



CHINA AND ITS PERIPHERIES BEIJING, XINJIANG & HAN-UYGHUR SCHISM

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Integration of contested periphery and disgruntled people has been a challenge for many countries across the world. Surprisingly, in contrast to the development of newer and technologically more advanced means of communication, novel designs and devices are being persistently engaged in the banishment of existing others and fresh creation of otherness.

While accepting universality of asymmetric relations between core and periphery, the paper points out that sense of belonging and alienation among the peripheral people develop within the political atmosphere of a particular country characterized by historical experience, national ethos, social practices, political culture and economic rationale of its core people. The paper explores how ethnic propaganda, symbols of state powers and official

representation of Muslim minorities of Xinjiang and rationale behind economic development in minority regions contribute to alienation and peripheralization of the people of Xinjiang.

The core-periphery as well as the Han-minorities relations in China is guided by various forms of deterministic logic – geographical, historical, cultural and economic. All these concepts do not necessarily have Western origins, however many of the Chinese arguments related to backwardness of ethnic minorities are difficult to distinguish from the Western theories and concepts.

Following are some concepts which represent incorporation of determinism in the development of Chinese party-state's ideological position regarding national question: core and periphery is a pair of opposites; periphery is organically related to the core; periphery as underdeveloped entity is opposed to the developed centre; dependency of periphery on the centre; and Exchanges between the two are always unequal (Michael Rowlands 1987).

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The uncritical adoption of traditional thinking about the surrounding people of the Chinese empire and the Western habit of subjective categorization of ethnic others as inferior, incomprehensible and undesirable is responsible for limited innovations in the minority thinking in contemporary China. This essay argues that ethnic propaganda is one of the most ineffective measures in the ethnic works (*minzu gongzuo*) in China.

From economic perspective, Mao Zedong viewed minority dominated peripheral lands as resource rich part of the country, whereas he identified the Han areas as huge concentration of population. However, he did not apply the concept of dependency between the two entities. Rather, he admitted that it was imperative to foster good relations between the Han people and the minority nationalities. He emphasized that the key to this question was to overcome Han chauvinism (Mao 1977: 110-111).

Though this betrays the usual depiction of impoverished periphery, invention of progressive revolutionary tradition among the Han as opposed to primitive, feudal and backward minorities in the peripheries helped to legitimize age old narrative of Han dominated civilized core and culturally impoverished peripheries. Here he used the logic of dependency by suggesting that the minority leaders with mass support would require active assistance of the Han dominated Communist Party of China (CPC) for their political, economic and cultural emancipation (Mao 1975: 256). He also

realized that the presence of advanced revolutionary Han population in the minority dominated areas had immense strategic implications as well.

In 1952, Mao Zedong made an assessment of Tibetan situation in contrast to that of Xinjiang. He identified that winning over the people in Tibet was the only option left to the communist authority. In Xinjiang, the party had other means to consolidate its position, because several hundred thousand Han people already lived there before the communist arrival (Mao 1975: 73-74). However, there is no doubt that because of some wrong policies, CPC failed to utilize this advantageous position in winning over minorities of Xinjiang. The persistent propagandist sloganeering and orchestration from the centre is equally responsible in creating *fangan* (aversion) in the minds of minorities in Xinjiang.

As CPC propagated the concept of building a new China (*xin Zhongguo*) after the revolution, in the early days of the communist arrival to Xinjiang, the party leaders promised to build New Xinjiang (*xin Xinjiang*). This is associated with the famous communist slogan 'the new China would not have come into existence without the Chinese Communist Party' (*mei you gongchandang jiu mei you xin Zhongguo*).

Following the same logic, it was inferred that emancipation of all ethnic groups would not have realized and new Xinjiang would not have built without the Chinese communists (Zhu 1991: 25). Today there are many Han people in China including the most patriotic persons who are critical about this kind of syllogism (Youguo zhi min 2008). Therefore, one can comprehend Uyghur reaction to this kind of assertion by the party-state.

At the height of radical politics in the Mao era, ethnic category was completely obliterated and extreme form of class struggle was unleashed, but inter-ethnic contradictions in Xinjiang was still not as sharp as it is now. For instance, the story of

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a Uyghur peasant who travelled all the way to Beijing on a donkey to express his gratitude to Mao Zedong. Undoubtedly, this is a propaganda story, but it is possibly true that that generation of local minorities had some good impression (*haogan*) about the Han people or at least they had some expectations from the collective leadership at the central and regional level (Wang 2007: 55-56). The depiction of the Uyghur peasant helped to legitimize subordination of the community, but unlike many contemporary propaganda, the story did not inculcate any adverse feelings among the majority population towards Uyghurs and Tibetans.

One of the purposes of the state propaganda is to manufacture consent and consensus among various sections to government policies and measures. From 1950s to early 1980s, the ethnic minorities were used by the PRC as signifiers of various ideological concepts such as prosperity under socialist state, need for progress and education, security, stability and national unity. The regular theme of the ethnic propaganda posters during this period was to create childlike, feminine, happy and playful image of the minorities (Li 2000). The grand objective of social transformation and political indoctrination has been replaced by public opinion building in the propaganda work in 1990s. Contemporary propaganda theme addresses current social and political issues and aims to gain public support for party's policies (Brady 2012: 161).

