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## Colin Mackerras, China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalisation

London, New York, Routledge Curzon, 2003, viii + 216 pp.

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**Édition électronique**

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/828>  
ISSN : 1996-4617

**Éditeur**

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

**Édition imprimée**

Date de publication : 1 mai 2004  
ISSN : 2070-3449

**Référence électronique**

Élisabeth Allès, « Colin Mackerras, China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalisation », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 53 | May- June 2004, mis en ligne le 24 avril 2007, consulté le 28 octobre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/828>

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- 1 In this short work, the Australian political scientist Colin Mackerras offers a general overview of the situation of ethnic minorities in China over the past twenty years. He takes as the basis for his study principal works published recently and his own interviews conducted in China since the beginning of the 1980s, while also collating statistical data. He synthesises data and elements of understanding of China's policies with regard to minority peoples there. He analyses the economic data on the autonomous regions, integrating here the recent development of tourism. He then turns his attention to education, demography, the situation of women and, in some cases, the relationship between religion and the state. The last chapter is dedicated to international relations. The author furthermore attempts to provide a reflection on the effects of globalisation on China's ethnic groups.
- 2 The object of the book itself does not allow him to analyse specific situations; nevertheless, he does spend more time on Tibet and Xinjiang, the two regions exhibiting the most conflict and the most in line with the idea of globalisation that he develops. He attempts to put the actual situations into perspective. However, if the approach is intended to be objective, it sometimes gives the impression in its formulations of a seal of approval for the political power. For example (p. 138), even if one can agree on the fact that there has been no genocide in Tibet, serious dangers nevertheless threaten Tibetan culture: one can think in particular of the new architecture of the towns that is based solely on Chinese standards. While recognising the sinification of Lhasa, the author stands by the strict term of "cultural genocide" used by the Dalai Lama only to refute it. To justify his position, he argues that the presence of Han migrants is only temporary.
- 3 As far as religions are concerned, and most particularly Christianity, Colin Mackerras restricts himself to a single paragraph, considering the presence of this religion to be of old standing and thus not linked to the current globalisation (p. 125). It would,

however, have been interesting to know if the progress made by Protestantism in China has also had an effect among the ethnic groups there.

- 4 This synthetic and highly didactic work is addressed principally to students or to the curious reader. It is understandable that the author cannot deal with all of the situations in all their complexity, but this leads him to take numerous short cuts. First of all, some complementary data on the predominant conditions that determined the categorisation of groups into such-and-such an ethnic people would have allowed the reader a better understanding of the situations presented. It also seems to us that it would have been desirable to pay greater attention to the associations that are open to criticism, for example colonialism and the idea of modernisation and its stated corollary, globalisation and democratisation (p. 9). On the question of colonialism, we refer the reader to the most recent work by Marc Ferro.<sup>1</sup>
- 5 Colin Mackerras specifies that the aim is to illuminate the effects of globalisation on the ethnic minorities in China (p. 2); but this notion is analysed in essence from the perspective of the relationship to the West (and more especially to the United States), in particular in light of human rights or even related effects such as the widespread diffusion of English across the whole of Chinese territory. One of the questions posed by the author—namely whether globalisation promotes a more fragmented or a better integrated society (p. 54)—demonstrates very well that there is a debate concerning the notion itself, as well as its presuppositions, which in reality allows the question of domination and of power to be avoided.
- 6 As far as Islam is concerned, we cannot accept the assertion that Islam (to be understood as radical, fundamentalist Islam) is hostile to the liberal form of globalisation (p. 49). It is sufficient to look at how the economy of Saudi Arabia functions or even how that of Afghanistan operated in the time of the Taliban regime to perceive that economic liberalism is in no way in contradiction with a religious fundamentalism, Muslim or otherwise. This idea is generally based on the severe disapproval in Islam of lending with interest. But Maxime Rodinson demonstrated a long time ago that many solutions have existed for circumventing this difficulty.<sup>2</sup>
- 7 Throughout his work, the author tries to evaluate whether globalisation entails a reduction in the control imposed by the Chinese authorities or not. He suggests that the country's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the Internet and the increasingly tighter links to the global economy are making it ever harder for this control to be exercised (p. 179). Here, too, more restraint would have been advisable. Two examples will suffice. First of all, Internet sites are to a great extent under the control of the Chinese state today. If they effectively represent the only possible forum, as soon as they go beyond a simple exchange, the authorities intervene, arresting the netizens or even closing down the sites. The outbreak of atypical pneumonia (SARS) is a second example. From the moment that the state decided to recognise the situation, the Party machine, the different powers that control the population—including the district and village committees that had slumbered for several years—were brought back into service with incredible speed and efficiency. The synthesising work of Colin Mackerras is nevertheless useful. Even if it does not allow us to grasp the internal dynamics specific to each of the minorities, it has the merit of at least opening up the debate.

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## NOTES

1. Marc Ferro (ed.), *Le Livre noir du colonialisme, XVIe-XXIe siècles. De l'extermination à la repentance*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2003.
2. Maxime Rodinson, *Islam et Capitalisme*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1966.