

**“CONTINUITY, ADAPTATION, AND CHALLENGE”:
THE CHINESE COMMUNIST IDEOLOGY AND POLICY
ON MINZU (1922-2013)**

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I. Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist Discourses on the National Question

The Chinese word *minzu* (民族) can mean nation, nationality, and minority group, and in this sense the entire Chinese people, or all the PRC (People’s Republic of China, proclaimed in 1949) citizens residing within the territory of the country belong to the Chinese nation, or the *zhonghua minzu* collectively, regardless of ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the *zhonghua minzu*, the ethnic Han people are called *Han minzu*. The Chinese definition of *minzu* in the early 1950s departs from classical Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist discourses on this issue, and it is of immense importance for us to trace the original meaning of nation and its adaptations in revolutionary practices in the Soviet Union and China.

Marxism is primarily an ideology of revolution based on the assumption about unequivocal irrevocable class struggle and towards a classless communist society, and nation was at the core of Marxist theory. For Marxism, “The nation was explained as a historically evolved phenomenon that comes into existence only with the demise of feudalism and the rise of capitalism”.¹ Marxism insists that nation as a historical phenomenon occurred only after the new, capitalist economic relations were entrenched, and

¹ Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 7.

nationalism, as part of superstructure, was nothing but a device for the bourgeoisie to assert its class interests. The ambiguity and insufficiency of the Marxist view of nation lies also in its perception of the nation being an economic unit, a congregate of all people living within a State, or sometimes, an ethnic-national group based on shared linguistic and cultural traits. It sees nationalism as both progressive and reactionary, depending on concrete historical stages and situations. Yet in the final analysis, Communism is above nationalism as an ecumenical vision of human future.

While classical Marxism prioritized class consciousness and class struggle over nation and nationalism, Lenin in his revolutionary practice of building a Soviet State coopted national forces and advocated national self-determination as the main weapons of his struggle. Self-determination was instrumental for Russian revolutionaries in 1903, because it was a means to build an alliance among the forces that were willing and able to bring down the Tsarist empire.² World War I became a catalyst in Lenin's mind while he developed growing interest in nationalism. As an important strategy to weaken colonialism, Lenin unequivocally called for national self-determination and insisted that nations had a right to political secession. The Chinese nationalist Party, or Guomindang (GMD), dropped the term *minzu zijue*, or national determination as early as 1931. In contrast, the Soviet constitution of 1936 "recognizes the right of self-determination of all peoples in the Soviet Union, including the right of secession".³ Although the Chinese Communist Party later denied the Chinese nationalities' right to pursue secession as a means to understand "national self-determination", it inherited the Leninist advocacy of "guaranteeing the members of each nation to use their own language and to an education in that language".⁴ This practice of cultural rights but not separation was called by Chinese Communists *zizhi*, or 'autonomy', not *zijue*, or 'self-determination', which has the connotation of pursuing independence.

As Anthony Smith suggests, a quintessential Western concept of nation is "predominantly territorial", and nations are compact impermeable [territorial] units whose citizens share a homogeneous culture in states of their own,⁵ that is, economic cohesion, and a common psychological make-up, and "a nation constitutes the combination of all these characteristics taken together". For Stalin, a nation should be a stable community

² Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *The Great Challenge: Nationalities and the Bolshevik State, 1917-1930*, translated by Nancy Festinger (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1992), 34.

³ Paul R. Brass, "Language and National Identity in the Soviet Union and India", *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities*, ed. by Alexander J. Motyl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 99-128, see 113.

⁴ Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory*, 7.

⁵ Anthony Smith, "Ethnic Identity and Territorial Nationalism in Comparative Perspective", *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities*, 45-65, see 46.

of people with common language, common territory, common economic life, that is economic cohesion, and a common psychological make-up, and “a nation constitutes the combination of all these characteristics taken together”. Stalin also distinguished nation from tribe, which was merely an ethnographical category, and he also denied the nationhood of the people living under ancient empires because these human groups were not stable and cohesive. As with classical Marxism, Stalin defines nation as a historical phenomenon “belonging to a definitive epoch [...] of rising capitalism”.⁶

II. Construction of the Chinese Communist Ideology of Nationality

The Chinese Communist view of the national question was shaped by three forces. The first was the deeply-ingrained Confucian cult of Great Unity (*da yi tong*), the traditional perception of China being the center of civilization, and the Chinese (Han) culture being inclusive and paternalist to the neighboring inferior cultures. As the eminent twentieth century Chinese philosopher Feng Youlan (1895-1990) points out, “Confucius advocated political and cultural unifications”.⁷ This dimension was hidden in the CCP’s early years of ideological formation due to the heavy influence of the Comintern and the instrumental needs of its own struggle, yet it became increasingly visible in the late 1940s, when the Communists became more like constructors of a new State rather than the destroyers of the old one. The second influence came from the anxiety about modern China’s loss of vigor and a quest for national wealth and power. In this process of searching for a strong Chinese State to confront imperialism and to revive the historical greatness of China, the Communists had a huge common ground with the Nationalists, and both parties inherited the inclusive, ethnic neutral concept of *zhonghua minzu*, proposed by Liang Qichao, and the transcendental value of the term *zhonghua*, which led the Communists to name their State *Zhonghua renmin gonghe guo*, or the People’s Republic of China. The eminent anthropologist in the PRC, Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005) defines *zhonghua minzu* as “a whole composed of all nationalities and jointly created by them through exchanges, merging, (re)separation, mutual reliance and mutual promotion”.⁸ The third dimension of the Chinese Communist national ideology was the outcome of the Soviet influence on its ideology and practices,

⁶ Joseph V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (New York: Red Star Publishers, 2015 [first edition, Natsional’nye vopros is Sotsial-Demokratii, 1913]), 7, 9, 14.

⁷ Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhaxue shi xinbian* [A New History of Chinese Philosophy] (Beijing: remin chubanshe, 1964), 95.

⁸ Fei Xiaotong, *Fei Xiaotong minzu yanjiu wenji* [Collection of Essays of Fei Xiaotong on the Nationality Question] (Beijing: minzu chubanshe, 1988), 191.

such as identification and classification of nationalities, implementation of the citizens' nationality identity registration, favorable treatment of minority nationalities, and the training of minority cadres.⁹ However, the national policy pronouncements of the CCP under the guidance of the Comintern should not be mistaken to be the CCP's sole and unchangeable dogmas.

