



Review Essay

China Virtual and Real: *Minzu* Spaces

Stéphane Gros, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique

Gros, Stéphane. 2019. "China Virtual and Real: *Minzu* Spaces." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (e-journal) 31: 216–225. <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-31/gros>.

Yuqing Yang. *Mystifying China's Southwest Ethnic Borderlands: Harmonious Heterotopia*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. 262 pp.

Miaoyan Yang. *Learning to Be Tibetan: The Construction of Ethnic Identity at Minzu University of China*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. 286 pp.

Margins, remote areas, and borderlands are not uniquely geographical locations but analytical categories that make apparent the limitations and constraints of exclusion as well as the opportunities it affords. The socially, culturally, and politically peripheral often becomes symbolically central. This articulation between peripherality and difference (or distance and alterity) and how they are made and remade, is one of the things the two books reviewed here have in common in their examination of China's *minzu* (ethnic) spaces.

Nowadays, it is well known beyond the circle of Chinese studies specialists that the People's Republic of China (PRC) claims to be a "multinational unified country" (*tongyi de duominzu guojia*) where minority peoples, officially referred to as "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*), have figured prominently in constructions of the national self in a form of multiculturalism with Chinese characteristics (see, for example, Gladney 1994; Schein 2000; McCarthy 2009). China's fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minorities represent roughly 8 percent of the country's total population and are for the most part located on the (Western) periphery across vast regions such as the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau, Tibet, and Xinjiang. The state has long deployed many efforts to integrate the borderlands and their people, create a sense of unity, and achieve harmony. On two different but complementary terrains—comparative literature in the case of Yuqing Yang's *Mystifying China's Southwest Ethnic Borderlands* and higher education in Miaoyan Yang's *Learning to Be Tibetan*—these two books offer rich case studies and stimulating discussions of the entangled relationships between ethnicity, representation, and nation-building.

In *Mystifying China's Southwest Ethnic Borderlands: Harmonious Heterotopia*, Yuqing Yang explores three sites that have become major tourist destinations during the last twenty years: Dali, hometown of the Bai; the "Country of Women" of the Mosuo; and Tibet as "Shangri-La." These are all actual sites of minority habitation and culture, but they are also "representational spaces" endowed with a mythical

aura. Y. Yang seeks to explore these “other spaces” through literary and intellectual discourses on minority people and, in doing so, she highlights “the role of geographical space in shaping the popular imagination” (11) and offers insights into “the intellectual impetus to conceive of spaces of otherness brimming with harmony” (3). The literary works of Han and minority authors provide fodder for Y. Yang’s analysis of these textually constructed spaces that emerge as both reactions to contemporary China’s ethnic politics and attempts to positively reevaluate the traditions of minorities, even if portrayed in a fantasized way.

These “other spaces” surface as the paradoxical synthesis of conflicting views and practices: the “backward” and “uncivilized” qualities that justify social change juxtaposed with the qualities of “wisdom” and “spirituality” that nourish utopian imaginings. Building on the idea that “spatial and temporal differences are the defining essence of China’s ethnic other in both the academic and popular discourses” (12), Y. Yang is inspired by French philosopher Michel Foucault’s notion of “heterotopia” as a formulation of the utopian (textual spaces and discursive imaginings) that actually exists (in the actual territories of some of China’s ethnic groups) “outside the norm of the political and cultural center” (132).

The subtitle of the book captures the author’s spatial approach: her “harmonious heterotopia” weaves together references to the old Confucian notion of “harmony with difference” (*he er bu tong*), Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong’s famous theory of “pluralistic unity” (*duoyuan yiti*), and the new millennium’s political ideology of (a socialist) “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*). Although this weaving would logically point to how the center is in fact the “definitive guide to achieving social harmony” (16), Y. Yang skillfully investigates “how the discursive imagination could interact with the real in a variety of ways” (14). The book thus brings to the fore the mythical dimension of heterotopia through the creation of modern mythologies intertwined with ideology.

The three-part division of *Mystifying China’s Southwest Ethnic Borderlands* reflects Y. Yang’s choice of three sites that epitomize spaces of ethnic otherness. In each part, a first chapter contextualizes the literary works that are the focus of her analysis. Throughout the book, the author navigates between scholarly and literary representations and intertwines intertextual connections between ethnographic perspectives and the literary formulations that feed on them.

In Part I on the Bai people of Yunnan province, Y. Yang traces the social life of a mythical narrative as a constant (re)interpretation of Bai identity and provides a vivid example of the potential of oral history, folklore, or myth as resources for various claims through a process of reevaluating the past according to periodic changing demands. The author focuses on the feminine mythical figure of Baijie, the “Holy consort” (also known as Mother Shayi), and her role in the continuous reconstruction of Bai identity as it is represented in local folklore and in some literary works and performing arts, such as martial-arts novels, episodic novels, and operas.¹ These various works draw their inspirations from or are based on the same set of folkloric narratives, but Baijie’s widow-martyr role is used to represent quite different conceptions of womanhood, motherhood, and gendered values. This

¹ See the study by Megan Bryson (2016) about this important mythical figure.

diversity raises the question of an identifiable local demand for such narratives and the question of the native's point of view (76). Such a perspective on "modern subjectivity" is brought to the fore in chapter 3 with the work of Jing Yi, a female Bai author, who (re)writes the Bai legend in fictionalized form and "feminizes ethnic representation from within the Bai community" as distinct from "the feminized dependent on the majority Han" (93). However original or dissenting Jing Yi's work first was in its introspective reconsideration of gender and cultural representation, Y. Yang show how the Bai author's later work about regional history comes to embrace the official ideology regarding ethnic harmony.

Part II centers on the myth of "The Country of Women" (*Nü'er guo*) of Chinese historiography as it constitutes the standard representation of the Mosuo, a matrilineal society located at the border between Sichuan and Yunnan. Two very different authors—the Han writer Bai Hua with his novel *The Remote Country of Women* (1994), which articulates sexuality and totalitarianism, and Yang Erche Namu, a Mosuo native who made a career of marketing her cross-culturally influenced identities—speak to this mythical image of a land where ideas about sexuality and gender exemplify alternatives (or resistance) to social constraints (patriarchal structure, authoritarianism). As the title of chapter 4 states, there is indeed a level of "representational violence" imposed upon minorities such as the Mosuo. Among other forms of representation, The Country of Women is a particular kind of utopia; what could be called a "feminotopia," after literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 166–168), to denote "idealized worlds of female autonomy, empowerment, and pleasure" (138). In the literary work of Bai Hua, it becomes a place of resistance to state ideology, the utopia of the Cultural Revolution and its dystopian becoming (128). Indeed, the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia itself stresses a dialectical tension between utopia and dystopia, to which I return below.

The intertextuality that guides the author as a method of analysis of her material is embodied particularly effectively in the "personage" of Yang Erche Namu, who both internalizes and is shaped by the multiple perspectives on the Mosuo, in a series of self-absorbed autobiographies (see, for example, Yang and Mathieu 2003). To start with, in her case there is an inversion in relation to place, because the story of Namu starts with her "leaving mother lake" (the title of one of her first autobiographies), hence running away from an "imperfect utopia" (147). Although Namu's relationship with her native place is a more complex and ambiguous form of nostalgia, her storytelling navigates the spaces of the stereotypical "matrilineal," "harmonious," or "living fossil" Mosuo, whereas she tailors her identities (performed, essentialized, or even fantasized) to a global market as forms of hypervisible femininity.

Part III centers on the modern myth of Shangri-La created by American novelist James Hilton (1933), and how it has been indigenized in a creative equation with the myth of Shambhala (a mythical Buddhist land of spiritual enlightenment). In this case, we are not so much witnessing the reinterpretation of local traditions and mythical motifs as a reconfiguration of a particular place, both remote and different. We are instead shifting to another scale: the modern myth has relevance beyond the actual localization (realization) of Shangri-La, previously known as Zhongdian, as a county that was officially renamed in 2001. The import of the myth is of larger

significance as it is broadly applied to Tibetan regions in China in a similar fashion as it has been in the West (see, for example, Bishop 1989; Lopez 1998). Beyond the trope of heterotopia as an “enacted utopia,” the concretization of Shangri-La conveys, Y. Yang writes, the image of the simulacrum as representation of a dreamland (like that of Disneyland).

Y. Yang discusses authors Tashi Dawa and He Ma, whose work, in very different ways, revolves around the quest for Shambhala and explores the relationship between mythology, spirituality, and psychology. Tashi Dawa is depicted as an “ethnically hybrid intellectual” (190) who writes in Chinese but asserts his Tibetan identity and whose work falls in the category of “Tibetan literature in Chinese.” His essay “Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong” uses the Buddhist understanding of Shambhala to relativize dominant ideologies and the communist utopia, whereas He Ma’s ten-volume bestseller, *The Tibet Code*, is a creative montage of new fantasies that merge Shambhala and Shangri-La in a contemporary construct of a modern myth. For Y. Yang, “the contemporary Chinese fantasy of Shambhala takes place when frontier imagination comes to fulfill people’s quest for difference” (212).

Y. Yang’s abovementioned “harmonious heterotopia” captures a tension that she directly addresses in the book’s conclusion when she writes that the literary imagination is “a means of retreating from state-led utopian schemes and debunking the idea that visions of a harmonious world are homogenous” (229).

Representations of ethnic others often circulate without the control of those who are represented. Y. Yang’s book raises the question of how people “talk back” to external representations but do so in an intertwined way through a process of internalizing followed by reformulation. The three main representatives of “indigenous voices” (Jing Yi, Yang Erche Namu, and Tashi Dawa), together with two Han authors (Bai Hua and He Ma), offer not so much a subaltern voice as a balanced polyphony on the relationship between culture, identity, and power. In my reading, the book is less about minority literature (in Chinese) than about the space of and for minority literature in the larger field of cultural representation in contemporary China. And that is what makes the book particularly interesting as Y. Yang successfully negotiates the ambiguities, nuances, and ambivalence of discourses on and by minorities in China.

Anthropologist Louisa Schein’s endorsement of *Mystifying China’s Southwest Ethnic Borderlands* fully captures how Y. Yang in fact proposes a “theory of mirroring” not exempt from the asymmetry that demonstrates how ethnic frontiers constitute an internal alterity in various forms of collective imaginings. In a short essay, Schein (2014, 371) asks, “What does it tell us when inhabitants of the remote are cocreators of its imaginaries?” Y. Yang’s study provides some answers to this question as she demonstrates that the borderlands are certainly places of “effectively realized utopias”—heterotopias—but are also intimately embedded in the larger space of China and its ideological search for harmony.

The initially exploratory Foucauldian concept of “heterotopia” has not only survived its author, who did not make much use of it, but has been productively generative in the hands of the many who have appropriated it. In a way, the fuzziness of the original notion (its non-definition) allows for some creative potential, giving Y. Yang some room for her own reformulation that rightly moves

away from the static differentiation of spaces as described by Foucault. In fact, the image of the mirror is particularly apt, and precisely in the sense Foucault explicates: as both a utopia and a heterotopia, both virtual and real.

Interestingly, the literary space of ethnic representation blurs categorical distinctions and mirrors the complexities of lived experiences of ethnicity, the various “ways of being ethnic” in China (Harrell [2001]) that vary greatly from place to place, from rural areas to the cities: ways that are differently shaped by the kinds of interactions, life experiences, family backgrounds, and education received. To some extent, how to be ethnic is a learning process, and there exist specific institutions for it.

In *Learning to Be Tibetan: The Construction of Ethnic Identity at Minzu University of China*, Miaoyan Yang’s first words are “I am a Han Chinese.” The author exposes straightforwardly how she negotiated her subjective position doing fieldwork, a good start for a book that examines “ethnic consciousness,” especially in a field where the “Han” category has too often been a by-default identity granted the invisibility of dominance.²

With Miaoyan Yang’s book, we move from the literary and virtual spaces of *minzu*-inspired mythologies to the bounded and controlled space of Minzu University of China (MUC). In this study, the “virtual” takes on another meaning. M. Yang approaches ethnicity as a combination of the “nominal” and the “virtual,” following the constructivist theorization of sociologist Richard Jenkins (2008), and she examines the consequences of categorization expressed in a name (*Zangzu* / “Tibetan” as an ethnic label) on the one hand, and the process of ethnic identity construction through social interaction, or “what the nominal means in terms of experience” (Jenkins 2008, 43), on the other. Stated differently, M. Yang provides a valuable ethnography of individual trajectories and negotiations of identity in the context of MUC, an institution with preferential policies toward minorities, where 60 percent of the students are from minority groups yet Han students represent the largest single ethnicity on the campus.

In the first of its two parts, M. Yang offers substantial discussions about the general background to her study (chapters 1–5). The author goes to great lengths to justify her chosen theoretical framework and methodology, and the notion of ethnicity receives much attention in the first chapter with its extensive review of sociological literature. For a reader unfamiliar with the Chinese context, chapter 4 contains a useful review of education in Tibetan regions. Chapter 5 presents the workings of Minzu University as an institution and, notably, the extent of political control and ideological indoctrination and the importance of political courses at MUC. We learn that, according to an administrator, “one third of the courses can be categorized as political education” (95), and M. Yang’s interviews reveal that, for many students, the “political stuff” is what they try to avoid. Diverse components of the curriculum are provided (Appendix 2 also lists the “Course Contents of ‘Theories and Policies on Ethnic Minorities’”). A lengthier discussion of how ethnic relations

² However, there has been a significant effort to address this issue in the last decade or so. See Mullaney et al. (2012) and Joniak-Luthi (2015).

and *minzu* theories are actually taught in class would have been a wonderful addition.

The second part of the book is more engaging, with its case studies and analysis of the “virtualities” of learning to be Tibetan in the context of a university. Indeed, this section is particularly interesting because, though it is both important to acknowledge that ethnicity is inevitably constructed and necessary to appreciate that the state is the primary agent of recognition (the nominal), it is more crucial to understand a person’s lived experience of ethnicity and the dynamics of objectification. This is what the ethnography reveals through a series of portraits that exemplify Tibetan students’ diverse experiences, including their struggles, frustrations, joys, and hopes.

M. Yang’s study demonstrates that educational trajectories prior to enrollment at MUC greatly determine the students’ experiences of their ethnicity and that, in the context of interethnic interaction (that is, for some students, much more intense than they have experienced), ethnicity becomes a more salient category at MUC. The author shows that students’ self-identifications oscillate between assigned and asserted identities in different ways according to their social and educational backgrounds.

The Tibetan students with whom M. Yang interacted seemed to hold regional identities based on their geographical provenance or dialectal distinctions, which were meaningful at different levels depending on the type of education they received, their variable fluency in Tibetan (130–131), and so on. But instead of focusing on the student’s regional affiliations, the author correlates their educational trajectories with dissimilar experiences and expressions of identity. A first distinction is whether the students received a predominantly Tibetan-language education or were educated in a Chinese-medium program. A second distinction is whether they majored in Tibetan studies or chose other majors available at MUC. On this basis, Yang identifies four categories of ethnic identity construction.

The first category is *min kao min* students, Tibetan studies majors who had received bilingual education in Chinese and Tibetan prior to their admission to MUC. According to M. Yang, for these students, education is overall a search for Tibetan culture as their major is related to their ethnicity; it is also, to some extent, a process of internalization of a (state-sanctioned) identity of which they become active preservers and transmitters. The author asserts that for this group of students, “being Tibetan means assuming an ethnic mission of promoting Tibetan language and culture” (233), a situation that “fulfill[s] the state’s goal to cultivate ethnic cadres for minority regions” (143). Indeed, jobs as public servants back in their home regions “were considered to be graduates’ top choices” (142), and were preferable to jobs in inland cities where competition would be much fiercer.

Students with similar backgrounds but enrolled in other majors (*min kao min* students in non-Tibetan studies programs) constitute a second category. M. Yang maintains that ethnic display is particularly important to this group of students; in their case, campus life reinforces their ethnic identity and pride. Generally, for them, “being Tibetan embodies having a different physical appearance, wearing different clothing, engaging in different religious practices, holding cultural beliefs and generally under-achieving academically in Han-dominant settings” (233). For this

group, as with the first, “the priority choice for jobs was consistently reported to be public servant positions” chiefly in the Tibetan Autonomous Region from which all the students came (171).

For the third category, “inland Tibetan school graduates”—Tibetans educated in schools outside Tibetan regions, in the Han Chinese “heartland”—who end up at MUC but also other universities in Beijing, pre-university experience implied living up to seven years in predominantly Han inland cities for secondary education where little time was devoted to Tibetan-language learning, leaving many of them with a sense of “aphasia” (191–193). These students “mourned their loss of Tibetan language and culture in inland secondary schools,” writes M. Yang, and “they became quite conscious of their ethnicity” (188) once they reached the university. Although for this group, work opportunities are not limited to “iron rice bowl” (guaranteed lifetime) jobs, graduates often intended to go back home. For them, “a strong ethnic identity is implicated in their critical reflections on their inland experiences, as well as their commitment to call for critical awareness among Tibetans” (201). What seems crucial here is the reflective awareness due to dislocated schooling. These students’ way of coping in the university setting is to reaffirm their ethnicity by “innovatively initiating, organizing or participating in Tibetan cultural programs” on campus (234).

Finally, *min kao han* students—students who have received a mainstream Han Chinese education while living in their native areas—make up a fourth group, which is addressed more briefly (in the six pages of Chapter 9). Students who fall into this category showed much weaker ethnic attachments because they did not speak Tibetan, were of mixed descent, or simply due to their educational background. They felt the divide between “pure” and “non-pure” Tibetans that often marks ethnic boundaries at MUC more deeply than the other groups of students. M. Yang claims that for most of them, being Tibetan is simply symbolic or an instrumental identity “that they sometimes utilize to gain preferential treatments” (234). In their case, job prospects were not linked to their ethnicity or to possible benefits for Tibetan communities.

Overall, this book offers a thorough exploration of how Tibetan students’ identities are the result of negotiation and interplay between state, school, and the social-political environment at large. M. Yang clearly demonstrates the important difference between mono- or bilingual education and how dislocated education influences perceptions of ethnic identity. Her study also shows that to a significant extent, a unified Tibetan identity is “promoted and strengthened within the university” (160). The book’s main achievement is the nuanced depiction of students’ subjectivities and the exploration of their self-identification, their sense of belonging and attitudes about their group membership, knowledge about key features of Tibetan culture, and differing involvement in the various activities associated with the Tibetan community on campus.

The political role of MUC as an institution for educating China’s ethnic minorities and training minority cadres—and “an ideological indoctrination center” (237)—makes it a particularly interesting object of examination. One of the original contributions of this book is its focus on MUC as a microcosm, a bounded unit of observation and “a site of Tibetan identity construction” (44–45). Since the 1950s,

cadres have been trained in minority-cadre schools and nationalities institutes (later renamed “*minzu* universities”), and minorities play an important role in the administration of many regions, including “autonomous” administrative entities in China. As anthropologist Stevan Harrell (2007) has discussed, ever since the beginning of the PRC, minority cadres have occupied the position of broker, which can be summarized as alternating between “*L’état, c’est nous*” and “We have met the oppressor, and he is us.”

Ethnic others in China—whether or not they live in the borderlands—have been discriminated against, marginalized, and impoverished but also educated, modernized, and empowered under the aegis of the developmental state. In any case, they are appropriated for symbolic, economic, and political purposes. Preferential policies, the gift of education and development to minority regions, are tools of statecraft deployed as pragmatic and instrumental strategies that are expected to foster reciprocal gratitude from ethnic minorities, thus contributing to harmonious ethnic relations.

Among the principles that Foucault lists for characterizing heterotopias, one is that such spaces are spaces of compensation: “their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (1986, 27). The “harmonious heterotopia” proposed by Yuqing Yang in *Mystifying China’s Southwest Ethnic Borderlands* “underscores...the asymmetrical mutual containment of the utopian and dystopian” (229). To some extent, she proposes heterotopia as an alternative to utopian spaces within the reigning dystopia of the system. The idea of “harmony with difference” could indeed be a form of mystification, an obscuring of particular social dynamics as an impediment to critical consciousness. If *minzu* spaces constitute heterotopias, it is also tempting to add to the nuances of possible heterotopias not only utopian aspects but also dystopian ones, as a kind of inverse mirroring effect.

Both books discussed here offer evidence that the state can actively encourage certain forms of ethnic revival and ethnic identity when they promote identification with the multiethnic nation. Echoing Yuqing Yang’s discussion of “harmony with difference,” Miaoyan Yang directly addresses Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong’s influential notion of “pluralistic unity” as the official interpretation accepted by the Chinese Communist Party to explain China’s ethnicity, a formulation that “meshes well with state ideology” and constitutes in fact “a straight-line integration theory” (6). Although *Learning to Be Tibetan* is replete with mentions of ideological indoctrination, it also clearly shows how Tibetan identity can be revitalized and strengthened at MUC. The university plays an explicit role in state efforts toward achieving national integration and ethnic solidarity, but an unexpected outcome is how studying at MUC also enhances “the formation of group unity among the students from different dialect regions” (236) and “catalyze[s] the ethnic consciousness of the Tibetan students” (245).

Through very different lenses, these two studies therefore address the question of membership in the Chinese nation-state. In particular, they illuminate how minorities can foster a collective identity and existence outside, but necessarily in dialogue with, the Han-centric mainstream in ways that are not overtly oppositional

but nevertheless have potential to produce localized subversions of the myth of harmony.

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About the Reviewer

Stéphane Gros is a researcher at the Centre for Himalayan Studies of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France. He is currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley.