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Reflections on the July 1, 2021, Centenary of the Chinese Communist Party Part Two: Centenary Propaganda and Nationalism with Xi Jinping Characteristics for a New Era

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As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrates its 100th anniversary this month, a persistent theme of the speeches and parades has been the extent to which the country has changed under the party's rule. The speech given by party leader Xi Jinping on July 1 in Beijing had a deeply nationalistic tone, extolling China's geopolitical strength and "morph[ing] the Party and the machinery of government and the perception of the nation of China into one."¹

While Xi emphasized the positive changes that have occurred in China, the party has changed in other ways, ones that its leaders prefer not to explicitly acknowledge. In order for the state, the party, and the nation to be conflated as one, the nation itself must be united behind the party. The Chinese Communist Party under Xi has adopted a new ideology of Chinese nationalism, creating a party that not only operates differently from how its founders envisioned, but also in ways that explicitly go against what the party historically stood for.

Events such as the ongoing genocide of the Uyghur people are particularly tragic and ironic in light of the party's rise to power. During the chaos of the final years of the Chinese Civil War, multiple ethnicities in China's outer provinces were engaged in revolts against the Kuomintang-ruled central government. The most notable revolt

was the Ili Rebellion of 1944 that created the Second East Turkestan Republic in Xinjiang, supported by the Soviet government.² The Communist conquests of areas like Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet were often achieved as much through astute political negotiation as through military strength, with Communist leaders forming agreements with local Uyghur, Mongol, Tibetan, and other ethnic minority leaders in order to assume control of these regions.

This was relatively easy to do because of widespread opposition to the Kuomintang's version of Chinese nationalism. Throughout the Second Sino-Japanese War, Chiang Kai-shek gave multiple speeches supporting the notion of the Chinese nation as a single group, claiming that the different ethnicities were "clans" within a single Chinese nation rather than separate nations in themselves.³ The Communists initially contrasted themselves against the Kuomintang view, pushing an idea of China as a multinational state united around Marxism. Some of the concessions given to ethnic minorities after the Communist victory in the war included the renaming of several major cities, such as Dihua, which was changed to Ürümqi, and Guisui, which became Hohhot. In these instances, the Chinese names were replaced with indigenous ones, and autonomous regions were created in places with large



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ethnic minority populations. In 1953, Mao Zedong even wrote an internal memo to the rest of the Party Central Committee condemning Han nationalism as a feature of the previous Kuomintang regime and associating it with “the landlord class and the bourgeoisie.”⁴

Contrast this with Xi Jinping’s 100th anniversary speech, which emphasized the strength and unity of China and barely mentioned the party’s historic role in opposing capitalism and economic exploitation. Instead of a country united around Marxism, Xi’s China is a country united around being Chinese. His references to China as a single entity evoke Chiang’s vision of China more than Mao’s. In a country where approximately 92% of Chinese people belong to the Han majority ethnic group, his rhetoric of a unified nation seeks to erase ways of being Chinese that do not conform to that of the Han majority.

Of course, the very idea of a single Han nation is fraught. China is a land of great regional differences. Contrasts within the Han ethnic group are most obvious in the south of China, where the majority of the population is Han but historically did not speak Mandarin. The first concerted attempts to promote Mandarin as the national language began in the Republican period of China from 1912 to 1949, when such features of the language as the Zhuyin Fuhao⁵ system of transcribing the pronunciation of Chinese characters and the Gwoyue Romatzyh⁶ system of romanization were created. These can be contrasted with the many other Sinitic languages. For example, since Shanghai was a major center of the Chinese publishing industry, Shanghainese experienced a brief period of popularity in novels in the 1910s and 1920s before its lack of written standardization—in contrast to Mandarin—eventually caused the latter to eclipse it.⁷

Chinese policy toward non-Mandarin Sinitic languages shifted from neglect to more open hostility in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Propaganda posters promoting Putonghua, the standardized version of Mandarin that serves as the official language of China, associate speaking Mandarin with being educated and cultured. Shenzhen, Guangdong, which became the

first special economic zone under Deng Xiaoping’s reforms and went from a rural county of 500,000 in 1970 to a mega-city of 14.6 million in 2021, is heavily associated with China’s economic transformation. Its population also primarily speaks Mandarin, since most of its growth has been the result of migration from other provinces. Thus, Ren Zhongyi, the former party secretary of Guangdong, was quoted in 1999 as saying, “Guangdong’s different languages should all be united using Mandarin, with Shenzhen as the model.”⁸ Ren may have connected Mandarin with Shenzhen not only because of Shenzhen’s association with wealth, but also its reputation as China’s Silicon Valley and thus, China’s future.⁹ Later developments, such as the Guangdong National Language Regulations passed in 2012, which limited the amount of Cantonese that could be used in Guangdong-based television broadcasts, seem to corroborate this sensibility of a Mandarin-speaking future.¹⁰

This may explain the particular hostility against Cantonese that is associated with Chinese rule in Hong Kong after the handover in 1997. Unlike Wu, Gan, or Xiang, Cantonese’s widespread use in the public sphere and its possession of a developed writing system and widely used romanizations have given it a tangible identity that most other Sinitic languages do not have. Even so, written Cantonese is not used in official settings, but mostly online, and while Cantonese is the medium of instruction in most Hong Kong classrooms, the Hong Kong curriculum does not provide for classes on Cantonese itself.¹¹ After the recent crackdown on civil liberties in the city, including the shuttering of the largest pro-democracy and Cantonese-language newspaper, *Apple Daily*, Cantonese is likely to become even more marginalized.

