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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

«CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD»:
A NARRATION OF SOUTHERN CHINESE MINORITY NATIONALITIES

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Guo Wu, *Narrating Southern Chinese Minority Nationalities. Politics, Disciplines, and Public History*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 229 pp. (ISBN 978-981-13-6021-3).

The issue of national minorities – their classification, their recognition and the definition of their relationship with the central government – is one of the crucial issues of 20th-century Chinese history, being an integral part of the discourse of the national construction and a founding element of contemporary Chinese nationalism. Zhao Suisheng identifies «ethnic nationalism» as one of the earliest forms of nationalism in the XX century. According to Zhao, Chinese nationalism started, in fact, as an ethnic state-seeking movement led by the *Han* majority to overthrow the minority Manchu dynasty. After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, both the *Guomindang* (GMD) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) defined the Chinese nation as «a multi-ethnic political community and endorsed only 'state nationalism'». As a result, ethnic nationalism has remained alive only among ethnic minorities along China's frontiers, such as Tibetans and Mongols, who were denied the right to establish separate states, and therefore posed a serious threat to the unity of the multi-ethnic Chinese state.¹

To a large extent, ethnic groups are the product of the PRC's Ethnic Classification Project undertaken in the first years of the Fifties with the assumption that «backward» (*luohou* 落后) non-Han peoples required the CCP's leadership and «advanced» (*xianjin* 先进) Han socialist culture. As a result of the Project, a total of 38 ethnic groups were recognized in 1954 (even if the names reported were more than 400). The number increased to 53 after the second PRC census in 1964. Finally, two more groups were recognized in the following years.² In 1990, it was officially declared that PRC had 56 nationalities (*minzu* 民族), the majority *Han* (*hanzu* 汉族) and 55 minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). In the 2010 census the minority na-

1. Zhao Suisheng, *Chinese Pragmatic Nationalism and Its Foreign Policy Implications*, paper prepared for delivery at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 28-31, 2008, p. 6, available at <https://sites01.lsu.edu/faculty/voegelin/wp-content/uploads/sites/80/2015/09/Suisheng-Zhao.pdf> (last access: 21 November 2019).

2. Lhoba and Jino in Yunnan were recognized as the 54th and the 55th ethnic group in 1965 and 1979 respectively. See Zang Xiaowei (ed.), *Handbook of Ethnic minorities in China*, Cheltenham (UK): Edward Elgar Pub, 2016, p. 3.

nationalities accounted for 8.5% of the population but were distributed in vast areas, covering some 60% of the national territory, much of which in China's border regions, and strategically important for Beijing's relations with its neighbors. Of all China's province-level administrative units, Yunnan province has the highest number of state-recognized minorities (25). Another relevant aspect is that among the 55 minorities surveyed, there were some *primi inter pares*, due to historical and political factors. It is no coincidence that in the 1950s and 1960s the Chinese Communist government established five autonomous regions – Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang Uyghur, Guangxi Zhuang, Ningxia Hui, and Tibet – home to Mongols (*mengzu* 蒙族), Hui (*huizu* 回族), Zhuang (*zhuangzu* 壮族), Uyghur (*weiwuerzu* 维吾尔族), and Tibetan (*zangzu* 藏族) ethnic minorities respectively. Actually, even if the Chinese constitution defines China «as a unitary multi-ethnic State created jointly by the people of all its ethnicities» and promotes the values of equality, unity and harmony, in practice some of them, such as the Hui Muslims, but especially the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the Tibetans in Tibet, are subject to discriminatory and repressive policies by the central government. Despite the long process of sinicization (*zhongguohua* 中国化), in fact they continue to represent a thorn in PRC's central government side.³ On the other hand, there are some «Children of a lesser God», away from the spotlight and mainly unknown, except for their colorful festivals, clothing and handicraft, being increasingly inserted in the state-sponsored ethnic tourism circuit.

One of the biggest contributions of *Narrating Southern Chinese Minority Nationalities. Politics, Disciplines, and Public History* is its specific focus on some of these «Children of a lesser God», namely non-Han Southwestern minorities, which had been for a long time unrecognized and unclassified. The late Qing and early Republican Chinese governments recognized in fact only five nationalities: the Han, Manchu (*manzu* 满族), Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans.⁴ Another important contribution of Guo Wu's monograph is related to the fact that it introduces readers to some key, but mostly unknown, aspects of the history of contemporary China.⁵

Guo Wu's monograph offers a critic examination of «the building of modern Chinese discourse on a unified yet diverse Chinese nation on various sites of knowledge production». It deals with the complex relationship between the State and modern Chinese knowledge elites (from political

3. In particular, Uyghurs have always been animated by independence impulses and, in the 1930s and 1940s declared twice independence from the central government, establishing the First and the Second East Turkistan Republic.

4. With few exceptions, these nationalities coincide with the ones that deserved an autonomous region in the 1950s and 1960s and, in recent times, have asserted their cultural and political differences and started to rewrite their history more vigorously (p. 2).

5. In the last few decades there has been an overabundance of publications on China, mostly focused on the economic and geopolitical dimension of China's rise.

scientists, to national-level scientists, to grass-roots level leaders) in collaborating to build authority and determine the correct approaches to the minority issue (p. 2). According to the author, Chinese ideology in minorities nationalities is rooted in modern China's quest for national integration and political authority, being political order a recurring theme of modern China after the disintegration of the traditional imperial Confucian political order (*ibidem*).

