

# China's National Insecurity: Old Challenges at the Dawn of the New Millennium

by Dru C. Gladney

Foreigners and the Chinese themselves typically picture China's population as a vast monolithic Han majority, with a sprinkling of exotic minorities living along the country's borders. This understates China's tremendous cultural, geographic, and linguistic diversity—in particular, the important cultural differences within the Han population. It also ignores the fact that China is officially a multinational country, with 56 recognized "nationalities." More important, recent events suggest that China may well be increasingly insecure regarding not only these official nationalities, but also national integration.

China is seeing a resurgence of pride in local nationality and culture, most notably among southerners such as the Cantonese and Hakka, who are now classified as Han. The differences may increase under economic pressures, such as inflation, the growing gap between rich and poor areas, and the migration of millions of people from poorer provinces to those with jobs. Chinese society is also under pressure from the officially recognized minorities, such as the Uyghurs and Tibetans.

For centuries, China has held together a vast multicultural and multiethnic nation, despite alternating periods of political centralization and fragmentation. But cultural and linguistic cleavages could worsen in a

China that is weakened by internal strife, inflation, uneven growth, or a post-Jiang struggle for succession. At the National Day celebrations in October 1999, commemorating 50 years of Communist Party rule, frequent calls for "National Unity" underscored the importance China's many ethnic populations will play in its national resurgence.

## **Ethnic Nationalism**

At the beginning of the last decade, not a single observer of international politics predicted that the former Soviet Union would now be fragmented into a melange of strident new nations and restive ethnic minorities. When Russian troops first marched into the Chechen capital of Grozny in 1996 in hopes of keeping what remained of the former Soviet empire together,<sup>1</sup> few analysts drew parallels to China's attempts to rein in its own restive minorities.

China is thought to be different. Cultural commonality and a monolithic civilization are supposed to hold the country together. While focus on ethnic nationalism generally has been absent from Western perspectives and reporting on China, the peoples of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have often demonstrated otherwise. Continuing separatist activities and ethnic unrest have punctuated border areas since a major Muslim uprising in February 1996 led to bombings in Beijing and frequent eruptions on its periphery.<sup>2</sup> Quick and violent responses to thwart

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localized protests—27 “splittists” reportedly killed in an uprising in December 1999 outside of Khotan in southern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—indicate rising Chinese concern over the influence of separatist sentiment spilling over from the newly independent Central Asia nations into China’s Muslim areas. In these areas, more than 20 million Turkic Uyghurs, Kyrgyz, Kazaks, and other Muslims are a visible and vocal reminder that China is linked to Eurasia. For Uyghur nationalists today, direct lineal descent from the Uyghur Kingdom in 7th century Mongolia is accepted as fact, despite overwhelming historical and archeological evidence to the contrary, and they seek to revive that ancient kingdom as modern Uyghuristan.<sup>3</sup>

Random arrests and detentions continue among the Uyghur, who are increasingly being regarded as China’s Chechens. A report in *The Wall Street Journal* of the arrest on August 11, 1999, of Rebiya Kadir, a well-known Uyghur businesswoman, during a visit to the region by a delegation from the U.S. Congressional Research Service, indicates that China’s suspicion of the Uyghur people continues.<sup>4</sup>

China is also concerned about the “Kosovo effect,”<sup>5</sup> fearing that its Muslim and other ethnic minorities might be emboldened to seek outside international (i.e., Western) support for stopping continued human rights abuses. Just before the National Day celebrations in October 1999, the State Council hosted its first 3-day conference on “the nationalities problem” in Beijing, and issued a new policy paper, “National Minorities Policy and its Practice in China.”<sup>6</sup> Though this White Paper did little more than outline all the “good” programs China has carried out in minority areas, it did indicate increasing concern and a willingness to recognize unresolved problems, and several strategic think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai initiated focus groups and research programs to address the issues of ethnic identity and separatism.<sup>7</sup>

But ethnic problems in Jiang Zemin’s China go far deeper than the official minorities. Sichuanese, Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Hunanese cafes [“cafes” correct word?] avidly advocate increased cultural nationalism and resistance to Beijing central control. As the European Union experiences its difficulties in building a common European alliance across linguistic, cultural, and political boundaries, we should not imagine China to be less concerned about its persistent multiculturalism.

