

Nationalism and Ethnicity: Korean-Chinese Academics' Views on China's Multi-Ethnic Nationalism

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To incorporate the multitude of ethnicities in its national narrative, the Chinese communist party made use of the concept of the *zhonghua minzu* which was created by the early 20th century philosopher Liang Qichao. Throughout the years this narrative has been developed further, and in the 1990s the national minority histories started to be retroactively included in China's history, by claiming that even though the minorities developed outside of Chinese territory, its direct adjacency to China influenced their cultural development heavily, and therefore their histories can be seen as Chinese territorial and multi-ethnic history.

This paper discusses how Korean-Chinese historians subvert this discourse by claiming that ethnicity is not the most important factor for the successful formation of one's national identity. This is a radically different view from the ethnic nationalistic discourses that are found in East Asia today. This research is based on personal interviews that were conducted with several Korean-Chinese scholars.

Keywords: Chinese Nationalism, ethnicity, *zhonghua minzu*, Korean-Chinese, national identity

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I. Introduction

Nationalism and ethnicity are closely intertwined with each other. As anthropologist Thomas Eriksen notes:

Nationalism and ethnicity are kindred concepts, and the majority of nationalisms are ethnic in character. The distinction between nationalism and ethnicity as analytical concepts is a simple one, if we stick to the formal level of definitions. A nationalist ideology is an ethnic ideology which demands a state on behalf of the ethnic group.¹

This aspect of nationalism has also been important in the Chinese nationalist narrative. From the 19th century onwards, Chinese intellectuals set out to construct a national narrative in which the Han Chinese were the main agent in the formation of its identity. When the

¹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, 3rd ed. (Anthropology, Culture and Society, London: Pluto Press, 2010), 144.

communist party found that the nationalist paradigm did not include the multitude of minorities within its borders, they adjusted the narrative to include these groups as well. The influence of this version of China's ethnic nationalism can also be seen in the academic discourse that emerged from 2002 on ancient Northeast Asian history, where states and peoples such as Koguryŏ (Chinese: Gaogouli) are included into Chinese history for the sole reason that their perceived descendants are inhabitants within China's contemporary territory. National minority histories are hereby retroactively included in China's history, by claiming that even though the minorities developed outside of Chinese territory, their direct adjacency to China influenced their cultural development heavily, and therefore their histories can be seen as Chinese territorial and multi-ethnic history.

In this paper I look at the incongruities in the multi-ethnic nation narrative in China, how this narrative developed and recently has been used to claim the history of ancient kingdoms. My main focus will be on the effects this paradigmatic change had on the identity of the Korean-Chinese (Chosŏnjok, Chinese: Chaoxianzu) minority. I will therefore look at how the Korean-Chinese reacted to Chinese historians' claims and how they have positioned themselves in this narrative.

Whereas the Korean-Chinese historians used to claim their identity along ethnic lines, after the emergence of the Northeast Asian History Project in 2002 they have changed their views and see themselves as an ethnic minority without fixed territorial or ethnic boundaries, and experience no existential crisis because of it. This is a radically different view from the ethnic nationalistic discourses that are found in East Asia today. By drawing on their own formative experiences, they instead argue for a reappraisal of the concept of nationalism altogether, and promote a form of post-nationalism. Therefore, I have resorted to conducting personal interviews with several Korean-Chinese scholars and their scholarly works. These interviews show that Korean-Chinese scholars see the methods of Chinese scholars to forcibly include

minorities' histories to make the nationalistic discourse fit with its claim of a multi-ethnic nation as convoluted and outdated, and something that will only hamper international cooperation and development.

