

6Chinese Language and National Identity*Andrew Simpson*

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, USA

1. Nations, nationalism, national identity, and Chinese

This chapter provides an overview of how Chinese language has affected, and continues to affect, the development and maintenance of national identity, drawing on a body of works which have investigated related topics. In order to embark on this task, it is first necessary to discuss how the important terms 'nation', 'nationalism', and 'national identity' may be applied in the context of China both synchronically and over the course of the last 150 years, and also what the language label 'Chinese' is regularly used to refer to. It will be seen that the relation of 'Chinese' to 'national identity' in fact varies depending on the perspective of the Chinese nation that is adopted (ethnic vs. political), and that different emphases have been placed on the role of Chinese in the development of national identity at different times in modern history. Having discussed these key terms in section 1, section 2 describes the place of Chinese in the modernization of China and the development of the People's Republic of China through to the end of the twentieth century, examining how the growth of Mandarin Chinese has affected the emergence of national identity among different Han Chinese groups. Section 3 turns to consider language and national identity issues specifically among the non-Han minorities in the People's Republic of China, and section 4 looks at changing attitudes towards language, national identity, and nationalism in very recent times.

1.1. Nations, nation-states, and nationalisms

The term 'nation' is often used in two rather different ways in discussions relating to national identity. A majority of analysts of nationalism hold that the development of nations is a comparatively recent phenomenon, resulting from a change in the way that populations have organized themselves in modern, industrial times. Nations are prototypically suggested to have a number of properties and consist of populations which are made up of a single ethnic group with a common ancestry, history, culture, and language, living in a distinct territory, where the national population benefits from a uniform mode of political organization, citizenship, and equal rights. A second way that the term 'nation' is often applied is in reference to all politically independent states, regardless of whether such territories contain populations connected by a common ancestry, language, history, and culture. In the literature focusing on nationalism, such potentially heterogeneous states are sometimes referred to as 'official nations' or 'territorial nations', whereas the term 'ethnic nation' is reserved for populations with a shared lineage and culture etc., and 'nation-state' for those ethnic nations which achieve political independence.

Considering China, much twentieth-century political activity aimed at establishing China as a strong modern nation has been focused on building an official nation which includes not only the ethnic nation of the Han Chinese, but also other non-Han minority peoples living within the borders of China who do

not share obvious ancestry and language with the Han majority. Safran (1998b) and others point out that the sizeable presence of such minority groups in China makes it extremely difficult to conceive of China as a nation-state populated by a single ethnic nation. Earlier, clear reference to properties of an ethnic Han nation were however prominent in the speech of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who Guo (2004: 160) notes as having described the Chinese nation as potentially being defined by 'blood kinship, common language, common livelihood, common religion, and common customs'. In assessing the relation of Chinese to national identity, it is therefore important to consider what kind of 'Chinese nation' is being conceived of in any characterization of national identity – a Han Chinese ethnic nation excluding minority groups, or a more inclusive but heterogeneous official nation made up of both Han and non-Han groups.

The bifurcation between ethnic and official nations as (potentially) different kinds of population groupings also feeds into the occurrence of different types of nationalism – 'cultural nationalism' and 'political nationalism' (Hsiao 2000; Gladney 2004; Guo 2004; Wei 2002). The former type of nationalism is a movement focused on the maintenance and strengthening of a shared historical culture among a people with the properties of an ethnic nation, whereas the latter is a political movement which attempts to achieve and maintain independence and autonomy for a population as an official nation. As will be noted later in the chapter, both forms of nationalism have occurred in China at different times, with differing repercussions on issues relating to language and national identity.

1.2. Language and national identity

'National identity' is commonly viewed as the self-conscious belief and subjective awareness that people have of belonging to a nation with certain objectively describable properties, such as a common history, language, ancestry, and culture, in ethnic nations, and membership of a territorially autonomous state with equal rights and a common future to invest in official nations, the latter occasionally also being referred to as 'state identity'. In the cultivation of feelings of national identity, language has regularly been assumed to have an important role to play, as a symbolic marker of group identity and boundary device which can separate adjacent populations with different languages, and create sentiments of group self-interest and solidarity among those who speak the same language. Furthermore, the promotion of a standardized, common 'national' language throughout a population has the potential to even out socio-economic inequalities and stimulate the unification of a nation through the provision of better opportunities for advancement and future prosperity (Simpson 2007).

