Book Reviews

Minzoku no katari no bunpō: chūgoku seikaishō mongoruzoku no nichijō bunso kyoiku (The syntax of narratives of ethnicity: daily lives, disputes and education of the Mongols of Qinghai Province in China).
Shinjilt

Minzu, a Chinese loan word adopted from the Japanese neologism minzoku, which refers to a spectrum of connotations that range from nation, nationality to ethnicity, is one of the most disputed concepts in recent academic writings on China. Most of these either take a macroscopic perspective to disentangle and define the notion itself, or engage in specific, microscopic analyses within the given framework of minzu. Few of them go so far as to analyze the phenomenon from the point of view of minority groups, which are often marginalised as the silent objects of numerous definitions and descriptions. It is in this sense that Shinjilt’s work contributes to our understanding of minzu as a realm of political and social knowledge to be represented and practiced by ordinary minority people of China in their everyday experiences. It also makes an exemplary case study of an uprooted diaspora community beset with difference, diversity and heterogeneity in identity formation.

In this richly documented and highly original ethnographical account, Shinjilt sets out to investigate the multiple and mobile ethnic identities in the Mongol community of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County, or Henan Mengqi (hereafter HNMQ) in Qinghai Province of China. This community had been the dominion of the office of Prince Henan, a powerful Mongol ruler and the biggest patron of Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism in this originally Tibetan territory, from the early eighteenth century to the 1950s. Their relatively autonomous history helped these Mongols sustain a distinctive identity different from both the indigenous Tibetans and other Mongols outside the region. Caught in between Tibetanisation as a result of two centuries’ geographical isolation and cultural assimilation, and their official classification as a ‘Mongol nationality’ (menggu zu) imposed by the Communist Chinese state since the 1950s, they have learned to adjust their identities in order to cope with the discrepancy between the official category of minzu that requires unity and conformity, and their everyday reality of disparity and hybridity. Shinjilt illuminates the ambiguity and fluidity that characterise their ethnic identities, as well as the dynamics and tactics of representation and negotiation of identities by ordinary people on a day-to-day basis. In doing so he problematises the ideological domination of the state in

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the formation of minority discourses and the power relations between minority and majority, centre and periphery.

The key phrase highlighted in the title of the book is 'syntax of narratives of ethnicity' (minzoku no katari no bunpo), which Shinjilt conceives as the conceptual pattern by which the phenomenon of minzu could be captured. He interprets minzu not as a self-contained entity that exists objectively ‘out there’, but as a result of narration, which includes not only the discursive representations centering on a particular subject, in this case the HNMQ Mongols, but also the actual action of story-telling that is to be recognised as meaningful by the narrator and audience alike and to have an impact on the real world. The narrators treated in this book include state representatives, religious groups, intellectuals, local elites, and commoner informants, who are simultaneously consumers of other narratives that have been produced and circulated. On the other hand, Shinjilt argues that the formation of narratives is by no means random or arbitrary. Rather, it follows the deep structure of ‘grammatical rules’ or patterns, which configure the narratives and inform people's behaviours and actions. This refers to the criterion by which the inclusion in and exclusion from a community are determined, which derives from a set of boundary-marking processes around a particular conceptualisation of a ‘self’ in relation to its ‘other’. These patterns, he argues, are not fixed and stable, but subject to change due to different historical and social contexts. Here Shinjilt’s approach seems to resonate with the Foucauldian ‘genealogy’, that is, historicising the different trajectories of the emergence of the subject inscribed in power relations, and prioritising the dissenting opinions and local beliefs that are often obscured and marginalised by institutionalised knowledge such as minzu.

Shinjilt starts with an overview of theoretical discourses concerning nation and ethnicity in the West and moves on to discuss the concepts of minzu and zuqun (ethnicity) in the Chinese context, as well as the academic and political tensions underlying these categories. On the one hand, he directs his critique at the state-oriented theory of ‘Zhonghua minzu de duoyuan yiti geju’ (plurality and unity in the configuration of the Chinese nation), proposed in 1988 by Fei Xiaotong (1910– ), the prominent social anthropologist. Arguably a resuscitation of the 1930s’ discourse proposed by nationalist scholars such as Gu Jiegang (1893–1981), it represented a paradigmatic change from the discourse of a unitary ‘Chinese state’ consisting of multiple nationalities in the 1950s to that of a singular, substantial ‘Chinese nation’ comprised of plural ethnic groups in the 1990s, thereby justifying ethnic assimilation and national integration. On the other hand, he also criticises the conventional Mongolist approaches, notably those from Japan, that depict the Mongols either as an essentialised object of cross-cultural studies, or as a homogeneous symbol of resistance against the state. In addition, he is also cautious of the tendency of ‘internal Orientalism’ (p.80) that...