

Behind the Great Wall

Identification of China's "Ethnic Minorities" & the State's Assimilation Process

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to give an overview of the minorities in China. Other than the majority Han population, up to 55 officially recognized "nationalities" live today in China. The Chinese Communist rule recognized these "ethnic minorities" or "minority nationalities" through a long and complex process that started in 1949. Most of these minorities live in southern China, Tibet, and the western Province of Xinjiang or near the borders of neighboring countries. Despite their small numbers if compared with the Han majority, ethnic minorities, occupy 60 percent of the national territory, including most strategic borderlands, contain extensive mineral and pastoral resources. Today's Chinese rule don't allow much freedom for minorities when they don't submit fully to the Communist Party authorities and power. Like the Muslim Hui ethnic minority, many minorities are assimilated and enjoy some sort of freedom of worship and belief. Others, like the Uighurs and the Tibetans, don't enjoy this type of freedom and have to struggle in order to resist the assimilation policies of the state.

Keywords: Minorities in China, Tibet Question, The Uighur of Xinjiang, Ethnic Cleansing, Assimilation in China

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Behind the Great Wall Identification of China's "Ethnic Minorities" & the State's Assimilation Process

Introduction

The People's Republic of China is the legitimate heir of one of the oldest and richest civilizations that ever lived. Situated in the heart of Eastern Asia, China possesses a very vast cultivable land and remains the unchallenged most populous country in the world. According to a demographic report published in 2015, China is populated with around 1.4 billion people which constitute 19 percent of the world's total population (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015, p. 1). Thus, for every five people living today one of them is Chinese.

With this enormous population numbers comes many big social, economic, cultural and political challenges. Many challenges date back to decades or even centuries, others are new. The existence of over 100 million minority members in China today constitute a challenge for both parties; the Chinese rule aiming to assimilate them, and the minorities aiming to have more rights and preserve their cultural, linguistics and religion identities. Hence, many challenges and conflicts resulted from these two different aspirations and ended in the death of thousands.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, many attempts were underway to assimilate the minorities; mainly the Uighurs and the Tibetans. Beijing allowed some minorities to express freely their identities and beliefs, others are not allowed to do so. In this paper, the Minority Identification Process and the Status of Minorities will be discussed after exhibiting a historical background and the formation of the current Chinese state. Additionally, a mapping of Chinese minorities will be displayed before addressing many issues and questions related to minorities; especially to the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Autonomous Region and the Buddhist Tibetan in the Xizang Autonomous Region.

Chinese Dynasties and the Formation of the State

The Chinese history and present were never simple or had long-lasting periods of stability, but were, on the contrary, full of challenges, conflicts, and invasions that resulted in a big number of Chinese dynasties rising and falling sequentially. The Xia dynasty (c.2700-1600 BCE) was followed by the Shang dynasty (c.1600-1046 BCE) and the long-lasting Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE), then followed by the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) and the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) which was considered as the golden age in Chinese history and witnessed the adaptation of Confucian policies that ended by the rise of a civil service and governmental trained body with Confucian thoughts (Kennedy, 1988, p. 7).

The fall of the Han dynasty led to the split of China to three independent kingdoms where military generals had the upper-hand over the realm and the Emperors. This period of time witnessed many migrations and displacement waves in China and led to an assimilation of many minorities. During these periods of chaos and instability, the upper class got richer and sympathized with the Buddhism which became the official religion of many regions in China. Taoism was becoming popular too between the people and was adopted by many (Pregadio, 2008, p. 67). Other dynasties followed the three independent kingdoms, the most lasting ones are

the Tang dynasty (618–906), the Song dynasty (960–1279) where Confucianism underwent a revival, the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The latter was the last Chinese dynasty followed in 1911 by the declaration of the Chinese Republic that lasted until 1949.

During the last years of the Qing dynasty, a political and social trend emerged in China with a goal of changing the existing old regime. Democratic, socialist and nationalist thoughts started to gain ground between Chinese and led to many rebellions and internal crises that ended with the Xinhai Revolution to the emergence of a new regime; the Republic. The establishment of the Chinese Republic was not at ease as many internal crises were affecting the country; the Kuomintang Nationalist Party emerged as a strong militant group aiming to rule, the parliament was closed in 1914, warlords took control of many regions and provinces, and Japan controlled some parts of China.

