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SPECIAL ISSUE

Sun Yat-sen, "400 million Chinese", and the Fear of Demographic Stagnation in Early Twentieth-century China

Jasper ROCTUS 
Ghent University, Belgium
Jasper.Roctus@UGent.be

Through a concise biography of the number "400 million" (*si wan wan*) as used by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the first provisional president of the Republic of China in 1912, this paper clarifies how and why Sun used the widespread image of a stagnating "400 million Chinese" despite the lack of evidence for this alleged population number. The article elucidates how the vagueness surrounding the image of "400 million Chinese" was attractive to Sun, as it allowed him to pragmatically adjust its (ethnic) definition along with his shifting aims. Ultimately, when systematising his philosophy in 1924, Sun used "400 million Chinese" to generate a sense of urgency for the implementation of his *minzu* ("Nationalism") doctrine, the first of three doctrines constituting his chief political philosophy: the Three Principles of the People.

本文通過傳記分析，探討了孫中山（1866 – 1925）在缺乏確切人口數據的情況下，為何及如何廣泛使用“四萬萬中國人”這一概念。研究表明，這一模糊意象對孫中山具有吸引力，因其允許他根據政治目標的變化靈活調整他的民族定義。最終，在 1924 年系統化其政治哲學時，孫中山使用“四萬萬中國人”這一數字，為其“民族主義”學說的推行營造緊迫感，而該學說成為其核心政治哲學“三民主義”的重要組成部分。

Keywords: Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan); Three Principles of the People; Late Qing China; Republican China; Biography of Numbers; Ethnic Politics

關鍵詞： 孫中山（孫逸仙），三民主義，晚清，中華民國，數字傳記，民族政治

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Introduction

In early 1924, Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙, 1866–1925), who had been the first provisional president of the Republic of China (*Zhonghua minguo* 中華民國; hereafter ROC) in 1912, discussed a wide array of themes as part of a set of six lectures on his central doctrine (*zhuyi* 主義) of *minzu* (民族, “nationalism”). *Minzu* was the first of three doctrines, the second doctrine being *minquan* (民權, “democracy”) and the third being *minsheng* (民生, “people’s livelihood”). Together these constituted his chief political philosophy: the Three Principles of the People (*San min zhuyi* 三民主義).¹ As Sun’s lectures on the *minzu* doctrine took place under the auspices of the First United Front (1923–1927) between his Chinese Nationalist Party (*Zhongguo Guomindang* 中國國民黨; KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (*Zhongguo Gongchandang* 中國共產黨; CCP) which received significant support from the Soviet Union, Sun’s rhetorical focus on the theme of anti-imperialism came as little surprise. His tendency towards allegorical references to the field of demography in making his case for anti-imperialism during the said *minzu*-lectures was, however, much less predictable.

Sun did not duplicate communist dogma in providing evidence for the threat of imperialism, instead opting to focus on the demographic threat presented by the imperial powers. An ever-present keyword in all of Sun’s six *minzu* lectures was “population” (*renkou* 人口), and, especially in his first speech of January 27, 1924, this was the theme that wove his anti-imperialistic argument together. When discussing demographic developments in this lecture, Sun noted that China’s population of 400 million (*si wan wan* 四萬萬)—a population estimate that he, just like many of his contemporaries, took as a preset but never substantiated—had essentially stagnated since 1800, while the populations of the imperial powers had increased exponentially during the same timeframe. Sun took lessons from demographic developments in France, where population growth during the nineteenth century had been similarly lacklustre to the allegedly stagnating population of China. As will be shown below, the cause for the French stagnation was clear to Sun: an excessive French fear over the demographic catastrophes predicted by Thomas Malthus (1766–1834).

Although mentions have been made of Sun’s obsession with demography or his usage of an image of “400 million Chinese” in passing, this has seldom served as the focal point in existing scholarship.² This article’s decision to focus on developments around 1912 and 1924

¹ 1924 was not the first time Sun had discussed his Three Principles of the People. The earliest references are found in his 1905 discussion of “Three Great Doctrines” (*San da zhuyi* 三大主義) that to him explained the strength of the West. It was not until 1924 that Sun systematised his ideology in a set of sixteen lectures: six on *minzu*, six on *minquan*, and four on *minsheng*. References to the Three Principles in this article pertain to the 1924 lectures unless stated otherwise. For the “maiden publication” of his political philosophy in 1905, see Sun Yat-sen (1989, II: 256–257).

² For instance, Audrey Wells (2011, 62–63) stated in reference to Sun’s first *minzu* lecture: “Inappropriate as it might seem today, Sun concluded by expressing concern that the Chinese population might fall behind that of the European powers who might then swallow her up”. Wells did not, however, discuss Sun’s invocation of “400 million Chinese”. Mainland Chinese

specifically, beyond these years being recognised as pivotal moments in his life, can be explained by the notably high frequency of references made by Sun to “400 million” in these periods. Using the *Sun Yat-sen Studies Database* (*Zhongshan xueshu ziliaoku* 中山學術資料庫), which includes *The Complete Works of the Father of the Republic* (*Guofu quanji* 國父全集) that this article follows for citations of Sun’s discourse,³ 150 instances of use of “400 million” by Sun between 1897 and 1924 were identified. Of these, 43 entries are concentrated in 1912, and 28 in 1924, while no other year surpasses 14 entries (1923).⁴

This contribution, originally inspired by the 2022 *Biographies of Numbers* conference at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, explores the background and evolution of the connotation of Sun’s “400 million Chinese” through a concise qualitative biography of Sun’s usage of the number up to his first lecture on the doctrine of *minzu* in January 1924. It clarifies how Sun frequently used the abstract image of a stagnating “400 million Chinese”—despite little factual basis underpinning the alleged population figure—to justify a sense of urgency in implementing his political aims. Furthermore, the article elucidates how the vagueness of the number was attractive to Sun, allowing him as it did to pragmatically adjust its (ethnic) definition as his own aims shifted over the years.

400 Million Chinese: an Abstract yet Attractive Image

Before delving into Sun Yat-sen’s views on China’s demographics, it is important to highlight that the notion of a stagnant population of “400 million Chinese” had by the early twentieth century already been widely accepted both within and beyond late Qing China. As shown by Andrea Bréard (2019) among others, the fact that census surveys were infrequent and imperfect prior to the founding of the People’s Republic of China (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo*

scholarship contains a handful of studies on Sun Yat-sen’s preoccupation with “400 million Chinese”, but these tend to use selective snippets of Sun’s rhetoric to argue that his ideas aligned with the PRC’s one-child policy (1980–2016), by claiming he had been worried about “overcrowding” (*ren man wei huan* 人滿為患). This claim is based on one single utterance in 1894, prior to the start of Sun’s revolutionary career (Sun Yat-sen 1989, IV: 3–11). Most scholars concede that by 1924 there had been a drastic shift towards an encouragement of demographic growth, with “400 million Chinese” as a sidenote in Sun’s general demographic views; e.g., Zhang Jianhua (2002); Li Daoji (2009). Other more recent works that look beyond the (now abolished) one-child policy and acknowledge the persuasive quality of an imagined “400 million Chinese” tend to gloss over the racial connotations of Sun’s demographic ideas, e.g., Yan Deru (2016).

