Chapter Three
Developing Minority Nationalities in Contemporary Urban China

Reza Hasmath

It is not unusual for gender and ethnic studies to borrow from each other. In the previous chapter, we saw that economic reforms from the late 1970s onward have altered the relationship between state and society for women. Using Beijing as an example, Currier demonstrates urban women workers are increasingly marginalized by the state, encouraged to return to more “traditional” household roles. The growing tension between the state and ethnic minority groups is another segment of the population deserving attention. Interestingly, when it comes to ethnic minorities in China the discussion is often directed toward the country’s under-developed, bordering Western provinces, where nearly three-quarters of the 106 million ethnic minority population reside (NBS/EAC 2003). Little is written in either English or Chinese literature about the nation’s growing ethnic minority population in the relatively developed urban centers such as Beijing. At core, ethnic minority management in China is operated by a cocktail of central government decrees, public policy protections, and local attempts to promote ethnic minority culture such as festivals, food, sport, or dance in the mainstream. In Beijing for example, local officials have stressed a loud confidence that the municipality promotes and respects the religious affairs, education, culture, and sport of ethnic minority groups. In fact, interviews conducted in late 2006 with officials from the Beijing Municipal Commission of Ethnic Affairs point to the Muslim population—comprised of approximately 300,000 persons spanning 10 ethnic groups, including the Hui, Uyghur, Uzbek, and Kazak—who practice their religion in the city’s 80-odd mosques, as a successful case study in managing ethnic difference. Officials argued this illustrates that social policies were successful in promoting ethnic tolerance. Moreover, this also illustrates that discussing the management of
ethnic difference in the relatively developed urban spaces of China is not necessary given this rosy reality.

Yet, despite long-standing efforts to integrate ethnic minorities at both the national and urban level, there has been a deep history of strained ethnic relations and tensions, rather than a Confucian-inspired, socialist vision of harmony in ethnic interactions (Mackerras 1994; Mittenthal 2002). For example, the separatist activities of the 1990s in Tibet and Xinjiang trickled down to the streets of Beijing, where severe crackdowns on Tibetan and Uyghur activities occurred. During the period of Deng Xiaoping’s state funeral (February 1997), bus bombings in Beijing signaled Uyghur contempt for the Chinese state (Mackerras 2001; Rudelson and Jankowiak 2004). Similarly, during the march for Tibetan sovereignty, the Beijing government forbade any meetings among Tibetan community associations. To this day, there still resides a stigma among key local government circles that such ethnic community associations are there for malice—suspected of encouraging drug trade or inciting “rebellious activities.” Although the integration of ethnic minorities into the urban milieu is a matter of great importance for Beijing’s development, suffice to say, it is conducted in a background of often tense ethnic relations.

Coiled in this background, there is seemingly a growing paradox in ethnic minority development in the capital city. When examining local ethnic minorities’ education attainments, they either outperform or are on par with the dominant Han population. However, when analyzing the ethnic minority demographics of those working in high-wage, education-intensive (HWEI) employment sectors, the Han population is most prevalent. What accounts for this discrepancy? What does this mean tangibly, in respect to the management of ethnic difference in Beijing? And, what steps can we take to improve this situation?

This chapter draws on recent findings, investigating the integration and social development of ethnic minorities in Beijing. It proceeds in four sections. First, it details exactly what is meant by ethnic difference in the Chinese context as the logic of ethnic difference is fairly distinct. This is followed by outlining the background conditions to Beijing’s strategies for managing ethnic difference. The third section elaborates on the paradox of ethnic minority development, drawing on rare, publicly available statistical information, and interview and ethnographic data. The chapter concludes by offering future steps to be taken, by both state and civil society actors, to improve the urban management of ethnic minorities.

**Ethnic Difference: The Chinese Perspective**

In the People’s Republic of China, the concept of ethnicity is fairly straightforward, definitive, and by some accounts rigid (Mackerras 1994).