In 1921 the Chinese Communist Party was founded by many including Mao Zedong (1893-1976) who headed the party in 1935. The Communist Party rose in China in parallel to the rapid expansion of industrialization, labor strikes and unrests. China was brought under Kuomintang control and Beijing was captured in 1928. Zedong led many peasant rebellions but they were crashed and the country came under the rule of a military dictatorship led by Chiang Kai-Shek (1887-1975) in 1928. However, Zedong adopted a new military approach and carried out guerrilla warfare. After the end of the Second World War, the Chinese civil war resumed between Communists and Kuomintang. At first, the Kuomintang were successful but the Communists took Beijing and Shanghai in 1949. The remaining Kuomintang fled to Taiwan (Meyer, 2012, p. 2) and Mao Zedong declared the People's Republic of China in Beijing.

During the rule of Zedong, many borders and minorities-related conflicts took place. In 1950, China sent the army into Tibet enforcing a longstanding claim of sovereignty and suppressed a large-scale revolt in the area in 1959. A brief conflict erupted with India over the disputed Himalayan border in 1963, and long diplomatic-ideological conflicts with the Soviet Union and the United States of America were overheard worldwide during the years of the Cold War.

On another hand, the industry was nationalized under the Communists and peasants were encouraged to form co-operatives. Many large-scale economic and social reforms failed to transfer the Chinese economy to a state of prosperity and wealth, instead, it led to the Great Chinese Famine between 1959 and 1961 that killed up to 45 million people. Zedong was not affected in any way in this man-made disaster and pledge to continue his reforms. For him: “when there is not enough to eat people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill” (Tyner, 2012, p. 81). He adds in a manner closer to mockery that “Deaths have benefits. They can fertilize the ground [...] We are prepared to sacrifice 300 million Chinese for the victory of the world revolution” (Johnson & Zimring, 2009, p. 261), and pledge to reassert his authority by launching a 10-year political and ideological campaign aimed at reviving revolutionary spirit, produces massive social, economic and political upheaval; The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Behind the Great Wall Identification of China's "Ethnic Minorities" & the State's Assimilation Process

The main tool of the Cultural Revolution were students who formed the Red Guard and started to root out old habits, beliefs, and attitudes. The Guard pressured intellectuals, officials and anyone who shows opposition to the ruling Communist Party or to the official state policies. Religion and religious were persecuted during these years and many places of worship were destroyed (Luo, 1991, p. 145). The Cultural Revolution years changed many old-time Chinese religious traditions as well as economic structures of the country.

The ruling Communist Party imposed a "One Child Policy" in 1979, years after Mao Zedong stimulated people to have lots of children which led to a baby boom during the 1970s. The Fifth National People's Congress announce the implementation of the "One Child Policy": each couple could have one child. This policy was imposed and applicable on Han majority only and not on minorities. It is true to say that this policy had many social impacts and wasn't always applicable due to corruption, and briberies given to state officials, but it was an example of the strength of the Chinese central government that can impose a decision against human nature onto an entire nation (Boden, 2008, p. 104).

In 1972, the American President Richard Nixon visited China and both countries declared a desire to normalize relations. It wasn't long when diplomatic relations were established between China and the United States followed by China's "Open-door policy" (1986-1990) that opened the country to foreign investment and encourages the development of a market economy and private sector. Since then the Chinese economy flourished and showed growth to the extent that economists mention a "Chinese Economic Miracle" to explain this growth success story and the huge increase in Chinese industrial output and the improvement in the population standards of living. According to many economic reports and studies some research optimistically have calculated that by the year 2020 China will be the world's largest economy (Cobbold, 1996, p. 114), many other realistic economists made 2030 or 2040 as the dates when Chinese economy will be the first in the world. Despite these conflicting studies and results, what is sure is that the Chinese economy showed growth during the last two decades and continues to show some more.

The People's Republic of China is ruled today by the Communist Party who controls all aspects of life in the country. The party members control the media, the educational system, the economy, and run the administration and the State. The National Party Congress, which is convened once every five years, elects a central committee that in turn elects a new politburo that actually rules China. Xi Jinping is the current General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. This almost absolute control of the party over the State and the unification and homogeneous aspirations and ideology of the Chinese official communist doctrine create many problems and challenges in China which can range from crops harvesting issues to minorities' issues.

Minority Identification Process and the Status of Minorities

Other than the majority Han population, up to 55 officially recognized “nationalities” live today in China. The Chinese Communist rule recognized these “ethnic minorities” or “minority nationalities” through a long and complex process that started in 1949. It is essential to define the meaning of “minority nationalities” in the Chinese context and to address the issue of their process of identification by the State, followed by a listing of the Chinese minorities.

In the Chinese context:

“The term most commonly used is *minzu*, meaning *a people* and *an ethnic group*, and it was taken directly from the Japanese term *minzoku* at the start of the twentieth century [...] The definition of ethnic identity is an unusually complex issue in China as each group has two definitions: self-definition by the ethnic group itself and definition by the state” (Gladney, Iredale, Bilik & Guo, 2003, p. 8).

