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China's Ethnic Reawakening

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I S S U E S

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SUMMARY Foreigners and the Chinese themselves typically picture China's population as a vast monolithic Han majority with a sprinkling of exotic minorities living along the country's borders. This understates China's tremendous cultural, geographic, and linguistic diversity—in particular the important cultural differences within the Han population. China is now seeing a resurgence of pride in local history and culture, most notably among southerners such as the Cantonese and Hakka who are now classified as Han. These differences may increase under economic pressures such as inflation, the growing gap between rich and poor areas, and the migration of millions of people from poorer provinces to those with jobs. Chinese society is also under pressure from the officially recognized minorities such as Uygurs and Tibetans. For centuries, China has held together a vast multicultural and multiethnic nation despite alternating periods of political centralization and fragmentation. But cultural and linguistic cleavages could worsen in a China weakened by internal strife, inflation, uneven growth, or a post-Deng struggle for succession.

Ethnicity in China

Officially, China is made up of 56 nationalities: one majority nationality, the Han, and 55 minority groups. The peoples identified as Han comprise 91 percent of the population from Beijing in the north to Canton in the south and include the Hakka, Fujianese, Cantonese, and other groups. These Han are thought to be united by a common history, culture, and written language; differences in language, dress, diet, and customs are regarded as minor and superficial. The rest of the population is divided into 55 official “minority” nationalities that are mostly concentrated along the borders, such as the Mongolians and Uygurs in the north and the Zhuang, Yi, and Bai in southern China, near southeast Asia. Other groups, such as the Hui and Manchus, are scattered throughout the nation, and there are minorities in every province, region, and county. An active state-sponsored program assists these official minority cultures and promotes their economic development (with mixed results).

The outcome, according to China’s preeminent sociologist, Fei Xiaotong, is a “unified multinational” state. But even this recognition of diversity understates the divisions within the Chinese population, especially the wide variety of culturally and ethnically diverse groups within the majority Han population. These groups have recently begun to rediscover and reassert their different cultures, languages, and history. Yet as the Chinese worry and debate over their own identity, policymakers in other nations still take the monolithic Han identity for granted.

History. The notion of a Han person (*Han ren*) dates back centuries and refers to descendants of the Han dynasty that flourished at about the same time as the Roman Empire. But the concept of Han nationality (*Han minzu*) is an entirely modern phenomenon that arose with the shift from the Chinese empire to the modern nation-state. Since the early part of this century, Chinese reformers had been concerned that the Chinese people lacked a sense of nationhood, unlike Westerners and even China’s other peoples such as Tibetans and Manchus. In the view of these reformers, Chinese unity stopped at the clan or community level rather than

extending to the nation as a whole. Sun Yat-Sen, leader of the republican movement that toppled the last imperial dynasty of China (the Qing) in 1911, popularized the idea that there were “Five Peoples of China”—the majority Han being one and the others being the Manchus, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Hui (a term that included all Muslims in China, now divided into Uygurs, Kazakhs, Hui, etc.). Sun was a Cantonese, born and educated in Hawaii, who feared arousing traditional northern suspicions of southern radical movements. He wanted both to unite the Han and to mobilize them and all other non-Manchu groups in China (including Mongols, Tibetans, and Muslims) into a modern multiethnic nationalist movement against the Manchu Qing state and foreign imperialists. The Han were seen as a unified group distinct from the “internal foreigners” within their borders—the Manchus, Tibetans, Mongols, and Hui—as well as the “external foreigners” on their frontiers, namely the Western and Japanese imperialists. The Communists later expanded the number of “peoples” from five to 56 but kept the idea of a unified Han group.

