

Nanguo Qingtian: The First Novel in Dai Contemporary Literature

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Abstract: This paper presents an analysis of *Nanguo Qingtian*, the first full-length novel in contemporary Dai literature. Authored by Fang Yunqin and Zheng Peng, the novel occupies a unique position in both Dai cultural expression and broader Chinese literary history. This study examines how *Nanguo Qingtian* navigates the complex interplay between traditional Dai cultural elements and modern literary techniques, often reflecting narratives of progress and national identity shaped by dominant cultural and historical frameworks. This paper argues for the novel's enduring significance beyond its pioneering status. It re-evaluates existing critical perspectives, positioning *Nanguo Qingtian* as a vital contribution to understanding the development of ethnic minority literature within China's evolving literary landscape of the late 1980s.

Keywords: Dai literature; ethnic minority; *Nanguo Qingtian*; Fang Yunqin; Zheng Peng

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标题: 《南国情天》：论当代傣族文学首部长篇小说

内容摘要: 本文以当代傣族文学首部长篇小说《南国情天》为研究对象。该作品由方云琴、征鹏共同创作，在傣族文化表达与中国文学史整体谱系中皆具有独特地位。本文探讨小说如何通过传统傣文化元素与现代文学技法的复杂互动，展现受主导性文化与历史框架所塑造的进步叙事与国族认同话语的微妙回应。研究认为，该作品的意义超越其开创性价值本身。通过重审既有批评视角，本文将《南国情天》定位为理解 1980 年代末中国文学转型期少数民族文学发展的关键文本，论证其对当代中国多民族文学格局建构的重要贡献。

关键词: 傣族文学；少数民族；《南国情天》；方云琴；征鹏

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1. Dai Literature: A Brief Review

In China, the Dai people are mainly distributed in Yunnan province, where 700,000 live in autonomous communities and 500,000 reside across more than 30 counties and cities.¹ They speak multiple varieties of their language, some mutually intelligible, others not.² The transnational distribution of Dai-speaking communities has long fostered a sense of cross-border Dai identity in Southeast Asia.³ The research object of this study is the Dai people, an ethnic group of China with Chinese citizenship.

While not all of China's minority groups possess traditional writing systems, all have developed vibrant oral literatures, and many have produced written works spanning centuries; in recent decades, some have also adopted Standard Chinese to express and preserve their cultural identities.⁴ Early efforts in China to compile Dai literature were shaped by an ideological stance. "Through these years of work, a large number of works and historical materials were discovered, and the *Introduction to Dai Literature* (《傣族文学概况》) was written. Subsequently, Comrade Wang Song (王松) wrote a monograph entitled *A Preliminary Study on the Development of Dai Poetry* (《傣族诗歌发展初探》)" (Yan et al., *Brief Literary History of the Dai People* 2)⁵.

Ancient Songs of the Dai People (《傣族古歌谣》) shows that ancient Dai culture is closely tied to the hero Sangmudi, who shaped their primitive religion⁶ into a unifying belief that influenced early Dai literature.⁷ To propagate its divine consciousness, this

1 See Zhou Yaowen and Fang Fenghe, "The Use and Development of Dai and Its Vernacular Writing Systems," *Language Policy in the People's Republic of China: Theory and Practice Since 1949*, edited by Zhou Minglang, New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004, 201.

2 See Zhou Yaowen and Fang Fenghe, "The Use and Development of Dai and Its Vernacular Writing Systems," *Language Policy in the People's Republic of China: Theory and Practice Since 1949*, edited by Zhou Minglang, New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004, 202. For an exhaustive description of the use and development of Dai and its vernacular writing systems, which goes beyond the scope of the present study, cfr. Zhou and Fang (2004).

3 See Riccardo Moratto, "Dai, Tai or Thai? A Transnational 'Imagined' Community," *Critical Arts* 5 (2025): 148-166.

4 See Mark Bender, "Ethnic Minority Literature," *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, edited by Yingjin Zhang, Worchesterhire: Blackwell, 2015, 261.

5 The present review draws mainly on Yan et al.

6 According to the editors, Shaluo (沙罗) was regarded as a hunting god and founder of the so-called primitive religion (See Yan et al., *Brief Literary History of the Dai People* 5). Then, "Sangmudi put forward the slogan of 'building houses and villages, settling down and cultivating' [...] to switch from hunting to settled farming. As a result, this period of Dai literature produced a large number of works reflecting settled life" (Yan et al., *Brief Literary History of the Dai People* 6).

