Introduction

President Xi Jinping’s China Dream is the ‘renewal of the Chinese nation’ to become a ‘strong and prosperous nation’ (fuqing daguo).\(^1\) This chapter will analyse China Dreams as acts of identity articulation to chart China’s (inter)national identity. It analyses China’s ethnic minority policy debates which centre on arguments about whether China should be a multi-ethnic state or a mono-ethnic nation-state. The increasingly contested relationship between ethnicity and nation is central to understanding how China’s leading thinkers articulate who is China and how the answer will either propel or bring an end to China’s rise. The chapter then explores how these different ethnic futures are deeply intertwined with predictions about China’s position in international politics. The China Dream thus becomes a way to chart the future of China’s domestic and international politics and a means to narrate who is China at home and abroad. William A. Callahan\(^2\) has shown how Chinese exceptionalism is increasingly popular amongst political elites and public intellectuals in China. The military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq alongside the 2008 financial crisis have led to a perception amongst Chinese thinkers such as Hu Angang\(^3\) and Zhang Weiwei\(^4\) that the soft power of the United States is declining and China’s is concomitantly rising. Hu Angang’s approach is described in his own book by Li Cheng as ‘optimism’ and ‘exceptionalism’.\(^5\) Zhang Weiwei and other leading public intellectuals draw attention to the failures of the US combined with China’s double-digit growth figures to argue we are entering a ‘post-American century’.\(^6\) They argue that China will emerge as a new type of superpower which relies on consent rather than coercion to organize its international relations. These are
profoundly optimistic dreams of China's future as a conservative return to its historically rightful place in world affairs. The growing optimism amongst scholarly elites is driving public debate through popular books as well as online commentary in China and has culminated in Xi Jinping's signature slogan of the 'China Dream'.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faces the challenge of how to manage this rising optimism because it does not entirely reflect state capacity or its level of economic development. Up to 200 million people live on a dollar a day and by 2005 the Party stopped announcing the number of public incidents of protest a day as the figure reached 500. China’s leading thinkers and policy-makers now ask how they can avoid the ‘nightmare’ of ‘domestic’ insecurity derailing the China Dream, most notably the increasingly violent challenges to CCP ethnic minority policies in Xinjiang and Tibet. The ethnically targeted violence in Lhasa in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the rising body-count from self-immolating Tibetans have stimulated policy debates marked by uncertainty and insecurity which bring China ‘nightmares’ to the foreground. The ethnically targeted violence of July 2009 in Ürümchi overshadowed the lead-up to the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Uyghurs and Han were both victims and perpetrators with official figures claiming 197 people were killed. The violence showed that ethnic relations remain an important issue in people’s daily lives in Xinjiang and a significant challenge to the Party-state’s capacity to provide ‘stability’.

The events of July 2009 led then Guangdong Party Committee Secretary and now 3rd ranked Vice Premier, Wang Yang, to suggest that China that needs to readjust its ethnic minority policies or there will be further ‘difficulties’. Zhang Haiyang, Professor of Ethnology and Sociology at the Minzu University of China (MUC) described the events of Lhasa 2008 and Ürümchi 2009 as a ‘turning point’ for ‘ethnic relations’ in China. Huang Zhu, chairman of the research office of the United Front Work Department, framed the ‘minzu’ question as ‘a question of life or death for our nation’. The CCP similarly explains that ethnic unity (minzu tuanjie) is a ‘zero-sum political struggle of life or death’. Discussions of ‘domestic’ ethnic minority policies, namely using the minzu category to differentiate between ethnic groups, the system of regional autonomy, and ‘preferential policies’ (youhui zhengce), are now hot topics in China. These events and Wang Yang’s comments sparked unusually frank debates amongst scholars at Beijing’s elite universities. These were publicized on the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) website as an ‘exploration of a Second generation of minzu