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ARTICLE

The Chinese Unitary Multinational State: A Normative Reappraisal

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Abstract
This article provides a normative analysis of the rationale behind the creation of the Chinese unitary multinational state. Far from being irrelevant in the face of the well-known aversion of scientific socialism for normative thinking, such analysis illuminates the Chinese Communist Party's long-standing commitment to the unitary multinational state as the best response to the national question. It shows that the Party's leadership, in a conscious effort to adapt Stalin's theory of nationality to Chinese revolutionary praxis, substantially revised the standard conception of national self-determination. Relying on its own materialist logic, it made participation in the struggle against alienation the normative basis to justify granting ethnic minorities special rights of regional autonomy under a common state. The creation of the Chinese unitary multinational state appears in this light as a normatively coherent attempt to guarantee that all ethnic groups that contributed to national liberation benefit equally from their imprescriptible right to collective self-determination.

Keywords: national self-determination; theory of nationality; revolutionary praxis; Marxism with Chinese characteristics; *minzu*; ethnopolitics

The academic literature contains several attempts to explain why, in 1949, China became a "unitary multi-national state" rather than an assimilationist mono-national state or a federal democratic republic organized on the Soviet model ("The Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference" 1949; *The Constitution of the People's Republic of China* 1982, Preamble). Surprisingly few of these attempts, however, take seriously the possibility that the adoption of this constitutional form may have been partly determined by normative considerations. This article explores this possibility by examining the normative underpinnings of the political project, formulated by the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP or Party) during the Yan'an period (1936–1947), to establish a unitary multinational state in China.

The idea that normative considerations can have a determining influence on political decisions of that sort may raise some eyebrows. Many historians and political scientists continue to doubt the normative role of ideas and to limit their analyses of political behavior to considerations of self-interest narrowly construed (Crick 2013, 163). Yet a series of insightful critiques has shed light on the propensity of political actors to act out of commitment to ideas they value independently of their vested interests (Mehta 2010; Rueschemeyer 2006; Sen 2002). This article illustrates the validity of this thesis by bringing to light the existing link between the CCP's normative work on the national question and the adoption of the unitary multinational solution.

The use of the term "normative" to describe a political project belonging to the Marxist tradition may also raise questions. Is this tradition not characterized by its hostility to all forms of normative

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theorizing? Undeniably, Marxism disparages "armchair normative theory à la Rawls," which derives action-guiding principles from the consideration of abstract moral values (Leiter 2002, 1131). It accommodates, however, a different form of normative thinking, one that is embedded in revolutionary action and aimed at rationalizing concrete revolutionary practices. The political project of creating a unitary multinational state in China is an instance of this latter type of normative thinking.

This appears more clearly when resituating the project within the broader context of the normative effort undertaken by the CCP in response to Mao's famous call for the Sinification of Marxism (Mao 1965c [1938], 209–210). This call, which initiated the Yan'an period, is often presented as reflecting Mao's conviction that Marxism must be "adapted" to the context of its implementation (see, for example, Hoston 1994, 16; Wylie 1979, 457). This suggests that Mao adopted an idealist stance and conceived of the CCP's task as being to work out the details of the "application" of an abstract doctrine to the material world (see, for example, Knight 2002, 203; Pfeffer 1976, 421). But Mao's stated views on the relation between theory and practice contradict this interpretation (Mao 1965b [1937]). His methodological writings of the Hundred Flowers period (1956–1957) make clear that, rather than an "adaptation" or "application" of Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese context, he conceived of the Party's task as being to facilitate the "integration of the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution" (Mao 1977 [1956], 304).

The difference between "adaptation" and "integration" is crucial here. Whereas adapting a theory to the context of its implementation gives rise to a new theory both distinct from the original and dependent on it for its validity, integrating theory with practice implies "an inherent transformation of the *same* theory" as it becomes informed by the concrete reality of the practice (Žižek 2007, 2–4). This process of integration reflects the scientific (as opposed to utopian) nature of Marxism, which does not present itself as an abstract philosophical doctrine conveying some transcendent truth, but rather as a materialist theory whose validity depends on its being informed (or actualized) by concrete practices. Mao's call for the integration of Marxism-Leninism with Chinese revolutionary practice is thus the expression of his commitment to scientific socialism and of his conviction that theory must be grounded in "the eternity of matter and motion" as opposed to "the perishable nature of moral ideas" (Engels 1910 [1876], 10–11; Mao 1965b [1937], 296). The normative work analyzed in this article, which was carried out in accordance with this conception of the relation of theory to practice, is therefore better described as a practice-dependent form of theorizing that derives political prescriptions from an interpretation of Chinese revolutionary practices. This type of normative activity is in line with the materialist orientation of Marxism.

Based on these clarifications, the article begins by explaining why the literature has been generally unmindful of the normative dimension of the national question. It shows that the inclination of Western scholars toward a realist conception of political rationality, on the one hand, and the commitment of Chinese scholars to a dialectical conception of the social world, on the other, conspired to make them oblivious to the role played by normative ideas in Chinese political life. The article then proceeds to discuss why, in the late 1930s, the Chinese Communist Party renounced its original commitment to the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationality in favor of a view that substituted minority nationalities' right to secession by a right to regional autonomy. I argue that, contrary to what the literature suggests, this modification does not echo a doctrinal evolution of international socialism, but results from a conscious effort of the CCP's leadership to adapt Marxism-Leninism to the reality of Chinese revolutionary praxis. The article concludes that the bulk of this effort of adaptation consisted of reworking the Marxist-Leninist conception of self-determination to make participation in the common struggle against oppression the normative basis that justifies granting ethnic minorities special rights of regional autonomy under a common state. In light of this rationale, the creation of the Chinese unitary multinational state may be seen as a normatively coherent attempt to guarantee that all ethnic groups which contributed to national liberation benefit equally from their imprescriptible right to collective self-determination.

