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# The Roots of China’s Ethnic Conflicts

YAN SUN

A surge of ethnic violence in China in recent years has revealed growing social tensions in a country beset by developmental strains, with a political system lagging behind epic economic change. In the first half of 2014 alone, there were at least five instances of what the state defines as terrorism associated with Xinjiang, the Muslim borderland in the west. A May attack at a vegetable market in Urumqi, Xinjiang’s capital, killed 43 people. In August, clashes in Xinjiang left nearly 100 dead. And the spread of violence to other provinces—notably in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square last October and at the rail station in the southwestern city of Kunming this March—has brought home the reality of ethnic tensions to Chinese citizens outside sensitive minority regions.

What has caused this eruption of ethnic riots and violence? Is Beijing guilty of political, economic, cultural, and religious discrimination against minorities, as its critics claim? Or is China vulnerable to ethnic separatism, as its leaders fear? A combination of sticks and carrots in Beijing’s policies—especially inappropriate carrots—deserves most of the blame for the deteriorating situation.

## PERIPHERAL ZONES

Until the nineteenth century, China defined itself as a “Celestial Empire” with a three-tier topography. The imperial bureaucracy governed the central agrarian zone, where the Sinic communities were concentrated, based on bureaucratic and legal rules. Inner and outer zones of tribal and peripheral territories encompassed the other two administrative tiers. Most of these territories—whether peacefully absorbed or conquered—were managed by a “loose rein” system

based on ritualistic obligations and titles. This history of center-periphery relations makes a difference in contemporary ethnic relations. The inner peripheral zone, ethnically and culturally close to the central zone, became increasingly incorporated into China’s regular governance system over time. The inhabitants of the outer peripheral zone—largely nomadic as well as ethnically and culturally more remote—faced fewer obligations and were left alone as long as they did not present military threats to agrarian communities.

Ethnic tensions in today’s China, which has 55 official minority groups, mainly concern the historical outer peripheries, Tibet and Xinjiang. These two regions were incorporated, respectively, by the two nomadic dynasties in Chinese history, the Mongols and the Manchus. Xinjiang became a regular province in 1884 under Manchu rule, while much of Tibet did not. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Beijing established a new system of governance across all ethnic regions. Known as the autonomous system, it has lately come under much criticism in China for providing either too little autonomy or excessive ethnic prerogatives.

In the autonomous system, Soviet features replaced historical practices. Following the Soviet definition of nationalities based on the practice of ethnic classification, the PRC launched a classification campaign in the 1950s and has since registered an official “nationality” for every citizen. This superseded neutral approaches to ethnicity under Confucian universalism. The PRC created uniform ethno-regional units named after the principal local nationality; in this way, indirect and diverse rule gave way to direct rule and political synchronization. The PRC adopted socio-economic strategies, including preferential policies, as a means of promoting social and other forms of equality across ethnic groups. Thus the historical practice of co-opting ethnic elites was replaced by

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a coalition between the party-state and the ethnic proletariat.

The party's class-based appeal helped to legitimize and rally support for the new system, while the socialist redistributive state helped to guarantee egalitarianism and prevent economic competition among ethnic groups. At the same time, the system of regional autonomy incorporated China's three-tier topography in an unprecedented way: It required that all autonomous areas accept their institutional frameworks under the PRC's unitary political system—namely, under the centralized leadership of the party.

In the post-Mao era, reform policies have eroded the party's solidarity with its ethnic support base, replacing class politics with identity politics. In the early 1980s, the party rehabilitated former ethnic elites, leaving the lower classes ideologically and politically abandoned. Since the early 1990s, economic liberalization has ended guaranteed employment and encouraged competition—leaving the lower classes socioeconomically abandoned. In ethnic regions with theocratic traditions, new policies have served to reconnect ethnic masses with former religious authorities, consolidating identities weakened during the socialist era. And new developmental initiatives—along with growing concerns regarding social stability—have intensified preferential policies for sensitive ethnic regions, further increasing the role of the state in local affairs.

Meanwhile, the built-in tensions of the autonomous system persist. It has reduced actual political autonomy for the constituent regions of China's traditional dynastic empire, while the enduring Soviet influence contributes to what Terry Martin of Harvard University has called an “affirmative action empire.”

## RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

Religious policy is a prime example of this mix of sticks (limited autonomy) and carrots (excessive ethnic prerogatives); lately, it has been the leading cause of terrorism in Xinjiang. In the early post-Mao era, the state encouraged and even sponsored the revival of religion, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang. The extent to which this state role helped to undermine secular forces and strengthen religious influences is a matter of much debate recently in China. Critics blame state sponsorship for playing a legitimizing and enabling role; supporters continue to defend the

policy, which was led by Hu Yaobang, the party's general secretary in the early 1980s.

