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# ‘Othering’ in the Construction of Chinese Citizenship<sup>1</sup>

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## A book chapter in:

König, Lion and Chaudhuri, Bidisha (eds.). 2016. *The Politics of the ‘Other’: Western Concepts in Non-Western Contexts—Case Studies from India and China*. London: Routledge

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The majority of scholarly analyses of citizenship in China in the reform period have equated citizenship with rights-endowed belonging to the Chinese state. This understanding of citizenship emphasises the role of civil, political and social rights on the one hand, and its state territory-bound character on the other. The distribution of rights within the PRC, and the dichotomous relationship between state and society have been central to the examinations of citizenship regime in the post-Maoist China. In this chapter we argue that the focus on rights and state territory does not take into account the ambiguity of the PRC’s citizenship regime, which engenders multiple expressions of belonging cutting across the territorial limits of the Chinese state. We discuss the negotiations of citizenship of ethnic minorities and rural migrants to illustrate how belonging to the Chinese state has been formulated in conversation and tension with the global developments of citizenship concept, neoliberal transformations, and the legacies of China’s imperial, semi-colonial, and socialist history.

## Introduction

The construction of citizenship in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is an ongoing product of historical processes and negotiations. In this chapter we draw attention to how citizenship has been shaped through the mechanism of ‘othering’ of the rural population and ethnic minorities. We present how the categories of migrant workers and ethnic minorities have been central to the construction of citizenship in contemporary China. We show how Chinese public and official discourses construct ethnic minorities and peasants as ‘backward’

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this chapter are based on Jakimów, M., 2012. Chinese Citizenship ‘after Orientalism’: Academic Narratives on Internal Migrants in China. *Citizenship Studies*, 16(5-6), 657-671 reproduced with the permission from the publishers (Taylor and Francis). The chapter also builds on the arguments developed in Barabantseva, E., 2011. *Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities, and Nationalism: De-Centering China*. London: Routledge.

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and ‘uncivilised’ in contrast to the assumed ‘proper’ citizen as a necessarily modern, urban, and Han Mandarin speaker. This citizenship discourse is reinforced by a citizenship regime, manifesting itself most prominently in the *hukou* (household registration) system and favourable policies for ethnic minorities, in which different citizenship rights are officially bestowed on the rural migrants in the cities and urban *hukou* holders, as well as ethnic minorities and the Han majority. Although the contention around the categories and social roles associated with peasants and ethnic minorities has led to limited reforms since 1978, their effects have been undermined by the lingering ‘othering’ mechanism embedded in the formulation of citizenship in China. The gradual concessions towards migrant workers and ethnic minorities’ inclusion as equal citizens remain superficial and do not seriously challenge the current citizenship regime in China. In order to overcome the ‘othering’ mechanism, new ways of understanding citizenship need to be put forward, which we allude to in the final section of the chapter.

In the first section we discuss the relationship between the concept of citizenship and the mechanism of ‘othering’, both in the West and in China. In the second part we present how the figure of the peasant migrant has impacted on the construction of citizenship in China. In the third part we discuss how ethnic minorities served a similar role in the process of the Chinese nation-building. In the concluding part we discuss how rural migrants and ethnic minorities can be viewed as citizens, notwithstanding their marginalisation, and how this in turn allows us to question ‘othering’ at the heart of the Chinese citizenship discourse and regime.

