

# SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES: A COMPARISON OF CHINA'S ETHNICITY POLICIES IN XINJIANG AND TIBET

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## Introduction

Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese administrations in different periods had varying approaches and policies concerning their own ethnic affairs. After 1949 the Chinese Communist Party as well had to deal with the question of how to transform peoples and lands of the heterogeneous Qing Empire into a unified nation state. Ethnic minorities are scattered across the country but they have traditionally inhabited in strategically important border areas which are extremely rich in natural resources. Historically relations between Han majority and minorities have rarely been easy.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, today, Chinese control in the remote regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, two

western provinces where the minority proportion is greatest, remains particularly problematic and both longstanding and recent policies of Beijing suggest failures in the strategy of integration of minorities in the Chinese nation.

China today is different to a great extent from that of 30 years ago when economic reforms were initiated. China as an industrial powerhouse is now the second largest economy in the world and its people live in increasing prosperity. The market reforms have changed the lives of ethnic minorities as well. More people among minorities enjoy an improved quality of living standards as a result of increased investment, state subsidies

<sup>1</sup> June Dreyer, cited in Wu, p. 58.

and economic aid from the central government. Yet, economic reforms are not accompanied with reforms regarding civil and political rights. Since 1950s local peoples of Xinjiang and Tibet which are culturally and linguistically distinct from the Han majority have challenged to the Chinese sovereignty over their territory through riots and demonstrations. By the 1990s due to exile groups' activities and the technological changes in terms of information flow the topic became a target of international interest.

Today officially recognized 56 ethnic groups (55 ethnic minorities plus Han) are considered as equal by the constitutional principles before the law regardless of their population, size, history, area of residence, level of economic and social development, languages or religious beliefs and are subject to equal rights and duties.<sup>2</sup> The Constitution guarantees the right to preserve customs and religious activities of each and every ethnic group on the condition that is legal.<sup>3</sup> In various areas like education, employment and civil service duty the Chinese government argues that it is trying to enhance particular quota systems as affirmative action which ethnic groups will benefit. There are exceptional policies at least in theory as in family planning system which foresees Han Chinese can have only one child while members of ethnic groups can have two. In the last decade bilingual education, native language and Mandarin, was introduced to the curriculum of the various schools at different levels from pre-school education to higher as well as universities. In the meantime there is a considerable rise in minority language publications and broadcasts.<sup>4</sup> Regional autonomy is the main pillar of China's ethnic minorities policy. The Chinese Communist Party practices regional autonomy in regions where ethnic minorities

compose 20% of the population. As of 2005, there are 155 ethnic autonomous areas. They include five provincial-level autonomous regions namely Tibet, Xinjiang Uyghur, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia Hui and Guangxi, 30 autonomous prefectures and 120 autonomous counties. The system of regional autonomy for ethnic minorities is considered a basic political system of the state in Chinese constitution and provides composition of organs of self-government.

Nonetheless, the authoritative nature of the Communist Party rule provide a suitable ground for repressive practices and policies time to time which tantamount to assimilation of the minorities into the Han culture. Ethnic minorities inhabit 64% of China mostly in the northern, western and south western frontiers which have abundant natural reserves of oil, natural gas and minerals. Natural reserves and increasing importance of strategic location of minority provinces are strong motives for the Chinese government to keep a tight hand on the regional politics.

Recent developments in Tibet and Xinjiang have highlighted the significance and challenges of China's ethnic policies. In March 2008 riots broke out in the city of Lhasa, the administrative capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) resulted in killing of at least 22.<sup>5</sup> Government's harsh response to the protestors had fueled further protests by pro-Tibetan independence activists in the torch relay of Beijing Olympics. One year later Urumqi was the stage for a series of riots following a violent incident in a toy factory in Shaoguan district of Guangdong in which at least two Uyghur workers were killed by Han Chinese. Protests became violent and at least 156 people were killed.<sup>6</sup> Since 2009 several cities in Xinjiang banned large beards and Islamic

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<sup>2</sup> White Paper, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> White Paper, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Wu, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> New York Times, "As Tibet Erupted, China Security Forces Wavered", March 24 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/24/world/asia/24tibet.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/24/world/asia/24tibet.html?_r=0)

<sup>6</sup> Xinhua, "Death toll in Xinjiang riot rises to 156", July 7 2009, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/07/content\\_11663866.htmnytimes.com/2008/03/24/world/asia/24tibet.html?\\_r=0](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/07/content_11663866.htmnytimes.com/2008/03/24/world/asia/24tibet.html?_r=0)

clothing in an effort “to standardize traditional Uyghur clothing” in public places including buses, train stations and hospitals. Students, civil servants and party members are subject to fasting and worship bans. The increasingly repressive measures that limit the religious freedom of Uyghurs contributes to ethnic tensions and clashes in which resulted in killing of hundreds in recent years. Meanwhile 143 Tibetans, 26 of which were women have been reportedly self-immolated in protest since February 2009 in the TAR and neighboring regions.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to the information flow provided by advocacy campaigns in exile, China is frequently criticized by the West for violating the basic rights of the Tibetans and Uyghurs.

What are the sources of the ethnic discontent in these two regions which have experienced similar historical and political relations with China? Are there common explanations for the simultaneous unrest in these regions posing an enduring separatist challenge to Beijing? The central aim of this study is to cover such questions and discuss the evolution of social, religious and economic development policies of Beijing government in Xinjiang and Tibet. In this regard, this study will focus on the last three decades because after the relative liberalization of 1980s, the 1990s saw considerable changes in Beijing’s approach to Xinjiang and Tibet. Two of the most important factors framing China’s minority policies in the last decades are; first, the disintegration of Soviet Union which caused Chinese authorities to fear domino effect, second the international campaign of “war on terror” following September 11 attacks on the US which offered opportunity to China to justify its controversial policies in Xinjiang and Tibet. Further, this paper will discuss the “minority” concept in the Chinese context and examine the ethnicity policy of CCP and its main pillar regional autonomy, then provide some brief historical background on the

Chinese rule in Xinjiang and Tibet. In addition, the political advocacy campaigns of diaspora Uyghur and Tibetan groups will be highlighted. The role of the Tibetan and Uyghur diaspora organizations challenging Chinese sovereignty is crucial to understand the recent tensions in the regions since their international visibility is growing and consequently it has effects on China’s approach to Uyghur and Tibetan people’s demands. The difference of popularity between Tibet and Uyghur cases in the eyes of international media despite notable similarities in the tragedies of the two peoples is a further topic to be mentioned.

In this study, the author’s major concern is to provide a balanced and objective perspective to Xinjiang and Tibet questions bearing in mind that it is not an easy task considering opposing political agendas of the relevant parties. Moreover this study aims to cover not just complex political situation in the region but also the consequences of the political situation from a humanitarian point of view.

### **Ethnic classification and recognition of national minorities: the Minzu system and “the one Chinese nation”**

Although it is difficult to formulate a precise and comprehensive description of the term “minority”, in broad terms it refers in Western social sciences to “a group of people who differ in a number of distinctive specific characteristics from the rest of the population of a country whose territory they inhabit”.<sup>8</sup> The differentiation can be based on race, ethnicity, wealth, language, religion, customs, morals or tradition set.

In the Chinese context there is no clear distinction between the terms “minority”, and “nationality” and the Chinese employ the same reference word *mínzú* to refer the different terms of

<sup>7</sup> Self-immolations by Tibetans, International Campaign for Tibet, [http://www.savetibet.org/resources/factsheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/english/2009-07/07/content\\_11663866.htm](http://www.savetibet.org/resources/factsheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/english/2009-07/07/content_11663866.htm) nytimes.com/2008/03/24/world/asia/24tibet.html?\_r=0

<sup>8</sup> Heberer, p. 7.