Notably, state sponsorship of religious revival occurred mainly in sensitive ethnic regions. Monasteries and mosques, enthusiastically destroyed by members of formerly oppressed classes during the Cultural Revolution, were restored with public funding in the 1980s. Construction of new houses of worship boomed. Former religious elites were restituted and compensated, and thousands of them received positions in local people's congresses, state agencies, and religious associations. Those associated with major monasteries received government salaries, along with fringe benefits and professional ranks. As mosques and clergymen resurged in social status and influence, private religious schools mushroomed, filling the spiritual void left by the end of the Mao era.

The revival of private madrassas in Xinjiang has posed one of the secular state's biggest problems, and has led to a cycle of restrictions and an increasingly violent backlash. The state's initial worry was education, as many Uighur students abandoned public schools for madrassas starting in the early 1980s. The Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim people, comprise over 80 percent of the population in southern Xinjiang. Rural parents want their children to learn traditional values and religious rituals and scripts—knowledge respected in the local communities. But today, due to government constraints, there are just a few officially established schools for Islamic teaching throughout Xinjiang, open only to students above 18 years of age.

This conflict between community needs for religious education and state bans on private madrassas defines the religious problem in Xinjiang. Since the late 1980s, local restrictions have created demand for imported Islamic sects in China's black market of religions. Wahhabism, a puritanical strain of Saudi origin previously marginalized in Xinjiang's mostly Sunni communities, arrived by way of Muslims returned from pilgrimages to Mecca, visiting foreign religious groups, and newly independent Central Asian states just across Xinjiang's borders. Spreading through existing and new madrassas, Wahhabism won converts through its simplified rituals, exemption of dues, and emphasis on helping the poor.

Wahhabism distinguishes itself from Xinjiang's traditional Islamic sects by claiming the exclusive supremacy of Allah and promoting resistance against the secular state. As Wahhabism spread,

traditional imams began to seem old and outdated, unable to prevail over the young *talibs* trained in the underground madrassas. Local authorities initially viewed their clashes as an intrafaith matter and refused to intervene, leaving the new sect's madrassas to grow uncontrolled. Less educated youths dominated the ranks of its adherents, especially among the unemployed, the self-employed, and students.

Wahhabi groups have been responsible for the spread of violence since 1990. More than a dozen major incidents of such violence reportedly occurred in Xinjiang in the 1990s; over half were targeted assassinations of traditional Uighur imams and local Uighur officials. The killings were often carried out in the name of various "East Turkestan" parties, inspired by a movement for Uighur independence in the 1930s and '40s. Authorities traced all the attacks to Wahhabi assailants, particularly students from one madrasa in the Kashgar prefecture of Xinjiang. Its senior imam advocated a pure Islamic and moral society—a message that appealed to Uighurs thrust into China's turbulent social transition in the reform era.

The violence in the 1990s led the central and local governments to tighten religious policy. Subsidies to officially sanctioned imams increased; Uighur officials have been assigned to supervise mosques. In Uighur and Tibetan regions, children under the age of 18, public school teachers, party members, and government employees are banned from practicing religion in public and communal spaces. Symbols of religious faith are banned in public schools. The failure to distinguish between a sect and Islam in general has alienated non-Wahhabi Muslims, and strengthened Wahhabism as a form of populist resistance against the state.

The global US antiterrorism campaign after 9/11 and Washington's listing of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as a terrorist group briefly stemmed violence from Xinjiang between the early 2000s and 2008—the year Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics. During that period, however, two international jihadist organizations entered Xinjiang: Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Hijrat movement. Hizb ut-Tahrir's stated aim is the unification of all Muslim nations in a single Islamic state or caliphate; in post-Soviet Central Asia, it has filled the ideological and socioeconomic void left

by the retreat of socialism and the rise of unemployment, and has appeal among the young. Its association with violence led to crackdowns in Central Asian states and Russia. In Xinjiang, local studies indicate that Hizb ut-Tahrir may not be directly responsible for violence associated with Islamic and separatist East Turkestan groups, but some members have belonged to Hizb ut-Tahrir organizations.

The Hijrat movement advocates leaving behind one's earthly possessions and traveling to engage in jihad. Loosely organized and operating through underground madrassas, it is regarded by Xinjiang's local authorities as the main perpetrator of violence emanating from the region at present.

