



AALBORG UNIVERSITY

**NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC
OF CHINA: WHY DEMOCRACY FAILS**

Master's Thesis



**DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
CHINESE AREA STUDIES**

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Abstract

After the fall of Qing Dynasty, which saw a true regime change in China for the first time in thousands of years, it seemed like China was finally ready for substantial changes, mainly, a democratic overturn. However, despite attempts at more democratic policy making and significant socio-economic development ventures and endeavours, more than a century later we are still faced with a China who, despite maintaining a relatively democratic front, has strong authoritarian policies.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse why the People's Republic of China has such a difficulty establishing democracy. It has become quite apparent that the ruling Communist party is reluctant to even endeavour to try. This thesis argues that the answer can be found in China's national identity problem, as well as in the PRC's firm approach to nationalistic homogenisation. The many ethnic and cultural minorities that currently reside on Chinese soil are threatening the PRC's territorial integrity, something that Beijing will never stand for. Simply put, each of these ethnic nationalities have their own communal identity, that separates them from the dominant Han nationality. Should democracy be established, it could promote ideas of self-determination and federalism, therefore the PRC strives for a unitarian identity, promoting nationalism. Nationalism, as this thesis deliberates, stands in opposition to democracy.

This thesis looks at two case studies to prove its validity: the Tibetan identity and its ramifications, and the Uighurs, which are two of the largest ethnic minorities in the PRC, as well as the policies implemented by the PRC in the regions and the measures taken to ensure that said communities do not contest the imposed national identity.

Keywords: China, national identity, nationalism, Tibetans, Uighurs.

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List of abbreviations

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

GMD – Guomindang (The Nationalist Party)

GZAR – Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region

IMAR – Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region

NHAR – Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region

OBOR – One Belt One Road

PLA – People’s Liberation Army

PRC – People’s Republic of China

TAR – Tibetan Autonomous Region

XUAR – Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region

1 Introduction

There is little that can be said about China that hasn't been said already. China is vast. Immense. Colossal. Massive. 'China' has a certain gravitas to it. Be it an American or Russian, they will speak of China with begrudging respect. China is China – an ancient force, ever enduring and unchanging, capable of great things. Sometimes good, sometimes terrible, but all great.

But it is truly the unchangeable aspect of it all which I believe needs a more thorough degree of contemplation, for even though the great sleeping dragon has endured the test of time over and over again, it has hardly been left unmarred by its passage and trials. If anything, in the last century, the PRC has proven itself far more adaptable than anyone has even given it credit, and in doing so has risen prouder and flown higher than anyone could have predicted.

That being said, however, it would be severely remiss of me to speak so candidly without also acknowledging the issues that plague China. And if we have learned anything in the past few decades, is that if there's anything bothering China, that doesn't really bode well for anybody.

China has a rich cultural tapestry that I'm more or less convinced that it doesn't know what to do with. Though the geographical stratification has ensured that it is well protected in its Asian cocoon against any kinds of foreign trespassing and ill-wishers, this also ensured that it is very much dependent of these regions which provide the covers and many other natural and geographical boons. China, or I should say, Mao, worked very hard to achieve the kind of territorial privilege that the PRC enjoys today, however, the modern globalised ideological framework which has emerged in the 80s and has gotten enough traction in the past four decades, has suddenly shaken the very core of the Chinese nexus. Those very territories which have been muzzled by Mao Zedong himself, have gotten a new breath of self-determination.

Out of all its many faceted territories which have contributed to the nexus that is China, three have shown themselves unrelenting in the face of overt and covert domestic policies meant to bring them to heel under the communist rule: Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. In my thesis, I decided to focus on Tibet and Xinjiang, as I feel they most represent the direction that I wanted to take my thesis in, for at the core of these issues, is that which troubles every one of us at some point in our lives: **identity**.

National identity is slightly different than the individual identity crises which we sometimes face. In China's case, it is an issue of belonging, of affinity. Simply put, some of the ethnic minorities, of which in China are many, do not share, or do not identify with the national identity that China has tried over the years to constrain upon them. Uighurs, for example, are Chinese Muslims of Turkish descent which populate the region of Xinjiang. For many years there has been unrest in XUAR. The PRC has tried to fixate domestic policies which would then encourage Uighurs to assimilate with the Han ethnic group and therefore, join the meld. But while that would work with ethnic minorities which have shed their communal identities with brevity and efficiency and have had no qualms with it, the Uighurs are a proud people, reluctant and even unwilling to do so.

Likewise, the Tibetans are another great example of an ethnical group who have a very deeply ingrained sense of self and communal unity, which they do not associate to the People's Republic of China under any circumstances. As far as they're concerned, they have a territory, they have a ruler, a spiritual leader who, unlike any other in history, has been ruling the region for centuries until the Chinese have stolen their land. Naturally, no matter the measures that the PRC tries to put forth, they would be at the very least unwelcome. In other words, "*China has a state but lacks a nation* (He, 2003)."

Then there is the aspect of political framework. Under the guise of the benevolent uncle who pours money in the aforementioned regions hoping that said tactics of persuasion would do the trick and soften the populous separatist drive in the region, lies the same communist party, with many of the same aims and ambitions which it has had since it was first established, almost a century ago. Even though China claims that it has taken a more democratic turn, that it actually is a democracy, albeit with Chinese Characteristics, I believe that democracy can't be established in the People's Republic of China and that the answer can be found in the nature of national identity and the inability that certain ethnic minorities have in identifying with it.

1.1. Problem formulation

Therefore, I ask: **Why is it so hard to establish democracy in the PRC and how does it relate to China's national identity crisis?**

2 Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to present the methodological approach that I have chosen to pillar my research on. The chapter is divided into four subchapters, each meant to explicitly map out the thought process behind every step that I have taken towards writing this thesis.

2.1. Research strategy

This thesis examines the nature of the natural identity crisis in the People's Republic of China and whether it is the reason why it is so difficult to establish a democracy. What made this issue the subject of my interest was the fact that identity politics are increasingly relevant in the geopolitical landscape of today, with more and more people discovering their roots and adopting a broader mind frame in relation to their backgrounds and sense of belonging. China, though ancient in almost all aspects, has only recently itself begun to delve into the politics of identity and how it may shape their narratives and socio-political currents.

National identity is a concept which is seldom approached in an explanatory sense when it comes to political currents. But upon further research, I concluded that it is related to the difficulty that democracy has in being established in the PRC and my interest could not be satiated with another subject.

The theoretical framework is to be established and posited in great detail, in order to cover all theoretical aspects which the subject may correlate to, followed by the analysis part, which beginning with an overview, will provide all the necessary background information and situations needed to be taken into account, as to further establish the basis on which the two case studies which I have decided to focus on will be built upon.

The choice of case study is used in this thesis to facilitate the comprehensiveness of the issue and present a more visual and practical approach in the Analysis part.

2.2. Case studies

I chose Tibet and Xinjiang as the regions for my case studies, as they are the most 'problematic' when it comes to succumbing to the assimilation processes put in place by the PRC and their

communal identities have shown time and again a resistance to the National identity adaptation processes. The difficulty shown in establishing any kind of control in the region is instrumental in proving my thesis on the struggles to establish democracy in the entirety of China.

2.3. Theoretical framework

To thoroughly explain the different aspects of national identity and its ramifications, I thought it best to start with explaining the key concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘state’, as, however simple they may be, some aspects may still be confusing at times, and the nature of the thesis is such that said notions must be clarified before we can delve further.

In the following subchapter, I proceed to explain the theory of national identity, its conceptualisation and derivivity from social identity. Here I will speak at length if Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Communities” theoretical concept, as, in terms of multiple nationalities in one states that precede a variety of national identities, the theory is most comprehensive and applies the most to my thesis.

Furthermore, I will then proceed to deliberate upon the concepts of national identity contestation and adaptation, as they are at the basis of my analytical work and present one of my main arguments in presenting this thesis.

Finally, in the last part of my theoretical framework, I will delve into nationalism, as it explains in the clearest way the though-process behind the PRC’s actions and aims.

2.4. Limitations

The main limitations of this thesis are the fact that it’s slightly hypothetical in nature, as the relation between Democracy and National identity has not been discussed and debated enough. Likewise, there was a shortage of theories which I could reliable posit from, as national identity delves more in concepts than in established theoretical premises.

Likewise, there was the language barrier. While I could have used speeches and documents to gather empirical data and establish a more solid pillaring for this thesis, unfortunately most speeches, documents concerning ethnic minorities have not been translated into English and I have sadly not finished learning Chinese.

The sources that I used were mainly found in articles, other online documents and books. While I consider the issue at hand very prevalent, it has not yet gathered substantive academic attention and thus the number of monographies of use is quite sparse. However, this is not to say that this project is completely void of them and what little I could use, were mainly found at the Aalborg University Library. I have tried to collect as many references as possible as to construct a plurilateral understanding of the issue, but I would like to say that I stand by what I write and my views are my own. Nevertheless, please note that I have strived to be very diligent in order to preserve the professionalism that is to be expected from an academic thesis. With that being said, I would like to start by focusing on the theoretical part of my project.

