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# The Bureaucratic Factor in PRC Ethnic Policy: Lessons from the 1950s

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, the People's Republic of China has sought to aggressively assimilate ethnic minorities. Focusing on developments in Xinjiang, international media and scholarship mostly have analyzed the crackdown on minorities in relation to Beijing's recent fears about terrorism and ethnic separatism, as well as the shift toward state capitalism and economic exploitation of the frontier since the 1980s. However, to understand what is driving the swing toward assimilationism, we also need to analyze the historical and institutional context of the PRC's ethnic policy, in particular the ethnic affairs bureaucracy (EAB). Accordingly, this chapter outlines the Chinese Communist Party's theory of the "national question," the development of the EAB, and an earlier swing toward assimilationist ethnic policy in the 1950s. It shows that bureaucratization in the form of the EAB left ethnic policy prone to politicization, with dire consequence for minorities. Much as we have incorporated institutional dynamics into our understanding of the policy process when it comes to China's economy, foreign relations, and environmental protection, so too should we consider the bureaucratic factor when analyzing ethnic policy and the politics that affect its local implementation.

## Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

- It is possible that many officials in the PRC do not support hardline assimilationism, a sentiment that US officials can use to their advantage as they press their Chinese counterparts on minority rights. Notwithstanding current policies, the CCP's theory of the "national question" does not require hardline assimilationism and in fact warns of the political and security risks such measures can create. Officials in the PRC may not support the current policy on the grounds that it is strategically unwise and wasteful. US officials should continue to press their Chinese counterparts on minority rights, raise these concerns in their communications, and make the case that hardline assimilationism harms China's domestic political stability in the long term.
- China's institutional configuration leaves ethnic policy prone to politicization and distortion at the local level. One of the distinctive

but generally overlooked features of the CCP's strategy for controlling ethnic minorities and managing interethnic relations is the ethnic affairs bureaucracy (EAB), which comprises offices throughout the country from the central to the local level. The EAB first developed in the 1950s to ensure local compliance with the central leadership's ethnic policy. However, in periods of greater political pressure on bureaucrats, bureaucratization also makes ethnic policy prone to politicization, as happened during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s.

- US officials should not assume that all cases of minority repression and abuse are the straightforward result of directives from Beijing. Local implementation of ethnic policy can be even more repressive than central policy demands, even when centrally determined policy promotes repression. Assimilationist measures adopted at the local level may reflect local or subordinate officials' efforts to signal loyalty and political enthusiasm to their superiors. This is especially likely in a climate of political distrust.
- Tensions related to ethnic policy in the PRC are not limited to the country's borderlands. First, because the EAB operates throughout China, it would be a mistake to equate ethnic policy with a single region of the country, such as Xinjiang. Part of why ethnic policy is so sensitive in China is that it implicates officials and communities countrywide. Second, because ethnic policy is linked to the wider state bureaucracy through the EAB, it is not insulated from general dynamics in Chinese politics. When planning for different scenarios, it is important to consider how developments such as a financial or leadership crisis could have spillover effects on the implementation of ethnic policy.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, the People's Republic of China has sought to aggressively assimilate ethnic minorities. International organizations and media have brought to light the Chinese state's repressive measures against Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim groups in the northwestern province of Xinjiang, including mass internment, forced labor, family separation, and forced sterilization.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, the state has cracked down on expressions of ethnic identity for many of the 125 million minorities living in China. As of 2021, all "ethnic work" in the People's Republic of China has officially been directed toward the goal of promoting the "contact, exchange, and blending" (*jiaowang jiaoliu jiaorong*) of all groups.<sup>2</sup> This hardline assimilationism marks a change from the preceding few decades, when the state provided certain protections and occasionally even support for minority religious practices and ethnic customs.

