

CHINA

HARRELL, STEVAN, Editor. *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*. Studies on China, 26. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xi + 321 pages. Tables, maps, figures, index. Paper US\$22.00; ISBN 0-520-21989-9.

From 19 to 24 August 2005 the 4th International Conference on Yi Studies was held in the town of Meigu (美姑; the term means “center” in Yi language) in the Liangshan Yi Nationality Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province.

In the years 1995 and 1996 I organized a Japanese-Chinese Team for Research into the Folklore of Southwestern China. Its purpose was to investigate the folk religion of the Yi Nationality, especially the *bimo* (畢摩, "priest") and *sunyi* (蘇尼, "shaman"). At that time I was very impressed by the words of the head of the town. He said: "Meigu is a poor town but it harbors many *bimo*," and "Even more than being a religionist, the *bimo* is the keeper of the Yi Nationality's cultural tradition. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to call him 'person of knowledge'" (SANO 1999).

The *bimo* knows the days and hours by watching the stars, he is a counselor for people in distress, and a doctor that cures sickness. As such he has an intimate relationship with the life of the Yi people. It is no overstatement to say that *bimo* culture epitomizes Yi representations from their view of nature to their spiritual world. In the past there were times when this was rejected as superstition, but this culture, which can be called the crystallization of Yi wisdom of life, has been kept alive and passed on.

On revisiting Meigu in 2005 I was surprised at the changes in the town's appearance. Besides a center for the study of *bimo* culture, a *bimo* museum and, in the outskirts of the town, a *bimo* park have been built, a demonstration that *bimo* culture has been put at the center of efforts to promote the region. On the one hand, as a consequence of the development of the west pushed forward by the Chinese government, and in the midst of rapid modernization, the traditional folk culture of the Yi people has been disregarded. On the other hand, the administration's intention to attribute to Yi culture a prominent role as a tourist resource within the framework of economic development can be noticed. Scholarly research concerning *bimo* culture and Yi national (folk) culture in general is, of course, very important. My participation in the recent conference made me painfully aware how important it is to think, together with other issues concerning the population, of the future of its folk culture, of methods and measures how it can be preserved and transmitted.

The present volume is edited by Stevan Harrell, the head of the International Society of Yi Studies, who not only advocates communication between scholarly research and local population, but also vigorously pleads for the returning of research findings to the locals. Although the book was published in 2001, it adopts a wide perspective in terms of problems and ways of analysis and thus points, as its title suggests, to the future of Yi culture. It is, therefore, a fundamental research tool for future Yi studies and required reading for scholars of that field. The volume constitutes the official publication of the results from the 1st International Conference on Yi Studies held at Washington University, Seattle, in 1995, and is supported by the American Council of Learned Societies.

This series of conferences, which began with twenty participants, among them eleven invited Yi scholars, was, ten years later, called to the deep Southwest of China, the center of Yi culture. It has grown into an International Conference with more than 150 national and foreign participants. In this way it has succeeded to bring Yi studies back to their homeland. Before I add a few comments about the publication I wish, therefore, to pay tribute to Stevan Harrell's enthusiasm for Yi studies.

The Yi, a population of about seven million people are a group of the Tibeto-Burman language group and live mainly in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. They are known by several names by which they call themselves or are called by others. Among them the group that calls itself Sani and lives in the famous tourist area of "Stone Forest" in the neighborhood of Kunming, in Yunnan, is particularly known for its strong local character. The present volume is the first scholarly work in English in a quarter of a century about the Yi, a group still little known in the West. Its authors comprise scholars of Yi origin as well as those from the United States, Germany, and Australia.

Stevan Harrell has written a sensitive and balanced introduction to the volume whose

sixteen contributions are divided into several parts: I. The Yi in History; II. Nuosu Society in Liangshan; III. Yi Society in Yunnan; IV. The Yi Today.

