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The Contemporary Ethnic Minority in China: An Introduction

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This article introduces the historical context behind the practice of fixed ethnic identification currently employed in the People's Republic of China. Notwithstanding the major problems to clearly delineate the boundaries of many ethnic groups in the Chinese context, the article contends there was a strong pragmatism for officially classifying ethnic minority groups rather than adopting the self-identification method used in many Western nations. Finally, the article poses the query whether ethnic minority status continues to hold a meaningful category of analysis in contemporary China.

Keywords: ethnic minorities; China; ethnicity identification; ethnic classification; ethnic boundaries

The People's Republic of China is home to an ethnic minority population of nearly 114 million, one of the world's largest ethnic minority populations. Considered from a different perspective, China's 55 officially recognized ethnic minority groups constitute only 8.5 percent of the national population. Of particular interest here is how China's ethnic minorities are classified as such. In comparison to other jurisdictions where individuals self-identify as being a member of an ethnic minority, in China, minority nationality (*shaoshu minzu*)¹ status is assigned at birth, recorded on official identity documents, and in almost all cases fixed throughout one's life.²

Ethnic identification

The lineage of this practice can be traced to a problem that arose only a few years after the founding of the People's Republic with the passing of the 1953 Election Law, which guaranteed that each minority group would receive at least one representative seat in the National People's Congress. The problem was that no one was quite clear who constituted the minorities and how numerous they were (Mullaney 2011). Consequently, tremendous effort went into enumerating the population by means of a census, which collected a very parsimonious set of demographic data and respondents' self-identified ethnicity. This early attempt at collecting ethnicity data yielded an unexpectedly large and considered unmanageable set of over 400 ethnic groups. In response, the Communist Party of China (CPC) commissioned a large-scale project to categorize, delineate, and meaningfully formulate a smaller number of ethnic groups (2011).

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Teams – composed of academic ethnologists and linguists as well as local cadres – were sent into regions heavily populated with ethnic minorities to investigate and assess minorities’ social history, economic life, language, religion, and ethnic potential.³ That is, the classification teams tried to develop a taxonomy based not only on their observations of the characteristics of various communities, but also on their assessment of the state’s probability of success at melding subsets of these communities into proposed ethnic groups (Mullaney 2011). The classification project was effective in reducing the number of ethnic groups officially recognized from the over 400 self-identified candidates of the 1953 census to 39 groups who were officially recognized in 1954. Another 16 ethnic groups were recognized by 1965, and the most recent was added in 1979. All Chinese citizens were subsequently registered by their “nationality” status in household registration and personal identification documents – a practice that continues to the present.

The validity of the concept of a unified Han nationality – with its population of nearly 1.22 billion grouping together a wide array of culturally diverse populations, including eight vastly different linguistic groups (Mandarin, Gan, Hakka, Southern and Northern Min, Wu, Xiang, and Yue) – has been questioned in recent scholarship (See Gladney 2004 and Mullaney 2012 for examples). While the notion of the Han *ren* (person) has existed since the time of the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), the Han nationality is an entirely modern phenomenon, which arose with the shift from Chinese empire to modern nation-state. The notion of a unified Han nationality – a Pan-Hanism – was promulgated by the revolutionaries instrumental in toppling the last empire of China, the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty in 1911. Although many factors contributed to the fall of the Qing, the anti-Manchu revolutionaries rallied support for their cause by arguing that the vast majority of people in China were Han and thus should come together to remove all “foreign occupiers.” The emphasizing of a pro-Han anti-Manchu revolution quickly became problematic in terms of actual and threatened territorial disintegration, given that many large and important border regions were the homelands of the Tibetans, Mongolians, Uyghurs, and other minorities. The new leaders of the Republic, thus, began to promote the idea of the “Republic of Five Peoples” (*wuzu gonghe*): the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Hui (which was used to refer to all Muslims). When Chiang Kai-shek ascended to power, he rejected this notion and rather promoted the notion of a single-race republic, the idea that the Han and the four other nationalities belonged to a supra-ethnic, nation-state that had been in existence from time immemorial (Hon 1996) – a notion that was then, and continues to be, proven flawed.⁴ Yet, by employing the term Han *minzu*, Sun Yat-sen and the Guomintang (GMD) essentially brought together northern Mandarin speakers, the southern Cantonese, and the economic power of Shanghai into one superimposed nationality. In effect, a new identity, or in Benedict Anderson’s terms, a new “imagined community” was formed for the Han, which seemingly served as a mechanism for future nation building.

