

# Who Are “Overseas Chinese Ethnic Minorities”? China’s Search for Transnational Ethnic Unity

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## Abstract

This article examines why, how, and with what implications the term “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities” has recently entered the official scholarly discourse and policy discussions on overseas Chinese in the People’s Republic of China. Through examining policy documents, reports, scholarly publications, and interviews with officials and scholars, the article shows that the *shaoshu minzu* category has permeated the discourse on overseas Chinese to steer the dual efforts of the Chinese authorities to overcome the Han-centricity of overseas Chinese studies in China and to mobilize transnational “ethnic unity” among Han and non-Han overseas Chinese. By way of highlighting a possible response to the government initiatives toward overseas Chinese ethnic minorities, the article also considers a written account of a Kazakh Dungan who took part in a government-sponsored tour to China in search of his “historic roots.” The analysis presented in the article points to a pervasive character of state power directed at totalizing heterogeneous transnational identities and reducing them to fixed categories. These transnational efforts emphasize unity over variety and cohesion over diversity within the Chinese nation. The inherently dichotomous understanding of diversity within the Chinese nation where the Han majority is contrasted to

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China's ethnic minorities informs the People's Republic of China's transnational nation-building efforts.

## Keywords

Chinese nationalism, "ethnic unity", overseas Chinese, ethnic minorities, politics of diversity

The deterioration of ethnic relations in Tibet and Xinjiang in recent years has prompted Chinese leaders to rethink and adjust their ethnic minority policies in several ways. The state authorities sent thousands of officials and police officers to the communities in the areas of unrest in the aftermath of violent breakouts in Xinjiang (People's Daily Online, 2009); introduced new economic policies and generous assistance packages in Tibet and Xinjiang (Kwok, 2010; Wong, 2010); released white papers on ethnic unity and policies in Xinjiang (*China Daily*, 2009a, 2009b); and initiated a new Ethnic Unity Law promoting "patriotic education" in schools across Xinjiang (Associated Press, 2010). The underlying motivation behind these initiatives is to mobilize all means to secure the unity and stability of multiethnic China. The themes of diversity and ethnic unity have been dominant in Chinese domestic and global public campaigns, including the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 60th anniversary celebration of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2009, and the 2010 Shanghai Expo.

These intensive efforts to consolidate national unity are far from new. Rather they are a continuation of practices as old as the pre-1949 attempts to bring together a vast and culturally diverse Chinese empire (Harrell, 1995; Zhu and Blachford, 2005; Leibold, 2007). What is new in the state's management of diversity and ethnic unity is that it has recently reached out to the transnational level. The visible presence of the awkward term "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" (*shaoshu minzu Huaqiao Huaren*; *shaoshu minzu Huaren*; *shaoshu minzu haiwai qiaobao*) in scholarly works and state pronouncements in recent years has immediate implications for our understanding of Chinese state nationalism. By focusing on the scholarly discussions and official policies on "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities," this article aims to provide a better understanding of why, how, and with what implications the official stress on ethnic unity has permeated the Chinese official discourse and policy-making agenda related to "overseas Chinese work" (*qiaowu gongzuo*).

The formulations of overseas Chinese policies, like the predicament of unity in diversity in China's relations with its domestic ethnic minorities, are closely related to Chinese identity politics. If China's ethnic minorities have been the symbol of China's ethnic and cultural diversity, the concept of "overseas Chinese" has long been constructed as an extension of the Chinese nation, a symbol of its continuity, cohesion, and coherence. In recent years, the sense of insecurity and fear of national instability resulting from the deterioration of China's ethnic relations and increased diversification and problematization of Chinese global migrant identities has led the current Chinese leaders to devise and pursue what I call "transnational ethnic unity" initiatives. These new policy orientations aim simultaneously at diversifying the notion of overseas Chinese and nationalizing multilayered and multiple identities of "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities." While these new discourse and policy perspectives have been motivated by the desire to resolve the unity-in-diversity dilemma, they are framed by its inherently binary logic juxtaposing the Han majority and China's ethnic minorities in the official production of the Chinese nation. This binary is informed by the interplay of coexistent racial and territorial discourses of the Chinese nation dominating contemporary formulations of Chinese nationalism. Official Chinese nationalism, as we shall see, is a "moving project" (Friedman, 2008) going beyond the territorial borders of Chinese sovereignty. This project is expressed through new modalities of sovereign power exercised through transnational identity politics.

This article is based on a critical reading of Chinese scholarly publications, official pronouncements and policy documents dealing with "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities," and online official and public texts, supplemented by interviews with Chinese scholars and government officials conducted during research trips to Beijing in May–September 2005 and May–June 2007, Kunming in Yunnan province in July 2009, and Nanning in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in May–June 2010.

The first section shows how the concept of overseas Chinese has been historically produced in Chinese official discourse as a narrow extension of the Chinese nation, prioritizing the so-called Han majority. The second section exposes the recent embrace of the "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" rhetoric by Chinese policy makers and the formulation of particular policy initiatives stressing this newly emergent policy direction. The third section contends that much of China's "ethnic unity" efforts play out in the transnational context through a complex web of state policies and bottom-up popular initiatives. The fourth section traces the origins of the discourse on "overseas

Chinese ethnic minorities” in scholarly publications and points to similarities between scholarly studies and the state position on “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities.” The final, fifth section considers how some of the intended targets view the Chinese state’s transnational “ethnic unity” initiatives. I will analyze a written account of a Kazakh Dungan who took part in a Chinese government-sponsored trip to China to visit his “historic homeland.” This section illustrates how the discourses and policies discussed in preceding sections play out on the ground. Of course, this account cannot be generalized to other overseas Chinese ethnic minorities or even be considered representative of all Dungans in Central Asia. What is interesting in this particular piece is how the author of the article internalizes and reproduces Chinese state discourse in his personal search for home. This written narrative, I argue, is indicative of how state power works to shape transnational identities through adaptations to the official narrative of the Chinese nation.

## **Overseas Chinese and Chinese National Dynamics**

Overseas Chinese have been an important research theme for documenting and understanding migration dynamics and their multifarious socioeconomic, political, and cultural aspects at global, national, and local levels (Pieke et al., 2005; Benton and Gomez, 2008; Thunø, 2007; Reid, 2009). Overseas Chinese and their relations with China have been also an important entry point for understanding the dynamics of Chinese nationalism (Williams, 1960; Callahan, 2003; Liu, 2005). As an aspect of official discourse and government policies, “overseas Chinese work” occupies the space between foreign and domestic policies. With the increasing global role of China and the expanding numbers of overseas Chinese worldwide, managing overseas Chinese might constitute a new challenge for the Chinese government (Liu, 2010). The ambiguity of the Chinese term for overseas Chinese, *Huaqiao Huaren*, incorporating Chinese citizens residing abroad and foreign citizens of Chinese descent and its imprecise official use in relation to the legal formulations of Chinese citizenship suggest that the status of overseas Chinese policies in official discourse and policy making is related primarily to the formulations and practices of Chinese national identity.

