Multiculturalism in China

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ABSTRACT

This article gives an overview of the demographic situation in China and provides an understanding of the way in which its Constitution approaches minority rights. The author discusses multicultural education policy, pointing out the various problems and contradictions which exist due to socialist ideology, economic disparity, religion, and other factors.

China has been a unified, multi-ethnic country since the ancient Han Dynasty. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the central government officially recognized, after a lengthy nation-wide investigation, 56 ethnic groups that make up the "Chinese nation." The majority Han group currently accounts for 91.96% of the total population, while the rest of the 55 ethnic groups are customarily called "minorities" (estimated based on the 1995 census).

The distribution of ethnic groups is characterized by general mixed inhabitation and local concentration in an interwoven pattern; that is, some minorities live in a concentrated pattern in the Han areas, while some Han Chinese live in the distinctive ethnic areas. This pattern of living has resulted from contact, migrations, and exchanges over the course of a long history. Though relatively small in number, people of ethnic minorities are so widely distributed that all provinces and regions in China are multi-ethnic. However, minorities are most concentrated in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Guangxi, Tibet, Yunnan, Guizhou, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Liaoning, and Taiwan, of which Yunnan Province is most ethnically plural. The major minorities are Tibetans, Mongols, Zhuang, Hui, Koreans, Manchu, Uighurs, and Miao.

This small portion of the population has occupied a crucial place on the government agenda for three reasons:

(1) Resources – minority areas contain large quantities of untapped mineral deposits, most of the forestland, and over 80% of the country's animal products. These resources are very important for China's future economic development.
(2) Geography – though small in number, minority groups occupy 63.7% of the land area of China. The less densely populated minority regions may provide an avenue for relief from China's overpopulation problem.
(3) Strategic – minorities inhabit over 90% of China's border region, and so minority issues are vital for national security (He & Liu, 1995).

Constitutional and Policy Approaches

The basic policy of China towards ethnic minorities is laid down in Article 3 of the 1954 Constitution:

> *The PRC is a unitary multiethnic state. All the ethnic groups are equal. Discrimination against or oppression of any ethnic group, and acts which undermine the unity of the ethnic groups, are prohibited. All the ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own customs and ways. Regional autonomy applies in areas where an ethnic minority lives in a compact community. All the ethnic autonomous areas are inseparable parts of the PRC.* (Mackerras, 1994, p. 145)

Here the principles include ethnic equality and unity, anti-discrimination, freedom of cultural maintenance, and regional autonomy. The secession or independence of minority areas is to be prevented at all costs. A feature of the new 1982 Constitution is an increase in minority representation. The 1982 Constitution, besides echoing the principles of the 1954 Constitution, adds new rights, such as appropriate representation in the National People's Congress (NPC) and in the NPC standing committee (Nathan, 1986).

Ethnic unity and equality are the two fundamental principles and policies in the resolution of ethnic problems in China. The Constitution of 1982 stipulates that

> *The state guarantees the language rights and interests of all ethnic groups and encourages the maintenance and development of the equality, unity, and cooperative relations among all ethnic groups. Discrimination against and oppression of any ethnic group are forbidden.* (A collection of legal documents of PRC on ethnic policies, 1997, p. 24)

Constitutional rights and freedoms, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and gender, include the right to elect and to be elected, personal freedom and dignity, freedom of religious beliefs, speech, press, assembly, association,

demonstration, as well as the rights to develop one's own languages and scripts, and so on.

The legal rights defined in the Constitution and various legal documents for ethnic minorities were seriously violated during the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-76), when minority leaders were persecuted and minority customs were banned. However, since the reinstatement of the pluralistic policy in 1979, ethnic relations have been steadily improved and ethnic rights have been better protected. For example, in 1998 the members of ethnic minorities elected into the 9th National People's Congress amounted to 438, accounting for 14.37% of all the people's representatives, 5% higher than the ethnic proportion in the total population (8.04%).

