

One Chinese Nation?

Promoting the Notion of *Zhonghua Minzu* as a means for
the solution to ethnic problems in the People's Republic of China



MA thesis (MA2, 2nd term)

Asian Studies: Chinese Studies (120ec)

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07/15/2014

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1. Introduction

The area that we nowadays know as the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been going through a long and turbulent period of transitions. What was once a multi-cultural, universalist empire suddenly became a multi-ethnic nation-state, where the former subject of the empire was now to be a citizen of the nation, and his allegiance was no longer to be pledged to the Qing dynasty court, but to this very vaguely outlined entity: the Republic, and later the People's Republic.

And it is building this New China, cementing and consolidating this nation and state, that has been for more than the past century, and still very much is, one of the top priorities of the government. Much like the fear of peasant rebellions that kept emperors awake at night, it is the securing of the people's allegiance that every government since the Xinhai revolution has had to find a solution to. As to date, the central government still has not found a successful way of keeping the people in check. And we are not talking about union strikes in Shanghai here, we are talking about those people, the "ethnic minorities", who just happened to find themselves in a region that has come under Chinese command at some point in time. We all hear the news about Tibetan monks protesting the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Or the riots in Ürümqi in 2009, where ethnic Uyghurs, the muslim inhabitants of Xinjiang, and Han Chinese clashed. Or the Tiananmen bombings last year performed by alleged fighters for a free and independent East-Turkestan. This is a very complicated situation, and it provides the central government with a problem that desperately needs solving. As such, it is one of the author's main interests of study. It is with the ongoing project of "cementing" the nation, of keeping China unified in a peaceful manner that this thesis is concerned.

As there are many different characteristics that a nation can be defined by, there are also more than a few ways of looking at the national build-up of China. Generally speaking, the dominant conceptualization of China's national configuration is the one where China is made up of many different ethnically defined nations, with one national group being the largest, the Han, and the rest being so-called ethnic minorities. This is a situation that resulted from the 民族识别 (*minzu shibie*; ethnic distinction) project carried out in the 1950s. Based on the Soviet model of ethno-federalism, it is believed by many – including the author – to be highly unstable, with lots of potential for territorially based ethnic struggle.

It is not my intention to deny that attributes such as language, ancestry, religion, or (memories of) historical experiences can be of major importance in shaping and strengthening

a human community. The point here is that there are also other possible factors determining whether or not a political entity can become a successful nation-state. We need merely look at the United States of America to see that national identity building does not specifically require a community of people within a political entity with the same religion, skin color, or even (first) language. If that were the case, then it would have been more likely to have a North America with, for example, a White Catholic nation, a White Protestant nation, an African American nation, a Jewish nation, a Hispanic nation, and a Native American nation. So there must be other powers at work. It is not language, blood, or religion that holds the US together as a nation. These can actually be seen as divisive factors in the US, just as they are in the PRC, but still the US provides an excellent example of a place that first was not, and now is, a successful and highly unified nation.

It is probably a much easier task to establish a nation-state, when there is but a single nation occupying the territory on which this nation-state is intended to be established. As with the US, however, it is certainly not impossible to craft a nation-state out of a plethora of ethnic communities. With the right mobilizing incentives, such as military prowess or economic grandeur, which also function as cohesive forces, and a well-functioning education system, a capable state apparatus can influence ethnic sentiment, and shape national identity.

This leads us to the focus point of my thesis: that – and I am employing a rather instrumentalist perspective on national identity here¹ — there is a paradigm shift happening in the Party leadership’s thinking on national identity on the contemporary People’s Republic of China. Seeing the shortcomings of their current ethnic policies, and their consequences on the fractured landscape of national identities in the PRC, it is my conviction that the Party has started using, alongside the familiar strategy, a different method of keeping China unified. Their thinking on nation building, and the very nation this process is intended to build, seems to have changed.

The thesis will look into the propagation of a Chinese nationalist discourse that, instead of being Han-centred, exclusivist, and ethnically and racially defined, is all-PRC, inclusivist, and multi-racially and politically defined. This is the notion of “*zhonghua minzu* (中华民族)”, with *minzu* being the rough Chinese equivalent of our word ‘nation’, and *zhonghua* meaning ‘Chinese’ in a very un-ethnic, almost civilizational sense. It is the idea of a nation that embodies *all* people, all different ethnicities, living within the borders of the PRC into one de-racialized national unit. Here, all citizens are connected to the nation-state through a shared

¹ The belief that national identity is something that is not necessarily ‘given’, but that it can be changed, and influenced. See for example: Smith, Anthony D. 1991. *National Identity*. London: Penguin.

sense of political allegiance, instead of the very divisive sense of shared blood, or some (often vague) historical sense of community. It is a common purpose, it is a common interest in the well-being of the country, it is the flag, the President, the political principles, a sense of equality and community, and economic prowess, it is all of these, I hypothesize, that citizens are steered towards feeling allegiance to.

The origins and early development of *zhonghua minzu*, however interesting studying the exploits of Liang Qichao may be, will not be within the scope of this thesis. It will not be a study focussed on “tracking” *zhonghua minzu* through time, mainly because *zhonghua minzu* has been an empty shell, a word without real meaning, for the majority of its existence. Only after Mao’s death, and with it the waning position of communism as a consolidative identity marker, so did the CCP come under threat of being made redundant. This is when nationalism came to the fore, and with it came a peaked interest in what kind of nationalism the people should adhere to, which peoples would constitute the nation that was to be the homeland of this nationalism.

