Main minority and indigenous communities: Minority groups include Zhuang 16.9 million (1.3 per cent), Manchu 10.4 million (0.77 per cent), Hui 10.6 million (0.79 per cent), Miao 9.4 million (0.71 per cent), Uyghur 10 million (0.75 per cent), Yi (Lolo) 8.7 million (0.65 per cent), Tujia 8.4 million (0.63 per cent), Mongol 6 million (0.45 per cent), Tibetan 6.3 million (0.45 per cent), etc. (Source: National Population Survey of China, 2010).

Main languages: Mandarin Chinese (putonghua), Yue (Cantonese), Wu (Shanghaiese), Minbei (Fuzhou), Minnan (Hokkien-Taiwanese), Qiang, Gan, Hakka, Uyghur, Tibetan, etc.

Main religions: Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Lamaism (Tibetan Buddhism), Protestantism, Shamanism, Animism, Taoism, Dongba.

According to the 2010 Census, China has a population of nearly 1.34 billion people, a figure that includes the 23 million population of Taiwan, which China claims as a breakaway province despite Taiwan’s fully independent political and economic system.

The definition of ethnic minorities/nationalities in the People’s Republic of China has been conceived by the state and does not truly reflect the self-identification of such ethnic minorities or the reality of ethnic diversity within China’s boundaries. Minzú (the Chinese term that signifies non-Han ‘undistinguished ethnic groups’, numbering more than 730,000 people) have not been recognized among or classified within the state’s official 56 ethnic minorities (these comprise the majority Han grouping and 55 minority nationalities).

The Minzú also do not include ethnicities that have been classified by the state authorities as belonging to existing minorities and hence denied their legal rights to public participation. For example, the Mosuo are officially classified as Naxi, and the Chuanqing are classified as Han Chinese, but they reject these classifications as they view themselves as separate ethnic minorities. The Gaoshan, categorized as a single nationality by the government of the People’s Republic of China, are generally considered to include 12 distinct indigenous peoples living mainly in Taiwan. There are also a number of unrecognized ethnic minorities known as ‘undistinguished nationalities’ in official parlance, including small numbers of Sherpas, Mang
and Khmu. While it is difficult to count precisely the number of minorities in the country given the fluidity of the concept, China probably has well over 100 distinct ethnic groups. The largest non-Han minorities are the Uyghurs, Mongols and Tibetans, and the territories inhabited by these three minorities occupy a huge proportion of China’s land mass along its western and northern borders, territories which in recent times have become increasingly strategically important in terms of resources and location.

Some groups are still actively fighting for recognition as minorities. During the first national census in 1953, over 400 separate groups applied for recognition but only 41 nationalities were recorded. In the 1964 Census, 183 nationalities registered, of which the government recognized only 53, not until the 1990 census settling on the current officially recognized 55 ethnic minorities. There are certain shortcomings with such classifications. The 1990 Census, for example, left nearly 750,000 ethnically unidentified individuals. This number is decreasing but even within the 2010 Census there were over 640,000 individuals whose ethnicity remained unidentified.

Census numbers are challenging due, in one sense, to the re-registration of significant numbers of Han people (a majority of 91.5 per cent in total, according to the 2010 National Population Survey of China) as members of minority nationalities in order to gain personal benefits, such as exemption from the former family planning policy of ‘one family one child’ or the right to cremate their dead. In large part due to relaxed family planning policies for ethnic minorities in China, the minority population is growing at a faster rate than Han. Comparing 2000 to 2010 Census figures, the Han population increased by 5.74 per cent, while the national minority population increased by 6.92 per cent.

Whether one focuses on language, religion or culture, China offers an overwhelming kaleidoscope. Most of the country’s largest minorities are in fact included in the Han Chinese grouping. Their languages are not Mandarin but one of many Chinese ‘dialects’ that are considered to be distinct languages by many linguists; for example, Yue speak Cantonese, Wu speak Shanghaiese, Minbei speak Fuzhou, Minnan speak Hokkien-Taiwanese and so on.

