
“There is no nation without history, there is no family without a family tree”

On Sibe Ethnic Nationalist Aspirations through the Example of a “Family Tree Unification” Story

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Abstract: The 1949 rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party (Zhongguo Gongchandang 中国共产党)¹ was the beginning of a new era in China: the declaration of the People’s Republic of China (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo 中华人民共和国) was the first step on the “socialist road” leading to the creation of the long-coveted Chinese national unity. However, progress on the “socialist road” has posed many challenges for the ethnic minorities living within China’s borders. Mostly because melting into the Chinese national unity – paradoxically – became a symbol of the autonomy of ethnic minorities. In the spirit of this process, the ethnic nationalist aspirations of the Sibe (Chin. xibo zu 锡伯族; Sib. sibe uksura ʃɪbɛ ʊksɪrɛ), the ethnic minority I studied, unfolded alongside the writing of Chinese national history. In my work, I follow these endeavors from the 1950s until recent times. At the center is a story that is seemingly about the knowledge base of Sibe ancestors, the family trees, and beyond that, about the “reunification” of a clan that was torn apart in 1764 by thousands of miles. But, in fact, it formulates much more than that: the idea of political martyrdom by the Sibe in the interest of creating the Chinese national unity. It is through this story that I wish to provide an insight into how Chinese national unity was created.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, nation, nation-building, nationalism, patriotism, genealogy
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¹ In the Latin script transliteration of languages using non-Latin script writing systems, I tried to consistently stick to unification. In the case of the Chinese language, this means the internationally accepted transliteration form of *pinyin* 拼音, while in the case of the Manchu/Sibe language, I used the transliteration form adopted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan 中国社会科学院). When using words and expressions transliterated with Latin script, upon their first occurrence I also provide their original script, adapted to the specified forms used in the source material.

² Prepared in the framework of research agenda No. 2014YSXBZD01, titled “Examination of the social- and cultural-anthropological value of Sibe family tree reconstruction (Chongxiu xibo jiapu de shehui wenhua renleixue jiazhi yanjiu 重修锡伯家谱的社会文化人类学价值研究)” for the Chinese Sibe Language and Cultural Research Center of Ili Normal College (Yili Shifan Xueyuan Zhongguo Xibo Yuyan Wenhua Yanjiu Zhongxin 伊犁师范学院锡伯语言文化研究中心). Research was made possible with the financial support of a six-month program of study/research by Campus Hungary (B2 / 1F / 5957).

INTRODUCTION

The idealized notions about the Chinese nation and state can be considered the result of a long historical process (HYER 2009:257). As a result of this process, the need for the creation of a unified Chinese nation arose simultaneously with the fall of the last imperial dynasty (1911). The chaotic period of the 1920s–1940s, however, did not allow for the then-emerging nationalist movements to have lasting consequences.

But historical events that hindered the expected development – such as internal power struggles or the Japanese occupation (1937) – still contributed much to the shaping of China’s national identity (SZAJP – TÖRÖS 2010:163). The Chinese Communist Party, which rose to power in 1949, earmarked the creation of a national unity formulated within the framework of statehood – and the “melting together” of all its ethnic minorities – as the essential element of the legitimization of its power (VÁMOS 2009:60).

This is well reflected in the official Chinese-language terminology used for the nation as well as for ethnic minorities. Namely, in Chinese, the same expression of Japanese origin, *minzu* 民族, is used for both “nation” and “nationality,” within which *min* means “people”, and *zu* carries the meaning of “clan”. The term *minzu* can also be found in the compound word *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族, used to indicate the ethnic minorities that lived within the borders of the People’s Republic of China. The literal translation of this word could be “a nation of few people.” *Minzu* is also compounded in the concept indicating the Chinese nation, *zhonghua minzu* 中华民族. Given that the compound word of *zhonghua* is made up of *zhong*, which means “centralized,” and *hua*, which means “blossoming, civilized,” this term is a political category as well: it is intended to refer to all the citizens of the People’s Republic of China, regardless of their ethnic identity (VÁMOS 2009:62).

In Chinese-English dictionaries (see, e.g., WU – CHENG 2007), in addition to nation and nationality, ethnic community can also be found listed under *minzu*. Simultaneously, *shaoshu minzu* is translated both as “national minority” and “ethnic minority”. However, social and cultural anthropological terminology makes a sharp distinction between these two concepts, preferring the use of ethnic minority in the case of *shaoshu minzu*. The reason is that the ethnic groups living within the borders of the People’s Republic of China, who are very different in linguistic, cultural and religious aspects, do not claim rights to create their own nation-state – with two exceptions. In their case, ethnicity is expressed in the form of rivalry between groups, not in political secession (ERIKSEN 2008:31).

Similarly, a distinction could easily be made between the concepts that indicate the nation-building efforts of the Chinese Communist Party and the efforts aimed at strengthening the ethnic identity of ethnic minorities in the People’s Republic of China. Quite simply, this is because at the “official” level of the definition, nationalist ideology can be defined as ethnic ideology that claims the right to a state in the name of an ethnic group. That is, in the case of Chinese ethnic minorities, one can hardly talk about nationalist aspirations. In practice, however, it is necessary to reconsider nationalism and ethnicity, as well as the use of the terminology marking the above efforts, while examining the creation of Chinese national unity. First of all, because nationalism can express an ideology beyond ethnicity that emphasizes the common rights of citizens instead of – or, in my opinion, alongside – the common cultural roots. Secondly, because in many cases it depends on the individuals whether they define themselves as members

of a nation or an ethnic group, and national and ethnic identity can also change, depending on the situation.³ I myself use the concept of ethnic nationalist aspirations in my research with this in mind: on the one hand, the concept is used to describe the plasticity of the relationship between nationalism and ethnicity; on the other hand, it distinguishes the ethnic minorities’ ambitions of strengthening their identity from the Chinese Communist Party’s nation-building ambitions.

Within China, the above mentioned efforts became concrete in the light of events taking place in the middle of the 20th century. Though built on the model of the Soviet Bolshevik Party, the new regime that came to power in 1949 always put more emphasis in its policy on the issue of social development than on governmental and economic problems. The creation of this required the transformation of society. In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party – in the spirit of establishing a Chinese national unity – announced its program aimed at studying the societies and histories of ethnic minorities. Sibe ethnic nationalist aspirations emerged alongside the implementation of this program, and their long-forgotten communal history was being written step by step – through the (re)construction of history. And the (re)construction of Sibe history came about via collecting the stories and material carriers of the preserved knowledge of the ancestors – the family trees.

