



Ethnic minority language and Sinophone minority literature in China

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ABSTRACT

Minority authors in China are generally conceived of as having two choices: they can make an attempt at becoming “major”, by repeating the major literature’s ideological praxis (successful examples may be minority authors who become literary “masters” such as Tibetan author Alai 阿来 and Miao-Tujia author Shen Congwen 沈从文); or conversely they can attempt to become (more) “minor”, reproducing regionalist and minority representations. This is perhaps best encapsulated by the turn of phrase used by Abram de Swaan: “there is a choice for authors between being a small fish in a big pond or a big fish in a small pond”. What I attempt to show in this article is the possibility of a third way, a refusal to play by the rules of the game, so to speak, by changing the fundamental framework of the literary territory itself. In the writing of Naxi author Sha Li 沙蠡 we see usage of ethnic language as a form of resistance not against the Sinicizing centre, but against the very notion of being peripheral (to refuse to recognize the existence of two separate “ponds”). Sha Li does this by deterritorializing Chinese in a way that moves the language away from its traditional centre. Sinophone minority literature thus becomes a way of reorienting the centre, a place where the centre *is* the periphery, and it is in these spaces that the reader can find an “authentic” China.

KEYWORDS: minority literature, Chinese minorities, Sinophone writing, Shen Congwen, Alai

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Introduction: between major and minor

Linguistic domination is not entirely a one-way process: the multilingual mingling that occurs at the borders of a nation cannot be confined to those far-off horizons, and minority languages can find ways back to the linguistic centre, affecting change from within. Research on minority literature within China (and indeed, of minority literature that has moved out of the geographical limits of “China” and engaged with the wider world)¹ has thus far not examined the issue of language mixing in much detail. This essay traces the fate of minority language within Sinophone minority literature, adopting the philosophical terminology used by Deleuze and Guattari to suggest that a minority writer wields the power to “deterritorialize” language: either by decentering the dominant language in favour of their native one, or vice versa. Each deterritorialization or language shift (Lara Maconi has used the linguistics term “code-switching” in the Chinese/Tibetan context)² helps to engender a literary re-territorialization, a re-creation of a literary space. The purposeful insertion of minority language into otherwise Chinese writing is one way for authors to re-centre an established literary “territory”: in the case of this discussion, the Sinicized genre of “minority literature” (*minzu wenxue* 民族文学).

China is a diverse country home to many ethnic peoples, but there is one dominant language: “standard” Chinese (Mandarin Chinese, itself originally the Beijing *fangyan* 方言, or topolect, which was chosen to represent the national language in the early twentieth century).³ This being the case, China’s minority literature has long been compartmentalized as almost a separate literary world unto itself, with its own publishing houses (the so-called *minzu chubanshe* 民族出版社 [Nationalities presses]),⁴ writer’s associations (such as the China Ethnic Literature Society), and literary awards (the *Junma* 骏马 award). This separation may have contributed to a widespread bias against ethnic literature in China: literature from the border provinces, culturally “backwards” and historically seen as being populated by “barbarians”, is minoritized and subjugated by the persistent myth of the “eternal civilizing political centre” as embodied by the Chinese state and, by extension, the Han majority.⁵

Alai, a poet and novelist of *rgyal rong* Tibetan descent, has written of the jaundiced view of minority literature in Chinese literary circles:

¹ See Mark Bender’s work on Nuosu poetry, particularly in collaboration with Yi poet Aku Wuwu, for example Aku Wuwu, Mark Bender, eds., *Tiger Traces: Selected Nuosu and Chinese Poetry of Aku Wuwu*, (Columbus: Foreign Languages Publications, 2006). Bender, Mark, “Ethnic Minority Literature”, in *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. by Zhang Yingjin, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), is a good overall English language introduction to China’s ethnic minority literature.

² Maconi, Lara, “One Nation, Two Discourses: Tibetan New Era Literature and the Language Debate”, in *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, ed. by Luran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 195.

³ Officially, China has 56 ethnic groups (of which the Han majority accounts for over 90% of the population), but there are many more peoples who self-identify as distinct ethnic groups. In the first census of the People’s Republic of China, carried out between 1953 and 1954, over four hundred different ethnic identities were recorded.

⁴ Five ethnic minority presses were established in the late 1950s, with the goal of promoting minority writing. These are the Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, Yunnan and (the now defunct) Xiangxi Ethnic Publishing Houses.

⁵ See Woodside, Alexander, “The Centre and the Borderlands in Chinese Political Theory”, in *The Chinese State at the Borders*, ed. by Diana Lary, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), p.11.

很长时间以来，中国的文学，但凡涉笔到汉族之外的族群，在绝大多数读者、批评者那里，都不会被当成是真正的中国经验、中国故事的书写。

[For a long time, Chinese literature, when written by any ethnic group other than the Han, has not been regarded by the vast majority of readers and critics as the writing of an authentic Chinese experience or story.]⁶

Sinophone minority authors are therefore subject to what can be termed an ideological bias by which Chinese readers tend to read and evaluate their works; their literary creations are “otherized” by the very designation of belonging to a minority, placed outside of the mainstream of Chinese literature. For Alai, the solution to such prejudice is greater inclusion, a process of “becoming (more) Chinese”:

而我以为，只是把这些非汉族的人民也当成真正的中国人，只有充分认识到他们的生活现在也是中国的普遍现实，他们的未来也是中国未来的一部分，这才是现代意义上真正的“天下观”。

[And I believe that only when these non-Han people are regarded as authentically Chinese, only by fully realizing that their lives are now also the universal reality of China, and that their future is also part of China’s future, only this is the real universalism of “all under heaven” in the modern sense.]⁷

One way of being regarded as more authentically Chinese by the majority would of course be to adopt the majority language of *putonghua* and standard written Chinese. Minority authors are generally conceived of as having two choices that play out primarily at the lexical and thematic level: they can make an attempt at becoming “major”, that is, repeating major literature’s ideological praxis (successful examples may be minority authors who come to be regarded as literary “masters”, such as Tibetan author Alai 阿来 and Shen Congwen 沈从文, with his mixed Han-Miao and Tujia heritage) and engaging in the deterritorialization of their own minor language and cultural landscape; or conversely they can attempt to become (more) “minor”, reproducing regionalist and minority representations, reterritorializing the cultural landscape of an already deterritorialized minority. This dilemma is perhaps best encapsulated by the turn of phrase used by Abram de Swaan: “Under conditions of free exchange there is a choice for authors between being a small fish in a big pond or a big fish in a small pond.”⁸ De Swaan was thinking simply in terms of the language that minority authors use in their compositions: adopting the dominant language indicates the desire to gain entry to the “big pond”, persisting in using minority language is indicative of being constrained to the “small pond”. Going beyond the simple parameters of language, this dilemma can also be construed as being between composing a “minor”

⁶ Alai 阿来, *Ji cun shishi I: suifeng piaosan* 机村史诗 I: 随风飘散 [The Epic of Ji Village I: Scattered in the Wind], (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2018), p. 208.

