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## **Can the Chinese Nation Be One?**

### **Gu Jiegang, Chinese Muslims, and the Reworking of Culturalism**

Leigh K. Jenco<sup>1</sup>

#### **Abstract**

This article examines how the classicist and folklorist Gu Jiegang, in conversation with his Hui (Chinese Muslim) colleagues at the Yugong study society and journal (published 1934–1937), theorized the “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*) as an internally plural and open-ended political project, to resist homogenizing claims 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 reworked 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 asserted in his notorious 1939 essay that the “*Zhonghua minzu* Is One,” he posed 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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## **Keywords**

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Is it possible to imagine a unified China, without reproducing oppressive and Han-centric visions of the nation? Twentieth-century Chinese discourse 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” 同化力 was assumed to spontaneously efface cultural difference among the diverse populations that had historically occupied Chinese imperial territories (Liang, 1994; Schneider, 2017). The 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* 少數民族, or *minzu* 民族) which constitute it. Many of the key conceptual frameworks for this national imaginary were first articulated in the 1930s, when the Japanese Empire sought a foothold in China 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 assertions of a unified and homogenous 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 decentering of Chinese identity. This article examines how the classicist and folklorist Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980), in conversation with some of his Hui (Chinese Muslim) colleagues affiliated with the journal

*Yugong Semimonthly* 禹貢半月刊 (published 1934–1937), theorized the “Chinese nation” (Zhonghua minzu 中華民族) as an internally plural, open-ended, and emancipatory political project, to resist homogenizing calls made by both Japanese imperialists and the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> 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 was distinctive in attempting to balance the tensions of inclusion and particularity. Gu argued that only unity would secure the territorial and national integrity required to fight Japanese imperial incursions, but importantly—nearly alone among his Han contemporaries—he asked how such unity could be achieved without reproducing the historical and structural oppressions that continued 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 redeployment 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,” 天下) would become Sinified (漢化、來華) through participation in Chinese culture (*wen* 文)—typically meaning the institutions and rituals of Han civilization (Ho, 1998; Langlois, 1980).<sup>2</sup> Nationalist ideology of the Nanjing decade built on such assumptions to argue for national homogeneity and the inevitable assimilation of non-

Han peoples into the Han majority. Gu's innovation was 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*.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on his own experience traveling through the Chinese northwestern frontier, Gu eventually specified this form of membership as affiliation with particular “teachings” (*jiao* 教), 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 the while co-existing within the larger domain of the “Chinese nation,” the *Zhonghua minzu*.

Gu's nationalist project thus introduced ambivalence into the designation of clearly bordered *minzu* even as it explored 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 the problematic assumption of Chinese superiority over “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 commitment to an objective and scientific historiography that produced a more nuanced and diverse picture 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 (Ma, 2012; Zhou and Zhang, 2007), implying that his arguments from the 1930s entail state centralization of a fully assimilated national population (Elliott, 2015).

However, 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.<sup>4</sup> When Gu asserted in his notorious 1939 essay that the “Zhonghua minzu is one,” he posed 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 transforms 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.

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### **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 from that point until the collapse of the Second United Front between the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) 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 (about 80% of the population) and the diverse non-Han groups—some but not all of which drew self-identity from their demarcation as constituencies under the overthrown dynasty, the Manchu-ruled Qing (Lipman, 2002: 114).<sup>5</sup> 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, this was superseded by an increasingly Han-centric vision of a homogenous “Chinese nation” (Zhonghua minzu) derived from Sun Yat-sen’s 孫中山 1906 declaration of the “three principles of the people” (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 Sun's *minzu* was an attempt to reinforce the traditional dominance of Chinese civilization over neighboring states (Qi, 1937: 27–28). According to James Leibold, Sun's concept marshaled 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 minorities within China. To Sun, these were peripheral peoples, "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, home to a variety of cultural groups that in some places outnumbered Han, grew strategically more important in the wake of the 1931 Mukden Incident, Chiang's regime appropriated Sun's rhetoric to promote a vision of Chinese identity as homogenous not only culturally but also racially. Applying Sun's ideas to Nationalist Party ideology, Chiang and his ideologues such as Dai Jitao 戴季陶 identified the *Zhonghua minzu* with direct bloodline descent from the mythical Yellow Emperor. These ideas revived a late nineteenth-century discourse on race most famously articulated by Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, who linked "race" to the indigenous practice of posing kinship among different lineages or clans with the same surname (Chow, 1997: 48). For Chiang, a shared racial lineage eventually converged into a homogenous cultural heritage. As he put it in his 1943 *China's Destiny*, a book widely circulated as "extracurricular material" for China's schools and universities:

Prod. ed.: Extract quotation follows

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)

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Chiang extended this narrative to justify inclusion of frontier areas within Chinese national territory, both by denying the racial distinctiveness of minorities in those areas and by deploying a traditional rhetoric of Chinese cultural dominance. This rhetoric, employed as well by intellectuals such as Liu Yizheng 柳詒徵 who resisted race-based identity claims (Hon, 2003: 265–66; Kuo, 2014: 285), held that it was through cultural assimilation of foreign others that the Chinese state extended its boundaries. Indeed, Chiang argued that cultural homogeneity determined the geographic as well as military limits of the state: “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).

This ideological narrative of a homogenous Chinese descent and singular, unified culture was further promoted by co-opted academic elites such as Fu Sinian 傅斯年, 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 northeast China, Fu encouraged his fellow academics to write and research national histories that promoted Guomindang (GMD) 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 proposition about the timeless and perpetual unity of the Chinese people:

Prod. ed.: Extract quotation follows

From the rise of the Qin and Han onward, two thousand 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, and are not facts of nature. Once there is an appropriate leader in place, everything immediately becomes united as one family. From the deserts of the north, to Hainan Island and Jiaozhi in the south; from the quicksands of the west to Jilin and Xuantu in the east—these are all lands naturally given to us, the Chinese nation [Zhonghua minzu].<sup>6</sup> We Chinese 我們中華民族 speak 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 家族. We also rely on the minority nationalities 少數民族 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: 1724–25)

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In Fu's characterization, the "Chinese nation" is 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 also motivated Fu's other work during this period, including the *Outline History of Northeastern China*, which 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 argued erroneously that the Chinese northeastern territories had been governed by the 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, 1932; Leibold, 2006: 189; Wang, 2000: 149–51).

This uncharacteristically careless presentation of history by an established scholar well-known for promoting rigorous standards of objective historical scholarship, was criticized by contemporaries, but offers insight into the pressure many scholars felt to defend Chinese territorial claims in the name of nationalism. Indeed, such work was amplified by a long-standing 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" 建設中國本位的文化 were advanced by a number of academics including the editor of the influential Shanghai Commercial Press, Wang Xinming 王新命, and which in turn has been linked to the GMD government's Committee on Cultural Construction, headed by Chen Lifu 陳立夫, a member of one of two GMD secret police organizations (Wang et al., 1990 [1935]; Zheng, 2004). A 1935 declaration, and several years of debate in popular media, reinforced essentialized

notions of Chineseness by identifying distinctive national characteristics 特殊性 that could exist independently of foreign influence (Jenco, forthcoming).

Amid these pervasive, politically supported assertions of 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 lead in this countermovement 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 *Gushi bian* 古史辯 (Debates on Ancient History). These projects of "doubting antiquity" 疑古 and "reorganizing the national heritage" 整理國故 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 objective, "scientific" account of Chinese civilization for the purposes of national renewal (Gu, 1926; Wang, 1987). Although executed with a spirit of academic professionalism self-consciously detached from political concerns, Gu's historical work in the early 1930s questioned Nationalist claims to a single unified Chinese identity based on homogenous bloodline descent (Chin, 2012: 134; Hon, 1996).<sup>7</sup>

In his essay "On the Origins of the Qin-Han Unification and the Global Imaginary of People of the Warring States Period" 秦漢統一的由來和戰國人對於世界的想像, published in 1930 in the second volume of *Gushi bian*, Gu argues, contra GMD 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.

Prod. ed.: Extract quotation follows

We have long had a misunderstanding in thinking that the eighteen provinces inhabited by the Han people [漢族 *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 the Qin emperor seek to create forty commanderies. (Gu, 1930: 1)

Prod. ed.: End extract quotation

This essay, and its argument 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.<sup>8</sup> 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” 世界觀念 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 GMD 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 GMD 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 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 iconoclastic counter-narrative to claims of national homogeneity, but nevertheless one that 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 characterizations to deem the work of Gu and his colleagues influenced by May Fourth discourse as suffused with "an exoticizing and paternalistic sentiment" in regard 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 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 beliefs 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 梁啟超 and Yan Fu 嚴復 were calling for the use of education in foreign ideas to invigorate a Chinese people about to be winnowed out of the race for evolutionary success (e.g., Yan, 1985). Gu is 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 was 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* 學衡 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 Liu’s much-reprinted *History of Chinese Culture* 中國文化史 (Liu, 1932), there existed beneath these transformations an enduring “national character” 國民性, 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 culminated in a definition of “the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*) as a *political* association rather than one comprised of a monolithic culture, race, or ethnicity.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, he divested 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.”

