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## **Causes of Ethnic Unrest in China:** The Cases of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia

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## **ABSTRACT**

By analyzing the cases of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, three Autonomous Regions of the People's Republic of China, this dissertation attempts to answer the following question: When do states' ethnic assimilation policies cause ethnic unrest? These regions have historically been populated by the non-Han ethnic groups of Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongols, respectively. Xinjiang and Tibet are well-known for their ethnic unrest, while Inner Mongolia has remained relatively free of it since China's economic liberalization in the 1980s. Mongols, unlike Uyghurs and Tibetans, largely seem to have assimilated into Han culture. This dissertation has identified four factors that contribute to the existence of ethnic unrest, or its lack, in the three Autonomous Regions: the presence of a strong religious identity tied to ethnicity, ethnic market segregation, a strong extranational community supporting the ethnic group, and, especially, the demographic share of the ethnicity in the region.

**Keywords:** ethnic unrest, ethnic conflict, ethnic assimilation, ethnic minority, China, Xinjiang, Uyghur, Tibet, Inner Mongolia

*Disclaimer: Since this dissertation was completed in March 2020, new information has surfaced regarding the conflict in Xinjiang. Reports from different media outlets of forced labor of Uyghurs have emerged, in which many international companies are implicated. This would represent a significant development in the relationship between the Chinese government and the Uyghur people and could be a key factor in any current or future ethnic unrest.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines modern ethnic unrest in the People's Republic of China. Although China is often described and studied as a culturally homogeneous state, ethnic minorities represent a significant portion of its population. Over the years, China has tried to assimilate regions in which ethnic minorities live into Han culture and gain better political control over these areas. However, while in some cases ethnic minorities have been successfully integrated into Han culture, assimilation policies have often resulted in ethnic unrest. This dissertation tries to answer the following question: When do state's ethnic assimilation policies cause ethnic unrest?

This dissertation compares three cases: Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. The case of Tibet became famous in 1959, when the Dalai Lama was forced into exile in India after the Tibetan Rebellion against China. Today, the question of his successor, how he will be chosen, and who he will align with are at the international fore. The case of Xinjiang had been less well-known in the Western world, but it has been gaining more international recognition recently. First, Xinjiang is a key strategic region for China's global development project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), since it connects China to Central Asia. Second, recently leaked documents and images show Uyghurs, the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, held in so-called re-education camps. Both Tibet and Xinjiang have been protagonists of ethnic unrest over the past few years with varying degrees of intensity. Meanwhile, other regions with non-Han ethnic minorities have seemingly been more successfully assimilated into Han China. Such is the case with Inner Mongolia, a region that used to experience ethnic unrest but has remained relatively peaceful since China's opening to the world in the 1980s.

All three cases share important, basic features. They were incorporated into the People's Republic of China during the 1950s and given the status of Autonomous Region. The regions have traditionally been inhabited by non-Han ethnic groups and have experienced different waves of ethnic unrest in response to Chinese governments' attempts at assimilation. Inner Mongolia has seemingly been successfully assimilated into China over time, while Tibet and Xinjiang still experience blowback against their Han rulers.

This dissertation contributes to the literature on ethnic conflict theory. By using the case of China's ethnic minority regions, the analysis helps bring to light how states manage ethnic unrest. This paper aims to isolate the variables that explain the persistence of ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang and its lack in Inner Mongolia. By comparing the three cases, the analysis helps reveal which state policies are successful and which, in turn, cause ethnic conflict.

This dissertation is divided into five main sections: This introduction. A literature review on ethnic conflict in China, which investigates the existing theories on China's ethnic unrest and minority policies.

A methodology section, which briefly outlines the research strategy by introducing the three cases and the hypotheses. The analysis section, which discusses each of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia after introducing a general history of China's policies on ethnic minorities. And, finally, the conclusions, which include a review of the hypotheses as well as some final remarks and indications for future research.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Reviewing literature about ethnic conflict in China encounters two kinds of setbacks. First, there is a lack of literature written from a Chinese perspective. Since the conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang are sensitive issues to the PRC, there are not many articles on the topics from Chinese authors. However, there are several articles by Chinese authors about China's policies towards ethnic minorities, including Tibetans and Uyghurs. There are also some authors who write from the perspective of an ethnic minority in China, such as Bulag, a Mongol.

The second problem is that the data available to scholars of other nationalities is restricted. The information that is available is not always complete or up to date in the constantly evolving country. Moreover, not many scholars have been able to physically visit Tibet or Xinjiang to conduct research (Hillman, 2016: 6). This does not mean that what scholars have written is wrong. The data available is still useful to identify general trends. Some authors, such as Hillman (2016), Cliff (2016) or Mortensen (2016), have even been able to collect field data in Tibet and Xinjiang, providing valuable information.

The conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang have already been widely explored in ethnic conflict literature. Two main groups of scholars can be identified. The first group focuses on the socioeconomic factors that lead to unrest, while the second emphasizes cultural and religious elements (Hillman, 2016: 5).

The substantial economic growth in Tibet and Xinjiang coming from big infrastructure projects has produced uneven regional development, excluded ethnic minorities, and given rise to inequality between Han and both Uyghurs and Tibetans. Scholars focusing on socioeconomic factors, including Zhu & Blachford (2012), Koch (2006), and Hasmath (2019), usually rely on theories that use split and segmentation of the labor market to explain ethnic conflicts in China. A labor market is ethnically split when there is a wage gap between two ethnic groups competing in the same market. A market is segmented when two or more ethnic groups occupy different status positions, often in different economic sectors. Such a labor market perpetuates economic institutions and insular ethnic networks, which strengthen ethnocultural consciousness (Olzak, 1983: 361). In consequence, areas with high market segregation have higher levels of ethnic unrest, according to the theory.

Some authors from this group, such as Chung (2018), also cite internal colonialism as an explanation for ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. Internal colonialism theories try to explain persistent inequalities

between ethnic groups within national borders (Chung, 2018: 118). As Olzak argues (1983), internal colonialism occurs when a culturally dominant core group exploits and dominates an ethnically identified periphery group (353). However, the emergence of ethnic conflict cannot be entirely explained by the disparities caused by industrialization or competition over resources. Only when these economic processes produce a cultural division of labor within the internal colony do ethnic boundaries get strengthened (Olzak, 1983: 353). Authors that try to explain ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang this way claim political domination, economic exploitation, and sociocultural marginalization help foster strong ethnocultural consciousness (Chung, 2018).

