



Local Knowledge Constructed by the State

Reinterpreting Myths and Imagining the Migration History of the Lahu in Yunnan, Southwest China

Since the 1950s, scholars Fang Guoyu 方国瑜, Ma Yao 马曜主编, and You Zhong 尤中 have established a historical link between the ethnic groups of the Yi linguistic family and the ancient Di and Qiang peoples, implying that the ancestors of the Lahu in Yunnan were migrants from Qinghai two thousand years ago. Based on the place names recorded in Lahu myths regarding the “world of death,” they have also drawn a clear migration route of the Lahu. Today, the young generation of Lahu villagers and ritual specialists all claim that “the Lahu came from Qinghai,” and that the mythical “world of death” should therefore be located in Qinghai. Some ritual specialists also report this local knowledge to foreign scholars when they serve as informants for them. Local knowledge is commonly cherished as preeminent anthropological understanding, often accompanied with a certain presumption of the locality of the informants, in this case the spatiality and temporality of the Lahu communities on the margin of the Chinese empire throughout history. This study aims to question such presumptions of locality by investigating how official history was disseminated locally and how it was reinterpreted and represented by Lahu communities as local knowledge for ethnographic research.

KEYWORDS: Lahu—Qinghai—myths—minority nationalities—migration

THE LAHU, with a population of about 450,000, are a minority people inhabiting the southwest of Yunnan province in China. In 1953, the Lahu Autonomous County of Lancang was set up, and it is the only politically autonomous Lahu body in China. Official websites on the Lahu often describe the Lahu as a people with their origins in the Di-Qiang nationality¹ system, and it was in the pre-Qin era (about two thousand years ago) that they began their migration from the Qinghai Lake area to the south of the Ji Sha River, and then further to the Lancang River (the Mekong) basin.² A similar description (LIU Huihao 1988, 3) also says that the ancestors of the Lahu once lived in the Qinghai Lake area, and were forced to move southwards because of wars, and that there have been five massive migrations in the history of the Lahu. In order to work out a clear idea of the migration history of the Lahu, the government of Lancang Lahu Autonomous County sent a number of research groups to search for the migration route(s) according to the place names recorded in Lahu myths. Their study shows that the places mentioned in the myths actually exist as geographic locations, and so the Lahu are a branch of the Bailan Qiang group 白狼羌, who originally lived in the Qinghai Lake area, and then after a lengthy migration settled down in Lincang, Simao, Xishuangbanna, and Honghe.³ Therefore, books on Chinese minority nationalities that were published thereafter all state that the Lahu in Yunnan came from the Qinghai Lake area; “Lahu” in the Lahu language literally means “the hunter of tigers.”⁴ The knowledge that “the Lahu came from Qinghai and were tiger hunters” has thus become firmly established in intellectual circles and is widely accepted in China.

However, as a result of research conducted on the genes of the Lahu people in Lancang County, there are rather conflicting ideas as to the origins of the Lahu. The results of fifty-five sample cases revealed that their genes showed no evidence that they came from the north. In other words, genetically speaking, the Lahu should be a group that originated in the south. Clearly, this idea is diametrically opposed to that suggested by historians and ethnographers on the Lahu (JIA 2002, 131–36). On the one hand, the notion that “the Lahu came from Qinghai” as knowledge on the *minzu* (nationalities) has been well accepted in China; on the other hand, genetic research on the Lahu show that they are not a group originating from a northern part of the country such as Qinghai. Why and how has this contradiction arisen? This paper, through reviewing the intellectual’s ideas regarding the Lahu’s “Qinghai origins” during the past fifty years, aims to explore how

the historical knowledge of the Lahu has been constructed by state administrative power and local intellectuals, how it has become a cultural resource reinterpreted by villagers in their daily life, and how this reinterpretation is taken to be local knowledge by anthropologists and cultural researchers worldwide.

According to Stevan Harrell, the Yi of Southwest China is a state-issued identity for some ethnic groups, but the category “Yi” or “Lolo” has meant different things to participants in different civilizing projects. He asks, “is a relatively ideologically neutral history of the Yi possible?” (HARRELL 1995, 63). The Lahu case is different from that of the Yi. In the early- to mid-Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) increasing numbers of Han Chinese moved away from the inner provinces and migrated to middle and southern Yunnan. In the 1720s, in order to control local resources such as silver mines, salt wells, and tea plantations the Qing government began to carry out reforms of the native chieftain system in the Ailao mountains. This change created continuous ethnic conflict against Han migration, the Qing government, and the local Dai chiefs. The incorporation of the outlying areas in the southwest into regions under Qing state control created a social crisis within local ethnic groups since the Luohei 倮黑 and other ethnic groups were repressed by local authorities and were often discriminated against by newly arrived Han immigrants. This social crisis spurred some marginalized elites, who declared themselves to be the reborn Buddha, to become leaders of religious movements among the Luohei. Throughout this process of mobilization and resistance, the Luohei became known as the Lahu, and the continually reborn E Sha Buddha was seen as the savior and the master of the Lahu people (MA 2007, 553–602). After the 1880s, the Qing government controlled the western part of the Mekong River and the established Lahu religious political system was destroyed (MA 2004, 1–32). Therefore, Lahu identity has been formed since the 1720s in the southwest Yunnan-Burma borderland, which is different from so-called state-issued identities such as that of the Yi or the Zhuang (HARRELL 2000; KAUP 2000). However, based on the academic paradigm of *minzu* history in the 1950s, the history of the southwestern frontier was displaced by social evolutionism and class struggle discourses. These led to another direction in state-constructed history and then created academic consequences such as the idea of the Lahu’s “Qinghai origins” that has been accepted by Western scholars (WALKER 2003, 63).

