

RALPH A. LITZINGER

Other Chinas

The Yao and the Politics

of National Belonging

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham and London

2000

contents

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xxi

Writing the Margins: An Introduction 1

one

Inciting the Past 32

two

Moral Geographies of Place 82

three

Remembering Revolution 138

four

The State and Its Ritual Potencies 183

five

Postsocialist Belonging 230

Epilogue 260

Notes 271

Bibliography 297

Index 321

chapter one

Inciting the Past

We now know that narratives are made of silences, not all of which are deliberate or even perceptible as such within the time of their production. We also know that the present is itself no clearer than the past. — MICHEL-ROLPH TROUILLOT, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*

This chapter explores how Yao ethnologists and social historians were writing histories of their people in the post-Mao period. What is remembered in narratives that locate the Yao subject in the history of the Chinese nation? What is forgotten? Who is empowered in the retelling of the past? Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani have observed that history is a text of the dead dictated to the living, through a voice that cannot speak for itself. The historian is the keeper of the text, the worker, as they put it, of mute mouths.¹ Yet, what happens when history is not perceived as the instructor of origin, power, and mastery? What happens when it is seen as a crowded space, where complex reckonings of the past refuse to be encapsulated in any dominant narrative?² Is it possible to write against the singular universality assumed in histories of the nation that speak for the local, the plural, and a range of incommensurable knowledges?³ Is it possible to displace the formal structures of a singular history into a space of dispersal, where different stories vie for voice? What is gained in this displacement? What is lost? Can we interpret the writing of histories of the Yao as anything but the search for origin and mastery?

Chinese Marxist historiography has long emphasized the “movement” and “development” of social groups, classes, and nations through history. History was imagined as a theoretical practice serving broader revolution-

ary goals. By focusing on urban commercial development, popular literature, and minority nationality resistance to dynastic regimes, Marxist historiography attempted to promulgate a new history, a history of and for the masses.⁴ To be sure, the writing of a Marxist-informed history has been marked by numerous moments of struggle, debate, and controversy.⁵ Yet, certain fundamental premises have remained constant since the 1940s. One is that the writing of history, like any intellectual pursuit, must “serve the people.” A second premise is that popular history is to be written about and for the masses and that these histories are more valuable than are histories about feudal emperors, scholar-officials, and imperial intrigue. A third premise is that history is alive. The past is not viewed as a document of lifeless events and facts but as a temporal frame to which one can turn for an explanation for the conditions of the present and a vehicle for action and change in the world. And finally, Chinese Marxist historiography has long maintained that statements and representations of history invariably have social and political roots and consequences.⁶

My fieldwork in Beijing at the Central Nationalities Institute, and then later in the Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County, often revolved around long and complex discussions with Yao scholars, government officials, and Taoist specialists about the twists and turns of Chinese revolutionary history. My job as a fieldworker interested in questions of Yao culture, history, and identity required that I not only read the texts that many of these scholars and officials produced; I also had to inhabit their language and try to make sense of the categories and analytical perspectives they brought to their work. In examining how they were writing the Yao subject back into the history of the Chinese nation, I hope to show that the relationship among culture, history, and the Chinese nation was an uncertain and often contested one. Minority histories were not marginal to the debates about the Chinese nation that raged on in China throughout the 1980s. Rather, they were at the very center of how the nation was being imagined, debated, and discursively reconstructed.

I argue that the nation—understood here as both a contested category and an object of devotion and protection—cannot be written out of our accounts of minority politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yao scholars were attempting to find a discursive place for the Yao subject in a highly contentious and uncertain national setting. Throughout this period, intellectuals were critical of the analytical usefulness of almost all forms of class discourse. Many were assessing the first three decades of the People’s Re-

of local officials. Known as “road guides,” or *lujinxin*, they tell of past sojourners who sought out Qianjiadong and the hardships encountered along the way. Perhaps most important, they incited the interests of others and motivated individuals and families to set out on their own.