The activities and status of overseas Chinese have been closely related to Chinese state-led national projects, especially the 1911 Revolution and the reform and opening-up strategy at the end of the twentieth century. Prasenjit Duara has shown how early modern Chinese nationalists deployed de-territorialized discourses and practices to reach out to overseas Chinese

(Duara, 1997). Not only state-led national projects, but also intellectual movements, such as National Studies (*guoxue*) in early twentieth-century Beijing and Xiamen, were closely linked to the activities of overseas Chinese societies (Cook, 2006: 165). With Deng Xiaoping's initiation of China's reforms, overseas Chinese were invited to "serve" the cause of China's modernization through their connections in South China (Friedman, 1994; Siu, 1993; Louie, 2000). The years of reform have been marked by reestablishment and reinforcement of the links between overseas Chinese and their "motherland" (Zhuang, 2001; Thunø, 2001; Xiang Biao, 2003; Barabantseva, 2005).

An important aspect of China's policies toward overseas Chinese is that they employ the culturally deterministic language of common Chinese origins and cultural identity of overseas Chinese. In Chinese scholarly and official discussions, overseas Chinese have been presented as an extension of the Chinese nation united with the goal of first "saving," then "serving," and now "rejuvenating the nation." They present the view of China's relations with overseas Chinese as premised on primordial sentiments mobilized around the idea of Chinese national unity. As an extension and reflection of Chinese national dynamics, the use of overseas Chinese across government pronouncements and many scholarly publications has been often linked with another problematic Chinese concept and ethno-cultural category: China's Han majority. The equation of overseas Chinese with Han Chinese is rather common across official and scholarly publications in China. In 2009, Wang Zhaoguo, a member of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, in his report on the achievements of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese at the Eighth National Congress of Returned Overseas Chinese and their Relatives stressed "blood lineage" as one of the bases of the work of the federation (Garnaut, 2009).<sup>1</sup> This explicit identification of overseas Chinese as Han has direct implications for how the Chinese nation is understood. An interchangeable use of racial and cultural arguments puts into question the nature of ethnic diversity promoted by China at its domestic level.

In contrast to viewing and treating overseas Chinese as an extension of the Chinese territorial nation, the role of ethnic minorities in Chinese national imaginary has been to present China as a multiethnic, diverse, and "colorful" society. This representation manifests itself in inflexible and restrictive forms of ethnic citizenship in at least two ways. One is a proliferation of the image of happy, innocent, feminized, eroticized, and "docile" ethnic minorities through state-endorsed tourism and cultural performances (Gladney, 1994; Schein, 2000; McCarthy, 2009). Another form is the securitization of ethnic minorities where they, in particular Uyghurs and Tibetans, are routinely singled out as a threat to Chinese national security and integrity.<sup>2</sup> This public

perception of certain minority groups has recently resulted in the blanket control of their social lives through restriction of Internet use, hotel room rentals, physical mobility, and even the use of photocopying and printing facilities (Graham-Harrison, 2010; Radio Free Asia, 2007; Millward, 2009: 348–49).

Since the ethnic clashes in 2008 and 2009 China's leaders have emphasized Chinese ethnic unity with ever increasing vigor. The picture of the ethnically diverse yet harmonious Chinese state is a preferred portrait presented to the outside world through China's global image campaigns. This celebration of domestic diversity and multiethnicity has been in direct contrast to the dominant official formulations and policies toward overseas Chinese. If othering is an important process of constructing national identity, the role of the overseas Chinese in Chinese politics has been to serve as an extension of the Chinese nation, while ethnic minorities, as has been powerfully argued by anthropologists, have played the role of China's domestic Other. As an extension of the Chinese nation, overseas Chinese have been encouraged to take part in the state's initiatives to secure China's "ethnic unity." For example, in 2004, the Xinjiang Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) reported that with the help of donations from "Han compatriots" (*Hanzu tongbao*) 33 schools opened their doors to the children of Xinjiang. Called "Overseas Heart Primary Schools" (*qiaoxin xiaoxue*), these institutions, in the words of a Chinese American donor, "will be an educational foundation for patriotism and ethnic unity" (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, n.d.). Conversely, in spring 2010, international human rights organizations raised concerns about a "suspicious questionnaire" distributed by Chinese state representatives to overseas Chinese organizations worldwide aimed to survey the "attitude of Chinese citizens and foreigners of Chinese origin" about the Tibet problem (Reporters without Borders, 2010). In other words, the state's transnational efforts to address China's "ethnic unity" concerns are closely linked to soliciting the support of overseas Chinese.

## **Overseas Chinese Ethnic Minorities in Policy Considerations**

Until the late 1990s, the policy debates on the "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" had predominately been within academic circles. Although Chinese scholars have emphasized the potential contribution of the overseas Chinese ethnic minorities to border stability and the development of the minority regions, a uniform treatment of "patriotic" overseas Chinese has been prevalent in China's official position on the overseas Chinese issue. Even in May 2010, an official at the Guangxi OCAO adamantly declared that

overseas Chinese policies do not distinguish between the Han and ethnic minorities among overseas Chinese populations. This state representative further affirmed that overseas Chinese policies are “formulated from the perspective of the Chinese nation” (Interview at the Guangxi Autonomous Region Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, Nanning, May 27, 2010). In doing so, the spokesperson stressed the “transnational unity” of the overseas Chinese and the Chinese nation. Indeed, until recently overseas Chinese policies were largely oriented toward mainstream (Han) Chinese. This perhaps explains why returned overseas Chinese of ethnic minority background find it difficult to reconcile the two social categories imposed on them by the Chinese state. In my conversations with returned overseas Chinese at Guangxi University in May 2010, it was pointed out that in most cases returned overseas Chinese of minority backgrounds have to choose which of the two types of positive discrimination, either for ethnic minorities or overseas Chinese, would be more beneficial for them (Interview with representatives of the Returned Overseas Chinese Association, Guangxi University, May 25, 2010).

