



BRILL

INNER ASIA 25 (2023) 23–38



brill.com/inas

Pluralistic Unity

The Social Life of Duoyuan yiti in China

Xiaoshi Wei

Newton International Fellow, SOAS, University of London, London, UK

wei.xiaoshi@gmail.com, xw5@soas.ac.uk

Abstract

This essay examines the term *duoyuan yiti*, ‘pluralistic unity’, in cultural and artistic contexts in China and its use in everyday speech in the form of cultural metaphors. It briefly introduces the history of this term and provides examples of its use in political speech, academic writing and grassroots communication. The article also analyses discourses, phrases and ideas that have been constructed around *duoyuan yiti*, noting their profound impact on social life in China, particularly in its ‘minority’ regions. The article seeks to fill in the gap between, on the one hand, research into the term in Chinese in line with China’s official views and, on the other hand, policy-focused critical approaches in English-language academic writing. Through examining a cluster of derivative terms and slogans, I illustrate how, in public discourse, ‘diversity’ is performed and articulated as subsidiary to ‘unity’ in contemporary China.

Keywords

pluralistic unity – Chinese nation – ethnic relations – common consciousness – Chinese academic writing – Chinese minority music research

The concept of *duoyuan yiti* (多元一体, pluralistic unity) has been popular for some time in academic circles within China to describe the formation of Chinese states throughout their long history. Recently, a number of related or derivative terms, particularly *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi* (中华民族共同体意识, the common consciousness of the Chinese nation), have become central to much scholarly discourse in modern China, framing the country’s

conception of its own image as a nation of many nations. This cluster of inter-related concepts and terms has also been central to the many tensions and conflicts that have occurred in the modern history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In this paper I will analyse different modes of framing and thinking about these terms at different stages, presenting their underlying cultural reasoning and their shaping metaphors (Tuohy 1991), while elucidating their usage within the political hierarchy, in academia and in daily life in the PRC. Today, *duoyuan yiti* needs to be analysed with an eye to its many imbricated layers of meaning and to its cultural, artistic and vernacular resonances, rarely critically discussed or reflected upon outside its use in the realm of government policy.

In 1988, the leading anthropologist Fei Xiaotong proposed a concept that he called the 'pluralistic-unitary configuration of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti geju*, 中华民族多元一体格局; Fei 2009: 109). In proposing this term, Fei differentiated between the 'self-existing' (*zizai de* 自在的) Chinese nation and the 'self-conscious' (*zijue de* 自觉的) Chinese nation, arguing that the former developed thousands of years ago, while the second came into being following contact between China and the West. Fei claimed that, in general, both domains contextualise modern concepts of the nationality groups in China, but at different levels, resulting in China having a 'pluralistic-unitary configuration'. Fei proposed the term based on his understanding of various historical conditions and admitted the complexity of the concept. He first described the term in a speech in Hong Kong in 1988, at a time when concern about cultural-political pluralism and the concept of 'opening up' was being extensively debated in China (and across the socialist world). Fei's speech was intended to reinforce the solidarity of the Chinese nationalities in line with the policies of the Chinese Communist Party at a time of particular precarity for the state. Fei outlined his conceptions of diversity and unity with sincerity, and entirely based on historical sources written in Chinese, yet lacked a more complex consideration of sources in languages other than Chinese.

This has led to a consequence: in the popular use of *duoyuan yiti*, scholars and officials often stress an essentially Han Chinese-centred idea – maintaining the importance of the country's ethnic diversity while simultaneously de-emphasising it in favour of a notion of general 'prosperity' in line with an image of a unified contemporary China. In Sue Tuohy's terms, in the modern history of PRC and beyond, 'variation and diversity [of China's regional and ethnic groups] are admitted, in fact celebrated, but within this unified Chinese culture' (Tuohy 1991: 213). At different times, CCP officials and scholars alike have employed a series of related terms, such as *gongtongti yishi* (共同体意识, the common consciousness), *wenhua xuemai* (文化血脉, cultural blood

ties), *wenhua jiyin* (文化基因, the cultural gene), or *gongyou jingshen jiayuan* (共有精神家园, the common spiritual home) of the Chinese nation, which essentially relate to the same concept of unity. As a result, the *duoyuan yiti* concept has been widely used in China's discourse concerning its borderland regions and peoples in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, as well as in what Steven Harrell (1998) calls the 'intricate ethnic mosaic of the Southwest and parts of the South'. Why is the term so popular and widely applicable? And how has it been relevant to aspects of life in contemporary China?

