China's National Question since 1949

Colin Mackerras

Description/Definition

The Chinese nation is conceived as a unified state composed of 56 ethnic groups, the majority Han and 55 state-recognized ethnic minorities. In theory they are all equal, though in practice the immense population and other dominance of the Han makes that impossible (in 2010 the ethnic minorities made up only 8.41 per cent of China's total). There is a political system of limited autonomy in the places where the ethnic minorities are concentrated, the five main ones being equivalent in status to provinces. These are the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The minority economies have greatly expanded and modernized, especially in the twenty-first century, and absolute poverty has been vastly reduced. However, serious inequalities persist both within and among the minorities themselves and, with a few exceptions, they are poorer than the Han. Many of these inequalities are due more to regional disparities than to ethnic. Tourism has been greatly promoted since the 1980s and had contributed to economic growth and to preserving ethnic cultures, but has been criticized for exacerbating inequalities and for showing tourists a false and reconstructed culture.

The Chinese state has zero tolerance for separatism. In practice only two minorities have spawned major, though so far unsuccessful, separatist movements, the Tibetans and the Uyghurs. In suppressing these two movements, China has been charged with colonial

attitudes and serious human rights abuses. In both cases, China's defence is the preservation of the unity of the Chinese nation.

China has been accused of a new imperialism, and its attitude towards its ethnic minorities and insistence on its territorial space are among the reasons. However, neither the theory of ethnic minorities and limited autonomy nor the concept of the unity of the Chinese nation is imperialist.

Introduction

In October 2019, the People's Republic of China (PRC) celebrated its seventieth anniversary. Although United Nations demographers believe that India's population will shortly overtake China's, the PRC has since its foundation been the world's most populous nation-state, with United Nations data estimating the total number of people in China in mid-2019 at 1,433,783,686. In terms of territory, China stands in third place, exceeded only by Russia and Canada.

In discussing China's "national question," we need to consider precisely who makes up the population of China in terms of nationality, particularly questions relating to ethnicity.

The Chinese term meaning "Chinese nation" is *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族. In a major Chinese-language dictionary, Chen Yongling 陈永龄 (1986, p. 573) defines it as "the general term covering all ethnic groups," of which the PRC state has come officially to recognize 56. China's foremost anthropologist and ethnologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1910-2005, also romanized in the old Wade-Giles system as Fei Hsiao-tung) conceived of the Chinese nation

as diverse, because of the different ethnic cultures among the 56 ethnic groups, but also essentially united. He summed up his concept in the phrase “plurality and unity in the configuration of the Chinese nationality” (Fei 1988), the title of a major lecture he gave in Hong Kong in 1988. As scholar Zhou Minglang (2016, p. 128) interprets Fei, the Chinese nation “is a national entity that has developed from a common emotion and morale for a shared destiny of successes and failures.”

Certainly, the idea of the Chinese nation has been used by many Chinese leaders to promote national unity. The “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴) has been a common theme since the late twentieth century. Chinese President (since 2013) and General-secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (since 2012) Xi Jinping equates it with his notion of the “China Dream” (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦).

The term *minzu* 民族 raises questions in the sense that it has two distinct meanings. One is close to the nation-state, that is an internationally recognized entity, with borders, an independent government and its own national institutions, an example being “the Chinese nation,” mentioned above, which is currently coterminous with the PRC. But *minzu* is also a nationality or ethnic group *within* a nation-state. Among the 56 state-recognized ethnic groups in the PRC, the Han is the dominant and most populous one, accounting for over 90 per cent of China’s total, while the other 55 are counted as the “minority nationalities” (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). The term *shaoshu minzu* is used in Chinese-language publications coming from the PRC. English translation varies, possibilities including “minority nationalities” and, more recently, minorities, minority ethnic groups, and minority ethnicities. This sense of the term *minzu* is interrogated more thoroughly below.

The PRC is a nation-state dominated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, *Zhongguo Gongchan dang* 中国共产党). The CCP led by Mao Zedong won the civil war against the previously dominant Nationalist Party (*Guomin dang* 国民党) in 1949, leading to the founding of the PRC on October 1 that year. Since that time the PRC has held power in most of those territories claimed as part of China. At the end of 1978, two years after Mao died in 1976, Deng Xiaoping instituted policies of reform and modernization, which have exerted profound effects on China's economy, society, politics and culture.

Territories in which the CCP claims full sovereignty and rules as part of China include some with extensive minority populations, making up about 60 per cent of the total territory. These include Xinjiang in the far north-west, Tibet in the south-west, Yunnan in the south and Inner Mongolia in the north-east. From time to time diasporas and others have contested Chinese rule in particular minority areas, but the PRC is very firm that Chinese unity is a core principle. There will be separate discussion of Tibetan areas and Xinjiang.

This chapter relies mainly on printed sources, primary and secondary, both in Chinese and English. However, it also appeals to extensive personal experience in ethnic areas in China, the author having travelled frequently in many of them since 1982. (An extensive bibliography of the main items relevant to ethnic minorities is available in Mackerras 2018.)

Politics in the PRC and Ethnic Minorities

The minorities make up only a small proportion of China's population, but inhabit a large part of China's territory, much of it near borders. Put another way, most of China's borders

are minority areas (*minzu diqu* 民族地区). So the political importance of minorities is far greater and out of proportion to their population.

The concept of a minzu and identity

Minzu in the sense of an ethnic group within a larger nation-state has always been officially understood in the PRC according to Stalin's definition of 1913 (1953, p. 307): "a historically constituted group of people, having a common territory, a common language, a common economic life and a common psychological makeup, which expresses itself in a common culture." It is this definition that spawns the concept of minority nationality or minority ethnic group (*shaoshu minzu*).

