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## **CHINA'S ETHNIC POLICIES: POLITICAL DIMENSION AND CHALLENGES**

LAI Hongyi\*

### **China's Ethnic Policies Facing Challenges**

Developments in Tibet and Xinjiang since 2008 have again cast the spotlight on China's ethnic policies, highlighting its significance and challenges. In March 2008 two-week riots broke out in Tibetan-inhabited areas in western China. In the wake of the Chinese crackdown, protests against the Beijing Olympic torch relay occurred in London, Paris, San Francisco, Tokyo, Seoul, and New Delhi.<sup>1</sup> In August the worst attacks by radical Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang since mid the 1990s took place in Kashgar and Kuqa, killing twenty-nine people.

The aforementioned events signified challenges to Beijing's ethnic policy. Many in the West usually blame Beijing for frequently violating rights of Tibetans and Uighurs. To better understand Beijing's ethnic policy, a proper and balanced perspective is needed. This article gives an overview and assessment of the pillar of Beijing's policies toward ethnic minorities, i.e., regional autonomy for ethnic minorities (RAEM, or 民族区域自治). It also looks at the recent development of ethnic issues and ethnic policy in China.

### **Context and Evolution of China's Ethnic Policies**

There are 55 officially-recognized ethnic minorities in China, accounting for 8.4% of the population. Ten of them each range from two to sixteen million in population, and the remaining 45 ethnicities each from 1.9 millions to 2,900. Ethnic minorities concentrate in the twelve western provinces, especially the five autonomous provinces. A number of ethnicities spread through provinces. For example, the Hui (Sinicized Muslims) live in 19 provinces.

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<sup>1</sup> "China Ready to Tackle Unrest in Tibetan Regions," posted at <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSLAU64099220080316> on March 16, 2008, accessed July 2, 2008.

The ethnic issue has broad ramifications for China's national unity and security. Although relatively small in population, ethnic minorities inhabit areas 64% of the area of China, most of which is on the borders. In the recent decades separatist and ethnic riots have broken out in Xinjiang and Tibetan areas.

To satisfy ethnic aspirations while securing national unity, the CCP practices so-called regional autonomy (*quyu zizhi* 区域自治) in areas where 20 percent or more of the population is ethnic minorities. RAEM was inspired by the Soviet ethnic policy, imperial China's practice toward ethnic groups and the CCP's competition against the Nationalists in winning over ethnic minorities in the 1930s and 1940s. It was installed in the 1950s. It aimed to introduce a balance between integration and co-existence of ethnic minorities with the Han. However, from the late 1950s to the late 1970s the RAEM was undermined by Mao's radicalism and forceful integration. RAEM was reinstated in the late 1970s. In the 1980s the state laid an emphasis more on co-existence of ethnic groups, but shifted increasingly to economic and cultural integration after the mid 1990s.

### **Main Ethnic Political Policies**

China's ethnic policies are spelled out chiefly in the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law*. First promulgated in 1984, it was amended in 2001. It allows the setting up of ethnic autonomous areas (Article 12) of regions (provinces), prefectures and counties if one or more minorities live there in concentrated communities.

By the end of 2000 the PRC had 154 ethnic autonomous localities, including five provincial-level autonomous regions (*zizhiqu*) (see Table 1), 30 autonomous prefectures (*zizhizhou*), and 119 autonomous counties or leagues (*zizhixian* or *zizhiqi*). In addition, there were 1256 ethnic townships (*minzu xiang* 民族乡). Forty-four of the 55 ethnic minorities have set up their own autonomous areas. Three quarters of ethnic minorities reside in autonomous areas which accounted for 64% of the national territory.<sup>2</sup>

According to Li Weihuan, the architect of RAEM, the core of regional ethnic autonomy is administrative autonomy.<sup>3</sup> According to the Law, in the ethnic autonomous areas, the administrative chief (including the chairman of an autonomous region, the prefect of an autonomous prefecture or the head of an autonomous county), as well as the chairman or vice chairman of the standing committee of the legislature (coined people's congress) shall be a

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<sup>2</sup> Wang Geliu and Chen Jianyue, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan (Development of the Ethnic Regional Autonomy System)*. Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2001, pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Xu Xiaoping and Jin Xin, *Zhongguo minzu wenti baogao (A Report on the Ethnic Issue in China)*. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2008, pp. 70-1.

