Names Have Memories: History, Semantic Identity and Conflict in Mongolian and Chinese Language Use

NARAN BILIK

Carleton College, USA
nbilik@carleton.edu

ABSTRACT

Nomenclatural tension and pragmatic incongruence underscore the Inner Mongols’ resistance to sinicisation and the process of their integration into the newly constructed nation-state of China. This paper focuses on the interplay between the original sense and the translated meaning of some ethnic, state, and place names that travel inter-lingually between Mongolian and Chinese in modern Inner Mongolian history. It challenges the Chinese nation-building elite’s agenda to depoliticise minzu through lessening, diluting, and assimilating ethnic diversities into Chinese homogeneity.

Keywords: Names, Memory, Language Use, China, Chinese, Mongolian, Minzu, Negotiation

INTRODUCTION

The official Chinese formulation of the nationality question is reflected in the present Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy: ‘The People’s Republic of China is a unitary multinational State created jointly by the people of all its nationalities’ (China 2001: 28). In a similar way, the officially sanctioned discourse of Zhonghua minzu (the Central Florescent/Chinese Nation) in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) emphasises its ‘unity and plurality’ (duoyuan yiti), a process of assimilating the non-Han into Zhonghua minzu (Fei, et al. 1989). Although not formulated as such in the PRC Constitution, the Chinese populace, however, tend to treat ‘zhonghua’ (Chinese) as coterminous with ‘Han,’ in line with the Chinese official discourse in recent history.2 As Atwood argues, ‘The force of the “unified, multinational” formulation lies in its radical dissociation of the idea of nationality (minzu) from that of country (guojia)’ (Atwood 1994). According to an official narrative on minzu, the Chinese (Han) civilisation, which ‘extends backwards in time some 4,000 years’
(Ma, et al. 1980: 1), has come a long way to assimilate other ethnic populations (minzu) and their cultures, shaping what we now call ‘China’ or ‘Zhongguo’ (the Central State). This dominant discourse of Zhonghua minzu tries to show that China’s history is a unified multi-ethnic/nationality creation (GMSWZYS 1982).

If there was once a need for ‘radical dissociation of the idea of nationality (minzu) from that of country (guojia)’ in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) discourse, now a group of nation-building scholars are beginning to call for depoliticising ethnicity by re-associating the idea of nationality (minzu) with that of country (guojia). In 2001 and 2004, two researchers in Beijing published articles dealing with ‘jointnomy’ (sic.), and depoliticising zuqun (Zhu 2001; Ma 2004). The author of the ‘jointnomy’ article argues that autonomy should now be replaced with ‘jointnomy’ (the self-governing national minorities should govern their autonomous regions together with the majority Han, which means literally nullifying minorities’ self-governing rights). The depoliticising article claims that minzu should denote ‘Nation’ only as in the case of ‘the Chinese nation (Zhonghua minzu)’, and the 55 national minorities, identified politically by the central government, should be referred to as zuqun (ethnic group), not minzu, for the sake of depoliticisation. Both these authors, and some others, are trying hard to make state boundaries, national boundaries, and, possibly sooner, linguistic-cultural boundaries, coincide. They are pursuing the idea of a homogenous China.

However, comparing divergent denotations and connotations of Chinese and Mongolian proper names, both in recent history and at present, will help reduce the power, vitality and vigour of these nation-builders’ arguments for depoliticisation of ethnicity. Names of places, states and peoples will testify that both Zhonghua minzu and ‘Zhongguo’ are vulnerable to multiple and multilingual interpretations and are undergoing political reconstruction; that ‘jointnomy’ is out of joint with history and reality; and that minzu is not ‘depoliticisable’.

TRACING ‘CHINA’ AND THE ‘HAN’: A HISTORY OF MULTIPLICITY

The Chinese character guo (‘state’, as used in ‘Zhongguo’ [Central State(s)], now referred to as ‘China’ in English) did not appear in writing until the early Zhou dynasty (1046 BC–256 BC) (Yu 1981). There were three states at the time: 1. ‘Xia’ dynasty (2070 BC–1600 BC), 2. ‘Zhou’, a cultural system, had evolved to the west of Xia, in opposition to another cultural system, which included ‘Yi’ and 3. ‘Shang’ dynasty (1600 BC–1046 BC) that had originated to the east of Xia (Fu 1935). At the time of the Zhou dynasty the concept of the ‘Central States’ (‘Zhongguo’) started to take shape based on the identity of ‘Xia’. Geographically positioned between the Zhou and Shang, the Xia took great pride in their graceful language, and their culture had become the core of early ‘Chinese’ civilisation (Chen 1989). In late Zhou dynasty warring states were contending for supremacy, creating a
situation in which some ‘Yi Di’ (less-than-civilised groups) were assimilated into ‘Xia’; the Qin and Chu, for example, the two previously despised ‘Yi Di’, became two of the seven warring states, all of whom claimed to have inherited Xia culture and thus appropriated the title ‘Zhongguo’ (Chen 1989). The ‘Central State’ is thus foregrounded in topographic symbolism and territorial-cultural centrality in classical Chinese literature. Such semantic distinction, however, is hardly discernable in its English equivalent ‘China’.