The Nationalist Party recognized five ethnic groups in China: Han (the majority and the one most commonly associated with "the Chinese"), Manchus (who had ruled China under the Qing dynasty from 1644 to 1911 but were overthrown by Sun Yat-sen and his Republicans in 1911), the Tibetans, Mongolians, and the Hui or Muslims. When the PRC was established, many groups came forward to express their identity, because the new government promised a better life for all oppressed groups. Classification of these ethnic groups was a major project of the 1950s, with "extensive field work" beginning in 1953 to establish which were genuine ethnic groups and which not (Fei 1980, p.94). The final number of 55 minorities was reached in 1979, when a small-population ethnic group called the Jino (living in Yunnan Province) was formally recognized as a *minzu*. (For a range of articles on theoretical and identity questions, especially ethnic classification, see Mackerras, [Ed.], 2011, Vol. I, pp. 27-203).

Stalin's definition applies much more readily to ethnic minorities of the past than to those of the present. Migration processes have tended to dilute inhabiting a "common territory," modernization has affected any "common economic life," while globalism has made "common culture" much less easy to define. However, despite difficulties, Stalin's definition does at least establish some firm criteria, upon which a judgment can be made about who and what make up a specific ethnic group.

Two case studies exemplify important difficulties and raise interesting issues. They are the Hui and the Manchus.

Hui 回 is the name applied to people who are Muslim by religion but Han in other ways. They speak and write Chinese and have contributed to Chinese literature. They inhabit areas generally not too different from other Chinese, and live all over China, even including the Tibetan capital Lhasa. In general, their "economic life" is very similar to that of the Han. Being Muslim by religion has a very important implication. This is that Han cannot be Hui. Han who change religion to become Muslim, also change their ethnic group to be Hui.

The Manchus come originally from the north-east of China. When they ruled China, they greatly expanded its territory but gradually lost their identity and became absorbed into the Han. Nowadays, the Manchu written and spoken language is very rarely used. It is interesting that Cao Xueqin, the main author of the late eighteenth-century social novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* (*Honglou meng* 红楼梦), often considered China's greatest, was Manchu.

In the early days of the PRC, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Hui and Manchu ethnic identity was very blurred. People who might otherwise be considered Han

were not too keen to emphasize their Muslim identity. Manchus might conceal their ethnic identity, because they feared discrimination or contempt as belonging to the minority group that had dominated the Chinese state for so long in the past. In the 1980s, however, ethnic identities revived strongly in China. Referring to the Hui, Dru Gladney (1991, p. x) writes of “the emergence of a new ethnoreligious identity in China.” Bai Lian has likewise found that a “reawakened Manchu identity has made the Manchus one of the conspicuous minority nationalities in China.” According to the 1982 census, the Manchu population was 4,304,981, but had grown to 9,846,776 according to that of 1990. The main reason for such a rapid growth in so short a time was re-registration by people who had been reluctant, or even ashamed, to claim themselves as Manchu in 1982 but were proud to do so in 1990 because of the political change that allowed for the strengthening of their ethnic identity (Bai 2005, pp. 183-184).

Policy towards the ethnic minorities

The CCP’s essential policy on the ethnic minorities is that all ethnic groups are equal, but those in China may not secede. However, they may practise a form of autonomy within the areas where they form a concentrated community. The organs of self-government of the autonomous areas can pass their own laws, though these must be submitted to the central government for approval. The head of the organs of autonomous government must belong to the specific ethnic group exercising autonomy.

The details of this policy of autonomy are spelled out in the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy of 1984, as amended in 2001. They are quite liberal, including the rights of minorities to develop and maintain their own cultures, use their own

languages and follow their own social practices. Article 11 ensures the protection of “normal religious activities,” but the same article specifies that “Religious bodies and religious affairs shall not be subject to any foreign domination.” The Autonomy Law also provides preferential policies (*youhui zhengce*) in various areas (discussed in Leibold 2016). An example is in education. Article 71 states that the government will help poor minority families with the education of their children and “in enrollment, institutions of higher education and secondary technical schools shall appropriately set lower standards and requirements for the admission of students from minority nationalities,” and special consideration will be given to the “admission of students from minority nationalities with thin populations.”

A major limitation to this autonomy system should be noted. Although the head of the governing organ of autonomous places must by law belong to the ethnic group exercising autonomy, this prescription does not apply to the CCP. So, for example, the head of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) must be an ethnic Tibetan, but the Secretary of the CCP in the TAR can belong to any ethnic group, including the Han. In practice, the Party secretary is much more powerful than the government head.

The degree of actual autonomy has fluctuated over the years, depending in large part on the policy of the day. During the Cultural Revolution, autonomy was very restricted, but with the period of Reform under Deng Xiaoping, it broadened greatly and allowed for a much greater degree of freedom. (For a general rundown on autonomy, see Lai 2016). The policies of greater Sinicization that have followed since 2015 have resulted in a reduction in the degree of autonomy and greater insistence on national unity, both of which have had the effect of

restricting freedoms. Personal experience suggests that preferential policies in such areas as education are not affected by these changes.

As of 2003 there were 155 autonomous areas in China, including regions, prefectures and counties. Autonomous regions are equivalent to provinces in level. There are five autonomous regions in China, the earliest being set up before the PRC. The five are, in chronological order of establishment:

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, set up May 1, 1947;

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, October 1, 1955;

The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, March 15, 1958;

The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, October 25, 1958; and

The Tibet Autonomous Region, September 1, 1965.

