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and its Repercussions

Elena Barabantseva, *Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities and Nationalism. De-centering China*

London, Routledge, 2010, 202 pp.

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- 1 How has belonging to the modern Chinese nation been formulated over the twentieth century in order to integrate ethnic minorities on the one hand and members of the diaspora on the other? What issues and objectives led to both of these seemingly distinct categories becoming the focus of policies in the “post-socialist modernisation” era? How do nationalist discourse and modernisation projects of the People’s Republic of China connect to these marginal populations? In a book issuing from her 2006 doctoral thesis, Elena

Barabantseva, Research Fellow and Lecturer in Chinese Politics at the University of Manchester, looks at these significant and burning issues in current debates on ethnicity in modern China. She offers a perspective analysis of official statements pertaining respectively to ethnic minorities (on Chinese territory) and to the Chinese diaspora (including both foreign citizens of Chinese ancestry and Chinese citizens living abroad). Her book relies on a set of policy statements, legislative and academic texts, and other documents issued by Chinese officials, as well as interviews with scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing and government representatives. Arguing that in the official line, “The future of the

Chinese nation is premised on the successful accomplishment of the modernisation process” (p. 4), Barabantseva focuses her reflections on the role assigned to ethnic minorities and to the diaspora in political and academic discourse on modernisation. As noted in the introduction, her aim is to bring a new perspective on the place of territoriality and ethnicity in the Chinese authorities’ national modernisation project. Her argumentation is spread over six chapters replete with discreetly placed tables and charts that aid the reader without making for heavy reading.

- 2 Chapter 1 of *Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities and Nationalism* offers a panorama of debates defining the national affiliation of ethnic minorities and members of the Chinese diaspora in the imperial and then republican era and the policies they spawned. This chapter goes over the different stages that imparted an institutional form to two very imprecisely defined groups. Inclusion of Chinese settled abroad, coming at a key moment in the transition from empire to republic and based on common ancestry, contradicted the idea of citizenship based on common territory incorporating several regions inhabited by (non-Han) ethnic minorities. Barabantseva clearly shows that this issue is built around the concept of *minzu*, which refers to the Chinese nation, especially the dominant Han population, freed of all territorial attachments and defined in terms of race by transnational forces. But this notion also characterises the diverse ethnic nationalities composing the nation, based on a territorial assumption and on so-called scientific claims of “objective” and historical affiliation to China. Barabantseva’s contribution to already well-documented studies of the notion/concept of *minzu* lies in her two-pronged analysis, combining two diametrically opposed categories and according them equal importance in China’s national construction.
- 3 Chapter 2 is a study of strategies developed by the nascent PRC leadership to integrate the diaspora and ethnic minorities in the great socialist project. The author distinguishes between two periods, before and after the Great Leap Forward, 1958 having been a major turning point. The early 1950s were marked by the introduction of programmes to identify and classify ethnic minorities and the founding of institutions for educating non-Han cadres. The implementation of autonomous governance systems in the non-Han regions provided the occasion to reassert Chinese hold on peripheral territories. Populations identified as Chinese living abroad were also sought out to aid China’s socialist construction, especially with their financing and technical know-how. In contrast, the second period stretching up to 1976 is characterised by a rejection of particularities, a disinterest in groups at the cultural, economic, and territorial margins of New China, and a general hardening of policies pertaining to them. Barabantseva observes the use of the notion of classes in official narratives seeking to downplay ethnic differences and to integrate the minorities in the national project. She calls it domestic cosmopolitanism – in other words, a call to ethnic minorities to support a programme based on a universal problematic, transcending ethnic affiliation. In contrast, in the case of overseas Chinese, ethnic internationalism sought to overcome territorial links and to gather members of the diaspora around racial lines and “filial” duty towards China, irrespective of social levels. The Communist government thus incorporated the Nationalist rhetoric of overseas Chinese belonging to the nation. As the author points out, this policy could not but affect China’s diplomatic relations with host countries, especially in Southeast Asia, where the Chinese diaspora has a strong presence. It led to abrogation of the dual nationality law that had been passed in the

early twentieth century. This chapter, extremely rich in facts and theory, draws readers' attention to the contradictory definition of nation under the socialist regime. It also underlines the differences in treatment meted out to populations labelled "Chinese" without rhyme or reason. While the diaspora was accorded privileged treatment and flexible policies so as not to compromise New China's international status, ethnic minorities were subject to strict Communist ideology and a programme that curbed political, economic, and cultural freedoms.

