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Ethnicity and the State in Contemporary China

Anne-Marie BRADY

Ethnic relations in China are at an all-time low. Since 2011 more than 96 Tibetan monks, nuns, and laypeople have died from self-immolations in protest against the policies of the Chinese government. In 2012 there was unrest in Inner Mongolia, and there has been a series of violent incidents in Xinjiang since 2009; riots rocked Tibetan areas in Yunnan, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in 2008; and ethnic Han-based groups such as Taiwanese independence activists and Falungong adherents continue to threaten the authority of the state by challenging official definitions of “Chineseness”. Meanwhile, many within the Han population complain that China’s ethnic minorities receive unfair advantages as a result of positive discrimination policies. China’s ethnic policies are clearly in need of an overhaul, but how can the Chinese government improve ethnic relations while maintaining political and social stability?

China’s ethnic minorities make up approximately 8 per cent of the population, while occupying about 50 per cent of the territory of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), in some of the most resource-rich parts of the country. The politics of ethnicity has been a perennial issue in the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) quest for political stability. China is a multi-ethnic state, with transnational ethnic groups along all of its borders. The boundaries of the PRC are based on the territories of the former Qing Empire, large sections of which had been eroded by foreign invasion and succession in its latter years. The period from the end of the Qing in 1911 to the founding of the PRC in 1949 further accentuated this trend of territorial erosion. For this reason, defining ethnicity and creating a sense of national identity is a key task for the CCP government. The CCP’s Cold War experience of being drawn into successive border conflicts (over Korea, the Offshore Islands, Vietnam, India, USSR) and post-Cold War experience of the rise of ethnic nationalism among some of its closest neighbours have only served to heighten the historical sense of anxiety about ethnic issues in modern China.

This issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* looks at the place of ethnicity (民族, *minzu*) in various aspects of Chinese politics, outlining

some of the structures and policies in place to manage ethnic issues, and discussing some of the key points in ethnic affairs in recent years. Ethnicity has the potential to be both an undermining and a unifying force in China; whether or not the CCP is able to manage the current crisis in ethnic affairs could prove to be a litmus test of the sustainability of its hold on power.

Ethnic affairs are a central concern in China's national security and have been given high priority by the country's post-18th Party Congress CCP leadership, who are looking for new approaches to deal with the ongoing cycle of ethnic-related violence and tension. In November 2012 the new leadership boosted the numbers of senior officials with ethnic-affairs expertise in the CCP Central Secretariat, a sure sign that major new policy initiatives relating to ethnic affairs are being planned.

Officially, the CCP government allows China's ethnic-minority groups autonomous rule and opposes forced assimilation; but, in fact, the effect of many of the government's ethnic policies has been increased integration and the steady loss of cultural diversity. The CCP government fears that giving too much autonomy to China's ethnic minorities will lead to the creation of break-away states, as occurred in the former Soviet Union. Yet many observers argue that this lack of true autonomy is one of the underlying causes of current antagonism between many of the ethnic-minority groups and the central government. This contradiction (and conundrum) lies at the heart of CCP ethnic politics and policy today.

The six papers in this issue are all written within the context of the ongoing ethnicity-related tensions in the Chinese polity. Ethnic politics here are not taken to mean only ethnic-minority policies, but also include policies relating to ethnicity that affect various ethnic groups in China. Each author explores factors that may be adding to the existing ethnic tensions in China and discusses strategies the Chinese government has employed to ameliorate them.

In putting together this issue I have gathered a range of perspectives from different disciplines – sociology, anthropology, social anthropology and political science – to examine China's ethnic affairs and policies. Our authors include one from an ethnic minority in China; a scholar whom the CCP government would define as “overseas Chinese”; and three non-Chinese researchers – one is a China specialist, the second a Tibet specialist, and the third specialises in ethnic groups on the Chinese–Thai border. The papers analyse China's overall ethnic policies at the macro

level (Freeman, Brady, Bulag, To) as well as exploring representative examples at the micro level (Barnett, Sturgeon).

The authors in this issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* are not all of the same mind regarding the causes of ethnic tensions in China and how to resolve them. We have not attempted to “harmonise” the perspectives of the various authors in compiling this issue. There are widely differing views on ethnic policies both within China and internationally. This topical issue aims to showcase recent and representative research on various aspects of the Chinese government’s policies on ethnic affairs. It is not the last word on ethnic policies; indeed, I hope the papers here will stimulate further debate both within China and outside the country.