### **The origins of ‘othering’ in the formulation of citizenship in China**

The debates on modern citizenship entered the Chinese intellectual and political circles in the late-Qing and early Republican period (1861-1928). They emerged in parallel to the formulation of new programmes to save China from the domination by imperial powers, which drew on Western and Chinese traditional philosophy (Zarrow 1997: 5). Due to the influence of the philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism, citizenship was first defined in cultural, rather than in political terms. Chih-yu Shih shows how the newly emerging political elite drew on the traditional notion of *tianxia* (all under heaven), calling for the unification of all people, regardless of their language or customs and without a clear demarcation of territory (Shih 2002: 234). This philosophical foundation also served as a justification for incorporation of different ethnicities into the modern Chinese nation. During the transformation of the multi-ethnic Chinese Empire to the modern nation-state, the ‘ethnic question’ emerged as a contested site of political debates on the character of the Chinese nation among the political revolutionary elite. Influenced by the decline of the Qing Empire and the need to unite China against foreign rule, the revolutionaries constructed a new sense of identity that narrowly focused on the Han race, pictured as a perennial biological unit, which descended from a mythological ancestor of the Yellow Emperor (Dikköter 1997; Leibold 2006). By the time of the Xinhai revolution in 1911, Chinese revolutionaries used the concept of nation conterminously with the state, referring to all the peoples inhabiting China as Chinese citizens or ‘*guomin*’. However, this concept was centred on the Han majority, who were seen as the unifying core of the nation.

In the late nineteenth’s century several Chinese words entered the political vocabulary to denote Chinese ‘citizens’, including *gongmin* (public people), *shimin* (city people) and *guomin* (people of the state). All of these terms share the second character of *min*, meaning ‘the people’. In the Confucian term *minben* (‘people as the basis’) citizens were understood as people who are both ruled and who sanction the ruler’s authority (Harris 2002: 187). At the same time the term *minzu* was introduced to integrate the conception of people (*min*) and the notion of descent (*zu*). The concept served the purpose of strengthening internal borders in order to confront outside threats and later the ruling regime of the Qing dynasty. The *minzu*

concept also marked a start to the development of the theory of the Chinese nation, granting China and its people a rooted history and culture. The shift from the narrow interpretation of nationalism against the rule of Manchu to the integration of different groups within one notion of the Chinese nation was manifested in the adoption of a five-colour national flag, in which stripes of red, yellow, blue, white and black symbolised the ‘harmonious cohabitation of five ethnic tribes’ (*wuzugonghe*)—the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Muslim and Tibetan—which constituted one single nation (*minzu*).

Western discourses on modernity and their references to China played an influential role in the emerging debates on Chinese citizenship. The portrayal of China as backward in the influential writings of philosophers such as James Legge and J.J.M. de Groot was an important source of the Western reading of Chinese culture and tradition, most prominently expressed in Max Weber’s critique of Chinese religion (Hung 2003: 267, 271). Weber insisted that citizenship could not be conceived of outside the city, because the city gives space for formation of solidarities based not on kinship, but on spontaneous association between people who are not related by links of blood (Weber 1951: 13-14, and 1963: 1226 - 1228, 1233). The juxtaposition of urbanite-citizen with peasant-non-citizen, which Weber introduced in his theory, was neither a solitary attempt nor detached from the general spirit of his era. Eugen Weber (1976: 3) shows how the ‘othering’ mechanism in relation to peasants (and impoverished migrants to the city), resulting in their portrayal as ‘savages’, was rather commonplace in modernising and industrialising nineteenth-century France. As such, what Max Weber solidified into a ‘scientific’ theory was in fact a common attitude towards peasants as non-citizens in modernising Western Europe, and was intimately related to the powerful discourses of modernity, urbanisation, and colonisation. The Weberian understanding of citizenship as non-rural, rational, and non-religious became a cornerstone in the contemporary construction of citizenship. The mechanisms of ‘orientalising’ and ‘othering’ served as primary political instruments in 19th and early 20th century Europe, and found a fertile ground in the colonial and semi-colonial societies, such as China’s.