citizen of the ethnic group exercising regional autonomy (Article 17). As of 1998, the top legislative and administrative leaders of 154 autonomous regions and areas in the reform era were ethnic minorities.<sup>4</sup>

The state also allows ethnic minorities to have a higher representation in legislature and at various levels of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference than their shares in population. Compared to the 1954-59 period, an era of moderate ethnic policies, the share of ethnic minorities as national legislators initially increased from a low 9.4% in 1975, to around 14.8% in 1988 and 1993. It was a respectable 13.8% in 2003 and 2008 (Table 2). This is much higher than the 8.4% share of ethnic minorities in the population.

The Party devotes considerable resources to training and grooming cadres of ethnic minorities. According to official statistics, in 1998, there were 2.7 million cadres of ethnic minorities, accounting for 6.9% of cadres nationwide, 54 times that in the early years of the PRC. The share of ethnic minorities in the cadre corps was 73.9% in Tibet, 47% in Xinjiang, 34% in Guangxi, 23.4% in Inner Mongolia and 17.5% in Ningxia.<sup>5</sup> In 2002 there were 4.1 million ethnic CCP members, equivalent to 6.2% of the total 66.4 membership, a noticeable increase from 2.8 million or 5.7% in 1990.<sup>6</sup>

The Law leaves it to the ethnic autonomous regions to decide on whether to implement regulations and policies from higher authorities. The decision, however, is subject to the approval of the higher authorities who are given 60 days to respond (Article 20). However, in practice there are indications that the higher authority sometimes sits on the request without giving a timely reply.

The Law also empowered autonomous areas with the right to enact self-governing regulations and separate regulations tailored to local and ethnic conditions. These regulations, again, need to be submitted to the legislature of the next higher level for approval (Article 19). Autonomous areas can also organize local public security forces for local need and with national approval (Art. 24).

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<sup>4</sup> Wang and Chen, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan*, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Wang and Chen, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan*, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> See sources of Table 2. Colin Mackerras. "Ethnic Minorities", in Czeslaw Tubilewicz. ed. *Critical Issues in Contemporary China*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 177.

## **Social and Economic Privileges for Minorities**

Other than limited regional autonomy, the RAEM also entails affirmative action for the ethnic minorities, as well as fiscal benefits and economic and cultural support from the state for ethnic areas. First of all, ethnic minorities in China enjoy favorable social treatments comparable to affirmative actions enjoyed by minorities in the U.S. They are under lax restrictions in birth control and are subject to relaxed requirements in admission into schools, colleges and universities and employment in state or public institutions. They even enjoy the state's favorable treatment in judicial and civil disputes involving the Han. In addition, ethnic minorities have cultural privileges of using ethnic minority's languages at schools and receiving support from the state in preserving ethnic culture and heritages.

In addition, ethnic areas receive relatively generous fiscal subsidies from the central government, and economic aids from developed coastal provinces for the autonomous areas. In the 1990s autonomous areas suffered from limited fiscal support from the state. The state focused on coastal development and drastically scaled down its subsidies and financial support for the ethnic autonomous regions. This led to growing fiscal deficits and declining national economic standing of these areas. In order to address growing discontents from cadres and population from these regions (including unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang in the 1990s), Beijing introduced the western developmental program in 2000. In 2005 Beijing launched a social-economic developmental program in the ethnic areas coined "flourishing borders and prosperous people". Since the mid 1990s economic growth in five ethnic provinces has accelerated.

## **China as a "Unitary Multiethnic State"**

There are limits to rights bestowed on China's ethnic minorities. First of all, according to the Law, the PRC is a "unitary multiethnic state", whereby separation of any territorial units from the nation is strictly prohibited, ethnic unity preserved, and separatist activities severely punished.

Second, as the Chinese Communist Party is the ruling party, the Party is the supreme power holder at all levels and in all localities in China. Ethnic autonomous regions are no exception. The post of administrative chief (governors, mayors, magistrates, etc.) of the EAAs that is held by ethnic minorities is the No. 2 office. In most EAAs the Party Secretary, the No. 1 power holder, is usually a Han. This led to some to view regional autonomy as a mere political facade to disguise the Han's dominance.

