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The Entanglement between Science and Politics

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Editorial

Karsten GIESE

This issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* presents two important topics. The first part of the issue reflects some strands of a recurring debate within the area of social science research on China. The conditions under which research in the People's Republic of China can be conducted, primarily in cooperation with Chinese academic institutions, have been a meta-topic for critical discussions within the scientific community. Researchers must be aware of these conditions, and the limitations but also the opportunities that are inherent to this system, which officially requires every foreign scholar to cooperate with an official Chinese partner when conducting research in China. A number of issues – including the integration of Chinese research institutions with government bodies and administrations, the widespread self-conception of Chinese colleagues as policy consultants, and the political agendas involved in many research interests – have caused some non-Chinese academics to refrain from collaborative research altogether. Other researchers have been accused by the mass media in their home countries for being biased and acting as propaganda tool for the PRC government for producing research results that have not replicated longstanding media prejudice.

It cannot be denied that research cooperation in China and with Chinese partners can be problematic. Certain central questions still frame our research reality in and with China, and should be reflected upon. These include formulation of acceptable research questions; access to data, documents, field sites and informants; sampling criteria, methods and interpretations; and, last but not least, (joint) publications. However, it would be too simple to frame the necessary reflections and our academic debate on this topic in the same way as this was done back in the 1980s, for example. We cannot ignore the rapidly changing academic landscape within the PRC particularly over the past one or two decades. Factors such as the drive for international cooperation on the Chinese side, marketisation of academic education and research, or the introduction of academic evaluation systems, have had profound impacts on the conditions for doing research on and with China. Taking some of the prominent earlier

criticisms as vantage points, the individual contributions in this issue reflect upon these more recent developments within Chinese academia. In order to sensitise us for the challenges and opportunities that are inherent to research collaboration with China today, the authors present personal viewpoints and interpretations based on individual experiences and/ or the in-depth analysis of general reforms and developments within the Chinese academic system. We believe that this discussion adds important perspectives to the ongoing international academic debate on conducting research in and with China.

The second part of this issue focuses on the interplay between non-Han ethnic religions, state policies and development and sheds light on multiple actors engaged in identity politics. Within the framework of the revival of ethnic religions, the three contributions present case studies on the Zhuang, the Nuosu and the Tibetans. While the strength of each individual article is the richness of detail and the depth of analysis of each case study, the three articles combine to facilitate insights beyond the single case into more structural issues of the complex relationships in which multiple actors are entangled over questions of religion, politics, and ethnic identity.

Kao Ya-ning discusses the simultaneous dynamics of a top-down approach by Zhuang officials, scholars and business people, on one hand, and bottom-up activities of religious practitioners, on the other. While officials and other stakeholders are striving to create a standardised and state-legitimated Zhuang religion by selecting and canonising those parts of Zhuang ritual practices known as Mo religion, the grassroots practitioners of shamanic rituals that are officially labelled as superstition have contributed much to the recent revival of religion and ethnic identity of the Zhuang. While the former have chosen to instrumentalise religion for the development of ethnic tourism, the latter have succeeded in subversively participating in government-sponsored religious events without worrying about official positive sanctioning. Kao concludes that both local and central governments have chosen to tolerate the intrusion by so-called superstitious activities by ethnic groups because indigenious "customs" are valuable for attracting tourists.

In the second case study, Olivia Kraef discusses similar developments among the Nuosu-Yi. The author describes and discusses the strategies of various (scholarly) stakeholders to re-define the traditional animistic and ancestor worship belief system as cultural prac-

tices ("bimo culture") rather than religious practices. Ethnic elites in this case work hand in hand with local officials. As in the case of the Zhuang discussed by Kao, the elite discourse focuses on strengthening the written parts of the religious traditions by building on related scholarly discourses. At the same time, it deligitimises oral traditions as having less cultural value. Nuosu-Yi elites, alongside state authorities, have established that texts (bimo scriptures) should be regarded as being at the core of Yi cultural heritage. Kraef concludes that instead of simple top-down policing of ethnic religious practices, it is the active stance of local elites that has been driving this decentered and displaced scholarly and cultural discourse, and its outcome on Yi ethnic identity. Also, the reconfiguration of the religious activities of the bimo in terms of cultural heritage has potentially contributed to the (further) demise of the bimo as once-vital religious figures.

In the third case study, on Tibet, Martin Saxer discusses a recent turn in PRC policies towards non-Han ethnic groups: ethnicity and religion have been re-fused under the label of cultural heritage, while for decades the Chinese government had been eager to keep religion and nationality politics separate. The author argues that the Chinese state has chosen to endorse religion as an attribute of Tibetan heritage that is legitimate – and also expected – to be practised within well-defined public spaces and (touristic) events in similarly well prescribed forms. At the same time, all religious practices beyond these spatial and temporal limits have become illegitimate, and politically problematic. Saxer argues that by confining religious practices to clearly defined and "laboratory" conditions of public performance, all forms of private religious practice, as well as practices in public that deviate from the newly established orthodoxy, become political acts of dissent.

Beyond the single case, all three articles show how the interplay of state politics and the political and economic interests of various stakeholders result in narrowing down ethnic religions to accepted aspects of much larger and deeper religious traditions. By creating new orthodoxies under the label of valuable ethnic cultural heritage, certain parts of religious traditions, social practices and practitioners are excluded from the newly established canons and are deligitimised and marginalised. Although the marginalised parties can sometimes find their ways (back) into the new mainstream, practitioners and

participants of the deligitimised aspects of ethnic religions may easily find themselves playing the role of dissidents.

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Contents

The Entanglement between Science and Politics

Editorial

Introduction

Analyses

Research Articles