Apparently, beginning from the Kingdom of Wei (220–65), an extra term ‘Han’ had to be used in addition to ‘Zhongguo’. According to Chen (1989), those ‘Yi Di’ peoples who were beyond the confines of ‘civilisation’ also had a territorial stake in the ‘Central State.’ That is, ‘Zhongguo’ had been a territorial container for xia and non-xia peoples and cultures from the outset. The non-‘Xia’ used the term ‘Han’ to designate the descendants of the Han dynasty who also lived in the ‘Central States’.

While the term ‘Zhongguo’ was used by multiple cultures as a toponym that denoted a multi-ethnic land, some ethnonyms were also used by various peoples, both inside and outside the ‘Central State’, to designate ‘Zhongguo’. The Tuoba, a subgroup of the Xianbei (a non-Xia people), ruled what is now Northern China for quite some time and was so well-known to the Turkic speaking world that the latter used ‘Tabghach’ and ‘Taughast’ to refer to China (Jia 1989). Actually, while it is believed that the term ‘Han’ comes from the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), people who inhabited the Han territory were actually known as the ‘Qin’ to the people in India and Persia, rather than ‘Han’. The word ‘Qin’ (‘Cin’ or ‘Chin’) is believed to be the root from which the word ‘China’ derives (Jia 1989: 138). The Khitan (‘Qidan’) conquered Northern China and established the Liao dynasty (907–1125). Their military might (wuwei) has left their ethnonym ‘Cathay’ (Khitan), which had become equivalent to the ‘Central State’ in several European languages (Lathan 1958: 10; Jia 1989). Mongols refer to China and the Chinese as Khitad.

Moreover, the term ‘Han’ was used in difference senses in different contexts. The ‘Han’ of the Northern Wei dynasty were different from the ‘Han’ of the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), the latter being a generic term covering the ‘Han (people from Henan and Shandong)’ ‘Bohai’ and ‘Qidan’ who inhabited what had been the Liao territory (Jia 1989). Again, the Mongols of Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) included in the category of ‘Han’ not only ‘Han’ but also Jurchen, Khitan (Qidan), and Koreans, excluding the Han subjects of the southern Song, who were called ‘Nangggyiad’ or ‘Nanren’ (‘southern people’) (Jia 1989). The Manchu word ‘Nikan’ shares the same root ‘Nankia’ (Nangggyiad, cf. Wu Lan 2000: 787) with Mongolian ‘Nangggyiad’, and both refer to Southern Han.

We can observe the disparity between China and the Han more clearly during the Qing dynasty (1636–1911) established by the Manchu. For the Chinese, to be conquered ‘by a foreign people whom they considered below themselves was a bitter pill to swallow’ (Elliott 2001: 21). In 1730, a native scholar of Hunan, Zeng
Jing, acquired a copy of a secret treatise ‘exposing the unworthiness of the Manchus to rule’, authored by a dead scholar Lü Liuliang from Zhejiang who claimed that the ancestors of the Manchus were described as barbarians as early as the Zhou dynasty of classical times, and therefore ‘the Manchus themselves must still be barbarous in character’ (Crossley 1997: 110). Interestingly, the Yongzheng Emperor rebutted Lü’s accusation by writing the Dayi juemi lu (Record of great righteousness to dispel confusion), insisting that the Manchus had been civilised through centuries of exposure to Confucianism (Spence 2001; Crossley 1997: 110–12; Elliott 2001: 347). The Manchu rulers were clearly fighting to define ‘Central State’ as a domain open to non-Han and to maintain their dominance. The notion of ‘Central State’ was understood quite differently in the meaning systems of Chinese, Manchu and Mongolian.15