Third, the CCP devotes considerable resources to training cadre corps of ethnic minorities. They are taught to dutifully implement the Party's line and refrain from making ostensible demands for their ethnic groups, especially political ones. Fourth, the actual utilization of the legal prerogatives of not implementing policies from above in ethnic areas is quite rare.

### **Achievements of China's Ethnic Policies**

In terms of economic development, Beijing has developed ethnic areas at a faster rate than the nation as a whole in the last 12 years. By doing so, Beijing has narrowed the economic gaps between the ethnic areas and the nation. This does help to take out the steam from ethnic discontent. Ethnic autonomous regions grew by 1.5% a year, much more rapid than the nation as a whole from 1996-2006 and by 2.4% a year from 2001-2006 (Table 3).

Moreover, the central and local governments have provided comparable medical services to ethnic areas. From 1995 to 2006 there were 2.3 to 2.4 hospital beds per 1,000 residents in the ethnic regions, almost the same as the range of 2.3-2.5 for the nation (Table 4).

Similar changes have taken place in Southern Xinjiang. In the past rural Uighurs there drank dirty untreated water from small ponds right outside their run-down houses. In the recent years, many villagers are provided with sanitary water. Villagers there no longer need to worry about disease from unclean water. As a result, some Uighurs even cooperated with the local authority in reporting and arresting violent Uighur extremists in recent years.

Moreover, in the course of China's rapid economic development, many ethnic groups in China want to ride on the nation's rapid economic progress and prosperity. Mastering the Chinese language seems to be the most viable option. Many ethnic parents want their children to speak Mandarin so as to fare well in the job market. This helps in the economic and cultural integration of China.

Internationally, two factors have aided Beijing. First, the September 11 attacks and the West's anti-terror war have undermined the legitimacy of radical and violent movements for independence in Tibet and Xinjiang around the world. Second, a rising China has given ethnic groups the incentive to identify themselves with the Chinese nation.

Finally, despite the real limits of regional ethnic autonomy, the institution apparently has been acceptable to most of the 55 ethnic minorities. This is vividly reflected in the fact that only liberal and radical Tibetans and Uighurs demand autonomy and even independence far beyond the

current RAEM allows for; all the other ethnic groups have been more or less quite relatively silent, despite sporadic unrest in Inner Mongolia in the early reform years.

### **Internal and External Challenges for China's Ethnic Policies**

China's ethnic policies face practical challenges in economic and social terms. Despite rapid growth, the gap in GDP per capita between ethnic regions and the nation as a whole is enlarging, even though the ratio to GDP per capita is declining. The gap in GDP per capita between ethnic regions and the nation steadily increased from 1773 yuan in 1995 to 5488 yuan in 2006 while the ratio of the gap to ethnic GDP per capita has been declining, from the peak of 76% in 2000 down to 52% in 2006 (Table 3).

Adult literacy is also comparatively lower in ethnic areas which also register serious fiscal deficit. According to the last major national census in 2000, adult literacy in ethnic areas was 86.9%, 5.8% lower than the national rate of 92.7% (Table 4). The ratio of deficit to local revenue in these areas grew from 1.4:1 in 1995, to 1.47:1 in 2000, and peaked at 1.97:1 in 2005. It decreased slightly to 1.92:1 in 2006. In comparison, the ratio in the nation as a whole in these years ranged mostly from 1.21:1 to 1.29:1. It peaked at 1.48:1 in 2000 (Table 4). The weak capacity for local revenue generation has hindered the provision of public services in ethnic areas, reflected in lower local fiscal expenditure per capita than nationwide (Table 4).

In Tibet and Xinjiang, where ethnic separatism has been most prominent and in some cases, violent, there seems to be an uneven distribution of economic benefits. The Han and the Hui outperform other ethnicities in the western region, where ethnic minorities are concentrated. This is due to their entrepreneurial spirit and hard work, their possession of capital, skills, and social and even political networks, and proficiency in Mandarin.

The most serious challenge to China's ethnic policies comes from Tibetans and Uighurs. In general, language, religion, geopolitics, and the late integration with China all play a part in their political separatist tendency. Most of the 55 ethnic minorities are not proficient in their own ethnic language. Even the most populous ethnic groups, such as the Zhuang, Manchus, the Hui, and Mongolians, use Mandarin. Most of them have been integrated into China for centuries, and are therefore highly sinicized.

