

Comparative Study of the Policy Towards Ethnic Minorities of P.R. China and Vietnam

Teng Chengda

I. Introduction

China and Vietnam are two of the very few countries in the world that have an official definition of ethnic groups. There are 56 ethnic groups in China and 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam. China and Vietnam share some common characteristics of ethnic groups. Policy towards ethnic minorities in these two countries were based on the theory of Marxism combined with the actual situation of China and Vietnam, respectively. As their economies develop, however, the diversity of ethnic minority culture is dying away. These two countries are faced with the problem of retaining traditional culture while realizing economic development for ethnic minorities.

Equality, unity and mutual assistance are foundational principles of the policy on ethnic groups of China and Vietnam. For equality of ethnic groups and national unity, China and Vietnam have different and special policies towards ethnic minorities. This paper mainly concerns the contemporary policy towards ethnic minorities of China and Vietnam with regards to economic development and cultural preservation, specifically the similarities and differences of the ethnic minority policies between China and Vietnam. One main difference of the policy towards ethnic minorities between China and Vietnam is the ethnic regional autonomy.

II. Methodological Framework

The study used two major methods: fieldwork and the comparative method.

1. Fieldwork: Fieldwork was conducted in Lang Son, Cao Bang and Lao Cai province of Vietnam and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China. The information collected from fieldwork was combined with data obtained through a series of interviews conducted with scholars and people holding detailed knowledge of the policy towards ethnic minorities.
2. Comparative method: Analysis and synthesis method were used to analyze and synthesize materials collected in China and Vietnam. This method is essential in order to carry out the comparative study to identify the similarities and differences in the policy towards ethnic minorities.

III. The policy towards ethnic minorities of China and Vietnam

1. Background of ethnic minorities in China and Vietnam

1.1. Outline of ethnic minorities in China

China is a united multi-ethnic country. So far, 56 ethnic groups have been identified and recognized by the Central Government. The population of various ethnic groups varies greatly. According to the fifth national census conducted in 2000, the total population of all the 55 ethnic minority groups is 104.49 million, accounting for 8.41 percent of the total population of China. The history of the evolution of China's ethnic groups is one of frequent contacts and intermingling. In its long historical development, various ethnic groups moved frequently from one place to another and gradually formed the pattern of living together over vast areas while some live in individual compact communities in small areas. The Han ethnic group has the largest population. The Han people are distributed all over China, while most of the other remaining 55 ethnic groups live in the frontier areas. The ethnic minorities mainly reside in the Northeast, Southwest and Northwest parts of China. The regions where ethnic minorities live in compact communities are large, and rich in natural resources. Since the 1940s, China established the system of ethnic regional autonomy in the regions where ethnic minorities reside. At present, there are 5 autonomous regions, 30 autonomous prefectures and 120 autonomous counties in China.

1.2. Outline of ethnic minorities in Vietnam

According to the general census carried out on 1 April 1999, the population of Vietnam is 76,324,753. Each of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam has its language and its own unique culture. The Kinh live all over the territory but mostly near the rivers where they have created the wet rice civilization and in urban areas. Almost all ethnic minorities (except the Hoa and Khmer people) live in the midland and mountainous regions. Ethnic minorities in Vietnam do not have distinct ethnologic territories; many groups intermix with others. This phenomenon resulted from the history of immigration of ethnic minorities into the northern and central regions. Various ethnic groups immigrated to Northern Vietnam at different times. Those who came later had to either join another group or move to higher regions. Different ethnic minorities have different levels of development.

1.3. Classification of ethnic groups in China and Vietnam

Ethnic classification was carried out by China and Vietnam to formulate and implement the policy towards ethnic minorities and deal with ethnic issues. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Chinese government carried out a classification of ethnic groups on the basis of full investigation of various ethnic groups. The criteria for classification include language, territory, economic life, common mentality, common consciousness and desires. Also, the history and the name of ethnic groups were taken into account. In the first national census in 1953, China acknowledged 39 ethnic

groups. From 1954 to 1968, China recognized 15 more ethnic groups. In 1990, China completed the classification of ethnic groups with an official list of 56 ethnic groups.

