

Problems associated with using the terms China/Chinese when describing Zhōngguó

The Nation of China has not always been known as this name, only when the Portuguese arrived on China's shores in the 16th century did the land and its people adopt it. However, when speaking in Mandarin China is usually referred to as Zhōngguó (中国), meaning 'Middle Kingdom' as in past generations the Chinese people believed their nation to be the centre of the world. Even before this, China referred to itself as Tianchao (天朝) or Tianxia (天下) meaning 'heavenly empire' and 'all under heaven'. These terms were usually evoked by the political leaders of the Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046-256 BC) to claim that the Dynasty was appointed by heaven. This coincides with the Chinese traditional viewpoint that the Emperor was not just the leader of a nation-state, but the presiding ruler of the entire world (Wang, 2012, p. 72). Through these few examples on the very name of the Chinese nation, it's evident to see that the use of the words China and Chinese are difficult to justify. As well as this, with the distribution of distinct peoples in the modern nation of China, it may not be fair to call all of them Chinese, or even the land China at all.

According to Xinhuanet.com, in 2010 the largest ethnic group was Han Chinese, encompassing 91.51% of the 1.34 billion population (Xinhua news (English), 2011). The remaining 8.49% are comprised of 55 ethnic minorities normally referred to as the Zhonghua minzu (中华民族): these include 16.9 million Zhuang, 10.5 million Hui muslims, 10 million Uyghurs and 6.2 million Tibetans to name a few (China Statistics Press, 2010). Hui muslims are more integrated into Han Chinese society than Uyghur muslims and Tibetans, mainly because of their geographical proximity to large population centres in Northern China. They are most similar to Hanzu but their Islamic practices allow them to remain distinct from them, preventing a loss of their identity as Hui Muslims (Lipman, 2004, p. 3). The Hui have virtually no separatist movements and no leaders outside of China, leading to peaceful cohabitation with Hanzu in the region. Where the problem lies however, is with the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and Tibetans in Tibet, who seek independence from what they see as an oppressive regime in Beijing. Both regions have greater autonomy than inland provinces like Sichuan or Yunnan because of their 'Special Autonomous region' status, granted in 1955 and 1965 respectively. After a failed violent uprising in Tibet in 1959, the Dalai Lama fled to India, carrying on the calls for independence for Tibet and making silencing him more difficult for the CCP. Han Chinese only account for 8% of the population of Tibet (Xizang.gov, 2013), making the Chinese claim to Tibet tenuous at best. The written script of Tibetans (called the uchen and umê script) is also different from the Simplified Chinese script that Mandarin speakers use, further differentiating Tibetans from their Hanzu counterparts. In spite of this, there has been no significant push to erase Tibetan culture, literature or history from existence. A more harrowing story is occurring for the Uyghurs.

Internment camps for Uyghurs and other 'problematic' muslims in China were set up in 2017 by the General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping (习近平). These were introduced in the wake of the 2014 'People's war on terror' policy that aimed to curb Islamic terrorism in the Xinjiang region. New restrictions including the banning of long beards and the wearing of veils in public were imposed on the predominantly Muslim population (Gan, 2017). Many have theorised that the CCP are using tragedies such as the 2014 Kunming knife attack, which left 31 civilians dead, and a further attack in 2017 in Xinjiang, leaving 8 dead, as a

political tool to quell separatist attitudes in the region. As well as erasing the Uyghur identity as a whole and replacing it with the superior Hanzu culture. The Chinese Government has been attempting to relocate Han Chinese into Xinjiang since 1999 and ensuring that they stay there through any means (Bao, 2018), with extraordinary amounts of money going into the development of the region, leading to economic benefits for Han Chinese and Uyghurs alike. In this respect, Beijing is not necessarily wrong for investing in the region, however, critics would argue that Uyghurs benefitting from the investment is just a happy coincidence (Liu, 2017). That it is a veil to mask the forced assimilation of Uyghur muslims into Han Chinese society. According to Uyghur Nationalists, the mere fact that three independent nations emerged in the Xinjiang region between 1864 and 1949 shows that the Uyghur people do not want to be incorporated into the PRC.

Joanne Smith-Finley detailed in her 2016 article *The Persecution of Chinas muslim Uyghurs* that Uyghurs do face ethnic discrimination in China's big cities, but that this is generated by politicization of the Uyghur identity in Chinese state media. Before the introduction of State-owned media, ethnic discrimination of Uyghurs was alot less widespread as the collective consciousness among Han Chinese were that they were just like them, Chinese, with one distinct factor, that they were muslims. This was not a major issue before the 19th century as all Chinese citizens believed that everyone lived in one nation, all under heaven.

As I have detailed here, sometimes it is inappropriate, dangerous or blatantly wrong to use the terms China/Chinese, even when discussing events occurring inside the modern borders of Zhōngguó. Even with such a large majority of the nation's population being ethnically Han Chinese, those who do not want to be included should not be forced to do so, through assimilation or other more heinous means. The Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongols and others who face oppression should not have to deal with being labelled Chinese just because they fall within China's borders. These are the issues with using China/Chinese so flippantly.

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