

A Federal Republic of China: The Road Not Taken

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Abstract

This paper explores the position of the Chinese Communist Party on federalism and ethnic self-government from 1922 to the present in historical and comparative perspectives. Its initial blueprint of a Federal Republic of China became a path not taken; however, the road to establishing a unitary multiethnic state for the future of China was neither inevitable nor accidental. This argument is developed and illustrated through comparing the pre-1949 and post-1949 periods, paying particular attention to the period of 1945-1954. The founding of a unitary state with regional autonomy while rejecting the Soviet ethnofederalism reveals Mao Zedong's own autonomy vis-à-vis Stalin. The Chinese state since 1997 has carried out a kind of federalist experiment to a lesser extent, which can be perceived as a partial resurrection of an old Party line abandoned six decades ago.

Keywords: *federation, regional autonomy, minority nationality, United Front, Chinese Communist Party*

1. Introduction

One of the most significant issues that characterized a century of modern state-building in China is the central-local relations. The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 signified a triumph of centralism over federalism after decades of political disunity during the Republican era. Throughout most of the pre-1949 period, however, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promised a right to ethno-national self-determination and a federal scheme. As one scholar aptly summarized, the CCP made "a sharp U-turn in favor of the notion of a unitary, multiethnic nation-state" while admitting "its earlier emphasis on self-determination and federation was a mistake" (Zhao, 2004: 175-76). While a plan of federalism disappeared, the tensions and conflicts remained after the turn. For instance, the implementation of the five Autonomous Regions since December 1949 was the CCP's strategy to balance the centripetal and the centrifugal political

forces. However, unconvinced non-Han cadres questioned the validity of ethnic regional autonomy over a federated state. The CCP leaders accordingly had to defend their position as to why the PRC decided not to adopt a Soviet-style federal system (Li, 1980 [1961], 1987: 541-65; Zhou, 1989 [1957]). Such top-down persuasion did not prevent native populations especially in Tibet and Xinjiang from mobilizing political protests, armed revolts, mass migration and terrorist acts. Perhaps there remain some of the painful costs consequentially for not taking the road to a Federal Republic of China. What are the benefits of it then?

The sharp contrast between the survival of the PRC and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and to some degree Ethiopia in line with ethnicity leads to a sociological question: Does a federation as a decentralized political system contribute to state fragmentation in a multiethnic state? When the foundations of the Soviet Union began to unravel during the *glasnost* era, the nationalist movements sprang up to take the lead. It was therefore a systemic collapse together with strong national movements in the federal state that explained the difference from China (Li, 2002; Duara, 2011: 294). A number of Sovietologists have also suggested that the rise of ethnic nationalism during the Gorbachev era was in some way the unintended consequence of the Soviet system of ethno-federal institutions and arrangements that consolidated segmented regionalism (Beissinger, 2002; Burgess, 2009). In that sense, the CCP's shift to regional autonomy would have inhibited the PRC's territorial disintegration. Nonetheless, it would be not feasible to measure precisely to what extent the CCP's 1949 resolution was decisive. There is no definite answer for such a counterfactual condition as what would have occurred if the CCP affirmed its original plan of a Federal Republic of China or a Federal Democratic Republic of China. This paper seeks to provide only a partial explanation.

Scholars have confirmed that most ethnic policies of the PRC in its early years were theoretically modelled based on the writings of Lenin and Stalin and institutionally the Soviet Union system (Schwarz, 1973, 1979; Ma, 2007). To my knowledge, however, comparatively little emphasis has been made to differentiate the PRC from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on the implementation of autonomy for minority nationalities. Until the undoing of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, scholars in both China and overseas largely ignored it. This lack of attention may be partly based on a teleological interpretation of the development of the Maoist party-state.

I here argue that a teleological view, which naturalizes the blueprint of the PRC's line of regional autonomy as being already laid out in Mao Zedong's pre-1949 works such as *On New Democracy* and *On Coalition Government*, fails to explain reality. Howland (2011), for example, explored Mao's thesis of new democracy relating to the notion of territorial sovereignty and the

application of ethnic policy of the PRC based on Althusserian structural Marxism. Such an approach, which assumes a smooth relationship between Mao's pre-1949 and post-1949 positions, engenders some serious issues. For instance, as will be discussed in detail, the original version of Mao's 1945 *On Coalition Government* envisioned a new Chinese government as "a Federation of Democratic Republic of China" and "a federal state." His proposal had been confirmed in numerous occasions until the eve of the establishment of the PRC. The evidence including the term federation 聯邦 in the internal party document can be traced as late as August 22, 1949. Mao eventually determined to expunge it within the next two weeks. All phrases on federation thereafter became politically incorrect so that they were *cleaned* in the post-1949 publications notably the *Collected Works of Mao*. This omission was intentional for the purpose of constructing a teleological master narrative for the modern Chinese state-making project. Despite the popular generalization about the pattern of Chinese history conceiving political unity as ideal, normal and inevitable, the road to establishing a unitary state was neither ineluctable nor merely contingent. It was rather path-dependent.