If the Roman Empire were around today, it would look much like China. Two millennia ago, the Roman Empire and the Han dynasty were at their peaks. Both empires barely lasted another 200 years. At the beginning of the last millennium, China was on the verge of being conquered by the Mongols and divided by a weakened Song dynasty in the south and the Liao dynasty in the north, whose combined territory was equal only to the five northern provinces in today’s PRC. Indeed, it was the Mongols who extended China’s territory to include much of what is considered part of China today: Tibet, Xinjiang, Manchuria, Sichuan, and Yunnan. Over the last two millennia, China has been divided longer than it has been unified. Can it maintain national unity throughout the next century? History suggests not. Indeed, with the reacquisition of Macao in late 1999, China is the only country in the world that is *expanding its territory* instead of reducing it. Will China be able to continue to resist the inexorable forces of globalization and nationalism?

Chinese linguists, such as John DeFrancis, speak of the linguistic diversity within China. Attention to cultural diversity should force observers to give further weight to the plurality of Chinese peoples in national politics. An American President once claimed to know the mind of the Chinese. This is as farfetched as someone claiming to know the European mind. Have any U.S. policymakers spent time talking to disgruntled entrepreneurs in Canton and Shanghai, impoverished peasants in Anhui and Gansu, or angry Central Asians in Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Tibet? While ethnic diversity does not necessitate ethnic separatism or violence, growing ethnic awareness and expression in China should inform policymaking and take into account the interests of China’s many peoples, not just those in power. China policy should represent more than the interests of those in Beijing.

## China’s Han Nationality

Officially, China is made up of 56 nationalities—the majority nationality known as the Han, and 55 recognized minority groups. The peoples identified as Han comprise 91 percent of the population from Beijing in the north to Canton in the south, and they include the Hakka, Fujianese, Cantonese, and other groups.<sup>8</sup> These Han are thought to be united by a common history, culture, and written language; differences in language, dress, diet, and customs are regarded as minor and superficial.

The rest of China's population is divided into 55 official minority nationalities that are mostly concentrated along the borders, such as the Mongolians and Uyghurs in the north and the Zhuang, Yi, and Bai in southern China, near southeast Asia. Other groups, such as the Hui and Manchus, are scattered throughout the nation, and there are minorities in every province, region, and county. An active state-sponsored program assists these official minority cultures and promotes their economic development (with mixed results). The outcome, according to China's preeminent sociologist, Fei Xiaotong, is a "unified multinational" state.<sup>9</sup>

But even this recognition of diversity understates the divisions within the Chinese population, especially the wide variety of culturally and ethnically diverse groups within the majority Han population.<sup>10</sup> These groups have recently begun to rediscover and reassert their different cultures, languages, and history. Yet, even as the Chinese worry and debate over their own identity, policymakers in other nations still take the monolithic Han identity for granted.

The notion of a Han person (*Han ren*) dates back centuries and refers to descendants of the Han dynasty who flourished at about the same time as the Roman Empire. But the concept of Han nationality (*Han minzu*) is an entirely modern phenomenon that arose with the shift from the Chinese empire to the modern nation-state.<sup>11</sup> In the early part of the 20th century, Chinese reformers were concerned that the Chinese people lacked a sense of nationhood, unlike Westerners and even China's "other" peoples such as Tibetans and Manchus. In the view of these reformers, Chinese unity stopped at the clan or community level rather than extending to the nation as a whole.

Sun Yat-sen, leader of the republican movement that toppled the last imperial dynasty of China (the Qing) in 1911, popularized the idea that there were "Five Peoples of China"—the majority Han, the Manchus, the Mongols, the Tibetans, and the Hui (a term that included all Muslims in China, now divided into Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Hui, etc.). Sun was a Cantonese, educated in Hawaii, who feared arousing traditional northern suspicions of southern radical movements. He wanted both to unite the Han and to mobilize them and all other non-Manchu groups in China (including Mongols, Tibetans, and Hui) into a modern multiethnic nationalist movement against the Manchu Qing state and foreign imperialists. The Han

were seen as a unified group distinct from the "internal" foreigners—within their borders the Manchus, Tibetans, Mongols, and Hui—and from the "external" foreigners, namely the Western and Japanese imperialists. Professor Frank Dikötter, Director of the Contemporary China Institute at the University of London, has argued a racial basis for this notion of a unified Han *minzu*,<sup>12</sup> but I suspect the rationality was more strategic and nationalistic—the need to build national security around the concept of one national people, with a small percentage of minorities supporting that idea.

