Tang poetry and the reproduction of nation-building ideology in Chinese society

Patchanee Tangyuenyong
Tang poetry and the reproduction of nation-building ideology in Chinese society

Patchanee Tangyuenyong

Abstract

This article analyzes poetry during the Tang dynasty by using the cultural dimension as an analytical lens. I have selected eighty-seven Tang poems dealing with war that were compiled in the Complete Tang Poetry (全唐诗 Quán Táng Shī), commissioned by the Kangxi 康熙 emperor of the Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1911 AD). The article takes the approach of discourse studies, which postulates that language, literature, culture, and society are inseparably related. These poems were compiled by the Qing court to shape tradition and form a dominant ideology in the society. They contain hidden agendas on subjects such as race, class, and gender. These poems are good resources for analyzing the power relations, discourse, and ideology embedded in them. I focus on the relationship between discourse and ideology, especially the interplay of dominant discourse, counter-dominant discourse, and ideology.

Introduction

Chinese literature has been regarded as a literary culture rich in both written and oral works. Among Chinese literary genres, poetry has always been considered the most outstanding mainstream literature, the one that forms the identity of Chinese individuals and Chinese society (Wright and Twitchett, 1973: 38). Since the Han 汉 dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), Chinese emperors have mainly employed Confucian philosophy to govern the country. As a result, Confucius’ ways of thinking and his values became major influences in Chinese society. Moreover, Confucianism has played a vital role in the creation of Chinese literature. Under Confucianism, a poet is
responsible for criticizing and cultivating society, as well as for acting as “the voice of morality” of that era. Therefore, Chinese poets interacted with and responded to the society from the beginning. The ability to compose poetry functions as an indicator of how subtle and sublime one’s thinking is. Thus, the ability to use language as a communication medium demonstrates the poet’s education and his place in the scholarly world.

The Tang dynasty (618–907 AD), when effective governance strengthened the nation, has been regarded as “the Golden Age of Chinese Empire.” During this period, China became one of the most prosperous nations in the world (Wright and Twitchett, 1973: 1), and the dimension of power entered the Chinese poetic realm.

By imperial command, poetry was scheduled as one of the major subjects for the Imperial Examination System (科举制度 kējǔ zhídù). Because poetry now functioned as a ladder by which one could rise in reputation, honor, power and wealth, and because it bestowed social and economic values onto Chinese scholars, Chinese people during the Tang dynasty became extremely interested in augmenting their literary skills and building their literary fundamentals. One could say that they were “inhaling and exhaling” poetry. During the Tang dynasty, poetry seeped into every social activity, such as giving warnings to those holding power, and spread to various public platforms, such as those concerning politics, foreign affairs, social networks, and entertainment. These factors made the Tang dynasty renowned as “the Golden Age of Chinese Poetry.”

Poetry in the Tang dynasty has various themes. Poetry dealing with war was abundant, leading to the emergence of a “School of Frontier Poetry” (边塞诗派 biānshāi shīpài) for the first time in the history of Chinese literature. Twenty-four emperors were enthroned during the three hundred years of the Tang dynasty, and there were up to 192 wars during that time. On average, each Tang emperor engaged in eight battles (Fu Zhongxia, 1985: 570). The frequency of war can be interpreted as a sign that rulers more or less sanctioned these battles, legitimizing them for their people. And thus, social and economic prosperity was significantly related to state power.
I have been interested in poetry on war because art related to war can reflect the naked soul of human beings. I would argue that no set of circumstances can echo what it means to be human as clearly as war. Wartime is the period when human beings most suffer from bodily and spiritual hunger. Moreover, I have found that war poetry acts as a “space of meaning” which clearly illustrates power relations in society, and particularly their racial, class, and gender dimensions. However, since there is limited space in this article, I will address only the racial aspect by examining how war poetry constructs dominant discourse and counter-dominant discourse on this theme.

Furthermore, I will analyze the ideology hidden behind the language in these discourses. Although the nature of warfare and the identity of national enemies have since changed, the war poetry of the Tang dynasty has been employed continuously from the seventh century to the current time. I will examine why ethnic groups who were classified as non-Han and as enemies of national security were demoted to “barbarian” status. Even when barbarian tribes took state power and ruled China for more than three hundred years (the Yuan dynasty of the Mongols lasted from 1279 to 1368 AD, and the Qing dynasty of the Manchurians from 1644 to 1911 AD), they could not reject this Tang poetry. Chinese courts repeatedly commissioned compilations of these Tang poems, ensuring preservation, reproduction, and continuity in the literary world.

Discourse, power, and ideology

The word “discourse” is employed here to mean ways of thinking that are presented through texts. Texts can illustrate perspectives and worldviews from any given time or group of people. Conceptual thoughts are not universal, but are formulated in the context of cultural suppositions shared by people within a society. Discourse is important because it joins power and knowledge together. Those who have power have control over what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1998: 72). Knowledge is power. In order to make a
society conform, those who determine knowledge must have authoritative power to specify ways of thinking.