⁷ *Ibid.* The idea that all China rules “all under heaven” is a historical Confucian worldview that espouses an all-encompassing non-exteriority: “a Sinocentric symbolic universe (conceptual world order) that regarded China as the centre of civilisation, surrounded by countries and peoples who were not only culturally inferior but also actively sought to be ‘transformed’ by Chinese civilization”, see Zhang Haiyang, “Wrestling with the Connotation of Chinese ‘Minzu’ Author(s)”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32:30 (1997), p.75.

⁸ De Swaan, Abram, *Words of the World: The Global Language System*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.21.

literature or a “major” literature, which, if we follow Deleuze and Guattari’s example of Kafka (a Czechoslovakian Jew who wrote in German) as minor literature, seems to be concerned primarily with formal features such as his lack of literary ornamentation.⁹ Indeed, their conception of minor transcends the literary space, into the field of general culture. Kafka is “minor” because he belonged to a social group situated outside the hegemonic cultural mainstream. While it is certainly possible to deterritorialize a cultural space in numerous ways without the explicit use of minority language vocabulary, in this essay I will purposefully narrow the parameters of deterritorialization by focusing primarily on the simple question of language of composition.

The choice of which language to use has, at least at the most visible level, already been made for most minority authors within China because of a universal education system weighted heavily toward instruction in the dominant language of Chinese. The conditions of free exchange do not necessarily exist, for many minority peoples simply cannot write their heritage languages, and in any case the majority of China’s ethnic languages do not possess a viable script in which to write (while all minority languages *can* be written in either historical native scripts or newly invented romanisation systems, these are not widely used for a variety of socio-economic and political factors). The practical reality is that only a handful of minority languages in China have publishing industries that can support literary endeavours, thus funneling most authors into the dominant literary system: standard Chinese.¹⁰

Minority authors in China who compose in Chinese can therefore be classified as “Sinophone” authors because they use Chinese despite not belonging to the majority Han ethnicity. Sinophone studies as a field “has as one of its objects the culture, history, and society of minority peoples who have acquired or are forced to acquire the standard Sinitic language of Mandarin, often at the expense of their native languages”.¹¹ Among the ranks of Sinophone writers, then, are ethnic minority writers in China proper who write in standard Chinese. The choice, at least for most minority authors in China, becomes not one of language, but of literary orientation. When engaging in literary creation in Chinese, how do they depict the landscape and culture of their native places? Authors, as professional producers of texts, have a special interest in defending the collective cultural capital. They stand on the forefront of language change and language revitalisation: I would argue that the insertion of minority language into Sinophone

⁹ See Deleuze, Giles and Felix Guattari, “Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature: The Components of Expression” translated by Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* 16:3 (1985).

¹⁰ Luo Changpei and Fu Maoji divided the scripts of China’s ethnic minorities into four general categories: (1) those that have widely used scripts with a large number of published texts, i.e. Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur, Kazak, Korean, Russian, Xibe, Uzbek and Tatar; (2) those that have widely used scripts but no new published texts, such as Dai, Jingpo, Lisu, Wa, and Lahu; (3) those that have scripts that are not widely used, such as Man (Manchu), Yi, Naxi and Miao; and (4) those that have no writing systems, such as the Miao, Dong, Yao, Bouyei, Tu (Monguor) and Hezhen (Nanai). See Luo Changpei 罗常培, Fu Maoji 傅懋勤, “Guonei shaoshu minzu yuyan wenzi de gaikuang 国内少数民族语言文字的概况” [An Overview of the Spoken and Written Languages of Ethnic Minorities in China], *Zhongguo yuwen* 中国语文 [Studies of the Chinese Language] 3 (1954). Even those minority groups in the fourth category above were given phonetic writing systems by the Chinese state after the publication of Luo and Fu’s piece, and in this essay I analyze examples featuring Miao, Tibetan and Naxi, using Xiangxi Miao orthography, Wylie transliteration and Naxi pinyin romanization respectively.

¹¹ Shih, Shu-Mei, Tsai, Chien-hsin, and Bernards, Brian, eds., *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 3.

writing can be seen as a practical, albeit limited, form of revitalization, at least when compared to the wholesale rejection of minority language in Chinese compositions.

When we read minority literature, we should not just ask ourselves what the periphery *looks* like, but also what it *sounds* like. What languages are being spoken? While Sinophone minority authors are ostensibly using Chinese, the language of the majority, this does not necessarily have to be entirely “at the expense of” their native languages, as Shih has said. There is still tension between the minor and major languages within Chinese minority writing, and authors can insert their native language into these works via translational techniques such as transcription and glossing, essentially hybridizing the dominant language. Such texts can be said to be engaging in an act of subversive deterritorialization, because “to read a border text is to cross over into another set of referential codes”.¹² In a sense, then, through such hybridity the waters of the “big” pond and the “small” pond can be merged, but only if the author makes a conscious choice to “become minor” and introduce variation into the major language. This essay will look at three Sinophone minority authors from three ethnic groups (Miao, Tibetan and Naxi) and the divergent degrees to which they have used minority language as a tool of deterritorialization in their writings.

Shen Congwen, regional literature and minority literature

China’s minority literature can be said to have its roots in regional literary movements, and Shen Congwen (1902-1988) is often seen as a forerunner of modern regional literature in China. In fact, Shen, whose father had mixed Han and Miao heritage, was one of the first authors to try to incorporate minority language into his literary creations. In his works that depict his native West Hunan (Xiangxi 湘西), Shen can be said to have refigured what Chinese literature was traditionally thought to have been, by displacing it from the centre and focusing on his own particular geographic region. His most famous stories are known for their distinctive sense of place, and a portrayal of the life and culture of the people in West Hunanese villages and towns. Chinese scholar Liu Hongtao has suggested that Shen’s *Biancheng* 边城 (*Border Town*), composed in the early 1930s, heralded a new, more poetic kind of “Chineseness” quite different from the image of China portrayed during the May Fourth movement.¹³

Shen created his own literary world suffused with regional trappings: rural villages, small riverports, and the Miao *zhai* 寨 (fortified villages inhabited by the Miao people). Such a focus was unusual for the time, for there was a tension between the major and the minor in Chinese literary discourse of the early twentieth century, centered around the general anxiety that a regional focus might reduce one’s national loyalties. But what is regional writing? In a classic article on Shen Congwen and regionalism, Jeff Kinkley uses Holman and Harmon’s definition, that is, fidelity to regional “habits, speech, manners, history, folklore, or beliefs”,¹⁴ where the focus is clearly on the people of a region (Holman and Harmon had Hardy’s Wessex in mind when creating this definition, perhaps not so relevant to the minority linguistic

¹² Hicks, Emily D., *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. xxvi.

¹³ Liu Hongtao 刘洪涛, *Shen Congwen xiaoshuo xinlun* 沈从文小说新论 [A New Study of Shen Congwen's Novels], (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Holman, Hugh and William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, fifth edition, (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. 430.

milieu of China's borderlands). A slightly more nuanced definition that may bring into question the truly "regional" credentials of Shen's writing can be found in Abrams and Harphan, who emphasize "the setting, speech, and social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as *local color*, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting".¹⁵ The regional does not, of course, map directly onto the ethnic (contemporary Han Chinese writers such as Jia Pingwa and Mo Yan write literature that focuses on their culturally distinct regions of Shaanxi and Shandong, respectively), but perhaps this movement beyond mere "local colour" can be seen as a defining characteristic of ethnic literature: when a piece of writing engages with the distinct language and culture of a minority people.

