

Foreign Models and Native Mold: the Making of China's Nationalities Policy

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Instead of being a racial or political concern, in most of China's history, ethnic issues were about cultural and economic differences between the civilized Chinese and Barbarians. This remained unaffected even during the recurring periods of breaking up. However, things changed when modern conceptions like "nation state" and "nationalism" were introduced to the country and nation building emerged as a serious challenge to the semi-colonial, post-imperial Chinese state. Long before taking over China, the Chinese Communist Party had started grappling with this issue, whether consciously or not.

There are several contradictions in China's nationalities policy. For example, whereas the Ethnic Classification project and the self-government of minority groups are promoted, the overall policy aims to the demise of minority identities. Also, despite the affirmative action that has caused many Hans to resent, it is not serving to empower minorities either. Paradoxically, it intends to encourage assimilation and the creation of a unified state, which are at odds with its surface function. What explains such inconsistencies?

Unlike previous works blaming either the incompatibility of communism and nationalism or the relentless intervention of foreign powers, this article pays more attention to the interactive process than any particular player. Specifically, I argue that China's nationalities policy is the result of the localization process, during which Chinese native elites, regardless of their political orientations, attempted to make sense of the novel ideas of nationalism and national self-determination. Though it ended up with the nationalities policy of Communist China, it should not be isolated from this history.

To be clear, this article is not an ethnographic work and does not really study the origins of Chinese peoples/nation. Rather, it focuses more on the narrative of "Chineseness" and "the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*) in the first half of the 20th century, which may or may not correspond with the anthropologic facts of the ethnic groups living on the borderlands. In other words, this is a study of social construction of national identity.

The article is organized as follows. It begins with a brief review of China's nationalities policy. Then the second section examines the current literature on the topic and lays out the theoretical framework of this article. This is followed by the empirical study of "foreign models" and "native mold" of China's nationalities policy in the third and fourth sections respectively. The fifth section attempts to make sense of China's nationalities policy within the framework of norm localization. The article ends with a short conclusion.

I. Communist China's Nationalities Policy: Constructing a Unified, Multinational People's Republic

While has never been a homogeneous state, the conception of a multinational Chinese state is not a historical given either. Instead, it was constructed in the course of Chinese revolution. During the Nationalist era, the Guomindang (GMD, also known as the Nationalist Party) government insisted that the country was home to only one people, “Chinese people” (*Zhonghua minzu*), and that the supposedly distinct groups of the republic were merely subvarieties of a common stock (*zongzu*).¹ It was only after the establishment of the Communist rule that the fifty-five minority nationalities, besides the majority Han Chinese, were identified and that a unified, multi-national Chinese state was eventually formed.

As a semi-colonial state, remarkable political chaos and violence had featured China’s transition from an empire to a modern nation state. Particularly, with its Han Chinese core, the Nationalist rule on the mainland was always accompanied by the self-determination movements among non-Han peoples on the borderlands, in which the sponsorship of foreign imperial powers was never absent.² Although the eventual consolidation of power by the CCP forcefully restored the territorial boundary of the Qing Empire (the notable exceptions of Outer Mongolia and Taiwan), the challenges of nation building remained in the People’s Republic.

Unlike those typical post-colonial states, Communist China’s nationalities policy was not generated through parliamentary debates, but in the long-term struggle against both the internal and external “enemies”. Specifically, the nationalities policy of the People’s Republic can be summed as consisting of the following three aspects:

1. Ethnic Classification Project (minzu shibie). By means of the Ethnic Classification Project, “the Communist state determined the number, names, and internal composition of China’s officially recognized ethnonational groups.”³ As a key move of nation building, in 1953, the project was launched and a huge number of field-workers were sent out to all parts of the country for surveying. It then continued off and on for almost four decades until 1990. Consequently, 39 nationalities were recognized before the First Session of the First National People’s Congress in 1954. This number was revised to 54 in 1964 and eventually confirmed as 56 in the 1982 census. By carrying out the systematic recognition of minority populations, the communist state aimed to reintegrate the former Qing territories into a unified polity, left in piece after the 1911 Revolution when the Manchu rule over non-Manchu subjects collapsed.⁴ Since the project, China has been reconceptualized as a unified, multinational state.

2. National Regional Autonomy. In areas where minority people concentrate, the communist state establishes special “autonomous” governments at the provincial, county and village level and grants minorities more control over their own affairs. Particularly, in those areas, a certain percentage of government officials are required to come from minority populations; no tax

¹ Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to terms with the nation: ethnic classification in modern China* (University of California Press, 2011), 2

² Enze Han, *Contestation and Adaptation: The Politics of National Identity in China* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 29.

³ Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to terms with the nation: ethnic classification in modern China* (University of California Press, 2011), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

money collected has to be sent to Beijing - it can all be invested locally. This institutional design has been known as the National Regional Autonomy.

The first provincial level autonomous region was created in Inner Mongolia in 1947, two years before the party taking over China. Later, Xinjiang was made autonomous in 1955; Guangxi and Ningxia in 1958, and Tibet in 1965. In spite of the concentration of specific minority nationality population, it is worth to note that in both Guanagxi and Ningxia, Han Chinese still made up two-thirds of the population, and in Inner Mongolia, the percentage of Han population was even larger.

Legally, in 1952, with the promulgation of “The People’s Republic of China’s Program of Implementation of Regional Self-administration by Minority Nationalities” (“中华人民共和国民族区域自治实施纲要”), the system of limited self-administration by minority nationalities was formally founded. The document stressed the principle of limited autonomy for minority nationalities under the sovereign authority of the Chinese central government. Specifically, it permitted the formation of local governments in minority areas that were given the *de jure* power of self-administration. Despite the fact that it failed to grant minority nationalities full political autonomy, it allowed a slightly higher degree of decentralization of power to minority-inhabited areas than to Han Chinese-inhabited areas.⁵ This institution was incorporated into the Constitution in 1954 and elevated to “The Law on Regional Autonomy for Minority Nationalities” (“民族区域自治法”) in May 1984 by the National People’s Congress (NPC).

3. Affirmative Action Policies for Ethnic Minorities. The communist government instated affirmative action policies immediately after its taking over of the country. Grounded in the principle of equality of the nationalities, these policies gave preferential treatment to minority groups, expecting them to be better integrated into the communist state. In spite of criticism, people still admit “in general, China has managed its other ethnic minorities in an enlightened manner, granting them special privileges to co-opt them into the system.”⁶ To be specific, such preferential policies include (but are not limited to):⁷

- There are free elementary, middle and high-school-level boarding schools and special college-preparatory classes for minority children.
- Minority children can get into a university with lower scores than Han children.
- A separate network of segregated universities exists only for minority students.
- Though most Han in urban areas are limited to one child per family, minority families can have two, and in rural areas many are legally allowed three. In practice, many minority families simply have as many children as they want.
- No-interest loans are offered for small minority businesses.

⁵ Minxin Pei. “Self-Administration and Local Autonomy: Reconciling Conflicting Interests in China.” In Wolframh Danspeckgruber, ed. *The Self-determination of Peoples: Community, Nation, and State in an Interdependent World* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 318.

⁶ Nicholas D. Kristof, “The World; Affirmative Action, Chinese Style, Makes Some Progress,” *The New York Times*, March 31, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/31/weekinreview/the-world-affirmative-action-chinese-style-makes-some-progress.html>.

⁷ Rena Singer, “China’s Minorities Get Huge Affirmative-Action Benefits,” *The Seattle Times*, August 26, 1997, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19970826&slug=2556773>.

- Businesses are officially encouraged to hire minorities.
- A comprehensive, bilingual-education program aims at helping minorities learn Chinese. Meanwhile, scholars are creating alphabets for minority languages that had no writing systems to help ensure that these languages do not die.

It might be true that these policies do not grant real power to minority nationalities and are often window-dressing. Yet, just as a western diplomat in Beijing said, “there are efforts to bring minorities into high-profile positions, which has its own value because then they begin to serve as role models.”⁸

The CCP summed up its nationalities as “unity and equality.”⁹ However, even with its idealistic blueprint, there are some obvious contradictions inherent in this policy. First, whereas the independent ethnic identities have been recognized and fixed by the state, the overarching identity of the Chinese Nation compromises the cultural significance of each individual group and aims to create a homogeneous image of the communist state. Moreover, although the self-government of the minorities has been promoted, they are still denied with “real” access to political power.¹⁰ Instead, “backward and primitive peoples” are often used to depict these minorities.¹¹ Since they are usually considered as lack of capabilities to properly govern themselves, guide and help from the advanced majority people are necessary. Finally, the affirmative action program is purely pragmatic and “to give the minorities just enough power, education or economic success to keep them quiet.”¹² Yet, as opposed to empowering the minorities, it is actually meant to encourage assimilation and turn them into non-territorial, apolitical, cultural “ethnic groups.”¹³ Then, what explains these inconsistencies? This is the question this article will address.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1) Existing literature: alternative explanations

Despite the extensive discussion of China’s ethnic politics, most of this literature is interested in the content and nature of China’s nationalities policy, and not so much has paid attention to how this policy was made and what explains its inherent contradictions. No doubt it is risky to generalize the nationalities policy of the People’s Republic into several points, since the policy itself has been in fluid all the time. However, it is equally important to know the logic behind the policy, which makes generalization necessary. Generally speaking, among the little literature that

⁸ Nicholas D. Kristof, “The World; Affirmative Action, Chinese Style, Makes Some Progress,” *The New York Times*, March 31, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/31/weekinreview/the-world-affirmative-action-chinese-style-makes-some-progress.html>.

⁹ Colin Mackerras, *China’s Ethnic Minorities and Globalization* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 19.

¹⁰ Rena Singer, “China’s Minorities Get Huge Affirmative-Action Benefits,” *The Seattle Times*, August 26, 1997, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19970826&slug=2556773>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Uradyn E. Bulag, “Alter/native Mongolian identity from nationality to ethnic group”. In *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance (Third Edition)*, eds. Perry, Elizabeth and Mark Selden. (Routledge, 2000), 283.

explores the reason why China's nationalities policy appears as it is, two opinions stand out: 1) the incompatibility of communism and nationalism; 2) the external factors.

In some literature, scholars examine the nationalities policies of communist states within the framework of the Marxist-Leninist theory and found that the contradictions in their nationalities policy were caused by the incompatibility of communism and nationalism. For example, Walker Connor investigates the degree to which "Leninist national policy" has been implemented in China (among other cases of communist states). Although the CCP leaders were fully cognizant that they did not intend ever to permit it to be carried out, they still pledged the Party to allow peoples to shape their own national destiny.¹⁴ Basing his analysis on the Leninist principle of "national in form and socialist in content," Connor explores the consequences of imposing the "national forms" in China. As he stated, on the one hand, the CCP adopted the Soviet's stratagems — language policy, the recruiting and purging of elites, and the redistributing and gerrymandering of national groups— to enhance socialist content. On the other hand, by intentional policy design, the implementation of these stratagems was instead used to strengthen the nationalist substances, in this case, the Han assimilationism. Ironically, "form becomes the father of content" in China.¹⁵ Likewise, Kwong also argues that central to China's nationalities policy are the Marxist tenets, including the right to self-determination, the emphasis on developing the economy of minority regions, continued politicalization of minorities, and promotion of cultural diversity. The contradictions in the nationalities policy are thus based on a limited set of ideological principles, which are inherently inconsistent with the state's nationalist goals.¹⁶ This argument was as well echoed by Ma Rong, who similarly blames the communist principle, especially the Soviet model, to be responsible for the problems emerging in China's nationalities policy.¹⁷ While this group of literature is informative, it focuses on the static policy outcome but downplays the dynamic process of how this policy was constructed and justified in the historical course.

There is also some literature analyzing the CCP's nationalities policy from the perspective of foreign factors. Although not necessarily addressing the contradictions in China's nationalities policy, these scholars indicate that the external factors, either active or passive in form, would affect the communist state's perception of minority groups and thus shape its policies toward them. In this case, foreign factors account for the features of China's nationalities policy. For example, James Leibold contends that the process of incorporating non-Han peoples into the Chinese nation simultaneously involved tackling the frontier question and the national question, both of which happened just against the backdrop of foreign intervention.¹⁸ Enze Han argues that whether a better, achievable external alternative is perceived plays a significant role in determining ethnic groups' reaction to national identities imposed by the Chinese state, which in

¹⁴ Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 582.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 501.

¹⁶ Julia Kwong, "Theoretical Basis of China's policies towards Her Minority Nationalities," *Ethnicity*, 06/1980, Vol. 7, Issue 2, 203-217.

¹⁷ Rong Ma, "Ethnic Relations in Contemporary China: Cultural Tradition and Ethnic Policies since 1949," *Policy and Society*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 2006, 85-108.

¹⁸ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

turn influences the CCP's policies toward these groups.¹⁹ Han and Mylonas also point out that interstate relations and ethnic group perceptions about the relative strength of competing states explain the variation on state-ethnic group relations.²⁰ For all their diverse research focuses, these authors put emphasis on external factors and explore how they affected the formation of nationalities policy, which are definitely relevant but also inadequate to address the question proposed here.

In China, the history of nationalism, modernity, and imperialism are closely intertwined. As correctly pointed out by Benjamin I. Schwartz, "the political strategy of Mao Zedong was not planned in advance in Moscow, and even ran counter to the tenets of orthodoxy which were still considered sacrosanct and inviolate in Moscow at the time when this strategy first crystallized."²¹ Meanwhile, simple foreign factors do not suffice to account for all of the features in China's nationalities policy either. More precisely, the CCP's worldview is more a potpourri of Confucianism, nation-state outlook and communism that supplemented and complicated one another all the time. Therefore, we need a theory that can help unpack the process of policy formation and that will pay more attention to agents than outcomes in China's ethnic politics. Norm localization is such a theory.

2) Norm approach

Norm localization is a theory proposed by Amitav Acharya in explaining why some norms matter more than others in the Asian regionalism.²² Specifically, localization is "the active construction of foreign ideas by local actors resulting in the former developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices."²³ This theory emphasizes the role played by **local agents** in norm processes and the effects that **cognitive priors** may have on norm outcomes.

In this article, I will apply the framework of norm localization to make sense of the nationalities policy of the People's Republic. Comparing with the alternative explanations mentioned above, I am more interested in the norm process, defined as continuing assessments and adjustments of foreign models by local agents. Only when the local actors are able to find convergences between the foreign model and native mold, will this model be localized. Otherwise, if they feel the model is harmful to their overall political agendas, they will choose to reject it.

To be clear, in the case examined here, **local agents** refer to the native actors, or more precisely, Chinese nationalist elites, who are in charge of assessing outside ideas in terms of their suitability for local construction.²⁴ They are the insider proponents committed to a localized

¹⁹ Enze Han, *Contestation and Adaptation: The Politics of National Identity in China* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁰ Enze Han and Harris Mylonas, "Interstate Relations, Perceptions, and Power Balance: Explaining China's Policies Toward Ethnic Groups, 1949–1965," *Security Studies* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 148–181.

²¹ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 5.

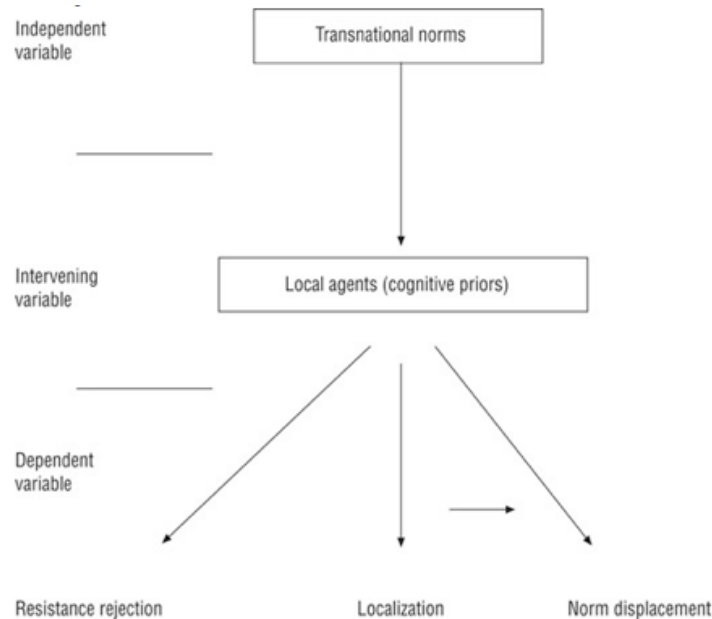
²² Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter?: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism*, 1 edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

²³ Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization*, 2004, 58 (2), 245.

²⁴ Acharya, 2011, 5.

normative order.²⁵ Meanwhile, norms never enter into a local normative vacuum.²⁶ *Cognitive priors* thus are “an existing set of ideas, belief systems, and norms, which determine and condition an individual or social group’s receptivity to new norms.”²⁷ In China’s case, especially taking into account of the post-colonial and post-imperial contexts in the country, cognitive priors, also known as native mold here, include three aspects: historical beliefs, colonial/imperial policies and institutions (in minorities-concentrated borderlands), and post imperial ideology.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Local response to transnational norms



See Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter?: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism*, 1 edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 99.

In the following sections, I will unpack the norm process in making China’s nationalities policy. In particular, I will look at how foreign models entered into China and were adjusted to fit the native mold/cognitive priors by the local norm entrepreneurs. As a point of departure, let’s start from the two foreign models that played crucial roles in China’s nation building.

III. Foreign Models: Nation and “National Self-determination”

With the strong anti-Manchu and anti-foreign sentiment, the nationalist movements emerged in the late nineteenth century set off China’s long journey of transforming itself from a self-centered, universalistic civilization to a modern nation state. When the People’s Republic was founded in 1949, not only had the conceptions like “nation”, “nationalism,” and “national self-determination” been integrated into the political discourses, they were also finely maneuvered by

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, 257.

²⁷ Acharya, 2011, 21.

the communist leaders in engaging their (unfamiliar) minorities. However, this was not the case just several decades ago, when these conceptions were completely strange to the early Chinese nationalists.

1) Nation: the Japanese myth of a homogeneous nation

The meaning of nation/*minzu* has been a big problem in modern China's political life. Even until recently it hasn't been quite resolved. Many reasons may explain the complication behind this term, but ultimately it is a concept imported from the West and translated from the Japanese language—there was no Chinese prior practice that corresponded with this term.

In the late nineteenth century, many of the later Chinese nationalists, including Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, etc., spent some time in Japan and got their first knowledge of western social science from Japanese translation of western literature. Partly because of the shared characters, they found it easier to accept the Japanese interpretation of western concepts than to explore its original meanings in western literature. "Nation," *minzu* in Chinese, was one of such examples of "made in Japan by Chinese."

As a western term, "nation" was first introduced to Japan after the Meiji Restoration. However, Japanese had two basic ways to express "nation": *kokumin* (國民) and *minzoku* (民族). Whereas *kokumin* rested on citizenship within the liberal state, *minzoku* referred to an ethnic/racial nation that was supposedly more traditional and more populist.

In Japan, the period from the establishment of the Meiji government in 1868 to the completion of a bureaucratic infrastructure for the new state in 1900 witnessed simultaneous processes of state building and nation building, featured by the competition of liberal civic "nation" (*kokumin*) and conservative racial "nation" (*minzoku*). During the first two decades of the Meiji period, ethnic and cultural issues were only secondary considerations; "the overriding ones were civilization, universal development, participation in the international system, and the development of legal codes to determine the conditions and practices of citizenship and governance in the new Meiji state."²⁸ This was most obviously reflected in the Fukuzawa Yukichi's famous concern. As one of the founders of modern Japan and a progressive liberal, he believed that the lack of a sense of a community was the fundamental challenge for liberals of his time. Therefore, he encouraged a common sense of civic national identity, known as nation (*kokumin*), while promoting internationalism and liberalism in strengthening state building in Japan.²⁹

However, in the 1890s, the conservative populism started emerging, as a result of people's growing disappointments with internationalism following Japan's concessions to the Western powers in negotiations over treaty revision. In contrast to the civic "nation" (*kokumin*), the young intellectuals associated with the newspaper *Nihon* and the journal *Nihonjin*, increasingly identified with another expression of "nation," *minzoku*, which was first popularized by Shiga Shigetaka in the 1880s. As articulated by Shiga and his contemporary Kuga Katsunan, "*minzoku* reflected what were assumed to be the unique characteristics (historical, geographical and

²⁸ Kevin Doak, *A History of Nationalism in Modern Japan: Placing the People* (BRILL, 2007), 170.

²⁹ Dick Stegewerns, *Nationalism and Internationalism in Imperial Japan: Autonomy, Asian Brotherhood, Or World Citizenship?* (Routledge, 2005), 24-25.

cultural) of the Japanese nation.”³⁰ More specifically, the Japanese nationalists tended to believe that the Japanese people were a unitary *minzoku*,³¹ and the Japanese *minzoku* was the manifestation of common ancestry rather than shared culture.³² As for them, the Japanese society had always had three primary elements (the imperial family, the regional clan and the family unit), each forming a discrete though inter-related consanguineous community.³³ In this sense, *minzoku* was closer to Germanic concepts of the *Volk* than a French emphasis on the civic nation.³⁴ This new translation of “nation” as an ethnic or racial nation (*minzoku*) gained widespread circulation in the 1890s.³⁵

It was exactly during that period that many of the Chinese nationalists travelled to Japan and started learning universal political norms through the Japanese translation of western texts. While they had little knowledge about western political tradition, their original understanding of “nation” was influenced by the Japanese nationalists. The Japanese myth of a homogeneous nation thus became the prototype of a modern nation in the eyes of the early Chinese nationalists.

2) National Self-determination: the Soviet’s myth of self-determination

As the world’s first communist state, the model of the Soviet Union often became the one that many late-coming communists sought to emulate. It was also no surprise that its nationalities policy provided the Chinese Communist Party with the basis for its own theories and practice in managing ethnic problems.

In his 1913 work *Marxism and the National Question*, Stalin defined a nation as “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture.”³⁶ Nations were always different: there were small nations and larger nations, “backward” nations and “civilized” nations, “oppressor” nations and “oppressed” nations, etc. However, as for Lenin and Stalin, “all nations were EQUAL because they were equally sovereign, that is, because they all had the same rights.”³⁷ Victorious socialism, therefore, must “not only bring about the complete equality of nations, but also give effect to the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, i.e., the right to free political secession.”³⁸ As a result, *the Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia*, adopted by the Bolshevik government immediately after the October Revolution, recognized that “1) equality and sovereignty of all the peoples of Russia; 2) their right for free self-determination,

³⁰ Michael Weiner, *Japan’s Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* (Taylor & Francis, 2009), 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³² Frank Dikötter, *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 102.

³³ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁴ Kevin Doak, *A History of Nationalism in Modern Japan: Placing the People* (BRILL, 2007), 76.

³⁵ Dick Stegewerns, *Nationalism and Internationalism in Imperial Japan: Autonomy, Asian Brotherhood, Or World Citizenship?* (Routledge, 2005), 27-28.

³⁶ J.V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, January 1913, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm>.

³⁷ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (July 1, 1994), 416.

³⁸ Vladimir Lenin, “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination”. Thesis, January-February 1916, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jan/x01.htm>.

up to and including secession and creation of an independent state; 3) freedom of religion; and 4) free development of national minorities and ethnic groups on the territory of Russia.”³⁹ They combined laid the foundation for the Soviet nationalities policy.

In accordance with these principles, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet government initiated a *national delimitation project*, through which it assigned national territories to ethnic groups and nationalities and established a four-tier ethno-federal hierarchy for the country. Consequently, tens of thousands of national territories were created, including union republics, autonomous republics, autonomous oblasts, and autonomous okrugs.⁴⁰ In addition to this ethno-federalism, what was distinctive in the Soviet case was the state-sponsored codification and institutionalization of nationhood and nationality.⁴¹ This means, once identified and assigned with territory, each adult citizen’s ethnicity was recorded in his/her passport. Personal nationality was thus noted in almost all official transactions, was transmitted by descent, and was formally unchangeable across generations.⁴²

Moreover, confronting the rising tide of nationalism, Stalin judged that much minority agitation was caused not by lack of independence, but by restrictions on the use of minority languages, schools, and freedom of conscience. Removal of these restrictions would thus go a long way toward removing minority distrust of the Bolsheviks.⁴³ Consequently, he put forth a broad program of national autonomy combined with economic opportunities and freedom to develop individual cultures. Specifically, the government systematically promoted the national consciousness of its ethnic minorities by training national leaders, establishing national languages, and financing the production of national-language cultural products.⁴⁴ Nationalities were allowed to have their own bureaucracies and “mother-tongue” education. There were also national sections in party cells and local soviets, and national quotas in college.⁴⁵ In the early Soviet period, even voluntary assimilation was actively discouraged by the government.

However, despite its face value, all these policies were paradoxically not aimed at the differentiation of nations but at unifying them over time. According to Lenin, “the surest way to

³⁹ “Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia,” November 2 (15), 1917, <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1917/11/02.htm>.

⁴⁰ Dmitry Gorenburg, “Soviet Nationalities Policy and Assimilation,” in *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Dominique Arel and Blair A. Ruble (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 274.

⁴¹ Rogers Brubaker, “Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutional Account,” http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/brubaker/Publications/10_Nationhood_and_the_National_Question.pdf, 50.

⁴² Dmitry Gorenburg, “Soviet Nationalities Policy and Assimilation,” in *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Dominique Arel and Blair A. Ruble (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 276.

⁴³ June Teufel Dreyer, *China’s Forty Millions: Minority Nationalities and National Integration in the People’s Republic of China*, Harvard University East Asian Series, no. 87 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976), 50-51.

⁴⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, 1st edition (Ithaca ; London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1.

⁴⁵ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (July 1, 1994), 422.

unity in content was diversity in form.”⁴⁶ While it may seem odd to promote the fusion of nationalities by encouraging their points of difference, he believed that minorities, if not forced to adopt the characteristics of the majority group, would do so voluntarily.⁴⁷ Therefore, by “fostering national cultures” and creating national autonomies, national schools, national languages and national cadres, the Bolsheviks would overcome national distrust and reach national audiences.⁴⁸ In other words, what the Bolsheviks really expected was not a loose federation but a completely unified modern socialist state.

While promoting national equality and self-determination in the international stage, the Soviet Union set up a model of nationalities policy for other late-coming communist states, China included. As scholars have correctly pointed out, “the world’s first state of workers and peasants was the world’s first state to institutionalize ethnoterritorial federalism, classify all citizens according to their biological nationalities and formally prescribe preferential treatment of certain ethnically defined populations.”⁴⁹

IV. Native Mold: Historical Beliefs, Prior Institutions, and Post-imperial Ideologies

With their increasing military invasion and ideological penetration, the Japanese and Soviet models of nation building inevitably influenced Chinese elites—in this case, nationalists and communists alike—in constructing their own nationalities policy. However, as foreign norms, “nation” and “self-determination” did not enter into a local normative vacuum. Instead, they confronted resistance from domestic norms and institutions, which would by no means give up easily. This being said, however strong the foreign models were, they had to be fit with the native mold before they could be accepted.

Here I define the “native mold” as the cognitive priors of norm localization, meaning “an existing set of ideas, belief systems, and norms, which determine and condition a social group’s receptivity to new norms.”⁵⁰ Specifically, in China’s case, it includes but is not limited the following three elements: 1) historical beliefs; 2) prior institutions; and 3) post-imperial ideology.

1) Historical Beliefs: “All Under Heaven” and the Great Unified Empire

Historical beliefs referred to a set of beliefs concerning the apprehension of state and world by traditional Chinese elites. Given the fact that the term “Chinese” was fluid in history, how Chinese people understood the relations between state and world became particularly relevant in

⁴⁶ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (July 1, 1994), 420.

⁴⁷ June Teufel Dreyer, *China’s Forty Millions: Minority Nationalities and National Integration in the People’s Republic of China*, Harvard University East Asian Series, no. 87 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976), 48.

⁴⁸ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (July 1, 1994), 420.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁵⁰ Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter?: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism*, 1 edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 45.

their construction of a modern nation state. Even when the pre-modern empire had collapsed, these historical beliefs remained rooted and influential.

In the west, state, as opposed to society, is the highest unit that organizes people together. By contrast, in pre-modern China, state was attached with equal importance with family, out of which there was still *tianxia* or “all under heaven” that assumed the top position in the political hierarchy.⁵¹ Compatible with the essence of Confucianism, *tianxia* constitutes the basic worldview of traditional Chinese elites.

Literally, *tianxia* incorporates three levels of meaning: 1) geographically, it refers to all lands under the sky; 2) psychologically, it forms a universal consensus in the “hearts” of all people; and 3) institutionally, it is a political system for the world with a global institution to ensure universal order.⁵² Therefore, an important principle of the *tianxia* system is “the exclusion of nothing and no one,” or, put differently, “the inclusion of all peoples and all lands.”⁵³ In other words, in the *tianxia* system, no difference of “us” and “others” existed and no body would be excluded from this system.

The *tianxia* system was usually related to the Chinese culturalism. As stated by Prasenjit Duara, what has been described as culturalism was “a statement of Chinese values as superior, but, significantly, not exclusive.”⁵⁴ In this sinocentric worldview, the closeness of one’s relationship to the emperor was determined by both physical proximity to the capital and cultural affinity with China proper.⁵⁵ Non-Chinese barbarians, who were living far away from the center, could be transformed through education and increased contact with Confucian rituals and norms. As a result, there was also no “minority” in any sense: everyone, barbarian and Chinese alike, was assigned an appropriate place within the social order. It was distance from the center rather than size that determined one’s place in the moral hierarchy.⁵⁶

Within this framework of “*tianxia*,” a most remarkable fact in Chinese history is the survival of “grand unity” as a perceived normality despite the country’s recurring divisions.⁵⁷ A favored practice among scholars in China is to use a 7:3 ratio to depict the unitary and the divisive period in China’s history, suggesting that China has been unified most of time.⁵⁸ Certainly, as a core idea of Confucianism, “grand unity” did not just mean a simple unification of territory, but also indicated enlightened governance, social stability, and economic prosperity.⁵⁹ Even though in

⁵¹ 吴文藻,《民族与国家》, 见《吴文藻人类学社会学研究文集》, 32.

⁵² 赵汀阳,《天下体系:世界制度哲学导论》(南京:江苏教育出版社,2005),41-44.

⁵³ Zhang Feng, “The Tianxia System: World Order in a Chinese Utopia,” *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 21, March 2010, http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/tien-hsia.php?searchterm=021_utopia.inc&issue=021.

⁵⁴ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, First Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 60.

⁵⁵ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁷ Xiaoyuan Liu, *Frontier Passage: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism, 1921-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁹ Ji Qiufeng, “Grand Union: the conception, its extent, and its historical impact,” *Guangming Daily*, May 10, 2008, http://www.gmw.cn/content/2008-05/10/content_767118.htm.

those divided dynasties, “grand unity,” as an “ideology”, has never been suspended or broken in Chinese history.⁶⁰

Unlike modern nation state demarcated by the fixed boundaries, pre-modern China was historically constructed. Without specific definition, the term “China” or “the middle kingdom” was fluid and simply meant the central location in a world of concentric circles. There was no absolute dichotomy in this world. What is under heaven was organized according to levels of moral and cultural development, which suggested a unity in the Chinese state and world.

2) *Prior Institutions: the legacy of the Manchu rule and the nation building efforts of the GMD*

While the transition from a pre-modern empire to a modern nation state was full of conflicts, the prior institutions that had been shaping the interaction between Han and non-Han peoples remained to be influential in people’s perception of the Chinese state. Therefore, it is important to know how the non-Han peoples were situated in the Qing Empire and what the Nationalist government had been done in nation building. These prior institutions affected how flexible the Communist regime could be in drafting nationalities policy.

The Qing Dynasty, also the last dynasty of Imperial China, happened to be founded by the non-Han, Manchu people. Having massively expanded its imperial boundaries and Sinicized many of the ethnic minorities in inner China, in its early years, the Manchu rulers did not intend to integrate the non-Han peoples (particularly the Manchus, Tibetans, Mongols, and Muslims) residing on the borderlands into the Chinese state. Outnumbered 35:1 by Han Chinese, instead, they always kept vigilant for Han rebellions and wished to take these non-Han groups, who had independent military capabilities and who could geographically besiege inner China, as counterbalance against them.⁶¹

Specifically, the Manchu rulers imposed different legal and governance structures,⁶² collected and maintained genealogical records, and promoted different cultural practices in these areas where these people concentrated.⁶³ In order to prevent the expansion of Chinese influence there, they fixed and naturalized ethnic boundaries among non-Han peoples and isolated them from the rest of China. While effectively consolidating the Manchu rule, they also enhanced the political and cultural identities of these non-Han peoples and left their successors with difficulties of nation building, especially in terms of national integration.

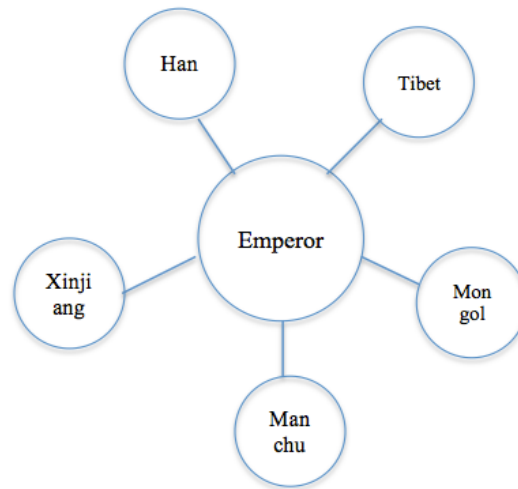
⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Wang Ke, *Nation and State: The Genealogy of the Idea of the Unified, Multinational China* (Beijing: China’s Social Science Press, 2001), 184. 王柯, 《民族与国家: 中国多民族统一国家思想的系谱》(北京: 中国社会科学出版社, 2001), 184.

⁶² The Qing “cultivated different forms of rulership to legitimate their hegemony over their imperial constituencies: a Confucian monarch among the Chinese; a “divine lord” among the Manchus; a ‘great khan’ among the Mongols; and Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, among the Tibetans.” – see James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 28.

⁶³ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 11.

Figure 2. Four other constituencies balanced against Han (a multiconstituency empire)



Despite all its measures to keep the Han in check, the final years of the Qing dynasty witnessed the rise of Han Chinese nationalism, targeting both foreign imperialism and the alien rule of the Manchu. The campaign for the revolution explicitly appealed to ethnic nationalism and urged the Han majority to expel the ruling Manchu. It was this call that triggered the 1911 revolution, which led to the establishment of the Republic of China.

Unfortunately, although the Chinese Republic had constantly reiterated its claim to the non-Han borderlands, neither the Beijing Warlord Government (1912-1928) nor the early Nanking Nationalist Government (or the Guomindang/GMD government) (1928-1949) had exerted effective control over these territories. After nominally unified China in 1928, the GMD government was well aware of the strategic importance of these territories and had spared no effort to keep them in China, even just in name. For example, in a bid to consolidate state control over the Tibetan and Mongolian frontiers, it established three Inner Mongolian provinces—Suiyuan, Chahar, and Jehol—and another province called Xikang along the Sichuan frontier with Tibet. It also created a special commission, the Commission of Mongolia and Tibetan Affairs (CMTA), to formulate central government policy toward Mongolia and Tibet and help promote domestic and international awareness of the imperialist plot to break apart the Chinese Nation under the bogus banner of national self-determination.⁶⁴ In Xinjiang, it silently played on the warlord and the Soviets, took out the warlord when chances came, “imposed a political umbrella over every Uighur activist not under the Soviet wing”, and “made impressive progress in taming Kazak wildcard Osman Batur.”⁶⁵

In the meanwhile, the GMD regime vociferously argued that the country was home to only one people, “Chinese people” (*Zhonghua minzu*), and that the supposedly distinct groups of the republic were merely subvarieties of a common stock (宗支).⁶⁶ As for the GMD government,

⁶⁴ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 66.

⁶⁵ Justin Jacobs, *Empire Besieged: The Preservation of Chinese Rule in Xinjiang, 1884-1971*, PhD dissertation 2011, UCSD, 527.

⁶⁶ Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to terms with the nation: ethnic classification in modern China* (University of California Press, 2011), 2.

only by fostering a single identity from amongst China's numerous parochial, class, and ethnic identities could the Chinese nation ensure its continued existence in the invasion of foreign imperial powers.⁶⁷

In the "painful" transition from an empire to a nation state, the prior institutions had both laid the ground for and constituted the future nation building. While the legacy could be either positive or negative, its influence is significant. However hard the communists had tried to differentiate themselves from the "old" China, they had been grappling with the prior institutions all the time.

3) Post-imperial Ideologies

According to Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "states that have undergone the traumatic transformative historical event of extractive colonialism maintain an emphasis on victimhood and entitlement that dominates their decision calculus" in later times.⁶⁸ Burdened with a legacy of national humiliation, Chinese elites were extremely sensitive to certain issues, especially regarding sovereignty and non-intervention.

Since the late nineteenth century, partly as a result of the decline of the Qing dynasty, foreign imperial powers had started penetrating China's land borders. As noted, Qing's western and northern borders were abutted British India (and Burma) and Russia. In the late nineteenth century, competition between the British and Russian empires over influence in Central Asia, known as "The Great Game," began to transform Xinjiang and Tibet, Qing's remote borderlands, into an object of international interest. As a tactic, they alienated the non-Han peoples there from the Qing Empire and provided all the support to the local independent movements against the rulers from Beijing. In the meantime, on the other side of the country, Japan and Russia also competed for the control of Manchuria, the Northeastern borderland of China. When the Qing dynasty fell, the Japanese also defeated the Russians and gradually turned Manchuria to their colony.