Michel Foucault (1925–1984), the French post-structuralist philospher, posited that discursive formation is a process to construct subjects and construct meanings of everything in the society. Discourse consists of a group of statements embedded with power and the ideology of the society in certain periods (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates, 2005: 75). The language and discourse selected to communicate conceals certain conceptual ideas on society and social actions. Power relations, identity, and certain forms of social ideology are always present in the language in use. However, discourse is about more than issues of language or speech because it consists of discursive practices including ideas, beliefs, values, and other social institutions.

What is ideology? Louis Althusser (1918–1990) argued that there were two ways that a state could exert control over its subjects—through the repressive state apparatus, such as law, the police, and prisons; or through the ideological state apparatus, meaning tools for controlling ways of thinking, such as religion, education, art, and literature (Booker, 1996: 82). The latter approach gradually cultivates attitudes and beliefs beneficial for state power and governance. Therefore, ideology is a system of ideas and representations that does not originate from thought. Instead, it is shaped by social structures filled with illusions. Every society must be formed by ideology in order to equip individuals to manage their real conditions of existence. Hence, any society requires a thinking system, belief system, and value system to enable human beings to survive in the world.

Teun A. van Dijk interestingly argued that ideology is power, but a kind of thinking power. It consists of discourse which acts as a tool for disseminating one group’s ideas to win over other people. Van Dijk proposed that ideology may be presented via various linguistic methods, such as the lexical method that focuses on vocabulary selection and interpretation, or rhetorical devices such as metaphor and hyperbole (Van Dijk, 2000: 208). These methods play a vital role in disseminating ideology embedded in language.

I argue that Tang war poetry employs discursive practices that emphasize the Han ethnic group’s idea of “nationalism.” In the
process of constructing discourse on ethnic nationalism, Chinese poets employed various linguistic methods noted by van Dijk, such as the naming of ethnic groups involved, metaphors, intertextuality, as well as representations of other ethnic groups as violent imposters. Some poems used one method, while others employed numerous methods simultaneously.

Discourse on ethnic nationalism is embedded in state ideology, which in this case was the ideology of nation-building, of the unification of Han Chinese in China, and of the establishment of stability within the Chinese empire. Since Tang poetry had long been a subject for official examination, it cultivated the reproduction of nation-building ideology in Chinese intellectuals, and encouraged conformity of understanding. However, power has a binary aspect. That is to say, it involves domination and resistance (Edger and Sedgwick, 2002: 74). Analysis of war poetry in a discursive way, covering both linguistic and social dimensions, can illustrate hidden power and inserted ideology.

**Discourse on ethnic nationalism in war poetry during the Tang Dynasty**

All through the history of mankind, the human race has never been free from conflict. These conflicts have occurred ever since two human beings lived in the world. Another human being's survival means less opportunity for the first human to possess property, or more intrusion into the others' living space. World culture since ancient times can be divided into two main strands. The first group is the valley civilization or agricultural culture. People in this category tended to love their lands, have a well-defined social system and hierarchy, and a clear-cut familial lineage. The second group is the tribal civilization or nomadic culture. People in this category mostly dwelled in the highlands or deserts, herding livestock, and tended to organize the society loosely with vague familial lineage.

China is a valley society whose outer territories border herding societies. For this reason, China has always been confronted with military crises in distant frontier lands. The clash of civilizations has been occurring for a long time in Chinese history. Inter-state
warfare during the era of Chinese feudalism often meant inter-ethnic battles between agricultural tribes and nomadic ones. The Great Wall of China symbolizes the ultimate boundary, the division between these two groups.

In the Tang dynasty, four ethnic tribes often clashed with the Han Chinese. They were the Turks (突厥 Tūjué), the Tibetans (吐蕃 Tūbō), the Huihu (回鹘 Huihú) and the Yunnan (云南 Yúnnán). The most problematic tribe was the Tibetans (Ge Zhaoguang, 2001: 112). The conflict between the Han Chinese and the Tibetan tribe was unavoidable because the Han Chinese wanted to protect the Silk Road, the main economic route connecting China with Central Asia. Silk has long been one of the most significant exports of China, carried by two routes: the land route along the Silk Road, and the ocean route past India. However, as shipping was not advanced during the Tang dynasty, people mostly transported goods via the land route. As a result, Han Chinese had to engage in repeated battles with Tibetans in order to scramble for power over the Silk Road.

Han Chinese history ultimately comes down to a process of unifying various tribes under the Han Chinese leadership. A sense of nationhood and sentiments of nationalism emerged in the eighteenth century. Before that, people did not define their identity with reference to their nation. Instead, identity was more linked to categories like tribe, race, ethnicity, and religion. Ethnic nationalism functioned as a means to integrate people within the nation. War poetry during the Tang dynasty constructs two discourses on ethnic nationalism: the discourse on patriotism and the anti-war discourse.

