

# Han Chinese Identity and Securitization

Written by Robbie Murray Fergusson

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### **Has Chinese Policy Towards the Han Chinese Identity Contributed to its Securitization? What Are the Implications and Consequences of Securitization in this Case**

The 'Han' Chinese ethnic nationality is closely tied to the identity of the ruling Communist Party in China, and therefore into the identity of the Chinese state itself. Within the framework of the Copenhagen school, we will attempt to analyse the securitization of the Han identity. This essay will be split into two sections. The first will examine why and how the Han Chinese identity has been securitized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The second section will then attempt to examine the implications and consequences of this securitization. I argue that the securitization, while a natural choice in many respects, has perhaps been detrimental to the overall security of the CCP regime.

### **Has Chinese Policy Towards the Han Chinese Identity Contributed to its Securitization?**

#### *The CCP as the Securitizing Actor*

As an authoritarian unelected party-state, the CCP is deeply concerned with issues of legitimacy, and asserting that it has the right to rule all those within its borders. However, "as a legacy of its own imperialism, China's population today includes groups that are not ethnically Han, that have traditions of independence from China, whose communities straddle today's international borders, and some of whose members yearn for independence." [1] The CCP is therefore left with a dilemma – while its makeup is almost entirely Han, it controls a multi-ethnic portion of territory. On such a dubious platform of legitimacy, and as the leaders of a 'weak' state, the CCP "either do not have, or have failed to create, a domestic political and social consensus of sufficient strength to eliminate the large scale use of force." [2] If they are to remain in power, the CCP clearly needed to build on this position because of the importance of "national identity and social cohesion in terms of the degree to which the population identifies with the nation-state and accepts its legitimate role in their lives." [3] The CCP therefore has to both appear inclusive, while simultaneously promoting "the Han to the vanguard of the peoples of the People's Republic," [4] as this is where its main volume of support comes from. The CCP therefore, is the securitizing actor, as it "securitize(s) issues by declaring something, a referent object, existentially threatened." [5] The strategy it has adopted however, blends inclusion with exclusion all within its territorial boundaries and is riddled with contradictions – perhaps necessary ones, as it is oft argued that "China's government does not have the luxury of choosing between progress and stability; it cannot enjoy social peace without economic advance." [6] We will attempt to examine what makes the Han identity essential to Chinese security concerns.

#### *The Han as the Referent Object of Security*

Referent objects are "things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival." [7] In this case, the referent object is the Han Chinese identity, as referent objects "can be collective identities." [8] The Han Chinese identity has been promoted as a means of nation building, and "the notion of Chinese Nation (Zhonghua minzu) as an inclusive concept presumed the 'Han' as its core and is deeply inflicted by racism." [9] We can see that "minorities play an important role in China's official vision of history, nationality, and development. Their "primitivity" contrasts with supposed Han "modernity". [10] When securing an identity, the process is intrinsically linked with 'othering', i.e. defining who we are by showing who we are not. The very "representation of the 'minority'

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in China reflects the objectivising of a 'majority' nationality discourse"[11] because societal security is not a benign concept and requires some level of subordination of other socio-cultural groups. Tying the Han identity to the state has been one of the most effective ways of nation building, because "despite official protestations to the contrary, Chinese is the language of China, and Han is the *minzu*[12] of China." [13] This securitization of the Han is not a recent phenomenon. "When PLA soldiers and CCP functionaries arrived to run Xinjiang in the 1950s, they encouraged Uyghurs to refer to 'big brother Hans.'" [14] Attempting to 'domesticate' the other is another way to ensure the dominance of the referent cultural identity.

