

# Minority rights and national development in the People's Republic of China

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China

As an empire-turned modern state, the Peoples' Republic of China has sought to integrate peoples within its territory under the banner of common citizenship. The subsequent state project implemented policies based on subjects' *minzu* identity. The PRC constitutionally proclaims itself 'a unitary, multi-*minzu* socialist state' – the Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu*) comprised of the Han majority and 55 other officially recognized 'nationalities'.

By Xu Yuan

## Minorities in a multi-*minzu* state

Popularised in the early twentieth century by Sun Yat-sen, the founder of republican China, the term *minzu* can variously be translated as nation, nationality, ethnic group, ethnic minority (or minority nationality) or people. The state-sponsored project of 'minzu identification' (*minzu shibie*) from 1953 to 1979 identified 55 minority *minzu* out of over 400 applicant groups seeking official status. With the identification of the Jinuo Zu in 1979, the PRC's population of 56 *minzu* was fixed; unidentified groups were placed under the umbrella of other groups.

The 55 minority *minzu* can be divided into those who once had state or state-like polities and those without such historical memories and national claims. In China's peripheral areas, more 'indigenous *minzu*' are surrounded by more 'civilized *minzu*'. All groups, including the Han majority, are constitutionally equal in their relation to the state, though they differ in many respects.

Western tradition, implies a collective right to self-determination. The issue remains politically sensitive; the assertion of nationality by any single *minzu* is forbidden.

## Minzu work

Although equality, unity and mutual assistance among all *minzu* is proclaimed, there is a *de facto* inequality among groups. The colonial anthropological methodology of universal evolutionism, merged with Marxist historical materialism, was employed in the first stage of the massive state-sponsored Social Historical Investigation project (1956-1964). It slotted *minzu* into successive modes of production: primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist. The political teleology created under this Sinified evolutionary framework legitimised the state's intervention in minority peoples' livelihoods. *Minzu gongzuo* or *minzu* work employed ethnologists, historians, technologists, cadres, and thousands of others devoted to the socialist transformation of the minority subjects they studied and administered.

The immediate purpose of Social Historical Investigation was to set the stage

stigmatised as 'backward' in the 1960s and 1970s, and condemned as environmentally destructive in the 1990s.

## State intervention and livelihoods

Sedentarization of indigenous minority *minzu* has long been official policy. The Kucong people, previously a group of shifting hunter-gatherers and swidden farmers in the tropical forests of Southwest China's border areas, have been subjected to government efforts to sedentarize them since the 1950s. This included their identification as a primitive branch of the sedentary Lahu Zu, the sending of army and work teams to find them in the forest, the building of residential villages, training in the frying of foods, the use of chopsticks and sedentary agricultural tools. The program enjoyed relative success in the Maoist era, for the Kucong could adjust to life in people's communes, where state cadres replaced their chiefs but left their social relations intact. Since the 1980s, however, privatisation has turned Kucong households into poor producers; many abandoned their paddy fields and returned to the forest. Until 1994, the conflicts between traditional pur-

Provincial government policies to encourage the Hezhe to adopt agriculture have yet to alleviate their poverty.

From the point of view of the state, there have been some successful examples of sedentarization. According to the media, poverty among the Jinuo Zu was eradicated in the mid-1980s through diversified crop farming. Another is the Mengpeng state-run farm in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, which between 1979 and 1998 incorporated fifteen minority *minzu* communities, transforming indigenous swidden people into farm workers.

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## Minority rights and national development

National development has at times been promoted at the expense of minorities' human rights and interests. From the 1950s to 1970s, public funds were directed to western minority areas to balance China's regional industrial distribution. Government projects – mineral extraction infrastructure, military bases, state-run farms and rubber plantations – transformed previously self-sufficient areas into peripheral dependencies, which critics labelled a process of internal colonization. Most of these projects employed Han immigrants, and brought little benefit to minority communities, who often grew poorer through the growing difference in prices between primary and industrial goods.