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The Neglected Role of Normative Ideas

The widespread disregard for the normative underpinnings of the unitary multinational project extends to both Western and Chinese scholars, albeit for different reasons.[1] Western political scientists tend to consider that the rationale behind the creation of the unitary multinational state was purely strategic. This view originates in the body of works produced by a first generation of scholars in the 1970s and 1980s. Very much a reflection of their time, these works address the evolution of the national question in China as a case study illustrating the deceptive nature of communist ideology (Connor 1984; Dreyer 1976). They argue that the CCP, adopting the same strategy as the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union, feigned ideological commitment to national self-determination in order to win support from ethnic minorities in its bid for power. After rising to national preeminence, the Party then went back on its empty commitment and imposed on ethnic minorities the solution of a unitary state under Party rule.

This account, shaped by the ideological prejudices of the Cold War, has been rightly criticized as "a misleading depiction" of the CCP's engagement with the national question (Leibold 2007, 81; Liu 2010, 109). As a corrective, a second generation of scholars proposed instead to see this engagement as "a dynamic process" in which ideological commitments, political calculations, and nascent nationalist aspirations all play an important part (Liu 2010, 109).[2] The alternative picture they draw comprises two distinct phases. From the early 1920s to the mid-1930s, the CCP's inexperienced leadership invested a lot of effort trying to translate the ideological orthodoxy of the Comintern into a consistent minority policy. But the dramatic events of the Long March, from October 1934 to October 1935, ended this initial phase. Confronted with the imminent risk of military defeat, the CCP renounced its ambition to craft a workable policy out of the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationality and adopted instead a "pragmatic" approach aimed at creating a strategic alliance with the minority elites (Leibold 2007, 93–96; Liu 2010, 122–126). The political ties and network of solidarity established through this alliance later served as a concrete basis to the edification of a new state and society inclusive of all ethnic groups (Leibold 2007, 97).

By showing that the CCP did not make deceitful use of Marxist ideology, but was "compelled" by events to change its minority policy, this account constitutes undeniable progress in our understanding of the CCP's engagement with the national question (Liu 2010, 118). One may wonder, however, whether its authors went far enough in distancing themselves from the realist paradigm that dominated the social sciences during the Cold War. Though they clearly reject the classical form of realism, which regards ideology, in line with Karl Mannheim's seminal definition, as a "conscious disguise of the nature of the situation" used "to dupe others" (1936, 49), they seem to remain committed to another and perhaps more insidious form of realism through their refusal to regard normative beliefs as potential motives for action. In their account, all the Party's decisions, from the long March onward, resulted from pragmatic considerations, as if the exclusive concern of the leadership was "enlarging the appeal and authority of the CCP" (Leibold 2007, 96; Liu 2010, 117).

This interpretation, which has been very influential in the literature, is a sure sign of commitment to (or at least inclination toward) a realist conception of political rationality.[3] In this conception, political actors are self-interested parties acting out of a fundamental desire for power and without great consideration for their own normative beliefs, whether religious, moral, or ideological. Those who endorse, consciously or not, this conception of political rationality account for the actions of the CCP's leadership in terms of power relations and tend to neglect the role played by normative beliefs in determining its conduct.

Some may object that the second generation of scholars goes beyond a purely realist interpretation insofar as, contrary to their predecessors, they acknowledge that the Party took advantage of the Second World War to emancipate itself from Moscow's ideological tutelage and to develop its own view on the national question. These scholars also recognize that Mao and his closest advisors played a major role in this movement of ideological emancipation by developing a new theory of

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nationality that served as a basis to the solution of the unitary multinational state (Leibold 2007, 96–99). These authors do not, however, provide a detailed account of this theoretical effort, because their realist inclination encourages them to regard it as being guided by considerations of power rather than by a commitment to the realization of a normative ideal. Leibold, for example, holds that Mao's intention in distancing himself from Moscow was not so much to gain the latitude necessary to formulate a political ideal more in line with his fundamental ideological convictions as "to consolidate his power within the Party" by establishing himself as its only legitimate ideologue (2007, 98). Along the same lines, Liu maintains that Mao was not really interested in engaging with "the theoretical subtleties of the Stalinist formula," but only in establishing a sound theoretical basis to justify imposing the Party's authority on ethnic minorities (2010, 123). Despite their laudable methodological ambition, both authors thus fail to overcome realism and to accommodate the possibility that the Party's leaders may have acted out of ideological convictions or, at least, that ideological convictions may have somehow influenced their behavior.[4]

Let me now turn to the Chinese literature. While Chinese social scientists operate within a different methodological framework, they also tend to disregard the normative dimension of the national question. In accordance with their Marxist training, they hold that the logic of social development is that of the development of social phenomena toward the realization of their inner nature, which therefore constitutes the *telos* from which the entire development process derives its meaning (Cohen 2000, 46; Engels 1910 [1876]; Marx and Engels 1998 [1946], 54–62; Wood 2004 [1981], 104–111). Consistent with this dialectical conception of the social world, they do not understand their task as being to justify the creation of the unitary multinational state by reference to certain basic values and principles, but as being to provide a teleological reconstruction of the historical-materialist process that brought the different ethnic groups living on the Chinese territory to "national unification" (Chen 2014; Hao 2016, 36; Wang 2012, 2014).

