

Explaining Ethnic Protests and Ethnic Policy Changes in China

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Abstract

Why were there violent ethnic riots in Tibet and Xinjiang? After the riots, how did the Chinese government adjust its ethnic policies, and will those new policies solve the problems? This article argues that multiple factors have contributed to those riots, including economic inequalities, lack of religious freedom, and incompetence of local governments. The new policy package focuses on boosting economy in minority areas and improving the livelihood of ethnic minorities. Promising in the short run, the new policies may face challenges domestically and internationally in the long run.

Keywords: ethnic issues, ethnic policies, Tibet, Xinjiang, Chinese politics

1. Introduction

The past two years have witnessed two major ethnic protests in China. In July 2009, there was a bloodshed conflict between the Uyghurs and Han Chinese in the northwestern province Xinjiang. Almost 200 were killed, the deadliest ethnic violence since 1949 in the country. The riots, called by some Chinese commentators as the Chinese version of “9/11”¹, have taken Beijing by surprise and shocked the top leadership, so serious and critical that President Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 had to cut short his Europe tour and cancelled his participation at the G8 summit.

In March 2008 riots broke out in Lhasa and other Tibetan-populated areas in China. Eighteen people were killed and hundreds of shops and stores run by Han Chinese in Lhasa were burn to ashes.² The government crackdown on the riots evoked protests against the Beijing Olympic torch relay from London, Paris, to Tokyo, and New Delhi. China’s global image dropped to a record low in recent years.³

More than one year after the Xinjiang riots, observers still found that “resentment simmers” in this region.⁴ People from one ethnic group felt

unsafe to go to the neighbourhood of another group, as they perceived the other group as frightening and untrustworthy. Even two years after the rioting in Tibet the cross-group tension and distrust were still evident. In April 2010, a deadly earthquake nearly flattened the predominantly Tibetan city Yushu 玉树 in Qinghai Province. Beijing made a very quick response and immediately sent thousands of soldiers and truckloads of food in recue and relief. Thousands of the injured were taken to hospitals in the provincial capital 500 miles away or even to Beijing hospitals. President Hu Jintao cut short a state visit to Brazil and fled home to lead the relief efforts. Premier Wen Jiabao 温家宝 postponed his own visit to Indonesia and went to the quake stricken area. However, these high profile efforts looked not successfully enough to win trust from Tibetans.⁵

These ethnic riots and lack of trust revealed deep-rooted ethnic tensions in western China and called into question the underlying principles of Beijing's ethnic policies. Based on the system of regional autonomy for ethnic minorities, the Chinese government has promoted a series of preferential policies (of particular importance is economic development) for minority groups. Thousands of billions of dollars have been channeled to ethnic areas in the past two decades on the presumption that ethnic minorities with improving material conditions would eventually legitimize Beijing's rule in those areas.

Since the middle of the 1990s GDP in minority areas has grown more rapidly than the national average. In 2000 Beijing launched the western development programme and in 2005 a "flourishing borders and prosperous people" programme. These programmes subsequently gave ethnic regions a larger edge over the nation in growth. To a large extent this policy turns out to be successful as most of the 55 ethnic groups in China seem contented and have apparently accepted the existing regime (Lai, 2009).

To tap the Tibet issue, from 1980 to 2001, the CCP had held four top level work conferences.⁶ In each of these conferences the Party leaders promulgated new policies and development plans in Tibet. From the very first conference leaders in Beijing saw the solution to the Tibet problem as one of "supplying creature comforts". They set the theme of Tibet policy as "development and stability".

Socioeconomically, this policy has made great achievements. The annual GDP growth rate in Tibet from 2001 to 2008 was 12.4 per cent. In the same time period, the central fiscal transfer was RMB¥154.1 billion, occupying 93.7 per cent of total revenue in Tibet (CCTS, 2009). After the third Work Conference Beijing invested RMB¥8 billion in 62 projects; after the fourth Conference, RMB¥31.2 billion were invested on 70 projects. In 2007, the Chinese government made a more ambitious plan, decided to invest RMB¥778.8 billion in 180 projects by 2010 (*ibid.*).

In the end of 2008, all counties in Tibet were finally communicated by highways. And the first railway on the Tibet Plateau, the Qinghai-Tibet railway was opened in 2006. Beijing's also made efforts in social welfare of Tibetan people. Medical care is free for farmers and herdsmen in Tibet. Urban Tibetans enjoy more governmental subsidies in healthcare than Han Chinese. Children of farmers and herdsmen enjoy the "three covering" programme in their elementary and high school education – covering food, covering lodging, and covering tuition by the government. By the end of 2009 there were 270,000 students in Tibet enjoying the "three covering" programme and 200,000 receiving grants.⁷

While in Tibet the Chinese government has been promoting an economy-centred policy for decades, situation in Xinjiang was different. Due to a series of turbulences and bloodsheds launched by Uyghur separatist and Islamic extremist organizations in 1980s and 1990s⁸, the Chinese government has adopted a policy of "stability above all else" in Xinjiang. Economic development has been of only secondary importance in the region.

Yet in the past decades the government has still invested a lot in infrastructure and heavy industries in Xinjiang. Each year since 2003 (except 2009) the region's GDP growth has been higher than that of China as a whole (*China Statistical Yearbook*, 2001-2010).

Apparently, ethnic policies in China are benevolent and generous. Then why were there such violent riots in Tibet and Xinjiang? In this study I want to address two questions. First, what are the underlying reasons for ethnic protests in China? Second, after the series of riots, the Chinese government has adjusted its ethnic policies. What are the new policies, and are they going to resolve the ethnic issues in China? In the following sections the paper will first go through the theories on collective protests, then those theories will be applied to the Chinese context to see if they explain ethnic riots. Followed will be a discussion on ethnic policy adjustments and their challenges.

2. Three Theories of Political Contentions

In the existing literature, there are three lines of theory dealing with collective conflicts. The first is the "greed" theory. It argues that contentious politics is a product of cost and benefit calculations (Collier and Hoeffler, 2000). If people expect looting can generate profits, for instance, control over certain natural resources, gain from financial subsidies, preferential policies, and so forth, people would go to violence. In this sense, ethnic contentions are "motivated by greed, which is presumably sufficiently common that profitable opportunities for rebellion will not be passed up" (Collier and Hoeffler, 2001: 2).

Grievance theory argues that political contentions result from dissatisfaction and resentment (Collier and Hoeffler, 2000; Bodea and Elbadawi,

2007). If an individual or group is treated unfairly in political or economic spheres, this individual or group would tend to resist with force. Reasons for grievance include political exclusion, ethnic discrimination, income inequality, lack of religious freedom, etc.

De Tocqueville stated the thesis that “almost all of the revolutions which have changed the aspect of nations have been made to consolidate or to destroy social inequality” (1961: 302). A number of empirical studies revealed the relationship between distributional inequality and political violence. Growth without a just distribution tends to undermine mass support for a regime and push the disadvantaged to change the status quo in a contentious way. Some observers argued that inequality is “at least part of the explanation for the Iranian revolution of 1978-79” (Muller, 1985: 47).

Lack of political rights, for instance, the freedom of religion or protection of ethnic culture, is another reason for grievance (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). People take offence if their beliefs and values are not respected by the authorities or other groups. Once the grievance is sufficiently acute people may engage in violent protest. This type of collective action is not dependent on economic gains, but on the desire to preserve one’s ethnic identity. People may fight even when there are not explicit material interests (Sambanis, 2001: 266).

The third model is opportunity theory, which maintains that collective action cannot be possible without certain resources or opportunities. For instance, to what extent state power can control the grassroots largely determines the probability of collective action in the society. If the state at the grassroots level is able to detect potential unrests effectively, and to manage any possible collective action from the very beginning, it is not likely for the action to be escalated into large scale violence (Hegre, 1999). Another important opportunity variable is elite. Whether an ethnic group can be organized to take collective action largely depends on whether this group has capable and devoted elites: “Ethnic sentiments and identity are frequently manipulated and promoted by a political elite that seeks to lead its reference community in opposition to other groups” (Shultz, 1995: 78). With the leadership of elites, a group is more likely to be mobilized into political contentions.

Demographic composition in ethnic areas also matters. Previous research found that a society composed of two major ethnic groups is more likely to face ethnic conflicts than a society consisting of a number of small groups (Reynal-Querol, 2002). When there are a dominant group and a large minority group side by side in an area, it is very likely to have large scale ethnic mobilization. To mobilize a large minority group into contentious actions against the majority group is not as costly as to mobilize a number of small groups into the same kind of actions (Fearon and Laitin, 2003: 78).

3. Explaining Ethnic Protests in China

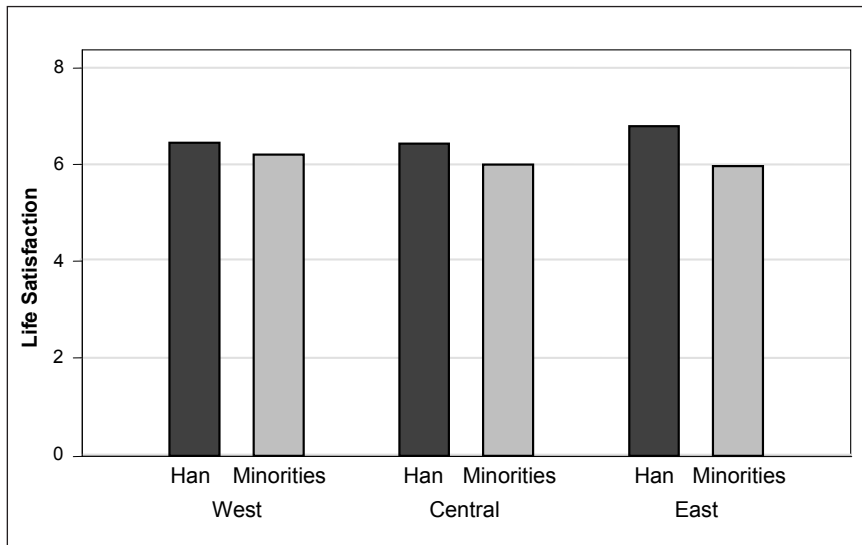
Now let us see what kind of factors contribute to riots in Tibet and Xinjiang. In these incidents, we did not see protestors gained any material interests through the conflicts. And we did not see they were purposely hunting for any material goods. On the contrary, rioting and looting destroyed local business and brought material loss to both Han majority and ethnic minorities. The greed model hence looks inappropriate here.

3.1. Grievance Model

Grievance model assumes dissatisfaction or discontentment. Let us first see if there is grievance existing within ethnic minorities in China. Figure 1 reports data from a national public opinion survey in 2008 regarding people’s life satisfaction⁹. The respondents were selected by random sampling. We divided the Chinese provinces into three groups: west, central, and east.¹⁰ According to the figure, all over the country minority people are less satisfied with their life than Han people.¹¹

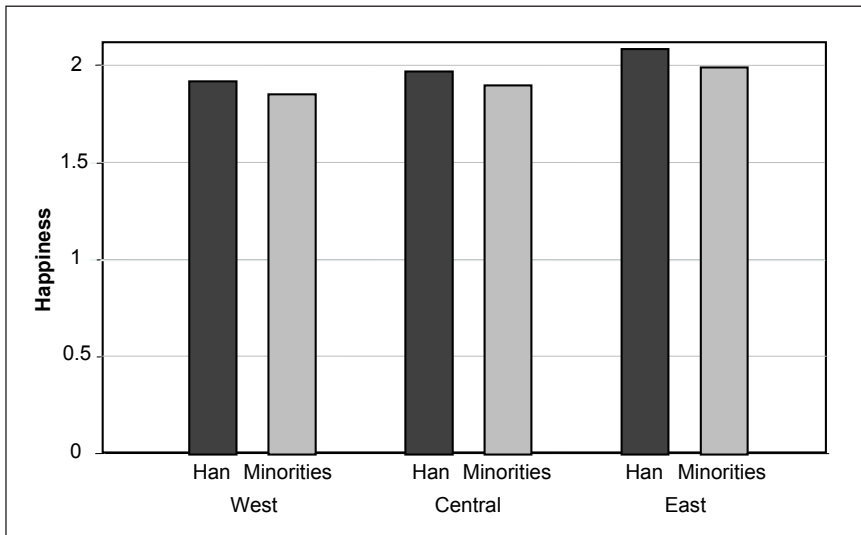
There is a similar pattern for happiness level. From Figure 2 we can see across regions in China, members of minority groups have lower level of happiness than their Han neighbours. In short, minority people are less

Figure 1 Life Satisfaction of Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese



Source: Asian Barometer, 2008.

Figure 2 Happiness of Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese



Source: Asian Barometer, 2008.

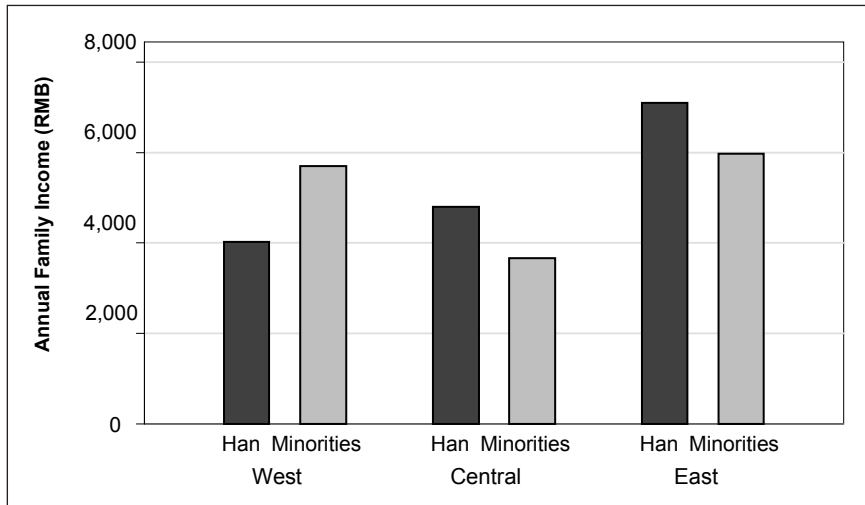
satisfied and feel less happy than the dominant Han. These findings provide supporting evidence that grievance exists among ethnic minorities in China.

There could be two reasons for minority's grievance. The first is income gaps between minority groups and Han Chinese. The rapid economic growth in western China actually increased the income gaps between Han and local minorities. The modern industries brought by Han depressed many traditional farming or handicrafts of local minorities. Local ethnic groups tend to perceive economic growth as beneficial only to Han and believe them are victims of Han exploitation (Shan and Chen, 2009).

Market economy has also weakened minority people's job security. Since the late 1970s, local state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have been required to employ at least 60 per cent of minority employees. However, in the recent decade many local SOEs went bankrupt, leading to a great laid-off of minority employees. Now most enterprises are privately owned and not bound by the official regulations. Private owners in western provinces are inclined to hire Han Chinese workers instead of local Uyghurs or Tibetans who are disadvantaged in language and technical skills (Shan and Weng, 2010).

To promote economic development in southern Xinjiang, where most Uyghurs live, Beijing has encouraged large-scale SOEs to invest in that area since the late 1990s. These large companies, most of which are energy tycoons like PetroChina and Sinopec, however, prefer to hire Han workers for

Figure 3 Family Income of Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese, 1993



Source: China Survey, 1993.

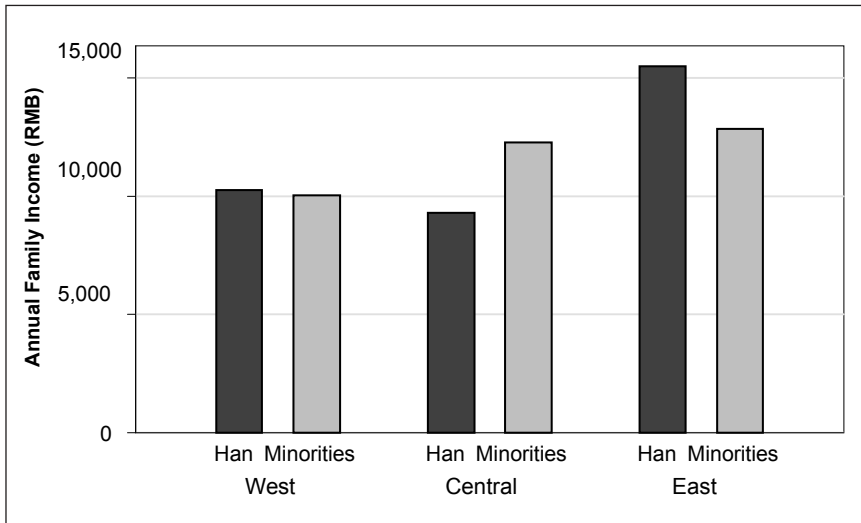
their technical skills. Moreover, they do not pay income tax to the Xinjiang government, but to Beijing or Shanghai, as they are registered in Beijing and their oil and gas pipeline subsidiaries registered in Shanghai (Shan and Weng, 2010).

Figure 3 reports income levels of Chinese people from a 1993 national survey¹². In the early 1990s minority groups in the west actually had higher family income than Han. At that time most minorities were herdsmen or handicraftsmen and tended to make more money than traditional farming, in which most Han people were engaged.

In the following decade, the situation changed dramatically. Figure 4 provides family income of Chinese respondents from another national survey held in 2002.¹³ As the rapid industrialization went on, income levels of Han Chinese caught up with those of ethnic minorities and even surpassed the latter.

Another possible reason for grievance is the religion policy in minority areas. Among the 55 officially recognized minority groups in China, only 5 of them are politically important, namely, Tibetan, Uyghur, Mongolian, Hui, and Kazak. They are important mostly because they are “religious minority” (Tang, 2009). The majority of Tibetans and Mongols are Buddhists, while most Uyghur, Hui, and Kazak are Muslims. Their values and belief systems are essentially different from the official ideology of Beijing and the culture of Han.

Figure 4 Family Income of Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese, 2002



Source: China Survey, 2002.