What is behind this assimilationist turn in ethnic policy? Some observers situate current policy within the longer history of Chinese colonialism in Inner Asia since the late nineteenth century, casting Xi Jinping and his lieutenants as the latest and most powerful in a line of ethnic chauvinists intent on conforming the region to their nationalist vision. Others diagnose the repression as a symptom of the Chinese Communist Party's break with its multicultural roots, whether due to marketization and state capitalism, exploitation of the frontier, or militarized Islamophobia spurred by the US-led Global War on Terror. Still others maintain that sporadic incidents of separatist and extremist violence at home and around the world instilled in China's leaders a sense that the older, more accommodating ethnic policy was no longer viable.<sup>3</sup>

Each of these explanations has its merits, and the unprecedentedly draconian nature of the current crackdown in Xinjiang has appropriately directed attention to these relatively recent developments. But this analysis also overlooks two key points. First, the PRC has experienced prior periods assimilationist rhetoric and policies in its history, dating back to the 1950s. Changes in the economic system and geopolitical environment since the 1980s-90s cannot explain this earlier pattern. Second, while most attempts to understand ethnic policy treat it as a unique area of politics, China's ethnic policy shares many features of the wider political system. China scholars have long emphasized the role of bureaucratic politics and conflicts between central

and local governments in shaping both the formulation and implementation of various areas policy, from energy and development to climate and foreign relations.<sup>4</sup> Why not for ethnic policy?

In fact, while it is not often discussed, the PRC has an expansive bureaucracy for “managing ethnic affairs” (*guanli minzu shiwu*).<sup>5</sup> The central-level State Ethnic Affairs Commission (*guojia minzu shiwu weiyuanhui*, formerly translated as the Nationality Affairs Commission) assists the central government in formulating, implementing, and monitoring ethnic policy. It also oversees the work of provincial ethnic affairs bureaus, which in turn oversee offices at the prefectural and county levels. This hierarchy, known in Chinese as the *min-wei* (“ethnic [affairs] commission”) system<sup>6</sup> and which I will refer to as the ethnic affairs bureaucracy (EAB), extends to every province; it is not limited to the frontier regions that are conventionally associated with ethnic minorities and where the majority of the country’s so-called “ethnic autonomous areas” are located.

Notably, the EAB appears to be distinctive to the PRC’s approach to ethnic governance. The comparable Soviet institution, the central-level Commissariat for Nationality Affairs (“Narkomnats”), was dissolved within a few years of the establishment of the Soviet Union, which adopted a federal structure in which the largest minority populations formed nominally separate republics.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, in the unitary PRC, the EAB was extended down to the provincial and sub-provincial levels during the 1950s. Although the entire system was abolished during the Cultural Revolution, it has been restored, expanded, and deepened throughout the country in the post-Mao era.

To better understand what might be driving the broader effort to assimilate minorities in China, we need to analyze the historical and institutional context of the PRC’s ethnic policy. In this chapter I attempt to do so by examining the development of the EAB and an earlier swing toward assimilationist ethnic policy in the 1950s. During this period, “ethnic work”—the concrete application of ethnic policy at the local level—was bureaucratized and then politicized. These processes were interrelated.

Expanding the EAB in the early and mid-1950s was an attempt by the central leadership to ensure that local officials adhered to ethnic policy and did not jeopardize political stability by rashly disregarding protections for or cracking down on minority customs. At the same time, the expansion of

the EAB created a contingent of officials with a vested interest in signaling the value of ethnic work to the central leadership. In the late 1950s, amid the witch-hunting and political radicalization of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and Great Leap Forward, these officials were pressured to adopt increasingly assimilationist measures that contradicted earlier protections for minority customs. In other words, bureaucratization made ethnic work vulnerable to politicization, worsening the state's repression of minorities.

The rest of this chapter proceeds as follows. I first outline the CCP's theory of the "national question," which entails an ethnic policy aimed at eventual assimilation while balancing accommodation of minorities' "special characteristics" and implementation of social and economic reform. I then examine internal reports on ethnic work in the early 1950s and show that the central leadership believed that its ethnic policy was being stymied at the local level. In the subsequent section I look at the central leadership's response to that problem: establishing a bureaucracy (the EAB) dedicated to implementing and monitoring ethnic policy. I then analyze how this process of bureaucratization left ethnic policy vulnerable to politicization and distortion amid the broader radicalization of Chinese politics in the late 1950s, despite the concerns of top EAB officials. I conclude with a brief discussion of what this analysis of the PRC's early swing toward assimilationism suggests about the dynamics of ethnic policy today.