“people”, “nation”, “nationality” and “ethnos”.<sup>9</sup> Today all ethnic groups that do not belong to the Han majority in China are designated as national minorities (shǎoshùmínzú) which is a terminology that implies “an ethnic group that is relatively small numerically compared with the largest nationality and that is distinguished from society at large and from the Han by certain specifically national characteristics”.<sup>10</sup> According to a prominent professor of sociology from Hui<sup>11</sup> background, Rong Ma, the minority groups in China “should be considered ‘ethnic minorities’ like the racial and ethnic groups in the USA, (Blacks, Asians and Hispanics) not ‘nations’ or ‘nationalities’”. In this regard, ethnic minorities in China are equal citizens before the law having certain rights and responsibilities but they cannot establish political organizations to seek separation and independence.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, all ethnic groups, big or small, as a united whole are called “the Chinese ethnic family”, an “imagined community” as coined by Benedict Anderson, an ‘artificial construct’<sup>13</sup> in Dikötter’s terms. From the Chinese historical perspective there are several reasons connecting those ethnic groups into a unified nation. First, all ethnic groups constituting the Chinese nation are native ethnic communities that lived for centuries “in a relatively closed geographic area in the East Asian continent”. Second since they traditionally inhabit such a closed geographic area “these groups have had more frequent political, cultural and eco-

conomic contact among themselves than their contact with other groups outside this area”. Third “these groups developed around a political, economic and cultural core which is Han group that had been more advanced in many aspects.”<sup>14</sup> Han group itself is a fusion of different ethnic groups integrated and assimilated for thousands of years and eventually, as Liang Qiachao argued in the late nineteenth century, became a driving force of Chinese civilization. Since Han people became the core of the Chinese nation because of its advanced culture and technology it “should not be ranked at the same level as other minorities in the ethnic structure”.<sup>15</sup>

The official rigid historical picture painted by mainstream nationalist Chinese scholars can be summarized somewhat in these terms. However in scholarly discussion, Heberer asserts, to achieve a more realistic depiction of Chinese history one must consider that “China could be said to have been a multinational state for thousands of years, but it has by no means always constituted a unified state structure.” And once a taboo, today the question whether the national minorities have always been a part of Chinese ethnic family or they performed a great degree of self-rule in the course of Chinese history is being debated among Chinese historians.<sup>16</sup>

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China 55 ethnic groups with varying populations have been identified and recognized by

<sup>9</sup> Heberer, p. 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Heberer, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Hui people are, arguably, the descendants of Arab and Persian tradesmen who travelled to south China in 7th century, settled and gradually intermarried with local peoples. The majority of Hui people live in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Hebei, Henan, Yunnan, Shandong, Beijing and Tianjin. Hui population together with Uyghurs comprise %90 of all Chinese Muslims. They are one of the minorities in China granted significant autonomy.

<sup>12</sup> Ma, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Schein, p. 114.

<sup>14</sup> Ma, p. 14

<sup>15</sup> Ma, p. 14-17; Tang and He, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Heberer, p. 19.

the central government in addition to the Han majority.<sup>17</sup> The Han (*Hànzú*)<sup>18</sup>, numerically the largest with some % 91.51 of the total population, often thought of as culturally homogenous yet linguistically, culturally and socially diverse<sup>19</sup>, is regarded as the “core” of the Chinese nation (*Zhōnghuámínzú*) while the other ethnic groups (*shǎoshùmínzú*) are relatively small and “customarily referred to as ethnic minorities”<sup>20</sup>. In the first nationwide census held in 1953 more than 400 ethnic groups were registered to be officially recognized. Numerous teams of ethnologists, sociologists, historian and linguists were sent out to do fieldwork and determine what actually constituted minorities or sub-branches of minorities. Four major criteria inspired by Soviet leader Stalin’s definition of ethnic groups was taken into account for ethnic identification in the country: common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up. Further as a result of China’s national circumstances such principles of “ethnic willingness, historical basis and proximity identification” were also embraced in the ethnic identification process. Thus far, 55 out of 400 ethnic groups were identified as *mínzú* according to these criteria. The rest of the ethnic groups were not classified as having separate ethnic identities since they were found to be sub-branches of a particular minority or simply having different names for the same ethnic group.<sup>21</sup>

After the Qing empire collapsed the nationalist Kuomintang struggled to secure the vast territory

of the empire. In order to protect its claim on the Chinese mainland the Kuomintang deployed a specific conception of the “Chinese nation” that was based on the assumption that all ethnic groups in the country together was in fact one part of the “Greater Chinese race”.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, since all ethnic groups came from the same race the territorial integrity of the nation cannot be challenged. Thus there could be no basis for the right of autonomy or of self-determination for any minority group. Nationalist leader of the republican movement Sun Yat-sen acknowledged only four distinct minority groups: the Mongols, Tibetans, Manchus and Huis (all Muslim ethnic groups under one term). Under the principle of Five Races Under One Union Sun Yat-sen advocated racial integration and gradual assimilation of the minorities to achieve national harmony.<sup>23</sup> However his ideas did not receive much support and never properly implemented after his death. His successor Chiang Kai-shek denied the existence of minorities and adopted an even more assimilationist policy.<sup>24</sup> However, from early on, the CCP pursued a different path inspired by the Soviet model and assured to guarantee a degree of political and cultural autonomy via the establishment of regional autonomy system in the minority populated areas.

Until the 80s there was only sparse information on the ethnic minorities and CCP’s ethnicity policies. The CCP maintained an effort to present a picture of “One Big Chinese Nation” and of ethnic groups being the happy “masters of

<sup>17</sup> 55 ethnic minorities namely: Mongolian, Hui, Tibetan, Uyghur, Miao, Yi, Zhuang, Boueyi, Korean, Manchu, Dong, Yao, Bai, Tujia, Hani, Kazak, Dai, Li, Lisu, Va, She, Gaoshan, Lahu, Shui, Dongxian, Naxi, Jingpo, Kirgiz, Tu, Daur, Mulao, Qiang, Blang, Salar, Maonan, Gelao, Xibe, Achang, Pumi, Tajik, Nu, Uzbek, Russian, Ewenki, Deang, Bonan, Yugur, Jing, Tatar, Derung, Oroqen, Hezhen, Monpa, Lhoba and Jino.

<sup>18</sup> Dikötter on *hànzú*: “In the revolutionary context, Han minzu is a race or a nationality, which is distinct not only by culture, territory or history but by the blood that flows through its veins, up to the Yellow Emperor” In, Louisa Schein, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Dikötter, p. 179.

<sup>20</sup> White Paper, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Qian, pp.22-24.

<sup>22</sup> Clarke, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> Zhao, p. 171; Wu, p. 61; Heberer, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Wu, p. 61

their land". However after the opening up era the Chinese leadership has openly admitted that they have been facing several difficulties and complications in carrying out ethnicity policies.

### **Regional autonomy for ethnic minorities**

Around 60 % of China's vast territory is populated by ethnic minorities which are culturally and linguistically different from the Han Chinese. Considering this fact the Chinese Communist Party adopted several policies to win over ethnic minorities against the nationalist Kuomintang forces during the Chinese civil war. Inspired by the theory and practice of Soviet ethnic policy Chinese government had carved out a path exercising ethnic policy featuring regional autonomy for dealing with ethnic minority areas.

Initially in the Second National Congress held in 1922 Chinese Communist Party proposed to adopt federalism for the peoples of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. Later in the 1945 Seventh National Congress commitment to organization of central government on the basis of federal system in which all ethnic groups would have democratic right of self-determination was renewed. According to Dreyer, self-determination policy in this period may have been formulated to alleviate minorities' traditional fears of Han control and assimilation.<sup>25</sup> This idealistic policy on the right of secession of minorities changed by the time the CCP secured victory and came to power. The CCP acted on "a more realistic understanding"<sup>26</sup> and employed ethnic regional autonomy rather than federalism. That was because China had a "different national condition" from Soviet Republic. That is to say, considering that total population of ethnic minorities only accounted 6 % of the country's population and that they had long been living in mixed

communities Chinese authorities concluded that the Chinese concept must be different since in the Soviet case ethnic minorities accounted for 47% of the total population.<sup>27</sup> In the Common Programme of 1949 and the Constitution of 1954 the clause of self-determination was replaced by the administrative autonomy.<sup>28</sup>

From 1936 to 1949 several autonomous administrations allocated to Hui and Mongols were established. The largest was the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region established in 1947 by the Chinese and Mongolian communists in an effort to prevent Inner Mongolia from uniting with Outer Mongolia and drawing into the Soviet sphere of influence.<sup>29</sup> Soon after the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949 Chinese government formally introduced the system of regional autonomy in minority areas. Between 1955 and 1965 four more provincial level autonomous regions were established, namely, Xinjiang Uyghur, Guangxi Zhuang, Ningxia Hui, Tibet (Chinese name, Xizang). While all other provinces, municipalities and regions in China have a Han majority, Tibet and Xinjiang have a majority population of minorities.

From the late 1950s to the reform era the practice of regional autonomy heavily influenced and left almost impotent by Mao's radical reforms. With the relative liberalization of the 1980s the Chinese state reinstated regional ethnic autonomy provisions and laid more emphasis on economic and cultural integration of ethnic groups.

In the first national census conducted in 1953, the combined population of ethnic minorities was 35.32 million.<sup>30</sup> As of 2013 it reached to 113 million accounting for an approximately %8 of the country which is more than the populations of many other nation states. Ethnic minorities

<sup>25</sup> Dreyer, cited in Wu, p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> Qian, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> Qian, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Dreyer, 1968, p.97.

