I

Changing Approaches to Identity

From Maintenance to Transformation

This chapter focuses on the transformation of approaches to ethnicity in China’s transition from empire to nation state. That is, how and why Chinese approaches evolved from a maintenance-oriented strategy aimed at pacification and stability in pre-modern times to a transformative strategy aimed at institutionalizing identities in the socialist era, with huge unintended consequences.

This classification and engineering, I argue, created the first institutional dynamic for ethnic strife in contemporary times. That is, they contributed to the politicization of identity at national level. Historically, Confucian universalism provided a neutral and inclusive approach to ethnicity, but it could not accommodate the advent of the minzu (nation) and the nation state in modern times. Yet the minzu discourse was ineffective at nation building during the late Qing and Republican eras. It took the CCP to accomplish this task through a mix of class universalism and politicized identities. The new approach served to incorporate minority members as equal citizens of a new modern state, but it also departed sharply from pre-modern approaches of maintenance and pacification. The contradictions therein – promoting political incorporation but also ethnic identities to fit that goal – would render minzu identities a key source of institutional strains in the autonomous system in contemporary times.

This chapter covers the following topics: (1) relevant legacies of pre-modern China’s approaches to ethnicity, (2) relevant legacies of modern China’s efforts at nation building, and (3) the CCP’s transformative approaches to ethnicity as a nation building strategy and its unintended consequences.

PRE-MODERN LEGACIES: UNIVERSALISM, MAINTENANCE, AND PACIFICATION

For China’s modern nation building, the most relevant legacies from pre-modern times were Confucian universalism, and a maintenance-oriented
26 Changing Approaches to Identity: From Maintenance to Transformation

approach to ethnicity and localized identities that it helped to foster. Universalism was a common strategy used by empires to deal with different peoples across extensive territorial spans. By proclaiming principles of universal application, universalism embodies inclusiveness and non-racial neutrality. Confucianism and neo-Confucianism comprised the uniqueness of pre-modern Chinese approaches.

The Confucian system of values and governance was adept at ruling an empire and pacifying frontier communities. That is, a maintenance-oriented approach aimed at pacification and stability for different territories and peoples. From John Fairbank to Joseph Levenson, historians characterize a cultural universalism (tianxia) in imperial China. As a form of cultural consciousness and identification with the moral values of Confucian civilization, it entailed that culture (as a way of life) was more fundamental than nationalism or race, hence non-racial and inclusive. This universalist culturalism allowed China’s dynastic emperors to assert that they ruled civilized mankind without distinction of race or language. It permitted nomadic invaders to rule and assimilate easily. “Barbarian” dynasties, so long as they ruled by the proper Confucian order, reinforced rather than weakened that universalist conception. Successive alien rulers acknowledged this fact and ruled accordingly (Fairbank 1983: 98–9).

Confucian culturalism was conducive to ethnic acculturation but also localized identities. Unlike Christian universalism, Confucian universalism was not messianic with the assumption that the “barbarians are always with us” (Levenson 1971: 24). The comparative advantage of organizational and technological know-how, crystallized in the Confucian bureaucracy, allowed it to prevail once nomadic rulers and invaders settled in: “major dynasties of nomadic or semi-nomadic origins sooner or later adopted Confucianism as a ruling ideology and relied on the Confucian-Legalist state to rule the most populated part of the country” (Zhao 2015: 324). As successive nomadic invaders voluntarily succumbed to the ways of the settled people, Confucian universalism was periodically reinforced. The ideas of the nation and nationalism based on ethnicity or race per se did not exist. As Henry Kissinger puts it, imperial China expanded by “cultural osmosis, not missionary zeal” (2011: 512). It did not seek to convert and change, leaving alone localized identities.

Confucian universalism was conducive to localized and crosscut identities also because it did not preclude cultural pragmatism or alternative beliefs. The Confucian offici had made constant compromises in order to adapt to “alternative views of the world order," compromises that the Confucian elites would cover with the rhetoric of universalism (Duara 1997: 57). Cultural pragmatism entailed that the creation of a Confucian society “did not diminish the strong presence of numerous religions and other traditions in China,” for as long as all religions accepted Confucian orthodoxy, and did not worship ethnically problematic gods or turn against the state, the Confucian
state did not repress popular religion or non-Confucian teachings but made efforts to co-opt it (Zhao 2015: 342, 344–5). Whether it was cultural universalism or pragmatism, none denied admissibility to the Chinese political community on the basis of ethnicity, faith, or other ascriptive features.