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### **“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, 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 GMD 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 response to this conundrum was to assert that “the Chinese nation is one” 中華民族是一個的, a phrase that also serves as the title of his hugely controversial 1939 essay published in the monthly “Frontier supplement” 邊疆周刊 of the *Yishibao* 益世報. The summary appended to the beginning of the essay explains Gu’s point as “the Chinese people 中國人 are all Zhonghua minzu” (Gu, 2010d: 94).<sup>10</sup> The essay goes on to explain, however, that such national unity can be 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 narrative of Chinese territorial expansion through cultural assimilation, Gu argues that historically Chinese shared identity was built solely on *political* rather than racial or cultural unification:

Prod. ed.: Extract quotation follows

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 人民 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 綜合 culture. (Gu, 2010d: 96)

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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 the notion of

Zhonghua minzu can be open to the possibility that other people can legitimately live differently. First, he glosses a passage from the *Analects* 論語, 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 and 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. Insofar 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” 中華民族的文化 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).<sup>12</sup> Living as co-equals under a single government, Gu urges the abandonment of terms such as “China proper” 中國本部 and the “Republic of Five Races” 五組共和, which divide peoples on the peripheries from the dominant 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 personal and professional engagement with members of one of the minority groups the Nationalist narrative marginalized: the Hui 回 (Chinese Muslim) people who inhabited the strategically important northern frontiers as well as resided in many of China’s cities. Gu himself admitted that he became interested in Chinese Muslims only when Japan’s incursions on the mainland underscored 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 its scope. 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, 2011; Schneider, 1971: 286–87). 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 journeyed to Qinghai to meet with the Muslim provincial officials General Ma Bufang 馬步芳 and Ma Lin 馬麟 (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 teaching at the relocated Jilu University in Chengdu (Schneider, 1971: 290–91, 294).

By this point the Japanese invasion had forced the 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 the anti-Japanese vernacular journal *Popular Readings* 通俗讀物 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 GMD policy hoped to integrate, offering unprecedented opportunities for their firsthand 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 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 GMD insisted? (Mullaney, 2011: 61). These

questions were, obviously, more than academic: Japan had invaded Manchuria in 1931 on the pretext 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 GMD 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: 173–76). Some contemporary and modern commentators tend to see Gu’s political activism in this period, centered on his arguments about the unity of the *Zhonghua minzu*, as constituting a sharp break with his iconoclastic studies of China’s ancient past in *Gushi bian* (Ge, 2015; Qian, 1998: 171; discussed in Chan, 2016: 165–66 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 “reorganization of the national heritage” 整理國故 that originally guided his work on *Gushi bian*.<sup>13</sup> As I explain below, those scholarly interests increasingly dovetailed with political movements to expand the scope of the “national heritage” to include research on the identity-formation and presence of Hui Muslim and other minority groups in historical Chinese territory—a point also noted by Hui contributors to *Yugong* (Jin, 1937: 182).<sup>14</sup>

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 GMD and the fragmentation of China by the Japanese imperialists: 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 this third way become manifest in Gu’s work on the journal *Yugong* with Chinese Muslim writers, who explored their relationship both to their supposed *minzu* affiliation and 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 that subsumed them was itself a unity.

