

United



and

Equal



—THE PROGRESS OF
CHINA'S MINORITY
NATIONALITIES

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**THE PROGRESS OF CHINA'S
MINORITY NATIONALITIES**

by Yin Ming

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中国少数民族在前进
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A Unitary Multi-National State

The People's Republic of China is a unitary multinational state. Since antiquity the ancestors of its various nationalities have laboured and lived on the motherland's vast and fertile soil, and jointly created China's long history and splendid culture.

Before liberation, under class and national oppression by the reactionary ruling class, the various nationalities were unequal in status. No matter which nationality's exploiting class gained power over China's central government, it invariably practised national oppression and brought suffering to the people of all nationalities, with the smallest ones suffering the deepest oppression. Some were decimated by armed force; some were compelled to leave their native places; some driven into desolate border regions and mountains.

In the hundred years or so before China's liberation, the people of all nationalities suffered together from imperialist aggression. Evil-doing imperialism invaded and occupied our territory, harmed and enslaved the people of various nationalities and sowed discord and splits among them, all in a vain attempt to subjugate China.

The people of all nationalities in China replied to the oppression and exploitation by internal and external

enemies, and to their splitting schemes, by strengthening their unity and waging resolute struggle. Over a long period they rose up together against the reactionary rule of feudal dynasties, opposed exploitation and extortion by the ruling classes of their own nationalities, and waged a common struggle against imperialist aggressors. Every large-scale revolutionary struggle against imperialism and feudalism in the century before liberation was a multi-national one. For instance, the famous Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement (1851-64) started in Kueiping County, Kwangsi Province, where several nationalities lived together. People of all these nationalities participated in it from the very beginning; the revolutionary movements in the other nationality areas in the southwest and northwest also gave it support and co-ordinated their own actions with it.

The history of the Chinese people's revolution since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party is the history of heroic struggles waged by the people of various nationalities under the Party's leadership. After the First Revolutionary Civil War in China (1924-27), many of the older revolutionary bases were set up in minority areas and the people of all nationalities made important contributions to the common cause of liberation. After protracted and dauntless struggles, in 1949 the people of China's many nationalities finally overthrew the three big mountains on their backs — imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism — and the revolution was crowned with success. Since then our unitary multinational state has been united into a fraternal co-operative family, opening a new chapter in the history of China's more than 5,000 years of civilization.

At present there are 55 nationalities in China. The Hans are the most numerous; the remaining 54 nationalities total about 40 million people. Due to their relatively smaller population they are called minority nationalities.

These in turn differ greatly in size. The largest is the Chuang, with about 10 million people. The Olunchun, numbering about 2,700, is one of the smaller ones. The Hoche nationality has just over 700.

Among the 54 minorities 10 have a population of over one million each: the Mongolian, Hui, Tibetan, Uighur, Miao, Yi, Chuang, Puyi, Korean and Manchu. All the others have less. Among them, 18 number over 100,000 each: the Tung, Yao, Pai, Tuchia, Kazakh, Hani, Tai, Li, Lisu, Wa, She, Kaoshan, Tunghsiang, Nahsi, Lahu, Shui, Chingpo and Lopa. Twenty-six nationalities each have a population of under 100,000, including 16 with 10,000 or more each: the Khalkhas, Tu, Tahur, Mulao, Chiang, Pulang, Sala, Maonan, Kelao, Sibbo, Achang, Tajik, Nu, Uzbek, Pumi and Monba. Ten have a population of under 10,000 each: the Russian, Owenke, Penglung, Paoan, Yuku, Ching, Tartar, Olunchun, Tulung and Hoche.

Before liberation the minority nationalities were severely oppressed and exploited by enemies at home and abroad, which led to a decline in their population. To say nothing of the past, in the 1930s the reactionary warlords perpetrated massacres of the Hui people in Kansu and the Miao and Yao peoples in Kwangsi; in the 1940s the reactionary Kuomintang government slaughtered Mongolians in the Ikh Chao League, Inner Mongolia, and suppressed the Uighur, Kazakh and other nationalities in Sinkiang. In all these cases the victims numbered thousands. When Japanese imperialism invaded China, it slaughtered the Hoche people in the Northeast, and

carried out inhuman bacteriological experiments on the Owenke, nearly extinguishing these nationalities. In Tibet, under barbarous serf-owner rule the population decreased by 60 per cent in the course of a century.

