

## **Examining the Successes and Problems of China's Policy on Minority Nationalities\***

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to describe the interethnic relations between the majority Han nationality in China and the minority nationalities. It presents the official policy on how the central government should treat the 55 minority nationalities since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 and examines the public statements of the political leaders since then on this important aspect of this multinational country. For a number of the larger minority nationalities administrative autonomy is given to their region so that the minorities can develop with their own policies, language and customs. In many other provinces autonomy is provided to individual counties or other areas for administering their local government. Examples of the interethnic and intercultural successes and problems of the policy in practice are provided.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to explore the interethnic relations between the majority Han nationality in China with the minority nationalities. China has a long history of relations among many nationalities, but specifically since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, there has been a public policy of granting recognition of, support for, and even autonomy to, many of the nationality groups. I wish to analyze this public policy as promoted in the government documents and the leaders' speeches, and examine the research from those who have written on how well the policy has worked and how the minority people themselves feel about the interethnic relations. Some of the findings are taken from the research from two of my post-graduate students at Peking University which they did in the fall semester of 2000 in my class in intercultural communication.

There are 56 recognized nationalities in the People's Republic with the Han nationality making up approximately 92% of the population. There is a wide variation in terms of population among the minorities, ranging from about 15 million among the Zhuang who have the largest, to 2,300 Lhoba, the smallest (Qin Shi, China Handbook, Beijing, New Star Publishers, 1993, p. 37). The minority nationalities cover a large area of the country, as much as 64% of the land, including the provinces of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Guangxi, Ningxia, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangdong, Hunan, Hubei, Fujian, and Taiwan. Yunnan Province, in the southwest, has the largest diversity of over 20 ethnic groups within its borders. In five of these provinces–

Xinjiang, Tibet, Guangxi, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia—the people have an administrative system of governmental autonomy. In addition, there are 30 autonomous prefectures and 124 autonomous counties where the local leaders are to be from the designated minority nationality (Qin, 1993, p. 39).

### **Historical Background**

The origin of the autonomy concept for the minority nationalities is found in the early days of the Chinese Communist Party, even before 1949 when the Party attempted to preserve "the Chinese geographical entity of late Imperial China, except for Outer Mongolia" (Olivier, 1993, p. 2). A good description of the situation is provided by Olivier when he writes, "In the past, the Han combined shrewd politics with brute force to control the non-Han and hold together the territory that, they thought, ought to encompass China. Socialist China attempted, instead, to win the non-Han over to the new regime by devising an official nationality policy. The initial goal of that policy was to increase non-Han voluntary participation and collaboration by making them feel that they, too, were part of the 'big Chinese family of fraternal peoples,' as the Chinese Communist party defined the multinational People's Republic. In the 1940s and early 1950s, this led to the establishment of autonomous nationality areas for the non-Han, and to the adoption of policies that encourage them to preserve and develop their language and culture" (Olivier, 1993, pp. 2, 3).

### **The Policy**

The emphasis on indigenous development and preservation within the multinational state of China is established legally in the Chinese Communist Party Constitution adopted by the 12th National Congress of the CPPP. It reads, "The Communist Party of China upholds and promotes relations of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all nationalities in the country, persists in the policy of regional autonomy of minority nationalities, aids the areas inhabited by minority nationalities in their economic and cultural development, and actively trains and promote cadres from among the minority nationalities" (Kwan, 1991, p. 96).

Mao emphasized the importance of giving opportunities of indigenous development to the minority nationalities in the Communist Party Constitution. Deng Xiaoping, early in the reform and opening up period that he introduced, emphasized in a 1979 speech to the fifth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that the minority nationalities were making great progress in their "democratic reform and socialist transformation" by forming "a new, socialist type of relationship among themselves—a relationship of unity, fraternity, mutual assistance and co-operation" (Deng, 1984a, p. 75).

