



Leadership–Ethnic Minority

Shǎoshù mínzú gànbù 少数民族干部

Chinese leaders recognize the value of ethnic minority integration, but have maintained power by appointing ethnic Han to many important positions. Understanding the changing role of minorities in Chinese politics is essential for comprehending China’s transforming political landscape.

The changing role of ethnic minorities in Chinese politics is helping to transform the political landscape. Recent problems in the Tibetan regions of China and in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have highlighted the challenges that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faces in governing a Han-dominant but multiethnic China. While authorities have recruited and promoted more non-Han leaders in recent years to carry out the state’s policies and to demonstrate affirmative action to the public, they also want to make sure that Han Chinese leaders are firmly in charge. How China handles the “nationalities question” will be a crucial determinant of social stability and economic development in the future.

Ethnic Distribution

Han Chinese account for an estimated 91.5 percent of the total population of the country, or 1.2 billion of the 1.33 billion people in China. In addition to the majority Han, the Chinese government officially recognizes fifty-five other

nationalities, or ethnic minorities, numbering approximately 106 million people. Although the ethnic minority population constitutes only 8.5 percent of the population, the geographic area of those political units under the autonomous administration of ethnic minorities accounts for 64 percent of the total area of the country.

These ethnic minorities vary greatly in terms of their population size. Eighteen of them exceed 1 million people: Zhuang, Manchu, Hui, Miao, Uygur, Tujia, Yi, Mongol, Tibetan, Buyi, Dong, Yao, Korean, Bai, Hani, Kazakh, Li, and Dai. The largest ethnic minority, the Zhuang, had more than 16 million people in 2000 when China conducted its fifth national census. By contrast, the seven smallest ethnic minorities have populations of fewer than 10,000. The smallest ethnic group is the Lhoba, a group that resides in Tibet. This ethnic minority had only 2,965 people in 2000.

The Chinese government’s one-child policy, first adopted in 1979, has not been applied to many ethnic minority groups, which is one reason some groups’ populations are growing. In general, ethnic minority families can have two or even three children. Rural farmers and herdsman in Tibet face no restrictions in terms of the number of children they can have.

The growth rate of the ethnic minority groups varies widely from one group to another. With the exception of Zhuang and Manchu, all other minority groups had much faster growth rates than those of the Han between 1990 and 2000. The low growth rate of the Zhuang and Manchu is largely due to the fact that they are well integrated into the national community. Many members in these two groups are so intermarried that they have lost their

distinctive cultural identities. A large number of people in these two groups presumably identify themselves as Han rather than as ethnic minorities.

Although Han Chinese have a relatively lower population growth rate in comparison with most of the ethnic minority groups in the country, the absolute number of Han nonetheless increased by nearly 117 million people between 1990 and 2000. According to one official Chinese source, in three minority autonomous regions (Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, and Ningxia), the number of Han has already surpassed that of the minority groups, while in Xinjiang the Han account for 40 percent of the total population.

Minority Participation

One strategy for reconciling ethnic tensions in Han-dominant China has been to recruit more ethnic minority elites into the political establishment. Chinese authorities have made a concerted effort in recent years to promote ethnic minority elites to leadership positions.

As the ethnic minority population grew rapidly over the last half of the twentieth century, the number of ethnic minority cadres also significantly increased. According to official Chinese sources, the number of ethnic minority cadres at all levels of leadership increased from about 10,000 in 1950 to almost 3 million in 2007. CCP leaders have been explicit about the necessity of recruiting and promoting more ethnic elites into the party-state leadership.

Soon after becoming a member of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1993, Hu Jintao made a long and important speech at the national conference on the promotion of ethnic minority cadres. Hu argued that recruiting and promoting ethnic minority leaders was a major strategic objective for the People's Republic of China (PRC), one that would determine whether China could resolve its ethnic problems and whether the Chinese state could achieve long-term sociopolitical stability. Hu particularly emphasized that the CCP should provide more educational and training opportunities as well as leadership experiences for young ethnic minority cadres.

One important development in terms of promoting ethnic minority leaders has been in the realm of legislation.