SOCIAL EVOLUTIONISM AND THE PARADIGM OF MINZU HISTORY IN THE 1950S

Fang Guoyu is the founder of the academic paradigm of Yunnan historical geography and the history of minority nationalities in southwest China. He was born into a Naxi family in Li Jiang in the northwest of Yunnan, and received his academic training in Beijing in the 1920s. In the early 1950s he began his study on the origins of ethnic minorities (Cn. *zu yuan* 族源) on the basis of the political classification movement in use since 1951.⁵ His study initiated the establishment of the academic paradigm of the social evolutionism of the history of ethnic minorities.

Before the 1950s, many scholars, including Fang Guoyu, Xu Jiarui, Xian Da and others concentrated on the study of the history of ethnic groups, and attributed some so-called “barbarians” (Cn. *man yi* 蛮夷) to the Di-Qiang system (氏羌; XU 1985). Xian Da’s study on the Nanzhao kingdom is a case in point (XIAN 1962). Even though some scholars had done research on the history of local ethnic groups, it was not until the early 1950s, when ethnic minorities were forced into the minority nationalities’ autonomy system by the government, that things changed. At that time, a systematic paradigm based on the classification system for ethnic minorities to be recognized as minority nationalities by the state in southwest China came into being. In other words, it was only when the system of district autonomy for minority nationalities was created by the communist state after 1949 that an academic paradigm on the study of the minority nationalities of southwest China was needed. This paradigm served as an academic tool for the illustration of the political strategy on China’s southwest frontier, so as to construct and interpret the newly-built nation-state system and its history.

The earliest historical document that refers to the southwest indigenous groups is by Sima Qian during the West Han dynasty (206 BCE to 8 CE). In the chapter entitled “Xinanyi Liezhuang” it is stated that:

There are dozens of barbarian chiefdoms in the southwest, the biggest of which is the Ye Lang; to the west of the Ye Lang, there are several Fei Mo groups, and the biggest of them is the Dian; north of the Dian, there are also dozens of chiefdoms, the largest being the Qiong Du. They all farm and live in settled villages, with the custom of tying their hair. Besides this, between Tong Shi in the west and Ye Yu in the north, there are groups named the Sui and the Kunming. These people wear their hair in braids, and migrate with their cattle, so they do not have permanent settlements and do not have chieftains, either. In the northeast of the Sui, there are several chiefdoms, the largest one being the Xi Zuo. Among the groups living in the northeast of the Zuo and west to the Shu, the largest is the Ran, whose livelihood is a combination of settled farming and nomadism. To the west of the Ran, there live dozens of groups, the largest of which is the Bai Ma. As part of the Di people, they are barbarians living beyond the southwest of the Ba and the Shu. (SIMA 1981b)

According to Fang Guoyu, this record divided the indigenous people of the southwest into three different economic and cultural groups: the first group was agricultural, including the Ye Lang, the Dian, and the Qiong Du; the second group was nomadic, including the Sui and the Kunming; the third group was half agricultural and half nomadic, including the Xi, the Zuo Du, and the Ran. Because it was generally accepted that two thousand years ago the Di were the same as the Qiang, almost all indigenous groups in the southwest were regarded as subgroups of the Di-Qiang people. But Fang also noted that:

The fact that it was not until the West Han dynasty that Yunnan began to be recorded in historical documents, together with a lack of convincing archeological evidence, made it impossible to construct a history of Yunnan before the West

Han dynasty. But based on the areas where they live and languages used today, it is still possible to presume that all ancient peoples came from outside Yunnan: the Di-Qiang language (the Lolo groups or the Yi language family) groups came from the north, the Tai language groups from the south, the Miao and the Yao language groups from the east. Therefore, even though the origins of the indigenous groups seem extremely complex, it can be concluded that there were four original indigenous groups: the Qiang, the Zhuang, the Miao, and the Mon-Khmer, and this has been so up until today. But it has to be pointed out that there may have been fewer groups in ancient times than today. (FANG 1994, I)

Fang developed this idea in another paper in 1953:

No matter how complex the origins of the minority nationalities appear to be, it is still possible to find a simple explanation for their origins. On the basis of the directions in which they settled, it is possible to explain the origins of a minority nationality. From northwest Yunnan to south Sichuan, and at Xi Kang in the northwestern part of south Sichuan, lived the Di-Qiang language speakers; from the southern part of Yunnan to the north of the Southeast Asian peninsula lived the Tai speakers, and in the direction of Burma lived Burmese and Mon-Khmer speakers. (FANG 1994, II)

