Pluralist Universalism
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As a global project, multiculturalism’s search for workable formulas for balancing national coherence and ethnic justice is always already characterized by cross-national comparisons and borrowing. Even as they propose expansive models of multiculturalism, the authors studied in this book help bridge, consciously or unconsciously, the imagined chasm between two multiculturalist projects. In other words, they translate between two national contexts against the grains of existing modes of translation. Herein lies the crux of this study. The double critique that it performs does not simply intervene in two different cultural and political processes simultaneously; it also revises the comparative discourses that have emerged between them. The existing comparative discourses, as I pointed out throughout this study, are mostly marked by a conservative impulse toward self-justification. This impulse is visible whether the other country (as opposed to one’s own) is criticized for minority rights violations or exalted as a commendable example of cultural tolerance. When U.S. liberal multiculturalism is affirmed and embraced in China as an instructive precedent, as we saw in the chapter on Kuo, it usually works slyly to legitimize the privileging of the national over the ethnic in China’s own ethnic policy. The literary readings offered here counter the banal universalism—
“excusing one bad deed by pointing to another,” that is, in colloquial terms—entailed in such self-defensive modes of comparison.

The double critique framework determines the specific interpretative tactics employed in each of the literary chapters, which examine how the literary narratives at hand interact with political, cultural, and theoretical discourses emanating from a particular national context and the ways in which they mediate between two different national contexts. It also shapes the structure of the entire study, destabilizing the boundaries between diasporic Chinese American literature and U.S.–Chinese comparative literature. If authors inhabiting the liminal space between the United States and China can be resituated in both national contexts, then those working more squarely within one national context can be paired together and read as commentaries on what happens in between the two nations.

Over the past decade, Chinese investments in Western multiculturalisms, especially the U.S. variety, have been on the rise. New U.S.–China comparisons have emerged in discussions of possible antidotes to the more recent upheavals in Tibet and Xinjiang. In an immediately catchy turn of phrase, sociologist Ma Rong has put forth an argument for the “depoliticization of ethnic minority issues” in China. Ma faults the regional autonomy model and its Soviet antecedent for institutionizing, or politicizing, group differences and destabilizing national identity. For an alternative, he turns to the kind of pluralism that he personally experienced as a doctoral student at Brown University in the 1980s. Echoing the U.S. Ethnicity School of the 1980s, Ma portrays American multiculturalism as a de-essentializing, “culturalist” approach to conceptualizing ethnic difference that can be instructive for China’s battle against ethnic conflicts.1 Ma’s call for depoliticization recalls the Habermasian subordination of ethno-cultural communities to an inclusive national community. One may regard it as a Chinese variation upon, indeed a belated translation of, Western liberal criticisms of official multiculturalism and state-sanctioned ethnic identities. Ma’s concern with the Chinese state’s manufacturing and consolidation of minority identities does not lack parallels in new U.S. studies of the Chinese ethnic policy. Benedict Anderson’s Foreword for Thomas Mullaney’s Coming to Terms with the Nation claims explicitly that the more populous minorities in China—Tibetans and the Uyghurs, for example—develop their ethnic self-awareness and antagonism against the Han as a reply to the state’s “incessant ‘Who are you?’” 2

2. Benedict Anderson, Foreword to Coming to Terms with the Nation, xx.
While Ma Rong invokes the American model as a liberal alternative to China’s official multiculturalism, critic Wang Hui warns against adopting the narrow culturalism of the liberal “politics of recognition,” which obscures the nonlocalizable material processes at work in the shaping of ethnic relations in China.3 In an implicit response to the rhetoric of depoliticization, Wang offers an analysis of the history of Tibet–Han conflicts, suggesting that it cannot but be a political issue. What truly “depoliticizes” the Tibet issue is the reduction of ethnic differences to purely cultural and religious divisions, as we can see in Western condemnations of religious suppression in Tibet, a conceptual error that has long acquired the name of “orientalism.” Instead, the social upheavals and religious revival in Tibet have to be situated in the development of a market economy in China over the last few decades, which have created new social inequities that deprive many poor and rural Tibetans of opportunities to compete effectively within this economy. This, for Wang, has reversed the many policies, implemented before the 1990s, geared toward integrating Tibet economically with the rest of the nation. Only by recognizing the material underpinnings of ethnic differences in China, can the Chinese version of the “politics of respect” have a real possibility for living up to its purpose of facilitating the advance of the socialist revolution in both Han and non-Han areas and creating a shared (though not necessarily narrowly nationalist) identity among the inhabitants of these different areas. Wang’s argument against the “depoliticization” of ethnic relations resonates strongly with my argument against conciliatory multiculturalism. The reframing of “the politics of respect” is a critique of tepid culturalist conceptions of ethnic justice that has assumed a kind of global traction, traveling from the United States to China, to say the very least, and setting severe limits for the multicultural projects in both places, among other parts of the world. This recent intellectual discussion of the “depoliticization” of ethnic policy helps illustrate, yet again, the need for a transnational, comparative framework for any new studies of the configurations and politics of multiculturalism.

Comparative critique, however, is by necessity a collective, collaborative project. Let me conclude my envoi, then, with the hope that this book will pass through the minds of others and give rise to ideas that eventually return to me, unrecognizable yet familiar.