II. Ethnicity and Chinese Nationalism

A recent propaganda poster explaining the peaceful co-existence of the multitude of ethnic groups starts out as follows:

What is a *minzu*? (ethnic group)

According to Marxism, a *minzu* are a community of people who have formed from its specific historical developments a common language, a common territory, a common economic life and have formed a common characteristic *minzu* culture and a common mentality. (...) The *zhonghua minzu* is the term for each *minzu* who have inhabited China's territory from ancient times to today. The *zhonghua minzu* now includes 56 ethnicities.²

From its inception, the Han Chinese nationalist narrative has had to deal with an inherent contradiction that needed to be addressed: how to fuse China's territorial claims with its multi-ethnic identity. Especially concerning the question of ethnicity, many Chinese intellectuals have given differing views on its relation to Chinese nationalism: either by highlighting the mono-ethnic Han Chinese claim and therefore the aim to assimilate the other ethnicities within its territory, or to give space to the minorities and include their differences into the Chinese nation. Liang Qichao therefore coined the concept of a *zhonghua minzu* (Chinese Ethnicity), which could include other ethnicities as well. This however created the impossible formation of different ethnicities within one

² <http://www.nipic.com/show/12999593.html> (Last visited: July 16, 2016)

ethnicity. As can be seen from the contemporary quote I just gave, however, it is this concept of a *zhonghua minzu* that has found the most traction in China's narrative of its multi-ethnic nation.

This was not always the case. In the 20th century there were various opinions by both scholars and the Chinese government on how the ethnic minorities should be viewed and what ethnic policies should be pursued. The first flag of the Chinese Republic in 1911 had five colors, representing the five "races" of China: the Han (red); the Manchus (yellow); the Mongols (blue); the "Hui" (Muslim Chinese) (white); and the Tibetans (black). Zhang Tingxiu writes:

If we go into the border region of Southwest and Northwest China, we can meet people who differ in language, customs, or beliefs. They seem to be very different from those of China's interior. Customarily one gave them different names, probably because of their language or the area, like Miao, Yi, Tu, Mongols, Tibetans, etc. There are many such names and some people therefore thought that these are all different ethnic groups.³

The point that Zhang Tingxiu wants to make is that there are no essential differences between these people. The five-coloured flag was soon abolished (in 1928) and replaced by the Republican flag, which symbolized the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) and not the ethnic groups. Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the revolution of 1911 and for a short time president of China, was at first of the opinion that China's minorities should be quickly brought to a level similar to that of the Chinese, so that assimilation would be possible. Later he began to speak of the need to raise the cultural level of the minorities so that they themselves could decide whether they would like to be integrated or be

³ *Bianjiang lunwenji* [Journal of Frontier Studies] (Chongqing, 1943-1945): 1065-1066.

allowed self-government. But he still admitted the existence of four minorities as symbolized on the old republican flag. From 1914 to 1927 the Chinese government maintained a special ministry for Tibetans and Mongols, which later became only a “commission”. During the last years of his life Sun Yat-sen became more and more impressed by the Russian Revolution, and his policy of 1924 spoke of *self-determination and autonomy*, the same terminology that Lenin used. The government should help and guide small, weak racial groups toward ultimate self-determination and self-government - this was Lenin’s important change of the original Marx-Engels theory that each society would have to develop stage by stage from a primitive to a socialist society.

III. The Chinese Communist Party’s Views on Ethnicity

During the years before the Chinese Communist Party came to power, it gave consideration at various times to the problem of minorities. After the foundation of the Party in 1922 the idea was that Mongolia, Tibet, and Turkestan (Xinjiang) should be autonomous states, which would voluntarily be united with China as a federated republic. In 1930 it was decided that these regions should have the right either to join the federate state or to secede.

Mao Zedong reformulated the Party’s position in 1938: All minorities should be given equal rights with the Chinese. They should not be forced to learn Chinese but rather be encouraged to develop their own cultures. They also should control their own affairs - but they must live in a unified state together with the Han Chinese. Mao’s statement of November 6, 1938 led to the adoption of the concept of “autonomous areas”, which Lenin had developed.

When the Nationalist regime was overthrown, the Communists had to decide what attitude they would take on the minority question. The idea of the independence of specific ethnic groups was given up and branded as reactionary and dangerous because it would necessarily lead

to imperialism. Instead, the Party tried to inculcate the spirit of patriotism and to project the image of the “older brother” who helps his “younger brothers” to develop their own languages, literatures, and folk arts.

