

## Methodological Features of Study and Development of "Ethnic Culture" Images in China

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### ABSTRACT

The article attempts to analyze the methodological basis of contemporary Chinese publications devoted to the study of ethnic culture in China. The authors identified a number of concepts specific to the Chinese ethnological discourse, such as "unified Chinese nation", "nationality", "small ethnicity", "middle state" which prove that ethnology in China is part of the state information strategy. Comparative analysis showed that instrumental use of ethnological knowledge is based on the two types of ethnic culture images. Some of them are directed "outside" and distribute images of the multi-ethnic state promoting the state image on the world stage. Other images are directed "inwards" and serve the purpose of creating the image of a "single" state united around the idea of the "single Chinese nation". In conclusion, the article proves that specifics of the Chinese ethnological science imply its application as a tool used to form the ethnic group aimed at centralizing the state, and therefore is viewed not only in terms of ethnological analysis, but also as the subject of analysis. Research findings contribute to a better understanding of methodological foundations of the Chinese ethnological science and the essence of Chinese policy toward ethnic cultures at the present stage. The authors indicate that ethnological science in China is understood as the most correct, understandable and effective public conviction method, aimed at the development of worldviews and ethnic ideals.

### KEYWORDS

Single Chinese nation; small ethnicity; middle state; information strategy; ethnic development

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### Introduction

China is a large multi-national state, which is exposed to the spreading of globalized culture, influencing the cultural development of the titular nation and the subsequent development of many small ethnic groups; it is committed to sustainable development, and defines its way in terms of building a harmonious society in which the national question is one of the most important (Jinghua 1998). Up to 1990s, the Chinese science, being exposed to the ideas of Marxism,

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Leninism and Maoism, was not interested in this problem. However, in 1989 in China under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, a series of reforms led to building socialism having new Chinese specifics of "exiting outside", which meant openness of Chinese policy.

At that time, the task of Chinese science was to study transformation processes, characteristic of ethnic cultures that were subject to the national program of harmonious development (Peng, 2003). Since that time, the question why the cultures of some ethnic groups representing national minorities in China kept their identity, while others were completely dissolved in the han became a regular issue for the Chinese government and soon transformed into scientific debates. It became clear that the Chinese scientists did not have an independent methodological base and experience in studying ethnic and national groups, so they used the works of Western and domestic scholars, which later became the basis of the actual Chinese vision. It has its own specific features and the analysis of its content is an urgent task at the present stage of research development related to ethnic processes in China, which are studied and developed depending in many ways, on the Chinese understanding of the Western methodology. This led to the emergence of many publications, as well as the need to analyze the methodological basis of Chinese ethnological studies that were influenced by the well-established branches of ethnology. However, keeping in mind specific features of these studies, their analysis is carried out for the first time.

The purpose of this article is to justify the notion "ethnic culture of national minorities in the PRC". In this endeavour, the following research tasks were identified: comparative analysis of the Western, Russian and Chinese ethnological research publications; detection of content specificity in the Chinese ethnological texts; determination of their functional purpose. Research methodology was based on the interpretative anthropology, which implied analysis and comparison of ethnological texts, related to primordial, instrumentalist, constructive and Chinese directions. Research relevance is determined by the need to carry out a comprehensive and functional analysis of ethnological science in the multinational and globalized China, being engaged in the intensive development and construction of single Chinese nation, which is accompanied by self-identification problems among the Chinese national minorities. In the content of Western research works, the ethnic culture of national minorities in China is represented as the aggregate of traditional norms and values, display of mental peculiarities, religious views of the Chinese ethnic minorities, which present the cultural component of a single Chinese nation, contributing to the formation, development of its uniqueness through involvement of certain national motives, elements, ideas coming from separate ethnic cultures in the general Chinese culture (Callahan, 2012; Connor, 1993; Erin, 2008). However, they don't pay attention to the constructive role of the Chinese science in the development of single Chinese nation.

Descriptive models related to the processes of ethnicity development in China represented in the article will be used to develop national programmes, aimed at the preservation of traditional cultures of ethnic minorities in other multinational countries, in particular in Russia. The obtained results provide essential theoretical contribution to the world ethnology and promote development of research views regarding development trends of the Chinese

ethnological science, which instrumentally uses the methodology of primordial and constructive approaches, highlighting trends in ethnic culture transformation of various national minorities in China.