Despite the affirmation of the regional OCAO official, in recent years government offices at provincial and central levels, as well as Chinese embassies and consulates, have increasingly raised the issue of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities. While scholarly discussions somewhat calmed down by the mid-2000s, Chinese policy makers upheld the idea of the overseas Chinese ethnic minorities and took it to the policy making realm. The timing of China’s more proactive engagement with overseas Chinese ethnic minorities is important. Roughly at the point when the state OCAOs accelerated its policy of “going out and inviting in” (*zouchuqu, qing jinlai*), China’s top leadership wholeheartedly embraced the slogans of “building a harmonious society” and “building a harmonious world” and endorsed the concept of “soft power.” Since then, an all-encompassing concept of soft power has become a popular trope for explaining China’s global initiatives. It is not surprising that some Western and Chinese scholars also started referring to overseas Chinese as one of the channels of China’s “soft power” (Kurlantzick, 2007: 71–77; Liu and Zeng, 2008: 44).

Central and regional governments in areas with a high concentration of ethnic populations started paying attention to the issue of ethnic minorities among overseas Chinese in the late 1990s. In 2002, the state OCAO carried out the first study on whether overseas Chinese ethnic minorities should be included in the overseas Chinese policies (Luova, 2006), which signaled an increased interest of the state in this issue. Prior to this, the development model of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin province extensively relied, with a varying degree of success, on ethnic ties between Chinese

Koreans and Koreans in South Korea. Outi Luova reports that according to a survey conducted by the Ethnic Affairs Commission among Korean households in Yanbian, 23% had close relatives abroad. Foreign Koreans with links to Yanbian have been actively encouraged to get involved with their *guxiang* (ancestral town) through a web of activities celebrating shared kinship and descent (Luova, 2006: 39–40). Similarly, the authorities in Qinghai turned their interest to overseas Chinese ethnic minorities after a study conducted by the Qinghai Provincial Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (Qinghai sheng Qiaolian) in 2004. The study's research findings reported that 71% of the returned overseas Chinese and overseas Chinese relatives (*guiqiao qiaojuan*) in Qinghai (more than 100,000 out of 140,000 people) were from ethnic minority backgrounds (Qinghai sheng Qiaolian, n.d.). More recently, the Yunnan provincial government underlined the importance of deepening research and policies toward overseas Chinese ethnic minorities in countries neighboring Yunnan for “strengthening China’s unity” and “border stability” (He, 2009). These developments highlight the increasing centrality of ethnic issues, as defined by the state, in the official articulations of overseas Chinese policies.

The Xinjiang regional OCAO has been particularly active toward overseas Chinese ethnic minorities. One of the OCAO's policy objectives is to carry out “group self-identity work” (*woyou rentonggan qunti de gongzuo*) among overseas Chinese (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, n.d.). The online document summarizing the work of the OCAO reports that from 1998 to 2004, overseas Chinese from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan visited China. Significantly, the official language emphasizes overseas Chinese Uyghurs' negative relation to China: “although they [overseas Chinese] are not separatists, they might be connected to separatists and hostile forces” (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, n.d.). In other words, the official position is based on distrust of the overseas Chinese Uyghurs and treats them as a potential security concern. Unlike its practices toward Han overseas Chinese, which stress mutual “blood ties,” culture, values, interests, and patriotism, the state reaches out to overseas Chinese Uyghurs on the assumption that they might otherwise pose a threat to Chinese security. Importantly, there is no especially designated OCAO in Tibet, indicating the peculiarity of Tibet's status in the PRC's overseas Chinese policies. Instead, Tibet's Communist Party United Front Department directly carries out work related to overseas Chinese Tibetans. In 2010 at the Fifth Tibetan Work Forum, a China Tibetology Center scholar emphasized the importance of “targeted work” among the second and third generation of overseas Tibetans. In addition to working with later generations of Tibetan emigrants



and exiles, the scholar proposed to support the establishment of new organizations for overseas Tibetans, the most prominent example being the China Overseas Tibetan Friendship Association set up in California in 2010.<sup>3</sup> This scholar's proposals were later published online, provoking harsh criticism by many Tibetan netizens, including Woesser, a prominent Tibetan poet and blogger (Woesser, 2010).

The state's initiatives for overseas Chinese ethnic minorities are aimed at nurturing their sentimental connection to China. The aforementioned document of the Xinjiang OCAO stresses that China is "home" for overseas Chinese Uyghurs, and this is where they could find emotional and physical attachment to their roots. For example, the document quotes one of the visiting group members as saying

To tell the truth, although we abroad are not in need of anything, what we lack is the maternal love of our homeland (*zuguo*). Only by coming back to the homeland you experience this kind of love and appreciate people's dignity and value. (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, n.d.)

In a similar vein, the increased number of visits of "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" from Central Asia to China hinges on the assumption of the "love" of the visitors for their place of origin, China (Zhongguo Qiao wang, 2006). A professor at Minzu University of China in Beijing observed that there has been an increasing number of "patriotic" tours for "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities, which usually include a stop at the main university for China's nationalities in Beijing" (Interview at Central Minzu University, May 28, 2010).<sup>4</sup> The elusive positioning of "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" as a social construct in between the political and territorial boundaries of the Chinese state, informing both ethnic minority and overseas Chinese policies, is evidenced by the fact that the PRC's Ethnic Affairs Commission (Minwei), China's ministerial body dealing with domestic ethnic issues, takes part in events for overseas Chinese ethnic minorities. A representative from the commission attends events for "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" hosted by other institutions. The commission also organizes "inspection" (*kaocha*) tours around China for overseas Chinese ethnic minorities like the one in October 2007 for visitors from seven countries (Li, 2010: 298).