This attitude appears in an article from 1958 written by two well-known cultural anthropologists of China (both foreign trained), Fei Xiaotong and Lin Yaohua, who wrote in the official newspaper of the People’s Republic, the *Renmin ribao* (August 10, 1958):

A minority nationality might at one time ascend to the status of the ruling group in history, and its people became scattered over different parts of China. Later they lost their ruling status and became discriminated against. They changed their language and other national characteristic in the attempt to conceal their true nationality, but they still retain their national consciousness.

Han Chinese who moved to different minority areas had gone in different groups and at different dates. Those who had moved earlier had been separated from the Han people in the interior for a longer period of time, and some had come under the influence of the minority nationalities, so that there arose definite differences of language and customs and living habits between the early groups and those who have moved to the same areas at a later date. Such early resettlers admit differences from the Han Chinese, and after liberation demand to be treated as minority nationalities.⁴

The authors reject attempts to define a minority by its special customs or living habits, by language, or by tracing of racial origins. After referring to Stalin’s *The National Question and Leninism*, they state that “the special characteristics of tribes and clans are the special characteristic of nations in their rudimentary stage, that is to say, the common nature, to a

⁴ *Renmin ribao*, August 10, 1958.

certain extent, of their language, territory, economic ties and psychological factors.”⁵ In other words, when these underdeveloped tribes develop and become socialistic, they will be like the majority, that is, Chinese. Here we therefore see the re-emergence of Liang Qichao’s idea of a *zhonghua minzu*, a Chinese ethnic nation that is able to, without contradiction, contain multiple ethnicities within its being.

IV. Mobilizing the History of Ancient “Minority” Kingdoms: The case of the Koguryŏ Kingdom

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the multi-ethnic narrative was supplanted with a policy of assimilation, but after this period the earlier idea of a multi-ethnic national identity was taken up again. In the propaganda quote I gave at the beginning of my text there was the claim that the ethnic groups have inhabited China’s territory from ancient times to today. This particular view was especially forged from 2002 onwards, when the Chinese government established research projects that would study China’s borderlands and the histories of the ethnic minorities that inhabited these borderland territories. In Northeast Asia this led to the establishment of the “Northeast Project” (its full name is the Northeast Borderland History and the Chain of Events Research Project), a five-year state-funded project, which dealt with various problems related to history, geography and ethnicity in China’s Northeastern provinces, Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. In reexamining the ancient history of the region, project researchers conclude that the Gaogouli kingdom was an ethnic regime which constitutes a part of China’s national history. Wei Cuncheng, a Chinese professor of Jilin University and an expert on the Gaogouli issue, also considers Gaogouli a regime established by ethnic

⁵ Wolfram Eberhard, *China’s “Minorities: Yesterday and Today”* (The Wadsworth Civilization in Asia Series, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1982), 153.

groups in northern China, representing an important part of Chinese culture.⁶ Since Korean scholars have claimed Koguryō to be solely part of Korean history this project has led to a fierce standoff between the two countries from 2003 onwards.

In the project minority histories (like the research done on the ancient kingdom of Koguryō) have been retroactively included into Chinese history. This project was part of a process of nation building on the part of the Chinese government and Chinese historians to try to overcome the inherent contradictions within its own national narrative where the Han ethnic group is seen as the guiding force to which the smaller ethnic groups look for guidance. It is an effort to claim the ancient kingdoms to have been multiethnic and under the direct influence of China, hereby bolstering the contemporary view of China's nation to always have been multi-ethnic in nature and thereby suggesting that the current configuration of the Chinese nation and its border are "natural".