The pragmatism of ethnic classification

There is an acute pragmatism for officially classifying ethnic minority groups in China rather than adopting the self-identification method used in many Western nations. This is rooted partially in history of the CPC, and partially in the modern-day public benefits afforded to minorities.

During the “Long March” of 1934–1935, Chinese Communist leaders became aware first-hand of the extent of ethnic diversity and differing cultures within China as they

traversed from the southeast to the northwest. Fighting for survival against both the GMD and the Japanese, the communist leaders developed their minority policies strategically. They made promises of special treatment, recognition, and the establishment of autonomous regions for minorities – notably the Miao, Yi, Tibetans, Mongols, and Hui – in exchange for their support (Snow 1994). Within days of the official founding of the People's Republic, the Communist leaders promulgated political guidelines to serve until a constitution was developed. Mullaney (2011) reports that those guidelines declared the equality of all ethnic groups and a theory of regional autonomy to be enacted in minority-rich areas. Thus, the Chinese leadership committed itself to the concept of China as a multiethnic nation. It is from this legacy that ethnic nationality identification and ethnic minority policies emerged.

It has also been suggested that the minority identification policy allowed the new People's Republic to forge its nation-building project under the leadership of the dominant majority, the Han. Projecting an image of Han superiority proved useful for the Communists who incorporated it into a Marxist ideology of progress. Recognized minority nationalities were categorized according to five major modes of production: primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist. The Han were ranked the highest on this scale, reinforcing the Han idea that minorities were backward and perpetuating the Communists' portrayal of the Han as the "vanguard" of the people's revolution (Heberer 1989). Ethnic minorities were thus encouraged to follow the Han example.

From early on, the CPC turned its attention to "modernizing" and "improving the livelihoods" of ethnic minorities through public policies. That process was abruptly halted by the Cultural Revolution, in which extremists targeted many ethnic minority communities for their traditional practices. After the Cultural Revolution ended, many of the earlier policies and practices were reinstated, and by the mid-1980s newer government policies increased the benefits of minority identification. As a consequence, ethnic minorities today are guaranteed systematic and procedural "special rights" and preferential treatment under China's constitution, reaffirmed in various national (e.g. 1999 National Minorities Policy) and local (e.g. Beijing Minority Rights Protection Policies) public policies. While the government's preferential policies toward ethnic minorities include special exemptions that vary by province, autonomous region, or municipality, they often include an exemption from, or easing of, the restrictions of the government's family planning program, as well as preferential treatment in school admissions, hiring, and promotion; the financing and taxation of businesses; and the provision of infrastructure, easier access to public office, freedom to practice, and funding to express their ethno-cultural difference (Hasmath 2011; Sautman 1998).

Ethnic minorities are well represented both regionally and in the National People's Congress. Regional autonomy is given in areas heavily populated by ethnic minorities. There are currently five provincial-level autonomous regions which have nominal political autonomy: Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Moreover, autonomous cities, prefectures, and municipalities exist where minority nationalities are territorially concentrated. In practice though, the system remains subject to the political control of the CPC (see Hasmath 2014; Hasmath and Hsu 2007).

Due to the potential advantages and the preferential treatment afforded to ethnic minorities in China, the status of an ethnic citizen cannot be altered at his/her discretion, nor is there an appetite for increasing the number of ethnic minority groups. The main logic for this stance is that the economic cost of maintaining preferential treatment would potentially rise with an increase in the ethnic minority population.

