
Katherine Kaup is assistant professor of political science at Furman University. She completed her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Virginia under the supervision of Brantly Womack and others. Her present work is based on that thesis and on field visits to Yunnan and Guangxi, where she worked with local scholars at various research institutes.

The Zhuang are by far the most populous of China’s officially recognized minorities, with a population now approaching 17 million. Unlike the far less numerous Mongols and Tibetans, the Zhuang were not recognized as a separate ethnic group before 1949, and seem not to have posed any serious threat to the security of the Chinese state since then. As a result, they have remained largely invisible to Western scholarship. Even the existence of the Zhuang has been questioned: whereas official Chinese documents and Zhuang activists claim that the Zhuang are a unique group with an ancient history and culture, the view most common among Western China scholars is that the Zhuang are almost entirely sinified, and that Zhuang nationality is a “purely artificial recent construct.”

The present book is intended to explore this dilemma and investigate other questions about Zhuang identity politics. As a work of political science, it addresses such topics as the role of the Chinese state and the policy framework, the nature of political processes internal to the Zhuang, the factors that limited the Zhuang capacity to mobilize as a nationality, and the reasons for the rise in Zhuang ethnic consciousness in recent decades. It does so against a background of Western theory about the origins of nations and a burgeoning scholarly literature on minority ethnic movements around the world.

Kaup’s basic thesis is that the Chinese People’s Government unified what was originally a disparate group of peoples in the western part of Guangxi under the label “Zhuang.” Before 1949, these peoples were affiliated most closely with others in their immediate locality with whom they shared a common language. Ethnic labels varied from place to place. The new state aimed first to weaken local ties and build loyalty to the new, larger grouping, and on that basis to integrate local people into the broader nation-state system. Differences between the sub-groupings were downplayed. Once local ties had been weakened, however, the state began to lose interest in the promotion of minority autonomy and minority culture. By the end of the 1980s, it began to dismantle the former policies giving preference to minorities, which led in turn to the growth of activism among the Zhuang themselves during the 1990s. Kaup’s paradoxical conclusion is that Zhuang ethnic consciousness has increased since 1949, and activism among Zhuang scholars and other elites has blossomed in the 1990s, but the political influence of the Zhuang has undergone a commensurate decrease.

This book has both strengths and weaknesses. One of its strengths is that the author did not confine her field investigations to Guangxi, but paid visits to the Wenshan Autonomous Zhou in eastern Yunnan as well. As a result, her discussion about internal divisions among the Zhuang is particularly lively. Much of the material that Kaup presents here is new, at least in Western-language scholarship.

One area of weakness lies in the reasons Kaup adduces for the CCP decision to recognize the Zhuang. Kaup is at her most polemical in her treatment of earlier discussions by G.F. Hudson, George Moseley, and Diana Lary. Moseley, followed by Lary, argued that the Chinese government accorded recognition to the Zhuang in order to provide a counterweight to the Cantonese, who were seen as implacably opposed to the new regime. Kaup criticizes these earlier scholars for “failing to acknowledge” that the Chinese state needed to develop special policies for the Zhuang not in order to deal with anyone else, but in order to integrate the Zhuang themselves into the Chinese state system, even in the absence of ethnic organization and ethnic consciousness. The evidence Kaup adduces for this alternative view seems to me insufficient. Her discussion of the Zhuang fluctuates between the assertion that the Zhuang were not merely a political fabrication, and detailed discussion about differences between various branches of the Zhuang, which suggests the opposite. Her position on the origins and earlier history of the Zhuang is strictly neutral, reporting various views without taking sides, and thereby avoiding the need to address the question of cultural, linguistic, or historical continuities, or indeed the objective or subjective existence of the Zhuang in history (on this question, readers should be referred to Jeffrey Barlow’s magisterial study *The Zhuang: A Longitudinal Study of Their History and Their Culture*, 2001, http://mcel.pacificu.edu/as/resources/zhuang/). More directly
pertinent for her argument about political motivations, however, is the almost complete lack of
discussion of the role of the Zhuang in the pre-war and wartime base areas, or indeed within the
Guangxi Party organization before 1949. This gap is crucial, since minorities such as the Zhuang were
indeed substantially over-represented in the local CCP branches in the early 1950s. It is to be hoped
that Kaup will address such issues in future publications.

Kaup’s work will certainly help to address a long-standing gap in scholarly documentation on
the contemporary Zhuang. There is a great deal here that is new, and there is much useful information.
Readers should be aware, however, that the scholarly documentation is of very uneven quality. This is
particularly the case with Chinese-language materials. Many of the footnotes give inaccurate
information: authors’ names are misread (Xie Qiguang rather than Xie Qihuang, Fan Qixu rather than
Pan Qixu), and page references are frequently incorrect. I checked everything I could, and found in a
high percentage of cases in which the relevant information was not on the specified page. Sometimes
these were simply typographical errors, but I also found cases where the relevant information or
quotation was not to be found anywhere in the work cited. The author’s handling of terms in
Zhuangwen (the official transcription system for the Zhuang language) is even more error-ridden. For
these reasons, while the work has its merits, I hesitate to recommend it to undergraduates or to the
general reader. For specialists on Chinese minorities, and for those whose command of Chinese is
good enough to overcome the book’s deficiencies, it will be required reading, for the interim.

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