



Managing Multi-Ethnicity in China, Challenges at Home and Abroad

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ABSTRACT

China is unique compared to ancient civilizations due to its 3000-year written history that witnessed the succession of many dynasties, beside its geographic extent, which borders 14 countries. The vast geographic size of China on the Asian continent led some to say that Asia is more Chinese than China is Asian. This was due in part to the political authoritarianism imposed by spreading Confucianism throughout the Asian continent. While China represented the edge of the heart of the world in the theory of Mackinder, the present day says that it is gradually moving towards the center. Politically, China is considered one of the last strongholds of communism in its Chinese version, with a one-party system (the Chinese Communist Party) still in place. The claim that China is a communist state does not deny the existence of capitalist features that are coupled with the state-directed economy, where the state controls about 65% of production. Socially, China is known for its diversity of races and ethnicities, with 56 ethnic groups in which the Han ethnicity dominates with about 1.286 billion people, which is 91.11% of the country's population of approximately 1.411 billion people as announced in May 2021. The rest of the population is distributed among 55 minorities. These minorities vary between Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Taoists, Tibetans, and others, including 10 Muslim minorities.

Introduction

China is unique compared to ancient civilizations due to its 3000-year written history that witnessed the succession of many dynasties (Ma, 2006, p. 85), beside its geographic extent, which borders 14 countries. The vast geographic size of China on the Asian continent led some to say that Asia is more Chinese than China is Asian (Understanding the Geography of China, s. d.). This was due in part to the political authoritarianism imposed by China by spreading Confucianism throughout the Asian continent. While China represented the edge of the heart of the world in the theory of Mackinder, the present day says that it is gradually moving towards the center.

Politically, China is considered one of the last strongholds of communism in its Chinese version, with a one-party system (the Chinese Communist Party) still in place. The claim that China is a communist state does not deny the existence of capitalist features that are coupled with the state-directed economy, where the state controls about 65% of production under the control of the Communist Party, which has granted the private sector space to operate within the framework of the state plan.

Almost everything in China is directed internally or externally, with the media and economy heavily influenced and compliant with the directives of the single party. The economy is based on strict centralization that adopted cooperative agriculture and government industries during the era of Mao (Manzoor Butt & Sajid, 2018), the same applies to other policies.

Socially, China is known for its diversity of races and ethnicities, with 56 ethnic groups in which the Han ethnicity dominates with about 1.286 billion people, which is 91.11% of the country's population of approximately 1.411 billion people as announced in May 2021 (Ning, 2021). The rest of the population, about 125.47 million people, is distributed among 55 minorities. These minorities can become majorities in some areas according to Chinese standards, and they vary between Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Taoists, Tibetans, and others, including 10 Muslim minorities. The recognition of these minorities was the result of a long process that started in the 1950s in which the state participated along with representatives of the minorities.

This ethnic distribution intersects geographically with the distribution of natural resources, where China is considered one of the richest countries in terms of natural resources. Additionally, China is known for its impressive modern achievements, especially in industry and technology, and its role in the global economy has grown significantly in recent decades.

Socially, China is known for its great diversity of races and ethnicities, with 56 ethnic groups. The majority of the population, around 1.286 billion people, or 91.11% of the country's population of approximately 1.411 billion people as of May 2021, is dominated by the Han ethnicity. The remaining 125.47 million people are distributed among 55 minority groups, some of which become majorities in certain regions according to Chinese standards.

These groups include Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Taoists, Tibetans, and others, with 10 Muslim minorities. Recognition of these minorities was the result of a long process beginning in the 1950s in which the state worked with minority representatives (Gustafsson & Sai, 2006, p. 2).

This ethnic distribution intersects with geographic, territorial, and economic distribution, as well as political and social distribution aimed at controlling the ethnic structure in line with the desires of China's decision-makers. This ethnic and ethnic relations diversity has given China lessons in dealing with and coexisting with minorities, making it a unique system in this field.