The rise of neo-Confucianism, between the Song dynasties (960–1279 CE), greatly strengthened the influence and universalizing facility of Confucianism in Chinese society. This helped to further expand and consolidate a large demographic/territorial core in pre-modern China. The expansion of the civil service exam as the defining institution of society spurred academies for Confucian teaching in urban and rural areas, giving rise to a unified elite culture and identity. The expansion of lineage-based networks and other Confucian rituals helped to extend Confucian tenets in local communities. These two developments facilitated the penetration of Confucian ideology and institutions into all spheres of Chinese life as never before, creating a Confucian society (Zhao 2015: 334–8). Confucianism’s influence, in terms of territory and population, was greatly expanded as a result. This demographic/territorial core consolidated, notably, before the arrival of two minority dynasties, the Mongols and Manchus. The Manchus, who embraced Confucianism, ruled much more successfully and lasted much longer than the Mongols.

Official records from Qing, China’s last imperial dynasty, are illustrative of the imperial court’s loose groupings of various subjects under its empire. They show functional, localized, and crosscut groupings of disparate communities. During the period of Emperor Jiaqing (1760–1820), the Comprehensive Gazetteer of Jiaqing used just three categories to classify twenty groups of subjects: soldiers, civilians, and frontier peoples. These were functional rather than ethnic categories. The category of soldiers, or the “banner register,” included Manchu, Mongol, and Han soldiers. The category of civilians, or the “household register,” included the Min (or civilians, covering the Han, Chinese-speaking Muslims, and sinified minority groups in the south), the Hui (covering Turkic-speaking Muslims of Xinjiang and Gansu), the Fan (or alien tribes, covering Tibetan and Qiangic herdsmen and Taiwanese aborigines), and the rest (covering the Qiang, Miao, Yao, Li, and Yi). The category of “frontier peoples” included nine Mongol and Manchu subgroups in the northeast. Importantly, these categories were largely for the purpose of differentiating tax rates. Households listed under ethnic categories were placed alongside functional groups, such as soldiers, craftsmen, fishermen, opium smokers, and salt workers. The ethnic categories, moreover, had little internal logic to them. The Fan group ranged from pastoral people in western Sichuan to indigenous people in Taiwan, while the Manchu tribes were divided into six subgroups. The Qing court never established a coherent logic of ethnic classification, but only an ethnic description for administrative purposes (Wu 2013). This practice was representative of the general approach to ethnicity in imperial China.
At the micro level, the social unit of identification in pre-modern China helped to reinforce localized identities and crosscuts. This prevented local identities from consolidating into a sustained cross-regional ethnic or proto-nationalistic political identity. Kinship and lineage networks were the focus of localized identities rather than ethnicity or race. Most illustrative is the word “zu,” the term for ethnicity and race in the contemporary Chinese vocabulary. The etymology of "zu" signifies the role of interclan conflict in the emergence of the concept of "zu" and the clan-based rule of early Chinese society. The conventional usage of "zu" in pre-Qin texts denoted a clan or tribe linked by blood lineage and/or surname (Ma 2010b: 211–15). This “zu” was also rooted in the military functions of a community with blood ties: "zu" was bigger than "jia" (family) but smaller than "zong" (interrelated clans). Subsequently, when used in compound phrases in historical texts, "zu" retained the meaning of a social unit based on blood lineage, for example "jiazu" (family clan), "shizu" (surname clan), "zongzu" (interrelated clan), "jiuzu" (multiple interrelated clans), "buzu" (tribal clan), "gongzu" (royal kinsmen), and "wangzu" (royal clan). Until modern times, the word "zu" was never used with an ethnic group in classic Chinese texts (Ma 2010b: 214–16). Like Confucian universalism, the pre-modern understanding of the royal house as a kinship clan allowed the Sinic communities to overlook the ethnic origin of the nomadic and semi-nomadic dynasties.