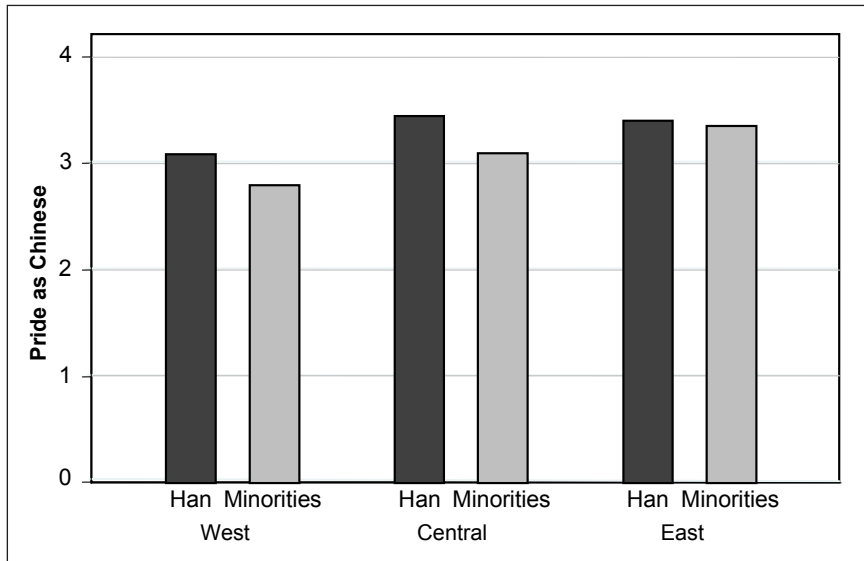
Religious beliefs facilitate the formation of ethnic identity, enhance the emotional ties and group cohesion, and distinguish group members from other groups. Observers found that in rural area of Xinjiang, people tend to establish their social networks on the basis of religious identity and alienate those who have different religious background (Pan and Long, 2008: 49).

In this sense, we anticipate religious minorities, mostly residing in western China, have lower level of identity with the Chinese Nation (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) than other groups. Figure 5 is the finding from the 2008 national survey regarding the question: “To what degree do you feel pride as a Chinese, not pride at all, not pride, pride, or very pride?” from the figure we can see ethnic minorities in western provinces reported the lowest level of pride as Chinese, which confirms our expectation.

For Tibetans, the overwhelming majority are Buddhists. In Xinjiang there are believers of Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, etc. In 2005, 58 per cent of population in Xinjiang were Muslims, which occupied 97 per cent of minority population (Pan and Long, 2008). Buddhism and Islam have deep influence in these restive regions.

Yet Beijing’s religion policy in these regions has manifested grievances within the minority community (Shan and Chen, 2009). Tibetans and Uyghurs take offence at government attempts in constraining their religious practices. But the Chinese leaders have been adamant about controlling religious

Figure 5 Chinese Identity of Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese



Source: Asian Barometer, 2008.

activities, especially in Xinjiang and Tibet. Their anti-religious attitudes have been enhanced by their perception that religious organizations are often involved in separatist activities instigated and organized by exiled leaders abroad, posing a major threat to China's national security.

Heavy-handed restrictions on religions have radicalized many ethnic minorities, as some observers argued.¹⁴ Because of the restrictions, some Tibetans ran away from their hometown to India to join Dalai Lama's exile camp. Many Muslims in Xinjiang join underground Koran study groups, where the imams teach the divine scripts as well as the political blueprints of an independent East Turkestan.

3.2. Opportunity Model

Opportunity model gives emphasis on conditions based on which collective action could be mobilized. Before the riots in Tibet and Xinjiang, there were certain "opportunities" in favour of collective actions. First, both Uyghurs and Tibetans have committed and capable elites. We do not have enough information about how much the Dalai Lama's exile government or the World Uyghur Congress played a role in the protests, but there is no doubt that they had influence on their ethnic fellows. Their political programmes

and blueprints certainly facilitated collective protests against Han Chinese and the government.

Secondly, demographic structure in Tibet and Xinjiang is favourable to ethnic conflicts. As we've discussed, when there are only two major groups, it is most likely to develop cross-group conflicts and intra-group mobilization. Among the 21 million residents in Xinjiang, around 46 per cent are Uyghurs, 39 per cent are Hans, and 7 per cent are Kazaks; the other 44 ethnic groups take up the rest 8 per cent. In the capital city of Urumqi, however, the majority is Han Chinese (73 per cent), while the Uyghurs only account for 12.3 per cent of the total population (*Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2008*). In both entire Xinjiang and in Urumqi, Han and Uyghurs take up 85 per cent of total population.

In Tibet most Han are concentrated in Lhasa. According to official statistics in 2007, Tibetan residents occupied 88.9 per cent while Han only took up 10.5 per cent, yet these numbers did not count in temporary residents, mostly Han workers or business people.¹⁵ Some researchers revealed that in 2000 Han people already constituted 34.34 per cent of Lhasa population (Su, 2006). Some others believed that Han population in Lhasa was larger than Tibetans.¹⁶ In short, in both Urumqi and Lhasa, there are two major groups standing side by side, which promoted intra-group cohesion and inter-group antagonism.

