

## Why do we refer to “Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas”? – A Response by a Chinese Scholar

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Over the two days 4-5 April 2014, the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University and the School of International Studies/Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies at Jinan University, Guangzhou, jointly convened an international academic conference entitled “Non-Han Chinese Diasporic Communities beyond China”. Some 20 scholars from Australia, China, Germany, Malaysia, Japan, New Zealand, and the US participated in the event which was held at the Centre on China and the World at ANU. The conference was organised into six panels entitled “The Uyghurs overseas”, “Islamic communities and their external relations”, “Connections across mainland Eurasia”, “Tibetans and their external relations”, “Koreans and Mongols” and “Southeast Asian connections”, and the papers and discussions addressed issues relating to Koreans, Mongols, Hui, Uyghur, Tibetans, Miao and Zhuang, essentially covering the main overseas communities of the PRC’s non-Han Chinese ethnic minorities overseas. It can be said that this was the first systematic investigation by international scholars of the PRC’s Chinese ethnic minorities overseas, and was thus of key significance in opening up the field.<sup>1</sup>

Through the efficiency of the organisers, the conference proceeded smoothly over the two days. The discussions were intense and excellent results were achieved, with all scholars understanding the novelty and importance of the conference topic and even noting the need for further conferences on the subject. But, as in all academic conferences, there were both points of commonality and debates over differences of opinion. These issues included the links between these communities and China, their identity, the commonality between these groups and so on. In particular, there was much debate on the terminology used in the title of the conference and the final form which the publication of the presentations would take. Some pointed out that “non-Han diasporic groups” was exclusive, while others queried whether it was possible to use a single theme to encompass the diasporic communities of so many different ethnic groups.

Personally, I believe that we can use the term “Shaoshu Minzu Huaqiao Huaren” (“Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas”) to encompass the various themes discussed at this conference. What needs to be stressed is that this term is used mainly in the context of Chinese-language discussions in China. One of my deep impressions from the conference was when, during the discussions, Professor Anthony Reid reminded me that in China there are many terms prefaced with the word “*minzu*” (nationality/ethnicity), such as the “Nationality Hotel”, “ethnic persons”, and “ethnic schools”, and that in these terms,

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<sup>1</sup> Zhang Zhenjiang, “A Summary of an academic conference on ‘Non-Han Chinese Diasporic Communities beyond China’”, *International Journal of Research on Chinese People*, 6:2 (2014): 87-90.

"nationality/ethnicity" refers solely to minority ethnic groups. He suggested that it is as if the Han ethnic group is not considered an "ethnic group", and this certainly reflects "Great Han nationalism". His enquiry chastened me, but I also called attention to the fact that, in the light of the history and realities of the formation of the Chinese nation, the formulation "minority ethnic group" was simply a customary convention and it had no derogatory implications. Of course, regardless of whether we speak in terms of political correctness or cultural correctness, the most appropriate appellations should be the specific terms "Han ethnic group", "Mongol ethnic group", "Hui ethnic group", "Uighur ethnic group", "Tibetan ethnic group", "Miao ethnic group" and so on. Further, in the light of the history and realities of the formation of the Chinese nation, we can say, certainly within the scope of Chinese-language use, that the term "Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas" is a reasonable appellation.<sup>2</sup> I will set down my reasons for this belief below:

First, "Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas" is a concept which has long existed in the academic world. According to research by Li Anshan,<sup>3</sup> the earliest that Chinese scholars engaged in related research was in 1986 when two papers on migrations by Uighurs appeared in the journal *Overseas Chinese Research*. The two authors used the terms "Overseas Chinese of all ethnic groups" and "Chinese Uighur overseas" respectively, and they were the first to use such terminology in China.<sup>4</sup> In 1989, Mr Xiang Dayou wrote on the issue of ethnic minorities Chinese migration to Vietnam. He noted that the opinion of the Vietnamese government and scholars that "only Han ethnic persons who migrated to Vietnam can be considered Overseas Chinese" was not appropriate. He urged that "Chinese" "should be a general reference enjoyed by all component ethnic groups of the Chinese nation." He also calculated on this basis that there should be some 2.35 million Overseas Chinese in Vietnam, including about 1.3 million ethnic minorities such as Zhuang, Yao and Miao.<sup>5</sup> He subsequently published two other articles, explicitly employing the concept "Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas". In the first article, he pointed out "For historical reasons, among those who have migrated abroad from our country, not only have there been the main group of Han ethnic migrants, but there have also been a large number of ethnic minorities migrants. From the past to the present, these persons have formed a community of Chinese ethnic minorities overseas, and constituted an important component part of Overseas Chinese society." According to his estimates, there are more than 3.1 million Chinese ethnic minorities living abroad, including Overseas Chinese of some 25