7 See Yan Feng et al., eds, *Brief Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1988, 5.

primitive religion created the supreme god Ba Ying (叭英), around whom the Dai genesis epic *Patamaga Pengsangluo* (巴塔麻嘎捧尚罗)¹ was built, “the first climax in the history of Dai literature” (Yan et al., *Brief Literary History of the Dai People* 6). As argued by van Loenen, the dawn of literature in every civilization is linked with mythical heroism and religion; Dai literature is no exception.²

In ancient times, literature and Theravada Buddhism reinforced each other: religion supplied themes and material for literary creation, while literature disseminated Buddhist teachings. Yan et al. note that “the peak of Dai literature is closely related to the fact that Theravada Buddhism had become the faith of all Dai people. In turn, Dai literature helped Theravada Buddhism to become the universal³ faith of the Dai people” (*Brief Literary History of the Dai People* 7). They further claim that intellectuals “around the eighteenth century broke the fetters of Buddhist thought and wrote tragic narrative poems that reflected the reality of life, leading to the emergence of realism in Dai literature” (*Brief Literary History of the Dai People* 10). This view reflects a teleological interpretation of literary development. I contend, however, that the emergence of realism had little to do with the so-called “fetters of Buddhism”; rather, it mirrored broader literary trends evolving worldwide during that period.

Epic and narrative poems have long held a prominent place in Dai literature. Even after the emergence of the novel, Dai writers continued to favor poetry over prose forms. A key figure in Dai society has always been the *zanha* (赞哈)⁴, who bears multiple social functions such as inheriting ethnic history, disseminating religious culture and presiding over folk rituals.

Folktales, in both narrative and epic poem forms, appear to be the most prolific genre among the Dai people. Several anthologies exist, with Fu et al.’s (1985) *Collection of Dai Folk Tales* (《傣族民间故事选》) being a notable example. In Xishuangbanna, storytellers, known as *bozhang* (波章), those who invite monks to recite sutras, have recorded over 10,000 stories across the dynasties.⁵ A persistent

1 Also known as 《南师巴塔麻嘎帕萨傣》. This work covers topics such as the opening of the heavens, the creation of humanity, the emergence of the Dai ancestors, and their subsequent migration and settlement. It preserves numerous Dai myths as well as legends about historical figures, making it an invaluable ancient source for the study of Dai mythology and society.

2 See Eva van Loenen, “Examining Religious Identity through Literature: The Chosen by Chaim Potok,” *Emergence* 4 (2012): 7.

3 Whether Theravada Buddhism was universal or not is a controversial topic.

4 See Wang Song, “A New Beginning for Dai Literature—Review of the Long Novel ‘Nanguo Qing-tian’,” *Studies of Ethnic Literature* 3 (1991): 86.

5 See Fu et al., eds., *Collection of Dai Folk Tales*, Shanghai: Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House, 1985, 8.

problem with such anthologies, however, is the ideological interpretation that arises from selectively choosing stories aligned with particular historical or societal values while omitting others; biased readings are inevitable, even in anthologies that purport to be ideologically neutral.

Fu et al., for instance, describe the myths as expressing “the simple materialistic worldview of the Dai ancestors” (9) and “everything in the world is obtained through labor and sweat” (9). While early literary works did emphasize materialistic aspects more than later religion-inspired ones, I would hesitate to characterize the Dai ancestral worldview as “simple” or “materialistic.” I do agree, however, with Fu et al.’s observation¹ that Dai folktales express “the Dai people’s pursuit of a better life” and an “optimistic fighting spirit,” reflecting their imagination, ideals, and oral creativity.

Anthropological research has contributed much to the study of ancient Dai literature, but contemporary Dai literature must also be examined through the lenses of modernity (which involves the reconfiguration of worldviews through the “nation-state”) and secularization (which reflects a shift toward everyday concerns).

The emergence of contemporary ethnic minority literature in China is inseparable from post-revolutionary institutional developments, most notably the establishment of *Minzu* universities and colleges, where many minority students received bilingual education in their native languages and Standard Chinese. Combined with state policies supporting minority-language publishing and local literary associations, this fostered a generation of writers who participated in both their own cultural traditions and the national literary sphere. The latter half of the twentieth century thus saw a flourishing of secular ethnic minority literature. Novels, poems, and short stories, often written in Chinese but infused with local themes, exploring modern ethnic identity, social change, and the place of minority cultures within the broader national narrative. It is within this context that the present analysis proceeds.

