

## THE SINIFICATION OF CHINA

HOW THE MINORITIES ARE BEING MERGED INTO ONE NATION

Jyrki Kallio



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- The long-term aim of the Communist Party is to make China unified, and the most recent tool for this is the creation a Chinese nation. This term was included in the Constitution last year, which contradicts the definition of China as a multi-national state.
- Unifying China includes promoting a Chinese identity through history and culture. The current borders and ethnic composition of China are presented as the results of natural processes. History is written from the viewpoint of the Han Chinese and their relations with the border regions. Culture is discussed in a similar Han-centric manner.
- The Party has set “Chinese values” against “universal values” and religions. It demands religions to be Sinified in order to alleviate any risks they might pose to national unity.
- Most concretely, the creation of a Chinese nation is affecting the people in Xinjiang. This has given rise to concerns in other countries. The Sinification of minority nationalities may potentially become a new stumbling block in China’s relations with Western states.



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### INTRODUCTION

The Communist Party of China (CPC) is obsessed with national unity. According to the traditional and still largely prevailing understanding of history in China, without unity, there would be chaos, as was always the case during periods of disunity. Similarly, the ability to establish and maintain unity is the single most important criterion for measuring a ruler's success. While the Chinese empire fell more than a hundred years ago, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has existed for 70 years, nation-building is still ongoing in China. This is because national identity in a multi-ethnic state is hard to define, and because issues related to sovereignty and territorial integrity remain touchy, predominantly with regard to Taiwan and the South China Sea. There are also vocal supporters of the independence of Tibet and "East Turkestan" (Xinjiang), especially outside of China.

The CPC seem to have intensified their efforts to unify all the people living in China under one Chinese Nation. This contradicts the Chinese Constitution to some extent, which defines China as a multi-national state. The creation of a Chinese nation requires the boosting of a Chinese identity, which is taking place through campaigns aimed at "harmonizing" the Chinese, including the Sinification of religions. The consequences of these actions are most clearly visible in Xinjiang. International concern is growing over the measures undertaken there, and the term "cultural genocide" has even been used to describe the situation.

This begs the question of why China has chosen to resort to such measures in spite of all the risks, such as the alienation of its Muslim neighbours, possible sanctions by the international community, and a domestic backlash in the form of a cycle of violence. This Briefing Paper argues that the answers are indicative of the Party's priorities, and aims to shed light on why China has chosen this path. The paper also points out that despite the power of the CPC, China is not an intellectual monolith. When it comes to questions relating to the Chinese nation and Chinese identity, China also has its fair share of dissenting and critical voices.

### THE CHINESE PEOPLE, A MULTINATIONAL NATION, AND THE CHINESE NATION

Both the invention of the Chinese nation and classifications of ethnic groups are modern constructs, dating back to the revolutionaries of the late 19th century. The concept "Chinese nation", *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族) in Chinese, was coined by Liang Qichao (1873–1929) in 1902. He used the term to refer to all the nationalities within China. Once established in 1912, the Republic of China recognized five ethnic groups within the country: the Han, Hui (i.e. Muslims), Mongols, Manchus, and Tibetans. In April 1920, the founding father of the Republic, Dr Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) wrote: "We must merge all the nationalities in China into one Chinese nation."<sup>1</sup> That was the rallying cry for Chinese nation-building.

In the People's Republic, inspired by the ethnic classifications and ethnicity-based administrative divisions in the Soviet Union, the number of nationalities was expanded to fifty-six. According to its constitution (Preamble), "[t]he People's Republic of China is a unitary multi-national state built up jointly by the people of all its nationalities". In practice, this is reflected in the system of administrative regions, which include autonomous regions designated for ethnic minorities. Five are at the level of a province, the two largest of which are Xinjiang and Tibet.