The essence of the idea of *duoyuan yiti* was not new when Fei introduced the term in 1988. According to Harrell (1998: 5), in the history of China, 'culturalism' served as a criterion for the construction of hierarchy and the organisation of peoples in China according to their skills in using the Chinese literary language, and thus created the literacy-based bureaucratic system. This scheme led to the inclusion of different peoples in the borderlands, including Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia and the southwest regions, within the Chinese imperial states. Such projects of inclusion have long been rooted in Chinese feudal empires, so that, as Harrell stresses, 'without the special claims made on these territories, the Chinese national [concept] is incomplete'. Inevitably, accompanying discourses have been created by central authorities to show 'itself, its people, and the world in general in just what way these territories are more than accidentally or coercively Chinese' (ibid). As for the term created by Fei, Harrell sees *duoyuan yiti* as a part of the 'cultural appeals' of China's modern inclusion project, and he claims that 'cultures of diverse origin from all over East, Southeast, and Central Asia have come together in a common Chinese culture, which will somehow transcend its origins and become something new and commonly held' (Harrell 1998: 7). However, while western scholars like Harrell have been trying to examine the term in a wider historical frame, most scholars and officials in China quickly adopted *duoyuan yiti* after 1988 in their usage as an integral axiom, a process which I will explain later in this essay.

On the national political stage in recent years, *duoyuan yiti* has rarely been used as an independent concept, theory, or policy proposal; it always appears to accompany high-level political projects as justification for certain multi-ethnic policies implemented by the CCP. Crucially, when President Hu Jintao proposed the 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) concept as a key principle of Chinese socialist society in 2004 (see Hu 2006), he also stressed the importance of building an equal (*pingdeng* 平等), unified (*tuanjie* 团结), mutually helpful (*huzhu* 互助) and harmonious (*hexie* 和谐) relationship between nationalities in China, 'representing the fundamental configuration of pluralistic unity in China' and thus representing 'the maximum benefit of the large family of Chinese nationalities' (Hu 2006). Since Xi Jinping's inauguration in

2012, the authorities have been promoting concepts such as the 'great resurgence of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴) and 'cultural confidence' (*wenhua zixin* 文化自信). In Xi's words, 'pluralistic unity is a rich legacy from our ancestors and a huge strength for our nation's continued development' (Wang 2019).¹ He went on to describe the extensive territory, rich history, splendid culture and great spirit of all Chinese nationalities as jointly explored, written about, created and nurtured by all nations of China. In both cases, these political leaders used *duoyuan yiti* to buttress political slogans or projects in official documents, sounding and reading more like declarations of a strident political objective rather than a scholarly discussion.

A recent 'inspection' of Xinjiang by Xi Jinping in July 2022 provides a striking example of *duoyuan yiti* and *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti* being used together within an overtly political context:

Our country is a unified multi-ethnic country, and the *duoyuan yiti* of the Chinese nation is a distinctive feature of our country. We have creatively combined Marxist ethnic theory with the concrete reality of China's ethnic issues, and established ethnic theory and ethnic policy with ethnic equality, ethnic unity, ethnic regional autonomy, and common prosperity and the development of all ethnic groups as the main goal. Real equality, unity and progress have been achieved under our system. Our national theories and policies are good and effective. We must adhere to the correct path of solving ethnic issues with Chinese characteristics, continuously enrich and develop the Party's ethnic theory in the new era, and advance research on fundamental issues of the Chinese nation. A China with great unity of all ethnic groups is bound to be invincible and has a bright future. Our goal of the second century of striving will surely be successfully achieved, and the great resurgence of the Chinese nation will surely come.

Chinese civilisation is broad, profound and has a long history. It is necessary to strengthen research into the history of *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti* as well as studies on the pattern of the *duoyuan yiti* of the Chinese nation, and to fully excavate and effectively use historical facts, archaeological objects and cultural relics of the exchanges between various ethnic groups in Xinjiang, and to make it clear that Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of our country and a multi-ethnic area since ancient

1 *Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti shi xian renmen liu gei women de fenghou yichan, yeshi woguo fazhan de juda youshi* (中华民族多元一体是先人们留给我们的丰厚遗产，也是我国发展的巨大优势).

times. All ethnic groups in Xinjiang are important members of the big family of the Chinese nation, connected by blood and sharing a common destiny. It is necessary to strengthen the protection and inheritance of [our] intangible cultural heritage and carry forward the excellent traditional culture of all ethnic groups. (*Renmin ribao* 2022)

Xi Jinping's speech can be seen as a revealing case where the two terms are directly used together in formal public remarks by the country's leader. Noticeably, Xi attempts to link the terms, as mutually supporting 'theories', to current prevalent political slogans and concepts.

