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The *Minzu* Net: China's Fragmented National Form

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Nets are for catching fish; after one gets the fish, one forgets the net. Traps are for catching rabbits; after one gets the rabbit, one forgets the trap. Words are for getting meaning; after one gets the meaning, one forgets the words. Where can I find people who have forgotten words, and have a word with them?

Zhuangzi, Ch. 26

From its origins as a distinct genre of academic enquiry in Europe and America during the 1980s and 90s, the study of 'nationalism' has been a highly contested pursuit, with many of the debates over its meaning and significance appearing in the pages of *Nations and Nationalism* and countless other academic journals. Unsurprisingly, additional conjurations arise when we seek to translate this discourse into another language and civilisational context like China.

Rather than seeking to rescue 'Chinese nationalism' from heretical interpretations or reframe it conceptually, I would like to suggest a deeper and more robust engagement with the heteroglossia of nationalism: its multi-voiceness. Group-making - that is the contingent and variable *processes* of framing what 'group' matters - is foundational to both human societies and *homo academicus*, and it is difficult to imagine a world without racial, ethnic and national schemata, irrespective of one's normative stance. In what follows, I briefly trace the etymology and slipperiness of this group-making process as it relates to the polysemic concept of *minzu* (民族, nation/race/people/ethnic group, etc.) in modern China.

The Promiscuous Nation

To my mind, the Carlson-Costa debate highlights the fundamental promiscuity of nationalism as a fluid constellation of ideologies, appellations, political movements, and emotive sentiments. The search for belonging is fundamental to the human condition but its protean character can be extremely difficult to pin down analytically. Throughout modern history, nationalism has formed consummate marriages with a range of disparate ideologies/ideas (from liberalism to fascism) and around groups at different spatial and temporal scales (from ancient tribes to global citizenries). These complex mediations produce different types of nationalism - civic, ethnic, cultural, racial, religious, diasporic, to name but a few - that scholars have long attempted to categorise and study.

No single discipline or set of methodological tools can hope to come to terms with such a mercurial phenomena. Instead, different academic traditions have sought to indigenise nationalism: reframing it with their own idioms, assumptions, research methods, and working hypotheses. The end results is a heuristic chameleon that helps to explain both the continued appeal of nationalism as well as the

differences of opinion between Carlson and Costa, as well as the doyens of nationalism studies Ernest Gellner and Anthony D. Smith.

Carlson and Costa both approach Chinese nationalism from the perspective of international relations/international studies, with its chief concern about how sovereign states and institutions relate to one another globally, or in this case, how China and its 'national identity' operates on the world stage. Yet, this is only part of the story of Chinese nationalism. What happens if we alter the referent and scale of nationalism in China?

Things look different when we move away from a distinct and undifferentiated 'China' toponym and 'Chinese' ethnonym, and instead examine the instability and multivocality at the core of these super-signs. My intellectual engagement with Chinese nationalism has come through a deeply multidisciplinary interrogation of *minzu*. My book *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism* (2007) sought to demonstrate how the boundaries of modern Chinese subjectivity are shaped not only by the 'foreign Other' (USA, Japan, Europe, etc.) but also a more familiar 'domestic Other', the so-called barbarians that are today China's 'ethnic minorities' (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族).

These sorts of 'boundary-spanners', Allen Carlson (2009: 30) argues, complicate our understanding of Chinese nationalism, as have studies of diasporic Chinese nationalism (Callahan 2003; Barabantseva 2011), peripheral nationalisms of the Chinese frontier (Wang 2001), cyber-nationalism (Wu 2007), and even the multiple sub-ethnic nationalisms that haunt and fragment the majority Han category (Mullaney 2012; Joniak-Lüthi 2015).

If we return to the written language in which Chinese nationalism is articulated, we quickly discover a linguistic-cultural anxiety underpinning its existence, study, and politics. In Chinese, nationalism can be rendered as either *aiguo-zhuyi* 爱国主义 - the ism (*zhuyi* 主义) of loving the state (爱国), or as *minzu-zhuyi* 民族主义 - the ism of the people's clan (民族). These concepts are now specific to the Chinese context, yet entered via a complex 'translingual encounter' that must be carefully unpacked by scholars working across-languages and cultures (Liu 2004; Bilik 2014; Dirlik 2015).