The discourse on patriotism

Showing that the survival of the Han Chinese was in danger was a way to establish the legitimacy of making war, and of demanding the necessary sacrifice from the people in the nation. War was described as a space for creating heroism and proving one’s value in the battlefield, in order to move up the social ladder and be eulogized and honored. Many involved in such wars were willing to give their lives for a higher calling, thereby fulfilling an inner quest for fame and recognition by others.
War is an eradication of national enemies who are savage barbarians.

The notion that it is spiritually uplifting to be courageous and make sacrifices can be found among numerous war poems during the Tang dynasty. Certain poems—and specific sentences within them—have become key texts for arousing patriotism in Chinese society until the current time, for instance, “If we do not defeat Loulan, we may not return home,” a line from a poem entitled “Following the Army on Campaign” (从军行Cóngjūn xíng) (QTS 143/014)⁵ by Wang Cangling 王昌龄 (698–756 AD). The poem reads:

黃沙百戰穿金甲，
不破樓蘭終不還。

The sands wear out the mail and chain;
If we do not defeat Loulan, we may not return home.⁶

Loulan was the name of a small state located in the northwestern part of China during the Han dynasty. This state used to assassinate envoys from the Han empire so many times that Han emperors sent armies to eradicate them, eventually capturing and killing the Loulan lords. The word “Loulan” in this poem is a metaphor for every enemy tribe who invaded the northwestern part of China.

The “Song of Longxi” (陇西行 Lǒngxī xíng) (QTS 746/054) by Chen Tao 陈陶 (812–85 AD), describes the enemies of the nation:

誓扫匈奴不顾身。

They vowed to crush the Xiongnu, holding their lives light.⁷

The Xiongnu were one of the tribes who dwelled in the frontier lands in the north and northwest of China in ancient times. They were regarded as the first enemy of national security of China in the Han dynasty.

Tang poet Du Mu 杜牧 (803–852 AD) expressed his concern about the nation by warning the authorities against carelessness in governance which would lead to the end of the nation. One of his
poems entitled “Mooring on the Qinhuai River” (泊秦淮Bó Qínhuái) (QTS 523/019) clearly states:

商女不知王国恨，
隔江犹唱后庭花。
The sing-song girls don’t understand the bitterness of losing a kingdom,
Across the river they are still singing the “Backyard flowers.”

“Backyard flowers” comes from a song called “Emerald Trees and Backyard Flowers” (玉树后庭花 Yùshù hòuting huā). A flower commonly planted in backyards in the Jiangnan 江南 area came to be known as “Hòuting Flower” (“hòuting” means “backyard”). The plant has red and white blossoms. When it is fully grown, its twigs and leaves turn emerald green, hence “Emerald Trees and Backyard Flowers.” Someone wrote a song about this flower. Emperor Chen Houzu 陈后祖, the last emperor of the Chen 陈 dynasty during the Southern and Northern dynasties 南北朝 (420–589 AD), added lyrics to this “Backyard Flowers” song and ordered court ladies to sing it. Later when enemies invaded his soil, Emperor Chen Houzu did not realize the danger at first, but instead indulged in singing this song with court ladies, resulting in the loss of his land to the Sui. Thus, people in later generations named this the “Song of Chaos” or “Song of the End of the Nation.”

The poet Gao Shi 高适 (706–765 AD) wrote a “Song of Yan” (燕歌行 Yàngē xíng) (QTS 213/055) warning generals not to be careless regarding their enemies. The first and second lines talk about preparation prior to battle, saying:

汉家烟尘在东北，
汉将辞家破残贼。
In Han days, with the smoke of battle on the north-east border,
Han generals left their homes to smash the evil invader.  

The seventh and eighth lines read as follow:
The Tartar Khan’s hunting fires glimmered on Wolf Mountain.  

The poem entitled “They Fought South of the Walls” (战城南 Zhan cheng nan) (QTS 017/007) by renowned poet Li Bai 李白 (701–762 AD) emphasizes how long war lasted throughout the Qin and Han dynasties, and how enemies of the nation and wars against them have been constant from the Han to the Tang dynasty. Two lines in the poem read:

秦家筑城避胡处，
汉家还有烽火然。 

Where the Chin built a wall to keep out the Tartars,
The Han still light a beacon fire.  

The poem named “An Old General” (老将行 Laojiang xing) (QTS 125/090) by Wang Wei 王维 (701–761 AD) narrates a story of one warrior who had been fighting ever since entering the battlefield at fifteen years of age. This poem highlights courage, determination, and the fight against obstacles. The first two lines read:

少年十五二十时，
步行夺得胡马骑。 

In the days of his youth, between fifteen and twenty,
He chased a Tartar horse, seized it and rode it off.  

Later, the eighth and ninth lines describe situations during war.

