The Soviet Model’s Influence And the Current Debate On Ethnic Relations
By Ma Rong

Periodic eruptions of ethnic tensions in certain regions of China, particularly as they are portrayed in the international media, often obscure the complex history of identity and the idea of the nation-state in modern China. Peking University Professor of Sociology Ma Rong unravels that history and provides a possible path to accommodation with the country’s many minority communities.

THE EVENTS OF THE LAST two years in Tibet and Xinjiang brought renewed international attention to ethnic relations in China. The March 2008 Tibet riots and the July 2009 riots in Xinjiang revealed serious ethnic tensions in minority regions that had been ignored by the mainstream in China for decades.

In order to understand the situation in Tibet, Xinjiang and other minority areas, and to find the roots of ethnic tension in present policies regarding minorities, a historical framework of the “nation-building” process in modern China should be reviewed.

For the period of the People’s Republic, that process should be studied in connection with the ideological background of the “nation” as it is understood in the form of Marxism and Leninism that has had a major influence on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since it was founded in 1921. These principles have helped to define policy-making since 1949, when the revolution was victorious. A review of the nation-building process and an in-depth macro-level analysis of minority-majority relationships in modern China can provide the key to understanding the present conflicts and predicting the direction of a possible solution in the future.
1. WESTERN ORIGINS OF THE ‘NATION’

The term minzu (nation) only appeared in China around the end of the 19th century when European thought and political influences entered the Qing Dynasty by force. As a result of the contact with the West, China’s self-image was transformed from the traditional framework of tianxia (“the land under the sky,” meaning China was the civilized center of the world) to a new international order in which European nations were the dominant powers. The Chinese began considering how to transform China from a “central empire” (zhongguo) into a nation-state.

In the CCP’s terminology, the concept of minzu was simply adapted from Russian communist theories developed by Joseph Stalin. In forming the USSR, Kazak, Ukraine, Byelorussia and other constituent republics were defined as “nationalities” that supposedly had the right to become independent. The CCP accepted Stalin’s theory of nationalities and practiced it in China. Therefore, whether it is the “nation” theory as practiced in Western Europe or the “nationality” theory from Russia, the term minzu was an imported idea in China.

In 17th and 18th century Western Europe, nationalism as a social movement aimed to reorganize political entities and establish nation-states with a new political orientation to overthrow the feudal hierarchy. “Historical territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology; these are the components of the standard, Western model of the nation.”

The basic principle of nationalism was “one nation, one state.” After nation-states were established with new political and legal systems, industrialization developed fast. Then the armies of these capitalist nations marched into Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. Traditional regimes in these regions had to face aggressive invasions of these well-organized new nations.

There were several possibilities for traditional regimes that found themselves under assault from modern Europe. One was losing control of marginal regions where native groups searched for political independence — as was the case with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

An alternative was to reorganize the regime and turn it into a form of nation-state by reducing group identity among minorities and creating a new national identity. Tsarist Russia and the Chinese Qing Dynasty tried this solution before they were overthrown by revolutions.

A second alternative was to establish a multinational federation that recognized all groups as nationalities. The Soviet Union was an example of this model. The risk was that such nationalities would always have the potential to become independent nations. The experiences of the USSR and Yugoslavia proved that this risk was all too real.

The United States represents another model of nation-building through immigration. As a colony and an independent country, Europeans formed the majority of its population with other immigrants, either forced, such as slaves, or voluntary in the case of Hispanics and Asians, forming various minorities, along with Native Americans. National identity in the US was gradually established among virtually all citizens after long struggles for independence, a civil war, the Indian wars and the civil rights movement. The English term “ethnicity” was an American creation to refer to cultural and racial minorities within a united nation.

2. THE RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE

When the Russian Empire felt the challenges of rising European nationalism, the Tsars tried to strengthen the identity of their subjects towards the “empire-nation.” One such attempt was the administrative adjustment of establishing provinces in many minority regions with limited autonomy.

Traditional Marxist theory of class struggle and proletarian revolution says revolutions should occur in countries where capitalism has developed to a high level. Russia in the early 20th century was thus not ready for proletarian revolution since its working class was too weak to seize power.

