LIANG YONGJIA

Reflections on Chinese Ethnicity and Ethnic Politics

Guest Editor’s Introduction

Ethnic issues have been marginalized in Chinese social science for the following two reasons. First, ethnicity is a sensitive issue that differs from other domains such as economy, law, or social security, where compelling reasons may be felt for reform. Second, ethnology, a formally recognized social science in China, has been largely uninterested in ethnicity. As a result, we seldom find that leading scholars or public intellectuals are confident in commenting or writing about Chinese ethnicity.

The March 14th incident in Tibet and the July 5th incident in Urumqi have made the world more attentive to Chinese ethnicity and ethnic politics. Every now and then, moderate or radical opinions are released from and beyond China, by people from different political, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Academically, among English-speaking scholars, especially anthropologists from the United States, a great many studies on Chinese ethnicity have been completed since the 1990s. Despite the good quality, many of these studies tend to either neglect what Chinese anthropologists and ethnologists write about, or take them as nothing more than an indigenous specimen of their field. Except for a few (un)pleasant discussions, the academic dialogue between the Western and Chinese scholars over Chinese ethnicity and ethnic politics is quite inadequate. How and when did the idea and practice of minzu (ethnicity, nations, ethnic groups, nationality, and minority) come into being? What knowledge or lines of knowledge were involved in creating it, and why?

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What are the meanings and challenges immanent to minzu? How is it that the minzu identity “lived” half a century after the ethnic identification?

The five articles published in this issue provide examples of Chinese intellectuals’ views on Chinese ethnicity and ethnic politics. Though writing mainly in Chinese, these scholars are adequately exposed to Western intellectual life. The articles are based on the authors’ thorough study of the topics from the point of view of the intellectual of a civilization.

The first article, written by Professor Wang Hui, “The ‘Tibet Issue’ Between East and West: Orientalism, Ethnic Regional Autonomy, and the Politics of Dignity” was published in Tianya (Frontiers) in 2008. The article approaches the Tibetan issue as the “crisis of modernity” of a religious society. Professor Wang explains how and why the image of Tibet was created and circulated in the West in an Orientalist and exotic way, and how these images are translated into various movements, including the crisis in 2008. The author assesses the ethnic regional autonomy as a transforming power that addresses the Chinese modern crisis of “from empire to state.” He also interprets the political campaigns of overseas Chinese in 2008 as a campaign of seeking “politics of dignity.”

The second article, “The ‘Politicization’ and ‘Culturization’ of Ethnic Groups,” written by Professor Ma Rong, focuses on one of the hottest debates of a decade arising among Chinese anthropologists and ethnologists, thus making it the most quoted article in anthropology in recent years. In this article, the author holds that all multiracial or multiethnic nations face the important issue of guiding the direction of ethnic relations in modern times. The tradition of “culturalization” of ethnic minorities in ancient China resulted in a united-pluralist country with a huge population. However, China started to treat ethnic minorities as political groups following the policies of the former USSR. In the new century, China should learn from both its own historical heritage and the lessons of Western countries, the USSR, and India, change the direction from “politicalizing ethnicity” to “culturalizing ethnicity,” and thus strengthen national identity.

The third article, “Deconstructing China’s Ethnic Minorities: Deorientalization or Reorientalization,” was written by Pan Jiao and published in the Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities in 2009. The article questions the ethnographies of southwestern Chinese minorities by American anthropologists. Since the 1990s, the ethnic identity in China or China’s policies on ethnic minorities at home has been deconstructed by the Western anthropologists of China. Professor Pan believes that in such post-colonial deconstructions, China’s policies that recognize and accommodate ethnic minorities have been misinterpreted as discriminating and excluding. He warns us that among these Western writers, the issue of China’s indigenous
ethnic minorities has been confused with the diasporic ethnic minorities, and the ethnic identity in China has been taken as internal colonization or internal Orientalism. While China’s ethnic minorities are described as being treated as the internal Orient, there has not yet been any critical response from Chinese intellectuals. Rather, they have cherished some Western fantasies like implementing depoliticization to the ethnic minorities, practicing polyarchy by different ethnic groups, and over-advocating individual rights. More than a refutation of Ma Rong’s article, it is the first attempt in twenty years in which a Chinese anthropologist makes a general and powerful response to Western anthropological studies on Chinese ethnicity.

The fourth article, “The Intermediate Circle: Anthropological Research of Minzu and the History of Civilization,” was written by Professor Wang Mingming and published in 2006. In this article, Professor Wang looks at ethnic minorities from a new perspective: a civilization. As such, China is understood as a civilization with three hierarchical circles: the core, the intermediate circle, and the outer circle. Chinese anthropologists have written accordingly but seldom realize this division. The ethnic regions from all directions, centering on the Han region, form the intermediates. According to Wang, the concept of “intermediates” is powerful both in method and theory. Ethnologically, it challenges the conventional method of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, which neglects the historical connectedness between and among different ethnic groups. Theoretically, it challenges the idea of “minority” itself by emphasizing the historical and contemporary flow of ideas, people, and materials in the form of trade, war, and rituals. The article invites us to see the ethnic politics from a new perspective.

The final article, written by myself, “The ‘Ethnic Error’ in Under the Ancestors’ Shadow and Dali Society in the Period of the Nationalist Government,” was published in the Chinese Review of Anthropology in 2008. It is a case study of the Bai identity and identification. It attempts to answer the question of why Francis Hsu’s Under the Ancestors’ Shadow was interpreted by anthropologists, such as Edmund Leach, as committing “an ethnic error,” which is why Francis Hsu “mistakes” the West Towners as Chinese. With archival and ethnographic evidences, I argue that around the 1940s, the West Towners considered themselves Chinese, though it may not be necessarily true by contemporary standards. The ethnic error is created by the inventors of Chinese ethnic minorities rather than by Francis Hsu himself. In this case, the article reveals the importance of treating ideas historically, and lets us know that locating the phantom of Orientalism is many times harder than expected.

Despite the heterogeneity, the five articles focus on Fei Xiaotong’s concept of “unity of diversity” (duoyuan yiti), and the problematic of minzu and
its depoliticization. The authors also seem to be in agreement, explicitly or implicitly, on the following three points:

1. Chinese ethnicity and ethnic politics is an issue integral to contemporary China, thus it involves all ethnicities. To understand the problem, one must be aware of the social and cultural landscape of the People’s Republic of China, with all its economic booming, social disparity, political strategy, urban-rural dichotomy, international engagement, ideological work, etc.

2. To understand the issue, historical studies are equally important. Though ethnicity and ethnic politics are mainly a post-1949 issue, it is part of the overall modernization movement of contemporary China. Many post-1949 issues are profoundly embedded in the century-long agony of Chinese modernization, and one should understand, in addition to the political, economic, and social history, the history of Chinese thought. For example, it would be a serious mistake to take the ethnic classification project as merely an imitation of the Stalinist version of “nailing down the ethnic issue.”

3. Instead of merely bringing particularistic concepts in universalist disguise to study the people in question, one should engage in a serious dialogue between the Chinese and non-Chinese intellectuals, in terms of Chinese ethnicity and ethnic politics, because the issue is still in crisis, and we are far from coming up with concepts of comparative value.