

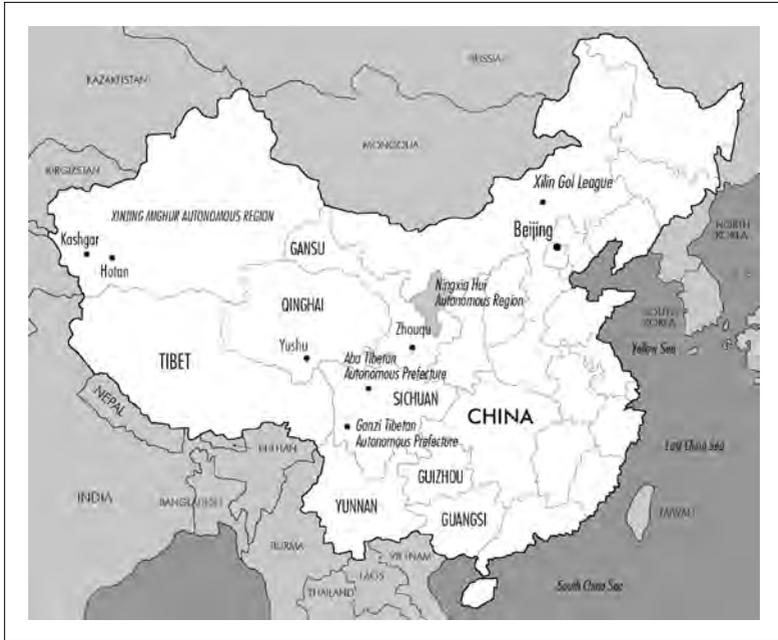
CHINA

Officially, China proclaims itself a unified country with a multiple ethnic make-up, and all ethnic groups are considered equal by law. Besides the Han Chinese majority, the government recognizes 55 ethnic minority peoples within its borders. According to China's sixth national census of 2010, the population of ethnic minorities is 113,792,211 persons, or 8.49 % of the country's total population.

The national "Ethnic Minority Identification Project", undertaken from 1953 to 1979, settled on official recognition for 55 ethnic minority groups. However, there are still "unrecognized ethnic groups" in China numbering a total of 734,438 persons (2000 census figure). Most of them live in China's south-west regions of Guizhou, Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet and other hinterland areas in the country's north and west. The officially recognized ethnic minority groups have rights protected by the Constitution. This includes establishing ethnic autonomous regions, setting up their own local administrative governance and the right to practice their own language and culture. "Ethnic autonomous regions" constitute around 60% of China's land area.

The Chinese (PRC) government does not recognize the term "indigenous peoples", and representatives of China's ethnic minorities have not readily identified themselves as indigenous peoples, and have rarely participated in international meetings related to indigenous peoples' issues. It has therefore not been clearly established which of China's ethnic minority groups are to be considered indigenous peoples. The Chinese government voted in favor of the UNDRIP but, prior to its adoption, had already officially stated that there were no indigenous peoples in China, which means that, in their eyes, the UNDRIP does not apply to China.

In June 2012, China organized a large-scale event to celebrate the "harmonious living" and diversity of its ethnic minority peoples. Held in the capital Beijing, the month-long "National Arts and Cultural Performance Festival of Ethnic Minority Peoples" was lauded by the PRC government as one of the highlights of the year.



The event's opening ceremony on June 12 was a grand showpiece entitled "A Glorious Era for the Chinese Nation", involving a total of 1,700 dancers and stage performers of ethnic minority art troupes from many regions around China. Stressing that China's 56 ethnic groups all live in harmony and prosperity, the show presented the audience with the idea of China as a strong power and a peaceful nation, one that allows the ethnic minority peoples under its protection to enjoy growth, development and social stability. The story off stage, however, is quite different.