After liberation, national oppression was abolished; since then socialist revolution and socialist construction have been carried out, and health and medical services have developed. The downward trend in the population of the nationalities has been fundamentally reversed; they have become more numerous and prosperous. The Chuang people in Kwangsi have increased from over six million at the time of liberation to about 10 million at present; the Hoche, of whom there were only 300 or so at the time of liberation, have grown to 700 today.

The 40 million people of the national minorities make up only a small proportion of China's total population, but they are spread over 50 to 60 per cent of the country's total area.

The minorities live mainly in the country's western half; a comparatively small number live in the other parts of China, including islands off the southeastern coast. Particularly it should be noted that there is hardly any place along China's long border without its communities of minority nationalities. Among them are the Kaoshan in Taiwan Province in eastern China; the Li and Miao on Hainan Island in the south; in the northeast the Koreans along the Tumen River, the Hoche along the Wusuli River, the Owenke and Olunchun along the Heilungkiang River; the Mongolians in Inner Mongolia; the Kazakhs, Uighurs, Khalkhas and Tajiks in Sinkiang; the Tibetans, Monba and Lopa in Tibet; the Lisu, Tulung, Nu, Chingpo, Wa, Tai and Yi in Yunnan; and the Chuang and Ching in Kwangsi.

The historical migrations of the nationalities have given rise to the characteristic of their population distribution: mixed in the main; ethnic homogeneity — except for the Han regions — in relatively small areas. The map of ethnic distribution resembles a mosaic. All provinces and autonomous regions contain several nationalities. Seventy per cent of all counties and cities in China contain people of more than two nationalities. It is true, the Hans, the most numerous, are spread throughout most of China, and their areas of concentration are large. In varying numbers, they are generally found in all the minority communities as well. Most of the other nationalities also have their areas of concentration, different in size, some being spread over a vast area. For example, the Hui who are spread over 60 per cent of the counties and cities in China also have their concentrations in the Ningsia Hui Autonomous Region in northwestern China. The overlapping communities of large and small nationalities form an inseparable whole.

The areas inhabited by minority nationalities are vast and rich in resources. The land, beautiful and fertile, is suited to the development of agriculture and animal husbandry and abounds in minerals, forests and other industrial resources, with many characteristic local and special products. However, under the savage plunder of the reactionary ruling classes in the past, the people in these areas became poor and deprived, and their economy developed very slowly. After liberation all resources reverted to the people of the various nationalities, ensuring broad prospects for the development of their economies and playing an ever increasingly important role in the socialist construction of the motherland.

The languages of the minority nationalities are many and varied. More than 20 of them, used by 74 per cent of the entire minority-nationality population, belong to the Han-Tibetan family which, besides the Han language, includes three other branches: Chuang-Tung, Tibeto-Burman and Miao-Yao. The minorities speaking Han-Tibetan languages live mainly in south-central and southwestern China. About 15 nationalities, making up 21 per cent of the total minority population, use Altaic languages; they are found mainly in China's northwest and northeast. The Altaic family is divided into three branches: Turkic, Mongolian and Tungus-Manchu. Moreover, the Korean nationality speaks Korean. A few nationalities with small numbers living along the southwestern and northwestern border speak, respectively, South Asian or Indo-European languages. The Hui, Manchu and She people now use the Han language as their own.

Before liberation only 10 of the minority nationalities — including the Mongolian, Tibetan, Uighur, Korean and Kazakh — had their own written national languages. Many, oppressed by generations of feudal rulers, were never able to develop their own writing. Some kept records by knotting strings or carving wood. The reactionary Kuomintang government practised a policy of compulsory assimilation of the nationalities, forcing them to use the Han language in speech and writing. They were deprived of the freedom to use their own spoken and written languages; those who did so in public were humiliated and punished.

