

A New Perspective in Guiding Ethnic Relations in the 21st Century: ‘De-politicization’ of Ethnicity in China¹

Most of the world’s countries today are multi-ethnic, due to thousands of years of migration. Some countries have been political entities with many ethnic groups for very long periods of time. Some countries have accepted ‘new citizens or permanent residents’ from other nations, with various backgrounds in race, national origin, language, and religion. In some countries (such as today’s western European countries), the immigrants who have settled down for decades or even generations have become a more or less indispensable part of the local community, even though the receiving country may not have granted them citizenship or ‘permanent residency’. From a sociological point of view, all those societies with the aforementioned features are deemed multi-ethnic societies.

In any political entity with a multi-racial or multi-ethnic composition, the political leaders and elites are confronted with such questions as how to cope with the legal status and basic rights of distinct ethnic groups within its political entity (federation or state); how to regard their socio-economic structural differences (e.g. in education, industry, occupation, and income) and cultural differences (e.g. in language, religion, and customs); how to understand their existence and evolution (ideology and social norms) and the trends of ethnic-based movement in the future; and the strategies and measures the governments should adopt to guide the trends of inter-ethnic relations for group equality, social justice, ethnic harmony, social stability, and political unity.

A nation with good ethnic relations will be able to strengthen the cohesiveness of its citizens continually through positive internal integration, so as to reduce administrative and operational costs, enhance the efficiency of social and economic organizations, and to strengthen its economic power. In a country where politics, economy and culture are undergoing positive developments, all ethnic groups will enjoy the benefits brought about by a prosperous economy and by a harmonious society. Although a totally egalitarian distribution of benefits among all members is almost impossible, to a great extent, all ethnic groups are ‘winners’ in the process.

On the other hand, a nation with poor ethnic relations will suffer growing social disunity and disintegration caused by internal contradictions, followed by an evident increase in social costs in the forms of money, manpower and material goods for maintaining social order, which in turn will aggregate the government’s expenditures and citizens’ tax burdens. In the event that ethnic controversies turn into open political confrontations or separatist movements, the entire society will be turned upside down,

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which may lead to riots or civil war, or even foreign invasion. Consequently, the state will be quickly weakened or torn apart, the economic foundation and establishments will be destroyed, and all ethnic groups will have to suffer the hardships brought about by social riots, economic collapse, and political separation. Then, ultimately, all ethnic groups will become 'losers'. An apparent example is witnessed in the transformation of ethnic relations in the former Yugoslavia. Hence, ethnic relations have become one of the core problems facing all societies in the twenty-first century.

'Nation' and 'Ethnic Group'

'Nation' and 'ethnic group' are distinct concepts in Western literature. In discussing definitions of these terms, Immanuel Wallerstein (1987: 380) emphasized that:

'Race' is supposed to be a genetic category, which has a visible physical form.
..... A 'nation' is supposed to be a socio-political category, linked somehow to the actual or potential boundaries of a state. An 'ethnic group' is supposed to be a cultural category, of which there are said to be certain continuing behaviors that are passed on from generation to generation and that are not normally linked in theory to state boundaries..... The last of these three is the most recent and has replaced in effect the previously widely-used term of 'minority'.²

Given their respective time of appearance and inner meaning, these terms represent human groupings at totally different levels and reflect different forms of identity in human society under different historical conditions. 'Nation' is related to 'nationalism' and the political movement for 'national self-determination' taking place in the Western Europe in the seventeenth century. The term 'ethnic group', on the other hand, only appeared in the twentieth century and is commonly used in the US, being gradually adopted by other countries. It refers to groups that exist and identify with a pluralist country with various historical backgrounds, cultures and traditions (including language, religion, place of origin), and even distinctive physical features. 'Ethnicity' only appeared in English dictionaries in the early 1970s (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975:1).

There are important differences between ethnic groups, which are characterized by distinct cultural traditions and histories, and nations, which are political entities tied to a more or less stable territory. However, there is no an impassable gulf between 'an ethnic group' and 'a nation'. With changes in the internal and external conditions, an 'ethnic

2 All concepts or terms have emerged in human societies under certain circumstances. In other words, they were created to describe a special phenomenon that needs to be distinguished from others. Different groups 'learned and borrowed' those terms from each other in the process of interaction. Therefore, the same term (e.g. 'ethnicity') might have different meanings in different countries and can be variously interpreted (Fenton, 2003: 25–50).

group' and a 'nation' are transferable. Between the 'pure' cultural group (a minority group) and the 'pure' political entity (state) that can be considered as two 'idea types' in ethnic relations, there is a continuum with numerous points or steps of transitions (see Figure 1). This is a theoretical model in examining the ethnic-nation process. In practice, none has reached either extreme end. In reality, ethnic groups in all countries can be located at various points along this continuum. With economic development, guidance by government policies, or endorsement by external forces, an ethnic group would move from its original location toward either end of the continuum; its nature as a 'political entity' being either strengthened or weakened.

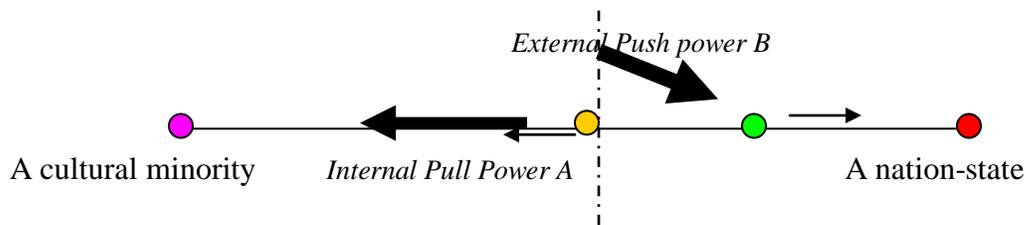


Figure 1. The 'ethnicity-nation' continuum

Therefore, ethnic relations within various nations are multi-faceted and dynamic, rather than fixed in a single form. Under the combined pressures of internal and external factors, the quantitative change of a group along this continuum may turn into qualitative change at a certain point. For some ethnic groups, it is possible to split from their home countries and transform into independent nations.³

The Terms Used in Contemporary China Concerning 'Nation' and 'Ethnic Group'

In China, *minzu* 民族 has been one of the most frequently used terms. Another word *zuqun* 族群 has appeared in the scholarly literatures in recent years. The term corresponding to *minzu* in English is 'nation', while the latter corresponds to the English 'ethnic group' (or ethnicity). When we speak of the *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族, the Chinese nation, and the fifty-six *minzu* or 'nationalities' in Chinese official translation, we actually confuse their conceptual difference by using the same word for two different concepts.

