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Review of "State Schooling and Ethnic Identity: The Politics of a Tibetan Neidi Secondary School" by Zhiyong Zhu

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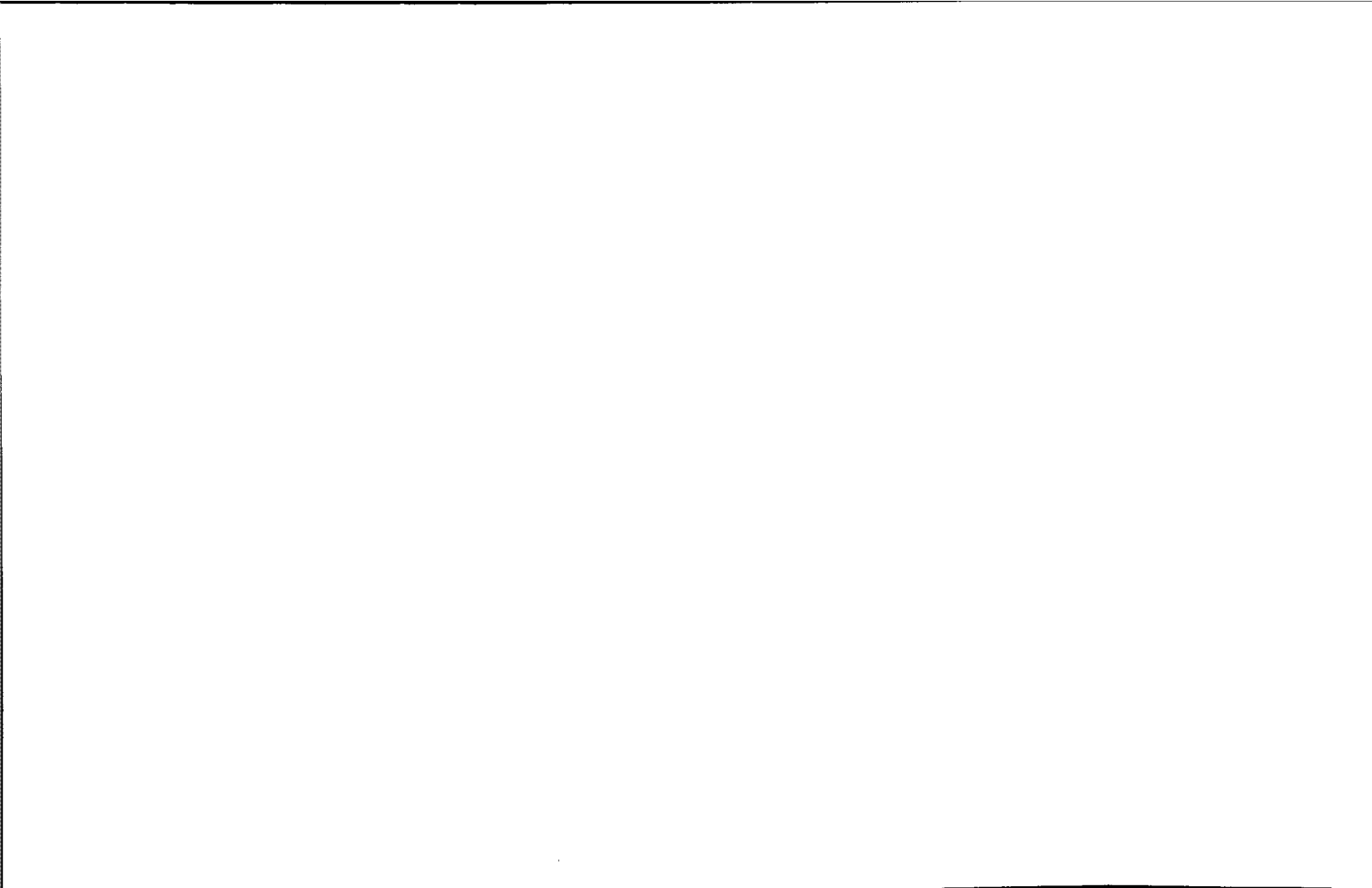


