

The National Question in China

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Writing nearly 150 years ago Karl Marx noted that it was a “precondition for the emancipation of the English working class” that Ireland be freed from British rule as “a nation that enslaves another forges its own chains”. In other words it was crucial that British workers break from the ideology of their own ruling class and support Irish independence if they were to achieve their own emancipation. Much the same argument applies to contemporary China and its emerging labour movement. The regime, having largely abandoned any claims to socialism with the country’s integration into global capitalism, has fallen back for its legitimacy on a crude nationalism that involves the oppressive rule of Tibet and other non-Han Chinese areas.

Although formally autonomous, the predominantly minority areas have little real freedom. They are ruled by a combination of repression – especially in those border areas that could aspire to independence – and a patronising paternalism that sees the non-Han ethnic groups as colourful but somewhat backward cousins, in need of the civilising influence of Han culture. The Chinese population, according to the official categorisation, is made up of 56 nationalities, of which the Han, at around 92%, are by far the most numerous. This combination is largely a legacy of imperial history and particularly of the last dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911) who conquered vast swathes of territory beyond China proper.

Historically relations with the peoples to the north and west pivoted around the conflict between Chinese agriculturalists and the nomads of the steppe. The line of the Great Wall, broadly speaking, marks the boundary between territory suitable for the kind of intensive agriculture practised by the Chinese, and land on which only nomadic herding was suitable. But between them,

as Owen Lattimore argued, was an intermediate zone, where either was plausible, that was often a site of conflict.

The early decades of the Qing dynasty, were dominated by a drawn out and ultimately near genocidal war against the western, or Djungar, Mongols whose home territory straddles the modern border between China and Kazakhstan. The dynasty was founded by the semi-nomadic Manchus from the area that today forms the most north-eastern part of China. The eastern Mongols, from roughly the area of the modern state of Mongolia, were long time allies of the Manchus, helping in the establishment of the dynasty and the extermination of the Djungar empire.

Both sides fought for control of Tibet as Tibetan Buddhism was influential amongst all the Mongols. The Qing won this battle but imperial rule was far lighter than that imposed today. There are currently in the region of 200,000 Chinese troops stationed in Tibet. Under the Qing dynasty the imperial representative, the Amban, commanded a force of just 2,000, little more than a bodyguard. A larger force would have been too expensive, and unnecessary. Chinese rule largely suited the feudal aristocracy that ruled Tibet as it acted to limit conflict between them over scarce arable land. To this end the Qing elevated the pre-eminent religious leader the Dalai Lama to a position of secular power, acting as a centralising force in a society that was naturally fragmented.

As a result of its victory, the Qing also brought under their control the large area that they named *Xinjiang* or “new territory”. Still known by this name it now forms the far north-west of the Chinese state. Lying on the route of the old silk roads, this region is inhabited by a number of Turkic Muslim peoples, the largest being

the Uyghurs, but also including groups such as Kazakhs, Tajiks and Kyrgyz related to peoples in the bordering states of the former Soviet Union.

In the south Chinese expansion was a more drawn-out process, mostly initiated by the migration of Han Chinese farmers into the fertile valleys. Indigenous people who adopted Chinese agricultural methods were assimilated by the newcomers; those who did not were left practising more primitive farming in the hills. Consequently today the provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi autonomous region are populated by a patchwork of different groups, interspersed with Han Chinese.

Modern Chinese nationalism only emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in reaction to the violent intrusion of European (and then Japanese) imperialism. Some of the first nationalists advocated an ethnic nationalism on the European and Japanese model, based solely on the Han Chinese population. However this would have meant foregoing the huge territories acquired by the Qing which are inhabited by non-Han peoples and was quickly abandoned in favour of a multi-ethnic version. The various peoples of modern China have come together over millennia, so nationalist mythology claims, through a “great fusion” to form a single nation. But within this the Han, having the most “advanced culture” led their more backward compatriots. Thus justifying both the retention of most of the territory inherited from the Qing dynasty and the domination of a more or less exclusively Han ruling class.