Tales of individuals such as Dong Yuanzhu were circulated in Jianghua well into the 1950s. A popular folk story in Jianghua recounted one such movement as follows:

There was once a father who took his father and his son to search for Qianjiadong. On several occasions they roamed the mountains of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hunan but were continually thwarted in their efforts. They nonetheless maintained their faith. As they died, they told their descendants to continue the search. Some three generations later, these descendants launched a large-scale movement to find Qianjiadong, which eventually took them to a place called Jiucailing [the land of flowering chives]. After climbing over two thousand meters, they discovered a wide and verdant plain with a small river cutting across it. They returned to their village, sold their land and belongings, and moved to Jiucailing. They worked the land for a year but the harvest could support them for only a month. The primitive forest around the plain contained numerous wild animals, which caused them to live in fear. Storms hit the mountain with relentless ferocity. They eventually left Jiucailing, returned home, but, having previously sold everything, were now forced into a life of endless wandering. They all died of hunger in the 1940s.⁷⁴

A less tragic tale of Qianjiadong wanderings is told among the Pan Yao of Lipu County in Guangxi. This story recounts the travails of a Yao named Chao Yulin, who led an expedition of more than fifty persons into a different region of Hunan, in the mountains that border present-day Guizhou Province:

In the fall of 1913, Chao Yulin came across a book entitled *Origin Stories of Qianjiadong* (*Qianjiadong yuanliuji*). There is mention of a place called Daozhou, which is said to produce rice grains the size of peanuts and where the Yao have lived in peace for centuries. Chao decides to gather some food, clothing, and money and head out in search of this land. Traveling by foot, he passes through Pingle, Gongcheng, and other places where Yao have settled; he encounters story after story about Qianjiadong. No one knows exactly where Daozhou is located, and many people are reluc-

tant to join him for fear of bandits who roam the hills. Chao eventually encounters these bandits somewhere in the hills around the border of present-day Guangxi and Hunan; he is robbed of all of his possessions except for a few pieces of cold bread and his book of Qianjiadong stories.

In the summer of 1941, Chao, now in old age, is rewarded with the birth of a grandson, Chao Debiao. To celebrate, he gives his son, Chao Rutian, his coveted book on the origins of Qianjiadong. He implores his son to keep searching for this lost land. Chao Rutian is unsuccessful, but the grandson heeds the call and wanders the mountains repeatedly throughout the 1950s. He has no luck and eventually gives up the effort. In the early 1980s, however, a man named Xiong Fenglong and his niece Xiong Chunjiang, who had themselves been roaming the mountains for decades looking for Qianjiadong, visited him. On August 15 of the next year the three of them set out and soon arrive in the same Jiucailing region related in the story from Jianghua, Hunan. The three go their separate ways after they survey the area and decide that it is much too small to support a large community. Chao Debiao sets out on his own the next month and soon encounters two men from a distant county who have likewise been searching for the lost homeland of the Yao. These men are brothers, known as Chao Shunwang and Chao Shunde, who come from Dayuan Village in Jiangyong County in Hunan. They make their living as hunters and boast of traveling by bus and foot throughout the many remote mountains that border the provinces of Guangxi, Guangdong, and Hunan. Eventually they return to the village of Dayuan. Upon arrival, Chao Debiao is suddenly hit with the force of an uncanny recognition. He opens the book his grandfather had passed on decades earlier, the *Qianjiadong yuanliuji*, and then looks out at the fertile plain and the mountains that surround it. He proclaims in a moment of enlightenment: “My Yao brothers and I have searched for decades for Qianjiadong. Little did we realize that we had been living in Qianjiadong all along!”

There are many such tales told in villages throughout Guangxi and Hunan, and they often contain images of Yao sojourners studying letters and handwritten books and surveying the land, trying to match the stories in the texts to the landscape around them. I talked to several ethnologists in China, some Yao, some Han, who thought this a ridiculous enterprise, a clear sign of how mountain peasants continue to be idealistically tied to the mythologies of the feudal past. The specter of large groups of Yao peasants



Lao Huang and friends.

eign anthropologist in conversation, and he shows her how to gesture with her hands to the town that surrounds us and how to point to the paintings on the rafters above our heads. Before I know it, our little drama is underway. We walk across the bridge, pleasantly taking in the sites around us. A camera follows our every movement. She does all of the talking. I nod my head in agreement, forcing an occasional smile, playing along with this manufactured stroll across the Jinxiu River. When we reach the other side, a journalist approaches us and the interview begins. The female tour guide is now silent, her task almost complete. She is instructed to stand alongside the anthropologist.

