

China's ethnic minority issues, analysis and future (Tibet & East Turkestan)

རྒྱ་ནག་གྲངས་ལྷུང་མི་རིགས་ཀྱི་གནད་དོན་དང་། དབྱེ་ཞིབ། མ་འོངས། བོད་དང་ཤར་ཏུར་ཁི་མི་ཐན།

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In today's China, top Party officials from minority regions also encounter issues, similar to those faced daily by the local people in Tibet and East Turkestan region. Recently, Wu Yingjie, one of the longest-serving Chinese officials in Tibet, has come under investigation. Wu, who had served in the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) for 47 years, including as the Communist Party Secretary (2016-2021), is being reviewed by the country's top anti-graft watchdog "Central Commission for Discipline Inspection". He has also been sanctioned by the Biden administration for human rights abuses in Tibet. Additionally, he studied at Tibet Minzu University (བོད་ལྗོངས་མི་རིགས་སློབ་ཤེས་མཉམ་འཇུག་སྡེ་ཁོལ།) in Shaanxi with Lobsang Gyaltsen, who is one of the top officials of Tibetan ethnic background. Currently, he holds the position of Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region Congress.

Former Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji stated that true development in China cannot occur without progress in its western minority regions mainly Xinjiang and Tibet. Contrary to that, Professor Hongyi Li argues that because this western drive may encounter economic, political, and cultural obstacles—including official corruption, governmental inefficiency, ethnic division, and low economic returns—Chinese leaders may reap limited political and economic benefits from it in the near future, particularly in areas with large ethnic populations.

However, we can't ignore the economic benefits China gains from infrastructure projects in Tibet and Xinjiang, regions rich in natural resources. Politically, Beijing hasn't achieved the desired obedience despite over twenty years after the implementation of the Western Development Project. Intense surveillance and intense assimilation drives through Sinicization, large budgets for domestic security, and constant checks on the native people in these peripheral regions persist and these measures indicate a lack of confidence in their political control over Tibetans and Uighurs.

Ethnic minorities in China share common cultures, languages, heritages, and religions, often concentrated in specific areas. The PRC recognises 56 ethnic minorities. Professor Yan San categorises groups as "Cultivated" (Shufan) in the interior and eastern China and "Uncultivated" (Shengfan) in peripheral and mountainous regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet. This classification stems from the hierarchical and Sinocentric nature of Chinese society and politics.

Here, I discussed the perception of minorities in China and the debate surrounding the governance model for minorities, examining different schools of thought. This includes the scope, prospects, and future of achieving "great unity" between the Han majority and minority groups in China. China has a long history of dealing with minorities, influenced by both Confucian and Marxist traditions. These differing ideologies continue to shape China's approach to minority rights and multiculturalism.



1. Confucianism frames ethnic relations through the concept of the five broad relationships, viewing minorities as a younger brother (Yi) to the Han majority (Xia). The Xia, as the elder brother, has a duty to correct and civilise the Yi. This Yi-Xia framework positions the Xia as rulers and the Yi as outsiders or uncivilised. The Confucian principle of "Ren" underscores the Xia's obligation to civilise the Yi, a notion supported by Mencius (Chinese Philosopher who expanded on Confucius's teachings and is best known for his views on human nature and government), who believed the Xia should civilise the Yi, not vice versa. As in Baogang He articles "Minority rights with Chinese characteristics" further argues that in the contradiction of Mencius, Hao Jin cites if the minority accepts the Confucianism (儒家思想) then they can rule the majority as Qing and Yuan were set as an example whereas, Fang Xiaoru argues differences in Xia-Yi while setting an example of dogs therefore he asserted the barbarians should not let to hold the Chinese throne as this will confused the order.

2. In the 20th century, the discourse and perception of minorities changed rapidly and drastically with the advent of Marxism and Leninism. The central argument here is that economic development will lead to cultural changes, suggesting that human identity is not authentic. Furthermore, historical materialism supports an assimilation policy.

During the initial days of the CCP, with the constitution of the Chinese Soviet Republic in 1931, the right of self-determination and secession was granted. However, Mao later abandoned both self-determination and federalism for several reasons:

- Self-determination does not apply to a socialist state; it is a product of imperialist occupation.
- Chinese states had coexisted with all ethnic groups for centuries; this concept is a European product.
- Japan's liberation of Mongolia was influenced by the Soviet concept of self-determination.
- Lenin, Marx, and Engels all endorsed a unitary centralized political system.

Around the inception of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and by 1965, the PRC established five autonomous regions under a law on autonomy designed to ensure the preservation of the cultures of ethnic minorities. The Tibet Autonomous Region was the last to be granted autonomous status in 1965, following Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi Zhuang, and Ningxia Hui, all of which received autonomous status in the 1950s.

These days, there is considerable debate over the governance model for "China's ethnic policies," as cited in Yan San's article "Debating Ethnic Governance in China." She articulates three prevailing schools of thought on the governance model for minorities in China.

1. Liberal autonomist 2. Integrationist 3. Socialist autonomist

1. The Liberal autonomist critics consistently focus on the limited autonomy within the broader institutional structure of China's minority governance. They argue that this perspective overlooks ethnic particularism and prerogatives, which the critics claim is a biased observation.

