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China's National Identity and the Root Causes of China's Ethnic Tensions

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the People's Republic of China's (China) self-defined national identity and the consequences on China's ethnic relations with its ethnic minorities. This paper argues that China's identity is equated with the identity and culture of its ethnic Han Chinese majority—a narrative originally constructed by the Chinese state which its ethnic Han Chinese majority since indulges in. However, this hegemonic narrative is at the root of interethnic issues and tensions in China today, as further ethnic tensions stem from the resistance of ethnic minorities against Sinicization and the imposition of this "Chinese" identity against them. These phenomena thus both indicate what I term a weak "internal soft power appeal" of Han Chinese Confucian culture for ethnic minorities living in the PRC, and imply that China must adopt a different, more inclusive national identity if it were to maintain ethnic stability in the long term.

Significance of the "National Identity" as a Factor in Ethnic Relations in Multiethnic Countries like China

While the topic of ethnic tensions in China as a research topic has been approached by numerous scholars from different angles, including from the perspective of political repression or socioeconomic gaps, the impact of China's national identity construction on ethnic tensions is an approach that, while often alluded to, is yet to be directly addressed in the literature. However, as I will demonstrate in my analysis, the perceived hegemonic national identity, which originated as Chinese statist construction, plays a

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crucial role in the ethnic tensions: China is perceived by non-Han ethnic minorities as a state for the Han Chinese and is alienated from the hegemonic state identity. Thus, ethnic tensions emerge as the non-Han ethnicities seek to assert their own identities and preserve their own ethnic communities amid pervasive pressure of attempted assimilation. Conversely, an in-depth analysis of the Chinese identity to the Han Chinese shows that, in practice, there is little incorporation of other ethnicities' identities in the Chinese identity construction. My paper thus argues that China's constructed national identity is a fundamental contributor to its ethnic tensions, and by extension, that the choice of statist national identity has a fundamental impact on the country's ethnic relations in general.

This impact of national identity on ethnic stability in China also leads to my theory of a country's "internal soft power." In contrast to the original concept of "external" soft power that describes the exertion of influence between different states, my adapted conception of the "internal soft power" within a state analyzes the tools and effectiveness that a state employs to maintain social cohesion within its borders, specifically in the context of ethnic minorities' relationship with the hegemonic cultural identity of the country's dominant majority. In the context of the formation of the Chinese national identity and Chinese ethnic policy as statist construction, a Han Chinese centric national identity is thus being used as the vehicle of China's "internal soft power" promotion efforts. The ineffectiveness of the "internal soft power" of the current Chinese national identity, however, suggests that China must adopt another national identity with more "internal soft power" if it were to remain stable in the long term.

The Construction of China's Modern National Identity

Of all the topics concerning the study of China, few have had such a long contentious history and persistent relevance as the conception of what defines China as a nation. While Lucian Pye described China as a "Civilization pretending to be a nation state" [38], a sentiment helpful to the uninitiated in learning about Chinese history and culture; it is also precisely this perception held in the mind of many Han Chinese themselves, of China the monolithic and eternal, that lay at the heart of China's *Minzu*[1] issues, the Chinese identity debate, and all its derived topics. The identity debate, manifesting itself on both China's official policies and the realities of society, is between two conceptualizations: the first one being that China is simply the civilization of the Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group, and thus the country's identity is an extension of Han culture and its citizens should be treated and conform to such, while the second conception sees China as a multi-ethnic state, and thus, at least nominally, believes in a multi-cultural Chinese identity and rejects Han chauvinism. However, scholars argue that the current realities of Chinese identity in Chinese society demonstrate significant Han-centric perspectives. These realities are in turn significantly related to the ethnic tensions and ethnic policy issues China faces and minority resistance to the dominant Han-centric identity and their own identity assertions. Thus, a literature review of China's identity must draw relevance from all these aspects of

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[1] An ambiguous political and sociological term used in the People's Republic of China, translated before the 2000s as "nationality" and currently as "ethnicity," to be discussed in this paper.

scholarship: The first aspect traces the history and evolution of the two strains of Chinese identity: the competing Han-centric view and the multi-ethnic view on the perspective of the official narratives and policies of the Chinese state. The second aspect concerns the reality of Chinese identity in the Chinese society. This leads into the topic of current ethnic tensions, the rise of Han nationalism, and the current debate surrounding Chinese ethnic policy. Finally, I will discuss the ethnic relations on a ground level and the perspectives of minorities—the phenomena of persistent rejection of mainstream "Han" identity and the assertion of their own modern identities, which carry significant implications.

The Historical Strains of Chinese Identity: Competing Ideas of the Han Nationalist State Versus Theoretical Multi-ethnicity

The first aspect of literature on Chinese identity is narratives on the formation and course of Chinese identity as modern concepts. China's scholars like Werner Meissner and others identify that the concept of China and Chinese identity in the modern sense originated in the nineteenth century [36, p. 41; 17, p.478; 4, p.570]. The process, as they illustrate, follows a typical pattern of non-Western civilizations forming their identity based on their own experiences with Western powers and culture, where China, then under the rule of the Manchu Qing dynasty, was one of the victims of traumatic encounter and defeat by the much stronger Western Powers. The resulting shock and humiliation triggered an awareness of own identity in the face of the Western others. Thus, they argue, the identity of being "Chinese" was largely created in the late nineteenth century by Qing dynasty intellectuals as a response towards the invasions and defeat at the hands of Western powers, where the contact with Western powers established the Chinese notion of the Western "others" versus Qing "Chinese" themselves [36, p.44; 17, p.492]. This conceptual shift thus constituted the creation of a Chinese identity in a modern, national sense, where the contact with the West and Western theories of Nationalism lead to a rise in ethnic consciousness of the markers of the Han Chinese identity for the majority of the Qing dynasty's subjects in "China proper," and therefore, a fundamental change in the Chinese worldview. Traditionally, the Han Chinese has seen the world through a universal lens and based on the idea that the "Huaxia"[2] civilization, embodied by Confucianism, which is their own culture, is at the center of the world's civilization and cosmic order, while their inferior neighbors are to be subordinated and enlightened, as the Chinese dynasty occupies the world's center and have no equal in terms of cultural development. This contact with European and Western powers, however, led to the abandonment of these Sinocentric notions and embraces the Western concept of "nationhood," where nation, united by certain characteristics, forms a distinct group among the communities of the world [36, p.46; 17, p.500].

Origins of the Han Nationalist Versus the Multi-Ethnic China Conceptions

The contents of what this new national identity is to be made up of proved problematic to agree upon. Scholars identify two different and competing versions of what "China"

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[2] A historic term for the Chinese civilization.

and being "Chinese" means. The first strain of a "Chinese" identity equates China with the Han peoples and the Chinese nationalism with Han nationalism. As James Leibold notes, the present-day ethnicity of "Han" is often conflated with "Chinese" among Anglophone scholars and layman [30], perceptions which certainly attest to the significance of Han nationalism which formulates precisely this. This Han nationalism, scholars explain, has roots in both China's historical conception and the circumstances it found itself in the late nineteenth century. China, at that time, was under the rule of the Qing dynasty—a dynasty founded and ruled by the Manchus, a people from the steppes north of "China proper," who were historically outside the Confucian cultural sphere, and the Qing Empire itself stretched deep into Inner Asia to include many other people outside of historically Chinese territories. For the Han nationalists, most famously represented by the founder of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-Sen, the awakening of their identity vis-a-vis their contact with the Western powers also strengthened the awareness that China itself is governed by what they see as an alien race of the Manchus, and thus achieving modernity for China calls for the driving out the Manchus and other non-Han peoples and the establishment of a Han Chinese nation state—exemplified by the famous "Expel the Barbarians and Restore China" slogan of the late Qing Republican revolutionaries [4]. The nature of this Han identity is equated with the idea of the civilized *Huaxia* peoples originating from the Central Plains, espousing Confucianism, the people which formerly formed the core of the concept of the Celestial empire—now turned into an ethnic group, and peoples of other origins are not Han, but rather uncivilized aliens—other ethnicities who are not part of Chinese civilization [17, p.498). Such Han-centric conception of China, indeed, renders it incompatible with significant non-Han "ethnic minority" populations of the Qing dynasty, which by definition, cannot exist in its current form if the vision of Han nationalism were to be executed, and they would thus have to be driven out or assimilated into the Han nation, thereby making Han and Chinese identity an ethnically and culturally homogenous state [17]. To be sure, this version of Chinese identity that the nationalists are calling for was not a return to the purity of the Han's past as much as a synthesis of modern Western ideas and culture infused with traditional Han culture and identity. The influence by Manchus and other minorities within Chinese borders though, on the other hand, was to be purged away [36].