Some 30 years after the initial measures, in 1988, in a book called *The Chronicle of the Sibe of Shenyang* (Shenyang xibozu zhi 沈阳锡伯族志, SHENYANG SHI MINWEI MINZU ZHI BIANZUAN BANGONGSHI 1988), details of seventeen Sibe family trees had been published, the collection of which was initiated in the 1950s with the purpose of achieving the above goals. The authors of the “prefaces” to the family trees, most of which were re-edited several times,⁴ tried to grasp through a variety of poetic images all that remembering their origins meant for their clans. Of all the prefaces, one of the most quoted among the Sibe is the preface written in 1947 for the family tree of a clan known in Chinese as An 安. This is where a sentence fragment can be found, which is most commonly quoted when the topic of writing and preserving Sibe family trees comes up. I quote:

[...] “There is no nation without history, there is no family without a family tree [...].

[...] *Guo bu neng wu shi, jia bu neng wu pu* [...].

[...] 国不能无史，家不能无谱[...].”⁵(SHENYANG SHI MINWEI MINZU ZHI BIANZUAN BANGONGSHI 1988:64).

I only understood the significance of the above words when, during my research about the nation-building efforts of the Sibe, my attention turned to Sibe family trees.

The term “family tree unification,” just as the “family tree unification” story, which I mention in my subtitle, comes from a person of exceptional importance within the Sibe ethnic nationalist efforts:⁶ Han Qikun 韩启昆 (1925–2010), a former employee

³ For more on the specific subject areas, see ERIKSEN 2008:164–166.

⁴ The issues of family tree reconstruction, forms, types and contents are discussed in detail later.

⁵ The *guo* expression within the highlighted quote means country, state and nation in Chinese. In this case, I used “nation”, in line with the political discourses heard during my fieldwork in which the highlighted text was quoted in reference to the issue of the creation of a Chinese national unity.

⁶ Han Qikun’s “family tree unification” story is discussed in more detail in my doctoral dissertation under the heading “There is no nation without history, there is no family without a family tree.”

of the Shenyang College of Education (Shenyang Jiaoyu Xueyuan 沈阳教育学院).⁷ In the summer of 2012, when I was in the city of Shenyang 沈阳, the regional seat of Liaoning 辽宁 Province, I did not have the chance to personally meet Han Qikun. However, Ding Linye 丁林野,⁸ a folk healer of great renown among the Shenyang Sibe, made it possible for me to get in touch with the descendants of Han Qikun. The meeting with them eventually took place in Ding Linye's home, where Han Qikun's descendants showed me three family trees preserved within their clan.⁹ They then took out their father's treasured photo album, and while looking through it, a picture of Han Qikun's life – and through it the history of Sibe ethnic nationalism – developed photo by photo. Finally, before we said goodbye, Han Qikun's descendants handed me a small, paper-bound blue booklet: the bound edition of Han Qikun's notes (HAN 2004).

In this booklet there is a section, *Notes on tracing the Hashihuli*¹⁰ *clan kinship across ten thousand li*¹¹ (Hashihuli jiazu wanli xunqin ji 哈什胡里家族万里寻亲记) (HAN 2004:11–20). This is the “family tree unification” story which nicely frames the story of the “unification” of Han Qikun's clan. The story begins with the following lines:¹²

The Hashihuli [name] is nothing more than the name of our clan in the Sibe language, which was translated into Chinese as Han. This is the name of my clan. Recorded here are my experiences that I gained when even ten thousand *li* wasn't considered too far for me to travel to the motherland's northwestern border region (...) in search of my relatives. The story is true, I write this now, and I recommend it to all my compatriots of Sibe ethnicity, as well as all ethnic readers who are interested.

In my childhood I often heard the old people say, “We have a branch in Yili.” The old people considered it to be particularly important to bring this up when we celebrated the New Year. To us, Sibe, our holidays are important; upon the New Year, sacrifices had to be presented to our ancestors. First we bowed before “Xili Mama”¹³ and the “family tree” (touching the ground with our foreheads); then we came in front of our sitting grandfathers and fathers so we could bow

⁷ Today's Institute of Education at Shenyang University (Shenyang Daxue Jiaoyu Xueyuan 沈阳大学教育学院).

⁸ In Ding Linye's family, herbal medicinal knowledge is handed down from generation to generation; they do not reveal their knowledge to anyone born outside of the clan. Ding Linye's and his father's name is included in the *Cultural Dictionary of Chinese Minorities* (Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wenhua dacidian 中国少数民族文化大辞典), see TIEMU'ER 1997:424.

⁹ Two of the family trees shown to me at this time for purposes of documentation will be discussed in detail later on.

¹⁰ The titular Hashihuli name 哈什胡里 is the Chinese transcription of Han Qikun's clan name. The clan name in Manchu/Sibe is written as Hashūri. In the following, I use these two forms when transliterating the clan name with Latin script, depending on whether the specific quotes come from Chinese or Manchu/Sibe language texts.

¹¹ *Li*: Chinese length measurement (= 1/2 kilometer).

¹² The length of Han Qikun's “family tree unification” story precludes me from providing the full text; considering the length of my work, I can only include excerpts, without providing the original text. In the quotes taken from Han Qikun's “family tree unification” story, only those words and phrases are in quotation marks which Han Qikun himself enclosed in quotation marks. The explanations within brackets in the original text are also in brackets in my text. My own remarks are enclosed in curly brackets.

¹³ The female deity known in the Sibe language as Sirin mama, in Chinese as Xili mama 喜利妈妈, is responsible for the protection of children and the continuance of the family.

before them; finally we visited all the families of our clan to pay them our respects, seeking first the closer, later the more remote branches (...).

When coming to bow before “Xili Mama,” the “family tree” and the generations of grandfathers and fathers, our clan chief lectured the children and grandchildren about the history of the clan (...). After listening to the lecture about the history of the clan, the eldest grandson shouted while kneeling: “Happy New Year to Grandfather!” Then everyone bowed low with him. Then the Grandfather fluttered his shawls, indicating that he accepted the best wishes of the children and grandchildren, then admonished all of us: “Oh! Children, remember that we have a branch in Yili!” So these words, that “we have a branch in Yili,” have become entrenched in my childhood heart. But where is “Yili” to be found? And what are those “branch people” called? I did not yet understand it all. (...) (HAN 2004:11–12)

To understand what Han Qikun’s lines quoted above actually mean, I must first and foremost explain the knowledge preserved through the family trees and what it might have meant for the Sibe.

THE SIBE AND THE CARRIERS OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST

The Sibe are one of the PRC’s 55 ethnic minorities officially accounted for. Their population in the present territory of China, according to 2010 census data, is estimated at 190,481.¹⁴ The vast majority lives scattered in the northeastern provinces, in Heilongjiang 黑龙江 (7,608 people), Jilin 吉林 (3,113 people) and Liaoning (132,431 people) provinces, but large communities can also be found in China’s western part, within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang Weiwu’er Zizhiqu 新疆维吾尔自治区, 34,399 people). Their language belongs to the southern branch of the Manchu-Tungus group of Altaï languages.