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### **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 scholarly journal *Yugong Semimonthly* 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.<sup>15</sup> Gu identified *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 to (and central topic of discussion of) *Yugong*, for several reasons. Unlike other Muslim groups in China such as the Turkic-speaking Uighurs, most Hui did not resist 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 文言 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 (e.g., Bai, 2010; 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 (Ben-Dor 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” 回漢問題 formed the core of a special supplement to *Yugong* in 1937, spearheaded by a reprint of Gu’s essay “The Hui-Han Question and the Work We Ought to Be Doing Now” 回漢問題和目前應有的工作 with responses and original essays from several 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 *Awakening Islam* 醒回篇 and *Islam* 伊斯蘭 (Aubin, 2006: 252; Yang et al., 1992). The wartime exigencies of the 1930s had provoked attacks on Islam and Muslim customs, inflaming prejudice (and even violence) against these presumably cultural outsiders to the Chinese nation (Cieciora, 2016: 127). In *Yugong*, as well as similar publications including Chengda University’s appropriately named *Crescent China* 月華, Hui intellectuals pursued two basic arguments in response. The first 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 王日蔚 discussion of the distinction between the Hui as an nationality or people 族 (*zu*) and as a religion 教 (*jiao*), published in

*Yugong* in August 1936. Advancing a detailed historical argument that made systematic use of Chinese records including dynastic histories, Wang argues [[AU: Personally, I think the past tense here and in the next sentence is perfectly fine. However, since the third sentence down switches to “Wang argues” maybe sticking w/ the historical present enhances consistency. OK?]] that the term “Hui,” often used interchangeably to refer both to Chinese Muslims and 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 contends, “Huihui” 回回 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” 色目人 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 童書業 and others publishing in *Yugong* that interrogated the relationship between categories such as *Xia* 夏 (“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 occurring, preexisting 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 that were not perceived as Hui; yet the assumption that there existed a single bloodline that could determine Hui-ness was also untenable, precisely because Hui associated with 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” 僑民 whose loyalties lie in their presumed homelands 族國 in Turkey, Egypt, and places west (Liu, 1929: 60).

Imam Wang Jingzhai 王靜齋, writing about Hui patriotism in *Crescent China* 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 “state” 國家 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 *Crescent China*, a writer using the pseudonym Liu Zhou 六洲, 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).<sup>16</sup>

In pursuing these two arguments, Hui writers drew on sources ranging from Chinese classics and traditional historiography to contemporary Egyptian debates over Quranic hadith.<sup>17</sup> Their arguments offer a clearer picture of how the contingent signifier of *minzu* could mark both the distinctive contributions of minority groups as well as the larger politically unified whole associated with the *Zhonghua minzu*. It is therefore not surprising that for Gu and these Hui colleagues who published in *Yugong*, the means to resolve the “Han-Hui question” was not to promote the assimilation of Hui into Chinese civilization nor 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 made as simultaneously both Muslims and Chinese. They expressed 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 hoped greater knowledge about the Hui would lead to a redefinition of national identity. Central to these efforts was establishing, at all educational levels, the study of Hui writing and language 回回文字語言 (presumably Arabic) and history as a proper form of *guowen* 國文, or “national literature,” because Hui language and culture were legitimately Chinese (Gu, 1937a: 180). This does not mean that they were to be 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 was 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 on the “Hui-Han question” took 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 回教的文化 is not only a kind of rampart of virtue [that protects the Hui minzu]; if its religious intentions were to be blended 融化 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 陳寅恪, who attempted to write general “cultural histories” that acknowledged the 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:

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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 種族 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 with and a deep understanding of 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)

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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 馬戎, who argue that the “blending” 融合 Gu asserts here and in essays such as “The Chinese Nation Is One” either entails the eventual assimilation of all ethnicities and races into a unified Chinese nation, akin to the American “melting pot” (Leibold, 2003: 482–83), or else renders meaningless their political, legal, and social practices in the face of existing national institutions (Ma, 2012: 5).<sup>18</sup> 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 Gu 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: 62–63).

Second, scholars ought to research and write a new-style “general history” 通史 that collates records from every minzu to build a shared history. The Han-centric nature of most current national histories, Gu complains, incites disgust among 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 the Qing and Republican regimes will be racialized, in that cultural differences will be interpreted as evidence of racial prejudice by the dominant majority (Gu, 2010a: 63–64). 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 had all along claimed to have originally constituted the hybrid Chinese civilization. Rather than see Hui contributing to an 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.

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### **Jiao Affiliation and the Dissolution of Minzu**

Gu sometimes explained his project of political unification using the term *tonghua* 同化, often translated as (and sometimes understood by his contemporaries to mean) “assimilation,” giving the impression he favored the eventual dissolution of minority groups into the grander unified Zhonghua minzu. However, in a lengthy rejoinder to a letter from 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* 教, “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 constituted it, creating some of the confusion Fei cites in his letter.