³ This 1989 ROC anthology represents the most comprehensive collection of Sun’s discourse. While certain contentious texts attributed to Sun such as the much-debated 1925 ‘second will’ addressed to the Soviet Union are omitted, these exclusions do not pertain to the focus of this article. Therefore, all translations of Sun’s Chinese-language discourse follow the *Complete Works of the Father of the Republic*.

⁴ Beyond this quantitative note on the frequency of Sun’s utterances on the “400 million”, the hermeneutical selection and analysis of Sun’s references below is based on the author’s personal research on Sun’s Complete Works. The lack of quantitative methods in spite of the numerical nature of the topic, can nevertheless find support in the argument made by Theodore Porter (2020, ix) on the sometimes-excessive *Trust in Numbers* in recent times: “Those who undertake to toss qualitative reasoning out the door are likely soon to be found sneaking it back in through the window”.

中華人民共和國; PRC) in 1949 did not dissuade intellectuals, politicians, and scholars from using constructed “biographies” of the number 400 million to their advantage. Tong Lam (2011, 36) called this constructed image of a “400 million Chinese” an “enumerative imaginary”, noting that it became a popular trope in the West which before long was also employed by the Chinese to “express their own hopes and fears” on the future of their country.

Demographic surveys were not alien to China. The first somewhat unified empire-wide census was taken in 2 CE during the Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE, 25–220 CE), with 57,671,400 “mouths” (*kou* 口) in 12,366,470 “households” (*hu* 戶) registered in a bid to obtain a clearer view of the empire’s tax base and the amount of soldiers available for mobilisation. Demographic dread might already have been present during the late Han, as the (recorded) population dropped significantly to 48 million by 140 CE as the dynasty faltered (Twitchett, Loewe, and Fairbank 1986, 240). Population surveys came and went by differing frequencies and accuracies throughout China’s dynastic history. Census surveys taken during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), for example, attested to a stagnant Chinese population just above 60 million, with a massive northward migration of the population underway. Ho Ping-ti (1959, 258–260) noted, however, that said migrations were “probably more apparent than real”, as the south worked more actively (and successfully) to reduce its local tax burden by understating its population. This phenomenon would extend well into the twentieth century and was by no means limited to China alone. In the preindustrial world, especially, qualitative factors often outweighed quantitative ones, as (census) figures offered local interests a means of negotiating with central authorities, thus providing opportunities to increase agency (Porter 2020, 25). Indeed, reliable population statistics have been hard to come by through China’s dynastic history: numbers more often reveal qualitative local narratives than quantitative numerical facts.

During the first centuries of the Qing, novel ideas on population censuses had started to take shape. A survey taken in 1741, for instance, made a distinction between “men/women and adult/child” (*nannü daxiao* 男女大小) (Bréard 2019, 220). From the issue of this census until 1851, when the Taiping rebellion (1850–1864) fragmented the unity of the Chinese realm, statistics were recorded annually (Durand 1960, 236). While numbers fluctuated heavily over the years and still suffered from similar deficiencies as during the preceding Ming dynasty (1368–1644), they at least to some degree attest to explosive population growth. Demographic surveys of the faltering Qing dynasty between 1873 and 1887 suggest a Chinese population somewhere between 277 and 426 million (Bréard 2019, 223–224). Considering the high death toll caused during the Taiping rebellion and general calamities related to the decline of the dynasty after 1850, it appears likely that an actual “400 million Chinese” could have been reached somewhere during the first half of the nineteenth century, and perhaps was maintained beyond. However, given the eventful and bloody nature of the century, a *stagnant* figure of “400 million Chinese”—the abstract demographic narrative that was ultimately popularised—is extremely unlikely.

“400 million Chinese” gained traction in Chinese, as well as Western and Japanese ideas on the Chinese population. Andrea Bréard (2019, 228–229) invoked the example of polemic Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929), who, despite also noting that the actual population statistics were vague and the number should have been much higher by the turn of the twentieth century had no misfortunes befallen China, used the image of 400 million and its half, 200 million, to put emphasis on the fact that Chinese women were still unable to productively contribute to society.⁵ Equally, however, the number was invoked abroad whenever suspicion arose that the estimate of “400 million Chinese” was too high. Other times, the number was taken as a given, and used in the West to emphasise that the “400 million Chinese” constituted a massive untapped market, be that religious or economic. Bréard (*ibid.*) cited, for instance, a 1880 letter by an American Presbyterian missionary which held that a “Chinese gentleman” had stated that the actual number of Chinese was closer to a quarter of the alleged 400 million, but equally showed examples that the number of 400 million when seen as a preset staple number, was used to stress that a large amount of people remained estranged from the Christian God. Another popular frame with an ethnic connotation, as we shall see below through Sun Yat-sen’s usage of the demographic image, was that of a “400 million [Han] Chinese” being unjustly occupied by a mere few million “Manchu foreigners” (Tong Lam 2011, 32–33).

Such demographic images of “400 million Chinese” would persist well into the first half of the twentieth century, and even survive the return of census surveys with some level of credibility during the waning years of the Qing. These were, once again, incomplete and fragmentary at best, as most efforts were upended by the dynasty’s collapse (Durand 1960, 245). Further adding to the ambiguity surrounding the actual size of the Chinese population was popular resistance to the “modern” census practices that the Qing administration tried to implement, with some Chinese accusing census takers of “stealing souls” (Tong Lam 2011, 128).

In lieu of clear numbers, be they to emphasise that the Chinese population was too low, stagnating, full of boundless potential, or too high, the constructed image of “400 million Chinese” would, by the turn of the twentieth century when Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary career started to gain traction, take shape as a leading narrative in Chinese demography. As will be shown below, just like most of his compatriots—and for that matter, those who invoked the trope abroad—Sun would use a wide array of evolving frames using the image of “400 million Chinese” to suit various revolutionary and governmental aims.

⁵ On Liang Qichao’s advocacy of numbers and statistics in relation to economics and concepts of society, see Stefan Christ’s “The Quantification of Chinese Society: Why Did Liang Qichao Ask for Statistics?” in this special issue.

Sun Yat-sen's Formative Years

Sun was one of the first Chinese to receive an almost entirely Western education with only the bare minimum of Chinese education at the primary school level. After enjoying a middle school education on Hawai'i, where his elder brother owned a considerable estate, Sun successfully pursued a medical degree in Hong Kong. After graduating in 1892, Sun would attempt to obtain government employment in Beijing through a letter to the senior Qing statesman Li Hongzhang (李鴻章, 1823–1901),⁶ which went unanswered as Li was preoccupied with the military and diplomatic fallout of the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895). This failure to obtain a position in the Qing government was a turning point for Sun, who abandoned reformism to opt for revolution. In November 1894, Sun would play a prominent role in the establishment of the revolutionary Revive China Society (Xing Zhong hui 興中會), which would conduct a failed revolutionary attempt a year later in Guangzhou.

Shortly prior to the Guangzhou uprising of 1895, Sun had connected the suffering of the “400 million Chinese” to his revolutionary cause, and expressed great pride in the size of the Chinese population in the founding declaration of the Hong Kong chapter of the Revive China Society: “With 400 million people [四百兆人民]⁷ and tens of thousands *li* [里]⁸ of land, we [Chinese] can become heroes, invincible in the world”. (Sun Yat-sen 1989, II: 2–5; quoted in Hu Shengwu and Dai Angang 1996, 18). Despite the great potential Sun saw in his plentiful compatriots, no national uprising was triggered by his efforts in Guangzhou, and he was forced into exile to Japan. Many more attempts at revolution and many voyages over Asia, the United States and Europe would follow, before the Wuchang Uprising (*Wuchang qiyi* 武昌起義) would finally succeed in late 1911.

A period worth singling out during Sun's early revolutionary career with regard to the topic of demography is his visit to London in 1896 and 1897.⁹ After gaining celebrity status in Great Britain through a dramatic kidnapping incident at the Qing dynasty's consular offices during October 1896 (see Sun Yat-sen 1897), Sun spent several months in the British capital and frequently visited the city's libraries where he met with local and foreign scholars, many of

⁶ The letter, dated June 1894 and listed as *Explaining the Great Plan to Save the Country to Minister Li Hongzhang*, can be found in Sun Yat-sen (1989, IV: 3–11). This was Sun's only reference to the dangers of overcrowding, see footnote 2.

⁷ Note that Sun here refers to “400 million” with *si bai zhao* (400 times one million). Subsequently most of his references (and all others mentioned in this article) were to *si wan wan* (four times 10,000 times 10,000). Presently, this manner of denoting units of a hundred million has fallen out of grace as well, and *si yi* (four times 100 million) has become the standard way to denote 400 million.

⁸ *Li* is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. Its length was never fully standardised but was usually close to half a kilometre.

⁹ Considerable controversy surrounds the length of Sun's Europe stay in the late nineteenth century. Sun himself attested to a stay of two years (until 1898) and claimed he also visited France. However, as nothing is documented about this proposed longer stay, a sojourn of less than a year limited to London and some places in England seems more probable (Wells 2001, 11–14).

whom held left-wing sympathies.¹⁰ Expecting to witness prosperity on every street corner, Sun had been shocked by the London slums and the general inequality of British society. It was the era of the Fabians and Socialists, and Sun witnessed with his own eyes that not everybody had profited from Great Britain’s industrial successes. While a degree of speculation remains on which specific ideological influence ultimately prevailed on Sun during this time, one inspiration is clear: the American economist and philosopher Henry George (1839–1897). As George had passed away during Sun’s sojourn in London, he and his magnum opus *Progress and Poverty: an Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth* (1879) received amplified media attention in the British press, likely catching Sun’s eye. This work essentially represented a “liberal fix” to prevent the social upheavals predicted by Karl Marx (1818–1883) through a land-equalization scheme under a single-tax movement, and would ultimately provide much inspiration for Sun’s anti-Marxist standpoints in the doctrine of *minsheng* in his 1924 version of the Three Principles of the People.

That Sun chose to connect Henry George’s ideas to the perils of late Qing China is hardly surprising as the American philosopher cited ample demographic examples from China in his work. Specifically, George referred to China to prove the fallacy of the theory of Malthusian population growth in one of his central arguments (e.g., George 1912, xi–xii). George, for instance, claimed that the descendants of Kongzi (孔子, 551–479 BCE, a.k.a. Confucius) should have numbered in the septillions (24 zeros) by the nineteenth century had Malthus’s predictions been correct: under Malthus’s theory, they should have doubled in number every generation due to the societal privileges they had generally enjoyed since Kongzi’s death, which evidently had not been the case (George 1912, 111–112). The fact that George not only praised China as a great ancient civilisation while simultaneously criticising its stagnation under Qing rule (e.g., George 1912, 480), and sharply condemned imperialist practices in general throughout the work by, for example, connecting the Indian and Chinese plight (e.g., George 1912, 117; 121), likely made it even more suited to the reinforcement of Sun’s ideological foundation.

While Sun would not immediately reproduce any demographic arguments in a Georgist vein, one finds an increasing amount of references to a “400 million Chinese” in the years following Sun’s stay in London. A noteworthy early usage of this image came shortly after Sun’s return to Japan in 1897 during a discussion with the eccentric Japanese adventurer Miyazaki Tōten (宮崎滔天, 1871–1922), when Sun connected the ongoing suffering of the “400 million Chinese” under the faltering Qing dynasty to the general plight of oppressed Asia:

The reason why our Party is trying so hard to agitate is in order to live up to the expectations of our compatriots (*tongbao* 同胞]. You have all tried your best to

¹⁰ For information about Sun’s (possible) meetings with foreign scholars during his stay in London, see Wells (2001, 10–28). For an overview of English writings by Sun, many of which were compiled during his London stay, see Anderson (2016).

support the way of our party and wish to provide support for China's 400 million common people, as well as wiping away the humiliation of Asia's yellow races, in restoring humanity in the universe. Only if our country's revolution succeeds, will [an end to the humiliation] be obtained. (Sun Yat-sen 1989, II: 398-399)

The fact that Miyazaki Tōten had likely (further) inducted Sun into Georgism should, in this regard, come as little surprise.¹¹ In the subsequent years, Sun would continue to invoke the image of “400 million Chinese” under the domination of a tiny minority of Manchu oppressors. In *The True Solution of the Chinese Question*, a treatise dated Autumn 1904 and aimed at convincing the American people to support his revolutionary quest, Sun emphasised the non-Chinese status of the Manchu Qing rulers as well as their relatively small demographic size vis-à-vis the oppressed (Han) Chinese, and stated (in English): “The Manchus number at present not more than five millions, while the Chinese have a population of not less than four hundred millions. It is therefore their constant fear that the Chinese might rise up some day and regain their country” (Sun Yat-sen 1989, X: 87-96). Sun's aims were clear: by affirming the hugely discrepant population sizes of the ‘subdued’ native (Han) Chinese and their ‘foreign’ Manchu occupiers, Sun hoped to find sympathisers to liberate them from this injustice.

Clearly, “Chinese” was equal to “Han Chinese” during this part of Sun's life. In an English treatise dating back to 1898 titled *The Chinese Rebellion*, Sun had already made a distinction between “China with its four hundred million inhabitants” and the “comparatively small body of Tartar conquerors” that governed them in a bid to elicit British support for his cause.¹² Similar views would gain more ground in the same year, after the Hundred Days' Reform (Wuxu Bianfa 戊戌變法; June-September 1898) at the Qing court was crushed, and, among others, Liang Qichao started to propagate the notion that China was experiencing a Darwinist struggle between the Manchu and Han (Pusey 1983, 181-185). Such beliefs would be further radicalised in *The Revolutionary Army (Gemingjun 革命軍, 1903)* by the young revolutionary Zou Rong (鄒容, 1885-1905), who hailed the revolutionary struggle of the Han Chinese to replace the Manchu occupiers as the racial duty of all 400 million Han Chinese (Zou Rong 1903; quoted in Tong Lam 2011, 32-33).