Both Western and domestic researchers focus on studying the dynamics of ethnic culture, mainly related the origin, development, distribution and degradation and assimilation of various ethnic groups (Naughton, 2010). The study of ethnic culture in the XIX-XX centuries was associated with evolutionism, sociological trend, functionalism, ethno-psychology and other areas, which formed the theoretical basis dedicated to changes in the culture of certain ethnic groups and to the dynamics of ethnic cultures. Western research and methodology aim at the analysis of the ethno-cultural processes developed upon evolutionist traditions (Morgan, 2012), the cultural-historical school (Hall, 2013) sociological direction (Durkheim, 1997), functionalism (Bloch, 2013), ethnopsychology (Kardiner, 1939) and other areas in which gradually formed the theoretical foundation, dedicated to cultural changes and cultural dynamic (Wei & Gang, 2009). The leading Western research concepts are based upon the theory of ethnic group formation, considered from the standpoint of primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism; the difference between these concepts determines discussion and generates various explanatory models related to the essence of ethnic group formation (Zhong, 2016).

Primordialism, which views ethnicity as an objective reality, emphasizes that the primacy of natural proximity prevails over social interaction in the process of ethnic development (Smith, 1983). Participation of ethnic representatives in socialization processes against the background of modern global transformations in the world of culture, is regarded in terms of success or degradation of ethnic groups involved in these processes (Junjie, 2014).

The understanding of ethnic development processes and transformations by the supporters of instrumentalist approach is significantly different. This approach focuses on specific explanation of ethnic processes: all manifestations of ethnicity are understood as its artificial "awakening" from the hidden "latent" state subsequently used for social mobility, overcoming dominance and submission, social control, the implementation of mutual services and solidary behaviour, the pursuance of harmony and hedonic aspirations (Semenenko, 2015).

The constructivist approach implies maximum focus on the analysis of modern social transformation processes and the related ethnic socialization phenomenon. Supporters of this approach view ethnic sense generated by ethnic differentiation of cultures as well as related attitudes and "doctrines" as an intellectual construct of writers, scientists, politicians. Productivity of constructivist ideas in the context of the present analysis implies detection of space-time and situational relativity of ethnicity, since the followers of constructivism believe that ethnicity is rooted not "in the hearts" but "in the heads" of individuals who represent ethnic groups – the "imagined communities" or "social structures". Constructivist ideas were designed and developed in the writings of P. Bourdieu and L. Boltanski (2008). Ethnic group formation in the understanding of constructivists is a process of dynamic change in personal and social characteristics, in parallel to the purposeful social development of a community of people linked by the belief that they have common natural links, a single type of culture, common origin and history. In

general, the use of the above three approaches for some time (as it seemed), described the ethnic reality in the context of established paradigms; at the same time, a growing number of authors chose the principles of constructivism.

### Materials and Methods

Research methodology is based on the dialectical and subject-activity approaches, the principles related to the unity of the historical and logical, conceptualization methods, methodological analysis, idealization and structural-functional analysis.

### Data, Analysis and Results

Since the second half of 1960s-1970s, the structure of ethnological knowledge was subject to substantial changes. The increased disintegration of the international community on ethnic grounds caused the problem of determining the nature of ethnic solidarity and ethnic interaction in ethnology (Connor, 1993). Its analysis has political context and complied with the task of keeping the national (civil and political) unity in every multi-ethnic country. This problem led to methodological transformations. In 1960s, social integration direction took the lead, however afterwards the impact of disintegration processes in science predetermined the "theory of the conflict of forces" (Smith, 1983). Its introduction gave impetus to the development of different research areas, some of which remained within the scientific worldview and noted the emergence of new trends, synthesizing their positions with the principles of systemic-functional analysis (Semenenko, 2015). However, starting from the second half of the twentieth century Chinese scientists chose a research direction, which used a certain amount of the Western theory, focusing on the methodology that would substantiate the governmental viewpoint in terms of considering integration and consolidation of the objectives of China's population as a whole (Callahan, 2012). Instrumental use of ethnological descriptions in modern China, where significant importance is attached to ethnocultural features, therefore, depends not only on science, but also on the ruling elite. Given turbulent manifestation of ethnicity in recent decades, China's leadership understands the methodology of presenting information on ethnic groups only in the context of ideas, synthesizing political and scientific concepts. This approach does not imply further reflection, but it aims at effective dissemination of certain ideas (Connor, 1993).

