

# FROM A PLATE OF MIXED APPETIZERS TOWARD A MELTING POT? ACADEMIC DEBATES ON CHINA'S CURRENT ETHNIC POLICIES

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## ABSTRACT

### **From a Plate of Mixed Appetizers toward a Melting Pot? Academic Debates on China's Current Ethnic Policies**

Large-scale ethnic unrest in recent years has instigated heated debates among Chinese intellectuals as well as the wider public about the suitability of current PRC ethnic policies. This article is an attempt at an introductory critique of the views of certain notable academics on this issue. A brief outline of the development of Chinese ethnic policy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is followed by an overview of the arguments of sociology professor Ma Rong, the main proponent of abolishment of ethnic minority rights. The views of those who support the current policies are then briefly summarized. The article concludes with a critical examination of both positions, expressing support for the introduction of proper self-governance.

Keywords: Chinese ethnic policies, ethnic autonomy, preferential policies, Ma Rong, depoliticization

## IZVLEČEK

### **Od mešanih predjedi k talilnemu loncu? Akademske razprave o sedanji kitajski etnični politiki**

Veliki etnični nemiri zadnjih let so spodbudili vroče razprave o primernosti sedanje etnične politike Ljudske republike Kitajske tako med kitajskimi intelektualci kot med širšo publiko. Članek skuša kritično očrtati poglede vidnih kitajskih akademikov na omenjeno vprašanje. Avtorica najprej na kratko oriše razvoj kitajske etnične politike od druge polovice 20. stoletja, nato pa predstavi glavne argumente profesorja sociologije Ma Ronga, ki velja za najglasnejšega zagovornika odprave manjšinskih pravic. Tem zoperstavi poglede tistih, ki podpirajo obstoječe stanje. V sklepnem razdelku avtorica vzpostavi kritično distance do obeh stališč in se zavzame za uvedbo dejanske etnične avtonomije.

Ključne besede: kitajska etnična politika, etnična avtonomija, prednostne politike, Ma Rong, depolitizacija

## INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGES OF MULTIETHNIC CHINA

The question of how to politically conceptualize and manage the country's culturally diverse population

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has been at the heart of Chinese state-building and nation-building efforts since the founding of the first Chinese republic on 1 January 1912. As the multi-ethnic Qing dynasty with vast border territories inhabited by non-Han peoples was successfully toppled and China was again to become a full member of the international community – now organized into a system of territorial, uniform nation-states – the victorious revolutionaries had to decide on the place of these peoples within the newly imagined political community. Several alternatives were considered, including separation (based either on racialist ideas or the acknowledgement of the special status regions in Northern and Western China held under the Manchu reign) and complete assimilation into one single unified nation. Sun Yat-sen eventually decided in favour of the concept of a five-nation or five-race republic (*wu zu gonghe* 五族共和), recognizing the separate nations of Han, Tibetan, Mongol, Manchu and Hui (Muslims). However, in the face of independence movements which threatened to rob the new country of large amounts of its extensive borderlands, his successors as well Sun himself started to increasingly favour ethnic intermingling/fusion (*ronghe* 融合) and homogenization/assimilation (*tonghua* 同化) (Wang 2001: 206–207).

After winning the civil war and establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) adopted a different attitude. Constructing its own version of the Stalin-developed Marxist approach to the nationality question, it recognized the existence of several dozen ethnic groups and afforded them a number of political, economic and social rights. The ethnic tensions that started to build up in the mid-1990s and have reached their peak in the Tibetan protests in the wake of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Xinjiang Ürümchi riots in the summer of 2009, and continued self-immolations of Buddhist monks have challenged many scholars, policy-makers and the wider public to rethink the suitability of the existing arrangements. The calls for reform or even complete abolition of ethnic policies have been growing, although the Party's position for the moment remains unchanged. This article offers an introductory sketch of these deliberations by introducing the work of sociology professor Ma Rong 马戎, the most prominent and consistent academic critic of the current policies. His articles have instigated fierce debates among Han and minority intellectuals and bloggers, but here only the opinions of some of his academic peers – supporters and opponents – will be summarized and critically examined.

