

CHINA AS A MULTINATIONAL STATE: An Overview of the Minority Groups' Policy

CHINA COMO UM ESTADO MULTINACIONAL: Uma Visão das Políticas de Grupos Minoritários

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to explore the development of the minority nationalities' policy since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 by Mao Zedong. The minority nationalities' policy has been strongly influenced by the historical development of the Chinese nation, passing through a moderate period from 1949 to 1957, in which the government has recognized the right to autonomy and put in place an impressive process of recognition and classification of the 55 ethnic groups, a "radical" period corresponding to the decade of the Cultural Revolution, until the mid-1970s, in which the government has put in place strong policies of assimilation to the major group of the Han and a phase that can be defined as "moderate" and lasts until today, corresponding to the economical openness of the country launched by Deng Xiaoping in the post-Mao era.

Keywords: China; Minority Groups; Development; Language; Globalisation.

RESUMO: O presente artigo tem por finalidade explorar o desenvolvimento das políticas de minorias nacionais desde a fundação da República Popular da China em 1949 por Mao Zedong. As políticas de minorias nacionais tem sido fortemente influenciadas pelo desenvolvimento histórico da nação chinesa, com um período inicial moderado entre 1949 a 1957, no qual o governo reconheceu o direito de autonomia e colocou em prática um expressivo processo de reconhecimento e classificação de 55 grupos étnicos; passando por um período "radical" correspondente a década da Revolução Cultural que vai até a metade de 1970, no qual o governo adotou uma intensa política de assimilação pelo grupo majoritário Han; e, finalmente, uma fase que pode ser definida novamente como "moderada", compreendendo a abertura econômica do país lançada por Deng Xiaoping na era pós-Mao até os dias atuais.

Palavras-chaves: China; Minorias Nacionais; Desenvolvimento; Língua; Globalização.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Constitution defines the country as a nation that is comprised of multinational people. There are 56 ethnic groups very different from each other in terms of culture, religion and language that constitute the dimensions of the population living within its territory. The Han represent 91.51% of the Chinese population, thus constituting the largest ethnic group in the country and even in the world. Despite the fact that the remaining 55 minorities represent only 8.49% of the population, the issue related to the minority nationalities is a very important concern for nation's unity and security because, historically, they live in the border and strategic regions of Beijing (e.g., India, Central Asia, South East Asia, etc.). If it is true that all multiethnic nations have to cope with the complicated issue of ethnic groups resident inside of their territories and, in particular, the way in which the Central Government has to deal with them, this is particularly true for China. For this reason, the Chinese Government has devoted special attention to the question of minorities, guaranteeing them, except at certain periods, a series of rights and the autonomy in the Constitution, and other specific laws as, for example, in the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People's Republic of China*.

At the same time, the autonomy guaranteed to the minority groups is characterized by the firm control of the Communist Party, which is concerned about the safeguarding of the unity and the stability of the country.

This article aims to explore the development of the minority nationalities' policy since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 by Mao Zedong. The minority nationalities' policy has been strongly influenced by the historical development of the Chinese nation, passing through a moderate period from 1949 to 1957, in which the government has recognized the right to autonomy and put in place an impressive process of recognition and classification of the 55 ethnic groups, to a "radical" period corresponding to the decade of the Cultural Revolution, until the mid-1970s, in which the government has put in place strong policies of assimilation to the major group of the Han. Finally, a phase that can be defined as "moderate" and lasts until today, corresponding to the economical openness of the country launched by Deng Xiaoping in the post-Mao era, characterized by a spectacular economical growth of the country that, in less than 40 years has passed from an agricultural society to a developing industrial nation and a central player in the political and economical global scenario. Finally, we will analyze the inequalities that have resulted within the society as a consequence of the rapid growth, and that damage, amongst others, the minority nationalities. A special paragraph will be devoted to the question of language that appears as an important instrument in attaining national unity.

2. CHINA: A MULTINATIONAL NATION

China is defined in all government documents as a multinational nation with its 56 ethnic groups living in its territory which differ from each other in terms of culture, language, dimension of the population, religion, way of living and work, etc. Beyond the 56 minority groups officially recognized, there exist other ethnic communities, characterized by a lower degree of cohesion in terms of language and culture.

Among them, the Han group represents 91.51% of China's population, thus representing the largest ethnic group not only in the country, but also the largest in the world². The name *Han* comes from the Han Dynasty, which ruled over a unified China from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D. The name of the Chinese official language *Hanyu* (汉语), the Mandarin language, has its origin in the name of this ethnicity

² According to the 2010 census the Chinese population amounts to 1.339.724.852 people. The 91,51% belongs to the Han and the remaining 8,49% to the minorities nationalities.

which, in fact, in Chinese, the term *Hanyu* literally means the “Han’s language”.

Except the Hui and the Manchu minority groups who adopted Mandarin as their language, the other minority nationalities speak languages completely different from the *Hanyu*. Among them, one is able to count approximately 120 mother languages, 30 of which are written languages, while 20 languages have less than 1000 speakers (WANG; PHILLION, 2009, p.1).

Chinese ethnic groups live together in vast areas, or in some cases they live in very close-knitted communities in small and isolated areas. This is the main result of the groups’ migration and interaction during China’s history that shaped the actual distribution of these groups in the country. During its long history, China with its role of “civilizer” extended its influence to the bordering regions. The Han Chinese have, historically, considered themselves (from a cultural point of view) to be the superior and most advanced ethnic group in the world compared to the rest of minorities who were considered as “barbarians”. This ethnic identity has always assumed a central issue for the Han’s relations with the other groups. As stated by the scholar, Ma Rong, those people who were culturally assimilated into the Han became members of the civilized group, and for this reason treated in a fair way. The others, considered the “barbarians”, were mostly treated in a more discriminating way, needing consideration to be “educated”. This discrimination was based on a cultural superiority rather than on a racial superiority. According to the scholar, this is demonstrated by the fact that according to the Confucian ideas, all people are brothers, all groups should be treated equally, and their differences in terms of religion, customs, languages, etc., should not prevent their peaceful coexistence. So, the difference concerns a cultural superiority in the sense of a more developed and advanced culture that is able to integrate all the other groups (MA, 2007, p.7).