In the pre-modern Qing empire, the Chinese countryside was often portrayed as ideal and superior, rather than inferior to the city (Whyte and Parish 1984: 10-16). After the first Opium War in 1840, however, the coastal cities became penetrated by the European influences, opened to foreign trade and started growing rapidly. This resulted in a new spatial and temporal imaginary, which envisioned the character of Chinese cities (particularly Shanghai) as ‘global’, and the urban dwellers as modern, in contrast to rural China and to the rural migrants in the city (Yeh 1997: 380, 382). After assuming power in 1949 as a result of ‘the peasant revolution’, the Communists strived to renounce anything that they associated with the ‘bourgeois’ capitalist class, including urban merchants and semi-colonised urban culture, which came to increasingly define the idea of ‘Chineseness’ in the Republican era (Whyte and Parish 1984: 10-16; Yeh 1997: 378; Mao 1940). However, while the Republican urban culture was rejected as a basis for what China was to become, the rural identities with their pre-modern beliefs, institutions and cultural underpinnings were equally scorned and rejected by the Communist government that sought to remake the countryside into a new society (Cohen 1993: 152-154; Mao 1940), –a process which reached its peak in the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). In Communist China, the category of ‘peasant’ (*nongmin*) was appropriated to depict a part of society increasingly perceived as ‘feudal’, ‘backward’ and in dire need of reform, which was a continuation of the pre-Mao citizenship discourse (Cohen 1993: 156). The centrepiece of the new citizenship regime was the *hukou* system, which instead of empowering the rural population, eventually led to even deeper rural-urban disparity and to the creation of a privileged urban class.

Although Max Weber is not specifically cited in Chinese discussions on citizenship, the way citizenship is understood in contemporary China is remarkably reminiscent of the way it was

understood in Europe during the prominence of his theory<sup>3</sup>. This interpretation does not take into account those expressions of citizenship, which were not necessarily institutionalised or associated with the city (Isin and Wood 1999: 5). Many of the discourses which were imported to China from the West have been constructed through Orientalist strategies (such as the understanding of both modernity and citizenship as necessarily occidental), and in the process many of these discourses retained their implicit Orientalist qualities. Mayfair Yang (2011), for example, shows how the Western orientalist discourse about citizenship as necessarily occidental was absorbed in China with disastrous effects on local religiosities. She calls the process of appropriation of Western theories by Chinese elites and official classes a ‘colonisation of consciousness’ and explains how it led the Chinese to view themselves through the lens of Western Orientalism, seeing anything non-modern as ‘backward’ and ‘shameful’ (Yang 2011: 7, 13). This understanding, which emphasises the redeployment of the orientalist discourse within the state, resulted in the construction of citizenship based on the ‘othering’ mechanism. In China, there are many groups who play the role of orientalist ‘Others’ within the state; apart from rural migrants and ethnic minorities, women and religious minorities have also played this role (see Schein 1997, and Gladney 2004). Ethnic minorities, in particular, have predominately been seen as peasant, female, erotic and religious. The way ethnic citizenship has been formulated and regulated in China has produced ethnic minorities as underdeveloped, localised members of the Chinese nation. The status of ethnic minorities in China remains strictly in line with the rigid procedures of ethnic categorization. Their favourable treatment is restricted to the area of their household registration, primarily located in the rural ethnic areas in the Western part of China, which de-facto restricts their specific ethnic rights to the areas of their *hukou* registration.

### **The figure of ‘rural migrant’ in the construction of citizenship in China**

In this section we discuss how the figure of the ‘rural migrant’ has played a crucial role in the construction of citizenship in post-Maoist China. We argue that while the citizenship discourse is constructed through hybridisation of ‘Western’ theories of state-building, modernity and citizenship with the Chinese concepts and therefore precedes the citizenship regime in its current form (as based on the *hukou* system and the containment of migrants’ resistance), the citizenship discourse and regime have been mutually reinforcing. This interdependence of the citizenship regime and the related discourse has resulted in the portrayal of the ‘rural migrant worker’ as a marginalised non-citizen, the ultimate ‘Other’ of a modern urban city dweller, the citizen.

The *hukou* system, though initially created in order to stabilise welfare provision through control and immobilisation of people in their respective birthplaces by assigning either a rural or an urban household registration number (*hukou*) to each Chinese citizen, eventually deepened the rural-urban divide in China. The resultant process, which Dorothy Solinger labelled ‘internal colonisation’ (1999: 27), turned the Chinese peasants into an underprivileged workforce, which financed the modernisation dream of the urban working class that was granted secured employment, education and food rations. Concomitantly, instead of eliminating many of the late-Qing and Republican-period Western discourses, the CCP strengthened the ideas of linear progress, modernisation and rural/urban divide (Chen 1995: 4; also see Mao 1940). Both, the discourse and the regime have reinforced, rather than challenged, the ‘Weberian’ understanding of citizenship as essentially urban.