Consequently, the preferred moniker used by the CPC has traditionally been "the Chinese people", *Zhongguo renmin* (中国人民) in Chinese, referring to all people living in China. However, this moniker has slowly been giving way to the "Chinese nation" in recent decades. In 2012, Party leader Xi Jinping stated that the goal of the China Dream is "the grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". When this goal became enshrined in the PRC Constitution in 2018, the concept "Chinese nation" also appeared. The fact that both terms are used in the Constitution is problematic,

<sup>1</sup> Li Xisuo, "Liang Qichao shi tichu 'Zhonghua minzu' chengwei de diyi ren", *Renmin wang*, 9 February 2006, <http://theory.people.com.cn/BIG5/49157/49163/4089792.html>; Sun Yat-sen's speech in Shanghai, November 1920, in *Sun Zhongshan Quanjī* 1, *Zhonghua Shuju* 1981: 394.

as one nation and a multi-national state are potentially at odds.

## THE CHINESE NATION IN HISTORY

In the Chinese context, the “Chinese nation” is an ambiguous concept, firstly for linguistic reasons. In Chinese, the same word, *minzu*, stands for both a nationality (an ethnic group) and a nation. In 1988, renowned Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005) attempted to remedy the situation by suggesting that the Chinese nation is “unified but pluralistic”, *yiti duoyuan* (一体多元) in Chinese. In his view, China is pluralistic because it has over fifty *minzu*, and unified because all of those make up the Chinese *minzu*.<sup>2</sup>

The second reason is related to historiography. The CPC has reinvented history for its own nation-building purposes. According to the state-approved histories, regions like Xinjiang have been a part of China since time immemorial, while in reality the Chinese empire extended its *de facto* rule to the outlying border regions only some 300 years ago. The name Xinjiang actually means “New Frontier”. Outspoken Chinese historian Ge Jianxiong has sarcastically noted that, by the same token, if Xinjiang, Tibet, (Inner) Mongolia and Taiwan are considered integral parts of China, China should oppose the independence of North Korea or Vietnam, as they also used to be – at one time or another – parts of the Chinese empire.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the politicization of history is being taken to new extremes. Xinjiang is officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region after its largest ethnic group, the Uyghurs. While diverse in origin, the Uyghurs commonly identify with their Central Asian neighbours, and they are indeed one of the oldest Turkic-speaking peoples in the region. Nevertheless, according to *Global Times* (26 August 2018), Yasim Sadiq, the mayor of the largest city in Xinjiang, Ürümqi, has said: “The Uyghur people are members of the Chinese family, not descendants of the Turks, let alone [have] anything to do with Turkish people.” No wonder that the CPC organ, *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily), had to explain on 28 October 2018 that historical facts are less important than their correct interpretation: “In order

to correctly understand the history of Xinjiang, one must not focus on the study of historical details. Instead, one should reach a deep understanding on the CPC Central Committee’s views and resolutions regarding Xinjiang’s nationalities, history, culture, and religion.”

China’s State Council published a policy paper on 18 March 2019 entitled “The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang”, which states that “multi-ethnic unification has been the norm in China’s historical development, and therefore Xinjiang has always been part of a unitary multi-ethnic China”. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes that the Uyghurs “are not descendants of the Turks” but “came into being in the long process of migration and ethnic integration”.

For the CPC, the importance of controlling historiography is manifested in the mammoth project dedicated to writing the history of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), launched in 2003 and now nearing completion. Every dynasty has tasked itself with writing the history of the preceding dynasty in order to justify its own rise to power, but the official history of the last imperial dynasty, the Qing, has been missing. As the borders of modern China are predominantly based on the borders of the Qing dynasty, this project is vital in further cementing the official view that those borders were not achieved by conquest but peacefully and naturally.<sup>4</sup> An editorial in the *Renmin Ribao* from 14 January 2019 stressed that China must “firmly grasp the discursive power regarding Qing history research” for the sake of promoting “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, namely CPC rule.

## HAN CHAUVINISM

The biggest challenge in promoting the idea of a Chinese nation is the predominance of the Han Chinese in both Chinese history and contemporary demographics. In Chinese parlance, all of the other nationalities besides the Han are “minority nationalities”. This echoes ancient histories which, as a rule, distinguished between the “civilized” people living on the central plains, namely the ancestors of the Han, and the “barbarians” in the peripheries. Mao Zedong shared this

2 Fei Xiaotong, “Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of the Chinese People”, The Tanner Lecture on Human Values delivered at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 15 and 17 November 1988, [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/f/fei90.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/f/fei90.pdf).