Things were no better during the republic era. After the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Tibet and Outer Mongolia were in *de facto* independence, with the sponsorship from Britain and Russia/the Soviet Union respectively. Meanwhile, Manchuria was under the influence of the imperial Japan, which took it as a springboard to further invade the rest of China. Xinjiang was the only majority non-Han region of the former empire to remain consistently under the Chinese rule, although the Chinese warlord there was more willing to cooperate with Moscow than Nanking in most of the 1930s. It was only after the end of the anti-Japanese war that the Nationalist Government started to have certain influence in Xinjiang and resumed sovereignty of Manchuria from Japan. As Justin Jacobs correctly pointed out, during the republic era, China was not just a "semi-colony;"

⁶⁷ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 116.

⁶⁸ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Wronged by Empire: Post-imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2013), 2.

large parts of its territory were actively colonized by the Japanese, and, one could argue in Xinjiang, the Russians.⁶⁹

As stated by Miller, “the core of anti-colonial nationalism that emerged in colonized states was an emphasis on the sufferings and injuries of colonial rule and the search for redress. Even after independence, these states continued to give the utmost importance to the wrongs they had suffered and the quest for restitution.”⁷⁰ This is also applicable to China. For Chinese, if “the century of humiliation” was a form of collective trauma, the alienated non-Han peoples inhabiting in the vast borderlands would be the bleeding wounds that kept reminding Chinese people the potential conspiracy of external powers in splitting and undermining China. In the minds of Chinese, the foreign intervention constitutes the major reason that should be responsible for most of nationalities problems in modern China. Therefore, integrating these non-Han people and making them identify with a Han state became a task to correct the wrongs of the past. However costly it might be, this was necessary for Chinese nation building.

The post-imperial ideology was also reflected in China’s stubbornness on state sovereignty. Acharya used to call Asia “the most sovereignty-bound region in the world,” while Johnston also pointed out, “China is clearly ‘constrained’ by a particularly extensive and absolutist version of the sovereignty norm.”⁷¹ On the one hand, this means any nationalities problem or minorities’ request for autonomy would easily be elevated to a sovereign threat, which usually led to severe response from the state; on the other hand, the international support of nationalities cause would only trigger tighter control and do no help in mediating conflicts.

For Chinese, it is no easy to get rid of post-imperial ideology. Even when the state unification had been achieved, the sense of insecure resulted from collective historical trauma would never get away easily. This also explains why Chinese attitudes toward Tibet and Xinjiang have always been tied to the anti-imperial, anti-colonial national identity.

As a brief summary, no foreign, strange ideas would enter into a local normative vacuum in its process of diffusion. Applying the norm localization framework in the Chinese case, the native mold constituted the cognitive prior for norm localization. Specifically, this native mold included, though was not limited to, the historical beliefs, prior institutions and post-imperial ideologies. In the making of a modern nation state, the Chinese nationalist elites had struggled to adapt the foreign models to this native mold and made sure the relevance of the local context.

V. Making Sense of the Foreign Models within the Native Mold

After discussing the foreign models and native mold that had been crucial in China’s nation building, it is time to explore how they worked in the localization process and how they combined to constitute the CCP’s nationalities policy. As mentioned, all these puzzles regarding

⁶⁹ Justin Jacobs, *Empire Besieged: The Preservation of Chinese Rule in Xinjiang, 1884-1971*, PhD dissertation 2011, UCSD, 24.

⁷⁰ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Wronged by Empire: Post-imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2013), 15.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

the CCP's nationalities policy need to be put in the context of localization. This section aims to unpack this process and address the puzzles raised at the beginning of this article.

I will divide the localization process into two stages. In the first stage, the idea of nation was introduced to China from Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. The early Chinese nationalists spent years making sense of "nation" based on the local situation and cultivated at least some degree of national consciousness among Chinese people. This happened prior to or during the first several years after the establishment of the Communist Party and premised the nationalities policy of the People's Republic. The second stage came with the gradual mature of the Communist Party and was the period of localizing the self-determination norm by the Party. In this stage, the Comintern imposed this alien idea on China and forced the party leaders to apply the Soviet model to China's nationalities. However, self-determination did not completely match with the Chinese cultural and practical reality. Making sense of "self-determination" and constructing a unified nation state thus became the major challenges facing the party.

1) Making sense of "Nation/minzu": the so-called "Chinese nation" (Zhonghua minzu)

Before the twentieth century, there was barely any national consciousness among Chinese people. Instead, they were concerned more about the continuity of Chinese culture and distinguished Chinese from barbarians based on cultural criteria rather than racial differences. Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen were the early Chinese nationalists, who defined nationalism and laid foundation for the later nationalist movements in China.

Both Liang and Sun travelled to Japan in the late 1890s when the populism movement was going on there. They were obviously influenced by the populism's definition of nation/*minzoku*. On the one hand, they maintained good personal relations with those Japanese who were deeply involved in the *minzoku* movement during their time in Japan (e.g., Liang Qichao with Shiga Shigetaka, and Sun Yat-sen with Tsuyoshi Inukai and Kuaga Katsunan).⁷² On the other hand, the call for national consciousness in Japan also resonated among these Chinese intellectuals, especially when they were so eager to preserve China from the imminent threats of foreign intervention and the corrupted rule of the Manchu court. As a result, they decided to adopt "minzu", which shared the characters with the Japanese word *minzoku*, as the Chinese equivalent of nation in English. In 1903, Liang began employing the terms *Zhongguo minzu* (Chinese race/nation), *Zhongguo zhongzu* (Chinese race), and eventually *Zhonghua minzu* to refer to a new subject of a linear national history in China.⁷³ The word *minzu* had been accepted and popularized since then.

However, despite sharing the characters, the Chinese *minzu* was by no means similar with the *minzoku* of Japan. As said, Japanese nationalists championed the homogeneity of the Japanese society and the Japanese *minzoku* was believed to thrive from a common ancestry. Unfortunately, this was apparently not the case of China. If adopting the Japanese racial version of "nation," where should non-Han peoples inhabiting in China's frontiers be situated? What were the

⁷²王柯：“‘民族’，一个来自日本的误会：中国早期民族主义思想实质的历史考察”，《二十一世纪双月刊》2003年6月号第七十七期，第78页。

⁷³ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 32.

relationship between the so-called *Zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation) and those *minzu* like Han *minzu*, Manchu *minzu*, Tibet *minzu*, etc.? Therefore, the localization and reconstruction of *minzu* seemed to be necessary.

In a 1903 article, Liang criticized the “petty nationalism” (*xiao minzuzhuyi*) and subscribed instead to a “broad nationalism” (*da minzuzhuyi*), which subjugated Han Chinese to a coalition of rulers from various ethnic groups. China’s very survival, as he claimed, “requires us to adopt imperialist tactics to unite the Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui, Miao and Tibetan peoples in constituting a single large *minzu* with the Han at its core.”⁷⁴ As for him, even with all the differences, China’s situation was more like Japan than Russia or France. Therefore, he advocated the path of the Meiji Restoration and built a constitutional monarchy in China.

In contrast to Liang, Sun Yat-sen insisted that the principle of nationalism was “to seek equality with the foreigners and not be their slaves.”⁷⁵ The Liang’s formula of nationalism, as he criticized, would only be “slavery and subordination without establishing ethnic nationalism.”⁷⁶ Here by “foreigners”, Sun referred to the Manchu rulers (not Manchu people). He was actually calling on the Han people to overthrow the Manchu rule and to build a Chinese state governed only by the Hans. Unlike Liang’s “broad nationalism”, Sun adapted the so-called *minzu* to a Chinese race-state (*guozu*) and put emphasis on assimilation of other groups by the majority Hans. This remained the core of the Three People’s Principles after the 1911 revolution, despite his advocacy of a free and equal “republics of five races” (*wuzu gonghe*), which literally expanded the narrow nationalism to include other races. Yet, as a matter of fact, Sun never changed his belief that a modern Chinese state had to be constructed according to the classical principle of “one state, one nation” and repeatedly emphasized this point in the rest of his life.⁷⁷

However, the disagreements between Liang and Sun were only limited to their means in constructing a modern Chinese state. They shared the social Darwinist view on the relations between the Hans and non-Hans. To be specific, although Liang insisted that non-Han peoples could be considered equal partners with the Han nationality, he concurred with Sun that the non-Han peoples were culturally backward⁷⁸ and that they had been “smelt together in a single furnace” with the Han in creating a unitary and indivisible Chinese nation.⁷⁹ In other words, both Liang and Sun championed the unification of the Chinese nation and stressed the role of assimilation (or more precisely, sinicization) in China’s nation building. Additionally, “Chinese nation” (or *Zhonghua minzu*), used by both men as a localized version of “nation/*minzoku*”, was such a notion that was broad and ambiguous enough to incorporate various peoples of the Qing

⁷⁴ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 33. “政治学大家伯伦知理之学说”, (《论国民与民族之差别关系》), 《饮冰室文集》之 13, 1903 年.

⁷⁵ Sidney H. Chang and Leonard H.D. Gordon, *All under heaven—Sun Yat-sen and His Revolutionary Thought* (California: Hoover Institution Press, 1991), 103.

⁷⁶ Sophie Site Jia, “Sun Yatsen, Liang Qichao: Friends, Foes and Nationalism,” <http://history.emory.edu/home/documents/endeavors/volume4/Jia.pdf>.

⁷⁷ 王柯, 《民族与国家: 中国多民族统一国家思想的系谱》, 中国社会科学出版社 2001 年版, 212.