1 Academic Usage

It is important to examine the academic use of *duoyuan yiti*, particularly the texts produced as part of anthropological and folkloric fieldwork in recent decades, since scholarship has played an important role in popularising the term. Before Fei Xiaotong, many writers in China often chose to write about the inter-ethnic mingling of cultures through the lens of 'proletarian' reasoning. Various published anthologies (*jicheng* 集成) carried a large series of publications on folktales (*minjian gushi* 民间故事), ballads (*geyao* 歌谣), proverbs (*yanyu* 谚语), folksongs (*minge* 民歌), traditional operas (*xiqu* 戏曲) and so forth from the 1950s to the 1990s. During this period, notions of the proletariat and social class were still prevalent, and concepts of pluralistic unity were often expressed along these lines, although differing in rhetoric across different times. Collections concerning the cultural heritage of minority peoples were often accompanied by texts such as the following: 'With its long history, China is a nation comprised of multi-ethnic nationalities. Many generations of many nationalities have created and passed down extremely rich folk oral literature, and this belongs to the glorious cultural treasury of spiritual assets of the Chinese nation' (YLMWJB 1986: 1).

In creating such an anthology, the purpose was said to be 'to serve the people and Socialism, and to function in the construction of socialist material and spiritual civilisation' (YLMWJB 1986: 1). In order to warn readers about what the collectors saw as often raw or unpalatable content, and to steer them towards a 'correct' socialist interpretation, the preface might also say of the folk materials it presented, and of the cultures from which they were drawn, that the collection was 'eliminating the dross, and taking its essence' (*quqi zaopo, quqi jinghua* 去其糟粕, 取其精华). The explanation for inclusion is to claim commonality between smaller ethnic groups and the Han majority. In such anthologies,

writers often conclude by musing on the importance of unity, in its different aspects, in enriching a sustainable socialist culture (Ma 2006).

Since the 1990s, *duoyuan yiti* has been heavily used in academia in research and archival projects. In contrast to the term's use in the context of governmental policy-making, scholars often analyse *duoyuan yiti* with respect to their own academic fields of study or geographic areas of interest, dismembering the phrase or experimenting with it in order to conjure up their own scholarly aphorisms. In October 2022, for example, a well-advertised online presentation by the prominent ethnomusicologist Yang Minkang, titled 'The cross-century transformation of Chinese minority music research towards the "multi-layered unitary pattern"',² was held by the China National Arts Fund as part of a series entitled 'The cultivation of backbone talents for minority music research theory.'³ Prof. Yang used the concept of a 'multi-layered unitary pattern' to elaborate on the meaning of *duoyuan yiti* for his research. Scholars based in 'minority' regions often publish articles reflecting on the relation of a regional culture to the unified whole. Yang Fen (2017) published an article in the *Journal of Qinghai Social Sciences* to justify her claim of a natural integration of Islamic and Chinese cultures within the Hui community. She uses the phrases 'diversity as accumulated in parallel' (*duoyuan bingxu* 多元并蓄) and 'unity as collaboratively performed and developed'⁴ (*yiti gongyan* 一体共演) to claim that Hui cultures in the contiguous Chinese-Tibetan regions comprise a type of 'secondary pluralistic-unitary mode' (*ci sheng duoyuan yiti* 次生多元一体). Both cases present clear examples of scholars deriving new terms based on *duoyuan yiti*.

At the same time, related terms or phrases related to ethnic issues, such as *gongtongti yishi* and the 'three inters' (*sanjiao* 三交), including 'interaction' (*jiaowang* 交往), 'interchange' (*jiaoliu* 交流) and 'intermingling' (*jiaorong* 交融), have been frequently and heavily used in academic writing in China. Since 2010, the annual number of research articles that employ the phrase *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi* has been rising dramatically, reaching its single-year-peak of 696 in 2019 (Yang 2021: 3). Similarly, the term *jiaorong*

2 *Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti shi xian renmen liu gei women de fenghou yichan, yeshi woguo fazhan de juda youshi* (中国少数民族音乐研究面向'多元分层一体格局'的跨世纪转型).

3 *Shaoshu minzu yinyue yanjiu lilun gupan rencai peiyang* (少数民族音乐研究理论骨干人才培养).

4 The Chinese term *yan* (演) can be understood as both 'performed' and 'developed' in its original context. Deploying such terms, Chinese writers (in cultural fields) usually would not go into detailed discussion of their terminology, but instead apply the terms vaguely.

appears prominently in Chinese writings, notably in Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe's influential policy paper on so-called 'second-generation *minzu* policies' (Hu & Hu 2011), which provoked major debate both domestically and internationally (Elliot 2015).

In the field of music research, scholars have recently been writing about 'music with common roots' (*tongyuan yinyue* 同源音乐). Some scholars have written about shared lyrical motifs and the similarity of folksong and instrumental melodies performed by different ethnic groups. This type of study makes sense when it provides a morphological comparison and historical accounts of dissemination. However, much of this scholarship is constrained by the need to demonstrate that the *duoyuan yiti* concept works in musical contexts. For example, the prominent Mongolian ethnomusicologist Wulanjie (2021a; 2021b) published a two-part article, 'Duoyuan yiti ethnic configuration and musical exchange between Mongolians and Han people', analysing melodies with common historical roots and contemporary cultural relevance. He concludes: 'The vast nine schools [of various cultures] flow in China, and a heavy, unified line stitches together the North and South,'⁵ a perfect example of using poetic Chinese to produce a romanticised conclusion based on *duoyuan yiti*. Wulanjie continues by noting that there are tunes of the same ancestry in Mongolian and Han folk songs, which is 'an indisputable fact'; thus, there has been 'closely exchanged music' between Mongolians and the Han Chinese throughout their long history 'under the national pattern of *duoyuan yiti*' (2021b: 83).

