

Growing Apart? Challenges to High-Quality Local Governance and Public Service Provision on China's Ethnic Periphery

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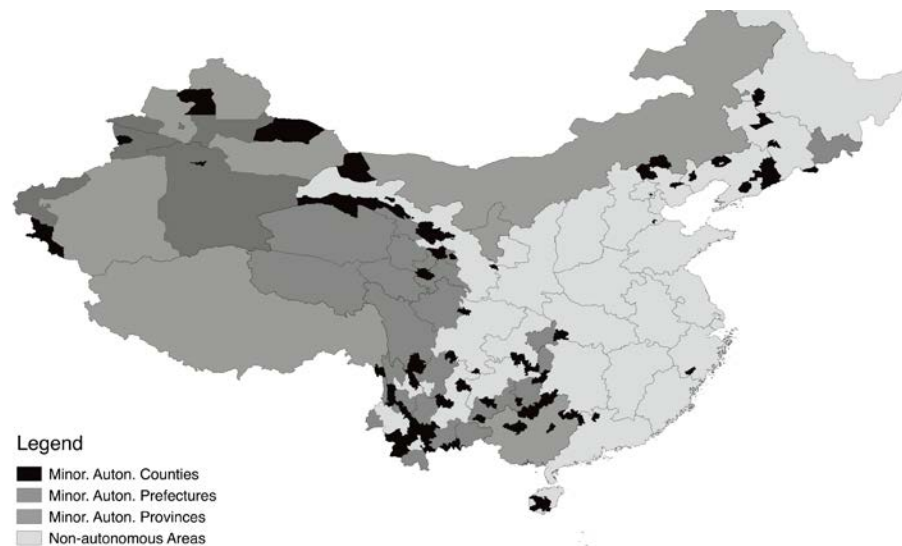
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GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN MULTIETHNIC CHINA

Often assumed to be an ethnically homogenous country, the People's Republic of China (PRC) in fact has a substantial minority population with 54 officially recognized ethnic groups that comprise close to 10 percent of the population. Integrating these diverse groups, many of which have a centuries-long history of conflict with the Han Chinese, into a unified Chinese nation-state has been a core policy challenge for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since 1949.¹ At first, these challenges were largely political and ideological. The CCP struggled to integrate minority elites, many of whom did not share a common language or culture with the overwhelmingly Han leaders of the CCP, into the party. They also sought to create political institutions that both respected local cultural practices and combined these diverse regions under a single, unified state, a challenge that the Soviet Union also had to confront.²

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FIGURE 1: MAP OF AUTONOMOUS AREAS IN CHINA



These political challenges remain relevant and troubling, even 60 years later. In the face of increasing interethnic violence in recent years, particularly in the so-called minority autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, some scholars and policymakers have

called for dramatic changes to the institutional arrangements for balancing national unity with ethnic difference. Prominent Hui scholar Ma Rong, a professor at Peking University, has argued for the dissolution of China's minority autonomous areas on the grounds that they increase minority citizens' attachment to their ethnic identities and strengthen the separatist impulses they were intended to forestall.³

These challenges have been further complicated by China's economic liberalization. In general, ethnically diverse areas have struggled to succeed in the market-based economy that emerged with "reform and opening" beginning in 1978. China's economic growth has fundamentally altered the living conditions for its population; the World Bank estimates that over 600 million Chinese citizens escaped poverty between 1981 and 2004.⁴ However, the gains from growth have been unequally distributed; although the PRC was one of the most economically equal countries in the world in 1978, its income inequality is now higher than that of the US and among the world's most severe.⁵ Ethnic minorities, clustered in rural, inland areas, have been largely left behind by China's high-powered coastal and urban growth, due to a combination of overt discrimination, difficulty migrating to high-employment areas, and poor educational attainment.⁶ Even as rural poverty overall has diminished in China, the Han-minority poverty gap persists; Hannum and Wang (2010) show that between 2000 and 2002, poverty was twice as common among rural minorities as among their Han counterparts.

