

2010

Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE to Twentieth Century CE)

Michael C. Brose

University of Wyoming, mbrose@uwyo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.uwyo.edu/history_facpub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Information

Brose, Michael C. (2010). "Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE to Twentieth Century CE)." *China Review International* 17.3, 305-309.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Wyoming Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Wyoming Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact scholcom@uwyo.edu.



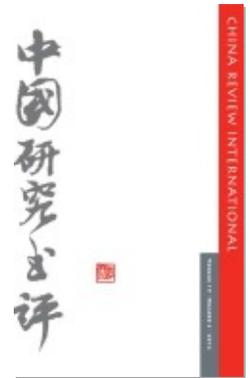
PROJECT MUSE®

Yunnan: Periphery or Center of an International Network?

Michael C. Brose

China Review International, Volume 17, Number 3, 2010, pp. 305-309
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: [10.1353/cri.2010.0082](https://doi.org/10.1353/cri.2010.0082)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cri/summary/v017/17.3.brose.html>

To his credit, rather than manufacture a thesis for the book that did not match his evidence, he chose instead simply to present the information he had. Most of the interpretation he does offer is from other scholars. He does not offer his own interpretation beyond tempering the positions of others, or engaging in some limited speculation. It is similar to some of the books of translation he has previously published in which he expects the translated material to speak for itself. This material is important, but it does not speak for itself. Moreover, I would very much like to know the opinions and perspectives of someone who has studied this subject for more than thirty years. I know he has something to say, and I just wish he would be more assertive in saying it.

There is only one area in which he has made a serious error, and that is in choosing to use Wade-Giles romanization in the text. While it is certainly true that *pinyin* is no better than Wade-Giles in representing the Chinese language, it is very much beside the point. The issue is no longer a struggle for dominance between two equal systems. *Pinyin* is now the standard for instruction and publication in America. General textbooks on Chinese culture all use *pinyin*, and, with a few exceptions, most scholarship is published using *pinyin*. By insisting on Wade-Giles, Sawyer has made his book almost unusable in classrooms. Scholars will have no difficulty with this quirk, and presumably some lay readers find Wade-Giles more comfortable, but undergraduates will find it extremely bothersome.

Notwithstanding my small quibbles and bemoaning some aspects of this book, *Ancient Chinese Warfare* is a fundamental text for studying early Chinese warfare in English. It has significantly advanced the field of early Chinese military history and made it much easier for nonspecialists to access an enormous amount of materials. I expect to refer to it often.

Peter Lorge

Peter Lorge is an assistant professor of history at Vanderbilt University, specializing in the military history of Song dynasty China.



Yunnan: Periphery or Center of an International Network?

Bin Yang. *Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE to Twentieth Century CE)*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. x, 338 pp. Hardcover \$60.00, ISBN 978-0-231-14254-0. Gutenberg-e online book, ISBN 978-0-231-51230-5.

For those of us whose work focuses on Yunnan, there is often a sense of the liminal that seems to be a part of the territory. It is a given that Yunnan's historic, geographic, and social landscape is heavily textured and not easy to navigate. And while contemporary state narratives make it clear that Yunnan is part of China, this is less clear once one attempts to find one's way over and through that historic, geographic, and social terrain. Bin Yang's energetic new book provides us with maps that make sense of Yunnan from these perspectives, and it should be read by anyone interested in this fascinating province.

A big factor in Bin Yang's success in making sense of Yunnan is his global perspective. Rather than approaching Yunnan from a Chinese perspective, he sets it within a larger global context. This is not to exclude China's role in the history of Yunnan, but rather to uncover the large picture in which Yunnan was embedded. Yang does not, however, limit his interrogation of Yunnan over time to a global approach; he successfully invokes frontier theory to query Yunnan's position in China and vice versa. Also as Yang makes clear in his introduction, his book relies heavily on Fang Guoyu's thirteen-volume compilation of Chinese historical sources on Yunnan, the incomparable *Yunnan Shiliao Congkan*. If Yang's scholarship accomplished nothing else, his reduction of the innumerable nuggets contained in Fang's work for the general reader is invaluable for anyone interested in Yunnan history.

