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The "*Minzu*" Conjecture.
Anthropological Study of Ethnicity in post-Mao China[1]

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In the 1950s and 1960s, many Chinese scholars were engaged in one of the hottest academic debates, discussing the definition and connotation of "*minzu* 民族." The debate took place during the Chinese Communist Party's campaign of ethnic classification. At that time, "*minzu*," a word borrowed from the Japanese around 1900, was confusingly used to stand for a number of words in European languages, such as the Russian *народ* and the German *Volk*. Some participants of the debate believed that, in order to avoid confusion caused by the lack of contextuality, the word should not be applied to all human groups in China across time and space. For example, both Yang Kun 杨堃 (1964), a student of Marcel Granet and Marcel Mauss, and the Harvard-trained anthropologist Lin Yaohua 林耀华 (1963) contended to limit the usage of *minzu*. However, Historians like Fan Wenlan 范文澜 (1954) and Ya Hanzhang 牙含章 (2009) proposed that despite the possible confusion, a certain degree of general usage could be allowed with additional connotations when necessary. The historians' proposal apparently won, judging from the institutionalisation of *minzu* through the national ethnic classification project conducted in the 1950s. The Chinese people were eventually classified into officially recognised *minzu*, while the scholars in practice had to calibrate "*minzu*" to meet the Chinese situation and avoid the possibility of violating the principles laid in the writings of Marx, Engels, and, in particular, Stalin's "four commons."[2] However, this is not the end of the story.

Because of the flaw in overuse and new challenges brought by the international intellectual exchange, the anthropological study of ethnicity, or of "*minzu*" to be accurate, has to return constantly to the question that lies in the centre of the above-mentioned debate: how *minzu* could (or could not) describe the Chinese reality? The question was exemplified by the debate between Professor Steven Harrell, an

[2] Common territory, common language, common economic life, common psycho-mental make-up.

anthropologist at the University of Washington, and late Professor Li Shaoming 李 绍 明 , a Chinese anthropologist who was personally involved in the ethnic classification project. Based on his research on the Yi 彝 of Sichuan, Harrell (2002) argued that the Yi of different areas had different ways of identifications, and the term Yi (or Yizu 彝族) was unable to accommodate these differences. He concluded that *minzu* itself was an unjustified concept. While Li Shaoming (2002) objected to Harrell's argument by stating that there was adequate evidence to show that the subjects of Harrell's study belonged to the same *minzu*, because they shared common languages, institutions, historical memories, etc., Li stressed that *minzu* was a concept with solid facts. Despite the sea change in the social-political landscape of post-Mao China, the *minzu* issue challenges contemporary Chinese anthropologists much in the way it challenged Yang Kun, Lin Yaohua and others during the high-socialist period.

During the extensive introduction of English-speaking anthropology to China in the 1990s, *minzu* was immediately applied to stand for "ethnicity," "ethnic groups," "ethnic minority," "nation," "people" and "nationality." Today, most Chinese-speaking anthropologists also have the difficulty at certain level to choose among these words in their English writings because the Chinese equivalent of all those English expressions is nothing but *minzu*. The lack of specificity has made *minzu* a stand-alone concept in English, as tellingly demonstrated in the shift of the official translation of the national university commissioned to train ethnic elites, *Zhongyang Minzu Daxue* 中央民族大学, from "Central University for Nationalities" to "Minzu University of China." If there is a specific connotation of *minzu*, it might be "ethnic minority" (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族), though the Han majority is also designated as a *minzu*. The problem is further complicated when *minzu* refers not only to a particular ethnic group, but also to the "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*, 中华民族), a politically charged word that includes the collectivity of all Chinese citizens.

Given the ambiguities and the controversies about the concept of *minzu*, it is essential for scholars to find a practical way to discuss concepts such as ethnicity, ethnic group, and nation. One way to avoid losing information in the process of translation and encompass the complexities of the term is to introduce it to the English-speaking audience in its vernacular form -*minzu*. In that sense, I propose to dub the primary concerns of the post-Mao anthropology of ethnicity "the *Minzu* conjecture," referring to the complicated, perplexing challenge of using a word pinned down by power relations as a tool to understand Chinese ethnoscape, thus creating endless debates, as mentioned above. For better or for worse, the investigation of the conjecture is an inevitable step to evaluate the contribution of Chinese anthropological study on ethnicity to the international community of the discipline. I argue that by reifying or problematising "*minzu*" and its distinct social-political context, these studies contribute to the sinicisation of the keyword that is pivotal to the making of contemporary China.

In this paper, I will firstly analyse why and how *minzu* is an overlapped field of anthropology, ethnology and sociology in the process of disciplinary institutionalisation. Secondly, I will review the post-Mao study of *minzu* in its three clusters – the ethnographic studies on "ethnic areas" (*minzu diqu* 民族地区), the

studies developed from Fei Xiaotong 费孝通's "the Chinese people's pluralistic and unified configuration" (*zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti geju* 中华民族多元一体格局, 1989), and the dispute over the "ethnic issues" (*minzu wenti* 民族问题) starting from the turn of the century.

"Ethnic classification" and disciplinary structuring: two critical factors in the anthropological study of ethnicity in post-Mao China

Anthropological study of ethnicity in post-Mao China is defined by two critical factors: one is the ethnic classification starting from the 1950s, the other is the disciplinary structuring since the late 1980s. The former is related to the subjects of study, and the latter is concerned with methodology. Both factors contribute tremendously to the institutionalisation of *minzu*, which eventually led to the institutionalisation of the anthropological discipline.

Ethnic classification in the 1950s was a crucial step for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to legitimise its regime and domesticate its people. During the period of the Long March (1934-1936) and the Yan'an period (1936-1945), when the CCP struggled through and settled down in China's ethnic frontiers, the CCP realised the significance and distinctiveness of non-Han populations of the Western and Northern China. Eventually, it adopted a strategy of "a unified multi-ethnic state" (*tongyi de duominzu guojia* 统一的多民族国家) as the basic tenet for the newly founded People's Republic of China. Unlike the policy of "five races under one union" (*wuzu gonghe* 五族共和) of CCP's previous regime, the nationalist party's Republic of China, the CCP claimed that the total number of Chinese *minzu* were far more than five and that all the *minzu* deserved political equality and were entitled to preferential policies under some circumstances. On the other hand, "a unified multi-ethnic state" is different from the Soviet Union model of "ethnic self-determination," by which an ethnic polity has the right to retreat from the union. Whatever the rationale was, ascertaining how many *minzus* there were in China became an indispensable task, which created one of the most extensive anthropological projects in the world: ethnic classification (or literally "ethnic identification," *minzu shibie*, 民族识别).[3]