In Vietnam, the classification of ethnic groups started in the 1960s. In 1973, scientists published one list of the ethnic groups living in Northern Vietnam -- this list comprised 36 ethnic groups. Since Vietnam was unified in 1975, the investigation of ethnic groups in Southern Vietnam was carried out. Based on the researches of linguists and ethnologists, Vietnam acknowledged 54 defined ethnic groups by 1979. The official list of ethnic groups was applied to the national censuses in 1979, 1989 and 1999. Three criteria used to classify ethnic groups of Vietnam are language, culture and ethnic self-consciousness, and ethnic self-consciousness is considered the most important. Since the end of the twentieth century, however, the classification of some ethnic groups have been under consideration. Vietnam started the re-classification of some ethnic groups as further investigations of some ethnic minorities were carried out.

Since the criteria used for ethnic classification in China and Vietnam are different, some ethnic groups are classified differently in these two countries. For instance, the ethnic group Zhuang in China is classified into five ethnic groups in Vietnam -- Tay, Nung, Giay, Cao Lan – San Chay, La Chi. The ethnic status in the border areas between China and Vietnam are relatively complex.

2. Comparison of the policy towards ethnic minorities of China and Vietnam.

The content of policy towards ethnic minorities is extensive, involved with the ethnic minorities' autonomy, economy, culture, education, religion, language, population, etc. For the sake of comparing feasibly, this paper mainly compares the contemporary policy towards ethnic minorities concerning economy and culture

2.1. Economic Policy

Since reform and opening-up, China and Vietnam have paid much more attention to the development of the economies and societies of ethnic minorities. China and Vietnam have created preferential policies to accelerate the economic and cultural development in ethnic minority areas, such as strengthening financial support for ethnic minority areas. At present, China has projects like "The Development of the Western China" and the "More Prosperous Frontiers and Better-off People Action". Similarly, Vietnam has the "135" Project, Settlement Program, etc.

2.1.1. China

Article 4 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China stipulates: "The State assists areas inhabited by ethnic minorities in accelerating their economic and cultural development according to the characteristics and needs of various ethnic groups". The Law on Ethnic Regional Autonomy provides that the organs of self-government of ethnic autonomous localities shall accelerate the development of economy and culture.

China has increasingly strengthened its assistance to impoverished ethnic minority areas. Since the mid-1980s the Chinese government launched a large-scale poverty-alleviation drive in an organized and programmed way. Ethnic minorities and the areas they live have been key targets of governmental aid. The Central Government encourages better-off areas and ethnic groups to help those that are not well-off yet so as to realize a common prosperity. The Central Government organized the more developed areas along the eastern coast to provide corresponding aid to western areas and help ethnic minority areas develop their economies and public services. In 1996, corresponding assistance was made specific: Beijing is to assist Inner Mongolia; Shandong assists Xinjiang; Fujian assists Ningxia; and Guangdong assists Guangxi. Tibet receives assistance from all the other areas of the country. From 2001 to 2005, Tibet received assistance and grants totaling 1.062 billion yuan from all over the country for the construction of 71 projects.

More Prosperous Frontiers and Better-off People Action

Since 2000, the Central Government has pursued a drive known as "More Prosperous Frontiers and Better-off People Action." In the period from 2000 to 2004, the central budget appropriated a total of 264 million yuan to back the drive, which has in turn encouraged and attracted a large amount of investments from various channels and siphoned off to the frontier regions. More than 20,000 projects have been launched involving infrastructure, agricultural production, ecological construction, culture and education. Every province and autonomous region of the frontier regions has projects to develop the economies and societies of frontier regions. For instance, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region has a project called "Constructing the frontier regions." Guangxi, located in the southwest part of China, shares a 1,020 km border with Vietnam. There are 12 ethnic groups residing in the border region of Guangxi, 80% of population of the border region is ethnic minorities. From August 2000 to October 2002, Guangxi plunged 2.16 billion yuan into building roads, schools, healthcare stations and a power system in the border region. Many specialised movements were implemented, like eradicating couch grass roof houses in villages and building free boarding schools for minority children. After the Project "Constructing frontier regions" was completed in 2002, the living conditions of the people in

the border regions of Guangxi was improved – schools were opened at all levels, clinics established in many places, national radio and television coverage reached villages, and electricity came to mountainous and far-flung areas.