Economic development and its impact

From the perspective of economic standards, progress has been made, and with noticeable results. The Chinese government is continually implementing infrastructure, education, poverty alleviation and community development programs, mostly in the hinterland regions. Through these efforts, ethnic minority peoples

have seen a rise in their income levels and improvements in living standards. On the other hand, the emphasis on economic development and infrastructure construction has caused damage to the region's natural environment. Most of the derived economic benefits and revenue generation go to government agencies and businesses, while it is largely the ethnic minorities who have to bear the consequences, including the destruction of traditional community landscapes and the hastened disappearance of ethnic cultures.

The adverse effects of this development model can, for example, be seen in Yunnan Province which, by the government's estimate, holds 70 per cent of China's total potential hydroelectric resources. Many regions of Yunnan Province have been suffering from persistent drought conditions for more than three years now, including during the first half of 2012.

According to one summary report by the Yunnan Provincial Government, the persistent drought led to severe water shortages for a total of 7.9 million inhabitants and 1.64 million livestock animals.¹ The affected area covered a total of 16 cities and prefectures, and 125 counties. At the peak of the drought (February–March 2012), 413 small-scale water dams, along with 273 small to medium rivers in Yunnan, had totally dried up. A number of cities and towns had to implement rotational district shutdowns of the water supply and other strict measures on water usage, and the drought badly affected several sectors of the local economy, with the closure of manufacturing factories and mining operations.²

According to official government figures, the drought had already led to a direct economic loss of over RMB 10 billion for Yunnan Province by the peak of the drought in March.³ To deal with the disaster, the PRC central government repeatedly dispatched working units and scientific teams to Yunnan from the departments in charge of water resources, agriculture and forestry. The central government announced that they had spent a total of RMB 424 million on supporting funds for combating the disaster and for drought relief programs.

The prolonged drought in Yunnan is in stark contrast to the image of a province with green mountains and rich in water resources. Yunnan has three major Asian river systems flowing through its territory: Jinsha River (upstream of the Yangtze), Lancang River (upstream of the Mekong), and Nu River (upstream of the Salween). So far, the government has built 5,514 hydroelectric dams on these major rivers, and other water courses in the province. Of these dam projects, 39 are classified as "major hydroelectric power stations", and are either already in operation or under construction.⁴ It is thus quite a major turn of events for the

province with such a favorable geography and abundant natural resources to experience such prolonged drought. Scientists said it could be due to the nature's changing climate pattern, with a warming of the climate and more weather extremes, but man-made factors were also undoubtedly to blame.

In terms of the drought disaster in Yunnan, Chinese researchers have pointed to four significant economic activities that may, in recent times, have exacerbated the water shortage situation in the province.

1. **Anti-hail measures** – over the past two decades, districts with tobacco leaf and other high-value crops have been shooting anti-hail rockets (packed with silver iodine pellets) into approaching rain clouds during harvest time to prevent hail damage. This has led to a dispersal of clouds and reduced precipitation.
2. **Mining** – unchecked mining operations and mineral excavation activities in the province have placed high demands on the water supply. Many companies have drilled into deeper substratum to tap into underground water, resulting in the depletion and drying up of the water table.
3. **Deforestation** – forest cover in Yunnan has been receding for several decades, due to logging for timber. In recent years, deforestation has accelerated due to the massive clear-cutting that has been taking place for large-scale commercial rubber and eucalyptus plantations. This is highly destructive to the forest biodiversity and the natural environment.
4. **Hydroelectric dams** – to meet energy demands, state utility companies have been allowed to build more hydroelectric dams in ecologically sensitive areas and in fragile geological settings. However, the utility companies often have improper management methods, which lead to problems of water depletion, flooding and landslides in the surrounding areas.

Disaster-induced migration

When environmental destruction or disaster happens, it is the local people who suffer. And, in most cases, the local populations are ethnic minority peoples. During the first months of 2012, the prolonged drought in China's southwest provinces led to dried-up rivers and streams and dams without water. Farmers had to give up cultivating their fields; with no income and no subsistence crops, many

adults from ethnic minority groups had to leave their villages to become migrant workers, taking on jobs in more developed areas and urban centers.

Out-migration has become a serious problem for ethnic minorities as it leads to the gradual erosion of their traditions. Over time, the loss will be irreplaceable. This will have serious detrimental effects on the preservation of ethnic minority cultures and languages.