In principle, the recognized ethnic minorities have considerable autonomy with regard to their way of life and this has resulted in complicated forms of autonomy for six provinces (among them Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang), but also in the creation of autonomous cities, prefectures and municipalities where minority nationalities are territorially concentrated. In practice, the system remains subject to the political control of the Communist Party.

China’s western regions are the most ethnically diverse, with 80 per cent of the country’s minorities living in the area. However the Minzú are mainly distributed in the border areas of the north-east, north, north-west and south-west of China. Many of these regions have significant natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals and precious metals, and new regional development strategies are being specifically targeted there. Nevertheless, without accompanying decentralization of political power, this strategy risks further exacerbating the already simmering ethno-regional tensions, as development rights for these groups are totally controlled by the central government.
Minorities and the general population in China continue to face severe monitoring and censorship of expression and assembly. In 2016, Freedom House labeled China as the worst abuser of internet freedom of the year and Reporters Without Borders ranked China 176 out of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index. Public dissent is all but impossible, and the documentation or sharing of rights abuses leads to swift punishments, ranging from enforced disappearances to arbitrary detention and imprisonment. Minorities face additional constraints. Dissent, monitored everywhere, is harshly suppressed in minority regions, where any criticism of the regime may be equated with terrorist activity. The Counter Terrorism Law provided for the expansion of the security apparatus, while the Cyber-Security Law further stifled freedom of expression, such as reporting on abuses in Tibet and Xinjiang. In November 2016, a leaked police report from Xinjiang went so far as to define online circumvention tools, required to reach beyond the Great Firewall (the term used for Chinese state control of internet access), as ‘terrorist software’, and in January 2017 China launched a 14-month campaign against circumvention tools nation-wide.

Despite the passage of the National Human Rights Action Plan (2016-2020) in September 2016, guaranteeing certain rights for ethnic minorities, cultural, religious, and linguistic freedoms have been further curtailed. In April 2016, Wang Zhengwei, an ethnic Hui, was dismissed as the Chairman of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, likely in part due to his moderate support for more regional ethnic autonomy as guaranteed by law and championing of ethnic diversity in the face of more hardline assimilationists. In August 2016, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, after visiting China recounted an ‘abysmal tour’ of a model ethnic village that fell short of international standards for the protection of minority languages or cultures. Scholars have long criticized such sites as the Splendid China Folk Village in Shenzhen or the Yunnan Nationalities Village in Kunming as nothing more than ‘human zoos.’ Elsewhere, such as the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, ethnic Dai culture is facing increasing commodification for ethnic tourism purposes.

In October 2016, Uyghur economist Ilham Tohti won the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. An economics professor at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing, Tohti had devoted years speaking out against China’s abusive policies toward Uyghurs and advocating ethnic unity, but in 2014 he was sentenced to life in prison on separatism charges. The verdict and his ongoing imprisonment have been widely criticized. In November 2016, the election of former Chinese Public Security vice-minister Meng Hongwei to head Interpol sparked further concern from rights groups that China would use this position to further expand persecution of Chinese dissidents and minorities abroad. Such concerns are grounded, for example, in China having pressured Interpol to include World Uyghur Congress General Secretary Dolkan Isa on a terrorist list, despite the lack of evidence. Isa was denied a visa to India in April 2016, in a move criticized for appearing to confirm China’s warrantless
accusations. In another incident, in April 2017, during the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Isa was forced to leave the premises by UN security, a decision which has been blamed on pressure from China.