The Communist Party expanded the number of peoples from 5 to 56 but kept the idea of a unified Han group. The Communists were, in fact, disposed to accommodate these internal minority groups for several reasons. The 1934–1935 Long March, a 6,000-mile trek across China from southwest to northwest to escape the threat of annihilation by Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) forces, took the Communists through some of the most heavily populated minority areas. Harried on one side by the KMT and on the other by fierce "barbarian" tribesmen, the Communists were faced with a choice between extermination and promising special treatment to minorities—especially the Miao, Yi (Lolo), Tibetans, Mongols, and Hui—should the party ever win national power.

The Communists even offered the possibility of true independence for minorities. Chairman Mao frequently referred to Article 14 of the 1931 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) constitution, which "recognizes the right of self-determination" of the national minorities in China, their right to complete separation from China, and their right to the formation of an independent state for each minority. This commitment was not kept after the founding of the People's Republic.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the party stressed maintaining the unity of the new nation at all costs.

The recognition of minorities, however, helped the Communists' long-term goal of forging a united Chinese nation by solidifying the recognition of the Han as a unified "majority." Emphasizing the difference between Han and the minorities helped to deemphasize the differences within the Han community. The Communists incorporated the idea of Han unity into a Marxist ideology of progress, with the Han in the forefront of development and civilization, the vanguard of the people's revolution.<sup>14</sup> The more "backward" or "primitive" the minorities were, the

more “advanced” and “civilized” the so-called Han seemed and the greater the need for a unified national identity. Cultural diversity within the Han has not been admitted because of a deep (and well-founded) fear the country would break up into feuding warlord-run kingdoms, as happened in the 1910s and 1920s.

China historically has been divided along north/south lines—into Five Kingdoms, Warring States, or local satrapies—as often as it has been united. Indeed, China as it currently exists, including large pieces of territory occupied by Mongols, Turkic peoples, Tibetans, and so forth, is three times larger than China was under the last Chinese dynasty, the Ming, which fell in 1644. Ironically, geographic “China” as defined by the People’s Republic was actually established by foreign conquest dynasties, first by the Mongols and finally by the Manchus. A strong, centralizing Chinese government (whether of foreign or internal origin) has often tried to impose ritualistic, linguistic, and political uniformity within its borders. The modern state has tried to unite the various peoples with transportation and communication networks and an extensive civil service. In recent years, these efforts have continued through the controlled infusion of capitalist investment and market manipulation. Yet even in the modern era, these integrative mechanisms have not produced cultural uniformity.

### **Invented National Unity**

Although presented as a unified culture—an idea also accepted by many Western researchers—Han peoples differ in many ways, most obviously in their languages. The supposedly homogenous Han speak eight mutually unintelligible languages (Mandarin, Wu, Yue, Xiang, Hakka, Gan, Southern Min, and Northern Min). Even these subgroups show marked linguistic and cultural diversity; in the Yue language family, for example, Cantonese speakers are barely intelligible to Taishan speakers, and speakers of the Southern Min dialects of Quanzhou, Changzhou, and Xiamen have equal difficulty communicating.<sup>15</sup> Chinese linguist Y. R. Chao has shown that the mutual unintelligibility of, say, Cantonese and Mandarin is as great as that of Dutch and English or French and Italian.<sup>16</sup> Mandarin was imposed as the national language early in the 20th century and has become the *lingua*

*franca*, but like Swahili in Africa it must often be learned in school and is rarely used in everyday life in many areas.

Cultural perceptions among the Han often involve broad stereotypical contrasts between north and south.<sup>17</sup> Northerners tend to be thought of as larger, broader-faced, and lighter-skinned, while southerners are depicted as smaller and darker. Cultural practices involving birth, marriage, and burial differ widely. Fujianese, for example, are known for vibrant folk religious practices and ritualized reburial of interred corpses, while Cantonese have a strong lineage tradition, both of which are almost nonexistent in the north. One finds radically different eating habits from north to south, with northerners consuming noodles made from wheat and other grains, open to consuming lamb and beef, and preferring spicy foods, while the southern diet is based upon rice, eschews lamb and beef in favor of seafood, and along the coast includes milder dishes. It is interesting, in this regard, that Fei Xiaotong once argued that what made the Han people different from minorities was their agricultural traditions (i.e., minorities were traditionally not engaged in farming,<sup>18</sup> though this failed to take into account groups like the Koreans and Uyghur who have farmed for 1,400 years). Yet Fei never considered the vast cultural differences separating rice-eaters in the South from wheat-eaters in the North.