While the Han nationalist consciousness was still being formulated, another interpretation of China simultaneously took shape. Scholars on the multi-ethnic conception of China trace it back to the heritage of the Qing dynasty, which itself was conceived and operated as a multi-ethnic state, and the subsequent construction of a distinctive multi-ethnic Chinese identity. A traditional view of China's scholars, as exemplified by Cooper's views, paradoxically believed both that Manchus during the Qing era did not see themselves as "Chinese" and that Classical literary Chinese was the only language of the Qing administration [17]. Deeper research, like Gang Zhao's analysis of the legacy of the Qing dynasty to modern China's national identity, however, showed that the dynasty, created by the Manchus out of their conquests of a huge part of Eastern and Inner Asia, including the historical territories of Ming dynasty China, is a composite of different ethnicities and became a precursor of the concept of the multi-ethnic state. Due to their needs of governing a large Han population in their empire, the Qing, by necessity, refuted previous Han conceptions which equated China with the country of the Han and created an entirely different conception of China as a multi-ethnic state,

where included both Inner Asians and are included in the multi-ethnic identity of the Qing, which is treated as synonymous with "China/Dulimbai Gurun (Manchu)/ Zhongguo 'Middle Kingdom' (Chinese)" [52]. This new identity's significance, Zhao explains, was how it rejected the previous two conceptions of China: both the ethnic conception of equating China with the Han, and the cultural approach of China the Confucian society, and replacing them with the concept of China as composing of many ethnicities under the same political unity, with all different ethnicities and their lands under Qing rule as being a part of China, and all these ethnicities are "Chinese" (*Dulimbai Gurun I Nyalma/Zhongguo Zhi Ren*) [52]. Such conception manifested in the practice of the Manchu state, in contrast to previous Han dynasties, of not practicing Confucian assimilation on the borderlands, with cultures other than Confucianism, such as Tibetan Buddhism, were embraced and promoted in non-Han areas as a part of Chinese culture. These Qing cultural policies have deeply influenced both Han and non-Han officials by the end of the dynasty and formed the legacy of the conception of a multi-ethnic China [52]. In fact, he argues that such ideas of a "greater China," which originated from the Manchu state model and supported by famous late Qing reformists such as Kang Youwei, were always present, and in fact, more numerous than the Han Chinese nationalists embodied by Sun Yat-Sen, whose influence has been mistakenly overstated by the scholars of the 1911 revolution [52]. Meanwhile, Jiani He's study of language use in the Qing Empire also supports the legacy of the Qing Empire as multi-cultural. He found the official use of different languages in different parts of the empire, such as Chinese in the Han core areas, Manchu as an interethnic language in the peripheries, and local languages used in an official capacity and remained dominant for ethnicities in their respective territories of the Western and northern borderlands, and credits these tolerant cultural arrangements as the key part of the Qing governance strategy in successfully maintaining the integrity of such a large political unit [21].

The Evolution of the Two Conceptions: From the Republican Period until Present

The fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China by the Han Chinese revolutionaries in 1912 marked the beginning of putting the previously debated conceptions of Chinese identity into practice and the execution of the resulting ethnic policies. Barabantseva noted that Sun Yat-Sen viewed all ethnicities within the claimed borders of the new Republic of China as sharing a common blood lineage, that non-Hans are sub branches of Hans, and that all Chinese ethnicities belong to one race, with the Hans being the dominant majority [4]. Chiang Kai Shek, Sun's successor, who ruled during most of the Republican era, also shares this view and goes further to say that the differences between different Chinese groups are purely due to their circumstances and environmental factors, not to any blood lineage difference whatsoever [40]. The Nationalists' policies echoed their rhetoric: Sun Yat-sen supported the settlement of Han settlers in ethnic minority border areas of Tibet, Mongolia, Manchuria, and Xinjiang, in order to better assimilate and control these areas, although political weakness and foreign invasions in the Han heartland of China at that time meant that these government-sponsored assimilationist policies were sparsely carried out in practice [17]. To be sure, as the implications of officially claiming China as a Han nation-state would leave Chinese control of areas of the former Qing Empire dominated by non-Han ethnicities—such as Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang, which the ROC

government claims to naturally inherit—in an awkward and indefensible position. Thus, ROC propaganda, especially for regions of ethnic conflict such as Xinjiang in the 1940s, did their best to it as an integral part of China—albeit an exotic, backward region in need of Han tutelage [26]. A further analysis of the propagated properties of such a "Chinese" province, however, shows that they were not genuine perceptions that Xinjiang was indeed Chinese, but rather a political endeavor to justify keeping the territory under Chinese control. This was because the contents of such propaganda did little to explain what Xinjiang's ethnic minorities actually has in common with the Han Chinese to justify being a part of the Chinese society, but rather just treated the status of ethnic minorities being Chinese as a fact in itself.

The official assimilationist and Han-centric periods of Nationalist China gave way to fluctuating attitudes with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Here, scholars document the shifts in official conceptions of China. James Leibold gives an overview to this evolution; initially, the PRC, influenced by the communist views of the "friendship of nationalities," officially promoted the inclusiveness of all ethnic minority peoples now termed "Shaoshu Minzu," translated as minority nationalities, within the country, and thus Han supremacy, though having been a continuously presence and ingrained sentiment, was theoretically suppressed during the early days of Mao Zedong's rule, who identified Han chauvinism as the "primary contradiction to solving the national question" [30]. The resulting Chinese *minzu* or nationalities, policy, Barabantseva argues, were largely copies of the Soviet Union's concepts of nationalities, translated as such in English, and manifests in the creation of "autonomous regions" in places where non-Han nationalities form a plurality, although in practice, the minority nationalities are afforded less autonomy rights than in the USSR, and the Han are more explicitly held as the "elder brother" of the minority *minzu* [4]. A brief period during the Cultural Revolution disrupted this inclusiveness and greatly renewed assimilation efforts, but the formal recognition of minority cultures and rights resumed after the period of reforms in the post-Mao era, after much chaos and bloodshed [30].

Following this, the post-Mao era is portrayed by scholars as having inconsistent attitudes and seemingly paradoxical views from official government views on the concept of Chinese identity. Zhao Suisheng argues that one important phenomenon of the post-Mao era is the decline of communist ideology and the rise of nationalism (Zhao 1998, p.290), while Meissner argues that the contents of this nationalism are a new Chinese identity where the invocation of Marxism and socialist ideals, which were a prominent part of Chinese identity in the Maoist era, is largely dropped in favor of a cultural and nationalist one that stresses a common cultural identity, namely a renaissance of Confucianism and other cultural attributes associated with the Han Chinese [36]. Such shifts thereby manifest in the Chinese state stressing a common cultural identity for the different *minzu* living in China. Nimrod Baranovitch illustrates this by tracing the changing representation of non-Han peoples in Chinese history textbooks since CCP rule—a good indicator of official government views on national identity since these textbooks represents CCP orthodoxy and represents the instruments of educational indoctrination [5]. His findings suggest that efforts to bring identification of ethnic minorities into the Chinese conception of themselves only took place in the post-Mao era [5]; since back in the 1950s, he argued that even the authors of the history books had a hard time imagining that these minority *Minzu* were, in fact, "Chinese," and the appellation of them as "Chinese" was strictly politically motivated [5]. It was

only the 1980s and after, when minorities were specifically and consciously stressed to be identified as Chinese, and the Chinese nation, with all its spatial, cultural, and ethnic definitions, was painstakingly defined as to include all ethnicities whom live within current Chinese borders, that this new conception was conveyed through textbook education, which resulted in an essential rewritten version of Chinese history in the newer Chinese history textbooks. For instance, while previous wars between Hans and other ethnicities were defined as national wars with the Han being equated as Chinese and other ethnicities as foreign invaders, the newer interpretations define them as interethnic conflicts between different ethnic groups within the *Zhonghua Minzu*, a term now defined as representative of all Chinese ethnicities within the Chinese nation [5]. Moreover, the derived culture from all ethnicities of China was also compiled to be defined as the collective culture of all the "Zhonghua Minzu" [5]. Such changes define what Uradyn E. Bulag describes as the replacement of the concept of "Zhongguo Renmin[3]" an inclusive term to describe all nationalities of the Chinese people, with the term "Zhonghua Minzu[4]" or the "Chinese ethnicity", which signals a signaling shift from the communist conception of people of various nationalities in one union to a multi-ethnic statehood based on a single nationality [11]. By the new millennium, Chinese language scholars such as Ma Rong have begun arguing that the previous 50 years of CCP ethnic policy, inherited from Soviet nationhood doctrines, need to be reinterpreted to strengthen ethnic stability and thus advocates for formally redefining the "Zhonghua Minzu" as one nationality tied by a common mainstream culture itself, with the clear notion that redefinition will delegitimize any rationale for succession among China's other ethnicities (Ma 2004, p.149).

But, what does being a member of the "Zhonghua Minzu" mean? Zhengzhou Zhao, who discusses China's ethnic minority education, provides us a hint through his analysis of China's strategy for ethnic cohesion. He supports the concept that while the Soviet Union maintains the bonds between different nationalities through ideological ties, the Chinese focuses on strengthening national identity by cultural bondage— the perceived common blood and soil of the Chinese nation—especially in the decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Zhao [53], p.4). Meanwhile, the creation of this "Zhonghua Minzu" concept, Barabantseva finds, also manifests in the conceptual change of the concept of "minzu" itself from the identification with the Soviet concept of "nationality" to the Western concept of "ethnicity," along with the changes in the corresponding English translation for the term *minzu* to the latter. This conceptual change, she illustrates, serves to strengthen the narrative that all of China's *minzu* belong in one nation and derives from a single race, with parallels to the earlier Han nationalism [4]. Such paradigm shifts finally manifested in the official changes in translation of the term "minzu" to mean with "ethnicity" instead of "nationality"— exemplified by events such as the renaming of the official English name of top Chinese university designated for ethnic minorities— the "Central University for Nationalities" (CUN) to become the "Minzu University of China" (MUC) in 2008.

In practice, these developments implicate the reconceptualization of all non-Han ethnicities as "Chinese," with shared roots of identity, although such narrative shifts are often rationalized only with flimsy justifications. Wang Anran provides an example

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[3] Literally "The Chinese People"
[4] Literally "The Chinese Ethnicity"

with China's Mongol ethnic minority and how China's *Zhonghua Minzu* concept leads China to recognize Chinggis Khan as part of its own history, in the objective of increasing a sense of the Mongols' belonging to China, justify Inner Mongolia's and other Mongolian territories as a part of China, and justify their encapsulation of them as part of the *Zhonghua Minzu*. Such efforts were, unsurprisingly, faced with intense criticism from the State of Mongolia whom it sees as an appropriation of Mongolian heritage to which, Mongolia believes, only it can inherit from. The point of contention is that for China, any legacy derived from one of its current ethnic minorities which currently inhabits the PRC's territory is claimed as part of the Chinese heritage, a stance that Mongolia obviously disagrees with Wang (2016, p.372). The reception by the Chinese ethnic Mongols themselves, meanwhile, is outwardly mixed but certainly skeptical to the *Zhonghua Minzu* concept. While some celebrate Chinggis Khan's[5] recognition as useful in bringing about better recognition and treatment of ethnic Mongols, all explicitly reject the conception of themselves as the "descendants of Yan and Huang" (emperors), which they believe underlies the concept of *Zhonghua Minzu* and of which the state media remains contradictory on whether this is the correct understanding or not (Wang 2016, p.372). Anran Wang points out that the state's promoted founding legends—the descendants of the dragon of Yan and Huang—are all Han legends, and the use of this term thus in effect equates Chinese with Han, but does not represent the identities of other *Shaoshu Minzu* [45]. This leaves the *Zhonghua Minzu* identity being only, as Jiao Pan argues, a nationalistic concept equating it with the "yellow race," which forms itself against vis-a-vis the cultural and political struggle against the Western Powers [27]. This thus illustrates the artificial nature of the *Zhonghua Minzu* concept as framed more by a supposed struggle against "foreign races" or "Western Powers" than any common cultural identity by different ethnicities among the "Zhonghua Minzu" themselves.