Sun, who during this period was in close touch with both Liang Qichao and Zou Rong, would occasionally also drop any inclusive ethnic pretences by referring directly to the perceived

¹¹ Miyazaki Tōten (1982, 31-45) described in his autobiography how his brother had introduced him to George's philosophy at an early age. It is highly likely that he discussed this with Sun, as contact between the two men was frequent around the turn of the twentieth century. Marius Jansen (1967, 56-57) also noted that Tōten's brother may have even introduced George's philosophy to Sun directly.

¹² The article was released on July 22, 1898, in the London-based newspaper *The Morning Post*. Found through a reprint included in Anderson (2016, 218-222).

plight of a humiliated “400 million Han Chinese”. An example of this came during a speech in 1906 in Tokyo, where he ended an exposition on an early version of his Three Principles of the People as well as his aim of overthrowing the Qing dynasty and founding a republic by stating: “[A Chinese republic with a strong constitution] is the greatest happiness for *we* 400 million Han Chinese. I think all of you will be willing to take this task on and work together to make it into reality, which is what I have wished for the most” (emphasis mine; Sun Yat-sen 1989, III: 8–14).¹³ Despite such rhetoric, even Sun himself does not appear to have claimed that “400 million Chinese” was a factual estimate: an English journalist who attended a 1905 lecture by Sun in Beckenham, London noted that during his speech Sun stated that the “estimated 400 millions of inhabitants of China was based on a census made 200 years ago and the number might have increased or decreased” (Anderson 2016, 248–249).¹⁴

Sun had clearly paid note to the useful ethnic connotations of the “400 million”, but perhaps in somewhat less radical terminology than, for instance, Liang Qichao and Zou Rong. James Pusey (1983, 319) observed that Sun, unlike some of his revolutionary contemporaries, had been “anti-Manchu before he was pro-Darwin”. Wu Benxia (2015) has also argued that, compared to Liang Qichao’s Social Darwinism concerning racial competition, Sun’s ideas were to a greater extent centred around the notion of “mutual aid” (*huzhu* 互助), which would become especially apparent in his 1924 version of the *minsheng* doctrine. Be that as it may, Sun’s narrative of the “400 million Chinese” during his revolutionary career was primarily also one of ethnic (Han) pride whenever he spoke of their suppressed potential.

“Inclusive” Provisional President Sun Yat-sen and the Road to the First United Front

After the success of the Wuchang Uprising in late 1911, Sun Yat-sen, seen as the ideal compromise candidate between bickering factions on account of his senior revolutionary track record, was elected provisional president (Linshi da zongtong 臨時大總統) of the ROC and started his term on January 1, 1912. Sun’s tenure was to last no more than six weeks, as he resigned in favour of military leader Yuan Shikai (袁世凱, 1859–1916). Despite the fact that the Qing dynasty had been successfully overthrown and the image of a “400 million Han Chinese oppressed by a tiny minority of Manchus” seemed now a matter of the past, Sun maintained a tendency to invoke “400 million Chinese”. On his first day as provisional president of the ROC, Sun paid tribute to his compatriots as follows: “We owe the restoration of

¹³ The entry *The Three Principles of the People and the Future of the Chinese Nation* is dated December 2, 1906.

¹⁴ These remarks were originally printed in *The Beckenham Journal* of March 18, 1905.

our country to the efforts of all of you, and I, the president, therefore would like to respectfully convey a message of appreciation to you, my 400 million compatriots” (Sun Yat-sen, II: 437). Many similar callouts to ‘his’ 400 million compatriots would follow in 1912.

At least in public, the definition of these “400 million compatriots” was now broader than it had been during Sun’s revolutionary years. On the same day as his tribute to the Chinese people Sun explained that the ROC consisted of five major nationalities: “The essence of the country is in the people. Combining the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Hui,¹⁵ and Tibetan lands into one country; that is, combining the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Hui and Tibetan nationalities into one people, is the unification of our people” (Sun Yat-sen 1989, II: 23–24).¹⁶ Sun would even hail the “five nationalities” (*wuzu* 五族) as “one family” (*yi jia* 一家) during 1912.¹⁷ However, as also aptly noted by Murata Yujiro (2004, 123), while perhaps not as frequent and openly Han-centric as before, the goal of striving for racial assimilation of said five nationalities was still present during this period whenever Sun was speaking to specific audiences, such as other party members.¹⁸ It goes without saying that the core of this to-be-assimilated new Chinese ‘family’ was implied to be the Han.

This view was also prominent in the foreign press at the time. For instance, when explaining that the five-coloured flag of the ROC was based on the idea of the five nationalities, James Cantlie and Charles Jones (1912, 141–142), whose *Sun Yat-sen and the Awakening of China* (1912) can be considered the first coherent biography of Sun, stressed that it was only logical that the (Han) Chinese were entitled the highest red stripe of the flag due to their “intellectual, commercial, and political superiority”. While the authors did not invoke the image of the “400 million Chinese” and were highly positive about Sun’s “enlightened” efforts in 1912, they did touch upon related demographic tropes that were popular around the turn of the twentieth century, as if Sun was to prevail in China they expected the “yellow peril” to materialize (Cantlie and Jones 1912, 126). The discourse by Sun imbued with a more inclusive interpretation of the “400 million Chinese”, rebranded as made up of the five nationalities, would nevertheless persist until the first half of the next year. On March 13, 1913, for instance, Sun paid tribute once more to the five nationalities and included them in his “400 million Chinese” during a speech to the Chinese community in Kobe, Japan: “Today our country is a country shared by our five nationalities’ 400 million. Our 400 million people have become

¹⁵ Note that the “Hui” here pertained to all Muslims in China, and is unrelated to the later Hui ethnicity delineated by the PRC. On the notion of Hui and the ambiguity surrounding Muslim population statistics during nineteenth- and twentieth-century China see also Li Gang’s “Recognition through Numbers: Muslim Population Numbers and the Hui in Modern China” in this special issue.

¹⁶ These comments were made in the *Proclamation on the Inauguration of the provisional president* on January 1, 1912.

¹⁷ The most prominent example is Sun’s speech *The Five Races Work Together for the Benefit of Mankind All over the World* of September 3, 1912 (Sun Yat-sen 1989, III: 72–73).

¹⁸ The *KMT Manifesto* of August 13, 1912, can be considered an example of this (Sun Yat-sen 1989, II: 33–35).

the masters of the Republic of China, which is very different from the position of slaves [that they held during the Qing dynasty]” (Sun Yat-sen 1989, III: 150–153).