The Communists were, in fact, disposed to accommodate these internal minority groups for several reasons. The Communists’ 1934-35 Long March, a 6,000-mile trek across China from southwest to northwest to escape the threat of annihilation by Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang (KMT) forces, took the Communists through some of the most heavily populated minority areas. Harried on one side by the KMT and on the other by fierce “barbarian” tribesmen, the Communists were faced with a choice between extermination and promising special treatment to minorities—especially the Miao, Yi (Lolo), Tibetans, Mongols, and Hui—should the party ever win national power. The Communists even offered the possibility of true independence for minorities. Chairman Mao frequently referred to Article 14 of the 1931 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) constitution, which “recognizes the right of self-determination of the national minorities in China, their right to complete separation from China, and to the formation of an independent state for each minority.” This commitment was not kept after the founding of the

China has historically been divided along north/south lines

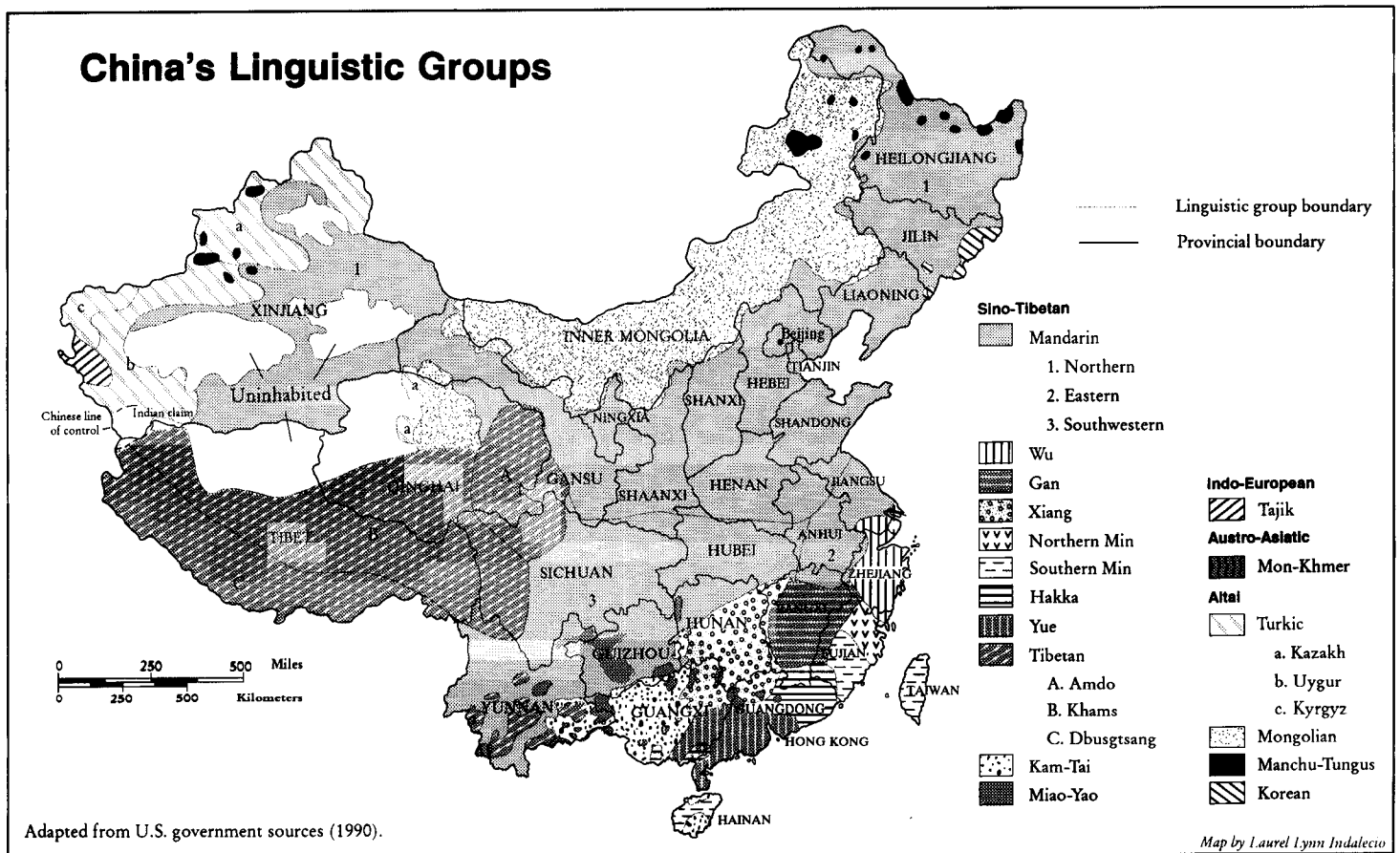
**In China, ethnic
and linguistic
boundaries do not
always match up**

People's Republic. Instead, the party stressed maintaining the unity of the new nation at all costs.

