

# The Chinese Communist Party's Treatment of Ethnic Minorities

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### **Has the Chinese Communist Party treated the Ethnic Minorities Especially Badly? Consider Evidence and Arguments for Both Sides.**

The world, in general, cannot boast of setting a great record when it comes to treating its ethnic minorities 'decently.' This point is well illustrated in the film, *Les Invasions Barbares*, where the main character dismisses his collective international body count of roughly 145 million in the 20th century as being paltry when compared to the onslaught of indigenous people in the new world, alone, by 'civilized' Europeans and Americans. He theorises, somewhat grotesquely, that at least 150 of these 200 million were killed with axes. If his conclusion that, "The history of mankind is a history of horrors," is to be taken seriously, then there are very few heinous things the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could have done (and can do) to shock the cynical sensibilities of such 'worldly' historians (*Les Invasions Barbares* 2004). But such acrimony, taken by itself, neither informs nor answers the question of how the CCP's treatment of its ethnic minorities should be fairly evaluated from contemporary political and sociological standards, even though it demonstrates quite effectively the pitfalls of comparing and contrasting "bad" treatments around the world willy-nilly. Such a perspective also does not recognise that the relationships between those in central authority and those isolated in the peripheries are actually constantly in flux with each side's actions incessantly influencing and constraining the others' future moves (Harrell 1997). This paper ventures to take into consideration more nuanced arguments that posit successes or mistakes in the CCP's treatment towards its ethnic minorities, while forwarding the argument that the CCP's direction, here, has been more dominated by short-term, political self-interests than commonly perceived.

### **Arguments For How The CCP Did Not Treat its Ethnic Minorities That Badly**

In 1950, the CCP instigated the *minzu shibie* (ethnic minorities)[1] project that set about labelling ethnic minorities on the basis of Stalin's four criteria of a nationality ("common territory, language, economy, and psychological nature [i.e. common culture])" (Harrell 1996, 23 & 33; Schein 1997). The result was that 8.1% of the population were classified into fifty-five officially-recognised ethnic minority groups (Schein 1997). To the credit of the Communists in contrast to Han Confucians and European Christians, the Communists harboured no "a priori assumption" that a distinct ethnic group was "innately superior" (Harrell 1996, 23). Of course, the Han nationalities predominated the CCP's major positions of power, but theoretically, "In the Communist project, the goal is not ostensibly to make the peripheral people more like those of the center, but rather to bring them to a universal standard of progress of modernity that exists independent of where the center might be on the historical scale at any given moment" (Ibid). While those closest to the vanguard party would naturally have an advantage in being more highly developed than those deemed to be stuck in the "late-feudal stage of the landlord economy," Communism itself immediately grants "full legal equality to the peripheral peoples," which is absent in Confucian and Christian civilizing dogmas (Harrell 1996, 24 & 23).

It is important to qualify this argument by admitting that by no means was the vanguard Communist party ever deprived of its top-down, paternalistic role in nurturing less 'sophisticated' groups, like ethnic minorities, and 'helping them to reach their full potential.' However, by taking the step of recognising *de jure*, if not exactly *de facto*, that

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people coming from different ethnicities can still arrive at the same level of development and 'progress' and in potentially divergent ways, meant that the CCP did not have the ideological ammunition nor inclination to eliminate entire racial groups or their distinctions from the Han majority. Although, the ultimate goal of socialism is "[assimilating]" likeminded, 'red' proletariats, those practicing socialism understood that "in a sense it may amount to that in the long run" as in the "*very long* [...]" run all the way to communism" (Harrell 1995, 27; emphasis added by author). Orthodox Leninist theory also acknowledges that ethnic minorities are probably here to stay for the foreseeable future, and as a way of minimising any built-up resentment against the majority-dominated state, those differences "that foster ethnic pride, but do not impede progress" should be preserved and even encouraged by the vanguard party (ibid.). This translates in contemporary practice to the CCP's active endorsement of ethnic costumes (as seen on Chinese money), festivals, and dances, preferably in circles, which all feature prominently in public events like the televised New Year celebrations (ibid, 27).