Without anyone's coaching me on what is about to take place, the interview begins. The journalist, a young man from Nanning, the capital city of Guangxi, who I later learn is on his first trip to these mountains, turns to the camera and provides some background information. "Mr. Li is a scholar from America affiliated with the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing. He is a friend of the Yao and Chinese people, who has come to these splendid mountains to study the relationship between Yao traditional culture and socialist modernization. Let us turn to Mr. Li, who speaks Chinese, and ask him what he thinks about his stay in the Dayaoshan."

Journalist: Mr. Li, could you tell us about your impressions of the Yao people?

Anthropologist: The Yao are a very hardworking people with a long and glorious history. While they have their own languages, many Yao are literate in Chinese. They live in a very harsh environment, in which it is very difficult to make a living, but the Yao are a very hardy people making the best of their circumstances.

Journalist: So how do you pass your time here? I understand you are very busy studying Yao customs. Do you miss your home and your family?

Anthropologist: Well, of course, I sometimes feel homesick. However, the Yao have warmly welcomed me here and I feel as though I am a member of the family with whom I live. During the New Year I was very busy recording Yao rituals, marriages, and other local customs. But now I mostly interview older people, talking to them about history and the changes that have occurred in these mountains.

At this point Huang, who has been standing off to the side and conferring with a man I have never seen before, signals to me not to talk about local history. The journalist continues.

Journalist: So what are your impressions about China's socialist modernization effort here?

Anthropologist: Actually, I have many different thoughts about this problem. It is obvious that the streets are full of activity, many new shops have opened in recent years, and many people are making a lot of money. But, many new problems are arising.

Journalist (suddenly interjecting): Thank you, Mr. Li. Hope you have much success in your research. Good luck!

The interview is over as quickly as it began. Local officials gather around me, shaking my hand. Huang is boasting of my ability to climb mountains; several other men hand me their name cards, imploring me to visit if I am ever in Nanning, Liuzhou, or Guilin, the major cities in the valleys below. We are then asked to pose for photographs. From nowhere appear two young Yao women adorned in traditional Yao clothing, each representing the two dominant Yao subgroups found in the vicinity of the county, the Chashan Yao and the Pan Yao. They are first photographed alone and then together with the various members of the documentary team. They are familiar faces around the Tourism Bureau and this, I know from other similar kinds of

critical use of Foucault's work on disciplinary power, see Lisa Rofel, "Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China," and Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "The Modernity of Power in the Chinese Socialist Order." For a trenchant critique of Foucault from the perspective of Chinese notions of ritual and ideology, see P. Steven Sangren, "'Power' against Ideology."

- 51 Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions*, 189.
- 52 I owe this image to James Clifford's essay, "Spatial Practices: Fieldwork, Travel, and the Disciplining of Anthropology." See also Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology."
- 53 Don Robotham, "Postcolonialities: The Challenge of New Modernities," 357.
- 54 Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History*, 1.
- 55 See Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, xi. Laclau's view is discussed in David Scott, "The Aftermaths of Sovereignty."
- 56 Alessandro Russo, "The Probable Defeat," 179–180.
- 57 This theme is taken up in Bob Stauffer, "After Socialism," and is central to the project that informs Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*

chapter one Inciting the Past

- 1 See Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani's introduction to the edited volume, *Re-making History*, ix.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Partha Chatterjee takes up a similar set of questions in *The Nation and Its Fragments*.
- 4 One of the best analyses of the origins of Marxist historiography in China is found in Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History*.
- 5 One of the more recurrent struggles in the post-1949 historiography has been the debate between "historicism" (*lishi zhuyi*) and the "class viewpoint" (*jieji guandian*). The former, perhaps best represented by Liu Jie's arguments in the early 1960s that class analysis is an inappropriate analytical tool when applied to ancient historical events, has attempted to delineate those features of China's cultural legacy that should be preserved and embraced. Liu argued that the Confucian concept of *ren* (roughly, "benevolence") was devoid of class content, a position for which he was severely attacked. See Albert Feuerwerker, *History in Communist China*, for a discussion of these struggles over historiographical method in post-1949 China.
- 6 See Robert W. Weller, "Historians and Consciousness."
- 7 See, for example, Pamela Kyle Crossley, "Thinking about Ethnicity in Early Modern China"; Stevan Harrell, "The History of the History of the Yi"; Ralph Litzinger, "Making Histories: Contending Conceptions of the Yao Past"; and

Charles F. McKhann, "The Nazi and the Nationalities Question." For critiques among scholars in China, see Tong Enzhang, "Moergen de moshi yu makeshi zhuyi."

