

“Like tenderloin in a cow”



At an international conference at a Chinese university in 2011, I sat next to a sixtyish year-old man who could not understand English, but was eager to follow foreign speakers' presentations. He asked me to translate. Looking more like a businessman or retired official than an academic, this man, Shi Anda,² turned out to be a so-called “grassroots scholar” (*minjian xuezhe*); a term applied to the growing number of individuals in China trying to assert themselves as researchers outside the university and academic institutional system.

Nyíri Pál

SIGNALLING THE GROWING FREEDOM of Chinese academic exchanges and/or Mr Shi's favourable credentials or connections, his paper proposal had been accepted by the organisers. Yet they were clearly concerned that he might say something out of line. Before it was Mr Shi's turn to speak, he asked me to translate his talk into English. One of the organisers – hoping that I would understand what particular sensitivities she had in mind – then took me aside and asked me to tune down any sharp comments that he might make.

As it turned out, Mr Shi was indeed both a businessman and a former official, as well as an amateur photographer and cultural activist. He was accompanied by the conference representatives of a China-based Kachin group called Jinghpaw-Land Cultural Exchange Committee (www.jinghpawland.org; accessed September 2011). They did not give a presentation, but distributed to participants a printed text that charged China, which had recently agreed with the Burmese junta to build several large dams in Kachin State, for ignoring the interests of the people. Mr Shi's richly illustrated presentation focused on his past travels in Kachin State and – no doubt to the organisers' relief – it eschewed politics. But he had brought along some of his own unpublished articles, which praise earlier Chinese help for the Kachin and other borderland insurgencies and criticize China's recent marginalisation of these groups (e.g. Shi 1998).

Other articles (e.g. Shi 2006) told the story of Mr Shi's family, a lineage of Chinese-appointed Lahu chiefs (*tusi*) in Lancang County on Yunnan Province's border with Burma. According to these, his father, the last *tusi*, who had been educated in Japan and acceded to the title in 1937, liaised with British

officers stationed in Yunnan on behalf of China's Kuomintang government. After the Kuomintang's defeat, he went to Taiwan, while both of his younger brothers served with the Kuomintang forces that remained in northern Thailand after their retreat from mainland China (see e.g. Chang 2001). Unlike family members of other Kuomintang officers, however, those of the *tusi* who remained on the mainland received privileged treatment as “key subjects of united front work” – until the Cultural Revolution, when they became the target of a struggle campaign directed by the provincial Revolutionary Committee.

In Lancang County, some 2300 households were raided in 1969 by a work team dispatched to root out class enemies and counterrevolutionaries (cf. Schoenhals 2004: 38-39). Mr Wang and his sister, however, had been resettled in Kunming and gone to university. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Mr Wang joined the Red Guards and travelled to Peking to see Chairman Mao. In his absence he was accused of crossing the border to defect to the enemy, and his Red Guard group declared a reactionary organisation. Later, he was rehabilitated and transferred to a remote area of northern Yunnan. Mr Shi went on to work at the provincial library and the cultural bureau while producing numerous writings on Burma and the Lahu. In the 1990s, he became an advocate of local Chinese governments' cooperation with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) splinter groups and their Kachin allies across the border to eradicate opium production and facilitate Chinese investment in their areas. In 1998, he produced a report for the provincial government praising these efforts, which were seen with ambivalence by the provincial and especially the central government.³ After retiring, Mr Shi remained active in advocating contacts with these special regions even as the

central government shifted away from them. He also founded a number of associations promoting various aspects of “minority culture” and took up the fight to have his father rehabilitated as a patriot who had fought against the Japanese.

“Bad class backgrounds” and overseas connections

Compared to the Korean War, the assistance to the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, or the 1979 war with Vietnam, China's armed intervention on the side of the Burmese People's Army (BPA) between 1968 and 1975 is a relatively marginal, though protracted, instance of the Chinese Communists' military engagements abroad. It is, however, distinctive in that it took place during the decade of the Cultural Revolution and subsequent mass repression, which is generally seen as the most self-isolating period of China's modern history, but which also witnessed large-scale Chinese development projects in Africa (see Snow 1988, Monson 2009). The engagement in Burma was unique during this period, in that it allowed individuals who had not been officially vetted, to leave the Chinese mainland in a way that was officially sanctioned or at least tolerated. The motivations of those volunteers who chose this path showed a complex mix of resentment against and support for the regime and its ideology.