The Chinese Han live in almost every part of China. It is possible to find a larger concentration in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, the Yangtze River and the Pearl River, and in the northeast of the Plain Region. The other 55 ethnic groups, corresponding to the 8.49% of the population³, generally called “minority nationalities”, in Chinese *shaoshu minzu* (少数民族), live distributed in different regions of the Chinese territory with a major concentration (about 70% of the total) in the Southwest, Northwest and Northeast, in particular in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Guangxi, Tibet, Yunnan, Guizhou, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Hubei, Hunan and others. Although the minority nationalities constitute the 8.49% of the total Chinese population, they inhabit 64% of China’s territory (see Table 1). It is important to notice that the fact that the Central Government decided to not apply the One Child policy to the minority nationalities resulted in the increment of their population. The phenomenon involved mainly Inner Mongolia, Guangdong, Guizhou, Liaoning, and also Qinghai, Sichuan, Hebei, Yunnan, Jilin and Ningxia. In the last 10 years approximately, the population of the minority nationalities has grown 0.11% percentage points more than the Han population. (MA, 2011).

From an administrative level, in order to guarantee a form of autonomy to the ethnic groups, the Central Government has established five autonomous regions: the Guangxi (38.54% of the total population belongs to a minority nationality), the Inner Mongolia, where the Mongol minority lives (21.6% of the total population belongs to a minority nationality), the Ningxia, where the Hui minority lives (35.98% of the total population belongs to a minority nationality), the Xinjiang, where the Uighurs live (60.4% of the total population belongs to a minority nationality), and Tibet (93.48% of the total population belongs to a minority nationality). In the Yunnan province live approximately 25 minorities, and for this reason, it is the most multiethnic province of China. It is important to specify that each nationality lives in more than one area, for example, the Tibetans live in five provinces (Tibet, Yunnan, Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan).

3 *Communiqué of the National Bureau of Statistics of People’s Republic of China on Major Figures of the 2010 Population Census* (No. 1). Site web of the National Bureau of Statistics of China. Available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/NewsEvents/201104/t20110428_26449.html>.

The *Shaoshu Minzu* and the *Han* form the Chinese nation: the *Zhonghua Minzu* (中 民族). In Chinese, the word *Minzu* is constituted by two characters that respectively mean: a community of people (*min*) and a group of people linked by ties of blood (*zu*). The term *Zhonghua* means literally central country based on the traditional view according to which China is the centre of the civilized world surrounded by barbarians.

Despite the fact that the minority groups constitute 8.49% of the total Chinese population, they represent an important concern for the Central Government because they are involved in the question of unity and security of the country. Most of them live in the border and strategic regions of interest of Beijing, e.g., URSS, India, Central Asia, countries of South-East Asia, and have constant contacts with the populations of these areas.

In its long history, China has been conquered at least five times by a minority: the Wei of the north (the Tobas) from 386 to 534 A.D., the Liao (the Khitan) from 907 to 1125 A.D., the Chin (the Jurchen) from 1115 to 1134 A.D., the Yuans (the Mongols) from 1260 to 1368 A.D. and, finally the Qing (the Manchus) from 1644 to 1911 A.D.. Chinese historians believe that all these groups were able to retain power only because they assimilated the Chinese culture, and identified with the Han culture, which was considered superior to all the other minority groups.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MINORITY GROUPS POLICY

Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Mao Zedong and his entourage have recognized the minority nationalities' question as central. Even before the foundation of the PRC, the Constitution of the Jiangxi (the Chinese Soviet Republic)⁴ recognized that the minority groups had the right to equality of auto-determination, and even the possibility of forming independent states. The attention that the Communist leadership gave to the question of the protection of the minority nationalities has been interpreted as a strategy to attract the support of this part of the population against the Nationalists. After the end of the Qing's Dynasty in 1911, the Han were considered the natural and legitimate heirs of the new Chinese Republic. Sun Yat Sen, founder and first President of the Republic of China and its political party, the Guomindang, conceived the Chinese nation as a "nation-race". Thereby, they did not accept the existence of the non-Han if they were not merged with the Han. Chiang Kai-Shek, who took the leadership of the Nationalist Party after Sun Yat-Sen, strongly sustained a national unity with the assimilation of the non-Han with the Han (FRANGVILLE, 2007, p.39). But, in reality, the question of the minorities wasn't the priority of the Chiang Kai-Shek Government due to the Japanese invasion of China between 1937 and 1945. It is important to note that even before the foundation of the Republic of China (1912–1949), the last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911), recognized five main ethnicities: the Chinese Han, the Manchu, the Mongols, the Tibetans and the Uighurs. For example, the official texts were written in the five languages of these five ethnicities (QIN, 2011, p.3).

Considering the process of separation of Mongolia from China, it was clear that the new government didn't want to allow the minorities the right to auto-determination and separation, but it guaranteed them their rights as part of the united nation of China, in a perspective of integration with the Han. In order to define a minority group, the Central Government adopted Stalin's definition of 1913 according to which a minority is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up, all manifested in a common culture⁵. The Mongolia separation represented a concern for Mao because it could represent an inspiration for other

4 The Jiangxi Soviet was a self-governing region under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) formed in 1931 by Mao Zedong and Zhu De in the Jiangxi province in south-eastern China. Through this government Mao gained experience in peasant organization that allowed it some years later to found in 1949 the PRC.