3 Ge Jianxiong, *Tongyi yu fenlie – Zhongguo lishi de qishi (zengdingban)*, Zhonghua Shuju 2008: 241–243.

4 Crossley, Pamela Kyle, “Xi’s China is steamrolling its own history”, *Foreign Policy*, 29 January 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/29/xis-china-is-steamrolling-its-own-history/>.

traditional view in 1939 when he made the development of the Chinese nation analogous with the development of the Han. Later, supporting the then official line of a multi-national state, Mao warned of the dangers of Han chauvinism in an internal Party directive issued in 1953, where he stated that Han chauvinism was lurking almost everywhere and was creating conflicts in many minority regions.<sup>5</sup> This warning is still very apt today.

The leading expert in China's intellectual history, Professor Ge Zhaoguang from Fudan University, has noted<sup>6</sup> that there is indeed a tendency among many promoters of traditional culture in China to perceive that as synonymous with Han Chinese culture. This is a reflection of the old Confucian separation of the civilized people, namely the Chinese, from the "barbarians". This kind of cultural promotion is by nature nationalistic, and when a clear national identity that recognizes China's multi-ethnic nature is missing, the meaning of nationalism is easily reduced to defending one's own ethnic group. Recently, Professor Ye Zicheng from Peking University has coined the term "Chinese-ism" to describe Xi Jinping's thinking based on China's traditional schools of thought.<sup>7</sup> The word that Ye has chosen to refer to the Chinese is *huaxia* (华夏), which only includes the people on the central plains, namely the Han.

## "COMMUNITY OF THE CHINESE NATION"

Possibly aiming to alleviate concerns over Han chauvinism, Xi Jinping has been calling for "actively nurturing consciousness of the community of the Chinese nation". The concept of "consciousness of the community of the Chinese nation" was added to the CPC Charter in 2017. According to Professor Shen Guiping from the CPC Central Institute of Socialism, this consciousness is a strategic effort aimed at Chinese nation-building in the face of a globalizing world, and conducive to the causes of national unification, social harmony and unity of the nationalities.<sup>8</sup>

"The community of the Chinese nation", *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti* (中华民族共同体) in Chinese, appears to have emerged in China's political jargon as a sort of domestic equivalent of the "community of a common destiny for Mankind", which China has been promoting as its new foreign policy ideal. Both concepts try to give a pluralistic, "communal" face to an ultimately unitary subject, namely the "destiny of Mankind" and the "Chinese nation".

According to Professor Shen, it is a mistake to understand the Chinese nation as being formed solely of those who identify themselves as "descendants of the Yellow Emperor", that is, the Han Chinese. Similarly, it is wrong to believe that the Chinese nation would extend outside of the PRC borders, which could be the case when talking about "the sons and daughters of *Zhonghua*", a phrase often used of the overseas Chinese. Both of these popular forms of self-aggrandizement by the Chinese have given way to the "Chinese nation", and as early as 2002, China's National Radio and Television Administration issued a circular recommending that when promoting Chinese culture, one should talk about the Chinese nation instead of the descendants of the Yellow Emperor.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, Professor Shen states that one should not try to dismiss the nation by simply talking about the "Chinese people" (*Zhonghua renmin*) or "Chinese nationals". Shen explains that while the Chinese nation is a community of all Chinese nationals, its core lies in the "Chinese culture". In the same self-contradicting fashion, she declares that although the Chinese culture includes the cultures of the minority nationalities, the unifying factor of the Chinese culture, from "an objective viewpoint", is the language of the Han Chinese.

Professor Shen goes on to explain that the cultures of the different nationalities are at a different "stage of development", and some nationalities – like the Tibetans or Uyghurs – have historically remained isolated, and are thus still in the process of joining the "unity" (*yiti*). For this reason, China needs to intensify education on identity based on citizenship. This in turn needs to be supported by the creation and promotion of joint memories of history and joint forms of culture. All in all, "the cultures of the different nationalities, Chinese traditional culture and modern culture" need to be merged into a "new culture". Here again, while

5 Mao Zedong *xuanji* 2, Renmin chubanshe 1976: 585. Mao Zedong *xuanji* 5, Renmin Chubanshe 1977: 75–76.

6 Ge Zhaoguang, "If horses had wings: The political demands of Mainland New Confucians in recent years", trans. by David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream*, 30 September 2018, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/ge-zhaoguang-if-horses-had-wings.html>. fn. 71.