Authors whose arguments depend on cultural and religious factors, such as Henry (2016), Nyima & Yeh (2016), and Hillman (2016), note the government's increasing intolerance towards cultural and religious difference, which makes Tibetans and Uyghurs fear for the survival of their culture and language (Hillman, 2016: 5). Although ethnic minorities have benefited from certain preferential policies, the promotion of standard Chinese over minority languages and state intervention in religious affairs have exacerbated grievances among Uyghur and Tibetan populations. For instance, letters left by Tibetan self-immolators or banners used in Tibetan protests usually express concern for the survival of Tibetan identity. In Xinjiang, the re-education camps, which aim to integrate Uyghurs into Han culture, have also increased resentment towards China in the Uyghur population.

Some authors such as Shichor (2005) explore theories based on the perceived security threat posed by ethnic minorities, particularly in Xinjiang. These theories explore the possibility that extremist and terrorist movements could pose a serious threat to the Chinese state's survival. However, articles examining this theory usually conclude that China uses the 'security threat' argument to justify repressive policies in Xinjiang and Tibet. Even if mobilization of violent separatist groups could cause internal instability, they do not actually represent a threat to the Chinese state's survival (Shichor, 2005: 135).

The two schools of thought, the one focusing on socioeconomic factors and the one focusing on religious and cultural factors, are not mutually exclusive and recognize the importance of the factors the other one chooses to analyze. Overall, the literature seems to imply that state policies that try to assimilate Xinjiang and Tibet into Chinese culture, whether economically, religiously, culturally, or linguistically, are the primary source of ethnic discontent. Furthermore, both schools take into account similar factors when analyzing the conflicts. Both agree, for instance, that Han immigration and the control exerted over the *de jure* autonomous regions by the CCP have played a major role in generating ethnic unrest.

The literature has less to say about Inner Mongolia. Since there has been no significant unrest in recent years, the articles available do not follow any approach common in ethnic conflict literature. Instead, authors such as Bulag (2002, 2004, 2010) and Han (2011) prefer to focus on the loss of Mongolian

identity and the progressive assimilation of Mongols into Han culture. Factors such as the massive immigration of Han, the degradation of the Mongolian grasslands, the loss of the Mongol language, and the adaptation to Chinese methods of production are mentioned as the main causes for Mongols' assimilation.

Inner Mongolia is sometimes compared to Tibet and Xinjiang in broader literature about ethnic minorities' situation in China. Studies such as the ones from Wu & He (2014), Yang & Björn (2017), and Yuen (2011) rely on statistical methods to get comparative data on levels of income, years of education, occupational distribution, and demographic growth to assess the economic situation of ethnic minorities in China. Most of these articles come to the conclusion that their living standards vary from minority to minority: some ethnic minorities have higher economic levels than Han, some have a similar level, and some a lower level.

There are a few authors, such as Clarke (2013) and Han & Paik (2017), who specifically compare the case of Inner Mongolia to those of Xinjiang and Tibet. However, this comparison remains largely unexplored even though Inner Mongolia had a similar trajectory to Xinjiang and Tibet up until the 1980s, when China opened its economy to the world under Deng Xiaoping's rule. Clarke's (2013) article analyzes the evolution of the conflicts in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia since the Qing dynasty to understand its modern implications for domestic and foreign policy. Han & Paik's (2017) article also uses these three cases to analyze the correlation between ethnicity and development in China. However, none of these articles analyze the three cases from the perspective of ethnic conflict literature. Therefore, a comparison between the three cases from an ethnic conflict approach brings a new perspective to this topic.

This dissertation uses elements found in both of the two groups of authors who discuss ethnic conflict in Xinjiang and Tibet to formulate the hypotheses described in the following section. The case of Inner Mongolia is key in testing their arguments. Understanding Inner Mongolia in terms of the existing literature allows us to better understand why Mongols were successfully assimilated after decades of conflict in Inner Mongolia. In turn, these insights shed light upon how state-led socioeconomic, religious, and cultural assimilation policies have affected the ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang and Tibet.



### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This section briefly outlines the research strategies this dissertation employs to answer its central question: “When do states’ ethnic assimilation policies cause ethnic unrest?” The research primarily consists of finding available online resources, mainly academic articles, to collect and interpret data on each of the cases.

#### **3.1 The selection of cases**

Three cases have been selected for analysis. The first and second case, Xinjiang and Tibet, have been analyzed using Mill’s method of agreement, in which the common factors between cases with similar outcomes are used to choose independent variables. Xinjiang and Tibet have different ethnicities, religions, histories, and cultures: Xinjiang has been historically populated by Uyghurs, a Muslim Turkic ethnic group, while Tibet has been historically populated by Tibetans, who follow Tibetan Buddhism. However, despite their socio-cultural differences, both regions have experienced ethnic unrest over the years. Their similarities lie in their relationships with China.

Both Xinjiang and Tibet are Autonomous Regions of the People’s Republic of China and are heavily populated with traditionally non-Han ethnic groups. Chinese dynasties have tried to integrate those regions into Chinese empires with varying degrees of success. After the fall of the Qing, both regions were incorporated into the People’s Republic of China and were granted the status of Autonomous Region. Both regions have been subject to several assimilation policies. These policies and the strong presence of the Chinese government in the region have given rise to waves of ethnic unrest.

The third case, Inner Mongolia, has been analyzed using Mill’s method of difference. Inner Mongolia is similar to Tibet and Xinjiang in many aspects. It is also an Autonomous Region, has been traditionally populated by a non-Han ethnic group, and has a history of conflict with China. However, Inner Mongolia has not seen much ethnic unrest since the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution despite being the home of the ethnic group most affected by the movement. Inner Mongolia’s story has followed a different arc than those of Xinjiang and Tibet. There is currently no significant conflict in Inner Mongolia, and Mongols seem better integrated with their Han neighbors. Even though assimilation policies have caused resentment among some Mongols, these policies have largely been successful in Inner Mongolia. Most Mongols speak Chinese as their first language and lead a life very similar to that of Han.

A comparison between these three cases elucidates the factors which cause assimilation policies to be successful or cause ethnic unrest.

### 3.2 The hypotheses

The dependent variable (DV) analyzed will be the existence or absence of potentially destabilizing ethnic unrest. Since the research is focused on modern ethnic unrest, the time-frame of analysis begins during China's economic liberalization under Deng Xiaoping's rule in 1978. This period marks the divergence in the progression of the ethnic conflicts in Inner Mongolia as opposed to Tibet and Xinjiang.

Chinese policies have had different outcomes, whether intended or unintended, in each case. Mill's methodologies allow us to identify several Independent Variables (IV). The first policy element identified as an IV is the dilution of the ethnic group. The second is the presence of a strong religious identity tied to ethnicity. The third is ethnic market segregation. The fourth and final IV is the support of an extranational community with the same ethnic identification as the minority group. It should be noted that, although the analysis of the DV is restricted to the period beginning in 1978, some policies can be traced back as far as the Qing Dynasty, especially state-led migration. Since these policies have continued and still impact the period analyzed, they will also be taken into account.

