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民族

Nationality

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Modern China has inherited not only a large territory but also many ethnic groups from the Manchu Qing Empire it overthrew in 1912. How to ‘stretch the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire’ has been a question confronting the successive governments of the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China (PRC).¹ In 1912, Chinese revolutionaries came to power with an anti-Manchu rage vowing to ‘drive out barbarians to restore China to the Chinese’ (*quchu dalu, huifu zhonghua*), but settled with the last emperor, who issued an abdication edict handing over the non-Chinese dominions of the Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, and Muslims to the new Chinese state, thereby inaugurating it as a ‘union of five races’ (*wuzu gonghe*).² This multinational settlement was only a temporary compromise by Chinese nationalists whose foremost goal was to build a ‘Chinese’ nation-state in which the nation and the state were congruent. The imagined nation was *zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation) to match the state name *zhonghua minguo* (Republic of China). Thus, the Chinese Nationalists who established a National government (*guomin zhengfu*) in Nanjing in 1928 scrapped the Five-colour Flag of the Republican government (*minguo zhengfu* or *beiyang zhengfu*) based in Beijing, which symbolised the five races, and replaced it with a Blue Sky with a White Sun Flag (*qingtian bairi qi*) signalling a desire for a national unity.

The PRC founded by the Communists in 1949 had a different vision for the new state. Since the Communists’ legitimacy lies in ‘the people’ (*renmin*), the PRC Constitution defines China not as a nation, but a ‘unitary multinational state created jointly by the people of all its nationalities’ (*quanguo gezu renmin gongtong dizao de tongyi de duo minzu guojia*). And yet, with the waning of communist ideology, in the recent decade the discourse of the nation—*zhonghua minzu*—has come to the fore, thereby raising

the question not only of how to refer to its diverse constituent nationalities, but also whether they should have any place in the newly imagined Chinese nation now openly embraced by the Communists.

Pre-communist Ethnopolitics

At the turn of the twentieth century, as the empire was transformed into a nation-state, China's ethnopolitics centred around how to name the diverse ethnic groups and the nation itself. The Chinese borrowed the concept of *minzu* from the Japanese *minzoku* (written with the same characters), which translated the English terms *nation* and *nationality* in the original Western sense of a civilian class opposed to aristocracy. In China, though, *minzu* came to denote a genealogical group with a racial connotation. In his oath of office as the provisional President of the Republic, and his reply to Sun Yat-sen's congratulations on 10 March 1912, Yuan Shikai referred to the 'five great nationalities' (*wuda minzu*), thanking them for elevating him to the supreme position and swearing to work for their happiness.³ The nationalist vision espoused by Sun Yat-sen and his successors was, however, to blend these five groups into a single *minzu*, which was called *zhonghua minzu*—the Chinese nation. The adoption of the term *minzu* to refer to two different categories faithfully reflected the built-in structural tension of the Republic. Not surprisingly, as the Nationalists overthrew the Beijing-based Republican government in 1928 to build a national state centring on the Han, they attempted to resolve the tension by changing the designation of the five national groups from *minzu* to *zongzu* (lineages). In this schema, *minzu* was reserved for the Chinese nation, while *zongzu* was used to designate the five groups as lineages descending from the same ancestors as the Han—the Yan and Huang emperors—with a hope to bind them into a single large Chinese nation-cum-family.⁴ Such a genealogical gerrymandering to assimilate non-Han peoples into the Han was prompted by a national crisis in the 1930s, when the Japanese invaded China and supported non-Han nationalist 'dissent' by restoring their own sense of 'descent.'

