

**Research Project: Educational Provision for Ethnic Minority Students in Hong Kong:
Meeting the Challenges of the Proposed Racial Discrimination Bill (HKIEd8001-PPR-2)**

Technical Paper

Ethnic Minority Policy of People's Republic of China

An overview

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Introduction

For centuries, China has been a united multi-ethnic state which is formed by the majority Han (over 90%) and other 55 ethnic groups. In order to sustain unity of the state, an effective ethnic minority policy hence has become one of the major agenda in the China's domestic policy. This paper briefly illustrates the ethnic minority policy adopted by the PRC Government and the challenges it faces over the ethnic minorities issues.

1. Background: Ethnic Minorities in China

1.1 Identifying the ethnic groups

Shortly after the establishment of the PRC authority, the PRC Government began its ethnic minority policy with the identification of different ethnic groups within the territory. China criteria of 'ethnic groups' (minzu) was modified from Stalin's approach developed in 1913, under which the criteria have been increased from 4 to 6. Under the Official criteria, an ethnic group refers to a group of people sharing the: common history, common means of production, common Language, common culture, common custom, and common psychological makeup. (Shen & Ou 2007, pp. 41-42). Under the new criteria, 56 ethnic groups have been identified and recognized by the Central Government. (Information Office of the State Council, 2005) According to the fifth national census conducted in 2000, the population of all the 55 ethnic minority groups totaled 104.49 million, accounting for 8.41 percent of the total population of China. (Ibid.)

1.2 Pattern of distribution

According to the government's white paper on ethnic minority policy (1999), ethnic groups in China inhabit in 3 major patterns: 1) living together over vast areas; 2) living in individual concentrated communities in small areas; 3) minorities living in concentrated community within the Han-majority community or the situation the other way round. Such distribution pattern is the result of groups' migrations and interactions during China's historical long development. Currently, ethnic minorities' population are scattered over the territory and could be found in every province, autonomous region and municipality directly under the Central Government. In most county-level units there are at least two ethnic groups inhabited together. Currently, over 50 million – accounting for half of the ethnic minority population, are inhabited in the border regions (Shen & Ou, 2007, p. 19). Province or autonomous region with concentrated ethnic minority population are namely: Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Guangxi, Tibet, Yunnan, Guizhou, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Liaoning, Jilin, Hunan, Hubei, Hainan and Taiwan.

1.3 The Agenda after the Cultural Revolution

China's ethnic minority policy encountered severe setback during the Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1975). During the time, Chair Mao attributed ethnic conflict to class conflict and attacked the ethnic minority policy for its perception of taking minority as backward people (Hansen 1999, p. 17). Ethnic minority policy was replaced by a mass mobilization campaign against class conflict. Expressions of ethnic identity such as religious activities, local festivals and use of local-languages were perceived as 'incorrect' and hence were brutally suppressed. After Mao's death and the fall of Gang of Four in 1976, China's ethnic minority policy was gradually restored. (Xu & Jin, 2008, pp. 78-86), and the following agenda on ethnic minority policy was

confirmed:

- The removal of the ideological obstacle against the initiation of ethnic minority policy in the state - The perception that 'Ethnic conflict as the result of class conflict' was denied by the Central Government;
- Speeding up the development of ethnic region would be the main focus of the state's ethnic minority policy;
- System of ethnic autonomous area would be uphold and improved.

2. China's ethnic minority policy: Theory and practice

Characteristics of China's ethnic minority policy:

2.1 Chinese Multiculturalism

China's multiculturalism is characterized by its Confucian dominated values and state's overriding concerns on unity and economic development.

Ren

Since the after the Cultural Revolution, the China Government readopted the principal of Ren - which 'implies a paternalistic government whose duty is to look after the weak and the poor.' (He 2005, p.59). Ethnic minorities are entitled to certain benefits and communitarian support from the government such as: right to self autonomy; higher proportion of representatives in the government; right to bear more children and entitlement to direct economic subsidies from the government. Most of these policies are top down policies initiated from the Central Government

and could be perceived as the majority Han's duty to take care of their weaker ethnic minority brothers.

Ronghe (intermingling)

Upon the cultural differences between the majority Han and the ethnic minority groups, the PRC Government prefers the policy of Ronghe (intermingling) instead of assimilation over its ethnic minority policy. Ronghe (intermingling) differs from the Sinicization approach in the sense that it recognizes the cultural differences between the Han and ethnic minorities, while it does not enforce the compliance of the later to the former (He2005, p76). To a certain extent, the policy is based on the Confucian principals of 'harmony with differences' a, mutual respect and responsibility. These principals are manifested in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which states that:

All ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the ethnic groups and upholds and develops a relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all China's ethnic groups. Discrimination against and oppression of any ethnic group are prohibited.' (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 1999, ¶15)

Unity

Despite the dominating influence of Marxism to the Chinese communist party. The PRC Government abandoned the principal of national self-determination; neither had it adopted the soviet-style multination federalism. A weaker system of regional autonomy, which is more favorable to the consideration of national unity, was

established instead. Since the beginning of the PRC regime, the state has identified upholding a 'unified multi-ethnic state' and achieving 'unity among ethnic groups' (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 1999) as the 2 most priority agenda in its ethnic policy. Indeed, unity among ethnic minority groups has critical impact to the national security and territorial integrity of the PRC since most of the ethnic minority groups are distributed in border regions or in remote regions.