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recognize that the book “combines . . . an introductory approach to East Asian education systems with selective in-depth analyses and discussions” (xiii). While some chapters might serve as a reference guide introducing education systems to secondary students, others provide minute details on the history of the development, expansion, and reform of education systems and merit inclusion in graduate-level curricula. Overall the volume presents a comprehensive picture of the current state of East Asian education systems. Additionally, this work provides some very illuminating excerpts on issues related to globalization and education reform within the context of national efforts to train and socialize populations for economic and political development. However, for readers who seek a more in-depth analysis of issues related to education in East Asia, this reviewer would recommend other volumes that focus on issues such as education finance (Mark Bray, *The Costs and Financing of Education: Trends and Policy Implications*, Education in Developing Asia, vol. 3 [Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2002]), decentralization (Christopher Bjork, *Educational Decentralization: Asian Experiences and Conceptual Contributions* [Dordrecht: Springer, 2006]), education reform and policy (Ka-Ho Mok, *Education Reform and Education Policy in East Asia* [New York: Routledge, 2006]), values education (William K. Cummings, Maria Teresa Tatto, and John Hawkins, *Values Education in Dynamic Societies: Individualism or Collectivism* [Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001]), and citizenship education (W. O. Lee, David L. Grossman, Kerry J. Kennedy, and Gregory P. Fairbrother, *Citizenship Education in Asia and the Pacific: Concepts and Issues* [Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004]).

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State Schooling and Ethnic Identity: The Politics of a Tibetan Neidi Secondary School in China by Zhiyong Zhu. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. 378 pp. \$75.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-739-11539-8.

State Schooling and Ethnic Identity: The Politics of a Tibetan Neidi Secondary School in China by Zhiyong Zhu is the first in a new series, published by Rowman and Littlefield's Lexington Books, of studies by “young” scholars presenting their firsthand fieldwork in mainland China for their doctoral dissertations at the University of Hong Kong. The current study focuses on a politically sensitive topic, the cultural incorporation of Tibet into the greater Chinese state, founded on Han culture, through the intervention of special schooling for select Tibetan youth. Zhu's intention is to examine the influence of state schooling on Tibetan students' ethnic identity—and whether the state succeeded in its stated aim to assimilate Tibetan students. Clearly the issue of Tibet creates difficult data collection conditions in mainland China and, therefore, any in-depth investigation on the ground can throw welcome light on a subject often obscured by political and religiously colored debate.

Zhu presents a case study of Changzhou Tibetan Middle School, a junior secondary boarding school in Jiangsu Province, far from the Tibetan homelands.

These schools are seen by the government as a social experiment in Sino-Tibetan relations of the reform era. Theories of state schooling and minority ethnic identity are amply developed in cross-cultural and multicultural education literature, but very little of it was used to explain the nuances of the data here.

The current study highlights the influence of macro state policy and micro school environment on the Tibetan student body at the boarding school, called the Neidi school due to its central Chinese location. The name alone tells all about the position of the young Tibetans in the midst of Han China, in a Han Chinese institution surrounded by Han Chinese communities. The author provides a thorough review of state policies, programs, and curricula applied in the boarding school with the express intent to “help” the officially classified “backward” Tibetans to be “civilized” and “integrated” into the “plural” Chinese state. Officials and teachers are dedicated to the school mission to “cultivate talent for Tibet’s development on the one hand, and indoctrinate Tibetan generations with state ideologies on the other hand” (98), as prescribed by the official ideology for minority nationalities, “state unification, ethnic unity, [and] Tibetan development” (98).

The description of the heavily regimented Neidi boarding schools recalls stories of other boarding schools far away—twentieth-century American Indian boarding schools. “Coercive normalization” is the Foucauldian term the author uses to describe the effect of totalitarian control exercised by Neidi boarding school personnel. The Tibetan students were brought to the school at the young ages of 12–13, far away from their families, whom they were not allowed to see for the full 4 years. They were not permitted to leave school grounds, except for organized visits to Han Chinese schools or events. To say that they were cut off from everything familiar and comforting is not an exaggeration. They had only each other to rely on—a substitute family.

