Comparing Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese in China: Life Satisfaction, Economic Well Being and Political Attitudes

SHAN Wei*

A nationwide survey in 2008 demonstrates that ethnic minorities do have grievances and feel economically disadvantaged. Minority groups are more psychologically alienated from the political regime and less likely to believe that the government is responsive to their needs. They trust the government less than the Han, and in general are less likely than the Han to identify themselves as “Chinese.”

THE TIBET RIOTS in March 2009 and the recent violent ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang revealed deep-rooted ethnic tensions in China. The discontentment and resentment among ethnic minorities, especially the Uyghurs and Tibetans, called into question the official claim that China is a “harmonious family for the 56 ethnic groups.”

* SHAN Wei is Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.
Besides the majority Han Chinese (91.5% of the population), the government recognises 55 other “nationalities” or ethnic groups, including Zhuang, Manchu, Hui, Miao, Uyghur, Tujia, Yi, Mongol and Tibetan, concentrated mostly in the central and western provinces. Most of the groups have their own languages and religion, such as Islam, Buddhism and Taoism.

Among these groups, two religious minorities, the Uyghurs and Tibetans, exhibit great capacity for organised resistance against the government. Some of their leaders are even capable of mobilising resources for independence movements from within or outside China.

One of the major reasons for ethnic conflicts is “grievance,” a feeling of suffering from unfair treatments, such as income inequality, lack of political rights, cultural discrimination, etc. Academic research has revealed that the grievances of minorities underlie the violence in Tibet and Xinjiang. What gave rise to such grievances? Do the minorities feel they are discriminated by the political system? How does their attitude towards the nation and the government differ from that of the Han Chinese?

It is vital for a multi-ethnic society to close the gaps among different ethnicities in terms of their political attitudes. Whether the Chinese government can hold these groups with different languages, beliefs and cultures together largely depends on whether the ethnic minorities share a common national identity with the Han Chinese. Experiences of other countries, such as Singapore and the United States, demonstrate that racial harmony can only be achieved when all ethnic groups in the society have some common identities and shared attitudes towards the existing political system.

In a nationwide survey of citizen attitudes by Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), Chinese citizens were asked about their satisfaction with their daily life, their interest in public issues, their evaluation of economic wellbeing in the past five years, and so forth. While the survey was conducted between December 2007 and May 2008 with a small number of cases collected in November and December of 2008, it throws light on the current state of the minorities.

The data show that ethnic minorities in China do have grievances and they feel politically disadvantaged in comparison with the Han majority. In general minorities are significantly less satisfied with their life and feel less happy than their Han neighbours.

Economically, while all Chinese people feel better off than five years earlier, ethnic minorities believe they gain lesser in terms of welfare than the Han group.

Han Chinese has a higher level of interest in political issues while minorities in the west are most indifferent to politics. Generally, ethnic minorities feel competent in understanding and participating in public affairs, but again those in the west have the lowest level of such sense of capacity.

Minority groups and the Han Chinese also differ in their perception of the Chinese government. Minorities are less likely to believe that the government is responsive to their demands and needs. And the government is less trustworthy to them than to the Han people. Minority citizens in central and western provinces prefer a more speedy reform of the political institutions, which somehow reflects their discontentment with the existing regime.
Consequently, minority citizens are less likely than the Han to identify themselves as “Chinese,” especially so in the central and western provinces, where most Uyghurs and Tibetans live.

Implications for Chinese policy makers are clear. The government will do well to change the disadvantaged status of minorities. Substantial efforts need to be taken to reduce income inequalities and improve life satisfaction of minorities. It is also crucial to enhance minority citizens’ psychological involvement in the national political system by improving their perception of participation capacity and governmental responsiveness.

In the long term Chinese decision makers should make it their central task to promote the Chinese identity of minority groups. It is only when non-Han groups and the Han have more political opinions in common and a common national identity can they live harmoniously and peacefully in a multi-ethnic China.

**Life Satisfaction and Happiness**

A look at ethnic minorities’ satisfaction with their life shows that they are not as happy and satisfied as the Han majority.

