

**Socio-Political Processes of Southwestern China in the XIV-
XV Centuries Using Sources From the Ming Empire**

A Research Proposal Presented to
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by

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Abstract

With the rise of Mid and Late Imperial China's local histories research, scholars have addressed a number of problems concerning the Ming Empire's policies in its south-western borderlands. However, most of the research employs a colonisation model which proposes the ultimate transformation of indigenous populations into the subjects of the Ming Emperor. This paper aims to identify a number of factors (including the silver supply and chieftaincy systems) which determined Yunnan province's socio-political development in the XIV-XV centuries using an alternative historical anthropological approach developed by the Historical Anthropology School of the Chinese Society. With this purpose in mind, historical research design involving content analysis and comparative historical analysis will be employed. By translating and comparing two main sources (a chapter in the "History of Ming" and "Baiyi Zhuan"), this paper will attempt to explore Yunnan's fiscal system and the policy of local chiefdoms and their impact on the development of the region during the period under study.

Keywords: Yunnan, Baiyi Zhuan, chieftaincy system, Ming history

Introduction

A recent upsurge in the number of studies focusing on the history of minorities has affected both Western and Asian academic communities. As noted by one of the most influential modern Russian historians D. V. Deopik (Bashkeev et al., 2012), the translation and research of the entire array of Chinese sources on the history of Southeast Asia should be one of the most important areas of historical research. Yunnan as a border territory and a home for the substantial non-Han population is of a particular interest for sinologists. Nowadays the province comprises more than 26 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, accounting for more than one-third of Yunnan's population. Back in the XIV-XV centuries, Yunnan was one of the economic centers in the Southeast Asia due to its strategically advantageous geographical position, connection to trade routes, and rich natural resources (e.g., gold, silver, rock salt, aluminum, lead, zinc, tin). As a result, after the fall of Yuan Empire (1279–1368) the newly established Ming state (1368-1644) allocated vast resources to conquer Yunnan.

Most researchers concentrate on repressive policies of Chinese officials against Yunnan minorities (Baldanza, 2013; Fernquest, 2006; Swope, 2016). They interpret the expansion of the Chinese state and its institutions as well as the spread of Chinese culture and religions to the borderlands as civilization projects aimed at ultimately transforming indigenous populations into subjects of the Ming Emperor. While there are good reasons to accept this approach as in some cases the expansion of Chinese authority in this region was accompanied by numerous military campaigns (e.g., Pingmian-Luchuan Campaigns), this colonization model has some flaws. In particular, it overlooks the diversity of responses from the local society to the extension of Ming administration, which resulted in different degrees of subordination and autonomy in Yunnan.

Thus, instead of adopting the traditional framework of center–local dichotomy employed by Harrell (1995), Perdue (2005) and von Glahn (2010), this research will attempt to expand the alternative historical anthropological approach developed by the Historical Anthropology of Chinese Society on economic backgrounds behind the Yunnan chieftains' policy in XIV–XV centuries.

Literature Review

This research relates to the research area that focuses on the socio-political development in the XIV–XV centuries of Yunnan—one of the Ming Empire border provinces. It specifically examines the Yunnan silver supply system and the Ming throne's relations with local chieftains.

A number of works that highlight the links between the economy and socio-political processes in the region have found that in the studied period the monetary policy in the region was primarily determined by the Pingmian–Luchuan Military Campaign (Grass, 2015, 2017; von Glahn, 2010; Waag, 2021; Yang, 2004). The focus of these studies, however, is on the functioning of the general monetary system and the place of Yunnan in it, while the aspects of foreign trade and the salt-barter system still remain uncovered.

A study by von Glahn (2010) investigates the genesis of silver usage in China's monetary system between the XII and XIV centuries. The author concludes that paper money mediated the transition to silver as the basis for the money issuing in China. Although von Glahn provides a detailed framework explaining money flows within the state, the author overlooks the role of silver in foreign trade which took place in border areas such as Yunnan.

In contrast, studies by Yang (2004) and Wang (2021) emphasize the role of Yunnan as a key source of silver and gold used for both domestic and foreign trade. As Yang's findings suggest, as Yunnan contributed to the Southwest Silk Road by providing horses and silver, the

county was strategically important for the Ming Empire and more than once became a territory for military disputes with border states. The main contribution of the paper by Wang is linking the constant presence of military forces in Yunnan with the silver flows and developing the framework of the single-whip method of garrison taxation. At the same time, this paper neglects the important role of the salt-barter system in the Yunnan local economy, which was highlighted by Daniels and Ma (2020), as well as Li and Wang (2022).

Finally, an article by Grass (2017) investigates the gold floral silver as a policy for maintaining military garrisons in Yunnan and a means of payment for military salaries. The author argues that its appearance reflects a deep transformation in the fiscal policy of the Ming Empire and identifies the practice of commutation in tax collection. The author (2015) also describes the role of tax communication in state finance. In addition to valuable remarks on the fiscal system structure, Grass also introduces sources previously unknown to European researchers. However, this study has some limitations, as it concentrates only on the territories that were officially part of Yunnan thus excluding the vassal lands, which were also de facto part of the Ming Empire.

