

# CHINA

Officially, China proclaims itself a unified country with a multiple ethnic make-up, and all ethnic groups are considered equal before the 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. 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 practise 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 2013, the national slogan of the "Chinese Dream", as espoused by China's president Xi Jinping, continued to be an important theme for the government's policy directives and program implementation. The chairman of China's Ethnic Affairs Commission, Wang Zhengwei, described this dream slogan as "national

rejuvenation, improvement of people's livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and military strengthening.”<sup>1</sup>

The proposal for “national rejuvenation” and other key themes in the slogan was quoted and promoted by the Chinese media and government officials. As such, observers' attention is drawn to the reports on the Chinese government's implementation and “successful results” of its ethnic minority policies.<sup>2</sup>

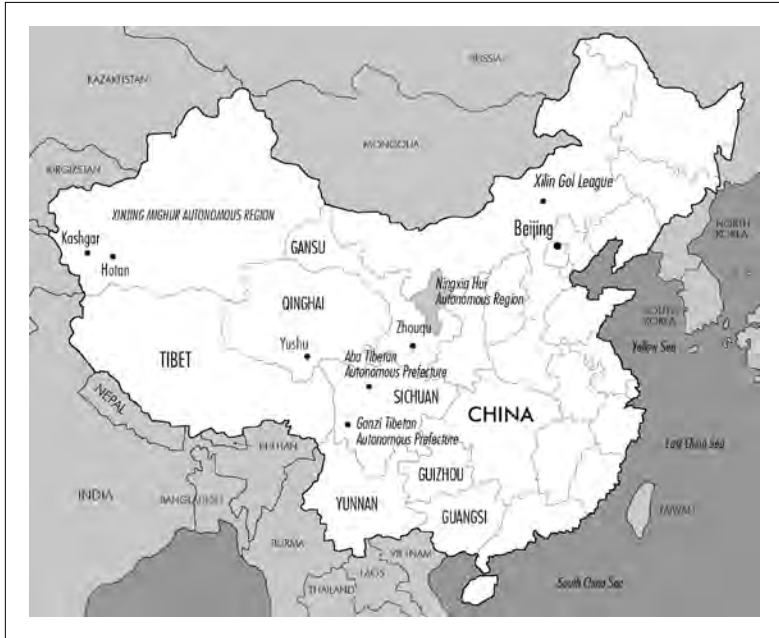
In a press interview in March 2013, Wang Zhengwei elaborated on this theme and said, “For the ‘Chinese Dream’ at its roots is the common dream for China's 56 ethnic groups. It is the dream for peoples in ethnic minority regions to consolidate together with the whole nation, to foster economic development and build up our middle-class society. It is a dream of unity for the 56 ethnic groups working together as brothers within our big family.”<sup>3</sup>

This media statement by Wang was a significant pronouncement and upheld the “Chinese Dream” as the core concept for China's state policy directives on ethnic affairs last year. It was applied to promote and develop the local economy in ethnic minority regions.

To achieve the goal of the “Chinese Dream” with regard to ethnic minority groups, the national government trumpeted two key programs in 2013. One was the continuation of the “Poverty Alleviation through Economic Development” program, and the other stressed the promotion of “National Unity for Ethnic Minority Peoples”.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese government touted the fact that it had commissioned poverty alleviation works and economic development in ethnic minority regions, with a mandate to step up the pace to remove poverty from these regions, and bring them closer to middle-class society.

The focus on “Poverty Alleviation” was discussed at China's fourth national work conference on “pairing assistance” projects to support the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, held in Beijing in September.<sup>5</sup> Yu Zhengsheng, a top government adviser, said that the development and stability of Xinjiang was still facing challenges, and that the autonomous region still needed aid across the nation. According to Yu, “The central government will take measures that include improving employment and education to boost the development of the Xinjiang region. More job opportunities should be created for people in Xinjiang, especially for those who live in the southern part of the region.”



Yu and other officials outlined a number of policies for Xinjiang, including support for education, especially bilingual and occupational training, improving local people's abilities to start businesses, encouraging private investments and encouraging people from the region to seek jobs in other parts of China.