Kinkley acknowledges that Shen's portrayal of region does not go far beyond "local colour": "Shen's most famous works are known for their strong sense of place, their delight in the individuality of West Hunanese villages, town, and cities....but a regional vision is more than this; it abstracts a typical kind of life, and spirit, from many such villages and towns. It bespeaks regional consciousness".¹⁶ He admits that Shen's works possess a strong local identity, but while Shen paints a picture of the individuality of West Hunan life, this is not a specifically *ethnic* culture. Shen merely highlights a different regional landscape to that which had been normally depicted in Chinese literature, but the inner life of the Miao people who inhabit this region never emerges. Shen, as Kinkley points out, had more on his mind than espousing the traditional culture of the Miao. His West Hunan went on to become a surrogate for all of China, a China which eventually appears ethnically and linguistically monolithic.

This is particularly interesting because Shen did, in fact, begin his literary career by focusing on the local patois of West Hunan in an attempt at capturing something more than just "local colour". Perhaps influenced by the Folk Song Movement of the May Fourth era, which saw a heightened interest in the oral literature of regional and ethnic cultures across China, Shen was, for a time, interested in studying his native Miao language so as to record the religious rituals and traditional songs of the Miao people. He gathered a number of mountain songs which he appreciated for their direct and lively nature, qualities that he hoped to transpose into Chinese literature. Over 40 of these songs were published in late 1926 in the *Chenbao fukan* 晨報副刊 (*Morning News Supplement*). Introducing these songs, he wrote about his desire to learn more of the linguistic heritage of his region: "我并且也应把苗话全都学会, 好用音译与直译的方法, 把苗歌介绍一点给世人 [and I should also study all of the Miao language, so that I can use phonetic and direct modes of translation to introduce something of the Miao songs to the world]".¹⁷ Shen had in fact earlier toyed with hybrid ethnic minority literary creation, and his 1925 *Xiangjian de xia* 乡间的夏 [*Summer in the countryside*], first published in the periodical *Guoyu zhouban* 國語週刊 [*The National Language Weekly*], is particularly illuminating in this regard, for it contains a number of non-Chinese (or non-standard Chinese) words that are explained in footnotes. He

¹⁵ Abrams M. H, and Geoffrey Harphan, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, eleventh edition, (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2014), p. 257, emphasis in original).

¹⁶ Kinkley, Jeffrey, "Shen Congwen and the Uses of Regionalism in Modern Chinese Literature", *Modern Chinese Literature* 1:2 (1985), p. 158.

¹⁷ Shen Congwen 沈从文, *Shen Congwen quanji* (vol. 15), 沈从文全集 (第十五卷) [The Complete Works of Shen Congwen], (Taiyuan: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2002), p. 20.

labels the language of composition *tuhua* 土话, “local language”. These “unusual” words are not all from the same language: some belong to a Chinese topolect (in this case a topolect of Southwestern Mandarin spoken in western Hunan, *Xiangxi xinan guanhua* 湘西西南官话), and some are Miao language words (specifically the Xiangxi Miao language spoken in western Hunan, or *Xiangxi Miaoyu* 湘西苗语). No distinction is made between them, and in any case it is unclear if Shen would have been able to do so. As an example of a Chinese topolect word, the line “是吗！**躬** 伢仔到水中去” includes the word *lengya*, meaning child,¹⁸ which is explained in a footnote “**躬** 伢即小孩 [*lengya* means a little kid]”.¹⁹ Kinkley translates this line as “Yeah! The ol’ kid slips on into the water” in an attempt to capture something of its nature as a dialect word.²⁰ The word for “little kid” that Shen uses is comprised of an unusual dialect graph, **躬** *leng*, meaning small in stature (a compound of the “body” radical and “small”),²¹ followed by *ya* 伢 (the topolect pronunciation of which would perhaps be closer to *nga*²¹), meaning child. But Shen also sprinkles this text with non-Chinese words. His *daipa* “代帕” is glossed as “代帕为苗姑娘 [*daipa* means a Miao girl]”, although the Miao language word that Shen is transcribing in sinographs (in a form of usage that has been termed “phonetically adapted logograms”²² by Zev Handel) here is presumably “*deb npad*” which simply means “girl”: the word is a girl in “Miao language”, not a girl who is necessarily ethnically Miao.²³ Another example of a Miao word to be given an explanatory gloss is the term for “joking”, which Shen writes as *xianmao* 擗毛, giving the footnote “擗毛即开玩笑 [*xianmao* means to joke around]”, a word that can be written in Xiangxi Miao orthography as *xenbmaox*.

Crucial here in contextualizing this minoritarian language is the context in which it is employed. Shen Congwen acts as if he is almost embarrassed by the smattering of Miao and topolect words in the poem, writing an apologia for them by way of an afterword. The afterword first attempts to explain the non-standard use of language: “没有会做诗而又做出写出与诗约略相似（一律用中国字，一样的用了点韵）的东西来，无以名之，乃谓之为‘土话’ [Despite being unable to write poetry, I still ended up writing something somewhat akin to a poem (using Chinese characters throughout and employing some rhyme). I didn’t know what to call it, but settled on “local language”]”.²⁴

¹⁸ Shen Congwen 沈从文, “*Xiangjian de xia* 乡间的夏” [Summer in the Countryside], *Guoyu zhoukan* [National language weekly], 12 July 1925, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁰ Kinkley, “Shen Congwen”, p. 166.

²¹ See Xu Baohua 许宝华, Miyata Ichiro, eds., *Hanyu fangyan da cidian* 汉语方言大词典 [Chinese Dialect Dictionary], (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), p. 4946.

²² Handel, Zev, *Sinography: The Borrowing and Adaptation of the Chinese Script*, (Leiden: Brill, 2019), p. 243.

²³ Xiangxi Miao language meanings and romanizations are from Xiang Rizheng 向日征, 汉苗词典: 湘西方言 *Han-Miao cidian* (*Xiangxi fangyan*) [Han-Miao Dictionary – Xiangxi Dialect], (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1992).

²⁴ Shen Congwen, “Summer”, p. 6. Shen states his desire to use Chinese characters “throughout”. As we shall see, an alternative to Chinese characters may have been a method of transliteration using the Roman alphabet, although a standardized proposal for the romanization of the Miao languages was only ratified by the Central Nationalities Affairs Commission in 1957.

