

**The Chinese Cult of Chinggis Khan:
Genealogical Nationalism and Problems of National and Cultural Integrity**
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The Characteristics and Morality of the Chinese Genealogical Nationalism

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the overseas Chinese economic success and the rapid economic development in China have been widely attributed to Confucian values. Family system, *guanxi*, and tradition, all formerly denounced as impediments to China's development, are now hailed as the very source of its success, by the Chinese (including Taiwanese) authorities, international businesses, and many Chinese/international scholars. Seeing the value of overseas Chinese, the Chinese government began to invoke the mythical Yanhuang emperors, and the totemic dragon, refurbishing the derelict shrines, and presented China as the ancestral land of the "Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu*), a designation used by the Chinese Nationalists (GMD), but rejected by the Chinese Communists (CCP) after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). To appeal to the sensuality of overseas Chinese, the Communists resorted to racial stereotypes, describing ethnic Chinese within and without China as yellow-skinned and black-haired people, with roots in the Yellow earth.

At the same time, the PRC began to retreat from the vision of China as a multi-national state, with minority nationalities enjoying some measure of territorial, political, and cultural autonomy, to one in which the minorities are seen as non-political, non-territorial ethnic minorities constituting the Chinese nation. This nationalism generates an

interesting multiculturalism, wherein Mongol and other non-Chinese heroes, who were indeed long denounced as China's enemies, have been taken aboard as Chinese. In China's worship halls today, Chinggis Khan is the number one hero, whereas the quintessential Chinese hero Yue Fei, a Song loyalist fighting the Jurchens has recently been expunged from Chinese history textbooks. Yue Fei's anti-Jurchen stance is now deemed incompatible with the current view that foreign conquest dynasties were "Chinese dynasties" and their conquest and occupations of China only fulfilled the Chinese mission of unifying and expanding Chinese territories. In this logic, the Chinese national hero Yue Fei became a narrow nationalist or secessionist, the worst designation in Chinese Communist parlance, and Chinggis Khan became not only the unifier of China for the Chinese (not for the Mongols), but more importantly, "the only Chinese who ever defeated Europeans," winning the first and perhaps the only racial glory for China and the Chinese, as the current line has it.

That throngs of Chinese kowtowing before the shrine of Chinggis Khan - the Mongol world conqueror, and worshipping him as a towering national hero, and trashing the Chinese hero Yue Fei, would be readily imaginable had this happened during the Mongol rule of China in the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries at the peak of the Mongol world empire, but Chinese piety to Chinggis Khan since the 1980s and unfiliality to Yue Fei since the 1990s is a twentieth century phenomenon that shows little sign of abatement at the turn of the twenty-first century. It rests of course not on Mongol oppression, but serves the interest of contemporary Chinese nationalism. The Chinese cult of Chinggis Khan may be understood both as a statist attempt to accommodate minorities within China and as the exercise of a racial nationalism on the part of a victimized nation

seeking to exact revenge for the humiliations of Euro-American and Japanese colonialisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

These two kinds of nationalism are both genealogical, but are they compatible with each other? The Chinese worship of their nemesis, the paragon of nomadic powers that has constituted the ultimate Other of the Chinese for more than two millennia, goes against the finest grain of Confucianism – it is a cardinal sin to worship somebody else’s ancestor – and, at least at first glance, similarly defies the logic of modern nationalism.

Many overseas Chinese have been enchanted by the CCP genealogical offensive, and have been generously opening their wallets, and minorities, especially some Mongols, are blithely content that their ancestor is at long last worshipped by the Chinese. These “ethnics” have no interest in examining the contradictions and are happy to maintain a status quo that benefits them in their own way: the overseas Chinese can return to worship their ancestral tombs, and Mongols not only need not be harassed because of their history but can take pride in it. However, the contradiction takes on political significance to China’s two neurotic neighbors: Taiwan and Mongolia.

The Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan dominated by the pro-independence group struggles to fence off the genealogical offensive of mainland China, by insisting that they are not Chinese but Taiwanese, a new ethnic identity fused with Polynesian aboriginal blood, thereby rendering the Chinese genealogical nationalism a moot effort. At the same time, Taiwan’s push for popular citizenship in the form of referendum largely for the purpose of joining international organizations makes the PRC military threat particularly brutal and illegitimate in both the eyes of both Taiwanese and the world community.

In Mongolia, after seventy years of Soviet domination, which criminalized the Chinggis Khan worship, Chinggis Khan has been invoked as their national hero, who put the Mongols on the world map. Mongolia is now engaged in an archeological race with China to find Chinggis Khan's tomb, as though his national identity would somehow be determined by the side of the national border where it is discovered, or claimed. In this, China sees Mongolian worship of Chinggis Khan as offensive, encouraging pan-Mongolism, and Mongolia regards Chinese worship of Chinggis as hypocritical imperialism.

What are the implications for Mongols and pan-Mongolism of Chinese worship of Chinggis? What are the implications for the ROC-Taiwan and overseas Chinese of the PRC's preaching of the virtues of the Chinese nation and its mythical ancestors, and its expunging of quintessential Chinese ethnic heroes? My interest in this paper is as much to understand China's quest for international distinction and respectability as to understand the implications of the maneuvers have for both Taiwan and Mongolia, and the implications for the national and cultural integrity of China, and of its diasporic and minority accomplices. I am particularly interested in how the minority strategy of the Mongols in China, i.e. compliance with the Chinese worship of Chinggis Khan, might or might not incur questions of their own ethnic integrity from Mongolia and the implication for their membership as Mongol in the world Mongolian community.

National Distinction, Morality, and National Integrity

A nation-state is a unique ethical community that repeatedly reinvents and seeks to legitimate itself both domestically and internationally. If this statement appears to be a

truism, the mechanisms whereby ethical dimensions of legitimacy play out have received scant attention. Membership in the international club is contingent on effectively conveying the content of the nation in terms acceptable to the international powers. The issue is, moreover, not simply a question of whether a nation is accepted or denied recognition but the level of acceptance in a hierarchical world. Indeed, the level of international acceptance in turn informs the internal dynamics of a nation-state. In the pursuit of distinctional advantages, the national and cultural integrity of the formative nation-state is profoundly implicated, which in turn may or may not be helpful in its goal. The success of a new nation in achieving a measure of national and cultural integrity will in turn play a significant role in shaping its survival and success as a viable political entity internationally. These elements defining nationhood may be highly elastic, amenable to changing standards of international respectability.

There have been competing visions of what constitutes a legitimate and respectable nation. In the 19th century and at the turn of the 20th century, a legitimate nation was an imperial power. This compelled many not only to aspire to become sovereign nations but also to compete for overseas colonies or concessions. In response, communism, in parallel with the ideology of national self-determination, emerged as a powerful driving force and as an alternative respectability system, one that juxtaposed a vision of a world without international imperialism and internal class exploitation, thereby setting off innumerable social revolutions to build socialist nations of equality. In neither the imperialist nationalism, nor the communist nationalism were ethnic or national diversity desirable. National minorities, as peoples incorporated within multinational states came to be styled, were viewed, moreover, as obstacle to national consolidation. While some

were tolerated or strategically manipulated, others were subjected to outright assimilation or genocide. Historically rooted cultural values were also confronted with conflicting treatments. Sometimes, they were seen as impediment to economic development and indeed an impediment to making the nation more competitive economically, and other times, they were used as powerful weapons for national consolidation or for cultivating national essence. Towards the end of the 20th century, it became clear that diversity was irrepressible and multiculturalism came to be touted as desirable in many societies, yet for the most part, this has been a multiculturalism predicated on acceptance of the norms of the dominant culture or nationality. For all these limits, civilization or culture, after a tumultuous career, has come back to define the inner essence of national respectability, a measure frequently sustained by ancient relics now designated as national heritage, and invented tradition as national culture. It is also seen as the force behind economic development. Human and ethnic rights and civilization or culture would become among the measures distinguishing a rogue state from a putatively good one, with important controversies centered on the appropriate measures (economic, political, cultural for example) of human rights.

