

# Ethnic Diversity and Identity Politics in Comparative Perspective

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia. In the current edition, we focus on the theme of “Ethnic Diversity and Identity Politics in Comparative Perspective.”

Our authors discuss how the spaces for and discourses about ethnicity and ethnic diversity in various parts of the region are circumscribed by the identity politics of the state and majority groups. Dak Lhagyal explains how the Chinese government seeks to maintain a form of ‘pluralist-unity’ through a strategy of depoliticising ethnicity. Lewis Mayo analyses how non-Indigenous majorities in Taiwan both engage with and contest Indigenous Austronesian cultures, in ways similar to the identity politics of non-Indigenous majority groups in Hawai‘i and Aotearoa

New Zealand. Both authors demonstrate the impact of these identity politics on the political, economic and socio-cultural marginalisation of Indigenous minority groups.

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## The Depoliticising of Ethnicity in China

Dak Lhagyal

Echoing Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s critique of colour-blind racism in America, China’s approach to depoliticising ethnic issues tends to downplay legitimate concerns about the role of race or ethnicity in persistent social and economic inequalities.<sup>1</sup> This approach not only minimises the need for meaningful policy change but also fails to acknowledge the socio-economic privileges associated with the Han majority. Moreover, it overlooks the unique contributions of Indigenous knowledge and the deep connections to nature that minority groups hold, which are critical to the cultural and environmental richness of the nation.

In essence, the discourse surrounding China’s ‘second-generation ethnic policy’ and the push for ‘depoliticisation’ of its ethnic policies warrants a thorough examination. It mirrors the scepticism and critique surrounding colour-blindness observed by scholars studying Western societies. Therefore, a closer look at these issues requires understanding how China acknowledges multiple ethnic identities while simultaneously ensuring national cohesion and social harmony.

### Ethnic governance in China

China’s management of its ethnic minorities is marked by a strategy that seeks to balance tolerance and integration. Historically, this approach has involved a nuanced alternation between leniency and stringency, reflecting the dual

objectives of the nation’s policies: to acknowledge certain aspects of ethnic diversity while ultimately encouraging cultural assimilation.<sup>2</sup> The country’s demographic makeup – a predominant Han Chinese majority that comprises about 92 percent of China’s vast population coexisting with various ethnic minorities<sup>3</sup> – often sets the stage for this intricate dynamic in ethnic governance.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese government’s acknowledgement of ethnocultural pluralism is encapsulated through the representation of a pan-ethnic *Zhonghua Minzu* 中华民族 “Chinese nation,” which encompasses all ethnic groups under this modern Han-centric national identity. While policies have been introduced to benefit ethnic minorities, including educational programs in native languages, scepticism persists regarding the true extent of support for ethnocultural diversity due to its Han-dominant perspective in national policymaking.

China’s ethnic governance strategy is said to be heavily influenced by the *duoyuan yiti* 多元一体 “pluralist-unity” framework, proposed by Fei Xiaotong in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> This concept posits that all of China’s ethnic groups, despite their linguistic, cultural, and religious differences, move from ‘diverse origins’ (*duoyuan* 多元 or pluralism) to a ‘single body’ (*yiti* 一体 or unity) constituting the Chinese Nation. This ideology underpins China’s narrative on ethnic integration, which is deemed vital for national unity and stability.<sup>7</sup>

In its ‘pluralist-unity’ model, China recognises ethnic diversity while promoting



Fig. 1 (above): United as one family of ethnic groups, building Chinese dream together in Tibetan and Chinese scripts on a poster, Qinghai Province. Image courtesy of Dak Lhagyal.

a unified national identity. This approach permits a degree of ethnic expression,<sup>8</sup> particularly in areas such as minority language usage<sup>9</sup> and cultural festivities.<sup>10</sup> However, any overt demands for increased autonomy are denounced as unlawful challenges to the established social harmony. Within this political landscape, for example, promoting education based on one’s native language from these minority groups, in accordance with the constitutional language rights of ethnic minorities in China, requires tactful expression to avoid inciting widespread protests.<sup>11</sup> This delicate balance highlights the complexity of navigating ethnic identity within a framework that seeks unity while acknowledging diversity.