<sup>29</sup> Wu, p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> White Paper, p. 4.

often living in compact communities scattered across the country yet they are mostly concentrated in the south, west and north of China. Western China consisting of nine provinces, three autonomous regions and one municipality is home to almost 70 percent of total minority population. The minority areas boast 85 percent of the country's natural reserves.<sup>31</sup>

The Chinese constitution along with several laws and regulations guarantees full equality among ethnic groups. That is to say the Chinese constitution stipulates political and legal equality as well as economic, cultural and social equality to each and every ethnic group "regardless of their population size, length of history, area of residence, level of economic and social development, differences in spoken and written languages, religious beliefs, folkways and customs".<sup>32</sup> Each has the rights and freedom to use its own spoken and written language and to preserve its own way of life.

Regional autonomy system is the main pillar of China's official policy on ethnicity. Regional ethnic autonomy in the Chinese concept basically means that "under the unified leadership of the state, regional autonomy is exercised and organs of self-government are established in areas where ethnic minorities live in compact communities".<sup>33</sup> The basic law guaranteeing the regional autonomy system is the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law adopted in 1984<sup>34</sup> that was based on the relevant articles of 1982 Constitution (later amended in 2001). China's ethnic policies are

mainly spelled out in this law that sets up ethnic autonomous areas including regions, prefectures, counties and townships. According to Wu, the 1982 Constitution and the Law on National Regional Autonomy of 1984 have granted national minorities the most pluralistic rights in comparison with any of the previous legislation.<sup>35</sup>

In accordance with this law, today there are 30 autonomous prefectures and 120 autonomous counties along with 5 autonomous regions. People's congresses and people's governments are the organs of self-government implementing state laws and policies in accordance with local conditions. 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 people's congresses having legislative power shall be a member of the relevant ethnic group exercising autonomy, according to law.<sup>36</sup> Aside from the self-government within designated areas, the 1982 Constitution and the Law on National Regional Autonomy also guarantee "proportional representation in the government, freedom to develop their own languages, religions and cultures, greater control over local economic development than allowed in non-autonomous areas and the power to adapt central directives to local conditions".<sup>37</sup> Moreover the autonomy system entails preferential policies and affirmative action for minorities in criminal justice, family planning, school admissions, hiring officials, poverty alleviation, bank loans etc.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> White Paper, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> White Paper, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> White Paper, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> For the English translation of the Regional Ethnic Autonomy of Law China, see US Congressional Executive Commission on China, "Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People's Republic of China (Chinese and English Text)", <http://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regional-ethnic-autonomy-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-amended>

<sup>35</sup> Wu, p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> White Paper, p. 24; Regional Ethnic Autonomy, China Internet Information Center, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/Brief/192293.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Wu, p. 80

<sup>38</sup> Sautman, p. 11.

There are limits to the autonomy bestowed on China's ethnic minorities. First any efforts by the organs of self-government to instigate secession is strictly prohibited. Second the CCP wields supreme power over all levels of governments and localities including minority regions. As Hongyi Lai puts forth, the post of administrative chief such as governors, mayors, magistrates, etc. in the ethnic autonomous areas is the number two office.<sup>39</sup> That is to say the party secretary which is usually Han is the number one power holder. Further although the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law empowers the organs of self-government to decide on the implementation of regulations and policies the decision is subject to the approval of the higher authorities who have 60 days to respond. According to Hongyi Lai, "in practice there are indications that the higher authority sometimes sits on the request without giving a timely reply".<sup>40</sup>

Consequently, autonomy with Chinese characteristics has received increasing criticism. For some Western audience China's minority policy fails to meet its obligations to the minorities<sup>41</sup> and regional autonomy is no more than a political facade to disguise Han dominance.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand within China there is an alternative debate whether the autonomy with current features serves for the social harmony or exacerbates the differences between the Han and the minorities since the autonomy system entails affirmative action for minorities. There is a significant group of Chinese intellectuals who argue that "China's own institutions and policies provide internal separatists with the latitude to advance plans to

break up China."<sup>43</sup> Sociologist Rong Ma is one of those who proposes for depoliticization of ethnicity by diminishing state's role in ethnic affairs. In this regard Ma argues for elimination of "ethnic barriers" including autonomy to build up national unity.<sup>44</sup> Alternatively there are other scholars who see the role of regional autonomy indispensable and it is in an urgent need of a thorough inquiry and reformation to address rightful demands of minorities.<sup>45</sup> For instance an Uyghur economics professor in Beijing Minzu University Ilham Tohti who is an outspoken critic of CCP's minority policies and was sentenced to life in prison last year after being convicted of "separatism" once stated that all minority intellectuals he knows were harshly critical of this idea- abolishing regional autonomy- and the real issue at stake here is that the autonomy policies have not been adequately implemented.<sup>46</sup> In the same way, Wu elaborates this view by arguing that although the theoretical framework contain measures ensuring autonomy and equal rights of minorities, "the implementation of the laws on ethnic minorities' rights has varied greatly across China and under various circumstances" and much of the recent discontent stems from "uneven and incomplete implementation of the laws and policies rather than flaws in the normative framework itself".<sup>47</sup>

### Overview of Xinjiang and Tibet

Xinjiang and Tibet are two of the areas practicing regional autonomy that are provincial level entities allocated to Uyghur and Tibetan minorities within China. Tibetans and Uyghurs with strong cultural and religious traditions in-

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<sup>39</sup> Lai, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Lai, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Davis, p. 227.

<sup>42</sup> Lai, p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Sautman, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Sautman, p. 11, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Wu, p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> Sautman, p. 20. For Tohti's related commentaries on "Present-Day Ethnic Problems in Xinjiang" in English see: <http://chinachange.org>

<sup>47</sup> Wu, p. 81-82.

corporated into Chinese mainland under the Qing empire in 18.th century.

Tibet, *Bod* in Tibetan, located in the Tibetan plateau in the northeast of Himalayas is the traditional homeland of the Tibetan people as well as some other minor ethnic groups such as Monpa, Qiang and Lhoba. It is the least populated region within China with a population size of 3 million of which%93are Tibetans. Neighboring provinces Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai also home to significant Tibetan populations (at around 2 million in total) and with the Tibet Autonomous Region (*XīzàngZìzhìqū*), of which boundaries were determined by the territory controlled by Dalai Lama government in 1950, altogether constitute the historic Greater Tibet. Tibetans first came into contact with Buddhism in the seventh century. The Tibetans exhibited great interest in Buddhism and it became official religion of Tibetans in 8th. century. The initial contacts occurred between China and Tibet was during the Tang Dynasty (608- 907). Tibet was incorporated into Mongol Yuan Empire in the 13th century yet retained nominal power over religious and domestic affairs. Until the Qing Empire made a substantial effort to expand its administrative control over Tibetan authority, Tibetans performed a greater degree of self-rule though eclipsed by internal unrest and weak central authority.<sup>48</sup>

Situated in the hinterland of the Eurasia continent, spanning over 1,6 million km<sup>2</sup>, bordering eight countries Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (*XīnjiāngWéiwú'ěrZìzhìqū*) accounts for one sixth of the Chinese territory. It is home to a large Muslim population namely Uyghurs and other ethnic communities including Huis, Kazaks and Mongols comprising 60% of the region's population. Historically Uyghurs remained the major-

ity in the region lying at the heart of the ancient Silk Road and the Altishahr region in the south, the oasis towns encircling Taklamakan desert, is known as the traditional center of Uyghurs.<sup>49</sup> Uyghurs in diaspora prefer to use East Turkistan or Sharqi Turkistan instead of Xinjiang since it was given during the Qing dynasty and has colonial connotations. Similar to Tibet, Xinjiang, which Mongol and Turkic tribes dominated until the 18th century, has experienced different levels of Chinese influence in the course of history.

Why is Xinjiang and Tibet important for China? First and foremost the territorial unity is a major concern of the Beijing government. The humiliating territorial concessions subsequent to the Opium Wars have lingering legacy in the collective mind of the Chinese. As the Qing empire lost its supremacy in the face of European powers it was forced to sign unfavorable treaties and had to cede parts of the territory to the foreign powers which resulted in limitations in its sovereignty. Later as the Qing disintegrated Chinese authority in newly acquired minority-populated territories, Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia in particular, seriously challenged by the local elements.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover 14th the Dalai Lama who is seen as one of the world's most influential figures is both a spiritual and political leader for most Tibetans. He has been living in exile since 1959 yet his engagement of diplomatic relations with Western powers made Tibetan struggle internationally visible and a matter of polemics. In the same way, China is voicing its concerns over Uyghur diaspora communities' activities and holds frequent use of the term "East Turkistan" instead of Xinjiang as an indicator of separatist tendencies. In this regard, the Beijing regime in fear of internal and external challenges to its territorial unity perceives a possibility of terri-

<sup>48</sup> Elmer, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> According to a number of scholars including Dru Gladney, Justin Rudelson, Linda Benson and Rian Thum the term "Uyghur" was not in use for a long time until the 19.th century when Russian historians introduced and reapplied the term to all non-nomadic Muslim peoples of Xinjiang. However the ethnic origins of today's "Uyghurs" are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>50</sup> Elmer, p. 5-6.

torial fragmentation in the separatist tendencies in Xinjiang and Tibet.