## The National Question and Ethnic Policy

The concept of the nation (*minzu*) is central to Chinese communist ideology. From a strictly materialist point of view, ethnonational identity, the sense of belonging to a nation, is false consciousness that obscures the class basis of true solidarity. However, as Chinese writings on subject often state, "the nation is a historical category"; it has a material reality that cannot simply be dismissed.<sup>8</sup> The nation here is a form of political organization and stage of development through which all societies must pass on the way to communism. The "national question" refers to the heterogeneity that arises from the coexistence of multiple nations at different stages of development.<sup>9</sup>

It was clear to Stalin and other communists in the early twentieth century that ethnonational identity was a psychologically powerful force with massive

mobilizational potential. Under the proper guidance of the communist vanguard, nationalism could be progressive, advancing the goal of revolution by forging alliances and mobilizing different peoples against imperialism. The experience of domination by a stronger nation strengthened the national consciousness and solidarity of the weaker, oppressed nations, motivating their movements of national liberation. But such movements could become reactionary once national oppression ended, inhibiting class alliances (“workers of the world, unite!”) across national boundaries and thereby entrenching capitalist domination within nations.<sup>10</sup>

For the CCP, the “national question” was further complicated by the fact that the aspirational polity—the territory and peoples that would become the People’s Republic of China—encompassed multiple nations, or “nationalities” (the terms are the same in Chinese: *minzu*, which can also be translated as “ethnic” or “ethnic group”). Respecting differences between nationalities was also a pragmatic strategy for early communist leaders.

During the revolutionary era, the CCP endeavored to build alliances with non-Han nationalities and win them over to the Communist cause. In principle, each nationality could have its own liberation movement, and the CCP initially promised that all the nationalities that were part of “New China” would enjoy self-determination and the right to decide for themselves whether to join a multi-national “federation.”<sup>11</sup> The desire to extend control over as much of the territory of the late Qing empire as possible led the CCP to revise these terms: soon after establishing the PRC in late 1949, the CCP leadership directed all cadres to stop emphasizing “self-determination” in their dealings with non-Han peoples and talk instead simply of equality and autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

The “resolution” of the national question entails the elimination of all disparities between nations and the erosion of each nation’s distinguishing characteristics—in other words, the end of national heterogeneity. Ultimately, all nations will merge into a single, homogeneous entity, leaving only a communist, egalitarian, and division-free society. As an early PRC textbook for high-ranking cadres explained:

The more that different nationalities come into contact, the more they influence one another, especially when one of the nationalities is comparatively advanced in government, economy, and culture and

therefore in a position to influence heavily the more backward nationality. Over a long period of time, this mutual influence will naturally produce a new psychological identification that will lead to the gradual disappearance of the original differences between them. This kind of natural assimilation is an unavoidable and progressive phenomenon as well as a natural law.<sup>13</sup>

However, until this “natural assimilation” (in contrast to artificial or coerced assimilation) is complete, national differences must be recognized and accommodated. Disregarding them or attempting to prematurely eliminate them through assimilationist policies is counterproductive. The textbook continues:

We are opposed, however, to an assimilationist policy. The more a policy of oppression and assimilation is employed, the more fearful are the minority nationalities of losing their identity and the more a spirit of fierce resistance is produced among them; only by letting them base the development of their political, economic, and cultural life on their own special characteristics can the ways of life of each of the nationalities be brought closer together and improved; in this way, they can be more easily induced to cast off their backwardness. This is appropriately dialectical.<sup>14</sup>

It was by recognizing and respecting such “special characteristics,” in other words, that the Party could most effectively neutralize the latent threat of minority ethnonationalism and ensure that rival political identities would ultimately fade away.

The erosion of distinguishing national characteristics and the attendant formation of a single, homogenous entity is known as “ethnic fusion” (*minzu ronghe*). Adapted from Soviet discourse on the national question, “ethnic fusion” is a “general law” (*guilü*) of history and the ultimate goal of ethnic policy.<sup>15</sup> Per communist theory, it will occur only after the elimination of class differences and the establishment of communism. Yet, the concept has never been completely confined to utopian visions of the future. Even if the completion of the process is a remote possibility, the pace of progress and the role of human agency and social engineering in promoting it remain open questions.