The first Chinese-language historical sources, which mention the name Sibe, are from the end of the 16th century – from the period when the Sibe were subject to the Khorchin (科尔沁 ke’erqin) Mongols and fought against the more and more powerful Nu’erhaci (Chin. Tianming 天明; Mand. Abkai Fulingga ᠠᠪᠬᠠᠢ ᠫᠤᠯᠢᠩᠭ᠎ᠠ; 1616–1626), the founder of the later Qing Empire (Chin. Chao Qing 清朝; Mand. Daicing gurun ᠳᠠᠢᠴᠢᠩ ᠭᠤᠷᠦᠨ; 1644–1911). There are no written sources about the Sibe available prior to this time.

The war waged by the Sibe, and which came to be recorded in Chinese history as the Nine Tribes’ War (Jiu Bu Zhi Zhan 九部之战; 1593) (ZHONGGUO DIYI LISHI DANG’ANGUAN 1989:3–4), sealed the fate of the Sibe. Following Nu’erhaci’s victory and the defeat of the nine allied tribes, the building of the largest-ever “Chinese” empire began, along with the Eight Banners army that was the basis of the Manchus’ power and to which the Sibe were also drafted, subject first to the surrendering Mongols, then the Manchus.¹⁵

¹⁴ The census data were provided by the staff of the History and Culture Research Center of Northeast Ethnic Groups in China at Dalian Nationalities University (Dalian Minzu Xueyuan Beifang Shaoshu Minzu Lishi yu Wenhua Yanjiu Zhongxin 大连民族学院北方少数民族历史与文化研究中心).

¹⁵ In addition to military tasks, the Eight Banners also had social, economic and political functions. The construction of the whole system, which was made up of the Manchu, Mongolian and Chinese Eight Banners, was completed by 1642 (ELLIOTT 2001:59).

The disintegration of the Sibe's traditional social order was also accelerated by conscription to the Eight Banners army.

The basic, functional unit of Sibe social organization is the mukūn ᠮᠤᠬᠤᠨ (Chin. mukun 穆昆), which is in fact nothing more than a patrilineal branch encompassing 5–6 generations: a named, exogamous, solidary, ritual group whose members are descended from a common ancestor. The patrilineal branches are divided into larger units and clans; in Manchu, these are called hala (Chin. hala 哈拉). However, in addition to ties based on actual or presumed consanguinity, and simultaneously with conscription to the Eight Banners army, there was more and more emphasis on communities evolving as a function of their specific geographical location, which had irreversible consequences in maintaining kinship relations.

The resettlement, which took the Sibe who originally lived around Manchuria nearly five thousand kilometers away, took place in 1764, upon the command of Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (Chin. Abkai Wehiyehe $\text{ᠠᠪᠬᠠᠢ ᠠᠪᠬᠠᠢ ᠠᠪᠬᠠᠢ ᠠᠪᠬᠠᠢ}$; 1736–1795). At this time, a little more than 1,000 soldiers of the Sibe army were ordered to border defense service at the northwestern borders of the Manchu Empire, to the Yili River mentioned in Han Qikun's "family tree unification" story (Chin. Yili he 伊犁河; Sib. Ili bira ᠶᠡᠯᠢ ᠪᠢᠷᠠ), along today's Chinese-Kazakh border; the Sibe soldiers set out with their families to meet the emperor's command (WU – ZHAO 2008: 61). The resettlement is today known in China as the Great Western Relocation (Da Xi Qian 大西迁). In the 250 years since then – during which a wide range of political powers exchanged each other – these two groups gradually lost their original unity: a significant part of their language, writing system and traditions has been preserved only by the Xinjiang Sibe.

The separated Sibe groups got their first opportunity to reconnect in the 1950s. I will address the way they reestablished contact later on; here and now, I just want to point out that during this reconnecting, the representatives of the northeastern and northwestern Sibe looked at each other as "strangers". Firstly, because both their language and their culture was now different from each other. Secondly, because their shared knowledge of a shared past was minimal. This is the point at which the family trees, as the carriers of knowledge of the Sibe's past, connect to the thread of my writing.

Sibe Family Trees

Among the Manchu and other peoples conscripted into the Eight Banners, family tree writing started after the development and introduction of the Manchu writing system (1629). To ensure that ethnic groups serving in the Eight Banners are able to authenticate their rank and preserve their identities, Manchu emperors encouraged the tracing of genealogies. Starting in the first third of the 17th century, in order to advance in the ranks and demonstrate their right of succession to a particular office, verification of one's descent was necessary (LI 2006:3–4). The visual inspection of the Eight Banners took place every three years: when boys reached 16 or 18 years of age, they were considered fit for duty. At this time, they all had to get registered by providing their ethnicity and official position (XINJIANG SHAOSHU MINZU GUJIBAN – BEIJING SHI MINWEI GUJIBAN 2003:3–4).

The earliest available written evidence of the folk practice of family tree writing comes from the reign of Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (Man. Elhe Taifin ᠡᠯᠡ ᠬᠠᠭᠢ ; 1662–1723) (LI

2006:Prologue 1). The Sibe, having been drafted into the Manchu Eight Banners, “inherited” and took over the Manchu writing system, and with it the practice of family tree writing.

In these times – if the relevant ethnographic literature can be trusted – all Sibe *hala* and *mukūn* had its own family tree, written in the Manchu language (HE-TONG 2004:364). Its writing and – when appropriate – distribution among the branches of the clan was originally the task of the clan chief, the *hala da* (GONG 2002:110). However, the terms that distinguished the different types of family trees, indicating whether a particular family tree is of a tribe or within that of a clan branch, are today echoed mostly in some Chinese idioms.¹⁶ In the Manchu/Sibe language, family trees are referred to with the expression *booī durugan* *ᠪᠣᠣᠶᠢ ᠳᠤᠷᠦᠭᠠᠨ*, which is the equivalent of the Chinese *jiapu* 家谱, i.e., family tree, translated into Manchu.

Formally, two variants of Sibe family trees can be distinguished: the so-called “Memorandum sheets”, written on linen or silk sheets, and the so-called “Memorandum books”, written in the form of books. In Chinese, the former is called *puḍan* 谱单, the latter *pushu* 谱书 (TONGJIA-WEN 2009:144).