This paper explores the kinds of nationalism in China and Inner Asia directed toward transforming national histories (and cultures) to win international acclaim and competitive advantage, and the implications for the national and cultural integrity of all parties involved. Nationalism is widely understood as a nation's program to establish and/or strengthen a state, one resting on the creation of orthodox parameters of the communal imagination, or an expression of primordial sentiment rooted in blood and sweat. Although such characterizations are not wrong, it is necessary to recognize the

existence of competing nationalisms within a nation, which vie to enhance their national and cultural integrity, a problem confounded by the fact that there are equally competing visions of what constitutes national and cultural integrity. Precisely because of the enormous stake involved in achieving respectability for one's value system both within the national political economy and internationally, a nation-state forms a highly contested terrain. This is particularly true in a multi-ethnic or multicultural society such as contemporary China – the focus of this paper.

Genealogical Nationalism and National Integrity in China

China's road to nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries was punctuated with humiliation and debauchery. Confucianism, far from maintaining its cultural universalism, became ethnicized, serving as the boundary-setting principle to distinguish Chineseness from barbarians, by both those who had for centuries comprised part of the Chinese empire, and those who came from afar. A marriage of Confucian culturalism with racism compelled Chinese nationalists to reject as alien the Qing empire established by Manchu conquerors. From another perspective, however, we discern the emergence of what I call genealogical nationalism in which Chinese Nationalists (GMD) rewrote national genealogy to demonstrate that the Manchus and other non-Chinese such as the Mongols were consanguinally linked or related through intermarriage to the Chinese.

The GMD rewriting of national genealogy did not go unchallenged. In addition to non-Chinese peoples, it was defied by radical Chinese nationalists who favored outright assimilation and by Chinese Communists (CCP) who advocated self-determination for minority nationalities, or to a lesser extent, ethnic autonomy, regarding nationalism of the

Chinese as imperialism. It might be argued, in terms of the fundamental character of national integrity, including relations with international powers the history of twentieth century China may be seen as one of the competition of these three Chinese visions of the Chinese nation, one often involving wars. Different ideas of national integrity was central to this armed debate: while radical nationalists did not see any place for any non-Chinese in China's geobody, lest the Confucian Chinese national integrity be compromised, the GMD maintained an expansionist Confucian genealogy to incorporate the minorities. The Communists saw neither as legitimate, but presented themselves as selfless internationalists, with missions to bring freedom to every oppressed individual or nation. But neither the GMD position nor that of the CCP was unflinchingly maintained, as each changed their position when their place in the national structure changed. For instance, the GMD changed from extreme nationalists who vowed to "drive away the barbarians" to inclusive nationalists who envisioned a union of five nationalities for the Chinese Republic as soon as they won power, and the CCP abandoned communist internationalism as they assumed power, and wavered between exclusive nationalism and inclusive nationalism, depending on the extent to which they needed support from minorities for survival. All these positions center around genealogical nationalism.

Genealogical nationalism is a concept first developed by Andrew Shryock (1997), who studies the Bedouin sheikhs and their use of genealogies in political maneuvers. Although Bedouin society is a segmentary system organized along patrilineal kin lines, and China is putatively more complex, I find the concept of genealogical nationalism particularly pertinent in the Chinese nationalist context, not least because Chinese society is also organized significantly along patrilineal kin lines. Central to genealogical

nationalism is the moral universe that prescribes the defense of patrilineal kin as the most honorable of acts, and a bedrock of the national patrimony. Indeed, Frank Pieke (2003) recently writes that modern Chinese have a genealogical mentality. He argues that Chinese genealogical mentality is a Chinese device that crisscrosses and transcends complex class and regional lines. After a few decades of quiet but nonetheless extensive operation in structuring powers both locally and nationally under high-Maoism, genealogy now regains momentum as villagers and scholars began to engage in genealogy renewal or rewriting. However, we may query whether, as Pieke suggests, the genealogical project is characteristically Chinese and is antithetical to non-Chinese peoples, who are presumed to have separate genealogies. Lacking in the sinologically biased study of Chinese genealogical mentality that is tilted towards “culture” or “civilization” is the recognition of the role of state in transcending ethnicity or culture. When a nation is married to a state, genealogy can be either contractive or expansive, according to perceived necessity. But what matters is the morality of this instrumentalist manipulation or invention of primordial essence.