Wang Linzhu offers in his research on Chinese minorities a more accurate definition of “minority nationalities” by stating that:

“The Chinese term “*minzu*” was reinterpreted in the early twentieth century as the translation of “nation”. Following the Soviet tradition, “*minzu*” was used as the synonym of “nationality” within the People’s Republic of China until the 1990s. After the dissolution of former socialist states, the State Nationality Affairs Commission became the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) to avoid any possible political implications deriving from the concept of nationality. In the most recent reports submitted by China to international human rights bodies, “ethnic minorities” and “regional ethnic autonomy” have replaced the old terms “minority nationalities” and “regional national autonomy”. Although the term “nationality” is still being used in practice, the official stance seems to prefer “ethnicity” or “ethnic group” as the translation of “*minzu*” in relation to Chinese minorities” (Linzhu, 2015, pp. 3-4).

Thus, the content of “ethnic minority” and the Chinese ethnic practice had been influenced by the Marxist doctrines (Guangxue, & Lianzhu, 2005, p. 76). According to the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, a nation is “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Smith, 2010, p. 11), but Zedong did not implement Stalin’s definition literally or solely when it comes to identifying minorities since “minority groups in China experienced uneven socioeconomic development” (Linzhu, 2015, p. 7). Hence, the Chinese leader ordered in terms of the definition and criteria employed in the Chinese identification project a flexible definition, in accordance with Stalin’s four-element concept of a nation and the reality of Chinese ethno-national situation (Linzhu, 2015, pp. 7-8).

Other than the theoretical identification, Wang Linzhu explained how the State identified minorities in practice. He states that:

Behind the Great Wall

Identification of China's "Ethnic Minorities" & the State's Assimilation Process

“The Common Program of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference recognized in 1949 the equal status of all ethnicities in China and provided for regional autonomy where national minorities were concentrated. [Additionally], the 1952 General Program for the Implementation of Regional Ethnic Autonomy further expanded the ethnic territorial autonomy system. It provided autonomous agencies with a wide range of rights on the matters of local economy, finance, and culture. However, when the ethnic territorial autonomy regimes were first established, there had yet to any accurate records made of minority population statistics. Hence, a number of minority visitation teams were sent to minority areas from 1950 to 1953 [...]. The major tasks of the teams were to [...] investigate and collect relevant information on minority groups” (Linzhu, 2015, pp. 5-6).

Linzhu continues by demonstrating the first findings followed by the governmental action, saying that:

“In the 1953 national census, over 400 self-reported groups were recorded. This number, however, was apparently too many to be a suitable figure for implementing regional autonomy [...]. An official project of ethnic identification with distinctive Chinese characteristics commenced nationwide after the self-reported census. Hundreds of ethnologists, linguists, historians, sociologists, and archaeologists were divided into teams to investigate the claims of self-reported groups [...]. The Ethnic Identification Project [...] was a collective term for a series of Communist-era expeditions [...] to determine once and for all the precise ethno-national composition of the country, so that these different groups might be integrated into a centralized, territorially stable polity” (Linzhu, 2015, pp. 6-7).

He concluded that:

“[...] minorities were classified pursuant to various criteria with contingency. Some identification was based on language [...] some identification was made in accordance with history and ancestry origin [...] Groups were also identified on the basis of religious beliefs [...] Others were recognized on the basis of national consciousness and ancestral heritage. [...] In practice, large groups, geographically or numerically, were very likely to be approved as minorities, whilst small numbered groups might often be ruled out or incorporated into other minorities... [Leaving] enough space for the communists to control the identification process for political and/or economic considerations” (Linzhu, 2015, p. 8).

It is true to say that the Chinese authorities took into consideration the will of the people during the identification process, but it kept the final decision for itself which led to many criticisms to the process as a whole. Additionally, other critics were given due to the identification of some minorities as branches of other minorities, and to neglecting small groups and depriving them to be recognized as minorities.

The ethnic identification was primarily done during the 1950s so the practice in the 1980s avoided identifying new minorities. “The ethnic campaign during this period attempted to absorb

and incorporate the proposed groups into already identified minorities through linguistic, territorial, and/or historical ties as much as possible” (Fifty Years of Ethnic Work, 1999, pp. 230-232), leaving many without an official recognition.

The status of Chinese ethnic minorities is protected by the constitution. Article 4 states that:

“All nationalities in the People’s Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China’s nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any acts that undermine the unity of the nationalities or instigate their secession are prohibited. The state helps the areas inhabited by minority nationalities speed up their economic and cultural development in accordance with the peculiarities and needs of the different minority nationalities. Regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of minority nationalities live in compact communities; in these areas organs of self-government are established for the exercise of the right of autonomy. All the national autonomous areas are inalienable parts of the People’s Republic of China. The people of all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs” (China’s Constitution, 2017, p. 5).