Economic determinism

One of the core values under Chinese multiculturalism is economic determinism. Instead of replacing ethnic identity of different ethnic group with 'class consciousness', Deng Xiaoping, the former leader of the PRC had successfully unified the ethnic groups together under the shared objective of economic development. As He (2005) has pointed out, 'Deng's theory of modernization requires economic development to override any consideration of ethnic identity (p.63). Deng's economic approach to ethnic minority question was adopted by his successor Jiang Zeming, and then the current president Hu Jintao.

2.2 China's multiculturalism in practice

Generally speaking, China's ethnic minority policy could be described as the hybrid product of Confucian paternalism and Marxist economic determinism. In order to implement the *Ronghe* policy, the Central Government initiates various political, economic and social measures to protect the rights of ethnic minority groups and to preserve and develop the culture of ethnic minorities. These policies are proclaimed to be respecting the ethnic minority and 'keeping with China's actual condition and the common interests of all ethnic groups.' (Information Office of the State Council of

the People's Republic of China 2005, ¶65). However, with the absence of democratic participation among the ethnic minorities in the policy initiation process, the policy shows strong paternalistic nature, and could be perceived as the Han's duty to look after the weaker ethnic minority groups (He, 2005, p.59). At the mean time, the PRC Government has adopted economic development as the overriding consideration in its ethnic minority policy. The following part highlights some important areas in China's ethnic minority policy.

Regional autonomy for ethnic minorities

PRC's ethnic minority policy is implemented upon the system of regional autonomy of the ethnic minorities. Such policy could be considered as the realization of China's Ronghe (intermingling) approach upon the ethnic issue. Under the system of ethnic regional autonomy, local state organs are granted the right to legislation. They also enjoy certain level of autonomy over local finance, power to develop education and ethnic culture, as well as the power to develop and employ the local and written language etc. (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 1999 ¶40). Practice of regional autonomy enhances local government's overall effectiveness in its policy implementation by enabling local governments to make more flexible use of local resource, and to develop policies which are more appeal to the local condition. By the end of 2003, China had established 155 ethnic autonomous areas. They include: five autonomous regions, 30 autonomous prefectures and 120 autonomous counties (banners). According to the fifth national census, conducted in 2000, 44 out of the 55 ethnic minority groups have their own ethnic autonomous areas. The population of ethnic minorities practicing regional autonomy accounts for 71 percent of the total population of ethnic minorities, and the area where such regional autonomy is practiced accounts for 64 percent of the entire territory of

China. (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2005 ¶11)

The practice of regional autonomy for ethnic minorities in China is characterized by two features: First, the precedence of national unity consideration and central authority over the minority rights. Article 5 of People's Republic of China Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (Law on Regional Autonomy) has defined local government's obligation in upholding national unity, while Article 7 has defined the subordinating position of the local government to the rule of Central Government and the of state interest over the minority rights by stating that:

The organs of self-government of national autonomous areas shall place the interests of the state as a whole above anything else and make positive efforts to fulfill the tasks assigned by state organs at higher levels.

The second characteristic of the regional autonomy practice is that the autonomy is in form of integration of ethnic and regional factors and the combination of political and economic factors (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 1999 ¶ 38) and the objectives of such practice are to benefit national unity, social stability and ultimately state development.

In accordance with the establishment of the ethnic autonomous areas, the Constitution (Article 59) of the PRC also provides ethnic autonomous regions special representation right in the National People's Congress (NPC), under which a quota system which allocates 12 percent of NPC seat to the representatives of the ethnic minorities was developed. Such proportion is higher than the actual proportion of

ethnic minority population in the state. However the effectiveness of ethnic minorities' representation in the NPC has been criticized for its weak democratic foundation. As He (2005) pointed out

[T]he fact that 12 percent of seats in the NPC are reserved for minorities does not guarantee the effective representation of national minorities, because in most cases, there are no competitive elections for people's deputies and minority representatives are 'hand-picked' by the Party. (p.67) .