Since the 1990s, Beijing’s ethnic-affairs policies have followed a dual approach of, on the one hand, emphasising economic development – which aims both to raise the standard of living and to better integrate the whole economy of China – but, on the other hand, consistently downplaying ethnic differences within China – symbolised by the common ethnic-affairs slogan “We are all one family”. The first paper in this issue, by Johns Hopkins University political scientist Carla Freeman, evaluates the Chinese government’s recent emphasis on economic development as a central theme in ethnic policy; she examines present-day fiscal policies toward ethnic minorities and contrasts these with fiscal policies adopted in the Mao era. In recent years, the CCP government has attempted to increase integration between China’s prosperous coastal zones and the poor western areas through improving rail links, setting up special economic zones in Tibet and Xinjiang, and partnering coastal cities with poor regions in Western China. Although the economic growth rate of China’s western areas has surpassed that of China’s coastal areas in recent years, income disparities within these areas have also grown substantially both inter-regionally and between urban and rural areas. Sixty per cent of China’s poor live in the western part of the country. Non-Han are overrepresented among rural poor and unemployed. Rather than benefitting from the new policies, Professor Freeman finds that many of China’s ethnic minorities have been the groups most negatively affected by them. Freeman argues that inequities related to fiscal allocations are a significant source of instability and one cause of violence along ethnic lines in China. She argues, moreover, that the lack of genuine opportunities for ethnic-minority Chinese to help shape the policies which directly

affect them – which would entail true “ethnic autonomy” – is a factor in the ongoing social instability involving many ethnic regions in China.

The second paper in the issue, by Tibet specialist Robbie Barnett, continues the critique of China’s ethnic policies, arguing that it is the CCP government’s religious policies in Tibet that have led to the series of violent conflicts and self-immolations in Tibetan areas in China in recent years. Professor Barnett uses sociological frames to discuss how, since the Jiang Zemin era of the 1990s, the CCP government has combined emphasising economic development with conveying messages of political stability that defined the Dalai Lama and his adherents as significant threats to the Chinese state. Barnett’s paper gives a detailed and thorough analysis of the implications of this policy approach, such as the range of restrictions on religious belief in Tibetan areas of China. He says the religious policies employed against Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism render Tibet a “parallel world” within China compared to the relatively tolerant social and political controls elsewhere in China. The same could be argued for policies employed in Xinjiang and against Uyghurs. Force is a short-term measure of political control, and the government clearly needs to come up with a sustainable, long-term approach to resolve the antagonisms in ethnic affairs in these regions.

In the third paper in the issue, anthropologist Janet Sturgeon uses Marx’s concept of the commodity fetish and Polly Hill’s critique of cash crops to analyse the cultural politics of ethnicity for Akha and Dai farmers in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province. Coming from an interesting angle, one that echoes the concerns raised in Freeman’s and Barnett’s papers, Sturgeon says that the Chinese state’s emphasis on “cash crops” keeps minority farmers dependent as passive recipients of state-led economic development. She says the way that the government frames tea and rubber production in China portrays minority farmers both as “backward” minorities in need of state help and as agrarian entrepreneurs. Under the state rubric for understanding development, Yunnan’s tea farmers are “ethnic”, while its rubber farmers are “modern”. Sturgeon’s paper highlights the agency of many of the farmers she studied, some of whom she says take advantage of their cash-crop production to raise their social status and their income.

In the fourth paper in the issue, social anthropologist Uradyn Bulag explores the role of “political tourism” in the CCP government’s efforts to influence ethnic elites in China from the 1950s up to the present. Professor Bulag says that the CCP’s emphasis on political tourism re-

flects a strong desire to be seen and admired by others outside the party. Then as now, after participating in these ritual tours of important sites in China, minority leaders are expected to articulate their impressions of the journey as an indication of their acceptance of China as their nation-state.

While political tourism is an approach that has been adopted by many states to influence elites, Bulag argues that the CCP's understanding of this activity draws on distinctively Chinese traditions for managing ethnic affairs. Bulag argues that we can expect to see China stepping up its political tourism as the nation's international influence rises, because he says, China's present-day status, like that of yore, must be "consummated" by devotional foreigners and minority leaders bearing tribute. He says that part of the process of China becoming a global power will necessitate the world properly recognising this "greatness".