Yuan Shikai seized absolute power in 1913 by expelling Sun’s KMT, which had won the first national assembly elections (Spence 2012, 266–267). After a second revolution in 1913 to oust Yuan failed, Sun was forced into exile to Japan for another three years. During the remainder of the 1910s, Sun desperately sought ways to get back into power, and approached several Western countries and Japan for assistance. By 1916, Sun was once again able to operate from China after the collapse of Yuan Shikai’s imperial ambitions and his subsequent demise. An attempt to retake power from Guangzhou as generalissimo of a government comprised of part of the assembly elected in 1913 ended in failure, and in 1918 Sun retreated from politics to his estate in Shanghai’s French concession. After Yuan Shikai’s downfall in 1916, China fragmented with the advent of the warlord era (*junfa shidai* 軍閥時代, 1916–1928).

Thereafter, the image of “400 million Chinese” sharply decreased in frequency in Sun’s discourse,¹⁹ and came to be subject to another narrative shift. Domestically, Sun used the large size of the population to emphasise the raw potential of the country and inspire his compatriots to (re)unite. While the limitless potential of the (Han) Chinese had previously been a theme in Sun’s pre-1911 rhetoric on the “400 million Chinese” as well, only now did it truly take centre stage, since the downfall of the Qing dynasty had rendered the foreign occupiers narrative impractical. In the preface to his *The Fundamentals of National Reconstruction* (*Jian guo fanglüe* 建國方略) released in February 1917, a work Sun would expand during his self-imposed exile in Shanghai before releasing a full version in 1921, Sun exhorted the Chinese people to familiarise themselves with the content of his forthcoming work:

If everyone becomes familiar with this book, then the hearts of our people will be united and the people’s power will be consolidated. If we, with our nation of 400 million people and outstanding civilisation, the most beautiful land in the world, and the greatest source of wealth, are united like one heart and mind to be rich and strong, I am sure that we will be able to catch up to and surpass Europe and America within ten years. My 400 million compatriots, you should strive for this (Sun Yat-sen 1989, I: 553–555).

Another of a number of similar uses of the image to energize the Chinese is found in a speech to students in Shanghai where Sun would emotively start off the description of each of his ideas to save China by exclaiming: “Oh dear 400 million compatriots!” (Sun Yat-sen, III:

¹⁹ The *Sun Yat-sen Studies Database* records 48 entries for 1912 and 1913, but only 9 between 1914 and 1918.

200–202).²⁰ The persuasive use of the image of “400 million Chinese” in making a political comeback was clear to Sun by this point.

In May 1917, Sun extrapolated the image of “400 million Chinese” in a treatise named *The Vital Problem of China* (*Zhongguo cunwang wenti* 中國存亡問題), which urged against Chinese participation in World War I, to the subjects of the British Empire, who happened (at least by Sun’s practical estimation)²¹ to boast 400 million as well. Sun explicated that the strength of the British empire of 400 million was due to its demographic majority of 350 million Indians, who constituted an enormous marketplace and were a crucial element in its empire-building (note the similarity with the abovementioned “large untapped market” frame consisting of a “400 million Chinese” popularised in the West). Most striking in Sun’s argument is the statement that followed an account of the unequal trade relations between the British Isles (which brought industrial goods to India) and its Indian dominion (that primarily provided agricultural products for the British) which, according to Sun, depended specifically on the size of the population.²² Despite Sun’s intentions at making an anti-imperialist (or more precisely: anti-British Empire) argument, the citation betrays his underlying belief that a large population was a major factor in the success of a nation (or empire), an idea he would further expound on in 1924. The indirect message that Sun hoped to convey to the foreign powers—the treatise was translated into English—is equally apparent: China could be a marketplace as large as the British Empire, and it could be so even without any colonial apparatus by counting on its 400 million natives alone.

Western and Japanese support for Sun’s development of the untapped Chinese market was not forthcoming,²³ however, and by the early 1920s his eye fell on a newly established power: the Soviet Union. Around this time the Soviets had successfully overthrown the Russian empire and the Russian civil war (1917–1923) was ending in their favour. Therefore, the Soviet leadership felt the time had come to search for allies to spread the revolution abroad. Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) had in his *Theses on the National and Colonial Questions* (1920) decided that during the early stages of spreading the revolution abroad (nominally) temporary alliances between communist parties and bourgeois revolutionary parties were warranted.²⁴ As the CCP was still too weak to be a major force in the ongoing struggle

²⁰ The speech *The Urgent Need to Save the Country* is dated October 18, 1919. Similar rhetoric can be found in *The Revolutionary Army* by Zou Rong (1903, e.g., 11).

²¹ Sun crudely added the population of the British Isles (50 million) to that of India (350 million), and apparently ignored other British colonies for the sake of producing a figure of 400 million.

²² The original Chinese for *The Vital Problem of China* can be found in Sun Yat-sen (1989, II: 284–329).

²³ Martin Wilbur (1976, 100–111), among others, reported a telegram by Sun to American president Warren G. Harding (r. 1921–1923), in which Sun asked the American president to recognize his government, as well as Sun’s dispatchment of a representative to the recently vanquished Germany to solicit support and recognition, both during 1921.

²⁴ The manuscript dated June 5, 1920, can be found in Lenin (1977, XXXI: 144–151). The Soviet shift to alliances with bourgeois parties should also be understood in light of the failure of “pure” communist revolutions in Europe during the preceding years.

between the Chinese warlords, the Soviet Union reached out to Sun and his KMT, despite the “bourgeois” nature of the Party and its founder.

Sun, meanwhile, had been impressed by the Soviets’ success in unifying their broken country, and had been especially pleased by the pragmatic “New Economic Policy” (NEP, 1921–1929) which reflected Sun’s belief that capitalism and socialism could exist side-by-side (e.g., Sun Yat-sen 1941, 237; Sun Yat-sen 1989, II: 559–560). Initial contacts between Sun and the Soviet Union were made in early 1920, and in January 1923, Sun signed a manifesto that created a united front between the Soviet Union, the CCP, and his KMT. Although Sun and the KMT were to be the alliance’s leader, the communists were allowed to retain their own Party structures, and they could join the KMT on individual basis (Spence 2012, 301–309).²⁵ Despite the fact that Sun occasionally also reached out to the West during 1923 and 1924, support proved not forthcoming and the Soviets were able to fully capitalise on this opportunity (Schiffirin 1980, 247–250).

In October 1923, a Soviet support mission under the leadership of Comintern representative Mikhail Borodin (1884–1951) arrived at Sun’s Guangzhou base. The mission that Borodin had received from his superiors in Russia was that support was only to be given if it was willing to break with its right-wing elements, unconditionally support an alliance with the CCP, and strive to improve the rights of the Chinese workers (Wilbur 1984, 7–8). Sun was aware of these demands, and after the arrival of Borodin one can observe a shift in his discourse toward anti-imperialist rhetoric. Sun’s anti-imperialist views at this time were likely further fuelled by a conflict with several Western powers over the customs rebates in late 1923, as several nations deployed gunboats to pressure Sun into abandoning his plan to seize their customs offices (Wilbur 1976, 183–190). By January 1924, Sun’s pro-Soviet attitude can be said to have reached its apex, as the KMT was effectually reorganised along Soviet lines, with Leninist organisational principles introduced to make the Party a more efficient fighting force.