The Chinese government has attempted to address these inequalities with a series of preferential policies that either explicitly target ethnic minorities or target the geographic areas (primarily in Western China) where ethnic minority populations are clustered (see Table 1). These areas receive fiscal transfers and preferential access to development loans from state banks, for instance, and minority citizens can get into college or the civil service with a lower exam score than can their Han counterparts. Yet these policies have yielded few positive outcomes. Many of the areas that have received the *most* targeted development aid have been the *least* successful at moving people out of poverty, and under the Develop the West program⁷ several human development indicators have been stagnant or even declined in the Western areas where ethnic minorities live.⁸

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TABLE 1. AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PROGRAMS FOR MINORITY AREAS (PARTIAL LIST)

Program	Location	Start Date	Description
Xinjiang Class	Xinjiang	2000	Places students from Xinjiang in elite coastal schools
<i>Gaokao</i> (college entrance exam)	Nationwide		Extra points added to minority students' scores
National Compulsory Education Project	Poor areas	1996	Provides school funding and student subsidies; emphasizes remote and minority areas
"Twinning" program	Nationwide		Pairs coastal areas with poor and minority areas; provides support for education
Develop the West	Western China	2000	Large-scale infrastructure investment program
Minority institutes and universities	Nationwide	1950s	Tertiary institutions with preferential admissions for ethnic minorities, largely devoted to the study of minority languages, culture, autonomy law, etc.
Xinjiang Six Principles	Xinjiang	1990s (?)	60 percent quota for Uyghurs in hiring, army positions, and university admissions in Xinjiang
Poverty county designation	Nationwide	1986	Minority autonomous counties can be designated as "poverty counties" (and eligible for preferential funding as a result) with a higher per capita income than other counties
Subsidized bank loans	Nationwide	1986	Funds disproportionately target minority areas (part of "8-7" national poverty alleviation plan)
Food-for-work program	Nationwide	1986	Rural residents are paid to work on local public infrastructure projects; funding disproportionately goes to minority areas
Development capital	Nationwide	1986	Disproportionately given to minority counties as part of "8-7" national poverty alleviation plan

TOP-DOWN SUPERVISION AND THE FAILURE OF LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES

Why have these policies been so ineffective at reaching their intended targets, especially in the face of the CCP's remarkable success at developing poor areas and raising human capital and living standards in China as a whole? The author's research suggests that the persistence of these problems is a *political* problem as well as a socioeconomic one. To be sure, there are unavoidable challenges to public service provision in areas that can be hard to reach and where citizens' education level and Mandarin-language ability are low. However, the success of China's development

trajectory overall suggests that this is an incomplete explanation for the persistent problems in China's minority areas; after all, many rural Han areas are similarly disadvantaged by geography and language, and yet have been better served by the government than minority areas.

More specifically, the CCP's primary mechanism for holding officials accountable—a system in which an official's superiors monitor his performance on a set of economic, political, and social stability targets, and may reward good performance with promotion—operates poorly in areas that higher-level officials perceive as remote, either physically or culturally. Such officials are reluctant to visit areas that are physically distant from the political capitals in which they work, and they are often reluctant to visit minority areas that they perceive as *culturally* distant, unsanitary, and dangerous. As a result, local officials in these areas go largely unsupervised. They have little professional incentive to work hard to provide high-quality public goods and services, as their hard work is unlikely to be observed (and hence unlikely to lead to promotion). Instead, they do nothing at all or invest in wasteful infrastructure projects rather than in services that benefit citizens more directly.⁹

Two different southwestern counties where the author conducted interviews and non-participant observation bring these dynamics into sharp relief. South Mountain County,¹⁰ a minority autonomous county in Sichuan Province, had limited contact with higher-level officials and suffered from persistent problems with do-nothing local leaders as a result. The area has long been regarded as “barbaric” and “backward” by Han elites, who are reluctant to visit these areas. Even the local officials employed in these areas spent as little time there as possible, keeping apartments and sending their children to school in the prefectural capital several hours away. With minimal supervision from above, local officials had little professional motivation to invest hard work and resources in much-needed improvements to public services, despite the area's alarmingly low educational attainment levels (especially among women and girls), minimal sanitation facilities, and severe public health challenges related to widespread drug use and high rates of HIV/AIDS. As one employee of a local NGO put it:

There has been a lot of new investment, most of it from national transfers—building new school buildings, new houses, and so on. However, none of it really benefits

the common people (*laobaixing*). For instance, township schools have new buildings, but teacher quality is very low. There are kids who have attended several years of school but can't count from one to one hundred; their educational level is lower than that of kindergarten students in [the prefectural capital]. If you go into a township government office, the offices are empty. Township officials don't "serve the people," they take their salaries and move to the county seat or another city. Teachers stick around, but whether they actually teach is another question. Maybe they only teach when someone shows up to observe the school.¹¹

Jade County, an ethnically mixed county in Yunnan Province, provides a useful counterpoint to South Mountain. Like South Mountain, Jade County is rural, but its relatively central location and predominantly Han Chinese county seat make it a common destination for higher-level officials, who visit both during formal "study tours" and for other reasons (such as a province-wide conference that occurred at the county's Party committee-run hotel during the author's stay there). The near-constant presence of higher-level visitors means that local officials who try to shirk their duties will likely be detected and punished. It also means that there are clear career payoffs to hard work and innovation, which are likely to be observed and perhaps rewarded with promotion. These dynamics induce relatively virtuous behavior among county-level officials in the county seat and in nearby, predominantly Han Chinese, townships. The county Party Secretary at the time this research was conducted was a young, ambitious rising star who had spearheaded the creation of a new and heavily used public park, as well as improvements to the county hospital. And lower-level, "street-level" bureaucrats, such as school principals and hospital administrators—subject to frequent observation by their superiors at the county, city, and provincial levels—were also motivated to work hard in the service of their citizens they served. Shirking was not an option in a place where such behavior would almost certainly be detected (and likely punished).

The relatively high quality of services in the county seat provided a marked contrast to some of the county's Yi minority townships, however. These townships suffered from persistent problems in public services (for instance, high dropout rates and poor outcomes among Yi students). Just as officials throughout South Mountain County were poorly supervised by their superiors at the prefectural level, minority townships in Jade

County had little contact with largely Han officials at the county level. Furthermore, county-level officials demonstrated little familiarity with these townships, incorrectly blaming problems on an aversion to education among minority youth, for instance. They rarely spent time in these townships, and their informal social networks brought them into far closer and more frequent contact with local officials from the county's Han townships. These dynamics meant that, while the Yi townships might occasionally benefit from hard work by an altruistic and genuinely service-oriented official, there were few systems in place to provide carrots and sticks that might compel a broader set of officials to act in this manner.

CONCLUSION

China is not the only country that must confront a persistent gap in public service provision and outcomes between ethnic majority and minority populations. However, the author's research suggests that while many of the challenges to high-quality public services in China's minority areas are common problems—among them disadvantageous geography, discriminatory attitudes toward minorities, and low human capital—the CCP also faces a distinctive set of *political* obstacles to improving public services in these areas. As long as the CCP relies on a system of top-down monitoring of local officials and affords the supervisors substantial discretion over the extent of their contact with the areas they supervise, both ethnic and geospatial challenges are likely to emerge. In the absence of frequent contact with higher officials, local officials responsible for implementing public service programs have little incentive to innovate or to expend more than minimal effort, as their hard work is unlikely to be observed by their superiors and rewarded with career advancement. Because higher-level officials are often reluctant to visit areas that are geographically remote or minority areas, which they often regard as culturally distant or “backward,” the problems of poor supervision disproportionately affect the residents of such areas.