Regardless of their type and form, Sibe family trees primarily enumerated the generations of the clan, starting with the first recorded ancestor. In addition to the names of ancestors and the order of descent between the lineage and the clan members, however, the most complete family trees also recorded the story of the given clan, along with the circumstances and the time of writing of the family tree. Furthermore, next to the names written on the family tree they sometimes added biographical data, too, such as the office the clan member held in the Eight Banners. In the documents appended to family trees, even regulations were recorded, in which the correct behavior and norms to be followed were set out for clan members. Common property issues and the registration of revenues and expenditures were also appended to the family trees. These documents, though not an integral part of the family tree but affixed to it, were handed down from generation to generation (GONG 2002:127). Additionally, family trees also played a key role in the commemoration of the dead, as shown in the above-quoted excerpt from Han Qikun’s “family tree unifying” story.¹⁷

Sibe family trees can therefore be viewed as particular material carriers of commemorations of the ancestors, as well as physical tools used to transfer knowledge of the past, the main function of which was to create and maintain identity.¹⁸

The Loss of Knowledge of the Past

In light of the above, it becomes evident why the 1764 Great Western Relocation caused such a big rift. Naturally, after the relocation there was no way for the separated clans

¹⁶ With regard to the different types of family trees, Chinese vernacular preserved these differences. For more detail on the issue, see: LIU 1959:25–26.

¹⁷ In connection with his research conducted in the early 1900s, Shirokogoroff also reported that the records he called “clan lists” had a religious aspect among the Manchu-Tungus nations (SHIROKOGOROFF 1924:57). Yan Yunxiang also wrote about a similar practice of sacrificing to the ancestors based on his research among the Manchus (YAN 1996:33).

¹⁸ This form of remembrance of the dead is what Jan Assmann calls “retrospective memory” (ASSMANN 1999:61).

to maintain the knowledge of their common ancestors and their common history. In this regard, the loss affected much more the displaced Sibe groups. By indicating the relocating ancestors as the first ancestors on their newly started family trees (TONG–WEN 2009:145), the relocated clans determined the fate of their knowledge of the past.

At the same time, though it was theoretically possible for the Sibe groups that remained in the northeast to maintain the memory of this pre-separation ancient past through this peculiar form of commemorating the ancestors, it was to no avail. By the 20th century, this knowledge became severely compromised. First by the great devastation affecting the family trees, which Shirokogoroff wrote about in his book on the Boxer Rebellion (SHIROKOGOROFF 1924:62). Secondly, because after the fall of the imperial dynasty in the northeast, the Manchu language was gradually lost and with it the ability to interpret the data recorded in the family trees, their translation into Chinese and the reconstruction of lost family trees becoming more difficult.¹⁹

However, the second great wave of forgetting ancestors and thereby their common past affected both separated Sibe groups. All this took place shortly after the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976), came to power in 1949. The establishment of the People's Republic of China was followed first by the “great leap” program (dayuejin 大跃进; 1958–1961), which led to the starvation of the masses, then the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Wuchanjieji Wenhua Dageming 无产阶级文化大革命; 1966–1976), which was aimed at the destruction of cultural values, the persecution of intellectuals, and the radical elimination of traditions. These were all cataclysmic historical events that affected China in general, but also brought about an irreversible setback in the traditional knowledge of the ancestors and the past within the two separated Sibe groups. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, many Sibe family trees were permanently destroyed; out of fear, clan members often burned them or buried them themselves, thereby permanently dooming the history of their clan to oblivion. And with the history of the clans, a significant part of Sibe history was lost as well.

However, all this still does not mean that the family trees had not survived, and that the significance of the knowledge of the ancestors necessarily diminished.²⁰ But until the beginning of the new millennium, only a single family tree survived which showed that the two Sibe clan branches torn apart in 1764 belonged together: the Manchu language family tree of the Hashūri clan. This is the one which Han Qikun's “family tree unifying” story is all about.

THE REVIVAL OF ETHNIC SELF-AWARENESS

Han Qikun's “family tree unifying” story – as is clear from the above cited excerpt – takes its readers first back to Han Qikun's childhood (the 1930–40s). Then it continues decades later, in the 1950s. In the beginning of that decade, in hopes of creating a

¹⁹ That there were attempts at all of this after the fall of the last imperial dynasty is evident from the research about Sibe family trees (HE – AN – HE – GUO – ZHANG – WU 2009).

²⁰ A 2009 study found that 10 family regulations and 111 family trees have been preserved (HE – AN – HE – GUO – ZHANG – WU 2009), both of which show a great diversity in respect to their shape, type, content, language and material carrier (NA 2005:227).

Chinese national unity, a draft of a trial program for the “feasibility of training ethnic leaders” (peiyang shaoshu minzu ganbu shixing fang’an 培养少数民族干部试行方案) was completed. The education of ethnic Sibe cadre also began within this framework (BAN 2010:107).

Six years later, in 1956, the Chinese Communist Party announced the launch of the “National Minority Social History Survey” (quanguoxing de minzu shehui lishi diaocha gongzuo 全国性的民族社会历史调查工作), which, being part of the central program for the employment of ethnic minorities (Ji 2004:1), primarily targeted the exploration of the living conditions of ethnic minorities living in autonomous ethnic areas. These objectives brought the opportunity for the Sibe, having been separated from each other for almost two hundred years, to reestablish contact for the first time since the Great Western Relocation.

The Role of the Manchu Language Family Tree of the Hashūri Clan in the Revival of Ethnic Self-Awareness

In July 1956, Han Qikun received authorization to join the delegates of Liaoning Province and travel to Beijing to attend the meetings convened by the Ministry of Education (Jiaoyu Bu 教育部). According to Han Qikun, it was at this time that he formulated the idea that in Beijing he might be able to contact Sibe students from Xinjiang:

“All the while I was thinking: the Central Academy of National Minorities²¹ is in Beijing; I wonder if it is possible that there are ethnic Sibe students from Xinjiang there? If there are, I will visit them, and I will ask them about the “Yili branch.” Then I telephoned the Academy of National Minorities, trying to contact them, and an ethnic Sibe student talked to me. We arranged to meet the next day. That next day, five ethnic Sibe compatriots came, two of them students at the Academy of National Minorities, the other three instructors at the Academy of National Minorities; there were some among them who worked at the Research Institute for Nationalities. (...) After meeting, I immediately asked them whether there was someone with the surname of Han, of the Hashihuli clan, among the Sibe in Xinjiang – to which they responded that there was, but added that it is unclear which Han family is the descendant of the branch I was looking for. Despite it turning out like this, all in all, the most important part is that I had successfully established a connection with the ethnic Sibe in Xinjiang.” (HAN 2004:12–13)

In the above excerpt, Han Qikun refers to a problem which is closely linked to the issue of language loss, and with it the loss of ability to translate Manchu/Sibe surnames into Chinese. For the Hashūri clan, it is as follows: when Han Qikun contacted the “compatriots” from Xinjiang, his clan branch that stayed in the northeast called itself the Hashihuli 哈斯胡里 clan. Its simplified, official, Chinese-language version became their surname Han 韩 as well. However, clan members no longer knew in the 1950s how their name was written in the Manchu language and exactly how it was pronounced.

²¹ Today’s Minzu University of China (Zhongyang Minzu Daxue 中央民族大学).



