

A Brief Review of Shi Zhengyi and Chinese Ethnological Economics (Book Review)

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The monograph of *Shi Zhengyi and Chinese Ethnological Economics* was published by the North America Business Press in 2023. In this volume, Professor Robert Tian and his assistant Ni Zhong introduce the work of the late Zhegyi Shi and his legacy of Ethnological Economics to the English-speaking audience for the first time. It is both a professional and a personal account as Robert Tian, along with Foreword writer Professor Wang Tianjin are his former students and carry on Shi's work today. For instance, Robert Tian has co-authored many volumes in the same Modern China series for North American Business Press. He has organized annual international conferences on business anthropology in many locations across China for years. The Preface and Foreword are thus essential parts of the book and tell of the intertwined lives of Professors Tian, Wang, and Shi.

Theoretically, Professor Shi's most significant contribution is the concept of ethnological economics, which might be characterized as ethnology and economics with Chinese Marxist characteristics. Specifically, Marx aimed to eliminate class differences by redistributing the means of production. Shi saw that this principle should also apply to redressing the wealth disparity between the Han majority in China (>90%) and the 55 ethnic minorities that China officially recognizes. These minorities are primarily in the west part of China, such as Yunnan, Hunan, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Qinghai.

Shi used and trained his students to use scientific methods and in-depth field investigations to study these groups. Subjective pronouncements and abstract numerical analyses were not to be tolerated. Furthermore, he taught that each situation required adaptable methods to address the local problem. Ideally, these in-depth studies use ethnographic methods to understand better the cultures of those studied.

Professor Shi devoted most of his work to studying the ethnic areas of western China to help them catch up economically with the more prosperous regions of eastern and southern coastal China. While the nature of Ethnological Economics is both ethnological and economic, Tian and Zhong make clear that Professor Shi's contributions are more economic. For example, the Belt and Road initiative is cited as a primary tool to bring economic prosperity to the minority areas of China through improved infrastructure, transportation, education, and animal husbandry. There is an occasional mention of the importance of local ethnic cultures, but most commonly as a means to attract tourists to these areas as a source of revenue.

What is missing is a focus on other impacts of such economic development on local ethnic cultures. For example, there is little consideration of the effects on language, religion, gender, ethnicity, age opportunities, the influx of Han Chinese, the types of entrepreneurial and employment opportunities for locals versus Han Chinese, beliefs, customs, and local status hierarchies.

While Deng Xiaoping rationalized market-based development for raising living standards as "first the east, then the west," Xi Jinping emphasized "one belt, one road." In other words, the West should now become more like the East through Sinicization. Harmony, nationalism, and unification have long been

principles of Chinese governance. However, local languages and cultures may be victims of this drive to bring prosperity and unity.

On the one hand, there is a condemnation of the American and Western tendency to relegate traditional cultures to museums; on the other hand, there is a mandate to protect cultural relics for ethnic and cultural tourism. Indeed, ethnic and cultural museums can be seen as a big part of economic development in areas such as Zhongdian (“Shangri-La”) in Yunnan province. The same tends to be true in other partially reconstructed ethnic old towns in China’s west. The 12th Five-Year Plan calls for preserving and building 1,000 such ethnic-minority villages, even though some ethnic groups were seen as “the last stage of primitive society” before “the democratic reform and socialist transformation.” Presumably, such nostalgic villages are intended as tourist draws and to show the “primitive” picture of life before contrasting it with the “modern” *now*.

Tian and Zhong quote a study by Chaudhuri (2010) that found that “...exploitative and profitable development projects are still widespread in Xinjiang, thus forming an insurmountable gap between Han nationality and other ethnic groups in the region.” The environment, climate change, and economic development are other areas of conflict that are ignored in China’s development plans for the West. For instance, the region’s vast coal and petroleum resources are seen as a valuable utilization of economic potential. The economic development program advocated by Shi also touts the “Four Modernizations” from the Mao Era: agriculture, industry, science and technology, and military. Given the former emphasis on animal husbandry in these mountainous areas, this agenda also represents an emphasis on urbanization. Shi (1992) critiques objections to this plan as being raised by “some people who believe too much in Western neoliberal ideas.”

The authors conclude that “insufficient research has been done on the cultural factors of economic process and their influence.” This more cultural focus seems to be a worthwhile agenda for future Ethnological Economics in China and elsewhere. It was couched as a fight against religious extremism, ethnic division, terrorism, and harmonization (a longtime Confucian concern to make all of China Chinese, including language, education, and nationalism) are promoted as a means of national unity that suppresses difference. Thus, the drive to harmony inhibits further attention to cultural factors.

This monograph is a valuable volume on the history of ethnological economics and a tribute to Professor Shi. Like other volumes in this series, it provides insights into Chinese social science for non-readers of Chinese. Specifically, we learn more about how and why the Chinese development of minority areas of western parts of the country has taken its present shape.