As the CCP has recently published various compiled volumes of its archival documents, several mainland scholars have begun to revisit the CCP's positions towards a federal state (Zhou, 2002; Song, 2008; Chen, 2009, 2013; Wen and Wang, 2010; Wang, 2013). After the 1997 change of sovereignty, scholars in Hong Kong also examined both the history of the federalist movements and the contemporary revival of interest in federalism (Lam, 2006). My purpose here is not to paraphrase their works but to construe the CCP's position on federalism and ethnic self-government from 1922 to the present in historical and comparative perspectives. There are two interconnected issues: the transition from federal to unitary state and that from endorsement to denial of self-determination. This paper mainly focusses on the former. Several questions will be discussed. First, what was the CCP's position until 1949? When did the CCP leaders abandon the Soviet model of ethnofederalism, and why? What was the peculiarity of Chinese model in comparison to that of Soviet federal system? Finally, what were the consequences and implications of China's path to regional autonomy?

2. The CCP's Adoption of the USSR Model

The Marxist theory of nationalism was formulated to solve the question of autonomy for nationalities. The Austro-Marxists such as Otto Bauer and Karl Renner rendered one of the first Marxist theories of ethnicity. They argued that ethnic minorities like the Jews in the Hapsburg Empire should be conferred a right to cultural autonomy because a nation was essentially a community of characters and cultures. Joseph Stalin blamed their notion of national-

cultural autonomy not just as subjective and super-structural, but as perilous since it was a masked form of nationalism encased in socialist armour. His alternative was to practice regional autonomy on the grounds of four objective constituents of a nation – a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture (Stalin, 1953 [1913]: 307). Stalin further argued that local autonomy was acceptable for the Transcaucasus because it would help the backward groups there to break the shell of small-nation insularity. But national-cultural autonomy would lead in the opposite direction, locking up those nations in their old shells.

Several multiethnic communist regimes including the PRC adopted this Stalinist perspective of regional autonomy; however, their concrete programs were diverse. The USSR and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia adopted a federal system. Yet it should be noted that both Lenin and Stalin had originally advocated a unitary state with regional autonomy for non-Russian regions while opposing federalism before June 1917 (Martin, 2001: 13). The Union, conceived as a transitional form toward a complete unitary state, was an outcome of pragmatic concession by the Bolshevik Party (Burgess, 2009: 26-9).

The CCP adopted only selectively the programs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) where the federal principle did not come into effect. The resolution made in 1949 was to create a unitary republic on the principle of regional autonomy for minorities without establishing an administrative unit tantamount to Union Republic. The PRC instead institutionalized autonomous regions, autonomous prefectures, and autonomous counties, which structurally resembled autonomous republics (*avtonomnaya respublika*), autonomous regions (*avtonomnye oblasti*), and autonomous districts (*avtonomnye okrugi*) of the USSR (see Lai, 2010). In 1957, Zhou Enlai 周恩來 raised a question on this issue, “Why, in China, did we choose the system of autonomous areas, rather than the system of autonomous republics?” He answered, “The differences do not lie in the presence or absence of self-government. ... The differences lie in the way administrative lines are drawn in the two countries and in the particular rights and powers delegated to the autonomous areas. These differences are attributable partly to differences in the historical backgrounds of the two countries” (Zhou, 1989 [1957]: 259-60).

In retrospect, the establishment of the USSR in December 1922 evidently influenced early leaders of the CCP who envisioned a Federal Republic of China. The CCP’s pre-1949 position, however, could not be entirely attributed to the Soviet Union experiences. China’s domestic situation during the Republican period also needed to be considered. The idea of confederacy or a union of autonomous provinces was proposed by various groups including regional warlords who sought to keep their autonomy in relation to the dysfunctional central government (see “Federal Scheme”, 1925; Duara, 1995:

177-204, 2011; Hu, 2011). Similarly, Dr. Sun Yat-sen early in his career advocated what he called federalism, although his preferred model was a modified form of centralism rather than a variant of federalism (Fitzgerald, 1994: 55n61). Under such historical conditions, the CCP endorsed both the right to national self-determination and the federal scheme until 1949, albeit with some revisions toward a more centralized state (Zhao, 2004: 173-75; Song, 2008; Wu, 2009: 92-7; Wen and Wang, 2010). In the following sections, I divide the history of the CCP's first three decades into three phases.

2.1. First Phase: 1921-1936

The Manifesto of the CCP's Second National Representative Meeting in July 1922 was possibly the earliest example indicating the party line on the form of governmental organization – the three-stage strategy towards a *Zhonghua lianbang gongheguo* 中華聯邦共和國 (Federal Republic of China). It read: “The united China proper including three eastern provinces [of Manchuria] will become a genuine democratic republic; three areas of Mongolia, Tibet, and Hui-Xinjiang shall carry out self-rule and become a democratic autonomous government; the United China Proper, Mongolia, Tibet, Hui-Xinjiang shall construct a Federal Republic of China employing the system of free federation” (*Minzu wenti*, 1991: 18; see *ibid.*, 24). This statement has two principal foci. First, the emphasis on constructing ‘united China proper’ 統一中國本部 was an effort to eradicate provincialism and militarism. Second, the separation of interior and exterior was to recognize the differences between Han and non-Han peoples with regard to their history, language, culture and economy. Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 avidly argued these points through his articles published in the CCP Central Committee's journal, *Xiangdao* 嚮導 (The Guide Weekly).

Early leadership of the CCP in the 1920s had consistently favoured the adoption of Soviet-style federation, while opposing the *liansheng zizhi* 聯省自治 (federal self-government) movement that would ruin the territorial integrity of China proper (see Wen and Wang, 2010). Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 in his essay, “Leninism and China's National Revolution”, for example, lauded the Soviet Union in which the formerly oppressed nationalities such as Ukrainian, Belorussian, Armenian, Georgian and Uzbek had their own Union Republic. He then emphasized the “complete right to self-determination” and suggested that the CCP should learn from the Soviet Union example concerning an organized doctrine of a revolutionary government in China having a solid foundation of “federal republic for every nationality” 各族的聯邦共和國 (Qu, 1991 [1926]).

