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**Book review: Ethnicity in China: a critical introduction**

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***Ethnicity in China: A Critical Introduction*, by Xiaowei Zang, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, 236 pages. £15.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0745653617**

Ethnicity has been at the centre of debates about many aspects of China's current domestic and international affairs. The Chinese government has promoted PRC (People's Republic of China) as a unified and harmonious multinational country. In contrast, scholars, commentators and politicians in the West have accused Beijing of suppressing minority rights, in particularly its harsh treatments of minority nationalities in Xinjiang and Tibet. Why is there such a big gap in the perception and assessment of China's minority issues between China and the West? What is the reality of China's ethnic minority situation, what is the basic stance of Chinese government on its nationality question and why? To what extent will China's nationality issues affect its domestic stability and global rise? *Ethnicity in China* is a timely publication that offers insightful and authoritative assessments of these questions that are important for having a good understanding of not only China's ethnic issues but also about China itself.

Xiaowei Zang is a leading scholar in the research of China's Han-minority relations. In this book that he wrote for Polity Press' *China Today* series, he defines the broad contour of ethnic relations in China for a wider audience. Contextualizing Han-minority relations in China's social and political transformations since 1949, it puts analytical focus consistently on Beijing's nationality policy in post-1978 era when ethnicity is becoming an increasingly complex and troublesome issue in the PRC. As it is the party-state that plays a dominating role in classifying and managing ethnic minorities, a focus on the state policy provides readers with an ideal entry point to disentangle many issues related to ethnic minorities and to evaluate future developments of China's ethnic relations.

This book consists of 7 chapters. **Chapter 1** offers a demographic and historical contextual background of China's nationality question. It starts with an introduction of basic information about the 55 minority nationalities, such as location, size of population and varied relations with Han people. It goes on to explain how these ethnic groups were artificially identified and classified by Chinese state as a result of the Ethnic Classification Project conducted in the early 1950s. It then traces CCP's (Chinese Communist Party) nationality policy to the Confucian idea of *ronghe* (融合), defined as 'amalgamation or fusion of the Han majority and non-Han minorities in a process of Confucian cultural diffusion' (p. 20). It argues that the *ronghe* ideology is the driving force behind Beijing's policy-making in relation to ethnic minorities, a concept that is used to frame analyses throughout this book.

The remainder of this book addresses how much the *ronghe* ideology has dictated Beijing's policy-making in the realms of ethnic equality (chapter 2), the preservation of minority cultures (chapter 3), regional autonomy (chapter 4), inter-group and intra-group differences (chapter 5), the governance of Xinjiang and Tibet (chapter 6) and finally the promotion of minority rights in international politics (chapter 7). **Chapter 2** outlines Beijing's efforts to reduce ethnic inequality by pursuing a two-fold strategy: to narrow down socioeconomic gaps between Han and non-Han

regions by promoting economic development in minority areas on the one hand, and to give preferential treatments to members of minority groups in education, employment, family planning, etc., on the other. Despite these efforts, ethnic inequality has become wider in post-1978 China compared to in Mao's era. This alarming result, according to Zang, is because the Han region and the Han Chinese in general have benefited disproportionately from market reform than the minority regions and minority people due to long-existing inter-group differences in education, access to loans and government offices.

**Chapter 3** assesses government's policy toward the preservation and promotion of ethnic minority cultures and languages. After an outline of CCP's policy towards minority cultures since the 1930s, it gives a fine-grained and up-to-date overview of Beijing's efforts for the promotion and protection of minority customs, arts and languages. The preservation of minority cultures is however monopolized by Beijing and the Han majority, with limited consideration of grass-root interests and little input from the minority people. In addition, Chinese state has put tight control over religious practices in minority regions especially in Tibet and Xinjiang. Ethnic autonomy is the focus of discussion in **Chapter 4**. After an overview of the historical origin of regional autonomy system in minority regions, it examines how the CCP has established ethnic regional autonomy as a major institution device in managing ethnic minorities after 1949. It maintains that rather than following the international norm and understanding of national autonomy, the CCP has utilized this system for political purposes and social control. Based on discussions above, Zang identifies a 'pecking order' of China's nationality policy:

The CCP is most interested in economic development because it considers the reduction of ethnic inequality an essential step to the success of *ronghe*; it is selective in preserving minority cultures because some elements of minority cultures may inhibit *ronghe*; and it is least interested in regional autonomy because this system poses the greatest threat to *ronghe*. (p. 108)

I find **chapter 5** most fascinating as it contributes to the remedy of a long-standing misconception that all non-Han population are homogeneous and treated equally by the Chinese government. By examining the nuance in intra-and inter-group differences, it demonstrates convincingly that 'the differences among the non-Han people in demographics, cultures, schooling, labour market outcome etc., are no smaller than or as large as the aggregate Han-minority differences' (p. 110). It also shows how these differences have been exploited effectively by Beijing to divide and rule non-Han groups and minority areas for national interests. For example, Beijing gives a higher degree of freedom to some 'model minorities' (such as the Zhuang people and Hui Muslims) that are useful to it while puts the 'unruly' ones (notably, Tibetans and Uyghur Muslims) under strict control; pro-Beijing minority elites often enjoy preferential political recruitment who are used by the party-state to advance ethnic integration or counterbalance separationists.

**Chapter 6** offers in-depth case studies of Tibet and Xinjiang, the two minority regions that have attracted most international attention due to rising ethnic tension and conflicts in recent years. Beijing has placed economic development at the very forefront of its policies in these two areas. This simplistic market approach however fails to bring in harmony and stability that Beijing had

expected. The case studies of Tibet and Xinjiang show once again that unless Beijing ditches the outdated Han-centred *ronghe* ideology and starts to embrace true multiculturalism, the relationship between Han and non-Han people will not be fundamentally improved.

In the **final chapter**, Beijing's nationality policy is assessed from the perspective of international minority right regime. It argues that as a country that has one of the world's largest Muslim population (over 20 millions) and when minority has become an integral part of global governance, China's nationality policy and practice is not only significant for China's domestic politics but also has broader international implications. As a rising global power, China has legal and moral obligations to make sure its policy toward minority groups meet the demand of international norms. The book ends on an optimistic note that the Confucian *ronghe* ideology will sooner or later give way to the global trend of minority rights when China starts to share more universal values with the international community.

Overall, this book provides readers with rich details, solid research and critical analyses of Han-minority relations in the PRC with admirable clarity and sharpness. Another merit is its skills in presenting and comparing diverse material and different views on the same issue, making space for readers to have informed judgements. The recommended readings presented at the end of each chapter allow readers who are interested in the topic to make further explorations. While the *ronghe* ideology has had an enduring impact on CCP's nationality policy, it will be helpful to examine more explicitly how other ideologies and forces becoming dominant in post-1949 China have come into play in the policy-making process. It is a small pity to see this fine book does not have any imageries (apart from the one that appears on book cover) illustrating Han-minority relations which would have been useful for readers who are new to this subject to establish a visual understanding of this interesting topic. Overall, this is a significant book that offers comprehensive and accessible examinations of ethnicity issues in the PRC. It will be of great interest to specialists and the general readers. It will also be a useful reference book to university students studying Chinese ethnicity, society and culture.

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