Second, the strategic location and natural resource reserves are another strong motive for Chinese leadership to keep an iron grip in the regions. To quote American scholar of China and Central Asia Owen Lattimore, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region strategically lies “in the Pivot of Asia”, “the new center of gravity” forming in the world.<sup>51</sup> Located at the crossroads of Central Asia bordering eight countries three of which are Turkic republics Xinjiang is an extremely valuable trade and energy corridor for China’s energy-hungry economy. Cultural links between Muslim populations of Xinjiang and of Turkic and Persian Gulf states provides an advantageous position for China to maintain its oil imports and trade links.<sup>52</sup> Further Xinjiang has vast natural resources including uranium, coal, silver, copper, iron ore, asbestos, gold and zinc as well as natural gas and oil reserves vital for its growing economy. Estimates put Xinjiang’s coal reserves at about 38 percent of the national total while petroleum and natural gas reserves estimated at 30 billion tons, account for more than 25 percent of the national total.<sup>53</sup> In this regard, China attributes particular strategic significance to Xinjiang for both its natural resources and strategic location.

By comparison to Xinjiang, Tibet is still largely dependent on agricultural production. Yet the region is rich in forest and mineral resources including chromite, lithium, copper, iron, lead, zinc, uranium, boron, magnesite, sulphur, phosphorus and potassium. Moreover Tibet also leads China in water, geothermal, solar and wind

energy. It produces approximately 200 million kilowatts of natural hydro-energy annually, about 30 percent of the nation’s total.<sup>54</sup> Fresh water resources in Tibet are of vital importance for the functioning of Chinese society and industry.

Third and ideologically significant is that Chinese claims over Tibet and Xinjiang are of high importance for China’s political culture. Although Tibet and Xinjiang had enjoyed varying degrees of self-rule before 18th century the Republic of China under Sun Yat Sen and the PRC claimed over sovereignty over Qing territories and laid emphasis on uninterrupted control of Chinese authorities in these remote regions. Creating a self-image of the great savior of the local people of these remote regions the CCP leadership cannot afford to lose territories that are seen as part of China with a strong sense of nationalism and national unity.<sup>55</sup>

### **Roots of ethnic discontent in Xinjiang and Tibet**

Since China’s ethnic minority populations inhabit more than 60 percent of the country’s total area, principally border regions which have rich deposits of raw material, the Han and ethnic minority relations have a great importance to maintain domestic stability and territorial integrity. Most of the ethnic groups are well integrated into the Han majority whereas the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, the Huis, the Mongols and the Kazaks possessing huge territories and natural resources have posed serious challenges to CCP’s rule.<sup>56</sup> The historical legacies of the imperial and republican period and the policies pursued by CCP itself have contributed to the deteriorating relations between ethnic minorities with Han majority and with central government. Arguably Xinjiang and Tibet having

<sup>51</sup> Owen Lattimore, *Pivot of Asia. Sinkiang and the Inner Asian frontiers of China and Russia*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Elmer, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> China Internet Information Center, *Xinjiang’s Natural Resources*, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/MATERIAL/139230.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Elmer, p. 9; China Internet Information Center, *Tibet*, <http://www.china.org.cn/e-xibu/2JI/3JI/xizang/xizang-ban.htm>

<sup>55</sup> Elmer, p. 6-7.

<sup>56</sup> Tang and He, p. 1.

strong cultural and religious traditions distinct from the Han Chinese have been major areas of conflict and resistance against CCP's rule.

### >"Peaceful liberation" of Xinjiang and Tibet

Despite the official discourse on the pattern of "great unity" between a great number of ethnic groups which had been living on Chinese territories ever since ancient times, Xinjiang and Tibet along with Mongolia were only incorporated as late as mid-eighteenth century to Chinese territories by Qing imperial campaigns. To quote Elliot Sperling, Tibet as well as Xinjiang had had their history "distorted by modern Chinese writers in order to conform to the ideological requirements of the modern Chinese state" and the assertion that Tibet and Xinjiang has been an integral part of China since Tang and Yuan dynasties is "clearly a modern creation".<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, Millward and Perdue elaborates, regarding today's historical claims and political disputes over Xinjiang, it is noteworthy that Tang dynasty have enjoyed a relatively firm sovereignty over oasis dwelling Turkic population of Tarim states for about 100 years (630s-750s). China based powers involved themselves closely in Turkic tribes' politics in Xinjiang starting from the Sui dynasty (581-618). Indeed the Tang dynasty (618-906) which was one of the most cosmopolitan rulers of China was able to establish alliance with Western Turks and control over Altishahr oasis towns and Silk Road trade. Nevertheless, Chinese cultural and political influence of this period did not resulted in Sinicization but rather it marked the beginnings of Turkicization of south Xinjiang especially in Kuqa and Turpan where Turkic troops allied with the Tang moved in force.<sup>58</sup>

Before the large scale Qing military expeditions, the area inhabited by inner Asian peoples largely remained independent or performed a greater

degree of self-rule under the hegemony of Turkic, Mongol or Tibetan dynasties. Imperial powers who ruled Xinjiang and Tibet held only part of them and even then only temporarily. In the 20th century, however Millward and Perdue asserts, "the Qing Empire appears to have started something more permanent."

According to Shakya and Blondeau, the traditional relationship between Tibetan regime and Chinese empires was "characterized by the politico-religious term *chöyön* (priest-patron)". That is to say, China was seen as a political ally not a suzerain in Tibet.<sup>59</sup> In the same way, the northern Xinjiang was under the control of Mongol Zhungar state practicing Tibetan Buddhism -not Chinese empire- whereas the oasis towns lying in the south of the Tianshan range had been under the leadership of Central Asian Naqshbandi Makhdumzada Khojas. After crushing the Zhungars, in Perdue's terms, "a genocidal" military campaign in 1750s<sup>60</sup> the Qing troops brought the Turkic oasis dwelling population of Altishahr, who remained autonomous to a great extent under the rule of Zhungars, under imperial control. Subsequent to the Western military expeditions the Qing established a protectorate over Tibet in 1720- and renewed its effort in 1750- and further proclaimed that Xinjiang was officially designated as a province of the empire in 1884. By the end of the 18. century, Xinjiang and Tibet was incorporated into the Qing empire together with Manchurian homeland, Taiwan, Qinghai and the southwest provinces. As the strategic rivalry between British and Russian empires intensified in Central Asia, China, in an effort to maintain its stronghold in the bordering regions, established permanent garrisons, installed civilian officials representing the Qing court and promoted immigration, commercial activities and agricultural settlements to strengthen links with central administration.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Elliot Sperling in Blondeau and Buffetrille, p. 12-14.

<sup>58</sup> Millward and Perdue, in Starr, p. 38-39.

<sup>60</sup> For a detailed account of Qing military campaigns see Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Asia*, 2005, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

<sup>61</sup> Millward and Perdue, in Starr, p. 56-58.

In the beginning of the 20th century however the central administration found itself weakened and faced with constant resistance especially in the frontier regions with a majority of non-Han population. After the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 that overthrew the Qing dynasty many minority regions saw increasing autonomy under the rule of semi-independent warlords or native elites including Xinjiang. In the 1930s rebellions involving Uyghurs, Hui Muslims, Kazaks and other Turkic groups broke out across the Xinjiang against the political administrations of the Chinese warlords.<sup>62</sup> In 1933 and in 1944 Uyghurs established short-lived independent states namely East Turkistan Islamic Republic in the south Altishahr region and East Turkistan Republic in the north Altai region. East Turkistan Republic, a coalition of Chinese and local elements, lasted for five years until the Communist troops marched into the region in 1949.<sup>63</sup> As soon as Communist forces gained control in Xinjiang most of the Uyghur political leaders and intellectuals fled to Turkey through India.

