

CRN Proposal

Title: The Ethnic Family: a case study of a multi-ethnic family history from the Upper Salween

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Ethnicity and place in the ethnography of the Upper Salween

Prompted by the growth of interest in ethnic minorities due to a renewal of anthropology in China, and a public interest linked to tourism, the 1980s and 1990s saw a flourish of serial publications on the ethnic groups of Yunnan. Series bearing titles such as ‘Ethnic Perspective’, ‘Cultural History’ and ‘Yunnan’s ethnic minorities at the Twenty-first Century’ each produced monographs on each of Yunnan’s 25 ethnic groups. Some series required Kunming-based scholars to write on an individual ethnic group according to a set outline (often without any fieldwork), and were edited according to a set ‘tone’. One series consisted of books reporting all aspects of life in one village selected to represent each ethnic minority, based on surveys by university students undertaken according to a pre-set outline. Each ethnic group is now represented in these series that summarize and in themselves also show the accumulated knowledge of the diversity of Yunnan’s ethnic groups. In these ethnographies, there is often little sense of place in relation to the ethnic subject. Cultural traits are generalized across a whole ethnic group, where in fact many reported habits (and even languages) are very localized. Traits are taken as ‘emblematic’ of the ethnic group and extended in geographical range to others.

The immediate roots of this mode of representation of ethnic diversity can be traced to the outcomes of the ‘ethnic identification’ project that began in the early 1950s. For each ethnic group, social and historical surveys were undertaken and research compiled between the mid-1950s to the early 1960s.¹ The basis for these latter reports that covered all ethnic minority areas was a uniform model. Each was implemented in a highly organized way, and compiled according to set themes. Through sifting and reorganization of data, these surveys took the ethnic groups in an area and divided them through representation into discrete units. Thus, from these materials one cannot gain any sense of the mutual interchange – including opposition and resistance - between ethnic groups within the same area. The appearance of these official ethnographies, with their set contents and artificial ethnic boundaries serve to show more commonality among ethnic groups than the individuality of each. In particular, ethnic interchange and the real situation of ‘weaker’ groups were not portrayed and were even purposively deleted from the record.

Records from the Qing and Republican periods sometimes also used this ‘ethnic unit’ approach. But often, we also find a greater concern with administration and with the exigencies of travel in the Upper Salween led Qing and Republican reporters to represent the ethnic diversity from different perspectives, as the authors traveled from one village to the next. Inevitably for travelers, place is represented as meaningful in their reports. And the diversity of place and its relation to ethnicity are represented in other ways that were not accessible to the desk-top ethnographers of the 1980s.

¹ The Upper Salween area in Gongshan county is represented by the “Nu Nationality Social and Historical Survey Report” and the “Dulong Nationality Social and Historical Survey Report”.

Ethnicity, place and family in auto-ethnography

The first ancestor in the Luo family to enter Gongshan came because of religion. The Catholic church in Cizhong village (Deqin county in the Mekong valley) was built in 1889. Historical records relate that the materials for the wooden church were carried by transport bearers from Jianchuan county (in Dali). My great-grandfather was one of the carpenters. He later found a Tibetan wife in Cizhong village, and then came to Gongshan to build the Buddhist temple at Dala in Gongshan, where he remained thereafter. He also came because of ethnicity: with a Tibetan wife, it is said his Bai ethnic family would not let him return to Jianchuan. And he came because of his livelihood: Jianchuan carpenters are famed throughout northwest Yunnan for their fine carving, even today. The arrival of French Catholic missionaries in Gongshan supported his livelihood as they built a succession of churches, which were successively burned down by the Nu and Tibetan followers of the Buddhist temple in Bingzhongluo, and then rebuilt.

At the height of the prosperity of my ancestors' household, they lived in a courtyard house built in a half-Tibetan half-Bai style in Dala. When my father was nine years old, because his Han mother could not stand the distance she was required to carry water on her back, and could not stand eating tsamba (barley meal) everyday, she left that house. And taking her husband and children, she returned to her natal home in Yonglaga, the rice producing village of Gongshan. Other nephews and great-nephews of my great grandfather remained in the old house in Dala – where they went through the vicissitudes of the various political and economic movements of the post-Liberation period. When I went to visit the old house two years ago, my uncle – who still sees himself as Bai - had a Lisu wife, and the whole household spoke Nu at home. My great uncle had moved to the site of the township government where he had opened a small grocery retail shop after the economic reforms began.

I was born and grew up in Gongshan, as part of a multi-ethnic family. To date, I have no strong identification with any one ethnic identity or another. Often, if I claim membership of one ethnic group, others will deny it. It has often been of interest to me from where did my father's ancestors come? What did they experience? What does that tell me about the present? Or the future? I grew up in the county town, but spent some years of the Cultural Revolution at Yonglaga. That was where I came to see as our family home. That is, until recently, when my father began to tell me of the movements of our family. Now I understand why our house in Yonglaga is at the very edge of the village.

When I review my family history, the first point to strike me is that the creation of my multi-ethnic family has a history. That history is linked with the wider history of the area, its political history and its history of ethnic and religious relations. But the perspective of the family - and others like us - is not represented in any of the official ethnographies. The second point is that from the perspective of my own family, ethnicity and identity are tied as much to place as they are to group, but in different ways.

Research objectives

Through a historical record of the experiences of a mixed Tibetan, Bai, Lisu, Nu and Han family:

- To document how the Upper Salween area (an area marginal to the mainstream of 'history', society and the power over the writing of ethnography) experienced major political and other changes over the last more than hundred years;
- To document the factors contributing to the creation of the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity that characterizes Gongshan today;
- To document the experience of *ethnic* and *cultural diversity*, and of *place* of a multi-ethnic family.

Significance

Due to the dominant practices of ethnology in Yunnan (and China more generally) the experience of ethnicity in conditions of ethnic diversity have not been represented before. This research will adopt the approach of auto-ethnology in order to document and reflect on the experience of the researcher and my family. This case study will make contributions to the understanding of ethnicity in Yunnan by (a) providing a previously undocumented case, (b) analyzing ethnic relations from a new perspective, and (c) providing reflections on the writing of ethnicity.

Research plan

May – December 2002: Review existing historical materials on Gongshan.

January – June 2003: Interview family members and neighbours in Gongshan; trips to Cizhong and Jianchuan

July – November 2003: complete writing

Budget

Fieldwork in Gongshan and Cizhong (Deqin):

USD 10/day (RMB80/day) X 180 days = RMB 14,400 (USD1756)

Transport (Kunming to Gongshan, Gongshan to Bingzhongluo, Kunming to Cizhong):

RMB 1500 (USD 185)

Film cost, processing and photocopying:

RMB 800 (USD 100)

TOTAL: RMB 16,700 (USD 2040)

Biography:

Luo Rongfen was born in 1962 to a Dulong mother and a Bai father of mixed ethnic background in Gongshan county, NW Yunnan. She grew up in the county town until the age of 18, when she was selected to study Chinese at the Central Nationalities College in Beijing. Upon graduation in 1985 she was sent to work at the Institute of Ethnology of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, where she has focused on the culture of the Dulong, Nu and Lisu inhabitants of the Salween valley. Her major works include *Tattoo-faced Women in Nature* (a book on Dulong women which has been translated into several languages), *The Dulong Ethnic Minority* (one of the series of Ethnic Perspectives books), and articles or book chapters on dream interpretation among the Dulong, sustainable development in the Dulong River area and social forestry practices of the Nu minority. From 1996 to 2000 she worked as a Program Officer for Oxfam Hong Kong, supervising community development projects in Lahu and Wa minority communities.