The Article 59 of the constitution states that all the minority nationalities are entitled to appropriate representation in the National People’s Congress (China’s Constitution, 2017, p. 15), while Article 65 declares that minority nationalities are entitled to appropriate representation on the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (China’s Constitution, 2017, p. 17). It is true to say that the Chinese constitution offers equality and protection for ethnic minorities, but it wasn’t always the case since some practices violated the constitution and many other laws. Additionally, Article 59 and 65 left the number of the representatives in official institution ambiguous and dependent on what the central authority sees fit.

China’s Ethnic Minorities Mapping

By 1954, thirty-eight ethnic minority groups were official recognized. By 1964, another fifteen were identified, with the Lhoba and the Jino ethnic groups added to the list in 1965 and 1979 respectively, solidifying the official fifty-five ethnic minority groups in China (Hasmath & Hsu, 2009, p. 147). Hence, in the today’s People’s Republic of China, there is 56 state recognized ethnic group. The Han majority accounts for 91.5 percent of the total population and the 55 ethnic minority groups¹ make up 8.5 percent (Zang, 2016, p. 1). The most predominant

¹ The Achang, Bai, Blang, Bonan, Bouyei, Chaoxian, Dai, Daur, Deang, Dong, Dongxiang, Dulong, Ewenki, Gaoshan, Gelao, Gin, Hani, Hezhen, Hui, Jingpo, Jino, Kazak, Kirgiz, Lahu, Li, Lisu, Luoba, Man, Maonan, Miao, Monba, Mongol, Mulam, Naxi, Nu, Oroqen, Primi, Qiang, Russ, Salar, She, Shui, Tagik, Tatar, Tu, Tujia, Uighur, Uzbek, Wa, Xibe, Yao, Yi, Yugur, Zang (Tibetan) and the Zhuang.

Behind the Great Wall
Identification of China’s “Ethnic Minorities” & the State’s Assimilation Process

minorities are the Zhuang, the Uighur, the Hui, the Manchu, the Miao, the Yi, the Tujia, the Zang known as the Tibetan and the Mongol, etc.

Table 1: Number and Percentages of Ethnic Minorities in China (Mackerras, 2003, p. 135)

Census	Ethnic Minorities (Million)	Proportion of Total (%)
1953	34	5.89
1964	39.9	5.77
1982	66.4	6.62
1990	90.6	8.01
2000	106.5	8.41
2010	113.8	8.5

Most of these minorities live in southern China, Tibet, and the western Province of Xinjiang or near the borders of neighboring countries. Despite their small numbers if compared with the Han majority, ethnic minorities “occupy 60 percent of the national territory, including most strategic borderlands, contain extensive mineral and pastoral resources” (MacFarquhar, 2011, p. 52). Autonomous regions established for minorities house 75 percent of their population which include five provincial-level regions, 76 prefectures and 699 counties, and account for disproportionate shares of various resources and raw materials like oil, uranium, tin and copper (Maurer-Fazio, Hughes, & Dandan, 2004, p. 3). Due to these geographical, demographic and economic facts, China pursued a special policy towards its own minorities who are considered more important than their share of the total population.

As for the geographical distribution of minorities, many books and booklets published by Chinese official authorities concluded that:

“China’s ethnic groups live together over vast areas while some live in individual concentrated communities in small areas. In some cases minority peoples can be found living in concentrated communities in areas inhabited mainly by the Han people, while in other cases the situation is just the other way round. This distribution pattern has taken shape throughout China’s long history of development as ethnic groups migrated and mingled. The national minorities, though small in numbers, are scattered over vast areas. Minority peoples live in every province, autonomous region and municipality directly under the Central Government, and in most county-level units two or more ethnic groups live together” (National Minorities Policy, 1999, pp. 449-450).

As for linguistics minorities, the Chinese society speaks a large number of languages or dialects. The official widely famous language is the Mandarin spoken by some 70 percent of the population which is “the standard language based on Beijing dialect and spoken on Televisions. In almost every provinces educated people are bilingual; they speak a dialect and the standard language” (Xu, 2008, p. 1). Some “dialects” are very different from the Mandarin, so some people consider them as a single language, others refer to them as just dialects. Besides the

Mandarin, other “dialects” are spoken in China: Jin, Wu, Min, Hui, Gan, Hakka, Yue, Xiang and Pinghua (Xu, 2008, pp. 1-2). The vast geography of China and the many differences between “dialects” make communication between linguistic groups hard. The diffusion and propagation of officially-backed Mandarin in minorities’ provinces create many conflicts with minority groups. Many other languages with their own distinct grammatical and phonological differences are used by ethnic minorities; some twenty-one ethnic minority groups have unique writing systems (Hasmath & Hsu, 2009, p. 47).

