

Mission Impossible? Can China Survive as a Multinational State?

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Abstract:

After the collapse of the two communist multinational states, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the fact that the People's Republic of China survives as the only communist multinational state poses two serious questions: First, why does China remain intact? Second, will China be able to survive in its present state and for how long? This paper intends to answer these two questions. The analysis is centred on two areas: formation and characteristics of China's ethnic minorities and their role in this multinational state, and the government institutional building and ethnic minority policies that contribute to the national cohesion and unity.

We argue that in fact only two minority groups in two regions, Tibetans in Tibet and Uyghurs in Xinjiang, have the real potential of secession. But it is highly unlikely that China as a multinational state will disintegrate in the near future. This is mainly because of China's institutional building for minority nationality governance and the government's minority policies, which serve as determining forces, persuasively and coercively, to maintain national unity and keep the separatist forces at bay. On the other hand, however, China is facing a lot of challenges, some of which are directed at or have a strong impact on its minority policies. If the government does not respond properly, that may lead to crises. But ethnic minority separation might become possible only as a *result* of China's political crisis, rather than separatist movements *leading to* the demise of the multinational state.

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1. Introduction

One of the remarkable phenomena of the twentieth century was the rise and fall of communism, especially exemplified by the collapse of the two communist multinational states, the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. One of the major causes leading to the “end of the communist empire” has been attributed to ethnic issues.¹ However, the fact that the People’s Republic of China survives as the only communist multinational state poses, in the minds of the world, two questions: First, why does China remain intact given the fact that it has 56 distinct ethnic groups with diverse cultures such as languages and religions and with some highly volatile ethnic minority regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang? Second, will China be able to survive in its present state and for how long?²

This paper presents new arguments and conclusions based on a close examination of China’s ethnic minority situations, the political institutions and related policies. Our analysis is centred on the two areas: First, we examine China’s ethnic formations and their impact and influence within this multinational state. Second, we will provide a critical examination of the pertinent institutional building and the Chinese government’s policies towards minority regions to determine their impact on the country’s unity and stability, for it is believed that these policies have contributed substantially to holding China together and keeping separatism at bay.

2. Put China’s Minority Nationalities in Perspective

In order to answer the question as to why China can survive as a multinational state, we should first put China’s minority nationalities in perspective.

China’s minority nationalities, though limited to only 9% of the total population, their unique characteristics and strategic geographic positions make their political and economic importance outweigh their absolute numbers. Their socio-cultural, political and economic conditions affect policy decisions in ways sometimes subtle and sometimes powerful. Since the key element of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ethnic minority policy is to maintain national unity and political stability, the minorities’ social, economic and demographic characteristics always have had a direct bearing on the policy decisions towards them.

¹ See, e.g., Ge Gongshang, 1994, Hua Xinzhi, 1994, Xu Ling & Liu Jingbei, 1995, Chen, Lianbi, 1999.

² However, it should be mentioned that whether or not current China remains to be a communist country is very debatable. More commentaries would put China also in the group of post-Communist countries; others say that China is at the stage of pre-socialism, or the capitalist stage of historical development. See e.g., Maurice Meisner, 1999.

The 9% minorities population is concentrated in 64.3% of China's total land area, including 90% of the country's border regions.³ About 30 ethnic minority groups have some members in China as well as in neighbouring countries⁴. Three new republics created out of the demise of the former Soviet Union in late 1991—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—share not only borders with China's minorities' territories but also share the same religions and languages with the corresponding ethnic groups living there such as Kazaks, Uygurs, Kirgizs, and Tajiks. In many other cases, too, the borders as presently demarcated divide minority groups between two or more countries. There are, for example, the Shan people in Thailand and Burma as well as in China, and Mongols in Russia, China, and the Mongolian People's Republic.⁵

Throughout history the minority regions have had a strategic effect in China's national security. Since the Communist state was founded in 1949, it has had four serious military confrontations with Korea, India, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union. China's borders with almost every one of its neighbours were in dispute though some of these have since been settled.⁶ The Chinese government is naturally concerned about separatist influences from across the borders. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist Eastern Europe has shown the continuing power of ethnic nationalism and has no doubt caused major concerns on the part of the Chinese government over its policies towards the minority nationalities.

Apart from their strategic locations, minority regions also weight heavily in China's economic development. China is a huge country with a vast land and rich natural resources. The vast land areas where ethnic minorities inhabit happen to store most of China's natural resources, such as 75% of grassland, 43.9% of forests, oil, gas, minerals, and precious metals.⁷ The current strides of China towards economic modernization depend on the tapping of the resources under the soil of these minority regions and, to do this, both good relations with the minority nationalities and the education of skilled local works are crucial.⁸

In addition to the natural resources, the minority regions contribute significantly to other aspects of China's economic development. Since most of the minorities reside in the border regions, they not only promote China's international influence in politics but also are a great asset for cross-border or open border trade. Also, the unique cultures of various national minorities, including their picturesque costumes and colourful way of life, draw a large income for China's tourist industry.

³ Postiglione, 1992

⁴ Jin Chunzi, 1995

⁵ Dreyer, 1976

⁶ Rod Mickleburgh, *the Globe and Mail*, February 12, 1997

⁷ Li, Wei, 1994, Zhang, Huijun, 1996

⁸ For example, Mao Zedong alerted his colleagues and the Party of this situation as early as 1956 in his speech titled "On the Ten Major Relationships" (Published later in Mao Zedong, 1977, 296): "We must foster good relations between the Han nationality and the minority nationalities and strengthen the unity of all the nationalities in the common endeavour to build our great socialist motherland."