In the PRC today, the two terms are often used interchangeably. Yet *aiguo-zhuyi* is more frequently employed as a gloss for the sort of outwardly focused patriotism that was on display during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In contrast, *minzu-zhuyi* is an acutely ambiguous and inwardly divisive concept. This is due to the lack of agreement on which 'clan' or 'group' (*minzu*) is the appropriate focus of the people's loyalty and attention across the last century. In other words, the search for *minzu* came before the founding of the nation in modern China and any external expressions of patriotism.

The *Minzu* Chameleon

Liang Qichao, arguably modern China's most formidable intellectual, was the first to use the term nationalism, when he encountered the ideas of the German jurist Johann Kaspar Bluntschli in 1901 while living in exile in Japan during the

dying days of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Liang was enthralled by Bluntschli's notion that a strong, united *volk* (people/nation/race, or *minzoku* in Japanese) was crucial for survival in the modern world; yet he lamented that *minzu*-ism, as he rendered it in Chinese, had yet to reach an embryonic form in China. Liang followed his mentor Kang Youwei in calling for the 'Chinese people' to rally around the Manchu Qing emperor in order to construct a modern constitutional monarchy like Meiji Japan (Wang 2003).

Others had a less inclusive image of the Chinese nation/race. The fiery teenage activist Zou Rong insisted the 'furry and horned Manchu race', among other nomads, were not a part of neither the Han nor Chinese *minzu* (like many others, he often transposed these terms), and thus they needed to be overthrown and even annihilated in the name of purity. Throughout the early twentieth century, Chinese officials and thinkers alike employed the *minzu* referent to mark their own people/nation/race and distinguish it from unwanted outsiders (Leibold 2007).

Yet the *minzu*'s boundaries remained contested, with frequent discussion over who was in, who was out, and even how many *minzu* existed. Early Han leaders of Republican China (1912-49) insisted on uniting all the peoples and territories of the former Qing empire in opposition to the 'foreign' *minzu*, with Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and even Mao Zedong employing the term *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族) to express this collective sense of nationhood. Yet this sentiment was not shared by many of the indigenous populations (Tibetan, Muslim, Mongol, and others) that lived along the vast and remote frontiers of Qing China.

The rise of communism in China muddied the waters further, packing additional meanings and confusion into the *minzu* idiom. Communist intellectuals like Li Wei-han and Fan Wenlan were tasked with sinicising the vast and internally diverse discourse on nationalism in Europe, and more particularly, Stalin's 1913 definition of the nation (*natsiya*) as a historical category unique to 'the epoch of rising capitalism'. Did this mean that semi-feudal, semi-colonial China had no nation(s)?

Hardly, rather Mao declared China a 'multi-*minzu*' (多数民族) country with both 'complete *minzu*' like the Han majority and a range of 'incomplete' and 'backward' *minzu* like the Hui, Mongols, Tibetans, Miao and others. Yet, the debate did not end here, as the *minzu* appellation was made to work overtime in glossing a range of terms which now existed as a part of the global literature on nationalism and the 'national question' (民族问题).

At a 1962 conference in Beijing, the Chinese Communist Party formally declared *minzu* (or 'nationality', as it came to be translated into English) as the official and only acceptable locution for a range of distinct Russian, German and English terms (Lin 1963), and by 1979 the PRC arrived at its now axiomatic *minzu* taxonomy: fifty-five minority nationalities plus the Han nationality which together comprise a single super-*minzu*, the Chinese nationality. The result is an odd sort of calculus, Thomas Mullaney (2004: 197) contends, which can be rendered as: $55 + 1 = 1$.