In 2002, for example, China's National People's Congress (NPC) revised the Law of Ethnic Minority Autonomous Areas of the People's Republic of China. The revised law now specifies that the top post of the local government in all ethnic minority autonomous areas should be held by a leader who hails from the same ethnic minority background as the majority of the citizens in that area.

In 2008, for the first time in PRC history, all of the governors of China's five provincial-level ethnic minority autonomous regions—the Tibet Autonomous Region, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region—had ethnic minority backgrounds.

However, the CCP has maintained its firm control over these provinces by giving the most important leadership posts—the party secretary positions—to cadres who come from Han Chinese backgrounds. In 2008 none of the party secretary posts in any of the five provincial-level minority autonomous regions were held by an ethnic minority leader.

In 2008 all of the heads of China's 155 local governments that had status as ethnic minority autonomous areas—including the 5 provincial-level regions (*qu* 区), 30 prefectures (*zhou* 州) and 120 counties (*xian* 县 or *qi* 旗)—were non-Han ethnic minority leaders. The head of the local government is considered the second-highest-ranking official in a given administrative jurisdiction, second only to the party secretary. Ethnic minority leaders have occupied more seats on this important decision-making body in the reform era than they did during the Mao era.

In the five national congresses held between 1987 and 2007, ethnic minority members usually constituted from about 10 percent to 11 percent, almost double their numbers from the five congresses of earlier periods. Forty ethnic minority leaders serve on the Seventeenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (in session from 2007 to 2012) as both full and alternate members. The Hui, Zhuang, Tibetan, Mongolian, and Uygur ethnic groups have the highest representation on the Seventeenth CC, and Tibetan, Mongolian, Hui, Manchu, Miao, and Yi minority groups are well represented among the so-called fifth generation of leaders, those born between 1950 and 1965. Most of them work in the provincial leadership, including four (6.6 percent) full

governors, thirty-seven (60.7 percent) vice governors, and seven (11.5 percent) who serve in other provincial leadership positions. They constitute 78.8 percent of the total number of fifth-generation leaders with ethnic minority backgrounds.

Opportunities Limited

While ethnic leaders have been making political inroads, most of the highest level positions are still reserved for the Han. Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, only three ethnic minority leaders have served on the all-important Politburo, the body of leaders that oversees the CCP. From the Thirteenth Party Congress to the Fifteenth Party Congress, a period of 15 years between 1987 and 2002, no ethnic minorities served on the Politburo. As of yet, no ethnic minority leader has ever risen to membership on the Politburo Standing Committee, the top leadership of the CCP.

In 2008 a Mongolian and former governor of Inner Mongolia was appointed minister of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission. In 2008 three ethnic minority leaders were serving on the State Council, the chief administrative authority of PRC. But among the twenty-eight ministers on the State Council, only one member was from an ethnic minority. Two ethnic minority leaders were serving as vice chairs of the NPC, and five ethnic minority leaders were serving as vice chairs of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Only one ethnic minority leader was serving as provincial party secretary in China's thirty-one provincial-level administrations.

Future Implications

For understandable reasons, the Chinese Communist Party is unwilling to give up its power over personnel appointments, particularly in China's five ethnic minority autonomous regions. The growing ethnic tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang have led Chinese authorities to conclude that they need to exert tighter control over these regions. This has meant appointing Han Chinese leaders to serve in the most important posts in these administrative units.

At the same time, top Chinese leaders have recognized the value of having ethnic minority cadres serve in the party-state elite, both for propaganda purposes as well as to inspire minority peoples to view the system as containing opportunities for their own advancement and, therefore, work within the system rather than against it. Those ethnic minority elites who have been appointed by the CCP Organization Department have usually gone through a great deal of scrutiny to make sure that they are loyal to the Communist regime and will carry out the orders of the party's national leadership.

As in many other countries, ethnic identity in China is becoming an increasingly important political issue. The demonstrations in Tibet in 2008 and the worldwide protests they helped fuel over the Olympic torch rally suggest that ethnic tensions in China may constitute a major liability for the country's future stability and territorial integrity. How top Chinese leaders handle ethnic tensions and how effectively they recruit ethnic minorities into the political establishment will be not only crucial determinants of social stability going forward but also major criteria for China's international image.

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Further Reading

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