Introduction

Ethnic Politics, War and the Future of Multinational States

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China and Russia have recently been in the international spotlight, with their multi-ethnic or, more precisely, multi-national structures on full display. But multi-nationality, or mnogonatsional’nost’ as it is known in Russia, or duominzu in China, no longer provides a vision of the future beyond the nation-state as it was originally intended; rather, it has become a cause célèbre whose nature is no longer understandable. The deployment of minority soldiers in the Russian war against Ukraine recently prompted Pope Francis to describe Chechens and Buryats as the ‘cruellest’ soldiers in Russia while insisting that being cruel is ‘not of the Russian tradition’; in contrast, minorities in China including Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongols have received unprecedented sympathy in the West for their sufferings at the hands of the Chinese state, whose ethnic policy has been condemned as genocide or crimes against humanity.

Politicians, public commentators and scholars in the West have scrutinised with great intensity China’s new ethnic policy and the Russian war against Ukraine. Rarely, however, do we hear the voices of minorities directly. We are therefore pleased to present this special issue of *Inner Asia* which contains two sections, one on minorities in China and the other on minority participation in the Russian war, written by Western-based researchers and anti-war activists of ethnic minority background. These are the results of two workshops held in the summer of 2022 at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge. The editors of the two sections: Keywords: A Window into China’s Governance of its Inner Asian Borderlands – Robert Barnett and Tenha Seher, and Voices: The Voices of Russia’s Minorities on the Invasion of Ukraine – Ayur Zhanaev and Kristina Jonutytė, deserve our special thanks for organising and editing the papers. We are also grateful to all the contributors for sharing their unique insights and perspectives on the tragedy befalling their respective ‘nationalities’.
The current state of ethnic affairs in China and Russia is a regrettable development, considering China was the world’s first modern multi-national state, with the Republic of China proclaiming itself a ‘union of five nationalities’ (wuzu gonghe) when it was founded in 1912. The Soviet Union was the first ‘union’ of Soviet Socialist Republics for nationalities when it was created in 1922. With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the greater part of the landmass of Eurasia was organised in accordance with the multi-nationality principle, granting ethnic groups varying degrees of political and territorial autonomy. Thus, the long twentieth century witnessed a vast worldwide experiment to reorganise groupings, to resist the nation-state paradigm that partitioned the world into coloured patches on the world map, and to provide an alternative route to globalisation. Despite its flaws, communist cosmopolitanism based on slogans of inter-ethnic equality and brotherhood had drawn hundreds of millions of people around the globe, playing a significant part in the decolonisation of European empires and, in some measure, inspiring the civil rights movement in the United States.

Both the strength of nationalism and the failure of cosmopolitanism or ‘internationalism’ have contributed to the demise of multi-nationality in these two communist states. In constructing a multi-national state, the two regimes attempted to convert the ethnic groups to conform to the ideal by redrawing their boundaries, modifying the substance of their cultures and physically eliminating elites or ‘enemies of the people’. This was a violent process that was exacerbated by the institutional partition of the population into two broad categories, the majority and the minority, with the former being assigned leadership positions in uplifting the latter, thereby re-establishing inequality. Concretely, Han and Russians were granted superior status, thus rendering the fight against Chinese and Russian chauvinism a farce, as this majoritarian democracy made refusal to accept Chinese or Russian superiority or ‘advancement’ a political crime, constituting separatism, or splittism, as it is known in China. The struggle against minority separatism/splittism worsened the very phenomenon communists sought to eradicate.

Insofar as it was used as a weapon against colonialism and injustice in the capitalist West, communist internationalism and its home version of multi-nationality have been responded to in kind. Minorities victimised by the so-called ethnic process, an engineering of inter-ethnic camaraderie, also looked to the West for inspiration and support. This is not a symmetrical process, as communists, in order to maintain power, have not only acknowledged the superiority of the capitalist market economy, but also come to a curious
understanding that the multi-national structure and its associated autonomy for nationalities were harmful to the core nationalities of the two states. Communists-turned-nationalists, notably Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian leaders, were among those who agreed to dismantle the Soviet Union to save their respective nations, and the Chinese Communists not only tried to learn a lesson from the breakup of the Soviet Union by identifying its cause, but also followed with interest the Russian reform that aimed at weakening institutional autonomy for minorities. In between, they concluded that the Communist nationality policy and regional autonomy for nationalities encouraged minority nationalism.

The Communist experiment with multi-nationality or multi-nationalism was thus such a colossal failure that it spawned an even deeper experiment, precisely the one that the Communists had hoped to forestall. Xi Jinping has proclaimed the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Zhōnghuá mínzú), the Chinese dream; it is a newly imagined nation with the Han Chinese majority at its core, in which minorities do not have a meaningful existence apart from their assimilation into it. This dream has a certain allure since it adheres to the most ethical language of inter-ethnic intimacy by ‘strengthening interethnic contact, exchange and mingling’ (jiàqiáng mínzú jiàowǎng, jiàoliú, jiàoróng). Minority languages, cultures, and identities based on territorial autonomy are consequently viewed as unethical since they are seen as justification for split tism, extremism and even terrorism. Such an ethical stance has led to policies and programmes to foster inter-ethnic intimacy in the borderlands, particularly in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, by prohibiting minority language teaching, destroying minority symbolism both at home and in public and harshly penalising minorities for any expression of identity.