It thus seems that the state promotion of the *Zhonghua Minzu* narrative serves, aside from fostering patriotism within the Han Chinese majority, to essentially persuade and convince ethnic minorities into accepting and assimilating into an identity, that is, identical with that of the Han Chinese and incorporates little to none of the identities of other ethnicities in practice. For instance, ethnicities like the Mongols, Uighurs, or Tibetans are under pressure to accept the narrative that they are part of the *Zhonghua Minzu*, but an examination of the actual cultural identities of the *Zhonghua Minzu* as viewed by mainstream, CCP party theorists and even Chinese president Xi Jinping himself indicate that the *Zhonghua Minzu*'s culture is defined as to espouse Confucian and Taoist principles as well as numerous other cultural characteristics which are normally associated with the Han Chinese, while the specific cultures, attributes, or worldview of other ethnicities under PRC rule like, Mongolians, Uighurs, or Tibetans are never mentioned in this [25, 37, 28]; thus, indicating that non-Han ethnicities have little to do with the *Zhonghua Minzu* identity in practice. demonstrating that the "Zhonghua Minzu" is more of an artificial political concept employed to support minority assimilation into the Han Chinese identity and provides ideological justification of the current incorporation of other ethnicities inside the Chinese state, rather than a real identity rooted in history.

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[5] Often spelled as "Genghis Khan" in English language literature, due to earlier mistranslations of his name

The Reality of Chinese Identity in Contemporary Chinese Society: Han Chauvinism and the Othering of Minorities

Beyond the paradoxes in the official conceptions of China, scholars present numerous evidence that the reality of Chinese identity in Chinese society is very Han-centric, and minorities are conceived and treated as "others" intensely at the societal level, seemingly even more so than what the official stances suggest. An examination of the situation of ethnic minorities in present-day Chinese society can be observed through three aspects:

1. The Perceptions, Portrayals, and Attitudes of Hans towards Minorities and their Implications

    While Chinese ethnic policies at least preach ethnic inclusiveness at the official level, scholars found that ethnic minorities are by large perceived, portrayed, and treated by the Han majority as "Others" while only the Han identity is equivocated with Chinese. First, there is this recurring Han theme of minorities representing exoticism and backwardness. Dru Gladney's study of Chinese ethnic minority depictions in China argued that for Hans in China, the Han ethnicity is treated as the equivalent to "Chinese" (Gladney 1994, p.98). He also found the equivocation of Hans and Han society with modernity, while minorities and minority societies are backwards, unable to reach modernity on their own, and must rely on the Han for support (Gladney 1994, p.101), and found the exoticization and eroticization of minorities, especially of minority females, to express the superiority of the Han against the Othered, feminized, and backwards minorities (Gladney 1994, p.116). Similar conclusions were made by Zhao and Postiglione, whom also found the portrayal of otherness and backwardness in representations of minorities in China's university media [54], and argue that university newspapers' portrayal of minorities and Han is characterized in three dichotomies: minorities are distinctive, potentially separatist, and visible, and Hans are normative, patriotic, and invisible [54]. Barabantseva also notes the pervasive conception that the minorities are "pre-modern," possess a backwards, conservative worldview, and need to catch up with modern society through economic prosperity, thereby strengthening ethnic cohesion. This idea prevails despite the fact that the business participation rate among some ethnic groups is higher than that of the Han, such that of the ethnic Hui, Koreans, or Russians [4]. The distinctiveness of ethnic minorities is thus persistently emphasized.

    Meanwhile, scholars also find that ethnic minorities are not truly seen as being "Chinese" by Han people but instead as a peripheral "other." Baranovitch finds that while minorities such as Mongolians and Manchus were included into the conceptualization of China in its textbooks, subtle nuances still depict them as "others," and depictions of them are still seen and narrated from a Han-centric view [5]. One such indication is a historical survey of Chinese university students, examining the social distance between the Han and other peoples of both domestic ethnic minorities and foreign nationalities, shows that the Han perceive ethnic minorities in significantly different ways than themselves, and demonstrating much less warmth especially for Tibetans, as well as the Yi, Mongolians, Koreans, and Dai. In fact, these groups are actually perceived by the Han to be at a greater social

distance from themselves than with many foreign nationalities such as the Americans, British, or Germans [19]. Such perception, they argue, of ranking a nation's own minorities at a lower warmth level than that attributed to foreigners demonstrates the extent that the Han truly feels about minorities being part of the Chinese nation [19]. It is also significant to note that, here, the Uyghurs are ranked quite positively as the highest ranking ethnic minority, with the surveyed sample in Nankai University seemingly unaware of the ethnic tensions in Xinjiang [19]. It must also be noted that this interview was taken in 1994, before the Uyghur-Han tensions reached high publicity in *Neidi* (Inland) China, so one can only imagine that the perception of social distance towards the Uyghurs to have now sunk to become at least comparable with other poorly perceived minorities, if not dropping to least favored status.

2. The Han-Centric Equivocation of "Chinese" with the Han Confucian Identity

The second aspect of Chinese identity perception in Chinese societies is the perception that being Chinese is equated with being Han as well as practicing Han culture, represented by Confucianism, as well as social pressure to identify as such, and these sentiments, going back centuries, can be affirmed by the writings of many Chinese scholars today. Ma Rong, the ethnic policy reformist, narrates that historically, the distinction between "Chinese" and "foreign" is that to be Chinese means to adopt Confucian cultural norms, but implied that there are no racial differences between "Chinese" and "barbarian" groups [33]. Such views, scholars argue, have in fact strengthened in recent years. While Confucianism and Han cultural traditions were traditionally denounced by communism, and the Chinese cultural revolution was in fact executed in the name of rooting them out; Billioud documents the dramatic reversal of negative opinion of Confucianism and Han cultural identity under the Mao communist era to a positive one in the decades after China's opening up and reforms, and embodies the new trend of "Chinese" traditional cultural revival [8], leading Agnew to conclude that Confucianism has been elevated to an embodiment of traditional Chinese culture and ideology in recent years [1]. In wake of the decline in appeal of communism after the Maoist era, the Chinese government, in search of new ideologies of legitimacy, tapped into nationalism and pride in the distinctiveness of China as the new source of ideology and legitimacy, and the rehabilitation of traditional culture became a centerpiece of this goal [8]. Heike Holbig argues that the rationale was for using Confucianism at the centerpiece of this cultural revival was that, since Confucianism teaches harmony and respect for the existing social order, it can now be a useful tool in maintaining social stability for better governance of China and represents a shift from a performance-based economic delivery-based legitimacy to an ideology-based legitimacy for CCP rule since Hu Jintao's administration [22]. Thus, Confucianism has now become increasingly used and infused with the official Chinese socialist ideology in order to support the legitimacy of the current authoritarian rule of the CCP, with its message of "harmony." It utilizes "Chinese" (Han) traditional culture and stresses Chinese exceptionalism to justify current Chinese political and social status quo, at a time where communism's waning appeal among China's public is replaced by Confucianism to fill China's ideological vacuum [23]. In summary, Meissner argues that it functions as a cultural justification for the CCP rule of China—as it solidifies the idea that China's special culture requires a unique

political rule, and beneficial for nationalism and thus support for the CCP [36]. This Confucian and traditional cultural renaissance, in turn, fuels a sense of renewed cultural pride and sense of superiority of Han Chinese culture compared to other cultures, as well as an increased desire to reclaim the prestige of Chinese identity and culture on the international sphere [36]. The result is that these government policies pushed the rise of racial nationalism in the post-1989 era, which prompted an increased sense that all minorities shared the same culture and blood relations as the Han, and rejection of the idea of minority uniqueness [36].

Meanwhile, scholars confirm that these Han-centric perceptions of China as propagated by the official policy are very much prevalent throughout mainstream Chinese society today. James DeShaw Rae and Xiaodan Wang's survey on Chinese university students provides an analysis of how young Chinese perceive their national identity. They found that current Chinese students mostly share a defensive stance against any question of ethnic differences and tend to share a nationalistic stance that all Chinese are the same [39]. They found that while the surveyed students, being mostly Han, strongly identified with civic nationalism claiming their Chinese identity before ethnic identity on the surface, but also adopted the contradictory tendency to equate the concept of "Chinese" as an ethnic quantifier also, with most respondents equating the term "Huaqiao," which is understood to mean "Han Chinese abroad," with being "Zhongguo Ren" or Chinese [39]. This illustrates, Rae and Wang argue, the contradictory term of *Zhongguo Ren* to be understood through shifting racial, cultural, and citizenship identifiers, and demonstrates the confusing and muddled relationship of equating Han identity with larger Chinese identity. On the surface, Han Chinese people also tend to believe themselves and ethnic minorities to share the identity, and some expressed hostility at the implication of any difference between different ethnics, while more minority students disagreed with such a conception [39]. Further questioning, however, bring about more clear subconscious views: Hans abroad are always seen as *Zhongguo ren* (Chinese people), *Huaren* (of Chinese descent), or *Huaqiao* (Chinese abroad), by both Hans and minorities, but when it comes to describing minorities abroad, a significant portion of ethnic Tibetan/Uyghur respondents, even whom attended Chinese schools in Inner China, consider them to be not Chinese, but their respective ethnicities. More significantly, even a small portion of Han Chinese students also described them as being not Chinese [39].