In addition, the geographic distribution of ethnicities is partly due to the history of the successive dynasties in the country. Initially, these ethnic groups are distributed based on their proximity or distance from the sea, proximity or distance from industrial areas, and concentration in rural areas. However, the specificity of some regions makes the ethnic groups living there subject to special policies, as is the case with northern Mongolia, the Xinjiang region in western China, or the southern regions adjacent to Tibet.

The ethnic diversity in China is a unique characteristic that has implications in various aspects of life in the country, including the political system, media, economy, and religion. While the state recognizes that there is no foreign religion in China, making it open to all religions, it does not include

religious affiliation or accurate statistics on the number of believers in its statistical standards.

It is impossible to accurately obtain numbers related to the religious affiliation or number of religious individuals in this country. It is important to note that the terms and concepts used in the research, particularly those expressing a political or ideological stance, have been conveyed as they were expressed by their proponents without bias or criticism. What some view as a resistor, others view as a separatist, and the researcher remains neutral between the two positions.

1.1. A Historical Overview

Discussions about minorities in China date back to ancient times, perhaps no dynasty that ruled China was free from the conflicts, if not outright struggles, between different ethnic groups. The Great Wall of China is perhaps the most significant testament to this fact, its construction was prompted by various factors, including the expansion of the country's geographical reach and the intercultural exchange that it underwent throughout history as a significant economic and trade hub, as evidenced by the Silk Road.

Islam, in particular, had a unique presence in China, with the first arrival of Muslims in the country dating back to the seventh century during the time of Othman bin Affan.

Early conflicts between China, Muslims, Mongols, Tartars, and Buddhists demonstrate that relations between ethnic groups were not always ideal. This means that the integration of these ethnic groups into the Chinese population was never an easy task.

Reasons for choosing the topic: The reasons for choosing the topic vary between personal/objective reasons on one hand, and practical/theoretical reasons on the other. In terms of personal reasons, China presents a mystery that researchers face in all aspects of their research. It is a challenge of a special kind to delve into a field that is difficult to explore.

Ethnic groups in China, while known in terms of names, affiliations, and geographical distribution, have a relationship with the political system that remains an area where facts are scarce to the same extent that speculations abound. This requires a detached approach to the topic through research on some tangible data supported by numbers and statistics.

Objectively, the issue of ethnic groups remains present and strong, especially in authoritarian political systems such as China, where the one-party system, directed economy, and controlled policies persist. Therefore, approaching the issue of ethnic groups in these systems requires multiple perspectives and a variety of approaches, as well as digging through multiple Chinese, Western, and Arab references from various possible approaches.

Practically, the first obstacle to researching this topic appear in the language, as the Chinese language remains completely unknown to the researcher, in addition to the lack of specialization of writings in the Arabic language in such a field. This pushes us to rely mainly on references in English, along with French.

However, efforts have been made to find writings by Chinese researchers to understand the internal perspective, and to complete the picture with Western research interested in the subject.

Theoretically, this paper seeks to contribute to exposing a dark side of China. The country is deep as much as it is vast, and this contribution may shed some light on understanding the behavior of the Chinese towards the issue of ethnicity, whether minorities or the majority, under a unique political system.

1.2. The importance of the subject

Dealing with ethnic and racial minorities is one of the most important issues currently facing the world, as exclusion and discrimination against minorities remain among the greatest challenges faced by political systems around the world. This issue arises from tensions between ethnic and racial minorities and the majority population of a country, which can lead to violent conflicts and struggles.

Protecting the rights of ethnic and racial minorities and managing them democratically is one of the most important components of modern states and civilized societies. All citizens should be equal in rights and responsibilities regardless of their race, nationality, religion, or culture. Countries that succeed in achieving these goals are more stable and experience greater economic and social growth.

Therefore, the international community gave this issue the necessary attention and work to encourage countries to respect the rights of minorities and enable them to participate in political, economic, and cultural

life, and reduce tensions between minorities and the majority in the country. Countries such as China must take necessary measures to ensure that minorities are not discriminated against or excluded, and that justice and equality are achieved in society.