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<sup>2</sup> It needs to be stressed that I believe that the term "Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas" is in accord with the history and contemporary situation of the ethnic makeup of the Chinese nation and is in accord with the context and practices of the Chinese language. However, as for the corresponding English term, I feel that "Non-Han Chinese Diasporic Communities" can be better understood and accepted by the foreign scholarly community.

<sup>3</sup> Li Anshan, "The Migration Characteristics, Identification Standards and Numerical Statistics of Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas" in *Historical Research on Overseas Chinese*, No. 3, 2003; and "Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas: A Research Report", August 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Huang Liping, "On When Migration of China's Ancestral People from Xinjiang to Central Asia and West Asia began" and Wang Jingfeng, "An Historical Exploration of the Migration of Uighur Overseas Chinese to West Asia", *Overseas Chinese History* 1986, No. 3, pp. 36-42 and pp. 43-48. These two articles were later included in Liang Chuhong and Zheng Min (ed.) *Collection of Studies on Overseas Chinese History* (Beijing: Haiyang Press, 1989). The title of Wang's article was changed slightly.

<sup>5</sup> Xiang Dayou, "A Preliminary Analysis of the Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas who have Moved from Guangxi to Vietnam", *Bagui Overseas Chinese History*, 1989, No. 1.

Chinese ethnic minorities living in 29 countries.<sup>6</sup> In his second article, he further affirmed that those persons of ethnic minorities who had settled abroad but maintained Chinese nationality were Overseas Chinese, and it was possible to add the term "Chinese Overseas" to their ethnic name, such as "Chinese Uighur Overseas", "Chinese Zhuang Overseas" and so on. As for those who had adopted the nationality of the countries to which they had moved, he urged that the term "Chinese" be added to their ethnic name, such as "Kazakh Chinese", "Hui Chinese" and so on.<sup>7</sup>

After him, other scholars began to use and develop the concept of "Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas". Tan Tianxing noted that Chinese ethnic minority persons who had moved abroad could be divided into two groups: trans-border Chinese ethnic groups and Chinese ethnic minorities overseas. The latter category is broader and richer in content, and includes members of the same ethnic group who have migrated to different countries, such as the Yao people who have settled in Europe, the United States and Asia.<sup>8</sup> After this, an increasing number of scholars began to research Overseas Chinese of various ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> Zhao Heman published a monograph entitled *Research on Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas*.<sup>10</sup> Professor Li Anshan conducted systematic analysis and summation of the origins, contents, statistical data and evolution of the concept "Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas" and this research is certainly encompassing.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, many scholars in the Chinese mainland's academic realm have already accepted the concept of Chinese ethnic minorities overseas. For example, Zhuang Guotu when enumerating China's Overseas Chinese, noted that "the countries of Central Asia have about 600,000 Chinese ethnic minorities overseas" with "some 200,000 Chinese Uighurs Overseas in the Middle East, about 25,000 Chinese Kazakhs overseas, 20,000

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<sup>6</sup> Xiang Dayou, "A Preliminary Discussion of the issue of Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas—Present Situation and Historical Analysis", *Bagui Overseas Chinese History*, 1993, No. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Xiang Dayou, "A Preliminary Discussion of the issue of Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas—Spheres which cannot be Denied or Overlooked", *Bagui Overseas Chinese History*, 1993, No. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Tan Tianxing, "A Preliminary Exploration of Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas who have Migrated Abroad in Modern Times: Taking Xinjiang and Yunnan as examples" *Overseas Chinese Historical Research*, 1995, No. 2, pp. 14-21, 40. Later this article was presented at a conference of the International Society for the Studies of Chinese Overseas and included with the same title in Elizabeth Sinn (ed.), *The Last Half Century of Chinese Overseas* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998), pp. 447-461.