All nationalisms depend on these sort of “invented traditions”, as Eric Hobsbawm called them, in which the modern nation appears as a natural outcome of historical developments. China has a better claim than most to historical precedent: the first unified state, the Qin, was established in 221 BC, and elements of Chinese culture go even further back. But the empire was ruled on a very different basis. Loyalty was to the dynasty and the person of the emperor, guided by a universalist Confucian morality (rather than a particularist nationalism). Only the ruling layer of bureaucrats had any real conception of the state as a whole, with the vast majority of peasant farmers necessarily having much more local horizons. And, unlike a modern nation state, the empire’s borders were not clearly defined, the centre’s influence just tended to fade away at the extremes.

One of the first to advocate developing Chinese nationalism as a response to imperialism, reforming official Liang Qichao, wrote that “If we want now to oppose the national imperialism of the powers, rescue China from disaster and save our people, we have no choice but to adopt the policy of pushing our own nationalism.” But reforming the empire proved impossible, the following generation developed a revolutionary nationalism led by Sun Yat Sen.

This appealed to the layer of frustrated intellectuals from which Sun himself came. In previous generations they could have hoped to enter government service via success in the examination system. But as the system became increasingly corrupt, before being abolished in 1905, that door was closed. Added to this frustration was a sense of humiliation at the inability of the empire to resist foreign domination.

Popularising nationalism beyond this narrow base proved more difficult. As Sun himself explained “What Chinese people worship is the family and clan, so China only adheres to the doctrines of family and clan, not to the state-nation.” It was only really the brutal experience of Japanese rule during the Second World War that created a popular sense of a Chinese nation. The 1949 revolution that brought the communists to power was essentially nationalist in character despite the Marxist rhetoric. For the first time China had a government capable of resisting foreign domination and committed to the development of modern industry.

In the 1930s the Communist Party recognised the right of self-determination for national minorities in order to win support in their desperate struggle with the nationalist government. But as they neared power this was quietly dropped in favour of a unitary state encompassing all ethnic groups. After the revolution the People’s Liberation Army moved in to secure control over Tibet, Xinjiang and other border regions. The peoples of these regions had no say in the matter.

The Cultural Revolution period in the mid-60s was particularly hard on Tibet. Calls to destroy the “four olds” became an excuse for widespread attacks on Tibetan culture and the majority of Buddhist monasteries were destroyed at this time. In the 1980s the regime made some attempt to atone for these crimes, restoring and reopening the larger monasteries. But the feelings of bitterness and resentment could not so easily be erased. For its part the government remains highly suspicious

of the monasteries which have become centres of resistance whenever opposition flares up.

Gross Domestic Product in Tibet has, according to official figures, grown by over 10 percent for 24 consecutive years. This is in large part due to massive government subsidies, reflecting China's predominantly strategic interest in a region that shares a long border with India. But the benefits have largely passed Tibetans by. Much of the investment is in infrastructure, but contracts are awarded to companies from elsewhere and they tend to bring in labour from their home provinces. Tibetans can usually only get the least skilled and lowest paid jobs. More generally, Han migrants dominate employment in urban areas and are now over half the population of the capital Lhasa. The majority of Tibetans remain on the land, the most impoverished rural population in all China.

To the north of Tibet Xinjiang, which borders eight different countries, is also strategically crucial to the Chinese regime, but it is economically far more significant too. The so called "autonomous region", covering about a sixth of China's area, is a key source of raw materials, especially oil and gas. At the centre of its economy is the extraordinary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC). This gargantuan organisation, a legacy of the Mao era, is run by the party-state on military lines and maintains both an economic and a political role. It controls a third of the region's arable land and also has interests in a wide range of industries. Nearly 2.5 million people or 13% of the population come under its remit, 86% of them Han in a region where Han Chinese constitute about 40% of the population. It also maintains a 100,000 strong militia for internal security purposes.

