



China Perspectives

2011/2 | 2011
The Changing World of Chinese Labour

Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation, Ethnic Classification in Modern China*

Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011, 256 pp.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5586>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.5586

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 July 2011

Number of pages: 75-76

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Vanessa Frangville, « Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation, Ethnic Classification in Modern China* », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2011/2 | 2011, Online since 30 June 2011, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5586> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.5586>

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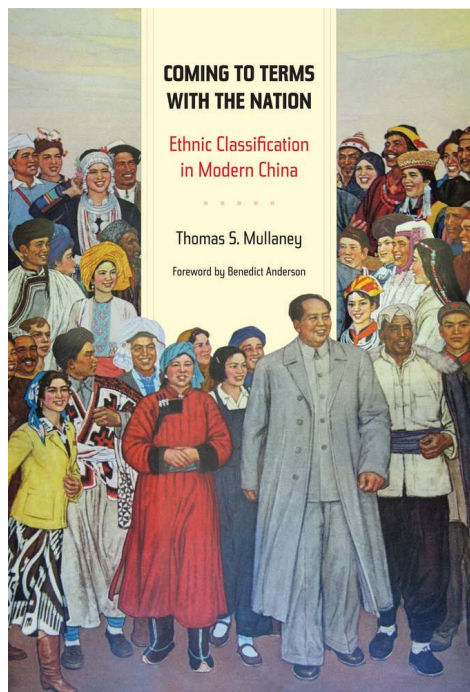
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- 1 China's ethnic classification project (*minzu shibie*), launched in Yunnan Province in 1954, lies at the heart of this book, which includes a preface by Benedict Anderson. In this first monograph resulting from his doctorate thesis, Thomas S. Mullaney proceeds from a simple observation that leads to a series of more complex issues: during the 1953 census organised by the Communist government, more than 200 groups in Yunnan claimed *minzu* status, but a mere 25 of them received state recognition in 1954. What became of the unrecognised groups? Which taxonomic theories prevailed in the classification? How was the China-of-56-*minzu* discourse diffused through this classification? Proceeding from the postulate that this was a key moment in modern Chinese history, Mullaney seeks to open the “black box’ of the fifty-six *minzu* paradigm [sic]” (p. 6) so as to understand the adoption and implementation of the classification of populations. In this task, he has relied on extremely rich and previously unseen archives, as well as



interviews with members of teams that took part in the classification. Mullaney says his ultimate aim was not to pass judgement on the classification or its contradictions and limitations, but to place the construction of the “unified, multinational People’s Republic of China” discourse (p. 9) in its historical context, particularly the relationship between the new mode of “governmentality” in the Foucauldian sense and modern social sciences in China.

- 2 The introduction presents in a clear and orderly fashion the existing literature (or absence of specific literature in China as well as in the West), primary and secondary sources, the methodology adopted, and the ordering of the chapters. The author follows a chronological sequence, beginning with the Republican period in the 1920s through the decades following the classification. A short passage is devoted to defining and translating the concept of *minzu*, which Mullaney chooses to adapt to each specific context. He believes the term’s ambiguity is fundamental to understanding the interaction between the modern state and scholars called upon to offer a vision that is not realistic in the strictest sense, but realisable and applicable to China’s non-Han populations. In this sense the *minzu* category and the national model of 56 *minzu* remains “a work in progress” (p. 17) not amenable to objective or foolproof definition.
- 3 The first of the book’s five chapters nevertheless dwells on the uses and conceptualisation of the term *minzu*. Less a detailed analysis of the uses and implications of the concept than an overview of the state’s relationship with the population’s diversity, this narrative nevertheless has the merit of retracing the categorisation process in relation to the intellectual and political evolution of early twentieth century China. This chapter points above all to the failure in 1953 of the call for the population’s self-categorisation in *minzu* terms, the result of which was a confused and thus unmanageable taxonomy in Yunnan. Facing this “dire political crisis” (p. 39), the government mobilised the social sciences community and put in place an ethnic classification project.
- 4 Chapter 2 retraces the first weeks of the project’s launch in Beijing. Against a very tight agenda, researchers from diverse social science backgrounds quickly put forward linguistic criteria as a categorisation tool. Here Mullaney advances two determining factors: on the one hand the researchers’ crucial interventionist role in the classification in Yunnan; and on the other the profound influence of pre-1949 categorisation models, in particular that of British officer Henry Rodolph Davies, who undertook an expedition in Yunnan in 1894.
- 5 In the third chapter Mullaney returns seamlessly to the reasons that led researchers to make adjustments to accommodate central authorities’ directives. His thesis is developed around two arguments. On the one hand, Stalinist criteria of categorisation did not constitute an inflexible strategy in the 1954 project, contrary to the impression subsequently created by historians and ethnologists. In fact, as he explains, it was the concept of “plausible communities” or what he calls “ethnic potential” (p. 80), that is to say, the possibility of the communities becoming *minzu* in the future, that informed the classification. These ingenious acrobatics validated a “dynamic and futurological definition of *minzu*” (p. 90) on which the classification team’s work was subsequently based.
- 6 Several concrete examples in Chapter 4 illustrate this theory in action, combined with group interviews and linguistic argumentation. Manipulating the categorised populations’ awareness and banishing their subjectivity thus became essential to the

formation of the *minzu* and obtaining consensus among the populations. Impressive intellectual contortions incorporated many groups into much larger categories, which thus grew further. The pre-eminence of the team of scholars was evident even in their power to name the groups, as the author emphasises.