This process of national unification based on an invented majority at the expense of a few isolated minorities is widely documented in Asia and is not unique to China.<sup>19</sup>

### **Identity Politics and National Minorities**

China’s policy toward minorities involves official recognition, limited autonomy, and unofficial efforts at control. The official minorities hold a significance for China’s long-term development that is disproportionate to their size. Although totaling only 8.04 percent of the population, they are concentrated in resource-rich areas, cover nearly 60 percent of the country’s land mass, and exceed 90 percent of the population in counties and villages along many border areas of Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Yunnan. While the 1990 census recorded 91 million members of the official minorities, the 2000 census is estimated to report an increase in the minority population to 104 million.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after taking power, Communist leaders sent teams of researchers, social scientists, and party cadres to the border regions to identify groups as official nationalities. Only 41 of the more than 400 groups that applied were recognized, and that number reached 56 by 1982. Most of the nearly 350 other groups were identified as Han or lumped together with other minorities with whom they shared some features for generally political reasons. Some are still applying for recognition, and the 1990 census listed almost 750,000 people as “unidentified” and awaiting recognition—which means they were regarded as ethnically different but did not fit into any of the recognized categories.

In recognition of the minorities' official status as well as their strategic importance, various levels of nominally autonomous administration were created—five regions, 31 prefectures, 96 counties (or, in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, “banners”), and countless villages. Such “autonomous” areas do not have true political control, although they may have increased local control over the administration of resources, taxes, birth planning, education, legal jurisdiction, and religious expression. These designated areas have minority government leaders, but the real source of power is still the Han-dominated Communist Party—as a result, they may actually come under closer scrutiny than provinces with large minority populations, such as Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan.

While “autonomy” seems not to be all the word might imply, it is still apparently a desirable attainment for the minorities in China. Between the 1982 and 1990 censuses, 18 new autonomous counties were established, three of them in Liaoning Province for the Manchus, who previously had no autonomous administrative districts. Although the government is clearly trying to limit the recognition of new nationalities, there seems to be an avalanche of new autonomous administrative districts. In addition to the 18 new counties and many villages whose total numbers have never been published, at least 8 more new autonomous counties are to be set up. Five will go to the Tujia, a group widely dispersed throughout the southwest that doubled in population from 2.8 million to 5.8 million from 1982 to 1990.

The increase in the number of groups seeking minority status reflects what may be described as an explosion of ethnicity in contemporary China. Indeed, it has now become popular, especially in Beijing, for people to declare themselves to be Manchus or mem-

bers of other ethnic groups, admitting they were not Han all along. While the Han population grew a total of 10 percent between 1982 and 1990, the minority population grew 35 percent overall—from 67 million to 91 million. The Manchus, a group long thought to have been assimilated into the Han majority, added three autonomous districts and increased its population by 128 percent, from 4.3 million to 9.8 million, while the population of the Gelao people in Guizhou shot up an incredible 714 percent in just 8 years.

Clearly, these rates reflect more than a high birth rate; they also indicate “category shifting” as people redefine their own nationality from Han to a minority or from one minority to another. In interethnic marriages, parents can decide the nationality of their children, and the children themselves can choose their nationality at age 18. One scholar predicts that if the minority population growth rate continues, there will be a total of 100 million minorities in the year 2000 and 864 million in 2080.<sup>21</sup> China has recently begun to limit births among minorities, especially in urban areas, but it is doubtful that authorities will be able to limit the growing number of applications for redefinition and the hundreds of groups applying for recognition as minorities.

Why is it popular to be officially ethnic in 1990s China? This is an interesting question, given the negative reporting in the Western press about minority discrimination in China. If it is so bad to be a minority in China, why are the numbers of minorities increasing? One explanation may be that in 1982 there were still lingering doubts about the government's true intent in registering the nationalities during the census. The Cultural Revolution, a 10-year period during which any kind of difference—ethnic, religious, cultural, or political—was ruthlessly suppressed, had ended only a few years before.<sup>22</sup> By the mid-1980s, it had become clear that those groups identified as official minorities were beginning to receive real benefits from the implementation of several affirmative action programs. The most significant privileges included permission to have more children (except in urban areas, minorities are generally not bound by the one-child policy), pay fewer 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 including practices, such as shamanism, that are still banned among the Han),

and express their cultural differences through the arts and popular culture.