汉兵奋迅如霹雳，
虏骑奔腾畏蒺藜。 

When his Han soldiers stormed on like a crash of thunder,
War as a space for creating heroism.

War is a way to prove one's value as a brave man. A long period of warfare requires a great number of soldiers. During the Tang dynasty, Chinese society encouraged intellectuals to engage in military service. This action represented loyalty to the emperor in accordance with the Confucian concept of the Five Relations. Furthermore, it correlated with the life-goal of Chinese men, which involved the four steps of self-development: self-cultivation (修身 xīushēn), family management (齐家 qíjiā), country administration (治国 zhìguó), and pacification in the world (平天下 píng tiānxià). Thus, engagement in war might lead to an official appointment, initiating a chance to govern the country and guaranteeing the existence and peacefulness of the nation after the mission was completed, albeit with many human lives lost.

Gao Shi described war heroism in his “Song of Yan” Lines 3 and 4 read as follow:

男儿本自重横行,

天子非常赐颜色。

Young men are by nature eager for brave deeds,

The Son of Heaven deigns to bestow them many favors.¹⁴

The lines emphasize loyalty to the emperor by serving the country, while the emperor bestows favors in return. In addition, Gao Shi presented a story of a Han hero named General Li Guang (李广 ? –125 BC) in lines 27 and 28:

君不见沙场征战苦，

至今犹忆李将军。

Do you not see the hardships of war on the battlefield?,

Even now we still remember the exploits of General Li.¹⁵
In Chinese history, Li Guang was one of the renowned generals during the Han dynasty (Xia Zhengnong, 1989: 1421). He fought battles against Xiongnu more than seventy times. During the reign of Emperor Han Wudi 汉武帝 (156–87 BC), Xiongnu led troops to invade China. Emperor Han Wudi commanded Li Guang to recruit armies to fight against these enemies. The Xiongnu troops were of immense power. Li Guang’s armies were defeated and scattered. He himself was injured and captured as a prisoner of war. But finally, he escaped and survived. However, he had lost a great number of his troops, and as a result, he was sentenced to death. But as the Han dynasty had a law stating a prisoner could redeem himself by paying money, Li Guang collected money in order to do just that. Later he returned to his hometown to live an ordinary life.

Not so long after, Xiongnu led troops to invade China again. Emperor Han Wudi called for Li Guang and re-appointed him to serve as prefect (太守 tàishǒu) at You Bei Ping 右北平 (nowadays located in Liaoning 辽宁 Province). Li Guang had been fighting in wars against Xiongnu most of his life. His courage and warfare skills made him a terrible adversary from his enemies’ perspective. But he was constantly confronted with many great and unexpected obstacles. Throughout his life he was never offered any honorific titles.

The Tang poet Wang Changling eulogized General Li Guang in one of his poems entitled “Passing the Frontier” (出塞Chū sài) (QTS 018/019), saying:

秦时明月汉时关，
万里长征人未还，
但使龙城飞将在，
不教胡马度阴山。

Under the Qin moonlight and through the Han passes,
Mile after mile to battle they marched and never returned,
If only the “Flying General” of the Dragon City were still among us,
Never would the Tartar horsemen cross Yin Mountain.”

13
Since Li Guang moved more swiftly than his enemies could predict and his archery skill was superb, he was called the “Flying General” (飞将军 Fēi jiāngjūn). When Li Guang was appointed to serve at You Bei Ping, the Xiongnu tribe did not dare to invade any longer.

Wang Wei 王维 (699-759 AD) was another renowned Tang poet who portrayed war heroes named General Wei Qing 卫青 and General Huo Qubing 霍去病 in his “Song of Mt. Yanzi” (燕支行 Yànzī xíng) (QTS 125/091).

卫霍才堪一骑将，
朝廷不数贰师功。

General Wei and General Huo are skillful warriors on horseback,
The court does not regard them as second-class officials.

Here “Wei” refers to Wei Qing (?–106 BC) who was one of the best known generals during the Han dynasty (Xia Zhengnong, 1989: 462). He was born into a low-class family. His father was a servant in a station owned by the Lord of Pingyang 平阳侯 named Cao Shou 曹寿. Once grown up, Wei Qing was responsible for taking care of the horses in this station. Later, when his elder sister Wei Zifu 卫子夫 was selected as a court lady and became a favorite consort of Emperor Han Wudi, Wei Qing’s status improved.

By the time Li Guang was captured by the Xiongnu as a war prisoner and escaped from them, of all four Han troops, only Wei Qing’s was victorious. He was bestowed the title “Lord of Changping” 长平侯. Later on Wei Qing’s defeat of the Xiongnu and his other triumphs gained him merit many times. In 124 BC, Wei Qing led an army of thirty thousand soldiers to chase the Xiongnu fighters outside the Great Wall. Moving rapidly, he was able to encircle Prince You Xian (右贤王) and eventually captured over fifteen thousand prisoners of war. The position of Prince You Xian was merely one level lower than that of the Xiongnu chieftain, Chan Yu 单于.