If the history of Yunnan minorities could not be traced back to a period earlier than the West Han dynasty, the method used was to combine linguistic features with the geographic distribution of minority nationalities today. We are assuming that the ancient Di-Qiang were a minority who spoke the same language, and that this language is the source of the languages of the Yi-speaking groups today. Therefore, Sima Qian's document that the Kunming, the Sou, and the Bo belong to the Di-Qiang category means that they were Di-Qiang language speakers, and this group was further separated into today's much larger number of minority nationalities like the Yi, the Bai, the Naxi, the Hani, the Lisu, the Lahu, and so on. The idea underlying this kind of analysis is that these minority nationalities had fewer branches of descendents in ancient times and more branches in the modern era. Therefore, in ancient times the four groups separated into more than twenty groups over a period of two thousand years. But as for the Han Chinese, the case is totally different: with the development of history, a large number of groups in ancient times combined into a single one, the Han. However, Fang never mentioned the case of the Han Chinese, as it would contradict his own assumption. Fang's discussion set up the research paradigm for later discussions, for example in the 1970s and the 1980s, when MA Yao (1977) and YOU Zhong (1979) developed Fang's idea, and expertly weaved historical literary data into this paradigm. The two books have been seen as milestones in the knowledge constructed on the origins and history of southwest minority nationalities.

The method of combining historical documents such as *Shi Ji* (SIMA 1981a), written two thousand years ago, and later *Han shu* (BAN 1962), *Hou Han shu* (FAN 1975), *Hua Yan Guo Zhi* (CHANG 1965), *Man shu* (FAN 1987), *Xin Tang shu* (OUYANG 1975), and *Jiu Tang shu* (LIU 1965), together with a large number of local

gazetteers and today's language materials, traces back to the West Han dynasty from the categorization of official ethnic minorities in the 1950s. The methodology of this paradigm takes the officially identified categories of nationalities as the beginning point, and this categorization was accepted as the linguistic classification of languages to define ethnic groups as "minority nationalities." Starting from this new definition, historians attempted to locate the names of the original groups that were recorded by Sima Qian two thousand years ago. In general, the history of the minority nationalities is written from today's classifications, and their name changes are explained from a simple point in history two thousand years ago when Sima Qian recorded the names of indigenous people. This academic paradigm says that all minorities came from a simple single origin, while the Han came from a complex set of origins. This assumption shows that social evolutionism was so powerful that it not only influenced political practice, but also the construction of a history of minority nationalities. This assumption also sees the minority nationalities as physical races who evolved from some four or five races into more than twenty over a period of two thousand years. Therefore, the task of constructing a history of minority nationalities involves drawing a genealogical tree for their evolution. This work has been going on for several decades and a very detailed knowledge system for minority nationalities has thus been gradually constructed.

Recent research by Wang Minke suggests that the Qiang (羌) was a group title created under the conditions of the powerful Han or Huaxia centralism, which used to define its cultural and political boundaries with the marginalized peoples living west of the Han. Qiang, therefore, was a floating identity, floating with the expansion of Han culture's boundaries to the west or southwest. When the boundaries were extended, the marginalized peoples would historically still be known as the Qiang, but some people who had been known as the Qiang converted their identity into that of the Han after they were brought under the rule of the Han. In these cases, we can conclude that the Di or the Qiang were merely titles used by Han intellectuals since ancient times in the West Han dynasty, and the title was generally used by the Han to refer to "the others" on the other side of the boundary. There is not enough evidence to show that the Di-Qiang were speakers of the same language, and so the Di-Qiang is just a social and political construction in the process of historical interactions between those in the center and those marginalized.

MIGRATION HISTORY AS CONSTRUCTED BY THE ELITE OF LANCANG LAHU AUTONOMOUS COUNTY

Suppose it is possible to trace back history to its beginnings: in this case this would be when Sima Qian recorded groups such as the Kunming, the Sou, and the Zuo. But it is still hard to find any written record of the Luohei prior to the Qing Dynasty because the Lahu was written as Luohei 倮黑 in historical documents during the Qing Dynasty. Therefore, it is difficult to obtain enough material to write a complete history of the Lahu from the beginning (the West Han dynasty) up to the present-day in south Yunnan.

A research group consisting of three Lahu cadres and another four or five Han cadres was then organized by Lancang Autonomous County government to search for the migration route of the Lahu according to the records in *Han shu* and *Hou Han shu* from the so-called place of origin of the Qiang in Qinghai.

The history imagined by this research group had much earlier beginnings than that on which Fang Guoyu based his research, the West Han dynasty. The group asserted that the Lahu had nothing to do with people such as the Kunming or the Sou as documented by Sima Qian; rather, they were the part of the Qiang who were forced to leave their place of origin, Qinghai, after they failed in their efforts to resist the intruding Han. Besides, the research group strongly believed that the places recorded in the myth must be located on today's maps, as the similarities found between the language of the Lahu and those spoken by the people living in the western Tibet-Qinghai plateau is evidence that proves that the Lahu had once lived in this region. Therefore, the political and academic construction of the assertion that the Lahu came from Qinghai should be seen as a part of the history of the creation of the minority nationalities system in the nation-state. Fang Guoyu's academic paradigm has been widely accepted and applied since the implementation of the system of the regional autonomy of minority nationalities in the early 1950s, and the discourse of class struggles thus dominated the narrative of the history of the Lahu in the 1960s.