## UIGHUR ALIENATION

By the late 2000s, the cumulative effects of economic liberalization and marginalization had frustrated Uighur society. This discontent manifested itself in massive unemployment, a surge in crime, epidemic drug problems, family breakdown, disintegration of traditional moral fabrics,

spreading fundamentalism and cultural conservatism, and, not least, a growing hatred of the Han people, China's majority ethnic group. Han-Uighur relations ruptured with violent riots in Urumqi on July 5, 2009, when a Uighur student

protest escalated into the worst ethnic rioting in the history of the PRC, leaving 197 people dead, most of them Han pedestrians. The riots created an opening for extremist groups to exert pan-ethnic pressure on Uighur communities. The line between boycotting the Chinese state and traditional Uighur society is now increasingly blurred, as extremists make an emphatic distinction between what is Muslim and not Muslim, inter- as well as intra-ethnically.

Lately a so-called Arabianization of Uighur costumes and mores has become prominent. The conservative black *hijab*, which covers a woman's entire face and body, has spread more widely; traditionally, Uighur women wore colorful headpieces and dresses. More men, especially among the younger generation, now wear beards and refuse to drink or smoke. Anything issued by the state, from marriage licenses to free television sets and earthquake-proof houses, is rejected as "un-Muslim," perhaps as a form of political resistance. But in a trend that troubles

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many Uighur intellectuals, traditional Uighur art forms are also discouraged. Extremists in the rural south ban dance and music on celebratory occasions and crying at funerals. But local governments can be just as draconian: Bans aimed at fundamentalist practices may be brusquely implemented or make little distinction between fundamentalist and traditional Uighur customs, further alienating the Uighurs as a group. For example, head scarves are banned in public schools and workplaces, and during Ramadan in the summer of 2014, local agencies barred government employees, teachers, and students from fasting.

The state's heavy-handed policies in both promoting and restraining religious revival in Xinjiang have backfired. More autonomy might have allowed local communities to sort out their own strategies—and perhaps find a means of effectively thwarting radical forms of Islam. Uighur intellectuals had qualms from the beginning about the state's vigorous restoration of religion, fearing that this would impede secular progress.

## TIBET IN FLAMES

Whereas Uighur parents prefer some religious education for all their children, Tibetan families have a tradition of each sending one child to a Buddhist monastery. Despite the ban on religious practice by minors, the Tibetan system of full-time monasticism creates various pretexts, such as taking care of an uncle who is a monk. As long as one child is in a monastery, most Tibetan parents encourage their other children to attend regular schools. These factors contribute to a far better

equilibrium between secular and religious education than in Xinjiang.

Recently, religion has been linked to violence in a different way in Tibetan regions: the self-immolation of low-level monks. The most important cause lies in the deep tensions between the Chinese state and the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism—historically the leading sect, headed by the Dalai Lama. State control is felt more acutely among monasteries of this sect, because when the government urges the monks to endorse its chosen Panchen Lama or to denounce the Dalai Lama, the Gelugpa monasteries have no option to dodge the issue, as the non-Gelugpa sects can. They face a chronic challenge to the heart of their sect.

Since its first occurrence in 2009, self-immolation has primarily been associated with Gelugpa monasteries—specifically, the Kirti monastery in the Ngawa region of western Sichuan. Until their conflict with Beijing over the selection of the Panchen Lama, monks and lamas there enjoyed relative freedom to travel to India and study in exile monasteries.

Based on an analysis of their last words by the Tibetan dissident writer Woesser, the self-immolators' major motives were to take an action (54 percent) and to offer themselves to the Dalai Lama as a religious sacrifice (38 percent). The exact meaning of the action was not always clear, but the immolations were often timed to coincide with commemorations of political events and thus presumably an implicit form of political protest. As in Xinjiang, Beijing's conflation of religious sentiments and separatism has led to an overly politicized religious policy in Tibet.

## ANEMIC ECONOMIES

The massive unemployment among Uighurs—especially college graduates and youths—raises the question of why intensive economic growth in post-Mao China has not sufficiently lifted a key minority region such as Xinjiang. To be sure, there has not been a lack of carrots in this area: State subsidy has exceeded 90 percent of the total annual revenue of Tibet in recent decades, and at least 60 percent of the revenue of three of the other four autonomous regions in recent years (Inner Mongolia is the exception). There is also a myriad of other assistance and antipoverty programs for Tibet and Xinjiang.

Chinese analysts have blamed the futility of these carrots on diffusion bias in the state's devel-

From the archives  
of *Current History*...

“Since the June 4 massacre, [the Chinese people] have felt that this regime is even worse than what they had come to hate and revile. In their eyes, the failure of the Tiananmen movement proved that they are unable to rid themselves of it and the consequent hopelessness of China's situation.”