3 Theory

In the following chapter I will outline the theoretical framework that I consider to be most appropriate in sustaining my thesis.

3.1 Key concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘state’

In order to delve properly into the theoretical aspects of national identity and nationalism, it would be best to first establish the workable definitions and concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘state’. It so happens that some of the most often used terminology and key terms with a broader understanding are incidentally also often misused, incorrectly applied, or used loosely.

The very same phenomenon was observed by Prof. Lowell W. Barrington in “‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’: The Misuse of Key Concepts in Political Science”, who surmised that a nation can be defined as: “*a collective of people [...] united by shared cultural features (myths, values, etc.) and the belief in the right to territorial self-determination*” (Barrington, 1997, p. 713). He further elaborates that the peoples of a nation, aside from being linked by shared traits, are also joined by the desire to control the territory that the peoples have established as their homeland, thus distinguishing the ‘nation’ from any other form of a collective (Barrington, 1997).

To further establish the ground rules, or pillars, of this thesis, it is important to stress the distinction between a ‘nation’ and a ‘state’. In the aforementioned article, Barrington notes that the two notions are recurrently and, more importantly – incorrectly, used in an interchangeable way. He stresses that while a ‘nation’ is a collection of people, a ‘state’ is “*the principal political unit in the international political system corresponding to a territory, a relatively permanent population, and a set of ruling institutions* (Barrington, 1997)”. It is important to underline the distinction, as the core aspect of the state as an institutional apparatus versus the nation’s more communal features are perhaps at the very crux of the problem posed by this thesis.

More often emerging is the concept of a ‘nation-state’. In “The Nation-State and Global Order”, Opello and Rosow deliberate that the formation of a nation-state is the result of specific historical, social, and political circumstances. The notion expounds that a nation-state is keyed into

claiming sovereignty over a specific territory and that said territory be recognised by other nation-states of the global nexus (Opello & Rosow, 2004, p. 5).

“Nation-states represent territory as an empty space to be filled in by the representations of the state’s power and authority. Through their governing practices and artifacts, nation-states diffuse a singular identity within the bounded space their borders arbitrarily but legally enclose (Opello & Rosow, 2004).”

The very label of a nation-state can be at times confusing. It can refer to a national territorial state, the key feature of which lies in the recognition of other sovereign states, as expressly explained above, or it can be constituted as *“a state that exercises power over a population defined exclusively or primarily in some form of nation identity (Jessop, 2011, p. 168).”* It is precisely this aspect of a nation-state that merits further understanding and comprehension, as it extrapolates the construction of territorial state power stemming from the consolidation of national identities, as well as nationalism.

3.2 National identity

Currently, there is no theory dedicated to national identity in its entirety, as the concept has basis in both psychology theories, as well as social development and its complex nature makes it difficult to construct an anchored and enduring theoretical premise (Tartakovsky, 2012, p. 1852), however, national identity as a theoretical concept is derived from the theory of social identity. The two main cores of the social identity theory are 1) the individual – collective relationship, mainly the emotional and behavioural understanding of the individual that he belongs to a collective and 2) the inter-collective relationships, or intergroup relations, focusing on conflictual and co-operational issues between large-scale parties (Hogg, 2016, pp. 6-7).

To construe in depth the ramifications of national identity, it is imperative to first consider the very aspect of ‘identity’. Identities are layered and multi-faceted, as they can be defined as the features, qualities, social relations, roles, group associations that define who a person is. However, the definitive trait of identity is its relation to choice. The true nature of identity is that it’s rooted in the choices that eventually define us and by extension, the community that we choose to place ourselves in (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012, p. 69). And it is this precise argument that proves

one of the seminal works that begat the discussion on national identity and nationalism: Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities".

Anderson defines the concept of nation as "*an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign* (Anderson, 2006, p. 6)." He reflects that communities are imagined because people do not know and most likely will never know all the other members of the collective that they believe themselves to be in, however they do feel a sort of kinship to them and furthermore, respect the imagined relationship. Likewise, it is thought of as a community because the mental map of said imagined collective is not territorial, as much as tribal or familial (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). It is precisely this that manages to construct the preconceived notions and ingrained parameters in a community, be it shared ethnicity, culture or historical belongingness to the geopolitical sphere, into communal identity, or national identity.

The same parameters were identified by Jessop as the three forms of nations that are based on three forms of national identity (Jessop, 2011, p. 5):

1. The nation based on ethnicity is rooted in an imagined identity of a nation through its ethnical characterisation, however, more and more nations are now typically multi-ethnic or have systematically lost their sense of identity.
2. The nation based on culture is defined by the cultural identity of its peoples, but likewise, it faces a decline in authenticity as more often than not states actively promote a certain definition of the national culture to fit their preferred cultural outline. In this way, the cultural mass can be narrowed through language, religion, or traditions. This phenomenon invokes the notion of multi-culturalism, as positive encouragement of cultural diversity can lead to cultural assimilation or, in the case of its negative counterpart, to acculturation (Jessop, 2011, p. 6).
3. The nation based on the loyalty towards the constitutional and political order is a civic nation and it is a final parameter of national identity. It is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural community that recognises above all the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, as well as other key symbols of the state (flag, coat of arms, etc.)

The table below presents the three types of nations and their basis in national identity and community membership.

Simple National Community	Basis of Community Membership	Plural Expression in a State
Ethnos	Blood ties or naturalisation	Multi-ethnic
Shared Culture	Assimilation, Acculturation	Multi-cultural
Constitutional Patriotism	Test of Political Loyalty	Nested political loyalties to Multi-tiered government

Table 1. A typology of Imagined Political Communities Linked to Nation-States (Jessop, 2011, p. 5)

However, the characteristics outlined by Jessop give the indication that national identity is more of an established congregation of values and characteristics, often enabled by intergenerational exchange (passing down traditions, assimilating religions, etc.), which is not always the case. Bechhofer and McCrone deliberate that national identity is rooted more in the individual actors’ identities. They surmise: “*there is a complex matrix involving how actors define themselves, how they attribute identity to others and how they think others attribute identity to them. [...] it confers much more negotiating and mobilising power on the actors themselves.* (Bechhofer & McCrone, 2009, p. 8)”

They elaborate that an individual constructing the national identity of the community he belongs to, does so through claims: “*the receipt of claims and the attribution of identity characteristics to others on the basis of what the audience is able to perceive* (Bechhofer & McCrone, 2009).” In other words, we act on the representations that others have of the community, whether by accepting the preconceived notions that foreigners have of said community, or by negating aspects that are not in line with our mental representation of the imagined community. That isn’t to say that individuals have the capacity to shape national identities as they will, but rather that national identities are also keyed in some form of social actions or social inter-play.

3.2.1 National identity contestation and adaptation

As mentioned in the previous subchapter, positive encouragement of cultural diversity can lead to cultural assimilation, whereas a negative approach, to acculturation. This phenomenon was analysed at length by Enze Han, who based on the concept, derived two aspects of national identity: contestation and adaptation (Han, 2013).

- **National identity contestation**

National identity contestation is defined by Enze Han as “*concerted political efforts, violent or nonviolent, waged by an ethnic group to question and dispute the meaning of a particular national identity imposed on group members* (Han, 2013, p. 27).”

Han deliberates that minority and ethnic groups are at odds with an imposed national identity and political agenda and their attempts at retaliation can either be soft in nature – searching for a more cultural autonomy, or hard and deliberate – outright rejecting any imposed measures designed to stifle a minority’s underivative identity (Han, 2013, pp. 4-5). Han also surmises that national identity can find itself at the core of political contestation.

- **National identity adaptation**

Diametrically opposed to the previously discussed concept is national identity adaptation, which Han defines thusly: “*the process by which an ethnic group starts to accept the newly imposed national identity, and thus it involves substantial effort on the part of the group toward acculturation or even assimilation into the ethnic majority* (Han, 2013, p. 5).”

Not every ethnic group or minority is as set to preserve their cultural and political identity as others may be and, therefore, actors at times find themselves acting on their aspiration of belonging, seemingly shedding with relative ease their selfhood, in order to feel as a part of a bigger collective. This, of course, leads to acculturation and a muted sense of communal oneness.

It would be remiss to theorise on the causes and effects of national identity without mentioning ideals. The dictionary defines the ideal as “*relating to or constituting mental images, ideas, or conceptions* (Merriam-Webster, 1828)”, among other things. It is important to note that national identity or communal identity is, just as the community to whom it belongs – imagined, as described in depth by Anderson. It does not conform to any realistic or tangible things, although it may shape policies that later affect very real people.

The concepts of national identity contestation and adaptation are, in a way, concerned with ethnic political mobilisation. Han’s book supports the argument that both international and domestic actors can be instrumental in moulding how and if an ethnic group will politically mobilise to preserve or contest their national identity. These sorts of acts can very easily decide

whether the ethnic group will find itself looking to fraternise with neighbouring or larger communities, or trying to alienate themselves.