With a history of multilingual interpretations, today’s ‘China’, both as a notion and as an entity, is still open to such pluralism. ‘Polyphonic’ narrations (Bakhtin 1981) produce contextually structured remembrance and amnesia (Halbwachs 1992; Connerton 1989). Structures in their turn are structured by state power, class formations, and even corporeal treatment including torture and death. Multilingual versions of ‘China’ do not allow for the alleged existence of a homogeneous ‘Central State’; instead, it is multiethnic and is defined on the periphery (Wang 1997). According to Chen Liankai, in ancient times ‘Zhongguo’ (Central State) meant the place where the king lives; the centre of civilisation surrounded by barbarian tribes; the joint community of the Xia, the Shang and the Zhou of ancient China.16 It meant a ritual centre of enormous complexity that both despised those non-Han nomads on the peripheries and invited them to ‘convert’ to ‘the Central Efflorescent (culture)’. ‘China’ as a concept and an entity has been defined and redefined through interactions and encounters between the Centre and the Periphery, between the earthbound and the seaward people (Lattimore 1951; Wittfogel 1957),17 and between China and foreign countries.18

In Japan’s modern period, the term shina was used by nativist (kokugaku) scholars to separate Japan from ‘the barbarian/civilised or outer/inner implication of the term chuugoku’; in the late Qing period, Chinese revolutionaries used it to distinguish themselves from the Manchus; and in early-twentieth-century Japan, shina ‘signified China as a troubled place mired in its past, in contrast to Japan, a modern Asian nation’ (Tanaka 1993: 3–4).

Modern history also saw the Sino-foreign interactive creations of new frontiers before, during, and after the Opium War (1840–42); a newly conceptualised ‘China’ emerged at a time when the West was gaining wide-ranging supremacy over the rest. New ideas, such as those of science and democracy, and new technologies, such as telegraphy and mechanised printing technology, were borrowed and localised to match, measure and manage Chinese affairs.

Between 1918 and 1919, Sun Yat-sen wrote The International Development of China, which became the second part of Jianguo fan glie (Nation-building
Strategies). The author planned to relocate 10 million Han people over a span of 10 years in Southwest China, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. This long-term plan for colonising Mongolia and Xinjiang was designed for demobilised soldiers in the future (Sun 1998: 175–6). In Sun’s vision ethnic minorities in China could not stand on their own and should be assimilated into the Han, forming a big minzu and therefore a homogenous nation-state (Sun 1994: 272).

PLACE NAMES, STATE NAMES AND ETHNIC NAMES

One way to read the multiple versions of ‘China’ is to revisit names of the state, places and ethnicities. Place names, for example, can help construct history and social traditions by maintaining norms; they are a form of cultural activity and acts of remembering and imagining. ‘We are the place-worlds we imagine’ (Basso 1996: 7). Names have memories; they reveal ethnonational relationships in the past by allowing us to revisit history.

Sun’s new vision of a China as ‘a single, indivisible country held in common by five nationalities’ is a far cry from ‘Mongolian political theory of the time’. Under Qing rule, the Mongols, as well as Manchus, Han, Tibetans and Muslims, were each distinguished with their own language, religious and cultural traditions and their own native institutions, and ‘thus came under no pressure to trade in their own identity for an all-imperial one’ (Atwood 2002: 37). At that time, the Mongols were an ulus (state/realm, people, tribe, cf. Sechenchogtu 1988: 410–11), ‘existing alongside China (Khitad), Tibet (Töbed or Tanggud) and so on’ (Atwood 2002: 37). Here Khitad referred to both Han and the realm of China ‘defined by its traditional eighteen provinces; ‘Mongolia was thus part of the Qing empire (Ching ulus) but not part of China (Khitad) (Atwood 2002: 38).

Mongolian political sensibility has had a profound impact on how the Mongols, both in Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia, conceptualise their relations with China and the Chinese. Seeking to establish an independent Mongol state, Prince De, a Mongolian nationalist leader during the 1930s and early 1940s, resorted to a language game in naming his Mongolian Autonomous State (1941–1945). Calling it Menggu Zizhi Guo in Chinese would not work, because guo connotes an independent state. So he used an alternative archaic Chinese word bang which also means nation or state or country. There is, however, only one Mongolian word – ulus – for both guo and bang, ‘The formal title of this new regime became Monggol-un Obesuben Jasakhu Ulus, a title satisfactory to Mongol patriotic feelings’ (Jagchid 1999: 259).

In the Mongolian language used in independent Mongolia such post-1911 politico-nomenclatural complications had simply no place.