## *The Reasons for Securitizing the Han Identity*

Why has the CCP as the securitizing actor chosen the Han identity as its referent object to securitize? Essentially, securitizing the Han identity is a means to an end, that end being regime security and territorial integrity – "peripheral areas (Tibet and Xinjiang) have always been important to Chinese security concerns and provide a buffer zone to protect the 'Han-core' from possible invaders"[15] – so keeping them subordinate to the Han is essential.[16] Indeed, "The Party brands all challenges to Han rule, however oblique, as 'splittism', punishable by a prison term or even death." [17] Accordingly, when the CCP makes concessions in the name of multinationality, such as granting provincial powers, "Autonomy does not mean independence, or anything like it. Indeed, article 4 of the Chinese Constitution specifies that 'all the national autonomous areas are inalienable parts of the People's Republic of China.'" [18] This is why "there is no visible difference of opinion among Chinese leaders over the need to maintain tight control of Tibet for the sake of Chinese security." [19] Ethno-nationalism, tying the fate of both the CCP and the fate of China to the sense of Han identity is the best way to ensure regime stability and territorial integrity – the CCP has long viewed this as the best way to attempt a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue as "Winning over ethnic Chinese loyal to the KMT would not only potentially bring more investments to the PRC, but would 'promote the development of virtual contact across the Strait', and hence the dual goal of reunification with Taiwan." [20] Appealing to a sense of Han solidarity across the strait can be seen in the use of the 'One China' policy that is supposed to emphasise the similarity between the two peoples. The process works two ways, as "if China were to allow self determination on the grounds that the people of Taiwan see themselves as culturally and politically distinct, this would weaken China's claims to Tibet." [21] In this sense, the Securitization of the Han identity is the common principle between China's Taiwan and Tibet policies.

## *Means of Securing the Han: The Ethnic Classification Project of 1953-1983*

One method used by the CCP has been that of naming and classifying ethnic groups. Officially, China has 55 ethnic groups and the Han, although some of the categories are disputed and arbitrary; indeed, a 1953-1954 survey found there was over 400 ethnic names.[22] "The power to name is the power to discriminate between those who fulfill the requirement of the model and those who do not, and it is a power that the Chinese Communist Party has reserved for itself." [23] This is not an act which is politically neutral; it is a 'speech act', and "the official scholars of a PRC policy machine, among the best and brightest social engineers in the land, would have understood the importance of moulding the very categories through which the everyday Chinese citizen saw the social world." [24] In this context of nation building, then, we can see that ethnic classification "can be situated in a trajectory of imperial process that both nods to a critical history as necessary context, and identifies recent ethnic nationality policies as an elemental part of the empire-to-nation-state transformation in a China *not in fact severed from past historical – which is also to say 'cultural' – structures.*" [25]

The reason this naming 'speech act' is so crucial is because it subjugates the other ethnic minorities and solidifies the referent object (the Han identity) at the centre. Because "within areas in which the sovereign group is already an overwhelming majority, homogenization can be brought about by legal and bureaucratic means" [26]; the ethnic classification project of 1983 was a particularly useful tool for state building, and for Kevin Caffrey, "ethnic classification is ... simply part of the PRC state's attempt to control its people." [27] Societal security, "is concerned with the security of society as a whole, but not the security of groups *in society*" [28] – therefore, by categorising and dividing them, the "ethnic classification project... as with other forms of state-led demographic enterprises... was an inventive process of social engineering rather than simply an attempt at neutrally reflecting some 'pre existing property of the world.'" [29] This point of view is shared by Colin Mackerras, who says that,

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“Ethnic classification is largely a political matter. In the early days of its rule, the CCP was keen to... carry out social revolutions among the ethnic minorities, just as it was doing among the Han people. [This] required political control in the ethnic areas.”[30]

Naming may seem like a particularly benign form of securitizing, but these are the categories through which people see and interact with the world. By representing the “other” in such a manner, the CCP further tied itself to its referent object that had to be secured, the Han, and “the representation of the Han as ‘normal’ and ‘un-exotic’ is critical for understanding the construction of present-day Chinese identity.”[31] This is because “if a society loses its identity it will not survive as a society”[32]; and your own identity is intrinsically tied to the identity of the ‘other’.