The institutionalisation of *minzu* is a complicated process. At first, the Chinese government promoted the principle of "ethnonym by owner" (*mincong zhuren* 名从主人) and asked for reports from all over the country. Unexpectedly, the government received more than 400 ethnonyms, 260 of them submitted from the Yunnan province alone. Both officials and scholars involved in the project decided it was impossible to handle. They suggested to "incorporate" (*guibing* 归并) these ethnonyms, especially in the Yungui Plateau of Southwest China, the home of numerous languages and cultures. For the implementation of the project, the central government summoned experts in Beijing and provincial capitals to form research teams. The teams were required to do fieldwork with the support from the local governments, following the doctrines of Marxism and Leninism, especially Stalinist outlook of ethnicity. Their goal was to investigate which ethnonym could constitute a single *minzu* (*danyi minzu* 单一民族) and to define who could claim the

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3. Given the fact that the promulgation of the ideas in ethnic classification is guided by the ideology of class struggle calling for social reform, it is a significant social project to legitimise the people at the state's frontier (Tapp, 2002).

ethnonym. By 1953, when China conducted its first national census, thirty-eight ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) had been "identified." Fifteen more were added during the second national census in 1964. With another two added in 1965 and 1979, the number of ethnic minorities was fixed at 55 in 1979. Ever since, the state authority has never made any change in the numbers of *minzu* identified. But the project was not complete: first, there are constant appeals from certain groups for a separate *minzu*; second, over 640 thousand people are still classified as "unidentified" *minzu*; thirdly, ethnic classification was never conducted, and would prove unable to describe the ethnic landscape in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau.

The project of ethnic classification was coordinated and implemented under the supervision of the state power, by which the subject of the paper, anthropology, was profoundly affected as an academic discipline. Anthropology was abolished in 1952 because of its "capitalist" origin. Anthropologists had to rename themselves as ethnologists, or historians, or linguists, among others. They had to deal with the ideological constraint in academic writing as well. However, the project of ethnic classification in fact provided anthropologists with a remarkable opportunity to do fieldwork at unprecedentedly large scale. At the same time, because of high demand of work caused by the enormity of the project, they had to train students. Besides the vibrant environment for individual scholars, for better or for worse, the era also witnessed (the) extensive collaboration across institutions. For example, "the Social and Historical Investigation" was an ambitious project co-organised by the National People's Congress, Institute of Ethnology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Minzu University of China and many other institutions. The project produced more than 100 research reports amounting to one billion Chinese characters (about 1.4 billion English words), available to the public since the 1980s. All studies were governed by the principle of the Stalinist four commons about *minzu*. However, high flexibility was allowed in practice, for example, "common pyscho-mental make-up" of the "four commons" was barely mentioned.

Ethnic classification not only saved anthropological study, but also fuelled the revival of the discipline in the 1980s and hence. Anthropologists fostered an intimate relationship with the making of ethnic identity, willingly or unwillingly. Under the name of ethnology, the anthropological research in the 1980s took up the unfinished mission of the "Social and Historical Investigation" project on ethnic minorities, producing many important anthropological studies over the past three decades. One of the examples is the debate between Harrell and Li mentioned above. Because ethnic classification is a matter of "seeing like a state" (Scott, 1998), it inevitably caused the great loss of the local "metis." Anthropologists in the field find the outcome of ethnic classification continues to challenge and shape the new narratives. Many ethnographic studies transcend the four commons and explore topics of a broader scope, including ethnic identification, cultural change, religion, rituals, oral literature, and so on. Nevertheless, many of them are essentially the extension of the project, studying the social patterns of those "unidentified *minzu*" and defining to which existing *minzu* they belong.

Meanwhile, a close working relationship has been established between anthropological knowledge and the state power at different levels. When the Law on Ethnic Regional Autonomy (*Minzu quyu zizhi fa* 民族区域自治法) was passed in 1984, China restored and created over 100 ethnic autonomous regions, prefectures, counties, and townships, where the ethnic minorities are the legal candidates to leadership in the government. Ordinary ethnic minority members enjoy preferential policies to some degree, too. Therefore, ethnic identity became more important than ever. As a result, numerous works have been done with specific *minzu*, under denominations such as "ethnohistory," "customs," "language," "philosophy," "thoughts," and "technologies," written by local literati with preliminary anthropological training. Moreover, when China joined the UNESCO Convention of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004, ethnic identity became more relevant. Governments at different levels compete for mobilizing scholars to do research and apply for cultural heritage on their behalves. Many projects have succeeded in making their names in the national, provincial lists of cultural heritage, even to the UNESCO list.

The second important factor affecting the study of ethnicity after the 1980s is the way disciplines were categorised, institutionalised or structured by the Ministry of Education. The latest structure of disciplines was created in 1997, and has remained largely unchanged ever since. Within the structure, anthropology is a second-tier discipline subordinate to sociology, which is a first-tier discipline. Intriguingly, under ethnology (literally translated as "the study of *minzu*"), another first-tier discipline, one finds cultural anthropology and ethnology. In other words, anthropology is subordinate to both sociology and ethnology. Such an ambiguous division of academic labour cannot be neglected because the word "discipline" in contemporary China is perhaps closer to the Foucauldian sense than the examples given by Foucault himself: the academic resources in China – funding, departments, degree-conferring qualifications, promotion quotas – are almost entirely distributed according to the tiering system. Knowledge and power are closely tied up together, so much so that it largely shapes the landscape of the anthropological study of *minzu*.

Cultural anthropology, subordinate to ethnology, generally deals with studies of ethnic issues. It has to choose *minzu* as its subject and follow certain criteria of its master discipline. However, since ethnology inherits from the Soviet Unions' paradigm of the 1950s, it had lost the rigour for knowledge production and its international influence since long time ago. Instead, it has become a "field" that contributes only to the study of *minzu* economy, politics, art, etc. Though anthropology has advantages over ethnology in that perspective, its research scope

and funding are defined by its master discipline, ethnology. Even though anthropologists, like scholars of other disciplines of the post-Mao era, enjoy greater academic freedom, however, ethnology, to some extent, is still considered as a sensitive subject. The sensitivity was reflected in the event when the Ministry of Education took over the administration of most of the Chinese universities in the late 1990s but left the six *minzu* universities and institutes under the supervision of its old master – national or provincial commissions of ethnic affairs. In fact, the six *minzu* universities and military academies are the only few tertiary education institutes that are still under the leadership of state authorities other than the Ministry of Education, suggesting that academic activities would be closely monitored by the governmental power, which does not necessarily specialise in higher education. In other words, *minzu* is not just a field of anthropology, but an institutionalising power/knowledge that defines Chinese anthropology.

The outcome has at least three effects. First, anthropological research in the areas of ethnic minorities and that in the Han areas are mutually exclusive. The dichotomy has been existing in Chinese anthropology for an extended period of time. Secondly, the reification, interrogation and reflection of *minzu* have become a research field, and it is the most accomplished field in the anthropological study of *minzu*. Thirdly, protection of minority rights – support for regional autonomy, sympathy for ethnic minorities' situations, promotion of preferential policies, etc. – has become the political correctness of anthropological research.