The fall of the Qing empire provided an opportunity for local Tibetan population alike. As the Chinese authority collapsed the Dalai Lama leadership achieved to drive Chinese troops out of their territory. Tibet remained almost independent between 1913 and 1950 with total power on its internal and external matters.<sup>64</sup> Moreover the Dalai Lama proclaimed Tibet's independence however this attempt failed to gain international recognition. After a period of unfruitful negotiations with the Dalai Lama delegation, the CCP invaded Tibet and compelled Dalai Lama to sign a treaty known as the 17 Point Agreement (1951) that formally recognized Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and reflected the view that China was

liberating Tibetan territory from imperialist forces. In 1955, the autonomy system was introduced in Tibet with Dalai Lama its head. Kham and Amdo, the historically eastern parts of Greater Tibet which have a significant Tibetan population, were left out of the Tibetan Autonomous Region and incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Yunnan, Gansu and Sichuan.<sup>65</sup>

### **>Political and cultural repression in the Maoist-era**

The CCP leadership attached great importance to minority policies since, as Mao expressed in the National Congress of 1955, the ethnic minorities inhabit more than 60 percent of China's territory and "rich resources and hidden wealth abound in these areas".<sup>66</sup> Beyond that, security of the strategic border areas was a top priority because of the perceived threat from the hostile foreign and local forces. The CCP had ideological concerns as well to make China "one big co-operative family" functioning with socialist principles. Any possibility of secession was ruled out yet national minorities were to be treated equally and were to enjoy autonomy in certain areas they were concentrated.<sup>67</sup>

In the early 1950s the CCP cadres pursued relatively tolerant policies towards ethnic minorities and followed a gradualist and pluralist approach. The central government showed considerable effort to accommodate local conditions. Respect for the minorities' local customs, cultural practices, religious traditions and avoiding traditional Han chauvinism was repeatedly reminded. Local party cadres were encouraged to help "less advanced" minorities. Prominent members of local minorities were invited to join in the ranks of newly established administrative bodies. An

<sup>62</sup> Millward and Tursun, in Starr, p. 73-75.

<sup>63</sup> Dillon, p. 20-22.

<sup>64</sup> Tsering Shakya and Anne-Marie Blondeau, in Blondeau and Buffetrille, p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> Sperling, in Blondeau and Buffetrille, p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Volume 5, Elsevier, 2014, p. 169.

<sup>67</sup> Wu, p. 64.

intensive effort was shown to train and develop a core of ethnic cadres.<sup>68</sup>

However during the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956 minorities' demands to be granted the right of secession or to have more local cadres of their own nationality and complaints about the presence of Han settlers and forced use of Mandarin were not welcomed. Subsequent radical leftist campaigns of the CCP proved that Communist leadership were not satisfied with the pace of transformation in the country. As the country embarked on the Great Leap Forward in 1958 rather repressive and assimilationist policies with disastrous consequences were adopted.<sup>69</sup>

As Dreyer puts it, if these policies were "a failure in Han China it was a fiasco in the minority areas".<sup>70</sup> As a reaction to the extreme hardships of the revolutionary policies major rebellions occurred in Xinjiang in 1958 and in Tibetan populated regions of Sichuan, Qinghai and in the TAR in 1955 and 1959 which were briefly suppressed. The Young Dalai Lama 14th. fled in 1959 and set up a government in exile in India.

Meanwhile as the Sino-Soviet split intensified the Soviet Union did its best to take the advantage of the situation and it encouraged the native population in Xinjiang by radio broadcasts to revolt against China and join the federation. In the late 1950s and early 1960s thousands of families fled to Central Asia and sought refuge. Only in 1962, more than 60.000 Uyghurs and Kazaks from the northern Ili region who were distributed exit papers by Soviet officials fled to Kazakhstan across the border which was a great embarrassment for Chinese authorities.<sup>71</sup> Chinese authorities having fears about the loyalty

of minority population responded to the exodus by closing the borders.

The Cultural Revolution (1967-1976), the most assimilative period in the history of the PRC<sup>72</sup> resulted in violent devastation and severe repression in the minority regions as in the rest of China. Ironically even the ruling party cadres in minority regions struggled to keep the Cultural Revolution out of their areas.<sup>73</sup> However they couldn't be successful and minorities having distinct cultural and religious practices from the Han were particularly targeted by the Red Guards since their societal structure, daily routines, traditions and daily costumes etc. were regarded as backward and decadent. The regional autonomy system became dysfunctional. After the revolutionary hysteria was launched in 1966, as Bovingdon puts forth, "pressures to assimilate linguistically and culturally, the persecution of religious practices and personnel and attacks on respected authorities had profoundly alienated most Uyghurs"<sup>74</sup> and most Tibetans as well.

### > "Opening up" and ethnic revival in the 1980s

Following Mao's death, the CCP admitted that minority policies needed to be reexamined and saw great importance to show greater tolerance to heal the wounds of Cultural Revolution in minority populated regions. In the relative liberalization of 1980s after the announcement of economic reforms reformist cadres replacing hardliners in local governments have been influential in launching somewhat more tolerant cultural and economic policies in ethnic minority regions.

Minorities' discontent for the first time received public attention when The National People's Congress of 1980 saw openly voiced criticisms

<sup>68</sup> Dreyer, 1968, p. 97; Wu, p. 67.

<sup>69</sup> Dreyer, 1968, p. 97-98.

<sup>70</sup> Dreyer, 1968, p. 99.

<sup>71</sup> Dreyer, 1968, p. 98-100; Bovingdon, 2004, p. 10-11.

<sup>72</sup> Wu, p. 67.

<sup>73</sup> Dreyer, 1968, p. 101.

<sup>74</sup> Bovingdon, p. VIII.

by minority deputies who demanded effective implementation and expansion of the autonomy system.<sup>75</sup> In 1981, the Dalai Lama in exile sent a letter to Deng Xiaoping stating that the three fact-finding missions sent by Tibetan Government in Exile found “sad conditions” in Tibet and therefore “genuine efforts must be made to solve the problem in accordance with the existing realities in a reasonable way.”<sup>76</sup> In parallel with extensive discussions about the extent of national autonomy in governmental and academic circles, the Chinese constitution promulgated in 1982 provided detailed provisions for minorities and gave minorities rather more rights than 1954 Constitution.

Further the Chinese government instated several affirmative action programs including exemption of minorities from the one child policy, tax reduction and preference for admission to institutions of higher education etc. The government contributed to the rebuilding of religious sites, monasteries and mosques that had been damaged or demolished during the Cultural Revolution. Minority students were allowed to study in their own languages at the elementary level and to attend religious schools. Annual pilgrimage for Muslims was allowed. Tibet’s highest ranking spiritual leader after the Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama, was given more freedom of speech on controversial issues about such as the Dalai Lama’s right of return, internal unity among Tibetan people and brutal practices and leftist mistakes of revolutionary policies. Moreover greater efforts have been made to train and recruit local cadres among minorities and the proportion of minority members in the People’s Congress and party bureaucracy increased.<sup>77</sup>

However, contrary to the CCP’s expectations that favorable treatment would alleviate minorities dissatisfaction, with the loosening of political and economic restrictions western minority regions experienced an unexpected ethnic revival. Additional problems including the quality and quantity of minority cadres, acute poverty, deepening economic gap between Han and minority groups, Han settlements and over-exploitation of natural resources in minority areas became apparent.<sup>78</sup> Throughout the second half of the 1980s minorities in an effort to express their grievances and demand full autonomy rights poured into the streets in Xinjiang and Tibet as the rest of China. A series of demonstrations in varying sizes by Buddhist monks in Tibet between August 1987 and March 1989 which were the largest since 1959 resulted in the imposition of martial law and police crackdown that left hundreds dead.<sup>79</sup> In April 1990, the Baren township of Kashgar where limits on mosque construction, family planning and the removal of a popular imam caused widespread anger, witnessed a riot and an armed confrontation against local authorities which resulted in the killing of three thousand according to witness accounts and generated a wave of arrests across southern Xinjiang. Later the news of the disproportionate use of force by local authorities spread across the neighboring cities of Hoten, Kuqa, Aksu, Artush and Urumqi and led violent confrontations between local populations and government forces.<sup>80</sup>

Beijing remained silent on grievances underlying the on-going ethnic discontent and implied in many instances that they arose solely from religious separatism and local nationalism. Beijing’s iron grip in these regions contributed further

<sup>75</sup> Wu, p. 69.

<sup>76</sup> International Campaign for Tibet, “Chronology of Tibetan-Chinese Relations, 1979 to 2013”, <https://www.savetibet.org/policy-center/chronology-of-tibetan-chinese-relations-1979-to-2013>

<sup>77</sup> Wu, p. 68-72; Dreyer, 1993, p. 348; Karmel, p. 487-488

<sup>78</sup> Dreyer, 1993, p. 350-351.

<sup>79</sup> Karmel, p. 490.

<sup>80</sup> Dreyer, 2005, p. 73

<sup>81</sup> Dreyer, 1993, p. 350.

riots and demonstrations throughout the 1990s.

