

One Nation Under Xi: How China's Leader Is Remaking Its Identity

The leader's nationalist effort to meld ethnic groups, an agenda increasingly central to his rule, is seen as a bulwark against internal divisions and threats from the West.

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The Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, meeting with members of ethnic groups in 2015. Yao Dawei/Xinhua, via Getty Images

Across Tibetan villages in southwest China, Communist Party officials have been spreading the top leader Xi Jinping's gospel of national unity: that every ethnic group must fuse into one indivisible China with a shared heritage dating back over 5,000 years.

[Thousands of officials](#) in Ganzi, a Tibetan region of Sichuan Province, have been paired with families to [collect information](#) and [give out](#) gifts of rice, cooking oil and [beatific portraits](#) of Mr. Xi — all to hammer home his message of an

encompassing Chinese identity, from Xinjiang in the west to the contested island of Taiwan in the east.

“In the future I’ll be a member of your family, too,” Shen Yang, the Communist Party secretary of Ganzi, called Kardze in Tibetan, told one household, according to [a local newspaper](#).

The nationalist impulse behind this campaign is increasingly central to Mr. Xi’s efforts to reshape China, with far-reaching consequences for education, social policy and politics. While appeals to the motherland have long been part of the party’s tool kit, Mr. Xi has taken the imperative to new heights, calling for a unified “community of Chinese nationhood” as a bulwark against threats at home and abroad.

As Mr. Xi prepares to claim a ground-breaking third term in power at a party congress starting on Sunday, he has in effect appointed himself China’s historian in chief, crafting a story — retold in museums, on television shows and in journals — that casts his authoritarian, centralizing agenda as a fulfillment of values rooted in antiquity.

In his vision, all Chinese people, regardless of ethnicity, are bound by cultural ties that reach back earlier than the first emperors. The implication is that anyone who defies Mr. Xi’s priorities is also betraying China’s ageless, sacred values.



Portraits of Mr. Xi and former Chinese leaders hanging on the house of a Tibetan family in 2020. The picture was taken during a media tour to Tibet organized by the Chinese government. Roman Pilipey/EPA, via Shutterstock

At a time when the United States, Russia, India and other countries have experienced their own resurgent nationalism, Mr. Xi's vision is also aimed at inoculating China against unwelcome influences, especially from the West. In May, Mr. [Xi told the Politburo](#), the party's top 25 officials, that Westerners often wrongly viewed China as just a modern nation-state.

"They don't view China from the vantage point of over 5,000 years of civilization," he said, using an often-used but [disputed](#) dating of its origins, "so it's hard for them to truly understand China's past, present and future."

At its extreme, Mr. Xi's insistence on a singular Chinese identity has led to charges of cultural genocide from scholars and foreign countries, citing the mass detention of Uyghurs and other largely Muslim groups in Xinjiang.

Other indoctrination efforts are underway among Tibetans, [Mongolians](#) and [Hui Muslims](#). Mr. Xi's message is also aimed at Hong Kong and at Taiwan, the island that has grown increasingly averse to Beijing's demands for unification. "Cultural identity is the deepest kind of identity," he [has told officials](#).

A decade ago, Ganzi was a center of protests by Tibetans who set fire to themselves, sometimes fatally, to denounce Chinese rule. The new campaign appears intended to eradicate any remnants of potential resistance.

The campaign is "about encouraging the family to think of ways of changing traditional thinking while retaining local cultural features," Wuji Tsering, a Tibetan hostel operator visited by officials in the campaign, said by telephone.

'The key is unity'

The relics, dug up in southwestern Sichuan Province, looked utterly unlike anything previously found in China. Enormous sculptures of heads with bulging, tube-shaped eyes. Gold masks with elfin ears. A 13-foot bronze tree, seemingly an object of worship.

One of China's most spectacular archaeological finds, the Sanxingdui site has been excavated since the 1980s, but has attracted a new burst of attention in the past two

years, after the discovery of [13,000 more artifacts](#). Many who see it ask the same question: What do these unearthly looking objects have to do with China?

“I think Sanxingdui might have come from aliens,” said Han Zhongbao, a tourist visiting a museum dedicated to the site. “I feel like Sanxingdui doesn’t have any connection with Chinese culture.”

The Chinese authorities have emphatically argued the contrary. The government has promoted the more than 3,000-year-old relics as proof that early Chinese civilization was more diverse than many previously assumed, yet fundamentally cohesive.