**Xinjiang**

In Xinjiang, human rights have increasingly been subordinated to security measures under new Party secretary Chen Quanguo, who arrived in August 2016 from his previous post in Tibet. Chen presided over a rapid police expansion, implementing the same grid-style policing tactics he oversaw in Tibet, which have been criticized for encroaching further on freedoms of expression, belief, and association. Seven new prisons were constructed outside of Urumqi, with at least one designed to hold several thousand prisoners. Thousands of new police stations and checkpoints, some equipped with high-tech surveillance equipment, were built across Xinjiang in 2016, with 949 new stations in Urumqi alone. Thousands of new police officers, many recruited based on lowered entry requirements, patrolled around the clock, conducting identification checks at local mosques, and weekly midnight raids on Uyghur homes. In some townships police confiscated visitor’s identification cards until they departed for their hometowns.

Restrictions on the freedom of religion have also intensified. Thousands of mosques were demolished during 2016 under the ‘Mosque Rectification’ policy in the name of safety, while renovation did not occur apace. During the summer, students in Aksu and Hotan were forced to attend school on Fridays, a holy day in Islam, and forbidden from attending religious observances. Uyghurs from Kashgar, Aksu and elsewhere were arrested for distributing material about observing Ramadan outside mosques and as in past years students and government employees were forbidden from fasting during Ramadan, one of the five pillars of Islam. In April 2017, a region-wide policy was announced banning parents from choosing many traditionally Islamic names for their children, despite the fact that they are not foreign but have been used by Uyghur parents for generations and are an integral part of Uyghur identity. Children named in violation of this policy may be barred from household-registration, denying free access to health and education. Such a policy had already been in place in Hotan since 2015. Other religious minorities have also been targeted in Xinjiang as part of counter terrorism efforts, including a ban on all Christian activity outside of official state-sponsored churches.

A government notice posted online instructed parents to bar their children from ‘illegal religious activities’ such as praying, fasting, or studying religion. In November 2016, a new regional law took effect further criminalizing ‘forcing or coercing children to participate in religious activities.’ Parents who permit their children to observe religious activities may now be reported to the police, and their children removed and placed in correctional schools. In some prefectures, local governments required middle and high school students to complete questionnaires about their families’ religious activities. In other locations, authorities again made residents sign ‘Joint Responsibility Contracts,’ which threatened collective punishment and required community monitoring for such things as the teaching or promotion of Islam. In 2017 there were reports from Aksu prefecture that residents were forced to stand at a podium to confess errors and
threatened with legal consequences if they failed to disclose any anti-state activities by themselves or others.

In August, Xinjiang passed a regional counterterrorism law supplementing the national law. The legislation was criticized for its overly broad definitions, permitting gross invasion of privacy and infringement of peaceful religious and cultural activities. In February 2017, in Bayingol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture all residents were informed they would be required to install GPS tracking in their vehicles. The government in Xinjiang has also implemented mandatory health examinations and forced collection of DNA. Patients were forced to clearly denote their ethnicity and religion. The apparent profiling of Uyghurs via collection of DNA not part of an active criminal investigation and the lack of privacy controls or other legal protections raise serious concerns over the scope and purpose of future policies in the region.

Hitherto prefecture-level travel regulations were imposed across all of Xinjiang in 2016, in stark violation of the freedom of movement and impacting Uyghur’s ability to participate in religion pilgrimage or seek employment opportunities. In June 2016, police in Ili prefecture began ordering residents to provide DNA and voice samples to apply for passports, and later in the year the provincial government announced a blanket recall of all passports, a measure previously implemented under Chen Quanguo in Tibet. Xinjiang residents living elsewhere in China have been notified they must return to Xinjiang to relinquish their passports in person or face punishments. Those who wish to travel abroad must now first seek government permission, while even travel between villages has become harder. In a concerning turn of events, in May 2017, authorities in Xinjiang ordered Uyghur students studying abroad, mainly in Turkey and Egypt, to return home for investigation and threatened the family of those who refused. At the time of writing, many of those returning from Egypt had reportedly disappeared after arrival.

