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Can the Chinese Nation Be One?

Gu Jiegang, Chinese Muslims, and the Reworking of Culturalism

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Abstract

This essay examines how the classicist and folklorist Gu Jiegang, in conversation with his Hui (Chinese Muslim) colleagues on the *Yugong* journal (published 1934-1937), theorized the "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*) as an internally plural and open-ended political project, to resist homogenizing claims made by both Japanese imperialists and the ruling Chinese Nationalist party under Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s. Echoing the struggles of his Hui colleagues to articulate their place in the nation as both Muslim and Chinese, Gu reworks traditional "culturalist" assumptions about the non-racial character of identity formation to pose minority experience as constitutive of a constantly expanding and transforming political community. When Gu claims in his notorious 1939 essay that the "*Zhonghua minzu* is one," he poses a unity built not on cultural assimilation or ethnic identity, but on a shared political commitment to an expansive and culturally hybrid concept of the "Chinese nation."

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Can the Chinese Nation Be One?

Gu Jiegang, Chinese Muslims, and the Reworking of Culturalism

Is it possible to imagine a unified China, without reproducing oppressive and Han-centric visions of the nation? Chinese discourse of the twentieth century is rife with claims that present the "false unity of a self-same, national subject evolving through time" along a linear path enabling that subject "to realize its destiny in a modern future" (Duara, 1995: 4). Liang Qichao's germinal work in the 1920s grafted these assumptions onto an existing ethnocentrism when he narrated "Chinese" history as the history of a single majority, the Han, whose "assimilative power" (*tonghua li*) was assumed to spontaneously efface meaningful cultural difference among the diverse populations that had historically occupied Chinese imperial territories (Liang, 1994; Schneider, 2017). The inherent assimilative power of Chinese civilization has continued to support the hierarchical supremacy of a Han-centric Chinese national identity, over and above the so-called minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*, or often just *minzu*) which comprise it. Many of the key conceptual frameworks for this national imaginary were first articulated in the 1930s, when an aggressive Japanese empire sought footholds in Chinese territory in part by encouraging separatist movements of minority peoples on the northern frontier (Bodde, 1946; Tamanoi, 2000: 253). In response, Chinese intellectuals and policy-makers accelerated and expanded existing claims of a strongly unified and homogenous definition of the Chinese nation, to buttress both territorial and cultural dominance over its northern and northwestern borders.

Ironically, amid this intensely political and hyper-nationalist wartime environment, there emerged a (still largely overlooked) contribution to the de-centering of Chinese identity. This essay examines how the classicist and folklorist Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893-1980), in

conversation with some of his Hui (Chinese Muslim) colleagues on the *Yugong* journal (published 1934-1937), theorized the "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*) as an internally plural, open-ended, and emancipatory political project, to resist homogenizing claims made by both Japanese imperialists and the ruling Chinese Nationalist party under Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s.[1] Gu and his colleagues would agree with many modern scholars who narrate China's past in terms of mutual accommodation and porous boundaries between diverse cultural groups that changed over time and space (Gladney, 1994; Mullaney et al., 2012)—what Pamela Crossley has called a "totality of convergently and divergently related localisms" (Crossley, 1990: 15). Yet Gu's vision is distinctive in attempting to balance the tensions of inclusion and particularity. Gu argues that only unity will secure the territorial and national integrity required to fight Japanese imperial incursions, but importantly—nearly alone among his Han contemporaries—he goes on to ask how such unity can be achieved without reproducing the historical and structural oppressions that continue to marginalize non-Han peoples in Chinese lands. Echoing the struggles of his Hui colleagues to articulate their place in the nation as both Muslim and Chinese, Gu's concept of the *Zhonghua minzu* poses minority experience and cultures as constitutive of a constantly expanding and transforming community, bound by shared consciousness and commitment to political goals rather than unified by racial or cultural similarity.

One of the most unexpected and innovative features of Gu's work in this period was his creative re-deployment of the "culturalist" premise behind claims to China's assimilative power, namely the belief that anyone of any racial, cultural, or ethnic background (in Chinese terms, "all under Heaven," *tianxia*) would become Sinified (*Hanhua, lai hua*) through participation in Chinese culture (*wen*)—typically meaning the institutions and rituals of specifically Han civilization (Ho, 1998; Langlois, 1980).[2] Nationalist ideology of the Nanjing Decade famously

built on such claims to argue for national homogeneity and the inevitable assimilation of non-Han peoples into the Han majority. Gu's innovation is to empty such claims of their specific ethnocentric features, while retaining their emphasis on deliberate participation in shared practices—rather than patrilineal bloodline descent—as the key criterion for membership in any *minzu*.[3] Drawing on his own experience travelling through the Chinese northwestern frontier, Gu eventually specifies this form of membership as affiliation with particular "teachings" (*jiao*), which may or may not have any relationship to one's presumed cultural or racial background. *Jiao*-affiliation thus enables overlapping identities, allowing for the possibility of radical self-transformation from one "teaching" to another—all while co-existing within the larger domain of the "Chinese nation," the *Zhonghua minzu*.

Gu's nationalist project thus introduces ambivalence into the designation of clearly-bordered *minzu* even as it explores the necessary relationship of China's internal diversity to projects of political unification. However, perhaps because of his support for national unity over separatist movements, Gu has been criticized for endorsing problematic assumptions of Chinese superiority vis-à-vis "barbarian" others, upholding some notion of a singular albeit dynamic Chinese essence, or sublimating recurrent ethno-cultural difference in the name of a unified Chinese national subject (Leibold, 2003: 466, 2006: 211; Lipman, 2002). Chinese scholars, in particular, have argued that Gu promoted an inaccurate vision of a culturally monolithic China as a wartime exigency, contradicting his earlier commitments to an objective and scientific historiography that produced more nuanced and diverse pictures of the Chinese past (Ge, 2015; Yu, 2007). Recent debates over reforming China's current Soviet-inspired ethnic policy have favorably invoked Gu as an advocate of the "depoliticization" of ethnic identity (Rong Ma 馬戎,

2012; Zhou and Zhang, 2007), implying that his arguments from the 1930s entail state centralization of a fully assimilated national population (Elliott, 2015).

I argue here that a more careful reading of Gu's work in the 1930s, in tandem with that of his Hui colleagues, decenters and problematizes China's importance: it poses the nation as a contingent and plural political signifier, rather than an enduring racial, ethnic or cultural one.[4] When Gu claims in his notorious 1939 essay that the "*Zhonghua minzu* is one," he poses a unity built not on cultural assimilation or ethnic identity, but on a shared political commitment to an expansive and culturally hybrid concept of the "Chinese nation." This theorization attempts to transform the "Chinese nation" from a homogenizing and oppressive concept to an emancipatory one—with the potential to liberate Chinese people not only from the threat of Japanese imperialism, but also from parochial and monolithic views of Chinese national identity.

Arguing about Culture in 1930s China

Debates about Chinese identity and nationalism long preceded the establishment of Chiang's Nanjing-based Nationalist Party regime in 1927. However, it was during this period, until the collapse of the Second United Front between the KMT and Chinese communists in 1940, that these issues took on acute and specific political significance. This so-called "Nanjing Decade" marked the first time in more than thirty years that China's former imperial territory was united under one government. The Nationalist unification project gave rise to unprecedented discussions about the nature and composition of "China" as a national entity, focused in particular on the relationship between the dominant Han Chinese majority (comprising about 80% of the population) and the diverse populations of non-Han groups—some but not all of which drew self-identity from their explicit demarcation as constituencies under the overthrown

dynasty, the Manchu-ruled Qing (Lipman, 2002: 114).[5] Attempts to write "cultural history" in the late 1920s began to explore the contribution of non-Han peoples to the Chinese past, by replacing a racialized Chinese subject of history with a cultural one (Hon, 2004; Schneider, 2014: 93). But by the early 1930s, these explorations were superseded by an increasingly Han-centric, homogenous vision of the "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*) derived from Sun Yatsen's germinal declaration of his "three principles of the people," first published in the 1906 manifesto for his anti-Qing revolutionary organization the Tongmenghui (Sun, 1927).

One of Sun's three principles, *minzu* ("nationality" or "nationalism") seemed to extend the promise of national self-determination to all oppressed peoples. However, both modern scholars and contemporary writers have argued that the *minzu* promoted by Sun was a term used to reinforce the traditional dominance of Chinese civilization over its neighboring states (Qi, 1937: 27–28). According to James Leibold, Sun's *minzu* concept marshalled the rhetoric of modern science and theories of development to consolidate national consciousness in the face of Japanese and European imperialism, while denying self-determination to minority groups within China's borders. To Sun, these peripheral peoples "were ethnic relics destined for eventual assimilation with a superior 'Han Chinese' majority via the dispassionate 'scientific law' of natural selection'"(Leibold, 2004: 165). Even as the frontier regions, inhabited by a variety of cultural groups that in some places outnumbered Han, grew strategically more important in the wake of the 1931 Manchurian Bridge incident, Chiang's regime appropriated Sun's rhetoric to promote a unified vision of Chinese identity that was homogenous not only culturally but also racially. Applying Sun's ideas to Nationalist party ideology, Chiang and his ideologues such as Dai Jitao identified the *Zhonghua minzu* with direct bloodline descent from the mythical Yellow Emperor. These ideas revived a discourse on race articulated in the late nineteenth century most

famously by Zhang Taiyan, who linked concepts of "race" to the indigenous practice of posing kinship ties among different lineages or clans with the same surname (Kai-wing Chow, 1997: 48). For Chiang, a shared racial lineage eventually converged into a homogenous cultural heritage. As he would eventually put it in his 1943 tract *China's Destiny*, a book widely circulated as "extracurricular material" for China's schools and universities, including the Central Political Training Institute :

> According to its historic development, our Chinese nation was formed by the blending of numerous clans. These clans were originally branches of the same race, spreading to the east of the Pamir plateau, along the valleys of the Yellow, the Huai, the Yangtze, the Heilungkiang, and the Pearl rivers. They maintained different cultures according to the differences in their geographical environment. And cultural differences gave rise to differences among the clans. However, during the past five thousand years, with increasing contacts and migrations, they have been continuously blended into a nation. But the motive power of that blending was cultural rather than military, and the method of blending was by assimilation rather than by conquest….
>
> Within the Four Seas, the clans of the various localities were either descendants of a common ancestor or were interrelated through marriage. The *Book of Odes* states: "The descendants of Wen Wang extend to hundreds of generations, but all come from the same family tree." This means that the main and branch stocks all belong to the same blood stream (Chiang, 1947: 30–31).

Chiang extended this identity narrative to justify inclusion of frontier areas within Chinese national territory, both by denying the racial distinctiveness of minority groups on those areas and by deploying a traditional rhetoric of Chinese cultural dominance. This rhetoric, employed as well by intellectuals such as Liu Yizheng who resisted race-based identity claims (Hon, 2003: 265–6; Kuo, 2014: 285), held that it was through cultural assimilation of foreign others that the Chinese state extended its boundaries. Indeed, Chiang argues that cultural homogeneity determined the geographic as well as military limits of the state, now and in the past: "the territory of the Chinese state is determined by the requirements for national survival and by the limits of Chinese cultural bonds. Thus, in the territory of China a hundred years ago, comprising more than ten million square kilometers, there was not a single district that was not essential to the survival of the Chinese nation, and none that was not permeated by our culture"(Chiang, 1947: 34).

These ideological narratives of a homogenous Chinese descent and singular unified culture were further promoted by co-opted academic elites such as Fu Sinian, the influential historian and recently appointed leader of the Institute for History and Philology at China's national academy of sciences, Academia Sinica. Motivated by patriotic fervor and a need to invigorate opposition to Japanese imperialism after Japanese forces took Mukden in northern China, Fu encouraged his fellow academics to write and research national histories that promoted KMT readings of the past, while promoting his own vision of a homogenous, timeless national history that stretched both backward and forward in time (Fu, 1980b). In a 1935 essay, "The Chinese nation [*Zhonghua minzu*] is a totality," Fu advances a sweeping claim about the timeless and perpetual unity of the Chinese people for the past two millennia:

> From the rise of the Qin and Han onward 2000 years to now, sometimes because of barbarian invasion, the north and south were separated, and sometimes because of the separatism of unscrupulous schemers, the country has been split up. However, these are facts forced by human power, not facts of nature. Once there is an appropriate leader in place, everything immediately becomes united as one family. From the desert regions of the North, to Hainan Island and Jiaozhi[6] in the South; from the quicksands of the West to Jilin and Xuantu[7] in the East—these are all lands naturally given to us, the Chinese nation [*Zhonghua minzu*]. We Chinese [*women Zhonghua minzu*] speak with one language, write with one script, and practice the same kind of ethics according to one and the same culture. We are just as one single clan [*jiazu*]. We also rely on the minority nationalities [*shaoshu minzu*] within this nation, but we Chinese since ancient times have had a kind of attractive virtue, in that we do not discriminate against the partial views of small nationalities, while maintaining the bearing of a single family from sea to sea (Fu, 1980b: 1724–5).

Fu characterizes the "Chinese nation" here as a grand and special kind of nationality, whose culture inevitably attracts and assimilates the "small nationalities" in its geographic orbit, dissolving their cultural and racial distinctiveness (as well as their territories) into a single Chinese national culture. These ideas motivate Fu's other work during this period, including the *Outline History of Northeastern China* that he wrote for the Lytton Commission. Attempting to rebut Japanese claims that Manchuria (along with Mongolia and Tibet) were not parts of Chinese territory, Fu's hastily written report claimed erroneously that the Chinese northeastern territories had been governed by Chinese bureaucratic system since the beginning of recorded history, and

that Manchuria and Korea historically had maintained only minimal communication with Japan (League of Nations et al., 1932; Leibold, 2006: 189; Wang, 2000: 149–151).

The uncharacteristically careless presentation of historical realities, by an established scholar well-known for promoting rigorous standards of objective historical scholarship, met with great criticism from contemporaries, but offers great insight into the pressure felt by many scholars to defend Chinese territorial claims in the name of nationalism. Indeed, such work was amplified by an ongoing academic debate about the nature of "Chineseness" in light of the adoption of Western technology, medicine, social institutions and political ideas that had begun in the late nineteenth century. Calls to "construct culture on a Chinese base" (*jianshe Zhongguo benwei de wenhua*) were advanced by a number of academics including the editor of the influential Shanghai Commercial Press, Wang Xinming, and which in turn has been linked to the KMT government's "Committee on Cultural Construction" headed by Chen Lifu, member of one of two KMT secret police organizations (Wang et al., 1990; Zheng, 2004). A 1935 declaration, and several years of debate in popular media, reinforced essentialized notions of Chinese identity by claiming distinctive national characteristics (*teshuxing*) that could exist independently of foreign influence (Jenco, 2016).

Amid these pervasive, politically-supported claims to national homogeneity, some intellectuals began elaborating a counter-narrative of Chinese identity, rooting it in growing historical evidence of China's culturally and racially diverse past. Taking the unofficial lead on this counter-movement was the classicist Gu Jiegang, Fu's former Beijing University roommate who is best known for his painstaking text-critical analyses and editorial work on the iconoclastic series *Debates on Ancient History (Gushi bian)*. These projects of "doubting antiquity" (*yigu*) and "reorganizing the national heritage" (*zhengli guogu*) critically interrogated the traditional

celebratory narratives of China's ancient past using modern historiographical techniques and archeology, enabling what its producers believed to be a more objectively verifiable, "scientific" account of Chinese civilization for the purposes of national renewal (Gu, 1926; Wang Fansen, 1987). Although executed with a spirit of academic professionalism self-consciously detached from political concerns, Gu's historical work in the early 1930s took explicit issue with KMT claims to a single unified Chinese identity based on homogenous bloodline descent (Chin, 2012: 134; Hon, 1996).[8]

In his essay "On the Origins of the Qin-Han Unification and the Global Imaginary of People of the Warring States Period," published in 1930 in the second volume of *Gushi bian*, Gu argued, contra KMT ideology, that there exists no historical evidence for a unitary Chinese or Han *minzu* stretching back in time to before the Qin unification in 221 BCE.

> We have long had a misunderstanding in thinking that the eighteen provinces inhabited by the Han people (*Han zu*) have been unified since ancient times. This mistakenly uses a point of view from after the Qin and Han to determine the borders before the Qin and Han. In this speech, I want to explain this idea, namely: China before the Qin and Han was simply a scattering of small states that were not unified; and only after small states turned into big states did there arise a determination to unify [them]; and only under this determination to unify [them], did there exist the Qin Emperor's efforts to create forty commanderies (Gu, 1930: 1).

This essay, and its claims about the irreducibly plural and fragmented nature of historical Chinese identity, represents the intersection of Gu's classicism with the ethnographic work that

would come to preoccupy him throughout the 1930s.[9] In this essay, Gu is careful to show that not only was early China not united, there also existed no such "world concept" or "global imaginary" (*shijie guannian*) in pre-Qin China that could realistically be said to express any such justification or understanding of unification. This concept did not develop even incipiently, Gu argues, until the end of the Warring States period around the third century BCE.

This was another way of saying that the "China" claimed by the KMT government to have existed in the same way throughout time was in fact the object of multiple names, contained within expanding and contracting borders at different historical periods, and inhabited by different kinds of people. In Gu's eyes, to claim, as the KMT government did, that the borders of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties were identical to those of the Warring States, and in turn identical to those of present-day China, "is a total joke," propagated to falsely erase *minzu*-based differences for the ends of national unity (Gu, 1930: 4–5). What's more, Gu argues, there is compelling evidence to suggest that even the vaunted Zhou dynasty—whose cultural splendor and political prosperity made it the subject of Confucian veneration for nearly two millennia—was founded in Shanxi by a race derived from the so-called "barbarian" Di and Qiang peoples (Gu, 1930: 2). In writing about the changing "world concepts" found in ancient states associated with the birth of the Chinese people, Gu throws critical historical light on contemporary discussions about the present-day unification of China.

Most recent historical commentators have interpreted Gu's stance on the status of minority cultures as an importantly iconoclastic counter-narrative to simple claims of national homogeneity, but nevertheless one which upholds the inherent superiority of Han-based Chinese culture. Gu's biographer Laurence Schneider maintains that Gu valued non-Chinese peoples and cultures instrumentally for their ability to rejuvenate the periodically moribund dominant culture,

enabling it to continue and persist (Schneider, 1971: 263). James Leibold insists that Gu's narrative remained "firmly within the linear teleology of a Han-dominated Chinese nation, projecting both forward and backward through time a single national subject: the *Zhonghua minzu*" (Leibold, 2006: 211). Recent work by Thomas Mullaney builds from these prior characterizations to deem the work of Gu and his colleagues influenced by May Fourth discourse as suffused with "an exoticizing and paternalistic sentiment" in regards to minority and frontier peoples (Mullaney, 2011: 56).

These readings associate Gu with the same ethnocentric logic of "culturalism" propagated by Chiang Kai-shek and Fu Sinian: that is, the belief that Chinese culture irresistibly and inevitably attracts and assimilates the peoples of lesser cultures, resulting in the persistence of Han political and cultural authority over increasingly broad neighboring territories. These interpretations of Gu find some support in his 1930 essay, where he mentions the cultural power of the people in the state of Wei assimilating groups with less advanced cultures (Gu, 1930: 3). In his *Autobiography*, published as a preface to the first edition of the *Gushi bian* in 1927, he also states that "Had it not been for the infusion of new blood from the Five Barbarian groups (*wu hu*) of the Chin [Qin] dynasty, from the Khitan, from the Jürched and Mongols, I fear that the Han race could not have survived" (Gu and Hummel, 1931: 166).

Such claims that the "Han race" required infusions from foreign others for its vitality and survival had become part of nearly unquestioned common sense by the 1920s, both for Chinese reformers as well as for Western academics in the emerging fields of demography and anthropology. As early as 1895 Liang Qichao and Yan Fu were calling for the use of education in foreign ideas to invigorate a Chinese people about to winnowed out of the race for evolutionary success (e.g., Yan Fu, 1985). Gu is somewhat distinctive, however, in pointing out

here the value to Chinese survival, not only of the Western foreign elements that formed the backbone of most reformist thought since the late nineteenth century, but also of the historical influxes of non-Han cultural groups that generated vitality during waning periods of the Chinese empire.

Of course, Gu is not the first to point out that Chinese culture historically benefited from (and was transformed by) its interaction with non-Chinese groups. His contemporary Liu Yizheng and others associated with the journal *Cultural Review* (*Xueheng*) attempted to show that precisely because "China" changed over time as it came into contact with foreign others, it was best understood as a *cultural* entity rather than a racial identity (Hon, 2004: 520). Yet for Liu and others persuaded by his much-reprinted *History of Chinese Culture* (Liu, 1932), there existed beneath these transformations an enduring "national character" (*guomin xing*), which formed the subject of that history and "whose genesis in antiquity defined the founding moment of the nation" (Kuo, 2014: 284). In contrast, recognizing how thoroughly Chinese culture was invigorated, and at certain points reconstituted, by "foreign" elements, Gu began to question both the character and the historical stability of that national subject. His work during the 1930s on the historical and human geography of the frontier eventually culminates in a definition of "the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*) as a *political* association rather than one comprised of a monolithic culture, race or ethnicity.[10] In doing so, he divests claims about Chinese nationality from the historical ethnocentrism of "culturalist" arguments such as those of Liu Yizheng and Chiang Kai-shek, while simultaneously transposing the theory of non-racial, affect-based forms of membership onto the term *minzu*.

"The Chinese Nation is One"

Gu's clearest and most direct arguments about the nature of the Chinese *minzu*, including its relationship to the various groups within it (which he also, somewhat confusingly, also calls *minzu*), are found in a series of essays he wrote in the mid- to late 1930s, in response to mounting pressure from the political regime as well as politically co-opted friends and colleagues, including Fu Sinian. Fu, in collusion with KMT political leaders, repeatedly and at length urged Gu to abandon his attention to the frontier question and his insistence on the plural origins of Chinese civilization (Fu, 1980a). Both interests, Fu believed, encouraged sympathy for ethnic minorities at the expense of national unity (Leibold, 2003: 484–5). Recognizing the imminent threat of Japanese invasion and national fragmentation, Gu's basic response to this conundrum is to claim that "the Chinese nation is one" (*Zhonghua minzu shi yi ge de*), a phrase that also serves as the name of his hugely controversial 1939 essay published in the monthly "Frontier" supplement of the *Yishibao*. The summary appended to the beginning of the essay explains Gu's point as "the Chinese people (*Zhongguo ren*) are all *Zhonghua minzu*"(Gu, 2010d: 94).[11] The essay goes on to explain, however, that such national unity can be properly achieved only through deeper understanding of the diverse forms of life, including minority *minzu* cultures, that in actuality comprised that nation.

Key to his argument is his historical research on the blending of races and cultures in ancient China, and the continuation of such interaction under the empire. To Gu, these processes of interaction effaced racial consciousness in China, while simultaneously producing a distinctive mode of group affiliation in which people continuously abandoned certain ways of life to take up more favorable alternatives (Gu, 2010d: 97). Such choices constantly refigured group identity in ways that challenged prevalent assumptions that cultural and *minzu* identity necessarily overlap. In a passage perhaps deliberately reminiscent of Chiang Kai-shek's claims

to Chinese territorial expansion through cultural assimilation, Gu argues that historically Chinese shared identity was built solely on *political* rather than racial or cultural unification:

> We had never had racial prejudices; one had only to live within the borders of China and accept a governmental authority to become mutually confirmed as a citizen (*renmin*) in one equal body.
>
> Above I have already made clear that the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*) is not organized by bloodlines. Now I want to go a step further, and say that the Chinese nation is not even built upon the same culture. I already spoke about Confucius not wanting to unbind his hair and fold his robe from the left, [an incident] which seemed to indicate that that old gentleman loathed barbarian culture.[12] But actually that is not the case; he was merely hoping that people could have a better life, not that people *had* to live life a certain way. Today the culture of the Han people, everyone says, seems to continue the culture of the Shang and Zhou [dynasties]. But actually this is not correct; from early on it selected the good points and abandoned the bad points of every kind of race and nationality to become a kind of hybrid (*zonghe*) culture (Gu, 2010d: 96).

Although there remain here assumptions about the natural superiority of Han culture—such as that it alone seems to have integrated the self-evidently "best" aspects of foreign cultures to create its own extraordinary civilization—Gu nevertheless shows here how a theory of *Zhonghua minzu* can be opened to the possibility that other people can legitimately live differently. First, he glosses a passage from the *Analects,* typically interpreted as dismissive of foreign culture, in terms that suggest other cultures worthy of emulation do exist alongside Chinese civilization

(Miyakawa, 1960: 24–26). Second, more revealingly, he implies that other cultures must be free to develop on their own terms if they are to spread their influence to others. This is particularly because Gu emphasizes the ongoing dynamism of this "hybridity" or blending. In so far as such historical blending took place, Gu argues, its result cannot legitimately be called "Han culture" or a "Han" nation anymore; it is now a "Chinese national culture" (*Zhonghua minzu de wenhua*) because "we are just people who live a shared life together under the same government and we ought not to have another name outside of *Zhonghua minzu*" (Gu, 2010d: 98).[13] Living as co-equals under a single government, Gu urges the abandonment of terms such as "China proper" (*Zhongguo benbu*) or the "Republic of Five Ethnicities" which divide peoples living on the peripheries from the predominant Han populations in eastern China, and diminish their commitment to national projects meant to include them (Gu, 2010d).

Gu's claims here draw heavily on his ongoing personal and professional engagement with members of the very minority groups the Nationalist narrative marginalized: specifically, the Hui (Chinese Muslim) people who inhabited the strategically important northern frontiers as well as many of China's major cities. Gu himself admitted that he became interested in Chinese Muslims only when Japan's incursions on the mainland forced greater attention to the importance of the border regions (Gu, 1937b: 187). But from that point forward, the Hui would become both a source and site of his thinking about the constitution of the *Zhonghua minzu* and the scope of its inclusion. His work with the Hui extended beyond academic research to personal and professional relationships, including the establishment of scholarly networking and publication outlets to give voice to young Hui activists and scholars. His activities with the Borderland Research Society in Beijing exposed him to increasing numbers of local Chinese Muslims, such as those associated with Chengda Normal College, as well as representatives from Egypt's al-

Azhar University (Mao Yufeng, 2011; Schneider, 1971: 286–7). In 1937 Gu accepted an invitation from the Boxer Educational Commission to travel to the Northwest, to explore firsthand the Muslim communities targeted by Japanese propaganda. Setting out for Lanzhou in September of that year, Gu's journey took him Qinghai to meet with the Muslim provincial officials General Ma Bufang and Ma Lin (Gu, 2010b). When the Japanese began bombing Lanzhou, Gu accepted yet another invitation to join National Yunnan University in the south (also an area with concentrated minority populations). There he continued his investigation of Muslim education until 1940, when he resumed normal teaching at the relocated Jilu University in Chengdu (Schneider, 1971: 290–1, 294).

By this point the Japanese invasion had forced relocation of the Chinese capital from Beijing in the northeast to Chongqing in the western interior, where most universities and other social institutions had already relocated at the outbreak of hostilities. Gu himself, as the editor of an anti-Japanese vernacular journal called *Popular Readings* (*Tongsu duwu*) and founder of an anti-Japanese propaganda organization, found himself on the Most Wanted list of the Japanese Guandong army and fled to Suiyuan (Liu, 2014: 192; Schneider, 1971: 280, 285). Anthropologists, sociologists and historians such as Gu found themselves situated now within the historical territories of the very ethno-cultural groups KMT policy hoped to integrate, offering unprecedented opportunities for their first-hand study as a means of solving the by-now boiling hot question of national unity: were these groups culturally distinct, politically autonomous communities deserving of their own territorial self-determination, as many Chinese communist party (CCP) members believed, or would recognizing these groups as distinct communities fracture Chinese territory and leave the entire country vulnerable to further Japanese infiltration and invasion, as the KMT insisted? (Mullaney, 2011: 61) These questions

were, obviously, more than academic: Japan had invaded Manchuria in 1931 on the pretense that Chinese authorities denied self-determination to the minority groups inhabiting its northern frontiers (Ando, 2003; Bodde, 1946).

By that point, under pressure from colleagues (including his love interest Tan Muyu, who accompanied KMT operatives to Suiyuan to begin investigating what was called "the border issue"), Gu's scrupulous scholarly isolation from politics had completely broken down (Chan, 2016: 173–176). Some contemporary and modern commentators tend to see Gu's political activism in this period, centered around his arguments about the unity of the *Zhonghua minzu*, as constituting a sharp break with his iconoclastic studies of China's ancient past in *Gushibian* (Ge, 2015; Qian, 1998: 171; discussed in Chan 2016, 165-6 et passim; Yu, 2007). Although his work did become more presentist, in that his research topics were chosen on the basis of present needs rather than the purely intellectual goals of historicism, Gu's scholarly activities in the 1930s can be interpreted as advancing the same "re-organization of the national heritage" (*zhengli guogu*) that originally guided his work on *Gushibian*.[14] As I explain in what follows, those scholarly interests increasingly dovetailed with political movements to expand the scope of the "national heritage" to include research on the identity-formation and ongoing presence of Hui Muslim and other minority groups in historical Chinese territory—a point also noted by Hui contributors to the *Yugong* (Jin, 1937: 182).[15]

Such research, and the historical examples of cultural interaction that it unearthed, enabled Gu to imagine a third way of understanding the *Zhonghua minzu*, beyond both the homogenizing racial identity narratives of the KMT and the fragmentation of China by Japanese imperial interests: groups such as the Hui could be recognized *both* as distinctive *minzu* ("nationalities") *and* as part of a politically unified *Zhonghua minzu* (the "Chinese nation"). The

concrete implications of that third way become manifest in Gu's work on the *Yugong* journal with Chinese Muslim writers, who used expanding publication opportunities to explore their relationship both to their supposed *minzu* affiliation, as well as to the Chinese state. Gu's work with Hui intellectuals offers both a case study, and further theorization, of how Gu could simultaneously argue both that distinctive *minzu* identities were important and worthy of particular historical, cultural and political recognition, while also maintaining that the Chinese nation which subsumed them was itself a unity.

The Han-Hui Question

Gu's most significant contribution to the debates over a Chinese Muslim identity arguably lies in his co-founding of the *Yugong* semi-monthly scholarly journal in 1934, which until its wartime demise in 1937 offered increasingly broad coverage of contemporary *minzu* debates in addition to more academic pieces on historical geography.[16] Gu identified the *Yugong* as the upper-class literate counterpart to his widely circulating vernacular *Popular Readings* series: both were central to promoting a new vision of the nation during the war with Japan (Liu, 2014: 194). The content of this journal—including but not limited to Gu's personal contributions—is therefore significant for understanding Gu's perspective on the nation.

Hui intellectuals were a core set of contributors (and central topic of discussion) for the *Yugong*, for several reasons. Unlike other Muslim groups in China such as the Turkic-speaking Uighurs, most Hui did not pose resistance to inclusion within the Chinese nation and exhibited many outwardly Chinese traits. They were dispersed across every province and urban center in China, where often only their Muslim religious and dietary practices distinguished them from their Han neighbors. These "familiar strangers" (to use Jonathan Lipman's term) had passed

examinations for public service under the former empire and loyally served emperors since the Ming dynasty (Lipman, 1998). In addition, Hui elites had long mastered the Chinese classical language (*wenyan*) of official discourse, and continued to use it even after Chinese reformers abandoned it for the vernacular in the 1920s (Aubin, 2006: 262). In fact, letters and articles published in *Yugong* by Muslim scholars and activists show that the Hui very much saw themselves as part of the Chinese nation—albeit not always on the terms extended to them (Bai, 2010; e.g., Jin, 1936). The ambivalence of this relationship led Japanese propagandists to exploit Hui dissatisfaction with Qing and Republican Chinese rule, including the creation of an anti-Chinese Muslim league in the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932 (Benite, 2004: 98; Bodde, 1946). But it also led many Muslim scholars to explore creatively the nature of their inclusion in the Chinese state.

This "Hui-Han question" formed the core of a special supplement to the *Yugong* in 1937, spearheaded by a reprint of Gu's essay "Hui Han wenti he muqian yingyou de gongzuo" (The Hui-Han question and the work we ought to be doing right now") with responses and original essays from a number of Hui scholars. These discussions continued work begun by Hui intellectuals more than three decades earlier, when they debated the nature of their inclusion in the Chinese state in such publications as *Xinghui pian* (*Awakening Islam*) and *Yisilan* (*Islam*) (Aubin, 2006: 252; Yang and Yu, 1992). The wartime exigencies of the 1930s had provoked attacks on Islam and Muslim customs, inflaming existing prejudice (and even violence) against these presumably cultural outsiders to the Chinese nation (Cieciura, 2016: 127). In the *Yugong*, as well as other like-minded publications including Chengda University's appropriately named *Yuehua* (*Crescent China*), Hui intellectuals pursued two basic arguments in response. The first argument sought to deepen the critique of *minzu* by recognizing it as a contingent rather than

natural signifier, thereby troubling its identification with a homogenous cultural, religious, or ethnic community. The second interrogated the specific relationship of Muslims to a nation-state in which they did not form the majority. Both of these projects shared a similar goal: to establish the terms under which the Hui could be seen not as merely assimilated, Sinified Muslims, but rather as a group constituted by distinct experiences and practices that themselves should contribute to a broader understanding of *Zhonghua minzu.*

The first argument is typified by Wang Riwei's discussion of the distinction between the Hui as an nationality or people (*zu*) and as a religion (*jiao*), published in *Yugong* in August 1936. Advancing a detailed historical argument that made systematic use of Chinese records including dynastic histories, Wang argued that the term Hui, often used interchangeably to refer both to Chinese Muslims as well as to Islam as a religion, originated as a term for a people (*zu*) whose association with Islam came only much later (Wang, 1936: 41–42). As late as Song times, he argued, "Huihui" described not only Uyghurs in Gaochang and Beiting, but also the peoples of the Pamir high plateau; in the Yuan, terms such as "Hui" referred indiscriminately to the "persons of various categories" (*semu ren*) of western China (Wang, 1936: 44). Only with Sun Yat-sen's introduction of the "Five Race Republic," Wang argues, were the language, clothing, and practices of the so-called "Hui nationality" standardized to suit Sun's definition of a *minzu*. Wang's work dovetailed with that of Tong Shuye and others publishing in the *Yugong* that interrogated the relationship between categories such as *Xia* ("Chinese") and the contemporary groups of people they named (Tong, 1934).

These historical analyses showed decisively that both Muslims and the Hui—whether those categories were overlapping or not—had nearly always been a part of what was considered China. But these arguments did more than simply upend narratives of national homogeneity; they

also supported an already emergent theoretical insight about the nature of *minzu* that would go on to play a major role in Gu's work. By offering persuasive and systematic historical evidence of how variably markers such as "Hui" and "Chinese" were applied to particular groups across time, these arguments demonstrated the degree to which terms such as *minzu* did not mark naturally-occuring, pre-existing groupings of people. Rather, *minzu* was a deliberately constructed and contextualized category that could be politically imposed by national authorities on minority groups, but also resisted and refigured by the actions of their members. The borders and members of any given *minzu* were therefore contingent and subject to political transformation, a point made by Bai Shouyi 白壽彝 (1909-2000) in his response to Gu's article on the "Han-Hui question." According to Bai and other contributors, perceptions of Hui people and of Islam more generally in China come from the polarizing categories imposed by the Qing rulers, which themselves did not reflect reality (Bai, 1937: 187; Da, 1937). As Jin Jitang 金吉堂 (1908-1978) notes, being a Muslim did not make one Hui, because there were other Muslim groups in China who were not perceived as Hui; yet the claim that there existed a single bloodline that could determine Hui-ness was also untenable, precisely because Hui claimed so many different lands of origin (Jin, 1936: 29).

For some Hui intellectuals, including Bai, this realization about the flexibility of *minzu* categories and their detachment from bloodline lineages (including race) made possible arguments for the present and future inclusion of the Hui as loyal members of the Chinese nation (Bai, 1937: 186), rather than as permanent "sojourners" (*qiaomin*) whose loyalties lie in their presumed homelands (*zuguo*) in Turkey, Egypt, and places west (Liu, 1929: 60). Imam Wang Jingzhai, writing about Hui patriotism in *Yuehua* in 1930, elaborates the principles of this loyalty using the Arabic term *watan*, or "homeland," which he roughly translates as "the place where

people have political power and responsibility" (Wang, 1930: 1). Citing an alleged Quranic hadith, "*hubb al-watan min al-īmān*" ("love of the *watan* is an article of faith"), Wang argues decisively that Chinese Muslims should support the *guojia* ("state") of which they are a part (Huang, 2012: 79–80; for discussion of Wang's use of Quranic hadith here, see Matsumoto, 2006: 128; Wang, 1930). In an essay that reveals much about the interpenetration of Chinese and Muslim thought, Wang's colleague at *Yuehua*, a writer using the pseudonym Liu Zhou, quotes the Chinese classical philosopher Mencius to underscore the importance to his Muslim audience of the reliance of everyone on the nation, for the safety and security of themselves as well as their religion (Liu, 1929: 2).[17]

In pursuing these two arguments, Hui writers draw on sources ranging from Chinese classicism and traditional historiography, to contemporary Egyptian debates over Quranic hadith.[18] Their arguments offer a clearer picture of how the contingent signifier of *minzu* could mark both the distinctive contributions of minority groups—here, the Hui *minzu* specifically—as well as the larger politically-unified whole associated with the *Zhonghua minzu*. It is therefore not surprising then that for Gu and these Hui colleagues at the *Yugong*, the means to resolve the "Han-Hui question" is not to promote assimilation of Hui into Chinese civilization or to use them instrumentally as a means of Han revitalization, but rather to establish institutions that could uncover and sustain the distinctive historical contributions Hui have made as simultaneously both Muslims and Chinese. They express shock at the difficulty of doing research or even finding information on Hui and Muslim culture in China, given the globally recognized resplendence of Islamic thought, contained in classics plentiful enough "to make a pack-ox sweat"(Bai, 1937; Gu, 1937a: 180). Through the establishment of institutions meant to develop knowledge about Islam and Chinese Muslims, such as research networks, government-funded

religious schools, the professional collection of Muslim books and historical records, and the expansion of Islamic libraries, Gu hopes greater knowledge about the Hui will lead to a redefinition of national identity. Central to these efforts is establishing, at all educational levels, the study of Hui writing and language (*Huihui wenzi yuyan*, presumably Arabic) and history as a proper form of *guowen*, or "national literature," because Hui language and culture are legitimately Chinese (Gu, 1937a: 180). This does not mean that they are to become assimilated into Han or "Chinese culture," or even that their historical contributions to the invigoration of the larger "Han minzu" should be emphasized over and above other features of their religious or cultural life. Rather, Gu is explicit that the culture of the Hui is a distinctive yet integral and irreducible component of the larger Chinese nation. Some contributors to the symposium take these arguments farther, to suggest that recognition of Hui culture as integral to the *Zhonghua minzu* should eventually have influence over national culture. As Xue Wenbo 薛文波(1909-1984) argues, "Muslim culture (*huijiao de wenhua*) is not only a kind of rampart of virtue [that protects the Hui *minzu*]; if its religious intentions were to be blended (*ronghua*) within the hearts of people in society, its influence on the nation's *minzu* would be truly great" (Xue, 1937: 183).

This approach sets Gu apart from contemporaries such as Chen Yinke, who attempted to write general "cultural histories" which acknowledged transformation of Chinese culture through interaction with "foreign" influences but only in terms of the "gradual change of the 'national spirit,' which nevertheless retains its basic characteristics" (Schneider, 1996: 64). Rather, Gu urges a new stage of development and outreach that takes Hui Muslim identity as a central component of Chinese identity:

> According to my own observations among young Muslims I have approached, this new stage must include at the very least the following features. (1) It must advance a theoretical elucidation of the fundamental doctrines and most important teachings of the religion [of Islam]. (2) It must promote the general recognition by both Muslims and non-Muslims of the historical interactions of Arabic and Chinese culture, as well as various facts about the lack of a clear racial (*zhongzu*) difference between Muslims and non-Muslims. (3) It must translate and organize all types of Hui-language texts on a large scale and in great detail, to offer fresh provocations to the Chinese academic world. (4) It must have close contact and deep understanding with the various Muslim countries in southwest and central Asia, so that on the basis of cultural relationships they will find reasons to protect the border defenses in the western part of our country (Gu, 1937b: 188).

Not only are these measures a good way to develop Islamic religious consciousness among the Hui, Gu explains, they are also truly foundational for the establishment of the *Zhonghua minzu* (Gu, 1937b: 188). In speaking of a "new stage" of development for Hui cultural movements, Gu promotes a distinctly forward-looking, open-ended vision for the Chinese nation that belies claims that he expects their contribution to amount simply to a "melding" or enhancement" of existing Han culture.

This conclusion contradicts that of James Leibold, as well as more recent Chinese commentators such as Ma Rong, who argue that the "blending" (*ronghe*) Gu asserts here and in essays such as "The Chinese nation is one" entails the eventual assimilation of all ethnicities and races into a unified Chinese nation, akin to the American "melting pot" (Leibold, 2003: 482–483), or else renders meaningless their political, legal and social practices in the face of existing

national institutions (Rong Ma 馬戎, 2012: 5).[19] Rather, there is strong evidence to suggest that Gu had in mind a much more open-ended and indeterminate vision, which uses the fact of racial and cultural "blending" in China's past to argue for the ongoing interaction of irreducibly diverse (but not for that reason necessarily clearly-bounded) groups within the future Chinese nation. In a 1937 speech given to the Muslim Study Society, which in a later postscript he identifies as an early iteration of ideas that would be elaborated in greater detail in his essay "The Chinese Nation is One," Gu breaks this more ambitious goal down into three separate tasks (Gu, 2010a: 64–65). First, the culture of each nationality (*zu*) ought to interact with each other, which includes spreading the beneficial practices of each culture to other parts of China through sports competitions, cuisine, and most importantly simple human interaction. Gu realizes that many places in the interior suffer from serious transportation difficulties, so while working to improve their infrastructure, interested parties may also collect things for display in museums to at least familiarize people in coastal areas with the ways of life of people in the interior and vice-versa (Gu, 2010a: 62–3).

Second, scholars ought to research and write a new-style "general history" (*tongshi*) that collates records from every *minzu* to build a shared history. The Han-centric nature of most current national histories, Gu complains, incites disgust from other *minzu* groups, leading to enmity and resentment rather than the feelings of mutual sympathy required for national unity (Gu, 2010a: 63). On this basis, novels, poems and other popular literature can be produced to move people to understand and sympathize with their compatriots in different contexts. Otherwise, the persistent mistreatment of the interior regions under Qing and Republican regimes will be further transposed to a racial key, in that cultural differences will be interpreted as evidence of racial prejudice by the dominant majority (Gu, 2010a: 63–4). Finally, and

perhaps most importantly, Gu urges his young Muslim audience to work toward fostering "a forceful public opinion" in the frontier regions, to serve "as the mouthpiece of the people" to eliminate their hardships, identify corrupt officials, and advance their education (Gu, 2010a: 64). Like the other tasks, this one too was built on the assumption that the work of developing education and infrastructure, already begun in the frontier, would be continued and strengthened.

These tasks, along with those he outlines in response to the "Han-Hui question," mirror —probably deliberately—the kinds of historical interactions that Gu has all along claimed to have originally constituted the hybrid Chinese civilization. Rather than see Hui contributing to an already-existing entity whose parameters are assumed to be transparent and unchanging, the goal of such institution-building efforts and research is to interrogate what it means to be Chinese, as a means of inviting both Han and Hui to participate in a co-making of that identity. By offering these "tasks" as suggested strategies for an ongoing cultural movement that places Hui and non-Han *minzu* experience at the *center* (not just the periphery) of the identity of *Zhonghua minzu*, Gu indicates unambiguously that Chinese Muslims, like other *minzu*, are constitutive of China—not only looking backward, but also going forward.

***Jiao*-affiliation and the Dissolution of "*minzu*"**

Gu does sometimes explain his project of political unification using the term *tonghua*, often translated into English (and sometimes understood by his contemporaries to mean) "assimilation," giving the impression he does promote the eventual dissolution of minority groups into the grander unified *Zhonghua minzu*. However, in a lengthy rejoinder to sociologist Fei Xiaotong, published in the "Frontier Supplement" of *Yishibao*, Gu finally offers a decisively clear statement of the distinctively political, not cultural or racial, consequences of *tonghua*. His

response to Fei also offers further support for Gu's introduction of the term *jiao*, "teachings," as an alternative in some cases for the term *minzu*. Until that point, Gu had used *minzu* to refer both to the "Chinese nation" and to the "nationalities" that he claimed comprised it, creating some of the confusion Fei cites in his letter.

In that letter, Fei argued that by ascribing a multicultural and plural *minzu* character to a unified *Zhonghua minzu*, Gu conflates *minzu* (nation or nationality) with *guojia* (state or country). His thesis, Fei argues, thus amounts to nothing more than saying "The governmental structure of the people (*renmin*) within the borders of China is one," when really the "*minzu* question" troubles the very congruence of national and state borders that Gu seems to be assuming (Fei, 2010: 135). In response, Gu elaborates on how the *Zhonghua minzu* can be understood as a distinctively political association without reducing its coherence to simply the shared adherence to specific formal institutions. Rather, its coherence lies in the group affect (*tuanjie de qingxu*) that also constitutes, in his view, the (seemingly necessary and sufficient) condition for the definition of a *minzu* (Gu, 2010c: 125). This affect is produced through the collective accumulation of individual human intention (*renmen de yizhi*) and as such is importantly and distinctively independent of things such as language, history, and culture, which are produced in large part by the environment (Gu, 2010c: 126). The *tonghua* spoken of by Sun Yat-sen, Gu argues, cannot possibly mean assimilation into the "Great Han" race, because this kind of cultural coherence does not exist even within what are taken to be existing *minzu* (Gu, 2010c: 130).[20]

Gu's response turns on an alternative view that poses *minzu* identity not only as a social construction but also one in which individuals deliberately gain membership through participation in shared ways of life—what Gu calls the *minzu's* "teachings." In Gu's original

essay, "The Chinese Nation is One," he relates an observation from his time in the northwest the previous year. He notes that when discussing group differences with ordinary laypeople there, often they would remark, "We are of the Hui teaching (*jiao*); you are of the Han teaching; and there are people on the steppes who are of the Tibetan teaching." Gu remarks that

> In listening to them, I thought their use of *jiao* ["teaching"] instead of *zu* ["people" or "nationality"] was an exceedingly interesting thing. So-called "teaching" is a cultural classification.[21] Because culture is different, there are differences in ways of life, so that between them although they are all people of the same country they do not all live in the same way—much like there are divisions in occupation, such as the military, politics, scholarship, agriculture, industry, and commerce (Gu, 2010d: 100).

Just as all professional occupations are different but equally necessary, so too must different kinds of cultural formations exist and flourish within the Chinese nation. And, just as occupations—and their membership—can change on the basis of how those members perform what are taken to be constitutive functions, so too can Han turn Hui or vice-versa. In this passage, Gu identifies these participatory practices with "culture," suggesting parallels with similar processes that were assumed to function during the imperial era to transform "barbarians" into "Chinese" (Sun and Wang, 2013: 136–8). Significantly, however, there remains none of the chauvinism that once motivated such claims to cultural transformation. "*Jiao*" or "teachings" here denotes only the "ways of life" different groups of people pursue; in contrast to cognate terms such as "Sinicization," *jiao*-based transformations do not designate any particular culture

as inherently more capable of transforming others or drawing them into its ambit of territorial domination.

As an example of how such a theory, so similar to the culturalist claims assumed by Chiang Kai-shek and others, would work absent the presumption of an inherently superior culture, Gu offers a further illuminating example. During his travels through Gansu and Qinghai, he met two families of descendants of Confucius (designated by the family name Kong). Yet these Confucian descendants were not themselves Confucian: one had turned Muslim, and the other Tibetan (*fanzi*).[22] Did these people flippantly discard the teachings of their ancestor? Gu asks. No, they simply responded to the needs of the environment, and having freedom of religion, they chose to enter the Hui and Tibetan cultural groups. This proves, Gu argues, that people are not rigidly part of certain cultural groups, but ought to follow their interior desires and the needs of the external environment to choose an appropriate life (Gu, 2010d: 103). The *Zhonghua minzu* cannot but accommodate such diversity if it is to survive imperialism and embrace the true possibilities of its past.

These views had clear precedents in the discussions of *minzu* published in the *Yugong*. Already in 1937, the Harvard-educated Qi Sihe marshalled contemporary American anthropological and political theory—including that of Harold Laski and Arthur Holcombe—to refute the conflation of race, ethnicity and nationality evident in Sun Yat-sen's principle of *minzu*. Qi argued that neither racial similarity nor lifestyle were adequate for determining a *minzu*, because these changed over time and space, and through interaction (including inter-marriage) with others (Qi, 1937: 31–32). The hybrid identities that resulted meant that all racial divides were arbitrary and had no scientific value. Therefore, he argues, national unity cannot lie in racial background or other "material" conditions, but only in subjective affect ("the sentiment of

an esprit de corps*," bicijian paoze de qingxu*) (Qi, 1937: 30). The Hui intellectual Jin Jitang similarly concludes that Hui identity, absent other racial, geographic, or even cultural indicators, must rest only on the "shared purpose" (*gongtong zhi mudi*) of living in China and pursuing the Muslim teaching (about which he notes there is also disagreement) (Jin, 1936: 29).[23]

In his response to Fei and in subsequent elaborations, Gu melds these theories to an indigenous culturalism, to offer an innovative definition for *tonghua*: *tonghua*, Gu conclusively asserts, thus amounts to nothing more than "modernization" in historically underprivileged frontier areas to alleviate the alienation and vulnerability felt by peoples of China's frontier regions: that is, providing "in general, the skills and knowledge that a modern person ought to possess, and the material livelihood that a modern person should enjoy" (Gu, 2010c: 132). At that point, it is up to those peoples and individuals what they want to accept, reject, or transform. Indeed, Gu argues, their cultures may even encourage Han individuals to "*tonghua*" into a member of the "frontier people" (Gu, 2010c: 132).

Gu may here have been drawing on arguments developed by his Hui colleagues at the *Yugong*, such as Xue Wenbo and Bai Shouyi, who argued that part of the solution to resolving the "Han-Hui question" is recognizing the indeterminacy of the direction of influence between Han and Hui. One reason for studying Islam in China, Bai notes, is that "from the perspective of global cultural history (*shijie wenhua shi*)," Islam does not only absorb elements of other cultures, but also can transform them.[24] These readings of Chinese Muslim history reinforce an idea of "culture" as a target of deliberate (re)making in response to different contexts and needs, rather than as a given set of practices characteristic of particular ethnic or racial groups. They may also explain Gu Jiegang's insistence on the inclusion of Hui Muslims into Chinese nation-building: not only were the Hui in possession of a cultural heritage combining both Arabian and

Chinese influences, they were staunch exemplars of cultural adaptation and survival, from which Han had much to learn. In doing so, he creates unprecedented space in Chinese discourse for legitimating the contributions of non-Han minorities to Chinese culture and nation as valuable *on their own terms*, rather than simply via their contributions to a pre-existing Han culture.

On this reading, Gu cannot possibly mean by *tonghua* "assimilation" as it is commonly meant, i.e., as a form of absorption into a majority group without remainder. Using Gu's own vocabulary, we might more precisely define *tonghua* as a shift of *jiao*-affiliation, in which personal commitments to certain groups change over time in a multi-directional and open-ended way, resulting in broader changes to culture and practice for both individuals and the groups they inhabit. We might say *minzu*s and their members can thus be *tonghua'*ed into either other *minzu* groups, or into the larger *minzu* of a (modern) nation-state. These subgroups are themselves designated informally by certain practices or *jiao* but are never clearly bordered (Gu, 2010d: 102). The *Zhonghua minzu* for Gu thus stands as a special instance of *jiao*-affiliation, a site of encounter and exchange whose hybrid culture overlaps with but exceeds the affiliations of its internal *minzu*. Specifically, the *Zhonghua minzu* does not promote a homogenous cultural or ethnic identity; its only identity is a political one, emerging from the minimalist demands of what Qi Sihe called the "subjective affect" of groupness. On this basis, Gu argues, the term *minzu* should be abandoned as a description of these sub-groups in favor of *jiao*-affiliation (Gu, 2010d: 100). Only this shift in conceptual vocabulary will make clear that what binds individuals together into larger communities has nothing to do with bloodline descent or race (*zhongzu*), with which *minzu* as a category has become mistakenly, albeit pervasively, confounded (Gu, 2010d: 98–99).[25]

The Terms of Being "One"

Gu's nationalist project and his activities with Hui activists throughout the 1930s might best be understood as an invitation to decenter what contemporary scholars have identified as an "ethnicist" model of the nation, in which the nation is seen as "defined by common culture and alleged descent" (Townsend, 1992: 103; citing Smith, 1983: 176). Gu argues rather for a view of the nation defined by a shared political consciousness, but also suggests specific reforms in broad areas of education, research, and culture that may consolidate—but can never legislate in advance—a new, broader conceptualization of the Chinese nation and its internally plural culture going forward. His project does not, in other words, aspire to be either a coherent and comprehensive project of institutional design or a normatively defensible philosophical model that would resolve all tensions between *jiao*-groups and the *Zhonghua minzu*. He begins with more fundamental questions about how the modern Chinese nation, and indeed historical Chinese identity itself, might be conceived. For Gu, the *Zhonghua minzu* is (and should always continue to be) an open-ended and emergent, rather than teleologically defined or persistently unified, entity.

Gu's work in this area has been negatively compared to Will Kymlicka's vision of multiculturalism, defined as the "inalienable right" of different ethnic and political groups to peacefully co-exist under a unified political state (Leibold, 2003: 482).[26] Yet the comparison is not as unfavorable to Gu as it may appear. Despite grander claims that "the idea of multiculturalism in contemporary political discourse and in political philosophy is about how to understand and respond to the challenges associated with cultural and religious diversity," (Song, 2017), multicultural challenges to national and political unity are typically phrased as

accommodations to non-liberal minority groups, on the basis of those particular principles of justice presumably held by the "dominant" liberal national culture.[27] Gu would take fundamental issue with this way of thinking about the construction of the nation, precisely because his project is to challenge rather than reproduce the status quo hierarchies that uphold one group or culture as normatively or culturally "dominant" over others.[28] To grant "cultural rights" or even "recognition" (Taylor, 1992) to these *minzu* in the fashion of multiculturalism would be to further institutionalize their marginalization.

Gu argues rather that, if China was never as unified, Han-centric, and changeless as contemporary nationalists claimed, then the contributions of non-Han peoples must be recognized as legitimately part of the *Zhonghua minzu.* To Gu, this means that such peoples are seen as innovative producers of an always-expanding political community shared in common with many others, rather than as the "small and weak peoples" predicted by Sun Yat-sen to inevitably dissolve into some grander, pre-existing entity called "Chinese culture." His project thus bears closer similarity to—and would benefit—ongoing work by Talal Asad and William Connolly, who resist the liberal model of identity and multiculturalism in favor of a de-centered plurality in which *every* group is viewed "as a minority among minorities" (Asad, 2010: 180; Connolly, 1996). In speaking of Muslim minorities in another part of the world, Asad argues for a radical shift in the constellation of power, away from a model in which a centralized "majority" presides over smaller "minorities" toward a formation that attends to how "overlapping patterns of territory, authority and time collide with the idea of the imagined national community" (Asad, 2010: 179; see also Crossley, 1990). Gu's work helps us to see how such tensions, which inevitably beset the project of national unification, might be marshalled to productively create, rather than assume, the identity of the entire nation—by securing the conditions under which

"minority" contributions are made constitutive of, and not just supplementary to, the *Zhonghua minzu*.

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[1] Here, I translate *Zhonghua minzu* (literally, "people(s) of the Central Florescence") roughly as I expect Gu intended it, as the larger political category into which various cultural and ethnic identities (which he also calls *minzu*) of China might fit. (His dual usage of *minzu* to mean both the larger "nation" and smaller "nationalities" is a practice which continues today in the PRC, by commentators such as Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe: see Elliott, 2015: 193). Although such an inclusive usage of *Zhonghua minzu* is often associated with Liang Qichao, who coined the term (Leibold, 2007: 10, 32), Julia Schneider argues on the basis of a close textual reading that "*Zhonghua (minzu*) refers by definition only to the Chinese (*Han*) people in late imperial texts as well as those from the 1920s" (Schneider, 2016: 46, see also 120 *et passim*).

[2] "Culturalism" is a term coined by Anglophone historians, starting with Joseph Levenson (1958), to describe the Chinese imaginary of an "all-under-Heaven" defined by the normative structures of Chinese civilization. For a critical overview of "culturalism" as a concept in English-language historiography to describe the "culturally defined community" of pre-modern China, see (Townsend, 1992). It is frequently identified with the claim that Chinese civilization would inevitably "Sinicize" non-Chinese peoples (Fairbank, 1968; Schneider, 2017: 52), but because variants of this claim are also seen in other civilizations (such as the 'Sankrit cosmopolis' described by Pollock, 2000), and because Gu here empties these assumptions of their specifically Chinese features, I retain the more general-sounding term "culturalism" over the more specific "Sinicization" (*Hanhua*).