Eugene Tartakovsky elaborates on the concept of national identity as being multi-layered and complex in its nature. He delimitates the several parameters, some of them being (Tartakovsky, National Identity, 2011, p. 1851):

- A subjective conviction (self-categorization) as to which nation one belongs
- A strong sense of national affiliation as part of the individual's identity
- Emotions (positive or negative) toward the nation

As you can see, and as already established, there is a clear correlation between the individual's own identity and the identity of the nation to which one clings. To feel joined to a nation can be ethnic-genealogical in dimension or civic-territorial, however, above all, what truly matters when it comes to the dimension of the self are our choices.

3.2.2 National identity and democracy

Democracy has spread like wildfire through a majority of the world's states in the past few decades. It is not hard to see the appeal. Diamond and Morlino outline 4 key requirements that a "good" democracy must have (Diamond & Morlino, 2004):

1. Universal, adult suffrage
2. Recurring, free, competitive, and fair elections
3. More than one political party
4. Alternative sources of information

Democracy is perhaps most of all, egalitarian in nature. It requires that all citizens be granted rights and protection, that political offices be open to all peoples without distinction, that restriction be minimal, as well as impartial, and that all choices regarding the lives and prosperity of the peoples be made through public decisions, to preserve their equality and independence (Mostov, 1994, p. 9).

However, therein lies the crux. If democracy allows for a fair chance for all, then it is natural to assume that, well, anyone can be anyone. In a truly democratic environment, competitiveness runs high, as well as dissatisfaction. With multiple interests in one singular

society, there is a high chance of an aggravated morale. This, in turn, generates a certain level of disillusionment. If the most libertarian and inclusive of all forms of government does not yield results, how can we expect an authoritarian regime to do so?

Famously, Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln had very different views on democracy, with the former calling it “the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time,” while the latter considering it the “last, best hope on earth (Flanagan, Gallay, Gill, Gallay, & Nti, 2005).”

Indeed, there are very conflicting opinions on the matter of democracy, especially since a properly functioning democratic government should act or at least be oriented to, the common good of the people, or the relatively universal interest of its citizens. This in turn, opens another slew of issues, seeing as not all people have the same conceptions as to the government’s approach towards solving the problems concerning them. Either it becomes a struggle between the individual interests of the people, or between the political actors, who in turn, must not act on their own interests, but on those of the public (Young, 2000, p. 7).

Thus, we have arrived at the matter of contention: democracy cannot survive in a nationhood with a strong national identity. Mostov’s reasoning is this: *“In an environment in which national or ethnic identity provides the basis for the distribution of social goods, in which the political community is reduced to the nation, and political subjects are limited to nationally or ethnically defined collectivises, the politics of national identity is incompatible with democracy (Mostov, 1994, p. 9).”*

Simply put, a government with a proclivity towards recognising the collective, rather than the individuality of its peoples cannot satisfy the more sensitive desires of its citizens, and moreover, choose not to. As we have already established, national identities are not conformed to the territorial drawings of a state. The multi-ethnic and multi-cultural aspects of a statehood ensures that public institutions will seek to fit the objectives of the dominant national group, the dominant identity, thus disregarding the minorities. This in turn negates the very principles of democracy, which are, as we’ve established, equitable and unbiased (Mostov, 1994).

As multinational societies find themselves more and more at a disadvantage, public institutions will seek to impose a more unilateral and homogenous directive, to keep the state's geopolitical integrity. Such an environment is, of course, inhospitable for democracy.

3.3 Nationalism

In discussing the rather multi-faceted features of a state, Opello and Rosow emphasised on the state's key "us vs them" mentality, deliberating that states often exaggerate and concoct a false, dangerous view of the world, in order to establish a strong national defence and to ingrain into the population the perception that foreigners fall under the category of "enemy", thus laying the foundation of 'nationalism' (Opello & Rosow, 2004, p. 3).

Barrington outlines several definitions and approaches to nationalism (Barrington, 1997). The main suggestion is that nationalism is constructed on beliefs, ideas, and principles. He refers to Ignatieff's reasoning (Ignatieff, 1993) that nationalism is a three-fold construction, uniting the political idea of self-determination, the cultural idea – deliberating that the nation propagates the very core of identity, and the moral idea – one that allows the justification of actions and enabler of actions designed to protect the rights and integrity of the nation against another (Barrington, 1997, p. 713).

Barrington also defines a second approach to nationalism, describing it as a process linking the creation of key features of a nation, to the actions rooted in the beliefs of the group, taken to preserve the very foundation that said group stands on. Simply put, this approach seeks to elaborate on the organized and purposeful need to control the national homeland. Barrington himself states that "*Nearly all would agree, however, that the control over one's own nation-state is a goal for most nationalists* (Barrington, 1997, p. 714)." This need for control can be either territorial in nature, as most nationalists would agree that preserving the territorial integrity of the nation is almost synonymous to preserving the ideals that nationalism is based on, or political in nature, as striving to establish the political reach and aspirations of a nation are a by-product of wanting to lay the foundations for a validated nation.

The territorial integrity of the nation and the nationalistic need to preserve it is, more often than not, linked to the historical background of the nation. The modern world map suffered substantial changes in the past few decades. From a nationalistic point of view, the changes may,

in some cases, seem unwarranted, leading nationalists to feel wronged and act accordingly. Barrington refers to Gellner's "Potato Principle", explaining that "*groups will look back historically to periods when they were mainly farmers to justify the control of land in an urban and industrial age* (Barrington, 1997, p. 714)."

Concluding on all aspects outlined, Barrington defines nationalism thusly: "*the pursuit – through argument or other activity – of a set of rights for the self-defined members of the nation, including, at a minimum, territorial autonomy or sovereignty* (Barrington, 1997)." The term 'self-defined' is a keyword here, and not undeservingly. While Gellner argues that it's not an awakening of the self-consciousness that begets nationalism, but rather that nationalism "invents" nations where there are none to be invented, Anderson claims that it's a more radical view of the concept, saying that it relates more to imagining a community through ideological and invisible ties of fraternity and kinship (Anderson, 2006, p. 6).

Ernest Gellner was the developer of the nationalism theory. Thoroughly discussing it and examining it in his work, he described it as such: "*Nationalism is a political principle which maintains that similarity of culture is the basic social bond. Whatever principles of authority may exist between people depend for their legitimacy on the fact that the members of the group concerned are of the same culture (or, in nationalist idiom, of the same 'nation')* (Gellner, 1997, pp. 3-4)."

Gellner started theorising on nationalism at a pivotal time in history. The fall of the Berlin Wall and of the Soviet Union saw an upstart in the academical circles to make some sense of it. If before the 90s nationalism was a concept, if even that, or at least a branch on the social identity tree, suddenly, there were no shortages of theoretical perspectives. In appraising Gellner's writings, O'Leary described nationalism as "*the most potent principle of political legitimacy in the modern world* (O'Leary, 1997, p. 191)."

Most place nationalism at the core of social transformation and modernity. Gellner himself, being a historical sociologist, regarded nationalism as a by-product of sociological development (Minogue, 2001, p. 107). However, Eriksen notes that Gellner's theory, while seemingly trying to reach for a universal application, is too tied to certain time periods (the Industrial Revolution, the Versailles Peace Treaty, etc.), therefore neglecting that said happenstances are not universally reaching either.

Gellner attributes nationalism to the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, placing a certain amount of gravity on territorial identities (Eriksen, 2007). This aspect has been subjected to certain amount of critique, especially in the last few decades. With people being less inclined to remain within the territory of the nation in which they were born, seeking opportunism and systematically shedding their attachments to the land, is it any wonder that such approach can be considered antiquated? After all, the virtues of nationalism are rather cultural in nature and Eriksen himself notes on the deterritorialization of culture, economy, politics and people, attributing the shift to migration (Eriksen, 2007, p. 2).

O'Leary goes so far as to say that the negative foundations of nationalism are explained in the rigid social structures on which they were based, saying that *"a shared culture is now much more important in creating and sustaining social cohesion than it was (O'Leary, 1997)."* Be that as it may, but if culture is shared, does it still subscribe to the principles of nationalism? Gellner not only agrees with it, but stresses out the correlation between nationalism and cultural homogenisation, saying: *"Our initial definition of nationalism made it insist on the linkage of organisation and culture: the legitimate unit was to be one composed of persons of the same culture (Gellner, 1997, p. 6)."* Furthermore, he debates that political legitimacy stems from cultural similarity, however, this nationalistic structure cannot function without institutional leadership that would promulgate the 'national culture', that would define the unit, in this case, the state.

While Gellner recognised that nationalism is not this omnipresent, inescapable political force, he did attribute to it a certain degree of pervasiveness. O'Leary explained it as follows: *"just as nationalisms can be obstructed or modified 'by special circumstances', so they can also be facilitated by power-politics which may manipulate nationalist ideas, or by the dissemination of political norms which are infused with nationalist assumptions (O'Leary, 1997, p. 196)."*

This particular argument serves to exemplify why nationalism is perhaps diametrically opposed to the principles of democracy.