- 4 In Chapter 3, Barabantseva's reflections are in the context of various modernisation projects China launched in the 1980s. She rightly underlines the predominance of economic development in Chinese policies of the last three decades, and points to their influence on the conception of the Chinese nation. She adds that the "post-socialist" modernisation programme is a synthesis of the socialist ideology that dominated the early years of the PRC and market economy principles to which contemporary China is wedded. An examination of numerous academic texts that backed the leadership's actions presents different theories on the modernisation theme in contemporary China. Notably the "Second Modernisation Theory" formulated in the late 1990s by professor He Chuanqi, director of the China Center for Modernization Research under CASS, was an authoritative explanation of the development process. The researcher, who deems modernisation an ineluctable necessity, tries to steer away from Western theoretical frameworks to formulate a conception more specifically adapted to China. He offers a measure of the degree of development based on universal criteria applicable not only among China's diverse regions but also among different countries worldwide. As a result, the approaches and structures flowing from his work disregard local particularities and impose policies little suited to the environment, to social cohesion, and to cultural development in the long term. Barabantseva also adds that this developmentalist approach, highly restrictive in defining the populations' needs, ends up reinforcing the binary opposition between Han and Non-Han and denies a say to different social groups.
- 5 Chapter 4 focuses anew on ethnic minorities in China and the Chinese diaspora in official rhetoric on modernisation. Academic publications examined together offer a highly official view of the roles assigned to these populations. The texts' colonialist approach, assigning to the Han a civilising mission to help the development of backward ethnic minorities, seen as breaks on China's rise, deserve consideration and are amazing given their narrow-mindedness and analytical simplicity. Barabantseva notes with great precision this process of inferiorisation of ethnic minorities in political and academic discourse on modernisation. She also underlines the dichotomy between ethnic minorities on Chinese territory as subjects of the modernisation project, and members of the diaspora treated as active objects and bearers of modernisation. Far removed from the class struggle rhetoric of the socialist era, ethnic minorities are "depoliticised" and stand out in official discourse solely for their culture (especially their singing and dancing prowess), most often considered a hindrance to progress and modernity. Barabantseva notes that alongside this process, cultural diversity is "denigrated and subordinated to the all-encompassing language of modernisation and economic development" (p. 99). As for members of the diaspora, they benefit from a diametrically opposite image, assimilated in the forces directing the modernisation project and regarded as loyal subjects and infinitely patriotic. The author also introduces the few scholars who question the dominant line and propose alternatives better geared to integrating the differences within the modernisation

project.¹ However, these voices remain very much on the margins, and as Barabantseva notes, they do not challenge modernisation's ineluctability, or its conceptualisation by the dominant party.

- 6 In Chapter 5, Barabantseva sheds light on the different strategies the state has deployed to reformulate and strengthen the authorities' links with the diaspora since the late 1970s. In an illustration of de-territorialised nationalism, official rhetoric had no qualms about not only defining a transnational Chinese identity but also adopting active policies through the creation of associations, cultural programmes, and media celebrations directed at Chinese audiences abroad. "New migrants" are sought after, along with the "descendants" of Chinese citizens, whose links with China are often much more tenuous. This operation aims, of course, at encouraging the diaspora to invest in the Chinese economy, but it also has a political dimension, especially with regard to some sensitive issues such as reunification with Taiwan, ethnic separatism, or religious organisations such as Falun Gong (to this list may be added political dissidents such as the activist Hu Jia, the artist Ai Weiwei, or the Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo). Barabantseva points to central propaganda essentially directed at Hans abroad, but devotes a short passage to non-Han diasporic communities as well. She stresses that official discourse failed to win the backing of populations whose historical and political inclusion in China remains highly contested. Emotional feeling is lacking as well, in contrast to a large part of the Han diaspora with whom the racial link argument resonates and is a factor in effective mobilisation.
- 7 Chapter 6, the last, identifies "politics of localisation" in the case of ethnic minorities. Barabantseva gets down to deconstructing the "Western Development Project" launched in the 1990s. In official discourse, it is fused with a project very largely, if not exclusively, concerned with ethnic minorities. She shows how the government is seeking to confine ethnic minorities to a limited geographical space in the west as well as to rural areas on the margins of economic growth. Official discourse is far removed from socio-demographic realities that reveal a dominant Han presence in China's west and major economic disparities in the central regions as well. The author concludes that this depiction and stigmatisation of ethnic minorities as the main obstacle to modernisation prevents them "from engaging in China's transformation on equal terms with other Chinese" (p. 159).
- 8 Barabansteva has largely constructed her thesis using very recent sources in the core of her work, including laws, political statements, and academic publications from 2006 to 2010. What results is an absorbing account of the processes by which Chinese identity, or Chineseness, extends beyond intra-national and inter-state borders through the manipulation of flexible concepts along ever-changing contours. The case of non-Han and Chinese living abroad lends original and convincing perspective on the modalities of defining the Chinese nation in terms of ethnicity and (de-)territoriality. The argument developed in the book masterfully demonstrates the Chinese government's high capacity for tightening its authority on a transnational scale, adapting its discourse in line with global political, social, and economic trends. In this sense – and one agrees with the author on this point – China's case deserves attention in this globalised era, often seen as threatening state hegemony. Moreover, the relevance of the issue Barabantseva deals with is heightened by relating it, in the introduction and conclusion, to various uprisings of 2008 in 2009 that rocked Tibet and Xinjiang (one might add Inner Mongolia in 2011) and mobilised international communities and the

