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The Paradigmatic Crises in China's *Minzu* Studies: Reflections from the Perspective of Human Development

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Abstract

The field of *minzu* 民族 studies is currently in a state of disarray. This article proposes to discuss three paradigmatic crises—the one-dimensional interpretation, problematization, and de-ethnicization of the term *minzu*—from the perspective of human development. Although the meaning of *minzu* is, as this article argues, ambiguous, it has mostly been reduced to its political and ideological meaning. To solely rely on this one-dimensional interpretation in an academic discussion has led to a paradigmatic crisis in *minzu* studies. From the perspective of human development, *minzu* is the carrier and basic cultural unit of a pluralistic global culture. Although the concept of *minzu* is not inherently problematic, the word is being problematized by subsuming a number of extraneous issues. Problematization thus constitutes another paradigmatic crisis in current *minzu* studies. Opposing the current trend of de-ethnicizing the *minzu* question, this article proposes to de-problematize the concept of *minzu* instead, thereby preventing it from being used as a political tool. This article intends to shed light on the current state of crisis in China's *minzu* studies, discuss a suitable research methodology, and provide an academic basis for ethnic research and policy implementation.

Keywords

de-ethnicization – ethnic problems – *minzu* studies – paradigmatic crisis

China's ethnic question has become increasingly pressing in recent years, and a certain "ethnic"-phobia has started to surface. In China, several scholars put forward the idea of a "second generation" of ethnicity policy that has now turned into a second-generation problem. The many debates surrounding the concept of *minzu* and calls for de-ethnicization of the *minzu* question have brought to light a paradigmatic crisis in *minzu* studies. These developments not only cause *minzu* studies to stand at a crossroads but also have a negative impact on state governance and ethnic policy making in China.

In a recent article, titled "The Dilemmas and Paradigm Shifts in Chinese *Minzu* Studies," Zhao Xudong discusses two types of paradigmatic crises. First, a crisis in academic expression, with scholars unable to agree on a concept of *minzu* that can serve as a common basis for research. Second, he sees a crisis of political legitimacy. The crisis in academic expression shakes the foundations of the central government's vision of a multiethnic nation and reveals confusion about the very nature of ethnic politics.

Zhao argues that

the core crisis lies in the fact that, irrespective of which concept of *minzu* we employ or which standpoint we take, we are only exchanging one Western model for another, without ever finding a way of identifying and expressing our own Chinese uniqueness.¹

I agree that such a crisis exists and second the author's opinion that Chinese scholars have not yet agreed on a common concept of *minzu*, which, in turn, leads to confusion about the nature of ethnic politics. These challenges, however, can hardly be explained by simply regarding them as a crisis in academic expression caused by using one Western model of understanding rather than another. In this article, I propose to employ academic research methodology to explore the three paradigmatic crises in China's *minzu* studies: (1) the univocal or one-dimensional interpretation of the word *minzu*, (2) the problematization of the *minzu* question, and (3) the de-ethnicization of the *minzu* question. The article attempts to clarify the current crisis on a theoretical basis and discuss suitable research paradigms for ethnic research and policy implementation in China.

1 Zhao Xudong 趙旭東, "Zhongguo minzu yanjiu de kunjing jiqi fanshi zhuanhuan 中國民族研究的困境及其範式轉換 [The Dilemmas and Paradigm Shifts in Chinese Nationality Studies]," *Tansuo yu zhengming 探索與爭鳴 [Exploration and Free Views]*, 4 (2014): 29-35.

The Paradigmatic Crisis in the Univocal Interpretation of the Word *Minzu*

The paradigm of the univocal interpretation of the word *minzu* is a phenomenon that is extremely pronounced, yet, at the same time, not easily perceived. This often leads to ambiguous interpretations of *minzu*, which, in turn, affect ethnic policy making. In the 1960s, the anthropologist Barbara Ward formulated her well-known theory of conscious models. She proposed that in order to make sense of certain phenomena, individuals employ different conscious models—namely, the “external observer’s model,” “immediate models,” and “ideological models.”² As an observable phenomenon in human society, *minzu* can thus assume multiple meanings in such different contexts as self-perception, perception by others, ideology, and governance.

The Equivocal Model of the Word Minzu

Generally speaking, *minzu* refers to specific ethnic groups [*zuqun* 族群]. The concept of an ethnic group is defined more broadly than the concept of *minzu*, which is often used specifically to refer to an ethnic minority group [*shaoshu minzu* 少數民族]. In Thomas Barfield’s *Dictionary of Anthropology*, an ethnic group is defined as a group that “shares the same culture.”³ The social anthropologist Fredrik Barth pointed out that “if one chooses to regard the culture-bearing aspect of ethnic groups as their primary characteristic, this has far-reaching implications” and stressed the objective group and organizational characteristics of ethnic groups.⁴ In *Webster’s Dictionary*, the word *ethnic*, whose root is *ethno*, is also defined as a culturally defined group.⁵ In this sense, the essential meaning of *minzu* is that of a cultural group.