The recognition of minorities, however, also helped the Communists' long-term goal of forging a united Chinese nation by solidifying the recognition of the Han as a unified "majority." Emphasizing the difference between Han and minorities helped to de-emphasize the differences within the Han community. The Communists incorporated the idea of Han unity into a Marxist ideology of progress with the Han in the forefront of development and civilization, the vanguard of the people's revolution. The more "backward" or "primitive" the minorities were, the more "advanced" and "civilized" the so-called Han seemed and the greater the need for a unified national identity. Cultural diversity within the Han has not been admitted because of a deep (and well-founded) fear of the country breaking up into feuding warlord-run kingdoms as happened in the 1910s and 1920s. China has historically been divided along north/south lines, into "Five Kingdoms,"

"Warring States," or local satrapies, as often as it has been united. Indeed, China as it currently exists, including large pieces of territory occupied by Mongols, Turkic peoples, Tibetans, etc., is three times larger than China was under the last "Chinese" dynasty, the Ming, which fell in 1644. Ironically, geographic "China" as defined by the People's Republic was actually established by foreign conquest dynasties, first by the Mongols and finally by the Manchus.

A strong, centralizing Chinese government (whether of foreign or internal origin) has often tried to impose ritualistic, linguistic, and political uniformity throughout its borders. The modern state has tried to unite its various peoples with transportation and communications networks and an extensive civil service. In recent years these efforts have continued through the controlled infusion of capitalistic investment and market manipulation. Yet even in the modern era, these integrative mechanisms have not produced cultural uniformity.



**Cantonese and
Mandarin are as
different as French
and Italian**

Han diversity. Although presented as a unified culture—an idea also accepted by many Western researchers—Han peoples differ in many ways, most obviously in their languages. The supposedly homogenous Han speak eight mutually unintelligible languages (Mandarin, Wu, Yue, Xiang, Hakka, Gan, Southern Min, and Northern Min). Even these subgroups show marked linguistic and cultural diversity; in the Yue language family, for example, Cantonese speakers are barely intelligible to Taishan speakers, and the Southern Min dialects of Quanzhou, Changzhou, and Xiamen are equally difficult to communicate across. Chinese linguist Y. R. Chao has shown that the mutual unintelligibility of, say, Cantonese and Mandarin is as great as that of Dutch and English or French and Italian. Mandarin was imposed as the national language early in the 20th century and has become the lingua franca, but like Swahili in Africa it must often be learned in school and is rarely used in everyday life in many areas.

Cultural perceptions among the Han often involve broad stereotypical contrasts between north and south. Northerners tend to be thought of as larger, broader-faced, and lighter-skinned, while southerners are depicted as smaller and darker. Cultural practices involving birth, marriage, and burial differ widely; Fujianese, for example, are known for vibrant folk religious practices, while Cantonese have a strong lineage tradition, both of which are far less prevalent in the north. One finds radically different eating habits from north to south, with northerners consuming noodles from wheat and other grains, open to consuming lamb and beef, and preferring spicy foods, while the southern diet is based upon rice, eschews such meats in favor of seafood, and along the coast is milder.

Minority Politics

China's policy toward minorities involves official recognition, limited autonomy, and unofficial efforts at control. The official minorities hold an importance for China's long-term development that is disproportionate to their population. Although totaling only 8.04 percent of the population, they are concentrated in resource-rich areas spanning

nearly 60 percent of the country's landmass and exceed 90 percent of the population in counties and villages along many border areas of Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Yunnan.

Identifying minorities. Shortly after taking power, Communist leaders sent teams of researchers, social scientists, and party cadres to the border regions to "identify" groups as official nationalities. Only 41 of the more than 400 groups that applied were recognized, and that number had reached only 56 by 1982. Most of the nearly 350 other groups were identified as Han or lumped together with other minorities with whom they shared some features. Some are still applying for recognition, and the 1990 census listed almost 750,000 people as still "unidentified" and awaiting recognition—meaning they were regarded as ethnically different but did not fit into any of the recognized categories.

