



China Review International, Fall 2002 v9 i2 p436(4)

Stevan Harrell. Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China. (Book Review)
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Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001. xii, 370 pp. Hardcover \$50, ISBN 0-295-98122-9. Paperback \$22.50, ISBN 0-295-98123-7.

Since the publication of his edited volume, *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*; (1) **Stevan Harrell** has been justly regarded as one of the foremost experts on ethnic minorities in China, especially those in the southwestern provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan. This new work consolidates that position. While its insights into ethnic identity will probably not transcend Chinese specificities, the work offers new insights into long-standing debates within Chinese studies, and is a treasure trove of data on the region.

Southwest China and neighboring regions of upland Southeast Asia boast a tremendous ethnic diversity that is only partially described by China's post-1949 ethnic categories. Until now, most Chinese and foreign ethnographers working in the region, including Harrell himself, have restrained themselves to trying to grasp the language, culture, history, and politics of one ethnic group. In this work Harrell ambitiously tackles several, and thinks about the ways in which they individually position themselves and relate to each other. In mountain regions like these, where the nearest neighbors of a village calling itself Naxi minority may be villages calling themselves Lisu, Tibetan, Lahu, or something else, this approach is sensible and overdue. As Harrell himself concedes, it is also a perilous road to walk, and in the hands of a less careful and serious scholar we could end up with something slipshod and superficial.

Here, Harrell's sensitive accounts of individual Nuosu, Prmi, and Naze villages are nicely interwoven with convincing data on agriculture, education, kinship, clothing, and housing. While early on this can seem like slow going, the book winds up, ultimately, a magisterial survey of a diverse region. And while some poststructuralists may chafe at wading through tables and kinship charts, they may be won over again by affectionate accounts interspersed throughout, such as this one of a struggling, backwoods Nuosu school-room:

At the primary school, the first-grade class has nearly fifty students crowded into desk space for about forty, so that some of the desks have three grubby, unwashed little tykes (the thirty-four boys sharing some desks and the sixteen girls sharing others), who thus fill up the desks intended for two. (p. 110)

The author goes on to describe vividly classes taught in this bare room by a dedicated

and energetic teacher, paying close attention to the important role played by code-switching between Chinese and Nuosu language throughout the day. He shows us intent young scholars doing math problems on their fingers and shouting "laoshi zaijian" (good day, teacher) while dashing for the door, leaving behind "four or five little punkins" who are too heavily swaddled and small to do much except sit, blinking.

Harrell is at his best among these Nuosu, whom he has studied for decades, as he tracks the minutiae that make up the radically different textures of village life in three towns. The book moves from a remote mountain hamlet down into the valleys where Nuosu daily mix with and borrow from majority Hans. Here, villages of even the ostensibly "same" Nuosu ethnicity have radically different ways of identifying and describing themselves as Nuosu. This trek down the mountain culminates in a thoughtful and refreshingly clear discussion of the state-defined "Yi" ethnic group to which Nuosu were assigned in the state-building era. His exploration of this contentious (and, to novices, confusing) question of "Yi"-ness is one of the best and clearest available. His briefer and more glancing discussions of the Prmi, Naze, and Han, and even slighter discussions of the "tiny" ethnic groups scattered nearby, give us a glimpse of some other ways of marking ethnic difference in these Tibetan foothills.

What is striking about Harrell's account of the so-called Yi, though, emerges most clearly when compared with Erik Mueggler's ethnography of the Yi in Yunnan, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*. (2) While both books are wonderful in their respective ways, they are so different from each other that it seems almost surprising that the two researchers were in the same country, let alone related villages. These are really differences of personal style as much as of methodology: Harrell's work offers an exterior vision of the Yi compiled from the careful noting of things like kinship and linguistics and village organization. Mueggler's poetic text explores ethnic metaphysics, documenting the use of shamanic ritual, in which he often participated, to cope with the traumatic intrusions of the Chinese state. A comparison of the two authors' indexes says it all: where Mueggler has eighty entries under the subject "wild ghosts" and nothing on education or agriculture, Harrell has nothing on religion or ghosts but dozens of entries under "economic development" and the like.

Yet part of the difference between the two texts is not just stylistic but also methodological, and putting the books side by side one is struck by the difference this makes in terms of the kinds of voices we hear in Harrell's book, especially the absence of female voices who would not likely be heard in short-term public gatherings. Here Harrell's work reflects a post-1949 tradition among both Chinese and Western scholars to do "banquetary ethnography": short trips to minority villages accompanied by Chinese officials and translators, with much time spent over meals and toasts. Such patterns of fieldwork were established in China by Mao-era ethnographers dispatched by the state who had neither the time for nor the inclination toward long-term residence in impoverished minority regions. Such short-term studies were almost always filtered through the politically correct lens of a Chinese-speaking translator.

Harrell should not be grouped with these; he does speak Nuosu, and throughout this book one is confident that we are in the hands of a masterful researcher who could probably spend a half hour in a town and notice more about it than most people do in a week. The problem is that when a prominent scholar like Harrell does short-term

fieldwork and comes up with a good book at the end of it, he may inadvertently open the door for sloppier ethnographers, NGO officials, and others to do the same and come up with generalizations that are irresponsible or wrong. There has been an excess of this kind of short-term ethnography in Chinese minority regions, often resulting in the kind of ham-handed ethnic categorization that Harrell critiques. In earlier days, the government would not permit long-term fieldwork by foreigners in minority regions. Now that those days are gone, Harrell's book and others less successful than his could be used as an excuse by new researchers to eschew serious ethnic language study and fieldwork. If that happened, probably no one would grieve more than Harrell himself, as he will likely be asked to review all the resulting articles for publication.

The author's conclusion, broadly interpreted, is that when examining ethnic identity in China we should be doing more splitting and less lumping; or, as he puts it, "ethnicity matters differently in different contexts" (p. 12). When the newly formed PRC first called for ethnic minorities to self-identify in the 1950s, over four hundred ethnic groups rose up and demanded recognition. This caused some panic among leaders in Beijing, who envisioned a national congress where Hans would be overrun by minority delegates. The state dispatched teams of ethnographers to sort out the "real" national minority groups, and with effort managed to lump together enough groups to come up with the more manageable number of fifty-six.

Harrell critically engages the Morganian/Marxist theory of social evolution that these scholars used in their categorizing, an ethnocentric and hierarchical system that, while repudiated by many Chinese and international social scientists, remains the default for ethnic studies within China. He suggests that the fifty-six state-invented ethnic categories, rather than simplifying ethnicity in China, simply added another layer of complexity on top of already complicated local relationships. Today, he argues, some smaller ethnic groups of Sichuan are engaging in strategic self-lumping, that is, asserting a shared ethnicity with larger groups in order to strengthen their lobby. Thus: "Naze cadres who insist that they are Mongolians, or their Prmi counterparts who call themselves [Tibetan], do so in order to gain an ally, as their ancestors did" (p. 325). These points are useful, sensible, and drawn from years spent thinking over carefully accumulated data.

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NOTES

(1.) **Stevan Harrell**, ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

(2.) Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

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