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# Some Considerations on China's Minorities
# in the 21st Century: Conflict or Conciliation?

## Thomas Heberer

## Introduction

There has been a significant increase of ethnic conflicts in the last decade. They constitute one of the main sources of domestic political instability in multi-national countries. Political, economic, cultural, religious and history related conflicts as well as the worldwide *ethnic revival* are the main causes. China has not been exempt from this trend, as demonstrated, for instance, by ethnic conflict in Tibet and Xinjiang. This can be attributed to internal causes (liberalization, reform policies, the policy of "opening" to the outside world, social change), to the influence of the disintegration of multi-ethnic states like the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia or to increasing ethnic nationalism in neighbouring Central Asia. Therefore, in China new mechanisms of conflict resolution will have to be found as well.

The political campaigns of the Mao era led to deformations of ethnic cultures. Alienation from cultural values changed the character of minorities, and many minority intellectuals were alienated from their own culture and their cultural roots. But the attempt at forced assimilation, particularly during the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976) promoted a consciousness of ethnic identity. The liberal policies of the reform era have given great latitude to this ethnicity (Smith, A. 1996: 445-458). Social change following upon economic change, political liberalization, and the erosion of socialist ideology led to a new search for identity among the ethnic minorities, particularly because the process of modernization is in many ways felt as a menace to ethnic identity, ethnic cohesion and mode of life. Amidst rapid social change people turn back to their ethnic culture, seeking protection and security, and this becomes a substantial motive for ethnonationalism and growing ethnicity (Rösel 1995: 117-130).

Rising ethnicity, on the one hand, has a protective function for an ethnic group; on the other hand, it is a symptom of a crisis (Reiter 1991: 69). As Nash puts it:

> "The identity dimension of ethnicity (...) rests on the fact that fellow members of the ethnic group are thought to be 'human' and trustworthy in ways that outsiders are not. The ethnic group provides a refuge against a hostile, uncaring world. Like a family, it has continuing claim on loyalty and sacrifice .... The idea of refuge, the place where one is fully human, whatever failure or success happens in the larger world, is the cement and power of ethnic membership and continuity." (Nash 1989: 128)

It is exactly this element that prevents assimilation of ethnic groups in China in the name of "socialism" or "socialist modernization". This psychological force of ethnicity thus reaches beyond the idea of national consciousness and attempts to explain psychologically why people cling to a political identity. This explains to us why all attempts at forced or covert assimilation (not only) in China are unavailing, and why every political liberalization leads to a stronger self-consciousness of nationality.

The growing influence of religion and traditional culture among ethnic minorities in China must be understood as another indication of rising ethnicity (Haynes 1994: 150-155). In this context, religion and traditions are not only a reminder of one's own culture and cultural identity, but are also a reaction to the process of social change directed from above by Han Chinese (the ethnic majority in China). The process of modernization and change threatens the cohesion of an ethnic group and thus often provokes mobilization for preserving the group identity. At the same time this process creates new ethnic ideologies and institutions (Newman 1991: 452).
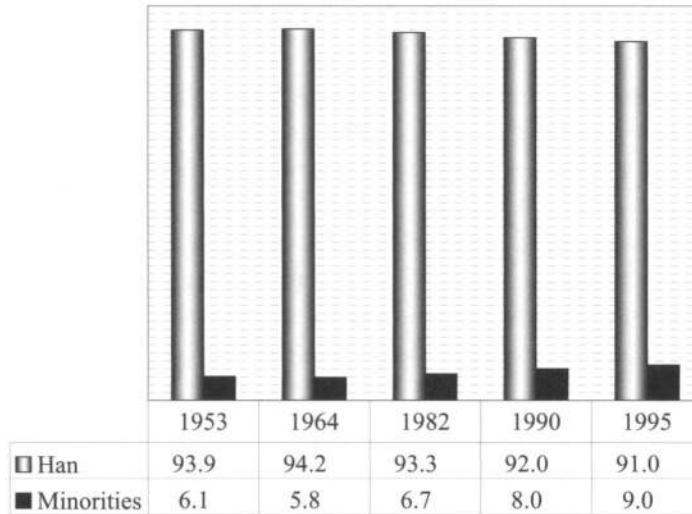
Ethnic identity we understand as a group's consciousness of its ethnic, historical and cultural peculiarity and 'otherness'. Here we must pay particular attention to cultural identity as part of ethnic identity (DeVos and Romanucci-Ross 1995: 349-353; DeVos 1995: 15-17). We think of culture as not only a kind of materially manifested system of habits and customs, but also as *psychic income*, "those things which satisfy the mental and spiritual needs of human beings" (Kellas 1991: 66-67). If culture, as a value system common to the members of a given society, becomes a means by which they define their identity and simultaneously mark themselves off from others, this explains why culture and nationality are very tightly interwoven, and why attacks on culture are concurrently understood as attacks on the identity of a nationality.

Social scientists once held the opinion that with economic development and modernization religious, ethnic and cultural differences between societies would disappear; ethnic de-differentiation would be the result of modernization processes (Banton 1967: 2; Esser 1980: 118-119; Heckmann 1992: 30-39). It was widely assumed that market expansion, industrialization and modernization would lead to ethnic homogenisation of cultures. But in fact the opposite was the case: ethnic revival as well as social and cultural differentiation. This is true also for China, but till now there have been very few detailed studies on this subject[1].