3 For example, in referenda in Quebec in 1980 and 1995, if a majority had supported the independence of Quebec, it would have separated from Canada and become a new country.

Accordingly, some years ago I made the suggestion to keep the term ‘Chinese nation’, and change any reference to the 56 ‘nationalities’ to ‘ethnic groups’ or ‘ethnic minorities’ when these groups are referred to as a whole (Ma Rong, 2001: 156). My proposal was based on three considerations. First, the social and cultural connotations of the minority groups such as Mongolians, Manchus, Tibetans, Uygurs and Hui in China approximate to ‘racial and ethnic minorities’ in other countries, such as the American Indians, African Americans, and Hispanics in the US.⁴ Thus, the term ‘ethnic groups’ reflects the structure of ethnicity in China more accurately. Second, by differentiating among these terms, conceptual confusion resulting from two different meanings (the ‘Chinese nation’ and ‘ethnic groups’ making up the ‘Chinese nation’) for the same term in Chinese will be avoided.⁵ Finally, if we translate China’s 56 ethnic groups (*minzu*) as 56 ‘nationalities’, and name their requests on behalf of economic and cultural interests as ‘nationalism’,⁶ we will seriously mislead English-speaking readers who might associate these groups with independent political entities who have the right to carry out ‘national self-determination’ and establish their own independent ‘nation-states’.

The reason we distinguish between ‘nation’ and ‘ethnic group’ in the Chinese language is because the different use of these terms may actually imply varied orientations for viewing, understanding and managing ethnic relations.

Two Types of Policies for Managing Ethnic Relations: Politicization and Culturalization

Government policy plays an important role in guiding group identity and adjusting the boundaries of a political entity. Throughout the history of social development, governments have generally adopted two contrasting policies for regulating ethnic relations: one views ethnic groups mainly as political entities and the other views them primarily as cultural groups. The former policy emphasizes integrity, political power and ‘territorial’ conservation of ethnic groups. The later prefers to treat ethnic relations as cultural interactions, and to deal with the problems between people of different ethnic backgrounds as affairs among individuals rather than between groups as a whole, even

4 There are great variations among the Chinese minorities regarding their population size, residential patterns, and historical relationship with the Han majority. These groups may be viewed as spreading along the ‘ethnic group–nation’ continuum in Figure 1. Tibet was close to the right end (*de facto* independent) before 1951. The Manchus were close to the left end and had largely lost their identity by 1949. Nine minority groups had a population of less than 9,000 in 2000 (Ma Rong, 2004: 662).

5 Some Western scholars used ‘ethnic relations’ to describe majority-minority relations, while using the term ‘nationalities’ in referring to Chinese official statements (e.g. Dreyer, 1976).

6 ‘Regional nationalism’ of minorities often appeared in Chinese documents. This term in Chinese interpretation only refers to the requests of economic benefits, cultural autonomy, and limited political autonomy within the present system.

though the common characteristics of the ethnic group membership are given recognition. By emphasizing the cultural characteristics of ethnic groups, their political interests are diluted. Furthermore, in processes of migration, the historical connection between ethnic groups and their traditional residence is gradually loosened.

The Traditional Culture-Centred View of Ethnic Relations in Chinese History

Historically the eastern Asian continent has been a motherland to many ethnic groups. Among these groups were more 'advanced' Han Chinese and relatively less advanced minority 'barbarians', including nomads in grasslands and people living in mountainous areas in the south.⁷ In the traditional Chinese cultural norms, ethnic identity rested on the distinction between barbarian minorities and civilized Han. This distinction, according to Confucianism, does not refer to apparent differences in physical features or language. Rather, it is mainly shown in cultural differences with values and norms of behaviour as the distinguishing characteristics.

Two contemporary scholars have written (Zhang Lei and Kong Qingrong, 1999: 285):

According to Confucianism, the distinction between 'hua (xia)' (civilized Han) and 'yi' (minority barbarians) was a cultural boundary rather than a racial and national boundary..... The barbarian-civilized distinction did not indicate racial or national exclusiveness. Instead, it was a distinction involving differentiated levels of cultural achievement.

In other words, the 'barbarian-civilized' distinction did not indicate division and exclusivity between different 'civilizations' such as that between medieval Christianity and Islam. Instead, it referred to the distinction between highly developed and less developed 'civilizations' with similar roots but at different stages of advancement. The less developed minorities ('barbarians') accepted such a distinction, and actively sought knowledge from Chinese civilization. Therefore, although there were conflicts and wars between the dynasties in the 'core area' and minorities in the peripheries, what characterized the interaction between the 'more civilized' and 'less civilized' groups was not mainly hostility and mutual destruction but cultural diffusion and learning.

The ancient Chinese viewed Chinese culture as 'the most advanced civilization' of the world, which would sooner or later influence surrounding 'barbarians'. In this point of view, those who were acculturated by Chinese civilization became 'members' of this 'civilized' world with 'Han' as its 'core'. Those who were un-aculturated remained 'barbarians' who needed to be 'educated'. Ambrose King (1997:177) argues that, as a political entity, traditional China was unlike any other nation-states since 'it was a

7 The terms 'advanced' and 'less advanced' refer only to the development stage of science and technology, not the nature of 'culture'.

political-cultural entity, or what is called the civilized state, which was marked by cultural rather than ethnic differentiations, and consequently followed a unique civilized order’.