After Emperor Han Wudi heard of the victory, he immediately commanded his officials to bring the major general’s seal to the
military station and announced the promotion of Wei Qing to commander-in-chief. Even his three young sons were appointed to be lords (侯 hóu, equivalent to the Thai noble rank of Chaophraya). However, Wei Qing rejected this honor, saying the fact that he had won victory was due to the soldiers’ merits. Besides, his three sons were still too young. If the emperor appointed them to be lords, then how could warriors see the necessity to prove their merit in the future? After the emperor had listened to Wei Qing’s warnings, he bestowed the title of lord on all generals under Wei Qing’s supervision.

General Huo Qubing (140–117 BC) was another famous general in the Han dynasty (Xia Zhengnong, 1989: 2247). His mother was Empress Wei Zifu’s elder sister, and hence he was considered a relative of the empress and General Wei Qing’s nephew. Like Wei Qing, General Huo was also a courageous warrior and skilled archer on horseback. When he was eighteen years of age, he joined with Wei Qing in battles against the Xiongnu and was able to kill many significant figures of the Xiongnu tribe. This was regarded as an immense achievement. After the war, he was bestowed the title “Lord of Guan Jun” 冠军候.

In 121 BC, Huo Qubing became commander-in-chief, leading ten thousand cavalrmen from Longxi 陇西 to attack Xiongnu. Huo’s troops prevailed and chased the Xiongnu armies thousands of miles away. Besides, he captured some important Xiongnu figures as prisoners of war. When Emperor Han Wudi thought about rewarding Huo by building a station for him, he rejected the offer, saying:

匈奴不灭，无以家为也。

As long as Xiongnu has not yet been eradicated, how can I own a house?

This line later became a key statement describing patriotism.

In 119 BC, Emperor Han Wudi thought about completely eradicating Xiongnu. He ordered Wei Qing and Huo Qubing to each lead fifty thousand soldiers to attack Xiongnu from two different directions. Wei Qing covered thousands of miles in the
desert until he reached Xiongnu territory. After a massive battle, Wei Qing won. In the meantime, Huo Qubing also journeyed through desert land for over two thousand miles. He attacked Prince Zuo Xian’s armies until they were defeated and dispersed. Eventually, he invaded faraway Mt. Lang Ju Xi (nowadays located in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia).

Through this battle, the Han troops extended their territories and chased their enemies further away than ever. From this point on, the Xiongnu retreated with their armies to the northern desert and no longer dared to invade China. Huo Qubing engaged in six wars in total and killed more than a hundred thousand enemies. He was bestowed titles four times, including being enfeoffed with the land of 15,100 families. He was also appointed to be commander-in-chief along with Wei Qing. Eventually, Huo Qubing fell ill and passed away when he was merely twenty-four years of age.

Anti-war discourse

A poet has the privilege to employ poetry as a means to resist power. The status of poetry enables any poet to use his legitimacy and his artistic abilities to negotiate with official discourse that has influence upon peoples’ lives in society. In the tradition of Chinese literature, poets are obliged to criticize in order to preserve or save society. Recording reality in the form of history was hazardous as the emperor might impose a death penalty. However, recording in a literary form did not refer directly to reality, and literary language was an effective tool for criticism. Opposition to war is expressed in war poetry by portraying war as disaster, and telling both parties, the Chinese and their “barbaric” foes alike, that war will bring nothing but sorrow and loss into their lives. Two sets of discourse were constructed.

War equals separation and death.

Poet Li Bai discussed separation and death caused by war in many of his poems. For instance, in “A Song of an Autumn Midnight” (子夜吴歌・秋歌 Zǐ yè wú gē • Qiū gē) (QTS 165/029), Li Bai talked about a young lady who looked at the moon in the sky over Chang’an, the capital of the Tang empire,
with concern about her husband who was engaged in battle.

何日平胡虏，
良人罢远征。

Oh, when will the Tartar troops be conquered,
And my husband come back from the long campaign!  

In “Moon over a Mountain Pass” (关山月 Guān shān yuè) (QTS 018/053), Li Bai emphasized separation and death:

汉下白登道，
胡窥青海湾，
由来征战地，
不见有人还。

The army of Han has gone down the Bai Deng Road,
As the barbarian hordes probe at Qinghai Bay,
It is known that from the battlefield,
Few ever live to return.  

Mt. Bai Deng was located in Shanxi province where Emperor Han Gaozu 汉高祖, the first Han emperor, was captured by the Xiongnu for seven days. “Qinghai” here can be literally translated as “Blue Sea.” It was the westernmost area on the frontier of China. Its name derives from a vast lake (currently in Qinghai province). During the Tang dynasty, Qinghai was governed by Tibetans.

Another Li Bai poem entitled “They Fought South of the Walls” (QTS 017/077) also projects an image of horrifying war.