The CCP's theory of the national question thus construes ethnic policy as a balancing act. Too much repression of minority culture risks provoking a reactionary backlash, hardening ethnic consciousness, and jeopardizing political unity, while too much accommodation of minority culture risks inhibiting revolutionary progress and fostering ethnic separatism. Communist victory in the Civil War and the establishment of the PRC transformed the challenge of mobilizing a multiethnic revolutionary alliance into one of maintaining and strengthening multiethnic political unity. But the latent tension of ethnic policy remained unresolved. Once the new regime took on the concrete tasks of government, this tension began to manifest, as local cadres contested the value of slowing social transformation for the sake of respecting minorities' "special characteristics."

## The Stymying of Ethnic Policy in the Early 1950s

PRC historiography and foreign scholarship alike generally portray the early and mid-1950s as a period of relatively tolerant and accommodating ethnic policy.<sup>16</sup> Mao's infrequent pronouncements on the subject tended to emphasize the need to overcome "Han chauvinism," reflecting the central leadership's concern about alienating ethnic minorities from the new regime.<sup>17</sup> The CCP also sought to bolster its legitimacy by contrasting what it claimed was unprecedentedly progressive and just treatment of minorities with the "oppressive" and "assimilationist" policies of its predecessor, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime (which had retreated to Taiwan), as well as the imperialism of the West.<sup>18</sup> The centerpiece of the program was the so-called "system of territorial national autonomy," which, according to the CCP, would ensure that minorities were represented in local government and be able to use their own languages and develop their own cultures.<sup>19</sup>

Statements by PRC leaders and foundational PRC documents such as the "Common Program" and first constitution corroborate this benign characterization of central policy.<sup>20</sup> However, internal reports by officials responsible for reviewing the local implementation of policy reveal a more complicated reality. Despite its propaganda claims of interethnic fraternity, the central leadership quickly came to believe that disregard for and violations of ethnic policy were widespread and routine, and that local cadres were insufficiently

accommodating of different groups' "special characteristics." Rather than a rosy multiculturalism, it was the discrepancy between central government caution and local government haste that characterized ethnic policy in the early Mao years.

A report on a 1953 inspection of the South-Central Administrative Region (including Guangxi, Guangdong, Jiangxi, Hunan, Hubei, and Henan provinces) reveals a frank assessment of rampant stymying of ethnic policy: "Disrespect or minority nationality customs and religious beliefs is almost ubiquitous."<sup>21</sup> Han cadres frequently violated rules intended to avoid provoking ethnic antagonism, heavy-handedly pressuring minorities to abandon their customs. The report offered a sampling of these missteps from throughout the region:

In Guangxi, coercing minority nationalities to change their dress, interfering in their sexual relations, being overly rigid in prohibiting superstitions, and not permitting nationalities to speak their own language are widespread phenomena. In Guangxi's Xing'an County, the Han cadre Zhao Yuchang arrested and held for two days members of the Yao nationality who were celebrating the King Pan Festival; in Longjin, slogans like "a long-grown beard is a feudal tail," "if earrings aren't taken off, the landlords can't be taken down" are commonplace. In the Hainan Li-Miao Nationality Autonomous District, prohibition of the *fangliao* mountain song is extremely widespread, provoking bad reactions from the masses...<sup>22</sup>

The South-Central Commission evidently viewed these measures as violations of ethnic policy and counterproductive for ensuring stability and winning the support of the masses, both of which were essential before socialism could be implemented among minority nationalities.

If these measures were such clear and dangerous violations of ethnic policy, why were they common? Internal Party documents indicate several problems diagnosed by the central leadership. One was sheer ignorance of the CCP's theory of the "national question" and need for special protections and policies for ethnic minorities. A November 1952 report from Guangxi criticized the phenomenon of "generalization," meaning the application of policies designed

for Han areas to minority ones and disregard for the latter's "special characteristics." The report listed several causes: "Insufficient study of ethnic policy, shallow experience, a lack of penetrating investigation and research into the circumstances of minority nationalities; and a lack of summarized experience, forceful propaganda, and consciousness-raising,..." all of which "give rise to generalization in work. Some areas mechanically apply work methods for Han areas, neglecting the special characteristics of minority nationalities work, prohibiting superstition through coercion and commands, even coercing minorities to change their dress and customs..."<sup>23</sup>