Presently, the Chinese ethnic studies are mainly focused on the image of a single community, in which ethnic identity is subordinated to political identity. This approach determines the explanation of ethnic groups, built on the combination of primordialism and constructivism, however, focuses on the state nature primacy, which cultural essence "constructs" people that fall under its influence. These ideas form the state concept of social cohesion, which does not recognize the ideals of civil society, and adheres to the values associated with patriarchal attitudes characteristic of Confucianism. It should be noted that this attitude toward science is based on archetypes related to the historical consciousness of the Chinese people for whom concepts like "wealth of history" and "historical memory" is the value, providing authentication, integration, consolidation, psychological protection and patriotic development (Erin, 2008).

The history of Chinese policy proved the fact that traditions related to control over people since antiquity included the methodology of constructing state images perceived as "chzhongguo" or "middle state", in contrast to the neighbouring states perceived as "the land of the barbarians." In addition, the image of "chzhongguo" did not refer to any specific territory; it gradually expanded and after joining the "barbarian" lands, they became "chzhungozhen" territories, belonging to the citizens of the Celestial Kingdom (Wei & Gang, 2009). Therefore, when the Chinese society was reformed according to the European standards at the beginning of the twentieth century, the rulers of the Republic of China needed such name of their state, which highlighted its perennial nature, so they used the term "chzhongguo". Today, it promotes not only the progressive "sinification" of China's national minorities, but also provides the basis for the China-centric worldview of the entire population of this country.

Modern Chinese scientific and political thought aims at using the results of rethinking the recent past to keep the ideological orientations of society "on the right track". For example, according to W. Callahan (2012), at the dawn of the twenty-first century Chinese identity was formed as a result of complex interaction between the positive and negative images, depicting Chinese past and present, which spread the image of the "people-victim", which experienced centuries of national humiliation since the beginning of "Opium Wars" to the founding of the PRC. This was quite handy when it came to finding diplomatic response to the claims of Tibet's independence and allegations of human rights abuses in the area. It is important to note that within the strategy aimed at creating the image of China as a powerful centre of power, and a candidate for world leadership (Naughton, 2010), the facts of using "national humiliation" memories are almost unexplainable. Nevertheless, the practice of distributing two images of ethnic culture, one of which contradicts the other is specific to China's information policy. Many researchers noted that images presented "outside", "for others" are different from those used "inside" the "for oneself".

In the first case, the government of the PRC directs efforts towards propagation of intense patriotic feelings. Policy aimed at development of these images is based on the universal and insistent emphasizing the greatness of ancient traditions and their continuity. It fits into the strategy of using the arsenal of the so-called "soft power", promoting development of positive Chinese image in the world (Jinghua, 1998). However, this trend causes countermeasures both on the part of "small ethnicities", and representatives of the titular nation. This leads to meetings, evaluated as "archaic relapses and bursts" in the context of modern Chinese methodology. Therefore, in relation to han on the one hand, and to the "small ethnicities", on the other, the authorities have to use control and restraint techniques, revealed in the formation of the second trend related to constructing ethnic images inherent in domestic policies (Junjie, 2014).

The design principle can be seen in the formation of cultural images, ethnic culture, and the culture of "small ethnicities". The concept of culture is the basic one in the Chinese science dealing with peoples. Culture is understood on the one hand, as a set of products and production results that have emerged due to human activity, and on the other - as a spiritual heritage (Geertz, 1973). When designing the concept of culture, Chinese scholars pay attention to its regional

diversity, which determines uniqueness of local ethnic culture types (Peng, 2003).

The most important feature distinguishing notions of Chinese culture in ethnology, is that Chinese researchers consider culture as a common way of thinking and attitude of each state member rather than the ethnic group. Reflecting widespread China's ideas related to the cultural structure, a modern author, Z. Minfu (2006) suggests understanding its structure within four levels: the culture of humanity, culture of an epoch, national culture and the culture of national minorities. There are two levels of culture: national culture and the culture of ethnic groups. National culture is understood as the traditional Chinese culture and the culture of ethnic groups is regarded as local manifestation of the ethnic culture elements referring to national minorities. The opinion expressed by Z. Minfu regarding cultural structure coincides with the viewpoint of the CPC leadership, which is going to boost the construction of a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics, creating the appropriate the market economy that would fit Chinese socialism, along with relevant system of rules and laws, knitting traditional and moral values of the nation with the values of socialism with Chinese characteristics, thus forming the national spirit, which will serve as a new impetus to reforms and development (Junjie, 2014).