This teleological approach has limited explanatory value for whoever does not subscribe to the dialectical idea. Part of the problem lies with the determinism inherent in a conception of the social world that assumes certain ends are historically inevitable; but equally problematic is the marginalization of politics that inevitably follows when making the historical inevitability of these ends the principle of intelligibility of the social world. This latter point may be illustrated by resorting to Marx's famous "obstetric" metaphor (Cohen 2000, 43, 54, 58–78; Marx 1971 [1859], 21). Everyone perceives that the role of the midwife is not to realize, in practice, the ideal delivery she has in mind. Her role is only to facilitate the natural process of delivery, which unfolds according to its own, predetermined pattern. Similarly, what guides the evolution of the social world in a dialectical framework is not the course of actions freely chosen by political actors, but the evolutionary process itself. The proper way to account for the creation of the unitary multinational state, in this framework, is therefore to account for its development out of the socio-economic reality that preceded it in history. Such an account relegates political actors to the status of midwives accompanying the unfolding of the historical process toward its predetermined end.

Given these limitations, it is not surprising that the dialectical idea came under much criticism, even within the Marxist tradition. The British school of analytical Marxism, for example, pointed out that 20th century history severely damaged the basic trust one might have had in the historical inevitability of socialism (Cohen 2000, 64; Leiter 2002). The belief that the rise of a politically conscious working class, plus the continuous growth of material productive forces, made the advent of socialism historically inevitable no longer appears to be straightforwardly corroborated by facts. And this uncertainty about the advent of the postulated *telos* casts legitimate doubt on the dialectical idea itself—hence the claim that Marxism should renounce dialectics, take a "normative turn," and recognize the need to justify political prescriptions on the basis of moral values and principles (Cohen 2000, 101–116).

Without going as far as analytical Marxism in denying scientific value to dialectics, it is undeniable that excessive reliance on a teleological mode of explanation obscures the decisive influence of political actors on the evolution of the social world. In the case at hand, it appears that

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the endeavor of Chinese scholars to explain in dialectical terms the creation of the unitary multinational state prevented them from properly accounting for Mao Zedong's role in this process. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from the most recent monograph of Hao Shiyuan, who is regarded in China as a leading authority on the national question:

> [Mao] took China's actual situation as his starting point and incorporated national autonomy into the connotation of national self-determination. "Recognize the right to equality and autonomy of the minority nationalities within the borders of China." This was Mao Zedong's historic contribution to solving China's nationality question, as well as a creative development in the integration of Marxist-Leninist theory of national autonomy with the actual situation of China's nationality question. (2016, 66–67)

In this passage, Mao is said to have inflected the course of events by introducing "creative development" into the treatment of the national question. This explicit reference to the creative input of a political actor is at odds with the commitment expressed elsewhere by the author to a dialectical presentation of the question (Hao 2016, 12). In theory, such a presentation should focus on the process of development of socio-economic phenomena and attach secondary importance only to the discrete actions of political actors. In his monograph, Hao complies with this methodological requirement and refrains from delving further into the explanation of what he nevertheless presents as Mao's "historic contribution." Far from being specific to Hao, this paradoxical situation is confronted by most Chinese specialists on the national question, who find themselves caught up in a contradiction between the methodological requirements induced by their commitment to dialectical materialism and their awareness of the importance of Mao's contribution.

Each in their own way, Western and Chinese scholars are thus victims of a methodological bias preventing them from comprehending all the aspects of the "dynamic process" that led to the creation of the unitary multinational state. In the next section, I set the stage for an analysis of the normative dimension of this process by focusing on the moment when the CCP started to deviate from the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy on the national question. I will argue that the reasons for this deviation are normative rather than strictly strategic.

The Turn of October 1938

The CCP's position on the national question radically changed during the first half of the twentieth century. From the early 1920s to the late 1930s, the Party was committed to the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationality. In line with this theory, it advocated the right to full political autonomy of every Chinese *minzu* and regarded the creation of a Chinese Federal Democratic State as the most appropriate solution to the problem of territorial unity.[5] The CCP's commitment to this solution is reflected, for example, in the Outline Constitution of the Chinese Soviet Republic (1931–1937). This important constitutional text, drafted by the Russian-trained lawyer Liang Bo Tai, explicitly recognizes "the right of self-determination of *shaoshu minzu* within China, to the extent that even the weak and small among them have a right to secession from China and to the formation of an independent state" (Outline Constitution 1991, art. 14). In October 1938, however, the CCP suddenly ceased to promote the federal solution, advocating instead the unitary multinational solution, which grants all *minzu* equal but limited rights of autonomy under a common state.

What caused this sudden change of policy? Why, in 1938, did the Party renounce its prior commitment to national self-determination? Those Western scholars who are sensitive to the role of ideology suggest that this decision resulted from the re-orientation of Marxism-Leninism from the perspective of world revolution to the idea that the proletarian-socialist revolution could, and should, be achieved nationally. This ideological re-orientation, which occurred in the late 1930s, constitutes a well-known structural shift within Marxism-Leninism—a shift to which Mao,

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according to these scholars, would have adhered in the wake of Stalin (Howland 2010, 171; Kryukov 1996, 373; Leibold 2007, 88). Adherence to this shift implied rethinking the very notion of the nation, which could no longer be defined in terms of ethnocultural substrate but had to be conceived instead as the proper site of the proletarian-socialist revolution. In October 1938, Mao would have accordingly modified the Party's conception of the nation: while prior to that date, the term "Chinese nation" was used to refer to the ethnic group formed by the Han, it started to be used from that date forward to refer to all Chinese *minzu* insofar as they formed a single nation with its own characteristics. In this new conception, the Chinese nation was no longer constructed on an ethnic basis, as being primarily Han, but on a materialist historical basis, as resulting from the life in common of different ethnic groups in the same territory.[6]

This evolution in the conception of the Chinese nation brought a decisive change in the nationality policy advocated by the Party. So long as the Chinese nation was conceived as ethnically one, the state could pursue a policy of assimilation intended to narrow the distance between Han and non-Han. However, once the coexistence of separate ethnic groups was both admitted and identified as a legitimate feature of the Chinese nation, specific *minzu* policies were required to accommodate the political rights of these newly recognized entities.

