

BOOK REVIEWS/CHINA

Yu Luo. *Ethnic Branding in Contemporary China: Buyi and the Paradox of Difference*. University of Washington Press. 294 pages. Hardcover, \$110.00; paperback, \$35.00.

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As the twenty-sixth monograph in the series Studies on Ethnic Groups in China, Yu Luo's *Ethnic Branding in Contemporary China: Buyi and the Paradox of Difference* carries on the academic endeavor of studying ethnicity in China from a dynamic model focused on power relations and multi-scalar interactions

As the twenty-sixth monograph in the series Studies on Ethnic Groups in China, Yu Luo's *Ethnic Branding in Contemporary China: Buyi and the Paradox of Difference* carries on the academic endeavor of studying ethnicity in China from a dynamic model focused on power relations and multi-scalar interactions. This book is a timely, nuanced, and exquisite demonstration of the development of ethnicity among the Buyi. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Wuyang Village and neighboring areas in southwestern Guizhou, the book explores how the Buyi (re)discover the "uniqueness" of their culture in relation to the state, the market, and other ethnic groups. Amid the boom in ethnic tourism (*minzu lüyou re*) over the last three decades, ethnic groups must face the paradox of preserving traditional heritage to present exoticness and initiating new developments to cater to the modern tourism industry simultaneously. Luo elucidates the subtle in-betweenness of the Buyi: they are neither attractively exotic like the Miao, nor respectably advanced like the Han. This in-betweenness runs deep in the whole process of branding themselves.

The book is deftly structured, with "branding" serving as the key theoretical term weaving together Mo rituals, female performances, museumization, and village infrastructure through which the local Buyi's everyday lives and living spaces are shaped. Chapter 1, "Becoming Buyi," builds the historical background and ethno-social milieu that support the overall argument of the rest of the book. Luo outlines the process of becoming Buyi from the late Qing Dynasty depicted in the Miao album to present-day Guizhou. Placing particular emphasis on interaction, Luo argues that although the Buyi's ancestors are traced to the Baiyue, centuries of intermarriage, migration, and interaction have created complicated and permeable ethnic boundaries. Although they share cultural elements with other ethnic groups such as the Zhuang, this fluidity doesn't mean the Buyi lack a core identity: their "waterside" geographic context and religious practices like the Mo rituals continuously influence their core group identity as Buyi.

Chapter 2, “Rituals, Experts and Cultural Revivals,” explores how the Mo ritual tradition is being strategically transformed, “academicized,” “valorized,” and “visualized,” by local elites in collaboration with cultural experts and the state. This process repackages indigenous practices into state-approved “intangible cultural heritage” (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan*) and marketable cultural products, aligning them with national political agendas and tourism economies rather than purely religious or local community purposes. The author not only conducted participant observation on how local cultural elites revitalized Mo literature and rituals but also skillfully incorporated the research and writings of these local cultural elites into the discussion.

Chapter 3, “Female Performance and the State,” examines how Buyi ethnic identity and cultural continuity are actively negotiated, performed, and reinvented through women’s everyday practices in three key domains: sartorial traditions (clothing/textiles), oral/performative arts (songs/dances), and modern media engagement. It argues that these practices are dynamic sites of meaning-making where women navigate between tradition and modernity, local belonging and state integration in their own ways. The gist of this chapter is that Buyi women’s cultural ideals and eclectic personal expression were shaped through the gazes of tourists, the state, and other ethnic groups, as well as their internal self-awareness and ethnic pride.

By delving into the decades-long effort of Chairman Yang, a local cultural elite and key interlocutor of the author, to establish a Buyi folklore museum in Wuyang Village, chapter 4, “Heritage and Identity Politics on Display,” reveals that museumification in the village functions as a strategy for branding and commodifying ethnic identity for tourism in collaboration with the state. However, this museumification runs into the danger of constructing a simplified “authentic” heritage that distances the community from its own culture and lived experience. This chapter questions who benefits from and controls the representation of minority culture in contemporary China.

The preceding chapters predominantly address how people in Wuyang Village valorize their metaphysical cultural elements. Chapter 5, “Modernizing Rural Infrastructure,” shifts its focus to the physical landscape of the village. Deploying the term *baohuxing kaifa* (protective development), Luo explains the underlying tension Wuyang Village faces, namely building modern amenities to develop tourism and conserving historical elements like stone architecture to cater to tourists’ desires for an idealized, traditional rurality. This chapter highlights that development is shaped by local inspirations and power structures, as well as by state support. The village’s ability to brand itself as a “thousand-year-old” Buyi village is heavily dependent on its villagers’ political and familial connections to the local government. Conversely, managing the village’s physical appearance becomes the most tangible tool for ethnic and place branding for the local government.

Ethnic Branding in Contemporary China is insightful in many ways. First, it captures a spatial and temporal paradox for ethnic groups living in peripheral regions of China: participating in state-led development to eliminate “backwardness” while preserving a “traditional” aesthetic to market themselves as authentic ethnic minorities to tourists. Second, the book offers a groundbreaking study on an ethnic group that is largely invisible in both Chinese society and the academic world. Academic studies on the Buyi and many other seemingly politically negligible ethnic groups are scarce. This runs counter to the undertakings of anthropologists who promise to study and speak to/for/with the marginalized. Third, Luo’s ethnography is very personal and reflexive on her Buyi identity. She vividly renders cultural elites such as Chairman Yang and many other ordinary village men and women, through their efforts, pride, doubts, struggles, jokes, and emotions in the process of branding themselves as Buyi.

The book is not without its limitations. Although this book extensively cites local cultural elites’ writings on the Buyi, the book could have also benefited from the inclusion of more perspectives from Chinese ethnologists working in China on contemporary ethnic issues. Another point worthy of attention in future research is that the village selected by the author possesses many privileges, such as being home to many cultural elites and powerful government officials. Finally, perhaps most importantly, more direct attention could have been paid to the market. The author discusses and critiques government actions. However, if government officials were interviewed more deeply, many would likely argue that they too are caught in a dilemma because of the force of modernity, or more specifically, the market.

These shortcomings do not detract from the fact that *Ethnic Branding in Contemporary China* is a worthy addition to studies on ethnic groups in China. This book offers an exemplary study on the pressing issues surrounding ethnic groups. The theoretical strength of this book, namely “ethnic branding,” is inspiring to scholars who study ethnicity. Since the state’s proposition to “foster a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation” (*zhulao zhonghua minzu gongtong ti yishi*) in 2014, both academic study and government administrative work related to ethnic affairs have become focused on this official proclamation. How would ethnic groups brand themselves in relation to the state, the Han, and other ethnic groups in an era where presenting uniqueness and exoticness have been shifting to identifying interactions and shared cultures? That said, *Ethnic Branding in Contemporary China* will be of particular interest to scholars and students of ethnicity in China, religious studies, tourism studies, gender studies, urban-rural relations, rural development, and the anthropology of China in general.



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