Figure 1. Han Qikun and the delegation visiting Shenyang in 1956: Su Deshan, Na Qintai (standing, left to right), Aleke, Han Qikun, Guan Xingcai and Fu Lishan (sitting, left to right). (Source: descendants of Han Qikun, private property).

Simultaneously, it was not known – and still cannot be accurately known – which of the clans living in Xinjiang was referred to by the Hasihuli clan name, and beyond it the Han surname, written in Chinese script, since in Xinjiang there are several clans who used the transcribed surname Han. For example, the Hajiri ^{ᠬᠠᠵᠢᠷᠢ} (Chin. Hanjili 韩吉里), the Haira ^{ᠬᠠᠢᠷᠠ} (Chin. Hayila 哈衣拉), the Hashūri ^{ᠬᠠᠰᠢᠬᠤᠯᠢ} (Chin. Hasihuli 哈斯胡里), the Hanggari ^{ᠬᠠᠩᠭᠠᠷᠢ} (Chin. Hangali 杭阿里), etc. (GONG 2002:31). In addition, the Xinjiang clans bearing the surname of Han understand that the Manchu clan names Hanggari and Hashūri designate branches belonging to one and the same clan (YONG 2005:140). In light of this, the uncertainty of the “compatriots” meeting Han Qikun is quite understandable.

In any case, the meeting, which Han Qikun describes as the first contact between the Sibe clans torn apart in 1764 (HAN 2004:12), did actually take place, and as a consequence, the reconstruction of the system of relations between “East and West” Sibe has commenced. In August 1956, following this first contact, a delegation arrived in the northeast from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, among whom were five Sibe: Su Deshan 苏德善, party leader of Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture (Bo’ertala Menggu Zizhizhou 博尔塔拉蒙古自治州); Aleke 阿勒克, head of the Sibe village Yiche Gashan in Huocheng County (Huochengxian Yiche Gashan Xibozu Xiang 霍城县伊车噶山锡伯族乡); Guan Xingcai 管兴才, Sibe poet; Fu Lishan 富里善, party leader of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture (Yili Hasake Zizhizhou 伊犁哈萨克自治州), and Na Qintai 纳勤泰, a doctor accompanying the group (NA – HAN 2010).

These five people, upon arriving in Shenyang, sought out Han Qikun (*Figure 1.*):

“At the time, my knowledge about Sibe ethnicity was very shallow, I could not bring up any issues during the conversation with them, so I visited some relatives from the Hashihuli clan that worked in the regional seat. The next day I met with them again, and I even brought with me the Hashihuli clan’s family tree written in the Manchu language, thinking it might be of some use.” (HAN 2004:13)

The second day after the arrival of the delegation, on August 26, 1956, at Han Qikun’s initiation a small symposium was convened. At this symposium, evidenced by the photos taken there, apart from Han Qikun and the five-member delegation, there were certainly present two Tibetan Buddhist lamas, Fuling’a 福陵阿 and E’erdengbu 额尔登布, two of Han Qikun’s close relatives, Han Desheng 韩德盛 and Han Zheng 韩正, as well as two students from Xinjiang studying in Shenyang, He Chang 贺昌 and Tuqishun 涂其顺 (NA – HAN 2010:2).

The family tree that Han Qikun presented to the delegation then and there was one of those family trees which Han Qikun’s descendants showed me as documentation upon my 2012 visit in Shenyang. This “family tree sheet” was written in the Manchu language, with only a single line of text in Chinese. This line runs on the right edge of the family tree, and according to its content, the family tree was made in 1872. The seven-line Manchu preface, which contains the history of the clan, is on the left side of the family tree.

Between this seven-line note and the Chinese text indicating the times and names of persons writing the family tree, there is a description of the clan’s order of descent, divided into 14 generations. Within it, the kin relationship between clan members is indicated by red lines drawn between the names. Next to the names, written in two different colors, there are notes here and there. Some of the ancestors’ position within the Eight Banners is indicated in red color, written in the Manchu language. In black color, also in Manchu, is indicated if an ancestor did not produce a male child. Under the names of such ancestors, the caption reads: “no descendants” (enen aku ʉ/ʉ/ʉ ʉ/ʉ/ʉ).

The only entries that are different, written in Manchu, in black color, can be found under the names of three ancestors. The first inscription is under the name of Usubu ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ, the first-born son of Yacibu ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ, the earliest ancestor of the clan, which says, “The descendants of Usubu are in Be ki”²² (Usubu i enen Be ki de bi ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ). The second and third entries are under the names of Darjan ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ, Yacibu’s sixth-generation descendant, and Walihai ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ, his eighth-generation descendant, and their content is the same: “He went to Ili” (Ili de genehe ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ/ʉ).²³

The interest of the Xinjiang Sibe delegation visiting Shenyang in 1956 was captured by the seven-line note on the left side of the family tree and the above records. The exact content of these was not known to Han Qikun at that time due to his loss of the Manchu language. Let us return to Han Qikun’s words again:

“As they caught sight of the family tree [in question, as described above], they became extremely happy: especially Guan Xingcai, the old man, who slapped his thigh in delight. Why? Mostly because he noticed two inscriptions on the family tree. One was the preface to the family tree, which says: “The clan initially lived in the Mo’ergen region, which belongs to Heilongjiang, and in the Yalu River Valley;²⁴ the ancestor is Yaqibu, who had two sons, the older was named Wusubu, the younger Wusumai (...). But the Xinjiang Sibe only knew that they resettled from

²² Subsequent studies identified the specific geographic name as Baiqibao 白旗堡 in Liaoning Province.

²³ The relevant inscriptions were also circled in red pen, the Chinese translation of the Manchu language subtitles are next to them; they are likely to have been made when the delegation from Shenyang translated the Manchu writings on the family trees for Han Qikun.

²⁴ The Yalu River (Yalu he 雅鲁河) is one of the tributaries of the Nen River.

Mukedun (Shenyang).²⁵ What they did not know is that the homeland of the Sibe in Mukedun (Shenyang) was in Heilongjiang, so this was a very pleasant surprise for them. The other is that on the diagram in the family tree they noticed an inscription under sixth-generation Da'erzha's name, which said, "He settled in Yili;" under eighth-generation ancestor Walihai's name it said: "He arrived in Yili." How is all this possible? [...] They were happy because the history of the resettlement of our ancestors to the Yili border region found written evidence in the family tree of our Hashihuli clan." [...] (HAN 2004:13–14)

At this symposium, among representatives of the northeastern and northwestern Sibe, and based on evidence discovered in the family tree of the Hashūri clan, a dialogue aimed at exploring the common past of the separated Sibe was started.