### **National Minorities Policies in the 1990s**

By the time 1990s began the Chinese government pointed to a number of achievements with regard to development in minority areas. The minority population had risen sharply, the autonomous area system had been enlarged by about twenty percent, the minority literacy rate had increased by almost ten percent.<sup>81</sup> Deng's reforms made a crucial turning point for dealing with minorities and loosened rather than tightened the ties between central government and minorities.

However the revitalization period for ethnic cultures did not last long and major changes in the world changed the CCP's approach to ethnic minorities in the 1990s. The two most important are, first, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and second, war against terrorism subsequent to September 11 attacks on US targets.<sup>82</sup> Xinjiang and Tibet as well as Inner Mongolia were affected from the emerging of new neighbors on their borders. Independence of Central Asian republics exacerbated Beijing's pre-existing anxieties regarding the political aspirations and separatist tendencies of the minorities in its bordering regions. Moreover the international campaign of "war on terror" following September 11 attacks on US offered opportunity to Beijing to contain and justify its controversial policies in Xinjiang and Tibet. Clarke remarks that "the major effects of these events were to delegitimize separatist movements worldwide and to present states with the pretext of terrorism to justify their repression".<sup>83</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union strongly influenced the border security of China leading to fears of a demonstration effect from the newly established states whose populations have kinship with local populations of west-

ern China. In Mongolia, the early 1990s saw a revival in Tibetan Buddhism, which had been suppressed under communist rule. Large numbers of Mongols returned to their faith and the Dalai Lama living in exile in India was highly venerated by Mongolian authorities. In the case of Xinjiang, the fact that Turkic populations in newly established Central Asian republics enjoyed relatively greater freedoms, have been inspirational for the Xinjiang Uyghurs in terms of aspirations for self-determination. Arguably many Uyghurs expected China would not hold together long.

Moreover, the internal political changes including Tiananmen demonstrations also affected the fate of the minority regions as the rest of the country. The political clampdown subsequent to the Tiananmen tragedy "involved a complete reversal of the situation and of Beijing's treatment of the unrest"<sup>84</sup> in Xinjiang and Tibet. The crackdown following the lifting of martial law in 1990, targeted not just protestors but also political, religious and educational institutions in Tibet. As Karmel set forth,

"In 1993, almost 80 percent of the documented arrests and sentences for political crimes in the country occurred in Tibet. In 1994, the number of officially acknowledged arrests for pro-separatist or counterrevolutionary activities rose by over 90 percent in the Tibet Autonomous Region."<sup>85</sup>

During the mid 1990s, Beijing launched a series of police crackdowns known as Strike Hard campaigns which became a key element of hard line policies throughout the late 1990s and 2000s. While officially targeted at criminal activities in general, in Xinjiang and Tibet the specific target of the campaign was "separatists and illegal religious activities", or, arguably, Uyghur and Tibetan political dissidents and practicing

<sup>82</sup> Dreyer, 2005, p. 69.

<sup>83</sup> Clarke, p. 130.

<sup>84</sup> Guerif, p. 10.

<sup>85</sup> Karmel, p. 492.

Muslims and Buddhists. First “Strike Hard” campaign with accelerated arrests, summary trials and mass sentencing launched in 1996. Since 1996, local authorities conduct periodical anti-crime operations which have often targeted religious activity. In Tibet, several restrictive policies never previously implemented were employed including ban on monks from entering tea houses, restaurants, dance halls and cinemas.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile Xinjiang, according to Amnesty International, has executed an Uyghur, on separatism and terrorism charges, every four days on average since the campaign began.<sup>87</sup> As Human Rights Watch report reveals,

“Official accounts of these campaigns usually claim hundreds of arrests. Summary trials and sentencing is common, as courts are under orders to reduce judicial process to a minimum under the principle known as “the two basics”. This principle sets out that only “basic truth” and “basic evidence” are required to proceed.”<sup>88</sup>

After the September 11 attacks on US targets and subsequent “war on terror” campaign of US led coalition China launched its own anti-terrorism campaign directly targeting Uyghur political dissidents. Prior to these events China had already been using the pretext of terrorism for Uyghur separatism in its multilateral relations with Central Asian states. The war on terror gave an opportunity to China to make this approach “global”.<sup>89</sup> With the initiatives of Chinese government the Bush administration and the UN agreed to designate the East Turkistan

Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization which reportedly was founded by Hasan Mahsum from Kashgar who reportedly has links with international terrorist organizations. Yet denunciations of Uyghur separatist cause as having links with al-Qaida type organizations have been revealed to be superficial at best.<sup>90</sup> As the CFR report asserts,

“Experts say reliable information about ETIM is hard to come by, and they disagree about the extent of ETIM’s terrorist activities and ties to global terrorism... Information about ETIM’s activities is tightly controlled by China, which has blamed the group for more than two hundred terrorist incidents in Xinjiang between 1990 and 2001.”<sup>91</sup>

Yet, such vague and inconsistent information about East Turkistan movement did not stop the US to constrain from detaining 22 Uyghurs on several charges in Guantanamo detention facility for 12 years in serious violations of international law.<sup>92</sup>

Nevertheless, the atmosphere of “justified” repression facilitated the treatment of ordinary Uyghurs as potential separatists or “East Turkistan” terrorists. Several kinds of repressive and discriminatory measures contributed to the alienation of Uyghurs by worsening the existing dissatisfaction. All “separatists” including armed resistance groups and all political dissidents as well, were assumed to be terrorists and extremists “an equation made internationally easier after September 11”.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Karmel, p. 504.

<sup>87</sup> Dreyer, 2005, p. 76.

<sup>88</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang”, April 2005, Vol. 17, No. 2(C), p. 67, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/china0405/china0405.pdf>

<sup>89</sup> Clarke, p. 130

<sup>90</sup> Clarke, p. 131.

<sup>91</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), 4 September, 2014 <http://www.cfr.org/china/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim/p9179>.

<sup>92</sup> New York Times, “U.S. Frees Last of the Chinese Uighur Detainees From Guantánamo Bay”, 31 December 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/01/us/us-frees-last-of-uighur-detainees-from-guantanamo.html>

<sup>93</sup> Dreyer, 2005, p. 78

There arguably have been several major issues that have been constant source of ethnic discontent in minority regions in the last three decade: the inadequate implementation of regional autonomy system; deepening economic gap between Han and minorities; extensive limitations and bans on religious and cultural practices; demographic consequences of Han immigration; ethnic discrimination.

Beijing's response to such ethnic grievances was to renew its commitment to delivering economic growth and development and to couple hard-line policies including "the rigorous military/police suppression of overt protest and renewed attention on the management of 'religious affairs'"<sup>94</sup> which contributed further serious and sometimes violent outbursts of ethnic minority unrest in the mid to late 1990s: the Hoten incident of June 1995, a wave of assassinations of Uyghur party cadres or imams affiliated with government's local bureaus in 1996, Gulja riots - one of the largest protests in Xinjiang's distant history<sup>94</sup> - and Urumqi bomb attack in 1997. In 2008 on the eve of Beijing Olympics, a series of riots, protests, and demonstrations started in Lhasa and spread to other Tibetan areas in Qinghai and Sichuan. Later on 5-7 July of 2009, a fighting between Han and Uyghurs in a toy factory in the Shaoguan city of Guangdong province resulted in the death of several Uyghur workers which led to the ethnic clashes between Han residents and Uyghur population in the Uyghur capital Urumqi. All of these tragic events have contributed to worsening relations between Beijing

and the local populations of Xinjiang and Tibet. According to one of the few moderate Uyghur voices, Ilham Tohti, "Beijing faces no organized Uyghur insurgency; there isn't even an organized political opposition." Moreover the upsurge in violence Uyghurs involved in, he reveals, are of individual nature and the escalation of violence is rather a product of China's repression.<sup>96</sup>

In dealing with ethnic discontent in minority regions, Beijing government tended to emphasize the importance of economic development and modernization. From Beijing's perspective, fostering economic growth and development in less developed minority regions is the key in resolving ethnic minority issues.<sup>97</sup>

In this regard, in June 1999, Beijing launched an ambitious project of economic modernization and infrastructure development entitled the "Great Western Development" strategy (*Xībù Dàkāifā*-GWD) covering 6 provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan), 5 autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang), and 1 municipality (Chongqing). Under Deng Xiaoping the Chinese authorities mainly concentrated on developing the eastern and southern coastal regions. While these regions greatly benefitted from the reforms, the central and western provinces accounting for 56% of the country's total land surface severely lagged behind. Starting in 2000, Beijing has aimed to narrow the widening income disparities between its rich coastal and poor interior regions by "steering state investment, outside expertise, foreign loans and private capital into

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<sup>94</sup> Clarke, p. 123.