3.3.1 Nationalism and democracy

Democracy is not a radical directive, where there must be either a democratic construct in all of its entirety or none at all, rather it's a gradual practice, prone to pluralistic views that are, and should be if there is to be change, at odds with each other. Nationalism, however, is a structure of

communitarian politics. While democracy focuses on the needs of the individual and establishes structures that would help preserve and protect the individual under any and all circumstances, nationalism operates under the guise of ethnic terms, where one ethnic group – often the most prevalent one – is put above all others, and all policies promulgated by the institutions that should protect all, are carefully constructed to serve the needs of the one (Denitch, 1996, p. 466).

Ethnic minorities are, of course, the targets most of the time slighted. Denitch explained it best: you are born of a certain ethnicity and that cannot change by any means, however citizenship can be acquired (Denitch, 1996, p. 480). Certain nation-states, operating under false pretences of democracy or some degree of authoritarianism, allow for more rights or membership privileges to one ethnicity or group above others, which is often the dominant one. In doing so, they incite minority ethnicities to change their convictions, traditions, religions, in order to conform to the more opportunistic rationale, thus slighting democracy and its principles.

Self-determination and identity politics are in many ways averse to national rights as well as the rights of smaller, multi-fragmented nations that are scattered along states, which is why in a nation-state that chooses to value nationalism and its forms, democracy and its inclusiveness has no place to be.

4 Analytical overview

The following subchapters will be devoted to describing in detail several aspects and information concerning the topic of the thesis. This step is necessary to ensure that the case studies which will be covered in the Analysis part have a clear pillared and factual base.

4.1. The history of democracy in China

It is difficult to think of China in any way other than unyielding. Countries face changes – regime changes, perceptive changes, ideological changes, while China seemingly has always been China – a resolute tower of dignity and honour. For over 2000 years China operated under imperialistic rule, things finally taking a turn with the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912. For a country to preserve its imperialistic form of government for millennia and until the 20th century, past the industrial revolution, speaks of more than just the uniqueness of the Chinese people, but of their culture and principles as well.

If there is one word that could describe China, it would probably be traditional. This is why China is the oldest living civilisation, and why the imperialistic rule has lasted until the 20th century. Change is simply not a concept one usually associates with the nation that has seemingly been the same since before the Egyptian Pyramids were built and until the first World War. Therefore, it is important to note just how drastic a change the emergence of the democratic current was. With the fall of the Qing, an ancient Chinese ‘tradition’ was ended, the so called “dynastic circle”, which Guo, outlines in these stages:

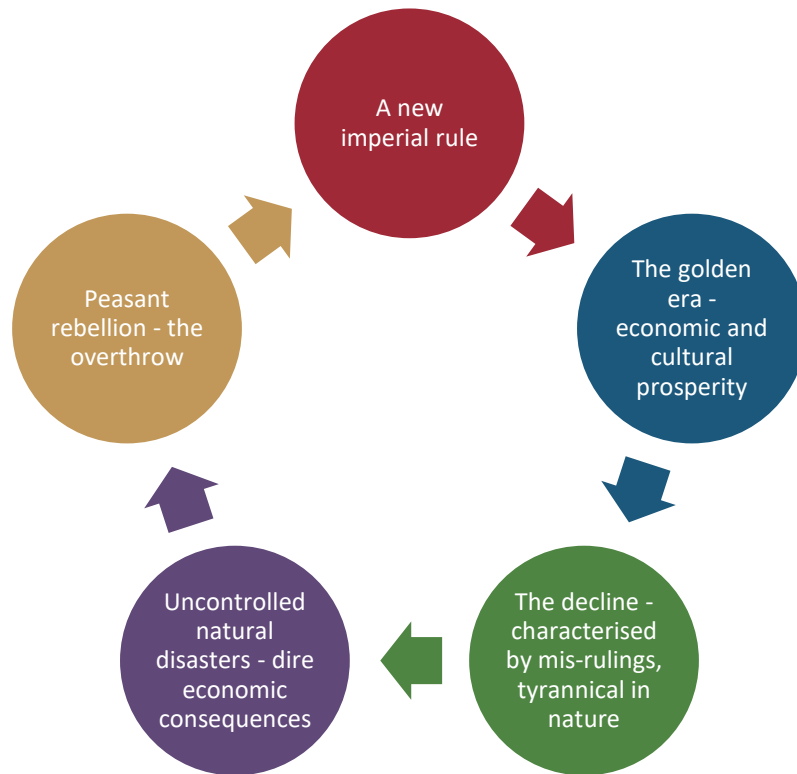


Chart 1: The dynastic circle (Guo, 2013, p. 45)

The pattern posits that power, ideology and organisation hinge on geographical/climatic conditions and the agrarian wellbeing (Guo, 2013, p. 46). Guo, naturally notes that though agrarian wellbeing is at the core of the entire system, the political framework is very much despotic in nature. So then, it is perhaps understandable that after two millennia, the final stage of the above-described matrix, would be just that – final. What should emerge from a great and neighborly endless period of tyranny, if not its political opposite – democracy.

To be fair, China’s search for democracy dates a bit farther than 1912. It could be placed somewhere by the end of the 19th century. It’s worth taking into account the geopolitical landscape of that time. After suffering a defeat from Japan in 1894-1895, Chinese scholars and revolutionists were seemingly fascinated with Japanese constitutionalism, seeking to introduce constitutional measures, as marginal as may be, into the Chinese traditionalism (Fung, 2000, p. 3). What followed (1895-1925), was a crucial time in Chinese history, marking a cultural transition from traditionalism to modernism. However, as Huang has already established, such a pivotal moment did not necessarily mean that China transitioned overnight from one end of the political spectrum

to another, rather than the traditional, the old way of thinking, shaped how the Chinese interpreted and strived to understand the new, Western thought (Huang, 2016, p. 186).

The overthrowing of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, saw an emergence of forward-thinking, rather progressive thought. The first general elections were held, the first autonomous political parties were established, with The Nationalist Party (GMD), led by Song Jiaoren winning the elections in 1913. Unfortunately, Song died being assassinated on the order of President Yuan Shikai (Fung, 2000, p. 3). It's interesting to consider just what would China be like today if Song were allowed to live and if he established even a marginally democratic regime, as long-lasting as it could have been, but that is rather hypothetical.

Nevertheless, the quest for democracy did not abruptly stop there. Li Dazhao, a founder of the CCP, believed democracy to be a politics for change, and in the 1920s developed an utopian theory of democracy. In line with the changing political framework and mindset, in the 1920s, The Nationalist party adopted the Three Principles of the People, developed by Sun Yat-sen (Fung, 2000, p. 4). The programme, or lectures, in which said principles were outlined, have become subject to many debates in the following decades, for even though they were developed for the purpose of establishing a “purer” political base for the Nationalist Party in opposition to the CCP, they also presented a very idealistic ideology, that thoroughly critiqued the Western model of Democracy and set out to achieve the “happiness” of the people, which in Sun-Yat-sen’s view, severely lacked in the Western government’s considerations.

4.1.1 The Three Principles of the People

Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), is considered to be the Founding Father of Modern China. He is also acknowledged as the precursor of social justice in China. While his lectures on *San Min Chu I* only mention the word ‘justice’ once, the root of his lectures underline a need not for interpersonal justice, but for social accountability (Dy, 2017, p. 172).

Here are his Three Principles of the People (Dy, 2017, pp. 173-182):

Nationalism	Democracy	People’s Livelihood
- He stressed the difference between state and race,	- He defined People’s Sovereignty as the political	- By People’s Livelihood, he defined the welfare of the

<p>claiming that race and nationality are developed naturally, while state through militaristic measures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He claimed that economic oppression is worse than political oppression, as it is more severe and less apparent. - He described nationalism as a means for a nation to perpetuate its existence, claiming that the Chinese should embrace nationalism and preserve the unity of the people. 	<p>power of the people, the power to control their own government.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He compared Chinese liberty with French liberty, the Western model of liberty, claiming that it does not apply to the Chinese, as they have too much individual liberty and therefore must work on shedding it and coming together as a unit. - He referred to the American principals of democracy, saying that they are erroneous, claiming that China is already united while America is divided into states. 	<p>masses and of the nation. He describes the industrial revolution as a means for people who possess machinery to take wealth away from people who don't.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He theorised that the industry depends entirely on the livelihood of the people, and not on capitol distribution. - He unveiled two methods designed to protect the Livelihood of the People: equalisation of land ownership and the regulation of capitol.
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Table 2. Key points from Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People

To sum up, the Principle of Nationalism is rooted in solidarity. Only a society that works together towards progress can actually achieve it (Dy, 2017, p. 184). However, while Sun encourages a certain degree of detachability from other nations and to look inward, inside the boundaries of the nation to comradeship and preservation of culture, he calls to learn from other nations as well, especially in matters of technology and innovation.

The Principle of Democracy relates to common good. A society must work towards the common good's interest and not individual interest, relating to the people holding the power in a democratic society. Sun Yat-sen's Democratic principle relates less to the freedom of the individual to act as he likes, but rather to the freedom of the organised people to act in favour of the nation (Dy, 2017, p. 186).

