

***The Art of Ethnography: A Chinese “Miao Album.”* David M. Deal and Laura Hostetler, trans. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006. 177 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Jiang Lu

The *Art of Ethnography: A Chinese “Miao Album”* is a fully-illustrated translation of a “Miao album.” Miao albums originated in the 18th century to depict the minority ethnic groups living in frontier regions of imperial China during the Qing dynasty. “Miao,” in this specific context, refers not only to the groups of people who were classified as Miao, or Hmong, by the majority Han culture, but also to the many minority peoples along the southwest frontiers of China. The original and important purpose of producing the Miao albums was to provide new officials with information about the populations to be governed. The genre employs prose, poetry, and detailed illustrations. This genre combines hand-painted, color illustrations of ethnic minority groups paired with hand-written annotations in classical Chinese.

In this book, 82 beautiful illustrations are selected from the original albums. The Chinese calligraphic texts annotating the illustrations are translated into English. Each plate illustrates a different ethnic group residing in Guizhou province, and documents its ritual performances, especially those of weddings and funerals. Details of daily life, such as diet, garments, and annual festivals, are also emphasized in these documents. Therefore, this book is a unique and valuable source for the fields of history, anthropology and folklore. In addition to its lovely artistic illustrations and descriptive annotations in both languages, the profound analysis of the albums in the introduction by Laura Hostetler gives the book its scholarly significance.

Using the album as evidence, Hostetler points out that ethnographic representation was practiced by expanding powers in many parts of the world, not only by European or “Western” states. In her analysis, the Miao album is compared with the *Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples* (Huang Qing Zhigong tu) commissioned by Emperor Qianlong in 1751. This work aimed to describe peoples from around the world and in frontier areas of China proper. In the comparison, Hostetler sees striking similarity between the two, although the Miao albums were more rustic and informal. Since the Miao albums were compiled during the late Yongzheng (ca. 1723-1735) or the early Qianlong (ca. 1736-1796) period, Hostetler suggests that the genre of *Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples* was based on that of the Miao albums. While tracing the genesis of the genre, Hostetler examines the sociopolitical context in which the albums were first made. The Miao album directly served the purpose of the Qing Empire’s expansion, implemented by the aggressive frontier policies of Emperor Yongzheng, by providing useful ethnographic information to the imperial officials. Based on this observation, Hostetler argues that ethnographic interest in other peoples was not simply a “Western” phenomenon, but was rather part of a much more widespread process of state building in that period (p. xxiii). Hostetler hopes that greater awareness of non-Western representations of their “Others” will serve to balance current Euro-centric views of the early modern history of the world.

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To further support her argument, Hostetler uses a comparative approach to examine similar ethnographic documents from Tokugawa Japan (1603-1876) and the Ottoman Empire (ca. 1300-1920). The comparisons demonstrate that a variety of different expanding states and empires actually collected and recorded information about people with whom they were coming into contact. In the period roughly between 1500 and 1800, these states countenanced exploration, direct colonization, or diplomacy. These two examples of ethnographic representation place the Miao albums in a comparative historical perspective.

Hostetler also points out that the Miao album was a phenomenon long before the introduction of the Western-based forms of nationalism into China, and that it represents its special Chinese characteristics. Instead of using a simple dichotomy of the barbarian versus the civilized, the Miao albums focus more on the distancing of the observed group from the Confucian cultural center through description of specific local cultural practices.

A weakness of this book is in the English translation of the texts. Careful comparison of the original Chinese text and the English translation shows that the translation is not very accurate in some places where the translation does not reveal the true meaning of expressions that hides behind literal meanings of words. For example, in plate 13, the text *Nu Huai Chun* (女怀春) is translated as 'Young girls cherish springtime' (p. 27). The actual meaning is 'Young girls are longing for love.'

Another issue resides in the analysis of the Miao album when Hostetler discusses and explains the use of the word *Han* as Chinese. The explanations become even less satisfactory when we recognize that the rulers of the Qing dynasty, who produced or commissioned the albums, were non-Han people. In this sense, the problem is more than the Chinese versus the non-Chinese ethnic groups. A careful examination of the ethnicity of the Qing rulers may lead to some interesting discoveries in our future studies of the Miao albums.

Although there are several elaborately edited Miao albums (*Miaman tu* or *Baimiao tu*) published in the Chinese language in China, this is the first Miao album with an English translation of the texts, and a comprehensive and profound analysis. It thus, despite some limitations of translation, provides a useful resource, especially for non-specialists interested in these compelling documents of early Chinese ethnography.

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