The CCP has, consequently, treated ethnic minorities better than 20<sup>th</sup> century perpetrators of genocide as seen in Rwanda.[2] To a lesser extent, the CCP has not even implemented institutionalized racial discrimination at the level of the South Africans under apartheid rule or the Americans and their Jim Crow laws. And while the unruly events of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) certainly left a traumatic impact on easily distinguishable ethnic minorities, as seen in the irreparable damage done to Tibetan temples, it was not so much a suppression directed specifically at ethnic minorities as an arbitrary attack on "any kind of difference—whether it be ethnic, religious, cultural or political" (Gladney 2004, 22; Schein 1997, 71). One can, thus, tentatively establish a lack of intent to destroy or methodologically limit opportunities for the advancement of ethnic minorities in the majority of CCP's official policies, which should not be taken for granted in light of all the tragedies that have occurred in the world.

Another popular argument that supports taking an easier stance in assessing the CCP's treatment of ethnic minorities is to focus on the material benefits that the CCP bestows to those who identify themselves as minorities. Perks that were put in place in the mid-1980s include:

permission to have more children (except in urban areas, minorities are generally not bound to the one-child policy), pay lower taxes, obtain better (albeit Chinese) education for their children, have greater access to public office, speak and learn their native languages, worship and practice their religion (often religious practices such as Shamanism that were still banned among the Han), and express their cultural differences through the arts and public culture (Gladney 2004, 22-23).

On the other hand, how much of these privileges can be considered as tokenisms or compensations for the absence of any real political powers invested in minorities is a pertinent issue. To be fair, it is still hard to accuse the CCP of sanctioning racial discrimination *per se* as even the Han Chinese live under an authoritarian state in which all serious discussions of legal and political rights remain tenuous.

Furthermore, although the People's Republic of China (PRC) did not emulate the Soviets in setting a formal precedent for "true geopolitical secession" after the PRC was founded in 1949; areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities are sometimes designated as autonomous regions on the provincial and county levels (Gladney 2004; Guo 2008). Because these areas are often economically disadvantaged when compared to more prosperous parts of China the central government is inclined to give them significant financial subsidies or funding (ibid). For example, Tibet's total annual spending is at an estimated \$550 million dollars, and it only takes in \$43 million in taxes (Starr 2001, 174).

In conclusion, when the CCP is judged by what it promises on paper and is compared to some other nations in the world— which have committed blatant atrocities and well-engineered prejudicial practices against their ethnic minorities— the CCP, technically, has not treated its ethnic minorities *that badly*. Of course, the nonappearance of an officially approved, systematic racism has also inhibited public outrage and awareness of possible, rampant discriminations occurring within the Chinese public sphere and its greater society. More importantly, and as the following section attempts to show, actual practices do not necessarily follow ideal abstractions, and therefore, it is important to reevaluate the CCP's role in the lives of its ethnic minorities from this angle.

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## Arguments For How the CCP Did Treat its Ethnic Minorities Especially Badly

Every society is probably guilty of discriminating against some of its ethnic minorities or at the very least, putting some at a significant disadvantage in their pursuits of life, liberty and happiness. In evaluating the claim that the CCP treats its ethnic minorities *especially badly*, the burden becomes trying to demonstrate that what actually happens to ethnic minorities in China are worse than what can be normally expected.

Perhaps a major part of this is the CCP's consistent obstinacy in always trying to retain the upper (patronising) hand in its dealings with ethnic minorities. The very categories that mark ethnic minorities were formulated by the CCP itself and experts on its payroll. By demarking limits, the party is essentially picking what is and is not acceptable for discussion, and this overall process is subjective and very vulnerable to pre-existing prejudices of party members and researchers, most notably a strong preference towards Han Chinese (Gladney 2004). Of course, later on, enterprising minorities might capitalise on these categories by using them to shame the party's handling of certain ethnic affairs,[3] but even these discussions are already restricted by the scope that the party set in the very beginning.