According to a former fighter's possibly inflated estimate, a total of some 30 thousand volunteers from China joined the BPA between 1968 and 1978 (Wang 2011:9). At first, in addition to military advisors from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), Chinese volunteers for the BPA were recruited at special stations in cities like Kunming and Nanning, in the two Chinese provinces nearest to Burma. In 1972, when there was a thaw in China's relations with the Burmese government, official

Above:
Former *zhiqing* BPA volunteers including Wang Xi (author of two volumes of memoirs), Shi Lei (a.k.a. Shi Anding, Shi Anda's younger brother), and Luo Changbao (deputy commander-in-chief of the National Democratic Alliance Army, Special Region 4, Eastern Shan State, Burma) discuss photographs from the 1970s. Courtesy of Shi Anda.

Memoirs of former Communist Party of Burma insurgents in today's China¹

recruitment stopped; but Chinese border guards continued to let young people volunteering for the BPA across the border. The beginning of recruitment coincided with the Chinese government's decision to remove former Red Guards from the cities to be "re-educated" in mostly remote villages as a way to curb the chaos and spontaneous violence of the Cultural Revolution, which, along with the ensuing state violence, was particularly severe in Yunnan (Falkenheim 1969, Solinger 1982, Schoenhals 2004). There were reportedly 800 thousand sent-down urban youths in the province, at least 300 thousand of whom came from outside it (Solinger 1982:643). These "educated youths" (*zhiqing* 知青), to use the term by which these rusticated young urbanites are known in China, accounted for the majority of BPA recruits. They were joined by some young people from the borderland minority groups and by older Han Chinese who had settled in the border region under the *zhibian* (支边, "helping socialist construction in the borderlands") campaign in the 1950s and 1960s.

As memoirs of former volunteers reveal, some of them were driven by the ideals of heroism and international solidarity they had been taught; a remarkably large number among these, however, came from "bad" class backgrounds – their parents labelled as rich peasants, landlords or other class enemies – and were frustrated by being denied admission to the "loyalist" Red Guard units or of being deemed unworthy of revolutionary action. Others wanted to escape the hardships of their forcible rustication (cf. Yang 2009) and/or persecution, which intensified in the post-1968 army crackdown; yet others were fleeing poverty. Although there were also those who simply used the escape to Burma as a springboard to the "free world", such people were, according to the memoirs, generally despised (e.g. Wang 2011:416).

The large number of *zhiqing* with "bad" class backgrounds, as well as of fighters from borderland ethnic minorities, who were being subjected by the Yunnan provincial government to a targeted class-struggle campaign in 1969-70 (Schoenhals 2004:40-44), among the volunteers of a communist guerrilla army beholden to the very powers at whose behest they were being hounded, is at first sight surprising. The CPB faithfully followed the rhetoric and, within its own ranks, the practice of China's political campaigns. Indeed, its work was overseen by Kang Sheng, the CCP's intelligence chief and a central figure both at the outset of the Cultural Revolution and in its ensuing suppression, as well as the architect of Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge (Schoenhals 1996). Yet, as a *zhiqing* from Kunming – whose father had been arrested for his alleged Kuomintang connections – remembers, BPA officers were not interested in the volunteers' class labels: "As long as you fought they didn't bother you." The possibility of getting away from the daily "struggle sessions" and achieve revolutionary "redemption", or at least less harsh treatment, and the alternative possibility of flight, provides a plausible explanation for the preponderance of volunteers who, at first sight, had little reason to sacrifice themselves for the cause of world revolution.

The same logic may help explain another striking feature of volunteer demographics: the presence of many youths who had returned to China from abroad, mostly Indonesia, as children in the 1960s, and were, before the Cultural Revolution, afforded certain privileges – for example, according to *zhiqing* recollections, girls were allowed to wear make-up and miniskirts! – but who became the target of violent struggle in 1966-68 in Kunming (Wang 2010:15-16). Company 2 of Battalion 3033 of the BPA consisted mostly of such returned overseas Chinese *zhiqing*, with fighters born in Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Malaysia who largely came from special overseas Chinese secondary schools (*huaqiao buxiao*, 华侨补校). For example, two sisters born in central Burma had been sent back to China by their parents in 1964 to study, when the Burmese junta closed down Chinese schools (Wang 2010:23). Perhaps incidentally, the presence of these youths in the BPA accorded with Kang Sheng's plan to make the CPB's base areas into a springboard of revolution in the rest of Southeast Asia.