In short, pre-modern Chinese approaches to ethnicity aimed at pacification and stability. Confucianism served these imperial goals through cultural universalism, pragmatism, and religious tolerance, allowing cycles of nomadic rulers and communities to acculturate. At local levels, family-centered Confucian values reinforced kingship and lineage-based identities, rather than providing a basis for ethnic or proto-nationalistic political identities. All this helped to create a large demographic/territorial core, while also leaving distinct ethnic communities alone.

TRANSITION TO THE MODERN STATE

Confucian universalism came under serious challenges after China’s defeat in the Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60). The arrival of the West presented the “conceptual shock” of the three millennia of Chinese history, in the words of the prominent Qing official, Li Hongzhang. While alien invaders were nothing new, the earlier ones posed military rather than civilizational challenges to the Chinese society. But the invaders from Europe imposed not only their terms of engagement but also their worldview and world order. In particular, their power politics and racial exclusivity presented conceptual and normative challenges to the longstanding universalism of Confucian culturalism.

For China’s nation building, the most relevant legacies from modern times were the challenge from the Western concept of the nation and the subsequent

1 Cited in Liang Qichao (1901/1963: ch. 6).
regimes’ ineffective responses to meeting the challenge of modern nation building. Those failures paved the way for the CCP to embrace the Soviet doctrine of nationality and class universalism, resulting in the adoption of ethnic classification as the CCP’s strategy of nation building. Compelled by exigencies of the time, China’s accession to the new concepts – the nation and the nationality – disregarded historical and local realities, with unintended consequences for contemporary times.

Problems of the “Nation” Discourse

Late Qing reformers failed to develop an alternative worldview because the Western concept they embraced, the minzu (nation) and nation state, did not fit with China’s pre-modern realities. After China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 and the failure of the Reform Movement of 1898, frustrated reformers saw Confucian universalism as a fundamental barrier to an effective response to the challenge of the West: domestically it impeded awakening Han nationalism against the inept Qing court, whose rulers were ethnic Manchus, and externally against Western and Japanese encroachments. Qing reformers were convinced that the absence of the nation state, along with its attendant nationalism, put China at a disadvantage in the internal and external politics of the day. They desperately turned to the nation discourse for its perceived potency to save the country and Chinese civilization.

Key differences among late Qing reformers illustrated the mismatch of the nation concept in the local context, and why they could not come to a consensus. Thanks to the large demographic/territorial core of the Qing empire, or the Han people, the radical reformers equated the Chinese nation with the Han people. This group, represented by Zhang Taiyan, Sun Yat-sen, Wang Jingwei, Chen Tianhua, and Zou Rong, were deeply indignant at the Manchu regime and implored the nation discourse to displace it. However, the moderate reformers or Constitutional Monarchists, represented by Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, Huang Zunxian, and Wang Tao, upheld the Confucian tradition by including the multiethnic constituents of the empire as part of the Chinese nation. Both groups, as modern-minded writers and translators of their times, were bearers of new ideas and terminology to China, including minzu and minzu zhuyi (nationalism). These terms – mainly through translation of Japanese renderings of Western texts, became profuse in Chinese publications from the late 1800s. The context of such use was so politicized that a century later, the validity of the Japanese renderings was among the first topics debated by Chinese ethnologists in the post-Mao era.

The concept of nation posed serious problems for Chinese nation building in late Qing, contributing in important part to its failure. Foremost was the linkage of race to the nation state. Radical reformers expressed their anger at the Qing court by directing hostility toward the Manchus as an alien group, espousing the infamous slogan “Expel the Manchus and Restore China.” This narrow
conception of the nation excluded the Manchus as well as other lesser “nations” of the Qing empire. Because Japan was a homogenous country in racial and cultural terms, the Japanese rendering of the Western concept of “nation” as *minzu* denoted a racial-cultural-political community (Wang K. 2003). By appropriating the Japanese term, radical reformers sought to save China by appealing to its large demographic/territorial core, the Han nation.