In actual usage, *minzu* can assume multiple meanings. This not only poses the question of clear differentiation among different terms but also raises issues concerning epistemology, methodology, and the multifaceted functions the word can assume in our society. Following Durkheim, social facts can be divided into objective facts and representations. With respect to *minzu*, objective facts denote the way in which *minzu* is conveyed by specific

2 Barbara Ward, “Sociological Self-awareness: Some Uses of the Conscious Models,” in *Through Other Eyes: An Anthropologist’s View of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1985), 61–79.

3 Thomas Barfield, *The Dictionary of Anthropology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 152.

4 Fredrik Barth, “Introduction,” in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. Fredrik Barth (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1998), 11–12.

5 *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2003), 429.

ways of life, customs and traditions, material culture, or even the instrumentalization of the term. Representations assume the form of information, such as symbols, language, or ideology. Representations of *minzu* thus include ethnic symbols, language, identity, and discourse as well as national ideology.

Considering the actual usage of *minzu* in the Chinese context, its meaning includes the following definitions: the United Nations' definition (basically, an ethnic group), the Chinese national definition (China distinguishes among fifty-six officially recognized nationalities; during the identification process, nationalities were perceived mainly as culturally homogeneous ethnic groups), the academic definition (mostly: cultural groups), or people's identity (either through self-identification or identification by others). In reality, however, *minzu* is currently being narrowed to a concept used solely for national governance and its ideological context. If we rely on this univocally political concept of *minzu* in our discussions, it will lead to a paradigmatic crisis in *minzu* studies.

Debates on Minzu in Modern China: "Nation-State" and "Multinational Republic"

The ambiguous nature of *minzu* as a concept also leads to differing interpretations of the word itself. In current academic discussion, *minzu* is commonly used to denote minority groups and is translated as *ethnic minority* or *national minority*. China's long and stable history as an empire differs from the history of Western nation-states. Until the Qing dynasty [1644-1911], China was still considered an empire ruled by an ethnic minority group. Although Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 [1866-1925] at one point supported the expulsion of the Manchu rulers, he eventually advocated the idea of a Republic of Five Races and the Three People's Principles. He was of the opinion that "nationalism is simply racial nationalism" [*Minzu zhuyi jiu shi guozu zhuyi* 民族主義就是國族主義], clearly with the idea in mind of establishing a (multiracial) nation-state.⁶ At the time, however, China was still far removed from the ideal of a Chinese nation-state.

The politicization of *minzu* can be traced back to the period between 1903 and 1905. Liu Shipai 劉師培 [1884-1919] made the acquaintance of Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 [pseud., Zhang Binglin 章炳麟; 1868-1936] and Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 [1868-1940] in Shanghai, where he wrote articles for publications such as the *Alarm Bell Daily* [*Jingzhong ribao* 警鐘日報] and the *Journal of National Essence* [*Guocui xuebao* 國粹學報]. He completed his book *A History of the*

6 Sun Zhongshan 孫中山, "Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義 [Three Principles of the People]," in *Sun Zhongshan xuanji* 孫中山選集 [*Selected Works of Sun Yat-sen*] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1978), 2: 590.

Chinese Race [*Zhongguo minzu zhi* 中國民族志], which is arguably the first volume in modern China to systematically discuss the question of ethnicity. In his own words, his motivation for writing the book was as follows:

I observed that in Europe the time of the nineteenth century was the era of nationalism. The Greeks [made the Ottomans] leave the land and founded a country. The Italians drove Austria away and founded a state. And now the Irish, who had been subdued by England, arise and fight for the right of self-government. But are my people of the Han race aware of these facts? This is why I wrote *A History of the Chinese Race*.⁷

In his book, Liu Shipai advocated the idea of a Han Chinese nation-state. This shows that, in the early period, when the word *minzu* entered the Chinese language, the term was closely connected to the ideas of national state-building and the nation-state. By the time Li Ji 李濟 [1896-1979] published his book *The Formation of the Chinese People* [*Zhongguo minzu de xingcheng* 中國民族的形成] in 1928, however, the term had already begun to be distinguished from “nationalism,”⁸ and Li Ji suggested that a distinction be drawn between what he called the “we-group” and the “you-group.” He advocated the idea of five big Chinese ethnic groups, namely, the Han Chinese as descendants of the Yellow Emperor, the Tungus, the Tibeto-Burman, the Mon-Khmer, and the Shan. Li conceptualized the Chinese nation as being multiethnic and was one of the first scholars to use the term *minzu* in his research in the sense of a cultural group. Because academic discussion of *minzu* began to transcend the narrow confines of nationalism, the foundations were laid for the idea of a multiethnic republic. It should be pointed out, however, that at the time the concept of *minzu* was still rather blurred.⁹ In the republican period, a large group of scholars conducted in-depth research on ethnic minority groups, producing

7 吾觀歐洲當十九世紀之時為民族主義時代，希臘離土而建邦，意人排奧而立國，即愛爾蘭之屬英者今且起而爭自治之權矣。吾漢族之民其亦知之否耶？作民族志。 Translation adapted from Julia C. Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity: Chinese Discourses on History, Historiography, and Nationalism (1900s-1920s)* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 236. Original quotation from Liu Shipai 劉師培, *Zhongguo minzu zhi* 中國民族志 [*A History of the Chinese Race*] (n.p.: Zhongguo minzuxue xuehui yinxing, 1962).