Ethnic classification not only saved anthropological study in the 1950s, but also fuelled the revival of the discipline in the 1980s. Anthropological knowledge contributes tremendously to the institualisation of *minzu* and continues to work in lieu of reification of the state-classified ethnic identities. Meanwhile, the position of anthropology in the state's disciplinary structuring and the power relation entailed has resulted in a sui generis field that paradoxically defines anthropology, the anthropological study of *minzu*.

The forging of *Minzu* and the reflection on *Minzu*

The ethnic classification project was resumed immediately after the Cultural Revolution, but with a focus on the "identified *minzu*." The identification of Jinuo in 1979 called for an end to the project of ethnic classification. However, the mission of "seeing like a state" persisted since many people were categorised as "unidentified *minzu*." From 1978 to 1990, the commissions of ethnic affairs at different administrative levels and researchers of various academic institutes collaborated to investigate the "unidentified *minzu*," such as *Dabu, Xishe, Kemu, Nari(moso), Lingao, and Baima*.

The expertise of anthropologists and ethnologists played an indispensable role in categorising the unidentified *minzu*. It is worth mentioning that the unidentified "people" were incorporated into the identified groups in the first place, but they never constituted a new *minzu*, except for the Jinuo. It seems like a sequestration of political identity, that is, the door of classification had been closed and there would be no new *minzu* any more. Anthropologists and ethnologists had to incorporate these groups of people into the given classification. Gelong, Waxiang, Biaozu, etc., were therefore regarded as Han. Many were grouped with Zhuang, Yao, Miao, Yi, Tibet, Hui, such as the case of Kucong becoming Lahu, and Moso

becoming either Naxi or Mongolian. The incorporated groups amount to more than fifty. Meanwhile, some Han changed their identities to ethnic minorities. For example, about seven million of Han and Miao living in middle-southern China became Tujia. Moreover, some of them suggested creating the Tujia autonomous region at the provincial level. For those who were not willing to carry any name of the identified *minzu*, they remained as "unidentified *minzu*," which amounts to 640,000 people according to the sixth national census conducted in 2010.

The complexity of the process can be best exemplified in the case of the Chuanqing people (穿青). According to Zhao Jiapeng 赵家鹏 (2012), Chuanqing people is a group with a population of 670,000 (2000) inhabiting in the North-western Guizhou. They regard themselves as different from the neighbouring Han, who are called "Chuanlan." Considering the criterion of common historical memory, the investigation team led by Fei Xiaotong classified them as Han in 1953. The discontent of the local elites was soon overlaid by the political change thereafter. Until 1983, after intensive research, a local elite, Zhang Chengkun, reached the conclusion that they were not immigrants from Jiangxi and were therefore entitled to become a *minzu*. He submitted his report to Fei Xiaotong, who then was visiting the area as a state leader. However, it was too late because it had been decided that there would be no new *minzu*. Therefore, Fei Xiaotong denied the petition of the Chuanqing people again. The decision caused grudge among the local elites and drove them to demonstrate, seeking support from the higher administrative levels. Eventually, in 1986, Hu Jintao, then top leader of the Guizhou Province, decided that the Chuanqing people who had not changed their identities to Han could remain as Chuanqing officially. In 2007, the government gave the freedom to Chuanqing people of choosing to which *minzu* they were willing to belong. However, the freedom brought different opinions within the group, as some of them wanted to be Yi while others wanted to be Tujia. The official identity of Chuanqing people is still an unsolved problem today.

Anthropological studies on the identification of Chuanqing people and Gejia people (Cheung Siu-woo, 2012) and the ethnic classification in general (Shi Zhiyu, 2004) illustrate a common question, the tension between *minzu* as an academic field and *minzu* as a political issue. It seems that anthropologists' findings (many remain unpublished to this day) suffice to give evidence for the ethnic belonging. However, apparently, the formation of an official *minzu* is the consequence of power games.

It is the culmination of a series of endeavours of the local elites with the endorsement from higher authorities. Beyond that, the process needs to be constantly calibrated to the development of government policies. The "unidentified *minzu*" occasionally ascribed their failure at becoming a separate *minzu* to the lack of support from the government or to the lack of powerful elites defending their interests. As an academic field, anthropologists, by all means, break through the boundaries drawn by the Stalinist four commons. However, in terms of getting acknowledgment from the state, *minzu* as an analytical tool falls far behind its political sense. It gradually led anthropologists into an awkward situation in the work of ethnic classification since the 1980s – they are unable to satisfy the need of local elites to establish a new *minzu* while they are required to incorporate those unidentified people into another *minzu*.

The subtle relationship between the academic research on *minzu* and the political recognition of *minzu* has been explored explicitly in the work of two pioneers of Chinese anthropology, Fei Xiaotong and Lin Yaohua. In his paper "On Our Country's Ethnic Classification" (1980), Fei Xiaotong raised his doubts about "writing histories under the names of different *minzu*" (*fenzu xieshi* 分族写史) and stressed the importance of following the principle of "ethnonym by owner." Few years later, Lin Yaohua (1984) published his work "Ethnic Classification in Yunnan." He also emphasised the political significance of "ethnic classification." In fact, as early as in 1957, when the two scholars were middle-aged, they had clearly stated the subtlety of the issue in their co-authored paper. They indeed pointed out that "ethnonym cannot be imposed or changed by others. Our job is to study the formation of communities, and provide materials and analysis, then we can help those who proposed their ethnonyms to decide by negotiation, whether they are ethnic minorities and whether they can be a *minzu*. The answers to the questions have to be given by the people themselves; it is their right" (Fei Xiaotong & Lin Yaohua, 2009: 157).

As I discussed earlier on ethnic classification, the academic *minzu* is largely shaped by the political *minzu*, leading to plenty of anthropological studies reifying the latter. The Law on Ethnic Region Autonomy of 1984 postulates that all the *minzu* are entitled to establish autonomous administrative units, headed by *minzu* members. The rule gave rise to the yearning for reification of *minzu* authenticity. One of its consequences was the emergence of ethnic studies in the name of a specific *minzu*, in which anthropologists and historians played crucial roles. The most influential one among these emerging disciplines was "Tibetan studies" or "Tibetology" (*zangxue* 藏学). Because of the political significance of the Tibetan issue, the Chinese Communist Party established the China Tibetology Research Centre 中国藏学研究中心 in 1986, which is subject to the direct supervision of the CCP's Department of United Front. It consists of sub-institutions of economics, history, religion, contemporary issues, etc., while hosting many anthropologists working on Tibet. It also hosts an associated journal, *China Tibetology*. Although it remains the only national research centre under the name of a single *minzu*, the approach has triggered the creation of numerous academic institutions of different *minzu* at lower administrative levels. In addition, the enthusiasts, people informed by anthropology or other related knowledge, set up various "learned societies"

