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REVIEW ESSAY

Chinese Approaches to Ethnic Diversity

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Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 256 pp. \$50 (cloth), \$30 (paper).

Pitman B. Potter, *Law, Policy, and Practice on China's Periphery: Selective Adaptation and Institutional Capacity*. London: Routledge, 2011, 272 pp. \$130 (cloth).

The two books reviewed here clarify how China addresses the problem of internal diversity. All states have to address this issue to some extent. Multiethnic empires like the Qing chose a strategy that recognized the separate political, legal, and social rights of communal groups (Mongols, Tibetans, Han Chinese, and the rest), as long as those groups accepted the overarching authority of the emperor.¹ The Qing also drew in part on a far older Chinese vision of the imperium as a set of increasingly distant tribute zones, where people became less politically integrated and less civilized as one moved out from the center. While not all Chinese dynasties viewed themselves in this way, the Qing shared this broad mode of governance with many other empires in world history.

In Europe, the horrific religious warfare that tore the continent apart in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fostered an alternative vision of the state as nation rather than empire. In 1555, the Treaty of Augsburg adopted the crucial formula *cuius regio, eius religio* (whoever rules, his is the religion): the ruler determined the religion of the state. The treaty explicitly granted people of other religions the right to move to another state unmolested. That is, it envisioned a vast religious cleansing that would lead

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to states with no important religious diversity—the state as single nation. The bloodshed did not really end until the Westphalian Peace of 1648. Those agreements adopted the same formula but allowed more diversity by permitting followers of other religions to worship together publicly a few hours per week, and in private as frequently as they wished. Nevertheless, Europe continued to move in the direction of the nation-state with its vision of a culturally, religiously, and socially unified population separate from the unities of other states. By the nineteenth century, this had unfolded into a vision of the state as organizer of a people unified by race, language, and culture. Cleansings of all kinds have followed, targeting Jews, Roma, Tutsis, Bosnians, Armenians, and so many others. Even places that imagined themselves as far more diverse, like the United States, expanded on the Westphalian principle that religious diversity was acceptable only if privatized and noncorporate.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the nation-state system became increasingly entrenched around the world as the only way to participate in diplomacy. China also had to learn to reimagine itself as a nation-state. In the Mudanshe Incident of 1871, for example, which Emma Teng discusses in *Taiwan's Imagined Geography*, aboriginal people on Taiwan's southeastern coast apparently slaughtered most surviving sailors of a Japanese shipwreck. When Japan demanded compensation, the Chinese government replied that the wreck had occurred on ungoverned, savage territory and thus China had no responsibility. When Japan countered that it would claim this unclaimed territory, however, China was forced to redefine its boundary as a hard line around a closed space, instead of a gradual decline out to barbarism.² It had no choice but to be a nation-state.

Part of the issue here was that boundaries could no longer be fuzzy or ambiguous: “savage territory” in Taiwan was no longer a political possibility. Either it fell within China's borders or it did not. The same was true of ethnic and other communal groups, whose people were either citizens or not. France took this concept to its extreme in 1808, when it demanded that representatives of the Jewish community state whether Jews should be considered as Jews, with their own communal laws and practices, or as French citizens no different from any other citizens. As citizens, they would have full and equal

rights; as Jews, they would have no rights. Religious difference was thus acceptable only if limited to the private sphere—a direct extension of the Westphalian Peace two centuries earlier. As James Scott argues in *Seeing Like a State*, this insistence on drawing clear boundaries and defining unambiguous categories also fueled the needs of modern states to rationalize, count, and patrol even the daily lives of their people.³

The Communist world, however, offered a major alternative to the nation-state's image of itself as a cultural and historical unity. Faced with enormous territory and a mosaic of ethnic difference, the Soviet Union imagined itself as a new sort of nation-state, in which diversity could be embraced through explicit recognition of the communal rights of ethnic groups. Similar arguments over how to handle diversity characterized Republican China during the same period, but the dominant voices in the Kuomintang, especially after the rise of Chiang Kai-shek, insisted ultimately on the classic nation-state view that there was only one ethnic group in China: the Zhonghua people.⁴ The Chinese Communist Party, of course, had many reasons to emulate Soviet models of all kinds, and in this case the alternate Soviet vision of how diversity could work must have appealed in large part because it could help build a united front with China's minorities against the assimilationist policies of the Kuomintang. It also suggested a model of how to live with diversity. That model combined an empire's recognition of corporate ethnic difference with a nation-state's insistence on independence and territorial integrity.

This is the point at which Thomas Mullaney's *Coming to Terms with the Nation* picks up the story. Many scholars have noted how the Chinese Communist ethnic classification project grew out of theoretical roots transplanted from the Soviet Union, and many have documented the important social and political consequences of the project, as well as its sometimes awkward fit with the cultural diversity we can see in practice. Mullaney is the first, however, to illuminate in detail the actual processes involved, through an examination of new sources and oral histories with some of the most important participants. He concentrates on how the project was carried out in Yunnan, by far the most ethnically complex and diverse province in China; this site provided an exceptionally difficult test for the project.

Mullaney's sources allowed him to reach several fresh and fascinating conclusions that come as a surprise to many of us. The first is that the entire project was by no means simply a recasting of Stalin's system of categories to fit the Chinese case. In fact, the Chinese first tried to let people classify themselves, without forcing any external scheme on them. They gave this up only when an early ethnic census based on self-identification led to a list of 157 ethnonyms in Yunnan alone. Of those, ninety-two groups had fewer than one hundred people and twenty had only a single person each (p. 36). Faced with an urgent dilemma because the new government had promised all ethnic groups at least one seat in the National People's Congress, the party had to find a way of limiting the number of groups. Only at that point did Soviet categories begin to come into play.

As Mullaney shows, though, Stalin's definition of a *natsia* (the Russian word translated as 民族 or "nationality") required a group to have reached the stage of capitalist production, which was clearly not plausible for the vast majority of the groups in Yunnan. Far from simply localizing a Soviet classification scheme, the party instead turned to an earlier Chinese ethnographic tradition, hiring some of the leading ethnographers who had worked to classify the people of Yunnan in earlier decades. In many cases, linguistics became the leading mode of differentiation, in part because it appeared least problematic. Ironically, as Mullaney shows quite convincingly, that project itself grew directly out of earlier colonial British projects of ethnic and linguistic classification.

Mullaney's book is wonderfully revealing about the input from ethnographers in the classification process. Further work on the party side of this project and its relationship to the Soviet ethnic scheme, however, would be welcome in the future. Stalin's definition of *natsia*, after all, did not ultimately determine ethnic categories within the Soviet Union either. The USSR had also seen enormous debate over how to carry out ethnic classification, and in the end it developed a list much longer than China's: 128 groups in 1989, although the number changed significantly over time. Like China, though, the Soviet ethnographers did not limit themselves to *natsia*, but used the more flexible category of *natsional'nost'* (meaning a "nationally self-conscious community").⁵

Another arena in which Mullaney brings important new insights is the nature of the classification project itself. Most of us have long assumed that the Chinese were simply classifying—naively trying to fit every individual into clearly demarcated linguistic and cultural groups that had an objective existence in people's daily lives. It thus seemed almost laughable that some groups who seemed so similar were classed separately, whereas other groups (like the Yi) who were so diverse were classified together. Mullaney shows us, however, that this is a misapprehension of the exercise. The Chinese ethnographers knew as well as we do that no classification would ultimately match the situation on the ground. Instead, they saw their project as a combination of classification and a shaping of ethnic potential. That is, they fully recognized the constructed nature of ethnic identity, and they intended to shape that construction. The ethnographers knew quite clearly that they were sometimes combining very different groups, but they also recognized that the process itself and the political reality of the resulting categories would ultimately mold new identities. This was a kind of hybrid between Republican-era ethnography and Communist methods of shaping political identity. Mullaney's argument here is compelling, leaving one to wonder what happened after 1956, at which point the ethnic groups no longer appeared to exist in potential, but were rather frozen: fifty-six groups only, each given a unique history and identity, with change apparently impossible. Ethnic boundaries again became absolute, with no room for ambiguity or fuzziness. In any case, *Coming to Terms with the Nation* is an innovative telling of a fascinating and important historical moment.

In a very different way, Pitman Potter's *Law, Policy, and Practice on China's Periphery* picks up the story from there. Potter's interests are almost entirely contemporary, and he addresses especially the legal frameworks that shape how China deals with issues of ethnic diversity in the three large autonomous regions of the North and Northwest: Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. The ethnic classification project itself was established long before the period that Potter discusses but, like Mullaney, he tells us about forms of rule making and classification—in this case through law and regulation.