THE COUNTY GOVERNMENT OF LANCANG (1961) put forward a narrative style of Lahu history, and this is said to be typical for almost all of the minority nationalities of that period:

Lancang has been part of the great motherland since very early times. The Lahu are now the predominant nationality of Lancang autonomous county, and over the long course of history they gradually migrated from the Tibet-Qinghai plateau, via the Erhai Lake area, to Lancang. It was not until the nineteenth century that Lancang's primitive communal economy was transformed into that of the feudal system, with some elements of primitive society remaining. During a period of two hundred years from the 1720s onward, Lancang was a center of Lahu peasant uprisings and rebellions. The Han immigrants came after the eighteenth century, bringing their advanced farming skills and seeds. They were mostly poor peasants, miners, workers, and businessmen. They shared the same fate as the poor Lahu people, living under class exploitation, but they contributed a lot to the construction of the local culture and economy. In Lancang County, most of the thirty-seven townships located close to the state boundary did not carry out the Movement of Land Reformation in the 1950s.⁶ Rather, their social and economic structure was directly transformed into that of socialism. In the process of social transformation, the frontier people were faced with complex social conflicts: the main conflict between the enemies of imperialism and the Guomindang armies and us (the communists); conflicts between the masses and the ruling classes; and conflicts between socialism's ideals and the desire of peasants to be rich. As we need to safeguard national boundaries, conflict with the enemy is most crucial.(4)

After the Cultural Revolution, when China began its policy of opening up in the 1980s, a campaign to compile a brief history and language handbooks on minority nationalities was initiated by the central Chinese government as the largest project in the creation of knowledge on minority nationalities. The result was *Lahuzu Jian shi* (BIANXIE ZU 1986), which can be seen as a transition between the 1960s version and the 2003 version of the history of the Lahu compiled by the county government. It pushed the history of Lahu migration clearly to the beginning of a time period in history linked to Qinghai, even if there was not enough evidence for discussion:

The ancestors of the Lahu belonged to the Qiang system. In the Neolithic age, one group of Qiang people moved from Gansu and Qinghai to northwest Yunnan, and their migration opened a passage from the north to the south. In the fourth century BCE, Qin Xiaogong regained control of the west part of his Qin kingdom, and this forced the Qiang people to move southward. That is why the Lahu called their place of origin “Beijing and Nanjing,” a place without forests and bushes, a barren plain. This story might be seen as a reflection of their memory of the place of origin, the Tibet-Qinghai plateau.

(BIANXIE ZU 1986, 4)

Lahuzu Jian shi is a stepping-stone between the 1961 version to the 2003 version in the migration history of the Lahu. In 1988, an earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale occurred in Lancang. In the years of reconstruction after the earthquake, an important task for the county government was to organize scholars to write a detailed history of the Lahu. The aim was “to maintain the spirits of Lahu identity” (THE PEOPLE’S POLITICAL CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE OF LANCANG COUNTY 1991, 4). In 1991, the county government held a conference on Lahu history. Many cadres and scholars from neighboring counties where the Lahu are concentrated attended the meeting, and at the conference the attendees discussed the issue of the origins of the Lahu. Prior to the conference, the county government had sent some research groups to Qinghai to check place names on maps of Qinghai, and to confirm whether those localities matched the place names in Lahu myths. Based on the work done in Qinghai and the myths collected earlier, they drew a migration route by linking the places recorded in the myth. At the end of the conference, all the participants reached a unanimous conclusion that when the ancestors of the Lahu left Qinghai they moved southward, passing by the places mentioned in the myths, and then settled down in Lancang. This, as the researchers themselves have claimed, is a new method in the study of the history of minority nationalities:

On the basis of the homological relationships among the words in the languages concerned, archaic words and expressions can be employed to study the origin of a nationality, especially for those who have no written documents. There are great differences in pronunciation between the same ancient and present vocabulary in a language, and it is hard to find evolutionary ties among them, but we find that some ancient words have similar pronunciations and meanings to those

of other languages. And if we link these different languages with a line, we will find a linguistic distribution that is associated with a geographic distribution of nationalities. (ZHANG 1991, 18)

The problem is that when we use these words as part of everyday usage, how do we define whether a word was used in ancient times or not? For example, in the Lahu language, if “rice” is used for food, the pronunciation is *jiá³¹ ká⁵⁴*, but if “rice” is used for the ritual of summoning the souls, it is pronounced *na³¹ bu²¹ na³¹ be³³*. It is still difficult to define whether the words chosen for comparison are of the same origin, borrowed, or linguistically affected. If we link languages of the same language family together, we find that there is a shared geographic distribution, but it is still difficult to define whether the migration was from north to south or from south to north. This method, which was announced at the conference, used the features of language to define the features of minority nationalities, regarding language and ethnic groups to be the same, and then constructed a geographic migration route linking selected similarities in the languages.