Again in 1980, in a speech to the senior officials of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Deng provided the ideological and policy foundation for continuing the policy of indigenous development among the minorities by stressing in another form his now famous saying of "seeking the truth from facts." This means, he said, that each minority nationality should be given the opportunity to meet its own needs by "developing production suited to local conditions" and "developing what is appropriate for a specific locality and not arbitrarily attempting what is unsuitable" (Deng, 1984b, p. 298). He elaborated on this when he said: "It is extremely important for us to proceed from concrete local conditions and take into account the wishes of the people. We must not propagate one method and require all localities to adopt it. In publicizing typical examples, we must explain how and under what conditions people in these localities achieved success. We should not describe them as perfect

or as having solved all problems; and we should certainly not require people in other places to copy them mechanically in disregard of their own specific conditions" (Deng, 1984b, p. 299).

President Jiang Zemin in the early years of his administration, while still under the watchful eye of Deng Xiaoping, made a strong effort to place importance upon the ethnic minorities by going on a trip to the frontiers of China at all of its borders. By the end of 1990, over a year after the events of Tiananmen Square, and his own rise to power with Deng's blessing, Jiang had visited the provinces of Heilongjiang, Yunnan, Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Guangxi, and Jilin. In his visits to these provinces where there was always the potential of ethnic unrest, especially following the break-up of the Soviet Union near some of these borders, Jiang pledged, for example, in Tibet, "special policies and flexible measures" that continued the initiatives made in 1980 by Hu Yaobang for "a modest revival of religious activity and the breakup of agricultural collectives" (Gilley, 1998, p. 179). Jiang's trip was "meant to establish his authority, not bring about change," though he did not "exhibit the marks of a Han nationalist during his imperial progress around perimeters of the People's Republic." He supported fully the Communist Party belief "that communism could unite disparate ethnic groups, and his worldly intellect inhibited a narrow, Han-based outlook on the minorities as inferior, tributary nations" (Gilley, 1998, p. 180). One of his biographers claims, "Minority affairs would always be low on his agenda and would be handled by other Politburo members in line with the repressive party policy that Mao had instituted" (Gilley, 1998, p. 180).

The government more recently, however, has been giving much prominence in the media to the contributions that the ethnic minorities have made to the culture of China. The *China Daily* has regular, almost daily, features of the traditions, customs, culture, and beauty of the lands occupied by the minority nationalities. Some examples are seen in these headlines: "Bilingual programmes benefit minority teenagers," in southern Xinjiang province (Xiao Xiao, 2000, p. 9), "Arts festival helps keep minority traditions alive," in Guangxi province (Xiao Zhu, 2000, p. 10), "Mongolian tribe sticks to old lifestyle," in Xianjiang province (Min Zu, 2000, p. 10) and "Binzhongluo, a paradise on earth," in Yunnan province (Ling Feng, 2001, p. 9).

The official policy of the Jiang government in the fall of 2000 was to stress the economic development of the country's Western provinces, which in large measure, are populated with ethnic minorities. In the Fifth Plenary Session of the 15th Communist Party of China's Central Committee the development of the western regions was given top priority. Premier Zhu Rongji stated: "We should seek every opportunity to implement the western development strategy to achieve a coordinated development among different regions of the country, and at the same time promote the urbanization process" (Zhu, 2000, p. 4). Much media attention has been given to the needs and plans for building up the western infrastructure, engaging in regional development, constructing highways, gas lines as well as agricultural development among the rural and western regions (Huang Zhiling, 2000, p. 9).

China's recent White Paper on National Minorities stresses the policy of "promoting the common development of all ethnic groups" so that their agriculture, infrastructure, industry, and economic growth are all important elements to be improved. The White Paper has identified in it also the development of the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities, including folkways, customs, arts, traditional medicine, and sports. The government wants the preservation and development of all ethnic groups to be a priority of its policy (Information Office, 2000).