[3] *Minzu* is, to put it mildly, an incredibly complex concept in modern Chinese. Originally a neologism to translate the German word *volk*, over the past hundred years it has taken on collateral nuances derived from the German, English, French and Russian (Soviet) languages of

nationalism, ethnicity and peoplehood. Zhou Chuanbin offers a helpful chart of this evolutionary process, showing that generally *minzu* "with Chinese characteristics" can best be translated into English as "nation" or "people" (Zhou, 2003: 24). Given that Gu and his colleagues are debating the very meaning of *minzu*, I leave this term untranslated in most of the essay, to avoid overdetermining the analytic work done by it. Leaving *minzu* untranslated in the English name of research institutions, scholarly conferences, and journals is also an increasing practice in the contemporary PRC.

[4] Gu's *Zhonghua minzu* category, I will show, explicitly rejected claims that China was built either on a single culture (*wenhua*) or a single race (*zhongzu*). To the extent that homogeneity (or claims of homogeneity) along either or both axes are usually implicated with "ethnicity" (see Townsend 1992, 109), typically "defined as a sense of common ancestry based on cultural attachments, past linguistic heritage, religious affiliations, claimed kinship, or some physical traits," (James, 2017: n.p.) we can infer that Gu would also be against claims to a Chinese ethnicity. However, I generally avoid use of this term (except when it is used by secondary sources), to prevent conflation of this broader and more diffuse concept with the concepts of "race" and "culture" that capture more precisely Gu's own vocabulary. For a discussion of how "ethnicity" is conflated historically with "race," see Crossley (1990: 2).

[5] The term "constituencies" is taken from Crossley (2002: 44), who defines them as "the constructed audiences to which the multiple imperial personae [of the Qing emperor] addressed themselves."

[6] Jiaozhi is now part of northern Vietnam.

[7] Xuantu was the name of one of four Han commanderies established after this area was taken by the founding emperor of the Han, Han Wudi: http://baike.baidu.com/view/897811.htm

[8] Hon's arguments focus on Gu's commitment to cultural pluralism in the *Gushi bian*, but do not consider how Gu extended or transformed these commitments in his debates with Nationalist ideologues in the 1930s.

[9] In this sense, I agree with recent arguments made by Chan Hok-yin, who shows that contrary to the pronouncements of historians such as Yu Yingshi, Gu's work in the 1930s exhibits conceptual continuity with that of his earlier iconoclasm. See Chan, 2016: 194-195. I say more about this below.

[10] This emphasis on *political* association again distinguishes Gu from someone such as Liu Yizheng, who explicitly distinguished the Chinese "nation" as a group separate from, and at times in tension with, any given sovereign authorities (Hon, 2004: 523).

[11] It is not clear, however, if Gu himself wrote this introductory summary, which simplifies the more complex issues Gu discusses here.

[12] That is, because unbinding one's hair and folding one's robe a certain way were considered by Confucius to be practices of uncivilized "barbarians."

[13] Given the extent of his research on the shifting territorial boundaries of historical Chinese geography in the *Yugong* and elsewhere, we can safely assume that for Gu this definition of Chinese identity was doubly contingent, subject necessarily not only to changes in political authority but also to the transformations of historical, cultural and geographical circumstances over time.

[14] Chan Hok-Yin argues that the continuity in Gu's work lies in his commitment to explicating the plurality of the Chinese past and to finding unity in plurality, and vice-versa (Chan, 2016: 195.) I agree, but would stress the important political goals such commitments served: here, they underwrote Gu's suport for research on a broadly expanded "Chinese nation." (For an

introduction to the ‘re-organization of the national heritage’ movement, see Eber, 1968; for a discussion of Gu’s relationship to that movement, see Jenco, 2017: 463-465).

[15] Jin explicitly notes the continuity between Gu’s work on *Gushibian* and his call to attend to the records and history of Muslims in China, a project he calls “organizing” (*zhengli*) Chinese Muslim history. Indeed, such work effectively fulfills the mandates of new “national studies” outlined by Hu Shi in his 1921 statement inaugurating the *National Studies Journal* (Guoxue jikan), namely to broaden the scope of research; attend to the systematic organization of the past; and broadly seek comparative material (Hu Shi, 1953: 5). For Hu as for Gu, the “national heritage” (*guogu*) was constituted by the “entirety of China’s past culture and history,” not only those parts devoid of foreign influence that scholars took to be the ‘national essence” (*guocui*) (Hu 1953, 6).

[16] The journal was named after the *Yugong* chapter of the ancient classic the *Book of Documents* that described ancient geography. *Yugong* means literally “The Contributions of Yu,” but more often is translated as “The Tribute of Yu.” Yu was the ancient sage held to be responsible for irrigation and river diversion in early antiquity. One of the journal’s contributors, Qi Sihe, identifies “research of the *minzu* question” as one of the journal’s core concerns (Qi, 1937: 25).

[17] Pleas to "preserve China's original virtue" are found throughout *Yuehua*, signaling the close relationship between Chinese philosophy and Muslim belief in the eyes of *Yuehua's* writers and readers (e.g., Ma, 1931).

[18] Matsumoto Masumi's work (2003, 2006) on Chinese Muslim intellectuals documents the influence of Middle Eastern, specifically Egyptian, Islamic movements in their writing.

[19] Part of Ma Rong’s argument for the “depoliticization” of minzu identity, which he links to Gu’s arguments in the 1930s, seems to rest on the claim—which Gu would likely deny—that

most of the *minzu* identified in the Ethnic Classification Project of 1954 do not have meaningfully distinct forms of political (including legal and economic) institutions or practices that would be necessary to incorporate into the larger nation (Ma, 2012: 5).

[20] He repeats these claims explicitly in the course of responding to critics of the "Chinese Nation is One" essay, including the Miao writer Lugefu'er, who objected to the possibility that Han might share historical origins with the southern Miao people. Gu argued that bloodline descent was a historical matter, which had little to do with the political consciousness or "shared sentiment" that did the real work of unifying the nation (Sun and Wang, 2013: 127–8).

[21] Before the neologism "religion" (*zongjiao*) was adopted by modern Chinese from European languages, *jiao* or "teaching" was typically used to designate what might be considered religious practices. Ultimately, however, *jiao* is bound up with cultural as much as religious practices, particularly in cases where (as here) the very boundaries between two groups are not clearly designated as belonging to one category of difference over another. This is especially true given the ambivalent relationship between Chinese forms of religious practice and the modern category of "religion" that itself reflects Protestant Christian pre-occupations and values (see, e.g., Yang, 2008).

[22] In the Ming and Qing periods, "Fan" referred to a variety of culturally diverse non-Han ethnic groups; however, it is likely Gu is speaking here of the Tibetan peoples of Gansu. For more on the ethnonym "Fan," see Ma (2008: 3, fn. 6).

[23] Jin does, however, make claims about the identity of the *Huizu* (that is, the Hui *minzu*) as determined by religion, a line of argument which Gu explicitly rejects (Gu, 2010d: 101)

[24] "Islamic culture…has absorbed ancient Greek culture, Persian culture, and Indian culture to produce its own distinctive nature. On another, it has repeatedly spread to medieval Europe, developing contemporary European civilization" (Bai, 1937: 185).

[25] Gu here includes the English words "nation" and "race" as translations of *minzu* and *zhongzu*, respectively.

[26] Leibold's presentation of Kymlicka's idea of multiculturalism overstates its case in at least one significant respect: so far as I know, Kymlicka nowhere defends these rights as "inalienable." For Kymlicka and other liberal multiculturalists, such cultural "rights" are posited only insofar as there are presumed to exist clearly-defined ethnic groups capable of exercising them for predetermined liberal ends—in Kymlicka's case, autonomy and equality (for a well-known critique of Kymlicka on these grounds, see Kukathas, 1992; Kymlicka, 1989, 1996).

[27] There are, of course, prominent exceptions (Kukathas, 2003; Young, 1990)

[28] It also goes without saying that Gu would also fundamentally reject the notion (promoted by many multiculturalists) that the valid units of analysis are groups defined by "societal cultures" that share a single language, culture and history (e.g., Kymlicka, 1989: 135; Taylor, 1992).

Biographical paragraph

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