The current structure of China's ethnic culture dates back to 1950s, when the state with predominant han population, recognized the rights of other national groups. Since then, China decided to distinguish such phenomena as nation or nationality ("minzu") and the small ethnicity ("shaoshu minzu"). Nationality is regarded as a stable group characterised by common language, territory, economic relations, as well as by general psychological qualities, formed in the process of historical development, and enshrined in the general culture (Jinghua, 1998). This is a primordial definition, however, it is used as a tool for designing ethnic reality, since according to this definition all Chinese people are above all, citizens of the PRC, which, regardless of nationality constitute a single nation "Zhong Hua". In this context, every citizen of the PRC is primarily a bearer of the national culture, at the same time he/she represents a certain nation. Thus, "national culture" and the culture of "small ethnicities" present two different concepts. Their specificity implies the fact that in the Chinese sources, the term "small ethnicity" is used to denote only one concept - non-han peoples (Jinghua, 1998).

The total number of these people is much less than the number of han people, so they are called "small ethnicities". The feature, which distinguishes non-han peoples from the han peoples is their ethnic culture. It is important for Chinese scientists that the very culture, not genetic inheritance determines the nature of ethnicity (Minfu, 2006). The reason is that China's view on ethnicity is based on the belief that all non-han peoples, are united with the han peoples by their origin and genetic features. According to the Chinese scholar Li Sutszi (2015), "small ethnicities" are nothing but integral parts of a single Chinese nation, which were isolated from it due to the historical development of culture. From this viewpoint, which combined both primordial and constructivist views, han peoples and "small ethnicities" are the indispensable components of the "single Chinese nation." They differ in specific features of historical development, which led to their separate existence, as well as by specific



features of their culture, which emerged as a result of this historical isolation. Thus, methodology of ethnological studies in China, excludes neither constructivist, nor primordial approaches being used depending on specific tasks related to each description.

In general, the system of ethnological knowledge recognized construction of all modern ethnic groups – both "small ethnicities", and han peoples, which existence is determined by the impact of the local history and culture. However, against the background of ethnic constructs in ethnological knowledge of China, one should note the primordial image of the originally existing ethnic group – the "single Chinese nation" which is the key one in the entire system of ethnological studies in China (Naughton, 2010). In this system, the culture of "small ethnicities" presents a structural element of the culture related to the "single Chinese nation" (Sutszi, 2015). First, it is characterized by the formation and development of its uniqueness through introduction of national motives, elements and ideas from specific cultures into the common culture. Secondly, it is subject to the formation impact of the "single Chinese nation," which is embodied in the CCP actions (Semenenko, 2015).

At that, the Chinese leadership, pursuing a policy aimed at strengthening the unity of the multinational state is not seeking immediate redesign as regards cultural foundations of "small ethnicities", and tries to maintain their national peculiarities (Sutszi, 2015). Therefore, the Chinese government tries to support further cultural development of "small ethnicities".

At the same time, proceeding from the analysis of concepts related to the cultures of national minorities, one can conclude that Chinese science does not find their deep significance, which is essential for the culture of the "single Chinese nation" (Erin, 2008). For example, the concept of culture, represented by Z. Minfu (2006) implies that ethnic culture of national minorities includes three levels: basic level - material culture and technology; core level - public organization; and the highest level - values and forms of thinking, which, having the character of ethnic separatism and selfishness, may not coincide with the values inherent in the "single Chinese nation." According to the opinion expressed by the Central Committee of the CPC, the highest level is pivotal in influencing ethnic culture transformation. For example, Jia Qinglin (2015), a PC member of the Central Committee of the CPC considers the importance of the influencing the culture of "small ethnicities" in the following way: "Under present conditions, it is necessary to give a powerful impetus to the development of areas inhabited by small ethnic groups. Today, the Central Committee of the CPC pays special attention to national efforts aimed at public consolidation". However, the statement of the party functionary, that "in the national work, one should fight against all kinds of separatist activities, in order to protect the unity of the state and to maintain social stability" clearly proved the dual character of the Chinese practices related to dissemination of cultural images of "small ethnicities". Thus, dissemination of two different images of ethnic culture is specific to China's information policy, which is an integral part of the Chinese ethnological science. Its specificity is that it is a tool used to form the ethnic group for the purpose of centralizing the state; it is viewed not only as ethnological analysis, but also as the subject of analysis, its dissemination as an instrument of certain ethno-political images and ideas. Ethnological science in

China is understood as the most correct, easy to understand and effective public persuasion method, aimed at the construction of worldviews and ethnic ideals.