The Chinese authorities have always been clear that they have zero tolerance for separatism or independence movements. International relations specialist Enze Han (2013, p. 5) has developed a theory according to which an ethnic group must satisfy two conditions for aspirations towards separation from China to be realistic. These are: (i) that independence must offer an “achievable better alternative” to current conditions, and (ii) that the ethnic group must get “substantial external support” for political mobilization, with diasporas a major source. In practice there have been enduring separatist movements only among the Tibetans and Uyghurs, both considered separately. There have been occasional suggestions that Inner Mongolia might join with the independent Republic of Mongolia, but such movements have never posed a serious threat to the Chinese state.

Population

The population of ethnic minorities is very small by comparison with China's total, but has risen both in absolute and relative terms. As of the end of 2019, there have been six population censuses under the PRC, held in 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2010. The 1953 census counted the minorities at 34 million, or 5.89 per cent of the total population; that of 1982 showed them at 66.4 million, or 6.62 per cent of the total. By 2000 the ethnic proportion had risen to 8.41 per cent or 106.46 million people, while the 2010 census put the ethnic minorities at a total of 113.79 million people, which was 8.49 per cent of the total population of China. (See also Mackerras 2016, pp. 117-118).

Reasons for the rapid rise between 1982 and 2000 are manifold. But we may single out two. One is re-registration, to which reference was already made in discussing the Manchus. The other is that, at the time the Han were subjected to the one-child-per-couple policy, policy towards the minorities was much more flexible, people in areas with sparse populations being allowed more children. Although most minorities did suffer restrictions, they were far more lenient than those imposed on the Han. Rural Tibetans were allowed as many as they wanted. (Mackerras 1994, pp. 233-245). At the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, this writer randomly found several families in rural Xinjiang with nine children each.

Populations among the 55 individual minorities vary widely. Figures from the 2010 census show the most populous as the Zhuang, whom we saw above as concentrated mainly in Guangxi, which borders Vietnam; the smallest in population being the Lhoba (3,682) of Tibet and the Tatars (3,556) of Xinjiang. Those with over 5 million (2010 census) are: Zhuang, 16,926,381; Hui, 10,586,087; Manchus, 10,387,958; Uyghurs, 10,069,346; Miao, 9,426,007;

Yi, 8,714,393; Tujia, 8,353,912; Tibetans, 6,282,187; and Mongolians, 5,981,840. (See Zang 2015, pp. 4-5).

Han immigration

One highly controversial issue is that of Han migration into minority areas. A frequently heard charge is that Han are taking over land that formerly belonged to other ethnic groups and in that way establishing domination over them. China's official position is that, since these territories are all integral parts of China, the ethnic group of residents there is immaterial. Still, three important cases can indicate some realities of the population composition. These are Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang.

When the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region was set up in 1947, Mongolians were only 14.81 per cent of the total population. Although the 1990 census showed the proportion somewhat higher at 19.38 per cent (Mackerras 1994, p. 252), the 2010 census saw a drop to 17.11 per cent, still higher than in 1947. In other words, the extensive migration of Han into Inner Mongolia preceded the PRC.

In the case of Xinjiang also, we find that Han migration is not new to the PRC. Early in the nineteenth century, the Han proportion was already quite high (Millward 2007, p. 306). However, it later fell back in the mid-nineteenth century and, though it had to some extent recovered by the middle of the twentieth century, Han migration under the PRC has been unprecedented.

Census and other figures show that about three-quarters of Xinjiang's population were Uyghurs at the time the CCP took over. In 1954, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, designed to promote economic development and assure security in Xinjiang, functioned as an organization which Han settlers could join for work purposes. This involved extensive Han immigration into Xinjiang. According to census figures, the proportion of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang population fell from 75.42 per cent in 1953 to 45.48 per cent in 1982, while over the same period, the Han proportion rose from 6.94 per cent to 40.41 per cent. Absolute numbers rose for all ethnic groups, and the total population climbed from 4,783,608 in 1953 to 13,081,633 in 1982. (Mackerras 1994, p. 253). In other words, there was a major reshaping of the population, with most of the Han immigration going to the north and east of the Autonomous Region. The extent of immigration caused great resentment to many Uyghurs, who felt they were being taken over, but justified by the government on the grounds of helping with economic development and national security.

Since the early 1980s, the population has continued to rise in absolute terms. In relative terms, the proportion of Uyghurs and Han have remained reasonably stable. The 2000 census put the Uyghurs at 43.6 per cent and the Han at 40.6 per cent, while official figures for the end of 2015 from the Xinjiang statistical yearbook showed the Uyghur percentage rising to 46.42, that of the Han falling to 38.99.

Some Uyghurs have moved to places outside Xinjiang. Han immigration includes a good deal of rotation, that is people who go to Xinjiang for short-term work and then return home. In general, the Uyghur population remains concentrated more in the southwest while Han tend strongly to live in the north and east.

As for Tibet, the issue of Han immigration is extremely fraught, because there is a literature condemning China for this phenomenon. In July 1996, the Dalai Lama gave a speech to the British Parliament in London in which he claimed that “The destruction of cultural artefacts and traditions coupled with the mass influx of Chinese into Tibet amounts to cultural genocide.” In other words, he saw immigration of Chinese into Tibet as on a scale amounting to mass influx, which, combined with the destruction of cultural artefacts and traditions, was equivalent to cultural genocide.

Census data for the TAR suggest that the proportion of Han has always been small. The percentage of Han was 3.68 in the 1990 census, growing to 5.9 in the 2000 census, and 8.17 in that of 2010. Although there are a few Hui, Lhoba and others, the overwhelming majority of the TAR population is Tibetan.