China consists of 56 nationalities. The majority, more than 1.2 billion peoples call themselves "Han", although the Han are not a homogeneous nationality, but include different groups, a point I will not address here. The population census of 1990, the last one, revealed that 91.2 million people belonging to one of the 55 "national minorities", 8% of the entire population. According to the micro census of 1995, only five years later, China had about 108.5 million people belonging to such minorities, about 9% of the total population *(Gongren Ribao* (Worker's Daily, Beijing) 《工人日报》, 15

February 1996). Since the 60s, the minorities' population has developed more rapidly than that of the Han.

**Table 1. Han - Minorities Population Share According to Population Census (in %)**



|  | 1953 | 1964 | 1982 | 1990 | 1995 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☐ Han | 93.9 | 94.2 | 93.3 | 92.0 | 91.0 |
| ■ Minorities | 6.1 | 5.8 | 6.7 | 8.0 | 9.0 |

Surprisingly, the population of some nationalities multiplied between the population census of 1982 and that of 1990. For example, the number of Russians increased from about 3,000 to 13,000, that of the Gelao from 54,000 to 438,000. The numbers of Manchus, Xibe, Qiang, She und Tujia doubled (Guojia Minzu Shiwu Weiyuanhui Jingjisi & Guojia Tongjiju Gouminjingji Zonghe Tongjisi (eds.) 国家民族事务委员会经济司·国家统计局国民经济综合统计司编 1997: 299, 300). There are several reasons for this: higher birth rates, changes of ethnic registration, or because people identify with a minority due to a stronger feeling of ethnic identity or material advantage. In principal, It is less the natural increase of populations, but rather rising ethnicity and ethnic identity that are the principal reasons for this development.

In contrast to the former Soviet Union two points are important:

· Unlike the former Soviet Union, China is not facing disintegration
· Today we do not have any kind of ethnocide inside China

Furthermore, we should appreciate affirmative policies toward non-Han nationalities, such as the recognition of the existence of different ethnic groups, the prohibition of discrimination, special laws for minorities in the 1950s and in the 80s; providing aid to minority areas, guarantees of special representation in political institutions, special benefits in terms of population policy and university entrance examinations, freedom to choose ethnic identity etc[2]. But when discussing the future of

minorities, it is not sufficient to mention positive aspects only, but features which explain existing conflicts that affect stability should be addressed, and possible methods of conflict reduction should be considered[3].

## Patterns and Sources of Conflict

For many years China officially denied the existence of ethnic conflicts. But recent opinion polls among Chinese citizens point to their grouth. For instance: A survey (about 80% of the people asked belonged to minority groups) revealed that:

(1) 51.7% of the people asked did **not** believe that the relationships between Han and minorities were harmonious and that unrest in minority areas would **not** occur.
(2) The growing disparities between Han-areas and minority areas were assessed to:
  · increase feelings of inequality among minorities (63.3%);
  · stir up ethnic unrest (35.6%);
  · increase feelings of discontent (33.0%).
(3) Only 30.3% were of the opinion that political equality between Han and non-Han has been realized.
(4) Only 9.7% were satisfied with the existing autonomy (Weng, Zhang, Qu et al. 1995: 202-219; Jiang, Lu, Dan et al. 1996: 212-219).

Another survey (in which 135 people of 24 nationalities were questioned) asking for trends in the next decade revealed:

**Table 2. Trends in the Next Decade**

| *Answers* | *%* |
| --- | --- |
| No unrest will occur | 32.6 |
| Unrest and turmoil will happen | 23.7 |
| No answer | 43.7 |

**Source: Yang Jingchu 1996: 18.**

Less then one third were of the opinion that no unrest will occur. More than two thirds were not so clear about this or expressed the opposite opinion. The findings of the two surveys demonstrate that a rather large percentage of people expect growing ethnic conflicts in the near future.

In my opinion there are primarily five sources of conflict: collective memory, political conflicts, economic conflicts, cultural conflicts and new conflicts arising from economic and social change.

In the following, I will explain the above mentioned five threads of conflict.

4

**The First Source of Conflict: Collective Memory and Historical Knowledge**

"Nations begin in the minds of men" argues Ross Stagner (Stagner 1967: VII), indicating that conflicts have their origin in the mind of nationalities. Stereotypes and prejudices towards others shape behavior towards them. This implies a historical dimension. Therefore, an analysis of ethnic conflicts has to start with an analysis of the historical and mental-cognitive dimension, with the ideological resources of conflicts[4], in order to understand what creates ethnic conflict and resistance.

The dimension of collective memory and historical knowledge encompasses two points: (a) *historical conflicts and traumatic events in the memory of an ethnic group* (such as suppression or expulsion, something that has happened rather frequently in Chinese history, e.g. the bloody suppression of the Miao and Hui uprisings in the 18th and 19th century or of the uprisings of the Yi, Tibetans, Yao and others in the 50s or 60s), and especially traumatic events during the Cultural Revolution; (b) *perceptions of non-Han people by the Han in history*.

**Sino-centred Images**

Even today, traditional perceptions shape the behaviour patterns and attitudes towards other people (minorities) and the expectations of how those minorities should behave towards the power center. This has to do with more than two thousand years of continuous predominance of central power and Chinese culture. Imperial China understood itself as the cultural center of the world and its culture as the culture of mankind per se. In traditional concepts of belief the existence of various peoples with clear-cut settlement areas was accepted; but there was only one people entrusted by heaven to be in charge of the whole of mankind. This people was thought of as the center of the world, as the "Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo* 中国)" and its emperors as "Sons of Heaven".