匈奴以杀戮为耕作，
古来唯见白骨黄沙田。

The Tartars live on killing and slaughter,
Since of old there have been white bones in the yellow sands.
Here Li Bai used words like “white bones in the yellow sands” to represent death faraway from home and death without funerals.

In addition, the poem “The Old Man of Xinfeng with the Broken Arm” (Xīnfēng zhé bì wēng) (QTS 426/009) by Bai Juyi (772–846 AD) portrays the life of a man who was enlisted to do battle at Nanzhao during the Tianbao period of Emperor Tang Xuanzong (685–762 AD). He feared for his death. In the middle of the night, he grabbed a stone and smashed his right arm until it was paralyzed in the hope that he would survive since he could no longer shoot arrows or carry flags. Lines 21 and 22 read:

２１

They all said, of those who went out to fight the barbarians,
Not one out of thousand lived to come back. ２０

Here the word “barbarian” refers to savage tribes in the south of China. Lines 38 and 39 state:

２１

I would die, my spirit fled, and my bones left to rot,
I would have wandered, a ghost in Yunnan looking for home.

In this poem, Bai Juyi employed the metaphor of “bones” to represent death faraway from home—something everyone feared. From a Chinese viewpoint, death in foreign lands, even by natural causes, is unacceptable. The Chinese believe that their descendants are obliged to worship the older generations who have passed away because the ancestors’ spirits will transform into deities who protect them. Therefore, death in the battlefield on foreign soil is a most tragic circumstance as the ancestors will not find their way back home and their descendants will have no one to protect them.
“Song of War Carts” (兵车行 Bīngchē xíng) (QTS 216/011) by Du Fu 杜甫 (717–770 AD) also depicts people’s suffering, during the time when Emperor Tang Xuanzong decided to fight against the Tibetans. The poem begins with a weeping man and ends with crying ghosts. The poem reads:

君不见青海头，
古来白骨无人收，
新鬼烦冤旧鬼哭，
天阴雨湿声啾啾。  
Sir, have you not seen, near Qinghai,  
The white bones from olden times no one collects?  
New ghosts complain, old ghosts lament,  
At night or in the rain their voices moan.  

Du Fu described death in the war as something repeated time after time. He also used the metaphor of white bones left behind without burial in the barbarian soil.

In Chinese culture, a family with no male descendant is regarded as unfilial towards its ancestors. Yet, Du Fu related how people hoped to have daughters rather than sons during wartime. The melancholy behind this reason was conveyed in the poem, as follows:

信之生男恶，
反是生女好，
生女犹是嫁比邻，
生男埋没随百草。  
We truly know the evil of raising sons,  
Opposite are the joys of raising daughters,  
If you have a daughter, you may still marry her to a neighbor,  
If you have a son buried, he will lie with the weeds.
Barbarians are also human beings

The poet Li Qi 李颀 (690?—751? AD) clearly stated the proposition that barbarians are also human in “An Old Marching Song” (古从军行 Gǔ cóngjūn xíng) (133/001). (QTS 216/011)

胡雁哀鸣夜夜飞，
胡儿眼泪双双落。
Tartar geese fly over night after night mournfully honking, 
And the Tartar soldiers’ tears keep falling, falling.24

Here Li Qi sympathized with the barbarians’ fates. His attitude towards war was reflected by his decision to cross the boundary between self and other.

Linguistic methods to construct discourse on ethnic nationalism

Judging from the study of war poetry of the Tang dynasty, I would argue that there are five linguistic methods employed to construct the discourse on ethnic nationalism: naming of other ethnic groups, antagonistic metaphors, metonymy, legends of heroism, and intertextuality.

Naming of other ethnic groups

This method involves Chinese cosmology. Notions such as sovereignty, society, nation states and the political system in the modern world derived from the West (Ge Zhaoguang, 2001: 451). Before that, Chinese society had its own “grammar” of speaking about membership in the national state, which was totally different from western approaches. The Chinese constructed their own cosmology, based on the physical features of the country in which the east connects with the ocean and the other frontier areas connect with different ethnic tribes. In this cosmology, the Han Chinese tribe was at the center, surrounded by barbarian tribes. The divisions of the cosmos were not territorial but cultural (Feng Youlan, 1994: 212). Naming China as the “Middle Kingdom” conveys that China is a dominant center surrounded by marginal peoples of lower civilization. Overpowering these marginal peoples
is a civilizing mission for the Han Chinese.

