



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Asia Report: Contestation and Adaptation: The Politics of National Identity in China

As an ethnically heterogeneous country, China faces a unique challenge in its nation building efforts: establishing a unified Chinese national identity that satisfies both the Han Chinese majority and China's various ethnic minority groups. Thus far the results of these efforts have been mixed: while most of China's 55 ethnic minority groups have assimilated into a "Chinese" national identity, other minority groups, most notably the Tibetans and Uighurs, have forcefully contested the idea of Chinese national identity on multiple occasions.

Why do some ethnic groups mobilize national identity contestation while others do not? For a view on China's nation building processes from a leading expert, Dr. Enze Han, Lecturer at the Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS, University of London, listen to a talk on "Contestation and Adaptation: The Politics of National Identity in China," delivered at the Sigur Center on March 31 [here](#). Rising Powers Initiative author Allen Carlson also weighed in on the "fractured state of relations" between Han Chinese and minority populations in a blog post that can be viewed [here](#).

National Identity Contestation: External Kin and External Support

An ethnic group's national identity contestation is conditioned upon two factors, according to Enze Han. First, a better alternative for the ethnic minority group needs to exist. An ethnic group's well-being is

relative to that of external kin—if external kin have a higher standard of living, this may be considered the better alternative, thereby creating ethnic minority grievances. However, if external kin have lower living conditions, then the ethnic minority may remain content; relative standing vis-à-vis other groups matter in determining a group’s perception of their current situation. The second factor conditioning an ethnic group’s national identity contestation is that the better alternative needs to be achievable—tangible support from external kin must be available. In other words, “people will only do it if there’s a better option, and if this better option is achievable; otherwise, they won’t engage politically to achieve the better alternative.”

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In instances where external kin with higher living standards exist, three potential sources of external support for the ethnic minority are identified. Large powers constitute one source of external support. The United States and Soviet Union, for example, supported ethnic rebel groups during the Cold War. Another potential source of support comes from the external kin homeland—those countries that claim themselves as the homeland for a particular ethnic group and act as spokespeople for these groups, as in the case of the Uighur minority and their historical ties with Central Asian republics and eastern Turkestan. The last source of external support stems from diaspora communities that have more recently become salient in contesting identity, including groups such as the Tamil diaspora and their involvement in the Sri Lankan civil war. Given these variables, the following hypotheses are posited to determine whether ethnic groups will contest or adapt to national identity:

Predictions for Ethnic Group National Identity Contestation and Adaptation

	Groups with External Cultural Ties		Groups without External Cultural Ties
	External Support	No External Support	
External Kin Enjoys Better Living Condition	National Identity Contestation	Emigration	Assimilation
External Kin Enjoys Worse Living Condition	Cultural Autonomy	Assimilation	

Of China’s 55 ethnic minority groups, four groups with external ties are identified to examine in closer detail: Chinese Koreans, or *chosenjok* in Yanbian, Jilin; Mongols in Inner Mongolia; Uighurs in Xinjiang; and Tibetans in Tibet. Each of these groups have varying levels of support from external kin and demonstrate the importance of considering external factors in explaining whether ethnic groups choose to contest or adapt to nation-building policies.

Chinese-Koreans and Mongols: Ambiguous Understandings of Ethnic and National Belonging

For Chinese-Koreans, or *chosenjok*, mixed interactions with external kin groups have produced ambiguous understandings of ethnic and national belonging. These mixed interactions stem from the existence of two external kin states: South Korea and North Korea. In South Korea, economic prosperity and democracy act as an “achievable better alternative”; however, *chosenjok* find themselves excluded from potential opportunity due to their exclusion in the Overseas Korean Act, which affords visa status, economic rights, and social benefits such as health insurance to defined groups of “overseas Koreans.” Conversely, poverty, hardship, and a brutal dictatorship have ruled out

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North Korea as a source of external support for *chosenjok*. The disparity in external support has resulted in two outcomes. The first outcome is emigration to South Korea, typically through illegal means. This emigration is oftentimes gendered, with women being heavily recruited as part of match-making marriage programs for South Korean men. The second outcome is a large influx of *chosenjok* migrating to large coastal cities within China with sizable South Korean business interests, where greater economic opportunities exist. Thus, the case of the Chinese-Korean community exemplifies an instance where mixed interactions with external kin have produced ambiguous understandings of national identity.