Also, the relatively sparsely populated minority areas are seen by the government as having the potential to absorb migrants from the ever increasingly overcrowded Han areas. In 1994, there were 123 people per square kilometre within the country, yet there were only 25 people per square kilometre in minority areas.⁹

As the political, security and economic importance of minority regions is evident, the Chinese government has always been concerned about the potential separation of the minority regions. However, the complexity and diversity of China's ethnic minorities indicates that they all have different relationships with the Han and the central government and therefore they do not present similar concerns with respect to China's national unity and stability. We need to examine and distinguish among China's ethnic minorities, their formations and relationships with the Centre, in order to determine the possibility of separation of different minority nationalities.

In the past, China is often viewed as a homogenous nation-state.¹⁰ China's minority nationalities, accounting for about 9% of China's total population and reaching one hundred million according to the most recent statistics, are highly dispersed for some groups but for others highly concentrated in certain peripheral areas.¹¹ In a Chinese expression, this situation is described as *dazaju xiaojuju* (big dispersion and small concentration) and that actually constitutes the most important invariable element for China's minority nationality policies. More and more analysts begin to realize that China is not an ethnically homogenous country but a culturally diversified and multinational state.¹² Particularly noticeable is that the population growth rate of China's minority nationalities has been 3.95% since 1982 compared at 1.31% population growth rate for the Han Chinese during the same period, and there are now 18 minority groups that have a population of more than one million, compared at only 10 such groups in 1964.¹³ On the other hand, the Han Chinese (more than 90% of China's population) remains the dominant group within this multinational state. Nevertheless, the relationships between the Han and the minorities and among the minority groups themselves are extremely complex. Any simple generalization or attempts to define China's minority nationalities as a whole, especially in their relationship with the Han Chinese and the central government, is very problematic.

For the last thirty years, two important demographic trends could be observed. First, according to the 1990 census, minority nationalities accounted for 8% of China's overall

⁹ Yang, Jingchu, 1996

¹⁰ For example, Lucian W. Pye (1992) described China as a homogenous country. In Lenin's view, if 95% of the population belong to one nationality, this country is a unicultural state; if 90-95% of the population belong to one nationality, this country is a primarily unicultural state; if more than 30% of the population belong to the different nationalities, this country is a complex multicultural state. According to this characterization, China can still be seen as a relatively homogenous state. See Pan Zhiping, 1999, 27.

¹¹ According to the 1990 census, minority nationalities in China reached 91.3 millions that accounted for 8% of the total population in China. More recent statistics show that the number is more than 100 million and the survey also shows that up to 1995, the administrated area under China's minority self-government where minority nationalities are concentrated is 64.3% of China's overall territory. Li Jianhui, 1995.

¹² Gladney, 1998 11-13.

¹³ Re. the ethnic minority population situation, see Wang Hongman, 1999.

population and in 1999 this percentage increased to 9%. This is proportionally a big increase, from 6.6% in the previous census in 1982 and this trend continues. Second, because of the booming market economy and unfolding political decentralization, population mobility in China has also dramatically increased since the 1970s. Minority members moving to the Han concentrated areas and Han migrants moving to the areas originally inhabited by minorities have made all the ethnic groups more intermingled, even though there are regions where minority nationalities are still very dominant, such as Tibet and Xinjiang. This two-way domestic migration trend makes any straightforward attempt of separation by any ethnic minority group more difficult.¹⁴

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, studies on China's future began to focus on the prospect of the secession and disintegration. However, according to many Chinese scholars, though the three communist states shared the nature of multi-nationality they were very different in many other aspects.¹⁵ For example, even though China is not a homogenous country, demographically, the domination of one ethnic group, the Han Chinese, makes it much more homogenous than the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Politically, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were federal states but their federal systems were in deep crises that largely led to their disintegration. In the case of the Soviet Union, there was a highly centralized federal system which did not resolve but perpetuated the ethnic nationality rift; and in the case of Yugoslavia there was a destructive decentralization after Tito in which the internal division and the final disintegration of the governing communist party became the catalyst for the collapse of the federal union. In both cases, they failed to establish and maintain a balanced division of power. In contrast, China is not a federal state but has built a unique unitary system with special institutional arrangements to accommodate the needs of diversified multi-ethnic nationalities, i.e., "*minzu quyu zizhi*" (minority nationality autonomous governments).¹⁶ Based on China's Constitution, any sub-national unit, either province or region, does not legally have the right to secede from China.

For the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia the historical disputes also made the ethnic relationships more sensitive, tense and often conflicting. The primordial legacy of ethnic relations in these two federal states was never really resolved, only temporarily being shuffled away under the communism.¹⁷ In its practice of ethnic policies, the Soviet Union had carried out some arbitrary and oppressive policies; e.g., for political reasons, 11 ethnic minorities had millions of their population (e.g., Chechnyans, Germans) expelled from their homeland and forced to resettle in the remote areas.¹⁸ The strife between the dominant Russian and other minorities was never remedied during the Soviet time. Mou

¹⁴ According to Michael Brown, for example, countries with highly intermingled populations are less likely to face secessionist demands because ethnic groups are not distributed in ways that lend themselves to partition. Brown, 2001, 7.