A number of recent developments signal the acceleration of policy making toward overseas Chinese ethnic minorities at local, national, and transnational levels. The underlying theme of these concerted efforts is to address ethnic problems in China through mobilization of transnational ethnic unity of the Chinese nation. In May 2010, the biennial World Congress of Overseas

Chinese Associations, the fifth held since 2001, gathered representatives of overseas Chinese associations from more than 120 countries in Beijing. The congress opened only a week after the launch of the World Expo in Shanghai, and indeed was accompanied by an Expo trip under the program "Overseas Chinese Return to China to Visit the World Expo." The theme and the content of the congress, titled "Defending China's Unity: History and Situation in Xinjiang and Tibet," were aimed at "introducing overseas Chinese to the government's policies in Xinjiang and Tibet." The distinct aspect in the otherwise familiar position of the Chinese government toward overseas Chinese was voiced by the head of the OCAO, Li Haifeng, who stressed the need to work closer with overseas Chinese ethnic minorities, in particular Chinese Tibetans and Uyghurs abroad (China News Net, 2010a). Jia Qinglin, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and the Chairman of the Eleventh Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), addressed the congress with three "hopes" (*xiwang*) concerning overseas Chinese, emphasizing the need to promote a closer relationship with "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities." Li Haifeng's and Jia Qinglin's proposals were subsequently built into the government's "five measures to accelerate overseas Chinese Tibetan and Xinjiang work" (China News Net, 2010b). In a similar vein, in March 2011 at the fourth session of the Eleventh CPPCC, an institution where new policy proposals are presented and reviewed, conference representative Lin Zhaoshu delivered a report on "Strengthening overseas Chinese ethnic minorities work and promoting unity and sustainable development of border and minority areas" (*Qieshi jiaqiang shaoshu minzu qiaowu gongzuo cujin bianjiang he shaoshu minzu diqu shixian wending tuanjie he kechixu fazhan*), which outlined six recommendations for policy work, including strengthening propaganda work among overseas Chinese ethnic minorities and conducting a forum on overseas Chinese ethnic minorities work (for a full list of the recommendations, see Renmin wang, 2011).

Within China the offices of the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (Qiaolian) play an important socializing role for returned overseas Chinese. In 2000, there were more than 8,000 Qiaolian offices across the country (Cheng, 2007: 54). The activities of Qiaolian stress the loyalty of its members to the development objectives of the state and helping returnees reintegrate into society. Proud of his returned overseas status and somewhat uncomfortable with being Zhuang at the same time, Mr. Deng, the chairman of Qiaolian branch at Guangxi University and a local People's Congress representative, clearly prioritized his status as a returned overseas Chinese over his ethnic minority status. Talking of his years in Italy, he could not hide his pride in China's development success:

When I left China in 1998 the difference in development between China and Italy was enormous. When I came back in 2002, I didn't feel so much difference. In fact, we're better off buying most things in China now. Our technology is the same, if not better, and is cheaper. (Interview at Guangxi University, Nanning, May 24, 2010)

Mr. Deng also offered his perspective on China's minority policies from his vantage point as a returned overseas Chinese. Evoking Confucian and socialist terminology adopted by the current leaders of China, he said that

the Zhuang are one of the most assimilated groups in China, and it's better this way. It is so difficult to learn a new language. I remember how I struggled learning Mandarin Chinese. The quicker we develop and assimilate (*tonghua*), the better. This way we'll achieve "great harmony" (*datong*) and "unity" (*tuanjie*). (ibid.)

Mr. Deng was content that he had overcome the differences between his minority background and mainstream Chinese culture. With a foreign education and a seat in the local People's Congress, his unease about his minority background is evidence of the difficulty of reconciling the contradictory social statuses attributed to overseas Chinese and ethnic minorities in contemporary China.

The new ethnic aspect of overseas Chinese work is reflected in the recent focus of Qiaolian's activities. In July 2010, at a national symposium on Qiaolian's work in ethnic areas, one of the identified objectives was to "expand work among overseas Chinese ethnic minorities organizations" (All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, 2010). Almost concurrently, the Xinjiang OCAO welcomed 60 representatives of overseas Chinese ethnic minority organizations from abroad for a study group on Xinjiang (Yan, 2010). While several years ago overseas Chinese ethnic minorities work was characterized as "less institutionalized, less centralized" (Luova, 2006: 54), there is now a move in the opposite direction—to bring dispersed and diverse populations under a unifying discourse and institutional structure of the Chinese state.

## Transnational Dimensions of "Ethnic Unity Work"

The state efforts to incorporate overseas Chinese ethnic minorities into the discursive and policy dimensions of "overseas Chinese work" go well

beyond the activities of the Chinese state and quasi-popular organizations and have gained a truly transnational character. In 2001 the Overseas Chinese Ethnic Minorities Association (Haiwai Zhonghua shaoshu minzu lianhehui) was established in the United States with members representing over 20 (out of 56) different ethnic groups with the aim to promote “China’s ethnic unity.” Supported by the Chinese consulate general in Los Angeles, the association’s main aim was to foster “warm familial relations like at home” (*zai jia yiyang de wenuan qinqie*) among overseas Chinese in the United States, where the number of Chinese ethnic minorities in the mid-2000s was estimated around 210,000 (Zhao, 2004a: 85).

The head of the association is Dr. Zhao Guolin, a Chinese American of Buyi ethnic origin. Dr. Zhao found professional acclaim in the United States thanks to his hepatitis B treatment, which he developed on the basis of Buyi herbal medicine. After immigrating to the United States, Dr. Zhao became active in charity work in ethnic areas in China and also in promoting the idea of a multiethnic China, eventually becoming the head of the association in 2001. The online news report highlighting the association’s opening ceremony presents a solemn atmosphere at the event, at which the founding members and guests sang “I Love My China,” a patriotic song celebrating China’s multiethnic character (Cao, 2009). The lyrics go as follows: “I love my China: fifty-six constellations, fifty-six flowers, fifty-six brothers and sisters forming one family.” Incidentally, eight years later, a CCTV concert dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the PRC on the theme of ethnic unity was also entitled “I Love My China—Ethnic Unity Celebrations” (CCTV, 2009). Although there is no way of checking how impassioned the participants of the Claremont-based organization’s opening ceremony joined in the singing of the officially endorsed song of national unity, the attempt to present overseas Chinese of minority backgrounds as patriotic and loyal representatives of the Chinese nation abroad is telling. Earlier similar efforts by the Chinese state treated overseas Chinese in ethnically blind terms. But now there is a clear state recognition of the need to “diversify” China’s transnational community of patriotic Chinese. In a similar move in 2003 the PRC embassy in Kyrgyzstan initiated the merger of the previously two separate Associations of Overseas Chinese (one composed of Chinese citizens [*Huaqiao xiehui*] and the other of people of Chinese descent [*Huayi xiehui*]) into the Kyrgyzstan Overseas Chinese Association (Ji’erjisitan Huaqiao Huaren lianhehui) with a view toward placing greater importance on “unity work” among overseas Chinese of diverse ethnic backgrounds in Kyrgyzstan (Li, 2010: 287).