This paper aims to examine the manifestations of ethnic groups in China, their characteristics, and their geographic distribution throughout China. It also seeks to analyze the reality of Chinese political practices aimed at these minorities in order to determine the aspects of peaceful coexistence among Chinese people in a multi-ethnic society, with a focus on strategic practices, especially since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The central question that arises is: How does the political system in China reconcile the components of the ethnic fabric in China?

This central question gives rise to subsidiary questions, including:

- How do Chinese politicians deal with ethnic issues?
- How is the ethnic map distributed throughout China and what is its impact on minorities?
- What are the most important aspects of the Chinese system's interaction with ethnic minorities to maintain the unity of China?
- Where do the most significant internal and external challenges lie in ensuring the stability of the multi-ethnic political system in China?

2. First: About Ethnic Policy in China.

China followed the Soviet Union's approach and launched a major campaign to identify ethnic groups in the early 1950s (Dreyer, 1976), inspired by Stalin's ideas, based on 4 pillars: 1- Common territorial area, 2- Common language, 3- Common economy, 4- Common identity built on shared cultural heritage.

Upon taking power, Communist Party leaders sent a team of researchers, sociologists, and party officials to border regions to define ethnic groups as official nationalities. More than 400 groups applied for recognition, and by 1982, 56 were recognized, with the remaining often grouped under the Han or other recognized minorities with whom they share some characteristics. A 1990 census indicated that 750,000 people remained outside any definition (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 4).

It is worth noting that the early 1980s witnessed a continuous migration of Chinese families to minority regions, particularly Uyghur areas, in an attempt to erase their identity and change the demographic composition of their province. In addition, a violent policy of suppression and establishment of detention camps was adopted, initially based on a perspective of rehabilitation, which was replaced by anti-terrorism following the events of 2001 in the United States.

The ethnic classification policy in China has led to the emergence of new ethnic identities within the framework of official groups, known as *Minzu*, which refer to two main official ethnic categories:

- The *Zhonghua Minzu*, which includes all Chinese citizens;
- The 56 ethnicities that enjoy official citizenship status.

While ethnic division in the 1950s was binary, with the majority Han in one category and the rest in the other, the policy aimed to purify the Han from other groups (David, 1998). The above discrimination adds 51 ethnic groups to the original five that were recognized in the Chinese constitution of 2011: Han, Hui (Muslims), Zang (Tibetans), Ming (Mongols), and Man (Manchus). This policy was initiated by Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the republican movement that overthrew the Qing dynasty, the last imperial dynasty in China (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 2).

In the field of education, the government has implemented a series of policies for the benefit of minorities, where their children receive additional points in national exams or benefit from quotas for university admission. Additionally, they are allowed to be taught in their mother tongue, and the gradual integration of Mandarin, the official language, takes place. However, those who are proficient in Mandarin have a better chance of obtaining jobs (Ma, 2006, p. 99), highlighting the centrality of Mandarin speakers and the marginality of other minorities.

2.1. Han Centrality and Minority Marginalization

The concept of the Han Person, or *Hanren*, dates back centuries and refers to the descendants of the Han Dynasty (Han Dynasty - HISTORY, s. d.; The Han Chinese (Hanzu, Han People), China Majority Ethnic Group, s. d.), which emerged around the same time as the Roman Empire. However, the idea of Han as a relatively new Chinese nationality is linked to the

formation of the nation-state in China, long after the 1911 constitution.

The Han was considered a unified group distinct from internal foreigners such as the Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, and Hui, as well as external foreigners such as Westerners and Japanese. Although the number of ethnic groups has increased to fifty-six under the Communist regime, the idea of a unified Han identity has persisted.

China has attempted to attach the Han label to a group of minorities by linking them to the ancestry of the majority group. For example, the majority of farmers in Nanning in the south were considered descendants of Han soldiers who came from the north to quell a local uprising. In addition to relying on myths of ancestry, shared history, culture, and written language unite these groups. Differences in clothing, traditions, and food are merely surface-level distinctions (Frank, 1992).