<sup>9</sup> There are many examples of such research, involving diverse disciplines. Those most directly relevant to 'Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas' include but are not limited to: Ding Hong, "Thoughts on Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas Research – and also on the Significance of the 'Cultural intermediary' of the Dungan people", *Journal of the Guangxi Nationalities Institute (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2006, No. 2; Liang Lili, "A Preliminary Investigation on Social and Current Situation of Chinese Ningxia Hui Overseas", *Hui Research*, 2012, No. 2; Wang Qingfeng, "The Hajj to Mecca and the Formation of Chinese Uighur Overseas", *Overseas Chinese History*, 1990, No. 4; Liu Hongyu, Wang Jing and Zhang Quansheng. "An Investigation of the Chinese Uighur Overseas in Kyrgyzstan", *Xinjiang Normal University Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2012, No. 2; Shi Cangjin and Yu Linlin, "The Influence of Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas in Building 'Peaceful Borders' for our Country and an Analysis of Responses", *Gansu Social Sciences*, 2010, No. 1; Huang Wenbo, "Observations on Distinguishing Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas from Cross-Border Ethnic Groups", *Guangxi Ethnic Research*, 2011, No. 2; Wang Jing, "Strategic Research on Implementing the Cultural 'Going Abroad' Policy' in respect of Kyrgyzstan—Specifically in reference to Xinjiang Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas", *Xinjiang Vocational University Journal*, 2013, No. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Zhao Heman, *Research on Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas*, China Overseas Chinese Press, 2004; Zhao Heman, "Various issues in Research on Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas", *Research on Overseas Chinese History*, 2004, No. 3; Zhao Heman, "On Various Characteristics of Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas", *Research on Nanyang Issues*, 2004, No. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Li Anshan, "Chinese Ethnic Minorities Overseas: Characteristics of Movement, Identification Criteria and Population Statistics", *Overseas Chinese History Research*, 2003, No. 3; and "China's Minority Nationality Overseas Chinese: A Research Report", August 2003 [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/gb/doc/2003-08/15/content\\_255090.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/gb/doc/2003-08/15/content_255090.htm)

Chinese Hui overseas and 150,000 Chinese Han overseas."<sup>12</sup> In the *Encyclopaedia of Overseas Chinese*, when detailing the Overseas Chinese in Turkey, the author noted "According to statistics, in 2000, Turkey had about 80,000 Overseas Chinese. Of these, 50,000 were Chinese Uighurs, 25,000 were Chinese Kazakhs, and there were smaller numbers of Chinese Uzbeks, Chinese Kirgiz, Chinese Tatars and Chinese Han".<sup>13</sup> The efforts of China's scholars have attracted the attention of scholars around the world, with Australia at the forefront. Over the three days 26-28 September 2001, the Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora at ANU organised a conference entitled "Migrating Identities and Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Diaspora". Some of the scholars who presented discussed "Chinese ethnic minorities overseas".<sup>14</sup> Gradually, scholars around the globe have begun to pay attention to this topic and begun to use the concept "Chinese ethnic minorities overseas".<sup>15</sup>

Second, a new phenomenon worth noting is that in recent years an increasing number of Chinese ethnic minority diasporic members have begun to consciously pay attention to and promote the links between themselves and China. The author has been interviewed some Overseas Chinese who have migrated from Xinjiang to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Germany, the US and Australia. Many of these persons are of Chinese Uighur, Kazakh and Russian ethnicity, but in daily exchanges and discussions, I found that they are increasingly concerned about their hometowns in China. For example, when I was in a Xinjiang restaurant in Munich, Germany, the owner who was a Uighur migrant from Xinjiang constantly stressed that he was Chinese (*Zhongguo Ren*). At the conference from which the papers below derive, an American scholar who has been engaged in research on Chinese Tibetan migrants abroad also noted that in his discussions he found that the Tibetan petty traders make a deliberate effort to stress their Chineseness. In looking for the reasons for this, I can find no other than that they have strong emotional attachment to their homeland. In particular, at a time when China's influence is rapidly growing globally, connecting themselves to China not only gives these people an identity and a certain pride, but can also bring them very tangible benefits and economic opportunities. Following China's economic development, the benefits of associating oneself with China have become increasingly clear. Stressing one's links with China undoubtedly brings great opportunities. In the Munich Xinjiang restaurant I mentioned above, for example, over half the customers who ate there were Chinese, and the majority of them were Chinese Han not Uighurs. Upon being queried, many customers said that they came to the restaurant because it offered the

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<sup>12</sup> Zhuang Guotu, "Distribution Spread and Development Trends among Overseas Chinese", *Research and Investigation*, 2010, No. 4.