With regards to China, Chinese language has consistently been seen to have served a major binding role among the Chinese nation, as it has emerged in modern times, as part of Chinese national identity. This will be discussed at some length in future sections. The primary

components of this general (Han) Chinese national identity are suggested in Meissner (2006) to include and be predicated on the following: (i) the long history of China, (ii) the shared identity of the Han people as descendants of the Yellow Emperor, (iii) the notion of a Chinese Empire continuing through different dynasties, (iv) the uniqueness of the Chinese language, (v) shared traditions of religion and philosophy, (vi) Chinese literature, art and music, and (vii) Chinese achievements in the area of medicine, ceramics, and the invention of printing, papermaking, gunpowder, and the compass. Meissner (2006) and Smits (2013) both suggest that while the ready ingredients for a Chinese 'national' identity were indeed long present in previous centuries, clear feelings of nationalism and national identity only emerged and grew from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, when foreign incursion into China and military defeat triggered the beginnings of a new collective national consciousness and modernization, amid resistance to outside Western and Japanese forces. Such a national identity then developed further and in different ways following the course of major political changes in China during the twentieth century and the economic booming of the country in the early twenty-first century.

1.3. 'Chinese'

The final, complex term which needs some clarification here before we consider the interaction of 'Chinese' and 'national identity' is the language label 'Chinese' itself, often discussed and disputed and of major importance to the notion of Chinese national identity. The critical question is whether there is any single language that can actually be referred to as 'Chinese', or whether there are many distinct languages which might all be classed as Chinese languages, as was suggested by Bloomfield (1933) in his statement that: 'Chinese is not a single language but a family of languages made up of a variety of mutually unintelligible languages'. As noted by Bloomfield and many others, the problem is that, descriptively, there are many regional varieties of 'Chinese' that vary so significantly in their pronunciation that they cannot be understood by speakers of 'Chinese' from other parts of China. If the criteria of mutual intelligibility is applied as a linguistic means of distinguishing languages from dialects, the conclusion should be that northern/Mandarin Chinese and Min, Hakka, Xiang, Gan, Wu, Yue, Jin, and Hui varieties all constitute different languages. However, officially, all such regional forms have been classified as dialects of a single Chinese language, and subjectively, such a classification has largely been accepted as reasonable within China and has not been seriously challenged. What has significantly helped buttress the impression of a single Chinese language with regional dialect forms is the existence of two sets of connections among such forms. First, it has been noted that although the 'dialects' are pronounced in ways that are often extremely different from each other, they do nevertheless share much of a basic lexicon and grammar. Second, since perhaps the time of the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Wei–Jin (CE 220–420) dynasties, the writing of Chinese has almost exclusively been carried out in all Chinese-speaking regions in a uniform way, making use of a parallel style, vocabulary, and orthographic means of representation, which for much of Chinese history has been substantively different from common forms of spoken Chinese. This special linking function of the written language, coupled with strong underlying lexical and grammatical similarities among regional forms of Chinese has been enough to maintain the image of a single Chinese language (with regional dialect forms), and allow it to serve as one of the several pillar components of Chinese cultural, ethnic, and later national identity, with common standardized forms of both written and spoken Chinese becoming ever more important during the course of the twentieth century, as will shortly be discussed.

2. Language and the development of national identity in modern China

2.1. The emergence of China as a nation, political nationalism, and language reform

There is some divergence in opinion as to whether a Chinese 'nation' existed in pre-modern times. Certain scholars have suggested that China was indeed a nation from early times on, perhaps from as early as the Qin–Han unification (Townsend 1996: 25) with a population sharing a single culture, ancestry, and history, governed by a powerful, centrally administered state. However, the majority opinion is that nationalism, and the emergence of China as a nation, only occurred from the late nineteenth century onwards (Xu 2002; Guo 2004). What preceded this is viewed at most as being possibly a 'collective consciousness' (Guo 2004) of belonging to a larger state with a widespread, similar culture and historical continuity. Smits (2013) suggests that such a consciousness of being Chinese was furthermore largely confined to the elites of society, and that the vast majority of the population in the empire had no clear feelings of being Chinese. He adds that national consciousness in China remained minimal among non-elites through until the time of the first Sino-Japanese war in 1894–5. Ten years afterwards, however, it had started to become strong in all those areas in which foreigners had come to live and carry out business in China, and later on, in the 1920s, propaganda distributed by the Guomindang nationalists helped stimulate the wider growth of Chinese national identity among all sections of society. Subsequently, from 1949 onwards until the present, the Chinese Communist Party fueled this further into a much stronger sense of national consciousness among ordinary people, so that 'Today, national consciousness in China is intense' (Smits 2013).