Since 1979, the beginning of China's modernization project led by Mao Zedong, cultural changes have been a top priority. Drawing from both Confucian socialist and contemporary liberal cultures, traditional and modern elements are blended.

The ethnic minorities in Chinese society can be divided into two distinct phases in the political scene of China since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949:

The first phase, from 1949 to 1961, was characterized by an openness to religious freedom, as enshrined in the 1954 Constitution, under the supervision of state agencies. However, in 1958, a large part of religious activities came to a halt with the rise of the socialist educational movement and the beginning of the Great Leap Forward, which ended in 1961. During this time, a group of Muslim figures were arrested and detained on the grounds of belonging to the rightist movement. They were dismissed from their jobs, and many mosques, especially those for women, were closed and converted into industrial workshops and housing (Allès et al., 2001, p. 4).

The second phase, from 1961 to 1978, was characterized by a restriction of religious activity and the overall situation in China during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. China attempted to integrate minorities into the Chinese mainstream through

various mechanisms, such as allowing individuals to hold some leadership political positions. For example, in 1980, one of the founders of the Islamic Association was appointed deputy prime minister. China also legally allows for a change in ethnic affiliation, and among the reasons that led to an increase in requests for affiliation to non-Han minorities, there are some government programs that grant certain privileges to these minorities.

One such example is the good education that Chinese Koreans receive, partly built on investments from South Korea in tourism and natural resources, which enabled them to make an economic leap in Liaoning and Manchuria (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 5). In addition, some minority areas benefit from international tourism, such as the Silk Road tourism in Xinjiang (Silk Road | UNWTO, s. d.), with the marketing of tourism packages for the colorful regions of Yunnan aimed at Japanese and Taiwanese tourists, as well as tourist groups from Southeast Asia.

It has been widely believed among the Chinese since ancient times that they are the civilized ones responsible for educating the neighboring barbaric regions. This belief asserts that China is at the center of the world. Historian Wang Tongling described five measures taken by the Han to attract barbarians (Ma, 2006, p. 89):

1. Encouraging dual residency by relocating the Han to the periphery and moving peripheral populations to Han areas.
2. Encouraging intermarriage between the Han and others.
3. Changing names and titles from the minority style to the Han style.
4. Encouraging Han adoption of children from other groups.
5. Encouraging the use of Chinese language, clothing, and social rules.

This intersects with what Milton Gordon has argued, particularly in relation to mixed marriage and identity. Despite these Chinese characteristics that have shaped ethnic relations, this theory underwent a transformation under the influence of external forces, resulting from colonization first and the nation-state theory second. In addition, Lenin's and Stalin's theories of nationalism and Soviet Union practices have had an impact (Ma, 2006, p. 90)s, especially given the geographical distribution of ethnic groups,

which explains some of the policy outcomes targeting them.

3. Second, the geographic distribution of ethnic minorities

Concerning minorities, China includes an official recognition policy, limited independence, and unofficial monitoring efforts. The importance of ethnic minorities for China is of strategic and exploratory significance for the long-term development of the state, a significance that is not proportional to their demographic size. While minorities make up only 7% of the population, they are concentrated in around 60% of the country's land area, mostly on the internal borders (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 4), such as Inner Mongolia in the north, Xinjiang in the northwest, and Tibet in the southwest. These areas are mostly rich in energy resources and agricultural regions, ensuring the country's energy and food security.

Over thousands of years, several population groups have alternated in the geographic space of China, led by the Han, who settled in the fertile and technologically and culturally advanced inland plains, while the so-called barbarians settled in the surrounding grasslands and mountains, with a relatively different and backward way of life (Ma, 2006, p. 87). This classification is attributed to Confucian culture. It is noted that minorities are concentrated in rural areas and small towns in western China (Gustafsson & Sai, 2006, p. 3), while their presence is less common in the south and northeast of China, where major cities dominate.