When talking of a mass influx of Chinese into Tibet, the Dalai Lama includes not only the TAR, but also all Qinghai Province, and parts of Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu Provinces as well. His concept of Tibet is very much larger in area than that of the Chinese authorities. Moreover, when he refers to “the Chinese,” he includes not only Han, but also Hui. Even including those areas, his charge that Han immigration is one of the two main factors in “cultural genocide” is an exaggeration. Among the studies done on this subject, the most credible is that of Ma Rong, professor of sociology at Peking University. He has access to the most reliable data and has undertaken the most thorough investigation. His conclusion (Ma 2011, p. 79) is that “although the Han population in the Tibetan-inhabited areas has increased to a certain extent, it still comprises a small proportion of the local population, especially in the TAR.”

Economic Development

Since the reform period began at the end of 1978, China has experienced an unprecedentedly rapid growth in the economy. This has raised China to be the world's largest economy but one (the United States). The standard of living of the people has risen all over the country.

However, the growth has been uneven. In general, the minorities have always been, and remain, poorer than the Han. Among reasons for this are that they are caught up in two of the biggest inequalities in China.

One of these is the contrast between the urban and rural regions. Leaving aside ethnic issues, cities have always attracted more industry, investment and money than the rural areas.

Minorities tend to be rural, with major cities comparatively few in the ethnic areas.

The second is the regional distinction, between richer north and poorer south, and between much more prosperous east and poorer west. Governments have for a long time focused more attention and money on the north and east than the interior, southwestern or western regions.

The traditionally richest parts of China are mostly Han, not minority.

We should note a few important exceptions to these generalities. The Koreans of Jilin, near the border with Korea, are just as rich as the Han and, according to some indicators, better off. Their literacy rates are the best in China. They have always enjoyed good relations with the Han, and share a tradition dominated by Confucianism. The government regards them as a "model" minority. (Zang 2015, p. 118). Two others that are probably no worse off than the

Han in many ways are the Manchus and Mongolians, while the Hui are hardly different from the Han in matters affecting economic life.

Still, the fact remains that economic inequality has always been a feature of China's ethnic minorities. This inequality applies especially to the relationship between Han and minorities. However, it also applies within and among ethnic minorities. Those of the south are generally much poorer than those of the north. Class distinctions within minority society are not necessarily worse than in Han, but they are traditionally severe all the same. In the past, the Yi practised a particularly ghastly form of slavery.

The CCP authorities have tried to alleviate these inequalities. They have invested large sums of money in special attempts to raise the living standards of the minorities. We saw earlier that minorities enjoyed "preferential policies." These applied to many areas, including not only exemption from the one-child-per-couple policy and quotas for educational services, but also tax alleviation, employment opportunities in government organizations and government subsidies of various kinds.

In 2000, the government launched its Great Western Development Strategy. This applied to six provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan and Yunnan), five autonomous regions (Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Guangxi, Tibet and Xinjiang) and one province-level municipality (Chongqing), altogether about 400 million people. Although not all these are minority areas, they do include some 90 per cent of China's minority populations. The three main aims were to improve the welfare of the poor, develop the natural resources of the western provinces in environmentally friendly ways to reduce dependence on other countries, and to further China's national security and unity (see Bhalla and Luo 2017, p. 117). The

main policy is preferential taxation and national investment in key projects of all kinds. After a decade or so of implementation, one scholarly account reached the evaluation that “although the western region has experienced impressive rates of economic growth, regional disparities in China have continued to widen in spite of the western regional strategy” (Grewal & Ahmed 2011, p. 161).

As for the main aim of alleviating poverty, the following quotation from two Chinese scholars suggests that there was indeed improvement, but that *region* is actually a greater indicator in accounting for poverty than *ethnicity*. The minorities are poor because of where they live rather than because they are minorities.

Descriptive analysis reveals that ethnic differences in terms of poverty narrowed from 2002 to 2013. Regression analysis suggests that this might be attributed to the fact that ethnic minorities are mainly located in less-developed regions where their ethnic identity does not make any difference. In fact, when controlling for the regional variables, the level of poverty among Han is even more serious than that among ethnic minorities. It is also worth noting that the coefficient of education among ethnic minorities is significantly larger than that among Han, indicating that the development of education may be a very effective anti-poverty strategy for ethnic minorities. (Liu and Lu 2017, p. 2).

The point about education is also very telling. Literacy and education certainly improved greatly over those years. But regional disparities between east and west were not reduced. If anything, they increased.

Another attempt to improve the economy in areas with large minority populations came with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which President Xi Jinping launched in 2013. The main aim of the BRI is to link China much more with countries to its west, including those of Central Asia, South Asia, Europe and Africa. Infrastructure, including railways and roads, is vitally important to improving intercommunications. It is still too early to cast authoritative judgements on the success of the BRI, but some main points already stand out.

A very important concept is that of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which Xi Jinping launched during a visit to Pakistan in 2015. CPEC links Kashgar in southwestern Xinjiang, now a special economic zone, with the port of Gwadar in Pakistan, and has become important for the economic development of the regions along the corridor. Admittedly, the CPEC is controversial, because it goes through some territory claimed by India, which is consequently vehemently opposed. However, the CPEC is certainly bringing about economic and infrastructural progress in Xinjiang and Pakistan.

One of the most important aspects of development in contemporary China is urbanization. Indeed, the degree of urbanization under the PRC is possibly the most rapid and thorough in world history. China's urban population was only 13.3 per cent of the total in the 1953 census. According to Liu Baokui (2019), associate research fellow at the Institute of Spatial Planning and Regional Economy of National Development and Reform Commission under the State Council, the urbanization percentage rose from 17.92 in 1978 to 59.58 percent in 2018, thus increasing by an average of more than one percentage point per year over the first 40 years of the reform policies. Because, with exceptions such as the Koreans, Mongolians and Hui, the Han tend to be more urban than the minorities, they have enjoyed much better access to the improved facilities that urban life can bring about, such as hospitals, schools,

universities, cinemas, big hotels, good restaurants, clubs and so on. What this means is that, while the standard of living has risen impressively everywhere, it tends to do so more in the places where Han live than those where the minorities have their home.