But therein lies the conundrum: when a state is as multifaceted and multi-layered in terms of culture and ethnicity as China is, which ‘organised people’ are to act in favour of the nation? Is it the government and its many representatives? Is it a certain ethnical minority group? And if a minority, which is part of a great congregation of people that forms China, a cog in an enormous machine, that has been persecuted and oppressed for decades if not longer, can they also be expected to act in favour of the nation? I think the same questions have plagued the PRC’s ruling party, the CCP, since its inception and that their uncertain answers, or certain – if only frightening, prompted them to adopt the very same nationalistic mentality which China is so known for today.

After all, Guo, who so carefully spoke of the wheel of despotism and its characteristics, proceeded to then mention that it has endured in modern times and can be observed in China to this day (Guo, 2013, p. 46).

4.1.2 Democracy in the PRC at present

Is the People’s Republic of China a democracy? According to the Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office website – yes, yes, it is (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office, n.d.).

After being invaded by the imperialist forces of Japan in 1949, China split into two – The PRC, led by Mao Zedong and his Communist Party; and the ROC, led by the Nationalist Party (Ci, 2019, p. 4). The PRC has been under communist rule for around 7 decades now, and yet somehow it still maintains that they are a democracy, albeit a democracy with ‘Chinese characteristics’.

Seeing as I have outlined in the previous sub-chapter the hopefulness with which the Chinese peoples started to look at democracy, how did everything derail to the point that nothing but an idea endured, and the reality shifted to communism? The answer to this question is the same which answers the durability conundrum – traditionalism.

“Chinese traditional and political culture and political history have always extolled the primacy of the state and the collectivity while minimising individual rights and autonomy, which is quite different from the Western tradition of human rights based on individual rights, and they continue to influence the Chinese communists and provide the cultural base for Chinese official norms and popular mentality (Guo, 2013, p. 47).”

From one totalitarian regime, had to emerge another, radically different in terms of ideology, yes, but when it comes to the centralisation of power, it did seem like China exchanged one form of tyranny for another. Still, one does not simply have the longest recorded history and not learn from it, which is why the emergence of communism was marked by a period of “systematic remolding of human minds” (Guo, 2013, p. 67).

To ensure that the final stage of the dynastic circle never comes to pass again, the communist regime begat the Yan'an Rectification Movement (1942-1945), the first period of mass ideological movement by the Chinese Communist Party. The movement was characterised by ideological and political campaigns, brainwashing indoctrination and political purges meant to cleanse the ranks (Guo, 2013). The changes to the national ideological framework were substantial. After all, how could it be any different, when this ideology, the belief that any action taken by the communist party was unquestionable and absolute, was not just meant to influence the people, but the members of the party as well. Deng Rong notes in her book “Deng Xiaoping and the Cultural Revolution”:

“He [Mao Zedong] had already set himself up as an absolute authority, and was increasingly impatient with any disagreement. ... He brushed aside all hindrances and obstacles, determined to push through a revolutionary line he insisted was correct (Rong, 2002, pp. 1-2).”

Still, such a stifling environment could not last and as it happened, the death of Mao Zedong, the father of idealistic totalism, saw the Chinese political landscape go through changes yet again. Granted, communism endured, and thrived, but post-Mao, in the time of factions and frictions in the party, Deng Xiaoping prevailed and established himself as the one and only ruler of the CCP, later becoming the “Chief Architect of China’s Reform and Open Door Policy” (Guo, 2013, p. 81).

Deng’s policies and re-structuralism of the Party and the policies it put forth, established a generally peaceful environment oriented towards economic development and sustainability. Willing to learn from other countries and propelling China to a period of globalisation of trade and manufacturing, the undercurrent was this: Mao’s concept of self-reliance is in the past. This is a new China (Lampton, 2014, p. 18).

While the history is much more tumultuous and complex than that, and while the party in charge is still the Chinese Communist Party, now, the Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office, can make an argument that China is actually a democracy (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office, n.d.).

Li Xing deliberates on the same idea in the Journal of Political Science, mentioning that the CCP’s 18th Party Congress “*emphasised that deliberative democracy is important for China*” (Xing, 2017, p. 13). He assesses that the deliberative mode of governance is in line with the democratic view, as it puts people’s voices at the core of decision-making processes, however, he also outlines that the deliberative method is meant to utilise persuasion-based influence. That is in more in line with the Chinese model, as a fully democratic system would challenge the CCP’s rulings.

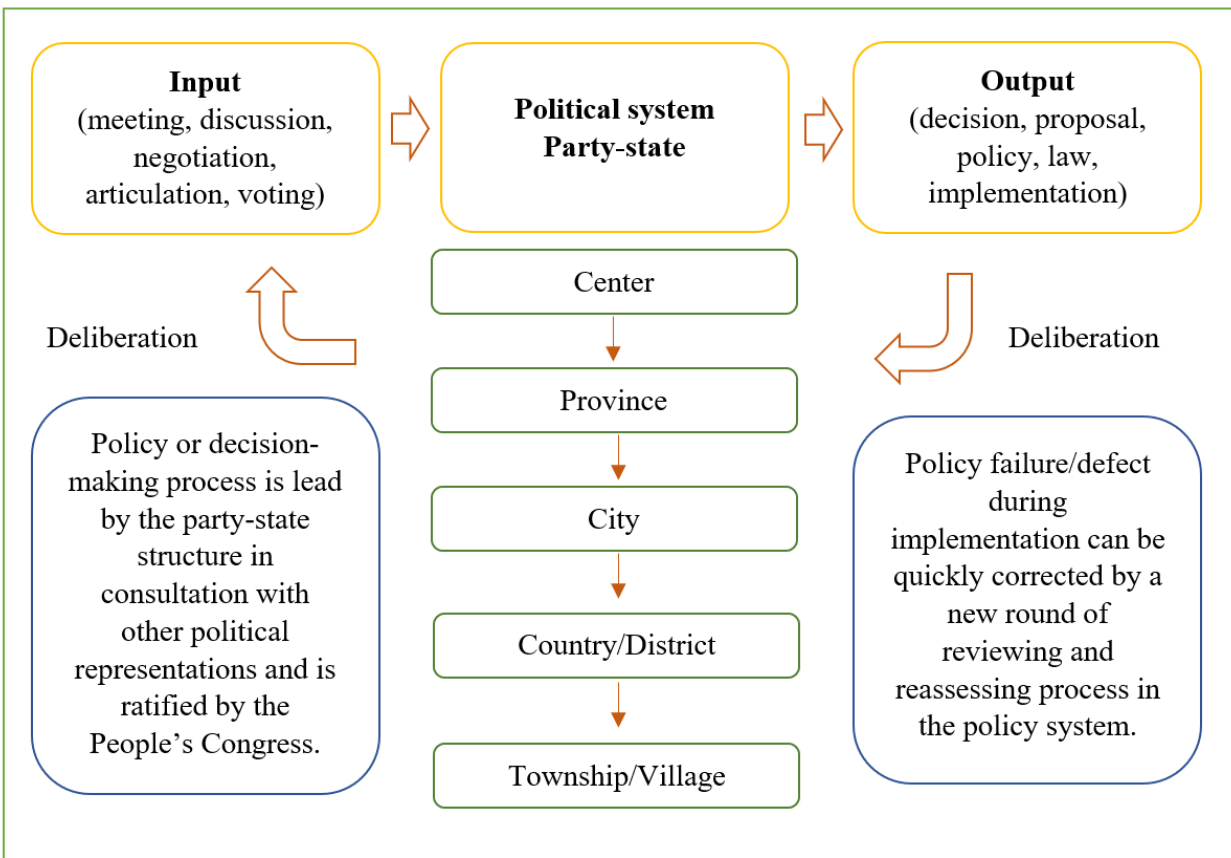


Chart 2: Public deliberation in the CCP’s policy making and policy-correcting processes (Xing, 2017, p. 13).

The deliberative method is now one of the principal shapers of Chinese politics. On one hand, it ensures that the communication method of deliberation, or persuasion is used instead of power struggling, thus creating the image that the government is efficient, as well as multi-partial. Li Xing outlines that such methods are used at both a small and grader scale, through assemblies and deliberative polls, while also making sure that the wester-style of democracy does not take the limelight. Deliberative policies have at their core the “common interest” and “public good” narratives, which under the guise of democratic changes, are still inherently communist (Xing, 2017, p. 14).

What gives the PRC the modicum of credibility or benefit of the doubt in regard to democracy and its presence/relevance at the core of Chinese policies, is China’s economy. Due in no small part to Deng’s policies and years of economic re-structurisation, China has become the main contributor to global economic growth, and while it may not be a democracy, it is definitely a capitalistic meritocracy and it seems to be all the better for it (Ci, 2019, p. 3). So then why should anyone be concerned with China’s prospects of democracy? Simply put, for political stability. China’s economic ventures allowed for another phenomenon to take place: globalisation. Under the guise of globalisation, more and more people got acquainted with the foreign concept of democracy and began demanding more freedoms, as well as outside technology and informational sources (Mackerras, 2003, p. 5). While for the foreseeable future the PRC can maintain its dignity and revel in its economic domination, there are fears, well-founded ones, that China’s domestic policies, especially in regards to its ethnic minorities, has led to political unrest (Ci, 2019, p. 1).