Potter develops his analytical framework through the ideas of institutional capacity and selective adaptation. By *institutional capacity*, Potter means both the purposes to which institutions are dedicated and the social and historical location of institutions in particular places and contexts. The book highlights one institutional purpose above all: the necessity, as articulated in article 7 of the National Regional Autonomy Law, “to place the interests of the state as a whole above all else” (p. 25). Potter points out how the Communist solution to the problem of ethnic diversity in a nation-state carries its own tensions. It exemplifies “the basic quandary faced by the Han-dominated regime—how to gain legitimacy by appearing to grant autonomy, while at the same time restricting that autonomy so that it does not pose a threat to the power of the Party/state” (pp. 28–29). It is not so easy, in other words, to combine the ethnic strategies of empires and nation-states. Since the reforms, the government has hoped that economic development along market lines would ease ethnic tensions in these areas, but Potter points out that, in practice, this secondary institutional purpose has carried its own tensions and limits. Here, of course, he echoes other critiques of the Western development campaign.

Potter often argues that the local embedding of institutions of autonomy, like the need to hire cadres from local ethnic groups, creates its own sets of difficulties. Of course, the need to hire local officials has created dilemmas for the state for most of China’s history, and this is a dynamic that has spread far beyond the autonomous regions that Potter discusses. The real strength of his analysis is in making available an enormous amount of legal and regulatory material from China. Potter understands well that laws do not fully determine practices and, to his credit, he constantly points us toward the resulting contradictions. The book itself, however, provides little of the ethnographic or sociological detail we need to understand how those dynamics worked in practice.

The discussion of selective adaptation begins, rather remarkably for a book of this kind, by borrowing a theoretical frame from the postmodern literary critic Stanley Fish. The idea of selective adaptation is that laws, regulations, and standards are open to interpretation and may be significantly reworked in the processes of transmission and implementation. Potter picks up Fish’s concept of “interpretive communities” as a way to

discuss this. Most of the book is actually only interested in one aspect of this problem: the way China selectively adapts international laws and standards. While it would be nice to learn more about how selective adaptation might work inside China, Potter still makes some important observations. He points, for example, to three key Chinese terms for discussing autonomy: *zizhi* 自治 (self-governance, which is the word used in “autonomous region”), *zizhu* 自主 (self-sovereignty), and *zijue* 自决 (self-determination). Any of these might plausibly translate the English word *autonomy*, and this creates the possibility of significant slippage as China interprets international law. For China, only a nation-state has all three—no single region of the country could possibly have that much freedom. Autonomous regions have only the first, the right to govern themselves, which means in practice only the right to have significant representation among government cadres. It does not guarantee representation in other crucial arenas, especially not in the Communist Party, as Potter points out.

Potter makes another interesting connection when he shows that policies on the “inner periphery” (Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia) run parallel to those on the “outer periphery” (Hong Kong and Taiwan). In all cases, the national laws of China still hold sway over any proposed form of autonomy, whether as an autonomous region or as a second system within a single country. That is, we remain in the realm of *zizhi* only. The sole exception is the economy, where businesses from Taiwan appear to have the same kinds of privileges as those from outside the country—the right to be their own masters (*zizhu*). Politically, Potter sees the projects on the inner and outer peripheries as very close. He does point out, however, that the reality of cross-straits relations can create informal arrangements in daily interaction that go beyond the law (pp. 158–159), although he does not discuss in detail what these are.

Potter has collected an impressive amount of material, and the Chinese bibliography alone will be valuable to people working on the topic. I can think of no other source offering comparable information on the law in these areas. Potter is also aware of the dangers of formalism that sometimes mar discussions of Chinese law. As a result, he frequently points us toward informal arrangements, underlying tensions, and interpretive communities. In practice, however, the book remains primarily a discussion

of the law itself, with little concrete information about how those informalities, tensions, and interpretations play out on the ground.

As both of these books show in their very different ways, there are no simple solutions to the problem of how a state should manage internal differences. The Communist solution, pioneered by the Soviet Union but then adapted, altered, and reworked by China, has its own advantages and contradictions. Both books focus our attention on state projects of control, with their multiplying categories and regulations, but also remind us that the informal negotiations of daily life may be just as crucial and that success and failure in managing diversity is as much tied to particular local histories as to the grand narratives of state policy.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, the essays in Crossley, Siu, and Sutton (2006).

² Teng (2004).

³ Scott (1998).

⁴ See, for instance, Gu Jiegang's arguments with the Kuomintang ideologue Dai Jitao in Hon (1996, 321-323).

⁵ Hirsch (2005).

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