This concept of 'common music' has also appeared in writing on Uyghur music, focusing mainly on the pre-Islamic cultural sphere in Xinjiang. In this regard, some general discourses persist among the majority of Chinese scholars. Firstly, they argue or assume that current Uyghur traditional music is a mixture of ancient Chinese *xiyu* (western territory) music and ancient Chinese *huihe/huihu* (historical non-Islamic Uyghur) music, together with components absorbed from the Islamic world. Secondly, the argument is made that modern Uyghur music inherited the main corpus of the ancient Buddhist *Qiuci* (Kucha) Kingdom from the second century BCE to the seventh century CE (Wang 2015; Zhou 1983). Although not quite as frequent as in the Xinjiang and Inner Mongolian cases, such discourse also appears in writing about Chinese influence on the southwest minorities, such as the Miao, Buyi, Dong, Tujia, Yi and Mulao (Xu 2014). These arguments about common roots

5 *Mangmang jiupai liu zhongguo, chenchen yixian chuan nanbei* (茫茫九派流中国，沉沉一线穿南北).

in music, unsurprisingly lacking ethnographic data for the parts concerning musical phenomena in the present, reinforce ‘an active role in establishing and normalising the hierarchical relationship between Han Chinese majority and ethnic minority peoples’ (Harris 2017: 36). These cases illustrate one way that scholarly theories about the authenticity and legitimacy of ‘minority’ people’s music have ‘been fixed in advance by the state’ (Harris 2005: 393).

Recently, the central government policy, the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (*yidai yilu* 一带一路), and the political slogan, the ‘Community of Common Destiny for Mankind’ (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体), have been influential in renewing and enriching the discourse of *duoyuan yiti*. The promise of research funding through the Belt and Road Initiative has encouraged scholars and institutions in China to conduct research on topics that incorporate foreign cultures within a Chinese framework of exchange, presentation and management. To embody the principle of *duoyuan yiti*, institutions accordingly present diverse, localised transnational and transborder cultural practices as stemming from a ‘unified’ point of origin that is historically Chinese, burnishing modern China’s global reputation with a fanciful, inflated picture of its cultural influence over many centuries. Recently, many new institutions have been established to study such cultures, such as the Asian-Europe Music Research Centre at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, which opened in 2017. At its founding ceremony, Yang Yandi, the vice-president of the school, pointed out that the establishment of the Asia-Europe Music Research Centre was a contribution to music under ‘the guidance of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, in the face of the big proposition of the “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind”’. Yang Yandi (Chen Daiying 2017) continued:

As just indicated in the term ‘New Era’ used by General Secretary Xi Jinping, there are profound changes taking place in the world’s political, economic, cultural and social patterns. As a country on the ‘Belt and Road’, we are facing challenges about how to absorb Western modernity on the one hand and how to safeguard our own traditions on the other hand, while then shaping our own voice in the new world configuration. The Centre will unify colleagues from around the world to study issues of common concern, and contribute to the revival and rise of China and Chinese culture in the world.

The concerts and conferences that followed the opening of this centre aimed to represent music from the Silk Road and to reflect and strengthen scholarly discourse on China’s musical forms as found in the borderlands as part

of the Silk Road. For example, in a report about the 25th Colloquium of the International Council for Traditional Music, which was entitled 'Double Reeds of the Silk Road', Xiao Mei, director of the Asia-Europe Ritual Music Research Centre at the Shanghai Conservatory, wrote: 'The cultural exchanges along the Silk Road have led to so many splendid cultures. The *suona* that we are familiar with is the most important musical instrument of ancient *Qiuci* (Kucha) music' (Chen Hong 2018). Although never directly using the term *duoyuan yiti*, the discourse refers to borderland instruments and music as parts of a mosaic of China and the minorities, thus presenting Chinese diversity in the global Silk Road context.