Han administrators and teachers apparently ascribed to state ideology unquestioningly. They assigned students a static Tibetan ethnic identity defined in the political and economic interests of the state (see 162). They believed that Tibetan students did not form “good” behavioral habits in Tibet because of its low educational and cultural level and implemented discipline “aimed at civilizing the Tibetan students” (134). They placed special emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness. They saw themselves as friends of Tibet, as supporting its sociocultural and economic development by being teachers, and they felt no need to understand the Tibetan students’ behavior. Their cultural difference was seen as a cultural deficiency that needed to be eliminated.

The mechanisms of enforced normalization included the standard Han formal curriculum of the school. In the nonformal curriculum Tibetan students were made to attend performances by Han school students to see how superior Han culture was. Outside of the curriculum, the students’ time was completely regimented, like in the military; privacy was not permitted. Students were required to write and turn in diaries. They were exhorted to be “honest” and “reveal their innermost thoughts” so teachers could correct their grammar, help when they were troubled, and, as the author states, “dominate the students’ thought orientation” (169).

It is these diaries that the author mainly relied on to analyze the ethnic identity construction of the students. Surprisingly, the students showed remarkable independence of thought in occasional outbursts. The students also used the diaries to ma-

nipulate the teachers by bringing to their attention issues of concern. Here we can see moments of students acting out of a sense of urgency, trying on modes of power.

This is the weakness of the author's framework. Zhu uses only one framework, Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann's "constructionist approach" (1998), limiting his analysis to their notion of assigned and asserted identity, whether "thick" or "thin." This does a disservice to his second research question—whether the state succeeded in assimilating the Tibetan student—which was left unanswered for this reader. Perhaps this lack of conclusion is justified by the lack of independent evidence available. However, the four diary texts presented are rich in anecdotes that speak of strong ethnic identities and identity conflicts in cross-cultural environments, showing patterns long identified in the ethnic identity development literature. Had he used William Cross's and Janet Helms's models on racial identity development; Etta Hollins's, on minority identity in schooling; John Ogbu and Signythia Fordham's work on oppositional and deracinated identity in schooling; R. T. Carter's, on the social psychology of identity development; or Janet M. Bennett and Milton Bennett's on cross-cultural identity development, he would have found profound stirrings of independent Tibetan self-awareness, ethnocentricity, pride, and commitment to the Tibetan culture and people.

To American educators, the story of the Neidi Tibetan boarding school has a familiar ring. It reminded me of the boarding school for American Indians, where Indian children were separated from their communities and forcefully alienated from their home cultures. Here, too, regimentation and hygiene ruled the nonclass schedule. The curriculum did not relate to the world with which they were familiar but rather was meant to impress upon them the superiority of the "White Man's" ways. A recent review of several studies of American Indian boarding schools by Julie Davis ("American Indian Boarding School Experiences: Recent Studies from Native Perspectives," *OAH Magazine of History* 15 [Winter 2001], <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/deseg/davis.html>) reads as if written for this book: "[the author] chronicles the endless regimentation, harsh discipline, homesickness, and cultural loss that boarding schools inflicted on Indian children. . . . For many Indian children, this cultural assault would lead to confusion and alienation, homesickness and resentment. . . . Others resisted institutional authority through covert strategies such as devising insulting nicknames for teachers."

Similarly, a close reading of the students' voices suggests that over time it is likely that these Neidi schools may serve as a place to consolidate a nativist Tibetan ethnic identity—as happened in American Indian boarding schools. Graduates of Neidi schools, on their return to Tibet, are meant to assume positions in the Han state bureaucracy. Instead, they may find in their homeland fertile ground for building strong ethnic alliances outside of state control. This is the lesson of the American—as well as the Canadian—Indian boarding school. They eventually fed into the successful campaign for American Indian cultural self-determination in the latter twentieth century. One would hope that future studies of the Neidi boarding schools would present the perspective of its students and graduates, to illuminate the schools' multilayered legacy for Tibetan people's historical and contemporary identities.

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