Considering language in pre-modern, pre-nationalist times, written and spoken forms of Chinese underwent significant divergence from the end of the Han dynasty (206 BCE – CE 220) onwards, with regional, spoken forms of Chinese diverging both from each other and from the written language of classical Chinese, which itself remained unchanged and fully dominated the creation of all official written Chinese and high literature right until the early twentieth century. However, the acquisition of literacy skills in classical Chinese was both very costly and highly time-consuming and beyond reach for all but the advantaged classes in China. Consequently, when China entered the twentieth century, its general population still had no common spoken form of Chinese that could be widely used and understood, and little widespread knowledge of written Chinese, which had long become disconnected from all spoken forms of Chinese. In pre-modern China, language thus neither served as an effective linking device among most of the large population, nor helped facilitate the acquisition of literacy because of the differences between written and spoken Chinese and the effort needed to learn classical Chinese. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was felt among emerging nationalist leaders that some kind of language change was necessary as part of the broader drive to modernize the country and stimulate a stronger sense of collective national identity among the people. It was argued that only when the population in general could communicate effectively, have easier linguistic access to education, and feel united as a single people would China be able to strengthen itself and successfully defend itself against foreign incursion and exploitation.

The modernization that took place was influenced by changing orientations towards the value of Chinese traditions and culture in comparison to Western systems of knowledge, and had important consequences for the kinds of language reforms that were advocated and adopted. The language changes that occurred in turn reflected a particular view of the ways

that language should best support the development of national identity and modernization in China. Meissner (2006) charts three distinct phases of attempts made at modernization prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, in which differing amounts of Western technology and culture were absorbed into China. In the first period, from the mid-nineteenth century to 1895, there was a selective adoption of Western scientific learning for purely practical purposes, and the Confucian system and other forms of Chinese traditional learning were maintained to regulate other social and cultural areas of life. In the second period, 1895–1911, it was claimed by certain intellectuals that the adoption of Western technology alone would not strengthen China sufficiently, and other aspects of Western learning were imported for use alongside traditional Chinese philosophies. In the third, most important period of modernization, 1911–49, four intellectual groups vied for dominance in the development of post-imperial China, with significantly different outlooks. The Confucians strongly defended Chinese traditions, and campaigned fervently against the increased adoption of Western ideas. The nationalists, led by Sun Yat-sen, attempted to blend Chinese traditional culture with Western political models. A vocal body of 'liberal thinkers' argued that only the full-scale import of Western learning would save China from the advances of its enemies. Finally, the Marxists, led by Mao Zedong, set out to destroy Chinese 'feudal' culture and Confucianism and replace this with a new socialist identity inspired by the writings of Marx and Lenin (Meissner 2006: 45–6). These different attitudes towards the optimal way forward for China competed with each other and affected the shape and success of proposals intended to 'modernize' Chinese and make literacy and a national language accessible to the masses.

What was broadly agreed upon was the need for significant improvement in the ability of common people to read, write, and potentially communicate with other Chinese throughout the country. What caused dispute was the way this should practically be achieved, particularly in the area of the orthographic representation of Chinese either via traditional characters or some alternative mode of writing. Prior to the vigorous debates over orthography, however, important progress was made relatively swiftly in reforming the language used to write down Chinese. While the norms of classical Chinese had been used in all formal writing and high literature for two millennia, and had grown increasingly separated from spoken language, at the end of the nineteenth century a movement grew to fully replace classical Chinese style with a written style more closely connected to the vernacular. A form of vernacular writing known as *baihua* had in fact come into use from the time of the Tang dynasty (CE 618–907) onwards, but was highly restricted in its use, being reserved for certain 'lower' forms of literature and the writing of unofficial notes. As pressure for more effective written communication asserted itself at the turn of the century, a form of *baihua* based on northern varieties of Chinese came to be increasingly used in writing and in print, and was officially sanctioned by the government in place of the older written style. Chen (1999: 71) notes that by 1911 there were dozens of new newspapers and magazines published in *baihua*, over 1,500 *baihua* novels, and that rising generations soon came to learn to read and write via *baihua* following a 1920 decree of the Ministry of Education that *baihua* be used as the language of literacy in schools.

