

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TIBETAN “MINZU” IDENTITY THROUGH CHINESE EYES: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS ¹

MAURO CROCENZI
(Università per stranieri di Siena)

This article examines the representation of Tibetan history in Chinese contemporary Tibetan studies. It does not address the question of the political *status* of Tibet, and thus does not intend to contribute to the historical analysis of the Sino-Tibetan political relationships. It focuses on the Chinese descriptions of three key moments which have had a significant impact on the Tibetan Plateau: (1) the origin of the Tibetan people, (2) the stabilization of a Buddhist society in Tibet, and (3) the emergence of a national consciousness in modern China. Today, Chinese scholars of Tibetan history usually consider these key moments as having contributed to the development of an overall “Chinese” identity. Their misrepresentation – or even their ignorance – of political resistance in contemporary Tibet shows the nationalist orientation of Chinese academic studies on Tibetan and Chinese history.

Despite the fact that historians use scientific methods and strive for unbiased results, history – as any social science – remains a subjective branch of knowledge. In line with the most influential contemporary historians,² the approach used in this article is based on the idea that history is a matter of interpretation and representation, and thus unavoidably subjected to several influences, included cultural values, political goals, as well as ideological biases. In this sense, this article supports the view that both Tibetan and Chinese nationalist historians have made different use of history to promote their political agenda.³ At the same time it shows that the traditional way of thinking about political identity still plays an important role in portraying the main features of national identity in contemporary China.

This article argues that Chinese nationalist perspectives on Tibetan history are not only attributable to the political authoritarianism and censorship imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but also to the conceptual transformation of the Chinese state between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Many academic studies have efficaciously corrected the distortion of

1 I would like to thank Dr. Federica Venturi and Dr. Michela Clemente who offered me valuable suggestions for this study.

2 Carr 1966: 27-35; Chabod 2004: 64.

3 Powers 2004: x-xi.

historical facts in the Tibetan histories edited by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC).⁴ The re-actualization of traditional sinocentrism within the international world order also had a deep impact on the representation of Tibetan history in China. However, the consequences of this process have not received the right attention within the academic environments. Following this line of thought, the present article seeks to contribute to the literature on the Chinese representation of Tibetan history.

Based primarily on fieldwork conducted in 2008 and 2009 and on the analysis of several texts about Tibetan and Chinese national history written by Chinese scholars,⁵ this article takes in account the high degree of homogeneity within terminologies, methodologies and perspectives adopted by Chinese scholars. It also provides a brief theoretical discussion of Chinese evolutionism and nationalism, and of their influence on contemporary Chinese scholars.

The Main Features of the “Chinese *Minzu*”

In the PRC, Chinese scholars usually translate the Chinese concept of *minzu* 民族 into English as “nation” or “nationality”.⁶ While these conventional translations capture the general meaning of the word *minzu*, they fail to convey adequately its complexity and plurality. *Minzu* not only refers to the Han nation (汉族 *hanzu*), but also to all the different minorities (少数民族 *shaoshu minzu*) which have been subsumed into the PRC, and thus has both a “narrow” and a “wide” sense. According to Communist Chinese understanding of *minzu*, all the nations within the PRC should evolve, through integration, into a higher-level identity, an over-arching “Chinese” nation (中华民族 *Zhonghua minzu*).

4 See, for example, Blondeau & Buffetrille 2008; Shakya 1999; Sperling 2004.

5 In 2008 and 2009, I attended classes on Tibetan culture and Tibetan history at the Minzu University of China (*Zhongyang Minzu Daxue*) in Beijing. The classes were mostly intended for Tibetan students studying for their bachelors degree. During that period, I also consulted academic studies about Tibet written by Chinese professors, especially texts published in the last two decades by the Chinese Tibetan Studies Press (*Zhongguo Zangxue Chubanshe*), the Minzu University of China Press (*Zhongyang Minzu Daxue Chubanshe*), and the Minzu Press (*Minzu Chubanshe*). Most of these sources deal with the ethnic and the national question from an anthropological, historical, sociological and political point of view.

6 See for example Ma, R. 2008 a: 10. According to Chinese scholars, the most ancient text recording the term “*minzu*” has been written in the 5th century, during the Northern and Southern dynasties. The term would also appear in some texts during the Tang period (7th-9th century), but its use would be very limited, as its absence from the dictionaries of that period prove. Originally the term “*minzu*” could have both a social and a political meaning, pointing at the definition of a single social class as well as of a population as a whole. At the end of 19th century, through the mediation of the Japanese word “*minzoku*”, the term was selected by many Chinese modernist intellectuals, in order to introduce in China the concept of nationality (Luo & Xu 2005: 28-29).