As emerges clearly in the author's analysis, the process of conceptualizing, investigating, classifying, and writing minority history is a very complex one, characterized by disputes and contradictions (one for all the tensions between the scholars' non-Han Chinese identity and the Han-dominated mainstream nationalist discourse). This complexity is epitomized by the purges suffered by the scholars with more or less dissenting tendencies (Fei Xiaotong, Wu Zelin, Cen Jianwu, and Huang Xianfan) during the Anti-Rightist campaign in 1957.

The monograph is articulated in seven chapters (followed by a conclusion, a substantial epilogue and an extensive bibliography) which examine the construction of the nationalist ideology in modern China, the research and investigation of southern Chinese minority nationalities, the debates among concerned intellectuals and the resulting political tensions, and, finally, the public representation of minority culture, in the form of public museums.

The first chapter defines the scopes of the analysis; the sources, methodology and producers of modern Chinese knowledge of nationalities; the geographical realm of the investigation; and the main layers of the Chinese knowledge production mechanisms.

The second chapter analyses the different approaches of the Nationalist and Communist governments in dealing with the national issue, with a special reference to the CPC's national discourse, which was influenced by both the Marxist ideology and the Confucian tradition of Great Unity. In particular, the chapter underlines how the Communist's approach changed over time, eventually distancing itself from the Soviet experience, which had initially influenced it.

The third chapter deals with the diffusion of social sciences in China, from sociology (*shehuixue* 社会学), to anthropology (*renleixue* 人类学) and ethnology (*minzuxue* 民族学). The chapter highlights the contribution of Chinese social scientists to the state-building and nation-building processes, stressing the fact that «what was at work was 'an inexperienced Chinese state that was able to orient itself only by observing the world through the eyes of its social scientific advisors'» (p. 43). The author focuses on the rise of modern Chinese anthropology and ethnology as autonomous disciplines and shows Chinese social scientists' search for indigenization, i.e. their attempts to reconcile their Euro-American training with Marxist theories and their Chinese identity.

The fourth chapter investigates the collaboration between historians and anthropologists in inventing «primitive society» in classical Marxist sense in Chinese history. According to Cen Jiawu (a renowned ethnologist and historian of primitive society), this served a dual agenda: a Marxist one, that tried to incorporate China into the grand narrative of historical materialism; and a highly nationalistic one, that insisted on the historicity of China High Antiquity and the presumed long and glorious history of the Chinese civilization (p. 87).

Chapter five scrutinizes minority nationalities' society and history before and after 1949, as an important practice of social engagement and disciplinary knowledge in the PRC.

Chapter six sheds light on the disputes and contradictions that characterized the complex process of conceptualizing, investigating, classifying, and writing minority history, exemplified by the experience of the Guilin-based Zhuang nationality scholar Huang Xianfan (p. 139). Author of the first general history of the Zhuang nationality, Huang was a tenacious critic of the Nationalist government's assimilationist policy and an advocate for the subjectivity of the Zhuang nationality, and its equal recognition under the PRC government. (p. 140). He was also a staunch advocate of the theory that there were no slave society as a stage of social development in Chinese history, strongly opposing leading Marxist scholars, such as Guo Muoruo, and the entire Chinese Marxist academic discourse after 1949.

The last chapter deals with the instruments through which knowledge about minority nationalities' history, culture and lifestyle are transmitted to the public, i.e. mainly by museums of nationalities (p. 161). Their narratives, according to the author, «still show certain traits of instrumentalization when promoting multiculturalism and a tendency of Han-centric primitivizing of non-Han cultures» (p. 180). The chapter includes the result of the author's fieldwork in 2017 in four Chinese provinces and five museums with nationality and ethnology as their main themes, as well as his visit to Taiwan's museum of aborigines in 2018. The chapter also reports the results of the Sino-Norwegian collaboration for the realization of the Buyi Ecomuseum, inaugurated in 2000 in the mountainous Zhenshan village, in Guiyang, that the author considers as a half failure. «Due to the lack of substantial collection of artifacts and the vagueness of the idea of ecomuseum, e.g., there is virtually no way to demonstrate “heritage” and “cultural memory” as the museum promised» (p. 173).

In the epilogue, the author shifts his focus to the village-level minority communal life and power relations to illustrate the persistence of Shamanism in the context of Chinese cultural tradition and the limits of the Chinese central state in actual life.

Aside from the complexity of the topic, the book is clearly written, well researched and documented (based on fieldwork, archival research and interviews). This makes Guo Wu's study a fundamental contribution

to historiography on its subject and an enriching reading for both scholars and advanced students of Asian Politics, China Politics and International Relations, in general. Although it presents a historical study with a specific focus on Southern Chinese minority nationalities, the work is timely in light of some recent events. Here it suffices to refer to the so-called *Xinjiang Papers*, a 400-page report, possibly leaked from a high level source within the Chinese Communist Party, which became public in November 2019. The *Xinjiang Papers* contributed to confirm the persisting tensions in the relations between the Han-dominated central State and the national minorities, and the topicality of the themes of political order and political authority in today's China.⁶

6. Austin Ramzy & Chris Buckley, 'The Xinjiang Papers. «Absolutely No Mercy»: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims', *The New York Times*, 16 November 2019.