Founded in 1921, the CCP, as a branch of the Comintern, began to pay attention to the 'national question' in 1922, which was represented by the issue of Mongolia. Part of the collapsed Qing empire, Outer Mongolia showed tendency of seeking independence from the young Republican China, proclaimed in 1912. The CCP supported, not surprisingly, the Comintern's stance of backing all Chinese nationalities' 'liberation' from the Republic, for the concept of secessionist self-determination also dominated the CCP ideology and policy at the time. In an article to defend the Communist stance on the national question published in 1925, the author denounced the bourgeois nationalism as self-contradictory for it pursued self-emancipation yet denied the liberation of the nations that were subjugated by it. Instead, the article extolled the proletarian nationalism which advocated national self-determination of all nations and more importantly, the liberation of nations that were weaker and subjugated by the stronger nation to which the proletarian revolutionaries themselves belonged. The author named this "egalitarian nationalism", and proclaimed that the Mongols' right of self-determination to decide whether they wanted to stay in China should be respected.¹⁰ The CCP was defeated in 1927 by a coup staged by the Nationalist military leader Chiang Kai-shek, and engaged in its mountain-based armed struggle and the Long March (1934-1935), ending up in a poor arid region of northwestern China. During the westward Long March, the CCP Red Army engaged Tibetans and other non-Han people in the southwest, Miao, Yao, Yi, and Qiang, and the relationship was not always friendly and trustful. The Red Army attempted to engage "upper class representatives" of the non-Han peoples, showed compassion to their lower-class people based on the class theory, and began to advocate an egalitarian anti-"great Han Chauvinism" (*da hanzu zhuyi*) ideology among revolutionaries who were overwhelmingly Han nationals.¹¹

Facing the threat of the encroaching Japanese imperial army, the CCP enhanced its ideological and rhetorical thrust of constructing a united and self-defensive *zhonghua*

⁹ Ma Rong, "Lijie minzu guanxi de xin silu – shaoshu zuqun de 'qizhengzhihua'" (Depoliticization: A New Approach to Chinese Ethnic Relations), *Beijing daxue xuebao*, 6 (2004): 122-133.

¹⁰ "Xianweijing xia zhi xingshipai" [The Wakened Lion Faction under Microscope] *Makesi zhuyi zai zhongguo zaoqi chuanbo shiliao changbian, 1917-1927* [Historical Source Materials Concerning the Early Spread of Marxism in China], ed. by Lu Yanqin, vol. 3 (Wuhan: Changjiang chubanshe, 2016), 217.

¹¹ Xiaoyuan Liu, *Recast All Under Heaven: Revolution, War, Diplomacy, and Frontier China in the 20th Century* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Group, 2010), 118.

minzu led by itself and emphasized that all nationalities should be incorporated in the common cause of fighting the Japanese. During the CCP’s Yan’an years from 1936 to 1945, the Yan’an Institute of Nationalities (*Yan’an minzu xueyuan*) engaged in empirical studies of the conditions of the Hui and Mongol peoples in northwestern China, and it is said to have used “Marxist standpoint, viewpoint, and methodology to analyze and study the problem of minority nationalities”, according to Lin Yaohua (1910-2000), a Harvard-trained eminent Chinese anthropologist.¹²

After the end of World War II, the CCP was on full swing as a political party with its own military force of 900,000 troops. Towards the end of the Civil War (1947-49) years, the CCP anticipated its own the building of the new socialist State, and the leadership began to abandon the old slogan of national self-determination, which could imply the split of new China. Here, the traditional Confucian political concept of ‘great unity’ was implicitly revived, and the instrumental need for territorial integrity and development of resources in the vast non-Han areas also required the CCP to espouse the Leninist slogan of self-determination. Leninist ‘united front’ tactic lent both the GMD and the CCP theoretical justification for incorporating non-Han minority groups and especially their elites.¹³ Chinese scholars were not hesitant to admit the Chinese changing attitude towards national self-determination based on purely pragmatic political consideration:

In October 1949, the New China has been established. To achieve the great cause of unification by thwarting imperialists and their followers’ conspiracy of splitting China and undermining national solidarity, we should no longer emphasize minority nationalities’ right of self-determination. Instead, we should highlight the friendship, cooperation, mutual aid, and unity.¹⁴

The Chinese Communist desire for acquiring natural resources in the regions inhabited by minority nationalities was stated explicitly by Mao Zedong in 1956: “Underground in the minority areas there are buried many valuable deposits which are needed for our socialist construction”.¹⁵ Against this background, the PRC discourse on nationality emphasized ‘intermingling’ (*ronghe*). One 1958 work document of Guilin Municipal People’s Committee shows how the discourse had trickled down to the grass-

¹² Lin Yaohua, “New China’s Ethnology: Research and Prospects”, *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, 21, 1 (1988): 34-55, see 35.

¹³ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and Its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 82.

¹⁴ Lang Weiwei, *Deng Xiaoping yu xinan shaoshu minzu* [Deng Xiaoping and Southwestern Minority Nationalities] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2004), 37.

¹⁵ Mao Zedong, “On the Ten Relationships”, *Government and Politics in Revolutionary China Selected Documents, 1949-1979*, ed. by Harold Hinton (Washington: Scholarly Resources INC, 1982), 37.

roots level of the State apparatus: “A *minzu*’s development and formation itself is a blending process of the people under certain conditions. Without this process, modern *minzus* could not be formed and developed”.¹⁶ In the definition of the Communist Chinese *Dictionary of New Nouns*, the entry “Right of National Self-determination” (*minzu zijue quan*) was conceptualized as a basic right of the oppressed nations and the peoples of colonies and semi-colonies to strive for. It is also a “Marxist principle of solving the national question”, which emphasizes that “national self-determination cannot be achieved in capitalist society”.¹⁷ This definition was positive on “national self-determination”, but the use of the concept was limited to the international anti-(Western) imperialist/colonialist struggle, not in domestic nationality politics of China.

If the PRC government envisioned a cohesive nation called *zhonghua minzu* under the unified governance of the Socialist State, then recognizing and naming multiple non-Han peoples as official nationalities seemed to be superfluous and potentially splitting. The Nationalist regime, which shared the Communist vision of a *zhonghua minzu*, rejected further recognition beyond the four officially recognized large non-Han groups. The Nationalists maintained that southern non-Han groups were historically branches of the Han, and they pursued a policy of assimilation in the southern non-Han areas. In some regions, speaking non-Han native languages was forbidden by the GMD.¹⁸ The CCP, however, pursued a policy of recognition and used the rhetoric of equality to justify its different policy. For the CCP, failure to recognize the existing distinctiveness of non-Han peoples was not respectful to their own culture, and would lead them to hide identity and feel inferior about their difference. In the CCP’s design, the first National Congress, to be convened in 1954, was intended as a show of national solidarity, manifest in the participation of Han as well as multiple non-Han groups. The CCP in fact adopted the expression “multiple nationalities in China” (*zhonghua zhu minzu*) to differentiate themselves from the Nationalists who used “the Chinese nation” as a singular. The terminology “multiple nationalities in China” in plural as appeared in the dictionaries of neologisms published in the early PRC years seemed to emphasize New China’s nature as a cultural congregate. Inconceivably, the singular *zhonghua minzu* did not appear in any early PRC dictionaries that I examined.