(*xuehui* 学会) affiliating to local governments, e.g., the learned societies of Mongolian, Hani, Yi, Bai, Manchu, Tujia, Miao. In the universities like Minzu University of China, Southwest University for Nationalities, Sichuan University, many departments and institutes were formed in a similar way, aiming at "digging" deeper into the traditions of certain *minzu* cultures.
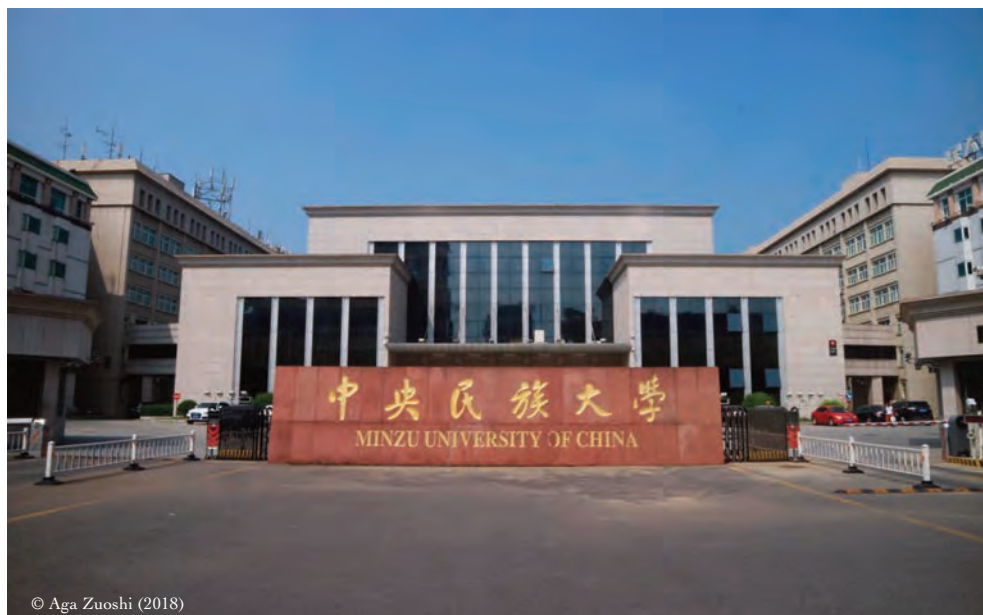
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Fig. 1 - Minzu University of China, Beijing

The endeavour of studying *minzu* in a more intensive manner was first reflected in tracing ethnic origins and migrant routes in historical material. The approach tends to make the hypothesis that an officially recognized *minzu* should have an ancient origin, and the origin and migrant routes can be traced in historical documents. However, many *minzu* found that they had to share the same ancient ethnonyms because the *ethnonyms* recorded in those materials do not correspond with the number of officially registered *minzu* today. Naturally, the finding leads to the consequence of "squatting" a descent origin in the history or registering or appropriating ethnic markers. For example, The Institute of Yi Studies of Yunnan Chuxiong Prefecture, under the leadership of Liu Yaohan, a well-known anthropologist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, traced back the Yi's history as far as one could. Some of the research even linked the Yi history to the Homo Erectus Yuanmouensis 1.7 million years ago (Harrell, 1995). The similar arguments played significant role in the heritage-making fever emerging after China joined the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2005. Intangible cultural heritages were used as evidence to elaborate the ethnic markers. The "unidentified *minzu*" mentioned earlier, after they were incorporated into a certain *minzu*, got marginalized as a sub-division of the *minzu*. However, in the process of heritage-making, their once-despised customs were reversed into markers of the *minzu*. One of the examples is the famous "visiting marriage" of Moso (Yan Ruxian & Song Zhaolin, 1983). After Moso had become

a sub-division of Naxi in the official record, their "visiting marriage" system was reinforced as a part of the Naxi culture and used to essentialise the authenticity of the Naxi.

Besides appealing to historical resources to fulfill the agenda of studying different *minzu*, the amount of fieldwork on ethnic minorities has increased considerably since the 1990s. Most of the studies attempted to provide a panoramic view of a limited space (usually a village). They tried to cover every aspect of social life, including the background information on the community, kinship, rituals, production mode, religious life, and so on. The methodology was claimed to be influenced by the functionalist classics, such as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, or *The Andaman Islanders*; however, its interest was not developing the theoretical discussions in these works. Village ethnography became popular in the 1930s, when Professor Wu Wenzao of Yenching University invited Robert Park, the forerunner of community studies, to China. *Peasant Life in China* by Fei Xiaotong (1986) is one of the classics of community studies. The Chinese version of the book, *Jiangcun Jingji* 江村经济 (literally, "economy of a riverside village"), immediately won a wide audience after its publication in the 1980s. It immediately became a must-read textbook for subsequent scholars working on Chinese societies, especially for anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists. Doing all-inclusive research on villages became adopted widely by the new generation of anthropologists. They believed that, in that manner, the social life can be represented in a comprehensive or even exhaustive way. They considered the village at issue as "typical," a miniature version of certain *minzu*. Not surprisingly, given its functionalist roots, village ethnography also studied informal social institutions as constraints on individuals while neglecting contradictions, conflicts, and institutional changes.

In the mid-1990s, the mainstream of Chinese anthropology was still dominated by evolutionist ideas infused by Engels, Morgan, Tylor and Frazer. By combining with community studies in a paradoxical way, the evolutionist paradigm fostered the interest in community history. It considered community as an independent system, assuming that ever since the people from the community migrated to the place in ancient times, the community had been immune to external influence, and had started to change only after the arrival of researchers. Some research even suggested the communities of their studies are the hosts of thousand-year-old customs, truly representing the cultures of the *minzu*. The inclination took a further step into reinforcing ethnic identities and "authenticity" of *minzu*. The historical studies on *minzu* generally adopt the evolutionist paradigm and classify phenomena existing in same time and space as surviving traces of the primitive, savage, and civilised eras.

As evolutionism, functionalism and community studies mixed up in an intriguing way, the 1990s became more fascinating when the new generation of anthropologists made their debuts with more systematic training from domestic or overseas institutions. It stimulated the attempt to establish a dialogue with western theories of ethnicity, identification and nationalism, which departed from reifying the concept of *minzu*. The research agenda explored the meanings of *minzu* in the Chinese context and questioned its validity. For example, in his book *Constructing Ethnic Groups in Modern Context* 现代背景下的族群建构, Naran Bilik (2000) gave

an extensive review of the new trends of ethnicity theories in European-American anthropology. Focusing on linguistics and the anthropology of symbols, he analysed the principles in the formation of Chinese ethnic groups. He argued that language was the most significant marker of Chinese ethnic groups. The specific context, grammar and semantics related to the culture were all embedded within the language. Therefore, he proposed that the study of ethnic groups should be done case by case, rather than seeking a holistic representation. Fan Ke 范可 (2005)'s research on a Hui village in Quanzhou provides another example of interrogating the *minzu* identity. He analysed how the administrators of the village "relocalise" the Muslim architecture during the process of making its own identity, transplanting the Arabian style to the local and transforming it into "the marker of *minzu*." Based on archival studies and interviews, Jian Zhixiang 菅志翔 (2006) tried to recover the process of ethnic classification of Bao'an. She demonstrated the subtle differences between self-identification and identification ascribed by others. Zhou Daming 周大鸣 (2002) argued that the most significant markers of ethnic identity are cultural traits, therefore, the maintenance of ethnic boundary relies on culture. The newly developed research themes at that time in western anthropology, or anthropology in English, were also reflected in the work of Chinese anthropologists, such as tourism (Peng Zhaorong, 2004), health care (Weng Naiqun *et al.*, 2004; Jing Jun & Huan Jianli, 2010), house (Zhang Jianghua, 2007), politics of difference (Zhang Zhaohe, 2012), or ethnonym (Liang Yongjia, 2012).

Along with the trend of applying different paradigms of western anthropological theories to the Chinese context, Pan Jiao 潘蛟's "Deconstructing the Ethnic Minorities of China: De-orientalisation or Re-orientalisation" (2009b) provides the most comprehensive review of anthropological research on Chinese ethnic minorities written in English in the past two decades. He points out that in these writings, the policies of recognition and inclusion are misinterpreted as discrimination and exclusion overall; issues of indigenous ethnic minorities have been confused with those of diaspora ethnic minorities; and the deployment of ethnic identity has been taken as internal colonialism or internal orientalism. He motivated Chinese anthropologists to address these issues, which are essential to understanding *minzu*.

The study of *minzu* in post-Mao China began with the futile effort of filling the gap between political *minzu* and academic *minzu*, compensated by the intensive and extensive research on the identified *minzu* with mixed methodologies of evolutionism, functionalism and community studies. While the new generation of anthropologists of the 1990s and early 2000s tried to apply and test the western anthropological theories, they had to return to the initial question: how could – or could not – *minzu* describe the Chinese reality? It is this "*minzu* conjecture" that drives the development of Chinese anthropology.

Studies on "the Chinese people's pluralistic and unified configuration"

As the major architect of restoring anthropology in post-Mao China, Fei Xiaotong made a capital contribution to the anthropological study of *minzu*. His "The Chinese people's pluralistic and unified configuration" (1989) is the single most original and influential theorization on "*minzu*," and the most authoritative

source for dealing with *minzu* issues in political settings. It is considered as the most significant contribution made by Chinese anthropologists in the post-Mao era. In particular, it tries to bridge the gap between the academic *minzu* and the political *minzu*. The attempt proves to be very successful. On the one hand, it is perhaps the most quoted work in Chinese anthropology of *minzu*. On the other hand, his "pluralistic and unified configuration" was quickly adopted by the Chinese supreme authority as the official description of Chinese *minzu* landscape and remains so till today. The theory appeared firstly in Fei Xiaotong's Tanner Lecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1988. Its publication in 1989 immediately triggered numerous studies.

In his memoirs (Fei Xiaotong, 1997), he said the paper was developed from one of the courses he had designed in the 1950s during the ethnic classification project. At that time, Fei Xiaotong had been commissioned to set up a department at Minzu University of China and offered courses on ethnohistory. The mission corresponded with the calling from the central government to write ethnography for individual *minzu*. However, Fei Xiaotong found it impossible to teach a history of individual *minzu* without mentioning the Han's influences. Since then, the theorization of Chinese *minzu* became his continuous endeavour. He finally presented his thoughts on the topic in 1988. Fei Xiaotong went beyond the functionalist interest of his early age and elaborated the formation of "pluralistic unity" from a holistic and historical perspective. He argued that the configuration of *minzu* in China at that moment could be described as "pluralistic unity." In his words, "fifty-some *minzu* are the pluralistic, the Chinese *minzu* is the unity. Though they are all *minzu*, they are positioned at different levels." (Fei Xiaotong, 1989: 1). He described the configuration as "formed in the process that numerous *minzu* once dispersed and independent *minzu* contacted, mingled, allied and merged with each other, which also was accompanied by division and vanishment as well. *Minzu* are compromising and inclusive yet their individual characteristics remain. The same process might be found in the formation of *minzu* of different areas of the world." (Fei Xiaotong, 1989: 1)

His reasoning can be generalised as follows: about three thousand years ago, Huaxia, the self-designation by the ancient Chinese after the consolidation into polities, emerged in the middle reaches of the Yellow River, which was formed in the process of fusion of numerous *minzu*. It grew and spread, like a snowball, in the plains of East Asia, where the Yellow River and the Yangtze River flowed. Huaxia was called Han by the Chinese people inhabiting on the plains. Han became gradually stronger by assimilating other *minzu* and spread over the settlements of other *minzu*. The connection and network formed during the process later became the basis of the inseparable unity consisting of different *minzu*. The unity first appeared as a self-evident entity of *minzu* and it later developed into Chinese *minzu* through self-consciousness (*loc.cit.*). The continuous interaction between the Han at the core and neighbouring *minzu* forged an inseparable unity. *Minzu* in the north kept moving southward and transferred new blood to the Han. The process continued from the Han Dynasty (3rd century B.C.-3rd century A.D.) to the Qing (1644-1911). Meanwhile, many Han moved southward and westward since the Song Dynasty (960-1279), which enriched different *minzu* of the areas.

Immediately after Fei Xiaotong's elaboration of "pluralistic unity," the idea gained attention from the state power. The State Ethnic Affairs Commission held a conference in 1990 to endorse the theory as a political expression, that is, *minzu* have their distinct origins but have inseparable connections (Fei Xiaotong, 1991). At that moment, the Chinese top leaders were promoting the idea of "the three inseparable" (*sange libukai* 三个离不开): the Han is inseparable from ethnic minorities, ethnic minorities are inseparable from the Han, and ethnic minorities are inseparable from each other. Fei Xiaotong's theory resonated with the idea perfectly. In 2005 and 2014, at the CCP Central Conference on Ethnic Work, the most authorative events intended to lay foundations for the ethnic policy of another decade, and the state of *minzu* in China was officially generalised as "pluralistic unity." It manifests how significant Fei Xiaotong's impact on Chinese ethnic policies is. As pointed out by Zhao Xudong (2012), who dated the origin of his theory to Fei Xiaotong's early work during Republic era, we have to be aware of the fallacy of reducing the theory of "pluralistic unity" to a political terminology while Fei Xiaotong's idea is an academic concept as well. Wang Hui discussed in more depth Fei Xiaotong's contribution in *The Tibet Issue Between East and West* (2011). Wang Hui argued that "pluralistic unity" emphasised diversity as much as mingling. Hence, he continued, the theory went beyond the Soviet paradigm and it also surpassed the Republican nationalist expression, which claimed that Chinese *minzu* was a unity of "one or multiple clans." He considered the configuration of "pluralistic unity" prerequired ethnic regional autonomy, pointing out that the theory was innovative by revealing that the process of mingling and merging is perpetual and that unilateral assimilation is impossible. Wang furthered the discussion by stating that "pluralistic unity" not only referred to the co-existence of *minzus*, but also suggested diversity within any defined *minzu*. Therefore, "pluralistic unity" applied to all Chinese *minzu*, the Han and all the other ethnic minorities. He added that "the unity" referred to the political entity formed in modern times and embodied by (all the) citizens (*ibid.*: 87).

Besides the domestic, political significance, Fei Xiaotong's thoughts attract those interested in China, too. A workshop to discuss "pluralistic unity" was held in Japan by the National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka) in 1996. In his keynote speech "Summarising My Research Experiences and Thoughts on *Minzu*," Fei Xiaotong criticised the approach of "ethnography by individual *minzu*" for neglecting connections between the Han and ethnic minorities, and stated that the mutual influence and interaction between *minzu* are crucial (Fei Xiaotong, 1997).

The profound impact of the theory on Chinese academia is reflected in numerous works (Ma Rong, 1989; Chen Liankai, 1991; Gu Bao, 1993; Song Shuhua, 2000). Xu Jieshun 徐杰舜 (1999) borrowed Fei Xiaotong's idea of "snowball" and developed his monograph on the formation of the Han. He Shaoying 和少英 (1998) improved the theory by pointing out that given the Han is one of the *minzu*, researchers should also study the relations between ethnic minorities rather than over-emphasising the relations between the Han and ethnic minorities. Borrowing Lin Yaohua's "Chinese economic and cultural types," Zhang Haiyang 张海洋 (2006) transvalued Fei Xiaotong's theory as a dynamic Taiji Diagram, the ancient Chinese cosmography. He suggested that the prerequisite of Chinese identification

is "harmony of difference" (*he'er butong* 和而不同). He argued that the agrarian societies in China's east and the nomadic societies in its west are the double helix structure of the DNA of Chinese *minzu*, complementary to each other. In order to understand the relationship, one should start from the perspective of cultural ecology rather than social evolutionism.

Many scholars contributed to further the discussion. Wang Mingke discussed the applicability and limitation of the theory in his work (2006, 2008). He used historical materials to explore the flexibility of identification of Huaxia (the ancient self-identification of the Han) and the change in ethnic relations over time. For example, the Qiang people was found settled in different places in historical records, which may lead to the misunderstanding on the migrantion of the Qiang. However, Wang Mingke suggested that instead of showing the migration routes of the Qiang, it showed the malleability of the boundaries of Huaxia. In Chinese materials, the people living in the western peripheries to the empire were usually called "Qiang people" (*qiangren* 羌人). Therefore, the habitats of the Qiang in the records reflects the meallable peripheries of the empire's administration. It is the change of the peripheries that caused the illusion of the Qiang's migration.

An important research field was derived from Fei Xiaotong's work on "pluralistic unity" – "ethnic corridor" (*minzu zoulang*, 民族走廊) by name. Fei Xiaotong writes "it is hard to grasp the situation if [we] study *minzu* individually;" therefore we could "study the ethnic areas formed historically," which are "the North-west corridor, the Tibet-Yi corridor, the Southern Mountains corridor, and the area covering the provinces of Northeastern China" (Fei Xiaotong, 1982: 5). Research on the North-west corridor and the Southern Mountains corridor did not begin until recent years and they are relatively less numerous than studies on the Tibet-Yi corridor (Hao Sumin, 1999; Ma Guoqing, 2013).The earliest response to Fei Xiaotong's proposal happened in the 1980s when Tong Enzheng 童恩正 and Li Shaoming of Sichuan Institute of Ethnic Studies organised a research team to investigate the ethnic societies along the Yalong River, part of the Tibet-Yi corridor (藏彝走廊). In the 1990s, Li Shaoming, then director of the institute, wrote in his article "Southwest Silkroad and Ethnic Corridor" that these corridors were naturally formed by human migrations and settlements in the pre-modern times (Li Shaoming, 1994); and the holist perspective could yield a better understanding of the ethnic histories and cultural sediment. Shi Shuo 石硕 and his team (Shi Shuo *et al.*, 2014) studied the history of migration and interaction of the Tibet-Yi corridor. They used case studies to illustrate changes in ethnic identification, economic relations, conflict and compromise between religions and kinship. Meanwhile, some scholars also tried to develop the theory of "pluralistic unity" by adding or redrawing ethnic corridors. For example, Li Xingxing 李星星 (2005) proposed the framework of "two vertical and three horizontal" (*Erzong Sanheng* 二纵三横) corridors, in order to better grasp the areas formed in the process of interaction.

In his collaboration with Minzu University of China and Southwest University for Nationalities, Wang Mingming 王铭铭 studied systematically the modern history of the Tibet-Yi corridor and proposed the concept of "intermediate circle" (*Zhongjian Quan* 中间圈, 2008), trying to encompass the idea of corridors. He located the

intermediate circle within the key zone of *Tianxia* 天下 (All Under Heaven), the Chinese cosmological perspectives and political ontologies. From his point of view, the Tibet-Yi corridor signifies the transition between the Han areas in the heartland of China and the "barbarian" areas in the outer circle. Under the influences from neighbouring empires and other civilisations, the intermediate circle formed its own world order. According to Wang, the study of the Tibet-Yi corridor can neither rely on concepts like ethnicity, identity, representation, which are embedded in the western nation-states, nor repeat the sociological "community studies" adopted widely in the studies on the Han. He suggested treating "relations" as the fundamental subject of research. Numerous research outputs on the Tibet-Yi corridor have been published, mainly in *Chinese Review of Anthropology*, a journal he founded and that became the most important venue for scholars working on the topic.

Isolated from the western academia for nearly thirty years because of the political environment, Fei Xiaotong's work on "pluralistic unity" demonstrates amazing originality. The theory of "the configuration of pluralistic unity" is developed from a historical perspective and proved by archaeological evidence, not a very popular approach among his European-American colleagues at that time. The theory stresses the boundaries formed in the interactions between *minzu*, a familiar theme in Fredrik Barth's study on ethnicity, though Fei Xiaotong probably never knew his work. Fei Xiaotong (1989) also suggests that while focusing on the boundaries of *minzu*, it is worth addressing the entangled relations, or in his words, "you are part of me and I am part of you (*wozhong yongnim, nizhong yowo* 我中有你，你中有我)." While exploring the political structures and principles of interaction between *minzu* in Northern and Middle China, the theory also looks into the formation of nomadic and agrarian livelihood, natural environment and modes of subsistence. It provides archaeological evidence of agrarian society found in the nomadic area. Fei Xiaotong's arguments to some extent resonate with Owen Lattimore, Caroline Humphrey, and Alan Barfield's work. Fei Xiaotong distinguishes the concepts "self-consicous" (*zijue* 自觉) from "self-evident," arguing that "Chinese *minzu* is a self-conscious entity emerging in the conflict between China and Western bullies over the past hundred years; however, Chinese *minzu*, as a self-evident entity, formed in a historical process over thousands of years" (Fei Xiaotong, 1989: 1). He also argues that "self-evidence" is the prerequisite as, without it, there is no "self-consciousness."