So the main points concerning economic development among China's ethnic minorities, can be summarized as follows:

1. As with all China, the economy has grown enormously, especially in the twenty-first century, with the standard of living among ordinary people improving dramatically.
2. Absolute poverty has been greatly reduced, and in 2019 is nearing elimination, but in general the minority areas remain considerably poorer than the nation as a whole.
3. Serious inequalities persist both within and among the minorities themselves and, with a few exceptions like the Koreans, Manchus, Hui and Mongolians, they are somewhat poorer than the Han. Many of these inequalities are due more to regional disparities than to ethnic.
4. The PRC has undergone an intensive urbanization process, which has affected minority areas less than Han, but contributed to improving living standards greatly.

Tourism

Because it raises major issues connected with the economy and culture and because of its enormous growth since the period of reform began in the late 1970s, tourism has become an important theme in discussing the ethnic minorities. In the increase in domestic tourism that has accompanied the rise in the standard of living, the number of Han visiting minority areas has been far greater than the converse. As for international tourism, World Bank statistics show the number of arrivals in China from outside rising from 20.034 million in 1995 to

60.74 million in 2017, the second figure being the highest in the world after France (86.861 million), Spain (81.786 million) and the United States (76.941) (World Bank Group, 2019).

The economy benefits greatly through tourism and *vice versa*. Good roads and railways enable people to travel more extensively than they have ever been able to do before, while the hospitality trade leads to improvements in hotels, restaurants, theatres and so on. In recent years, tourism has been used directly to eliminate absolute poverty by enabling the poorest villages to find enterprises capable of enriching them. There is a great deal of inequality in tourism in ethnic areas, because inevitably some regions are more attractive than others or easier of access.

It is true that the cities in the ethnic areas rarely figure near the top of the list of tourist destinations. Yet in recent years, tourism has been a major government enterprise in the ethnic areas. There are two basic aims: to promote and facilitate economic development and to showcase and preserve cultural and ethnic heritage.

Tourism gives traditional cultures a viable commercial reason to survive. Villages with the people dressed in traditional clothing charm tourists. Public and private buildings are cleaned up and have modern facilities like electricity, but they maintain their traditional style.

One aspect of traditional culture displayed very commonly for tourists is the performing arts, especially dance. “They love to sing and dance” is a familiar introduction phrase. Dance is readily appreciated through its beautiful costumes and movements, irrespective of language, while its styles are easily linked to particular ethnic groups. Performances can be short, requiring little concentration. In China, ethnic dances do not need stages. They can be

performed readily for tourists in any open space. Moreover, it is customary to invite the tourists to take part towards the end of a show, so that they have the additional feeling of being part of the society they are visiting.

As the trend towards learning about and appreciating ethnic cultures has increased, the idea of authenticity has grown more significant. In order to attract tourists, Chinese people, including those of the ethnic minorities, revive and recreate traditions that may claim to be authentic, but actually differ somewhat from originals. Timothy Oakes (1998, p. 229), a foremost Western scholar on China's ethnic tourism, has argued that such tourism is a "false modernity." It is true that the "tourist dollar" and the "tourist gaze" both affect how people display their traditions and their culture. It is also true that traditions shown to tourists are no longer an integral part of the society that created them. But by their nature living cultures change and it is natural that people should present themselves to the outside world in the best light.

One category of tourist attraction is museums, which are very much about cultural memory and the preservation of histories and traditions. China's museums are not universalist and do not show cultural objects from all over the world. Yet the localized function of showcasing a regional or ethnic culture is also a legitimate function of a museum.

Museums in China, including ethnic areas, share several features in common. Firstly, the buildings that house them are quite impressive relative to the area where they are located. An example is the Regional Museum in Ürümqi, capital of Xinjiang, which is enormous and well maintained. Secondly, these museums exist at various levels, even in small towns, where they showcase the local culture. Thirdly, they cover defined cultural categories. For example, one

quite small museum in the Dong town of Zhaoxing in Guizhou Province, has sections on Dong history, and the customs, marriage and family practices, arts, including performing arts, clothes, diet and ideologies special to the Dong people. Local governments and people care enough about their ethnic traditions and histories to allocate money and effort to remembering them.

A brand of tourism to have drawn attention is sex tourism. According to Dru Gladney (1994), there is a tendency among the majority Han to objectify minority women as “colourful, exotic and erotic” (e.g. p. 110), and, by implication, inferior. A town that can illustrate sex tourism is Jinghong, the capital of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, the Dai being culturally and ethnically close to the Thais of Thailand. In the mind of many Han men Dai women are more “sexually promiscuous and licentious” than their Han counterparts (Hyde 2001, in Mackerras [Ed.] 2011, p. 329) and in the 1990s, Jinghong became a major destination for Han men seeking sex tourism. Actually, according to Sandra Teresa Hyde, many of the women practising prostitution to make money from the desires of these men, were not in fact Dai, but Han. However, they could dress as Dai and behave as Dai and thus make money from sex tourism as Dai.

Language

There is one aspect of traditional culture that is generally not showcased to tourists, namely language. It is not that minorities wish specifically to hide their own language. However, for domestic tourists, which is the great majority, the language used is Modern Standard Chinese

(Mandarin), while for overseas tourists it is English or the language most appropriate to the particular tourists.

Language is not only a major part of culture. It is also a highly significant way of expressing and remembering culture. The culture of an ethnic group can survive without its language, but only with the greatest difficulty, and the extinction of a language is also likely to involve the crucial weakening or disappearance of the culture it expresses.