Official usage in Mongolia for ‘China’ fluctuated along with Sino-Mongolian relations. When relations went well, as in 1925–27 and in 1945, the Mongolian government scrupulously referred to China as Dumdadu ulus or even more
officially Dumdadu irgen ulus, but when they went badly or indifferently, as in all other periods, the Mongolian government referred to China as simply Khitad or Khitad ulus. Only after the period of 1949–51, when Mongolia’s bureaucracy finally switched to Cyrillic and China changed from a Republic to a People’s Republic, was this ambiguity resolved. Influenced no doubt by Russian Kitai for China, the official translation of the People’s Republic of China in Mongolia become Bügüde Nairamdakhu Khitad Arad Ulus, finally eliminating Dumdadu ulus as a usable term in Mongolia proper. (Atwood 1994)

In fact, this was also how the Chinese nationalists conceptualised China initially. The Zhonghua to be revived in Sun Yat-sen’s slogan: ‘Drive out the dalu (northern barbarians) and Revive Zhonghua’ obviously did not include the Manchu and the Mongols – the dalu. However, the Republic of China was defined as a ‘quinque-zu harmony’ (wuzu gonghe; zu could mean nationalities, races, peoples, ethnicities). After the CCP established the PRC, Zhonghua is redefined as consisting 56 zu.

In this new imagined community, the Inner Mongols became a zu, deprived of their ulus, which is now reserved by the Republic of Mongolia, an independent state – Mongol Ulus. Meanwhile, for Mongolia, Khitad ulus no longer refers to a Han-inhabited country; it is also inhabited by the Mongols within Inner Mongolia and elsewhere, though these Mongols continue to distinguish themselves from Khitad/Han.

Nomenclatural sinification is no less important than political and territorial sinification. Yan Xishan, the warlord of Shanxi province, complained that the Mongolian place name Chahar has no meaning and should be changed (Atwood 2002: 815). Long before that, Hohhot, now capital of Inner Mongolia, was given the Chinese name of Guihua (Return to Civilisation) and Suiyuan (Pacify the Distant). Urumqi, now capital of Xinjiang, was given the Chinese name of Dihua (Enlightening the Distant). There are still some survivals of place names that testify to the Chinese attitudes towards the non-Chinese. The capital of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region is Nanning – meaning ‘bring tranquility to the south’; Xining, the capital of Qinghai province, means ‘bringing tranquility to the west’; Ningxia in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region means ‘tranquilising the Tagut kingdom or Xixia; and Liaoning in Liaoning province means ‘bringing tranquility to the non-Chinese Liao dynasty’ (Bulag 2002b: 203).

The translation/transcription of toponyms directly reflects how history should be interpretively remembered, and so do ethnonyms. Chinese logographic–pinyin system is an effective tool to set new ethnic-state boundaries. The Tai in China are called Dai to distinguish them from their kinsmen outside China (who are called Tai); the Kirghiz inside China are called Ke’erkezi and outside China they are called Ji’erjisi; the Khmer inside China are called Kem or outside China they are called Gaomian; the Evenki inside China are called Ewenke and outside China they are called Aiwenji. Editors at Sinomaps Press in Beijing replaced the phrase ‘autonomous region’ in place names with the Chinese
pinyin ‘zizhiqu’, ‘Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region’ with ‘Nei Mongol Zizhiqu’; ‘Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region’ with ‘Xinjiang Uygur Zizhiqu’; ‘Tibet Autonomous Region’ with ‘Xizang Zizhiqu’ (Hao 2002). This change has made ‘autonomy’ unrecognisable and therefore meaningless for English readers.

On the other hand, in response to sinification, the non-Chinese elites have their own ‘arts of resistance’ (Scott 1992). A Mongolian professor at the Central Institute of Nationalities (now the Central University of (for) Nationalities) has been writing annually to the top leaders to try to convince them that the Mongols are not offspring of legendary Kings of Yan and Huang;24 instead, they are descendants of Chinggis Khan. This is an example of ethnic phenomena being produced by ‘intertwining acts of naming others and naming oneself’ (Pamela, Helen, and Sutton 2006: 1).

Manipulations through nomenclatural hybridising (Bulag 2002a: 2–3), hazing and kidnapping are kinds of ‘cultural technologies of rule.’ This state-controlled, Han-centric appellation system that consists of naming, renaming, name translation and compulsory name using facilitates the process of dehyphenisation of the non-Han into the Han.

TRANSLATING MINZU

China’s communist history is full of ‘translation’ issues, that is, how Marxist-Leninist terminologies should be ‘accurately’ rendered to provide pragmatic guidance to the revolutionary cause. Recently, the term minzu has stirred up great debates amongst Chinese scholars, communists and non-communists alike. The word minzu can mean ‘peoples’, ‘ethnic group’, ‘nationality’, ‘minority’ depending on context. It can also mean ‘nation-state’. However, since the usage of minzu by the CCP has been under the direct influence of Stalin’s ‘four-common definitions’ of natsia, which emphasises common language, common territory, common economic life and common psychological make-up based on shared history/culture (Stalin 1942: 12), it is helpful to briefly exam its performative meaning.