The manifestation of this racial nationalism and its consequences has in turn been identified by scholars to be quite problematic. Kevin Carrinco and Peter H. Gries argued that, as Chinese racialized nationalism identifies all those living or with origins in China as being the same people, those who do not agree with this self-identification are targeted negatively [13]. This national conception therefore obviously poses a problem towards ethnic minorities as they, by definition, do not fit this mold of homogeneity. Barry Sautman questions the usefulness of propagating the myth of common descent of ethnicities, as it has alienated important segments of minorities, undercuts state nationalism, and cites evidence of resistance against the privileged Han majority by Chinese minorities, especially by Uyghurs and Tibetans, as well as by Mongolians and other smaller ethnic groups [40]. The coercive nature of the Chinese national identity construction is perhaps also ironic given as Agnieszka Joniak-Luthi illustrates that the Han identity itself is

fragmented due to their huge geographic size and regional diversity, especially between Northern and Southern Han, although this diversity gets put aside when compared with a *minzu* "other" [29]. In any case, the wide range of evidence clearly indicates that in China, the Chinese identity is de facto equivocated with the Han Chinese Confucian identity.

3. The Marginalization of Minorities in the Education System and its Consequences

This decline of minority languages is also argued to be exacerbated by socioeconomic pressure which abet rather than ameliorate the situation. Rebecca Clothey's on the study of the Central University for Nationalities (now Minzu University of China), one of the few places where minority education is promoted, found that while significant resources are given to minority education in their own language, the environment outside is quite stifling towards the future of minority students who are the products of such education, as job opportunities that would make use of their abilities in their own ethnic languages are very limited, rather, China's market place little value in an education in minority languages (Clothey 2005, p.408). She found that while Minkaomin[6] students studying their own languages feel grateful that they have a positive environment like the CUN (Minzu University of China), where they can keep and rediscover their own ethnic culture and consciousness, they feel relatively isolated from the rest of the population in Beijing because they are often mistaken as foreigners in China, and therefore, they feel less identified with being "Chinese" (Clothey 2005, p.405). Meanwhile, Bulag's analysis of the decline of Mongolian language and culture in China argues that there is a Mongolian language anxiety, the loss of Mongolian language [11]. He found, similar to Zhu's conclusions, that while China affirms the right of different nationalities to their own national development, it also creates an "ideology of contempt" for minorities and their cultures and languages, with the minorities being "backward" [11]. For the Mongols, the use of their ethnic language in China is under severe strain, as the socioeconomic structure of Inner Mongolia leaves Han Chinese with a dominant economic and social position as the avenues of social mobility are dependent on speaking Chinese, thereby exerting great pressure on Mongols to speak Chinese while the protection of the Mongolian language and argues that Chinese social policies intentionally, as well as the general environment, pose a threat towards Mongols maintaining their language and ethnic culture [11, p.760].

The second aspect of minority marginalization is the promotion of a Han-centric culture and national perception. Yiting Chu's analysis of the depiction of ethnic minorities in China's elementary textbooks shows that while knowledge about the Han and their values and beliefs are very thoroughly taught in all Chinese textbooks, knowledge about ethnic minority groups in these elementary school textbooks are incomplete, stereotypical, and presented through a Han-centric [15, p. 469]. She argues that the most troubling issue is the fact that due to the Han's demographic dominance, their ethnicity and ethnic features

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[6] Minkaomin refers to non-Han ethnic students receiving primary and secondary education, and taking the university examinations in their own respective ethnic languages instead of in the Chinese (Putonghua) language.

were presented in textbooks as if they are simply "Chinese," in other words, Han-ness is normalized, is taken to be the default, de facto "Chinese" person, who are often unmarked by their ethnicity, while other ethnicities are always "marked" as something different [15]. Ethnic minorities are thus seen through the lens of the Han and their stereotypes—a typical one being that the minorities are extroverted, proficient "singers and dancers." Such caricature demonstrates an obvious Han bias—people obviously do not do it all the time like the textbook suggests—as well as the stereotypes of backwardness and need Han guidance to obtain civilization. It is also obvious that such a characterization is made in comparison to the reserved nature of Han culture [15]. Meanwhile, the Han is presented as the default "we" and are normalized, stripped without markers of nationality, as Han culture receives overwhelming attention, yet its cultural practices are not represented in the nationality context, but in the sense that they are simply "Chinese," insinuating that Hans are the prototype representative of China [15]. Thus, Chu argues that the dominant Han-centric ideology and unequal power relations favoring the Han are reflected and reinforced through this current education to Han as well as minority students and use this power to promote ethnic discourse—that of ethnic stereotypes and ethnic harmony, while eliminating other discourses from the education—that of minority alternative versions of modernity and ethnic tensions, thereby presenting only a Han-centered view instead of ethnicity and ignoring the minorities' own perspectives [15]. Drawing from similar observations, Catriona Bass argued that the primary objective of minority education was to foster allegiance towards China and ensure ethnic stability in minority areas [7]. However, such artificial efforts are ultimately flawed, as ethnic minorities using the Han-centric Chinese textbooks often feel an alienating experience in the education curricula where its discourse have little resonance in their communal experiences and worldview in their own ethnic societies [7].

Such Han chauvinism, in turn, fosters racism towards ethnic minorities, as found by Li Yi's case study of the integration of Uyghur schools. Here, in a case study of a Han-Uyghur integrated public school in the Tianshan District of Urumqi, he noted that the greater parts of the ethnic tensions are caused by friction between the Hans and Uyghurs, with a tendency by the Han teachers and students to view the Uyghur *Minkaomin* as barbaric, violent, unreasonable, undisciplined, stupid, and dirty [50]. Meanwhile, within the classrooms, Uyghur language and culture is given the message of being useless and even detrimental in thriving in a modern Chinese society—Uyghur students are reprimanded for speaking in Uyghur, in a conveyed message being, Yi argues that the Uyghur heritage should be marginalized, and the teachers attempt to indoctrinate them into an inferiority complex regarding Uyghur culture [50]. Meanwhile, as the Uyghurs express a sense of inferiority regarding their Chinese proficiency, the Han students and teachers interviewed in the school all expressed clear objections in learning Uyghur history, culture, or language [50]. Such an environment of marginalization for Uyghurs resulted in the asymmetrical integration found by Herbert Yee, where Uyghurs are generally proficient in Chinese while Han knowledge of Uyghur is practically zero, and Uyghurs take more initiatives in making Han friends than vice versa (Yee 2003, p.436).

The Current Problems in Ethnic Policy and the Resulting Ethnic Tensions, Rise of Han Nationalism, and Debate on Policy Reform

Unsurprisingly, these problematic conceptions of China are in turn directly linked to the current ethnic issues and tensions pervasive in China. The literature on these issues can be categorized into four focuses: on the problems in ethnic policy, the current resulting ethnic tensions, the backlash of Han nationalism, and the current debate on ethnic policy reform, with each catalyzing the next.

Issues in the Current Chinese Ethnic Policy

An Unfulfilled Autonomy

Numerous scholars have pointed out the marginalizing nature of the current ethnic policy on minorities. The first aspect concerns the marginalization of their political participation, particularly for Uyghurs and Tibetans, as Sautman notes that different levels of freedoms for different ethnicities in China—with the Uyghurs and Tibetans being offered the least freedoms in the reflection of their long-troubled relationship with the Chinese government [40]. Scholars point out that in theory, that CCP have recruited numerous 5 million ethnic minority cadres—6.6% of the national total, which is slightly below their population percentage, but, more importantly, many of them occupy ceremonial functions with few real power [31]. A closer examination of the state of autonomous regions for ethnic minorities indicate that, contrary to neither the CCP's self-proclaimed Marxist aspirations and these entities' official titles, the "autonomous regions" are not autonomous at all, as they fulfill none of the criteria for being politically "autonomous" [9]. Scholars provide consensus that, while many minority officials occupy lower tier and symbolic government posts, the Han is disproportionally dominant in government posts in autonomous regions, especially in party positions above the county level in autonomous regions like Xinjiang [40, p.60; Yee 2003, p.449; 9, p.30], and hold the real power in all ethnic minority regions (Zhao 2010, p.5). Thus, the minority cadres do not wield real power are few in percentage numbers and are alienated from their own ethnic groups through their execution of unpopular CCP policies [9]. The reasons for this, Bovingdon argues, is because the minority cadres are not trusted. For instance, in the Xinjiang case, Han scholars see the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Bingtuan[7])—the unique economic and paramilitary entity answering directly to the CCP—as the only reliable forces for stability in Xinjiang and do not trust minorities, and thus advocate for increasing Bingtuan numbers in southern Xinjiang to maintain stability in the region. Meanwhile, while it is already a Han-dominated force, the Bingtuan also tends to be bolstered with non-Uyghur minorities in order to further weaken the Uyghurs and increase interminority tension [9]. Meanwhile, the actual contents of autonomy in autonomous regions consist of the powers of modifying laws coming from higher government levels at the local level as well as creating local level legislation. However, these require approval from higher

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[7] The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, AKA "Bingtuan," is a unique economic and paramilitary organization in Xinjiang. Dominated by the Han Chinese and answering directly to the CCP, they wield exceptional power in Xinjiang and is perceived as an apparatus for maintaining CCP control in the region.

levels, except for general local laws. The contents of these laws are mainly cultural, such as minority language laws and minority holidays, and social, such as on building up local government cadres, but have little control over the setting of the important economic or strategic decision-making policies. Even with such insubstantial essence in autonomy, ethnic cadres are told to thank their position due to ethnic policies, while Han Chinese thanks their position to national policies [9]. Such situation thus deprives ethnic minority cadres of much real power and renders the autonomous regions as being more symbolic instruments than structures with real autonomy.

