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Abstract

This book is about how a marginal ethnic, religious, and racial minority group produces a sense of community and a space of social order at the geo-cultural margins of a totalitarian state. The research draws on findings from multi-sited fieldwork conducted among the Tajiks of Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County in south Xinjiang between May 2010 and September 2011, and on the author's experience as a former state prosecutor in Xinjiang. It deals with the processes by which the Tajiks in the far west of China continued to manage disputes and maintain internal order in a restrictive political environment, where the course of law and order is often difficult to predict.

Drawing comparative lessons from Laura Nader's work on Mexico (1991), and Fernanda Pirie's work on Ladakh (2007), the study focuses on the significance of "harmony ideology", whereby there is a normative stress on avoiding open conflict. It argues that such a focus on "harmony" is an attempt to produce stability and a measure of cultural autonomy in an ideologically driven top-down political system. However, the same "harmony ideology" can also serve to reproduce internal Tajik inequalities along gender, age, and other hierarchical lines. This book sheds light on identity politics, connate morality, and the existential challenges faced by a peripheral group at the geo-cultural margins of a secular state.

By examining the micropolitics of disputing, the study analyses the roles of formal and consensual norms and values that govern various aspects of Tajik society's normative practices. The moral and ethical values guide internal social order, which is maintained through a series of informal mechanisms, and set the standard for the propriety of interpersonal and communal behaviours within the group. The formal laws and regulations, which represent the will of the single-party state, see to it that local practices comply with the statutory laws when regulating internal social order. Provided that juridical boundaries are respected and the superiority/priority of formal laws is observed, the two sets of norms sometimes complement each other subtly in keeping an orderly social existence.

The selective case examples shed light on the workings of state law and politics on the ground, and the detailed ethnography focuses on the ethics of

Tajik sociality that gives meaning to the regulatory aspects of informal values, norms, and practices and evinces the Tajik perception of the state and its agents. In broad terms, the study draws attention to the dynamics/interdependence of law and politics and its impingement on the ways marginal societies organise internal social life. On the one hand, the persistence/relevance of vernacular norms and mechanisms bear witness to the benignity of the cultural autonomy enjoyed by smaller cultural groups. On the other hand, the Tajiks' unwillingness to interact with the legal establishment also supports the lack of trust in a politically manipulated legal system that serves the needs of the party-state.

Structure and Thematic Overview

This study is situated at the intersection of harmony ideology and legal pluralism, offering a grounded ethnographic analysis of how the Tajiks of Tashkurgan navigate normative life and law within the structural confines of the PRC. It examines how locally embedded norms and values are sustained, adapted to, or challenged by state-centric legal structures. The book is composed of eight chapters, including the introduction. It is structured to present a coherent narrative that interweaves conceptual discussions with grounded empirical insights, thereby systematically addressing the core research questions.

The introduction establishes the general context by providing a detailed overview of the region and the subject population, the Tajiks in Xinjiang. It outlines their ethno-linguistic identity, demographic and geographical distribution, internal social and linguistic diversity, and relevant historical background. This foundational context sets the stage for the following theoretical and ethnographic analyses.

Chapter 1 engages with the theoretical frameworks of harmony ideology and legal pluralism. It introduces the central conceptual issues and critically reflects on how these frameworks relate to governance and social order in multi-ethnic settings, particularly within the Chinese state. This chapter lays the intellectual groundwork for understanding how state discourses and local practices interact in the Tajik context.

Chapter 2 offers an ethnographic account of Tajik society in Tashkurgan, focusing on local norms, values, and social etiquette that serve as informal regulatory mechanisms. It highlights how these normative practices underpin community cohesion and internal social regulation, despite the community's evident internal diversity.

Chapter 3 examines the cultural logic pertaining to the notion of legitimate violence. It explores the historical and moral foundations of such practices and their reproduction in everyday life. The chapter also considers how informal acceptance of extra-legal actions by state agents contributes to sustaining social hierarchies and exacerbating inequality within Tajik society.

Chapter 4 looks into the role of personal reputation as a core normative value. It analyses how individual social standing is assessed within the community and how reputation serves as a mechanism for reinforcing behavioural expectations and social order.

Chapter 5 critically examines the evolution of the PRC's nationality policy and its implications for Tajik identity formation and everyday life. It discusses how the policy promotes a discourse of "harmony" while facilitating

selective assimilation. The chapter interrogates the role of state classifications in shaping both the visibility and regulation of minority identities.

Chapter 6 concisely outlines the structure of the Chinese legal system, including its institutional frameworks, legislative hierarchies, and law enforcement mechanisms. It provides an essential background for understanding the broader legal terrain within which Tajik's experiences of law and justice unfold.

Chapter 7 explores the interface between Tajik society and formal legal institutions. Drawing on case studies, it highlights the disjuncture between legal ideals and practical realities, exposing the subordination of legal norms to political imperatives. The chapter further illustrates how communities resort to tolerated forms of extra-legal or informal dispute resolution in response to the erosion of judicial credibility.

The concluding chapter synthesises the key arguments developed across the study. It revisits the contradictions inherent in the Chinese state's governance of ethnic minorities, particularly under conditions where judicial independence is absent and political control is paramount. The chapter reflects on the current trajectory of harmony ideology among the Tajiks, offering a prognosis on the future of their cultural practices amid expanding pressures of involuntary assimilation.

In sum, this study presents an in-depth ethnographic investigation into the lived experiences of the Tajiks in Tashkurgan, contextualised within the broader frameworks of legal pluralism and harmony ideology in the PRC. Through an exploration of cultural, normative, and legal dynamics, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how minority communities negotiate identity, social order, and legality on the peripheries of a centralised, Han-dominated state.