As the revolutionary romanticism and naivety began to fade away from the public memory in the reform period, more realistic assessment of actual situation of the minority areas like Tibet and Xinjiang began to appear in the official discourse. The major thrust of the ethnic policies under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin were: requirement of minority mobilization and support for the reform and open door policies; economic development of the minority communities and their regions; recognition of the importance of a theory for long-term and

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complex ethnic work; theory of common prosperity of all ethnic groups; fostering ethnic minority cadres; greater emphasis on the importance of national and religious issues; strengthening sentiments of soul-to-soul bonding, same breath and common fate (*xin lian xin, tong huxi and gong mingyun*) among all ethnic groups; reassertion of inalienability (*bu ke fenge*) from the mother land; pushing forward the idea of "three no-separations" (*san ge libukai*); patriotic education; and restoration of Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) in case of Xinjiang (Xu 2002: 7-6).

However, the policy of common prosperity of all ethnic groups remained a mere propaganda for almost two decades because of excess reliance on the development in the eastern provinces along the coast which were designated as more efficient and growth friendly in economic sense. Some Chinese authors highlight the paradox of development in China and trace its origin in the developed nations and regions of the world. It is pointed out that there has been a tendency of viewing cultural backwardness as a determinant factor of economic sluggishness of ethnic minorities.

Language, customs and religion of the minorities are increasingly being considered as barrier for economic development. Advocates of this economic modernization have molded public opinion in such a way that many people in China today believe that

various markers of ethnic identity like language and religion would die away in the process of urbanization, consumerism, literacy and communication. This new ethno-religious theory has created a situation where the victims can be easily blamed (*zebei shouhaizhe*) for their ethnic attributes (Zhang 2006: 4-7).

A stereotype image of Islam as a force against economic development and militancy has been created through official as well as academic discourse in the recent years (Shen 1995: 59). Speedy decline of inter-ethnic relations in the last few decades has surprised many people in China (Li Xiaoxia 2011:2-3). The government policies and the attitude of the Han people in Xinjiang appear to be the main reasons behind deterioration of Han-Uyghur relations in China. The local Han population always treats Uyghurs from the ruler's perspective. According to Mukhtar, Wang Lixiong's Uyghur companion during his stay in Xinjiang, the official propaganda since the Baren incident in the early 1990s has immensely contributed in making an atmosphere of mistrust and hatred (Wang 2007: 56, 281 & 379).

In this political atmosphere, symbols of Chinese state power cannot inspire sense of pride among the Muslim minorities of Xinjiang, rather alienates them. One of the latest additions of symbols of state power in Xinjiang is the 'National Unity Tripod' (*minzu tuanjie baoding*). Tripod is a traditional Chinese ceremonial vessel which symbolizes state power, prosperity and stability. This tripod was gifted to the

region by the central government on the "50th birthday" of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 2005. It carries inscription of President Hu Jintao, and was unveiled by Wang Lequan, the then head of Xinjiang regional party leader in the presence of senior CPC leader Luo Gan, Vice-Premier Hui Liangyu and Uyghur Chairman of the region. During the ceremony the Han party leaders talked highly of friendship of all ethnic minorities and unity in the multinational family (Xinhuanet 2005).

The local Uyghur perceive the role of Xinjiang as provider of raw materials for the economic prosperity of China and the Han people. They believe that they should have greater stake over the resources of Xinjiang, but most of profit from energy and mineral exploitation in the region enriches the eastern provinces and helps to sustain China's growth engine. Xinjiang is not a poor region but poverty in Xinjiang is concentrated mainly in the Uyghur dominated prefectures (Chaudhuri 2010: 21).

In the political atmosphere where state justifies marginalization of ethnic minorities, continuous sloganeering of unification of mother land and ethnic unity generates only adverse public opinion and dissent among the ethnic subjects. Many Uyghur believe that it is the Han people who are dependent on the resources of Xinjiang and they cannot afford separation from the minorities, hence there should be 'one no-separation' theory.

Propagandist attitude of the party state has resemblance with the behavior of the protagonist in Lu Xun's story 'The New-Year Sacrifice'. Xianglin's wife, the protagonist, when returns for the second time to work at the Lu family after the death of her child, she painfully narrated and repeated how her baby was killed by a wolf. The first couple of times people sympathized with her plight however gradually they started losing interest in her tragic fate and began ridiculing and mocking her. Likewise, in the age of war

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against the Uyghur separatism, the unification rhetoric of the Chinese State has become ineffective and futile.

It was only in the last phase of Jiang Zemin's rule that the central government began to show concerns about the economically backward western provinces and the Tenth FYP (2001-05) was the first that focused on large scale economic activities in the minority areas. The fourth generation leadership under Hu Jintao introduced some idealistic programs like social construction, development of harmonious society and scientific development, which possibly helped, at least in the policy level to address differences of tradition, language, culture, customs and identity of various ethnic minorities and social groups (Hao 2007: 4-5). However, there was hardly any difference in the governance at the local level in Xinjiang and inter-ethnic relations did not improve because of economic deprivation and indiscriminate suppression of Uyghurs in the name war against terrorism, which was manifested in the 2009 July riots in Urumqi. The Urumqi riots revealed not only inter-ethnic cleavage between the Han and the Uyghur, but also exposed weak social foundation, poor social management and inefficiency of the regional authority. But within a few weeks of the riots, the government engaged once again in the craft of propaganda to create false notion of amicable inter-ethnic relations and argued in favour of existing minority policies in China.

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