In that letter, Fei argued that by ascribing a multicultural and plural character to a unified Zhonghua minzu, Gu conflates minzu (nation or nationality) with *guojia* 國家 (state or country). His thesis, Fei contended, thus amounts to nothing more than saying “The governmental structure of the people 人民 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 assume (Fei, 2010: 135). In response, Gu elaborated 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” 團結情緒 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” 人們的意志 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* that Sun Yat-sen spoke of, 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).<sup>19</sup>

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 “The Chinese Nation Is One,” he relates an observation from his time in the northwest the preceding year. He notes that when discussing group differences with 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

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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.<sup>20</sup> 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)

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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: 136–38). Significantly, however, there remains none of the chauvinism that once motivated such assumptions of 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 for how such a theory, very similar to the culturalist claims of 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 surnamed Kong, descendants of Confucius. Yet these Kongs were not themselves Confucian: one was Muslim, and the other Tibetan 番子.<sup>21</sup> 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 wishes and the requirements of the environment in choosing an appropriate life (Gu, 2010d: 103). The Zhonghua minzu must 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 in *Yugong*. Already in 1937, the Harvard-educated Qi Sihe 齊思和 marshaled contemporary Anglo-American anthropological and political theory—including that of Harold Laski and Arthur Holcombe—to refute the conflation of race, ethnicity, and nationality in Sun Yat-sen’s principle of minzu. Qi argues that neither racial similarity nor lifestyle determines a minzu, because these change over time and space, and through interaction (including intermarriage) with others (Qi, 1937: 31–32). The hybrid identities that result mean 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*” 彼此間袍澤的情緒) (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” 共同之目的 of living in China and pursuing the Muslim teaching (about which he notes there is also disagreement) (Jin, 1936: 29).<sup>22</sup>

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 asserts, thus amounts to nothing more than “modernization” 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 to determine 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 *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” 世界文化史 Islam has not only absorbed elements of other cultures, but also can transform them.<sup>23</sup> 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 preexisting 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 multidirectional and open-ended way, resulting in broader changes to culture and practice for both individuals and groups. We might say minzus 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 subgroups in favor of jiao (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* 種族), with which minzu as a category has become mistakenly, albeit pervasively, confounded (Gu, 2010d: 98–99).<sup>24</sup>

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### **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 "defined by common culture and alleged descent" (Townsend, 1992: 103, citing Smith, 1983: 176). Gu argued rather for a view of the nation defined by a shared political consciousness, but also suggested specific reforms in education, research, and culture that might consolidate—but could never legislate in advance—a new, broader conceptualization of the Chinese nation and its internally plural culture. His project did not, in other words, aspire to be either a coherent and comprehensive institutional design or a normatively defensible philosophical model that would resolve all tensions between jiao groups and the Zhonghua minzu. He began with more fundamental questions about how the modern Chinese nation, and indeed historical Chinese identity itself, might be conceived. For Gu, the Zhonghua minzu was (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 coexist under a unified political state (Leibold, 2003: 482).<sup>25</sup> Yet the comparison is not as unfavorable to Gu as it may appear. Despite grander pretenses 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 particular principles of justice presumably held by the "dominant" liberal national culture.<sup>26</sup> Gu would take fundamental issue with this way of thinking about the construction of the nation, precisely because his project was to challenge rather than reproduce the status quo hierarchies that uphold one group or culture as normatively or culturally "dominant" over others.<sup>27</sup> 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 believed 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 meant that such peoples are innovative producers of an always-expanding political community shared with many others, rather than the “small and weak peoples” predicted by Sun Yat-sen to inevitably dissolve into some grander, preexisting entity called “Chinese culture.” His project thus bears closer similarity to—and would benefit—work by Talal Asad and William Connolly, who resist the liberal model of identity and multiculturalism in favor of a decentered 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 see how such tensions, which inevitably beset the project of national unification, might be marshaled 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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### **Author Biography**

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<sup>1</sup> 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. (This dual usage of “minzu” to mean both the larger “nation” and smaller “nationalities” 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, 2017: 46, see also 120 *passim*).

<sup>2</sup> “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 premodern 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). However, because variants of this claim are also seen in other civilizations (such as the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” described by Pollock, 2000), and because Gu here empties these assumptions of their specifically Chinese features, I retain the more general term “culturalism” rather than the more specific “Sinicization” 漢化 (*Hanhua*).

