Han Father, *Minzu* Children: Gender and Family in China's Ethnic Governance

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Yuan Wei's Sociology and Anthropology 365 course *Gender and Intimacy in China*. The assignment asked students to compose a 2300–2700 word term paper, either an analysis of one of the films shown in class or a research paper on any topic related to gender or intimate life in China. My submission took the latter option. The paper uses Chicago citation style.

The People's Republic of China recognizes fifty-six distinct nationalities (*minzu*) including the Han, who constitute 90% of the population, as well as fifty-five ethnic minorities. Understanding this enumeration of *minzu* as a recent phenomenon designed to meet state goals, I argue that the Han-dominated Chinese state has posed ethnic relations in starkly gendered terms. As seen in state communications from the Mao era to the present, the Chinese government represents ethnic minority subjects in feminized and infantilized poses in relationship to a masculine Han state. As a result of this, the Chinese government has encouraged particular forms of state-compatible minority femininity while minimizing minority masculinities yet posing Han men as natural extensions of the state.

Introduction

In this paper, I build on Zheng's (2005) notion of a "state patriarch" (2005, 519) to illuminate the patriarchal and ethnic chauvinist posture adopted by the Chinese state in its management of the country's fifty-five ethnic minorities (*minzu*[1]). While Brady (2012) has argued that idioms of the family are the primary theme of contemporary ethnic propaganda (*minzu xuanchuan*), I go further to uncover the substratum of gendered assumptions which use the model of the family to pose the relationship between the Han majority and *minzu* minorities. I suggest that

[1] *Minzu* means ethnicity/nationality. Properly, this includes the Han, however in light of my arguments, I use the term *minzu* for the fifty-five official ethnic *minorities*.

government ethnic policy can be read as a gendered endeavour in which a Han-dominated state accentuates its masculinity as a motif of governance while depicting minority subjects in feminized and infantilized positions.

In so doing, I draw on textual and visual materials from a variety of time periods—primarily contemporary news articles and Mao-era posters—as well as government policies to argue for the existence of an enduring complex of gendered themes within ethnic governance and propaganda.

Creating the Minzu

Officially, the 'Chinese nation' is composed of fifty-six distinct nationalities (*minzu*), a number which technically includes the Han who account for 90% of the country's population. This precise number was produced by a six-month ethnological project undertaken in 1954 which aimed to clearly distinguish the nations and peoples of China. On behalf of the government, the classification team actively contoured ethnic identities, "working hard to convince various smaller groups that they could merge [...] because of affinities of language [or culture]" (Jacka et al. 2013a, 150). As Jacka et al. (2013a) argue, this project operated on no consistent criteria for nationhood, with the eventual definitions being arbitrary decisions by state ethnologists. However extreme the contrivances behind this project, once established it became the foundation for ethnic governance in China. Through affirmative action policies towards the 55 minority *minzu* and state sponsorship for conforming forms of ethnic dress, dance, and cuisine, these state-imposed identities became very real.

If *minzu* arise not from primordial divisions—as ethnicities and races are often imagined to—but from conscious policies aiming to create manageable social units, how have these units been represented in official discourses? What can that their representation tell us about the relationship of the Chinese state to minority nationalities? Following on Zheng's (2005) attempt to 'find the woman in the state', I here want to try to 'find the Han in the state'.

Ethnic Femininity, Craft, and Costumes

The most common image of the *minzu* subject in state media is as a conventionally attractive young woman wearing an exotic costume. From the Mao era to today, the vast majority of news images, stories, and posters centre colourfully-dressed women and girls engaged in visually interesting cultural activities, the details of which are usually left unexplained.

Fig. 1, Junsheng, Yang, *Long live the great unity of all the peoples of the whole nation*, Poster, January 1957, Landsberger Collection, Amsterdam. https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-355.

Fig. 2, Miao women in Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture (*CGTN* 1 Feb. 2023).

The women in figure 2 are from a *CGTN* article on the Miao ethnic group in southern China, vaunting their cultural flourishing within the designated

'cultural protection area' of Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture. Relations between the mountain-dwelling, periodically rebellious Miao and the Han-dominated state have long been contentious and have been accompanied by a shifting topography of ethnosexual tropes about Miao women (Schein, 2000). Miao women have been stereotyped as dangerous and promiscuous, themes which draw from two unique elements of Miao society: a folk poison called *gu* and comparatively loose gender norms. The Maoist era saw what Schein calls the transition from "*gu* to goods" (2000, 60) where the dominant view of Miao women shifted from a mode where "the 'other' woman's attractiveness and sexual availability also constitute her danger" to one where Miao women are "celebrated most often for [their] beauty" (2000, 61).

