the mining industry, and perhaps one or two additional items by L. Struve. In sum, *Between winds and clouds* makes an insightful survey that should be read by all those interested in the history of Southwest China.

RODERICH PTAK

*Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich*