

# Translating 'Nation' in Late Qing China:

The Discourse and Power of Nation in the Remaking of Chinese Society, 1895-1911

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## Introduction

In the study of the Chinese nation, a crucial problem lies in different understandings of 'nation' inside and outside of China<sup>1</sup>. Duara (1993:1) summarises this dilemma succinctly: 'most sinologists view the Chinese nation as a relatively recent development. . . this contrasts with the view of Chinese nationalists and the ordinary people of China that their country is an ancient body that has evolved into present times'. Crucial in this disparity is the existence of different conceptual frameworks applied by those inside and outside of China. In the west, nation is understood as part of a *new political* structure of nation-state that expresses itself as a sovereign subject of history, superseding traditional dynasties. In China, however, people view their nation as a long-standing *ethnic* body of civilization dating back three millennia. The incongruence is created in part by the translation of 'nation' as *minzu* (民族 people's lineage) into Chinese in late Qing. As a term, '*minzu*' has never fully conveyed the meaning of nation in the western sense. As indicated by the semantics of *min* (民) and *zu* (族), the Chinese translation points to the 'lineage' (*zu*) of a 'people' (*min*). The concept of joining *min* and *zu* as a rendition for 'nation', however, is not of Chinese origin. It is instead derived from Japan and the Japanese translation of 'nation'. Rather than viewing *minzu* as an erroneous translation, this study examines the role that different renditions of nation plays in the social changes of late Qing society. Drawing on Melvin Richter (2005) and his idea of translation as a conceptual transfer, I discuss the political dynamics behind the ascent of *minzu* as a most widely accepted translation. Moreover, I probe into the crucial, and yet neglected issue of the

impact of the discourse of nation on the epistemic remapping in late Qing. Key to my analysis is the way in which different renditions are temporally enmeshed with historical semantics, but spatially reconfigured from its western origin. I argue that far from being a linear linguistic transfer of ideas across civilisational boundaries, the discourse of nation is part and parcel of China's socio-political struggle to cope with the onset of modernity to survive in the western-dominated 'modern' world. Translating 'nation' into Chinese illustrates the process of adopting, negotiating, and creatively appropriating an alien system of values, institutions, and practices to deal with a national crisis triggered by external colonialism and imperialism.

### **Translating 'nation': the historical conditions**

Nation is generally understood as a territorial community with a population united by a common history, culture or language. As a modern invention, the concept of nation has been discussed extensively. Hobsbawm highlights the constructive nature of nation, noting that 'if the nation had anything in common from the popular-revolutionary point of view, it was not, in any fundamental sense, ethnicity, language and the like, though these could be indications of collective belonging also' (Hobsbawm 1990: 20). Viewing nationalism as a function of modernity, Gellner (2006) argues it is nationalism that produces nations rather than the other way around. For Gellner, nation and nationalism are inevitable consequences of industrialism in Western Europe. The idea of nation as a neologism first appeared in China during the nineteenth century, but it was used only 13 times before China's 1895 defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (Jin and Liu 2009: 561)<sup>2</sup>. However, after 1895, the use of the term *minzu* as a dominant rendition of nation rose sharply within heated debates about China's post-war crisis. In 1901, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), arguably the most influential cultural leader at this time, coined the term *zhongguo minzu* (China nation 中国民族) in his article 'On Chinese

History'. A year later he changed this term to *zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation 中华民族) – a term that has been in use to this day. Liang believed that it was critical to build a nation in order to mount an effective defence against external aggressions. This view was shared by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), known widely as the father of the Chinese revolution, who led a revolutionary republican movement that succeeded in overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China in 1911.

Nation as a translated concept must be understood against the backdrop of these volatile and often violent changes in the last decade of the Qing Empire, around the turn of the twentieth century. In this context, translation acted primarily as an effective means of acquiring tools for national salvation. Consequently, this determined the expedient nature of translation that prioritised socio-political efficacy over linguistic accuracy. As European ideologies were imported into China, modern Chinese political discourse was significantly influenced by the terms coined and normalized as translations of western notions. Kurtz (2001:147) observes: 'far from serving as simple equivalents of imported ways of understanding, many terms of foreign origin have unfolded a life of their own in modern Chinese contexts. More often than not, they have acquired new meanings that creatively alter, extend, or even undermine established European conceptions'. To appreciate the semantic and conceptual differences between the source terms and their Chinese renditions, we need to examine the multi-layered process of translation and appropriation from which these terms have emerged.

There were two major phases<sup>3</sup> of translation in late Qing, paralleling two waves of external conflicts. The first was the 1860-1900 period, in which a total of 555 books were translated - five times more than the first half of the century (Xiong 2011:9). This burgeoning of translation activity was integral to the 1861-1895 Self-Strengthening Movement (洋务运动) that the government launched in response to two unequal treaties imposed on China – the

1858 Treaty of Tianjin<sup>4</sup>, and the 1860 Treaty of Peking<sup>5</sup>. The movement introduced European technologies, military technology in particular, onto Chinese soil. Under the mantra of ‘learning from the barbarians to defeat the barbarians’, many translation agencies sprang to existence, including the renowned government-sponsored Jiangnan Arsenal’s Translation House (江南制造局翻译馆) in Shanghai which translated the largest number of books during this period, as well as the Jingshi Tongwen Guan<sup>6</sup> (京师同文馆) in Peking. As a result of the desire to establish a modern industry and defence force, over 70% of the translations during this time were in the sciences and applied subjects.

The second phase of translation occurred during the last decade of the Qing Dynasty, spanning from 1900 to the 1911 Xinhai Revolution. This period parallels the dual political movements of revolutionary republicanism and constitutional monarchism. The upsurge in translation and the rise of these political movements were prompted by China’s defeat in the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War, and the 1900 occupation of Peking by the Eight Nation Alliance forces<sup>7</sup>. Over this decade, around 1,600 western books were translated, doubling the total number of the previous 90 years. Significantly, most translations were in the social sciences, humanities and the arts. Compared to the premise of Chinese cultural superiority that underpinned the Self-Strengthening Movement, both republicanism and constitutional monarchism were underpinned by newly imported western assumptions, values and institutions. The second phase falls within the ‘threshold period (*Sattelzeit*)’ of China’s ‘conceptual history’ (*Begriffsgeschichte*). Conceptual history, as the study of historical semantics of key social and political terms, examines the paradigmatic shift of ideas and values reflected in the change of language use. Of central importance is the emergence of a ‘threshold period’ in which new concepts arise and create fresh episteme within the social, political and economic language. The threshold period in modern China is broadly believed to have occurred between the Sino-Japanese military defeat in 1895 and the 1919 May Fourth

Movement that inaugurated popular participation in politics. During this threshold period, a cultural rupture occurred when the elites cast doubts over traditional values and looked to the west for inspiration and intellectual resources to resolve a national crisis (Cao 2017). More importantly, it is during this period that a large number of neologisms flowed from Japan to China as loanwords. Most of these neologisms are Japanese translations of western books. Popular loanwords included the aforementioned ‘*minzu*’, along with concepts such as *ziyou* (自由, liberty), *shehui* (社会 society), *jieji* (阶级 class) and *zhengfu* (政府 government).

It is important to note the conceptual transfer from the west to China, however, is different from other Asian countries. In spite of its eroded sovereignty, China was never fully colonised and subjugated to foreign rule. Conversion to an alien value system and style of thought was internally driven rather than externally imposed, as in the case of the Indian subcontinent. Of equal importance is the strong centralised power that Chinese elites believed was essential for China’s political modernisation. This context gives translation additional potency as a greater and more complex space for conceptual innovation. Traditional China saw itself as the centre of the world in a universalist view of ‘all-under-heaven’ (*tianxia* 天下). In the Sinocentric world, the centre of *huaxia* (华夏 China) and its peripheral *yi* (夷 barbarians) were defined culturally rather than ethnically – peripheral peoples were dealt with by their level of acceptance of Chinese culture. The Chinese empire expanded or contracted in accordance with its cultural influence, albeit backed by military power. Steeped in the politics of intra-Europe conflict, the idea of ‘nation’ encountered immense difficulties in registering in the collective consciousness of China. For Chinese people, the characters *min* (民) and *zu* (族) that comprise *minzu* conjured up meanings embedded in Chinese tradition. *Min* referred to an unspecified collective in relation to the emperor and was conventionally understood as containing four social strata - *shi* (士 scholars), *nong* (农 farmers), *gong* (工

artisans), and *shang* (商 merchants)<sup>8</sup>. These social strata were arranged in a hierarchy with the *shi* scholars filling the highest position, followed by the *nong* peasantry, whilst the *gong* artisans and *shang* merchants occupied the bottom. Aware of the challenges of promoting the concept of ‘nation’, Sun Yat-sen lamented: ‘there is no nationalism in China but familism and clannism. Foreign observers see the Chinese as a heap of loose sand . . . Chinese unity is limited to the clan and has never been extended to the nation’<sup>2</sup> (Sun 1924/2011: 5). To build a collective ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) of a Chinese nation, the elites underscored the importance of ‘national’ strength in fighting for the survival of the Chinese civilisation in a Darwinian world.

Translation as a process of conceptual negotiation and reinvention was a crucial site of discursive struggle for competing visions of the world. The task of translating ‘nation’ became a contest between two epistemological traditions where ‘the irreducible differences between them are fought out, authorities evoked or challenged, ambiguities dissolved or created, and so forth, until new words and meanings emerge in the target language itself’ (Liu, 1996:6). Establishing nation as valid concept entails confronting the Chinese *jia-guo-tianxia* (家国天下 family-imperial court-*tianxia*) system with the European paradigm of nation-state. The *jia-guo-tianxia* structure had existed in China since its first unification (221BC) as a fundamental and unified worldview. It is a continuum from the small and specific to the large and abstract in an integrated cultural and political order as a way of making sense of the world. Family as the core from which the entire world was imagined as ‘all under heaven’ provided an essential framework for human relationships, morality, and power structure. Originally a principality under the feudal system before the 221BC unification, *guo* was transformed since then into an entirely different political institution - the imperial court that presided over the Chinese empire, as well as the *tianxia* – the cultural and moral order of the universal world. The introduction of nation meant that this long-held

worldview had to be radically modified and reconfigured to adjust to the new reality of China being only one country among many in the world, and a rather weak one at that. It entails a swift shift in conceptual map from the Sinocentric *tianxia* to the European Westphalian world of nations.

### Negotiating nation: the *minzu-guomin-guojia* trinity

*Minzu* as ‘nation’ therefore sits uneasily at the juncture between tradition and modernity, China and the west. The intricacy of *minzu* lies in combining the two characters *min* and *zu* – each with its own etymological origin. Though recognised as a foreign neologism, *minzu* makes sense to the Chinese primarily within its historical semantics embedded in traditional epistemology. Joining two characters to create a new term was an innovative element of translation. Traditionally, the single characters *min* (民), *zu* (族), and *lei* (类) were used to indicate social groupings. To express ‘nation’ in Chinese, a plethora of words (see Table 1) were employed from the 1850s to the 1910s (Matten 2012: 72) in a wide range of texts and contexts. From 1895, *minzu* became the most widely-used translation of nation, although *guozu* (国族 state lineage) has nonetheless been a favoured translation to this day, especially in Taiwan. All other translations have long been forgotten.

No.	Translation	Meaning in English	Historical origins
<i>Area One - Lineage</i>			
1	民族 <i>minzu</i>	People’s lineage	southern dynasty (420-589AD)
2	种类 <i>zhonglei</i>	race	pre-Qin term (221BC)
3	族类 <i>zulei</i>	people in the same clan	pre-Qin term (221BC)
4	族种 <i>zuzhong</i>	race	<b>translation (late Qing)</b>
5	民种 <i>minzhong</i>	race	<b>translation (late Qing)</b>
<i>Area Two – State</i>			
6	国家 <i>guojia</i>	state, country	Western Han (206-23BC)
7	国族 <i>guozu</i>	state lineage	pre-Qin term (221BC)
8	邦 <i>bang</i>	large country	pre-Qin term (221BC)
9	国 <i>guo</i>	small country	pre-Qin term (221BC)
10	邦国 <i>bangguo</i>	country	pre-Qin term (221BC)
<i>Area Three - People</i>			
11	国民 <i>guomin</i>	people in a country	pre-Qin term (221BC)
12	民 <i>min</i>	people	pre-Qin term (221BC)

13	一国之人 <i>yiguozhiren</i>	people in a country	<b>translation (late Qing)</b>
14	百姓 <i>baixing</i>	populace	pre-Qin term (221BC)
15	纳慎 <i>naxun</i>	nation	<b>transliteration (late Qing)</b>

**Table 1: Different translations of ‘nation’**

Most of these renditions were double-character words formed by different combinations of single-character words. They are situated in three categories of historical semantics – lineage (Area One), state (Area Two) and People (Area Three). Incidentally, they correspond to what Xu (2017: 11) proposes as a tripartite translation of nation - *minzu*, *guojia* and *guomin*. They are also identical to Fang’s (2002: 21) conclusion that ‘nation’ covers three aspects of semantics captured in three single-character words - *zu* (lineage), *guo* (state) and *min* (people). Other scholars came to a similar view. Rei (1972: 4) suggests the trinity of *minzu*, *guojia* and *guozu* as an appropriate equivalent to nation. Meanwhile, Lobscheid (1869: 1211) translated ‘nation’ with three single-character terms - *min*, *guo*, *bang* (state) in his 1869 *English and Chinese Dictionary*.

In Area One, the five renditions are different combinations of only four characters - *zu*, *zhong*, *lei* and *min*. Except *min*, they were used in classical Chinese to refer to ancestral lineage. *Zu* refers to a kinship of blood relations. *Zhong* originally indicated seeds of grain and categories, whilst *Lei* denoted typology. The term *zulei* is rooted in etymological origin that connotes an us-vs.-them distinction. It suggests an exclusionary nature of group differentiation akin to ‘nation’. For example, *Zuozhuan* (左传 The Spring and Autumn Annals, 770-476BC), one of China’s oldest historical chronicles, states: ‘those from outside our clan must have a different mind (非我族类, 其心必异)’. The terms *zhonglei* and *zuzhong* are synonyms to *zulei*, though used much less widely. Only *minzhong* and *zuzhong* are coined words in late Qing for rendering ‘nation, though both point to patrimonial descent. As shown in Table 1, most terms existed in pre-Qin (221BC) classics. Hao Shiyuan (2004) postulates



that *minzu* as a double-character word first appeared in the Southern Dynasty (420-502AD) in the book *On the Xia-Yi Distinction* (*Xia* means China, and *Yi* means barbarians) written by a Taoist monk Gu Huan. Since then, *minzu* has taken on two different connotations – a clan-based community, and the differentiation between China and its peripheries in what is known as peripheral peoples surrounding China - *dong yi* (东夷 eastern *yi*), *bei di* (北狄 northern *di*), *xi rong* (西戎 western *rong*), and *nan man* (南蛮 southern *man*). Locating at the centre of *tianxia*, the term *huaxia*, the traditional word for China, typifies a collective self-referent that represents an awareness of the Chinese as one cultural group. Primordial clannism and culturalism are therefore inscribed in *minzu* rooted in traditional epistemology.

However, clannism and culturalism embedded in *minzu* evolved differently in late Qing. Whilst the culturalism represented by Confucian thought suffered sustained setbacks and remained largely in the background, clannism grew steadily as the primary milieu of ethnic nationalism. The cultural appeal of the term *huaxia* shifted away from Confucian intellectual traditions to the legendary *Huangdi* (黄帝 Yellow Emperor, 2717-2599) as the origin of Chinese race in the last decade of the Qing Dynasty. *Huangdi* as a mythical king noted in *the Records of the Grand Historian* (史记, 91BC) was reinstated as the collective ancestor of Chinese nation, together with another mythical king *Yandi* (炎帝) of the same period. With declining cultural confidence and growing nationalist sentiment, *minzu* focused on primordial *yanhuang zisun* (炎黄子孙 descendants of *Huangdi* and *Yandi*) in a genealogical ancestralism. *Min* in *minzu* became defined as offspring of the *yanhuang* race; while *zu* acquired a racial undertone of patrimonial descent. *Minzu* thus fused popular culture of ethnic descent with an intellectual discourse of quasi-biological lineage. *Yanhuang zisun* functions as a condensed symbol of a fictive genealogy for late Qing political actions against Manchu rulers in the revolutionary republican movement. Indeed, Sun Yat-sen's early

nationalism was defined largely by an anti-Manchuism that underscored Han ethnicity. Nonetheless he changed this stance immediately after the 1911 Xinhai Revolution for a five-ethnicities republicanism that includes the Hans, Manchus, Mongols, Hui, and Tibetans. *Minzu* thus reconfigured nation into people's lineage comprising ancestry and territory.

In Area Two, all five terms point to the notion of *guojia*. But crucially, they are words from classical Chinese used in novel ways to indicate the newly imported western concept of 'state'. *Guo* and *bang* as single-character words are synonyms to *guojia*. The characters *jia* (家 family) and *zu*, when combined with *guo* (*guojia* and *guozu*), produce a specific understanding of the state modelled on familial relationship and moral code. It is significant that all five terms are still in use today, though divorced from the notion of nation except *guozu*. *Guojia* has now become the standard translation of 'state'. The five terms in Area Three are relatively straightforward. Other than *naxun* as a transliteration of nation, all four terms indicate a unspecified population within a country. But it is the term *guomin* that stood out as a significant concept. Though closely associated with nation, it acquired eventually an independent status as a separate term no longer deemed as a translation of nation, but people in a modern state. The decoupling of *guomin* with nation means that *minzu* has fully taken on the meaning of nation. Nonetheless, both *guomin* and *minzu* as neologisms have played an essential role in the transformation of Chinese society.

### **Nation as *minzu* and *guomin*: the Japanese connections**

The late Qing understanding of 'nation' is intricately linked to Japan. Most scholars believe the terms *minzu* and *guomin* were loanwords from Japan in the 1900s (Bastid-Bruguiere 2004; Wang 2010). They were brought to China through the writings of such key exponents of nation as Liang Qichao and Wang Jingwei (1883-1944). It is through such writings that the two terms started to take on new meanings based on European political

theories of nation, and therefore are crucially different from their previous usages (Jin and Liu 2009) in classical Chinese. Influenced by theories about the nation in Japan, Chinese elites living in Japan took *minzu* and *guomin* as key conceptual frames in their blueprint to reform the declining empire. The sharp rise of *minzu* and *guomin* as popular terms in political discourse paralleled to an upsurge of political activities of Chinese students and scholars in Japan. However, what they took back home is a particular patrimonial-based understanding of nation. This is partly a result of Japanese elites approaching the concept of the ‘nation’ from the perspective of *minzu* in Japan’s specific historical circumstances. Japan first became aware of the idea of ‘nation’ after the arrival of ‘Perry’s black ships’ from the United States during 1853-1854. In confronting the challenges of western colonialism, Japanese Meiji reformers strove to transform their feudal shogunate into a modern nation-state. However, at the time, no Japanese word could express the concept of nation in both its political and cultural dimensions. Nation was therefore translated into two words - *guomin* and *minzu*. However, these two terms are written in Japanese *kanji* – the Japanese word for Chinese characters (*hanzi*) that Japan borrowed from China over a thousand years ago. For Chinese living in Japan, these terms in Chinese characters represented no linguistic barriers, though to acquire them conceptually is heavily influenced by the way they were explained in the translated texts, and the texts that were chosen to be translated. As the primary books on nation and state that Chinese elites such as Liang Qichao and Wang Jingwei had read were written by the Swiss-German jurist Johann Kaspar Bluntschli (1808-81) who was popular in Meiji Japan, the Chinese understanding of *minzu* and *guomin* had a distinctive German characteristics. In fact, in the early Meiji period other renditions of nation existed, such as *minzhong*, *zhongzu* and *zumin* – all in Chinese characters as Japanese *kanji*. The first two words were exactly the same as the Chinese renditions (see Table 1), though pronounced differently in Japanese.

The term *guomin* designates nation as a political community, emphasising the rights of people in relation to the state – this is entirely different from its classical use in ancient Chinese texts that means ‘people in a *fengjian* principality’. Whereas *minzu* expresses nation as a cultural community with a shared ethnic origin, again different from its classical use. The two renditions are linked to two phases of the Japanese interpretation of nation. The first occurred in the early Meiji period during the liberal civil rights movement (1874-1890) that promoted individuals’ rights and popular participation in politics. Nation as *guomin* was perceived as an effective way of building a modern Japan, inspired by the French Revolution’s spirit of liberty and equality. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), a leading Meiji thinker, criticised Japan as having only a government, but no *guomin*. The Meiji government however emphasised a different dimension of *guomin* – to build a *guomin*-centred state following the German model of promoting people’s obligations to the state.

The second phase began in 1888 during the ‘national essence’ campaign. Intellectuals such as Shiga Shigetaka (1862-1927) and Kuga Katsunan (1857-1907) advocated the preservation of Japanese cultural identity and national characteristics in opposition to extreme forms of westernisation. Shigetaka translated ‘nationality’ as *guocui*, (国粹 national essence) in *kanji*, this is understood as the history, tradition, and culture that underpins a *minzu*. Such an understanding helped forge the Japanese nation as being synonymous with the Yamato – the dominant ethnic group in Japan. Shifting the focus from *guomin* to *minzu*, Japanese understanding of nation moved from political community building to cultural community building. However, the popularity of the concept of *minzu* rests primarily upon the notion of a single-ethnicity nation. Significantly, it is the second phase of Japanese nation-building that Chinese elites witnessed in Japan. Key late Qing thinkers on nation-building, including Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, Wang Jingwei and Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), lived in Japan during

this time. It is not surprising that, at the time, all seminal texts about the Chinese nation were written in Japan.

Wang (2010) argues that the attraction of *minzu* to Chinese elites lies in their consonance with Japanese nationalism that underscored the unity of a single ethnicity with a single state. As a racially homogeneous country, with 98% of the population identifying themselves as Yamato, Japan prizes full identification with the political and ethno-cultural community. The single-nation state is embedded in the institution of the Imperial House of Japan, with the Emperor as heir of an unbroken royal lineage, symbolizing the modern state and unity of the people. Reinstated to the centre of Japanese politics during the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), the Emperor was installed as a centrepiece of Japan's modern nation-state. By uniting the nation with the state, the Emperor was transformed from representing a regal lineage of a traditional ruling house to a 'national' lineage of the modern state.

The Japanese imprint of the Chinese understanding of nation is visible in late Qing nation-building campaigns. The drive for a single-nation state was reflected in Sun Yat-sen's early political discourse of driving out the ethnic Manchus (驱除鞑虏) who had ruled China since 1644, in order to establish a Chinese republic. Conceived as a political and ethnic revolution, the campaign appealed to Han ethnic nationalism. Thus, *minzuzhuyi* (民族主义 nationalism) became the first of Sun's three people's principles (三民主义). In his cultural discourse of nation-building, Liang Qichao strove to build a multi-ethnic nation-state. By coining the term *zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation), Liang created a distinctive discourse of a single-nation state. *Zhonghua minzu* refers to a combination of territory (*zhong* as China), culture (*hua* as Chinese culture), people (*min* as population) and descent (*zu* as lineage). It is understandably easier for *minzu* to represent a Japanese population that is 98% Yamato

because ethnicity and nation are broadly aligned. For late Qing China, such an alignment is far more complicated given the existence of more diverse and larger ethnic groups such as the Manchus, Mongols, Hui, and Tibetans. *Minzu* as a Japanese loanword obfuscates the ‘multi-ethnic state’ and ‘Chinese nation’ when *minzu* can be understood as both ethnicity and nation. The semantic tension within *minzu* created by its multiple interpretations became magnified in late Qing’s discourse of a multi-ethnic but single-nation in China. It eventually grew into a recurring ‘nationality issue’ – how to align multiple ethnicities with a single nation-state. In the current expression ‘China is a unified multi-*minzu* state’, *minzu* must be understood as ethnicity; but in the term *zhong hua min zu* (Chinese nation), *minzu* is understood as a nation.

In tracing the migration of ‘*minzu*’ from Japan to China, Wang (2010) argues late Qing intellectuals did not fully grasp the notion of *minzu*. In their efforts to develop political consciousness of *guomin*, they appealed to ethnic *minzu* nationalism. Consequently, instead of building a *guomin*-centred state as intended, they ended up building a *minzu*-centred state because they mistook *minzu*-building as *guomin*-building. However, this argument overlooks an important point. Equating *minzu* rather than *guomin* to nation reflects the priority of late Qing nation-building in China’s unique historical circumstances, rather than the misunderstanding of the term *minzu* or *guomin*. As Qin (2015: 325) argues, the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) established the Emperor as a symbol of absolute power who could unify a fragmented Japan by abolishing the feudal shogunates, just as the first Chinese Emperor Qin (259-210BC) had absolute power in unifying a warring China (221BC) by abolishing the *fengjian* (封建<sup>9</sup> a system of principalities) system. Meiji reformers reinstated the Emperor for a modern state grounded in a trinity of *minzu* as a single-ethnic nation, *guomin* as a politically conscious people, and *guojia* as a constitutional state. But for the late Qing anti-establishment elites, they prioritized the dismantling of the deep-rooted centralised power of the two-millennia Imperial House and shifting the authority and power to the new

state. In their efforts to build a modern state, *guomin*-building became to a large extent a key approach to creating a new centralised authority and power capable of pushing for modernisation programmes effectively.

