

*Ethnic Autonomy and Ethnic Inequality: An Empirical Assessment of Ethnic Policy in Urban China**

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Abstract

To balance ethnocultural diversity with national integration, the Chinese government started formulating a series of ethnic policies in the early 1950s, including policies on identifying and classifying ethnic groups, a system of regional ethnic autonomy, and a set of preferential treatment policies toward 55 minorities. This article aims to examine socioeconomic disparities between ethnic minorities and the Han majority in China, focusing on the role played by regional ethnic autonomy. Based on a large sample of China's mini-census data collected in 2005, we show that among nonfarm working populations,

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minorities are more likely than the Han to become managers/professionals or obtain high-status occupation, regardless of whether they are living in their own autonomous jurisdiction or other places. Minorities are paid lower wages, however, even after controlling for other characteristics, and the gap is even wider in autonomous jurisdictions than elsewhere. Finally, children of mixed Han-minority marriages in ethnic autonomous jurisdictions are more likely to identify themselves as minorities, especially those holding urban registration status (*hukou*) whose parents have received more schooling. Our findings bear important implications for the current debate on ethnic policy in China.

China is a multiethnic nation consisting of 56 groups—the Han and 55 minorities. These 55 minority groups combined account for about 8.4 percent of the national population, according to the most recent population census in 2010.¹ These ethnic minorities are scattered across the vast territory, but mainly concentrated in the border regions in northwestern and southwestern China, with each inhabiting certain areas.² For a long period of time, it had been a great challenge for the Chinese central authority to achieve national unity and social cohesion while maintaining ethnocultural diversity and dignity.³ Back in the early 1950s, the newly established communist government had adopted a more circumscribing ethnic policy that “sinicized” some important aspects of Marxist-Leninist theory on ethnic issues within a country whose population was overwhelmed by the Han majority. The new policy to advocate minorities’ socioeconomic rights and to promote ethnic egalitarianism and national unity consisted of three key elements: policies on identifying and classifying ethnic groups, a system of regional ethnic autonomy, and a set of preferential treatment policies toward minorities.⁴

To implement the Chinese version of the affirmative actions, the party-state had to first determine the number of ethnic groups in China so that they could be fully protected and represented in the political, economic and cultural spheres. Ethnologists were dispatched to determine the ethnic diversity of the new nation-state, which led to the official recognition of 56 ethnic groups comprising 55 minorities in addition to the Han majority.⁵ Of the 55 ethnic minority groups, 18 had reached a population of 1 million by 1990.⁶ Nowadays Chinese citizens have their ethnicity clearly marked on their personal identification cards and also most other official documents.⁷

According to the first Constitution of China in 1954, minority groups residing in a compact community are entitled to the rights of regional