In Russia, both far-right populism against foreigners and non-Slavic citizens and Eurasianist expansionism with a strong Slavic base at the state level have emerged. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ‘special military operation’ launched by Putin in February 2022 to ‘de-nazify’ Ukraine merit special consideration, for they are Slavic imperialism gone unbridled. The Ukrainian rejection of Putin’s Slavism or the Russian Orthodox Church’s ethos of ‘the Russian World’ – Russkiy mir – as an opposition to the Western liberal culture, and insistence on a separate national identity aligned with Western democratic values, points to the fact that imperialist nationalism has difficulty in building up its own base. Frustrations of post-Communist nationalist imperialism thus open a new war front, targeting their ‘own people’. We can see a parallel process going on in China, in its sabre-rattling against Taiwan’s ‘separatists’ and its imposition of national security law on Hong Kong.
This new development, which may be called intra-Slavic and intra-Sinitic implosions, at least from the point of view of their advocates, have important ramifications for inter-ethnic relations in both Russia and China. In Russia, non-Slavic ethnic minorities, particularly Caucasian peoples like the Chechens and Inner Asian peoples like the Buryats, Tuvans and Yakutians, may have been overrepresented in the military. This has engendered what may be called ‘war multi-culturalism’, for lack of a better description, to serve as a cover for Putin’s war objective, which is the putative ‘denazification’ of Ukraine. The question remains as to whether this weaponisation of multi-culturalism would result in improved inter-ethnic or Russian-minority relations as well as a modification of the fundamental ethnic foundation of Russia, i.e. a de-ethnicised Russia. It is too soon to tell. What we do know is that this war multi-culturalism has increased the Ukrainians’ resolve to reject a Mongol- or Buryat-faced, barbaric Russia. While this counter-racialisation may be justified against a unilateral invasion from Russia, what is at issue is its long-term effect on inter-ethnic relations in Russia.

We can detect a similar racialisation by Chinese advocates of the notion of Chinese nation, which celebrates its hybrid composition and alludes to centuries of Inner Asian invasions and conquests, not so much to give Inner Asian minorities more respect, but to make them ‘inseparable’ from Han Chinese. The instrumentalisation of hybridity has elicited two types of responses from Taiwan: Chinese Nationalists insisting on their undiluted Chinese stock, demonstrating their moral superiority to barbarised or hybridised mainland Chinese; and Taiwanese independence fighters justifying their cause of independence on the basis that they have mixed blood with Taiwanese aboriginals of Austronesian stock.

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unified in their opposition to war, colonisation and all forms of oppression. There is an implicit continuum between the perceived extinction of minorities through ‘slow genocide’ in China and being used as cannon-fodder in a war in Russia, making the distance between the two states less than our imaginations allow. As revealed by the linguistic analysis of a transition from communist multi-nationality to Chinese dominance, the situation of minorities in China is structurally identical to that of minorities in Russia today. How minorities and their intellectuals perceive the place of their peoples in China and Russia, and whether they believe their fortune lies better within a multi-national state or in a state of their own, will have a significant impact on the institutional structure of China and Russia. The reinstatement of multi-culturalism for the purpose of war in Russia and the emphasis on hybridity in the construction of the Chinese nation in order to contain minorities, as described above, indicate that nationalism and imperialism unfold in China and Russia in a highly complex and sometimes unpredictable manner. Our special issue aims to give varied minority perspectives on this process of transforming the globe.

There is an added advantage to think about China and Russia's multi-national issues in relation rather than in separation. With the avowed (although the timing of which is anyone’s guess) Chinese invasion of (euphemised in China as peaceful unification with) Taiwan, what implications does minority participation in the Russian army have for Chinese minorities? If the world is caught off-guard by the deployment of Putin’s ‘Buryat Warriors’, we only need to remind ourselves that China’s last imperial rulers were a tiny minority called Manchu who conquered and ruled China from 1644 to 1911. And as in Russia, minorities may also be over-represented in the Chinese army, even though they may be invisible. This is not so much a question of comparison as a possible refiguration of the ethnic scape throughout Eurasia saturated with an Inner Asian cultural link. We now have a taste of what may lie ahead in the exodus of large numbers of Buryat, Tuvan and even ethnic Russian youngsters to Mongolia, Kazakhstan and beyond.

By decolonising academic knowledge production, we do not mean that the voices of minorities represent the truth. No knowledge is unbiased. And there is no such thing as a correct knowledge. Furthermore, we do not imply that there is only one type of minority voice. Minority scholars are individuals whose knowledge formation, ethnic consciousness and political attitude vary based on their life path and type of schooling. In this regard, they are comparable to other academics and opinion leaders. But they differ in one essential sense: as members of their respective ethnic groups, they have more intuitive grasp of the predicament of their peoples, and as members, they are
also active players, albeit from a distance in this case. Thus, in this special issue, the minority authors in the Chinese section provide a unique insight into the workings of some of the key concepts used in Chinese ethnic politics. And the authors in the Russian section are more activistic in orientation, responding to the minority participation war from a variety of angles, with some hoping to find more political space within the current Russian state for minorities and others viewing their relation with the Russian state as one of colonialism and thus independence as the only imaginable future for their ‘nations’. Both policymakers and scholars must take such perspectives seriously, not least because social formations may coalesce around them, intellectually and tangibly, a force to be reckoned with.