Having identified a DV and several IVs, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

**H1) When policies successfully dilute the ethnic group, the more likely the ethnic group is to assimilate.**

One of the key elements of Chinese assimilation policies is the state-led migration of Han to Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. China has historically tried to control regions by creating settlements and encouraging Han immigration (Hasmath, 2019: 5). In the cases of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, Han immigration has dramatically transformed the regions' demographics over the years, making Han a much more prevalent ethnic group than they had been previously. In the case of Tibet, migration has not produced a dramatic change in the total Tibetan share of the population but has had an impact in urban areas.

After gaining control of China, the CCP started Han migration programs into all three regions. Self-led migration has also occurred. For instance, during the Cultural Revolution there were food shortages in many Chinese provinces, leading many Han to move to the relatively food-rich regions of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. In addition, the development of all three regions has attracted many Han looking for economic opportunities. Nonetheless, state-led migration has had the greatest impact on the regions' demographics. By encouraging migration to non-Han areas, the government tries to Sinicize the populations living there. The CCP has also manipulated the borders of these regions by excluding certain areas containing ethnic minorities while including traditionally Han areas to artificially skew the regions' population percentages. The immigration project and border manipulation endeavor to integrate these regions into China in order for the CCP to maintain stronger political control over them.

**H2) When assimilation policies directly or indirectly attack the religious identity of the ethnic group, the ethnic group is more likely to cause ethnic unrest.**

Religion is often a strong component of ethnic identity. Some societies have been shaped by their religion more than others, independent of how religious modern individuals in the society actually are. Religion is understood here through its use as a cultural signifier and not in its moral or ethical senses.

It is important to take into account that the Chinese government is a communist government. Even if the PRC formally recognizes Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam as religions, the state's official position regarding religion is atheist. Therefore, assimilation policies often try to regulate religious practices and expressions, especially if the CCP is concerned that they could spark separatist ideas. Assimilation policies geared toward religion are often interpreted as an attack on ethnic identity, a reaction which fosters resentment among the minority and greater ethnocultural consciousness.

**H3) When economic policies produce ethnic market segregation, the more likely the unfavored ethnic group is to cause ethnic unrest.**

To the Chinese government, one of the main causes of ethnic unrest is the economic underdevelopment that regions with ethnic minorities suffer. As a consequence, government policies include pushing economic growth into these areas. By delivering economic development to Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, the government hopes to appease ethnic discontent and strengthen the presence of Han culture, which to Han is often associated with economic development itself. The CCP has two goals for these initiatives. First, the government carries out big infrastructure projects to better integrate and connect these far away regions to the rest of China. Second, the government undertakes these big development projects in order to develop secondary and tertiary industries. Economic development sometimes fails to benefit ethnic minorities, however. Unequal effects on the labor market produced by economic development, which the government can't fully control, exacerbate the feeling of discontent experienced by the native ethnic groups.

**H4) When the ethnic group has a strong extranational ethnic community supporting the ethnicity resisting assimilation, it is more likely that the ethnic group causes unrest.**

China's policies have sometimes instigated violent clashes between the state and ethnic minorities. Sometimes, these have unintentionally led to the establishment of political movements outside the country in support of the ethnic minority. Some ethnic minorities who are in conflict with a state controlled by a dominant ethnic group manage to build international networks that help them resist assimilation. These networks help the minority find moral or economic support from the international community and give a voice to minority political activists and dissidents. If a strong community exists abroad, it is possible to create an alternative narrative outside the state's borders and find allies in other

organizations. This helps globalize the conflict while keeping the ethnic minority movement alive inside the country.

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1 China's relationship with its ethnic minorities

Before discussing each particular case, this section presents some background on ethnic minorities' general situation in China. China is often portrayed as a culturally homogeneous state, and, indeed, Han represent 91.5% of the population as the dominant ethnic group. Consisting of over 1.3 billion people, Han constitute the biggest ethnic group in the world. In addition to Han, the Chinese state recognizes 55 民族 *minzu*, ethnic minorities, including Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongols. Even though ethnic minorities account for only 8.49% of China's population, they have an outsized impact on China's national and international policy (Picciau, 2016: 14). 64% of China's territory is in an area inhabited by a significant number of ethnic minorities, and most of these areas comprise strategic border regions (Picciau, 2016: 14). Some of these areas are also very rich in natural resources. Thus, ethnic minorities present a constant security and unity concern for the Chinese state, since conflict in these areas can cause high degrees of instability to the country.

Before exploring the current state of ethnic unrest in China, it is useful to understand how Han have historically understood their own culture. Their self-conception has informed the assimilation policies that Han-led central governments have instituted throughout China's history, up to and including today. The ancient Chinese believed that the world belonged to the emperor and that all people were his subjects under the same heaven, 天下 *tianxia* (Ma, 2007: 6833). Han were at the center of the world, and their culture was synonymous with civilization. The further outside of the emperor's influence a culture was, the less advanced it was considered, and such cultures were called 'barbarian.' However, since this value judgement was based on cultural norms and not on physical features of the people themselves, 'barbarians' were merely uneducated and could, therefore, potentially become members of the civilized Han world (Ma, 2007: 6834). Although this sense of superiority was eventually pejoratively named "Han chauvinism" by Mao Zedong, it still informs some modern Han thinking towards ethnic minorities.

During the twentieth century, two political groups with opposing ideals, the Guomindang (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), attempted to construct a modern nation-state out of the remnants of the Qing empire and to maintain its territorial extent (Clarke, 2013: 112). This territory included the non-Han regions of Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang, even if they were never fully integrated into the empire and had enjoyed varying degrees of political autonomy after the Qing's collapse (Clarke, 2013: 112).

During the Japanese invasion of the Sino-Japanese War, the CCP realized it needed the support of ethnic minorities both to survive in the face of mounting political opposition and to fight against the Japanese. Thus, the CCP started paying special attention to the protection of minority rights (Clarke, 2013: 117). Ultimately, after the Japanese were expelled and the CCP won the civil war against the GMD in 1949, the then-newly founded People's Republic of China recognized 55 ethnic groups. The 1954 Constitution explicitly acknowledged their importance, and the Ethnic Identification Project, aimed at classifying ethnic minorities, was implemented. Five Autonomous regions – Inner Mongolia (1947), Xinjiang (1955), Guaxi (1958), Ninxia (1958), and Tibet (1965) – and additional autonomous districts and counties in lower administrative levels were created. The five Autonomous Regions were not granted the right to secede. They were guaranteed a certain degree of political and cultural autonomy, however, in hopes of appeasing secessionist aspirations.