According to the Stalinist Soviet nationality theory, the formation of natsia is based on one important precondition, that it evolves only at the prime stage of capitalism, which has created a huge proletarian army, thus laying the class foundation for building a modern state. The pre-capitalism people should, in this theory, better be called narodnast’ (pre-capitalism) or plemia (pre-class). Chinese communists, however, deviated from this hegemonic theory in their nationality policy. Altogether 56 minzu, according to its original English translation ‘nationality’ (Cf. the old title of ‘the State Commission of Nationalities Affairs’), were identified from over 400 ethnic-claims, and these ‘nationalities’ are politico-governmental minzu and units for preferential treatment (rights to
territorial autonomy, getting extra credits for entering a university, enjoying quotas for political promotion at local levels and so on). Importantly, all the 56 official minzu, large or small, developed or underdeveloped, modern or ‘primitive’, with or without writing systems, are equally called nationalities, and are not discriminated by terms like, in Russian, narodnast’ or plemia. However, as it turns out, on many occasions minzu is usually reserved for national minorities, not for the Han. For instance, minzu daxue (university of/for nationalities) means universities for national minorities; minzu ganbu refers to minority cadres and minzu gongzuo national minorities work. The State Nationalities Affairs Commission is responsible only for dealing with affairs that involve national minorities, not the Han.

In the latter half of the 1990s the Chinese government replaced ‘nationality’ with ‘ethnic(ity)’ in its translation of minzu. Policymakers argue, often by proxy of academic publications and translations, that consciousness of minzu should be weakened or diluted for the sake of modernisation, which requires homogeneity rather than heterogeneity. The English version of Guojia minzu shiwu weiyuanhui, which was State Nationalities Affairs Commission of the People’s Republic of China (cf. Zhang and Yuan 1994: 322), has officially been changed to State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People’s Republic of China. At about the same time, the journal of Minzu tuanjie, the official journal dedicated to minzu affairs, has also changed its English title from ‘Nationalities Unity’ to ‘Ethnic Unity’. These changes have broad political implications.

Ma Rong, a professor based at Peking University, published an article in the Journal of Peking University (Ma 2004) calling for ‘depoliticising’ zuqun and following models for coping with the ‘ethnic question’ (zuqun wenti), which have been developed in the United States, Canada and elsewhere. He insists that minzu (which he translates as ‘nation’) and zuqun (which he translates as ‘ethnic group’) are very different concepts: minzu purportedly involves nationalism and national movements of self-determination beginning in seventeenth-century Europe, but zuqun is said to have appeared only in the twentieth century and is more popular in the United States as it denotes group identities based on particular history and cultural traditions (including language, religion, etc.). Confusing a ‘multinational state’ with a ‘polyethnic state’ (Kymlicka 1995; Bulag 2002a), Ma believes that the national minorities in China are largely similar to racial and ethnic minorities in other countries (such as the United States), thereby necessitating a terminological rectification to match the reality of China’s national structure (minzu jiegou). Ma calls his newly named ethnic groups in China ‘subcultural groups’ (ya wenhua qunti), meaning they are not even autonomous cultural groups but are branches of the Culture of the Chinese Nation (Zhonghua minzu). What is more, he claims that this nomenclatural change will help avoid misunderstandings due to the close connection of ‘nationalities’ (the old translation of shaoshu minzu) with nationalism and rights of national self-determination, which will bring instability and separatism. Ma also recog-
nises, however, that both ‘nation’ and ‘ethnic group’ are places on a continuum and that there is no absolute demarcation between them, contradicting his own claim that ‘nation’ and ‘ethnic group’ are very different concepts.

Ma’s depoliticising voice echoes that of Zhu Lun, who asserts that minzu zizhi (nationality autonomy) should be replaced with minzu gongzhi (jointnomy, sic) (Zhu 2001). He claims that minority areas, especially Autonomous Regions, are inhabited by many Han people who govern together with the minorities. Therefore these areas/regions are not that minority-only autonomy; they are Han-and-non-Han ‘jointnomy’. He explains that ‘jointnomy’ has two levels: (1) the ‘jointnomy’ of the state by all minzus, and (2) the ‘jointnomy’ of areas co-inhabited by various minzu by all the local minzu involved. He even makes a bold morphological guess at the word ‘republic’, a keyword in his formulation: the modern political history of Europe started with autonomy and ended with republic; ‘republic’ is a ‘compound word’ (fuhe ci), which consists of ‘public’, meaning ‘shared by all people’, and ‘re-’, a prefix meaning ‘again, return’ (chongxin, huifu).29 ‘Republic’ means ‘return to public’, he declares, and we have entered a post-autonomy age. He hints that national autonomy should give way to ‘jointnomy’ to guarantee national unity and integrity of the state.