Chinese analyses on social organizations adopt a strong evolutionist perspective. According to Chinese contemporary theories, any kind of social community or entity passes through three stages: formation, development and extinction. The last stage of this evolutionary process implies the disappearance of social and ethnic identities and the merging into a larger entity, rather than political conquest and cultural assimilation of smaller identities.⁷

The prominent position of evolutionism in Chinese studies on the concept of *minzu* is due to several factors. First, it is due to the strong influence of the Maoist theory of social change on contemporary Chinese ethnology and anthropology, which postulates that national identity will eventually extinguish into internationalist class identity. Despite being strongly influenced by modern and revolutionary nationalism, the CCP followed this theory and adopted the evolutionist description of nation from Stalin as first definition of the concept of *minzu*.⁸

Second, social evolutionism played a relevant role in modern China’s history. Chinese modernist intellectuals firmly believed that the development of “Chinese national” identity, which replaced the traditional imperial identity, was a precondition to build up a modern and advanced state. According to Sun Yat-sen, only the strongest groups in the world could survive to evolution.⁹

Lastly, the modern concept of *minzu* historically originated from the political and cultural identity patterns in the *Tianxia* 天下 imperial system.¹⁰ Political identity in imperial times was very flexible, due to the absence of exact political borders, and to the existence of different levels of acknowledgement of the emperor’s centrality from the outside.¹¹ In order to get official acknowledgement inside the imperial space, “foreign” political subjects had to pay tribute to the ruling dynasty, avoiding in that way substantial political interferences. This means that the *Tianxia* system was focused on the principle of inclusiveness, and has evolved into a potentially unlimited political unity, as the expression “all under the sky” seems to suggest. In fact, the imperial space grew over times, since the imperial world order received growing acknowledgment from the “outside”. During the Qing dynasty, the *Tianxia* system reached the widest extent during the reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong (1661-1792), following the political relationship between the Manchus and the Mongols, and the collapse of the Dzungar Khanates in the middle of the 18th century.

7 Luo & Xu 2005: 42-43.

8 Jin 2000: 136.

9 Bergère 1994: 407; Gordon 2010: 46.

10 *Tianxia* (“all under Heaven”) is an expression adopted since the Zhou period (XI B.C.-256 B.C.) to describe both the political space of pre-imperial China and the cultural core of Chinese civilization. Most of the “hundred schools” of thought during the Warring State period (453-221 B.C.) acknowledged the concept of *Tianxia*, but after the establishment of the empire (221 B.C.) the definition of *Tianxia* has been absorbed in to the Confucian political and cultural terminology until the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 (Schwartz 1968: 276-77).

11 Schwartz 1968: 276-77.

However, the rule of the Qing obtained a growing consensus in Central and Eastern Asia, since the political membership was grounded on the synthesis of different patterns of political relationships, such as the sinocentrism and the Buddhist *mchod yon* (“priest-patron”) systems, which linked together the Confucian Han majority, the Manchus and the Buddhist minorities, such as Mongols and Tibetans.¹²

The Representation of Tibetan Ethnic Identity in the Chinese Official Historiography

Chinese analyses on Tibetan history have been driven by political goals. Historic and anthropological research in the PRC has primarily been aimed to legitimate political unity and the role of the CCP, particularly in the face of sensitive political issues such as the Tibetan question.¹³ Thus, paradigms such as nationalism, sinocentrism and evolutionism underpin research on Tibetan history in the PRC. The premise of Chinese analyses usually is that Tibetan *minzu* is one of the fifty-six ethnic groups or “nationalities” within the Chinese nation. Then, these analyses evaluate historical Sino-Tibetan relations through the lens of the official political language adopted in the *Tianxia* imperial system. Finally, Chinese analyses characterize Tibetan identity as originating from processes of integration and assimilation among Himalayan groups. According to these analyses, such processes of integration and assimilation occurred not only in Tibet, but also throughout all the “Chinese” territory, where the high degree of ethnic and national cohesion ultimately created a higher-level “Chinese” *minzu* identity.¹⁴

From this point of view, the Chinese representation of Tibetan “*minzu*” identity has been very distinctive from the idea of Tibetan “nation” by Tibetan nationalist authors,¹⁵ which describe Tibet as a distinct country and maintain that Sino-Tibetan relations were based on the “priest-patron” pattern, and do not regard sinocentric universalism as a factor.¹⁶

Similarly, the Chinese pattern looks very different compared to the idea of national identity in the West. According to the Western principle of self-determination, every national group under alien domination and foreign occupation keeps the right to build