This sino-centered image was combined with Confucian perceptions of social hierarchy: Ideas of equity didn't exist, because things weren't equal. Take for example two persons, one was always older, higher ranking or of another sex. Those conceptions were applied to external relations as well, with the Chinese empire at the top of the hierarchy. The rest of the world consisted of immediate border areas which were directly subordinated to the empire, like Vietnam, Korea or Japan, the "inner barbarians" at the periphery of the empire and the "outer barbarians" outside that realm.

The people who represented the ancient river culture (later called Han) classified the people surrounding them as "barbarians". This classification was done according to directions (north, south, east, west barbarians), from the distance of that people from the center of the world (the court of the emperor) as well as according to their behaviour towards this center. The emperor's court expected regular tributes, the rulers and leaders of other people were regarded as tributary vassals. Relationships existed mainly with people assessed as weak and culturally inferior. Under conditions of

far-reaching isolation for many centuries the idea of superiority was always confirmed. The Han, who were farmers, were contemptuous of the peoples around them, who were hunters and gatherers or nomads and whom the Han believed to be culturally and technologically inferior.

Confucianism, for centuries the state-bearing ideology, was the ideological fundament of the contempt of the "barbarians". They were held in contempt, because, as the great Chinese historian Sima Qian 司马 迁 (ca. 145-86 B.C.) stated, they knew nothing of "*li* (礼), the proper [Confucian] rules of life and *yi* (仪), the duties of life" (Groot 1921: 3). To be different was by the old Chinese understood as an expression of ignorance of the social structure of relations and of the Confucian rites. They concluded that "barbarians" were unable to control their "emotions", tended rather to give way to their feelings and would behave "like birds and wild animals" (Wiens 1954: 219; Müller 1980).

Nevertheless Confucianism did not intend to annihilate these people, but demanded their subordination to the emperor as well as their integration into the Chinese empire. The aim was "cultivation" by Confucian values, i. e. a cultural, non-violent assimilation. Even a "barbarian" could become an emperor, but only by fitting into the Chinese system and by giving up his previous identity (Franke 1962: 22). Even today this attitude has changed only gradually and remains an important component of Chinese nationality policies.

In fact, this traditional world image has been disintegrating since the middle of the 19th century, last but not least through Western influence and penetration, but its basic ideas have by no means disappeared.

Not only does the traditional assessment of non-Han people by the imperial court belong to the historical facts, but also the historical experiences which those people have had with the Han. All these experiences, which find expression in the collective consciousness of a nationality, are underestimated. In official descriptions the history of the non-Han people is mainly reduced to three points:

(1) to an early and close connection or affiliation to China;
(2) to the struggle of the exploited and suppressed against the rulers of their own nationality;
(3) to the struggle against imperialism and against those who want to split up the unity of the motherland.

Till today the evaluation of minorities depends on their service to the (Han-) Chinese nation (See for example Bulag 2000: 196).

However, in Chinese history another point exists as well, that is the expulsion of these people to remote areas and cruel punishments in case of revolt. The history of the Miao or the Hui and their treatment by the imperial court serve as evident examples.

These aspects of history are rarely or never mentioned in Chinese history books. And this one-sided perception of history is the very reason why traumatic events (like expulsion and cruel punishment) are not critically re-assessed, but reproduce themselves in the collective consciousness of an ethnic group and thus perpetuate contradictions between nationalities. Traumatic events did not only occur during the time of imperial China or in the Republic of China, but also during the People's Republic. The various political movements (movement against local nationalism in the second half of the 50s, the Great Leap Forward at the end of the 50s or the Cultural Revolution 1967-76) represented the worst excesses of suppression of nationalities which cannot simply be blotted out from the memory of an ethnic group. It is true that the Cultural Revolution has influenced every inhabitant of China, but there is one important difference: these movements were perceived by the Han as movements for which their own political leadership was responsible, but by non-Han as movements for which the Han and their party were responsible. In the first case it is considered as a political conflict, in the second case as an ethnic one. The trauma of those years, when all ethnic and religious differences were regarded as hostile and reactionary, has not simply disappeared.

At the beginning of the 80s a cadre of the Yi expressed this different attitude between Han and non-Han rather clearly:

> "In the 50s the Party told us, Gao Gang and Rao Shushi [two leading Party figures in northeast China that were purged in 1954] were bad guys and should be criticised; in the 60s Liu Shaoqi [the former head of state; died in prison during the Cultural Revolution] had to be criticized. Lin Biao, the deputy of Mao [during the Cultural Revolution] was at first magnificent, then an evildoer (*huaidan* 坏蛋). We had even to criticize Confucius. All those people were Han, and we don't know, if they were good or bad. We have nothing to do with them."[5]

The Cultural Revolution was not only directed at psychological and physical annihilation and suppression, but comprised an element of *memoricide*, that is the extermination of historical documents, accompanied by rituals of intimidation, in order to demonstrate who has the monopoly of interpretation of Chinese history. This memoricide has not been forgotten, especially today, when representatives of various minorities are trying to reappraise and reinterpret their history. Concurrently, among ethnic minorities in China we find a rediscovering and an increasing consciousness of history. Accordingly, Stevan Harrell has argued that in China a triple pattern of ethnic classification exists: *ethnohistory*, a scholarly discourse on the history of a nationality or an area; *state discourse of ethnic historization*, the official classification by Chinese authorities, and *ethnic identity*, the perception of one's own and ethnic identity (Harrell 1995c: 98). Undoubtedly, there exist differences in the way in which different nationalities evaluate history and historical events, a fact that till today is not

sufficiently understood by the political leadership of the Han.