Helping 22 ethnic minorities with small populations

More assistance has been given to support the development of 22 ethnic minorities, each with a population of less than 100,000. In the period from 2002 to 2004, a large amount of special-purpose funds was allocated for the construction of infrastructure -- roads and water and power facilities -- in the regions where ethnic minorities with small populations live in compact communities. Funds were allocated as well as for the development of education, medical services, cultural and other social welfare undertakings. In May 2005, the “Development Plan (2005-2010) for the Aid of Ethnic Minorities with Small Populations” was formulated which set a target of helping poverty-stricken ethnic minority villages with insufficient food and clothing meet their poverty-relief targets within five years to bring their economic and social development to a moderate or higher level in the local areas.

All these programs have greatly improved infrastructure construction, economic and social development, and raised the living standard of people in ethnic minority areas.

2.1.2. Vietnam

Article 5 of the Constitution of Vietnam stipulates: “The State carries out a policy of comprehensive development and gradually raises the material and spiritual living conditions of the ethnic minorities”. To close the growing gap between the country’s mountainous regions and the rest of the country, Vietnam has implemented numerous preferential policies on socio-economic development to improve all aspects of the living conditions of ethnic minority people in mountainous regions.

Programme 135

Programme 135, the State-funded Poverty Reduction Project, focuses on socio-economic development for especially needy communes and eradicating hunger and poverty in over 2000 disadvantaged communes - most of them in mountainous and border regions. Programme 135 focuses on building infrastructure facilities, developing both the processing and marketing of agricultural and forest products,

relocating local populations and training communal officials. The programme aims to reduce the proportion of households living in poverty nationwide from 26.7 percent to 16 percent by 2010 (based on the new poverty line of VND200,000 per month per head in rural areas and VND230,000 in urban areas.)

The State's program on hunger eradication and poverty alleviation for 2001-2005 was adopted with a budget of VND16.2 trillion, VND6.3 billion being reserved for job generation. The State invested in building roads, schools, healthcare stations, irrigation, and a power system in mountainous areas. Many specialised movements were implemented, like eradicating dilapidated houses and building houses for the poor. Some daily necessities such as iodized salt, anti-malaria drugs and textbooks for students are now provided free of charge for ethnic minorities. The State also built free boarding schools for minority children. In the school year 1999-2000, there were 750 minority boarding schools throughout the country with over 60,000 pupils from 45 ethnic minorities. National radio and television coverage reaches villages.

Programme 135 has helped the Cuu Long (Mekong) Delta province of An Giang reduce its poverty rate in mountainous areas from 23-30 percent to 10 percent from 1999 to 2005. Twenty-five mountainous communes in An Giang have benefited from Programme 135, which contributed VND 96 billion to 252 public works, including 102 roads, four water supply systems, and six irrigation works. Four healthcare stations, in addition to cultural centres, markets and other socio-economic projects, were also upgraded with the program's funding. Under the program, 4,580 Khmer ethnic households have been given a total of 2,471ha of land for farming and 2,600 poor Khmer households have received houses. The average income of people in the disadvantaged communes has increased three to six times since the launch of Programme 135 in 1999. All beneficiary communes now have access to electricity and 22 of the 25 communes are accessible by car. All the communes have their own medical stations. More than 87 percent of school-age children in the area attend classes, and ethnic languages are being taught at many of these schools.

These programs have brought about a new image of the mountainous areas where most of ethnic minorities live, helping to shrink the gap between the lowlands and the highlands. The second phase (from 2006 to 2010) of Programme 135 aims to promote a farming economy aligned with market-oriented production to increase the quality of ethnic minorities' lives and to reduce the development gap between rural and urban areas.

2.2. Cultural Policy.

Culture is one important characteristic of ethnic groups. To foster equality and unity of ethnic groups, nations must recognize and embrace cultural diversity. In the course of modernization, China and Vietnam have put in place policies to preserve and develop the traditional culture of ethnic minorities, including intangible culture.

2.2.1. China

While helping the ethnic minorities develop their economies, the Central Government actively supports and develops their cultural affairs. Article 119 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China stipulates: "The organs of self-government of the ethnic autonomous localities shall independently administer education, scientific, cultural, public health and physical culture affairs in their respective localities, protect and sift through the cultural heritage of the ethnic groups and work for a vigorous development of their culture". A series of relevant laws, regulations and policies have been formulated and effective measures have been taken in recognition of this constitutional mandate.

Protection and fostering of traditional cultures

The Central Government has sponsored the construction of cultural facilities in ethnic minority regions, trained artistically-inclined local talents in an organized manner, and encouraged innovations in ethnic culture and arts. The Central Government rescues threatened cultural legacies and protects their precious traditional cultures with special policies, measures, plans and funds. More than ten thousand materials of folk literature and art from the ethnic groups have been collected and sorted out. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the central authorities organized over 3,000 experts and scholars to compile and publish five different series of books on the history, language, and societies of ethnic minorities, totaling 403 volumes with over 90 million Chinese characters. In 2003, the ethnic autonomous areas had 122 radio broadcasting organizations with 73 radio stations and 523 radio transmitting stations broadcasting in 15 ethnic minority languages. Since 1992, the State has allocated a large amount of money to set up the "National Long Cultural Corridor along Ten-thousand-Li Border Areas" which shall further enhance cultural development in border areas where the ethnic minorities live in concentrated communities.

Preservation of the intangible culture

As a developing country, China's intangible cultural heritage is at risk from the impact of the country's modernization drive. China, a cradle of the world's intangible cultural heritage, has launched a project to authenticate, rescue,

preserve and study the nation's oral and intangible heritage. The ethnic and folk culture preservation project started in 2003 with special purpose government allocations. In addition, many renowned structures were properly repaired and protected, and a center was set up at the Chinese Academy of Arts to co-ordinate these efforts. The project is planned for implementation from 2004 to 2020. Every year, the Central Government invests 10 million yuan in this project. Notable progress has been made in the protection, rescue, collection, collation, translation, research on and publication of ethnic minority classics. So far, 39 areas of ethnic and folk arts have been chosen as pilots for the project. More than 20 provinces, regions and municipalities have drafted protection schemes and initiated local protection projects. At the moment, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces in Southwest China have put regulations in force to protect ethnic and folk culture. China is building up its own list of intangible cultural heritage to protect ethnic minorities' languages, art, music, dance and religion. To preserve intangible cultural heritage, experts have chosen 501 examples from more than 1,300 contenders throughout the country, including craftsmanship and festive rituals, to be put on a State-level protection list.

2.2.2. Vietnam

In Vietnam, respect for ethnic and cultural diversity is enshrined in the constitution. Article 5 of the Constitution of Vietnam stipulates: "Every ethnic group has the right to use its own language and system of writing, to preserve its ethnic identity, and to promote its fine customs, habits, traditions and culture". Vietnam has defined the abundance and diversity of cultural heritage treasures and intangible cultural heritage. Intended to preserve and develop the traditional culture of ethnic minorities, researches on the cultures of ethnic minorities are aggressively promoted. For instance, since the 1980s, the Culture Institution of Vietnam Academy of Social Science has collected and published the customary laws of the following ethnic minorities: Ede, Mnong, Giarai, Xtieng, and Ma.

Since 1986, Vietnam has established a set of regulations on the culture of ethnic minorities. These regulations include developing the language, culture, and education of ethnic minorities. The Government provides 18 different free newspapers and magazines to the communes in mountainous areas where ethnic minorities reside. To preserve distinctive cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities, Government has plans to build cultural villages in the ethnic minority areas. The Central Radio and TV Station, as well as the radio and TV stations of 20 provinces, use languages of ethnic minorities in broadcasting. Languages of the Hmong, Dao, Giay, Tay, Nung, Thai, Khome, Ede, Giarai, Bana, Xodang, Coho, Xtieng are used in broadcasting. In Lang Son province, the languages of the Tay and Nung are mainly used in daily life,

literature, and radio and TV broadcasting.

Preservation of the intangible culture

Intangible culture is an important part of ethnic minorities' culture. Vietnam has programs to preserve the traditional intangible culture of ethnic minorities. The preservation of Tay Nguyen Gong culture is one example. In 2005, the UNESCO recognized the Tay Nguyen (Central Highlands) Gong culture as a masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage of humanity. Tay Nguyen Gongs are not only musical, but their music also serves a cultural function for about 20 ethnic minorities as they herald life changes. Gongs appear in most rituals and ceremonies of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. Ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands play gongs to commemorate good harvest, during festivals, and to mark occasions like the birth of children, weddings, and funerals. Gongs come in a variety of shapes and sizes: *cong* have a nipple and produce a single, uniform sound, while *chieng* are flat and offer a wider range of notes. The centuries-old gong music is a precious cultural heritage of Vietnam's ethnic people. Faced with the possible extinction of the traditional instrument, the Culture and Information Institute has created a plan to preserve and develop gong cultures as part of Vietnam's unique heritage. The US\$500,000 project covers the five Tay Nguyen provinces of Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Lam Dong, Dac Lac and Dac Nong (formerly part of Dac Lac). In January 2006, Dac Nong province has invested more than VND5.6 billion into a project helping the province's M'Nong ethnic people maintain and develop their gong culture. Under the four-year project, cultural houses in the area will receive 100 sets of gongs. Festivals will be organized regularly in the province's communes and districts and training courses on playing gongs will be organized for the youth. Arts schools in Gia Lai and Dac Lac provinces and the Tay Nguyen College have also begun to train students in gongs and the gong culture.

3. Similarities and differences in the policy towards ethnic minorities of China and Vietnam

A detailed comparison of economic and cultural policies reveals the effects of these policies as well as the reasons for similarities and differences between those employed by China and Vietnam.

3.1. Summary of similarities.

3.1.1. Policy towards ethnic minorities of China and Vietnam are explicit in the

laws and regulations of the State.

Content of the policy towards ethnic minorities appears in the Constitution, laws, and regulations of the State. For instance, China has the Law on ethnic regional autonomy. Since the State attaches importance to the ethnic issues and the policy towards ethnic minorities, the policy of the State is implemented better.

3.1.2. Marxism, in combination with the specific situations of each country, influences the theories and practices concerning ethnic issues in China and Vietnam.

China and Vietnam combine Marxist theories on ethnic issues with their own actual situations. For instance, in the course of ethnic group classification, both China and Vietnam did not completely adhere to the definition of nationality as outlined by Stalin. The philosophies of ethnic issues of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping in China and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam take off from Marxism but adapt to the realities of their own countries.

3.1.3. Since the period of reform, China and Vietnam have exerted great effort to develop the economies of ethnic minorities.

The economies and societies of China and Vietnam are developing rapidly. In turn, economic development is regarded as a crucial component when dealing with ethnic issues. As the economy develops, the State and local governments have increased ability to preserve the traditional culture of ethnic minorities and solve ethnic issues. Both China and Vietnam have many programs to develop the economy and reduce poverty in the regions where ethnic minorities reside.

3.2. Summary of differences.

3.2.1. Ethnic regional autonomy is one main policy difference between China and Vietnam.

From the 1950s to 1975, Vietnam established two ethnic autonomous regions in Northern Vietnam. Thai Meo autonomous region and Viet Bac autonomous region were founded in the years 1955 and 1956 respectively. After Vietnam was reunified in 1975, however, ethnic regional autonomy was cancelled. On the other hand, China has been implementing a policy of ethnic regional autonomy since the 1940s. Now there are 5 autonomous regions, 30 autonomous prefectures and 120 autonomous counties

in China. China has a “Law on ethnic regional autonomy”; in addition, many autonomous regions, prefectures and counties have specific regulations that cover autonomy issues. These laws and regulations reflect the overall state policy towards ethnic minorities. The policy towards ethnic minorities of China is comparatively particular.

3.2.2. The modes of implementation of policy-related projects are different.

As the actual situations of each country are different, they therefore have different modes of implementing projects for ethnic minorities. For instance, in Programme 135 of Vietnam, each commune puts forward the local projects based on the ideas of local inhabitants. Local inhabitants take part in the course of implementation of local projects. In "More Prosperous Frontiers and Better-off People Action" of China, projects were put forward and implemented by the local government.