Development in the Ethnic Autonomous Regions

Economic Development

In the white paper concerning Ethnic Minorities Policy in China (1999), the PRC Government has identified 'Promoting the Common Development of All Ethnic Groups' as one of the 5 major objectives in its ethnic minority policy. It is obvious that in the practice of its ethnic minority policy; economic development occupies one of the most important places in the state's agenda; As Yeung (2000) has pointed out,

[A]ssisting ethnic minorities with their economic development, and hence promoting the common prosperity of all ethnic groups is the core idea of Deng Xiaoping's theory on ethnic minority policy (p.79).

The PRC Government's efforts in promoting economic development in the ethnic autonomous regions are in form of state-led industrialization projects, state subsidy to agricultural and animal husbandry activities, preferential financial and trade policies for minority areas etc.

To accelerate the development of China's western regions and ethnic autonomous areas, a grand strategy for the development western China has been launched in 2000. According to the Information Office of the State Council of the PRC (2005, ¶ 38), such strategy covers five autonomous regions, 27 autonomous prefectures and 83 of the 120 autonomous counties (banners), under which there are 60 important projects accounting for a total investment of 850 billion yuan. Most of the investment is spent on the construction of infra-structure like the West-East Natural Gas Transmission Project, West-East Power Transmission Project and Qinghai-Tibet Railway etc.

In addition to the large scale industrialization projects initiated by the Central Government, the state also provide financial subsidies to promote economic development and social progress in ethnic autonomous regions. Funds such as 'Subsidy for Ethnic Minority Areas' and 'Stand-by Fund for Ethnic Minority Areas' were established since 1955 and 1964 respectively. In 1994, the PRC Government further reformed the tax revenue management system to enhance local government's flexibility in allocating its resources for economic development. The practice of transitional transfer payment since 1995 has further increased local government's capital in developing the economy of the ethnic minority regions.

Education

Under the system of regional autonomy of the ethnic minorities, ethnic autonomous areas are granted the right to develop ethnic education of their own. This includes the right of teaching minority languages and to carry out bilingual teaching in the

autonomous area. In addition to the development of diverse of education, another main agenda of the PRC Government on ethnic minority education is to eliminate illiteracy among the young and middle-age population in the ethnic autonomous areas. Assistance has been provided to the ethnic autonomous region to universalize nine-year compulsory education. Between 1995 – 2000, the Central and local government had planned to provide 10 billion yuan (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 1999, ¶172) in promoting basic education in the ethnic autonomous area. However, scale of government input in promoting education in ethnic autonomous area is obviously much smaller than that of in economic development.

Apart from direct investment in education, the PRC Government also encourages the establishment of public service project such as the 'Hope Project' to promote basic education in the ethnic autonomous areas.

Other Social Policies

One of the distinctive features of social policy on ethnic minorities is minorities' preference over the birth control policy. Ethnic minorities are exempted from the 'one child' policy that ethnic minority families are allowed to have 2 or 3 children. Some families in the border regions are even allowed to have more than 3 children. In spite of PRC Government's rationale of facilitating economic development in the ethnic autonomous area, ethnic minority's preference over birth control policy has been criticized as the means to win the loyalty of the ethnic minorities. As He (2005,) commented,

The original purpose of exemption was to win the loyalty of minorities in opposing foreign intrusion; nowadays it is to achieve national unity and stability
(p. 66)

Uphold of Religious Freedom and Protection and Development of Ethnic Minority Culture

To a certain extent, ethnic identity is linked with the religion and cultural heritage of different ethnic groups. In accordance with the recognition of identity, the PRC Government has taken measures to uphold the religious freedom and to protect the cultural heritage of the ethnic minorities. Article 36 of the PRC Constitution and Article 11 of the Law on Regional Autonomy provide ethnic minorities the freedoms of religious believe to the extent that religious activities would not 'disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state.' (Article 36 of the Constitution). The objective of such measure is probably to facilitate harmony and unity within the state. As Jiang Zeming had emphasized, 'our policy of religious freedom is to unit together those with religious faith with those without, and also those with different religious faith.' (Yang 2000, pp.201). PRC's policy on religious freedom on one hand appeals to many ethnic minorities - such as the Uygur in Xinjiang, who are mostly Muslims, and the Tibetan Buddhists in Tibet, one the other hand, it exercises tight control over religious activities by restricting the venue, time and content of religious activities (Regulations on Religious Affairs) in the hope of avoiding religious conflict and to undermine religious organization's threat to the Central Government.

To show its respect the ethnic minorities, the PRC Government also introduced various policies to preserve the culture of ethnic minorities such as: upholding ethnic

minorities' right to preserve their folkways and customs; preservation of the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities; promoting ethnic minorities' cultural and arts undertakings; preserving and developing the traditional medicine of ethnic minorities; developing the traditional sports of ethnic minorities etc. (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 1999).