Chinese ethnic minorities are mostly distributed along the land borders, such as the Mongols in the north, Uyghurs in the northwest, and Zhuang in the southeast of Asia, while some other ethnic minorities are distributed throughout the Chinese territory, including the Hui and Manchu. There is a presence of ethnic minorities in every province or region. Historically, Canton in the south has a Muslim community that traces its origins to the city's historic role as a southern gateway for Arab traders.

As regions with a high population density of minorities have a unique political and administrative status (Gustafsson & Sai, 2006, p. 2), this was brought

about by the 1954 Constitution in China, which indicated the possibility of establishing autonomous regions in areas where minorities are concentrated (Ma, 2006, p. 94). At the provincial level, there are five regions with a special status, in addition to 76 autonomous areas and 699 administrative units.

However, this division should not conceal the fact that Han Chinese are the majority in three of the autonomous regions, with 79% of the population in Inner Mongolia being Han (Gustafsson & Sai, 2006, p. 3). In some provinces, the percentage of minorities does not exceed 10%. While the total area of autonomous regions represents 64% of China's land, the population in these regions did not exceed 8.5% in 2000 (Ma, 2006, p. 94). This necessitates a special approach to these minorities who find themselves geographically on the margins.

4. Thirdly: the Chinese government's treatment of minorities to maintain the unity of the state.

Generally, government policies related to ethnic groups in China fall into two directions:

The first direction is based on discrimination between ethnic groups and considers them as distinct political entities, attempting to establish a political situation where each group finds its place within it.

The second direction distinguishes between groups based on cultural and civilizational standards and differentiates between groups based on social and moral criteria and cultural conformity or detachment.

One of the characteristics of the special treatment that minorities have received is President Mao Zedong's reference, on several occasions, to Article 14 of the 1931 Chinese Communist Party Constitution, which recognizes the right of national minorities to self-determination and their right to complete separation from China to form an independent state for each group. However, this agreement was disguised after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, as the party demanded the unification of the new state at any cost, relying on the concept of self-government instead of independence. This suggests that the party's branches at the provincial level have control over the administration, and that the decision is subject to the center.

Administratively, a group of territorial administration levels with self-government have been created, including 5 regions, 31 provinces, and 96 counties, which enjoy some autonomy in terms of administration resources, taxes, population determination, education, justice, and religion. These regions are led by local governments from ethnic minorities, but the real power is in the hands of the Communist Party, and most of them are Han Chinese (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 4). This is due to considering these regions as electoral districts for larger provinces with a majority of Han Chinese, such as Gansu, Qinghai, or Sichuan.

These autonomous administrative structures allow for the support of various ethnic groups in benefiting from government policies, such as tax relief and public expenditures directed towards these regions (Gustafsson & Sai, 2006, p. 2). Additionally, some state-funded programs assist minorities in preserving their identities and revitalizing their economies (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 2), highlighting the role of ethnic status in everyday life and policy-making in China.

Although the governor of certain minority regions may be from that ethnic group or elected by them, they are often surrounded by Han Chinese officials or bureaucrats to maintain a balance between the administrative system and the Communist Party system and unified authority across the party hierarchy (Ma, 2006, p. 97).

It can be said that China's Communists needed to integrate minorities for several reasons. The Communist's long march from southwestern to northwestern China to escape the Kuomintang's Chiang Kai Shek (Loh, 1966, 1970) required them to pass through minority areas, where they adopted a unique approach to dealing with these ethnic groups, especially the Miao, Yi, Mongols, and Hui (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 3).

Since the beginning of the 20th century, China has adopted Mandarin as the official language of the state in an effort to create linguistic unity in the country, but it remains weakly used in daily life and is often limited to schools.

Socially, China has worked to encourage mixed marriages between Han Chinese and other ethnic minorities, relying on financial incentives for the couple for five years after their marriage (Kaiman,

2014; Refugees, s. d.), as well as educational and financial benefits for their children, aimed at assimilating the Uyghur people into Chinese culture. However, the rate of mixed marriages remains low .

Members of ethnic minorities benefit from certain privileges, such as access to universities and exemption from the one-child policy (Yang & Wu, 2009, p. 118). Regarding family planning, rural farmers have taken advantage of the lack of social security coverage in Chinese villages to demand benefits for a second or more children.