The academic debates on current PRC ethnic policies are not only relevant from their theoretical perspective, but are very interesting due to the influence they exert on policymaking. Since the 1990s, rapid economic development and the subsequent social transformations have demanded increasingly specialized research to address complex structural changes. This has resulted in the increased involvement of research institutes and key universities in policy-related projects. Moreover, each generation of central leadership has designated certain scholars as top government advisors for their particular fields, sometimes even granting them direct access to the highest tier of decision-making (i.e. the Politburo) (Wang 2008: 66–67). The frequent inclusion of academic research into the policymaking process is also perceived as an important aspect of China's commitment to "scientifically-based development" (*yi kexue fazhan* 以科学发展). Chinese academics and academic think-tanks make policy suggestions through a number of avenues, most important of which are internal reports (so called briefings and reference materials), short opinion pieces in the internal governmental periodicals and newsletters, and lectures and training workshops for officials as well as the top leadership (cf. Wang 2008: 63–69; Zhu 2011).

The prevalent pattern of policy agenda setting that includes academics generally follows what Wang (2008: 63–64) terms the "inside access model", indicating that policy proposers (and policy makers) are little if at all concerned with the public opinion on a particular matter. The case of China's ethnic policy debate, however, better suits his "reach-out model", where policy advisors publicize the policy suggestions in order to exert pressure on decision makers. Although the less desirable approach of the two, academics can resort to it when they are facing strong opposition from within the establishment, but can expect a level of support from the public (ibid. 67–68). The long trajectory of Ma Rong's efforts to foster debate on the suitability of China's ethnic policies demonstrates how successful such a strategy

can be.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, before we engage with his arguments, we should first have a brief overview of the policies under discussion.

## ETHNIC POLICIES IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

At its very inception in 1921, the CPC showed no interest in ethnic issues, yet it soon became concerned with them due to the prominence of the topic in the Communist International the Party wished to join. Following the Soviet example, the CPC at this early stage supported the self-determination of non-Han nations in Northern and Western China, which could lead either to independence or their inclusion in the Chinese federation (Wang 2001: 247–248). Nevertheless, by the time the Party gained influence and eventually won the civil war, thereby becoming the leading party in mainland China, it abandoned both the principle of self-determination and the federal political system (and for much the same reasons as Sun, i.e. to keep the country in its imperial dimensions with the exception of the runaway Outer Mongolia). Instead, it set up a system of ethnic regional autonomy (*minzu difang zizhi* 民族地方自治).

Ethnic regional autonomy can be understood as a combination of Mao Zedong's initial acknowledgement of the importance of the nationality question and his later disinterest in the issue, as he re-conceptualized his programme entirely in terms of the class struggle, relegating nationalism to bourgeois phenomena. Mao became concerned with the internal revolution (anti-feudalism) on the one hand and China's international relations (anti-imperialism) on the other. Minorities presented a potential threat to both his goals, first because their societies tended to be more feudal than Han, and second because of their susceptibility to cooptation by foreign powers (Howland 2011).

Thus a system was designed which allows ethnic minorities to form autonomous territorial units at all administrative levels and grants them rights of (very limited) self-government. Furthermore, quotas were introduced to guarantee minority participation in local administration and the National People's Congress. In the 1950s, the newly established state embarked on a project of ethnic identification in order to determine which groups could be understood to have Stalin's (1949[1913]: 13) four characteristics of a nation – a common territory, language, economy and culture, and could hence be accorded said political rights.

Nevertheless, different administrative, political as well as historical and linguistic considerations have often resulted in categorizing disparate groups under one name and splitting those who had perceived themselves as more closely related (Tapp 2002). In many cases, the potential for forming an ethno-political identity was taken as the basis of categorization rather than the actual existence of such consciousness (Mullaney 2011: 11–13). By 1979, 55 ethnic minorities were recognized in addition to the majority Han, and despite attempts to the contrary, no other group has been added to this list since then. Today, members of minorities make up almost 8.5 per cent of the entire population, numbering more than 113 million people in total (NBSC 2011). Every Chinese citizen has their ethnic identity inscribed on all official documents and only the children of mixed marriages can choose their ethnic status upon attaining the age of majority.

The Regional Ethnic Minority Law (REML 1984) stipulates that autonomous areas can be established in places with dense minority populations. It is possible for two or more minorities to jointly form an autonomous area (e.g. Jishishan Bonan, Salar, Dongxiang Autonomous County) as well as to form a lower-level autonomous area within the higher-level autonomous area with a different titular minority (e.g. Yili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture within Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). By 2000, 44 of the 55 ethnic minorities had their own autonomous areas (China's Ethnic Policy 2009).

<sup>1</sup> Zhu's (2011: 672–673) analysis shows that the influence on policymaking is actually determined by a combination of expert knowledge, administrative connections (governmental vs. non-governmental think tanks) and personal ties.