12 Dawa 2001: 47-51.

13 Powers 2004: 8-9.

14 Fei 1998 c: 134; Gelek 2008: 36; Liu 1999: 68; Zhang 2006 b: 82.

15 E.g. Shakabpa 2010: 442.

16 At this time I am not aware of an officially authorized translation of the study of Shakabpa in the PRC. The original version of the book in English is available in several Chinese libraries, but in fact it is very hard to get the book for consultation. However, Chinese histories on Tibet pay much attention to this book, which has been one of the main targets of the official historical propaganda of the CCP (Wang & Gyaincain 2000: 6). Among Chinese scholars, the work of Shakabpa has been praised, since it quotes many official documents of the Tibetan traditional government, but it also has attracted strong criticism for its nationalist stance on the Tibetan question (Zhang 2006 e: 221).

one’s own state.¹⁷ In the Western “nation-state” model, ethnic boundaries ideally coincide with geopolitical boundaries.¹⁸ On the contrary, the PRC has been following the principle of “ethnic inclusiveness” inherited from the *Tianxia* system, where both the “barbarians” and the “civilized people” found their own place, equally contributing to the “harmonious” development of the empire.¹⁹ In comparison with the different patterns of “nation-state” arisen in Western Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, this system is intrinsically multidimensional and leans towards universalism.²⁰

In Western countries, national histories usually aim to portray the political and cultural roots of nations. In China, history, anthropology and ethnology all seek to understand how different “nationalities” (*minzu*) or “ethnic groups” came in contact with each other, and how their slow mutual assimilation and integration began. While “nation-states” have a static nature, China’s *minzu*-s can be seen as very dynamic entities, which originate from the merger of different groups, and gradually evolve into higher-level political entities.

The nationalist propaganda has deeply influenced Chinese historical investigations into “Chinese” nationalities. Despite conducting in-depth analysis of the historical contacts and cultural convergence that occurred between the nationalities within the PRC, Chinese scholars generally do not go beyond China’s contemporary geopolitical borders, and rarely evaluate the integration processes between minority nationalities and populations that inhabited other Asian countries, lands or kingdoms. For example, cultural and religious contacts between Tibet and Northern India in ancient times are constantly undervalued in Chinese historical analyses of Tibet.²¹ In this way, Chinese scholars avoid political censorship, since they abstain from questioning the cultural borders of the “Chinese” nation.

The orientations of Chinese scholars do not always reflect the propaganda and the censorship imposed by the CCP on Tibet-related political issues. After the Tibetan uprising in 2008, some Chinese independent scholars and intellectuals became involved with the Tibetan question and tried to explain the eruption of a new crisis in Tibet after about thirty years of reforms and development policies in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR).²² All these studies openly disapproved the official

17 Dhokalia 1996: 22-23.

18 Hermet 1997: 89-90.

19 Zhang 2006a: 31.

20 Gao 2007: 32-33; Santangelo 2014: 3-7.

21 Powers 2004: 38-47.

22 Gongmeng falu yanjiu zhongxin 2009; Ma, R. 2009; Wang 2011. Chinese intellectuals consider the political reformism of Deng Xiaoping as the cornerstone of the present CCP policy in the minority areas. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the acknowledgement of cultural and local identities has replaced the establishment of supranational class identity in the CCP political agenda. In 1980, the new policy in Tibet was introduced by the General Secretary of the CCP Hu Yaobang, and opened Tibet to the liberal economy and to the protection of cultural identity. See Wang 1994: 285.

policy in Tibet, but they did not question the Chinese sovereignty on the Tibetan Plateau. In this way they distanced themselves from the propaganda of the CCP, which downsized the events, but, at the same time, they proved to be very receptive to the theories on “Chinese” *minzu* identity.

The Formation of the Tibetan “*Minzu*”

Most Chinese contemporary anthropologists trace back the origin of the Tibetan “*minzu*” to the Qiang 羌 group, which first appeared in Chinese sources during the Shang dynasty (XVII?-XI B.C.). However, the appearance of a real, ethnic self-consciousness among the Qiang people has been considered a modern phenomenon.²³ The term “*qiang*” literally means “sheep-man” and was presumably adopted by some communities of farmers to name different tribes coming from Amdo and living in the Western and North-Western parts of China.²⁴

Chinese scholars point out that the Qiang people historically served as an “ethnic bridge”, putting in connection the Han with other minority groups. Chinese historical sources also reveal that there were several marriage alliances and commercial exchanges between the Zhou dynasty (XI-III B.C.) and the Qiang.²⁵ The Qiang entered into imperial China’s political scene through the establishment of the Tangut Dynasty of Western Xia (1038-1227), which according to Chinese sources came in contact with Tibetan Buddhism, while also showing a high degree of “sinicization”.²⁶