V. The Views of the Korean-Chinese Minority on the Changing Chinese National Narrative

The policies that have been pursued by the Chinese government vis-à-vis the minority population are viewed very positively by Korean-Chinese. The Korean-Chinese historian Piao Wenyi wrote in 1996:

The Qing, The Republican, The Japanese and the Puppet Governments all never recognized or fully recognized the legal status of the Korean-Chinese. They installed policies that discriminated ethnicities and tried to assimilate them. Therefore, the Korean-Chinese could not write their own history. The Chinese communist party and government were perceptive of all these things and had forged a policy of cooperation

⁶ Interview conducted with Korean-Chinese scholar A in July 2016..

from early on. [...] They supported greatly the writing of Korean-Chinese history within the history of the big *zhonghua minzu* family and valued this greatly.⁷

However, how were the changing views and claims of minority histories viewed by the Korean-Chinese minority? Before the Chinese efforts to claim ancient kingdoms like Koguryō as part of its Chinese historical heritage, the Korean-Chinese scholars had claimed the heritage of Koguryō themselves and saw themselves as the descendants of the Koguryō people. Writer Jin Kuanxiong, for example, claims this very specifically in his book *Huashuo lishi de jiang -Tumenjiang* (The Historical Tumen River speaks).⁸

When the Northeast Project started in 2002, Korean-Chinese scholars of pre-modern history immediately came into action to become part of this research project:

When the Northeast Project was established Yanbian⁹ University was excluded from participating. A Korean-Chinese scholar wanted to go against this. His wife was against this course of action, telling her husband that he only had a few years left before his retirement. But he said that it indeed could have repercussions if he said something sensitive in his position, but he decided to establish himself within the debate anyway, as he wanted to maintain a proper historical questioning

⁷ Pak Munil et al., *Chungguk chosŏnjoksa yŏn'gu* II (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1996), iii.

⁸ Jin Kuanxiong, *Huashuo lishi de jiang -Tumenjiang* (Yanji: Yanbian renmin press, 2012), 2.

⁹ Yanbian is an Autonomous Prefecture in North-eastern Jilin Province, People's Republic of China, just north of the border with North Korea. Yanbian is designated as an autonomous prefecture due to the large number of ethnic Koreans living in the region. The prefectural capital is Yanji, and the total area is 42,700 square kilometres (16,500 sq mi). The Prefecture has an important Balhae archaeological site: the Ancient Tombs at Longtou Mountain, which includes the Mausoleum of Princess Jeonghyo.

of the ancient Northeast Asian states. From then on he would defer to the Han Chinese scholars, but make it possible for Korean-Chinese scholars to participate in conferences and get published in journals.¹⁰

Through these efforts, Yanbian University almost immediately was included in the debate surrounding Koguryō history and organized five conferences when the project was running. After the fierce reaction from South Korean scholars, they started to see an important role for themselves to alleviate the differences that exist between China and Korea in their historical outlook. One scholar described the unique position that Korean-Chinese hold in relations between the two countries as follows:

We Korean-Chinese are daughters-in-law from the Korean peninsula who were married off to China. Because of this we will have to defer to our husband's wishes, but running one's own household properly remains the task of the woman. It is the task of a daughter-in-law to see to it, that the parents of both families keep good relations with each other.¹¹

In scholarly works this translated to intensifying the usage of a concept that was first coined by Korean-Chinese scholar Jiang Mengshan in the 1990s, the concept of “One History for Dual Use” (一史两用, *yīshǐ liǎngyòng*).¹² He started to use the term to look at Koguryō cities that are now in Northeast Asian territory as being considered Chinese history, while Koguryō remnants from the Korean peninsula were seen as

¹⁰ Interview conducted with Korean-Chinese scholar B in August, 2015.

¹¹ Interview conducted with Korean-Chinese scholar C in August, 2015.