China has a rich religious diversity. Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Legalism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Confucianism are the main religions. Despite being the old dominant religion in China, Confucianism has lost its importance and dominance after the Communist revolution. “Buddhism continues to occupy the majority of the south and south-west regions, Protestant and Catholic followers have begun to occupy China’s eastern regions” (Yzola, 2015) during the last decades. Taoism and many folk religion still have hundreds of millions of adherents dispersed on the entire Chinese map.

Ten of China’s minority nationalities are predominantly Muslim and comprise roughly one-fifth of all of China’s minorities. Between 1990 and 2000, China’s Muslims increased by 15.5 percent, compared to growth rates for China and for the Han people of 9.6 and 9.1 percent respectively. The two numerically largest Muslim nationality groups in China are the Hui and the Uighur, the remaining eight groups are the Kazak, Uzbek, Tajik, Tatar, Kirgiz, Salar, Dongxiang, and Bonan (Sáenz Embrick, & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 253). The Xinjiang Autonomous Region located in the northwest of China is dominated by Muslim who are mostly from the Uighur ethnic minority. Other Muslims groups live elsewhere in China; the Hai ethnic group can be found in Ningxia Autonomous region and in Gansu in the center of the country.

The Tibetan Buddhism is dominant in the Tibet Autonomous Region (or Xizang Autonomous Region) west of China. The preference of the Tibetan to their leader the Dalai Lama and the existence of a strong religious authority and institutions is looked at by Beijing as a threat to its authority. As for the Hong Kong’s Special Administrative Region situated in the east of China, a multi-faith diversity exists with a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. The Zhuang ethnic minority is the largest minority group living in China, this minority have a long history and rich traditions and lives mostly in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China. The Zhuang practices old Chinese folk religious tradition, and both Taoism and Buddhism or a fusion of the two are important in the community life. The Mongol ethnic minority lives in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in the north of China near the border of the Mongolian state and is a mix of Russian and traditional Mongolian herder cultures. In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Mandarin and the Mongolian languages are used, the latter is not similar to the language used in the state of Mongolia.

In the following, we address many issues and questions related to minorities, especially to the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Autonomous Region and the Buddhist Tibetan in the Xizang Autonomous Region.

Behind the Great Wall Identification of China's "Ethnic Minorities" & the State's Assimilation Process

The Uighur of Xinjiang and the Muslim Hai: Separatism and Assimilation

The Uighurs are Muslims² with Turkic origins. Their language is related to Turkish, and regard themselves as culturally and ethnically close to Central Asian nations; mainly to the people and states established after the collapse of the Soviet Union in central Asia. Most of the Uighurs live in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region northwest of China limiting the borders of Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The Xinjiang Autonomous Region was formed in 1955 and is the largest of China's administrative regions, and until recently its population was mostly Uighur.

Historically, "Chinese interest in Xinjiang originated out of the need to safeguard mainland China from foreign incursions. As such, this westernmost border region [...] was regarded as a buffer zone against these attacks from beyond the Great Wall" (Warikoo, 1992, pp. 2-20). The importance of Xinjiang comes from its geographical position. It allowed China to extend its political influence over the people of Central Asia. The Han, the Ming and the Qing dynasties established administrations to look after the affairs of the central Asian dependencies of Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Tibet. During the Qing dynasty, numerous oasis-settlements were created and a policy of permanent settlements of Han Chinese families was applied in order to change the ethnographic and demographic composition of Xinjiang (Warikoo, 2016, pp. 2-3). This policy ended by conquering the Xinjiang province by the Qing dynasty and incorporated it into China.

The adaptation of Islam in Xinjiang was related to a series of reasons; The Tang dynasty power declined and Islam rose between the eighth and the tenth century; the ruling Prince Satuk Boghra Khan (944-1037 AD) introduced Islam to the region in the tenth century; the Mongol armies took control of Central Asia, including Xinjiang, in the thirteenth century, then Mongolian rulers converted to Islam which contributed in the alteration of the religious identity of the people living in the region (Warikoo, 2016, pp. 3-4). The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw many rebellions in Xinjiang against the Chinese rule. After the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 and the establishment of the Republic, "Xinjiang entered into an era of warlordism which lasted until the mid-1940s. All successive provincial leaders were Han Chinese [...] whose authoritarian policies acted as a catalyst for a series of Muslim uprisings that rocked Xinjiang from 1931 to 1949" (Warikoo, 2016, p. 6). Many massacres with ethnic backgrounds took place in the region. Uighur separatism was on the rise, but it was crushed by the Chinese with the military help of the Soviets. An attempt to establish "the Turkic Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (TIRER) between 1933 and 1934 [...] ended in failure and the Xinjiang was completely brought under control by the Chinese Communist forces in 1949" (Warikoo, 2016, p. 7).