After liberation a policy of equality among nationalities was put into effect. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China provides: "All the nationalities

have the freedom to use their own spoken and written languages.” In order to satisfy the demands of the masses of some nationalities, the state has helped them create written languages or reform existing ones. Publication in the nationality languages is now flourishing. A great many books, newspapers and periodicals have been published in Mongolian, Tibetan, Korean, Uighur, Kazakh and other languages. Works by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Chairman Mao as well as the documents of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the government have been translated and published in them. All autonomous regions and most autonomous prefectures have newspapers in the language used by the respective nationalities. The Central People’s Broadcasting Station has programmes in minority languages. The local radio stations in autonomous areas broadcast in the local languages. At some institutes of higher learning, and institutes for nationalities, numerous cadres are being trained to work in such languages.

Thanks to the equal status obtained by all nationalities, a new trend of learning the languages of other nationalities, by personal volition and for practical need, has developed among the masses. Han cadres who work in minority areas enthusiastically learn the local languages; minority people eagerly learn the written Han language for direct access to books published in it. All this is important in the promotion and strengthening of national unity, cultural exchange among China’s nationalities and their joint efforts to build up the socialist motherland.

Various religious beliefs, customs and habits are found among the minorities. These are related to the

original social and economic systems of these nationalities. The development of society brings with it constant changes with regard to religion, customs and habits.

Before liberation the exploiting classes of the minority nationalities used religion as a tool to oppress and enslave their labouring people; imperialism used it as a weapon for aggression. The people of some nationalities were forced to embrace a given religion. For example, the Tibetans and the Mongolians were forced to follow Lamaism and to send their sons to the temples to become lamas, condemning them to lifelong celibacy.

In the past the following religions were prevalent among the various nationalities: Islam among the Hui, Uighur and Kazakh; Lamaism among the Tibetan, Mongolian, Tu and Yuku, and Hinayana Buddhism among the Tai and Pulang. There were also Shamanists, Eastern Orthodox Christians and polytheists. Imperialism spread Protestantism and Catholicism among some nationalities as part of its cultural invasion.

After liberation the Party and the government fully applied the policy of freedom of religious belief. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China provides: "Citizens enjoy freedom to believe in religion and freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism." The people of the minority nationalities enjoy these fundamental rights of citizens just as the Han people do. Feudal privileges and oppression and exploitation in religion have been resolutely abolished.

The customs of various minority nationalities as regards marriage, funerals, festivals, dress, food and drink were developed over long periods of history and determined by their different social and economic conditions. After the foundation of socialist economy was laid, the

customs left over from the old society underwent corresponding changes. In the past the reactionary ruling class discriminated against these customs and made use of them to sow national discord. Since liberation, the Party and government have respected the customs of all the nationalities, which the latter have the freedom to preserve or reform. With regard to old customs that impede production, national development and social progress, the people of each nationality have constantly and voluntarily carried out reforms. With the development of the socialist revolution the people of all China's nationalities have greatly changed their customs.

In the old society the minority nationalities were subject to oppression and discrimination; in new China the equality of all nationalities has its full expression in their political status. The people of all nationalities are the masters of our country. They manage the affairs of the state jointly and on an equal footing.

There are cadres of minority nationalities occupying leading positions in the Party and the state. Among them are members of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party Central Committee, members or alternate members of the Central Committee, Party secretaries of provinces or autonomous regions, and vice-chairmen of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Deputies of minority nationalities have been elected to all the sessions of the National People's Congress, the highest organ of state power. All 54 minority nationalities had deputies attending the Fourth National People's Congress convened in 1975. The ratio of the number of deputies of minority nationalities to the total number of deputies exceeds their ratio in the

population as a whole. The same is true of the local people's congresses at all levels.

While ensuring that the people of all nationalities manage the affairs of the state together, various minority nationalities practise regional national autonomy in areas which they inhabit compactly, thus their people have the right to be their own masters and manage local affairs within their own nationality. Regional national autonomy ensures their equal status and takes account of their special characteristics. Their initiative in participating in the political life of the state and in building socialism is brought into full play and the unity and co-operation among the various nationalities are constantly enhanced.

Now the task of establishing national autonomous areas and autonomous organs has been basically accomplished throughout China. There are five autonomous regions, equal in status to a province; 29 autonomous prefectures, equal to prefectures of a province; and 69 autonomous counties. In autonomous areas the various nationalities enjoy the right of self-government. Equality of rights for minority nationalities scattered among or mixed with other nationalities is also fully safeguarded.