Another problem of the nation concept was the need to reconstruct a collective memory for this core nation, which ironically had to begin overseas. In 1902 a group of Chinese intellectuals studying in Japan convened a meeting to observe the “242nd anniversary of the fall of China.” That is, the fall of the Ming dynasty that preceded the Qing dynasty. Emulating Meiji Japan’s construction of emperor worship and the imperial lineage, Zhang Taiyuan implored the Han collective memory by constructing the Yellow Emperor as the Han ancestor (Sun 2004: 18–19). Chen Tianhua held anyone who did not descend from the Yellow Emperor as non-Han and anyone who helped non-Hans as disloyal to his ancestors (Chen 2002: 87). From these Japanese origins, the new cultural symbol of the Yellow Emperor was promoted across China to rally support for the overthrow of the Manchus.

Yet another problem of the nation concept was the inconvenience of the Manchu race, a fellow race of the Han. The dichotomy of the yellow and white races grew out of Chinese exposure to the theory of social Darwinism from 1895. The translator of Darwin’s works, Yan Fu, warned of the danger of the “extinction of our country and race” after China’s loss in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 (1986: 4). Fellow intellectuals quickly embraced the new divine law of “natural selection.” Fearing that the Chinese nation and race would be “gobbled up” by imperial powers, they depicted a “racial war” between the yellow and white races. But the dichotomy posed dilemmas, since the Manchus were a fellow race. Radical reformers circumvented this inconvenience by dismissing the Manchus as a “Siberian race” (Zou 1958: 25–6) or not part of China’s “historical nation” (Zhang 1977: 195, 199). At the same time, they exalted Meiji Japan as a racially pure nation state, thus racializing China’s plight inflicted by the Western powers but not its defeat dealt by Japan (Sun 2004: 12).

The most serious problem of the Han nation discourse was the intellectual and political threats that it posed to the “nationhood” of the various non-Han communities in the Qing empire. Major ethnic communities – being Qing subjects – did not necessarily equate the Qing empire with China, and they were equal members like the Han in the constituent territories of Qing; but since they had already accepted the Confucian cultural and normative order, the Manchus and other so-called barbarians should be equal members of *Zhongguo* (China) (Duara 1997: 76). And like the Han, minority groups fought against foreign encroachments as members of the Qing empire (EdB 1979: 23, 95, 216, 223). Moreover, the Han nation discourse inspired some minority groups to assert their own nationalism and nationhood, making it...
Transition to the Modern State

difficult to oppose the growing independence movements in Mongolia and foreign incitation of separatism in Tibet and Xinjiang in the midst of the Qing dynasty’s disintegration.

Moderate reformers developed the concept of a composite nation, but were unable to prevail initially. They phrased the Darwinian battle as one between China and foreign powers, rather than between China’s internal groups, or in Yan Fu’s words, a conflict between the white and yellow races, with the Mongols, Manchus, and Hans all being part of the yellow race (Yan 1986: 9–10). Arguing against internal divisions, Kang Youwei wrote, “If we set ourselves up as weak prey, how can we avoid being attacked? If we set ourselves up for chaos and decline, how can we complain about being bullied?” (Xu and Jin 2008: 37). Instead of a Han nation, they urged the fusion of internal ethnic groups into one modern nation state, a precursor to the idea Zhonghua minzu (the Chinese nation) popularized a decade later in the 1911 revolution.

The momentary prevalence of radical reformers contributed to the failure of an elite consensus. When China’s first political party – the Chinese Revolutionary League – was established in 1905 under the radical reformer Sun Yat-sen, its major platform was to “Expel the Manchus and Restore China.” Moderate reformers countered with the concept of Zhonghua minzu, to include the Manchu and other ethnic groups in the new Chinese nation (Huang 2002; Chang 2010), but the Han-centric approach prevailed among the revolutionaries who led the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911.

Republican Failures

The overthrow of the Qing dynasty, during the revolution of 1911, thrust new challenges of nation building for the ensuing Republican regimes (1911–49). With the Manchu dynasty fallen, the various populations of imperial China could no longer be called Qing subjects (Qingchao chenmin), while their potential separatism became a real threat to the new Republic. Clinging to the Han-centric conception of the nation, the Republican regimes (1911–49) attempted assimilationist strategies at nation building, but ultimately failed. This influenced the CCP’s embrace of class universalism, which was the major Republican legacy.