In discussing ‘the nature of Chinese nationalism’, the great American Sinologist John King Fairbank (1979: 98) emphasized that:

Undoubtedly this universalism has meant that culture (the way of life) has been more fundamental in China than nationalism. Early Chinese emperors asserted that they ruled over all civilized mankind without distinction of race or language. Barbarian invaders who succeeded them found it expedient to continue and reinforce this tradition. To any Confucian ruler, Chinese or alien, the important thing was the loyalty of his administrators and their right conduct according to the Confucian code. Color and speech were of little account as long as a man understood the classics and could act accordingly.⁸

Since culture can be learned and taught, Chinese traditional ideology therefore held that the two sides of the ‘civilized-barbarian distinction’ were transferable. That is to say: ‘evil Chinese retreat to being barbarians, and fine barbarians advance to becoming Chinese’ (Zhang Liu and Kong Qingring, 1999: 285). ‘Fine’ refers to ‘civilized’ whereas ‘evil’ means ‘uncivilized’. This ideology articulates dialectic reasoning and echoes a tolerant attitude on the part of Chinese culture towards other cultures.

Chinese emperors, elites and people considered ethnic minorities that had accepted Chinese culture as ‘civilized’ citizens and treated them fairly equally. Yet, they adopted a discriminating attitude toward the ‘barbarian’ groups. The foundation of such discrimination, however, was ‘cultural superiority’ rather than ‘racial superiority’. Behind this superiority was a flexible and dialectic view that accepted ‘barbarian’ groups to be ‘civilized’ through acculturation. Following the principle of ‘teaching without discrimination’, it was the Chinese cultural tradition to transform the ‘uncivilized’ minorities into ‘civilized’ members of society through acculturation rather than military conquest.

In the Chinese cultural tradition, the ‘civilized-barbarian distinction’ was advocated along with a unified view of ‘the world’ (*tianxia* or ‘all under heaven’), which emphasized that ‘all lands belong to the emperor and all people are his subjects.’ Both ‘barbarians’ and ‘civilized’ were under the same ‘heaven’, and thus ‘barbarians’ could be ‘educated’. Based on these thoughts, in the Chinese cultural tradition, all ethnic groups were considered equal to each other. This idea was most explicitly expressed in the Confucian saying that ‘all people around the four seas are brothers’, which emphasized

8 The fact that most groups in China belong to the Mongoloid also made the physical differences less significant in China.

that all ethnic groups should be treated equally; that their differences in biological characteristics,⁹ language, religion, and customs should not override their common traits in basic ethics and norms or peaceful co-existence among them; and that the main difference between ethnic groups is cultural, with the ‘superior (more advanced) culture’ being capable of integrating all other cultural groups.¹⁰ It is a ‘diffusion model’ (Hechter, 1975: 6) but one that only emphasizes the aspect of culture. In Chinese history, it is quite clear that when acculturation occurred among the ‘barbarians’, a diffusion process followed in other respects.

American sociologist Milton Gordon classifies ideologies concerning ethnic issues into two categories. One view maintains ethnic inequalitarianism or racism, while the other view supports ethnic equalitarianism or non-racism. Gordon further divides the second view into three sub-categories, namely (1) assimilationist structure, (2) liberal pluralism, and (3) corporate pluralism (Gordon, 1975:105–106). The Chinese traditional view of ethnicity (‘teaching without discrimination’) and practice (‘transforming barbarian into civilized’) belongs to the ideological type of assimilationist structure.

Although there is always politics in issues concerning race, nationality and ethnic groups, ideas on ‘majority-minority relations’ or ‘civilized–barbarian relations’ were to a great extent ‘culturalized’ in the Chinese cultural tradition, both in theory and practice. This strategy enabled the civilized group in the core region to unify and embody the ethnic minorities in periphery areas. In addition, the Chinese tradition of treating ethnic differences as ‘cultural differences’ made it possible to implement the policy of ‘transforming barbarian into civilized’, which resulted in attracting ethnic minorities from the periphery areas and the ultimate formation of a unified pluralist Chinese nation with the Han group in the central plain as the core (Fei Xiaotong, 1989: 19).

But it should be noticed that the idea of ‘cultural racism’ also emerged among the ethnic groups and their elites throughout the historical interactions among the groups. Sometimes, when the central government was weak while ethnic minorities became a fatal threat to the Han group, then ‘barbarians’ were viewed as the enemy who could not be ‘civilized’ and become a part of China. It happened during the late Qing dynasty

9 In the Chinese tradition, there was no clear correspondence to the Western term ‘race’ (Stafford, 1993: 609). I do not agree with Frank Dikötter’s argument about racism in modern Chinese thought. The statements he cites from Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Sun Yatsen (1866–1925), or Su Xiaokang (1949--) only expressed the influence of Western categories in modern China. See Dikötter, 1997:1–4.

10 In his study, Frank Dikötter noticed the distinction between ‘outside barbarians’ and ‘inside barbarians’ and he also said that ‘despite many disparaging comments on the supposedly bestial origins of the minorities, the Han perception of minority Chinese remained embedded in an ethnocentric framework that stressed sociocultural differences’ (Dikötter, 1992: x). Therefore sociocultural differences, not biological differences, were major indicators of ethnic characteristics and boundaries in ancient China.

when the Western and Japanese invasions became a fatal threat to China's independence and culture, racism among the Han elites has become very strong.

The European Nationalism Movement: 'Politicizing' Ethnicity

With industrialization and emergence of capitalism, a trend began in some European countries to 'politicize' majority-minority relations. By advocating the regrouping of political entities around the world based on 'national identity', the essence of the contemporary 'nationalism' became the establishment of 'nation-states' through 'national self-determination'. Thus the 'nationalist' movement was an important historical landmark in the 'politicizing' of ethnic issues.

Ernest Gellner (1983:1) has remarked: 'nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent. ... Nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones'. Nationalism did not exist in the past, emerging only in the process of industrialization. Geller (1983: 40) also states:

The age of transition to industrialism was bound... also to be an age of nationalism, a period of turbulent readjustment, in which either political boundaries, or cultural ones, or both, were being modified, so as to satisfy the new nationalist imperative which now, for the first time, was making itself felt.