¹⁵ Guo Hongsheng, 1997, Liu Chengdun and Cheng Jichun, 1997.

¹⁶ Constitutionally, China's minority nationality autonomous governments are defined by the Law on Regional National Autonomy. The law mainly deals with "minority nationalities" in China though they are also seen as "Chinese." According to Chinese Constitution and relevant laws, the concept of "Chinese" includes all the nationalities in the PRC.

¹⁷ Re: the comparative studies on this topic, see Mou Benli, 2001, no.5, 1-8.

¹⁸ Hao Shiyuan and Ruan Xihu, 1994, 5.

Benli and others find that compared with the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia experiences, China's issue of ethnic minorities has had five distinctive features. First, historically China has been a multinational country. Second, China has the long enduring tradition of *duoyuan yiti* (multi-section but one core) that indicates the Han Chinese and other ethnic groups have amalgamated intensively.¹⁹ Third, a wide range of policies had been made to accommodate particular needs of minority groups and demonstrated a certain gesture of respect for their diverse socio-economic development, customs, and cultural traditions. Fourth, in China's modern history of revolution the ethnic groups and the Han people all made their contributions and therefore strengthened their ties. Fifth, the establishment of the new People's Republic in 1949 started a new nation-building campaign in which all the ethnic groups were encouraged to participate in the process.²⁰ These are the major reasons leading them to believe that China's future, as a multinational state, will be much brighter.

More precisely, the analysis should be on ethnic minority groups' socio-demographic, cultural and political situations, religions, foreign connections and the history of their relationship with the central government. Rather than treating all the 55 minority nationalities monolithically, we intend to distinguish them in terms the condition and tendency of secession.

First, the population distribution of various ethnic minority groups in China needs to be examined. The top thirteen most populous ethnic minority groups (the criterion is the ethnic group having about 2 million) in China are tabulated from three perspectives: the population (in millions), the respective major distribution areas, and the relative proportion in the concentrated area.

Table 1: China's minority nationality population distribution

Ethnic minority	Population (million)	Major distribution (province, autonomous region or municipalities)	Relative proportion:
Zhuang	15.55	Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangdong	Dispersed in 4 areas, in the southwest, most concentrated in Guangxi: 33% of the total populaion
Manchu	9.84	Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Hebei, Beijing, and Inner Mongolia	Dispersed mainly in 5 areas, but in no area having more than 6% of the total population
Hui	8.61	Ningxia, Gansu, Henan, Hebei, Qinghai, Shangdong, Yunnan, Xinjiang, Anhui,	Dispersed widely in 15 areas, the most concentrated area: Ningxia, 34% of the

¹⁹ That is based on the theory constructed by one of China's most well known sociologist Fei Xiaotong. In his opinion, China has a unique tradition based on the shared history of all ethnic groups living in China. See Fei Xiaotong et al, 1989.

²⁰ Zhang Erju, 1988, 39-44; Mou, 2001.

		Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Shaanxi, Beijing and Tianjin	total population
Miao	7.38	Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangxi, Sichuan, Hainan, and Hubei	Dispersed mainly in 7 areas in the southwest
Uygur	7.2	Xinjiang	Almost exclusively concentrated in Xinjiang, 47.5% of the total population vs. Han population 38%.
Yi	6.57	Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi	Dispersed in 4 areas in the southwest
Tujia	5.72	Hunan and Hubei	Concentrated mainly in 2 areas
Mongol	4.8	Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Gansu, Hebei, Henan and Qinghai	Dispersed in 9 areas, the most concentrated area: Inner Mongolia, 14% of the total population
Tibetan	4.59	Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan	Dispersed in 5 areas, the most concentrated area: Tibet, 95% of the total population
Bouyei	2.54	Guizhou	Concentrated in only 1 area in the southwest
Dong	2.5	Guizhou, Hunan, Guangxi	Dispersed in 3 areas in the southwest
Yao	2.13	Guangxi, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangdong, Guizhou	Dispersed in 5 areas in the southwest
Korean	1.92	Jilin, Liaoning, Heilongjiang	Dispersed in 3 areas in the northeast, but concentrated in Jilin

Sources: compiled based on the 1990 Census.

It is worth noting that the two most populous minority nationalities, Zhuang and Manchu are both ethnically similarly to Han. Some studies claim that Zhuang's nationality status largely was an officially imposed recognition rather than a real distinctive ethnic group.²¹ Manchu as a minority nationality which governed China in the last dynasty (Qing Dynasty 1644-1911 AD), is actually highly assimilated with Han and they even adopted the use of Mandarin in place of their own language. As a result, now they have lost their language.²²

²¹ According to Katherine Palmer Kaup, "The Zhuang case provides one of the clearest examples of the state imposing its own classification system on a people who previously did not perceive of themselves as a bounded group. In no other situation is a government's active attempt to impose a minority nationality status on a group more pronounced." Katherine Palmer Kaup, 2000, .20.

²² See Mackerras, 1994, p.45. Interestingly, the recent resurgence of their population numbers are actually partially the policy result as more claims are made because of the encouragement by the official policy. See Li Bolin, 2000.

The third very distinctive minority nationality is Hui, the major part of China's Muslim population. Although they still practice their own religion, they mostly share the same language with the Han and they are widely dispersed among Chinese with some concentrated in few western regions.