¹⁶ Guilin shi renmin weiyuanhui, “Guanyu minzu gongzuo jihua zongjie, huibao, jianbao, diaochao cailiao” [Summaries, Bulletins, Investigation Reports Concerning Nationality Work], file number 68, catalogue number 1, Guilin Municipal Archives.

¹⁷ Chunming chubanshe, *Xin mingci cidian* [Dictionary of New Nouns] (Shanghai: Chunming chubanshe, 1955), 7028.

¹⁸ Mette Halsknov Hansen, *Lessons of Being Chinese: Minority Education and Ethnic Identity in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Seattle Press, 1999), 49.

III. How the Chinese Communists Departed from the Soviet Model in Nationality Question

It is more pertinent to rethink the PRC's nationality policy in a Third World historical context. And the practice in China after 1949 should not be considered merely a cloning of the Soviet model, but had global relevance, for it faced the same problem of all multicultural Third World countries which needed to accomplish State-building, nation-building, and rightful placement of its diverse peoples in a unified political framework. For instance, the postcolonial Indian government undertook the same task as China did in the 1950s of recognizing the minority groups within its territorial boundary, classifying them as 'tribes' and 'backward classes', and granting favorable treatments. This process accelerated in the second half of the nineteenth century, and in 2006, there was still ethnological survey conducted in India by State ethnologists, and there have always been yearnings from marginalized groups to be officially recognized by the government as a 'tribe', so that the minority group could expect the benefits of affirmative action and local autonomy. The anthropologists in India also had tensions with the bureaucracy about the academic criteria vs political consideration when deciding whether one minority group should be qualified to become a 'tribe'.¹⁹

The PRC was influenced by the Soviet ideology and policy but did not always follow the Soviet path. In the early 1950s, the Chinese Communist leaders and the anthropologists who were trained in the West and adopted a “Marxist” standpoint, such as Fei Xiaotong and Lin Yaohua, collaborated to modify the Soviet theory of resolving the national question. By using the terms *zhonghua* and *zhonghua minzu*, the CCP inherited the Chinese quest for building a multi-nationality and inclusive Chinese nation as a cultural entity and the foundation of the modern Chinese State, as discussed above. It also revived the Confucian value of 'family/household' (*jia*) and imagined *zhonghua minzu* as a big family and all nationalities as brothers (*xiongdì minzu*) that could prosper in an egalitarian and common cultural climate. The familial metaphor, which was not unique to China, enacted by the CCP and its internalization rendered *zhonghua minzu* less coercive in the eyes of non-Han peoples. It is also notable that if the imagery of the 'Mother Russia' denotes a home for the Russians, yet *zhonghua* was imagined as a home

¹⁹ Townsend Middleton, *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). For the rise of Hindu nationalism and the tension among the ethnic groups in India, see Richard G. Fox, “Hindu Nationalism in the Making, or Rise of the Hindian”, *Nationalist Ideologies and the Production of National Cultures*, ed. by Richard G. Fox (Washington: American Association of Anthropology, 1989), 63-80. For power-sharing and pluralism as a common experience in modernizing multi-ethnic societies from Yugoslavia to Czechoslovakia, see Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), 58-60.

to not just for the Han but for all peoples living in China.²⁰ The Chinese metaphor of *jia* also helped internalize the value of an inseparable family bond in which members depend on each other, unwilling to assert full independence. In traditional Chinese values, the breaking-up of a big family was never desirable, and the harmony among family members was given high priority.

When tackling the issue of southwest minority nationalities in 1950, Deng Xiaoping, the supreme CCP in the southwest region, admitted that

The People's Republic of China is a multi-national country and only by ending this national estrangement and enlisting the concerted efforts of the various nationalities can we form a truly great, happy family of the Chinese nation.²¹

In the Soviet Union, *narod* was used to refer to the integrated 'Soviet people', which was different from ethnic (Russian) nation (*natsiia*).²² If the *zhonghua minzu* was the Chinese equivalent to the Soviet political construction of *narod*, then the former was more entrenched, for, as we discussed above, the *zhonghua minzu* concept was invented not by the Chinese Communists but by late Qing nationalist intellectuals and appropriated by the PRC. During the process of implementing the nationality policy in the 1950s, the CCP also appealed to human emotion when cautioned its Han cadres against being "callous to the pain that minority nationalities suffered in the past".²³

The PRC definition of the term equivocal *minzu* eschewed the Soviet connotation of its 'nationality' (*natsional'nost'*) which legitimized a nation's search for its State, as we discussed above, although *minzu* was a "generic term with a complex and relatively recent history in China that has been translated into English as 'nation', 'nationality', 'ethnicity', or 'people'".²⁴ For the purpose of our analysis here, only 'nation' and 'nation-

²⁰ For other culture's familial metaphors, see Walker Conner, "Beyond Reason: The Nature of the Ethnonational Bond", *Ethnicity*, ed. by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 69-75, see 74.

²¹ Deng Xiaoping, "Guanyu xinan shaoshu minzu wenti" [On the Question of Southwest Minority Nationalities], available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66655/4492596.html>, last accessed on 2 May 2019. Official English translation is available at http://cpcchina.chinadaily.com.cn/2010-10/13/content_13918125.html.

²² M. Crawford Young, "National and Colonial Questions and Marxism", *History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR*, ed. by Alexander J. Motyl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 67-98, see 87.

²³ Zhonggong zhongyang tongzhanbu [CCP Department of United Front], "Guanyu guoqu jinnian dang zai shaoshu minzu zhong jinxing gongzuo de zhuyao jingyan zongjie" [Summary of the Key Experiences in the Past Several Years Concerning the Party's Work Among Minority Nationalities], available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66659/4492943.html>, last accessed on 2 May 2019.