The "Law on Ethnic Minority Education," as an example of the government's effort to support the development of minorities in the country, stipulates that "the education law [is] for the purpose of developing the cause of ethnic education and for promoting the construction of material civilization and ideological and cultural civilization in ethnic areas" (Lipeng, 1999, p. 10). The law also stipulates that "special measures," "appropriate consideration," "actual needs," "real guarantees," "ethnic experimental schools," and "priority admission" shall be provided to ethnic minorities in their areas. In the colleges and universities, the law stipulates that regarding recruitment and admission of minorities, special consideration shall be given, such as "appropriate lowering of the marks needed for admission and giving priority admission to ethnic minority students whose conditions are the same as those of Han applicants" (Lipeng, 1999, p. 11). Further, the law requires that the ethnic schools which use the ethnic minority spoken and written language for classroom instruction shall gradually increase the time for use of the Han language so that the children will be bilingual by the time they graduate from junior middle school (Lipeng, 1999, p. 12). It is entirely up to the local government and the people in the community to decide whether to use the ethnic language for classroom instruction. China's White Paper on National Minorities claims that the spoken and written languages of the national minorities "are widely used in judicial, administrative and educational fields, as well as in political activities and social life" (Information Office, 2000).

A detailed chronicle of the record of how the Chinese government has handled the minority nationalities and the achievement of the minorities themselves has been published recently in Chinese as *The Chronicle of Chinese Minority Nationalities' Revolutionary History (covering modern and contemporary history)* by the Minority Nationalities University Press in Beijing (1999). It gives a record of these activities beginning in 1832 and coming up to 1996 by geographical region, including the minorities found in the provinces located in the northeast region, the northwest, the southwest, and the south.

Professor Guan (2001) of Peking University has described the factors that influenced the formulation of China's national minorities policy as being five in number: "Marxism's influence on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chinese history, the situation of the ethnic groups, Chinese traditional culture and the international environment" (p. 4). His assessment is that the policy "is basically successful" (p. 2). With this overall judgment in mind, we will turn now to examine some of the successes and some of the problems that have developed.

### **The Policy in Practice**

Though the policy of combining a centralized government with autonomous nationality regions was interrupted during the Great Leap forward and the Cultural Revolution, the non-ideological economic development era of Deng Xiaoping "guaranteed the return to and further improvement of the liberal nationality policy of the 1950s" (Olivier, 1993, p. 3). This policy has been examined in depth by Olivier, a Western scholar, who found a successful demonstration within one specific case study of the Korean minority in China's northeastern provinces.

### **The Korean Minority Nationality**

Olivier's research has concluded that the key factors in making the Chinese nationality policy successful in the case of the Koreans are that the alliance between the Korean nationality and the Chinese Communist Party enabled them to accomplish (1) a liberal economic

development whereby the "socialist transformation" "protected them [Koreans] from having to compete with the Han majority, and provided them with a feeling of security no capitalist system and free-marked economy could offer" and (2) the "establishment of two main Korean territorial autonomous areas in Northeast China [which] contributed to allowing the Koreans to develop their language and culture" (Olivier, 1993, p. 259). Though Olivier provides some conditional observations and emphasizes that constant assessment must be taken on these issues, he nevertheless overall argues that this case qualifies "as an example of relatively successful nationality policy and peaceful cohabitation with the Han in multinational China" (p. 260). Communicating and implementing a policy of economic, linguistic, and cultural self-determination to the Chinese minority nationalities is the challenge that faces Beijing, but the case of the Koreans in northeast China would appear to be an encouragement to the government that positive results are possible to achieve. A balanced relationship between the Han and the non-Han is a way to avoid what has happened in the former Soviet Union between its ethnic minorities.

Olivier also argues that if economic development is achieved by the minority nationalities then there is the threat of cultural and linguistic assimilation. This is potentially fatal to a minority culture. This does not necessarily need to occur, however, which the Korean case again demonstrates. He says that "most retain a very strong sense of Korean cultural identity, and that includes even those who, already, no longer speak the language of their ancestors" (Olivier, 1993, p. 262).

Even though in the Korean case cited above there may be a strong cultural identity possibly without the language, the preservation of the minority language is often seen as central to the continuity of the minority culture. Dai (1999) argues that the attitudes of the minority nationality toward their language are important. "Language," he argues, "is an important criterion by which to differentiate the nationalities. Without their own language they cannot represent their own nationality. Because clothing, physical appearance, life habits, and some psychological conditions cannot make big differences between other nationalities" (p. 88). He points out that the Mulao nationality in Guangxi Autonomous Region regard their language as "indispensable as a communicative tool in the early life of the Mulao nationality" and believe that, in addition, the people of their nationality who master another language or languages "are more capable and competent and more adaptable in communication" (p. 89). In fact, 40% of the Mulao people marry other nationalities and family members usually can use two languages of minorities (p. 89).