Though more Tibetans and Uighurs can speak Mandarin, they still maintain the use of their own language, their ethnic cultural identity as well as their strong religious belief. Both provinces were integrated into China at a rather late point in history. They became a standard sub-national unit

of China during the Qing Dynasty. Both provinces are also far away from the power center of Beijing. It takes about five hours of flight from Beijing to reach Lhasa and 4 hours to reach Urumqi.

Finally, both provinces are backed by external forces and influences. The Dalai Lama in exile becomes the spiritual and appealing leader for the Tibetan movement while the Uighurs are inspired by radical Islam, Turkic nationalism, the independence of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, and the once-successful Uighur attempt at setting up their own republic in the early 20th century.

The crackdown on demonstrators has been heavily criticized by the West. Beijing has much to do to improve its public image. It should be more open and less sensitive on its ethnic issues. Its ban on foreign journalists' coverage of ethnic violence, imposed again in the wake of the Tibetan riots and Uighur attacks, only deepens Western bias against Beijing.

The West's criticisms of Beijing do not end here. If Beijing upholds co-existence of ethnic groups, the West may criticize it for ignoring the economic hardship of the ethnic minorities and for only helping out the Han. However, if Beijing accelerates economic integration, it will be accused of "destroying the ethnic culture" and "colonizing the periphery inhabited by the ethnic minorities." Furthermore, the West tends to embrace self-rule or self-determination in areas embroiled in ethnic conflict. This inevitably sets itself on the collision course with Beijing which tolerates no major challenges to its unitary and centralized political control.

Recent riots in Tibet and terror attacks in Xinjiang apparently aimed to draw international attention, especially from the West, at a time China was about to host the Olympic Games. Disgruntlement and resentment of the more competitive Han and Hui by unemployed and underperforming Tibetans and Uighurs might have played a role in the recent riots in Tibet and terror attacks in southern Xinjiang. Some of the attacks (such as arson in Tibetan areas and blasts in Kuqa) targeted shops and stores owned by the Han (and in the case of Tibetan riots, also the Hui).

The riots are also apparently targeted at Beijing's ethnic policies. In 1992 the Dalai Lama withdrew his previous demands for autonomy of Tibet (and even a greater Tibet) like that enjoyed by Hong Kong. Instead, he demanded for "meaningful autonomy". Recently, he reaffirmed his position, declared his concern for "religious harmony", "human values" and "the well-being of the



Tibetan people". He referred to the elections of the Tibetan representatives and wanted the Tibetan issue to be resolved through "international norms".<sup>7</sup>

Radical Uighurs' demands usually include independence of Xinjiang. Many Uighurs see Xinjiang as their own land and resent the inflow of ethnicities that do not live there in the past, especially a large number of Han people. All these demands go far beyond Beijing's principle of limited autonomy, with some falling under Beijing's category of "splitting up the motherland", a serious political crime.

In the reform era, top Chinese leaders have attached great significance to regional autonomy for the minorities. In 1987 Deng once remarked that Mao was right in not copying Soviet federalism of allowing for secession of provinces, thus maintaining China's unity. His successor, the then State President Jiang Zemin coined regional ethnic autonomy as one of the three fundamental political institutions of the state.<sup>8</sup> In 2003, Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, proclaimed the "three insists" (三个坚持)—adherence to socialism, the CCP leadership and RAEM. This stance was reaffirmed in 2006 by the Politburo of the CCP.<sup>9</sup>

In July 2008, in its dialogue with envoys of the Dalai Lama, Beijing reaffirmed the "three insists" principles in its Tibet policy in. As RAEM will remain a pillar for China's ethnic policies in the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that Beijing will allow Tibet and Xinjiang to have political and administrative autonomy like Hong Kong, even less for independence. These political scenarios simply do not fit into Beijing's de facto limited regional ethnic autonomy framework offered to 53 other ethnicities, in addition to Tibetans and Uighurs.

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<sup>7</sup> Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (OHDL), "His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibet Issue," July 17, 2008, OHDL Press Release.

