

EVOLUTION OF THE ETHNIC POLICY OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

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At a dinner on October 1, 1950, to celebrate the first anniversary of the People's Republic of China, Premier Zhou Enlai announced that "not only have all ethnic groups been united, but love of the motherland has also been growing in their hearts."¹ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) classified the state's ethnic groups as fifty-six distinct *minzu* (nations) in 1953-1954, with the fifty-five ethnicities other than the Han constituting six percent of the total population.² In the 1920s and early 1930s, the leaders of the CCP had originally advocated for the right of each *minzu* to self-determination, but in 1954, they denied the right of the ethnic groups to independence. Instead, they incorporated a system of ethnic representation in the national government and established autonomous ethnic areas. These strategies represent one stage in the development of CCP ethnic policy—a means by which the leaders met the political needs of the party from 1921 to their establishment of the People's Republic of China. The policy went through three phases, each reflecting the response of the CCP leaders to the pressures the party confronted: as it first emerged and was establishing itself politically, then as it struggled for survival against the Kuomintang and the Japanese invaders, and finally as it consolidated power as the legitimate government. The leaders of the CCP ultimately decided to adopt an ethnic policy involving *minzu* recognition, representation, and autonomous areas as part of their effort to create a secure, unitary state while appeasing ethnic aspirations that would undermine that effort.

¹ Guojia jiaoyu wiyuanhui (State Education Commission), ed. *Guoqing* (National conditions). Beijing Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 1994, quoted in Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 178.

² Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (London: University of California Press, 2011), 4.

The earliest policies of the Chinese Communist Party's leaders concerning ethnic minorities were underdeveloped, reflected their urban focus and the influence of Stalin-Marxist theories of nationalities, and served as a response to Kuomintang (KMT) policy.³ With little to no exposure to minorities in the cities from which the CCP emerged, the leaders relied upon the Soviet model for a multi-national federation. According to that model, all nationalities, as defined by a common territory, language, economic mode, and culture, have the right to self-government and self-determination.⁴ Hence the CCP leaders, as espoused by Mao Tse-tung in a letter in 1920, supported the right of China's nationalities, in areas like Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Qinghai, to achieve "self-government and self-determination."⁵ However, early CCP leaders did not consider ethnic minority policy to be a major concern, trusting that the issues of the minorities would be unimportant in the face of a communist revolution.⁶

Very quickly, though, the leaders of the CCP realized that taking a stronger stance on the right of ethnic minorities to independence would differentiate the party from its rival, the KMT. The KMT, struggling to unify China and consolidate power in the early 1920s, promoted a policy of ethnic assimilation and the idea of one great Chinese ethnicity within a singular Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*).⁷ However, ethnic minorities fiercely resisted the KMT's Hanification (*Hanhua*) policy because it equated Chinese nationalism with being Han Chinese.⁸ The CCP, in response, emphatically declared that it was "the only party capable of granting the nationalities self-rule" and promoted a federalist system to counter the KMT's unitary state.⁹ Its potency as a policy drew upon its ability to appear as both anti-imperialist and anti-KMT oppression.¹⁰ The need to appeal to minorities increased acutely with the dissolution of the First United Front in 1927, the subsequent flight of the CCP members into the countryside, the

³ This concept of ethnicity itself was relatively new to the Chinese. Only during the late nineteenth century did a concrete definition of ethnic differentiation truly emerge as a result of European influence and dissatisfaction with the Manchu ruling dynasty and imperialism. Previously, the Chinese constantly had to reconcile the concept of ethnic "Han" Chinese with assimilated foreigners who had conquered and led dynasties. This precedent of foreign rule meant that the idea of "Chinese" went beyond ethnic definitions. By the early twentieth century, this changed, and groups within China identified based on ethnicity. Rong Ma, "The Soviet Model's Influence and the Current Debate on Ethnic Relations," *Global Asia* (June 2010: 1): 3.

⁴ Ma, "The Soviet Model's Influence and the Current Debate on Ethnic Relations," 4.

⁵ Hao Shiyuan, "Mao Zedong dui jie jue zhongguo minzu wenti de lishi gongxian," *Minzu yanjiu* 5 (1993): 1, quoted in Katherine Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷ Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, 166.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁹ Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang*, 69.

¹⁰ Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, 173.

establishment of the Jiangxi Soviet in 1931, and the Long March in 1934- 1935. KMT extermination attempts throughout the Long March forced CCP members to take refuge in minority regions, forcing the leaders to “relate to interests of the nationalities.”¹¹ By necessity, the objective of the CCP’s ethnic policy became to mobilize ethnic groups to resist the KMT, or in the words of a CCP Sichuan provincial committee document, “to establish a united front with ethnic minority lower classes” against the KMT.¹² As a result of their struggle to survive in response to KMT threats, culminating in the Long March, “the issue of national minorities took on strategic, real- world consequences” for the CCP, spurring the communists to “propagandize their policies of national equality and self-determination.”¹³

The balance of this struggle between the KMT and the CCP changed with the increasingly aggressive territorial grabs of Japan in the late 1930s. These led to the first major shift of the CCP’s evolving ethnic policy. Emerging from the Long March severely weakened in 1935, the CCP faced further attempts by Chiang Kai-Shek to eliminate the rival party. Japan, however, had invaded Manchuria in 1931, forcing the KMT and CCP to contend with both the Japanese threat and the threats posed by each other. In order to resist the Japanese in 1935, and, more importantly, to secure the party’s survival, the leaders committed the CCP “to a willingness to join in a government of national defense” with the KMT.¹⁴ Reluctantly, the KMT joined in a Second United Front with the CCP in 1937. They were spurred by popular support of a national salvation movement triggered by the Japanese invasion and by the end of the civil war following the release of Chiang Kai-Shek from kidnapping.¹⁵ The CCP leaders stressed national salvation rather than communism and no longer emphasized the right of ethnic minorities to secede.¹⁶ Advocacy of independence remained dangerous to China’s stability in light of unrest in the northwest. Ethnic Turkis, rebelling in Xinjiang against misrule by the KMT-appointed government, established an East Turkestan Republic in 1933, then again in 1937.¹⁷ Moscow had, in response, deployed Russian troops to secure the area under the guise of overthrowing the rebel leaders. By the late 1930s, the region was “economically and politically a dependent of the Soviet

¹¹ Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang*, 68.

¹² *Minzu wenti wenxian* (Collections of documents on nationality issues), Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Chubanshe, 1991, quoted in Zhao, *A Nation State by Construction*, 174.

¹³ Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation*, 27.

¹⁴ Marius B. Jansen, *Japan and China: From War to Peace 1894-1972* (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company, 1975), 424.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 425.

¹⁶ Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, 175.

¹⁷ Gardner Bovington, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 36.

Union.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, the CCP leaders continued to use their recognition of the existence of diverse ethnicities, in contrast to the KMT’s new policy of denying the existence of distinct ethnicities within a unitary China, as a means of winning the favor of the minorities. The communists argued that political recognition of diversity was “essential to state legitimacy and anti- colonial resistance,” but they no longer advocated the right of minorities’ to gain independence.¹⁹ Thus, the CCP leaders changed their policy from one supporting ethnic self-determination to one with a more unified nationalist message in response to the threats posed by Japan, the Soviets, and rebellious minorities, while they still retained a stance counter to KMT policy.

After benefiting from Japanese aggression and the resulting fervent Chinese nationalism, the CCP emerged from WWII a strong contender to the KMT government. In 1949, members of the CCP captured Peking and declared the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.²⁰ As the CCP asserted itself as the legitimate governing source of China, its party concerns changed dramatically. No longer the underdog agitating for overthrow of the entrenched power, the new leaders of the PRC were now responsible for securing China from external and internal threats and for consolidating power. With this new responsibility and shift in concerns, the leaders of the CCP asserted a new ethnic policy. That reversed their previous stance on self-determination and the formation of a federation, yet still reflected an acknowledgement of the need for the support of the minorities. Self- determination became untenable now that the CCP was obligated to maintain China’s borders by a need for legitimacy. The CCP leaders previously supported self-determination with the intent of forming a federation (similar to the Soviet Union). However, the Republic of China under the KMT had already recognized the plebiscite outcome for independence in Outer Mongolia in 1946. Further, the Soviets had made it clear that they would keep Outer Mongolia independent as a buffer, thus defeating the possibility of a federation. Article 50 of the Common Program, which the first Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference adopted on September 29, 1949, outlined the CCP’s new stance:

All nationalities within the boundaries of the PRC are equal. They should establish unity and mutual aid among themselves, and oppose imperialism and their own public enemies, so that the PRC will become a big fraternal and cooperative family composed of all its

¹⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹⁹ Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation*, 29.