One of the few Chinese news articles discussing the activities of the U.S. based association informs us that on the U.S. Independence Day in 2008 it

held its first U.S. flag rising ceremony in Claremont. The article compares the members of the association (overseas Chinese ethnic minorities) to “married off daughters” who, on becoming American “daughters-in-law” (*Meiguo xifu*), should demonstrate their loyalty to their new home. The implicit message of the piece is that while displaying their loyalty to the United States, overseas Chinese should preserve their devotion to and love for China as their true home (Qingdao yimin, 2008). Like the official reference to overseas Uyghurs mentioned above, the Chinese authorities conceive of “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities” in the United States as feminized members of the Chinese nation in need of protection and care of the mighty Chinese state. While overseas Chinese have been commonly presented in masculine terms (Pan, 1994), “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities,” like China’s ethnic minorities within China, continue to play the role of female members of the Chinese nation.

In May 2010, the Overseas Chinese Ethnic Minorities Association was renamed the Global Chinese Ethnic Minorities and Religions Association (Quanqiu Zhonghua shaoshu minzu he zongjiao lianhehui) with the same chairman and office in Claremont. The association declared May 16th, the day the organization was officially established, Global Ethnic and Religious Unity Day. The style and language of the webpage announcing the establishment of the new association strikingly resemble the official language of the Ethnic Affairs Commission. In fact the name of the association echoes the name of the official website of the Ethnic Affairs Commission: Chinese Ethnicities and Religions Web (Zhongguo minzu zongjiao wang). The association’s scope is, however, much wider as it deliberately stresses the global aspect of the Chinese ethnic unity project.

The developments discussed above testify to the emergence of a discursive field informed by the Chinese state’s concern for ethnic unity that permeates national sovereignty in an attempt to project the “true image” (Latham, 2009) of China and consolidate transnational ethnic unity. Expanding global information technologies facilitate the emergence of a public sphere that strongly links mainland Chinese to Chinese communities abroad (Sun, 2002; Ong, 2006). Cyber and social networks of Chinese migrants characterized by Aihwa Ong as “placeless political watchdog[s] on behalf of the Chinese race” (Ong, 2006: 55) also play an important role in China’s transnational unity efforts. The result is what Sun Wanning calls “a high level synergy” between the Chinese state and overseas Chinese (Sun, 2010: 126). For example, the creation of the Global Chinese Ethnic Minorities and Religions Association was announced on the website of the Chinese American Professors and Professionals Net with the call “to unite overseas and domestic patriotic forces” (Chinese American Professors and Professionals Net, 2010).

Importantly, the instruments of China's transnational unity efforts are interlinked in such complex and ambiguous ways that to separate official policies from popular initiatives would present an almost impossible task. Taking on the role of migrant welfare services, the association aims to help overseas Chinese ethnic minorities "feel at home" in the United States as if they had never left China. The online news announcing the creation of the association specifies that it would help "ethnic minorities and religious compatriots" to resolve everyday problems of all kinds, including opening an enterprise and finding a job (Boxun News, 2010). At the same time, the association is working closely with the Chinese Communist Party and China's ministerial organs. The same website mentions that the association plans to invite the heads of China's United Front Department and Ethnic Affairs Commission to be consultants of the association.

There are many gray areas as to who exactly falls within the category of "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities." There is, for example, no indication of what representatives and from which Tibetan, Uyghur, and other organizations abroad are invited to take part in the events sponsored by the Chinese government. Chinese citizen and president of the World Uyghur Congress Rebiya Kadeer, for instance, is unacceptable to the Chinese political establishment. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetans, publicly announced his wish to become a Chinese citizen again, but continues to be denounced as a "splittist," "separatist," and "traitor" (*Sunday Times*, 2008). All attempts by these exile leaders to start a dialogue with Chinese leaders have been cut short by the Chinese side.

By applying the *shaoshu minzu* label—a tool of domestic governance—to both citizens and non-citizens abroad, the Chinese state exercises an aspect of its sovereign power over these people's identities. Serving China's national interests without openly questioning politically charged language or the legitimacy of one-party rule are the conditions for being included among the patriotic overseas Chinese. Indeed, one of the premises on which the Global Chinese Ethnic Minorities and Religions Association is built is that "the majority of ethnic minorities and religious minorities are patriotic, and supportive of the country's reunification, ethnic unity, and harmony" (Boxun News, 2010).

The pursuit of "transnational unity" among overseas Chinese is closely related to the identity/security predicament in Chinese politics (Callahan, 2010). The incorporation of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities into the framework of the Chinese transnational nation is driven not by the state's desire to promote and foster cultural and human diversity but by its concern that human mobility, the unrestricted flow of information, and the diversification

of human experiences and identities could undermine the power of the Chinese Communist Party and loosen the political grip on ethnic minorities such as Tibetans and Uyghurs. The dispersal of China's ethnic minorities outside the directly controlled territorial sovereignty of China presents its leadership with a source of national insecurity. This source of insecurity informs China's efforts to consolidate transnational "ethnic unity" linking overseas Chinese and China. Integral to the state's transnational activities is the assumption that influencing, even if only nominally, identities of "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" will strengthen the territorial integrity of China and stability on its borders.

### **Scholarly Origins of "Overseas Chinese Ethnic Minorities"**

The recent policy moves and transnational efforts to consolidate transnational ethnic unity are rooted in the Chinese scholarly enquiries into overseas Chinese ethnic minorities that emerged in the second half of the 1980s and increased significantly in subsequent years (Xiang Dayou, 1989, 1993; Zhao, 2004a; Li, 2003). When in 2002 the new Research Center for Overseas Chinese (Haiwai Huaren yanjiu zhongxin) was opened at the Institute of Ethnology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" became one of its research priorities (Barabantseva, 2010: 133–34). Professor Xiang Dayou, arguably the first Chinese scholar to propose the concept "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities," for many years served as a director of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region's OCAO. A brief look at the dominant scholarly arguments on overseas Chinese ethnic minorities sheds light on how knowledge on overseas Chinese ethnic minorities is produced and relates to policy making.

Chinese scholarly publications dealing with overseas Chinese ethnic minorities share an ontological concern to delineate overseas Chinese ethnic minorities as a distinct and necessary object of research. They point to the need to identify and verify the number of overseas Chinese of ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, most of the discussions among Chinese scholars have been preoccupied with estimating the total number of the overseas Chinese ethnic minorities, and establishing the periods of their migration and reasons for leaving China (Xiang Dayou, 1989, 1993; Li, 2001; Zhao, 2004a). The estimates of the number of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities vary from very concrete numbers of 3.1 million (Xiang Dayou, 1993), 3.4 million (Zhao, 2004a), and 5.7 million (Li, 2001; Shi and Yu, 2010: 137), to an approximation that one-tenth of all overseas Chinese are ethnic minorities (Ding, 2006:



63).<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, the proportion of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities in relation to the so-called overseas Chinese Han roughly reflects the national composition of the PRC, where about 90% of the population is identified as Han and the rest as ethnic minorities. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that through maintaining the basic picture of China's ethnic makeup, overseas Chinese studies, in line with the official state discourse, treat overseas Chinese as a transnational extension of the Chinese nation transcending its state territorial borders.