8 Li Ji 李濟, *Zhongguo minzu de xingcheng* 中國民族的形成 [*The Formation of the Chinese People*] (Shanghai: Shanghai chubanshe, 2008), chaps. 1, 3-6, 8 (originally published by Harvard University Press in 1928).

9 In the authoritative Chinese dictionary *Ciyuan* 辭源 published in 1940, the definition of the word *minzu* does not reflect the cultural connotation of the word but mainly stresses its social function.

considerable academic output. They carried on the tradition of researching ethnic questions from the perspective of culture, which, in turn, also influenced the government's policies toward ethnic groups.

It can be argued that the project of identifying China's nationalities [*minzu shibie* 民族識別], carried out in the early People's Republic, was based on scholarly work during the republican period and not simply derived from [Soviet leader Josef] Stalin's definition of nationalities. Without the basic research on ethnic minorities carried out during the republican era, the identification project in the People's Republic would have been impossible to complete. Judging by the outcome of the project at the time, the designated minority nationalities were mainly understood as culturally defined ethnic groups and not minority nationalities in the sense of the nation-state. The idea of a Chinese (ethnic) people [*Zhonghua minzu* 中華民族] denotes a culturally defined, global group that transcends national boundaries, not a Chinese nation in the sense of the state-nation [*guozu*]. Some scholars have suggested that:

in several countries, such as the United States or India, the goal of nation-building is to form one unified nation out of all the different groups, which are designated as ethnic groups [*zuqun*]. In the name of pursuing cultural pluralism, those countries preserve and encourage the special cultural characteristics, customs, and traditions of the various ethnic minority groups.¹⁰

This idea of a cultural pluralism based on and subordinated to the nation-state neither reflects national realities in the majority of states worldwide nor provides an accurate depiction of China's history and current national condition.

What we today mean by nation [*minzu*] and nationalism [*minzu zhuyi*] has been at the center of political discussion for more than 100 years and has proven to be one of the fundamental reasons behind human development. In 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia established the notion of sovereign states in international law. Why then, we might ask, did the Chinese discussion about the nation [*minzu*] and the nation-state [*minzu guojia*] not begin at the same time as the birth of state sovereignty, but only about 100 years ago? One of the

10 Ma Rong 馬戎, "Dangqian Zhongguo minzu wenti de zhengjie yu chulu 當前中國民族問題的癥結與出路 [The Crux of China's Current Ethnic Question and Its Solution]," in *Lijie minzu guanxi de xin silu: shaoshu zuqun wenti de quzhengzhijiehua* 理解民族關係的新思路：少數族群問題的去政治化 [*New Ways of Understanding Ethnic Relations: Depoliticization of Ethnic Minority Groups*], ed. Xie Lizhong 謝立中 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2010), 192.

reasons is connected to *the crisis of the state*. In early times, mankind did not have a concept of the state in the modern sense, but after states became the organizational unit for survival and competition, this led to a *crisis of the state*. Over the past 100 years, the very idea of the nation-state was formed during this crisis, attempting to use the idea of the nation to solve problems of the state and to use nationalism to reconfigure the state as an organizational unit for survival. But the concept of the nation can also be used to create a crisis, as demonstrated by the recent situation in Ukraine, where the crisis was mainly a question of state unity and minority groups.

When the *nation* is used to resolve a *crisis of the state* and thus turns into a unit for struggle itself, this will eventually lead to a *crisis of the nation*. In this process of politicization, the concept of *minzu* is constantly changing and developing, whether in the sense of an ethnic minority or in the context of nationalism. Beneath the surface, these issues are closely connected to human development as a whole, because many crises, both those of the state and those of the nation, take place in a world of limited resources. Because they have only finite amounts of resources available, states compete to secure their share. The inequality of global development with an ever-widening wealth gap between the states is closely connected to the emergence of state-led nationalism and *crisis of the nation*. I contend, however, that, in light of the competition for resources, neither the nation nor the nation-state are suitable for genuinely resolving the *crisis of the state*.

Today, China's political system is a multinational republic, an idea different from that of the nation-state. A number of scholars are attempting to use the narrowly defined concept of the nation-state to characterize China's system and solve what they call the ethnic question. This, to me, seems to be a form of regression. In a letter replying to the students at the high school affiliated with China's Minzu University [which is designated for ethnic minorities], [President] Xi Jinping 習近平 stated:

China is a unitary, multinational state. People of all nationalities have lived side by side, shared a common fate, and stood as one in times of struggle. This is the main source for the strong cohesive force and unusual ingenuity of the Chinese people.¹¹

11 我國是統一的多民族國家。我國各族人民同呼吸、共命運、心連心的奮鬥歷程是中華民族強大凝聚力和非凡創造力的重要源泉。“Jianshi lizu tongyi duominzu guojia de jiben guoqing 堅實立足統一多民族國家的基本國情 [The Chinese Reality of Firmly Establishing a Unified and Multi-Ethnic State],” *Zhongguo minzu bao* 中國民

The idea of a “unitary, multinational state” mentioned here is firmly established in the Chinese constitution and can be understood as precisely prescribing China’s political system of a multiethnic republic. With his *pluralism-unity concept* [*Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti* 中華民族多元一體], the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong 費孝通 [1910-2005] proposed the idea of the Chinese people as a culturally pluralistic, yet politically unified body. He encouraged each ethnic group to be aware of its unique characteristics and to recognize and value the same uniqueness in others, thus allowing all groups to coexist harmoniously.¹² For Fei, the ideas of ethnic pluralism and national unity were not in conflict.