Rising Assimilative Pressures

Another problematic issue pointed out in the literature is the zigzagging of ethnic policy ultimately towards increased pressures at assimilation in recent years. Bovingdon described Chinese policymakers as charting a zigzagging but narrowing course between openness and control [9], while Timothy Grose elaborated that on the case of policy towards the Uyghurs, Chinese ethnic policy formed a cycle between *Fang* (loosening) and *Shou* (tightening), where China rhetorically acknowledges its multi-ethnicity yet insists on national unity as per the *Zhonghua Minzu* concept of different ethnicities being irresistibly bound together through history [20]. Grose's example of this was a comparison of Uyghur language textbooks published over the years, which showed that the portrayals of Uyghurs in these textbooks were not uniform. Rather, they are shaped by two competing poles of political ideology: a narrow, closed form of Han-centric nationalism on one hand, and an inclusive multi-ethnic *minzu* nationalism on the other, where the periods of *Fang* occur in periods more tolerant of ethnic diversity while *Shou* occurs during periods of increased Han chauvinism [20]. The textbooks, which are key to understanding official policy towards Uyghurs as they represent the official indoctrination for Han students and cadres on their views of Uyghurs [20], contained, in their 1980s and early 1990s versions, genuine content on the Uyghurs' distinct culture and identity, and implies a promotion for Han Chinese cadres to learn about local Uyghur culture [20]. By the late 1990s, however, due to part in the increasing ethnic unrest and violence such as the Ghulja incident of 1997,[8] a trend of "tightening" of Uyghur policy have begun, where Uyghur culture is little discussed and Uyghur textbooks instead stress the unity of the Chinese nation and the "Zhonghua Minzu" [20]. Such narratives were continued further since 2008/09, where the increasing violence in Xinjiang coupled with the international post-911 landscape allowed a political message of national unity to permeate heavily, and the narrative of economic development in Xinjiang brings about ethnic unity becoming the unchallenged orthodoxy [20]. The result of these efforts meant that cultural expressions of the Uyghurs, especially those containing political messages, faced increased scrutiny from the 1990s onwards (Bovington 2004, p.31). In fact, Mark Elliot pointed out that assertive control on minorities have increased even further in the past few years, with Zhu Weiqun, vice director of party's United Front Work department, argues that non-Han must substitute Chinese for their own native languages—another indicator of a harder line over control of education policies in autonomous regions (Elliot 2015, p.197).

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[8] Yining city, also known as Ghulja, saw a major ethnic conflict in 1997 which, by some sources, ended with dozens of ethnic Uyghurs killed.

One area where assimilative efforts and marginalizing effects are particularly acute is in terms of *minzu* language rights and *minzu* education policy. Scholars identify that language is one of the major conceptions of ethnicity [21], and it is the last and most important carrier of one's culture and identity for minorities in China, as is anywhere else [55, p.709; 11, p.759]. Zhu Luobin, analyzing the recent trend of language rights for Tibetans in Qinghai, argues that while officially, China officially affirms the rights of minorities to learn, use, disseminate in their own language and preserve, or reform their own culture and government protection, while Chinese Putonghua[9] is promoted as the means of common communication and national unity, the bilingual system has been steadily eroded in recent years. At first, the policy of bilingualism treated an ethnic's own language as the "principal language" and Putonghua as a secondary language in the 1980s; however, in a series of policies and laws since the 1990s, the status of Chinese Putonghua has shifted from an associate to the principal language in ethnic minority areas, by regulating that all schools teach Chinese Putonghua as the national official language and imposing it as a responsibility or local governments [55]. While he acknowledges that previously, there existed two parallel systems of schooling for ethnic minorities: education in Chinese as well as education in their native languages, and that many students chose to go to Han (Chinese) schools in the pursuit of greater economic advancement at the expense of their own language preservation [55]. Zhu argues that in recent decades, this dominant Chinese is being promoted even further while other languages, in the worst cases, have been marginalized to secondary status or eliminated altogether, while the Han, even in minority dominated areas, are never obligated to learn minority languages [55]. He illustrates this point using the example of Qinghai province's ethnic education program plans, which seeks to turn the situation in the province's primary and secondary schools, of 40% of subjects in ethnic schools being taught in Chinese in 2012, to all subjects being taught in Chinese except for ethnic language courses by 2015, thereby arguing that, although current policies are said to strengthen bilingualism, the fact of switch to full Chinese education amounts to a derailment of bilingualism as a national policy, and a de facto rejection of respect of minority language rights [55].

Scholars thus argue that the current policies permeate marginalization and disfranchisement of much of the non-Han *minzu*. Grose, for example, pointed out that Han residents in Xinjiang rarely know how to speak Uyghur, while over 80% of Han Chinese party cadres cannot speak it or speak it very poorly in Xinjiang, and even fewer among the general Han population here. This is certainly because it is not officially taught in schools in Xinjiang as well as not being given any sort of social power in public life to warrant its learning by other ethnicities [20]. Lin Yi's (2016) case study on Han-Uyghur merger primary schools in Urumqi argued that the merger school idea, proposed in 2012, is primarily motivated out of ethnic unity objectives in fostering ethnic unity among Uyghur and Han students in Xinjiang. Nonetheless, the reality of this proclaimed practice of "bilingual education" is to discourage of Uyghurs to learn their own language and encouragement to learn Chinese—what is called "state racism" [50]. The failures of such endeavors, however, are obvious, as even in the merger schools' scenario of forced integration; self-segregation continues due to the

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[9] Putonghua, or 'Standard Speech', otherwise known as Mandarin Chinese, is the official term for the standard dialect of the Han Chinese language in the PRC, and, by extension, the sole official language of China nationwide in practice.

construction of a Han dominated civilizational narrative and the Uyghur students' resistance towards them [50]. The failures of ethnic policy are also shown in the economic sphere. Wu Ge's empirical study of socioeconomic disparities between ethnic minorities and Han back in 2005 found that while minorities in China are more likely than the Han to become managers/professionals or obtain high-status occupation, thanks in significant part to affirmative action policies, they are also paid fewer wages, especially in their own autonomous regions. This suggests that the ethnic preferential system does not help promote socioeconomic inequality between minorities and Han Chinese and implies that improvement in social position does not translate into better economic well-being [48]. Sautman argues that the economic situation for minorities have in fact gotten worse with the increasing market economy in recent years, resulting in the shrinking of state sector reducing employment opportunities and local officials ignoring preferential ethnic policies [40], and intense discriminations against them in the workplace, especially in the Han-dominated private sectors, with the government doing little in correcting these problems [40].

These realities lead scholars' commentaries on the problems in the current ethnic policy. Yang Miaoyan argues that the dilemma for China's minority education, and ethnic policy general, is to balance cultural diversity with national integration [49], and Sautman points out that many dissidents, such as the Uyghur Ilham Tohti, argue that the autonomous policies for minorities are not properly implemented. Mark Elliot argues that the basic dilemma that China faces, and what ethnic scholars try to solve, is how to incorporate non-Han peoples into what is, for all intents and purposes, a Han nation state [18]. For ethnic minorities themselves, Zhao argues, the dilemma for their own lives and communities is whether to assimilate into the Han mainstream for socioeconomic benefits or maintaining of their own culture at the expense of lower socioeconomic status (Zhao 2010, p.6). It is also important, I argue, to understand that while market inequalities or stigmatic memories between ethnic minorities and the Han Chinese can be considered indirect issues not necessarily by the Chinese state's design, they are ultimately related to Chinese statist policies which have allowed such phenomena to occur in the first place—by enfranchising the Han Chinese language and disenfranchising minority languages in the economy for the former, and by enabling the cycle of mutual distrust and negative memories through the propagation of a tilt towards Han centrism as a national identity for the latter.

The problematic ethnic policies, in turn, are a major contribution for the current ethnic tensions in China. To be sure, statist policies and narratives and their resulting effects are not the only factors in creating this environment of ethnic instability; another root factor, which arguably fueled the impulse of China's hegemonic ethnic in the first place, is the longstanding and pervasive cultural and societal barriers between the Hans and other ethnicities, a phenomenon which I will discuss in a later section. However, it is also evident that the current Chinese statist national identity arguably aggregated ethnic tensions further and certainty were not very successful in ameliorating the cycle of tensions that exists today.

The Ethnic Tensions and Han Nationalist Backlash

The recent ethnic tensions in China are well documented. Scholars note that since the past decade, there has been an upsurge in ethnic tensions which cumulate in violent

riots, most notably the 2008 unrest in Lhasa, Tibet and especially the 2009 riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang [16, p. 214; 30, p.541]. These attacks marked a watershed in Chinese government perceptions, and while the official rhetoric after these riots has been to reaffirm the existing ethnic policy [40]; it also demonstrated the failure of these policies and set about generating new national discourses about policies going forward [31]. These increased troubles caused a division on ethnic minority policy among China analysts. While Western scholars such as Mackerras [35] or Sautman have advocated for the strengthening of minority rights and autonomy, Chinese thinkers tend to instead call for a strengthening of national unity [31].