In recognition of the minorities' official status as well as their strategic importance, various levels of nominally autonomous administration were created—five regions, 31 prefectures, 96 counties (or, in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, banners), and countless villages. Such "autonomous" areas do not have true political control although they may have increased local control over the administration of resources, taxes, birth planning, education, legal jurisdiction, and religious expression. These areas have minority government leaders, but the real source of power is still the Han-dominated Communist Party—and as a result, they may actually come under closer scrutiny than other provinces with large minority populations such as Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan.

While autonomy seems not to be all the word might imply, it is still apparently a desirable attainment for minorities in China. Between the 1982 and 1990 censuses, 18 new autonomous counties were established, three of them in Liaoning Province for the Manchus, who previously had no autonomous administrative districts. Although the government is clearly trying to limit the recognition of new nationalities, there seems to be an avalanche of new autonomous administrative districts. Besides the 18 new counties and many villages whose total

numbers have never been published, at least eight more new autonomous counties are to be set up. Five will go to the Tujia, a group widely dispersed throughout the southwest that doubled in population from 2.8 to 5.8 million from 1982 to 1990.

The rush for reclassification. The increase in the number of groups seeking minority status reflects what may be described as an explosion of ethnicity in contemporary China. Indeed, it has now become popular, especially in Beijing, for people to “come out” as Manchus or other ethnic groups, admitting they were not Han all along. While the Han population grew a total of 10 percent between 1982 and 1990, the minority population grew 35 percent overall—from 67 million to 91 million. The Manchus, a group long thought to have been assimilated into the Han majority, added three autonomous districts and increased their population by 128 percent from 4.3 to 9.8 million, while the population of the Gelao people in Guizhou shot up an incredible 714 percent in just eight years. Clearly these rates reflect more than a high birthrate; they also indicate “category-shifting” as people redefine their nationality from Han to minority or from one minority to another. (In interethnic marriages, parents can decide the nationality of their children, and the children themselves can choose their nationality at age 18.) One scholar predicts that if the minority populations’ growth rate continues, they will total 100 million in the year 2,000 and 864 million in 2080. China has recently begun to limit births among minorities, especially in urban areas, but it is doubtful that authorities will be able to limit the avalanche of applications for redefinition and the hundreds of groups applying for recognition as minorities.

Why has it become popular to be “officially” ethnic in 1990s China? One explanation may be that in 1982 there were still lingering doubts about the government’s true intent in registering the nationalities during the census. The Cultural Revolution, a ten-year period during which any kind of difference, ethnic, religious, cultural, or political, was ruthlessly suppressed, had ended only a few years before. By the mid-1980s, it had become clear

that those groups identified as official minorities were beginning to receive real benefits from the implementation of several affirmative action programs. The most significant privileges included permission to have more children (except in urban areas, minorities are generally not bound by the one-child policy), pay fewer taxes, obtain better (albeit Chinese) education for their children, have greater access to public office, speak and learn their native languages, worship and practice their religion (often including practices such as shamanism that are still banned among the Han), and express their cultural differences through the arts and popular culture.

Indeed, one might even say it has become popular to be “ethnic” in today’s China. Mongolian hot pot, Muslim noodle, and Korean barbecue restaurants proliferate in every city, while minority clothing, artistic motifs, and cultural styles adorn Chinese bodies and private homes. In Beijing, one of the most popular new restaurants is the Thai Family Village (*Dai Jia Cun*), which offers a cultural experience of the Thai minority (known in China as the Dai), complete with beautiful waitresses in revealing Dai-style sarongs and short tops, sensually singing and dancing, while exotic foods such as snake’s blood are enjoyed by the young Han nouveau riche. Surprisingly, the second-most popular novel in China today is “The History of the Soul” (*Xin ling shi*), which concerns personal and religious conflicts in a remote Muslim region in northwest China, written by Zhang Chengzhi, a Hui Muslim from Ningxia. This rise of “ethnic chic” is in dramatic contrast to the anti-ethnic homogenizing policies of the late 1950s anti-Rightist period, the Cultural Revolution, and even the late-1980s “spiritual pollution” campaigns.