<sup>8</sup> Wang and Chen, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>9</sup> "Central Government's Policy toward the Dalai Lama Changes from 'Two Supports' to 'Three Insistences'" (中央政府对十四世达赖政策 从"赞成两条"到"三个坚持"), posted at [http://cn.chinagate.com.cn/infocus/2008-05/20/content\\_15352505.htm](http://cn.chinagate.com.cn/infocus/2008-05/20/content_15352505.htm) on May 20, 2008, accessed July 2, 2008.

Table 1. China's Five Provincial-level Ethnic Autonomous Regions

Name	Set-up Date	Capital	Area (1000 square km)	Population (millions)	Population of Ethnic Minorities (millions)	Percentage of Ethnic Minorities (%)
Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region	May 1, 1947	Hohhot	1,183	23.9	5.2	21.6
Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region	October 1, 1955	Urumqi	1,650	20.1	12.1	60.4
Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	March 15, 1958	Nanning	236	49.25	19.0	38.54
Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	October 25, 1958	Yinchuan	66.4	5.96	2.1	35.98
Tibet Autonomous Region	September 1, 1965	Lhasa	1,228	2.76	2.6	93.48

Sources: Wang and Chen, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan*, p. 227; *China Statistical Yearbook 2006*, Beijing: China Statistical Press, 2006, p. 45.

Table 2. Number of Ethnic Minorities in the National People's Congress

NPC	Year	Total Deputies	Deputies of Ethnic Minorities	Percentage of the Total	Number of Minorities Represented
First	1954	1266	178	14.5	30
Third	1964	3040	372	12.2	53
Fourth	1975	2885	270	9.4	54
Fifth	1978	3497	381	10.9	54
Sixth	1983	2978	405	13.6	55
Eight	1993	2977	493	14.8	55
Tenth	2003	2985	415	13.9	55
Eleventh	2008	2987	411	13.8	55

Sources: Wang, *Xinshiqi minzu zhengce de lilun yu shijian*, p. 68; "Shijie quanguo renda daibiao mingdan gongbu" (The Name List of the Deputies of the Tenth National People's Congress Is Publicized), posted at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-03/02/content\\_752650.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-03/02/content_752650.htm); "Shiyijie quanguo renda 2987ming daibiao zige queren quanbu youxiao" (Qualifications of 2987 Deputies of the Eleventh National People's Congress Have All Been Confirmed), posted at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-02-28/214015040922.shtml>, accessed on April 14, 2008.

Table 3. Economic Indicators of Ethnic Areas Compared to Those of the Nation

	Ethnic Minority Autonomous Regions				National			
			1996-2006	2001-06		1979-2006	1996-2006	2001-06
<b>GDP Annual Growth (%)</b>			10.7	12.2		9.7	9.2	9.8
<b>Ethnic Regions' Edge over the Nation in Growth (%)</b>			1.5	2.4				
	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>GDP Per Capita (Yuan)</b>	3,055	4,451	8,991	10,554	4,828	7,828	14,062	16,042
<b>Gap Between Ethnic Regions and the Nation (Yuan)</b>	-1,773	-3,377	-5,071	-5,488				
<b>Gap/GDP Per Capita of Ethnic Regions</b>	-58%	-76%	-56%	-52%				

Sources: The author's compilation and computation using data from *China Statistical Yearbook 2007*, 26-33; 46-49; 60; *China Statistical Yearbook 2002*, 22-29.

Table 4. Fiscal and Social Indicators of Ethnic Areas Compared to Those of the Nation

	Ethnic Minority Autonomous Regions				National			
	1995	2000	2005	2006	1995	2000	2005	2006
<b>Hospital Beds Per 1000 Residents</b>	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.5
<b>Adult Literacy (%)</b>		86.9				92.7		
<b>Local Government Revenue Per Capita (Yuan)</b>	155	283	588	724	246	505	1155	1392
<b>Local Government Expenditure Per Capita (Yuan)</b>	371	697	1746	2112	563	1253	2595	3075
<b>Fiscal Deficits/ Fiscal Revenue (local)</b>	-1.40	-1.47	-1.97	-1.92	-1.29	-1.48	-1.25	-1.21

Sources: The author's compilation and computation using data from *China Statistical Yearbook 2007*, 26-33; 46-49; *China Statistical Yearbook 2002*, 22-29; *Zhongguo Minzu Tongji Nianjian 2007 (China's Ethnic Statistical Yearbook 2007)*, Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 2008, 644.