²⁴ Dru Gladney, *Ethnic Identity in China: The Making of a Minority Nationality in China* (Fort Worth: Hartcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), 14.

ality’ are pertinent. The PRC discourse also rejected the possibility of building China into a Soviet-style federation. According to the reminiscence of Fei Xiaotong, a State leader told him in 1949 that “it is Chairman Mao’s decision that we will not follow the suit of the Soviet Union to implement a federal system”.²⁵

Thus, the Chinese *minzu* acquired two layers of meaning: the *zhonghua minzu* is collective regardless of ethnic origins, meaning all Chinese citizens living within the boundary of the PRC territory, and it can also extend as a pan-cultural group to cover overseas Chinese who share the language and culture. Pamela K. Crossley aptly points out that the Russian language and the Soviet discourse presents a far more sophisticated set of words to precisely describe ‘people’, ‘nation’, and ‘nationality’, while the Chinese language “make do with *minzu*” in almost all these instances.²⁶ It is notable that modern (physical) anthropology arose in Russia as a full-fledged academic discipline as early as the last two decades of the nineteenth century to examine the different ‘tribes’ in Tsarist Russia, Jews in particular, and the sophisticated social knowledge of Stalin can be better understood in this context.²⁷

The second layer of *minzu* was at a micro level, meaning each individual internal component of the *zhonghua minzu*. The larger *zhonghua minzu* was the political entity that is qualified to pursue independence from the imperialist dominance, and this nation-State now assumes the form of the PRC. Yet, the *minzus* at the micro level are all denied, unlike in the Soviet Union, the right to separate from the PRC, for this *minzu*, nationality, is in fact a ‘subnation’ rather than a full-fledged nation by itself. For instance, the Chinese nation, or *zhonghua minzu* is sanctioned to pursue its statehood and global prominence, but that is not for the Tibetan nationality, or *zang minzu*, for the latter is a subnational ‘nationality’. Here I borrowed the word ‘subnation’ from a study of Western European nationalism, and argue that nation/subnation can be used as an effective analytical framework to approach the Chinese national question.²⁸ By adopting the unified term and definition of *minzu*, the minority groups that had longer history of distinct culture, religion, or State apparatus and those who were small, loosely organized, or newly renamed and promoted such as the Hezhe and the Zhuang, were treat-

²⁵ Fei Xiaotong, *Fei Xiaotong minzu yanjiu wenji*, 259.

²⁶ Pamela Kyle Crossley, “Thinking about Ethnicity in Early Modern China”, *Late Imperial China*, 11, 1 (1990): 1-35, see 12.

²⁷ For the rise and research topics of Russian anthropology, see Eugene M. Avrutin, “Racial Categories and the Politics of (Jewish) Difference in Late Imperial Russia”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 8, 1 (2007): 13-40.

²⁸ See William Petersen, “On the Subnations of Western Europe”, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, ed. by Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 117-208, see 181-182.

ed in the same way, and the place that a potential (minority) nation inhabit were not regarded as historical ‘territory’ in political sense, but only places where a certain *minzu* have relatively concentrated inhabitation (*juju*).²⁹ In 1996, Fei Xiaotong reaffirmed that the concept “*minzu jujuqu*” (an area where a certain nationality has concentrated its dwelling) as a Chinese creation helped China to deemphasize the political implication of (minorities’) territory and thus enhanced China’s internal integration and national unity.³⁰ When the Chinese authors discussed ‘national self-determination’, the first layer, namely, the Chinese nation/*zhonghua minzu* was considered eligible and justifiable to pursue self-determination as opposed to imperialist domination, but the second-layer nationality would be discouraged to pursue national self-determination after 1949. The *zhonghua minzu* was thus constructed as a pre-eminent “terminal community”.³¹

The PRC government thus redefined ‘*minzu*/nationality’. It admits that the Chinese use of the word *minzu* in the 1950s was indeed loose and broad, and Chinese nationalities have been intermingled with one another for centuries and the forms of residence demonstrate the characteristic of “big ethnic co-residing, small concentration (of one single nationality)” (*da zaju, xiao juju*). The Chinese *minzu*, according to the theory of the PRC government, was not predicated on the rise of capitalism but was a political concept incorporating the communities of people at various stages of social development. In 1953, Mao Zedong pointed out that it was politically inappropriate to distinguish nationality from clan (*buzu*) or tribe (*buluo*) though it was academically acceptable.³² This principle of avoiding a developmental hierarchy departed from the Soviet (also Indian) practice of using ‘tribe’ (*narodnost*) to formally describe and politically determine the status of certain ‘backward’ communities of people.³³ Contemporary Chinese ethnologists continued to confirm that the suffix ‘*zu*’ implies, first and foremost, a “recognized political identity”, not merely “a group of people”.³⁴

²⁹ For the importance of territory in defining a nation-State, see Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim, “In Search of a Theory of National Identity”, *China’s Quest for National Identity*, ed. by Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1-31, see 27.

³⁰ Fei Xiaotong, “Jianshu wo de minzu yanjiu he sikao” [A Brief Review of My Nationality Studies and Thinking], *Minzu shehui xue yanjiu tongxun* [Sociology of Ethnicity], 6 (1996): 2-10, see 5.

³¹ For the concept of terminal community, see J. Milton Yinger, “Intersecting Strands in the Theorisation of Race and Ethnic Relations”, *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*, ed. by John Rex and David Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 20-41, see 40.

³² Shi Lianzhu, *Minzu shibie yu minzu yanjiu wenji* [Essays on Nationality Identification and Nationality Studies] (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 2009), 10.

³³ M. Crawford Young, “National and Colonial Questions and Marxism”, 86.

³⁴ Shi Maoming, *Kuaguo Miaozu yanjiu: minzu yu guojia de bianjie* [A Study of Hmong, a Cross-Border Ethnic Group: Boundary between Nation and State] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2004), 315.