The question of the origin of Tibetan people is highly debated in China. After the establishment of the PRC, the famous linguist Yu Min asserted that Tibetan and Han people shared a “common origin”.²⁷ Other scholars have challenged this view, arguing that Tibetan people originated from the Qiang. These scholars have based their work on linguistic data, archaeological, and historical sources, such as the chronicles of the Tang dynasty, which report the migration of a Western branch of the Qiang towards the Tibetan plateau.²⁸

Although this view of the origin of the Tibetan people has been rejected by professor Shuo Shi, who based his studies on sources in Tibetan language,²⁹ it is widely used by Chinese scholars as an evidence of the existence of historical contacts between Tibetans and the “sinicized” Qiang groups. This link between Tibetans and

23 Wang 1999: 44-45.

24 See Fei 1998a: 27. Since 1953, the Qiang have been acknowledged by the Chinese government as one of the ethnic minorities of the PRC. In the 21st century, their population includes more than 300,000 people, which are mostly located in Gansu, Ningxia and Sichuan provinces. See Ma, R. 2008b: 46-50.

25 See, for example, Zhang 2006f: 253.

26 Chen 2002: 171.

27 Yu 1980: 45.

28 For more references, see Shi 2007: 29.

29 Shi 2001: 241.

Qiang has also been represented by the Chinese official tibetology as a historical premise of the first direct contact between Tibetans and Han during the Tang dynasty (618-907).³⁰

The origins of the Tibetan people prior to the Tang dynasty remain largely speculative due to the lack of historical sources.³¹ Imperial annals of this period do not even mention the Tibetan and the Qiang people, meaning that at that time Chinese historians lacked knowledge about the Tibetan regions and the local people. While the migration of the Qiang people to the West first appeared in the Tang dynasty imperial annals, it is only in the annals of the Song dynasty (960-1279) that the question of the origins of Tibetans was explicitly pursued, recording for the first time that Tibetan ancestors were related to the Qiang.³²

According to the Chinese sources, archaeological discoveries in five distinct regions show that the Tibetan plateau was inhabited since the Stone Age.³³ However, according to the Chinese perspective, this does not prove that Tibetans had either an autonomous origin or an autonomous development. For contemporary Chinese scholars, Tibetan people presumably originated from the union between local people and incomers, including Qiang, as historical, archeological, and philological evidence would point out.³⁴ According to Chinese studies, other groups lead a key role in relation to the development of the Tibetan identity, especially after the military conquests in Eastern Tibet by the early Tibetan kings. Among these groups they include also the Yi *minzu*, which is one of the most populous minority groups in the PRC.³⁵ According to the concept of “*minzu*”, this would prove that the Tibetan identity has a pluralist nature, just like the “Chinese” higher-level identity.

Therefore, Chinese researchers connect the origin and development of a Tibetan “*minzu*” with the process of interaction with other groups inside the PRC’s national borders. Chinese scholars don’t exempt Han people from this same process, as they were partially absorbed by Tibetan and other bordering people during their historical exchanges. In so doing, they attempt to consolidate the existence of a “Chinese” *minzu* comprising all the minority nationalities. They also assert that at the beginning Tibetan identity, at the same extent of all other *minzu* in China, should have held only a political character, since between the 7th and the 9th centuries many heterogeneous groups lived on the Tibetan Plateau. However, all these groups acknowledged the authority of the Yar klungs kings, and after the formation stage, political identity would have developed in an effective ethnicity.³⁶

30 See, for example, Shu 2008: 24-25, 147.

31 Ma, C. 1984: 27-28.

32 Shi 2007: 31-32.

33 Gelek 2008: 15; Shi 2007: 35-36.

34 Gelek 2008: 22-26.

35 Fei 1998a: 29.

36 Wang 2011: 126-27.

According to this perspective, Chinese historiography situates the formation of the Tibetan *minzu* during the era of the Yar klungs kings. Despite some exceptions,³⁷ academic circles believe that the Tibetan kingdom was not subjected to the Chinese civilization. During the Tang-Yar klungs dynasties era, the wars in Eastern Tibet set the conditions for the first cultural exchanges among the Tibetans, Han people and cultures of smaller, intermediate groups. In China the Sino-Tibetan relations during the Tang dynasty era are still considered the precondition of cultural and political integration of Tibet into modern China. In a similar way, the establishment of the Yuan dynasty (1271) and the Manchu's takeover of China (1644) would mark the beginning of integration of Mongols and Manchus into the *Tianxia* system. According to this perspective, the strengthening of the *Tianxia* system should be equally considered the base for the formation of an over-arching “Chinese” national identity, and the political conquest of Tibet by the Mongols was not a historical incident, but it would have historical grounds on previous contacts among Tibetans, Mongols and Han in political, cultural, economic, and – not least – in military fields.³⁸

