

Teaching about Ethnicities in China

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A unit on China's ethnicities provides students rich opportunities to explore multiple themes in the social studies while helping them to develop a deeper understanding of recent events in western China. Studying China's ethnic minorities encompasses such topics as stereotyping, cultural diversity, the creation of ethnic identities, and key historical and geographic concepts. The rise to dominance of Han Chinese culture within East Asia, the nature of Han/non-Han relations, the emergence of nation-states and nationalism, and the development of ethnic and political identities are major threads in world history. Finally, a study of the modern period presents students with opportunities to examine questions of power, authority, governance, human and civil rights, and international relations.

Regardless of which thematic vehicle students use, they should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the following key points:

1. Definitions of diversity vary among cultures and change over time.
2. Ethnic identities are not immutable; they result from a variety of forces—self, group, other groups and the state—and are negotiated or evolve over time.
3. The development of the majority Han Chinese identity and its relationship with minority groups has a complex history.
4. The emergence of nationalism is a relatively new development in world history.
5. The roots of the current issues in Tibet and Xinjiang go back to the expansion of the Qing Empire, the emergence of European-style nationalism, and the conflict between “empire” and “nation-state” that began with European expansion.
6. The designation, “nationalities” (*minzu*) in China is the result of influence from Soviet social science.
7. Modern concepts of civil and human rights are understood differently in different settings, both by those engaged in struggles for them and by those accused of repressing them.

Diversity

China has 56 officially recognized “nationalities,” including the majority Han comprising over 90 percent of China's population. Within the Han, there is considerable linguistic and cultural diversity. An introduction to this diversity, however defined, can help students to

overcome stereotypes about the homogeneity of China and lead to deeper questions of how diversity came to exist and how cultural and ethnic identities are formed in the United States, China, and other parts of the world. Students might begin by brainstorming how diversity is defined in their own communities, how they define themselves, how other groups define them, and what role government plays in creating, maintaining or breaking down ethnic identities. Once students become aware of the fluidity of ethnic identity and the various forces that shape it in their own experience, they can begin a serious look at ethnic identities in China. An investigation into the emergence of a “Chinese” or Han identity, more closely connected to Confucian universal ideals than to ethnicity, can be very instructive as students struggle to determine what defines the “American” identity. The Stanford Program on International and Cross Cultural Education (S.P.I.C.E.) unit, “Ethnic Minorities in China,” begins with activities that engage students in exploration and reflection.

History

Students should understand that today's news stories about Xinjiang and Tibet have complex histories that go back hundreds of years. Some studies of the history of “Chinese” identity go back to the earliest dynasties;¹ others to the fourth century CE, when the Chinese



Bai minority women in Yunnan Province stitch patterns into fabric. (Caryn White Stedman, Summer 2001)

court fled south following the loss of the North China Plain to non-Chinese nomadic people.² For much of the history of China, the official policy was one of assimilation, so that many of those who identify themselves as Han (ethnic Chinese, a referent to the Han Dynasty, 221 BCE- 220 CE) today may have ancestors who were non-Han in the past.

In a world history course, students studying ancient and classical civilizations might explore the concepts of political/cultural identity through a comparison of the Roman Empire and Han China. The Cornell University Expanding East Asian Studies program's unit "Chinese Perspectives on Identity before the Nation" engages students in a study of Chinese cultural identity in the classical period. Using this unit and

widely available primary sources on the Roman Empire, students can compare perspectives on Roman and Chinese political identity and discuss the ramifications of the fall of both. Did a "Chinese" cultural identity endure after the collapse of the Han? What happened to Roman political identity in Byzantium and Medieval Europe?

Some scholars argue that the concept of Han as the majority nationality in China is the result of modern nationalism and the attempt to create a nation-state out of the remnants of the Qing Empire, which encompassed not only the Manchu homeland in present-day Northeast China and the traditional Han territory of eastern China, but expanded to include Mongolia, Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang. The inclusion of

these territories into its multi-ethnic empire at the very time when conflict with the West was beginning has some bearing on the situation today. After the collapse of the Qing in 1911, Chinese nationalists debating questions of national identity were faced with what to do about these regions. Dr. Sun Yat-sen promoted the idea of a new Republic of Five Nationalities—Han, Hui (Muslim), Manchu, Mongol and Tibetan—with the ultimate goal of assimilation into a single Chinese identity. Chiang Kai-shek's continued support of the concept of assimilation was evidenced in his statement in 1939 that all non-Han groups were sub-varieties of an ancient Chinese race.³

The Qing and the Ottoman Empires provide rich opportunities for compari-

sons of how multi-ethnic empires were established, expanded, faced Western imperialism and internal disruption, and dealt with questions of ethnic and political identity. Both the Cornell unit (mentioned previously) and a unit on China and Tibet published by Indiana University's East Asian Studies Center include teacher background materials and student activities on the Qing Empire. Students might also explore American imperialism and the acquisition of Hawaii and debate the oft-cited statement that "China has as much right to Tibet as the U.S. has to Hawaii."