According to REML, minority regions may promulgate their own regulations and they may choose to modify or even not to implement national directives if deemed inappropriate for the local situation. However, this can only be done if it doesn't infringe on the interest of state. Furthermore, the head of the autonomous area must be a member of the titular minority, but no such stipulations are made for the Party secretaries who actually wield more power. The two main benefits of ethnic regional autonomy are the appointments of minority officials to the local administration and the right to use minority languages in government and courts. For some of the larger minorities with established written languages, the language right also extends to schooling in the mother tongue or bilingual education from primary through tertiary levels. The purpose of ethnic colleges and universities is to train minority cadres and cultivate state-friendly minority elites.

With the shift in official rhetoric after the Cultural Revolution from class to development and the implementation of economic and political reforms, the government introduced preferential policies for ethnic minorities (*youhui zhengce* 优惠政策) in the spheres of education (bonus points on university entrance exams/lower university admission scores), family planning (exemption from the one-child policy) and criminal justice (more lenient punishments for similar crimes – see Sautman 2010). Their aim is to help minorities catch up with the Han-led modernization and to ensure national unity and stability. Moreover, as a part of its Great Opening of the West project (*xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发), the government channels large subsidies into minority regions, which tend to be among the poorest parts of China. Finally, in addition to the policies mentioned above, there are a number of policies which are not ethnically defined, but nonetheless have consequences for ethnic minorities, for example provincially-based differences in the treatment of religious practices.

## DEPOLITICIZATION OF ETHNICITY: ETHNIC POLICIES 2.0?

The ethnic unrest in recent years has led many to doubt the success of ethnic policies in achieving the desired goals of national unity and development. Vociferous demands have been made by the wider (cyber) Han public for the complete abolishment or at least for a reform of preferential treatment and ethnic autonomy. Academic discussions about the drawbacks and benefits of current policies, however, predate these events and the public outcry that followed.<sup>2</sup>

For more than a decade, professor Ma Rong from the prestigious Peking University, himself a member of Hui ethnic minority, has engaged in a sustained critique of both the conceptualizations and the treatment of ethnic issues in contemporary China. Initially, his first concern was the terminological confusion in the academic and political parlance, where the word *minzu* (民族) was/is used to refer both to the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) and the 56 ethnic groups (nationalities) that it is made up of (Ma 2000). Then in 2004 he published an article in which he denounces ethnic policies for hindering the formation of a unified Chinese national identity, advocating a new conceptualization of ethnic relations in the PRC (Ma 2004, for the English version see Ma 2007). He introduces two different approaches to ethnic relations: a politicizing one, which treats ethnic groups as groups with power and territory (exemplified by the European nationalism of the modern period, the Soviet and contemporary Chinese ethnic policies); and a culturalizing one, which treats them merely as groups of individuals with shared cultural traits (exemplified by Confucian culturalism and the American understanding of ethnicity) (Ma 2004: 123–127).

<sup>2</sup> My understanding of current debates on the PRC ethnic policies, especially the arguments of Ma Rong, has been informed not only by his publications but also through my participation in his postgraduate course on Sociology of Ethnicity from September 2010 to January 2011, during my Erasmus Mundus postdoctoral fellowship at Peking University.

In his opinion, the breakups of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia demonstrate the weakness of politicizing or ethno-federal approaches to managing the ethno-cultural diversity of multiethnic states (Ma 2009). Although the model China has adopted from the Soviets does not grant minorities the right of secession, the linking of territory with ethnicity (i.e. ethnic regional autonomy) has, according to him, hindered the building of strong cohesive ties between the Han majority and various minorities. For Ma, the ideal political framework is that of “political unity and cultural pluralism” (政治一体 文化多元) (Ma 2004: 130) – a slightly modified model of the Chinese nation as a historically formed single body of plural origins (*duo yuan yi ti* 多元一体) that was put forward by Ma's famous teacher and the father of Chinese sociology and anthropology, Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1989).

In his lectures and writings, Ma often looks up to the US and India – countries where people feel strong ties with their nation while at the same time being proud of their particular ethnic background – as positive examples of what he believes to be a more suitable path for China. According to him, the PRC's ethnic policies have created a certain divide if not outright segregation between the Han majority and ethnic minorities, rendering the concept of *Zhonghua minzu* (“the Chinese nation”) devoid of any meaning. On the one hand, preferential policies have strengthened the self-awareness of ethnic minorities while generating resentment among Han in the face of such institutional discrimination.<sup>3</sup> These sentiments have resulted in the fixing of the ethnic boundaries between different groups, especially in places of frequent ethnic contact (such as autonomous areas and ethnic educational institutions) (Ma 2010).