5 *Marxism and the National Question*. Marxists Internet Archive. Available at: <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm>>.

minorities groups, in particular for the Uighurs (based in the Xinjiang region) and the Tibetans.

The 55 ethnic groups of the country have been recognized with the *Ethnic Identification Project* developed between the 1950s and 1980s. Since the 1950s, groups of ethnologists and anthropologists (most of them formed in the west), politicians and local leaders have been sent to all corners of the country in order to identify and classify the minorities groups. So, basically, the classification that was developed according to Stalin's definition, the communist party adopted as criterions of classification four elements: the territory, the language, the economic life and the psychological make-up.

This classification has been institutionalized to such an extent that the ethnic background is marked on the personal identifications and documents of each Chinese citizen. Before the *Ethnic Identification Project*, no concrete census has ever been developed to identify the ethnic groups living in the territory.

The question of the national minorities for their importance has been introduced in the Constitution promulgated in 1954 (that has constituted the base for the actual Constitution promulgated in 1982). Its preamble put emphasis on the principles of equality, unity and mutual assistance. It states:

The People's Republic of China is a unitary multi-national State created jointly by the people of all its nationalities. Socialist relations of equality, unity and mutual assistance have been established among the nationalities and will continue to be strengthened. In the struggle to safeguard the unity of the nationalities, it is necessary to combat big-nation chauvinism, mainly Han chauvinism, and to combat local national chauvinism. The State will do its utmost to promote the common prosperity of all the nationalities.

The Constitution elaborated the concept of regional ethnic autonomy, and the autonomous regions were created in order to satisfy ethnic aspirations and, at the same time, guarantee national security. Beyond the 22 provinces in which China is administratively divided, the Chinese Government has created five autonomous regions in the areas in which the minorities are particularly numerous. These are the regions that were created between 1947 and 1965: the Guanxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (1958), the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (1947), the Ningxia Autonomous Region (1958), the Tibet Autonomous Region (1965) and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (1955).

The fact that the question of the relationship between Han and the minority groups was a central point of the Communist Party is demonstrated by Mao's speech given on 25th April 1956 at an open meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Bearing in mind lessons drawn from the Soviet Union, Mao summed up China's experience, dealt with 10 major relationships in socialist revolution and socialist construction. One of these relations is that between the Han and minority nationalities⁶. Mao stated:

The minority nationalities have all contributed to the making of China's history. The huge Han population is the result of the intermingling of many nationalities over a long time [...]. So we have to make extensive and sustained efforts to educate both the cadres and the masses in our proletarian nationality policy and make a point of frequently reviewing the relationship between the Han nationality and the minority nationalities [...] We need to make a thorough study of what systems of economic management and finance will suit the minority nationality areas [...]. We must sincerely and actively help the minority nationalities to develop their economy and culture⁷.

6 The others relationships are: the relationship between heavy industry on the one hand and light industry and agriculture on the other; the relationship between industry in the coastal regions and industry in the interior; the relationship between economic construction and defence construction; the relationship between the state, the units of production and the producers; the relationship between the central and the local authorities; the relationship between party and non-party; the relationship between revolution and counter-revolution; the relationship between right and wrong; the relationship between china and other countries.

7 Mao Zedong's speech given at an enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on 25th April 1956. The entire speech is available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_51.htm>.

Starting from the end of the 1950s the minority nationalities' policy, as well as the other socio-economic and political policies, have been characterized by a strong radical approach. This radicalism brought to the period of the Cultural Revolution ended only in the half of the 1970s. During this period, all forms of ethnic identity and expressions, such as the use of local languages or religious activities were considered "incorrect", and for this reason suppressed. (YUEN, 2011, p.3). The ideological arguments justified to some extent the tentative abolition of the cultural identities and languages of the minorities. The destruction of the Four Olds (Old Customs, Old Habits, Old Ides, Old Culture), one of the main goals of the Cultural Revolution, considered these cultures and habits as old and dangerous for the development of the society (LAI, 2002, p.10). A strong policy of assimilation with the major group, the Han, was introduced. In other words, all these expressions were considered as obstacles to the realization of a socialist society even if from a juridical point of view, no changes were provided. Some political and religious leaders of the autonomous regions, such as Ulanhu of Inner Mongolia, and the Panchen Lama of Tibet, were accused of being traitors (LAI, 2002, p.7), causing a strong resentment among the minority nationalities, and insurrections by some of them: the Tibetans (in 1959) and the Uighurs (in 1962). Both of them represent, until today, the two most worrisome nationalities for the Central Government. It was exactly in this situation that the Dalai Lama and his staff escaped from Tibet to take refuge in Dharamsala (India).

After the end of the Cultural Revolution and the period of the Gang of Four in 1976, China entered a period of change⁸. The *Open Door Policy* launched by Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1970s with the objective to pursue the liberalization and the economic growth through a series of actions as the introduction of foreign capital and the technology, the development of the private sector, the decollectivisation, etc., while maintaining its commitment to socialism. In this context, the situation for the minority nationalities settled down slowly to normality, and the government became engaged in the process of assuring the rights to the minorities. For example, it was decided to not apply the "One Child Policy", introduced between 1978 and 1980, and in force until 2015, to the families of the minority groups. As a consequence, in the last decades, the population of the minority groups has registered a growth rate higher than that registered by the Han population.

In 1982, the new Constitution was adopted, and is still being used today (amended in 1988, 1993, 1999 and 2004). As the precedent version of 1954, it is constituted by a preamble and four chapters: the General Principles (Chapter I); the Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens (Chapter II); The Structure of the State (Chapter III); The National Flag, the National Anthem, the National Emblem and the Capital (Chapter IV). From a juridical point of view, the Chinese legislation provides protection of all recognized minorities groups, and gives them a set of rights as economic and fiscal benefits, the protection of their languages, own culture and heritage. Article 4 of the Constitution states that:

All nationalities in the People's Republic of China are equal. The State protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops a relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any act, which undermines the unity of the nationalities or instigates division, is prohibited.