² According to James Millward, a professor of History at Georgetown University who is specialized in the history of China and Central Eurasia, the "Uighurs are mostly Muslims, but their individual expression of this affinity takes varied forms: for some it is a secularized cultural identity; others practice in a traditional Sufi manner involving shrine pilgrimages, music, and chanting; and more recently some have gravitated to Islamist ideology that condemns Sufism and condones political violence" (Millward, 2014).

The rise of Islamism all across Central Asia (Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, Mujahidin in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, etc.), provided thrust to the radical Islamic forces in Xinjiang, and religious factor has assumed significance in the ongoing Uighur nationalism, separatism, and violence. A growing Uighur demand for a separate homeland and violent acts have brought national and international attention (Warikoo, 2016, p. 7). At the same time, social and political movement in Xinjiang witnessed during recent years intensifying demands and struggle for more autonomous power, a better standard of living, and more religious and cultural rights. Internationally, the World Uighur Congress members living outside of China try to promote the minority's demands and to expose Chinese suppression to the world. Additionally, Turkey showed interest in the Xinjiang unrest during the last years and called several times for the improvement of Uighur's members' life and to the release of prisoners. On the opposite side, the Chinese central government looks onto the Uighur with suspicion and see any of their movement as an introduction to the establishment of a separate state which aims to undermine Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Islamic religious affiliation of the Uighur plays a role in the disturbance with the authorities and with the Han majority. Many violent events took place in Xinjiang and other regions between the Han and the Uighur during the 1990s, and between 2009 and 2014, leaving hundreds of dead from both sides. Despite playing a big role in this conflict, religious differences are not solely the reason for the dispute, many other socioeconomic factors play a role in rising the tension between the two groups. In Xinjiang, many areas are occupied by the Uighur, but the people working in official administrative are mostly Han (Winston, 2012, p. 483). Additionally, during the last decades, development was underway in Xinjiang; much governmental funding were spent to develop the region and ended by attracting many of the Han ethnic groups coming from neighboring regions to work and live in Xinjiang. This massive displacement altered some of the identity of the region when the Han started to constitute a little less than the half of the inhabitant, leading to the fact that the Uighur became a minority in Xinjiang (Walcott, & Johnson, 2014, 64).

Table 2: Demographic Changes in Xinjiang (Howell, & Fan, 2011, p. 123)

	1945	1982	1996	2008	2010
Han (%)	6.2	40.3	41.1	39.2	40.8
Uighur (%)	82.7	45.7	50.6	46.1	45.8
Hui (%)	2.8	4.3	4.9	4.5	4.5
Kazak (%)	1.1	6.9	8	7.1	6.5
Other (%)	7.2	2.8	2.8	3.1	2.6
Total (million)	3.6	13.1	16.8	21.3	21.8

Behind the Great Wall Identification of China's "Ethnic Minorities" & the State's Assimilation Process

When it comes to Muslim minorities, the Chinese state policy doesn't paint all ethnic groups with the same brush. The Hui ethnic minority, which is the dominant Muslim minority in China is mostly treated in a good way in the condition of submission to authorities:

"It seems clear that Hui Muslims have been granted so much more religious latitude because almost none have challenged secular authorities. The Hui religious leader of a Sufi sect [...] was reportedly allowed to establish a "virtual religious state" with one and a half million followers and a wide network of mosques and religious schools [...] The price of this freedom was his profession of absolute loyalty to the Chinese state" (Bovingdon, 2010, p. 68).

A media report from 2016 on Deutsche Welle concluded that:

"While their fellow Muslim Uighurs in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region are experiencing severe restrictions on their religious freedoms, the Hui mostly practice their faith openly, and in certain areas are enjoying a resurgence in their religious participation. The reason for their success has to do with centuries of remarkable assimilation, while also maintaining their identity [...] the Hui took the path of assimilation, speak Mandarin and adapted their religious traditions to the local customs [...] Another reason for the Hui's relative freedom are the characteristics that distinguish them from the Uighurs. The [latter are] ethnically distinct, and does not speak Mandarin as a first language. Most importantly, they have a homeland that they wish to claim. The majority of Uighurs live in the far-western province of Xinjiang. Many of the ethno-religious group seek independence from China, and the Uighurs as such are oppressed for it" (Dörrer, 2016).