Apart from the Hui, virtually all the ethnic minorities have their own language, many more than one. Among these languages, the Sino-Tibetan phylum is best represented and spoken by peoples living in the central, south and southwest China. Some minority languages belong to the Altaic language phylum, being spoken by peoples in northeast and northwest China. Remaining languages belong to the Indo-European or other phyla. (Tsung 2009, pp. 11-12).

Only a small proportion of the minority languages have their own script, the main ones being Tibetan, Mongolian, Yi, Dai and Manchu, though this last is now more or less extinct. Some languages like Zhuang use the international phonetic alphabet, which is based almost entirely on Latin script, while others like Uyghur use Arabic script. Nowadays, most of the minority languages are written with Chinese characters.

Official policy promotes the use of minority languages. For example, in autonomous places, government building and precincts must have names both in Chinese and the relevant minority language. Every single bill in Chinese currency, from 100 *yuan* RMB to 10 cents

(one *jiao*), has “the People’s Bank of China” written in Chinese characters, *pinyin* Romanization, Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur and Zhuang.

However, according to a study by Huang Xing from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in fact only five minority languages are in regular use in written form in the public sphere, such as government, the media, publishing and education. These are Uyghur, Tibetan, Mongolian, Korean and Kazak (Huang 2003, p. 2). Chinese is the national language and the one that makes it easier to advance in society and gain employment. “At present the language situation in China is that Chinese is prestigious and influential whereas minority languages are weakening” (Huang 2003, p. 4).

The use of minority languages as a medium of instruction in school varies throughout China. But as Linda Tsung points out, real literacy and familiarity with one’s own language shows one’s ethnic identity.

Although minority parents are already sending their children to Han Chinese schools for further education and expanded career perspectives, there are still those who want their children to remain in minority schools or classes. In doing so, they believe that they can maintain their language and culture, as well as their ethnic status and identity. (Tsung 2009, p. 201).

The overall trend in the last few years has been for minority languages to weaken, and many will likely disappear altogether over the next decades. Some scholars regard that prospect with alarm, considering that it will not only diminish China as a multilingual society, but

could even lead to conflict. One writes that “Many minority languages have become endangered and Beijing’s integrative policy has had the perverse but predictable effect of helping to create the inter-ethnic conflicts that it had hoped to avoid, with scenes of ethnic tension in minority regions over the last few years” (Tsung 2014, p. 210).

The Tibetan areas

Overall, relations among people of different ethnic groups are not necessarily any better or worse than among those of the same group. However, two of China’s ethnic minorities have exemplified persistent disunity and conflict. These are the Tibetans and Uyghurs.

Of all regions of China, the one most relevant to the issue of Chinese unity is Taiwan, because China insists as a core value that Taiwan is part of China, whereas many in Taiwan, the West and elsewhere are unsure of or hostile to that position. Taiwan is not an ethnic issue and need not be considered here.

Among ethnic minorities the one most relevant to China’s unity is the Tibetans, who believe in an esoteric form of Buddhism, headed by the Dalai Lama. Tibetan Buddhism and its icon the Dalai Lama enjoy a very positive image in the West, where this religion partly fills the gap of a spiritual life inherent in the rapid decline of Christianity.

An agreement between the Dalai Lama's and the central government in 1951 affirmed that Tibet was indeed an integral part of China, but an unsuccessful rebellion in 1959 and the Dalai Lama's escape to India and subsequent establishment of a government-in-exile there reopened the question. Many in the Tibetan diaspora pushed for independence or a degree of autonomy far greater than China was prepared to tolerate. Large-scale demonstrations by monks wanting independence occurred in the Tibetan capital Lhasa in the late 1980s, with the international community appearing to offer support through the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama in 1989.

In a speech in Strasbourg in 1988, the Dalai Lama proposed "genuine autonomy," not independence. He later repeated the suggestion many times, most notably in his speech in London in July 1996. Two issues should be noted here.

One is that "genuine autonomy" involves free elections that could easily remove the CCP from power in Tibet. It also makes the government subservient to the Dalai Lama responsible for education in Tibet. Both might seem reasonable. However, the Chinese government will never tolerate the removal of the CCP from power in a substantial section of China, especially since it believes (with some reason) that the Dalai Lama's government would use its influence in the education system to discredit the CCP in all ways, and to win the total support of the population. The result would be that a "genuinely autonomous" Tibet would inevitably later press for full independence.

The second issue is even more important. The Dalai Lama's supporters have a different conception of Tibet from the Chinese government's. For the Chinese government, Tibet

means the Tibet Autonomous Region, while the Dalai Lama's government considers "Tibet" to cover, in addition, Qinghai Province and other regions, so that the TAR would be only about half the area of Tibet. This means that the Dalai Lama's government is asking for effective political and ideological control over about one-quarter of Chinese territory. In the estimation of this writer, Chinese leaders will do everything they can to prevent such an eventuality and are supported by the overwhelming majority of China's people in this stand.

China's attempts to maintain control include CCP cells everywhere, including in monasteries and units involved in Tibetan culture, and cracking down on what it interprets as signs threatening to the Chinese government rule in Tibetan areas. Although the United States and many other governments and human right activists condemn such activities as serious human rights abuses, including suppression of religious freedom, the Chinese authorities claim them as defensive and as legitimate preservation of Chinese unity.

In March and April 2008, serious disturbances broke out in Lhasa and many other Tibetan areas of China. The Western press interpreted these disturbances as resistance against Chinese oppression and human rights abuse, whereas the Chinese blamed outside interference, especially from the United States. The demonstrations were suppressed and have not recurred up to now. However, the situation remains tense with a great deal of bitterness and resentment. This is evident from a series of self-immolations beginning in 2009 and reaching a peak in 2012, when about 85 Tibetans set fire to themselves. (International Campaign for Tibet 2019).