This study examines the first full-length novel in contemporary Dai literature, *Nanguo Qingtian* (《南国情天》, *Love in the South*, henceforth *NGQT*), published by People’s Literature Publishing House in 1988.² The authors, Fang Yunqin (方云琴) and Zheng Peng (征鹏), were born in Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture and Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, and both studied at the Beijing

1 See Fu et al., eds., *Collection of Dai Folk Tales*, Shanghai: Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House, 1985, 11-14.

2 To my knowledge, this work has been discussed by Chinese critics but not yet by Western scholars or in English-language studies.

Institute for Nationalities.¹ They represent the first cohort of Dai students to receive a college education after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.²

The novel does conform to the tenets of socialist realism, but my theoretical point of departure differs from scholars such as Lukács, who claimed that “works of art that belong to this genre [epic]—for example Homeric epic poetry and the modern novel—must always express the objective reality of social and individual human life *as it is* (1916, 46 in Stahl 2018, np, emphasis in the original).³ I do believe, however, that the novel, given its constructed nature and length, provides “a lens through which a society sees itself and the rest of the world” and plays a role “in the propagation of ideas, thoughts, desires and feelings in the public domain” (Saidu nd, np).⁴ As Dentith puts it, the novel was, and I argue still is, “one of the ways of constructing the national imaginary, the ‘imagined community’ which is the necessary conceptual counterpart to the material realities of nation-states” (46).

I agree with Wang that, given the history of Dai literature and the development of minority literature in China, *NGQT* “should not be given a lukewarm reception” (86). Beyond its historical significance as the first full-length novel in contemporary Dai literature, *NGQT* weaves traditional Dai motifs, Buddhist devotion, oral folklore, with modern narrative techniques such as shifting perspectives, psychological depth, and intertextuality. Its nuanced portrayal of cultural conflict, identity, and belonging, especially through the character Danrui, adds emotional and philosophical depth beyond ethnographic description. The novel’s paratexts, symbolic nature imagery, and the interplay between realism and allegory position the novel as a literary artifact engaging both national discourse and regional aesthetics. Its value lies not only in its pioneering status but in its articulation of a distinctly Dai literary voice within modern Chinese fiction.

2. Before and Beyond the Text: Paratextual Allusions

The title 南国情天, freely rendered here as *Love in the South*, resists easy translation. The noun phrase *nanguo* can mean Southern nations and/or state/

1 See Yan et al., eds., *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 804. See also Zheng and Yang (1999, 263). The authors belonged to the first cohort of Dai students to receive higher education after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (See Yan et al., eds, *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 804.).

2 See Yan et al., eds, *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 804.

3 See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lukacs/>. Accessed September 27, 2023.

4 See <https://www.globalacademicgroup.com/journals/knowledge%20review/Daada%20Saidu.pdf>. Accessed 28 September, 2023.

s (plausible given that the novel is set in both China and Myanmar) or “Southern country” (Chinese has no plural marker). The notion of a “Southern country”—whether imagined as a distinct or even separate cultural and geographical space in the south (of China?)—may well invite reflection from readers inclined toward cultural or political interpretations, or even overinterpretations. As for *qingtian*, this word nowadays usually indicates the realm of love.¹

The paratext is “‘an undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text)” (Genette 2).² *NGQT* offers a short introduction that foregrounds the novel’s leitmotifs and sets a “paternalistic” tone. I translate it here:

The heroine of the novel, Danrui Aili, is a mixed-race Italian and Burmese Dai. When she was fifteen years old, she had to give up her love for John, a young Englishman, for special reasons, and married Dao Chengzong, a Chinese-Dai *Tusi* [local chieftain] of Mengwanba, who was more than twenty years older than her [...]. After her arrival in Mengwanba, Danrui learns that she is her husband’s seventh wife and endures great suffering. Thereafter Danrui is repeatedly ravaged by her husband’s first wife. In the midst of anger and remorse, she tries to commit suicide once by taking poison and she even runs away twice. When Dao could not bear to see his wife abused, he sends her back to her mother, and that is when the Japanese planes bomb Menggu [Mong Ko]. Dao Chengzong is wounded saving Danrui’s brother. [Through this gesture], Danrui sees that Dao loved not only her but also her family, so she was deeply moved and [finally] came to love Dao wholeheartedly. (*NGQT*, np)

Whether written by the authors or the editors, this introduction reveals much about their stance on Dai traditional culture. The story is set in Mengwanba (勐婉坝), in Mengwan County 勐婉, also known as Longchuan County (陇川县). Situated in Dehong Prefecture, it shares a natural border with Myanmar, connected through mountains and rivers.³ This paratext plays a crucial role in establishing tone and conveying the cultural values the authors seek to support or contest.

