



**“Rude Tribes and Wild Frontiers”:
Treatment of Ethnicity in Chinese
Children’s Literature**

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Abstract

This essay investigates the treatment of ethnicity in Chinese children's literature, focusing on the portrayal of China's ethnic minority groups. It considers the construction of minority ethnic identity in various historical contexts, the linguistic implications of such constructions, and also examines these representations in the context of recent economic developments. It argues that representations of ethnicity in Chinese children's literature reflect an overriding sense of the superiority of Han Chinese culture in terms of the latter's role in creating national unity and harmony, and also in advancing the notion of the exoticism of minority ethnicities. The essay also attempts to demonstrate the reasons for the persistence of traditional stereotypes in representations of ethnicity in China.

Keywords: ethnicity, minority identity, ethnic exoticism, Chinese children's literature

Background

It is not difficult to discuss the ideas of “cultural conformity” and “cultural diversity” (*wunhua yizhixing* and *wenhua duoyuangxing*) in Chinese literature; however, while cultural conformity is well accepted in the Chinese cultural context, cultural diversity appears to be an alien concept. In as early as the fourth century BC, in the Confucian classic, *Spring and Autumn Annals with Commentary by Zuo*, it was claimed that “if he be not of our race he is sure to have a different mind” (Translation from Legge 354–355). That is not to say that minority cultures have not flourished in China, but harmonious coexistence requires equality of status, and this has been lacking throughout Chinese history. Confucius (551–479 BC) himself said, “The rude tribes of the remote areas, even when they are governed by princes, do not match our civilized realm, even when we are in a state of anarchy” (Liu Juntian et al. 105).

The history of China has been a continuous process of making the “rude tribes” conform to dominant political values. The Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC) and the Warring States period (475–221 BC) witnessed such conformity. During the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) China became further unified, and Chinese people (formerly the Huaxia) began referring to themselves as the Han. From this point on, the history of “China” has been the history of the expansion of Han Chinese culture and the absorption of neighbouring ethnic groups, achieved primarily by means of military might and political power. Notably, the census of 2000 shows that China's officially recognized ethnic minorities constituted a mere 8.41 percent of China's overall population, compared to their occupation of 63.72 percent of the total area of China (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2003, 43): that is to say, they have primarily lived in the rural parts of the country. Indeed, the Great Wall of China itself, the icon of Han China, is an awe-inspiring feat of ancient defensive architecture, built as a considerable barrier between the Han and the nomad horsemen from the north and west. Yet it should also be noted that the Han people have not always been politically and militarily dominant, and that at times they themselves have been dominated. For example, Mencius (371–289 BC) recalled one such incident:

In the past, King Tai [of a Huaxia state] dwelt in Bin. The barbarians of the north encroached upon his lands. Though King Tai presented them with skins and silks, he could not evade them; though he presented them with horses and hounds, he could not evade them; though he presented them with pearls and jade, he could not evade them. Thereupon, he gathered his elders together and announced, “What the barbarians really want is our land.” (Trans. by Eno 34)

These were the earliest examples of cultural exchange, along with the earliest examples of the capture of prisoners of war. Later, the Tang dynasty (618–907) also witnessed great strife between the Han people and the adjacent northern and western peoples and, as a result of such confrontations, a school of “frontier poetry” emerged. A selection of a few lines from *Three Hundred Tang Poems* is included here to offer some idea of the “mood” of those times. For centuries, elementary pupils memorized these poems and used them to learn how to read and write. The first is by Cen Shen:

Do you not see how the Canterng Horse River
Races to the Sea of Snow,
And the flat yellow sands stretch forever to the sky?
At Luntai in the ninth moon, the wind howls all night
And shattered rocks from the gullies, big as rice dippers,
Are flung about and sent rolling by the wind.
In the Xiongnu country, the horses are sleek and fat
As the grass yellows;
And away to the west, near Gold Mountain, smoke and dust billows to the sky.
(Trans. from Herdan 102)

The second is by Chen Tao:

They vowed to crush the Xiongnu,
thinking nothing of death:
Five thousand in sable battle-dress
Fell in the foreign dust.
How sad that the bones that lie
By the banks of the Wuding
Are still lovers in many a woman’s dream. (Translation adapted from Herdan 462)