On the other hand, the blame must also be assigned to the predominance of Han-centred Chinese nationalism, which doesn't perceive ethnic diversity as a part of what it means to be Chinese. This is best demonstrated in the emphasis on the descent from the mythic Yellow Emperor or the definition of the Chinese as sons and grandsons of the dragon, both of which symbolically exclude non-Han groups subscribing to other mythic narratives; in the exclusion of minorities from the mainstream media (except in highly exoticized or folkloric forms); or the impossibility to identify minority languages and literatures as Chinese (Ma 2010).

In Ma's view, the danger that the sharpening of the ethnic divide presents to the (territorial) unity of China could be averted by detaching ethnic identity from various political, economic and social benefits and returning to the Republican-era fusion (*tonghua*)-based nation-building process. Ma doesn't advocate the instant abolishment of ethnic policies but rather their gradual if speedy supplanting with policies aimed more generally at the inhabitants of poor areas (Ma 2009: 20).

After the 2009 Uyghur riots, Ma's ideas received strong support from other academics. For example, retired Nanjing University professor of literature Wang Yingguo 汪应果 (2009) similarly proposed that any differential treatment of minorities and Han should be abandoned because it inhibits the formation of Chinese consciousness among minorities. He further proposed that minorities pledge allegiance to and identify themselves with the mainstream ethnic group and learn Standard Chinese. While they should be encouraged to maintain their cultural traditions, large scale intermarriage and territorial mixing should be promoted.

More importantly, Ma's ideas were taken up by two professors from the equally prestigious Tsinghua University (one of them a particularly influential policy advisor) in a 2011 article entitled *The Second Generation of Ethnic Policies*. As the title suggests, they call for a new line of policies that would remove obstacles to “ethnic contact, exchange and blending” (*minzu jiaowang jiaoliu jiaorong* 民族交往交流

3 Contra Ma, Mette Halskov Hansen (1995: 112–113) in her comparative study of Han migrants in two autonomous areas in Southwest and Northwest China finds that preferential treatment afforded to officially recognized minorities was generally believed to be appropriate and just by both the minority populations and the Han in those areas. Moreover, certain Han groups also benefit from similar preferential provisions that Ma highlights as particularly damaging for interethnic relations in China. For example, since 1990 special entrance quotas have been in place for overseas Chinese for the highest ranking Chinese universities (Bofulin 2010: 128–129), and the Han in poor regions also receive extra points (although less than minorities) on the university entrance exams.

交融). Through a colourful juxtaposition of the 'melting pot' vs. 'appetizer plate' as metaphors for the global models of ethnic relations, they reiterate Ma's pleas for an apolitical approach to ethnicity and the fusion principle of building the Chinese nation. However, contrary to Ma they propose that reforms be immediate and radical (Hu, Hu 2011).

Interestingly, the China Ethnicity and Religion Network (中国民族宗教网), a web portal closely associated with the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, has created a special website featuring short articles by academic scholars in favour and against what could also be rendered as "Ethnic Policies 2.0". The side-by-side display of both camps suggests that the bastion of the defence of current policies is the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology, headed by Hao Shiyuan 郝时远.<sup>4</sup> Much of the critique by researchers based in this, the government's top think tank, aims to unpack the assumptions that ethnic issues can ever be apolitical or that China's current policies differ significantly from international practice. In their opinion the abolishment of ethnic policies might not only prove detrimental to interethnic relations in China but would also be deeply unjust (cf. Hou 2005).

In an early rigorous engagement with Ma's proposal of depoliticization, Hao's colleague Chen Jianyue 陈建樾 asserts that preferential policies are in fact a way of building citizenship. They are not only practiced in other countries but also advocated by organizations such as the UN (Chen 2005: 6–7). He points out that all social policies imply special protection of benefits for certain social groups or certain locales and that all institutional arrangements or provisions with regard to interethnic relations are in fact political (2005: 7–8). While shared cultural traits may serve as a basis for the creation of ethnic consciousness, ethnic groups or nations cannot be defined solely in terms of cultural difference as Ma Rong suggests. What is more, claiming the possibility of a purely cultural ethnic identity while at the same proposing the 'depoliticization' and 'culturalization' of ethnic questions which originally belong to the sphere of the political is scientifically unsound and logically contradictory (ibid. 9).