The creation of the Autonomous Regions served the additional purposes of reducing minorities' political influence and further integrating them to the Chinese state. For instance, when Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) was created, some Mongol populated areas were left out of the region while other Han areas were incorporated in order to manipulate the region's demographics (Bulag 2003: 90-91). Tibet, meanwhile, lost about half of the Tibetan plateau: the ethnically Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo were incorporated to the provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan, respectively (Clarke, 2013: 119). In addition, the CCP started Han resettlement programs – a legacy of the Qing – to Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang with the intention of diluting Mongol and Uyghur populations.

Between 1957 and 1976, the years of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, policies towards ethnic minorities took a radical communist approach. Laws encouraging or acknowledging ethnic division were repealed or reframed in terms of class conflict (Yuen, 2011: 3). In practice, this translated into harsh assimilation policies. Ethnic languages, religions, and cultural practices were suppressed while members of the traditional elite were persecuted. They were considered part of the *Four Olds*<sup>1</sup>, cultural holdovers of pre-communist China. Therefore, they were dangerous for the construction of a communist state. Waves of ethnic unrest soon followed in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet, resulting in strong repression in all three regions. Scholars believe that approximately 100.000 Mongols died due to the Cultural Revolution and that between 350.000 and 500.000 Mongols were arrested (Jankowiak, 1988: 276). A revolt seeking the complete independence of Tibet erupted in Lhasa in 1959 and spread over the region, resulting in the exile of the Dalai Lama to India.

After the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong's death, policies in China took a new turn. The new CCP leader Deng Xiaoping and his successors started prioritizing the state's economic development and modernization. This initiative gave rise to the so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics, which

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<sup>1</sup> Term used during the Cultural Revolution to refer to Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas that needed to be destroyed.

adapts communism to specific Chinese time periods and circumstances, in this case China's opening up to the global market. With this new approach, ethnic minorities' situation largely improved.

In the new 1982 Constitution, *Article 4* was introduced, which protected minority languages and cultures while providing economic and fiscal benefits to reduce poverty (Picciau, 2016: 17). For instance, ethnic minorities were not subject to the One Child Policy. Other policies such as fiscal subsidies, tax reductions, and preferential access to tertiary education were introduced.

The *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People's Republic of China*, which guarantees the rights of ethnic minorities in autonomous regions, districts, and counties, was implemented in 1984. This law states that in autonomous areas, the Chairman and Vice-chairman, as well as the chief administrative official, need to come from the regional majority ethnic group (Feng & Cheung, 2008: 256). Non-Han cadres persecuted during the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated, and efforts to introduce more non-Han cadres were made (Horowitz & Yu, 2014: 19). State-led Han immigration to Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang was slowed down and even reversed in the case of Tibet (Horowitz & Yu, 2014: 19).

Nonetheless, policies from this new era did not solve all of ethnic minorities' problems. As Clarke points out, new policies "were based upon the assumption that minorities would be content with being culturally distinct, but not politically distinct" (Clarke, 2013: 121). *Article 4* still highlights national unity as the most important value of the Constitution, allowing the protection of ethnic minority rights to be curtailed in the name of national unity (Picciau, 2016: 18). Moreover, as Hasmath & McDonald (2017) argue, the Constitution ignores the reality created by the parallel political structures that govern the Autonomous Regions: the Command of the State and the Communist Party. While a person of the dominant ethnic minority leads the autonomous administrative area, this is not required for the CCP branch at the same level (4).

Furthermore, China's development strategy led to disparate outcomes between Han regions and those of ethnic minorities. Although the economic and fiscal policies supporting minorities were formed during the period of China's economic liberalization, they maintain strong characteristics of a planned economy, often making them unsustainable or economically costly (Feng & Cheung, 2008: 257). Therefore, while the economy developed quickly in the predominantly Han coastal eastern provinces, the policies designed to aid minorities were only partially implemented due to their incompatibility with the new market-led economy.

Consequently, the openness and liberalization of the regime counterintuitively gave rise to new waves of ethnic unrest in both Xinjiang and Tibet, and to a lesser extent Inner Mongolia. The revival of cultural and religious practices combined with the widening of economic disparities between Han coastal provinces and inland provinces with large concentrations of minority groups gave rise to strong local nationalism (Clarke, 2013: 122): In Tibet, massive pro-independence demonstrations occurred between

1987 and 1989. In Xinjiang, violent separatist uprisings took place during the 1990s. Inner Mongolia remained relatively peaceful but did experience some secessionist student protests in 1981. These movements were met with severe pushback by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin governments, resulting in more control over religious and cultural practices and an increase in the securitization of Xinjiang and Tibet.

Chinese policies have continued to emphasize stability and economic development to this day. Despite the preferential treatment minorities enjoy in theory, ethnic policies are strongly assimilationist in practice. The use of standard Chinese is promoted in education and public institutions. Religious practices are restricted and strongly controlled by the government. Chinese cadres have control over the administration in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia. Policies such as the *Strike Hard Campaign*<sup>2</sup> have further increased securitization and have justified the persecution of political and religious entities. Close to a million Uyghurs are thought to be held in “re-education camps,” for instance. The construction of big infrastructure projects has accelerated the economic growth of border regions while also connecting them to the rest of the country, but this has encouraged more Han migration to these regions without necessarily improving living conditions of the ethnic minorities already there. These issues contributed to major violent incidents in Lhasa in 2008, coinciding with the Olympic Games in Beijing, and Urumqi in 2009. Inner Mongolia, however, has suffered no destabilizing separatist incidents since the 80s.

Xi Jinping’s policies are keeping China on the path his predecessors set. However, the rise of a new nationalist discourse can hardly alleviate tensions with Tibet and Xinjiang. Although ethnic unrest has not been as high as it was in the late 80s and 90s, protests have continued to the present day. Tibet has seen the self-immolation of many monks and nuns, while Xinjiang suffered episodes of violence in 2011 and 2014.

## 4.2 Xinjiang

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR),新疆维吾尔自治区(*Xīnjiāng Wéiwú'ěr Zìzhìqū*) in Chinese and رايونى ئاپتونوم ئۇيغۇر شىنجاڭ (Shinjang Uyghur Aptonom Rayoni) in Uyghur, is the largest province of China by area, comprising 1.6 million km<sup>2</sup> and constituting one-sixth of Chinese territory. The region is geographically characterized by its desert and mountains, and it has a semi-arid and desert climate. It shares borders with Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Its historical importance stems from the Silk Road, which ran through it. The region had been controlled on and off by Chinese empires, Mongols, Tibetans and Turkic groups until the Qing

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<sup>2</sup> Campaign launched in 2014 aimed at eradicating separatism, extremism, and terrorism.

gained control of it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Uyghurs are the largest ethnicity in Xinjiang and are officially recognized as one of China's 55 *minzu*. The region is also populated by Han, Kazakhs, and Hui.