The PRC showed resilience when applying Stalin’s classic “four commons” to suit the Chinese reality. The policymakers and scholars realized that Stalin based his theory on the study of the nations “after the development of European modern capitalism”, while *minzu* in China is defined as a historically formed human community, and in reality none of the Chinese *minzuz* contains all the four features defined by Stalin.³⁵ Fei Xiaotong subtly suggests the lack of relevance of the Stalinist theory to China when he remarked that the Stalinist theory was a “scientific summary of the Western nation formed in the period when Capitalism was on the rise”.³⁶ He asserts that Chinese nationalities were in the pre-capitalist stage and thus did not possess the four traits of modern nations, or only showed some “sprouts” (*mengya*). Chinese nationalities are fluid and spread very widely, Fei says, and it is very difficult to say that a certain nationality has fixed territory or common economic life among its own members. Fei seems to be most vocal about the importance of “common psychological make-up” in the Stalinist scheme, and for him, this means a subjective feeling among the group members about their sameness. However, in *Marxism and the National Question*, Stalin added an alternative way to explicate “common psychological make-up”, which he also called “national character”. This “psychological make-up manifest in a common culture” for Stalin was an objective existence, but for Fei, the determinant became more like subjective feeling. The context of Fei’s discussion about the adaptation of the Stalinist criteria to China was the PRC’s State project of identifying and classifying Chinese minority nationalities, beginning in 1954, and the Stalinist theory served as theoretical guidance of the identifying work, but in practice, the Chinese government and anthropologists “turned to historical and linguistic methods” to determine the status of a nationality.³⁷ Lin Yaohua relied on the overlapped language, identical cultural practice, social organization, and economic life to make proposal about identifying the Zhuang nationality living in southern Yunnan Province, rather than its most concentrated western Guangxi.³⁸

The PRC discourse on *minzu* emphasizes each nationality’s equal historical process of identity formation and their gradual mutual blending. One 1958 work document of Guilin Municipal People’s Committee shows how the discourse had trickled down to the grassroots level of the State apparatus:

³⁵ Huang Guangxue, *Shi Lianzhu, Zhongguo de minzu shibie: wushiliu ge minzu de laili* [Nationality Classification in China: Origins of the 56 *minzuz*] (Beijing: minzu chubanshe, 2005), 1, 101.

³⁶ Fei Xiaotong, *Fei Xiaotong minzu yanjiu wenji*, 171.

³⁷ Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China’s Cultural Politics* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2000), 83.

³⁸ Lin Yaohua, *Zai daxue yu tianye zhijian* [Between University and Field] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2011), 206.

Minzu is a historical category. It had its own process of appearance and development, which in turn was a process of the blending of people under certain circumstances. A modern nation cannot be built without this process.³⁹

By turning to the historical foundation of a modern Chinese minority *minzu* and the historicity of a *minzu*, the Chinese Communist leaders and anthropologists who accepted the Communist nationality theory unwittingly became closer to a sociological approach to the national question, which emphasizes the importance of ‘primordial’ ties within a *minzu* based on language, historical memory, and collective cultural ties and sentiments. This pre-capitalist, historical cultural community, or what Anthony Smith called “ethnic”, became the *de facto* criterion of the PRC State to ‘identify’ and classify a *minzu*, and it served as the foundation for writing ‘brief history’, which ubiquitously trace minority nationalities’ historical origin and ancient names, for each officially identified and recognized minority nationalities in China.⁴⁰

IV. The Communist Party vs. the Nationalist Party

The Nationalist Party, which ruled mainland China from 1928 to 1949, recognized the Republic of China, proclaimed in 1912, as a country of five ethnically distinct nationalities, but its nationalist theory had two distinct features different from the CCP’s. First, Sun Yat-sen in general advocated the notion “State-nation” (*guozu*) and in China the nation and the State had been one.⁴¹ By putting the State ahead of nation, Sun showed his inclination of prioritizing a strong State which was supposed to somewhat suppress rather than assert the rights of internal minorities. Second, the Nationalist government’s scheme did not recognize the non-Han peoples as ‘nationalities’ the way the Communists did. In the Chinese version of Chiang Kai-shek’s book *China’s Destiny*, published in 1943 in Chinese and in 1947 in English, all minorities including the officially recognized Mongols and Tibetans were called “*buzu*” and in the official English translation, “*buzu*” was rendered as “clan”. Chiang Kai-shek emphasized that the Chinese nation is “of one stock”, which had undergone centuries of blending of

³⁹ Guilin shi renmin weiyuanhui, “Guanyu minzu gongzuo jihua zongjie, huibao, jianbao, diaochao cailiao” [Summaries, Bulletins, Investigation Reports Concerning Nationality Work], file number 68, catalogue number 1, Guilin Municipal Archives.

⁴⁰ For different approaches to modern nation and nationalism and the concept “ethnic”, see Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

⁴¹ Peter Zarrow, *Educating China: Knowledge, Society, and Textbooks in a Modernizing World, 1902-1937* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2015), 125.

“clans”, and the still existing different cultures were only due to “the differences in their geographical environment”.⁴² Based on the assimilationist assumption, both Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek refused to recognize southern minority groups such as the Miao, the Bai, and the Zhuang.⁴³ Regarding southern minorities as just branches of the Han descent group or vague “border population”, the local governments pursued a policy of radical assimilation of them, which often aroused the minorities’ resentment.⁴⁴

There is no doubt that the Nationalist government’s exercise of political authority in the non-Han frontier regions was not only driven by the ideology of a unified Chinese nation, but also by pragmatic concerns about national security, because its political decisions were largely spurred by the crisis of foreign and civil wars.⁴⁵ The Communist government, as we mentioned above, also sees the control of the borderlands as a strategic imperative. However, the two parties differed in their treatment of the non-Han peoples. Disavowing the Nationalist government’s untenable assimilation and non-recognition theory after 1949, the PRC government embraced a “modern notion of dignity”, for “non-recognition or recognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being”.⁴⁶ And its forceful promotion of the discourse of *zhonghua minzu* as a large family with internal differentiation and diversity presented a less stern and impersonal image of future China in terms of nationality relations.⁴⁷ By studying, classifying, and naming southern minorities, the PRC policy allowed local ethnic elites to assert their cultural distinctiveness and to call for political recognition and identity. The CCP’s rejection of the use of terms such as ‘clan’ or ‘tribe’ helped promote the self-esteem of non-Han minority groups with less population, for the loose yet practically generic and egalitarian *minzu* elevated the political standing of small ethnic groups to an equal footing with large groups.

⁴² Chiang Kai-shek, *China’s Destiny and Chinese Economic Theory* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1947), 29-30.

⁴³ Colin MacKerras, *China’s Minority Cultures: Identities and Integration Since 1912* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 9.

⁴⁴ June Tüefel Dreyer, *Minority Nationalities and National Integration in the People’s Republic of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 40. Katherine Palmer Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China* (Boulder; London: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 2000), 61.

⁴⁵ For the motivation of the Nationalist government in extending its authority into the non-Han regions, see Hsiao-ting Lin, *Modern China’s Ethnic Frontiers: A Journey to the West* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁴⁶ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”, *Multiculturalism, Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. by Charles Taylor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-73, see 25.

⁴⁷ For the comparison and contrast of the CCP and GMD’s nationalist ideologies, also see Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 28-29.