3.3. Causes of the similarities and differences

3.3.1. The underlying philosophy on ethnic issues of China and Vietnam shares the same origins.

They are derived from Marxism and the Soviet Union. As Marxism spread broadly in China and Vietnam in the beginning of 20th century, Marxist thinking on ethnic issues influenced China and Vietnam deeply and serves as the basis for the formulation of policies on ethnic minorities. Some theory about ethnic issues of China and Vietnam are therefore rather similar. For instance, equality and unity at all times are foundational principles of the policy towards ethnic minorities of both China and Vietnam.

3.3.2. China and Vietnam share some common characteristics of ethnic groups.

Some characteristics of ethnic groups of China and Vietnam are similar. The ethnic groups of China and Vietnam can be divided into majority and minority. The population of ethnic minorities is less than 15% of the total population. The ethnic minorities live together over vast areas while some live in individual compact communities in small areas. Many ethnic minorities intermix with others. The characteristics of ethnic groups often serve as the basis for the formulation and implementation of policies towards ethnic minorities.

3.3.3. The policy towards ethnic minorities is deeply influenced by the history and politics of each country.

The history of each country has its own characteristics, and as the history and politics change, so does policy. From 1945 to 1975, Vietnam was at war with France and the United States. The policy towards ethnic minorities of Vietnam served the victors of these wars. In the period of Culture Revolution (1966-1976), the policy towards ethnic minorities of China was destroyed. Since reform and opening-up, the policy towards ethnic minorities served the developing economies and societies of ethnic minorities.

IV. Conclusions

China and Vietnam share some common characteristics of ethnic groups as well as a common foundation for their philosophy on ethnic issues. However, the policies towards ethnic minorities play different roles in each historic stage of its own country. Comparing the contemporary economic and cultural policies towards ethnic minorities, it is obvious that China and Vietnam have both similarities and differences of policy towards ethnic minorities, but the similarities outnumber differences.

Since the 1980s, the focus of policy towards ethnic minorities in China and Vietnam gradually shifted from politics to economic and social development. As their economies develop, it has become both feasible and necessary to preserve and develop the traditional culture of ethnic minorities. But the consciousness of some people to preserve the culture of ethnic minorities is weak. The result of preserving the traditional culture of ethnic minorities is not as expected. The importance of preserving culture should be propagandized more broadly. At this stage, China and Vietnam continues to take great efforts to realize the harmony and stability of relations between different ethnic groups towards their common development, consequently quickening the pace of modernization both in the minority areas and the country as a whole. This is the goal of the policy towards ethnic minorities of these two countries.

References

I. In English

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. *Ethnicity and Nationalism*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.

Evans, Grant. *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social & Cultural Change in the Border Regions*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000.

Keyes, Charles F., 2002, "The peoples of Asia: Science and politics in the classification of ethnic groups in Thailand, China and Vietnam", *Journal of Asian Studies*, v. 61 (4).

Comment: no page numbers

Keyes, Charles F. *Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Vietnam and Southeast Asia*. Hanoi: Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, 2005.

Nicholas, Colin. *Indigenous Peoples of Asia: Many Peoples, One Struggle*. Bangkok, Thailand: Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, 1996.

Schliesinger, Joachim. *Hill Tribes of Vietnam: Introduction and Overview*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997.

Tapp, N., 2002, In defence of the archaic: A reconsideration of the 1950's ethnic classification project in China: *Asian Ethnicity*, v. 3 (1), pp. 62-84.

II. In Vietnamese

Congress of Vietnam. *The Policy and Law towards Ethnic Minorities of Vietnam*. Hanoi: Ethnic Culture Press, 2000.

Ethnology Institution. *Classification of Ethnic Minorities in Northern Vietnam*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Press, 1975.

National Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs of Vietnam. *The Affairs of Ethnic Minorities (1946-2001)*. Hanoi: National Politics Press, 2001.

Phan Huu Dat. *The Theory and Practice about Ethnic Group Relationships in Vietnam*. Hanoi: National Politics Press, 2001.