Well before the 1949 Communist victory, Mao and the party leaders had developed policies toward minorities that were, in part, modeled upon the Soviet example of identifying Central Asian nationalities, and included some level of autonomy, if not self-determination. After 1949, the Chinese government, in emulation of and with some support from Soviet social science (using Stalin's criteria of territory, language, economy, and culture), undertook a massive campaign to identify and classify "nationalities." From among the hundreds of groups that sought minority status, the government recognized 56 "nationalities." More recently, minority status has come to include official privileges not available to Han—more than one child, consideration in university admission, tax breaks. Unlike the Soviet Union, which provided a constitutional right for its "nationalities" to secede, the Chinese government was concerned with preserving national unity and offered "autonomy" in the form of separate administrative regions. As Dru Gladney notes, "The contradiction between a policy that promotes both autonomy and assimilation is an irony that continues to plague China's nationality policy."⁴

Students looking at the twentieth century might examine and compare the Soviet and Chinese experience of identifying nationalities, and debate the outcomes—dependent states in

References/Background Readings

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Teaching Resources

Ethnic Minorities in China

The Asia Society

www.asiasociety.org/countries-history/traditions/ethnic-minorities-china

Ethnic Minority Groups in China

Stanford Program I International and Cross-cultural Education (SPICE)

Full Unit \$44.95, spice.stanford.edu/catalog/ethnic_minority_groups_in_china/

“Chinese’ Perspectives on Identity Before the Nation”

The Expanding East Asian Studies (ExEAS) program at Cornell

www.exeas.org/resources/chinese-perspectives.html

Lesson Plan on Tibet and China

Indiana University, East Asian Studies Center

www.indiana.edu/~easc/outreach/educators/lessonplan.shtml

Nationalities in the USSR

Teaching Module from “Making the History of 1989”

Center for History and New Media
George Mason University
chnm.gmu.edu/1989/exhibits/nationalities/introduction

Newspapers online

onlinenewspapers.com

BBC

“Xinjiang Violence: Views from China”

news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8143107.stm

Central Asia and independence movements in Xinjiang and Tibet. George Mason University’s Center for History and the New Media’s unit on “Nationalities in the USSR” works well with the Indiana University lesson plan (previously mentioned) and the S.P.I.C.E. unit’s lesson on classification of the Hui (Muslim) minority (lesson two) in helping students to understand the historical processes by which “nationalities” in both countries have been identified and managed by the state.

Power, Authority, and Governance

Recent events in Xinjiang and Tibet provide material for students to explore issues of ethnic and political identity, sovereignty, and human and civil rights in a global context. Students might begin by defining and differentiating between human and civil rights and explore the questions posed by Diana Ayton-Shenker in her background paper for the United Nations: How can universal human rights exist in a culturally diverse world? As the international community becomes increasingly integrated, how can cultural diversity and integrity be respected? Is a global culture inevitable? If so, is the world ready for it? How could a global culture emerge based on and guided by human dignity and tolerance?⁵

There are numerous online resources for teaching and learning about human rights. Amnesty International, the *New York Times*, PBS and other organizations have lesson plans on human rights that can be adapted to a study of Xinjiang and Tibet. A comparison of media perspectives of the events is a useful tool for helping students to understand point of view and the complexity of both situations. Several websites provide links to newspapers from around the world. The BBC has recently posted an article with firsthand reactions to the unrest in Xinjiang from the perspectives of various people, Han and Uighur. Students might read reports from these

perspectives and create a newspaper or TV news story that features the different points of view before writing an editorial opinion essay advising the U.S. government’s response to the events.

Conclusion

Helping students to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the events in western China is not the only reason for spending class time investigating minorities in China. Through a rigorous examination of the Chinese case, students also develop a better understanding of the complexities of ethnic and political identities, questions of sovereignty, and civil and human rights globally, while they develop and hone their skills in critical analysis, persuasion, reading, writing, and action. 📖

Notes

1. David N. Keightley, “What Did Make the Chinese ‘Chinese’? Some Geographical Perspectives,” *Education About Asia* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2004).
2. Charles Holcombe, “Re-Imagining China: The Chinese Identity Crisis at the Start of the Southern Dynasties Period,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 1 (Jan-March, 1995), 1-14.
3. Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People’s Republic*, 2nd edition (Harvard University Asia Center; 1996), 83.
4. Gladney, 88.
5. Diana Ayton-Shenker, “The Challenge of Human Rights and Cultural Diversity” *The United Nations: Background Note*, www.un.org/rights/dpi1627e.htm

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