When the XUAR was created in 1955, Uyghurs accounted for 70 to 75% of the total population while Han accounted for only 6% (Clarke, 2013: 117). In order to consolidate its control over the region, the CCP created a new paramilitary institution called Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), known as the Bingtuan, in 1954. The Bingtuan conducted a massive immigration program of Han settlers, and, consequently, Han population steadily rose in Xinjiang (Clarke, 2013: 118). The Cultural Revolution caused even more Han immigration to Xinjiang, one of the few areas that was not suffering food shortages, while approximately 60,000 Uyghurs (and Kazakhs) left to Central Asia to escape cultural repression (Clarke, 2013: 119). Xinjiang's demographics changed dramatically during those years. Uyghurs went from representing 75% of the population to around 45% today, while Han went from representing 6% to more than 40% of the population (Wu & Song, 2013: 6). Although the Chinese government stopped its resettlement programs after the Cultural Revolution, self-led migration to Xinjiang continues to the present day. Thanks to the Great Western Development Strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative, Han have kept moving to Xinjiang in search of economic opportunities, while Uyghurs have moved to other parts of China for similar reasons (Chung, 2018: 130).

Han migration to Xinjiang has had several consequences besides the obvious demographic change. By promoting migration through an administrative organ such as the Bingtuan, the CCP has managed to consolidate political power over the region, something the Qing struggled with (Hasmath, 2019: 5). Moreover, due to Han preferences for the wealthier urban areas in Northern Xinjiang, migration leads to unequal urbanization patterns (Hasmath, 2019: 6). With the arrival of marketization, these patterns have resulted in an ethnic split and segmentation of the labor market. Since Uyghurs tend to be concentrated in poorer rural and urban areas in the South, Uyghurs usually hold low-status and low-paid positions in the agriculture and service sectors, where productivity is low (Wu & Song, 2013: 21). Han, by contrast, occupy high-status and high-wage positions in capital-intensive industries concentrated in developed urban areas (Hasmath, 2019: 6). Consequently, there is a big earnings gap between Han and Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Uyghur farmers earn 20 times less than Han energy sector workers, for instance (Leibold, 2016: 233). The development of capital-intensive industries has also caused commodity prices to rise in Xinjiang (Cliff, 2016, 137). Due to this rise, farmers who were already dependent on subsidies and loans from the government find themselves sunk in debt to the state (Cliff, 2016: 143). Some authors have suggested that inter-ethnic inequality caused by the effects of marketization has been one of the major sources of ethnic violence in Xinjiang (Cao *et al.*, 2017: 14). While the Chinese central government believes that the economic development of Xinjiang will solve ethnic unrest, Uyghurs do not materially benefit from the region's development, as evidenced by the split and segmentation of the labor market.



Uyghur grievances are aggravated by the strong presence of the state, which is perceived to be protective of Han and discriminatory against Uyghurs, in Xinjiang's economy (Cliff, 2016). The importance of Xinjiang's resources to China is highlighted by the country's biggest development projects, the Great Western Development Strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative, in which Xinjiang plays a key role.

Oil and cotton production, Xinjiang's biggest industries, are also mainly controlled by the central government, because the rest of China depends on their supply (Chung, 2018: 130). The production of cotton in Xinjiang accounted for 68% of China's cotton production in 2016 and is mainly undertaken in farms from Northern Xinjiang controlled by the Bingtuan (Chung, 2018: 130). Infrastructure projects such as the West-to-East Gas Pipeline are carried out by state-owned companies. Due to taxation laws, 75% of the profits from the oil and gas industries are taken by the central government (Chung, 2018: 130). These two industries account for 45% of the region's GDP (Chung, 2018: 130), and, in contrast to the central government, the regional government does not receive any tax revenue from them. Thus, despite an increasing GDP, Xinjiang faces increasing fiscal deficits (Chung, 2018: 130). The whole region's economy is, therefore, dependent on state subsidies to function, which exacerbates Uyghurs' perception of being colonized (Chung, 2018: 130).

In addition to economic development policies, the Chinese government pursues strong security and assimilation policies to stem conflict in Xinjiang. After the riots in the 1990s, the government launched the "Strike Hard Campaign," aimed at fighting the "three evil forces": separatism, extremism, and terrorism. Although sporadic terrorist attacks have occurred in Xinjiang, the state is able to take harsh measures against any kind of Uyghur activism, including peaceful cultural events, through this campaign (De Pedro, 2008: 125). Other policies, such as student exchange programs and the promotion of the Chinese language in public spaces, try to integrate Uyghurs into Chinese culture. These policies are often at odds with Uyghur religious practices, however, and are not well received. Islam is a central element to Uyghur cultural identity, but the government views it as source of separatism. Therefore, to Uyghurs, policies trying to regulate their religious or cultural practices, intended to increase national unity, implicitly end up undermining their identity and are viewed as a form of repression (Bhattacharya, 2003: 359), as can be seen by the reaction to the re-education camps.

After the 9/11 attacks, China pushed the narrative of Uyghur terrorist extremism. The Chinese government claimed Uyghur groups had links to Al-Qaeda in an attempt to connect the Uyghur conflict to the global war on terror. This endeavor ended up backfiring on China: not only were these allegations eventually proven wrong, but, as Clarke (2013) argues, "China's diplomatic offensive against Uyghurs prompted the Uyghur diaspora to overcome some of its long-standing divisions" (131). In 2004, exiled Uyghurs established the "World Uyghur Congress" and chose Rebiya Kadeer, an exiled Uyghur businesswoman prosecuted by the Chinese government, as President. Uyghurs now seek to create a community outside China. Uyghur entrepreneurs who manage to build successful businesses inside or

outside the region prefer to use their success to build an alternative economic network that favors Uyghurs (Harlan, 2016).

Market segmentation, Chinese control over resources, assimilation policies, and security measures contribute to fomenting Uyghur ethnocultural consciousness, hindering Uyghurs' assimilation into Han culture.

## 5. Tibet

The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)<sup>3</sup>, 西藏自治区 (*Xīzàng Zìzhìqū*) in Chinese and བོད་རང་སྐྱོང་ཁུངས། (*Poi Ranggyong Jong*) in Tibetan, is the second largest province in China after the XUAR, comprising 1,200,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The entire Tibetan plateau, the region of Earth with the highest average elevation, is 2,500,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Besides Tibetans, the plateau is populated by a small percentage of other ethnic groups such as Monpa, Tamang, Qiang, Sherpa, and Lhoba, as well as Han and Hui. The IMAR borders India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Tibet had been under Qing administrative control; however, after the fall of the dynasty, the Dalai Lama expelled the remaining Chinese troops, and Tibet functioned as a *de facto* independent nation for almost 40 years (Clarke, 2013: 114).