A second problem was opposition to ethnic policy on ideological grounds. Now that New China had been established and ethnic oppression had been abolished, what need was there for special measures and institutions for minorities? If minorities were equal citizens of the PRC, why did they need autonomy? Wasn't treating minorities differently the real source of ethnic "splittism"? In a report delivered at a planning conference for a future Zhuang autonomous area in western Guangxi, Zhang Zhiyi, a top official in the South-Central Administrative Region the United Front Work Department, lectured attendees on the misguided opinions he had encountered:

...all sorts of views have come up, the relatively widespread of which are: "The People's Government is an authority that already includes each nationality, class, and party, so isn't territorial autonomy redundant?" "Everybody is led by Chairman Mao, so what need is there for this additional measure?!" "The [local] People's Government is led by the superior [government], so who leads the authorities in the autonomous areas?" "Isn't this equivalent to 'splitting', each [nationality] handling itself?..." These views are all incorrect...<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, a December 1951 report on ethnic work in southwest China noted that throughout the region "there are some cadres who do not sufficiently recognize the major significance of national-democratic political construction, believing that 'there's no need for this' and 'it's just needlessly creating trouble' and fearing 'ethnic splitting' and 'stirring up ethnic independence'."<sup>25</sup>

A third problem was a tendency to downplay or avoid ethnic work because it was troublesome and inconvenient. In the early 1950s, local officials were

under immense pressure to carry out land reform, increase productivity, and restructure society to lay the groundwork for collectivization. Even if cadres paid lip service to the Party's ethnic policy, they had ideological, political, and professional reasons to push ahead with "socialist transformation" in minority areas. After all, ethnic policy was about caution, exceptions, and special provisions, all of which cost time and resources. Other practical considerations regarding communication and training inclined Han cadres to resent the obligation to recruit and work with non-Han cadres.

In a report at an ethnic work conference in late 1953, Tan Yingji, himself an ethnic Zhuang and then the chairman of the Guixi Zhuang Nationality Autonomous Region, criticized cadres who believed that minority cadres "have no ability and low [levels of] culture, and that telling them to handle a matter is not as good as just doing it oneself."<sup>26</sup> Other top officials routinely criticized the attitude of "not wanting trouble" (*pa mafan*) on the part of cadres responsible for ethnic work. One major summary of Party experience composed by the United Front Work Department and approved by the CCP's Central Committee in late 1954 noted that some cadres had even said that "the national question was caused by ethnic work and ethnic policy propaganda, that it was trouble [people] sought out for themselves."<sup>27</sup>

## The Bureaucratization of Ethnic Work

The central government's response to this neglect of ethnic work was to expand the ethnic affairs bureaucracy at the provincial and to a lesser extent sub-provincial level. In other words, the expansion of the EAB was intended to solve the problem of policy failure at the local level. By mid-1957, almost every province and dozens of sub-provincial administrative units had established independent bureaus for managing ethnic affairs.<sup>28</sup>

The expansion of the ethnic affairs bureaucracy was a contingent process. Some in the Party leadership initially opposed establishing separate institutions dedicated to managing ethnic affairs. For example, in April 1950, the Northwest Bureau of the CCP issued a directive instructing officials in Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, and Ningxia to not establish separate nationality affairs commissions. A CCP Central Committee document from the same month and circulated to all regional bureaus gives some indication of

the reasoning behind this proscription. The document, “Directive Regarding Establishing National Democratic Coalition Governments in Regions Where Nationalities Comingle,” reflected a belief that the key to resolving the “national question” was enabling minority nationalities to participate fully in the representative political institutions of the new regime. Accordingly, it deemed special “nationality consultative commissions” to be merely a “transitional means” (*guodu fangshi*) of administration, suitable only until ordinary people’s governments and congresses could be established in areas where different nationalities comingled. The Central Committee directive also noted that there was a risk associated with establishing permanent institutions dedicated to ethnic affairs, which could have the effect of reducing the sense of responsibility for ethnic work on the part of other parts of the government.<sup>29</sup>

However, by 1952, the central government was beginning to change its calculus. That year, the Government Administration Council (predecessor of the State Council) of the Central People’s Government passed a document outlining “organizational principles” for nationality affairs commissions (NACs) at every level of government. Reversing its previous logic, the central leadership now called for the establishment of NACs in all areas where minority nationalities resided. In areas with a small minority population, it was sufficient to establish an office within an existing bureau of local government or to designate a cadre to focus on ethnic work, but in areas with a substantial minority population, local governments would have to establish separate bureaus dedicated to ethnic affairs.