In addition to relying on policies that provide administrative, economic, and cultural privileges to ethnic minorities, the central government in China has attempted to impose a unified identity, language, and political ideology within the country's borders. It has worked to unite the various peoples that make up China through transportation and communication networks and by intensifying civil services.

This intervention has extended to capital investment and market control (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 3). However, several issues in China still relate to ethnic conflicts as a class struggle, in addition to problems of inequality between ethnic groups. This puts China in the face of internal and external challenges to achieving social harmony from an ethnic perspective.

5. Fourth: Challenges to the stability of the Chinese social system in the context of ethnic diversity.

Based on a systemic vision that views the state as a system operating within an international environment, the analysis begins internally (1), without neglecting the external influence on what happens within the state's borders (2).

5.1. Internal Challenges:

Despite Fei Xiaotong's talk of a Multi-National state, the reality indicates that the official recognition of this ethnic diversity has not prevented divisions within the Chinese population, particularly between the Han on the one hand, and other minority groups on the other. The mid-1990s saw a rediscovery of minorities' cultures, languages, and histories (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 2), despite the debate at the time

about unifying the Chinese identity through public policies in this area.

Some observers believe that China's unity stops at the level of the tribe or clan and has not reached the level of the nation, and that attempts at cultural unification have failed, either internally and externally (Harding, 1993). It is worth noting here that linguistic and ethnic boundaries do not always intersect with geographic boundaries, as some minority languages are geographically located within Han areas, and vice versa. Also, the geographic location of minorities affects their economic situation and their integration into economic life. Villages of the Hui, Uyghur, and Zhuang in the northwest suffer from weak manufacturing and low wages, which leads some minorities to undertake long and collective migrations towards the southeast, where the major industrial cities are located.

Despite the idea that many researchers in Chinese affairs have embraced that the Han group is a unified group, it is subject to some doubt that is mainly evident in language. The Han use eight different languages, and one Chinese linguist, Y.R. Chao, pointed out the lack of mutual understanding between languages in China. It is difficult for a Mandarin speaker to understand Cantonese (D. D. Gladney, 1995, p. 4), in addition to the physiological differences within the same group between the north and south.

The people of Northern China have a broad build, sharp features, and fair skin. In contrast, those in the south are shorter in stature with dark skin. There are also cultural differences, especially in the practices surrounding weddings, births, and funerals. Some people in the north lean towards folk rituals, while others are more attached to their ancestral traditions. There are also differences in dietary habits (Song & Cho, 2017), with northerners preferring wheat and other grain-based products, meat, and seasoned food, while southerners tend to favor rice and seafood.

Individual income among minorities varies depending on their geographic location. Villages in the northwest are better off than others, with the Uyghurs being the least well-off. Meanwhile, the villages of ethnic minorities in the southeast have a less developed economic situation. Various factors contribute to these disparities, such as the rate of manufacturing, differences in agricultural production, and investment in human capital.

It's worth noting that the ethnic divisions established by the Chinese Communist Party remain unresolved, and the numbers are constantly shifting among the minorities. The law allows individuals to change their ethnicity or move to another group, which has led to a 127% increase in the number of Manchus between 1982 and 1990. This increase is not just due to births, but also to changes in ethnic affiliation. Most children born of mixed marriages between Han and ethnic minorities are registered as belonging to the ethnic minority (Wu & He, 2018, p. 186), a move aimed at benefiting from certain privileges.

The creation of ethnic groups within the country has led to the emergence of what is known as "separatist tendencies" among some of them. While Mao relied on attracting minority symbols, such as inviting the Dalai Lama (Dillon, 2001), the leader of Tibet, to Beijing and considering him a national leader, religion was considered an opium, resulting in the destruction of many temples and statues in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution (Ma, 2006, p. 100). The separatist tendency has spread to several regions, including Xinjiang, where the Uyghurs have been detained in re-education camps.