The literature points in the right direction when evoking a structural shift from internationalism to a nationalist form of communism. It is misleading, however, when suggesting that Mao would have simply adhered to a theoretical innovation originating in the Soviet Union. In the next section, I show that the recasting of the concept of nation proceeds instead from the inner logic of Maoism understood as the integration of Marxism-Leninism with the Chinese revolutionary praxis.

A Normative Interpretation

From a Marxist-Leninist perspective, what matters when considering the question of national self-determination is not so much its theoretical validity as its political significance under given historical circumstances. The political significance of the question for the Comintern, between 1919 and 1943, was that of the emancipation of all oppressed peoples of the world from bourgeois-capitalist rule. Capitalism, which was confined to Western Europe for most of the 19th century, had recently expanded to other continents through a new wave of colonization. This expansionist phase was regarded by Marxism-Leninism as characteristic of a new stage in the development of Western capitalism—a stage in which the increasing scarcity of profitable domestic investments necessitated the conquest of foreign markets (Lenin 1996 [1917]). In this context, the political significance of national self-determination was to resist the advance of Western capitalism and to free colonized peoples from the yoke of imperialism.

Between the early 1920s and the late 1930s, the CCP, which regarded China as "a semi-colonial country for which many imperialist powers [were] contending," willingly endorsed this analysis and consequently upheld the principle of national self-determination (Mao 1965a [1930], 117). The Party considered that, so long as the country was occupied by imperialist powers and ruled by the Guomindang, not only the Han but all the Chinese *minzu* would remain subject to economic exploitation and political alienation. Its intention in promoting national self-determination was to overcome that stage of Chinese history characterized by the struggle of the petty bourgeoisie against the landlord and comprador classes—a stage of bourgeois-democratic revolution in which the proletariat could only play a subordinate political role.

In Mao's reading of history, this stage was finally overcome during the national war of resistance against Japan, as a result of the opposition of two distinct political lines within the Chinese resistance forces.[7] While the Guomindang pursued a conservative domestic policy aimed at limiting the progression of Marxist ideology within the proletariat, the CCP developed a progressive domestic policy to prepare the ground for the rise of a "new-democratic republic" (Mao 1965e [1940]). These two lines were not only diametrically opposed in their treatment of the Chinese proletariat, but also in their conception of the type of relations that should exist between domestic

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political forces for the purpose of national unification. While the CCP initially regarded the Guomindang as the legitimate representative of a social class that was to form an integral part of the new-democratic republic, the Guomindang denied from the start any political legitimacy to the CCP.

For some time, the CCP hoped that the nationalist party's intransigence would soften in the face of military necessities. Between the Xi'an incident, in December 1936, and the fall of Wuhan, in October 1938, the recrudescence of Japanese attacks on its positions forced the Guomindang to cooperate militarily with the CCP within the anti-Japanese united front. But after the conquest of Wuhan, the Japanese army removed most of its troops from Guomindang-controlled areas, and the nationalist party, relieved from this military pressure, resumed its policy of defying the CCP. This move dealt a fatal blow to prospects of a peaceful settlement of the civil war by convincing the CCP that the Guomindang was unwilling to genuinely commit to the cause of national unification.

In October 1938, the Sixth Central Committee of the CCP, gathered in plenary session, drew the consequences of this situation by concluding that the Party, despite remaining an integral part of the anti-Japanese united front, was engaged in a domestic struggle against the Guomindang (Mao 1965c [1938], 195). In his address to the Committee, Mao endorsed this new political line and argued that, from now onward, the CCP had to regard itself alone as "consciously shoulder[ing] the great responsibility of uniting the entire nation" (Mao 1965c [1938], 197). This is, I argue, the fundamental reason why his conception of the nation evolved in October 1938. Contrary to what the literature suggests, this evolution was not dictated by uncritical adherence to a theoretical novelty originating in the Soviet Union. Instead, it was triggered by Mao's realization that, given the reluctance of the Guomindang and the social class it represented to cooperate with the proletariat within a united democratic government, the CCP had to take on itself the difficult task of uniting the Chinese nation under its leadership.

Successfully fulfilling this new responsibility implied discovering within Marxism-Leninism the resources necessary to overcome the Comintern's internationalist orientation. Mao's recasting of the traditional conception of the Chinese nation on a historical-materialist rather than ethnocultural basis constitutes the bulk of this theoretical effort. In this new conception, national unification no longer depends on sharing certain ethnic and cultural features, but a common economic structure. This historical-materialist principle of unification cuts across traditional identity categories, neutralizing their potential for division. In this respect, it constitutes a sound theoretical basis to argue that national unity should be achieved by the proletarian-socialist movement. A substantial part of Mao's address of October 1938 is thus dedicated to proving that Marxism-Leninism can accommodate both internationalism and patriotism. To the rhetorical question of whether "a Communist, who is an internationalist, [can] at the same time be a patriot," Mao answers "he not only can be but must be" (1965c [1938], 196). He can, because historical materialism gives him the theoretical means to think of patriotism as something other than chauvinism; he must, because "only by achieving national unification will it be possible for the proletariat and other working people to achieve their own emancipation" (Mao 1965c [1938], 196). Beyond the most urgent task of national liberation, national unification founded on historical materialism thus becomes a fundamental condition of emancipation.