The Paradigmatic Crisis of the Problematization of the Word *Minzu*

What, then, is the so-called ethnic question? The problematization [*wentihua* 問題化] and stigmatization of the term *minzu* has been a misguided trend in recent years. First, from a global perspective and considering the history of mankind, ethnic culture is an important source of world culture and the basic unit of cultural pluralism. It would be unreasonable to assume that an ethnic group or an ethnic culture that has existed for hundreds of years could be intrinsically problematic. Second, in current usage, the term “ethnic question” actually subsumes a number of different issues, such as poverty, low levels of education, poor economic development, and problems with religion and extremist thought. These issues, however, are not inherent attributes of any particular ethnic group but, instead, a product of the society in which they exist. To turn these social problems into ethnic problems is misguided. Following the same logic, it would be equally wrong to suddenly pronounce that China’s social problems are “state” or “race” problems.

If we seek to avoid problematization of the term *minzu*, we need to contemplate the question from the perspective of human development. What is central to human development is the belief in universal values. In this regard, the following four pairs of ideas are of special importance: cultural liberty/culturally pluralistic development, cultural ecology/culturally sustainable

族報 [*China Ethnic News*], December 10, 2013, accessed April 28, 2017, http://mzzjw.cn/zgmzb/html/2013-12/10/content_95711.htm.

12 中華民族多元一體，各美其美，美美與共。Fei Xiaotong 費孝通，“*Zhonghua minzu de duoyuan yiti geju* 中華民族的多元一體格局 [The Pluralism-Unity Structure of the Chinese Nation],” *Beijing daxue xuebao* 北京大學學報 [*Journal of Peking University*], 4 (1989): 1-9.

development, cultural equality/culturally equitable development, and cultural tolerance/culturally symbiotic development. Only by using the development perspective to gain an understanding of the idea of *minzu* will it be possible to avoid problematizing the issue and even achieve deproblematization.

Cultural Liberty and Diversity of Culture

The *Human Development Report 2004* was titled *Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*. From the perspective of cultural liberty and diversity, the core idea of *minzu* is culture. When the report was published in 2004, then—UN Assistant Secretary-General Hafiz A. Pasha stressed that “states must actively devise multicultural policies to prevent misunderstandings and discrimination caused by ethnic, religious or linguistic plurality.” The official summary of the report points out:

Human development requires more than health, education, a decent standard of living and political freedom. People's cultural identities must be recognized and accommodated by the state, and people must be free to express these identities without being discriminated against in other aspects of their lives. In short: cultural liberty is a human right and an important aspect of human development—and thus worthy of state action and attention.¹³

Why should we accord cultural liberty the status of a basic human right? In the Western context, human rights denote rights that are inherent to all human beings. The concept of cultural liberty relies on the idea of collective human rights of a group of individuals. An ethnic group or nationality is such a group of individuals who share a common culture, enjoy cultural liberty, and are entitled to the human rights accorded to that group. Scholars, such as Ma Rong 馬戎, have suggested that “the China of today can resolve all questions concerning the livelihood and culture of ethnic minority groups within the existing framework of civil rights.”¹⁴ This statement is only partly correct insofar as it disregards the important distinction that civil rights are individual rights vis-à-vis the state, while ethnic minority rights are group

13 UNDP, *Summary: Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2004), 15-16.

14 Ma Rong 馬戎, “Guanyu dangqian minzu zhengce de fansi 關於當前民族政策的反思 [Rethinking Current Ethnic Policy],” *Fenghuang wang* 鳳凰網 [Phoenix News], March 30, 2014, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://news.ifeng.com/exclusive/lecture/special/minzu/marong.shtml>.

rights of a culturally defined group of individuals. To speak of both individual and group rights, however, does not necessarily have to be contradictory. The Chinese scholar Gao Binzhong 高丙中 assumes a mutually constructive relationship between an individual's identity as a citizen and his identity as a member of an ethnic minority group. To think about China's multinational state-building practice from the perspective of this evolving pair of complementary identities can be highly instructive in both academia and politics.¹⁵ With regard to ethnic minority groups, what is needed is cultural liberty and culturally pluralistic group rights. From a global perspective, multiethnic culture is an important carrier of global cultural pluralism, but the current process of globalization causes the loss of diversity in our global culture. When everyone in a society adopts an identical way of life, this will lead to a relative shortage and exhaustion of certain types of resources in that society. This is one of the reasons that the United Nations Development Programme advocates cultural liberty. By encouraging and preserving cultural diversity, we can achieve lasting political stability for all people.

Cultural Ecology and Culturally Sustainable Development

From the perspective of cultural ecology and culturally sustainable development, the protection of ethnic culture is of fundamental importance. Because of the transformation of societies, blind modernization, urbanization, and excessive commercialization are now seriously threatening ethnic cultures and causing the rapid destruction of precious ethnic cultural heritage. This process will lead to cultural desertification and cause an even more far-reaching cultural impoverishment of ethnic regions. Thus, the protection of the harmony and ecological equilibrium of ethnic cultures must be the basis for culturally sustainable development.