SEEING THE HISTORY OF MIGRATION AS LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

My fieldwork was carried out in a village in Muga valley in Lancang County, and it is here that the famous myth *mu⁵⁴ pha³¹ mi²¹ pha³¹* “Creating Heaven, Creating Earth” was first documented in 1960 and then published in 1989 (WALKER, 1995). The history of migration from Qinghai constructed by the research group also claimed that this famous myth is the key part of the words selected to match the places along the migratory route drawn from Qinghai to Lancang. Mr. Liu, collector of the myth, said:

The myth “Creating Heaven, Creating Earth” was largely collected from Ban and Ke villages in Muga. In May 1960, we came as college students to Ban village. We employed two translators, one of whom was a local school teacher, and spent two months there for the work. Two old singers, one called Zha Mo in Ban village, and the other called Li in Ke village, sang almost the same myth. On the basis of these two versions, we constructed a new version of the myth together with some elements from more than twenty other versions gathered from all over the Lahu mountain areas. But I still think that Zha Mo’s version is comparatively complete in itself, hence the best among all the versions collected.⁷

“Creating Heaven, Creating Earth” was published in 1989 and is a bilingual version with both Mandarin Chinese and Lahu written in roman characters. One of the paragraphs in the Lahu language reads: *Xuel yad mud kawl dar peul, sha yad mil yar dar peul. Xuel mud peul ci mud qaw ji, Sha mil nar ci mil qaw ji*. The literal translation of this is “after the god E Sha finished the creation of the sky and the earth, he (and she, as a pair) lived in Beijing and Nanjing.” The footnote of this paragraph explains: “Beijing 北京 is Bei Di 北氐; according to the myth, it is the place where the Lahu originally came from” (THE CULTURAL BUREAU OF

LANCANG COUNTY 1989, 12). The large water pool, *Nawq loq nawq shieq xeul*, the place where E Sha created animals, was interpreted to be the famous lakes Erhai and Dianchi in the footnote provided by the editor (130).

Ban village in Muga valley has long been my site for fieldwork. According to some ritual specialists called *mo³⁵ pa³¹*, the meaning of the myth and the ritual should be as follows:

The origin of the world is *mu⁴ pha³¹ mi²¹ pha³¹*. After E Sha created the sky and the earth, he lived at Beijing and Nanjing, the center of the world (not the north). During the New Year Festival, some families will hold a ritual known as “summoning the souls of the year,” whereby villagers ask E Sha in Beijing and Nanjing to send the “seeds of fortune” back home. If people receive these seeds, livestock could be raised easily and the family would have good fortune in the coming year. The specialists *mo³⁵ pa³¹* at the ritual sing:

When they arrived at Beijing and Nanjing, the couple of the ritual-hosting family came to E Sha’s house. Then they would ask E Sha to write down the names of what they would need on a piece of cloth, including the soul and the fortune of something they want, each in a pair. Gold, silver, food, cattle, and land can all be asked for. Then they would ask E Sha to write down words such as water, salt, pigs, chicken, and so on. After all this, the couple would take the cloth back. On the way home, they would pass by different plains, where they would pick up the souls of things listed by E Sha on the cloth. For example, at the plain of Zha Yi and Na Yi, where E Sha separated the common villagers (always being led) from the leaders (the village heads), the village cadres could find the leader’s fortunes here. With E Sha’s list in hand, the couple can also find the souls of clothes and weaving strands of fabric at *mu³ mian³⁵* plain, for their weaving and iron and copper for their tools at *mu³ go³¹ mu³ lao³⁴* plain, and obtain the souls of cattle at *mu³ zu³¹ mu³ ba³³* plain. This is what soul summoning in the New Year Festival is all about.⁸

In rituals in Ban village, *nuo³⁵ non³⁵ nuo³⁵ xie³⁵* refers to a bowl of water used for calling back a sick person’s soul. This is because when E Sha created the world, some living beings were formed from the pool of *nuo³⁵ non³⁵ nuo³⁵ xie³⁵*. But once, during the process of a ritual, the ritual specialist Zha Wu said to me, “do you know that *nuo³⁵ non³⁵ nuo³⁵ xie³⁵* is Lake Erhai in Dali?” I was quite interested in this, and I asked him “How do you know that?” Zha Wu replied, “When we attended literacy class at a night school to learn the Lahu writing system, one of the texts was about where the Lahu came from. It says *nuo³⁵ non³⁵ nuo³⁵ xie³⁵* was a lake in Dali, and we Lahu people came from Qinghai, and lived in Dali for a long time before our ancestors came to Muga.”⁹ Most people in Muga or Lancang like to talk about Beijing and Nanjing in the myth, and according to their understanding, Beijing and Nanjing is the place where E Sha lives. It is also where Chairman Mao lived, that is, the capital. The Lahu villagers’ ancestors were from Beijing and Nanjing, the center of the world.

According to the myth, after E Sha created the world, he lived in Beijing and Nanjing, the Lahu's place of origin and the center of the world. But why did the editor of the book "Creating Heaven, Creating Earth" say that Beijing and Nanjing is Bei Di? This is because both the editors and the research groups who think that the Lahu came from Qinghai are from the same group of local intellectuals. They tried their best to highlight that the places mentioned in myths can be seen as key evidence that the places where the Lahu originally lived are associated with the Di-Qiang. But they ignored that, and when the people relating the myth talk about Beijing and Nanjing, they are talking about "the lost center of the Lahu," suggesting the Lahu situation in history or in contemporary politics. What is interesting here is the research group that sees the Lahu myth as history itself, and converts the meaning of "the center" and "the capital where a universal social order comes from" into "the place in the north, where the Di people had lived." The created migration history of the Lahu is largely based on this point, and this association shows how the imagined history of the Lahu reveals their process of being marginalized, and the shifting of this meaning to "Qinghai" by translating Beijing 北京 to Bei Di 北狄 in Chinese characters.