The third is by Wang Changling:

In the same moonlight as the Qin and through the same
Walls as the Han
Mile after mile they marched and never returned.
If only the ‘Flying General’ of the Dragon City
were still among us,
The Tartar horsemen would never dare to cross Mont Yin.
(Translation adapted from Herdan 468)

When analysing these poems with a Marxist lens, the source of conflict between the minorities and the Han is said to be class struggle, rather than in the attempts of one race to conquer another. For example, in their introduction to *A Selection of Tang Poems*, the editors comment:

According to the principle that national struggle is in fact class struggle, the nature of these wars should be analyzed for their specific circumstances [...]. [T]he frontier poets, such as Cen Shen and Gao Shi, rightly sang of the heroic spirit of the soldiers fighting a just war against invasion by minorities [...]. In the late Tang period there is no shortage of unprincipled poets who were prepared to sue for peace at any cost. They were anti-war in the abstract. (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 13–14)

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, however, political imperatives have necessitated an image of national unity; hence the construction and reconstruction of a harmonious multicultural and multi-ethnic society has become a central theme in the discourse of children’s books. For example, *The New Three Character Classic* (1994) compiled by a committee of fourteen experts, scholars, educators, ideology workers, propagandists, and workers for “spiritual civilisation” contains these lines:

For thousands of years,
fifty-six ethnic groups
have lived together like a big family,
and are now holding hands of one another
to build the Chinese nation. (Trans. from Fang 24)

Thus, political imperatives and the need for an image of a multi-ethnic “family” often override other concerns, such as an accurate portrayal of reality. The best example to illustrate this point occurred at the 2008 Beijing Olympics’ opening ceremony, when fifty-six children dressed in ethnic costumes, representing the fifty-six ethnic minority groups, carried the Chinese national flag into the stadium – it was later revealed that these “representatives” were all of Han ethnicity (Goldsmith, reuters.com).

Historical stories

Historically, from a Han perspective, cultural exchange between the Han and minority peoples need only be one-way, as from the Han point of view there was very little to learn from those tribes at the frontiers. In fact, tribal people were often described as uncouth and uncivilized, wearing animal skin, drinking blood from the skulls of their enemies, and marrying all their father’s wives (except their own mother) upon his death. Their deafness to reason (from the Han perspective) is exemplified in a well-known Chinese story, in which the Han court sent Su Wu (140–60 BC) to negotiate a peace settlement with the Xiongnu. Su Wu was taken hostage and sent to the shores of “the northern sea” (Lake Baikal) to tend to a flock of rams, and was told that he may return to Chang’an (the Han capital) “when the rams give birth to lambs” (Cai Dongfan 226). This story has been adapted into various editions of comics and picture books and patriotic education materials for children. During the early Han rule, the Xiongnu constantly harassed the Chinese state, until 119 BC, when Han Wudi (156–87 BC) sent a strong force to defeat them.

An important development in cultural exchange during that period was the *heqin* policy: the marriage of Han princesses and other Han girls to nobles of the frontier peoples. The best known example of the *heqin* policy is that of Wang Zhaojun. It is said that Huhanya Khan of the Xiongnu people submitted himself to the Han court as the prospective son-in-law of Emperor Han Yuandi. Yet from this information, traditional and modern accounts differ greatly. For example, *Tales of the Early Han Dynasty* (1926), a traditional account of this affair, stresses the terrible fate that had befallen the poor Han girl, who now had to live among the barbarians and marry the Khan’s son upon his death (376). In contrast, modern texts emphasize the positive value of her contribution to intercultural understanding. For example, in *Golden Millet Dream* (1981), the following account is given:

In order to maintain a long-term cordial relationship between the Xiongnu and Han peoples, in 33 BC Huhanya Khan of the southern Xiongnu on the Mongolian steppe presented himself to Emperor Han Yuandi of the Han dynasty as the prospective husband of a Han woman. The emperor agreed to his request and issued a decree that any of the prospective imperial concubines in the palace could offer to become the bride of Huhanya. Wang Zhaojun was from a poor family and

loved the common people. The long years of suffering caused by the protracted war between the Han and Xiongnu peoples made her sick at heart. For the sake of good relations between the two peoples, she responded straight away to the decree and consented to marriage with the Khan [...]. When she reached the Mongolian steppe, she observed local customs and, like a Xiongnu, ate beef and mutton, drank goat's milk and lived in a yurt. At the same time, she taught the native people the more advanced culture and technology of the Han. So she was loved and respected by the Xiongnu and for half a century neither race raised a finger against the other, and the two peoples lived in peace. (Liu et al. 38-42)

