Renarrating the “western territories:” training programs for college students in China’s Far West

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Abstract

This paper shows how history is rewritten in China by shaping the memories of its youth, who create new communities by sharing and renarrating new memories. They can become a powerful channel to convey an official interpretation of local histories to a larger public, by marginalizing and appropriating local narratives. The idea behind the program for voluntary narrators under analysis¹ is to shape memories of China’s young and wealthy students about a place, by transforming its rich cross-cultural fundamentals, symbolic and inner meanings, into a representation of the Nation, able to convey powerful declinations of official narratives on the history of China. The analysis is conducted in consideration of the larger context of the construction and transmission of the official discourse on national identity in contemporary PRC. Specifically, the author provides evidence of how young Chinese internalize and disseminate the party line on Chineseness, and the subordinate role assigned within this process to “minorities.” Minorities are seen both as a threat and an opportunity: a threat to the Party and social cohesion as carriers of diverse identities, an opportunity for contrasting Chineseness with the Other, a backward entity, inadequate and unable to embrace—if not help—the path to modernity.

Keywords

Dunhuang; national minorities; Chinese history; community; memories; China’s youth; renarrating.

Introduction

The main argument of this article is that communities are created and engineered to share constructed memories of China’s past, and to socialize them through a process of renarrating. These memories reflect Chinese leaders’ voice

1 “Explaining Dunhuang – 2019 University students’ summer programme to become voluntary narrator at Mogao grottoes”. The original name of the program in Chinese is Jieshuo Dunhuang – 2019 Mogao ku gaoxiao shuqi zhiyuan jiangjiyuan 解说敦煌2019莫高窟高校暑期志愿讲解员.

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es and narratives on Chinese western regions, which are meant to “engineer the nation,” whereas textbooks, the media, and the majority of China’s educated youth, intellectual, and academic communities are all pushed to spread the official historical narrative. This complies with a top-down discourse that strategically and selectively constructs the Chinese past. This political stance is created by leveraging the narrative and ideological potentials of a carefully selected batch of historical sources and narratives. It reveals a fundamental idiosyncrasy within China’s decision and policymaking circles, a sense of fear of looking deeply and vertically into Chinese multicultural dimensions and its implications for historical narrations and peoples’ identities, a sort of concern about what a historical past, a non-Han history of China (Tu 2005; Crossley et al. 2006; Mullaney et al. 2012), might disclose. Moreover, the duality “us versus them” helps the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders legitimizing their rule and power.

The focus is a site (Dunhuang) that embodies China’s vast ethnic and cultural diversity, and the analysis revolves around how this has been reconfigured as an emblem of triumphant, monolithic and essentially Han Chineseness in the present. This is revealing when it comes to the relationship between the vast expansion of domestic tourism over the past two decades and the Party’s intensifying use of heritage as patriotic propaganda and the extent to which young, educated Han elites appear to have been won over by, and assumed ownership of, the increasingly assertive and totalizing vision of a Han-centric China that has become CCP orthodoxy under Xi Jinping.³ Moreover, the training program tells us a lot about ideological shifts under Xi Jinping, and the evolving propaganda strategy of the CCP, which puts the “people” at the centre and reduces the distance between the leader and the people, the Party and the people, the nation and the people.⁴

It is a form of social engineering that leads Chinese people to think about their own national history according to “authorized” and consistently aligned transmitted memories. The program for voluntary narrators analyzed here as a case study contributes to the dissemination of such narratives through

3 An analogy can be drawn here with the volunteers joining the US Peace Corps, and the symbolic meanings and narratives related to the concept of “culture shock,” as described and analyzed by Schein (2015).

4 An upcoming article by Fanoulis and Cappelletti (2022) on populism in contemporary China is currently under review and focuses principally on this reduction of the distance between the populist leader and the People.

China's youth.⁵ This has to be understood in the context of the multiple and fragmented narratives about Chinese nation and Chinese history, with only one of them reaching the general public powerfully, basically presenting China as a multicultural and multinational nation where Hans are the majority and have always been the main actors and demiurgic forces of the nation.⁶ Chinese minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族), 8% of the total population, are often presented by Chinese leaders as marginal actors, underdeveloped and uncivilized “others,” a sort of uncomfortable appendix in the context of the glorious Chinese past. The transformational power of “renarration”—the final step of the program—turns the image and the meaning of a place into a selection of carefully pondered messages complying with the official Party line on the Chinese history of the western regions. The main tools to reach this goal are community creation and renarration. This process prevents Chinese people from adopting a critical and possibly challenging perspective.

Drawing on semi structured interviews conducted through focus groups and individual conversations with returning students who participated in the 2019 edition of the program, as well as from concepts and literature on memory, community, renarrating, knowledge construction, and agency, the article argues that the understanding of local histories is performed according to a Han-centred perspective, as it comes out clearly from the ethnicity of members of the evaluating committee; the students who apply and are selected to join

5 This is in line with what Hughes (2017) argues in his conclusions. The China Model is allegedly entering a third stage, together with Chinese militarism, with “a version that is compatible with the broader post-socialist, composite ideology of the China Dream and inoculates young people against the transformative influences of globalization. Only by treating the construction of tradition in this project more critically than is done by advocates of the China Model, is it possible to unravel some of the paradoxes of a state that promotes militaristic themes, practices and strategic myths alongside notions of ‘peaceful rise’ and Confucianist harmony.” Other authors are arguing that China is currently undergoing a shift from authoritarianism to totalitarianism (this has been discussed during a workshop on local governance in China held at XJTU in Suzhou).

6 On powerful narratives and their channels for diffusion, see Chapter 3 in Schein (2000). Besides the several academic sources on the topic of the construction of a main ethnic group, a powerful overview on how the Han majority and the national unity of China have been engineered is provided in an online post by Frank Dikötter (2001).

the program; the sources they use to study the history of Dunhuang; and from the positions, arguments, and perceptions they express when interviewed.⁷

The nature of the program is unique. On the one hand, voluntary narrators are encouraged to remain faithful to the provided learning materials, and thus straying from the official narrative is discouraged, yet in allowing for the volunteers to “renarrate,” the program creates the deceiving impression that what is transmitted to readers results from a process of spontaneous creative thinking. In this way, young Chinese students are encouraged to fill their minds with information that is not understood critically; their potential for thinking differently and giving innovative contributions is not expressed, and the conceptual and analytical tools that the program should provide are absent, erasing any possible benefit that students could obtain from this experience. By creating new communities, the acquired constructed memories are shared, and the way to a rewriting of the past in the collective memory of Chinese people is paved.

Rejuvenating the Chinese Nation

Since Xi Jinping rose to power, China has been undergoing a process of “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” expressed in the Chinese language with the concepts of “China Dream” (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦) and “rejuvenation” (*fixing* 复兴).⁸ The idea is directly connected with the so-called “century of humiliation,” understood as a period of deep shame in the history of

7 The author organized focus groups and individual interviews with participants to the program in the context of a university-funded project, with the help of a research assistant. These have been conducted in the home universities of the students, in cafeterias close to the universities and, in some cases, online via WeChat (when the student location was far from the author's), all under the condition of anonymity due to the potential sensitiveness of the interview topics. Students were still motivated to talk about their experiences as part of the renarrating endeavor. These are some of the questions asked: 1) Why are you interested in Dunhuang and in Chinese history? 2) What did you know about Dunhuang before joining the project? 3) Please describe the Dunhuang project and the selection process you had to go through to join it; 4) What did you do there, on a daily basis? 5) What kind of narration were you delivering to tourists? 6) What did you learn during the project? Did you learn something you did not know before? 7) How did joining this project change your perception of the place? 8) Do you think that “narrating Dunhuang” fits into the idea of “讲好中国故事, 传播好中国声音” (*jiang hao Zhongguo gushi, chuanbo hao Zhongguo Shenyin*, “tell the good stories of China, spread the good voice of China,” a popular slogan in political communication in today's China); 9) Why do you think the Dunhuang Academy and the Chinese government promote such programs for voluntary narrators?

8 The extended expression is *zhonghua minzu weida fixing zhongguo meng* 中华民族伟大复兴中国梦, translated literally: the “Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” For a historical overview, see Zheng (1999); for a contemporary interpretation, see Garrick and Benner (2018).

China.⁹ Fuxing refers to a situation where it became urgent for China to regain a status that was lost due to injustices inflicted by other countries’ (mainly Western powers’) aggression and misconduct. The effort to revive the ancient splendour of the Chinese nation, by leveraging its culture and civilization, traditions, and artistic excellence, became a national strategy that was announced and operationalized by the Chinese leadership since President Hu Jintao, and strengthened since Xi Jinping took power in 2013. The year 2013 signals a major watershed in contemporary Chinese politics, especially when we consider the new endeavours conceived and initiated by the current president to centralize powers within the Party’s higher authorities (Tsang 2016; Lam, 2015). The China Dream is an oneiric vision of a red China where everybody—regardless of nationality—belongs to the Chinese Nation (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) and is moderately wealthy (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会) and healthy, satisfied, and optimistic when it comes to prospects for children and siblings. It is a China where the Party acts like a parental entity that nobody can dare to criticize because it keeps the harmony among generations and different social strata, by guaranteeing ideological consistency and wealth. In this ideal life, where the Chinese Dream has some similarities with the American Dream (the image of a happy urban family with one son and a daughter, a house, a car and a dog is rampant in today’s advertisements of life insurance in Chinese cities)—with the difference that in China the dream can exist only with a strong country and Communist Party, while in the US it is the individual who controls his or her own destiny—the main ethnic group, the Hans, follow the Party and are in charge of showing the way to prosperity to the rest of the population, the 55 minority groups. We can understand in this framework the many programs where Han Chinese Party cadres are sent to live together with Uyghur families in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or teach Uyghurs the thought of Xi Jinping, the so-called “Becoming family campaigns.”

The plan to rejuvenate the nation relies on a batch of selected cultural messages and concepts designed to giving shape to an image of Chinese culture that has the semblance of coherence and consistency in order to give a sense of solidness and homogeneity to the domestic audience as well as to peoples abroad (Cappelletti 2017a; 2017b). Being motivated both by top-level domestic and international strategic aims, these goals imply a number of political steps that Chinese leaders are already taking in order to build stronger foundations for a

9 The “century of humiliation” is the concept adopted by Chinese scholars and political leaders to refer to the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century, when the British government and other Western powers imposed unequal treaties and conditions on the Qing court to obtain advantages in trade and benefits for their merchants in the Asian empire and markets.

national identity which, though constructed, is necessary to inform and serve Beijing's policy goals.

"Chinese nation," "Chinese culture," "Chinese cultural heritage," "Chinese history," "sense of belonging," and "building the nation" progressively became key concepts in the speeches of Chinese leaders. Renarrating the history of China, especially of those areas that cannot be directly connected with a centrality of the Han ethnicity,¹⁰ became key to building the foundations of a viable and politically correct "national historical narrative."¹¹

Contextually, Chinese political communication is becoming more and more sophisticated, with its recovery of classical (mainly Confucian but also Taoist) and traditional culture, a new centrality of the individual in the context of collective concepts such as "nation," "people," and "country." The increasing occurrence of the two characters *you wo* 有我, which can be translated literally as "I am there", in several new slogans that can be found on walls or spread on air in any Chinese city, reflects this new central place of the individual in a society still strongly based on collective tenets. The two characters often appear together with *jiandang* (建党), which means "building the Party," giving an individualized sense to the action and processes of construction of a Party which is becoming stronger and stronger in society, as well as more centralized and in charge of guaranteeing "harmony," which has always been the main aim of any Chinese governor, both during and after the empire. Another socio-political tool of nation building consists in dispersing and disrupting the diversity of communities: These turns interrupt the flow of memory sharing and socializing, which is the only way to keep historical and collective memories alive (Halbwachs 1980). The social pact, which can be summarized with the government's implicit message, "You will be silent and disengaged with politics and I will be guaranteeing that you will improve your conditions and live in a safe society" is more alive today than in any other period of Chinese history. Images of three well-fed and satisfied generations of Chinese families fill the city walls in posters that are a silent homage to the Confucian idea of familial and socio-political hierarchy.

10 Information and first-hand material on these campaigns can be found in the Xinjiang Documentation Project, the University of British Columbia, under the title "Hundred Questions and Hundred Examples: Cadre Handbooks in the Fanghuiju Campaign" (available at: <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/chinese-sources/cadre-materials/cadre-handbooks/>, retrieved on the January 8, 2022).

11 For a better understanding of the role of the Muslim populations in China's history, see Lipman (2004) and Ben-Dor Benite (2005).

Memory, Communities, National Discourses and Renarration

Memory provides us with the capacity for experiencing where we are in the temporal flow; it is our sense of where we belong, and how we relate and connect to others. As such, it provides us with the comfort of the familiar (...) it gives peoples' mind a timeframe and a place to feel a sense of security and ease. This has nothing to do with the nature of memories, they can be either good or bad, what is important is the “familiarity” that memories provide to our minds.” (Scanlan 2013, 8)

At the same time, “the fact that memory can undo our present sense of time and place, and thus remind us that we live also with the past, means that it is also often displacing, discomfiting, and strange” (Scanlan 2013, 9). Both comforting and unsettling, “memory” becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of governments. Roudometof (2002) provides an extensive overview of how the study of collective memory has been approached by sociologists and anthropologists and combined with approaches from political sciences. It is, though, Maurice Halbwachs who enlightens with his work on collective memory. “Just as we must introduce a small particle into a saturated medium to get crystallization, so must we introduce a ‘seed’ of memory into that body of testimony external to us in order for it to turn into a solid mass of remembrances” (Halbwachs 1980, 8). In Halbwachs’ thought, without the communities who share memories, there is no past, as memory can only be collective. What links history, community, memories, and national narratives then becomes clear: history has a meaning only if there are communities who share memories, and powerful national narratives can manipulate the past, impacting communities and their memories. What is important for governments and elites is to engineer communities who share selected memories of the past and to help build national narratives on the basis of those memories. At the same time, destroying those communities that are carriers of a diverse version of history and are therefore potentially disruptive in the nation building process becomes equally important.¹²

The connection between collective memory and national narrative has been researched with the aim of describing mechanisms and dynamics that shape our understanding of the past and view of the future through the interpretative lenses provided by the introjected concept of “nation.” Moreover, as memory works through selective processes, we can reasonably argue that it can be defined as a renarration in itself, as Halbwachs (1980, 22) argues when he delves into the connection between individual and collective memories.

12 Worth noting is that while Chinese children are targeted with new campaigns of rewriting Chinese narratives in their textbooks, renarrating history for China’s already young adult populations requires a certain dose of creativity to succeed in spreading the ideas.

Therefore, when the voluntary narrators of our Dunhuang program engage in renarrations, they are creating new memories, giving ontological meaning to ideas and concepts that need to be filled with insignificance in order to get a shape, an official authoritativeness, to be spread and accepted among the general public. Substantiating, reviving feelings of and reproducing—at least in peoples' minds—selected (fabricated or not) aspects of historical, sociocultural and political background and patterns, are all aims of the narration and renarration processes. Renarrating can be understood as the act of giving new meaning and life to the Chinese nation, to its revival from an unspecified time in history (it could be the Republican period or the 1950s), while simultaneously “forgetting,” an act which impacts the actual basis of personal and social life.¹³

In contemporary Chinese politics, the ethnocentric national narrative according to which Hans are civilized and all the other nationalities tend to be backward and unapt to modern ways of living—an engineered discourse according to which Chinese history has been essentially driven by the Hans¹⁴—has generated conflicting and confusing ideas about China's past among Hans and minority nationalities since the 1960s, when the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong started his state-sponsored project of “mapping” of the Chinese population and creating an ethnic taxonomy. Most importantly for the aims of this work, these narratives show how “culture” and “history” can become an important site for political conflict in the contemporary world (Wallerstein 1990).

Intercultural Encounters and CCP Nationalist Grand Narratives: Chinese Youth As Voluntary Narrators in the Dunhuang Oasis

The Mogao grottoes and the Promotion of Tourism in Western China

This article's site of focus is the Mogao grottoes in the oasis of Dunhuang, in the Gobi Desert of Gansu Province.¹⁵ A religious, trade, and cultural

13 This is, for instance, what happened, and is still happening, with Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongols as examples of diverse communities in China.

14 For a comprehensive overview of how memories of Tiananmen events have been removed from the collective awareness within Chinese society, and of how historical amnesia deeply impacted individual and social life, as well as the understanding of the past in China, see Louisa Lim (2014).

15 The only imperial dynasty with the imperial family commonly believed to be Han is the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), but there is a part of academic scholarship that challenges this assumption; for instance, Chang (1988) argues that the Ming emperors adopted Confucianism to govern the empire, but privately retained their Muslim identities as *semuren* 色目人, the “men with coloured eyes,” as the Central Asian population was called at the time (probably due to the fact that many of them had blue eyes, and this was the most prominent trait that distinguished these populations from the Hans).

crossroads on the ancient Silk Roads, Dunhuang hosts more than 2,000 sculptures and 45,000 square meters of murals in 750 Buddhist cliff caves. Its rich and diverse history is showcased by the place names it had across centuries, such as Shazhou in Chinese and Dukhan in the Uyghur language. Famous for the discovery of an ancient library with scrolls written in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Uyghur, Chinese, and other languages, and for its caves with frescoes that attest to the wide range of absorbed artistic influences (spanning from Gandahara to Mongolian and Altaic pictorial style), Dunhuang is one of the most popular tourist destinations in today's China. The major attraction for tourists is the Mogao grottoes (the first created in the fourth century CE), a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1987. Documents written in ancient Phags-pa (Coblin (2007), Xixia (Barfield 1989), and Uyghur languages were also found, all of them—including a Syriac Bible—dating back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

In the year 2000, China started to understand the importance of developing its Western touristic resources. It was the time of the “Scheme for Developing the Western Regions,” a series of targeted policies launched by the central government to promote a more equal socioeconomic development (Goodman 2004). The largest domestic tourism fair was held in Xinjiang in July 2000, and the eastern part of China also started to place emphasis on the promotion of tourism in China's west.

Engineering the nation: identity and cultural sense of belonging in Xi Jinping's visit to Dunhuang

In August 2019, Xi Jinping visited Dunhuang, where he emphasized the fundamental meaning of “cultural preservation” in today's China. He also stated that the “quintessence of the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua jingying* 中华精英) should be recognized well beyond China's borders. According to Chinese news reports related to this official visit, Xi Jinping visited Dunhuang “as he sees the fine traditional culture as important in rejuvenating

the Chinese nation and promoting inclusive international cooperation on the BRI,” and “stressed the need to preserve the finer features of the nation’s culture” (Cao Desheng 2019). During his speech (Xi 2019), he put a particular emphasis on the need and urgency to increase authorities’ support for cultural diplomacy, including the promotion of Dunhuang culture to preserve “our quintessence.”¹⁶ A cultural and historical continuity between Dunhuang culture and today’s Chinese nation was established, as often happens in political speeches, without empirical or theoretical foundations.

Xi Jinping encouraged experts to “tell the good stories of Dunhuang” (*jiang hao Dunhuang gushi* 讲好敦煌故事) and “spread the good voice of China” (*chuanbo hao Zhongguo shengyin* 传播好中国声音) to the rest of the world, in an effort to promote international cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁷ Since 2012, after becoming the General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee, the President frequently stressed the importance of preserving traditional Chinese culture, and often visited cultural heritage sites during inspection tours nationwide.

Genesis of the Dunhuang Training Program

The Context

In response to Xi Jinping’s direct calls for an enhanced engagement with China’s cultural heritage and rich past, different actors within the society have made plans and committed to invest into a range of programs addressed to a variety of social groups. The historical evolution of CCP ideas and narratives about Chinese identity have not always been uniformly characterized by this “Han-centeredness,” as the Communist discourse on national identity has been going through different stages since the 1950s. The place and positionality of minorities within this framework is complex. There have been periods—for example, the 1980s–1990s—when official discourses seemed to incorporate greater acknowledgement of and respect for China’s

16 The Gobi is a sand dunes and stone desert covering part of northern China and southern Mongolia. It stretches from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to Heilongjiang Province, through Gansu and Qinghai, and the Tibet Autonomous Region. It has a highly symbolic meaning in China, as during the Empire, it represented a natural border between the agricultural civilization of the civilized courts and the “barbarian” populations of the western territories. For an extensive account on the transformations and developments of this north-western geographical, but above all metaphorical, frontier, see Gaubatz (1996).

17 The notion of “quintessence” is problematic in itself, as culture in Dunhuang has a heterogeneous connotation, a diverse and outstanding original nature, both in terms of novelty and creativity. It is a mesmerizing blend of different, apparently irreconcilable elements, which in Dunhuang find their own harmony. Therefore, the concept of the “quintessence” of the nation can only refer to the mixture of various “quintessences” and the contributions of numerous cultural traditions. It does not make sense talking of Chinese culture *stricto sensu* in Dunhuang (anthropologists such as Fabietti 2007 delves into the problematization of a squared understanding of cultures).

ethnic and cultural diversity. This depends very much on the debate among Chinese scholars, as well as on the political environment. For instance, we are currently in a period when the CCP is regaining and recentralizing power at all levels of society, and the distance between the leadership and the people is decreasing, resulting in stronger nationalist and populist discourses (Fei and Vickers 2019).

As Hughes (2017) argues, there is an element of military training across all levels of Chinese education, which leads students on the path of patriotism, nationalism, and discipline, inculcating in their mind that there is only one way to education and personal development, a path that does not imply the individual contribution of members of the society and therefore discourages critical thinking and creative solutions to problems. In this way, students and young Chinese are prevented from challenging what is taught to them and what they have learned, especially if it is a “patriotic content”. Hughes explains that one of the main tasks of the National Defence Education, put in place after 1989, “is to disseminate ‘patriotic spirit’ (*aiguo zhuyi jingshen* 爱国主义精神) as part of the Patriotic Education Campaign” (*aiguo zhuyi jingshen* 爱国主义精神). Chinese pedagogy scholars and their debate focus on how the leadership is concerned about an erosion of patriotic consciousness among young people after the adoption of a “socialist market economy” and the transformation of the CCP from a revolutionary to a ruling Party, by extending its membership to various and diverse social strata. This trend was allegedly already clear in the 1980s, as collective memory about the threats from imperialism—something that represented a glue for the previous generations—started to fade away. This is why in speeches by the current Chinese leadership, the past humiliation inflicted by imperialist powers remains vivid and is always refreshed as a collective memory that legitimates and empowers the CCP. It is an antagonistic element necessary to maintain peace and stability. This author presents in an extensive manner the characteristics of the National Defence Education and its implications for the Chinese society at all levels, in particular for Chinese youth in schools and higher education institutions.

There is also a vast literature on how the CCP has involved citizens in propaganda and myth-making, including in historiography. The literature on recruiting activists to “speak bitterness” can bridge the grand theory by Halbwachs and the case under analysis here (Makley 2005), and provide a framework to better understand students’ incentives and motivations behind their choices to become voluntary narrators and to join the activities connected to the Dunhuang program.

The structure and articulation of formal education in promoting or disseminating the official view of “Chineseness”¹⁸ play a fundamental role in reflecting and shaping dominant visions of national identity, as the views about Chinese history and culture of these youngsters express. Moreover, the new system of reporting in force with the new frameworks on education since 2019 does not help, as students are requested to report professors and teachers who convey unpatriotic contents in class. All what students have to do is to fill in an anonymous form and claim that unpatriotic behaviours or context have been performed or distributed in class. They can also attach evidence, such as articles, PowerPoint slides, and so on. The filled form is directly sent to the related government unit, which gets in touch with the university, with the aim of having this content deleted from teaching platforms. In this case, there is a fine that the university has to pay. If there is an attempt to push back, the university might go through a higher level of punishment because if the government unit deems the response inappropriate, the faculty member risks being fired. In this way, the system gives a lot of power to students, who might want to show their patriotic behaviour to be considered for the extremely competitive Party membership, for instance.

18 Regardless of the efforts the CCP puts in defining and communicating Chineseness as an essentialist monolithic idea embodied in the concept of *Zhonghua minzu*, it remains a highly contested term. There is no consensus even on the Chinese translation, which sometimes appears as *Zhongguo xing* 中国性 and at other times as *Zhongguo Renmin* 中国人民. These different ideas of Chineseness are reflected in art, literature, and in the identity discourses of Chinese people on how they perceive themselves. For instance, new cinematic imaginaries of Global China can be read in Berry (2018).

Caption: Posters which appeared projected on LCD screens across university campuses in China's Jiangsu Province in 2019. They highlight the increased level of surveillance of classroom discussion and students being encouraged to “report teachers” to Chinese authorities.

The Program

Within this new context, the voluntary program is aimed at training college and university students from mainland China to become narrators and tourist guides in Dunhuang, with a particular focus on the Mogao grottoes.

“Explaining Dunhuang—2019 university students’ summer program to become voluntary narrators at the Mogao grottoes” is a “dispatching plan” of volunteer students aimed at enhancing awareness about cultural protection and disseminating Dunhuang culture among China’s youth. The first edition was launched in 2018 and lasted 40 days in total during the months of May and June. It was conceived as a pilot project, open to any participant with proper qualifications. The training would have turned the participants into “cultural custodians” (*wenhua shouwangzhi* 文化守望者), an idea that was first introduced in February 2018 by Wang Xudong, the former Dean of the Dunhuang Research Academy, now the president of the Palace Museum in Beijing. After a phase of project design and launch, the recruitment of ten volunteers started. Instructed and guided by the staff of the Dunhuang Academy headquartered in Dunhuang, candidates needed to perform well in the interviews and also pass an after-training test aimed at getting the official qualification of “voluntary narrator” in Dunhuang. This first edition was aimed at recruiting ten “Dunhuang cultural watchmen” from all over the world. With a clear intent of enhancing China’s soft power worldwide, the recruitment team received more than 2,000 applications from China, the United States, Norway, Malaysia, Italy, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other areas. After several rounds of interviews, 20 participants were selected. Among them there were designers, famous curators, foreign executives, museum librarians, talk show actors, social media and other online platforms’ representatives, influencers, together with teachers and staff in higher education, and college students. After 2018, the program developed, and one of its foci became Chinese university students. The scheme targeting Chinese students is designed, sponsored, and implemented by the Dunhuang Research Academy (*Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan* 敦煌研究院), the Foundation for Cultural Development of Shanghai Jiaotong University (*Shanghai Jiaotong Daxue Wenhua Fazhan Jijin* 上海交通大学文化发展基金), the Research Foundation for the Protection of the Dunhuang Grottoes (*Zhongguo Dunhuang Shiku Baohu Yanjiu Jijinhui* 中国敦煌石窟保护研究基金会) and the Mingdao Centre for Cultural Development of Shanghai Jiaotong University (*Shanghai Mingdao Wenhua Fazhan Zhongxin* 上海明道文化发展中心). The launch of the program, together with the diffusion of the call for applications and news, is entrusted to Shanghai Jiaotong University. According to the interviewed students who participated in the 2019 edition, the notice and call circulated on the Web and were shared on the WeChat moments, mainly in closed WeChat groups where former volunteers post audio-visual materials and inform interested students about the program details. Some reports from former volunteers can be found online

on the WeChat official account of the cultural custodians, who are previous participants and are considered seniors and mentors.

The 2019 Edition and the Application Process

The 2019 edition targeting Chinese university students was entrusted to Shanghai Jiaotong University, which collected applications and completed the selection process. This was competitive, and only 20 candidates made it to the end of the recruitment steps and eventually joined the program. The recruitment campaign was launched and marketed to attract cool young and adventurous Chinese urban youth (see the image of the advertisement), ready to plunge themselves into the considered-as-exotic environments of Dunhuang and the Mogao grottoes. The sense of mystery and unknown, the request to be adventurous, is symbolized in the recruitment poster by the seaside which appears as the background image, to impress wealthy and full-of-potential urbanities. This seaside is a constructed imaginary, as Dunhuang is one of the places in the world that is farthest from the sea. In the second picture (see below), Chinese urban youth assume a cool posture and give the impression that the aim of the program has something to do with “urbanizing Dunhuang” by sending them “out there,” creating new knowledge about the place and spreading it. Completely void of any reference to China’s western

territories, its history and peculiarities, the recruitment posters are rather focused on stylish and cool university students soon to be transformed into one of the many megaphones of the official discourses on the history of the highly symbolic and turbulent Chinese western territories.

According to students' accounts, the rhythm of the selection process was quite intensive. Students were chosen on the basis of qualifications achieved, professorial recommendations, resumes, and applicant writing samples focused on their knowledge of Chinese culture and history of the region. The first 50 shortlisted applicants were interviewed, and subsequently asked to submit audio-visual recordings of themselves narrating, upon which the final 20 were given the chance to complete a test on their capacity to remember and recite the narration content provided to them by the Dunhuang Academy Expert Group. Students applied to the program in the order of the thousands. After a two-month concentrated selection process, successful candidates started the training on-site, and gained empirical experience to become "volunteer narrators" from July 7th to August 27th. Students did not receive a stipend, but were provided with free travel, meals, and accommodations in Dunhuang. According to students' reports on the experience, they spent the whole summer in a program that made them become an active part of the major national goal of preservation and diffusion of the Mogao grottoes' culture in Dunhuang.

Evaluating Committee

All members of the evaluating committee were ethnic Hans. It is possible to recognize the ethnic affiliations of members of the evaluating committee from their names and records. Worthy of note was also the fact that many of them were Party members with executive roles within the CCP.

The Students

Mainly affiliated with Chinese state universities, the majority of selected students were female (16 out of 20). In total, 19 of them actually joined the program, as one MA student from Shanghai Jiaotong University withdrew from the training in July because his tutor asked him to work on a research project over the summer. Eight out of 20 students were enrolled in universities located either in Shanghai or Beijing, namely, Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology; Shanghai Jiaotong University; Fudan University; Shanghai Normal University; and Shanghai Jiaotong University School of Medicine. Fourteen of them came from universities situated in Beijing, Tianjin, and in China's most developed south-eastern coastal regions such as Nankai University in Tianjin; Nanjing Finance University; Communication University of China in Nanjing; Guangzhou University; and a transnational university in Suzhou (Jiangsu Province). Considering that one student was enrolled at the University of Atlanta in the US, only five of them came from internal provinces and western China (namely, Henan University, Wuhan University, Lanzhou University, and Hebei University). There is evidently a competitive advantage in being enrolled in universities located in the advanced areas of China, and in being Han. According to the outcomes of the semi structured interviews to the 19 students, applicants were all Han. Notably, none of the students—in their ethnicity or place of origin—reflected Dunhuang diversity in terms of cultural heritage, ethnicity, or mother tongue. Considering that in Dunhuang cultural identities other than Han cannot be considered as “Other”, as they are integral parts of the area's uniqueness, this is a major shortcoming of the project. Intraregional disparities that still exist in China's educational environment are therefore reflected in the composition of this group.

When one of the interviewed students was asked for a personal opinion about why minority students did not apply for the program, the reaction was mainly of surprise to a bizarre question, and the reply was “they do not speak good Putonghua” and “they probably do not have access to those networks advertising the program.” It was a quick response, which mainly shows how controversial the concept of “other” and “diversity” in Chinese society still is. Another question is how much other is the other, and how distant is from

the supposedly shared “core.” As Schein (2000) argues, there is agency in all actors involved in the creation of identities, but it is the dominant power that possesses the prerogative of spreading and channelling knowledge to preselected circles and the broader audience, and to create communities, narratives and memories, shaping the understanding of an area.

The fact that only Han students applied and were successfully recruited for this program has a number of implications. First, instructors are facilitated as they teach historical narrations to students with the same background knowledge and shared meaning-making of concepts, deriving both from their ethnic identity (minority students might have a different perspective on China’s history due to cultural ties with neighbouring countries and to the religious education that some of them receive at home, e.g., Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists) and educational environment (which in border regions is different, often more politicized and of lesser quality in comparison with the higher standards of education guaranteed in the most developed areas of China). In this context, instructors can better control the learning process and be reassured that what they teach is not easily going to be questioned. The same can be argued if we consider the renarration by students after the end of the program: By creating a homogeneous community of young people, teaching them specific narratives, encouraging them to share memories through the “custodians” platform, and entrusting them to the renarration process, the integrity of the Party line can be better guaranteed, as the Other is excluded, and a feeling of closeness and empathy is created among students, members of the selection committee, and instructors. No ambiguities in communication and understandings arise; therefore, there is no risk of misinterpretations. Overall, the program is not inclusive but excludes from the beginning the Internal Other, as Jinba (2013) explains in his work on the Sino-Tibetan borders.

The nationalistic fervour to teach people about the greatness of Chinese culture is matched with incentives that are given by Party organizations to young Chinese who join these programs. They organize and deliver post-training lectures on the Dunhuang caves at their home universities, spending substantial time and energy on these kinds of activities, making observers wonder why these young students would want to become narrators of such staged events to “rejuvenate the Chinese nation.” It can also be quite surprising to hear that these students’ peers are willing to participate in these events and listen to “decontextualized” reports on the history of the caves.

Motivations behind these choices are multiple and pertain to the very nature of Chinese society in the New Era. In some cases, it is the system that

encourages and rewards these activities among the Chinese youth, mainly with social respectability and the opportunities that the Party grants to students. The successful applicants in many cases have already internalized the key ideological messages that officials want them to help disseminate in Dunhuang and beyond Dunhuang. In other cases, it is the fascination for an exotic place, its glamor, and the sense of adventure that moves these students. There are also cases of students who have a genuine interest in China's history and history of art. All these motivations are incorporated, used, and exploited by the Party, which is seen by these students as the main facilitator for job and career opportunities.

The Training

The training scheme consists in a combination of students' independent learning, based on readings provided by the Academy, and on-site training. Instructors are voluntary narrators themselves, who joined previous editions of the program and are therefore considered custodians in their new experienced identity and “renarrating” phase. As soon as students arrive in Dunhuang, they are inducted with two weeks of preparatory training on the history and history of art of the site, with a focus on the Mogao grottoes. Interviewed students noted that the agenda is tight: from Monday to Saturday, they were educated on three caves a day, one cave in the morning and two in the afternoon. These young aspiring volunteers memorize the stories behind frescoes, together with a selection of historical events connected to the paintings' subjects. After two weeks of intensive training, volunteers start accompanying groups of tourists to visit the caves. One group of students accompanies the group of tourists to the caves, introduces the history and external appearance of the grottoes, and afterwards briefly presents murals and statues. Aspiring narrators have the keys to grottoes' doors and independently choose the caves they want to show. Another group of students is in charge of explaining the meanings behind frescoes and statues inside the caves in more detail. Each student leads three groups a day, one in the morning and two in the afternoon. The tourists guided by the students are all Chinese, since I was told by respondents that the English level of the trainees is not proficient enough to explain the technicalities behind paintings and frescoes to foreign tourists.

Before and during the training, students are given sources in Chinese written by Han authors, many of them Party members.¹⁹ The leading scholar on Dunhuang is considered to be Fan Jinshi 樊锦诗, Honorary President of

19 It was in fact considered a good chance by the students, as accommodation costs in Dunhuang are very high over the summer because of the huge number of tourists gathering there from all over China, as well as from abroad.

the Dunhuang Research Academy, who met the 2019 edition's students, as she resides permanently in Dunhuang. Students mentioned with a certain admiration that she is known with the nickname "the woman of Dunhuang." She is Han, a Party member, a former "reform pioneer" (*gaige xianfeng* 改革先锋) with a series of other Party and academia-related honorific titles, originally from Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province. Besides her works, which the interviewed students judged as outstanding, the trainees learn from instructors the stories and narratives behind the frescoes, considered by these youth as sort of *bandes dessinées*. The process of decontextualizing the frescoes meanings by extracting exotic stories serves the purpose of levelling the visual complexity of these pieces of art as well as of the history of the area well.

The predominance of Han scholarship on a topic that is related to a multiplicity of civilizations, cultures, populations, and ethnicities reflects how, at least since the 1950s, there has been the need to create Han-dominated narratives to rewrite history and to empower Han people in the production of knowledge. Translations of sources in the Tibetan and Uyghur languages, for instance, are not included in the list of sources.²⁰

The Renarration

The idea of renarrating is substantiated in two main modes: One is the narration and explanations of the caves' characteristics by the trainees to tourists; the second way consists in renarrating their acquired knowledge through activities that students organize and carry out after the summer project, such as writing blog posts, engaging in delivering public presentations, in being involved in recruitment activities, and in addressing speeches to large audiences. During the renarration, students do not provide any "vertical" insight on the meaning of the Mogao caves, nor an in-depth understanding

20 Data collected from the official WeChat account of the program: Fan Quan 范泉, Director of the Gansu Hongwen Dunhuang Art Research and Training Center; Song Shuxia 宋淑霞, Secretary of the Party Branch of the Department for Cultural Promotion at the Dunhuang Academy, Deputy Director for Reception Activities; Bian Lei 边磊, Deputy Director of the Training Department, Reception Department staff, member of the Dunhuang Academy, Senior Narrator; Hu Hao 胡昊, member of the Standing Committee of the CCP department and responsible for the Propaganda Department at Shanghai Jiaotong University; Lu Qiang 陆强, Council of the Cultural Development Fund, Shanghai Jiaotong University; Cui Yan 崔艳, Vice President of the Research Foundation for the Preservation of the Dunhuang Caves; Chen Lin 陈凌, Director of the Dunhuang Culture Custodians Project, Executive Director at the Shanghai Mingdao Development Center; Luo Yier 罗伊尔, responsible for the First Phase of Dunhuang Culture Custodians' Project, Founder of "Art Talk Show;" Xie Huan 谢焕, participant in the First Phase of Dunhuang Culture Custodians' Project, Koguan Law School, Professor of Ideology and Politics, Shanghai Jiaotong University; Chen Mengchu 陈梦楚, participant in the Second Phase of Dunhuang Culture Custodians' Project, illustrator; Zhan Xiao 詹啸, participant in the Second Phase of Dunhuang Culture Custodians' Project, museum educational promoter.

of the history of the area. This is mainly due to their lack of research skills, as well to not being encouraged to develop their own independent and critical thinking. What tourists basically get is a flat narrative of the frescoes’ scenes, as if they were simple *bandes dessinées*.

At the beginning of the new semester in September, students are asked to organize events, lectures, and any other kind of initiative on the history and the art of Dunhuang, in particular about the Mogao grottoes, both within their communities and in their respective schools and universities in order to spread awareness about Chinese culture and history among younger generations. The concept of renarration has been expressed by the interviewed students through three main verbs: *zhongsu* 重塑 (to reshape, to remodel), *fenxiang* 分享 (to share), *jixu* 记叙 (to narrate, to popularize a narrative), meaning that in this socialization process a certain space for interpretation—though not critical—is left open to students. It is interesting to see how many different verbs and concepts are being used by students for expressing the idea of “renarration,” which has a very clear meaning of socialization, sharing, and accommodating to the political leadership’s expectations and concepts about what Dunhuang should represent in the context of contemporary Chinese culture and in peoples’ memories.

Students are then in charge of organizing community talks, lectures, projections of videos, and conferences. Moreover, students are particularly active on social media, where they create groups where they post and share messages, pictures, experiences, and reports on their summer training.

One volunteer respondent elaborated on what renarrating means to her by explaining:

I think the activity of renarrating Dunhuang is in line with Xi Jinping thought. He put forward the idea of spreading the China’s story. In Dunhuang we can see the *essence of traditional Chinese culture, the crystallization of Chinese culture for thousands of years’ history*.²¹ While in the past, due to various reasons, Dunhuang was considered as a kind of familiar stranger for China, volunteers today have cultural tools, together with a clear idea about the development of cultural studies, and Chinese people in general have got more opportunities to reach and familiarize with Dunhuang. Today we have all the tools to better understand Dunhuang culture, which can be an *element of our own cultural pride*, and for the *current construction of Chinese cultural power* this is very significant. I think that the Dunhuang Academy, as well as the organic cooperation between universities and governments at all levels, have supported the development of the youth’s culture, providing

21 Emphasis, here and below, is by the author.

the opportunity to participate in volunteer projects, communicate with each other, *spread cultural awareness among the youth*, and also promote the ancient Dunhuang culture. In this way Dunhuang becomes alive, and *China's youth a reflection of the country's cultural soft power*. And because the youth is the hope of the motherland, the future of the nation, if enough understanding of these cultural treasures is achieved, the future development of the culture of the motherland will have broad prospects.

I think it is worth spreading Dunhuang culture beyond the domestic perimeter, as excellent Chinese culture is very important for Chinese people, but more importantly, Dunhuang culture has to be transmitted to the people all over the world, let them suffer a *cultural shock, infection*, so as to know more about China, so as to *expand the influence of Chinese culture, promote the cultural power in our nation building scheme*.

This extensive feedback shows that students do not approach the education scheme with an empty, free, and critical mind; on the contrary, they go to Dunhuang with an attitude that is more like responding to a call, fulfilling a duty, something that can be compared to how Red Guards went to the countryside with the task of “learning from peasants” but also “civilizing the peasants.” While the two schemes have obvious differences, the approach is similar and has to do with complying with the nation’s requirements and expectations from Chinese youth. The knowledge accumulated during high school, matched with a set of concepts acquired *a priori*, prevents students from experiencing the whole program with an open attitude. Instead of taking the chance of getting an on-site learning experience beyond the limited classroom environment, and developing students’ research skills, the meaning of the whole scheme is turned into fulfilling the tasks of appropriating a multicultural environment for the sake of national narratives and raising the awareness of Chinese people about “their own” culture by using Chinese youth as a megaphone and a diffusion channel.

Another volunteer explained why the program is attractive: “Dunhuang elements appear more and more frequently around us. They are combined with online games, songs and books. This place appears in all aspects of our lives, and it has attracted my attention.”

A genuine interest pushed her to apply for the program: “Mogao Grottoes are big and small, they span across centuries, and present different styles and different ages. But why did these people build Mogao Grottoes here? What are the murals in the cave? I did not have an answer to these questions.”

The student identifies Dunhuang with “Chinese” culture: Ancient Chinese religion, history, painting, sculpture. Is there a better way to return to ancient times than sitting in a cave and meditating?”

While about the role of Chinese youth in the venture, she states that “although young students have no social influence for the time being, the importance of a small number of outstanding young students, in the mid-term, cannot be underestimated. With the development of Internet, all kinds of platforms have become the stage for young people. We have more and more strength to do something for Dunhuang.”

Another volunteer expressed her gratitude to the program organizers for the opportunity she has got to meet Xi Jinping in person. When asked, beyond the prepared set of questions: “Do you think the concept of ‘renarrating Dunhuang’ is in line with the idea of ‘narrating Chinese stories and spreading Chinese voice’ stated by Xi Jinping?,” she replied:

For sure it is in line with this. I was very lucky to meet Xi Jinping in Gansu the 19th of August. The General Secretary of the CCP visited the Mogao Grottoes and praised what the Dunhuang Research Institute has been achieving over the past years. He also held a symposium at the Dunhuang Research Institute. I thought: why does the General Secretary attach so much importance to Dunhuang? Why is he so concerned about this place? It is because Chinese now advocate cultural self-confidence. Unfortunately, we cannot understand Chinese traditional culture. How can we reach self-confidence? *Cultural self-confidence* is based on understanding. Only when we will be able to *master our traditional culture*, we will become naturally self-confident. So what does traditional culture look like? Dunhuang culture represents a concentration of traditional culture, so we need to ‘renarrate Dunhuang’ to ‘convey Chinese stories and spread Chinese voice’.

When asked about the significance of the program, the student talked about its importance also for younger students:

Very young students are the architects of our future “cultural fortress.” When I was in Dunhuang, I once worked together with the “little Mogao people” for the explanations to be provided to tourists at the entrance of the site. The majority of these voluntary children are 10-year-old primary school students.²² They introduce the Mogao Grottoes to tourists with a fresh and tender voice. After their presentations, tourists use to clap and shout out of satisfaction. When I was together with these “little Mogao people” I deeply felt the power of cultural heritage. The education of these children is still in the first stage of knowledge-

22 The student here refers to another scheme for voluntary narrators within the same program.

building. This is why it is of such a great significance to actively integrate the history of Dunhuang into the knowledge of traditional Chinese culture in the first stages of educational curricula. As these students are still very young, they will greatly benefit from learning about the history and reality of Dunhuang culture.

Beyond the different motivations, which span from a genuine interest in history of art to the willingness of participating into a great national endeavor, there is no complexity nor nuanced perspective in students' voices. Without tensions or contradictions in their narratives, what they provide is a more genuine version of state propaganda, as their views are fresh and without second aims. It is in the phase of "staged renarration" that their genuine voice has the chance to be conveyed to the public and becomes a fresh nationalistic wind which impresses the audiences.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, the author argued that Chinese leaders—especially since Xi Jinping got to power—realized the need to take action and rebuild an awareness and a self-confidence among Chinese people about the country's cultural heritage and traditions. This is a key task in the government agenda because the country is becoming a great power and therefore gaining prominence in the international arena, with the need to obtain recognition among foreign countries, and, first of all, among its own peoples. This process of recognition cannot happen on an uncertain and shifting basis: in order to be controllable and manageable, its foundations need to be created, cultural elements need to be selected from a rich and multicultural civilization, combined and proposed to the public for study and renarration. It is a huge operation of social engineering aimed at reconstructing a selective cultural awareness.

The scheme for voluntary narrators in Dunhuang's Mogao grottoes analyzed in this article is part of this effort and targets the most strategic section of the society, Chinese university students. The way it is designed, launched, and conducted positions it as a dispatching plan that recalls the way young intellectuals were going to the countryside during Mao's time to receive education from farmers. The way students learn, the sources and the concepts they use, their renarrations, are all arranged in a top-down manner, where critical thinking and challenging thoughts are not encouraged nor welcome—in fact, they are not allowed.

The Han-dominated program is conducive to a uniformization of historical narrations on Dunhuang and corresponds at the same time to a dramatic

reduction of its inner cultural potential as a multicultural and multi-ethnic cultural heritage site. In this way, Dunhuang enters into the realm of “Chinese cultural history” and related narrations, which are easily controlled and managed from the top levels of political leaders. Therefore, history becomes politics and a preferential tool for the exercise of power, and the control of peoples’ minds through the promotion of historical narratives is very effective. The exclusion of minority members from the selection committee, minority students, and sources written by non-Han authors, leads to the removal of cultural differences and to the guarantee that discourses are under control. With minorities and “diverse histories” being streamlined into a singular monocultural history of “China,” memory is reshaped by spreading a selection of historical facts and removing the Other.

The appropriation of the place and its multiple narratives serves the highest goal of the current Chinese leadership: the appropriation on China’s diversity for the aim of reshaping Chinese culture and embedding it into a new national narrative.

The successful applicants for this program are selected because they have already internalized the key ideological messages that officials want them to help disseminate at Dunhuang, mainly through their previous education, and at the same time these messages are freshly drummed into them during the training programme itself. The training in itself, provided to the successful applicants, is not the most significant thing about it. It is mainly the exoticism, glamor, and razzmatazz surrounding the promotion of the programme, which encourages urban Han elites to compete for the honour of helping to spread the gospel of Chinese rejuvenation, which makes it meaningful. This is a more sophisticated way to rewrite history if we compare it with how cultural and religious heritage, local histories, and oral traditions are destroyed—physically—in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, as David Brophy (2016) and Riam Thum (2020) have been documenting.

For this political operation to be successful, there is the need to impact China’s younger and soon-influential younger generations. This is why the scheme for voluntary narrators, among its aims, has that of creating homogeneous communities of educated and promising young students, selected from the more developed areas in China and belonging to the same ethnicity, the Han. These students receive focused training based on rigorously preselected sources, so that they can introject narratives and historical records related to a former multicultural and border area, Dunhuang, which, in imperial times, represented the geographical and metaphorical watershed between the civilized (on the East) and the barbarian (on the West) worlds. These narratives

of a multicultural area dominated by the Han majority are then socialized and shared, and memories are created. As history has a meaning only where its memories exist, and memories need to be shared as they can only be collective, in this way a new history is written, as these youngsters internalize and disseminate the party line on Chineseness, and the subordinate or even nonsignificant role assigned to “minorities.”

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