Subsequently, since the start of reforms in 1978, the narratives of development and progress became even more pronounced and running in parallel was the process of further downgrading peasant identities as not fitting within the modernisation project (Yang 2011: 5,

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<sup>3</sup>Max Weber is the most widely cited non-Chinese author in Chinese social sciences on the topic of legitimacy for instance (Zeng 2014: 7) therefore, it can be argued that his impact on the Chinese academia has been crucial.

6; Morton 2007: 240-241). The inequality of the system came to be more tangibly experienced by the rural-*hukou* holders who migrated to the cities, the so-called ‘peasant workers’ (*nongmingong*) or ‘floating population’ (*liudongrenkou*), who at present amount to about 261.39 million people (Ma 2011). The migration led to discrimination of the rural-*hukou* holders in the cities, not only in terms of the denial of access to social rights (such as free healthcare, education or work-place insurance), but also by social discrimination and constant threat of deportation (Solinger 1999: 9; Wang 2010). Additionally, both labels (‘peasant workers’ and ‘floating population’) implicitly deny them the right to permanently settle in the city (Chen 2005: 131). Today, although the *hukou* legislation still remains unchanged in the main Chinese cities (the so-called ‘first-tier cities’), there have been some developments, which transformed the impact of the *hukou* system, to be discussed later in the chapter. The phenomenon of rural-urban migration exposed the magnitude of inequalities produced by the *hukou* system. It has also brought about pressure to transform the *hukou* system and renewed academic discussion on citizenship in China.

The tension between urban and rural is further encapsulated in the very name for ‘citizen’ in the Chinese language. Although *gongmin* (public people) forms the core of the term for citizenship (*gongminquan*), indeed the word most commonly used in China to denote ‘citizen’ is *shimin* (urban citizen). While in the Republican period *shimin* referred to the city associations’ attempts of self-governance (Harris 2002: 188), in post-Maoist China, the notion of *shimin* became somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand it is used to depict ‘citizen’, but on the other hand it is also popularly understood as an administrative term meaning ‘an urban-*hukou*-holder living in a city’ (Harris 2002: 188, Chen 2005: 120). The exclusionary character of both understandings is further reflected in the notion of *shiminhua* (‘becoming a citizen’ or ‘turning/being turned into a citizen’). *Shiminhua* is used to describe both the process of transformation from rural to urban (as in the culture, the identity, the sense of belonging) as well as the attainment of urban citizenship rights (e.g. Cai 2008). In the majority of state and academic narratives the process of ‘becoming citizens’ (*shiminhua*) is seen as the migrants’ ultimate need and aim. While often deployed in the migrant-victim narrative in order to make requests for migrants’ ‘rightful access to social benefits’ or ‘respect for labour’ (Fan and Mao 2008, Cai 2008: 69, Chen 2005: 121), this concept, nevertheless, entails a refusal of the pre-existing (rural) identities of migrants and appeal for their replacement with one of ‘a better kind’; modern and urban. The peasant is still portrayed as inferior, but also as a victim of the underdevelopment of the countryside; an answer to their problems is to ‘become (like) an urban citizen’. *Shiminhua* is often used interchangeably with the most common Chinese terms for ‘citizenship’: *gongminquan* or *shiminquan* (the notions depicting a passive state of possessing citizenship rights) (Wang 2009: 126). Both terms are indicative of the pervasiveness of the understanding of citizenship as urban privilege. Although originally simply a translation of the English word ‘citizenship’, the words came to represent the privileged status of those, who ‘possess urban *hukou* endowing them with social rights of citizenship and a privileged identity of urban citizens’ (Chen 2005: 120). The term *shimin* is, therefore, a marker of the boundary between those who are *de facto* endowed with citizenship rights, status and identity and those who are not.