The Constitution of the Soviet Republic of China of 1931 stipulated the right to national self-determination. As promulgated in Article 14, the Soviet

government of China recognizes the right to self-determination of the national minorities in China, their right of complete separation from China, and of the formation of an independent state for each national minority. All Mongolians, Tibetans, Miao, Yao, Koreans and others living in the territory of China shall enjoy the full right to self-determination, i.e., they may either join the Union of Chinese Soviets or secede from it and form their own state as they may prefer (*Minzu wenti*, 1991: 165-66). This CCP line favouring Soviet-style federalism and even affirming the unconditional right to secessionist self-determination continued during the pre-Yan'an years (*Minzu wenti*, 1991: 177-80, 278-82). In his interview with Edgar Snow in July 1936, Mao said, "The Outer Mongolian republic will automatically become a part of the Chinese federation, at its own will. The Mohammedan and Tibetan peoples, likewise, will form autonomous republics attached to the China federation" after the victory of the revolution (Snow, 1968: 444; *Minzu wenti*, 1991: 595).

2.2. Second Phase: 1937-1945

The CCP during the Second Sino-Japanese War period gradually moved from its earlier emphasis on national self-determination 自決 and self-independence 獨立自主 to forming self-government in autonomous areas (Zhou, 2002). The rationale for this adjustment was that returning the management of currently unstable frontier to its indigenous people would be dangerous for both Han and minority nationalities, given the insufficient level of local self-defense struggling against the Japanese, Kuomintang and warlord forces. Accordingly, as an editorial at *Jiefang ribao* 解放日報 (The Liberation Daily) in June 1941 claimed, the only correct nationality policy to unite China's various nationalities was to "implement equal rights of Mongol and Hui nationalities with Han nationality in politics, economy and culture, and establish the Mongol and Hui nationalities autonomous region on the basis of the principle of the equality of nationalities" (*Minzu wenti*, 1991: 681-82; see Li, 1986: 451-71, 1987: 121-32). This was the first time for the CCP to set forth the system of autonomous regions.

Yet still, the idea of federation did not disappear. In April 1945, Mao in his seminal work, *On Coalition Government* 論聯合政府, explicitly confirmed both a federalized central government and the right to national self-determination. He regarded the question of federation as part of the formation of the state modelled on his principle of New Democracy. He argued in the General Programme, "All nationalities within China proper, on the basis of voluntary and democratic principles, should be able to organize a Federation of Democratic Republic of China 中華民主共和國聯邦, which then becomes a foundation for forging a central federal government" (Mao, 1948 [1945]: 313). To precisely plan for improving the condition of non-Han peoples,

Mao promised, “[We Communists] allow all minority nationalities to enjoy the right to national self-determination and the right to establish a federal state 聯邦國家 with Han peoples, provided they are willing” (Mao, 1948 [1945]: 320). As will be explained, Mao’s proposal of fabricating a Federal Democratic Republic turned out to be an *ad hoc* scheme under the principle of the United Front.

2.3. Third Phase: 1945-1949

After the end of the Second World War, the CCP’s minority nationality policy increasingly focussed on a centralized control while Mao’s outline in 1945 remained unchanged. This situation augmented the inner contradiction between the actual programs and the Maoist doctrine of self-determination and federation. The CCP steadily emphasized the national self-governance, while silencing the slogan of independent self-determination.

One of the impending issues, as the Japanese control over the borderland regions ended, was to consolidate the CCP rule particularly in Inner Mongolia. There was an apparent irredentist Pan-Mongolian movement demanding national self-determination among Inner Mongolian revolutionaries who hoped to be independent from China first and then join Outer Mongolia. In late 1945, they not only tried to persuade Chinese Communists who immediately opposed their plan, but also sent representatives to Outer Mongolia who met Khorloogiin Choibalsang. The responses from the CCP and Choibalsang were essentially similar: Yan’an could help Inner Mongolian nationalist revolutionaries (*Minzu wenti*, 1991: 1002). Hence, in March 1946, the CCP Central Committee, according to its directive, decided that the forthcoming Inner Mongolian self-government would not serve as an independent government but belong to China as its autonomous region (Zhonggong zhongyang, 1991 [1946]). Despite the debates over the territorial scope and the degree of autonomy of a new Mongolian polity, this point was repeatedly underscored as seen through the decree in March 1947 (Zhonggong zhongyang, 1991 [1947]). Several weeks later, the Inner Mongolian Self-government 內蒙古自治政府 was established on May 1, which later became the first Autonomous Region of the PRC on December 1949 (Wu, 2009: 118-19). However, this transformation was not predetermined at the time.

There were two competing perspectives on the future administrative status of non-Han self-government: high-level autonomy within a federal democratic republic of China and regional autonomy within a unitary state. The CCP’s nationwide propaganda of the ‘Chinese federation’ was explicitly articulated in the Manifesto of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, published in *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 (The People’s Daily) on October 10, 1947. Its Article Seven originally stated that “Recognize the right to equality and autonomy

of the minority nationalities within the borders of China and the freedom to join the Chinese federation at their own will 及自由加入中國聯邦” (Chen, 2009: 15-6). After 1949, nine Chinese characters in this sentence were omitted (Mao, 1961 [1947]: 150).