The potential of ethnic tensions is always present where minorities and majorities must live together, but the China case perhaps suggests that a minority nationality policy that is communicated openly, protected by law, and implemented in a cooperative manner, is more likely to be accepted by all sides, a necessary condition for success in a multinational country.

As an example of the Korean case, I would like to share the work of one my Chinese students, Nanji Hua (2001), at Peking University, who wrote her research paper on her own family situation, as a Korean minority. She writes this based on interviews with her family members, first about her grandparents, or the first generation, then her parents, or the second generation, and finally, herself, or the third generation:

### **The First Generation of Nanji Hua**

For most part of their life, my grandparents lived in the Korean Autonomous Region where ethnic Korean and ethnic Chinese lived in separate communities. As my father

remembered: "the Hans and the Koreans lived far apart. Their living style, clothes, cuisine, customs and festivals were very much different. But, they were quite content with the separation, and consciously avoided conflict of any kind " So, in the first two decades after the founding of new China, there was little pressure for conformity on the ethnic Koreans to adapt.

Ethnic Koreans had developed Chinese national identity. They conceived of themselves as Chinese, different from North Koreans and South Koreans. During the Korean War my grandfather volunteered to go to PingYong (capital city of North Korea) to assist their socialist construction, but he went there thinking himself as a foreigner (interview with father). When he was at the end of his life, he asked Grandmother not to inform my father of his death, who at that time was in service in Shanxi Province, for fear that it might interfere with my father's serving the nation. My grandmother (father's side) lived with my parents in Jilin City far from the Korean Autonomous Region for about twenty years before she died at the age of 83. But she still could not communicate with the Hans, and even could not utter a single Chinese word. (p. 4).

### **The Second Generation of Nanji Hua**

My parents generally have adopted the integration mode of cultural adaptation. They are bilingual, but often speak Korean mixed with Chinese. They have no difficulty in communicating and developing satisfactory relationships with ethnic Chinese.

They maintain some of the Korean traditions and customs and also have lost some. Since coming out of the Korean Autonomous Region, they have not worn Korean traditional clothes nor do they have any. My mother does make some Korean food, but compared with my grandmother, her skill is far from satisfactory. Most of our relatives live in the Korean Autonomous Region. So my parents often go and visit them on special occasions, such as weddings, birthdays of the elders and funerals. In Jilin, they participate in almost the same kinds of activities as their Han friends. There is not much trouble for them coping with the shift of rituals. (p. 5)

Psychologically, they feel comfortable with their double cultural environment, but they still have a strong sense of their ethnicity and have a special feeling for the Korean nations. In my telephone interview with my parents, I asked: " Which one do you expect to be the winner when China encounters Korea in the Olympic games?" They answered me: " Either one will be fine. But I do not want to see them compete." (p. 5).

### **The Third Generation of Nanji Hua**

My parents did not send me to an ethnic school. "I want you to have a fair competition with the Hans," my father explained to me later. I think they did not foresee the result of going to an ordinary school for me, nor did they care about my losing my ethnic identity at all.

My family does help me in maintaining some of the ethnic awareness. My grandmother kept Korean traditions and customs all her life. She made excellent Korean pickles and cakes, which I love and admire very much. Once in 3 or 4 years, I visit my relatives where I experience Korean life and know what I have lost and have retained.