3. Challenge to Multiculturalism in PRC China

In spite of the PRC Government's effort in upholding its Ronghe (intermingling) approach in its ethnic minority policy with the hope to achieve national unity and development, China's ethnic minority policy has been facing challenges from the growing discontent among the ethnic minorities to their situations, separatist movement, and the decline of ethnic minorities' culture in the state.

Growing discontent among the ethnic minorities

Growing discontent among the ethnic minorities to their social, political and economic situation could be considered as one of greatest threat to China's Ronghe (intermingling) policy since it is likely to stir up anti-Han and anti-Government feeling among the formers. The 5 July Riot of 2009 in Xinjiang and 14 March Riot of 2008 in Tibet could be interpreted as the emotional expression of the accumulated discontent among the ethnic minorities. The discontent among the ethnic minorities could be the result of the followings:

Failure of the PRC Government to uphold the rights of ethnic minorities

Constitutionally, the PRC Government respects the right of ethnic minorities and measures have been taken to uphold the ethnic minorities' right as provided by the

constitution. However, the effectiveness of the state's measure to protect the right of ethnic minorities is under much criticism. As He (2005) commented,

[T]he actual practice of minority rights often fails to live up to the promises made in the Constitution and in laws pertaining to ethnic minorities. It seems that rights that are recognized on paper are sometimes ignored in practice. The question of whether legally mandated minority rights have been internalized as a part of Chinese culture and collective psychology remains to be seen (p.67).

Despite central policy of elimination of Han chauvinism (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 1999, ¶124), Han chauvinism remains exist in even in the government organs. Speech containing ethnic prejudice content is often delivered in the official announcements (Sautman, 1999, P. 291), and ethnic minorities are deprived of the right of holding organizations with political agendas at the local grassroots level (He, 2005, p. 68).

Regional gap of development

Under the PRC Government's effort in speeding up the economic and social developments, economic and social developments in the ethnic minority have achieved remarkable progress. However they are still far from catching up with those of the developed areas in the east. In addition, development disparity between the rural and urban areas in the ethnic autonomous area is also increasing. Comparing with the urban region, many rural areas have fallen behind in economic, education and medical services developments, and large proportion of rural areas remains in poverty. (Xu & Jin, 2008, p. 95).The increasing in social and economic equalities in the

region is likely to arouse social discontent – especially among the grassroots. Such discontent might turn into hostility against the better off Han's in the regions.

Failure of the preferential policy to the ethnic minorities

In the beginning, the PRC Government intended to appeal to the ethnic minorities by adopting preferential policy to the latter. However, such policy seems to have stirred up tension between the ethnic minorities and the Hans. As Shen (2009) commented, China's ethnic minority policy appeals neither to the ethnic minorities nor to the Hans: The ethnic minorities consider the state's preferential policy as a form of positive discrimination to the ethnic minorities, while the Hans perceive the ethnic minorities as lack of gratitude to the state. The above thoughts have deepened the hatred between the ethnic minorities and the Hans (p.36).

Separatist movement

In recent years, the growing discontent among the ethnic minorities in ethnic autonomous areas together with the rise of ethnic nationalism among ethnic minorities have provided breeding grounds for the separatist movements (e.g. in Tibet and Xinjiang). For instance, the PRC Government has attributed the 14 March Riot of 2008 in Tibet as the work of the Tibetan separatist, while it blamed the Xinjiang separatists for mobilizing the 5 July Riot of 2009 in Wulumuqi.

Decline of ethnic minority culture

In spite of the state's effort in preserving the ethnic minority culture, economic development (e.g. development of tourism) has resulted in the commercialization of multiculturalism (He, 2005, p.78), resulting in the 'vulgarization and fundamental

alteration of minority cultures.’ (Ibid., p.78). Xu and Jin (2008), also concerned about the risk of marginalization and assimilation of ethnic minority culture in the rapid process of modernization in China (p. 105)

Conclusion

PRC’s ethnic minority policy could be considered as a hybrid product of Confucian paternalism and Marxist economic determinism. The practice of ethnic regional autonomy could be perceived as the means to uphold the Confucian principal of ‘Harmony with Difference’, which is designed to minimize the conflict between the Han and the ethnic minorities – which would hence facilitate national unity. At the same time, the PRC Government attempted to override ethnic group’s identities by uniting all ethnic groups under the common goal of development. However, the lack of democratic practice together with the absence in effective monitoring system has greatly undermined the effectiveness of ethnic regional autonomous practice.

Constitutional rights guaranteed to the ethnic minorities are always ignored or violated when coming into practice. In addition, rapid economic development in the ethnic autonomous area has resulted in widespread social and economic inequalities, which provides the breeding ground for social instability, spread of separatism as well as hatred between the ethnic minorities and Hans in the ethnic autonomous areas. There is an urgent need for the PRC Government to reform its multicultural practice as to uphold national unity and harmony within the state.

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