Generally, the analysis conducted by the authors of this research showed that Chinese researchers consider the notion of ethnic culture through the idea of “national minorities” as opposed to the Western and domestic researchers, who use similar, but different notions: ethnic group, small nations, nations and nationalities, etc. In Chinese conceptions, “national minorities” present ethnic groups, residing within the multinational state, which are inconsiderable in number as compared to the titular han nation. The feature that distinguishes non-han nations from han nations is their ethnic culture. It is very important for the Chinese scientists that genetic inheritance, not the culture, determines the nature of ethnicity. Paradoxically, but this approach is formed by the persuasion, which in the context of European methodology can be called a primordial conception. The reason lies in the fact that China considers ethnicity with regard to the fact that all non-han nations, i.e. “national minorities” are single with han nation according to genetics. Thus, methodology of ethnological descriptions in China doesn't exclude both constructive and primordial approaches. Generally, all modern ethnic groups like “national minorities” and han peoples, are acknowledged, which is a result of impact on their individual history and culture. The Chinese authors prove that presently in China, cultural formation of a single commonality is based on the assumption that all citizens of the country are united by the single type of culture, language (Putonghua) and attitudes towards their common history.

### Discussions

Research results indicate that the most appropriate tool for explaining the vicissitudes of modern development of ethnological science in China presents a synthesis of the three approaches of the Western ethnological science: primordialism explaining emotional state of ethnic groups, constructivism, describing the processes of constructing ethnicity by means of state efforts, which cultural design essence falls under the influence of peoples and instrumentalism, legitimizing the use of primordial ideas with the view of forming the unified nation state. This approach formed an explanation of ethnic nature, which combines elements of primordial, instrumental and constructivist concepts, however, focuses on the state primacy. It should be noted that these ideas comply with the well-known ethnological concepts; at the same time they determine a new vision of the state concept of social cohesion in China, which adhere to the values associated with patriarchal attitudes characteristic of Confucianism.

### Conclusion

1. Modern developments related to ethnic identity images in China are in line with the state policy, having due regard to science, providing not only ideologically corrected texts, but also the methodology of ethno-cultural policy aimed at getting the most effective results. Instrumental application of ethnological science, using the elements of the primordial ("single Chinese nation"), constructivist (the idea of "small ethnicities") and instrumentalist conceptions focusing on the cultural role of ethnicity, when a person or a group of people makes a conscious choice with the view of achieving economic and



political goals, creates a dual context of ethnic group images. Some of them are directed "outside", and distribute images of a multi-ethnic state. Others are directed "inwards" in order to construct an image of a single state, united around the "single Chinese nation."

2. To date, China's civil identity, that is, self-identification in terms of the "single Chinese nation" prevails over ethnicity, but it is important for the Chinese leadership to state that the identity of "small ethnicities" has not lost its significance. This statement is confirmed by the Chinese ethnological sciences, proving that the culture of "small ethnicities" presents the wealth of the Chinese and world civilization, and that their interaction enhances Chinese culture, thereby increasing its attractiveness and forming the image of the Chinese nation in the world. At the same time, keeping in mind research focus on the ethnic "ego", promotion of differences, such as the name, physical appearance, geographical origin, economic specialization, religion, language, and traits such as clothing and food, China has taken every effort to overcome the mental opposition ("we-they") and differentiation of groups that are considered in terms of a single civic identity, which implies wider social interaction.

Thus, the authors of this study believe that the existing primordial image of primarily existing ethnic group – the "single Chinese nation" presents a key phenomenon for the entire system of ethnological thought in China. Application of the Western ethnological concepts, such as primordial (the "single Chinese nation") and the constructive one (the idea of "national minorities") in China generates double context of ethnic groups. Some of these images are directed "outside", and distribute images of a multi-ethnic state. Others are directed "inwards" in order to construct an image of a single state, united around the "single Chinese nation."

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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