<sup>95</sup> According to the witness testimony of Rebiya Kadeer, a former member of Chinese National People's Congress and the president of World Uyghur Congress, large numbers of people were arrested and hundreds, possibly thousands, lost their lives or were seriously injured in the massacre committed by Chinese security forces during the riots on 5 February 1997 and aftermath. For details see, Amnesty International, "People's Republic of China: Rebiya Kadeer's personal account of Gulja after the massacre on 5 February 1997", February 2007, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA17/001/2007/en/>

<sup>96</sup> Nicholas Bequelin, The Price of China's Uighur Repression, 25 September 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/nicholas-bequelin-china-jailing-of-ilham-tohti-will-radicalize-more-uighurs.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/nicholas-bequelin-china-jailing-of-ilham-tohti-will-radicalize-more-uighurs.html?_r=0)

<sup>97</sup> Clarke, p. 121-123

the regions.”<sup>98</sup> The massive concentration of funds brought in by the GWD has been funneling towards large infrastructure project, such as highway/railway, power plant, telecommunications network and oil and gas pipeline construction.<sup>99</sup>

While the Chinese government’s declared goal is to promote “common prosperity” and reduce potential social conflict the reality is different when it comes to assess the impact of the massive economic program upon local residents. It needs to be admitted that, Clarke asserts,

“...while (GWD) has delivered economic growth to Xinjiang and Tibet, it also heightened inter-ethnic tensions as increased state investment has attracted large populations of often migrant Han Chinese that many Uyghurs and Tibetans perceive as disproportionately receiving the benefits of government policies.”<sup>100</sup>

However the ongoing increase in Han population in Uyghur and Tibetan cities is not a new phenomenon. The Chinese state already wields great economic influence in Xinjiang by means of large state owned enterprises and by virtue of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) in particular which is almost 90 percent Han. Having been established in 1954 under the orders of Mao Zedong with the stated aims of settling, cultivating, developing and safeguarding of sparsely populated frontier areas XPCC’s, *Bingtuan* in short, main function is simply “utilization of military manpower for economic and infrastructural development”.<sup>101</sup> As a massive, economically powerful and autonomous entity,

elaborated by Martine Bulard in her Le Monde Diplomatique article, Bingtuan is

“.. still under the control of the People’s Liberation Army. The districts they control have a population of 1.9 million. They have powers to levy taxes. They own 1,500 businesses, including construction companies, several of which are quoted on the stock market. They also run two universities and control a third of the agricultural land in Xinjiang, a quarter of its industrial output and between half and two-thirds of its exports.”<sup>102</sup>

As “the largest business group in China, if not the world”, Bingtuan producing nearly one-sixth of Xinjiang’s GDP within an area twice the size of Taiwan,

“...controls 172 giant farms, 344 industrial enterprises, 500 schools, 200 hospitals and 46 research institutes. The corps has its own police and courts. Half of all Xinjiang’s laogai, China’s notorious prison camps, are said to fall under its control. In all, the group has 2.4 million people in its charge, including one-third of all the ethnic-Han Chinese in Xinjiang.”<sup>103</sup>

Exhibiting similarities with military agricultural colonies established by the Qing in the western frontiers<sup>104</sup>, the Bingtuan is the most crucial agency to facilitate Han migration into the region. Out of the total population employed in Bingtuan 86% are Han Chinese and nearly one-sixth of Xinjiang’s GDP is produced by Bingtuan.<sup>105</sup> As a natural consequence, discriminative practices in employment against Uyghur population create

<sup>98</sup> Ögütçü and Taube, p. 13.

<sup>99</sup> Clarke, p. 123.

<sup>100</sup> Clarke, p. 124

<sup>101</sup> Clarke, p. 118.

<sup>102</sup> Martine Bulard, China’s Wild West, Le Monde Diplomatique, August 2009, <http://mondediplo.com/2009/08/02china>.

<sup>103</sup> “China: The New Pioneers?”, The Economist, 17 June 1999, <http://www.economist.com/node/213804>

<sup>104</sup> Clarke, p. 118.

<sup>105</sup> “Circling the wagons”, The Economist, 25 May 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21578433-region-plagued-ethnic-strife-growth-immigrant-dominated-settlements-adding>

resentment and a sense of marginalization.

With respect to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), the CCP does not follow the same suit. As Zhu and Blachford set forth, unlike Xinjiang, “Tibet lacks industry potential and extractable natural resources, so its economic importance for China’s market-oriented economic reforms is less evident”.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless development policies in Tibet have been criticized by many Chinese economists for “being highly subsidy dependent and inefficient”.<sup>107</sup> As highlighted by Fischer,

“... despite almost 20 years of intensive efforts since the central government started to prioritize development in the west of China and the TAR came out of a ten-year recession in the mid-1990s, this autonomous region has remained locked into the structural norms established during the Maoist period.”<sup>108</sup>

Moreover to many observers development policies and accompanying Han influx to minority regions can be closely associated with frequent inter-ethnic conflicts in minority regions. As Zhu and Blachford highlight, in the late 1950s Han population in Xinjiang was less than 30%. Today it comprises above 45%. Administrative capital Urumqi has become largely a Han city with 77% of its population consisted of Han. In the case of Tibet, more than 90% of the population is still Tibetan. However in-migration is prevalent in urban areas especially in Lhasa. Han population have noticeably increased their presence and this caused concerns that Lhasa will become like Urumqi.”<sup>109</sup> In this sense,

“.. the overall employment situations in Xinjiang and Tibet are similar and also dif-

ferent. They are similar in the sense that new jobs do not benefit local ethnic minority populations as much as they should; they are different in that in Tibet, market forces and state intervention remain concurrently more important than in Xinjiang, where marketization is more prominent.”<sup>110</sup>

The fact that Han residents of urban areas primarily in Urumqi and several industrial cities have exceeded the number of local minority population is a particular source of grievance due to its demographic consequences including perceived threat to the local cultures and discriminative hiring practices in the job market.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore some of the scholarly literature argue that the recent trend of state-sanctioned migration to ethnic minority areas equals an “ethnic genocide” or “demographic annihilation”.<sup>112</sup>

Beijing’ concerns regarding the activities of Uyghur and Tibetan diaspora played a leading role in its initiative in the establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which majority of its member and observer states have authoritarian regimes. Since its foundation in 2001, the organization has developed a legal and political framework to combat the “three evils” of “terrorism, extremism and separatism”. The SCO framework prevents individuals from seeking asylum in neighboring SCO states because their suspected involvement in separatist or terrorist activities. As indicated by the International Federation of Human Rights’ report, the SCO’s mutual recognition principle requires the refoulement of such individuals to their home state irrespective of the fact that they could face torture there. The report further demonstrates that “some SCO documents imply that not only those accused of terrorist

<sup>106</sup> Zhu and Blachford, p. 728.

<sup>107</sup> Fischer, p. 73.

<sup>108</sup> Fischer, p. 95

<sup>109</sup> Zhu and Blachford, p. 722-724.

<sup>110</sup> Zhu and Blachford, p. 730.

<sup>111</sup> Clarke, p. 124.

<sup>112</sup> Zhu and Blachford, p. 720.

involvement but also those merely suspected of terrorism by one SCO Member State, must be so recognized by other SCO state.”<sup>113</sup>

In this regard there is a growing Uyghur refugee problem that needs to be addressed in South East Asia as it accelerated after the 2009 Urumqi riots. As a result of regular Strike Hard campaigns fighting with the “three evils” of “terrorism, extremism and separatism” by accelerated speedy arrests, quick trials and mass sentencing<sup>114</sup> political activists and intellectuals who are blacklisted by security forces and facing daily harassment joined those who seek refuge in neighboring countries of many being SCO member. What is more, according to Kılıç Buğra Kanat of SETA, the demographic characteristics of refugees arrived in Malaysia, Thailand or Indonesia changed dramatically to include families and children today.<sup>115</sup> Uyghur refugees often relying on networks of Chinese smugglers are in different instances caught by local authorities in unwelcoming SCO member states or other neighboring countries and face the threat of extradition as recently seen in the example of 100 plus Uyghur refugees who were deported from Thailand in gross violation of international law.<sup>116</sup>

### Political activism abroad

In reaction to deteriorating conditions there have been major migration waves from Tibet and