Before China was a territory, and before concepts of sovereignty or nationhood, the Chinese employed a discursive practice to preserve the Han ethnic group and establish its sovereignty. Under this practice, the Han were described as “civilized people,” while others were derogatorily referred to as “barbarians.” The saying goes: “Han Chinese are civilized, while other surrounding groups are barbarians.” (guizhōnghuá, jiàn yí dǐ)

Words used to name surrounding tribes included “yí”夷 meaning eastern barbarians (exterminate), “mán”蛮 southern barbarians (fierce, unreasoning), “qīāng”羌 western barbarians (lower-class people), “dī” 訇 northern barbarians (inferior clerks) and “hú” 胡, a collective name referring to Tartars or western and northern barbarians (outrageously savage) (Wu Jingrong et al., 1979). Here the words in parentheses are extra meanings related to the original ones that are currently used in the Chinese language. For instance, the word “hú” was used in Tang poems in such phrases as Tartar troops (胡虏 hú lǔ), Tartar horsemen (胡马 hú mǎ) and Tartar geese (胡雁 hú yàn).

All of the above terms were employed with negative connotations. The Han Chinese referred to other surrounding ethnic groups derogatively, positioning them as less civilized people. Here language is used to construct an enemy, such as by the usage of the word “savage” to describe opponents. This kind of language not only indicates or constructs one’s own enemies, but also has implications of threat. Stories or legends about exaggeratedly abominable enemies are created in order to project images of danger and to excite fears over the need for national security. Portraying an enemy as atrocious is also one way to establish the benevolence of those who use more acceptable methods to eradicate enemies.

The language used to construct enemies shifted from an individual level to a social one. The more enemies were depicted as wicked, the more legitimacy and moral purpose there was in destroying such enemies. The language used in the construction of political enemies is not communicative or descriptive but transformative—employed to transform certain individuals or groups of people into political enemies.
Usage of antagonistic metaphors

In Chinese war poetry, “fox” (lang) is used as a metaphor referring to opponents from different ethnic groups in order to portray them as dangerous. In Chinese culture, the fox symbolizes greed and slyness. The animal is a threat to human beings, particularly those dwelling in agricultural society. By nature, the fox likes to steal agricultural products. It is untrustworthy. In contrast, “dragon” (龙 lóng) is used as a metaphor for Han Chinese. The dragon is an imaginary animal with a tiger-like head, snake-like body, eagle-like claws, and deer-like horns. This image was created by assembling the totems of various tribes in Chinese history. These tribes formed alliances which eventually established states. The Han Chinese dragon symbolizes the mutual benefit of the long-term unification of these tribes. It is a symbol of the Chinese emperor. Chinese poetry uses phrases such as “Fox Mountain” (狼山 láng shān), “Fox General” (狼将 láng jiāng) and “Dragon Empire” (龙城 lóng chéng). This naming classifies places and peoples through a set of standards and values. These terms exemplify the language of power. This naming classifies places and peoples according to a set of standards and values which are in turn prescribed by Chinese political paradigms. Thus, these linguistic terms exemplify the language of power as exerted by the Han Chinese.

Metonymy

Some Chinese poets have used metonymy to fight against power. Metonymy is a method in which one word or image is substituted for another with a close and natural connection. (Booker, 1996: 483). Tang poets used words like “Qin” 秦 and “Han” 汉 as adjectives instead of “Tang” 唐. The reason lies in the fact that these three prosperous empires of China shared the same enemies among the nomadic tribes. For instance, the Xiongnu became the most threatening enemy of the Han court, whereas the Tibetans turned out to be the most hazardous foe of the Tang empire. Poems contain words like “Qin Moon” (秦月Qín yuè), “Han Pass” (汉关 Hàn guān), and “Han General” (汉将 Hán jiāng). The use of words like Qin Moon, Han Pass, and Han
General help position the poems in a distant past, thereby shielding the poets from punishment for their choice of word and intended message. Against such metonymic backdrops at the time, poets were fully aware that the people involved in warfare would face hardship, uncertainty, and the likelihood of never returning home. Yet resistance and rebellion against those in power was hardly an option for the peasants who are the innocent victims of wars.

*Heroic legends*

The heroic deeds of warriors on the battlefield, particularly their combat abilities, self-sacrifice and bravery, are a prominent feature of war poetry in every culture. The image of heroes plays a vital role in augmenting the “power” of warfare. The eulogization of war heroes confers acceptance and approval on their benevolent and righteous deeds. War poetry written in the Tang dynasty often depicted the heroism of various famous generals during the Han dynasty, such as Li Guang, Wei Qing, and Huo Qubing.

*Intertextuality*

Texts acquire meanings by references to other texts of contemporary or different periods (Allen, 2000: 36). Such connections can be found in Tang poetry. For example, the notion of preference for having daughters in “Song of War Carts” by Du Fu refers to a folksong of the Qin dynasty named “Long City Wall” (长城 Chang chéng), which reads:

生男慎勿举，
生女哺用脯。
不见长城下，
尸骸相支拄。

When giving birth to a son, don’t raise him,
When giving birth to a daughter, feed her with dry meat.
Haven’t you seen underneath the Long City Wall?
Corpses are hanging criss-cross.
According to Chinese history, when the First Qin Emperor 秦始皇 commissioned the construction of the Great Wall, numerous men who were enlisted for labor fell ill and died. People suffered so tremendously that they had no desire to have sons for fear that their sons would be enlisted to suffer from this brutal labor and eventually die far away from home. As a result, they yearned to give birth to daughters instead, as daughters were more likely to survive.