To translate "Beijing" into "Bei Di" also shows an eagerness to have a complete history for the Lahu people. "We want to edit a book about our own history and this is what all our cadres and people hope for. A group was then organized, and most of the group members were native cadres and intellectuals, including some Han cadres who know much of Lahu myths" (THE PEOPLE POLITICAL CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE OF LANCANG COUNTY 2003, 3-5 and 516). The People's Political Consultative Conference¹⁰ of the county 县政协 sent this research group to Qinghai three times over a period of two years. "Even if the group members have never written anything about history, they still finished the first draft of Lahu history by taking advantage of the place names mentioned in myths and referring to historical records" (3-5). Therefore, "the book is something like a history, as it has rich historical documents, like an epic; it has grand scenes, like a myth; it has many unexpected coincidences, and more like a historical story, it fits the developmental stage of history" (3-5).

After fourteen years of discussion on the migration route, the book *Lahuzhu Shi* was published in 2003. As a mythological history, it fits the historical stages as stated above, but it is also very clear how historical imagination has become truth under the county government since the early 1960s. I interviewed Mr. Qi in Nanmei valley, Lincang city,¹¹ who attended the conference on Lahu history in 1991. Mr. Qi said:

I graduated from a teachers' training school in Kunming, and then taught in a primary school in Nanmei in the 1950s. I have been studying the Lahu language and the newly-created writing system for the Lahu since then, so I have contributed many important suggestions to the improvement of the Lahu writing system. In 1991, I attended a conference on Lahu history as the representative of the Nanmei Lahu. At the meeting, for one reason or another, all the attendees

accepted the notion that the Lahu came from Qinghai. Actually, before the conference, the research groups came to Nanmei to tell me what they already had in mind regarding Lahu history. Therefore in the end, the agreed-upon version of Lahu history is that after the Lahu left Qinghai, they passed by Dali and then settled in Lincang (*mu⁵⁴ me³¹ mi³¹ me³¹*).

Therefore, the *nuo³⁵ non³⁵ nuo³⁵ xie³⁵* recorded in the myth must refer to Erhai Lake. The *pe³¹ je³³ na³¹ je³³* in the Nanmei myth means a very nice plain where the Lahu once stayed very happily. The Lahu then moved to Lincang, and fought with the Dai first and the Han later, with the result that the Lahu separated into different places. Maybe my ancestor was a Han in the Qing Dynasty. When he was young, he came to the Lahu mountains. He wore long clothes with a paper fan, which means he was then a student or a scholar. A Lahu king, also a Han, ruled that region during that time. He didn't want the young man to leave and marry a Lahu girl. The young man, whose surname was Qi, then became the king's secretary. Later, when official armies controlled the Lahu Mountains, Qi escaped. Nobody knew where he went, but he left a son and two daughters behind. Zha Fa, his son, later became the head of villages in the Pa Jie area. The heads of the Lahu planned a rebellion against the Han officials, but they confused the date of rebellion. Mannuo and Dafenshan villagers rebelled a day earlier. Unfortunately, the rebelling Lahu heads were all arrested by the Han officials. When Zha Fa heard the news of his friend at a banquet, he escaped. After he came to Hapa village in Genma County, he had a son, who was my grandfather Zha Zuo. The year the Lahu king rebelled was the year of the dragon, so it was about 150 or 160 years ago. I still remember when in 1963 my grandfather said, "it was 160 years ago that the Lahu king rebelled."¹²

The Lahu people in Nanmei valley call the places where the deceased live *na³³ jie³³*, as opposed to the world of the living which is known as *tʃho³³ ka⁵⁴*, meaning human villages. As in Muga valley, traditional cremation is practiced here. After the funeral, the soul of the deceased will be sent back to *na³³ jie³³* through a symbolic bridge.¹³ The name of *na³³ jie³³* is quite similar to Beijing and Nanjing, a place for ancestors or for the highest god, but it does not indicate it is a place in the north, or somewhere like Qinghai. Another informant, Lao Si, presented a different version on the world and of history, a Nanmei version:

At the very beginning, there was a pool named *nuo³⁵ non³⁵ nuo³⁵ xie³⁵*, with a gourd floating on the water. A bee said, "There must be human beings inside!" Then a mouse came to bite it open and a couple of men and women came out. They married, and gave birth to nine pairs of sisters and brothers. These nine pairs occupied nine mountain peaks. They laid down the regulations for marriage among their sons and daughters: if two sisters occupied the same mountain peak, then their children could marry; if a brother and a sister took the same mountain, they could also let their children marry. But if two brothers lived on the same mountain, their children could not marry one another until three generations later. Therefore, the law of human beings was set up (as a taboo), and then people multiplied. I heard that the Lahu came from Dali, and then moved