Zhu’s remedial prescription for a ‘post-autonomy’ age aims at imposing a singular, unilinear evolutionary Narrative and History as told and written in Chinese, and at obscuring minority narratives and histories written in their own languages. Zhu, like Ma, is actively trying to play a nation-building role. They both think that it is high time to complete the grand project of sinifying all national minorities to realise the century-old dream for one country, one nation, and one language-culture.

This type of discourse is not new. As Prasenjit Duara writes, freedom only belongs to those nations that possess ‘the fullness of History’. ‘Those without History’ are ‘non-nations’ and can have no such claims; nations are entitled to destroy them and bring them Enlightenment (Duara 1995: 20). These depoliticisers are merely parroting the imperial attitudes of those conquering nation-states towards India and China in modern history. In the same way, according to these depoliticisers, China’s national minorities can either be granted nationality (less than nation/non-nations) status (that is, when it is ‘necessary to do business with them’), or ‘diluting’ them into ethnicity, that is, when time is ripe and when they are dispensable for the sake of ‘modernisation’. Just as Victoria was Queen of England and Empress of India, the Han is made the ‘crown’ of Zhonghua minzu and the ‘canopy’ of the 56 minzu.30

As we discussed above, the differing denotations and connotations in Chinese and Mongolian nomenclatures testify that ‘Zhongguo’ and ‘Zhonghua minzu’ are open to a wide spectrum of interpretations; it has been constructed on the basis of multiple, diversified histories that are written or told in Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur and many languages other than Chinese. Despite the official narratives of a unifying China with 4,000 years of fixed history, the ‘Central State’, both
physically and nominally, is a fluid and fluctuating entity, defined, and redefined, constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed at multiple centres and with different boundaries. Our historic, multi-lingual nomenclatural examination will delegitimatise the ill-conceived efforts of the nation-building intelligentsia who, by re-associating minzu with guojia and depoliticising minzu into zuqun, try to ‘homogenise’ ‘Zhongguo’ and ‘Zhonghua minzu’. We need to rescue from ‘the repressive teleology of the History of the nation’ ‘the ways in which the past is meaningful to the present’ (Duara 1995: 16).

NOTES

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1‘Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi quanguo gezu renmin gongtong dizao de tongyi de duo minzu guojia.’ This Autonomy Law was adopted at the Second Session of the Sixth National People’s Congress on 31 May 1984, amended in accordance with the Decision on the Amending the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy made at the Twentieth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People’s Congress on 28 February 2001.

2Cf. note 27.

3There is no proper translated equivalent for the Chinese word minzu. The word is so polysemous that it often carries conflicting meanings. First of all, China is one minzu (nation); second, this minzu contains 56 different minzu (previously nationalities, or, recently, ethnic groups). The word minzu is still being redefined pragmatically according to the vicissitudes of international relations and those of the Han and the non-Han. Scholars in China differ over the English translations of minzu (Zhou 1998). I would agree with Kymlicka (1995) and Bulag (2002) that a ‘multinational state’, involving ‘previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures’ which were incorporated into ‘a large state’ and as a result of which cultural diversity was created, is fundamentally different from a ‘polyethnic state’, in which case ‘cultural diversity arises from individual and familial migration. Hence, in the former case, the incorporated cultures are ‘national minorities’; I would use the Chinese pinyin ‘minzu’ to avoid complications due to differing translations and disputed interpretations. Another critical point for further understanding China’s minzu cannot be overlooked: their identification and recognition depends, in the final analysis, on the State’s will.

4In May 1871, the Qing official Zhang Deyi, who accompanied the first official embassy to Europe, questioned the Europeans ‘who know very well that my country is called the Da Qing Guo or the Zhonghua [the Central Efflorescent States] but insist on calling it “China”, “la Chine”, “la Cina”, [sic] “Shina”, etc. Over the past four thousand years, we have never used the toponym ‘China’ [to designate our country]. On what basis do the Westerners call my country by that name?’ (Zhang 1982: 181–2). There is a referential disconnection between Western languages, Chinese, Mongolian and other languages such as Uyghur when the notion of ‘China’ is involved. In English ‘China’ can refer to a territorial landmass, a political entity, and a peoplehood. Hereafter I will use ‘Han’ in the sense of peoplehood for the word ‘China’; ‘Central State’ in its sense of political entity or, some-
times, territorial landmass. We need to keep in mind, however, that the Chinese word guo as in ‘Zhongguo’ (Central State) can be translated differently into English as ‘country’, ‘state’ and ‘nation’ (peoplehood) according to context (DDILCASS 2002: 738). The semantic field of both ‘China’ and ‘Han’, however, has undergone complicated changes in history, and therefore, in the following section, we outline such changes and define a consistent (if we can) conceptual framework in the use of ‘China’ and ‘Han’ here.