Like the *Huangdi* emperors in the *Tianxia* system, the Yar klungs kings represented the core of the Tibetan *minzu*'s formation process. Through the political conquest and the acknowledgment of both the Buddhist and *Bon* élites at court, the early Tibetan kings became the main symbol of Tibetan identity.³⁹ The enlargement of the Tibetan kingdom was grounded on political submission and cultural integration, as the success of military campaigns and of the marriage alliances would prove. At the same time, the political centralization by the kings sealed the formation of a “*minzu*” identity at the political stage.⁴⁰ This was possible through several initiatives, such as the unification process in the administrative, cultural and juridical fields, and the acknowledgment of historical myths on the origin of the Tibetan group. The final result was that “*Tubo* became both a political and a *minzu* community, provided with a different and richer connotation compared with the past”.⁴¹

One of the most common myths in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition tells the story of the union between a civilized monkey, who personifies the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara,

37 Zhang, Y., 2006a: 23-24.

38 Shi 1994: 9-11.

39 Dreyfus 2003: 496-97.

40 Lin 2006: 94.

41 Zhang 2006b: 76: “[...] 也使“吐蕃”作为一个政治和民族共同体有了不同的、较前更加丰富的内涵”。 In the PRC “Tibet” is usually translated into Chinese as “Xizang”, which points to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). When Chinese authors discuss the ancient history of Tibet, they usually express the idea of Tibet through the Chinese word “Tubo”, which has both a historical and a geographical connotation. It firstly points to the ancient Tibet of the Yar klungs Era, and secondly to the Tibetan plateau as a whole. The use of the term “Tubo” has been deeply criticized by several scholars, who have examined the pronunciation of the compound “吐蕃” (Tubo/Tufan) in ancient and modern times inquiring the reason why the pronunciation “Tubo” has been widely adopted in the PRC. Coblin 1994: 148.

and a wild ogress, who is the personification of Tāra. According to this myth, the union generated six offspring, namely the ancestors of all the Tibetans. According to Chinese sources, the myth would be a reference to the pluralistic grounds of the Tibetan “*minzu*” identity, suggesting that Tibetan people originated from the political unity of several tribes, and that the Tibetan identity originated from the union of different cultures, coming presumably from Tibet and beyond, as in the case of the Qiang.⁴² During the Tang period both the Tibetan and Han *minzu* reached their widest geographical extent. However, according to Chinese official historians, the Tang dynasty continued to exert an attractive influence on other *minzu* at the borders of the imperial space, including Tibetans. The existence of a highly centripetal Han core during the Tang era would be supported by the establishment of the “uncle-nephew” pattern of relations, which the Tibetan kings and the Tang emperors subscribed in the Sino-Tibetan treaty signed in 822 A. D.⁴³

According to this perspective, the contacts between Han and Tibetans during the Tang dynasty were a precondition for the extension of the imperial sovereignty during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as for the formation of a “Chinese” *minzu* identity in the contemporary era. In particular, Chinese contemporary sources highlight the role played by wars, which established the first contacts among people.⁴⁴ At the same time, the cultural and commercial exchanges along the highly-celebrated “tea-horse” road, as well as the civilizing mission of the Tang princesses Wencheng and Jincheng, would have increased direct contacts between Tibetans and Han.⁴⁵

The Development of the Tibetan “*Minzu*”

Chinese scholars state that after the fall of the Tibetan kingdom the development process of the Tibetan “*minzu*” continued through the centuries until the beginning of Western colonialism. In particular, the Tibetan identity was enriched by the spread of Buddhism in Tibetan society. Buddhism would have converted a military alliance among several tribes into an integrated civilization, grounded on the monastic social system. Despite linguistic variations and differences in the way of life, Buddhism would become the main symbol of Tibetan identity, both from the viewpoint of the Tibetans and from that of their neighbors.⁴⁶

42 Zhang 2006b: 77.

43 For the full text of the treaty, see Richardson 1962: 244-45. It is useful to note that Chinese analyses usually summarize the content of the treaty, putting in evidence the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the Tibetan king and the Tang emperor. Moreover, Chinese scholars often have a “Confucian” understanding of the agreement, since they propose the idea of a “harmonious” unity between the two countries. See, for example, Shu 2008: 10, 152-53; Wang & Gyaincain 2000: 12-13; Zhang 2006: 10-11.