On a 1-10 scale, respondents of the survey were asked to assess their life, where “1” refers to “extremely unsatisfied” and “10” means “extremely satisfied.” Figure 1 presents the level of satisfaction of the Chinese people. The score of over six shows that people are generally satisfied with their lives. However, the Han people are significantly more satisfied than certain minority groups in all the three regions.

Respondents were also asked, “In general, do you think your life is happy?”

![Figure 1: Life Satisfaction of Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese](chart.png)

*Source: Asian Barometer, 2008*
assess their level of happiness with life. The answers are 1: not very happy; 2: relatively happy; and 3: very happy. Figure 2 shows that the Chinese people are generally not very happy. Only residents in the coastal provinces have a score of over two and believe they are relatively happy; people in the central and western regions are somewhere between “not very happy” and “relatively happy.” Across the three regions,
the Han are happier than their minority neighbours. Ethnic minorities in the western provinces are the least happy group in the country.

While the Chinese government has invested heavily in the minority areas with the intention of improving the economic wellbeing of the natives, income gaps between the Han and other groups are still prevalent. These gaps, as argued by many, are one of the major reasons underlying ethnic tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang.

Figure 3 illustrates how the Han and minority people evaluate their family economic conditions in the past five years in response to a survey question: “In comparison with five years ago, what is the economic situation of your family, much better (5), better (4), no change (3), worse (2), or much worse (1)?” Although both the Han and the minorities feel they are better off than five years earlier, the minority people in the central and western regions perceive lesser gains in welfare than their Han counterparts.

This explains why rapid economic growth in China fails to ease ethnic tensions. The minority groups in the central and western regions believe they do not benefit equally as the Han, and they are victims of Han exploitation.

**Political Attitudes**

*Political interest*

Political interest is an indicator of an individual’s psychological involvement in the political system. Indifference to public affairs reveals alienation from the regime and the authorities. Citizen interest can be measured by how often people acquire political information via the mass media, or how frequently political issues were discussed among citizens.

Figure 4 shows the interest of the Chinese in their existing political system as measured

![Figure 4: Political Interest of Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese](image)
by four survey questions: “How often do you listen to radio, watching TV, or read newspapers regarding political matters?”, “Are you interested in political matters?”, “How often do you talk about politics with your family?”; and “How often do you talk about politics or national issues with your friend?” The four variables are loaded on one factor and the factor score is used in the analysis. Except for the eastern provinces, where the interest level of the minorities is slightly higher than the Han, the Han people are more psychologically engaged in the political system. Minority citizens in the west feel the most alienated from the Chinese political system.

**Political Capacity**

Political capacity is a type of efficacy. Political efficacy refers to a feeling that one has some control over one’s political environment. According to Shi Tianjian, “(W)ithout any political efficacy, there exists political apathy and withdrawal from political life, and strong feelings of efficacy tend to make people interested in political activities.” There are two types of efficacy. Political efficacy refers to one’s competence in understanding politics and participating effectively in politics. Governmental responsiveness, another type of efficacy, refers to beliefs regarding how responsive governmental authorities are to the demands of citizens. In academic research on political attitudes, these two types of efficacy are called “internal efficacy” and “external efficacy” respectively.

To assess the political capacity of Chinese citizens, respondents were asked to give their assessments of politics in their country: (1) “I know the situation in our village/work unit well”; (2) “I know well the major political issues faced by our country” and (3) “Like most others, I know well politics and government.” The three variables are

![FIGURE 5 POLITICAL CAPACITY OF ETHNIC MINORITIES AND HAN CHINESE](source: Asian Barometer, 2008)
Governmental responsiveness refers to the perception of how much the government cares about citizen demands and opinions. Figure 6 shows the perceived responsiveness of the government. It is measured by five items: (1) “People like me have no influence on governmental decisions”; (2) “The country is controlled by a small number of powerful persons and the general public has no say in governmental issues”; (3) “In our work unit/village, people like me have no say in public affairs”; (4) “Governmental officials don’t care much about what people like me think” and (5) “In general, politics is too complicated for people like me to understand.” The five variables are loaded on one factor and the factor score is used in the analysis.