The idea of federation indeed persisted until as late as mid-1949 especially among the pro-USSR factions such as Gao Gang 高崗, the CCP leader in Manchuria. In August 1948, he spoke to the cadres of Inner Mongolia including Ulanfu, “After nationwide liberation, ... the Inner Mongolian Self-government shall be a federative state which comprises an integral component of our national northern border”, citing the phrase from Mao’s *On Coalition Government* mentioned earlier (Gao, 1991 [1948]; see Chen, 2009: 16). Furthermore, it is possible to infer that the local authority in Inner Mongolia, Manchuria and Xinjiang, having been influenced by the Soviet Union, would favour the USSR model as a state system for the new China. For example, on August 1949, the Yili 伊寧 faction in Xinjiang, headed by a Uyghur revolutionary Saifuddin Azizi who was one of the key figures of the Soviet-backed Second East Turkestan Republic (SETR), demanded the adoption of a federal government with a high degree of autonomy 高度自治 for the new Chinese republic (Wu, 2009: 97-9). Yet this proposal was declined by Zhou Enlai when the representatives of the SETR, Saifuddin and his colleagues, attended the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) 中國人民政治協商會議 in Beijing the next month.

3. Decisive Turn in 1949

In comparison to Tito’s Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the CCP’s final resolution was not a Federal Republic. This was based on the suggestion of Li Weihai 李維漢 (1896-1984) upon Mao’s urgent request. Li was appointed in September 1948 as the head of the United Front Work Department 統一戰線工作部 of the CCP Central Committee and kept this position until 1964. During the PRC’s early years, he was a chief negotiator with the Tibetan delegates on the Seventeen-point Agreement of 1951 (Chen, 2007). He was also the chairman of the State Commission of Nationalities Affairs 國家民族事務委員會, functionally equivalent to the People’s Commissariat of Nationalities (Narkomnats) of the Soviet Union.

It is important to emphasize that, when organizing the CPPCC and drafting its Common Programme 共同綱領, the principle of federation was kept until late August 1949. In the first preliminary draft of the Common Programme sent exclusively to Mao by Zhou Enlai on August 22, it read: “Realize the right to self-rule for each nationality and organize a federation of China’s nationalities 中華各民族聯邦 on the basis of voluntary and

democratic principles” (Zhou, 2008 [1949]: 296). As he was preoccupied with the upcoming CPPCC, Mao was struggling to deal with this sentence built upon his own blueprint promulgated among the CCP cadres in 1945. Mao intended to solve this conundrum before responding to the Politburo so that he asked Li Weihan, possibly in late August, to investigate whether a new Chinese state should keep a federal system. While trying not to deviate from the canonical Marxist-Leninist theories on nationality, Li suggested a unitary republic because a federal state would be inadequate and impracticable to take the characteristics of the Chinese nationalities into consideration.

Li argued that autonomy in the Chinese context should assume a form different from the one in the Soviet Union. He enumerated two particular conditions incommensurable with the Soviet Union (Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi, 2011: 12). First, while non-Russians comprised about 47 per cent of total population of the USSR, non-Han nationalities in China only accounted for six per cent. Further, their territorial boundaries could not be delineated in most cases because China’s minorities were either widely scattered nationwide or lived inside tiny ethnic enclaves integrated into larger ethnically mixed communities. Such spatial settings facilitated a long history of reciprocal acculturation and mutual influence – the Han people assimilated others and were assimilated by them. In contrast, many of the nationalities in Russia in the days of the October Revolution were geographically separated, each living in its own area. Second, the Marxist-Leninist theory in essence advocated a unitary state system with local self-rule and regional autonomy for nationalities. A federal system could be considered only under exceptional sociopolitical circumstances. Romanov Russia was an imperial power with a number of colonies. Many non-Russian nationalities had already achieved *de facto* independence from Russia when the Revolution succeeded. The Bolsheviks therefore selected a federal system as a transient form before transcending into a complete unitary state in the future. China, however, was never an imperialist state and the CCP led the revolution to emancipate the Chinese people from imperialist aggressions. Moreover, China has been a united country and has not gone through national separation. Thus, a new China should not implement a federal system.

Mao endorsed Li Weihan’s argument and subsequently dropped two phrases of “national self-determination” 民族自決 and “organize a federation of China’s nationalities” 助成中華各民族聯邦 in the revised draft of the Common Programme completed on September 5. Zhou Enlai reported this significant decision at the preliminary meeting for the CPPCC on September 7:

On the facet of governmental institution, there is still one more issue, that is, whether or not our country will adopt a multiethnic federal system. ... Every nation possesses the right to self-determination, and this is absolutely indisputable. However, imperialists today plot to disintegrate our Tibet,

Taiwan, and even to the point of Xinjiang so, under such circumstance, we hope each nationality will need not to listen to the incitement of imperialists. For this point, our country's name should be called "The People's Republic of China", but not to be called a "federation." In today's meeting, there are quite a lot of participants, who are the nationality representatives. We especially clarify this opinion towards them and at the same time hope that all are able to agree with it. Although ours is not a federation, we instead propose regional autonomy for nationalities and implement the authority for self-rule. (Zhou, 1984 [1949]: 139-40)

Zhou Enlai's tone here was not so much conclusive as suggestive in the presence of non-Han delegates, who might not necessarily agree with his opinion of abandoning a federal autonomy scheme. His affirmation of national self-determination while rejecting a federal system was justified on the basis of the success of Inner Mongolian Self-government and multilateral conspiracy of imperial powers to disrupt China's territorial integrity and sovereignty. He mentioned the British approach toward Tibet and southern Xinjiang and the American engagement in Taiwan and Hainan, and insisted that these areas had been consistently located inside China proper.