I had a problem in communicating with my grandmother, which upset me and stimulated me to learn more about ethnic Korea. When in college, I once called my parents. My grandmother picked up the phone, which she seldom did because most of the people calling speak Chinese. She asked in Korean: "Who's there?" I was too surprised and unprepared to answer. After a while, I told my name in terrible Korean. She was so delighted and proceeded with a sequence of questions: "Where are you? How is your study? How is your life?" I was nervous. Holding the phone tightly near my ear, I tried hard to formulate an answer. I failed. I told her, "I am fine," in slow Chinese. She was disappointed and both of us were hurt. I then decided to study Korean, hoping one day I could tell her how much I love her. I regret losing my Korean characteristics. (p. 8)

This case study shows some of the successes of the minority nationality policy in China with one of the larger minorities that enabled them to be helped economically but also discloses some of the problems which come with adaptation and assimilation.

### **The Miao Minority Nationality**

The Miao minority nationality is another minority that I wish to share with you from another one of my students from Peking University, Miss Peng Liping (2001). She is from the Miao nationality and has researched her family background, as well. She writes of the Miao people:

The Miao people, an ethnic minority in China with a long history of more than five thousand years, are the "gypsies of China". The moment they came into being they were on their way moving. The Miao never established a regime for themselves. But even when they retreated into the "deserted" areas in southwest China, the reach of the central government still followed them. First, war, then, officials and officers, armies, then, people. There have been several furious fights between them, but peace and harmony also accompanied these interactions. The interaction between the Miao and Han never ceased whether in war or peace. Their cultures have been influenced more or less by each other. (p. 3)

The Guizhou and Yunnan provinces and the western part of Hunan province have compact Miao communities within them. Elsewhere, the Miao people are always intermingled with other nationalities in a unit which is called "Zhai," meaning stockade village. And some have even immigrated into other countries, such as those in South Asia, the United States, and France. (p. 4)

Most of the Miao people live in the hinterlands with an austere living situation and infertile land but rich in minerals and vegetation. Due to the difficulty of getting into

the Miao regions, the Miao people are somewhat secluded from the outside world. (p. 4)

The Miao nationality is an important ethnic group in China. According to the fourth national population census in 1990, there were 7,300,000 Miao people altogether in China, mainly distributed in Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangxi, and Hubei provinces. It is the fourth largest ethnic group in China. (p. 5)

The Miao nationality has only an oral language, not a written one. There are many differences in costume and language between the various branches of the Miao nationality. Its language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan system. And it can be divided into three dialects in light of its phonetics, vocabulary and wording. (p. 5)

After liberation, the Chinese government promulgated bilingual education in the Miao community, which means instruction there is given in both the Han language and Miao language. Since the Miao language has little usage outside the Miao community, fewer and fewer people want to spend time on it. The shortage of faculty and financial support is another reason. Due to the above reasons, bilingual education in Miao areas exists in name only. Now in my hometown, it is difficult to find a school which still implements this bilingual education system. (pp. 14-15)

We can see from history that the Miao are quite different from the Han in the aspects of language, beliefs, costumes, and customs. The recognition of same ancestor comes from the above aspects. No nationality can remain the same over the passage of time. The Miao nationality is not an exception either. The policy of autonomous regions for minority nationalities since the founding of the People's Republic of China has greatly helped the Miao nationality to develop itself in a completely new environment. But there are also some new problems emerging under the new conditions.

After Deng's policy of reform and opening to the outside, the Miao nationality has experienced great change. Through cadre training, education, a preferential policy and financial aid from the central government, the Miao nationality has made tremendous improvement in economy and culture. But during this process, a lot of traditions have been replaced by so-called modernization and market economy and thus lost. And since most of the Miao people live in the hinterland of China with poor transportation facilities and communication, the gap between minority nationality areas and the more developed coastal areas is enlarging. And with the development of the economy and the dissemination of equality among the nationalities, the Miao consciousness of nationality has been awakened and intensified. More and more information flows into Miao villages and continually changes their mind.

Ethnic equality and plurality are essential for peace and harmony for a multi-nationality country like China. "Looking around the globe, we will find that many regional conflicts and wars are related to the poor handling of ethnic issues and to



foreign intervention in ethnic disputes. Problems occur in all places where ethnic issues are not correctly handled," said Jiang Zemin, the president of the People's Republic of China in a high-profile national working conference (*China Daily*, Sept. 30, 2000). (pp. 18-19)

I come from a family of the Miao nationality. My mother is a Miao, but my father is a Han. I grew up in Hunan province. The first time I was aware of my identity was from my mother. She told me I was half originated from the Miao. Later when I was able to understand the world, I found people around me were mostly Miao. We have our own festivals, living habits, customs and beliefs.