In order to further illustrate the pervasiveness of the mechanism of ‘othering’ in the citizenship construction in China, it can be illustrative to see how, despite attempts to reform the *hukou* system in the past decade, the current citizenship discourse has persisted. An increasing wave of migration since the 1980s led to increasing pressure on the government from academics, artists, media (e.g. DaHeWang-DaHeBao 2010), foreign organisations, NGOs (Amnesty International, 2007; Wang, 2008), and rural migrants themselves (Wang 2010: 80; Xiang 2005) to reform the *hukou* system. The ‘reforms’ that were undertaken since

2003<sup>4</sup>, however, have been superficial and largely geographically uneven. They were arbitrary, because they mainly involved an extension of urban-*hukou* registration to rural-*hukou*-holders, rather than a complete overhaul of the system. This is exemplified by a general shift towards commoditisation of *hukou*, i.e. the acquisition of urban *hukou* via purchase of a property (*goufangruhu*) (particularly after the 2008 financial crisis), the selective granting of urban *hukou* to ‘qualified talents’, usually university graduates (Wang 2010: 85, 95) or those able to pay a sufficient bribe (Zhang 2007:92-93). In terms of the controversial repatriation policy and the *hukou* enforcement system, the new regulations issued in 2003 restricted checks on personal identification cards, and limited automatic detentions and deportations of migrant workers (Wang 2010: 91). However, these reforms were short-lived, as the rise in the number of homeless people in the city centres of Shanghai and Beijing prompted authorities to revise the policy, resulting in limitations in the acquisition of property, and renewed repatriations and checks (Wang 2010: 84, 92). The reforms have been geographically uneven, because different cities and provinces have employed varying policies towards migrants, with some smaller and medium-size cities relaxing many of the *hukou* rules as opposed to the first-tier cities where urban *hukou* system is more significant in determining migrant workers’ lives (Zhan 2011).

This point also brings us to the problematic of the over-emphasis of the *hukou* system in the academic discussions on citizenship in China. While many scholars see the *hukou* system as the source of inequality and exclusion (Solinger 1999; Wang 2010), others argue that while this might be the case, in practice, even if the *hukou* system was abolished, the situation of many migrants would not change for the better, as the economic subsistence, the ability to afford property and the social acceptance would become more determining of the individual’s quality of life than the rights associated with urban *hukou* (Zhan 2011; Wang 2009; Jacka et al., 2013). Zhan Shaohua argues that market mechanisms (particularly the property ownership) and social exclusion (through informal relationships, *guanxi*, which denies access to social networks to outsiders) determine migrants’ lives to a far greater degree than the actual *hukou* system (Zhan 2011: 247). As some of the even most ardent critics of the *hukou* system pointed out, the mere acquisition of urban *hukou* does not dissolve the barriers between the migrants and the established urban communities (Solinger 1999: 9). The social discrimination around the mechanisms of ‘othering’ (urban/rural, insiders/outsideers or permanent/temporary binaries) persists even when urban *hukou* is attained by an individual. There is also a further problem associated with the focus on the *hukou* system: in the academic discussion on citizenship in the past two decades, this emphasis overshadowed alternative ways of understanding citizenship in China, especially such based on the idea of ‘active citizenship’, which, as we show in the final section of this chapter, have the potential to transform the ‘othering’ mechanism embedded in the construction of citizenship into alternative ways of understanding citizenship in China.

### **Ethnic minorities and the question of citizenship**

At the official state level, citizenship positions of ethnic minorities during the reform period have been articulated predominately in two ways. Firstly, the post-Mao era in China was marked by a ‘cultural fever’ (*wenhua re*) manifesting itself in the valorisation of ethnic cultures for commercial and national consumption. Ethnic minorities have become an imperative feature in national holiday celebrations, such as the annual spring festival TV gala, and other nationally important events such as the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics (Leibold 2008). Their otherness has been mobilised to present China as a multiethnic, diverse and ‘colourful’ society, commoditised as a tourist attraction. The ethnically diverse and harmonious image of the Chinese state is a popular portrait projected to the outside world