With the emergence of 'nationalist' ideologies and political movements in Western Europe, 'nation-states' were established. European capitalism was first developed in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century. Holland was considered the 'first capitalist nation-state'. Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius treated the independent 'nation-state' as the principal unit of international law or the sole authority of the state. In France the French Revolution overthrew the Bourbon Dynasty's Louis 16th in 1789. In resistance against the armed forces of other monarchical states, the French 'citizens' were enthused with nationalism in defending their motherland. During the American War of Independence in the eighteenth century, the idea that 'all men are created equal' inspired the people to establish their own independent state. Consequently, the American War of Independence and the French Revolution were regarded as important landmarks or pioneers for the construction of contemporary nationalism.

The twentieth century witnessed three waves of nationalist movements. The first wave took place at the end of World War I. With the collapse of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, a number of 'nation-states' were established in eastern and southern Europe.

The second wave arose in the mid-twentieth century following World War II. With the weakening of the global colonial system, 'nationalist' movements were launched in colonies in the African, Asian, Latin American, and Pacific regions. Those educated in

European countries or influenced by Western ideologies became indigenous elites who promoted the local 'nationalist' movement.¹¹ Under these new historical conditions, the colonial countries had no choice but to consent to the independence of the former colonies. As a result, a large number of newly independent states were established in the colonies, some of them copying the political and administrative structures of Western 'nation-states'. These newly independent states are the 'liberated type' of 'nation-states', regardless of whether they are ethnically more homogeneous (such as Iraq, Egypt, and Algeria) or heterogeneous (such as India, Indonesia, and Malaysia).

The collapse of the USSR started the third nationalist wave of the 20th century. National separatist movements took place in the former USSR and some eastern European countries, such as former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. During this movement, 23 newly independent states were established on the territory of the former three states. Separatist movements have continued to cause instability in some of these states.

Continuation of the European Tradition of 'Politicizing' Ethnicity by the Former USSR

Communism is deeply tinted with ideology and thus has a tendency to 'ideologize' cultural or social differences among ethnic groups, using political measures to deal with these differences or issues. After the October Revolution of 1917, imperial interventionists employed 'national self-determination' as a political slogan to instigate the ethnic groups' rivalry in Russia against the new proletarian regime. To counteract this trend, Lenin decided to support 'national self-determination' selectively on the basis of whether it would be beneficial to the proletarian revolution or not. In the political climate of the time, the Soviet leadership used the idea of the Federation or the Union to unite those ethnic groups under the rule of the former tsarist Russia (Wang, 2000:151). However, as one specialist has written (Rakowska-Harmstone 1986: 239):

The convergence of ethnic and administrative boundaries results in politicization of ethnicity and emergence of nationalism. The identification of ethnic with political and socioeconomic structures sharpens the perception of each group's relative position in the competition for the allocation of social values.

Various groups were linked together under the Federation or the Union, while maintaining their own republics or autonomous regions and a full range of political rights. It was exactly this type of institution that later provided legal grounds for these groups to separate themselves from the USSR and to establish their own independent

11 There were political maps in the mind of these indigenous elites, which referred to the administrative boundaries of colonies, not to cultural, linguistic or tribal boundaries. The new 'nation-states' were 'imagined communities' rooted in colonialist education and administration (Hobsbawm, 1990: 138; Anderson, 1991).

states. Lenin pointed out clearly that the Union is, under unique historical conditions, a 'transitional' form toward complete unification (a unitary state) (Lenin, 1920: 126). After Lenin's death, the Soviet regime was consolidated, with the Communist Party enjoying high prestige among the people, especially after World War II. Stalin had many opportunities to lead all groups from this 'transitional' stage into a unified nation, but he and his successors failed to do so.¹² Instead, the transitional stage became permanent and persisted for several decades until the Soviet Union last days.

In handling ethnic relations, the Soviet government emphasized the political power of minority groups, either consciously or unconsciously, and institutionalized such power. Minority groups were treated as political units and thus 'politicized'. At the macro level, political entities such as 'Soviet republics', 'autonomous republics', or 'autonomous states' led to the establishment of autonomous administrations and the identification of nationalities or ethnic groups connected with their own territory. These groups thus became 'territorialized', which implied 'a nation'.

At the micro level, in the 1930s, a 'nationality recognition' campaign was implemented and every resident's 'nationality status' was identified and formally registered in his/her internal passport. The internal passport system that lists the owner's nationality 'has had a negative impact on integration' because it has created a 'legal-psychological deterrent' (Rakowska-Harmstone 1986: 252).

Thus, the individual's nationality status became evident and permanent, and membership boundaries between ethnic groups became unambiguously marked and fixed. Government policies favouring minorities in terms of language, education, the promotion of cadres and financial aid further strengthened clear group identification and boundaries. The USSR government also tried to establish a new identity for the 'Soviet People (Soviet man)' among all ethnic groups, but this identity was mainly based on political-ideological ties (Sovietism or communism). When people lost belief in Sovietism and communism during the reforms promoted by Gorbachev and the rise of Russian nationalism promoted by Boris Yeltsin, the base of the new identity also collapsed.

The Soviet practice of 'politicizing' minority groups and the corresponding institutionalization of minority groups greatly influenced Chinese policy after 1949.

The 'Politicization' of Ethnic Groups Re-emerges in the Process of Globalization

12 There might be several reasons why Stalin did not change the system. Firstly, the USSR took control of several East European countries, so to maintain individual republics in the USSR lessened these countries' concerns about formal Soviet expansion. Second, the three Baltic nations (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) had just recently become union republics of the USSR, and a change in the system could bring about desires for independence. Third, since the Cold War had begun just after World War II, the votes of Ukraine and Byelorussia might be helpful in the United Nations in negotiations with the US.

With the end of the construction of nation-states, globalization has become a universally popular topic. Some scholars have noticed that, in the processes of globalization, a new tendency towards ‘politicizing’ ethnicity has reappeared both within multi-ethnic nations and between states. ‘National self-determination’ has once again become a political weapon for domestic groups or external hostile powers to split or weaken some multi-ethnic nations. Joseph Rothschild (1981: 2) has stated:

In modern and transitional societies—unlike traditional ones—politicizing ethnicity has become the critical principle of political legitimation and delegitimation of systems, states, regimes, and governments and at the same time has also become an effective instrument for pressing mundane interests in society’s competition for power, status, and wealth.