Indeed, one might even say it has become popular to be ethnic in today's China. Mongolian hot pot, Muslim noodle, and Korean barbecue restaurants proliferate in every city, while minority clothing, artistic motifs, and other expressions of cultural styles adorn Chinese bodies and private homes. In Beijing, one of the most popular new restaurants of the young Han nouveau riche is the Thai Family Village (*Dai Jia Cun*), which offers a cultural experience of the Thai minority (known in China as the Dai), complete with beautiful waitresses in revealing Dai-style sarongs and short tops, sensually singing and dancing, and exotic foods such as snake's blood. It is not unusual to learn of Han Chinese prostitutes representing themselves as Thai and other minorities to appear more exotic to their customers.<sup>23</sup> Surprisingly, the second-most popular novel in China in 1994 was *The History of the Soul* (*Xin ling shi*), which concerned personal and religious conflicts in a remote Muslim region in northwest China. It was written by Zhang Chengzhi, a Hui Muslim from Ningxia. This rise of ethnic chic is in dramatic contrast to the anti-ethnic homogenizing policies of the late 1950s' anti-Rightist period, the Cultural Revolution, and even the late 1980s' "spiritual pollution" campaigns.

Foreign policy considerations have also encouraged changes in China's treatment of minority groups. China has one of the world's largest Muslim populations—nearly 20 million, more than the United Arab Emirates, Libya, or Malaysia—and has increasing contacts with trade partners in the Middle East and new Muslim nations created on its borders. China provides the Middle East and Central Asia with cheap labor, consumer goods, weaponry—and increasing numbers of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca.<sup>24</sup> These relations will be jeopardized if Muslim, especially, Uyghur, discontent continues over such issues as limitations on mosque building, restrictions on childbearing, uncontrolled mineral and energy development, and continued nuclear testing in the Xinjiang region.

Foreign policy considerations also argue for better treatment of Korean minorities, since South Korean investment, tourism, and natural resources have given China's Koreans in Liaoning and Manchuria a booming economy and the best educational level of all nationalities (including the Han). Another factor has been the increase in international tourism to minority areas, including the "Silk Road" tours to Xinjiang and

package tours to the "colorful" minority regions of Yunnan and Guizhou that are marketed to Japanese, Taiwanese, and Southeast Asian Chinese tour groups.

The most striking change in Chinese policy toward a single minority as a result of international relations has been the initiation—just after the improvement in Sino-Israeli relations in 1992—of discussions about granting official nationality status to Chinese Jews (*Youtai ren*), once thought to have disappeared entirely. As Sino-Israeli relations improve, and China seeks increased tourism dollars from Tel Aviv and New York, one would assume the Chinese Jews will once again reappear as an official nationality in China.

The creation of several new nations on China's Central Asian frontier with ethnic populations on both sides of the border has also made ethnic separatism a major concern. The newly independent status of the Central Asian states has allowed separatist groups in Xinjiang to locate some sources of support, leading to over 30 reported bombing incidents in the Xinjiang region in 1999 claimed by groups militating for an "Independent Turkestan." At the same time, freer travel across the Central Asian borders has made China's Muslims well aware of ethnic and political conflicts in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, and also demonstrated that they are often better off economically than their fellow Muslims across the border. Several meetings of the "Shanghai Five" (PRC, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia) since April 1997 concluded treaties to strengthen border security and establish the refusal to harbor separatist groups. In April 1999, for example, Kazakhstan returned to China three Uyghurs who were accused of separatism.

Beijing's challenge is to convince Chinese Muslims that they will benefit more from cooperation with their national government than from resistance. In the south, a dramatic increase in cross-border relations between Chinese minority groups and Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, and Thailand has contributed to a rising problem of drug smuggling. Beijing also wants to help settle disputes in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar, because it fears ethnic wars will spill over the border into China. In Tibet, frequent reports of ongoing resistance and many arrests continue to filter into the media, despite Beijing's best efforts at spin control.