1 See <https://www.chinesewords.org/dict/120169-481.html>. Accessed January 1, 2023.

2 See also Moratto and Xu 2023.

3 In Dai, *mengwan* means “the place where the sun shines.” Another toponym, mentioned in the introduction, Meng Gu (勐古), or Mong Ko in Burmese, is located on the China-Myanmar border.

3. The Novel *Love in the South*

The novel consists of twenty-two chapters and an epilogue. This analysis attends not only to the story but to its extratextual and paratextual elements, conveyed through intra- and intertextual cultural and linguistic features, to explore the literary representation of the protagonists and the Dai culture they embody.¹

Before Chapter One, a “dedication” provides another paratextual element, not a real dedication but a citation from Wang Can’s (王粲, 177-217) *Denglou fu* (《登楼赋》, “Mounting the Tower”) of the late Eastern Han period (25-220 CE).² The two verses “情眷眷而怀归兮, 孰忧思之可任?” may be loosely translated as “Affection lingers and I long to return home, who could bear such sorrow and longing?” Paired with the chapter title, these verses hint at the story’s *leitmotif*: a longing for home. The question that remains is: where is “home”?

3.1 Idyll and illusion: Exploring identity and marginalization in Dai literature

The novel opens with the heroine, Danrui, caught in a nightmare. She drifts across an ocean toward a boy whose “hair changes from black to blonde in the wind” (3), but a towering black wave blocks her path and she loses sight of him. Waking in tears, she gazes at the calm dawn sky, wondering who the familiar boy might be,³ drifting back to memories of her long-lost love.

She opens the window to “the fragrance of the lotus flower” (4). Beyond the pond lies Jewel Mountain (宝石山)⁴, named for greenery that glimmers in various shades and resembles a gem throughout the day. With nearby White Elephant Mountain (白象山) and the rose-tinted dawn, the landscape contrasts starkly with the nightmare’s dark tension. Nature is portrayed as a refuge for the soul, a key theme in Dai culture. “What is emotion? What is reason? Different people and different societies have different standards” (4). The landscape resembles any typical Dai village in Yunnan.

On her first day in Mengwanba, Danrui arrives in a flower-adorned sedan. Her husband, Dao Chengzong, in traditional Dai attire, welcomes her to their new white

1 All the citations are my own translations and are drawn from the novel itself (Fang and Zheng 1988). In the following pages, when the pages are not accompanied by other bibliographical information, it means the citation is from the novel.

2 For more information regarding Wang Can, please cfr. <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Division/personswangcan.html>, Accessed December 8, 2022.

3 The fact that she is not certain is quite peculiar, considering that Danrui’s first love, as we will learn, is a blond Englishman.

4 An attentive reader would be aware of the similitude both in terms of names and landscape-wise with the Baoshan Hill in Hangzhou, towering over the West Lake.

home as locals celebrate for seven days to honor their *zhaomeng* 召勐 (local ruler). Veiled in red, she cannot see her future family, yet she has already “fallen in love with this beautiful, fertile, and magical place” (5); Mengwanba seems like “a green peacock” (5). The landscape is personified, with White Elephant Mountain likened to a mother embracing her children.

Danrui’s life seems idyllic, reflected in the lake outside her window—the lake of happiness, beauty, and love, also called “Peacock Lake” because in ancient times seven peacock princesses would bathe and marry there; its white lotuses symbolize pure love (6).¹ Even her maidservant E’jing (娥静), whose name means “beautiful and serene,” conceals an atrocious destiny. Born and raised in Mengwanba, E’jing tells Danrui she never tires of its beautiful dawns and sunsets. Such emphasis from a local sharpens the contrast with the cruel fate that awaits both women, introducing an atmosphere of emotional dissonance that permeates the following chapters. The instability between joy and sorrow, illusion and reality, also functions allegorically: the Dai people’s perceived harmony and exotic beauty often masks deeper tensions, marginalization, and identity crisis.