The local stymying of ethnic policy described above likely motivated this reversal. Notably, although the local NAC “organizational principles” were passed in February 1952, they were only promulgated in August, in the wake of the revelation of missteps in ethnic work during land reform in Guangxi.<sup>30</sup> The following November, Guangxi’s NAC was reorganized and expanded to include a work team with 100 employees, which increased to 131 the following year.<sup>31</sup>

The 1952 “organizational principles” were part of a broader shift in the central leadership’s thinking about ethnic policy from an abstract political challenge to a concrete bureaucratic one. It was becoming clear that the only way to ensure that ethnic work was actually carried out was to assign it as the primary responsibility for particular offices. The “organizational principles”

charged local EAB offices and personnel with “coordinating the handling of all matters concerning minority nationalities at with bureaus at the same level of government” and “guiding ethnic work at lower levels of government.”<sup>32</sup> A few months later, in October 1952, the Central Committee further instructed the Party’s local organization departments to strengthen “ethnic affairs commission structures” at every level of government.<sup>33</sup> Revisions to one of the Party’s early documents summarizing its experience with minority nationalities reflected this new interest in bureaucratic solutions to shortcomings of ethnic work. The final version, approved by the Central Committee in October 1954, included a stipulation—not present in the original June 1953 draft—that Party bureaus and governments at every level should “set up a specialist or establish a specialized mechanism to carry out nationality-related undertakings and strengthen their leadership of work beneath them.”<sup>34</sup>

The growth of the EAB at the provincial and sub-provincial level remained slow and largely ad-hoc, despite directives from the central government. In Henan, a provincial NAC was not planned until the spring of 1953, after the discovery of widespread violations of ethnic policy during the South-Central Nationalities Tour in January, and the body was not formally established until 1954.<sup>35</sup> While Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Qinghai, Hunan, Guangdong, and Hebei had all established NACs by the end of 1952, other provinces took longer: Gansu did so in 1953, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, and Inner Mongolia together with Henan in 1954, Shandong and Shaanxi in 1955, and Anhui in 1957.<sup>36</sup>

Although the EAB enhanced the central leadership’s capacity to enforce and monitor ethnic policy at the local level—two countrywide inspections were carried out, in late 1952–53 and 1956<sup>37</sup>—it did not alter the basic tension inherent in ethnic work, which required local officials to compromise on socioeconomic reform, administrative efficiency, and therefore potentially career advancement for the sake of ethnic accommodation. At a national conference on ethnic work in July-August 1957, Liu Chun, then a vice director of the State Nationality Affairs Commission, detailed several problems that continued to hamper the *minwei* system, including understaffing, uncertainty over which areas of work EAB offices should lead or support other bureaus, a lack of regular convenings to exchange experience, and the “mistaken belief” of “some individual comrades” regarding what the EAB was authorized to do.<sup>38</sup>

## The Politicization of Ethnic Work

Once it was established as a regular responsibility of state organs, ethnic work became bound to some cadres' careers, which in turn depended not just on the satisfactory performance of that work, but also on its perpetuation and continued ideological legitimacy. The cadres that staffed and led the EAB had an incentive to justify the necessity and value of their domain of policy. This incentive was reinforced by the exceptional political precarity of ethnic work, which remained susceptible to charges that it was no longer necessary after liberation or even that it was at odds with the regime's revolutionary goals.