International minority politics. Foreign policy considerations have also encouraged changes in China’s treatment of minority groups. China has one of the world’s largest Muslim populations—nearly 20 million, more than the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Libya, or Syria—and has increasing contacts with trade partners in the Middle East and new Muslim nations created on its borders. China

People are starting to “come out” as members of ethnic groups

provides the Middle East and Central Asia with cheap labor, consumer goods, weaponry—and increasing numbers of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. These relations will be jeopardized if Muslim, especially, Uygur, discontent continues over such issues as limitations on mosque building, restrictions on childbearing, uncontrolled mineral and energy development, and continued nuclear testing in the Xinjiang region. Foreign policy considerations also argue for better treatment of Korean minorities, since South Korean investment, tourism, and natural resources have given China's Koreans in Liaoning and Manchuria a booming economy and the best educational level of all nationalities (including the Han). Another factor has been international tourism to minority areas, including the "Silk Road" tourism to Xinjiang and marketing of package tours to the "colorful" minority regions of Yunnan and Guizhou for Japanese, Taiwanese, and Southeast Asian Chinese tour groups. The most striking change in China's policy toward a single minority as a result of international relations has been the initiation, just after the improvement in Sino-Israeli relations in 1992, of discussions about granting official nationality status to the Chinese Jews (*Youtai ren*), once thought to have disappeared entirely.

But the creation of several new nations on China's Central Asian frontier with ethnic populations on both sides of the border has also made ethnic separatism a major concern. The newly independent status of the Central Asian states has allowed separatist groups in Xinjiang to locate some sources of support, leading to over 30 reported bombing incidents in the Xinjiang Region in 1994, claimed by groups militating for an "Independent Turkistan." At the same time, freer travel across the Central Asian borders has made China's Muslims well aware of the ethnic and political conflicts in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, and also that many of them are better off economically than their fellow Muslims across the border. Beijing's challenge is to convince China's Muslims that they will benefit more from cooperation with their national government than from resistance. In the south, a dramatic increase in cross-border relations between Chinese minority groups and Myanmar (Burma), Cambo-

dia, and Thailand has led to a rising problem of drug smuggling. Beijing also wants to help settle disputes in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar because of the danger of ethnic wars spilling over the border into China. In Tibet, frequent reports of ongoing resistance and many arrests continue to filter into the media despite the best efforts of Beijing spin control.

Han Divisions

Not only have the "official" minorities in China begun to assert their identities more strongly, pressing the government for more recognition, autonomy, and special privileges, but different groups within the so-called Han majority have begun to rediscover, reinvent, and reassert their ethnic differences.

Rise of the South. With the dramatic economic explosion in South China, southerners and others have begun to assert cultural and political differences. Cantonese rock music, videos, movies, and television programs, all heavily influenced by Hong Kong, are now popular throughout China. Whereas comedians used to make fun of southern ways and accents, southerners now scorn northerners for their lack of sophistication and business acumen. And, as any Mandarin-speaking Beijing resident will tell you, bargaining for vegetables or cellular telephones in Guangzhou or Shanghai markets is becoming more difficult for them due to growing pride in the local languages—and nonnative speakers always pay a higher price. Rising self-awareness among the Cantonese is paralleled by the reassertion of identity among the Hakka, the southern Fujianese Min, the Swatow, and a host of other generally ignored peoples now empowered by economic success and embittered by age-old restraints from the north.

Tang, Chu, and Song people. Interestingly, most of these southern groups traditionally regarded themselves not as Han but as Tang people, descendants of the great Tang dynasty (618–907 A.D.) and its southern bases. Most Chinatowns in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia are inhabited by descendants of Chinese émigrés from the mainly Tang areas of southern China and built around

China's relations with Central Asia encourage better treatment of its minorities but raise fears of separatism

“Tang Person Streets” (*tang ren jie*). The 1990s may see the resurgence of Tang nationalism in southern China in opposition to northern Han nationalism.

There is also a newfound interest in the ancient southern Chu kingdom as key to modern southern success. Some southern scholars have departed from the traditional Chinese view of history and begun to argue that by the 6th century B.C., the bronze culture of the Chu spread north and influenced the development of Chinese civilization, rather than this culture originating in the north and spreading southward. Many southerners now see Chu as essential to Chinese culture, to be distinguished from the less important northern dynasties—with implications for the nation’s economic and geopolitical future. Museums to the glory of Chu have been established throughout southern China. There is also a growing belief that northerners and southerners had separate racial origins based on different histories and contrasting physiogenetic types, that are influenced by highly speculative 19th century notions of race and Social Darwinism.