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of these reforms see Wang 2010.

through global celebrations. This cultural commodification is closely related to the second articulation of ethnic citizenship in post-Mao China, which was powerfully visible in the 2009 Mass parade celebrations of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the PRC. Marchers dressed in ethnic costumes performed the concluding part of the parade entitled 'Brilliant achievements'. Through this performance, they symbolically recreated a common perception in China that ethnic minorities are the most underdeveloped and poor sectors of the Chinese society slowing down the pace of China's development trajectory (Barabantseva 2012). As such, ethnic minorities remain the least developed citizens of China in the eyes of the state. The dominant social roles of being the sources of cultural fascination and economic backwardness rely on framing ethnic minorities as the ultimate 'others' in the construction of the Chinese nation.

Chinese ethnic laws and regulations promise equally favourable treatment to all fifty-five ethnic minorities within the territory of the PRC. White Papers emphasize the achievements of the party-state in developing a system of ethnic autonomies, and adopting policies which are aimed at developing various aspects of minorities and their regions. Ethnic minorities are commonly seen as the special members of the Chinese state, which enjoy favourable policies (*you tequan*), such as more flexible terms of family planning policy, reduced taxes, and university quotas. However, these special treatments also have associations with underdevelopment, backwardness and a lack of culture and only apply in designated minority areas. Ethnic minorities have been portrayed as groups in need of acculturation and economic development, which in the Chinese context means to achieve the level of development of the Han majority. It is common in Chinese scholarly publications to refer to ethnic minorities interchangeably as "weak and small nationality" (*ruoxiaominzu*), "small nationality" (*xiaominzu*) and "backward nationality" (*luohouminzu*) (Barabantseva 2011: 86). Although, as noted by Gladney the idea of the Chinese nation-state "has been predicated on the idea, if not the myth, of pluralism", the dominant principle is that the Han people are superior to minorities (Gladney 1996: 319). The language and practices of economic development are born out of the assumption of a dichotomy between the Han and minority nationalities, who are ascribed the characteristics of insignificant numbers, backwardness, poverty and remoteness (*shao-lao-pin-bian*). This kind of discourse localises ethnic minorities within the periphery of the Chinese nation-state, traditionalises and ethnicises their status, and reiterates their limited and passive citizenship. The state's preferential policies perpetuate the minority status of non-Han ethnic groups, allotting them a limited number of rights, and reinforcing their limited position within the geo-social space of China. The rigid character of ethnic citizenship became obvious in the 2009 case of He Chuanyang, a high school student from Chongqing whose national exam score, the highest in his province, was annulled after it was discovered that his father had changed Chuanyang's nationality status from Han to the Tujia minority in order to qualify for twenty additional exam points (Barabantseva 2011: 273). Within the existing framework of ethnic citizenship in China there is no room for multiple expressions of ethnic difference. Every individual is entitled to one ethnic identity only, with no further transgressions allowed.

Although the state guarantees equal treatment of all ethnic groups in China, certain minority groups are widely perceived as trouble makers, violent, and untrustworthy. This especially concerns Uyghurs and Tibetans, but also affects other groups like the Huis and Mongols. Uyghurs and Tibetans, in particular, have been targets of the 'three evils' campaign against 'separatism, terrorism and religious extremism' since the mid 1990s, but in particular after 9/11 and ethnic unrests in Tibet (2008), Xinjiang (2009), and Mongolia (2011). When violent ethnic clashes broke out in Tibet and Xinjiang in the span of one year, the Chinese government blamed the outbreak of violence on the 'separatist' forces and the Internet rather than on the PRC's ethnic policies. Many Han people accused Uyghurs and Tibetans of being 'ungrateful' for the development which their regions had been enjoying. Despite the