The radicalization of PRC politics during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s increased the pressure on the EAB's defenders to demonstrate their ideological bona fides and the value of what they did—in other words, to convert their work into a signal of political loyalty and compliance. Launched by Mao Zedong in the summer of 1957, the Anti-Rightist Campaign were an attempt to purge the political system of alleged “rightists” sabotaging the revolution. Although it began as a response to the surge of criticism both within and outside the CCP unleashed during the preceding year's Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Anti-Rightist Campaign soon spiraled into a countrywide witch hunt, as cadres at all levels of government came under pressure to “discover” and purge rightists within their ranks. The following year, the promulgation of the second five-year plan marked the onset of the “Great Leap Forward,” which, according to Mao's utopian vision, would bring about rapid industrialization through the mobilization of China's vast and still underutilized labor force.<sup>39</sup>

In the domain of ethnic policy, the drive to root out rightists and match the pace of the Great Leap Forward had dire consequences for minorities. Theorists and officials engaged in ethnic work reinterpreted “ethnic fusion” to justify rapid assimilation. Previously cast as the ultimate disappearance of differences between nationalities achievable only after the realization of communism, ethnic fusion was rearticulated as the aim of current ethnic work. In a certain sense, the call to accelerate this process—expressed in the new official formulation (*tifa*) “promoting ethnic fusion” (*cujin minzu ronghe*)—was theoretically coherent, since the whole premise of the Great Leap Forward was possibility of rapid industrialization and the development of communism. However, later reports synthesizing lessons about what went wrong during the

Great Leap Forward identify “promoting ethnic fusion” as a dangerously misguided goal: “The harm caused by ‘promoting ethnic fusion’ was very great. As soon as it was raised in 1958, it brought about neglect for nationalities’ special characteristics and the crippling of ethnic work.”<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, over the course of 1958, EAB officials flipped the old ethnic policy on its head. Developments in Guangxi are a case in point. The traditional clothing, customs, and festivals that the EAB had previously protected as nationalities’ “special characteristics” were prohibited and punished as backward and feudal.<sup>41</sup> Claims of the need to respect minority customs and deal practically with the unique characteristics of minorities and the underdeveloped regions they inhabited were condemned as erroneous “theories”—the “uniqueness theory,” “backwardness theory,” “conditionality theory,” among others—excuses for slowing down socialist transformation.<sup>42</sup>

The preceding two years were derided as the “saddle-shaped low tide period” during which passivity and complacency had left room for a “revival of old things” (*fu gu*) and excessive emphasis on differences rather than commonalities between ethnic groups.<sup>43</sup> In late September of 1958, delegates from EAB offices across the country descended on Sanjiang, a Dong nationality autonomous county in Guangxi, for a national conference on ethnic work. Sanjiang was heralded as a model of an especially backward minority region that had long suffered from low productivity but that had finally liberated itself of conservative and rightist thinking and endeavored to “catch up” to Han levels of development. Participants and reports on the conference helped disseminate and legitimize the practice of labeling allegedly conservative cadres as believers in rightist “theories” justifying caution when promoting the Great Leap Forward in minority regions.<sup>44</sup>

The fervor intensified over the following months. The 11th national-level United Front Work conference was held in Beijing. In his speech on ethnic and religious work, Wang Feng, then deputy director of the central Nationality Affairs Commission and first party secretary of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, declared that under the new paradigm of “socialist ethnic relations” (*shehui zhuyi de minzu guanxi*), the country’s nationalities were drawing nearer and nearer together, and thus “the commonalities between nationalities were becoming more and more numerous and the differences between them fewer and fewer, with the factors for ethnic fusion gradually



increasing. Ethnic fusion is a necessary trend of historical development, and with respect to this trend, the peoples of each nationality of our country should adopt an attitude of enthusiastic welcoming, and moreover should actively promote it."<sup>45</sup>

Political fear and insecurity within the EAB motivated this swing toward aggressive assimilationism in this period. Earlier scholarship has explained this shift in terms of the balance of power between gradualist and radical factions, with the latter ascendant in the late 1950s.<sup>46</sup> However, the most prominent invocations of ethnic fusion at the national level came from established authorities on ethnic affairs, like Wang Feng, whose experience working on ethnic affairs dated back to the 1930s and who was already a top EAB official prior to the Anti-Rightist Campaign.<sup>47</sup> The swing toward assimilationism therefore cannot be attributed simply to a change in leadership.

Rather, calls to promote ethnic fusion were an attempt to defend the enterprise of ethnic work from attacks emanating from the political left. Some participants at the United Front Work conference maintained that the whole enterprise of ethnic work was no longer necessary now that the Great Leap Forward was underway. It was against these charges that Wang reminded his colleagues of the country's progress toward ethnic fusion and, implicitly, of the necessity of continuing ethnic work to manage that process.