Such unification does not necessarily imply, however, the immediate establishment of socialism. In Mao's view, China's level of socio-economic development in 1938 remains incompatible with this mode of production. Instead of a socialist society, Mao therefore advocates the creation of a "new-democratic society" governed by an alliance of all the parties under the leadership of the proletariat—a society that remains organized around the fundamental contradiction of labor and capital (Mao 1965f [1945], 229). This "new democracy" is a capitalist society in which social actors continue to defend their class interests, but where the democratic alliance of parties under the CCP's leadership ensures that those interests will not "grow and transcend the interests which all have in common" (Mao 1965f [1945], 230). The new democracy is, in other words, a society in which class

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antagonism is kept within reasonable bounds so as to preserve the benefits of cooperation in achieving common political, social, and cultural objectives.

Mao's advocacy of this regime does not mean that he embraces capitalism as a morally acceptable mode of production. His endorsement of capitalism rather comes as the acknowledgment of the functional necessity of this particular mode of production given the stage of development of the material productive forces. His deep-rooted reservations about the exploitative nature of capitalism continue to prevail, leading him to incorporate in his new-democratic program measures intended to ensure that social cooperation does not work to the exclusive benefit of the capitalist class, but of society as a whole (Mao 1965e [1940]). This is the same fundamental concern for the protection of vulnerable groups and for the limitation of class antagonism that led Mao to contemplate the possibility of granting special rights of self-determination to *shaoshu minzu.* In comparison to the Han, *shaoshu minzu* suffered from lower levels of socio-economic development and were therefore vulnerable to different forms of capitalist exploitation. According them a certain degree of autonomy in the domain of economic, social, and cultural development was, in Mao's view, the best way to protect them from this threat.

The Maoist rationale for the justification of minority rights thus bears little in common with its liberal counterpart. Mao's main concern in granting those rights was not to protect the different ethnocultural identities coexisting on Chinese territory, but to preserve economically vulnerable groups from capitalist exploitation within the new-democratic society. In the next section, I further specify Mao's position by showing that he holds, in the wake of Stalin, that the essence of *minzu*-hood lies in sharing a common material fate, not in sharing a common ethnicity, culture, or language. In light of this conception, respecting *minzu*-hood does not mean respecting the crucial importance of ethnocultural resources for identity construction, but respecting the right of each *minzu* to pursue autonomously its own development trajectory.

Before turning to this, however, it is important to explain further why Mao's decision to postpone the realization of socialism and to implement a new-democratic program, including provisions for the protection of *shaoshu minzu*, should not be interpreted as a strategic decision, but rather as one following from his acknowledging a formal requirement of historical materialism. Remember that historical materialism is a functionalist theory of history that resorts to a special type of causal explanation when accounting for the course of events. In contrast with an ordinary causal explanation, which explains the occurrence of something by reference to its proximate cause, a functional explanation explains the nature of that thing—not simply its occurrence—as being determined by "its effect on what explains it" (Cohen 2000, 278; see also Cohen 1982, 2010). Explaining, for example, the nature of the superstructure by saying that it is as it is because it contributes to the development of the material basis is to provide a functional explanation of the superstructure. In this explanation, the nature of the superstructure is explained by reference to the effect it has on the material basis. Resorting to functional explanations implies assuming that what is explained fulfills a specific function in history conceived as a wider process oriented by a certain force toward a certain end. In the case of historical materialism, this is a process moved by the continuous growth of the material productive forces and oriented toward the political and economic emancipation of the proletariat.

The philosophical insight behind functional explanations is that the nature of super-structural elements, such as the set of laws defining the political status of *minzu*, depends on the function they play in the necessary furtherance of the ascribed final end. The new policy favoring regional autonomy should not, therefore, be explained by reference to the circumstances of its adoption, but rather by the long-term effect that policy was meant to have on the political and social emancipation of the proletariat. Instead of saying that the CCP substituted regional autonomy for self-determination because it served the consolidation of its power and preserved the country's territorial integrity, Mao may have said, in line with the present analysis, that the Party endorsed the principle of regional autonomy because the necessary orientation of history toward the overarching goal of human emancipation ordained such modification. This evolution can also be

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described as a necessary modification of the superstructure in response to a new development of the material basis, namely the fact that China moved, at the domestic level, from the country being torn apart by the struggle of the petty bourgeoisie against the landowner class (a bourgeois-democratic revolution) to the people's leadership consciously shouldering the task of national unification and emancipation (a proletarian-socialist revolution). In this view, the realization of the multinational vision is not an end in itself, but only a means to a more fundamental end, namely the total emancipation of human beings from capitalist alienation.

This analysis shows that, beyond the strategic reasons highlighted in the Western literature, the CCP's leadership also had strong normative reasons to renounce the principle of national self-determination in favor of regional autonomy. This renunciation resulted from the acknowledgment that the country had reached a different stage of economic development that required reforming the superstructure and introducing minority rights. In the next section, I go one step further in the analysis of this rationale by contrasting its policy implications with that of the standard Marxist-Leninist theory of nationality.

The Materialist Reduction of Nationality

Central to the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationality is the materialist reduction of nationality effected by Stalin in his seminal essay on the national question (Stalin 1953a [1913]). Regarding the traditional conception of nationality as a collective psychological disposition manifesting itself in the culture, Stalin opposes the view that the perceived differences in the culture and psychological make-up of each nation develop out of "dissimilar conditions of existence" (Stalin 1953a [1913], 306). Nationality, in his view, is not so much a cultural or psychological fact as a material fact reflecting the conditions of life of the community. These conditions include the raw materials and productive forces available to the community, but also the set of relations of production that determine how individuals relate to this material environment. These relations of production, Stalin argues, form the "internal economic bond" that binds the different parts of the community together into a coherent whole.

