



Villages where China's ethnic minorities live

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how ethnic minorities in rural China are faring compared with the ethnic majority. The village is the unit of analysis and large surveys for 2002 are used. Minority villages in northeast China are found to have a somewhat better economic situation than the average majority village, but minority villages in the southwest are clearly faring worse. Industrialisation, inputs in agricultural production, stock of human capital of the labour force, wage level on the local labour market as well as indicators of path dependency are all found to affect the economic situation of a village. Location is the single most important circumstance working against a favourable economic situation for minority villages in the northwest and particularly the southwest. Low village income results in long-distance migration for many ethnic minorities, but for some minorities their ethnicity hinders migration.

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1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China now officially recognises the Han majority and 55 different ethnic minorities (*minzu*, meaning ethnic group or nationality). Most minorities have their own languages. People belonging to a particular minority typically share a common history (an important component of identity) as well as religious beliefs. For example, there are ten minorities usually labelled Muslim. Official recognition of ethnicity (or nationality) is the outcome of a complex process that mainly took place during the 1950s and involved representatives of the state as well as representatives of the groups being proposed minority status. As a consequence, Han includes groups that outsiders would find more different from the Han majority than some of the groups now considered a specific minority. Also, when the ethnic categories were institutionalised, they lumped together groups of people who did not necessarily feel they belonged to the same minority, while other groups were split.

Officially designated ethnicity plays a vital role in the PRC as each citizen is assigned one of the 56 official ethnicities. Ethnic status is stated on every citizen's official identity card and used for school, legal and official records. Minority persons can benefit from preferential policies, e.g., easier entrance into college and exemption from the more rigid population policy. At the regional and sub-regional levels, areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities have been given special political and administrative status. At the province level there are five Autonomous Regions given special status (Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Tibet, Ningxia and Xinjiang), 76 autonomous areas at the prefect level and 699 autonomous administrative units at the county level. (*China's Yearbook of Ethnic Works*, 2003; the information refers to the end of 2002). This administrative structure with elements of self-

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government makes it possible for different levels of the government to support ethnic minorities by lowering taxes and increasing public expenditures. Further, in minority areas, having minority status makes it easier to become a cadre (that is, a village head, village party secretary, or village accountant).

Ethnic status thus plays a role in the day-to-day life of people living in the PRC as well as in policymaking. Surprisingly little is known, however, on how the 104 million persons making up 8.4% of China's population (according to the 2000 census) are faring in economic terms.¹ True, much statistical information on autonomous units at different levels can be found, but this information is limited in that the overlap between ethnicity and administrative structure is not perfect. Many minority persons live outside the autonomous areas while certain autonomous areas are inhabited by many majority persons. Actually, in three of the five autonomous regions the Han are in the majority; Inner Mongolia is the extreme with a minority population of only 21%. At the level of autonomous county there are even examples of a minority share of the population of 10% or lower.

This study aims to throw new light on the economic situation of ethnic minorities in rural China by applying an original approach, that of using the *village* as the unit of analysis. We argue that there are strong arguments for a village level analysis for understanding the economic situation of persons living in rural China. The village is the basic production and social unit for rural people in China.

In this study we go one step further than to distinguish between the Han majority on one hand, and the minority as one category on the other. There is great diversity between China's ethnic minorities regarding religion, language and other aspects of culture. China's minorities also differ by location and ethnic identity. For several ethnic minorities the relations towards the Han majority are rather unproblematic, but there are exceptions. There are thus good arguments for the approach taken here of identifying minority villages inhabited by different ethnic minorities.

We study as separate categories villages inhabited by a large concentration of Manchu, Hui, Uyghur, Zhuang, Miao and Yi. The Manchu villages are all located in relatively prosperous northeast China, and their inhabitants are in many aspects similar to the Han. The Hui people, many living in northwest China, differ from the Han by their Muslim religion, but in virtually no other aspect. In contrast, the Uyghur (who also are Muslims and live in Xinjiang), have their own language, differ in appearance and have a strong identity. The three categories of Miao, Yi and Zhuang all live in (in economic terms) less fortunate southwest China, where inter-ethnic relations are relatively uncomplicated. However, the degree of ethnic identity varies across the three groups from comparatively high among the Yi to comparatively low among the Zhuang. Thus although our study does not cover minority villages inhabited by all ethnic groups of China, we cover villages where the inhabitants differ in many aspects.² Further, the minorities studied are the most numerous minorities.

Our research questions are the following: First, how are the different categories of minority villages faring compared with the majority villages in rural China? Three criteria are used; average household per capita income, average per capita wealth and villagers' perceptions. Second, which circumstances affect average household income of a village as well as average wealth of a village and how can these circumstances throw light on differences in mean economic situation between the different types of minority villages and majority villages? Third, does low village income cause minorities to move out, and to what extent does ethnicity promote or hinder out-migration? The database for this study is a survey of more than 900 villages located in 22 provinces in 2002 and a matching survey of households living in the same villages.

The study draws the following conclusions: On average, minority villages in northeast China have a somewhat better economic situation than the average majority villages. In contrast, minority villages situated in the northwest fare worse according to some, but not all indicators. Most troublesome from an equity point of view is that minority villages located in southwest China clearly have a poorer economic situation than the average majority village.

Many circumstances are found to contribute to differences in average household village income as well as household wealth across rural China: the rate of industrialisation, various inputs in agricultural production, the amount of human capital of the labour force, the wage rate at the local labour market and indicators of path dependency. These factors contribute in varying degrees to differences in economic situation between minority villages and majority villages. However, location is found to be the single most important circumstance working against a favourable economic situation for Uyghur and Hui villages, and particularly for Zhuang, Miao, Yi and Other southwestern minority villages. We also find that a low village income induces many ethnic minority persons to be involved in long distance migration, but for some minorities this potential source of economic development is thwarted by their ethnicity.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The next section defines "minority village", presents the surveys and provides basic information on the different categories of minority villages studied. The economic situation of minority villages is described in Section 3 while Section 4 analyses reasons for why the economic situation at the village level varies and how it can explain the gap between categories of minority villages and majority villages. Out-migration from villages is studied in Section 5 and the paper ends with a section summing up and commenting on the results.

¹ Colin Mackerras has on several occasions written about the topic. (Mackerras, 1994, 1998, 2003). Hannum and Yu (1998) investigated the occupation among the Han and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region 1982–1990. Longworth, Brown, and Williamson (1997) studied the pastoral regions, and Heberer (2005) the entrepreneurship among the Yi/Nuosu ethnic group in Liangshang, Sichuan. Chen Qingde, Pan Shengzhi and Qin Xuemei (2004) studied the characteristics and the dynamics of the economic transition of the ethnic villages. Xincai Gao and Tangwei Teng (2006) analyzed the economic underdevelopment and industry economy of the ethnic region of the Northwest of China. Gustafsson and Li (2003) assessed the ethnic minority-majority income gap in rural China. Using data from 19 provinces for 1988 and 1995 they found that although average income among minorities had increased, the majority/minority income gap had also increased. This was found to be the result of economic growth being spatially unbalanced in combination with China's ethnic minorities living to a larger extent in locations that have experienced below average growth. The same data were also used by Bhalla and Qiu (2006) who focused on Southwest China and also studied education, healthcare and anti-poverty policies.

² Issues on minority language, religion, identity, political participation as well as the minority policy are not addressed in any depth in this paper. Readers interested in such issues are referred to, e.g., Palmer Kaup (2000), Harrell (2001), Gladney (2004) and Rossabi (ed) (2004).

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