Liberal autonomists identify three barriers that prevent and thwart the exercise of true autonomy:

- Political centralisation, which Wang Lixiong argues limits administrative units and leads to the practice of pseudo-autonomy in TAR and Xinjiang.
- The codification of Marxism in the Chinese constitution, which prohibits religion.
- The monopoly on the appointment of party secretaries by the CCP echelon, a situation warned against by Ilham Tohti as creating a "double jeopardy" involving both State and Party.



2. Many integrationists are critical of the liberal autonomist argument. Statist integrationist Zhu Weiqun (Executive Deputy of United Front Work Development) emphasises state rights and interests, while liberal integrationist Ma Rong advocates for equal citizenship over ethnic identity. Integrationists criticise ethnic-specific policies like quotas, arguing they undermine meritocracy and fairness, and foster identity politics. Ma Rong suggests such policies could lead China down the path of the Soviet Union by promoting ethno-national identities and territorial units. Integrationist views gained prominence during the 2008 Lhasa and 2009 Urumqi protests. Zhu Weiqun argued for revoking minority autonomous status, emphasising the commonalities of one Chinese nation.

Unfortunately, Zhu Weiqun, Executive Deputy Head of the United Front Work Department, also played a crucial role in the Sino-Tibet dialogue, representing the Chinese government's position. While Dharamshala advocates the Middle Way Approach, which is liberal in nature and promotes mutual coexistence and adherence to the constitutional rights granted to minorities, negotiating with officials whose vision is strongly driven by integrationist, conservative, and statist ideologies is quite unfortunate for all Tibetans and may be one of the factors contributing to the current stalemate. Despite existing state orders, the success of diplomacy also hinges on the nature of the leaders involved. It is questionable whether the Chinese government might have intentionally appointed him, knowing his statist and integrationist ideology. If that is the case, we can conclude that Beijing has been engaging in Sino-Tibet dialogue for more than two decades merely for the sake of China's image-making process during the period of intense globalisation, without any real motivation to resolve the issues concerning Tibet. This stands in stark contrast to the efforts from Dharamshala, whose sole purpose is to address and solve the Sino-Tibet conflict.

3. Socialist autonomists focus on distribution and development rights, accepting limited autonomy. They contribute to the Chinese debate by defending the left, countering the right and the centre, and upholding established policies. Despite their main challenge from integrationists, who were publicly rebuked by Xi Jinping, socialist autonomists currently prevail politically and ideologically, safeguarding the autonomous system from any fundamental change, at least for now. The 2006 TAR delegation's report to Hu Jintao also cited economic and infrastructural development as solutions, a policy continued by Xi Jinping with goals such as the China Dream and fostering a sense of national unity.

Scope, future and prospect

China perceives its peripheral regions, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, as hotbeds of separatism. The current approach to these regions often relies on Ba Dao (rule by force) rather than Wang Dao (rule by virtue). Although Confucianism supports assimilation through cultural diffusion (Ronghe), it does not advocate force. China's policies towards minority regions are driven by two main forces:

1. *Class conflict*
2. *Economic development.*

During Mao's era, class conflict was predominant. However, since the reform and opening-up period, economic development has become the central focus in the western minority regions. Despite this, China remains fearful of separatism and protests, such as self-immolation in Tibet and the Urumqi protests in Xinjiang. These incidents suggest that the belief in economic development as a path to stability is flawed. Dr. Lobsang Sangay, former Sikyong of the Central Tibetan Administration and a Harvard graduate, argues that economic development in Tibet primarily benefits the Han Chinese, exacerbating the division between the Han and Tibetan people.



The residents of these regions, particularly Tibet, aspire to greater freedom in practising their culture, religion, and language, and demand respect for their human rights. They do not solely prioritise economic development, which Beijing often uses as a means to secure loyalty. However, such an approach does not resonate well in societies as deeply cultured and religiously oriented as Tibet and Xinjiang. If Beijing seeks a harmonious relationship and unity with its minority regions, it must prioritise five key areas:

1. *Human rights*
2. *Respect for culture and religion*
3. *Respecting their aspirations*
4. *Genuine fraternity*
5. *Adherence to LEAR and the Chinese Constitution*

Fang Lizhi argues that genuine democratisation, encompassing democracy and human rights, is essential for harmony. Yan San suggests Beijing needs to reassess its policies, balancing autonomy with ethnic prerogatives. Fang further claims that as long as one-party authoritarianism persists, ethnic conflicts will continue.

The future of Tibet and Xinjiang raises questions about the viability of autonomous status, especially with the influx of Han Chinese following the Great Western Development Project. This migration has created a heterogeneous ethnic mix, challenging the very concept of autonomous regions based on specific ethnic concentrations. There are concerns that Beijing might revoke this status under pressure from statist integrationists. Reflecting on Hao Jin's argument, the question arises: if China offers genuine autonomy in line with Confucian principles in the future, will the Central Tibetan Administration accept it? Fang Lizhi contends that forced assimilation and mere economic development are misguided solutions to the issues of ethnic minorities. Xinjiang scholar Ilham Tohti, a liberal autonomist, argues for a genuine sense of fraternity to facilitate peaceful coexistence.

Beijing can achieve temporary stability through forced assimilation, but lasting peace requires respecting the culture, religion, and sentiments of minorities. Only by embracing diversity can China achieve the "Great Unity" (大团结) it seeks. Uniformity in diversity should not be the adopted approach. The ultimate power of history lies in the will and judgement of the people. That is the lesson from the Chinese classic "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" (Sānguó Yǎnyì).



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