The advent of reform and pragmatist 'open door' policies since 1978 have placed minorities on the playing field of the market. The return to household production – the 'responsibility' system, utilizing minorities' local social structures – has helped to diversify minority economies. Increased income has enabled some Dai family owners to employ Han workers who lost their jobs in declining state-run farms. The state and media have even expressed concern over economically successful minorities' 'loss' of subject identities and *minzu* characteristics.

The reform era reopened the PRC to the world, placing government policies under the examination of another universal discourse: human rights. The PRC proclaims it acknowledges the fundamental universality of human rights. Human rights, however, are to be applied within China's particular historical, social and economic conditions. This Chinese-style particularism, with an emphasis on collective rights, places minorities' human rights under the purview of state sovereignty. Meanwhile, through the discourse of rights to existence and development, the ghost of evolutionism still haunts the PRC. For

unsuccessful populations, the blame is often placed on minorities' cultures and the persistence of traditional values and worldviews.

Since the beginning of the new century, the international discourse on 'human development' – for example, the United Nations' human poverty index – is more noticeable in the PRC's official and academic discourse. It suggests that understanding of development has shifted from pure emphasis on GDP to more comprehensive concerns. The state-promoted '*minzu* economy' now champions local communities' efforts at self-reform,

the use of indigenous knowledge and preservation of biodiversity. Furthermore, the revised Regional Autonomy Law (2001) has begun to respect minorities' land arrangements by promising compensation to minorities whose natural resources are claimed by the state. These trends indicate a growing recognition of minorities' human rights, at least to some extent. ◀

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Long live the great unity of the people of all nationalities, June 1979

Gao Quan & Yang Keshan, Renmin meishu chubanshe. From the IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection: <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger>

*Minzu* regional autonomy was stipulated in the Common Program, the provisional constitution promulgated on the eve of the PRC's foundation, and adhered to in following constitutions. Regional autonomy applied to 'minority concentrated communities' at the level of regions, prefectures and counties rather than to particular *minzu*. The qualification for minorities to establish their autonomous areas depends on their proportion of the population and their habitation patterns within specific administrative districts.

Although Chinese authorities and academia have long taken the concept of nationality for granted, equating *minzu* with nationality remains problematic. As a result of historical inter-ethnic amalgamation, China's ethnic groups are mixed and dispersed over vast areas. Nationality, whether in the modified Stalinist definition employed in the *minzu* identification project or in the

for land reform and social transformation, to bring all *minzu* communities under socialism. Minority *minzu*' ranking in the evolutionary hierarchy at times had a protective effect. Reform in communities in the 'earlier stages' was milder, with more consultations with minority elites, than the radical measures adopted among Han and 'more advanced' communities. For communities in the stage of 'feudal manorialism', such as the Dai Zu in Xishuangbanna and the Yi Zu in Liangshan, a 'peaceful, consultative' approach kept many traditional institutions relatively intact.

In many other cases the state's developmental ideology destroyed the traditional livelihood and customs of minority *minzu*. The sedentary, irrigated cultivation practised by the Han and 'more civilized' *minzu* was considered the most productive form of agriculture. In contrast, swidden forest cultivation practised by many minority peoples was

suits, state ideology and forest protection led to evictions of Kucong people from forests.

Similar situations were faced by fishing and hunting *minzu*. The Jing Zu, a coastal fishing *minzu* in Guangxi who migrated from Vietnam hundreds of years ago, were encouraged to cultivate rice on reclaimed tidal land in the 1960s. This was touted as the end of the Jing people's non-agriculture history; low grain yields on poor land and lack of agricultural knowledge, however, led to their impoverishment. For the Hezhe zu, previously a fishing and hunting people in China's northeast border area, agriculture was not systematically introduced until the 1990s. After enjoying relatively easy lives due to their marketable salmon, their traditional livelihood was undermined by competition for salmon from the growing immigrant population and an upstream dam built by Russia preventing the yearly return of fish.