

# Multiculturalism and Museums in China

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# Multiculturalism and Chinese Museums

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## National Minorities and Chinese Society

Many people will recall this scene at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games: a group of children represented China's 55 minority groups by wearing regional costumes and holding their country's flag during the opening ceremony [fig. 1]. Such symbolic performances representing diverse ethnic groups in China are not restricted to international audiences but have been long-observed traditions in state level events as well. Since the time of Mao Zedong, minority cultures have been made a central part of symbolic national events. For example, at the ceremony for the 60th anniversary of the National Foundation of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2009, ethnic minority issues were such an important theme that the chairman of the PRC joined in to dance with the minority dancers by holding hands with a Tibetan dancer.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of *shaoshu minzu*<sup>2</sup> (ethnic minorities) has been a complicated one for Chinese leadership since the formation of the PRC in 1949. The founding leaders of the PRC were aware of such concerns in China and established their government by acknowledging the equality of different minority groups who had been discriminated against throughout Chinese history. For this reason, shortly after its founding in 1949 the PRC government began the task of officially defining minority groups and establishing administrative regulation of them.

Interestingly, however, while I was staying in Beijing in the spring of 2008 I read a newspaper article outlining the need to build a national museum of China's ethnic minorities noting that a desire to accelerate the project had been conveyed at the recent meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Because China often trundles out minority groups in costumes to represent the unity of the nation and the harmony among the various *shaoshu minzu*,<sup>3</sup> and since China has a long history of using museums at the national level for propaganda purposes, the lack of a museum for *shaoshu minzu* does not seem consistent: "although Beijing already has hundreds of different types of museums, there is not any national level *minzu* museum<sup>4</sup> which has the capacity to fully display the colorful culture of the Chinese *shaoshu minzu*."<sup>5</sup>

Contributing to an explanation of this inconsistent situation are reports found in the foreign press which reveal that the performance by the ethnic minorities during the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games was not authentic.<sup>6</sup> In these reports the foreign press alleges that the participants dressed in 55 different ethnic costumes were not actually from the ethnic groups they represented despite the fact that the official guide to the opening ceremony indicated that they were. In fact, the children were performers from the Galaxy Children's Art Troupe, an artistic group comprised of children drawn entirely from the dominant Han nationality (who make up more than 90% of the country's 1.3 billion people). In other words, the performance functioned simply as a living display of 55 different ethnic costumes instead of as an event that allowed members of the *shaoshu minzu* to participate in the Olympic Games.

This event symbolically shows the status of nationality issues in China. The organizing committee of the Beijing Olympic Games was more interested in the presentation of its colorful and exotic ethnic cultures than in enhancing its core values of equality and diversity by giving *shaoshu minzu* the opportunity to participate in the ceremony. It was reported that the Olympic Games Vice President Wang Wei answered that he did not know exactly where these children were from and added that it is very typical for Chinese performers to wear traditional apparel from the different ethnic groups. He added that "they will wear different apparel to signify people are friendly and happy together."<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I will provide general background information on ethnic diversity in China and analyze China's official discourse of being a "unified country of diverse nationalities" in the context of museums. I will conduct two distinct analyses. First, I will present the history, development and current situation of the *minzu* museum in China. Second, I will discuss the assertion that "China has no national level *minzu* museum."<sup>8</sup>

## Background Information on Chinese National Ethnic Groups

China consists of a large number of diverse ethnic groups. As shown in figure 2, the PRC officially recognizes 56 distinct ethnic groups. However, the proportions of the different *shaoshu minzu* are very unbalanced. According to data collected in 2000, the largest ethnic nationality

group, which comprises about 92% of the total population (or 1.3 billion people), is the *Han* nationality. The remaining 8% (or about 104 million people) consists of 55 different groups, which are officially called *shaoshu minzu*. The largest minority nationality group in terms of population is the *Zhuang* (representing about 1.2% of the total population) followed by the *Man* (about 0.8%) and *Hui* (about 0.7%) [fig. 2].<sup>9</sup> However, the categorization of the *shaoshu minzu* is not based on self-determined or self-reported ethnic identities but is intended to classify people by “scientific” criteria in order to make them manageable under state control.<sup>10</sup> The determination of ethnicity is based on four criteria, namely common language, common territory, common economic base, and common psychological character, which comprises the Stalinist-Leninist national policy founded on evolutionary theories of state development.<sup>11</sup>

Officially, the PRC government emphasizes both diversity and unity. It declares China a unitary multinational state (*tongyi de duo minzu guojia*), which easily conceals the inequality among different *shaoshu minzu*.<sup>12</sup> The celebration of China’s 55 *shaoshu minzu* in pageants often presents them as objects of curiosity, silently contributing to the country’s self-image as a harmonious and multiethnic society. *Shaoshu minzu*, though small in population, are scattered over vast areas. In many cases, people of the same nationality live together, comprising autonomous regions and municipalities. In particular, *shaoshu minzu* tend to be concentrated in provinces and autonomous regions located on the margins of Chinese territory, both geographically and socially. Overall, *shaoshu minzu* are regarded to be poorer and less educated than their Han countrymen and most people of the Han nationality do not have many chances to interact with or consider ethnic minority people.<sup>13</sup>

## A Brief History of Museums in China

The concept of the museum in Chinese society has been laden with nationalistic characteristics from the first time it was introduced. During the late Qing dynasty, which marked the last imperial reign in Chinese history, the idea of the museum was introduced in the mid-nineteenth century by high ranking officials who traveled to European countries as a way to learn how to modernize and empower imperial China against the pressure of imperial powers overseas.<sup>14</sup> However, despite the imperial officers’ position on the importance of establishing a national museum, the Qing government could not afford one. The leaders of the Republican Era, the political regime that overthrew the imperial Qing dynasty in 1911, seem to have been acutely aware of the role museums could play in establishing the

legitimacy of the ruling powers. Great efforts were made to establish the first national level museum in China, namely the Central Museum (*Zhongyang Bowuyuan*) beginning in 1933.

According to Chinese textbooks,<sup>15</sup> the first Chinese museum was the Nantong Museum established in 1905 in Zhejiang province, which was a commercialized city but was not politically important in those days. The Nantong Museum was founded by Zhang Jian (1853—1926), a famous industrial entrepreneur and social reformer, when China was undergoing rapid historical changes. This museum has been highly praised for its effort to realize Chinese patriotic modernization.<sup>16</sup> While there were museums founded by foreigners and missionaries<sup>17</sup> before the Nantong Museum was constructed,<sup>18</sup> they were not considered “Chinese museums,” despite being established in Chinese territory. This idea that the Nantong Museum is the first museum of China was not questioned in China; many conferences were held and books published to commemorate the centennial of the Nantong Museum’s establishment. This museum was run privately, which is notable given the fact that this is the only non-government museum mentioned in the history of Chinese museums.

Apart from the Nantong Museum, the history of museums in China is mainly that of the state governed museum. It could be argued that both the leaders of the Republican Party and of the Socialist Party were aware of the important role of museums in establishing national legitimacy since the opening ceremony of a national museum was, for each regime, combined with a ceremony celebrating the anniversary of the regime’s foundation. In 1911, when the Nationalist Party subverted Imperial China, its leaders reinterpreted the Imperial collections as public patrimony to legitimize their power.<sup>19</sup> The National Peiping Palace Museum, which was transformed from its former function as the imperial residence in the Forbidden City, became the first national level museum in China. It was officially opened in 1925 on the fourteenth anniversary of the founding of the Republic of China.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, after the foundation of the PRC government by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, the leadership began to work on legitimizing their ownership of cultural patrimony. In 1951, the head of the Ministry of Culture announced that

The entire responsibility of museum endeavors is to promote the patriotic education of the revolution, and therefore the museum must educate the people to know more about their history and culture, so that they will love their country wholeheartedly while promoting political determination and the passion for the economic production. <sup>21</sup>

The first Council of Museum Work was held in 1956 to clarify that museums are institutions to be used “for propaganda and educational purposes of both the Party and the state,” as well as “for scientific research and to store important cultural materials and natural specimens.”<sup>22</sup> In the following four years, three national museums were opened in Beijing. They were the Museum of Chinese History, the Museum of Chinese Revolution and the People’s Revolutionary Military Museum. In addition, the Exhibition Hall of Agriculture and the Cultural Palace of Nationalities<sup>23</sup> were built. Altogether, these comprised five of the most important ten historical buildings from the early days of the PRC. Above all, it is notable that the opening ceremonies of these national level museums were held on the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the PRC.<sup>24</sup> This example shows how the museum was used politically in China and how important its symbolic role was to the PRC leadership.