In understanding how the image of the Miao woman became defanged and commodified, *gu* is a useful starting point. A 'poison'—though it could equally be labelled as an aphrodisiac or magical charm—*gu* is produced by grinding down the bodies of venomous insects and was purportedly used by Miao women to seduce and manipulate men (2000, 60). Once prominently featuring in exoticizing Han discourses as emblematic of dangerous Miao sensuality, *gu* has mostly vanished from the contemporary imagination. Nonetheless, its history remains particularly interesting in light of contemporary state media's fixation on *minzu* folk crafts. A huge number of *minzu*-focused articles detail the production and sale of textiles, foods, medicines, and other commodified traditional products. Articles such as "Miao embroiderer takes ethnic intangible heritage to world stage" in the *People's Daily* celebrate the successes of small artists like Miao craftswoman Pan Yuzhen, valorizing the place of handicrafts in the modern economy. In so doing, they emphasize the compatibility of minority cultures with the latest pillar of Chinese national cohesion: the demands of the capitalist market.

Moreover, these crafts are explicitly associated with femininity. In the aforementioned *People's Daily* article, Pan relates that "the girls in my hometown can embroider with needles from a very young age [...] I learned embroidery from my mother and sister". Artisanal traditions are often gendered across many cultures, but the conspicuous absence of male crafts—Miao men, for example, are traditionally silversmiths and woodworkers (Schein 2000, 53)—from state discourses makes it clear that femininity serves some key function here. Why? It is clear from the historic demonization of Miao women that femininity does not necessarily imply the absence of danger. Instead, we see the development of new forms of femininity which can more easily synergize with the goals of the Chinese state, including market participation. Still, it is hard to imagine that male

handicrafts are much harder to commodify than those of women. The reconstruction of traditional identity markers in service of state aims need not be gendered at all, yet it is commodified forms of ethnic *womanhood* which take centre-stage.

I suggest this may have something to do with women's place in the home and in society within the traditional Han imaginary. Seen as fundamentally the property of men—first her father, then her husband—the 'ideal' Han woman was an isolated and subservient contributor to a patrilineal heritage which she could only hope to attach herself to (Jacka et al. 2013b). In the idiom of the family—a core theme of *minzu xuanchuan* (Brady 2012)—the feminized *minzu* subject takes this same place within the Chinese nation. By drawing on the tropes of domestic femininity and emphasizing their compatibility with unifying nationalism and market development, the *minzu* woman is a microcosm of the place of ethnic minorities within the Chinese nation.

Han and Minzu Men

A byproduct of the focus on ethnic womanhood is the de-emphasizing of *minzu* men. Indeed, for the entire modern history of *minzu xuanchuan*, ethnic minority men have been absent or tertiary in most forms of state-sponsored media (Gladney 1994).

Fig. 3, Wei, Ge, *All nationalities of our nation have already united into a great family of independent and equal nationalities*, Poster, March 1955, Landsberger Collection, Amsterdam. https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-297.

Fig. 4, Mingyu, Wan, *Prosperity*, Poster, June 1976, Landsberger Collection, Amsterdam. https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-479.

Mao-era posters overwhelmingly centre women, with their husbands usually playing a supporting role. This can be indexed as part of the broader Maoist emphasis on empowering women—men are decentred in many non-*minzu*-themed posters as well—but nonetheless takes place within a wider pattern of state discomfort with ethnic minority masculinities.

While the era of postering is over, modern-day forms of digital *minzu xuanchuan* continue to omit or minimize ethnic minority men. Of the fifty-six articles about ethnic minorities in the *People's Daily* in July, only three (5%) feature men in the leading image. The sole article focusing on a mostly male cultural sphere—a performance of Kirgiz, Tibetan and Mongol epics—shows men singing and dancing in rugged traditional costumes, while being careful to situate these performances within a unified Chinese nationalism. Speaking of the titular character in the *Epic of King Gesar*, a performer states that "King Gesar [...] is a Tibetan hero and a precious cultural asset of the Chinese nation" (Zhao, Zhang, and Ma 2023). This article draws on motifs wherein minority men are "exoticized

as strong and virile, practicing strange and humorous customs, or possessing extraordinary physical ability" (Gladney 1994, 97). Such examples of "positive propaganda" (*zhengmian xuanchuan*) (Brady 2012, 169) akin to those featuring *minzu* women are becoming increasingly uncommon in state media. Alongside contemporary counterterrorist initiatives, state inflections of *minzu* masculinity have taken on a decidedly darker tone— especially in Xinjiang.

Amidst ongoing colonial projects of extraction and settlement, Byler (2021) illustrates how the ethnic threat posed to the Chinese state by Uyghur separatism has become constituted in gendered terms. Finding its villain in the Uyghur man, the Chinese state in Xinjiang has constructed Uyghur men as dangerous and "wolfish" , always the prime suspects for crime, terrorism, and religious extremism (2021, 155). The bloated counterterrorist regime imposed on Xinjiang focuses disproportionately on men, who are seen as "simultaneously dependent and violent, inept, and predatory" (2021, 159).

On the other hand, Uyghur women are seen as more compatible with the incorporation of Uyghurness into a Han-dominated state and are thus core to the reconstitution of a pacified Uyghur identity. But where Miao women's freedom once constituted their danger, it is Uyghur women's purported oppression which places them in a position of salvageability—and indeed, 'saveability'—by the Han state. The favoured means by which Uyghur women—and by extension, Uyghurness at large—are safely reconstituted is through ethnic intermarriage (*minhan*) with Han men. As reported by the *New Yorker* (Mauk 2023) and the Uyghur Human Rights Project, Han–Uyghur marriages—almost always between Han men and Uyghur women—have been promoted in state media, incentivized with cash rewards, and appear to be compelled in some cases. These marriages offer an insight into the ways that Han men are posed as state representatives, and show how 'good' Han and 'bad' Uyghur masculinities are juxtaposed.