The State assists areas inhabited by minorities in accelerating their economic and cultural development according to the characteristics and needs of the various minority nationalities. Regional autonomy is practised in areas where people of minority nationality live in concentrated communities; in these areas organs of self-government are established to exercise the power of autonomy. All national autonomous areas are integral parts of

⁸ The Gang of Four was a political faction of the Chinese Communist Party led by the Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing. The others members were Yao Wenyuan, Wang Hongwen and Zhang Chunqiao. The Gang of Four controlled the power of the Party in the last stage of the Cultural Revolution.

the People's Republic of China.

All nationalities have the freedom to develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve their own folkways and customs.

The Article states very clearly that any act which undermines the unity of the nationalities or instigates division is prohibited, this is a way to protect the unity of the state and in some way authorizes the central government to limit somehow these rights in case the unity and security of the state are put in danger. In effect, even if the policies concerning the minority groups have been inspired by the Marx-Leninist theories and the experiences of the ex-URSS, the Chinese Communist Party has sinicized important aspects concerning the national question, which the leaders, starting from Mao, have constantly excluded in any form of federalism for the minorities. The unity of the state has always represented the most elevated political value.

The Constitution attributes to the minorities other rights, for example, it attributes power to the autonomous regions to manage education, science, health and culture, and protects their cultural heritage (Article 119), or the right to organize local public security forces necessary for the maintenance of public order, according to the military system of the state, and with the approval of the State Council (Article 120).

The administrative division of the PRC (regulated by Article 30 of the Constitution) takes into account the presence of the various ethnic groups inside the territory, which is divided into provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government. Provinces and autonomous regions are divided into autonomous prefectures, counties, autonomous counties and cities. Counties and autonomous counties are divided into townships, nationality townships and towns. The municipalities directly under the Central Government and other large cities are divided into districts and counties. Autonomous prefectures are divided into counties, autonomous counties and cities. All autonomous regions, autonomous prefectures and autonomous counties are considered national autonomous areas. According to Article 59 of the Constitution, all the minority nationalities are entitled to appropriate representation, therefore, the National People's Congress, the supreme organ of the State is composed of deputies elected from the provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities directly under the Central Government and special administrative regions, and of deputies elected from the armed forces. The Chinese territory counts: 154 areas of ethnic autonomy (*minzu zizhi diqu* 民族自治地区); 5 provincial level autonomous regions (*zizhiqu* 自治区); 30 autonomous (*zizhizhou* 自治州); 119 autonomous counties (*zizhixian* 自治) and 1256 ethnic townships (*minzu xiang* 民族乡) (WANG; CHEN, 2001, p.4-5).

The rights and obligations of the autonomous regions are stated in a systematic way in other legislation sources. The most important document is the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People's Republic of China* (*minzu quyue zizhi* 民族区域自治) of the 31st May 1984 (amended in 2001). This document is the most important Chinese law that guarantees the rights to the autonomous regions inhabited by the minority nationalities. According to Article 2, Regional autonomy is practiced in areas where ethnic minorities live in concentrated communities. The government assures the right to practice the regional autonomy in the areas of the country in which more than the 20% of the population belongs to a minority nationality.

According to the Constitution, the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law* establishes that all ethnic autonomous areas are integral parts of the People's Republic of China, but each new establishment, the delineation of its boundaries and the elements of its name are proposed by the state organ at the next higher level jointly with the state organ in the relevant locality, after full consultation with representatives of the relevant nationalities, before they are submitted for approval according to the procedures prescribed by law (Article 14).

4. MINORITIES' LANGUAGE POLICY

Language represents a very important element in the ethnic identification. In China in particular, language has always represented a central element of unity of the empire. The linguistic situation in China is very complex, and the country is far from being homogenous. Around 93% of the population speaks languages that can be defined as *Han* languages; the languages spoken by the ethnic groups constitute the remaining 7%. In order to understand to what extent the language has represented and still represents a fundamental instrument of national unity for the Central Government, a short overview of the common language's history is necessary.

With respect to the Han language, it is important to differentiate the spoken from the written language. This is due to the fact that the Chinese language is ideography and not alphabetic. There is no fixed system of reference to transliterate the syllables, each character has a meaning and a defined sound. The written language is common to everybody, and since several centuries has represented an important element of unity of the country. The spoken language includes one principle language, named *Putonghua* (普通话), the official language of the PRC, and a set of dialects that, for their characteristics, can be defined as languages⁹. Since the formation of the Chinese empire in 221 B.C., the concept of unity and uniformity become the main objectives of Emperor Shi Huang Di. Beyond the unification of the currency, tax and infrastructures, some important policies were implemented in what concern the linguistic unity. Li Si, prime minister of the emperor, implemented the reform of the Chinese written language in order to build a common identity that was lacking because of the heterogeneity of the country. The prime minister made all the characters identical in all areas of the empire; about 3300 characters have been standardized (ROBERTS, 2002, p.65). But if the first step toward the standardization of the language has realized the uniformity of the written language (letting each person pronouncing the characters according to his/her dialect) it would require a person to spend 2000 years to complete the reform that included a common pronunciation of the characters for all Chinese citizens, and a gradual simplification of the characters in order to make them easier to memorize. The Communist Party completed this reform in the 1950s, the new government engaged itself by including in its political program the language reform, and to take concrete decisions regarding the written language influenced by Stalin's article *Marxism and Linguistic* that contained the linguistic theories of the most important communist leaders that considered the language's reform necessary for political propaganda and information of the masses. For this reason, starting from 1955, was adopted the common language, the *Putonghua*, based on the *Beifanghua* (North's dialects), defined with a decree of the Council of State Affairs as: "The common language of the Chinese nation, which has its basis the *Beifanghua* dialect and as phonetic rule the Beijing (Peking) dialect" (BRESSAN, 1991, p.37).