²⁰ Jansen, *Japan and China*, 444.

nationalities. Nationalism and chauvinism shall be opposed. Acts involving discrimination, oppression, and disrupting the unity of the various nationalities shall be prohibited.²¹

To justify this reversal of position regarding the right to self-determination, the leaders of the CCP recast their rise to power as the achievement of self-determination and liberation for all Chinese people from foreign imperialism, reinterpreting it in “the context of China’s right to win freedom from foreign imperialist interference.”²² In a cable from the New China News Agency to a branch in northwest China, a Beijing CCP leader explained that the party had advocated self-determination “for the sake of strengthening the minorities’ opposition to KMT reactionary rule.”²³ Though that was “correct at the time,” the CCP announced that it would now “emphasize cooperation and unity among all nationalities in order to complete the great cause of national unification and to defeat the conspiracy of imperialists.”²⁴ The fact that the leaders of the CCP tried so hard to justify their new policy indicates that they were significantly concerned with the response of ethnic minorities to CCP rule, even though they only comprised 6% of the population of China.

Consequently, the leaders of the CCP turned to policies that would help them create and maintain a secure, unitary, and multiethnic state, while at the same time appeasing ethnic aspirations. As a result, the leaders of the CCP implemented a system of autonomous ethnic areas at the founding of the PRC. The 1953 Election Law guaranteed a minimum of 150 minority delegates in the first National People’s Congress and at least one delegate per ethnic minority, a representation that far exceeded their relative population.²⁵ The CCP leaders subsequently were obligated to define what those ethnic minorities were, a process that led to the official classification of fifty-six *minzu*. After defining the *minzu*, the leaders of the CCP devised a means of incorporating them into a singular China in order to retain for the PRC the resources of the land occupied by each *minzu*.²⁶ As Mao noted succinctly, “When we say China has vast land, rich resources, and a huge population what that actually means is that the Han nationality has a huge

²¹ *Minzu zhengce wenxuan* (Selected documents on nationality policies), Urumchi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1985, quoted in Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, 175.

²² *Ibid.*, 175-176.

²³ New China News Agency cable, quoted in *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁴ *Dangdai Zhongguo minzu gongzuo dashiji* (Chronological records of contemporary China’s nationality work), Minzu Chubanshe, 1989, quoted in *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁵ Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation*, 18-19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

population and ethnic minorities have vast land and rich resources.”²⁷ Areas of ethnic minority concentration comprised 64.3% of all of China, containing (according to official PRC publications) 26.9% of the cultivated land, 52.5% of the water resources, and significant amounts of oil and coal. In addition, these areas were located on borders essential for China’s national security.²⁸ Hence, the CCP leaders confronted the challenge of all previous governments of China: reconciling the issues of legitimacy and maintaining power over the land, its people, and their resources. The CCP leaders worked to appease ethnic concerns as part of their larger policy of consolidating and creating a unified China.

The CCP’s ethnic policy evolved from 1921 to 1954 in order to meet the needs of the party. The leaders of the CCP first used the policy as a response to the KMT, then as a means of survival in the face of KMT and Japanese threats, and finally as a tool of the government in power to keep legitimacy and resources. The reasoning behind the decisions of the leaders of the CCP to develop this particular ethnic policy over time provide a background for their establishment of ethnic autonomous areas and provisions for the rights of ethnic minorities. This system would nevertheless fail to respect ethnic autonomy and promote full ethnic equality, as outlined in its stated goals and provisions. An understanding of how the leaders of the CCP finally decided to resolve the issue of ethnic minorities as it transitioned into the legitimate power of China is necessary to explain this failure.

²⁷ Mao Zedong, “Criticize Han Chauvinism,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 5 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1997).

²⁸ Zhao, *A Nation-State By Construction*, 178.