Cultural Fairness and Equal Development

Beginning in the 1980s, the progressive development view was gradually replaced by a new model of fair development. The notion of fairness requires that no one, irrespective of gender or ethnicity, may be deprived of the

15 Gao Binzhong 高丙中, "Gongmin shenfen yu minzu shenfen de jianshexing guanxi: xiandai duominzu guojia de guanjian zhidu sheji 公民身份與民族身份的建設性關係: 現代多民族國家的關鍵制度設計 [The Constructive Relationship between Citizenship and Ethnic Identity: Key Structural Design of Modern Multiethnic States]" (paper presented at the conference Shenghuo Shijie: Lishi, Wenhua, Shijian 生活世界: 歷史·文化·實踐學術會議論文 [Lifeworld: History, Culture, Practice], Fudan University, Shanghai, December 1, 2014).

opportunity to benefit from the process of development. In this sense, offering assistance to ethnic regions and ethnic minority groups cannot simply be reduced to the idea of granting economic aid but must also mean providing everyone with equal rights and opportunities as well as the chance to choose the most suitable path of development.

Cultural Inclusion and Cultural Symbiosis

From the perspective of culturally inclusive and symbiotic development, multiethnic cultures require an atmosphere of tolerance that does not allow exclusion and strives for harmonious coexistence and symbiosis that accommodates the needs of all groups. Inclusion means tolerance, refusing to exclude others, accepting pluralistic differences, and accepting the right to choose. Inclusion is also the respect for culture, mutual understanding, and dialogue between equals. Symbiosis is a central concept that can be employed when humans are faced with the reality of finite resources. Whenever we are confronted with the problem of limited resources, we have a choice between two extremes: either to fight one another or to coexist. With regard to human development, the latter is undoubtedly the more preferable choice.

In human development, *minzu* is the carrier and basic cultural unit of a pluralistic global culture. In this sense, ethnic culture is not inherently problematic. What we today call the ethnic problem is in reality a social problem. This is the basic principle of understanding *minzu* that we should follow in order to build positive ethnic consciousness.

Ethnic consciousness can have both positive and negative effects; the key lies in proper education and guidance. Positive ethnic consciousness means self-respecting, self-reliant, and self-improving ethnic groups that treasure and develop ethnic cultures, take pride in contributing to the big family of the Chinese nation, and show a willingness to learn from others. This type of ethnic consciousness is consistent with the national Chinese consciousness.¹⁶

Only by promoting the peaceful coexistence of all different ethnic cultures can we guarantee a healthy, multiethnic republic and cultural ecology.

16 Zhu Weiqun 朱維群, "Dui dangqian minzu lingyu wenti de jidian sikao 對當前民族領域問題的幾點思考 [Thoughts on Several Current Issues Concerning Ethnicity]," *Xuexi shibao* 學習時報 [Study Times], February 13, 2012.

The Paradigmatic Crisis of the De-Ethnicization of the Term *Minzu*

In recent years, many ideas have been discussed under the heading of de-ethnicization [*qu minzuhua* 去民族化], such as watering down the concept of *minzu*, substituting alternative expressions for it, or even replacing the concept with the traditional idea of a monoethnic state [*guozu* 國族]. These suggestions for de-ethnicizing China's ethnic question do not conform with the requirements of human development and have led to a paradigmatic crisis in *minzu* studies.

The Problem with Second-Generation Ethnic Policy

The idea behind the second-generation ethnic policy,¹⁷ proposed by the scholars Hu Angang 胡鞍鋼 and Hu Lianhe 胡聯合, can be summarized as follows:

to politically, economically, culturally, and socially promote the fusion of all Chinese ethnic groups into one single unity; to continuously weaken ethnic group consciousness of all Chinese citizens and to weaken the idea of fifty-six distinct Chinese nationalities; to further strengthen a common national consciousness and a shared national identity; to earnestly advance national unification and help national development prosper.¹⁸

This view can be summed up as an attempt to use the concepts of a monoethnic state [*guozu*] or the Chinese nation [*Zhonghua minzu*] to replace and

17 This was criticized by several scholars; see Mark Elliott, "The Case of the Missing Indigene: Debate Over a 'Second-Generation' Ethnic Policy," *China Journal*, 73 (2015); Hao Shiyuan 郝時遠, "Ping 'di'erdai minzu zhengce' shuo de lilun yu shijian wuqu 評“第二代民族政策”說的理論與實踐誤區 [Commenting on Problems with the Theory and Practice of the 'Second-Generation Ethnic Policy']," *Xinjiang shehui kexue* 新疆社會科學 [*Social Sciences in Xinjiang*], 2 (2012); Du Yonghao 都永浩 and Zuo Xiuxian 左岫仙, "Shenmeyang de minzu zhengce keyi baozheng guojia changzhi jiu'an 什麼樣的民族政策可以保證國家長治久安 [What Type of Ethnic Policy Will Guarantee National Stability?]," *Heilongjiang minzu congkan* 黑龍江民族叢刊 [*Heilongjiang Nationality Series*], 4 (2012).