But, beside the sinocentric world view we have another element of perceiving non-Chinese "barbarians" in China: the idealization of their naturalness and simplicity, a factor mentioned above that I will not address here.

### Minorities and Exotism

"Exotism", writes the French anthropologist Michel Leiris, is

> "the distortion of the stranger and unknown as the brave 'savage' or 'good guy from the jungle' or generally his degradation to an object of projection. The exotically motivated encounter is not based on the desire to learn something about the other or about oneself. Exoticism is ethnocentric decoration and adventure." (Leiris 1979 : 40, 41)

It is exactly this exoticism which seems to characterize the official image of "minorities" among the Chinese public. Mostly they are depicted dancing, singing, laughing, in colourful garments, under palm trees, in high mountain areas or bizarre landscapes. The dances are wild, fires are blazing, mythical images are shown, so that the spectator feels strangeness and sometimes suspicion and fright. Mainly young women are depicted whose features, figures and motions are similar to Han ideals of beauty. This can even include an eroticisation of minorities (Heberer 2001e).

### Patriarchal Myth of Kinship

A patriarchal kinship myth characterizes the official description of the relationship between Han and minorities. The Han are described as father-figures or elder brothers. Surrounded by members of minorities they advise, teach and instruct them, they are teachers and idols. This is expressed by the name "big elder brother" (*lao da ge* 老大哥), the name the Han have given themselves in terms of minorities.

Well, fathers or elder brothers have the task of educating the children or the younger brothers and sisters - a clearly Confucian element, which of course can be found in other world regions as well. This patriarchal concept finds its ideological expression in the idea that the most advanced culture is that of the "father ethnic group", i. e. the Han. Society as a whole is regarded as a homogeneous ethnic community, a closed unit like a family, where only a division of labour between the superior and the inferior exists. The head of the family (the Han) has the duty to protect the family, to educate, instruct and advise its members, the children (minorities) are expected to be loyal and to respect the father of this family and his education concepts.

### Historical Backwardness and Hierarchization

The traditional perceptions correspond well with historic-materialistic concepts developed, for example, by Josef Stalin in the 30s. According to his "doctrine of socio-economic formations" the societies of all nationalities in history could be

8

classified in five categories: primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist societies[6]. This concept, which has its origin in the European history of ideas (e.g. Turgot), fitted well into the traditional Chinese thinking of hierarchization. In this way every ethnic group had its fixed place in the hierarchy of nationalities and in its relationship with the "most advanced" people, the Han. Under socialism the Han could retain their traditional position and function toward non-Han people: As the societies of the national minorities were considered inferior to that of the Han, the culture of the Han remained the highest-ranking one. It was the duty of the Han to civilize and modernize the minorities' societies. The cultural "avantgarde", representative and guardian of culture and civilization, was now no longer the emperor's court, his officials, the gentry and the traditional examination system, but the Communist Party with its functionaries and its education system. The duty of every nationality was to catch up with the Han as quick as possible and to bring its economy and society into line with that of the Han. The patriarchal state correspondingly had to initiate suitable measures and policies. It decided what was useful for a minority, what was advanced or backward, civilized or uncivilized, and which customs or habits were beneficial or harmful and had accordingly to be abolished or reformed. Even today school students learn that ethnic minorities were economically and culturally more backward than the Han (Hansen 1999).

Stereotypes like those mentioned above are an obstacle to earnest discourse and debate between the Han and the non-Han people and their cultures. The de-mystification of the strange and unknown, of the "other", the understanding of exoticistic prejudices and stereotypes remains an important task. The decisive aspect of such stereotypes is the concept of hierarchization, because it perpetuates and legitimizes inequality and tutelage. The philosopher Michael Walzer has pointed out that the idea of a cultural hierarchy always poses a threat for the people whose culture is devaluated. Hierarchies, says Walzer, are never "innocent", because they tend towards policies of discrimination. The classification as inferior is thus an obstacle to true autonomy or self-administration, because those nationalities are seen as incapable of successful management and self-government.

To summarize this point, the Chinese nationalities project is characterized by the following distinctive mental concepts:

(a) **The concept of China as a territorial project** (*Zhongguo*, the Middle Kingdom), i.e. the idea of a territory that is not populated by nationalities per se, but by a territorially defined community constituting a large family (*guojia* 国家, as a general term for state and country, a combination of the characters for state/country and family). All people living upon this territory are considered as "Chinese (*Zhongguoren* 中国人)". In this concept the Han are perceived to be a cultural model and political pace-maker[7].

(b) **The notion of the homogeneousness of a dominating culture "*Han* (汉)"** in contrast to quantitatively und qualitatively inferior "ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族)". Indeed, this dichotomy is only a construction. Actually, the Han do not constitute an ethnically homogeneous group either. Rather, they are the result of a mixture of various peoples during history; furthermore, they comprise groups that differ significantly in terms of language, dress, customs, habits or ways of living. Some groups do not even perceive themselves as "Han" (e.g. the Hakka or the Taiwanese)[8]. As far as the minorities are concerned they do not constitute an uniform entity, either, but comprise a wide range of different groups. Considering the relationship between Han and non-Han the American social anthropologist Charles McKhann argues that ethnicity in China is not only related to a "bipolar structure, in which all (55) minorities are opposed to the majority Han", but also an interdependent process of relations between neighboring minority groups (McKhann 1998).