The Mongol ethnic minority is another ambiguous case, wherein low external support combined with mixed quality of living conditions has led to cultural autonomy with increasing tendency towards assimilation. Mongols in China are relatively well off economically compared to Mongols across the border, but do not enjoy the same political freedoms as in Mongolia. Within China, the minority group has faced tremendous pressure from the Han Chinese minority to assimilate. In Mongolia, nation-building campaigns emphasizing the racial purity of Mongols as exclusionary to Chinese Mongols have limited the amount of external support available for national identity contestation. This has led to cultural autonomy amongst the Mongol minority with the establishment of Mongolian-language schools in Inner Mongolia. More recently however, a larger percentage of the Mongol minority has elected to send their children to Mandarin-language schools, hoping to strengthen job prospects upon completion of their education. With a growing number of Mongols attending Mandarin-speaking schools, it is predicted that growing fluency in

Chinese will lead to greater assimilation towards a stronger 'Chinese' identity.

National Identity Contestation amongst Uighurs and Tibetans

For Uighurs in Xinjiang, strong religious and cultural ties to Turkic Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan combined with alternative better models of development in Soviet Central Asia and Turkey have caused the minority group to view their external kin as a "better alternative." Moreover, Uighurs in China generally suffer from poverty and a lack of economic development in comparison to both external kin and other regions of China, in addition to a lack of cultural rights. Historically, external support for the Uighurs has come from the Soviet Union such as the Soviet-supported Ili Rebellion against China from 1944 – 1947 and the Ili-Tarbagatay incident in 1960. Another source of external support has come from Turkey and the Central Asian republics, who spoke out in support of the Uighur population following violent protests in Urumqi in 2009 that resulted in nearly two hundred casualties. Therefore, an achievable "better alternative" combined with external support has led to identity contestation in Xinjiang.

Similarly, Tibet's external connections have impacted its views on national identity. Historically, Tibet has never desired to be part of China; in fact, when China annexed Tibet in 1950, the Tibetan government considered itself economically closer to India. Following the People's Liberation Army's suppression of a major Tibetan uprising in 1959, the PRC government has continued to tighten its political grip on Tibet while simultaneously encouraging ethnic Han Chinese to move to Tibet. The government's economic development programs in Tibet have disproportionately benefited ethnic Chinese residents and increased Chinese migration to the region, stoking fears of marginalization and cultural assimilation. External support for Tibet has come from the U.S. government, who once offered the Tibetan resistance paramilitary and intelligence support through the CIA's covert mission during the early Cold War, and now diplomatically pressures Chinese officials to start talks with the Dalai Lama. Given Tibet's strong ties with external kin, political suppression by the Chinese government, a lower standard of living compared to ethnic Han Chinese and external kin, and U.S. external support, national identity contestation in Tibet comes as no surprise and confirms the hypothesis.

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Conclusion

While the hypotheses reveal significant insights on the role that external factors play in an ethnic group's national identity contestation, the speaker cautioned that the relationship is more complex: history, natural resources, repression, institutions, race, and numerous other variables may affect whether and how a group may challenge national identity. Nonetheless, examination of the *chosenjok*, Mongolian, Uighur, and Tibetan minority groups reveals the impact of external factors in determining whether these groups have chosen to migrate towards greater economic opportunities, assimilate into mainstream Han Chinese culture, remain culturally autonomous, or contest national identity. In some cases, as with the *chosenjok* and Mongolian ethnic minorities, mixed external support and economic conditions have kept notions of national identity in a state of flux. Conversely, the Uighur and Tibetan case demonstrate that in instances where the ethnic minority has external kin enjoying better living conditions along with external support, the existence of an "achievable better alternative" will result in national identity contestation. As the Chinese government continues the push to create a unified Chinese identity, it would do well to consider how external factors may impact national identity amongst China's ethnic minority groups.

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