problematic nature of the ethnic policies which the unrests in Tibet and Xinjiang alluded to, the Chinese leadership insisted that economic development was the main solution to ethnic strife. There were no attempts by the central government to investigate into the ways in which the implementation of economic development in the minority areas might have caused the friction and violent outbreaks of frustration among the ethnic populations. When President Hu Jintao visited Xinjiang after the violent clashes in late August 2009, he identified economic development as the central task for the region when dealing with ethnic issues. Similarly, a White Paper on Ethnic Policy issued by the central government in September 2009, only four days before the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, reasserted the state's position contending 'that quickening the economic and social development of minority communities and minority areas is the fundamental solution to China's ethnic issues' (Information Office 2009). The Chinese leaders do not officially recognize that the PRC has ethnic problems which cannot be solved by economic development, or indeed that specific development initiatives can exacerbate rather than resolve these problems. Instead, these events resulted in the blanket restriction of basic freedoms for Uyghurs and Tibetans. For example, the whole of Xinjiang was cut from the Internet after the clashes in Xinjiang, and Uyghurs travelling outside of the region could not make use of internet cafes. They were seen as a potential threat and a source of danger simply because of their ethnic group affiliation and religion. Additionally, the clashes resulted in the intensification of patriotic education campaigns across the ethnic regions.

There is a general and strong conviction expressed across the official writings on the ethnic issue in the PRC that the chosen direction of policies and their implementation is one of the most successful in the world. Chinese leaders often praise the ethnic work by pointing to the absence of major ethnic disputes and conflicts in China. Former Tibetan Autonomous Region Chairman Qiangba Puncog asserts that the Party-state's ethnic policies have been 'extremely successful' (Cheng, cited in Leibold 2013: 43). Although a number of public intellectuals and scholars call for the reform of China's ethnic policies, these calls remain rooted in the narrow racial understanding of the Chinese nation (Ma 2007, 2012). Essentially, the underlying structure of the official 'ethnic question' rhetoric has not significantly changed from the Republican era, when assimilation and acculturation were seen as the only solution to the 'ethnic question'. During the reform period, accelerated economic development was seen as the only credible answer to addressing the ethnic question. The way the developmental rhetoric of the ethnic question is framed reflects and transcends an existing binary opposition of ethnic minorities versus the Han majority, restraining the participation and citizenship of ethnic minorities.

### **Towards a different recognition of migrant workers and ethnic minorities as Chinese citizens**

We have so far illustrated how the rural/migrant population and ethnic minorities have played the role of the 'Other' against which the concept of 'citizen' has been formulated in contemporary China. Rural migrants and ethnic minorities have been portrayed as exotic, backward, uncivilised and, ultimately, as non-citizens. While the Chinese state has made some gradual concessions towards their inclusion as equal citizens, these reforms often remain superficial and do not seriously challenge the current citizenship regime and discourse in China. In order to redeem these groups as citizens, a simple 'extension of the rights of citizenship' is not enough. Only through acceptance of the identity and rights to citizenship of the 'Other', which takes place through border-crossing practices, can the marginalised be conceived of as citizens. These 'border-crossing practices' precipitate an inclusion of various different rights, not just those related to the *hukou* system (civil, political and social) and favourable treatment of ethnic minorities, but primarily those which Engin Isin and Patricia Wood (1999) call the 'rights to identity' and the 'right to have rights'. In order to achieve

such inclusion, there is need to acknowledge that citizens themselves, and not the state or the dominant groups in the state, are the locus of legitimacy of citizenship. In the case of contemporary China, the marginalised groups can only reclaim their citizenship and ascertain their place as citizens through the transgression of the urban/rural and Han/ethnic dichotomies.

Isin is critical of approaches which tend to portray marginalised groups as excluded from privileges of citizenship (Isin 2002: 4). Instead, he argues that the marginalised groups are crucial in the process of the construction of citizenship, as they are ‘the immanent Other’ against whom the citizenship practices and status are formed (Isin 2002: 4). The concept of ‘border-crossings’ pertains to this idea reflecting the marginalised experience (of migrants and ethnic minorities for instance), which is rendered as ‘irregular, unusual and deviant even as it tries to assert its importance’ in the dominant narrative (Isin 2002:18). This theoretical insight might be helpful in diluting the ‘othering’ mechanism in the construction of citizenship in contemporary China.