It is also interesting to note that another modern account of this marriage in *China's Inner Mongolia* (1986) has employed the word “*neizhan*” (civil war) to describe the struggles between the Han and Xiongnu peoples (Wang et al. 3). So the nature of the union has been portrayed over the passing of time in very different ways – first, as a degrading union for the Chinese woman, then as a noble act of self-sacrifice in the interests of two distinct races, one of which is clearly inferior to the other, and finally as a sort of political union between equal members of the same racial family.

In the 1990s, however, with the emergence of patriotic discourse, the battle of the Han against the northern nomads was again described as a fight for sovereignty and territorial integrity. For example, Jiangsu Juvenile and Children's Publishing House published a set of ten volumes entitled *The Golden Treasure House of Stories for Moral Education* in 1995. The core moral principle advocated in this set of ten volumes is to “love the nation” (Fang 20), which is best demonstrated by the absolute and unconditional loyalty to the nation and the emperor in the story of Yue Fei (Yan and Liu 25-26). The story takes place at the time when the Tartar State of Jin occupied the capital of the Song dynasty (960–1279) and had captured the emperor. Yue Fei was the combat general primarily responsible for recovering lost territory. His heroism is well-known in China through his poem which contains these lines:

My hunger will subside only when I taste
with relish the flesh of the Tartar invaders
And my thirst will be quenched only when I drink
with glee from the blood of the Xiongnu (Yu et al. 52)

Although he recovered large areas of territory, Yue Fei was ultimately thwarted. The new emperor Gao Zong was advised by a treacherous minister, Qin Gui, who worked as an enemy agent for the Tartar State of Jin. On Qin Gui's suggestion, Emperor Gao Zong issued twelve imperial commands, written in gold characters, to

summon Yue Fei back and though Yue Fei knew what these commands meant, as a loyal officer he did not hesitate to return to the capital. As expected, he was sentenced to death on the charge of conspiring to carry out a coup d'état. The story of Yue Fei ends with these words:

When Yue Fei was twenty, he witnessed the sufferings of the common people caused by the Jin invasion, and even fowls and dogs were not left in peace (*jiquan buning*). He longed to offer his service to the motherland and join the fight to destroy enemies. He fought for over a decade, recovering large areas of lost territory. Yue Fei was only thirty-nine years old when he died. His ideal for serving the motherland, however, has been highly acclaimed by the people, generation after generation. (Yan and Liu 26)

Stories of “liberation”

In the long history of China, however, the ethnic minorities generally were no match for the military might of the Han people, under whatever guise this has been portrayed. The last military expedition to unify the whole of China by the Han army in the early 1950s is known in China as the “liberation”. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao Zedong established the People’s Republic of China in 1949, after defeating the Nationalist (KMT) government led by Chiang Kai-shek, a large area in the south and southwest, mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities, was not “liberated” as such. Fairbank and Goldman comment that under the CCP, “efficient control” of the public would be “by ideological indoctrination and by self-sustaining motivations of fear and hope among the people” (345). Indeed, The CCP’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) used two different methods of “liberating” those areas of ethnic minorities, each duly reflecting both “fear” and “hope” strategies: liberation either by military force or “peaceful liberation,” which would lead to the supposed “autonomy” of China’s ethnic minorities. However, in any “liberation” process the role of fear-mongering should be noted as primary; Fairbank and Goldman further note that “killing” was frequent, with the goal of “keep[ing] terror always in the background” (345).