Finally, the Chinese state capacity in the grassroots was not effective enough to stop ethnic conflicts. In both Lhasa and Xinjiang riots, local governments responded in a tardy and inefficient way, leaving time for the escalation of violence. Before the Urumqi bloodshed, there were a lot of discussions in Uyghur-language Internet forums about possible attack toward Han, many general public felt something would happen in early July. Yet the local authorities did not take any effective action to prevent violence.

4. New Policies¹⁷

After the bloodshed violence in Tibet and Xinjiang, Beijing began to change its policy in these two regions. As the prelude to adjustment, some major personnel change took place. In early January 2010, the Chairman of the Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Legqog, retired. Champa Phuntsok resigned his governorship and took the place of Congress Chairman. Padma Choling, 58 years old, was elected the new governor. Born into a serf family, staying in the People's Liberation Army for seventeen years, Padma is believed by some observers to be a loyalist to Beijing's policy.¹⁸

In April 2010, the Xinjiang party secretary, Wang Lequan 王乐泉, was replaced by Zhang Chunxian 张春贤, then the party chief of Hunan Province.

Wang promoted the stability-first policy and enforced it with iron hand, which won him the nickname “secretary of stability” (*wending shuji* 稳定书记). It is believed that Zhang is relatively softliner and moderate. His amiable and responsive style to journalists makes him popular.¹⁹ Hong Kong media once voted him as the “most open-minded party secretary”.²⁰ Based on his experience in state companies and economic-related ministries, people expect Zhang will promote a development-centred and softliner policy.²¹

The Tibet Work Conference and the Xinjiang Work Conference, the joint conferences of the Chinese Communist Party’s central committee and the State Council, were held in January and May 2010 respectively. The new policy packages in Tibet and Xinjiang were made and promulgated in the conferences.

Almost the entire top leadership group was present in these conferences. The attendee list included the State President and Premier, the whole politburo, all the relevant cabinet ministers, provincial leaders, as well as military leaders and chiefs of the armed police.

In both Tibet and Xinjiang the top leadership believed that the “major contradiction” is between the increasing material demands of the people and the less developed social productivity, while there is also a “special contradiction” between “the people of all ethnicities in Tibet” and the separatist “Dalai Lama clique”, as well as a struggle against separatism in Xinjiang.²² Based on the contradictions, the focus of governmental endeavour in these regions has to be on economic development, with consideration given to political stability.

To achieve “leapfrog development,” the top leaders set specific goals. For Tibet, by 2015 the income gap between local farmers and herdsmen and the national average should be significantly reduced; in 2020 the average net income of farmers and herdsmen in Tibet should be close to the national average, with basic public services significantly enhanced, ecological environment further improved, infrastructure projects considerably promoted, and the society more harmonious and stable, and hence set a solid foundation for a “moderately prosperous society” (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会).²³

A more ambitious goal was made for Xinjiang. By 2015, per capita GDP in this region should catch up with the country’s average level and the residents’ income and their access to basic public services should reach the average level of the country’s western provinces. During this period, “marked” improvement must be achieved in the region’s infrastructure, self-development capacity, ethnic unity, and social stability. Xinjiang should accomplish a “moderately prosperous society” in all aspects by 2020. Efforts should be focused on improving people’s living standards and building an eco-friendly environment, as well as ensuring ethnic unity, social stability, and security.²⁴

4.1. Balanced and Sustainable Development

There are three aspects of policy adjustment. First, Beijing has decided to promote a more geographically balanced and environmentally sustainable development in the west. In the past most industries and investment went to urban areas of Tibet and the northern part of Xinjiang, where most Han live; whereas, most local minorities reside in rural areas of the Tibetan Plateau and southern Xinjiang. Geographical inequality has widened income gaps across ethnicities. Chinese leaders planed to fix the problem by introducing more investment to rural areas, to farming and livestock husbandry, and to southern Xinjiang, such as Kashgar and Hotian.

For the first time the four neighbouring provinces with significant Tibetan population, Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, and Qinghai, have been included in the Tibet development plan. The four provinces are required to give priority to the development of the Tibetan-populated areas and ensure that people in these areas are not left behind in pursuit of rapid economic growth. It is a big step forward for Beijing to seek coordinated development of the whole Tibetan-populated regions, making Tibet and its neighbouring regions more integrated politically and economically.²⁵

Ecological security, or environmental protection, is for the first time included in this top level policy agenda. In 2006 the ambitious Qinghai-Tibet railway project received a lot of criticisms from the international society. One of the major criticisms was targeted at the environmental consequences of the project. This time Chinese leaders have demonstrated their concern for the environmental costs of modernizing Tibet and Xinjiang.