When it comes to the ideology and to the policy of the Chinese Central government in dealing with religious groups, it is the following: you either assimilate with the majority under the Communist rule or you will be exposed to all forms of pressure. The Uighurs know this policy very well, as they have felted it for many decades. Recently, authorities are leading two form of policies to assimilate the Uighurs; the first is a long list of pressures that can range from forbidding fasting in Ramadan, barring Mosques to call for prayers, banning children under 18 from entering mosques, ignoring the Uighur culture and language (Rashid, 2016), passports confiscating (China confiscates passports, 2016), enforcing security pressures that can range from arrests and trials to strengthening military presence, to labelling Uighurs aspirations as terrorist action, and the reaction of the Chinese authorities as a "war on terrorism" (Siddiqui, 2015). The second is to promote China as a multicultural and multiethnic country by organizing a wide range of cultural activities with ethnic minorities, and by doing so increase soft power at home and abroad (Montefiore, 2013). The many forms of pressure performed by China towards the Uighurs led in the past years to a revival of their religious, linguistic and cultural identities which might end up to many more fierce confrontations with the authorities in the future.

Tibetan Ethnic Minority: The Lamaist Society and State Assimilation

The Tibet Autonomous Region or Xizang Autonomous Region is the home of around 3 million people. An additional 3 million Tibetan ethnic groups live in China outside the Autonomous Region. Xizang is located in the west of China and occupies a vast area of plateaus and mountains in Central Asia, including Mount Everest, limiting the border of India, Bhutan, Nepal and the disputed Kashmir region. Historically, the Tibet lands were simultaneously occupied by Chinese dynasties and India. Despite being a land where the Chinese and India “cold wars” took place, Tibetan had some glorious years when they occupied, in 763 AD per example, China, and its capital. Before the 1950s Xizang enjoyed a *de facto* independence and was isolated from the rest of the world and constituted a unique cultural and religious community with the dominance of the Tibetan language, the Tibetan Buddhism and with the Dalai Lamas who play the role of spiritual and temporal leaders of the Tibetan people.

The Buddhist “Lamaism” (doctrine of the Lamas) is very strong between Tibetan. The region was underdeveloped, and the ruling class is highly influenced by the Lamas where they have interest and power in almost all aspects and fields of the body-politic. This religious underdeveloped type of a regime was on the exact opposite side of the Communist one established in Beijing. Due to its richness of resources and its closeness to India; which marks a strategic importance of the region, the newly established Chinese Communist rule under Mao Zedong invaded the Tibetan region. In 1950, China controlled the Tibetan region and forced the Tibetan government led by the Dalai Lama to recognize China’s rule in return for promises to protect Tibet’s political system and Tibetan Buddhism (Norbu, 2001, pp. 105-106). Many promises were unfulfilled so a Tibetan revolt took place in 1959, but was brutally suppressed by the Chinese forces, and the Dalai Lama was forced to flee into exile. Tibet’s incorporation into the People’s Republic of China remains a highly controversial issue, both home and abroad. Some consider China’s action to be an invasion of a sovereign country, labeling it as an occupation by a foreign power. Others, mainly the Chinese, believe that Tibet has historically been part of China and that they liberated Tibetan from a repressive feudal regime.

Other than the legitimacy issue of the Chinese rule in Tibet, the conflict between the two parties is highly influenced by religion. Zedong declared in a meeting with the Dalai Lama in 1955 that the: “so-called religion is poison, religion only harms the human race. It does nothing helpful. The great poison of religion is particularly pervasive among Tibetans and Mongolians” (Lempert, 2012, p. 95). The current President of the People’s Republic of China puts the issue in a more political obvious way: “Religious groups [...] must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party of China” (China’s Xi stresses, 2016). On the opposite side, for a Lamaist society, religion is highly important and constitute the core of the Tibetan people identity and culture. The Chinese authorities don’t mind any kind of worship or religious freedom to any of the minorities, on condition that the religious group is submissive to the state, the Communist Party and shows unquestionable loyalty to the regime. The Chinese authorities don’t allow any minority group, whether it is ethnic, religious or linguistic to be its competitor, but leaves religious freedom for any group who don’t show challenge for the rule.

Behind the Great Wall
Identification of China’s “Ethnic Minorities” & the State’s Assimilation Process

After entering it in 1950, the communist enforced an almost total integration and assimilation of the Tibet with China, used force to undermine Tibetan autonomy and destroy Tibetan identity. The Xizang Autonomous Region continues to be under a relentless reign of terror directed against the religious community and lay believers. They denied the population the freedom of religion and movement and launched an anti-Dalai Lama campaigns, etc. The limited autonomy given to Xizang by the Chinese Constitution is further undercut by the Communist Party’s power monopoly, operative behind the scenes in every department or office of the local government. Most officials in the Tibet region are non-Tibetans cadres following orders from Han majority ruling elite in Beijing (Norbu, 2001, pp. 106-113).

