ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE KAM PEOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

GOVERNMENT VERSUS LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

Dr Wei Wang and Dr Lisong Jiang
Ethnic Identity of the Kam People in Contemporary China

Based on three years of fieldwork in Zhanli, a remote Kam Village in Guizhou Province, Wang and Jiang explore the complex dynamics between the discursive practices of the local government and the villagers in relation to the reconstruction of Kam identity in response to social change, particularly the rise of rural tourism.

China’s profound demographic and socio-economic transformation has intensified the dominance of Han culture and language and seriously challenged the traditional cultures in ethnic minority areas. The authors draw on multiple empirical sources, including in-depth interviews with Kam villagers and local officials, field observations, media discourse, local archives and government documents. They present an engaging account of the significant compromises that government and villagers have made in relation to ethnic identity in the name of economic development, and of the tensions and struggles that characterise the ongoing process of ethnic identity reconstruction.

Students and researchers in sociolinguistics, ethnography, and discourse studies, especially those with an interest in Chinese discourse, and everyone interested in issues around ethnicity (minzu) issues in China, will find this book a valuable resource.

Dr Wei Wang is an Associate Professor and the Chair of the Department of Chinese Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. His research interests include discourse studies, sociolinguistics, translation studies, and language education. His recent research focuses on sociolinguistics and (critical) discourse analysis, especially contemporary Chinese discourse, and is characterised by a highly interdisciplinary approach. He is the author of multiple books and journal articles across these subject areas.

Dr Lisong Jiang is an Associate Professor in anthropology at Southwest University, China. His academic interests include historiography, historical anthropology, and cultural anthropology. His recent research focuses on historical anthropology, especially on studies of the literary texts of Southwest China in the early Qing Dynasty. He has published extensively on ethnic studies, including a previous monograph and multiple journal articles.
Routledge Contemporary China Series

Ethnic Minorities, Media and Participation in Hong Kong
Creative and Tactical Belonging
Lisa Y.M. Leung

The Politics of Waste Management in Greater China
Environmental Governance and Public Participation in Transition
Natalie Wai Man Wong

Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics
From the Tributary System to the Belt and Road Initiative
Asim Dogan

Homeownership in Hong Kong
House Buying as Hope Mechanism
Chung-kin Tsang

Local Clan Communities in Rural China
Revolution and Urbanisation since the Late Qing Dynasty
Zongli Tang

China’s Energy Security and Relations With Petrostates
Oil as an Idea
Anna Kuteleva

Ethnic Identity of the Kam People in Contemporary China
Government versus Local Perspectives
Dr Wei Wang and Dr Lisong Jiang

China’s Globalization from Below
Chinese Entrepreneurial Migrants and the Belt and Road Initiative
Theodor Tudoroiu

Civil Society in China
How Society Speaks to the State
Runya Qiaoan

Ethnic Identity of the Kam People in Contemporary China
Government versus Local Perspectives

Dr Wei Wang and Dr Lisong Jiang
Contents

List of illustrations vii
Acknowledgements viii
Foreword ix

1 Introduction 1

The Chinese nation (Zhonghua Minzu), ethnic minorities, and the Kam people 2
The cultural reconstruction campaign for China’s ethnic minorities 11
Multiple perspectives on ethnic identity 17
Research aims and linguistic ethnography 19
An overview of the book 21

2 The Kam people in China and Zhanli Kam village 25

The Kam in historical context 25
The ethnic classification project (1950s) 34
Social development in the Kam area since the 1980s 36
Re-construction of the Kam culture, language, and ethnic identity (2000s) 38
Zhanli Village 41

3 Ethnic identity reconstruction: Local government’s perceptions and practices 57

Intangible cultural heritage protection 57
Local government’s planning and practice 62
The alignment of local practices with the socio-political milieu 72
Contents

4 Encounters with local villagers in Zhanli 81
  Group 1: The local villagers 82
  Group 2: Educated people returning to the village 88
  Group 3: Outbound migrant workers from the village 95

5 Three case studies from Zhanli 103
  Group 1: Wu A 103
  Group 2: Wu B 109
  Group 3: Wu C 116

6 Reconstruction of ethnic culture and identity in the Kam community 122
  Practices and processes of ethnic identity reconstruction in the Kam community 122
  Ethnic identity and the Kam people in and from Zhanli 124
  Tensions and differences between the perspectives of government and local people 127
  Reflections on the reconstruction of ethnic identity and culture in China 132
  Conclusion and future research 133