Guerrillas into dissidents

The histories of Chinese BPA volunteers have yet to receive scholarly attention both in China, where the topic is more or less off-limits to researchers, and outside it. (The same applies to China's better-known interventions in Korea, Vietnam, and Cambodia.) The last few years have witnessed a remarkable number of publications by ex-volunteers, published either online or in Hong Kong with the financial support of former comrades-in-arms. According to these recollections, volunteers from China were far better educated than local "tribal" soldiers and often given the hardest tasks. As one veteran puts it, they were "the best part of the BPA, like tenderloin in a cow" (Wang 2011:422). They had a very high casualty rate, but those who survived often made it up the ranks and, after the BPA collapsed in 1989, came to occupy leading positions

in the administrations of the special regions that succeeded it (Nyiri, forthcoming). Most of the surviving volunteers returned to China either in 1975, when they were officially recalled, or in the early 1980s, when Maoist persecutions ended and China's economy began to develop. Many of these returnees made use of their earlier contacts by becoming traders or business brokers engaging in the lucrative cross-border jade, timber, and presumably drug trade; but those without business acumen often had difficulties adjusting to life in reform-era China and became embittered by the lack of social, political and financial recognition of the services they had rendered to the Chinese Communist Party's former ally.

A forthcoming collection of essays (Toyota, Xiang, and Yeoh) examines the return of the emigrant in the framework of nation-state ideology, showing how return is important as an element of nationalistic discourse, but that there are also many instances in which society and politics have no place for the actual returned migrant. Unwanted returnees, like war veterans, may then become loose cannons, uncontrollable sources of various grievances, some apparently supporting a democratic political transition.

Another participant Mr Shi brought to the conference was a silent, frail-looking Han Chinese man I will call Mr Zhang. During the Cultural Revolution, Mr Zhang's father was imprisoned, so Mr Zhang, a Red Guard, and his sister were sent to the countryside near the Burmese border, from where they crossed into CPB territory. Mr Zhang says he did so "to survive. Surviving can be difficult in two ways: physically and spiritually," he added. Even so, he ended up fighting for the BPA. "There was no choice. Outside CPB territory we would have just been illegal immigrants," while inside it, "there was no point trying to be an ordinary dweller," as that would have meant the same poverty as in China, but without any social support network. In 1981, Mr Zhang followed his sister back to China. He believed Deng Xiaoping's promises, but later grew increasingly disappointed, "particularly that China did not go down the democratic path."

The experience of *zhiqing* returnees from Burma parallels that of veterans of other wars that are now preferred to be forgotten, although the politics of forgetting are rarely as hegemonic as they are in China. China's export of revolution has not been a permitted subject of public discussion since the end of the Mao era. Unlike veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars, who were regular soldiers engaged in international warfare, CPB volunteers have never been recognised in any official account of history.

A sense of having being betrayed by the party whose call for revolution they answered is one that Burma veterans share with other former Red Guards. While literary recollections of the Cultural Revolution in the 1980s focused on its violence and physical hardship, a refiguring of memory took place in the following decade. A spate of books emerged in which former *zhiqing* conjured up, as Guobin Yang (2003:267) puts it, "a past viewed as containing beauty, meaning, and purpose" and contrasted it with "a present increasingly dominated by economic inequality and instrumental rationality." A group of Yunnan ex-*zhiqing* are making efforts to set up a *zhiqing* museum. Yang sees *zhiqing* nostalgia as a platform for civil society organising. Although the current political positions of former *zhiqing* presumably vary, some former *zhiqing*-turned-dissidents, who then participated in the 1979 and 1989 democracy movements, have been increasingly vocal in calling for the recognition of genuinely democratic elements in the first years of the Cultural Revolution (see Liu 1996).

In an interesting rhetorical move, some ex-volunteers now describe their contribution not only in terms of "supporting world revolution," an ideal most portray as misguided if well-intentioned, but in terms of bringing modernity to backward tribal populations. As Zhang Jianzhang writes, "they led the Wa soldiers, who had come out of a primitive tribal society, to become a civilized army" (Wang 2011:8). Such a recasting of the *zhiqing*'s role is in line with the current, state-endorsed rhetoric of Chinese migrants' and investors' engagements in Burma and Laos (Nyiri, forthcoming), which includes the "opium-substitution" schemes Mr Shi continues to advocate. Thus recast, BPA volunteers appear as the forerunners of these Chinese initiatives to "open up" mainland Southeast Asia.