<sup>13</sup> "An Overview of Turkey's Overseas Chinese, Widely Believed that Xinjiang is their Homeland". See China News Service website <http://www.chinanews.com/zgqj/2011/02-12/2839027.shtml>

<sup>14</sup> Li Anshan, "A Survey of the Studies on Ethnic minorities Huaqiao-Huaren in the People's Republic of China (1980-2000)" in Shen Yuanfang & Penny Edwards (ed.), *Beyond China: Migrating Identities* (Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Division of Pacific and Asian History, RSPAS, The Australian National University, 2002) pp. 90-106. Li Anshan's work was also introduced in Pal Nyiri and Joana Breidenbach (ed.) *China Inside Out: Contemporary Chinese Nationalism and Transnationalism* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Elena Barabantseva, "Who are 'Overseas Chinese Ethnic Minorities'? China's Search for Transnational Ethnic Unity", *Modern China*, 38(1), 2012, pp.78-109; Elena Barabantseva, *Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities and Nationalism: De-Centering China* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

Xinjiang taste of Chinese cuisine, a northern wheat-based cuisine. That is to say, both the customers and the restaurant owner link themselves with China, not with either Uighur or Han ethnicity. Another time, in the United States, I was having a discussion with some very highly capable Uighur migrants (professors and pharmaceutical engineers) who had migrated from Xinjiang. In the discussion we used English (as their Chinese was not very good and I am not able to converse in Uighur). And yet, they spoke of themselves as "Chinese".<sup>16</sup> Of course, the motivation of interests can have both a positive aspect as well as negative considerations. For example, it might be considered that if they expressed some ideas which were anti-China or manifested alienation from China, it might have had negative effects for them, and the restaurant owner may have lost customers, or they may have faced difficulties when returning to their hometowns or their relatives and contacts in China may have faced problems.

But, regardless of the motivation, the phenomenon whereby an increasing number of Chinese ethnic minorities overseas have been stressing their links with China is certainly worthy of further research. In fact, it is precisely in response to such a phenomenon, and in the light of the situation where traditional research on overseas Chinese has been largely directed at Chinese Han and not Chinese persons of other ethnic minority groups, that this work has, in English-language conferences, been referred to as research on "Non-Han Chinese diasporic communities".

Third, the Chinese government has paid increasing attention to "Chinese ethnic minorities overseas." The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office which is the State Council's main organ for managing Overseas Chinese affairs as well as related provincial Overseas Chinese affairs departments do not generally make any thoroughgoing divisions among the ethnicities of Chinese overseas. However, many years ago, they did begin to pay attention to and conduct research into ethnic minority Chinese overseas. Two persons mentioned above who had conducted research on and urged further attention to "Chinese ethnic minorities overseas" -- Xiang Dayou and Tan Tianxing—had actually worked in provincial and central departments involved with Overseas Chinese.<sup>17</sup> Over the last 10-plus years, in the research project guidance for the National Social Sciences Fund issued by the National Philosophy and Social Science Plan's Leading Group, which is at the highest level of China's social sciences research, we have also seen some related topic proposals. For example, a book on the Overseas Chinese from Xinjiang published in 2013 grew out of research based on a project funded by the National Social Sciences Fund in 2009.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In my view, the English word "Chinese" can mean at least "a person of China", a "person of Chinese culture", or a "Han nationality person". In my understanding, by "Chinese", the interviewees meant a "person of China" or "a person who has come from China". However, many first-language English speakers will, when they say "Chinese" generally be referring to a "Han nationality person of China". I think that this confusion was one of the causes of debate during our conference as the language of the conference was English.