Moreover, these events are accompanied by a rise of Han supremacy sentiments in China. Leibold found that public opinions in China are increasingly different from the official rhetoric of ethnic unity, with a rise in attitudes of Han supremacism. He illustrates how, in one incident, the physical attacks on a respected scholar of Manchu history, by a Han supremacist perpetrator who alleged that the scholar's ethnic views amount to being a traitor to the Han, garnered a 93% support of his actions from the general population in online polls [30]. Thus, he argues, the term "Han" has now become similar to how the term "White" has been used following the backlash against affirmative action in the post-civil rights era in the USA [30]. He contributes this scenario to the failures and backlash against the China's minority policy; while it failed in alleviating the income gap between the Han and minorities, it instead stirred Han resentment, which sees that Han are marginalized in favor of China's minorities through China's affirmative action policies. Especially those related to the national college entrance exam and population policy [30]. According to Han nationalists, the Qing dynasty and any other non-Han dynasties are periods of foreign rule by barbarian races, and thus do not consider Manchus, Mongols, or any other minority ethnicities as being really Chinese or part of China [30]. These activists formed the vanguard of the Hanfu Movement, a movement seeking the revival of the traditional Han clothing with a strong Han-supremacist undertone, as well as of Hanwang, a Han nationalist website shut down after Tibetan and Uyghur riots of 2008 and 2009, which advocated Han supremacy, where Han is the pure and dominant Chinese race while minority races in China should occupy a subordinate position. In this view, ethnic minority figures, such as Manchus or Mongols, also cannot be regarded as national heroes, thereby defying the official conceptions, but rather only the real Hans are Chinese [30]. They also claim that minorities will always have the aspirations to secede from China, thereby being "hidden threats" and advocate for the concept of "blood purity" for China and the Han race, such that these positions have indeed provoked criticism comparing them to figures like Hitler and Saddam Hussein [30]. To be sure, Leibold does point out that the movement prompted sharp criticisms from the Chinese academic establishment, such Peng Yongjie or Zhang Xian, but the fact is that it enjoys significant support among large and diverse sections of Han society from leftist Mao sympathizers to the fascist right and can be found among students, teachers, reporters, lawyers, and even low-level government officials [30]. He argued that these phenomena sprang from the desire of refuge from China's increasing social malaise and tedium of urban life, backlash against the inclusion of even lip service of inclusion of minorities into the Chinese identity [30], with minorities used as scapegoats for the problems confronting Chinese society [30]. Together, these developments seem to indicate that Han Nationalist sentiments are on the rise.

Debates on the Ethnic Policy

The most important policy implication of these rising ethnic tensions is that it fueled an increasingly vigorous debate initiated by the rise of Chinese academics pursuing a reform agenda, and this debate in turn spawned both debates within the Chinese academia and policymakers as well as commentary by independent and foreign scholars on the matter. James Leibold documents the rise of ethnic policy reformists in the Chinese academia, whom, bolstered by the alarming increase of ethnic tensions in recent years has now risen from the periphery to the center of the *Minzu* debate, with their proposals now being seriously considered for implementation [31]. These reformists are exemplified by Ma Rong, an ethnic Hui who have long advocated for the complete "integration" or assimilation of different Chinese minorities—what others call Sinicization is to him the modernization of minorities in China—to be pushed forward in an American style integration approach stressing a shared common culture [33]. He argues that China's old nationality policy was blindly inherited from the Soviet Union and is inherently flawed and attributes the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union to its flawed ethnic policies which created ethnic strife; therefore, China should follow an American style, assimilationist policy instead to avoid a similar fate as the USSR [33]. He thus advocates a new policy direction of weakening *minzu* consciousness and replaces it with a common national sense of belonging to be done through the removal of preferential treatment of minorities and calls from a move away from ethnic-based policies towards individual-based policies, which he calls the "depoliticization" of ethnic minorities [33]. This "depoliticization" effort thus calls for the elimination of minority nationality status and the encouragement of assimilation such that the different groups consolidate willingly into a single nation, taking inspiration from the examples of India and the USA [33]. To this end, the term "minzu" (ethnicity/ nationality) should also be discarded in favor of the neologism "Zuqun," where the different ethnicities in fact comprise one national group. Ma argues that this confusion, that China should not be confused as a state made up of multiple nations but instead as a multiethnic, yet unicultural society, is at heart of the flaws of the post-1949 Chinese state [34], and what caused foreigners to mistakenly assume that the different *minzu* have a right to self-determination [33]. Such views have been pushed even further by Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe, two influential Chinese policy advisers. The two Hus warned about the dangers of regional ethnic elites and regional ethnic interests, whom will continue to threaten China's unity as long as the current status quo is maintained, and shares Ma Rong's views on abandoning the USSR's "hors d'oeuvres" ethnic policy in favor of the assimilationist style employed by the USA, Brazil, or India to avoid national collapse [24]. Building on Ma's proposals, the "two Hus" propose the "2nd generation Minzu policy", an explicit assimilationist stance with the ultimate goal of abolishing ethnic differences in China altogether in the future [24].

Such drastic views are, to be sure, met with intense opposition, but assimilationist policies enjoy broad, if lukewarm, support from wide sections of the Chinese academia. As Leibold illustrates, the Minzu establishment within the CCP expectedly put out fierce rebuttals warning of ideological chaos if challenging the basic policy framework, and argues that forced assimilation is dangerous, undermines current ethnic relations even further, and draws parallels to Nazism and xenophobic-one race, one state ideology, as well as being unconstitutionally against *minzu* equality. *Minzu*

establishment leaders, such as Hao Shiyan, instead call for "perfecting" existing policies as opposed to radical change [31]. But, Chinese liberals, perhaps surprisingly, are increasingly supporting the reformist policies that characterize Ma Rong and Hu and Hu. For instance, the Charter "08 of Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo makes no mention of ethnic minorities" self-determination. In fact, Leibold points out that liberals who are known for supporting democratization in China are increasingly supporting a "Ma Rong" approach when it comes to ethnic relations after the ethnic unrests of 2008 and 2009 [31]. The Chinese left, perhaps ironically, is more sympathetic with the economic aspects of ethnic inequality and tend to call for a more social justice approach in resolving the minorities' economic grievances, in line with their socialist outlook, but also insists on the rigid enforcement of national unity and reject any notion of self-determination [46]. The broader public opinion, meanwhile, shows reliably strong support for Han assimilationist ideas, with one poll on the "liberal leaning" social media Sina Weibo suggesting an 82% favoring the abolishment of extra points for minority Gaokao[10] students (Leibold, 2013, p.39). Moreover, evidence shows that official policies already shifting towards such an assimilationist approach, as known supporters of ethnic reform occupied key posts in ethnic policy, and Leibold predicts that in the long term, any adjustment in policy would certainly move it in the direction of an assimilationist path at the expense of minzu-based rights and autonomy [31]. These predictions, Mark Elliott argues, have in fact proved correct, as in the time since Leibold's research, the tone under the new administration is more assimilationist. For instance, Xi Jinping's inaugural speech on Xinjiang policy clearly adopting aspects of Hu and Hu's assimilationist rhetoric, while the current Xinjiang party secretary commented back in 2014 that he, in fact, wanted to eliminate prudential party policies for Uyghurs, signaling that, at least in Xinjiang, elements of such reform policies were already being adopted [18]. More recently, numerous journalistic reports, such as those about the allegedly ever-increasing amounts of arrests and detention of Xinjiang's Shaoshu Minzu into "re-education camps" on charges of "separatism" or "religious extremism," suggest that China have already moved towards a policy of pushing for total assimilation against its Shaoshu Minzu dissenters [10].

Meanwhile, those denounce the ethnic reform proposals as unwise and called instead for greater minority rights mostly consists of foreign academics, and only recently, one notable Chinese scholar. Barry Sautman wrote to refute the merits of the reform proposals. First, he argues that in contrast to some perceptions of a rising Han nationalism in China, discontent against the current ethnic policies are actually a non-issue among the Han, since there have been no protests about this, in contrary to many other social issues in China, and there is no sign of significant Han resentment of minorities, at least before the ethnic unrests of 2008 and 2009 [40]. Also, contrary to Ma Rong and the reformists' depictions, many countries in the developed world, such as European nations, do recognize minority rights, with countries like the USA being outliers, and in fact, throughout the world, non-recognition of minorities are more of a problem of instability [40]. He also illustrates in detail that ethnic tensions actually played very little in the collapse of the USSR than Ma Rong describes, while it is true that the Soviet Republics declared independence, most only did so after the USSR

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[10] The Gaokao is the University Entrance Examination in China, which is treated with great importance in the Chinese education system.

already collapsed. In fact, in the case of Soviet Central Asia, which is the most comparable USSR region in ethnic composition and development level with Chinese Xinjiang, the local ethnic elites were against the dissolution of the Soviet state, in part because the region is a benefactor of Soviet subsidies [40]. He further argues that in the decade before the collapse of the USSR from the top down, ethnic relations in the USSR were the best that they have ever been, with ethnic cadres promoted to high levels, who in turn, kept stability within their constitutive republics [40]. He also refutes the example of India or the USA as potential models for China, as he points out that India has experienced multiple ethnic conflicts and insurgencies, such as the Kashmir conflicts, Northeast States independence movements, or Maoist insurgencies, that are more intense and arguably more well-known than any insurgencies in China, while the USA, he argues, do in fact has deep ethnic problems such as systemic discrimination and incarceration rates, which is of a different nature and arguably not much better from the Chinese situation [40], thereby concluding that Ma Rong's analysis is mistaken and does not have a deep understanding of a comparison between China and foreign countries at all [40]. If anything, he argues that the elimination of minority rights triggers more agitation for separatism than anything else, however little the current rights are [40]. Instead, he suggests the improvements of minority rights, including restricting the migration of Hans to minority dominant areas to specific personnel with needed skills, expanding freedom of religion to include everyone, developing use of minority languages for official use and instruction, allowing and encouraging greater minority participation in government, and provide greater compensation for the exploitation of minority area natural resources and protection of the environment [40], and such policies will separate the radicals, who want independence no matter what, from the majority ethnic minorities who only seek justice and protection for their community [40].

Mark Elliott, meanwhile, argues that the Chinese policy debate is flawed as it omits a key perspective aspect: the recognition of minorities as their respective regions' indigenous inhabitants. For him, Ma Rong's comparison with the USA fails to account for the USA's fundamental difference of being primarily an immigrant nation, thus, comparing Chinese *Shaoshu Minzu* to immigrants are mistaken, since a more appropriate analogy would be the indigenous native peoples of North America, Australia, and New Zealand, where the Han is the newcomers to lands already inhabited by native *Shaoshu Minzu* on China's borderlands. However, Chinese language literature never equates aborigines with ethnic minorities in China [18, p.206]. This is because China avoids any association of ethnic minorities to "native peoples" as the very notion of "indigeneity" would be at odds with the concept of China as a "unified polyethnic state," with all ethnicities being native to the land, that is, now China for millennia. In other words, China can have no indigenous peoples because it was never a colonizer, all lands under China have already been historically part of China, it has no "indigenous persons" problem [18]. Such policy taboo in China also means that ethnic relations, despite the pronouncements of the reformers, cannot be depoliticized here [18].

