Big Country, Subtle Voices:
Three Ethnic Poets from China’s Southwest

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Abstract:

In the southwest corner of China, the confluence of cultural diversity and national integration have produced a new kind of voice in the Chinese language: an ethnic voice. Speaking fluently in the Chinese nation’s language and culturally beyond its Han foundations, minority ethnic writers or shaoshu minzu in China are inciting a challenge to the traditional conceptions of Chineseness. In the PRC, the re-imagining of the boundaries between ethnicity, nation, and the globe is being produced in ethnic voices that resist the monopolizing narratives of the CCP and the Han cultural center. Furthermore, in the West where the antiquated conception of China as a monolithic Other is still often employed, the existence of these ethnic voices of difference demands a (re)cognition of its multifaceted and interwoven ethnic, political, and social composition.

Three ethnic poets from the southwest are examined in this thesis: Woeser (Tibetan), He Xiaozhu (Miao), and Jimu Langge (Yi). They represent the trajectory of ethnic voice in China along the paradigms of local/ethnic vision, national culture, and global connections. By being both within and outside the Chinese nation and culture, they express a hybrid struggle that exists within the collision of ethnic minority cultures and the Han cultural center. Like the hybridity of postcolonial literature, this is a collision that cannot be reduced to its parts, yet also privileges the glocal impetus of ethnically centered vision. The poets’ voices speak the voice of difference within China, the Chinese language, and Chineseness throughout the world.

Keywords: Chinese, Poetry, Ethnic Minority, Hybridity, Ethnopolitics
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Introduction

In the new China of rapid economic development and change, voices have emerged speaking languages of difference. Contrasting especially with the homogenizing rhetoric of the Mao era (most notably the Cultural Revolution), these voices represent a new kind of multiplicity within Chinese society predicated by a fluency in the dominant language and a perspective from the periphery. In-between the vocal registers of global fluency and local vision, these voices speak a Chinese empowered far beyond its traditionally imagined center. The drivers of this change and the subject of this thesis are China’s ethnic minority writers. Positioned within and without the Chinese nation and more importantly the Han language, these writers present a new conception of “Chineseness” and its relation to the world.¹

With the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the relationship between China’s Han majority and ethnic minorities experienced an unprecedented re-imagining. Prompted primarily by the dual agendas of national unification and social development, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP [Zhongguo gongchan dang 中国共产党]) integrated the ethnic minority populations arguably more than ever before into the Chinese nation. This was fundamentally accomplished by inscribing many of the ethnic minorities into the modern nation with the ethno-political term shaoshu minzu 少数民族

¹ It is necessary to demarcate the difference between the Han as an ethnicity and “Chinese” as a national/cultural concept encompassing a much greater sphere of peoples and places. In this thesis, I will use the “Han language” (Hanyu 汉语) to refer specifically to the language that is native to the Han ethnic group and is generally shared as one common written language, yet also includes a great diversity of regional “dialects” and sub-cultures. In contrast, I will use the “Chinese language” (Zhongwen 中文) to signify the language of a great diversity of ethnicities and communities who communicate through the Han language. This is similar to the transnational concept of “English” as a common world language versus its local varities such as “American” or “Australian” English.
(literally “minority nationalities”, but now more often translated as “minority ethnic groups”), the official identity they are known by today. Currently, there are fifty-six official minzu in China including the Han as the majority. The term minzu translates a broad range of concepts in English, having as much to do with nation building in China as it does with its more recent adopted meaning of ethnicity. However, following trends in current scholarship and the focus of this paper, I will use the term minzu specifically to mean the officially recognized ethnic minorities of China.²