Miao as a populous minority nationality widely dispersed in China's southwest where a lot of China's ethnic minority groups are intermingled. Yi, Tujia, Bouyei, Dong and Yao are in the similar situation like the Miao, highly dispersed in the region, but all of them do not possess a large sized area as an exclusive homeland.

Uygur as an ethnic minority group have a very distinctive religion, language and cultural traditions, and are highly concentrated in Xinjiang where is clearly their homeland.

Mongol is an ethnic minority with a relatively large population and long history. It once governed China (in Yuan Dynasty 1208-1368 AD), but now its population distribution has become highly dispersed. Even within its own region, Inner Mongolia, the proportion is very low compared with the dominant Han population.

Tibetan is another ethnic minority with a very distinctive religion, language, political, and cultural tradition. Also, they are highly concentrated in Tibet where they account for 95% of the total population. In the four neighbouring provinces, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan, they also have significant numbers in certain concentrated areas.²³

Korean is an ethnic minority group with its own language and strong cultural tradition concentrated in China's northeast neighbouring with Korea, the country sharing their ethnic background.

Based on above analysis, a primary observation is that regarding the key demographic and geographical conditions for potential separation, only Uygur in Xinjiang and Tibetans in Tibet (which is smaller geographically than what Tibet claimed historically) have their own potential "homeland." All the other ethnic minority groups either are too intermingled with each other or their concentrated area is too small in size, and therefore they do not have the same power that Uygurs and Tibetans possess.

There are also other factors to distinguish different ethnic minority groups. One evident fact is that China's ethnic minority groups mostly occupy China's peripheral areas from the north, west to the south. Those are the areas less developed economically, less industrialized and less urbanized but possess very rich natural resources. Except for the economic implications, an important consequence is that those areas become crucial for China's national security, especially from geopolitical perspective. Among the four autonomous regions which border foreign countries, in Guangxi and Inner Mongolia the security concerns decreased in recent years.²⁴ But Xinjiang and Tibet are persistently the

²³ According to the 1990 census, China has 4.59 million Tibetans and 99.6% of them lived in Tibet (2.09 million), Sichuan (1.08 million), Qinghai (0.91 million), Gansu (0.36 million) and Yunnan (0.11 million). He Jingxi, 1995, 105-106.

²⁴ Mackerras, 1994, 77.

national security concerns to the central government. Religious factor is also very relevant in determining the relationship between minority groups and the Han and the central government. Uygurs and Hui are the two leading Muslim groups. The Islamic religious tradition heavily influences these two groups. Tibetan Buddhism is the foundation for Tibetan's ethnic identity and insecularity for long time. Religions surely strengthen these ethnic minority groups shared identity. That might become a critical reason for their demand for separation. Because of all the above factors, all the ethnic minority groups have developed their historical relationships with the Han and China's central government differently. China has the tradition of big Han nationalism as an oppressive force upon ethnic minorities that often led to minority's discontent and resistance. Historically, the two ethnic minority regions, which are relatively distant from the central government, are Xinjiang and Tibet. In fact, Tibet and Xinjiang are also different. Xinjiang's problem with the central government has been influenced by the Czar's Russia, then by the former Soviet Union and now by some central Asian countries. But Tibet's incorporation into China is weak from a historical perspective and it also has more western support.²⁵ Usually, a less cohesive relationship with the central government is coincident with various strong foreign connections. But another relevant factor to shape the relationship between the ethnic minority region and the central government is modern history. For example, ethnic minority nationalities have different experiences of the revolution, or played different roles during the Chinese revolution. Among China's major minority nationality groups, Korean, Mongolian and Zhuang were very active in participating in China's revolution and therefore they have been far more integrated into it.²⁶ Uygurs and few other ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang had initiated their own revolutions which were linked to the Soviet Union.²⁷ Tibetans are much less involved because of its isolation; almost under no revolutionary influence until the 1959 Rebellion and the central government sanctioned reform.

In sum, compared with all other minority nationalities in China, only the two groups and regions mentioned above indeed have some distinctive elements that could contribute to their potential secession.²⁸ They have a relatively concentrated homeland, strong ethnic identity based on cultural traditions and religions, complex primordial history with the Han population and China's central government, border dispute, internal homogeneity in the demographic sense, and some foreign connections, and they also pose security concerns to China's central government.

In short, China's minority nationalities represent significant importance for the central government in terms of national security, political stability, economic development and social coherence. On the other hand, however, any simplified generalization to define China's minority nationalities monolithically is problematic. The diversity of the 55 ethnic minority groups and the complexity of their relationship with Han and the central government and with each other make any kind of breaking-up of the country highly unlikely. In fact, the so-called potential secession and disintegration is mainly the issue of

²⁵ Mackerras, 1994, 196.

²⁶ Mackerras, 1994, 100.

²⁷ Pan Zhiping, 1999.

²⁸ Mackerras made a similar but very implicit claim. Mackerras, 1994, 167.

Xinjiang and Tibet, two distinctive ethnic groups and regions. That prospect is largely determined by the characteristics mentioned above. Meanwhile, the continuing state of national unity is also conditioned by the established institutions and Chinese government's minority nationality policies that are the analysis of the next section.