<sup>17</sup> Xiang Dayou had been the head of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, while Tan Tianxing had previously been the deputy head of the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.

<sup>18</sup> Li Dehua, *Xinjiang Persons Migrating Abroad*, Xinjiang People's Press, 2013.

Various levels of government in autonomous regions where ethnic minority groups reside have also taken various measures to support related Chinese ethnic minorities overseas, and to encourage and strengthen research on them. For example, the Foreign Affairs and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region People's Government has set up special "Love Xinjiang Scholarships" to assist excellent students from Xinjiang who are studying abroad in countries such as Egypt and Turkey. Most of these persons are Chinese ethnic minority students.<sup>19</sup> In 2014, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region's Overseas Chinese Historical Research Institute, advertised for researchers to engage in "historical research on Overseas Chinese from Xinjiang". Special consideration would be shown to applicants who were Uighur, Kazakh, Mongol, Kirghiz, Sibo, Tajik, Daur, Uzbek, Tatar, or Russian ethnicity.<sup>20</sup> Clearly this was encouraging researchers who were themselves of ethnic minorities to engage in research on Overseas Chinese who were of their ethnicity or another ethnic minority.

The efforts of the Chinese government are not difficult to understand. Like many other developing countries, China is engaged in the process of modern state-building. In this process of state-building, a hugely important aspect is nation-building.<sup>21</sup> Following the sustained growth in China's influence in global affairs, and following the increasing trend for Chinese people to travel abroad and come into contact with a wide range of peoples, the issue of what the term "Chinese person" really means is becoming a pressing challenge for the Chinese government and the Chinese people. In recent years there has been much discussion in China on ethnicity policies.<sup>22</sup> In my view, playing down ethnic difference and strengthening "nation-building" is not a bad option, and is a stage which many countries seem to have already gone through.<sup>23</sup>

To a great degree, the task of scholars is to explain phenomena, rather than to judge and choose phenomena on the basis of their own ideas, stands and viewpoints. In my view, the three phenomena mentioned above show that, regardless of whether we speak of an academic concept, or an observation of changes in identity going on among Chinese overseas, or even Chinese government policy, "Chinese ethnic minorities overseas" has

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<sup>19</sup> PRC Consulate General in Istanbul, "Notice on Applying for the 2012 'Love Xinjiang Scholarships' offered by the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region People's Government". <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgtur/chn/xwdt/t979440.htm>

<sup>20</sup> "Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Overseas Chinese Historical Research Institute Notice on the 2014 Open Recruitment of Workers for the Unit". Issued 22 December 2014. <http://www.cjob.gov.cn/sydw/8751.html?tableName=CB22>

<sup>21</sup> There is a huge literature on this topic. One of the more recent and authoritative works is Francis Fukuyama's study *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). See Chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ma Rong, "How to Further Think about the Nationalities Question at the Present time in Our Country – A discussion of 'The Second Generation Nationalities Policy'", *Central University of Nationalities Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2013, No. 4; Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe, "The Second Generation Nationalities Policy: Promoting Ethnic Integration and Joint Prosperity", *Xinjiang Normal University Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2011, No. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Seen from the angle of the history of international relations, the most appropriate Chinese translation of the term "nation" is "guozu" (国族). Nation-building involves a process of turning different ethnic groups and communities into national citizens. In popular linguistic practice, in Chinese we use the concept of "minzu" (民族), which includes "ethnic communities" based on blood, language, religion, history and culture. It also includes the "nation" as the identity of a citizen of a modern nation.

already become a significant phenomenon and is very worthy of systematic research and exploration in the academic sphere.

This conference was not an easy one to organise. The main organiser Professor Li Tana had for several years been proposing a conference on the cross-border peoples between China and its neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, a topic she is very familiar with. However, because potential contributors to such a conference were limited in number, the responses had been few. It was thus that we discussed expanding the scope of the conference to the cross-border peoples on all of China’s borders and their diasporic communities. That is how this conference emerged. We believe that if we can publish the various contributions to this conference through various formats, it will certainly play a role in promoting the understanding of these issues across the scholarly world and further research in them. I realise that my views are necessarily limited and I would appreciate responses and corrections from colleagues.