To promote a revolution in Russia despite a weak working class, the Bolsheviks made the strategic move of encouraging minorities to rebel and pronouncing them “nationalities” with the right to independence. When the Russian Front collapsed during World War I, many nationalist parties be-
came active in the revolution. Facing this reality, the Bolsheviks continually recognized more groups as nationalities having the right to secede.

In forming the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, nationalities were recognized, and various republics and autonomous regions were established within the union. The Soviet model was different from other federations such as Switzerland and Germany where states largely followed historical boundaries and traditional regional names. The USSR, however, was established as a “multi-national federation,” not a nation-state. Under the direct domination of the Communist Party, controlled by a massive army and watched carefully by the secret service, or KGB, the republics were simply cogs in the big machine of a planned economy. There was no chance to actually seize real independence.

Meanwhile, the modern sense of the nation and nationalism was strengthened under Stalin’s model of nationality. It can be considered a politicization of ethnicity. “Rather than a melting pot, the Soviet Union became the incubator of new nations.”

After Sun’s death in 1924, Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist (KMT) government followed this framework for a Chinese nation that denied the Mongols, Manchu, Tibetans, Uighurs and other groups the status of nations.

In general, the efforts of the KMT to transform the old Chinese empire into a nation-state made significant progress. By the 1940s, after World War II, except for the area of the present Tibet Autonomous Region, which was under the control of the Dalai Lama, and the area in northern Shaanxi Province, which was under the control of the CCP, the rest of China was under the direct administration of the Republic.

4. IDEOLOGY OF THE ‘NATION’ AND THE CCP
From its founding in 1921, the CCP adopted almost all the theories and strategies of the Bolsheviks and the Soviet Union. The CCP claimed that all minority groups in China were “nationalities” and had the right to become independent. After winning the civil war and founding the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the PRC established policies towards minority groups that were similar to those in the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, the government launched a campaign that recognized 56 “nationalities” based on Stalin’s criteria (common territory, language, economic mode and culture). A variety of “autonomous areas” were established, which together make up 64 percent of Chinese territory. The only difference between the Soviet model and the PRC model is that the constitution of the PRC does not offer the formal right of political separation to its nationalities.

As the USSR did in its “national regions,” the PRC government also instituted many policies that favor minorities in terms of family planning programs, university admissions, administrative positions in autonomous areas and dual school systems for local minorities. In a policy announced in 1984, the Chinese courts were also

An Ethnic Uighur girl watches at a window following two days of deadly riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang Province, in July 2009. The city was under martial law. Photo: Diego Azubel/EPA
ordered to reduce charges and penalties handed out to minority suspects. This policy was called “two less and one loose,” meaning that minority criminals should be arrested and executed less than Han Chinese, and that the final sentences of minority criminals should be generally lighter than the Han. These policies have strengthened and politicized group identities while at the same time creating tensions, given that the Han majority often feels discriminated against.

This “nationality consciousness” can be seen in four aspects. First, minority groups often do not welcome immigrants from other groups into their autonomous areas. Second, they are strongly against any school arrangements that might weaken the use of their languages, although learning Mandarin is a necessary condition to finding jobs. Third, they hope to establish their own minority economies. Fourth, they would like to strengthen group consciousness in order to maintain their cultural identity. These four aspects are exactly the same as the four conditions that define a “nationality” in Stalin’s theory. It is clear that, even today, Stalin’s theory and the Soviet model dominate Chinese thinking on minority nationalities.

5. THE ROOTS OF ETHNIC CONFLICT TODAY

In summary, the systems and policies towards ethnic minorities in the PRC, just as in the former Soviet Union, have strengthened and politicized minority group identity. The CCP broke up the nation-building process started by the Qing Dynasty. Instead, the People’s Republic turned China into a “multi-nationality state,” similar to the national structure of the Soviet Union. Although the Chinese Constitution does not offer minority groups the right of secession, the basic ideology, theory, social system and policies are quite similar to those of the Soviet Union. The CCP’s systems and policies have turned these traditional minority groups into “nationalities” with a modern sense of nationalism. This is the theoretical root of nationalism among minority groups and the key to understanding and interpreting minority issues in today’s China.