Living mostly in the remote regions of China, the minority minzu are situated within a dynamic clash of modern and traditional forces. Although economic development has produced improved living conditions for the minority minzu, this has generally been at the cost of traditional ethnic cultures and languages. Learning the Han language has become the key tool for raising oneself out of the economic isolation of the minority areas.³ Yet at the same time, this has produced a growing fragmentation of traditional ethnic culture as customs and even ethnic languages are increasingly lost between generations. In the large territories of China’s west, widely known minzu such as the Tibetans, Mongolians, and Uyghurs most directly experience this clash as their traditions of religion, art, and especially literature are challenged by first the growing number of Han migrants to their areas and second the modernizing force carried by the Han language. On the other extreme, the ethnic Koreans located mainly in China’s northeast (close to the border with North Korea) are the prime example of a minzu successful in

both integrating into the Chinese nation and preserving its own ethnic culture.\footnote{The Koreans have the highest literacy rate of any minzu in China, including the Han. See Colin Mackerras, \textit{China's Minority Cultures: Identities and Integration since 1912} (Melbourne: Longman Australia, 1995), 184-95.} The culture and literature of minzu like the Koreans and even the Mongolians, however, are greatly supported by the existence of nation-states and national cultures beyond China’s borders. On the other end of the spectrum, the Tibetans and the Uyghurs are paramount examples of ethnic voices embattled between ethnic preservation and national integration within China as they struggle between the extremes of ethnic isolation (localized language) and national assimilation (modern and political force of the Han language).

In contrast to these dynamics of voice between China’s northeastern and western regions, the southwest of China presents a powerful blend of both ethnic preservation and national integration. This area of China has historically been a “melting pot” of ethnic cultures and influences. Propagated by traditional trade routes like the “Tea-horse road” (chama lu 茶马路) that connected Chinese, Tibetan, and Southeast Asian cultures and diverse geographies from high mountain plateaus to southern rainforests, the southwest is a hotbed of diverse cultural interaction. Because of this “multi-cultural” atmosphere, the southwest has become a site where the Han language as the \textit{lingua franca} and Han education has penetrated sufficiently enough to produce fluent minority minzu speakers of the language. It has given these writers the means to speak back to the center and alter the “gaze” traditionally inscribed in Han words. These new minority minzu writers stand between the inherently political designation of “ethnicity” in China and the rich and defiant ethnic cultures of their native identity. By wielding these two aspects of
their voice, they create a new language, literally a “Chinese language” beyond the traditional assumptions of a Han defined China. As both Chinese and ethnic, these writers are vocalizing a new vision of what it means to be within China and the world.

At the forefront of these new voices in Chinese literature is poetry. As having direct ties to both oral literature (sometimes similar to ethnic traditional literature) and the highly nuanced language of art, poetry stands as a tie between these two worlds. Jahan Ramazani in his book *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* assesses

...a rich and vibrant poetry has issued from the hybridization of the English muse with the long-resident muses of Africa, India, the Caribbean, and other decolonizing territories of the British empire. Postcolonial poets have dramatically expanded the contours of English-language poetry by infusing it with indigenous metaphors and rhythms, creoles, and genres.

Coincidental to the dramatic increase of minority writers writing in the Chinese language since the reforms, Chinese poetry in the southwestern region has become a potent alternative voice in Chinese literature to the domination of Beijing and Shanghai “intellectualism”.

In his doctorate dissertation, Michael Day comprehensively outlines this growth of a “second world of Chinese poetry”; an avant-garde poetry outside the official mainstream. In particular, he discusses a group of poets called “Not-Not” (*feifei* 非非) centered in the city of Chengdu 成都, Sichuan 四川 during the mid eighties to early nineties. Day details how the group through experimentation and radical deconstruction of language was able to create vibrant new voices within Chinese poetry.

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Thus, the southwest is a crossroads of both avant-garde poetry and ethnic poetry, creating a doubly significant alternative voice in the Chinese language.