### **Re-configuring *guomin* and *minzu* in China**

Late Qing anti-establishment forces did not overlook the idea of *guomin*. In fact, *guomin* resonated with the political discourse of nation-state building more than *minzu*. It is epitomised in the high-profile press debate between two influential newspapers, the constitutional monarchist *Xinmin Congbao* (1902-07) and revolutionary republican *minbao* (1905-10) – both were anti-establishment papers operating in Japan but circulated in China and overseas Chinese communities. In the combined database of the two papers, *guomin* ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in a frequency count of concept nouns, while *minzu*<sup>10</sup> ranks only 37<sup>th</sup>. The difference reflects the roles the two terms played in late Qing nation-building discourse. In Japan, both *guomin* and *minzu* were seen as objectives, though the latter took a more prominent role. In late Qing, however, *guomin* was taken primarily as a tool of nation-state building while *minzu* as a goal in pursuing a single-nation state. *Guomin* therefore took to the centre stage as a people-building campaign, the success of which was believed would lead to the birth of a *minzu* and state. As one of the most prolific and eminent writers on the Chinese nation and state, Liang Qichao saw *guomin*-building essentially as a transfer of an individual's loyalty from the family to the state. This is the main thrust of his popular text *Xinmin Shuo* (新民说 On New People) – a collection of twenty essays published in *Xinmin Congbao* between 1902 and 1906. Striving to build a new people out of the peasantry he deemed *bumin* (部民 clan people), Liang reinterpreted *guomin* as those who recognise the importance and power of the state. *Guomin* were portrayed as opposite to *bumin* who were narrow-minded and fiercely

loyal only to a family-based clan, and indifferent to the larger interests of *qun* (群 a grouping beyond the face-to-face community). For Liang, *xinmin* (新民 new people) were *guomin* transformed from being *bumin*:

At the beginning of human society, there existed only *bumin*, but no *guomin*. For *bumin* to evolve into *guomin* is to transform people from savagery to civilisation. But what distinguishes *bumin* from *guomin*? Those living in clans and evolving naturally into their own system of customs are *bumin*; those versed in state consciousness with political capability of governance are *guomin*. There does not exist in the world a state that does not have *guomin* with such a consciousness<sup>11</sup> (Liang, 2013:43).

The understanding of *guomin* resonates with a Bluntschlian interpretation of *volk*. Bluntschli equates German ‘*volk*’ to the Anglo-French ‘nation’ as a political idea; while equating German ‘nation’ to the English ‘people’ – both referring to culture and civilisation. In distinguishing cultural and political dimensions of ‘nation’, Bluntschli (1875/2000:79) argues: ‘The political idea is expressed in English by nation, and in German by *volk*. Etymology is in favour of German usage, for the word *natio* (from *nasci*) points to birth and race, *volk* and *populus* rather to the public life of a state.’ Liang seemed to have understood *minzu* in its cultural dimension and *guomin* in its political dimension. This is where the problem lies – the normative understanding of nation comprises both culture and politics as illustrated by Gellner’s (2006: 6-7) definition of nation: ‘Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture. . . and if and when the members of the same category firmly recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it’. Relying primarily on Bluntschli’s state theory, Liang took the political dimension away from *minzu* in understanding *guomin* as *volk*. Nation is left to orient entirely around culture and civilisation. In his 1903 article ‘Theories of the great political scientist



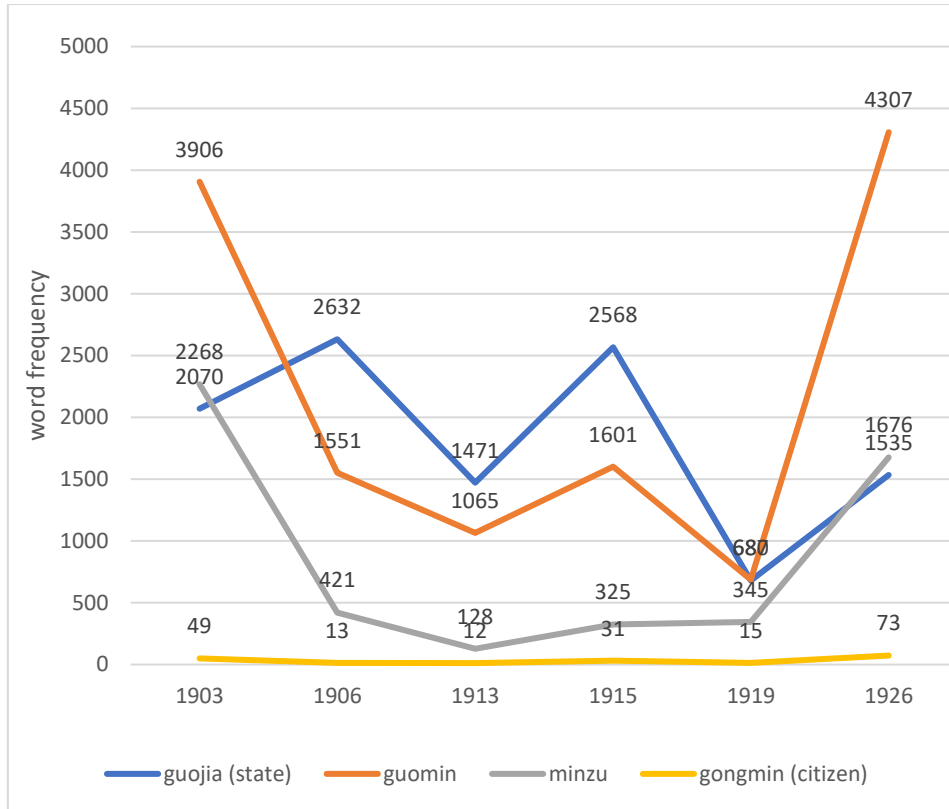
Bluntschli' published in *Xinmin Congbao*, Liang (1999: vol 2, 1067-1068) defined *minzu* as having eight characteristics – all focused around culture and civilisation:

- 1) common land of settlement from the beginning
- 2) common bloodline from the beginning
- 3) common phenotypical appearance
- 4) common language
- 5) common written system
- 6) common religion
- 7) common traditions and customs
- 8) common livelihood.

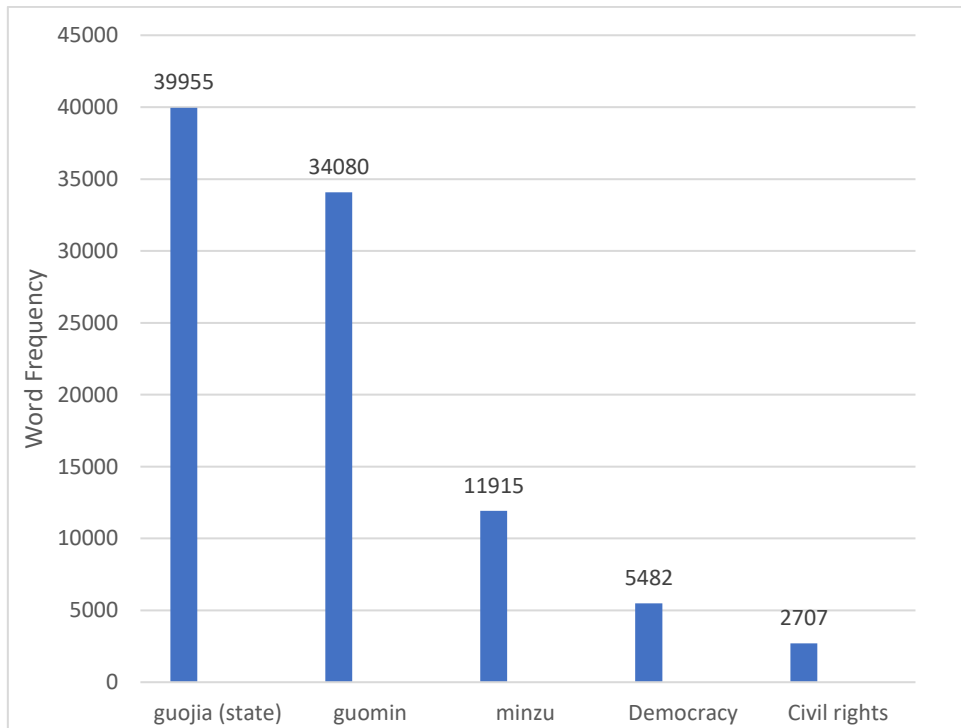
In the same article, *guomin* is defined along two political dimensions. Firstly, it refers to those who recognise the state as an organic body and are capable of political expression as well as understanding the entitlements of rights. Secondly, they must also see themselves as members of a corporate body of the state. For Liang, *minzu* had the potential to become a state if only *bumin* could be turned into *guomin*. This is why Liang regarded traditional China as consisting only of *bumin*. In other words, turning *minzu* to a state required the bonding strength of *guomin* as a crucial component. Sharing Bluntschli's suspicions of the French style of liberty, Liang was keen to underscore state authority and deeply wary of allocating too much liberty to the people. Indeed, he regarded individual liberty as a threat to, rather than a prerequisite of *guomin*-building. Liang effectively endeavoured to turn the traditional subject-emperor relationship to a modern *guomin*-state relationship, though the former is symbolic and culturally defined while the latter is substantive and politically-defined. The ethno-cultural-based understanding of *minzu* became attractive to Liang as he believed

China's weakness lay in a fragmented, localised identity of patrilineal lineage that hindered the formation of national unity. Such thinking motivated his people-building campaign to produce a modern *guomin*, emphasising their allegiance to the state rather than their rights as autonomous individuals.