To promote "National Unity for Ethnic Minority Peoples", the Chinese State Council has promulgated the "Commendation for Ethnic Unity and Progress of Model Units and Individuals".<sup>6</sup> Five commendation ceremonies have been held since 1988, as the national government regards them as encouraging ethnic unity and positive actions through society. The commendation program has been codified and standardized in order to be able to assess the progress made towards ethnic unity. Overall, 35 "model units" in China were selected for commendations in 2013. Some of these "model units" were based in villages, schools and enterprises in ethnic minority regions, others were prefecture and province-level government agencies. They were lauded with citations for good results in promoting ethnic unity.

## **Protests by ethnic minorities**

In contrast to the touted results of the Chinese government's tandem programs of "Poverty Alleviation through Economic Development" and "National Unity for Ethnic Minority Peoples", observers and the media reported many incidents of protest and public outcry on the part of ethnic minority groups throughout the year. These incidents revealed how ethnic minority and human rights were being sacrificed in the Chinese government's drive to preserve social stability and ethnic unity. Observers of Chinese ethnic affairs pointed to four main areas of conflict and protest on the part of ethnic minority peoples in 2013.

## **Violent suppression of protests**

In the aftermath of the large-scale riots in Urumqi, Xingjiang's capital city on 5 July 2009, the Chinese national government's crackdown and violent suppression was aimed at "preserving the social stability of Xinjiang". However, the riots and protests spread throughout the regions. Between March and December 2013, disturbances broke out with increasing frequency. The turmoil of violent incidents occurred in Kashgar, Hotan and Kurla in south Xinjiang, as well as in Turfan in east Xinjiang. These demonstrated the failure of the government's policy to preserve social stability.

In earlier decades, the government's policy towards ethnic minority peoples was more benign, and violent suppression was less frequent. However, the Chinese government has played up the portrayal of the Muslim Uighur people of Xinjiang as having direct links to "international terrorist groups". Under such implications, the national government has applied violent suppression and crackdown tactics in the region. The authorities are upholding the view that the main danger for Xinjiang comes from its "separatist movement and illegal religious activities". This logic effectively splits the two ethnic groups apart – Xinjiang's original inhabitants and the immigrant Han Chinese, creating antagonism and confrontation between them.

## **Land grabbing**

Many disputes and disturbances of recent years in various regions of China have arisen from land grabbing. Most of the trouble stems from local governments' forced expropriation of land from people who have lived there for generations, for development projects and in the name of public interest. In other cases, ethnic minority people have been swindled by government officials, using deceit and fraudulent practices, into selling their land at low prices. Other cases have involved the illegal expropriation of land by business conglomerates.

In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, a major riot broke out over land disputes in May 2011, and throughout 2013 there were many protests and violent disturbances all over Inner Mongolia. One incident occurred in the region's Ongnuud Khoshuu county of Chifeng City in May 2013, with skirmishes between ethnic Mongolians and Han Chinese due to disputes over the terms of land rental.<sup>7</sup> Another incident occurred in the prefecture of Xilin Gol League in July last year, where a violent protest was led by dozens of Mongolian pastoralists.<sup>8</sup> The herders in the area said their traditional pasturelands had been occupied illegally by powerful officials and businessmen.

The land dispute problems in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region have revealed the biased and unjust treatment of local ethnic minorities by the government. Some cases have involved mining and exploitation of natural resources, which often does not provide any economic benefits to local residents, frequently resulting in pollution and destruction of the environment. The disputes and protests by the ethnic Mongolians were their only way of seeking justice and fair compensation.

## **Restrictions on freedom of religion, languages and traditional customs**

While enforcing policies of suppression to preserve social stability, the Chinese government also places restrictions on ethnic minority peoples' religious activities, use of mother tongue and practice of traditional customs. For the troubled Xinjiang regions, the authorities continue to view the Muslim Uighurs and other ethnic groups with suspicion and distrust. Measures and laws have been imposed

to limit Muslim religious and traditional practices. For example, according to their customs, Muslim women should wear a veil in public to cover their head and parts of the face. The Chinese government, however, has banned such practices. Muslim men growing beards or fasting during Ramadan has also been prohibited.<sup>9</sup> Other measures include banning bilingual education in schools, and the implicit rule of “not hiring ethnic minority persons for government employee jobs”.

