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Events of 2015

With 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities, China has in the past pursued policies of 'coexistence' that have included subsidies, special cultural protections and support for minority language education in schools. Yet in practice, as demonstrated in the appropriation of minority cultures in so-called ethnic theme parks across the country, their customs and traditional practices are often commercialized or essentialized while underlying issues of discrimination remain unaddressed. For example, during the annual meetings of the National People's Congress, China's legislature, state media is typically awash with images of smiling ethnic minority delegates in traditional costume – yet little if anything is said about their level of effective political participation.

Furthermore, since the mid 1990s, state policy has placed greater emphasis on cultural integration rather than coexistence, with some prominent academics arguing for a 'unitary' national identity where existing ethnic categories are subsumed within the dominant influence of the ethnic Han majority. These ideas are now shaping national policy, reflected in President Xi Jinping's emphasis on the importance of national unity and the concept of the 'China Dream', which is noticeably silent on the subject of ethnic autonomy and cultural rights. This raises real concerns over the future of autonomous ethnic minority culture in China.

These issues are especially evident in regions such as Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang, where the state is engaged in a security crackdown against the local populations. While, as noted by the UN Committee Against Torture in October 2015, abuses include numerous reports of 'torture, death in custody, arbitrary detention and disappearance' of community members, many of the state's most repressive policies take the form of cultural and religious restrictions. The securitization of minority traditions and practices, besides fostering a climate of surveillance and the stifling of free expression, negatively affects targeted communities in every area of their lives. Frequently the repression or destruction of minority culture is a corollary of state-led development, such as top-down urbanization programmes that have devastated pastoralist livelihoods, architectural heritage and long-established neighbourhoods.

Xinjiang

In Xinjiang, repressive state policies continued throughout 2015 amid escalating violence in the region, with security crackdowns and intrusive restrictions on free expression, assembly and movement. In Hotan, for example, ordinances required Uyghurs to obtain official permission in order to visit relatives or seek medical treatment outside their village. Authorities in Ili stopped issuing passports and ordered that all Uyghur passports be handed over to the police, or be cancelled. Information on developments within the region remains difficult to access due to obstacles for independent journalists wishing to report on the region. In addition, the state has launched an aggressive assault on rights lawyers across China, including several Han lawyers who have attempted to highlight abusive treatment of Uyghurs. In December 2015, lawyer Pu Zhiqiang was found guilty and sentenced to a three-year suspended sentence for 'inciting ethnic hatred' and 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble' in relation to social media posts, including two from 2014 that were critical of government policy towards Uyghurs. Another lawyer, Wang Yu, was detained in July 2015 and, after six months of incommunicado detention, formally arrested on subversion charges in January 2016. She had represented Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti, who was sentenced to life in prison in 2014 on separatism charges.

Uyghur citizens of other countries who visited China to visit family have reported intimidation, harassment and threats, including cases of Chinese authorities attempting to intimidate and threaten them to get them to spy on Uyghurs abroad. The Chinese government has also been able to exert pressure on other countries where Uyghurs have taken sanctuary, as suggested by the forced repatriation of 109 Uyghur refugees from Thailand in July 2015.

As in previous years, in the period leading up to and during Ramadan, religious rights in Xinjiang – Islam is a central part of Uyghur identity – were aggressively repressed. In April, a respected Uyghur imam was jailed along with 16 other defendants on security charges and sentenced to nine years in prison for preaching without a permit. Women in veils were denied entry to public hospitals, raids on mosques intensified and, in some areas, Uyghur storeowners reported that authorities forced them to sell alcohol and cigarettes, contrary to Islamic practice, under penalty of fine. Authorities also banned Uyghur officials and students from fasting during Ramadan and forced restaurants to stay open, provoking widespread outrage. In September, reports emerged that Uyghurs in Hotan were being prohibited from giving their children Islamic names, which have strong cultural significance. A list of 22 forbidden names was disseminated, with residents reportedly threatened that children with those names could be barred from attending kindergarten and elementary schools.

A government white paper published by the official state press agency, Xinhua News Agency, in September praised urbanization policies for improving living standards and promoting inter-ethnic harmony in Xinjiang. Yet state-led redevelopment has been responsible for the destruction of Kashgar's old city, devastating its traditional architectural heritage and undermining local Uyghur identity. Anthropologist Jay Dautcher argues that Uyghur residential neighbourhoods, or *mehelle*, have been critical components in the production of Uyghur culture for hundreds of years. Traditional architecture and how residents socialize within the physical space is especially formative in the construction of gender identity.

Since 2011, Chinese authorities have been promoting a system of 'bilingual education', purportedly offering Uyghur pupils the opportunity to study in their mother language and Mandarin. However, the system has been criticized for in practice undermining Uyghur linguistic and cultural identity, with the majority of the curriculum focusing on 'patriotic education' that leaves a marginal role for Uyghur culture and history. Although the Law on Regional Autonomy stresses autonomy in education and culture, including literature, arts, news, film, television and the preservation of historical cultural heritage, in 2015 Uyghurs continue to see their linguistic and cultural autonomy eroded. In an article published after his 2014 imprisonment, Ilham Tohti explained that: 'In recent years, Uyghur fears of cultural and linguistic annihilation have been

greatly exacerbated by a sharp contraction in Xinjiang's local-language publishing and cultural industries.'