to Lincang, *mw⁵⁴ mε⁵³ mi⁵¹ mε⁵³*. During the time in *mw⁵⁴ mε⁵³*, the Dai people farmed with the Lahu, and the Dai used stone to mark their lands, while the Lahu used wood. Years later, the Dai people burned the Lahu's landmarks and claimed that all land belonged to them. Wars therefore took place between these two groups. The Dai sent spies to the Lahu villages, and exchanged the bores of bows with candies from Lahu children. When the Dai attacked the Lahu, the Lahu, without weapons, lost. There was another time when the Dai planned to attack the Lahu again. The Lahu said to the Dai, "only if the smoke in our village dies out would we fight with you," and gave the Lahu seven days to escape from *mw⁵⁴ mε⁵³* because the Lahu burned bran to make the smoke last longer. The Lahu then lived with the Han people at Bo Shan, south of *mw⁵⁴ mε⁵³*. The Han also wanted to take the Lahu's land, but there was an agreement reached earlier between them: "those whose cock crows first have the right to live here." The Lahu's cock crowed first, but because the Han had been crouching at the cock's nest, they claimed that it was their cock that crowed first. The Lahu failed again, and lost the Bo Shan plain. The Han pursued the Lahu, and when the Lahu arrived at a banana forest, they cut down banana trees to search for an escape passage. Since the banana trees grow very fast, when the Han arrived, they could not find which way the Lahu had escaped. This is the reason why the Lahu worship the banana tree during the New Year's Festival in Nanmei.

As to the idea that the Lahu migrated from Qinghai or Dali, I obtained this not from the older generations, but from Mr. Qi. Mr. Qi was the principal of our primary school for more than forty years, and he graduated from a teachers' training school in Kunming, the provincial capital. I myself like the Lahu songs very much and it is our custom to hold a two-day ritual to sing songs at weddings. There are only three singers in Nanmei who can sing Lahu wedding songs, including me. It was very hard to acquire this skill as you have to learn a great many things by heart. I would never miss a chance to listen to old Lahu stories from the elder people, but I think Mr. Qi is the only one among them who can tell relatively systematic stories. He told me that we Lahu people started our migration at Qinghai, then passed by Dali, and finally settled down in Lincang. He also said that *nuo³⁵ non³⁵ nuo³⁵ xie³⁵* in the Lahu language refers to Erhai Lake. If somebody else came to me for the history of Lahu migration, I would tell this to them.

In recent years, many people who work in the government have come to ask me about Lahu issues because they think that I can tell Lahu stories clearly. Foreigners have also visited me very often, including Japanese and Americans. They came to do research here and asked me to serve as their reporter on questions such as the migration route of the Lahu. The city's television station once interviewed me but it was a pity that I did not watch the show. Last summer, some people from the cultural bureau of Lincang city came to record me singing the Lahu myths. We worked together for a week. So I can say I am quite proficient at dealing with this kind of work.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The Lahu people of different regions, based on different myths of migration, constructed an origin for their social order and their world view. This helped confirm their Lahu identity, as they see the Han or the Dai as the “other” who threatened and forced them to leave their original hometown, or *mu⁴ me³¹ mi³¹ me³¹*. Therefore, both the people in the Nanmei valley and those in the Muga valley use the theme “escaping from somewhere under the threat of others” to highlight the reason why the Lahu are now living here. Beijing and Nanjing are described as the center of the world, where the highest god lives in Muga myth. But such a theme does not exist in Nanmei. Similarly, people used *pe³¹ je³¹ na³¹ je³¹* to refer to the world where the deceased live and there is no highest god in Nanmei myth at all.

On the one hand, even among the people who are known as the Lahu, there are very different versions of myths corresponding to their different social surroundings, social institutions, and ethnic identities under different local historical contexts. Therefore, there are different descriptions or views on localities and time. The worshipping ritual for banana trees at Nanmei stresses that the Lahu find a social order from their experience of escaping from outside threats, while the Lahu in Muga emphasize that a lost social order can be reestablished through the holding of the yearly soul-calling ritual. There were too many wars in the last two centuries but these ethnic conflicts shaped the different historical experiences for the Lahu in Muga and in Nanmei.

On the other hand, both ritual specialists in Muga, Nanmei, and cadres in Lancang County government understood the myth through the same direction, even if their aims might be quite different. By linking the myth to Qinghai, research groups on Lahu history tried to construct the Lahu as part of the nation-state. The imagined history of migration thus becomes an integral part of the state’s knowledge of minority nationalities. They also transformed the Lahu myth into several highly abstract stages to make it fit history as interpreted by social evolutionism. It is in this way that the Lahu have been made a state-recognized minority nationality on the outer edge of China. The nationalized history constructed on the basis of myths can be used as a new resource by common people to interpret their daily experiences, and by ritual specialists or singers to explain social changes, and to express their marginalized group identity in the context of everyday life. So the imagined history of migration from Qinghai can be used by local Lahu society as a tool to reconfirm their identity, and it has also been an important part of cultural resources exploited by the state since 1953 to shape the Lahu as an official minority nationality among Chinese ethnic minorities.

The problem is that this constructed history and the interaction between the governmental elite and local villagers has created a special product: local knowledge, as it is called by cultural researchers or anthropologists. The agreement on the Lahu’s Qinghai origins that was reached at the conference, the published history, the myths published in the romanized Lahu writing system, the teachings of those who attended the conference, and ideas on Lahu history have all

penetrated into the daily lives of ordinary people. These ideas in turn are transferred to academic fields through the collaboration between local informants and scholars. Anthony R. Walker, a famous anthropologist who has studied the Lahu for more than thirty years, also learned these ideas from local villagers and the elite, and put the Lahu's migration from Qinghai into his book as part of the history of the Lahu (WALKER 2003, 52–68). This academic work by Western scholars has further spread knowledge of minority nationalities in China, making it a part of the worldwide knowledge on the Lahu. Therefore, the idea that the Lahu migrated from Qinghai was produced at the conference, and then accepted by Mr. Qi, and then Lao Si. When Lao Si served as an informant for researchers, he passed these localized ideas on to them as a kind of local knowledge. This process originally began at the academic paradigm of social evolutionism set up by the historian Fang Guoyu in the 1950s under the social context of administrative construction for autonomous districts for minority nationalities and the classification of ethnic minorities as official minority nationalities. From the 1950s to the 1980s this “complete Lahu history” can also be seen as one part of local politics, aiming to create autonomy, or to transform a primitive society into a socialist society. All this constitutes what we call the narratives of minority nationalities. Therefore, the route from Qinghai to Lancang shows that a constructed history can be used as an important stage in the construction of a nation-state, and to fit the theoretical needs of social evolutionism.