The rationale for reaching out to overseas Chinese ethnic minorities was perhaps most succinctly outlined by Taiwanese anthropologist Li Yiyuan: "Non-Han ethnic minorities are also Chinese; they live in Chinese territory. So, if they migrate outside China, they should be called overseas Chinese. From a theoretical point of view, China's ethnic minorities, although they are non-Han, are Chinese. They have been influenced, to a varying degree, by Han culture and so constitute an important topic to consider" (quoted in Ding, 2006: 64). Zhao Heman writing on the predominance of ethnic minorities among overseas Chinese hailing from China's Guangxi Autonomous Region stressed that these overseas Chinese populations are part of "the concept of China" (*Zhonghua*) (Zhao, 2004a: 61). As such, the goal of problematizing the Han-centricity of overseas Chinese studies and projecting a multinational character of the Chinese nation to the transnational level results in the synchronizing of domestic and transnational outlooks of the Chinese nation and the extension of the official take on the national composition of the PRC. In other words, "overseas Chinese ethnic minority" as a scholarly concept serves to objectify the current ethno-cultural division of the Chinese state as an accurate and true representation of Chinese society.

The debates on the most suitable concept to refer to overseas Chinese ethnic minorities and their role in the Chinese nation have taken a similar pattern to the discussions on the conceptualization of overseas Chinese in general. For example, several authors have suggested referring to overseas Chinese ethnic minorities who have taken the citizenship of their country of residence as *shaoshu minzu Huaren*, and those who have retained Chinese citizenship as *shaoshu minzu Huaqiao* (Tan, 1995: 15; Zhao, 2004a: 64; Li, 2003: 4). In practice, however, scholarly and official publications use the two concepts next to each other as *shaoshu minzu Huaqiao Huaren*, signaling its ambiguous and contingent use. Like the perceived role of the overseas Chinese, official and scholarly discussions refer to overseas Chinese ethnic minorities as a bridge between China and neighboring countries with their particular importance for securing Chinese borders (An, 2005; Ding, 2006; Shi and Yu, 2010).



Cross-border minorities (*kuajing minzu*) spanning China's borders with all its neighboring countries present a particular difficulty for Chinese scholars' conceptualization and theorization of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities and their relations with China. Chinese scholars have identified 30 cross-border ethnic groups (Li, 2001: 3). The consensus seems to be that although cross-border minorities and overseas Chinese ethnic minorities are two different concepts, all those who left China after the establishment of independent states around China should be referred to as *shaoshu minzu Huaren* or *Huaqiao*. For example, people who left China after the establishment of the independent state of Vietnam in AD 938 would fall into the category of *Huaqiao Huaren*. In the particularly sensitive case of Tibetans who left the PRC in the 1950s, scholars have concluded that they are not a cross-border ethnic group, but an example of the *shaoshu minzu Huaqiao Huaren* (Zhao, 2004b: 65; Li, 2001: 5). As such, not only is all of Tibet (including contested border areas with India) unambiguously reaffirmed as belonging to China but also those who fled Chinese Communist rule to India and beyond, including the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala, are included in the symbolic community of overseas Chinese.

One of the suggested solutions for overcoming the overlap between the "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" and "cross-border minorities" concepts is to distinguish their disciplinary origins. Zhao Heman, for example, proposed viewing "cross-border minorities" as a generic notion, widely used by ethnologists and sociologists across the world, while treating "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" as a concept deriving particularly from overseas Chinese studies and developed in relation to the concepts of the Chinese nation and overseas Chinese (Zhao, 2004a: 76). Talking in particular about southwestern cross-border minorities, Zhao suggested that both concepts can be used interchangeably with reference to overseas Chinese ethnic minorities such as the Zhuang, Yao, Miao, and Jing (Zhao, 2004b: 66). Other scholars seem to agree with this assessment (Li, 2003; Li, 2010; interview with Xiang Dayou, June 10, 2010). For example, while studies on Dungan people stress the peculiarity of Dungan identity as a complex intersection of Hui, Central Asian, and Russian influences (Ding, 1999; Wang, 1997; Allès, 2005), Zhao refers to them essentially as Central Asian Hui Chinese (Zhao, 2004b: 66). In both cases, the overseas Chinese ethnic minorities' link to China is ascertained and their, even if only symbolic, belonging to China is emphasized. They are made part of Chinese national identity rather than acknowledged as the sites of complex cultural influences, interactions, exchanges, and tensions.

The arguments of overseas Chinese scholars have met with disagreement on the other side of the border. For example, Vietnamese scholars do not agree with Chinese scholars' articulations of overseas Chinese in Vietnam. Some Chinese anthropologists also contest the use of the concept of "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" to refer to populations in neighboring states and prefer the term "cross-border ethnic group" (*kuajing minzu*) instead (Jin and Wang, 1994; Fan, 1999). Fan Honggui, for example, points out that it would present considerable difficulty to identify who qualifies as a Zhuang overseas Chinese in China. Those who would be seen as Zhuang, a recent and rather arbitrary Communist invention (Kaup, 2000), are split up in at least five different ethnic minority groups in Vietnam: Dao, Nùng, Pu Péo, La Chí, Sán Chay (transliterated in Chinese as Dai, Nong, Bubiao, Lai, Shanzhai) (Fan, 2005: 24). In other words, only overseas Chinese who still hold their Chinese passport specifying their ethnic belonging could be referred to as Zhuang in an unambiguous way. In the case of Vietnam, scholarly debates on the origins and number of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities have not translated into open policy formulations due, perhaps, to the complex relations between China and Vietnam and a number of unresolved territorial disputes, such as the ongoing South China Sea issue.

The scholarly enquiries into overseas Chinese ethnic minorities discussed above can be seen as part of a continuous collective effort to define and solidify China's national contours, making them immutable and uncontestable. By numerically estimating the numbers of the "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities," scholarly interventions contribute not only to turning "societies into categories" (Bulag, 2010), but also to making sovereign claims (in an attempt to secure their loyalty) on the people who might have, to say the least, complex relations with China. These scholarly discussions in concert with the recent transnational policy initiatives discussed above demonstrate an explicit attempt to define a distinct body of the overseas Chinese ethnic minorities in order to make them part of the transnational Chinese nation with the center in Beijing.