A more explicit example can be seen in the 'Anthology of transnational music in the Lancang-Mekong river region' (*Lancangjiang Meigonghe liuyu kuajie minzu yinyue wenhua shilu*, 澜沧江-湄公河流域跨界民族音乐文化实录) project, led by Zhao Talimu, former president of the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing. Project members have emphasised the relevance of the 'Chinese minority' peoples to the countries along the Mekong River in south-east Asia. The concluding report confirms that the goal of this research is to 'expand the scope of Chinese minority music research and open up a road from domestic research to comprehensive research on the music culture of ethnic minorities in our country' (Zhao 2018: 9). It states:

It is possible to establish a mutual reference of domestic and foreign music cultural information, observe the inheritance and changes of homologous ethnic music in different times and spaces, as well as the motivation and direction of inheritance, thus contributing to the integration of domestic and foreign homologous ethnic traditional music and cultural information fragments ... All ethnic groups in China are participants in the formation of the history of Chinese music and it is an indisputable fact that historical documents lack records of the content of ethnic music activities [Such] cross-border mutual verification can provide new proof for the reconstruction of China's national music history. (Zhao 2018: 9)

In summary, in recent uses of *duoyuan yiti*, scholars have extracted components of the term, specifying *duoyuan* and *yiti* in their particular contexts and enriching them with Chinese expressions and poetic phraseology, as well as at times framing them within grand, national-level policy concepts which have institutionalised *duoyuan yiti* as integral to government practice, a phenomenon that can be predicted to continue in further decades.

2 Grassroots Usage

Among common people in the borderland regions, the related term *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi* is frequently used in various contexts. In Uyghur, the term (*Jongxua milliti ortaq gewdisi éngi*) has been set as the highest principle for carrying out the task known in official discourse as ‘the Five Grabs’ (*wuge zhua* 五个抓; Uyg: *bash tutush*) – education (*ma'arip*), interchange (*yughuru-lush*), development (*tereqqiyat*), regulation according to law (*qanun idare qilish*) and stability (*muqimliq*) (Raxman 2021). In ordinary usage, the term’s popularity stems in part from its resonance with other cultural metaphors present in people’s daily lives, even if those might not invoke it word for word. For example, a particularly potent image to express a notion of consolidated unity is that of pomegranate seeds, as in the standard political formulation, ‘all nationalities should hold tightly together like pomegranate seeds’.⁶

Such cultural metaphors have widespread grassroots popularity in Xinjiang, where the pomegranate serves as a local marker of ethnic identity. The Uyghur term for pomegranate, *anar*, carries significance in representing Uyghur culture in modern times, as a pomegranate is a speciality in the Central Asian diet and its juice is a common street drink in Xinjiang. In a recent Douyin (Tiktok) video posted by a well-known Uyghur vlogger who goes by the name of ‘Kashgar Thick Eyebrows’ (喀什浓眉哥), the vlogger is shown drinking with a Mongolian in Ordos, an area of Inner Mongolia. The Mongolian host says: ‘Cheers! There’s no difference between us, whether in Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia!’ The vlogger replies: ‘We are all pomegranate seeds!’ The Mongolian host then teases him: ‘You are the pomegranate seeds; I am the Gobi buckthorn juice!’ In this vlog, as in many real-life scenarios, a Xinjiang pomegranate represents many small elements tightly attached within a mother body, while the Inner Mongolian buckthorn refers to a tough, exotic plant that sticks firmly to its motherland. Similarly, in Tibet, a common analogy, ‘tea and salt’, is used to represent multi-national harmony, since it is widely found in folk literature from Tibet.⁷ These expressions are circulated at a grassroots level as something supported by official propaganda. Douyin and other social media videos which showcase cross-cultural dialogue, as in the example above, include such nods to ‘pluralistic unity’. On the one hand, the authorities consider such interactions

6 *Ge minzu yao xiang shiliu zi nayang jin jin bao zai yiqi* (各民族要像石榴籽那样紧紧抱在一起).

7 The term relates to a story of two lovers who are able to meet and be together, despite enduring conflict between their communities or peoples. The use of this phrase to illustrate pan-Chinese unity is an example of how in modern usage, people have drawn on analogies that historically had different connotations than those given to them in the current *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti* context (Robert Barnett, pers. comm., 5 November 2022).

and rhetorical framing devices ‘genuinely’ to reflect ideas of nationhood and intercultural perceptions; on the other hand, ordinary members of ‘minorities’ often simply view them as a mandatory element to be indexed and so legitimise the performance.

As in Xinjiang, *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi* has been widely used among grassroots communities and sectors in Inner Mongolia, especially in the last three years. According to Baatar (a pseudonym), a Mongolian intellectual who studied in the US and is currently based in Ordos, people there ‘had rarely heard of or used *gongtongti yishi* until three years ago, after the promotion of the “bilingual education” policy in 2020.’ Now, almost any online presentation in Inner Mongolia, such as on a social media platform like WeChat and on webpage essays, or offline presentations such as an on-stage performance, would probably have to include the phrase *gongtongti yishi*, whether or not it is relevant to the issue being discussed. Baatar described inclusion of the phrase as often ‘an indicator of anyone who is conforming to the policy’ (pers. comm., 2022). He illustrated his point with a joke:

I have a brother-in-law who found it difficult to explain the term *gongtongti yishi* to his colleagues. Then he figured out a way – he said: ‘This term is just the newest version of *Geser*.’ His logic was that in old times, *Geser*, a name of Tibetan origin, represented a transnational figure and idea, so it is like *gongtongti yishi*, emphasising cross-*minzu* unification. Then his colleagues seemed to understand the term. (Pers. comm. 2022)

Chinese-speaking people sometimes also post their ideas about *duoyuan yiti* on Internet platforms. Below is an example of a comment posted by a person who is seemingly aiming to promote Taoism:

Many people asked me: ‘Master Liang, are there any ethnic minorities among your apprentices?’ I said, ‘Yes, there are Zhuang, Tibetan, Mongolian, Tujia, Hui, and Oroqen. Does this address your question?’