With the help of the XPCC, the regime has actively encouraged Han in-migration to Xinjiang in recent years to improve its control over what it perceives as a hostile indigenous population prone to "splitism". This is concentrated in the more developed and urbanised northern half of the region. The south, where the population is overwhelmingly Uyghur, remains largely rural and therefore poorer, and falling further behind. The other minority groups also tend to be disproportionately poor within their localities.

The one substantial area of Qing territory that modern China did not inherit was Outer Mongolia, which took advantage of the weakness of the republican

government in the 1920s to free itself from Chinese rule and now forms the state of Mongolia. Inner Mongolia however remained under Chinese control. Some of the land here was suitable for agriculture and, despite prohibition by the Qing government, Chinese farmers migrated in numbers from the eighteenth century on, so that they formed a majority of the population by the time the dynasty fell. Integration with China was then cemented by the coming of the railway. Today Mongols make up less than twenty percent of the provincial population.

Like Xinjiang Mongolia is rich in mineral resources and their intensified exploitation to fuel China's industrial boom is causing environmental damage and eating into traditional grazing lands. Herders have also been subject to forcible resettlement policies. Resentment boiled over in 2011 after a herder protesting at a new mining development was run over and killed by a Chinese truck driver, and thousands took to the streets in protest.

After consolidating their rule the communists set about systematically categorising the country's ethnic groups, eventually recognising 56. But these categories could be quite arbitrary. For instance the people designated as Zhuang, from Guangxi and neighbouring southern provinces, and at 18 million the largest minority in China, had previously identified themselves as belonging to various more localised groups. There is some debate as to whether this was done to create a group larger than the Uyghurs and Tibetans but without the same potential to strive for independence, or whether as a way to integrate into the new state a people who had largely been beyond central control.

But if the regime's purpose was to integrate the minorities into the Han dominated state, and as a first step towards assimilation, it has to some extent had the opposite effect. The layer of lower level cadres drawn from the various minorities to administer their regions has a vested interest in strengthening their people's identification with their defined ethnicity. So even where the categorisation originally had little basis in reality, it can take on a life of its own.

This can have cultural consequences too. For instance, the Muslim Hui are indistinguishable from Han Chinese physically and are distributed throughout

China. Over the generations they have adapted to their local environment modifying or dropping some of their religious practices. In the south-east, for example, where they are surrounded by Han Chinese, the taboo on eating pork had largely disappeared. However, their designation as members of a nationwide Muslim grouping has led to a revival in religious observance.

Rapid economic development in China has tended to exacerbate the differences between the Han majority and the minority peoples. The minorities are predominantly rural and often live in the poorest rural areas too, while development is centred on the Han dominated urban areas. Some minority people have been drawn to the cities for work, although they often end up in the lowest paid jobs, or even unemployed.

Other causes of resentment are the dominance of the Chinese language and religious persecution. The regime formally recognises indigenous languages and they are taught in primary schools, but teaching at secondary and especially university levels is in Chinese, disadvantaging those for whom it is a second language. Similarly with religious practice, it is formally tolerated but severely restricted in reality. So Tibetan monasteries are closely monitored by the state and Uyghurs employed by government institutions actively discouraged from attending the mosque.

Just as the experience of imperialism helped create Chinese nationalism, the oppression of communist rule has helped to forge national consciousness among the minorities in a way that didn't really exist beyond small elites prior to 1949. In Tibet and Xinjiang this can take the form of demands for independence, although these are primarily articulated by exiles. In other areas, where the populations are more diffuse, the emphasis is on greater equality and respect within China.

The potential for division on ethnic lines within the working class was horribly revealed in 2009. Then two migrant Uyghur workers in a Guangdong factory were murdered after falsely being accused of raping a Han woman, followed a week later by riots in the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi that left at least 197 dead, mostly Han. But the possibility of unity is there too. One of the student leaders of the 1989 democracy movement in Beijing was the Uyghur Wuerkaixi. The emerging labour movement needs to challenge the nationalism of the ruling class by supporting genuine self-determination for the minority peoples.

References

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