¹² Sun Jinji, “Zhongguo Gaogoulishi yanjiu kaifang fanrong de liunian [Six Years of Opening and Prosperity of Koguryō History Research],” paper presented at the conference titled Koguryō yoksa-wa munhwa yusan [History and Cultural Heritage of Koguryō], March 26–27, 2004.

belonging to Korean history. This compromise had also been adopted by Han Chinese scholar Sun Jinji who had started to criticize the traditional scholarship on Gaogouli history in the 1980s and started to see its history as local histories of both China and Korea.¹³ In the 1990s, however, more emphasis was given to the efforts of creating a “unified multicultural state”, and this led many Chinese historians to start to regard the whole history of Gaogouli as being part of China’s history.¹⁴ Especially during the 1993 “International Conference on Gaogouli’s Culture” in Ji’an attended by Chinese and North Korean historians, North Korean historian Pak Sihyŏng argued heavily against Chinese scholars that they claim ancient history based on contemporary territory.^{15, 16} This led to an effort by Chinese historians to strengthen their claims on Koguryŏ history. Jiang Mengshan, therefore, tried to return to the earlier views that were espoused by Chinese scholars as well by making use of the “one history, dual use” concept. After the Northeast Project started, other Korean-Chinese historians also made ample use of Jiang Mengshan’s concept, for example Piao Wenyi and Piao Zhenshi. Piao Wenyi thought that the term “one history, for multipurpose use” (一史多用, *yīshǐ duōyòng*) would be more appropriate, but in general the meaning of the concept did not change.¹⁷

¹³ Song Yongho, “Chunghwainmingonghwaguk-ŭi koguryŏsa waegokkwa ilsayangyong-e gwanhan yŏn’gu.” *Koguryeoyŏn ’guhoe haksulch’ongsŏ* (July 2008): 539–566.

¹⁴ Yŏ Hogyu, “Chunggukhakkye-ŭi koguryŏ taewoegwangyesa yŏn’guhyŏnhwang,” *Han ’guk godaesa yŏn’gu* 31 (September 2003): 35–66

¹⁵ Ji’an is a county-level city in the South-western part of Jilin province, People’s Republic of China. During the Western Han dynasty, Ji’an was governed by Xuantu Commandery. In 3 AD, the kingdom of Goguryeo (Gaogouli) moved its capital to Gungnae Fortress in today’s Ji’an. Until 427 AD, Ji’an was the capital of Goguryeo, one of the Three kingdoms of Korea, and was called Gungnae Fortress, for 400 years until the capital’s relocation to Hwando Mountain Fortress, also in Ji’an, in 209 AD.

¹⁶ Sun Jinji and Cui Guangzhi, “Gaogouli he zhongchao(han) de guanxi ji guishu,” *Koguryŏ Barhae yŏn’gu* 18 (December 2004): 57–66.

¹⁷ Li Sheng and Piao Wenyi, *Gaogouli lishi wenti yanjiu lunwenji* (Yanji: Yanbian University Press, 2005).

In official writings most Korean-Chinese align themselves with the Chinese scholars' views. This can be seen for example in the book *History of the Korean-Chinese in Yanbian* which was written jointly by a number of prominent Korean-Chinese historians and was published in 2011. Here we find an overview of ancient history from the prehistoric to the late Qing, and the history of each ethnic group is seen as part of China's minority history. In the part where they describe Koguryō's history, for example, it is visible that they agree with the notion that the majority of Koguryō people integrated themselves with the Han Chinese after the fall of the Koguryō kingdom.

Throughout its history, the Yanbian region has been inhabited by a number of ancient ethnic communities that were present in China's Northeast. [...] In 37BC the kingdom of Koguryō was founded. [...] In 668AD the Tang dynasty defeated Koguryō and most of the Malgal population moved to the Tang, which therefore reduced the population in the Yanbian region dramatically.¹⁸

In personal interviews however, the opinions can differ greatly from those that are published. One of the historians I interviewed was very frank in his opinion of the Chinese claims, especially the one claiming that the majority of Koguryō people moved to the Tang:

There are huge problems with the view that the Han Chinese scholars espouse. The contemporary ethnicity and borders are completely different from what they were in the past. We can discuss with accuracy about ethnic and people's movements from the 18th century onwards. But to claim that we can accurately describe the movement of people