## Nationalizing Ethnic Cosmopolitans?

To what extent are the transnational ethnic unity efforts of the Chinese state successful? We can glean an answer to this question from a written account from a participant in one of the trips to China organized by the state OCAO for a group of Dungans from Kazakhstan (Mashanlo, 2006). Written in Russian in an online Kazakh journal, this essay shows how China's engagement with "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" could be received and interpreted

by those at whom it is aimed. Far from being an unproblematic example of how discourses and policies are translated and responded to on the ground, this personal account vividly depicts how discourses on non-Han overseas Chinese and the territorial (rather than solely racial) premises of the Chinese nation take shape and become reified. This essay shows how the Chinese state's official aim to nurture a particular transnational Chinese identity is enmeshed with individual searches for a place of belonging and home. The official Chinese national history serves as a lens through which the author views the history (and identity) of his family and community in Kazakhstan.

In China, interest in Central Asian Dungans has increased since the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the early 2000s, a special research institute on Central Asian Dungans was established at the Central University for Nationalities. Perceived as a more politically correct group (compared to Uyghurs) by the Chinese authorities, Dungans have capitalized on the newly opened opportunities and actively engaged in developing business links with China, with over 30% of Dungans in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan involved in trade with China (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009: 106). The author of the piece is one of over a hundred thousand Dungan people in Central Asia. In 2006, he went on his first trip to China under the auspices of the Chinese government, which took him on a journey to Urumqi, Kuldja, Lanzhou, Xi'an, Beijing, and Shanghai.

From the first lines of this elegantly written piece, the author presents his exuberantly positive impressions of China. He praises everything—from new roads, construction sites, and preservation of historical monuments, to the local market and farm fields—as orderly, efficient, affordable, and of high quality. The author applauds the Chinese government's preservation of the Hui mosque in Kuldja, accessibility of education for ethnic minorities, and development projects for local communities. He compares his upbeat impressions of China to living conditions in Kazakhstan. For example, he contrasts the market in the Xinjiang town of Kuldja to a rag fair (*tolkuchka*) in his native Almaty; trade activities in China, in his impression, are akin to “art,” rather than just a way to make money. There is not a single negative impression of China expressed in the article.

Having embarked on his first trip to China, the author slips into referring to his historic roots in “the People's Republic of China,” not the Qing empire or simply China. Although he perceives China as his historic home, that is, the home of his ancestors, contemporary China and its socio-political conditions have become the lens through which he conjures the home he has longed for. He recurrently points out that the mosque in Kuldja was built by “our ancestors” (*nashi predki*), and calls Chinese Hui “our compatriots”

(*sootechestvenniki*). Talking metaphorically of his journey through China, he draws parallels between the path the participants of the nineteenth-century anti-Qing Hui movement took to escape prosecution and the route he and his Kazakh compatriots are now taking in search of their historic home:

One hundred and twenty years ago my ancestors took this road [ . . . ]  
to flee the Manchu army, which crushed the Hui resistance movement.  
Now we, their descendants, are going in the opposite direction towards  
our historic homeland.

“We are back” (*my vernulis*) is how the author of the article refers to his visit to Xi’an, China’s old imperial capital and an area with a large Hui population. This Dungan visitor seems certain that he (as well as all other members of the group, according to him) has not only made physical contact with his roots, but even met a distant relative—the imam from the mosque in Kuldja with the common Hui surname Ma. His “return” to China prompts a rethinking of his own identity, and epitomizes a new turn in overseas Chinese work aimed at creating ethnically diverse overseas Chinese. While it is not always necessary to physically visit one’s homeland to imagine it (Appadurai, 1997; Tapp, 2003), stepping on the soil of one’s ancestors certainly makes the sensation of being in contact with the home more real, even if it is the home which has never been.

The Dungan visitor’s self-problematization of identity is likely to be more complex and multifaceted than the narrative of his essay suggests. His search for home is certainly influenced by his peculiar experience of the “politics of the local” (Hall, 1997) in present-day Kazakhstan and in the Soviet Union, where Dungans were treated as outside settlers. The ongoing negotiations of a Kazakhstan national identity around Kazakh ethnic identity rather than the purported idea of multiculturalism (Svanberg, 1994; Antelava, 2008), and Russia’s active engagement with ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states (Kolstø, 1999; Zevelev, 2001) creates favorable conditions for Dungans in Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian states, to revisit their Chinese roots and rethink their relationship with China.

Analyzing the OCAO-sponsored festival for young overseas Chinese, Andrea Louie argues that connecting to diaspora through cultural links produces Chineseness as a “unifying and differentiating factor” (Louie, 2000: 646). She concludes that China’s attempt to create a particular sense of transnational Chineseness is a “failed ritual” because it produces “narratives of identity that complicate official discourses on overseas Chinese” (Louie, 2000: 646). It was perhaps premature to deem these efforts so unsuccessful

considering a chain of outbreaks of pro-China overseas Chinese nationalism in the last decade (Liu, 2005; Ong, 2006: 54–57; Nyíri, Zhang, and Varrall, 2010). The Chinese government's shift in overseas Chinese discourse and policies suggests that there is a recognition of the need to promote Chineseness as a “unifying and differentiating experience” (Siu, 1993: 20) rather than a sentiment based on the assumed connections between race, culture, and common origins. While the main objective of the Chinese state's transnational efforts is to instill a particular sense of transnational Chinese unity centered on China and the leadership of the Communist Party, the content of these efforts goes beyond stressing “common Chinese blood” to incorporate the idea of an ethnically diverse Chinese nation.

In the words of the Dungan author of the essay, the participants in the tour were perceived and treated by the inviting side as Hui descendants and representatives of Kazakhstan who could assist the cause of friendship and cooperation between China and Kazakhstan. These expectations are based on the premise that China is a homeland for these people, and so they would feel a certain degree of loyalty toward it and would express solidarity with its objectives. This covert stress on present-day China as the Dungans' true home, and the acceptance of this idea by at least one Dungan, highlights how the state appropriates understandings of history, home, and identity to generate attachment to China that goes beyond Confucian values and racial bonds.

The term *zuguo* (the land of ancestors), often used interchangeably to mean “homeland” or “motherland,” has been employed by the Chinese government to encourage a sense of patriotism and belonging among Chinese citizens and overseas Chinese alike. It is telling that this term was widely used in the official celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the PRC in 2009. For example, the series of Xinhua online photo, video, and writing competitions, called “My Homeland and I” (*Wo he wode zuguo*), was not specifically oriented toward Chinese citizens in China and invited submissions from around the world (*Wo he wode zuguo*, 2009.).