4.2. New Focus of Investment

Second, the focus of governmental financial transfer and aid is changed from infrastructure and heavy industry projects to local people's livelihood. The previous development plans gave priority to infrastructure projects. These projects, while setting a foundation for economic growth, were largely done by Han workers who tend to be more skillful than their local ethnic counterparts. It is hard for minorities to benefit directly from those projects. As we have discussed, this is one of the major reasons for minorities' anger at the modernization brought by the Han.²⁶

In the new plan, the government will spend more resources in public services, social welfare, healthcare, education, and environmental protection. More central financial aid will go to improving social welfare and livelihood, and helping in agriculture and animal husbandry. The government will take efforts to create job opportunities and vocational training for all ethnic groups, and devote more resources to training and grooming cadres and professionals

and attracting more talented people from developed provinces. In Tibet a new pension system for rural residents will be in place by 2012.²⁷ Beijing will keep promoting the “three-cover” programme for children of farmers and herdsmen in their basic education. Also free medical care has been provided in farming and pastoral areas.

4.3. More Government Investment and Aids

The third and also the most significant part of the new package is to increase fiscal subsidies and investment in Tibet and Xinjiang. Xinhua News Agency reported that the Chinese government has invested \$45.6 billion in Tibet since 2001. GDP in this provincial unit, approximately \$6.4 billion in 2009, has increased 170 per cent since 2000.²⁸ Beijing has vowed to pour more money and aid into Tibet and other Tibetan populated areas in the next 10 years. In addition, the “pairing assistance” model (*duikou zhiyuan* 对口支援)²⁹ between Tibet and other provinces will be reinforced. The rest of the provinces in the country are required to introduce more professionals, funds, and technology into this less developed region.

In the Xinjiang conference, the Chinese leaders made an even more ambitious and specified plan to boost economy in this northwestern province. Premier Wen Jiabao told the meeting that the fixed asset investment for the region in the next five-year plan beginning in 2011 would be more than double the amount in the current plan³⁰, which means investment from 2011 through 2015 could run to 2 trillion yuan³¹. Besides, there are 19 provinces and cities that joined the “pairing assistance” programme with Xinjiang. They are required to grant 0.3 per cent to 0.6 per cent of their annual budget to Xinjiang every year. Joint-equity commercial banks, foreign bank, and banks of various kinds are encouraged to open outlets and branches in remote areas, mostly in southern Xinjiang, and provide more loans to local people and enterprises.³²

Moreover, the current tax system will be changed in favour of local government. The most striking reform is to change the way tax is charged on natural resources including oil and gas from a quantity-based to price-based levy. As oil and gas are taxed according to the volume of output, Xinjiang has yet to benefit from the growth of prices in the international market. With the new resource taxation, this autonomous region may receive 8 billion yuan to 10 billion yuan of additional fiscal revenue annually.³³

Enterprises in less developed southern Xinjiang will enjoy favourable “two-year exemption and three-year reduction” (*liangmian sanjianban* 两免三减半) tax policy, which was applied only to foreign invested companies in the past. In the first two years after the enterprise begins making profit, it is completely exempt from income tax; in the following three years it is allowed a 50 per cent reduction.³⁴

Finally, a new Special Economic Zone is to be established in Kashgar, the hub in south Xinjiang where 90 per cent of its residents are Uyghurs. The Special Economic Zone usually enjoys preferential policies in industries, taxation, finance, land use, and trade, which are especially conducive to doing business. In the 1980s and 1990s, Special Economic Zones such as Shenzhen 深圳, Zhuhai 珠海 and Pudong 浦东 were engines of China's economic miracle. Observers anticipate Kashgar to play the same role in Xinjiang's growth.³⁵

5. Conclusion: Future Challenges

As we have seen in the previous sections that there may be multiple factors underlying ethnic riots in Tibet and Xinjiang, including economic inequalities, lack of religious freedom, incompetence of local government, ethnic composition, and so forth. It looks that the Chinese leaders gave priority to economic issues and decided to focus their efforts on boosting economy in minority areas, while ignoring other issues.

In the short and medium term, this economic therapy may take effect as livelihood of ethnic minorities is getting better and public services are improved. The income inequalities across groups may gradually diminish. Minority people may generally become less likely to support extremism or terrorist attacks (Shan, 2010).

Yet the development process itself could bring trouble, as the process may rekindle ethnic loyalties and anti-modernization sentiments. Economic modernization brings a lot of rural residents into cities. Urban setting put formerly isolated populations into contact so that those migrant workers easily develop ethnic networks of information, jobs, and housing (Olzak, 1983: 367). These new migrants move to the city usually with unrealistically high expectations. They are likely to be frustrated and become particularly hostile to some cultural aspects of modernization, and therefore "ripe for radicalization" (Richardson and Sen, 1997). For instance, many rioters in the Lhasa or Urumqi violence were newly urbanized youth from rural areas in south Xinjiang. The ethnic conflict provided them with a vent of their grievances resulting from economic growth.³⁶

In the long run, there are more challenges the Chinese leaders may have to face. People who are economically better off and better educated are more likely to give attention to their own history, culture, languages, and religions, and hence are more likely to strengthen their ethnic identity. Academic research has revealed repeatedly that when people are economically better off, their identity with their ethnic background is actually getting stronger, and they are more committed to their own languages, cultures, and religions, as well as human rights issues.