The conflict between the Chinese Nationalists and the four non-Han groups was masterfully exploited by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was in need of any support it could muster to fight the Nationalists who were bent on annihilating them in the 1930s. The CCP adopted a different concept for the non-Han peoples, calling them '*shaoshu minzu*'—in its original Western sense of 'national minorities' whose anti-imperialist national self-determination was deemed legitimate. Initially, the CCP couched the 'nationality question' in class terms, seeing national minorities as exploited and oppressed by the Chinese Nationalist regime, and their struggle for liberation a just cause. Pursued by the Nationalist Army on their Long March (1934–35) to safe haven, the Red Army passed through the Yi, Tibetan, and Muslim territories, and found in the non-Han peoples natural allies. Presenting themselves as 'good Han' (*hao hanren*), the Communists forged alliances with political leaders of the non-Han groups, pledging to help fight against their 'bad Han' (*huai hanren*) common enemies, and support their demand for autonomy.⁵ This 'united front' strategy proved to be effective in winning them over to the CCP and the new state it later built—the PRC. The Chinese Nationalists, in their zealotry to assimilate non-Han peoples, inadvertently pushed minorities into the embrace of their enemies, resulting in their own demise in 1949.

Conceptual Contradictions

However, the communist class-nation principle had a built-in contradiction. The communist support for national minorities and their nationalist aspirations was predicated on the existence of exploitation and oppression by ‘the enemy.’ It operated not in binary opposition, but in a triadic relation, with the Communists and the minorities forging an alliance against their common enemy—the Nationalists. But the victory in defeating the enemy and the termination of exploitation and oppression rendered any continued nationalist demand on the part of minorities illegitimate, for not only had they lost their basis for grievance, but any nationalist demand was performed an indictment against their former ally, the CCP, casting it among the ranks of the ‘bad Han.’ Thus, the recognition of *shaoshu minzu* after the founding of the PRC was not so much a concession to minority nationalism as it was the adoption of a different logic pertaining to state-building.

The Qing Empire, ruled by the Manchu from 1644 to 1912, and the two Chinese republics built by the Chinese after 1912, were all composite states divided into two large components: China proper and Inner Asia. They were also conquest states, the Manchu conquering Inner Asians and the Chinese, and in turn the Chinese conquering the Inner Asians who had their separate territories and whose loyalty to the Chinese regime had little historical precedent. Ruling Inner Asians and their territories required conquests, which were euphemistically referred to as ‘liberations’ (*jiefang*). The friendship and alliances forged earlier during the Long March certainly helped make the liberation a relatively easy process, but the new government faced the task of both knowing the peoples it had incorporated into the new state and ruling them through appropriate representations.

The PRC thus launched a nationality identification (*minzu shibie*) project in the 1950s, which resulted in the recognition of 55 *shaoshu minzu* groups. The project followed both the Chinese genealogical principle and the Stalinist definition of nationality, which is based on four criteria: common territory, common economy, common language, and common culture. Each identified and approved group was granted territorial autonomy at various administrative levels depending on the size of their population and that of the territory they occupied. *Shaoshu minzu* now acquired a different connotation than the previous understanding as ‘national minorities;’ they were instead understood as ‘minority nationalities,’ whose identity was to be set against the ‘majority nationality,’ the Han, and were to enjoy rights only to territorial autonomy but not to secession. As a communist state, the PRC represented itself as a radical rupture from the previous regimes, thus it did not define itself as a nation-state, but as a unitary multinationality state, comprising ‘the Chinese people of all nationalities’ (*zhongguo gezu renmin*).

The autonomy granted to minority nationalities was, thus, not national autonomy as originally demanded by minorities. Nor were minorities recognised purely for their own sake. Rather, the classification was an act of statecraft to recast minorities in a way that was legible for the state to solve the ‘nationality question,’ i.e. to achieve the twin purposes of both winning their loyalty to the regime and integrating them into ‘the Chinese people.’ The territorial autonomy granted to each minority nationality was defined as ‘regional national autonomy’ (*minzu quyū zìzhì*) rather than ‘national autonomy’ (*minzu zìzhì*). The term *quyū* has two sets of connotations: first, as ‘local,’

i.e. a lower administrative level, and second as a region, whose *raison d'être* was to accommodate other nationalities, especially the Han, in the autonomous area which is named after a specific minority nationality. The combination of the regional and nationality principles then effectively rendered an autonomous *quyu* a local-level multinationality administrative area. Moreover, a minority nationality would not be granted autonomy until there was a significant Han Chinese presence in the designated autonomous area, and autonomous leadership was firmly in the hands of the CCP.