Debating the categories of ethnic groups

Although the categorization of 55 ethnic minority groups by the CPC was a step forward from Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party's denial of the existence of a wide variety of different ethnic groups in China and from the derogatory names commonly used to refer to ethnic minority groups (officially abolished in 1951), the process of modern-day official ethnic group recognition has sparked intense debate. For example, Chinese sociologist Fei (1981) points to the Chuanqing Blacks, who, although they had a close relationship with Han, had unique features in language, location, and economic life that would warrant *minzu* recognition based on the four official classification criteria. However, it was determined by CPC researchers that the Chuanqing Blacks were not a separate nationality, but rather descendants of Han garrison troops who intermarried with the local population during the Ming dynasty. Thus, they were categorized as Han Chinese.

In a contrasting example, in 1978, 30,000 Fujianese who no longer practice Islam were recognized as members of the Hui (Islamic) nationality using historical records of foreign ancestry (Gladney 1994). They were able to prove descent from foreign Muslim officials and traders who settled in their area between the 9 and 14th centuries. This practice would appear to create precedence for many groups to seek nationality recognition based on historical records of foreign ancestry. Jankowiak (1993), focusing on Mongolians in Hohhot in the 1980s, further documents that, in response to improvements in the perceived benefits of minority identification, a number of people reclaimed their minority Mongolian status based on a government ruling allowing anyone with a minority parent or grandparent to be reclassified.

Although some previously assimilated individuals and groups have been able to reclaim minority status, they have succeeded only in claiming or reclaiming membership in one of the 55 officially recognized minorities. The CPC has not recognized a "new" ethnic group in nearly 35 years. In fact, among the more than 350 groups who were not originally classified as a separate ethnic group, only 15 groups are still officially being considered for nationality recognition. The *wei shibie minzu*, literally the "undistinguished ethnic groups," total around 730,000 people. Examples of these groups include the Gejia, Mang, Deng, Bajia, and Yutai (Jewish). These individuals are regarded as ethnically different, but they do not currently fit into the CPC's official taxonomy of ethnic minorities.

Analytical queries

The issues addressed thus far collectively beg the question whether ethnic minority status continues to hold a meaningful category of analysis in modern-day China. The four articles in this special section definitely demonstrate that ethnic minority status remains a meaningful distinction and that differences among ethnic minority groups can be ascertained. Cherng and Hannum's article, "Ethnic Disparities in Educational Attainment in China: Considering the Implications of Interethnic Families," challenges the assumption of assimilation. They investigate one dimension of the permeability of ethnic boundaries across generations by looking at the educational attainment of interethnic children, which they define narrowly as children for whom one parent is Han and the other a member of an officially designated minority group. Based on population census data, they explore how two groups of interethnic children (those identified as minority and those identified as Han) compare to each other, to Han children, and to co-ethnic children in terms of educational attainment. They find that the educational attainment of

minority interethnic children is better than that of their non-interethnic co-ethnics, and, in some cases, comparable to or even better than that of Han children. The advantaged position of interethnic children is robust across each of the major minority groups included in their study. However, the likelihood of interethnic marriage (and thus interethnic children) varies considerably by ethnicity. They also note that the likelihood of parents (in interethnic marriages) choosing minority classification for their children increases with socioeconomic status.

The economic well-being of ethnic minorities provides important clues as to whether the identification of certain groups within China as “minorities” and the recognition of the Han as a unified “majority” will continue to play a fundamental role in forging the future of the People’s Republic of China. Hasmath and Ho’s article, “Job Acquisition, Retention, and Outcomes for Ethnic Minorities in Urban China,” looks at wage differentials between ethnic minorities and the Han majority in China’s large eastern seaboard cities. They find that while Han-minority wage differentials estimated with regression analysis show little evidence of ethnic minority disadvantage, evidence based on the process of ethnic minority hiring and retention suggests that minorities are disadvantaged in the job search process. They attribute this disadvantage to a number of factors including, but not limited to, employers concerns over non-local accents and minorities’ lack of job-related social connections. Based on detailed semi-structured interviews, they report that less than 10 percent of the ethnic minority individuals in their study found work by means of their social connections and networks, which stands in marked contrast to the experience of the Han, the vast majority of whom found their work through such connections.