## Internal Divisions Among the Han Majority

Not only have the official minorities in China begun to assert their identities more strongly, pressing the government for more recognition, autonomy, and special privileges, but different groups within the so-called Han majority have begun to rediscover, reinvent, and reassert their ethnic differences.

The dramatic economic explosion in South China has encouraged southerners and others to emphasize their cultural and political differences. Cantonese rock music, videos, movies, and television programs, all heavily influenced by Hong Kong, are now popular throughout China. Whereas comedians used to make fun of southern ways and accents, southerners now scorn northerners for their lack of sophistication and business acumen. And, as any Mandarin-speaking Beijing resident will tell you, bargaining for vegetables or cellular telephones in Guangzhou or Shanghai markets is becoming more difficult due to growing pride in local languages; nonnative speakers always pay a higher price. Rising self-awareness among the Cantonese parallels the reassertion of identity among the Hakka, the southern Fujianese Min, the Swatow, and a host of other generally ignored peoples now empowered by economic success and embittered by age-old restraints from the north.

Interestingly, most of these southern groups traditionally regarded themselves not as Han but as Tang people, descendants of the great Tang dynasty (618–907 A.D.) and its southern bases.<sup>25</sup> Most Chinatowns in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia are inhabited by descendants of Chinese immigrants who came from the mainly Tang areas of southern China. They are built around Tang Person Streets (*tang ren jie*).

The next decade may see the resurgence of Tang nationalism in southern China in opposition to northern Han nationalism, especially as economic wealth in the south eclipses that of the north. There is also a newfound interest in the ancient southern Chu kingdom as key to modern southern success. Some southern scholars have departed from the traditional Chinese view of history and now argue that by the 6th century B.C., the bronze age culture of the Chu had spread north and influenced the development of Chinese civilization, rather than the culture originating in

the north and spreading southward. Many southerners now see Chu as essential to Chinese culture, to be distinguished from the less important northern dynasties—with implications for the nation's economic and geopolitical future. Museums celebrating the glory of Chu have been established throughout southern China. There is also a growing belief that northerners and southerners had separate racial origins based on different histories and contrasting physiogenetic types, a belief influenced by highly speculative 19th century notions of race and Social Darwinism.<sup>26</sup>

There has also been an outpouring of interest in Hakka origins, language, and culture on Taiwan, which may be spreading to the mainland. The Hakka, or “guest people,” are thought to have moved southward in successive migrations from northern China as early as the Eastern Jin (317–420 A.D.) up until the late Song dynasty (960–1279 A.D.), according to many Hakka (who claim to be Song people as well as Tang people). The Hakka have the same language and many of the same cultural practices as the She minority, but they have never sought minority status themselves—perhaps because of a desire to overcome their long-term stigmatization by the Cantonese and other southerners as “uncivilized barbarians.”<sup>27</sup> This low status may stem from the unique Hakka language (which is unintelligible to other southerners), the isolated and walled Hakka living compounds, or the refusal of Hakka women during the imperial period to bind their feet.

Nevertheless, the popular press in China is beginning to note more frequently the widely perceived but difficult-to-establish rumors of the Hakka origins of important political figures (even Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong, Sun Yat-sen, former party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, and former President Ye Jianning). People often praise Zhou Enlai by stressing his Jiangnan linkages and Lee Kuan-yew as a prominent Hakka statesman; and even Chiang Kai-shek is lauded as a southerner who knew how to get money out of the United States.

## National Disintegration

China's economic vitality has the potential to fuel ethnic and linguistic division, rather than integrating the country further, as most would suppose. As southern and coastal areas get richer, much of the central, northern, and northwestern regions are unlikely to keep up, increasing competition and contributing to

age-old resentments across ethnic, linguistic, and cultural lines.<sup>28</sup> Southern ethnic economic ties link wealthy Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Fujianese (also the majority people in Taiwan) more closely to their relatives abroad than to their political overlords in Beijing. Already, provincial governments in Canton and elsewhere not only resist paying taxes to Beijing, but they also restrict the transshipment of goods coming from outside the province across provincial—often the same as cultural—lines. Travelers in China have seen an extraordinary expansion of toll roads, indicating greater interest in local control.