The era of the Gang of Four witnessed some of the most significant violations against Muslims, with the remaining mosques being closed after 1955. Muslim officials were also subjected to regular criticism, insults, beatings, and forced pig farming, and eating in some cases. Furthermore, Shadian Muslims in southern China were accused of attempting separatism, resulting in violent military intervention in 1975 that led to the demolition of homes and the deaths of over 160 Hui Muslim victims (D. C. Gladney, 1996, p. 137).

The Belt and Road Initiative laid the foundation for a massive project aimed at connecting over 68 countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe through land and sea transportation routes to stimulate trade with China. This required the construction of infrastructure and the establishment of free trade zones, with Shanghai in eastern China becoming one of the most important of these zones. However, the passage of this road through minority regions was not always smooth, and the uniqueness of Xinjiang attests to special difficulties.

Uyghur Muslims in the far west of China suffer from the curse of their geographical location, which has made them a key point on the Silk Road, rich in

natural resources such as petroleum, coal, lead, natural gas, and uranium(Weiwen, s. d.; Yin, 2015). Despite enjoying self-rule, the region suffers from persecution, including forced labor and the prohibition of some Muslim practices under the pretext of combating extremism(United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2022, p. 11). Beijing's policy aims to eradicate Islamic identity and assimilate it into the Chinese mainstream, or else Muslims will be subject to punishment.

Although it is difficult to deny the connection between group identities, ethnic relations, and politics, Chinese history has a particular peculiarity in this regard, with discrimination based theoretically and practically on culture(Ma, 2006, p. 88). Therefore, culture was made the axis of connection between the majority and the minority, and China adopted strategies to facilitate the unification of minorities by the Han group.

In contrast, a group of studies has found that social disparities continue, including differences in the minimum wage and access to education and healthcare(Howell, 2020, p. 115), which are more pronounced in rural areas and minority regions. This situation has led to protests and demands for greater rights and freedoms, especially among young people who are better educated and more exposed to the outside world.

One of the indicators of the continuation of these challenges is President Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Communist Party Conference in 2017, in which he emphasized the importance of unifying Chinese ethnic groups within the framework of collective action. The goal of government policies is to create a collective sense among different minorities to work towards a common social development (Huang et al., 2020, p. 77).

Government also pointed out that supporting a sense of belonging to a unified group is a goal for political institutions to achieve, despite the difficulties that individuals face in identifying their identity in a society with multiple ethnicities and races, as numerous studies have shown (Brodsky, 2009). This is particularly important in light of the international reality that witnesses frequent international relations and the challenges that arise from this.

5.2. External challenges:

Historically, the Chinese have considered themselves a superior race, and all dealings with foreigners were framed in terms of Chinese superiority. This has led to ethnic issues in China extending beyond the borders of the state. Throughout history, Beijing has faced various stages of external ethnic conflicts due to their potential impact on the internal situation. This has been the case, for example, with ethnic conflicts in the southwest on the borders with Myanmar, Burma, and Thailand, due to fears of the conflict spreading across the borders. The same is said of Tibet, where reports indicate continued resistance against government intervention in arresting dissidents.

The collapse of the last ruling dynasty in China in the early 1990s posed a risk of the state's extinction, prompting the political and social elite of the time to reform the state and adopt the formula of the nation-state. They adopted strategies influenced by the West (Ma, 2006, p. 85), initially based on political models of European industrialized countries, in addition to significant influence from the Soviet Union, particularly Marxist thought and Stalinist practices, which have affected the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party.

China fought a civil war between the two World Wars, during which the Chinese Communist Party was supported by the Soviet Union, in contrast to the Western-backed Chen Chaichang group. After Japan's defeat and withdrawal from China, Mao Zedong emerged victorious, with support from the Soviets as part of their support for communist parties in Southeast Asia during the Cold War.

One of the recurring themes in Chinese history is its connection with the former Soviet Union. China adopted its approach to organizing national associations based on religious affiliation. This led to the emergence of associations such as the Islamic Association, the Buddhist Association, Protestant and Catholic associations, among others (Allès et al., 2001, p. 4). Representatives of these associations, especially Muslims, presented a democratic image of China at international meetings, such as the Bandung Conference in 1954, which facilitated Beijing's relations with Islamic countries, particularly Arab ones.