Chinese diaspora. The rich use of primary sources in Chinese is another plus in this work, although the absence of a glossary of Chinese characters is regrettable. Finally, readers will appreciate the flowing and precise language, devoid of extraneous jargon.

- 9 While it is a very good work on fascinating and fertile themes, the book does raise some questions relating to recent developments not dealt with by the author. One such instance is the Chinese authorities' decision not to translate the word *minzu*, as in the name of one of the key institutions for ethnic minorities' education: The Central University of Nationalities (*Zhongyang minzu daxue*) was renamed in English as "Minzu University of China" in 2009. Similarly, a luxury establishment on Chang'an Avenue is known as "Beijing Minzu Hotel." Does this deliberate non-translation indicate a change in the depiction of ethnic minorities (nationalities) on the one hand and of the Chinese national identity on the other (nation, national)? Does this discursive strategy aim at transcending ethnic frontiers within China and state frontiers in the world to transnationalise Chinese identity? Or is it part of an exercise in formulating a concept of differentiating itself from the West and to mark a Chinese "specificity"? Further, over the past ten years, Taiwan has promoted with great dynamism research on Hakkas, a population group that is highly influential in debates on Taiwanese national identity. The Hakkas comprise a sizeable portion of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and North America. In this context, would the dominant discourse in the PRC on the diaspora's role in the construction of Chineseness conflict with the Taiwanese official line? Will the PRC adopt a discourse especially directed towards the Hakka diaspora – subsumed under the Han in current ethnic classification – or will it maintain a uniform rhetoric addressed to the entire diaspora, as seems to be the case in Barabantseva's study? To conclude, the issue of ethnic minorities living outside of China is explored only briefly for reasons she has stated: official discourse is at pains to find points in common with communities often bitterly opposed to the regime. Nevertheless non-Han minorities abound among new migrants and are integrated into host countries with the double identity of Chinese but non-Han. This was not the case for generations preceding the ethnic classification of the 1950s, which as is now known was part of a project to build cultural identities that are now being offered as historical and immutable. What about young non-Han Chinese citizens who moved abroad in recent decades? Do they form a distinct diaspora? It is possible that the Chinese government, ever concerned over the need to garner support for its cause, would sooner or later get around to addressing the ethnic minority diaspora? This discourse was already hinted at in Zhu Feng's propaganda film *Xunzhao Liu Sanjie*, 2009, (*A Singing Fairy* in English), recounting the journey of an American descended from Guangxi's Zhuang ethnic minority. The film harped on the protagonist's non-Han origins and the grandeur of Zhuang culture, as well as his love for the Chinese motherland where he decides to settle. All of this should be an encouragement to pursue a direction of study that is certain to expand in the coming years, as attested by Barabantseva's excellent work.

NOTES

1. Zhang Haiyang of the Minzu University of China and Xiong Jingmin of the Chinese University of Hong Kong are among the scholars most critical of the modernisation policy. Especially concerned about the ecological future of several western regions, they also express disagreement with the official interpretation of ethnic minorities' role in the modernisation project. Wang Hui, professor at Beijing's Tsinghua University, joins them by offering a critical analysis of the East/West dichotomy structuring the vision and understanding of national development in Chinese scholarly literature.

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