Another theoretical approach which might be helpful in overcoming the dichotomous nature of ‘othering’ in the construction of citizenship in China is the concept of ‘radical citizen’ (Isin and Wood 1999: vii). According to this approach, citizenship should be viewed as ‘multiple subject-positions’, where individuals are viewed as entangled in a network of claims for various rights: civil, political, social, cultural, ethnic, sexual, technological and ecological. This position emphasises the importance of *rights to identity* in addition to the *rights of status* (political, civic and social). Isin and Wood (1999: 13) emphasise the importance of identity in the construction of citizenship where subjectivities, self-fashioning, belonging, recognition and group solidarities are to be accounted for. The emphasis is placed on the re-conceptualization of the means and processes of allocation of rights (rather than these rights’ substance), and rethinking the sources from which these rights draw their legitimacy. Therefore, they understand citizenship not just through a ‘legal status’, but also as ‘practices of citizenship’ (Isin and Wood 1999: ix) and ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielson 2008). The concept of ‘radical citizen’ and ‘acts of citizenship’ is central to how we see the possibility of a re-conceptualization of citizenship in China.

The need for accounting radical acts as an expression of citizenship is seen, for example, in the case of recent harrowing acts of Tibetan self-immolations. On December 20<sup>th</sup> 2013 the 125<sup>th</sup> Tibetan self-immolation in China took place since the blazing campaign began in 2009 in Tibet and Tibetan parts of Sichuan. While the Chinese state labels them as the acts of terrorism, viewing self-immolations as desperate demands for citizenship through which self-immolators reclaim ‘sovereignty over one’s own self within a state of siege’ might prove more productive (Yeh 2012). Ethnic practices, in particular those deemed to be sensitive by the state, are strictly regulated by the state and operate in the very limited, and quickly shrinking space for different expressions and practices of ethnic citizenship. Most of the self-immolators were born after the beginning of the Chinese economic reforms in the late 1970s, and as such should have benefited from the state development efforts. Yet, these earlier unprecedented individual acts head-on challenge the narrative of the peaceful liberation of Tibet and the party-state’s self-celebration of the successful implementation of economic reforms. Self-immolations turn on head the developmental logic of the Chinese ethnic policies in Tibet, by reclaiming their autonomy to the collective body of Tibetans through the extreme individual acts of defiance (Tan 2012). In the very limited spaces left for unauthorised expressions of will, they practice their citizenship in a violently arresting way by denying the state its monopoly over violence (Litzinger 2012). Tibetan self-immolators reclaim the space of their own, their own sovereignty over their bodies, destabilise the status-quo of Tibetan-Han-majority relationship, challenge the received wisdom of common goodness of economic development, and desperately demand new spaces for Tibetans to

practice their renewed fully-fledged citizenship. This radical expression and practice of citizenship, like those by the migrant workers, tells us that the parameters and terms of citizenship in contemporary China should be rethought anew.

With reference to migrant workers and ethnic minorities, in order to transform the construction of citizenship in China, at least two areas need to be addressed. First, the focus on the *hukou* system as the only source of inequality in the construction of citizenship in China is not satisfactory. Instead, in order to transform the citizenship construction in China it is necessary to acknowledge 'othering' as its underlying mechanism and its rootedness in the Western discourse of modernity. Indeed, as argued elsewhere, the current academic trends in the Chinese-language academia increasingly postulate to go beyond the narrative of *hukou* and to account for other factors behind the citizenship regime in China in order to overcome the urban-rural division (Jakimów 2012). Second, it is equally important to broaden the understanding of citizenship beyond merely seeing it as a rights-endowed membership in a nation-state; rather, our understanding should also incorporate the notion of de-territorialised, agent-driven and active citizenship. This conceptualisation opens the space to viewing citizenship as a co-produced and contested series of relational processes, rather than a state-imposed phenomenon; an understanding which should be even more compelling in light of the increasing migrant workers' civic activism and growing ethnic tensions in certain parts of China.

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