Tibet

In Tibet, Tibetan freedom of expression, cultural, and linguistic rights remain severely constrained, while repressive ‘stability maintenance’ policies include extended grid-style policing, checkpoints, and intensive surveillance. The government has responded to perceived acts of dissent with enforced disappearances and collective punishment. In December 2016, following Tashi Rabten’s self-immolation in Gansu, police detained and reportedly tortured his wife and daughters into signing a document that he was not protesting Chinese policies but suffered from problems at home. In March 2017, police in Kardze county detained some 200 Tibetans who had shown support for Pema Gyaltsen following Gyaltsen’s self-immolation.

The government’s draconian land and water policies have also impacted severely on many Tibetans. In August, on a visit to Tibetan nomad encampments in Qinghai, Xi Jinping lauded the policy of relocating nomads for environmental protection, despite strong scientific consensus that indigenous and pastoralist knowledge is crucial to ecosystem preservation. Advocacy organizations pointed out that the Qinghai encampment was also at China’s largest salt lake, crucial for lithium production. At the end of 2016, China’s National Energy Administration released its five-year plan, calling for a 27 per cent growth in energy production.
This includes expansion of damming throughout the Tibetan Plateau, which has been linked to widespread displacement and loss of land. As land rights remain a paramount concern in Tibet, nonviolent civil resistance against land grabs continued, some with innovative tactics including all-women demonstrations believed to dissuade violent police retaliation.

The most troubling recent example of forced demolition and relocation is the ongoing destruction at the Larung Gar monastic complex, also a clear assault on the freedom of religion. Larung Gar is not a monastery as such but a Chögar, a special type of religious institution for the study and practice of Buddhism often unavailable in regular monasteries due to government repression. Demolition at Larung Gar, which is one of the world’s largest Buddhist centers, began in July 2016. An estimated 1,500 police and paramilitary arrived to blockade the area, prevent independent documentation, and assist with relocation. Government plans include the forced relocation of at least half of the 10,000 residents by the autumn of 2017. By November 2016, an estimated 4,600 had already been evicted. Tibetans living in neighboring towns were also forced from their homes. Some monks and nuns who have been expelled from Larung Gar have been forced into months of political re-education, a form of administrative detention, after returning home, and in December authorities began requiring remaining Larung Gar students to pass a ‘political examination’ administered by the police, which included denouncing Tibetan culture and religion. In November 2016, authorities also canceled an annual religious assembly at Larung Gar, in which individual Tibetans are acknowledged for service in preserving Tibetan language and culture.

China’s plan to relocate upwards of 10 million rural citizens into towns by 2020 has had far ranging impacts on ethnic groups around the country. For example, in Guizhou, one of China’s most ethnically diverse provinces and also one of the poorest, an estimated two million people alone are expected to face relocation. In February 2017, the government announced that over 750,000 rural residents in Guizhou will be relocated in 2017 alone, an increase of two thirds from those relocated in 2016. Forced relocation in Guizhou is not solely explained with economic development motives, however. In early 2016, over 9,000 residents in the Qiannan Buyei and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, which is home to some 2 million ethnic Buyei and Miao respectively, were informed they would be relocated to make way for the construction of the world’s largest telescope to look for extraterrestrial life.

Other restrictions on religious freedom included a sweeping campaign requiring the surrender of Dalai Lama images. While images and references to the revered Tibetan figure have long been banned, the severity of punishment for those who refuse appears to have intensified. A Qinghai monk was sentenced to two-year prison terms in February 2016, for circulating images of the Dalai Lama on social media and in person, and a number of Tibetans throughout the year were imprisoned for discussing the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile on social media. In September 2016 the State Council released a draft revision of the 2005 ‘Regulations on Religious Affairs,’ which detailed enhanced measures regarding imported religious material and religious schools. It also upheld vaguely defined notions of religious extremism, maintaining a long-held practice of equating potentially any religious activity with political crimes and terrorism.
As in Xinjiang, Tibetans continue to suffer a near total denial of the freedom of movement, severely infringing on cultural and religious freedoms. Beginning in 2012, Chinese authorities have been confiscating Tibetan passports and from last year ordering Tibetans in India and Nepal to return home, telling many that their families would be punished if they failed to return. In the first month of 2017, Chinese authorities threatened punishment, ranging from ten days to five years, for Tibetans who traveled to the Dalai Lama’s Kalachakra teaching in India, which took place from 11-13 January 2017. Around 7,000 Tibetans attempting to attend the important religious event were blocked from traveling, with authorities in some places going form house to house confiscating passport. The University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab further documented systematic keyword censorship in English, Chinese, Tibetan, and Hindi related to Kalachakra on the Chinese social media platform WeChat.