- 7 The last chapter notes that while the research team virtually established a classification, the central authorities concretised it through massive political propaganda. In the years following the end of the project, cultural and scientific works rewrote the history of China and its diversity in an effort to promote a so-called “historic” and “ancestral” model of the 56 *minzu* components.
- 8 The book’s brief conclusion stresses that the classification system necessitates the state’s continuing engagement and the populations’ perpetually reformulated consent.
- 9 In many ways, this book is of major interest in understanding the theoretical and practical implementation of the multinational system as well as the issue of diversity and its management in the PRC. It throws light on facts often neglected due to either political calculation or carelessness, and deconstructs a number of presuppositions on which much scholarly writing relies. The arguments are presented in a rigorous and convincing manner in a narrative made agreeable through a tone that is ironic but never sarcastic. The main virtue of Mullaney’s work – in the 136 pages from introduction to conclusion – lies in its concrete evaluation of the ethnic classification project in Yunnan. He brilliantly recreates the reasons that lent the project a primordial place in modern Chinese history, the key actors and their influences, methodologies adopted and the manner in which their contradictions were ingeniously subdued, as well as the work of assiduous and continuous legitimisation underway since the 1950s. In this context, it was essential for Mullaney to round out his *China Information* article of 2004,¹ which had addressed the same issues in a less detailed manner and within a greatly reduced timeframe. Furthermore, as China’s colonisation was never “total” but rather partial and sporadic, colonial influence on the ethnic classification issue tends to be neglected, whereas it is well recognised and studied in Vietnam, India, and Taiwan. Mullaney’s contribution is thus incontestable not only in the realm of Chinese studies but also in postcolonial literature.
- 10 It is regrettable, however, that the author did not expand his study to include more systematic comparisons with other countries deemed “multicultural” or “multinational,” which would have allowed him to develop the more theoretical aspects of the fragmentation of populations, which this book ignores. Mullaney, it must be said, restricts his work to his own discipline, whereas a multi-disciplinary approach would have helped refine his analysis by including concepts from political science, sociology, or semiology (to help with names of groups, for instance). Furthermore, while variations between the provincial (25 *minzu*) and national (56 *minzu*) levels and the changes between 1954 and the present are no doubt necessary to lend dynamism to the text, they could nevertheless mislead the lay reader, especially because the author fails to state clearly (except through two lines in the introduction, p. 3) that the classification work did not end in 1954, and that the predominance of the key formula, namely 56 *minzu*, in political discourse does not date all the way back to the 1950s. It is curious, first of all, that there is no discussion of the Lhoba and Jinuo, the Yunnan *minzu* recognised by the state in 1965 and 1979 respectively, and probably included in the “others” or “non-classified” categories in 1954. Second, it was only in 1987 that the central authorities announced the end of the national ethnic classification project,

thereby indicating that the 56-*minzu* figure was henceforth definitive and non-modifiable. These two elements assume importance in that they are linked to the idea, too weakly argued by Mullaney, that the post-1954 period, especially the 1980-90 decade, was determinant in rooting the 56-*minzu* discourse. From this standpoint, the last chapter is disappointing in its failure to clarify this aspect with greater rigour: readers enthused by the previous chapters would certainly want a more detailed analysis of the role of state discourse regarding the 56 *minzu*, as well as of the way in which the populations' consent is recast. Moreover, the mere three-page conclusion could have been developed to further reflect on the centrality of the classification in the contemporary Chinese state, especially in the maintenance of an integrity at once territorial, political, and economic. Finally, on a strictly presentational level, the paucity of tables and annexes is regrettable, as is the total absence of illustrations (barring the beautiful cover). Some photographs taken by the research teams in the 1950s or archival extracts would have embellished and backed up the book's contentions.

- 11 Despite these reservations, it should be noted that Mullaney's book constitutes a very good analysis of ethnic classification in the People's Republic of China. The book will remain an indispensable tool figuring in numerous bibliographies.²

NOTES

1. Thomas Mullaney, "Ethnic Classification Writ Large: The 1954 Yunnan Province Ethnic Classification Project and its Foundation in Republican-Era Taxonomic Thought," *China Information*, n° 18, 2004, p. 207-241.
2. It received the 2011 American Historical Association-Pacific Coast Branch book award, which honours the best first book in any field of historical study.

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