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The History of Ethnography in Lingnan

Research on the history of the Tai-speaking peoples of Lingnan has tended to concentrate on historical justifications for the classifications of minority nationalities by the PRC in the 1950s. Little research has been done into why ethnographic writings from preceding centuries often contradicted these later classifications. By tracing the genealogy of names and descriptions of these non-Sinitic peoples from the mid-Ming dynasty to the 1930s, this paper will demonstrate how changes in their representation, and in theories of their history and descent, have reflected the cultural preoccupations and political concerns of successive generations of writers.
Research on the history of the Tai-speaking peoples of Lingnan has tended to concentrate on historical justifications for the classifications of minority nationalities by the PRC in the 1950s. Little research has been done into why ethnographic writings from preceding centuries often contradicted these later classifications. Ming, Qing, and Republican writers used names such as “Zhuang”, “Lang”, and “Lao” to refer to various groups of people in the Lingnan region, but their use of such terms bears little relationship to the PRC classification of minority minzu. A commonly-held belief is that pre-modern writers simply did not have the ability to research local conditions or were careless in applying ethnonyms correctly. Instead, this paper argues that the background reason for the discrepancy between PRC and pre-modern naming conventions lies in a fundamental difference between two systems of knowledge. Unlike the modern use of names for non-Sinitic people, pre-modern descriptions were often based not on personally-observed differences between definable ethnic groupings, but on their authors’ background reading and employment of long-standing literary tropes. By tracing the genealogy of names and descriptions of these non-Sinitic people from the mid-Ming dynasty to the 1930s, both inside and outside the textual tradition, the paper will demonstrate how changes in the representation of these peoples, and in theories of their history and descent, have reflected the cultural preoccupations and political concerns of successive generations of writers.

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