Reserving primordial arguments for Han overseas Chinese audiences,<sup>6</sup> the government's work among non-Han overseas Chinese implicitly reiterates the long-standing message of the Communist government that ethnic minorities in China only found their true liberation and recognition with the victory of the Communist revolution, which “opened up a new era in which all ethnic groups in China enjoy equality, unity and mutual aid” (White Paper, 1999). Following this logic, Dungans would have never found their home in the oppressive and exploitative regimes of the pre-PRC era. In accordance with this view, the diversity of Chinese cultures is possible only within the overarching commitment to multinational unity centered on leadership by the Communist Party.

In the effort to co-opt personal home-search journeys into the Chinese government's transnational unity project, overseas Chinese ethnic minority policy considerations rely on the conflation of history with present conditions, local with national sentiments, personal struggles with national goals. The binary understanding of "unity in diversity" juxtaposing the majority Han versus ethnic minorities is not overcome but perpetuated in the Chinese transnational ethnic unity efforts. By referring to the PRC as his historic home, the Dungan author of the essay taps into and reiterates the Chinese official version of history.

The very existence of the activities discussed above, however, demonstrates that the Chinese state continuously searches for ways to legitimate its multiethnic character domestically, regionally, and globally. By aiming to achieve this goal through diverse overseas Chinese populations, the official discourse on "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" on the one hand dilutes the blend of ancestry, descent, and blood arguments with the "homeland" discourse as its transnational unifying force. On the other hand, it transcends particular ethno-social categories to account for the populations outside China's sovereign territory. These legitimizing efforts, however, might have detrimental effects on the popular perception of China in the host societies of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities. For example, one of the prevailing views among Russian and Central Asian public figures and journalists is that China relies on its diasporic communities abroad for the realization of its imminent expansion into Central Asia (Sadovskaya, 2007: 160; Syroezhkin, 2009: 36–37). Similar suspicions of China's reliance on its diasporic communities are widely expressed in some Western societies (Lewis, 2008; Garnaut, 2009). Chinese scholars' and leaders' use of overseas Chinese ethnic minorities in relation to communities and people with complex and often loose ties to China runs the risk of feeding existing myths rather than disrupting them.

## Conclusion

By delineating the concept of and formulating policies toward overseas Chinese ethnic minorities, the Chinese government in concert with scholars of the overseas Chinese applies Chinese national categories of ethnic and cultural distinctions to populations abroad. This is an expression of sovereign power directed at the creation of transnational identities that ultimately emphasize unity over variety and cohesion over diversity within the Chinese nation. State power directed at totalizing the heterogeneous identities of overseas Chinese and reducing them to the fixed category of "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" is pervasive. The inherently dichotomous

understanding of the diversity of the Chinese nation where the ostensible transnational Han majority is contrasted to overseas Chinese ethnic minorities informs the state's transnational nation-building program. These dominant discourses and practices nationalize the history of migration from China, making it part of a Chinese national narrative as well as its multiethnic present. Yet, the actual positions and experiences of the "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" and their troubled relations with China do not find their place in this dominant narrative. As the written account of the Kazakhstani Dungan suggests, the official version of national history has potency to influence how "overseas Chinese ethnic minorities" view their history and articulate their identities.

The urge to determine the national contours of China not only in terms of territory but also in terms of human identities testifies to the reluctance of the Chinese authorities to accept the changing character of Chinese identities within and outside China. The cultural interpretations of the center take precedence over local manifestations of identity, and even if the latter are recognized as part of the official perspective, they are celebrated only insofar as they serve the overall national idea. The inability to recognize the sheer scale of human diversity embraced by China is related to the challenges which the changing, adapting, and fluid character of migrant identities within and across Chinese borders pose to the cultural and ethnic harmony of the Chinese nation that the state desires. Multilayered and multiple loyalties, fluid identities, and human mobilities are a source of insecurity for a coherent Chinese national identity and a source of fear that China's ethnic tensions might eventually prompt territorial disintegration.

What is missing in the Chinese states' drive for "transnational unity" is the recognition and celebration of the interplay of the local, national, and global in the construction of the Chinese nation (Duara, 2009). Cosmopolitan diversity is the reality of Chinese society, and a much more complex one than the Chinese official representations of it would have it. On the path to becoming an increasingly strong and influential world power, one of the problems with which Chinese authorities will have to grapple is how to grant and accept freedom of individuals to formulate and change their identities, and at the same time to guarantee and protect meaningful group rights for ethnic minorities in China. One remains hopeful that the PRC's reformers do not learn the hard way that exploiting the old rhetoric of "uniting patriotic forces" around the Chinese leadership in Beijing might further alienate overseas Chinese of non-Han ethnic background, especially those who have grievances about China's treatment of ethnic minorities and their cultures.

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## Notes

1. See Barabantseva (2010: 103–4) for more discussion on the equation of the concepts overseas Chinese and the Han majority in Chinese official and scholarly discourses.
2. Securitization of Chinese ethnic minorities takes other forms. Criminal activities in urban areas have been attributed to the increased number of ethnic minority migrant communities, in particular Uyghurs and Tibetans. Thus, in the late 1990s, Beijing city authorities demolished two city-based Uyghur villages on the grounds of escalating crime in the area (Baranovitch, 2003: 731). Ethnic minorities in China's border areas are often held responsible for organized crime and the spread of HIV and AIDS, as the case of the Tai Lue minority in Yunnan province illustrates (Hyde, 2007).
3. I am grateful to John Garnaut for sharing research materials with me.
4. Minzu University of China is the new English name for the university, which was recently endorsed by the university administration in all publicity materials. The university was previously known in English as the Central University for Nationalities.
5. The report delivered at the fourth session of the Eleventh Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in March 2011 similarly estimates the number of ethnic minorities among all overseas Chinese to be 10% (Renmin wang, 2011).
6. During the sixth "Root-seeking" tour in July 2010, 6,000 participants from 51 countries came together to "rediscover" their Chineseness in China under the guidance of China's top leadership. Supported by China's top political establishment



and accompanied by a reception in the Great Hall of the People, the assembly of overseas Chinese was greeted by Chinese Vice-president Xi Jinping. During his address to the participants of the tour, he underlined that young people taking part in this event were brought together by their common "sense of closeness" toward their "ancestral home," and that because "their blood is Chinese" they would be "willing to carry on the Chinese culture that has lasted thousands of years" (People's Daily Online, 2010).

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