Later on during the conference, Wang again confronted comrades who were skeptical of ethnic work and qualified his prior to call promote ethnic fusion, stressing that ethnic fusion would still require a long time and that it could not be coerced, and insisting that—without questioning the positivity and necessity of ethnic fusion—it was not yet appropriate to incorporate the concept into education for the “minority nationality masses.”<sup>48</sup> The version of the speech that was ultimately published and circulated for officials to consult omitted this point about education and retained the call to promote ethnic fusion, but added a caveat that it was still be a long-term process.<sup>49</sup> Ethnic work remained necessary, if contested. Other EAB officials recognized that the “leftist errors” in thinking that infected the Party at that time were reflected in Wang's speech, but they also believed that this performance at the conference ultimately helped safeguard ethnic work and the Party's ethnic policy.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Beijing's ethnic policy has become a point of steady tension in the already strained relationship between the United States in China. PRC officials often claim that their American counterparts politicize the "national question" to tarnish China's image and justify anti-China policies. As we have seen, the politicization of ethnic policy historically has also been domestic problem for China. The stymying of ethnic policy at the local level in the early 1950s prompted the central leadership to institutionalize ethnic work in the form of the EAB, which gradually expanded down to the provincial and sub-provincial levels. The creation of a countrywide functional bureaucracy dedicated to ethnic work enhanced the center's ability to enforce and monitor ethnic policy. But the strategy of bureaucratization also had unintended consequences. Amid the radicalism and witch hunts of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, EAB officials were pressured to adopt increasingly assimilationist measures to demonstrate their loyalty and utility. Bureaucratization enabled the central leadership to coordinate and execute ethnic work across multiple levels of government, but it also left ethnic work vulnerable to politicization.

This analysis sheds lights on several features and dynamics of the institutions set up by the Chinese state to "manage ethnic affairs": the tension between ethnic policy and other regime goals; friction between different parts and levels of government; the discrepancy between central policy prescriptions and local implementation; and the potential for a rapid shift in policy toward aggressive assimilationism amid broader political radicalization. The survival and indeed expansion of the EAB since the onset of the reform era suggests that we should consider these elements when analyzing ethnic policy today.

Of course, there are important differences between the 1950s and Xi Jinping's "New Era," both in general and with respect to ethnic policy. The dramatic rise in state capacity, the proliferation of new surveillance technologies, the wider effort to construct a unified Chinese national identity through the selective embrace of traditional Chinese culture, and China's increasing connections with and influence over its neighbors and the broader international system have all affected the significance of the "national question" in China and the way the state attempts to address it. Moreover, Xi's personal involvement in articulating the new "main line" for ethnic work and

numerous published speeches and essays on ethnic policy not only contrasts with Mao's relatively scant commentary on the subject but also suggests a concerted effort by the central leadership to clarify the signals sent down to the EAB's local offices.

Nevertheless, the evolution of ethnic policy in the 1950s examined above offers several insights that analysts and policymakers should bear in mind when evaluating ethnic policy in China under Xi Jinping. First, the CCP's theory of the "national question" does not simply dictate an assimilationist ethnic policy and in fact warns of the political and security risks that such measures can create. Thus, it is possible that there are loyal Chinese Communists who oppose the current policies, even if they feel unable to resist or change them. Second, the bureaucratization of ethnic affairs in the form of the EAB has left ethnic policy prone to politicization, particularly in times of political distrust and witch-hunting. Third, it follows that not all cases of minority repression and abuse are necessarily the straightforward result of directives from Beijing. Finally, because the EAB operates throughout China and is linked to other parts of the state bureaucracy, the tensions associated with ethnic policy are not limited to the country's borderlands. The national question is a point of political sensitivity for cadres in every province, and the implementation of ethnic policy can be affected by wider developments in China's political system. Much as we have incorporated institutional dynamics into our understanding of the policy process when it comes to China's economy, foreign relations, and environmental protection, so too should we consider the bureaucratic factor when analyzing ethnic policy and the politics that affect its local implementation.

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## Notes

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