18 在政治、經濟、文化、社會等各方面促進國內各民族交融一體，不斷淡化公民的族群意識和56個民族的觀念，不斷強化中華民族的身份意識和身份認同，切實推進中華民族一體化，促進中華民族繁榮一體發展。Hu Angang 胡鞍鋼 and Hu Lianhe 胡聯合, "Di'erdai minzu zhengce: cujin minzu jiaorong yiti he fanrong yiti 第二代民族政策：促進民族交融一體和繁榮一體 [Second-Generation Ethnic Policy: Promoting Integration and Prosperity of the Ethnic Groups]," *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao* 新疆師範大學學報 [*Journal of Xinjiang Normal University*], 5 (2011).

dissolve ethnic pluralism, to stress unification, and to oppose diversity. This approach means weakening ethnic groups and taking away ethnic rights. The ideas of both a monoethnic state and nation were already raised by Sun Yat-sen, who initially advocated expelling the Manchu rulers. After further examining the issue, however, he suggested the theory of the Republic of Five Races, based on the idea of a multiethnic republic. In his proclamation as provisional president of the Republic of China, in January 1912, he stated:

I say the foundation of a state is the people. The different races such as Hans, Manchus, Mongols, Mohammedans and Tibetans are now to be united as a nation. This is what I call the Unity of Races.¹⁹

For this reason, the early Chinese republic initially used a five-color national flag symbolizing the Republic of Five Races. The flag represented the idea that five different races make up the people of China and of China as a multiethnic republic. Even Sun Yat-sen, who had initially advocated a monoracial state, eventually accepted the notion of a multiethnic republic. The proponents of the second-generation ethnic policy, however, have now abandoned the original intention behind the founding of the republic and propose the establishment of the identity and unity of the Chinese nation by weakening ethnicity. We should continue to follow the principles of a multiethnic republic with culturally pluralistic ethnic groups, as we have since the early days of the People's Republic. We should not try to ensure the longevity of the Chinese nation by weakening ethnic group consciousness or the idea of a China with fifty-six nationalities but, quite to the contrary, should attempt to ensure it by strengthening the idea of a multiethnic community.

19 國家之本在於人民，合漢、滿、蒙、回、藏諸地為一國，即合漢、滿、蒙、回、藏諸族為一人，是曰民族之統一。Sun Yat-sen 孫中山, "Linshi da zongtong xuanyanshu 臨時大總統宣言書 [Proclamation of the Provisional President]," in *Wen quanshu 孫文全書 [Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen]* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 2: 2; translation taken from Sun Yat-sen, "President Sun's Proclamation to the People after Assuming the Presidency of the Provisional Government of the Republic of China," in *Important Documents Relating to China's Revolution, With English Translations* (Shanghai: Shanghai yinshu guan, 1912), 66. For an alternative translation, see, for instance, Marc A. Matten, "China Is the China of the Chinese: The Concept of Nation and its Impact on Political Thinking in Modern China," *Oriens Extremus*, 51 (2012): 85: "The foundation of our country (*guojia*) lies with the people (*renmin*). We need to combine all areas of the Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui and Tibetans into one unified state, just as we, the different ethnic groups of Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui and Tibetans, are to be united to form one people. This means that the nation (*minzu*) is unified."

The Problem with the Idea of Substitution

In order to weaken the current concept of *minzu*, Ma Rong suggested using the term *zuqun* [ethnic group] instead:

We can define *minzu* at the national level, let it refer to the Chinese nation as a whole [*Zhonghua minzu*], and serve as the common political identity of the entire Chinese people. At the same time, we can follow the Western classification system and define the existing fifty-six Chinese nationalities [*minzu*] as ethnic groups [*zuqun*]. This way, we will be able to differentiate more clearly between the two fundamentally different levels of meaning and successfully weaken the political connotation that the term fifty-six nationalities carries even today.²⁰

Ma Rong's suggestion to substitute fifty-six ethnic groups [*zuqun*] for fifty-six nationalities [*minzu*], however, is not feasible. In the expression "fifty-six nationalities" [*minzu*], the word *minzu* is used in the context of national governance. The term *zuqun* [ethnic group], however, is an academic concept, with *minzu* [nationality] often considered but one type of *zuqun* [ethnic group]. For this reason, substituting one term for the other not only fails to depoliticize the issue but, on the contrary, will have the adverse effect of *politicizing* what was until now essentially an academic term. In many countries, the constitution encourages cultural pluralism and establishes systems of political and cultural self-governance. What was initially aimed at weakening the political connotation of the term "nationalities" [*minzu*] has quite adversely made the term part of the current efforts at de-ethnicization, which is nothing but another form of politicization. The French scholar Gil Delannoi, in his book *Sociologie de la nation*, suggested:

Nation and nationalism have occupied a central position in politics for the past 200 years. ... judging from its scope, tenacity and adaptability, the phenomenon of the nation has entirely dominated the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

To set aside the idea of the nation now is untenable. National factors, in the positive as well as the negative sense, greatly contributed to establishing popular democracy. At the same time, national factors have

20 "Hao Shiyuan, Zhang Haiyang, Ma Rong fangtan: goujian xinxing minzu guanxi 郝時遠、張海洋、馬戎訪談：構建新型民族關係 [Discussion with Hao Shiyuan, Zhang Haiyang and Ma Rong: Constructing a New Type of Ethnic Relations]," *Xibei minzu yanjiu* 西北民族研究 [*Northwestern Journal of Ethnology*], 1 (2014): 76.

partly replaced the role of religion in creating fervor in everyday life and in mobilization for war.²¹

By the time the issue of *nationality* has revealed itself, a myriad of problems come attached to it, still waiting to be uncovered. Without the problems of fairness and discrimination, without any of the problems encountered during national development, and without politicization, *nationality* is a completely unproblematic concept. To simply replace the concept of *minzu* with the idea of the Chinese nation [*Zhonghua minzu*], or attempting to remove any of its political connotations, will not suffice in solving the many social questions attached to it.