The Angry Roaring of Kasai, published by Shanghai Juvenile and Children’s Publishing House in 1965, is an example of “liberation” by force. Notably, the factor of “ideological indoctrination” has to be taken into consideration when examining the literature of this era, as it was perceived as a key instrument for the realisation of unity. The CCP’s victory brought with it a state apparatus that required the support of all its cultural activities, complete with a cultural bureaucracy that was staffed by established writers who had demonstrated their talents as well as loyalty. It grew at such a rate that there was a shortage of editors to fill the positions at provincial levels and with such excellent career prospects, writing and editing as professions attracted many young talents (McDougall and Louie 263). Besides the attraction of the power and financial

reward associated with being a part of the elite state apparatus, faith, loyalty and tradition may have played an even more important role in the participation of the creation of a socialist literature. The authors of this book, the Guizhou Provincial Literature Editing Training Class, were a group of such people; almost all of them were CCP members who were familiar with the Party's policies and strategies.

The story is said to be based on true events, and Kasai is the name of an ethnic Miao community consisting of four villages in a mountainous area in South China. Because of its unique location among the steep mountains, Kasai was in a perfect place to defend itself against any external threat. Consequently, it has always been autonomous, in spite of numerous efforts to integrate it into greater China by different governments of dynastic imperial courts, regional warlords, and the KMT. Furthermore, the Kasai had their own factory to produce guns and ammunitions, funded by the opium they grew. The PLA is described in the book as patient and reasonable, sending negotiators for a "peaceful liberation". They even tried to learn the language of the Kasai people, which turned out to be very challenging; because of the isolation of these people, no one outside their community could speak their language, and so the PLA could not even find a tutor. Thus, the patience of the PLA grew thin and they readied to launch an assault.

The first half of the book, written in simple children's language, is nonetheless strongly didactic in portraying class struggle within the Miao. The chief of the tribes is described as a local tyrant, whose word is "law" in the mountainous villages (Guizhou Provincial Literature Editing Training Class 3). A representative of the exploitative class, he uses and abuses poor villagers using various methods of torture. One of the methods was to feed the victim to the "dragon cave", which was a very deep vertical cave behind his house. Sometimes, if he was unhappy with someone, he would say, "Take him to feed my dragon cave" (3). His thugs would first tie up and then slowly drop the victim down the cave until the ransom was agreed upon. However, he would also often order the victim simply to be killed, and then thrown down the cave, or he would even simply push the person into the cave alive. In the twenty years before the arrival of the PLA, this dragon cave had swallowed more than two hundred lives, resulting in a pile of white human bones at the bottom and the brown earth at the entrance which was black, stained with blood. Hence, his cruelty can be interpreted as fully justifying the CCP's military action but most importantly, however, the book emphasizes the role played by members of the ethnic minority group, who had started an uprising themselves against his despotism. Furthermore, the CCP's military force also consisted of members from the ethnic group who had fled the oppression and joined the CCP. Consequently, the "liberation" of the minority ethnic group became an exercise of "self-salvation" aided by the CCP's troops, thus removing any ambiguity that could be interpreted as invasion, occupation, or colonisation by the outsider.

Flames of a Frontier Village by Lin Yu and Yao Leng can be regarded as an example of what would happen after a "peaceful liberation". A picture book, adapted from a 1957 feature film of the same title and published in 2006, it mixes elements of an anti-espionage thriller with political propaganda advocating

national unity, and involves the ethnic group of the Kawa people, who live by the Lanchang (Mekong) River bordering China and Burma. Like most other stories published in the 1950s, it involves both heroes and villains but it is the CCP's People's Liberation Army, stationed in the village, which is again the hero.

Unlike the previous story, *The Angry Roaring of Kasai*, the villain of this book is not the chief of the tribal people, but simple-minded villagers. The KMT troops, who fled China to escape to the other side of the border, leave behind their agent hidden in the Kawa village. However, the battle between the CCP and KMT is only a secondary plotline, intended to support the development of the main conflict of the story, which is between the CCP's efforts to introduce the new wet-land agricultural method and the resistance from the villagers, who were used to the primitive slash-and-burn method of farming. Thus, these tribal people are constantly portrayed as "ignorant", "benighted", "backward" and "fatuous" throughout the book. They are also described as unscientific. For example, they often refuse to take medicines prescribed by the Han army doctor. Quite ironically, they are portrayed as being prejudiced against the Han people. Unable to understand there are "goodies" and "baddies" among the Han people, they view the battle between the CCP and KMT as a fight between two buffalos and, since they are not the owners of the beasts, they believe that it is none of their business. The effect of the ideological indoctrination of stories like this lies in the presentation of the Han culture as the leader of the scientific advancement to modernity, which justifies the Han majority's control of the ethnic minority. Of course, it is debatable whether one culture is more "advanced" than the other, as perspectives on concepts such as "advancement" or "civilisation" are invariably culturally relative, but an examination of publications from China on the subject of minority nationalities suggests that there is little doubt in the minds of those who present the official line. For example, here is an excerpt from *Welcome to Our China*, compiled by *Guangming Daily*:

In China's modern history, the Hans played a leading role in the nation's struggles against imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism. These struggles usually started in areas inhabited by the Hans and then spread to minority areas. Today, the Han people, with the advantage of being more advanced in culture, science and technology, are playing an important role in China's drive for modernization. (104)

So what do minority ethnicities themselves have say about their cultural contribution to China? Malaqinfu, the ethnic Mongolian editor of *An Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature 1976–1982*, says in his introduction to the volume on minority nationality literature:

[I]n the big family of our multi-national state, the Han people, who constitute the largest population and who also have a long cultural tradition, have made the greatest contribution to the development of Chinese culture and have greatly influenced the development of minority literature. (1)

It is stated in *A Teaching Program for Communist Ideology and Morality* (1984) that all ethnicities in China can learn from one another by adopting this simple principle: “*qu chang bu duan*” – “adopt strong points and discard shortcomings” (70). It is implicit in this that all cultures have something to learn from each other – even the Han from the non-Han. According to Dru Gladney’s assessment of the relationship between the Han and other ethnic groups, “Minority is to the majority as female is to male, as ‘Third’ World is to ‘First’” and “the widespread definition and representation of the ‘minority’ as exotic, colourful, and ‘primitive’ homogenizes the undefined majority as united, monoethnic, and modern” (93). Indeed, China’s cultural apparatus makes it very clear that the cultural contribution of the ethnic minority sits generally in their “music and traditional dancing,” their “fine artistic tradition” in clothes (Ma Yin 9), and handicrafts such as silver jewellery. Indeed, cultural products or practices of the ethnic minority, which are perceived to be “exotic” or unfamiliar, are highly attractive to artists, writers, and the general Han majority.

Stories of exotica and primitiveness

Published in 1956, Ji Kang’s short story “Mengpa’s Dream” is a fictional report by a first-person narrator, who is a local Yunan journalist who goes on a field trip to a frontier mountain village. He works together with an artist from Beijing, as both of them need materials for their creative works. The main character in the story is thirteen-year-old Mengpa, who is of the Yao ethnic minority and depicted as having many aspirations about what he would like to do in the future. The story’s didacticism is in the cliché of the time: whilst young people should be able to contribute to the socialist motherland by participating in all kinds of work, as a member of the socialist new generation of the Yao people, Mengpa ought to go and take up a position in the most difficult and challenging place in which he is needed. In the end, Mengpa joins the government’s training course to become an instructor to introduce the new wet-land farming technique to replace the primitive slash-and-burn method. In spite of the lengthy depiction of the “backwardness”, “insanitation,” and “lack of culture” of the locals (154-155) the narrator cannot help but admire the exotic beauty of the locality:

The track was so muddy and slippery that we dared not lift our gaze from the next few steps in front of us, but suddenly we saw a few bamboo cottages about three hundred meters away in a clearing surrounded by palms. They stood there

mysteriously behind a veil of mist in the forest, and some buffaloes were grazing peacefully nearby [...]. I stopped to lean on a bamboo fence as Lao Chen sketched a black swallow-tailed butterfly hung like a piece of torn satin on a red hibiscus just inside the fence. I looked around. A pig was snuffling around between the timber poles of a thatched cottage. Tall, thin palms and fleshy banana trees were planted everywhere. Everything was green and dripping wet. (Ji 158)

With the rapid development of China's economy in the 1990s, the exotic charm of China's ethnic minorities has become a highly sought-after commodity, used to attract Han majority tourists. Due to rapid urbanization and environmental deterioration, middle-class, urban Chinese Han have begun to entertain a yearning for a lost rustic past, which they believe they can find "in less economically developed areas" and particularly in those places where there are "authentic minority cultures" (Krischer 142). Shu Huibo's prize-winning *You Listen to Me* (2015) both reflects and turns on these new tastes of the Han people. It depicts the trend of ethnic-minority youths to move from their villages to the big cities, joining Han migration workers on major construction projects. Consequently, their villages are left almost empty, inhabited only by the elderly and children. This new wave indeed should be read as the continuation of the history of the Han majority, who are depicted as having a sort of superior magnetism that is able to absorb and assimilate ethnic minorities.