⁷⁸ 梁启超: 《中国历史上民族之研究》, 《饮冰室合集》专集之四十二, 34.

⁷⁹ James Leibold, “Searching for Han: Early Twentieth-Century Narratives of Chinese Origins and Development,” in *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation and Identity of China’s Majority*, eds. Thomas Mullaney, James Leibold, Stéphane Gros and Eric Vanden Bussche (Berkeley: University of California Press), 354.

Empire, as long as the Chinese culture remained the core. While it had been widely mentioned in both men's works and popular throughout the twentieth century, it is also worth to note that the term was lack of precise definition, especially in terms of its racial and geographical boundaries.⁸⁰ This convenient ambiguity was kind of a tacit agreement, in spite of their different stratagems in building the Chinese nation.

While both Liang and Sun literally learned the conceptions of "nation" and "nationalism" from Japan, what explains the differences and convergences in their interpretation of "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*)? On the one hand, their differences were more related to their different political identities and stances than their understandings of Chinese history. As a political leader, Sun Yat-sen was well aware of the advantage of using anti-Manchuism as a political slogan to arouse Chinese nationalism and mass support. For one thing, it would motivate "the upper levels of society with the nationalist cause", and "the lower levels with a vengeful spirit." For another, it was also an emotional, simple, and unifying force that would rally large masses of people and make them comprehend the most immediate national priority.⁸¹ In comparison, Liang in most cases was an idealistic literatus, who concerned more about theoretical indication of a concept and was less sensitive to the political mobilization in real politics. This can be seen from his inconsistent approach to China's political order, switching from an anti-Manchu stance between 1898 and 1903, then to a pro-Manchu one from 1903 to 1919, and finally to complete conservatism for an authoritarian rule after 1919.⁸² As Joseph Levenson put it, Liang was caught in a conflict between "the abstract, logical necessity to choose between two alternatives, history and value, and the practical, historical necessity to cling to them both."⁸³

On the other hand, unlike Japan, China was not a mono-ethnic state and the state boundary was much larger than the boundary of the Han group. Therefore, for anyone who introduced the idea of "nation" to China, he had to situate the Japanese version of *minzoku* in Chinese setting and make sense of it to the Chinese reality. With their shared historical belief in the grand unity and the resentment of foreign intervention in mind, not by coincidence, Liang and Sun constructed the so-called "Chinese nation" with a core of Chinese culture and did not intentionally emphasize its boundary and racial composition. While leaving confusion on its exact connotation, it also left enough room for the future maneuvering.

More specifically, how was the Japanese model localized in the native mold by Liang and Sun? First, even with their disagreements, neither Liang nor Sun ever attempted to construct a Chinese nation that would be divided or exclusive especially in racial sense. As for Sun, instead of rejecting their access to the Chinese state, the point of nationalism was to *Sinicize* the non-Han peoples and to assist their participation of the Chinese nation state. As emphasized in his speech, most those non-Han peoples were under the control of the foreign imperialism and incapable to defend themselves. Therefore, the Han people ought to shoulder their responsibility to *help* them

⁸⁰ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 10.

⁸¹ Sophie Site Jia, "Sun Yatsen, Liang Qichao: Friends, Foes and Nationalism," <http://history.emory.edu/home/documents/endeavors/volume4/Jia.pdf>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Joseph Levenson, *Liang Chi-Chao and the mind of modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 136.

and to preserve a unified China.⁸⁴ By the same token, the reason that made Liang accept the legitimacy of the Manchu rule was the fact that the Manchus had been completely Sinicized and well assimilated into the Chinese culture. Comparing to revolution, Liang believed that the nominal existence of the Manchu emperor would keep the non-Han peoples in China and thus make sure the unity of the country. Notwithstanding their different emphasis on Chinese nationalism, their common commitment to a unified Chinese nation and a Sinicized cultural value was rooted in their belief in the grand unity ideal. Whereas Sun knew no political mobilization would be effective if he failed to secure the territory of Qing Empire, Liang was also cognizant of what he was defending—it was the Chinese culture, not the Manchu one.

Second, in the most of the first half of the twentieth century, the challenge for all the Chinese nationalist elites was finding room within this new *minzu* construct for the smaller non-Han peoples living on the fringes of the Qing Empire.⁸⁵ As part of the historical legacy, these alienated non-Han peoples were not well assimilated to the Chinese culture and had little identification with the Chinese state. Instead, they were aspired by their own national causes. In order to dissuade the necessity of separation, Chinese nation was thus geographically poorly defined, despite Liang's clear Chinese culturalism and Sun's convinced assimilationist intention. Moreover, the most significant feature of the "Chinese nation" was the highlighting on teaching and cultivation, rather than conquest, in integrating non-Han peoples. This was well reflected in Liang's advocacy of "broad" nationalism and in Sun's repeated emphasis on how the Han people should "help" the non-Hans in modernization.

Last, but not least, the turn of the twentieth century witnessed China's simultaneous fight against an alien government that was too weak to resist outside forces and those very outside forces that had aggressively encroached China's territory. Against this backdrop, both men were searching for the reason of China's failure in the face of foreign pressure. Whereas Sun attributed Qing's weakness to the corrupted rule by the Manchu court and the monarchy system itself, Liang instead realized that revolution would inevitably lead to more violence, which might end up with further intervention by the foreign imperial powers.⁸⁶ In employing their versions of "Chinese nation," they both aimed to construct a strong nation state that would compete with the foreign imperial powers and that would enable China's modernization. Indeed, for both Liang and Sun, the invention "Chinese nation" *per se* was a reaction to foreign invasion.

As early nationalist elites, Liang and Sun introduced and reconstructed the conception of "nation/*minzoku*" in the local context. While this localization took place in the early twentieth century and before the birth of the Chinese Communist Party, the idea of the "Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu*) had deeply shaped the design of nation building in the rest of the twentieth century by both the Guomindang (GMD) and CCP nationalists. However they defined the national identity of Chinese people, neither of the GMD nor the CCP managed to jump out of the framework that had been laid down by the early nationalist elites like Liang and Sun. Indeed, like their political rivals, the Chinese communists were first and foremost the Chinese nationalists

⁸⁴ 孙中山, "在中国国民党本部特设驻粤办事处的演说", 《孙中山全集(第五卷)》, 473.

⁸⁵ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9.

⁸⁶ Sophie Site Jia, "Sun Yatsen, Liang Qichao: Friends, Foes and Nationalism," <http://history.emory.edu/home/documents/endeavors/volume4/Jia.pdf>.

who were committed to the native mold. Also for this reason, although the localization of the Japanese model was not carried out by the communists, it was still an inalienable part of the communist nation building.

2) *Making sense of “self-determination”: words or deeds*

If the notion of the Chinese nation was coined and popularized before the establishment of the CCP, what was more relevant with the CCP’s nationalities policy was the localization of the self-determination norm. Three reasons explain why self-determination mattered in China’s nation building. First of all, as a political idea, self-determination was introduced and imposed by the Soviet Union through Comintern, which provided critical material and ideological support for the survival of the CCP during its early years. More importantly, once introduced, self-determination would become a political slogan and naturally be employed to mobilize nationalities, no matter whether it was endorsed by the central government. As a result, the party was forced to respond to the demand of self-determination from its domestic nationalities, in the hope of rationalizing why they should join the state and how much rights they would be granted in the People’s Republic. Finally, as a post-(semi) colonial state, the Chinese nationalists had used self-determination to defend the independence of China from foreign imperialism. Now that this goal had been achieved, the government needed to justify why only China as a whole deserves independent sovereignty. Taking these in consideration, reconstructing self-determination became inevitable in China’s nation building.

Because of its peripheral political status and geographical distance from the minority-concentrated borderlands, national question did not really bother the CCP leaders during its first decade. Nevertheless, to demonstrate its closeness with the Soviet Union and Comintern, the obvious Soviet expression of national self-determination still entered the lexicon and appeared in the CCP official documents. For example, the Manifesto of the Second National Congress of the party (1922) mentioned self-determination in reference to China’s struggle against foreign imperialism.⁸⁷ In the following year, the Draft Outline for the party pledged, “Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Qinghai should be granted with the right to self-determination in deciding their relations with the China Proper.”⁸⁸ Again in 1928, the Political Resolution of the Sixth National Congress (1928) took “unify China and recognize [the principle] of national self-determination” as the third of “ten great demands of the Chinese Revolution.”⁸⁹ In 1931, with the establishment of the Chinese Soviet Republic, a rebellious regime occupied limited territory and lasted until 1937, the communists drafted a constitution that proclaimed “the Chinese Soviet Republic categorically and unconditionally recognizes the right of national minorities to self-determination.”⁹⁰ The same article later was reconfirmed in the 1934 Constitution of the Soviet

⁸⁷ 中共中央统战部编：《民族问题文献汇编 1921年7月-1949年9月》，中共中央党校出版社1991年版，15.

⁸⁸ 中共中央统战部编：《民族问题文献汇编 1921年7月-1949年9月》，中共中央党校出版社1991年版，22.

⁸⁹ 中共中央统战部编：《民族问题文献汇编 1921年7月-1949年9月》，中共中央党校出版社1991年版，86.

⁹⁰ 中共中央统战部编：《民族问题文献汇编 1921年7月-1949年9月》，中共中央党校出版社1991年版，166.