### *Exoticization of the Other as a Means of Securitizing the Han*

One of the more obtuse ways the CCP has ‘securitized’ the Han identity has been by the exoticizing of the internal other. This is because “the objectified portrayal of minorities as exoticized, and even eroticized, is essential to the construction of the Han Chinese majority, the very formulation of the Chinese ‘nation’ itself.”[33] Like naming, this intense othering is designed to quantify the minorities as commodities rather than equal footed citizens. It seems “the state has turned its gaze upon the internal other, engaging in a formalized, commodified, oriental orientalism, that may be focused on the minorities but represents a long tradition of fascination with the outsider in Chinese society.”[34] Pornographic laws ensure the illegality of the depiction of naked Han Chinese, “yet despite this severe restriction upon and preoccupation with the sale of nude representations of foreign and Han Chinese women, throughout China, state-sponsored media as well as foreign and domestic tourist shops, images of nude minority women are publicly displayed.”[35] This creates a sharp difference in value and representation and elevates the Han to a higher cultural plain than is afforded to the minzu. Securitizing the Han identity in this unique manner and emasculating the other is essential to the CCP. “Belonging to a distinct culture tells us ‘who we are’ and it is this process of self-identification which is key to nations.”[36] This non-violent and arguably non-repressive means of objectification never the less constitutes a speech act, as “the exoticization of minorities essentializes the imagined identity of the Han and reaffirms Han feelings of superiority,”[37] crucial to the existence of the regime.

### *Han-CCP Cultural Domination*

The CCP could be accused of “defending societal identity through cultural nationalism.”[38] Take Tibet – international politics shows us that “state elites have also been able to brand their internal enemies as terrorists,”[39] a label the Dalai Lama has been tarred with in the wake of the March 2008 riots in Lhasa. “Beijing apparently fears that the Dalai Lama is so popular that if he returns to Tibet with any authority the situation in the region would be uncontrollable,”[40] and therefore, for the sake of territorial integrity, has redoubled its efforts to securitize the identity of the Han in a number of ways. For one, China is perhaps guilty of cultural cleansing, because by belittling the Dalai Lama and attempting to isolate him internationally, they are in essence belittling the identity of the Zang (Tibetans). “Cultural Cleansing” is “perpetrated not against members of the group as such, but against manifestations of group culture.”[41] This leads to the contradictory position whereby “Chinese leaders profess to believe both that traditional Tibetan culture is repugnant, full of superstition and cruelty, and that Tibet is ‘an inalienable part of China,’”[42] simultaneously deriding the internal other and tying its future and identity to that of the State. The state recognises the necessity of appearing to encompass the Tibetan identity and “it is not surprising that Tibetans are often represented as the most willing subjects of Chinese “democratic liberation.” In one state-sponsored pictorial, a Tibetan is portrayed as happily voting, as if Tibetans really did control their own destinies.”[43] Appearing to appease the Tibetan identity attempts to consolidate the existence of CCP-Han domination; as “the policy of multinationality... provided a way to justify reasserting dominion over Tibet and Xinjiang”[44] and secure Chinese borders. To further neuter the Tibetans, China wishes even to become politically involved in the choosing of the next Dalai Lama as a means to further protect Han dominated territory, a move fiercely opposed by the incumbent – we see that “appointing the 15th Dalai Lama during his predecessor’s lifetime would be a huge blow to China. It would enable the new generation to gain credibility among Tibetans before China has a chance to appoint its own puppet.”[45] If China ‘owned’ the next Dalai Lama, it could feasibly make the Tibetan identity more submissively docile with regards to the Han, and therefore the state. This is a perfect example that “within areas in which the sovereign group is already an overwhelming majority, homogenization can be brought about by legal and bureaucratic means.”[46]

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## *The Securitization Process*

The most notable feature of the securitization process of the Han identity is that it is circular. The Securitizing actor (the CCP) securitizes the Han identity (which the CCP is also comprised of) from an internal threat (other Chinese citizens) by subverting and subsuming the internal other (Tibetans and other minzu). While “transforming an issue into a security question only requires the audience’s acknowledgement that it is indeed a threat,”[47] in this case, the audience is the referent object of which the securitizing actor is also a part. Therefore admission of the existence of a threat is pre-determined so long as the audience (Han Chinese) keep faith in the securitizing actor (the CCP), which it is not going to do whilst the securitizing actor has securitized their identity, thereby ensuring it. This therefore legitimises “the claims of the state to authority over citizens as citizens [which] provide a source of its ability to exert violence against them.”[48] This logical process is difficult to follow, but it boils down to a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby as the CCP articulates the threat as an “existential threat to a referent object”[49] and hence propagates its own existence because “in practice, the idea of state security – the integrity and functioning of the institutions and idea of the state – and regime security – the security of the ruling elite from violent challenge – become indistinguishable.”[50] In the next section we will look at the impact of this securitization.