The Significance of Family Trees with Respect to the (Re)Construction of Sibe History

The compilation work for "A Brief History of the National Minority and Their Local History" (quanguoxing bianxie shaoshu minzu jianshi jianzhi gongzuo 全国性编写少数民族简史简志工作) began in 1958 ("XIBOZU JIANSHI" BIANXIEZU – "XIBOZU JIANSHI" XIUDINGBEN BIANXIEZU 2008:Preface 1–2). As part of this work, in 1959 two Sibe men born and raised in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region were commissioned to oversee the process of writing a comprehensive history of the Sibe; one of them was Xiao Fu 肖夫 (1924–1992), a high school history teacher, the other Ji Qing 吉庆 (1936–2006), head of the People's Government Office of the Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County (Chabucha'er Xibo Zizhixian Renmin Zhengfu Bangongshi 察布查尔锡伯自治县人民政府 办公室) (Ji 2004:2).

The first step for the two of them was to study the centrally mandated research methods concerning the history and society of ethnic minorities, along with relevant policy documents. The exact program of the research trip was conceived in the city of Ürümqi (Wulumuqi 乌鲁木齐), bearing in mind the need for Ji Qing and Xiao Fu to conduct research in both of the two large geographical areas inhabited by the Sibe – the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Manchuria. The main goal of the research was to collect as many documents and materials as possible relating to the history and culture of the Sibe preserved among the people, handed down generation after generation, in order to reveal the "historical development" of the Sibe (Ji 2004:2).

It was no accident, therefore, that in the process of (re)constructing Sibe ethnic history, Ji Qing and Xiao Fu's attention turned to the family trees: the clan stories recorded in them carried the possibility of sketching out the Sibe's history, while the appended family regulations hinted at folk customs – and with it ethnic identity. At the same time, the Great Western Relocation (as I mentioned above) had no trace in the family trees that were discovered and known at that time: those who were relocated to the west were not recorded by the northeastern Sibe, and among those relocated, the first generation of resettlers became the first ancestors.

²⁵ Since 1634, today's Shenyang city has been officially called Shengjing 盛京, known as Mukden in Manchu.



Figure 2. The „Yili branch.” (Source: descendants of Han Qikun, private property).

However, the family trees preserved by the Hashūri clan afforded the opportunity to (re) construct the common past of the Sibe; furthermore, they held the allure of the possibility of physical evidence of the Sibe torn apart in 1764 belonging together, and of the revitalization of Sibe ethnic identity. The realization of the “family tree unification,” however, was yet to come. Han Qikun recalled this period in the “family tree unification” story as follows:

About two months later, towards the end of 1956, I finally received a letter from Mr. Guan Xingcai. He told me that when they returned from Beijing to Xinjiang, he immediately visited all the *nirus* (villages) in the Autonomous District²⁶ to report on what he had seen in the internal parts of our country, all the while faithfully seeking the descendants of Hashihuli Da’erzha, until he finally found them in the Sixth village (in Qapqal County, the seat of government in the Autonomous County). In the letter he also enclosed a photo of members of three generations of a family belonging to the descendants of Da’erzha (Figure 2). Seeing the shape of their heads, their faces, their clothes, they were like facsimiles of the people in my village in my childhood; that is when the “Yili branch” mentioned and sought by the ancestors was finally found.

But a photo is just a photo, and I have yet to face the man, from the northeast the northwestern frontier is ten thousand lis away, is not it easier to talk about the encounter than to make it happen? I would have wanted it, I craved it [meeting them], but I never had an opportunity, and so did 25 years pass! (HAN 2004:14–15)

After a quarter of a century, however, all Han Qikun waited for seemed to become a reality. The Hashūri clan family trees survived the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution period too, and of the remaining family trees, they became the first evidence of the separated Sibe clans belonging together. And along with this, a symbol of the newly forming Sibe national identity.

²⁶ The original meaning of the Manchu word *niru* is arrow, but within the Eight Banners the word *niru* designated the basic unit of the banners (URAY – KÓHALMI 2000:6).

THE SHAPING OF SIBE NATIONAL IDENTITY

Following the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a new era began with respect to the (re)construction of Sibe history; this is when all Manchu language materials held in China's historical archives were systematically processed and translated into the Chinese language.

The central government tasked two young men born and raised in Xinjiang's Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County with conducting the research, who from that point forward dedicated all their energies to establishing and developing scientific research about Manchu-Sibe history: Wu Yuanfeng 吴元丰 (1956–), who in the meantime became the head of the First Historical Archives of China (Zhongguo Diyi Lishi Dang'anguan 中国第一历史档案馆), and Zhao Zhiqiang 赵志强 (1957–), who is now the department head of the Institute of Manchu Studies at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing Shehui Kexueyuan Manxuesuo 北京社会科学院满学所).

In 1975, Wu Yuanfeng and Zhao Zhiqiang applied for advanced studies in Beijing that trained cadres responsible for processing Manchu language archival materials (Manwen Ganbu Peixunban 满文干部培训班). Along with twenty-one other students from Beijing, Xinjiang and Heilongjiang, they continued their Manchu language studies for three years. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution ended just as they were finishing their studies, which prompted Wu Yuanfeng and Zhao Zhiqiang to take advantage of the emerging opportunities and deepen their scientific research (WU – ZHAO 2008:Preface 1–3).

Thus, starting from 1978, Wu Yuanfeng and Zhao Zhiqiang used all of their free time to begin a systematic review of archival materials, in search of data that might be relevant to Sibe history. The undertaken task proved to be far from simple, seeing that just in the former Ming-Qing Palace Museum Archives (Gugong Bowuyuan Ming Qing Dang'an Bu 故宫博物院明清档案部), today's First Historical Archives of China,²⁷ the number of materials relating to the Qing dynasty exceeds ten million.²⁸

The continued processing of archival materials, however, did not lessen the significance of the clan stories preserved in family trees collected among the people. This is due to the ideological and political changes following the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which were also determinants in Sibe ethnic nationalist aspirations.

The "Patriotic" Turning Point in Ethnic Nationalist Aspirations

Mao Zedong's death, and the launch of "Reform and Opening" (gaige kaifang 改革开放) brought, in principle, a new era in China: the era of building a "socialism with peculiarly Chinese characteristics" (Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi 中国特色社会主义), which continues to this day (CHEN 2010: 18). When Deng Xiaoping (邓小平; 1904–1997) came to power in 1976, he launched a number of programs that did not officially denounce Marxist tenets, just framed them differently (VAMOS 2009:38).

²⁷ The archive's name has changed several times since 1925; its current name was given in 1980.

²⁸ The majority of the material, about 80%, was written in the Chinese language; the number of Manchu language materials is close to 20%, but there are also preserved documents in Mongolian, Tibetan, etc. languages (NA 2005:31).