Setting a research agenda

The BPA's *zhiqing* volunteers are not only forgotten by Chinese society, they are also ignored by historians. Soldiers fighting on foreign soil are rarely among the favourite subjects of research. Communist guerrillas in the Cold War, from the Congo to Afghanistan to Malaya, are generally seen as pawns of a greater power game rather than taken seriously either as individuals or as the executors of a historical experiment in their own right. (As a consequence, the Communist experiment with the social transformation in Afghanistan, for example, is completely

ignored, as if post-Taliban Afghanistan had only a "tribal" heritage to build on.) Chinese volunteers in the BPA are seen as doubly "inauthentic": as Communist fighters and as foreigners. Yet their experiences, and their later attempts to transform themselves into brokers of licit and illicit international trade and into pioneers of modernization, attest to a neglected history of human connections between China and its neighbours, even as they tell the story of a changing society in China itself.

Research into the history of CPB volunteers carries a double urgency. First, the former volunteers are now in their sixties. Second, while accessing the special regions of Burma, where much of CPB documentation is still located, is not straightforward, chances are that these documents will not survive the regions' reincorporation into the Burmese state, a scenario now largely accepted as inevitable.

Nyiri Pál is Professor of Global History from an Anthropological Perspective at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. His main research interest is international migration from China.

His blog on China's development export can be found at <http://MqVU.wordpress.com>. (p.d.nyiri@vu.nl)

References

- Chang, Wen-Chin. 2001. "From War Refugees to Immigrants: The Case of the KMT Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand," *International Migration Review* 35(4):1086-1105.
- Falkenheim, Victor C. 1969. "The Cultural Revolution in Kwangsi, Yunnan and Fukien," *Asian Survey* 9(8):580-597.
- Guo, Xiaolin. 2007. *Towards Resolution: China in the Myanmar Issue*. Washington, D.C., and Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program.
- International Crisis Group. 2009. *China's Myanmar Dilemma*. Asia Report No. 177. <http://www.crisisgroup.org> (accessed 25 December 2010).
- International Crisis Group. 2010. *China's Myanmar Strategy*. Asia Briefing No. 112. <http://www.crisisgroup.org> (accessed 25 December 2010).
- Liu Guokai 刘国凯. 1996. *Fengshabuliao de lishi* (History cannot be suppressed). Hong Kong: Mirror Books.
- Monson, Jamie. 2009. *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nyiri Pál (forthcoming) "Enclaves of improvement: Sovereignty and developmentalism in the special zones of the China-Lao borderlands," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.
- Schoenhals, Michael. 1996. "The Central Case Examination Group, 1966-1979," *The China Quarterly* 145:91-103.
- Schoenhals, Michael. 2004. "Cultural Revolution on the Border: Yunnan's 'Political Frontier Defence' (1969-1971)," *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 19:27-54.
- Shi Anda 石安达. 1998. „Menghai moshi de yiyi he qishi" (The significance of the Menghai model). Report on the "green drug ban" project initiated by Menghai County, Yunnan, China, and the Number 4 Special Region, Eastern Shan State, Burma. Unpublished, in author's possession.
- Shi Anda 石安达. 2006. "Youguan Lancang Lahu zu ji qi Shi tusi wenti de qingkuang fanying" (A response to the situation around the question of the Lahu of Lancang and their Shi tusi). Unpublished, in author's possession.
- Snow, Philip. 1988. *The Star Raft: China's Encounter with Africa*. New York: Grove.
- Toyota, Mika, Xiang Biao, and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (forthcoming) *Return*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Solinger, Dorothy. 1982. "Politics in Yunnan Province in the Decade of Disorder: Elite Factional Strategies and Central-Local Relations, 1967-1980," *The China Quarterly* 92:628-662.
- Wang Xi 王曦. 2010. *Hong fei'e: Saerwenjiang juechang* (Red moth: Last stand on the Salween). Hong Kong: Tianma.
- Wang Xi 王曦. 2011. *Hong fei'e: Zhonglin lianyu* (Red moth: Imprisoned in the jungle). Hong Kong: Tianma.
- Yang, Bin. 2009. "'We Want to Go Home!' The Great Petition of the Zhiqing, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, 1978-1979," *The China Quarterly* 198:401-421.
- Yang, Guobin. 2003. "China's Zhiqing Generation. Nostalgia, Identity, and Cultural Resistance in the 1990s," *Modern China* 29(3):267-296.

Notes

- 1 Some of the ethnic Burman former leadership of the Communist Party of Burma also live in China, under a de facto asylum arrangement implemented in the 1980s. This article does not deal with them.
- 2 Mr Shi has asked me to use his real name.
- 3 On the recent changes in China's policies towards Burmese insurgent groups, see Guo (2007), International Crisis Group (2009, 2010). These analyses see the "opium-substitution" subsidies from China – as well as from the United Nations – as a form of investment and trade promotion that did contribute to the economy of the special regions, but not to the eradication of drugs.