By Xu Yuan

Minorities in a multi-minzu state

Popularised in the early twentieth century by Sun Yat-sen, the founder of modern China, the term ‘minzu’ has variously been translated as nation, nationality, ethnic group, ethnic minority (or minority nationality) or people. The state-sponsored project of ‘minzu identification’ (minzu shibie) from 1953 to 1957 identified 55 minority minzu out of over 4,000 applicant groups seeking official status. With the identification of the Jinzu Zu in 1979, the PRC’s population of 56 minzu was fixed; unidentified groups were placed under the umbrella of other groups.

The 56 minority minzu can be divided into those who once had state or state-like politics and those without such historical memories and national claims. In China’s peripheral areas, more ‘indigenous minzu’ are surrounded by more ‘civilized minzu’. All groups, including the Han majority, are constitutionally equal in their relation to the state, though they differ in many respects.

Western tradition, implies a collective right to self-determination. The issue remains politically sensitive; the assertion of nationality by any single minzu is forbidden.

Minzu work

Although equality, unity and mutual assistance among all minzu is proclaimed, there is a de facto inequality among groups. The colonial anthropological logic of universal evolutionism, merged with Marxist historical materialism, was employed in the first stage of the massive state-sponsored Social Historical Investigation project (1956-1964). It slotted minzu into successive modes of production: primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist. The political teleology created under this Sinified evolutionary framework legitimised the state’s intervention in minority peoples’ livelihoods. Minzu ghongzu or minzu work employed ethnologists, historians, technologists, cadres, and thousands of others devoted to the socialist transformation of the minority subjects they studied and administered.

The immediate purpose of Social Historical Investigation was to set the stage stigmatised as ‘backward’ in the 1960s and 1970s, and condemned as environmentally destructive in the 1990s.

State intervention and livelihoods

An ample corpus of indigenous minority minzu has long been official policy. The Kucong people, previously a group of shifting hunter-gatherers and swidden farmers in the tropical forests of Southwest China’s border areas, have been subjected to government efforts to sedentarise them since the 1950s. This included their identification as a primitive branch of the sedentary Lahu Zu, the sending of army and work teams to find them in the forest, the building of residential villages, training in the firing of foods, the use of chopsticks and sedentary agricultural tools. The program enjoyed relative success in the Miao era, for the Kucong could adjust to life in people’s communes, whereas state cadres replaced their chiefs but left their social relations intact. Since the 1980s, however, privatisation has turned Kucong households into poor producers: many abandoned their paddy fields and returned to the forest. Until 1994, the conflicts between traditional pur floods, the use of chopsticks and sedentary agricultural tools. The program enjoyed relative success in the Miao era, for the Kucong could adjust to life in people’s communes, whereas state cadres replaced their chiefs but left their social relations intact. Since the 1980s, however, privatisation has turned Kucong households into poor producers: many abandoned their paddy fields and returned to the forest. Until 1994, the conflicts between traditional pur

Provincial government policies to encourage the Hezhe to adopt agricultural practices have yet to alleviate their poverty.

From the point of view of the state, there have been some successful examples of sedentarisation. Collecting rights, abated poverty among the Jinzu Zu was eradicated in the mid-1850s through diversified crop farming. Another is the Meng- gernei people, previously a group of swidden farmers in the tropical forests of Southwest China’s border areas, have been subjected to government efforts to sedentarise them since the 1950s. This included their identification as a primitive branch of the sedentary Lahu Zu, the sending of army and work teams to find them in the forest, the building of residential villages, training in the firing of foods, the use of chopsticks and sedentary agricultural tools. The program enjoyed relative success in the Miao era, for the Kucong could adjust to life in people’s communes, whereas state cadres replaced their chiefs but left their social relations intact. Since the 1980s, however, privatisation has turned Kucong households into poor producers: many abandoned their paddy fields and returned to the forest. Until 1994, the conflicts between traditional pur

The advent of reform and pragmatist ‘open door’ policies since 1978 have placed minorities on the playing field of the market. The return to household production – the ‘responsibility system’, utilizing minorities’ local social structures – has helped to diversify minority economies. Increased income has enabled some Dai family owners to employ Han workers who lost their jobs in declining state-run farms. The state and media have even expressed concern over economically successful minorities’ ‘loss’ of subject identities and minzu characteristics.

The reform era reoriented the PRC to the world, placing government policies under the examination of another universal discourse: human rights. The PRC proclaims it acknowledges the fundamental universality of human rights. Human rights, however, are to be applied within China’s particular historical, social and economic conditions. This Chinese-style particularism, with an emphasis on collective rights, places ‘minority peoples’ human rights under the purview of state sovereignty. Meanwhile, through the discourse of rights to existence and development, the ghost of evolutionism still haunts the PRC. For the use of indigenous knowledge and preservation of biodiversity. Furthermore, the revised Regional Autonomy Law (2002) has begun to respect minorities’ land arrangements by promising compensation to minorities whose natural resources are claimed by the state. These trends indicate a growing reconfirmation of minorities’ human rights, at least to some extent.

Minzu work employed ethnologists, historians, technologists, cadres, and thousands of others devoted to the socialist transformation of the minority subjects they studied and administered. The 55 minority minzu can be divided into those who once had state or state-like politics and those without such historical memories and national claims. In China’s peripheral areas, more ‘indigenous minzu’ are surrounded by more ‘civilized minzu’. All groups, including the Han majority, are constitutionally equal in their relation to the state, though they differ in many respects.

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The immediate purpose of Social Historical Investigation was to set the stage for land reform and social transformation, to bring all minzu communities under socialism. Minority minzu’s rank in the evolutionary hierarchy at times had a protective effect. Reform in communities in the ‘earlier stages’ was milder, with more consultations with minority elites, than the radical measures adopted among Han and ‘more advanced communities’. For communities in the stage of ‘feudal manorialism’, such as the Dai Zu in Yuxi and the Yi Zu in Liangshan, a ‘peaceful, consultative’ approach kept many traditional institutions relatively intact.

In many other cases the state’s developmental ideology destroyed the traditional livelihood and customs of minority minzu. Although traditional cultivation practised by the Han and ‘more civilized’ minzu was considered the most productive form of agriculture. In contrast, swidden forest cultivation practised by many minority peoples was unsuccessful populations, the blame is often placed on minorities’ cultures and the persistence of traditional values and worldviews.

Since the beginning of the new century, the Chinese government has focused on ‘human development’ – for example, the United Nations’ human poverty index is more noticeable in the PRC’s official and academic discourse. It suggests that understanding of development has shifted from pure emphasis on GDP to more comprehensive concerns. The state-promoted ‘minzu economy’ now champions local communities’ efforts at self-reform, the use of indigenous knowledge and preservation of biodiversity. Further, the revised Regional Autonomy Law (2002) has begun to respect minorities’ land arrangements by promising compensation to minorities whose natural resources are claimed by the state. These trends indicate a growing reconfirmation of minorities’ human rights, at least to some extent.}

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The theme is the Peoples’ Republic of China, as an empire-turned modern state, the Peoples’ Republic of China has sought to integrate peoples within its territory under the banner of common citizenship. The subsequent state project implemented policies based on subjects’ minzu identity. The PRC constitutionally proclaims itself a ‘unitary, multi-minzu socialist state’ – the Chinese nation (zhonghua minzu) comprised of the Han majority and 55 other officially recognised ‘nationalities’. The PRC constitutionally proclaims itself a ‘unitary, multi-minzu socialist state’ – the Chinese nation (zhonghua minzu) comprised of the Han majority and 55 other officially recognised ‘nationalities’.