Index 138
Illustrations

Figures
1.1 The three-fold logic of cultural reconstruction 14
2.1 Map of the Kam area 27
2.2 Drum Tower (left) and Sa Sui Altar (right) in Zhanli 42
2.3 Stone Monuments inscribed with Zhanli Village Rules and Code of Conduct 45
2.4 Drum Tower paintings in Zhanli 49
2.5 The Wind and Rain Bridge and its paintings in Zhanli 50
2.6 Sa Linhai’s leaf collage artworks 51
3.1 The hierarchical structure of ICH protection in the Kam area 61
3.2 The statue of Ancestral Roots erected in Zhanli in memory of brothers Wu Zhan and Wu Li (left) and the inscription below the statue (right) 75
3.3 The “male well” (left) and “female well” (right) in Zhanli 78

Tables
2.1 Distribution of the Kam population in the three main provinces (1990–2010) 30
2.2 List of Kam autonomous areas and ethnic townships 35
2.3 The Kam Population in Guangdong and Zhejiang provinces based on the 2010 Chinese National Census 37
4.1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Group 1 Participants 84
4.2 Socio-demographic characteristics of Group 2 participants 89
4.3 Socio-demographic characteristics of Group 3 participants 96
Acknowledgements

It has been a long journey for the two of us to bring our project to fruition in the form of this book—from the initial conception of the project in 2015, the subsequent fieldwork visits from 2016 to 2019, the signing of the book contract with Routledge in 2019, to the final writing up in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The work would not have been possible without the kind support of many people and organisations.

First, we are very grateful to the China Studies Centre and the School of Languages and Cultures at the University of Sydney, who provided us with generous funding and support to enable our extensive fieldwork and other international travels possible.

Second, we are much indebted to the hospitality and generosity of the local villagers in Zhanli and the local government officials in Congjiang county who took the time to participate in our interviews, and without whom we would not have any data.

Third, we would like to thank the many people who provided moral inspiration and intellectual input, especially our research students in China and Australia who assisted with fieldwork interviews, documentary data collection, preliminary data analysis, translation of Chinese materials into English, and other editing support. They include He Meishu, Huang Xia, and Cheng Ziyan from Southwest University and Samantha Xu and Liang Xia from the University of Sydney. Their hard work and important contribution to this project over the years are all deeply appreciated.

Moreover, we are enormously grateful to Dr Cherry Russell for her meticulous and professional editing and proofreading of our book manuscript at the end of this journey, which has allowed this book to be presented in an accessible and professional manner.

Finally, no acknowledgement would be complete without thanking our dear families. We are immensely grateful to Liao Dan and Wu Hongrong for their moral support and immeasurable intellectual input and discussions throughout this project.
China’s profound demographic and socio-economic transformation has intensified the dominance of Han culture and language and seriously challenged the traditional culture in ethnic minority areas. This book makes a timely contribution to academic discussion of this phenomenon by presenting a sociolinguistic ethnography of the ethnic identity of the Kam people in contemporary China.

Based on three years of fieldwork in Zhanli, a remote Kam Village in Guizhou Province, the book explores the complex dynamics between the discursive practices of the local government and the villagers in relation to the reconstruction of Kam identity in response to social change, particularly the rise of rural tourism. Whereas the local government adopts a grand, top-down and outside-in approach that arguably dominates the process, the villagers work from a bottom-up and inside-out perspective that is characterised by disparate agendas that reflect their experiences of external mobility.

The authors draw on multiple empirical sources, including in-depth interviews with Kam villagers and local officials, field observations, media discourse, local archives, and government documents. The book presents an engaging account of the significant compromise that government and villagers have made in relation to ethnic identity in the name of economic development, and of the tensions and struggles that characterise the ongoing process of ethnic identity reconstruction.
1 Introduction

In China, the ethnic identity of minority groups, including the Kam, has been seriously challenged by the spread of the dominant Han culture and language and the rapid socio-economic transformation of ethnic minority areas. Local governments and Kam residents have been working hard to reconstruct the cultural identity of the Kam people, often with the aim of promoting economic development and tourism. This book is based on the results of fieldwork conducted in Zhanshi cun (占里村), a remote Kam village in Guizhou Province, Southwest China, over three years from 2016 to 2019. The aims of the research were to explore how the traditional ethnic identity of the Kam people has been transformed with the social, political and cultural changes in contemporary China, and how the local Kam people and the government have sought to reconstruct their ethnic identity in response to these changes. This book addresses ethnic minority issues in China from a linguistic and ethnographic perspective, providing a case study on the reconstruction of ethnic identity in relation to ethnic conflicts, government accountability, cultural assimilation, and economic development.