Tibet

The Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) Party Secretary Chen Quanguo's 2014 exhortations advocating inter-ethnic marriages continued, despite concerns voiced by Tibetan writer Tsering Woesser that this amounts to 'an attempt to dissolve the Tibetan identity in the Han Chinese culture'. In December, the former TAR governor, an ethnic Tibetan, Qiangba Puncog, countered that the government was not doing enough to tackle ethnic discrimination. Throughout the Tibetan plateau, numerous monks, nuns and laypeople were detained and sentenced, some on unspecified charges. At least seven self-immolations took place during 2015, bringing the total at the end of the year to 143 since 2009. As in the previous year, family members of monks who self-immolated have themselves been punished. While restrictions on the freedom of movement imposed since riots in Lhasa in 2008, which had impeded the ability of Tibetans to participate in cultural activities, were gradually lifted, many monks and nuns still faced impediments to movement or obtaining passports.

In July, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, a respected Tibetan monk, died while serving a life sentence his supporters claim was in reprisal for his support of the Dalai Lama and promotion of Tibetan cultural institutions. The 65-year-old monk had been denied medical parole, despite being in poor health preceding his death, and when his family tried to visit the body they were repeatedly turned away. China's *Rules on the Handling of Deaths in Prison* requires the delivery of the bodies of ethnic minorities 'with respect to ethnic traditions'. But although Tibetan Buddhism has specific funeral prayers and burial rituals, the authorities refused to release Tenzin's body to his family and, when protest over this denial of cultural rights erupted, the police opened fire with live ammunition. In other cases of Tibetans who died in police custody, authorities have also refused to release the body to family members for traditional rites, such as with Lobsang Yeshe, a village leader and rights activist.

The year 2015 marked the 20th anniversary of the disappearance of the Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, who would have been 26 years old. On 17 May, the Tibetan government in exile released a statement recalling the 1995 recognition of the then 6-year-old and his subsequent disappearance by Chinese authorities three days later. Later the same year, Chinese officials appointed Gyaincain Norbu as the Panchen Lama, a move disregarded by many Tibetans and the Dalai Lama. Responding to concerns that the Chinese government would attempt to control his succession, in March the Dalai Lama stated that he might not reincarnate after his death. This would mean an end to the practice since the fifteenth century of recognizing the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Emblematic of the lack of sensitivity and religious autonomy afforded Tibetan Buddhism, was the response of Zhu Weiqun, chairman of the Committee for Ethnic and Religious Affairs, a high-level committee within the central government, who stated that: 'The reincarnation of the Dalai Lama has to be endorsed by the central government, not by any other sides including the Dalai Lama himself.'

State-led urbanization, part of a long-term government policy to bring hundreds of thousands of pastoralists in the region into towns and cities, continued during the year. By forcing nomadic Tibetans off their ancestral lands, the programme is effectively erasing their ancient indigenous culture. Mining and dam projects across the Tibetan plateau have also fuelled protests. In Chamdo, road construction leading to a mining project threatening Mini Mountain, a local sacred mountain, reignited protests that had momentarily halted the mining project in 2014. Top-down redevelopment of Tibetan towns and cities is also another source of conflict. In December 2015, for instance, the Lhasa City government announced a policy of demolishing traditional Tibetan houses and replacing them with Chinese-style buildings. Some Tibetan families are even being

required to contribute upwards of RMB 200,000 of their own funds to the construction, whether or not they object to the demolition of their existing homes.

Security measures that seek to limit participation in religious activities are especially intrusive. For example, government policy imposes quotas on the number of monks allowed in given monasteries, leading to the expulsion of more than 100 monks and nuns from their monasteries in Driru County in April and further expulsions in Tridu County in June. In advance of the Dalai Lama's 6 July birthday, authorities in the region also forbade public gatherings. In January 2016, authorities announced the indefinite extension of police presence and surveillance measures in Tibetan villages and monasteries, signalling that the state's intrusion into Tibetan cultural and religious freedoms could be extended indefinitely.

Inner Mongolia

Mongolians in 2015 experienced renewed conflicts with Chinese authorities over the loss of traditional grazing lands, an important part of their semi-nomadic culture and economic livelihood. The year began with a delegation of Mongolians filing complaints in Beijing over the ongoing loss of traditional lands, much of which had been taken by the army. Efforts to exploit Inner Mongolia's abundance of coal and other natural resources have often been seen as an assault on the traditional cultural practices of pastoral communities. Enghebatu Togocho, director of the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center, spoke out saying, 'Mongolian herders are trying their best to defend their land, culture and way of life, but very little resources are available to them, and government policies are very hostile to the Mongolian way of life.' This perception has continued to spark protests and police crackdowns. In November, Odongerel, a Mongolian rights defender and leader of the protest movement, was detained for ten days for comments she made on WeChat, a popular mobile app. Meanwhile, well-known Mongolian rights defender Hada, despite having been released in 2014 after serving 15 years on separatism charges and a further four years of extra-judicial detention after his sentence ended, continued to be subjected to coercive measures and *de facto* detention throughout 2015. On Human Rights Day, 10 December, Hada's family went on hunger strike to protest his ongoing abuse and harassment.

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