

‘No one can be Separated from the Other’: The Curse of Relatedness and Ethnopolitics in Contemporary China

BULAG, Uradyn E.

Department of Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

BULAG, Uradyn E. is reader in social anthropology, University of Cambridge (since 2007). He received his PhD in social anthropology at the University of Cambridge in 1993. He was Research Fellow at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (1995-1998), Assistant Professor (1998-2002) and Associate Professor (2002-2007) at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His interests broadly span East Asia and Inner Asia, especially China and Mongolia, nationalism and ethnic conflict. His works include *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), *The Mongols at China's Edge: History and the Politics of National Unity* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), *The Mongolia-Tibet Interface: Opening New Research Terrains in Inner Asia* (co-editor, Leiden: Brill, 2007), and *Collaborative Nationalism: the Politics of Friendship on China's Mongolian Frontier* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), which has won the International Convention of Asian Scholars 2011 book prize. ueb10@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

Concepts such as ‘relatedness’ and ‘connections’ have become not only academic clichés, but political programmes nowadays. The forcefulness of their articulation and the way they affect ethnicity has been left largely un-explored, however. This paper thus critically examines the discourse and the operation of ‘three inseparables’ in China, namely, ‘ethnic minorities cannot be separated from the Han; the Han cannot be separated from ethnic minorities; and ethnic minorities cannot be separated from one another’, a powerful discourse that emerged in the early 1980s to manage ethnopolitics.

The imperative of this ethnic ‘relatedness’ must be understood in historical contexts of Chinese-Inner Asian interaction, which has been punctuated with Inner Asian programmes to ‘identify’ with the conquered Chinese and repeated Chinese efforts to ‘expel’ the invaders, denying any relationship with them. However, Pax-Sinica maintained by the Manchu in the Qing dynasty and the natural resource industrial development in Inner Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century reversed the population flow, prompting Inner Asians to fear the Chinese in the same way as the Chinese did in former times. This paper will argue that it was the effort to overcome the Inner Asian quest for ontological difference and their ‘flight’ that gave rise to the Chinese political slogan of ‘no one can be separated from the other’.

The structural similarity between the past Inner Asian and the contemporary Chinese emphasis of relatedness suggests that if there is any ‘truth’ in this articulation, we must attend to the economic and political contexts in which that such discourses have arisen, and their intended ‘organisational’ function. These concepts are as illocutionary as they are political and affective.