Inner Mongolia

In Inner Mongolia, forced demolition, pollution and seizure of traditional grazing lands remain commonplace. Within the first few months of 2016, dozens of Mongolians were detained for speaking with foreign media about resistance to grasslands exploitation. In February 2016, a spokesperson from Haliut Township noted that over 1,000 households had been affected by illegal land grabs in his township alone. Some 100 Mongolian residents of Lubei Township staged a sit-in to prevent trucks from reaching a reservoir construction site that locals say will affect over 160 households. In Arikunduleng Township, over 300 Mongolian herders protested an aluminum plant for poisoning livestock and residents.

Updated November 2017

Environment

China is a vast country and the home of one of the world’s most ancient civilizations. The world’s most populous (almost 1.34 billion people in the 2010 Census) and fourth largest country, it encompasses a huge variety of climates and landscapes, as its borders extend all the way through Central, South and South-East Asia, from the shores of the Pacific Ocean to the tropical jungles of South-East Asia and the highest mountains of the globe with the Himalayas. It contains mostly plateaus and mountains in the east. The north near Mongolia and the north-west contain extensive grasslands and desert areas (Gobi Desert), while the south is dominated by hills and low mountain ranges and the west has among its features the Himalayas mountain range. China shares borders with 14 countries, the longest stretches with Mongolia, Russia and India, as well as bordering Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Korea. Both historically and in contemporary border politics, China often treats its western borders as a security buffer to protect Han-dominated Central and Eastern China.

Much of its population is concentrated in the east, along the shores of the Yellow River and East China Sea and the alluvial plains of the main rivers emptying into the Pacific, such as the Yangtze and the Huang He.

Because of its antiquity, vast size and geographic features, there is also a huge variety of climates and vegetation, and a corresponding diversity of human cultures and societies
throughout China’s long history.

History

China contains one of the world’s oldest civilizations, with the earliest evidence of modern human presence in Guangxi dated to approximately 67,000 years ago.

While there were a number of Han cultures prior to it, the first reliable historical Chinese dynasty is that of the Shang (or Yin) from the eighteenth to the twelfth century BC, which settled the north-eastern region along the banks of the Yellow River valley. What is now known as China would gradually, from these modest origins, expand to form one of the world’s greatest empires, as conquest, colonization and absorption would bring into its control huge tracts of territory and large numbers of peoples of different ethnicities. The Shang dynasty was to be replaced between the twelfth and fifth century BCE by the Zhou, expanding the borders of what was to become China north of the Yangtze River. The authority of Zhou rulers eventually weakened, leading to a period of warfare between states that only occasionally or nominally recognized the sovereignty of the Zhou during what is known as the spring and autumn period.

It was after the Zhou dynasty that China began to take form as a unified state under the Qin Dynasty in 221 BCE. More importantly, it was also during this period that the Chinese language was standardized and was to become one of the defining characteristics of Chinese culture. This was further strengthened during the Han Dynasty which ruled China between 206 BCE and 220 CE. From this period onward the close identification between Han culture and China became firmly established, though at the same time China’s territory was vastly expanded, reaching Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia and Central Asia during this period. It was also during this expansion that many of today’s minority populations were incorporated into China.