## **What are the Implications and Consequences of Securitization in this Case?**

### *Failure to Encompass Ethnic Nationalities as ‘Chinese’: Disaffected Minzu*

The fall-out from the securitization of the Han identity is in many ways quite predictable. Favouring the majority ethnic group and trying to emasculate and assimilate other cultures is usually met with ill feeling and violent resistance. China is left with “the lingering problem of large unassimilated groups, which have implications for territorial control, and ultimately, for sovereignty.”[51]. The net result of this failed forcible integration is the CCP “faces continuing ethnic unrest amongst ‘minority’ peoples (particularly in Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang) exacerbated by an assertive Han Chinese nationalism that the CCP has itself encouraged (directly and indirectly) in a bid to bolster its legitimacy by highlighting its patriotic credentials.”[52] The transparency of the close relationship between the Han identity and the Chinese state has made any pretensions of multinationality increasingly difficult. One obvious such failure is amongst its Muslim population – “the CCP’s ideological project in Xinjiang – to win recognition as the sole legitimate representative of Uyghur interests and to make Uyghurs think of themselves as Chinese and citizens of the PRC – has not been successful.”[53] We should not be surprised at the failure of communities to accept the imposition of identities that do not correspond with how they view themselves and their surroundings. Favouring the national ethnic group ensures a strong base of support, but discontented minorities have the possibility of taking asymmetrical means to destabilise key elements of the CCP rule, and the Chinese economy. As we established that Tibet and Xinjiang especially are areas which are vital for the CCP to retain control of for geopolitical imperatives, the securitization of the Han identity comes with its own set of problems as “the formulations of Chinese nationalism generally limit the extent and ways that non Han Chinese voices are recognised, and the CCP has problems in dealing with ethnic or nationality difference other than as a function of economic development.”[54] In this analysis, the securitization of the Han identity has been a failure amongst minorities.

### *Migration & Problems Arising from Demographic Change*

Population transfer as a method of gaining regional preponderance and ensuring the stability of the majority ethnic group is not unique to China, or even to the CCP within China. Recently we have seen that “many Han Chinese from Sichuan and other nearby provinces have migrated to Tibet to take the jobs being created in the more modern sector of the economy”[55], allowing the CCP to take credit for ‘inclusive’ Tibet/Xinjiang development projects, while at the same time continuing to favour the Han. The net result of this is that “increased Han migration to participate in the region’s lucrative oil and mining industries continues to exacerbate ethnic tensions”[56]. This is because there is a strong feeling amongst locals that this “development allegedly includes population transfer that is causing Tibetans to disappear in a sea of Han Chinese and is displacing them from traditional occupations,”[57] which they can do nothing about. This is not a new phenomenon though, as in a move reminiscent of the British colonising of Australia, in the early days of the PRC “the Han influx was accelerated by the establishment of prison labour camps, whose inmates were forced to settle nearby when released from custody.”[58] The preferential treatment of Han criminals

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over indigenous civilians gives a clear indication of the CCP's intention to drastically change the population makeup of those areas it does not feel gives it allegiance. This policy survived into the reform era when,

"Chinese traders and workers flooded the territory, especially from the 1980s on, when Deng's reform program created new opportunities for migration and profit. Although they probably make up no more than 10 percent of the population, the Han sojourners are concentrated in Tibet's cities and dominate the modern sectors of the economy." [59]

The close ties between economics and demographics are illustrated here, as well as the fact that "many Tibetans claim they are being pushed to the economic margins and overwhelmed by Han immigration. They fear the Chinese will solve the Tibetan problem by eliminating Tibetan culture." [60] Despite all of this, "officials are adamant that most Han are in Tibet temporarily and provide services that would otherwise not be available," [61] which seems blind to the statistics. In the next section, we will look at the economic implications of the securitization of the Han in these ethnic areas.