Republic.⁹¹ However, despite its rhetoric subscription of self-determination, when debating with the GMD over the issue of Outer Mongolia during those years, the CCP seemed to be very mindful of the national emotion within China. In particular, it “only defended the Mongol’s right to secession but not to promote their actual separation.”⁹²

As mentioned, the CCP had little concern with the national question before 1935. In most cases, it just fully accepted the Soviet expression of national self-determination and no localization took place. Moreover, considering that the party barely had any contact with the minority populations during those years, its so-called nationalities policy was lack of practical implications. Meanwhile, it is worth to note that, despite its political alliance with (or more precisely, dependence on) the Soviet Union, the CCP leaders were not completely unaware of Soviets’ maneuvering of the ethnic groups in China’s borderlands. To be sure, Soviets’ interests in self-determination of China’s minorities were related to its foreign policy agenda in Central Asia. As far as self-determination was concerned, Soviet leaders always paid particular attention to the three prized territories of the old “Great Game”: Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet.⁹³ Accordingly, even though the CCP had slavishly followed the Soviet expression of self-determination, it certainly did not intend to clarify what this concept really meant in China and never attempted to incorporate it into its political agenda. Instead, in some cases, it even put “unify China” and “recognize national self-determination” together, while did not elaborate the relations of these two seemingly contradictory terms.⁹⁴ Obviously, the former represented the traditional value in Chinese culture and the latter was simply an empty slogan for the communists.

The irrelevance of the national question eventually changed when the Long March was launched in late 1934. During this overwhelmingly long journey, for the first time in history, the communists had to traverse the territories of various minorities in the Southwest China and thus had the direct encounter with the non-Han peoples. However, due to the historical distrust these minorities held towards the Han people and the unsuccessful integration in the imperial era, the Red Army’s sudden appearance in these areas entailed great risk of triggering minorities’ resistance. In order to ensure the party’s safe passage through this hostile and unfamiliar terrain, the party center was “compelled to develop a functional ethnopolitical strategy.”⁹⁵

Traditionally, emulating the Soviet model, the CCP defined the national question through a class-struggle lens. It blamed the Han rulers for the plight of the non-Han groups and boiled down all the inter-ethnic relations to the confrontation between a laboring-class alliance and an upper-class alliance.⁹⁶ However, this doctrine would be harmful if the party needed to neutralize the minority elites and reduce their hostility towards the Red Army. Therefore, instead of taking

⁹¹ 中共中央统战部编：《民族问题文献汇编 1921年7月-1949年9月》，中共中央党校出版社1991年版，209。

⁹² Xiaoyuan Liu, *Frontier Passage: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism, 1921-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 42-43.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹⁴ Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 69.

⁹⁵ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 93.

⁹⁶ Xiaoyuan Liu, *Frontier Passage: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism, 1921-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 79.

them as class enemies, the party adopted the so-called “united front tactic” and sent friendly letters to those tribal leaders. Despite its disadvantaged political status, the party promised them its definite policy to grant self-determination to the tribes of China and to preserve them if they assumed power someday.⁹⁷ Although such promise did not immediately transform enmity into camaraderie, it did help the party peacefully pass through the areas and eventually survive the Long March.

The importance of minorities did not terminate after the Red Army established the historic base in Yan’an in the northwest China. For the similar historical reasons, the minorities in the area did not truly welcome a Han “regime” based so closely to their own territory. To secure its rear and right flanks, the party had to maintain good relations with the nearby Mongols and Hui Muslims.⁹⁸ Once again, the united front tactic and the promise of national self-determination helped the party achieve the goodwill from local minorities. While still following the Soviet model of national self-determination, the idea had been subtly adapted to local needs when it was applied together with the united front. For the Soviet, self-determination was a right only granted to the toiling masses. In the practice of the CCP, by contrast, it was given to the minority elites.

This policy remained until 1938. In the face of increasing Japanese aggression, the CCP’s attitude towards national self-determination was adjusted one more time. Speaking to the Sixth Plenary Session of the Sixth Central Committee in 1938, Mao made it clear that his intention was to create a unitary state structure in which the former Qing frontier peoples would be offered autonomy rather than independence.⁹⁹

Mongols, Hui, Miao, and “Fan” were to be given equal rights with the Han. Working for the common anti-Japanese objective, all would be given *the right to administer their own affairs* while at the same time establishing *a unified state* together with the Han. [...] Minorities’ cultures, religions, and customs must be respected. Their peoples not only must not be forced to study the Han language and script, they must be encouraged to develop their own languages, cultures, and education.¹⁰⁰

While the party would have continued manipulating ethnic sentiment on the frontier, at the moment of great national crisis, its leaders were obviously more interested in forging an overarching sense of “Chinese” identity. Accordingly, they began to follow Sun Yat-sen in calling the Chinese Nation, or *Zhonghua minzu* in Chinese, which was ambiguous and often used as opposed to Japanese imperialism.¹⁰¹ At the same time, concerning with the minority nationalities, self-determination was no longer mentioned in party documents. Instead, it was substituted by self-government, the definition of which was also ambiguous.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 77.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹⁹ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 99.

¹⁰⁰ 中共中央统战部编：《民族问题文献汇编 1921年7月-1949年9月》，中共中央党校出版社1991年版，205。

¹⁰¹ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 82.

¹⁰² Xiaoyuan Liu, *Frontier Passage: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism, 1921-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 122.

Three reasons may explain this adjustment in CCP's policy in 1938. Without doubt, facing the increasing Japanese aggression, winning sympathizers among the Han mattered more than pleasing minorities for the party. Dominantly composed by the Han members, the CCP shared with the GMD the vision of a strong, independent, and unified Chinese state free from foreign interference. To grant self-determination to minority nationalities at that specific moment would not only offend these sentiments, but also undermine the party's patriotic credentials and territorial definition of the nation.¹⁰³ Also, it was likely that by that time the party leaders had realized Soviet's design in Xinjiang. In spite of his lip service on self-determination, Mao Zedong, the party's top leader and a well-known nationalist, had bitterly resented the separation of Outer Mongolia from China. When finally apprised of Soviet's influence in Xinjiang, as suspected by Dreyer, he might have felt that "Stalin would try to instigate a Mongolian-style secession in Xinjiang."¹⁰⁴ Unsurprisingly, he would do all he could to avoid the party falling into this "trap" of self-determination. Lastly, the temporary dropping of self-determination was also related to the Japanese policy in Manchuria and the east Inner Mongolia. At that time, Japan had backed the establishment of the puppet states in the so-called homelands of the Manchus and Mongols. Like the GMD, the CCP was aware of the danger that other minorities might also ally with Japan for their own causes. In order to stop such trend, stopping its advocacy of self-determination seemed to be necessary.

However, by 1945, with an American victory over Japan imminent and with the CCP now in a much more powerful position relative to the GMD, self-determination as rhetoric was employed once again by the party.¹⁰⁵ For example, in *On United Government*, his report to the Seventh National Congress of the CCP in 1945, Mao echoed with Sun Yat-sen's pledge of granting the right of national self-determination to all the nationalities in China and confirmed that the CCP will completely follow this policy.¹⁰⁶ Even right before taking over the country, in a talk in September 1949, Zhou Enlai stated, "without doubt, every nationality had the right to self-determination. However, because the imperialists now attempt to split Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang from China, we hope that the nationalities will refuse to be exploited by these imperialists. For this reason, our new country will be called as the People's Republic, rather than federation."¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the party's ostensible commitment to self-determination survived until the eve of total victory.

In explaining the CCP's post-war nationalities strategy, particularly important was its policy toward Mongols. As noted, when the CCP and its Red Army moved to Yan'an, which was located in northern Shannxi and bordered on the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia, in late 1935,

¹⁰³ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 82.

¹⁰⁴ June Teufel Dreyer, *China's Forty Millions: Minority Nationalities and National Integration in the People's Republic of China*, Harvard University East Asian Series, no. 87 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976), 70.

¹⁰⁵ Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 82.

¹⁰⁶ 毛泽东, 《论联合政府》, April 24, 1945, <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-19450424.htm>.

¹⁰⁷ 周恩来, 《关于人民政协的几个问题》, September 7, 1949, <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/zhouenlai/226.htm>

the Mongols became strategically relevant to the survival of the encircled CCP. Desperate to win over the Mongols, Mao made a declaration in December 1935 in which he promised to return Inner Mongolia to the Mongols and called on them to join the common struggle against both the Japanese and the GMD government. As a result, many Mongols were mobilized to support the CCP and some were even moved to the Communist base in Yan'an in the early 1940s.¹⁰⁸

However, immediately after the Japanese surrender, the GMD occupied Manchuria. Meanwhile, Mongols in eastern Inner Mongolia also set up their own pro-independence Eastern Mongolia Autonomous Government.¹⁰⁹ Although the CCP still controlled the Inner Mongolian communists with the support of the Soviet, these events convinced its leaders that only a CCP-sponsored autonomous region would effectively avoid the GMD penetration and secure the party's domination in the region. Consequently, the CCP sent Mongol party members to eastern Mongolia, where they successfully founded the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Government in May 1947.¹¹⁰ Due to the promise and support of the CCP in Mongolian autonomy, the establishment of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region was attractive to the Mongols and thus set a good precedent for the future practice of regional national autonomy in other minority concentrated parts of China.