A sculpture from an exhibit about the Sanxingdui archaeological site. The government has promoted such relics as evidence that Chinese civilization goes back earlier than previously assumed. Feature China/Future Publishing, via Getty Images

“In ‘diversity in unity,’ the key is unity,” Sun Qingwei, an archaeologist at Peking University, told [Xinhua](#), the state news agency. “Sanxingdui civilization is one chapter in the formation of Chinese civilization, and it contains many cultural factors, but in the end it is integrated into Chinese civilization.”

Experts point to similarities between the materials and techniques used to fashion the Sanxingdui bronzes and those used by kingdoms of central China traditionally regarded as a cradle of Chinese civilization.

“Through this very specific, practical scientific evidence, we want to recover these connections one by one,” Li Haichao, an archaeology professor at Sichuan University who led some recent excavations, said in an interview. “‘Diversity in unity’ is not just an empty slogan.”

But other archaeologists argue that the ancient settlements don’t support China’s modern claim to be a united state reaching back millennia.

“There was no idealized nation before,” said [Wang Ming-ke](#), a Taiwanese scholar of ancient China who has studied the Sanxingdui site. Stories of national origin — in China and the world — are constructed by the authorities to consolidate power, he added. “And then they say, ‘This is where our culture, our civilization, our ancestors came from.’”

To Mr. Xi, these questions are loaded with political implications. Before the meeting in May on the origins of Chinese civilization, he held a Politburo [meeting in 2020](#) on “archaeology with Chinese characteristics.” In 2017, he and President Donald J. Trump [haggled](#) over whether China or Egypt had the older civilization.

“Only China has continued onward, unbroken as a culture,” [Mr. Xi told Mr. Trump](#) as they strolled through Beijing’s Forbidden City.



President Donald J. Trump and his wife, Melania Trump, in 2017 touring the Forbidden City with Mr. Xi and his wife, Peng Liyuan. During the visit, they haggled over whether China had the oldest civilization. Doug Mills/The New York Times

The government has poured increased funding into historical and archaeological research. The support comes with pressure for researchers' findings to reflect the official narrative. Projects should "reveal the formation and development of a diverse yet united Chinese civilization," says the [government's five-year plan](#) for archaeology.

The goal is to excite the kind of pride that Nie Yuying, a 17-year-old high school student, felt as she visited the Sanxingdui museum.

"They show the inheritance of Chinese culture," Ms. Nie said of the exhibits.

"We've been quite deeply influenced by Western culture and art," she added. "For the sake of our future development and so we don't forget our own roots, we must study this nation's past."

The Chinese government's efforts go far beyond Sanxingdui. It insists that books and displays about Tibet, Xinjiang and borderlands present them as ageless parts of China. Officials argue that [genetic](#) and linguistic links between Tibetans and Han Chinese, the country's dominant ethnic group, show that even the mountains of Tibet were conjoined to Chinese civilization thousands of years ago.

"The community of Chinese nationhood originally existed as a natural phenomenon, a natural essence, and only then did we give it a name," Li Hui, a genetics [professor](#) at Fudan University in Shanghai, [said in a recent lecture](#). "There was first the community and only then each ethnic group."

'Strangers in their own home'

Gyal Lo grew increasingly worried as this muscular vision of Chinese nationhood reached the remote towns and villages he regularly visited.

A Tibetan professor of education, he had traversed western China for decades, encouraging Tibetan administrators, teachers and families there to keep schooling alive in their native language and culture. His efforts, never easy, became increasingly fraught in recent years as schools moved to almost exclusively Chinese-language classes.

“A language is not just the grammar,” he said in an interview. “It carries our culture.”

Mr. Xi has sharply accelerated a drive to instill Chinese language and culture in ethnic minorities, most extensively in Xinjiang, but also among ethnic Tibetans and Mongolians.



Gyal Lo, a Tibetan professor of education, left China for Canada, fearing that his Tibetan ethnicity and educational activism made him a target of political suspicion. Brett Gundlock for The New York Times

Officials in Inner Mongolia, a region of northern China, detained parents who protested against the shift to an [all-Chinese curriculum in 2020](#). Last year, the Chinese Ministry of Education [issued orders](#) that preschool for all children from ethnic minorities be in Mandarin.

“For a long time our country’s ethnic work gave too much emphasis to ethnic minorities’ particularity, traditional culture and right to self-government,” Ma Rong, a sociologist at Peking University who has long championed stronger efforts to integrate minorities, wrote [in July in Global Times](#), a state-owned newspaper.