My main interests lie with the post-Reform developments involving the *zhonghua minzu*-version of Chinese nationalism. For, as several secondary sources among the academic literature that exists on this topic have led me to believe, an interesting aspect to the notion of *zhonghua minzu* is that its propagation has steadily been gaining momentum ever since the early Reform years (see for example: Baranovitch, 2010, Zhao, 2005, or Leibold, 2013: 40).

The research focuses on the strategy of deliberate top-down implementation and dissemination of a nationalist discourse aimed at being able to achieve in keeping the ethnically diverse PRC together as one integrated and unified political system. It looks at the driving forces behind these perceived changes in strategy. I will be looking in some detail at one of the more problematic border regions of China’s ethnic frontier: the far western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), and will try and demonstrate the far-reaching consequences a new discourse on China’s ethnic configuration could have.

As such, this thesis’ main research question is: “To what extent does the promotion of ‘The Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ constitute a strategy actually aimed at propagating the notion of *zhonghua minzu* in preparation for an impending reconfiguration of the PRC’s ethnic policies?” In order to answer that question, we must also answer these sub-questions: “Does the Chinese Dream discourse and the accompanied stress on ‘the Chinese nation’ really indicate the government’s intention to ‘de-politicize’ ethnicity?” And also: “To what extent does the concept of *zhonghua minzu* and its

corresponding version of “Chinese nationalism” contribute to the (lack of) success in incorporating the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region into the Chinese nation-state?”

As for the methodology, I aim to use discourse analysis on Party documents and speeches, as well as some newspaper articles, to see whether my hypothesis is based on more than ideas and a few academic articles. I want to see if there are hints to be discerned in what is being said by Chinese officials, and by the Chinese media – nation-wide newspapers as well as regional newspapers from Xinjiang – that might indicate a historic shift in the managing of ethnic affairs by the central government. Will the government slowly move away from the all too familiar ‘family of 56 ethnicities’ discourse, so heavily influenced by the faulty Soviet policies of ethno-federalism (Sautman, 2012 : 17), with the modern Han ethnic living in big cities, fuelling the successful economy, providing a helping hand to the backward minorities, living in villages, achieving nothing? Will China’s guiding ideology for its ethnic policy gradually shift more towards a discourse (and accompanying policies) of de-politicizing minority ethnicities², of breaking the tight connection of ethnicity and territory, of a broadly defined, state-wide nation: the Chinese nation, *zhonghua minzu*? Seeing as how the whole notion of *zhonghua minzu* is a top-down creation, I am convinced that by analyzing official rhetoric as it gets disseminated among the public by the media, it is quite possible to get a clear insight into government strategy. For the media are controlled by the state, hence anything the big newspapers communicate to the people are in line with what the state wants the media to communicate to the people.

By studying the newly invigorated usage of the term *zhonghua minzu*, I believe I will be able to draw comparisons between the government’s assumed intentions, and the way these intentions are made public to the people in both China Proper and in Xinjiang. I will also provide examples of official communications from before Xi Jinping assumed the office of General Secretary, to show how the official rhetoric has changed over a relatively short period of time.

Furthermore, I feel that it needs to be pointed out that due to the general lack of transparency the PRC government is known for, all of the official communication I have studied are public documents, meaning they reveal to the public, both domestic and international, exactly as much as the government wants to reveal.

² Here, I am referring to Ma Rong’s notion of 祛政治化 (*quzhengzhihua*; de-politicization). See for example: Ma Rong, 2007. “A New Perspective in Guiding Ethnic Relations in the Twenty-First Century: ‘De-Politicization’ of Ethnicity in China”, *Asian Ethnicity* 8 (3): 199-217

2. Theories and concepts

Differentiating between nation, nationality, and ethnicity, is no feeble task; these terms are often used interchangeably, resulting in a confusing jungle of words and ideas. This is especially so when dealing with China. The reason for this is that the word used in the Chinese language for *all* these different concepts is *minzu*. I cannot imagine anyone to be particularly happy about this situation, but to change this is easier said than done. One of the people who got fed up with this, and who has the academic muscle to try and get something done about it, is Ma Rong. His proposal is, as read in Sautman (2012), to more clearly differentiate between “*ethnic groups*, which are cultural-historical entities, and *nations*, which are political-territorial entities” (Sautman, 2012: 17, italics mine), by using the word *zuqun* (族群) for ethnic groups.

Let us stick to English for now. In his very insightful monograph on national identity, Anthony D. Smith lays out his definition of the nation: “The nation is a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (1991: 40).

However, when it comes to the terminology we are concerned with here, the situation is a bit more complicated than this. For in English as well, the lines between terms like ethnicity, nation, and state, are blurry. How often does one encounter the word nation used to mean country, or state? Often, this is because many “old-school”, i.e. Western, nations are largely congruent with the corresponding state. Thus, nation-state is not just a type of political and social entity, for a sizeable part of the globe it also represents a *goal*. To have but one nation in the People’s Republic is something the Chinese central leadership at present can only dream of.