(c) **The perception of history as a gradual development and learning process, in which the Han have the "historical task" to "cultivate" the "minorities"** as well as the perception of the existence of an ethnic hierarchy with the Han as the most developed nationality at the top. Stevan Harrell has called this the *civilizing project* (Harrell 1995b: 3-10). And this is exactly the fundament of what in China is labelled "nationality relations" (*minzu guanxi* 民族关系), a concept that last but not least could be classified as an expropriation of the history of the ethnic minorities[9].

But to reduce the perception of minorities by the Han just to those three concepts would be one-sided. There are other perceptions as well, e.g. an idealization encompassing images of exoticism, originality and pureness. Depicting European images of Asia the German sociologist Volker Heins once distinguished three "moral world maps" in perceiving the "East" (Frankfurter Rundschau, 28 December, 1996). If we adopt this concept to the Han perception of ethnic minorities we will find the same set of maps in the minds of the Han: (1) the *barbarian minorities* of stagnation and backwardness; (2) the *sinicized minorities* as late-comers of development that have to catch up with the Han as quickly as possible and to bring their economies and societies into line with those of the Han, and (3) the *delightful minorities* of prodigy, exoticism and esotericism (Heberer 2001e).

**The Second Source of Conflict: Political Sources of Conflict**
These encompass two points:

- *Lack of real autonomy*
- *Contradiction between a multi-ethnic country and a party where ethnicity counts for little*

10

The Cultural Revolution made it clear that the integration of non-Han people was to be achieved not through force, but through measures that were based on a broad consensus. The 1982 constitution re-evaluated the minorities correspondingly, and the 1984 "Autonomy Law" formally extended to them the widest-reaching freedoms since the founding of the People's Republic (Heberer 1984b). But most of the clauses of the Autonomy Law were so vaguely worded that they are unimplementable in the absence of accompanying laws. It is a *soft law*, that is it sets goals that should be followed as much as possible by state policies. It lacks reference to an effective system for the protection of autonomy. In addition, there are no legal measures for the implementation of this law. There are correspondingly many complaints that local authorities do not keep to it (Wang Geliu 1997; He Gaowa 1997; Ma Wenyu 1997; Wu Zongjin 1998: 167-171; Hao 1998: 241-245; Shen and Shi 1998: 136-142; Wang Yunwu 1998).

Because those rights are not really enforceable (in the end, there is no law independent of the Party and no constitutional or administrative court), the degree to which rights can be realized depends on the current party line, and is therefore quite arbitrary. As early as 1980 a representative of the Li on Hainan complained bitterly about this indeterminacy of rights. There were laws even in the fifties, but in 1958 these were criticized and the Li and Miao Autonomous Prefecture was dissolved. In 1962 it was restored. In 1966 it was explained again that autonomous areas were no longer needed, and those dissolved were later once again restored. And "Today a party secretary comes and abolishes the autonomous region, tomorrow the next one comes and establishes it again. In many ways the autonomous regions and their development depend on this or that line" (*Minzu Tuanjie* (Unity of Nationalities) 《民族团结》 10/1980: 4). That this development continues is demonstrated by the fact that this autonomous prefecture was again dissolved in 1988. The relatively large autonomous prefecture stood in the way of the process of opening up the island of Hainan, elevated to the status of a province, and was therefore abolished without much comment.

The lack of implementable rights of self-rule, together with the creeping undermining through Han migration into minority areas and environmental damage in those areas, things over which nationalities who are practising autonomy have no kind of influence, are the nuclei of discontent in non-Han areas (Heberer 1987: 25-40). Corruption, if involving Han cadres, contributes to this discontent, because minority people often perceive corruption as the misbehaviour of Han towards minorities.

A basic conflict of Chinese society consists of the incompatibility between the (ideologically) single-ethnic party and the polyethnic society. The party which, corresponding to the majority of the population, is dominated by Han Chinese, is the court of last resort. It is dedicated in its organizational structure to the levelling of all ethnic differences and is not subordinated either to the legal system or to autonomy. Therefore all forms of self-rule find their limits here. And this inhibits actual, implementable laws of autonomy.

Accordingly, the *Autonomy Law* did not in any way calm the calls of many minority leaders for wider-ranging, actual autonomy (up to the maximum degree, that Beijing would, following the Emperor's example, manage only the international relations and military interests of large regions like Tibet or Xinjiang, and leave local politics to the peoples living there). Particularly among the larger nationalities, such as the Tibetans and the Uyghur, disappointment spread widely. At the beginning of the 1980s the non-Han peoples looked to Beijing. From that quarter at the outset much was promised, but in fundamental questions little was given. Percentage increases in the economic and educational spheres and the re-granting of certain freedoms in the cultural sector deceive us into ignoring the basic problem: while local ethnic cultures are valued and promoted in the short run, long-term objectives assume that development equals Hanification, and policies thus become self-contradictory. Particularly among the larger nationalities, disappointment spread widely, and younger forces were radicalized, because they no longer expected any solutions to their problems from Beijing.

**The Third Source of Conflict: Economic Sources of Conflicts**
Those are primarily:

- *Poverty*
- *Increasing development gaps*
- *Increasing income gaps*
- *Economic neglect of a nationality or its territory*
- *Conflicts over usage of land and resources*

Minority areas remain the stepchildren of development. The gap in development between the autonomous regions of the non-Han peoples and the Han regions has increased in spite of the reform policies. 80% of the official number of people under the poverty line live in minority areas (Weng, Zhang, Qu et al. 1995: 216, 217). Particularly in terms of industrial development the gap between Han and minority' areas is growing (compare table 3).