One main aim of government policies in recent years has been the drive to open up the hinterland regions of China for economic development, and to raise the living standards of the ethnic minority peoples. However, under such government-directed initiatives, most of the economic benefits do not go to the local inhabitants, far less to the ethnic minority groups of the region. Instead, new restrictions have been imposed on them and they have come under security surveillance. As mentioned above, suppression of expressions of discontent has resulted in even more frequent strife and protests.

## **Tourism development**

Over the past decade, China’s tourism industry has seen burgeoning growth in the domestic market. Ethnic minority communities and enterprises are being attracted into the growing tourism business in order to boost revenues for their regions. However, uncontrolled tourism development has led to a depletion of resources and over-development of the land for construction and infrastructure projects. Overall, the current model of China’s tourism industry has had serious negative impacts, among them a form of exploitation that could be termed “neo-colonialism by tourism”.

Along with the incursion of commercialism has come damage to and corruption of the traditions and culture of ethnic minority groups. Most well-known is the case of the Naxi traditions and culture in the Old Town of Lijiang of Yunnan Province. The Old Town of Lijiang was the first in China to be selected as a UNESCO World Heritage site based on the cultural heritage, living traditional practices and town construction of the indigenous inhabitants, the Naxi people. However, unchecked economic development and commercialization of Lijiang’s Old Town has led to severe destructive impacts in recent years. UNESCO has been closely monitoring the situation in Lijiang, as the prevalent commercialization of its Old

Town has led to doubts as to whether it will maintain its status as a World Heritage site.

Similar developments are also taking place in other old towns and ancient city quarters throughout China, as they come under assault from economic development and tourism. In the Tibet region and neighboring provinces inhabited by Tibetan communities, the Chinese government has undertaken a number of construction and public infrastructure projects. Most of the new buildings are no longer in the Tibetan traditional style. In 2013, the attention was on Barkhor Street in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, which is one of the few remaining urban quarters with its original architectural and cultural elements still well preserved.

It is a popular destination for local people as well as for tourists. However, projects have been initiated to demolish old buildings for new construction and the Chinese government has not respected the wishes of local residents or recognized their rights. As a result, many local Tibetan residents have been forcefully resettled elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

The new development of Barkhor Street is to meet the demands of tourists and operators of tourism businesses. Concerned groups consider this to be a very worrying trend, as such an approach is directly threatening the culture and traditional practices of ethnic minority people.

In their path to achieving the “Chinese Dream”, government officials have found that the quickest and most expedient way is to enhance prosperity, and thus obtain derived benefits. Among these is the supposed effect of preserving social stability, which has been one of the major aims of ethnic policies in recent years. However, these aims and policies are pervaded with Han Chinese chauvinism, which is forcing ethnic minorities to conform to the viewpoints and practices of the majority population, which do not recognize or respect the culture and traditions of ethnic minority peoples. The Chinese government is only focusing on short-term economic gains, while violating and sacrificing the rights of the ethnic minority peoples. The result of this policy is the exact opposite of social stability: it is causing more trouble and unrest in ethnic minority regions. ○

## Notes and references

- 1 Interview with Wang Zhengwei as reported by Xinhua News Agency, 19 March 2013
- 2 Report on “Important development and news of the year in ethnic minority regions”, China Minzu Daily Newspaper, 14 January 2014, headline front page

- 3 Interview with Wang Zhengwei op.cit.
- 4 "Poverty Alleviation Projects", China Agriculture News Network, 30 December 2013 (<http://www.ntv.cn/a/20131230/15156.shtml>)
- 5 Xinhua News Agency, 24 September 2013
- 6 China Minzu Daily Newspaper, 5 March 2013, headline front page
- 7 News report by Yang Fan on Radio Free Asia, 6 May 2013 (<http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shaoshuminzu/nm-05062013101325.html>)
- 8 News report by He Ping at Radio Free Asia, 22 July 2013 (<http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shaoshuminzu/jz-07222013150056.html>)
- 9 News report by Yang Fan on Radio Free Asia, 13 November 2013 (<http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shaoshuminzu/nu-11132013145707.html>)
- 10 News report by Dan Zhen on Radio Free Asia, 13 May 2013 (<http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shaoshuminzu/dz-05132013163317.html>)

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