The conceptual problem I kept facing during research, is that ethnicity and nation, often are rather overlapping concepts. Adding to that, both are rather elusive notions. They stem from human emotion, they are a collective, an aggregate of human sentiment. It is difficult to determine how, or when, ethnic sentiment arises, or when a group of people – who by and large are complete strangers to each other (Anderson, 1991) – start to develop a national consciousness. Now, in order to apply this to the present case of the top-down “zhonghuaminzufication” of Chinese citizen’s ethnic orientation and, along with it, their national identity, we must first take a look at the factors that determine whether or not a

population constitutes an ethnic community. Smith, once more, is revealing: it needs “a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific ‘homeland’, a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population” (Smith, 1991: 21).

Smith explains, and I fully concur, that “most important, it is myths of common ancestry, not any fact of ancestry (which is usually difficult to ascertain), that are crucial” (1991 : 22). This is where Uradyn Bulag’s short article on the Chinese cult of Genghis Khan (2003) fits in nicely. For the common practice of forging history for nationalist purposes is absolutely essential in the ongoing process of the molding, creating, or re-shaping of national identities. When done convincingly, this can be very effective. In the case of China, whenever subtle changes occur in the history curriculum, the extensive education system in the PRC will make sure that twenty years thence no one will remember the “wrong” history, every adolescent and young adult will see these matters the way the state likes them to see it.

If we look back at the elements that determine ethnic affiliation listed earlier, we can see that all these elements are, in theory, controllable. Even more so, in contemporary China, these are also controllable in practice. This means that the state has the ability to realign, over time, the ethnic affiliations of its people. If we then realize that “nations require ethnic ‘elements’. These may be reworked; they often are. But nations are inconceivable without some common myths and memories of a territorial home (Smith, 1991: 40), I becomes obvious that the state possesses all the required abilities to ‘create’ its own nation.

And although realizing that these practices occur day in, day out, in China, as well as in every other nation-state on the planet, might leave one with moral objections – after all, this is brain-washing we are speaking of –, it is absolutely brilliant. We may think that we are in control of our nationalist sentiment and national identities, but it is inside of us, it is elusive, it goes deeper than just our brains. And this is a scary thought. Anderson must have felt the same way, for he stated: "That's when I realized that nationalism is not an ideology, it's something much deeper. You don't notice it, you breathe it. It's no ideology, it's oxygen, political oxygen."³

³ Benedict Anderson, conference on Imagined Communities, UvA, Oudemanhuispoort, 12/9/2013.

3. Fei Xiaotong and Ma Rong

Special attention must be devoted to two very influential sociologists/anthropologists, who have both written heavily debated, yet increasingly important (and respected) work on the Chinese nation. Both academics have initially not been taken very serious. Especially Fei Xiaotong, who happened to live and publish at a time when even slightly different opinions could mean death, has had to struggle for recognition for his works.

Most important for the current endeavor is Fei Xiaotong's (1989) famous *zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti geju* (中华民族多元一体格局; The Plurality and Integrity of the Structure of the Chinese Nation). It represents, with hindsight, the first major piece of academic work that provides academic support for the strategy of moving away from the Soviet-style framework of the 56 territorially based ethnicities, and towards a more open, symbiotic broader ethnicity – *zhonghua minzu* – as the basis of the Chinese nation-state. It shows in a surprisingly fresh and understandable language, how, in antiquity, Chinese civilization thrived, merged, expanded, encountering, fusing with, and assimilating neighboring peoples.

Ma Rong, who is still alive today, and still publishes increasingly popular material on exactly our topic, identifies a lot of similarities between the current situation in the PRC and the situation in the former Soviet Union. His critique of the Soviet system is strongly worded, and had this man been born 30 years earlier, he probably would have been persecuted by the Party for spreading dissent. Here is an example:

“那些自治共和国[of the European part of the Russian Federation]都是俄罗斯帝国的一部分，它们从来没有过真正的自治。它们只是俄罗斯帝国行政体系中的少数民族地区。它们从来没有过真正的自治。它们从来没有过真正的自治。” (Ma, 2009: 4).

“Those autonomous republics [of the European part of the Russian Federation] were all just provinces under Czarist rule, and there was no problem with ethnic autonomy. The administrative maps of those times show that at the time, Czarist Russia was ardently working to fuse these minority ethnicities into the unified administrative system of Russia, so that Russia would become a ‘nation-state’. But this process was interrupted by the October Revolution.”

At this point then, I will treat with what I believe is truly Ma Rong's *piece de resistance*; it is a blueprint for solving China's ethnic problems:

“中国当代和未来根本民族制度和政策的调整，调整的顺序和节奏不是最紧迫的问题。我们可以，当我们达成共识后，开展具体研究，我们可以实验，所以我们可以一步一步地进一步。但是，现在，如果我们不讨论好最核心的现代国际政治和民族理论，随着民族之间互动的增加，随着民族之间互动的增加，随着那些熟悉共和国时代经典民族概念的人的死亡，那么中国民族之间的关系只会变得更加复杂，而且更加紧张。如果有一天，中国民族分裂，每一个[民族]社区都失去了家园。前南斯拉夫是最令人震惊的典型例子。我们必须让每个人清楚地理解：每一个民族的根本利益和长远利益都是整个中华民族的利益。我们只能通过民族理论的基本原理，重新考虑中国‘民族结构’的框架，我们必须一步一步地调整中国的相关制度和政策，并努力让‘中华民族’成为13亿人的最核心、最根本的身份和社区。这，而且只有这，是中国民族问题的未来出路。” (Ma, 2009: 8).