Table 3. Gross Output Value of Autonomous Regions as a Percentage of China's Total (in %)

| Year | 1952 | 1978 | 1985 | 1990 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ind./Agriculture | 7.1 | 6.5 | 9.1 | 7.2 | 6.3 | 6.1 | 5.9 |
| Industry | 3.3 | 5.0 | 7.9 | 5.4 | 4.9 | 4.6 | 4.5 |
| Agriculture | 10.1 | 11.1 | 12.1 | 12.8 | 12.6 | 12.9 | 13.1 |

Source: Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1999: 40, 41, 382, 423.

Only in terms of agricultural output is there a gradual increase, pointing out that a division of labour between Han areas (industry) and non-Han areas (agriculture) is emerging, a development pattern that Michel Hechter has characterized as a form of a

*internal colonialism* (Hechter 1975; 1976).

**Table 4. Per capita Net Income of Rural Households in Autonomous Regions and Provinces with High Percentage of Minorities (1985 and 1998 in comparison)**

|  | 1985 | | 1998 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | *Yuan* | *%* | *Yuan* | *%* |
| *China* | 398 | 100. 0 | 2,162 | 100.0 |
| Guangxi | 303 | 76.1 | 1,972 | 91.2 |
| Inner Mong | 360 | 90.5 | 1,981 | 91.6 |
| Ningxia | 321 | 80.7 | 1,721 | 79.6 |
| Tibet | 353 | 88.7 | 1,232 | 57.0 |
| Xinjiang | 394 | 99.0 | 1,600 | 74.0 |
| Guizhou | 288 | 72.3 | 1,334 | 61.7 |
| Yunnan | 338 | 84.9 | 1,387 | 64.2 |
| Qinghai | 343 | 86.2 | 1,425 | 65.9 |

**Source: Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1999: 339.**

In all provinces (except Guangxi and Inner Mongolia in which the gap between Han and minority areas still increased) the average per capita income of minority' areas has considerably decreased.

Although, for sure, considerable materials flow from the center to the minority areas, nearly half of the counties classified as "poor" lie in national minority areas. Of course, the Party is not solely responsible for this, because some of these areas are remote regions of refuge, into which non-Han peoples have had to flee from Han expansion in recent centuries; but this also makes clear that since the founding of the People's Republic no development policy suited to these areas has been followed. The reform policies have visibly diminished the state tutelage. But this has not in any way brought advantages to the minority areas. According to Chinese reports, many autonomous areas have not been given enough credit, subsidies, foreign exchange materials by the center or the provinces. The financial subsidies per head have partly been reduced. The investments in autonomous areas (about 60% of the total Chinese territory) were 11.7% of the total investments in 1993, 8.9% in 1994 and still less at the end of the 90s (Hechter 1976: 216-217).

Delegates from minority regions at a meeting of the National People's Congress in the early 90s warned of the emergence of a "new fourth world" inside China, by which they meant to point to the alarming developments in many minority areas.

## The Fourth Source of Conflict: Cultural Conflicts
These encompass:

  • Unequal treatment of cultures
  • Different conceptions of state and law

· Different cultural or religious expectations and aims

The main problem of cultural policy is that since the 1950s "healthy" and "unhealthy" customs and practices have been differentiated. Unhealthy ones should be eliminated or "reformed"; healthy ones preserved. Because this definition has never been precisely clarified, it always has led and continues to lead to local interference in the area of customs.

## The Fifth Source of Conflict: New Conflicts Due to Economic and Social Change and Due to Breakdown of Authority

These are:

· *Modernization as an imagined threat to ethnic identity*
· *Exploitation of resources*
· *In-migration of Han*
· *Corruption*
· *Growing unemployment*
· *Growing discrimination*
· *Economization of minority cultures*

Exploitation of resources in minority areas (forests, mineral resources, land), in-migration of Han, corruption, spatial mobilization, growing unemployment among minority people and the growing gaps between Han and minorities in terms of income, economic development; growing discrimination against and the economization of minority cultures lead to new patterns of conflict. Modernization processes and social change generate feelings of threat, of disintegration, and of decay of minority cultures and social communities.

## Patterns of Resistance

Ethnic resistance was for a long time romanticized by the Communist Party in terms of class conflict, national liberation or revolution (Bulag 2000: 184, 185). In fact, there are different patterns of resistance: active and passive, violent and peaceful, formal and informal patterns. Conflicts and resistance are by no means uniform. Each group has distinct interests and responds to patterns that evoke particular forms of ethnic opposition.

### Growing separatist movements

Such movements exist not only in Tibet, but particularly in Xinjiang and on a smaller scale in Inner Mongolia[10]. Most crucial seems to be the development in Xinjiang, a region inhabited primarily by Moslem and Turkic people. According to

Chinese sources there are 12 movements in Xinjiang fighting for independence, among them radical Islamic or Pan-Turkic groups. Guerrilla warfare and violence are widespread. In March 2000 alone more than 20 Uyghur guerilla fighters were executed in Xinjiang (Heberer 2001c; Hoppe 1995).

### Active local resistance

Such as open protests and demonstrations against the closing of temples, churches and mosques; against the conversion of pasture land into arable land; against deforestation, damage to the environment and ecological destruction; against interference in customs or birth control, and against all forms of discrimination.