The majority of the contributions come from Yi scholars. Harrell hopes, therefore, that the volume does not only present Yi culture to the world and provide material for comparative research free from differences of ideology and paradigms that exist between China and the world, but that it also can be read by those who have just begun Yi studies because of its grasp of Yi culture as a corner stone. The possibility for a new start of anthropological research in China in the 1980s provides the background to these studies. In Socialist countries such as China, Yi society was held to constitute the stages of slavery (in Da Liangshan, the "Great Cold Mountains"), of feudal serfdom (in Guizhou), and of landlord feudalism (in the larger part of Yunnan). Arguments and studies about this society were often based on the premises of Morgan's theory of social evolution, and that the Communist Party brought it liberation.

The volume does not contain a contribution by Stevan Harrell himself. However the awareness about such issues as the essentials of traditional Yi culture and its local character or about the direction of changes caused by modernization betrays the editor's hand. He contrasts part II, a rich presentation of Yi culture centered on the theme of the clan in the Liangshan region, with part III, which discusses the situation of advanced Sinization of the Yi in Yunnan. In part I he offers a general view of Yi history, and perspectives for the future in part IV.

Yi culture contrasts with the culture of the neighboring Naxi, a population of about 300,000. In one word, while Naxi culture is passive and possesses a highly flexible structure, Yi culture is hard and puts up high guards against the influence of an alien culture. However, once it accepts such a culture, its influence is widely accepted. It can also be said that the degree of the local color of Yi culture depends on the degree of its Sinization.

It can also be said that the solidity of Yi society in the Da Liangshan is founded on such institutions as clan (this term is usually used to translate the Yi term *cyvi*), class, and marriage. The life of the Yi in the Da Liangshan, based on the nuclear family as its smallest unit, is deployed in villages formed by small and middle-sized lineages. These lineages are further grouped into great lineages, groups of organizations of blood relations (*cyvi*) that are based on an awareness of patrilineal genealogy which can be noticed in the practice of a system of father-son linked names. In Western anthropology these groups are called clans.

Harrell himself has argued that these patrilineal clans constitute the basis of Yi society in the Da Liangshan (2000). However, although clan exogamy and ethnic marriage within the same class applied also to the slave institution, and were strictly observed, today great changes can be noticed in intermarriage with other ethnic groups and other areas. In fact, the process of transition from a traditional society to a modern one can be observed in the current climate. It is, therefore, the great significance of this publication that it provides a vantage point from which to grasp Yi society in the midst of a maelstrom of social changes.

On the other hand, Cultural Anthropology, which was used to study non-literate societies with almost no written documents, has to produce a model that includes historicity in the face of China, an area rich in written culture. It is clear that a reconsideration of the theory of clan and lineage, which was based mainly on African studies, is necessary in the light of such evidence as the clan system of Yi society. Freedman's studies on Han society included, cultural anthropology will need to reconsider its methods in producing ethnographies of minority cultures in analysis and generalization of findings.

The present volume offers many incentives toward this end. However, granted that the form of an edited volume poses certain limits on its range, I would have liked one more

question, that of ethnic identity, to have been raised. Yi settlements are scattered, there are differences in their language and totems. Therefore, I would like to have seen a contribution on what provides the Yi with a sense of unity, including recent studies on their ancestor worship and present trends of research in that area. I also would have expected some more indepth research about *bimo* and *sunyi*, the core of Yi beliefs.

Rather than appealing for things that cannot be produced, I prefer to point out that this volume succeeds in describing, from the point of view of Yi studies, how in a country strong in political and historical institutions such as China focusing on an ethnic culture has local, national, and even global meaning, and illuminates the dynamic aspect of their interrelationship.

At the recent conference in Meigu there were also contributions about negative aspects of modernization, such as the proliferation of the use of opium, AIDS, and the problem of orphans. In line with Stevan Harrell's intentions I hope that this book will promote Yi studies nationally as well as internationally, and that the results of science become linked up with the wellbeing of people.

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