They asked again: ‘How do they get along with each other? Different ethnic groups have different customs, do they not?’

For this question, I think it is very simple, no matter what nationality they belong to, those are all appearances, and the essence is ‘they are all Chinese, they are all descendants of the Yan and Huang emperors, and they should all agree with Chinese civilisation.’

We often say that the Chinese nation is pluralistically unitary. This issue looks complicated but is actually very simple ... The Chinese nation is like a luxuriant tree, full of vitality. The identity of Chinese civilisation is the foundation of the tree. Whether it is the Han nationality or other

ethnic groups, they are all branches of the tree, and ethnic minorities are also branches of the tree, sprouting from the trunk. If cut off from the [trunk of] Chinese civilisation, even if they seem to be immortal for a short period, [the minorities] will become dead branches and disappear into history after a little wind and rain.

This is what I understand as pluralistic unity, and it is also the fundamental reason why I accept apprentices from ethnic minorities. Our roots are the same – that is, Chinese civilisation. (Liang 2019)⁸

The post got more than 140 replies and is searchable on open Internet platforms. Seemingly claiming equality among different ethnic groups, the post, by using the image of a tree and its branches, provides an eloquent metaphor and form of cultural reasoning which are frequently found in Chinese writing and speaking. This eloquent style of cultural reasoning is also found in the writings of ‘minorities’ that are Chinese-influenced. Its core logic stems from ancient Chinese literature, but its usage in vernacular language gained prominence after the founding of the PRC. It is heavily used by officials in their less formal remarks, in juvenile literature, and in editorial-style writings, important in the common life of people in the modern Chinese state.

Such cases represent the use of cultural metaphor and reasoning in explaining or justifying *duoyuan yiti* and *gongtongti yishi* in various contexts. As Sue Tuohy explains in relation to a different set of cases, firstly there are ‘dominant assumptions of a continuous Chinese civilisation and of China as a unified nation of diversity combined to present the Chinese nation as a historical and cultural entity’ (Tuohy 1991: 189), presented as axiomatic and habitual among people in everyday speech. Second, this type of cultural reasoning is ‘far more pervasive than the official ideology in China’ (Tuohy 1991: 213). We can extend Tuohy’s explanations to examples in contemporary cyberspace, where such discourses are created by grassroots actors who are anonymous representatives of the ‘people’. Perhaps this is why such discourses of pluralistic unity appear so popular in grassroots contexts within China.

3 Conclusion

In contemporary China, the differences between the national and local or ethnic is sometimes problematised and questioned. People’s true feelings about such terms are often coloured by specific ethnic sentiments, sometimes leading

⁸ Due to the interface limitations of the platform, the specific date and time of the post is unavailable.

them to an ironic or negative attitude towards ideas of 'pluralistic unity', whilst nevertheless continuing to invoke the terminology in public life. However, in public discourse, 'diversity' seems to yield to 'unity' most of the time, as all the examples in this essay of applications of the *duoyuan yiti* concept seem to demonstrate.

This essay has examined the social life of *duoyuan yiti*, a term aimed at promoting unity across ethnic groups in China. Following Harrell's framing of the concept as a 'cultural appeal' for the unification of people in contemporary times, I examine *duoyuan yiti* mostly in cultural and artistic contexts, as well as in everyday speech with cultural metaphors. I consider these contexts to be the most important in present life in China. Since the state's updated campaign of 'anti-historical nihilism' (*fandui lishi xuwu zhuyi* 反对历史虚无主义) in 2021 (QZPY 2021), the unification of China's nationalities is set to remain unchallenged for some time, and the core ideas of *duoyuan yiti* and *gongtongti yishi* have been reinforced in line with the unquestionable idea of the continuity of *the* Chinese civilisation. The cases discussed above include the usage of these terms in various contexts: their use by central Party officials to direct the activity of the professional classes; the diverse scholarly uses of the term in academia; and, most importantly, their integration into the pre-existing *quotidien* cultural metaphors of regular people at the grassroots level. Originally a historical scholarly concept, *duoyuan yiti* is now politically actualised, academically integrated, and adopted, though not always sincerely, in everyday social parlance among the very minorities it seeks to occlude. Since the pandemic of 2020 and the 20th Congress of the CCP in 2022, the public sphere in China has entered a new phase, but the use and discussion of these terms, especially in the 'minority' regions, will remain. As in previous times, we can expect to see integration of the terms within new contexts and their use in fractious and ever more conflicted situations.