### *Economics as a Vessel for Securitization Rather than a Cure for Unrest*

Attempting to square cultural problems with economic solutions has been a favoured technique of the CCP, with limited success. Since the reform era began, Tibet has enjoyed an economic boom which has failed to prevent the current crisis, where "thousands of troops are keeping a tight grip on Lhasa, which was swept by ethnic violence by Tibetans against Han Chinese on March 14th and 15<sup>th</sup>." [62] Although triggered in part by the upcoming Olympics, "it is now plain that this month's rioting in Lhasa was not an isolated venting of anti-Chinese spleen. It was part of a broader outpouring of fury felt across the Tibetan plateau." [63] This suggests that there are long-term socio-cultural problems in the Tibetan Autonomous Region that have their roots in anti-Han feeling and cannot be solved purely by Economics. Similarly, as well as using economics as an unsuccessful sedative, economics has also been used as a securitizing vessel to favour the Han over the indigenous minorities. Upon the annexing of Tibet, "the PRC brought the region under state planning and directed its trade entirely to the east." [64] By heavily integrating the provinces both in terms of their economics and their demographics, the CCP is attempting to ensure the compliant acceptance of Han rule. But "years of rapid economic growth, which China hoped would dampen separatist demands, have achieved the opposite. Efforts to integrate the region more closely with the rest of China, by building the world's highest railway connecting Beijing with Lhasa, have only fuelled ethnic tensions in the Tibetan capital." [65]

The construction of the 'World's highest railway' to the Tibetan capital Lhasa has been criticized for making it easier for mass Han migration into the densely ethnically Tibetan homeland, and therefore also altering the demographic population makeup, as some Tibetans feel that "only the Han in Tibet are allowed to participate in development." [66] While the Han identity is securitized, "many urban Tibetans will view these [economic] concerns through an ethnic prism so long as the gap between Han and Tibetan incomes, education levels, and economic opportunities persists" [67], rather than them being purely understood in the economic sphere. For another example,

"The Uyghurs (from Xinjiang) live in an occupied territory, run and increasingly populated by Han Chinese. The territory is geographically and ethnically divided. Hans enjoy better jobs, do better economically, and benefit from a cultural dominance that has been decades in the making." [68]

By favouring the Han, who tend to work predominantly in the urban and service sectors of both the Xinjiang and Tibetan economies, the CCP are further securitizing the Han identity, as there is a sharp affluence divide between the urban and rural populations in China.

### *The Folly of Securitization and the Chinese Case*

The securitization of the Han Chinese identity is a perfect example of where "elites will favour certain groups in the allocation of state resources, oppress minorities viewed as hostile, create minority scapegoat groups during times of unrest and appoint members of the elite's own ethnic group to positions of power. Such strategies are frequently successful, as ethnic consciousness is usually well developed and readily exploitable in many developing

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societies”[69] But by “the adoption and implementation of extraordinary measures”[70], the CCP has succeeded in alienating large portions of its population with predictable backlashes.

As the Copenhagen school forecast, securitization is not a positive tool of statecraft. “Security is what we make of it”[71], and “what constitutes an existential threat is regarded as a subjective matter”[72]; but in dealing with these subjective ‘threats’ we often ignore other threats, and simultaneously create new ones. To ensure the Han identity at the expense of others “the state confronts powerful social forces with substantial coercive force, which in turn provokes violent resistance.”[73] But securitizing an issue can make you vulnerable to the consequences of the exceptional actions you undertake, something that has been bitterly experienced by those Han Chinese whose lives and livelihoods have been lost in the anti-Han riots in Lhasa in March 2008. The Copenhagen school advocates desecuritization and repoliticization as more sustainable methods of dealing with security issues, dealing with them in the political sphere. While attempting a discussion of the means, merits and likelihood of any repoliticization of the Han Chinese identity is not going to be attempted here, this essay has hopefully shown the decidedly limited benefit of the Han Identity’s securitization.

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