All these linguistic methods are employed in constructing discourse because the boundary between ethnic groups is not a natural given but has to be created by language which functions as a regulator and organizer of ways of thinking.

**Discourse on ethnic nationalism and nation-building ideology**

Chinese war poetry reflects the creation of a Han Chinese "ethnically nationalistic" identity. Han identity was a gold standard, far superior to the identities of other ethnic tribes. The representation of different ethnicities conceals Chinese state ideology on nation-building. The ethnic Chinese had consolidated the Chinese empire on Chinese soil. Chinese poets portrayed other ethnicities in stereotypical ways. At the basic level, the Han Chinese were "civilized people" and others were "barbarians." Ethnic groups were then subcategorized by referring to the Qiang tribe in the west, Yi tribe in the east, Di tribe in the north, and Man tribe in the south. All were reduced to inferiority as mere "savage barbarians." But in reality, every human being has his own ethnic group. No one is without nation; no one lives in the "center" or at the "margin." Furthermore, neither centralization nor marginalization exists eternally. The relation between center and margin remains fluid and unstable. This linguistic regulation echoes how China acts as an authoritative agent which has exercised power over the process of meaning-creation.

The process of national-identity creation rests on a fundamental mythology about the genesis of the nation. The dragon symbolizes a conglomeration of different ethnic tribes. The description of wars to defend the borders emphasizes the shared pain of the people in the nation whose enemies were nomadic tribes, and the superior civilization of the empire.
To convince its people to accept the ideology inserted in Tang poetry as truth, the Chinese state has employed different strategies, particularly by making the study of this poetry a part of the official examination system. Thus, Chinese scholars and bureaucrats unwittingly absorbed the ideology of nation-building.

Conclusion

China is a nation with more than two thousand years of culture and civilization. This reflects the structural dynamics of Chinese ideologies and ideas of social responsibility. Tang poetry contains evidence of the clash among different discourses. Particularly, war poetry reveals crucial ideologies of a society where the authorities wanted to preserve and nurture the social and cultural system.

War poetry during the Tang dynasty used derogatory descriptions of other ethnic groups to construct the legitimacy of armed combat and to affirm the sublimity of Han culture. However, two dynasties ruled by other ethnicities, namely the Yuan (1279-1368 AD) presided over by Mongolians and the Qing (1644-1911 AD) presided over by Manchurians for over 356 years, could not deny the existence of this war poetry because the ideology embedded in these poems was a stabilizing force for the Chinese empire. Moreover, the Han people perceived any ethnic tribes that accepted Han culture as a part of them. Any Mongolians or Manchurians who became sinicized were legitimate and acceptable as “Son of Heaven” (天子 tiānzǐ) or emperor (Anderson, 2006: 13). Hence, Tang war poetry has been continued to circulate in Chinese society up until now. No matter how much Chinese economics, politics, and society have changed, the main ideology remains ingrained in the structure of the Chinese people’s feelings like a second nature.

Notes

1 This paper comes from a research project financially supported by the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University and the Commission on Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Thailand
Tang poetry and the reproduction of nation-building ideology

2 The chronology of Chinese dynasties mentioned in this article is taken from “Chronology in Chinese History” in Ci Hai 菁海, Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 1989, pp. 2345—405.

3 Confucianism prescribed human relations through the “Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues.” The Three Cardinal Guides were: 1. ruler guides subject; 2. father guides son; and 3. husband guides wife. The Five Constant Virtues comprise benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity. The philosophy of Confucianism strengthened and stabilized Chinese sovereignty. As a result, it was valued as a main principle for state administration.

4 The Imperial Examination System or the Merit System began during the sixth century under the Sui dynasty and continued until the nineteenth century under the Qing dynasty, a period of 1,300 years. This system enabled China to draw government officials from every social class. This diversity has shaped the Chinese empire and its long history.

5 QTS is abbreviated from “Quan Tang Shi” (Complete Tang Poetry). The number before / refers to the compilation number, and that behind / refers to a specific chapter in that compilation.

6 All English translations of poems in this article are mine, unless another translator is cited.

10 Herdan, Three Hundred Tang Poems, p. 228.
12 Herdan, Three Hundred Tang Poems, p. 236.
13 Herdan, Three Hundred Tang Poems, p. 236.
14 Liu and Lo, Sunflower Splendor, p. 115.
15 Liu and Lo, Sunflower Splendor, p. 115.
18 Herdan, Three Hundred Tang Poems, p. 103.
19 Herdan, Three Hundred Tang Poems, p. 108.
20 Liu and Lo, Sunflower Splendor, p. 204.
23 See note 22.
References