The ‘pluralist-unity’ concept is not without contradictions in practice. For example, it promotes multiculturalism yet prioritises Mandarin as the national language that must be taught to minority children in preschools, often at the expense of non-dominant languages.<sup>12</sup> An inherent contradiction lies in its ambiguity, signifying a plurality of ethnicities or nationalities while emphasising a singular and unified *Zhonghua* 中华 nation or race.

The ‘pluralist-unity’ ideal, therefore, presents a dilemma. It encompasses a wide range of ethnicities and cultures but tends towards the commonality in a unified *Zhonghua* nation. This paradox has profoundly influenced China’s ethnic policies, offering a foundation for those advocating “unified community of the Chinese nation” and those who see

diversity as a pathway to uniformity.<sup>13</sup> This approach significantly impacts the education of Indigenous peoples in state-run schools in terms of choice for language of instruction in classrooms.

In multiethnic China, the Han community often emerges as the principal symbol of the nation’s modern identity. Historically, ethnic minorities have been portrayed as less advanced, in need of guidance towards modern norms of the Han peers. This viewpoint, which is labelled ‘Han chauvinism,’ underscores the Han-centric tendency in defining national identity.<sup>14</sup>

### Depoliticising ethnicity

China’s ‘second-generation ethnic policy’ has sparked a scholarly debate, not censored by the government, about the role of ethnicity in modern China.<sup>15</sup> This vision, not a formal legal policy document but spearheaded by scholars such as Ma Rong, advocates a paradigm shift in managing ethnic diversity.<sup>16</sup> Central to this debate is the ‘depoliticisation’ of ethnic identities, a proposal urging a rethinking of minority policies to foster a sustainable solution to ethnic conflicts in minority areas, ultimately creating lasting peace and stability in ethnically diverse regions.

Proponents of the ‘second-generation ethnic policy’ argue that ethnicity should cease to be a defining factor in the social and economic trajectory of China’s ethnic minorities. It argues that classification of nationality (*minzu*) since the 1930s has inadvertently ‘politicised’ ethnicities



### The Asia Institute

The Asia Institute is The University of Melbourne’s key centre for studies in Asian languages, cultures and societies. Asia Institute academic staff have an array of research interests and specialisations, and strive to provide leadership in the study of the intellectual, legal, politico-economic, cultural and religious traditions and transformations of Asia and the Islamic world. The Institute is committed to community engagement and offers a dynamic program of academic and community-focused events and cultural exchanges that aim to promote dialogue and debate.



Fig. 2 (above): Mural of China's ethnic minorities at the National Museum of Chinese Writing, Anyang. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Gary Todd)

by categorising these groups as political entities with territorial affiliations in their corresponding 'autonomous' states or provinces, thus having a negative impact on national cohesion.

Despite differing in their political and historical backgrounds, there are notable similarities between the 'depoliticisation' approach in China and the idea of 'colour-blindness' held by some in Western societies, particularly the United States. In the West, 'colour-blindness' has been critiqued for perpetuating the belief that racial and ethnic barriers no longer hinder the progress of historically marginalised groups.<sup>17</sup> This ideology promotes the illusion of a 'post-racial' society, where the existence of inequality and its causes is often overlooked, and diversity is celebrated only to a certain extent. This perspective, despite its liberal roots, may inadvertently conceal the racial and ethnic underpinnings of inequality, hindering true progress toward equal treatment.<sup>18</sup>

The depoliticisation notion emerging from China's 'second-generation ethnic policy' debate strikingly echoes the discourse on colour-blindness by advocating for the reduction of ethnicity's political significance. However, it risks oversimplifying the differences between ethnic groups concerning economic, educational, and social development. By advocating for depoliticisation of the group rights of ethnic minorities, the argument disregards structural inequalities associated with ethnicities that account for the underlying socio-economic disparities between the Han majority and ethnic minorities.