Additionally, in the later years, the Latin alphabet (introduced by Matteo Ricci) was chosen for the transcription of the sounds (called *pinyin*), and furthermore, an important simplification of the characters was launched (making them simpler to write).

The diffusion of the *Putonghua* in all areas of the country became the strategic objective of the Central Government, but despite the different campaigns launched on different occasions, the realiza-

⁹ The *Putonghua* has its origin from the dialects of the north or *beifanghua* (北方) *beifang* 北方 means "north" and *hua* language, in particular from the Peking's dialect. The spoken language includes seven main groups of dialects: the *Putonghua* spoken by the 70% of the Han languages speaking (divided in turn in other sub-dialects); the *Wu* spoken by the 9% of the population and diffused in the Jiansu and Zhejiang provinces; the *Min* spoken by the 4% of the population and diffused in the Fujian and part of the Guangdong provinces, in Leizhou, Hainan and Taiwan; the *Gan* spoken by the 3% of the population and diffused in the Hunan and part of the Hubei provinces; the *Hakka* spoken by the 4% of the population and diffused in part of the Sichuan, Taiwan, Guangdong, Guanxi and Fujian provinces; the *Yue* spoken by the 5% of the population and diffused in the Guangxi and Guangdong and the *Xiang* spoken by the 5% of the population and diffused in the Hunan.

tion of the diffusion of the *Putonghua* still remains an objective to be realized. In some areas far from the big cities, it's still hard to find people able to speak and write *Putonghua*¹⁰.

With respect to the ethnic groups' languages, the Central Government assures the right to use their language. The Constitution of the PRC and other numerous relevant laws, such as the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (of 2000 put in place in 2001) and the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People's Republic of China* (1984), etc., guarantee the right of the minority groups to use and develop their own languages as working languages in administration, publications, education, etc.

As for the ethnic groups' policy, the language's policy has been influenced by the development of the history of the PRC. Starting from 1949, the languages of the minorities have been supported by the government in the spirit of support and integration of all minority nationalities. In the 1950s, when the Central Government started the process of establishment of the autonomous regions, the Central Government engaged in the elimination of illiteracy in these areas, and Han and local officials were trained in minority languages (WANG, 2009, p.3). Furthermore, the Central Government supported the creation of a set of systems to develop the written languages of the minorities where they didn't exist.

During the years of radicalization of the CPC's (Communist Party of China) policies, especially in the years of the Cultural Revolution, support to the languages of the minorities was suppressed. Mandarin became the official language in schools, and its assimilation was the main objective of the education of the minority groups (QIN, 2009, p.3).

Starting from the end of the 1970s, the protection of the languages of the minorities, and their use in administration and education, was introduced again as a policy of the Central Government. Article 37 of the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People's Republic of China* of 1984, for example, states that:

In schools, which mainly recruit students of minority nationalities, textbook in languages of minority nationalities concerned should be used where conditions exist. Languages for instruction should also be used languages of the minority nationalities concerned. Primary school students of higher grades and secondary school students should learn the Chinese language. Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese), which is commonly used throughout the country, should be popularized among them.

The diffusion of the bilingualism among the minority groups, that is the protection of the local languages, but at the same time the diffusion of the common language, the *Putonghua*, is a concern of the Central Government because, as already stressed, since the first dynasty, the creation and the diffusion of a common language has always been an important element of national unity and identity. Furthermore, the economic opening up process of China has made the diffusion of Mandarin even more essential for economic reasons not only inside the country but also outside.

Considering the extent of the Chinese territory, it is easy to understand that the problems concerning the language can differ from area to area. In the most remote areas, the most evident problem related to the diffusion of the bilingualism is the lack of teachers who are really able to teach in two languages. In some areas, the languages of the ethnic groups are mostly used in very small administrative units. Even if the Han officials working in the ethnic regions are supposed to learn and use the local language, the most common use is that they continue to use *Putonghua* (Mandarin) in their daily work, much to the detriment of the local languages. The massive inland migrations are also challenging the question of bilingualism, the languages that have a small number of speakers, most of them already seniors, are at risk of disappearing because the young people move to the cities, learn the *Putonghua*, and don't speak their own ethnic languages anymore. In other cases, the use of the *Putonghua* by the

10 For more information about the Chinese language and the national unity see: Picciau (2008).

Han officials, or local and sinized officials, is perceived by the local people as an imposition and a tentative attempt to weaken the local identities. This phenomenon is particularly true for the Tibetan and the Uighurs in the Xinjiang Region, causing protests against the attempt to impose the Han language in all aspects of their lives.

As it is easy to understand, this phenomenon appears complex and contradictory, the promotion of bilingualism in the ethnic minority areas represents an important element of a major cohesion between people inside the country, the limit to learn and communicate will place these groups in a disadvantaged situation, both at national and international level. For the students, the fact of not being able to speak Mandarin represents a way to be excluded from the university based outside of their regions; but at the same time, it is necessary to convert policies into concrete actions in order to avoid the diffusion of the *Putonghua* that is done at the expense of the survival of minority languages, which represent incalculable value for the nation.

5. MINORITIES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The development of the Chinese economy represents an important event for China and for the rest of the world. It is considered as one of the most spectacular phenomenons of the Twentieth Century that was able to transform a country of 1300 million people from an agrarian country to a developing country in less than 30 years. It has improved the living standards of a part of the Chinese population, and conferred on China the status of a great power. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita rose from US\$524 in 1978 to US\$4433 in 2010. The annual household expenditure was ten times higher in 2011 (US\$932) than in 1978 (US\$90) (GONG; LI, 2013, p.10).