In the process of modernization, societal-institutional change and re-adjustment of power and interest give rise to opportunities for various ethnic groups to acquire and defend power and resources. The ethnic group thus becomes an ideal cohesive group unit and an effective tool for social mobilization. Ethnic groups advantaged and disadvantaged in social competition will all strive to ‘politicize’ ethnicity in order to mobilize their followers and establish ethnically based political and economic interest groups. Under such circumstances, ethnic conflict becomes one of the major sources of social instability, violent conflicts, and state break-up.

Rothschild states further (1981: 6–7):

Many observers, indeed, have been so fascinated and/or alarmed by this initially destabilizing impact of freshly politicized ethnicity that they have interpreted it as launching an absolutist, zero-sum type of politics over uncompromisable values and rights (for example, to self-determination, group status, territorial control) and, hence, as more dangerous to civic order than class and functional interest-group politics are.More seriously, it is also true that the energies of ethnic politics have sometimes produced catastrophic violence.

The above analysis provides us with some insights for understanding the effects and ideological basis of the ‘politicization’ of domestic ethnicity, as well as its potential to damage national stability. Such trends are visible in many countries.

The Policy of ‘Acculturation’ in the United States of America

In industrialized countries, the US in particular, the idea of ‘nation’ has increasingly become a symbol of a stable political entity. The concept of ‘racial and ethnic groups’, in contrast, has gradually been faded out in its political meaning. With more frequent interactions and intermarriages, boundaries separating ethnic groups have become

blurred, with members of all ethnic groups being acculturated by one another. Members from all racial and ethnic groups have been led to look upon themselves as equal citizens. The Constitution and government protect the rights of minority group citizens.¹³ In daily life or social events, members of minority groups are officially treated as individual cases rather than collectives of an independent political group. Problems (such as inadequacy of the English language or lower levels of education) faced by disadvantaged groups are not perceived as ‘political interests’ and regulated through government policies. Rather, these problems are resolved through assistance from public or semi-public social welfare programs. As a result, ethnicity-related issues are shown as individual or social problems, not political issues facing the entire ethnic group.

For a long time, the US government and the mainstream society have operated on the policy of assimilation without enforcing an identical majority-minority culture through administrative measures. Enforced assimilation is in essence an indication of ‘politicizing’ ethnicity. In promoting a unified political entity, the U.S. government and the mainstream society direct the public to look upon differences in ethnicity and religion mainly as ‘cultural diversity’ within a ‘pluralist society’.

Considering the long-term existence of racial and ethnic diversity and conflicts, American academic circles proposed in the mid-20th century the goal of achieving ‘cultural pluralism’ (Gordon, 1964:157–159), and of perceiving ethnic groups as ‘sub-cultures’. There are three measures for achieving the goal. The first is to enforce a unified federal law and the mainstream culture (English as the *de facto* official language and the Christian culture). Secondly, preservation of certain traditions by ethnic minorities is permitted. Finally, to avoid race/ethnicity-based discrimination in employment and in other aspects of social life, Americans are not required to identify their racial-ethnicity status for job applications, and for school admission application this item is optional. In the census questionnaire, the item on ‘race/ethnicity’ is optional and filled out by the informant himself/herself.¹⁴ The government also purposefully de-stresses or blurs ethnic boundaries through reducing residential and school segregation and adopts a neutral attitude towards intermarriages and other practices (e.g. interracial adaptation).

In the past half-century, the US has emphasized ‘pluralism’ in dealing with racial and ethnic relations. ‘Pluralism’, of course, does not indicate any form of division by ethnic groups either politically or geographically. Instead, American ‘pluralism’ is overseen by a strong unified political entity at both the federal and state levels. Although the government sanctions the establishment of ethnically based, inclusive informal cultural organizations, the setting up of racial/ethnic-exclusive organizations with tendencies

13 Of course, there are still racial/ethnic prejudice and discrimination in the US, but the situation has improved greatly since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

14 That was why 2.4 per cent of the respondents of the 2000 US Census reported their racial status with two or more races, 823 respondents even reported 6 races in their census reports of racial/ethnic status (Farley and Haaga, 2005: 335).

towards political and economic ‘self-determination’ is prohibited. Obviously, the US government stresses a ‘unified politics’ by all racial and ethnic groups, although such a view is not openly communicated in the discussion of ethnic issues. Yet, with its advanced economy and a strong armed force, the tendency of ‘self determination’ and of establishing an independent state still exists among certain minority groups and their organizations living at the bottom of the society, such as the African Americans and American Indians, even if in a very weak form.¹⁵ The US government keeps a close eye on any organizations with this tendency.

In addition to political and economic unification, the US also implements powerful measures for a ‘unified national culture’. For example, the most popular language in public is English. Fundamental values and norms of behaviour—the core of culture—are also shaped by mainstream society. In fact, members of minority groups will hardly advance in society unless they learn English. Also, they will face tremendous difficulties in interaction with mainstream of the community and government agencies unless they accept and learn Christian values and norms. Therefore, ‘pluralism’ does not help to preserve independent ‘cultural groups’; it only permits the existence of ‘sub-cultural groups’ and preservation of certain aspects of their tradition. The US government and politicians will not accept any ‘cultural groups’ with tendency of self-determination since they will endanger the political unity of the US.

In sum, since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, a fundamental policy and the guiding ideology of the US government in handling racial and ethnic issues has been to develop minority groups into ‘sub-cultural groups’ within a pluralist society, or to ‘acculturate’ and to ‘de-politicize’ ethnicity in the US.

The Political and Cultural Levels of ‘Ethnicity’

‘An Ethnic Group’ Might Become a ‘Nation’ and Re-write its History

Indigenous ethnic groups have their traditional area of residence. Immigrant groups have their place of origin. Wallerstein (1987: 385) states:

The concept ‘ethnic group’ is therefore as linked in practice to state boundaries as is the concept ‘nation’, despite the fact that this is never included in the definition. The difference is only that a state tends to have one nation and many ethnic groups

This means that ‘ethnicity’ is not only meaningful at a cultural level but at a political level as well. It indicates that, under favourable conditions, ‘an ethnic group’ has the potential to become a ‘nation’. Therefore there is no impassable gulf between the ‘ethnic

¹⁵ ‘In the United States, only among the most disadvantaged minorities do we find such separatist tendencies’ (Yinger, 1986: 25).

group' and a 'nation'. The leaders and elite of ethnic minorities will fight for their power and space in a national political structure, and they are also given some political space by the government in some nations.

