Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands
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Published by University of Washington Press

Wellens, Koen.
Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands: The Premi of Southwest China.
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The Premi are one of China’s smallest, most remote, and least-known ethnic groups. What can we learn from them? Koen Wellens’s *Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands: The Premi of Southwest China* provides copious information on the Premi as well as on contemporary China, ethnography, ethnicity, religion, and the state. As the twelfth volume in the Studies on Ethnic Groups in China series, his book continues a tradition of interdisciplinary scholarship that puts the specific into the context of the general and uses particular cases to illustrate general points.

Any book on contemporary ethnic groups must be grounded in ethnography. Until now, there has been precious little material on the Premi, most of it in obscure, minimally distributed, local Chinese-language journals and in some of the shorter chapters of general works on China’s “nationalities.” Most people who have written about the Premi (myself included) learned about them as a side-effect of research on a better-known group, such as the Nuosu or Naxi or, especially, the Premi’s famous matrilineal neighbors, the Na or Mosuo. It seems that, except for the very few Premi who had become local scholars, no one had set out to study their history or society. As Wellens describes in his Introduction, a chance nighttime encounter with a Premi *hangui* priest led him to fill this gap. It wasn’t easy. The places he went required days of upsy-downsy hiking, weeks of sleep-
ing on hard board beds, months of subsistence on a limited diet. He had to learn a language for which there are no textbooks or even texts of any kind and deal with villagers rightly suspicious of any investigator (even a 190-cm European) as a possible agent of the Chinese state. But with the eventual help and cooperation of community members and scholarly collaborators of many ethnicities, Wellens gives us the first detailed ethnography of a Premi community.

Religious Revival, however, is not just ethnography for its own sake; it is ethnography that teaches us lessons about ethnicity, religion, and the state in reform-era China. The ethnic identity and ethnic relations of various Premi communities are extremely complex. This group of about sixty thousand people, living in two provinces, turns out to be distributed among two different minzu, or state-determined ethnopolitical groups. In Sichuan, where many of the Premi were traditionally subject to the Gelugpa king of Muli, they are Zangzu, for historical reasons lumped, along with their close linguistic relatives such as the Nameze and Duoxu, into the larger group whose name we translate as “Tibetan.” In Yunnan, they are their own minzu, bearing the name Pumi, which is as close as Chinese characters can get to transcribing their name. We knew (we who knew anything about the Premi at all) that this division had consequences—Tibetans have long objected to the separate status of the Yunnanese Pumi—but Wellens’s book adds two important things. One is a detailed historical account of how this came about, in a tangle of politics, language, and religion stretching back to the beginning of the Qing dynasty and forward to the 1950s, reminding us that ethnic identity is often determined by historical contingency as much as by stable genealogical and cultural traditions.

We also see for the first time how the different minzu statuses of Premi in the two provinces have led to very different configurations of religion, ethnicity, and religious and ethnic revival in the post-Maoist polity. Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands enriches our understanding of the revival of religion in post-Maoist China by showing how historical contingency and the relationships among state, local elites, and communities can influence this process in locally specific ways. In Sichuan, where the Premi are Zangzu, or Tibetans, elites have promoted Tibetan Buddhism, while the revival of the indigenous hangui tradition has been a grassroots movement. But in Yunnan, local elites, eager to promote Pumi separateness, have been active in the revitalization of the hangui.
All this crisscrossing detail of history, ethnicity, and religion allows us to see the nation-building efforts of the PRC regime in light of a novel sort of complexity. It points out the delicate road that a no-longer revolutionary but still very authoritarian regime must tread as it draws leaders and members of local communities into its national body politic. At the same time, the Premi case demonstrates the opportunities that the construction of this body politic presents for local political and religious leaders as well as the limits to these opportunities. As so many volumes in the Studies on Ethnic Groups in China series have shown, the CCP goal of building a multiethnic or multicultural nation entails a project that is both worthwhile and tricky, both ideological and opportunistic, both inclusive and alienating of minority people. What the project is not, is predetermined. Every case and every community is different, and every study adds materially to our understanding of the places of these differences in the national fabric.

I am thus delighted to introduce and recommend Koen Wellens’s *Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands*. It is a fascinating report, from a faraway place, with lots to tell us about ethnicity, religion, and the Chinese nation.

STEVEN HARRELL
Seattle, July 2010