“As for how to adjust our country’s contemporary and future fundamental ethnic system and policies, the sequence and pace of these adjustments are not the most pressing problems at hand. We can, when we have reached consensus, carry out specific research, and we can experiment, so we can progress a little further step by step. But at present, if we do not discuss well the most central concept of modern international politics and national theory, following the increasing interaction between the ethnic groups, following intervention from outside our borders, following the death of those who are familiar with the classic concepts of nationhood from the days of the Republic, then the relations between the ethnic groups of our country will only get more complicated, and more intense. If one day, China breaks up in ethnic pieces, every [ethnic] community loses their Home. The former Yugoslavia is the most shocking typical example of this. We must let everyone understand this clearly: The fundamental interests and long-term benefits of every ethnic group are identical to the interests of the entirety of the Chinese nation. We can only think this through on the fundamental basis of the theory of ‘the nation’, we have to reconsider the framework for China’s ‘national structure’. And we must step by step adjust our country’s relevant systems and policies, and strive to let ‘the Chinese nation’ be the most pivotal, most fundamental identity and community to 1,3 billion people. This, and only this, is the future way out of China’s ethnic problems.”

In the next chapters, we will see if there is any reason to believe that the central government is planning to do anything with the very insightful suggestions that are constantly being posed by Ma Rong. The above is merely an example of his line of reasoning. I must admit, it sounds as if this – were the Party leadership to listen to this – might really provide policy makers with the tools to peacefully resolve the imminent crisis in China’s ethnic affairs.

4. Party discourse

Here, we shall explore in some detail examples of what I deem to be convincing evidence in support of the author's claim that a subtle, yet significant shift in the thinking on the PRC's domestic ethnic affairs has started to take place in the highest echelons of the Party ever since Xi Jinping's appointment as General Secretary in 2012.

It has by now become a solidly established tradition for every "paramount leader" to create their own "unique" piece of Party discourse. This is then to be heavily propagated through the media as the signature ideology of the new leader, and after he resigns it will be this "catchphrase" that this era of the CCP's history will be remembered by. The new piece of Party discourse gets adopted into the grand canon of Party ideology. With each change in paramount leadership, the collection of thoughts and ideas that together make up "Party ideology" gets supplemented. First Mao Zedong puts his personal touch on Marxist-Leninist thinking (which, obviously, in itself is already an adaptation of Marx's original work), then Deng Xiaoping promoted "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (*zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi*)". More recent examples include Jiang Zemin's "The Three Represents (*san ge daibiao*)", or Hu Jintao's "Harmonious Society (*hexie shehui*)".

The latest addition to the official ideology of the CCP is Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream (*zhongguomeng*)", which he began promoting in early 2013, right after his appointment. It describes a set of ideas and goals, which are meant to inspire the Chinese people, but – and here it breaks with earlier dogma – also the Chinese *individual*, the self-aware citizen, to achieve greatness. There have to date not yet been given any strict definitions or outlines regarding the content of the Chinese Dream; its meaning has shifted slightly according to the occasion where the concept has been deployed. The term has been embraced wholeheartedly by the Chinese media, and nowadays it is rare to find a page in a newspaper where the characters 中国梦 (*zhongguomeng*: Chinese Dream) do not occur.

Hence, it is not difficult to get a comprehensive grasp of the meaning of the concept. One needs merely to seek out the occurring elements of this dream, as they are described in the papers, and it becomes clear what Xi Jinping would like the People to dream of. Recurring descriptions of the characteristics of the Chinese Dream are: promoting the advancement of society, assuring the well-being of the *Chinese people*, reviving the *nation*, increasing military strength, combining efforts to tackle challenges, striving together for a better tomorrow for the *entire Chinese nation* (the term used in Chinese here, in every instance I encountered it, is

zhonghua minzu), walking the road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, constructing an ecologically responsible civilization in order to secure the future of the *Chinese nation*.

At this point, I would like to turn our attention to (what I believe to be) a landmark speech by Xi Jinping, delivered at the National Museum in Beijing in late 2012. Xi had very recently assumed office, and together with the entire Politburo Standing Committee went to visit the “*复兴之路* (*fixing zhi lu*: The Road of Rejuvenation)” exhibition. For the current project, it is not really necessary to devote too much attention to the content of that exhibition itself. It dealt with modern Chinese history – the century of humiliation – and this provides Xi Jinping with an excellent occasion to outline his ideas for the Chinese nation.

Shown just below is the transcript of (what the author deems to be important parts of) Xi Jinping’s *fixing zhi lu* speech. The translation into English is also given.

“刚刚我们参观了‘复兴之路’展览。这个展览回顾了中国历史，展示了中国现实，也寄托了中国未来。[...] 每个人都有自己的理想和追求，我们说，每个人都有自己的梦想。现在，大家都谈到了‘中国梦’。什么是中国梦？我认为，实现中华民族的伟大复兴是今天中国最大的梦想。[这个梦想]反映了中华民族的完整性和中国人民的完整心愿。它是全体中国人民的希望和期待。历史告诉我们，我们的未来前景和命运，都与这个国家、这个民族的未来前景和命运紧密相连。国家好，民族好，大家才会好。”

“Just now, we visited the ‘Road of/to Rejuvenation’ exhibition. This exhibition looks back at the history of the Chinese nation, it displays the present of the Chinese nation, and it also pledges the future of the Chinese nation. [...] Everyone has ideals and goals [he pursues], as we say, everyone has dreams. Nowadays, everybody talks about ‘The Chinese Dream’. What is the Chinese Dream? I reckon that realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest Chinese Dream of today’s Chinese nation. [This dream] reflects the integrity of the Chinese nation and of the Chinese people. It is all the common hopes and expectations of Chinese sons and daughters. History shows us that all of our future prospects and destinies are closely linked to the future prospect and destiny of this country, of this nation. If the country does well, if the nation does well, only then will everybody do well.”