Mr. Xi’s government has been promoting officials who support that viewpoint. This year, it appointed Pan Yue to lead China’s National Ethnic Affairs Commission. From the 1950s until 2020, the commission was always led by an official from an ethnic

minority. But Mr. Pan and his immediate predecessor are both Han, and Mr. Pan has energetically taken up the idea of a shared identity rooted in the ancient past.

“Chinese civilization has never been interrupted, and its foundation lies in a great unity,” Mr. Pan said in [a speech last year](#). “Historically, China has not lacked a diversity of ethnic groups and religions, but no matter how diverse these groups, they must through their shared fates always merge into one.”

The Tibetan educator, Mr. Gyal Lo, 55, began his efforts over two decades ago, when the Chinese government was more relaxed about ethnic policy, and schools in Tibetan regions often taught children in their own local language.

Mr. Gyal Lo said he hoped that Tibetan children could first learn their local language — Tibetan is actually a wide family of dialects — and then begin to master standard writing and speech.



A photo of Mr. Gyal Lo working in China teaching the Tibetan language. Brett Gundlock for The New York Times

Under Mr. Xi, the space for local languages shrank and shrank. Schools increasingly demanded that pupils be educated almost exclusively in Chinese. Since 2016, growing numbers of Tibetan children, as young as 4 or 5, have been sent to boarding

schools to accelerate their Chinese language immersion, Mr. Gyal Lo said. He saw the effects when children returned home for the weekend.

“It felt like they became strangers, guests, in their own home,” Mr. Gyal Lo said. “They stay away instead of engaging in the conversation and physically touching their parents.”

Mr. Gyal Lo left China in late 2020, after his teaching contract at a university in Yunnan Province was terminated. He said he feared that his Tibetan ethnicity and educational activism made him a growing target of political suspicion. He now campaigns from Canada, where he previously studied, to end China’s compulsory boarding schools for Tibetan children.

“For a little while we had a little bit of space to do our own approach,” he said. “Now we can speak of school education in Tibet, but we can no longer say there is Tibetan education.”

Honoring the Yellow Emperor

In a narrow, lush valley in eastern Zhejiang Province, hundreds of officials and their guests gathered this month for a ceremony to [honor the Yellow Emperor](#).

Horns and a drum sounded. Soldiers laid baskets of flowers for the emperor, a mythical deity-king known as the forefather of the Han people. Dozens of performers in flowing robes sang and danced. A giant dragon was released into the sky.

“How great our ancestor, who laid the foundation for 5,000 years of Chinese culture,” the local mayor, Wu Shunze, intoned. He included a dedication to Mr. Xi.

Nation-building spectacles like this one — grandiose, often far-fetched recreations of ancient rituals — have grown larger, more elaborate and more prominent across China.

Mr. Xi’s nationhood drive is also aimed at building unity among China’s Han people, who make up 91 percent of its population. Officials see state-managed nationalism — organized, scripted, contained — as a tool to channel public sentiment and maintain a united front in the face of growing hostility, especially from Washington and its allies.

It is the driving force behind Mr. Xi's attempt to fold Taiwan into China. At his Yellow Emperor ceremony, Mr. Wu promised that unification with Taiwan was "unstoppable."



In China, ceremonies in April celebrated the Yellow Emperor, a mythical deity-king known as the forefather of the Han people, the country's majority. Ma Jian/Visual China Group, via Getty Images

"In this view, the party is the arbiter of all Chineseness," said Geremie R. Barmé, a Sinologist in New Zealand.

A risk is that the government can lose control of nationalism, even as it encourages the emotion. This summer, Chinese social media users — dismayed that Beijing did not forcibly stop the House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, from visiting Taiwan — [erupted in anger](#). They complained that the government's swaggering rhetoric had misled them to expect military action, and mocked the Chinese Army as weak.

Beijing raced to bring the ire back within its preferred contours. After Ms. Pelosi's visit, it [issued a policy paper](#) emphasizing bloodlines and cultural ties to restate its view that Taiwan had always been part of China. China's foreign minister said Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, had "betrayed the ancestors." Another official

pointed to noodles served in Taipei as proof that Taiwan was China's "long lost child."

Yang Chen, a pharmaceutical company worker who helps organize an annual ritual honoring the Yellow Emperor near Zhengzhou, in central China, said that he hoped more people from Taiwan would take part in such rituals.

"That's good to acknowledge that you're Chinese, to first find something in common in culture," he said before hesitating about whether such symbols could win over Taiwan. "But then again, wasn't there that thing a while ago about Pelosi going there?"

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