The Problem with Depoliticization and Culturalization

Ma Rong suggests steering the trend of politicizing ethnic questions, which has been marked since the founding of the People's Republic, in a new direction. He argues for culturalizing ethnicity, slowly creating and strengthening a nation-state consciousness, while gradually weakening consciousness of the various ethnic groups.²²

To consider differences between racial and ethnic groups to be primarily cultural, to neither recognize nor allow for special political rights to be bestowed upon them, this may be called the idea of culturalizing ethnic groups.²³

Ma Rong's intention is to strengthen citizen consciousness in China, while, at the same time, weaken the group consciousness of ethnic minority groups.

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- 21 Gil Delannoi 吉爾·德拉諾瓦, *Minzu yu minzu zhuyi* 民族與民族主義 [*Sociologie de la nation*], trans. Zheng Wenbin 鄭文彬 and Hong Hui 洪暉 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2005), 14, 16.
- 22 Ma Rong 馬戎, "Lijie minzu guanxi de silu: shaoshu zuqun wenti de quzhengzhijie 理解民族關係的新思路: 少數族群問題的去政治化 [New Ways of Understanding Ethnic Relations: Depoliticization of Ethnic Minority Groups]," *Beijing daxue xuebao* 北京大學學報 [*Journal of Peking University*], 6 (2004).
- 23 把種族、族群之間的差異主要視為文化差異, 不認為也不允許各族群有自己特殊的政治權利. 這可以看作是將族群 '文化化' 的思路. Ma Rong 馬戎, "Dangqian Zhongguo minzu wenti de zhengjie yu chulu 當前中國民族問題的癥結與出路 [The Crux of China's Current Ethnic Question and Its Solution]," in *Lijie minzu guanxi de xinsilu: shaoshu zuqun wenti de quzhengzhijie* 理解民族關係的新思路: 少數族群問題的去政治化 [*New Ways of Understanding Ethnic Relations: Depoliticization of Ethnic Minority Groups*], 192.

As previously stated, citizen consciousness and ethnic consciousness are, in fact, neither mutually exclusive nor inversely related. Civil rights and the group rights of ethnic minority groups can actually reinforce each other. The idea to weaken group consciousness with the aim of strengthening the consciousness of a unified people is extremely political and clearly at odds with the self-proposed goal of depoliticization. If we accept that ethnic groups are primarily defined by culture, then any attempt to weaken them must per se be an act of deculturalization. How can we then still speak of culturalizing ethnicity?

For close to 200 years now, nation and nationalism have been politicized concepts. Just as what we call the Chinese nation [*Zhonghua minzu*] is equally a politicized concept today. Does this mean that we should now begin to 'denationalize' the Chinese nation [*qu Zhonghua minzuhua* 去中華民族化]? Politicization is actually a fairly common process and whenever the concept of the nation appears, more often than not, there is a political context or the concept is used as a political tool. The number fifty-six in China's designated fifty-six nationalities was mainly agreed upon for its administrative usefulness and may serve as a concrete example of what politicization actually means. Simply based on cultural factors, the number of Chinese nationalities could surely have exceeded the number fifty-six. If we are serious about depoliticization, should we not first of all discard the number fifty-six (instead of substituting fifty-six *ethnic groups* for fifty-six *nationalities*)? Nationality in itself is pluralistic and when used as a method for governance, different countries and regions employ a range of methods for determining nationalities. In Taiwan, for instance, sixteen minority groups have been determined. Given the need to protect cultural plurality, this number has increased compared to earlier days. Laos with its long history of identifying nationalities, currently distinguishes forty-nine, a number that still continues to rise today. How come the use of numbers in governance is so often considered a sort of administrative wisdom? I, for my part, am more inclined to view them as a symbol of cultural pluralism and hope they will help support multi-cultural development in China's ethnic politics.

A number of recent articles on cultural regions have discussed the French government's methods of protecting cultural plurality.²⁴ Cultural regions in France are established outside the fixed boundaries of the administrative

24 Zhuang Chenyan 莊晨燕, "Wenhuaqu yu renlei fazhan: faguo wenhua fazhanqu de qishi 文化區與人類發展: 法國文化發展區的啟示 [Cultural Regions and Human Development: Taking Inspiration from Cultural Development Regions in France]," *Beifang minzu daxue xuebao* 北方民族大學學報 [*Journal of the Northwest University for Nationalities*], 6 (2014).

system and create an alternative national system of culturally defined areas. In national governance and for the protection of ethnic culture it is unavoidable to politicize nationality. The only question then becomes: which political direction to follow? If it were not for the identification project in the early days of the People's Republic, we would never have arrived at the number of fifty-six nationalities. Given today's trend of globalization, we might not even distinguish between nationalities at all. Self-governance of ethnic groups should include the right to govern their own cultural affairs. Here, we can follow the French example and realize this goal by establishing special cultural regions.