This hegemonic sense of Han centrism among the Han Chinese meant that, among notable Han Chinese scholars, it is only Zhang Xiaojun who denounced the current direction of the ethnic policy debate altogether. Zhang argues that China's current *minzu* studies is in a state of disarray, because the "ethnic policy reformists" and their policies (depoliticization for Ma Rong; the "2nd generation minzu policy" for Hu and

Hu) are all policies which ultimately reduces or eliminates *minzu* classifications and *minzu* rights, and this goes against the nature of China's nationhood: China is not a nation state but, as he terms it, a "multinational republic," and thus cultural pluralism should be promoted and not be viewed as a threat to separatism [51, p.150–152]. Such analysis thus rejects the premises of the "Minzu policy reformists." It also does not distinguish the "Chinese civilizationalism" of Ma Rong versus the "Han chauvinism" of Hu and Hu, but instead recognize them as fundamentally originating from the same Han-centric conception of Chinese identity, with the views of Hu and Hu simply being a more extremely articulated version of policies which aims to achieve the same outcome.

Thus, the issues and dangers of the current ethnic policy debate in China, between those who support the status quo versus those who wish to press for further assimilationist policies, are manifestations of some fundamental issues concerning Chinese identity construction and culture, as well as drivers for further ethnic tensions. It is evident that both Ma Rong's "Chinese civilizationalism" views and Hu and Hu's "Han chauvinism" views together represent the same long tradition of a Han-centric conception of Chinese identity. With ethnic tensions on the rise for the past two decades, the rise of the ethnic reformists gives academic fuel to the Han-centric Chinese identity conception, strengthens such divisive views even further among the Han-Chinese populace, and further weakens any institutional resistance against a completely assimilationist state. As *Shaoshu Minzu* becomes ever more embattled in the endeavor to maintain their own identities, the increased assimilationist pressures on ethnic policy brought by ethnic reformists will instead intensify ethnic tensions even further.

The Self-Perceptions of Minorities: the Rejection of Han Confucian Culture and Assertion of Their Own Identities

Finally, any understanding of China's identity problems has to take a look at the perspectives of the minorities. While the debate among Chinese scholars is still dominated by the debate on further assimilation, much of the literature on the self-perceptions by the non-Han ethnicities, who have yet to be Sinicized en masse, instead concerns the preservation, and to a great extent, self-segregation of their own ethnic community and culture against the larger Han society and cultural influence. While there are certainly differences in perceptions between different ethnicities, the literature shows that, for non-Sinicized minorities, they share a common thread regarding the rejection of Han culture and assimilation and the assertion of their own modern identities.

Many scholars find a prominent example of such identity resistance among the situation of the Uyghurs and share a consensus on their observations. While the modern concept of the Uyghur nationality indeed has recent Soviet origins [43], their collective identity is undoubtedly very strong today, stemming in great part, Adila Erkin explains from their significant ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic difference from the Han Chinese and conscious resistance against Han assimilation (Erkin 2009, p.418). This is because collective memories of repression only left Uyghurs with sentiments of resistance against Beijing (Erkin 2009, p.420). As Joanne Smith's study on the social boundaries, the Uyghurs drew for themselves shows Uyghurs are currently activating

and exaggerating certain religio-cultural differences between themselves and the Han in order to justify social, symbolic, and spatial segregation from the Han amid the deterioration of ethnic relations since the 1990s. However, these justifications are shown to be largely excuses to avoid Uyghur-Han interaction when the real reason is that there is simply increased animosity between them, where the poor ethnic relations resulted in their resistance towards Han assimilation and leads to a strengthening of Uyghur ethnic identity, to the point where the identity differences are exaggerated and politically motivated rather than based on fact [43]. This segregation between the Uyghur and Han are largely consensual and self-enforced, with both sides are wary of the other side entering their own social space, and offenders can be punished with violence [43].

Scholars thus agree that ethnic relations in Xinjiang, especially between Han and Uyghurs, are very poor. Smith argued that Uyghur-Han relations have steadily worsened since China's opening and reform periods [43]. For instance, while there were significant rates of intermarriage between the two ethnicities in the past, such occurrences are now almost unheard of [43]. Herbert Yee's surveys on the matter noted that compared to Hans, Uyghurs are much more disapproving of intermarriage, especially with their Han counterparts, and there are thus extremely low levels of Uyghur intermarriage with Hans, and those who do are ostracized by the Uyghur community (Yee 2003, p.450). The Uyghurs tend to be comparatively more proud of their own ethnic identity, and, while most of them agree with the notion of themselves being Chinese as per survey results, they are more attached to Xinjiang, are less likely to agree with the idea that Xinjiang has been part of China since ancient times, and Yee argues that even these sentiments are likely to have been underreported due to the sensitive nature of these interview questions (Yee 2003, p.438). Yee's interviews also reveal that there is significant mutual distrust between the Uyghurs and the Hans: both tend to believe they are smarter and more hygienic than the other (Yee 2003, p.441); the Uyghurs are significantly dissatisfied with the current ethnic policy; they have a dimmer view of (CCP) cadre-people relations in Xinjiang and on Uyghur-Han relations. Moreover, they express high disapproval towards the current language policy of Xinjiang as not properly implementing enough usage of the Uyghur language, express skepticism towards the current affirmative action policies as not effective in addressing root problems, and most notably, believes that the benefits of the Xinjiang's economic growth since China's economic reforms went to the Hans instead of themselves, a view in contrast with the local Hans, whom instead believed that the standards of living have been narrowing in recent years (Yee 2003, p.443). They also express opposition of the Han influx into Xinjiang (Yee 2003, p.444), matching Bovingdon's point that they tend to see it as state-sponsored Han colonization of their own territory [9]. It is thus not surprising that the Uyghurs surveyed displayed more sympathy towards the Uyghur separatist movements, with them largely scrutinizing the notion that Xinjiang's main problems currently originates from separatism, and displayed a guarded, but a noticeable negative attitude on the government's reactions towards separatist activities even given the sensitive nature of this issue [9]. The sample also demonstrates a one sided-integration but not necessarily assimilation, as Uyghurs, especially the young generation and government cadres, tend to be very fluent in Chinese, while very few Han can speak Uyghur fluently, if at all. Han cadres tend to speak a bit more Uyghur and have more Uyghur friends than average Han, but not to any significant degree. However,

Uyghurs, cadre, or commoner tend to form a cohesive group regarding their sentiments on the Han: a significant proportion of Uyghurs surveyed are cadres who, supposedly loyal to the party line, share their ethnic group's common sentiments on the Uyghur-Han tensions in private, even while they maintain significant interactions with their Han counterparts [9]. Such failures of ethnic integration, Yi points out, are the norm throughout the society, from schools to the workplace, as both sides move to self-segregate at the individual level, even though they are compelled to integrate in formal occasions; they simply express cultural distaste for each other and express intense awkwardness when forced to socialize with each other, especially when the Han are seated in Uyghur festivities, where they feel out of place in the singing and dancing that the Uyghurs are fond of [50].

It turns out that the root of such friction, evident in its scholarly analysis, boils down more to fundamental differences of cultural self-conception at the individual and societal levels than any political grievances to which it caused subsequently. Adila Erkin's analysis of modern Uyghur identity and culture explains that the rise of Turkish, Central Asian, and Russian consumer products in Xinjiang and their popularity with Uyghurs was because Uyghurs feel culturally closer to Central Asians, Turks, and even Russians than to the Han Chinese, and tend to associate themselves with these peoples and countries towards the West rather than that of Han dominated China to the East (Erkin 2009, p.421). In contrast to its cultural resistance towards the Han, the Uyghurs' interactions with the outside world after the re-opening of Xinjiang quickly confirmed the Uyghurs' self-association with countries and cultures towards its West. They demonstrate a preference for consumer goods from Turkey or the Former Soviet Union (FSU), arguing that these consumables suited their lifestyles better. Uyghur stores tend to be stocked with imports from these regions to the West rather than from the Chinese Neidi to the East, and while they tend to stress the differences between themselves and the Han, they stress the similarities between themselves and cultures of the FSU and Turkey (Erkin 2009, p.422). This perception of ethnocultural affinity with Central Asian and FSU countries manifests in adopting Turkic and Russian *conceptions of modernity* with exposure to these countries, the Uyghur entertainment scene is now filled with Central Asian and Turkish music, fashion, and modern culture through mutual cultural interactions, while Han Chinese entertainment culture in the region has almost zero market share with the Uyghurs, as Urumqi's shop owners tell Erkin that the sale of CDs of "songs sung by Han people only sell to Han tourists." In contrast with their disdain of Han Culture, however, Uyghurs admire cultures to its West, views them as more similar peoples culturally and thus looks to them as inspiration for their own modern identities (Erkin 2009, p.423). It is telling that Uyghurs see Central Asian and Turkish goods as less foreign than PRC domestic Han-made goods from Inland China. Through free trade and re-exposure to these regions to its West, Uyghurs have gained a greater understanding of self as being socially closer to Turks, Central Asians, and the Former Soviet Union (FSU), seeing similarities in mutual lifestyle and culture, while reject being grouped together with the Han Chinese and the *Zhonghua Minzu* concept (Erkin 2009, p.426). Instead, the Uyghurs' Central Asian interactions facilitated the rise of the Uyghur's own modernity through creating a fashionable district for middle and upper class Uyghurs in Urumqi, who describe it as a cosmopolitan and comfortable area of their own creation (Erkin 2009, p.424). Chuen-Fong Wong provides another example of this modern Uyghur identity in his analysis of Uyghur popular music,

noting that Uyghur musicians tend to denounce the appropriation of Uyghur music by "Orientalist" Han Chinese singers as well as the state's encouragement of keeping Uyghur culture in a state of conservative traditionalism. Instead, the Uyghur singers of the newer generation tend to champion their own modern genres of Uyghur pop, hip, etc., which tend to be influenced by Turkish, Uzbek, Kazakh, and other Western musical styles rather than the "soft" Han Cantopop style songs, thereby affirming their own Central Asian affiliated identity [47].