You Listen to Me develops around the friendship between two girls, Ah Duo and Ah Xiruo, who both work for a young man who injured his leg in an accident in a big city. With the compensation money and his savings, and more importantly with his newly acquired knowledge of the Han people's growing predilection for the so-called authentic cultural products of ethnic minorities, he hires seven to eight girls to make the traditional clothes of the ethnic Miao people. The success of this award-winning narrative lies in its detailed description of the customs of the old Miao village through the life and fate of the two Miao girls. The "exotic" elements of the story derive from the portrayal of the Miao people's shamanistic traditions, as one of the two girls, Ah Duo, is destined to become a new shaman. Before this can happen, however, she has to pass a tough test by going through a complex network of dark mountain caves to demonstrate her connection with the spirit of higher dream places. Her link to the spirit world will assign her the ability to heal, contact deceased ancestors, influence the weather, increase her willpower, and predict the future. This test is not without risk. Some years ago, a candidate of another village went into the caves and never came out. Because of this risk, Ah Duo's father, who has received some elementary education, questions the tradition. But this concern is short lived, as he changes his mind, even encouraging his daughter, after seeing the handsome amount of cash his mother-in-law, the current shaman, receives for her services. More and more people, including many wealthy Han people, come all the way to their mountain village to seek her service with regard to their business projects and investment plans. In the past, the local Miao people would bring a pheasant or a few slices of

preserved meat as payment, but the modern-day customers bring wads of banknotes, which she never counts, simply stacking them under her bed made of palm branches and leaves.

Each time Ah Duo visits her grandma, she would grab a few pads of cash and put them in her bag but Grandma never minds. Instead, her mind is full of concern about Ah Duo's friend, Ah Xiruo's plan to escape: "They all think the outside world is wonderful, but they don't know that tigers and wolves are hidden everywhere waiting for them" (Shu 2). Ah Xiruo is a deaf-mute girl and is described as being exceptionally beautiful – "her eyelashes are thick, hiding her pair of bright and charming eyes, like flower petals covering the pistil" (3). Although she cannot speak, her eyes can. Consequently, she is a bride in many a Miao boy's dreams, but she belongs to the young man who runs the clothes-making business. Ah Xiruo's father died when she was young and her mother then re-married and left. Because of his disability, it is difficult for the owner of the clothes-making business to find a wife, so he buys Ah Xiruo from her uncle to be his future wife. She wants to escape, not because he is "crippled", but because the attraction of the exciting world beyond the mountain ranges is hard to resist. Naturally, given her condition, she would need a lot of cash to survive in a totally strange place, or even if she succeeds in escaping. The exotic sexual undertones in this story support Gladney's argument that the depiction of female characters in China's literature about minorities often exemplifies the Han majority's long-held fantasy that feminizes and eroticizes ethnic minorities in both the political and cultural realms (92-125).

Conclusion: ethnicity and the language issue

In 2017, Liaoning Juvenile and Children's Publishing House launched its *China's Contemporary Ethnic Minority Children's Literature Original Creation Series*, which now consists of ten titles, all written by ethnic minority writers. In this Han Chinese language publication, out of the ten titles, only one was published originally in the language of the author and then translated into Han Chinese, and eight out of the ten ethnic authors involved in this publication had never published in their own ethnic languages. The growing dominance of the Han Chinese language in minority areas has attracted increasing criticism from the West, where using one's mother tongue is seen as a human right ("Tibetan Students" 2010). However, in China, the principle of national unity is always the first priority, and language policy follows this principle. Linguistic justice is merely a secondary consideration.