Demography Boosts the First Principle of the People: *Minzu*

Still under the looming threat of Western warships, a considerable amount of (pro-)Soviet rhetoric was present by the time Sun Yat-sen embarked on explicating his doctrine of *minzu* on January 27, 1924. Especially the theme of anti-imperialism was emphasised as the KMT was holding its first “National Congress”²⁶ (January 20–30, 1924) under United Front auspices where this subject was at the forefront (Wilbur and How 1989, 93–100). On the opening

²⁵ The *Joint Declaration on Sino-Russian Relations with Joffe* of January 16, 1923 can be found in Sun Yat-sen (1989, II: 116–117). For an overview of the prelude to the establishment of the United Front, see Bergère (1998, 293–351); Wilbur and How (1989, 18–139).

²⁶ While the KMT’s Guangzhou government was by this point only in control of most of China’s southern Guangdong province,

day of the congress, Sun paid tribute to the Soviet Union and its ruling party, related their revolutionary success to the Chinese need to implement his Three Principles of the People, and exhorted the KMT to follow the Soviets' Leninist example by also "building the state by the means of a party" (*yi dang jian guo* 以黨建國) (Sun Yat-sen 1989, III: 412-414).

Merely praising the Soviet Union, however, was not sufficient, and Mikhail Borodin considered it in the best interest of the United Front that Sun systematised and deepened his Three Principles of the People through sets of lectures, six per doctrine. So as not to suffocate Sun's enthusiasm (remember that Lenin himself had allowed bourgeois partners onto this stage of the proletarian revolution) he gave Sun considerable freedom in writing them. For Sun, who always had wanted to eventually systematise his ideas, a suitable opportunity to explain his vision for the "400 million Chinese" in more detail had finally come.

With the KMT congress ongoing in the background, Sun held his first lecture on the doctrine of *minzu* on January 27, 1924. Except for the segments with the predictable praise for the Soviet Union, Sun's emphasis on the themes of race and population might have come as a surprise to his audience. In the first part of his lecture Sun distinguished the "kingly way" (*wangdao* 王道) from the "hegemonial way" (*badao* 霸道) present in international politics, stating that the first was a natural force that had shaped nationalities (*minzu* 民族), and the second was an artificial invention that had given rise to nation-states (*guojia* 國家) (Sun Yat-sen 1989, 3-12). Sun argued that China followed the first way, while the West (ab)used the second, and singled out Great Britain's large colonial empire as example of the weakness of those that followed the hegemonial way. Sun's point was that although the British had added large parts of the world to their empire through violent means, the "natural" nationalities of the subdued parts, such as the Chinese in British Hong Kong, would never perceive themselves as British (*ibid.*).

After providing five forces (*li* 力) that, unlike the "artificial" concept of the nation-state, made nationalities "natural", such as bloodlines (*xuetong* 血統), which Sun considered the most important factor, lifestyle (*shenghuo* 生活), language (*yuyan* 語言), religion (*zongjiao* 宗教), and customs and traditions (*fengsu xiguan* 風俗習慣), Sun went on to claim that China was made up of one nationality—the largest of the world. This was followed by his definition of this "natural" nationality with reference to the "400 million Chinese":

In order to promote the doctrine of *minzu*, it is necessary to fully understand this doctrine before it can be brought into full play to save the country. The total number of Chinese people is 400 million, interspersed (*canza* 參雜) among them there are only a few million Mongols, just over a million Manchus, a few million Tibetans, and a million and few hundred thousand Muslim Turks, a total of less than 10 million

delegates representing other parts of China were also present. It was in this sense that it could claim to be a "national" congress.

externals [in China]. So, for the most part, the 400 million Chinese can be said to be entirely Han Chinese, with the same blood, the same language and script, the same religion, and the same customs; they all are one people (Sun Yat-sen 1989, I: 3–12).

Despite acknowledging that other nationalities “interspersed” among the Han Chinese, Sun clearly presented the Han population as the true core of the “400 million Chinese”. This strikes a similar chord to his rhetoric prior to the founding of the ROC in 1912, now without a need to attack a non-Han oppressor. Racial inequality, though still less pointed than during Sun’s pre-revolutionary years (“interspersed” instead of downright exclusion), thus prevailed in his demographic ideas. As Audrey Wells (2001, 69) aptly stated, those that considered Sun’s *minzu* doctrine of 1924 to connote equality between nationalities were mistaken.²⁷ While one may assert that around 1912 there was—in public at least—some form of racial equality in Sun’s rhetoric on the “400 million Chinese”, the above citation demonstrates that by the 1920s this had once more ebbed away in favour of his pre-revolutionary focus on the Han Chinese. Earlier in the same decade, when lecturing on previous versions of his *minzu* doctrine, Sun had also again identified himself as a Han Chinese on multiple occasions.²⁸ Even when discussing other nationalities in China in a more inclusive manner, admitting they were not limited to the five nationalities, he always indirectly stressed the leading role of the country’s Han majority in fusing the groups into one Chinese nation.²⁹

Still, as fluid as the ethnic boundaries of Sun’s “400 million Chinese” might have been, he maintained his strong belief in their limitless potential. In his speech of January 1924, Sun stated his regret that although the “400 million Chinese” should be “on par with America and Europe” on the world stage, they were: “a patch of scattered sand (yi pan san sha 一盤散沙)”,³⁰ despite China being made up by 400 million people” (Sun Yat-sen 1989, I: 3–12). He warned his compatriots that urgency was needed in implementing his doctrine: “Our position is most perilous at this time. If we do not take care to promote the doctrine of *minzu*

²⁷ Here Wells mostly refers to a claim by Chang Hsu-Hsin and Leonard Gordon (1991, 23) that supports a more inclusive ethnic connotation for the 1924 version of the *minzu* doctrine.

²⁸ In a 1921 speech titled *The Specific Methods of the Three Principles of the People*, for instance, Sun (1989, III: 226–233) stated: “The Han nationality boasts about 400 million, or perhaps even more than that. It really is the greatest shame for us Han Chinese that we cannot truly independently form a country that is completely Han. This is due to the failure of our Party’s *minzu* doctrine”.

²⁹ During a speech before KMT delegates titled *Explanation on Amending the Party Charter* dated November 4, 1920, Sun (1989, III: 215–219) stated: “We must actively raise the status of our 400 million people and carry them forward. Now we are talking about a republic of five nationalities, but actually the term “five nationalities” is not appropriate. Aren’t there more than five nationalities in our country? What I mean is that all nationalities in China should be integrated into one Chinese nation”.

³⁰ Sun had introduced the idea of the “400 million Chinese” being “a patch of scattered sand” in the preface to *The Fundamentals of National Reconstruction* (1917). Sun (1989, I: 553–555) stated: “The 400 million Chinese resemble ‘a patch of scattered sand’”.

and unite the 400 million people into a solid nationality, China will suffer the sorrow of national and racial extinction [*wangguo miezhong* 亡國滅種]” (ibid.). This was both the most prominent and urgent fusion of the fate of the Chinese nation and Chinese nationality that Sun would ever make.