Gustafsson and Yang explore ethnic boundary crossing in a more literal sense. In their article, “Are China’s Ethnic Minorities Less Likely to Move?” these authors investigate the various factors that determine whether ethnic minorities migrate from their “home” *hukou* jurisdictions, their places of registration, to other locations. Their findings suggest that there is no single geographically fixed pattern; however, the probability of migrating increases with the amount of education attained and decreases with age, and for females, with the number of children. They report that in most cases, ethnic minorities with rural *hukou* (rural household registration) are less likely to migrate than the Han. This is particularly notable for Uyghur, Tibetan, Mongolian, Bai, Yao, and Tujia groups. In contrast, Korean and Hui have higher probabilities of migration than the majority, indicating a higher rate of potential integration. The lower propensity for rural minority individuals to migrate to urban areas implies that China’s cities are likely to be less ethnically diverse than would be expected if minorities had the same propensity to migrate as the Han. The migration patterns of ethnic minority holders of urban *hukou* are similar to those of rural residents with respect to many demographic variables. Their ethnic status, however, is much less likely to be a determining factor in terms of reducing the propensity to migrate.

When ethnic minorities do migrate, pulled by better employment and wage prospects, there may be a residual effect on the co-residency patterns of the rural elderly minority population. Connelly, Iannotti, Maurer-Fazio, and Zhang analyze in their article, “Coresidency, Ethnicity, and Happiness of China’s Rural Elders,” the coresidency patterns of rural elders in seven areas of China with high concentrations of ethnic minority populations. Their analysis reveals the large role cultural norms play in determining coresidency, as evidenced by differences across ethnic groups. Of particular interest is their comparison of coresidency patterns across ethnic groups with respect to both individual and regional degrees of assimilation versus isolation. Their study

strongly suggests elder ethnic minorities who do not speak Mandarin have higher rates of coresidency than those who do. Additionally, those who live in counties with low rates of intermarriage and intergroup friendships are also more likely to coreside. The implications for China's aging population are remarkable, with the policy concerns for integration aptly outlined in their article.

In short, this special section brings together leading economists, political scientists, demographers, and sociologists to profile the current socio-economic life of ethnic minorities in contemporary China. The findings of the following four studies will be of interest to those who are ultimately interested in the well-being and demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic integration of China's heterogeneous ethnic minority population.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. There is an ongoing debate over whether it is appropriate to use the term "ethnic minorities," "ethnic groups" (*zuqun*), or "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*) (see Ma 2004). For the purpose of this article, the three terms will be used interchangeably.
2. Parents whose ethnicities differ from one another select their child's official ethnicity as one of their ethnicities; that is, there is no classification of mixed ethnicity. The child's ethnicity is then fixed until age 18 when the child has a two-year window in which to choose to reclassify his/her ethnicity to the other parent's ethnicity. Hoddie (1998) reports that 24 million more people identified themselves as ethnic minorities in the 1990 population census than in the 1982 census. He argues that fertility trends were such that an increase of only 10 million was expected. In two extreme cases, the populations of the Manchu and Tujia more than doubled between these two censuses.
3. Mullaney (2011) convincingly argues, "the Ethnic Classification was based on a dynamic and futurological definition of *minzu* – that is, it was primarily concerned with assessing the plausibility of certain categorical groupings, rather than their fidelity to ethnic realities ca. 1954".
4. In response to Pan-Hanism, the Chinese historian Jiegang Gu, a contemporary of Sun Yat-Sen and Dai Jitao, argued that China before the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC) was ruled by groups with different ethnic backgrounds. Gu continued to prove that a unified China was not only a relatively late development, but also the result of a long process of conquest by stronger ethnic tribes (see Hon 1996). In effect, Gu's efforts unmasked the political agenda behind the GMD attempt to promote a Pan-Hanism.

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