

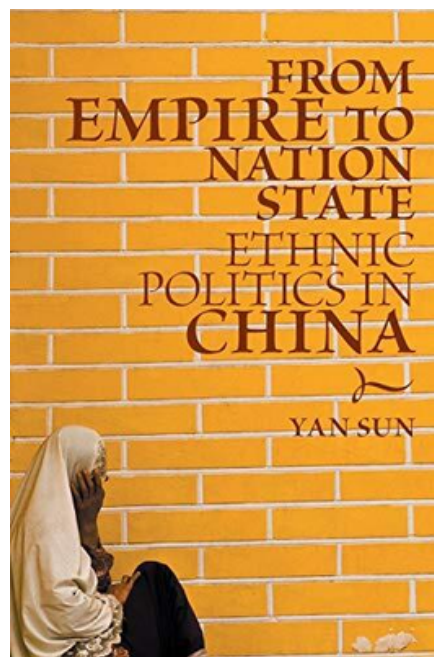
Book Review

Yan Sun, From Empire to Nation-State: Ethnic Politics in China

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Sun, Yan. From Empire to Nation State: Ethnic Politics in China. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 250 pp. Paperback, ISBN 9781108794411. USD \$41.99.

Yan Sun 孙雁, a distinguished professor at the City University of New York 纽约市立大学 and a prolific scholar of Chinese politics, offers a compelling and thought-provoking analysis in her book From Empire to Nation-State: Ethnic Politics in China. Drawing on sources in both Chinese and English, fieldwork, and interviews with Chinese Party cadres, political scientists, and anthropologists, the book provides a deeply informed exploration of ethnic policy in China, culminating in the Lhasa and Urumqi riots of 2008–2009.



Source: Official Website of Yan Sun (孙雁)

One of the book's central contributions is its use of what Sun terms a "long causal chain" to interpret ethnic tensions. She foregrounds two key dynamics: centralisation—rooted in China's imperial legacies—and ethnicisation, shaped by modern political imperatives. The administrative ambiguity in the classification and enumeration of ethnic groups is well detailed, illustrating how the ethnic framework was both constructed and manipulated. Sun's treatment of "loose rein" policies versus ethno-territorialism sheds light on the historical shifts in governing China's outer peripheries, namely Tibet and Xinjiang.



The narrative traces the evolution of governance strategies from elite co-optation in imperial China to assimilationist efforts in the Beiyang era, through to Mao's contradictory mix of egalitarianism and ethnic particularism. In the reform era, Sun identifies market-driven ethnic particularism as a third force fueling discontent. The discussion of Hu Yaobang's ethnic reforms in the 1980s, along with central policy documents that facilitated ethnic identity formation, is especially insightful in author's argument.

Importantly, Sun maps out the ideological contest among Chinese elites over ethnic policy, dividing perspectives into three broad schools: liberal autonomists, integrationists, and socialist autonomists. This framework enhances our understanding of ongoing policy debates in China for minorities. Currently, social autonomists exert a discernible influence over prevailing policy frameworks, while the author astutely categorises the former United Front Work Department executive chairman, Zhu Weiqun, as an integrationist. This circumstance elicits a disconcerting inquiry: by what rationale was a fervent integrationist entrusted with leading the Chinese delegation in the Sino-Tibet dialogue, which has remained deadlocked since 2010? Such a choice profoundly underscores the Chinese government's apparent disinclination to pursue a genuine resolution to the Tibet issue.

The concluding chapters of the book present a nuanced comparative analysis of religious, educational, and economic policies in Tibet and Xinjiang. Sun compellingly contends that the state's initial endorsement of religious revivalism—intended as a strategy for integration—paradoxically facilitated the articulation of distinct ethnic identities, thereby triggering increasingly repressive countermeasures. Her discerning contrast between Tibet's sectarian pluralism and Xinjiang's vulnerability to transnational pan-Islamic ideologies offers a cogent explanation for the Chinese state's divergent policy responses towards these two peripheral regions.

Nevertheless, several limitations merit critical consideration. The book's methodological reliance on a historical-political lens, while analytically robust, affords scant attention to the lived realities of ethnic minority communities. One is inevitably left pondering: how, in a civilisation steeped in Confucian principles of social harmony, did such deep-seated class and ethnic conflict emerge and Why in China? Why does the Chinese state persist in implementing policies that recurrently provoke resistance and unrest? And why is there a conspicuous absence of adaptive governance, despite the demonstrable socio-political costs of sustained repression?

While the book skillfully outlines institutional tensions—centralisation versus autonomy, development versus identity. It is less attuned to grassroots perspectives and the emotional landscape of minority communities. Nonetheless, Sun's work remains a vital contribution to the field of Chinese politics and ethnic studies. It is an essential read for students and scholars alike, as well as anyone interested in the complexities of state-building in a multi-ethnic society of People's Republic of China 中华人民共和国.



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16 May 2025