Yang's first chapter, "The Southwest Silk Road," sets the global context for this work by situating historical Yunnan as the natural crossroads of China, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Tibet, linked together by the southwest Silk Road. Few historians of Yunnan have really bothered to adopt this perspective, but it is most productive because it releases Yunnan studies from the narrative imposed by the Chinese gaze. He argues that before there was even a place called "Yunnan," this frontier region played a very dynamic role in several states and systems, because of its intrinsic quality of linking together three overland trade routes: the Yunnan-Burma-India route, the Yunnan-Vietnam route, and the Yunnan-Tibet route. Until the Mongol conquest in the 1250s, China was only one of several culture areas linked to Yunnan, in spite of occasional attempts by Chinese states to govern that frontier zone.

As his second chapter, "Military Campaigns against Yunnan," makes clear, the incidental conquest of Yunnan by the Mongols on their way into southern Song China made possible more concerted military campaigns by successive Chinese states to bring this frontier area firmly under central Chinese state control. Here too, however, the author is not content with the traditional China-centered approach to Yunnan's history and, instead, frames the various military campaigns run by Chinese in the area as "transnational, cross-boundary, or cross-regional interactions" (p. 73). The effect of this analysis is that Yang paints a lively picture of the region (or the states or groups that inhabited this region) as a dynamic actor in the formation of various Chinese dynasties because of its geopolitical location.

This can be seen, for example, in the first subsection of this chapter, “Yunnan and the Making of the Qin Empire” (p. 73).

The effect of Yang’s Yunnan-centered, transnational approach in this chapter, however, was an odd elision of the Mongol conquest of Yunnan, except for a very brief mention between long narrative sections devoted to the independent states Nanzhao and Dali and the Ming military incorporation of Yunnan. It is almost as if an implicit counternarrative of the China-centered construction of Yunnan is the only alternative to his global approach. In other words, once conditions favored more direct and sustained Chinese military involvement in the region, there was no alternative to an autonomous place that independent states like Nanzhao and Dali could inhabit. Thereafter, Yunnan was constructed by the Chinese state. Thus, the era when the region was ruled by the Mongols was a short liminal and instable period between these two alternatives. A close reading of his next chapter, “Rule Based on Native Customs,” I think reaffirms this view.

The explicit goal of this next chapter is charting the growing penetration of China and Chinese people into this region, especially starting with the Mongol Yuan dynasty. The specific vehicle for that penetration was the age-old frontier principle of Chinese states as far back as the Qin and Han to institute rule based on native customs, using native personnel. Yang provides an invaluable review here of frontier administrative systems used in Yunnan, especially the institutionalization of local chieftains as administrators that featured especially in Yuan, Ming, and Qing control of the region, and of the gradual accomplishment of the mission to civilize the area and its inhabitants according to Chinese lights. Yet here, too, the Mongol Yuan dynasty is given rather cursory treatment, even while being acknowledged as vitally important in bringing the region into China proper and establishing administrative systems that successive dynasties continued. Yang does provide a good overview of Ming developments in Yunnan, especially welcome since, as he acknowledges, most scholarship on Yunnan in the late imperial period focuses on Qing administration.

Yang’s main argument, and the most innovative contribution of this work to scholarship on Yunnan, comes in the next chapter where he charts the creation of a hybrid Yunnan for the first time in history. While he acknowledges in earlier chapters references to this region as “Yunnan” in early Chinese texts, it was only in the Ming and Qing eras that the twin forces of sinicization and indigenization came together to create a new identity among residents of this region as people of Yunnan (*Yunnan ren*). His argument that Confucian civilizing ideals of the core and periphery, employed by the Chinese state, were balanced by the irrepressible force of local or native culture that immigrants adopted (invoking the historian Lu Ren’s concept of indigenization [*tuzhuhua*]) in constructing this new place and identity Yunnan) is quite persuasive and refreshing.

Yang’s global perspective also enables him to develop the counterpoint argument in this chapter that frontier zones like Yunnan also were critical in

developing a *Chinese* national and ethnic identity. Here he takes a cue from Frederick Jackson Turner, Richard White, and Pat Giersch to lay out the idea that Yunnan, as part of the larger Yunnan-Guizhou frontier macroregion, has occupied a middle ground for ages. Important demographic changes that began in the Ming only served simultaneously to bring this place into China proper and to crystallize a specific regional identity among the native and newly arrived inhabitants. Those identities, in turn, have informed the maturation of a Chinese identity down to the present.