The three poets I have selected for analysis in this thesis embody the combination of these voices. Each is a member of a minority minzu from the southwest and also was either a participant or contributor to the Not-Not group and its poetry journal. Woeser is a Tibetan (Zangzu 藏族) poet from the city of Derge in Kham (in Sichuan’s western autonomous Tibetan area). And although she is firmly tied to her native culture and religion, she uses the Chinese language to portray a new view of the Tibetan land and people. He Xiaozhu, on the other hand, is a Miao (Miaozu 苗族) poet from the city of Chongqing (formerly apart of Sichuan). He has little cultural connection to his ethnic group, yet still writes with an implicit ethnic vision. The last to be discussed is Jimu Langge, a Yi (Yizu 彝族) poet from the Yi Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture of southern Sichuan. Out of the three, his subtle irony and self-reflexivity between ethnicity and the Chinese nation most staunchly reveals a new kind of China. Representing this new generation of minority poets, these three all use the Han language as their native written language, yet their words speak an avant-garde language of ethnic vision.

Because of this hybrid confluence, in this thesis I am focusing on the southwest, particularly Sichuan, as the site of highly dynamic voices of fluency and ethnic vision. The southwest captures both the contested space of voice in China by speaking in the language of the Han yet in the worldviews of local/ethnic cultures. Although this new trajectory of Chineseness is all but ignored in China itself, Western scholarship on China

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7 An additional question beyond the scope of this paper is the ability for minority minzu educated elites to speak for the less educated members of their groups. For a more detailed analysis of this issue see: Ralph A. Litzinger, *Other Chinas: the Yao and the Politics of National Belonging* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
further adds its own shackles to these simplistic conceptions by misinterpreting terms like “Chinese” and “Han” as equivalents in English. In China, these conceptions are also convoluted and overlapping, but they at least contain the space for expansion of these conceptions and identities. To appreciate the complexities of China, it is absolutely necessary that Western scholars differentiate between terms such as Hanification (becoming Han) and sinification (becoming Chinese). Particularly in Chinese literature, Western scholarship has failed to appreciate the complexity and growing abundance of minority voice. Writing in Chinese, rather than just Han words, the three poets I am focusing on in this thesis actually create a Chinese language in the grandest sense of a “national” culture. How is one sinified when one is already Chinese and speaking in a Chinese voice?

However, these poets’ identities can also not be so simply contained within the PRC. The greatest significance of China’s minority poetry is its instancing of a vibrant and discursive “Sinophone” in China and throughout the world. The struggle between the global and the local produces the kind of hybrid identified by Ramazani in postcolonial poetry as not the peaceful harmonizing of equal parties but the intense struggle of maintaining a centered “locality” in the face of colonizing forces. These voices are a glocal component along the Sinophone trajectory both reifying the Chinese language as a modern and global language as well as manifesting the local worldviews of ethnic cultures in China. As Djelal Kadir describes in his article on the “worlding” of literature,

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8 Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, 36.
In the case of literature, the compelling question becomes, who is worlding literature and why? And in the instance of globalization the inevitable issue is the locus where the fixed foot of the compass that describes the globalization circumscription is placed. Where the foot of the compass rests is inexorably the center.  

Contemporary Chinese ethnic poetry has its feet in the ethnic center but it speaks a language of outward projection; an interwoven conglomeration of local/global and tradition/modern impetuses, the dynamic hybrid struggle.

Finally, I think it is necessary to acknowledge my own participation is this glocally translative process. In this thesis, I am presenting for the first time in English translation the poetry and prose of these three ethnic poets. Although the Anglophone world and its similarly modern trajectory may in comparison mute the strength of a Sinophone, I also argue that it is this very leap from one globally discursive language to another that highlights the Sinophone’s potential. Because Chinese carries increasing currency in the world, ethnic poets such as these can reach far beyond their isolation and inscribe an ethnically centered worldview onto the world stage. Without a Sinophone vibrantly shaped by participants like these poets, the voices of China’s diversity would be left unheard. Though an outside observer and non-native to either Han or minority minzu cultures of China, I have attempted to capture in translation the glocal impetus of the original poems that provide a sense of both the Han language and ethnic vision.

The thesis is divided into five sections. The first two sections will discuss the foundations of ethnic poetry in China by addressing the ethno-political nature of minzu in China and the conception of “minority literature” within/out of the cultural center.

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Sections on each of the three poets, Woeser, He Xiaozhu, and Jimu Langge will follow, including appendixes of translations at the end of the thesis.