This is merely a little more than half the speech, but already one must have noticed the absurd frequency of the term *zhonghua minzu*, *zhonghua*, or *minzu*. In this piece of, frankly, quite powerful rhetoric, Xi employs *zhonghua minzu* six times, plus a solo *zhonghua*, and two *minzu*’s. The term (*zhongguo*) *meng* (*xiang*) occurs merely four times. This, I reckon, is a clear indication that *zhonghua minzu* is the real pivot of the speech. I am actually going to go as far as to say that I think the entire show that has been created around *Zhongguomeng* is merely a vehicle for propagating *zhonghua minzu*. Everybody is hearing the most wonderful

things about a bright future, but in the meantime we get slapped around the head with the recurring utterance of the term *zhonghua minzu*.

This ‘priming’ is a very important element in shaping national identity. According to Billig’s views, nationalism as a system of thought that is to such an extreme extent integrated in our daily life in this world of nation-states, that we do not even notice the ‘flagging’ of nationhood and nationalism around us anymore. This ideology of common sense “operates to make people forget that their world has been historically constructed. Thus, nationalism is the ideology by which the world of nations has come to seem the natural world” (Billig, 1995: 37).

One striking example of a senior party official who seems to have fully embraced the new discourse in his communications with the public is an interview with Wang Zhengwei, vice-chairman of the national Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), as well as the head of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC, 国家民委). This interview was published originally by the official Party publication *Ziguangge* (紫光阁), I found it, however, on the SEAC’s website (SEAC, 2014).

The interview⁴ is a bit too long to fully go over in the limited space we have – the article is over 4000 words in total – so I have selected, and provided the translations to, a few bits that, to me at least, clearly show the path that the Party has recently come to envision. His phrasing resonates the *fixing zhi lu* rhetoric. It shows a different breed of national identity, of ethnicity, and Ma Rong’s influence can be felt here as well⁵:

“我们必须坚定不移地贯彻党的民族政策。[我们必须] 坚持不懈地团结新疆，[我们必须] 牢固树立国家意识、公民意识，[我们

“We must unflinchingly implement the Party’s ethnic policies. [We must] persevere in uniting a stable Xinjiang, [and we must] firmly establish national awareness, awareness of citizenship, [as

⁴ *Yu shi ju jin, chongshi dang de zhijiang fanglüe*, available at: http://www.seac.gov.cn/art/2014/7/9/art_31_208675.html.

⁵ I am referring here to the attention given to open, nation-wide, citizenship, equal opportunities for all, as well as ethnic interaction/blending, see, for an example of Ma Rong’s ideas: Ma Rong. 2009. “国家民族问题的关键和出路” (The Crux and Way Out of Contemporary China’s Ethnic Problems), *Lingdao* 26 (2): 1-9.

well as] awareness of the community of the Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu*), among every ethnicity. And we must make it so that every ethnicity, and every citizen, contributes his strength to the realization of the ‘Chinese Dream of Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’. Together we will enjoy the fruits of the prosperous development of the Motherland. [And we must make it so that] every ethnicity has mutual understanding, mutual respect, mutual tolerance, mutual appreciation, and that we may learn from each other, and help each other, that we lay close to each other like the seeds of a pomegranate. We must increase ethnic association, ethnic interaction, and ethnic mixing/blending/fusing, we must deploy and carry out many kinds of common work, advance bilingual education, and push for the establishment of a social structure and communal environment in which every ethnicity is embedded. In order to expand the scope of education, employment, and housing to the hinterlands of Xinjiang’s ethnic minorities, [we must] promote the deepening of our understanding, and the enhancing of our feelings, in the common producing, living, working, and studying of the masses of every ethnicity.”

Reading this interview, a number of things struck me immediately. Wang Zhengwei mentions the word *zhonghua minzu* five times, but not once does he utter the words *hanzu* (汉族; Han Chinese, or “ethnic majority”) or *weiwuerzu* (维吾尔族; Uyghur, the dominant ethnic minority in Xinjiang). The term *shaoshu minzu* (少数民族; ethnic minority) is used only once. *zuguo* (祖国; the Motherland) is used six times. *tuanjie* (团结; unity) eight times. *yishi* (意识; awareness, consciousness) is also used quite frequently: five times. The term *rentong* (认同; identity) four times.

Now, the number of times a single term pops up in an interview may not be a one hundred per cent waterproof method of determining the importance the speaker attached to these respective terms. But it is certainly not without significance. In every country, in every language, and in every political system, the frequency of terms used definitely indicate their significance. I have not had the time to do so, but one might imagine research to point out that the word ‘communist’ was used a lot more extensively in US newspapers during the McCarthy era than in today’s US newspapers. Or that the words ‘Islam’ or ‘immigrant’ would occur frequently in the strong rhetoric of the speeches of the Dutch, right-wing, islamophobic, politician Geert Wilders.