The novel’s repeated use of aestheticized natural imagery to contrast with the characters’ emotional and social hardships suggests a disjunction between surface beauty and underlying trauma. The novel raises a rhetorical question about whether the “joy” associated with rural Dai life is genuine, reflecting a broader Han narrative of “liberation” that frames these “primitive” yet “docile” communities as improved through modern intervention, as suggested in the first chapter.

Despite being written in Chinese, *NGQT* is regarded as a “Dai novel” because of the authors’ ethnic identity and the novel’s cultural substance: it depicts Dai customs, the *tusi* system, religious life, and transnational connections with Myanmar, elements central to plot and character rather than ornamental. The novel thereby contributes to Dai literary history while engaging the national literary discourse through Chinese, articulating the distinctiveness of Dai cultural heritage.

Nature continues to mirror the protagonists’ inner states. At the start of Chapter 4, Dao is consumed by passion for the roses in his garden, symbolizing youth and his young wife. In Chapter 5, Danrui discovers she is not Dao’s first wife; as she prepares a welcome banquet for his eldest son Dao Kunlong (刀坤龙), “black clouds [...] covered the bright moon, and the lotus lake was pitch black” (106). In Chapter 7, Dao takes Danrui to her mother’s village in Myanmar, where a Japanese air raid sparks their deepening love. Danrui tends to his wound overnight in an air-raid

1 By the end of the book, we come to understand that these white lotuses acquire an entirely new symbolic significance with E’jing’s death, representing pure love.

shelter; by morning her mother encloses the shelter with bamboo, and within days blooming petunias symbolize renewal. The primeval forest and its flowers come to symbolize the destiny and temperament of the Dai. Later, after being scolded by her grandmother Osmanthus, Danrui's daughter Nanman (喃曼) vents her frustration on the flowers in her grandmother's garden; Danrui teaches her that "flowers can also suffer, even if silently" (277-278).

3.2 Transnational ethnic agency amidst modernity's tensions

The novel showcases several Dai customs. Dao Chengzong enjoys watching Danrui perform Burmese-style court dances each morning, highlighting the region's cultural hybridity, while villagers' deference to him as local chieftain prompts his explanation of the Dai people's gentle disposition and hospitality.

Early on, a ritual involving *Jasminum grandiflorum* (素馨花) introduces Dai cultural symbolism: Osmanthus promises to place the flower, which blooms in April during the Dai New Year, on a mountaintop if her husband George dies in war, believing its fragrance could reach him. Her decision to cut down a mango tree after George's ominous dream also reflects Dai spiritual beliefs.

Han readers are clearly the target audience: they are told that young Dai boys are sent to a monastery at an early age, and that locals encourage Osmanthus to do the same with Zoey, Danrui's little brother. After three months, boys may leave the monastery if they choose not to become monks (还俗). Like Danrui, Zoey deeply loves his mother, reflecting the prominent role mothers play in Dai culture, and is happy to go, believing it will help his mother ascend to heaven. Yet Osmanthus's words sound more Han than Dai: "We, the Dai people, have not had special schools to train our children from ancient times to modern times, and have relied entirely on *kyaungs*¹ to preserve and spread our national culture" (28). No Dai person would say this, since monastery schools *are* schools for training children. As McCarthy argues, for the Dai, "state-provided education [...] is lacking in application to rural life" (80).

The conundrum is that the Dai's perceived backwardness is consistently associated with their values and Buddhist practices, particularly the detachment outsiders mistake for passivity.

Despite these alienating elements, the monastery's significance in Dai social life emerges through tragedy. One night a fire consumes the monastery, killing two boys; Zoey flees in terror, runs up the mountain, and hits his head on a tree, shouting "fire." In shock, he is confined while his mother prays. Danrui stops attending school to help, and Osmanthus's sister arrives from Yangon urging that Zoey be taken to a larger hospital. Osmanthus blames herself, believing her husband would

¹ A *kyaung* is a monastery (*vihara*), comprising the domestic quarters and workplaces of Buddhist monks.

have prevented the tragedy. Readers observe a subtle cause-effect link between Zoey's monastery attendance, framed as "not a special school," and disaster. Notably, the fire occurs the night before his planned departure: had he stayed, would the tragedy have been averted?