Wallerstein (1987: 384) provides a vivid case of the Sahrawi people in northern Africa.

Is there a Sahrawi nation? If you ask Polisario, the national liberation movement, they will say yes, and to add that there has been one for a thousand years. If you ask the Moroccans, there never has been a Sahrawi nation, and the people who live in what was once the colony of the Spanish Sahara were always part of the Moroccan nation. How can we resolve this difference intellectually? The answer is that we cannot. If by the year 2000 or perhaps 2020, Polisario wins, there will have been a Sahrawi nation. And if Morocco wins, there will not have been. Any historian writing in 2100 will take it as a settled question, or more probably still as a non-question.

In order to make their independent movement legitimate, some ethnic groups will work very hard to 'prove' that their group has established a legitimate and independent 'nation' a long time ago. Meantime, governments and other groups rarely accept the 'evidence' they provide. But if one such group successfully becomes an independent nation, the materials that prove 'the history of this ancient nation' would become the new official historical record.

Practical Measures of 'Politicizing' Ethnicity: Institutionalization of Ethnic Status and Ethnic Relations

One important measure was that governments can identify and recognize an 'ethnic status' for each of its citizens as part of a political system. Any citizen who wants to change his/her ethnic status applies for permission from government offices with certain criteria. In China, for instance, some applicants switch from the ethnic status of one of his/her parents to that of the other after the applicant reaches the age of 18 in the case of intermarriage. Also in cases where the government was mistaken in a previous status allocation in the 1950s, then the relevant person might like to apply for 'correction' of his/her status, in order to obtain some benefits assigned to minorities. This situation happened after the 'Cultural Revolution' when CCP called to 'correct' the political mistakes during the 'Revolution'.

The institutionalization of ethnic groups systematically creates institutional barriers for the interaction and integration between the members of different ethnic groups. This official system always reminds them that they belong to 'a specific group'. Clarifying the boundaries between ethnic groups and fixing the 'membership' of each ethnic group makes the ethnic boundaries become a social issue, and when the ethnic status is related

to some favourable or discriminatory policies, ethnic boundaries will become a political issue.

The measure of institutionalizing ethnic relations might have both a positive and negative impact. Favourable policies toward disadvantaged groups might improve the situation in ethnic stratification and reduce the structural differences in education, industry, occupation, and income among groups. Discriminatory policies towards disadvantaged groups might worsen the situation in ethnic stratification and provoke ethnic tension. In both cases, these policies designed for ethnic groups as a whole will certainly strengthen ethnic identity and consciousness. Under certain historical and social circumstances, favourable policies toward minorities might effectively improve ethnic relations and reduce tensions and promote cooperation, but these policies will certainly not weaken ethnic consciousness or promote integration.

The former Soviet Union politicized and institutionalized its minority groups and made great progress in helping minorities to improve their education and socio-economic development in minority regions. The relationship between Russians and other groups was generally improved. But based on the institutionalized ethnic relations (union republic—autonomous republic—autonomous region) and fixed ethnic status, the consciousness and political interests of ethnic groups were obviously strengthened. When international and domestic political attitudes and conditions change, as happened in the USSR in the late 1980s, the political consciousness of ethnic groups will be provoked and turned into ‘nationalist’ movements aiming at independence based on their autonomous ‘territory’.

There are many interpretations among scholars and politicians as to why the USSR and Yugoslavia disintegrated. Ways of treating minorities should be considered one of the most important factors. There is a great contrast between the Soviet Union and the US in the way they handle ethnic relations. The former ‘politicized’ and institutionalized ethnicity/nationality, while the other ‘culturalized’ or ‘de-politicized’ ethnic minorities.

‘Culturalism’ and ‘Nationalism’ in Modern China

The Indian/American historian Prasenjit Duara has proposed looking at Chinese history from what he terms a ‘bifurcating linear way’, which he believes was how the ideas and narratives of Chinese history were formulated in the past. He recognizes ‘culturalism’ as the core of Chinese traditional views of different groups, and that this was a ‘mode of consciousness distinct from nationalism’. He states (Duara, 1995: 56):

Viewing ‘culturalism’ (or universalism) as a ‘Chinese culturalism’ is to see it not as a form of cultural consciousness per se, but rather to see culture—a specific culture of the imperial state and Confucian orthodoxy—as a criterion defining a community. Membership in this community was defined by participation in a ritual order that embodied allegiance to Chinese ideas and ethics.

But Duara also claims that there was another ‘nationalist’ route in Chinese history in viewing minorities. When ‘barbarians’ could no longer be educated in the Confucian manner but became so strong militarily as to threaten the existence of Chinese empire and culture, the Chinese elite would be forced to turn to the ‘nationalist route’. For example, ‘during the Jin invasion of the 12th century, segments of the literati completely abandoned the concentric, radiant concept of universal empire for a circumscribed notion of the Han community and fatherland (*guo*) in which the barbarians had no place’ (Duara 1995: 58). Then a defensive ‘nationalism’ emerged among the elite and people.

Towards the end of the Qing dynasty (late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries), ‘nationalism’ emerged among the Han Chinese elite who had supported the Qing for over two centuries mainly because of the failures of the Qing in the wars against imperialist invasions. Sun Yat-sen and his colleagues, who were influenced by this nationalist movement, issued a call to ‘expel the barbarian Manchus and restore China’. By contrast, Kang Youwei, the leader of the ideologically ‘royalist’ defenders of the Qing dynasty,

cited Confucius to argue that although Confucius has spoken of barbarians, barbarism was expressed as a lack of ritual and civilization. If indeed they possessed culture, then they must be regarded as Chinese.he was convinced that community was composed of people with shared culture and not restricted to a race or ethnic group. (Duara, 1995: 74)

When the Qing dynasty was overthrown in 1911, China faced a very different situation, and among its many problems were independence movements by the ethnic minorities. As Duara writes (1995: 76),

Sun Yat-sen and the leaders of the new Republic sought to supplement their racialist narrative with the culturalist narrative of the nation espoused by their enemies—the reformers and the Qing court itself. The Chinese nation was now to be made up of the ‘five races’ (Manchu, Mongol, Tibetan, Muslim, and Han).