Now let us return to the Wang Zhengwei interview. Besides the terms he utters often, there is also significance in the terms he does not, or not often, use. For example, he never mentions the word *yisilan* (伊斯兰; Islam) or *huijiao* (回教; Islam), even though he himself is a muslim, but rather he says *zongjiao* (宗教; religion), and not once, but eleven times. To me this indicates that religion is important to the issue of maintaining peace in Xinjiang (i.e., keeping Xinjiang

under Beijing rule), but “Islam” as an identity marker is too strong, and so he phrases differently, more neutral.

Let us return to the Chinese Dream. With the first encounter, parallels with the American Dream can immediately be discerned. If we believe Xi Jinping, there is a better tomorrow waiting for us, and it is within the nation’s grasp, as long as ‘we’ work for it, ardently, and united. And these visions of hopes for a better future, all of which the citizen is able to realize through the unique opportunities presented to the citizen by the environment created by his nation’s capable government.

Like the American Dream, with its slightly egoistic and self-centered characteristics, or the prerequisite that one apparently must first wipe out all the natives before being able to achieve greatness, there are some suspicious elements to the Chinese Dream. As the CNTV website, in English, would have us believe: “Today, on a global scale, there are three partially overlapping dreams competing for influence over human civilization. These three great visions are the American Dream, the European Dream and the Chinese Dream” (CNTV, 2014).

Besides the fact that this website looks like some eerie advertisement for the brand ‘China’, the weirdest thing is that what the authorities would want foreigners to understand about the Chinese Dream apparently is that it is a competitor in the – I assume – ongoing battle between Dreams for global influence over all of human civilization. This rather combative character of the Dream gets balanced out by pointing out that “the Chinese Dream is a dream of cross-straits peace and national unity” (CNTV, 2013), so the Taiwanese need not worry.

Domestically then, we may conclude that the Chinese Dream is a very positive concept, with a focus on progress, well-being, and a refreshingly liberal element of individualism. Internationally though, the Dream takes on a rather schizophrenic character. The current project is dealing with enough as it is, however, so let us not complicate things further by dragging the international component into the equation.

When we think of the official guidelines that determine the framework, which in its turn determines the laws on China’s ethnic policy, it is pivotal to note that there have been no official announcements been made about any possible changes in the laws managing China’s ethnic affairs. There have been no changes yet, and it is uncertain if there ever will be. As the ‘2009 White Paper: Ethnic Policy and Common Prosperity and Development of All Ethnic

Groups'⁶ – written and published in response of the Ürümqi riots in the summer of 2009 – showed, the central government is still very much committed to the old system. It is important to point out that although this document is already from five years ago, it is still the official guideline for the government's ethnic affairs. We can not predict the future, but I would not be surprised if a new White Paper on the matter of ethnic affairs comes out in the foreseeable future, downplaying the “Han vs. the rest” discourse found so far, and reflecting more Xi Jinping's phrasing, with a stronger emphasis, of course, on the increased importance of *zhonghua minzu*.

In the below fragment from the 2009 White Paper we can clearly pick up the discourse on China's ethnicities that has been dominant for the entire history of the PRC:

“In China, **ethnic unity** includes the **unity** of the **Han ethnic group** with the **minority ethnic groups**, the **unity** among the **minority ethnic groups** and the **unity** of members of the same ethnic group. For **maintaining ethnic unity**, all China's ethnic groups, in the **big family of the unified motherland** and on the basis of **equality**, are required to respect each other, trust each other, learn from each other and cooperate with each other.”

Another example can be found on the State Ethnic Affairs Council's website. It heads ‘爱我中华’ (*ai wo zhonghua*; love my/our China/Chinese nation), but other than that the text is just like during the Mao era. There is a big family, they all work together, the Han cannot do without the minorities and vice versa⁷. All the old rhetoric is still there, firmly in place. This leads me to believe that no far-reaching decisions have been made on the subject of reforming the ethnic policies.

⁶ PRC State Council White Paper, China's Ethnic Policy and Common Prosperity and Development of All Ethnic Groups, Sept. 27, 2009, available at: <http://china.usc.edu/ShowArticle.aspx?articleID=1907&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1#iii>

⁷ *Ai wo zhonghua*, available at: http://www.seac.gov.cn/gjmw/zt/M2267index_1.htm

5. The new discourse in the media

My aim here is to show that as a result of the efforts of the CCP propaganda machine, now instructed to disseminate Xi’s Chinese Dream discourse, the position of *zhonghua minzu* as a focus point of national identity has increased significantly in recent times.

The following is a paragraph from a newspaper article, from Ürümqi based newspaper Xinjiang Economic Daily (XED), dated 04/06/2014⁸. The article describes the 天山大讲堂 *Tianshan da jiangtang*, which appears to be a series of lectures to Party members in Xinjiang. The following is a short fragment from that newspaper article:

“天山大讲堂”系列讲座自启动以来，深受各族干部群众欢迎，成为新疆各族干部群众增进团结、增进了解、增进感情的重要平台。此次系列讲座，将邀请专家学者，围绕新疆历史、文化、宗教、民族等方面，开展深入交流，帮助大家进一步加深对新疆的了解，增强对伟大祖国的认同感、对中华民族的归属感、对中国特色社会主义的道路自信、理论自信、制度自信。通过系列讲座，不断增强各族干部群众对伟大祖国、中华民族、中华文化、中国共产党、中国特色社会主义的认同，为实现新疆社会稳定和长治久安总目标提供思想保障。