As a result of the impact of the policies of the Cultural Revolution, which began in the late 1960s, museums were not fully operational during that period. In fact, in the early 1970s when the Cultural Revolution was at its most extreme, all the museums were closed nationwide for more than five years. During this time, museum personnel were sent to the countryside to perform physical labor.<sup>25</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s, museums and cultural institutions reopened and government works and policies relating to museums were resumed. From this point on, the number of museums increased almost explosively. The Memorial Museum of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance to Japan is a representative museum established during this Reform Period.<sup>26</sup> This period also marked the beginning of the reconstruction and renovation of provincial museums like the Shaanxi Museum. The number of museums nationwide was 349 immediately following the Cultural Revolution in 1978 and grew to 1,392 by the year 2000 [fig. 3].<sup>27</sup>

In 2008 the total number of museums in China was more than 2,300, which ranks China as having the seventh largest number of museums worldwide. In less than thirty years, between 1978 and 2008, the number of museums in China increased seven times over. One paper reports that in 1984, the year the growth rate was highest, 151 new museums were built. This is equivalent to one museum being built every 2.4 days.<sup>28</sup> Because the Chinese government aims to increase the number of museums to the same level as the most internationally developed states, which have on average one museum per two hundred thousand people, China was determined to increase the number of museums to 6,500.<sup>29</sup> In Beijing, the rate of museum construction and renovation was even higher; the number of museums was two in 1949 and it increased to 15 in 1965. In 2007, Beijing

had 143 museums, including a diverse range of museums like the National Museum of China, the National Palace Museum, the Capital Museum, and even the Museum of the Watermelon.<sup>30</sup>

## The History and Current State of the *Minzu* Museums

### The History of the *Minzu* Museums

What is a *minzu* museum (*minzu bowuguan*)? When one goes through Chinese articles and books on museums, one can find such terms as *minzu bowuguan* (*minzu* museum), *minzu lei bowuguan* (museums related to Chinese *shaoshu minzu*), or even *minzu bowuguan xue* (studies of *minzu* museums).<sup>31</sup> These terms refer to specialized museums focusing on the theme of *minzu* issues. In Chinese museum studies, however, the topic of *minzu* issues is barely dealt with. In the earliest museology textbook in China<sup>32</sup> no discussion of *shaoshu minzu* is mentioned in the list of examples of different specialized museums. Another list of museums made in 1983<sup>33</sup> includes natural science museums, history and archaeology museum (including memorials), university museums, societies of museum studies, and associations or universities offering museum education, but does not include any mention of the *minzu* museum. The book *Zhongguo Bowuguanxue Jichu* (*The Basis of Chinese Museology* 1990/2004), which is the only nationwide museum studies textbook issued by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, also does not mention the *minzu* museum as a subcategory. It is only in the *The Yearbook of Museums in Beijing 1995-1998*<sup>34</sup> where a subcategory of museums on *minzu* issues and on religion appears on the same level as the categories like history and archaeology museums, natural history museums, etc.

This term *minzu bowuguan* is mostly used by scholars who specialize in ethnic studies and by curators working at the *minzu* museums or the universities of nationalities (*minzu* universities). Although different ways of categorizing museums are introduced in museum studies textbooks, in official terms prior to 1988 museums in China were categorized as either specialized (*zhuan yexing*) museums, memorial (*jinianxing*) museums, or comprehensive (*zonghexing*) museums. According to the encyclopedia *Dabaike Quanshu* published in 1995, China has since changed its official categorization of museums into four groups, namely historical, fine art, science and technology, and comprehensive (*zonghelei*) museums, after consulting the international standard.<sup>35</sup> Yet this categorization did not become a nationwide standard, and the specific category of *minzu* museum still does not have a proper position in



the discipline of museum studies despite its importance in contemporary Chinese society.

In contrast to the history of Chinese museums in general, the history of *minzu* museums is not well established. Before the foundation of the PRC, the history of *minzu* museums was more closely linked to academia than to politics. It seems that the first museum that dealt with *shaoshu minzu* issues was the museum of Huaxi University (formerly Sichuan University). Due to its high level of academic research and its extensive collections, this university museum became one of the first well-known *minzu* museums.<sup>36</sup> Built in 1914 as a kind of natural history museum, it included an antiquities hall displaying objects from the cultures of several *shaoshu minzu*. Outside of museums in academia, the *Zhongyang Bowuyuan* (Central Museum) is one of the earliest museums to deal with *minzu* issues.<sup>37</sup> Although the museum did not specialize in *shaoshu minzu* themes exclusively, it did display objects from different *shaoshu minzu* (including arts and crafts).

The systematic development of the *minzu* museum began after the founding of the PRC. The preparation committee of the Central Museum of Nationalities was established and the State Bureau of Cultural Relics<sup>38</sup> decided to send out a notice on “the scope of collecting cultural relics from each of the brother national minorities” in 1950.<sup>39</sup> Beginning in 1954, *minzu shibie* (The Ethnic Classification Project)<sup>40</sup> sponsored scholars who collected objects of the *shaoshu minzu* while conducting political and cultural research to identify and categorize them. Objects collected during this period became the main collections of the Museum of Minzu University (Central University for Nationalities) and the Cultural Palace of Nationalities.<sup>41</sup>

In 1956, the PRC government decided to construct several museums in Beijing celebrating the tenth anniversary of the PRC’s founding, including a *minzu* museum. In 1956, the intended name of the *minzu* museum was the “Central Museum of Nationalities.” However, in 1958 the official name of the institution was changed to the “Cultural Palace of Nationalities.” Because museums in China are government organizations which do not open their internal archives and documents to the public, I could not find more clues as to the reason for this name change.

As a next step, the “twenty-year project on Chinese *minzu* museums” was enacted, including plans to build a central *minzu* museum in Beijing and five museums in the autonomous regions. However, this plan was not realistic due to political developments such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1950s and early 1960s) and the Great Leap Forward (1958—1963).<sup>42</sup>

Before 1959, there were three museums in the autonomous regions: the Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region Museum, the Guangxi Zhuangzu Autonomous Region Museum, and the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region Museum. However, these three museums were museums in name only and did not specifically focus on nationality issues. There was only one specialized *minzu* museum built in 1957, namely the Tujia and Miao Minzu Autonomous Prefectures Minzu Museum in Hunan province. Finally, in 1959 the Cultural Palace of Nationalities was built in Beijing, making it the first cultural institution specifically focusing on the *shaoshu minzu* as a national level (*quanguoxing*) institution.

After the long recession in cultural enterprises during the Cultural Revolution, a planning committee for the Minzu Museum of China was established in 1984. Six museums of ethnology (at the provincial level) have been built since 1985, namely the Heilongjiang Museum of Ethnology (1985) [figs. 6a, b], the Hainan Museum of Ethnology (1986), the Yunnan Museum of Ethnology (1995) [fig. 7], the Keerxin Museum (Inner Mongolian Museum of Ethnology 2004), the Guangxi Museum of Ethnology (2008), and the Museum of Ethnology inside the Guizhou Cultural Palace of Nationalities (1985). In addition to these museums, several university museums have been established at institutions such as Yunnan University and the Central University for Nationalities.<sup>43</sup> In 2006, the board of the Minzu Museum of China was established at the Academic Society of Chinese Museums.