The authors deliberately embed historical and geographical codes to highlight Dai transnational agency in modern political contexts. Dao's father, an ambitious man, left for Tokyo to study, where Sun Yat-sen's call to expel the "Tatar barbarians" inspired him to join the United League and spread revolutionary ideas among southwestern minorities, aiming to "save the Chinese nation, including the Dai people" (77).

The Dai way of life, often labeled backward under Han-dominated worldviews, is quietly subverted through the Dai people's transnational connections. Dao recounts his father's frustration that boys could only learn their language in monasteries, with no instruction in mathematics, physics, or chemistry, so he hired teachers and established the first elementary school in Mengwanba so that his children could "make due contributions to the progress and prosperity of the Dai people" (79). Danrui notes that Myanmar faced the same educational dilemma until state-run institutions were established—implicitly highlighting the shared historical experiences of Dai communities across borders. The Dai are not confined within the political boundaries of the PRC but form a larger ethnolinguistic network spanning Southwest China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and even Assam in India. Their cross-border kinship, religious practices, and educational traditions point to a transnational Dai identity shaped as much by regional flows as by national policies.¹

Buddhist devotion is another recurring element. In Yangon, little Nanman visits Shwedagon Pagoda to pray for protection and notices poor flower sellers, realizing not everyone shares her wealth, an enlightening journey. At their pension she befriends Indian staff, highlighting India's persistent presence in the novel (the Dai are also found in Assam).

When Dao dies, cannons are shot seven times to mark the passing of the last *tusi* of Mengwanba, a status the authors emphasize repeatedly. Danrui is only 28. Funerary tradition appears in the bamboo figures in the courtyard: "each as tall as a real person and dressed in clothing [...] These figures represented attendants, servants, and soldiers who serve Dao in the underworld" (446).

4. Reception and Criticism

Published in 1988, *NGQT* is "the first full-length new work written by Dai writers

¹ For a more comprehensive analysis of these transnational dynamics, see Moratto (2025).

since the founding of the People's Republic of China that reflects the modern social changes and real life of the Dai people" (Zhang 54). Although Yan et al. claim the novel received widespread attention,¹ the actual response has been relatively lukewarm. A Google Scholar search for “南国情天” yields only two papers, none in English.²

As Wang frankly states, the novel “has not attracted the attention of the ethnic literature community, let alone the literary world in China” (86). Non-Chinese critics have followed suit: no work to date exclusively discusses the novel despite its pioneering status.

For Zhang, the novel's value lies in being “a true and graphic record of the historical changes of the modern Dai people” (55), depicting through turbulent upheavals the lives, thoughts, and characters of the Dai in China, their upper-class figures, the Burmese, and the wider world. Wang credits it with critical social significance, arguing that “through the marriage and love between Dao Chengzong and Danrui, the novel reveals the contradictions and ugliness [*sic*] within the feudal lords of the Dai people” (86), an “ugliness” he traces to a lack of internal cohesion and stunted productivity. Wang's analysis reflects a(n alleged) Marxist lens emphasizing class struggle that may overshadow other readings of the characters and social structures. Overall, however, critics recognize the novel as a reflection of Sino-Burmese friendship embodied in Dai transnational ties³ and appreciate it from the perspective of socialist realism.⁴

The novel also has shortcomings, notably its limited inclusion of Dai legends. Zhang further argues that it lacks depth and perspective on the historical events of the 1940s and 1950s, fails to explore the Kuomintang's shift from anti-Japanese to anti-communist positions.⁵ The characters' lives in Myanmar are portrayed superficially, with flat depictions of the British and allied forces. While the novel highlights the tenderness of transnational ethnic groups, Zhang finds it lacks the grandeur needed for a more compelling narrative.

In the early 1980s, humanist and neo-enlightenment discourses dominated; by the late 1980s, root-seeking literature and modernism were emerging. *NGQT* can to

1 See Yan et al., eds, *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 804.

2 As of January 27, 2023.

3 See Yan et al., eds, *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 806.

4 See Wang Song, “A New Beginning for Dai Literature—Review of the Long Novel ‘Nanguo Qingtian’,” *Studies of Ethnic Literature* 3 (1991): 86-89.

