

PREFACE

My interest in exploring the native chieftaincy (*tusi*) system in southwest China grew out of my undergraduate study of the Song dynasty poet-official Fan Chengda's observations on the *man* (southern 'barbarians') in his monograph, *Guihai yuhengzhi* (Record of a Posting to the Forests, Mountains and Waterways in Guangxi). Written in 1175, it provided a direct record of many aspects of Han Chinese colonial administration in China's southwest frontier and its interaction with the local tribal chieftaincies during that time.

Fan's thoughts as he set off on his posting, revealing a sensibility quite at odds with the usual trepidation of the central Chinese bureaucrat posted to the ecologically hazardous and culturally alien south, captured my imagination:

I was setting off from Weiyuan on a military assignment to Guangxi. My relatives and friends had seen me off – thereafter, their place was taken by the wild districts and picturesque landscapes, which became my companions. I brought with me poetry written by the Tang poets, and read what I could on the Guilin (Guangxi) area. Dufu had said it brought the people felicity, Bai Juyi said it was not miasmal, and Hanyu wrote, when he reached Xiangnan Jiangshan, that it was more stunning than where the Canluan sages had ventured. So, for a travelling official hastening to the region, could anything be better? ¹

Recalling his arrival at the heart of the administrative districts (which were essentially protectorates) to which he had been assigned, Fan wrote:

By the third month of 1173, I had reached the commandery, where the weather was indeed clear and comfortable, just as I had heard. The wondrousness of their caverns and mountain peaks, the simple and unadulterated nature of their customs, and the splendour and power of their prefec-

¹ Fan Chengda, *Guihai yuhengzhi* (Record of a Posting to the Forests, Mountains and Waterways of Guangxi), in *Nanfang caomu zhuang (wai shi er zhong)* (A Record of Plants and Trees in the Southern Regions [and twelve others]) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), Preface, pp. 589–367. This work is also available in several other publications, such as the annotated version by Qi Zheping, *Guihai yuheng zhi xiaobu* (Nanning: Guangxi minzu chubanshe, 1994). The most thorough annotated version to date is by Hu Qiwan and Qin Guangguang, *Guihai yuhengzhi jiyi jiaozhu* (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1986).

tural administration, far surpassed what I had heard. I do not look down on their people, whose simplicity is tinged with compassion, who trust in each other's sincerity, and lack any malevolence towards one another. They reap harvests continuously, and their commanders treat books lightly. I resided there for two years, during which my heart was at peace.²

Fan also described how he memorialized the Emperor repeatedly, without success, to allow him to stay on in Guangxi at the end of his posting rather than accept his new orders to go to Sichuan. When Fan finally had to take his leave, the local *man* saw him on his way, proffering wine and stretching out their farewells for as long as two days after Fan had gone outside the city wall. Such reminiscences revealed a senior Han Chinese official at ease with border administration over the non-Han peoples in China's southwest who already had an established prefectural administration, were culturally more receptive and less aggressive than the non-Han in the north and northwest and were, like the Han, skilful at wet-rice farming. A kind of communion was evident, even though such feelings may well have been engendered by Fan's literary sensibilities. Nevertheless, I decided that further investigation of Han Chinese colonial administration in Guangxi could provide a fruitful and colourful source of postgraduate research. I was fortunate to be able to investigate the evolution and later development of the Chinese protectorates into *tusi* native chieftaincies through the abundance of Chinese language materials on the *tusi* system available to me when I embarked on my PhD thesis. Perhaps because of my legal training, I was also drawn to the task of piecing together and systematically recording the political, social and economic systems which formed the basis of this *tusi* native chieftaincy. My PhD supervisor, Professor David Holm, brought to my attention the 1950s ethnological data on the Zhuang, revised and reprinted in the 1980s, from which I discovered a wealth of information on *tusi* native chieftaincies in Guangxi. A subsequent trip to Guangxi funded by The University of Melbourne enabled me to supplement this data with original classified reports, maps and other local materials, aided wholeheartedly by staff from the Guangxi Nationalities Research Institute, the Guangxi Provincial Library and the Xincheng *tusi* museum.

² Fan Chengda, *Guihai yuhengzhi*.