The replacement of classical Chinese with a written style much closer to contemporary spoken forms of Chinese had the effect that the acquisition of literacy was made easier to achieve for the common population, a clearly positive result. However, it was argued that the use of thousands of complex Chinese characters to represent the language still created a major impediment to the rapid learning of written Chinese, and was likely to hold back progress towards mass literacy. Radical suggestions were subsequently made by many leading liberal intellectuals to actually replace the traditional system of characters with an alphabetic system as a way to speed up the acquisition of written Chinese further, and though such proposals clearly threatened to eliminate one of the central symbolic components of Chinese tradition and identity, quite remarkably the motion to use a system of Romanization to write Chinese received very wide support as a desirable goal to work towards, being opposed only by the Confucianists. Chen (2007) highlights how surprising it may appear to be that major liberal thinkers and nationalists would advocate such a potentially drastic change to the distinctive writing system of Chinese, which had

maintained a link among different Chinese dialect groups and functioned as a highly visible symbol of the Chinese throughout their long imperial history. Chen notes that prominent intellectuals of the time not only emphasized the simple practical value of introducing a less complicated alphabetic representation of Chinese for the learning of reading and writing, they also vigorously and emotionally depicted the traditional system of characters in strongly negative terms, referring to it as 'backward', 'clumsy', 'abominable', 'primitive', 'uncivilized', 'coarse', and having other highly undesirable qualities. Whereas aspects of inherited linguistic tradition have elsewhere often been made use of as important symbols of national unity by groups seeking to ignite popular nationalist sentiments (e.g. in Germany, Poland, France, Croatia), precisely the reverse appeared to happen with regard to written Chinese during the modernization of China in the twentieth century, and not only the classical Chinese style of writing but also the long-revered system of characters were targeted as negative inheritances from the past, responsible for impeding progress towards the attainment of a united, modern nation.

Chen suggests that such an anti-traditionalist position successfully dominated discussions of language and modernization among early Chinese nationalists due to the special circumstances of China's history and its language. He notes that China had long evolved as an independent polity, and Chinese nationalists therefore had no need to incite the population to rise up and establish China as a new territory. The potentially symbolic value of the Chinese language consequently did not need to be made use of as a force to trigger nationalist sentiments, unlike certain nation-building situations elsewhere in which a focus on inherited, shared language has been pivotal in helping amalgamate a previously un-united population in a new territorial space. Rather, what was needed in China in the view of nationalists and intellectuals was a purely utilitarian approach to language and the adaptation of spoken and written forms of Chinese in whatever way would best help the nation achieve its modernization goals. If this meant the discarding of traditional forms in order to make progress and strengthen the country, so be it. China should not dwell on its past traditions as sacred in any way, but look to a new, modernized future in which China would secure its position and be able to defend itself against foreign aggression.

As things happened, a switch from the use of characters to an alphabetic representation of Chinese ultimately did not come about. Internal discord in China involving conflict between nationalist and the communist armies, followed by Japanese invasion, interrupted efforts at language reform, including plans to devise an alphabetic representation of Chinese, and a second major language project, the 'creation' of a spoken national language, *guoyu*, that could be used as a means of communication by all the population and unite the nation. When these two projects were resumed in the 1950s, the drive to replace characters with a form of Romanization was superseded by a different modernization strategy aimed at simplifying the learning of written Chinese, and the national language project also underwent change. These events played out as China was led in a new direction under a quite different nationalist philosophy, as the People's Republic of China came into existence.

2.2. *The People's Republic of China, simplified characters, putonghua, and regional forms of Chinese*

The plans to reform spoken and written Chinese noted in 2.1 were made and effected during a time when the dominant approach to nation-building was utilitarian rather than symbolic and also significantly one of political nationalism, aimed at a strengthening of the Chinese state in general rather than being guided by ideas of any Han-centric ethnic nationalism. Certainly, it was northern Chinese that was earmarked to become promoted as the base of the national language, but under the circumstances this was simply a natural, practical choice given the very large numbers of speakers of mutually intelligible northern dialects. It was not supposed to symbolize any belief that Han Chinese in the north somehow represented the critical 'essence' of the nation, hence that their way of speaking should specially be adopted as the nation's language. The selection of northern Chinese as the future expanded link language in China was purely motivated by the practicality of developing a successful lingua franca for the modernizing state. As the founding of the People's Republic of China ushered in a fourth phase of attempted modernization up until the late 1970s (Meissner 2006), this new period in China's history saw a significant rejection of both Western and Chinese 'feudal' culture, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, and the attempt to shape China according to Marxist-Leninist socialist principles.