References

All hyperlinks included in the references for this article were current at the time of writing.

Chen Daiying (陈黛莹). 2017. *Shang yin Ya Ou yinyue yanjiu zhongxin zhengshi chengli* 上音亚欧音乐研究中心正式成立 [The Asia-Europe Music Research Centre of the Shanghai Conservatory is officially established]. Shanghai yinyue xueyuan wangzhan [上海音乐学院网站, Shanghai Conservatory Website]. 15 November. <https://www.shcmusic.edu.cn/2017/1116/c1683a35863/page.htm>.

- Chen Hong (陈宏). 2018. *Jujiao si lu yinyue wenhua: Shang yin zai ban dingji guoji xue-shu jiaoliu* 聚焦丝路音乐文化:上音再办顶级国际学术交流 [Focus on the musical culture of the silk road: the Shanghai Conservatory holds a top international symposium again]. *Qingnian bao* 青年报 [Youth Paper]. 29 November. http://www.why.com.cn/epaper/webphone/qnb/html/2018-11/29/content_75947.html.
- Elliot, M. 2015. The case of the missing indigene: debate over a 'second-generation' ethnic policy. *China Journal* 73: 186–213.
- Fei Xiaotong (费孝通). [1988] 2009. *Zhonghua minzu de duoyuan yiyi geju* 中华民族的多元一体格局 [The pluralistic-unitary configuration of the Chinese nation], in *Fei Xiaotong tong quanji di shisan juan: 1988–1991* 费孝通全集第十三卷:1988–1991 [Complete Works of Fei Xiaotong, vol. 13: 1988–1991]: 109–47. Huhehaote (Hohhot, IMAR): Neimenggu remin chubanshe 内蒙古人民出版社 [Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House].
- Harrell, S. 1998. *The Role of the Periphery in Chinese Nationalism: Is China a Nation? The View from Three Peripheries*. Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica.
- Harris, R. 2005. Wang Luobin: folk song king of the northwest or song thief? Copyright, representation, and Chinese folk songs. *Modern China* 3: 381–408.
- Harris, R. 2017. The new battleground: song-and-dance in China's Muslim borderlands. *World of Music* 6(2): 35–55.
- Hu Angang (胡鞍钢) & Hu Lianhe (胡联合). 2011. *Di er dai minzu zhengce: cujin minzu jiaorong yiti he fanrong yiti* 第二代民族政策:促进民族交融一体和繁荣一体 [Second-generation minzu policies: promoting organic ethnic blending and prosperity]. *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao* 新疆师范大学学报 [Journal of Xinjiang Normal University] 32 (5): 1–13.
- Hu Jintao (胡锦涛). 2006. *Zai quanguo tongzhan gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua* 在全国统战工作会议上的讲话 [Speech at the National United Front Work Conference]. *Zhongguo gaige xinxi ku* 中国改革信息库 [China Reform Information Base]. 10 July. <http://www.reformdata.org/2006/0710/5018.shtml>.
- Liang Xinyang (梁兴扬). 2019. *Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti de benzhi shi shenme?* 中华民族多元一体的本质是什么? [What is the essence of the pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation?]. *Zhihu* 知乎 [Know]. 29 October. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/89005529>.
- Ma Xueliang (马学良). [1991] 2006. *Chubanxu* 初版序 [Preface], in Bi Xun (ed.), *Hasake minjian wenxue gailun* 哈萨克民间文学概论 [Introducing Kazakh folk literature]: iii–vi. Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe 中央民族大学出版社 [Central Nationalities University Publishing House].
- QZPY ('Qiushi' zazhi pinglun yuan 《求是》杂志评论员). 2021. *Qizhixianming fandui lishi xuwu zhuyi* 旗帜鲜明反对历史虚无主义 [A clear stand against historical nihilism]. *Qiushi* 求是 [Seeking Truth] via Xinhuanet 新华网. 27 April. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-04/27/c_1127381069.htm.