Statistics shows discrimination towards the Tibetan ethnic group in the Xizang Autonomous Region. In 1990, the total labor force of Tibetan origins is 957 thousand and 49.6 percent of them are working. The Han labor force in the Autonomous Region constitutes only 91 thousands while 73.3 percent of them are working. In 1989 the death rate of Han minority in the region was 1.14 per thousand, while Tibetan ethnic group in the same region had an 8.68 per thousand death rate (Ma, 2007, pp. 8-14). Additionally, Tibetan opposition claims that China has organized a big scale migration of Hans into the Xizang in order to change the demography of the region (Ma, 2011, p. 41). Other publications claim that the change in minimal.

Table 3: Demographic Changes in Xizang (Mackerras, 2003, p. 139)

	1990 Census		2000 Census	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
Total population	2,196,010	-	2,616,300	-
Han	81,217	3.6	155,300	5.9
Tibetan	2,096,346	95.4	2,411,100	92.2

Between 2007 and 2008, many violent incidents and riots took place in the Xizang Autonomous Region, mainly in Lhasa; the capital of the region, and ended the life of hundreds of people. The Chinese authorities increased its pressure on Tibetan during this period, many monks were arrested, place of worship closed and students killed. Chinese authorities have put the successive incidents as an attempt of separation organized by the Dalai Lama and the Dalai clique. The Chinese Ministry of Public Security press said that:

“We now possess sufficient evidence to prove that the Lhasa incident is part of the Tibetan people's uprising movement organized by the Dalai clique. Its purpose is to create crisis in China by staging coordinated sabotage activities in Tibet [...] The Dalai Lama keeps talking about a peaceful way. However, solid facts prove that his much-vaunted 'middle way' policy and 'peaceful demonstrations' are blatant lies fabricated by the Dalai himself and the Dalai clique” (The Tibet issue, 2008).

As for Tibetan, the uprising is against Chinese rule and a resistance movement to all the changes the Chinese Communist Party is introducing in Tibet. The Buddhist monks took the streets to protest and even established a “new” way to attract international attentions to their cause; Self-immolation. Since 2009 there have been 138 reported self-immolations in Tibetan areas of China; mostly monks and nuns protesting against Chinese rule (Williams, 2015).

The Chinese rule continues to pressure the Tibetan until today by depriving them their religious freedom and trying to assimilate them with the majority. Some Tibetan cooperate with the Han, the communist rule, and the authorities to obtain some socio-economic benefits, many others wait in the shadow for another round of chaos and confrontations with authorities, and the Dalai Lama still lives in India trying to promote peace in his country and in the world.

Conclusion

The Chinese history witnessed many dynasties rising and falling sequentially until the declaration of the Republic in 1911, and the establishment of the state under the almost total domination of the Communist Mao Zedong in 1949. The newly formed rule enforced many socio-economic changes in China that ranged from agriculture and economic sectors to the population set of values, habits, traditions, beliefs and identities.

The communist rule identified China’s 56 ethnic identities through a long process; the Han ethnic group consists more than 91 percent of the population, and another 55 minority groups identified based on many criteria. The identification was conducted basing on Stalin’s four-element concept of a nation, the ethno-national situation of China, and in regards to the economic and political interest of the rule. Thus, the process was criticized since it did not label all distinct groups as minorities, but rather defined some minorities as branches of others.

Today’s Chinese rule don’t allow much freedom for minorities when they don’t submit fully to the Communist Party authorities and power. Like the Muslim Hui ethnic minority, many minorities are assimilated and enjoy some sort of freedom of worship and belief. Others, like the Uighurs and the Tibetans, don’t enjoy this type of freedom and have to struggle in order to resist the assimilation policies of the state. Many assimilation processes have taken their way in the Uighur Muslims region of Xinjiang Autonomous Region and the Buddhist Tibetan region in Xizang; displacement of Han ethnic group majority members to these regions, depriving ethnic minorities of local administrative positions, and other sorts of pressure performed on minorities in order to force them to submit to the leadership of the Communist rule. Over many years, some assimilation steps have succeeded in altering the identity of many regions, but members of ethnic minorities are still resisting Beijing’s pressure and conduct a resistance that can take a violent path as it did in many cases.

Behind the Great Wall
Identification of China's "Ethnic Minorities" & the State's Assimilation Process

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Behind the Great Wall
Identification of China's "Ethnic Minorities" & the State's Assimilation Process

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