More specifically, Shen then goes on to acknowledge the hybridity of this language, and relate the necessity of explanations to help his readers appreciate its artistic value:

镇竿土话者，即苗民杂处几同化外之湘边镇竿地方土话也。为保存趣味的缘故，本想不加什么注解；但为使这趣味普遍的散到读者心中去，又不由我不下一点小注解了。

[Zhengan dialect is the local language of those not yet Sinicized people in the Miao areas of Zhengan on the border of West Hunan. In order to preserve the appeal of the writing, at first I didn't want to add any notes, but to allow the general reader to actually appreciate this appeal, I was forced to add a few.]²⁵

What emerges in *Xiangjian de xia* is an experimental admixture of vernacular Chinese, western Hunan topolect, and minority Miao language that could, had Shen Congwen pursued it, have turned into something akin to Pasoloni's "language *x*", a translational language that is "none other than" ... "the *actual process*" of one language "*becoming*" another.²⁶ The apologetic addition of explanatory glosses (the implicit suggestion being that minor language can only be appreciated if it is accompanied by explanations in the major language), the imposition of the majoritarian viewpoint, serves to hinder this becoming. We get another tantalizing example of these possibilities in Shen's 1926 prose poem, "Láo mei, zuohen!",²⁷ which uses a Latin script title to create a hybrid language. Within the piece itself, "láo mei, zuohen! (妹子，真美呀!)" [girl, you're so pretty!] is a repeated refrain. Despite Shen's own gloss indicating that this is "Miao language (*Miaoyu* 苗语)", it is in fact a mixture of southwestern *guanhua* dialect (*laomei* = "girl") with Xiangxi Miao language (*zuo* = "pretty, beautiful", Miao "*nhou*"; *hen* = "very", Miao "*hent*", and follows the Miao syntax by placing the adverb after the adjective). By 1930 this desire to hybridize Chinese was still present, to a somewhat lesser extent. In a letter to Wang Chi-Chen 王际真, Shen wrote "我将学一点苗语，将来写文章一定还有趣味 [I will study a bit of Miao language, so that my forthcoming articles will be even more appealing]."²⁸ This did not come to pass, however, as Shen did not insert further examples of hybrid language into his later writings.

Ultimately, then, this linguistic experiment was short lived, and the glossed words do not amount to more than lexical souvenirs that serve to exoticize the subject matter. They add a splash of regional colour, Shen's "*quwei* 趣味" (appeal), to the text, but they do not lead us into the cultural milieu. Judged solely by this metric, Shen's early work cannot be classified as a deterritorializing minor literature as such. This is, in Michael Cronin's words, language operating as "mere decoration or ornament", which leads us to "the specular exoticism of Orientalism and Celticism",²⁹ a particular kind of domestic Chinese orientalism whereby minority peoples themselves are otherized.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Deleuze, Giles and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 106.

²⁷ Shen Congwen, *Writings*, pp. 26-32.

²⁸ Shen Congwen 沈从文, *Shen Congwen quanji* (vol. 18) 沈从文全集 (第十八卷) [The Complete Works of Shen Congwen], (Taiyuan: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2002), p.36.

²⁹ Cronin, Michael, *Translation and Globalization*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 143.

Liu Hongtao has written on the marked Sinicization (*Hanhua* 汉化) displayed in Shen's later stories which purport to focus on the borders of Han civilization: specifically, the fact that the supposedly ethnic characters still speak Chinese language and wear Han clothing (人物说汉话, 着汉服).³⁰ Liu further points out that when characters of different ethnicity meet, one would ordinarily expect them to engage in some form of linguistic translation, for the characters should natively speak different languages, but this is not something that ever appears in Shen Congwen's writing. Beyond the rare instances of linguistic diversity in his earlier work, the reader of Shen Congwen's stories "见到的是湘西人, 乡下人, 而不是苗族人[sees West Hunan people, country folk, but not the Miao]".³¹ We see a region, but not an ethnicity.

But this was deliberate, for Shen Congwen attempted with his later, more widely read works such as *Biancheng* (which David Der-wei Wang calls his "abiding masterpiece")³² to make his region speak for all of China. The cost of this universalization cannot but be the deterritorialization of the native culture. The landscape of "Xiangxi" and the culture of the Miao becomes tokenized, Sinicized, and what regional spirit emerges from these works is not authentic. In Liu's words:

沈从文终于给自己定了位。在身份上他是苗族, 而在心态和思想意识上, 则把自己归入汉族。在他的湘西世界里, 紧迫的问题不是苗汉文化冲突而是城乡差异, 是乡村与城市因文明进化阶段不同所引起的矛盾。

[Shen Congwen finally sets out his stall. In terms of identity, he belongs to the Miao nationality, but in terms of mentality and ideology, he belongs to the Han nationality. In his West Hunanese world, the pressing problem is not the cultural conflict between the Miao and Han cultures but the difference between urban and rural areas, and the friction between the countryside and the city that comes from their differing stages of civilizational evolution.]³³

In other words, his focus is on the aesthetic trappings of region, not the inner world of ethnicity, and as such Shen Congwen does not "become minor", he remains majoritarian, and his literary output does not breathe fresh life into the Chinese language because of it. Liu is essentially critiquing Shen for not writing minority literature, but Shen abandoned this idea early on and became a regional writer. In fact, Shen, himself only a quarter Miao by ancestry, never officially possessed Miao identity, and he adopted Han nationality after 1949.

In what could be deemed a subtle acknowledgement of the limitations to Shen's regionalism, Kinkley concludes his article by looking into the future (the late twentieth century and beyond), pondering the question of whether regional writing will be able to delve authentically into the imaginations of individual ethnic peoples: whether they could truly become regional, and divorced from the majoritarian

³⁰ Liu Hongtao 刘洪涛, "Shen Congwen dui Miaozu wenhua de duo zhong chanshi yu xiaojie 沈从文对苗族文化的多种阐释与消解" [Shen Congwen's Various Interpretations and Dissolutions of Miao Culture]. *Twenty-First Century* 25 (1994), p. 81.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³² Wang, David Der-wei, *A New Literary History of Modern China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 382.

³³ Liu Hongtao, "Various Interpretations", p. 81.

viewpoint. The final question, then. Who can “pick up where he [Shen] left off”?³⁴ While Shen Congwen turned toward regional literature, away from his dalliance with ethnic Miao literature, other writers would later take up the mantle of writing hybridized minority literature.

With the advent of socialist nation building after the establishment of the PRC, we can see literary regionalism coalescing around ideas of fixed ethnicity: many of China’s peripheral regions became defined along ethnic lines, by the groups living in them, and, at least in literature, the people belonging to those groups came to be defined by their language and culture. Ethnic minority classification gave the peripheral peoples a concrete delineation, but it also fixed the boundaries of the “small pond”. In 1949, the eminent writer and cultural critic Mao Dun championed the development of Chinese minority literature in the publication of the first issue of *People’s Literature*. He believed that fostering the literary movements of various ethnic minorities in the country would promote the multi-faceted development of a new Chinese literature.³⁵ Mao Dun does not mention the language of composition, but we can assume he was writing about literary creation in the national language of Chinese: the implicit goal of the development of “minority literature” was the literary “territorialization” of ethnic space. Minority authors, now distinctly aware of the group to which they had been assigned (rightly or wrongly) by the “Ethnic minority classification project” (*minzu shibie yundong* 民族识别运动) that began in the 1950s, were left to struggle with issues of language, identity and belonging. The minority groups were defined by a series of criteria borrowed from the Soviets: the primary two being a common language and a common territory (the other two being a common economic life and psychological make-up). Language came first. The most visible way to portray “ethnic-ness” (as opposed to “ethnicity” directly) in writing is to use ethnic language, and this is what certain minority authors began to do, even in their Chinese compositions.

Alai and deterritorialization of the self

In the world of contemporary Chinese literature, perhaps no minority author has the cachet of Alai, who is often championed as one of China’s most prominent minority authors (he was the youngest fiction writer to win the prestigious Mao Dun Literary Prize in 2000) and an inheritor of Shen’s regionalist legacy. He is certainly among the authors that have garnered the most academic attention, both within China and more globally.³⁶

Michelle Yeh has said that in Alai’s work the “re-creation of place finds...powerful expression”.³⁷ This is true, but perhaps not in the way Yeh envisions it. The re-creation of place in his works is very much in line with the territorializing project of Chinese minority literature, in that Alai’s recreation is one that

³⁴ Kinkley, “Shen Congwen”, p. 176.

³⁵ Mao Dun 茅盾, *Mao Dun quanji* 茅盾全集 [Complete Works of Mao Dun], (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1984), p. 89.

³⁶ See, for example Choy, Howard, “In Quest(ion) of an “I”: Identity and Idiocy in Alai’s Red Poppies”, in *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, edited by Lauran Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, (Durham: Duke University Press 2008), and Rojas, Carlos, “Alai and the Linguistic Politics of Internal Diaspora”, in *Global Chinese Literature*, edited by Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

³⁷ Yeh, Michelle, “Chinese literature from 1937 to the present”, in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature: From 1375*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 673.

ultimately elides linguistic tension and therefore local identity. Yeh directly compares Alai to Shen Congwen, and also notes a connection to Faulkner, one of Alai's favourite writers, and his depictions of regional culture. Like Shen Congwen's West Hunan, Alai's Tibet is equally tokenized for the Han Chinese audience, but in one concrete sense at least Alai does go further than Shen in his novels: he does acknowledge the "problem" of minority language. In Alai we do see occasional glimpses of Tibetan language via transcription, and the characters are often labelled as speaking Tibetan. The language issue, the fact that multi-ethnic and multilingual society necessitates translation, is addressed. For Alai, an author who broadly aligns himself with nationalist narratives, however, the resolution of this issue often appears to be the deterritorialization of the local language.

In *Yun zhong ji* 云中记 [*Record from Within the Clouds*], Alai's 2019 novella set in a remote village around the time of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the narrator (a Tibetan known as "Aba") notices how the Tibetan people of the village slur the tones of such "advanced" (*xianjin* 先进) Chinese loanwords such as *dian* 电 "electricity" and *diya he gaoya* 低压和高压 "high and low pressure" to make them fit into their native tongue: "这些新的表达不断加入，他们好像说着自己的语言，其实已经不全是自己的语言" [These new expressions were constantly being added, and while they were seemingly speaking their own language, it was no longer completely *their* language].³⁸ Alai's narrator points out that this corruption of Chinese loanwords muddled their thinking, but that exposure to modernity was still a good thing:

这使得他们的思维不能快速前进，他们的思维像走路不稳的人一样磕磕绊绊。但无论怎样，他们还是往自己脑子里塞满了世界送来的新鲜东西。

[this [the use of loanwords] made it so that their thinking could not progress, causing them to stumble along like someone who can't walk straight, but even in this way, they were still at least stuffing their minds full of new things from the outside world.]³⁹

In *Yun zhong ji*, and Alai's works as a whole, Chinese is the language of modernity, of fast-paced development, and – crucially – of clear thought. Hybridizing language is seen as a stumbling block to full fluency in the dominant tongue, but even this linguistic no-man's land is preferable to remaining immersed in the "dark ages" of the minor language, a language that does not have words for new things and new ideas. Far opposed to the near-total elision of the language question in the later works of Shen Congwen, in Alai we can see how a kind of translational modernity helps to shape the sense of belonging to a modern nation-state of the people of the Tibetan borderlands, or indeed in Alai's own worlds, how the acculturation of the ethnic population leads to them being included under the "*tianxia*" of the sinosphere. In Alai, language, and the domination of the majority, becomes the key to saving the multi-ethnic nation.

In Alai's *Epic of Ji Village*, a novel told over six parts that relates the story of a remote Tibetan village throughout the second half of the 20th century, language often emerges as a tool of acculturation. In the first volume, *Suifeng piaosan* 随风飘散 [*Scattered in the Wind*], we can see an example of hybridization brought about by economic progress and development. Two Tibetan characters discuss a new

³⁸ Alai 阿来, *Yun zhong ji* 云中记 [*Record from Within the Clouds*], *Dangdai* 2019:5, p. 69.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

technological addition to the village in their local language, but the object in question is spoken of in Chinese:

“格桑社长，告诉我这个东西的名字！”

格桑旺堆从窗口伸出脑袋：“马车！”

他是用汉语说的。这时的机村的土著藏语中，已经夹杂了好多的汉语。这也是新加入的词汇之一。

[“Director Bskal-bzang, tell me what this thing is!”

Bskal-bzang-dbang-'dus stuck his head out of the window: “A carriage!”

He said it in Chinese. The local dialect of Tibetan spoken in Ji village already included lots of Chinese words, and this was one of those new inclusions.]⁴⁰

Similarly, in *Kong shan (Hollow Mountain)*, the final part of his *Epic of Ji Village* (originally released in 2009), we can see an example of translation into the majority language serving as a form of linguistic oppression:

工作组这个懂些藏语的家伙看着次仁措远去的背影，摇摇头说：“湖，一个湖怎么会走得动呢？”次仁措这个“措”，在藏语里，就是湖泊的意思。

[The one guy in the work group who understood some Tibetan looked at Tshe-ring -tso as he walked off into the distance, and shook his head. “A lake, how can a lake be walking about?” The “tso” in “Tshe-ring-tso” meant “lake” in Tibetan.]⁴¹

Here, a villager's Tibetan name is first translated from Tibetan into Chinese by a Chinese worker, and then made fun of. Of course, the Tibetan name “Tso”, or more accurately the Chinese transcription used by Alai, *cuo 措*, does not necessarily mean “lake”. Such a transcription could be used for a number of different words in Tibetan, such as *tso* (lily), *gtso* (chief), or *tsho* (to nurture), as well as *mtsho* (lake). The very act of indeterminate transcription into Chinese allows for a derogatory pun that signifies the translation of the land, and of the people who inhabit it.

If Alai is one of the inheritors of Shen Congwen's “regionalist” mantle, an author who would speak for a place and its people, then what language are these people speaking? In the *Epic of Ji Village*, the answer is Chinese, even when they are nominally speaking their local dialect of Tibetan, because loanwords are introduced into the native language from the Chinese, thus deterritorializing the minor language. In the first volume, the Han newcomers politely ask the locals how to say certain words in the local dialect. They attempt, at first, to learn Tibetan, just as the villagers attempt to learn Chinese. Initially, there is two-way communication between languages. But this communication swiftly becomes unidirectional: the villagers must learn Chinese to fit into the new society. Alai attempts to make the case not for his region to speak *for* all of China, but to suggest that his region should become more fully integrated *into*

⁴⁰ Alai, *Ji Village I*, p. 181.