- Raxman, A. 2021. *Dölet milletler ishliri komitétii Junghua milliti ortaq gewdisi é'ngini mustehkemleshni اساسiy liniye qilip, 'besh tutush' ni yaxshi ishlesh kéreklikini bildürdi* [The State Ethnic Affairs Commission has proposed to reinforce stabilisation of the Common Consciousness of the Chinese Nation as the main line, and urged for the 'Five Grabs']. *Xelq tori* [People's [Daily] Online]. 21 January. <http://uyghur.people.com.cn/307382/15835875.html>.
- Renmin ribao* (人民人民 [People's Daily]). 2022. *Wanzheng zhunque guanche xin shidai dang de zhi jiang fanglüe, jianshe tuanjie hexie fanrong fuyu wenming jinbu anjuleye shengtai lianghao de meihao Xinjiang* 完整准确贯彻新时代党的治疆方略·建设团结和谐繁荣富裕文明进步安居乐业生态良好的美好新疆 [Completely and accurately implement the party's governance strategy in the new era Xinjiang, and build a beautiful Xinjiang of unity, harmony, prosperity, civilisation and progress with a good ecology]. *Renminwang* 人民网 [People's Daily Online]. 16 July. <https://baijiaohao.baidu.com/s?id=1738456151241990973&wfr=spider&for=pc>.
- Tuohy, S. 1991. Cultural metaphors and reasoning: folklore scholarship and ideology in contemporary China. *Asian Folklore Studies* 50(1): 189–220.
- Wang Shi (王时). 2015. *Alabo yinyue tixi dui xinjiang weiwu'er zu yinyue de yingxiang* 阿拉伯音乐体系对新疆维吾尔族音乐的影响 [The influence of the Arabic music system on Uyghur music in Xinjiang]. *Zhongguo minzu bolan* 中国民族博览 [China Nationalities Exhibition] 12: 172–4.
- Wang Zihui (王子晖). 2019. 'Duoyuan yiti': Xi Jinping de minzu guan '多元一体': 习近平的民族观 [Pluralistic unity: Xi Jinping's view on ethnicity]. *Xinhuanet* 新华网. 29 September. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/xxjxs/2019-09/29/c_1125054038.htm.
- Wulanjie (乌兰杰). 2021a. 'Duoyuan yiti' minzu geju yu Meng Han yinyue jiaoliu (shang)—shi lun Meng Han mingde zhong de tongzong qudiao yu tonglei qudiao '多元一体' 民族格局与蒙汉音乐交流(上)——试论蒙汉民歌中的同宗曲调与同类曲调 [The 'Pluralistic Unity' configuration and musical exchange between Mongolians and Chinese, Part 1: On pieces with common roots and in the same genres]. *Zhongguo minzu daxue xuebao* 中央民族大学学报 [Journal of the Nationalities University of China] 18(2): 73–80.
- Wulanjie (乌兰杰). 2021b. 'Duoyuan yiti' minzu geju yu Meng Han yinyue jiaoliu (xia)—shi lun Meng Han mingde zhong de tongzong qudiao yu tonglei qudiao '多元一体' 民族格局与蒙汉音乐交流(下)——试论蒙汉民歌中的同宗曲调与同类曲调 [The 'Pluralistic Unity' configuration and musical exchange between Mongolians and Chinese, Part 2: On pieces with common roots and in the same genres]. *Zhongguo minzu daxue xuebao* 中央民族大学学报 [Journal of the Nationalities University of China] 18(3): 77–84.
- Xu Tiantian (许甜甜). 2014. *Lun Guizhou Hanzu muti mingde 'ganma diao' ji qi tongzong mingde* 论贵州汉族母体民歌《赶马调》及其同宗民歌 [On the 'ganma tune' with

- the Han motif in Guizhou province and folk songs with common roots]. Master's thesis, Guizhou Normal University.
- Yang Fen (杨玠). 2015. *Zhonghua wenhua rentong: hehuang Han Zang bianyuan diqu duoyuan chang yu zhong de minzu jiaorong* 中华文化认同: 河湟汉藏边缘地区多元场域中的民族交融 [Chinese cultural identity: ethnic intermingling in diverse fields in the Hehuang Han-Tibetan regions]. *Qinghai shehui kexue* 青海社会科学 [Journal of Qinghai Social Sciences] 5: 13–19.
- Yang Wenjiong (杨文炯). 2021. *Zhulao Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi, jianshe ge minzu gongyou jingshen jiayuan* 铸牢中华民族共同体意识, 建设各民族共有精神家园 [To forge the common consciousness of the Chinese nation and to build the spiritual home for all ethnic groups]. *Qinghai minzu daxue xuebao* 青海民族大学学报 [Journal of Qinghai University for Nationalities] 2: 1–14.
- YLMWJB (*Yunnan Lahuzu minjian wenxue jicheng bianweihui*). 1986. *Yunnan Lahuzu minjian wenxue jicheng* 拉祜族民间文学集成 [Anthology of Lahu folk literature]. Beijing: Zhongguo minjian wenyi chubanshe 中国民间文艺出版社 [China Folk Literature and Art Publishing House].
- Zhao Talimu (赵塔里木). 2018. *Jianding jiexiang shenpi shu* 鉴定结项审批书 [Approval letter for appraisal finalisation]. Unpublished ms.
- Zhou Jingbao (周菁葆). 1983. *Qiuci yue yu mukamu* 龟兹乐与木卡姆 [Qiuci music and *muqam*]. *Xinjiang daxue xuebao* 新疆大学学报 [Journal of Xinjiang University] 3: 46–61.