In light of this, can the PRC attain some basic democratic principles in regard to its cultural minorities in order to preserve its national and territorial integrity?

5 Analysis

The People's Republic of China is massive in territory, being about the same size as the United States of America (Dryburgh, 2016, p. 12). It stretches from Russia in the North to Burma and Vietnam in the South. The buffers in the East are the so called “stans” – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan in NE, while in the West, it is pillared by Korea, with a corner of Russia dipping in the Sea of Japan. This territory is actually relatively new on the map, the achievement belonging in no small part to Mao Zedong.

One of Mao's main goals was to centralise power, and he achieved it to an unprecedented extent. By blocking Russia's influence in Mongolia and annexing Tibet, he made China into the geopolitical giant that we have today. The outskirts regions were poor, yes, but by the 50s the territory would be more or less consolidated into a unified unit. This legacy will become by far his biggest achievement, and one that Deng and Ji will fight to keep (Marshall, 2016, pp. 41-42).

However, with great territory almost always comes multi-nationalism.

5.1. Ethnic minorities in the PRC

Shaoshu Minzu in Chinese literally means *minority nationality*. *Minzu* describes a community of people who share (Mackerras, Ethnic Minorities, 2016, p. 116):

- History,
- Language,
- Culture,
- Territory,
- Economic life,
- Culture.

China's vast territory is home to 56 official ethnic groups, of which 92% (1,220,844,520) are the Han, also known as “the Chinese”, while the other 8% making up China's rich cultural tapestry.

Table 3 outlines some of the minority nationalities that can be found on the territory of the PRC (Chinese Ethnic Groups: Overview Statistics, 2020).

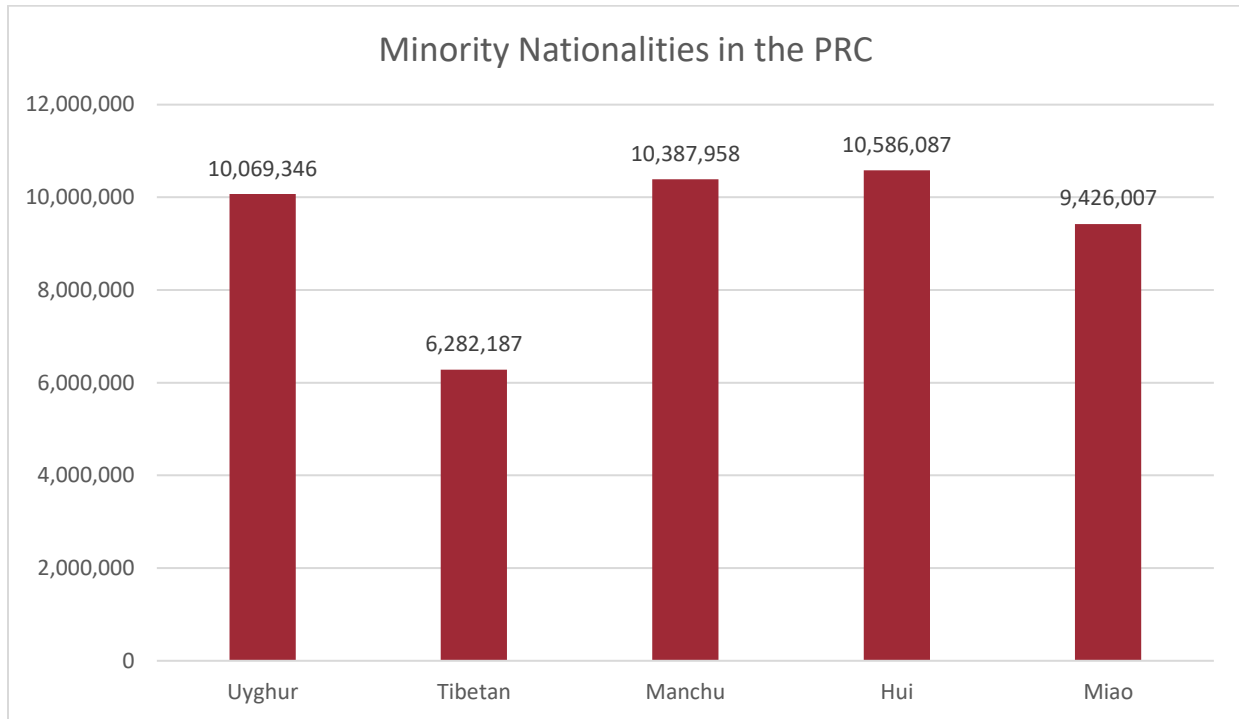


Chart 3. Representation of some of the largest minority nationalities in the PRC (Chinese Ethnic Groups: Overview Statistics, 2020).

The PRC follows a definition of a nationality outlined by Stalin in 1913: “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture (Mackerras, 2003, p. 2).”

Everyone in China belongs to one of the 56 ethnic groups and is even registered as such, but the process of being registered as belonging to one minority or another is less based on choice, or at all, and more on state designation (Mackerras, Ethnic Minorities, 2016). The ethnic status of a person is very much important in the bureaucratic sense, as it features on identity cards, has to be specified when applying to primary school/college/joining the CCP (Zang, 2016, p. 3).

Still, being home to over one billion people, China’s successfulness to keep track of all its ethnic minorities in the comprehensive way that it has is admirable, if not slightly thought-provoking.

In the article “Ethnic Minorities”, Mackerras elaborates on the different ways that one can categorise ethnic minorities in the People’s Republic of China:

- ❖ By territory – nearly a quarter of the entire China belongs to the Tibetans, housed by the rich Tibetan Plateau. Though not the largest ethnic minority in terms of population, the Tibetans are one of the main nationalities with a separatist directive.
- ❖ By culture – the Zhuang, the Yi, the Miao, and the Yao, predominant in the Southern and Southern-West region.
- ❖ By religion – by far the biggest nationalities classified by religion are the Islamic groups, of which the largest and the most separatist in nature are the Uighurs, who reside predominantly in Xinjiang, in the North Eastern region. There are also the Hui, which are not marginalised in one Chinese region, but are spread all over and they are Chinese in terms of culture and ethnicity. They are differentiated simply because they follow the Islamic religion (Mackerras, *Ethnic Minorities*, 2016, p. 17).

But although the Chinese are holding on with tooth and nail to all their territories and have a very unified stance in terms of territorial and nationalistic integrity, the policies concerning the ethnic minorities residing in the PRC have been variant, with no small amount of interest and debate from foreign scholars and international observers. After all, as Xiaowei Zang so simplistically and eloquently put it,

“How the PRC treats its ethnic minorities can indicate how it will behave towards peoples outside China.”

5.2. The PRC’s policies towards ethnic minorities

Like with the Three Principles of the People, China’s policies towards ethnical minorities have also been put forth by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, while also having roots in Confucianism:

“Anyone can be a part of the Han community if he or she accepts Han culture (Zang, 2016, p. 4).”

The idea was that as long as minority groups are willing to shed their ‘peculiarities’ and conform to the Han way of life, they could have harmonious communal life. Confucianism does not negate the intermingling of nationalities, as long as the one culture which remains as a result, is the ‘true’

one – the Han way. Therefore, the PRC’s policies towards ethnic minorities would never allow for contestation of the national identity which the predominant Han was dispersing, but only of adaptation.

As such, true to the nationalistic principle of democracy outlined by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, initially, the CCP based their policies on minor nationalities on unity, solidarity and equality, however in the 50s, after the Second World War concluded, the government began identifying minority nationalities according to Stalin’s definition. Quickly after that followed the establishment of early autonomous regions (Mackerras, 2003, p. 20). The regions were (Mackerras, Ethnic Minorities, 2016, p. 120):

- ❖ The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (set up 1947)
- ❖ The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (1955)
- ❖ The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (1958)
- ❖ The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (1958)
- ❖ The Tibetan Autonomous Region (1965).

The idea of an autonomous region in China is quite thought-provoking. For good measure, Mackerras outlined the different aspects of the nature of being a minority in an autonomous region:

Merits	Restrictions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The head of the government that oversees the Autonomous region must belong to the ethnic group represented. ➤ There are many positions of power and influence, as well as possibilities for professional qualifications for ethnic minorities. ➤ Aspects of the minority cultures can be preserved, provided that they are “good”. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ While the head of the government must be from the same ethnicity he/she represents, the rest of the high-ranking positions are not required to be filled by ethnic minorities. ➤ Though encouraged to join the CCP, the more religiously inclined groups with a certain history with the PRC are reluctant to do so. Therefore, a very small percentage of the CCP is ethnically diverse.