Political oppression

When it comes to politics among ethnic minority peoples, those who play by the rules can rise through the ranks in government jobs and local district offices, and become representatives at national congress meetings. For those who do not follow the rules and attempt to resist government policies, the Chinese state has always used military force to suppress any dissent. It is the Communist Party of China's (CPC) iron-clad decision to maintain stability and social order.

Reports of Tibetan protests and suicide by self-immolation have received much international attention. In 2012, there were also riots and clashes between Uighurs and Han Chinese in Kashgar, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, along with protests by ethnic Mongolians in Inner Mongolian Region, and other cases of human rights violations.

While gaining wide international news coverage, these incidents have been silenced within China, including in ethnic minority areas. Inside China, much of the reporting on these ethnic minority issues and their protests has largely disappeared from the state media, and from most local news. It seems the ethnic minority peoples have had their voices silenced, have lost their freedom of expression and the right of access to the media. They are lost under the guise of the protection and benevolence of the great Chinese motherland.

The ethnic identity issue

As a result of the changing economic and political conditions, ethnic minority issues and conflicts have become major problems for the PRC government. Zhu Weiqun, Vice-Minister of the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee and Beijing's main contact with the Dalai Lama, has been sounding

out his ideas over the past year with regard to dealing with ethnic minority issues. He has suggested taking the ethnic group classification off the national identification card. He has also suggested not adding any more autonomous districts for ethnic minority people, and promoting a mixing of ethnic group students in schools.⁵

Zhu's ideas are a major departure from past government policies. He says the current education structure and government administrative programs have placed undue emphasis on ethnic peoples' identity, and this has weakened their identification with the Chinese state and undermined their sense of belonging within the Chinese national family. He believes that it is not conducive to the cohesion and unity of all Chinese ethnic peoples, and will lead to disharmony and separation of ethnic groups from the state.

These viewpoints, as stated by Zhu, have already generated heated debate and disagreement in academic circles over the concepts and recognition of "Minzu" ("ethnic people") and "Zuqun" ("people group"). Those who favor the concept and recognition of the more openly inclusive term "Zuqun" believe it is more important to assimilate. Those opposing this say that, by dropping the concept of "Minzu", the Chinese government will erase all ethnic peoples' research, programs and policies since the founding of modern China in 1949, and will lose its claim to be the motherland of all 56 ethnic groups in China.

Conclusion

Besides the discussion on ethnic identity, most official announcements regarding indigenous peoples in China in 2012 remained focused on economic development and infrastructure construction in ethnic minority regions. In the 12th Five-Year National Plan, adopted in 2011, the main focus is on the administration and implementation of programs to raise standards of living, improve income levels and open up ethnic minority regions. In terms of these government policy announcements, outsiders receive only promotional news on how the CPC is helping the ethnic minority peoples to live in harmony and enjoy economic growth, and rarely are they able to see the reality of their current living conditions. The perspectives from the inside reveal a far different picture, one of discontent, economic disparity and eroding culture in ethnic communities. ○

Notes and references

- 1 Summary Report (Yunnan Government) <http://green.sohu.com/20121227/n361810216.shtml>
- 2 *Xinjin News* (city-government and state-controlled newspaper): "Drought in Yunnan: 273 rivers in province dried up". Dec. 27, 2012.
- 3 *China News Agency* (official PRC state news organ), March 26, 2012: <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2012/03-26/3773159.shtml>
- 4 Of these major dams, 15 are on the Lacang River (the largest of them under construction is the Nuozadu Dam with a production capacity of 5,850 MW), and 12 are on the Jinsha River (the largest of them under construction is the Xiluodu Dam with a production capacity of 13,860 MW). For the others, two are on the Red River (which flows downstream to Vietnam), six are on the Lixian River, along with one major hydroelectric dam being planned for the Nu River.
- 5 *The Study Times* (a newspaper of the Communist Party of China's central training school), Feb. 13, 2012. www.studytimes.com.cn 22222222222222

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