⁴¹ Alai 阿来, *Ji cun shishi VI: kong shan 机村史诗 VI: 空山* [The Epic of Ji Village VI: Empty Mountain], (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2018), p.221.

the rest of China, a deterritorialization of the source language and culture that is embedded in a historical reality, a “smoothing out” of linguistic, and by extension cultural, difference. In so doing he also foregoes the “becoming minor” and remains a (big) fish in a big pond (he is, after all, the chairman of the Sichuan Writers Association, alongside many other official posts).

Alai’s oeuvre seems to operate as a majoritarian response to the anxiety and tension that exists between minor and major. While Shen’s regionalism serves to elide linguistic and cultural difference altogether (implicit Sinicization), Alai’s approach first highlights these differences, only to later suggest that linguistic and cultural assimilation is the key to peaceful co-existence (explicit Sinicization). Thematically, the language of the minorities is always replaced by the language of the majority. This is deterritorialization of the minority space coupled with its reterritorialization, its remaking in a Han Chinese image. The anxiety in Alai is centered around the ability to fit in and use the “standard” language of the nation, and not only that, but to pronounce it correctly too.

Contrast this with the usage of Tibetan in the Sinophone works of Sina Nongbu from the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan (Diqing Zangzu zizhizhou 迪庆藏族自治州), or the foregrounding of Bai language in Dali author Yang Tengxiao’s 1994 collection of short stories, *Yun zai Erhai shangkong* 云在洱海上空 [Clouds above Erhai Lake] (1994), for example. In these works, both by contemporary Sinophone authors, understanding of the local language plays a central thematic role (the reader who doesn’t understand Tibetan or Bai language will not understand the full nuances of these stories). The characters in such tales are happy to use their native language, even when faced with the forces of acculturation. Both writers make use of translational strategies in their Chinese writing, incorporating native language words into dialogue and even writing out fully syntactic phrases in transcribed Tibetan and Bai, respectively.

One particular example (which I have chosen for its similarity to the word “*lengya*”, little kid, as used by Shen Congwen) is the term Diqing locals used to describe the protagonist of Sina Nongbu’s short story, *Yingrao xinling de qinsheng* 萦绕心灵的琴声 [Zither Music that Lingers in the Soul]: “人们说我野得像‘布’（男儿）” [people said I was wild like a “*bu*” (boy)].⁴² The lexical choice here is clear: Sina Nongbu could very easily have used the Chinese *nan'er* 男儿 for “boy” but did not. The word spoken in the dialogue is Tibetan, *bu*, and the meaning is provided for non-Tibetan speakers in the parentheses, via a Chinese translation. The characters here are coded as Tibetans, speaking Tibetan. Alai, however, seems to take the opposite approach to minority language. He finds ways of encouraging his characters to learn and use Chinese. This is unsurprising, as he has been labelled by Li Changzhong as an advocate of “China’s Tibet” (“中国的西藏”), that is, of a Tibet that is distinctly Chinese.⁴³ Li has noted that Alai is often called a “spokesperson” for Tibetan culture or a “eulogizer” of Tibetan civilization, but that the author has tried

⁴² Sina Nongbu 斯那农布, “Yingrao xinling de qinsheng 萦绕心灵的琴声 [Zither Music that Entangles the Soul], in Wenxue Xianggelila 文学香格里拉 [Literary Shangri-La], edited by Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Writer’s Association, (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2017), p. 5.

⁴³ Li Changzhong 李长中, “Alai de wenxue daolu yu zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi 阿来的文学道路与中华民族共同体意识” [Alai’s Literary Path and the Community Consciousness of the Chinese People], *Literary Review* 2021:4 (2021), p. 140.

to shrug off such labels.⁴⁴ I would however argue that, like any author who either markets themselves or is marketed specifically as belonging to a certain minority group, Alai does not have the luxury of claiming to speak only for himself or a geographically restricted region. Alai speaks for his borderland hometown of Ngawa autonomous prefecture in Sichuan, and thus for the regional *rgyal rong* Tibetans, but even more so, as possessor of a hybrid identity he speaks for all Tibetans in contemporary China.

Alai has always had an uncomfortable relationship with certain Tibetan writers who generally adopt a more puritanical approach to questions of Tibetan language usage, but he cannot have it both ways.⁴⁵ He cannot write novels professing only to relate the true situation of a small region of Sichuan's Tibetan hinterland while also speaking for all minority writers as a whole in his more political essays.⁴⁶ His novels, too, have a collective value, just as the label of being a "minority" author has a collective value, for as Deleuze and Guattari have said, "everything has a collective value...what the solitary writer says already constitutes a communal action, and what he says or does is necessarily political -- even if others do not agree with him".⁴⁷ The issue is that Alai is not, at least in the Deleuzian-Guattarian sense, actually attempting to write "minor literature", for a minor literature must originate a minor use of a major language, it is inherently political, and forces variation within the major. In short, we must look beyond Alai for a truly minor Sinophone literature.

Sha Li and deterritorialization of the major

Rather than simply conforming to the hegemonic literary system, using glossed minority language in Sinophone compositions is a concrete step towards deterritorialization of the major. But glossing still leaves a metonymic gap between major and minor.⁴⁸ Can such a gap be bridged? Perhaps only by the implicit recognition that the relaying of an authentic Chinese experience in literature is not solely reliant upon the use of standard Chinese language, and indeed, that two (or more) languages can be interwoven more organically. In short, "standard" language can be changed. In this section I will introduce a Naxi author, Sha Li 沙蠡, who in his Sinophone works goes beyond simply transcribing the odd word or sentence in his native language of Naxi, and begins, ludically, to shift the norms of Chinese usage.

⁴⁴ Wang Yiyan has said of Alai that his "literary construction gives voice, perhaps for the first time, to a people whose identity and history have never emerged in the world's vision" (see Wang, Yiyan, "The Politics of Representing Tibet: Alai's Tibetan Native-Place Stories", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 25:1 (2013), p. 124). This places Alai into the ranks of world literature, but as I argue here, the exact nature of this "voice" – what language the people are actually speaking – is worth questioning.

⁴⁵ Lara Maconi ("One Nation") has described how some Tibetan authors refuse to label Sinophone literature written by Tibetans as "Tibetan literature".

⁴⁶ As an example of the latter, see Alai 阿来, "Fanyi shi tuidong shehui jinbu de Liliang 翻译是推动社会进步的力量" [Translation Drives Social Progress], in *Alai yanjiu* (1) 阿来研究 (1) [Alai Studies 1], edited by Chen Siguang 陈思广, (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 2014).

⁴⁷ Deleuze, Giles and Felix Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?" translated by Robert Brinkley, *Mississippi Review* 11:3 (1983), p. 17.

⁴⁸ For Bill Ashcroft, glosses are one of the most commonplace ways of signifying that a text is cross-cultural. See Ashcroft, Bill, *Caliban's Voice: The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 176.