Another of Fei Xiaotong's most quoted arguments about this theory is the levels of identification. In his words, although "Chinese *minzu*" and individual *minzu* can both be called "*minzu*," they are not at the same level. The contribution can be best exemplified in Wang Hui's elaborations of the trans-systematic society. As Wang Hui points out, "some western historical research and cultural studies endeavour to deconstruct 'the unity' by 'the diversity' and neglect the historical and political significance of the construction of 'the unity'" (Wang Hui, 2011: 89). They do so without knowing "the unity" encompassed "the unity" of individual *minzu* and "the unity" of *minzu* area. Hence, they will not understand that the so-called "unity" can only be an "inter-unity." The level of identification betters the understanding of the structure of Chinese civilisation and exceeds the limit of the Euro-centric idea of "nation-state."

The most important merit of Fei Xiaotong's idea of "pluralistic unity" is the fact that he successfully bridges the gap between a political *minzu* and an academic *minzu*. As I pointed out once and again, this gap is the fundamental issue for Chinese anthropology, as it shapes the study of *minzu* on the one hand, and is shaped by the institutionalisation of *minzu* on the other. Of course, Fei Xiaotong's attempt is not conclusive and will be subject to continuous discussion and contention. It appears to me, at least, that Fei Xiaotong's idea is insufficient in the following aspects: first, it reifies the official recognition of *minzu* without sufficient consideration on the social life of *minzu*, that is, how *minzu* identities make sense to the people in their everyday life where official categories do not necessarily work; second, he might underestimate the appropriation power of official *minzu* identity by the ethnic elites for their own benefit; third, he might deliberately overlook the separatist-cum-violent force in inter-ethnic relations over history and, more especially, today. However, whatever the contentions other anthropologists may come up with are exactly the proof of Fei Xiaotong's success: since he published "The Chinese people's pluralistic and unified configuration" in 1989 any serious study of Chinese *minzu* has to start with this seminal piece. So does any political attempt to change the Chinese *minzu* landscape. Fei Xiaotong's work has become the single most important masterpiece of Chinese anthropology of *minzu* in the post-Mao era, if not of all time.

The dispute over "ethnic policy" between the "fusionists" and the "establishmentists"

Since the turn of the century, strong dispute over the *minzu* issues has been taking place in the Chinese anthropological community, a rare phenomenon in Chinese academia (Leibold, 2013; Yao Xingyong, 2014). Though the dispute might have started earlier, it was heated by Ma Rong 马戎's paper (2004) "De-politicization of Ethnicity in China" published in *Journal of Peking University*, which also appeared in *Asian Ethnicity*. Professor and Director of the Department of Sociology at Peking University, Ma Rong argued that cultural differences were acknowledged widely in Chinese history but that in modern China, the differences between *minzu* are politicised too much, especially after ethnic classification. Given that politicising of ethnicity had caused the Soviet Union's dissolution, Ma Rong suggested to combine Chinese historical strategy of "culturalising" *minzu* issues with the American policy of "melting pot." From his point of view, in that way, "*minzu*" with a strong political significance can be replaced by "ethnic group" (*zuqun* 族群) with a stronger connotation of cultural significance. He proposed to strengthen the sense of citizenship instead of ethnic identity to reinforce political unity while retaining cultural diversity.

Ma Rong's arguments were established on the following hypotheses. Firstly, the failure of the Soviet Union and the success of the US are largely due to their different ways of dealing with ethnic affairs. His opinion is very controversial because the role of ethnic policy played in the Soviet Union's dissolution should not be overstated. The same goes for the "sucessful" American ethnic policy. Secondly, Ma Rong seemed to suggest the ethnic policy of the PRC is simply a copy of the Soviet Union's model. The generalisation does not fit into the facts. At the macro level, testified in the PRC's Premier Zhou Enlai's speeches in 1949 and

1954, the central government of the PRC explicitly rejected Soviet's self-determination model by adopting the autonomy model, which disavowed *minzu*'s right to withdraw from the state (Wang Hui, 2011: *77*-85). At the micro level, Fei Xiaotong and other scholars had stated that ethnic classification was not implemented fully under the Stalinist definition of *minzu*. Thirdly, Ma Rong suggested ethnic identity is a dangerous and manipulated political factor, and should be "culturalised." However, one of the things that characterises contemporary social sciences is what might be called the "political turn." In that sense, "culture" is politics too, which suggests that it is impossible and unnecessary to distinguish "culture" from "politics," as the classical sociologists did.

Ma Rong's doubt about the institution of ethnic regional autonomy, one of the pillars of the PRC, is the most controversial point. The doubt later appeared in a more explicit way in his paper entitled "Is there a Separation Risk in China of the 21st century" (Ma Rong, 2011). In his words, as in the Soviet Union, there are three major risks of separation in China. First, there are groups of people who do not identify themselves as citizens of China. Second, the settlements of these people have become relatively independent administrative units and their "original territories" imply a sort of indigenous right. Third, these groups have nurtured a new generation of elite leaders promoting their own cultures. His conclusion is that the situation in China meets all the criteria for separation, so that the unity of the state is indeed at risk. The argument resonates with his earlier idea that the most threatening force is the nationalism forging among the elite of ethnic minorities (Ma Rong, 2009).

To sum up, Ma Rong considered that the overstatement of ethnic identity and the flaws in the institution of ethnic regional autonomy had led to the social problems and conflicts in ethnic areas. His argument became even more controversial after two violent incidents – "3·14 Lhasa Incident" in 2008 and "7·5 Ürümqi Incident" in 2009. As many Han people were attacked in the riots, it once again raised doubts among the public about the preferential policies that ethnic minorities enjoyed. To some extent, Ma's view gained support from the national leaders. For example, Zhu Weiqun 朱维群 (2012), the vice-minister of the CCP's United Front Work Department who oversees ethnic affairs, wrote that it was urgent to discuss the possibility of ethnic fusion; ethnic regional autonomy should not be extended to wider areas; preferential policies should be reduced; ethnic identity in citizens' ID cards should be deleted. At the same time, Hu An'gang 胡鞍钢, an economist at Tsinghua University, and Hu Lianhe 胡联合, a security officer, co-authored an article exploring "second generation of ethnic policy" (2011a). They proposed to replace ethnic classification by ethnic fusion and abolish the institution of ethnic regional autonomy. In their conclusion and in another paper (2011b), they stated there were only two models of ethnic policy, "melting pot" and "salad bowl." The Soviet Union, the follower of the latter model, suffered its dissolution, while Brazil, India and the US, the followers of the former, are examples of success. Though Ma Rong, Zhu Weiqun, and the Hus may disagree on specific points, they can all be called "fusionist" because they share one idea: minimising ethnic identity and disestablishing ethnic regional autonomy because of the political risks it entails.