Subsequently, Sun went over the main imperial powers that had, in his opinion, successfully implemented some localised form of his *minzu* doctrine to strengthen themselves. In order, he discussed Great Britain, Japan, Russia, Germany, France, and the United States. While Sun would focus on different aspects that could explain the strength of the respective states and their peoples (ibid.),³¹ he either started with, or returned to, one similar theme for all of them: demographic developments during the nineteenth century. Sun praised the demographic growth of Japan and most Western nations, but noted that there was one nonconforming example among the population increases of the West: “In the last hundred years, [the population of] the United States has increased tenfold, threefold in Britain, threefold in Japan, fourfold in Russia, two and a half times in Germany, [but merely] a quarter in France” (ibid.). The culprit of this lacklustre development in France had been clear to Sun since his encounter with Henry George’s work in the late nineteenth century:

A hundred years ago, there was an English scholar named Malthus, who was worried that the world’s population was too large and the supply of goods was limited, so he advocated reducing populations. The French, being naturally disposed to strive to live an untroubled life, embraced Malthus’s doctrine, and advocated that men should not be burdened with their families and women should not bear children (Sun Yat-sen 1989, I: 3–12).

Disregarding Sun’s extremely stereotypical portrayal of the French, at least two interesting evolutions in his thought are evident: 1) even successful nationalities, like the French, could encounter demographic stagnation; and 2) Sun now saw such stagnation as extremely dangerous for a nationality’s internal cohesion. According to Sun, the French, who in the early nineteenth century had been the most populous out of the countries mentioned, but by 1920 were on the lowest step of the ladder, had eventually realised that Malthus’s “toxic” teachings could lead to racial suicide, and were desperately trying to avert their ongoing demographic downfall (ibid.). In this attack on Malthus, who was not well-known in China during the 1920s, Sun’s intellectual debt to Henry George is especially apparent.

³¹ With regard to Great Britain, Sun focused on the strength of the Anglo-Saxon race in forging their empire. On Japan, Sun stressed its embrace of science and technology and racial unity, which, he held, equipped it as suitable example for the Chinese. On Germany, Sun stressed that the Germans had recently successfully overthrown their militaristic (“Teutonic”) tenets to pursue justice and rights. But most of his praise was reserved for his Soviet benefactors, eulogizing their efforts in assisting oppressed nations like China to resist the imperial powers.

Fearing similar developments in China, Sun stated: “I feel alarmed when comparing the increase in population of each country with the [stagnating] population of China!” (ibid.). He further explicated this by pointing out that the Chinese population already numbered 400 million during the reign of Qing emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1735–1796), but had then stagnated: “There will soon have been 200 years between Qianlong’s reign and the present. Yet, there are still 400 million Chinese. It was 400 million a hundred years ago, and it will certainly be 400 million a hundred years from now” (ibid.). Later in the speech, Sun even professed doubt in the 400 million itself, citing an undated population estimate by American diplomat William Rockhill (1854–1914) of “no more than 300 million [Chinese]” (*bu guo sanwanwan* 不過三萬萬). Sun mentioned that despite the possibility of a retained 400 million, which he apparently viewed as more likely than a decrease, was not much better as it still implied stagnation (ibid.).

Sun’s demographic fears are even more apparent in his discussion of the demographic developments that had occurred in the United States during the same period. Claiming that the American population had increased more than tenfold in the previous 100 years, Sun predicted that the American population could number one billion by the year 2000 if this trend persisted (ibid.). Sun then compared his fear of an eventual demographic American domination to an supposed assimilation of the Manchus by the (Han) Chinese:

In the past, the Manchus could not conquer the Chinese nationality because they only had a million or so people, which was too few compared to the Chinese population. Of course, they were absorbed by the Chinese. If the Americans came to conquer China, then in a hundred years, when there could be ten Americans interspersed among four Chinese, the Chinese would be assimilated by the Americans (Sun Yat-sen 1989, II: 3–12).

Sun’s standpoint concerning assimilation was something new, to say the least, considering that he had presented the Chinese as effectively occupied by the Manchus until the 1911 revolution that had brought him into power, and had made no prior mention of the occupiers’ alleged Sinification. His repeated usage of “interspersed”, now with an even clearer connotation of impending racial assimilation, also raises questions regarding his views on the position of the Han vis-à-vis the other nationalities in China. Sun nevertheless pressed the argument in the final part of his lecture, and even included the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) in an allegory that predicted a grim future if the Chinese population of 400 million continued to stagnate:

In a hundred years, if our population does not increase and the population [of the imperial powers] increases a lot, they will use [their] majority to conquer [our] minority and are bound to annex China. By that time, China will not only lose its sovereignty, but will also be lost entirely as a country. The Chinese people will be digested (*xiaohua*

消化) by their nationalities, and face extermination. The Mongolian and Manchurian conquests of China in the past used their minorities to conquer the [Chinese] majority, and wanted to use the majority of Chinese people as their slaves. If the imperial powers conquer China in the future, they will use the majority to conquer the minority, and will not need us to be their slaves. By that time, we Chinese will be lower than slaves (Sun Yat-sen 1989, I: 3-12).

In Sun's next five lectures on *minzu*, his demographic fears were repeated in the background as he discussed other (political and economic) ways in which China was oppressed.³² Demographic themes would, however, largely retreat when Sun held his lectures on the doctrine of *minquan* in March and April 1924, which were concerned to a greater extent with adapting and perfecting Western (democratic) conceptualisations. Here, the few references to population and the 400 million were imbued with the "limitless potential" frame. The sixth and final lecture on *minquan* of April 26, 1924, contained the series' most direct note on China's imagined "400 million". Sun (1989, I: 113-128) stated: "Speaking of our Chinese population, with 400 million people, we are the most populous country in the world. Our vast territory and abundant resources should surpass those of the United States".

Initially, demographic references would not make a return when Sun started lecturing on the doctrine of *minsheng* on August 17, 1924. The first and second lectures addressed the social issues China was facing and sharply attacked Marxism in a Georgist vein, almost creating a rift with Sun's Soviet benefactors (Wilbur 1976, 243-245).³³ By then, as Harold Schiffrin (1980, 257) has argued, Sun had likely clearly 'cooled off' after his customs dispute with the West and was looking once again towards avenues for cooperation beyond the Soviets. In the third lecture, which was concerned with the issue of food, his previous demographic fears prominently returned as Sun (1989, I: 157-170) again professed doubts in the size of the Chinese population by stating that an unnamed "accurate foreign investigation" (*waiguo queshi de diaocha* 外國確實的調查) had put it closer to 310 million that year, which he related to famines due to China's lagging food production—this time seeming to accept population decline as a fact. Strikingly, in his final *minsheng* lecture a week later on the issue of

³² In the second lecture, for example, Sun was concerned to a greater extent with political and economic oppression by the Western powers. He nevertheless tied his arguments to demographic fears at the end, stating (1989, I: 12-22): "In the past hundred years, China has already been oppressed due to the population issue. While China's population has not increased, foreign populations have grown continuously day by day. Now, we are also being oppressed by political and economic forces simultaneously. We are under pressure from these three forces at the same time, and if we do not find a solution, no matter how vast China's territory is or how large its population may be, within a hundred years, we will surely face national and racial extinction".