Chen then takes issue with Ma's equation of national consciousness with nationalism of the 'one country, one nation' type, his suggestion being that ethnic consciousness in combination with the territorial concentration of the population necessarily leads to political, economic or cultural separation and the idea that preferential policies for minorities in fact represent the institutionalized discrimination of the Han. He argues that comparisons should be made with the experiences of other countries. Here Chen addresses the two of Ma's favourite role-models. Chen maintains that the Soviet Union didn't collapse due to the design of its ethnic policies but due to their implementation, and that India is actually full of ethnic strife and various independence movements.

Given the prominence of the scholars participating on either side of the debate, what influence does it exert on those in power to actually change ethnic policy? For the most part, officials have reaffirmed their commitment to upholding the present policies, as for example in the 2009 White Paper published soon after the Ürümchi riots (China's Ethnic Policy 2009). Nevertheless, one of the CPC's leading spokesmen on ethnicity recently admitted that there were serious problems in the Party's ethnic and religious work, claiming that the Party should remove measures which "hinder the free flow of people and allow ethnic differences to harden", and suggesting a few concrete examples of how the party could do so, among them the removal of ethnic status from identity cards (Leibold 2012). Furthermore, even the reassurances of continuous support for the present direction of ethnic work can be taken as a sign that a split similar to that among the academics actually also exists among the policymakers (Sautman 2010: 72).

<sup>4</sup> The "battle of opinions" (*guandian jiaofeng* 观点交锋) can be found at <http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/folder/292573-1.htm> (15 Nov. 2012).

## IN PLACE OF CONCLUSION: SUBTEXTS OF THE POLICY DEBATE

Current academic debates on China's ethnic policies reflect several different political philosophies. While the protectors of the current arrangements adopt repertoires of various strands of multiculturalism, Ma Rong and his supporters subscribe to a mix of Confucian culturalism and classical liberalism. In their quest for the abolishment of group cultural rights, they fail to mention that contrary to the United States, India or Brazil which they like to take as role models, in the current political system Chinese citizens have virtually no legal means for systematically claiming individual rights. What is more, in the absence of an independent judiciary even the protection of those rights which are already guaranteed by both the constitution and the laws of the PRC remains entirely arbitrary and subject to the particular interests of the Party state.<sup>5</sup>

Another point worth highlighting is the implications of the debate which extend to the concerns about how to conceive the Chinese nation which I mentioned in the introduction. While both proponents and critics of depoliticization agree that the CPC and hence PRC ethnic policies are of Marxist origin, Australia-based professor of political science He Baogang 何包钢 (2005) elucidates the hidden Confucian underpinnings of contemporary policy. These can be found in the instrumentality of minority rights in achieving greater unity and harmony. Confucian culturalism was opposed to forced assimilation and recognized cultural difference in order to maintain peace. Articulated through the inalienability of all minority territories and in demanding that the interests of the state as a whole must override all other concerns (REML 1984), this goal is uniformly shared across the spectrum of the participants in ethnic policy debate. Nevertheless, the final goal of Confucianism was in fact assimilation, which it sought through imposition of Chinese/Han value norms. In this process, the relationship between the central majority and peripheral minorities was equated with the Confucian relationship between an older brother and younger brothers. It is the duty of the older brother to guide the younger one on its path to cultivation (He 2005: 59–60).

Today, ethnic relations in China continue to be referred to in brotherly terms (*xiongdi* 兄弟). Although not always explicitly stated, it is implied that the Han are the benevolent older brother which the minorities must follow, either in the revolution and class struggle as in the early decades of the PRC or in the contemporary development project. What both the academic proponents and opponents of the current policies seem to misrecognize is that minority grievances stem precisely from such "civilizing missions" (Harrell 1995). The main sources of Uyghur and Tibetan resentment lie in the rapid displacement of mother-tongue schooling by Standard Chinese-dominated bilingual education; discrimination in the job market, banning of religious practices; masses of Han immigrants who (in addition to small circles of minority elites) benefit from subsidies, the exploitation of natural resources and industrial development in minority areas; lack of proper self-government and an utter disregard for their own visions of modernization by the state.

Although Ma Rong is careful to distinguish the process of modernization from Hanification, neither he nor others have so far created space for alternative modernities. From an outside perspective (e.g. He 2005; Sautman 2010), the solution to the current impasse in China's ethnic relations seems to lie neither in the abandonment of ethnic policies nor in strengthening the current ones; it can only be found in the implementation of true autonomy.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the analysis of the differential implementation of religious laws and regulations in the case of the same Islamic practices depending on the ethnic affiliation (Hui, Uyghur) and location of those who practice them (Veselić 2011).

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