The CPPCC passed the Common Programme on September 29, which approved Zhou's view. This connotes that the voice of federalism had been silenced during the CPPCC. Yet several questions still remain; for instance, the detailed negotiation process between Mao, who wanted to lower the administrative level of self-government, and Stalin, who would be more inclined to establish autonomous republics in such strategic buffer zones as Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. Scholars have recently rendered the conflicting interpretations on Stalin's prospect of Xinjiang particularly on the dissolution of the SETR and his attitude toward the CCP leadership (Gao, 2007; Wu, 2009: 97-102). One thing is nevertheless clear: Mao adopted regional autonomy over federal republic that marks his autonomy vis-à-vis Stalin.

Once the shift towards nationality policy was made, the PRC immediately applied a new guideline on the question of the right to self-determination as well as the enactment of regional autonomy to the newly liberated non-Han areas. Within a week after the declaration of the PRC, on October 5, the CCP Central Committee sent a telegram to the Frontline Committee of the PLA Second Field Army marching then to indigenous areas in southwest China, later to Chamdo in 1950, and eventually to Lhasa. It read:

Today we should no longer highlight the right to self-determination 自決權 for minority nationalities. This slogan was emphasized for our Party to compete for minority nationalities with the Kuomintang during our struggle against its reactionary rule and was absolutely correct at that moment. The situation today, however, has already gone through fundamental changes, as the Kuomintang's reactionary rule is basically overthrown and our Party

leads the birth of new China. We should not emphasize this slogan again with regard to domestic nationality problem to accomplish our great cause of national unification, to defeat the imperialists and their running dogs who have plotted to break up China's national unity, and to immune from foreign imperialists and domestic reactionaries among minority nationalities who have utilized this slogan to let us demote ourselves to passive position. Today we should instead emphasize fraternal cooperation and mutual unity among all nationalities in China. Hope you pay special attention to this point. (Zhonggong zhongyang, 1992 [1949])

The CCP's withdrawal of granting the right to self-determination and establishing a federal republic has substantially shaped the PRC's ethnic policies until today. Zhou Enlai in 1957 provided the comprehensive explanation to justify the CCP's rejection of federal state and adoption of regional autonomy as an alternative solution (Zhou, 1989 [1957]: 259-68). Equally important was, as will be discussed, the evolution of master narrative – the PRC's official rhetoric of including non-Han nationalities within a 'great family of the Chinese nation' 中華民族大家庭.

4. After the Transition

Regional autonomy, as defined in Article 51 of the Common Programme of the CPPCC, "shall be exercised in areas where national minorities are concentrated, and various kinds of autonomous organs for the different nationalities shall be set up according to the size of the respective populations and regions." The rights associated with regional autonomy, however, were subordinate to the central government. According to Article 52, local non-Han people's security forces ought to be in keeping with the unified military system of the state (Blaustein, 1962: 52; see *Constitution*, 1954: 41; Schwarz, 1979: 145). To that end, the State Commission of Nationalities Affairs was created on October 22, 1949 in which Li Weihai and Ulanfu became the first chairman and vice-chairman respectively. Ulanfu took the chairmanship in 1954 and assumed this position until 1970. He claimed that the fundamental nationality policy meant "regional autonomy practised within the boundaries of the People's Republic of China under the unified leadership of the Central People's Government" (Ulanfu, 1953 [1952]: 52). Regional autonomy therefore does *not* mean either independence or self-government without leadership by the government of a higher level.

In accordance with the general provisions of the Common Programme as an interim constitution, a set of more specific supplementary guidelines were ensued during the first five years of the PRC (Li, 1953 [1951], 1981: 451-61; Zhou, 1953 [1951]; Blaustein, 1962: 172-79). By October 1951, more than 80 local governments of nationalities other than Inner Mongolia were

established, ranging from township-level and up. There were also “more than 50,000 cadres of national minority origin who are withdrawn from production to engage in full-time work among the national minorities in various parts of the country” (Zhou, 1953 [1951]: 23). By the end of 1953, health teams had established over 300 clinics and 38 hospitals for minorities, and more than 2,700 minority members had received some medical training (Schwarz, 1971: 87-8). As an expert on the PRC’s ethnopolitical enterprise evaluated that “in general the Communist tried their best during most of the 1950s to improve the life of most minorities and that in several instances they may have actually improved” (Schwarz, 1979: 147). Although it was still questionable to what extent the overall condition of non-Han peoples was actually ameliorated, the PRC would feel an urge to exercise compensatory preferential programs at the expense of federal autonomy.