This explains the prevalence of the term *guomin* over the term *minzu* in the late Qing. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, *guomin* has a much higher visibility than *minzu* in usage. Statistics in Figures 1 and 2 are taken from 'the Database for the Study of Modern Chinese Thought and Literature, 1830-1930' that consists of 120 million words from newspapers, magazines, books and translations from 1830 to 1930<sup>12</sup>. It is significant that the term *gongmin* (公民 citizen) has an even lower usage (Figure 1). *Gongmin* as a translation of, and equivalent in semantics to, 'citizen' is what was generally understood as the civic dimension of nation. As shown in Figure 1, *gongmin* never took off as a political term in late Qing. Parallel to *gongmin* is the infrequent usage of 'democracy' (民主 *minzu*) and 'civil rights' (民权 *minquan*) (see Figure 2). What dominated the late Qing political discourse is a trinity of *guojia-guomin-minzu*, where constitutionalists and republicans gave primacy to the idea of modern state represented by *guojia*. Constitutionalists emphasized the authority of, and people's allegiance, to the state through *guomin*-building; and republicans emphasized the power of the state in representing the Chinese nation through *minzu*-building. *Guomin*-building became a battle with traditional *bumin* mentality, rather than for civil rights as assumed in the normative theory of nation-building. Both *minzu* and *guomin* were reconstituted from the Japanese loanwords as a Chinese discourse of state-building.



**Figure 1: Frequency in appearance of key concepts, 1903-1926**



**Figure 2: Frequency in appearance of key concepts, 1830-1930**

## **The consequences of translating nation**

Richter (2005: 16) argues that the understanding of translation as intercultural communication is flawed by inequalities of power in a colonial or semi-colonial settings. In late Qing China however, the situation is more complex. Translation played a far greater and active role in generating momentous changes unforeseen by those involved in the process. In identifying with European concepts, the elites were more interested in appropriating those concepts for Chinese nation-state building in ways similar to acquiring western technology. This is what Liu (1995) emphasises as the creative, even empowering element of translation by native agents who construct new and more effective terms for foreign concepts. The conceptual transfer of ‘nation’ to China as *minzu* contributed to fundamental alternation of identities. Traditionally, the Chinese self-other distinction was marked by a lifestyle grounded in the mode of production – China as the agrarian center and the rest as nomadic and hunter-gathering peripheries. The agrarian society was sustained by Confucian tradition that prioritized compromise to minimize disruptions of agricultural production. The *huayi zhibian* (华夷之辨) - distinction between the Chinese and the ‘barbarians’ - served to reinforce a lifestyle rather than a political identity for external competition or racial identity for political domination. As no political bond existing among numerous self-sustained farming communities, collective security was provided by the imperial court, which also organized military expeditions to push back on sporadic nomadic incursions.

The imperial court presided over a symbolic *tianxia* – a set of universalist cultural principles that combined cosmic, political, and moral orders. Between the throne presiding over the *tianxia*, and the family commanding people’s loyalty, existed a large historical community that did not have a term to designate it. Traditionally, this community was named after the reigning dynasty, such as the Han (206BC-220), Tang (618-907), Song (960-1279)

and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties. China, as it is known today, only became the official name after the collapse of the dynastic empire in 1911. Traditional China is best described as a cultural entity with a centralized political structure, rather than a political entity. All of this was changed with the introduction of the concept of ‘nation’ from Europe, when entirely new relationships between people and state were imagined and organized for millions of isolated communities. The idea of ‘nation’ therefore helped transform China from a cultural to a political entity, from a face-to-face local community to an enormous *minzu*-oriented community of strangers, and from a universalist empire to a particularistic nation-state.

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<sup>2</sup> The count only includes the dominant translation of nation as *minzu*.

<sup>3</sup> In a major study of the flow of Western ideas into late Qing China, Yuezhi Xiong (2011, 6-12) summaries four phases, but it is the last two phases that had a major impact on China that I discuss here.

<sup>4</sup> It include three separate documents – The Sino-Anglo-French Treaty, The Sino-Russian Treaty and the Sino-American Treaty. They were signed as a settlement of the first phase of the Second Opium War (1856-60).

<sup>5</sup> The Treaty also consists of three separate documents – ‘The Sino-British Treaty’, ‘The Sino-French Treaty’ and ‘The Sino-Russian Treaty’ signed when the Anglo-French Expedition to China occupied Peking in October 1860 as the final settlement of the Second Opium War. During the occupation, the Yihe Royal Place was burnt down. The Qing government finally gave in to all demands of the invading powers.

<sup>6</sup> It was established as a school to train people with foreign languages skills, in response to the demand in the Treaty of Tianjin that all future official texts of the treaty must be in English and French.

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<sup>7</sup> The Alliance consists of Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, the United States, Italy and Austria-Hungary.

<sup>8</sup> Such social stratification occurred during the Warring States (475-221BC) period as described in the Confucian classic *Guliang Zhuan* (谷梁传) that chronicled Warring States history, though *Guliang Zhuan* was written only in East Han dynasty (25-220AD). The explanatory note in the book defines the four social strata as ‘scholars enjoying high status due to their superior virtues; farmers cultivate and farm the land; artisans making utensils with their ingenuity and hands; and merchants facilitating the flow of finance and goods.

<sup>9</sup> The Chinese *fenjian* system is different from the European feudal system though it is erroneously translated as ‘feudal’ in English.

<sup>10</sup> The full database of the two newspapers amount to six million words.

<sup>11</sup> The translation from the Chinese text to English is my own.

<sup>12</sup> The data was developed by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Taiwan National Chengchi University.