Nonetheless, there are several factors that have had a positive impact on the stability of ethnic relations in China over the past six decades. First is the predominance of the Han majority — it accounted for 94 percent of the total population in 1953 and 91 percent in 2005. Second, the Han regions are more economically and socially advanced. Third, the central government has introduced many favorable policies towards minorities and provided huge financial subsidies to autonomous regions. Fourth, many members of minority groups have co-existed with the Han for centuries and have been assimilated to a high degree.

Other factors that used to play a positive role in keeping the country together, however, are now changing. First, the communist revolution brought many benefits to the poor, both majority and minority groups. But after six decades, the memories of land reform and other benefits have little impact on generations born in the 1980s and 1990s. The sympathy of older generations of Han towards minorities who also suffered under the KMT government made them inclined to support preferential policies for minorities. Now, young Han complain that they are discriminated against by these policies. Many Han cadres who were sent to work in minority regions in the 1950s were war
survivors with sincere communist beliefs. They were welcomed by minorities and served as a link between the government and minority people. Today, there are many critics of Chinese cadres, who say they are corrupt and bureaucratic. The gap between the generations is an important factor in understanding the sharp contrast in ethnic relations between the 1950s and the 2000s.

Second, communist ideology, as expressed by charismatic revolutionary leaders such as Mao Zedong, helped bind the worker-farmer classes together under the leadership of the CCP. As these leaders passed away, their ideological influence vanished.

Third, the transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy over the past three decades has radically altered the terrain. The privatization of the economy also has largely marginalized production in autonomous areas. While preferential admissions policies may help minority students to enter university with lower examination scores, after graduation they find it difficult to get jobs, mainly due to their lower overall average educational achievement, inferior Mandarin or their cultural differences. The effect of the preferential policies, which worked well under a planned economy when all jobs were government arranged, has been largely cancelled out by market mechanisms.

Furthermore, there are many gaps between theory and daily practice. If the minorities in their autonomous areas issue policies and regulations in favor of their own group, the Han majority often feel discriminated against. The “nationality” quota system for official appointments in the government also leads to a variety of contradictions that undermine legitimacy. On the one hand, it helps some minority candidates achieve positions they are not really qualified for, resulting in reduced administrative efficiency. On the other hand, although top government positions in autonomous areas are only open to “natives” of the minority group, the Han usually occupy the position of Party Secretary, which is where the real authority lies. While the minorities resent this lack of “real” autonomy, the central government considers this to be a basic guarantor of unification, which explains why the CCP has been very cautious about reforming this aspect of the political system.

6. SOLVING ETHNIC CONFLICTS

When a minority group has been officially recognized as a nationality by the central government, and when this group has its own “territory” in the form of a republic (the Soviet case) or autonomous region (China), the desire to become an independent nation through the “right of self-determination” emerges, supported by both nationalist theories in the West and the Marxist-Stalinist theory of nationality. The problem and danger of nationalist secession was actually created, at least in part, by the USSR and the PRC themselves in the process of nation-building.

Based on this observation, perhaps China’s approach to minorities should be reconsidered. The “culturization” strategy towards minority groups in the US and India might be a better alternative for China in the future.4

In the meantime, policies in favor of minorities should continue, but the target of these policies should be gradually switched from all members of minority groups to residents of poor areas and then to individual citizens who need assistance. Similarly, the administrative structure of autonomous areas should be maintained for a period of time, but the sense of it being national “territory” should be reduced gradually. The dual system of schools in autonomous areas should continue, while various kinds of bilingual education facilities should be offered to all members of minority groups. The situation of ethnic stratification in Chinese society should be systematically studied and the government should establish programs to help minority members who are disadvantaged in terms of language or other skills.

In general, the future of the nationality issue and ethnic relations in China largely depends on government direction. Of course, it will also be related to the level of economic development and to what is sure to be cautious political reform.

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