The story of Tibet's journey has had the most significant international impact out of the three regions. Tibet was incorporated into China in 1950 after the People's Liberation Army (PLA) took control of eastern Tibet and pressured the fourteenth Dalai Lama into signing the *Seventeen Point Agreement of Peaceful Liberation*, which recognized Chinese sovereignty over the area (Clarke, 2013: 118). In 1955, the TAR was established with the Dalai Lama at its head. However, half of the Tibetan Plateau was left out of the TAR, and the ethnically Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo were incorporated into the provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan, respectively (Clarke, 2013: 119). In 1959 during the Great Leap Forward, when Mao Zedong's policies took a more radical approach, a revolt seeking the complete independence of Tibet erupted in Lhasa. This revolt resulted in the exile of the Dalai Lama to India that same year.

Resettlement programs of Han to Tibet were not as successful as they were in Xinjiang (Han & Paik, 2017: 38). Although some Tibetan sources claim that Han immigration was so extensive that Han outnumbered Tibetans during the 1960s and 1970s, official sources say that the Han population of Tibet increased at a very small rate between 1953 and 1990 (Ma, 2011: 51). As Ma points out, Han who migrate to other areas are often farmers looking for new lands to cultivate. The harsh climate of Tibet makes this task very hard, however, and immigration of Han peasants was limited to the border regions of the Tibetan plateau (Ma, 2011: 51). Therefore, state-led Han immigration did not cause significant

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this research, the term 'Tibet' refers to the IMAR, not the whole ethnically Tibetan area comprising the Tibetan Plateau.

demographic changes during that time. To this day, the population of Tibet remains 94% ethnically Tibetan, even more so in rural areas (Blachford & Zhu, 2012: 722).

Although state-led migration has not significantly changed the makeup of the Tibetan population, self-led migration resulting from the CCP's economic reforms has had a strong impact on cities in recent years. Since the 1980s, more and more migrant workers have started moving to urban areas in search of opportunities in retail and tourism (Blachford & Zhu, 2012: 723). Han presence has significantly increased in cities such as Lhasa, where Han now represent more than half of the population (Blachford & Zhu, 2012: 723). However, a great part of the Han population in Tibet is made up of temporary migrants who do not wish to or cannot stay there permanently (Han & Paik, 2017: 38).

This migration pattern is a result of the emergence of secondary and tertiary sector industries: big infrastructures projects and tourism, respectively (Blachford & Zhu, 2012: 728). However, Tibetans do not benefit from the growth of these Han dominated industries. First, big infrastructure projects are carried out by Chinese construction companies who bring their own labor force (Blachford & Zhu, 2012: 728). Second, opportunities in the service sector are usually taken by Han (and Hui) migrants with better education, more capital, and a wider business network (Blachford & Zhu, 2012: 728). Therefore, as in Xinjiang, the market is split and segmented: while Han hold high-status and high-wage positions in secondary and tertiary industries, Tibetans hold low-status and low-paid positions largely in agriculture (Chung, 2018: 125). By the 2000s, rural income was less than 20% of urban income (Koch, 2008: 17). Some authors argue that the inaccessibility of urban job positions to Tibetans is a major factor in Tibetan discontent (Chung, 2018: 122). Some provinces of China with a majority of ethnic Tibetans, such as Mortensen (2016) states, allow Tibetans greater access to job opportunities and have seen less resistance to assimilation.

Overall, industry in the TAR is still less developed than in Xinjiang, especially since the central government is less dependent on its natural resources. Even the industries that have been developed in the region, such as mining, have contributed to Tibetan aggravation. Mining often occurs on a small, unregulated scale by Han and Hui migrants (Nyima and Ye, 2016: 166). The environmental degradation it causes has triggered Tibetan protests against it, especially when mineral extraction occurs in sacred mountains, a terrible religious offence (Nyima and Ye, 2016: 166).

As in Xinjiang, government attempts to regulate religious practices and expression have caused resentment in the Tibetan population, and policies designed to assimilate Tibetans into Chinese culture have instigated a backlash (Clarke, 2013: 123). When protests occur, demonstrators, whether monks, students, or farmers, usually lament the ongoing loss of their culture. For instance, even if education has improved significantly in Tibet due to the government's high expenditures to combat illiteracy, Tibetans remain unsatisfied by the education system's failure to prioritize the preservation of their language and

culture, as Henry (2016) points out. Letters left by many self-immolators raise concerns about the survival of Tibetan identity, specifically noting Chinese policies preventing the Dalai Lama's return and the assumption of his legitimate political authority (Barnett, 2012: 56).

The eventual death of the Dalai Lama and the subsequent debate over the identity of his reincarnation have also caused concern. Many worry that, as happened with the reincarnation of the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama, the Chinese government and the Tibetan Government-in-exile (TGIE) in India will choose two different Dalai Lamas, destabilizing Tibet (Barnett, 2009). Although the TGIE is not officially recognized by any state and lacks sovereignty in Tibet, it successfully managed to keep an international community of Tibetans in India alive. Its survival and prominence has allowed the TGIE to maintain some bargaining power with China, and it has furthered international awareness of the conflict through the decades.


## 5.1 Inner Mongolia

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), 内蒙古自治区 (*Nèi Měnggǔ Zìzhìqū*) in Chinese, and *Öbüür Monggol*<sup>4</sup> in Mongolian, has an area of 1.2 million km<sup>2</sup> and comprises 12% of China's territory. The region is in the north of China and shares borders with Russia and Mongolia. It has traditionally been inhabited by Mongols, who created history's largest empire in total land area under Genghis Khan. Unlike the Uyghurs and Tibetans, Mongols once ruled China under the Yuan dynasty.

The entire Mongolia region, including both Inner and Outer Mongolia, was a part of the Qing empire. Taking advantage of the empire's decline, Outer Mongolia gained independence in 1921 and established the Republic of Mongolia. The Republic of Mongolia fell into the orbit of tsarist Russia and then the Soviet Union, while Inner Mongolia, because of its close connections to the Beijing court, remained under Chinese influence (Clarke, 2013: 115).

The IMAR was established in 1947 after the CCP gained control of the region by allying with the Mongolian communist party, led by Ulanhu. Unlike Xinjiang and Tibet, the resettlement programs importing Han to the region had been started by the Qing dynasty and were already well underway when the CCP came to power (Bulag, 2004: 87). The Mongols felt that this forced Han influx amounted to colonization. When the Mongolian communist party partnered with the CCP, the Mongols expected to recover their territory and that their Chinese allies would expel Qing Han settlers from the region (Bulag, 2004: 91). In reality, the creation of the IMAR led to the further integration of Inner Mongolia to the Chinese state. Not only were Han settlers not expelled, the CCP even considered them class victims and

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<sup>4</sup>  Inner Mongolia in Mongolian script

refused to treat them as colonists (Bulag, 2004: 91). Furthermore, the CCP created new borders that incorporated Han areas into the IMAR, while some ethnically Mongol areas became part of other Chinese provinces (Clarke, 2013: 117).