On the basis of exercising their right to be masters in their own house, the various minority nationalities have carried out democratic and socialist reforms, putting an end to oppression and exploitation. Nationalities still living in feudal or slave society or even retaining remnants of primitive communism have skipped the historical process that would otherwise take one or several centuries to accomplish and entered socialist society. The establishment of the socialist system greatly liberates

the productive forces and opens a broad path for socialist construction in the minority regions.

The minority regions in China's border areas have ended their history of complete lack of industry and backwardness in agriculture and animal husbandry. Now large iron and steel enterprises have been built on the vast grasslands, and oil-fields and coal-mines in the immense deserts; many modern machine-tool factories and textile mills dot the mountainous areas. Contingents of the working class of the minority nationalities are rapidly maturing. Those that lacked even handicraft workshops in the past now have their own first generation of industrial workers. Production in agriculture and animal husbandry has grown greatly. The backward production methods of some minority nationalities such as slash-and-burn agriculture or nomadic pasturing have gradually changed to more up-to-date ones.

The Tibet Autonomous Region, after the democratic reform of 1959 in which the reactionary and barbarous system of feudal serfdom was abolished, went on to the socialist transformation of agriculture and animal husbandry. By 1975, people's communes had been set up in the entire region. The million and more emancipated serfs now hold their destiny in their own hands, bringing their revolutionary zeal into full play, greatly reforming their methods of cultivation and developing scientific farming. On the cold and high "roof of the world" they have planted wheat on large tracts of land and reaped bumper harvests, achieving a record high yield of 700 kilogrammes of wheat per mu.* In 1974 the entire region

* 1 mu = 1/15 hectare or roughly 1/6 acre.

became self-sufficient in food. The total output of grain was 15 per cent more than that of 1973 which was a bumper year, and 2.5 times that of 1958, the year before the democratic reform. The total number of animals was 2.3 times that of 1958. This was a historic change.

Since its founding the Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region, with the support of the people of the whole country, has advanced in the spirit of self-reliance and hard struggle and rapidly changed from the backwardness and poverty left by the old society. Over the last 20 years or so Sinkiang has set up scores of light and heavy industries. Besides the large and medium-sized enterprises that form the core, small-scale industries run by counties or communes have sprung up everywhere. Before liberation this region had no modern industry; almost all industrial products came from the more developed provinces or were imports. Now Sinkiang's rate of self-sufficiency in industrial products is increasing constantly; in some there are even surpluses. Socialist collectivization has been achieved in its agriculture and animal husbandry; people's communes have been set up in both farming and pastoral areas. Agricultural techniques have been substantially reformed. Dams with a total storage capacity of more than 4,300 million cubic metres have been built, watering much agricultural land on which high and stable yields are thus assured. The level of mechanization in agriculture is steadily rising, with the output increasing by leaps and bounds. The sad pre-liberation spectacle of peasants, enslaved by landlords, using primitive implements to till arid lands has vanished into history.

The Olunchun people who live in the remote mountains and dense forests of the Greater and Lesser Khingan

Mountains in Heilungkiang Province used to wear animal skins, build huts of birch bark and warm themselves with bonfires. They eked out a living by hunting. Now, helped by the state, they have settled down, built new hunters' villages, and moreover have developed agriculture and set up small factories. Their lives are happy.

With the development of agriculture, industry, communications and transport and the rise in the people's living standard, the level of culture in the minority regions is rising rapidly. In the past poor peasants and herdsmen had no right to education; now primary and middle schools have been set up in the vast agricultural and pastoral areas of the minority regions, with institutes for nationalities and colleges in major areas where they live in concentrated communities. Each nationality, including the smallest, has its own college students. In the past, medical and sanitary conditions were deplorable, and diseases rampant. Now the co-operative medical system has been set up everywhere. Barefoot doctors have been trained; counties and communes have their own hospitals and clinics. The masses of the people conduct large-scale patriotic health campaigns and health has improved.

Thus, in the 20 and more years since liberation, profound changes have taken place in the minority areas. The following chapters will introduce in more detail their great achievements in politics, economy and culture.