The economic growth has not been accompanied by an equal distribution of income. Effectively, a set of internal disparities has been produced among the different areas of the country, especially in what concerns the GDP per capita, the access to education and health, the infrastructures, the social services, etc. The growth in income has, in general, increased faster for people with high income than the people with lower income.

In March 2013, Premier Wen Jiabao¹¹, just before leaving office, in his final assessment to the National People's Congress, warned that the Chinese development was unbalanced, and that China has still to face many difficulties in its economic and social development, affirming that the country needs to navigate a global recovery that's "full of uncertainty". In the domestic economy, "unbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable development remains a prominent problem. The social problems have increased markedly", he stated (BLOOMBERG NEWS, 2013).

Despite the leadership of Hu Jintao (the former President) and Wen Jiabao from 2003 to 2013, who pursued a harmonious society emphasizing an equitable growth through measures aiming to reduce the disparities, the income disparity in the country still remains very high. According to the data published by the World Bank, China's Gini coefficient¹², rose from 0.3 in the early 1980s to more than 0.45 in the early 2000s (SICULAR, 2013). China is now among the least equal 25% of countries in the world¹³.

The income disparity is evident by geographical region. The model of development gave priority to the development of the coastal areas, in which are based the most important Chinese cities, in order to play the role of locomotive of Chinese development. The coastal cities have been called to act as

¹¹ Premier of the People's Republic of China from 2003 to 2013.

¹² The Gini coefficient, developed by the Italian statistician Corrado Gini is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income distribution of a nation's habitants. It is the most commonly used measure of inequality. A Gini coefficient of zero expresses perfect equality, where all values are the same (for example, where everyone has the same income). A Gini coefficient of 1 (or 100%) expresses maximal inequality among values.

¹³ *Gini Index*, web site of the World Bank, available at: <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI/>>.

“engines” in economic growth (HAN; YAN, 1999, p.1). The poverty tax has been reduced much faster in the coastal region than in other parts of the country. In 1992, 80% of the country's poverty was located in non-coastal regions. Considering the urban areas, the coastal per capita income was 40% higher than the interior (LAI, 2009). Today, the income gap between urban and rural households is large, and since these less developed rural areas are inhabited, in part, by the minority nationalities, the question of minorities appears as a central element for national stability, and is strictly connected to the economic development of the country.

Between 1988 and 1995, in just 7 years, the gap in revenue between the Han and the other ethnicities represented 35.8% (GUSTAFSSON; LI, 2003). So the disparity concerns the coastal and internal regions, the urban and the country population, and also the Han and the minority nationalities. It is important to specify that vulnerability to poverty can vary from one nationality to another. In 2002, for example, the Hui registered a median income that was close to that of the Han, while the Manchus that ruled the country until the end of the Qing¹⁴, registered an income 32% above that of the Han. The rest of the ethnic groups appeared more disadvantaged, with median incomes ranging from 50% for Miao to 73% of Uighurs compared to that of the Han. The median per capita income of the ethnic groups was 64% of that registered by the Han, 68% if we take into consideration the Hui and the Manchus (GRADIN, 2013, p.6).

Despite the protection guaranteed by the Chinese juridical system, the fact that the minorities live in the less favored areas, represents a handicap for their economic and human capital development (BOROOAH; GUSTAFSSON; LI, 2006, p.802). In 2009, over 54% of the poor people lived in ethnic minority areas (especially in the western interior regions) (CHAUDHRY, 2012, p.7).

In order to achieve modernization of the country, China recognizes the importance of the development of its educational system. If it is true that in the recent decades all groups have registered for expansion of the school system, there are still high disparities between them in what relates to access to compulsory schooling, and the quality of the teaching. In general, the ethnic groups' regions results were disadvantaged, because their local governments dispensed with limited amounts of money to invest in their sectors. The female children of the poorest families appear particularly affected, because in most of the cases, the parents give the privilege of education to the male children, letting the females do all the domestic work.

The situation relating to the health system in some of these areas is characterized by a very weak public service (WONG; TANG; VAI, 2007, p.145). In general, the health infrastructures are less developed than in other areas. The cost of medical care is become very high for the local citizens. According to a research published by the Council of State of the *China Development Research Center* in 2006, 80% of the population living in the western regions did not have access to adequate health service (BERGSTEN; GILL; LARDY; MITCHELL, 2006, p.15). In general, the infant mortality rates are higher for minority groups, and among those affected by HIV, the minorities are over-represented, especially in the Yunnan, Guangxi and Xinjiang (CHAUDHRY, 2012, p.8).

To these elements it is necessary to add the fact that the system of *hukou*, the permission of residence put in place in the 1950s in order to regulate the internal migrations, allows the benefits of the services in the cities only to the citizens that have the permission to live there, and not to the numerous countryside people (the so-called *Mingong*) that move illegally to the city in their search for a better life. As a consequence, these persons are excluded from the right to benefit from these basic services, despite the fact that the migrants from the countryside and poorest areas of the country have played, and still play a very important role in the economic development allowing China to become one of the main actors in the global economy.