7 Ye Zicheng, "Huaxia zhuyi: Zhongguo de bentu renwen jingshen", *Xueshu Qianyan*, 2013.02: 64–83.

8 Shen Guiping, "Zenyang renshi 'Zhonghua minzu gongtongti'?" *Zhongguo Shehuizhuyi Xueyuan*, 1 January 2017, <http://www.zysy.org.cn/a1/a/a-XCVJQLB-8F3777D5732E34A>.

9 Ye Jiefu, "'Hainei-wai Zhonghua ernü' tifa de youlai", *Renmin wang*, 16 July 2011, <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/GB/85040/12163701.html>.

Shen's intention is to promote a joint community with regard to the Chinese nation, she nevertheless differentiates between the cultures of the different nationalities and Chinese culture, implying that they are not the same.

## SINIFICATION OF RELIGION

In his time, Mao Zedong aimed to Sinify Marxism in order to make it both palatable to his compatriots and to show that China was not simply blindly following the Soviet Union. Since the beginning of the Opening Up and Reform era in 1979, China has been proclaiming the development of "socialism with Chinese characteristics". Now China is committed to following "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" in order to realize the so-called "China Dream", which calls for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Domestically, Xi is hoping to build a new set of citizens' virtues based on indigenous, traditional Chinese schools of thought. This is reflected in China's opposition to the existence of "universal values". In international relations, Xi is promoting the ancient Chinese ideal of "great unity under Heaven", which is presented as an alternative to the anarchic rivalry of the nation states.

All of this can be regarded as taking further steps down the same road to making China both more unified and more Chinese. Xi Jinping has called cultural identity the foundation for strengthening "the great unity of the Chinese nation". This identity apparently needs to be indigenous with regard to its ideology and virtues. The project to build a Chinese nation based on Chinese values and representing a Chinese identity is thus akin to establishing a "civil religion" in China.

When it comes to religions, the CPC also wants to make them more Chinese. The goal of Sinifying religion in China was introduced by Xi in 2015.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese Government Work Report, delivered on 5 March 2019, states that China should persist in the Sinification of religions. While Sinification sounds patriotic, and makes sense to many Chinese who have learned that most religions practised in China are, in fact, foreign

imports, the goal is first and foremost to ensure that the religious leaders are loyal to the Party, and do not endanger national unity.

Again, this is nothing new in China's history. The famous reformist Kang Youwei (1858–1927) wanted to turn Confucianism into China's official religion. He believed that Islam would vanish naturally, and he would have preferred to allow the practice of Buddhism to continue only in the minority regions. His thoughts, in turn, echoed those of Han Yu (768–824), who demanded that books by the Taoists and Buddhists should be burned and their temples turned into residences. Reminiscent of the radicalism of ardent Confucians in the imperial era, the CPC demands its members to be atheist. While the Party does not officially extend that demand to the population at large, it is suggestive of the fact that, according to Karl Marx (1818–1883), the eradication of religions is a prerequisite for the happiness of the people.

The Uyghurs were already subjected to Sinification during the Qing dynasty. In the late 1800s, the imperial government endeavoured to make the "turban heads" change their Islamic faith to Confucianism, and discard their own language in favour of Chinese. These attempts failed, but the CPC seems to be taking all the necessary steps to ensure that similar mistakes are not made again.

According to credible estimates, hundreds of thousands of people in Xinjiang have been subjected to indefinite detention in internment camp-like facilities for ideological re-education. Other measures aiming at the Sinification of the Uyghurs, such as intrusive mass surveillance, have followed. The Chinese media is calling this an "ideological liberation movement", referring to the eradication of religious extremism, and warning foreign countries "that have eaten their fill of bread and slept soundly", namely without terrorism concerns, that their rebuking of China has no effect because the Party and the people stand resolute.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The historical narrative of the CPC is based on the perceived humiliations that China was subjected to for over a century by the colonial powers – the "bread

10 Gan, Nectar, "Beijing plans to continue tightening grip on Christianity and Islam as China pushes ahead with the 'Sinicisation of religion'", *South China Morning Post*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2188752/no-let-chinas-push-sinicise-religion-despite-global-outcry-over>.