The Problem with the Idea of Independence of Ethnic Groups

Advocates of the *second-generation* ethnic policy are convinced that "the key of the national struggle against separatism is to establish such a system that would make it impossible for 'local ethnic elites' to claim themselves as the representatives and spokesmen for local group interests."²⁵

Theoretically speaking, if a group has been identified as a *minzu* or "nation" by its own government, foreign governments and the elites within the group, then, no matter if we follow the "national self-determinism" theory of Western capitalist countries or the Marxist principle of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin which says "unconditionally and firmly protect the self-determination right of each nation," which is the right to secession, the term "nation" will always invoke the desire to establish an independent nation-state through self-determination.²⁶

The reasons given above are not completely convincing. Without even further discussing whether there is indeed a desire to establish fifty-six independent Chinese nation-states, if we assume that distinguishing between different nationalities automatically means allowing and encouraging their independence, would this not equally mean that by delineating administrative areas at

25 一個國家開展反分裂鬥爭的關鍵應是通過制度安排使所謂“地方民族精英”無法宣稱是本地區本民族的利益的代表者和領導者。Hu and Hu, "Di'er dai minzu zhengce: cujin minzu jiaorong yiti he fanrong yiti"; translation based on Ma Rong, "Reflections on the Debate on China's Ethnic Policy: My Reform Proposals and Their Critics," *Asian Ethnicity*, 15 (2004): 2, 242.

26 Ma Rong, "Current Crux and Solutions to Current Ethnic Issues in China," in *De-Politicization of Ethnic Questions in China*, ed. Lizhong Xie (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2014), 167.

the provincial level, we are encouraging regional independence? Objectively speaking, the idea of nationality [*minzu*] can be misused and turned into a cultural tool for secession, but, at the same time, the concept of nationality can also be used to foster unity and cohesion—such as when we profess adherence to the Chinese nation [*Zhonghua minzu*]. Would this not mean that the word nation [*minzu*] in Chinese nation [*Zhonghua minzu*] has the singular purpose of provoking independence and secession? Many countries in the world are multiethnic unions, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Germany. Modern national consciousness has already rid itself of the narrow national consciousness of the past and upholds a national self-awareness based on the principle of cultural pluralism. National self-awareness is also an aspect of cultural self-awareness. Ethnic groups vying for independence and founding of an independent nation are no longer part and parcel of a modern national consciousness. National independence today has two distinct meanings: independence as a nation, as a nation-state, or independence as a legally recognized nationality. The underlying motivation is not a cultural desire, but a demand for resources, amongst other things. To date, the world has yet to witness a case in which the very act of recognizing a nationality will automatically “evoke the desire to establish an independent nation-state through self-determination.” This is simply a false proposition.

Conclusion

This article attempts to understand the three paradigmatic crises in China's current *minzu* studies, the univocal interpretation, problematization and de-ethnicization of the term *minzu*, from an academic perspective.

To allow for an ambiguous understanding of the word *minzu* is, in fact, conducive to ethnic policy formation and helps prevent equivocal interpretations. If *minzu* is simply treated as an aspect of national governance, its basic characteristics as a cultural group will be discounted. This will, in turn, lead to misinterpretations and inconsistencies in ethnic policy making. From the perspective of cultural pluralism, China's political system is best described as a multinational republic and not as a so-called nation-state. It is of pivotal importance to keep this distinction in mind when discussing China's ethnic minority groups and the pluralism-unity structure of the Chinese nation.

As cultural groups that have existed for hundreds or even thousands of years, ethnic groups or nationalities are not inherently problematic. Today's *minzu question* exists but for one reason, the wide array of social questions that have been subsumed under the term *minzu*. By employing a human development

perspective, we can successfully elevate the discussion and seek an understanding of today's *minzu question* at a transregional and a transnational level. At the very basis of the term *minzu*, lays its cultural connotation. With regard to the cultural aspects of human development, ethnic culture does not pose any problem. Any irresponsible attempt at aggravating the *minzu problem* or at making use of the term to cover up or shift the blame for social questions should be ceased immediately.

From the human development perspective, any form of de-ethnicization can only be considered inadequate. The idea of *minzu* is so deeply embedded in society that it has become an expression of that very society as well as a tool in war and power struggles. It should thus be obvious, the most pressing issue is not to de-ethnicize, but to deproblematize the *minzu* question and rid it from any connotations of struggle and conflict. *Minzu* must be restored to its original meaning of ethnic cultures, cultures that are neither prone to violence nor hotbeds for extremism. The restoration of *minzu* will benefit the harmonious relationship between all peoples, help eliminate conflict and war, and foster peaceful cultural co-existence in a pluralistic world. Any opinions held or methods proposed that advocate de-ethnicization are preposterous and misguided. Advocating de-ethnicization of the *minzu question* is dangerous and virtually useless in resolving any of the problems we are currently facing. De-ethnicization will only serve to pull the concept of *minzu* even deeper into a quagmire of conflict and war, eventually leading to the destruction of ethnic harmony and culture.

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