China's response to the problems in Tibet has been to try to develop the economy and modernize. This has been broadly successful in material terms, raising the standard of living to an extent unprecedented in Tibetan history. However, activists still charge that the Han population gets an unfair proportion of the wealth increases, employment opportunities and improvements in welfare, and that ethnic inequalities remain not only profound but unacceptable. (See bibliography on the Tibetans in Mackerras 2018, "Tibet and the Tibetans" and a selection of articles on the same topic in Mackerras [Ed.], 2011, Vol. IV, pp. 1-110).

Xinjiang and its Islamic minorities

As with Tibet, there is a long-standing independence movement in Xinjiang, hoping to set up an "East Turkestan Republic," as well as an active diaspora the great majority of them actively hostile to China and broadly sympathetic to independence. Unlike the Tibetan case, there is no major disagreement on the borders of this "republic," which are those of Xinjiang. Also in contrast with Tibet, there is no universally admired icon of independence with fame and influence comparable to the Dalai Lama's.

In April 1990, an uprising took place in Baren Township in the southwest of Xinjiang, which a local television report attributed to the separatist Islamic Party of East Turkestan. Although easily suppressed, it showed the existence of Sunni Islamic fundamentalist thinking. For the Chinese authorities it showed a rise of separatism, extremist religious thinking and even terrorism among the Sunni Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, especially the Uyghurs.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 changed the architecture of relations to the west of China. It added to the number of Muslim-majority independent republics just to the west of China. The renewed separatism in Xinjiang was undoubtedly among the flow-on effects of the Soviet Union's decline and then collapse, and the rise of ethnic nationalism in an era of globalization.

In April 1996, the Presidents of China, and four newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union, namely Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, met in Shanghai to discuss problems like terrorism and separatism. In mid-June 2001 the leaders of these five countries, plus that of Uzbekistan, met again in Shanghai and established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). They also signed a document pledging to cooperate to combat separatism, terrorism and extremism, a clear reference to Islamism or Islamic fundamentalism.

Islamist terrorism was thus already a problem in Xinjiang by the last years of the twentieth century. The destruction of the World Trade Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, just three months after the SCO's establishment, worsened the cauldron by increasing the role of the United States in Central Asia. China gave strong support to the war on terrorism, which United States President George W. Bush had declared following the September 11 Incidents.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Uyghur diaspora reorganized itself to exert international influence, especially in the West. In 2004, the World Uyghur Congress was established in Munich, aiming to represent Uyghur interests, both inside and outside China.

One of the key members of the Uyghur diaspora is Rebiya Kadeer, a female entrepreneur, who became the richest woman in China. Imprisoned in 1999 for “passing on classified information to foreigners” and for subversion, she was released in 2005 after the intervention of American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and went to take up residence in the United States. Though never as influential or famous as the Dalai Lama, she attained leadership positions in such organizations as the World Uyghur Congress and the Washington, DC-based Uyghur American Association, becoming a kind of icon for the Uyghur diaspora.

Throughout the twenty-first century, the balance of China’s ethnic problems has tended to move more towards Xinjiang and away from Tibet. One event of crucial significance was in July 2009. Ethnic riots in the Xinjiang capital Ürümqi killed 197 people, according to Chinese official sources, mostly Han Chinese. China put the blame on outside forces, especially Rebiya Kadeer and terrorism in Central Asia, while in the West, governments, media and popular opinion, blamed Chinese repression, including Han Chinese takeover of Xinjiang through extensive Han immigration and inequalities in employment, wealth, living standards, health and power.

Whatever the causes of the disturbances, one thing was very clear, namely that ethnic resentment in Xinjiang had deepened and, with it, the scourge of terrorism. Over the years following 2009, there were numerous terrorist incidents in Xinjiang and, even in the capital Beijing. The war in Syria worsened the problem. Some Uyghurs went there for terrorist training. When the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1971-2019) made a speech in Mosul, Iraq, in July 2014, announcing himself as caliph of all Muslims, he stated that “Muslim rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine” and

more than a dozen other countries and regions. “Your brothers all over the world are waiting for your rescue, and are anticipating your brigades,” Baghdadi is reported to have told his followers (Olesen 2014). While it is doubtful how much trouble ISIS can really cause in Xinjiang, it would be a foolhardy government that ignored such provocative statements.

Since 2017 reports have emerged of camps where some million Uyghurs and other Muslims are forcibly held under inhumane conditions. There is an increasing number of Western reports, both journalistic and scholarly, on the subject (an example being Zenz 2019), some of it likening these places to internment or even concentration camps. Chinese spokespeople have countered that they are aimed at eliminating radicalism and terrorism and educating people to live productively. They argue that Muslims are still free to practise their faith, provided that they do not disrupt Chinese unity, and that Uyghur culture is being preserved and promoted.

In general, the advanced industrial democracies, especially the United States, have condemned China for human rights abuse and religious and cultural suppression in Xinjiang. In October 2019 the United Kingdom represented 23 advanced industrial democracies, almost all Western, in issuing a statement in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) condemning human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and in December 2019 the United States Congress adopted its severely condemnatory Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act.

However, international opinion has not been unanimous. For example, in October 2019, Belarus led 54 countries in the UNGA to oppose Britain’s statement and supported China’s deradicalization measures in Xinjiang. What is even more striking is that the

Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which describes itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world,” in May 2019 issued a public statement in support of China’s attempts to “provide care to its Muslim citizens.” In October a dozen or so OIC members sided with Belarus’s stand in the UNGA in support of China’s deradicalization programme in Xinjiang.