One reason for the Republican failures was an expedient approach to the idea of the Chinese nation. Initially the new Republic turned to the multinational narrative largely to inherit the Qing empire. As Sun Yat-sen and other revolutionary leaders realized, Han nationalism, after justifying the overthrow of the Manchus, would now lead to the breakaway of the outer peripheral regions. The new Chinese nation would now have to consist of five major groups, the Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, Huis (Muslims), and Hans, such that the new Republic could legitimately inherit the territorial boundaries of the Manchu dynasty (Duara 1997: 76–7). In naming the five co-nations, the
new Republic acknowledged the major challenges for nation building. The Manchus and Mongols were part of the ruling coalition in the Qing dynasty and must therefore be co-opted by the new regime. Uighurs were incorporated into the regular provincial system less than three decades ago. Tibetans of Ü-Tsang were not yet governed in such a system.

Thanks to the large demographic/territorial core left from imperial times, however, Republican leaders soon returned to a Han-centric conception of the Chinese nation. The demise of the Qing dynasty had left the Manchus and Mongols on the defensive, the Tibetans under British influence, and the Uighurs under regional warlordism. These centrifugal forces put pressure on the Republican regimes to attempt nation building. Merely a year after the revolution of 1911, Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary league openly espoused “racial assimilation.” In the same year, the reorganized league, the KMT, vowed to implement “racial assimilation” (Wu 2014: 41). After Chiang Kai-shek came to power in 1928, the KMT formally backtracked on the idea of a multiethnic republic. By the 1930s, when separatist movements surged among all four ethnic co-nations, the KMT repudiated the idea of ethnic minorities altogether. Chiang Kai-chek replaced the idea of the five-zu nation with one “guozu” (national race), calling ethnic groups “different clans of the same lineage” (zongzu) (Wu 2014: 45–6). The intention was to counter the rise of ethno-nationalism and separatism encouraged by foreign powers in all four “co-nations” of the new republic: Japan in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, Britain in Tibet, and the Soviet Union in Xinjiang.

Without an inclusive universalism, the KMT’s assimilationist policies bumped up against ethnic identities in flux. Conventional Chinese historiography on the early Republican period tends to blame foreign powers for inciting ethnic separatism in the outer peripheral regions (Xu and Jin 2008: 69). Recent historiography by China’s minority scholars, however, emphasizes the unprecedented dilemma faced by minority elites at that critical historical juncture: to stay with or leave the Middle Kingdom. The collapse of the Qing dynasty had left a power vacuum and an identity crisis in the outer minority regions, whose elites used to be part of the Qing’s ruling coalition and were more loyal to the empire than to the new Republic. Across all four ethnic “co-nations,” many minority elites struggled with a new national identity and with their uncertain fate in a turbulent period, and some turned to foreign forces in the hope of pursuing separatism (Chang 2011: 13–14; Ma 2011e: 2; Jian 2011: 36). The KMT’s assimilationist policies caused a backlash among the already anxious minority elites.

Forced assimilation did not go well even in the more integrated communities of the inner peripheral regions, which would later turn to the CCP. From administrative integration to the banning of ethnic tongues in local urban areas, the KMT’s enforcement of assimilation was felt to be too harsh. Rather than secession, the inner peripheral groups sought an equal status in a multinational framework. Without it, they could not legitimately resist the
assimilationist drive. In 1935, more than thirty ethnic chieftains from southwestern provinces sent representatives to Nanjing, China’s capital at the time, to lobby for recognition and political rights (Wu 2013: 6). Japanese invasions soon damped their hope for reform, but gave them a different boost. From the late 1930s to the mid-1940s, China’s leading academic institutions were relocated from eastern China to Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, close to the traditional inner peripheral regions. The relocation boosted scholarly studies on the hitherto neglected ethnic groups in the southwest. The researchers’ field experience during this period was to have a major impact on the CCP’s ethnic policy in the 1950s.

In short, in the turbulent transition to the modern nation state, the Republican model of five co-nations failed to provide an alternative identity to the pre-modern identity of minority communities as imperial constituents. Extraordinary circumstances aside, the Republican regimes failed because of their intrusive assimilationism, in contrast to Confucian universalism. The demographic weight of the Han majority, no doubt, rendered it easy to take assimilationism for granted and to avoid taking serious measures to forge a modern national identity. The major impact of the Republican legacy was the CCP’s turn to the Soviet doctrine of nationality and class universalism.