“Meanwhile, hosted by the Xinjiang Autonomous Region Party Committee Propaganda Department, and co-hosted by the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences and Xinjiang Television, the ‘Tianshan Lectures’ are also broadcasted on Xinjiang Satellite TV. Expert scholars will, in the form of lectures, talk to cadres of every ethnicity about **Xinjiang’s historical background**, about the **processes of development of [the region’s] ethnicities’ religion**, [they will] enhance everyone’s **common understanding of [the region’s] history and culture**, [and the will] deepen [everyone’s] understanding of the problems of today’s reality.⁹ [They will] deepen [everyone’s] ability to distinguish right from wrong, and [they will] unceasingly strengthen ‘**The Three Inseparables**’, ‘**The Four Identities**’¹⁰, and ‘**The Four Awarenesses**’ ([Meaning] awareness of the country, awareness of the citizens, awareness of the law, and awareness of modernity). That together we may build our beautiful homeland.”

⁸ Xinjiang Economic Daily, *Tianshan da Jiangtang*, 04/06/2014, available at: <http://epaper.xjjjb.com/xjjjb/20140604/index.htm>. The important detail here is obviously the fact that it was published on June 4th, which is the day that the media are absurdly well-monitored by the government. Anything that gets published on June 4th must be *incredibly* in line with Party requirements.

⁹ It is interesting to note here that history and culture are matters that one can obtain 共识 (*gongshi*; consensus, common understanding) on, thus implying subjectivity, but that, on the other hand, one can obtain 认识 (*renshi*; knowledge, understanding) when it comes to reality, or ‘current affairs’, implying objectivity.

¹⁰ The ‘four identities’ are: 对伟大祖国的认同, 对中华民族的认同, 对中华文化的认同, 对中国特色社会主义道路的认同 (*dui weida zuguo de rentong, dui zhonghua minzu de rentong, dui zhonghua minzu wenhua de rentong, dui zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi daolu de rentong*). This means that the envisioned 公民 (*gongmin*; citizen) must identify himself with: the Great Motherland, the Chinese nation, the culture of the Chinese nation, as well as the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.

Describing the Party's work, and its goals, in Xinjiang, a softer tone is discernable overall. No mention is made of the Han versus minority struggle. Cooperation is promoted, and the Four Identities are mentioned prominently. These, I think, are pivotal here, and its references to *zhonghua minzu* are revealing too. The speaker in this article, Wang Zhengwei, I would say, has felt the influence of the new tone set by Xi Jinping. Perhaps, but we shall probably never know, he has already received formal instructions from the top, informing him on all future ethnicity-related jargon to be employed from now on.

On the other side, examples of the 'old' rhetoric in the media are ample. The archives of the People's Daily are full of useful examples, showing the traditional discourse on the framework of "56 ethnicities in ethnic unity", for example, when then vice premier Hui Liangyu visited Tibet in 2011, People's Daily wrote:

"Vice Premier Hui Liangyu on Thursday stressed the importance of **ethnic unity** and **balanced prosperity** in his visit to southern Tibet's Shannan Prefecture. Hui told officials of the prefecture that they should always **stick to the policy of uniting all ethnic groups** and bringing the prosperity to all ethnic groups fairly. Hui said officials should always bear in mind that the **Han Chinese** and **ethnic minorities** cannot live without each other, and different ethnic minorities are **inter-dependent** on each other. Hui said **development** holds the key to solve China's ethnic issues. He ordered Shannan cadres and officials to seize the opportunity for **development, uphold ethnic unity**, govern well religious affairs, and maintain social stability. The vice premier visited rural families in the county of Nedong, urging local officials to try all sorts of methods to raise the average income of local herders and farmers (People's Daily, July 22, 2011)."

It is certainly not my meaning to argue that the emphasis on *minzu tuanjie* (民族团结; ethnic unity) has disappeared from what I identified as the new *zhonghua minzu*-influenced official discourse. It is as much there in recent government publications and newspapers as it ever was. As we can read in the abovementioned article, this article still stands out, compared to the Xinjiang Economic Daily article on the previous page. Yes, ethnic unity is important. But the overall tone of this last piece is different. It stresses more the differences between the ethnicities, it seems. Whereas the XED article devotes attention to commonality, – which is a major element in constructing nationhood. The latter article implies a difference in hierarchy between the Han and 'the rest', i.e. those that are left behind, but whom now luckily have the Han, who are on a civilizing mission to elevate these villagers to full respectable membership of modern life. And then we get some more of the familiar "Han cannot live without the minorities", and vice versa. Development is also crucial, as the minorities, after all, are poor

farmers and herders, as this text seems to imply. So, money must be spread evenly over these rural areas. As such, these rhetorical elements signal the 'old' paradigm to me.

6. Conclusion

It might be prudent to begin this chapter by trying to answer one of the main research question's more suggestive sub-questions, namely: to what extent might promoting the concept of *zhonghua minzu* and its corresponding version of "Chinese nationalism" contribute to the success in incorporating Xinjiang into the Chinese nation-state? This question has not directly been very central to the thesis' research, as this is impossible to predict, but it is an important question to keep in mind, because the consequences of the possible paradigm shift in the central government's thinking on the ethnic structure most certainly will have a thorough impact on the people in Xinjiang.