To tell you the truth, I am a beneficiary of the preferential education policy to minority nationalities in China. And to my knowledge the central government has paid much attention to the development of the Miao people, including politics, economy, education, and culture preservation and protection.

The relationship between the Miao and other nationalities in our region is quite harmonious. In my hometown, one can hardly feel the difference between the Miao and Han people, except different traditions, customs and language. Almost every Miao person can speak Chinese, but not all of them can speak the Miao language. The conflicts between the Miao and Han hardly arise. In addition, the customs of the Miao and Han have been influenced by each other. Miao people usually spend two new year festivals every year, one is the lunar new year of the Han, another is the new year of the Miao. The Miao costumes also have adopted many forms from the Han. On the other hand, the Han, especially those who have lived with the Miao for many years, have been greatly assimilated by the Miao. The Han people in my hometown celebrate many festivals of the Miao, and they have taken for granted the customs and living styles originating from the Miao. And it is a common phenomenon for a Han man to marry a Miao woman, which would have been unimaginable and incredible in the earlier days. (pp. 19-20)

We can see from these two case studies from my students that there are aspects of success and also problem areas that develop from the national policy on minorities. I turn now to a couple examples where actual discrimination has occurred.

### **The Subei People**

There is one case of ethnic identity where the people have been discriminated against and subjected to humiliation and subordination. The ethnicity, however, is not based on race, nationality, or language. I refer to the Subei people of Shanghai who have been the victims of a socially constructed ethnicity. Honig's study (1992) offered a description of the Subei people as being ethnic because their "native place identity has been socially constructed and embedded in a system of power relationships" (p. 134). She argued that these people from a certain area in Shanghai have not benefited from the Communist Party's attempt to eradicate inequalities in China by their social construction because, unlike the minority nationalities, the Subei do not have a racial, physical, linguistic, or objective reality of their own and are thus "invisible to the state and therefore unacceptable as a basis of policy-making" (p. 128).

Since their existence has been created by others due to "social relationships, and historical processes" (p. 135), and they are perceived as "poor, ignorant, dirty, and unsophisticated" (p. 2), similar to the "Appalachian 'hillbillies'" in America, it is problematic to call them an ethnic group. But Honig used the term because (1) "ethnicity is not an objective thing, such as blood ties, but rather a process," (2) ethnicity is not inherent or immutable, but "depends upon context," (3) ethnicity can mean solidarity or pride in one's heritage but also can mean "extrinsically determined, for example, for purposes of subordination and domination," and (4) ethnicity can mean inequality or "beliefs about ethnic difference" to create or "to explain or rationalize occupational hierarchies," as in the case of the Subei in Shanghai (pp. 9, 10). This use of the term "highlights ethnicity as a historical process" that depends upon local conditions and experiences (p. 8).

### **The Hakkas People**

Another group of people who are analogous to the Subei are the Hakkas, an immigrant population of southeastern China, who have been "described as poor, uneducated, country bumpkins, uncivilized, and even non-Chinese barbarians" (p. 5). Though they have been the objects of prejudice like the Subei, they had no specific place of origin, unlike the Subei (p. 5). These groups, as examples of cultural ethnicities created by history and social relationships, are exceptions to the ethnic minorities given special treatment by the Chinese government to preserve cultural, linguistic, and native (national) identity.