3. China's Minority Policies and Institution Building

Among a number of factors that helped China survive as a multinational state, the CCP's minority policies and its strategy of institution building stand out as two of the major contributors to hold the 56 ethnic groups under the central control. We have already discussed the minority situations that lay down the foundations and the essence of the minority policies. Now we will examine the institutional building as well as the minority policies including the policy-making and policy changes to see how they have helped shape the relationship between the minorities and the central government, and overall how they have impacted China's political stability and national unity.

China's ethnic minority policies are the result of a careful balance of various factors and conditions. We identified four major factors that helped form the policy decisions at various historical moments. These factors include: the characteristics of China's national minorities already discussed; the influence of deeply rooted Chinese imperial traditions in nationality relations and governance; the Communist ideologies on ethnicity; and the political and economic agendas of the CCP. An important observation is that one or more of these factors may change such as the conditions of the minorities or CCP agendas and such changes may trigger changes in policy decisions. Yet, one most important element that manages to balance all these factors is the CCP's never changing conviction of its mission –to maintain a unified state.

One should realize that the challenge of understanding modern China and its future lies in the understanding of the strong influence of its thousands of years of imperial traditions which still weighs heavily on present ideologies, social relations and policies. History has shown that, of the many rulers who conquered China, while they might belong to different ethnic groups, none changed China, but rather they themselves were changed. As Salisbury points out "In China more than in any other country a knowledge of the past is essential for understanding the present."²⁹ Even the CCP policy is largely moulded by a combination of communist ideology and the Chinese reality. One critical reality is that the attitude and beliefs of many China's top leaders and policy makers are influenced sometimes quite unconsciously by the subtle but powerful thinking of their ancestors. Many Chinese top leaders who claim to be communists but are, first of all, Han Chinese. Their thoughts are largely shaped by their cultural roots and traditions. Their values and visions for the country, including the way of governing, and their attitude towards minority nationalities, have always been affected by traditional Chinese ideology handed down over the centuries.

²⁹ Salisbury, 1992, 1; Pye also made the similar argument, see Pye, 1992.

Mao Zedong, for example, was noted for his attraction to, and keen knowledge of Chinese history.³⁰ Mao's attitude towards minorities, which represents that of the Party, is partly that of a Han Chinese and partly that of a Communist, and a synthesis of the two has also been the constant objective of the CCP with respect to nationality problems. After all, Mao maintained at all times that Marxist-Leninist theory should be applied creatively to the specific conditions in China.³¹ But much as Mao and his colleagues like to proclaim themselves rebels against the old society, they were a product of that same society.

An examination of the imperial nationality policy, its controlling ideology, its organization for ruling and its impact on nationality relations illuminate not only the underpinning of the persistent goal of 'integration' in minority policy but also the methods and mechanisms applied to carry that policy through. Throughout recorded Chinese history every effort has been made by various rulers to amalgamate China's minorities or border people with the dominant Han group. The methods employed to achieve this have ranged from tolerance to forced assimilation. But the bottom line is to make sure that country's integrity and national unity remain intact.

When Mao Zedong and his colleagues formed the CCP on July 1, 1921, they had the ambition of eventually taking control of all the people within the Chinese borders. Ever since then the ethnic minority policy has been an element in the matrix of Chinese Communist policy, a constantly evolving synthesis of ideology and real political concerns. Marxist, Leninist, Stalinist, Maoist and Deng Xiaoping's theories on ethnicity provide a theoretical foundation to which all policies or policy changes are made to conform, even if only in theory.³² It has been repeatedly stressed by the minority sector leaders that "Marxist and Maoist theories on nationalities are the guiding light for solving nationality problems in China."³³

For Karl Marx, the term "nationality" is a category that took shape in the rise of capitalist society and "...ethnicity movements are no more than mere by-products of a more basic economic cause, phantoms manipulated by leading capitalist circles in order to fragment and weaken the international proletariat."³⁴ Clearly, Marx viewed ethnic issues as a class category. Lenin and Stalin's ideology is said to be developed from that of Marx. They

³⁰ Two books were said to have lain on Mao's bed throughout his long rule, dynastic works of great distinction, studied and annotated by emperors, statesmen and scholars for hundreds of years. One was *The Records of the Historian* (shi ji) which covered the period from semi-mythical Yellow Emperor, China's founding father, to the Han Dynasty a hundred years before Christ. The other, *General Mirror for the Aid of Government* (zi zhi tong jian) covered thirteen hundred years of history and was compiled in the eleventh century. It was designed as a practical handbook for the emperor, telling him how his predecessors had handled difficult questions. Both books were well-thumbed by Mao, who regarded them as a vital guide in running the vast country he had taken over. See Murray, 1994.

³¹ Moseley, 1966.

³² For example, Zhang Chih-I, a veteran and senior officer in charge of nationality work, once said "Marxist-Leninist theory on the nationality questions must be studied by Party members, for only thus can they equip themselves with the 'ideology weapons' they needed in order to carry out the Party's policy towards the national minorities." Moseley, 1966, 4.

³³ Sai Fudeng, 1994, 1.

³⁴ Fishman, 1989, 14.

believed that with the eventual disappearance of the classes the ethnicity would disappear accordingly. Mao Zedong showed his consensus by indicating that a homogeneous society would come about automatically with increasing levels of socialism and communism. However, the CCP's ideology on minority issues and policies have some fundamental differences from that of the Soviet Union. Mao's targeted ideal homogeneous communist society will eventually emerge by integrating the national minorities into the socialist culture with really largely the Han culture. Mao's ambition to achieve this goal was to solve the nationality problems in China by letting them develop for a long period and gradually integrate them into the communist cause.