The implications of Professor Bulag's conclusions dovetail neatly with the remaining two papers in this issue. In the fifth paper, political scientist Anne-Marie Brady examines the CCP's management of ethnic-related publicity and information, along with its efforts to mould public opinion on ethnic issues amongst the Chinese population and internationally. All matters that relate to ethnicity are strictly managed in the Chinese public sphere and in China's foreign relations. The CCP government works hard to promote an image of ethnic harmony in China and downplays ethnic conflict by carefully controlling public information and debate about ethnic affairs. In this paper, Brady surveys the broad themes of ethnic propaganda (民族宣传, *minzu xuanchuan*) in China in the current period, looking at the organisations involved, the systems of information management they utilise, and the current "go" and "no-go" zones for debate. Professor Brady argues that while China's ethnic-related propaganda has been relatively successful in winning over the Han majority, and in some of the areas where ethnic minorities dominate, such as Yunnan, it has been less successful in some of the most restive areas of China such as Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, and it has in many respects (but not all) failed in the battle for influence over international public opinion.

The sixth and final paper of the issue, by political scientist James To, looks at how the CCP government attempts to influence and manage the overseas Chinese (OC) population (侨务工作, *qiaowu gongzuo*), an activity which affects both Han and non-Han populations living abroad. Overseas Chinese form a vast network of powerful interest groups and

important political actors capable of both influencing the future of China (culturally and politically) and undermining the political power of the CCP. Some OC are also a potential source of investment and know-how for the CCP government. Dr. To analyses the CCP government's techniques to entice and co-opt OC elites, as well as to isolate troublemakers, particularly focusing on pro-democracy, Taiwanese independence, Falungong, Tibetan Buddhist, and Xinjiang independence movements. To says that *qiaowu* is a key means to legitimise and protect the CCP's hold on power, and to retain influence over the important channels of access to social, economic and political resources that China needs to advance its national interests, both domestically and abroad.

Ethnic conflict is one of the most challenging issues the CCP faces in its ongoing attempt to stay in power. As the papers in this issue show, there are many points of tension in China's ethnic affairs. In the Mao era, the CCP system of ethnic affairs politicised ethnicity in China, arguably to a greater extent than witnessed at any other period in China's multi-ethnic history. The politicising of ethnicity created expectations which, from the perspective of many ethnic groups, the government's policies have consistently failed to meet. Since the 1990s, government policies have attempted to depoliticise ethnicity and focus on economic development. However, China's market reforms appear to have accentuated the income and education gap between the majority Han population and minority ethnic groups. Nevertheless, some ethnic groups do seem to be prospering despite, not because of, government policies. Many ethnic Han are resentful of the perceived advantages and preferential treatment ethnic minorities receive from the Chinese government. The CCP's handling of religious issues has created further tensions. The CCP promotes atheism, but interest in religion is growing rapidly in China, most of the growth being generated by non-officially controlled religious groups with strong international connections. China's multi-ethnic, multicultural citizens are increasingly exposed to the global marketplace of ideas. Meanwhile, information communication technology (ICT) has the potential to turn every Chinese person with a connection to the Internet into a citizen journalist. The CCP can no longer monopolise the Chinese public sphere in the way it has been able to in the past, as ICT greatly challenges the government's censorship abilities. The CCP government takes drastic measures to combat alternative viewpoints when it regards them as political threats. Within days of ethnic violence erupting in Urumqi in 2009, the whole Xinjiang Autonomous Region was cut off

from all access to Internet, international phone calls, and international post communications for close to a year. However, mass communication is only a tool: It is not the new technology itself, but rather public opinion, that is challenging CCP policies. The overseas Chinese diaspora, both Han and non-Han, are sources for alternative perspectives that threaten to challenge the Chinese state's portrayal of China as a united, harmonious multi-ethnic family; the OC create the locations for the media outlets, blogs and Twitter accounts that promote an alternative to the party line and that are out of the reach of CCP media censorship.

The CCP must find a way to manage these and other tensions in ethnic affairs if it is to continue to maintain its rule. Examining ethnic affairs in the current period offers us a unique view of one of the most tenuous fault lines in Chinese society. It also can reveal some of the methods by which the CCP will address real and perceived threats to stability and maintain its authority to rule.

Dr. Anne-Marie Brady is an associate professor of political science at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. She is currently researching the politics of ethnicity in China, and China's polar strategy.

E-mail: <Anne-Marie.Brady@canterbury.ac.nz>

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