Fig. 5, A newly-wed Han–Uyghur couple with local government officials (Uyghur Human Rights Project 2022).

In posing itself as a 'matchmaker', the state touts Han men as representatives of the Chinese government and *minhan* marriage as a pathway to happiness and stability. State media shows Han–Uyghur couples "thanking the CCP for the 'beautiful life' the government had given them" (UHRP 2022). In semi-official 'marriage guides' with titles like "How to Win the Heart of a Uyghur Girl", the state focuses on motivating and mobilizing Han men to enter into relationships with Uyghur women. Marriage to a Han man ensures access to state-supported financial security, with payments of ¥10,000 (~$1,870CAD) per annum for the first five years of a 'harmonious marriage'—effectively penalizing divorce—along with subsidies for housing, healthcare, and education (UHRP 2022).

The deployment of Han men in service of party goals is perhaps best embodied in the 'Becoming Family' program, which places Han civil servants in the homes of Uyghur families. While these representatives are not exclusively male, Uyghurs have complained about the pattern of placing Han men in the homes of Uyghur women whose husbands have been detained. This has lead to sexual assaults and rapes, and in some cases Uyghur women have come to marry the civil servants assigned to them (Mauk 2013; UHRP 2022). Whether coerced or

otherwise, the program of state-supported *minhan* marriage poses Han men in the role of 'saviors' to Uyghur women and as party representatives whose loyalty is assured on the basis of their ethnic and gendered identity.

Children, Family, and the Han Patriarch

No model has proven more fertile for successive generations of Chinese political thinkers than the metaphor of the family. Late Qing writers saw the "values inculcated in the family" as "the very foundation of social order and state function" (Hershatter 2014, 184). It has seen deployment throughout modern Chinese history as a multifunctional political idiom able to legitimize a wide and sometime contradictory range of party programs.

Fig. 6, Xiao, Papao, and Xiao Tiaotiao. *Embroidering a silk banner with words of gold*, Poster, August 1978, Landsberger Collection, Amsterdam. https://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-323.

Fig. 6, Wei, Zhigang. *Celebrate a festival with jubilation*, Poster, August 1983, Landsberger Collection, Amsterdam. https://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-363.

Even amidst the iconoclastic zeitgeist of the Mao era, the family remained a useful metaphor, including in the burgeoning field of *minzu xuanchuan*. Posters from the era frequently represent ethnic minorities as children, juxtaposed with adult leaders like Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Liu Shaoqi. The immediate association between children and adults is one of parentage, with some posters directly invoking domestic imagery such as a dinner scene in figure 6. These images leave little doubt as to the place of ethnic minorities in the new China: as colourful, helpful, and junior members of a national family headed by Han élites.

Fig. 7, Yi children rehearsing for a performance in Chengdu (*People's Daily* 30 July. 2023).

Minzu children continue to be a favourite image in state media. The recent *People's Daily* article "Children from once poverty-stricken area stage performance at opening ceremony of Chengdu Universiade" focuses on a group of mixed-sex children from the Yi ethnic group performing at the opening of an international sporting competition. The children are all from Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, which was until recent efforts one of the poorest prefectures in China (*People's Daily* 30 July. 2023). This exposes another implicit message in the 'ethnic family' idiom: that *minzu* flourishing can take place only under the guidance and sponsorship of the implicitly Han state.

Along with the earlier article celebrating Miao culture within the Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture (*CGTN* 1 Feb. 2023), *minzu xuanchuan* emphasizes that ethnic minority cultural and economic successes cannot happen on their own, but due to the circumstances created by the party-state. Everything from Miao craftswomen's economic success—achieved by commodifying their culture for a Han audience—to Uyghur women's 'uplifting' through marrying Han men relies upon legitimation by the state through Han representatives. Much like the 'pseudo-environments' of state-controlled minority language media (Brady 2012, 167), initiatives from 'cultural protection areas' to interethnic marriage schemes make it clear that ethnic minority success can only be within state-created environments under Han patriarchy.

Conclusion

I have argued that in seeking to govern China's ethnic diversity, the state has created artificial and carefully-contoured categories of fifty-five minority *minzu* which it has subsequently administered by deploying imagery which poses Han men as the dominant figures of the Chinese nation and ethnic minorities as women and children. Continuing with remarkable stability through the Mao and Reform eras, the Han-dominated state has de-emphasized minority masculinities while ensuring that the only means of minority success are through engagement with state-created economic, social, and political structures. From Mao-era posters showing minority children surrounding Han 'state patriarchs' to state-sponsored *minhan* marriages which treat Han men as natural extensions of the state, the state adopts a masculine posture in interfacing with minority subjects which it feminizes and infantilizes.

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