Concerning language and pre-People's Republic of China plans to fully replace characters with an alphabetic representation of Chinese, this potentially dramatic change was not made by the new communist regime, and efforts at developing a Romanization schemata for Chinese were restricted to the adoption of the *pinyin* alphabet system as a supplementary way to help in the early learning of characters and writing. Chen (2007) suggests that the primary reason why characters were ultimately not abandoned was in fact a practical, linguistic one, specifically that the existence of large numbers of homophonous words in Chinese makes the use of an alphabetic system impractical for the writing of Chinese and would have resulted in much confusing ambiguity in the written language. A second interesting reason why the Romanization efforts may have been significantly reduced in the 1950s, hinted at in Chen (1999), is the fact that this might have opened up the way for the expanded application of alphabetic/phonetic writing to other, non-Mandarin dialects of Chinese in a politically undesired way. From the time of the Qing dynasty onwards through the nationalist era, there were common warnings that the development of ways to successfully write down southern dialects of Chinese was harmful to the unity of Chinese and the unity of the country, and similar concerns may have had an impact on Romanization language planning in the early years of the People's Republic of China, when the leadership was heavily focused on establishing and maintaining a unified state. If the common character-based writing system were to be replaced and allow for multiple regional alphabets in different dialect areas, the unifying role of written Chinese would be lost, facilitating political division along regional lines and the possibility that China might even split into different linguistic 'nations'.

What did happen to the script, instead, is that it underwent a thorough simplification process in which many of the complex, traditional characters had their shapes converted into new simplified characters requiring fewer strokes, over 2,500 simplified characters being officially promulgated for use between 1956 and 1964. As this alteration of traditional characters into modern, new forms was mostly effected at a time that 'feudal' traditional culture was under common criticism, it did not cause the kind of defensive reaction from nationalists that was directed at similar simplification attempts in Japan during the 1930s, where it was argued that tampering with traditional characters was a direct attack on the national identity of the country, heavily embodied in the writing system. Indeed, as Guo (2004) notes, the communist leadership in the People's Republic of China aimed at revolutionizing China, and in the area of language

this naturally translated into a jettisoning of the traditional language. The new simplified characters then came to be associated with modernization and the eradication of China's 'backward' feudal past.

As for spoken Chinese, the continuation of the goal to create a form of Chinese that could be learned and used by all of the population as a link language was re-initiated in the early years of the People's Republic of China, taking the Beijing dialect as the base for most pronunciation norms and northern varieties of Chinese as the source of grammar and lexicon. Significantly, there was a renaming of this form of Chinese from the pre-People's Republic of China term *guoyu* 'national language' to *putonghua* 'common language'. In Chen (1999: 25), it is suggested that the adoption of the new designation 'common language' occurred so as to avoid the perception that northern Chinese was being presented as more representative of the nation than other varieties of Chinese, and signals a clear move away from overtly emphasizing any links between language and national identity as communicated by the term *guoyu*. In such a way, the non-political promotion of a national lingua franca in the People's Republic of China contrasts with the symbolic use of language by ethnic nationalist movements in other states during periods of modernization and the strengthening of independence.

The promotion of *putonghua* from the mid-1950s onwards was very successful, and *putonghua* is now very widely understood, used in education, the media, and also socially in many areas. Liu (2011) notes that the 2001 'Law of the People's Republic of China on the Use of Chinese Language and Chinese Characters' prescribes that *putonghua* and standard characters are to be the principal language and means of writing in broadcast media, movies, school education, and administration, and discourages the use of dialects in such domains. With the great success of *putonghua*, it can be said that though the initial motivation for spreading this form of Chinese was certainly functional, *putonghua* has now over time become a clear part of Chinese national identity for much of the population at least, in the sense of being a major part of everyday life in China for much of the population, speaking and 'consuming' *putonghua* in the media and in written Chinese. The regular daily use of *putonghua* therefore embeds a national link among the population and connects up people from around the very large area of the People's Republic of China, instilling feelings of belonging to a single national entity.

Although the government has strongly promoted the learning of *putonghua* as a shared means of communication in China, it does not forbid or even discourage the use of local dialects in non-official domains of everyday life (e.g. at home and with friends etc.). In the pre-People's Republic of China nationalist times, there were also no initiatives to suppress dialect use, and this attitude has been largely maintained ever since. Dialects are seen as perfectly appropriate for use in the more informal domains of life, and at no point has the Chinese leadership pursued an agenda to fully replace other varieties of Chinese with *putonghua*.