Another example is how the Communist party believes that it is in a position to tell ethnic minorities, like the Muslims, what the appropriate bounds are for their religious expression, birth planning, education, etc. regardless of the minorities' personal beliefs or even a consideration of local issues (Harrell 1995). The CCP legitimises this position with the 'scientific' scaling of the "material stages of social process [...] that [basically] tells each group exactly how far it needs to go to catch up with the civilizers" (ibid, 8-11). Unfortunately, the CCP and its sketchy 'scientific' research are ultimately coloured by the officials and researchers' underlying assumptions that some groups in society can be objectified as being lesser than them and/or more feminine, infantile, and ancient than the socioeconomic group of the ruling party (ibid; Schein 1997). Anecdotal evidence of condescending behaviour— like how Han scholars researching on the Yi cannot speak their language but still insist that they are bringing culture to the dirty Yi, while photographers from the Nationalities Publishing House in Beijing baited heavily-costumed Miao women with candy to perform songs—are presented to support this assertion (Harrell 1996; Schein 1997).

Other arguments focus on how the CCP has literally kept an iron fisted, upper hand on 'troublesome' minorities that may go beyond a reasonable usage of force (akin to the legal concept of proportionality in humanitarian law). In 2005, Manfred Nowak, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Torture, famously concluded that, "[The] practice of torture though on the decline—particularly in urban areas—remains widespread in China," and identified "members of the Tibetan and Uighur ethnic linguistic and religious minorities" as being especially at risk for torture because of exercising civil liberties like freedom of speech (Nowak 2005, 4; Nowak 2006, 18). The Special Rapporteur was particularly concerned with the treatment of Tibetan monks in Qushui Prison and inmates at Drapchi Prison of the Tibet Autonomous Region (Nowak 2006, 46). The world's attention has also often been captured by the violent struggles in Xinjiang as separatist Uyghur groups and other ethnic minorities (i.e. Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks) resort to terrorist methods and are countered by equally or more brutal CCP suppression; likewise, the Tibetan independence movements and the violent CCP reactions to them—which date as early as 1959 to an armed Tibetan rebellion— are also well-known outside of China (Gladney 2004; Starr 2001). There has recently been a CCP approved and even sponsored exodus of Han Chinese settlers moving to Tibet, and the People's Liberation Army has retained its strong, historical presence in Tibet. When ethnic tensions between the indigenous Tibetans and the new settlers arise, the Han-dominated CCP frequently sides on the Han Chinese's behalf and infringe on the human rights of Tibetans in the process (Starr 2001).

## The CCP's Treatment of Ethnic Minorities Informed by a Realpolitik Mentality

These two positions appear, *prima facie*, to be mutually exclusive. However, they actually complement one another, because they highlight two integral parts of the overall CCP's strategy in dealing with ethnic minorities. On the one hand, the CCP is not actively seeking to pick fights with ethnic minorities, although many individual Han Chinese party members' may still harbour knee-jerk, ethnocentric attitudes that come out in actual practice. It is the CCP's wish to maintain social stability in an already volatile environment given all the rapid changes that the *gaige kaifeng* reforms have brought to China. On the other hand, the CCP remains an undemocratic state, which in the interest of

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prolonging its own existence, will not hesitate to take whatever coercive measures it feels are necessary to maintain power. It is possible that the lack of restraint that the CCP shows to those who challenge them, maybe even regardless of their ethnicity, is similar to a parent punishing a naughty child and in line with its overall paternalistic governing style. This inherently personalized ruling style also discourages the formation of lasting regulatory institutions, like an independent judiciary branch that can diminish the central authority's prerogatives. Remember that although the United States of America's treatment towards African-Americans leaves much to be desired, organisations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) could resort to using American courts— with their implicit norms of upholding justice and equality at a much more stringent level than the rest of society— no matter how much these institutions were originally stacked against minorities.