Ethnic regional autonomy is a basic policy made by the government according to the special circumstances of China, and also an important political system. From 1947 to the end of 1998, China established five autonomous regions (at a level equal to provinces), 30 autonomous prefectures, and 120 autonomous counties. Altogether 44 ethnic groups have set up autonomous areas at various levels and the ethnic members in ethnic autonomous areas account for 75% of the total ethnic population (Wu, 1999).

The Law on Regional Autonomy for Minorities (The Autonomy Law), adopted in 1984, amplifies previous autonomy rights, specifies functions and rights of self-government units, and defines the relationships between the autonomous authorities and the higher-level bodies of the state. The new provision includes:

a) The leading cadres should be the members of the ethnic group(s) that practice(s) autonomy (Articles 16-18);
b) Instructions which are issued by higher level bodies, but do not meet local requirements, would not necessarily have to be implemented (subject to approval by the State Council) (Article 20);
c) The right of drafting development plans for autonomous areas (Article 26), with a view to economy, protection and administration of their resources (Articles 28 & 29), foreign trade (Article 32), finance (Article 33), and education (Articles 26 & 37). (Heberer, 1984, p. 37)

The Autonomy Law stipulates that in ethnic autonomous areas, the People's Congress at all levels should be composed of members from all ethnic groups living that area.

The birth control policy for minorities in China is less stringent than that for the Han Chinese and gives a freer hand to the People's Congress of autonomous areas in making their own local policies for birth control. For example, the five autonomous regions have made amendments to the PRC Marriage Law, which lower the legal age for marriage from 22 to 20 for males, and from 20 to 18 for females. In general, each family of ethnic minorities is entitled to have two or three children, but for those living in poverty-stricken areas, border areas, or thinly populated areas, each family can have three or even more children. Peasants and herders in Tibet are exempt from any birth control regulations.

Consequently, the ethnic population growth is at a higher rate than the national average. The 5th national census (2000) showed that the ethnic population increased from 35.32 million in 1953, to 40 million in 1964, then to 67.24 million in 1982, further to 91.2 million in 1990, and finally to 106.43 million in 2000 (Wu, 1999).

The ethnic education policy has evolved around the goal of developing a strong ethnic economy, i.e. raising educational quality and training skilled workers needed by society. The new ethnic education policy includes the following elements: delegation of educational power to the autonomous government in planning, curriculum, language and script, etc.; increased special financial grants; relaxed control of religious freedom, and emphasized minority rights, especially rights related to language and script. The policy signifies a strategic shift from the limited goal of training a few minority cadres seen in the previous policy to the goal of establishing a complete minority educational system. Cowen (1997, p. 75) contends that Chinese educational policy, at the official level, recognizes and respects a range of cultures, and is officially multicultural.

In China, though the majority Han culture dictates the mainstream of education, priority is given to the educational development of all minority cultures. Therefore, the Education Law of the PRC declares that "the state shall, in accordance with the characteristics and needs of respective ethnic minorities, provide assistance to the development of educational undertakings for each ethnic minority" (Wulan, 94, p. 68).

Autonomous areas are empowered to make decisions on education and cultural development in their own areas, such as type of school, duration of study, curriculum, language of instruction, admissions, etc. The state has taken measures to support ethnic education, such as special funding and subsidies for ethnic heritage language and bilingual education, training of ethnic teachers, setting up of ethnic colleges or ethnic classes in regular universities, and lowering admission requirements. Education at all levels in Tibet is free and gets support in various forms from developed provinces.

In the press, broadcasting, publication and cinema, ethnic languages and scripts are respected. At present, over 100 newspapers in 17 ethnic languages, and 73 journals and magazines in 11 ethnic languages are published. The CCTV uses 16 ethnic languages, and local TV and broadcasting stations use over 20 ethnic languages in broadcasting. Feature films produced in ethnic languages have come up to 3,410. 4,100 kinds of books in various categories had been published in 23 ethnic languages by 1998, totaling over 53 million volumes, by 36 ethnic publishing houses across the country (Wu, 1999).