Table 3: An outline of the general ramifications of living in an Autonomous Region (Mackerras, Ethnic Minorities, 2016, p. 120).

One of the main policies that the PRC has towards its ethnic minorities is that they can have autonomy in their regions, but in doing so, they must shed all ideas of separatism. After all, the greatest concern and preoccupation of the PRC since its inception, has been territorial integrity, maintaining that legacy which Mao Zedong has spent many years building. Even economical development, though necessary for the wellbeing and prosperity of the entire country, still had a nationalistic undercurrent: a developed country and a raised standard of living will inspire loyalty to the country.

The meaning of these autonomous regions was spreading nationalism, and doing so in two ways:

1. Members of the minority groups will take over governing themselves – to ensure a certain approachability within the community and avoid any unrest
2. The state would train the aspirants themselves – they would promote their own culture and ideals inside the minority groups. By 1957, 5.5% of all CCP members were from minority communities (approx. 700.000) (Mackerras, 2003, p. 21).

Articles 5 and 7 of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy adopted and promulgated in 1984, and amended in 2001, state:

“The organs of self-government of national autonomous areas must uphold the unity of the country and guarantee that the Constitution and other laws are observed and implemented in these areas (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2001).” – Article 5.

“The organs of self-government of national autonomous areas shall place the interests of the State as a whole above anything else and make positive efforts to fulfil the tasks assigned by State organs at higher levels (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2001).” – Article 7.

These articles, along with the give-and-take relationship systematically ingrained in the trade of development and social improvement for integrity and loyalty, has created an almost

contractual obligation and even acceptance among ethnic nationalities. By encouraging minority nationalities to take a more active role in political processes, Beijing begat a period of arduous national identity adaptation. The Deng era saw an apparent embrace of multiculturalism, by establishing the following practices and policies (Magid, 1998, p. 13):

- Several ethnic minorities were exempt from the one-child population policy,
- More opportunities for political involvement/representation,
- Job mobility,
- Allowing them to celebrate more holidays,
- Greater freedom of religious practice,
- Allowing more traditional forms of music, art, architecture, literature,
- Easing restrictions on private entrepreneurialism,
- Lessening local tax collection ventures.

These policies, naturally, were appealing. Those ethnic minorities preoccupied with short-sighted economic and social betterment were more than eager to exchange compliance and loyalty for a benefits and better standing. However, hard-handed nationalism and still massive disparity between the Hans and the rest of the ethnic spectrum discouraged substantial assimilation and identity adaptation among groups. The distrust prevailed in no small part due to ethnic stratification dynamics and socioeconomic opportunities (Xiaogang Wu, 2018, p. 190). Eventually, by trying to promote the nationalism of smaller communities and not that of China as an entity, the project hit a bit of a snag. By giving away even slightly more independence, the communities denounced the Han ideology as fanaticism and soon after, high-ranking officers began to be accused of ‘local nationalism’.

Nationalism works wonderfully in China as long as it’s not the ‘wrong’ kind, the even slightly foreign kind. While China may seem like an untameable dragon at times, instead of a sleeping one that has just recently woken up, the truth is that its political stability rests on the territorial stability of the state, which is conditioned by the stability within these internal communities.

The next example will shed plenty of light on the situation.

5.3. The case of Tibet

“Demographics and geopolitics oppose Tibetan independence (Marshall, 2016, p. 46).”

As mentioned before, territorial integrity is crucial to the PRC. From the very beginning of establishing the PRC, the CCP knew that the territories of the passed Qing empire, had to endure. In terms of territorial expansion and consolidation, no other dynasty was as successful and prosperous as the Qing dynasty, which incorporated under its rule all the territories that we recognise as Chinese today, and then some (He, 2003, p. 72).

The case of Tibet is a complex one. There are many ethnic Tibetan communities, distributed along not only China, but India, Nepal and Bhutan as well. The 1990 census saw Tibetans divided into 2 branches: the Tibet Autonomous Region (political in nature, exercises jurisdiction under the Chinese control); while the other half, the ethnographic Tibet, holds more or less the territories that were previously known to house traditional native Tibetan states (Goldstein, 1997).

Tibet has been occupied by the PRC and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) since 1951. The death of the 13th Dalai Lama generated political unrest. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the Dalai Lama declared Tibet independent from China. His death, however, made his claims unwarranted, especially since his successor was only a child that hadn’t even been found yet. The current Dalai Lama was discovered in 1937. By the time he was supposed to take his vows in 1941, Tibet was already under a great deal of pressure from the Chinese government. The 14th Dalai Lama finally took his vows in 1947, however in 1951, he was forced to relinquish control over Tibet to the new People’s Republic of China by the Seventeen Point Agreement (Goldstein, 1997).

The Seventeen Point Agreement is the first document that officially states, in written form, that Tibet is to be surrendered to the People’s Republic of China.

Point 1.	“The Tibetan people shall unite and drive out imperialist forces from Tibet: the Tibet people shall return to the big family of the Motherland—the People's Republic of China.”
Point 3.	In accordance with the policy towards nationalities laid down in the Common Programme of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference, the Tibetan people

	have the right of exercising national regional autonomy under the leadership of the Central People's Government.
Point 4.	The central authorities will not alter the existing political system in Tibet. The central authorities also will not alter the established status, functions, and powers of the Dalai Lama. Officials of various ranks shall hold office as usual.
Point 7.	. . . The religious beliefs, customs, and habits of the Tibetan People shall be respected, and lama monasteries shall be protected. The Central Authorities will not affect a change in the income of the monasteries.
Point 11.	In matters related to various reforms in Tibet, there will be no compulsion on the part of the central authorities. The local government of Tibet should carry out reforms of its own accord, and when the people raise demands for reform, they shall be settled by means of consultation with the leading personnel of Tibet.

Table 4. Key points from the Seventeen Point Agreement (Goldstein, 1997, p. 48)

This situation, however, is far from resolved. Tibetans still view the Dalai Lama as the rightful leader of Tibet and nationalistic riots are known to happen often. The truth is, that the PRC cannot afford to lose Tibet.

- Firstly, capitulation of this level is without precedent. Should Tibet be set free, other autonomous regions would like to follow suite, truly threatening the PRC’s territorial integrity (He, 2003).
- Secondly, from a purely geographical standpoint, Tibet is invaluable. Marshall outlines that *“if China did not control Tibet, it would always be possible that India might attempt to do so. This would give India the commanding heights of the Tibetan Plateau and a base from which to push into the Chinese heartland (Marshall, 2016, p. 45).”*
- And thirdly, Tibet is known as “China’s Water Tower”, with some of its most prominent rivers and water sources originating from the Tibetan plateau. China’s large population needs an equally large water source. Should Tibet fall out of China’s reach, China’s water supply will be cut straight from the source (Marshall, 2016, p. 45).

To ensure that Tibet remains under the PCR rule, the Chinese have settled on a three-fold nationalistic approach (He, 2003, p. 79):

1. Any rebellion or act of uprising must be expressively terminated at once.
2. Investing in development projects. This is actually a very prominent and result-yielding response for the Chinese. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is being constantly discussed and examined. Unfortunately for the Chinese's long-term goals in Tibet, the Tibetan cultural identity is stronger than any economic venture and so far, the secessionism movement has not relented.
3. Compromise. To offer the secessionists a version of the semi-autonomy, but marginally relenting on the policies towards minorities. However, as mentioned in an above chapter, offering minorities even the slightest concession goes against the Chinese nationalistic view. They will always fear retribution from a more unified minority.

In the previous chapter I outlined policies meant to integrate ethnic minorities in the PRC's socio-political environment by appealing to people's desire for economic betterment and opportunity, but each policy put forth, Tibet readily refused to comply and to engage. Tibetans, along with the Uighurs are the most politically active and the most likely to opt for national identity contestation, of the narrative put forth by Beijing (Han, 2013, p. 4).

Why is it that only the Tibetan and the Uighurs are so vehemently opposed to every measure put forth by the CCP? Simply put: better alternatives. Unlike all the other ethnical minorities, have a clear view of the international aspect – they have kin living outside the realm of China, and living in a better alternative. Why, Tibetans not only do not perceive themselves a part of China, but they actually have a ruler, the Dalai Lama, who has been living in exile for decades. They perceive themselves to be in a makeshift hostage situation, therefore, they are less inclined to act on any 'boon' that their holders might offer them. Furthermore, any act of resistance and resilience in part of the Tibetans is lauded from the outside as 'self-determinism' and very much encouraged and supported (Han, 2013, p. 6).

And as mentioned above, the Dalai Lama is quite the figurehead to have. He isn't some unseated tyrannical despot which has been terrorising the country and holding it hostage with military power and militia-like tactics. He's a spiritual leader – the very embodiment of hundreds of years of Tibetan culture and traditions, of pride and of national identity.

China has taken every measure to modernise Tibet, by building a railway right into the Tibetan capital of Lhasa – long considered impossible to do, opened in 2006 by then Chinese president Hu Jintao (Marshall, 2016, p. 46), it has created various economic and trading opportunities and ensured the socio-economic development of the region. However, rapid modernisation is empowering, and empowering people leads to the demand of true autonomy and independence (He, 2003, p. 75).