<sup>3</sup> Minzu is, to put it mildly, an incredibly complex concept. 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



evolution, showing that generally “minzu with Chinese characteristics” can best be translated as “nation” or “people” (Zhou, 2003: 24). Given that Gu and his colleagues were 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 PRC.

<sup>4</sup> Gu’s Zhonghua minzu category, I will show, explicitly rejected claims that China was built either on a single culture 文化 or a single race 種族. 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 reject the notion that there was such a thing as a Chinese ethnicity. However, I generally avoid use of the term “ethnicity” (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” has been conflated historically with “race,” see Crossley, 1990: 2.

<sup>5</sup> 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.”

<sup>6</sup> Jiaozhi is now part of northern Vietnam. Xuantu was the name of one of four Han commanderies established after this area on the Korean peninsula and Liaodong was taken by the founding emperor of the Han, Han Wudi.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, I agree with Chan Hok Yin's argument that contrary to the pronouncements of historians such as Yu Yingshi, Gu's work in the 1930s is conceptually consistent with his earlier iconoclasm. See Chan, 2016: 194–95. I say more about this below.

<sup>9</sup> 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).

<sup>10</sup> It is not clear, however, if Gu himself wrote this introductory summary, which simplifies the more complex issues Gu discusses here.

<sup>11</sup> That is, because Confucius considered unbinding one's hair and folding one's robe a certain way to be practices of “barbarians.”

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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 support for research on a broadly expanded “Chinese nation.” (For an introduction to the “reorganization of the national heritage” movement, see Eber, 1968; for a discussion of Gu's relationship to that movement, see Jenco, 2017: 463–65.)

<sup>14</sup> Jin notes the continuity between Gu's work on *Gushi bian* and his call to attend to the records and history of Muslims in China, a project he calls "organizing" 整理 Chinese Muslim history. Indeed, such work fulfills the mandates of new "national studies" outlined by Hu Shi in his 1921 statement inaugurating the *National Studies Journal* 國學季刊, namely to broaden the scope of research, attend to the systematic organization of the past, and broadly seek comparative material (Hu, 1953: 5). For Hu as for Gu, the "national heritage" 國故 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" 國粹 (Hu, 1953: 6).

<sup>15</sup> The journal was named after the *Yugong* chapter of the *Book of Documents*, which described ancient geography. *Yugong* means literally "The Contributions of Yu 禹," but more often is translated as "The Tribute of Yu." Yu was the ancient sage credited with introducing flood control. One of the journal's contributors, Qi Sihe, identified "research of the minzu question" as one of the journal's core concerns (Qi, 1937: 25).

<sup>16</sup> 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).

<sup>17</sup> Matsumoto Masumi's work (2003, 2006) on Chinese Muslim intellectuals documents the influence of Middle Eastern, specifically Egyptian, Islamic movements in their writing.

<sup>18</sup> 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; for a discussion of the Ethnic Classification Project, see Mullaney, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> He repeats these claims in 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: 127–28).

<sup>20</sup> Before the neologism “religion” 宗教 (*zongjiao*) was adopted by modern Chinese from European languages, “jiao” 教, 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 where (as here) the boundaries between two groups turn on multiple and overlapping categories of difference. This is especially true given the ambivalent relationship between Chinese religious practices and the modern category of “religion,” which itself reflects Protestant Christian preoccupations and values (see, e.g., Yang, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> In the Ming and Qing periods, *fan* 番 referred to a variety of culturally diverse non-Han ethnic groups; however, it is likely Gu is speaking here of the Tibetans of Gansu. For more on the ethnonym *fan*, see Ma, 2008: 3n6.

<sup>22</sup> Jin did, however, believe that religion was integral to the identity of the *Huizu* 回族 (that is, the Hui minzu), an argument Gu rejected (Gu, 2010d: 101).

<sup>23</sup> “Islamic culture . . . has absorbed ancient Greek culture, Persian culture, and Indian culture to produce its own distinctive nature. . . . It spread to medieval Europe, developing contemporary European civilization” (Bai, 1937: 185).

<sup>24</sup> Gu here includes the English words “nation” and “race” as translations of minzu and zhongzu, respectively.

<sup>25</sup> Leopold'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 those rights for predetermined liberal ends—in Kymlicka's case, autonomy and equality (Kymlicka, 1989, 1996; for a critique of Kymlicka on these grounds, see Kukathas, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> There are, of course, prominent exceptions (Kukathas, 2003; Young, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> 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).