One of the most important physical attributes of this frontier zone was its large metal deposits, especially of silver and copper. The next chapter, “Silver, Cowries, and Copper,” uncovers the unexpected role of Yunnan metals in late-imperial Chinese history, all outside of Yunnan itself. Here, Yang’s regional focus plays out in his revelation that cowries, not metal or paper, were used as currency in Yunnan through the seventeenth century because Yunnan’s dominant economic orientation was determined by the southern Silk Road leading into Southeast Asia. For the same reason, cowry use declined in Yunnan not because of Chinese state policy, but because of European disruption of these old trade systems in the Indian Ocean. At the same time, Yunnan’s silver and copper resources were being exported to China to fuel its monetization in the late imperial period. As the Chinese monetary economy grew, Yunnan was drawn inexorably into the Chinese network. By the end of the Ming, it was possible for Yunnan to be considered a regular province whose contributions were assumed by the central government. This economic reorientation was naturally accompanied, if not driven, by the waves of Han in-migration in the Qing. The effect of this chapter is to substantiate Yang’s central two-pronged argument that Chinese state penetration of this frontier zone went hand in hand with the critical role of this same frontier zone in the formation of China.

In his final chapter, “Classification into the Chinese National Family,” Yang switches his focus from the frontier, or the periphery, to the center. His real focus here is also the way the modern Chinese state has dealt with non-Chinese peoples. He argues that the state’s project to identify minority nationality groups (*minzu shibie*) is really a continuation of the ways that imperial Chinese states treated and incorporated non-Chinese frontier peoples into the state; both imperial and modern states share the same goal, state penetration and control of the frontier zone. This is a very compelling argument, in spite of the fact that Yang never mentions nationalism as an ideology of the modern Chinese state. This chapter presents a very helpful, brief overview of the history of the modern project of identifying ethnic minorities and some of the problems inherent in that project, all of which will be useful for readers. This chapter also reveals Yang’s abiding interest in defining the real Chinese nation, a hot topic right now with the blossoming of nationalist fervor in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It is no surprise that his Yunnan-centered study allows him to conclude that the construction of Yunnan

and its incorporation into the Chinese state expanded the very definition of “Chinese” to include non-Han peoples. However, he does not end there. Indeed, his final word is that the incorporation of this hybrid place and people called “Yunnan” into China has at least reaffirmed, if not made more apparent, a local identity consciousness that has facilitated the development of modern China. Reaffirming the importance of regional or local identity is, thus, the most important contribution of Yunnan to building and maintaining China as a state and the Chinese people as a nation.

As the careful reader will have noted, this book has been published both online and in print. I reviewed the print version and found two specific problems that came with the transition from e-book: none of the maps provided in the e-book were in the print version, and there was no index, since the index in the e-book is provided by a word search mechanism. I can understand the financial reasons for not providing an index to the printed book, but omitting the maps is less excusable. This reader, at least, found the dearth of maps annoying, especially since so much of Yang’s discussion is rooted in the specific geography of Yunnan and the region. The only other criticism that might be leveled at this work is the persistence of a China-centered analysis at a deep level that Yang so assiduously tries to avoid. Yang’s global perspective and willingness to see Yunnan’s history from its own perspective is an admirable and necessary corrective to most scholarship. His rather cursory treatment of the Mongol period, however, belies that global approach. It is as if he does not quite know where to place Yunnan when it was neither autonomous nor a part of China, but rather part of the much larger Mongol empire. As such, Yang’s treatment reads like a traditional Chinese view of the Mongol period as a lacuna in the long history of China.

Apart from these issues, this is an invaluable contribution to world, Chinese, and Yunnan history and studies. As I have pointed out, Yang provides an excellent précis to Fang Guoyu’s exhaustive collation of primary sources related to Yunnan history. He also introduces readers to other important scholarship on Yunnan, some of which is undoubtedly not known by nonspecialists. More important, he challenges the reader to rethink both China and Yunnan, specifically the critical role that frontier regions and non-Han peoples have played and continue to play in the construction and identity of China and the Chinese people, as well as the importance of regions and regional identity to the nation. It is a highly accessible book that should be of some interest to general readers and specialists alike, and it certainly fills a void in Yunnan studies. Yang is to be commended for taking on such a large project with such erudition.

Michael C. Brose

Michael C. Brose is an associate professor of history in the Department of History at the University of Wyoming. He specializes in Mongol Yuan social history and the history of Islam in Yunnan.