In the following years, the demographics of the IMAR continued to shift. The Mongol share of the population was significantly diluted to the point where Mongols became an absolute minority in their own land. The CCP continued to establish new resettlement programs, leading to new waves of Han migration to Inner Mongolia (Bulag, 2010: 268). As in Xinjiang, the Great Famine exacerbated immigration into the relatively food-rich Inner Mongolia. It is estimated that approximately 3,5 million Han moved to the region between 1950 and 1960 (Bulag, 2010: 268). Moreover, many Mongols were killed during the Cultural Revolution, as the CCP used unconfirmed reports of secessionist activity to justify the persecution of the Mongol population (Jankowiak, 1988, 273). Scholars believe the state purged approximately 100.000 Mongols (Jankowiak, 1988: 276). The combination of Han migration and the toll of the Cultural Revolution led to a dramatic decrease in Mongols as a percentage of Inner Mongolia's population. Mongols made up 44% of the population at the fall of the Qing and represent only 17.1% of the IMAR population today (Kotking & Elleman, 2015: 197).

Han migrants brought with them a lifestyle that often clashed with traditional Mongolian society. Previous to Qing-led Han immigration, Mongolians had mostly been herders who lived nomadic lives in the grasslands. Han settlers, in contrast, imported agriculture. In Chinese society, agriculture has traditionally been seen as the source of culture and civilization (Bulag, 2010: 276). The sedentary lifestyle built around it allows cities and complex societies to flourish (Bulag, 2010: 276). Mongolians, on the other hand, usually attribute their historically famous military power to their nomadic lifestyle (Bulag, 2010: 276). Han often consider this lifestyle inferior (Bulag, 2010: 276).

In addition to its cultural significance, the introduction of agriculture to the Mongolian grasslands had a strong environmental impact. The exploitation of fields for farming resulted in the degradation and desertification of the Mongolian grasslands, shrinking available pastoral areas (Liu *et al.*, 2014: 8758). The management of the grasslands has been a sensitive issue in Inner Mongolia and a major source of conflict between Han and Mongols, as Mongols had been resisting these cultural and ecological changes since the Qing dynasty. Nonetheless, many Mongols had adopted a farming lifestyle long before the CCP came to power (Bulag, 2004: 101). Massive Chinese immigration, the degradation of the grasslands, and CCP policies promoting and sometimes imposing agriculture increasingly pushed Mongols into this agrarian lifestyle. As they became more and more sedentary, they somewhat organically assimilated into Han culture and even began speaking Chinese (Bulag, 2002: 209).

In response to the loss of lands, culture and language that followed agriculture's introduction, Mongolian nationalism began to romanticize life in the grasslands (Bulag, 2010: 277). While true Mongols,

according to the romanticization, supposedly live like their ancestors, in reality, most modern Mongols speak Chinese and either are farmers or live in cities. By emphasizing pastoral life's role in Mongolian identity, elevated above even religion, most Mongols are necessarily excluded from this definition of "Mongolness" (Bulag, 2010: 277). There is little space in the collective imagination for Mongols who do not aspire to a life in the grasslands. The processes of modernization and urbanization that have arrived in the last few decades are defined in distinctly Chinese terms. There is a means of assimilation and Sinicization for Mongols who aspire to capitalist success that does not similarly exist for Uyghurs and Tibetans in their regions, where achieving financial stability does not entail ceding a crucial aspect of their cultural identity. Mongols are forced into a choice between risking a poor life in the grasslands or hopping on the Chinese economic bandwagon. Moreover, as Han & Paik (2017) point out, many Mongol herder communities are resettled to urban areas for promised compensation in the form of housing and jobs (39). Due to these societal pressures and economic policies, Mongols experience a greater reward from the development of their region than Uyghurs and Tibetans (Han & Paik, 2017: 39).

Further realities lead to an even greater degree of Sinicization. Development has fully integrated the region with the rest of China, so a good command of the Chinese language is rewarded in the job market (Han, 2011: 64). Although families can choose between Chinese and Mongolian schools, many prefer their children to study in Chinese. Students educated in Chinese have a much wider range of universities to choose from, while students educated in Mongolian will only be able to apply to universities in the IMAR (Han, 2011: 64-65). Since most jobs available require Chinese, students educated in Putonghua have many more opportunities than students educated in Mongolian.

Even if Mongols regret the loss of their language and worry about their culture's survival, linguistic assimilation does provide a materially greater chance for success. Mongols are better integrated into the Han-dominated economy than other ethnic minorities are in their own areas. Despite having a lower GDP than coastal provinces, Mongol income is relatively similar to that of Han in Inner Mongolia (Yang & Gustafsson, 2017). Mongols can improve their financial wellbeing by assimilating, leading some to celebrate the change from *league administration*, a traditional Mongolian community, to *municipality*, a Chinese administrative unit (Bulag, 2002). Some even wish to give up their autonomous status, which is associated with ethnicity and underdevelopment, to become a Chinese province (Bulag, 2002).

Inner Mongolia's relationship with their northern neighbor, the Republic of Mongolia, also partially explains Mongols' susceptibility to assimilation. After all, the existence of a Mongol state could have increased the desire for a pan-Mongolian nation. The areas are already economically linked, as trade between Inner Mongolia and the Republic of Mongolia accounts for more than half of overall China-Mongolia trade (Han, 2011: 69-70). Mongols in Inner and Outer Mongolia, however, do not enjoy a good relationship.

Two factors explain this lack of unity. First, the Cold War caused different processes of identity construction in the two Mongolias, as Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia fell into the CCP's and the Soviet Union's orbit, respectively (Clarke, 2013: 115). Outer Mongols now largely view Inner Mongols as Chinese citizens and do not consider them truly Mongol (Han, 2011: 71). Second, the IMAR has enjoyed higher levels of economic development than the Republic of Mongolia. In general, Inner Mongols perceive themselves to be more well-off than Outer Mongols (Han, 2011: 72). These two factors keep the two Mongolias from seeking each other's assistance, diminishing possible international support if a secessionist movement were to arise.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout its existence, The People's Republic of China has tried to assimilate ethnic minorities to create a state united under the CCP's rule with Han culture at its core. Achieving this goal has proved difficult. Having reviewed the causes of ethnic unrest in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia individually, it is now possible to analyze the common variables that have affected the likelihood and success of Mongol, Tibetan, and Uyghur assimilation and test the hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1) When policies successfully dilute the ethnic group, the more likely the ethnic group is to assimilate.**

Since Inner Mongolia was geographically closer and thus more accessible than Xinjiang and Tibet, the Qing dynasty had already sent many Han settlers to the region. By the time the People's Republic of China was established, Mongols were already a minority in their own territory, and Han had already been populating the area for generations. Han migration to Inner Mongolia occurred progressively. Despite their grievances, Mongols were, over time, assimilated into the dominant Han culture.