But the new policies largely ignore the identity issue, and particularly, the religion issue. In the last Tibet Work Conference in 2001, the official statement claimed “protecting freedom of religious belief and legal religious activities ... actively guiding Tibetan Buddhism to be adapted into the socialist society”.³⁷ By contrast, in this latest conference the CCP announced, “maintaining the normal order of Tibetan Buddhism, and guiding Tibetan Buddhism to be adapted into the socialist society”.³⁸ The freedom of religion was dropped and control over religious activities will still be there.

In the Xinjiang Work Conference President Hu’s keynote speech had only one sentence related to religion, “fully implement the Party’s ethnic policy and religion policy, fully strengthen and improve propaganda and ideological work ...”.³⁹ There is no sign that the exiting religion policy will be changed.

It looks like the CCP leadership has yet to figure out a new way to handle religion issues. But this is a challenge they cannot evade. Heavy-handed restrictions on religious practice have exasperated many Muslim Uyghurs and Tibetans and pushed them to radical anti-governmental actions.⁴⁰ The CCP in turn takes it as a justification for more harsh control over religion. To achieve “lasting stability” in minority areas, Beijing may need to break this vicious circle and find out a way to accommodate religion in its system.

Also it is unclear how Beijing would establish an identity of the Chinese nation among the Muslim Uyghurs, Buddhist Tibetans, and other groups and achieve national integration. Hu called for comprehensive education about ethnic unity in order to help local people identify with the “great motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, and a socialist development path with Chinese characteristics”.⁴¹ But on the other hand, he said that the Party will stick to the existing system of regional autonomy for ethnic minorities, a system that has politically sharpened ethnic divisions and weakened the Chinese identity (Shan and Chen, 2009). How to promote integration among various ethnic groups based on the exiting system remains a question.

Another challenge is the possible radicalization of the overseas Tibetan camp. While the Dalai Lama has been proposing a moderate approach, not all Tibetans buy into his proposal. The Tibetan Youth Congress⁴², which is under the leadership of the Dalai Lama’s exile government, has its own political agenda and is increasingly diverted from the moderate approach. Since 1974 the Dalai Lama has given up the independence goal and promoted a “highly autonomous Tibet within China”. The TYC, however, believes that only through independence can the human rights issues in Tibet be resolved. Once the Dalai Lama passes away, the TYC may play a more central role in the exiled Tibetan camp and push the policy to more radical and confrontational.⁴³

There are also challenges from the international society.⁴⁴ The US has been underpinning the exiled Tibetan camp since 1950s. About a month after

the Tibet Work Conference, US President Barack Obama met the Dalai Lama to show his support. Beijing appeared very angry, but there was little Beijing could do to completely disengage the US and the Dalai Lama camp. The Tibet issue will remain a major challenge to the Chinese government in its relations with western nations. Xinjiang will also remain as an issue between China and the US, although it may not be as controversial as the Tibet problem. While the Obama Administration's response toward the Xinjiang riots was cautious, the US still underlies certain overseas Uyghur movements. Uyghur American Association and the World Uyghur Congress, two major Uyghur organizations in the western world, receive financial support from the National Endowment for Democracy, an American organization financed by the US Congress.⁴⁵ The US also brings up Xinjiang as an issue of concern in its human rights talks with Chinese officials.⁴⁶

The riots in Tibet have made Indians uncomfortable. As cracking down the disturbances, China's military presence in Tibet was strengthened. While those troops were not there directly against India, "it may not be surprising that the Indians found them threatening" (Mackerras, 2010). India hosts the government of the exiled Tibetans, which made China unhappy.

However, both countries look to realize that it is their interest to get on well with each other. They need to cooperate in a wide range of issues from trade, the Pakistan issue, to climate change issue in the Copenhagen Conference. That is why India handled the protests against the 2008 Olympic torch relay very carefully. The police frustrated efforts of Tibetan groups in India to embarrass the Chinese torch relay.

Turkey is another country that has adamant interest in the Xinjiang issue, due to its cultural and linguistic linkages with Uyghurs. It made the strongest reaction to the Xinjiang incident.⁴⁷ Turkey by itself may not constitute a major challenge to China. But it has significant impact on the Turkic, also Islamic states in Central Asia, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁸ China's any imprudent move in Xinjiang, if being interpreted as anti-Turkic or anti-Islamic, might spark off chained reactions in those countries and make Xinjiang a matter full of knots.

Notes

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