¹⁸ Committee for the History of the Korean-Chinese in Yanbian, *Yanbian chaoxianzu shi* (Yanji: Yanbian renmin press, 2011), 22.

before this time is impossible.¹⁹

The Korean-Chinese scholars think that the focus of the study of Koguryō and other ancient states need to be placed in multiple relationships and should contain perspectives from all sides, so that scholars from both countries can transcend their national, cultural, social and political borders. Such a transnational approach makes it possible to posit the Koguryō heritage in cross-continental relations and influences as a heritage of East Asia that is not the exclusive property of a single nation, but which spread across a wide area eventually leaving its imprint on realms that include contemporary Northeast China, North Korea, South Korea and beyond to Japan. One Korean-Chinese professor from the Social Sciences Department at a Beijing university is thinking of such a solution to the ongoing debates. He is, however, quite pessimistic of the possibility of this happening.

Koreans and Chinese are both expecting absolute loyalty from the Korean-Chinese. However, with the nationalist approach that they abide by, they are forcing us to become speechless. There is no discrimination within the minority policies that the Chinese government has implemented, but within it is the pressure to not be able to speak out. They use ancient Northeast Asian history for economic development. Their claims help in case the North Korean government collapses and their resources become freely available. The Northeast Project was established for nothing more than this reason. Instead they should espouse a vision about a global society, about being international citizens that goes beyond the nation state.²⁰

¹⁹ Interview conducted with Korean-Chinese scholar D in August, 2015.

²⁰ Interview conducted with Korean-Chinese scholar D in August, 2015.

As can be seen from the interviews and their scholarly works, the Korean-Chinese scholars consider themselves to be caught in the middle in this debate. They are not able to publish their views freely, as they realize that it will not pass the scrutiny of fellow Chinese scholars and the authorities. Therefore, a direct opinion and stance from Korean-Chinese scholars cannot be found in their scholarly works on Koguryō. Their works do show some strategies that they use to get their vision across. They: 1) either do not mention the debate at all in their historical works on Koguryō, but by doing so they want to present Koguryō as an independent entity not belonging to either Chinese or Korean history, but as having its own history; or 2) they make use of theories in which the history of Koguryō should be seen as belonging to both Chinese and Korean history, as a mutual history that can bind the countries together, instead of dividing them; or 3) they make use of theories that go beyond the nation-state history. A notable example is the use of the theory of transnationalism and looking at the Koguryō state and its people in this manner. It is interesting to note that even with the harsh censorship and the limited voice they have in the debate, they are united in their wish to help the Chinese and Korean scholars to find a common ground and to do away with the claims that are being made regarding Koguryō's history.

VI. Conclusion

As I have shown, ethnicity plays a crucial part in the Chinese nationalist narrative. When the communist party found that the nationalist paradigm did not include the multitude of minorities within its borders, they adjusted the narrative to include these groups as well. The influence of this version of China's ethnic nationalism can be seen in the academic discourse that emerged from 2002 on ancient Northeast Asian history, where states and peoples such as Koguryō are included into Chinese history for the sole reason that their perceived descendants are

inhabitants within China's contemporary territory. National minority histories are hereby retroactively included in China's history, by claiming that even though the minorities developed outside of Chinese territory, its direct adjacency to China influenced their cultural development heavily, and therefore their histories can be seen as Chinese territorial and multi-ethnic history.

Korean-Chinese historians used to claim their identity along ethnic lines, but after the emergence of the Northeast Asian History Project in 2002 they have changed their views and see themselves as an ethnic minority without fixed territorial or ethnic boundaries, and experience no existential crisis because of it. This is a radically different view from the ethnic nationalistic discourses that are still found in East Asia today. By drawing on their own formative experiences, they instead argue for a reappraisal of the concept of nationalism altogether, and promote a form of post-nationalism. In this way, they try to search for a middle ground and forge better international relations between China and Korea.

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