There are two ways to translate ‘Zhongguo’: one is the ‘Central States’, which is used as a geographical term, referring to several states that are located at the ‘centre’ in ancient times; the other is the ‘Central State’, which is used as a political term, emphasising a unified nation-state.

Such self-governing rights are mostly symbolic. Taking Inner Mongolia as an example, for the past 35 years the CCP secretary, who wields ultimate political power, is always appointed by the CCP central committee and is always a Han. The nomination of chairpersonship of the autonomous region has to be approved by the central government. Demographically, due to immigration, the Han population makes up 85% of the total population in Inner Mongolia. As a result, Mongolian speakers have a much lower chance of finding a job in the autonomous region than Chinese speakers. Though recently some changes have taken place, in the past ministries of the central government had controlled important local resources such as petroleum and forestry.

After the founding of PRC the government needed to establish highest power-holder the People’s Congress, that is represented by all nationalities (minzu), politically realising Marxist idea of proletarian dictatorship. However, nobody at that time could convincingly tell how many nationalities there were and how many languages they spoke. Starting in 1950 the PRC government sent out a ‘Central Government Visiting Team’ (Zhongyang fangwen tuan) to travel around to publicise CCP nationality policies, and investigate ethnonyms, population, languages and history of the nationalities (Fei 1996). As a top priority, the CCP launched the minzu Identification Project, which came up with 56 minzu. Signifying symbolic possession and political ownership of national minorities by the PRC, this grand project engaged thousands of professors, students and officials, and lasted about 20 years (1950s–1970s) (Guldin 1994: 105–108; Gladney 1998: 11–24; Harrell 2001: 26, 35, 40). The above account by Fei Xiaotong and the implementation of the minzu Identification Project serves as a mocking reminder for those depoliticisers: the identification of 56 minzu is based primarily on political considerations, namely, ‘realising Marxist idea of proletarian dictatorship’, and therefore cannot be depoliticised.

In his article, Ma calls for replacing minzu with zuqun (ethnic group) when referring to the 56 minzu. As we know, the 56 minzu have been identified according to political needs and are very different from ‘politically innocent’ zuqun (a recent neologism). Had the 56 minzu (with political and territorial autonomy) turned so easily to subcultural zuqun (having their political and territorial autonomy depoliticised), it would have either been a wonder created with a magic formula, or simply a redundancy – depoliticising is not concerned with whether you call it minzu or zuqun. What is more, if zuqun is a subcultural group (meaning politically already innocent), as Ma claims, then why does he bother to depoliticise it? Is it a witch-hunt? He should have been trying to depoliticise minzu, not zuqun. Depoliticising zuqun is a misformulation.

One Han professor at the Central University of Nationalities wrote to the central government lobbying for the removal of the Central University of Nationalities; another Han researcher at the Institute of Nationality Studies (now the Institute of Ethnology &
Anthropology) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences also proposed to the central government that the national autonomous system should be repealed or further divided. Such actions were beyond imagination in the past, except during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). They were not punished and continue to enjoy their ‘freedom of speech’.

Though Ma, the author of the depoliticising article, is trying to smuggle zuqun into the discourse of minzu and to replace minzu with it, his usage of zuqun is deviant from common usage in Chinese when referring to the 56 minzu. While he is calling for depoliticising zuqun, the actual signified is still minzu. We will come back to further discuss it later in this article.

Chen Liankai believes that the Yi were coterminous with the Shang, which existed in the west of what is now Shandong province and the northeast of what is now Henan province. (Chen 1989)

The people of Zhou regarded themselves as descendants of Xia, and their state belonged therefore to the ‘Central State’. The very name of ‘Zhongguo’ (‘Central State’) also appeared in stone inscriptions that chronologically belonged to the Zhou dynasty (Chen 1989).

Northern Wei dynasty 386–534; Eastern Wei dynasty 534–50; Western Wei dynasty 535–56.

According to Qian Daxin, a well-known scholar of the Qing, the boundaries between the ‘Han’ and the ‘Hanren’ were between those of the Song dynasty and the Jin dynasty (1115–1234) (Jia 1989: 148).