Dislocations from rapid economic growth may also fuel ethnic divisions. Huge migrations of “floating populations,” estimated to total over 150 million nationally, now move across China seeking employment in wealthier areas, often engendering stigmatized identities and stereotypical fears of the “outsiders” (*wai di ren*) within China. Crime, housing shortages, and lowered wages are now attributed most often to these people from Anhui, Hunan, or Gansu who are taking jobs from locals—complaints similar to those heard in West Germany about the influx of Easterners after reunification. Reports that 70 percent of those convicted of crimes in Beijing were outsiders have fueled criticisms of China’s increasingly open migration policy.<sup>29</sup>

The result of all these changes is that China is becoming increasingly decentered. This is a fearsome prospect for those holding the reins in Beijing. Perhaps it was a factor in the decision to crack down on the June 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. At that time, central authorities had begun to lose control of a country, which they feared could quickly unravel. That such fears have not eased is shown by the increased calls during the National Day celebrations for National Unity and efforts to reduce corruption. Worker and peasant unrest reported throughout China cuts across, and may at times exacerbate, cultural and ethnolinguistic differences between the haves and the have-nots, who in today’s China increasingly interact along lines marked by multiethnic diversity.

### **National Disunity?**

Although ethnic separatism will never be a serious threat to a strong China, a China weakened by internal strife, inflation, uneven economic growth, or the struggle for succession after Deng Xiaoping’s

death could become further divided along cultural and linguistic lines. It was a southerner, born and educated abroad, who led the revolution that ended China’s last dynasty; and when that empire fell, competing warlords—often supported by foreign powers—fought for local turf occupied by culturally distinct peoples. And, the Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s and 1860s that nearly brought down the Qing dynasty also had its origins in the southern border region of Guangxi among the so-called marginal Yao and Hakka peoples.

These events are being remembered as the generally well-hidden and overlooked “others” within Chinese society begin to reassert their own identities in addition to the official nationalities. At the same time, China’s leaders are moving away from the homogenizing policies that alienated minority and non-northern groups. Recent moves to allow and even encourage the expression of cultural diversity, while preserving political unity, indicate a growing awareness of the need to accommodate that diversity. This development will be important to watch over the next 2 years, as China prepares to incorporate Hong Kong, a city that operates on cultural and social assumptions very different from those of Beijing.

The construction of Chinese national identity has always been tentative. In June 1989, while China’s future hung in the balance, there was significant concern over which armies would support Deng’s crack-down—those based in Sichuan, Hunan, Canton, or Beijing; all had their own local concerns. The military has since been reshuffled and somewhat downsized, attempting to uproot any local attachments and professionalize the command structure. However, this only underscores the growing importance of regional and local ties. China, as of now, is a unified country militarily, and perhaps, politically. As a result of Jiang’s continuance of the Deng Xiaoping reforms, China is increasingly less unified economically. Yet how can China continue to withstand the forces of globalization and nationalism without a government legitimized through popular elections, transparency in the political process, adherence to the rule of law, and good governance?

Last November, an ambassador from one of the Muslim nations friendliest to China remarked privately to this writer that, by the end of the next decade, China would be divided into nine republics.

Historians debate whether a foreign threat has been the only thing that has held China together. Now that the encirclement doctrine, upon which President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger built the Sino-American alliance, is no longer valid, and containment has been replaced by improving U.S.-China relations based on a policy of engagement, China faces only enemies from within.

The Chinese press reported more than 5,000 organized social protests in 1998 alone, with many more in 1999, culminating in the widespread Falun Gong uprising and crackdown. Most of these protests have been organized by labor unions and peasant associations, but, increasingly, ethnic and religious groups such as the Falun Gong have begun to speak out. The fact that China is becoming dangerously decentered perhaps may be the main reason for the recent rush on Beijing's part to finalize international border agreements with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and most recently, Vietnam.

U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan predicted that there will be 50 new countries in 50 years. The trend began with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and has continued throughout much of Africa and Asia, particularly Indonesia. Why should China be immune from such global diversification? While ethnic separatism alone will never be threatening enough to pull a strong China apart, a China weakened by internal strife, inflation, uneven economic growth, or the struggle for (un)democratic succession could certainly fragment along cultural and linguistic lines. Ethnic strife did not dismantle the former Soviet Union; but it did come apart along boundaries defined in large part by ethnic and national differences. The generally well-hidden and overlooked "others" within Chinese society—the Cantonese, Shanghaiese, Sichuanese, and Fujianese—are beginning to reassert their own identities in addition to the "official" nationalities on China's borders. Increasing Taiwanese nationalism has caused great consternation in Beijing, an "internal" ethnic nationalism that few Chinese nationalists can understand.