- 8 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 15.
- 9 For a sampling of some of these controversies, see James Clifford's reading of Said in his book *The Predicament of Culture* and Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenberg's excellent overview of postorientalism commentary in their article "The Challenge of Orientalism." Much of this work takes up Said's methodological challenges, but also confronts his depiction of orientalism as a monolithic and uncontested discourse. In recent years, Said's work has been read, debated, and challenged by a number of China scholars. See, for example, Tang Xiaobing, "Orientalism and the Question of Universality"; Arif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism"; and Louisa Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism."
- 10 Paul Bové, *Intellectuals in Power*, 216–217.
- 11 See Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, for a similar approach.
- 12 See Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse."
- 13 By the time he wrote the essay "Traveling Theory," Said began to move away from his previous endorsement of Foucault's approach to power. He argued in part that the theory of power was too abstract and rarefied, unable to respond to the complex unfolding of the social world. For Said, Foucault could never imagine a theory of resistances; he could see power only as universalizing, a dominant force in all aspects of human life. In turning on Foucault, Said was searching for ways to define the nature of intellectual practice; to understand how intellectuals become invested in certain discourses, institutions, and practices; to image how intellectual work after Foucault can oppose repression and imagine alternative societies. As I argued in the introduction, this view of Foucault tends to focus on the conception of disciplinary power as developed in *Discipline and Punish* and ignores ambivalences and refinements of this conception in his later work. For a further discussion of Said's reading of Foucault, see Bové, *Intellectuals in Power*, 220–223.
- 14 This argument is set forth in Robert Young, *White Mythologies*, 141–156. See Ann Stoler's article, "Making Empire Respectable," for an analysis of certain ambivalences in the making of the colonial elite. In fact, the November 1989 volume of *American Ethnologist*, in which her article appears, is devoted to a rethinking of Said's image of the Orient as penetrated, silenced, and possessed. Stoler is primarily concerned with the constitution of colonial power and of a colonial elite and finds that the process, though no less insidious, is much more problematic than Said's initial formulation suggested. For a similar approach, see also Gyan Prakash, "Science 'Gone Native.'"

- 29 For similar approaches, see Anagnost, *National Past-Times*; Tani Barlow's notion of the "localization of the sign" in "Zhishifenzi (Chinese Intellectuals) and Power"; and Lydia Liu, "Translingual Practice."
- 30 Arif Dirlik, "Postsocialism? Reflections on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," 379–380.
- 31 See, for example, Vivian Shue, *The Reach of the State*; Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*; and Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: The Recent History of a Peasant Community in Mao's China*.
- 32 My approach here owes much to Helen Siu's important and, to my mind, underappreciated study, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution*. See also her essay, "Recycling Rituals: Politics and Popular Culture in Contemporary Rural China."
- 33 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 5.

epilogue

- 1 Rey Chow, "Pedagogy, Trust, Chinese Intellectuals in the 1990s: Fragments of a Post-Catastrophic Discourse."
- 2 *Ibid.*, 203.
- 3 Chow also pursues these issues in her essay, "Violence in the Other Country."
- 4 Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 196–198.
- 5 See Zha Jianying, *China Pop*, and Orville Schell, "China: The End of an Era."
- 6 Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China*, 273–274.
- 7 Andrew Ross, *Universal Abandon*, cited in Ellen E. Berry, "Introduction: Postcommunism and the Body Politic," 1.
- 8 Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State*, 393.
- 9 Dali L. Yang, *Beyond Beijing*, 73.
- 10 *Ibid.*

bibliography

- Abrams, Philip. "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1:1 (1988): 58–89.
- Alloula, Malek. *The Colonial Harem*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation)." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 121–173. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977.
- Anagnost, Ann. "Socialist Ethics and the Legal System." In *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989*, ed. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry, 177–205. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.
- . "The Politics of Ritual Displacement." In *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall, and Helen Hardacre, 221–254. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.
- . *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28:2 (1986): 356–361.
- . "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place." *Cultural Anthropology* 3:1 (1988): 36–49.
- . "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Public Culture* 2:2 (1990): 1–24.
- . "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology." In *Recapturing Anthropology*, ed. Richard Fox, 191–210. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1991.
- . *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Arkush, David R. *Fei Xiaotong and Sociology in Revolutionary China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asian Monographs, Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Asad, Talal, ed. *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Ithaca Press, 1973.
- . *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.