There has also been an outpouring of interest in Hakka origins, language, and culture on Taiwan which may be spreading to the mainland. The Hakka or “guest people” are thought to have moved southward in successive migrations from northern China as early as the Eastern Jin (317–420 A.D.) or the late Song dynasty (960–1279 A.D.) according to many Hakka (who claim to be Song people as well as Tang people). The Hakka have the same language and many of the same cultural practices as the She minority, but never sought minority status themselves—perhaps because of a desire to overcome their long-term stigmatization by Cantonese and other southerners as “uncivilized barbarians.” This low status may stem from the unique Hakka language (which is unintelligible to other southerners), the isolated and walled Hakka living compounds, or the refusal of Hakka women during the imperial period to bind their feet. Nevertheless, the popular press in China is beginning to more frequently note the widely perceived but difficult-to-establish rumors of the Hakka origins of important political figures (even Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong, Sun Yat-sen, former party general secretary Hu

Yaobang, and former president Ye Jianning). People often praise Zhou Enlai by stressing his Jiangnan linkages, and even Chiang Kai-shek is lauded as a southerner who knew how to get money out of the United States.

Fragmenting China

China’s very economic vitality has the potential to fuel ethnic and linguistic division, rather than further integrating the country as most would suppose. As southern and coastal areas get richer, much of central, northern, and northwestern China is unlikely to keep up, increasing competition and contributing to age-old resentments across ethnic, linguistic, and cultural lines. Southern ethnic economic ties link wealthy Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Fujianese (also the majority people in Taiwan) more closely to their relatives abroad than to their political overlords in Beijing. Already provincial governments in Canton and elsewhere not only resist paying taxes to Beijing but also restrict the transshipment of goods coming from outside across provincial—often the same as cultural—lines. Travelers in China have seen an extraordinary expansion of toll roads, indicating greater interest in local control.

Dislocations from rapid economic growth may also fuel ethnic divisions. Huge migrations of “floating populations” estimated to total over 100 million nationally now move across China seeking employment in wealthier areas, often engendering stigmatized identities and stereotypical fears of the “outsiders” (*wai di ren*) within China. Crime, housing shortages, and lowered wages are now attributed most to these people from Anhui, Hunan, or Gansu who are taking jobs from locals, complaints similar to those in West Germany about the influx of Easterners after reunification. Reports that 70 percent of those convicted of crimes in Beijing were “outsiders” have fueled criticisms of China’s increasingly open migration policy. Efforts to crack down on undocumented workers and migrants have led to debates similar to that over California’s Proposition 187.

The result of all these changes is that China is becoming increasingly decentered. This is a fear-

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**Accommodating
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as China prepares
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Hong Kong**

some prospect for those holding the reins in Beijing, and perhaps was a factor in the decision to crack down on the June 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. At that time central authorities had begun to lose control of a country they feared could quickly unravel. That such fears have not eased is shown by a front-page editorial in the November 29, 1994 *People's Daily* urging party members to "fight against regionalism and divisions." Worker and peasant unrest reported throughout China cut across and may at times exacerbate cultural and ethnolinguistic differences between the haves and the have-nots, who in today's China are often and increasingly interacting along lines marked by multiethnic diversity.

The future. While ethnic separatism will never be a serious threat to a strong China, a China weakened by internal strife, inflation, uneven economic growth, or the struggle for succession after Deng's death could become further divided along cultural and linguistic lines. It was a southerner, born and educated abroad, who led the revolution that ended China's last dynasty; and when that empire fell, competing warlords—often supported by foreign powers—fought for local turf occupied by culturally distinct peoples. And, the Taiping Rebellion that nearly brought down the Qing dynasty also had its origins in the southern border region of Guangxi among so-called marginal Yao and Hakka peoples.

These events are being remembered as the generally well-hidden and overlooked "Others" within Chinese society begin to reassert their own identities in addition to the official nationalities. At the same time, China's leaders are moving away from the homogenizing policies that alienated minority and non-northern groups. Recent moves to allow and even encourage the expression of cultural diversity, while preserving political unity, indicate a growing awareness of the need to accommodate cultural diversity. This will be important to watch over the next two years as China prepares to incorporate Hong Kong, a city that operates on cultural and social assumptions very different from those of Beijing.

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