The cultural issue has been a cornerstone of the relationship between the Han and minority ethnic

groups throughout Chinese history. This continued until 1950, which marked a turning point characterized by the Korean War and the international isolation imposed on China by Western countries, leading it to seek Soviet support. Beijing worked to transfer the Soviet Union's model in administration, education, economy, health, and nationality (Ma, 2006, p. 93), then established a centralized administrative and political system, a state-directed economy, and a revolutionary educational and cultural system.

The Chinese Communist Party was influenced by Leninist thought from its early days, particularly regarding the self-determination of minority groups in the early 1930s. However, since 1949, China has shifted to a new policy of equality and regional autonomy enjoyed by ethnic minority regions (Connor, 1984), fearing the success of the revolutions in the Soviet Union, leading to a focus on autonomous regions granted to minorities in 1950.

Externally as well, China evokes its energy security relationship with Arab Muslims, particularly in the Arab Gulf region, and works to market a positive image of Muslims within China. The Gulf is a large market for Beijing's products on one hand and an important source of oil on the other.

The freedom of movement between China and Central Asia has helped the Chinese gain insight into ethnic and economic conflicts in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. Some of them are better off economically than the Muslim minorities on the borders. The great challenge for Beijing is to address the demands of minorities and persuade them that cooperation with the government would yield greater benefits than resorting to resistance.

Deng Xiaoping has played a role in China's transition towards individual initiative and the launch of Chinese capitalism, allowing for freedom of ownership and replacing ideological legitimacy with achievement legitimacy. This has contributed to renewing the love of Chinese citizens for their country domestically and externally, resulting in the world witnessing the return of relations between the Chinese islands and the transfer of many Taiwanese to invest in China. After controlling investment channels in neighboring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, Deng's goal was to stir up Chinese nationalism among Chinese around the world.

On another front, the American presence in Southeast Asia is pushing China to deal cautiously with the ethnic issue in this region as it may be used by the United States to threaten Chinese stability. Beijing has worked towards building an economic bloc called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to protect common interests in Central Asia, with the agreement signed in St. Petersburg, Russia in 2001, and taking effect two years later.

China has focused on directed media that markets an image of China that respects ethnic diversity and promotes harmony among the various minorities living in the country. It has also relied on the establishment of Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese language and culture, without abandoning its citizens in Hong Kong and Taiwan, with all their ethnic groups, in an attempt to accommodate and leverage their potential.

However, several external entities, including human rights organizations, accuse China of imposing a siege on its Muslim population, particularly the Uighurs. Some even claim that more than a million people are being held in camps, which China claims are vocational training centers aimed at promoting the integration of local residents and curbing extremism among them.

6. Conclusion

Most research anticipates China's surpassing Western economies, indicating a shift in the world's center from West to East. Researchers generally agree that the Chinese dragon has risen from its slumber only to keep the earth beneath its wings. China's economic resilience in the face of the 2008 crisis and its ability to overcome the COVID-19 crisis are evidence of a shift in the global system externally, which will be accompanied by a shift at the cultural and ethical level, on which China is betting to integrate its minorities internally. If this is not achieved through peaceful and civil means, it would not be surprising for the Chinese Communist Party to go far in tempering the nature of minorities to ensure their fusion into the liberal Chinese Confucianism.

In general, it can be said that China's economic leap has not been of the same size and pace throughout the Chinese territory, which has automatically affected the distant ethnic minorities from the coast, including the regions of Mongolia and Xinjiang, which have not

benefited from the effects of growth, leaving a feeling of marginalization present in the minds of the people on the fringes.

China still needs to search for a strategy to integrate these minorities into Chinese society, relying on sectoral plans and action plans with clear objectives, while specifying the time, means, and resources. China's revival from its slumber is sufficient to boost its internal immunity on the one hand and drive what may come from outside on the other.

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