Stalin has a strong philosophical reason for making the relations of production the principle of the nation's unity. Remember that historical materialism, which provides the framework of his theory of nationality, conceives of world history as guided by the principle of material development. For an agent to find its place in history (for an agent to count as an "agency"), it must present a structure and pattern of behavior that is intelligible in terms of this guiding principle. A given community, that is, cannot find its place within the historical-materialist narrative if it does not display a constituted economic structure oriented toward material development. A community created on a strictly superstructural basis—say, through purely legal means—would not qualify as a national agency (Stalin 1953a [1913], 305). Superstructural means, such as nationality policies, can only be used to accompany a movement whose dynamic remains, in essence, material.

The promotion of material development to the rank of key explanatory factor in the emergence of nations is not the sole consequence of a commitment to historical materialism. This doctrine also carries a specific understanding of nationalism as a socio-economic phenomenon only emerging under the conditions of rising capitalism. As capitalism rises, more efficient means of communication and more intensive trade relations develop, which increases the degree of social cohesion and allows pre-capitalist groups to "consolidate themselves economically into integral nations" (Stalin 1953a [1913], 314). This historical-materialist narrative poses, however, a serious challenge to the revolutionary vanguard parties that have ascended to power. Whereas their main task is to guide the proletariat toward universal socialism, understood as the overcoming of current national capitalist forms, they cannot neglect the pre-capitalist groups that seem destined to become full-blown nations as their material basis develops. The challenge thus consists in accommodating the contemporary significance of nationalisms while preparing the transition to a socialist political order that would transcend class antagonisms and national determinations.

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The nationality policy advocated by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution addressed this challenge by relying on Lenin's three-stage conception of the transition from pre-capitalism to socialism. In Lenin's view, ethnic groups that are sufficiently consolidated first go through a phase of "national development" (*rastsvet*), during which their national conscience is strengthened and their elites empowered (Lenin 1972 [1916], 320–360). These elites, instead of pushing for separation from the Russian federation, engage in a process of "rapprochement" (*sblizhenie*), eventually leading to the "merging" or "fusion" (*sliianie*) of all nationalities under the leadership of a united Soviet proletariat that cuts across national divisions. The crucial moment of this transition is obviously the empowerment of national elites, which need careful guidance to avoid the rise of separatist aspirations.

The required guidance was provided in the Soviet Union by the policy of "nativization" (*korenizatsiia*). In accordance with this policy, aspiring elites were trained against a Marxist-Leninist background and offered high-ranking positions in local administrations. These elites became tied to the Russian Federation both by personal interest and by the ideological awareness of the transitional nature of nationalism. The winning over of minority elites—their *nomenklaturization*—was regarded by Lenin as the best way to channel public expression of nationalisms toward the realization of his vision of a federal socialist state allowing for the material flourishing of nationalities within a unified political framework. Through this artifice, the Soviet Union was able to grant the nationalities living on its territory the full right of separation from Russia while preventing, through co-option, not coercion, this right being used in practice.

The CCP faced a similar challenge when it came to power in 1949. In accordance with the historical-materialist reduction of nationalism, the Party's leadership considered that, in a context where feudalism was not yet overcome and where ethnic groups were not sufficiently consolidated to support the creation of independent states, a unitary multinational state had to be created. And just as for the Bolsheviks before them, the crucial point to ensure the long-term viability of this project was to contain the momentum of the materialist logic, which threatened to carry through to dismantling the multinational state into separate nation-states as soon as the different ethnic groups would reach the required level of socio-economic development.

On a superficial reading, the *minzu* policy developed in response to this concern appears to be similar to the Bolshevik policy of nativization. Like the latter, the former comprises a political component, with the incorporation of local elites into the state apparatus, and a cultural component, with the consolidation of *minzu* dialects, cultures, and folkways. These structural similarities suggest that both policies have the same purpose: preventing the rise of separatism by establishing a state monopoly on the different vectors of ethnicity. But this interpretation overlooks the fact that, unlike its Russian counterpart, the Chinese policy does not proceed from acknowledging Lenin's conception of the transition of pre-capitalist groups to socialism. Instead, this policy was tailored to accommodate the specificity of Chinese revolutionary history, which shaped in a very distinct way the relationship between *shaoshu minzu.* In the following passage, Zhou Enlai provides a rare and precious insight into the CCP's conception of this specificity:

> Overall, China is a country that was under the oppression of external imperialism for a long time. Internally, different *minzu* have built a fighting friendship from going together through … the revolutionary war and thus allowing the liberation of the big *minzu* family. Such internal and external situations enable us not to take the Russian policies of national self-determination and permission of national separation during the October Revolution. [Instead] History has given us conditions for *minzu* cooperation…. Therefore, after the liberation, we adopted the system of regional autonomy which benefits *minzu* cooperation. (Zhou 1989 [1957], 247)

It is clear from these lines that the Bolsheviks and the Chinese communists differ fundamentally in their treatment of the question of minority nationalities. Though they both subscribe to the historical-materialist rationale, they diverge in their interpretation of the normative prescriptions

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that follow from it. As we have seen, the Bolsheviks accepted the normative consequences of their commitment to the principle of self-determination by formally according the right of separation to minority nationalities. This is not the case of the CCP, which relied on the specificity of Chinese revolutionary history to postulate the existence of a common will of cooperation and justify the creation of a unitary multinational state in which all nationalities are regarded as equals. This notion of cooperation among equals, which holds a central place in the Common Program, superseded the logic of national self-determination in the Party's analysis. In the next section, I further elucidate this central notion and show that it remains in line with the fundamentals of Marxism.