5 See Zhang Chengyuan, “A Historical Scroll of the Modern Life of the Dai People—Review of the First Full-length Novel of the Dai People ‘Nanguo Qingtian’,” *Novel Review* 4 (1991): 54-57.

some extent be read as belonging to the root-seeking school: its exploration of inner lives and polyphonic dialogues on enlightenment and development (i.e. Bakhtin's dialogism) extends the humanist and neo-enlightenment discourse of the early 1980s.

NGQT continues the literary trends of the early 1980s: history serves only as a background for reflecting on modernization, enlightenment, and the fate of individuals and communities, not as the text's purpose. The authors, not historians, can only reproduce the pre- and post-WWII period through documents and materials (rather than lived experience), and even faithful reproduction is limited. This is the paradox of realism: no matter how realistic it is, it remains fiction. We can only discuss how the "realistic effect" of realist fiction is "realistic."¹ Rather than measuring the novel against typicality and realism, one should attend to its rootedness, how the authors mobilize contemporary Chinese literary resources to highlight the Dai situation and negotiate Dai identity in the globalized context of the late 1980s.

I agree with Yan et al. that the characters are multifaceted, represented in their emotional, cultural, social, ethnic, and psychological dimensions²; even E'jing, whose deeds receive little detail, leaves a strong impression. Politically significant characters, however, are treated less *in-profundum*. Yan et al. attribute this to the authors' unfamiliarity with certain political scenarios³.

5. Conclusion and Limitations of This Study

This paper has analyzed the Chinese-language novel *NGQT*, examining how Fang Yunqin and Zheng Peng articulate Dai ethnic identity and transnational agency. After tracing the origins of the Dai people in China and surveying their literary genres—both written and oral, the analysis focused on *NGQT* as a "new" Dai authorial voice in New China, reading the novel through its paratextual features and thematic representations of cultural clash. As Yan et al. acknowledge, the mere fact that *NGQT* is the first novel in the history of Dai literature in China warrants further attention.⁴ Moreover, contrary to some scholarly claims⁵, the typical and

1 This argument was inspired by Roland Barthes' concept of the "reality effect," which refers to the abundance of concrete details and signifiers in the text that seem functionless, yet actually serve to transform the tripartite nature of the sign, creating a direct connection between the object and its expression (qtd. in Adams 11).

2 See Yan et al., eds, *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 811.

3 See Yan et al., eds, *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 812.

4 See Yan et al., eds, *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 810.

5 See Zhang Chengyuan, "A Historical Scroll of the Modern Life of the Dai People—Review of the First Full-length Novel of the Dai People 'Nanguo Qingtian'," *Novel Review* 4 (1991): 57.

culture-bound characterization of the protagonists is itself a significant achievement of Fang and Zheng's work as Dai, and thus "ethnic," writers.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study devoted to the first novel in Dai literary history, but it is limited in scope. Future research focusing on other authors is warranted, including writers of other ethnicities engaging Dai topics, themes, or places.

A few final remarks on the role of the ethnic writer. Is the mission only to write about one's own ethnicity? Wang contends that a writer who "loses sight of the history and changes in the social life of his people [...], his own literary traditions [and] linguistic characteristics [...] loses the meaning of his existence as an ethnic writer" (87). This paternalistic stance is echoed by Yan et al., who insist that an ethnic writer's work loses its cultural style if disconnected from tradition, and must preserve and innovate within that heritage to be appreciated.¹

I argue, however, that the value of a novel should be judged, irrespective of whether it is written by a "native writer" in the "soil of his own traditional culture." That said, the fact that Dai authors write about their own customs may, though not necessarily, lend a further element of authenticity to the material. This point warrants further attention in future research.

It is hoped that more international literary scholars will recognize the works of Dai authors, as well as those of Han authors addressing Dai themes, as an integral component of World Literature. Here, as elsewhere², I would like to end with a warning and a wish beautifully articulated by Spivak: "Higher education in the humanities should be strengthened so that the literary imagination can continue to de-transcendentalize the nation and shore up the redistributive powers of the regionalist state in the face of global priorities. Imagine this, please, for a new world around the corner" (58).

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1 See Yan et al., eds, *Literary History of the Dai People*, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, 1995, 812.

2 See Riccardo Moratto, "Literary Representations of the Thái in the First Thái Novel in Vietnamese Literary History," *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture* 2 (2025): 115-131.

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