But a large gap still exists between the imagined migration from Qinghai and Fang Guoyu's academic paradigm. Sima Qian's record was the beginning of written history on minority nationalities in Yunnan, and the groups documented were the Kunming, the Bo, the Sou, the Xi, the Qiong Du, and so on. Sima Qian said that these groups all belonged to the Di-Qiang category, but nowhere else did he say they were the Di-Qiang. Therefore, the Lahu's ancestors must be one of these groups, that is, the Lahu should be a subgroup of Kunming, or Bo, or Sou, and so on. Linguistically speaking, some other groups like the Lisu, the Hani, and the Yi also originated from these ancient groups. Therefore, it is essential to prove that the Kunming, the Bo, or the Sou were from Qinghai, or that the Lisu, the Yi, or the Naxi also came from Qinghai; otherwise it will be impossible to logically link the Lahu with them.

Reviewing the process of the construction of the migration history of the Lahu cannot only enrich our understanding of the construction of knowledge on minority nationalities in China, but can also make clear the interactive process between the political environment and academic practices, which in turn will influence the construction of academe worldwide.

NOTES

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1. In China, *minzu* 民族 means “nation” or “nationality,” but *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族 means “minority nationalities.” The ethnic minorities have been classified into fifty-five minority nationalities since the early 1950s through the classification of minority nationalities by the Chinese government. See DREYER 1976, 141–46.

2. Taken from the Nationalities of Yunnan website <http://www.yethnic.gov.cn> (Accessed 5 February 2009).

3. Taken from <http://baike.baidu.com/view/4668.htm> (Accessed 5 February 2009).

4. The explanation of “the Lahu” is usually as follows: “La” (la⁵³) means “tiger”; “hu” (xu⁴¹) means the “smell of tiger meat being cooked.” Therefore Lahu means “tiger hunter.” There are two subgroups of the Lahu: the black Lahu and the yellow Lahu. They originally came from the Di-Qiang group, and are very close to the Yi. In Qing Dynasty literature, they were known as the Luohei 倮黑, and called themselves the Lahu. See <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/2300206>. (Accessed 5 February 2009).

5. Since 1952, having prepared the way by persuading the traditional elite to compromise, and beginning work with the masses, the Chinese Communist Party began to establish self-governing areas for minority nationalities at the provincial and local levels. Based on Stalin’s definition, “a nationality [*minzu*] is... a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (STALIN 1947). By 1979, fifty-five nationalities had been classified from more than four hundred ethnic groups. See FEI 1980; DREYER 1976, 141–46; and HARRELL, 1995, 66.

6. After 1949, the political movement of land reform spread to the larger body of China. Work teams entered the villages and organized the peasantry to attack and destroy landlords. The land reform shifted land-holding from landlords to their former tenants, the landless laborers. But in some frontier regions in Yunnan, this kind of land reform was not carried out. See FAIRBANK, 1992, 350–53; THE COUNTY GOVERNMENT OF LANCANG 1961, 4 and 17.

7. Interview with Mr. Liu, 4 September 2003.

8. Ma Jianxiong, field notes at Muga, Zawa, 28 June 2005.

9. Ma Jianxiong, field notes, at Muga, Zawa, 20 December 1996.

10. The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is the United Front organization of the Chinese Communist Party. The first CPPCC session was held in Harbin in September 1949, and it serves as forum for propagation of the Party line. The functions of the CPPCC are to conduct political consultations and democratic supervision, and organize its member parties, organizations, and people from various ethnic groups and walks of life to discuss and manage state affairs. There are different levels of CPPCC, from central to local levels; for example, there is a county level PPCC at Lancang. See SEYMOUR (1987, 23–41).

11. Nanmei valley is in the western part of Lincang City (临沧市) (a city in the north of Lancang county), with a population of about four thousand, ninety percent of them Lahu. It is the northernmost Lahu settlement. According to local oral history, the Lahu people migrated from the eastern part of Lincang plain (*mu⁴ me³¹ mi³¹ me³¹*). Before the reform to a native chieftain system in the 1720s and the coming of the Han people, Lincang plain was the main area where the Lahu settled.

12. That means the year was 1803, the eighth year of the Jia Qing Regime (1796–1820) in the Qing Dynasty. The King was Monk Tongjin, a Han immigrant of the Luohei Mountains, whose name was Zhan Fuguo; he was killed by a Qing official in 1813 at Lancang.

13. Ma Jianxiong, field notes, Nanmei, 24 July 2005.

14. Ma Jianxiong, field notes, Nanmei, 26 July 2005.

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