From National Self-Determination to Freedom from Alienation

Contrary to the Constitution of the Chinese Soviet Republic, which was drafted by a Russian-trained lawyer, and to the 1954 Constitution, which was sent to Moscow for revision prior to publication, the Common Program was conceived and drafted without interference from the Soviet Union. It therefore constitutes a key document in assessing how Marxism-Leninism was received by the CCP and progressively integrated with the specificity of Chinese revolutionary practices between 1938 and 1949. This document marks the completion of the CCP's normative work by turning a set of abstract principles into concrete constitutional norms. The two major figures who dominated this process of constitutionalization were Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. They not only decisively influenced the elaboration of the CCP's political line in the 1940s, but they also presided over the drafting of the Common Program by respectively acting as chairman of the People's Political Consultative Conference Committee and as president of the Program-drafting commission (Zhou Enlai 1981 [1949]).

A striking feature of the Common Program is the absence of reference to the principle of self-determination. The document relies instead on the notion of equality between *minzu* to justify the principle of regional autonomy and its associated rights. It is because *shaoshu minzu* are equal both between themselves and with respect to the Han *minzu* that they enjoy the right to set up autonomous political institutions in areas where they constitute the majority (China 1949, art. 50–53). But why shall we accept as a basic constitutional principle that "All *minzu* within the boundaries of the People's Republic of China are equal" (China 1949, art. 50; see also art. 9)? Should *minzu* be regarded as equals because of the intrinsic value of their ethnocultural identity, as most liberals would assume? Or is there something else, in the eyes of the drafters of the Common program, that justifies *minzu* equality? Unfortunately, there is no answer to these questions in the Common Program or its accompanying report. One has to rely instead on the writings of Mao and Zhou to reconstruct the rationale underlying the claim that *minzu* are fundamentally equal.

These writings suggest that, by contrast with the liberal tradition, the basis of *minzu* equality is not the mutual recognition of a moral status related to the possession of a distinct national character. The basis of *minzu* equality lies instead in revolutionary history, that is, in their common resistance to Japanese imperialism and their respective contributions to national liberation.[8] In his writings of the Sino-Japanese war period, Mao thus insists on the "ardent love for freedom" and the "rich revolutionary traditions" that characterize all Chinese *minzu* (Mao 1965d [1939], 306). In his view, it is their fundamental commitment to freedom and their historically attested capacity for resistance against alienation that justify granting *minzu* political equality. As he puts it, "All the *minzu* of China have resisted foreign oppression and have invariably resorted to rebellion to shake it off. [This is why] they favor a union on the basis of equality and are against the oppression of one nationality by another" (Mao 1965d [1939], 307).

Though alien to liberal thinking, this way of conceiving equality is in keeping with Marxist doctrine. In a liberal setting, equality in the juridical-political sphere is typically justified by reference to the equal moral worth of agents: it is only insofar as they are recognized as equal moral persons that agents are regarded as equal legal subjects. Equality in a Marxist setting has a different meaning. To be regarded as equals, agents must have demonstrated in history their capacity for resistance against economic exploitation and political oppression. The demonstration

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of this capacity for resistance, rather than attesting to one's moral quality, reveals one's specific positioning within the capitalist system. As others have also emphasized, engagement in revolutionary struggle is better conceived, in a Marxist framework, as "a reflex movement on the part of an agent strategically placed within the capitalist process" (Cohen 1995, 8). Whoever is subjected to capitalist exploitation or imperialist rule is thus expected to engage in revolutionary struggle to regain his basic freedom.

The revolutionary struggle is, in other words, the struggle of materially oppressed people for their liberation. What induces this struggle is not the violation of their moral person, but the internal contradiction of the historical process itself, which tends to generate inequalities despites its general orientation toward the abolition of class society. As Marx explains at length, the continuous growth of material productive forces, conceived as a necessary process without moral significance, modifies the relations of production, thereby creating inequalities. Equality, in this view, is not an abstract moral ideal that the state would have a special responsibility to pursue (Cohen 1995, 3–6, 155), but a state of affairs that everyone can contribute to bringing about by engaging in revolutionary struggle (Cohen 1994, 83–84). As one Marxist legal theorist pointed out, "Communism reads equality in conjunction with the right to resistance and revolution." In the same way as "the French and the Russians placed the idea of equality on the world stage through their self-authorizing revolutions," Chinese *minzu*, through their relentless struggle against internal and external oppression, contributed to creating the conditions of the multinational state in which they would all live as equals (Douzinas 2010, 97). Their unshakable commitment to the cause of national liberation forced their recognition by the state as equal *minzu* and won them the right to regional autonomy.

The compatibility of this argument with the fundamentals of Marxism is attested by its congruence with the materialist conception of human nature.[9] In this conception, central to Marx and Engels's early writings, human self-fulfillment depends on the unconstrained exercise of certain essential powers, especially the power to create external objects through labor. This power of production is so essential to human beings that its collective exercise constitutes human beings' "determinate mode of being" (Marx and Engel 1998 [1946], 37). It is this conception of human nature that leads Marxist thinkers to reject the moralistic understanding of self-determination promoted by liberalism. For them, self-determination consists in the capacity to retain control over the socio-economic conditions of production (Wood 2004 [1981], 51). Only when such control exists can human beings freely exercise their most essential power and strive toward self-fulfillment. When deprived of control, they find themselves in a situation of alienation, where the arbitrary imposition of extraneous forms of socio-economic organization frustrates their aspiration to self-realization and justifies resort to revolutionary action.