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#### Notes

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## Austronesians and "Localism" in Taiwan, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa New Zealand

Lewis Mayo

In her keynote address at the New Zealand Asian Studies Conference held in November 2023 at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha – The University of Canterbury in Ōtautahi (Christchurch) in Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand – Professor Bavaragh Dagalomai/Jolan Hsieh (謝若蘭 Xiè Ruòlán) of the Department of Ethnic Relations and Cultures at National Dong Hwa University in Hualien, began by speaking in Siraya, her ancestral language.

### The Siraya people and Taiwan's indigenous Austronesian history

The act of speaking their ancestral language is a powerful gesture of cultural reclamation by members of the Siraya community, the indigenous inhabitants of the area around Tainan, the part of Taiwan where a colonial outpost was established by the Dutch in the early 1620s, setting in motion the processes which would see Taiwan become a place where the indigenous population have become a subordinated minority. The Siraya were

among the first of Taiwan's Austronesian peoples to experience this process of subordination, as their traditional lands were located in the places where incoming peoples were concentrated from the mid-17th century onwards.<sup>1</sup> Until a few decades ago Siraya was primarily a language preserved in old texts, the first of which were produced by Dutch missionaries with the goal of Christianising the Siraya population, with Siraya people in the 20th and 21st centuries having become primarily speakers of various forms of Chinese.<sup>2</sup>

Siraya, like the other indigenous languages of Taiwan, belongs to the Austronesian language family, a family which spread out from Taiwan into Southeast Asia and then through the Pacific Islands and also across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar. Aotearoa New Zealand and Hawai'i are the southernmost and northernmost sites to which Austronesian languages spread in the era of settlement by people using traditional Oceanic seafaring techniques.<sup>3</sup>

The present-day situation of the Siraya people, like that other Austronesian-background peoples in Taiwan, is similar to that of Māori people in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Kānaka Maoli/Ōiwi – Native Hawaiians – in Hawai'i. They are minorities

in places dominated by populations that have moved there in the course of the last few centuries. Loss of land, of political self-determination, and of language and culture have been the common historical experiences of Austronesian-background peoples in all three places. Such processes necessitate ongoing action for the assertion of political and cultural rights and for the recovery of languages that have lost ground to those spoken by the incoming populations.<sup>4</sup>

### The identity politics of non-Indigenous majorities in Taiwan

While the political and cultural subordination of indigenous peoples to populations which arrived later is something found across the world, from Siberia, to mainland and island Southeast Asia, to Northeast Asia to the Americas and the Caribbean and to Australia, there is a distinctive set of features that mark the situations in Taiwan, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa New Zealand as historically linked.<sup>5</sup> We can argue that the three places have been shaped by a common set of historical processes that involve interactions between Austronesian peoples, the Chinese and wider East Asian realm, the Americas, and the Anglo-Celtic and Continental European cultures of the North Atlantic. These forces began to interact directly with each other in the 1500s. In all three cases, we see processes of demographic, cultural, linguistic, and political de-Austronesianisation. At the same time, in all

three cases, we see the emergence of non-Austronesian local cultures and identities which assert their distinctiveness and the importance of their own histories and identities that contrast both with those of the places from which their forebears originated and from those of societies with which they have much in common. In recent times, this assertion of cultural distinctiveness by the non-indigenous local majorities has entailed a complex combination of support for and resistance to the re-assertion of the cultural and political rights of the original Austronesian inhabitants.<sup>6</sup>

In Taiwan this assertion of the cultural distinctiveness of the local non-Austronesian population is primarily articulated in the form of a Taiwan localism that presents Taiwan culture and history as distinct from those of China, a localism that is strongly connected to the project of achieving Taiwan independence – the de jure recognition that Taiwan is a sovereign independent entity, not part of the territory of a Chinese nation-state.<sup>7</sup> Although the majority of Taiwan's population is of Chinese descent, non-Austronesian cultural and political activists who are involved with the idea of articulating Taiwanese distinctiveness contest the idea that Taiwan's culture and history are simply a subset of the history and culture of China. Although Taiwan's Austronesian history is understood as part of what creates the distinctiveness of Taiwanese culture, the narratives which affirm that Taiwan's history is separate from that of China tend to concentrate on aspects of the historical experience of Taiwan's Han population in the

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