In order to reduce the gap between the regions, and be conscious of the danger that these dispar-

14 The Manchus conquered the Chinese empire and established the Qing dynasty in 1644.

ities can have to the national security, in the 2000s, the Central Government under the leadership of Jiang Zemin (successor of Deng Xiaoping) had decided to put in place the *Xibu Kaifa* policy (or the policy on the development of the west) with the objective to reduce the gap between these regions and the coastal regions, and guarantee the unity and security of China. As observed by Goodman, when Zhu Rongji, the Prime Minister, affirmed that the common prosperity of the policy would result in the “strengthening of national unity, safeguarding the social stability, and consolidation of border defence”, it was an implicit reference to the non-Han people (GOODMAN, 2004). The areas included in the policy are: Chongqing, Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Yunnan and the five autonomous regions. All these areas, inhabited to a large extent by the minority groups, were characterized by poverty, lack of industries and infrastructures. The investments have been concentrated mainly in infrastructure projects. The government also provided fiscal policies in order to attract investors from China and abroad. The government encouraged the migration of low, but also mainly high-skilled Han workers, in order to encourage the economic development in these areas, and this phenomenon was particularly evident in the Xinjiang Region. According to Coté, since the 1950s, the strong waves of Han migrations to the Xinjiang Region has reduced the power of the local population, the Uighurs. The migration of the Han, both sustained by the Central Government or spontaneous, that is to say from a free choice to a Han people who moves to other regions, moved from business interests, has profoundly changed the ethnic space in China. According to some observers, the policy put in place in order to develop the western regions has not the objective to increase the ethnic groups' situation but to increase the control of the central state in this area¹⁵. From 2000 to 2003, the state invested in the western regions 200 billion Yuan in 50 mega projects, 37 of which were infrastructural. The roads of the ethnic areas were extended from 402,600 km in 1999 to 548,000 km in 2003, and electricity generation from 143 to 224 billion kwh (MACKERRAS, 2006).

The socioeconomic imbalance and inequality among the Chinese citizens brought Hu Jintao and his entourage to conceive the concept of “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) as one of the main objectives of the Communist Party, through the implementation of a set of actions targeted to solve the numerous contradictions developed in the Chinese society as a consequence of the economic growth. The disparity between the Han and some minority groups represents certainly an obstacle to the realization of the “harmonious society”. Especially considering that starting from 2000, the CPC has tried to contain the ethnic tensions that developed, in particular, in the Tibet and the Xinjiang Regions, that are challenging the capacity of the Central Government to realize the “harmonious society” and guarantee the unity and the security of the country. Even more, considering that this attempt is becoming complicated due to the growth in communication, and migration as a consequence the free-market forces.

The Tibetans and the Uighurs live in areas on the borders that are politically very sensitive for the Central Government. For this reason, their insurrections are considered particularly important for the Central Government. The situation of the minority nationalities, in particular with respect to the question of integration with the Han, is very different from nationality to nationality, if the Tibetans and Uighurs appear the most separatist and the minorities less integrated to the Han, on the contrary, the Hui (that share with the Uighurs the practice of the Muslim religion) for example, are much more integrated with the Han. They live in different areas of the country; the majority of them speak Mandarin (the Han's language), and marriages between the Han and Hui are numerous.

One of the main strategies of the Central Government since 1949 that was put in place in order to keep under their control the areas inhabited by the minorities and favor the economic development with specialized workers, is the strong immigration of the Han to these areas. The control of these areas is particularly important for Beijing because, in addition to being strategic border areas necessary to

15 See: Jeong (2015).

guarantee the national security, they are rich in natural resources.

The Xinjiang Region, in particular, accounts for over 20% of China's future petroleum reserves, over 40% of its coal reserves, and it has potential for large uranium deposits, but according to the local population its prosperity appears to be at an advantage mainly due to the Han population that represents 50% of the total population of the region. Effectively, the Han inhabit the richest areas of the region; they register a higher salary, and the government invests more in social affairs in areas inhabited by the Han. The most important local officials are Han. Furthermore, in this region, as well as in Tibet, the Central Government is implementing a strong educational system based on the bilingualism, probably at the expense of the local languages.

The protests of 2008 developed in Tibet on the occasion of the Olympic Games organized in China, and the reaction of the Chinese authorities, and the international visibility of the event that caused protests in cities like San Francisco, London, Paris, Seoul, etc., shows how significant is the question of the minorities for the Central Government. The international visibility of these protests represents an important issue for the Chinese Government just one year later, where on July 2009 in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang, a very strong protest occurred, considered one of the most serious protests in several decades. The event has been baptized as 7/5, a kind of Chinese 9/11 orchestrated from abroad. The tragedy started with a protest against a riot in the Xuri Toy Factory in the region of Guangdong, where in the city of Shaoguan, two Uighur employees were killed and others injured after the rape of a female Han employee. The repression of the Han policy in Urumqi and the reaction of the local population resulted in many deaths and injured persons. These and others protests that occurred successively (in Xilinhote and Inner Mongolia in 2011, among others), demonstrate that the Chinese Government needs a new elaboration of the ethnic policies more adapted to the stage of development of the country, and more attentive to the ethnic groups' requests.

Recently, the new Chinese President Xi Jinping, in power since November 2012, expressed his will to realize the *Chinese Dream*, a great national revival, and the reinforcement of the sense of unity in the nation under the party leadership, and through the essential elements of Chinese culture, and the reappropriation of its identity and values essential to building a new socialist morality, blending the socialist principles with the humanistic spirit of Confucianism (SCARPARI, 2015, p.9). For the moment, how the question of the minority nationalities will be treated is still unknown. In order to guarantee national unity and the cohesion of the Chinese people, Xi Jinping will need to be able to include the development of all ethnic groups in his concept of the *Chinese Dream* that appears characterized by a strong Han-culture vision.

In China, different scholars and intellectuals are involved in the discussion concerning the minorities. Among them, Ma Rong, professor in the Faculty of Sociology of the Beijing University, maintains that the complexity of the relations between the minorities represents the most important social problem of China. In particular, the dualism Han/*Minzu* (ethnic groups), created even involuntarily, has, de facto, created two parallel structures (one for the Han and the other for the rest of the minorities), encouraging the social conflicts and the development of the riots generated from a lack of comprehension. According to the scholar, a move away from the Confucian values occurred, that as we have already noticed, identify with the culture rather than with the race. He warns about the dangers of the actual system based on the divisions among China's 56 nationalities, and on the territorial-based autonomous units, that could, in his opinion, allow China to follow the USSR, Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia into national disintegration. Ma Rong takes, as an example, the Constitution of the United States that recognizes the rights of the individuals rather than the groups, favoring, according to the scholars, the interactions between the citizens. Beyond the fact that the United States' model is or is not adaptable to a completely different society as the Chinese one, the ideas of Ma Rong are influencing national debate¹⁶.