In any case, self-determination as a doctrine stopped appearing in the official documents after the CCP assuming power in October 1949. Generally speaking, rather than encouraging diversity or even independence, policy toward minority nationalities in the People's Republic had been motivated by a desire to integrate the life patterns and institutions of these groups with those of China, both Han and Communist.¹¹¹ However, this does not mean self-determination was completely dropped by the party for three reasons. First, the promise that the communists had made to the various nationalities before taking over the country could not simply be denied. In particular, given that the non-Han peoples living in several recently conquered minority areas were still deeply suspicious about the Communists rule, the party needed first and foremost to demonstrate itself as a credible partner in fulfilling its promises. Moreover, even with the achievement of political independence, the party was still vulnerable in the face of domestic unrest and international isolation. As the biggest donor and the only possible model for the socialist construction, the Soviet influence was still overwhelming and cannot be completely ignored. Therefore, with the local needs in mind, the communists nevertheless learned the Soviet experiences by adopting and reconstructing the Soviet model in domestic politics, which also included its nationalities policy. Finally, and probably most importantly, the communists had to distance itself from the "reactionary" Nationalist government, which had sponsored the assimilationist policy and completely denied the right to self-determination of the minority nationalities. While obviously sharing the similar goals in nation building with the GMD, the Communists had to emphasize its advocacy of minority rights, top of which was the right to self-determination.

¹⁰⁸ Uradyn E. Bulag, "Inner Mongolia: The Dialectics of Colonization and Ethnicity Building," in *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers*, ed. Morris Rossabi (University of Washington Press, 2014), 89.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹¹¹ June Teufel Dreyer, *China's Forty Millions: Minority Nationalities and National Integration in the People's Republic of China*, Harvard University East Asian Series, no. 87 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976), 261.

Consequently, following the successful practice in Inner Mongolia, regional national autonomy was put forward as the Chinese version of localized self-determination, which was also the heart of the CCP's nationalities policy. As an evidence of localization, Zhang Zhiyi, the Communist official, put it in 1956, "Marxists have never regarded the demand for the right to national self-determination as an invariable thing, generally it has been regarded as a factor in the struggle for democracy and socialism."¹¹² In 1957, then premier Zhou Enlai's speech also clearly defended the CCP's change from supporting self-determination to implementing regional national autonomy by emphasizing the potential exploitation of self-determination by imperial powers:

China finds itself in different historical circumstances. Although in old China, there was the reactionary rule of first the Northern Warlords and later the Guomindang, who opposed the working people and the fraternal nationalities, the whole country was one that suffered imperialist aggression, one that had become a semi-colony, or, in some regions, a colony. We were liberated under these circumstances. [...] In short, the Chinese nation as a whole has long been a nation suffering external imperialist oppression; among our various nationalities, they have shared weal and woe and cemented a militant friendship in the revolutionary wars, culminating in the liberation of this big family of nationalities. [...]

Historical development was provided us with conditions for national cooperation while the development of our revolutionary movement has also provided us with the basis for such cooperation. So, since liberation, we have adopted this system of national regional autonomy suitable to Chinese conditions and favorable to national cooperation. We don't lay emphasis on the secession of nationalities. If we do now, imperialism will take advantage of this.¹¹³

As pointed out by Zhou, what the party really embraced was the great unity of China and the self-determination of the entire Chinese nation, or *Zhonghua minzu*, from the foreign imperialism. Despite its rhetoric, like Sun Yat-sen, the Communists believed that the frontier minorities lacked the capacity for long-term political independence. The only national entity capable of self-determination and revolution was a Han-led *Zhonghua minzu* that included all the former peoples of the Qing Empire within a new spatiotemporal imagined community.¹¹⁴ Therefore, in addition to regional national autonomy, the localization of self-determination also implies that, in China's case, the most suitable subject of self-determination is Chinese nation as whole.

3) Explaining the contradictions in China's nationalities policy

After exploring how the Chinese nationalist elites—whether communists or not—localized foreign model(s) based on the native mold, it is time to explain the contradictions in China's nationalities policy. Two reasons are essential in making these contradictions.

¹¹² George Moseley, ed. and tr., *The Party and the National Question in China* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1966), 69.

¹¹³ Chou En-lai, "Some Questions," 21-22. Quoted from Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 90-91.

¹¹⁴ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 107.

First, while the early nationalist elites had introduced and localized the Japanese model of nation and nationalism, the communists, who declared to represent a “new” force in a “new” China, had to distinguish itself from the “old” nationalist elites and their interpretation of Chinese nationalism. In 1943, Mao Zedong, the top leader of the CCP and later the People’s Republic, authorized to refute Chiang Kai-shek’s propagandist article on *China’s Destiny*, in which Chiang emphasized the assimilationist identity of the “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*), which indeed directly inherited from Sun Yat-sen, and thus denied the existence of independent culture of its various non-Han groups. Intriguingly, after taking office, the Ethnic Classification Project was soon launched by the communists, which, in addition to the real political concern of assigning seats in the National People’s Congress, meant to contrast GMD’s Han chauvinism in its denying the very existence of non-Han nationalities in China.¹¹⁵ This rule was also applied to the realization of national regional autonomy and affirmative action program, which the previous GMD government was reluctant to implement during its rule on the mainland and which, in the communists’ propaganda, were declared as prominent differences from its repressive predecessor.

However, despite their antagonistic ideological orientation, the CCP actually recognized Liang and Sun’s construction of “Chinese nation” and the logic of social Darwinism in nation building. Though never explicitly expressed, Mao clearly endorsed the ideas of Chinese culturalism and the Sinification of non-Han peoples. In a tract published for instructional use within the CCP in 1939, he departed from Stalin’s definition of the “modern nation” and made “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*) and the Han nationality two almost interchangeable terms throughout the Chinese history. As for the histories and cultures of the other nationalities, he had nothing to say except for their being part of *Zhonghua minzu*.¹¹⁶ This vindicates the fact that CCP’s real stance on the national question was not so different from that of other nationalists, the GMD government included, from whom they were eager to distance. After all, being communists, they were also immersed in the cognitive priors that featured all the Chinese nationalists and concerned first and foremost with the unity and territorial integrity of the country. In fact, their commitments to national unity and territorial integrity constituted the major reason why they managed to mobilize Chinese people for the communist cause. However, for political reasons, they had to maneuver its nationalities policy and made it more accommodating to minority nationalities. This being said, as a nation building design, China’s nationalities policy was not just about national issue, but also an issue of politics.

Second, for a long period, the survival of the communist party had relied on the support from the Soviet and Comintern. Therefore, incorporating Soviet’s discourse seemed to be inevitable. Yet, at the same time, there were also factors in the Soviet model that would help justify CCP’s rule and unite various non-Han peoples for the communist cause. The idea of national self-determination and its implied rights of cultural and linguistic equality and practice of political accommodation were among such cases.

However, as a disciple of the Soviet model, the CCP was well aware of the gap between the Soviet model and the Chinese mold and modified the content of the Soviet model in the historical course (as been explained above). While still keeping its form, the Party’s practice in

¹¹⁵ Xiaoyuan Liu, *Frontier Passage: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism, 1921-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 123.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

nation building had diverged from that of the Soviet. For example, as mentioned, the CCP adjusted the class-struggle perspective when granting the self-determination right to minorities and instead developed its own approach of united front. The Soviet ethnofederalism and the institutionalized self-determination right were not copied in China, either. Moreover, in operating the Ethnic Classification Project, Stalin's "four commons" definition of nationality was replaced by a perennial approach, in which emphasis was placed on common language and common cultural psychology whereas common territory and common economic life were downplayed. While the Soviet differentiated the conceptions like "nationality", "socialist nationality", "tribe", and "clans", in China, people were all classified as belonging various "nationalities," the Han and non-Han alike. In other words, all communities in China were treated equally, despite their different levels of development.¹¹⁷ These deviations from the Soviet model demonstrated the commitments of the communist elites in national unity and their cautiousness of extra-foreign influence in domestic politics.

As a matter of fact, the CCP's attitude toward the frontier minorities never differed significantly from that of other nationalist elites. Like its ideological rival as well as other prominent early nationalists, the party's nationality policy ultimately sought "the equitable fusion of all Chinese *minzu* into a strong, independent, and, most importantly, unified Chinese nation/*minzu*." Meanwhile, it was cognizant of both the advantages and disadvantages of the Soviet model in China's nation building practice. Even it adopted the discourse of national self-determination introduced by the Soviet, there were nuances between China's rhetoric and practice. The contradictions laid out earlier in this article can thus be explained, on the one hand, by the party's attempts to distance itself from its ideological enemies, and, on the other hand, by the inconsistency between the Soviet model and the political commitments of Chinese nationalist elites.

VI. Conclusion

In the case of communist China, the nationalities question is framed as an issue of national integration, of finding a way to recognize cultural diversity and allow regional autonomy to various nationality groups.¹¹⁸ However, the attempts to simultaneously insist the Chinese characteristics in localizing the Soviet model and distance itself from other Chinese nationalists had put the CCP in a difficult position in balancing accommodation and assimilation in its nationalities policy.

Briefly speaking, the party has constructed a more encompassing and totalitarian Chinese identity while implementing a circumscribed form of regional autonomy and affirmative action program that leave little room for any alternative claims of sovereignty.¹¹⁹ The underlying logic is that the central government is willing to acknowledge the cultural identities of ethnic

¹¹⁷ 黄光学, 施联朱主编, 《中国的民族识别—56个民族的来历》, 民族出版社 2005 年版, 80-81.

¹¹⁸ Berch Berberoglu, ed. *The National Question: Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Self-Determination in the Twentieth Century* (Temple University Press, 2009), xvi.

¹¹⁹ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 181.

minorities and make provisions for limited decisionmaking power to them in exchange for their recognition of Beijing's sovereignty and the preservation of the country's overall unity.

By exploring the process how the CCP's nationalities policy was formed in the historical course, this article highlights the consequences of the party's dual identity of being both a communist and a nationalist organization. While emphasizing the obvious influence from the Soviet model, this article also acknowledges the contribution made by the earlier nationalist elites in making sense of the Japanese myth in the local context. Overall, the CCP's nationalities policy was the result of localization.