

***Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities
and Nationalism: De-Centering China*, by Elena
Barabantseva, London: Routledge, 2014. 202 pp.**

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Why do various overseas Chinese and ethnic minorities in China come to contest or support the official Chinese discourse on national identity? How are these people linked to the modernization project of the Chinese state? Elena Barabantseva struggles with these questions in her new book, which she developed from her 2006 dissertation, by analyzing how these two seemingly distinct social groups have been constructed and in what ways they have been related to China's pursuit of nationhood in the recent decades. Relying on a critical reading of recent Chinese scholarly publications, official pronouncements and policy documents, as well as interviews with Chinese scholars and government representatives, Barabantseva sets out to explore the particular roles assigned to ethnic minorities and to overseas Chinese in the Chinese authorities' effort at national identity, which is built through the framework of their link to modernity. For her, an examination of such roles can offer important insights into the place of territoriality and ethnicity in the national modernization project, because "[t]he future of the Chinese nation is premised on the successful accomplishment of the modernisation process" (p. 4).

Barabantseva's argument is expounded in six core chapters, bracketed by an introduction that lays the theoretical foundation of her study and presents her main theoretical configurations, and a conclusion. The first chapter offers a succinct historical context by charting the academic discussions about the national affiliations of various ethnic minorities and overseas Chinese during the last decades of China's Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and in the following Republican era, as well as the state policies these discussions inspired. Although these groups of people seem to be two separate categories that diametrically opposed each other, for Barabantseva they both centered on the modern Chinese notion of *minzu* (nation/nationality), and were therefore equally important in China's national construction. Chapter 2, which is extremely rich in facts and theory, moves onward to focus on changing state strategies in the first three decades of the PRC. Here, Barabantseva identifies two major periods, before and after 1958, in which the new communist leadership attempted to integrate ethnic minorities and members of the Chinese diaspora into the socialist project of building a new China. Prior to 1958, programs to classify ethnic minorities and a system of autonomous administration of ethnic peoples were introduced, while overseas Chinese were respected and encouraged to aid China's socialist construction. But from 1958 to the late 1970s, as the communist ideology became stricter, there was a general hardening of policies toward these peoples.

Chapter 3 draws readers' attention to the conceptions of ethnic minorities and overseas Chinese as reflected in various modernization projects launched since the 1980s. In analyzing a wide range of Chinese scholarly texts, in particular those by He Chuanqi, who coined the "second modernisation theory," Barabantseva cogently argues that such projects are in fact syntheses of the communist-socialist ideology that had dominated China in the early decades of the PRC with the market economy principles that were introduced to China since the late 1970s. The specific role of ethnic minorities and overseas Chinese in official

rhetoric on modernization is expounded in detail in Chapter 4. Based on an examination of extensive Chinese academic publications, Barabantseva incisively observes a colonist approach adopted by the overwhelming majority of them. The official discourse has moved away from the class struggle rhetoric of the socialist era, yet ethnic minorities are often considered as a hindrance to development and modernity. Members of the Chinese diaspora, on the other hand, are generally regarded as active objects and bearers of modernization.

The last two chapters turn to different state policies toward overseas Chinese and the politics of localization concerning ethnic minorities, respectively. Since the early 1980s, China has deployed a series of strategies to define a transnational Chinese identity by actively creating and supporting various cultural projects, overseas Chinese associations and media programs. Such strategies aim in the first place at encouraging economic investigations, but at the same time they also carry the political considerations of the Chinese authorities, in particular as the issue of ethnic minorities became thorny again in the recent years. Although Barabantseva's mainly pays attention to the overseas Han Chinese, who form the predominant target audience, she also notices that these official efforts are not particularly well received among non-Han diasporic communities.¹ Through an analysis of the "Western Development Project," which strives to help the western half of China to catch up with the economic advances in the east, Barabantseva shows in the last chapter that the official discourse fails to reveal a dominant Han presence, or the evident economic disparities between Han and non-Han in most of the non-Han regions.

1) For a detailed discussion of the efforts by China's authorities directed at non-Han diasporic peoples and their responses to the government initiatives, see Elena Barabantseva, "Who Are 'Overseas Chinese Ethnic Minorities'? China's Search for Transnational Ethnic Unity," *Modern China* 38.1 (2012): 78-109.

Separately, ethnic minorities and Chinese diaspora are two groups which have been intensively studied. But by placing them in a common framework, Barabantseva succeeds in offering new insights into non-Han minorities and Chinese diasporic communities abroad, as well the changing official rhetoric and policies of the Chinese state. Doing so reveals an original perspective on the construction of modern Chinese identity in terms of ethnicity and territoriality. Backed by ample examples, Barabantseva demonstrates that the current Chinese state is highly capable at adopting effective strategies and adapting them to socio-political and economic transformations. Through the years of the PRC, overseas Chinese, with their financing and technical know-how, are mostly valued as investors, partners, and advisers, so the authorities' policies toward them are relatively positive and flexible.

As for ethnic minorities in China, however, what emerges from this meticulously studied and clearly written book is a generally negative picture of ethnic diversity and nation-building in contemporary China. In China's modernization projects, ethnic minorities play an important role in constructing the Chinese national identity. But until now there has only been a rather narrow vision of modernity pertaining to ethnicity, which prevents non-Han peoples "from engaging in China's transformation on equal terms with other Chinese" (p. 159). Until the Chinese state is willing to think beyond this vision, contestations to the official rhetoric and unrest by ethnic minorities are likely to continue. Yet curious readers may wonder how different ethnic minority groups react to the official rhetoric and state policies, and in what ways these reactions relate to the external kin relations of different ethnic groups outside China. As Enze Han has forcefully shown in his thought-provoking analysis of different political strategies adopted by five major ethnic groups in China with regard to their negotiations of national identity with the Chinese state, whether a group chooses to adapt to or contest the official version is heavily connected to two variables: whether an ethnic

group is economically better off than its external kin relations, and whether the group receives substantial international support.² Although Barabantseva touches upon the issue of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities, a more elaborate discussion of their connection to their kin in China would shed valuable light on China's transnational nation-building efforts.

In sum, *Overseas Chinese* is a very informative and highly engaging book that explores how ethnic minorities and overseas Han have been involved in China's modernization program and national identity construction over the twentieth century. Her extensive use of Chinese language sources introduces many new materials hitherto largely neglected by Western scholarship (though the absence of a glossary of Chinese terms is regrettable). Packed with substantial information and convincing arguments, this book will deservedly find an appreciative audience among both scholars and general readers interested in Chinese ethnic minorities, Chinese diaspora, and Asian and comparative politics.

2) Enze Han, *Contestation and Adaptation: The Politics of National Identity in China* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

