

The Development and Impact of the Sinicization Concept

The aim of this research is to investigate the development and the spread of the sinicization concept in Chinese as well as in western historiography of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. The sinicization concept claims that as a result of the cultural dominance of the Han Chinese, ethnic groups in East Asia inevitably assimilate to Han Chinese culture when they come into close contact. Although the roots of this claim reach far back in history, the concept as such emerged during the final years of the last dynasty in China, the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), when ideas of a Chinese nation-state and a national identity became a new concern. The sinicization concept was used by political thinkers, such as Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) to introduce the idea of a Chinese nation within the borders of the Qing empire, which embraced also territories inhabited by non-Chinese ethnicities. Sinicization was seen as a prerequisite for the building of a Chinese nation-state (Liang: 1983, vol.7, p.1-104; Sun: 1962, p.37; Rawski: 1998, p.2-3).

Despite the political use of the sinicization concept, however, the concept cannot merely be seen as a strategy to support a Chinese national identity. It became in fact an academic standard. Some of the first historians who incorporated the sinicization concept or parts of it in their research were Liu Yizheng (1879–1956), Liu Shipai (1884–1919) and Fu Sinian (1896–1950). Especially in historical works specialized in contact between the Han Chinese and non-Chinese people, the sinicization concept emerges. See for instance the works by influential historians such as L. Simian (1884–1957) and Jin Yufu (1887–1962) (L.: 1989, p.153–194; L.: 1992, p.425–429; Jin: 1996, p.100f).

Although there were some Chinese and Western historians who rejected the sinicization concept and offered alternative suggestions already since the 1940s (e.g., Wittfogel/Feng: 1949, p.14f.; Bol: 1987; Xiang: 1988, p.1–3; Crossley: 1990a; Chen: 1996, p.1–2; Rawski: 1996; 1998), the basic assumptions of the concept were seldom questioned, not even in academic literature, and the concept's influence continuously increased in China. Despite the critical Chinese and western voices, also western historiography widely adopted the sinicization concept (Tillman/West (Eds.): 1995, p.1, Franke/Twitchett (Eds.): 1994, p.13), and also numerous reference works still continue to use it, fully disregarding the invalidating arguments. As a prime example of a fully successful sinicization, books and pamphlets often mention the Qing dynasty (the dynasty that also saw the emergence of the sinicization concept), claiming that although the Qing emperors were of Manchu origin, the dynasty completely adapted itself to the dominant Han culture (Rawski: 1998; Crossley: 1990b; 1997; Elliott: 2001).

As seen from the above, the sinicization concept was in fact taken for granted by a broad public of politicians and historians without thoroughly investigating its claim. Moreover, today, now that many historical works have questioned and even invalidated the concept, it still lingers on as common knowledge, and it is still used by contemporary Chinese politics.

With the present research, I do not want to further question the right- or wrongfulness of the sinicization claim, but I would like to explore how it was possible that such a claim emerged as a standard concept within political and historiographical circles alike in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The following research questions will be developed: Which conditions allowed for the development of the sinicization concept? What does it learn us on the perception of the Chinese role in history? How is it linked to specific notions of Chineseness and visions of the Chinese nation-state? What does it tell us on Chinese identity-making? What is the place of the sinicization concept within the debates on historiography, which took place from around 1900 until the 1930s? How did the concept become an academic concept widely used in historiography during this time? And finally, what makes the claim so attractive that it is still used today in political circles, and remains a kind of common knowledge, despite the invalidating arguments?

The questions raised in this research are of a double importance: in first instance, they concern the creation of the Chinese concept of a 'Chinese nation'. This concept, linked to the ideas on Chinese nationality and Chinese identity is of extreme importance in the present-day development of China into a leading power in the world. In second instance, these questions concern the way we, in the west, conceive China. More precisely, these questions regard the way historiography is responsible for the image of China that was created in the west, an image that lays at the basis of the way the west deals with China.

In order to research the above questions, I will do a discourse analysis of the primary sources consisting mainly of historical and political writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century until ca. the 1930s. I would like to combine this discourse analysis with a study on the social background of the academic and political thinkers of the time, which will lead to a further question: Which personal and academic relations did there exist between the protagonists? And how did the main players influence each other? In this way, I hope to come to a reflected picture of the development and the evolution of the sinicization concept and its impact on historiography and politics.