Despite challenges from Han scholars such as Lü Liuliang, the Qing government used ‘Qing’ and ‘Zhongguo’ coterminously in treaties signed with foreign countries. (Luokaqi Diqiu 2002) and on its world maps (Liu 2004: 126). According to Christopher Atwood’s research, as a translation of the Chinese ‘Zhongguo’ the Mongolian term Dumdadu ulus appeared in the history of the Mongolian nobility written in 1735 by the Eight-Banners bannerman Lomi, and in the writings of Injannashi (1837–1892) from southeast Inner Mongolia whose Khökhe Sudur or “Blue Chronicle” of 1871 exercised a tremendous influence on those Mongols familiar with Chinese literary culture. However, both Lomi and Injannashi limited Dumdadu ulus to the area south of the Great Wall, and ‘both continued to speak of Mongolia as a separate ulus or realm’ (Atwood 2002: 41).


Lattimore (1951, 1962) and Wittfogel (1957), who had experience in China, provided us with useful historical accounts of China and its ethnicity. Their works arguably help us examine the creation of ethnicity at the margin of China. A hydraulic organisation appeared at the margin of interaction between geography and mankind; a history of ethnicity was created along the marginal divide of the Great Wall of China.

The determining consideration, however, is not the political factor alone but the working out in combination of all the complex potentialities of the new age. A crude isolation of political arguments is untenable; the next chapter of China’s history will have more in it than a record of struggle for geographical expansion between automata marked “Russian communism” and “Japanese imperialism”. It is the Westernising of China’s own ancient civilisation that will in fact be decisive’ (Lattimore 1951: 9).

The establishment of the XPCC (Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps) between
1952 and 1954, comprising over 170,000 military personnel (Zhang and He 1999), has partially realised Sun’s plan. There is still well over a two-million-strong PCC presence in Xinjiang today (Bovingdon 2004: 18, 24, 26–28).

For the official name of the Republic of China (Zhonghua minguo), with Sun Yat-sen as the first president, ‘republic’ was translated into Mongolian as irgen ulus, which ‘came across to many if not most Mongols as ‘the Han [or ethnic Chinese] realm’ (Atwood 1994). The word irgen (subject or commoner) ‘had also come to mean “Ethnic Chinese” throughout much of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia’ (Atwood 1994).

The revolutionaries who overthrew the Qing realm had been originally motivated not only by republican and egalitarian beliefs, but also by a deep revulsion against the rule of China by an alien people, the Manchus. Thus in the early days of the Republicans’ military government in 1911–12, their first flag consisted of the eighteen balls of China proper, on a red field; red was the color of the Han’ (Atwood 2002: 39).

In 1696 the Kangxi emperor of the Qing launched a successful campaign north of the Gobi against the Zunghars led by Galdan. The emperor then used the town Guihua as a staging post. ‘Guihua’ was a name bestowed by the Ming court to the Altan Khan’s settlement. In the mid-1730s, two kilometres to Guihua’s northwest, the garrison of Suiyuan Town was built (Tighe 2005: 13).

The Qing court named what is now Urumqi (capital of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) Dihua in 1765 (www.xinhuanet.com 2004).

The Han Chinese, both inside China and overseas, regard themselves as descendants of King Yan and King Huang, who are legendary figures in Chinese history. Though classical Chinese records such as Shiji [Records of the Historian] by Sima Qian (145 BC–?) would trace the ancestry of some northern peoples such as Xiongnu to King Huang (Huangdi), such a claim is rarely seen in Mongolian historiography. It is possible that the Xiongnu made a pragmatic ancestral claim, if Sima Qian was not dissembling, in the same way many non-Han / non-Chinese would adopt Han / Chinese names out of utilitarian consideration (Bilik 2002).


Ma replaces minzu with zuqun in Chinese when it deals with (1) minorities; (2) what was ‘nationality’ in the sense of minzu in the old official English formulation.

He ignores the fact that ‘re-’ comes from Latin ‘res’, meaning ‘thing,’ ‘entity.’
The Chinese adopted ‘Enlightenment History as their own and pursues its inseparability from the project of creating a national subject evolving to modernity’ (Duara 1995: 25).

Before it had been used to refer to the ‘Central State’, the Mongolian term Dumdadulu ulus could denote Mongolia itself, according to Atwood. ‘[T]raditional Mongolian geography divided the world familiar to the Mongols into five realms, each with a characteristic colour, with the blue Mongols in the middle.’ The eighteenth century East Mongol authors Dharma Güüshi and Rachipungsug referred to Mongolia as Dumdalu gool ulus [middle centre realm] and Dumdalu yekhe ulus [great middle realm] respectively (Atwood 1994).

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