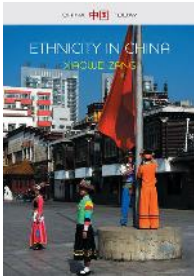


Review: *Ethnicity in China: A Critical Introduction*

Reviewed by Tricia Kehoe (University of Nottingham)



Zang Xiaowei. 2015. *Ethnicity in China: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Xxix + 190. One map, chronology, preface, acknowledgements, abbreviations, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-0-7456-5361-7. Hardcopy = 62.50EURO; Paperback = 20EURO.

Ethnicity in China, the latest in the China Today series, is an ambitious book, seeking to provide a panoramic overview of the defining issues of state-ethnic minority relations in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the context of immense social and political transformations since 1949, with particular emphasis on the post-1978 reform era.

Written by Zang Xiaowei, Chair Professor of Social Sciences at City University of Hong Kong and highly renowned scholar in Chinese ethnicity studies, the book explores the role of China's nationality policy and the many ways in which it has impacted and continues to impact state-ethnic minority relations in China. Relying on an extensive range of existing documentary sources including scholarly articles, books, and such official PRC sources as government white papers and statistics, Zang aims to identify, describe, and analyse the guiding ideology underlying the state's approach to the fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minorities residing within the PRC.

Drawing from both historical and cultural perspectives on ethnic relations in China, Zang's core arguments rest on the significance of *ronghe* 'amalgamation' in policy-making on ethnic minority rights in China. Heavily influenced by Confucian legacies, *ronghe* celebrates and promotes the acculturation and assimilation of

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non-Han groups into Han society in the name of an all-encompassing Chinese nation. Throughout the book, Zang consistently argues that this is the primary line of thought that informs and guides the state's governance and management of ethnic minorities.

Opening with a single basic map of the PRC, and a concise chronology of key events in Chinese history since 1894 up to the present, spotlighting those most central to ethnic groups, the book follows with seven well-organized chapters. Skillfully woven throughout each chapter is his core conceptual framework of *ronghe* whose manifestation is traced through issues central to state-ethnic minority relations, such as socio-economic development, regional autonomy, cultural preservation, language promotion, and so on. Zang also succeeds in demonstrating an admirable knowledge and grasp of existing literature in the area of ethnicity studies in China, and the book boasts an impressive bibliography of up-to-date scholarship in the field.

In Chapter One 'The People's Republic of China as a Multinational County', Zang sets his sights on dismantling what he sees as an enduring tendency among many in "the west" to see China as a homogenous entity. He begins by providing a pithy outline of China's fifty-six state-recognized ethnic groups, their various demographics, and the defining role of the state's Ethnic Classification Project in the 1950's in their creation. Yet, while the state has indeed gone to great lengths to identify and recognize the ethnic diversity of its citizenry, Zang argues that this should not be read as a promotion of multiculturalism. Instead, he maintains that from its very inception, informed by Confucianist legacies, the state has upheld a strong assimilationist stance that emphasizes the need for non-Han to unlearn and dispose of their "uncivilized" behaviors and incorporate Han ways. Charting the origins and development of *ronghe* ideology from Sun Yat's Sen's championing of Chinese nationalism based on Han culture through to the forced assimilation that characterized the political radicalism of the Cultural Revolution, and onto the post-1978 emphasis on economic development and national unity, Zang argues persuasively that integration,

assimilation, and acculturation have consistently formed the backbone of state management of ethnic relations.

Chapter Two 'Ethnic Inequality' offers a descriptive and analytical account of ethnic inequality in China. In exploring what the state has done to reduce these inequalities and how effective these efforts have been, Zang's frustration with the state's fixation on socio-economic development as the one-stop solution to nationality problems quickly becomes apparent. Indeed, he bemoans the state's lack of attention to and even outright denial of issues of deep-seated Han prejudice and discrimination often encountered by ethnic minorities. Zang does, however, agree that state promotion of economic development and implementation of affirmative action programs have resulted in ethnic minorities being generally better off in terms of access to public services, education, health care, and so on. Yet, in the wake of post-1978 market reforms, increasing privatization, commodification, competition, and the decline of state enterprises have seen intensifying patterns of income disparity between Han and ethnic minorities. Ultimately, Zang asserts that more efforts by and resources from the government are required to narrow the gap in status attainment between Han Chinese and the ethnic minority groups in the PRC.