The practical policy in the Soviet Union stressed national equality by establishing a system of country like states within the country. The first three Soviet Charter of Rights granted the right of self-government to its minority groups and in addition allowed these groups the position of a republic with the freedom to withdraw and to become independent.³⁵ In China, however, in the early days shortly after the birth of the CPC in 1921, with little knowledge and experience the Party followed the Soviet model by suggesting in 1931 that "All nationalities residing within the borders of China such as Mongolians, Hui, Tibetans, Miao, Li, and Gaoli (Korean), etc. have the right of self-government and the right to join or separate from the communist national state, or establish their own autonomous areas" But shortly after, in 1936, after much more thinking and experience, the Party for the first time put forward its own policy of regional national autonomy which has been revised several times, yet the core remains the same: the minority nationalities have the right to manage their own affairs within their own autonomous areas but will not have the right to become independent. Such policy has become the fundamental policy and political system since then and there is no sign of change in the foreseeable future.

For a multinational state to remain unified it is crucial to maintain its political stability and economic growth, and to satisfy its members in their socio-cultural life. The CCP and the central government initiated various policies and policy changes to achieve unity by addressing issues in the domains mentioned above.

The Law of Regional National Autonomy is the CCP's most important institutional building effort to manage minority nationality issues. It is actually entrenched in China's entire political system. The CCP claims that it is a communist policy with Chinese characteristics. It was created around the birth of People's Republic of China and updated in 1984 and 2001. Its major content is to establish autonomous areas and related governance. Up to now there are altogether 159 national minority autonomous areas in China including five autonomous regions (provincial level), 30 autonomous prefectures, and 124 autonomous counties. In addition, there are over 1700 minority villages. Except 10 minority groups with small populations, the remaining 45 all have their own autonomous areas.³⁶

³⁵ Chen Lianbi, 1999.

³⁶ Jin Shixin, 1995.

The autonomous rights include the following: 1) autonomous government has the right to implement the government policies and laws according to its local situations and has the right to make additional regulations and rules; 2) on the principle that as long as it falls in line with China's Charter of Rights and other laws, the autonomous government has the right to implement special policies to speed up local development; 3) autonomous government has the right to change or stop implementing government policies and regulations which are not applicable to the local situation after obtaining the permission from the government; 4) within the general guideline of central planning, the autonomous areas have the freedom to manage their local economy; 5) it has the right to manage local finances; 6) the right to manage their own affairs in education, science, culture, health, and sports; 7) if necessary, autonomous government may organize security forces to maintain local security, but must obtain permission from the State Council and must be in accordance with the government's military system; and 8) in conducting public affairs, the commonly used local minority languages should be used along with Mandarin.³⁷

Another characteristic of the autonomous system is that minorities have the right to participate in the management of the country. The number of minority representatives to the National people's Congress and provincial and local people's congresses is regulated according to the population of each group. According to Jin Shixin (1995), in each Conference of National Congress for the past years, the minority representatives surpass their percentage in population. For example, in 1988 during the Seventh National People's Congress, the minority representatives were 14.9% while they represented 8% of the total population at that time. Now each nationality has its own representatives in the central government.

One of the most successful practices of the autonomous policy is the CCP's continuous effort to train minority sector leaders to instil in them the superiority of the CPC's minority policies compared to other nations. The minority sector leaders have increased from over 10,000 in 1950 to over 2.06 million today. These are the key members who are mostly loyal to the Party's course and help to implement the Party's various policies. In this sense, the Law of Regional National Autonomy is not only the most important political policy towards minorities, but also most effectively the CCP's blueprint to build a sub political institution for the minorities to fit into the larger political institution of the whole country.

Complementing a relatively successful strategy of political institutional building are a series of policies targeting a wide range of minority issues such as economic development, culture and education, language maintenance and population control, etc.

Economic development is an important area of policy concerns for the Chinese government. According to Zhao Min, (1995) the Law of Regional National Autonomy has altogether seven chapters and 67 items of which 20 items relate to the autonomous rights in economic development and management. These regions should focus on socialist modernization, speeding up the development of the local economy and culture, building united and prosperous autonomous areas. The goal is to achieve common

³⁷ Jin Shixin, 1995.

prosperity among all nationalities and to build China into a prosperous socialist society with a great civilization and a high degree of democracy.

The major rights concerning economic development include the right to make policies and plan for the local economy, and to manage local resources, infrastructures, industries and small businesses. Of course all of these have to fit in with the overall economic policies of the central government. Apart from certain stipulated rights, there are also some so called favourable policies including reduced taxes and/or tax exemptions, favourable rates for loans, and more consideration for government's investment into these regions.³⁸

The minority economic policy seemed to be working well until recently. With economic reform for the past two decades and with the market economy gradually taking over the planned economy, the issues in minority economic policy become one of the most important elements that directly affect national unity and political stability of China. While the economic development in minority regions under the planned economy for the past nearly 40 years did not reveal serious inequality because of the overarching policies, in recent years there has been an increasing gap in the economic development between the east where most of the Han population reside and the central-west where more than 78% of the minority population call home.³⁹ One significant phenomenon is that the already existing gap between these areas has been increasing at an alarming speed, which make the minorities extremely unhappy. Such unhappiness, if not addressed, could become threatening to China's political stability and national unity. We will discuss this particular challenge later.