Liu Binyan

“Tiananmen and the Future of China”

September 1994

HISTORY IN THE MAKING  
**100**  
years  
1914 - 2014

opmental strategy—that is, an obsession with transplanting the practices of interior provinces to ethnic regions. In Tibet, despite unsuitable conditions for developing industries on the high plateau, the state vigorously promoted industrialization in the socialist era, generating huge deficits and chronic dependency on state subsidies. In the post-Mao era, Tibet received extra preferential treatment in the form of assistance from almost all interior provinces and major cities, as well as central ministries and large state firms. This assistance must be coerced by the central government because the aid donors have little interest in Tibet's natural resources (it is unknown whether these are significant, since the formidable elevations make the area unsuitable for exploration). The projects funded by this “partner assistance” are not always practical, since they tend to be based on economic models from the donors.

For resource-rich Xinjiang, central government jurisdiction over strategic resources and developmental patterns has left little room for local autonomy over development priorities and benefit distribution. Starting in 1997, Xinjiang became the other major recipient of partner assistance, with 19 partner provinces and cities involved, plus central agencies and large state firms. After the riots of 2009, these programs intensified with the intention of creating “leap forward” development in Xinjiang. Critics complain that aid projects have brought little direct stimulation to the local economy, as the diffusion of coastal models pays little attention to local needs. For efficiency's sake, project donors bring their own managers, workers, and construction materials, contributing little to local job creation. Citing skill gaps, they usually hire locals only for low-end jobs.

Likewise, economic zones with special incentives have been created to attract businesses, but lack of skilled labor is again an inhibiting factor. Some participating companies pay taxes through their headquarters located elsewhere in the country, depriving local governments of revenue windfalls. Low-income housing projects, which make up the bulk of partner assistance, have not always benefited those most in need. While local policy gives priority to poor households, many cannot afford the small matching fund required.

This vicious cycle of economic diffusion and dependency is vividly summed up in two phrases commonly heard in southern Xinjiang and the Tibetan regions: State subsidies and partner assistance sustain “blood transfusions,” but do little to improve the regions' own capacity for “blood generation.” Unconditional aid has nurtured a culture of dependency known as the “anemia complex.” The more aid transfusions an ethnic region receives, the worse its anemia gets, as local officials, farmers, and pastoralists develop the habit of expecting, relying on, and asking for outside assistance.

## MIGRANT COMPETITION

The issue of population resettlement often frames Western perceptions of ethnic conflict in Tibet and Xinjiang. The general view is that Han settlers and migrants are overrunning these regions, in a process typically referred to as “population swamping” or “transfer.” Close observers rightly suggest that this perception is essentially an urban-centric assessment of ethnic shares in the local populations, since Tibetans and Uighurs are still concentrated in rural areas. But important questions remain. What has pulled migrants to Tibet and Xinjiang in the reform era, when the state no longer sponsors population resettlement? And why has random and temporary migration in the reform era led to serious tensions, while the larger-scale and long-term migration of the Mao era did not do so to the same extent?

According to available data, during 1995–2000, the autonomous regions with the highest in-migration rates were Xinjiang, Tibet, and Ningxia. These three regions also happened to have received the highest per capita investment during that period. Analyses of demographic trends in Tibet from 1991 to 2005 suggest that significant fluctuations in the numbers of Han residents and migrants correlated with central government developmental policies. Migrant workers in Tibet and Xinjiang come mostly from poor provinces that lack economic opportunities. Sichuan, Gansu, and Henan top the list. These migrant workers have been drawn to Tibet and Xinjiang by the spillover effects of the state's elaborate investment and aid projects, often toiling as temporary laborers on construction projects, as

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tenant farmers for local ethnic landowners, or as owners and employees in small retail and catering services. Most are seasonal workers and few settle permanently. Demand for Mandarin-speaking, hard-working migrant labor is a major reason for their presence, not deliberate population transfer by the state.

Such unskilled migrants have posed direct competition to ethnic labor within the minority regions. During the 2008 Tibetan riot in Lhasa and the 2009 Uighur riot in Urumqi, participants were mostly vagrants from rural regions outside the provincial capitals. They face greater difficulties than Han and Hui (Mandarin-speaking Chinese Muslim) migrants in finding jobs in urban centers. Many are illiterate, whereas the Han migrants often have had secondary education. Rural ethnic youths also tend to be unfamiliar with life and employment opportunities in cities, or lack skills and work habits suited to urban employment.