In Chapter Three 'Minority Cultures', Zang moves on to address state efforts in the protection and promotion of minority cultures through the multifocal lens of language, literature, religions, and performing arts and crafts. He argues that the state remains highly selective in which elements of minority culture it chooses to promote. Unsurprisingly, cultural elements that foster a sense of national unity, bolster an image of China as a harmonious multicultural society and generally serve the political agenda of the state stand a great deal more chance of being promoted than those deemed to threaten social stability or arouse sub-nationalist sentiment. Besides poor policy design and implementation, and market forces, Zang claims that as long as nationality policy continues to be swayed by the *ronghe* ideology of assimilation and acculturation, official promotion and preservation of minority culture

will at best be of limited success. Nonetheless, he also notes that these forces have failed to deter grassroots efforts in cultural revivals and rising ethnic consciousness among ethnic minorities, showcasing the resilience of minority culture.

Chapter Four 'Regional Autonomy' deals with the politics of regional autonomy arrangements for minority nationalities in China. Mapping out the constitutional evolution of regional autonomy, Zang explores how meaningful regional autonomy is in the PRC today, as well as how and why this differs in different areas according to broader political circumstances. Moreover, he finds that minority officials are often selected not for their popularity or responsiveness, but for loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Yet, even when well represented in the People's Congress and governments of minority areas, the scope for decision-making by minority officials remains limited, with meaningful political power overwhelmingly remaining in the hands of Han CCP secretaries. The chapter also briefly touches on how Han migration into minority regions has affected regional autonomy and exacerbated ethnic tensions. Zang notes that this has led to more frustration among minority areas and strengthened ethnic consciousness. Once again, he attributes these shortcomings in regional autonomy governance to the narrow-sightedness of *ronghe* as a guiding ideology.

In Chapter Five 'Intra- and Inter-Group Differences', Zang seeks to delve deeper beyond state-society and Han-'other' approaches to ethnicity. He examines how and why ethnic groups are treated differently, particularly in terms of the distribution of public goods and services. Emphasizing the variation in socio-economic status, political orientation, family behavior, acculturation, and so on that exist among different ethnic minority groups in the PRC, Zang finds that the more acculturated an ethnic minority group becomes, the less likely Beijing is to reward members of that group. By way of example, he offers a brief but insightful comparative study of the Hui and Uyghur, and argues that the state is motivated to treat a minority group preferentially if it is perceived to be powerful and has the potential to pose a threat to national interests.

In Chapter Six 'Tibet and Xinjiang', perhaps the most interesting of the book, Zang explores why Beijing's nationality policy and *ronghe* ideology have failed to bring about ethnic harmony and unity in Tibet and Xinjiang. Succinctly setting out the historical contexts of both areas, he moves on to examine why, despite rapid economic development, rising ethnic conflict and tensions rather than minority acculturation continue to plague the political and social landscapes in both post-1978 Tibet and Xinjiang. He finds that current economic development favors Han migrants a great deal more than minority interests in both Tibet and Xinjiang, and is thus stimulating rather than alleviating ethnic inequality. The unrest is then further exacerbated by the state's persistence in associating ethnic unrest with foreign interference rather than acknowledging its home-grown roots of perceived relative deprivation, marginalization, and cultural anxieties. Zang concludes the chapter on the pessimistic note that current nationality policy is ill equipped to promote inter-group harmony in these two regions.

The final chapter 'China's Nationality Policy and International Minority Rights' turns to the question of locating China's approach to minority issues within international norms. Zang examines to what degree Beijing has accepted and become socialized into international norms on minority issues and whether there is scope for optimism about existing ethnic inequalities and unrest being resolved in the near future. Outlining the historical development of minority rights in global governance, he begins by considering how well Beijing has socialized into international norms on minority rights and also where it has fallen short. Sanguine about future prospects, Zang suggests that Beijing is showing signs that it may move towards a universal human rights regime that celebrates and promotes diversity, multiculturalism, autonomy, and self-determination. Yet, he is also quick to acknowledge the significant roadblocks that the distinct blend of *ronghe* ideology and Westphalian approach to state sovereignty pose. He concludes on quite a positive though arguably hasty note that, as the PRC becomes increasingly integrated into the international community, Han nationalism will lose its appeal and

desires for democracy, individual liberties, and human rights will win out.

This book will prove immensely useful as an introductory handbook in state-ethnic minority relations. While readers already well versed in Chinese ethnicity studies will likely find little novel here, Zang's treatment of *ronghe* may serve to stimulate new debate on how the ideological underpinnings of state-ethnic minority relations intersect with other well-established conceptual tools in the field such as "internal orientalism" (Schein 1997).

Zang is certainly to be commended on successfully bringing together a huge body of literature and source material on issues of ethnicity in China, and providing an insightful, wide-ranging overview of the defining issues of state-ethnic minority relations in China today. *Ethnicity in China: A Critical Introduction* is strongly recommended for those looking for an accessible, comprehensive, and authoritative overview of key issues shaping state-ethnic relations in contemporary China.

REFERENCE

Schein, Louisa. 1997. Gender and Internal Orientalism in China. *Modern China* 23(1):69-98.