The downside to the implementation of the new system, is that it would result in ethnic minorities losing their current privileges. These include, among other things, tax breaks and priority on university admission tests. The immediate consequences of implementing the so-called "Second Generation of Ethnic Policies", as Ma's proposals are known (Leibold, 2013), would probably result in widespread outrage among minorities, but only if this implementation is not gradual enough. If it is done sensibly, it will possibly end up resulting in true equality, true citizenship. And that might well result in the peaceful solution of the ethnic strife that is causing a great deal of suffering right now.

What matters also, is the level of success the central government has had so far in integrating Xinjiang into the Chinese nation-state. One might be inclined to say that here the government has not been successful at all. There is, however, no one true answer to this matter. One just cannot simply rate the extent to which a subdued region has been integrated into the larger political entity which has subdued it. There is really no way to realistically put a number to that. Can we, for instance, estimate the level of assimilation of the Crimean peninsula into the Russian Federation, and express the extent to which this process has been completed in percentages? No, I believe we can not. The same goes for the Chinese central government's efforts to consolidate Beijing's authority over the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Perhaps it can be argued convincingly that, for example, Inner Mongolia – which is another one of those historically un-Chinese border regions contested over with other peoples and which at some point in time also found itself becoming part of the territory of one of China's pre-modern empires – has been more thoroughly integrated into the Chinese nation-state than Xinjiang. Perhaps one can also make certain statements about this more thorough integration on the basis of statistical data – such as the number of violent protests,

number of Han Chinese vis-à-vis Mongolians, levels of Mandarin proficiency, etc. – that might actually imply that this integration is in fact more successful.

Another possible reason one cannot realistically assess the extent of Xinjiang's integration is that it is very difficult to gather reliable statistical data on people's ethnic affiliation, for a number of reasons¹¹. If a Chinese survey were to be held somewhere in Xinjiang asking the people whether or not they would support the notion of a free and independent Xinjiang, it can be imagined that not a lot of people, if any, would answer 'yes' to such a question. It would not matter if the survey was held by officials, an NGO, or by a university, the results would in the end find their way to some branch of government that undoubtedly holds a very conservative perspective regarding Xinjiang independence.

To get back to the possibility of a paradigm shift in ethnic policy making, we must concede that the inner workings of the central government of the People's Republic of China are unknown to us mere mortals, and as such, the questions I asked myself at the start of this project were doomed to remain unanswered. I had to find workable research questions, and with it, a way to link events that we can see happening in the real world, or that we can read about in the news media, to their probable intentions. There I go already, "probable intentions". It is a fool's errand to try to investigate inside the minds of China's top policy makers. What we can do, is using the knowledge that the press is an extension of the government, and look at what is being said in the press. Words are power, and the power is all the Party's. So, if a shift occurs in the thinking of the policy makers, a shift can be discerned in the newspapers. That is the assumption based on which I went out to find out to what extent the promotion of 'The Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation' constitutes a strategy actually aimed at propagating the notion of *zhonghua minzu* in preparation for an impending reconfiguration of the PRC's ethnic policies.

By now, I can answer this question with a measure of confidence. The promotion of the 'Chinese Dream of Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation' does indeed, in the author's view, to some extent represent a paradigm shift in the central government's thinking on China's ethnic problems. As has been pointed out, a new discourse has emerged in the last 18 months. There is an increase in the usage of words like *common identity*, *common goals* (such as achieving the Chinese Dream), and *zhonghua minzu*. The old umbrella-ethnicity has been given a new lease on life, and it features prominently in Xi Jinping's rhetoric.

¹¹ For an example of the difficulties one will encounter when doing a survey in Xinjiang, see: Yee, Herbert. 2005. "Ethnic Consciousness and Identity: A Research Report on Uygur-Han Relations in Xinjiang", *Asian Ethnicity* 6, 1 (Feb.): 35–50.

By now, I am fairly confident that the central government, too, realizes that the current framework, which has been in place for more than 60 years now, is dysfunctional. Ethnic sentiment has, as a direct consequence of the system of ethnic regional autonomy, become entrenched, and has acquired a political, sometimes even secessionist, potential.

A leadership change is an excellent opportunity to implement new policies. The texts that have been analyzed in this thesis have hopefully demonstrated that under the new leadership of Xi Jinping there has occurred a subtle change in the rhetoric. The launch of the Chinese Dream – the shiny gift wrap inside which is ‘hidden’ the real message, that of *zhonghua minzu* – is a spectacular show, but the consequences for the ethnic framework, despite the crystal-clear championing of *zhonghua minzu* over other ethnic affiliations, remain to be seen.

It may, or it may not, signal the dawn of the second generation of ethnic policies. In the meantime, the old framework, however, is still firmly in place, as has also been demonstrated, and these two paradigms are not very compatible. Furthermore, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission has published no new material of the same level of importance as the 2009 White Paper, and all other communication through this branch of government shows no sign that policies are officially changing. This is all we *can* know. We *must* draw the line there. Any further speculation has no place in an academic paper.

By way of a closing remark, I would nonetheless like to express the sincere hope that the central government will re-evaluate its current policies on ethnic affairs. If the government actually implements the reforms, as they are proposed by Professor Ma Rong, on the ethnic framework, and subsequently adjusts the policies that are determined by this rigid framework, then maybe, combined with the ‘guiding hand’ of the education system, when enough time has passed, the ‘dream’ of a unified Chinese nation may become reality, and there will be no more need for military crackdowns on ‘ethnic unrest’.

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