After a period of disunity, China was reunited under the short-lived Sui Dynasty from 580 CE. Chinese art, culture, economy and technology continued to expand during the succeeding Tang and Song dynasties. In 1271, the Mongols under Kublai Khan established the Yuan Dynasty, followed in 1368 by the Ming Dynasty until 1644. It was replaced in the seventeenth century by the Qing, who remained in power until the 1912 revolution. This was China’s last dynasty and involved not the majority Han Chinese, but the Manchus, a nomadic people based in what is now north-eastern China.

The creation of the Republic of China on 1 January 1912 was followed by a period of instability and fragmentation. China had already started to lose its grip on some of its territories during the Qing Dynasty, losing Taiwan to Japan as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5, as well as recognizing the independence of Korea.

The Kuomintang’s Sun Yat-sen became the provisional president of the new republic, but he was forced to step aside by Yuan Shikai, a former Qing general who took the presidency, dying shortly afterwards. The political fragmentation that followed also saw assertions of independence in some territories – including Tibet and Xinjiang – where Qing authority was weak or tenuous. Warlords in other parts of the country exercised real control rather than the
still existing national government of the republic. The Kuomintang, under Chiang Kai-shek, was able to reunify the country in the 1920s, but China was to lose further territory after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and its establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo. The Chinese Civil War also began during this period, when the faction of the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek purged the Communists in 1927 from an alliance then in place between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China. This was interrupted by the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45 (and the Second World War). After the war, the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang and the Communists resumed, ending in 1950 with the Communists controlling mainland China under the People’s Republic of China on 1 October 1949. The central Kuomintang government of the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan and several outlying islands.

The decades that followed were dominated by Mao Zedong, who as Chairman of the Communist Party oversaw the social and political upheaval of the country from a largely rural, politically fragmented state to an industrialized modern state. This transition came at a huge human cost, however, with tens of millions executed, imprisoned or starved to death during successive catastrophes that included the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. This period also saw an aggressive consolidation of Chinese control over Tibet, first with the 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement that established Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and then the subsequent crackdown on Tibetan resistance.

Following Mao’s death and the downfall of his wife and close associates, known as the Gang of Four, Deng Xiaoping eventually emerged as China’s new leader and led the country throughout the 1980s through a process of economic liberalization that nevertheless maintained the party’s strong control over the China’s political affairs.

**Governance**

Since its inception the People’s Republic of China has remained a centralized state with ultimate and paramount power firmly with the Communist Party of China (CPC). Most top positions in the government and military are held by Communist Party members and the 24-member political bureau (Politburo) or the supreme political body.

China’s human rights record is dire and has deteriorated further under President Xi Jinping, who will remain in power until 2022. The CPC has systematically worked to control every aspect of the rule of law in China, stripping judges and lawyers of virtually any semblance of independence. In 2012, the Ministry of Justice issued a requirement that new lawyers pledge loyalty to the CPC. Human rights lawyers routinely face delays or arbitrary denial of their yearly lawyer’s license renewal, and in 2017 the Ministry of Justice announced it would formally begin evaluating lawyers based on their support of the Party over their legal skills. Beginning in July 2015, China launched a nationwide crackdown, detaining some 300 human rights lawyers, legal assistants, and their family members, dubbed the ‘709 Crackdown.’ Many lawyers were subjected to enforced disappearances, lengthy pre-trial detention, torture, forced confessions, political show trials, and lengthy sentences. This has included several Han lawyers who had represented ethnic minority clients.
Over the last few years China has passed a number of new laws or amended laws that pave the way for the further erosion of human rights. The revised 2012 Criminal Procedure Law, for example, at Article 73, created a euphemistically named measure ‘Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location,’ (RSDL) which allows police to hold someone at a secret location, without access to lawyers or family, for up to six months. The measure effectively amounts to an enforced disappearance, a crime under international law. In 2015, China passed a raft of national security laws that risk legalizing discriminatory profiling of minorities under the premise of security.