The CCP's minority education policy is one of the most important policies towards its nation building. Although it suffered major set backs during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), overall it has helped the party to achieve two major fronts. On the one hand, these minority policies have been used successfully as gestures to help minorities with the development of their education to consolidate their support. On the other hand, most importantly, through these policies, the CCP has successfully managed to train large numbers of minority carders who in turn help to further spread and instil communist ideologies and goals among the minority population especial the children.

The Minority education policy includes the following content: 1) training minority carders. In early years the training was focused on cultivating political personnel who are sympathetic to the CCP's cause and who would serve as CCP's bridge to reach minority populations and in recent years technical aspects of training are added to the policy; 2) promoting free compulsory education for minority children and continuing education for minority adults; 3) training minority teachers including sending Han teachers to minority areas; 4) respect and support minority style of education where factors such as education administration, the length of schooling, the curriculum and teaching materials are considered according to local situations; 5) establish minority education institutions up to the present there are 13 minority institutions (equivalent to universities), over 40

³⁸ Wen Jixia, 1995.

³⁹ Li Wei, 1994.

education colleges (four-year teacher training programs). Since 1980, some prestige Chinese universities have started to offer programs and classes specially designed for minority students. The same practice started earlier among some Chinese high schools. There are also over 100 minority teacher training colleges (2-3 year programs), over 300 vocational technical schools, over 2900 middle schools (junior high and high school), more than 2500 elementary schools, and more than 2000 daycares (The programs in these minority institutions are conducted in minority languages);⁴⁰ 6) development of minority languages, bilingual education and minority publications; 7) establish a minority educational administrative system which allows minorities to participate in the management of their own education affairs; and 8) several policies with conditions favourable to minority populations such as a lower entrance requirement to enter higher education, additional funding for minority schools, teachers, and students.

The two major caveats in all of these are, first, the long time policy that religion cannot interfere with education, and second, all minority schools, especially higher institutions must offer the course “minority theory and minority policy”. Such policies help maintain the CCP’s overall control over minority education.

The Party fully realizes the sensitive nature of minority policies. Any minority policy or changes of policies usually reflect the degree of importance on the part of the Party, especially policies which affect the feelings of minority members. With this in mind the Party put forward a series of detailed policies on the cultural front except for issues in religion, which have been enjoying great success and also contributed largely to the satisfaction of the minority population and the stability of the country. The major policies in this domain include: language, population, arts and customs.

Minority language policy has been one of the earliest and most successful policies among all policies. Since the 1950’s as a gesture of goodwill, the government put in a major effort to identify, to create and to develop minority languages.⁴¹ Another policy that has been welcomed by the minorities is the government’s population policy. For example, the planned birth control policy that allows only one child per family was initiated in the early 1970’s and did not formally apply to the minority population until after 1982. The birth control policy is also more relaxed towards minorities. In both 1984 and 1991 government documents stipulate that minority women in general can give birth to more than one child. For minorities living in remote and mountainous areas three or four children are permitted.⁴² As a result, minority birth rate is higher than that of Han. Like the birth control policy, there are also a set of policies stating certain special regulations that favour the minorities and are well received by the general minority population such as relaxed requirements for employment, entrance to higher education, and promotion. As a result, more people have applied for minority status. For example, between 1978-1990 about 20 million people obtained minority status which accounts for about 50-60% of the net increase of the minority population during that period. Other effective policies include respecting the minorities’ traditions and customs, and the development of

⁴⁰ Jin Binggao, Peng Qian, & Wang Tiezhi, 2002.

⁴¹ Blachford, 1999.

⁴² Xu Xifa, 1994.

minority arts and literature. Respect for minority holidays and for the practice of certain burial customs (which are banned for the Han population), and providing special food supplies such as beef and lamb only for Muslims are other examples.

In sum, the CCP and central government has created a successful institutional building to accommodate ethnic minority's needs and to grant them carefully defined autonomy, that is always within China's unitary system which is particularly equipped with the relatively centralized power and the constitutional restrictions on any sub group's demand for separation. Moreover, the Chinese government has made some comprehensive and specific minority policies in the areas of economic development, education, language, culture, and population control to help minority nationalities protect of their own identity and cultural traditions, to promote common prosperity, and to encourage them to amalgamate with Han and other nationalities in China. With up and downs, the simple fact that China remains intact as a multinational state indicates the qualified success of central government's policies.

4. Challenges and Prospects

Although so far the CCP has enjoyed control over the country's political stability, the new and existing problems, which pose major challenges to the country's unity and stability, also call for major changes in government's minority policies to address some current, some potential, and some critical problems and issues. After reviewing the recent publications from China the following problems emerge.⁴³

1. Economic problems and conflicts

As discussed earlier, the current economic situation in China make the economic conflicts between the minorities and Han population a major threat to China's stability. The fast growing economic gap between the minority and the Han regions has caused ill feelings among minority groups since more and more minority members have fallen under the poverty line.⁴⁴ In a lot of minority areas, the main concern is not the potential separation, but perpetuating inequality and lack of economic development.⁴⁵ As a remedy, the government has started a new policy to develop the western regions. But a long list of new problems arises from it. For example, some minority members have complained about the government taking away their resources and referred to it as "blood donations" from the west to the Han regions. Other problems include environmental preservation and land compensation. These again require more policies to be dealt with. However, three major problems make the policy development extremely challenging. First, many economic policies that were based on a planned economy became not applicable under the market economy.⁴⁶ Secondly, the changes have been so rapid that the huge bureaucratic

⁴³ The studies are reviewed here include Wen Jixia, 1995, Zhao Min 1995, Ke Xun, 1996, Tian Zhengxiong, 1996, Zhang Huijun, 1996, Song Quan, 1999, Chen Wei, 2002, Duan Chao 2002, Guan Guixia, 2002.