He outlines the situation thusly:

“An affirmative policy toward minorities must prevent minorities from forming a privileged social group that may undermine the unity of the state (He, 2003, p. 80).”

Therefore, it is quite clear that democracy cannot be established in Tibet, or even awarded in minor privileges. To do so could encourage other minority nations to act out, therefore putting even more pressure on China’s territorial integrity.

5.4. The case of Xinjiang

Xinjian, or the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, is in the North Western part of China, limiting Russia’s reach into the region. It covers 1/6th of the entire Chinese territory and is also the largest administrative unit within the PRC (Dillon, 2004, p. 3).

The ethnic majority of Xinjiang comprise the Uyghurs, or the Uighurs, as they are more commonly referred to in recent publications, are the Turki, or Eastern Turki who migrated and settled in the Northwest region of the Chinese border, near Kazakhstan.

For China, Xinjiang is so strategically important, that for decades there have been dire missions of bringing the Uighurs into the fold that is China, with drastic degrees of failure. Here are the geographical reasons why China is desperate to keep the territory into its matrix (Marshall, 2016, p. 48):

- Borders 8 countries – buffering the heartland,
- Has oil reserves,
- Is the location of China’s nuclear weapons testing sites,
- Is strategically placed in the initiative “One Belt, One Road” through the port in Gwadar, Pakistan, on which China has a forty-year lease.

Any one of these reasons would make China privateer the territory as if it's gold, but all of them together has ensured that nothing will stand in China's way of keeping the territory under its absolute command. Therefore, over the years, while still trying to present a benevolent front allowing the aforementioned policies to try to appease the ethnic minorities in the region, the settled Uighurs, the PRC has actually adopted three courses of action for its most problematic region (Marshall, 2016, p. 48):

- Suppress dissent and any thoughts of independent movements,
- Pour financial resources into the region,
- Encourage Han migration into the region – through workers and tourism.

In April 1990, a Muslim group emerged under the name of the Islamic Party of East Turkestan. Staging an armed revolt which they called a “holy war” or *jihad*, the border near the city of Kashgar was suddenly crawling with units of the People's Liberation Army, resulting in two dozen civilian casualties (Magid, 1998, p. 15). The PRC's response was swift and unyielding.

February 6th-7th, 1997 – 10 people killed, 140 wounded, after Muslim youth were beaten during a pro-independence riot (Magid, 1998, p. 16).

While mentioned in the above chapter related to Tibet, it is worth mentioning again that the main cause for the constant rebelling and dissent in the Xinjiang region is the fact that unlike many ethnic minority groups, the Uighurs and Tibetans do know that they can do better, have better living conditions under another ruling party/regime.

Here is an outline of the major ethnic groups in China which have/do not have external cultural ties:

Major Ethnic Groups in China with/without external cultural ties	
With external cultural ties	Without external cultural ties
Tibetan	Bai
Uighurs	Buyi
Dai	Dong
Hani	Hui
Kazak	Li

Korean	Manchu
Miao	Tujia
Mongol	Yi
Yao	Zhuang

Table 5: Major ethnic groups in China and external cultural ties (Han, 2013, p. 18).

But why is dissent so frequent in the region and what exactly begat the Xinjiang conflict?

Dwyer postulates that the key to understanding the conflict lies in the PRC’s overt and covert policies in the region (Dwyer, 2005, p. 2).

- The overt policies – the official cultural policies, outlining the accommodative nature of bringing the Uighur ethnic group under the Han umbrella. The official stance is egalitarian in aspect and, as mentioned in the subchapter outlining PRC’s policies towards ethnic minorities, is meant to be understood under the guise of Confucianism – as though the Han way is harmonious and all intermingling.
- The covert policies – are far more heavy-handed in manner and have only one true goal in mind: assimilation.

However, unlike other ethnic minorities, the PRC has been especially assertive when it comes to the Xinjiang region. Since 2001, more and more accounts of conflicting relations concerning Uighurs have been appearing in the international media and then, on November 16th, 2019, 403 pages of leaked files detailing how China has organised mass-detentions for the Uighurs have been unearthed by The New York Times (Ramzy & Buckley, 2019).

Here is an excerpt of the questions and answers outlined in the documents, in which children are being explained by Xinjiang authorities why their parents and relatives are missing:

“2. Why do my family members have to take part in studying?”

Your family member has been sent to study because they have come under a degree of harmful influence in religious extremism and violent terrorist thoughts. If at some point the “Three Forces” or people with ulterior motives incited or bewitched them, the consequences would be severe (Ramzy & Buckley, 2019).”

Ramzy and Buckley also explain the “Three Forces” are terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.

*“The teachers will give them free instruction in the **Chinese language, the law, national policies and job skills**. That way, after they graduate, they won’t do anything harmful to themselves or others, and they will have learned skills that improve their job prospects. Currently, we are bringing in business and investment and attracting companies, and they will need many skilled workers. In the future, **they will be able to find work in these enterprises and lift the family’s income and improve living conditions.**”*

*“5. **Did they commit a crime? Will they be convicted?***

*They haven’t committed a crime and won’t be convicted. It is just that **their thinking has been infected by unhealthy thoughts**, and if they don’t quickly receive education and correction, they’ll become a major active threat to society and to your family. It’s very hard to totally eradicate viruses in thinking in just a short time. It needs to be dealt with like detox for drug addicts (Ramzy & Buckley, 2019).”*

This is only one of the more recently reported situations in Xinjiang. A tragic example of the inter-ethnic conflict occurred in 2009, on the 5th and 12th of July in Urumqi. According to the released data, the list of casualties goes as follows: 184 dead, 137 of which were of Han ethnicity, 49 – Uighurs and Hui; 1680 – injured, 939 – admitted to the hospital, of which 290 were in a very serious condition; 627 vehicles and 291 shops were destroyed (Zhang & McGhee, 2014, p. 2).

The reality is that China found itself in a very difficult position. It can either placate, or rather stifle the Chinese-Muslims in the region, or risk losing control of one of its most important territorial links, which, as mentioned before, is not something that China is even willing to consider.

But why have the actions of dissent increased in the last two decades?

I have mentioned before the aspects and causes of national identity contestation, but here, in the following table, I shall outline Enze Han’s predictions for an ethnic group’s national identity adaptation or contestation:

PREDICTIONS FOR ETHNIC GROUP NATIONAL IDENTITY
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CONTESTATION AND ADAPTATION			
	Groups with External Kin Ties		Groups Without External Kin Ties
	<u>External Support</u>	<u>No External Support</u>	Assimilation/identity adaptation
External kin enjoy better living conditions	National identity contestation	Emigration/identity adaptation	
External kin enjoy worse living conditions	Cultural autonomy/identity adaptation	Assimilation/identity adaptation	

Table 6: Predictions for ethnic group national identity contestation and adaptation (Han, 2013, p. 16).

As the disparities between the Han and the Uighurs get greater with every incident, Uighurs are reminded that there are indeed better alternatives. Both Turkey, as well as Russia, as the former Soviet Union and who has historically been linked to the region of Xinjiang are now looking like the safer option in terms of political, economic, and religious freedom than China, which clearly sees the identity crisis in the region but does not want to cede an inch. Additionally, as was the case with Tibet, the Uighurs are very politically active and the self-determination is evident, which is why they have great support from the international community, especially in light of the evident human rights violations and restrictions taking place there.

As long as the Chinese government restricts religious freedom, one of the most important aspects of national identity, the Uighurs will continue to be oppressed and the dissent will continue and if this situation is allowed to endure, there can never be even the mention of democracy, not in the entirety of China, much less in Xinjiang.

6 Conclusion

To the question: “**Why is it so hard to establish democracy in the PRC and how does it relate to China’s national identity crisis?**”, I answer: because democracy necessitates a climate of acceptance, understanding, choice and freedom of expression, verbal, religious and any other kind.

Does it relate to China’s national identity crisis? Yes, very much so. While one dynastic circle may have been broken with the fall of the Qing dynasty, another emerged once again to test the PRC: the CCP has gained power, it has had a period of prosperity and economic thrive, it has open doors for the population to glimpse democracy and globalisation and when the ethnic nationality minorities have tried to take back their independence and sense of freedom, they have been stifled and another period of discord and disunity has taken place.

The problem is, that as long as China has national interests, dire ones at that, in the preserving of its geopolitical integrity, and as long as that is conditional on key territories whose communal identities are not in line with the identity that the PRC is trying to put forth, then that is how long a democracy will have no place in the PRC.

Moreover, the ideology which China has been promulgating for decades is nationalistic in nature and the stability of the entire country hinges on the endurance of the nationalistic current. One cannot allow independent thought and separatist movements in a nexus which hinges on all cogs playing by the tune only the machine allows. As long as this aspect is still present in China, national identity contestation will persevere, policies meant to squelch them will also endure, they will in turn create rebellious actions and disharmony in the state, and a disharmonious nature could never sustain true democracy.

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