Therefore, the CCP's treatment of minorities, which is at times borderline tolerant, patronising, exploitative, and/or brutal, can be characterised as a political strategy "based on practical and material factors rather than on theoretical or ethical objectives," incidentally the dictionary definition of *realpolitik* (Merriam Webster). As early as the retreat of the Long March (1934-35), when the CCP was being hounded by the Kuomintang's forces, it was forced to adopt conciliatory attitudes with the powerful tribes, specifically the "Miao, Yi, Tibetans, Mongols, and Hui," for literal survival (Gladney 2004). Therefore, even before the PRC existed, the CCP was already making pledges of "recognition and autonomy" (i.e. demarcating the Hui as its own nationality and setting up the "first minority autonomous region in Tongxin, southern Ningxia") to ethnic minorities in Yunnan (ibid 11). Formal rights to self-determination, as first recorded in article 14 of the CCP's 1931 Constitution, might have been rescinded during the subsequent founding of the PRC, but there was only so much backsliding that could be done once these early promises were made.

Nonetheless, how can this analysis be reconciled with the CCP's brutal treatment of Tibetans and Muslims which ground observers like Nowak have purported as being harsher than most social groups in China? Perhaps the answers can be found in the heightened levels of resistance in these groups compared to others and geopolitical concerns. Harrell (1995) eloquently describes the former's general pattern:

The paradox of civilizing projects is that they can, in some circumstances, turn back on themselves. With their avowed (and often sincere) intention to raise the cultural or civilizational level of the peripheral peoples, civilizers also make an implicit promise to grant equality, to share power, to give up ultimate control over how and when the subalterns speak. When the first happens without the second, when the peoples of the periphery gain advancement without equal empowerment, revolts can be the result (35).

As the Tibetans and Uyghurs in China have demonstrated, neither the centre (the CCP) nor the peripheries are passive actors and both harbour ever-changing expectations of one another. The stakes are raised on the CCP's side because while only 9% of the population are minorities in 2004, their homelands make up 60 percent of the country's total land mass and are among the richest in natural resources (Gladney 2004). Tibet alone contains the mouths of two out of three of China's major river systems, the Yellow River (*Huang He*) and the Long River (*Yangzi* or *Changjiang*) (Starr 2001). Despite the increasing sway of Islamic fundamentalism in Xinjiang, it still serves as a physical buffer for the oftentimes even more radicalized states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, with China being a huge consumer of oil and energy resources, the CCP is aware of Xinjiang's status as one of the largest domestic suppliers of both coal and onshore oil fields (ibid). In summary, by virtue of the natural resources that these areas are endowed with, the CCP cannot help but keep a close watch on them. The CCP's already close scrutiny of them is further heightened by the increasingly loud and violent demands from ethnic minorities for more autonomy or voice in the management of their region. This competitive interaction between both the CCP and some of its minorities contributes significantly, at least more significantly than commonly acknowledged, to the explosive nature of some of China's periphery-centre relations.

## Conclusion

Hopefully, this paper's usage of "intentionality" as a standard in presenting a revisionist reevaluation of the CCP's treatment of ethnic minorities—which is contradictory to the simplistic "international cause célèbre" that "China [was/is] engaged in a systematic effort at suppressing [minorities especially those of the] Tibetan religion"—has not

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become a blanket apology for the CCP itself and its very real practices of ethnic discrimination (Starr 2005, 174). Furthermore, the presentation of both sides shows how the issue of ethnicity and China is more complicated than a simple approval or disapproval of the CCP's methods in handling them.

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[1] In general, a more widely accepted definition for ethnic groups are "people that shares a putative common origin through descent and a putative commonality of cultural features such as language, food, clothing, and monality of cultural features such as language, food, clothing, and customs that distinguish it from other ethnic groups" (Harrell 1997, 2).

[2] The legal term, "genocide," in international law includes a criterion of intentionality (see UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide [1948]).

[3] An excellent parallel example of this on the international arena, "[Even] the successful anticolonial rebellions that ended up dismembering the European empires in the mid-twentieth century were perpetrated in the name of nations that were originally the creations of the colonizers" (Harrell 1997, 35).

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