Xinjiang.<sup>117</sup> Following “the peaceful liberation” of Xinjiang in 1949 prominent Uyghur leaders and intellectuals - among them some of the members of short lived East Turkistan republics including Mehmet Emin Bugra and Isa Yusuf Alptekin fled to India and sought refuge from a third country, Turkey in particular. In 1959 following a major riot in Lhasa the Dalai Lama fearing for his life fled to India and established Tibetan government in exile. In the 1960s the resentment against Great Leap Forward policies, including increasing rate of Han settlements, appropriation of land and natural resources, among the local population of Xinjiang resulted in massive migration across the Sino-Soviet border. In 1962, the refugee flow from Xinjiang made a peak with 62.000 people crossing the Kazakhstan border which resulted in the formation of a Central Asian Uyghur diaspora which acted as an agent to circulate information between the West, Uyghur diaspora and Xinjiang.<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore the 1949 migration for Uyghurs and the 1959 migration for Tibetans have particular symbolic importance since these migration waves were highly political and marked the foundation of the two hostile émigré communities challenging Chinese sovereignty and denouncing its minority policy as forced assimilation. Moreover since the late 1980s re-opening of the frontiers for trade purposes created a new wave of migration. In addition the last migration wave have been accelerated, from Xinjiang in particular, after

<sup>113</sup> International-Federation-for-Human-Rights, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Vehicle for Human Rights Violations”, August 2012, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sco\\_report.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sco_report.pdf)

<sup>114</sup> Amnesty International, “China: Draconian anti-terror law an assault on human rights”, 4 March 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/03/china-draconian-anti-terror-law/>

<sup>115</sup> Kılıç Buğra Kanat, “Uighur refugees, China’s power and what to do about it?”, Daily Sabah, 1 December 2014, <http://www.dailysabah.com/columns/kilic-bugra-kanat/2014/12/01/uighur-refugees-chinas-power-and-what-to-do-about-it>

<sup>116</sup> Huffington Post, “UN ‘shocked’ after Thailand sends back Uighur refugees to China”, 9 June 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/07/09/thailand-uighur-refugees-china\\_n\\_7761784.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/07/09/thailand-uighur-refugees-china_n_7761784.html); Although it is not a SCO member country Thailand often repatriates Uyghur refugees to China. The motive behind the repatriations may be explained by the economic relationship between the two countries. See Robert Potter, “Why Thailand returned the Uyghurs”, August 5 2015, The Diplomat, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/what-thailand-retained-the-uyghurs/>

<sup>117</sup> Guerif, p. 5.

<sup>118</sup> Guerif, p. 9.

counterterrorism efforts of Beijing government subsequent to 2009 Urumchi riots.

So far the Tibetan diaspora have been very successful in generating an impressive level of worldwide support for Tibet. Unlike Uyghurs whose tragedy did not come to the fore until the 1990s, Tibetan plight was widely known in the Western societies from the beginning. Although Tibetan Buddhism is just a small branch of Buddhism with 20 million adherents, the Dalai Lama 14.th is almost equated with Buddhism and widely venerated in the West. For many, the Dalai Lama is the legitimate ruler of Tibet deposed by the imperialist policies of the Chinese. Not only Tibetans overseas involved in the mobilization of international public opinion but also many Western organizations and Hollywood celebrities involved. As Louisa Schein highlights, the multinational character of the Tibetan independence movement has a much greater impact and can generate greater international pressure on Chinese government.<sup>119</sup>

On the latest population census conducted in 2009 by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the main organization of the Tibetan diaspora led by the Dalai Lama, more than 130.000 Tibetans including those born in Tibet and those of Tibetan ancestry, live in exile in Asia and Oceania, Europe, and North America.<sup>120</sup> While the majority of Tibetan groups in exile are strongly in favor of independence<sup>121</sup> and eager to engage in direct action to end the Chinese rule in Tibet,<sup>122</sup> the Dalai Lama has declared in the late

1980s that he was not seeking independence but “meaningful” autonomy instead under the principle of Middle Way Approach.<sup>123</sup> The Chinese government has engaged in talks with Dalai Lama’s envoys starting in 1979 and negotiations accelerated after 2002 yet until today China has shown little flexibility in the talks and the dialogue process failed to produce substantive results.<sup>124</sup>

Whereas the Tibetan cause is widely known and studied in the international community since the People’s Republic of China Uyghur struggle remained rather of low concern. However in parallel with growing interest in China greater attention is paid to its multiethnic national structure and Uyghur cause. The early 1990s saw a growing concern in the international community about the state repression of Uyghurs which resulted in the promotion of Uyghur diaspora organizations all over the world.

The Uyghur diaspora is, although its accuracy is difficult to confirm, estimated at around 2 to 7 million according to former president of Uyghur American Association Nury Turkel.<sup>125</sup> However its international visibility was limited through a number of factors. First the Uyghur cause in contrast to the Tibetan has received no international support during the Cold War due to the fact that it was rather a matter of border dispute between China and Soviet Russia and “never incorporated into the prevailing Cold War geopolitical discourse in the West”.<sup>126</sup> Second, in the 1990s, the relative isolation of Xinjiang and

<sup>119</sup> Louisa Schein, p. 114.

<sup>120</sup> Davis, p. 229.

<sup>121</sup> Dreyer, 2005, p. 81.

<sup>122</sup> Clarke, p. 131.

<sup>123</sup> His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, “His Holiness’s Middle Way Approach For Resolving the Issue of Tibet”, <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/middle-way-approach>

<sup>124</sup> International Campaign for Tibet, “Chronology of Tibetan-Chinese Relations, 1979 to 2013”, <https://www.savetibet.org/policy-center/chronology-of-tibetan-chinese-relations-1979-to-2013>; Davis, p. 228.

<sup>125</sup> From the interview conducted by the author with Nury Turkel on 19 May 2012 in Istanbul. Doğu Türkistan’da Asimilasyon ve Ayrımcılık, 2012, İstanbul: İHH İnsani Yardım Vakfı. <http://www.ihh.org.tr/uploads/ihhkitap/kitap/dogu-turkistanda-asimilasyon-ve-ayrimcilik.pdf>

<sup>126</sup> Clarke, p. 129.

the Uyghur profession of Muslim faith hampered their ability to garner significant international support while Dalai Lama's public campaigns and diplomatic relations with Western leaders succeeded in internationalizing the Tibet issue.<sup>127</sup>

Moreover, the Uyghur diaspora remains highly fragmented and lacks a popular and charismatic figure such as the Dalai Lama who is holding the profile of both a spiritual and political leader of Tibet. A key leader in Uyghur diaspora is Rebiya Kadeer who was one of the top five richest people in China in the 1980s through her real estate holdings and ownership of a multinational conglomerate and held various positions in the Chinese parliament before being arrested in 1999 on "separatist" charges and spent six years in prison. The mother of 11 children Rebiya Kadeer is a respected figure in Uyghur exile communities but lacks charisma and authority that Dalai Lama has.

She is heading the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) the most prominent Uyghur-exile organization, though it's difficult to say how popular it is among the exile community, since its establishment in 2004 in Munich with the goal of bringing together various Uyghur exile communities under one roof. However Rebiya Kadeer's diplomatic initiatives and public events promoting Uyghur cause particularly in Japan and US are enough to create strong dissatisfaction on Chinese side.

The WUC is pursuing a moderate agenda underlining a quest for human rights and genuine autonomy without mentioning independence. This is because, Kadeer once stated, "If we push for independence, it is a given that there will be bloodshed. In that case, both Uyghurs and Chinese alike will be the victims."<sup>128</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of historical background of Chinese rule in minority populated Tibet and Xinjiang, evaluated the "minority" concept in the Chinese context and examined the ethnicity policies of CCP. A number of significant points emerging from this paper's subject is following: First, policies towards ethnic minorities vacillated between pluralist and assimilationist policies in parallel with the ideological fluctuations of the CCP over time since the PRC was founded in 1949. Second, the minzu political system in Xinjiang and Tibet autonomous regions is one of the most important factors contributed to the ethnic discontent and interethnic conflicts in the region. Autonomy guaranteed by the Chinese constitution is not fully implemented in practice and in reality Chinese authorities has allowed Uyghur and Tibetan minorities almost no independent action of self-rule. For future minority policy how this problem is dealt with will be of crucial importance. Third, in dealing on with its ethnic minority "question" Beijing tends to emphasize on delivering economic development and modernization while it keeps silent on underlying political and sociological reasons rooted in the historical legacies of the imperial and republican period and the policies pursued by CCP itself. Fourth, if not dealt properly increasing social and economic exclusion of Uyghur and Tibetan communities will be detrimental to Chinese government's goal of building harmonious and prosperous society in the foreseeable future. And a final conclusion is, in comparison with Tibet there is less sympathy in the West for Uyghur people since they are Muslims often portrayed as violent and extremist and frequently associated with global terrorism in media reports and scholarly studies.

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<sup>127</sup> Clarke, p. 129.

<sup>128</sup> Isaac Stone Fish, "Their Only Option Is Independence" Foreign Policy, 1 October 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/01/their-only-option-is-independence/>

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