The Kam, or Dong (侗) in modern Chinese, are a minority ethnic group whose members mainly reside in the border areas of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi in the subtropical mountainous areas of southern China. According to the 2010 China national census, most of the Kam population of 2.87 million live in rural areas and practise traditional intensive farming (Population Census Office of State Council of PRC & Population and Employment Statistics Department of National Bureau of Statistics of PRC 2012). As one of the major ethnic minorities in Southwest China, they have been adapting to the Han Chinese lifestyle since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (henceforth PRC) in 1949. The process of cultural integration and assimilation accelerated after the implementation of the Reform and Open-Door policy in 1978 and the rapid socio-economic development that followed. Ironically, however, the Chinese government is discouraging them from completely abandoning their ethnic characteristics and lifestyle and has proposed a series of policies and programmes to strengthen or even reconstruct their ethnic identities, along with those of other ethnic minorities. These government initiatives have received mixed responses. As the local Kam people interviewed for this study explained,

DOI: 10.4324/9781003019916-1
the practices they have adopted in the reconstruction of their own ethnic identity often differ significantly from what the government expects.

This book offers a sociolinguistic analysis of how the ethnic identity of the Kam people has been reconstructed and manipulated in contemporary rural China. Over three years of substantial fieldwork from 2016 to 2019 in Zhanli village in Congjiang County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong (Kam) Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou Province, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with more than 30 locals from different educational backgrounds and life circumstances living in or outside the village. The researchers also interviewed a dozen local officials during visits to local government agencies, libraries, and non-government organisations, such as the Office of the County History and the County Office of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection. Drawing on the analytical framework of linguistic ethnography (Rampton, Maybin & Roberts 2015), we examine the practices and processes of ethnic identity reconstruction at three levels, namely, the community, situated encounters, and typical figures. A systematic analysis of empirical and documentary data reveals a hidden dual system of ethnic minority cultural identity reconstruction in which, while the government’s agenda arguably dominates, the local government and the villagers are working with diverse perspectives and agendas.

This introductory chapter contextualises the research along several dimensions. First, it examines the complex concepts of the Chinese nation (Zhonghua Minzu), Minzu, and ethnic minorities (Shaoshu Minzu) in contemporary China. Next, it describes the background to the cultural reconstruction campaign for ethnic minorities in China, highlighting the multiple perceptions of ethnic identity construction. The chapter concludes with the research aims, the methodology of linguistic ethnography, and an outline of the organisation of the book.

The Chinese nation (Zhonghua Minzu), ethnic minorities, and the Kam people

Minzu and associated concepts

Minzu (nationality or ethnicity) is an important lens through which to observe, explain, and understand contemporary Chinese society. This is because China describes itself as “a unified multi-ethnic state founded by the Chinese people of all ethnic groups” (Constitution of PRC 2018). In other words, the country of China is composed of numerous ethnic groups, known as Minzu, and this fact is reflected in many aspects of China’s socio-political organisation. For instance, regional ethnic autonomy is a basic political system of China, which mandates adherence to ethnic equality and the promotion of ethnic culture as an important component of social development. The Chinese word Minzu (民族) was introduced from Japanese in the late 19th–early 20th century (Han & Li 1984). The Cibai (辞海), one of China’s most authoritative reference books, offers two definitions of Minzu:
1 Various communities of people formed at different stages of historical social development, such as primitive people, ancient people, and modern people.

2 A stable community of people historically formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological qualities and manifested in a common culture.

( Xia 1992, p. 2032)