Xinjiang and Tibet used to be difficult to reach from eastern China, and Han immigration is a relatively new phenomenon there. Ethnic groups do not generally voluntarily assimilate into a foreign culture that is seemingly colonizing their region. An ethnic group big enough to effectively resist assimilation is more likely to cause ethnic unrest under these pressures. Such is the case in Tibet and Xinjiang, where the native ethnic groups remain a majority and plurality, respectively, despite their status as minorities nationally. Even if cities in Tibet are becoming more Han, Tibetans still account for 94% of the region's overall population. Furthermore, most of the Han migrants to Tibet do not stay permanently. Even if Xinjiang has experienced a greater migration of Han than Tibet and Uyghurs no longer represent an absolute majority, they remain a plurality and the culturally dominant group.

**H2) When assimilation policies directly or indirectly attack the religious identity of the ethnic group, the ethnic group is more likely to cause ethnic unrest.**

Policies trying to regulate cultural and religious expression in Tibet and Xinjiang have caused a great deal of resentment among Tibetans and Uyghurs, who believe the Chinese state is trying to wipe out their culture. Both Tibet and Xinjiang have religions that distinguish them from Han China. The CCP's policies aimed at suppression of religious identity unintentionally heighten Tibetan and Uyghur cultural consciousness, as religion serves as a fundamental element in ethnic protests more often than not. Despite originally being Tibetan Buddhists, Mongol identity was not as dependent on religion as it was on the Mongolian grasslands and nomadic lifestyle. Therefore, after Mongols were successfully pushed into the agrarian lifestyle that clashed with their traditional sense of self, the PRC experienced less blowback than in other situations when religion was heavily involved in the cultural battle.

The primacy of the nomadic lifestyle in Mongolian identity also made Mongols more susceptible to assimilation than their more religiously motivated peers. When the grasslands became unsuitable for a nomadic lifestyle, Mongols could not realistically maintain their culture. Unlike Uyghurs and Tibetans, Mongols had not developed cities. Thus, moving into cities that had mostly been built by Han settlers and abandoning their nomadic roots necessarily meant assimilating into Han culture. This was often the only viable path before Mongols because it went hand in hand with economic survival. There is no action the CCP could take analogous to destroying the grasslands that would affect Uyghur and Tibetan culture so profoundly, since religion is not so easily destroyed as an ecosystem. Religious identity can survive even under severe repression. The major cities in the regions reflect this reality, as Tibetan and Uyghur culture still thrives in cities largely populated by Han immigrants.

**H3) When economic policies produce ethnic market segregation, the more likely the unfavored ethnic group is to cause ethnic unrest.**

Market segregation often strengthens ethnocultural consciousness as ethnic groups are stratified in different socioeconomic rungs. The conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang have been going on for years, but new waves of ethnic unrest emerged when Chinese economic development came to the region, producing inequality between Han migrants and the native Uyghurs and Tibetans. Although economic development has not been the primary source of ethnic unrest, it has certainly aggravated existing tensions. Tensions are made even worse by the central government's control of economic policies in the Autonomous Regions. Mongols, unlike Uyghurs and Tibetans, have benefited from the development of their region: they do not experience market segregation and have similar incomes to Han. Their assimilation into Chinese culture has granted them an economically more stable lifestyle than many other ethnic minorities in China—a lifestyle they could possibly lose if they were to cause instability.



#### **H4) When the ethnic group has a strong extranational ethnic community supporting the ethnicity resisting assimilation, it is more likely that the ethnic group causes unrest.**

Assimilation policies can spur an unintended emergence of strong communities outside the state who support ethnic mobilization inside the state, especially when related to conflicts with a history of violence. With TGIE and a strong network outside the region, Tibetans have kept the Tibetan liberation movement alive for several decades through support from other organizations, which gives Tibetans some bargaining power with the Chinese government. The persecution of Uyghurs, along with the split and segmentation of the labor market, has prompted the unification of the Uyghur diaspora around the world. Since Uyghurs are also followers of Sunni Islam, doors are open to them to create a strong network with certain Muslim countries. The sore relationship between Inner and Outer Mongolia, on the other hand, has made the decision for Inner Mongols to accept their assimilation into Han culture easier. Without other groups of Mongols supporting them, a large movement to resist assimilation is less likely to emerge in Inner Mongolia.

#### **Final thoughts**

The assimilation of Tibet and Xinjiang has produced markedly different results than that of Inner Mongolia, which has seen a relatively successful assimilation of Inner Mongolia in terms of both culture and demographics over a long period of time. Assimilation of Tibet and Xinjiang is a fairly new process which has spurred more intense cultural and political blowback.

When the CCP took control over the Chinese government, Mongols were already a minority in the region and many had already adopted Han language and customs. Therefore, there was not a necessity for the government to heavily regulate religious or cultural expression. Tibet and Xinjiang used to be too remote for significant Han immigration, and settlement programs have only recently begun to have an impact on their demographics. Both Tibetans and Uyghurs are still demographically strong enough to resist assimilation.

The prevalence of religion in Uyghur and Tibetan identity has also led to an unintentional feedback loop creating increasing ethnic unrest. The communist nature of the PRC makes them inherently suspicious of religion as a dividing force. The CCP fears political upheaval caused by religious movements, so they try to stamp out the problem at its source by systematically curtailing not only the cultural power but also the political power afforded religious bodies, activist groups, leaders and adherents. But this suppression of religious identity and political autonomy has caused fierce blowback in Tibet and Xinjiang. By regulating religious and cultural expression, the CCP has ironically caused higher levels of ethnic discontent and political instability in these regions.

Moreover, by being fluent in Chinese and living mainly among Han, Mongols have been able to achieve similar levels of income as Han in their region. In Xinjiang and Tibet, on the other hand, market segregation between Han and Uyghurs and Han and Tibetans aggravates their existing grievances, making them even more likely to resist assimilation.

The success of Inner Mongolia's integration into China has also perpetuated a bad relationship with Outer Mongolia, making international support for a resistance movement unlikely. Repression from the Chinese state, meanwhile, has unintentionally united Tibetan and Uyghur international resistance, which has furthered international recognition and support of both the Uyghur and Tibetan resistance.

In spite of these findings, the lack of concrete information about these regions suggests that more research needs to be done. The future also remains uncertain. As the PRC continues changing, the trajectory of their ethnic policies is constantly in flux. As migration continues changing demographics, Tibetans and especially Uyghurs will see their relative numbers decline, which will make resistance more difficult. Modernity remains a key facet of traditional Han perceptions of the world, and it is unclear if Uyghur and Tibetan cultures will be able to overcome the rapid development of their regions. Nonetheless, if policies stay unchanged, Tibet and Xinjiang are more likely than Inner Mongolia to antagonize and cause serious instability for the PRC.

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