While there has thus not been any explicit suppression of non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese in domestic and social domains, the successful spread of *putonghua* has nevertheless had the effect that knowledge and use of regional forms of Chinese has decreased, significantly in the case of certain varieties. As *putonghua* has increasingly become associated with modernity and higher levels of education and socio-economic status, it has come to be used more frequently not just in those domains where it is officially promoted (education, media, and government administration) but also in informal interaction, and ever more so by urban younger generations. Despite the observation of such a general downward trend in use of

regional varieties of Chinese as *putonghua* has strengthened, there are also some recent signs that certain dialects may now be enjoying new prestige among younger-generation speakers, and, for example, the use of Shanghai dialect is now viewed as 'hip' and trendy among the young, distinguishing them from their parents' generation who may largely use just *putonghua*. This use of dialect is not confined to oral communication but has been making its way onto the Internet among the young, with dialect writing being used in online forums such as shanghaining.com where there is no strict emphasis on standard language. As Liu (2011: 62) observes, 'Dialect writing on the Internet celebrates creativity, flexibility, multiplicity, heterogeneity, unpredictability, informality, freedom, and rebellion'. There is also an increased occurrence of the use of dialects on television in talk shows, docudramas, dialect-dubbed films, dialect television series, and sitcoms, despite the 2001 Chinese Language Law (Liu 2011). Yet in the absence of any well-accepted, standardized way of writing regional forms of Chinese, it is hard to see such forms posing a real challenge to *putonghua* and potentially replacing it in commerce, education, and officialdom, even if the government were to allow this. Hence the cohesion facilitated by *putonghua* in both its spoken and written modes is unlikely to be threatened by the existence of popular regional forms of Chinese. It may also be hoped by the government that the overarching Chinese state identity reinforced by daily use of a common language will serve as a counterbalance to new emphases on regional cultural differences among Han Chinese groups. Gladney (2004) remarks that with the rapid economic growth in the south of China, southerners such as the Cantonese, and others, have begun to assert their cultural differences. As part of such a process, there has been a reinterpretation of Chinese history, and southern scholars have argued that the early southern Kingdom of Chu spread its culture northwards to significantly influence the development of northern Chinese civilization, rather than the other way round as is commonly believed; hence there is a local re-evaluation of the importance of the south to China's past and presently inherited identity. Furthermore, relating to the existence of an ethnic Han Chinese national identity, many southern groups are noted to have traditionally regarded themselves not as Han people descended from the Han Yellow Emperor, but as historical descendants of the Tang dynasty. The potential for cracks in an assumed all-encompassing Han identity is therefore present, with possible consequences for the broader unity of Chinese 'state' national identity. The connections strengthened throughout the People's Republic of China from the increased use of *putonghua* may consequently be viewed as beneficial for national unity in shoring up signs of fragmentation caused by other factors.

3. Non-Han minorities, language, and national cohesion

Approximately 8% of the population in the People's Republic of China is made up of non-Han minority groups, recognized as belonging to 55 different 'nationalities'. All such minority nationalities are officially held to be Chinese, the People's Republic of China proclaiming itself to be 'a unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation' (Dwyer 2005, quoting a People's Republic of China Embassy statement). The Chinese leadership, at least as far back as Mao and his slogan 'nationalities unite' (*minzu tuanjie*, quoted in Safran 1998b), therefore envisage non-Han groups as belonging to the Chinese nation along with the Han. A natural question is whether the minority nationalities themselves feel that they are genuine parts of such an announced multi-ethnic Chinese nation. To some considerable extent, this depends on how effectively a state national identity is stimulated among the minority nationalities through measures of inclusion, including equitable access to socio-economic resources, the stimulation of feelings of being welcome partners in the future of the nation, the enabling of increased communication between Han and non-Han groups, and the non-devaluation of minority language and culture.

With regards to language issues, government policy towards minority languages has gone through a number of different stages. In the first two decades of the People's Republic of China, there was an