The first definition may be related to the widespread emphasis in contemporary China on the long history that binds together various ethnic groups. In this sense, the ethnic groups in China today are seen to have evolved from their historical antecedents, thus maintaining clear historical continuity. The second definition borrows Joseph Stalin’s definition of nationality (Stalin 1935), which emphasises the primacy of “common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up”. This definition informed China’s ethnic classification project in the 1950s, as discussed in more detail below. In China’s current sociocultural context, the concept of Minzu is often employed to refer to the 56 ethnic groups whose names are officially recognised by the government, and to ethnic minorities in the general sense. For example, “ethnic affairs” usually refers to matters associated with ethnic minorities, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission is a specialist body dealing with ethnic minority affairs, and “ethnic education” in the Chinese language usually means education for ethnic minorities. Many related concepts have been derived from the term Minzu. For example, Zhonghua Minzu (中华民族, the Chinese nation), Minzu zhuyi (民族主义, nationalism), Minzu duli (民族独立, national independence), Minzu tuanjie (民族团结, national unity), Minzu quyu zizhi (民族区域自治, regional ethnic autonomy), Minzu quanyi (民族权益, ethnic rights and interests), Minzu chengfen (民族成分, ethnic composition), Minzu wenhua (民族文化, ethnic culture), Minzu yishi (民族意识, ethnic/national consciousness), Minzu zunyan (民族尊严, ethnic/national dignity), Minzu qinggan (民族情感, ethnic/national sentiments), and Minzu chuantong (民族传统, ethnic/national tradition). It is noteworthy that Minzu in the Chinese language includes both the political sense of nationality and the social sense of ethnicity in the English language.

The above-mentioned concepts related to Minzu refer not only to people’s identity, but also to the rights and interests derived from being a member of a Minzu. They also relate to people’s feelings and values. They appear widely in government documents and mass media, such as television, the Internet, and newspapers, are a part of the everyday life of ordinary people, and are frequently used keywords and topic areas in the social sciences in China. Overall, Minzu is embedded in contemporary Chinese social life and in discourse around the themes of identity, interests, and sentiments. This complex Minzu discourse profoundly impacts the lives of all ethnic minorities in China, including those dwelling in the most remote Kam communities. Through research on the Chinese Kam, we hoped to gain greater insight into China’s ethnic minorities.
Zhonghua Minzu: “One” and “a pluralistic unity”

According to the Encyclopaedia of China (1992), Zhonghua Minzu (中华民族, the Chinese nation) is “the general name of all ethnic groups in China” and “an amalgamation of many ethnic communities”. This definition is based on the premise that the Chinese nation is multi-ethnic. Following this line of thought, should we perceive the Chinese nation as “one” nation made up of multiple ethnicities, or as a group of ethnicities in a plural sense? People’s understandings of “the Chinese nation” have been constantly evolving since its inception in the early 20th century and have varied in different settings and historical periods.

Liang Qichao, one of the most important enlightenment thinkers in modern China, was the first to offer a systematic account of the denotation and connotation of “the Chinese nation”. In his 1902 essay, Liang introduced the concept Zhonghua Minzu, which combined an existing Chinese term, Zhonghua (中华, Chinese) with the Japanese word Minzu. The combination conceptualised “the Chinese” as a Minzu, thereby incorporating the historical meaning of China into the discourse of the modern nation-state. This way of thinking became an important force in the construction of a modern state. However, Zhonghua in Liang’s concept only denotes Huaxia (华夏), that is, Han, a word that frequently appeared in anti-Manchu slogans in the early 20th century.

In the 1930s, the concept of “the Chinese nation” was widely recognised in China. In the discursive context of a nation state, the Chinese nation is often equated with the state. Especially after the Japanese invasion of China, anxiety over the subjugation of the entire country was usually expressed in terms of national crisis. For instance, a song titled The March of the Volunteers, which was the theme song of the anti-Japanese movie Children of the Troubled Times, included the line “the Chinese nation faces the greatest peril”. This song later became the National Anthem of the People’s Republic of China.

However, there was also confusion about the use of Minzu to refer to both the Chinese nation and the many different ethnicities in its territory. Most notably, at that time, the Japanese imperialists proclaimed the idea of national liberation (民族解放, Minzu jiefang) and national self-determination (民族自决, Minzu zijue) to encourage the separation of Northeast China and North China from the rest of the country. This highlighted the ambiguity in the use of Minzu. Against this background, there was a debate among Chinese academics in the late 1930s about the issues associated with the concept of Minzu. The core issue was whether Zhonghua Minzu was singular or plural. In 1935, before the start of the debate, Fu Sinian (under the pen name Meng Zhen) published an article entitled “The Chinese nation is a totality” in the Independent Critic, a weekly journal that was well-known for publishing political critiques. The article emphasised the national unity of Zhonghua Minzu (Meng 1935). In February 1939, the historian Gu Jiegang, in his essay “The Chinese nation is one”, asserted that the term Minzu should no longer be used in any sense other than the Chinese nation (Zhonghua Minzu). “The Chinese people are all Zhonghua Minzu—within Zhonghua Minzu