In addition to the rhetoric of unity and equality, the PRC government also faced the task of implementing the population census, which had never been thoroughly done in pre-Communist Chinese history. Classification of minority nationalities, which started in China in 1950, was not unique to China but was also required in the census of the United States, and in the US there was such artificial construction of racial categories as the vague “Asian/Pacific Islander”, created for census.⁴⁸ The population management function of a modern State based on accurate statistics required the PRC government to publish the exact number of the Han and non-Han peoples inside China. The first Chinese nation-wide census in 1953 shows that the overall population was 601,938,035, and minority nationalities had a population of 35,320,360, making up 6.06% of the Chinese population.⁴⁹ The census report also listed 10 minority nationalities with over 1 million people including Mongols, Tibetans, Uighur, Miao, and Tong (renamed Zhuang later). The need for population statistics and registration was a major factor that should not be neglected.

V. Broad Nationalism vs. Narrow Nationalism

Internally, modern China as a nation and with its various nationalities shows a tension between the unity of the country and individual groups’ assertiveness. The conceptualization of the two layers of the Chinese nation and nationalism began with Liang Qichao, who proposed the terms “broad nationalism” (*da minzu zhuyi*) and “narrow nationalism” (*xiao minzu zhuyi*). For Liang, the former means China as a nation-State, and the latter means ethnic nationalism within China and among various groups, and there was apparent value judgment because Liang Qichao supported the ideal of a corporate national identity.⁵⁰ This schematization was also inherited by the Chinese communists who since the early 1950s kept cautioning against “great Han chauvinism” (*da Hanzu zhuyi*) and “local nationality chauvinism” (*difang minzu zhuyi*), but the connotation was modified: the word “*da*”, big, or great, changed from a positive attitude that embraced national solidarity, as Liang Qichao defined, to self-aggrandizement that the CCP repudiated.

⁴⁸ Sharon M. Lee, “Racial Classifications in the US Census: 1800-1990”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 16, 1 (1993): 75-93.

⁴⁹ See Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojia tongjiju [State Statistics Bureau, the People’s Republic of China], “Diyici quanguo renkou pucha gongbao” [Bulletin of the First National Population Census](November 1,1954), available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/200204/t20020404_30316.html, last accessed on 2 May 2019.

⁵⁰ John Fitzgerald, “The Nationless State: The Search for a Nation in Modern Chinese Nationalism”, *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. by Johnathan Unger (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 68.

The PRC attitude against any nationality’s self-aggrandizement was first reflected in the compilation of dictionaries. A pocket *Dictionary for People’s Study* (*renmin xuexi cidian*) published in 1953 defined “*da minzu zhuyi*” as

An erroneous nationalist thought in a State of multiple nationalities. It is a tendency of narrow nationalist thought that departs from the interests of the broad masses of the people, namely, an ideology aiming at enslaving and annihilating alien nationalities.

The critique was then applied to ‘great Han chauvinism’ which was defined as an ideology that “advocates the superiority and nobleness of the Han nationality, lacking the spirit of equality when treating other nationalities and advocating the Han nationality’s dominance of all China”. The entry added that “The Chiang Kai-shek bandit clique are great Han nationalists”.⁵¹ Another influential dictionary, *Dictionary of New Nouns*, in that same year defined “*da minzu zhuyi*” as a “megalomaniac of bourgeoisie nationalism, assuming one’s own nation is a big and outstanding nation and one’s nation should enjoy political, economic, and cultural privileges. It disrespects the rights of other nations, supports national oppression, and opposes national equality”. This entry emphasizes the word’s imperialist tone: “It is a thought that serves the policy of imperialist invasion”.⁵² The *Dictionary of New Nouns* sees “narrow nationalism” as synonym of another word that did not exist in the *Dictionary for People’s Study*, “*difang minzu zhuyi*”, or “local nationality chauvinism”. For the compilers, *difang minzu zhuyi* was a sentiment of hostility against other nationalities, spread by the “public enemy” within a certain minority nationality of China, who opposed the fraternity, mutual aid, and cooperation among China’s various nationalities and created enmity between one’s nationality and other nationalities. In the political practice of the PRC, advocates of revitalizing a certain ethnic minority culture could be accused of committing the mistake of “local nationality chauvinism”, which runs the risk of becoming secessionist “split-ism” (*fenlie zhuyi*).⁵³

The repudiation of “local nationality chauvinism” accelerated in 1957 during the Anti-Rightist Movement, when the CCP Center issued a directive concerning carrying out rectification and “Socialist Education” among minority nationalities. The directive said:

⁵¹ Chen Beiou, *Renmin xuexi cidian* [Dictionary of People’s Study] (Shanghai: Guangxi shuju, 1953), 31, 33.

⁵² Chunming chubanshe, *Xin mingci cidian* [Dictionary of New Nouns] (Shanghai: Chunming chubanshe, 1955), 2023.

⁵³ Janet L. Upton, “Home on the Grasslands? Tradition, Modernity, and the Negotiation of Identity by Tibetan Intellectuals in the PRC”, *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan*, ed. by Melissa J. Brown (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 118.

Nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*) is the reflection of Bourgeois thought on the nationality question. Local nationality chauvinism (*difang minzu zhuyi*) spread because of the struggle and rebellion of the Bourgeois and other exploitative classes against the background of the continuous victory of socialist revolution

and “Local nationality chauvinists are part of Bourgeois rightists, who wear the cloak of nationality”. It further defined *difang minzu zhuyi* as manifest in the following aspects: conservativeness and xenophobia in terms of inter-nationality relations; passive or even opposing attitude towards the solidarity and mutual aid among the nationalities; unlimited demand for enlarging autonomous areas and excessive promoting of the status of autonomous regions. The directive determined that the struggle between socialism and “nationalism” (*minzu zhuyi*) was an important part of the struggle between socialism and capitalism.⁵⁴ Here, the radicalized CCP political discourse after 1957 built an equivalence between *difang minzu zhuyi* and capitalism, the confrontational enemy ideology of socialism.

A lexicological close examination of the words reveals that although the CCP used *difang minzuzhuyi* and *minzuzhuyi* interchangeably as synonyms, the English translation can be difficult, because the standard English rendition of *minzu zhuyi* is ‘nationalism’ whose political connotation in the Western context is different from *minzuzhuyi*/*difang minzuzhuyi* in Chinese political vocabulary. *Minzuzhuyi*/*difang minzuzhuyi* in China was more a xenophobic sentiment or self-assertiveness rather than an ideology or movement leading to the building of nation-State. If we apply the above-mentioned two-layer *minzu* scheme and the concept of sub-nation here, then *minzu zhuyi* in this scenario, as an often derogatory term in contemporary Chinese lexicology, did not indicate the legitimate ‘nationalism (patriotism)’ of the holistic Chinese nation or the support of the Chinese State, but the assertive or self-aggrandizing sentiments of a certain minority nationality, which is placed at a lower, subnational level.