Governance Innovations

One key area of innovation by the CCP in governing autonomy was the creation and training of minority cadres; they were to replace the traditional leaders who were removed after they had delivered their people to the PRC through the war-time Second United Front (see also De Giorgi's essay in the present volume). They were deemed politically suspect because they were elites, hence belonging to the category of 'enemy', whose rule must be overthrown. Minority cadres, recruited from lower classes and owing their political life to the CCP, were to serve the twin roles of both Party-state agents ruling their own respective nationality, and members of their nationality providing representation to the Party-state. To the extent that the degree of autonomy is measured by the number of minority cadres proportionate to the percentage of their nationality *vis-à-vis* other groups in their designated autonomous *quyu*, these cadres embody a conflict of interest. However, although the CCP is supposed to be transcendental and above ethnicity, the communist ideological authenticity is to be more faithfully maintained by Han cadres in an autonomous *quyu*, because the CCP subscribes to social evolutionism, which treats the Han as more 'advanced' than the minorities. Thus, with the exception of Ulanhu, a Mongol who served as the Party secretary of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region from 1947 to 1966, all Party secretaries in all the five provincial-level autonomous regions have been Han. In most cases, the Party secretaries also served as chairmen of the local People's Congresses, which represent the 'state,' leaving only the chairmanship of the people's government to a member of the nationality exercising autonomy. In the Chinese political hierarchy, the government chairmanship is the third position, and it has the duty to implement Party policy and state laws—both the prerogative of the Han.

The Party and state control of minority autonomy is supplemented by the presence of the Han population in an autonomous area. In addition to the principle of what may be called 'joint autonomy' (*gongzhi*), i.e. the combination of regional and nationality principles, the Han are also assigned the task of 'uplifting' minorities to the level of the Han. Culturally, this means assimilation as minority languages are deemed an obstacle to progress. Economically, it means Han 'replacing' minorities in the development of the autonomous area's economy. The Chinese development model of 'partner assistance' (*duikou zhiyuan*) since the launch of the Great Western Development (*xibu dakaifa*) policy starting in 2000, whereby numerous coastal provinces and municipal cities are to provide 'aid' to corresponding counties and departments in Tibet and Xinjiang only exacerbates the economic conflict in the frontiers. In the face of massive and rapid economic development initiated and carried out by forces from outside of the autonomous regions, minorities have begun to shy away from the public domain, and

have moved into their private domain—that is, seeking refuge in religions or traditions. There they hope to run their ‘internal affairs’ (*neibu shiwu*), rights actually prescribed by the Law on Regional National Autonomy passed in 1984, but never fully implemented.

Fears of Disintegration

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the partial Chinese attribution of its cause to nationality conflict, have led to open calls from both within the CCP and Chinese academia not only to abolish the regional national autonomy system, but also to change the *minzu* category.⁶ In their diagnosis, the system of autonomy has not led to minority integration in China; instead, minorities are alleged to have treated the autonomy under their ethnonym as their patrimony, and regarded the Han as alien invaders. Minority separatism is said to have been undergirded by the very category of *minzu*. From this perspective, the sin of the concept of *minzu* for minorities is that it competes with *zhonghua minzu*, the Chinese nation. The proposed solution to this apparent contradiction is to change minority as a *minzu* to minority as a ‘*zuqun*’, the latter being a direct translation of the English term ‘ethnic group.’ In their prognosis, *minzu*, with its allegedly misleading overtone of territorial autonomy, has led minorities to distance themselves from the Han and China, while the concept of *zuqun* is both relational and cultural, but not territorial, and the adoption of such a conceptual category would be conducive to interethnic intimacy, and eventually a consolidation of the Chinese nation.

What this amounts to is an attempt not only to ‘depoliticise’ *minzu* by replacing it with *zuqun*, but also to ‘securitise’ it in order to mitigate the minority tendency for splittism, terrorism, and extremism—the three crimes allegedly prevalent in minority regions.⁷ Such calls, as proposed in the so-called Second Generation Nationality Policy to replace the current nationality policy, effectively rendered the current system as ‘abnormal.’⁸ However, such a desire to make China a ‘normal’ country would mean scrapping the Regional National Autonomy System, which the CCP has defined as one of the three basic political systems of China, along with the system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CCP, and the system of community-level self-governance.