Other measures endorsed by the state to preserve ethnic cultural heritage include: sorting out and republishing ethnic precious ancient works, rescuing ethnic epics (e.g., Tibetan epic "Gesarer," and Mongolian epic "Jianggeer"), rescuing and collecting ethnic folk arts and songs, repairing major ethnic historical architectures. For example, in the reconstruction of Tibetan Pudala Palace from 1989 to 1994, the state invested 53 million yuan and used 1,000 kilograms of gold.

Policy Implementation and Public Opinions

However, if the pluralistic ethnic policy and multicultural education policy are put into the wider social context, or related to other official ideologies, some

contradictions emerge. These contradictions may affect the implementation of the policy and result in ethnic inequality, which is opposite to the policy statement itself. Firstly, minority cultural rights and freedoms, as a salient feature of the policy, are in conflict with the general educational guiding principle of the state. These principles say: "Education must serve socialist modernization… and train builders and successors who are developed in an all-round way – morally, intellectually, and physically."(Inner Mongolia Education Committee, 1991, p. 40). In the conventional definition in China, "morally" implies politically correct. "Successor" means socialist successor. The guiding principle points to the dual role of education – training skilled labor to develop production and indoctrinating socialist ideology to reproduce socialist successors.

Secondly, the cultural maintenance principle conflicts with the Marxist idea of ethnicity. The official theory and practice on ethnic issues are under girded by Marxism. According to this analysis, ethnicity and ethnic distinctions will disappear when class disappears, and then a homogeneous proletarian culture will emerge. If one of the communist goals is to eliminate ethnic distinctions, then communism and ethnicity are ultimately incompatible. The expectation of China's new pluralist policy is that relatively free expression of ethnic characteristics will lead to gradual decrease in ethnic tensions and eventually to more harmonious relations.

Thirdly, the conception of rights in the Chinese tradition has emphasized collective rather than individual interest. But Zhou (1994) points out that the collective orientation of rights in China has been extended from the family and community to both the state and the international level. The state is regarded as "the large collectivity." Patriotism overrides group rights.

Finally, there is a conflict with the current national curriculum. Article 36 of Autonomy Law on education specifies a broad range of areas, which include content of curricula in which autonomy may be implemented. However, school curricula are unified all over China and are enhanced by the unified entrance examinations. The existence of the national curriculum and unified examinations makes it hard for the minority regions to exercise their autonomy rights in deciding their curricular content according to their local circumstances.

Major Issues and Challenges

Some problems arise with increasing globalization and the modernization program. Historically, ethnic groups lived disproportionately in poor, barren, or border areas. Since opening and reform, the provinces in Eastern and Southern China have stepped up economic and social development. As a result, the disparity between ethnic areas and other Han-dominant areas has been aggravated. In some ethnic areas, people still live below the subsistence level. According to Wu (1999), by the end of 1992, 80 million people in China lived in poverty; half of them were members of ethnic groups or people living in ethnic areas. How to tackle relative ethnic poverty and development disparity will pose a major challenge to the government.

Moreover, ethnic issues in China are always linked to religion. Most ethnic groups are believers of Buddhism and Islam; some believe in Orthodox, and still a few others stick to primitive Deism. Some "ethnic entrepreneurs" are likely to take advantage of their traditional religions to raise group consciousness and resort to spliticism in order to establish "independent states." Tibetan expatriates led by the Dalai Lama have been trying to separate Tibet from China. In Xinjiang, undercurrents of a separatist movement exist with a view to changing Xinjiang into the independent "Eastern Tajikistan." Some members of the movement engineered two terrorist bombings in downtown of Beijing in late 1990s. Successfully dealing with religious issues while ensuring ethnic rights guaranteed by the Constitution is therefore another challenge.

Finally, the centrally dictated national curriculum makes it difficult for ethnic autonomous areas to exercise autonomy on cultural maintenance. Ethnic students usually must choose between instruction in their heritage language with limited job opportunities and opting to Chinese instruction with a brighter future. Therefore, a hard nut to crack is whether the government is willing to further delegate power on curriculum to local authorities or stick to hard-line attitudes to maintain ideological control through the curriculum.

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