Multicultural China through Genealogical Nationalism?

Contrary to the conventional understanding that the Qing dynasty glided into China, it actually split into three nation-states: the Republic of Mongolia (Mongolia), the ROC-Taiwan and the PRC. Actually, the last is well known, but the first is forgotten. But unlike cases in Ottoman empire, Spanish empire and other European empires, the PRC treats the Mongolian independence with barely disguised disdain and views the ROC-Taiwan push for independence as illegitimate and is determined to “stretch the national

skin over the empire” (Anderson 1991). Irony is never missing in this triangular relationship: Mongolia was once conqueror of China, but is now threatened by the “imperialist” China; the ROC once ruled the mainland China and was a self-claimed guardian of Chinese culture, but is now wishing to give up its Chinese identity for a Taiwan identity, disgusted as they are at the “immorality” of the “communist China.” Nor is the PRC enjoying tranquility, but is embroiled with ethnic problems in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia.

After twenty years of continuing revolution after the founding of the People’s Republic, which left the PRC impoverished and isolated in the world, from 1970 the PRC leadership reimagined its national history and sought to become a respectable nation, an effort in no small part motivated by its entry into the UN. A radical reversal of policies was inaugurated to both develop the nation’s economy, and to transform the national character of the country. In other words, the Communists began to imagine China to be a nation-state which has a permanent place in the world community of nations, and rejected the notion of communist state, which was ideally (though never perhaps practiced) an instrument to realize scientific communism in the entire globe. In this reimagination, the PRC leadership targeted two groups, the Chinese diasporas and minority nationalities, and they were given different priority according to the perceived ability to contribute to China’s international respectability campaign. Genealogical nationalism is then appropriated to achieve this twin goal.

Research Methodology and Goal

The schema outlined above transcends the conventional binary approach set in majority-minority, state-society, or national-diaspora relations. Instead, I put the subjects, China, Taiwan, Overseas Chinese (including Taiwan merchants in China or *taishang*), Inner Mongols, Mongolia, betwixt and between multiple groups: China between Mongolia/Inner Mongolia and Taiwan/Overseas Chinese; Overseas Chinese between China and Taiwan; Inner Mongolia between China and Mongolia; and Mongolia between China and Soviet Union/Russia. The liminality of these groups immediately exposes them to intense moral scrutiny as they try to pursue their respective respectability or distinctive advantages. This liminality approach is particularly conducive to what Michael Herzfeld (2001) advocates as “reflexive comparativism,” the goal of which is to treat seriously the positional responses to genealogical nationalism taken by various political groups.

The concept of genealogical nationalism provides a useful approach to understanding the mechanism whereby China, Taiwan, and Mongolia, and their diasporas and minorities engage in national integration and international distinction or perhaps mere survival. Genealogy is especially amenable to group dynamics as numerous studies in China and elsewhere attest. Kinship groups always engage in the politics of distinction and recognition, which has implication for marriage strategies, political transaction and economic activities. While genealogy has the capacity to tolerate differences, or indeed, its operation is contingent on differences, it also builds on wider differences, which may be racial. I believe and hope to demonstrate that examining the Chinese and Mongolian worship of Chinggis Khan and their pursuit for national and international distinction and

respectability, can shed light on the characteristics of genealogical nationalism and its capacity for national consolidation and the limit thereof. Above all, this study will contribute to a new understanding of the complexity and dynamics of nationalisms in China and Inner Asia that emerged from the debris of the Qing empire, and that continue to beset geopolitics in that part of the world and beyond.