At the same time – as a result of the forces of nationalist ideology moving in opposite directions (CHANG 2010:16) – the political elite recognized the timeliness of changing the terminology that framed the nation-building ideology. Consequently, beginning in the 1980–90s, the term “patriotism” was meant to express the concept of national belonging, and patriotic sentiment became inseparable from the road to the creation of Chinese national unity (VAMOS 2009:62–63).

Thus, in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, Sibe ethnic nationalism came to a crossroads. On the one hand, the persons controlling the ethnic nationalist efforts had to remain true to the values along which these aspirations continued to unfold since the 1950s. On the other hand, they had to adapt to the state, which called for the patriotic “metamorphosis” of ethnic nationalist aspirations in service of the establishment of China’s national unity. This turning point is also behind the much discussed principle of “autonomy for loyalty” principle (VAMOS 2009:70). But where can this turning point be detected within the Sibe ethnic nationalist aspirations, and what role in all of this does Han Qikun’s “family tree unifying” story play?

To answer this question, one should know that the first step towards the culmination and legitimacy of Sibe ethnic nationalism was the establishment of learned societies providing an institutional framework for these aspirations. After Deng Xiaoping launched the “Reform and Opening” policy in the late 1970s, eleven such societies of great significance were founded:

- (1) the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regional Sibe Language Association (Xinjiang Weiwu’er Zizhiqu Xibo Yuyan Xuehui 新疆维吾尔自治区锡伯语学会) in 1980;
- (2) the Ürümqi Sibe Linguistic Society (Wulumuqi Xibo Yuyan Xuehui 乌鲁木齐锡伯语学会) in 1980;
- (3) the Yili Sibe Historical, Language and Literature Art Council (Yili Xibozu Lishi Yuyan Wenzhi Wenxue Yishun Xueshuhui 伊犁锡伯族历史语言文字文学艺术学术会) in 1986;
- (4) the Liaoning Province Sibe Historical Society (Liaoning Sheng Xibozu Shixuehui 辽宁省锡伯族史学会) in 1987;
- (5) the Liaoning Province Sibe Historical Society’s Dalian Branch (Liaoning Sheng Xibozu Shixuehui Dalian Fenhui 辽宁省锡伯族史学会大连分会) in 1988;
- (6) the Shenyang City Sibe Society of Friends (Shenyang Shi Xibozu Lianyihui 沈阳市锡伯族联谊会) in 1988;
- (7) the Qiqihar City Sibe Society of Friends (Qiqiha’er Shi Xibozu Lianyihui 齐齐哈尔市锡伯族联谊会) in 1988;
- (8) the Changchun City Sibe Society of Friends (Changchun Shi Xibozu Lianyihui 长春市锡伯族联谊会) in 1988;
- (9) the Harbin City Sibe Society of Friends (Ha’erbin Shi Xibozu Lianyihui 哈尔滨市锡伯族联谊会) in 1988;
- (10) the Jinzhou City Sibe Society of Friends (Jinzhou Shi Xibozu Lianyihui 锦州市锡伯族联谊会) in 1989;
- (11) and the Liaoyang City Sibe Society of Friends (Liaoyangshi Xibozu Lianyihui 辽阳市锡伯族联谊会) in August 1989 (NA-HAN 2010:612–613).

The list above makes it clear that following the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a single decade was enough for the wave of ethnic nationalism to sweep through all of the more significant Sibe-inhabited communities. In the spirit of these efforts, the Xinjiang

Uyghur Autonomous Regional Sibe Language Association was also established in 1980, as I note above. The first scholarly symposium of the Association took place in 1981, in the Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County. All major Sibe communities were represented at the symposium, and Han Qikun himself was among those invited.

The main topic of the symposium was the issue of preserving the Sibe language, but also discussed were questions of Sibe history, culture, education and literature. Han Qikun gave a lecture, *Overview of the Sibe Ethnicity in Liaoning* (Liaoning xibozu gaishu 辽宁锡伯族概述), in which he summarized all the problems and objectives that the northeastern Sibe were most concerned about (HAN 2004:15).

At the symposium, Han Qikun met Su Deshan, who was a member of the delegation that visited Han Qikun in Shenyang 25 years earlier. Han Qikun writes about their encounter as follows:

“As soon as we met, he immediately asked me: ‘Did you receive the letter sent to you by Guan Xingcai? And what about the family photo of the descendants of Hashihuri Da’erzha? I said I got everything.’” (HAN 2004:16)

As the story goes, one word led to another, and they decided that the next day they should seek out the Darjan offspring noted in the family tree. At the first meeting, Han Qikun could only speak with one man, the ninth-generation Wusheng 吴胜, but on the third day they set out together to meet with the numerous relatives waiting at Wusheng’s father’s, Manqian’s 满钱 house, about twenty of whom gathered in the courtyard to greet Han Qikun. From here on, let me quote the story again verbatim:

“Upon entering the house, I saw that some people were murmuring out there, I asked, what’s the problem? They said we should call a car so that an elderly aunt could come and meet me. I asked them how old she was, they said 84, to which I said that I should go to her instead. So I went with them to the elderly aunt’s house, where I first offered a benediction for peace upon all residents, then Wusheng introduced me to the elderly aunt. The old woman (...) asked: ‘Hashihuli?’ I said, yes. She asked again: ‘Did you come from Mukedun?’ I replied, yes. The old woman cried! I also cried! Everyone in the house cried! Then a man leaned over to the aunt’s ear and asked her in the Sibe language: ‘What is the name of the ancestor of our northeastern homeland?’ ‘Yaqibu’! The old woman uttered the words without hesitation. Alas, the aunt called out the name of our Hashihuli clan’s ancestor. Then I was really surprised. It seemed that the descendants of the ‘people of the Yili branch’ that I was looking for were actually found. (...) With Da’erzha’s offspring, I unified the family tree.” (HAN 2004:17–18)

The resulting unified family tree – preserved to this day by Han Qikun’s descendants – was finally completed in the form of a family tree book by 1987, in the Chinese language. In it they recorded both of the major branches of the Hashūri clan separated from each other. The book is covered in a blue jacket, gold writing indicating that this is the “Family Tree of the Hasihuli clan of the Sibe nation” (Xibozu Hasihuli shi pushu 锡伯族哈斯呼里氏谱书). The family tree has a five-page-long preface, written, presumably, in Han Qikun’s handwriting. Within it, in the short summary titled New introduction to the Hashihuli clan’s family tree (Hashihuli shi jiapu xin xu 哈什胡里氏家谱新序), Han Qikun, through the example of his own clan but actually speaking on behalf of his entire ethnic minority group, outlines the problem which the two large groups of Sibe had to face, both individually and collectively:

“By now, our family members have grown very numerous. Following the social development and the necessity life brings with it, many families have moved to another land; some do not know upon meeting each other that they are from the same clan; some clan members do not know the ranking within the clan; there are some who do not know who their grandfather is. And tracing their steps even further back, it is even more unclear which branch they belong to.”