Another stream of research primarily focuses on different aspects of relations between the Ming court and local borderline chieftains (Lian, 2019; Nimick, 2008; Took, 2005). This research nonetheless is concentrated on the chieftain's system as a whole and does not delve into the local features existing in different provinces. Thus, despite scant research, the problem of specific features of the chieftain's system in Yunnan Province has not been addressed yet, therefore it is not obvious to what extent the local authorities were independent, given the economic potential of the region.

As the basis of the chieftains system (also known as *tusi* system) was enshrined in law, its general form was almost the same throughout the Empire. For this reason, it is crucial to highlight the fundamental research by Took (2005). The paper concentrates on the Anping *tusi* in Daxin County, a particular Tai *tusi* in a remote area of Guangxi southwest, and provides a framework explaining the changes brought to the indigenous elite by accepting the chieftains system. Although the work has made a remarkable contribution to the studies concerning Chinese political expansion into the southwest, it still leaves the question of the internal political dynamics in abeyance.

However, there were a few attempts to investigate the division of responsibilities between local elites and government officials (Lian, 2019; Nimick, 2008). For instance, Nimick (2008) highlights the introduction and abolition of the Ming policy allowing members of the local elite to collect taxes. On the other hand, Lian (2019) explores the ideological background of such policies and identifies the cultural strategies used by native authorities to protect their reputations and community interests.

The purpose of this paper is to extend the existing research by formulating a conceptual framework for describing the impact of silver flows in Yunnan and its borderlands in the XIV–XV centuries as well as the chieftain system on the socio-political structure of Yunnan's local communities. The current study is aimed to address this issue, and it is guided by the following research questions:

1. What was the degree of autonomy for each of the Yunnan's chieftaincies?
2. What was the fiscal policy of local authorities like and how was it carried out?

Methods

The “Baiyi Zhuan” and the “History of Ming” were chosen as the main primary sources for this study. The History of Ming, one of the official Chinese historical works known as the “Twenty-Four Histories”, was selected as it is a valuable yet understudied source. The major reason why it has remained so infrequently used in academic research is its huge size. Due to time constraints, this study will focus on Chapter #202, which highlights various Yunnan chieftaincies. The “Baiyi Zhuan” (or “Account of One Hundred Barbarians”) was written by two envoys, Qian Guxun and Li Sicong, in late XIV century, when they were sent to resolve the conflict between Dai polities. The rationale behind choosing the “Baiyi Zhuan” is that it is synchronous with the studied time and expresses an individual rather than the official position on the matter. Both sources will be obtained via Chinese Text Project, a digital library with the most comprehensive and accurate collections of classical Chinese texts on the Internet.

Content analysis will be used to explore the narrative of the local chieftaincy system in the chapter of the “History of Ming”. It will determine the presence of such themes as chieftains’ local policies, silver trade and diplomatic relations in order to reveal the official Ming court position on the Yunnan chieftain system. For this reason, the methodology developed by D.V. Deopik (1977) for structural and quantitative analysis of Chinese traditional sources will be used. Its core elements include establishing the smallest element of information, data processing and combined analysis.

Comparative historical analysis will be used to explore the similarities and differences in the narratives concerning Yunnan’s local communities and silver trade. By comparing the views presented in the “Baiyi Zhuan” and the “History of Ming”, a reliable historical analysis will be

developed emphasising the relationship between Yunnan's silver flows and the policies of local chieftaincies.

The scope of the study is limited to the socio-political processes in policies located in the Yunnan area in the XIV–XV centuries. Furthermore, due to the time constraints, this research employs only two primary sources. Thus, the results of the study will be relevant only for the Ming court policies.

Expected Outcomes

The perceived outcomes of this study are as follows. First, this paper could make an important contribution to the literature on socio-political development of China south-western border territories in the XIV–XV centuries, as it explores the relationship between the fiscal system and the policy of local chiefdoms and its impact on the development of the region during the studied period. In fact, this research is one of a few studies both in Russia and abroad that combines the interdisciplinary approach and historical anthropology framework to address the issue of Yunnan's development in the Ming period. Second, the research findings might have important implications for further study in the corresponding field. There is a good possibility that the translation of a chapter in the “History of Ming” presented as a part of the paper may be of use to the researchers specialising in the history of Southwest Asia and Ming China as it is the first translation of the source into Russian or any European language ever made.

The results of this research will be presented to the committee of experts in the field of Chinese Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics during the oral thesis defense in June 2023. The whole text of the study will also be uploaded to the website of the Higher School of Economics along with other students' theses. Thus, students and scholars interested in the topic will be able to access it. Furthermore, the results of the study may be

published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal (e.g., “Ming Studies”, “Journal of Burma Studies” or “China: Society and Culture”) in the form of an article.

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