### Passive local resistance

Minority groups taking refuge in mountains or forests and the revitalization of traditions and institutions (underground churches and mosques, Islamic underground schools, shamans) have to be interpreted as a reaction to Chinese perceptions of "modernization" and of growing ethnicity. The reform process did not lead to acculturation, but primarily to a re-emergence of local traditions. The statement of a young Yi scholar in her presentation at an international conference three years ago is an expression of the new pride in traditions. This scholar stated that Bimo (traditional priests, healers and exorcists) were characterized by "love for their profession" and a notion of equality, as they were active for every Yi. Bimo, she argued, are law-abiding, industrious and truth-loving, have high moral standards and fight corruption (Bamo Ayi 1997: 37-50; 1998). Because of this the Bimo, outlawed for many decades, are now once more considered to be ideal persons or, as one Yi participant at the conference remarked, as "ideal candidates for Communist Party membership".

### Revitalization of religions

This is not only true for Islam, Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism, but also for animistic and shamanistic beliefs, and for the increase of religious sects and chiliastic movements (Shen 1997: 35; Bajie Rihuo 1998: 8, 9). Among Miao groups the traditional expectation of salvation, predicting that after a large disaster or catastrophe the Miao king would return, give them back their lost land and create a Miao state, is re-emerging[11]. Among the Yi in the Liangshan mountains the influence of charismatic sect leaders who preach that the end of the world is near is growing. As a Chinese journal has stated, in some villages, townships and even counties such sects already control party organizations and government institutions (*Minzu*《民族》 1995(10): 41; Zhou and Xia 1995: 30). Such movements are occurring in situations of rapid social change, turning to a Utopian world view as a reaction to decay, social disintegration and the feeling of social and ethnic threat.

The increasing consciousness of national identity, especially among the larger

peoples, expresses itself, among other ways, in increasing religiousness. The growing influence of religion and traditional culture among ethnic minorities has to be understood as an indication of rising ethnicity. In this context, religion and traditions are not only a reminder of one's own culture and cultural identity, but also serve to get to grips with social change. The increasing influence of religion and traditions is thus also a reaction to the process of social change. The process of modernization and change weakens the cohesion of an ethnic group and produces mobilization to preserve the group identity and in that way promotes ethnicity.

### Cross-border Migration

By this I do not mean the mass exodus of minorities across borders as happened in the 50s and 60s. Currently we find different forms of migration: (a) migration due to perceived pressure on culture or religion (e.g.Tibetans or Uygurs); (b) migration due to economic reasons (e.g. Koreans or Dai seeking for higher incomes and improvement of living standards in South Korea or Thailand).

### Migration into the prosperous coastal areas or to provincial capitals

A well-known example is that of the former "Xinjiang Village" in Beijing.Yet, moreover, there a some new developments. Chinese reports, for instance, point to a recent phenomenon, i.e. that in major cities as Chengdu or Kunming Yi or Tibetan migrants have organized themselves into criminal gangs that have divided certain districts among themselves. Poverty, joblessness and the lack of educational opportunities are the reasons why young people increasingly migrate into larger cities. Such gangs frequently consist of drug addicts who attempt to make a living by means of theft or robbery. Growing income disparities between urban areas and rural minority areas are another major reason for this. Dissatisfaction with the situation in their native places corresponds with the erosion of ethnic communities and traditional values. Thus, criminality has to be discerned as a further expression of dissatisfaction and ethnic resistance.

### Segregation or Communalism

This means group-building in terms of ethnic categories, separation in accomodation, space, organizations, networking, lifestyles or consumption (Ma Rong 1996: 396-408). In the last decades there was no major change in the existing spatial segregation between nationalities. This has, however, now increased. Chinese investigations reveal that for instance through the process of revitalization of religion social contacts between Han and members of minorities believing in Islam have decreased. Moreover, the revitalization of traditional organizations (e.g. clans, lineages) contributes to this segregation. Segregation, i.e. group formation according to ethnic criteria, exists not only in the cultural and spatial domain, but also in economics.

Particularly ethnic groups with a strong tradition of trade and business (Hui, Xinjiang) constitute their own economic networks (ethnic economy). Such kinds of ethnic economy could be discerned as an expression of a "reactive ethnicity", i.e. one group's reaction to real or apparently imminent loss of status. It may emerge due to an unequal distribution of power between an ethnic minority and a majority, in the case of denying political rights or access to resources, capital, employment or education or due to demanding integration into and subordination to the majority. Even in consumer behavior we find segregation, for instance in terms of a lifestyle with strong Western or (in the case of Moslems) Arab features. This is not only an expression of delimitation, but also of originality, modernity, autonomy and reaction to Han-Chinese ascriptions of "backwardness".

Indeed, we could identify far more patterns of resistance, such as "linguistic resistance" (Bulag 2000: 186-190), the use of minority languages by minority officials in reports to higher administrative echelons (in oral or written form) or "constructive drinking" (Williams 1998: 18), an excessive consumption of alcohol in order to draw borderlines between the "we-group" and the "others". Furthermore, Han-scholars and Han-officials claim that they were, for instance in Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia, indigenous and that other groups migrated only after the Han (Bulag 2000: 192), an argumentation that necessarily will stir up ethnic resistance.