So Han Qikun traced the story of his clan all the way back to the secession of the clan members, and even beyond, thus breaking a practice that had a centuries-old tradition among the Sibe. By also including the question of the past and future of all Sibe in the story of his clan’s family tree, he became the spokesperson for not only his clan but the common belonging of his entire ethnic group. This is why Han Qikun’s “family tree unification” story does not actually end here.

Between 1980 and 2008, within the framework of the above-mentioned institutions, the Sibe organized more than thirty symposia which addressed mostly the questions of developing the Sibe language, culture, as well as education (NA – HAN 2010:489). But there was one issue that was of major importance to all communities: drawing up an ever more accurate picture of Sibe history and adapting it to the new spirit of the new age, the spirit of patriotism.

Three years after Han Qikun’s “family tree unification,” in September 1989, there was another such symposium, titled Strengthening Patriotic Education and National Unity (Jiaqiang Aiguozhuyi Jiaoyu he Minzu Tuanjie Yantaohui 加强爱国主义教育和民族团结研讨会). This was followed in September 1991 by another symposium, Sibe Patriotic History Workshop (Xibozu Aiguo Lishi Yantanhui 锡伯族爱国历史研讨会). The former assembly was attended by 45 people, while the latter by 85 (NA – HAN 2010:618).

Attendees of both symposia examined those historical turning points which were thought to be useful in proving the patriotism of the Sibe. Thus the subject of Sibe participation in the 1911 revolution came up (see, e.g., MA 1994:175). They also highlighted the northeastern Sibe joining the patriotic forces during the Japanese occupation, as well as the courageous resistance of the Xinjiang Sibe during the Three Districts Revolution (San Qu Geming 三区革命).²⁹ Still, no other event garnered more attention than the Great Western Relocation.

A number of historic moments were highlighted as evidence of the patriotism of the Great Western Relocation. These included the role of the Xinjiang Sibe in turning the Yili land into a “granary”,³⁰ developing the country’s western border defense,³¹ and their

²⁹ For more on the Three Districts Revolution, see: DIMULATI 2008:10–11; Ji 2004:57–63; and HA 1997.

³⁰ According to available resources, in the early 19th century the Sibe farmed an area as large as 78,700 *mu* 亩 (1 *mu* = 1/15 hectares). The most important crops included wheat, corn, barley, millet, sunflower and tobacco. But alongside these, animal husbandry and horticulture was also exemplary (DIMULATI 2008:15).

³¹ Although of the military camps set up in the Yili region only one was named the Sibe camp (xibo ying 锡伯营), Sibe soldiers served in multiple camps. For example, after infectious diseases decimated the Solon camp twice – first in 1798 and then in 1834 – the Sibe were ordered to serve at the Solon camp (DIMULATI 2008:8).

fidelity in providing protection.³² Most importantly, however, they emphasized the fact that during the western relocation, the Sibe sacrificed their clans – and thereby their “ethnic unity” – for the homeland. Such a view of the Great Western Relocation affected both Sibe groups torn apart in 1764.

This emphasis on the idea of martyrdom is what gave wings to and made Han Qikun’s “family tree unification” story ever more well-known among the Sibe, whose symbolic power even Han Qikun himself was well aware of. It is thus not by chance that at the end of the story there is a toast, which speaks of the significance of the “unified” family tree of the Hashūri clan:

“The journey across tens of thousands of waters and through thousands of hills is so remote,
Sealed in the hearts of the Sibe nation (...).
Today the Hashihuli’s union
is the symbol of our nationality.”(HAN 2004:19–20)”

CONCLUSIONS

In China, the process of becoming a nation – just as in modern European nation-states – coincided with the process of writing the national history. Sibe ethnic nationalist aspirations arose parallel with this process, too, making memory a key evidence in the writing of Sibe history.

The objectivity of this history and its writers is, of course, in many places and in many respects questionable. On the one hand, there is the cardinal problem of historiography, which is the direct consequence of the influence of the prevailing ideological and political powers: the delicate issue of ministering to political legitimacy. In other words, the influence of imperium, which is at once the main obstacle and the shaper of historical memory (DUBY – LARDREAU 1993:63).

On the other hand, there is the debatable objectivity of personal testimony, the main source that fuels the history of ethnic minorities. In fact, “memoirs” compiled on the basis of recollections – sifting arbitrarily through the products of historiography controlled by the imperium – have themselves become the shapers of historical consciousness. Han Qikun’s “family tree unification” story is imbued with such historical consciousness-shaping power, which I detailed above, and which in fact ends with the description of the quoted toast.

The news of Han Qikun’s story and of the newly “unified” family tree spread quickly among the Sibe. Its importance only increased when following the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and parallel to the “unification” of the Hashūri clan’s family tree, historical scientific research discovered more and more documents regarding the Great Western Relocation, yet until the beginning of the new millennium, no other clans were able to successfully prove that their branches torn apart in 1764 belonged together.³³

³² The Sibe knowledge elite classifies here the 1860s Russian conflict, which was resolved by 1882 (see DIMULATI 2008:8–9), as well as any action against all the riots that took place in the southern parts of Xinjiang in the 1800s (GUO 2005:357–362).

³³ Since then, if the rumors can be trusted, two other clans “unified” their family trees – the publication of the “unified” family tree of one of them is expected in 2015–2016.

This, too, served to reinforce the symbolic nature of the reconstructed family tree of Han Qikun and the Hashūri clan members.

Meanwhile, since the emergence of Sibe ethnic nationalist aspirations, the political-authoritative frames limiting those efforts had not changed. Patriotism remained the buzzword, and consequently, Han Qikun’s “family tree unification” garnered state-level attention: since 2001, it has been regarded as the epitome of the last ten years of 21st-century socialist modernization (HAN 2004:65). This is reflected in the story having gone through several editions since then (see, e.g., NA – HAN 2010:289–299; HAN 2005), and having been expanded with clarifications appended to it. These clarifications – without delving into them at this point – served a dual purpose. On the one hand, they allowed Han Qikun to adjust the data recorded in the family tree to the Manchu language archival materials that have been processed in the meantime. On the other hand, they allowed him to put the so-adjusted family tree entries in the service of writing Sibe history.

In other words: Han Qikun’s “family tree unification” story served not merely and not primarily the purpose of personal self-concept and remembrance; by emphasizing a key event in communal history, it played a crucial role in shaping the national identity. However, it was not only extremely important because it provided evidence about the separated Sibe clans belonging together. Its importance lies much more in that it brought before the emerging Chinese nation the seemingly almost lost cause of the unification of the Sibe nation-bodies, taking an important step towards making the Great Western Relocation the evidence of martyrdom – as a tangible reality of an event in the ancient past which once separated the Sibe clans but has now become the symbol of the unity of Sibe “nationality”.

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