³³ In the first two lectures on the doctrine of *minsheng*, Sun would reject Marxist notions such as the inevitability of class struggle and the incompatibility of capitalism and socialism in a similar vein to Henry George. For Sun's first and second speech on the doctrine of *minsheng*, held on August 3, 1924, respectively see Sun Yat-sen (1989, I: 129-145); Sun Yat-sen (1989, I: 145-157).

clothing, Sun presented that number (sometimes rounding down to 300 million) as a given (Sun Yat-sen 1989, I: 170–181), seemingly breaking with the “400 million” frame.

However, Sun’s final main speech, i.e., his lecture on Great Asianism (*da Yazhou zhuyi* 大亞洲主義) on November 28, 1924, in Kobe, Japan, en route to Beijing where he would fall ill and pass away, proved the frame too attractive to abandon entirely. Invoking an oppressed Asian majority of the world population fighting the imperialist West, the “400 million Chinese” were again portrayed as brimming with potential to flip the balance (Sun Yat-sen 1989, III: 535–542). Until the very end, then, Sun proved himself a pragmatist: the potential population decline was ignored, with the fact of the Chinese population outnumbering the West paramount in his bid for Japanese support in reuniting China.

Conclusions

From a glorious 400 million brimming with limitless potential to an outnumbered future lower than slaves: Sun’s ideas about the “400 million Chinese” and demography in general evolved significantly over the years. More than that, Sun contradicted himself on such matters during different periods of his life. Shortly before the revolution of 1911, for instance, Sun expressed the belief that his 400 million compatriots were being effectively occupied by the Manchus despite the latter’s trivial population size vis-à-vis the (Han) Chinese. In 1924, by contrast, he would maintain that the Manchus had failed to suppress China due to their successful racial assimilation by the (Han) Chinese. Clearly, the theme of anti-imperialism, the changing international circumstances, and the need to hurry along the implementation of his *minzu* doctrine had inspired Sun to swap the image of a “tiny minority occupying a grand 400 million with limitless potential” for the vision of a “stagnating 400 million vanquished by a potentially even larger population”, that is, if his political philosophy went unimplemented. As shown in the first section of this article, the shifting and contrasting connotations of the popularised narrative of a “400 million Chinese” detached from any verifiable census was emblematic for the era Sun lived in, whether that number represented a market, peril, or myth. Even when he occasionally pondered whether the Chinese population had dropped even lower (but never contemplated whether it might be higher), the frame proved too attractive to entirely abandon.

Just within the first lecture on the *minzu* doctrine in 1924, Sun contradicted himself multiple times. If nationalities were unchangeable, as claimed with his example of the persistence of a Chinese identity among the Hong Kong population despite living under British domination, then why should the Chinese people, who apparently boasted all five factors that made a nationality “natural”, fear American assimilation or even racial extermination if outnumbered? Furthermore, if the ways of the imperial powers were as artificial and hegemonial, and thus should not be copied, as Sun seemed to imply on multiple occasions, one could question his

praise of their “vigorous” demographic development and alleged successful implementation of a localised form of his *minzu* doctrine during the nineteenth century. These contradictions illustrate how political pragmatism consistently guided Sun’s rhetoric.

Equally striking are the shifts in inclusivity within Sun’s “400 million Chinese”. While originally vague and largely focused on the large untapped potential of an occupied group of native Chinese, an exclusive connotation of “*Han* Chinese” took shape under ideological influences such as of Liang Qichao and Zou Rong. While dropping these notions in public speeches during his short stint as provisional president in 1912 but retaining them in certain speeches with limited audiences such as party members, they returned after Sun was forced into exile again in 1913. Although from that point onwards, “untapped potential” came first and “Han-centrism” was secondary, the racial focus remained present throughout his career. In January 1924, Sun’s flirtation with exclusivity and inclusivity culminated into a fluid notion of a “400 million Chinese”, with other nationalities “interspersed” among them, which evidently implied “soon to be assimilated/Hanified”. Therein his rhetoric became more urgent than ever: If the stagnating figure “400 million Chinese” did not increase soon, they would face national and racial extinction.

Sun’s choice to use Malthusian theory in reinforcing this point by attacking France, the one anomalous demographic trend amongst the imperial powers, should also be emphasised. The citation of Malthus was a peculiar choice as the English demographer was virtually unknown in early twentieth-century China. Sun’s grounding in Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty*, which criticised Malthus, might help explain this decision. Sun’s debt to Georgism would become more apparent in August 1924, when he lectured on his third doctrine of *minsheng* which sharply attacked Marxism. Perhaps the erratic demographic theories espoused by Sun during the first speech on his doctrine of *minzu* had been similarly formed by his American inspirator. In January 1924, while his Soviet audience were perhaps puzzled by Sun’s bizarre brand of anti-imperialism that stressed the plight of “400 million Chinese”, they were probably willing to disregard it on account of the ample pro-Soviet rhetoric that accompanied it. Little did they know that the hints of an ideological debt to Georgism, the ammunition that would later assist him in attacking Marxism, was already apparent.

As we now know, Sun’s demographic fears never materialised. As of 2022, the United States boasts about 330 million people. This is still less than the imagined “400 million Chinese” of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and a far cry from Sun’s fear of “one billion Americans by 2000”. Great Britain would grant India independence in 1947 before growing at a slow rate to the 65 million of today. Chinese population growth, instead, would break out of its inertia soon after Sun’s demise, surpassing 500 million before the founding of the PRC in 1949, reaching 580,555,948 by the country’s first official census in 1953, before soaring to the 1,411,778,724 people listed as living in mainland China by the seventh PRC census of 2020, despite the implementation of extensive family planning measures over the preceding decades. In 2025, there are no “ten Americans for every four Chinese”, but about ten Chinese for every two and a half Americans. Yet, no “racial assimilation/extermination” as

predicted by Sun has taken place in any direction. In hindsight, if anything beyond being erratic, Sun’s usage of “400 million Chinese” as a quantitative statistical number was exemplary for the impracticality of demographic estimations and predictions of his era, even more so when fuelled by subjective nationalist sentiments. Sun’s political obsession with the idea of “400 million Chinese” and its pragmatically shifting ethnic inclusiveness, does, however, clearly show the high discursive and propagandist power that the attractive qualitative image of a vague but widespread number holds in providing impetus for action.

Sun’s invocation of “400 million Chinese” as a symbol of both potential strength and demographic peril also resonates with more recent usage of the “power of big numbers”. This motif, representing the scale of China’s population (until recently the largest in the world) as both an asset and a source of vulnerability—particularly after it went into decline for the first time in 2023—has continued to shape discourse on China’s global role and self-perception under growing Chinese nationalism. Contemporary discussions on China’s economic growth, military expansion, and influence often similarly leverage population size as a justification for a unique place in the global hierarchy for the (Han) Chinese, and subtly echo Sun’s early twentieth-century demographic appeals. While quantitative statistics are ever-changing, some qualitative narratives indeed prove highly resilient and are therefore still worthy of further investigation.

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