VI. Rethinking “Minzu” and “Ethnic Group”

While discussing the Chinese nationality ideology and policies by understanding its rationale and logic, I try to avoid the use of the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’, because they have their own context and connotation that are distinct from the Chinese political background and theoretical assumption in the first half of the twentieth century. As late as 1969, the term ‘ethnic group’ appeared in *A Modern*

⁵⁴ Zhongyang dang’anguan, *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji* (1949.10-1966.5) [Selected Documents of the CCP Center] vol. 26 (Beijing: renmin chubanshe, 2013), 269-270.

Dictionary of Sociology, in which an ethnic group was defined as a ‘culture subgroup’ of a larger society. And both terms, as largely neologisms in the 1970s, had the connotation of being marginal, exotic, or troublesome. More importantly, in the context of Western ethnic politics, the terms ethnicity and ethnic groups are often associated with ‘interest’, ‘interest group’, and ‘conflict’.⁵⁵ In scholarship, ethnicity is approached as a highly contested modern discourse that provides a window into the “politics of cultural struggle for peoples on the ‘margins’”.⁵⁶ In the PRC, *minzu*, extensively used as a historicized political category with added values such as equality, unity, harmony, and friendship, did not have the conflict-based meaning contained in Western theory of ethnicity. In addition, an ethnic group in the West might not necessarily be a cultural-linguistic-territorial community but can also be a religious denomination or a pan-cultural group.⁵⁷ This is also different from how *minzu* was defined in China even after the modification of the classic Stalinist criteria. *Minzu* in the Chinese socialist discourse also means symbolic political representation of the identified and classified group in the People’s Congress, and the identification and classification in the 1950s were to fulfil the political promise of allowing proportional representation of non-Han peoples in the first National Peoples’ Congress.⁵⁸

The traditional Chinese rendition of nation, nationality or minority nationality are all *minzu*, and in recent years, a neologism that exactly renders ‘ethnic group’ entered the Chinese lexicology: *zuqun*, which does not have *minzu*’s connotation of political identity but merely implies a cultural subgroup. It is in this context that in recent years, the Chinese government, wary of the rising separatist tendencies in China, began to use ‘ethnic group’ to replace ‘nationality’ in translating the names of concerned research journals or institute of higher education, in order not to instigate the association of the latter with State-making and separatism among non-Han elites.⁵⁹ The sociologist Ma Rong of Peking University became a strong advocate of using the de-politicized term ‘ethnic group’ and its less fixed classification to replace ‘nationality’ to

⁵⁵ Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, “Introduction”, *Ethnicity and Experience*, ed. by Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1-26, see 4-5.

⁵⁶ Ralph Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of the National Belonging* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2000), 239.

⁵⁷ William Petersen, “On the Subnations of Western Europe”, 181. J. Milton Yinger, “Intersecting Strands in the Theorisation of Race and Ethnic Relations”, *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*, ed. by John Rex and David Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23.

⁵⁸ Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 21.

⁵⁹ Mark Elliott, “The Case of the Missing Indigene: Debate Over a ‘Second-generation’ Ethnic Policy”, *The China Journal*, 73 (2015): 186-213.

describe the internal demographic composition and cultural diversity of China, while retaining the *zhonghua minzu* as the only self-appellation of an integrated Chinese nation, which is also a political entity.⁶⁰ Ethnologist of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Shi Maoming, however, suggests that it is more appropriate, mainly politically, to continue to call Chinese State-sanctioned human groups ‘nationality’, while he admits that ‘ethnic group’ is broader and more inclusive.⁶¹ While agreeing with what Professor Ma Rong explained in my interview with him that “no nomenclature is perfect”, I would caution that the legal adoption of ‘ethnic group’ as an alternative conceptual framework, might cause new problems in China, because some subcultural groups which are traditionally considered Han, such as the Cantonese, the Hakka, and the Fujianese might seek their cultural and linguistic assertiveness and distinct identity, which would exacerbate the regionalist, or ‘local nationalist’ tendency in the body politic of contemporary China.

VII. Conclusion

Following the contour of the CCP’s construction of the nationalist discourse, it is arguable that the CCP leaders, with the later collaboration of Western-trained Chinese anthropologists, developed their own nationalist theory after several decades of adoption, appropriation, and modification of a plethora of often conflicting ideologies. The Chinese Communist revolutionaries were influenced by the deeply ingrained Confucian ideal of great unity and cultural assimilation, modern Chinese nationalism calling for a diverse yet united and integrative China to confront Western imperialism and Japan, and the Leninist advocacy for national self-determination. The actual political and war experiences during the Long March and anti-Japanese War drove the CCP to modify its earlier radical policy of instigating internal national self-determination, which was used also as a strategy to weaken the Nationalist regime and embraced greater Chinese unity. While facing the mission of building a strong and unified China after 1949, the CCP abandoned the slogan of national self-determination and enhanced the propaganda of a blended, family-like, and reciprocal *zhonghua minzu* as the ultimate national community for Chinese citizens under the socialist State, while denying the subnations, *minzus*

⁶⁰ Ma Rong, *Zuqun, minzu, yu guojia goujian* [Ethnic Group, Nation, and State-building] (Beijing: shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2012), 4, 46.

⁶¹ Shi Maoming, *Kuaguo Miaozu yanjiu: minzu yu guojia de bianjie* [A Study of Hmong, a Cross-Border Ethnic Group: Boundary between Nation and State] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2004), 2-3. Shi directly uses the English term “ethnic group” and the international self-appellation of Miao people outside China, “Hmong”, to indicate the diaspora of overseas Miao people.

the right of pursuing their own independence. This ideological evolution to certain extent mirrored Sun Yat-sen’s shift from an anti-Manchu revolutionary to a national leader who attempted to build an inclusive State with territorial and national integrity. In the two-layer scheme that I have conceptualized, the great nation has the ultimate legitimacy while the local and ethnic nations, ‘nationalities’ in the PRC’s parlance, were subjugated by the great nation. By doing so, both the Nationalists and the Communists reclaimed political authority over the populations living on the territory of the Qing empire that crumbled in 1911.