### **Early Reports on Nationalities**

Early sources promoting the central government's policy on minority nationalities stressed the Stalinist criteria for distinguishing the different minorities, such as "(a) Common language, (b) Common territory, (c) Common economic life and (d) Common psychological structure or make-up as reflected in culture" (Masud, [1956], pp. 2, 3). Masud also reported that there were about 60 national minorities when his book was published in the mid-50s with 29 of these strong enough to be represented in the National People's Congress where they held 177 seats out of 1226, which is 14%, or more than double their actual proportion in the population (p. 3). Today there are 56 recognized nationalities, which shows that the process of deciding which nationalities were to be officially recognized has been a dynamic one. The tone of publication is seen in one of the final pages of the book when the author stated: "The fundamental rights of the minorities under the constitution are made living realities. To the backward communities, the conception of equality, fraternity and liberty are used as shields and not as swords. The tendency towards domination chauvinism of the majority and the narrow nationalism of the minorities have thus been permanently arrested by pursuing a policy of accommodation and tolerance. The People's Government of China under the leadership of Chairman Mao Tse Tung has created conditions under which the dominant chauvinism of the Han majority and the narrow nationalism of the National minorities are buried deep and are prevented from raising their ugly heads in any form in future" (pp. 34, 35).

Twenty years later, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, another source emphasizes the progress that had been made during the Mao period by claiming, "Before liberation, under class and national oppression by the reactionary ruling class, the various nationalities were unequal in status," but after Mao's "unitary multi-national state" was developed "the people of the minority nationalities, engaged in the great cause of jointly building the socialist motherland, to manage their own internal affairs in accordance with their own local national

characteristics, organs of self-government in national autonomous areas, not only exercise the powers of ordinary local state organs, but also, with the limits of their authority as prescribed by law, exercise the right of self-government" (Yin, 1977, p. 25 ).

### **The Negotiation of Ethnicities**

The successes and problems of the minority nationality policy in China as we have seen so far suggest that the issue is not a clear-cut issue. There are profound implications for theory and for practice. A recent work by Brown (1996) provides the perspective that some of the minority nationalities in China are more fluid and changing than many people realize and that "'identities' of all sorts, not just 'ethnic,' are created and subsequently reproduced through interaction with the specific group and with Others..." (Brown, 1996, p. viii). She presents in this edited volume a collection of essays that report a number of research projects that have as their focus the ways in which ethnicities are negotiated in China between the people and the government that espouses a policy of national autonomy for minorities. The book concludes, "...any government that wishes to gain the loyalty of its citizens must convince them that they are citizens by virtue of their historical and cultural attachment to the nation and that this attachment is a long, glorious, and immutable one. A government must not simply ignore, it must also actively attempt to hide, the fluid, multivalent nature of ethnic identity. It does this, ordinarily, by constructing narratives of national unfolding.... These narratives of unfolding are stories of the processes by which an ancient people has come down through the ages as agent, as victim, as subject and object, but most importantly as a unity. Any narrative of unfolding must replace the factual history of fusion and fission, alliance and conflict, and above all of negotiation, that is the real process of the origin, development, and demise of ethnic groups and nations" (pp. 4, 5).

### **The Tibetan Nationality**

On the Tibetan issue discussed by Upton, one of the primary observations made is that whereas the identity of Tibetans "is shaped not only by national minority policy and the theoretical and popular discussions of identity currently taking place in China, but also by a larger global discourse on Tibetan independence and human rights," it also true that the so-called opposition between the Chinese government and the Tibetan people "fails to take into account the roles that Tibetans themselves are playing in the continual transformation of their own culture within the PRC, particularly in the current era of economic and culture reform" (p. 121).

### **The Mongol Nationality**

In one of the chapters on the Mongols, Khan argues that while the identity of the Mongols may have a stereotypical characterization in the Chinese imagination, the Menggu (Chinese for "Mongol") minzu (nationality) "is far from unproblematic as a signifying entity; it is in fact a site for negotiation and contestation not only between the Mongols and the Han and the Mongols and the Chinese state but, what is more interesting, between the different regional and occupational subgroups that constitute the Mongol population of Inner Mongolia" (p. 126). Or, as Borchigud argued in the next chapter on the Mongols, "a split might develop between Mongolian-speaking Mongols and Chinese-speaking Mongols within Inner Mongolia. Or, perhaps, future political and economic benefits available to both Mongols

and Han within Inner Mongolia will bring urban Mongols and urban Han together under the multiethnic Inner Mongolian regional identity, Neimeng ren" ( p. 180).