Their "fusionist" argument raised fierce backlash from scholars working in *minzu* universities and institutes, who could be called "the establishmentists." In their defense, the institution of ethnic regional autonomy is a great legacy of dealing with ethnic affairs in Chinese history. Contrary to the "fusionists," they argued that the worsening of ethnic issues results from unfulfilled promises. These scholars are "establishmentists" because they support the present institution and urge full implementation of ethnic regional autonomy. For example, the director of the Institute of Ethnology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Hao Shiyuan (2013), argued the claim of "de-politicising" is established on the misunderstanding of the Soviet Union model. He pointed out that the "second generation of ethnic policy" basically violated the Constitution and the generalisation of "melting pot" and "salad bowl" was inapplicable to the actual situation. Responding to Ma Rong's claims, Zhang Haiyang (2011) argued the ethnic issues in China are rooted in the dilemma caused by the unilateral pursuit of economic growth and the ineptitude of national education, especially widespread Han chauvinism, social Darwinism and cultural chauvinism. Zhang Haiyang warned us if the "fusionist" proposals were accepted, the harmony of Chinese *minzu* would be destroyed.

However, policy studies are not the specialty of anthropologists. The dispute between Ma Rong and Hao Shiyuan, Zhang Haiyang is more at an idealist level rather than at a practical one. But Hu Angang, an expert on policy studies without prior expertise on ethnic issues, somehow finds the way to get attention from many sources, especially from the top, by naming his idea as "second generation of ethnic policy." His proposal disguises the complexity implicated in "de-politicizing". Moreover, he raised somewhat furious backlash from a dozen of senior anthropologists (who have been) working on ethnic issues. Paradoxically, these scholars find themselves in a very awkward situation since they are unable to find a practical way to argue against Hu's ideas. Even Mark Elliott (2015), sitting far away at Fairbanks Centre of Harvard University, takes part in the dispute, but like Chinese anthropologists, he does not brand his ideas with catchy words. Policy-making is a process of reducing local knowledge and "seeing like a state." It contradicts with the anthropological way of reflecting upon the mainstream from the perspective of the marginalized. It might be the reason why those anthropologists who engage in the dispute find it difficult to capture the complexity of policy-making. They are not good at effectively talking to the state, which favours simple and catchy slogans.[4]

Anthropologists' involvement with ethnic policy brings subtle change to the discipline. The dispute over ethnic policy is carried in a very heated way rarely found in recent years. As a marginalized discipline before, anthropology suddenly becomes the platform for mainstream discussion. However, the platform was quickly claimed by the ethnologists who are supposed to supervise anthropology. China is experiencing significant shift in its development mode at the moment. The central government is promoting the initiative of "one belt, one road" and the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Many anthropologists become interested in exploring the possibility of mainstreaming the discipline.

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[4] On the CCP Central Conference on Ethnic Work in 2014, the proposal of "second generation of ethnic policy" was not accepted. The supreme leader tries to find a balance between the two sides, by explicitly supporting the institution of ethnic regional autonomy, but promising to make some changes.

Some of them consider that anthropology has a better understanding of *minzu* and overseas societies than other disciplines and that it is the time for promoting anthropology to a larger audience. As the state funds more studies of ethnic issues, more anthroplogists are offered with distinguished professorship. The self-esteem of the discipline is higher because of its increasing power in academia. The level of confidence observed today was unimaginable five years ago. The marginalized position of anthropology seems doomed because of the subject of its study being overlooked by the mainstream scholarship. However, it is exactly the marginality of the discipline that confers it with a better position to reflect on mainstream discourse. Therefore, if the involvement with policy-making, nation-building and consultation of governance will keep going on for a longer period, we might need more time to find out what academic contributions Chinese anthropological research on ethnic studies can achieve.

The core of the dispute over ethnic policy lies in how to understand "*minzu*," a *fait accompli*. Almost everyone seeks for the meaning of "*minzu*" from sources in foreign languages (Ma Rong 2001; Zhang Haiyang, 2001; Hao Shiyuan, 2002) as the starting point of their discussions. It is also what anthropologists did in the 1960s. Ma Rong and other scholars try to replace *minzu* with *zuqun* (ethnicity) in order to reduce the ambiguity and complexity of the meanings of *minzu*. The replacement, however, is obviously inapplicable, because *minzu* has become an extremely complicated, indigenised concept to China exemplified in its discourse and institutionalisation. In conclusion, no matter how huge the gap between the "fusionists" and the "establishmentists," neither of them appreciates adequately the creativity and dynamics of the concept of *minzu* in reality. They tend to restore the concept according to certain ideals or certain designs. Paradoxically, the dispute reinforces the fact that *minzu* is shaping the Chinese reality, including reification of an authentic Chinese *minzu* and ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

As a discipline, anthropology was abolished right after 1949, however, anthropological knowledge found (its) shelter in the project of ethnic classification, which also fuelled the revival of the discipline in the 1980s. Anthropology contributes tremendously to the institutionalisation of *minzu* in the political sense, while continuing to work in lieu of reification of the state-classified ethnic identities. The position of anthropology in the state's disciplinary structuring and the power relation entailed created the sui generis field, the anthropological study of *minzu*.

The study of *minzu* in post-Mao China began with the futile effort of filling the gap between political *minzu* and academic *minzu*, compensated by the intensive and extensive research on the identified *minzu* with mixed methodologies of evolutionism, functionalism and community studies. While the new generation of anthropologists of the 1990s and early 2000s tried to apply and test the western anthropological theories, they have to return to the initial question: how *minzu* could or could not describe the Chinese reality. Fei Xiaotong's theory of "pluralistic unity" was endorsed by the state and has become the official statement of the Chinese ethnoscape since the 1990s. The originality of the theory also motivated numerous academic works addressing the issues raised by the theory, and therefore created a field where Chinese anthropological study can contribute to the

international intellectual community. The study of *minzu* in post-Mao China is also marked by the dispute between the "fusionists" and the "establishmentists," originated from the ambition of intervening in the ethnic policy-making. The "fusionist" proposal of de-politicising *minzu* were refuted by the "establishmentist" urge to fully implement the ethnic regional autonomy. Though both sides of the dispute largely failed to influence the actual policy-making, the situation of the discipline, in terms of sources endowed by the state, was largely improved by showing its potentials of contributing to the politically significant field. In other words, we have seen a constant return to the old "*minzu* conjecture" when new political and academic contexts emerge.

The word "*minzu*" was borrowed and used to stand for many other words in different languages. The process leads to the fact that the ambiguity and complexity of *minzu* are frequently reduced to the problems caused by translation, which entails the unceasing pursuit of sinicisation or indigenisation of Chinese anthropology (Wang Jianmin, Zhang Haiyang & Hu Hongbao, 1998). However, to understand the status quo of the discipline, it is crucial to acknowledge the fact that the discipline itself was imported (Pan Jiao, 2009a). The imported anthropology inherited the topics, fields, methodologies of different origins but the implantation has hidden the troubles, of which *minzu* is an example. The significance of the study of *minzu* lies in the following facts: firstly, anthropology played an essential role in the making of *minzu*; secondly, it keeps producing knowledge in the given category, and the knowledge production in turn keeps forging and reifying *minzu*; thirdly, anthropology as a discipline is in turn shaped by the institutionalisation of *minzu*. Thus, the history of the concept of *minzu* is the history of the discipline and the study contributes to the sinicisation of this keyword, which is pivotal to the making of anthropology as well as of contemporary China.

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