44 See, for example, Lin 2006: 247.

45 Jiarong 2004: 326-28; Zhang 2006c: 91.

46 Shi 2007: 18-19.

Moreover, the universalism of Buddhism would have opened the Tibetan civilization to the outside, encouraging the development of Tibetan “*minzu*” through the inclusion of other groups. The strategic position of Tibet also contributed to the expansion of the Tibetan “*minzu*”, since Tibet is located in the midst of several civilizations, i.e. India in the South, the *Tianxia* empire in the East, and the oases along the Silk Road in the North. However, the diffusion of Islam in Central Asia and in the Northern part of India would have pushed the Tibetans to look for the growth of cultural exchanges towards East.⁴⁷

From a political point of view, Chinese historiography places the beginning of Chinese sovereignty on Tibet during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). After some military clashes, the political integration of Tibet into the imperial space was grounded on mutual consensus.⁴⁸ The spread of Tibetan Buddhism among the Mongols supported economic and political exchanges, such as military protection and the promotion of the Tibetan monasteries by Mongol *khans*. On the other hand, the Mongols actively developed the *Tianxia* imperial system through the establishment of a new dynasty and the inheritance of the “Mandate of Heaven” from the Song dynasty (960-1279 A. D.). Through the *pax mongolica*, the people of Eastern Tibet would have started to integrate themselves into the political and cultural space of the *Tianxia* Empire. On the contrary, Central and Western Tibet would not have experienced the same integration process. For this reason, today the ethnic composition in these areas would be more homogeneous than the one in Eastern Tibet.⁴⁹

Chinese scholars do not consider the development of a Tibetan identity as antithetical to the political unity among Mongol, Han and Tibetan people. From a historical point of view, Chinese identity goes beyond the limits of ethnicity and has been considered an alternative to Western nationalism.⁵⁰ During the Yuan dynasty, the *Tianxia* Empire was ruled by Mongols, used Tibetan Buddhism to enhance political prestige, and adopted Confucian political symbols – such as the Mandate of Heaven, the Confucian ceremonies, the official historiography and, from 1314 A.D., the imperial exams – to stabilize society.⁵¹ Despite discrimination against the Chinese “*nanren*” (南人, the “people from the South”), Professor Fei Xiaotong records that the Yuan dynasty promoted the development of several “*minzu*” identities under a common political order.⁵²

The concurrence of the rise and fall of political authorities in Tibet and in the *Tianxia* Empire has been considered by the Chinese historians as an evidence of effective interaction, and of the dependency of Tibetans on the imperial prosperity. For

47 Shi 1994: 514.

48 Wang 2011: 95.

49 Shi 1994: 516-18.

50 Wang 2009: 204.

51 Dawa 2001: 47-51; Sabattini & Santangelo 2005: 399, 404-408, 413-414, 417.

52 Fei 1998b: 108.

example, the Sa skya pa relied on political and military protection by the Yuan emperors, while the rule of the Dalai Lamas increasingly depended on the expansion of the Qing dynasty. According to the tibetologist Zhang Yun, also the destiny of the Yar klungs kings was linked to the decline of the Tang dynasty, since the impoverishment of peasants would have deprived Tibetans of the outcome of their raids.⁵³

It is useful to note that the degree of acknowledgment of historical interaction between Tibet and the *Tianxia* Empire changes according to the specific viewpoint of Chinese authors. Works on Tibetan history underline historical connections and exchanges,⁵⁴ while analyses on Chinese policies in Tibet after the establishment of the PRC stress the gap existing between Tibetan and Han people still in the contemporary era. According to official statistics, from 1951 the central government of the PRC spent many unprecedented efforts to face the lack of integration of Tibet into modern China. For example, Chinese sociologist Ma Rong stated that geographical isolation and backwardness of the communication system of Tibet “made very difficult social, economic, and cultural exchanges between Tibet and other areas”, therefore imperial policies in Tibet until the Qing dynasty would have been limited to the “fulfillment of political subordination of Tibet”.⁵⁵ This contradiction shows that political propaganda still has a strong influence on academic research on Tibetan history inside the PRC.

The Perception of “Chinese” *Minzu* Identity among Tibetan People

The academic definition of “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*) by most Chinese scholars acknowledges China’s ethnic plurality and political unity. Political unity would be grounded both on protection and development of the identity of each “*minzu*”. Chinese studies on Tibetan history similarly pursue the questions of the development of Tibetan identity and of the Tibetans’ political conscience in China. These studies generally argue that the political integration of Tibet from the 13th century, together with the acknowledgment of the Yuan dynasty by the Sa skya élite, has been a cornerstone in the development of a unitary political conscience among “Chinese” nationalities in modern times. Among such studies one might note, for example, the critical analysis of ’Phags pa’s *Shes bya rab gsal* (彰所知论 *Zhang suo zhi lun*).⁵⁶

Chinese history is not considered by Chinese historians as the evolution process of one ethnic group becoming a nation. Rather, it is considered to be a civilization process realized through the contribution of several ethnic groups throughout the

53 Zhang 2006d: 96.

54 See, for example, Chen 2004: 308; Jiarong 2004: 322-23; Xiong 2004: 280-81; Wang & Huang 2004: 228-29; Zhang 2006c: 84.