assimilative drive to spread *putonghua* at the expense of the maintenance of minority languages. However, the 1970s and 1980s ushered in a new era of linguistic and cultural accommodation which has essentially been maintained until the present. The government initiated work to help develop minority languages, and the 1975 constitution confirmed the right of all nationalities to use their spoken and written languages (Dreyer 2003a: 369). Such rights were recognized again in the 1999 constitution (Article 4, quoted in Chen 2007: 162), which states, 'The people of all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs'. Since the 1970s, then, there have been no attempts to eliminate or repress the use of minority languages (and culture), and certain government support for the development of these languages (the provision of writing systems, educational materials, etc.) has been made available. Minority nationalities are relatively free to make use of their languages, and Han Chinese living in minority areas are also encouraged to learn local minority languages, though in practice inter-ethnic communication tends to be carried out in *putonghua* or other strong regional forms of Chinese, due to the economic pressures minorities feel to learn Chinese in order to access better employment. Partially as a result of such pressures and the 'market-value' of competency in *putonghua*, many minority groups have experienced a decline in the knowledge and use of their languages in the communities where they live, in a way similar to the increasing shift to *putonghua* among Han Chinese from non-Mandarin dialect groups, and paralleling global patterns of language shift to economically more powerful and prestigious languages. Rather more positively, however, *putonghua* does provide the means for minority nationalities to participate fully in the economic, political, and social activities of the People's Republic of China, and so in theory develop feelings of attachment and belonging to the Chinese state where other negative conditions do not undermine the growth of such a broader, non-ethnic, 'national' identity. In other non-linguistic domains, the People's Republic of China has indeed attempted to alleviate the poorer living conditions present in many minority areas, and introduced special preferential policies for minority nationalities in family planning, school and university admissions, hiring and promotion, the financing and taxation of businesses, and regional infrastructural support (Sautman 1998: 87). The government also provides considerable financial support for large regions inhabited by minority groups, 50% of Xinjiang's annual budget being subsidized by the government, and much higher investment being made in Tibet (Wang 2002). In this connection, Gladney (2004: 18) notes that various of the minority nationalities who live near China's borders are aware that they are economically better off in the People's Republic of China than their ethnic kin living across the border in states such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Where there have been ethnic problems between minority nationalities and Han Chinese, these have typically not been caused by language issues, but by other factors (e.g. the broader issue of increased autonomy and religion in Tibet and Xinjiang province). Hence in sum it can be said that the non-repressive and generally inclusive language policies implemented in China since the 1970s have laid the groundwork for minorities to feel more included in the nation and not negatively discriminated against, potentially allowing for a sense of national identity to develop over time with new generations, as has occurred in other ethnically mixed states where an official state language has been spread as a lingua franca without any accompanying suppression of minority languages; for example, Indonesia and Tanzania.

Finally, concerning the general issue of whether it may be possible to construct bona fide 'nations' that are ethnically heterogeneous with multiple minority groups, the mainstream conception of nations necessarily requiring a shared ethnic origin, language, history, and culture has been challenged by a number of scholars and political scientists who advocate an alternative model of genuinely multi-ethnic nations which potentially lends itself to the situation in the People's Republic of China.

The nineteenth-century French philosopher Ernest Renan, for example, has argued that modern nationhood is not based on a shared language, culture or ancestry, but on a shared sense of destiny and the desire of a population to live together (Dreyer 2003b: 393). Within China, Guo (2004: 13) notes that such thinking has been echoed by a prominent professor of philosophy at Zhongshan University, Li Zonggui, who argues that what is indispensable to a nation is a sense of belonging together, not necessarily a common language, culture or historical bloodlines. In such conceptions, then, it is perfectly feasible for the minority nationalities to become part of a modern Chinese nation oriented towards the future, and the adoption of a Chinese national identity perceived in such a way should not require the abandonment of other ethnic language and culture.

A second, recent approach to conceiving of the Chinese nation in a way that is inclusive of minority nationalities has been referred to as 'racial nationalism' in Meissner (2006), and is quite different to Renan's view of multi-ethnic nations, essentially denying that fundamental ethnic differences exist among minorities in the People's Republic of China. Meissner notes that since the watershed events of Tiananmen in 1989, when the government saw it as increasingly important to stress the collective identity of the Chinese, official documents have attempted to emphasize a common ancestry of both the Han and the minorities. Han and Tibetans (and other minorities) are presented as parts of a common race, and the early cultures of such peoples are regarded as identical. In such a view, Tibetans (and quite possibly other minority groups) may belong to the Chinese nation through a genuine blood relationship, and there is no need to imagine the People's Republic of China as a multi-ethnic nation. While the historical accuracy of such declarations may be questionable, it is nevertheless indicative of the leadership's desire to integrate the non-Han into a closer national identity and may function to adjust traditional perceptions of such groups as being unconnected to the Han.

4. Chinese and national identity in modern times

Perhaps the most striking phenomenon relating to Chinese national identity in very recent times in the People's Republic of China has been strident calls from many Han intellectuals for a return to Chinese traditions and Confucian values as a way to take the nation forward and save it from the spiritual decay perceived to be growing in China in the wake of an increasing loss of faith in Marxism and other aspects of Western thought which had fuelled China's modernization during the twentieth century. For the new 'cultural nationalists', it is paramount that China reclaim its national identity from traditional sources and Confucianism to combat the social chaos (crime, corruption, materialism, gambling, prostitution, etc.) which has arisen since the 1980s (Guo 2004), and calls for a return to tradition as a means to re-energize nationalism have significantly not been censured by the political leadership, which is keen to see loyalty to the state stimulated at a time when its Marxist platform of support may be less inspiring than in the past. The Chinese national identity which is being brought into focus by the new movement of the cultural nationalists is one which is considerably Han-centric, based on aspects of Han Chinese tradition and culture, and seems to be primarily aimed at strengthening and uniting the Han core of the People's Republic of China. It is therefore an ethnic nationalism which is not preoccupied with the integration of non-Han minorities within the state as nation, and instead makes its first concern the rejuvenation of the morally-threatened Han population from its traditional roots.