Prasenjit Duara applied his ‘bifurcating linear way’ mainly in examining Chinese history in the late Qing dynasty. But this approach can be applied to the period after the 1911 Revolution and even to that after the 1950s.

During the Republican period, Chiang Kaishek followed the ‘culturalist’ framework and denied Mongol, Tibetan, Hui, etc. status as ‘nationalities/nations’, considering these groups as tribes of the Chinese nation. He emphasized that China should be ‘one nation and one leadership’. Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party followed the Soviet

model and ‘nationalist’ narrative, claiming that these groups were ‘nationalities’. They should have the right to ‘self-determination’ and to establish their own nations.¹⁶

Sun Yatsen learned ‘culturalism’ from the royalists, and passed it on to Chiang Kaishek; the Chinese Communist Party learned ‘nationalism’ first from revolutionists of the late Qing and then from the Russians. This is the unimaginable historical dialect in a nation’s development process. It switches its positions continually along a bifurcating linear route.

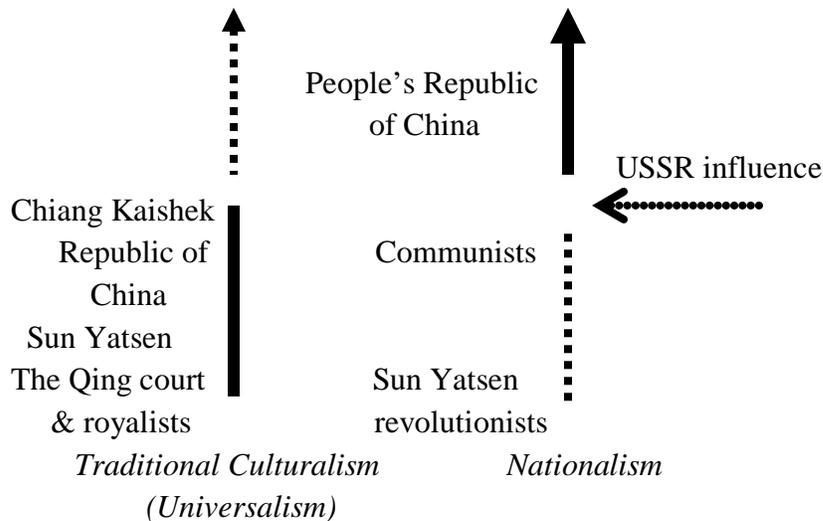


Figure 2. The bifurcating linear route in China

The Policies of the Chinese Government since 1949

Although there were some tortuous periods in ethnic relations in the thousands of years of Chinese history, the mainstream in ethnic relations and integration among the groups has always been ‘culturalism’. This process lasted until the 1950s. Under the international circumstances at that time, especially the Korean War of 1950 - 1953), the Chinese leaders, who were extremely inexperienced in administrative matters, had to seek support from the Soviet Union. They copied almost all the Soviet models in terms of administration, education, the economy, and military affairs. The government also followed the Soviet model by politicizing and institutionalizing the ethnic minorities in China.

First, the government organized the ‘identification of nationalities’ in the 1950s. Eventually 56 ‘nationalities’ were identified, their population ranging from 718 (Hezhe¹⁷)

16 This attitude of the CCP changed after they assumed power in 1949 (Connor, 1984: 87).

to 547,283,057 (Han in the 1953 census). All Chinese citizens were registered by 'nationality status' in household registration and personal identification. This system is still in practice today.

Second, the system of autonomy was established for all ethnic minorities. There are 5 autonomous regions at the provincial level, 30 autonomous prefectures, and 120 autonomous counties in today's China. The total areas of these autonomous places together make up 64 per cent of China's territory. The system assumes that the minority groups play a leading role and manage their own affairs in autonomous areas. The National People's Congress adopted the Autonomy Law of Minority Nationalities of the People's Republic of China in 1984. It contains detailed items regarding the administration, jurisdiction, education, religious and cultural affairs, and local regulations in the autonomous places and has become one of China's most important laws.

Third, the government has designed and practiced a series of policies in favour of ethnic minorities in the administrative, educational, economic, and cultural areas, and even in family planning programs.¹⁸ The central government provides large amounts of financial aid to these autonomous places each year. Aid accounted for 38–94 per cent of the total budget of the 5 autonomous regions in 2002 (Ma Rong, 2004: 525). These policies helped the minorities to speed up socio-economic development and reduced the disparities between ethnic groups. But since these policies were targeted clearly at specific groups, they also strengthened ethnic consciousness while the boundaries between ethnic groups became clearer and more stable than they had earlier been.

These policies link each ethnic minority to a certain geographic area, provide these groups a political status, administrative power in their 'autonomous territory', and guarantee ethnic minorities the potential to develop at a higher speed. The process of establishing and implementing these policies and the institutions, with their emphasis on 'equality between ethnic groups' rather than 'equality among citizens', will inevitably politicize and institutionalize these groups and strengthen their group consciousness. This will have the effect of pushing them away from being 'cultural groups' and towards the direction of becoming 'political groups' in the 'ethnicity–nation' continuum.

One of the reasons why the governments of some nations, including China, pay attention to the political aspects of minorities has been the pressure from western countries to promote human rights and democracy. In response to critical comments from

17 The Hezhe, a fishing group living along the Amur River, was officially recognized as a 'nationality' in the late 1950s and the registration records showed the group with only 718 persons in the 1964 census.