55 Ma, R. 2008c: 167.

56 Zhang 2006b: 80-81.

centuries. The most crucial historical passage in this process is the development of the “*minzu*” feeling of belonging to the “Chinese” nation, leading towards the rise of a larger unifying “national” identity. According to Chinese scholars, this passage is not unrealistic, because of the nature of the political and cultural identities in the *Tianxia* system. However, Chinese scholars don’t have a common understanding of the main distinctive features of “Chinese” *minzu* identity.⁵⁷

According to this perspective, Han, Mongol and Tibetan people would have all taken part in the development of an over-arching “Chinese” identity, in the same way that the ideas of “civilization” and “barbarity” equally contributed to the development of the concept of *Tianxia*.⁵⁸ After establishing the Yuan dynasty, the Mongol emperors joined the *Tianxia* system and started to promote the imperial civilization to other groups at the borders of the Empire. The Tibetans were thus integrated in this new regime, mainly, according to Zhang, because (1) Tibetan Buddhism became very popular among Mongolian *khans* and (2) Yuan emperors offered military protection and economic support to the Sa skya pa.⁵⁹

However, the emergence of political resistance in contemporary Tibet shows that the success of the “Chinese” *minzu* brand is very limited among Tibetans. After protests spread out in 2008, the liberal Han intellectual Wang Lixiong did not hesitate to label the *Zhonghua minzu* a “shop sign” (招牌 *zhaopai*).⁶⁰ Today, resistance in Tibet is directly connected to the question of self-determination. However, the lack of a “Chinese” *minzu* consciousness in Tibet also challenges the representation of modern history by Chinese historians of Tibet. The political transition from the *Tianxia* pattern to the modern nation-state system marks a breaking point in Chinese political thought, since Chinese intellectuals “could no longer imagine a future in which the form of the state was monarchical or made claims to universal rule. On the contrary, they came to imagine a state composed of citizens.”⁶¹ The new conception

57 The factors they take in exam include the “common psychological qualities” (共同的心理素质 *gongtong de xinli suzhi*), the “indisputable geographical ties and consanguinity” (一定的血缘、地缘关系 *yiding de xueyuan, diyuan guanxi*), as well as “commonality, sense of belonging, stability, common roots, common ancestors and common written language” (共通性、归属感、稳定性、同根、同祖、同文等等 *gongtongxing, guishuxing, wendingxing, tonggen, tongzu, tongwen deng deng*). However, the “compound nature” (复合 *fuhe*) probably is the most accepted distinguishing feature. For more references, see Gao 2007: 11-12.

58 Vogelsang 2014: 116-17.

59 Zhang 2006d: 99-100.

60 In his article Wang Lixiong openly contested the existence of a Chinese national consciousness among minority nationalities. However, the viewpoint of Wang Lixiong was not supported by other Chinese scholars. According to the Party’s propaganda, the 2008 uprising was the result of political separatism by the 14th Dalai Lama. Other influential scholars considered the impact of social reformism in minority areas. See, for example, Ma, R. 2009; Wang 2011. The article of Wang Lixiong is available online, see <http://wlx.sowiki.net/?action=show&id=32> (accessed September 2016).

61 Zarrow 2012: 5.

of the State had a deep impact on the political relations between the central government and the minority nationalities.

During the late Qing period, the attempt to establish central sovereignty on Tibet was an unprecedented challenge to the traditional pattern of relationship between the Tibetan government and the “*Tianxia*” empire. This attempt directly pushed the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to political separatism. However, after the fall of the Qing, the new Chinese republican government had no military instruments to integrate Tibet into the new Chinese state.⁶² In 1913, the declaration of independence by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama acknowledged the historical and political link between Tibet and the *Tianxia* Empire, but also criticized the changes occurred in the imperial policy with the invasion by Zhao Erfeng and the policies of Chinese representatives Zhang Yingtang and Lian Yu.⁶³ Chinese analyses on the late Qing’s Tibet policy completely ignore this transition, and when they examine the “separatist” policy of the 13th Dalai Lama they only consider the effects of British imperialism.⁶⁴