It appears that Mao and Zhou reinvested this materialist conception of human nature in their creative reworking of the notion of national self-determination. Instead of considering national self-determination as an abstract moral value to be blindly promoted by communist parties around the world, they engaged in a backward analysis of the materialist logic to locate the normative dimension of self-determination in human beings' basic commitment to the freedom of exercising their essential power of production. This commitment, when placed on the world stage through active resistance to all forms of alienation, opens a right to autonomy understood as a right to collectively determine the social conditions of production. This right, grounded in human beings' species-essence, is imprescriptible and it is therefore the duty of the leadership of the proletariat to ensure that those who have demonstrated a capacity for resistance equally benefit from it. The creation in China of a unitary multinational state recognizing all *minzu* as equals and according them a right to regional autonomy is, arguably, nothing other than an attempt to fulfill that duty.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to remedy a shortcoming of the literature, which neglects the role of normative ideas in the emergence of the Chinese unitary multinational state. I hope to have

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shown that, in addition to the strategic reasons highlighted in the literature, the CCP had strong normative reasons, derived from the integration of Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese revolutionary praxis, to turn toward the unitary multinational solution. The analysis of key statements and constitutional documents reveals that the Party reworked the standard conception of national self-determination to make participation in the common struggle against alienation the normative basis that justified the ascription of special collective rights to *shaoshu minzu.* Although the result of this normative work is at odds with the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationality, we have seen that it is compatible with the basic principles of Marxism—a condition essential for it to fulfill both its action-guiding function and its function to legitimatize the Party's minority policy.

Some may object that this analysis misrepresents the relations between *shaoshu minzu* and the Chinese state. They may even regard it as offensive to those who suffered very concretely from what they consider to be the CCP's failure to realize in practice its promises of equality and self-determination. In response to this objection, I must emphasize that my analysis only accounts for the adoption of a specific constitutional form (the unitary multinational state), not for the set of policies that subsequently developed within it. This can be better appreciated by recalling that a constitution does not only fix the general structure of the state and the set of rules and procedures that must govern its functioning. It also conveys definite views on a series of fundamental political questions, including the question of the basic political rights that citizens must enjoy both individually and as members of specific groups. These views, which constitute what Rawls calls the "constitutional essentials" of a political regime, are justified by reference to certain values shared by all citizens and forming the core of the society's public political culture (Rawls 1993, 137–138, 227–231). In accordance with this description of the functional role of a constitution, the Common Program (and subsequent constitutional texts) contains both a definite view of the basic political rights that *shaoshu minzu* must enjoy (art. 51) and an appeal to the value of equality as providing a justificatory basis for this view (art. 50). The analysis presented in this article contributes to making sense of this appeal by shedding light on the normative work that led the CCP's leadership to make equality the basis of the political treatment of *shaoshu minzu.* When I say that my analysis accounts for the adoption of a particular constitutional form, what I mean, therefore, is that it shows that there exists a coherent rationale behind the creation of a unitary multinational state in which *shaoshu minzu* enjoy certain rights of regional autonomy in recognition of their equality. I do not mean that all the minority policies that have been implemented under that constitutional regime were justified. On the contrary, the reconstruction of their supporting rationale enables—and to a certain extent encourages—the critical assessment of past and current minority policies by showing that their legitimacy depends on their expressing a constitutionally required commitment to *minzu* equality.

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Notes

1 The distinction drawn here between Western and Chinese scholars is based on their academic backgrounds and methodological commitments, not on their nationality or ethnic affiliation. Western scholars are Western-trained academics who embrace the Western methodology of the social sciences. In contrast, Chinese scholars are Chinese-trained social scientists who use dialectical materialism as methodological framework.

2 For brevity's sake, I focus in this section on the works of Liu (2010, 2004) and Leibold (2007), which I consider representative of a broader historiographical trend.

3 For instances of realist interpretation, see Connor (1984, 91), Dreyer (1970, 508), (Gladney 1991, 87), Kaup (2000, 19), Leibold (2007, 97), Liu (2010, 121), and Mullaney (2010, 27). For a view more congruent with my own, insofar as it recognizes in the unitary multinational state "a

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rationalization" of the normative aspirations contained in "the Party's Marxist vision of human society," see Han (2013, 33).

4 Note that one can remain committed to a realist conception of political rationality and acknowledge, nevertheless, the importance of normative ideas in the *ex post facto* legitimation of minority policies. In this case, analyzing the normative work carried out by the CCP during the Yan'an period remains essential to explain the long-term stability of the unitary multinational state.

5 In official documents issued by the Chinese government, the terms *minzu* and *shaoshu minzu* are translated as "nationality" and "minority nationality," respectively. This translation is partly misleading, however, insofar as *minzu*-hood does not perfectly align with the Marxist-Leninist notion of nationality. As the remainder of this article shows, the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationality grounds the special collective rights of minorities in the sharing of a common material fate (Stalin 1953a, 303–307), whereas the Chinese theory of *minzu*-hood grounds them in their common capacity of resistance to alienation. To avoid losing sight of this crucial difference, the terms *minzu* and *shaoshu minzu* are preferred to their official English translations throughout.

6 For a detailed analysis of the evolution of the concept of Chinese nation from the 1870s to the 1930s, see Hao (2016, 39–45).

7 Note that the historical accuracy of Mao's account is not at stake here, since our purpose is only to reconstruct the reasoning which, on the basis of this account, led the CCP to change position on the question of national self-determination.

8 Several *shaoshu minzu* provided the Red Army with recruits during the Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War. Among those whose contribution amounts to thousands, the most commonly cited are the Zhuang (Kaup 2000), Yi, Bai, Yao, and Miao (Liebold 2007, 95).

9 I refer here to what Marx and Engels call the "species-essence" (*Gattungswesen*) of human beings (Marx 1988 [1844], 77–84).

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