Minority groups in general hold a lower level of belief than the Han that the government authorities are responsive to their needs. In the western provinces the gap is the largest, where minorities had a score that was only about two-thirds that of the Han people.

Political trust refers to the belief that the government is able to deliver the preferred outcome. This is a crucial component of political support for a regime because it gives the government room to manoeuvre in times of crisis. In our analysis of political trust in China, in both the western and central provinces, the government is less trustworthy.
the minorities than to the Han people. In the eastern coastal region, minorities have the same level of trust as the Han, attributed possibly to the full assimilation of the minorities with Han culture and lifestyle.

**Political Reform**

Based on the aforementioned analysis, if ethnic minorities in China are less engaged in the political system and feel less capable of participating in the public issues, the minority groups are apt to support a change in status quo, aka, they are more likely to support political reform.

Figure 7 depicts Chinese respondents’ answer to the survey question about the pace of political reform: “Do you agree that political reform should be carried step by step and cannot be accomplished at one stroke.” In the analysis the question is coded as (1) very agree; (2) agree; (3) disagree; and (4) very disagree. Higher score means stronger support for speedy change. Except for the east coast area, minorities in both the central and western provinces prefer a more rapid reform of the regime and wish to get the reform done at one stroke; to some extent, this reflects their dissatisfaction with the current regime.

**Chinese Identity**

It is crucial for a multi-ethnic nation-state to establish a national identity, for example, the Singaporean nation, or the American nation. The disintegration of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia was largely a consequence of an absence of a national identity shared by different ethnic groups. Only when members of different groups identify

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**FIGURE 7 SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL REFORM OF ETHNIC MINORITIES AND HAN CHINESE**

Source: Asian Barometer, 2008
themselves with a common nation can these groups be possibly united as a country.

Figure 8 demonstrates how citizens in China evaluate their identification with the Chinese nation on a 1-4 scale based on the survey question, “Are you proud to be a Chinese, very proud (4), proud (3), not quite proud (2), or not proud at all (1)?” Although the average level is around 3, there are significant gaps between the Han Chinese and the minorities.

Except for the industrialised eastern provinces, minorities in the central and western regions have significantly lower levels of pride as a Chinese. In the west, where most Uyghurs and Tibetans live, the minorities only score between “not quite proud (2)” and “proud (3)”; this signifies that ethnic minorities in that region have yet to develop a strong Chinese identity.

**Policy Implications**

Overall, ethnic minorities in China do have grievances, especially those in the central and western areas because they tend to perceive themselves as the most disadvantaged in the country. In comparison with the Han majority, the minority groups are less satisfied with their life, feel less happy, are less interested in politics, trust the government less, are less likely to perceive responsiveness of the government and hold stronger belief that the current political system need to be reformed in a fast way.

As long as grievances exist, national integration of different groups remains an unenviable task for the Chinese government. Substantial efforts need to be taken to change the economically disadvantaged status of minorities and improve their life satisfaction. It is crucial to reduce income inequalities between the Han and other groups. More resources would need to be spent on increasing the income of minority families instead of pursuing GDP growth.

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**FIGURE 8  CHINESE IDENTITY OF ETHNIC MINORITIES AND HAN CHINESE**

![Chart showing Chinese identity of ethnic minorities and Han Chinese]

*Source: Asian Barometer, 2008*
Enhancing the psychological engagement of minority citizens in the Chinese political system will go a long way in assimilating them into the Chinese society. Improving channels of citizen participation in public affairs, local elections as an example, is an effective way to enhancing minority citizens’ interest in politics and their capacity to participate. The authorities could also pay more attention to meeting the demands or needs of the minority groups to make them feel that the government is responsive to citizens’ opinions across ethnicity.

In the long run the focus should be on promoting the Chinese identity of the non-Han ethnic groups. Only when the gaps in political attitudes among different groups become less and less significant and when minority people become equally satisfied and happy in life as their Han fellows can a common national identity be created and can different people live in harmony and peace within the multi-ethnic state of China.