

Jingyu Mao. *Intimacy as a Lens on Work and Migration: Experiences of Ethnic Performers in Southwest China.* Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024, 152 pp. ISBN 9781529225853

China's ethnic minorities have long been co-opted by the Party-state as colourful symbols of the country's diversity, even while facing increasingly strict campaigns for political assimilation. The ritualistic celebration of ethnic plurality is therefore largely confined to stereotypical singing and dancing performances by people dressed in traditional ethnic clothes. These exoticising ethnic spectacles – often enacted by young women from the countryside – can not only be found depicted in state propaganda but are also widely reproduced for touristic consumption purposes in restaurants and similar establishments in ethnic minority areas. Jingyu Mao's ethnographic account, *Intimacy as a Lens on Work and Migration: Experiences of Ethnic Performers in Southwest China*, provides a rare inside perspective on the social world of ethnic performers in the tourism sector in a lower-tier city in Yunnan province, southwest China. The author conducted participant observation by working as an ethnic performer herself, thereby gaining intimate insights into the everyday routines, precarious working conditions and steep social hierarchies that this line of work entails. Her book contributes to the understanding of ethnicity, gender and rural-urban hierarchies in China – and by focusing on physical and social mobilities within Yunnan province, away from the well-known migration centres, Mao specifically captures the lives of what she calls 'untypical migrants' (p. 3). Beyond the geographical location, her research subjects are also atypical because in general state discourse, ethnic minorities are seldom connected to migration at all. Whereas migrant work is often framed within the logic of developmentalism and seen as a pathway to modernity and upward mobility, ethnic performances are assumed to display the exact opposite: an essentialised, authentic form of traditional minority culture permanently stuck in the (rural) past (p. 69). However, by taking the inside perspective of the performers, Mao goes beyond this dichotomy and unveils these assumptions to be problematic.

The first of the book's four main chapters (Chapter 2) provides a detailed description of how ethnic performance work is structured, based on the author's observations and comparisons across three field sites within the city. Performers' work includes standard restaurant tasks such as waiting tables and cleaning up, but more importantly also encompasses singing ethnic songs and entertaining guests with supposedly traditional rituals, which often involve drinking games and practices with sexual undertones such as massages or sitting on the guests' laps. Mao convincingly shows how this physical proximity of the performers to the guests reinforces the social distance between them. Performers are required to always wear ethnic costumes during work, which distinctly mark their difference and thus reinforce the superior status of their urban (and largely Han) customers (p. 37). Wearing an ethnic costume attracts the gaze of the tourists, who perceive performers as authentic representatives of minority people regardless of whether that is the case (p. 38). In fact, although many different ethnic groups live in Yunnan, their specific customs rarely matter – in the performances, all non-Han groups tend to simply blend into the umbrella category of ethnic minorities (p. 85). In addition to ethnic authenticity, a gendered frame plays a strong role in the tourists' perception: the 'Han gaze' (p. 39) feminises both ethnic minority men and women and contributes to their eroticisation and sexualisation. Since tourists perceive (or want to perceive) performers as 'authentic' and 'exotic' minorities, this is an identity the service workers need to feign during work hours. However, this performance does not extend to their private lives – the author describes how performers eagerly change clothes after work and spend their wages on urban nightlife, thus joining the social group of aspiring urbanites (p. 46).

Chapter 3 analyses in more depth the performers' status as migrants and the role of their emotions within the rural-to-urban migration process. It details the precarious working conditions of the performers, which lack formal work contracts and social insurance. The author stresses the role of the household registration system (*hukou*), central to social welfare access in China, as a structural reason for inequality. She points out that migrants' decisions regarding *hukou* transfers from the countryside to the city are rarely fully rational but need to be understood in the context of 'emotional reflexivity' (p. 58) and by taking into account a lack of available practical information on this process (p. 60). Mao argues that the rural-urban divide is not only an administrative division, but 'deeply embedded in personal, everyday experiences'

(p. 65). For instance, when Mao was working as a performer, her own authenticity as an ethnic minority was questioned by guests who observed her wearing glasses, something imagined as belonging to the realm of urbanity and education (p. 71). This example shows how the differences between the rural and urban spheres and the question of authentic ethnicity converge in the imaginations of the tourists.