It is far too sweeping to conclude, however, that the phenomenon of Han language dominance is part of the Han state's assimilation agenda. There are other factors to be considered, and these are complicated. The 55 recognised minorities in mainland China use more than 120 different languages (Sun 179), and among the Han Chinese majority there is also great linguistic diversity, with a number of spoken Chinese language groups having tens of millions of speakers, such as the Wu, Yue, and Min language groups, which can be

further subdivided into various dialects. China's vast linguistic diversity is the result of long periods of community isolation, caused by the country's unique mountainous topography. In China, efforts to standardise language can be traced back to 221 BC, when the Qin dynasty became a unified polity after centuries of fragmentation. The purpose in standardising language was to ensure the implementation of the emperor's orders and to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the law. On the one hand, literacy is always an ally of political control but, on the other hand, it also facilitates communication across an expanding realm. For example, Chinese writing was eventually adopted in other East Asian countries, like Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, where for centuries reading and writing were undertaken in the "foreign" language of Chinese, yet these nations were still able to maintain their distinctive cultural heritage.

In today's environment, many minority ethnic Chinese parents encourage their children to learn to speak the Han majority's *Putonghua* (common speech, known as Mandarin in the West) over their own language because of the educational and career opportunities the former is seen to provide. Internal migration has also fuelled the spread of *Putonghua*, with the development of transport networks within China encouraging interaction between people who previously would have been unlikely to leave their local area. In some minority-dominated areas, the ability to speak *Putonghua* becomes imperative for enterprises to deal with Han tourists. Taking into consideration all of these factors, the force of the market seems much more influential than administrative power in promoting a unified language.

Nowadays, with the exception of a few primary and secondary schools in Xijiang and Tibet, only Han Chinese *Putonghua* is used as an instructional language, especially at tertiary level. The languages of ethnic minorities have been repressed and have often survived only because of customary use, thus lacking the political autonomy and academic authority associated with the Western discourse of human rights. Besides linguistic uniformity, the content of children's literature taught at schools is also tightly controlled. During his field trip to China, Jerry Loving observed:

[N]o matter which city I was in or which classroom I was monitoring, the children's literature lessons were from the same source in their schools [...]. No matter whether it was a poor public school with very little money and no local support from the parents or a private school for the children of the rich with a steady flow of cash to give their children the best education money could buy, the literature lessons were the same. In this vast country where in some regions there wasn't even electricity, roads, or a government subsidized school, the children would walk to a nearby pasture and one of the elders in the village would give the lessons for the day and it would be the same literature lesson I heard in a classroom in Shanghai, Beijing (77)

Most of the authors in *China's Contemporary Ethnic Minority Children's Literature Original Creation Series* are largely the products of this system. They were educated in the Han language, trained to write and publish in Han Chinese, and their works primarily target young Han readers. Their high proficiency in the Han language enables them to access a market of 367 million Han children who are potential readers (Qin Wenjun 2006). In the new millennium, Chinese children's publishing has had a double digit growth annually, much higher than the national economic growth rate (Li 392). As discussed previously, ethnic cultures have themselves become commodified products, and now these ethnic writers have an extra selling point – their own ethnicity. The need to “authentically” represent their ethnicity in their works has thus diminished. Their stories are mainly rendered in informative discourse, introducing exotic cultural elements to construct an imagined cultural diversity in contemporary Chinese children's literature. These writers have become the elite of their minority community and part of the Han majority's ideological apparatus. To further illustrate this point and to conclude this paper, we would like to quote Ngapo Ngawang Jigme, the former Chairman of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region:

Tibetan people have recently crossed a barrier over a thousand years old into socialism, and it is no exaggeration to say that their life has undergone an earth-shaking change. Under the veteran revolutionary leaders things got off to a good start, but just as our country was beginning to make up for lost time at a terrific speed, the ten years ravage of the Cultural Revolution set in all over China, and Tibet was not excepted. Socialist reconstruction came to a standstill and much precious time was lost, while wanton and irreparable damage was done to our cultural heritage. (24)

This is uncomfortably reminiscent of the saying from Confucius that we invoked in the opening paragraph. Could this Tibetan leader be implying that, even when the Han Chinese are in a state of anarchy, the Tibetans are better off with them than being left as a “rude tribe governed by princes”?

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