Although the CCP seems to have rejected such calls and stayed the course, fundamental changes have already taken place at multiple levels. For one thing, Xinjiang and Tibet are already ‘states of exception.’ Not that minorities there have more rights to enjoy, but quite the opposite, as the two autonomous regions are now under tight security control (see also Yi Xiaocuo’s essay in the present volume). Some of the measures adopted, such as the outright banning of minority languages in schools in Xinjiang, not only as a medium of education, but as a language in its own right, clearly violate the Chinese Constitution, which stipulates that ‘all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their own folkways and customs’ (Article 5). For another, *zuqun* is now deemed a scientific concept in Chinese ethnology or anthropology, which has shunned the term *minzu* as too political. And the English phrase ‘ethnic group’ has long been used to translate *minzu* in official documents, even though the official English translations of the Constitution and the Law on Regional National Autonomy still keep ‘nationality.’

The academic and popular ‘rectification of names’ (*zhengming*) by using *zuqun* and ‘ethnic group’ instead of *minzu* or ‘nationality’ is a *déjà vu* that reminds us of the Chinese Nationalist rendition of *minzu* to *zongzu* or lineages of the Chinese nation in the 1930s and 1940s. Although *zuqun* or ethnic group does not entail genealogism as in *zongzu*, it is made subordinate to *minzu*, which is now reserved for the larger Chinese nation—*zhonghua minzu*. However, both *zuqun* and *zhonghua minzu* are unconstitutional concepts.

On the Steppes of the Mongol Empire

This does not mean that these challenges should be dismissed. For they have been framed as a warning to the CCP that unless it gives up on the current nationality policy and the term *minzu* for minorities, there is a risk of demise for both the Chinese state and the Party. The argument is seductive as it is conceptualised academically: minority nationalities are said to have been invented out of nothing, a result of blindly following the Soviet model. Invented or socially constructed ‘nationalities’ are deemed as being creatures akin to Frankenstein’s monster, who have developed desires for independence and, when denied, begin to attack their very inventor: the CCP and the Chinese state.

Such a discourse mirrors the postcolonial criticism that often denounces Europe’s arbitrary demarcation of ethnic boundaries in its colonies for having caused interethnic violence and even genocide. The opponents of this view have argued, however, that it is not the implementation of the current nationality policy or the state’s Law on Regional National Autonomy that has led to minority splittism, but rather the lack of a good faith to put it into practice.⁹ They warn the CCP not to forget the solemn oaths it made to minority leaders when the Party was in dire need and urge the Party to keep its promise not to discriminate against minorities. Reversing the policy would be tantamount to returning to the position of the Nationalists, against which the Communists and minorities fought in alliance.

The notion of *zhonghua minzu* has come to centre stage in China’s imagination of its identity in recent years. The current Party leadership has set the goal of achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as one element of the China Dream. This version of *zhonghua minzu* is different from the Chinese Nationalist rendition, the purpose of which was to assimilate non-Han into the Han, giving no place to their culture and history in the Chinese nation. Instead, in this iteration the impetus comes from the new ambition of Chinese leadership for global recognition of China’s big power status. This dream has compelled China to present itself not as an inward-looking Han nationalist state, but as a big power in the image of the Mongol empire, as evidenced by China’s Belt and Road Initiative. This has meant broadening the scope of China to embrace its former conquerors, such as Chinggis Khan and Kublai Khan, as Chinese, and even as national heroes. The new notion of *zhonghua minzu* actually challenges the Han historical and cultural sensibility and pride, for the Chinese tradition of resistance to Inner Asian conquests is now redefined as petty isolationism. The question now is whether the Chinese celebration of the Inner Asian ‘minority’ contribution to China’s greatness and glory as embodied in the new *zhonghua minzu* will do justice to and improve the fate of its Inner Asian minority citizens. The situation in the frontiers does not, however, give any room for optimism, at least for the foreseeable future.

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