The movement of establishing eco-museums in *minzu* regions<sup>44</sup> is a recent boom in the enterprise of Chinese museum projects. Eco-museums first originated in France, developed by George Henri Rivière and Hugues de Varine. This type of museum focuses on the identity of a place, is based on local participation, and aims to enhance the welfare and development of local communities. Because most Chinese *minzu* people live together with their own *minzu* group to form a small community, this provides a highly efficient setting for building eco-museum-type institutions. In 1997, the cultural heritage department of Guizhou province established the first eco-museum of China with the help of the International Committee of Museums (ICOM). In 2008, the state announced that it plans to increase the number of *minzu* eco-museums and folklore museums of each *shaoshu minzu* in order to allow each of the 56 nationality groups to have more than one museum.<sup>45</sup> In addition, a project to build eco-museums in each of the national minority regions is being carried out by government officials and scholars with the guidance from the Chinese government.<sup>46</sup>

### The Current State of *Minzu* Museums

Along with the minimal academic discussion on *minzu* museums,<sup>47</sup> the number of museums related to the subject of *shaoshu minzu* is very small. Just seven out of 33 provinces (including autonomous regions and municipalities) have a provincial level *minzu* museum.<sup>48</sup> According to a 2008 report by the State Nationalities Affairs Commission, the overall number of museums in *minzu* regions is now as many as 286, which comprises 12.4% of the total number of museums nationwide.<sup>49</sup> The total number of *minzu* museums which are under the control of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC is 163, which comprise only 7% of the more than 2,300 museums nationwide.<sup>50</sup> This proportion is far lower than would be expected given the relative size and population of the autonomous regions. Moreover, more than half of those museums have only “hanging doorplates” (*guapai*), which means they have only small, simple exhibit spaces that are not regularly open to the public as only a few non-specialist employees work there. These museums are not fully operational, as they usually lack storage space, collections, museum experts, academic research and new exhibitions and as a result have almost no visitors.<sup>51</sup> Barely half of the minority groups have museums representing their own ethnic group, even at the level of autonomous prefectures or counties. In addition, as shown in figure 4, except for the Cultural Palace of Nationalities (if it can be called a museum), all of the other *minzu* museums above the provincial level were established after the 1980s.

The geographical distribution of the *minzu* museums is also skewed. As seen in figure 4, seven out of 33 provinces have *minzu* museums. There are two in the autonomous regions, two in municipalities and three in the provinces. Beijing, the capital of China, has two *minzu* museums. Two autonomous regions, namely the Inner Mongolia and the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous regions, have *minzu* museums, although China has five other autonomous regions with no *minzu* museums. The three provinces Guizhou, Yunnan and Heilongjiang have the highest concentration of minority population. As can easily be seen in figure 5, museums focusing on *shaoshu minzu* are mostly located in *minzu* areas where ethnic minority people have roles as the authorities and where national minorities live together. No other big municipalities, except Beijing, have a similar museum. Even the two *minzu* museums in Beijing, namely the Cultural Palace and the National Minzu Museum of China, are neither influential nor highly equipped. With the exception of the museums built in the autonomous regions, all of the provincial level museums are found in provinces where they have large minority audiences. In sum, these statistics show that the target audiences of the *minzu* museums are the minority

populations themselves, not individuals of the Han ethnic groups nor the other *shaoshu minzu*.<sup>52</sup> This implies that museums focusing on the *shaoshu minzu* are not built to educate and promote an understanding of the diverse cultures inside the boundaries of China to the people of the majority ethnic group who do not have many opportunities to explore and understand other ethnic people.

In 2008, the Chinese government established a rating system<sup>53</sup> for museums and distinguished a total of 83 first tier museums. In 2009, 171 second and 288 third tier museums were also distinguished. Five museums of the 83 first tier museums are located in the autonomous regions, yet only one, the Yunnan Minzu Museum, is a museum focusing on *shaoshu minzu* issues. The same situation can be found in the list of the 171 second tier museums since the Heilongjiang Minzu Museum was the only *minzu* museum included. Of the 288 third tier museums, five *minzu* museums are included, yielding a total of only seven museums recognized in the rating system out of the 163 total *minzu* museums. In other words, 156 *minzu* museums are acknowledged by the state as not having sufficient resources, staff, or collections to be considered full-fledged museums and are instead described as just “having doorplates.” It is noteworthy that none of the national level museums specializing in *shaoshu minzu*, that is to say, the Cultural Palace of the Nationalities and the National Minzu Museum of China, are included in the museum ratings list; this will be the subject of the next part of this paper.

Despite the fact that the districts where these *minzu* museums are located have, on the whole, worse economic situations than those of other districts, *minzu* museums are deprived of opportunities to get governmental support intended for the recent museum boom. First, the nature of the collections of the *minzu* museum differs from that of the collections of the mainstream museums. Even the definition of the *minzu wenwu* (cultural relics of the ethnic minority groups) is not clearly delineated. This reflects the fact that the majority of museums in China are focused on the topics of archaeology and history. The criteria suggested by the government for financial support are based on those more prevalent types of museums and, as such, make it difficult for the *minzu* museums to meet the required standards. In other words, archaeological and historical objects are regarded as scarce, old, symbolizing high class, artistically beautiful and showing evidence of technical skill, while the collections of the *minzu* museums are mostly dated after the nineteenth century and have folkloric characteristics which are thought to have less cultural or even economic value both in popular perception and according to professional appraisals. Because of this tendency, the collections of the *minzu* museums cannot be appraised by the same standard as the collections held by

other museums.

Second, despite the differences between the characteristics of folkloric *minzu* objects and other museum collections which are historical and archaeological, the governmental standard for the first tier *minzu* objects have not yet been established. The State Administration of Cultural Heritage has developed a set of criteria for cultural relics which focuses on historical and archaeological collections and has already conducted a nationwide appraisal of these objects.<sup>54</sup> However this standard is not applicable to most of the *minzu* objects and thus most of the *minzu* objects cannot become first tier cultural relics.<sup>55</sup> As the numbers of high grade cultural relics owned by each institution are part of the standard for national museum ranking, *minzu* museums remain outside of the tier system. Because the official ratings are acknowledged by state governments as an important authority in Chinese society, the *minzu* museums are deprived of this opportunity to improve their reputations.

Human resources at the *minzu* museums are also of lower quality than those at other museums. As can be seen in figure 8, the Inner-Mongolian Minzu Museum has 37 employees. Only 20 of these are permanent employees and only two of them are highly ranked.<sup>56</sup> The Hainan Provincial Minzu Museum has only 24 employees, including two high rank, six middle rank and ten entry rank employees.<sup>57</sup> This situation is no better at national level museums. The museum department of the Cultural Palace has 26 employees and the National Minzu Museum of China has about 20 employees (but only two who are able to conduct academic research).<sup>58</sup> These numbers reflect the inferior status of the *minzu* museums' circumstances compared to those of other museums. For example, the Capital Museum in Beijing, which is at the same provincial level, has a total of 87 museum personnel of high and middle rank out of the approximately 300 permanent employees.

In sum, the existence of these museums is a largely symbolic gesture of the government's recognition of these minority groups and can hardly be seen as active acceptance or encouragement of the cultural diversity of these different ethnic groups.

## The Project of Building a National Level *Minzu* Museum of China

### "The Capital of China Lacks a National Level *Minzu* Museum"

Before I began full-scale fieldwork in 2008, I had been puzzled by the inconsistency of information available on the Minzu Museum of China. For example, while I was able to find the name Chinese Nationalities Museum or National Minzu Museum of China on one list of museums, I could not find it in the records of the yearbook of the museums<sup>59</sup> or in any museum guide books. Even on the internet, very limited information was available. A homepage address was given, yet it directed me to a page with an error message. On one website, the year of the institution's establishment and basic information about the organization were provided, yet no address nor phone number. After I was able to get an address for the museum, I found that no one in the area had ever heard about the museum. When I asked personnel at other museums, they told me that there was no institution called The Minzu Museum of China. They said that if there was any such museum, it would be the Cultural Palace of Nationalities. However, the Cultural Palace of Nationalities did not have a permanent exhibition open to the public. In addition, I found an institution under a similar title, the *Zhonghua Minzu Bowuyuan* (China Ethnic Museum or National Minzu Museum of China)<sup>60</sup> which is regarded as a private cultural theme park by most Chinese people [figs. 9a, b]. As many Chinese museums use different titles over time, I concluded that there was no actual national level *minzu* museum in China. It was only when I was invited to the Annual Meeting of the Minzu Museum in China in November 2008 that I began to understand the true situation.

### The Cultural Palace of Nationalities: A Symbolic Cultural Institution

The Cultural Palace of Nationalities is the more popular English name for *Minzu Wenhua Gong*, but the official title is sometimes translated as the China Museum of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities. As I have stated earlier, the museum was opened in Beijing on the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC along with five other museums.<sup>61</sup> It is a huge complex with a floor plan of 32,000 square meters. Its main building includes a 13-floor tower which rises 67 meters high. The building's east and west wings are surrounded by additional hallways stretching to the north central exhibition hall [fig. 10]. However, the institution is not exclusively a museum building. When it was built, it included three distinct divisions: the museum (the name was changed to the "exhibition hall" in 1978 and again



to “museum” in 1997), the library, and the *wenwuguan* (cultural entertainment hall). The institution has been called “the first national level organization”<sup>62</sup> which focuses primarily on the activities of the *shaoshu minzu* (*minzu huodong*). It currently has a museum, a library, an art institute, an office for the Society of the Annals of Nationalities Issues, an exhibition hall, a performance hall, a friendship store for *shaoshu minzu* products (*minzu youyi shangchang*), and a hotel with an attached restaurant which are intended to support functions related to *shaoshu minzu* issues [figs. 11a, b, 12].

Museums focused on the topic of *minzu* or *minzu bowuguan* are directly controlled by the *Minwei*, a Chinese acronym of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC, which is different from other types of museums that are under the absolute control of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. However, *minzu* museums still have to follow the State Administration of Cultural Heritage with regard to work regulations (*yewu*), issues related to policy, while financial support and human resources are administrated by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission. This implies that *minzu* museums are frequently affected by political decisions made by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC.

As it is controlled by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and was built to focus on *shaoshu minzu* issues exclusively, the Cultural Palace of Nationalities has been administered in an overtly political way. Although it often calls itself a *minzu* museum, the most important element of this title of the Cultural Palace is “nationalities” (*minzu*) rather than “museum.” This is the first reason that its status as a national level *minzu* museum was easily denied by the leaders of the Minzu Museum of China and by government officers. As can be seen in the “Notice on Collecting of Objects of the Cultural Palace for Nationalities and Library by the Central People’s Government,” it is clear that the Cultural Palace for Nationalities was created for political purposes:

The main responsibility is to propagate the glorious victory of the Communist Party’s *minzu* policy and the successful accomplishments of the ten-year *minzu* campaign; to reflect the political and economic accomplishments of the *shaoshu minzu* under the Communist Party’s leadership, particularly the great achievements following the Great Leap Forward; to introduce the superior tradition of the *minzu* people’s labor, braveness and great wisdom, as well as their contribution to the motherland’s history and culture, to the revolutionary struggle, and to the construction of socialism; to broaden the provision of research and reference materials on *minzu* matters to all workers in the *minzu* sector and related divisions; to educate the

people of each *minzu* with patriotism and internationalism through collections, displays, exhibits and books; to stabilize the motherland’s unification and enhance the *minzu*’s solidarity; and to establish socialist education, and thus elevate the assertiveness of the *shaoshu minzu* in participating in the construction of the great socialist motherland.<sup>63</sup>

Today, government and political meetings involving *shaoshu minzu* issues are held at the Cultural Palace, and leaders of minority groups must stay there when they make official visits to Beijing.<sup>64</sup> In particular, certain spaces are used as residential houses for the Dalai Lama and Banchan Lama of Tibet when they stay in Beijing. By requiring leaders of minority groups to stay at the Cultural Palace, the institution provides a stage where the movements of minority group leaders can be monitored or tracked—thus serving a kind of surveillance function.

Before 1981, the exclusive role of this institution was to propagate the Party’s and the government’s policy on the *shaoshu minzu* and promote the development and progress of the national minorities after the foundation of the PRC.<sup>65</sup> As this institution was highly important politically, the highest leaders of the PRC participated in 1959 in the opening ceremony of the museum and its new exhibition on the tenth anniversary of the nation’s foundation.<sup>66</sup> The opening exhibition of the Cultural Palace was “Ten Years of Accomplishments on *Minzu* Issues” which was designed to show evidence of successful *minzu* policies led by the Communist Party and the PRC government. Political use of the museum lasted even after the Reform Era; many different types of political exhibitions were installed, including a photo exhibit entitled “The Chairman Mao Is Alive in My Heart Forever,” and visits by political leaders to this exhibit were frequently broadcast as television news events.

Both the nature of its exhibits and the other uses of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities show that its primary function is not that of a museum. In reality, it is an assemblage of institutions that works in and provides space for *shaoshu minzu*-related cultural sectors. Based on the interviews I conducted in 2008, it appears that the Cultural Palace’s multiple departments mentioned above seldom interact or collaborate, despite sharing a focus on *minzu* issues.

Strictly speaking, the Cultural Palace of Nationalities is an institution that includes an exhibition hall rather than a museum, despite the change in the official title of the organization. The institution was called the Cultural Palace of Nationalities when it was established in 1959, but this was changed to the Exhibition Hall of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities in 1979, and then to the Museum

of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities in 1997.<sup>67</sup> This name change implies that the museum was not the main department of the organization at least until 1997. The fact that “Ten Years of Accomplishments on *Minzu* Issues” was the only exhibition before the 1980s<sup>68</sup> is more evidence of this fact. Even after 1997, the operation of the institution was not that of a non-profit museum because the space was often rented out for profitable or commercial uses—including the sale of regional products (without educational displays), marketed as “exhibitions” of the items in question. This can be seen as a means of overcoming the discontinuation of financial support from the government, a method which other museums also used as a way to make up for financial shortages.<sup>69</sup> However, based on my 2008 interviews, the Cultural Palace of Nationalities seemed to illustrate an extreme case of becoming a “profit-driven” institution through such commercial events and arguably neglected its responsibilities as a museum, including losing many of its collections as a result of carelessness.<sup>70</sup> The operations of the Cultural Palace thus gave the impression to many Chinese people that it was only a space where they might buy products such as silks and furs—specialty goods mostly produced in minority regions.

While *zhanlan* (exhibition) is the word used most often to describe public museum offerings, the Cultural Palace of Nationalities often uses the word *zhanyan* to describe its offerings. *Zhanyan* represents a combination of the words “exhibition” and “performance.” By using *zhanyan*, the Cultural Palace of Nationalities implies that its purpose is the distribution of artistic creations, which is different than most museums whose main goal is to share knowledge. Even during the 2008 Olympic Games, when other national level museums displayed national treasures and blockbuster-type exhibitions, the exhibits of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities were not emphasized.

Finally, it is the Cultural Palace of Nationalities, not the museum itself nor the museum department of the Cultural Palace, which is considered to be a national level institution. This is extremely important in Chinese society where the rank of an institution determines its power in political relationships. Moreover, because museums are state-run institutions and the Chinese government is a highly stratified organization, the rank of a museum is directly linked to the rank of the government department to which it belongs. This rank factor then influences financial support for the institution and the control it has over other museums (whereby higher ranked museums can easily borrow or even entirely appropriate collections from lower level museums).<sup>71</sup> As the museum at the Cultural Palace is only a sub-department of the Cultural Palace, the museum cannot operate at the same level as an institution of national rank. Thus, the museum of the Cultural Palace of

Nationalities is not a national level museum that has control over other *minzu* museums nationwide and the director of the museum does not have as much authority as does the director of the National *Minzu* Museum of China.

#### The National *Minzu* Museum of China: An Authoritative National Level *Minzu* Museum

As I have discussed, although the Cultural Palace for Nationalities was established in the 1950s as a national level institution to symbolically represent the national minorities and is listed in the Museum Annals as a museum, it is often criticized as not deserving the rank of “national level museum” and it is not popularly regarded as a museum institution with any authority. This point provided justification for the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC to build another national level institution under its control, which is a highly political action. This action closely reflects the rank and power structure of the Chinese government because creating another national level organization under the management of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC would promote its authority within the entire hierarchy of the PRC. Although the Cultural Palace of Nationalities does not have the title of “museum” and does not operate as a museum exclusively, it has always been included in the list of Chinese museums and in the Museum Annals.<sup>72</sup> In other words, denying the museum status of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities, rather than working to refine or strengthen its museological role, was an intentional move by the Commission to justify building and maintaining another national level organization of its own. Thus, the Commission’s proposal is not to eliminate the Cultural Palace of Nationalities; instead, the Commission insists that the museum functions of the institution will become an independent organization while the other departments will remain as they are. In other words, the Cultural Palace of Nationalities would relinquish its museum functions to the National *Minzu* Museum of China<sup>73</sup> upon its construction.<sup>74</sup> The current museum boom in China has provided a convenient excuse to allow the Commission to expand with another national level institution, which will allow the Commission to accumulate more power and receive more financial support from the government.

The establishment of a new national level *minzu* museum was not an easy project. As I discussed earlier, after the cultural policy sector was reinstated (following the Cultural Revolution), a planning committee for the National *Minzu* Museum of China was established in 1984. However, it remained only as a planning committee for more than 20 years. Although it has the administrative status of a national level central *minzu* museum of China, even

now the institution consists only of an office space with two curators, seven directors and several administrative employees. It is difficult to describe it as an actual “museum” as there are neither exhibit spaces nor controlled storage spaces. This institution conducts limited scientific research and collection activities, while most of its work is centered on traveling exhibits and loaning collections. The reasons for this national level museum’s underdevelopment are not publicized. However, through my interviews and extensive conversations with museum personnel from 2008, I learned that the museum faced many political struggles and in many cases the interests of the Minzu Museum were subordinate to other endeavors. For example, the project of merging two museums, namely the Chinese Museum of History and the Chinese Museum of Revolution, into the National Museum of China in 2003 was given higher priority than the building of the Chinese Museum of Nationality, namely the National Minzu Museum of China. This example demonstrates the underdevelopment of the national level *minzu* museum in two ways: “diversity,” which can be represented through the *minzu* issue, does not have priority compared to the “unification” of Chinese history, and the power of the Ministry of Culture is stronger than that of the Minwei.

One of the reasons for the slowed progress on the museum can be gleaned from the substance of the petition of the National Minzu Museum of China Project, in which the members of the project committee had to explain how the Minzu Museum of China will be different from the National Museum of China. Chinese government’s emphasis on unification detracts from the importance of building a *minzu* museum, compared to the earlier days of the PRC when assuring *shaoshu minzu* rights was considered more important. In addition, because museums are seen as displaying Chinese history, the National Minzu Museum of China intends to display a historical exhibition related to *shaoshu minzu*.<sup>75</sup> The official history of China is the story of the amalgamation of different *shaoshu minzu* and since this story is already told in the National Museum of China the exhibit at the Minzu Museum of China may well be seen as redundant by non-specialists. Moreover, it is not clear how the museum will link the history of the different ethnic groups with the newly invented categorization of 56 official ethnic groups in the contemporary PRC.

In 2008, the Minzu Museum of China held a national level conference to initiate new museum alliances and to gain a foothold in completing the establishment of a Minzu Museum of China [fig. 13]. The purpose of this meeting was primarily to obtain official consent and perform a kind of symbolic ceremony, constructing a collaborative museum by obtaining the loyalty of other national level

*minzu* museums. This new system is called a “collaborative network among the *minzu* museums in China” (*zhongguo minzu bowuguan hezuowang*) and was proposed in 2003.<sup>76</sup> Representatives of many different museums related to *minzu* issues participated in this meeting along with a few representatives from other types of museums. As of September 2009, 23 museums had signed a contract to participate in the collaboration network, representing a collection of over 120,000 objects.<sup>77</sup> Since then, seven more museums have signed up to participate.

This new Minzu Museum of China’s operating system is an invention of the leadership of the Minzu Museum of China and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC. In a nutshell, the goal of this system is to build a hierarchical structure among *minzu* museums in which the Minzu Museum of China sits at the center and holds the highest position. Collections will be shared among the museums participating in the network, which will relieve the participating museums from struggling to obtain pieces for their collections. Through this system, the Minzu Museum of China attempts to “connect different *minzu* museums nationwide, to increase the capacity of support from the state to *minzu*-related cultural enterprises, to properly allocate collections, exhibition spaces, human resources and information, and to raise the standard of the culture of the Chinese *minzu* for international exchange.”<sup>78</sup>

This system is intended to overcome the limitations faced by the Minzu Museum of China in two ways. First, it is intended to supplement the limited collections of the National Museum.<sup>79</sup> Second, since the quality as well as the quantity of collections is an important indicator for museum ranking, the system allows the Minzu Museum of China to inherit authority over the important and widely authorized collections of other established museums. This idea of sharing collections, which is a way to overcome the late-starter status of the national level *minzu* museum, is a uniquely Chinese solution because it illustrates the power relationship among the hierarchy of museums controlled by the government. Finally, in 2009, 25 years after the commencement of the planning committee, the Minzu Museum of China received permission from the state to build actual museum facilities (though no completion date has yet been set for this project).<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

This case study on Chinese *minzu* museums shows that the issue of *shaoshu minzu* is an important subject; yet Chinese unity is consistently emphasized over ethnic diversity. Diversity, according to existing *minzu* museums, is reduced to a display of “varieties of colorfulness.” As

seen in the rhetorically meaningful description of China as a “unified country of diverse nationalities (ethnic groups),” museums controlled by the government promote the idea of the unified country over the idea of diverse ethnic groups and in doing so suppress the idea of diversity. This museum role is well supported by the official government statement on the mission of Chinese museums: “The primary responsibility of museums is to increase the nation’s self-confidence and cohesive force, and contribute, by way of intellectual support, to the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The existence of *minzu* museums is therefore intended more as a display of government ideals than as an assortment of independent institutions promoting the value of multiculturalism and reinforcing minorities’ identities.

In addition, this case study illustrates one way in which the government power structure has worked to support and even accelerate the current museum boom in China. Since museums in China are state-run, the increased number of museums means the amount of financial support and political power allotted to the relevant departments is significantly amplified. The result of state level interest in building more museums is therefore centered on quantitative increase rather than the qualitative improvement of existing museums. Nevertheless, considering China has successfully become aware of and made efforts to participate in the stream of globalization, I expect that Chinese museums will also grow more responsive to the multicultural trend currently embraced by the international museum community.





Figure 1. Children representing China's 55 minority groups by wearing costumes and holding China's flag during opening ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. (Source: Reuters)

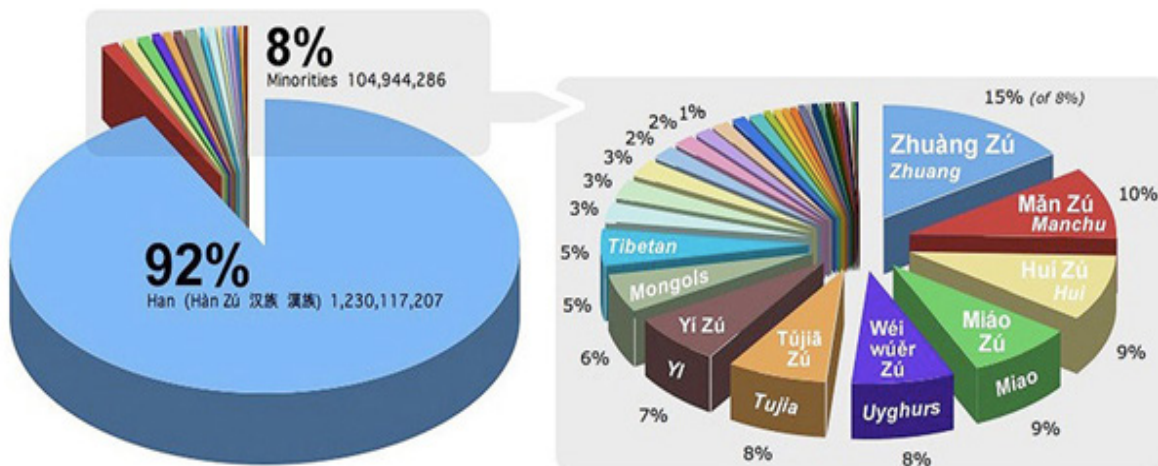


Figure 2. Proportions of Chinese ethnic groups.  
(Chart created by Steven Weathers@sdweathers)



Year	1929	1939	1949	1952	1957	1978	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
Number of Museums Reported	10	72	21	40	72	349	365	711	1,013	1,194	1,392	1,581

Figure 3. Numbers of museums in China accredited by the Chinese National Statistical Office.  
(Source: *Zhongguo Bowuguan Xuehi*, *Zhongguo Bowuguan Zhi 1995* and *Zhongguo Tongjiju*, *Zhongguo Tongjizhaoyao 2008*).

Institution	Foundation	Location	Dimension (m <sup>2</sup> )	Exhibition hall dimension (m <sup>2</sup> )	Collection size (numbers of objects)
Cultural Palace of the Nationalities	1959	Beijing	32,000	3,000 (5 exhibition halls)	Over 40,000
<i>Minzu</i> Museum of China	1984	Beijing	N/A	N/A	Over 3,000
Heilongjiang Nationalities Museum	1985	Haerbin	5,674	1,180	3,000
Hainan Nationalities Museum	1988	Wuzhishan	3,772	2,000	30,000
Yunnan Nationalities Museum	1995	Kunming	35,675	7,000	36,168
Keerxin Museum (Inner Mongolia Nationalities Museum)	2004	Tongliao	20,000	N/A	10,000
Guangxi Nationalities Museum	2008	Nanning	40,000	N/A	10,000 (transferred by the Guangxi Autonomous Region Museum)
Nationalities Museum under the Guizhou Cultural Palace	1985	Guizhou	7,000	N/A	Burned in 2000, not open to the public

Figure 4. Comparative statistics for *minzu* museums in China.  
(Source: *Pan et al. Minzu Diqu Bowuguan Shiye Fazhan De Lishi He Xianzhuang Baogao, 2008*)



Figure 5. Provinces where *minzu* museums are located (circled by author).



Figures 6a, b. The Heilongjiang Provincial Nationalities Museum. *(Photos taken by the author)*





Figure 7. The Yunnan Nationalities Museum. (Photo taken by the author)

Museum Name	High Rank	Middle Rank	Entry Rank	Total Employees
Inner-Mongolian Nationalities Museum	2	18	0	37
Hainan Nationalities Museum	2	6	10	24

Figure 8. Numbers of employees working at the nationalities museums.  
(Source: Tang, "Zhongguo minzu bowuguan lishi huigu yu xianzhuang fenxi," in Zhongguo MinzuBowuguan, Lun Minzu Bowuguan Jianshe, 2007)





Figures 9a, b. The *Zhonghua Minzuyan*, also called the China Nationalities Museum or the China Ethnic Museum. (Photos taken by the author)





Figure 10. The Cultural Palace of Nationalities in 1959.  
(Source: <http://www.chinese.cn>)





Figures 11a, b. The Exhibition Hall of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities in 2008. (Photos taken by the author)





Figure 12. The Performance Hall of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities in 2008.  
(Photo taken by the author)



Figure 13. At the annual meeting of the Minzu Museum of China in 2008, participants line up to sign the Hezuowang banner. (Photo taken by the author)

## Notes

1. This was a highly symbolic gesture of the PRC leadership, because the event was held just one and a half years after the 2008 episodes of Tibetan unrest, known in China as the “3 14 Riots.”

2. In China, one single term, *minzu*, is used to convey the conceptual range of the English terms “ethnic group,” “nationality” and “nation.” For example, *Han minzu* is “Han ethnic group,” whereas *zhonghua minzu* is “Chinese nation.” In Chinese terminology, *shaoshu minzu* is used to mean “ethnic minorities,” although it is usually translated as “minority nationalities” or “national minorities” because the primary or simple lexical translation of *minzu* is “nationality.” Contextually speaking, if the term *minzu* is not accompanied by any adjectives, it usually means “ethnic minorities.” For example, *minzu diqu* refers to any district where a significant population of ethnic minorities live, and *minzu bowuguan* means “museum of ethnic minorities.” I employ *shaoshu minzu* to refer to the ethnic minorities of China excluding the majority Han ethnic group, whereas I will use the terminology “ethnic groups” to refer to all groups, including the Han ethnic group.

3. It is highly interesting that in such performances, which intend to show the harmonious existence of different ethnic groups, the Han ethnicity is usually not presented. For the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympic Games, 55 minority groups appeared, without representation by the Han ethnic group. Similarly, the 60th anniversary celebrations did not display the Han ethnic group in traditional garb, unlike the other minority groups. In effect, the Han were present in the form of the political leaders who wore western suits, higher in status than the other ethnic groups.

4. I will use the term “*minzu* museum” to refer museums that focuses on the *shaoshu minzu* in China.

5. This statement was made at the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) held in March 2008 (Qian, “Rang Guojia Ji Minzu Bowuguan Zaori Jiancheng Kaifang,” *Zhongguo Minzubao*, March 11, 2008.). The original text was translated from Chinese by the author.

6. See newspaper articles such as Chao and Leow, “Chinese Children in Ethnic Costume Came from Han Majority,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 16, 2008; Goldsmith, “Ethnic children faked at Games opening,” *Reuters*, August 15, 2008; McCartney and Fletcher,

“New Fakery Scandal, as China’s ‘Ethnic’ Children Actually Come from Han Majority,” *The Times*, August 16, 2008; Moraes, “Something else at the Olympics rings false,” *The Washington Post*; Spencer, “Beijing Olympics: ‘Ethnic’ Children Exposed as Fakes in Opening Ceremony,” *The Telegraphs*, August 16, 2008.

7. Goldsmith, “Ethnic Children Faked at Games Opening,” *Reuters*, August 15, 2008.

8. The analysis of either the narratives in *minzu* museum exhibits or the topic of nationalities issues in comprehensive museums is another subject, which I will discuss in a separate paper due to space limitations.

9. Donald and Benewick, *The State of China Atlas*, 2005.

10. The Ethnic Identification Project (*minzu shibie*) was praised as one of China’s unique and creative achievements accomplished through scientific research because it followed the four criteria of the Stalinist-Leninist national policy, namely common language, common territory, common economic base, and common psychological character. However, although many scholars were involved in this project, this top-down application of criteria was not strictly “scientific” and was applied rather flexibly and “creatively,” which caused further problems. In some cases political decisions clearly affected these identifications – several of the known groups are accepted despite not having satisfied the four criteria, and some communities were not placed in any of the nationality groups. Even until 1990, as many as 749,341 people were said to belong to “not-yet identified nationalities.” Because the government does not want to increase the total number of the accepted minority groups, they remain grouped together without similarities across the four criteria categories (see Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53.1, 1994; Mecherras. *China’s Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century*, 1994; Cheung, “Representation and Negotiation of Ge Identities in Southeast Guizhou,” in *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan*, edited by Melissa Brown, 1995: 240-273. Interestingly, the identification of criteria for determining Han ethnic group was not established. Instead, the category Han is used as a kind of default, whereby the rest of the people (except those who are categorized as “unidentified”) are classified as belonging to the Han nationality without specific examination.



11. Fei, "Modernization and National Minorities in China," *Occasional Papers* 6, 1979; Fei, "Ethnic Identification in China," *Social Sciences in China* 1, 1980.
12. Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy.
13. Many of my Han nationality friends have told me that they have had very few minority nationality friends and rarely speak about this topic. Friends from Minzu University (the former Central University for Nationalities), a university specialized in educating individuals of various minority nationalities to become leaders in their communities, tell me that inside Minzu University is the only space with a multi-national presence in all of Beijing.
14. The museum concept was brought to China in 1847 from the United States by Lin, and again in 1848, Xu introduced the model of the European museum institution. The first Chinese governmental officer officially sent to Europe in 1866 also returned to China excited about the museums he had seen. See Wang, *Zhongguo Bowuguan Xue Jichu*, 1990.
15. Wang, *Zhongguo Bowuguan Xue Jichu*, 1990. Jing, *Bowuguanxue*, 1983; Wenhuaabu Wenwuju Jiaoyuchu and Nankai Daxue Lishi Xi, *Bowuguan Cankao Ziliao*, 1986.
16. A more detailed discussion of Zhang Jian and his project of creating "the first modernized museum of China" can be found in Claypool, "Zhang Jian and China's First Museum," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64.3, 2005: 567-604; Shao, *Culturing Modernity: The Nantong Model, 1890-1930*, 2004.
17. In 1868, a French Catholic priest named Pierre Heude built Xujiahui Museum (Sikowei Museum), which later became the Shanghai National History Museum (Shanghai Ziran Lishi Bowuyuan) in the Shanghai Xujiahui area. This museum was followed by a museum built by the North China Branch of the British Royal Asiatic Society in 1872. See Pao, *A History of Chinese Museums*, 1966. It is also known that in 1904 Huabei Museum was established in Tianjin by foreigners. Most of the museums built by foreigners and missionaries were natural history museums; see Jimin, *Zhongguo Bowuguanshilun*, 2004.
18. Wang, *Zhongguo Bowuguan Xue Jichu*, 1990.
19. Chinese dynasties have a longstanding tradition of owning and passing down royal collections from dynasty to dynasty, beginning with the extensively mounted and documented collection of the Song dynasty (960-1270 A.D.). This tradition was supposedly adapted from an ancient practice in use during the Spring and Autumn and Warring State Periods (770 – 256 B.C.).
20. Zhongguo Bowuguan Xuehui, *Zhongguo Bowuguan Zhi*, 1995. Discussions on the Nationalist Party and the transformation of the Forbidden City to the Palace Museum can be found in Hamlisch. "Preserving the Palace: Museums and the Making of Nationalism(s) in Twentieth-Century China," *Museum Anthropology* 19.2, 1995: 20-30. Watson also discusses the cultural politics of the Taiwan Nationalist Party in relation to the collection of the National Museum of History in Taipei (Watson, "Tales of Two Chinese History Museums: Taipei and Hong Kong," *Curator* 41.3, 1998: 167-77).
21. Translated from Chinese by the author.
22. Zhongguo Bowuguan Xuehui, *Zhongguo Bowuguan Zhi*, 1995; Beijing Bowuguan Xuehui. *Beijing Bowuguan Nianjian*, 1989; The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, The Ordinance of the Museums in China.
23. This is called *Minzu Wenhua Gong* in Chinese. Sometimes it is translated as the "China Museum of the National Cultural Palace."
24. For a detailed analysis on the construction of the National Museum of Revolution, see Hung, "The Red Line: Creating a Museum of the Chinese Revolution," *The China Quarterly* 183, 2005: 914-933.
25. Based on my interviews in 2009. Interviewees worked more than 30 years at different museums established in the earlier days of the PRC.
26. Mitter, "Behind the Scenes at the Museum: Nationalism, History and Memory in the Beijing War of Resistance Museum, 1987-1997," *The China Quarterly* 16, 2000: 279-93.
27. Beijing Bowuguan Xuehui, *Beijing Bowuguan Nianjian*, 1989. However, according to a study done by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, only 80% of museums had basic equipment and exhibitions and are able to open to the public. The remaining 20% are museums with names but sparse resources and



functions (Tang, "Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan Lishi Huigu Yu Xianzhuang Fenxi," in *Lun Minzu Bowuguan Jianshe*, edited by Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan, 2007: 162-184).

28. Su, "Zhongguo Bowuguan Shiye De Fazhan." *Zhongguo Wenhua Yichan* 4, 2005: 30-41.

29. Ma, "Introduction," in *Jiyi Xianchang Yu Wenhua Diantang: Wemen Shidai De Bobuguan*, edited by Bingwu Cao, 2005: 1-3.

30. This boom can be also witnessed by the amount of investment made by the Chinese government. The Beijing Administration of Cultural Heritage announced in 2003 that Beijing will invest seven billion Yuan (approximately 846 million U.S. dollars) in the construction or reconstruction of six museums over a period of six years. According to the report, every Chinese medium-sized city will have a modern functional museum by 2015. Specifically, the investment for the Capital Museum is over 1,200 million Yuan (approximately 144 million U.S. dollars; People's Daily, "Beijing to Invest 7 Billion Yuan on Museums," *People's Daily Online*, August 16, 2008.).

31. Sometimes *minzuxue bowuguan*, which means "ethnology museum," is also used to describe a *minzu* or nationalities museum because of the multiple meanings of *minzu*. However, this type of *minzu* museum is a museum with "Chinese characteristics" that only focuses on the ethnic groups (in most cases just minority groups) in China. It does not include ethnic groups from other countries.

32. Jing, *Bowuguanxue*, 1983.

33. Wenhuaabu Wenwuju Jiaoyuchu and Nankai Daxue Lishi Xi, *Bowuguan Cankao Ziliao*, 1986; Jing, *Bowuguanxue*, 1983.

34. The Chinese term is variously translated "Yearbook" or "Annals" in English, though the document is published every five years.

35. Jing, *Bowuguanxue*, 1983. Although the expression "international standard" is frequently used in China, there is usually no written document detailing the nature of this international standard. Yet this "ideal type" phrase has value and authority in China, and is used not only in political or governmental documents but also in academic papers, since the publication of journals and books takes place under the auspices of the government. This standard can be explained as

an assembled discourse made by so-called experts. For example, if I ask curators about this standard when they refer to it, they tend to cite "internationally renowned museums," and sometimes also give concrete examples such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Louvre Museum.

36. Zhongguo Bowuguan Xuehui, *Zhongguo Bowuguan Zhi*, 1995.

37. This Central Museum was the first national level museum established by the government of the *Guomingdang* (Nationalist Party) in 1933, and after the establishment of the PRC, became known as the Nanjing Museum.

38. This is the official English translation of *Guojia Wenwuju*, which was translated as the "State Bureau of Cultural Relics" prior to 2003. At that time China became increasingly aware of the fact that the term "cultural heritage" had become popular internationally, and the state even tried to change the translation of *wenwu* from "cultural relics" to "cultural heritage," despite having different terminology, *wenhua yichan*, to refer to the concept of cultural heritage. More discussion on this effort to shift the Chinese concept for culture and history from the materiality-focused *wenwu* to the intangibility embedded *wenhua yichan* is provided in Keun Young Kim, "Intangible Cultural Heritage and Materiality - The Case in the People's Republic of China," a paper given at a conference on "Intangible Cultural Heritage and Local Communities in East Asia" at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in December 2009.

39. Minzu Wenhua Gong Bowuguan, *Minzu Bowuguan De Lilun Yu Shijian*, 1999.

40. The 1954 Ethnic Classification Project was a joint social scientific - Communist state project. A group of ethnologists, linguists, and Party cadres participated in the project and traveled to the most ethnically diverse provinces in the PRC to determine which would be the officially recognized minority communities.

41. Pan et al., *Minzu Diqiu Bowuguan Shiye Fazhan De Lishi He Xianzhuang Baogao*, 2008.

42. The Anti-Rightist Movement refers to the systematic political persecution of the "rightists," a term for intellectuals who favored capitalism and critiqued collectivization from the 1950s to early 1960s. The Great Leap Forward was an economic and social campaign of the Chinese Communist Party.

This Campaign aimed to use China's vast population to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy into a modern communist society through the process of collective agriculturalization and industrialization, which finally ended in catastrophic grain shortages and massive numbers of deaths by starvation.

43. The official English name of the Central University for Nationalities was changed to Minzu University although the Chinese title remains the same. I could not get an answer as to why they changed the official title, but it seems logical to attribute this to the highly totalitarian, hierarchical and nationalistic connotation of terms like "central" and "nationalities." By using the Chinese term *minzu*, people who do not know Chinese will have no presumptions about the nature of the museum, and people who know Chinese will imagine a broader range of meaning.

44. "Minzu region" refers to the territories of the autonomous regions, the autonomous prefectures, the autonomous counties, the autonomous banners, the ethnic townships and the ethnic *sumu*.

45. See Wang and Zhou, "Guojia Wenwuhu Huzhang Dan JiXiang: Ge Minzu Dou Jiang You Bowuguan," *Jinghuashibao*, March 6, 2008. As seen in the minorities' identification project, minority groups share a strong identity and culture, while the culture of the Han Chinese is officially described as having absorbed and amalgamated a variety of different cultures. This weakness of common identity or cultures associated with the Han Chinese has facilitated close links between Chinese eco-museums and museums focusing on *minzu* issues.

46. This project of building eco-museums is also led by the government as a campaign to increase the number of the museums and increase the index of cultural facilities in minority areas. What caught Chinese officials' attention is the fact that the eco-museum is the most "updated" or contemporary form of museum, though they often ignore the fact that eco-museums are particularly distinguished by their community-based characteristics.

47. The discussion of museums of nationalities takes place almost entirely within a political arena, rather than an academic or cultural studies context. That said, even compared to political discussions surrounding archaeological and historical museums, *minzu* issues are quite a minor concern.

48. The number and rank of museum institutions cannot be used exclusively as criteria for these kinds of conclusions. However, in China, the rank and number of institutions are the most important criteria as they provide symbolic scientific data. State-led propaganda, policy, and achievements are similarly expressed according to quantity, without much consideration of individual differences.

49. Pan et al., *Minzu Diqu Bowuguan Shiye Fazhan De Lishi He Xianzhuang Baogao*, 2008.

50. Ibid. The paper explains that the data is based on resources provided by the Department of the Cultural Propaganda at the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the PRC.

51. Based on the conversations in 2008 with museum scholars the staff of several *minzu* museums.

52. My discussion is based on the intended audience of these museums, because I was unable to attain any data on the actual proportions of the museum visitors. Here I reason that if individuals of the Han nationality were the target audience, those museums should have been built more extensively outside of the *minzu* area. In terms of actual visitor counts, Chinese museums tend to record raw numbers of visitors, but do not seem to conduct surveys on the proportions of people of various ethnic groups who visit the museum. Although not in a *minzu* museum, when I had the chance to develop a survey questionnaire for museum visitors in one of the museums in Beijing, a museum staff member quickly eliminated the question asking visitors to identify their ethnic group. The staff member, who held a PhD degree, told me that this information was not meaningful in Beijing.

53. Chinese society places great value on rankings, and both museums and museum collections are appraised by official state-created ranking criteria. The standards for the first tier *wenwu* (cultural and historical relics) and first tier museums are established by the state, and museums and museum collections nationwide are evaluated by these standards. For the standards of the first tier museum, see Guojia Wenwuju, *Guojia Yiji Bowuguan Yunxing Pinggu Zhipiao Tixi* (The Scale of the Numeric Values for Evaluating the Operation of the National Level First Tier Museum), 2008.

54. The results of this appraisal of the first tier cultural relics are published in Guojia Wenwuju, *Quanguo Guanchang Yi Ji Wenwu Cong Mulu*, 2005.

55. For example, the established standard employs this categorization for Han ethnicity-centered archaeological and historical objects such as jade, bronze, ceramics, calligraphy and painting. In contrast, *minzu* objects are assigned a more folkloric classification, namely cloth, household, musical instrument, etc.

56. As museums belong to the government, the staff system inside the museums also follows the hierarchy of other governmental offices – a system which assigns rank to employees based on number of years employed, degrees obtained, and grades earned on promotion exams.

57. Tang, “Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan Lishi Huigu Yu Xianzhuang Fenxi,” in *Lun Minzu Bowuguan Jianshe*, edited by Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan, 2007: 162-184.

58. Based on my interviews in 2009.

59. I refer here to two kinds of yearbooks. One is the *Record of Chinese Museums* (Huaxia Chubanshe, 1995) published by the Chinese Museum Association (Zhongguo Bowuguan Xuehui). This is a synthesized record of museums in China and shares many characteristics of a Western-style year book. The other is *A Yearbook of Beijing Museums* (Yanshan Chubanshe), which was first published in 1989 for the 1912-1987 period, and then every 5 years by the Beijing Museum Association (Beijing Bowuguan Xuehui). In 2010 the first official nationwide yearbook of the museums in China was published by the Chinese Museum Association (Zhongguo Bowuguan Xuehui), but this has not yet been imported to the U.S.

60. The title of the museum is *Zhonghua Minzu Bowuyuan*, which is only two syllables different from the *Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan* (National Minzu Museum of China or Chinese Nationalities Museum). *Bowuyuan* (garden / park) looks and sounds very similar to *bowuguan* (museum). *Zhonghua* (the state) and *zhongguo* (a group of people sharing the same Chinese culture) have both similar sounds and meanings. The *Zhonghua Minzu Bowuyuan* is known to the public as *Zhonghua Minzuyuan* (Chinese Ethnic Culture Park) or as *Minzu Cun* (nationalities village), which is a theme park focused on architecture and cultural performances such as dance, music and shows of different nationalities in China. The official translation of the title is China Ethnic Museum, yet National Minzu Museum of China or Chinese Nationalities Museum is also used to refer to this institution. This is a private museum built by an

organization of overseas Chinese. Although its museum personnel insist that it is a museum with authentic objects, the Chinese whom I spoke with regarded it as a fun place to visit, but not a museum. Yet the Annals of the Beijing Museum and the Chinese Museum Association count it as a museum.

61. According to a catalogue published to commemorate the 50 year anniversary of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities in 1999, it is regarded as one of the best works of 20th century Chinese Architecture. Museum personnel are very proud that the museums' architecture is mentioned in the *International History of Architecture* published in the United Kingdom.

62. Minzu Wenhua Gong Bowuguan, *Minzu Bowuguan De Lilun Yu Shijian*, 1999.

63. Minzu Wenhua Gong Bowuguan, *Minzu Bowuguan De Lilun Yu Shijian*, 1999: 3 (translated from Chinese by the author).

64. Before the Reform Period, no Chinese could travel without the permission and recommendation of the provincial government.

65. Shi and Qin, “Minzu Wenhua Gong Bowuguan Gaihuang,” in *Minzu Bowuguan De Lilun Yu Shijian*, edited by Minzu Wenhua Gong, 1999: 1-9.

66. Premier Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Deng Xiaoping and Song Qingling visited the museum's exhibition before its opening, and Liu Xiaogi and Zhou Enlai took part in the museum's opening ceremony. See Minzu Wenhua Gong Bowuguan. *Minzu Bowuguan De Lilun Yu Shijian*. 1999.

67. Qi and Dong, *Minzu Wenhua Gong*, 2006.

68. According to my interview, this was the only exhibit that was installed in the Cultural Palace before the Cultural Revolution took place in late 1960s, and this institution basically did not operate during that time period.

69. Many articles written by various employees of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities have debated the differences between the *bowuguan* (museum) and *zhanlanguan* (literally “display hall” or “exhibition hall” but it has a sense similar to “exposition”) which is a space for profit-driven display. Examples can be found in Qin et al., 1999.

70. In 2009, during a conversation with a curator in one of the museum in Beijing, I learned that many of the collections at the Cultural Palace were damaged by a flood which was caused by certain staff members. Because of this carelessness and other non-specialist or unprofessional practices, the government tends to be reluctant to give financial support to that institution.

71. The Chinese government has a highly hierarchical structure and higher ranking departments can require lower ranking departments to dramatically adjust their practices. For example, if a new provincial museum is built, the provincial Ministry of Culture can force the county level museums to give their collections to the new provincial level museum. The *Shanrong Wenhua Chenlieguan*, which is one of the museums under Beijing's municipal jurisdiction, also had to transfer their collections to the newly built, higher ranking museum by the order of the city government, replacing the authentic pieces (including archaeologically excavated artifacts) with replicas instead.

72. Beijing Bowuguan Xuehui, *Beijing Bowuguan Nianjian*, [A Yearbook of Beijing Museums].

73. In many (if not all) cases the official title in English is the National Minzu Museum of China, or China Nationalities Museum. As I explained earlier, one of the Chinese "Wikipedias" translates *Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan* as "the National Museum of China" which has a totally different meaning. (See <http://www.hudong.com/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E6%B0%91%E6%97%8F%E5%8D%9A%E7%89%A9%E9%A6%86>)

74. Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan, *Minbo Jianyishu*, 2009.

75. Ibid.

76. Zhang, "Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan," in *Lun Zhongguo Bowuguan Jianshe*, edited by Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan, 2007: 1-22.

77. Zhongguo Minzu Bowuguan, *Minbo Jianyishu*, 2009.

78. Ibid. Many Chinese policy decisions and rhetorical choices are still based on the evolutionary perspectives outlined in forms of Marxism.

79. The number of objects owned by the National Minzu Museum of China is 10,000, including what they have collected for 20 years and what has been transferred from other institutions. The Cultural Palace

of Nationalities has a collection of over 50,000 objects, which will be transferred to the National Minzu Museum of China when it completes the construction of storage spaces.

80. Museum building completion dates are also frequently ignored - The National Museum of China, which was scheduled to reopen in 2008 in preparation for the Olympic Games, was in fact not able to open even by 2010.

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