The rising politics of difference are of concern not only in Lhasa and Urumqi, but in Canton and Shanghai as well. The "Kosovo effect" may very well turn into the "Chechnya effect," whereby ethnic groups, especially Muslims, are stereotyped as separatists, and cleansing is launched as an internal affair. The problem for China, however, is that many of its internal threats may not come from official nationalities who

are more easily singled out by race or language. China's Chechnya, like Indonesia's Aceh problem, may very well come from within its own peoples who are seeking economic and political advantage. The next decade promises to be as momentous for China as the last was for Europe and Russia.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Russian troops marched on Chechnya, a secessionist, self-proclaimed "independent" republic in the Northern Caucasus, in 1996. Russia again began bombing the territory of Chechnya in September 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See the critical report, *People's Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region* (London: Amnesty International, April 21, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> The best "Uighur nationalist" retelling of this unbroken descent from Karakhorum is in the document "Brief History of the Uyghers," originating from the Eastern Turkestani Union in Europe, and available electronically at [www.geocities.com/Capitol-Hill/1730/buh.html](http://www.geocities.com/Capitol-Hill/1730/buh.html). For a recent review and critique, including historical evidence for the multiethnic background of the contemporary Uyghur, see Dru C. Gladney, "Ethnogenesis and Ethnic Identity in China: Considering the Uyghurs and Kazakhs," in Victor Mair, ed., *The Bronze Age and Early Iron Age People of Eastern Central Asia: Volume II* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of Man, 1998), 812–34. For a discussion of the recent archeological evidence derived from DNA testing of the desiccated corpses of Xinjiang, see Mair, "Introduction," *The Bronze Age and Early Iron Age People of Eastern Central Asia*, 1–40.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Johnson, "China Arrests Noted Businesswoman in Crackdown in Muslim Region," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to the international effort to prevent the "ethnic cleansing" of the largely Muslim Albanian Kosovars in the Serbian province of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999.

<sup>6</sup> China State Council, "National Minorities Policy and its Practice in China," Beijing, October 1999.

<sup>7</sup> The China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), under the State Council, has initiated a "Nationality Studies Project" in order to examine security implications of China's minority problems (Chu Shulong interview, November 14, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Colin Mackerras, *China's Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Fei Xiaotong, "Ethnic Identification in China," in Fei Xiaotong, ed., *Toward a People's Anthropology* (Beijing: New World Press, 1981), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Emily Honig, *Creating Chinese Ethnicity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 47.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 60–75.

<sup>14</sup> Dru C. Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994a), 97.

<sup>15</sup> Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Yuen Ren Chao, *Aspects of Chinese Sociolinguistics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Fred C. Blake, *Ethnic Groups and Social Change in a Chinese Market Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> Fei Xiaotong, "Zhonghua minzu de duoyuan jiti juge" ("Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of the Chinese Nationality"), *Beijing Daxue Xuebao* 4 (1989), 12.

<sup>19</sup> See Dru C. Gladney, ed., *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Zhang Tianlu, "Xiandai Zhongguo Shaoshu minzu renkou zhuangkuang" ("Analysis of the Contemporary China Minority Nationality Population Situation"), paper presented at the Conference on Contemporary Migration and Ethnicity in China, Institute of Nationality Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, October 7–8, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution ran from 1966 until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

<sup>23</sup> Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities," 92–123.

<sup>24</sup> Dru C. Gladney, "Sino-Middle Eastern Perspectives and Relations Since the Gulf War: Views from Below," *The International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, November 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Leo J. Moser, *The Chinese Mosaic: The Peoples and Provinces of China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> Mair, *The Bronze Age and Early Iron Age People of Eastern Central Asia*.

<sup>27</sup> Blake, *Ethnic Groups and Social Change in a Chinese Market Town*.

<sup>28</sup> See Wang Shaoguang, et al., *China's Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Fei Guo, "Beijing's Policies Towards Ethnic Minority/Rural Migrant Villages," paper presented at the Conference on Contemporary Migration and Ethnicity in China, Institute of Nationality Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, October 7–8, 1999.