Differences in migrant labor trends also account for greater tensions in Xinjiang than in Tibet. Han settlers are often physically unfit for long-term residence on Tibet's high plateau, whereas Xinjiang's terrain poses no such problem. Han migrants' activities in Tibet are concentrated in urban businesses and coal mining, posing little threat to the core of the Tibetan economy and society in the pastoral regions. Han migrants in Xinjiang, both recent and long established, present a more comprehensive competitive challenge for the native Uighurs—urban as well as rural, economic as well as political, cultural as well linguistic. The result has been a shrinking of survival space for Uighurs since the 1990s, leading to intense resentment of the Han.

The state-sponsored migration of the Mao era did not produce the same direct competition with the local population. In Xinjiang, most immigrants settled on state farms away from local ethnic communities. The small number of Hans assigned to state and professional sectors did not overwhelm the natives linguistically or culturally. These professionals were required to receive training in ethnic languages and urged to respect local people and customs. Members of local ethnic groups enjoyed protected employment in the public sector, which also guaranteed equal remuneration.

Children grew up together, speaking each other's languages. Han migrants of the reform era, by contrast, are voluntary and short-term oriented, and care little about the local communities.

## TROUBLE AT SCHOOL

Preferential treatment in college admissions is perhaps the most polarizing carrot in China's minority policies. In interior regions, Han students complain that minorities look like them and go to the same schools but receive extra points on college entrance exams. In heavily ethnic regions, minority students may take those exams in their native language and receive a significant amount of extra points. The exams in ethnic languages are also easier in content.

Critics complain that lower academic standards, most visible in sensitive regions, have been responsible for minority students' poor employment prospects after college. State responses, however, have promoted bilingual education, on the ground that Mandarin proficiency will enhance employability. Draconian approaches to bilingual education in the lower grades, especially in Xinjiang, have in turn ignited serious tensions.

Of the two prevalent models in bilingual education, the so-called complementary model is balanced and popular. Humanities classes are taught in a minority language, while math and science classes are in Chinese. In the far more aggressive "immersion" model, Chinese is used for teaching all subjects, while one class in the ethnic language is offered; 13.7 percent of minority students were enrolled in this model in Xinjiang by 2009. Logistical difficulties would have slowed further progress, but the riots of 2009 led authorities to expand the immersion model. Some local officials, in their zeal to get fast results, adopt a top-down "political task" approach, issuing extreme commands that distort the meaning of bilingual education.

Moderate Uighur intellectuals worry about adverse effects on children's cultural values and identity. Dissidents contend that the latest promotion of bilingual education amounts to accelerated and forced assimilation by political methods. The immersion model has been tempered in Xinjiang since 2012 due to local opposition, but underlying resentment over Mandarin hegemony persists.

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In regions where other options are available, bilingual education has proceeded more smoothly and successfully. In Tibetan regions of Qinghai and Gansu provinces, local educational authorities and schools are allowed to pick models of instruction that they deem appropriate for local conditions. Local authorities in Qinghai have responded accommodatingly to Tibetan students' protests against the immersion model. In China's Korean and Mongol regions, balanced approaches have made their bilingual programs exemplary models.

### **SEEKING BALANCE**

The key to progress is improving China's understanding of the roots of its ethnic problems. A misunderstanding of Western support for minority human rights in China is perhaps the biggest source of a prevalent Chinese belief in a Western (especially American) conspiracy to destabilize the country. Sensationalist and nationalist Chinese media organs, lacking an understanding of pluralist domestic politics in Western countries, equate the support that Tibetan and Uighur exiled leaders enjoy in the West to Western governments' support for separatism—or even to indirect sympathy for “terrorist forces.” Authorities have blocked more extreme statements on the internet, such as those by the ultranationalist Dai Xu, a professor at

China's National Defense University. But the idea of “behind-the-scenes forces” lingers in the popular imagination, preventing a clear-eyed assessment of counterproductive elements in China's own policy.

In an encouraging sign, at a Communist Party work symposium on Xinjiang in May 2014, after the latest attack in Urumqi, President Xi Jinping spoke of cracking down on illicit religious practices but “protecting legitimate religion.” Following Tibet's example after the 2008 Lhasa riot, Xinjiang is trying a policy of guaranteeing employment to at least one adult child in each Uighur household. The policy is said to serve as a stabilizing factor for each family and to provide a good example for other young adults.

A better understanding of the flaws in China's ethnic policy would help ease the vicious cycle of ever more sticks and carrots in dealing with sensitive regions. In ongoing Chinese debates about policy failures, liberal critics have blamed a lack of regional autonomy, while integrationists criticize an excess of preferential policies. Little is noted in terms of the trade-offs between the two approaches. A more candid discussion about these trade-offs would be a good beginning to reassess and adjust a policy approach that has alienated both minority and majority groups in the name of interethnic equality and harmony. ■