Despite the increasing influence of a Chinese nationalism that aims to suppress differences—not just ideological but also ethnic and linguistic differences—Chinese media outlets are willing to promote diversity, but only when it serves their purposes and only differences that are superficial in nature. A recent article in *China Daily* extols a television drama about a group of party officials sent from Fujian to

a small village in Ningxia for highlighting the importance of linguistic diversity in China, but it does so by referring to the language spoken by Chen Jinshan, the official from Fujian, as “Fujian dialect” instead of its traditional name, Hokkien.¹² While the article briefly alludes to the cultural importance of these minority languages, this is downplayed in favor of discussion about how the contrast between Hokkien and Zhongyuan Mandarin makes the show interesting and affects certain plotlines, rather than any serious discussion of the Sinitic languages or even acknowledgment that these are separate languages. Instead, the term “dialects” is insistently used.

A similar phenomenon could be seen in the party’s centennial celebrations, during which 56 cannons were shot for the 55 ethnic groups of China, plus the “Gaoshan,” the term used in China for the indigenous peoples of Taiwan.¹³ Setting aside the question as to whether a people based in Taiwan count as a Chinese ethnic minority, the Taiwanese government recognizes 16 different indigenous groups within their borders, with over a dozen smaller groups that do not yet have official recognition. China’s conflation of over 30 ethnic groups into one, in the case of Taiwanese indigenous peoples, is not unique, as the classification and labeling of China’s ethnic minorities in the 1950s and 1960s was fraught with the usual complications that come with trying to sort a diverse group of peoples into neat little boxes.¹⁴

Despite the difficulty of determining who counts as a member of a certain ethnic group and who does not, the number 56 has stuck in the Chinese consciousness since it was finalized with the addition of the Jino people in 1979. That this celebration of ethnic diversity occurs while China is in the middle of committing a genocide in Xinjiang is not at all hypocritical in the eyes of the Chinese government. The number 56 is now firmly embedded in the minds of the Chinese people and has become another part of the now-established pattern of promoting ethnic minorities—but only in ways that subsume them within the larger Chinese nation, and by extension, the party.

The new nationalist China under Xi Jinping is one in which diversity is a marketing buzzword, where ethnic minorities are trotted out as dancing showpieces to promote China as a harmonious, multiethnic state while simultaneously engaging in genocide.¹⁵ Propaganda in Xi’s China highlights incidents like the murder of George Floyd in the United States and the protests and riots that occurred afterward, while simultaneously covering up its own even more blatant problems with racial discrimination, not only against Uyghurs,¹⁶ but Africans as well.¹⁷ Elsewhere, cities like Xiamen will put Hokkien phrases on subway ads but write them using nonsense characters meant to be pronounced in Mandarin for the benefit of tourists,¹⁸ to the chagrin and mockery of locals who do speak Hokkien¹⁹ (see Image 1). Xi’s China is a China where ethnic and linguistic minority groups are tools to bolster the nation’s image when they behave, and enemies to be obliterated when they do not.

IMAGE 1 — INCONSISTENCIES IN XIAMEN METRO HOKKIEN ADVERTISEMENTS



NOTE Two advertisements on the Xiamen Metro in Fujian Province with the Hokkien for “to eat” (left) and “let me tell you” (right). The poster with “to eat” uses correct written Hokkien but gives no guide to pronunciation, as 呷 and 飯 are pronounced very differently in Hokkien and Mandarin. In contrast, the poster with “let me tell you” tries to approximate Hokkien pronunciation using Mandarin sounds but still contains two mistakes—the wrong initial consonant for the first character and the wrong tone for the second character.

SOURCE “Underground Xiamen Dialect” Campaign, Amoy Metro Transit Rail

In his July 1 speech commemorating the party's anniversary, Xi Jinping referred to the Chinese nation as a "Great Wall of Steel" that would bloody those who bash themselves against it. Following that rhetoric, it is worth noting that in steelmaking, one of the most crucial steps is the removal of impurities, especially carbon, that would weaken the final product. The first major step in steelmaking is thus to blast large quantities of air at high temperatures into a mixture of iron ore, coke, and limestone to remove excess carbon. It is an incredibly loud, hot, and violent process that produces thick clouds of carbon monoxide-rich gas that glow orange from the molten metal. With Xi Jinping's new Chinese nationalism, what is considered an impurity has changed. But to ensure his vision of a "Great Wall of Steel" comes true, the party under Xi will resort to no less violent means of cultural destruction in order to purge the country of what it considers to be "impurities."

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This brief is the second of two parts on the CCP centenary. The first part, on Chinese propaganda and the rise of Xi Jinping, is available [here](#).

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