The "melting pot formula" is the proposition of another influential scholar, Hu Anggang, Director

16 See: Ma (2007).

of the Institute for Contemporary China Studies at the Tsinghua University (Beijing), one of China's most influential think tanks. Together with Hu Lianhe, Hu Anggang, supporter of new policies aiming to reinforce the national identity, proposes the "melting pot formula" that guarantees cultural pluralism, and to the individuals the right to maintain their own cultural traditions through the lack of specific institutions and privileges, that encourages ethnic fusion, reinforcing the sense of national belonging. According to these scholars, from a political point of view, the elimination of the group differentiated rights, and ensures the equality of all citizens of China. From an economic point of view, these eliminations increase the interactions between all the regions (in particular those inhabited by the ethnic groups). From a cultural point of view, it will be able to integrate all the different traditions in a collective civic culture, reinforcing the national identity (HU; HU, 2011).

Another influential theory very diffused in the Chinese Academy is the "Pluralistic Unity of the Chinese Nation", proposed by the scholar Fei Xiaotong. He recognizes the multiethnic principle as not antithetic to the concept of national unity. China has been developed as a continuum of fusions and assimilations of different populations and ethnic groups during its long history (FEI, 1998).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Since the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the Central Government under the leadership of the Communist Party has considered the question of the minority groups as a central issue for the security and unity of the nation. From a juridical point of view, the Constitution and other fundamental laws, the most important is the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People's Republic of China* published in 1984 and amended in 2001, have contributed to the ethnic groups living in the Chinese territory the autonomy and a series of rights including the preservation of their culture, language, heritage, etc.

Despite the fact that the policies concerning the minority groups have been inspired by the Marx-Leninism ideas, the Chinese Communist Party has sinicized important aspects concerning the national question, excluding any form of federalism for the minorities. The unity of the state has always represented the most elevated political value. For this reason, the Central Government conducts a policy of control on the minorities that represents a concern for national unity, for example, through the dispatch of Han officials to the autonomous regions or the attempt to diffuse the common language, in some cases, at the expense of the local languages.

The level of integration with the main ethnic group, the Han, varies according to the different minorities. If some of them have integrated themselves with the Han, for example the Hui that have even employed the *Putonghua* as their main language, on the contrary, other minorities, such as the Uighurs, for example, have kept a sense of strong identity, refusing the assimilation and pursuing their independence.

Despite the juridical protection and concrete policies put in place by the Central Government, the most important is the *Xibu Kaifa* policy, better known in the western countries as the policy on the development of the West, the rapid economical growth that has totally transformed China since the 1980s has had, as negative consequences. a very high level of disparities between the regions, especially between those inhabited by the Han and those inhabited by the minority nationalities. It is clear that the disparities that are characterizing China in the last decades can represent a serious menace for the economic and political stability of the country, and also for the international image of the giant dragon. The realization of a *harmonious society* will necessarily need the reduction of the internal gap and the improvement of the public services for all citizens, the development of the western regions constitute in this sense a very important factor. The protests that developed more intensively since the 2000s, especially in the Tibet and Xinjiang regions, and their international visibility, highlighted the significance

of the challenges of China's ethnic policies, demonstrating that the Central Government needs to think on the lines of a new policy that is able to guarantee the peaceful coexistence between the Han and the other ethnic groups. The stability of the country and its assertion as global power require a cooperative approach from all parties involved in order to achieve a better social balance between all ethnic groups necessary for the realization of the *Chinese Dream*.

Table 1

Ethnicity	Main Geographic Distribution (Provinces)
Zhuang	Guangxi, Yunnan and Guangdong
Manchu	Liaoning, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Inner Mongolia and Beijing
Hui	Ningxia, Gansu, Henan, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Yunnan, Hebei, Shandong,
Miao	Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangxi, Chongqing, Hubei and Sichuan
Uighur	Xinjiang
Tujia	Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing and Guizhou
Yi	Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou
Mongolian	Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Jilin, Hebei, Heilongjiang and Xinjiang
Tibetan	Tibet, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan
Bouyei	Guizhou
Dong	Guizhou, Hunan and Guangxi
Yao	Guangxi, Hunan, Yunnan and Guangdong
Korean	Jilin, Heilongjiang and Liaoning
Bai	Yunnan, Guizhou and Hunan
Hani	Yunnan
Kazak	Xinjiang
Li	Hainan
Dai	Yunnan
She	Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Guangdong
Lisu	Yunnan and Sichuan
Gelao	Guizhou
Dongxiang	Gansu and Xinjiang
Lahu	Yunnan
Shui	Guizhou and Guangxi
Va	Yunnan
Naxi	Yunnan
Qiang	Sichuan
Tu	Qinhai and Gansu
Mulam	Guangxi
Xibe	Liaoning and Xinjiang
Kirgiz	Xinjiang
Daur	Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang
Jingpo	Yunnan
Maonan	Guangxi
Salar	Qinghai
Blang	Yunnan
Tajik	Xinjian
Achang	Yunnan
Pumi	Yunnan
Ewenki	Inner Mongolia
Nu	Yunnan
Jing	Guangxi
Jino	Yunnan
De'ang	Yunnan
Bonan	Gansu
Russian	Xinjiang and Heilongjiang
Yugur	Gansu
Ozbek	Xinjiang
Moinba	Tibet
Orogen	Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia
Drung	Yunnan
Tatar	Xinjiang
Hezhen	Heilongjiang
Gaoshan	Taiwan and Fujian
Lhoba	Tibet

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Recebido em: 05/11/2016

Aprovado em: 06/11/2016