These problems are difficult to solve in the absence of democratic accountability to citizens. Research on village elections in China has shown that, although these elections typically do not meet the minimum standard to be considered “free and fair,”

they have nonetheless compelled village officials to be more responsive to voters.¹² Unfortunately, while there have been limited experiments with direct elections at the township level, these experiments have been slow to expand, and it is unlikely that citizens beyond a few localities will gain quasi-democratic control over their officials above the village level in the near future.¹³

However, there are other possibilities that could hold officials in ethnic minority areas accountable—without the political risks that make direct elections unpalatable for the CCP. First, since assuming the presidency in 2013, Xi Jinping has waged a fierce battle against local government corruption and waste. Campaigns like “four dishes and a soup”—designed to rein in the lavish banquets to which many officials were accustomed—have had visible effects on consumption of luxury goods across China, and in the longer term, it is certainly possible that these types of campaigns will deter official corruption and mismanagement more generally.¹⁴

A second possibility is that technology will provide citizens with new tools for monitoring local officials. E-governance has become increasingly important in China; in addition to nationwide phone hotlines for requesting public services or registering complaints, citizens in many localities can now use a “mayor’s mailbox” or an evaluation form to ask for help from local leaders or to register their opinion of local officials. Many “netizens” also use BBS (bulletin board system) sites and microblogging sites like Weibo and Weixin to draw attention to local government corruption, engaging in a “cat and mouse” game in which they try to evade censorship from automated text-blocking software and internet monitors. New research suggests that these methods can incentivize officials to respond to citizens’ complaints, especially when the potential career penalties for ignoring them are high.¹⁵ During the author’s fieldwork in southwestern China, however, there was little evidence that these new tools are acting as a check on local officials there; citizens often have limited access to the web, and officials in these areas make very limited use of e-governance tools. If higher-level political elites were intent on improving governance and public services in minority areas, investing in improved communication technologies and broader access to those technologies—in essence, giving citizens the tools to report on inept local governments—would be a powerful way to circumvent the control of local officials intent on insulating themselves from supervision.

Improved use of technology could also help officials to directly monitor the public services they are responsible for overseeing. In one experiment in India, using cameras to photograph classrooms during the school day reduced teacher absenteeism by 21 percentage points.¹⁶ Since the author's research finds that absenteeism and shirking are rampant in minority areas, where these behaviors are unlikely to be observed and punished, similar interventions could have dramatic effects in China as well.

Finally, the CCP should devise new methods of "minding the minders" to diminish the sizeable differences across localities in the frequency and quality of top-down monitoring. The author's research reveals that, whatever the policies on paper, in practice some localities receive near-constant attention from higher-level officials while others are essentially ignored. Randomly assigning officials to the locations where they have to go on study tours would take much of the discretion out of this process. The mid-level officials responsible for monitoring remote localities could themselves be monitored remotely when they conduct study tours (along the lines of legislation proposed in New York City that would require city health inspectors to wear cameras to diminish opportunities for corruption). These changes—consistent with the Xi administration's broader emphasis on bringing local officials to heel—could have especially large effects in the types of localities where existing systems for monitoring and control of local officials have largely broken down.

NOTES

1. Indeed, the CCP was forced to confront the challenges of managing diverse areas even before it formally founded the PRC in 1949, as the Long March took the CCP's Red Army through many areas largely inhabited by ethnic minority groups whose loyalty had to be won. For an interesting description of some of the CCP's early experiences with the Yi minority in southwestern China, see Winnington (1959).
2. The debates over these challenges, and the approaches that the CCP took to addressing them in the 1940s and 1950s, are described in greater detail in Dreyer (1976).
3. Elliott 2015; Sautman 2012.
4. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2010/03/19/results-profile-china-poverty-reduction>

5. Xie and Zhou, 2014.
6. Yang et al. 2015; Zang 2012.
7. A large-scale investment program designed primarily to improve public infrastructure in the Western region, where ethnic minorities are clustered.
8. Bhalla and Qiu 2006; Ma and Summers 2009.
9. The problem of inefficient infrastructure investment is certainly not limited to China's minority areas, as media stories about virtually unused airports and "ghost cities" across China suggest.
10. To protect the author's interviewees, the place names used here are pseudonyms.
11. Interview with NGO employee, South Mountain County, 2010.
12. Manion 1996.
13. Li 2002; Huang 2009.
14. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/28/world/asia/xi-jinping-imposes-austerity-measures-on-chinas-elite.html>
15. Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016.
16. Duflo, Hanna, and Rya 2012.

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