China is unlikely to bow to Western pressure over Xinjiang, which its leaders regard as unwarranted interference in its affairs. They are determined to uproot terrorism and to hold Xinjiang within China. The likelihood is for more conflict in Xinjiang and the situation is very troubling for the minorities and for any form of Islam the CCP regards as hostile to Chinese culture or threatening to its rule.

Meanwhile, as in the rest of China, modernization processes have gathered momentum. Xinjiang is highly relevant to the Belt and Road Initiative, and railways and other infrastructure linking China to Central Asia and Europe pass through it. As noted above, Kashgar is now a special economic zone. It is important for the BRI’s success that the region at least remain stable. (See bibliography on the Xinjiang issue in Mackerras 2018, “Xinjiang and the Uighurs” and a selection of articles on the same topic in Mackerras [Ed.], 2011, Vol. IV, pp. 111-211).

Conclusion: Summary and Relevance to Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism

Considering the problems ethnic issues have caused internationally in recent decades, the PRC’s overall record over most of its years of control has been positive. It has strengthened the economic life and prosperity of ethnic minorities, along with the country as a whole. It

has maintained national unity and its system of limited autonomy for ethnic minorities. The populations of the minorities have grown not only in absolute terms but in relations to China's total. Cultural rights have survived, although modernization and political processes have tended to weaken them. Specialist Michael Dillon sums up compellingly when he writes (2018, p.220) that "many non-Han people live peaceful and uneventful lives, even as others endure privations and severe repression."

What does this material tell us about imperialism and anti-imperialism? Some observers conceive of China's policy and behaviour towards its ethnic minorities as imperialistic, because the majority ethnic group dominates the minorities, and state power is in effect in the hands of the Han. They consider the increasing dominance of Chinese, as against ethnic languages, not in terms of strengthening national cohesion, as the state does, but as attempts to undermine legitimate multilanguage diversity. They regard Han immigration as a form of colonialism and takeover of other people's territory. They regard ethnic tourism as an example of "the tourist gaze," and thus as insincere and false attempts to showcase minorities as if in a zoo, not as legitimate and rational attempts to preserve traditional culture at the same time as strengthening ethnic economies. And the issues regarding the Tibetans and Uyghurs are for such observers no more than illegitimate attempts to colonize foreign peoples, not to maintain national unity.

Human rights have played a significant part in discourse in recent years, with China gaining the image of a country where ethnic minorities suffer abuse. To cite one example, China is accused of suppression of religion among minorities, amounting to serious breaches of human rights. And critics regard the excuse that religion in Tibet and Xinjiang sometimes

functions as a threat to the state simply as a pretext for what are in fact naked violations of human rights.

For the Chinese state, there is absolutely nothing imperialistic about a policy of the equality of nationalities, which it aspires to practise within its own borders, even admitting that practice falls far short of policy. While it is true that the Chinese language is increasing in dominance over minority languages, there has been no linguisticide (the killing of languages) in China. Nobody doubts continuing inequalities among ethnic minorities in China, but the greater prosperity and vastly improved livelihood of the mass of the people, combined with the radical reduction of poverty, amounts to a good human rights performance, according to Chinese authorities.

We turn finally to look again at the concept of “the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*). Some commentators regard it as imperialistic, because it sets the boundaries of China to include some ethnic groups over which the Chinese state has no legitimate control. With a couple of major exceptions, it determines the borders according to a historical time (the eighteenth century) when the control of the Chinese empire extended far beyond the core Han China.

On the other hand, the current Chinese state holds as a core value that “the Chinese nation” legitimately includes ethnic groups other than the Han. Most of the ethnic minorities live in territory that has been part of China for many centuries. If one started to question that the territory inhabited by the Miao, to take but one example, should devolve into an independent state, the breakup of China into numerous states would have the potential to loose many wars upon China and the world. Chinese unity is a core value no Chinese state will sacrifice unless forced by extreme circumstance. It is worth adding that virtually all states share China’s

position on this issue, and resist independence movements vigorously. Certainly, they do not regard insistence on territorial unity as imperialistic.

The PRC regards itself as strongly anti-imperialistic and opposed to the domination it sees as coming mainly from the Western powers, especially the United States. Chinese leaders typically cite the century of humiliation that preceded the founding of the PRC as a time when China was prey to foreign powers, especially the United States, Britain, Japan and France, which ate at pieces of its territory, and opposed attempts to unify the country. Many of those territories where foreign powers confronted Chinese power were the border regions where ethnic minorities live. Britain was heavily involved in Tibet; Russia (including the Soviet Union) and Britain in Xinjiang; Japan in Manchuria (the Northeast). To this day, the PRC feels its territorial unity and integrity threatened by outside interference in its ethnic affairs. In particular, there are many people in China, both inside and outside the leadership, who still believe that the United States is keen to use terrorism in Xinjiang to tear China apart and bring down the CCP. In this sense, the PRC leadership claims to oppose imperialism, certainly not to take part in it.

As for the future, current signs are that Chinese unity will hold, but that the circumstances will remain difficult, despite continuing modernization and improvements in the economy and living standards. Full-scale war will break out in Tibet or Xinjiang only if a foreign power intervenes militarily, and that is highly unlikely. But neither is there any sign that ethnic resentments or small-scale conflict will dissipate any time soon. Dillon (2018, p. 221) suggests that:

A successful accommodation between minority activists and the Chinese state is unlikely, but there will be periods of relative calm and episodes of great but

probably localized violence. What is certain is that the destiny of the minorities is inextricably intertwined with the political culture of the Chinese state.

In other words, despite ongoing conflict, national disintegration is not on the horizon.

Cross-References

China's Global Rise and Neoimperialism: Attitudes and Actualities

Cold War

Eurocentrism and Imperialism

Media Imperialism

Semi-Colonialism in China

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