Sha li 沙蠡 (1953 - 2008), pen name of Naxi author He Shanggen 和尚庚, was a native of Baisha village, a few miles north of Lijiang 丽江, the cultural centre of the Naxi people in Yunnan province. The Naxi are a small Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic group who live in the foothills of the Himalayas, but have something of an outsized presence in scholarship thanks to their unique “dongba” (Naxi: *dobbaq*) religious culture and logographic script. Li Congzhong places Sha Li alongside contemporaries Yang Shiguang, He Guocai and Ge Agan as belonging to a new generation of Naxi minority authors, not restricted by the artistic and literary education or “outmoded ideas” of minority authors from the previous generation.⁴⁹ For Sha Li, language serves as a foundation for culture. He railed against the commodification of his native “dongba” culture, and believed that good literature could act as a pillar of cultural value.⁵⁰

谁也不会为自己的故乡羞愧。

可是我呢？难道还要为这个用“文化”这个虚词副词包装起来而又时时刻刻鄙视真正的文化（文学）的“文化名城”而骄傲么！

文化要有文化实质，首先是文学作品，无论好坏。否则，只能是所谓的“文化”，比如：性文化，茶文化，吃文化，“东巴”文化和“旅游”文化……

[Nobody would be ashamed of their homeland.

But me? Do I have to feel proud about this “city of culture” that packages itself in this empty function word, “culture”, and at the same time constantly belittles real culture (literature)?

Culture needs to have a solid cultural value, primarily in its literary output, whether good or bad. Otherwise, it’s just so-called “culture”, such as sex culture, tea culture, food culture, “dongba” culture and “tourism” culture...]⁵¹

Sha Li understands literature as a synonym – even a translation – of culture, placing the former in parentheses after the latter like a gloss, and suggests that both need to have some tangible value. He criticizes the transitory, cynical value of culture that is embodied by the commercialization of Lijiang that has occurred since its emergence as a major Chinese tourist destination. He sees the possibilities of a literature of enduring value and realizes that this value comes from real culture, once again, not mere “local colour”. The addition of authentic Naxi language into his own literary works is, for Sha Li, a form of cultural value. But beyond ethnic language for language’s sake, Sha Li attempts something else: a variation of Chinese, a Naxi-Chinese interlanguage.

⁴⁹ Li Congzhong 李丛中, *Li Congzhong xueshu wenxuan* 李丛中学术文选 [Selected Academic Works of Li Congzhong], (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 2016).

⁵⁰ Emily Chao has written in detail on the creation and commodification of Naxi religious culture in the late twentieth century. See Chao, Emily, *Lijiang Stories: Shamans, Taxi Drivers, and Runaway Brides in Reform-Era China*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).

⁵¹ Sha Li 沙蠡, *Hutiaoxia zhi ge* 虎跳峡之歌 [The Song of Tiger Leaping Gorge], (Kunming: Yuanfang chubanshe, 2000), p. 92.

This is not pre-processed and commercialized “culture”, not the mere local colour of inauthentic regionalism, it is real, lived cultural experience, a “becoming”. Joseph Rock spent more than two decades travelling in and around the Naxi areas of China, and while he remained a staunchly critical of the barbaric “natives” to the end, in the minds of the Naxi locals at least, he became one of them. In an essay reflecting on Rock’s connections to his hometown of Baisha, where Rock lived in a small village while in Lijiang, Sha Li cites Rock as saying: “洛克说过的一句名言：我是崩石若，没有崩石就没有我！[I’m a Bbesheeq man, for without Bbesheeq [you see], there’d simply be no me!]” (*ibid.*, 32). Sha Li inserts the Naxi name for the village of Baisha, Bbesheeq, via variant transcription (Chinese Bengshi 崩石), and the Naxi word for boy or man, *sso*, via the Chinese graph *ruo* 若. These words are not glossed or explained in any way: the only way for the reader to comprehend this line is to know both languages.

The quote itself is probably apocryphal, and there’s no way of telling what language Rock would have used if he did ever say it. His native Austrian German? It would seem unlikely. His professional language of English? Or, given the context, Chinese, and perhaps even Naxi? What Sha Li does here is play with language, merging Chinese with Naxi in what amounts to a multilingual rhyme: Naxi *sso* (boy, man), rhyming with Chinese *wo* (me), at the same time suggesting that the great cosmopolitan, Joseph Rock, *National Geographic’s* “man in China”, was at heart very parochial, “belonging” to the small village of Baisha. This is a theme in Sha Li’s work: the global becoming the local.

Sha Li writes in Chinese, but in a Naxi inflected Chinese, fulfilling the Deleuzian requirement for a minority literature: one that “is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language”.⁵² Writing on the Naxi custom of committing “love suicide” (Chinese *qingsi* 情死), a favourite topic for Sha Li that he revisits in a poetry collection and his only full-length novel, we can see how he merges his native language with the literary language of the nation:

事实上，由于纳西女人太多情、太痴心，往往被外族的情哥哥的勤快和献媚所蒙蔽，加上外来人身上那张比纳西男人白皙得多、鲜嫩得多的肉皮子的迷惑，每每上当受骗。深入虎穴，无法返回居娜什萝山和真正的纳若情人共同飞升天国的纳西娇娥比比皆是，不胜枚举。

[In fact, because Naxi girls are too quick to fall deeply in love, they are often blinded by the persistence and flattery of non-Naxi suitors. This is compounded by the fact that these outsiders have skin that is much whiter and softer than that of the Naxi, and so, more often than not, the Naxi women end up being fooled. There are so many of these lovely Naxi beauties, trapped in the dens of tigers, that cannot make it back to mount Jjuqnasheel’lo and fly with the true Naxi *sso* to paradise. Just too many to count.]⁵³

The casual insertion of the Naxi words, “Naqxi *sso*” (Naxi man/boy) in the otherwise Chinese text highlights the difference here between the men from outside, who come to lure away the Naxi women and prevent them from attaining an authentic Naxi love suicide, and the “true” Naxi boys. It emphasizes

⁵² Deleuze and Guattari, “Minor Literature”, p. 16.

⁵³ Sha Li 沙蠡, *Lijiang Yumushen lun* 丽江鱼姆神论 [The Yumu Deity of Lijiang], (Kunming: Yuanfang chubanshe, 1998), p. 1.

also that language is a key component of ethnic belonging. The reader will have noted how the Naxi word *sso* (depicted again via Chinese transcription as *ruo*) is not even glossed, it is simply presented as is, as a “minoritized” Chinese. This is no longer ethnic language used as decoration or ornament, for local colour, because it has been internalized and left unexplained, it is no longer “other”; Chinese *ruo* here goes beyond the limits of transcription, it takes on a new pronunciation, *sso*, and with it a new meaning. Sha Li does not do this with all the Naxi words he employs in his writing; he does often use parenthetical glosses: “找个纳西美（女人）一生不愁吃和穿 [Find a Naxi *mei* (woman) and you won’t have to worry about food or clothing your whole life]”,⁵⁴ the author here favouring the Naxi noun over the Chinese, but still providing a translation.

While there is a process of deterritorialization of the ethnic language in Alai, there is a deterritorialization of the majority language in Sha Li. Reading Sha Li we come to learn these words (sometimes introduced with corresponding translations in glosses, otherwise not) and to appreciate that there is a different language, and a different culture, behind them. It is not enough to become completely acculturated to Han China, as it is in Alai, for then we would not have access to the cultural world of the Naxi.

