How Ethnic Solidarity and Development in Yunnan Are Made Possible

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Cultures do not necessarily come into "clashes" in a globalized context. Each can cherish its tunes while sharing the melody with others. What appear to be "cultural clashes" today are actually rooted deeply in a social, economic and political process in which cultural or ethnic identities are maneuvered to further certain interests and/or powers. Hence "culture consumerism" may not just mean the exploitation of culture as a source of economic benefit (e.g. the development of tourism on the basis of cultural attractions); it may also refer to the fact that cultural/ethnic identities become a means to mobilize different social forces to achieve certain economic and/or political purposes. In this sense, building an inclusive society does not rely solely on the consolidation of values, customs, norms, social behaviors and traditions. It also depends on the social, economic and political framework and process in which different agents are dynamically shaping/reshaping the context of defining/redefining one's relations with others, creating/recreating "sameness" among the members of a cultural/ethnic group. In other words, cultural and religious factors are not necessarily the key causes of conflicts or "clashes"; an inclusive society can be achieved through proper economic and political process. Cultural clashes can be reduced/mitigated through a proper social mechanism in which each person has an equal right to participate in social, economic and political life, and to get social services and life resources.

Ethnic conflicts, discrimination and oppression were not rare phenomena (particularly in marginal areas like Yunnan) in the long history before 1949 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established. The main causes of these ethnic conflicts were: (1) land disputes; (2) an excessive tax burden; and (3) blood feuds. Since the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), the imperial power at the center of China adopted the "*Tusi* (chieftain) system" in which hereditary tribal headmen in marginal regions were appointed by the imperial court to rule locally on behalf of the central power. This led to a power imbalance among ethnic groups because some groups (usually stronger ones) were empowered by the imperial count, while some smaller and weaker ones were oppressed. Ethnic identity at that time played an important role in power distribution. The conflicts between the stronger ones and the weak ones co-existed, and were triggered by land disputes, an excessive tax burden or blood feuds. But they were often expressed and/or represented as ethnic/cultural clashes.

In the early 1950s when asked about ethnic identity, people all over China identified themselves into more than 400 ethnic groups. Official ethnic re-identification between 1950 and 1983 has confirmed 56 ethnic groups based on the fundamental principles of "shared territory, shared language, shared economic mode and shared psychological make-up."[1] Among them, Han is the

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[1] This was borrowed from Joseph Stalin's concept of ethnicity in the time of the Soviet Union.

majority, accounting for 92% of the national population, and the other 55 are *shaoshu minzu* (ethnic minorities). Such official identification cannot be said to be unproblematic. But together with the up-coming national ethnic policies, strategies and the Law of Regional Ethnic Autonomy on the principle of "national unity and ethnic equality," this national identification has contributed significantly to reducing and mitigating ethnic conflicts in Yunnan.

The key policies and measures under the Law of Regional Ethnic Autonomy include:

(1) Integrating all ethnic groups into nation building through "socialist democratic reform," and stressing that "all ethnic groups, big or small, are brothers." Both Han chauvinism and narrow local nationalism should be absolutely opposed.

(2) Leaders and talents from ethnic minorities should be encouraged and trained, particularly those working in ethnic minority regions.

(3) Various preferential policies for ethnic minority people in education, family planning, employment and many other fields.

(4) Special support and subsidies for development in ethnic minority areas.

These and many other economic and political measures, or strategies, have on the one hand strengthened ethnic identity. For example, Chinese laws stipulate that a child can choose its ethnic identity based on its parents' ethnic identity. If one of the parents is Han and the other is an ethnic minority, it can almost be certain that most people will choose their child to be ethnic minority. On the other hand, the strengthened ethnic identity does not bring more conflicts among people from different ethnic groups. First of all, all the land in China is either state-owned or collective-owned (by village or community). Individuals or groups have the right to use (through contract) the land but have no ownership. This makes land disputes between different ethnic groups obsolete. Secondly, ethnic minority people enjoy more preferential policies and subsidies in community or individual development rather than have more tax burden. Sometimes, by claiming to be ethnic minority, an individual may have more life chances, particularly in ethnic minority autonomous regions. Thirdly, whether an ethnic group can get subsidies or national support depends wholly on empirical need rather than its power and strength. Particularly when the government targets subsidies and support to poor individuals/households rather than groups, ethnic group identity becomes less significant than individual identity.

The PRC's measures and strategies to reduce or mitigate ethnic conflicts, though controversial in some international academia or among some politicians out of the PRC, have significantly contributed to promoting a better relationship among different ethnic groups in Yunnan since the 1950s. The main success lies in the fact that ethnic culture and identity are taken as an integral part of the social, economic and political process.

Dulong Village after the reconstruction[2]

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[2] The Dulong people (total population 6,930) are one of the smallest ethnic groups in China. In 2010–2015, the government invested over CNY 1.2 billion as part of a national development scheme to improve the living conditions for the 4000 Dulong people living in the deep valley between China and Myanmar. This not only integrates the group into mainstream development, but also strengthens ethnic identity. (Photo by the author)