The Soviet Alternative

The Soviet doctrine allowed the CCP to find a viable new universalism. Based on social class solidarity, class universalism transcended ethnic particularism by emphasizing interethnic affinity as members of the proletarian class, regardless of ascriptive features. By identifying with oppressed masses across the ethnic spectrum, it helped the CCP to overcome the confines of the Republican regimes.

A brief discussion of the Soviet theory and policy on “nationalities” will suffice here, as it has been extensively studied (Martin 2001a; Suny and Martin 2001; Slezkine 1994). For Lenin and Stalin, both ardent advocates of nations and national rights, nations were a matter of historical reality that was taken for granted. In Stalin’s classic definition, “A nation is a historically evolved, stable community based on a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture,” and being here and real, nations had rights: “A nation can organize its life as it sees fit. It has the right to organize its life on the basis of autonomy. It has the right to enter into federal relations with other nations. It has the right to complete secession. Nations are sovereign and all nations are equal” (Slezkine 1994: 416). It did not matter whether they differed in size, power, and level of development, all nations or nationalities were equal because they had the same rights.

How could the Soviet Communist Party build a unitary state while encouraging ethno-nationalism? Terry Martin summarizes the Soviet reasoning: first, “nationalism is a masking ideology that leads legitimate class interests to be
expressed, not in an appropriate class-based socialist movement but rather in the form of an above-class national movement”; second, “national identity is not an essential and permanent quality but rather an unavoidable by-product of the modern capitalist and early socialist world, which must be passed through before a mature internationalist socialist world can come into being”; third, “since national identity is a real phenomenon in the modern world, the nationalism of the oppressed non-Russian peoples expresses not only masked class protests but also legitimate national grievances against the oppressive Great Power chauvinism of the dominant Russian nationality” (Martin 2001b: 72–3). These reasonings were unsurprising given the Bolshevik leaders’ own backgrounds. As Liliana Riga shows, two-thirds of those leaders were members of ethnic minority groups. Culturally assimilated yet socially and politically excluded by state imperial policy, they found revolutionary class universalism especially appealing (Riga 2012).

It followed that in the Bolshevik logic, neither nationalism nor national identity could be unequivocally condemned as reactionary. Some national claims, such as those confined to the national “forms” – territory, language, culture, and elite – are considered legitimate and must be granted in order to fragment the national alliance. Such a policy was expected to speed up the emergence of class cleavages and motivate the non-Russian proletariat and peasantry to support the Communist Party’s socialist agenda. In short, nationalism is supposed to be disarmed by granting the forms of nationhood. Two resolutions of the Soviet Communist Party from 1923, along with Stalin’s speeches in defense of them, became the standard Bolshevik “proof text” on nationalities policy. Policy implementation soon followed the 1923 resolutions (Martin 2001b: 73). The Soviet conception of the nation, along with the policy based on it, became the standard justifications for Soviet ethno-federalism, or an “affirmative action empire” in the words of Terry Martin (2001a). The Soviet theory and policy also became models for other multiethnic socialist countries, including China.

Soviet theory on nationality attracted the CCP’s interest because of its class universalism. Unlike the Darwinist nation discourse, the Soviet theory championed the rights of the weak and oppressed groups. When the CCP first learned about it at the Comintern conference on nationalities in 1922, Lenin’s point about the sovereign equality of all nationalities regardless of their size appealed deeply to the Chinese communists. Not only China’s minority masses, but China itself, were oppressed by domestic and foreign forces at the time. In the same year, the CCP began to use the concept of “nationality” to refer to China’s ethnic groups. By 1928, the CCP formally affirmed the “nationality” status of China’s “weak and small” ethnic groups, namely the hitherto unrecognized small groups. It also recognized the right of all nationalities to “self-determination” (minzu zijue), which would include the right to “completely separate from or freely associate with” the rest of China (MUF 1991: 87). The rationale, as with its Soviet precursor, was that China’s national