⁴⁴ The data is based on the numbers provided in Yang Jingchu, 1996, Zhang Huijun, 1996 and Tian Zhengxiong, 1996, Ke Xun, 1996.

⁴⁵ Heberer, 1989, 52.

⁴⁶ Song Quan, 1999.

structure of the government delays the policy-making and implementation process.⁴⁷ Thirdly, the lack of detailed and practical laws and regulations, in many cases, make many general policies lip service at best.

2. Religious issues and conflicts

In the west of China, more than 20 minority groups believe in certain religions and with the relaxed religious policy in recent years more religious activities and organizations have sprouted up causing several religious incidents. For example, in 1993 a Sichuan fine arts publisher published a children's picture book with some content that was offensive to Muslims and caused a strong protest from Muslims all over the country. At the end of 1994 and the beginning of 1995 many newspapers published articles "talking about pigs in the year of the pig" which hurt the feelings of many Muslims and caused large-scale unrest.⁴⁸ So religion is another potential issue which could cause political unrest if not handled well, not to mention that in both Xinjiang and Tibet, religions are always the potential grounds for demands for separation.

3. Nationalism, separatism and external pressures

The west region is bordering on more than 10 countries and more than 20 minority groups have the same groups living in the neighbouring countries.⁴⁹ There have been some inherited conflicts from history and some from external influences supporting the separatist movement overseas such as the Tibetan exiled government.⁵⁰ That is a serious concern of the central government. On the other hand, with the dramatic increase of China's economic, political and military power, the external support for the ethnic minority groups' struggle with the Chinese state is not favourable, mainly for *realpolitik* reasons. More precisely, because China is a rising power now, foreign countries' support for potential separation-independence based on a self-determination principle is not very strong. In fact, very few foreign countries want to sacrifice their wide-ranged interests to agonize China in supporting those ethnic minority groups, except for moral support in lip service.

On the whole the minority issues seem to have become more pointed now than before. According to a fairly recent research questionnaire conducted in Beijing on a sample of 135 people from 24 ethnic backgrounds,⁵¹ one of the questions asked was "which direction do you think the nationality relations is heading to: a) there will be generally good relationships among all nationalities and there will be no social unrest; b) there might be local minority unrest or fairly serious nationality conflicts in minority areas; c) there might be large-scale social unrest and nationality conflicts". The participants were asked to choose only one. Out of 135 people 44 chose (a), 32 chose (b), 2 circled (c) and 57 others were unwilling to express their opinions. Although it was only a very small survey, it revealed a certain element that may reflect China's reality.

⁴⁷ Blachford, 1999.

⁴⁸ Yang Jingchu, 1996.

⁴⁹ Tian Zhengxiong, 1996.

⁵⁰ Chen Wei, 2002.

⁵¹ Yang Jingchu, 1996.

5. Conclusion

Through our analysis, we can conclude that given the highly diverse nature of China's ethnic minorities, any simple generalization to define the condition of China's minority nationalities, especially their relationships with China as a whole, is problematic. Based on the demographic, geopolitical, religious, and historical factors, most of China's ethnic minority groups do not pose a separation threat to China's national unity. In contrast, some of them are highly amalgamated into the Chinese society and even become an integrated and indispensable part of it. Many minorities believe in working together with the Han for the common good. Only the two minority groups in the two regions, Tibetans in Tibet and Uygurs in Xinjiang, appear to have the potential to demand secession. Thus, it is highly unlikely that China as a multinational state will disintegrate in the near future. Also, the ethnic minority separatist movements will find it difficult to be successful under present conditions. This is mainly because of China's institutional building on minority nationality governance and the central government's minority policies that provide a powerful, albeit both persuasively and coercively, stable force to maintain the national unity and to keep the separatist forces at bay. On the other hand, however, as a transitional state, China is facing a lot of challenges, some of which are directed at or have a strong impact on its minority policies. If the government does not respond properly, they could lead to crises. But in our opinion, ethnic minority's separation might become possible only as a *result* of China's political crisis, rather than separatist movements *leading to* the crisis.

In any event, the real disintegration is very unlikely to occur. If China's modern history can be used as a credible reference, it is worth noting that during the early part of the last century when the Qing Dynasty collapsed and the new Republic was seriously fragmented, then further deteriorated due to wide-spread warlords with local control in the 1920s and 1930s, China as a multinational state was extremely vulnerable. But even under that condition China did not disintegrate. Furthermore, from the 1930s to 1949 China survived in spite of a war with Japan and a civil war. This might be why Colin Mackerras predicted a few years ago that "China has a better chance of remaining united even including Tibet and Xinjiang than the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia did."⁵² We have reach the similar conclusion based on our analysis.

⁵² Mackerras, 1994, 275.

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