## Conflict Prevention and Reduction of Conflicts

Of course, the reform policies have brought about a more liberal treatment of minorities and have helped to improve the lives of most of them. Despite those improvements, conflicts are growing. These conflicts cannot be solved by force or economic improvements alone. As the cases of other ethnic conflicts on a global scale demonstrate, we need a kind of a "therapeutic conflict treatment", as the German sociologist Dieter Senghaas has argued (Senghaas 1992: 116-128; 1993; 1996: 77), in order to reduce conflicts and to contend with ethnic traumas. And this is a precondition for the peaceful coexistence of nationalities in one country. Indeed, in recent years Chinese academics have started to discuss causes of nationality conflicts, new types of autonomy, safeguarding minority rights and even human rights in terms of minorities (Zhou Ping 1997: 73, 74; Chen et al. 1996: 35-40; Liu and Fang 1997: 22, 23; Yang Jingchu 1998: 21-27; Wu Zongjin 1998: 2-5; Song 1998; Yue and Yuan 1998; Chen 1998: 15-18). This does not mean that a basic change in Chinese nationality policies will occur immediately. Yet moreover, as stated above, there is a kind of affirmative action which offers advantages for members of ethnic minorities in terms of access to universities, birth control, use of their own languages and scripts or cultural issues

(Yang Houdi 1997; Wu Shimin 1995). Although that does not mean that minorities will be granted democratic rights in the next few years, they are in a way accepted as particular groups with specific rights. This and the above mentioned new discussion on minority rights might provide a good starting point for more equality and better rights in future. What could be done then?

To ease nationality conflicts in the long run a chance may lie in the creation of a federal state. The question of federalism arises not only for Tibet, Taiwan or all the provinces, but also for numerous other regions in which non-Han peoples live. Federalism seems advisable not only for ethnic reasons, but also for spatial-structural ones, since the central government has always had a difficult time putting together a flexible policy adequate to the task, because of the size and variety of the country. But if the fundamental political attitude toward the non-Han peoples does not change, even a federal system will not be able to solve the problems. A durable, stable federal system can only be built on the foundation of the consent of the peoples who are to constitute it. But one should be aware of the fact that ethnic minorities typically have substantially less affection and loyalty for the state than the dominant ethnic majority does. In this way the interest of a minority group in a common federal state may not be the same as the interest of the dominant group.

Therefore, when one thinks about concrete measures for reducing the above mentioned five sources of conflict, then the following points should be taken into consideration:

(1) **Establishing a federal system**: Under such conditions the state would be responsible: (a) for macro-policies (macroeconomic control, balanced foreign trade relations, balance of regional developments and disparities, public affairs on the national level); (b) for external affairs (e. g. foreign policy and security), and (c) regulation of social disparities and inequalities. The autonomous regions would have the right to make far-reaching decisions on their own in all regional or local matters (e. g. economic and cultural developments).

(2) **More laws** ensuring not only cultural, economic, and social autonomy, but also that all decisions in regard to an autonomous region, including such questions as immigration, the establishment of industries, control over land and natural resources available in the territory, and environmental protection, are made in the interest of that region and its population.

(3) **An institutional framework for implementing autonomy rights**. This requires independent courts: legal barriers must be erected against the majority. Also the party should not remain superordinate to autonomy, but should be subordinate to the law. Further, care would have to be taken that not only individuals but also ethnic groups collectively would have the possibility to bring a case to court.

(4) **Policies of affirmative action** not only in the political and education sectors but

also in the economic sphere (like preferential access to capital, raw materials and skilled labour) would be necessary to reduce inequality between Han and non-Han.

(5) **The histories and cultures of all nationalities as well as the histories of nationality relations should be reassessed** in a discourse of people from the various nationalities. The concept of a hierarchization of cultures and societies should be given up.

(6) To guarantee the above mentioned rights would require **organized representation of interests**, because the right to autonomy can only be represented or implemented by organized communities.

(7) Intensified measures are necessary **to counter the growing discrimination** of members of ethnic minorities in urban areas. While open discrimination is forbidden by law, there is much 'behind the scenes' and everyday discrimination, and it is increasing in an alarming manner. The existence of such a phenomenon should be acknowledged and special programs for reducing discrimination and prejudice established.

Last but not least I argue that China may provide a good basis for such measures, as ethnic minorities are not only recognized as nationalities, but also are respected by public law and - according to this law - enjoy the same rights as the ethnic majority. Due to international developments the Party leadership has recognized the explosive power of nationality conflicts. A rethinking of former policies has just begun, particularly in the academic field. Undoubtedly, in the years to come the issue of conflict management will become a crucial point in China's nationalities politics.

## Notes

1) Dru Gladney's study on the Hui is one of the rare case studies (Gladney 1991).
2) Cf. Sautmann 1998. For affirmative action see Pincus 1994; Blumenwitz 1995: 151-157. Many Han-Chinese perceive these policies as discrimination against the ethnic majority.
3) An enlarged German version of this article: Heberer 2001b.
4) On ideological resources see Imhof 1993: 333.
5) For more on the Yi Harrell 2001; Heberer 2001a; 2001d.
6) A more recent example of this classification: Yang Houdi 1997: 1-8.
7) Dikötter 1992: 97 notes that the Chinese concept of minzu (nationality) is a synthesis of the terms lineage with a common territory and common ancestors.
8) The Han consist of at least eight distinctive language groups.
9) The ethnic hierarchy is accompanied by a language hierarchy, cf. Dwyer 1998: 71-75.
10) Cf., for example, Hoppe 1997; Heberer 2001c; Barkmann 1997. For the Chinese leadership the separatist movement in Xinjiang is much more dangerous than the independence movement in Tibet, see Kaifang, July 1996, p. 39, op. cit. Becquelin 1997: 25.
11) According to information from Miao, who asked not to be identified, in Beijing, October 1998. For details compare Cheung 1995: 217-247.

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