In its endeavour of achieving national integration, however, the PRC rejected the Nationalist government’s attempt to impose assimilation, and instead insisted on differentiating *minzus* and recognizing their internally distinct identity, which promoted the social status as well as raised the political awareness of these groups. The PRC government also changed all derogatory and colonial names of the non-Han regions. For instance, the capital of Inner Mongolia was renamed Hohhot, a Mongolian name meaning “Green City”, which replaced the old Chinese name “*Guisui*”, and implying “return to and be pacified”.⁶² Through this well-woven, complicated network of words, meanings, ideologies, and policies, the PRC maintained the façade of a “unified multi-nationality country”, and importantly, from the very beginning, it snuffed the constitutional legitimacy of any separatist attempt, because from the very beginning, the PRC was not built as a federation that could be joined and withdrawn by a proto-nation-State, as occurred in the Soviet Union. To use traditional Chinese words and dialectic cultural concepts, the PRC government walked a fine line between *fen* (to separate or to differentiate) and *he* (blending and unification). It is important to keep in mind that the PRC device of minority nationalities regional autonomy (*minzu quyue zizhi*) “maybe viewed as in many ways having being influenced by the past rule of the native chieftains” in imperial times.⁶³

The PRC’s nationality ideology and policy are not without ambiguities, contradictions, and excessive State intervention. First, while promoting equality among all nationalities by rejecting a hierarchy of clan, tribe, and nationality, the PRC government still saw the majority Han nationality as the ‘big brother’ whose mission was to ‘help’ and to normalize the ‘backward’ ‘brother nationalities’. The Communist discourse of ‘advancement’ (*xianjin*) vs. ‘backwardness’ (*luohou*) rendered the intra-nationalist relationship between Han and other nationalities more paternalistic than egalitarian and more alienating than integrating. The living conditions and lifestyle of minority nationalities are also often depicted as ‘primitive’, while the Han who had achieved so-

⁶² Li Ziyuan, *Zhongguo gongchandang minzu gongzuo shi*, 250.

⁶³ Guo Xiaolin, *State and Ethnicity in China’s Southwest* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 12.

cialism were naturally ahead of all non-Han minorities.⁶⁴ The development of medical and hygienic work in southwest non-Han areas is often described as assistance of the nationality, namely, the Han, to minority nationalities that lagged behind (*houjin*).⁶⁵ Due to this pursuit of equality and protection of minority nationalities' rights, the PRC government perpetuated the official labeling of minority identity, as printed on the PRC Citizen's ID card and fixated the boundary between the Han and the minority nationalities and the regional autonomy system. Overemphasis on the cultural difference of the minority nationalities and the subsequent lack of the cultural cohesiveness and national sense of belonging as members of an integrated *zhonghua minzu* has become a new problem in China.⁶⁶ Moreover, the protection and special favour granted by the State has in fact divided China along the *minzu* boundary. Although the Han nationality is one of the officially recognized 56 nationalities of the PRC, the term '*minzu*' is reserved exclusively to refer to non-Han minority nationalities in real life linguistic and social practices. For instance, a university for nationalities (*minzu daxue*) is an institution of higher education established for and open to non-Han students, and the governmental branch "Commission for Nationality Affairs" (*minzu shiwu weiyuanhui*) handled policy and affairs solely related to minority nationalities. Perhaps due to the semantic ambiguity 'nationality', the Central University for Nationalities changed its English name to Minzu University of China in 2013. The official explanation was that the new pinyin word would be more accurate and seem more self-confident.⁶⁷ Thus, I will use the year 2013 as the end of the time span of my essay.

Second, the inherent tension between broad nationalism and narrow nationalism made the relationship between the PRC central government and local minority elites uneasy. Minority nationality elites were placed in a difficult position while they asserted

⁶⁴ For the discourse of "backwardness" and "primitiveness" of minority nationalities, see Stevan Harrell, *Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 47; Litzinger, *Other Chinas*, 44. Morris Rossabi, "Introduction", *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 3-18, see 8.

⁶⁵ Lang Weiwei, *Deng Xiaoping yu xinan shaoshu minzu*, 136.

⁶⁶ For the negative effect of the perpetual minority identity, see Ma Rong, *Zuqun, minzu, yu guojia goujian*, 23-24, and his "Lijie minzu guanxi de xin silu". For a detailed review of the intellectual debates among contemporary Chinese intellectuals regarding the viability of the CCP's minority nationality policy, see James Leibold, *Ethnic Policy in China: Is Reform Inevitable?* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2013). Another historian and scholar of Tibetology, however, contended that the removal of nationality category from the citizen identification card, as suggested by Ma Rong, would weaken the sense of belonging to their own group among minority nationality people.

⁶⁷ <http://edu.sina.com.cn/en/2013-12-31/081778600.shtml>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

their nationality’s right of self-development, cultural distinctiveness, or local self-interest, largely as a positive response to the CCP’s encouragement with the official discourses of equality and autonomy, because they could be easily accused of committing the error of ‘local nationality chauvinism’ for self-promotion; third, a lexicological study of word *minzu* in social life reveals its ambiguity.

Finally, if the Chinese government accepts ethnicity as an alternative political category and social analytical framework, it may avoid the sensitive association between *minzu* and concepts such as independence, yet it may encounter more fissures even among the Han people following the lines of religious affiliation, dialect, or geography, and the State will run the risk of accepting the assumption about the inherent conflict of interests among the ethnic groups. Consequently, the State will have to redefine its role no longer as the head of a harmonious ‘big family’, but an arbiter of the interethnic conflicts within the nation. It is likely that China would still be like the Soviet Union: not a “melting pot”, but just “the incubator of nations”.⁶⁸ Unlike what Ma Rong optimistically conceives, ‘ethnic group’ is not truly depoliticized. Rather, “Nations may be created by the transformation of an ethnic group in a multiethnic state into a self-conscious political entity”.⁶⁹ So far there has been no sign that the PRC government will replace the existing nationality category, that is, Han plus 55 minority nationalities with more self-claimed ethnic groups. Yet, as reflected in the translation of the Central University for Nationalities, the adoption of the Chinese word *minzu* serves as a new semantic and political strategy to circumvent the problem.

It is plausible that China may reestablish its citizens’ common political identity based on equal individual civic rights rather than nationality-based group identity after thoroughly “depoliticizing” ethnic identity, as Ma Rong suggests. However, this will require, as its prerequisite, the establishment of a modern constitutional democracy in China based on the recognition of individual civic rights. After all, the PRC was and, in a sense, still is a third world country, and the practice in the post-industrial United States should not be the only reference point.

⁶⁸ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 87.

⁶⁹ Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 20.