### **The Hui Nationality**

Reinforcing the notion that ethnicity is a negotiated process, Pang presents the case for the Muslims in Hainan Province who in varying social contexts "express alternative ethnic identities as Hui, Utsat, Musilin (Mandarin for "Muslim"), or simply Huan-nang in Hainanese" (p. 187). These different identities allow for differing results. Pang concluded, "Utsat do not present a specific ethnic identity for specific or expected gains. Officially, however, they have no other choice but to present themselves Hui. Although Utsat enjoy some state benefits as a Hui minority nationality, and Utsat as Muslim, Utsat expect assistance from foreign Muslims, Utsat select one of the three ethnic identities according to their perceptions of what the other party considers them to be and to the actual language of discourse in any specific social interaction" (p. 202).

### **The Naxi Nationality**

The Naxi people of Yunnan Province present another kind of problem for the Chinese government in exercising its policy of advancing the minority nationalities. Chao described the effort to invent or create "mountain Naxi and Naxi women as objects of authenticity and marginality" (p. 234). This resulted in the following conclusion: "In the post-Mao era the quest for a new national identity has encouraged representations of ethnic difference. There is little doubt that ethnic groups find the state's enthusiasm for difference infinitely preferable to its suppression undertaken during the Maoist era, yet the representation of a distinctly Naxi identity, as separate from a shared Chinese identity, placed Naxi nationalists at odds with the broader Naxi public, who had come to see themselves as indistinguishable from the Chinese" (p. 235). This may be an example of the government making a difference when the minority desired none.

### **The Ge Nationality**

In a final case study from the book edited by Brown (1996), Cheung presents the struggle of the Ge minority who are not officially classified as a national minority, but as a family within the larger Miao nationality. This forces the Ge people to remember that they have been "a deprived and oppressed people" which produced "enormous popular grievance" and adds fuel to the fire of their goal to be given a minzu identity, doing this "largely through self-representation under guidelines defined by the state" (p. 266). Cheung concluded: "The elite of a group whose local identity concurs with the state category is mobilized and provided with the necessary space and resources within state institutions for the undertaking. In contrast, the elite of the Ge, whose local identity has been at odds with the state category, have had to struggle for self-representation both as a reaction to the imposition of the unwanted state category and as an action to defy and redefine it. With limited access to resources within state institutions, the Ge elite have mobilized local Ge communities to engage in self-representation to combat 'mis-representation' in the renewed project of classification and in the public media, thus transforming the Ge public's local identity into a self-defined minzu identity" (p. 266). Here we see evidence that the people themselves within a minority group must take on the task of representing themselves to the government and to the public in symbolic and substantive ways in order for their identity to be visible. Thus the

policy of the central government poses some problems when certain groups are officially recognized and others are not, for political or economic reasons.

### Conclusion

In this overview I have tried to provide an analysis of the theory and practice on minority nationalities in China. The evidence that I have found suggests that there are at least six observations that can be made regarding the interethnic relations between the Han majority and the minority nationalities.

- (1) The People's Republic, at the time of its founding in 1949, perceived that it had the historic task of overturning the remains of a feudal system where previously the majority nationality had taken advantage of and discriminated against minority peoples. It took constitutional steps to correct this situation.
- (2) The People's Republic is a modern example of a truly multiethnic and multinational country that has the double burden of simultaneously modernizing and accommodating the development differences among diverse and autonomous provinces consisting of many nationalities.
- (3) The content of the central government's policy towards ethnic groups communicates and implements the ideal of treating the minorities with special recognition by law in allowing and encouraging their indigenous development and their cultural preservation.
- (4) The implementation of the central policy contains the threat of cultural and linguistic assimilation and the problems of compliance and subordination as well as building at the same time a strong sense of cultural identity for its minorities.
- (5) The historic realities of the China case study suggest that the socialist construction of economic reform promotes the process of negotiation of ethnic identities among the national minorities which means a continual transformation of their own cultures. In essence, this process is a process of intra/inter-national communication within the People's Republic.
- (6) The substantive and symbolic representation of the minority nationalities by the ethnic groups themselves and by the central government plays a crucial role in the success of China's policy on interethnic relations.

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