The relationship between ethnicity and authenticity is further explored in Chapter 4, which introduces the concept of 'ethnic scripts' (p. 74): that is, seeing ethnicity as something people do rather than what people are. Ethnic performance work is undertaken by people of varying ethnic groups, often even Han, who enact ethnic performances for guests. Even those who really do belong to ethnic minority groups (among them Mao herself) usually have to first learn the supposedly traditional songs and dances for the performances. Many of them distinguish their own identity from what they believe to be 'authentic' minorities (p. 77) and follow ethnic scripts – which correspond to state-sponsored societal expectations of ethnic minorities – when working as performers. These scripts include not only the clothes, songs and dances, but also a so-called 'happiness duty': an implicit obligation to regulate one's emotions at work (p. 87f.). Mao points out that performers are expected to adhere to general notions of self-improvement by developing their 'ethnic self', but that this ethnic self ironically also entails maintaining an 'image of primitiveness and backwardness' (p. 92f.) – the very opposite of development.

The role that gender and sexualisation plays in these ethnic performances is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. Ethnic minority women are eroticised and stereotyped to be more sexually open than Han women (p. 105), and yet their sexuality is simultaneously highly scrutinised and morally charged (p. 100). In rural communities, migration is seen as a path for social mobility, but also as potentially bringing negative influences on young women. Under these conditions, young women undertaking ethnic performance work face regular sexualisation and sexual harassment from guests, and yet at the same time they need to avoid the danger of gossip harming their reputation at home, which can affect their chances on the marriage market (p. 119). In this context, women attempt to desexualise their work by stressing that they are merely enacting *ethnic* customs. In fact, local officials requesting dinners with female ethnic performance are also justifying this under the label of promoting ethnic harmony (p. 110f.). Mao thus convincingly shows how sexualised behaviour that would

be unacceptable, or at least far more frowned upon, in other contexts is implicitly legitimised through ethnic scripts that emerge from official conceptions of ethnicity in China. The chapter also discusses how male performers experience gender conceptions in the context of their work. Ethnic performance work is largely seen as a feminised occupation that threatens male performers' masculinity, and therefore many of them selectively highlight aspects of their work that reinforce their conception of manliness, such as being able to deal with unruly guests, while others see the work as merely a stepping stone to a different urban occupation.

This ethnographic account presents an inside view of the social world of ethnic performers with compassion and an eye for detail, including aptly chosen interview material from the field. The participant observation for a total of five months across three locations (plus another month conducting 60 in-depth interviews) yields rich data that allows the reader to get a sense of the social dynamics on location. The analysis also highly benefits from the thoughtful and honest reflections of the author's own experiences and her positionality in the field, which not only give the work a personal touch but are crucial in understanding how class, gender and ethnicity play out in this setting. The empirical data is theoretically well embedded in the sociological literature on intimacy and personal life and in Chinese studies research. However, while the absence of local media reports and policy documents to contextualise the location can be explained by the choice to anonymise the city, the study might have benefited from engaging more with Chinese-language sources on this field site.

The book makes a valuable theoretical contribution to the understanding of ethnicity as a performative practice that follows prescribed expectations rather than expressing essentialised identities. It also provides reflections on gender stereotypes and on the logic of sexualised service work, which intersect with the aspect of ethnicity but certainly also connect to larger discussions on these topics in contemporary China and beyond. Throughout the book, the author succeeds in her goal to use intimacy and emotions as a lens to view these societal phenomena, as the focus always returns to the dimension of the personal, even throughout the theoretical parts, making this ethnography very readable and accessible. The book thus works on multiple levels and bridges the gap between several intertwined dimensions of inequality in contemporary China, which all are manifesting themselves in this specific micro-level setting.

While the book succeeds in these aspects, the chapter on rural-to-urban migration could have been enhanced with a longer-term perspective in order to compare planned and actual migration trajectories by individuals across a period of several years, for instance by conducting follow-up visits and including perspectives of people who have left the industry. Moreover, while the world of the performers is clearly described, the tourists' perspectives are largely glossed over, with the focus mostly lying on their (mis-)behaviour. A striking picture symbolising the 'Han gaze' (p. 31) shows a tourist from behind, in the process of photographing an ethnic performance – unknown to him, the researcher's camera has turned the gaze towards the tourist himself. This is a memorable picture subverting the usual power hierarchies, but it also neglects to analyse any heterogeneity within the social world of the tourists as well as the question of whether, and how, tourists follow their own scripts in the logic of ethnic tourism. That being said, these points are beyond the scope of the study's research aims and should mostly be taken as suggestions for future research that could further enrich perspectives on ethnic tourism.

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