11 "Xinjiang dadi yichang sixiang jiefang yundong zhengzai shangyan", *Sina xin-wen zhongxin*, 9 October 2018, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2018-10-09/doc-ihkvrhpt4037609.shtml>.



In creating a unified Chinese nation, China seeks to Sinify its western province of Xinjiang. This has led to tightening control of the region and a crackdown on the Uyghur ethnic minority. Image: Keith Tan/Flickr, used under the Creative Commons license.

eat-ers” mentioned above – before the establishment of the People’s Republic put an end to that. Since then, according to this narrative, China has strived to become wealthy and powerful again so that it can finally rid itself of the last remnants of these humiliations, including efforts by “the West” to restrain China’s rise.

Correspondingly, the China Dream and its ultimate goal to be fulfilled by 2049, “the grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”, speaks of China regaining its position as one of the world’s great civilizations. A lingering part of the perceived humiliations is the predominance of political ideologies and theories originating from “the West”. China wants to change the global governance institutions and their guiding principles in a way that would better reflect the “Chinese values”.

Presenting China as a civilization requires the distillation of “Chineseness” into some tangible form. It is in order to make China more “Chinese” that the Party is promoting the “Chinese nation” based on Chinese culture. So far, the CPC has not had much success in defining Chinese culture, nor has it been able to produce a coherent set of Chinese values, apart from adding the attribute “with Chinese characteristics” to such universal concepts as the rule of law and democracy. This is only to be expected as, realistically speaking, “Chineseness” eludes all definitions.

Nevertheless, the Party is making some efforts to distill the values it wants to promote from the vast Chinese ideational tradition. As this paper discusses, this is where the dangers of Han chauvinism still lurk. Furthermore, it is natural that the Party sees religions as competitors.

In Xi Jinping’s era, everything that China does has become tied to the realization of the China Dream. As James Leibold has observed, “[a]ny misalignment or resistance, especially on the part of restive groups like the Uyghurs and Tibetans, is viewed as a direct challenge to Xi Jinping’s rule and the realization of his ‘China Dream’”.<sup>12</sup> The CPC understands that only through stronger domestic unity can China afford to be more assertive externally.

In the eyes of the CPC, Xinjiang and Tibet are border regions where Chinese sovereignty has been contested. Therefore, tightening control in these regions with new drastic measures – starting with Xinjiang and later perhaps moving on to Tibet – is justified by the need to fight external hegemony. At the same time, they are also regions where cultural unity is still wanting from the perspective of the Chinese nation. In the CPC’s

12 Leibold, James, “The spectre of insecurity: The CCP’s mass internment strategy in Xinjiang”, *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.prclleader.org/leibold>.

logic, the realization of the China Dream requires both Sinifying Xinjiang and nipping any separatist activities in the bud. For the impassive Party machinery, then, it is only rational to try to achieve both at the same time, and the costs – either domestic or international – are of little significance.

As a consequence, China's drive to forcibly create a Chinese nation in general, and the related activities in Xinjiang (and perhaps later in Tibet) in particular, have the potential to turn into a new "Tian'anmen event" in the relations between China and the Western democracies. For thirty years, the political relations between China and the EU have been marred by what happened in Beijing on 3–4 June 1989. The EU arms embargo is still in place. For China, this was one link in the long chain of actions aimed at curbing the country's rise. But if anyone made compromises then, it was the EU member states that wanted to continue doing business with China.

What now remains to be seen is whether the concerns voiced over human rights abuses in China will turn into more direct criticism and actions, such as sanctions by the USA or the EU. China is probably also betting that its economic importance will prevent other countries, at least the EU, from turning against it. Based on the ever-deepening economic ties between China and the EU, and the customarily muzzled reactions to China's human rights situation, the odds are indeed in China's favour. Were the political relations to result in a new freeze, however, China today, driven by the China Dream of becoming a leading nation in the world, is even less likely to yield under pressure than it was 30 years ago. In the worst-case scenario, the project of building a Chinese nation based on Chinese culture and Sinified values could fuel an ideological cold war between China and its critics.