This short phase from 1949 to 1954, prior to the promulgation of the first PRC Constitution, was the last moment of holding remnants of a federal autonomy scheme, while fiercely suppressing separatist movements, one notably led by the Kazakh leader Osman Batur who was captured and executed in Urumqi on April 1951. The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region under Ulanfu and the Tibet government under the Dalai Lama had a parallel relation with six supra-provincial *daxingzhengqu* 大行政區 (macro military-administrative regions), which were abolished in 1954. Xinjiang, in contrast, was classified as a provincial-level unit mainly due to the history of Xinjiang Province since 1884. Such a decision frustrated non-Han leaders particularly the remaining figures of the former SETR (the Yili group led by Saifuddin). They proposed alternative plans: upgrading its administrative status tantamount to that of Inner Mongolia and Tibet and even changing the PRC’s regional autonomy to the Soviet-style *jiameng gongheguo* 加盟共和國 (union republic) or *zizhi gongheguo* 自治共和國 (autonomous republic) (Gao, 2007; Wu, 2009: 97-102). One of the CCP’s strategies to mitigate local dissents was to propagandize and educate the official line regarding the policy of nationalities. From 1951 to 1954, the central government invited over 6,500 minorities representatives to visit Beijing (Zhao, 2004: 178).

The final version of the PRC’s official statements was manifested in the Constitution of 1954 where the administrative, financial, legal and military affairs of local governments in non-Han areas were subordinated by the unified national regulations of the central government (*Constitution*, 1954: 5, 9-10, 40-2). Yet the complete provincialization of China’s territory was accomplished only in 1965 upon the establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region as a provincial-level unit. China’s nation-building project, articulated in the PRC’s official mantra that China is a single multinational state (*Constitution*, 1954: 9), has in essence been a long path towards provincializing its borderland.

Meanwhile it is worth to emphasize the existence of a subtle chasm inside the Chinese party-state. Unlike the PRC Constitution, the Constitutions of the CCP “not only fail to mention any rights and privileges of its minority members; they declare emphatically that the Party has *no place* for regional autonomy” (Schwarz, 1979: 145; italics added). The latest edition, revised and adopted in October 2017, still does not even mention the term “regional autonomy” in any of the 55 articles. This term was stated only once in the General Program. Thus, the political and administrative rights regarding regional autonomy stipulated in the PRC Constitution need to be interpreted with caution since the government is eventually subordinated by the CCP. As will be discussed next, the CCP also has no place for national self-determination.

The perennial political turbulence in Tibet markedly in 1959 (Heberer, 1989: 118-26; Wang, 2002) possibly led the CCP leaders to set a more concrete party line on the relations of national self-determination to local nationalism 地方民族主義. This was expressed in Li Weihang’s speech in September 1961 at the cadre meeting in Xinjiang in the midst of escalation of Sino-Soviet split and mass movement of non-Han peoples largely Kazakhs who crossed the national border (Schwarz, 1973: 205). Proclaiming the CCP’s nationality policy as the best application of “universal truth of Marxist-Leninist theory”, he regarded the right to national self-determination as neither universal nor absolute but merely conditional and circumstantial depending on the concrete historical condition. He admitted that the demand for national self-determination and separation was absolutely necessary and justifiable for struggling against foreign imperialism. He claimed, however, that such laudatory acknowledgement of the right to self-determination in Marxist-Leninist history was not theory-driven but should be understood through the historical context of the Bolshevik revolutionary strategy. He insisted, “Thus, Marx-Leninism always does not let national self-determination [unconditionally] reach up to the right of secession” (Li, 1980 [1961]: 13).

In 1962, Li Weihang further justified the CCP’s withdrawal from the right to national independence for China’s minority nationalities referring to Lenin’s writings on national self-determination. He blamed the Manchukuo regime, the Mengjiang United Autonomous Government 蒙疆聯合自治政府 under Prince De, Pan-Turkism, Taiwan independence as reactionary acts plotted by old and new imperialist powers. Thus, “national self-determination” was no more than a slogan of domestic and foreign reactionaries – that is, imperialists and their running dogs (Li, 1987: 549-50).

From Li’s argument, it is feasible to make sense of the previous discussion of the CCP’s exclusion of regional autonomy and national self-determination in its constitutions. Theory as being categorical is one thing, praxis as being hypothetical is another: there is “the question of the minority

nationalities; here we have elements of commonality and elements of particularity”, as Mao (1986 [1954]: 457) separated them. This demarcation creates an understated but profound chasm between the CCP and the PRC. The CCP’s position on national self-determination also reveals a critical departure not just from Western communism in the USSR and Yugoslavia but also, to some degree, from other Third World communist nations including China’s neighbouring North Korea and Vietnam. It instead reflects early Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg, who regarded national separatism as “the Trojan horse” sent by Woodrow Wilson and Leon Trotsky (Luxemburg, 1976 [1918]).

The CCP’s adherence to universal Marxist theory disregarding contextual particularity had gone extreme during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Although its impact on non-Han society was open to scholarly debate, the consensus was that the Cultural Revolution severely eroded the cultural and administrative autonomy for minority (Heberer, 1989: 23-9; Wang, 2002: 99). With respect to the cultural-linguistic policy, only Han Chinese was to be spoken at meetings, and it was often a misdemeanor to use one’s native language (Zhou, 2003: 72-7). At the administrative level, minority cadres were not only depicted as culturally inferior and sinister pullers of the strings of the tribal chieftains but, in many cases, they were also replaced by Han cadres. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, the Revolutionary Committee in Tibet – the highest political body of the region – had a Han chairman and only four Tibetans out of thirteen vice chairs. In 1973, Tibetans consisted of only 35.2 per cent of Party Committee members; in 1975, they accounted for a mere 23 per cent of leading cadres at the district level (Wang, 2002: 99). Another illustration of the diminishing consideration to non-Han groups was a contrast between the state constitution of 1954 and the one drafted in 1970: the former devoted eight articles and a section of its preamble to minorities, whereas the latter exhibited only one (Schwarz, 1973: 205).