Liberating *Minzu* from the Nation

This semiotic overburdening led some Chinese intellectuals to call for the introduction of a new theory and vocabulary for clarifying China's national composition after the death of Mao and China's reform and opening-up. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, there were renewed fears that the existing formula, which placed too much emphasis on minority identities at the expense of a shared national identity, was out of balance with the needs of a modern nation-state. What was required, some intellectuals insisted, was a new language for narrating the nation, one more in keeping with the way identity is discussed in the West rather than in China or Russia.

As early as 2001, Peking University Professor Ma Rong began employing the neologism *zuqun* 族群 (ethnicity/ethnic group) to describe China's internal ethnic diversity, while arguing that *minzu* should be reserved for the collective unity of Chinese nation. This would avoid the 'conceptual confusion' of employing *minzu* for both individual ethnic groups, like the Han and Tibetans, and the singular Chinese nation.

'Otherwise', Ma wrote (2007: 202), 'we might seriously mislead English-speaking readers into thinking these [ethnic] groups are independent political entities who have the right to carry out 'national self-determination' and establish their own independent 'nation-states''.¹ Others, however, disagreed, insisting that the shift from *minzu* to *zuqun* would undermine the legitimacy of non-Han identities, suggesting that it was the first step in scaling back minority rights and autonomy enshrined in the PRC Constitution.

This seemingly small conceptual problem has evolved into an acrimonious and as yet unresolved debate over the future direction of *minzu* policies in China (Leibold 2013). Some warn that the PRC will follow the Soviet Union in ethno-national collapse unless it adopts a 'second generation of *minzu* policies'. In place of the first generation of policies that were indiscriminately copied from the USSR, China should join the 'global norm' and adopt a 'melting pot formula', where state policies and institutions encourage, rather than hinder, natural inter-*minzu* mingling and fusion.

Opponents argue that any rethinking of *minzu* theory and policy would lead to 'ideological chaos' and political and social upheaval. Open the *minzu* box, they assert, and you will unleash a Pandora-like set of contradictions that will undermine the cooperation, solidarity, and trust central to solving social problems in a multi-*minzu* country such as China.

In 1998 the State Nationalities Affairs Commission (中国民族委员会) begrudgingly altered its English name to the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (Zhou 2010: 491-92). Yet since then, many now argue that *minzu* is best left untranslated, as is the case with the Minzu University of China (formerly the Central Nationalities University), and in keeping with the way the term is used in some of the foreign scholarship on China. The term *minzu*, Professor Ming Hao

¹ I've slightly altered Ma's original phrasing to make the sentence more fluid based on the original Chinese (See Ma 2004 123).

(2012) of Minzu University argues, is unique to China, and its complex meanings cannot be encapsulated in any single English term, or any other language for that matter.

In China, what Confucius first termed the ‘rectification of names’ (正名) is an explicitly political act, and these nomenclature wars signify the intractable ambivalence at the heart of China’s national form. Like the multiple meanings behind *minzu*, Chinese nationalism is an unstable basket of contested ideas and identities. What one sees depends on where one is standing. Context is everything.

Escaping the Hutongs

This rather torturous digression down the *minzu* path reminds us of the importance of scale and perspective in any rigorous intellectual pursuit. The ‘*minzu* turn’ in Chinese studies has helped to create a distinct sub-discipline of minority studies, enabling us to view China in new and interesting ways. Yet, like the study of Chinese nationalism internationally, one can easily get lost in the narrow alleyways (*hutong* 胡同) and lose sight of the way categories, practices and processes of identity formation flow (often rapidly and nearly always synchronously) across space and time.

Just as those who study Chinese nationalism on the global stage often miss the subterranean fractures on which China’s ‘external face’ is built, those who study ethnic minorities and ethnic identities inside China, like myself, can easily overlook the complex ways in which locally-embedded identities interact with larger frames and codes like China, Chinese, and Chinese-ness.

Rather than treating these rubrics as independent variables, we need to consciously dialogue with a range of different disciplines and viewpoints, seek out comparative examples and boundary-spanning actors that confuse as much as they illuminate. ‘Ethnicity, race, and nationhood are fundamentally ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world’, Roger Brubaker (2004: 17) reminds us. ‘They are not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world’. Nets rather than fish.

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