Freedom of expression and information is brutally controlled. China consistently ranks last in global internet freedom for its widely repressive cybersecurity laws, lack of privacy and anonymity, surveillance, and sophisticated censorship, with the international journalist protection organization Reporters Without Borders labeling China as ‘the planet's leading censor and press freedom predator.’ In 2016, Xi Jinping demanded state media pledge its absolute loyalty to the CPC. Domestic journalists who have exposed sensitive information have been targeted for harsh reprisals and foreign journalists have been kicked out of the country.

In theory, Chinese law provides for national minorities to exercise regional autonomy, such as Article 114 of the Constitution, which stipulates that the chairman of an autonomous region, or the prefect of an autonomous prefecture or head of an autonomous county, must be a member of the minority ‘exercising regional autonomy in the area concerned’. However, China’s five autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet and Xinjiang), as well as smaller autonomous districts, are autonomous in name only. Real power and decision-making authority rests with the regional branches of the Communist Party – usually dominated by Han Chinese – and national unity considerations always take precedence over regional autonomy. In recent years, some influential Chinese academics have articulated a second-generation ethnic policy, which would foster a unitary national identity that would ostensibly subsume the existing 55 distinct ethnic minority identities under the dominant influence of the ethnic Han majority. These theories have shown an influence on policy, with some senior decision makers calling for the elimination of the categories that set different ethnic groups apart. This raises real concerns over the future of autonomous ethnic minority culture in China.

The CPC’s minority policies have vacillated since the inception of the People’s Republic of China. In the more idealistic and egalitarian phase (1949 to the late 1950s) soon after the establishment of the republic, the policies towards minorities could be described as both tolerant and supportive, with nationalities being recognized in the country’s Interim Constitution (the 1949 Common Programme), and some recognition also for the use of their languages, though without any specifics. From the late 1950s to 1960s, nationalities were perceived by Chinese authorities as potential obstacles to the Revolution, and as holding on to ‘backward’ practices and attitudes. At this time the revolutionary authorities developed a more obvious identification with the Chinese Han majority. For example, the notion of the ‘need’ for a ‘common language’, literally putonghua, a standardized form of Mandarin Chinese emerged at
this time. During the Cultural Revolution, minorities and their leadership were often the target of some of the worst excesses, and minority languages were practically banned during this period.

The excesses of the Cultural Revolution gave way to greater tolerance and accommodation of China’s minorities from about the mid-1980s to 1995 during a period of relative liberalization. Though negative attitudes towards minorities still exist, the Communist Party’s approach is very different from the atrocities of the previous period. In theory, minorities gained substantial rights under 1984 legislation, such as the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (REAL, revised in 2001), which increased autonomy in education and culture and other activities which, *ipso facto*, meant some degree of control for minorities over autonomous administrative authorities and the language used by officials.

More recently, since about the mid-1990s, the Chinese authorities have entered into an increasingly repressive and less tolerant phase, especially with regard to the country’s largest minority groups such as the Mongols, the Tibetans and the Uyghurs. This can be partially explained as a backlash on the part of the Beijing authorities against the perceived ‘excesses’ of previous policies, which are now seen as encouraging ‘splittism’ and as constituting failures in light of incidents involving minority opposition in Tibet and Xinjiang, but may also be linked to an increasing prominence and assertion of Han nationalism within the state structures and hierarchy of China.

For minorities, the current period is one of increasing limitations in the areas of official use of minority languages – and consequent loss of employment and educational opportunities for the largest minority groups. While legislation and rhetoric still acknowledge the rights of minorities in a way that shows there is at least officially an acceptance of such concepts, in practice there is increasing monolingualism and promotion of Mandarin to the exclusion of other languages, and increasing Han domination in the areas of politics, education and employment.

*Updated November 2017*

**Minority based and advocacy organisations**

**Sources and further reading**