The literature also makes the point that the cultural differences between the Han and Uyghurs are indeed vast and is the root cause of mutual segregation. Elena Caprioni's study of the daily interactions between the two ethnic groups showed that the current ethnic tensions arise not only due government policy nor the stubbornness of the Uyghurs, but rather that neither the local Han nor the Uyghurs want to be integrated with each other. She argues that Han and Uyghur citizens do have agency, and they both want segregation and mutual distrust based on cultural differences [12]. Her private interviews show the two ethnic groups admitting that there is a lack of meaningful socialization between each other, such as in intimate social circles or clubs, which the two sides widely attribute to fundamentally different mentalities in life and in behavior: Uyghurs are seen as more likely to have a philosophy of living to enjoy life, which the Han criticize them for being too carefree, while Hans often adhere to a lifestyle of hard work "to improve China's economy," which the Uyghurs characterize as too boring and career focused. The Hans are derided by the Uyghurs as meek in appearance and character, to which the Hans retort the Uyghurs to be irresponsible and unintelligent [12]. The Han are also perceived as more reserved but ironically also possessing greater gender integration, as well as subscribing to different music tastes and heavy pork consumption, while the Uyghurs are viewed as more conservative with strong Islamic influences, but at the same time freer spirited and outgoing. These differences, the ethnicities themselves contend, lead to difficulties in socialization between the two different ethnicities where neither side appreciates the other's culture [12].

Meanwhile, the literature on other ethnic minorities illustrates different reactions on their relationship with the Han Chinese but share the common theme of resistance against Sinicization. In the case of the ethnic Kazakhs, who are kin to an ethnic majority state of their own across the Xinjiang border, Mayinu Shanatibieke and Astrid Cerny examines stories and rationale of the large-scale Chinese Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan. Shanatibieke illustrates, through his interviews with fellow Chinese Kazakhs, how Kazakhstan is seen by them as a place of modernity in comparison with Xinjiang, with Kazakhstani citizens more modern than themselves, and while the Han Chinese views them as a backward minority that needs to be modernized, the Chinese Kazakhs demonstrate more eagerness to embrace the Kazakh version of modernity than the Chinese one [41]. In fact, although modernization efforts have been focused on minorities and minority regions in Xinjiang like the Kazakhs, these Chinese Kazakhs still perceive themselves as more backward than Kazakhs in Kazakhstan [41]. The Chinese Kazakhs thus immigrate to Kazakhstan for the various attractions of modernity and modern lifestyle that it perceives Kazakhstan offers, for mainly personal economic and pragmatic reasons to improve their social livelihood, rather than solely based on sentimental attractions of ethnic kinship or politics [41]. Such phenomena also illustrate how the Great Western Development project efforts are insufficient or not attractive. In

fact, the bulk of the Chinese Kazakh emigration made up of rural pastoralists who form the majority (82.5%) of all such emigrants since the 2000s, which demonstrate the failure of China's Western development programs in creating enough economic prosperity to incentivize Kazakhs to stay in China, as well as the failure of sedentarization programs for Kazakhs as the pastoralists' preferred responses are to leave China rather than be settled as farmers [41, p.5; 14, p.221]. Cerny adds that the Kazakh pastoralists' response to this *Tuimu Huancao* (return pastureland to grassland) policy, which, he argues, is fueled by deep Han chauvinist sentiments which held nomads to be inferior to Han farmers and seeks to eliminate Kazakh pastoralism. The Kazakhs responded in resistance against the Han Chinese worldview and, in wishing to keep their traditions, seeks out any other alternative such as immigrating to Kazakhstan, even if the conditions to practice pastoralism there have long been eroded by its Soviet legacy and poor infrastructure [14].

Other minorities, even when they are more influenced by Han culture, also demonstrate a conviction in maintaining their own ethnic identity. Yang Miaoyan found that among Tibetan students who received an education in Chinese, the experience of living in inland China in ethnic schools have actually accelerated their ethnic consciousness and made them more motivated in contributing to the development of Tibet [49]. There are indeed some who express more positive sentiments towards Han assimilation, such as the many Mongols who reacted positively to China's recognition of Chinggis Khan as its own, reasoning that their hero is venerated at last by the Han [40]. However, as Anran Wang points out, most Mongols still insist on their own identity as they explicitly reject the state-sponsored conception that all Chinese peoples are the "descendants of Yang and Huang (emperors)," which Chinese propaganda erratically proclaims to this day [45]. In fact, Bulag curiously noted that ethnic minority nationalist and preservation efforts are mostly carried out those who are already Sinicized to a great extent and mastered the Chinese language—their realization of the inadequacy of knowledge of their native culture created a sort of "consciousness of preservation" [11]. Lian Bai's example of the Manchu experience, whom, since the 1980s, trended towards a surge and revival of Manchu ethnic consciousness and identity due to increased cultural and heritage awareness [3] seems to also illustrate this point on the resiliency of ethnic consciousness in China.

Insights from Examination of Chinese Identity and Inward Chinese Soft Power

The literature thus demonstrate the extent of resistance against Sinicization among all but the completely Sinicized ethnic groups in China, and this common cultural antipathy suggest that ethnic tensions, at their roots, stem not from political or even socioeconomic disputes, but rather the ethnic minorities' resistance towards cultural Sinicization and the prospective loss of their own cultural identity, sentiments which are itself fueled by the unattractiveness of Han Confucian culture felt by these ethnicities. I thus argue that Han Confucian culture and identity is equivocated as simply the "Chinese identity," but the PRC's attempts to promote and assimilate ethnic minorities into the Han Chinese identity are failing to win the hearts and minds of the ethnic minorities in any decisive manner. This failure indicates weaknesses in the Han

culture's attractiveness, as the core problem in both soft power and ethnic tensions stems from the rejection of Han culture and Confucianism. China's ethnic minorities who have not yet been Sinicized express a strong aversion towards Han culture. It is thus this repulsion and resistance against Sinicization, that is, at the root of China's soft power problems. China's "unassimilated" Inner Asian minorities (including Uyghurs, Tibetans, Kazakhs, and others) are simply not attracted Han Confucian culture in general. In the face of this fundamental flaw, China should thus change course and stop employing this Han Confucian culture to achieve its internal soft power objectives. Instead, it must either focus on other aspects of its soft power, such as on promoting its development model, or change the fundamental contents of its national culture, such as adopting aspects of its minority cultures into its own conceptualization if it seeks to obtain greater ethnic cohesion in the country.

Conclusions

Thus, China's ethnic tensions are fundamentally rooted in the use of Han Chinese Confucian culture and identity as China's national identity and soft power base since the post-Mao era. As the general reactions towards the assimilative pressures of Sinicization by non-Han ethnic minorities demonstrate, Han Chinese culture is a weak vehicle for cultural soft power on peoples of other cultures, and China's long-standing tendency of utilizing Han Confucian culture as the essence of country's national identity, and a coercive imposition of this alien identity on its ethnic minorities, is at the root of the country's ethnic tensions. As the decades of ethnic tensions in China prove, the cultural identities of China's different *Shaoshu Minzu* are not something that can be effectively be forcibly altered or assimilated out of, despite, China's repeated attempts at doing so. China should thus re-invent its national identity altogether, to one of multiculturalism where all ethnic minority cultures are promoted with equal weight in practice. Such ideas are not, in fact, radical and similar conceptions have been expressed by even the Han Chinese themselves, although in more couched terms. One major multi-cultural vision has been expressed, for instance, by Han Chinese writer Liu Liangcheng, who, having been born and lived his life in Xinjiang, wrote opinion pieces like "Seeing China from the perspective of Xinjiang," expressing the need to promote the culture and perspectives of Xinjiang's peoples to the Han people residing inland and engage in intercultural understanding [32]. While such perspectives fall short of proposing the mechanics of a real multi-ethnic state devoid of association with the Han Chinese identity, it does exemplify a type of opinion recognizing the need for China to consider other ethnic cultures within its national conception, which is a good start.

In fact, China should abandon its approach of drawing national identity from traditional cultures completely, and discard the *Zhonghua Minzu* concept, which proved to be fallacious, and instead construct a new national identity and political model that unites all ethnicities within its borders on transcending level, as to become a real "multinational republic" in both idea and practice. Such change would call for the establishment of genuine Federalism in China—a great part of it along ethnic lines. The contents of such a unifying model, in the absence of a unifying cultural identity, can only be theorized to lean towards a common ideological commitment, similar to the

situation of communism in the former USSR. As of now, the only available ideology that fits this bill appears to be China's "state capitalism," or an idealized version of it rather, in the form of the Beijing consensus that concerns the country's development model. While any theory in terms of how genuine ethnic autonomy is to be operated within this framework are not particularly articulated, one example of such a plausible outcome would be along a similar structure as the Russian Federation, with whom China also shares parallels in terms of possessing numerous ethnic minorities and historically under totalitarian communist rule but subsequent re-orientalized more along the basis of a nation state and a capitalistic society. While Russia arguably still possesses ethnic strife of its own, its situation is still enviable for China because it maintained, since the end of the Second Chechen War, an arguably much more peaceful society in an ethnic relations sense than China does. This is true as Russia has little to none of communal segregation or secessionist movements in its ethnic republics such as Yakutia [6], Tuva [44], or Tatarstan [42], while even in Chechnya and the north Caucasus, scholars argue that previous separatist sentiments mostly arose through the manipulations of political elites and foreign Islamic groups, and not because of ethnic hatred of ethnic Russians on a communal level [42, p.17; 2, p.235]. I thus argue that that China can learn from the Russian model, which arguably gives a certain degree of empowerment and respect to its ethnic minority republics. The future of Chinese ethnic relations remains unclear, but without becoming a real "multinational republic" through genuinely empowering and respecting its *Shaoshu Minzu*, as well as establishing a common ideological bond between China's ethnicities, China's ethnic tensions will continue to drag on, likely taking turns for the worse and stifling China's other geopolitical ambitions.

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