At the same time, top leaders of the nationalities affairs including Li Weihan and Ulanfu were purged by leftist leaders. The regular function of the United Front Work Department was suspended until June 1973. Li was later rehabilitated and became the Vice-Chairman of the fifth CPPCC in 1978 until his retirement in 1983, a year before his death. His experience during the Cultural Revolution is still barely known. His 900-page memoir, published posthumously to commemorate his 90th anniversary, only covered his life until 1964 (Li, 1986). During the early years of the Cultural Revolution, Ulanfu was charged of having made himself the ruler in an independent kingdom in Inner Mongolia and undermined the unity between the nationalities (Heberer, 1989: 27-8). He was rehabilitated in 1973 earlier than Li, and was later appointed as the head of the United Front Work Department from 1976 to 1982. The career path of Li Weihan and Ulanfu corresponded to the course of state-building and nation-building of the PRC.

5. Great Bifurcation

A comparative and historical perspective is necessary to better comprehend the impact and implication of the resolution of the Chinese party-state on the nationality question. In this section, I elaborate on the sequential mechanism after the initial divergence between a federal state (USSR) and a unitary state (PRC).

Admittedly, the USSR and the PRC are isomorphic in many ways. The PRC adopted major policies of the USSR such as the ethnic identification project (Heberer, 1989: 30-9; Mullaney, 2010), state-controlled voluntary migration or deportation to the complexes of corrective labour camp (gulag) in the frontier regions (Seymour and Anderson, 1998; Gao, 2007), and preferential treatment toward minority groups (Martin, 2001; Zhao, 2004: 194-98). In addition, both countries became a *nationless* socialist state (see Fitzgerald, 1995; Suny, 1995) that intended to forge the communal ties among their multiethnic citizenry. “National in form, socialist in essence” remained the guiding principle of Soviet nationality policies. It was also heralded in Mao’s China. To be more national in form, Han-sounding places were renamed Ulan Hot (meaning Red Town) and Uyghur-sounding Urumqi. China’s policy of nationalities in principle consisted of the use of native languages in government meetings and court proceedings, as well as the preservation of native traditions, customs and religious belief (Schwarz, 1971: 17; Zhou, 2003). To be more socialist in essence, on the other hand, the PRC leaders like Deng Xiaoping proposed the mass implementation of socialist education in “all minority areas and among all minority populations where the socialist transformation of the ownership of means of production has basically been completed” (Teng, 1957). Their argument was based on the CCP’s own assessment at the Eighth National People’s Congress in September 1956 that all non-Han regions except Tibet were ready for a socialist transformation (Zhao, 2004: 189). Yet despite these similarities, the critical difference between the USSR and the PRC should not be neglected.

The former Soviet Union, conceived as a large *communal apartment* (Slezkine, 1994) in which national state units – 15 union republics and many more autonomous republics – occupied separate rooms, put strikingly little effort to build a ‘Soviet Nation’ while ironically promoting ethnic particularism (Suny, 1995: 190). As an illustration, unlike the census in Yugoslavia allowing designation of a category “Yugoslav”, Soviet censuses did not provide a “Soviet” nationality (Anderson and Silver, 1989: 652). As a renowned Sovietologist perceptively pointed out, the unintended consequence of Soviet policy was that “an antinationalist state helped create nations within it” (Suny, 2001: 895). Recent studies, emphasizing the constructed aspect of nations, have also contended a popular misconception towards Soviet ethnic

policies labelled as “the nation killers” and alternatively suggested that the Soviets “created nations at least as much as they destroyed them” (Weitz, 2002: 8-9; see Martin, 2001). In the Soviet Republics, the CPSU actively built up the nationality ties. The making of Uzbekistan where there was no sense of nationality earlier could be an example (Duara, 2011: 294). The outcome of this territorialization of nationality was that titular nationalities in union republics became more consolidated demographically, better positioned in the administrative and intelligentsia apparatus, and more vocal in their national idiom.

The PRC, on the other hand, has been imagined as *fraternal family* of China’s nationalities — “All nationalities of our country are united in one great family of free and equal nations” (*Constitution*, 1954: 5). This inalienable unity among all nationalities, or what I would call “imagined commonalities” (Lee, 2013), has become stronger and more pronounced, as the importance of canonical Marxist ideology has dwindled in the post-Mao era. As an example, the official depiction of Tibetans as ‘brothers’ of Han assumes the indivisible blood relationships between the two through highlighting interethnic exchanges and even racial resemblances. This kinship rhetoric dates at least back to 1949 when the editorial of the *New China News Agency* 新華社 on September 2 wrote that “Tibet is China’s territory and Tibetans join the great family of China’s nationalities since there has been a long history of brotherly relations among Han and other nationalities within Chinese territory” (*Minzu wenti*, 1991: 1262). It is not mere *topoi* on non-Han peoples but the legal statement of China’s territorial sovereignty. In the 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet, the most significant Point One read: “The Tibetan people shall unite and drive out imperialist aggressive forces from Tibet; the Tibetan people shall return to the family of the Motherland the People’s Republic of China” (Chen, 2007).

Such primordial and inclusive self-image of China is distinctive from the primordial but exclusive concept of ethnicity and nation in most post-imperial and post-colonial national states. From pre-Qin times to the present day, there is a historical continuity and persistence in the making of a primordial dimension of nationhood. In the past, as head of the patrimonial state that extended and transcended the patriarchal family, the Son of Heaven portrayed himself to be the merciful father of the state. Currently, the leaders of the giant family of the Chinese nation are the CCP leaders, despite a conventional representation of the Han as the core ethnicity. Reconfiguring an old kinship metaphor in post-Qing China can be distinctive from the ethnic logic of nation-building in post-Ottoman, post-Habsburg, and post-USSR societies in the course of empire-to-nation transformation.

