



Emily Chao, *Lijiang Stories: Shamans, Taxi Drivers, and Runaway Brides in Reform-Era China*

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PUBLICATIONS ON ethnic minority groups in China are flourishing in both quality and quantity. *Lijiang Stories* is an illustration of such an achievement. Emily Chao has provided some potential answers to several quite important but often neglected issues in China studies: if ethnic minorities must perform their ethnic distinctiveness, what then unifies them with the Han as part of the Chinese nation-state? If the essentialization of difference categorizes the identity construction of Naxi and other ethnic minorities, shouldn't we expect that the Han may do the same? However, the author, as well as other China scholars on ethnic matters, could do more to address these issues in question.

When Lijiang became a famous tourist destination in China, the natives, most of whom are Naxi, had to deal with the consequences of a tourism boom, such as prostitution, a wealth imbalance, and cultural commodification. In negotiating with transforming social realities, the locals invoke or reinterpret their traditions and redraw or reinforce ethno-cultural boundaries. As a result, so-called *dongba* culture, elaborations of a once peripheral and rural ritual practice, was elevated to the center of Naxi culture; bride abduction and elopement were viewed by some local elites as an ethnic trait or *dongba* tradition to be exempted from the political discourse against such “uncivilized” practices; the stories of female taxi drivers with *muchou* (“bad hygiene”; lit. “fox stench”) were circulated to employ the putative purity-pollution category to differentiate various Naxi groups (for example, rural vs. urban, modern vs. backward, masculinized vs. feminized, and so on); and the brand of “ancient Naxi music,” which was exclusively of Han Chinese origin, became a major tourist attraction in Lijiang.

Chao's descriptive ethnography is able to delineate the complex landscape of social change in Lijiang and the locals' negotiations of their identities. This book asserts that the state of being was informed by official ethnic categorization, biopolitical classification, and sociopolitical reform agendas. In other words, it is the party-state that invented and applied the ethnic category to both incorporate the non-Han populations as part of the new Chinese nation-state and highlight their differences vis-à-vis more "modern" and "civilized" Han. In line with this representation, the state endeavors to transform the "primitive" and "backward" Naxi and other ethnic minorities by launching various cultural and development projects, including tourism in the case of Lijiang. In a way, both local government and the inhabitants were compelled to essentialize such differences. Their responses seem to be validated and have paid off through the development of tourism: on the one hand, authentic "otherness" is worth championing thanks to the tourists' craving for exoticness, but on the other hand tourism serves as an important modernization venue to promise a better future for locals.

However, the author contends that Lijiang locals were not the real beneficiaries of the tourism boom. They, especially women, suffered from the commodification and sexualization of their ethnic bodies, and Lijiang Old Town, the major tourist site, was almost taken over by outsiders who migrated there for business opportunities. Even worse, driven by privatization and entrepreneurship, rural communities started to fall apart as cohesive social bodies and moral communities. In all, rather than attaining upward mobility, Lijiang natives were further exploited and marginalized in the market economy.

Who or what are to be blamed for what has been happening in Lijiang? The author points her finger at the Han state and their engendered political and cultural discourses and development agendas. This logic is substantiated with a historical analysis, meaning that in the author's view many "bad" practices among the Naxi of today, such as the accusations of witchcraft and bride abduction, took root in Lijiang as a result of imperial expansion and the locals historical encounters with the Han.

I will not deny that this might be true, but if the Naxi were victims of the state and market expansion, are the Han, despite internal stratification, the beneficiaries? Moreover, many minority groups in China—Naxi are not an exception—are quite proud of their ethnic status and do not seem to embrace the idea of being such victims. Either we could attribute this phenomenon simply to the successful ideological inculcation of the party-state, or we could reconsider the position of seeing state-society relations or that of the Han-state and ethnic minorities as predominantly oppositional. I have argued elsewhere that such relations are much more nuanced and convoluted (JINBA 2014).

Finally, I will argue that it is of essential importance to learn from Eric MUEGLER's insights that ethnicity and Chineseness compose two sides of identity construction for ethnic minorities in China (2001). This implies that Naxi and other ethnic communities do not have to be ethnically distinctive all the time, although the Tibetan and Ugyhur cases are certainly more complex. The Chineseness of ethnic communities, namely, as subjects of the Chinese party-state or citizens of China, matters even more in their everyday lives. So the Lijiang stories told here

could happen not only among ethnic minorities but also among the Han, and all over China.

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