Another emblematic example of Sha Li’s proclivity to insert Naxi words and phrases into his Chinese writing to destabilizing effect would be the end of an essay on the value of environmental protection, where he employs a Naxi phrase alongside a glossed translation:

母吕笃萝，窝录佑贺！

我不知道，这一句我们纳西人的咒语式的口头禅，是否可以翻译成这样一句真言“请保佑地球吧！”…

窝---录---！

你，我，他的地球。

[*Mee’leel ddiuq loq, o’luq yel he!*

I don’t know if this oft-repeated mantra of the Naxi can be translated into something like the following saying: “Please bless this world!”

O...luq!

Your, mine, their world.]⁵⁵

In writing the Naxi phrase by way of Chinese transcription, Sha Li invokes a particular conception of the Naxi cosmos, “*mee’leel*”, not just the “world” per se, but a divine union of heaven and earth. Despite his tentative and obfuscating translation in the following line, the Naxi mantra is an entreaty for the gods to bless all things in heaven and on earth (Naxi *loq* meaning “in”). Translation invariably fails to hit the mark, but that is in fact Sha Li’s implicit point: standard Chinese can’t properly express the Naxi mantra, but Sha Li retains the original language (via Chinese writing), and again repeats the entreaty in Naxi (Chinese *wolü* 窝录 being the Naxi *o’luq*, “to bless”) in the penultimate line of the essay. Naturally, those not able

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵⁵ Sha Li 沙蠡, *Naxi shenling 纳西神灵* [Spirit of the Naxi], (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2001), p. 58.

to speak Naxi would only be able to guess at the meaning of those final emphatic graphs. This is not glossed minority language used as “local colour”, but rather language through which the meaning of the text emerges.

There is a clear difference between Shen Congwen’s Southwestern mandarin *lengya* (kid) with an explanatory footnote to Sina Nongbu’s Tibetan *bu* (boy) with its parenthetical translation to the Naxi *sso* (son) of Sha Li, presented with no translation. While all are different languages that appear in Chinese, they serve to deterritorialize the language to differing degrees. The language problem is still apparent even in Sha Li’s writing; he is, after all, still writing primarily in an assimilated form of Chinese, but the native terms that are included without translation are a variation of the major. This is the “becoming minor”, which is “a question not of reterritorializing oneself on a dialect or a patois but of deterritorializing the major language”.⁵⁶

This is the real value, perhaps, of Sinophone minority literature. Alai sees himself as writing “China’s Tibet”, but the Lijiang of Sha Li takes primacy: “‘中国，在丽江’。这不是狂语，是一种爱祖国的真情[China is in Lijiang. This is not crazy talk, it’s a true expression of love for the motherland]”.⁵⁷ Alai’s love for the motherland sees him advocating for acculturation, a placing of Tibet within China, while Sha Li’s love for the motherland seeks for greater engagement of the majority with the minority, a respect for heterogeneity in language. Although he is in this quote couching the idea in the words of Xuan Ke 宣科, the famous Naxi ethnomusicologist,⁵⁸ Sha Li turns the traditional mode of thinking on its head: he breaks down the traditional hierarchy, not to say that Lijiang, the cultural capital of the Naxi in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, is now necessarily in some kind of majoritarian position, but simply to suggest that the hierarchy was a false construct in the first place. The true way toward loving the multi-ethnic motherland is to stop minoritizing the smaller ethnic groups and to realize that each part of the multi-ethnic nation is equally important.

That is, Sha Li is not advocating for a rejection of or resistance to the centre, but something that is perhaps altogether more radical: the reorientation of the centre itself. He does not write “back” to the centre, but instead writes a new centre that is also the periphery, and this is where you can find China - in the local, where the major *is* the minor. The value of such reorientation can be found in the new pathways of cultural understanding that open up to the reader. Such an idea is perhaps best expressed in Sha Li’s introduction to his full-length novel, *Aiqing de juechang* 爱情的绝唱 [*Love’s Swan Song*]:

我这个几乎被汉文化“同化”了的小文人，只是凡夫俗子。可能像我等文人墨客是无论如何都很难登上这绝妙的乐园胜土了。

⁵⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, p. 104.

⁵⁷ Sha Li 沙蠡, *Tupo lishi* 突破历史 [Breaking Through History], (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 1998), p. 71.

⁵⁸ For more on Xuan Ke and traditional Naxi music, see Rees, Helen, *Echoes of History: Naxi Music in Modern China*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[As for me, a minor man of letters who has been pretty much completely assimilated into Han culture, I'm just a common person. Perhaps writers like me will find it very difficult to reach that great paradise, no matter what.]⁵⁹

Sha Li (admitting his “minor” status) is writing about the traditional afterlife of the Naxi, which is depicted in the literature as something akin to an old pagan paradise, like Yeats’ *Tír na nÓg*, although not an island paradise, but a mountain one. In this paradise spirits are free to roam the beautiful mountains, soar on the clouds, and indulge in consummating their love. In Chinese, it is in its very nomenclature an “otherized” third space called the “third kingdom” of the Jade Dragon Mountain (*Yulong di san guo* 玉龍第三國). In Naxi, this land is known as *Ngv'lv yeqchualgoq* (lit. silver stone love suicide meadow). The implicit message here is that those who are acculturated (*tonghua* 同化) into the dominant literary system cannot enjoy the fruits of a specifically ethnic afterlife: the paradise is reserved for the those in the “small pond”, those who have become fully minoritarian.

Conclusion: the importance of (minority) language

Although Wang Yiyan has said of Sinophone minority authors that their writing in Chinese “does not necessarily mean that their sense of cultural belonging has changed and that they have therefore forfeited the right to their own cultural identification”,⁶⁰ Sha Li points to the importance of language in this identification. While Alai sings the praises of acculturation, Sha Li offers us an idea of what might be lost when major and minor languages meet in literature. What is at stake? Of course, Alai is clear that minority languages are on the line, but that literacy in Chinese represents a greater good, a better future. Sha Li at once laments the loss of cultural authenticity, while subtly revealing an alternative future, the possibilities of inflecting Chinese with his own minority language in a way that does more than simply add the literary *quwei*, or “appeal”, that Shen was searching for; not the complete subjugation of the minority language (where words are replaced by Chinese terms), but the partial subjugation of the majority language (where Chinese words are replaced by Naxi ones, and Chinese translation cannot convey the full message).

It is in Sinophone literature such as this that there is reconceptualization of the literary territory itself, evidence that the minor can be more major than the major, that minority practices do not have to always be situated by and explained only in terms of the hegemony. It would be remiss not to point out that Sha Li’s literary legacy remains one that is firmly entrenched in the “small pond”; despite publishing prolifically, he never attained the mainstream success enjoyed by the likes of Alai or Shen Congwen. Even so, his deterritorialization of Chinese suggests a refusal to recognize the necessity of a binary of separate “ponds”, pointing the way to new possibilities for Sinophone authors who would go beyond reproducing majoritarian narratives in their writing.

⁵⁹ Sha Li 沙蠡, *Aiqing de juechang* 爱情的绝唱 [Love’s Swan Song], (Shenzhen: Haitian chubanshe, 1998), p. 4.

⁶⁰ Wang, “Representing Tibet”, p. 99.

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