18 The members of the minority groups were usually allowed to have more children while the Han have been restricted to the policy of 'one couple, one child'. This was one of the most important reasons why many farmers tried to change their 'nationality status' from Han to a minority group. From 1982 to 1990, several minority groups doubled their population size mainly by re-registration (e.g. the Manchu population increased from 4.3 million to 9.8 million, and Tujia increased from 2.8 million to 5.7 million during these 8 years) (Ma Rong, 2004: 662).

western countries, these governments have tried to enhance the political status and power of ethnic minorities in their countries. They have hoped that these measures would alleviate the criticism, but in fact this has not happened. The result is that minority groups ask for more powers, and their requests are always supported by the western nations. The political concessions of these governments towards minority affairs has done nothing to resolve the tension among their ethnic groups, but instead created a more solid base for future separatist movements.

The Ideal Nation-Ethnicity Framework: Political Unity and Cultural Pluralism

Political Unity and Equality among all Ethnic Groups

Fei Xiaotong (1989) proposed a framework of ‘a pluralist-unity structure’ to describe the basic pattern of ethnic relations in Chinese history. This theory can be further developed into a framework of ‘political unity–cultural pluralism’, which means strengthening the ‘national identity’ of all citizens at the nation level while promoting cultural characteristics at the ethnic group level. Of course, political and legal equality among all groups should be the precondition and political base for this framework. At the nation-state level, the equality of all citizens (including all ethnic groups) and the political and legal rights asserted by the Constitution should be guaranteed, as well as the rights of all groups to maintain and develop their own cultural traditions (including language, religion, customs, etc.). This framework combines political unity, ethnic equality, and cultural diversity.

‘Ethnic Cultural Pluralism’ and ‘National Cultural Identity’

There are two levels in cultural identities: one is the traditional culture of each ethnic group at the group level; another is the national culture at the national level. Habermas (1998) emphasizes that national identity requires a national cultural unity to create a group identity at the nation-state level. At the national level, the members of all ethnic groups should respect the common social norms; at the ethnicity level, each group should respect, even appreciate, the cultures of other groups.

An Indian scholar, who has spent a long time in the former Soviet Union, has made a comparison between the frameworks in the nation-building process in India and the Soviet Union. He comments (Behera, 1995: 31) that:

the Soviet Union came into existence as a multinational nation-state without creating an inter-ethnic, composite culture which would have promoted a common identity of the Soviet people in the form of ‘Soviet nationalism’. In the absence of such a common unifying identity, constituent nationalities were bound to develop

separate, distinct identities of their own which led to the growth of separate nationalism.

The former Soviet Union took a great risk by handling its nationality/ethnicity issues the way it did. The assumption that by emphasizing a common ideology (communism) would create a major linkage connecting its ethnic groups was fraught with peril and turned out to be false. The nation was at risk of disintegrating if the ideological linkage among the ethnic groups collapsed, because separate national identity remained strong among these groups.

By contrast, the Indian government tried very hard to create an Indian national identity in the process of its nation-building after independence. There were so many groups in India with different religious, linguistic, ethnic, caste, and even political backgrounds, and India was never unified before British domination. Since independence, 'India, though a multinational state, has developed "Indian nationalism" as a common bond, and the "Indian" as the common nationality' (Behera, 1995:16). Another study reported that about 90 per cent of the survey respondents in India said that they were proud of being 'Indians'; the percentage of positive response to this question to test 'national identification' in India was even higher than that in Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Belgium, Switzerland, or Germany (United Nations Development Programme, 2004: 49). Nation-building is still in progress in India and there have been ethnic nationalist movements in India among the minority tribes and even guerrilla wars. But these issues have not been internationalized or become a serious threat to Indian unity. However, the caste system is mainly a social structure (hierarchical social status system) with a limited political meaning in any modern sense.

The United States of America is a young nation and its citizens came from all parts of the world with various racial/ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Under the framework of 'cultural pluralism'—political unity, these immigrants have gradually established their new identity and developed loyalty to the nation. It seems that both India and the United States have tried hard to de-politicize and 'culturalize' their domestic ethnic minorities and have successfully created a 'national identity' among the majority of their citizens. Of course, there have been racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts in India and the US, as in other nations, but there has been no real threat to national unity from minorities. There must be some lessons the Chinese may learn from these three countries: the Soviet Union, India, and the United States in guiding the directions of ethnic relations.

Discussion

The successful strategy of 'culturalizing' ethnic minorities in the Chinese tradition has not been carried on in today's China, but plays a positive role in the United States. In

my opinion, the Chinese should carefully review this historical position. Although in general ethnic relations in today's China are smooth and cooperative, the differences among ethnic minorities in national identification still remain. The Chinese should learn from their ancestors and their experience for thousands of years in guiding ethnic relations. They also should look to other nations for both positive and negative lessons. China might in the future consider changing the direction of managing its ethnic relations from the 'politicizing' to 'culturalizing' route. The route of 'de-politicizing' ethnicity might lead China to a new direction, to strengthen national identity among ethnic minorities while guaranteeing the prosperity of their cultural traditions. Of course, how to protect the rights and benefits of ethnic minorities in that process will still be a big task. But to guide ethnic relations according to a modern civic model (citizenship and diversity), instead of the traditional tribal model (group or regional autonomy-separatism) (Gross, 1998) might be an alternative for China in the new century.

There are over 195 members of today's United Nations. They became independent political entities at different times. Many of them are multi-racial/ethnic nations. There are tensions among ethnic groups in these nations caused by many factors, but these groups came together to make up a political entity, which has gained recognition from the international community. When a man and a woman come together to create a family, a Chinese phrase has it that the two have fulfilled their 'destiny' and that this 'destiny' should be prized.

In domestic majority-minorities relations, de-politicizing ethnicity while strengthening national identity might be a strategy for preserving national unity and winning success in the process of nation-building. Meanwhile, no country should intervene in the domestic affairs of other nations, including ethnic relations. The national boundaries recognized by the international community should be fully respected, even if there might be some debates about them. If nations handle both their domestic ethnic relations and their relations with other nations in such a mature manner, then a peaceful international order might be achieved.

When social development, economic prosperity, democracy, and cultural diversity reach a high level in most nations, and equality among different groups has been reached, then the tension among ethnic groups will fade and finally vanish, because there will be no need to encourage minorities to fight for their rights and benefits. When that stage has been reached, the concept of ethnic identity will lose its political meaning, retaining its linkages only with cultural heritage.

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