

Foreword

Nation states, as a general rule, are composed of heterogeneous populations where, almost always, a ruling elite from the majority population governs. The treatment of minorities is a crucial issue for these states in their efforts to preserve social stability and harmony. While referring only to his own country, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, speaking only three years before the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, could have been talking about most states when he noted that ethnic nationalism was the “most fundamental vital issue of our society.”¹

Minority groups share a common identity and a self-identified set of cultural traits which could include race, ethnicity, religion, language, food, cultural practices, music, literature, art, and more. For minority groups, cultural identity is intrinsically linked to their sense of belonging. When cultural practices are threatened, individuals may experience alienation and loss of identity. This emotional impact can lead to broader societal issues, both personal and political. In its most extreme form, it can result in violence and separatism.

Whether a state views its minorities as a threat, a problem which can be managed, or insignificant depends on a number of factors such as their size, politics, geographic location, history, and how secure the ruling elites feel. Almost every state has structural inequalities that create discrimination and socio-economic disparities. How ruling elites deal with these inequalities is the underlying theme of the essays in this volume. The strategies they employ vary significantly from incorporating minority cultures into the mainstream through a peaceful process that could even include true autonomy or significant home rule for minority regions on the one hand to China’s attempts to depoliticize ethnic issues and force cultural assimilation on the other.

Some scholars have long argued that to achieve stability and allow minorities to feel they are loyal citizens of a state, policies need to take account of cultural differences. If minorities are going to feel they are stakeholders, they must: 1) be assured that their unique characteristics will not be diminished or eliminated; and 2) feel politically and economically equal to the majority as a result of equal access to education, the labor

¹ Thomas A. Sancton. 1988. “Soviet Union: The Armenian Challenge. Gorbachev Tries to Defuse Ethnic Clashes.” *Time Magazine* 32.

market, and/or other shared facilities. Systematic discrimination, such as restricted access to education, employment discrimination, and/or a lack of political representation, can only alienate those who are discriminated against from the state and threaten instability. When not managed properly, in a worst-case scenario, ethnic hostilities can flare into open conflict as they have in Rwanda, Iraq, Turkey, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, and Sri Lanka, to name but a few. These conflicts sometimes resolve themselves through the breakup of a larger state into smaller ethnic-based states, as in the cases of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and sometimes through the birth of proto-nations such as Kurdistan and Palestine.

The essays in this volume explore the relationships between the state and minorities in China and Mongolia. In China, certain minorities (Mongolians, Uyghurs, and Tibetans) are struggling to maintain their languages, customs, and religions in the face of a concerted effort to sinicize them since, in Beijing's eyes, they pose a separatist threat that could lead to something akin to the breakup of the Soviet Union. Since the very beginning of the People's Republic of China in 1949, government officials have debated how to manage minority populations and how to make them loyal citizens of the state. One of the major points of contention was whether to treat them differently from the Chinese (Han) according to their individual circumstances or to ignore their differences and force them to abide by the same policies that governed the majority culture. Over the decades Chinese policies have gone back and forth in this way, but since the ascension of Xi Jinping to the leadership of China, the policy has been to ignore the characteristics of minority cultures and force some measure of cultural assimilation.

In China the government has stopped elementary schools in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet from teaching in the minority languages. Education plays a crucial role in cultural preservation. It promotes language retention and fosters cultural pride. The loss of a language precludes access to their ethnic cultures and even older members of their own families. Beyond language, China is trying to radically alter Islam by curtailing religious practices, remodeling mosques to look more Chinese, forbidding religious customs such as fasting during Ramadan, and restricting culturally specific clothing. China has also introduced draconian security measures including the saturation of minority areas with security officials, extensive camera surveillance, mobile phone monitoring, DNA collection, and face recognition. The day-to-day reality in these areas, where Han Chinese are treated dramatically differently from their minority counterparts, only creates more alienation and a greater threat of social unrest.

China has also engaged in remaking minority cultures in a way that makes Han Chinese more comfortable – by sinicization of minority cultures. As a Tibet and China scholar discovered during a very recent trip to China: “in the new China of Xi Jinping, the cultures of China’s fifty-five ethnic minorities have been turned into a simulated commodity for domestic tourists under the guise of economic development and cultural preservation. Meanwhile, actual expressions of ethnic identity are suppressed.”²

These excessive measures speak to the insecurity that the ruling elites in Beijing feel about some of their minority citizens. They also speak to their inability or unwillingness to understand that these measures will only alienate the minorities further rather than bring them into the fold of the great motherland.

Culture, writ large, is not merely an aspect of life but a core component of individual and collective identity. For minorities, cultural security is vital for several reasons: it fosters social cohesion, empowers community members, and ensures the continuation of unique cultural practices that have been passed down through generations. Only when minority groups can feel assured their cultures are safe and thriving will they feel accepted by the majority populations among whom they live.

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² Natasha L. Mikles. 2024. “China’s Commodification of Minorities.” *The Diplomat*, November 14. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/11/chinas-commodification-ofminorities/>.