Organized into prominent bodies such as the International Confucius Foundation, the Chinese Yellow Emperor Association, the Chinese Culture Society at Beijing University, and the Beijing International Chinese Character Research Association, Guo (2004: 18) notes that the cultural nationalists take the Chinese language to particularize the Chinese way of thinking and enshrine the 'spirit' of the nation, and it is bemoaned that modern Chinese thought has become weakened and confused by the intrusion of Western influences. In new works of literature created by the cultural nationalists, Guo (1998: 172) reports that writers have accordingly set out to restore the purity of the national language corrupted by Western cultural influences and bring back 'the Chinese essence' through writing about Chinese traditions.

Extending the idea that Chinese embodies the 'spirit' of the nation to include its special mode of orthography, a major linguistic focus of the cultural nationalists' activities has been the defense of traditional characters, which in much of the twentieth century had been negatively portrayed as the direct cause of low levels of literacy among common people. The cultural nationalists argue that characters, and in particular traditional characters, should instead be recognized as instantiating 'the root of Chinese culture, a symbol of the Chinese nation,... the single most important agent for national cohesiveness, the transmitter of China's national spirit' (Guo 2004: 105). They thus suggest that it is crucial for rising generations to learn traditional characters, as a means to access and appreciate the full meaning of Chinese literature and philosophy written in previous centuries, and also warn against any further attempts at character simplification or increased use of Romanization, which would cause more harm towards the national identity.

Going on the offensive, the cultural nationalists have additionally made claims that, far from being detrimental to learning, Chinese characters actually help very considerably in the acquisition of literacy, and should therefore be valued and used as a possible mechanism to promote literacy in other languages of the world. Such an assertive defense of characters has led on to other eulogies of a range of 'superior' properties of the Chinese language which are taken to potentially qualify it for the role of a new world language (Lu 2008). These properties are well described in Guo (2004: 96) and include suggestions that:

- Chinese is the clearest and the most concise language.
- Chinese is the world's easiest language to learn.
- The ideographs (characters) are 'expressions of meanings' and 'symbols of ideas' and store more information than linear writing.
- Chinese grammar is the closest to the grammar of mathematics, musical notation, and chemical symbols.

Supporters of the potential spread of Chinese as an international language take heart from the growth in government-sponsored centers around the world (now over 200; Lu 2008: 269) which promote the international learning of Chinese language and culture; for example, the Confucius Institute in the USA. In this atmosphere of energetic assertion of the positive values/possible superiority of Chinese, it is also relevant to note that 'Chinese' is now increasingly being referred to as *Hanyu*, the language of the Hans, in everyday speech in China, in place of the ethnically more neutral *putonghua* 'common language' (Dwyer 1998: 80).

This further points to the emergence of a Han ethnic nationalism at the heart of the resurgence in language pride and a perception of Mandarin Chinese as being principally anchored in the Han nationality.

While such a movement to return to and re-exploit Chinese tradition has been strong amongst intellectuals in recent years, Guo (2004: 102–8) points out that there are also opponents to any increased use or learning of traditional characters, and it is maintained that the simplified script also has an important symbolic value for national identity, being the specially distinctive script of the People's Republic of China. Guo notes that such pro-People's Republic of China critics of cultural nationalism, termed 'political state nationalists', emphasize that 'modern Chinese, simplified characters, and *pinyin* are the three pillars of the People's Republic of China's socialist culture' (Guo 2004: 103), hence should not be displaced by the use of traditional characters, which are seen as symbols of capitalism, due to their continued use among overseas populations of Chinese living in non-socialist states. Guo concludes that this political symbolism of the simplified script will make it difficult for the government to allow for the reintroduction of traditional characters in any official way, though there has been frequent unofficial use of traditional characters in public signs such as restaurant and store names for several decades now, despite the imposition of fines for such displays (Chen 1999: 191). It therefore seems that it is unrealistic for the cultural nationalists to expect that simplified characters or *pinyin* will disappear and be replaced by full-form characters. However, in their campaigning for a return to the traditional past, the cultural nationalists have really put Chinese (Han) language back into focus as central to Chinese (Han) national identity, in a way that has not occurred so virulently before, during the twentieth century. It will be interesting to see how this engagement with national identity and the tensions between ethnic and political/state nationalism and language unfold further in the People's Republic of China as China and its complex population confront new challenges through the twenty-first century.

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