Even though Chinese and Western sources have a similar understanding of the traditional imperial identity, they show a completely different perception of the colonial era. The political crisis during the late Qing era resulted in the development of a “modern” state, grounded on sovereignty, territoriality, and nationality. However, according to Chinese analyses, the “Chinese” *minzu* identity would have solid historical roots, since all the groups which have been included in the modern Chinese state would have shared for centuries both a common identity inside the imperial order and the experience of imperialism.⁶⁵ On the contrary, for Chinese scholars, Tibetan “separatism” has no historical roots, and is related to Russian and British imperialism in Central Asia.⁶⁶ It is worth noting here that even the Tibetan protests in 2008 have been attributed by the Chinese propaganda to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and to the Tibetan community in exile.⁶⁷ In a similar way, Chinese analysis of the internationalization of the Tibetan question show that the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s political statements evaluate the status of Tibet through the lens of modern Western political culture.⁶⁸ This is also corroborated in Western sources, according to which the impact of Western colonialism had a close relation with the development of both

62 Crocenzi 2014: 38-40.

63 The text of the 13th Dalai Lama is available in Shakabpa 2010, 337-40.

64 See, for example, Yang 2001: 169-71; Zhou 1997: 343-71.

65 See, for example, Fei 1998a: 35-36; Ma R. 2008a: 9 -10. According to this line of thought, it is the imperialist aggression by Japan and the Western countries in the 19th and 20th century that would have fully shaped the Chinese national consciousness. However, the Chinese national identity would have already existed during the imperial era, even though only at a latent level. See Gao 2007: 39-41.

66 See, for example, Zhou 1997: 308.

67 ZFLP 2008: 50-58.

68 Tang 2003: 502

Chinese and Tibetan nationalism.⁶⁹ In addition, Western scholars also state that Tibetan nationalism originated from the assimilation policies of the late Qing emperors and then increased throughout the Tibetan world after the nationalist policies of Yuan Shikai, following the Xinhai revolution in 1911.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Despite the political transition from the Republic of China to the PRC – and the ideological division between the Guomin dang (GMD) and the CCP – the most recent theories on the origin of the Chinese nation echo the positions articulated by Chinese scholars during the Nanjing Decade (1928-1937). Since the 1930s, the goal of Chinese modern historians and anthropologists has been to trace back the origin and the development of the historical exchanges among all the *minzu*.

Chinese communists have taken their distance from the historical perspective of the GMD, by supporting the idea that the Chinese civilization originated from different parts of the national territory, rather than from the Central plains along the mid-course of the Yellow River. Moreover, the PRC is theoretically grounded on multiethnicism, while the Republic of China held an assimilationist agenda towards minorities.⁷¹ Nevertheless, Chinese nationalism has deeply marked the thought of Chinese intellectuals and theorists of both the GMD and the CCP. The nationalism of the CCP has strongly influenced the positions of Chinese scholars on the historical status of Tibet. Most of the historical texts consulted state that Chinese sovereignty in Tibet was established in the 13th century by the Yuan dynasty and that it was inherited by successive dynasties. On the contrary of the above stated ideas, Western studies have provided a rather more nuanced analysis on the alleged historical Chinese sovereignty in Tibet during the Yuan, the Ming, and the Qing period.⁷²

Regarding the existence of a “Tibetan political question”, Chinese studies acknowledge that the question of sovereignty in Tibet has arisen in the modern era. According to the most prevalent interpretation, the birth of the Tibetan question would be strictly connected with Western imperialism. However, Chinese scholars usually ignore how the practice of sovereignty in Tibet had radically changed during the late Qing period, after the British invasion of Tibet in 1903-1904. The 1913 independence declaration of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876-1933) illustrates the historical relationship between Tibetan institutions and the *Tianxia* Empire in a very impartial way, since it abstains from considering the rule of Mongols and Manchus merely as a foreign occupation of China. However, it also emphasizes how the

69 Anand 2006: 293.

70 Goldstein 1989: 54-58.

71 Leibold 2007: 114.

72 Blondeau & Buffetrille 2008: 15-16, 19-21; Petech 1972.

political interferences of Qing officers and the military invasion of Tibet by the Qing army had irreparably affected the character of that relationship.

In all the Chinese sources on modern history of Tibet examined, scholars either underestimate, or entirely ignore, this transition and the fact that the introduction of modern political concepts – such as central sovereignty, territoriality, citizenship and representative power – had a deep impact on the traditional sinocentric pattern of relationship. Most Chinese scholars consider the establishment of a national system as a natural and historical evolution of the *Tianxia* Empire. This perspective reiterates the political and ideological influence of the CCP on academic circles, as well as the deep impact of the Western modern political language in modern and contemporary China. At the same time, it would be worthwhile to consider to what extent the basic values of the *Tianxia* system – such as inclusiveness and sinocentrism – as well as the revival of traditional culture in the last decades, currently contribute to the validation of the idea of a national and multiethnic country in the eyes of Chinese contemporary scholars.

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