The legacy of patrimonial state is not restricted to the persistence of familial discourse of China but also evident in the emphasis of unified

state in China's *longue durée*. The CCP eventually selected the model of one unitary republic over a federal state on the basis of the heritage of the unified and centralized empire from the Qin-Han period much longer than the Russian state (Li, 1981: 673, 1987: 559). More specifically, one of the most significant legacies of the Qing dynasty in the post-imperial state-making and nation-building is the formation of a Greater China including Mongolia, Manchuria, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Qinghai, and Tibet. This roughly corresponds to the contemporary Chinese geo-body, despite the fourteen per cent loss in territory and a two per cent loss in population (Esherick, 2006).

Moreover, the lesson from the split of the Soviet Union (Li, 2018) and Yugoslavia would bolster the current system of regional autonomy within the inner frontier of mainland China. Chinese experts on nation and nationalism studies, in their comparative studies of the PRC and USSR, emphasized both the correctness of the CCP's decision regarding ethnic issues and the mistake of the Soviet leadership after Lenin (Guo, 1997). Here, Li Weihai's theoretical justification of regional autonomy has been undoubtedly inherited. To reiterate, the CCP's United Front line as summarized by Li Weihai conceived federal system as nothing but an interim stage prior to arriving at the unitary state system. From this perspective, the former Soviet Union dismantled due to mistakenly perpetuating the provisional political system. A telling example of tentative high autonomy is the tragic breakdown of the pseudo-federal relationship between Beijing and Tibet formalized through the 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement in eight years. An even more durable one, a high degree of autonomy given to Hong Kong, is also tentative for at least 50 years since reunification in 1997.

6. Conclusions and Prospects

A century of post-imperial transition in China is a history of configuring and reconfiguring relations between centre and periphery. The CCP's original blueprint of a Federal Republic of China became the path not taken. In retrospect, this scheme as part of the United Front strategy could be evaluated as an expedient measure to appeal to non-Han peoples in the Chinese *limes*. In prospect, the *de facto* federal system has been and will be employed to be a pragmatic solution for the PRC's revanchist goals to unify the greater Chinese ecumene.

I have illustrated that the top-down model of state-led nationalism in China has been agglomerating, nationalizing, and, above all, provincializing processes. I have also traced the CCP's final decision of shifting from federal to unitary state in 1949, the resolution of which resonates to Max Weber's 'switchman' metaphor for decisively shaping the path of history. There was another profound transition concerning the view of national self-determination

– Li Wei-han’s outright rejection of the right to self-determination in 1961, for example, exemplifies the shift from the CCP’s moderate stance until September 1949. Nevertheless, the nation building of the PRC was not simple one-way homogenizing process, taking into consideration the transition from nationalizing by force in the late-Mao period to nationalizing by persuasion in the Post-Mao era.

Meanwhile the debates over federalism with high autonomy are ongoing. The absence of federal autonomy has been a major criticism from overseas scholars and activists who blame the PRC’s treatments toward its peripheral ethnicities as “cultural genocide”, although this is a problematic term to illustrate reality (Sautman, 2006). Further, the Dalai Lama is not seeking independence but genuine self-rule as the mutually equitable solution for both Tibet and China, consulting the quasi-federal model of ‘one country, two systems’ (see Sautman and Lo, 1995). Last but not least, Hong Kong-based dissidents such as Zhou Jingwen (1947) and Yan Jiaqi (1992), the former director of the Institute of Political Studies at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, proposed a Western-style federated state as a political alternative to rescue China. So far, however, the voice for federalism during the post-Tiananmen period has not created much influence even among the dissident communities in the West (Lam, 2006: 88-91).

More importantly, a federal plan has not been completely abandoned within mainland China either, as the PRC is to some extent revisiting this century-old idea. In the last few decades, the PRC’s position reconfigured in two directions: the rise of what Zheng Yongnian (2006) aptly calls “*de facto* federalism” and the *de jure* establishment of ‘one country, two systems’ since 1997. First, as scholars have argued, the central-local relations in the post-Mao era resemble a federative model in many ways since local governments have gained a relative autonomy especially on fiscal affairs vis-à-vis central government to facilitate economic reform and regional development (Montinola, Qian and Weingast, 1995; Zheng, 2006). The evolution of market-preserving federalism with political centralization is a well-known institutionalist account for explaining China’s rapid economic growth. Second, the implementation of Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions (SAR) with a high degree of autonomy not just represents a significant move, but also reflects the PRC’s irredentist aspiration to reunite the former Qing territory considering its principle for the cross-strait relation. This kind of semi-federal edifice is, however, a weaker form of federalism limited in time, scope and space in comparison to USSR and Yugoslavia.

To conclude, the PRC today is experimenting a weaker federation, which is not only a resurrection of an old CCP line abandoned more than six decades ago but also reminder of the federative origins of the Chinese state in the pre-Qin times. The Chinese state in this respect is now reconstructing its tradition-

al statecraft of ‘one country, multiple systems’ in a more centralized manner. It strives to gain legitimacy by claiming to represent, protect and even restore China’s territorial heritage, while denouncing any secessionist movement.

Note

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