

Borderlands and Identity Building: The “Frontier Wall for the Miao Territory”  
in the Ming Empire

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During the second half of China’s Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when the imperial court intensified their efforts in rebuilding the Great Wall along the northern frontiers to deal with their external enemies, the government of Huguang Province in the south started to construct a “frontier wall” (bianqiang 邊牆) along the “Miao territory” (Miaojiang 苗疆) inside the empire. Compared to the world-renowned Great Wall in the north, the frontier wall in the south, or the “Southern Great Wall” as promoted in China today, has attracted little scholarly attention. Yet, the less impressive undertaking is no less significant in revealing the enduring process of identity building in China during both imperial times and the People’s Republic. Centered on this newly discovered wall, this essay seeks to examine how the Chinese government perceived and constructed the cultural and ethnic identity of their political entity along the Han-Miao borderlands. It argues that in Ming times, China (the country where the Ming empire happened to be located) and CHINA (Zhongguo 中國, or “the central country/kingdom” as many scholars render) were not identical or interchangeable concepts; and like the Manchu Qing dynasty (1636-1912), the Ming was also a multiethnic polity, embracing Han and a variety of other socio-ethnic groups. This essay will apply and test the new analytical concept of “Zomia,” and illustrate that while “Zomia” is helpful in understanding the “Miao territory,” this study of the “frontier wall” will also enrich the understanding of the scope and duration of “Zomia.”